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Death, Demise, and *Nibbāna*: Interpreting Heidegger on 'Being-Towards-Death'

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers an interpretation of Heidegger's conception of being-towards-death that differs from the 'mortality' and 'world collapse' readings that are dominant in the secondary literature. It takes as its point of departure the incompleteness and projective orientation implied by Heidegger's characterization of Dasein as 'being-possible'. In contrast to other entities, Dasein is not fully present because it is characterized in terms of possibility rather than actuality. But Dasein is constantly directed towards the actualization of its possibilities. That means that Dasein is constantly directed towards bringing about the condition in which – as fully actual rather than being-possible – it would cease to be Dasein. This, the paper argues, is what Heidegger means by 'being-towards-death'. It fleshes out this point by showing important parallels between Heidegger's practical philosophy and Buddhist soteriology: what Heidegger means by 'death' resembles in some important respects the Buddhist ideal of *nibbāna* rather than the end of a human life.

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1. Introduction

Division 2 of *Being and Time* opens with a chapter on death. This chapter serves as a pivot in the text, shifting from the analysis of Dasein's 'average everyday' existence in Division 1 towards an examination of authenticity and temporality. The chapter on death orients the reader towards the investigation of what authentic existence might look like. How we find ourselves oriented by that chapter, then, affects not just our understanding of what Heidegger makes of death, but our understanding of Division 2 as a whole.

Owing partly to its importance, but owing also to interpretive difficulties that are internal to the text of that chapter, Heidegger's discussion of death has occasioned more divergent readings than possibly any other chapter in *Being and Time*. In particular, two broad approaches have emerged in the Anglophone secondary literature over the past three decades, which seem

starkly at odds with one another. The first, which I will call the mortality reading, takes Heidegger to be looking at the phenomenon we ordinarily call 'death' – namely the end of a person's life – through a distinctively existential-ontological lens. For the most part, we avoid thinking about our mortality, or cast such thoughts as morbid, but Heidegger wants us to consider how our existence as a whole might take on an altered significance and urgency if we were to exist under the constant shadow of our finitude.¹ The second approach, which I will call the world collapse reading, pushes a more radical line, arguing for a less literal understanding of what Heidegger means by 'death'. This reading aligns death with the total collapse of Dasein's projects and world in the face of anxiety. What 'dies', on a world collapse reading, is not Dasein as the bearer of a human life, but rather Dasein as a being that comports itself towards a world that it understands.²

I don't find the world collapse reading entirely persuasive, but I do find it a productive spur for thinking about what Heidegger might mean by 'death', forcing on us the recognition that, at this deep level of the investigation, we shouldn't too readily take for granted that we know what Heidegger is talking about. In particular, the world collapse reading makes stark an insight that is already present in the mortality reading, although less pronounced: that the death at issue pertains to *Dasein's existence* and not to the *life* of a *human being*. Heidegger introduces his nomenclature of 'Dasein' and 'existence' precisely to mark a difference between the target of his investigation and the assumptions in the philosophical tradition about what a human life is. At many points in *Being and Time*, we can substitute 'human beings' or 'people' for 'Dasein' without too much risk of confusion or distortion, but not when Heidegger is talking about death. If we want to get clear on what is distinctive about Dasein's death, we must give attention to what is distinctive about Dasein's mode of being, namely existence.

Two related features of Dasein's existence are particularly salient for our understanding of death: Dasein's forward-facing practical orientation and its incompleteness. Although Heidegger emphasizes that Dasein is structured by both thrownness and projection, already-being-in and ahead-of-itself, past and future, he gives priority to the forward-facing aspect of Dasein.³ This orientation informs Heidegger's characterization of Dasein as incomplete. Heidegger repeatedly emphasizes 'Dasein's character as possibility' (*BT* 248–49/293). Dasein's projects are not simply contingent goals that Dasein may or may not have at any given time. It is rather an essential feature of the kind of being Dasein *is* that it projects itself towards possibilities that it is 'not-yet'. *Because* Dasein is oriented in this forward-facing way it is not wholly self-present in the way that other entities are.

I think we can best understand what Heidegger means by 'death' and 'being-towards-death' in terms of these two features. If the death of a biological organism is the cessation of its biological functioning, the

death of a being that is essentially incomplete should be the cessation of its incompleteness – namely in coming to wholeness. What's more, all of Dasein's projects aim at their own completion. In constantly aiming at completion, Dasein aims at the conditions under which it would cease to be Dasein. In this respect, we are constantly oriented in our being towards our own death.

I will spell all of this out in more detail. [Section 2](#) gives an account of Heidegger's practical philosophy in terms of Dasein's forward-facing orientation and its incompleteness. [Section 3](#) articulates the interpretation of existential death that I sketched in the previous paragraph, arguing that this interpretation follows naturally from the practical philosophy outlined in [section 2](#). [Section 4](#) develops this account of death by noting some parallels to the account that I've given in Buddhist soteriology. [Sections 5](#) and [6](#) raise problems for mortality and world collapse readings, respectively, showing how they don't adequately answer to the characterization I give in [section 2](#). And [section 7](#) concludes by considering, in light of my comparison with Buddhist soteriology, how far we might conceive Heidegger's project as soteriological.

2. Being-Possible: Projection and Incompleteness

To get clear on what it means for Dasein to die we need to get clear on the kind of entity Dasein *is*. Heidegger terms the distinctive kind of being of Dasein 'existence' (*Existenz*), which he distinguishes from the traditional philosophical conception of being as being-present-at-hand (*Vorhandensein*). A present-at-hand entity is an object with properties. A rock may have the properties of weighing 10.3 kg, being of a mottled grey colour, being roughly ovoid in shape, and so on. These properties are all *present* features of the rock – what Heidegger calls the 'factuality' (*Tatsächlichkeit*: BT 56/82) of the rock. In addition, there are various possible properties that the rock could have but presently does not. It could be painted yellow, it could sprout moss, it could be heated in a fire, and so on. These possibilities are not part of the rock's factuality, however. What the rock *is* is determined entirely in terms of actuality, not possibility.

