

25TH Anniversary Special Edition

THE REED

Undergraduate Journal of
Existentialism

2022 - 2023

The Reed Journal of Existentialism

Volume 25, 2023

St. Olaf College

Editorial Staff

Alyssa Medin '24, Editor in Chief

Thomas Garcia '23, Vice Editor in Chief

Ziza Nshaki '24, Editor

Charlotte Bossler '26, Editor

Caitlyn Pelican '23, Editor

Ariannya Herbst '24, Creative Writing Editor

Noah Smith '23, Creative Writing Editor

Ella Stremmer '24, Layout Editor

Maria Kardos '23, Art Editor

Olivia Jager '23, Art Editor

Advisors

Anna L Söderquist, Faculty Advisor

Eileen Shimota, Staff Advisor

The Reed's editorial staff would like to thank Anna L Söderquist, Eileen Shimota, the Howard and Edna Hong Kierkegaard Library, the St. Olaf Student Organizations Committee, and Engage Print for their help and support.

Cover Photo: Ariannya Herbst, St. Olaf College

The Reed Journal of Existentialism is published by St. Olaf College, in association with the Hong Kierkegaard Library, Northfield, MN. Please send questions about the 2023 journal to the-reed@stolaf.edu. Address written correspondence to The Hong Kierkegaard Library, ATTN: The Reed Journal, 1510 St. Olaf Avenue, Northfield, MN 55057.



“Yet a self, every moment it exists, is in a process of becoming; for the self is not present actually, it is merely what is to come into existence. In so far, then, as the self does not become itself, it is not itself; but not to be oneself is exactly despair”

— Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*

Dear Readers,

The contingency of existence—that there are no promises about what will happen in the future—is a leitmotif in Existentialism. And the beginnings of our undergraduate journal *The Reed* is a prime example of this element of contingency.

In 1998, St. Olaf housed what was then termed the “Para-College,” a kind of major in which students teamed up with faculty members to cobble together their own focus of studies. Peder Kjeseth, a gifted and infinitely curious student with a keen interest in Pascal and Existentialism, did just this. Throughout the year, he dove into line-by-line readings of both Pascal and that Pascal of the north, Kierkegaard. When it came time for Peder to develop a final project, he insisted he was going to establish an undergraduate journal of Existentialism. Gently, Peder was advised to come up with a reasonable project instead. But come May, to faculty members’ great surprise, Peder had solicited articles and assembled the first issue of *The Reed*.

Over the last quarter century, *The Reed* has continually grown, with submissions from all over the globe. It now includes philosophical essays, short stories, poetry, and visual art. Once a year, after undergoing a rigorous peer review process and tireless editorial work by St Olaf undergraduates, *The Reed* lands in academic departments across the disciplines. As it turns out, another theme in the Existentialist tradition is possibility; and, in this spirit, there can be no doubt that Peder’s initial dream has grown to take on a life of its own.

The title of the journal is based on Pascal’s famous quote, “Man is a reed, the most feeble thing in nature, but he is a thinking reed.” The students who have shaped *The Reed*—contributors and editors alike—have lived up to this simple yet fragile ambition: to become thoughtful creatures. Today, as we celebrate *The Reed*’s 25th anniversary, we stand in awe at their efforts and eagerly await what still lies ahead.

Sincerely,
Gordon Marino & Anna L Söderquist

Letter from the Editors

At the heart of the project of existentialism is a search for the self, a response to internal crisis. Each editor, faculty supervisor, author, and reader engages in the project of self-searching and self-creating through their relationship to our publication. We thank you all for engaging in this continuous effort.

There is, as the years pass, an increasing pressure from the post-modern world towards self-definition, a movement that commercializes identity in lieu of authentic pursuits towards finding our selfhood. Today, self-definition manifests in the marketplace and in the virtual spaces we inhabit and co-create. These outlets of self-definition continue to fail in encapsulating our very being, leaving us unsatisfied. Moreover, with the emerging and unclear influence of A.I. in creative pursuits, students today face ever-increasing pressure to be what we are becoming– that is, to embrace an authentic pursuit. This year's contributions to *The Reed* problematize the nature of categorical self-definition, raising alternative considerations to the established theoretical frameworks under which we are expected to identify.

Our final product contains a plurality of works– creative writing, photography, and essays– which highlight the diversity of our existentialist response to post-modernity. On behalf of the entire editorial team, we are honored to present you with our 25th anniversary edition: while the times, circumstances, and indeed individuals behind each edition have changed through the years, the crises and questions we face remain at the forefront of our mission as a publication.

The editorial team of *The Reed* have the pleasure of announcing the winner of the Edna Hong Memorial Essay Prize, in the name of Howard and Edna Hong, the founders of the St. Olaf Kierkegaard Library and the translators who brought Kierkegaard to the English-speaking world. This year, the honor is given to Benjamin Campbell for the work, “In touch with oneself: an existential-phenomenological

inquiry into hypochondria.” This essay provides an entry-point for reconsidering a specific subjective experience in light of the insights provided by existentialism. We appreciate the applicability and relevance of this novel work, which goes beyond scholarship to delve into lived experience, a lofty aim for any existentialist.

Once again, thank you to all who have contributed to this special edition of *The Reed*, we appreciate your hard work. We extend a special thanks to Eileen Shimota, our staff advisor, and Anna Söderquist, our new faculty advisor, for their encouragement and support in our efforts this year. Thanks also goes out to the Hong Kierkegaard Library for being a hub of scholarship and support in existentialist thought.

We hope that in sharing this special edition of *The Reed*, we can present existentialist considerations that are relatable, relevant, and provocative. Enjoy!

Alyssa Medin, *Editor-in-Chief*
Thomas Garcia, *Vice Editor-in-Chief*

Contents

Sheet Hanging from Tree	1
<i>Ella Stremler, St. Olaf College</i>	
A Cartesian Meditation: Searching for Firm Foundation	3
<i>Noah Tunis , Haverford College</i>	
Film and the UnCommunicable	7
<i>Graham C. Groff , Howard Payne University</i>	
Self-Portrait	30
<i>Auguste Bernick , St. Olaf College</i>	
In Touch with Oneself: An Existential- Phenomological Inquiry into Hypochondria	31
<i>Benjamin Campbell, Ohio State University</i>	
Aspiring to Queer: A Subjective Inquiry into the Favorability of Queer Existential Phenomonology	47
<i>Markian Romanyshyn, St. Olaf College</i>	
Death Consciousness: Thoughts on Immortality in Heidegger and Borges	69
<i>Holden Mize, University of Memphis</i>	
Eclipse	81
<i>Auguste Bernick, St. Olaf College</i>	



Sheet Hanging on Tree

ELLA STREMLER

NOAH TUNIS

A Cartesian Meditation, Searching for Firm Foundation

At the most basic level, there is an experience. It is interrupted, blinking in and out of oblivion during periods often classified as “sleep,” but existent. For the purposes of this essay, I will refer to that experience as my experience. I am the experiencer, or perhaps some self-aware portion of the experience itself. I use the term “I” to represent the experiencer experiencing the experience. This experience is hard, if not impossible, to doubt. Even if the nature of reality suggests that what I perceive is a dream, a hallucination, or an error, still it is impossible to refute that an experience is existent at all. An experience exists on some metaphysical level, regardless of how reflective it is of the basic, deeper nature of reality.

I, or my subjective experience, exist in a world composed of three primary inputs: sensation, reaction, and reflection. My sensations include sights, sounds, smells,

tastes, and the “feelings” of tactile interactions. These interactions include texture, temperature, and pressure. Concurrent with this continuous and nearly limitless barrage of sensory data, my experience is populated with reactions. These include desire and aversion, fear and love, pleasure and pain. Impulses, volitions, and gut feelings are reactions, too. Reactions are raw, powerful, and nearly overwhelming.

Rounding out the elements of experience are reflections. Reflections are what we would commonly refer to as “thoughts.” This term represents the linguistic dialogue woven subtly through every moment of experience. Quiet words, licking at the edges of experience, loud words screaming and nearly drowning it out, and words translating symbols or sensations into descriptions and explanations. Reflections are true insofar as I am certain they exist in my experience, yet they consist of information that is not necessarily an accurate reflection of reality.

While it is difficult to doubt the existence of an experience, it is impossible to know whether such an experience represents reality. It is similarly impossible to know concretely that the experience I am having functions according to any laws, rules, or internal, consistent systems. We commonly conceive that our senses can, and often do, provide us an accurate picture of reality. There is no guarantee, however, that what they are perceiving is reality. As has been so often wondered: Is this all a dream? A hallucination? A manipulation by some malevolent being? The only moment I am experiencing and am unable to doubt is the present moment. The truth, continuity, and certainty of the reality surrounding the experience of this moment is not guaranteed.

As an example, imagine that every instant, every advancement of an increment of time divided as finely as time can be split, is composed of a new illusion engulfing the epicenter of my experiencing self. New memories fill the reservoir of my perceived past; new emotions, hopes, fears, intentions, and expectations fill my sense of the future. A new environment with new systems surrounds me; new beings with whom I interact in a new way manifest. In each of these cases, an experience would continue, but it would be a radically different one from the instant before. While there is no positive proof that this hypothetical is true, there is no negative proof that it is false. The inability to prove such cases to be impossible is at the heart of philosophical skepticism. As an experiencing thing, I am at the mercy of what I perceive, and there is no guarantee that these perceptions are reflective of the nature of actual reality.

Despite this, I remain confident that my experience exists. I encounter stimuli of various forms, which often combine into complex packets of alleged knowledge about the particular world of my experience. Information arises describing the composition and machinery of its physical nature, the history and dynamics of its inhabitants, and the truths of its scholars. This information molds the beliefs I hold about reality, and eventually builds me up to produce knowledge of my own and contribute to the world in which I am theoretically present. While this information may function coherently within the system of the world I am experiencing, it may also be a false representation of reality. If the world is but one of an infinite number of possibilities, then understanding it provides no foundation at all for understanding deeper truths about the nature of reality.

As a semblance of a conclusion, I know that I undoubtedly do have an experience, composed of perceived sensations, reactions, and reflections. At the very least, this experience exists, and I am the experiencer. This experience is what we commonly refer to as consciousness, and is the only way that I exist in the world. It is potentially a reflection of actual reality, but there are infinite possibilities as to the nature of reality, and all but one of them suggest that this experience is not reflective of actual reality. The individual conscious experience is only a small corner on some layer of the metaphysical plane. Therefore, I am unable to determine if anything in my experience is reflective of the broader details of actual reality: I am unable to form beliefs about the structure of reality using this data, the only data at my disposal. As my experience is all I know for certain exists, I am equipped with few certain tools for a deeper, more grounded understanding as to the nature and mechanisms of the universe.

My agnosticism towards the origins of my experience, and towards in what way I exist at all, render me relatively helpless. All that I know to be real with certainty is this moment. While it may be brief, I am grateful for the experiences I am having, for the love and connection I am feeling. I am grateful to have an experience at all. Seeking to know definitively is a path that has led often to despair, while seeking to be as fully as possible is one of bliss.

GRAHAM C. GROFF

Film and the (Un) Communicable

Abstract:

In 1957, the prolific Swedish director Ingmar Bergman released *The Seventh Seal*, the dramatic story of a disillusioned knight's return to his plague-ravaged homeland after fighting in the crusades. The film's themes of mortality, faith, and the silence of God closely reflect events that Bergman relates in his autobiographies. The relationship between artists and their art is explored by Maurice Merleau-Ponty in his influential essay, *Eye and Mind*, which claims that artists convey a unique worldview through the depiction of accessible and relatable objects and events. This analysis references the relationship between Bergman's 1957 film, the life events that inspired it, and others' internalization of Bergman's work as an example of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of art. Applied to *Eye and Mind*, the relationship reveals four stages of "allegorical self-perception": externalization and projection, perception, self-reflection, and internalization. This examination of *The Seventh Seal* and Bergman's life, within the context of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of art, identifies the centrality of self-perception and self-reflection to artistic expression.

Keywords:

Merleau-Ponty; Ingmar Bergman; aesthetics; film; art

Introduction

In 1987, half a decade after the completion of his final film, Ingmar Bergman published *The Magic Lantern*, his autobiography. Rather than a simple account of his life's events, the book alternates between personal accounts of his efforts as a director, his numerous volatile relationships, and his innocent childhood in the Swedish countryside. Instead of composing his memoir behind a desk or at a Stockholm coffee shop, he returned to the rural, picturesque land of his upbringing, accompanying his father as he preached in various local churches. Inside, Bergman's interest in his father's pastoral oration was second only to the country churches' grand and austere interiors, which he detailed, writing,

“Like all churchgoers have at times, I let my mind wander as I contemplated the altar pieces, triptychs, crucifixes, stained-glass windows, and murals. I would find Jesus and the two robbers in blood and torment...the knight playing chess with death. Death sawing down the tree of life, a terrified wretch wringing his hands in the top of it. Death leading the dance to the land of shadows, wielding his scythe like a flag, the congregation capering in a long line and the jester bringing in the rear...some churches are like aquariums, not deserts. People are everywhere—saints, prophets, angels, devils, and demons—all alive and flourishing. The here-and-beyond billowing over walls and arches. Reality and imagination merged into robust mythmaking.”[1]

1 Bergman, Ingmar. *The Magic Lantern: An Autobiography*. 134.

It was in the churches that Bergman frequented as a child, listening to his father preach, a wary eye trained upon the grim scenes cut into stained-glass, that his boundless imagination grew and matured. The iconography that haunted his childhood grew more pronounced with time. Bergman's 1957 film, *The Seventh Seal*, depicts the somber journey of a knight's return to his homeland after fighting in the crusades. In the first scene, he encounters Death, a tall, cloaked figure with a harsh, pale face. The knight challenges Death to a game of chess, his life in the balance, and ultimately loses. Death claims his life as well as the lives of his wife and friends.

