

LIVING WITH THE DYING, BEING-WITH THE DEAD



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ABSTRACT: *Though Heidegger largely informs his conceptions of being and time through an analytic of the phenomenology of death, he treats death as an entirely personal experience. Through Robert Pogue Harrison's *Dominion of the Dead*, and Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, this essay examines the death of others, and how the experience of another's death informs the life of the living. The death of others is the possibility of a shift in the world of the living; this possibility for the living arises primarily through relationship with the corpse.*

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Martin Heidegger devotes an entire chapter of his magnum opus, *Being and Time*, to an explication and discussion of the importance of death.¹ However, he devotes only a few slim pages to the experience of watching others die. He willfully skims over the topic, claiming that the death of others is impossible to experience. Robert Pogue Harrison suggests in his book, *The Dominion of the Dead*, that the dead hold great bearing on the living and that the dead radically interpellate the lives of the living.² In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, a novella which greatly informed Heidegger's philosophical work on death, Leo Tolstoy posits a view of death that lands somewhere between Heidegger's and Harrison's.³ For Tolstoy, the living cannot directly experience the death of others, but their relationship to the dead changes the structure of life. This contradicts Heidegger's view and tempers Harrison's. While the death of another can certainly not be experienced directly, I submit that when one human experiences the death of another, especially through relationship with the corpse, they necessarily experience a fundamental shift in the structure of the world.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger uses the being of the corpse to explain why humans cannot experience the death of others. He claims that this becomes evident if the death of others is viewed with full "phenomenal appropriateness." He states there is no way that the living may access the same "loss-of-Being . . . which the dying man 'suffers.'"⁴ We see that *phenomenal appropriateness* means that one person may not die for another or even experience the same death as another person. He supports this: "No one can take the Other's dying away from him."⁵ In this way, Heidegger makes evident that no one may *actually* experience the death of another.

Aside from actually experiencing the death of others, Heidegger claims that the corpse of a human provides the best way to relate to the dead. He claims the corpse

1 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2008).

2 Robert Pogue Harrison, *The Dominion of the Dead* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2005).

3 Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (New York: Bantam Dell, 1981).

4 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 282.

5 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 284.

- possesses a different kind of Being than a living human (or *Dasein*, in Heidegger's terms). Whereas *Dasein* is that "which each of us is himself," a word that "stand[s] for the kind of Being that belongs to persons," the corpse "is still a Being, but in the sense of the Being-just-present-at-hand-and-no-more of a corporeal Thing which we encounter."⁶ This separates *Dasein* from entities with different kinds of being—entities like animals, kilograms, tools, or corpses. Thus, *Dasein*'s Being is a "Being-in-the-world;" an entirely different kind of Being belongs to the corpse.⁷ Heidegger labels the corpse with a kind of Being he calls "presence-at-hand," casting it in the same realm as entities within the world that are viewed philosophically or even meditatively. For example, kilograms and monads belong to a present-at-hand type of Being because they are divorced from the greater context of human use and activity.⁸ A hammer, however, possesses a different mode of being because it is *useful* in the sense that it can be manipulated as a piece of equipment, which Heidegger calls "ready-to-hand."⁹ A hammer can cross over into the realm of present-at-hand when it breaks, creating a useless thing from a previously useful thing, which ultimately divorces it from its context. A hammer becomes seen for what it *is*—present-at-hand—rather than what it is *used* for—ready-to-hand.
- Just as the hammer maintains a certain kind of being in its functional form, so does *Dasein* maintain its Being in living form as Being-in-the-World. But when the hammer breaks and when *Dasein* dies, they both exhibit a similar—but not identical—kind of being that is present-at-hand. Heidegger explains this distinction by claiming that dead *Dasein* is "*unalive*," whereas entities like the hammer are "*lifeless*."¹⁰ Even in death, *Dasein* maintains a unique orientation toward life and Being-in-the-World. *Dasein* moves not from Being-in-the-world to *merely* present-at-hand, but rather it moves into Being-no-longer-in-the-world, or, as Heidegger puts it, *Dasein*'s death is the "change-over of an entity from *Dasein*'s kind of Being (or life) to no-longer-*Dasein*."¹¹ This phrase *no-longer-Dasein* expresses the fundamental being of dead *Dasein* and how they experience being differently.

