

## **David Loy** The nonduality of life and death: A Buddhist view of repression

### SUMMARY

Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy? (Tolstoy)

Why was I born, if it wasn't forever? (Ionesco)

YAKSHA: What is the greatest wonder in the world?

YUDISHTHIRA: Every day men see others called to their death, yet those who remain live as if they were immortal. (*The Mahābhārata*)

One can no more look steadily at death than at the sun. (La Rochefoucauld)

All of life is but keeping away the thoughts of death. (Samuel Johnson)

*The king is surrounded by persons whose only thought is to divert the king, and to prevent his thinking of self. For he is unhappy, king though he be, if he thinks of himself.*

*This is all that men have been able to discover to make themselves happy. And those who philosophize on the matter, and who think men unreasonable for spending a whole day in chasing a hare which they would not have bought, scarce know our nature. The hare in itself would not screen us from the sight of death and calamities; but the chase which turns away our attention from these, does screen us.* (Pascal)

All our knowledge merely helps us to die a more painful death than the animals who know nothing. (Maeterlinck)

Death is easier to bear without thinking of it, than is the thought of death without peril. (Pascal)

*He who most resembles the dead is the most reluctant to die.* (La Fontaine)

"I had to die to keep from dying." (Common schizophrenic remark)

By avoiding death, men pursue it. (Democritus)

Man has forgotten how to die because he does not know how to live. (Rousseau)

It is true: we love life not because we are used to living but because we are used to loving. (Nietzsche)

History is what man does with death. (Hegel)

Madness is something rare in individuals—but in groups, parties, people, ages it is the rule. (Nietzsche)

Men are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness. (Pascal)

The struggle for success becomes such a powerful force because it is the equivalent of self-preservation and self-esteem. (Kardiner)

For life in the present there is no death. Death is not an event in life. It is not a fact in the world. (Wittgenstein)

The artist carries death in him like a good priest his breviary. (Böll)

*To live in the face of death is to die unto death.* (Kierkegaard)

Art has two constants, two unending concerns: it always meditates on death and thus always creates life. (Pasternak)

Only the man who no longer fears death has ceased to be a slave. (Montaigne)

As long as you do not know how to die and come to life again, you are but a poor guest on this dark earth. (Goethe)

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*Philosophy East & West*, volume 40, no. 2 (April 1990). © by University of Hawaii Press. All rights reserved.

*Q: Do not one's actions affect the person in after-births?*

*A: Are you born now? Why do you think of other births? The fact is that there is neither birth nor death. Let him who is born think of death and palliatives therefor.* (Ramana Maharshi)

Just understand that birth-and-death is itself nirvana. There is nothing such as birth and death to be avoided; there is nothing such as nirvana to be sought. Only when you realize this are you free from birth and death. (Dōgen)

Much has happened to psychoanalysis in its century of life, and Freud today would have difficulty recognizing many of his progeny. Among those descendants that are of interest to comparative philosophers, transpersonal psychology has attracted considerable attention<sup>1</sup>; but this article will focus on existential psychoanalysis, which originated quite early out of a cross-fertilization between Freudianism and phenomenology, including Heidegger's *Being and Time*.<sup>2</sup> The leading figure was the Swiss psychoanalyst Ludwig Binswanger, who is also distinguished by the fact that he was able to disagree with Freud without that leading to a break between them. For reasons that will become clear at the end, I think this original movement made a mistake by allying itself with the early Heidegger, and what I have to say is more influenced by the second and third generations of existential psychology in the United States: among the analysts are Rollo May and now Irvin Yalom, and among the scholars, Norman O. Brown and most of all Ernest Becker, whose last two books, *The Denial of Death* and *Escape from Evil*, cannot be recommended too highly.<sup>3</sup>

These figures are more pragmatic; for them the "existential" in existential psychology means not so much *existentialism* as being rooted in the fundamental issues of life and death, freedom and responsibility, groundlessness and meaninglessness. Despite this—or is it because of this?—their findings display a remarkable agreement with what I think is the best of the existentialist tradition. Becker refers often to Kierkegaard and Pascal, and he could have found as much in Nietzsche and Sartre to support his conclusions. This confluence may be of great importance, because it is one of the fertile places in our time where philosophy and science meet. Psychoanalysis is many things: a religion (with founder, dogma, and schisms), a philosophy (Freud and many since could not resist metaphysical extrapolations), but also a *science*, which means it doesn't just change, it learns. Despite a problematic philosophical foundation, it has discovered many things about how the mind functions, which we cannot ignore except at our peril. The problem, as usual, is separating the milk from the water.

Ernest Becker was not a psychologist but a cultural anthropologist, so his theory of death denial summarizes more than the conclusions of one psychoanalytic school; he attempts what might be called a unified field theory for the social sciences, and I think he comes close to succeeding. Here I want to bring a third party into this dialogue: Buddhism. If we add what Buddhism

has to say about the human situation—in particular, the “emptiness” of the ego-self—fireworks go off and another cross-fertilization can occur. While Becker demonstrates what *duhkha* really means today, Buddhism is able to show how Becker doesn’t *quite* grasp the main point and therefore misses an alternative to his pessimistic conclusions. I confess to high hopes for this expanded conversation: for if important movements in the existentialist tradition (philosophy), the psychoanalytic tradition (science), and the Buddhist tradition (religion) were to end up agreeing on the essentials of the human condition, who knows to what this might lead?

I shall begin by summarizing some of Becker’s rich exposition while making a few general criticisms, then gradually bring in the Buddhist perspective. The conclusion will apply what we learn from this to turn Heidegger’s *Being and Time* upside down.

Freud always emphasized that *repression* is the key psychoanalytic discovery which underlies the whole edifice. The concept is basically simple: something (it can be almost anything—usually a thought or a feeling) makes me uncomfortable, and since I do not want to cope with it consciously, I *choose to ignore or “forget” it*. This clears the way for me to concentrate on something else, but at a price: part of my psychic energy must be expended in resisting what has been repressed, to keep it out of consciousness, and (the real rub) *the repressed phenomenon tends to return to consciousness anyway*, but as a symptom which is therefore *symbolic* (because that symptom re-presents it in distorted form). Freud traced the hysterics and phobias of his middle-class Viennese patients back to repressed sexuality, and he concluded that sexual repression is man’s primal repression—although, like many of us, his attention gradually shifted from sex to death.

Today psychoanalytic attention has followed him there. Becker builds on a perceptive remark by William James: “mankind’s common instinct for reality . . . has always held the world to be essentially a theater for heroism.” Our natural narcissism and need for self-esteem mean that each of us needs to feel that we are of special value, “first in the universe.” Heroism is how we justify that need to count more than anyone or anything else. This is the common denominator behind the cultural relativity that anthropology discovers, which is nothing other than the relativity of hero systems. But why do we need to be heroes? It is “first and foremost a reflex of the terror of death” because heroism is *what can qualify us for a special destiny*. And we need that hope for a special fate, because the alternative is literally too much to contemplate.<sup>4</sup> The irony of man’s unique symbolic life is that it only serves to reveal our fate in no uncertain terms. “*Consciousness of death* is the primary repression, not sexuality.”<sup>5</sup> This fear of death is needed to keep our organism armed toward self-preservation; but it must also be repressed for us to func-

tion with any modicum of psychological comfort. The result is us: hyper-anxious animals who constantly invent reasons for anxiety even when there are none. This was also the conclusion of Otto Rank, Melanie Klein, Norman O. Brown, and more recently Irvin Yalom, who argues that “a considerable portion of one’s life energy is consumed in the denial of death.”<sup>6</sup> Most animals have fears programmed into them as instincts, but the animal who has no such instincts (or whose consciousness allows him to transcend his instincts) fashions his fears out of the ways he perceives the world—which unlocks a door that Becker himself does not open, for it suggests that if we can come to experience the world differently we might be able to fashion our fears differently, too. Or is it the other way around: do our fears cause us to perceive the world in the way we do, and might someone come to experience the world differently who was brave enough to face the thing we fear most?

