

Variagenic collapse—notes on *Rethinking Death in and after Heidegger*

“Ashby suggested that the cybernetic machine and the organism could be linked by this shared capacity to self-organize in moments of breakdown, a capacity that ultimately could be traced to the tendency to fail—at least temporarily—on a repeated basis.”¹

No person—tales to the contrary notwithstanding—survives biological death. But Iain Thomson claims, following Heidegger who was following Kierkegaard who was following Paul, that some people do survive **existential** death, a state of ‘projectless projecting’ in Thomson’s fine phrase.² How many? Estimates vary. Heidegger claims, says Thomson, “not only that we can ‘die’ in his existential sense without having to undergo mortal demise but also, conversely, that most human beings reach their [biological] demise without ever undergoing his kind of ‘death.’”³ (And because Heidegger asserts that “Mortals die their death in life,”⁴ we can infer that most human beings are not ‘mortals’ as Heidegger uses that term in articulating the Fourfold. Cf. ‘elect.’) Some scholars have concluded that to a first approximation **no one** becomes authentic in Heidegger’s meaning (i.e. by undergoing existential death), only a handful of world-historicals.⁵

Anyway, the population of individuals who experience existential death numbers somewhere between ‘all minus most’ and ‘a handful.’ What sense can we—all of us likely non-experiencers (non-philosophers⁶)—make of it? Heidegger says in “The Essence of Ground” that the primary,

¹ David W. Bates, *An Artificial History of Natural Intelligence: Thinking with Machines from Descartes to the Digital Age* (2024) 260, describing the work of W. Ross Ashby.

² “One of *Being and Time*’s most provocative insights . . . is that death and demise come apart phenomenologically. We Dasein can live through our own intelligible worlds having come to an end (in the existential phenomenon Heidegger calls genuine or authentic death) without having to undergo the experience of terminal world-collapse (in mortal demise). . . . This ontological core of the self disclosed in the phenomenon of existential death is thus our own Dasein reduced to sheer *existing* (from the Latin ‘*ek-sistere*’), ‘standing out’ into a world of practical possibilities we cannot connect to, a projectless projecting in which Dasein starkly encounters itself as ‘a naked “that it is and has to be,”’ an anxious ‘mineness’ (BT 173/SZ 134 [<https://www.beyng.com/pages/de/SeinUndZeit/SeinUndZeit.134.html>])) hungry to return to the world of practical projects.” Iain D. Thomson, *Rethinking Death in and after Heidegger* (2024) 25, 299.

³ *Id.* 49.

⁴ *Die Sterblichen sterben den Tod im Leben. Gesamtausgabe Band 4:* 165: <https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=4.00&pg=165>.

⁵ John Haugeland and Carol White “both interpret Dasein as a necessarily *collective* understanding of being, of which individuals are merely cases or instances. This misinterpretation . . . generates hermeneutically untenable consequences . . . like the conclusion that only a handful of people have ever achieved what Heidegger calls ‘authenticity,’ viz., those like Jesus, Copernicus, and Descartes who directly experienced the collapse of the entire historical understanding of being that previously guided their cultural ages or epochs *and* went on to disclose a new collectively livable historical world.” *Rethinking Death* 295 fn. 17.

⁶ Thomson quotes from the 1937 Nietzsche lectures: “Whoever fails to experience it [the nearness of the nothing, *die Nähe des Nichts*] remains forever outside the realm of philosophy, without hope of entry.” *Rethinking Death* 100 fn. 1. GA 6.1: 413: <https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=6.1&pg=413>. For the corresponding paradigm of

fundamental character of world (*primärer Weltcharakter, Grundcharakter*) is the ‘for the sake of’ (*das Umwillen, τὸ οὐ ἔνεκα*), and is the source of possibility as such (*die Quelle von Möglichkeit als solcher*).⁷ As Thomson makes clear, existential death occurs when the for-the-sake-of character of world is temporarily lost to the individual. *Möglichsein* having lapsed, *Dasein* becomes projectless; yet even projectless *Dasein* continues projecting, *Seinkönnen* still functioning.⁸

