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Can Death be Taught? Finding Meaning, Mortality, and Culture

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The question 'Can death be taught?' is a request for evidence on the possibility of teaching death from a Heideggerian perspective. The paper indicates that it appears unlikely to achieve the aim of death education, overcoming the fear of death, if it could not include one's own death, the utmost fear.

In Heidegger's philosophy, it appears possible for human beings to consider their own death since death is no more than being-toward-death: the human being lives in a condition in which 'I am dying' from the birth. Besides, the care-structure of Dasein involves its being-ahead-of-itself, and the anticipating of death opens the possibility of being authentic. Therefore, death education can take up this issue, one's own death as the most fear.

What remains to be questioned is, however, the difference in terms of fear and anxiety between what Heidegger tries to show and what death education tries to encourage pupils to overcome. In this respect we must, at first, differentiate being-toward-death from the concept of wellbeing. In Heidegger's analysis the meaning of death appears in human mortality and temporality as existential characteristics of Dasein.

It is a common saying in thanatology (the study of death and dying) that 'wellbeing is well-dying'. Although this phrase may seem to be relevant mostly to people who are old and nearing death, the basic concept of wellbeing here regards dying as part of living. In this respect death education in general also has dragged death into educational practice as a subject of wellbeing. The foundation of the idea is that we can come to see our lives as more meaningful through reflecting on death.

What I am curious about regarding death education at this point is whether it is possible to teach death in the same way that one teaches other subjects and topics. When we teach math, for instance, it is assumed that students can actually understand, or have the ability to acquire an understanding of, concepts of number, space, and so on, and this assumption is supported by philosophy and psychology, etc. In contrast, there is little reason to believe that by studying death as a subject children can actually come to *understand* it or *overcome the fear of death*, which death education supposedly aims for.

Besides, what we teach in death education is those social and cultural aspects that are reflected in others' deaths, rather than death itself, especially one's own death. And yet it seems understandable that it must be others' deaths that are the focus of attention since no one can experience their own death. Therefore, it appears reasonable to say that what we teach in death education is actually not death itself.

The question that is my starting point, 'Can death be taught?', is a request to see if there is any understanding in philosophy to support the possibility of *teaching death*

in such a way as to address the meaning of one's own death. In doing so, I want to discover ways in education in which the meaning of death is implied from a Heideggerian perspective.

HOW IS DEATH TAUGHT IN DEATH EDUCATION?

On the way to finding the meaning of death, it is necessary here to consider *how* death is taught in death education, where the assumption is made that death is something meaningful to human beings. In this respect I would like to take issue with the implications of such death education for our relation to death.

In my view death education should emphasize that death must be accepted openly, without hesitation or fear, so that reflecting on death enriches our lives and makes them more meaningful. In other words, what is found in death education is the desire to live happily (or, we may say, for 'wellbeing') while supposedly facing up to tragedy and psychological trauma, and all the shadow images of these.

The curious thing about this, however, is what happens in practice. Let's suppose that an influential teacher declares that death is a part of living so that we must not be afraid of it but face bravely. Apart from the fact that there is something suspect about 'accepting' death as a part of the living of a *happy life*, it hardly seems convincing that death is something that we can coolly and confidently face up to: rather death, when it comes to me or my family or friends, when it comes into our concrete lives, comes as something dreadful. What we 'face up to' in death education then is a general *image* of death, not the dread that truly breaks apart our concrete lives.

Besides, the assumption is made in death education that if we take death as a part of living, we can overcome our *fear* of it (Deeken, 1996). Then a series of questions is followed such as: what comes after 'overcoming' the fear? Or, in what sense can this be seen in terms of happiness? Setting aside all these questions for a while, the urgent question would be: what kind of fear is at issue in death education? There can be no fear greater than of one's own death, which eradicates everything and brings all to nothing. In death education, a logic is constructed to the effect that overcoming the fear of death leaves our lives in a state of happiness, as a dimension of our wellbeing. But if this is right, the challenge must be taken up of overcoming my utmost fear, fear of *my* death. At this point, let us look at death education curricula to see whether they deal with one's own death.

There are several ways in which death is taught. According to the research of Gibson, Robert and Buttery (1982, p. 14), death education is related to an interpretation of death that teaches 1) that there are diverse aspects of death and dying, 2) that we are consumers of medical and funeral services, 3) that we can improve our living quality through careful consideration of death, 4) that we can manage our lives well in relation to the deaths of others as well as to our own death, and 5) that we need to make up our minds about death in social and ethical terms. In short, death education supposedly accomplishes its purpose by teaching social and ethical values, and attitudes and understandings appropriate to death, and the fear of death can be overcome by sharing images of death.