By contrast, Heidegger claims that Dasein is defined in terms of being-possible (*Möglichsein*: BT 143/183; cf. also BT 42/67). Instead of having *properties*, Dasein has *possibilities*.⁴ The traditional hierarchy that accords higher ontological status to actuality over possibility applies to present-at-hand entities but is reversed in the case of Dasein: as an *existentiale* – an essential feature of Dasein's being – possibility 'is the most primordial and ultimate positive way in which Dasein is characterized ontologically' (BT 143–44/183). In contrast to the wholly present nature of present-at-hand entities, 'Dasein is constantly "more" than it

factually is' (BT 145/185). Heidegger claims that Dasein 'is existentially that which, in its ability-to-be, it is *not yet*' (BT 145/185–86) and characterizes Dasein as 'Being-ahead-of-itself' (BT 192/236). Unlike present-at-hand entities, what Dasein *is* is always more than the sum of its present determinate characteristics – its facticity – because these 'not yet' possibilities are essential aspects of Dasein's being. Indeed, the Latin verb *existere*, whence Heidegger derives his term for Dasein's distinctive way of being, literally means 'to stand forth': Dasein is the kind of being that stands forth from what it is at any given moment such that it is never wholly present.

Heidegger uses the term 'projection' (*Entwurf*) to characterize Dasein's relation to its possibilities (BT 145/185). The word contrasts suggestively with thrownness (*Geworfenheit*): Dasein is thrown into the world and then throws itself out into its possibilities. *Entwurf* literally means 'throw out' although it is also the word for a draft: Dasein is constantly drafting and re-drafting itself, never arriving at the finished version.

The possibilities that Dasein projects are existential possibilities, not logical possibilities. An existential possibility is not just something Dasein *could* be but rather something Dasein is oriented *towards*. Dasein's orientation towards possibilities is manifest in the recurring use of the preposition *zu* in Heidegger's practical philosophy – *das Wozu*, *das Um-zu*, *das Zuhandensein*, and the various 'being-towards' formulations, most importantly for our purposes the *Sein zum Tode* of being-towards-death.⁵ This formulation suggests not just a relation of proximity between Dasein's facticity and its possibilities, as if these possibilities were neutrally situated at a certain finite remove from Dasein's facticity within a mappable possibility space, but implicates Dasein in actively bringing about their actualization.⁶ When I walk to the bus stop or start chopping up vegetables, I am projecting myself upon the possibilities of taking the bus or cooking dinner. By contrast, it is *logically* possible that I could stop what I'm doing and lick the pavement or throw the kitchen knife out the window but these are not *existential* possibilities – or simply 'possibilities' as Heidegger uses the term – because they hold no salience for me.

Because Dasein is defined by existential possibilities towards which it is oriented, the being of Dasein is crucially not simply something Dasein *has* but is rather something Dasein *does*.⁷ Heidegger characterizes the unfolding of its being in terms of ability – an ability-to-be (*Seinkönnen*). This broader ability-to-be is what gives existential possibilities their salience. Taking the bus is available as a possibility in a way that licking the pavement isn't because the bus journey takes me to the university, say, and contributes to a broader sense of myself as a philosopher working at a university. This ability-to-be a philosopher isn't a particular goal that I am working towards realizing but a self-understanding within which other possibilities make the

sense that they do. It's in having this ability-to-be, Heidegger says, that we stand in certain possibilities and not others (BT 285/331).⁸

This account of Dasein as essentially projecting itself on possibilities yields a picture of Dasein as incomplete because of its forward-facing orientation and forward-facing because incomplete. On one hand, as being-possible, Dasein is 'more' than it factually is: unlike present-at-hand entities, Dasein's being is not present or actual as a whole. But on the other hand, as projecting, it is oriented towards the actualization of its possibilities. Dasein projects itself towards wholeness but this projection is a feature of a being-possible that is precisely what makes Dasein not a whole.

A suggestive analogy with walking illustrates this relation between projection and incompleteness. Walking consists of a series of controlled falls, in which the body throws itself off balance and then catches itself by swinging a foot forward. This series of controlled falls results in forward motion. Dasein is similarly oriented in a forward direction and is impelled forward by being ontologically off-balance, as it were: Dasein's status as being-possible is essentially unstable, as it is constantly directed towards the actualization of its existential possibilities. Dasein projects itself upon possibilities in the way that a walker swings her leg forward, aiming at a wholeness or stability that remains constantly ahead of itself. And just as walking comes to an end – and a walker comes to a halt – when the body achieves balance and stability, so does Dasein come to an end when it achieves wholeness.

3. Dasein's Death

Division 2 of *Being and Time* opens by calling into question the primordality (*Ursprünglichkeit*) of the analysis of Division 1. One reason to question its primordality lies precisely in the account of projection and incompleteness that I outlined in the previous section: Dasein's incompleteness means that it 'is essentially opposed to the possibility of our getting it in our grasp as an entity which is a whole' (BT 233/276). Hence Heidegger raises the question of whether and in what way Dasein can be understood as a whole. His answer, at least provisionally, is that Dasein comes to wholeness in death, so that making sense of the possibility of Dasein's being-a-whole requires 'an ontologically adequate conception of death' (BT 234/277). That is, Heidegger needs to develop a conception of death that answers to the distinctive kind of being of Dasein.

The problem, of course, is that, far from coming to wholeness in death, Dasein simply ceases to exist. As an entity that is essentially incomplete, the coming-to-wholeness of Dasein is also Dasein's ceasing to be. '[I]n Dasein there is always something *still outstanding*, which, as an ability-to-be for Dasein itself has not yet become "actual"', says Heidegger. 'It is essential to the basic constitution of Dasein that there is *constantly something still to be*

settled’ (BT 236/279). He goes on to note that ‘as soon as Dasein “exists” in such a way that absolutely nothing more is still outstanding in it, then it has already for this very reason become “no-longer-being-there” [*Nicht-mehr-da-sein*]. Its being is annihilated when what is still outstanding in its being has been liquidated’ (BT 236/280).

