

# Martin Heidegger's Notion of Death in Authentic Existence of *Dasein*: Also on Self-Sacrificial Death towards Otherness

WANG Tao

**摘要：**死亡是人有限性的根本表徵，更是海德格通過分析此在而對存在進行現象學考察的重要角度。在非本真的日常生存狀態中，死亡被視為一個發生在他者身上或將會發生在自己身上的客觀事件——有機生命的終結，而在「向死存在」的本真存在狀態中，死亡則展示為決心面向可能性存在的自由籌劃。但海德格對非關係性的、不可逾越的死亡的分析，未能有效地涵括為他者之有意籌劃下的死亡，即自我犧牲之死，後者亦體現了此在崇高的倫理向度及存在之本真性。參考列維納斯對「為他者而死」意義的強調，我們在蒂利希的存在主義神學思想中發現了對自我犧牲之死的另一解釋途徑

Death, one of the fundamental problems for human beings through the history of human ideas, is given a prominent position in Martin Heidegger's philosophical agenda on the phenomenological investigation of Being through the fundamental analysis of *Dasein* (*essereci*) as the sole distinctive mode of Being accessible to Being itself. As the basic feature of human mortality, death is usually considered physiologically and biologically as the "cessation" or "end" of an organic life. In a religious context, however, it is simply the beginning of another phase of life, a resurrection either simply spiritual or psychosomatic.

Heidegger's notion of death is proposed at two levels, in inauthentic existence and authentic existence. In the falling state of everydayness (commonness), death is considered as an objective event that happens all the time to others and will definitely befall me sometime in the far future. However, death in authentic existence as Being-towards-death (*Das-Sein-zum-Tode*) discloses the depth of the Being of *Dasein* and liberates it from the superficiality of everydayness, which also informs the authenticity of ethics for *Dasein* itself, namely, through the anticipation with resoluteness towards an impending death by projecting a vital vicissitude under freedom-to-be.

Heidegger articulates a special state-of-mind for existence informed by his notion of human mortality in the individual confrontation with his ownmost (*eigenste*) death as *Dasein*'s ownmost possibility of the absolute impossibility of existence. The non-relational unoutripped death as "my death" in Heidegger's illustration cannot fully be identified and justified in a self-sacrificial act which is intentionally projected for the sake of others as the projection itself. Self-sacrificial death as a phenomenon that undoubtedly has

transcendent implication other than *Dasein*'s ownmost matter shows also the characteristics of authentic existence. Unlike another more ownmost kind of projected death—suicidal death, a self-sacrificial one should be put in a much higher plane and located in another orientation to make sense. In addition, Heidegger's Being-towards-death cannot provide an unambiguous ethical orientation for human life even though sustained by authentic existence. The key aspect of his philosophy can be at times contradictory or ambiguous in meaning. With reference to the philosophy that concentrates on Otherness (alterity) that underscores the significance of self-sacrificial "dying for others," e.g. Emmanuel Levinas's philosophy, we find another approach in Paul Tillich's theological existentialist interpretation of self-sacrificial death resting on otherworldliness in the Christian God.

### Notion of Death in Inauthentic Existence:

#### An Objective Event in Everydayness as "Their" Death

The common sense understanding of death is perishing (*Verenden*), corresponding to the physiological or biological concept as "cessation of life-maintaining functions" or "the ending of life of a living organism." Based on this, death is nothing but an objective event or case in which we spectators watch or hear other people die. The dead body or corpse and funeral are the testimonies of others' objectively accessible death and are the Being-just-present-at-hand-and-no-more or entity present-at-hand (*Vorhandenheit*) in Heidegger's terms. In this case, death is not always the death of others until the right moment it befalls me. As far as my own death is concerned, the proposition "every living creature will finally die" is considered empirically an apodictic certainty inasmuch as we see and hear about death in daily

life and this final destination of all lives is endorsed by scientific axiom. Nevertheless, we usually have no definite idea when and how my own death befalls. The certainty (finally-will-come) and indefiniteness (when-to-come) of my own death compose the basic modality of the common sense understanding of death.

Heidegger regards these common senses as the superficial notions of death and consequently of our own Being in inauthentic existence which covers up the existential certainty of death by the empirical one. He attempts to drag us out of this modality, as he calls it, the falling into everydayness along with anonymous others (*das Man*). In inauthentic existence, death is simply counted as nothing more than an occurrence or a case which basically happens to others. On my part, the state-of-mind is that "I myself is left intact by the threat or menace of its impending." People get used to believing that he himself will die of an incurable disease such as cancer or of organic senescence as alleged natural death when "aged enough," and every kind of fatal accident are simply hearsay accounts which seemingly will never take place in his own blessed life. As a result, "I'll live peacefully and carefreely until the last stage of my life when I have to count down the days left."