Heidegger formulates the overall structure of care, *die Gesamtstruktur der Sorge*, as “*Dasein’s* being-ahead-of-itself in its always already being into something,” *das Sich-vorwegsein es Daseins in seinem immer schon Sein bei etwas*.⁹ When *Möglichsein*, being into things, fails, then occurs the Big Reveal (“*Dasein is its disclosedness*”¹⁰); *Seinkönnen* becomes self-aware, like Skynet. The story thus far:

“In the phenomenon of existential death, our selves get stripped of the positive, worldly contents they ordinarily seem [?] to possess (as we lose all the concretions of self conferred on us by the projects we can no longer project ourselves into in our lives). When we undergo this shipwreck of our life-projects in existential death, however, we do not simply disappear entirely; instead, we encounter ourselves as (what I am calling) a *projectless projecting*, that is, as a sheer *existing* that (at least temporarily) finds itself unable to exist *as* anyone or anything (teacher, man, father, and so on). To encounter death as the existential ‘possibility of an impossibility’ is thus (as Heidegger glosses it) to encounter a *positive* ‘nothingness’ – that aforementioned ‘utter nothingness of *Dasein*.’ The nothingness we encounter in existential death is not the onrush of oblivion . . . *Dasein’s* ‘utter nothingness’ is instead the stark condition undergone by what Heidegger calls the ‘solus ipse’ or *self alone* (BT 233/SZ 188; <https://www.beyng.com/pages/de/SeinUndZeit/SeinUndZeit.188.html>), that is, the utterly desolate core of the self that survives the shipwreck of all its worldly projects. In this way, existential death discloses to *Dasein* its ‘ownmost ability to be,’ that projectless projecting that forms the very *sine qua non* of the self in

absolute conditionality in Christianity see *John* 14:6: “Jesus saith unto him, I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.” (KJV) The plot of *Rapture-Palooza* (2013) takes this Scripture to mean having to go through (kill) Jesus to get to (kill) God (Ken Jeong) (by electrocution in a Jacuzzi). After which event the surviving humans tell themselves “We can be grown-ups.”

⁷ *das Umwillen als primärer Weltcharakter . . . Umwillen als dem primären Weltcharakter . . . Die Welt hat den Grundcharakter des Umwillen von* __. GA 9: 161, 157: <https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=9&pg=157>.

⁸ “Remember that Heidegger distinguishes between our ‘being-possible’ (*Möglichsein*) and our ‘ability-to-be’ (*Seinkönnen*) to mark this crucial difference between our life-projects, on the one hand, and our projecting ourselves into those life-projects, on the other. . . . Every particular life-project that constitutes our being-possible (*Möglichsein*) can be lost, but this brute projecting or *existing* cannot (so long as we have not demised but are still here as *Dasein*).” *Rethinking Death* 45.

⁹ GA 20: 408: <https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=20.00&pg=408>.

¹⁰ *Das Dasein ist seine Erschlossenheit*. SZ 133.

Being and Time (and so defines the touchstone of Dasein's definitive 'mineness'). The ontological core of the self disclosed in the phenomenon of existential death is not 'alone before God' (as Kierkegaard has it). Instead, in existential death, Dasein is alone before its own sheer existing, standing out into a world of possibilities it cannot connect to, and so starkly encountering itself as 'a naked "that-it-is-and-has-to-be"' (BT 173/SZ 134)."¹¹

What happens next? As Bernard Williams observes, "Philosophy, and in particular moral philosophy, is still deeply attached to giving good news."¹² In further particular, philosophy which is remodeled Christianity. In accord with this entrenched attachment, "Heidegger's phenomenological appropriation of Kierkegaard," says Thomson, "allows him to develop and convey his own sense of the significance of the *conversion* experience, that is, the experience of death and rebirth *in life* (an experience polysemically 'crucial' to Christianity). Thus, Heidegger is able to appropriate (and transform) some of the deepest insights preserved in the Christian tradition by expressing them in the secularizing language of existential phenomenology."¹³ In conformity with the Christian template existential death turns out to be a Fortunate Fail. As Thomson puts it, "there can be no mistaking the momentous influence on *Being and Time* of Kierkegaard's view that confronting the despair intrinsic to the structure of the self can allow us to pass through a kind of salvific death and rebirth to the public world."¹⁴