An entity of a given kind that loses a property that is essential to being an entity of that kind ceases to be an entity of that kind. That might seem enough reason to claim that Dasein ceases to be Dasein if it ceases to be incomplete. But why does Heidegger talk not just about Dasein’s annihilation (*Vernichtung*) but also about Dasein’s ‘death’? The reason for this difference is that incompleteness is not a *property* of Dasein, not even an essential property. As I noted in the previous section, Dasein’s incompleteness is a feature of its being defined by *possibilities* rather than by present-at-hand properties. Dasein’s death, then, is not a matter of Dasein ceasing to have an essential property but a matter of Dasein ceasing to be defined in terms of existential possibilities.

The twist is that, in its projective orientation, Dasein is constantly directed towards this coming-to-wholeness. What it means to be *towards* possibilities is to be directed towards their actualization. To the extent that Dasein is oriented towards its possibilities, it is oriented towards their annihilation *as* possibilities: ‘Being out for something possible, there is a tendency to *annihilate the possibility* of the possible by making it available to us’ (BT 261/305; emphasis in the original). What it means for my vegetable chopping to be directed towards the possibility of eating dinner is that eating dinner is a possibility I am working to actualize: if all goes well, eating dinner will cease to be a *possibility* for me. More generally, as an entity whose essence is partly constituted by its ability-to-be, Dasein must ‘*not yet be something*’ (BT 233/276), but this ‘yet’ entails a directedness towards this ‘something’ that it is ‘not yet’.

In other words, as an entity that projects possibilities, Dasein is existentially oriented towards creating the condition in which it ceases to be Dasein. As we have seen, Heidegger maintains that Dasein, as being-possible already ‘*is existentially that which ... it is not yet*’ (BT 145/185–86). Heidegger extends this reasoning, noting that ‘just as Dasein *is* already its “not-yet” ... it *is* already its end too’ (BT 245/289). Heidegger clarifies: this end that Dasein already is not Dasein’s being-at-an-end (*Zu-Ende-sein*) but Dasein’s being-towards-the-end (*Sein zum Ende*). All Dasein’s projective possibilities orient it towards the circumstances in which it ceases to be Dasein. ‘Death is a way to be’, Heidegger writes, ‘which Dasein takes over as soon as it is’ (BT 245/289).

This last remark, which is so central to world collapse readings, needn’t be read as saying that death is something that Dasein can ‘live through’ (Thomson 2013, 267). On the contrary, it’s clear from other moments in

the text that a 'way to be' (*Weise zu sein*) isn't a temporary condition but a general way in which Dasein comports itself towards its being like inauthenticity (BT 128/166), authenticity (BT 313/360–61), and everydayness (BT 371/422).⁹ Heidegger calls this way of being dying (*Sterben*), defining it as 'that way of being in which Dasein is towards its death' (BT 247/291). Dying and being-towards-death designate the way in which Dasein understands itself as existentially oriented towards the completion of those possibilities in virtue of which Dasein is Dasein. Any one of my particular possibilities can be actualized without disrupting my existence but if I understand these particular projective possibilities within the broader context of Dasein's existential structure, I recognize my existence as a whole is oriented towards its ending.

Heidegger distinguishes the practical possibilities that we are concerned with actualizing – possibilities, Heidegger says, that we encounter 'in the field of what is ready-to-hand and present-at-hand – what is attainable, controllable, practicable, and the like' (BT 261/305) – from being-towards-death as a possibility, which Heidegger says 'cannot have the character of concernfully being out to get itself actualized' (BT 261/305). He marks this difference by saying that we expect (*erwarten*) these practical possibilities whereas we anticipate (*vorlaufen*) the possibility of death (BT 262/306). In anticipation – literally 'running ahead' – Dasein runs ahead through its possibilities and sees how they empty out in death. This running ahead allows Dasein to understand itself as finite: although each possibility is open-ended, collectively Dasein's possibilities point towards a terminus.

Becoming whole is not a possibility for Dasein – since, as we have seen, possibility entails incompleteness – but Heidegger does write about an 'ability-to-be-whole' (*Ganzseinkönnen*; BT 233/276). He connects the ability-to-be-whole to anticipatory resoluteness (BT 303/350). Ordinarily, Dasein understands its ability-to-be in general terms – as a philosopher, a parent, a patriot: these are generalized ways in which others can be as well. But anticipation of death reveals to Dasein that it has its own ability-to-be, an ability-to-be 'in which its very being is the issue' (BT 263/307). In recognizing itself as a finite whole, anticipation 'includes the possibility of existing as a whole ability-to-be' (BT 264/309). In reckoning with its finite structure, Dasein also recognizes its ability-to-be as unfolding within this finite whole, and thereby makes it its own. Dasein does not *become* whole in death, but in running ahead towards death, Dasein comes to understand itself as a whole. Hence, Heidegger construes Dasein's being-towards-death as its primordial way of understanding its ability-to-be (BT 306/354).

Heidegger contrasts dying with two other related terms, both of which denote a different kind of ending associated with Dasein. Perishing (*Verenden*) is 'the ending of anything that is alive' (BT 240/284), that is the cessation of a biological organism. This is a fate that human beings share

with animals and plants. And demise (*Ableben*) is an ‘intermediate phenomenon’ (BT 247/291) between dying and perishing. As an entity that has existence rather than just life, Dasein doesn’t perish.¹⁰ But Dasein can still adopt the attitude towards itself as an entity that perishes. Demise is the ontic event of the death of the human being that we commonly associate with death.

Failing to recognize that there is more to Dasein’s death than demise is characteristic of an inauthentic relation to death. Inauthenticity is a form of motivated self-misinterpretation. By failing to reckon with its distinctive existential structure, Dasein disburdens itself of the distinctive challenge of being a self-interpreting being.¹¹ As a being that is defined by possibilities rather than by biological functioning, Dasein’s death is to be understood in terms of the cessation of possibilities rather than in terms of the cessation of biological function. The cessation of biological function is a future event, which Dasein can postpone reckoning with. But Dasein is at every moment oriented towards possibilities and so its being-towards-death is a way of being rather than a future event.