For Heidegger, however, the indefiniteness of death on the part of its indeterminate advent, its indefinite when-to-come, is just like something distinctively impending, that is to say, it is possible at any moment. Heidegger underlines, in that quotidian state-of-mind, *Dasein*'s ownmost Self falls into "they" as "they-self," along with which death is considered inauthentically as an event that will befall not right away but sometime in the far future. Although factually *Dasein* is dying as well as existing since it has been thrown primordially into being, for the most part *Dasein* covers up its ownmost Being-towards-

death by fleeing in the face of it in falling. In this nearly self-deceptive or illusory mood, death is not *Dasein*'s ownmost impending possibility as if "it's not my business at this moment yet, but far from now then." In Heidegger's own words,

In the publicness with which we are with one another in our everydayness manner, death is 'known' as a mishap which is constantly occurring—as a 'case of death'. Someone or other 'dies', be he neighbor or stranger. People who are no acquaintances of ours are 'dying' daily and hourly. 'Death' is encountered as a well-known event occurring within-the-world. [...] It ('they') talks of it in a 'fugitive' manner, either expressly or else in a way which is mostly inhibited, as if to say, 'one of these days one will die too, in the end; but right now it has nothing to do with us'.<sup>1</sup>

Furthermore, the wording "one dies" represents the fact that death is what "they" encounter and it becomes an objective case, by no means "subjective", and "'dying' is leveled off to an occurrence which reaches *Dasein*, to be sure, but belongs to nobody in particular."<sup>2</sup> My ownmost death in the fashion of impending possibility is overshadowed in the anonymous others, as it were, something irrelevant to my vicissitude. In inauthentic existence, the fear of facing *Dasein*'s own demise takes the place of anxiety (*Angst*) as the dominant state-of-mind by suppressing death as an approaching event within-the-world and being the object of fear. Fear is the fear of something present-at-hand as an actual event; it is depicted as a weakness that should be overcome as an ethical deficiency. One is ethically obliged to keep tranquilized during the

1 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 252-253.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 253.

living years without fear about death, as indicated in one of the Four Cardinal Virtues—fortitude or braveness. In falling of everydayness, “they” prevents *Dasein* from comporting its authentic Being-towards-death in face of death by means of reconfirming that thinking about death is “a cowardly fear, a sign of insecurity on the part of *Dasein*, and a somber way of fleeing from the world,” that is to say, “they” have already decided the state-of-mind to face death as “no anxiety in the face of death” and suggested the “indifferent tranquility as to the ‘fact’ that one dies.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, Heidegger concludes that the mode in inauthentic existence falling into everydayness is “an untroubled indifference towards the uttermost possibility of existence,” namely, “an evasion in the face of death.”<sup>4</sup> Contrary to fear, anxiety is uncanny anxiety about the constant possibilities which is not a definite present-at-hand object. For Heidegger, the false assumption is to be “hermit-like, moodily to contemplate that impending hour of doom. What is inauthentic is not avoiding the actual experience of dying, but avoiding the full significance of our ability not-to-be.”<sup>5</sup> Heidegger then begins to analyse death in the authentic existence.

3 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 254.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 255.

5 Michael Gelven, *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989), p. 151. Chinese four-character idiom “杞人憂天” literally means “the man worrying about the falling sky” shows such kind of mentality. As a literary quotation, it comes from an ancient story talking about a man who fears that the sky with sun and moon and all the stars will fall down someday so that the whole earth will be drastically destroyed, so he cannot eat or sleep well and spends every day in despair. The idiom signifies unnecessary fear and misgiving. We can imagine, if he transforms the fear into anxiety ontologically and existentially, he is not far away from being a convinced existentialist!

## Notion of Death in Authentic Existence:

### *Das-Sein-zum-Tode* as “My” Death and “My” Authentic Existential Vicissitude

To move from an inauthentic existence to an authentic one is a considerable leap; that is the case even for the notion of death. For Heidegger, the notion of death serves solely for the unveiling or disclosing of the Being of *Dasein* in depth and proposing an ethical drive for the vicissitude of existence as he called Being-towards-death.