The reason man’s essence was never found, says Becker, “was that there was no essence, that the essence of man is really his *paradoxical* nature, the fact that he is half animal and half symbolic.”<sup>7</sup> But how easily this moves from the common existentialist view that man has no essence to the claim that his essence is dualistic: a spirit with an anus and all the other accoutrements of mortality. This duality lies at the heart of Becker’s argument. The mind looks down at the body, realizes what flesh implies, and panics. As a consequence, “everything that man does in his symbolic world is an attempt to deny and overcome his grotesque fate. He literally drives himself into a blind obliviousness with social games, psychological tricks, personal preoccupations so far removed from the reality of his situation that they are forms of madness.” A good example is our character traits—secret psychoses, said Ferenczi, a mechanization of a particular way of reacting, not very different from a repetition compulsion. These sedimented habits are a necessary protection, for without them there can only be “full and open psychosis”: to see the world as it really is is “devastating and terrifying”; “it *makes routine, automatic, secure, self-confident activity impossible*. . . . It places a trembling animal at the mercy of the entire cosmos and the problem of the meaning of it.” Thus the bite in Pascal’s aphorism: “Men are so necessarily mad that not to be mad would amount to another form of madness.” For Becker this is literally true: normality is our collective, protective madness, in which we repress the truth of the human condition, and the ones who have difficulty playing this game are the ones we call mentally ill. Schizophrenics are suffering from the truth. Psychoanalysis reveals the high price of denying this truth about man’s condition, “what we might call *the costs of pretending not to be mad*.”<sup>8</sup>

This gives a more existential slant to such key Freudian concepts as guilt and the Oedipal complex. The early experience of the child is really his attempt to deny the anxiety of his emergence, his fear of losing his support, of standing alone, helpless and afraid.

This despair he avoids by building defenses; and these defenses allow him to feel a basic sense of self-worth, of meaningfulness, of power. They allow him to feel that he *controls* his life and his death, that he really does live and act as a willful and free individual, that he has a unique and self-fashioned identity, that he *is somebody*. . . .<sup>9</sup>

Yet this, which Becker calls the “great scientific simplification of psychoanalysis,” may be grounded in other views of human nature than Becker’s god-that-shits dualism. Elsewhere Becker refers to Maslow’s “Jonah syndrome” in presenting a somewhat different explanation for repression: because we are not strong enough to endure the full intensity of life. “It all boils down to a simple lack of strength to bear the superlative, to open oneself up to the totality of experience.”<sup>10</sup> In this sense, too, life is really too much for the child, and so we end up with the two great fears that other animals do not have: the fear of life, from inability to endure the intensity of full openness, and the fear of death, from inability to accept one’s inevitable fate—which, as we shall see, are not two distinct fears but two different aspects of the same fear.

But is mind-body dualism the cause of our panic, or its effect? Do we panic because we are consciousnesses with bodies, or is our panic what impels us to dualize ego-consciousness from body? The most detailed historical study of death in Western culture is Philippe Aries’ *The Hour of our Death*, a monumental—indeed, interminable—survey of the last millennium. Although Aries’ approach is not psychoanalytic, his conclusions are therefore all the more relevant, since his evidence comes to us from a different perspective. At the moment the most interesting to us are the first two stages of death-awareness that he distinguishes. In striking contrast to what came later, death in the Middle Ages was “tame.” Although recognized as evil, it was also accepted as inseparable from life. Contrary to the universal implications of Becker’s thesis, there do not seem to have been the extremes of terror and denial that we now associate with death; rather, it was a repose, a peaceful sleep from which one may or may not reawaken, in the eventual resurrection of the body.

But this changed. “The strong individual of the later Middle Ages could not be satisfied with the peaceful but passive conception of *requies*. . . . He split into two parts: a body that experienced pleasure or pain and an immortal soul that was released by death.”<sup>11</sup> Evidently it was this dualism that attained a philosophical rationalization in the *Meditations* of Descartes, whose legacy we still *are* and with which we still struggle.

Is it a coincidence that this new conception of death spread just before the acceleration—the *explosion*—of Western civilization that began as the Renaissance? If history is what man does with death, as Hegel said, then a more death-conscious society will create more history. Fromm pointed out that the

Renaissance brought an increased feeling of strength and freedom, but also isolation, doubt, skepticism, and *anxiety*. Burckhardt noticed the most outstanding symptom, now so widespread that we take it for granted: a morbid craving for fame. The desire to be famous is a good example of how something repressed (here, death terror) remanifests in consciousness in distorted form (the passion for *symbolic* immortality), which therefore becomes a *symptom* of our problem (if what I really want is *personal* immortality, no fame will ever be enough—but this is usually experienced as “I am not yet famous *enough*”).<sup>12</sup> This craving and the other character traits that Fromm mentions are associated with greater self-consciousness: increased consciousness is increased awareness of the end, and the need to resolve the increased anxiety that that awareness brings with it, whether by becoming an immaterial soul or by attaining symbolic immortality through one’s reputation.

This implies that the Platonic, Cartesian, and now “commonsense” mind-body dualism that Becker, too, presupposes (in a more sophisticated version: Plato’s immaterial psyche and Descartes’ *cogito* become with him the symbolizing functions that modern social science analyzes) is not the unvarying essence of human nature but another example of nurture being taken for nature: a historically determined conception of man now so deeply ingrained that its metaphysical nature is forgotten—which, we remember, is the definition of repression, something that can afflict whole civilizations as well as individuals. But if this understanding is conditioned, can it be un-conditioned?

From the Buddhist perspective, this is not the only questionable dualism that Becker assumes. Like most of us all of the time (and perhaps all of us most of the time) he takes for granted the apparently objective nature of the world, which Western philosophy (and cognitive psychology) since Kant has realized to be mentally constituted. Not only does each of us construct the supposedly objective world, but (just as important psychologically) we constitute the world in a manner that conceals the fact that we have constituted it—which can also be seen as a form of repression.

Perhaps the most potent defense of all [against death anxiety] is simply reality as it is experienced—that is, the appearance of things. . . . [A]ppearances enter the service of denial: *we constitute the world in such a way that it appears independent of our constitution*. To constitute the world as an empirical world means to constitute it as something independent of ourselves.<sup>13</sup>

Yalom relates this to repressed fear of groundlessness, which makes us try to secure ourselves by stabilizing the world we are *in*. This fits the Buddhist view of the problem if we understand this fear of groundlessness as the ego-self’s fear of its own “emptiness.” But it is not just the sense-of-self that is empty. The denial of subject-object dualism which is so fundamental to Mahāyāna (and Advaita Vedānta) implies that our usual sense of separation (between myself and the world I am in) is delusive; the supposed subjectivity of ego-consciousness gains a spurious reality only in opposition to the sup-

posed objectivity of the empirical world (and vice versa).<sup>14</sup> Then to repress the fact that I constitute my “objective” world is also to repress the fact that I constitute *myself*. But before we get any further ahead of ourselves, let us return to Becker’s exposition.