We obviously don’t for the most part reflect on this self-annihilating orientation explicitly but that orientation constantly structures our practical activity. Heidegger claims that, ‘if Dasein exists, it has already been *thrown into*’ its being-towards-death (BT 251/295), but this thrownness into death only becomes clear to Dasein in anxiety. Anxiety, he claims, ‘amounts to the disclosedness of the fact that Dasein exists as thrown Being *towards* its end’ (BT 251/295). Anxiety is related to death and conscience – the central concept of the second chapter of Division II of *Being and Time* – as one in a series of equiprimordial triads that align with the three temporal dimensions of past (anxiety), present (conscience), and future (death).

On this interpretation, Dasein’s death is not the ending of a human life, nor is it the collapse of its intelligible world. Death is rather the limit that defines Dasein’s existential structure: the end (in a teleological sense) towards which Dasein is constantly oriented but whose achievement would spell the end (in a terminal sense) of Dasein.

The death proper to a being defined in terms of possibility is itself a possibility. But, as the ultimate end upon which Dasein projects itself, death is a possibility of a special kind. On one hand, it is a *certain* possibility in the sense that Dasein, insofar as it projects itself upon possibilities at all, projects itself upon its death (BT 264–65/309). On the other hand, it is the one possibility that will never be actualized. Dasein exists only as long as it is structured by possibility, and it ceases to exist as Dasein when it ceases to be so structured. Death, as the coming-to-wholeness of Dasein through the ultimate actualization of all its possibilities, represents the outermost limit of Dasein’s existence as being-possible: both the end towards, which all possibilities aim, and the end of all possibilities as possibilities, and hence

the end of Dasein itself. Death is a possibility of sorts, but since its actualization would also represent the end of Dasein *qua* Dasein, Heidegger characterizes it as ‘the possibility of the impossibility of Dasein as such’ (*die Möglichkeit der schlechthinnigen Daseinsunmöglichkeit*; BT 250/294).¹²

As certain, death is inescapably a possibility for Dasein, and as its ultimate possibility (*äußerste Möglichkeit*; BT 255/299), Dasein’s death is constantly with it as a possibility. Heidegger thus characterizes death as Dasein’s ‘ownmost’ (*eigenst*) possibility. All other possibilities are contingent for any given Dasein and can be sloughed off through actualization. But to the extent that Dasein is structured by possibility at all – which is to say, to the extent that Dasein is Dasein – death is the ultimate endpoint at which all possibility aims. In this respect, as Heidegger has it, Dasein is structured by being-towards-death.

This might seem like a puzzling argument to make: I am at once assenting to a central plank of the mortality reading – that, contrary to the world collapse reading, Dasein’s ‘end’ is a terminal one from which it does not recover – while rejecting the natural and obvious candidate for such a terminal end, namely the end of a human life. Heidegger clearly does think that it is absolutely relevant that Dasein comports itself ‘towards’ its end or its death. And indeed it might seem that any adequate account of the structure and significance of human existence should give prominent place to the inescapable and unsettling fact of human mortality. But that isn’t universally so: despite the seeming importance of human mortality, it is functionally irrelevant to Buddhist soteriology. Heidegger’s existential phenomenology diverges from Buddhist soteriology in many ways but I think their teleological structures share important similarities. Tracing the outlines of Buddhist soteriology can help us see more clearly how Heidegger conceives of death. In particular, although Heidegger does not embrace the Buddhist soteriological project, the Buddhist ideal of *nibbāna* (Skt. *nirvāṇa*)¹³ provides a model for a terminal ‘end’ to our existence that doesn’t coincide with human mortality.

4. Death and Nibbāna

First let me state clearly what this comparison with Buddhist soteriology is supposed to show us about Heidegger. I have claimed that, *pace* mortality readings of Heidegger on death, human mortality has no essential bearing on Dasein’s existential structure. To think that it does is to confuse the apple of human life with the orange of Dasein’s existence. The first aim of the comparison with Buddhist soteriology, then, is to lend plausibility to the idea that deep and searching investigations of the meaning of human existence can overlook human mortality for principled reasons. Second, as I will show, the principled reason for which Buddhist soteriology overlooks human

mortality is that the importance we typically place on human mortality is motivated by what Buddhists take to be a misconception about the nature of the self. Although Heidegger's analysis of Dasein doesn't coincide with the Buddhist conception of no-self, or *anattā* (Skt. *anātman*), he too thinks that our unreflective conception of the self is perniciously misguided and his analysis of Dasein's existence – and concomitantly its death – aims to rectify this misconception. And third, Buddhist soteriology provides an account of what it might mean for human existence to have an end that doesn't coincide with the ending of a human life. This account obviously differs from Heidegger's in many important respects, but it shares with Heidegger the idea that the ending that is proper to us – once we come to an appropriate understanding of the self – should be sought in our intentional structure rather than in our physiological structure.

Heidegger's conception of Dasein responds to what he takes to be a deep misunderstanding in the received conception of the self. In broad outline, the Buddhist conception of *anattā* does similar work: the Buddhist tradition, too, addresses what it takes to be a fundamental misunderstanding in the received conception of the self, and promises that correcting that misunderstanding effects a radical transformation in our self-understanding. The details of these two programs differ in a number of important ways – although perhaps less so than it might at first appear – but some of the parallels are instructive. In particular, both Heidegger and Buddhist philosophers think that the shifts they want to effect in our conception of the self will also shift our focus from what Heidegger calls 'demise' to the ending that is proper to an entity with the kind of being that we have.

Like Heidegger, the Buddhist tradition rejects the notion of a substantial self, arguing for a more dynamic and open-ended conception of our form of being. What we call a self is a compound of five *khandhas* (Skt. *skandhas*) – aggregates or heaps – that are themselves in constant flux. The term *khandha* derives from the expression for a heap of firewood and the metaphor of fire features centrally in early Buddhist thinking about the self, suffering, and *nibbāna*, most notably in the *Fire Sermon* (*Ādittapariyāya Sutta*).¹⁴ On this metaphor, what perdures across time is not the fuel but the flame that consumes the fuel. The burning is suffering, or *dukkha* (Skt. *duḥkha*), and it is our ignorance concerning the origin of *dukkha* that keeps us adding fuel to the fire. Buddhist soteriology directs us towards *nibbāna*, or cessation, which is also the expression for the extinction of a flame.