Different from the empirical perspective of death as perishing, the existential interpretation of death is demise (*Ableben*), which refers to the end of *Dasein*'s pursuit of tasks, goals, and projects, an ending that is forced by organic perishing.<sup>6</sup> Heidegger's full existential-ontological definition of death is, “death, as the end of *Dasein*, is *Dasein*'s ownmost possibility—non-relational, certain and as such indefinite, not to be outstripped. Death is, as *Dasein*'s end, in the Being of this entity towards its end.”<sup>7</sup>

Heidegger suggests that we cannot experience the genuine dying of the other as a concerned Being-alongside of the Being-come-to-an-end (*Zuendegekommensein*), thus the phenomenological description of the dying of others fails to serve as the ontological analysis of the being of *Dasein*'s totality. Then he turns to the existential interpretation of death which focuses on my own death. Death as non-relational in the sense that death in authentic existence is just my own death, which can

6 William D. Blattner, “The Concept of Death in Being and Time”, *Man and World* no. 27 (1994): 67-68; Mark Wrathall and Jeff Malpas, eds., *Heidegger, Authenticity, and Modernity: Essays in Honor of Hubert L. Dreyfus*, vol. 1 (Cambridge/London: The MIT Press, 2000), pp. 325-326.

be borne by me alone. I can neither die the genuine death of others, nor my own death be substituted by others. "Death does not just 'belong' to one's own *Dasein* in an undifferentiated way; death lays claim to it as an individual *Dasein*. The non-relational character of death [...] individualizes *Dasein* down to itself."<sup>8</sup> Death is total isolation from others and finally falls into the abyss of impossibility of Being, namely, nullity or nothingness (*Ni-Ente*), absolutely opposite to Being.

Sheets-Johnston points out Heidegger's implicit agenda of the refutation of so-called immortality ideology, which transfigures the reality of death via various discourses of immortality to suppress the finality of death. He believes that Heidegger's negative attitude towards quotidian falling in inauthentic existence, along with others of its denial of one's mortality and concealment of one's anxiety about death, can be read as an implicit condemnation of immortality ideologies.<sup>9</sup> What the immortality ideologies attempt to challenge and undermine is Heidegger's notion of death as not to be outstripped. Nobody in the world can avoid death by any means. All ideologies promising immortality by minimizing the effect of death on *Dasein* or guaranteeing any forms of continuation of life beyond death are doomed to fail facing that unoutstripped possibility of the impossibility of Being. Authentically, *Dasein* should confront directly out of cowardliness its inmost existential condition, that is, the possibility of their own death, their own ultimate non-being that is constantly veiled in the cowardly protective immortality ideologies.

7 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 258-259.

8 *Ibid.*, p. 263.

9 Maxine Sheets-Johnston, "Death and Immortality Ideologies in Western Philosophy", *Continental Philosophy Review* vol. 36 (2003): 241.

The possibility of the *absolute* impossibility of *Dasein* not only leaves no doubt about the finality of death; it leaves no room for an immortality ideology that might appease or temper the finality. [...] Indeed, authentic being means having no comforting but illusory place to hide from the absolute impossibility of being.<sup>10</sup>

Sheets-Johnston continues, despite their particular form, immortality ideologies in various forms instantiated by "they" overshadow the existential meaning of death, that is, in a word: how to be is to die.<sup>11</sup>

*Dasein* has a contradictory and awkward situation in the face of death, which can be perfectly illustrated in the famous Epicurean argument: "if death is there, you are not; if you are there, death is not." As soon as *Dasein* gets its Being-in-totality when death is coming, it loses its "there" (*Da*) immediately and becomes "no-longer-being-there" (*Nichtmehrdasein*) or "no-more-able-to-be-there" (*Nicht-mehrdasein-können*), at that moment, as "*Dasein*-no-longer-being-there" or better as a "thing-present-at-hand" (corpse), which has nothing outstanding, nothing ahead-of-itself. As Heidegger says, unlike other kinds of being whose end coincides with an ontological fulfillment, such as the ripeness of the fruit, the death of *Dasein* cannot ontologically exhaust its possibilities as self-fulfillment or actualization, but simply the fulfillment of its course.<sup>12</sup> Anyway, *Dasein* cannot achieve its own ripeness before or at the very moment of death. Furthermore, it cannot even be done after death—*Dasein* will no longer be "there" anymore.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 242.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 244.

12 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 244.

According to Heidegger, dying is not an objective event or case but an existential phenomenon taken upon by *Dasein* itself in authentic existence. In this sense, the death of *Dasein* is not “perishing” which denotes the ending of the alive. *Dasein*'s going-out-of-the-world is different from the end of life (present-at-hand) in the physiological and biological sense.<sup>13</sup> In the same way, death is neither as vulgar saying “the loss of life” (in the passive sense) nor “abandonment of life” (in the active sense)—some-Thing as a property in the sense of present-at-hand, but *Dasein*'s possible projected vicissitude towards death as a whole. He says, “death is not something not yet present-at-hand, nor is it that which is ultimately still outstanding but which has been reduced to a minimum. Death is something that stands before us—something impending.”<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, when we speak of death as “ending”, we do not signify *Dasein*'s Being-at-an-end (*Zu-Ende-sein*), but a Being-towards-the-end (*Sein zum Ende*)<sup>15</sup> of this entity, “death is a way to be, which *Dasein* takes over as soon as it is. ‘As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die’.”<sup>16</sup> *Dasein*'s lack of totality constantly possessing its not-yet as potentiality-for-Being, discloses (*erschlossenheit*) itself little by little in something outstanding (*Ausstehen*) towards death. Thus *Dasein* gets to know its Being-in-totally not merely through “Being-at-an-end” but only

13 *Ibid.*, p. 241.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 250.

