THE PHENOMENOLOGY OF DEATH

Andreea-Cristina Dobre, 1st year
Master of Arts in The History and Circulation of Philosophical Ideas

Pindle, Arthur. *The Phenomenology of Death*. Austin Macauley Publishers, 2023.

Recently added to the canon of thanatological writings in social sciences and philosophy, Arthur Pindle's book is situated at the intersection of phenomenology, psychology, and culture, and proposes an examination of the way we discuss about mortality as "a crucial issue on the level of the individual," and a consideration of death with the purpose of better understanding our collective consciousness. According to Pindle, both death as a phenomenon in human culture and humanity's attitude toward it influence our psychological responses to the everyday. With a rich introduction that touches on the meaning of death, the recognition of and responses to death throughout centuries, and five chapters that tackle Martin Heidegger's ontological interpretation of death—alongside a proposed critique in the second chapter—Arthur Schopenhauer's philosophy of death, and psychological aspects such as uncanniness, anxiety, and guilt, the book is a thoughtful and thorough meditation on how death is woven with the experience of being human. The author's emphasis on mortality as a psychological presence rather than an absence—a presence that shapes how we feel, think, plan, relate, and assign meaning—resonates not only with phenomenological thought at its intersection with psychopathology, but also with existential philosophy. By shining a light on the quiet ways in which death influences behavior, belief, and language, Pindle's work, in a reflective tone, also shifts the attention toward what we often attempt not to see, both when it comes to our own finitude but also in relation to the death of the other. Given its multidisciplinary approach, the book is not necessarily an in-depth philosophical analysis of the phenomenology of death—yet it nevertheless can widen the path toward one, for it is not lacking in complex and important ideas, but rather in their unpacking in the realm of philosophical discourse.

Strandberg, Gustav, Hugo Strandberg, eds. *Jan Patočka and the Phenomenology of Life After Death*. Springer, 2024.

Centered on Jan Patočka's posthumously published essay, "The Phenomenology of Afterlife," the philosopher's reframing of the question of the afterlife, this volume is not only a historical retrieval of one of Patočka's lesser-known texts, but also a collection that advances a phenomenological and post-phenomenological inquiry into death through its valuable contributions that deliver a multifaceted, sustained meditation on topics such as: mortality, collective memory, philosophical anthropology, non-reciprocal love, human relationality, and the nature of life. The contributions of Jan Frei and Nicolas de Warren provide a further understanding of Jan Patočka's essay within broader currents in phenomenology; others, such as those of Erin Plunkett and Antony Fredriksson, bring to bear literary and existentialist frameworks, drawing on Søren Kierkegaard and Clarice Lispector, while the remaining essays of the anthology investigate, among others, themes of forgiveness, posthumous intention, or historical memory. Particularly notable is the way that the volume takes Patočka's central insight—the presence and persistence of the dead in the ethical life of the living—and tracks it through political, theological, and aesthetic terrains. *Jan Patočka and the Phenomenology of Life After Death* is a conscientious and moving contribution to contemporary continental thought, one that reveals how a phenomenology of death need not be preoccupied with what lies beyond, but rather with how we continue to live—ethically, historically, and relationally—with those who are no longer here. One could also venture to say that the volume succeeds in bringing forth an investigative path for the question at the heart of Patočka's essay: "How does the other live in us?"

Leman-Stefanovic, Ingrid. *The Event of Death: a Phenomenological Enquiry*. Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1987.

The book concerns itself with the topic of death not as it relates to grand metaphysical schemes but, quoting the author, to the "concrete, ontic realities of the phenomenon of death, as it appears to human consciousness," and addresses both an audience familiar with the phenomenological thought of Martin Heidegger, but also those who have never approached the Heideggerian ontology. As a foundational stratum for the rest of the volume, the first part deals exclusively with the phenomenon of death as encountered in Heidegger's philosophy, with an emphasis on concepts such as individuation, transcendence, and temporality, while the second and third parts discuss