Freud traced guilt back to the early ambivalent feelings of the child, particularly hate and death wishes toward parents, which lead to fears of object loss. *The Denial of Death* sees the origin of guilt in the child’s reaction to his bodily processes and their urges: “guilt as inhibition, as determinism, as smallness and boundedness” is implied by the constraints that the basic animal condition imposes upon the symbol-using god, who needs to control his condition and would like to escape it. *Escape from Evil* expands on this:

Guilt, as the existentialists put it, is the guilt of being itself. It reflects the self-conscious animal’s bafflement at having emerged from nature, at sticking out too much without knowing what for, at not being able to securely place himself in an eternal meaning system.<sup>15</sup>

This “pure” guilt has nothing to do with infringements or punishment for secret wishes; the major sin is the sin of being born, as Samuel Beckett has said. It is the worm in the heart of the human condition, apparently an inescapable consequence of self-consciousness itself—and not only the human condition but the social fabric, for Becker like Brown sees social organization as “a structure of shared guilt.” The burden is so heavy that man cannot endure it by himself; it must be shared in order to be expiated collectively, as we see more clearly (because more objectively) in the rituals of archaic man, whose life “was openly immersed in debt.”<sup>16</sup>

This illuminates the existential view of the Oedipal complex, which Norman O. Brown more accurately calls the “Oedipal project.” Brown agrees with Freud that this project is the attempt to become father of oneself, but not by sleeping with mother. To become one’s own father is to become what Nāgārjuna described (and refuted) as *self-existing*—in Spinoza’s formula, *causa sui*, self-caused; in Sartre’s, *être-en-soi-pour-soi*, “being both in-itself and for-itself,” which, in his ontology, is a contradiction. Becker summarizes this by saying that the Oedipal project is the flight from obliteration and *contingency*. The child wants to conquer death by becoming the creator and sustainer of his own life. In Buddhist terms, the Oedipal project is the attempt of the developing ego-self to attain closure on itself, foreclosing its dependence on others by becoming autonomous. *To be one’s own father is to be one’s own origin*. Rather than just a way to conquer death, this makes even more sense as the quest to deny one’s groundlessness by becoming one’s own ground: the ground (socially sanctioned but nonetheless illusory) of being an independent person. What is called the Oedipal complex is due to the discovery by the child that he is not part of mother, after all. The problem is not so much that Dad has first claim on Mom, as what that contributes to the child’s dawning realization of separation:

“but if I’m not part of Mom, what am I part of?”—which becomes, more generally: what am I? Who am I? This generates the need to discover one’s own ground, or rather the need to create it—a futile project, never to be fulfilled except by delusively *identifying* with something (“I may not be Mom, but I am *this!*”), which must include, as its other side, the fear of losing it.

If this is what happens, the Oedipal project originates in our intuition that *self-consciousness* is not something obviously “self-existing” but a fiction, a mental construct. Rather than being self-sufficient, consciousness is more like the surface of the sea: dependent on depths which it cannot grasp because it is a manifestation *of* them. The problem arises when consciousness wants to ground itself, to make itself *real*. But to real-ize itself is to objectify itself. The ego-self is this *attempt* of awareness to objectify itself by grasping itself—which it can no more do than a hand can grasp itself. Vedānta shows the futility of this by pointing out that whatever the “I” becomes aware *of* cannot be the “I”, that the “I” will always be different from anything cognized as “me.”

The consequence of this is that the sense-of-*self* always has, as its inescapable shadow, a sense-of-*lack*, which (alas!) it always tries to escape. It is here that the psychoanalytic concept of repression comes in, for the idea of “the return of the repressed” in a distorted form shows us how to link this fundamental yet hopeless project with the symbolic ways we try to make ourselves real *in* the world. This deep sense of *lack* is experienced as the feeling that “there is something wrong with me.” To the extent that we have a sense of autonomous self, we have this sense of *lack*, which manifests in many different forms. We have already noticed one: the craving to be famous, which is a good example of the way we usually try to make ourselves real—through the eyes of others. In its “purer” forms *lack* appears as ontological guilt or, even more basic, an ontological anxiety at the very core of one’s being, which is almost unbearable because it gnaws on that core. For that reason all anxiety wants to become objectified into fear *of* something (as Spinoza might say, fear is anxiety associated with an object), because then we know what to do: we have ways to defend ourselves against the feared thing.

The tragedy of these objectifications, however, is that no amount of money can be enough if it is not really money that we want. When we do not understand what is actually motivating us—because what we *think* we want is only a symptom of something else—we end up compulsive, “driven.” Such a Buddhist analysis implies that no true “mental health” will be found short of an enlightenment which puts an end to that sense-of-*lack* which is the shadow of the sense-of-*self*, by putting an end to the sense-of-*self*. Is psychoanalysis coming close to realizing the same thing?

*Transference* in the narrow sense is our unconscious tendency to take emotions and behavior felt towards one person (for example, a parent) and project them onto another (for example, one’s analyst). But if transference in the large

sense is “distortion of encounter” (Rollo May), then we all do it most of the time, and this is just what Freud concluded: it is a “universal phenomenon of the human mind” that “dominates the whole of each person’s relation to his human environment.” Transference reveals that I never grow up, remaining “a child who distorts the world to relieve his helplessness and fears, who sees things as he wishes them to be for his own safety.” The need to find security by subjecting ourselves to others remains, transferred from parents to teachers, superiors, and rulers. This is not making “an emotional mistake,” but a matter of experiencing the other as one’s *whole world*—just as the family is for the child. In this way we tame the terror of life, by focusing the power and horror of the universe in one place. “*Mirabile!* The transference object, being endowed with the transcendent powers of the universe, now has in himself the power to control, order, and combat them.” This natural fetishization for man’s highest yearnings and strivings explains our urge to deify the other: “the more they have, the more rubs off on us. We participate in their immortality, and so we create immortals.” Rank said that we need to erect a god-ideal outside ourselves in order to live at all, and the transference object fits the bill.<sup>17</sup>

The problem is that this process is unconscious and hence uncritical, a regression to wishful thinking which is not fully in one’s control. We children of the twentieth century do not need to think very hard to come up with good examples—but examples have never been lacking. Man has always been hypnotized by those who represent life to him, and eager to submit himself to charismatic personalities who legitimize their power with a little symbolic mystification. “Each society elevates and rewards leaders who are talented at giving the masses heroic victory, expiation for guilt, relief of personal conflicts.” Alas, these leaders are usually the grandest, most mindless patriots, “who embrace the ongoing system of death denial with the heartiest hug, the hottest tears, the least critical distance.”<sup>18</sup>

Yet Freud and Ferenczi also saw a more positive side, for transference indicates a natural attempt to heal oneself through creating the larger reality one needs to discover oneself, the “self-taught attempts on the patient’s part to cure himself.” Thus Rank concluded that “projection is a *necessary unburdening* of the individual; man cannot live closed in upon himself and for himself.” So for Becker the question ultimately becomes: “What is *creative projection*? What is *life-enhancing* illusion?”<sup>19</sup> As Jung put it: what myth do you live by?

If transference is broadened to include ego models, we can do it with someone we have never met. Let’s be honest with ourselves: don’t philosophers like Wittgenstein tend to be models for us, as movie stars are for many others? The person not fascinated by one model is fascinated by another, because *this is how we choose the cosmology for our own heroics*, even if those heroics must be vicarious; at least we can identify our universe with the one that our hero lived, thought, and acted within. And that brings us closer to the heart of the matter, for transference applies not just to people: we admire not only

outstanding sportsmen, but their teams; we identify not only with national leaders, but countries; not only with Nietzsche, Freud, and the Buddha, but with existentialism, psychoanalysis, and Buddhism.