Thomson remarks the key difference between Heidegger's phenomenological and Kierkegaard's Christian account of rebirth to the public world, *viz.*: "Kierkegaard's version of conversion seems to leave the world just as it was . . . whereas Heidegger's core self (the *solus ipse*) can (but, *pace* White, need not) choose quite different projects, and so a quite different world, for itself."¹⁵ Heidegger's variety of existential death potentiates variation. (Variation, selection, transmission. And the greatest of these is variation.¹⁶) Thomson describes this potential using Heidegger's notions of 'liberation' (*überliefern*, in the sense of 'freeing up;' *das Freisein für*, 'being-free for;' etc.) and 'transformation' (*Verwandlung*):

¹¹ *Rethinking Death* 112.

¹² "The Women of Trachis: Fictions, Pessimism, Ethics," in Bernard Williams, *The Sense of the Past: Essays in the History of Philosophy* (ed. Myles Burnyeat 2009) 49.

¹³ *Rethinking Death* 109 fn. 23.

¹⁴ *Id.* 35. And later on, "For, what initially looks like the tragedy of our common finitude turns out to be what enables us to creatively disclose the apparently inexhaustible meaningfulness of our being in time. Indeed . . . it is only because each of us dies that reality seems to show itself to human beings ever anew; it is thus such existential death that bestows humanity with a future other than nihilism's ultimate extinction of meaning." *Id.* 263. (In Wendy Hiller's voice (*Pygmalion* 1938)) 'Well *that's* a mercy anyhow.' <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Qab3yOVs5g>.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* fn. 65.

¹⁶ As Love is the Word, so "Variation, in fact, is Evolution." William Bateson, *Materials for the Study of Variation* (1894) 6.

“On those occasions when we *reconstitute* our living worlds (transforming central aspects of our embodied self-understandings) by, for example, sloughing-off an outdated, arbitrarily restrictive, unsatisfying, or otherwise unfree or no longer liveable way of being a father, man, teacher, philosopher, etc. (before taking up a more liberating or otherwise meaningful embodied self-understanding), existential death plays a crucial role in such transformations, as the very moment of that old world’s collapse. Indeed, such periodic personal deaths and rebirths to the publicly intelligible world are precisely what Heidegger means by ‘anticipatory resoluteness’ or, in a word, ‘authenticity’.”¹⁷

Thomson characterizes the *status quo ante Verwandlung* as ‘unquestioned existential inertia’—“I pursue my anxiety to the point where all my life-projects, foundering on the reef of their own contingency, forfeit their unquestioned inertia and so temporarily break down or collapse.”¹⁸ That foundering, if we stick with Christian structures, would be in the nature of a mercy, a blessing, a stroke of Grace *ab extra*. But, to anticipate a bit, such exogenous fiddling is the kind of thing Alan Turing would refer to as ‘screwdriver interference.’¹⁹

There’s plenty of *Gunst und Gnade* in later Heidegger,²⁰ in *Being and Time* not so much. In that work *Angst* is a *Grundbefindlichkeit*, a frame of mind which makes evident ‘how one is,’ *macht offenbar, »wie einem ist«*.²¹ Interpreting this uncanny state of mind from an existential-ontological point of view, Heidegger says it is the threat, *die Bedrohung*, which proceeds from *Dasein* itself, *die das Dasein selbst von ihm selbst her trifft*,²² that is, *ab intra*, endogenous. Adopting Thomson’s trope, there is an internal force—an existential impetus—acting upon existential inertia so as to bring the latter’s trajectory to a halt, to founder. What is that irruptive existential impulse? **Why** is there such an impulse anyhow? In

¹⁷ *Rethinking Death* 111. Reminds me of this: “Escape to a different milieu . . . even with imperfect adaptation, can be more advantageous than improved adaptation to a grossly hopeless or deteriorating situation.” Mary Jane West-Eberhard, “Alternative adaptations, speciation, and phylogeny (A Review),” 83 *PNAS* 1388, 1389 (1986): <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.83.5.1388>.