death as an ontic event and its ontic/ontological implications. Also, the third part in lieu of a conclusion, raises the question of whether phenomenology remains too metaphysical, in the context of Heidegger's attempt of going beyond metaphysics. At the heart of the author's investigation lies the proposal that we must return to seeing that ontic events are what make our lives "unique and meaningful," more so in the context of a phenomenological inquiry into death. The chapters of the book branch into domains such as poetry, literature, language, history, or medicine, and proposes a myriad of topics, from time and immortality to terminal illness, the death of the other, or the roots of belonging-together. "The phenomenon of death defines the finite, human condition in all the manifold structures of its existence," writes the author as defending argument for the fact that death is indeed present and meaningful for us, speaking here in the context of the Epicurean approach to death, in relation to death as an event that is not "explicitly acknowledged in a determinate, ontic event." Perhaps one of the most important points that the volume makes, in a Heideggerian vein, is that a phenomenology of death does not signify a preoccupation with what it is like to be dead, but rather one intrinsically connected with the phenomenology of life, reminding here also of the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy and his stance on the impossibility of separating death from life.

Rojcewicz, Richard. *Heidegger, Plato, Philosophy, Death: An Atmosphere of Mortality*. Lexington Books, 2021.

Connecting Heidegger's thought on death to the philosophy of Plato—to philosophy as the practice of dying—Rojcewicz's perspective brings forth a preoccupation not with death itself, but rather with the meaning of what it is to live understandingly toward death. An interesting feature of this volume, given the year of its publication, is the fact that is tackles the Covid-19 pandemic, from a Heideggerian perspective no less, thus discussing topics such as the perspective toward Dasein from an ontological point of view tainted with a biological one, collective mortality, the relation sense of life and fundamental aspects of caring, or *factical life* as something that always seeks to distance itself. Other topics addressed in the book include music, signs, anxiety, and conscience, all of them, including the aforementioned pandemic, in a dialogue with mortality. The Platonic-Heideggerian *intimation* of mortality and death is expressed by the author not solely through philosophy, but also, for instance, through the poetry of William Wordsworth and John Keats, or the music of the Conradin Kreutzer. To a possible argument that the book might be too abstract,

the author answers that "philosophical results make sense only when seen as actually worked out" in the course of an investigation. The argument can also serve as an accurate description of the method employed by Rojcewicz in the course of laying down his perspective on the bond between philosophy and death, making it thus important to familiarize oneself with the work as a whole, rather than attempt a fragmentary reading.

Harrison, Robert Pogue. *The Dominion of the Dead*. University of Chicago Press, 2010.

While not a philosophical work in the strictest of senses, belonging more to the domain of historical studies, *The Dominion of the Dead* is one of the most comprehensive contemporary studies on death, especially for audiences that approach it with a philosophical background, more so for those interested in the phenomenology of death. Proposing an investigation into how the living maintain their relation with the dead, and devoting particular attention to the subject of burial, the volume speaks with many voices: historical, archeological, philosophical, and, last but not least, a voice for and of those who have experienced loss and have suffered through grief. It is perhaps this very aspect, achieved through readings of thinkers such as Heidegger, Nietzsche, Dante, or Rilke, that makes Harrison's work one worthy of phenomenological investigation—its approach to the human experience of death. Given the author's preoccupation with contextualization and the authority of predecessors, both in ancient and modern societies, a parallel can be drawn with the work of philosopher Pierre Hadot, who also places a significant importance on the context of things and ideas discussed, and on how their existence in other times have shaped the times we live in today. Returning to *The Dominion of the Dead*, it is also worth noting that this foundational authority of the predecessor is what Harrisson considers to differentiate humanity from nonhuman species, who, according to him, "obey only the law of vitality." This is also necessary to understanding the reason why the dead have an afterlife in so many cultures, states the author in his concluding remarks, furthering that it comes upon the dead to "provide counsel when the debilitating darkness falls," for the nocturnal vision that the dead possess is something the living can never acquire.

Cole, Susan Letzler. *The Absent One: Mourning Ritual, Tragedy, and the Performance of Ambivalence*. Penn State Univ Press, 1991.