15 Michael Gelven suggests that to translate the German phrase “*Sein zum Tode*” into “Being-to-be-going-to-die” is more proper than into “Being-towards-death.” He writes, “For what is contained in the existential is not the actual experience of dying, nor a morbid concentration on the fact that one day I shall die. What the term signifies is the existential awareness of the possibility of ceasing to be: a real awareness, then, that I am going to die.” See: Michael Gelven, *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, p. 147.

16 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 245.

through “Being-towards-the-end.” Heidegger's notion of death finally turns to its opposite side: existence. In other words, to die is also to be, echoing Shakespeare's famous expression for the human ontological predicament in the voice of Hamlet: “To be or not to be, that's the question” and re-phrasing it as: “To be or not to be, those are one and the same question.”

Thus what Heidegger recalls in the authentic existence is the awareness of the urgency of death and our positive attitude towards that impending ceasing-to-be rather than the pessimistic evasion or total despair about it as a coming fact. “When Heidegger speaks of death, he is *not speaking of how one thinks at the time in which one is dying*. [...], but *what impending death can mean to one in the fullness of one's life*.”<sup>17</sup> The way and the state-of-mind to face death determines the significance of the vicissitude towards death. This is what Heidegger attempts to convey.

Heidegger highlights that death is the possibility rather than the actuality of *Dasein* to the extent that I can only consider my own death by treating it not as an actuality but a possibility, “as long as I am conscious, actual death belongs to someone else. Only others have actually died, hence for death to be properly meaningful to me, it must be seen as a possibility.”<sup>18</sup> Death as actualization is in inauthentic existence as “their” death, instead, death is simply a possibility in authentic existence. Being-towards-death is not an actuality drawn away from one's being-able-to-be but a possibility focusing on his being-able-to-be; it is not expecting (*Erwarten*, in German means “await passively”)

17 Michael Gelven, *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, p. 143.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 150.

the actualization of death but anticipating (*Vorlaufen*, in German means “running before, running into”) the existentielle possibility. Being-towards-death-as-the-ownmost-possibility is the authentic existential leap from being capable of not-being (in the fashion of concealing) to the disclosing of the capability of being (able-to-be). It is the higher level of the comprehension of our finitude and consequently of our Being itself in depth—courageous awareness of finitude or mortality.

The more unveiledly this possibility gets understood, the more purely does the understanding penetrate into it as the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all. Death, as actual, could itself be. It is the possibility of the impossibility of every way of comporting oneself towards anything, of every way of existing.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore for Heidegger, death in the authentic existence or the existential notion of death is found in *Dasein*'s own Being in its ownmost Self rather than in falling into everydayness. “The term ‘death’ in *Being and Time* does not refer to an event that takes place at the end of every human being's life. Rather, it is the name for a certain condition in which *Dasein* can find itself, viz., the condition of not being able to be anyone.”<sup>20</sup>

What does the authentic Being-towards-death compare with the inauthentic one in falling which comports along with “they” as “they-self” in everydayness? In short, Being is in the way towards death without either fleeing it or covering it up as prescribed negatively in

inauthentic existence. Nevertheless, death is not something possible to be actualized as a purpose (Being-out-for) which is ready-to-hand or present-at-hand, inasmuch as once one's death as demise is actualized, since “*Dasein* would deprive itself of the very ground for an existing Being-towards-death.” As a result, what should be considered in authentic Being-towards-death is not the actualization of death as a possible end in itself, but “when and how this possibility may perhaps be actualized.”<sup>21</sup> So the awareness of death opens up a realm of possibilities for *Dasein* in which its authentic existence is realized.

Gorner points out that “Heidegger's phenomenology of death is not a description of being dead or of dying but a descriptive analysis of being-towards-death and of death as it shows itself (and disguises itself) in such being.”<sup>22</sup> Authentic existence as Being-towards-death against an inauthentic one is no evasion and concealment of death like that in inauthentic existence, “letting death stand before” and living towards death resolutely to disclose the potentiality-for-Being in projection.