The Buddhist term for all this is *attachment*, but because that is such a vague term, Buddhism can here learn from psychoanalysis, which is more methodically discovering how delusion functions. What ties all these manifestations together as the same “universal phenomenon of the human mind” is more than our need to tame the terror of death: it is the need to organize the chaos of life by finding a unifying meaningsystem that gives us knowledge about the world, and a life program, telling us both what *is* and what we should *do*. The child tends to absorb this from his parents as part of what it means to be a person; we place ourselves in the universe by accepting the meaningsystem of someone we identify with. “All of us are driven to be supported in a self-forgetful way, ignorant of what energies we really draw on, of the kind of lie we have fashioned in order to live securely and serenely.”<sup>20</sup>

But not securely or serenely enough. After a century of theory and practice, psychoanalysis has come to agree with the great insight of existentialism: anxiety is not incidental but fundamental to the self, not something we have but something we *are*. From this, many (for example, Tillich) have decided that it is not possible to put an end to anxiety. But that conclusion does not necessarily follow. What is implied is that such an end would require ending the ego-self as usually experienced. Brown is sympathetic to such a possibility: “since anxiety is the ego’s incapacity to accept death, the sexual organizations were perhaps constructed by the ego in its flight from death, and could be abolished by an ego strong enough to die.”<sup>21</sup> But for Rank and Becker, anxiety cannot all be overcome therapeutically, because it is impossible to stand up to the terrible truth of one’s condition without anxiety; hence our choice is between anxiety and repression. If we cannot face the truth of our condition, which is mortality, we must repress that truth, which is to forget it. The difference between neurosis and normality—that undramatic, unnoticed psychopathology of the average (Maslow)—is how successful that repression is. The neurotic has a better memory than most, so his anxiety keeps breaking through into consciousness and so must be dealt with more harshly in order to preserve a little freedom of action. All of us react to our anxiety by “partializing” our world, by restricting our consciousness within narrow bounds, to areas which we can more or less control and which give us a sense of self-confidence. The neurotic has more difficulty sustaining the illusion of self-confidence and must confine himself even more narrowly. The psychotic can do this hardly at all, and in self-protection de-animates himself, often referring to himself as a toy, a puppet, or a machine; the literature on schizophrenia is full of expressions like “I had to die to keep from dying.”<sup>22</sup>

The difference between the three becomes a matter of degree. When you grow up unable to immerse yourself freely in the cultural roles available to

you, then your own life becomes a problem. Tillich called neurosis the way of avoiding nonbeing by avoiding being. Rank said the constant restriction of the neurotic's life is because "he refuses the loan (life) in order thus to avoid paying the debt (death)." The anguish and despair that the neurotic complains of are not the result of his symptoms but their cause; those symptoms are what shield him from the tragic contradictions at the heart of the human situation: death, guilt, meaninglessness. "*The irony of man's condition is that the deepest need is to be free of the anxiety of death and annihilation; but it is life itself which awakens it, and so we must shrink from being fully alive.*"<sup>23</sup>

Then is the guilt that seems to bedevil man not the cause of our unhappiness, but its effect? "The ultimate problem is not guilt but the incapacity to live. The illusion of guilt is necessary for an animal that cannot enjoy life, in order to organize a life of nonenjoyment" (Brown).<sup>24</sup> In Buddhist terms, if the autonomy of *self*-consciousness is a delusion which can never quite shake off its shadow-sense that "something is wrong with me," it will need to rationalize that sense of inadequacy somehow. The restriction of the neurotic life-sphere merely aggravates this universal sense of *lack* into a paralysis of consciousness, a *death-in-life*. But if fear of death rebounds as fear of life, they become two sides of the same coin. *Then genuine life cannot be opposed to death but must embrace them both*: "Whoever rightly understands and celebrates death, at the same time magnifies life." (Rilke)

The irony is that as long as we crave immortality we are dead. As La Fontaine noted, he who resembles the dead is the most reluctant to die. Aries is struck by the fact that, at the time of the late Middle Ages which we have already mentioned, the idea of death was replaced by the idea of mortality in general: "the sense of death henceforth diluted and distributed over the whole of life, and thus lost its intensity." Yes, but only because life, too, lost its intensity, as he notices elsewhere: "It is a curious and seemingly paradoxical fact that life ceased to be so desirable at the same time that death ceased to seem so punctual or so powerful."<sup>25</sup> In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the "living corpse" became a common theme: what better image could we ask for? Again, Aries' study implies that Becker's pessimistic conclusions about human nature do not reflect man's unchanging nature, only one particular, historically conditioned nature: ours. But cannot a conditioned nature be reconditioned—or *de*-conditioned?

Rank and Becker replace Freud's sexual reductionism with the fear of death and—every fear has a correlative hope—the desire for immortality. As different as these monologies are, they imply equally tragic conclusions about the human condition. The best that the early Freud could offer was sublimation or rational control of the libido by the ego, which he saw as making the best of a bad thing; and his later view was more pessimistic, postulating a

life-against-death struggle between two instincts, Eros and Thanatos, that death must always win. Becker is hardly more optimistic: if our deepest, most repressed fear is of death, we seem to be stuck between transference projections in one form or another, or psychotically acknowledging the terror of our situation; for each of us is indeed going to die. Again, death always wins—in this case even before we die, in the psychic paralysis of death-in-life.

The difference between Freud and Becker is that Eros and Thanatos are instincts, while the fear of death is not: it is a reaction of the animal who is conscious enough to become aware of himself and his inevitable fate; so it is something we have *learned*. But exactly what is it we have learned? Is the dilemma of life-confronting-death an objective fact we just *see*, or is this, too, something constructed and projected, more like *an unconscious game that each of us is playing with himself*? According to Buddhism, life-against-death is a delusive way of thinking it is *dualistic*: the denial of being dead is how the ego affirms itself as being alive; so it is *the act by which the ego constitutes itself*. To be self-conscious is to be conscious of oneself, to *grasp oneself*, as being alive. (Despite all their struggles to keep from dying, other animals do not dread *death*, because they are not aware *of* themselves as alive.) Then death terror is not something the ego has, it is what the ego *is*. This fits well with the Buddhist claim that the ego-self is not a thing, not what I really am, but a mental construction. Anxiety is generated by identifying with this fiction for the simple reason that I do not know and cannot know what this thing that I supposedly am *is*. This is why the “shadow” of the sense-of-*self* will inevitably be a sense-of-*lack*.

Now we see what the ego is composed of: *death terror*. The irony here is that the death terror which *is* the ego defends only itself. Everything outside is what the ego is terrified of, but what is inside? Fear *is* the inside, and that makes everything else the outside. The tragicomedy is that the self-protection this generates is self-defeating, for the barriers we erect to defend the ego also reinforce our suspicion that there is indeed something *lacking* in our innermost sanctum which needs protection. And if it turns out that what is innermost is so weak because it is . . . *nothing*, then no amount of protection will ever be felt to be enough and we shall end up trying to extend our control to the very bounds of the universe. Something like this, I think, is what motivates mankind’s compulsive technological project, and suggests what is wrong with it; but there is no space to go into that here.