Connecting Aeschylus's *The Persians*, Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Racine's *Phedre*, Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Ionesco's *Exit the King*, and Chaikin's *Trespassing* in order to investigate similarities between tragedy and mourning rituals, Susan L. Cole's study is an excellent resource for thanatological studies, more so for phenomenological thought, as it provides significant insight into how the human experience of mourning is present in one of the oldest and most impactful arts." Tragedy is the performance of ambivalence which ghosts emblematize," writes Cole, shining a particularly bright light on the paradox of what at the same time scares us and is the object of one of our most ardent desires: life after death. Philosophy itself has gathered many insights from the theater world and even from the very works that the author is analyzing in this study, so it is not surprising that putting them together and connecting them to something so deeply-embedded in the history of humanity, like the mourning ritual, can prove to be a more-than-adequate resource for all philosophically-minded audiences. The exploration of *ghosts and graves*, as the author herself puts it, brings forth the connection, the kinship, rather, between tragedy and funeral rituals, through a series of interrelated motifs traced through the history of both tragedy as art and humanity. A reader of *The Absent One* with collect insights on how humanity has mirrored the experience of mourning in art for centuries, on what has been lacking and what aspects we emphasize, making the "artistic transformation of the impulse to mourn" an excellent philosophical source for phenomenological comprehension of a significant part of the experience of death.

Heinämaa, Sara. "The Many Senses of Death: Phenomenological Insights into Human Mortality." ***COLLeGIUM: Studies Across Disciplines in the Humanities and Social Sciences*****, 19 (2015) Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies. 100–117.**

Rooted in the ability of classical phenomenology to provide conceptual tools for the articulation of the many senses of death, the article branches into a philosophical perspective on human mortality by categorizing death as follows: death as endpoint, death as event, death as interruption, death as threat, and proposes a return to Edmund Husserl's philosophy as starting point for the study of human death. Challenging the view that Husserl's thought disregards the embodiment and fundamental structures, the author expands the analysis on the premise that Husserl's reflections "involve insights that complement and enrich the Heideggerian discourse of being-towards-death." Thus, through Husserlian lenses, the article discusses aspects such as the phenomenology of

embodiment and its relation to finitude, personhood, generativity, or the impossibility of experiencing one's own death, in dialogue with Epicurean wisdom. The many *senses of death* are also dissected from a cultural perspective, the author reminding us here that Husserl argues that "in order to understand the special character of cultural objectivity, we must distinguish between […] subjects who are conscious of themselves as mortal beings and subjects who lack consciousness of themselves as mortals." The article concludes with an often-encountered thought in modern philosophy, that is: to make sense of death is not to make sense of something that is the opposite of life, but of something that generates and constructs the world, and it can serve as an excellent starting point for a more comprehensive work on a phenomenology of death from a Husserlian perspective rather than a Heideggerian one.

Traylor, S. "Living with the Dying, Being-With the Dead." ***Stance: An International Undergraduate Philosophy Journal*****, *11*(1) (2018): 80–91. https://doi.org/10.33043/S.11.1.80-91**

Sam Traylor's article proposes a meticulous engagement with the phenomenology of death, as it brings together philosophical, historical, and literary works, such as those of Martin Heidegger, Robert Pogue Harrison, and Leo Tolstoy, in order to ascertain how the death of others impacts the living, more so, the structure of the lived experience. Seen as an *event* that alters the world of the living in profound and long-lasting ways, the death of another is analyzed through something that the author states that is lacking in Heidegger's philosophy of death: a focus on the confrontation with the mortality of others rather than with one's own mortality. This absence is filled by Traylor with Robert Pogue Harrison's *The Dominion of the Dead*, especially for the study's essential role in making sense of how the dead carry on alongside the living rather than fading into nonexistence. Expanding the horizons of the Heideggerian philosophy rather than abandoning it, the author manages to portray death not only as that impossible event that be our demise but that we will nevertheless never experience in the sense that we define experience, but as a rupture in communities, in the shared life of self and another. This rupture not only brings about burial and mourning rituals, but is also responsible for a significant postmortem reorganization of space, an interruption in routine, but also for bringing into light the fragility of what we experience as everyday existence. The interlacing of Heidegger and Harrison with Tolstoy's novella, *The Death*

of Ivan Ilyich enhances the two and offers a poignant depiction of lived experience through the lens of literature. Situated between philosophical theory, literary narrative, and historical investigation, the article nevertheless creates its own framework—albeit with the use of the aforementioned three—a framework that contributes to a better phenomenological understanding of death as a world-disrupting phenomenon.