¹⁸ *Rethinking Death* 40; “that unquestioned existential inertia driving us through our daily lives” (58); “our unquestioned existential inertia” (59).

¹⁹ “Interference is the *rule*, not the exception, in the case of human beings. That is worth dwelling on. For by ‘interference,’ Turing did not mean that the machine is literally tampered with—that would be what he calls ‘screwdriver interference.’” *An Artificial History of Natural Intelligence* 270.

²⁰ The gift that keeps on giving: “As the later Heidegger teaches us to recognize, human beings *are* ‘facets of being,’ unique and finite perspectives on the historically shifting constellation of intelligibility, a temporally unfolding intelligible order which itself fails to exhaust the being it discloses and that, together we finite, world-disclosive beings constitute and transform.” *Rethinking Death* 242. Again, “that ontologically polysemic Ur-phenomenon from which all phenomena emerge . . . ‘noth-ing,’ ‘earth,’ ‘being as such,’ ‘beyng [Seyn],’ the clearing (as the open that can be lit-up differently), being written under a ‘cross-wise striking-through,’ (which itself becomes) ‘the fourfold,’ ‘the difference,’ ‘presencing,’ ‘the promise,’ ‘the same,’ the ‘it’ of ‘*es gibt Sein, es gibt Zeit*,’ and so on.” *Id.* 128, 126.

²¹ SZ 182, 188: <https://www.beyng.com/pages/de/SeinUndZeit/SeinUndZeit.182.html>.

²² SZ 189: <https://www.beyng.com/pages/de/SeinUndZeit/SeinUndZeit.189.html>.

the existentials-economy of *Being and Time* that irruptive impetus is the call, the appeal, of conscience, *der Gewissensruf*— “an appeal to the they-self in its Self”—whose receptor site is the wanna-conscience, *Gewissenhabenwollen*. “To the call of conscience there corresponds a possible hearing. Our understanding of the appeal [*Anrufverstehen*] unveils itself as our *wanting to have a conscience*.”²³

What stands in the way, Heidegger says in the Introduction to *Being and Time*, “of the basic question of Dasein’s Being (or leads it off the track) is an orientation thoroughly coloured by the anthropology of Christianity and the ancient world.”²⁴ Although the *Gewissensruf*-complex originates in Christian anthropology Heidegger retains it for the sake of autarky of the Soteriad, the *solus ipse*’s progress to *Entschlossenheit-Eigentlichkeit*. “He needed the assurance of a call, and so he called himself” (Flannery O’Connor, *The Violent Bear it Away*).²⁵

David Bates documents the questions of interest here—What is that irruptive existential impulse? **Why** need there be such an impulse anyhow?—in the form they took in the history of cybernetics. Bates writes, for example, of W. Ross Ashby (whose day-job was psychiatry),

“It was exactly this problem of reorganization in crisis that Ashby faced head-on in creating his cybernetic model of the adaptive organism, the Homeostat machine. Ashby knew that by definition a machine was fixed [sc. inertial], and its operations wholly determined. A machine, in its ideal operating state, had only one form of behavior and therefore could not change its fundamental design. . . . Ashby had to figure out a way to model the behavior of a genuinely *open* system, one that could assume a determinate structural organization, like any machine, but at the same time not be eternally *bound* to any one particular order. . . . he thought deeply about how to create mechanical systems that could not only respond to environmental changes [like a thermostat can], but in fact actually change its very *organization* as a way of finding new paths to stability and equilibrium.”²⁶

²³ Macquarrie and Robinson 314; SZ 269-270.

²⁴ *Id.* 74; SZ 48.

²⁵ O’Connor read ‘What is Metaphysics?’ in Werner Brock’s 1949 anthology *Existence and Being* and quoted a passage from the essay in her story ‘Good Country People.’ (See Martin V. Woessner, *Heidegger in America* (2011) 92-95.) If she also read Brock’s paraphrastic synopsis of *Being and Time* she would have come across this: “According to Heidegger, Dasein calls in conscience for itself. . . . Yet the call comes not from any one else, but from myself and upon myself.” <https://archive.org/details/martinheideggere0000wern> 67. The line from *The Violent Bear it Away* is a character’s remark on his mad uncle’s belief to have been called by God to prophesy. I can’t help reading it as the unPelagian O’Connor’s wry comment on Heidegger’s notion of bootstrap-vocation.