If, however, the ego is constituted by such a dualistic way of thinking, it means that ego can die without physical death and without consciousness coming to an end. What makes this more than idle speculation is that there is ample testimony to the possibility of such ego death:

No one gets so much of God as the man who is completely dead. (St. Gregory)  
The Kingdom of God is for none but the thoroughly dead. (Eckhart)

Your glory lies where you cease to exist. (Ramana Maharshi)  
 We are in a world of generation and death, and this world we must cast off.  
 (William Blake)

A moving example of death and resurrection is of course one of the sources of Western culture; but examples are found in many religious traditions. The problem is demythologizing these myths, extracting the core of psychological and spiritual truth from the accretions of dogma and superstition that all too often obscure their meaning, in order for that truth to spring to life again within *our* myth—the technical, objectifying language of modern science (in this instance, psychology). Blake’s quotation (from *The Vision of the Last Judgment*) points the way because it implies that we are not seeing clearly but *projecting* when we perceive the world in terms of the dualistic categories of birth and death.

Precisely that claim is central to the Buddhist tradition. “Why was I born if it wasn’t forever?” bemoaned Ionesco; the answer is in the *anātman* “no self” doctrine, according to which we cannot die because we were never born. *Anātma* is the “middle way” between the extremes of eternalism (the self survives death) and annihilationism (the self is destroyed at death). Buddhism resolves the problem of life-and-death by *deconstructing* it. The evaporation of this dualistic way of thinking reveals what is prior to it. There are many names for this “prior,” but it is surely significant that one of the most common is “the unborn.”

In the Pali Canon, what are perhaps the two most famous descriptions of *nirvāṇa* both refer to “the unborn,” where “neither this world nor the other, nor coming, going, or standing, *neither death nor birth*, nor sense objects are to be found.”

There is, O monks, an unborn, an unbecome, an unmade, an unconditioned; if, O monks, there were not here this unborn, unbecome, unmade, unconditioned, there would not here be an escape from the born, the become, the made, the conditioned. But because there is an unborn, . . . therefore there is an escape from the born. . . .<sup>26</sup>

Similar claims are common in Mahāyāna scriptures and commentaries. The most important term in Mahāyāna is *śūnyatā*, “emptiness,” and the adjectives most used to explain *śūnyatā* are “unborn,” “uncreated,” and “unproduced.” The best-known Mahāyāna scripture, the laconic *Heart Sutra*, explains that all things are *śūnya* because they are “not created, not annihilated, not impure, and not pure, not increasing and not decreasing.” This is echoed by Nāgārjuna in the preface to his *Mūlamadhyamikakārikās*, which uses eight negations to describe the true nature of things: they do not die and are not born, they do not cease to be and are not eternal, they are not the same and are not different, they do not come and do not go.

Moving from India to China, we read in the “Song of Enlightenment” of Yung-chia, a disciple of the sixth Ch’an patriarch: “Since I abruptly realized

the unborn, I have had no reason for joy or sorrow at any honor or disgrace.” That “all things are perfectly resolved in the Unborn” was the great realization and later the central teaching of the seventeenth-century Japanese Zen master Bankei: “When you dwell in the Unborn itself, you’re dwelling at the very wellhead of Buddhas and patriarchs.” The Unborn is the Buddha-mind, and this Buddha-mind is beyond living and dying.<sup>27</sup>

These passages (many more could be added) are important because, although it may not be clear what “the unborn” refers to, in each case it is an immediate experience that is being described (or at least claimed), rather than a philosophical conjecture about the nature of reality. For a case which combines personal experience with philosophical acumen, we shall turn to Japan’s foremost Zen master and philosopher, Dōgen.

For Buddhism, the dualism between life and death is only one instance of a more general problem, dualistic thinking. Why is dualistic thinking a problem? We differentiate between good and evil, success and failure, life and death, and so forth because we want to keep the one and reject the other. But we cannot have one without the other because they are interdependent: affirming one half also maintains the other. Living a “pure” life thus requires a preoccupation with impurity, and our hope for success will be proportional to our fear of failure. We discriminate between life and death in order to affirm one and deny the other, and, as we have seen, our tragedy lies in the paradox that these two opposites are so interdependent: there is no life without death and—what we are more likely to overlook—there is no death without life. This means our problem is not death but life-and-death.

At issue are the boundaries of the self as a symbolized entity, and for that issue the end and the beginning are of a piece. There is a clear sense of the relationship between awareness of death and a delineated self. The second is impossible without the first. Even prior to the disturbing syllogism, “If death exists, then I will die,” there is an earlier one: “Since ‘I’ was born and will die, ‘I’ must exist.” (Lifton)<sup>28</sup>

There is an implication here which Lifton does not consider: If we can realize that there is no delineated ego-self which is alive *now*, the *problem* of life-and-death is solved. And such is the Buddhist goal: to experience that which cannot die because it was never born. If our minds have created this dualism, they should be able to un-create or deconstruct it. This is not a devious intellectual trick which claims to solve the problem logically, while leaving our anguish as deep as before. The examples above make it clear that we are referring to an experience, not some conceptual understanding. It can be no coincidence that the *prajñāpāramitā* scriptures of Mahāyāna also repeatedly emphasize that *there are no sentient beings*.

The Buddha: “Subhūti, what do you think? You should not say that the Tathāgata has this thought: ‘I should liberate living beings.’ Subhūti, you should not think so. Why? Because there are really no living beings whom the

Tathāgata can liberate. If there were, the Tathāgata would hold (the concept of) an ego, a personality, a being and a life. Subhūti, (when) the Tathāgata speaks of an ego, there is in reality no ego, although common men think so. Subhūti, the Tathāgata says common men are not, but are (expediently) called, common men.<sup>29</sup>

This gives us the context we need to understand the cryptic remarks of Dōgen. His most important comments on birth and death are found in three fascicles of the *Shōbōgenzō*. First, from *Shōji*, “Birth and Death”:

Just understand that birth-and-death is itself nirvana. There is nothing such as birth and death to be avoided; there is nothing such as nirvana to be sought. Only when you realize this are you free from birth and death. . . .

It is a mistake to suppose that birth turns into death. Birth is a phase that is an entire period of itself, with its own past and future. For this reason, in buddha-dharma birth is understood as no-birth. Death is a phase that is an entire period of itself, with its own past and future. For this reason, death is understood as no-death. . . .

In birth there is nothing but birth and in death there is nothing but death. Accordingly, when birth comes, face and actualize birth, and when death comes, face and actualize death. Do not avoid them or desire them.

From *Shinjin-gakudō*, “Body-and-Mind Study of the Way”:

Not abandoning birth, you see death. Not abandoning death, you see birth. Birth does not hinder death. Death does not hinder birth.

Death is not the opposite of birth; birth is not the opposite of death.

The following passage from *Genjō-kōan*, “Actualizing the Fundamental Point,” connects birth-and-death with time:

Firewood becomes ash, and it does not become firewood again. Yet, do not suppose that the ash is future and the firewood past. You should understand that firewood abides in the phenomenal expression of firewood, which fully includes past and future and is independent of past and future. Ash abides in the phenomenal expression of ash, which fully includes future and past. Just as firewood does not become firewood again after it is ash, you do not return to birth after death.

This being so, it is an established way in buddha-dharma to deny that birth turns into death. Accordingly, birth is understood as no-birth. It is an unshakeable teaching in Buddha’s discourse that death does not turn into birth. Accordingly, death is understood as no-death.

Birth is an expression complete this moment. Death is an expression complete this moment. They are like winter and spring. You do not call winter the beginning of spring, nor summer the end of spring.<sup>30</sup>

What is Dōgen saying in these passages? (1) *Enlightenment is not other than birth-and-death*. Dōgen does not offer the consolation of a heaven or anywhere else “transcendental”—nor even the usual Buddhist hope of rebirth (although he does not deny that possibility). We cannot escape birth and death, but there is liberation *in* or rather *as* birth-and-death if we realize something about them.