For *Dasein* to acknowledge its mortality—to anticipate death—is for it to acknowledge one of the most fundamental limits or conditions of its existence. And it can do so only by acting upon the knowledge that it is authentically itself only when, as concerned Being-alongside (entities) and solicitous Being-with (others), it projects itself upon its ownmost potentiality-for-Being rather than upon the possibility of the they-self.<sup>23</sup>

19 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 262.

20 William D. Blattner, “The Concept of Death in Being and Time”, *Man and World*, 27 (1994): 54; Mark Wrathall and Jeff Malpas, eds., *Heidegger, Authenticity, and Modernity: Essays in Honor of Hubert L. Dreyfus*, vol. 1, p. 312.

21 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 261.

22 Paul Gorner, *Heidegger's Being and Time: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 124.

23 Stephen Mulhall, *Routledge Philosophy Guide Book to Heidegger and Being and Time* (London/New York, 1996), p. 120.

What can authentic existence benefit human life considered in this aspect of death? Heidegger describes it in the following words,

The ownmost, non-relational possibility is not to be outstripped. Being towards this possibility enables *Dasein* to understand that giving itself up impends for it as the uttermost possibility of its existence. Anticipation, however, unlike inauthentic Being-towards-death, does not evade the fact that death is not to be outstripped; instead, anticipation frees itself for accepting this. When, by anticipation, one becomes free for one's own death, one is liberated from one's lostness in those possibilities which may accidentally thrust themselves upon one; and one is liberated in such a way that for the first time one can authentically understand and choose among the factual possibilities lying ahead of that possibility which is not to be outstripped. Anticipation discloses to existence that its uttermost possibility lies in giving itself up, and thus it shatters all one's tenaciousness to whatever existence one has reached. In anticipation, *Dasein* guards itself against falling back behind itself, or behind the potentiality-for-Being which it has understood.<sup>24</sup>

In anticipation, *Dasein* actively and positively "runs before" death and is being-free-for in projection to disclose its possibilities as its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. Heidegger summarizes the characterization of authentic Being-towards-death,

Anticipation reveals to *Dasein* its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concerned solicitude, but of being itself, rather, is an impassioned freedom towards death—a

24 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 264.

freedom which has been released from the Illusions of the 'they', and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious.<sup>25</sup>

In this way, death as an objective occurrence which happens in every single hour upon "they" and will come in the future on "me," is elevated as a vicissitude of "go-aheadism" disclosed in possibilities along with ontological anxiety as the basic state-of-mind and projection with resoluteness in *Dasein*'s ownmost and uttermost potentiality-for-Being—the authentic existence. In his unique notion of death, Heidegger considers death as the possibility of existence and endows significance to existence in the light of death, in the certainty and urgency of death. It is "my" death, in anticipation of which I run enterprisingly before, that forges the resoluteness of existence—Being-towards-death in the freedom-to-be.

Self-Sacrifice:

Dying for Others beyond Death

Self-sacrifice or self-givingness is one of the most spectacular phenomena in human history which manifests itself as the voluntarily giving up of one's own life for the sake of others. Among these, Jesus Christ's self-sacrifice for the sin of human beings could be regarded as the supreme exemplar. Evidently, in Heidegger's discourse on death, self-sacrifice can find little room. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger mentions self-sacrifice, yet in another perspective he writes,

No one can take the Other's dying away from him. Of course someone can 'go to his death for another'. But that always means to sacrifice oneself for the Other 'in some definite

25 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 266.



affair'. Such 'dying for' can never signify that the Other has thus had his death taken away in even the slightest degree.<sup>26</sup>

Heidegger focuses on the death in the substitution on the part of the substituted rather than of the substituting one and even of this substitution (dying for) itself. We need to investigate whether and how this death for *Dasein* itself makes sense.

Self-sacrifice is a mode of death with the following characteristics. Above all, it is the voluntary or intentional decision or projection to face one's own death. It temporalizes death's indefiniteness definitely at the present time or in an upcoming future. Self-sacrifice is not merely as being towards what is projected, but also as what is projected. In other words, to consume one's life for others is the very content of projection toward death and consequently is uplifted as the very climax of one's vicissitude. It becomes the only purpose of existence. A self-sacrificial act happens relationally based on the benefit of others although it may be attached to a strong thirst for self-fulfillment of the victim himself. It is the apex of freedom to be (not-to-be) with the greatest resolution as the freest way to live towards death: "free to choose how and when to die" in resoluteness as the most evident *Vorlaufen-in-den-Tod*. Self-sacrifice drags the subject out of the everydayness and identity as "they-self" in a radical way to face this "deadly" option as "to be or not to be." Self-sacrifice is definitely a great possibility of Being-towards-death in authentic existence. Nevertheless, how does self-sacrifice make sense according to Heidegger's definition of death as non-relational and not to be outstripped? If Heidegger is right in that self-sacrifice is nothing but a death in which "*Dasein* would deprive itself of the very ground for

an existing Being-towards-death,"<sup>27</sup> then the self-sacrificial death has nothing to distinguish itself from another familiar human act: suicide.