According to Heidegger, though, *Dasein* can still "be-with" the corpse in a peculiar relationship. He writes, "In tarrying alongside [the corpse] in their mourning

6 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 27; 218.

7 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 78.

8 Michael Wheeler, "Martin Heidegger," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2011, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/heidegger/>.

9 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 103.

10 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 282.

11 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 281.

and commemoration, those who have remained behind *are with him*, in a mode of respectful solicitude.”¹² *Relating* to a corpse requires a particular structure of human involvement, such as “mourning or commemoration” in order for actual connection to take place.¹³ Mourning or commemoration of a corpse aligned with Heidegger’s concept of the *world* as a network of relational and significant activities composes a different world than that of everyday being.¹⁴ Dasein’s relation to a corpse requires a new and specific world of ceremonial lamentation. Heidegger agrees with this when he writes that the dead have left our world, “but *in terms of that world* those who remain can still *be with him*.”¹⁵ This newly italicized world refers to one of mourning and commemoration, as opposed to the old world in which the now-dead previously inhabited. In this way, mourning and commemoration erect a new world of meaning where the living may briefly relate to the dead.

Furthermore, this new-world relationship takes the form of a “respectful solicitude” which, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger defines as a form of *care*, an essential component of Dasein’s being.¹⁶ The first type of care—concern—is the kind of care that Dasein exercises upon entities ready-to-hand (such as a hammer), whereas the second—solicitude—is the kind of care that Dasein only exercises with other Daseins. If we apply “solicitude” to the corpse, we realize that the living may relate to the dead on the same level as the living relate to each other, though only within the worlds of ceremonial mourning and commemoration.¹⁷ In this way, even though Dasein may not *experience* the death of others as such, Heidegger makes it apparent that Dasein can *relate* to the corpse through the same structure used to relate to other Daseins.

Indeed, since solicitude and care normally arise when Dasein is alive and *then* may continue into a relationship with the dead, it is unlikely that they may arise for the first time between Dasein and a dead stranger or public enemies; on the one hand, Dasein does not know the stranger, and on the other, an enemy’s death is an occasion for celebration. Despite these complexities, I propose that any dead Dasein can still be related to. In the case of the public enemy, while celebration may replace mourning and commemoration, this is still a kind of ceremony. Ceremony, in turn, spells the construction of a network

12 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 282.

13 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 282.

14 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 93.

15 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 282.

16 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 282; 157.

17 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 282.

of relational and significant activities—a new world. The death of a stranger, however, still seems to lack significance for Dasein. In this instance, I propose that it takes the corpse to catalyze a relationship. Simply put, the corpse of any individual, stranger or not, bears with it a unique charisma; while it is normal and thus unnoticeable to see Dasein alive, it is abnormal and horrifying to see Dasein dead. I propose that this seizure of the Dasein's gaze is an invitation that lays the groundwork for Dasein's care. This care then may spur Dasein to commemorate the dead stranger. In this way, even the death of a stranger—through the corpse—provides the possibility for relationship between living and dead. In the cases of the public enemy and the stranger, then, relating to the corpse is never given, but it is always possible.

18 Harrison,
*Dominion of the
Dead*, ix.

19 Harrison,
*Dominion of
the Dead*, x.

20 Harrison,
*Dominion of the
Dead*, 90.

In *The Dominion of the Dead*, Robert Pogue Harrison explains how the dead interpellate the living. He makes explicit from the beginning that his views on death differ greatly from Heidegger's: "humanity . . . is through and through necrocratic."¹⁸ Harrison uses this word to show that aspects of societies such as the commandments, habits, and language that the living use all come from the dead. In this way, the dead hold full sway over the living. Also, the dead legitimize the living for Harrison, essentially bringing them into being.¹⁹ In statements like this, Harrison shows that while Heidegger wrote about death, he writes about the dead and the effect that the dead have upon the living.²⁰ To this end, Harrison concerns himself with burial practices, mourning practices, and the interpellation of the living by the dead and much less with the experience of those who die. Thus, *Dominion of the Dead* is more useful than *Being and Time* for gaining insight into the relationship between the living and the dead.