(2) *Birth and death are not opposites*. Birth is nothing but birth, death is

nothing but death: face and *actualize* them, says Dōgen. “Do not avoid them or desire them.” Do not grasp at one and try to push the other away. His solution is not a denial of life and death but a complete affirmation of them very different from our usual way of resigning ourselves to them. Does this deny what was said earlier about the interdependence of life and death? To criticize the fact that life and death are opposites for us is another way of pointing out the problem with dualistic thinking. The interpenetration of those opposites means I live my life paralyzed by the dread of death, and I experience my death clinging to the scraps of life that are being torn from my grasp. When life and death are not experienced as opposites they will not “hinder” each other in this way.

(3) *Then birth is no-birth, death is no-death.* When there is nothing but death—no repulsion from it nor seeking after it—then death is experienced as no-death. Dōgen correlates this with an alternative way of experiencing time, a present “which fully includes future and past.” Our flight from death takes the form of trying to make ourselves real *in* time, as something that will persist *through* time; I must accept my death in order to experience the true nature of the *now* which is outside time. In that *now* birth is no-birth because no ego-self is ever born: *if no “I” is ever born* then there is only the act of birth, but if there is only the act of birth *then there is really no birth.* Instead, the act of birth in itself and (in exactly the same way) the act of death in itself become lacking-nothing manifestations of . . . of what? We have already referred to “the unborn”; another common term is “Buddhanature”—but now we are in danger of falling back into postulating something like a soul. So perhaps it is better not to call them a manifestation *of* anything, since the point is that each act is realized to be complete and whole in itself when not experienced in relation to something else.

But something does come to an end: the attempt at self-reflexivity that constitutes the ego. If the ego-self is an act whereby consciousness tries to grab hold of itself and objectify itself—delusively, since consciousness can never do so, and so it only ends up self-paralyzed—*unmediated experience “of” the Unborn is the final shipwreck of that project.* The problem is resolved at its source. The “ridgepole” of ego-self which has been trying to make itself real by identifying with one thing or another in the objective world collapses. In terms of life-versus-death, the ego-self forecloses on its greatest anxiety by letting go and dying right now. “Die before you die, so that when you come to die you will not have to die,” as the Sufi saying puts it. Of course, if the ego is really a construct—composed of automatized, mutually reinforcing ways of thinking, feeling, and acting—it can’t really die, yet it can *evaporate* in the sense that these cease to recur. But insofar as these constitute our basic psychological defenses against the world, this letting go is not going to be easy. It means giving up my most cherished ways of thinking about myself

(notice the reflexivity), *which are what I think I am*, to stand naked and exposed. No wonder it is called the Great Death.

Earlier I suggested that a sense-of-*lack* is the inescapable shadow of the sense-of-self, and that the “purest” form of that lack is unprojected anxiety, which, because it has no object to defend itself *against*, gnaws on the sense-of-self. We find support for this in the conclusion to *The Concept of Anxiety*, where Kierkegaard defines the paradox that, if there is to be an end to anxiety, it can be found only in anxiety. Understood and experienced in the right way, anxiety is a school that roots out everything finite and petty in us, and then leads us wherever we want to go. *The way to resolve the problem of anxiety is to become completely anxious*: to let groundless anxiety devour all those “finite ends” with which I have attempted to secure myself; until, having no more attachments to chew on, it gnaws me to nothing.

The curriculum of this school is *possibility*, “the weightiest of all categories.” No matter what tragedies actually befall us, they are always far lighter than what could happen. When a person “graduates from the school of possibility, . . . he knows better than a child knows his ABCs that he can demand absolutely nothing of life and that the terrible, perdition, and annihilation live next door to every man. . . .”<sup>31</sup> It is an exercise in awareness: dredging up all the big and small securities we have hedged around us and then “forgotten,” until we found ourselves in a safe but constricted little world. Consciousness of what could happen at any moment deconstructs this comfortable cocoon by reminding us, at every moment, of our mortality; in psychoanalytic terms, this demolishes one’s unconscious power linkages or supports.<sup>32</sup> “He who sank in possibility . . . sank absolutely, but then in turn he emerged from the depth of the abyss lighter than all the troublesome and terrible things in life.” Such a person no longer fears fate, “because the anxiety within him has already fashioned fate and has taken away from him absolutely all that any fate could take away.”

Usually a large part of our mental activity is structured by the need to have reassuring boltholes, where we flee when our self-esteem is threatened. If I lose a chess game to an opponent with a much lower rating, I automatically compensate: for I am really the better player, as my rating shows. Each of us finds his own ways of rationalizing the more serious shortcomings of his life. Fixed by repetition, the web of these and other automatizations constitutes my character, and therefore my unfreedom: all the ways in which I habitually run away from open encounter with the world. For Buddhism as well as Kierkegaard, I must let go of these thought props, which is to suffer. Without these defenses to self-esteem, I die a thousand little ego deaths—or walk on the edge of a thousand swords, to use the Zen metaphor. My example is trivial compared to the postgraduate school of possibilities that Kierkegaard describes, but the process of ego deconstruction is the same. In Kierkegaard’s

terms, our thought props, of whatever sort, are the finitudes which must be rooted out to reveal the infinitude that is our true ground.

In a classic passage from the *Genjō-kōan* fascicle just quoted, Dōgen describes the result of this process:

To study the buddha way is to study the self. To study the self is to forget the self. To forget the self is to be actualized by myriad things. When actualized by myriad things, your body and mind as well as the bodies and minds of others drop away. No trace of realization remains, and this no-trace continues endlessly.<sup>33</sup>

Meditation is learning to “forget” the self by *allowing oneself to be absorbed into* the meditation object (mantra, and so forth). If the ego-self is the result of consciousness attempting to reflect back upon itself in order to grasp itself, meditation is an exercise in *de-reflection*. Enlightenment or liberation occurs the moment that the usually automatized reflexivity of consciousness ceases, *which is experienced as a letting go and falling back into the void*.<sup>34</sup> Suddenly consciousness stops trying to catch itself, stops trying to make itself real. I become nothing, and discover that I am everything—or, more precisely, that I can be anything. When I no longer strive to make myself real through things, I find myself *actualized* by them.

Needless to say, this cannot save the body from aging and rotting; then does this realization really solve our problem? It does, because, contrary to what Becker says, what we really seek is not immortality. The Buddhist analysis of the “empty” ego-self implies that death is actually not our deepest fear and the desire to become immortal is not our deepest hope, for they, too, are symptoms that represent something else. What do they symbolize?—the desire of the sense-of-self to become a real self, to transform its anguished *lack* of being into genuine being. Even the terror of death, with all its anguish, represses something, for that terror is preferable to facing my lack of being *now*, for *death fear at least allows us to project the problem into the future*. In that way we avoid facing what we are (or are *not*) right now.

One way to approach this is to reflect on whether immortality—the actuality of an existence that never ended—could really satisfy us. As much as we may fear death, is ceaseless life really the solution? Many have suspected that, like “the immortal” in Borges’ story of the same title, our existence would sooner or later—and probably sooner—become a burden, unless we also discovered a meaning system to place it in, a cosmology wherein we had both home and role. As the interminable succession of centuries kept undermining all my futile reality projects, what anguish would accumulate! Mere immortality would become unbearable as soon as I no longer craved it. As with other symbolic (because repressed) games, victory cannot satisfy me if it is really something else I want.

