

Article

Death, Consciousness, and Phenomenology

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Abstract

The gist of this paper will be my exploration of the kinds of issues that emerge when existentially-grounded phenomenologists confront the issue of death. After briefly examining the materialist perspective on consciousness, we will concentrate our attention on how the recognition of different levels of consciousness can show us how we can relate to death in different ways. We will proceed from examining the impossibility of the death of the self, to the possibility of transcendence through experiencing the death of the other. We will turn to Merleau-Ponty's concept of bodily knowledge for help with the matter of how consciousness constitutes the world around itself and enables the possibility of transcendence. We will also examine passages from Nietzsche's philosophy (with guidance from Heidegger and Blanchot) that cover the transition from viewing time as linear to viewing time as circular, and the transition from understanding our place in the universe in a passive, accepting way which leads inexorably to nihilism, to the possibility of making a decision to relate to our situation in a more dynamic and creative way, by directing our will to the ecstatic experience of the eternal return.

Keywords: Death, consciousness, phenomenology, materialist, transcendence, nihilism.

Introduction

In philosophy, the way a problem is framed has a lot to do with what questions are asked about it and how these questions are resolved. The study of the mental framing of the way things exist in the world, the questioning of the nature of their being, is called ontology. The ontology of consciousness, therefore, is the examination of the "being" of consciousness, the way it exists in the world. In this paper I will examine how contrasting ontologies of consciousness determine in significantly different ways how the human relationship with death is to be addressed. Thus, when the materialist view of consciousness is compared with the phenomenological perspective, we will find ourselves comparing a predominantly medical model which essentially views the human body in terms of its consisting of replaceable or fixable parts, with an experiential model which emphasizes the experiential quality of human life over its objective quantifiable aspects.

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different ways. We will proceed from examining the impossibility of the death of the self, to the possibility of transcendence through experiencing the death of the other. We will turn to Merleau-Ponty's concept of bodily knowledge for help with the matter of how consciousness constitutes the world around itself and enables the possibility of transcendence. We will also examine passages from Nietzsche's philosophy (with guidance from Heidegger and Blanchot) that cover the transition from viewing time as linear to viewing time as circular, and the transition from understanding our place in the universe in a passive, accepting way which leads inexorably to nihilism, to the possibility of making a decision to relate to our situation in a more dynamic and creative way, by directing our will to the ecstatic experience of the eternal return.

The materialist perspective on consciousness

For an example of the materialist perspective on consciousness, we discover how David Chalmers (1995) frames his examination of the ontology of consciousness in terms of what he calls the easy and the hard problems of consciousness. The comparatively easy problems concerning consciousness, he says, are those that represent some ability of consciousness, like its performance of some function or behavior. They include, among other things, "the ability to discriminate, categorize, or react to environmental stimuli, the integration of information by a cognitive system, the ability of this system to access its internal states and to focus its attention, etc." (p. 200). While it is obvious even from the materialist point of view that some organisms (like human beings for example) are subjects of experience and not mere objects, the question of how they come to be this way remains unresolved. If experience arises from a physical basis, why and how should physical processing give rise to such a rich inner life at all? "The really hard problem of consciousness, then," says Chalmers, "is the problem of experience" (p. 201). But how can we get from "the whirl of information processing" (p. 201) to the actuality of rich, subjective, conscious experience? Chalmers's way of framing the ontology of human consciousness, then, presents an *explanatory gap*, similar to Levine's (1983) use of the term to refer to the separation between materialism and qualia. Thus, if we begin with the materialist assumption that what is primary is the empirically measurable external world of scientific investigation, then the existence of the internal world of conscious awareness becomes problematic.

The materialist view of Chalmers and his associates also leads to the ongoing and extensive examination of the possibility of human immortality. However, while life extension might be an achievable goal in the near future from improvements in medical knowledge about the mechanisms of various diseases, ultimately the problem of aging would still need to be resolved as well. Alternatively, advances in AI research could lead to the possibility of mind uploading, in which the transference of brain states from a human brain to another medium would occur, providing immortality to the computational processing of the original brain. Such is the belief of the futurist Ray Kurzweil (2005), who names *the singularity* as the moment in the future when artificial brains reach full consciousness.