21 Harrison,
*Dominion of the
Dead*, 90.

22 Harrison,
*Dominion of the
Dead*, 91.

Part of Harrison's first comment about *Being and Time* states that one of its greatest shortcomings is that "it fails to show, or even suspect, that Dasein's relation to its death passes by way of its relation to the dead."²¹ From here, Harrison introduces the idea of primitive Dasein into his work. While Heidegger does not touch on primitive Dasein's being in his section on death, Harrison proposes that this being is essential to fully understanding its relationship to death and the dead.²² Harrison quotes the Italian philologist, Giambattista Vico, who writes

that doctrines must come “from that of the matter of which they treat.”²³ Harrison echoes Heidegger’s own dictum to go “back to the matter at hand.”²⁴ When death as an issue is fully retraced, the matter we arrive at is the corpse itself, making it into Harrison’s ultimate “matter at hand.” As he puts it, “the idea of death must proceed from the dead.”²⁵ From here, he elucidates the importance of the corpse within human history. In alignment with Heidegger, Harrison accepts the corpse’s presence-at-hand, though he boldly attaches more significance to the being of the corpse than Heidegger does. For example, Harrison invokes Vico’s dictum that burial, along with matrimony and religion, is one of the world’s fundamental human institutions.²⁶ As such, he claims it was only through the particular charisma of the dead corpse that early humans came to the idea of death itself.²⁷ Indeed, Harrison claims (via Vico) that the primal human had no “capacity for abstraction,” which is to say that primal humans had no concept of concepts; rather, they only had the worldly stuff in which our modern concepts now root. For example, primal humans had no philosophy but tribal codes of conduct instead. In the same way, they had no religion but only gods—not gods above, as ours might be today, but rather gods beside, for example, the birds and animals themselves. In this way, Harrison posits the inability of primitive humans to come up with any sort of abstract death concept without first experiencing the corpse’s gripping charisma.²⁸

Harrison speaks to both the primitive impact and contemporary importance of the corpse—namely, the grip with which it seizes the living. In his words, “Dasein does not die until its remains are disposed of.”²⁹ Harrison appeals to the record of human time to support this claim by referencing ancient Greek generals who lost sailors to the sea after winning a major victory. Despite the victory, they were tried in Athens upon their return and sentenced to hang. Because the generals had neglected their obligation to the corpse by failing to bring back remains, they created undead of the sea.³⁰ The undead are those who have died in the world but have not yet died in us. According to Harrison, the ability for the dead to die *in* the living (as opposed to our yearning to die with them) creates closure among those left living. The proper disposal of a corpse through a burial ceremony both liberates the one no longer living-in-the-world to enter

23 Harrison, *Dominion of the Dead*, 91.

24 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 67.

25 Harrison, *Dominion of the Dead*, 92.

26 Harrison, *Dominion of the Dead*, xi.

27 Harrison, *Dominion of the Dead*, 92.

28 Harrison, *Dominion of the Dead*, 92.

29 Harrison, *Dominion of the Dead*, 143.

30 Harrison, *Dominion of the Dead*, 143.

31 Harrison,
*Dominion of the
Dead*, 147.

32 Harrison,
*Dominion of the
Dead*, 55.

33 Harrison,
*Dominion of the
Dead*, 55.

34 Harrison,
*Dominion of the
Dead*, 57.

35 Harrison,
*Dominion of the
Dead*, 57.

fully into a different state of being, and liberates those left behind to fully resume Being-in-the-world.³¹