The Seventh Seal is a dramatization of the stained-glass epics that composed Bergman's childhood. The themes and scenes he pondered from his church pew, long fermented in his imaginative, sensitive mind, are animated in Bergman's harsh black and white cinematography; the characters that had once only lived in shards of red and black and blue are humanized by his dramatic dialogue and riveting monologues.

Most importantly, *The Seventh Seal* is a cinematic rendition of the pensive director's spiritual conflict at the time of the filming. According to Bergman, the opposed armies were his "childhood piety" and his "newfound harsh rationalism", and the film allowed him to juxtapose his "two opposing beliefs...allowing each to state its case in its own way."²] *The Seventh Seal* is not merely a film; it is a religious struggle—a battle between the guilt of rationalism and the innocence of traditionalism. The knight's pleas unto the heavens were his own and heaven's silence is his own admission of isolation.

Bergman's account of *The Seventh Seal's* origin clarifies the role of film as an artistic endeavor that allows for

² Bergman, Ingmar. *Images: My Life in Film*. 235–236.

the appearance of saints, prophets, angels, devils, and demons. It affords them the opportunity to make their cases and display their convictions. Film exhumes the mythical figures of the past and resurrects the memory of stained-glass saints, transforming them into spectral spirits that may strut and dance and argue and speak until their lines are spent. Film, considered, executed, and utilized correctly, is an indispensable means of philosophical inquiry, theological consideration, and spiritual expression.

“Eye and Mind”, Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s influential essay, explores the relationship between artists and their art. Merleau-Ponty claims that art is grounded in self-reflection and self observation. According to Merleau-Ponty, the paradox of artistic expression is that humans are capable of self-perception, seeing ourselves as objects but still recognizing ourselves as autonomous entities, therefore existing simultaneously inside and outside of the fabric of reality.[3]

This enigma is expressed in the artist’s inextricable selfreflection in their work, such as Bergman’s dramatization of his spiritual struggle in *The Seventh Seal*. However, the specifics of this self-reflection are particular to the artist and inaccessible to the audience, so the artist embodies it in objects and themes that the audience can relate to both objectively and in subjective relation to themselves. In order to be accessible, artists use allegory as a Rorschach test upon which the audience may project themselves; through allegory “...my body can assume segments derived from the body of another, just as my substance passes into them: man is mirror for man.”[4] Humans seek to communicate objectively but are inhibited by the subjectivity of perception. Every individual

3 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, and Thomas Baldwin. Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings. 294.
4Ibid. 300.

possesses a unique perspective that exists in relation to an underlying life philosophy. These perspectives are often antithetical to those held by others, causing conflict and alienation. However, film appeals to these radically different perspectives through the use of common themes that can be universally recognized and understood.

This article will seek to analyze and elucidate the relationship between artist and art, firstly through analysis of “Eye and Mind”, secondly through the consideration of the relevance of Merleau-Ponty’s essay to the study of perception and film, thirdly through an analysis of allegory in *The Seventh Seal*, and lastly through the examination of others’ self-reflective internalizations of Bergman’s work. This article, through the investigation of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy and Bergman’s magnum opus, will seek to establish a framework by which film and perception can be relationally understood.

“Eye and Mind”

Merleau-Ponty begins his 1961 essay with a description of science’s shortcomings as an avenue for the understanding of the human condition. Whereas science allows for the detached observation of the world as object and concept without appraisal, art necessarily puts the artist in relation to the object of their observation.[5] Life is not a laboratory of objective phenomena that can be understood absolutely, but an experience to be lived, appreciated, and subjectively appraised. According to Merleau-Ponty, the painter’s unique relationship to the world is understandable only through the phenomenology of perception. The paradox of this phenomenology is found in the self-perception inherent to the arts, which Merleau-Ponty describes, writing,

5 Ibid. 291-293.

“The enigma is that my body simultaneously sees and is seen. That which looks at all things can also look at itself and recognize, in what it sees, the ‘other side’ of its power of looking. It sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself... Visible and mobile, my body is a thing among things; it is caught in the fabric of the world, and its cohesion is that of a thing.”[6]

This begs the question, “What if we were incapable of self-perception? What if we were mere observers of the external, rather than beings which inherently perceive ourselves in relation to our perception?” Merleau-Ponty posits that this self-reference is the foundational principle of existence, and that all creation must be considered in relation to it. The world itself is an enigma composed of foreign, hostile, paradoxical and inexplicable objects and events; faced with this harsh reality, individuals fabricate understanding through internal equivalence:

“Things have an internal equivalent in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence. Why shouldn’t these [correspondences] in their turn give rise to some [external] visible shape in which anyone else would recognize those motifs which support his own inspection of the world?”[7]

This self-perception is our “third eye”, which relates the external to the internal:

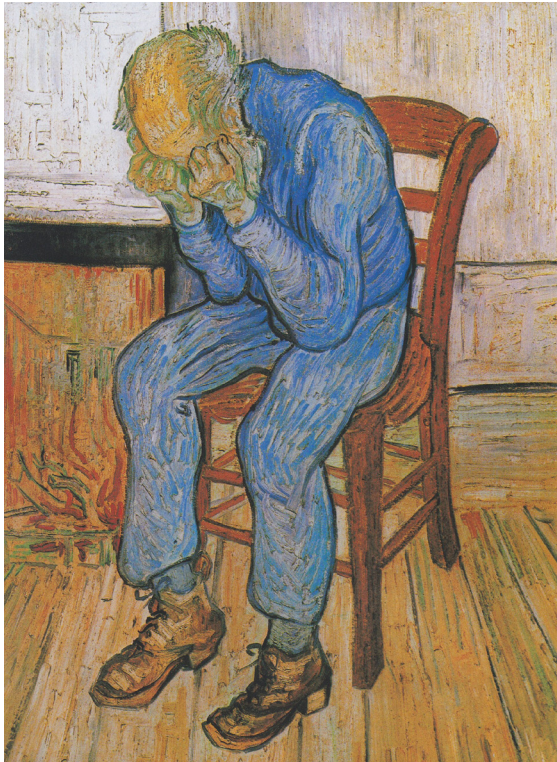
“Shall we say, then, that we look out from the outside, that there is a third eye which sees the paintings and even the mental images, as we used to speak of a third ear which grasped messages from the outside through the noises they caused inside us?”.[8]

6 Ibid. 294.

7 Ibid . 296.

8 Ibid. 297.

The relationship between artist, art, and audience can be visualized thus:



With regard to art, this self-reference is twofold, occurring in the creator and the audience. For example, consider “Sorrowing Old Man” by Vincent Van Gogh, a depiction of a balding elderly man, hunched forward in a simple chair, his head in his hands.[9]

The man is clad in a plain blue bombazine suit with rugged leather work boots. The background of a pier and beam floor, a wood plank wall, and a simple fireplace, is equally drab, framing the subject rather than distracting from him. The painting’s profundity is found not in what

9 van Gogh, Vincent. Sorrowing Old Man (“At Eternity’s Gate”).

it depicts, but in what it conceals. There are no grandiose flourishes of stars in the night sky or spiraling swirls of landscape foliage; there is only a faceless man whose body contorts into a despairing stoop. Van Gogh created the painting in an asylum at St. Remy two months before his suicide.^[10] The details of his sorrow and despair were specific to him, and the intimate details of his depression are fundamentally uncommunicable. Who can know what he was thinking as he painted? Perhaps he considered the flavorlessness of his breakfast and how even the consumption of sustenance had become laborious. Perhaps he lamented his own disinterest in the French countryside outside his asylum window—the same landscape with which he had once been so enamored. Perhaps he felt an acute pang of anxiety in his chest and wondered if he would feel an echo of the same panic when he took his own life. These thoughts are interior to the artist, communicable only through the creation of interpretable work. The man's facelessness allows the audience to imagine themselves in his stead. The drabness of his background allows the audience to imagine him elsewhere. The namelessness and ambiguity of his sorrow allows the audience to imagine him lamenting their own inexpressible anxieties. Therein lies the fundamental message of Merleau-Ponty's thought in "Eye and Mind"—the personal is communicable through reference to recognizable objects upon which others can project their own preconceptions, notions, hopes, fears, and experiences.

Although "Eye and Mind" is primarily concerned with the phenomenology of painting, Merleau-Ponty also addresses other mediums, writing,

"Anyone who thinks about the matter finds it astonishing

10 Hulsker, Jan. *The Complete Van Gogh: Paintings, Drawings, Sketches*. 444;491.

that very often a good painter can also make good drawings or good sculpture. Since neither the means of expression nor the creative gestures are comparable, this fact [of competence in several media] is proof that there is a system of equivalences, a Logos of lines, of lighting, of colors, of reliefs, of masses--a conceptless presentation of universal being.”[11]

Merleau-Ponty's shift to consider his phenomenology's relevance and applicability to other mediums of visual art suggest the possibility of a reflective philosophy of film, allowing film to be considered as a fundamentally reflective endeavor by which both director and audience relate the same media towards themselves.

Towards an Application of “Eye and Mind” to Film

The application of “Eye and Mind” to film is easily conceivable, as Merleau-Ponty even briefly addresses the cinematic medium in the fourth section. He rejects the capacity of photography to capture movement in the same capacity as painting, presenting the example of a photograph of horse suspended mid-leap:

“When a horse is photographed at the instant when he is completely off the ground, with his legs almost folded under him—an instant, therefore, when he must be moving—why does he look as if he were leaping in place?”[12]

Merleau-Ponty contrasts the non-movement of photographs to effective painting, which captures movement statically, because “the horses have in them that leaving here, going there, because they have a foot in each instant”.[13] Photography is static, while painting is

11 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, and Thomas Baldwin. Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings. 313.

12 Ibid. 316.

13 Ibid. 317.

dynamic. “The photograph keeps open the instant which the onrush of time closes up forthwith; it destroys the overtaking, the overlapping, the metamorphosis.”[14] In reality, movement never stops, and therein lies the incongruity between photography, which is supposedly the most accurate depiction of a single instant, and the reality reflected in painting. This incongruity is reconciled, therefore, only when the photographic medium approaches its own paradox, such as “when, for example, a walking man is taken at the moment when both his feet are touching the ground for then we almost have the temporal ubiquity of the body which brings it about that the man bestrides space. The picture makes movement visible by its internal discordance”.[15]

This discordance is also central to the cinematic medium, which portrays movement paradoxically through the rapid sequence of static images. The discordance between film’s static nature and dynamic appearance is central to its representation of theme and reflective image. Film’s paradox of time and movement detaches the characters in its incongruity, rendering it absurd—the bodies only appear to move. This discordance renders movement unknowable, and shifts focus from movement to dialogue, plot, theme, and motif. Whereas movement in painting is of profound significance to a painting’s efficacy, film’s inability to accurately depict movement shifts focus towards that which can be understood by the self, self-referentially. Furthermore, since film, through its immersive qualities, does not allow the viewer to visibly see themselves in frame, self-perception is enabled by allusion to common points of reference, allowing the viewer to place themselves in the film.

14 Ibid. 316–317.

15 Ibid. 316.

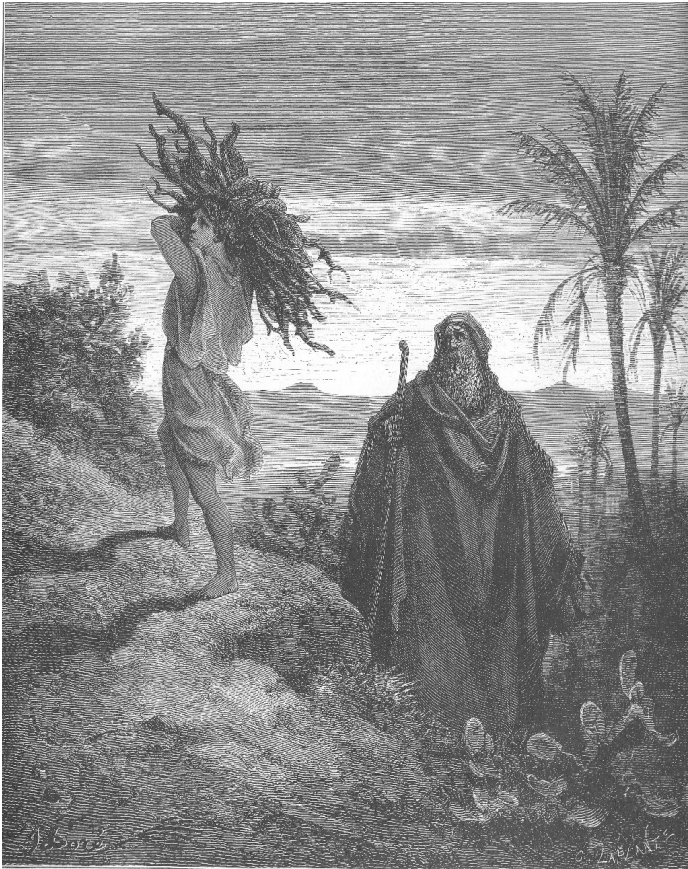


“Eye and Mind” elucidates the centrality of self-perception and self-reference to the consideration of art. Specifically applied to film, it establishes a framework by which film and perception can be relationally understood. However, only the analysis of a film’s reflective utilization of allegory can illustrate the centrality of self-reflection to communication in film. The following analysis of Ingmar Bergman’s cinematic masterpiece, *The Seventh Seal*, elucidates how religion is used as a common theme that both artist and audience can relate to, just as Van Gogh used the faceless old man as an object of mutual projection. Bergman’s spiritual struggle is reflected onto a canvas that is universally accessible so that the audience may relate it to themselves, thereby internalizing Bergman’s message.