Technological advances in a broad variety of fields, like nanotechnology, genetics, biological engineering, regenerative medicine and microbiology could easily provide the basis for extending the span of human lives, which are already longer than ever before due to better nutrition, greater availability of health care, higher standards of living throughout the world, and advances in bio-medical research. An important aspect of current scientific thinking about immortality is that some combination of human cloning, cryonics or nanotechnology will play an essential role in its realization as well. Some scientists believe that gene-therapies and nanotechnology will eventually make the human body effectively self-sustaining. This supports the theory that we will be able to continually create biological or synthetic replacement parts to replace damaged or dying ones. From this point of view, we are merely biological machines in need only of periodic maintenance. Future advances in nano-medicine could also give rise to life extension through the repair of the many processes believed to be responsible for aging. For humans to be able to survive death completely its three main causes – namely aging, disease, and physical trauma – would all have to be resolved. Even then, the environment would have to continue to provide nourishment, for without this we would still die. (See “Immortality,” Wikipedia.) Nevertheless, whether all consciousness dies along with the body remains an open question.

The constellation of these issues revolves around what has been called the medical model for scientific research. First identified by the humanist psychologist R. D. Laing (1972), the medical model focuses on the physical and biological aspects of specific diseases and conditions. The human body is characterized as a kind of sophisticated living machine whose symptoms can be traced back to biophysical causes that in turn can be repaired with replaceable parts, surgery, or biochemical procedures. This is the materialist view of the human body and human disease that dominates the medical establishment today, especially but not exclusively in the developed world. In large part, though, the subjective experience of the individual patient is marginalized throughout this orientation.

The phenomenological approach to consciousness

Conversely, Husserl with his phenomenological approach to experiential reality argued that empirical science simply isn't rigorous enough to account for such a phenomenon as consciousness. Empirical science in his view misses the central defining essence of consciousness because the physical model of the world cannot provide a direct description of lived experience. However, the dualist model that is behind empirical science has dominated our thinking for over 400 years. Positivist philosophers have put forth a rigorous physicalist point of view, which, as a form of materialist monism, views the mind as a mere side effect (see, e.g., Neurath, 1931; Carnap, 1933). By practicing Husserl's phenomenological epoché, though, a procedure which requires that we bracket out all such knowledge and limit ourselves to investigating the world only in terms of how it is given to us through our direct experience of it, we can stop putting into play these preconceived ideas about the nature of reality, and this will provide a result which he calls the phenomenological reduction, whereby the basic phenomena of consciousness are identified.

Heidegger (1982) described Husserl's phenomenological reduction as

the method of leading phenomenological vision from the natural attitude of the human being whose life is involved in the world of things and persons back to the transcendental life of consciousness and its noetic-noematic experiences, in which objects are constituted as correlates of consciousness. (p. 21)

Furthermore, according to Husserl our direct experience of the world is a temporal process, involving the ongoing correlation between the passive acquisition of noematic experience (the object as such, as it appears to consciousness) along with the active interpretation of this information through the noesis (conscious acts directed at the unfolding meaning of the object, as it undergoes changes over time). Consciousness for Husserl (e.g., 1982, pp. 59-62) is an ongoing relationship between individuals and the world they inhabit. Thus, even though the phenomenal objects of consciousness are named, they avoid being mere objects because they are situated within the temporal framework of the intentional consciousness.

The existentialist approach to death

The phenomenological perspective on the nature of human consciousness has created a more existentialist approach toward the human experience and its place in medical practice than has the materialist approach. *Existentialism* was made famous through Jean-Paul Sartre's (e.g., 1956) use of the term to mean that, in the case of human experience, "Existence precedes essence." He had encountered this theme through his reading of Martin Heidegger's work *Being and Time* (1962), in which Heidegger coined the term "thrownness" in order to refer to the idea that Dasein (by which he meant human situatedness) is "thrown" into a world. Dasein, then, is not a mere object but a state of mind; Dasein is also always in a "mood," and a central theme of this orientation is that Dasein's life-long project is to discover which of its moods are the most authentic, and then learn how to *attune* itself to them. However, an important part of our everyday situatedness, or what Heidegger calls our "being-in-the-world," is our constant state of anxiety. The source of this anxiety, he asserts, is our having allowed our "they-self" (society, the crowd, the medical establishment) to define who we are, and what we should strive to be. It is this "they-self" that introduces the *enframing* implications of the materialist worldview, with which Heidegger refers to the mindset of the human drive for a precise, controllable knowledge of the natural world, where things exist and come into existence only insofar as they can be measured. We feel anxious, in Heidegger's view, due to the inauthenticity of this self-orientation. We also feel anxious due to our feeling connected to the world, because we care about things. Our situatedness, which exists in consequence of our having been rooted in a past and placed into a present that faces a future, comes to the center of our being. We discover this feeling of connectedness when we are led to confront the necessity of our own death, a state of mind that Heidegger calls "being-unto-death." In contrast, the medical model's approach to death and dying can be shown to lead to feelings of increased anxiety for its patients, in part due to its comparative negligence of these psychological and philosophical components.