²⁶ *An Artificial History of Natural Intelligence* 248-249.

Alan Turing knew Ashby's work and corresponded with him. Bates shows that the two theorists labored at the same coal-face, the problem of how to get plasticity to emerge from automaticity. Turing, writes Bates,

"made an important connection between the idea of intelligence as break or deviation from routine and the concept of error and risk. The challenge was to imagine a coherent machine that could, at one and the same time, be open to determination and, when necessary, liberate itself from determination to become organized in a productively new way."²⁷

In the course of his work imagining such a machine Turing came up with a succession of philosophemes to name the liberating agency.²⁸ 'The residue' is the one most promising as an alternative to Heidegger's 'call of conscience.'

We can think of the residue as psychic neoteny. For Turing,

"the very programs and routines that define the possibilities of human behavior are themselves acquired from *outside* of our thinking apparatus. This is why determination through interference [experience and training, *Mitdasein*] must always presume a prior *indetermination*. We can suggest in this context that it is this foundational indetermination that Turing is alluding to when he writes of the 'residue' that always accompanies a disciplined and trained intelligent individual. As Turing remarks, 'A large remnant of the random behavior of infancy remains in the adult.' The plasticity of the cortex never totally disappears; in being determined from the exterior, the interior always retains the possibility of *not* being restricted by that determination, to move *without* cause ('randomly') into a new state."²⁹

Human infancy is polymodal perverse and its remnant in the adult is *das Unbewusstsein*, the antinomian unconscious. *Ça rêve, ça rate, ça rit* (Lacan); and the greatest of these for present purposes is *ratage*, failure; or rather, the precipitation of failure, as manifested e.g. in *Fehlleistungen*, 'parapraxes.' **This** unconscious—*erregt Unbewusstsein*, the excited, agitated unconscious—is the road rejected by Heidegger as early as 1912 when he denied its having *ausschlaggebende Bedeutung* for philosophy of religion and empirical religious psychology.³⁰

²⁷ *Id.* 270.

²⁸ Cf. "Indeed, each of the succinct philosophemes in Heidegger's succession of poietic names for this mysterious source of intelligibility disclose some of its aspects while missing others and sometimes even occluding them." *Rethinking Death* 128.

²⁹ *An Artificial History of Natural Intelligence* 272.

³⁰ *Religionspsychologie und Unterbewusstsein*, GA 16: 18, 22: <https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=16.00&pg=18>.

No surprise that in *Being and Time* he kept to his last and continued to tinker with Christian structures to build the result he wanted: Glad Tidings. For some.

Thomson's takeaway from the good news can be captioned 'profusion of variety.' "This seemingly disastrous loss [existential death] of our 'actual self' turns out to be our salvation . . . because when despair alienates us from the world of our ordinary projects, we discover that what survives this expulsion from the world is our true or 'infinite' self."³¹ With the result that after existential death, "as I find my own ways to take up, stretch, and transform this garb of worldly actuality, doing so also enables me to articulate and develop aspects of myself in ways I would not otherwise have been able to do."³²

For Thomson, this phenomenon—collapse or failure or *aporia* followed by profusion of variety—scales. The failure of the project of *Being and Time* was for Heidegger a kind of existential death, which stalled his inertial path within the Tradition and thereby opened up for him a vista onto the plenitude of the many-visaged Ur-phenomenon. "Instead of trying to deliver a fundamental ontological understanding of 'the being of entities' that would finally answer the question of being, Heidegger recognized that all such answers are but temporary metaphysical dams in the ontohistorical river that shapes Western history. . . . Heidegger came to see that these [various] metaphysical ontotheologies are themselves made possible by something . . . that they can never render fully intelligible and so permanently stabilize in the light of our historical worlds."³³ The Ur-phenomenon is the 'zero-' or 'floating' signifier underwriting the profusion of variety of beings, of meanings.³⁴

If existential inertia, automaticity, determinateness, etc. are constraining, then what disrupts them is deconstraining. Deconstraint potentiates profusion of variety.³⁵ The essence of

³¹ *Rethinking Death* 35.