An Analysis of *The Seventh Seal*

Themes of religion, death, and the silence of God are prominent even in the film’s title, a reference to Revelation 8:1, “And when the Lamb had opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven about the space of half an hour.” The film continuously employs Revelation’s apocalyptic imagery, even in its iconic opening scene.

The film’s opening shot is of an angular and rocky Scandinavian coastline. Antonius Block, a knight, and Jons the squire lie sleeping on the shore as their horses wade through the water. When Antonius wakes up, he washes his face in the water and then kneels to pray, but says nothing, face flushed with bitterness. Returning to the rock he slept against, Antonius sets up his chess board. Death, a dark, looming figure with pallid, severe features and black robes approaches him and says that his time has come. Antonius challenges Death to a game of chess on the condition he be allowed to live for as



The Testing of Abraham's Faith

long as he holds out, and that he be set free if he wins. Death agrees and they begin their game, framed by the ocean's tumultuous bouts of waves. Their game is played incrementally, and Antonius departs with his squire after the initial moves. They traverse the coastline in search of an inn and Jons details the degree to which the plague has ravaged the area. When they encounter a shepherd in a field, Jons approaches him to ask directions. Upon drawing closer, it is revealed that he is dead, presumably from the plague. His eyes are rotted from their sockets, his skin loose, decaying and cadaverously transparent.

The Seventh Seal's opening shots establish its primary themes: death and religion. Upon his return from a crusade, the knight, facing an imminent and impending death, seeks to make peace with a God in which he no longer believes while traversing his native countryside, which has been ravaged by the plague. The film's dark cinematography and introspective dialogue are a dramatization of Ingmar Bergman's personal struggles and background, and an excellent example of the application of Merleau-Ponty's work.

Projection- Reflections of Death and Religion

Ingmar Bergman's relationship with death began immediately after his birth; his mother had the Spanish flu, and he was so frail and sickly that he was preemptively baptized.[16] Various illnesses persisted through his childhood, and many of Bergman's earliest memories were of illness. In primary school, he had classmates die of polio. At an early age, he befriended a hospital caretaker, "who was in charge of transport between hospital and chapel, I heard a great many good stories and was allowed to see a lot of corpses in various stages of decay." [17] Additionally, because of his father's clerical vocation, he was introduced to biblical stories, such as the binding of Isaac, causing him to reflect, "It was difficult to differentiate between what was fantasy and what was considered real...the sagas, were they real...What was it truly like to be with Abraham and Isaac? Was he really going to cut Isaac's throat? I stared in dismay at Doré's engraving, identifying myself with Isaac. That was real. Father was going to slit Ingmar's throat." [18]

16 Bergman, Ingmar. *The Magic Lantern: An Autobiography*. 1.

17 *Ibid.* 7.

18 *Ibid.* 8.

Even as a child, Ingmar's perspectives on death and religion were inextricably linked. His early baptism was to defend him from damnation in the case of a premature death, rather than a confession of faith. His friendship with the caretaker, spent transporting corpses to the chapel for funerals established his perception of the church as a place of mourning rather than worship. Listening to his father's sermons made him fear righteous filicide.

The Magic Lantern tells the story of Bergman's first romance, a prepubescent friendship with a family friend named Marta. They spent the summer swimming and playing in the Swedish countryside, but even as a child, Ingmar's fear of death was inescapable,

"I simply had to tell Marta I was afraid of Death. An old pastor in the congregation had suddenly died. On the day of his funeral, he was lying in an open coffin while the guests were drinking wine and munching cakes in the next room. It was hot, flies buzzing round the corpse. His face was covered with a white cloth because his illness had eaten away his lower jaw and upper lip. A sweetish stench came through the heavy aroma of the flowers...Death's horrid. You don't know what comes afterwards. All that stuff Jesus says about in my father's house are many mansions, I don't believe it. Not for me, thanks. If I've at last escaped my own father's mansions, I'd prefer not to move in with someone who's probably worse. Death's an insoluble horror, not because it hurts, but because it's full of beastly dreams you can't wake up from." [19]

Despite his assertions of atheism, Bergman's fear of God persisted. While married to his second wife, Ellen Bergman, he fell in love with a married woman named

19 Ibid. 41.

Gun Grut, who he would later marry. Ingmar and Gun took a trip to Paris together, during which the unfaithful, anxious man reflected, “Exhausted and appalled, we sat on our beds, I at once realizing this was God’s punishment for my ultimate betrayal. Ellen’s delight at my unexpected homecoming, her smile that mercilessly clear picture kept appearing. It was to return again and again, and still does.”[20] Bergman’s account of a surgery he underwent over a decade after the completion of *The Seventh Seal* skillfully summarizes the complexities of his relationship to a god in which he did not believe,

“Twenty years ago, I underwent an operation, a minor one, but I had to be anaesthetized and, due to an error, was given too much anesthetic. Six hours of my life vanished. I don’t remember any dreams; time ceased to exist, six microseconds—or eternity. The operation was successful.

I have struggled all my life with a tormented and joyless relationship with God. Faith and lack of faith, punishment, grace and rejection, all were real to me, all were imperative. My prayers stank of anguish, entreaty, trust, loathing and despair. God spoke, God said nothing. Do not turn from me Thy face.

The lost hours of that operation provided me with a calming message. You were born without purpose, you live without meaning, living is its own meaning. When you die, you are extinguished. From being you will be transformed to non-being. A God does not necessarily dwell among our increasingly capricious atoms.”[21]

Bergman’s relationship to a god in which he has no faith is

20 Ibid. 81.

21 Ibid. 101.

dramatized in *The Seventh Seal* when, after encountering Death, Antonius visits a church. The church initially appears to be empty except for a large sculpture of Christ on the cross. Antonius sees someone in the confession booth, approaches, and begins an iconic dialogue which mirrors his postoperative reflections.

“I want to confess as best I can, but my heart is empty. The emptiness is a mirror in which I see my own face...and it fills me with loathing and horror. My indifference to my fellow men has cut me off. I live now in a world of phantoms, a prisoner of my own dreams.”

“Yet you don’t want to die,” the stranger replies.

“Yes, I do.”

“What are you waiting for?”

“I want to know,” Antonius glances at the image of Christ on the cross.

“You want a guarantee.”

“Call it what you will. Is it so hard to grasp God with one’s senses? Why must he hide in a mist of vague promises and unseen miracles? How are we to believe the believers when we don’t believe ourselves? What will become of us who want to believe but cannot? And what of those who neither will nor can believe? Why can I not kill god within me? Why does he go on living in this painful, humiliating way? I want to tear him out of my heart, but he remains a mocking reality that I cannot shake off. Do you hear me?”

“I hear you.”

“I want knowledge. Not faith or conjecture, but knowledge. I want God to reach out his hand, show his face, speak to me. But he is silent. I cry to him in the dark, but no one seems to be there.”

“Perhaps no one is there.”

“Then life is a senseless terror. No man can live with death knowing that everything is nothingness.”

“Most people never reflect on death or nothingness.”

“One day they’ll stand on the far edge of life, peering into the darkness.”

“Ah, that day.”

“I understand now. In our fear we make an idol and call it God.”

Considered individually, *The Seventh Seal* tells the story of a disillusioned knight’s crisis of faith, and *The Magic Lantern* relates the intimate details of Bergman’s profoundly complicated life. Considered collectively within the context of Merleau-Ponty’s work, *The Seventh Seal* is an excellent example of film’s reflective nature.



Perception, Self-Reflection, and Internalization

An analysis of *The Seventh Seal* in relation to Bergman's personal life demonstrates his artistic projection; similarly, consideration of his influence on his contemporaries reveals perception, self-reflection, and internalization, the other components of allegorical self-projection. Woody Allen^[22] is an outspoken student of the Swedish auteur, even calling Bergman "probably the greatest film artist, all things considered, since the invention of the motion picture camera."^[23]

Points of comparison between the artists are abundant. Both men were prolific creators, fabricating films and screenplays at an astonishing rate. They addressed similar themes of isolation, loneliness, faith, and death. In *Love and Death*,^[24] Allen parodied Bergman's personification of Death in *The Seventh Seal*.^[25] Both Allen's *Crimes*

22 Neither this article nor its author endorse Woody Allen's alleged misdeeds. He is referenced solely in relation to the cyclical nature of allegorical self-projection. Furthermore, subsequent analysis of Allen's personal life pertains exclusively to his stylistic similarity to Ingmar Bergman and is therefore immaterial to his alleged impropriety.

23 Ramm, Benjamin. "The 'Greatest Film-Maker Who Ever Lived'."

24 Corliss, Richard. "Woody Allen on Ingmar Bergman." *Time*.

25 *The Seventh Seal*.

and *Misdemeanors* and Bergman's *Wild Strawberries* depict their protagonists reliving a family dinner from childhood, but their subtle differences demonstrate the nature of Allen's internalization of Bergman's work. Whereas Allen's protagonist actively engages in the dinner, Bergman's character simply observes, thus revealing a "distinction in different religious and cultural settings of the two films, namely Lutheran and Jewish traditions. This example shows how Allen used a Bergman model, but did not apply it identically, rendering it in a different cultural setting to produce new meaning".[26]

This is fundamental to allegorical self-projection. Bergman was influenced by his own unique Lutheran upbringing and related it to a diverse audience through cinematic dramatization. Allen, who claimed a vastly different cultural background, perceived *Wild Strawberries* in relation to his own experiences. He then internalized his self-referential interpretation of Bergman's work and began a new cycle of allegorical self-projection by creating his own film. In an interview, Allen addressed the relationship between artists and their influences, saying,

"This is what happens in all art forms, whether it's music or film or comedy. You have certain people that you adore, and when you start out, you have the tendency to be influenced by them. Bergman had that himself, by his own explanations, with Victor Sjöström [the director who starred in *Wild Strawberries*]. He idolized him and his films, and his films were very derivative of Victor Sjöström's. This is just how it works. Then, gradually, you either remain an imitator your whole life, or that influence influences your work and adds a certain rich element

26 Attarieh, Maziar. "Bergman's Influence on Woody Allen,"

to your work, combined with your own contribution. I was in an odd position because I was a Brooklyn stand-up comic, doing stand-up comedy and doing comic films. It's an odd influence. If you say this guy does comic movies, and he's influenced by the Marx Brothers or Charlie Chaplin or Preston Sturges, that's completely rational. If you're influenced by Ingmar Bergman — who is, even among dramatic filmmakers particularly poetic, heavy thematically, heavy in technique — it makes for an unusual end product. And it did for me, for better or for worse”.[27]

Allen and Bergman were both influenced by circumstance and upbringing. Bergman's quintessentially Scandinavian fascination with religion, drama, and existential themes frequently recurs in his weighty, artistic, philosophical films. Allen is a self-described “creature of the New York City streets” and was raised Jewish, which is inextricably reflected in his critically acclaimed comedy and drama.[28] Both were heavily influenced by their predecessors, and their representation of those influences were mediated by self-referential self-reflection, which Merleau-Ponty calls the “third-eye”; their relationships to themselves and others exemplifies allegorical self-projection's process of projection, perception, self-reflection, and internalization.

Conclusion

Consider once more Merleau-Ponty's quote from “Eye and Mind”:

“Things have an internal equivalent in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence. Why shouldn't these [correspondences] in their turn give

27 Kilday, Gregg. “Woody Allen Pays Tribute to Ingmar Bergman.”

28 “Woody Allen Quotes.” Quote fancy

rise to some [external] visible shape in which anyone else would recognize those motifs which support his own inspection of the world?”[29]

Bergman's experiences with death and faithlessness were interior to him. Without reading *The Magic Lantern*, one would be unaware of his religious upbringing, his simultaneous familiarity with death and fear of death, or his contentious relationship with a god he did not believe in. However, those events had an internal equivalent in Bergman; his fear of death is personified in a cloaked figure with a mask-like face; his constant exposure to death is represented in his depiction of a plague-ravaged nation; his quest for reconciliation with an absent god is dramatized in a fatalistic knight's bitter confession. The relationship between Bergman's life and work is an exemplary representation of Merleau-Ponty's work, which this analysis applies to the study of film.

The parallels between Bergman's life and film demonstrate the relevance of Merleau-Ponty's work to the study of film and provide a framework by which film and perception can be relationally understood. To quote Bergman, “No form of art goes beyond ordinary consciousness as film does, straight to our emotions, deep into the twilight room of the soul.”[30] “*Eye and Mind*” allows film to be understood as it truly is; rather than a mere succession of static pictures and synchronized sound, film is a projection of the personal and interior onto the external and impersonal, which is in turn internalized by the audience. Knights and cloaked figures are the dramatizations of the incommunicable. *The Seventh Seal* exemplifies Bergman's projection of his experience onto his work. Woody Allen's account of Bergman's influence

29 Bergman, Ingmar. *The Magic Lantern: An Autobiography*. 296.
30 Ibid. 38.

reveals how the audience interacts with film through perception, selfreflection, and internalization. This phenomenological analysis of film reveals the personal within the abstract, dramatic, and symbolic; it relates solemn medieval figures to the personal experiences from which they were fabricated.