From this existentialist perspective, how we come to view the ultimate meaning of our own death becomes of central importance. When we turn in this direction, the more quantifiable and measurable aspects of our physical condition, such as the possibility of the extension of our consciousness into the indefinite future, fade into the background. We turn then to the existentialist viewpoint on the ultimate meaning of death, in order to discover how existential narratives regarding the meaning of death exhibit the potential to contribute to the mental stability of individuals in ways that are in stark contrast to the kinds of solutions introduced by the medical model. The question we want to keep in mind with regards to any of these narratives concerning the meaning of human death is not, “Is it true?” but, “What does it reveal about ourselves?” In this way, the meaning of our death ceases to be a mere incontrovertible fact, and becomes instead a matter of existential choice.

Accordingly we discover how Kierkegaard (1992, 2009) placed emphasis on personal faith over the various options for certainty with which he was aware. In response to the typical 19th century Danish Christian’s quest for personal immortality or for an assurance of survival of the self after death, Kierkegaard responded that there is no absolute proof but only the consequences of the option we choose to accept. Death in itself explains nothing, Kierkegaard insisted, since on a physical level everything, including individuals as well as the human race as a whole, passes away. Kierkegaard pointed to the example of Socrates as someone, like himself, who refused to dabble in speculation about life after death but still kept the question open. Through such learned, ironic ignorance — Socrates claimed ignorance of many things, but because he knew this about himself he was widely known as the wisest of all Athenians — Socrates philosophized in the direction of truth. In so doing, he turned away from the values sanctioned by the State, which claimed to guarantee happiness in this life if only one acted obediently and in accordance with the demands of civic morality. Socrates, though, by making his individualist subjectivity a universal starting point for philosophy, freed himself from the demands of such civic dictates (see Kierkegaard, 1992, p. 49).

When Kierkegaard (2009) identified three stages in life (the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious), he discovered that a confrontation with nothingness forces the individual to take a stand and make a choice, between the despair that leads actively to suicide or passively to madness, or to a leap of faith. These leaps were either out of the aesthetic way of life into the ethical sphere, or out of the ethical way of life into the religious. Both ways of life for Kierkegaard lead inexorably to suffering, and both require an irrational choice in order to overcome it. Since both the aesthetic and the ethical ways of life lead to despair and suffering, it would seem for Kierkegaard that the common human condition is relegated to negativity, since only the courageous few, the single *ones*, have the will to overcome and throw off their former selves. In a sense, only they will have learned how to confront their own death — and then learn how to overcome it.

The death of the self and the death of the other

There is also the possibility that death is “totally other” — a mystery that cannot be solved by rejecting or accepting it or by hating or desiring it. As the Franco-Russian philosopher Vladimir Jankélévitch says in *La Mort* (1977), in death there are no elements to affirm or negate anything, rational or irrational, spiritualistic or materialistic, immanent or transcendent. Death drives us to a condition of complete theoretical uncertainty, a constant oscillation that cannot fix on a determinate thesis, since nobody has returned from the *other shore* to explain how it is. We do justice to death only if we recognize this fundamental inability of ours to discover its essential nature. Neither sense (scientism, spiritualism), nor non-sense (nihilism, absurdism) can lighten such a darkness. We face death correctly only when we realize that death is truly enigmatic and impenetrable (cf. Cestari, 2016).