The real issue, Harrison writes, is to dispose of the corpse in such a way as to appease the aching desire of those left behind to die with their dead. In his words, “this desire ‘to die with our dead’ runs as deep in human nature as both love and the death drive.”³² In his explanation of mourning rituals and how they are perhaps the most direct ways that the living experiences the death of others, Harrison invokes Benedetto Croce’s claim that grief at the death of a loved one is akin to insanity.³³ These rituals of lamentation, Harrison suggests, do more for the aggrieved than just express; they also depersonalize the experience of grief.³⁴ He claims that the experience of watching a loved one die is so horrifying that only distancing oneself from the corpse can stave off the ensuing madness. To this end, many cultures, both ancient and modern, maintain highly ritualized mourning practices for the aggrieved to follow.³⁵ Such scripting allows for objectification of the corpse so the living may live on in this world with some sort of normalcy.

I propose that such depersonalization clearly indicates the intense personal identification that the living have with their deceased. If the living did not cleave to the dead so dearly, they would not have to undergo such processes of objectification. This opposing madness Harrison references is a result of a change in worldhood. That is to say, the disappearance of a loved one (through death) represents a huge change in the significance of the world in Heidegger’s definition of it. Thus, the death of one may eclipse the world of another. In this way, we might say that the death of a loved one literally is the end of the world. Thus, relating to the death of others is akin to death itself.

While it is one thing to acknowledge that the death of a beloved person provokes grief and calls out to be buried, it is another to consider the death of strangers or public enemies. Death in these circumstances is removed from the living in such a way that they do not experience the same rending loss. If they do not experience the same loss, it seems that the world—in its meaningful significance—is not altered. For example, imagine a stranger to all people, completely unknown and thus completely unloved; at this individual’s death, those who remain behind would not mourn the dead because they could not possibly ascribe

the proper meaning to this person's death. In the same way, it would be impossible to mourn the death of a public enemy since this occasions celebration instead. But, as described above, celebration can still be a ceremony that reveres the dead. The celebration, while not mourning or commemoration, is still a ceremony. In the same way, when the corpse of a complete stranger is stumbled upon, it still calls out to be buried; it is hardly conceivable to imagine one person stepping over the body of a stranger's without reacting. This reaction—even to a stranger—lays the groundwork for loss. And loss requires a ceremony, which itself is a reconstruction of the world. So even in the case of public enemies and strangers, I propose that Harrison's dictum "Dasein does not die until its remains are disposed of" still stands—and such a disposal requires a ceremony.³⁶

In *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, Tolstoy describes the changing relationship between Praskovya Fedorovna Golovina and her perishing husband. During the initial stages of Ilyich's death, she maintains great distance, which represents a state of being that Heidegger labels "falling," defined as a "constant *fleeing in the face of death*."³⁷ As Ilyich's dying progresses toward his final perishing, however, she changes her state of being from falling to authenticity, which indicates the possibility of relating to the death of others. Before the illness, Ilyich pours his life into his work such that it "totally absorb[s] him," while Golovina becomes "more irritable and demanding," then "more and more petulant and irascible."³⁸ As his illness becomes worse, so does their relationship. Indeed, from his perspective, she seems to blame him for his terminal illness and to concern herself with his ordeals only in regard to the way they make her life more unpleasant than necessary.³⁹ Instead of caring for him, she just resumes her social life. In this way, it seems to Ilyich that she flees from any chance of understanding or pitying him.⁴⁰

As Ilyich's death continues to progress, Golovina starts to take pity on Ilyich and attempts to understand his situation. At one point, for example, as Ilyich loses hope of recovery and heads out to meet with a friend, Golovina drops her usual bickering behavior and speaks to him in a "particularly sad and unusually kind tone of voice."⁴¹ This seemingly small change indicates the large and significant change within her as she watches her husband die. Even

36 Harrison, *Dominion of the Dead*, 143.

37 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 298.