Self - Portrait

AUGUSTE BERNICK

BENJAMIN CAMPBELL

In Touch With Oneself: An Existential- Phenomenological Inquiry into Hypochondria

Hypochondria, now branded “illness anxiety disorder,” is a subject of malign. To physicians, hypochondriacs may be understood as a waste of time and money that could be spent on sick patients, or may be, simply, an annoyance. Hypochondriacs often ask many questions and are tough to reassure: the physician may feel it is not their job to ease anxieties, but to treat and diagnose “real” problems. To family members and friends, hypochondriacs may appear as needy, neurotic people who lack any rational judgment, shoving off the burden of their irrationality on others. To hypochondriacs, their hypochondria is a defect and disorder which produces immense distress. In severe cases, some consider suicide to escape it. The task of this paper is to transvalue hypochondria, to see it in a new light, both for the sake of the hypochondriac and for humanity. The method by which I will seek to uncover

this value is existential phenomenology: approaching hypochondria as it presents itself in the lived world and what it says about human existence. I believe the hypochondriacal way of thinking bears a unique value that is difficult, or at least more difficult, to seek out elsewhere; hypochondria has alethic—disclosive—value. Hypochondria discloses three distinct, but deeply related aspects of human existence: (1) the inescapable perspectivity of consciousness, (2) the central role of death in life and (3) the interpretative uncertainty of objects in consciousness.

What is hypochondria?

The current psychiatric understanding, if there is one, is that hypochondria is a “preoccupation with having or acquiring a serious illness” based on mild or non-existent symptoms, which produces a tendency to check for signs of illness over a period of six months or longer.[1] This definition integrates some of the key elements of hypochondria, that it is a preoccupation—a kind of obsessive anxiety—with illness, and that this anxious obsession often emerges from ambiguous and weak evidence. This definition is incomplete, yet at the same time arguably affirms too much, like temporal demarcations for the sake of turning it into a “disorder” (which is neither affirmed or denied here), and sometimes, though infrequently, the stereotypical behavioral reactions of hypochondria (“checking”) are not realized in any truly tendential way. Nonetheless, the above definition contains a working model of what we are looking to clarify and understand—an obsessive anxiety about illness based on an interpretation of weak evidence. There are three key components contained within this conception: (1)

1 “Table 3.32, DSM-IV to DSM-5 Illness Anxiety Disorder Comparison ...” accessed October 25, 2022, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK519704/table/ch3.t32/>.

obsession, (2) anxiety, and (3) interpretative difficulty. These three components correspond to the three disclosures of hypochondria I endeavor to draw out: perspectivity, death, and uncertainty.

Obsession, focus, and perspectivity

Obsession is less of a purely affective state than a mode of comportment. Comportment is the way a being directs itself toward the world.[2] Comportment has a mood nestled inside itself which can direct parts of the broader whole, but is made up of multivariate components that resist simplification. A relevantly essential aspect of comportment is that, when the being comports itself toward the world in some way, the lived world changes. For example, if I comport myself by trying a new food—natto, for instance—the lived world becomes a world “about” natto and my consumption of it. The earthy flavor of the natto, its sticky texture, my beliefs about it, whether I enjoy the natto—my world, in that moment where I comport myself in the natto-consuming way, is about natto and my experience of it. The things which the lived world was composed of just a moment earlier are still there, in the field of my consciousness, but are diminished in their presence. Natto becomes the center-piece of my lived world. If we recognize this to be true, it can be said that consciousness is always predicated around certain foci, rather than existing as a neutral, blank reception of all objects on equal footing. The lived world, then, is an everchanging focus-world, a perspectival world.

Obsession is a mode of comportment in which one comports themselves toward the same object or set of objects, such that the focus-world is always “about the same thing(s).” Someone who is obsessed with philosophy, for

2 Mark A. Wrathall, *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon* (Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 167.

instance, constantly philosophizes, and their lived world is constituted, in large part, by philosophizing. A familiar example is a young kid who obsesses over a new toy. We may say of this kid that a significant amount of their energies and efforts are put toward attaining the toy—they beg their parents, they make a lemonade stand to raise money, they write Christmas lists asking for it—and if they get the toy, they play with it constantly, they look at it constantly, they think about it constantly, they think of new ways to play with it and how to make it interact with other toys. Their subjective world is predicated (to some degree) around and flooded with this toy. Obsession is the inundation of the subjective world with a single focus or a limited quantity of select foci.

Hypochondria is a form of obsessive comportment. When one has a hypochondriacal comportment, they are obsessed with their having or acquiring an illness. This means that the thoughts, beliefs, feelings, and more often than not, behaviors (like checking), of this person are somewhat centered around personal illness. In most cases, this obsession is manifested in terms of a strong focus on bodily phenomena and symptoms. Attention is turned to the symptom and repeatedly analyzed, “checked,” and perceived in great detail. The Scottish physician William Cullen rightly described hypochondriacs as “particularly attentive to the state of their own health, to every the smallest change of feeling in their bodies; and from any unusual sensation, perhaps of the slightest kind, they apprehend great danger, and even death itself.”^[3] This understanding of the hypochondriac as “attentive” to the body is in line with the characterization of the hypochondriac as someone who hears the body in all of its constant, perpetual noise, which is shut out and quiet

³ William Cullen, *First Lines of the Practice of Physic*, vol. 2 (Isaiah Thomas, 1788), <https://collections.nlm.nih.gov/catalog/.nlm:nlmuid-2547036R-mvset>, 382.

in “normal” people. The hypochondriac is not unlike the wine snob or the incense fanatic—it is a way of being where one notices certain sensations and nuances not otherwise apprehended.

Insofar as the hypochondriac is obsessed with personal illness, and, accordingly, obsessed with analyzing and noticing bodily phenomena that could suggest illness, the lived world of the hypochondriac is focused on illness and related phenomena. The hypochondriac’s world is, in large part, constituted by apprehensions of illness, feelings of dread and anxiety about illness, “checking” for illness, noticing changes in bodily feeling and bodily presentations (like color, hair volume, gait, etc). In the modern age, a significant aspect of the hypochondriac’s world is searching and reading about a given illness, because of the ease of access by which information can be found online: so-called “cyberchondria.”

Hypochondria, as a unique mode of comportment which is obsessive in nature, discloses the perspectivity of consciousness. How? For something to be disclosed, it must already be there, firing in the background, not yet subject to heightened reflection or awareness. In this case, the perspectivity of consciousness is there—it is always there—but is seldom recognized or brought into clarity. The real disclosure of perspectivity consists in becoming cognizant of one’s own perspectivity. Perspectivity discloses itself in some familiar ways. For example, when one runs into value-disagreements and arguments, wherein one is forced to recognize that their views are not necessarily totalizing, but are, rather, a “viewpoint”—literally a place from where things are seen. An awareness of the phenomenon of focus, however, puts us more directly in contact with the perspectivity of consciousness. If I am focused on a thing or a set of things, and I am aware

of my focus, then it is not all that much of a leap (though it can be, sometimes) to become aware that there may be things outside of this immediate apprehension, other potential objects of attention. Insofar as this is the case, that I am only seeing part of the picture, or any potential picture, then consciousness is understood as biased and perspectival. I am only aware of part of the whole range of potential things and I am only seeing them in certain narrow ways. Insofar as I am dragged from obsession to a deep awareness of focus, and therefore to a face-to-face confrontation with perspectivity, obsession has genuinely disclosed perspectivity to me.

Obsession is an extreme focus. It consists in an intense, rarely wavering focus which is dominant over a period of time. The hypochondriac has a unique ability to notice the power of focus via this extreme form of focus—its structural features and influence on the lived world are amplified so strongly that it can be hard to ignore. Obsession discloses perspectivity by pushing focus so far into its limits that its influence on subjectivity becomes obvious. If we are brought to reflect upon focus, we may be brought to notice perspectivity. Insofar as hypochondria is a kind of obsession, it can take on this disclosive role. Hypochondria, in this sense, is an opening by which a being can take note of the power of focus in constituting the lived world. The recognition that the lived world is narrow in scope and presence is something that, for me, came about in long thralls of obsession with rabies and bite marks. Whether the hypochondriac will take notice of the disclosive power of hypochondria—as in, bring it to fruition by letting it reveal itself—is contingent on a number of factors, including their self-awareness, desire to understand, etc.

Anxiety, hypochondria, and being-towards-death

Anxiety has played a critical role in phenomenological and existential philosophy. Kierkegaard and Heidegger, most famously, developed notions of anxiety from these perspectives. Kierkegaard described anxiety as the human confrontation with nothingness (possibility) which, in sum, is an ambiguous relation. On this view, the human faces toward the essentially infinite possibilities of what could be, and the way that the human faces these possibilities is in ambiguity.[4] This ambiguity is two-fold: there is the prospect of sympathy and the prospect of antipathy. As summarized by Haynes, “anxiety’s antipathy is the threatening possibility of losing all... anxiety’s sympathy is the joyful possibility of gaining all.”[5] Heidegger, picking up on Kierkegaard’s more ontical formulation of anxiety, especially the potential for ultimate loss, transforms anxiety into a fundamental mood that occurs in light of a threat to the being of Dasein.[6] Death, for Heidegger, is the “indefinite certainty” which constantly threatens Dasein. When one occupies the anxious “state-of-mind,” they come “face to face” with the “‘nothing’ of the possible impossibility of its existence”—death.”[7] Anxiety takes on a disclosive role, one which puts us in touch with our “Being-towards-death.” As Heidegger formulates it, “Being-towards death is essentially anxiety.”[8] This is not new ground. There is a great deal of literature which discusses the relationship between anxiety and “mortality salience”—the recognition of one’s own mortality, or “being-towards-death.” What is new, however, is the contention

4 Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Anxiety: A Simple Psychologically Orienting Deliberation on the Dogmatic Issue of Hereditary Sin*, trans. Reidar Thomte and Albert B. Anderson (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980), 41–42.

5 Jeffrey Haynes, “Anxiety’s Ambiguity: Via Kierkegaard & Heidegger” (dissertation, 2016), 28.

6 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York etc.: Harper Perennial, 2008). 265.

7 *Ibid.*, 266.

8 *Ibid.*

that hypochondria offers a unique disclosive pathway in recognizing being-towards-death.

It might do me well to start by delineating one crucial way in which my conception of anxiety differs (or at the least is developed differently) from the views espoused by Kierkegaard and Heidegger. For these two thinkers, anxiety lacks an object. For Heidegger in specific, anxiety concerns the possibility of existence itself, something which is, for him, not a “thing.” Regardless of whether there is an ultimate object for anxiety (contingent upon whether existence is an object or not), there typically is a proximal object for anxiety—an object which “gives rise” to the anxiety’s particular instantiation here and now or in a pattern over a period of time. I argue that this proximal object is what differentiates hypochondria from social anxiety and other commonly posited kinds of anxiety. Anxieties usually emerge in relation to specific objects of concern in specific time periods in relation to oneself. If I am anxious about a test tomorrow, I have a specific object of concern, the test. I am anxious about the test and how it relates to my success as a person (and perhaps at some level my ultimate being). Heidegger might call this fear rather than anxiety. I do not agree. Phenomenologically, anxiety is a discernible, intense and palpable worry, which usually integrates a range of experienced physiological responses, like a fast-beating heart, shallow breath, etc. It is a feeling that the world is in some way breaking and creaking, that there is something wrong in existence—this much Heidegger gets right. But this feeling of anxiety can and does emerge from and relate to (or at the very least, conjoin with) specific phenomena, like going to a grocery store, getting into a car crash, and, indeed, feeling a weird sensation in one’s leg. It is to the detriment of Heidegger and Kierkegaard that they do not sufficiently

engage with how anxiety comes to be experienced—as in, how the environment interacts with things like the body, the safety of loved ones, and prized possessions, to draw out anxiety. If we do not have this concern in mind, it seems as though anxiety floats above and outside experience, as some kind of speculative phenomenon, rather than something which is truly, deeply, felt. This concern needed to be addressed, otherwise we would not have the grounds to even investigate hypochondria as a “kind” of anxiety.

If that anxiety has “modes” by which humans confront possibility, hypochondria is a mode of anxiety that is uniquely able to bring one into a confrontation with their being-towards-death. Insofar as hypochondria is anxiety about illness, we might ask: for what reason is illness anxiety-inducing? We might say it is anxiety-inducing because illness can prevent us from going to work, making money to support ourselves, it might deprive us of personal time with others, it may just be extraordinarily painful. But what is most anxiety-inducing about illness is that it can kill us. Illness, at one point or another, kills most humans. In hypochondria, the stakes of the anxiety are, quite literally, one’s existence. The antipathy of Kierkegaard’s anxiety, the threat of losing it all, is made concrete in illness. Hypochondria, in my own experience, has proven a second-order anxiety, one which expresses a more fundamental anxiety about death. It was only upon reflecting on my hypochondria philosophically and psychologically that I came to realize just how terrifying and important death is to the human. Insofar as hypochondria is a form of anxiety that is predicated upon a more fundamental death anxiety, it is unsurprising that hypochondriacs are rarely anxious about diseases like a cold, but prejudicial, deadly diseases like cancer, rabies,

ALS, and deadly events like heart attacks, strokes, and aneurysms. Hypochondriacs, generally, are not anxious about illness per se. Rather, hypochondriacs tend to be anxious about deadly or severely-disabling illness. In psychiatry, hypochondria is often characterized, rightly, as containing a core of “patho-thanatophobia,” a phobia of death via pathogen.[9] Insofar as this is true, hypochondria is a mode of anxiety that puts the hypochondriac in close contact with the key classical element of anxiety, one’s own death. If the hypochondriac is able to bring this concealed anxiety about death to the fore, they might well recognize their own being-towards-death, and the enormous significance it has in forming how they live and behave. The task of the hypochondriac, on this analysis, is to comport themselves in such a way that they allow their anxiety to disclose the centrality of death in life to them. After all, if the recognition of death is essential to an authentic life, the hypochondriac has a great gift and blessing.