Unlike the passive temporalization of death upon *Dasein*, e.g. the dying of terminal cancer with an approximate countdown of life, both self-sacrifice and suicide are the extremely active intentionally projected temporalizations of death "ahead of schedule;" they are both free-to-dies. The former has to passively lead his remaining days in resolution, while the latter, however, chooses to terminate his being for the sake of nullity, the negation of being itself. We need to pay attention that free-to-die is not always free-to-be. Free-to-die for something else is absolutely distinguished from free-to-die for death itself, namely the not-to-be that suicide is. The difference between suicide and self-sacrifice could be explained in the following way: that suicide is the renouncement of care while self-sacrifice is the intensification and consummation of it. In dying, both acts show regrets to the objects of caring, but the former for the reconfirmation of the fact that the suicide used to be "there" and could be "there" on and on, while the latter for varieties of missing care for the sake of the very care itself which fulfills its death.

For Heidegger, it is not how to die but how to live towards death that really matters on *Dasein*'s part. Both as the "definite" immediate death, self-sacrifice and suicide comport and disclose their beings in such a projection straight to death itself with resoluteness as their projected Being-towards-death. Both of them deprive their own being voluntarily. One is for the being-of-others, while the other is for its

26 *Ibid.*, p. 240.

27 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 261.

ownmost not-to-be. We cannot distinguish those two in a more crystal-clear way in Heidegger's analysis on death and Being-towards-death.

Self-sacrifice is not dying in place of another. Everyone should face and experience his own dying (although unable to reflect on his own death) sooner or later. Heidegger emphasizes this point while neglecting the very death of the one who gives up his life for the sake of Others (in the broader philosophical sense). As he says, death itself is the non-relational severing of all the relations with others. The dead is ontologically lonely in his own dying. We have to admit that he is perfectly right in this point. But this phenomenological interpretation of death seems to impose a theoretical vacuum on the significance of the self-sacrificial act of human *Dasein*.

We do not intend to proceed with a phenomenological analysis on human self-giving conduct in the approach of Heidegger, but rather to demonstrate a radical but typical projection and resolution of existence towards death so as to "dig out" the ethical implications and ontologically religious insight in Heidegger. Without specific religious or spiritual presupposition or orientation, how is it possible to justify the self-sacrificial act, which is also called, in moral terms, "supererogatory altruism"?

In Chinese language, a four-character idiom vividly describes the state-of-mind of self-sacrificial death, literally, "unflinchingly looking upon death as homecoming" (視死如歸), which ontologically illustrates the death of *Dasein* as returning to its very foundation, the primordial thrownness in Heidegger's terms, or more accurately, the transcendent value and otherworldly eternity promised by ethical imperatives and religious faiths. That "home" is, as it were, the ontological nostalgia at the very foundation of *Dasein*'s being.

In self-sacrifice, death becomes a situation or context, not only of *Dasein*'s ownest concerning, but of something beyond, which contributes to Being-together (*Mitsein*). The self-sacrificial death should be further elaborated in the domain of Theology in the sense that it is not for the sake of *Dasein* itself as the means to self-fulfillment (*Dasein* has not already been "there" (*da*) anymore at that moment to confirm and enjoy it), but for something beyond this world rather than an entity (*ente*) as being-present-at-hand in this world or nothingness (*ni-ente*) as nullity, namely something proper to otherworldliness. Thus the death of *Dasein* will neither be considered as a thing or an objective event within the memories of others and being forgotten sooner or later, nor be regarded as an absurd non-sense, back to *Dasein*'s ownest primordial thrownness, which can make existentialism become the philosophy of absurdism or nihilism.

## Conclusion:

### A Theological Approach

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger explicitly rules out the religious or spiritual interpretation of death in his existential analysis by saying that,

If 'death' is defined as the 'end' of *Dasein*—that is to say, of Being-in-the-world—this does not imply any ontical decision whether 'after death' still another Being is possible, either higher or lower, or whether *Dasein* 'lives on' or even 'outlasts' itself and is 'immortal'. Nor is anything decided ontically about the 'other-worldly' and its possibility, any more than about the 'this-worldly'.<sup>28</sup>

28 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 247-248.