38 Tolstoy, *Death of Ivan Ilyich*, 50-52.

39 Tolstoy, *Ivan Ilyich*, 70.

40 Tolstoy, *Ivan Ilyich*, 72.

41 Tolstoy, *Ivan Ilyich*, 74.

so, Golovina still cannot directly experience the same death as Ilyich. A few pages later, when Ilyich knocks over a table and falls in despair, his wife comes to help him. Though she righted the table for him, Ilyich reacts to the help ambiguously: “She won’t understand, he thought. And she really did not understand.”⁴² While Golovina cannot directly experience the death of another in the Heideggerian sense, her ideas of death do grow from the death of her husband in a Harrisonian sense.

42 Tolstoy, *Ivan Ilyich*, 77.

This relationship with the death of another comes fully into view during the last moments of Ilyich’s death when Ilyich’s son, in tears, kisses his father’s hand. Ilyich’s response is totally uncharacteristic for him;

43 Tolstoy, *Ivan Ilyich*, 112.

instead of acting annoyed or dismissive as he would have shortly before, he grieves for his son.⁴³ Until this point, Ilyich craved the pity, understanding, and even grief of others.⁴⁴ Then his wife comes up to him, tears falling, open-mouthed, and grieving. Though Tolstoy describes her appearance briefly, it is narratively weighty. Up till now, Golovina has maintained great composure and propriety, which is to say she would never go about with her mouth open or with untended tears on her face. In this moment though, her attention turns away from its normal object—herself—entirely toward her husband. He, in turn, “grieved for her.”⁴⁵ As a result, both Ilyich and Golovina manage to turn their care completely toward each other rather than themselves. Thus, the two change their everyday modes of being by relating to Ilyich’s death through the world of mourning, grieving, and tears. This, in turn, changes the world in all its significance.

44 Tolstoy, *Ivan Ilyich*, 72.

45 Tolstoy, *Ivan Ilyich*, 112.

As far as the text itself is concerned, this scene occurs on the penultimate page, leaving the reader with a distinct impression of a meaningful change. As for the characters, the book shows us a lifetime of their being and behavior within the context of Ilyich’s life, then, just as he dies, we see a slightly different mode of being. What we do not see is Ilyich’s wife and son *after* the death, which necessarily leads the reader to extrapolation. Upon first extrapolation, it initially seems that the characters would simply revert to their old patterns of being. One hitch remains, however. Previously, they relied upon Ilyich’s life as their focal point, but after Ilyich’s death, they would have no center around which to rotate. As such, there is no way for them *not* to continue changing in the manner shown on the last

page. Thus, Ilyich's death does spell a change in the being of those who remain behind: a fundamental change in the worldhood of the world.

While *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* is a fictional account of death, I propose that it accurately depicts the way that Dasein relates to the death of others. It weds Heidegger's idea of respectful solicitude toward the corpse with Harrison's espousal of the corpse as a relational thing. Even though Harrison and Heidegger both focus on the corpse itself while Tolstoy ends his novella before Ilyich transitions from human to corpse, I believe this discrepancy ends up holding little bearing on the final topic of this essay: experiencing and relating to the death of others. While Tolstoy's novella shows only a single and minute instance of relation to the corpse, this instance is structurally the same in other instances, even those concerning strangers and public enemies. For both Harrison and Heidegger, Dasein enters into a relationship with the dead primarily through restructuring the world in ways such as lamentation, burial, and other mourning ceremonies. On the Heideggerian side, ceremonies of care such as "funeral rites, interment, and the cult of graves" create worlds where "those who remain can still be with [the deceased]."⁴⁶ On the Harrisonian side, communal grieving ceremonies move emotion from the realm of chaotic grief to a "socially shared language of lament."⁴⁷ I propose that both authors suggest here a resc scaffolding of the world that enables the living to experience the death of others. Finally, this new scaffolding necessarily interpellates the lives of the living. From Heidegger's admission that humans can still relate to corpses on the human level of solicitude, to Harrison's claim that the dead undergird the status of individuals and society, to Tolstoy who shows the change in Golovina's life when she faces her husband's death, we see that the death of others changes the living. Finally, this change occurs via the experience of the death of others, which fundamentally changes the world of those who remain behind.

46 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 282.

47 Harrison, *Dominion of the Dead*, 58.