Aktaş, Ahmet. "Thrown into the World, Attached to Love: On the Forms of World-Sharing and Mourning in Heidegger." *Human Studies* 47, no. 3 (December 29, 2023): 479–99. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-023-09701-6.

Situated within Heidegger's philosophical framework, "Thrown into the World, Attached to Love" strives to explore the experiences that lay at the heart of authentic existence by drawing attention to the fact that, according to the author, Heidegger's thought and the exegesis around it do not engage with the concept of *mourning* and the "relationships in which one mourns after a close other." The author thus proposes to construct a phenomenology of loss with mourning as its central experience, mourning as something that is singular and transformative in the life of the living. The loss of a loved one, states the author, is not merely an emotional inconvenience, but rather a significant experience in one's confrontation with death, even a philosophical turning point, as it gives birth to a moment of existential reckoning that would not otherwise exist in the life of a human being. This moment of reckoning is also a moment that brings forth a more comprehensive attitude toward community and life alongside another. Closely rooted in Heidegger's corpus but filling in missing gaps both in Heidegger's thought and in the exegesis surrounding it, the article makes for an excellent example of how one can construct upon the preexisting fragments of philosophy in order to create a phenomenology of loss and mourning as a vital force not only for authenticity, as is the author's thesis, but also for a resoluteness that goes beyond the self, beyond the orientation toward one's own death, and expands into a proper phenomenology that accounts for all the moments and instances and events that death bring forth in human life and lived experience—one's own death and the death of another, for "one is called for a work of mourning, to work through a loss" in both cases. Therefore, states the author, the way to an authentic existence "can be characterized as a labor of mourning."

Patočka, Jan. "The Phenomenology of Afterlife." Translated by Ondřej Beran. In *Jan Patočka and the Phenomenology of Life After Death*, edited by Gustav Strandberg and Hugo Strandberg, 13–24. Springer, 2024.

Published posthumously, and for the first time in an English translation, Jan Patočka's essay on the phenomenology of the afterlife shits the temporality of Heidegger's being-toward-death as the heart of authenticity beyond the individual and into the realm of our shared history. The essay can also be read as a meditation on the conditions and circumstances of existence that stretch past that which we know as the boundaries of life, not in a theological understanding, but rather in phenomenological rigor, for the Czech philosopher approaches the afterlife as a structure with phenomenological and existential implications, nothing akin to the theological portrayal of the soul's life after the death of the body. It is also important to state that, for Patočka, the afterlife is not a continuation of consciousness, but more like a *horizon* that makes visible and perceptible the meaning of life. "How remarkable," Patočka notices, "that nobody has asked with philosophical thoroughness: how does the other live in us? Who is this surviving other? What is his mode of being? To what extent is he identical to the one who lived, and how is this identity modified?" Questions to which he proceeds to provide answers outside of theological or naturalistic frameworks, but from the perspective of human experience. It is understandable then that the answer to "How does the other live in us?" is: we carry the other in ourselves, "as long as we ourselves live." In Patočka's thought, then, the afterlife becomes something like an existence destabilized by its own groundlessness, yet an existence that goes on living nevertheless, as long as the living carry it. Therefore, death is responsible for revealing the temporality of being as something akin to an existential urgency rather than a chronological progression, with the afterlife being not a destination, but a disclosure of life that opens a space of thought for the very question of meaning.

de Warren, Nicolas. "The Intimacy of Disappearance." In *Jan Patočka and the Phenomenology of Life After Death*, edited by Gustav Strandberg and Hugo Strandberg, 53–68. Springer, 2024.

