

Death: The Existential Meaning of The Ultimate Phenomenon, Towards an Aesthetics of Consolation

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Abstract

This paper considers the phenomenon of death as it is existentially relevant to us as existents. It raises the question: how should we live given that one day we will die? I explore how death uniquely shapes our conception of who we are and what we can become as naturally constrained human beings. I argue that we should seek to incorporate death as a meaningful consideration and factor in our daily living if we are to self-actualise. Furthermore, I argue that given the above we find ourselves in need of consolation. I proffer a proto-ontological aesthetics that seeks to show from the first principle of the I-You ontological structure of human existence how we can find consolation in a world besieged by death. I argue that there is a reciprocal relation between being-with-others, death, and self-actualisation. We appreciate being-with-others all the more because of the limitation imposed by death, whilst being-with-others allows us to find consolation in the other in the form of being-with-others-to-the-end. The second part of the essay considers the relationship between being-with-others, death and self-actualisation as applied to aesthetics. A number of aesthetic examples are employed that exemplify the reciprocal nature between death, love, and art. Art helps us to discover and integrate ourselves as a being-with-others: it helps us to form meaningful relationships. Thus, art as a mode of being-with-others provides a way for us to reconcile with death, while the finitude imposed by death moves us to find consolation in art.

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1. Introduction

The question of death is one of the principle and perennial questions of the philosophical tradition. It defines our mortal nature. To be human is necessarily to be a bounded entity, both spatially in terms of embodiment and temporally in terms of the fundamental fact that at some time in the future we as individual existents will cease to be. This paper analyses what death should mean to us as human subjects. It asks to what extent this phenomenon bears relevance to us in how we live our lives. I argue that the meaning of death as a necessary universal limit upon mortal experience allows us to realise ourselves as authentic human subjects; it is by the limitation of our being in time that death enables us to delineate systems of meaning, value, and morality, which would be inconceivable in a temporally infinite existence. I conclude that it is important for us to understand the meaning of death so that we may better orientate ourselves in the living world and holistically self-actualise. I hold this can only be achieved through a meaningful integration of the self with the other through a consideration of and coming to terms with death as the ultimate limit to our own existence and the existence of those we love.

In the world of the artist, tragedy is a well-suited medium to achieve this integration of self-and-other-actualisation; the world of the artist serves as a conduit by which we become able to reconcile ourselves with the other. Therefore, I develop a proto-ontological aesthetics that aims to show us who we are, who we could be, and the possibility (and necessity) of consolation in the aspect of being-with-others-to-the-end. In the first section I show that there is a reciprocal nature between the self and the other (being-with-others), self-actualisation, and death. By being aware of death, I argue, we become aware of the need to form meaningful relationships; reciprocally, meaningful relationships help us to reconcile with the idea of death. Similarly, in the following section, I show how art conceptualised as a reconciliation of the self and the other provides consolation; and, reciprocally, that the

awareness of death drives us to art in search of that consolation.

Here ontology is taken to mean the inquiry into the nature of being, and aesthetics as inquiry concerning the arts; thus by ontological-aesthetics I mean an inquiry into the nature of being itself enhanced, and exemplified more fully, by means of inquiry in the realm of the arts. Specifically, I show the importance of conceiving the subject as a relational subject characterised by the I-You relation. Being-with-others enables being-towards-death because it provides a transcendental consolation in the other; whereas being-towards-death enables being-with-others because it provides such a compelling and orienting motivation to cultivate meaningful relationships. Our being-with-others is necessary for our self-actualisation, and the arts furnish us with a means to accomplish this. The prefix, "proto-", merely indicates that it is a developing theory. A more ambitious scope and length would be required so that a fuller theory may be delimited from literature, drama, music, the fine arts, architecture, etc. Nevertheless, the broad outline of the theory is, in my estimation, adequate to express convincingly enough what it claims to establish: a reciprocal relation between death and love, precipitated and mirrored by a certain conception of art, which, the three being considered in their various ways, facilitates the process of self-actualisation and self-integration-with-the-other, and finally provides the grounds for apprehending the consolation that, in the end, all human beings need.