Since Jankélévitch’s thought is strongly dependent on the perspective of the first person speaking subject, its temporal dimension too is analyzed from the standpoint of the *I*. For Jankélévitch, then, the three temporal dimensions of death are equally unknowable. Future death is the non-sense of sense or the non-being of being; the mortal instant is an “outside-category” since the moment only exists outside of the flow of time; and past death is absolutely nothing to me since once I am dead I will no longer remember anything. Subjectively the *I* can only experience defeat in the face of death (Jankélévitch 1977; Cestari, 2016). Even though Jankélévitch grounds his argument concerning the unknowability of death from the particular perspective of the experiencing subject, this experience is severely limited since the subject experiences death only as a true impossibility, due to its realization that death and consciousness are radically incompatible. This is so because knowledge is possible only when the subject clearly knows the object of cognition.

Even outside the point of view of the experiencing subject, though, there are insurmountable problems with regards to understanding the nature of death since my knowledge of another person’s experience of anything must remain hypothetical, so that person’s death must be unknowable as well. Thus death in itself cannot be known by anyone. Death in the first person remains a paradoxical object of thought whose sense is completely impossible to find, since I am and always will be completely ignorant about it. Nothing can be said about my death, since my death points to the unspeakable silence of the complete nothing, the total lack of any relations. Here, sense is completely obstructed and affirming or negating it is impossible (Jankélévitch, pp. 67-91; Cestari, p. 24). Death in the first person remains an objective limit to my efforts to understand it. Death in the third person is equally problematic, though, since it is little more than an abstract concept, a kind of indeterminate category, and it is meaningful only in a very generic sense since it explains death according to rational, scientific, religious, mythical, or social explanations, and only these kinds of answers can derive from such an impersonal framing of death.

If death is knowable only as an empty concept, and my death cannot be known in any case, perhaps there exists an intermediate death that can be experienced. This is *your* death, the death of people whom we personally know and love, death in the second person. “Between the

anonymity of the third person and the tragic subjectivity of the first person [...], between the death of the other, which is far away and indifferent, and one's own death, that touches our own being, there is the nearness of the near" (Jankélévitch as cited in Cestari, 2016, p. 20). While your death may seem almost as painful as my death, it is not my death. Still, its effects on my world are deep and durable and underline the essentially social and relational character of death. And yet, my death and your death are equally unknowable, if for different reasons: the first because my very end coincides with the missed object of knowledge; the second because I cannot become you. Still, such an approach is grounded on the assumption that real knowledge can only be clear and distinct if it originates from the subject. This knowledge would be human and finite, and thus *far* from being absolute. But this would be the only manner by which human beings could perceive death. Your death is my first real experience of death. I realize that what happened to you also can happen to me, even if my death is destined to remain an undetermined state for me. Your death remains the only limited possibility I can have to come to grips with my death. Your death therefore lies at the foundation concerning how I approach my own death. In fact, the possibility of thoroughly realizing that I will die is generally impossible until I come to experience your death in some way (Jankélévitch as referenced in Cestari, 2016, pp. 20-21).

This confrontation of the self with the death of the significant other (or with *your* death, as Jankélévitch puts it) is further explored by Emmanuel Levinas (2000) in an essay entitled "Death of the Other and My Own" (pp. 16-21). From the death of the other, he says, pure knowledge (which is for him the same as lived experience) retains only the external appearances of a process of immobilization whereby someone whom you have known comes to an end. Any emotional rapport we might have with death, he continues, is due to its being an exception, and this is what confers on death its depth. We recognize this depth in the form of a disquietude within the unknown. But beyond our compassion for and solidarity with the other, we discover a responsibility for him even within the unknown. Levinas, echoing Heidegger, goes on to suggest "that our affectivity [the fact that we *care*] is awakened only in a being persevering in its being"; he adds, "intentionality is the secret of the psyche" (p. 18). From this perspective time emerges not as the limitation of being but in terms of its relationship with infinity, and the meaning of death is now uncovered not as annihilation but as an open question produced by this relationship.

When one speaks of *my* death, Levinas continues, this cannot be a matter of knowledge or experience. He quotes Epicurus in this context: "If you are there, then death is not there; if it is there, you are not there" (p. 19). He adds, "My relationship with my death is a nonknowledge on dying itself, a nonknowledge that is nevertheless not an absence of relationship" (p. 19). The nature of this relationship stems back to the death of the other, an eventuality that is transferred back to oneself. This transference, though, is not merely a mechanical one, but rather "comes to cut the thread of my own duration" (p. 19). This transference also belongs to what Levinas calls "the intrigue of the I" (p. 20), which for him is a matter of recognizing the uniqueness and the singularity of one's identity and refers to the possibility of someone being able to escape from his concept. He would accomplish this by making a nonsense of his own death: "This is," says Levinas, "a nonknowledge that translates into experience through my ignorance of the day of my death, an ignorance by virtue of which the 'me' writes checks on an empty account, as if he had eternity before him" (p. 21). For Levinas (1969), then, it is precisely the contingency of one's

own death, its nonknowability, its “not yet” that is the source of one’s freedom to pursue “the intrigue of the I” (p. 224)