Hypochondria qua interpretation, epistemic perplexity, and uncertainty

Hypochondria involves the obsessive recognition of bodily phenomena and anxiety about its consequences. What is missing thus far is the middle term: how what connects recognition and anxiety? Interpretation. To become anxious about the bodily phenomenon, the hypochondriac must understand the bodily phenomenon as something that indicates or is itself a threat. This move consists in interpretation. In other words, the hypochondriac needs to attribute a particular meaning to the object of consciousness in order for it to lead to anxiety. Interpretation figures into psychiatric notions

9 Danyan Luo et al., “The Development and Validation of a Chinese Version of the Illness Attitude Scales: An Investigation of University Students,” *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine* 21, no. 4 (June 2014): pp. 638–645, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12529-014-9391-9>.

of hypochondria, so it has broadly clinical significance. Relatively recent definitions of hypochondria, such as in the DSM-IV, state that a core component of hypochondria is the “misinterpretation of bodily symptoms.”^[10] The DSM-5 dropped the “misinterpretation” requirement. Clearly, interpretation plays some role in hypochondria, one that is not altogether uncontroversial. Interpretation is a notoriously complex phenomenon to describe with any degree of completeness or justice. The field of hermeneutic phenomenology has explicitly existed for almost 100 years at this point. I will refrain from making any statement about the ultimate nature of justification. However, I will describe the way that interpretation seems to function in a specifically hypochondriacal context.

The interpretation of hypochondria, on the most banal level, could involve merely noticing a bodily phenomenon and thinking, “this phenomenon is threatening!” irrespective of what it is or what diseases it could relate to. At this level, though, such a hypochondriac would seem to resemble something else—it would not be mere anxiety, it would be fear and a kind of intellectual arrogance. In other words, this might be considered hypochondria, but is not remotely representative of hypochondria as it exists in the vast majority of cases. Hypochondriacs are, in essentially all cases, still rational agents. The difference, however, is that the hypochondriac notices a great deal of ambiguity and difficulty in figuring out “what is wrong” or if there is something wrong, than the average person—someone who does not bring this question to mind and, if they do, are easily assured. Insofar as the hypochondriac is rational, but deeply uncertain and therefore anxious, we might ask where this uncertainty comes from.

10 “Table 3.32, DSM-IV to DSM-5 Illness Anxiety Disorder Comparison ...,” accessed November 1, 2022, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK519704/table/ch3.t32/>.

For one, we might say the uncertainty is predicated upon an apprehension that one does not know what will happen in the future. The uncertainty of hypochondria is future-projecting: one cares about how a potential illness which is held now or in the future could impact their possibilities. The future is something which is not observed until it happens, at which point it becomes present and accessible. To use inductive reasoning, to say what “likely will be the case” is sometimes of little comfort for many hypochondriacs because it is not a guarantor. I am anxious about my knee twitching because I do not know what it means and how it will impact my future. You can tell me that it is overwhelmingly unlikely it is a sign of ALS, that it is more likely due to dehydration or benign fasciculation, but I am not reassured because I do not know what will happen and your prediction could be wrong. If nothing else, I could be an exception. The uncertainty of future occurrences is something which, at the minimum, instantiates hypochondria (if the hypochondriac could see into the future and see that nothing actually came of x symptom, their anxiety about that symptom would presumably be much weaker). The hypochondriac might be called irrational for not assenting to this assurance and thereby feeling less anxious, but there is something deeply philosophically difficult to refute in their skepticism about future occurrences.

This is not the whole story. Hypochondriacs still, like everyone else, engage in probabilistic thinking and make predictions about the future. The difference is that this kind of thinking is generally taken less seriously and does not exhibit the same kind of pull on their beliefs and feelings. How, then, do hypochondriacs make predictions? Using medical information: diagnostic guides, lists of symptoms, and other medical texts. The hypochondriac looks at the illness and assesses the symptoms associated

with that illness and compares this list to the symptoms and bodily phenomena that they experience and observe. Hypochondriacs are always searching for a diagnosis: the true nature of the symptom or symptoms.

The diagnostic process is a key element of how hypochondriacs attempt to discern whether the symptom is a threat. However, this process almost always inflames anxiety. When one follows the track of any given symptom, they will see it split into multiple different diseases which all are said to have that symptom. For example, if I have the symptom of something as common and generic as arm pain and I seek to understand it (via the internet, for instance), I am immediately presented with the possibility of “angina,” “bursitis,” “carpal tunnel syndrome,” “fibromyalgia,” “heart attack,” and “rheumatoid arthritis.”^[11] My feelings jolt when I see these possibilities: I could be having a heart attack just from this arm pain? The symptom is, in itself, diagnostically ambiguous—symptoms are typically unspecific and shared across multiple conditions. What can be done? The next approach is to try to narrow the search by making reference to other symptoms. To some extent, this can be used to rule out some conditions—though the hypochondriac, even if they do rule out a condition, rarely treat this ruling out as anything absolute or immutable. If this process of ruling out and narrowing possibility is done with the utmost precision, we still do not reach anything like certainty. There are two big reasons. For one, diseases are multivariate in their symptomatic compositions: the presentation of the disease is not consistent between people, some symptoms appear, others do not, some symptoms are rare, some are common. This should decrease the confidence in any

11 “Arm Pain Causes,” Mayo Clinic (Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research, March 27, 2021), <https://www.mayoclinic.org/symptoms/arm-pain/basics/causes/sym-20050870>.

given diagnosis. The second reason is the difficulty of interpreting the symptom itself apart from any diagnostic process.

Here is an example of how the hypochondriac might confront the interpretative process: I feel a pain in my arm. But what does it feel like? Is it shooting? Burning? Maybe it is burning—but it also does feel a bit sharp. I also have an aching in my arm. How do I decide which it is, or is it all of them? Or am I imagining part of it? I have some redness in my thigh. Sometimes I see it, sometimes I do not. Maybe it comes and goes, or maybe it is always there but I do not always see it. Sometimes under certain light the redness is there. Sometimes it is not. When I take a shower it gets redder. What shade of red is it? I cannot tell. It is pinkish but also red. If you forced me to say what its “true shade” is, I would struggle to tell you. The hypochondriac constantly switches between ways of understanding the symptom and finds it hard to settle upon one as the “definitive” way that the symptom presents itself. The symptom does give itself, but is, when it is given, interpreted. Some interpretations are more forceful than others—I can say, straightforwardly, in some cases, that the pain I am feeling is a shooting pain. But this is not always the case and is usually not the case for the hypochondriac. It is often excruciatingly difficult to really know what one is feeling, let alone to speak it aloud, or use it diagnostically. The hypochondriac, when posed the question, is one leg warmer than the other, might be utterly unable to give a satisfactory answer.

Where the hypochondriac is left after all these epistemic convulsions, doubts and affirmations: utter perplexity, uncertainty, and exhaustion. One cannot know whether to trust their own judgment, whether to trust their own body. And against the backdrop of this crisis of

uncertainty is a shadowy army of horrible diseases that may or may not be there. This, unsurprisingly, brings the hypochondriac into a deep-seated anxiety. Hypochondria destabilizes interpretative arrogance and shows how deeply ambiguous the object of consciousness can be. Hypochondria, in this sense, discloses how exceedingly uncertain and questionable our beliefs about the subjective world are. Supposing there is an objective world, those beliefs are even more uncertain. We are, as the first disclosure taught us, trapped in a perspective by which we see only some things in a particular way. Uncertainty is a confrontation with perspectivity by which we question: is this the right perspective? How do I know? What should I believe? How can I be sure of anything? The hypochondriac suffers uncertainty, and what is disclosed is that uncertainty is an integral, enduring, and powerful characteristic of human existence. If we doubt the power of uncertainty, we might turn to the physicians themselves: “Medicine is a science of uncertainty and an art of probability.”[12]

The value of hypochondria

The purpose of this investigation is to transvalue hypochondria in terms of disclosures it can make to the hypochondriac and to others. What progress have we made?

We have uncovered and analyzed three disclosures that hypochondria is uniquely proficient at summoning. The first is that human subjectivity is perspectival. Consciousness is always focused on something or the other. This can be demonstrated to the hypochondriac by way of their obsession with illness. Since we are always focused, there may be something we are not focused on. Our vision is limited and we are therefore bound to a

12 William Osler, *Sir William Osler Aphorisms: From His Bedside Teachings and Writings*, ed. William Bennett Bean (Henry Schuman, 1950), §265.

perspective. The second disclosure is that the human is a being-towards-death—for all intents and purposes, it is guaranteed that the human being dies. Our being-towards-death shapes and guides human life. The hypochondriac has a special sensitivity to being-toward-death because their anxiety is about illness, which, generally, culminates in death. In some sense, the hypochondriac is death anxious via illness. If the hypochondriac can bring this fundamental anxiety about death into focus, they may stand to live more authentically. The third disclosure is the pervasive, foggy uncertainty which characterizes human understanding. Uncertainty is, ironically, among the most certain facts of human intellectual labor. The hypochondriac stands in the midst of uncertainty because they are deeply uncertain. The hypochondriac confronts just how difficult it is to be sure of what one is feeling, what one “has,” what they should believe about their well-being—more broadly, just how difficult it is to interpret. If I might invoke an example, my own hypochondria is related to a thorough-going skepticism and bewilderment at how to understand the world.

These disclosures and discoveries which make us parties to unconcealing are significant for hypochondriacs and for the human being more broadly. The hypochondriac, on account of recognizing important aspects of their consciousness and how they relate to the lived world, is privy to heightened self-knowledge. The hypochondriac is, in many regards, someone “in touch with themselves.” The value of this self-knowledge should be exalted without denigrating the struggles of the hypochondriac, and should be understood and appreciated by others who have historically marginalized or stigmatized the hypochondriac.

MARKIAN ROMANYSHYN

Aspiring to Queer: A Subjective Inquiry into The Favorability of Queer Existential Phenomenology

Introduction: The Underdeveloped Affinity Between Existentialism and Queerness

Academics have only just begun to excavate the queer potential of existential thought. And yet, since existentialism is oriented towards the radical capacity of the individual to assert oneself despite, and perhaps because of, the facts of life which push in the other direction, the affinity between queer theory and existential philosophy seems reasonably intuitive. In fact, this affinity is so intuitive as to be detectable by non-academic authors and readers. In the book *Queer: a graphic history*, the existentialists are identified as a “group of predecessors to queer theory” whose “central claim that ‘existence precedes essence’ reverses the traditional essentialist assumption that humans have a fixed and fundamental essence which precedes the meanings that we give to ourselves, and

to each other, through our experience.” [1] Though the association between the existentialist’s “central claim” and queer theory is not made explicit, we can ostensibly count this explicative imprecision as a mark for, not against, the claim that existential thought and queer theory overlap. The authors, writing for a popular audience as opposed to an academic audience, are relatively more inclined to connect ideas through implication as opposed to explication, especially when the authors have some sense that the audience will “get the point.” So, I conclude that for the authors and projected audience of *Queer: a graphic history*, the affinity between existentialism and queer theory is so clear as to make greater precision functionally redundant. Given the starkness of this affinity, a more robust academic investigation of the queer potential of existential thought is called for.

Though the academic conversation around existentialism and queerness is underdeveloped, some preliminary work has been undertaken. G. Kalaivani and P. Balamurugan, for instance, have experimented with the relationship between women-centered books and the possibility of a phenomenological feminist existentialism[2] and a forthcoming article from Penelope Haulotte engages with the work of Gale Ruben to argue that discourse analysis and phenomenology converge in trans studies.[3] Another thinker, Ros Murray, uses existentialism as an interpretive lens through which to engage with Chantal Akerman’s 1975 queer, avant-garde film *Je tu il elle*. [4] I take Murray’s article to be not just insightful but also in some sense artistically powerful and so am disposed to amplify and extend her ideas, in particular.

1 Meg-John Barker and Jules Scheele, *Queer: A Graphic History* (London: Icon Books, 2016), 33.

2 P. Balamurugan and G. Kalaivani, “Simone De Beauvoir’s ‘Second Sex’: An Outlook To Feminist Existentialism,” *Think India*, 22, no. 7 (September 2019).

3 Ros Murray, “Towards a Queer Existential Phenomenology Through Chantal Akerman’s *Je tu il elle* (1975),” *Feral Feminisms* 5, (2016): 44–56.

4 Ros Murray, “Towards a Queer Existential Phenomenology Through Chantal Akerman’s *Je tu il elle* (1975),” *Feral Feminisms* 5, (2016): 44–56.

Whereas Murray aptly recognizes the applicability of Beauvoirian existentialism to discussions of queerness and coins the term queer existential phenomenology as such, her discussion is focused on the extent to which queer existential phenomenology can be used to interpret *Je tu il elle*. I believe, however, that Murray's theory can extend well beyond film criticism. The argument that Murray opportunes, but does not endeavor in, is the one I formulate here, and dissect in the sections to follow.

Queer existential phenomenology, more than any other theory of queerness, can help both queer and non-queer identifying individuals, and thus society writ large, inasmuch as it:

- a. is **accessible**, is within the purview of that which any rational agent can chose to live according to and so
- b. is **applicable**, can address some of the collective psychological ills of the modern age while nonetheless
- c. is **suitable**, is oriented most acutely towards a rejection of normativity, and thus towards queer liberation[5]

This formulation identifies three factors (accessibility, applicability, and suitability) which will be discussed at length in section 4. Further, the italics in this formulation are suggestive of the logical association between each factor. That is, (and I use letters as placeholders in this instance for the sake of simplicity and logical clarity) factor 'a' enables factor 'b' which in turn can only contribute to a justification of my thesis given the more fundamental factor 'c' is also satisfied.

5 I follow Merriam-Webster Dictionary in defining accessible as "capable of being used or seen", applicable as "capable of or suitable for being applied" and suitable as "adapted to a use of purpose." Merriam-Webster Dictionary, (Springfield: Merriam-Webster Inc, 2022), s.v.