2. Ontology: The Existential Conception of Death, Being-Towards-The-End

Perhaps all existentialists, Macquarrie (1985: 77) notes, 'agree that the basic motivation of a philosophy of existence arises from the individual existent's need to come to terms with his own existence'. But this raises a vital question, and it is the question that concerns us here: what does coming to terms with one's existence mean, and how could one set about achieving it? The existentialist's response is that we need to accept the

intrinsic nature of our experience. We are mortal and finite, and the way to grasp the meaning of our experience lies in seeking first to understand, insofar as it is humanly possible, the meaning of its end. It is necessary to admit at this point that death can of course be considered in a variety of ways; however, it is the existential consideration of death that interests us here. Considering death existentially entails considering it as a certain-to-occur eventuality in which from some future time onwards one ceases to be alive (Macquarrie, 1985: 194-195). We are thus interested in what death as a phenomenon of existence, as the ever-present potential realisability of ceasing to be alive, means to us as existents in the light of our need to come to terms with our own existence.

For Heidegger (1987: 274), existence is the essence of our being, which leads to our self-conception as ‘an understanding potentiality-for-being’. Our self-conscious nature inculcates a view of the world as *our* world, in which we are always in some way developing. Our ‘potentiality-for-being’ means then that each of us has a well, as it were, of potential that is naturally a part of us (in some deep structural sense) and that we can draw upon in order to actualise the being that is our self. The phenomenon of death is, in Heidegger’s view, the meaning of being and the fundamental question of ontology. Death has an existential-ontological signification (Heidegger, 1987: 280): it has an impact on the existent’s own existential experience and forms his being. Existence, when properly conceived, is both potentiality-for-being and authentic existence construed as being-to-an-end (Heidegger, 1987: 276-277, 289). In this view, death stands before us as an impending something (like nothing we can conceive) (Heidegger, 1987: 294). By being-to-an-end Heidegger means living one’s life in the light of the reality of one’s temporal finitude. For Van Niekerk (1999: 415), this entails that we have a need to ‘come to grips with death

as the most significant aspect of life’. Thus, death is the ultimate ordering principle of our meaning, and that meaning’s relevance, in the world. To put the previous point in Van Niekerk’s (1999: 409) words: ‘[o]ur lives require interpretation because of death; death is the constant stimulus which prompts us to ascribe meaning to who we are, what we do and why we remain at it’.

The human existent is naturally limited and necessarily develops within given constraints. Macquarrie (1985: 191) notes: ‘possibilities occur only in actual situations, and this is to say that they are already limited by the situational element’ – we are always limited by our own perspective upon the world. Given this, existentialists construe existence as an art of possibilities conditioned by facticity: an acceptance of the given and the givenness of our experience conditioned by the limited nature of our horizon and the constraint imposed upon the openness of our future. We are always already situated circumstantially such that our possibilities are limited, and the ultimate limitation is death. One may say that to have an awareness of death is the price of self-consciousness, certainly it is necessary for self-actualisation. Heidegger (1987: 310) claims that having an awareness of death as a being-towards-the-end gives rise to the existent experiencing “anxiety”¹, the apprehension of this inexpressible something arising from our potentiality-for-being. In other words, anxiety manifests as our conscious mental discomfort in the world best characterised as a consciousness of nothing (but a nothing akin to something in that it affects us); it is the manifestation of our *unheimlichkeit* – our not feeling at home in the world.

The investigation into the significance of the phenomenon of death to our lives may seem largely subjective: after all, the existentialists stress that it is the individual existent’s *own* experience of death, or life in the aspect of death, that is under investigation (Macquarrie,

¹Many existentialists make this claim. Anxiety, a continual malaise or enduring feeling of uneasiness, is our fundamental affectation.

According to them, it is always there, something which is woven into the very fabric of human existence (Macquarrie, 1985: 165).

1985: 195). Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to infer that this search for understanding is a solipsistic or a selfish endeavour. Indeed, in the view of existentialism, it is our being-with-others that is structurally fundamental to our own existence; being-with-others is a condition of individual existence and not a derivative from a supposed first principle of the self (Macquarrie, 1985: 102-105). The reason for the hyphenation of the customarily separate terms 'being', 'with' and 'others' is to show that the separate terms are structural components of the hyphenated term, and as such they are interrelated as one entity. Thus *being with others* differs from *being-with-others* insofar as the former may merely refer to the idea of being in the presence of others, whereas the latter means to convey an ontological sense in which being (as a structural designation and a present consciousness denoting the individual) is fundamentally entwined with other beings such that the individual cannot be wholly individuated (that is, separated from others, as in the way that the Cartesian self is, and in the way that *being with others* unhyphenated may also suggest). One of the implications of being-with-others, then, is that we are concerned within our own being for the being of certain others, and so their deaths as well.