Such an approach is particularly valuable in an era that has forgotten death. In the words of Philippe Ariès, there is now, in contrast to the past, a tendency to hide death in darkness, away from our cheerful society (Ariès, 1998). Furthermore, such an approach to death in teaching would put the emphasis on differences between

cultures, between East and West in a broad sense. Through this approach, it is likely to be said that the pupil will come to understand what is to be learned in terms of the need to attain knowledge of cultural contexts—which seems, however, to leave one's own death behind, to leave this utmost fear out of the picture.

WHOSE DEATH IN TEACHING?

It seems appropriate to ask here whose death is the subject of death education. If we can agree that what death education typically addresses are matters of social and cultural context, then it can also be said that what students meet in death education is death as events or as objects of experience, happening outside of themselves, and with various forms of cultural symbolisation. Therefore, the opinions that children come to form about death will depend on this understanding of cultural practice, which does not even come close to their own concrete death.

Even in the case of therapeutic approaches or grief counselling, which constitutes a large part of death education, the therapy mainly focuses on overcoming grief by sharing feelings with others. Although children who are bereaved may make up their own minds about death, this will still be related to the deaths of others and not to their own death. Therefore, the fear of death remains since one's own death is not in question when death is understood primarily in terms of a shared or generalized anxiety.

However, this does not mean that one cannot understand other's deaths at all. The problem is that the attitude to another's death may be something impersonal (Kneller, 1958, p. 109). This impersonal attitude can exist alongside the illusion that one can live forever, since the dead person is not oneself. Asking whose death is in question in current educational practice reveals the fact that it is the other's death that is taken as the means to overcome the fear of death.

It might be said that considering another's death may allow us to think of our own death, perhaps as a result of the experience of the grief. Indeed, it might be claimed, death education practice is intended to lead us to a point where we can face up to the fact that we all die, and this can engender an authentic understanding of death and enable us to overcome our fear. However, it can also fail to do this since the image of death so often distorts the way that death must really come to us. As Paul Smeyers, Richard Smith and Paul Standish put this:

Here in particular there seems to be the possibility of the imaginative, vicarious confrontation with the experience of death and the topic of death is something to which young people can readily to draw. Authenticity of aesthetic experience seems to be of critical important in arts education, but the possibilities of fantasy and distortion that arise in relation to death are also evident (Smeyers, Smith & Standish, 2007, p. 92).

In this respect death education needs to avoid creating a kind of fashionable mystique of death, which itself will stand in the way of young people considering better the nature of their mortality. At the same time, it remains to be proved that it is possible to convert the culture of death, a consideration of the deaths of others, into an

understanding of one's own death. However, here once again the curious problem arises of how to turn from these images of death towards the death that is our own.

At this point, George Kneller, writing with extensive reference to the existentialists of the middle of 20th century, argues that instead of masking the 'awfulness of death', we should learn to anticipate it and actually 'run forward (*vorlaufen*)¹ to meet it' (Kneller, 1958, p. 109-110)—echoing Heidegger's philosophy, which is taken as one source of existentialism. Kneller's suggestion might be adopted as a maxim: children should face up to their own death in order that they overcome the fear of death and can live well. In the light of Kneller's analysis, there are two questions that follow: one is that whether one can *in practice* face up to one's own death, and the other is what *meeting death* means. The former question raises the suspicion that Kneller's suggestion, although it seems to be radical, in fact remains within the realm of a kind of consolation. The latter purports to catch the spirit of 'run forward' and *anticipation*, which is to be derived from death itself. In my view these questions are not far from each other, and rather that answering the latter along, one can also answer the two questions simultaneously by analysing what the former implies.

THE POSSIBILITY OF UNDERSTANDING MY DEATH

To overcome the utmost fear, which comes from one's own death, and to avoid accepting distorting images of death, we must come to the point where *we learn to anticipate it and run forward to meet it*. As Kneller emphasises, this idea comes from Heidegger's philosophy: *anticipation* and *running forward* are Heidegger's own terms for describing the character of human being or, as he prefers to put this, *Dasein*.² Heidegger understands *Dasein* as a being-toward-death, which implies that it is a condition of human being that *I am in dying*:

If such pointed formulations mean anything at all (the basic certainty of *Dasein* itself), then the appropriate statement pertaining to *Dasein* in its being would have to be *sum moribundus*[I am in dying], *moribundus* not as someone gravely ill or wounded, but insofar as I am, I am *moribundus*. The *moribundus* first gives the *sum* its sense (Heidegger, 1985, p. 317, the square bracketed parenthesis is mine).