³² *Id.* 110.

³³ *Id.* 95.

³⁴ See Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (tr. Felicity Baker 1987) 63-64 for 'floating signifier.'

³⁵ "the conservation of these core [cell] processes for the past 530 million years [of metazoan phenotypic change and radiation] is related less to the processes' own constraint, embedment, or optimization than to the deconstraint they provide for phenotypic variation of other processes, on the basis of which they are continually coselected." Marc Kirschner and John Gerhart, "Evolvability," 95 *PNAS* 8420-8421 (1998): <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.95.15.8420>. "These conserved processes have, we think, facilitated or deconstrained evolution because of their special properties of robustness and adaptability, their modularity and compartmentalization, their capacity for weak regulatory linkage, and their exploratory behavior. These properties make regulatory change efficacious and phenotypic variation copious and varied." John Gerhart and Marc Kirschner, "The theory of facilitated variation," 104 *PNAS* 8584 (2007): <https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.0701035104>.

technology, if we care to go there, is deconstraint.³⁶ So Thomson takes later Heidegger's vision of the Ur-phenomenon as deconstraining (he doesn't use the word) on a broad scale. "Today," Thomson wonders, "are we not witnessing the dramatic historical spectacle of a historical *return of the repressed* by the Enlightenment, that is, a multifaceted reemergence of numerous differences of parochial belonging and tribal identity that continue stubbornly to resist cosmopolitan assimilation – and for good as well as for bad reasons?" For Thomson, signs of a "burgeoning resurgence of difference and particularity [sc. profusion of variety] follow from and feed back into a deeper ontohistorical transformation from late-modernity to postmodernity." Thomson writes with passion of "the proliferating phenomenological rainbow of ontological pluralism," "the irreducibly plural truth of postmodern phenomenology," "a never entirely conceptualizable phenomenological excessiveness," "the emerging plenitude of particularities – in their irreducible diversity."³⁷

One heuristic for thinking about variety is 'Shannon entropy.' Thomson is persuaded in effect that the transformation from late-modernity to postmodernity is characterized by increase in Shannon entropy, better expressed as 'Shannon variability,' an index of "variability of the elements within a distribution, how diverse the objects are from each other within the collection."³⁸ Consider three sets of geometrical shapes. In the first there are 10 circles, 1 star, and 1 triangle. In this set almost all the elements (10 of 12) are similar to each other. In the second set there are 6 circles, 2 stars, 1 triangle, and 1 square. More variability, yet more than half the elements are similar to each other. In the third set there are 2 circles, 2 stars, 2 triangles, and 2 squares, no predominating species. "The Shannon entropy of the first set would be lower than the second set, which would be lower than the third."³⁹ Our intuition tells us that intra-set variety is clumpy in the first set and fully smoothed-out in the third set; entropy as diffuseness of intra-set variety increases across the three sets.

In these terms later Heidegger was persuaded that—Ur-phenomenon notwithstanding—the Shannon entropy of *Welt* is **decreasing**, that *Ge-Stell* by way of constraints and orderings and regimes is producing a Borg planet. An inertial path which we are evidently not capable of deflecting.

DCW 03/23/2025

³⁶ Though it may be kingdomist to say this (but some of my closest associates are fungi), the animals are life's pastmasters of technology. See J. Scott Turner, *The Extended Organism: the Physiology of Animal-Built Structures* (2000). Extension deconstrains limitation.

³⁷ *Rethinking Death* 256-257.

³⁸ Gabriele Carcassi, Christine A. Aidala, and Julian Barbour, "Variability as a better characterization of Shannon entropy," <https://arxiv.org/abs/1912.02012> ; pdf p. 1.

³⁹ Carcassi's example, here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-Rb868HKCo8> 1:25-2:02.