I turn to the work of Martin Buber for an explanation of Macquarrie's ontic observation that being-with-others is a condition of individual existence (ibid.). Buber (1979: 54, 55, 59, 62) proffers that there is an I-You relationship that characterises each individual existent, which is the ground for intersubjectivity, and moreover the basis of the possibility for extraordinary intimacy². 'In the beginning is the relation – as the category of being, as readiness, as a form that reaches out to be filled, as a model of the soul; the *a priori* of relation; *the innate you*' (Buber, 1979: 78 – his italics). Put differently, Buber tells us that being is already necessarily in relation to something other, and he argues

that true being is being in correct relation, the relation of dialogue, between self and other, which is the relation of the I-You.

Buber (1979: 62) claims that: '[t]he basic word I-You can be spoken only with one's whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become; becoming I, I say You'. In order to truly realise myself, I require a You; I require being a being-with-others to become an authentic integrated self. Buber speaks of concentrating and fusing oneself, bringing one's 'whole being' into being. In other words, he is describing the proper integration of the self, which is the realisation of authentic selfhood. This can neither be accomplished by oneself alone, nor of course without oneself at all, but by correct relation between self and other that is the I-You.

The I-You relation is the phenomenon that made the life and death of the character Sydney Carlton ultimately meaningful in Dickens's (2003) *A Tale of Two Cities*. When first the reader encounters Carlton he is a disillusioned sardonic youth and a drunkard. He is totally self-involved and appears to care nothing for other people. Carlton's character exemplifies the I-I relation that Kauffman speaks of in his preface to Buber's (1979: 11) *I and Thou*. Carlton's character arc is the journey of a being's move from the hollowness of the I-I relation, which always prioritises the self and shuns the other, to the wholeness of the I-You. Dickens's novel is set in the time of the French Revolution; it ends at the height of the Terror in Paris. In the end Carlton chooses to sacrifice himself to save the husband of the woman he loves, Lucie Manette. He goes to the guillotine in Charles Darnay's place for no other sake than hers. Consider Sydney Carlton's final thoughts before his death: '[i]t is a far, far better thing that I do, than I have ever done; it is a far, far better rest that I go

² Buber (1979: 59 – his italics) says the You 'fills the firmament. Not as if there were nothing but he; but everything else lives in his light'. There is certainly intimacy in the I-You relation thus

understood, in which the You, the other, comes to colour one's perception of everything else.

to, than I have ever known' (Dickens, 2003: 390). The rest Carlton speaks of is not only the heavenly rest as understood theologically, but also the rest of consolation that is born by being in meaningful relation with the other, in his case by performing the highest sacrifice for the beloved You. This is an extreme illustration of the I-You relationship: dying for the sake of the other is the ultimate sacrifice of affection.

Victor Frankl (2008: 48-52) recalls in his reflection on being incessantly surrounded by death and the threat of death in a concentration camp that what the camp inmates discovered was that they could not generate their own meaning or purpose in life, but had to live for something that was not merely themselves. For Frankl it was the image of his wife that sustained his will to live. Who we are and why we remain at the perennially decaying grindstone of meaning is essentially because of and for others. A world in which only I or only you (as an I) exist would be like Sartre's (1947) *enfer* in *Huis Clos*: a hell of inauthentic conjurations in which no person develops the I-You relation³. But by reconciling the I and the you, I and you enter the condition of the first person plural that the I-You gives rise to, which is the *we*, and *we* become better placed to live authentic lives: by being reconciled with the other, we also become reconciled with our own limitedness, and are able authentically and meaningfully to say *I*.

Montaigne (1971: 35) asserts that 'the earlier acts of our lives must be proved on the touchstone of our last breath'. While this is appealing as a romantic notion, I can only partly agree with it, for surely it is the case that acts done are proven by virtue of their being done and can at best only be *modulated* by the subsequent act of dying. As with the earlier example of Sydney

Carlton, for instance, death is the fulfilment of his life as sacrifice, however it does not qualify outrightly as good or bad or worthwhile *all* the actions he had ever undertaken over the course of his life. If he had gone to the guillotine sobbing, though not a heroic end, that would not necessarily entail that he had never been heroic at any point in his life. His heroic action to exchange himself for Charles Darnay in the prison would remain an act of heroism because the fundamental conditions of the act remain unaltered: *I* (Sydney Carlton) *have chosen to die that you* (Charles Darnay) *may live for the sake of her* (Lucie Manette). Thus, the 'touchstone of his last breath' cannot prove all the earlier acts of his life. It only affects some past acts by accentuating those that bear relevance to the meaning of his death, such as his moving pledge of affection to Lucie Manette (Dickens, 2003: 156-159), for whom, as we have seen, he will later choose to die.