What Levinas referred to as “the intrigue of the I” bears a striking resemblance to Karl Jaspers’s (1955) notion of Existenz philosophy, concerning which he speaks of individuals’ journey towards transcendence in terms of their ability to continue overcoming their limitations in order to transform themselves into an “authentic” person. He thus identified three levels of being: Dasein, by which he means objective being, or being-in-the-world; Existenz, or subjective, nonobjectifiable being-as-such; and the Encompassing of Transcendence, or the unattainable limit of all being and thought. The human person as Existenz claims her or his own uniqueness as a human being through the quality of the choices s/he takes. Jaspers believes that in the course of one’s life one encounters certain limiting situations, which push a person toward transcendence and authenticity. These limiting situations consist of the experiences of death, suffering, struggle and guilt. When one is confronted with any one of them, one is forced to confront one’s own existence, and one can no longer remain in a complacent state. For example, when a person is confronted by the reality of death, either through the death of someone with whom they were very close or even with their own approaching death, its reality cannot be ignored. In other words, when death becomes a reality and not just a concept, the person is forced to face their present situation. The same is true with the other limiting situations: one’s guilt brings the person to their present, as no one can totally escape guilt once it has stricken them; while suffering and struggle similarly bring the person to an undeniable yet uncomfortable present. These realities impose the present situation onto the affected individual, and as limiting situations bring the person to their Existenz. Thus, no one can continue to simply drift away when death is approaching, since its approach will force the person to ask vital questions about the sense of their life and the meaning of their existence. Either these limiting situations bring the person to their Existenz or the person becomes Existenz. Either way, the person has become aware of their potential for spiritual growth as Existenz through the encompassing power of transcendence (cf. Jaspers, 1969, pp. 76-89).

It is also in this context that Peter Sloterdijk (1989) announces that the unknowability of one’s death has unnerving social and political implications: “The inability of any modern, post-metaphysical, scientized thinking to conceive of any death as one’s *own* leads to two obviously ubiquitous attitudes” (p. 346): either death does not belong to life even though we cannot avoid confronting it, or our thinking clings to the only death that remains objectively thinkable, the death of the other. The primacy of self-preservation becomes the consequence of such thinking. Furthermore, if the subject is the one thing that cannot die, the world becomes the domain in which the struggle for survival takes place, and the other emerges as my enemy. In order to avoid this death of self, the technical-logical nature of instrumental reason is allowed to dominate everything that is not the ego. Then, it’s just a matter of either them or us; or as in the mindset of the James Bond films, *live and let die* (p. 346). Thus, “the incapacity to die subjects the world, in its visible and invisible areas, to a radical transformation” (p. 347). But this does not solve the problem; the need for transcendence remains. Sloterdijk clearly believes that if we are to be able to survive modernity, we will have to disidentify from everything that *arms itself* (p. xxiii). In fact, Sloterdijk presents the intriguing idea that “the concept of substitute transcendence could ground a phenomenology of modernity” (p. 348).

The dynamic approach to creating new levels of consciousness

Merleau-Ponty is yet another important phenomenologist who believed that materialist thinking cannot do justice to the discontinuous aspects of human experience, since it is unable to encapsulate the contingent and nonconceptual character of our ongoing relationship with the world and with other conscious beings. This is why he advocated “a new idea of reason, which does not forget the experience of unreason” (as cited in Spiegelberg, 1971, p. 525). He also did not wish to lose sight of the ambiguity that he believed was as central to understanding the human condition as was clarity. In fact, our understanding of death might well fit into this conception of the need to accommodate the experiences of unreason and ambiguity. Death may just be the “great unknown” for phenomenology, even if Merleau-Ponty’s related notions of *wild nature*, the *flesh of the world* and the *intertwining* indicate a dynamic relationship between the earth and its conscious inhabitants. Nevertheless, the “impossible” creative dynamism of the *chiasm* – “[W]e are the world that thinks itself, or the world is at the heart of our flesh” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, p.136) – is present before the particularity of embodied experience, as well as during it, and after it, too — since even before the birth as well as after the death of the individual self, the earth continues its dialogue with the others that remain.