For this argumentation to have any force, however, it must be prefaced with some additional context. In section 2, I will recount the distinction Murray makes between two strains of queer theory, the anti-social and the social. Here, I will also include Murray's commentary which associates the former with many of the dominant queer theorists of today, and the latter with existentialists like Simone de Beauvoir, as made evident by their differing conceptions of failure. In subsection 3a, I argue that queer existential phenomenology (referred to from here on as QEP) is accessible. In subsections 3b and 3c I proceed to argue that QEP is also applicable and suitable. Section 4, then, concludes by considering the arguments for accessibility, applicability and suitability together to make explicit my own claim that QEP is more favorable than the antisocial thesis.

Establishing Strains of Queer Theory

In 1996, Leo Bersani posed the question, "should a homosexual be a good citizen?"[6] Today, the answer is perhaps more contested than ever before. Though those who answer in the affirmative are strong in number and often hold positions of social and political power, arguments on behalf of the affirmative response have not blossomed in queer academic discourse with the same fervor that arguments on behalf of the negative response. Queer theorists today see Bersani's book as the origin from which a world of similarly provocative ideas sprung.[7] This world, more exciting than the muted world of default that Bersani challenges, has come to be associated with queer theory's so-called antisocial thesis. Murray engages with the antisocial thesis, but also with a social alternative. And it is the social alternative that

6 Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996), 113.

7 Robert L. Caserio et al., "The Antisocial Thesis in Queer Theory," *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006): 819-28.

she ultimately associates with QEP. The two social and antisocial thesis will be discussed in the paragraphs to follow.

The antisocial thesis is (not surprisingly) antisocial, but it is also characteristically negative. Murray begins her explication of the antisocial thesis by providing an example of the antisocial ideas in practice. The feminist politics which Halberstam advocates for is “a refusal to be or become woman as she has been defined and imagined within Western philosophy [...] a feminism grounded in negation, refusal, passivity, absence, and silence.”[8] On one level, if the framework of gendered norms that is imposed by, or associated with, Western philosophy is to be read as “society,” then a rejection of these norms is definitionally anti-social. On a deeper level, however, the mere act of rejection is itself antisocial insofar as it entails the “negation, refusal, passivity, absence, and silence” which make social creativity impossible. Halberstam, in my read, directs women to be either entirely and unequivocally as they are not, or as they are expected by society not to be. The difference between are not and expected by society not to be allows for the possibility that women might authentically identify with one of the forbidden womanly traits, especially given their social conditioning. What I mean by this is that if a woman does tend to be, say, content caring for young children—and this should come as no surprise given the woman’s social conditioning—Halberstam heeds them to reject themselves (to be as they are not), not only to reject society (to be as they are expected by society not to be). My analysis here is consistent with Murray’s, who uses the term “masochistic passivity” to describe Halberstam’s directive.[9] The second attribute of the antisocial

8 Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 124.

9 Ros Murray, “Towards a Queer Existential Phenomenology Through Chanta Akerman’s *Je tu il elle* (1975),” *Feral Feminisms* 5, (2016): 49.

thesis, negativity, follows from this anti-sociality. Since the antisocial thesis is characterized by rejection, it is a negating force, and since the antisocial thesis is characterized by a masochistic rejection of even oneself when necessary, it is a negating force at all costs and to no end. In practice, this negating force can manifest in any number of ways. For instance, Edelman's antisocial work rejects reverence of the future,[10] Berlant's antisocial work rejects the good life[11] and Halberstam herself can be read as rejecting market success under reproductive capitalism.[12] What unites all of them, however, is that the response to "Should a homosexual be a good citizen?" is a resounding "NO."

The social alternative to the antisocial thesis differs in that it is social (clearly) and also positive. The social attribute operates in opposition to, or as the inverse of, the antisocial attribute of the antisocial thesis. What the social alternative requires, then, is the opposite of negation (affirmation), the opposite of refusal (approval), the opposite of passivity (intentionality), the opposite of absence (presence) and the opposite of silence (noise!). The positive attribute is demonstrated through Simone de Beauvoir, whose ideas Murray presents as in tension with Halberstam's. To this end, Murray recalls the Beauvoirian idea, that "existence [is a] continual process" and a "continual doing or becoming." [13] What Murray means to say here, concerning the idea of positivity, is that one who exists simply cannot help but be, do, and create something. Even the rejection of something fails to be a lack of the thing, but instead is positively the rejection of a thing. Accordingly, Murray is right to recount the

10 Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

11 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

12 Judith Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011).

13 Ros Murray, "Towards a Queer Existential Phenomenology Through Chanta Akerman's *Je tu il elle* (1975)," *Feral Feminisms* 5, (2016): 48.

existential motif of a painting which, in Beauvoir's words, is ever a "movement towards its own reality." [14] Murray further demonstrates the contrast between social and antisocial strains of queer theory by discussing how failure is conceived of differently according to each.

For Beauvoir, failure is a fact of life in that we are condemned, by nature of existing as we do, to live with contradiction, and thus, in ambiguity. In Murray's own words, "Beauvoir founds the ethics of existentialism on the notion of ambiguity: the individual must determine how to come to terms with the fact that s/he is both subject and object, freedom and facticity. From the moment we come to face our own freedom, we must assume but not attempt to reconcile the contradictions it brings." [15] I interpret this summary as saying that on the one hand, we are granted complete freedom to paint our own life's picture, as it were, but on the other hand, our freedom is limited by the scope of that which we are predisposed or coerced by our environment into thinking, feeling, and doing. [16] In other words, we create our environment, but our environment creates us, too. This interpretation is supported by reference in *The Second Sex* to the fact that a woman takes on an identity which is "at once motivated [by external factors] and freely adopted". [17] For women, and analogously for all members of society, being requires failing, but being and failing as such also entails positive freedom and thus creativity. [18]

14 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1948): 129.

15 Ros Murray, "Towards a Queer Existential Phenomenology Through Chanta Akerman's *Je tu il elle* (1975)," *Feral Feminisms* 5, (2016): 48.

16 I follow Beauvoir in who defines 'environment' as a collection of externalities including the experienced biological and psychological tendencies of individuals and the historical precedent which produces social norms. Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Border (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1964), 60

17 *Ibid.*

18 Furthermore, it is from Beauvoir's conception of failure that Murray derives the phenomenological element of QEP (remember, as 'queer existential phenomenology'). That is, Beauvoir's existential approach is uniquely phenomenological in that it gives deference to the way in which the subject experiences phenomenologically biology, psychology, and historical positionality as constituent parts of the subject's unique position in society.

Halberstam conceives of failure differently as that which a) queer folks are condemned to b) under reproductive capitalism. To quote Halberstam now, “failing is something queers do and have always done exceptionally well.”[19] This establishes ‘a’ above in that queers are likely to fail merely and inevitably because of who they are. Murray adds to the idea that queers are destined for failure noting that “Halberstam’s project in arguing for a queer and feminist politics of failure aims to dismantle and challenge the logic of success that defines reproductive capitalism.”[20] Murray presents Halberstam’s “politics of failure” as being in direct opposition to, or failing specifically according to, reproductive capitalism and thus establishes ‘b’ above. ‘b’ makes sense as an outgrowth of the antisocial thesis in that the antisocial thesis is incompatible with reproductive capitalism: capitalism requires an endorsement of the social insofar as market demand is a result of that which is desired by society, and it requires an endorsement of that which is positive insofar as the capitalists can only benefit in response to the production of more and different positive desires. Further, the inevitability of queer failure, and queer failure according to markets, makes sense in that capitalism’s orientation towards the desires of society is de facto an orientation towards normativity. Those who cannot help but reject normativity (‘a’) cannot help but be failures under capitalism (‘b’).

This section has summarized Murray’s ideas to distill three insights: 1) the negative antisocial is distinct from the positive social 2) the antisocial thesis is associated with the negative antisocial and QEP is associated with the positive social and 3) the negative antisocial and the positive social are associated with two different

19 Ros Murray, “Towards a Queer Existential Phenomenology Through Chanta Akerman’s Je tu il elle (1975),” *Feral Feminisms* 5, (2016): 49.

20 Ibid.

conceptions of failure, namely, the antisocial thesis defines failure as a fact of queerness under capitalism and the social thesis defines failure as a fact of life. The following section uses these premises to put forth a novel argument: that QEP can ostensibly be construed as favorable to the antisocial hypothesis.

Investigating the favorability of QEP (as Opposed to the Antisocial Thesis)

In this section, I will evaluate the favorability of QEP according to three criteria—namely, accessibility, applicability, and suitability—so as to make the case that QEP is more favorable than the antisocial thesis. I will note first, however, that this section falls in line with the existential approach of Beauvoir in embracing some degree of ambiguity. Under conditions of ambiguity,[21] it is not beyond reason (and it makes plenty of sense in my view) to live as if it were the case that QEP is superior to the antisocial thesis. This argument is necessarily bound up with my own views, and yet is framed to invite others to step into, and consider, my own interpretation. I believe a first-person approach of this sort is (and I am not alone in this claim[22]) consistent with queer theory as a discipline.

Both QEP and the Antisocial Thesis are Accessible to All Rational Subjects

QEP appears to be at least as accessible as the antisocial thesis in that any subject can choose to live as if either QEP or the antisocial thesis were true without suspending their own rational judgement. In order to make this argument,

21 Specifically, I presuppose that all arguments about what it means to be queer can only be functionally true (in that we live them out as if they were true) and never confirmed as actually true. In some sense, then, I beg the question by arguing on behalf of QEP while already presupposing that the ambiguity which is laden in QEP ought to be allowed for. I am careful, however, not to present my own appreciation of QEP over the antisocial thesis as an assertion that QEP is certainly superior to the antisocial thesis.

22 Adale Sholock, "Queer Theory in the First Person: Academic Autobiography and the Authoritative Contingencies of Visibility," *Cultural Critique* 66, (2007): 127–52.

I will build Murray's work on failure and identify what one is failing at according to QEP and according to the antisocial thesis. More specifically, I will establish the ends which are not fulfilled when one fails according to Beauvoir and Halberstam respectively. In the end, I show that aspiring to either end can be reasonable.

First, I define Beauvoir's end as the state of being completely oneself. In her discussion of failure, Beauvoir writes, "human transcendence must cope with [the problem of never being able to achieve totality in a single instance]: it has to found itself, though it is prohibited from ever fulfilling itself.[23]" Here, I interpret Beauvoir to be saying that we humans fail in that we are never able to be wholly ourselves, and instead, our selfhood is inevitably corrupted by our environments. I refer to being "completely ourselves" in place of what Beauvoir calls "human transcendence"—and it is in being completely oneself that Beauvoir identifies the ultimate end.

Nonetheless, Beauvoir seems to assert that even as human transcendence is challenged by this failure, human transcendence as yet finds its constitution in the act of freely embracing said failure. This interpretation is supported by what Beauvoir says elsewhere: "freedom is achieved absolutely in the very fact of aiming at itself." [24] Given we, as human beings, are doomed to fail because we are inevitably both "subject and object, freedom and facticity," [25] and given that the act of aiming at freedom is thereby ludicrous, then the act of aiming at freedom anyway is itself a transcendent act. Somewhat paradoxically, we achieve freedom in aspiring for it. Beauvoir's failure, then, is liberatory because it

23 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1948): 130.

24 *Ibid.*: 131.

25 Ros Murray, "Towards a Queer Existential Phenomenology Through Chanta Akerman's *Je tu il elle* (1975)," *Feral Feminisms* 5, (2016): 48.

presents us with an opportunity to transcend failure through aspiration.

By contrast, Halberstam's end is a reproductive engagement with normativity through capitalism. Recall, Murray interprets Halberstam to be rejecting the "logic of success as defined by reproductive capitalism."^[26] With ends in focus now, I read Murray as suggesting that under the antisocial thesis, queers fail inasmuch as a) capitalism requires normativity (to produce and reproduce our desires), and b) queers are fundamentally at odds with normativity. Therefore, queers must fail under capitalism, Halberstam says, in order to be themselves. But indeed, the end of success under capitalism need not be limited to wealth. Hennessy, for instance, would be quick to register that the ends of reproductive capitalism also consume the frameworks of normativity which produce and reproduce our identities.^[27] These frameworks of normativity instantiate roles of oppressor and subaltern, but nonetheless subject both oppressors and subalterns to a compulsion to produce and consume. Halberstam's failure, then, is also liberatory in that failure aligns with a rejection of a normative discourse which is unjust and coercive.

The tension between Beauvoir and Halberstam's failure manifests most acutely as a tension between two distinct ends. Whereas Beauvoir's failure fails to achieve human transcendence, Halberstam's failure fails to live up to the normativity which fuels reproductive capitalism. In both cases, however, failure is to be admired. For Beauvoir, there is dignity in embracing failure as part of life, and indeed, living within failure paradoxically constitutes a becoming of oneself. For Halberstam, there is dignity in embracing failure as a rejection of that which ought not

²⁶ Ibid: 49.

²⁷ Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, (New York: Routledge, 2018).

to be. It is clear, then, that Beauvoir and Halberstam's ends reflect the positive-negative tension which separates QEP from the antisocial thesis. Beauvoir finds dignity in failure as a positive act which is part of life and Halberstam finds dignity in failure as a negative act which rejects the normative. So how are we to discriminate between ends? Which end and which associated conception of failure ought we to subscribe to, and thus, is it the antisocial thesis or QEP which deserves endorsement?

I argue that given there is no intersubjective basis upon which one can argue that one of these ends is 'correct' whereas the other is 'false,' and given QEP and the antisocial thesis are oriented around two equally viable options, both QEP and the antisocial thesis are accessible approaches to queerness. I define accessibility as "capable of being used or seen"[28] and associate accessibility with both theories of queerness because neither is rationally out of reach. We often think of the individual as subjectively defining their own ends, and according to their own particular preferences, and the case of QEP's end and the antisocial thesis's end is no different. The following subsections will address the question of which approach is more favorable, given that both fulfill the requirement of accessibility.