Heidegger (1987: 284) notes that such a choice, to choose to die for another, is being-towards-the-end and not being-at-an-end. Thus, it is not so much the actuation of death that determines retroactively the meaning of one's life, but rather it is the possibility of realising death, apprehended over the course of life that gives living its meaningful intention of action. We are reminded of T. S. Eliot's (1963: 211) corollary proclamation on the matter of being-towards-the-end:

"on whatever sphere of being
The mind of a man may be intent
At the time of death"⁴ – that is the
one action.

Heidegger's notion of the human existent as being-towards-the-end is closely mirrored by Eliot's view. Eliot is advocating for a sustained comprehension of being-towards-the-end as justification for 'the one action'. In

³In Sartre's (1947) play *Huis Clos* (No Exit) the three principal characters may all be said to be characterised by the I-I relation. They are wholly self-involved and fail to consider the other as other subjects worthy of genuinely felt consideration. The play is Sartre's take on hell, in which hell is having to spend eternity stuck in a banal hotel room with some other insufferable people – insufferable because inauthentic. Notably a most famous line of the play is

'*l'enfer, c'est les Autres*' (Sartre, 1947: 93), or 'hell is other people'. However, the line is spoken by an inauthentic person, what it conveys is that 'hell is inauthentic other people'.

⁴Eliot is here quoting Krishna's words to Arjuna from chapter 8, verse 6 of the *Bhagavad Gita* (Blamires, 1969: 103).

other words, the present and sustained cognisance of finitude presses one to value that which is most important and to pursue it: to perform 'the one action'. Being-towards-the-end is not a product of an occasional attitude, nor does it arise as the product of any attitude, but rather of a sustained comprehension of the human existent's thrownness in the world (Heidegger, 1987: 295). The fact that our existence seems contingent and to a degree random constitutes this thrownness into the world – as individuals, alone, and never able to bridge fully the void of this loneliness: these catalyse our anxiety.

The existentialist's claim that we are never able to overcome our fundamental affectation, anxiety, but rather it is part of the exercise of freedom by which the existent is able to self-actualise (Macquarrie, 1985: 170). If this is true then the freedom that we seek is from being ruled by anxiety, since to evade it would be to surrender the quest of self-actualisation; by confronting our anxiety about death we temper our anxiety about life generally and are more likely to reconcile ourselves to the world. We find ourselves situated consciously, and not by our own choosing, in the world: we discover ourselves *there*. The origin of *our there*, however, is mysterious. In laying out Heidegger's view Macquarrie (1985: 198) says: 'death, honestly accepted and anticipated, can become an integrating factor in an authentic existence'. This is why we have need for the consolation that being-with-others provides. We need to enter the fulfilling relation that death prompts us towards, which is the I-You relation; in so doing we necessarily self-actualise: self-actualisation constitutes integrating the self in the I-You and realising authentic selfhood. We are moved towards the other because of our thrownness in the world and the concomitancy of death. Death gives rise to our need for

meaningful relationships; meaningful relationships in their turn help us to reconcile with death.

Nevertheless, Heidegger (1987: 297) notes that many people adopt an attitude of prevarication towards death: '[o]ne of these days one will die too, in the end; but right now it has nothing to do with us'⁵. Such an attitude merely conceals and alienates us from our own most possibility-for-being, which emerges as life is lived in the aspect of death (Heidegger, 1987: 298). Death's meaning as final possibility is the ultimate hermeneutical ordering principle in that life's finiteness enables and incentivises the pursuit of meaning and goodness in our lives. The honest acceptance of death, through anticipation, integrates the existent into his authentic existence (Macquarrie, 1985: 198). For that reason it should be embraced and not shunned. In the words of Kauffman (1959: 92): 'the man who accepts his death may find in this experience a strong spur to making something of his life and may succeed in some accomplishment that robs him of the fear of death'. In other words, by accepting death and taking seriously the limited time that we have, we are more likely to accomplish worthy things and build worthy relationships, which redeem us from the void of death through consolation.

In a certain sense, death as final constraint constrains a certain type of being into existence. Whilst it is possible to conceive of a deathless world, it is difficult to argue that the immortals inhabiting it would resemble us mere mortals. It is rather more likely that these immortals would resemble the Grecian gods than the human beings we are currently familiar with, equipped as we are with our imperfect systems of morality and value intuitions. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that immortal human existents would retain these institutions as they would no longer be subject to the constraints under which they were conditioned: they

⁵Eliot echoes this sentiment in *Burnt Norton*: 'Go, go, go, said the bird: human kind / Cannot bear very much reality.' (1963: 190). The following 33 pages of poetry justify why we should try to bear it.

would be at liberty to exist in a state of perpetual vegetation, prevaricating life such that the existent never comes to grasp who and why the existent is (Thielicke, cited in Van Niekerk, 1999: 421). Furthermore, there is an intrinsically moral component to death in that, according to Van Niekerk (1999: 418), it 'is the call to distinguish right from wrong and value from futility; it is the call to sustained efforts at self-actualization'. We live by our (in)decisions and are subject to their effects throughout our lives. Consequences carry with them costs, and an authentic person will consider those costs seriously under the aspect of their possible death (which is at any and every moment an impending possibility).