However, death does not flow up from those events that are the deaths of others. The point is rather that *Dasein* is already constructed by care (*Sorge*),³ in which the human being, in its ontologico-existential structure, is explained by being-ahead-of-itself as possibility: this allows *Dasein* to consider its own death as possibility. In the structure of human being, anticipation (*Vorlaufen*) is possible as a form of being ahead-of-itself. Therefore, it is not enough to say that the human being can *think of death*.

Furthermore, it is the ontological understanding of death, the basis of *Dasein*'s existence, that allows *Dasein* its freedom. In Heidegger's ontology, what one's own death encloses is nothingness (*das Nichts*), which is an extremity of *Dasein*'s anxiety. Confronting nothingness, *Dasein* realises its 'thrown' situation in the world, which is also a dimension of care. In this thrownness, *Dasein* is encouraged to choose and decide to be itself in the name of freedom, apart from what 'they' want to force to be.

This also reveals that *Dasein* is a being that must throw itself into a world in which it is already thrown. In anticipation (*Vorlaufen*) the possibility opens up for *Dasein* of a form of authenticity. Only if *Dasein* anticipates its own death can it *be* in freedom, the way of authenticity. Heidegger describes the relation between freedom and anticipation as follows:

Anticipation reveals to *Dasein* its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concerned solicitude, but of being itself, rather, in an impassioned freedom towards death—a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the ‘they’, and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious (Heidegger, 1961, p. 311).

Here we find a clue to the meaning of *meeting death*. This is that we are, in our thrown structure, beings in dying but with the possibility of being free from the ‘they’ through the anticipation of our own death. This is a matter less of the emotional impact of death and more to do with the character of human being that is constructed as a result of mortality. What Heidegger’s philosophy implies in this analysis of death is that *Dasein* has the possibility of taking its death as an issue to be free from its existence. The idea of meeting death must be understood in terms of the ontological character of *Dasein*, which is care. This does not imply that we should insist on children somehow meeting death but that we realise that they are already in dying and that this holds the possibility of understanding their existential condition. Therefore, the fact that the human being is in dying proves that death itself can be taught.

What should be emphasised here, however, is that being-toward-death does not suggest some kind of technical approach in education. There have been many attempts to apply Heidegger’s philosophy in education but these have run into problems—because of unclarity over Heidegger’s philosophy and because of its questionable relation to educational, moral or social issues.⁴ While being aware of the limitations of his thought in relation to education, I want to explore how far his philosophy explains or enriches educational thinking by pursuing the question: *what is the meaning of death in Heidegger’s ontology in relation to the concept of wellbeing in death education?*

WELLBEING AS BEING-TOWARD-DEATH

The question of the meaning of death in Heidegger’s ontology can be approached in the contexts of his books, *Being and Time* and *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, the latter of which can in certain respects be seen as the second part of the former. Both books show his intentions in his ontological analysis of death, specifically his linking of mortality and temporality. In the light of this the question can be raised of whether the concept of wellbeing can in the end relate to death.

On the one hand, what is emphasised in the phrase, *Dasein is in dying*, is the finitude of perception. On the other hand, human being is not finite in terms of ontological understanding of Being, which means that the human being can imagine or understand Being in a way that goes beyond human perception. As simply noticeable from the title, *Being and Time*, the main focus of this book is to find the

relation of time in the question of Being. Heidegger expects to relate the following series—of the understanding of Being, the transcendence of man, the formative comportment toward beings, and the historical happening in world history of man—to truth and untruth, which all are based on an understanding of Being as well as oriented in respect to time (Heidegger, 1991, p. 199). In this process he arrives at his affirmation of the temporality of *Dasein*, which being-toward-death supports.

Heidegger suggests that time is always the basis of subjectivity, which is the opposite to the conventional view on temporality, which takes it to be an object of experience (Heidegger, 1991, p. 198). *Dasein* itself is constituted out of present, future, and past, and death is constitutive of the futurity of *Dasein*: as soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die (Heidegger, 1961, p. 289). This is also found in his words in the Davos debate with Ernst Cassirer in 1929. Heidegger states the need:

To bring out the temporality of *Dasein* with reference to the possibility of the understanding of Being. And it is with respect to this that all problems are oriented. In one direction, the analysis of death has the function of bringing out the radical futurity of *Dasein*, but not of producing an altogether final and metaphysical thesis concerning the essence of death (Heidegger, 1991, p. 199).