I view QEP as Uniquely Applicable to the Modern Age

The criterion of accessibility established a baseline. Now I employ another criterion to narrow my evaluation: applicability. Defined as "capable of or suitable for being applied,"[29] the word 'applicable' introduces a sensitivity to a context which is crucial to queer theory, where a particular social context is understood to be so fundamental to the way

28 Merriam-Webster Dictionary, (Springfield: Merriam-Webster Inc, 2022), s.v. "Accessible," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/accessible>.

29 Ibid, s.v. "Applicable," <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/applicable>.

we perceive the world. It is with this move towards greater particularity, however, that more of my own subjectivity is introduced. In other words, the way a particular social context is experienced varies widely from person to person. As a result, it is inevitable that the context which I consider applicability relative to is specific to me. Nonetheless, I continue in my embrace of the first person and present my own sense of the ills which define our context as I experience it.

I often perceive our social context as defined by those problems which the great critics of industrial modernity pointed out in the 19th and early 20th centuries. In short, I view many of the ills of our context to be products of some combination of bureaucracy, disenchantment with religion and nature, alienation from that which we produce and consume, alienation from ourselves and one another, a commodification of that which is perhaps better deemed priceless: in short, I often find myself wondering if there isn't enough meaning in this social world we have created for ourselves—if we are socially predisposed to do and feel and be in a way which is simultaneously both overstimulating and empty.

The existential psychotherapist Rollo May articulates this sentiment nicely. He calls our context “the schizoid age”:

It is not difficult to appreciate how people living in a schizoid age have to protect themselves from tremendous overstimulation—protect themselves from the barrage of words and noise over radio and TV, protect themselves from the assembly line demands of collectivized industry and gigantic factory-modeled multiversities. In a world where numbers inexorably take over as our means of identification, like flowing lava threatening to suffocate and fossilize all breathing life in its path.[30]

30 Rollo May, “Sex in a Schizoid Society,” in *The Case Against Pornography*, ed. David Holbrook (La

Given May views society through an existential lens, it would make sense that the human problems he describes are perhaps addressed through QEP. But how?

QEP, rather than the antisocial thesis, is uniquely applicable to the schizoid age in that the schizoid age is best addressed through a positive response and QEP is the positive, rather than negative, option. May helps to establish the need for a constructive response:

What of the constructive use of this schizoid situation? We have seen how Cézanne could turn his schizoid personality into a way of expressing the most significant forms of modern life, and could stand against the debilitating tendencies in our society by means of his art. We have seen that the schizoid stand is necessary; now we shall inquire how, in its healthy dimensions, it can also be turned to good. The constructive schizoid person stands against the spiritual emptiness of encroaching technology and does not let himself be emptied by it. He lives and works with the machine without becoming the machine. He finds it necessary to remain detached enough to get meaning from the experience, but in doing so to protect his own inner life from impoverishment.[31]

I observe two things: One, May describes the problem of our schizoid age as negative (“spiritual emptiness”) and the solution as a rejection of negativity (“not letting [her]self be emptied”). Second, the moniker of the “constructive schizoid” suggests that the actual constitution of the individual who is beholden to the schizoid age can nonetheless be positive. Even attributions like “not let[ing herself] be emptied,” “without becoming” and “detached,” all negative, take on positive overtones when in

Salle: Open Court, 1973), 141-2.
31 Ibid: 142.

opposition to the negating forces of “spiritual emptiness,” “the machine,” and “impoverishment.” In their positivity, however, the constructive schizoid person might be read as an apologist, who merely submits to the unjust power of the capitalist status quo.

I argue that the constructive schizoid person is not an apologist, but rather a well-equipped revolutionary. I argue this to be the case on two counts. First, the overall positive orientation of the constructive schizoid person does not override their capacity to resist. As mentioned above, it is simply that acts of opposition are in service of something, namely, meaning, rather than in service of nothing, as only opposition per se. Despite the fact that May’s polemic identifies systemic problems that are clearly associated with reproductive capitalism, resistance manifests positively.

Continuity in Beauvoir’s writings confirms that the constructive schizoid person’s disposition is consistent with the existentialist approach (and, by association, QEP.) In writing of the French resistance to Nazi occupation, Beauvoir asserts that it “did not aspire to a positive effectiveness; it was a negation, a revolt,” yet she adds that “in this negative movement freedom was positively and absolutely confirmed.”[32] It is the same, then, as for when one fails to reconcile their own nature as both “subject and object, freedom and facticity.”[33] For Beauvoir, as for May, even a rejection of something can, and perhaps ought to be if we care about our psychic wellbeing, construed as positive.[34]

32 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1948): 131.

33 Ros Murray, “Towards a Queer Existential Phenomenology Through Chanta Akerman’s *Je tu il elle* (1975),” *Feral Feminisms* 5, (2016): 49.

34 On the point of psychic wellbeing, May writes that “The human being cannot live in a condition of emptiness for very long; if he is not growing toward something, he does not merely stagnate; the pent-up potentialities turn into morbidity and despair, and eventually into destructive activities.” Rollo May, “Sex in a Schizoid Society,” in *The Case Against Pornography*, ed. David Holbrook (La Salle: Open Court, 1973), 138.

But one crucial point remains to be discussed: we may rightly be able to associate QEP and the actions of the constructive schizoid person but only to the extent that both are oriented towards existential thought. Provided QEP has been demonstrated to be accessible to all rational individuals and has been argued to be especially applicable to our schizoid society, QEP (as queer existential phenomenology) must nonetheless be especially suitable to the experience of queerness if it is to be deemed more favorable than the antisocial thesis.

QEP is Especially Suitable to the Needs of the Queer-Identifying Community

I argue in this section that QEP is especially suitable (as in, “adapted to a use of purpose”) to the needs and experience of queer individuals.[35] I believe this to be the case because 1) queers are uniquely challenged by the issues of the schizoid age and 2) queers are best equipped to put existential ideas into practice (through QEP specifically) and thus to rise above suffering—and further, to serve as an example of what is existentially possible.

First, I argue that queers are uniquely impacted by what May calls schizoid society. I return to May once again to draw the connection:

The interrelation of love and will inheres in the fact that both terms describe a person who is in the process of reaching out, moving toward the world, seeking to affect others or the inanimate world, and opening himself to be affected; molding, forming, relating to the world or requiring that it relate to him. This is why love and will are so difficult in an age of transition, when all the familiar mooring places are gone.[36]

35 Merriam-Webster Dictionary, (Springfield: Merriam-Webster Inc, 2022), s.v. “Suitable,” <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/suitable>.

36 Rollo May, “Sex in a Schizoid Society,” in *The Case Against Pornography*, ed. David Holbrook (LA

Love and will, as active and relational acts whereby we impact the world according to that meaning which we “moor” ourselves to, are especially difficult in times (like our Schizoid Age) when we have lost sight of meaning. In other words, it is difficult for the creator to create when they have no sense of what is worth aspiring towards in their creativity. One cannot create without being moored to a vision of that which can, or ought to, be created.

In my view, to the extent that we often use social normativity as a crutch to “moor” ourselves in times of uncertainty, queer individuals, in already having traversed the most consequential of normative barriers,[37] are uniquely and especially unmoored. It is as if normativity has become the new “opium of the masses” and coming out to oneself as queer sets in motion severe withdrawal symptoms. Therefore, queers must overcome more adversity than most in order to assert their own will by replacing normativity with values which they boldly define for themselves.

The fact that queers are especially unmoored means that queers are in a unique position to exemplify transcendence of the ills of the schizoid society. I’ll use Beauvoir as one such example. Beauvoir is an individual who performs queerness and thus is motivated to reject the framework of normativity which provides unwanted oversight in her own life. And yet, Beauvoir recognizes herself to be a product of said normativity as both subject and object. She is, then, alienated from the self-assuring benefits of normativity (the “moored-ness”), and yet nonetheless recognizes herself to be corrupted by normativity. It is a circumstance which prompts her to have to retheorize herself. In the paragraphs to follow,

Salle: *Open Court*, 1973): 140

37 Gayle Rubin, “Thinking Sex” in *Deviations: A Gayle Rubin Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011): 157.

I'll identify how Beauvoir rises to the occasion in her rejection of normativity and her subsequent coming to terms with normativity's impact on her selfhood.

First, Beauvoir raises a critique of normativity. Following from her title, *The Second Sex*, Beauvoir writes that “the man today represents the positive and the neutral—that is to say, the male and human being—whereas woman is only the negative, the female.”[38] Women are conceptualized as nothing more than deviations from a standard, and they face discrimination as a result. But Beauvoir's critique of normativity runs deeper, and elsewhere aligns more with the specific concerns of queer theorists. Lesbian relationships, she says, “are ordinarily carried on under more threatening conditions than are heterosexual affairs. They are condemned by a society with which they can hardly be integrated successfully.”[39] Here, Beauvoir identifies the terrors of being one who exists authentically in a society which is oriented around a status quo which contests your very existence. She also says that “when one fails to adhere to an accepted code, one becomes an insurgent. A woman who dresses in an outlandish manner lies when she affirms with an air of simplicity that she dresses to suit herself, nothing more. She knows perfectly well that to suit herself is to be outlandish.” In this passage, Beauvoir gives voice to the draw of queerness itself. She indicates that there is something meaningful, necessary, enjoyable, in the very act of pushing back against what is expected.

What makes Beauvoir unique among queer theorists (if we can, maybe liberally, consider her to be one among them) is how she addresses queer unmooredness by empowering the individual to exist as they are:

38 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*. (New York: Knopf, 1964) 408.

39 *Ibid*: 421.

as both a product of, and a revolutionary force within, normativity. For instance, in her discussion of biological, psychoanalytic, and historical materialist ways of considering womanhood, she recognizes the relevance of such explanations to the phenomenal experience of a woman while nonetheless maintaining that there is a transcendent woman subject which, in a sense, chooses how the self interfaces with context. In her own words,[40] “In our attempt to discover woman we shall not reject certain contributions of biology, of psychoanalysis, and of historical materialism; but we shall hold that the body, the sexual life, and the resources of technology exist concretely for man only in so far as he grasps them in the total perspective of his existence.”[41] That is, the stories told about women are only relevant insofar as they interface with the actual phenomenological experience of a particular woman. What she is is not only a collection of social antecedents, played out on a discursive plane beyond her reach, but a “relation to the world”[42] who “defines herself by dealing with nature on her own account in her emotional life.”[43] As such, “Beauvoir’s philosophy deals with the problem of how to theorize a subject that has agency and choice but is not the classical subject of enlightenment freedom and reason.”[44] Theorizing a subject as such presents queers and others with an opportunity to be personally at peace with their participation in, while nonetheless also opposing, the reproduction of normativity, under capitalism or otherwise.

40 Ibid: 38; Ibid: 49; Ibid: 60.

41 Ibid: 60.

42 Ibid: 49.

43 Ibid: 38.

44 Ros Murray, “Towards a Queer Existential Phenomenology Through Chanta Akerman’s *Je tu il elle* (1975),” *Feral Feminisms* 5, (2016): 48.

Final Thoughts on the Favorability of QEP Versus the Antisocial Thesis

In section 3, I argued that while both the antisocial thesis and QEP fulfill the criterion of accessibility, only QEP fulfills the criterion of applicability and moreover, that QEP is nonetheless suitable given the need for queer liberation. I summarize these points and fill in some details (the partial suitability of the antisocial thesis, for instance) in the chart below. Given the antisocial thesis fulfills only one requirement fully, and another only partially, I argue that QEP is favorable to the antisocial thesis.

I reiterate, however, that my argument for the favorability of QEP is absolutely tied to my own perspective. Particularly in defining the subjective context according to which applicability was evaluated, my own personal views and experience manifest in full force. Even so, I maintain that this self-consciously subjective approach is consistent with the approach of queer theory more generally. While I myself do not identify as queer, I can only respond to the first-person queer discourse on the same register. Further discussion of why first-person accounts are welcome in queer theory warrants an essay of its own and is beyond the scope of this article.

To conclude, I return to Beauvoir, from whom Murray was able to derive QEP: Beauvoir is unique in that she is both queer and existential in her approach, which was itself informed by Beauvoir's own positionality as a queer woman who is nonetheless influenced by existential ideas. According to Beauvoir's queer existential phenomenology, women, lesbians, transgender individuals, and polyamorous individuals ought to be celebrated as those who have gathered the strength to transcend normativity with their own positive assertions,

rather than pitied as those who fail to adequately negate, and so fall victim to the oppressive oversight of normativity. Queerness, in this view, is not only a way of interacting with the world which needs to be protected, but a beautifully overt expression of that which many of us aspire towards: authenticity.

HOLDEN MIZE

Death Consciousness: Thoughts on Immortality in Heidegger and Borges

If eternal life were made possible, would it be preferable to the finite life that we know? And what about meaning, would a hug from a loved one mean anything? What of love itself, would we still know of love at all? Would we merely gain eternity and live as if nothing had changed? Surely not, for currently we live knowing that we will die, and this, I will argue, necessarily shapes what is afforded to us by our Being-in-the-world and our Being-with-others. Nevertheless, eternal life has been quite an obsession throughout human history, so much so that it has made its way into our art, our media, our religions, and our general collective desires. And of course it has, for we are finite beings who are so intimately connected with our Being, which we know is finite, that we wish to evade that eventuality “of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there.”^[1] We strive, through medicine and technology, to extend our lives, and through myths, like heaven and

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Edward Robinson and John Macquarrie (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 2008), 294.

fountains of youth, to hold on to the possibility of eternal life on Earth or in the afterlife, as we see life — in most cases — as something which is inherently preferable to death. We are so intimately connected to life; we cannot let go of it without a fight.