For Gray (1951: 118), death is to be viewed as 'a fountain of possibility and potentiality', which, considered deeply and personally, will bring about a revolution in our everyday behaviour. Put simply, the transitoriness of life reminds and challenges us 'to make the best possible use of each moment of our lives' (Frankl, 2008: 150-151). For Thielicke (cited in Van Niekerk, 1999: 421), self-actualisation only occurs given the existent's awareness of the future and its limitedness. From the very existence of death, Van Niekerk (1999: 421) deduces that it makes sense to pursue a strategy of self-actualisation in order that we may realise our hopes concerning what it is we want to become. Human beings who have integrated the knowledge of their future death realise they are incomplete, alone in the world. This is why, as human beings conscious of the future reality of death, we seek after our ontological completion. We seek after an ontological completion which is both within and beyond ourselves, a completion in the other. In this we find hope for the consolation of loss, both of being-with-one-another when the other passes out of existence, and for oneself in the present anticipation of our own end of being-in-the-world-with-the-other.

3. Art, Love, Death: Self-Actualisation and Consolation Through an Ontological Aesthetics

In this section I will consider the existential implications of life understood as tragedy. I show that life experienced thus is opened not only to the existential terror, suffering, or angst that accompanies a reckoning with the possibility of death (Bradley, 2015: 409), but also consolation and a deepening of our acceptance of ourselves as bounded existents, in the sense of Heidegger's being-towards-death in everydayness. I argue that art can help us better integrate the idea of death into our existence, and the mode of art generally used to this effect is tinged with tragedy. 'Life as seen within the spectre of death is itself tragedy', says Van Niekerk (1999: 419), 'life plays itself off in a sequence of events culminating in death and is, as such, experienced as tragedy'. Tragedy aids us in this process of integration by relating our existence to the existence of others. Experiencing art is a mode of being-with-the-other. Art provides us with a subject matter (such as a situation, character, or musical movement, etc.) to which we are able to relate, and in so relating learn something about our existence. Thus, art as a mode of being-with-the-other spurs us to cultivate more meaningful relationships, and so spurs us to realise authentic being. Therefore, being-with-the-other, friendship, and romantic love are all incorporated in the ontological aesthetic inherent to the authentic bond of the I-You subject.

The artist 'may by his art cause us to notice features of the world or of things that had hitherto been concealed from us because our attention had been directed elsewhere', says Macquarrie (1985: 90) in his admittedly short discussion of art and existentialism. In the words of Eliot (2001: 6) we are 'Distracted from distraction by distraction' which leads us to be 'Filled with fancies and empty of meaning' giving rise to 'Tumid apathy with no concentration'. There are things in the world that draw our attention away from what is meaningful; such things direct our being away from the other as well as the reality of death, and so

diminish the possibility of our self-actualisation. It is unlikely that one could self-actualise living in a meaningless world of fancies, without the ability to feel passion or to concentrate. Aesthetics, on the other hand, has much to tell us about the meaning of the phenomenon of death, and the best works of art seek to lift us out of distractions and into the realm of the real and the true: they teach us to transcend ourselves in the direction of the other. Through art⁶ we can channel our sense of what it means to exist by engaging in an intersubjective dialogue (that between artist and observer, which takes place as an intra-subjective dialogue, within the observer). 'Reading well', says Harold Bloom (2001: 19), 'is one of the great pleasures that solitude can afford you, because it is [...] the most healing of pleasures. It returns you to otherness, whether in yourself or in friends, or in those who may become friends. Imaginative literature is otherness, and as such alleviates loneliness'. Literature moves our focus outside ourselves, returning us to a state of being-with-the-other, and extolling to us the importance of being-with-the-other. The best art seeks to express via the naturally limited means available to it (language, the spatiality of canvas and oil) *the* fundamental aspect of our being as existents: and, as has been shown above, this necessarily incorporates death.