The Pāli word *dukkha* is notoriously difficult to translate, connoting not just suffering but unsatisfactoriness, unease, or anxiety: there is something fundamentally unsatisfying about existence itself. Canonically, there are three forms of *dukkha*: suffering due to pain, suffering due to impermanence, and suffering due to volitional formations.¹⁵ These three forms of *dukkha* can be understood as a progressive deepening of the problem

of existence. The first form of *dukkha* (*dukkha-dukkha*) deals not just with physical pain but also with mental distress, and not just with the immediate negative sensations but with our negative reaction to these sensations. In effect, we can't always get what we want, and adverse outcomes cause distress. The second form of *dukkha* (*vipariṇāma-dukkha*) adds that, even when we *do* get what we want, our happiness is marked by suffering: everything is impermanent, and so we face the future suffering of losing what we have gained and the present suffering of anxiety in the face of that future loss. The third form of *dukkha* (*saṅkhāra-dukkha*) makes explicit what is already implicit in the first two forms: the problem is not so much with getting or not getting what we want but with the wanting itself. Volitional formations (*saṅkhāra*; Skt. *saṃskāra*) only give rise to further volitional formations – they heap more fuel on the fire of *dukkha* – and so our volitionally-driven actions, however they turn out in the short term, only keep us ensnared in an ultimately unsatisfying cycle of desire (*saṃsāra*).

Some similarities to the picture I sketched in [section 2](#) should be apparent. Heidegger's characterization of Dasein as shaped by its projective orientation to existential possibilities resonates with the Buddhist picture of human existence conditioned by *saṅkhāra*. Both portray human existence as fundamentally incomplete while also being directed towards completeness. On the Buddhist view, we are conditioned by our volitional formations and volition aims at its own satisfaction: desire aims at the extinction of desire. *Saṅkhāra* in the Buddhist picture has a strikingly similar role to existential possibility in the Heideggerian picture.

A picture of intentional action in which desire plays a central role is hardly unique to Buddhism. What makes this comparison salient is the way this familiar picture of desire and possibility opens up a longer view of human existence. In the previous section, I argued that we should understand Heidegger's conception of being-towards-death as spelling out the long-view consequences of this picture: Dasein is structured such that it is constantly directed towards the ending of the open-ended structure that makes it Dasein to begin with. In the Buddhist dispensation, too, we are constantly directed towards our own end, although here it gets a distinctive twist. Desire does indeed aim at its own satisfaction, but as long as we are ignorant of the origin of that desire, we will find no lasting solution to the problem of suffering.

The Buddhist scriptures present two routes we might take to the satisfaction of our desires. The first, based in primal ignorance (*moha*) of suffering and its origin, supposes that we can satisfy our desires by getting what we want, and that our suffering is a merely contingent consequence of not getting what we want. This outlook keeps a person captive in the cycle of *saṃsāra* by providing the fuel that feeds further desire: although we might

satisfy this or that particular desire, the craving that drives us to its satisfaction conditions us in such a way that we are vulnerable to further desires.

The second response to desire is the one the Buddha recommends: to understand the origin of the suffering that feeds our desire and to bring it to an end by following the Noble Eightfold Path. The goal of Buddhist practice is *nibbāna*, literally ‘cessation’ or ‘extinction’: suffering is brought decisively to an end not by satisfying our desire but by liberating ourselves from desire. This process is said to unfold over many human lifetimes. The sequence of *khandas* that constitute the self do not cease to exist at the end of a human life but are carried over from one life to the next, like a flame passed from one candle to the next.

How precisely we should make sense of the notion of rebirth is a sticky matter but the traditional view that awakening (*bodhi*) is achieved across multiple lifetimes is clear at least in its basic outline. What matters for the purposes of the present argument is that Buddhist soteriology conceives of a terminus that we are working towards that doesn’t coincide with the ending of a human life. And the reason for this alternative terminus is that the entity that is of salience to Buddhist soteriology is not essentially a physiological entity but an entity that is subject to *dukkha*. Stripped of its cosmological baggage, Buddhist soteriology is an attempt to work out the proper terminus for an entity that is conditioned by desire.

Like with Heidegger, we find here a distinction between, on one hand, what Heidegger calls demise and, on the other, a different kind of ending that is proper to the kind of entity that we are. To the extent that the entity that each of us is is not simply a human life but rather a changing conglomeration of aggregates fuelled by suffering and desire, then the end that is proper to that entity comes not with the cessation of a human life but with the cessation of suffering and desire. The aim of the Buddhist path is to achieve the self-understanding that helps us work towards the state of wholeness that is the ending of suffering. Fittingly, one of the most common epithets of the historical Buddha, *Siddhattha*, (Skt. *Siddhārta*), means ‘he who has accomplished his goal’. To the extent that human beings are directed by desire towards the final satisfaction of desire, the Buddha is exemplary as one who has achieved that goal.

There are many differences between Buddhist metaphysics and soteriology and the analysis of Dasein that we find in *Being and Time*, some fairly overt – for instance, the concept of rebirth plays no role in Heidegger’s analysis – and others that would require a detailed investigation of their own. I am not arguing for any broad-based similarity but rather highlighting an important feature of the Buddhist picture that can inform our reading of Heidegger on death. Buddhist soteriology provides a searching analysis of human existence, and the ‘end’ towards which it is directed, in which human mortality plays no central role. The Buddhist account identifies an ‘end’ to

human existence that focuses on what, on the Buddhist view, is spiritually significant about us, namely that we are entities that are subject to suffering and desire. Likewise, if we want to consider the ‘end’ of Dasein, we should focus on the salient features of Dasein’s structure, which I have argued are Dasein’s incompleteness and its projective orientation.