When we look at death as mortality and temporality in Heidegger's analysis, the concept of being-toward-death does not guarantee wellbeing in the sense assumed in contemporary practices of death education: it offers no assurance that we shall live happily. Rather, it is the contingency of beings that Heidegger tries to demonstrate. It seems then that the being-toward-death is not compatible with wellbeing because of the contingency of *Dasein* itself. If we consider the happiness that is implied in wellbeing in terms of an older sense of 'happy', in terms, that is, of happenstance, then perhaps the idea that death education might contribute to wellbeing can be retrieved. Happenstance refers to the nature of chance, including the chance that things may work out well, and this implies the contingency of what happens to happen, and an openness to the possibility of new possibilities, (Lear, 2000, p. 129; Smeyers, Smith & Standish, 2007, p. 82). This is compatible with the manifold structure of *Dasein* as contingency.

CAN DEATH BE TAUGHT?

My starting question has become a question of the possibility of teaching death from a Heideggerian perspective. What we have seen is that the familiar aim of death education—overcoming the fear of death so that we can live happily—is likely to turn away from one's own death, the utmost fear. Rather what death education teaches is a culture of death embedded in a series of opinions and information.

We saw also how Kneller insists on the need to face up to one's own death, as implied by Heidegger's philosophy, but it was unclear how the meaning of *meeting death* was to be interpreted in educational practice. In Heidegger, it appeared possible for human beings to consider their own death since, as human, 'I am in dying' from birth. Besides, the care-structure (*Sorge*) of *Dasein* was seen in terms of *Dasein's*

being-ahead-of-itself, which means that the anticipation (*Vorlaufen*) of death gives some authenticity to the notion of *meeting death*. Therefore, death education is possible if one can take up the issue of one's own death as the greatest fear to overcome. Furthermore, death appears in Heidegger's analysis of human mortality and temporality as existential characteristics of beings that allow the possibility of finding the meaning of Being. This, I have tried to show, may be compatible with wellbeing insofar as this is understood in terms of contingency.

The relation of Heidegger's philosophy to death education appears limited except outside of the claim that death can be taught in the light of its ontological importance. In this paper I have tried to explore the possibility of teaching death, and this has led me towards the possibility of teaching happiness in terms of contingency. What Heidegger's philosophy shows is not how this might be taught but rather its possibility. Although Heidegger gives few direct answers for educational practice, he raises questions regarding more knowledge and truth, and the relationship between the student and the teacher, all of which address us to the need for rethinking what we do. In this respect Heidegger's philosophy is not the end of a question, but a starting point for education that no one has ever reached before.

NOTES

- 1 Kneller takes 'vorlaufen', Heidegger's term, as to account one's own death in real, not to avoid. Therefore, it is far from encouraging committing a suicide, etc.
- 2 Heidegger wishes to avoid such terms as 'human being' or 'man' on the grounds that these are fatefully burdened by associations and connotations that deeply distort the nature of our being-in-the-world, and he adopts instead the term 'Dasein', which means literally 'being-there'.
- 3 Heidegger shows that the inner character of time is part of the ontological structure of *Dasein*. This is found in Care (*Sorge*), which is a structure of *Dasein*, and the ancient fable concerning the demi-goddess Cura, which Heidegger quotes in *Being and Time*, is a story of how the human being was named. Care is an existential structure, which indicates Being-ahead-of oneself, in connection with *Dasein*'s facticity and its fallenness into the world (*Geworfenheit*). This structure corresponds to the structure of time. Besides, Heidegger quotes the ancient fable, a story of how Saturn (the god of time) named humans in the course of a dispute between Jupiter, Earth, and Care. The story helps to show why *Dasein*'s existential-ontological structure is Care. At the same time, Heidegger picks up the point that it is in time that the 'primordial' structure of human being is found. The possibility of anticipation in being-toward-death is also supported in the structure of care. In this way, the futurity of *Dasein* is shown by death.
- 4 One argument is found in the field of philosophy and education particularly on death. In the 1960s, when existentialism was widely influential, an argument was raised on applying Heidegger's analysis of death in the educational field for three years. The key point of the argument is that there is little chance of applying Heidegger's philosophy in education and an even greater possibility that he will be misread. Professor Donald Vandenberg took issue with *Existentialism and Education* by G. F. Kneller, claiming at first that Kneller was misreading Heidegger (Vandenberg, 1965). Then Anthony DeSoto protested against Vandenberg's criticism on the grounds that Kneller's intention in the book was only to interpret Heidegger's thought in relation to education (DeSoto, 1966). Finally, in the following year, Vandenberg made clear his point of view, saying that he was trying to read Heidegger correctly while missing the educational implications (Vandenberg, 1967).

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