For Merleau-Ponty (1964), the conscious ego and its situatedness in the world are recognized and defined only in terms of their relationship with one another. “The world is not an object such that I have within my possession the law of its making,” he writes. “...Truth does not ‘inhabit’ only the ‘inner man,’ or more accurately, there is no ‘inner man.’ Man is in the world, and only in the world does he know himself” (p. xi). But who does this knowing? Or is it the world coming to know itself through us? In contrast to the standard understanding of transcendence as passage from self to other, perceptual transcendence for Merleau-Ponty does not stop at the exteriority of the outside world but loops back. This is the case for his notion of the *chiasm*, which moves from self to world and from world to self via the mediating elemental flesh of the world.

Similarly, Stéphane Lupasco, a Franco-Rumanian philosopher who is a proponent of a quantum-type logic (as cited in Brenner, 2008), believes that consciousness results from the antagonistic relativization between biological matter and physical matter. He argues that this relativization engenders a matter of a third kind and he calls it *psychic matter* or *quantic matter* (Lupasco, 1951). This position concerning the origin of consciousness links nicely with the dynamic views of creative consciousness developed by both Merleau-Ponty (see above) and Nietzsche (see below).

Finally, there is the perspective on the constitution of a new level of consciousness introduced by Nietzsche and analyzed in detail by Heidegger (1968). In Heidegger’s view, there is a necessary contradiction between Nietzsche’s central concepts of *will to power* and *eternal return*. They move in different directions and want different things. When we confront the will to power with the embrace of the eternal return, he argues, we confront a will to control with a will to destroy. This is also the confrontation between the linear view of time of the will to power, and the

circular view of time of the embrace of the eternal return. Can these seeming contradictions be resolved?

In order to resolve these contradictions, the subject has to *will non-willing*. This is a creative act of the will. The will has to say “yes” to the “it was” of time. It has to say “yes, this is how I will it” — again and again throughout the eternal return of the same event. Here, the will to power acts as a *synthesis of forces*. Since the eternal return implies that time is circular and not linear, when the subject gets back to the same place, it discovers that its consciousness has changed — each time. And once the will learns to will backward — this is the highest expression of the will to power. “That everything recurs is the closest approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being — high point of meditation” (Nietzsche, 1967, p. 617).

The will also wants something further. As Nietzsche (1967) puts it: “The will to destruction (is) the will of a still deeper instinct, the instinct of self-destruction, the will for nothingness” (p. 55). When nihilism, the will for nothingness, is confronted with the eternal return, it is itself negated. When the subject actively affirms its own reactive forces, these forces become neutralized and disappear. With its discovery of the eternal return, the human subject redeems itself from its past and frees up its future — through *amor fati*. By an act of the creative will, it breaks the chain of causality that determines the everyday world of becoming, and through its artistry creates a meaningful world for itself to live in. We recall from Nietzsche’s first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1968), that for him the creative will has two aspects, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, the restraint of form working against the excess of content. In the case of the experience of the eternal return, the Apollonian force provides the structural form of the circle, while the Dionysian force provides the joyous exuberance of repetition.

With his conceptualization and experience of the eternal return, Nietzsche introduces the possibility that the limitations of linear time can be overcome through an act of the creative will. This creative act, in turn, with its capacity to break the chain of causality that determines the nature of the human self, initiates a liberating force on the self.

Others add to this perspective. In the view of the Japanese philosopher Keiji Nishitani (1990), “The so-called ‘I,’ what we normally take as the self, is merely a frame of interpretation added to this life process after the fact. The true self is the source of the life process itself, the true body of the will to power” (p. 97). According to Stambaugh (1999), this true self involves “an ultimate self-awakening that is beyond ordinary consciousness and self-consciousness” (p. 101). On the other hand, it is precisely the so-called “I”, inhabited by ordinary consciousness and self-consciousness, that discovers the threat of nihilism. If consciousness turns away from this threat, however, it will become mired in its pursuit of worldly, everyday things. “What consciousness ultimately must do is to *become* that nihilism, and in so doing, break through the field of consciousness and self-consciousness” (p. 101). This confrontation with nothingness was also familiar to the Christian mystic Meister Eckhart. As Nishitani (1982) explains: “The subjectivity of the uncreated *I am* appears in Eckhart only after passing through the complete negation of — or detachment from — the subjectivity of egoity” (p. 65). This negation, in turn, leads to a moment of ecstasy, where the self takes a stand outside of itself. Nishitani explains: “Ecstasy represents an orientation from self to the *ground* of self, from God to the *ground* of God — from