Furthermore, the comparison with Buddhist soteriology gives us a clue to interpreting Heidegger’s claim that anticipation of death ‘includes the possibility of existing as a *whole ability-to-be*’ (BT 264/309). We find a Buddhist equivalent of anticipation in the ‘running ahead’ by which Buddhist initiates come to understand their present roles and concerns as part of an ultimately futile cycle of death and rebirth. Taking this longer view can initiate a sequence that leads to knowledge and vision (*ñāna dassana*), disenchantment (*nibiddā*), dispassion (*virāga*), emancipation (*vimutti*), and ultimately *nibbāna*.¹⁶ Seeing one’s present roles and concerns within this larger picture leads to disenchantment with those roles and concerns and an understanding of our proper concern with liberation from the cycle of *saṃsāra*. Similarly, in anticipation of death, Dasein understands its ‘*ownmost* and uttermost ability-to-be – that is to say, the possibility of *authentic existence*’ (BT 263/307). In both cases, an anticipatory clarity that takes in one’s intentional structure as a whole allows one to step into one’s authentic way of being.

The overall thrust of this interpretation of being-towards-death should be clear by this point. Now let me explain why I think this interpretation is called for – why, that is, I think the two dominant interpretations in the literature don’t fully account for the shape of Heidegger’s argument.

5. Problems for Mortality Readings

The account of death I gave in [section 3](#) and the account of projection and incompleteness from the section before it make no reference to human mortality. Nor does anything Heidegger says in Division 1 of *Being and Time* in laying out the care-structure of Dasein’s being-in-the-world. That Dasein’s being is an issue for it, that it has an understanding of being, that it is defined by its being-possible – none of these defining characteristics entails mortality. It isn’t obvious that an entity that has these characteristics *must* be subject to mortality in the way that human beings are. It is a fact of human life that we get our three score and ten and no one has ever lived considerably longer than that. But that fact is what Heidegger calls an *ontic* fact: it’s a feature of human physiology that, for reasons some are working furiously to understand and amend, the human organism seems unable to continue functioning much longer than a century. But this physiological fact is not part of Dasein’s existential-ontological structure. To the extent that we are interested in the existence of Dasein *qua* Dasein, physiological constraints should be irrelevant.

The name Heidegger gives to the ontic fact of human mortality is ‘demise’ (*Ableben*). Mortality readings distinguish death from demise by emphasizing the way in which death is an abiding *possibility* for Dasein. Inauthentic Dasein regards its demise as a definite but yet distant event, something that will happen but not something with which it need concern itself just yet. Authentic Dasein is different, according to mortality readings, in that it adopts what Mulhall (1995, 303) calls an ‘existential viewpoint’ on its mortality, acknowledging the way in which *every* moment of its existence is shaped by the finitude imposed by its mortality. The problem with this way of reading Heidegger is that it treats authentic dying as a distinctive ‘viewpoint’ on an ontic fact of human physiology that has no essential place in the basic existential structure of Dasein.

An advocate of the mortality reading might respond as follows: what I am brushing aside as ‘an ontic fact of human physiology’ is absolutely central to the basic existential structure of Dasein. Hoffman (2006, 228) argues that death *qua* human mortality and care are equiprimordial: ‘[I]f we were not threatened by death, our basic state would not be care; but if our basic state were not care, our death would not be felt as threatening’. If Dasein’s existence were not marked by finitude, it would lack the salience and urgency that makes that existence something that Dasein cares about. This seems plausible – Williams’s (1973) famous reflections on ‘the tedium of immortality’ could be understood as an argument that an immortal existence is one that one *couldn’t* care about in the manner of Dasein – but all it shows us is that Dasein’s existence is marked by finitude, not that the defining limit of that finitude is human mortality. A thoroughgoing account of Dasein’s finitude should find that limit not in an ontic feature of human physiology but in the ontological structure of Dasein.

Heidegger often uses terms in an ontological register in a way that differs in a systematic way from their use in an ontic register. Guilt is a telling example. His analysis of guilt in §58 of *Being and Time* follows the same pattern as his lengthier analysis of death. Starting with our everyday conception of the phenomenon in question, he pushes to find its ontological basis. We experience ontic guilt when we are responsible for something or owe something (*BT* 281–82/327–28): I’m guilty if I’m responsible for stealing the cookie from the cookie jar and not guilty if it wasn’t me that did it. Ontological guilt, by contrast, is the characteristic of Dasein’s being that makes it the kind of entity that can experience ontic guilt in the first place. This characteristic is roughly the incompleteness I adduced in [section 2](#), although I focused on projection while Heidegger’s discussion of guilt focuses primarily (but not exclusively) on thrownness. This ontological guilt isn’t the same as an instance of ontic guilt, nor is it a distinctive viewpoint on particular instances of ontic guilt. It is, rather, the ontological basis

for ontic guilt, the aspect of our being that makes ontic guilt salient to us *as* guilt in the first place.

Similarly, death understood in an ontological register is not simply a distinctive viewpoint on the ontic event of our human demise but is rather the ontological basis for demise, the aspect of our being that makes demise salient to us *as* demise in the first place. Dasein's demise is different from the perishing (*Verenden*) that befalls biological organisms precisely because Dasein's demise is an issue for Dasein: it is a way of relating to mortality that is only possible for an entity with Dasein's kind of being. Death is the aspect of Dasein's ontological structure that makes Dasein's demise an issue for it. As I noted above, I think Hoffman is right to think that only a finite entity can be structured by care, and the care-structure of Dasein makes its demise something other than the biological fact of perishing. But that does not entail that human mortality is the limit that defines Dasein's finitude, and the comparison with guilt suggests that, in his ontological terminology, Heidegger often intends a phenomenon distinct from the ontic phenomenon that terminology ordinarily denotes.

6. Problems for World Collapse Readings

Aspects of the argument in the previous section should feel familiar and sympathetic to advocates of the world collapse reading. That approach seems radical precisely because it detaches Dasein's death from human mortality.¹⁷ And like the interpretation I am articulating in this paper, it argues that its candidate for what, if not human mortality, Heidegger means by 'death' harmonizes more resonantly with Heidegger's overall existential analysis of Dasein. But it's precisely on this point that I think world collapse readings fall short: they don't adequately account for Dasein's projective orientation, and for the way that Heidegger's treatment of death sets an outer limit for Dasein's ability-to-be. In particular, I think these readings rely on being a bit loose with Heidegger's talk of being *towards* death and his characterization of Dasein coming to wholeness in death.¹⁸

To begin with the notion of being-towards, I have argued that Dasein is *towards* its death in a similar manner to that in which it is towards the realization of its projects. In its projective orientation, Dasein directs itself towards the actualization of its existential possibilities even though, if it were to actualize all of its possibilities, it would cease to be Dasein. If we take seriously the idea that Dasein is oriented *towards* its end, it's hard to see how that end could be understood in terms of world collapse. Collapse – whether it be the collapse of significance in anxiety (Blattner and Thomson), of a scientific paradigm (Haugeland), or of a historical world (White) – is not something Dasein is aiming at in the way that it is aiming at the realization of its projects.