Heidegger anchors his ontological interpretation of death in this world to precede other disciplines, which he calls the ontic, and is concerned not with the Being of entities but the entities themselves, properties of entities and relations among entities. Other-worldly speculation such as Theology is included.<sup>29</sup> Those speculations try to interpret mortal acts through the construction of the philosophy of Otherness—a kind of philosophy leaning on the relationship between subjects or between equal discourses. Sheets-Johnston ascribes the abovementioned immortality ideologies to a current Western philosophical trend called “philosophy of Others”:

Present-day Continental concerns with Other, Others, and Otherness—concerns related at times to seemingly near fanatical concerns with difference—can be curiously deflective with respect to death, successfully eliding the possibility of what Heidegger specifies as being face-to-face with oneself. At the same time, they can be curiously suggestive of an undercurrent theme of death in focusing on something nameless, something that is an unspecified unknown, something that is thus an easy stand-in for death.<sup>30</sup>

*Dasein* itself is not just Being-in-the-world but Being-with-in-the-world or Being-with-one-another-in-the-world. According to our daily experience, the death of “others”, particularly of the closest people, such as a beloved one, even that of someone less related in the narrow sense, but altogether within specific circumstances (for instance, patients in the same ward) or the same community (such as all the creatures), will also help to accomplish the leap from the inauthentic existence in

29 Paul Gortler, *Heidegger's Being and Time: An Introduction*, p. 125.

30 Maxine Sheets-Johnston, “Death and Immortality Ideologies in Western Philosophy”, *Continental Philosophy Review* vol. 36 (2003): 243.

everydayness to the authentic existence towards the ownmost possibility of *Dasein*. Empathy enables the possibility of participating in other's death, which takes effect on the spectator's deep understanding of his own death by arousing the death-awareness in the authentic sense.

The phenomenologist philosopher Emmanuel Levinas's point of view can be seen as the antithesis of Heidegger's argument of the authentic existence through his notion of death, which is highlighted in the self-sacrificial act. Levinas criticizes Heidegger's notion of death through human behavior in suffering and self-sacrifice. He puts the problem of Being to the fore as well as mortality, and particularly renders self-sacrificial “dying-for” with a moral primacy over the authentic existential death of *Dasein*'s ownmost possibility.

The priority of the other over the I, by which the human being—there is chosen and unique, is precisely the latter's response to the nakedness of the face and its mortality. It is there that the concern for the other's death is realized, and that ‘dying for him’, ‘dying his death’ takes priority over ‘authentic’ death. Not a post-mortem life, but the excessiveness of sacrifice, holiness in charity and mercy. This future of death in the present of love is probably one of the original secrets of temporality itself and beyond all metaphor.<sup>31</sup>

Levinas employs the ethical approach over Heidegger's ontological one to interpret death phenomenologically. Instead of reflecting on *Dasein*'s ownmost death, he considers the caring of the death of others, “dying-for” as the most extreme instance. Cohen remarks that,

31 Emmanuel Levinas, “Dying for...”, in Emmanuel Levinas, *Entre Nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 217.

Morality is not for Levinas a gloss on (or of) being, a merely “ontic” region of signification. Rather, it is at once beyond-being and better-than-being: beyond-being precisely because and insofar as it is better-than-being. To be for-the-other before oneself, caring for the other’s mortality and suffering before one’s own, is for Levinas the very height of a person’s own humanity, the highest form of selfhood in the sense of the morally best—the kindest, the most compassionate, and in this sense the most excellent and noblest.<sup>32</sup>

Cohen thinks that Levinas’s phenomenological–ethical account of death has a deeper “bottom” and a higher “top” than Heidegger’s phenomenological–ontological account to the extent that,

It begins more deeply, in subjectivity conceived in the self-sensing of sensibility, thus in suffering, rather than in a subject first defined by the worldly (instrumentality) and social (“the they”) distractions that are overturned in anxiety and the resolute self-understanding of one’s ownmost non-relational being-toward-death. And Levinas’s account of death faces a more radical or greater transcendence in the priority and exigency of an infinite moral responsibility for-the-other’s mortal being, ultimately a “dying for” the other person, and in the transcendence of an as yet unachieved justice for-all-others.<sup>33</sup>

What is the ethical agenda implied in Heidegger’s analysis of the Being of *Dasein*? What kind of ideal life-style or ethos (attitude) is

suggested in it? We believe that it is a kind of individual private ethics, or at most a self-cultivation.

The basic state-of-mind of existentialist philosophy, as Stegmüller concludes, is that either of the being without refuge, or indescribable fear of strangeness and perplexity towards the world, or the feeling of absolute mortality and finiteness towards oneself’s existence as the state-of-mind of being thrown into the inapprehensible absurd reality and to be at the mercy of death, and the guilty and basic mood, namely, *Angst*.<sup>34</sup> We know that dying for nothing is always easily followed by living for nothing, which introduces the philosophy of absurdism or nihilism. Existentialism such as Heidegger’s philosophy unavoidably swings between the state-of-mind of optimism (hopeful to be, facing the possibilities) and pessimism (desperate to be, facing the absolute impossibility), narcissism and nihilism, accompanied by sentimentalism all the time, mingled with the slight flavor of “go-ahead” heroism and moral aestheticism (sense of tragedy: courage and perseverance over impossibility and insignificance) in the sense of self-cultivation, a lonely pathetic Being with weak ethical transcendence and religious commitment.