One of the seminal cases of tragedy and romantic love that binds the being-with-others of existence with the existential phenomenon of death is Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*. Scruton (2013: 177) observes:

In *Tristan und Isolde* the victims [of death] themselves are redeemed, and this redemption is to be thought of as a purely human achievement involving no miracles, no supernatural powers, no transubstantiation, but merely the aura of seclusion and inviolability that

attaches naturally to the object of erotic love.

The Wagnerian conception of being-towards-death involves at its core redemption. Being a being-towards-death enables the existent to relate meaningfully to the other, and in the case of *Tristan and Isolde* this takes expression in erotic love. In Wagner's opera redemption is to be found in love: 'love is a relation between dying things. But love also includes, in its highest form, a recognition and acceptance of death' (Scruton, 2013: 13). To be redeemed is to be consoled, thus the existent is able to face up to and accept death. We come to understand by the Wagnerian example that an understanding of death involves the search for a consolation, perhaps the ultimate consolation (and it seems reasonable that the ultimate tragedy should seek out the ultimate consolation). Indeed, as Wagner and many others have realised, there is something about certain aesthetic works that speaks to humans about our mortal condition (Scruton, 2013: 3-14). These and their kind have been the conduit by which humanity has grasped the truth of its condition and, to varying degrees, made peace with it.

'To see life-until-death as tragedy, is to be exposed to catharsis in the continual effort to narrate the meaning of life', says Van Niekerk (1999: 422). Catharsis, as understood by Aristotle, is the purging of pity and fear (Scruton, 2013: 162; Van Niekerk, 1999: 422). If we are to narrate the meaning of our life we must live our life, and to live means to be burdened with possibilities and actualities; recognising each other as mortal beings we recognise that each of us is worthy of pity because we die, and subject to fear because of the frailty that life-until-death suggests. When we internalise the reality of life-until-death, says Van Niekerk, we are spurred to finding means for our catharsis. An observer can learn from the seminal tragedy of *Tristan und Isolde* that the catharsis they seek is only

⁶I make use of examples of art that I believe have an existential impact. They have such an impact, in my view, because they fundamentally address in their subject matter the issues of death,

modes of relating to others and the idea of authenticity, so presenting us with conceptions of self-actualization.

attainable through an orienting of themselves towards life in such a way that they come to manifest their fate, by self-actualising themselves as a being-with-others. The observer, through their interaction with art, comes to the existential realisation that Tristan and Isolde's mutual need for one another mirrors people's need for authentic being-with-the-other to achieve the self-transcendence that actualising the self entails, which is the integration of the self as a being-with-others-to-the-end. Hence the plausibility that 'Tristan and Isolde ... experience [their mutual] love as a will to die' (Scruton, 2013: 194).

As explained in the previous section, being-with-others (as opposed to merely being amongst them) is a definitive, rooted ontological aspect of our nature. Indeed, this being-with must be authentic if it is to be at all meaningful. Any ontologically meaningful relationship must be sincere: pursued not as a means to some end located outside of the other, but with the other himself as the end. Only by reconciling ourselves to those special people that have been lifted out of the minutiae of the everyday world either purposefully by us, or the other, or the chance of circumstance, can we become more than what we merely want to become: we become what we ought to want to become, which, in a certain sense, is what we were meant to become. The arts, furnishing us with no shortage of examples, crucially provide a means by which we may be reconciled with the other. In the popular song sung by Joe Dassin, *Et si tu n'existais pas*, the singer asks what his life would be like if a particularly significant person did not exist. He believes that without the significant other his life would have been just another trivial addition in a frenzied world, continually coming and going, but never dwelling or remaining meaningfully (Delanoë & Lemesle, 1975). In William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, the titular character, Macbeth, is forced to take stock of just such a world in his final soliloquy by the suicide of his wife: Macbeth sees life as a 'brief candle', 'a walking shadow', a poor actor strutting out a performance, who looks forward to nothing after the termination of his days because they never really

began. An inauthentic life is one such life (Shakespeare, 2010: 209-211):

a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury
Signifying nothing.

The death of Lady Macbeth leaves Macbeth alone in the world, and so his life loses what little meaning it had for him. Through the example of Macbeth, viewers or readers of the play may come to understand that being-with-others is what enables us to live authentically as beings-towards-death.