being to nothingness. Negation-*sive*-affirmation represents an orientation from nothingness to being” (p. 68). This experience leads to a shift, a conversion, from the traditional self, as person, to the self-revelation or transcendence of the “true self” through its manifestation of absolute nothingness — or as what the Buddhist seer Nagarjuna referred to as its realization of “emptiness” (Nagarjuna, 2016).

There can be little doubt that Nietzsche’s experience of the eternal return was an extraordinary event for him — in fact, his was an experience inaccessible to an ordinary state of consciousness. He even coined a term for any individual who underwent this experience: the *overman*. It was a gift brought by Zarathustra to man, whom, he feared, wasn’t ready for it yet. In Blanchot’s (1993) view:

[T]he overman is the being who has overcome the void (created by the death of God and the decline of values), because he has known how to find in this void the power of overcoming. ...The overman is he in whom nothingness makes itself will and who, free for death, maintains this pure essence of will in willing nothingness. This would be nihilism itself. (pp.147-148).

Nietzsche explains this further: “Let us think this thought in its most terrible form: existence, as it is, without meaning or aim, yet recurring inevitably without any finale of nothingness: the eternal recurrence ... the most extreme form of nihilism” (as cited in Blanchot, 1993, p. 149). This is a bit confusing, though, since we might initially have thought that nihilism was tied only to a belief in the pervasiveness of nothingness; now we are being told that nihilism is also connected to being. Blanchot provides an answer: “Nihilism is the impossibility of being done with it and of finding a way out. ... Nothing ends, everything begins again; the other is still the same” (p. 149). Blanchot (1982) also links the phenomenon of personal death to Nietzsche’s experience of the eternal return:

One dies: he who dies is anonymous, and anonymity is the guise in which the ungraspable, the unlimited, the unsituated is most dangerously affirmed near us. Whoever experiences this suffers an anonymous, impersonal force, the force of an event which, being the dissolution of every event, is starting over not only now, but was in its very beginning a beginning again. And in its domain, everything that happens happens again. From the instant “one dies,” the instant is revoked. (p. 241).

The American post-phenomenologist Mark Taylor (1987) elaborates on this point: “Since it is never present, death as such cannot be thought. Death, in other words, is unthinkable” (p. 242). But we seem to still need a way to think past or think through this impossible event, even if it is unthinkable.

Conclusion

So, then, how do we break out of nihilism's vicious circle? If nihilism is inseparable even from being and not just from nothingness, are we necessarily condemned to living in an absurd universe for all of eternity? The only authentic answer to this would seem to be self-annihilation, or suicide. But Nietzsche rejects this. Instead, the secret is found in forgetting. Blanchot again explains:

[W]elcome to the future that does not come, that neither begins nor ends and whose uncertainty breaks history. But how do we think this rupture? Through forgetting. Forgetting frees the future from time itself. ... This desire to be ignorant by which ignorance becomes desire is the waiting welcomed by forgetting... (p. 280).

Our only viable choice, then, is to learn how to live within the timelessness of the present moment. For, as Nietzsche (1980) says, "Without forgetting it is quite impossible to live at all" (p. 10).

As long as we are caught up within the limiting framework of linear time, we are forced to confront the singular inevitability of our own impending death. This bare fact has the power to paralyze us, since it forces us to contemplate the essential nihilism of all conscious life: that all living things inevitably die. Even if we turn to the liberating framework of circular time, to the expanding ecstatic moment of the realization of the eternal return, we find that we still cannot escape from the suffocating nausea of our very being. There is no way out of the circle of the passage from becoming to being, with each inextricably following the other throughout eternity. The answer is again found in the will. We will ourselves to forget, to forget our knowledge of the past and the future, and to forget that everything returns. We choose instead to live within the endless moment, in a willful ignorance which awakens our desire — we *will non-willing*, and thus choose life.

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