In the light of Heidegger, we have the notion of death in inauthentic existence as a single objective event, which is the ending of another’s life as will happen sometime in the future on my part; and in authentic existence, death performs as a vital vicissitude towards which a realm of possibilities for Being-free-for is disclosing. Besides those notions proposed by Heidegger, we must have something extra,

32 Richard A. Cohen, “Levinas: Thinking Least about Death—Contra Heidegger”, *International Journal of Philosophy and Religion* vol. 60 (2006): 26.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 38.

34 Wolfgang Stegmüller, *Hauptströmungen der Gegenwartsphilosophie: Eine Kritische Einführung*, vol. I (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 1978), p. 136.

that is, a death towards something *beyond*—the authenticity of ethical-religious significance which can serve as the final otherworldly shelter for *Dasein*.

From one of most famous Christian theologians in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Paul Tillich, we may find a better way out for Heidegger's notion of death concerning the aforesaid special mode of death: self-sacrifice. Tillich, incidentally, has also generally but controversially been labelled as the existentialist philosopher and theologian.

According to Tillich, "I" have to stretch out for the possibilities to increase the content of the centered unity that I am. He says,

For the sake of my present reality, I must keep many possibilities outside of my centered self, or I must give up something of what I now am for the sake of something possible which may enlarge and strengthen my centered self. So my life process oscillates between the possible and the real and requires the surrender of the one for the other—the sacrificial character of all life.<sup>35</sup>

Reiterated in Heidegger's terminology, *Dasein* has ontologically the dimension of otherness, namely, from the Other as well as for the Other. It has to sacrifice its possibilities which tend to be actualized for the sake of realities.

Although self-sacrifice is widely considered as a transcendent act with unambiguous spiritual implication and otherworldly orientation, Tillich emphasizes that self-sacrifice remains ambiguous in spite of its

35 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), p. 42.

being a moral function of the spirit. The ambiguity of sacrifice lies in the risk whether to sacrifice the real for the possible or the possible for the real.<sup>36</sup> How does *Dasein*'s death make sense for others, not only ethically but also ontologically, if its death is only an individual non-relational matter or if practically, it only serves the one unworthy to sacrifice for? By self-sacrifice, *Dasein* is no-longer-be-there-any-more, according to Heidegger, then what remains for those who are left behind, a corpse and a burial for commemorating? *Dasein* sacrifices its potentiality or possibility to be and resolutely projects and temporalizes his authentic existence intentionally for a purpose not for its ownmost Being because it will no-longer-be-there-any-more, but for something else. Tillich suggests, the possibility of sacrificing itself is actually to accept its finitude and participate in the infinitude of the sacred in the Spiritual Presence of God's grace.

The Spiritual Presence does not change that situation—for although the finite can participate in the infinite, it cannot become infinite—but the Spirit can create an acceptance of man's and mankind's finitude, and in so doing can give a new meaning to the sacrifice of potentialities. It can remove the ambiguous and tragic character of the sacrifice of life possibilities and restore the genuine meaning of sacrifice, namely, the acknowledgement of one's finitude.[...] In contrast to the humanist idea of man which actualizes what man can be

36 *Ibid.*, p. 43. As for the ambiguity in self-sacrifice, sometimes we cannot find a definite boundary between self-sacrifice and suicide. A typical and extreme instance can be found in the Japanese Kamikazes at the end of World War II, who proclaimed to swear their final allegiance to the human incarnation of the adored God—Heavenly Emperor. Man can die for false ideology or for illusion or even for the people for whom he is not worthy to be sacrificed. Tillich likewise notices this viewpoint and indicates the requirement of justice and love as criteria, which properly rest on God.

directly and without sacrifice, the Spirit-determined fulfillment of man sacrifices all human potentialities, to the extent that they lie on the horizontal plane, to the vertical direction and receives them back into the limits of man's finitude from the vertical direction, the direction of the ultimate.<sup>37</sup>

Tillich calls it Theo-nomous personal fulfillment, God the absolute Other lays bare a total other universe of discourse—otherworldliness in the Spiritual Presence, which is the lost dimension in Heidegger's notion of death in which *Dasein* can never achieve self-fulfillment in its isolation from Others and its finitude within this world.

---

37 Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3, p. 271.