A great deal here hinges on how we understand the ‘towards’ in ‘being-towards-death’. World collapse readings tend to gloss it as analogous to the way that Dasein comports itself ‘towards’ entities, i.e. dealing with them with understanding. On that reading, Dasein can be ‘towards’ the collapse of its intelligible world insofar as it understands such a collapse as a possibility without necessarily aiming at realizing that possibility. In effect, it understands the ‘towards’ in a *relational* sense whereas I understand it in a *teleological* sense – roughly the difference between ‘She feels indifference *towards* her uncle’ and ‘He kicked the ball *towards* the net’. Both of these senses of ‘towards’ are compatible with the German *zu*.

With Heidegger, the relational *zu* is subordinate to the teleological *zu*. Dasein comports itself *towards* entities at all because, as being-possible, it is directed *towards* realizing existential possibilities. Dasein comports itself towards entities that are available as ready-to-hand (*zuhanden*) equipment because that equipment has a role in realizing Dasein’s possibilities. A kitchen knife shows up *as* a kitchen knife, and not simply as a lump of hard and sharp matter, because it has a role in bringing about a possibility towards which I’m oriented, namely cooking dinner. In Heidegger’s nomenclature, the readiness-to-hand of equipment has an ‘in-order-to’ (*das Um-zu*) – in the case of the kitchen knife, to chop vegetables – and a ‘towards-which’ (*das Wozu*) – that is ‘[t]he work to be produced’ (BT 70/99), for example, dinner. The towards-which has a nested structure: a proximate goal may itself be a stepping stone towards a more distant goal. The laptop I’m typing on is directed towards producing the ‘work’ of a paper on Heidegger, which would contribute to an issue of an academic journal, which would contribute to a growing body of philosophical research, and so on. In other words, the ‘which’ of the towards-which is generally a further item of equipment that has involvements of its own. The endpoint of all these towards-whiches, however, is not some final item of equipment but an ability-to-be of Dasein (BT 86/119). So our ability to comport ourselves towards entities at all fits into an intentional structure whose overall shape is teleological.

Death has a special place within that intentional structure. It is not just one possibility among many but Dasein’s ‘ultimate possibility’ (*äußerste Möglichkeit*; BT 255/299). Death, in other words, defines the limit of the structure of existential possibility as a whole. Like an asymptote, death is the limit towards which all Dasein’s intentional activity tends, but which Dasein *qua* Dasein never reaches. It’s unclear how world collapse readings can make sense of death as the outer limit of Dasein’s projective structure. A depressive episode, for instance, does not seem a likely candidate for Dasein’s ultimate possibility.

7. Conclusion: A Heideggerian Soteriology?

As I have interpreted it, Heidegger's characterization of Dasein as being-towards-death identifies a deep irony in Dasein's existential structure. On one hand, Dasein is essentially incomplete: as being-possible, it is always constituted by its orientation towards what it is 'not yet'. On the other hand, this projective orientation aims at actualizing existential possibilities. As a result, Dasein is constantly directing itself towards the state of affairs in which it is no longer Dasein.

In section 4, I compared this conception of Dasein's death to the ideal of *nibbāna* in Buddhist soteriology. But precisely in this invocation of 'soteriology' we might see an important difference between the Buddhist practical philosophy I outlined above and Heidegger's existential analysis of Dasein. *Nibbāna* is not just the end towards which we are moving, on the Buddhist account, but it is a *desirable* outcome – indeed, on the Buddhist view, it is what all desire aims at if only we could see matters in an unclouded manner – whereas Heidegger's treatment of death doesn't present death as either desirable or undesirable in any overt way.

However, this difference is not as sharp as it may initially appear. The Buddhist soteriological project is a response to the problem of *dukkha*: *dukkha* is intrinsically undesirable and so *nibbāna* is intrinsically desirable as the only effective solution to the problem of *dukkha*. However, in the soteriological framework of the Four Noble Truths, the first step to working towards the cessation of *dukkha* is precisely to accept its ubiquity: the First Noble Truth presents *dukkha* as inescapable for all conditioned (i.e. not liberated) sentient beings.¹⁹ An important step towards liberation is to accept and learn to manage *dukkha* rather than to try to escape it. The fantasy that we could lead a life free from *dukkha* is precisely what drives the attachments and aversions that keep us ensnared in the cycle of *saṃsāra*.

This thought has an important parallel in Heidegger's treatment of anxiety – and indeed, the Pāli term *dukkha* is sometimes glossed as 'existential anxiety'.²⁰ For Heidegger, Dasein's uncanny existence is inescapably vulnerable to the unsettling mood of anxiety. The inauthentic response to anxiety is to flee from it, just as the unskillful response to *dukkha* is to react aversively in a futile attempt to live without it. The authentic response to anxiety, according to Heidegger, is not to suppress it but to be 'ready for anxiety' (BT 297/343), just as the skillful response to *dukkha* is to acknowledge it and to be 'ready' to manage it.

In an important sense, however, Heidegger's project is not soteriological. The First Noble Truth is followed by three more, the third of which indicates the possibility of the cessation of *dukkha* in *nibbāna* and the fourth of which indicates the path towards achieving this cessation. Heidegger's project in *Being and Time* is phenomenological rather than soteriological: he aims to

describe Dasein's structure and its relation to being without indicating what lies beyond or outside that structure. *Nibbāna* in Buddhist soteriology and death in Heideggerian phenomenology represent the terminal limit of human existence. But that limit is a *part of* Buddhist soteriology whereas death for Heidegger is an asymptotal limit towards which Dasein is oriented, but which is not itself a describable phenomenon.