This implies that our ultimate hunger is spiritual or “ontological” (Ken Wilber): it can be satisfied by nothing less than *becoming real*, which in the nondualist terms of Mahāyāna (and Advaita Vedānta) means real-izing that my mind is actually nondual with the whole universe, nothing other than the universe, *which is possible if the core of my ego-consciousness is “hollow,” groundless*. This reduces our striving for immortality to a symptom, the more common symbolic way that this unrecognized spiritual thirst surfaces into our consciousness; and death becomes a “complex symbol” (Charles Wahl) representing the feared failure of this reality project, but also a catchall for all the ugly, negative, tragic aspects of existence that we cannot cope with and so project as the Shadow of Life generally.

Why do we need to keep projecting ourselves into the future, unless something is felt to be lacking *now*? The obvious answer is that we are afraid of losing something *then* that we have now; but many have found this unpersuasive, replying that if life is not something we have but something we *are*, there’s nothing to fear because we shall not be around to notice (what) we’re missing. Epicurus stoically claimed that “the most horrible of all evils, death, is nothing to us, for when we exist, death is not present; but when death is present, then we are not.” Otto Fenichel followed Freud in doubting whether there is such a thing as a normal fear of death: the idea of my own death is subjectively inconceivable; therefore it must cover other unconscious ideas. The Buddhist perspective is that if nothing is lacking *now*, then immortality loses its compulsion as the way to resolve lack, and whether or not we survive physical death in some form becomes, if not irrelevant, at least not the main point.

Parmenides said that the real is timeless; we may add that it is timeless because it doesn’t *lack* anything. As long as I yearn for immortality I am still trying to run away from my shadow-sense that something is wrong with me *now*. In this way we are led to consider *time*. To make a Buddhist point in psychoanalytic terms, our choice is between a repressed metaphysics which disguises itself as the objective, commonsense temporal system we normally place ourselves within, or a more explicit approach which brings the repressed back into consciousness and allows us to see how we ourselves have constructed the time schema that now constricts us. As so many philosophers have noted, “time is generated by the mind’s restlessness, its stretching out to the future, its projects, and its negation of ‘the present state’.”<sup>35</sup> Pascal noticed why we do not rest satisfied with the present: “because the present is generally painful to us.” Brown calls time “a schema for the expiation of guilt,”<sup>36</sup> which in Buddhist terms becomes: time is created by our futile attempts to fill in our sense of *lack*.

Purposiveness means that we are more concerned with the remote future results of our actions than with their own quality or their immediate effects on

our own environment. The “purposive” man is always trying to secure a spurious and delusive immortality for his acts by pushing his interest in them forward into time. (John Maynard Keynes)<sup>37</sup>

If even our “purposive” preoccupation with the future is a reflex of death terror (and nonbeing terror), no wonder we are so obsessively busy.

I conclude by briefly considering the implications of this for Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. It can hardly be coincidental that *Being and Time* presents essentially the same relations among death, self, guilt, and time that we have outlined—but completely inverted. Heidegger offers a mirror image of the psychoanalytic view just discussed, and from that he naturally draws the opposite conclusions.

Perhaps the key metaphor in *Being and Time* is the need to “pull oneself together” out of the dispersion and disconnectedness of everyday, inauthentic existence, in which we are liable to be distracted by whatever the moment offers. But this image needs to be complemented by another one: the person so driven by his life project that he is never where he *is* because he is always busy going somewhere else—usually clawing his way up the ladder of success. Today, at least, such people are just as familiar to us as the dispersed people Heidegger finds inauthentic, and as a solution to the problem of life this is just as one-sided.

This is where Heidegger, too, needs to be supplemented, if not corrected, by a psychoanalytic/Buddhist approach. We have seen that repression can also appear as the compulsiveness of the person who *must* become wealthy, or famous, or even a “word-historical hero”—pardon me, *thinker*. How “authentic” is this “resoluteness,” if it involves an attempt to escape death through an unconscious symbolic immortality project? We have seen that even preoccupation with the future can be a reflex of death terror, an unconscious and therefore compulsive attempt to transcend death symbolically. That is the trap that Heidegger himself fails to guard against, and which he himself may have fallen into. Becker and others have argued convincingly that Freud never analyzed his own fear of death, and for that reason psychoanalysis became for him his own private “immortality project,” which is one reason why he reacted so strongly against any perceived threat to his own patriarchy. Is there not some philosophical bravado detectable in Heidegger’s call for resoluteness and in his eagerness to contend “violently” against our tendency to let the meaning of Being be “covered up” and obscured?<sup>38</sup> One senses that he, at least, hoped to fill up his own sense of *lack* by becoming a “world-historical thinker” who finally reveals the true nature of Being to a grateful posterity.

For Heidegger, anticipatory resoluteness cultivates death as not-to-be-forgotten possibility. Such resolution, activated by the call of conscience which reveals the “lack” of my groundlessness, pulls me together out of my

dispersion in chance possibilities and illumines my being as *care*. All these issues finally come down to the nature of time (the condition of care), which reveals itself to be the Being that Heidegger seeks, or as close to it as we can get: in *Being and Time*, “to be” means to appear according to the temporal “ecstasies” of past, present, and especially future. In *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, Heidegger criticizes Kant for recoiling from much the same realization, in the first edition of *The Critique of Pure Reason*, that temporality is the source not only of pure intuition but also of the categories of the understanding. Yet we may make a similar critique of Heidegger, for he himself never asks *what generates time*. Well, one must stop somewhere, but the irony is that Heidegger’s own analysis provides the answer: it merely needs to be read backward in order to realize that time is “a schema for the expiation of guilt” (Brown).

It comes down to whether Heidegger’s two possible ways of experiencing time, inauthentic and authentic, truly exhaust the possibilities. With inauthentic life, scattered by the distractions of everyday affairs, we experience and understand time as an interminable sequence of “nows” that consecutively arise and pass away. These “nows” have been “leveled off,” each shorn of its intrinsic relations with the others so that they simply follow each other. One’s attention is caught, now by this, then by that, because in this dispersal there is nothing to hold these “nows” together—which means there is nothing to hold one’s life together. But this is inauthentic, for such a leveling-off is caused by repression—in Heidegger’s terms, it is “a fleeing which covers up,” “a fleeing in the face of death.”<sup>39</sup>

Authentic temporality, which “temporalizes itself primarily in terms of the future,” is revealed only in resoluteness. Resoluteness pulls the present out of its dispersal on objects of immediate concern and holds it firmly in the future and the past; this gives us the authentic present, which Heidegger terms *Augenblick*, “the Moment.” In this way Heidegger conceives of our supposedly irreducible “now-moment” as something which can be understood only in terms of something else even more basic: the “stretching along” of future-oriented temporality. “The ‘now’ is not pregnant with the ‘not-yet-now’, but the Present arises from the future in the primordial ecstatic unity of the temporalizing of temporality.”<sup>40</sup>

But what if there is a “now” which *is* pregnant with the “not-yet-now”? The *nunc stans* or “standing now” of medieval philosophy has traditionally been offered as such an alternative, but Heidegger casually dismisses this possibility in a footnote: eternity conceived as a *nunc stans* has been derived from the ordinary (that is, inauthentic) way of understanding time and as such does not need to be discussed in detail.<sup>41</sup> This forecloses for him the possibility of any third conception of time: our choice is between the inauthentic, “vulgar” experience of the present as a uniform series of leveled-off “nows,” and an authentic temporality which pulls us and those scattered “nows” together by

resolute projection into the future. With this Heidegger believed that he himself had resolutely wrested the authentic nature of time from the veils of the common “vulgar” interpretation. But does his authentic temporality amount to another version of the vulgar veil? *The problem with both of Heidegger’s alternatives is that both are preoccupied with the future because in different ways both are reactions to the possibility of death; thus both are ways of running away from the present.* Inauthentic existence scattered into a series of disconnected nows is “a fleeing in the face of death”; authentic life pulled out of this dispersal by the inevitable possibility of death is more aware of its impending death, but still driven by it. This means that neither experiences the present for what it is in itself, but only through the shadow that the inescapable future casts over it. What the present might be without that shadow is not considered in *Being and Time*. For that, we must return to Buddhism.