Similarly, we have a vision of inauthentic existence in the character of Orwell's (2021) Gordon Comstock in *Keep the Aspidistra Flying*. Gordon Comstock is beset by a sarcastic and flippant attitude to the world in which he exists, an inauthentic world of ideology and disillusionment, buttressed by a very wealthy friend who pretends from time to time to share the burdens suffered by the working class. Comstock suffers crisis after crisis, each self-wrought and progressively more self-destructive, as he wrestles within his being to emerge from the inauthenticity that subjugates life around him, and which has also polluted his own being. He turns down a good promotion and quits his work, he severs himself from the one meaningful relationship he has, that with Rosemary, and he abuses the charity of his beloved sister to sustain himself in a terribly small, dark, and isolated single room, much inferior to his previous lodgings, in order that he may write in complete solitude an epic poem to rival the great poets. His attempt inevitably fails. But Comstock is redeemed when he accepts at the end of the novel the love of Rosemary, who succeeds in lifting him out of the inauthenticity of the purely idealistic world, which had troubled him so and had as its ultimate expression his all-consuming, though admittedly mediocre, poetic endeavours, and returning him to the world of genuinely felt interpersonal relations (Orwell, 2021). Thus, Rosemary saves Gordon from existential insignificance, and their relating to each other as a being-with-others is the precondition of their further self-formation. In Scruton's (2005: 91) words, 'the true task

of love [...] is to know oneself as other, by knowing another as oneself. Dassin's song echoes these observations (Delanoë & Lemesle, 1975):

Et si tu n'existais pas
Dis-moi comment j'existerais ?
Je pourrais faire semblant d'être moi
Mais je ne serais pas vrai.

The verse translated reads: '[a]nd if you did not exist, tell me, how would I exist? I could pretend to be me, but I would not truly be me' (author's translation). Dassin and Orwell, through their works, both enable their audience to realise that they cannot live an existentially meaningful life without their significant others. Such relations constrain our beings into growth both by example and by experience, for they show us our inadequacies and call us to reconcile ourselves to the world by living authentically, by being true to the self we have discovered, and wish to discover through our living. If we are not to fall into the trap of Macbeth, or become as the Hollow Men in T.S. Eliot's (1963: 86-89) haunting poem, impotent and unindividualised, we must relate authentically to the other, and we are brought to consciousness of this fact by our knowledge that death is an ever present and irrevocable possibility.

There is a mode of being for which the idea of self-actualisation has little purchase, at least in the way it is envisaged in this paper. I am referring to the postmodern orientation, which leads people to move from one experience to another, one state of being to another, all the while unwilling or unable to dwell on what they are and in the place at which they have arrived (Van Niekerk, 1999: 412). Van Niekerk's observation reminds us of a similar observation made by T. S. Eliot in his epoch defining poem *The Wasteland* (2009: 43):

A crowd flowed over London Bridge,
so many,

I had not thought Death had undone
so many.

The postmodern person is unwilling to integrate the possibility of death into their daily living, thus they are unable to dwell in a place, and instead speak incessantly of "space", being unable or unwilling to lay down roots⁷; the postmodern is in continuous movement, likened by Eliot to a deluge flowing over the bonds that connect the city: their frenetic style of life is so empty that to Eliot it was not life at all, but a shallow imposter from the shadow realm of death. 'Death is the impulse that generates the narrative quest in all of us. Without the reality of death awaiting us all, the interpretive integration which narrative facilitates, finds no impulse or sustenance' (Van Niekerk, 1999: 418). Integrating the reality of life-until-death is imperative for a person to be moved to 'narrate' as it were the meaning of their own life. Without such integration one loses the ability to interpret the meaning of one's life, and will likely fail to self-actualise. We self-actualise because of the anxiety that the threat of missed opportunity entails and because we are seeking a fuller existence, in which we tend towards the limit of being more whole than we are now.

Our lives are in need of consolation precisely because of our (necessary) consciousness of death; thus are we spurred to relation and reconciliation with the other, and not just all the others, but those that we come to identify and single out as special to us. Thus, may we succeed in realising the catharsis that tempers the pity and fear death would otherwise carry. In Ishiguro's (2005) *Never Let Me Go*, we are presented two youths, Cathy and Tommy, who grow up together at the same idyllic boarding school. Their love for each other develops slowly. However, all is not in fact Edenic. Tommy and Cathy, and all their peers, are clones who

⁷See Simone Weil's (1971) *The Need for Roots* for a related argument for dwelling.

are brought up for the sole purpose of “donating” their organs to their non-clone human progenitors. Towards the end of the novel, Tommy finally realises that he cannot escape his fast-approaching death. Such grief, when realised, is all-consuming, and can only be expressed by the mindless screams in the dark desolate field with which Tommy tries to drown out his fateful knowledge. Such knowledge has only one palliative – the other who also shares in his tragic factual burden (Ishiguro, 2005: 269):

I reached for his flailing arms and held on tight. He tried to shake me off, but I kept holding on, until he stopped shouting [...]. Then I realized he too had his arms around me. And so we stood together like that, at the top of that field, for what seemed like ages, not saying anything, just holding each other, while the wind kept blowing and blowing at us, tugging our clothes, and for a moment, it seemed like we were holding onto each other because that was the only way to stop us being swept away into the night.