"The Intimacy of Disappearance" is a persuasive contribution to the phenomenological anthology *Jan Patočka and the Phenomenology of Life After Death*, one that provides a multi-layered

exploration of death, absence, and the contours of finitude. Both an interpretation to Patočka's essay on the afterlife and an original essay on its own, the text engages with the concept of disappearance as it relates to memory, human existence, and the afterlife, as it situates within the lived structures of temporality. Nicolas de Warren presents and extends on the concept of *disappearance* as a *horizon of responsibility* that reshapes the landscape of the living. Expanding Patočka's thought into new directions, the author brings forth his own philosophical queries related to finitude, death, and the afterlife, queries that resonate with a broader understanding of existential and ethical concerns as they relate to aspects such as the limits of representation, mourning, and memory, both individual and collective. "To involve oneself in the lives of others, as opposed to merely living along with others, is to partake in the events and experiences that shape who we are, for ourselves as well as for each other," writes de Warren, shaping that aforementioned horizon of responsibility, while also drafting the ways in which memory and remembering work and shape us. In a phenomenological understanding of the afterlife and how the other lives in us, which remains Patočka's central question, and according to de Warren, the dead continue to inhabit the world of the living, and they are not ghostly presences, they are not spirits to be feared or whose company is sought-after—but rather, the dead are absences that demand to be recognized, cared for, and ethically reflected upon, reflections that bring with them a better understanding of how we live and what of what it means to live ethically in the wake of the disappearance of another.

Dodd, James. "Death and Time in Husserl's C-Manuscripts." In *On Time - New Contributions to the Husserlian Phenomenology of Time*, edited by Dieter Lohmar and Ichiro Yamaguchi, 51–70. Springer, 2010.

Providing an examination of temporality at the intersection with death in the later phenomenological writings of Edmund Husserl, James Dodd's essay both elucidates and gestures toward the limitations of Husserl's position. As exegesis, the essay provides a starting point for further thought, while on its own, it becomes a reflection on time, finitude, and mortality as an existential horizon, rooted indeed in Husserlian thought, from which Dodd's extracts the central thesis of death for Husserl. That is, death not as a mere object of experience, but as a borderline condition for experience and the possibility of experience. What bears mentioning is that Dodd's does not position Husserl in opposition to Heidegger, but as a precursor of themes and ideas that would later be further developed by the latter. Without drawing definitive conclusions and stating

narrowing readings, Dodds makes of Husserl's reflections something to be investigated furthermore, although the essay as a whole concerns itself more with the structural implications of death rather than with a motivation for the phenomenological turn toward finitude, perhaps a sign that Dodd's thought is somewhat tethered to that of Husserl even at times when it gestures toward its limitations. Regardless, the question at heart, the question of our understanding of death and what it can reveal about temporality and the nature of time, remains properly addressed, from the direction of what can life tells us about time, an and approach that not only reestablishes the life-death bond, but also returns the audience toward Husserl and to how the question of death for the philosopher is strongly related to that temporality.

Hollanek, Tomasz, and Katarzyna Nowaczyk-Basińska. "Griefbots, Deadbots, Postmortem Avatars: On Responsible Applications of Generative AI in the Digital Afterlife Industry." ***Philosophy & Technology*** **37, 63, no. 2 (May 9, 2024). https://doi.org/10.1007/s13347-024-00744-w.**

The use of generative technologies to simulate the dead is perhaps amidst the most ethically-fraught applications of artificial intelligence, one that is starting to be properly addressed by AI ethicists and discussed from a multidisciplinary point of view, including a philosophical one. The emergence of what the authors call "the digital afterlife industry," that is, the industry in which AI chatbots and avatars simulate the dead based on their digital traces, has brought to light an ethical terrain that was so far nonexistent in grief studies. What the article proposes, first and foremost, while drawing from philosophical thought, media studies, and artificial intelligence codes of ethics, is a framework for responsible technological development of such uses, but the authors also raise ontological and ethical questions that spring forth from the digital afterlife industry. For instance, the implications that the digital afterlife industry and the use of *griefbots* can have for the phenomenology of mourning—a still in-development subdivision of phenomenology—implications that can render impossible further progresses, as the experience and processing of grief is taken over by the intervention of AI-powered chatbots that blur the boundaries between life and death in manners that can no longer be discussed as part of a *natural process of grieving*. Bringing together philosophical theory and existing case studies, the article calls for ethical and innovative measures that are specifically-tailored to this industry rather than the implementation of what might already be in use in terms of artificial intelligence. While raising issues of consent

on account of the deceased, the authors also highlight the ambivalence and contingency that come with the implementation of these tools, without minimizing the emotional struggles and needs of the bereaved, situating at the heart of the article the issue of accountability.