This obstinacy of humans concerning immortality has led to literal human immortality as a future possibility — if you care to listen to certain transhumanists and/or cognitive scientists — becoming more and more viable. Many fields of practice and study are coming together to realize this goal. While some forms would be recognizable as literal human immortality (e.g. medically ‘curing’ aging), others would remain debatable (e.g. mind-uploads), likely requiring a scaling of the walls of the access to other minds and the hard problem of consciousness to achieve confirmation as actual immortality of a numerically identical human — would the one deemed immortal in this case even still be a human? a consideration for another time. With this becoming more and more of a possibility seemingly with every passing day, we must begin seeking the consequences. Aside from the obvious concerns in the fields of ethics, law, and economics, we must concern ourselves with what our death-consciousness affords us, and, therefore, we must look toward what we lose when we gain everlasting life. In my view, the entirety of our faculty for meaning creation is at stake, and to support this idea I will first explicate and comment on Martin Heidegger’s philosophy of death in *Being and Time*, then I will explore a story by Jorge Luis Borges titled “The Immortal,” and only then will I tie up all the loose ends and show that we really must keep death alive.

Heidegger's Existential Death

Heidegger provided us, in his work *Being and Time*, with a rather strange concept of death. In speaking of death we normally refer to that event which is the ending of a life, beyond which neither backward reaching nor forward projection in time by the person now dead is possible; their ties to the world which we inhabit are severed permanently. Rather, Heidegger gave us a death which is not final, but which defines our relation to our finality; a death which one survives, which occurs when one has a vague understanding of the demise which lay ahead of them. This is an important distinction in Heidegger's work which one must be aware of before reading any further: death refers to a phenomenon that occurs to one while living and which they live to see the other side of, whereas demise is the absolute, uttermost ending of the Being of one which is not experienced — by virtue of experience relying on a projection into the future which is no longer possible in demise, — and which is not survived.

The concept of death in *Being and Time* is important for this paper in that it is an encounter with finality, it is what contextualizes to Dasein its own finality and allows Dasein to go on and live with this knowledge of its ceasing of Being which is one day to come.

Heidegger's Terminology

To achieve an understanding of Heidegger's concept of death, first his dense, and at times ridiculous, terminology must be explicated, starting with his most basic — though hardly simple — concept: Being. A being is opposed to Being in that a being has Being but Being is not a being. It is helpful here to substitute entity for a being, where the previous sentence would become: an entity is opposed

to Being in that an entity has Being but Being is not an entity; which may be more readily understood by those who have not read Heidegger. Essentially, anything that Is has Being by virtue of its encounterability in the world, its ability to be talked about, and so on. It also must be understood here that Being is the main topic being investigated in a good portion of Being and Time; hence the name. Heidegger sets out on this project to answer the Question of the meaning of Being by way of our next piece of Heideggerian vocabulary: Dasein.

Translatable into English as Being-there, Dasein takes the place of the human in Heidegger's philosophy. A short and simple definition of Dasein, which is operative in this search for the answer to the Question, is as follows: Dasein is the entity which has its Being as an issue for it; or in other words, Dasein is the kind of entity which is finite, knows that it is finite, and therefore can worry about its finiteness and its future no-longer-Being. Throughout Heidegger's work Dasein picks up many different definitions which are either further expansions on the definition above or are completely set apart from it, commenting on other qualities of Dasein; for our purposes, the above definition will suffice.

Dasein's Death-Consciousness

Dasein is an entity which has its Being as an issue for it; Dasein can worry about "no-longer-being-able-to-be-there."^[2] This may seem like a very simple, and quite possibly familiar, experience, but we must not forget that this is Heidegger we are talking about, where even the seemingly simplest of phenomena warrant the creation of new terminology and the writing of a 400+ page book. So what exactly is so complicated here?

² Heidegger, 294

The experience described above, which many would call something like anxiety, worry, or fear, is what Heidegger will name death. Therefore, Heideggerian death is not what we understand death to be at all, it is an entirely different phenomenon. In Heidegger's thought, Dasein's recognizing and taking over of its uttermost possibility, which is its eventual impossibility of Being, and which is also its ownmost and which limits its relations to other Daseins, is death. It will be helpful here to refer to death as existential death to avoid any confusion based on our everyday usage of the word death.

When Dasein takes over existential death, it experiences the falling away of all of its possibilities of Being except for that possibility of Being which is its future, undetermined, demise. Dasein in this taking over of existential death experiences the loneliness of demise, for no Dasein can accompany it, no Dasein can take it over for it and do its demising for it, no longer can Dasein Be-in-the-world or Be-with-others. This must not be confused with fearing demise by a specific cause, for when Dasein attempts to envision its demise, or reason about how its demise may come about, this is a fleeing from the reality of the nature of Dasein's demise; Dasein can know nothing of its demise. Reasoning about our future demise is a way to comfort ourselves in the face of this Being-towards-death which is the experience of existential death, and we must not seek comfort in this Being-towards-death, for then we are inauthentically Being-towards-death.

Authentic Being-towards-death is the non-specific, objectless, anxiety in Being-towards-death which makes us quite uncomfortable; but this authenticity only comes with this discomfort: "In our existential projection of an authentic Being-towards-death...we must set forth...an understanding...of Being towards this possibility

without either fleeing it or covering it up.”[3] This authentic Being-towards-death stands us outside of the “common sense of the ‘they,’” which we fall into accord with when we try to flee our death. Essentially, we try, like we do when referencing the “they”,[4][5] to flee our death by saying things like, ‘oh yes, surely I will die one day, but not now, not today,’ or ‘I’m sure this is how I will die...,’ etc. It is a way of pushing death aside, assuring us that it happens to others and not to us, or that it happens to us all, even me, but not right now. This pushing aside of death, I will argue, seriously limits our ability to create meaning in our lives.

We will move on now, since the Heideggerian groundwork has been laid, to the story “The Immortal” by Borges. Once I have worked through the story, I hope the connections will come into view.

Meaning and Fulfillment in “The Immortal”

When death is no longer there for someone, there must be some quantifiable change, or changes. Of course, because we do not exist as immortals, and because immortality is not currently a possibility for us, conceiving of these changes is quite difficult and only achievable through efforts of great imagination and possibly through thorough reasoning. This is where “The Immortal” by Jorge Luis Borges fits in. This is a story about a man who, after hearing of a river that if drunk from grants immortality, and which lies in front of the famed City of the Immortals, sets out on a journey to find it. After many labors, he comes to the river. He drinks from the river out of sheer thirst, without the desire he previously had for immortality, and finds only later that he has

3 Heidegger, 305

4 das Man, the terminology Heidegger employs when talking about the faceless, numberless crowd we reference when we say things like “but they all do X” or “everybody dies”

5 Ibid.

achieved the goal he originally set out to achieve. This achievement, crucially, does not come without loss, as is exemplified in the Troglodytes who surround him, — who turn out to be the famed Immortals of the City he sought, — in the fleeing from immortality which occurs at the end of the story, and in the pleasure felt in finding mortality once again: “Incredulous, speechless, and in joy, I contemplated the formation of slow drop of blood. I am once more mortal, I told myself over and over, again I am like all other men.”[6]

Before drinking from the river, through his descriptions of the Troglodytes alone, our narrator gives us an idea of what awaits him, and what would purportedly await us all, in immortality. The first sign we find of the Troglodytes immortality, and the consequences borne of it, comes in our narrator’s journey across the arid deserts, through the lands which hold many different kinds of men. He says of the Troglodytes that they “devour serpents and lack all verbal commerce;”[7] serpents, which can themselves be a symbol for death,[8] are devoured by the Troglodytes, and therefore the Troglodytes devour death, they are immortal. This symbolism appears later in the story as well, soon after our narrator has taken his first sip of that divine and impure water; “I stood up and was able to beg or steal...my first abominated mouthful of serpent’s flesh.” [9]And with this devouring of the flesh of a serpent, our narrator devours death and becomes immortal.

As for lack of verbal commerce, a later passage, where our narrator speaks of the Troglodyte he calls Argos,

6 Jorge Luis Borges, “The Immortal,” in *The Aleph and Other Stories* (NYC, NY: Penguin Books, 2004), pp. 3–19, 16.

7 Borges, 5

8 Lynne A. Isbell, “Introduction,” in *The Fruit, the Tree, and the Serpent: Why We See so Well* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), pp. 1–8, 2.

9 Borges, 7

sheds light on this lack of verbalizing and how exactly it connects with immortality:

I reflected that Argos and I lived our lives in separate universes; I reflected that our perceptions were identical but that Argos combined them differently than I, constructed from them different objects; I reflected that perhaps for him there were no objects, but rather a constant, dizzying play of swift impressions. I imagined a world without memory, without time; I toyed with the possibility of a language that had no nouns, a language of impersonal verbs or indeclinable adjectives. In these reflections many days went by, and with the days, ye[10]ars.

These two, the one who has not yet realized his immortality — knowing one's immortality is the death sentence of meaning, for "[what] is divine, terrible, and incomprehensible is to know oneself immortal,"[11] — and the one already immortal, have different ways-of-Being afforded to them by the world. Though they perceive the same things, their affordances and interpretations are inherently different in that one of them believes he will die and the other is aware he never will; one's life hinges on every moment's perception of the world around him, his ability to recognize threats, his ability to use language — these nouns and verbs and declinable adjectives lost on the immortal — to communicate with others whose lives hang in the balance. When one lives eternally, all events and all entities in the world fall into homogeny, no longer does one need memory, for what is there to remember but the repetition of events which have no bearing on one's life.

Without language, without memory, and crucially,

10 Borges, 12

11 Borges, 13

without death, there is no longer individuation; “a single immortal man is all men.”[12] This loss of individuation, like inauthentic Being-towards-death in Heidegger, has severe consequences for the ability of one to relate to the world they inhabit. Moving from a life of individuation and death-consciousness to a life of homogeneity and the knowledge that one will never die would undoubtedly lead to stasis, like is seen in the immortals who made their homes near the river and who do not speak, and some who do not move, who birds make nests on.

Conclusion

Unlike the trees and the stars, we mortal humans know that once we came from, and one day we must return to, nothing; this is what led to Heidegger’s singling out of Dasein as the entity by which Being must be interrogated. Undoubtedly, this position is a very peculiar one for an entity to be in. Being in this position and in the same moment having such an intimate relationship with our Selves, how do we cope? — and does this intimate relationship with the Self arise from death-consciousness as well? I believe so, yes. How do we find the motivation to go into the world and lead a life?

We create meaning. To live is to create meaning for oneself in the face of sure and total annihilation. We see ourselves among others in the world and among the tools and things which we can use and interact with and thus we create a narrative that we then live, but it is not the narrative which allows us life. No, it is the interruptions in this narrative which make us feel alive.[13] No one lives or writes well enough to lay out an entire life before themselves. And even if one were to plan their entire life,

12 Borges, 14

13 E. M. Cioran, “Variations on Death,” in *A Short History of Decay*, trans. Richard Howard (New York, New York: Skyhorse Publishing, Inc., 2012), pp. 10–13, 11. “The inexactitude of its ends make life superior to death; one touch of precision would degrade it to the triviality of the tombs.”

would that not then fall into meaninglessness? Nothing could happen to the person who directs their entire life, they would live the direction they laid out and die at the end of that road, but that death must be directed too if everything else which will be terminated by it were to be directed by the person, and so the death would no longer have such a power over this person, and they would fall into the same absurd hole that the passive nihilist falls into.

This position, of the person living the life they planned; is it not that same position of the immortals? Nothing happens to them because everything happens to them; no event can carry a meaning because “every act (every thought) is the echo of others that preceded it in the past...and the faithful presage of others that will repeat it in the future, ad vertiginem.”[14] Everything falls into homogeny. The difference is that the person living the life they faithfully planned will die eventually, but with their death even necessarily being planned, there can be no possible meaning creation. They ride the wave until they perish, noticing nothing along the way, whereas the average mortal human will notice the flowers, the brushes of a lover’s skin against theirs, the clouds covering the sun or the moon trapping them right where they are on the earth. They will juxtapose these things, without always knowing it explicitly, with the nothingness they came from and which they know will greet them again one undisclosed day. The brushing of the lover’s skin against yours stands at the edge of the abyss where the lover will one day fall, where you will one day fall, where the earth and the entirety of the universe will one day fall; though this is not to say that there comes an end to Being in general —though that may be the case — this is merely the end of your Being-in-the-world and your Being-with-

14 Borges, 15

Others. This falling into nothingness that the mortal will one day have to do stands in stark contrast to the sensuous experiences that bring joy and pain during a life, and this contrast is what allows one to ascribe meaning to utterly meaningless phenomena like the atoms of one humans hand contacting the atoms of another human's arm or the vapor of water passing between a human and a star.

Death's own survival, not our own survival of death or our doing away with it, it turns out, is crucial to our Being as we know it. This may fall on some as bad news, but I assure you, based upon the investigations of Heidegger and Borges explored above, this is exactly what we should want.

In the faces of the transhumanists and doctors and cognitive scientists who fight for a post-death future for human beings, we should affirm death, we must rescue meaning. Without death, we lose our individuality, our authenticity, our ability to create meaning. This would of course have severe implications on the mental health of those who would be immortal; have you ever heard the despair in the voice of one pleading, begging to find meaning, no matter where? or the screams or desperate whispers of one who feels they cannot be authentically themselves? The demise of death itself, and therefore the demise of meaning, would be a nasty, heart and gut-wrenching event, leaving behind un-feeling and un-seeing vessels which once smelled flowers and made love, which now remain static, un-waiting and un-expecting, with no end coming to give them something to look forward to, something different.



Eclipse

Auguste Bernick