Ishiguro’s protagonists embrace each other and become as one not for any pleasure but to console. ‘Wisdom is truth that consoles’ says Scruton (2005: vii); love, then, in its authenticity, is wisdom. Love is the wisdom that accepts the tragedy of finitude by overcoming the vacuous protests we emit into the night through the consolation that being-with-the-other provides. By reconciling oneself to oneself as a being-with-others, one is consoled by the presence of the other as fundamentally involved with one’s being. Thus, the clones express a very human sentiment in confronting the reality of their impending death, something that might be expressed as “at least this will stand, for a time, and if it is to go, let us be taken with it, together”. Ishiguro’s reader is thus reminded of the tragedy that is the reality of their own death, but

reminded also of the consolation to be found in being a being-with-others.



Figure 1: *Christ carrying the Cross*, by Bartolomeo Montagna (c. 1503). Ashmoleun Museum, Oxford.

For an example from fine art, consider Bartolomeo Montagna’s (c. 1503) painting of *Christ carrying the Cross*⁸ (Figure 1), which exemplifies both being-towards-the-end and being-with-others. Montagna’s depiction of Christ is one of acceptance. In this painting we see an example of an existent that has accepted their own impending death, for Christ is carrying the cross on his back to the site upon which he will be crucified. His face shows a calmness that we may well wonder at in the face of death. However, calmness does not preclude tragedy, and the viewer may sense the tragedy either in the narrative context of the subject, the wounds apparent on his forehead and chest, or the pathos evoked by the dark palette surrounding his body. The painter has deliberately chosen for the subject’s eyes not to be focused upon the viewer of the picture, and this is where being-with-the-other enters

⁸ I make no religious claims in this short analysis of the painting, but rather I make claims arising from reflection upon the picture

in and of itself and religion as a mode of being-with-others. Whenever I refer to Christ I refer only to the subject of the picture.

the frame; for Christ's sympathetic eyes are focussed upon someone who is not in the picture. The viewer, in perceiving this, may view the picture partly as a depiction of being-with-others-to-the-end.

But there is another way in which the painting lends itself to an interpretation of being-with-others. Scruton (2016: 2), in outlining Durkheim's view of religion, says: 'if Durkheim is to be followed, this is the core religious experience, the experience of myself as a member of something, called upon to renounce my interests for the sake of the group and to celebrate my membership of the group in acts of devotion'. In this view, the core characteristic of religion is membership of a community. There is a being-with-others fundamental to religion that can be seen in acts of renunciation and in acts of devotion. The painting of *Christ carrying the Cross* is an example through which Christians may relate to one another through the religious figure of Christ that symbolises unconditional love and an acceptance of death.

Love is the call that allows us to reconcile with death, and the ever-present possibility of death is the call to love. Love and death, then, are calls to self-actualisation; they show our being the way to authenticity, and give us reason to develop ourselves. Love and death, the self and the other reconciled as being-with-the-other-to-the-end, are thus like a tremulous tenor, calling from the quire of a cathedral, beckoning us to begin or resume our lives, gracefully: then, like conjoined souls swaying close together in the twilight, can we be consoled of death by life.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, death should be an integrated consideration in our daily living. It is under the aspect of our finitude that human existence as we know it with its systems of mortality and value are maintained. Moreover, the reality of death spurs the creation of meaning because it places a limit upon our horizon, and invites us to consider not just the present moment, but the present moment in consideration of the future and our definite end. Indeed, the existential meaning and relevancy of death are to be found in how we integrate it, through a process of self-actualisation, as the final limit upon the possibilities that arise from our existence, and by which we discover who we could be. I submit that the strategy by which this can be achieved is through an existential consideration of the other as an ontological part of our being, and that we are aided in understanding this truth through an aesthetics that is existential, which speaks to our being. Such an aesthetic is rooted in the existent relating to others and the world. By self-actualising, the existent succeeds in integrating the self and the other and realises the authenticity of the I-You relation, so becoming an authentic being-with-others. Thus, by the reciprocal relation of art, love and death may one find consolation. The existent is moved to relate authentically to the other because of the finitude imposed by death, whilst the ever-present possibility of death enables the existent to forge meaningful relationships. Similarly, art as a mode of being-with-the-other informs the existent of the importance of self-actualisation and authentic being-with-others as a means of consolation, whilst death spurs the existent to art in search of that consolation.

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