Notes

1. We find variants of this reading in Mulhall (1995); Hoffman (2006); Richardson (2012), and McManus (2015b).
2. The *locus classicus* of this reading is Blattner (1994). Other readings that radically distinguish Heidegger's conception of existential death from the ending of a human life include Carman (2003); White (2005); Haugeland (2013), and Thomson (2013) and Thomson (2024).
3. e.g. 'The primary meaning of existentiality is the future' (BT 327/376) and 'the future has a priority in the ecstatic unity of primordial and authentic temporality' (BT 329/378). As a rule, I will draw on the Macquarrie and Robinson translation of *Being and Time* but I will modify some of their terminology and wording choices, and will give the German in parentheses where it seems pertinent. I will abbreviate references to *Being and Time* as 'BT', followed by the page number in the original German and then the page number in the Macquarrie and Robinson translation.
4. '[T]hose characteristics which can be exhibited in this entity [Dasein] are not "properties" present-at-hand of some entity which "looks" so and so and is itself present-at-hand; they are in each case possible ways for it to be, and no more than that' (BT 42/67).
5. Heidegger introduces the concepts of the 'in-order-to' (*das Um-zu*) and 'readiness-to-hand' (*die Zuhandenheit*) as grasped in terms of '[t]he work to be produced', which Heidegger calls the 'towards-which' (*das Wozu*). He uses the preposition *zu* to elaborate on the nature of this towards-which: 'The shoe ... is for [zu] wearing (footgear); the clock is manufactured for [zu] telling the time' (BT 70/99).
6. "'Being towards' a possibility ... may signify 'being out for' something possible, as in concerning ourselves with its actualization' (BT 261/305). With this 'may signify', Heidegger distinguishes between our concerned dealing with equipment from being-towards-death as a possibility. I will discuss this difference more in the next section.
7. Although my reading diverges from Blattner's, I think he is right to argue that '[a]ll of Dasein's characteristics are ability-characteristics' (Blattner 1996, 100) as distinct from 'state-characteristics'.
8. The relation between possibility and ability-to-be is subtle and there isn't scholarly consensus on how to understand the relation between these two terms. At times Heidegger uses them almost interchangeably and it isn't clear that his usage is entirely consistent. Thomson (2024, 37) argues that possibilities constitute 'life-projects' and our ability-to-be constitutes 'our projecting ourselves into those life-projects'. There is textual warrant for this reading – notably it provides a clear interpretation for Heidegger's remark that Dasein 'is existentially that which, in its ability-to-be, it is *not yet*' (BT 145/185–86) – but

I don't see how it can explain why Heidegger thinks some possibilities are 'annihilated' in their actualization (BT 261/305).

9. For other references to a 'way to be' (*Weise zu sein*), see BT 20/41, 42/68, 173/217, 239/283, and 312/359. The closely related 'way of being' (*Seinsweise*) has similar uses at BT 13/33, 60/87, 77/108, 127/168, 217/259, 220/263, 226/269, 241/285, 247/291, 309/357, 375/427, and 386/438.
10. Heidegger actually seems to be inconsistent on the question of whether Dasein perishes. Making reference to perishing, he writes that 'Dasein too "has" its death, of the kind appropriate to anything that lives' (BT 247/291) and later adds that 'qua Dasein, it does not simply perish', where the 'simply' implies that Dasein *also* perishes even if there's more to it than that. But then, shortly afterward, Heidegger writes that 'we must say that Dasein never perishes' (BT 247/291). This last statement seems more definitive and more consistent with Heidegger's analysis – if Dasein isn't to be understood as a biological organism then saying that Dasein perishes would be a category mistake – and most interpreters follow this line.
11. Heidegger writes about everyday Dasein as 'disburdened' (*entlastet*) by *das Man* (BT 127/165) and later writes of *das Man* relieving Dasein from the burden of choosing (BT 268/312).
12. This phrase recurs at BT 255/299, 265/310, 306/354, and 329/378.
13. The material that informs the reading that follows comes almost entirely from the Pāli Canon, which is regarded as canonical across the schools of Buddhism. Accordingly, unless otherwise noted, I will use the Pāli terms for various Buddhist concepts, but will give the Sanskrit equivalents in parentheses when those terms might be more familiar to a Western reader.
14. Garfield (2015, 12–13) unpacks the fire metaphor in its connection with the *khandhas* and *nibbāna*. Gombrich (2009, chap. 8) discusses the use of fire metaphors in greater detail, showing how the Buddha drew on and reconfigured earlier Vedic ideas and practices concerning fire.
15. Canonical sources for this distinction include *Dīgha Nikāya* iii.216 and *Samyutta Nikāya* iv.259 and v.56. For recent expositions of this theme, see Gethin (1998, 61–62); Siderits (2007, 20–21); and Garfield (2015, 7–8).
16. The *Upanisa Sutta* (*Samyutta Nikāya* ii.29) is a canonical source for this sequence.
17. By this, I don't mean to suggest that world collapse readings necessarily *fail* to draw a connection between death and human mortality. Thomson (2024), for instance, makes productive use of Heidegger's method of formal indication to outline a way of understanding the relation between death and demise.
18. This is not the only criticism one could make of the world collapse reading. McManus (2015a) and Wrathall (2025) both offer powerful critiques of this reading.
19. An important difference here from Heidegger's analytic is that Buddhist soteriology takes the central problem of human existence – *dukkha* – to be common to *all* sentient beings, animals included (canonically, humans and animals occupy two of six realms of sentient existence). However, in a manner similar to Heidegger's treatment of Dasein as unique in having an understanding of being, Buddhists talk about a 'precious human birth' that provides a unique opportunity, not available to animals, to understand and work towards the cessation of *dukkha*.
20. See, e.g. Bodhi (2015, 46) and Garfield (2015, 6).

21. The reviewers for this journal provided a number of helpful comments that substantially improved the argument of this paper and corrected several errors. I'm especially grateful to a reviewer who clearly disagreed with my thesis but was generous and charitable in working with me to improve the argument.

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