Keeping, Joseph. "The Time Is Out of Joint: A Hermeneutic Phenomenology of Grief." ***Symposium*** **18, no. 2 (2014): 233–55. https://doi.org/10.5840/symposium201418226.**

Drawing from hermeneutic phenomenology, Joseph Keeping's paper, with the assistance of philosophers such as Heidegger or Gadamer, engages with the concept of grief beyond the emotional or psychological state, as something akin to a foundational breach, a rupture rather, a temporal disruption, in lived experience. Joseph Keeping too notices what a few other contemporary thinkers have noticed: the fact that grief is not as explored as it should be when it comes to philosophical theory, remaining rather in the domain of psychological studies even in today's times. The author provides an explanation for this, from the very beginning of the paper, stating that while those who have not experienced grief might think themselves unqualified to tackle to topic, those who have are either "reluctant to recall painful memories," or consider that placing grief under a theoretical microscope might be disrespectful to both those who mourn and to those who are mourned. Thus, it can be said that it is this quite essential role and the meaning that grief plays in our lives giving it the reputation of unapproachable topic in the world of theoretical discourse. For the author, grief is a lived experience in which time itself is *out of joint*, alluding to Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, and also to "the bodily comportment of sadness" on which J. Keeping has written about in another paper. With a methodology that is both phenomenological and interpretive, and from under the light of a hermeneutic breakdown, the paper provides a close reading of the structures of meaning and lived experience that are revealed by grief, concluding that grieving is "neither weakness nor an evil, but a healthy response to loss." The author likewise states in the concluding remarks that the discussion proposed by the paper is not to be taken as definite, but rather as something conducive of further investigation.

Johnstone, Henry W. "Toward a Phenomenology of Death." ***Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*** **35, no. 3 (1975): 396–97. https://doi.org/10.2307/2106346.**

Written at a time when the phenomenology of death was not necessarily a broadly-discussed topic in philosophy, Henry W. Johnstone's paper is—for the reader of today's philosophy—first and foremost an excellent resource for seeing how the phenomenology of death has developed over the years and how philosophy has come to include grief studies within its sub-disciplines. Aiming to clarify how death should be approached from a conceptual perspective, within a philosophical discourse, the author proposes a series of observations meant to position death as a unique phenomenon in relation to lived experience and the modes of understanding. And while it does not develop a systematic phenomenological method, nor does it present a comprehensive position on death, it does precisely what the title and the author state: it positions the reader towards a phenomenology of death, providing the much-needed tools for further development. Johnstone states that to call death a phenomenon like any others will be an error, on account of the fact that one's own death is in fact not a phenomenon that we get to experience like all others, echoing here perhaps the Epicurean dictum that says death is nothing to us. The paradox that rises positions death as a phenomenon that holds significant importance in our lives, while also being a phenomenon that is not lived as we understand living, therefore remaining of impersonal significance, if by *impersonal* we understand something that we did not experience ourselves. The coming exegesis will delve deeper into what death as a phenomenon of lived experience means for human life, developing theories that today perhaps brings us closer to an understanding of the lived-but-not-experienced phenomenon, that is, the phenomenon we live through, into nonexistence, thus no longer being here to tell its story. The author also states that death lacks the intentional content that phenomenology is so concerned with, that death is not an object of intuition or an act that is constitutive of meaning, this, of course, in regards to our own death, and not the death of another. Raising fundamental questions, Johnstone's paper is a good resource and researching tool for anyone interested in the development of the phenomenology of death throughout the years.