## APPENDIX

## DEATH → SELF → CARE → TIME

## Becker:

*Mentally ill*: terror of death → damage to ego structure → paralysis, partial (neurosis) or full (psychosis) → disintegration of objective time schema.

*Normal*: denial of death → repression of fear by “healthy” ego structure → transference, symbolic immortality projects → necessity of objective time schema to expiate guilt.

Heidegger<sup>42</sup>:

*Inauthentic*: flight from death → dispersal of self → distraction by everyday affairs → “vulgar” time as a series of leveled-off passing moments.

*Authentic*: awareness of death → pulling of self together, acceptance of guilt → authentic care: anticipatory resoluteness → care grounded in authentic temporality; past and present united by concern with future.

## Buddhism:

*Deluded*: intuition of groundlessness, unconscious fear of nonbeing → sense of *lack* at core manifesting as death fear, anxiety, and so forth → various attachments, projects to make ego-self *real* → subject-object dualism: sense-of-self striving to real-ize itself in projected spatiotemporal world.

*Enlightened*: the Great (Ego) Death: “letting go,” evaporation of sense-of-self and collapse back into Emptiness → grounding in groundlessness: “from the very beginning, nothing was ever lacking” → freedom: no subjective need to real-ize self, thus an ability to respond appropriately to situation → *now* (Dōgen’s *being-time*) outside time; nonduality of self and world.

## NOTES

1. Among the works that I am familiar with, Ken Wilber’s *The Atman Project* (Wheaton, Illinois: Quest, 1980) and *Up from Eden* (Boulder, Colorado: Shambhala, 1981) are the most interesting.

2. For the origins of the “existential analytic” movement, including a selection of influential papers, see Rollo May et al., eds., *Existence* (New York: Basic Books, 1958).

3. Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death* (New York: Free Press, 1973) and *Escape from Evil* (New York: Free Press, 1975) (the second was unfinished at his death); Irvin D. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy* (New York: Basic Books, 1980); Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death: The Psychoanalytic Meaning of History* (New York: Vintage, 1961).

4. “We admire most the courage to face death; we give such valor our highest and most constant adoration; it moves us deeply in our hearts because we have doubts about how brave we ourselves would be” (*Denial of Death*, pp. 11–12). Becker points out that war is a ritual for the emergence of heroes (*Escape from Evil*, p. 109), but today sports plays that role: it has become the main way that we produce and admire heroes.

5. Becker, *Denial of Death*, p. 96.

6. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, p. 41. Yalom devotes half of his book to discussing it.

7. Becker, *Denial of Death*, p. 26.

8. *Ibid.*, pp. 27, 29, 60, 66; Becker, *Escape from Evil*, p. 163; Pascal’s *Pensées* no. 414.

9. Becker, *Denial of Death*, p. 55.

10. *Ibid.*, p. 49.

11. Philippe Aries, *The Hour of Our Death* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1981), p. 606.

12. Another example of this phenomenon is money, but unfortunately there is no space here to go into Brown’s and Becker’s brilliant analyses. See Brown, *Life Against Death*, chap. 15 (“Filthy Lucre”), and Becker, *Escape from Evil*, chap. 6 (“Money: The New Universal Immortality Ideology”).

13. Yalom, *Existential Psychotherapy*, p. 222. A similar realization—that the ego not only represses, but represses the fact that it represses—was a turning point in Freud’s career, deflecting his investigations from the nature of the repressed to the nature of repressing.

14. For an analysis of subject-object dualism, see David Loy, *Nonduality: A Study in Comparative Philosophy* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988).

15. Becker, *Escape from Evil*, p. 158.

16. *Ibid.*, pp. 28, 32. This was the reason for the gods and for their later visible counterparts, kings. They existed in order for the debt to be payable, to receive the sacrifices which periodically expiated the guilt and kept the universe working.

17. Sigmund Freud, *An Autobiographical Study* (London: Hogarth, 1946), quoted in Becker, *Denial of Death*, p. 147; *Denial of Death*, pp. 129, 146–152.

18. Becker, *Escape from Evil*, pp. 132, 166. Examples in contemporary American politics are not hard to think of.

19. Becker, *Denial of Death*, p. 158.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

21. Brown, *Life Against Death*, p. 113.

22. Quoted in Robert Jay Lifton, *The Broken Connection: On Death and the Continuity of Life* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), p. 223. On p. 227, Lifton quotes Harold Searles, who was struck by the fact that the “very mundane, universal factor of human mortality” seems to be a major source of anxiety in “this overtly most exotic of psychopathological processes”: people “became . . . and long remained schizophrenic . . . in order to avoid facing . . . the fact that life is finite.” As William Burroughs said, a paranoid is a man who knows a little of what’s going on.

23. Becker, *Denial of Death*, pp. 181–182 (quoting Roy D. Waldman), p. 66 (my emphasis).

24. Brown, *Life Against Death*, p. 270.

25. Aries, *The Hour of Our Death*, p. 333.

26. *Udāna* 6; 7:1–3 (my italics in the first).

27. Norman Waddell, ed. and trans., *The Unborn: The Life and Teachings of Zen Master Bankei* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1984), pp. 47, 52, 55.

28. Lifton, *The Broken Connection*, p. 69.

29. *Vajracchedika-Prajñā-Pāramitā Sutra* (“Diamond Sutra”), trans. Charles Luk (Hong Kong: Buddhist Book distributor, n.d.), p. 20 (Luk’s parentheses).

30. *Moon in a Dewdrop: Writings of Zen Master Dōgen*, ed. Kazuaki Tanahashi (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1985), pp. 74–75, 93–94, 70–71.

31. Unless otherwise noted, all the references in this section are from Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Dread*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), pp. 155–162.

32. Becker, *Denial of Death*, p. 89.

33. *Moon in a Dewdrop*, p. 70. Ramana Maharshi made the same point: “There will come a time when you must forget all that you have learnt.”

34. “Men are afraid to forget their minds, fearing to fall through the Void with nothing to stay their fall. They do not know that the Void is not really void, but the realm of the real Dharma.” (*The Zen Teaching of Huang Po*, trans. and ed. John Blofeld (London: Buddhist Society, 1958), p. 41.

35. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), vol. 1, p. 45.

36. Brown, *Life Against Death*, p. 277.

37. John Maynard Keynes, *Essays in Persuasion* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1932), p. 370.

38. Later, of course, after his *Kehre* “turning,” Heidegger’s attitude changed markedly.

39. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 474, 477.

40. *Ibid.*, pp. 476, 479. Cf. J. L. Mehta, *The Philosophy of Martin Heidegger* (Varanasi, India: Banaras Hindu University Press, 1967), p. 281.

41. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 499, note xiii.

42. This schema seems to put Heidegger on the same footing as the other two, but his conception is opposite because for him the arrows symbolize a different process. For Becker and Buddhism the arrows refer to mental construction: for example, the psychoanalytic need to repress death terror leads to the creation of symbolic immortality projects, and the Buddhist view of self as sense of *lack* leads to various projects to make ourselves real. But for Heidegger, resolute care is based on authentic, future-oriented temporality. This means that, with Becker and Buddhism, our mental condition creates its corresponding temporality, but for Heidegger the sense-of-self is *grounded* in temporality.