BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Radical Tragedy: Religion, Ideology and Power in the Drama of Shakespeare and His Contemporaries

Political Shakespeare
(editor, with Alan Sinfield)

Sexual Dissidence: Augustine to Wilde, Freud to Foucault

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Death, Desire and Loss in Western Culture

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II

The Philosophical Embrace of Death: Hegel

When Schopenhauer declared that 'without death there would hardly have been any philosophizing' (World, II.463) he was repeating what was by then a familiar idea, but one which would, if anything, become even truer of certain influential modern philosophers—especially those who make the relationship of consciousness to death of paramount significance. Two such (utterly different) philosophers are Schopenhauer himself and Hegel. Schopenhauer regarded his own philosophy as antithetical to Hegel’s, which (and whom) he hated, considering him to be (among other things) an obscurantist. Readers coming anew to Hegel may sympathize with this charge, finding themselves perplexed and alienated by his style and complexity. But it is a complexity which must be tackled, since there is no philosopher more influential in modern thought.

The dialectic of death

Hegel tries to get beyond the dualism, so influential in Western metaphysics, whereby opposition is construed as an absolute difference and distinction between separate identities. So confident is he that the contradictions of consciousness and existence can be ultimately reconciled, he incorporates them within identity, rather than trying to exclude them from it. His dialectic thinking about death constitutes a new and radical phase of death’s incorporation into being.

For Hegel, all opposites are eventually ‘sublated’ into a superior unity; the self-consciousness of absolute spirit finally incorporates all division and contradiction into itself. Experientially we lack ultimate
death is not merely the escape from this existence, but its essence.

Death is indeed the loss of all the other possibilities of existence, but it is not merely the escape from these possibilities; it is the extinction of all the other experiences. The philosophical problem is not what happens after death, but what happens before and during death.

The experience of death is indeed the most profound experience, but it is not merely the escape from the dangers of life. The experience of death is the experience of the absolute, the experience of the absolute freedom, the experience of the absolute insight. The experience of death is the experience of the absolute consciousness, the experience of the absolute self-consciousness.

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The bad infinite

Hegel identifies the error whereby, instead of dialectically incorporating the finite into the infinite, we try to escape the former by simply embracing the latter (a move typical of religion and metaphysics). This results only in what Hegel calls the ‘bad’ or ‘spurious’ infinite. The main point is this: to try to keep the concepts of the finite and the infinite distinct is to remain in the realm of finite thinking; the binary opposition finite/infinite still presupposes the finite: ‘in the very act of keeping the infinite pure and aloof from the finite, the infinite is only made finite’ (Logic, p. 137). According to this account, Western metaphysics, including all its Christian manifestations, has remained in the realm of finite thinking – that is, remained inside exactly that which it was its raison d’être to transcend.

As Hegel puts it in the Science of Logic, the bad infinite can be regarded as a straight line going on for ever instead of returning to itself, as in a circle. As such the bad infinite is merely the repetition of the finite, an ‘infinite progress’ which is akin to an infinite regress in that it defines itself against the finite only to always re-encounter it – a progress which is therefore tediously, fruitlessly, for ever ad infinitum. It was because he remained trapped in the spurious ‘linear’ progress of bad infinitude that Heraclitus believed everything was governed by the change and flux of mutability (Lectures, I.422–3). This notion of bad infinity resembles what we have been calling the impossibility or futility of desire.

In his Aesthetics Hegel describes the mythical overthrow of the Titans, whose punishments then include an insatiable eagle which for ever devours the self-renewing liver of Prometheus, and the unquenchable thirst of Tantalus. These punishments signify ‘the inherently measureless, the bad infinite, the longing of the “ought”, the unsatiated craving of subjective natural desire which in its continual recurrence never attains the final peace of satisfaction’ (Aesthetics, I.466). If Hegel is right, and Western metaphysics remains trapped within a bad infinity which includes this ‘unsatiated craving of subjective natural desire’, this would suggest why, as we’ve seen, within that tradition transcendence is so often envisaged as not an alternative reality so much as a self-annihilating freedom from desire.

Hegel’s dialectic alternative to bad infinity is radical: in a very real sense it commits us to taking death into life. What this means is that the affirmation of true infinity is contained within the finite in the sense that true infinity is inextricably a part of this process of ceasing to be:

The finite changes itself; it appears as another, [and so] other comes to other. What is the case here is that both are the same. The other coincides with itself and in the other comes to itself... This is the affirmation, this is being... the genuine other of the finite is the infinite. (Lectures, I.422–3)

This entails the contentious proposition that the infinite itself is at first something finite or negative – a proposition which seems to require that the finite is the foundation for the being of God (I.424). Hegel accepts this, and the blasphemy it seemingly entails. Spirit, he says,

must have this character of finitude within itself – that may seem blasphemous. But if it did not have it within itself, and thus is confronted finitude from the other side, then its infinitude would be a spurious infinitude.

Just as the infinitude which is set over and against the finite is spurious, so, if God is set over and against the finite, he becomes himself finite and limited. This sounds still more blasphemous, but Hegel is unequivocal: ‘Finitude must be posited in God himself’ (III.263–4). More severely still, the Absolute must ‘tread the path of extinction and death’. In death is the birth of the spiritual realm, in the sense that spirit has to partake of death; it has the ‘element of death in itself as belonging to its essence’ (Aesthetics, I.548–9; my emphasis).

Hegel’s detailed account of what he regards as the ‘true’ relation of the infinite to the finite, of the Absolute to death, is a crucial determining instance of dialectical negation and a powerful reminder of the radical implications of dialectic reasoning: the finite and the infinite ‘are inseparable and at the same time mutually related as sheer others; each has in its own self the other of itself’ (Logic, p. 141; my emphasis).

Inspired by the Christian Crucifixion, Hegel also inscribes death
into love: ‘Death is love itself.’ This is interesting not least for the way in which it suggests an elusive yet significant masochistic strain in his dialectic. Declaring that ‘the pinnacle of finitude is . . . death, the anguish of death’, Hegel adds, ‘The temporal and complete existence of the divine idea in the present is envisaged only in [Christ’s] death.’ Here death becomes the highest love, the identity of the divine and the human at its absolute fearful peak, ‘For [love] consists in giving up one’s personality, all that is one’s own etc.’:

[Love] is the supreme surrender [of oneself] in the other, even in this most extrinsic other being of death, the death of the absolute representative of the limits of life. The death of Christ is the vision of this love itself – not [love merely] for or on behalf of others, but precisely divinity in this universal identity with other-being, death. The monstrous unification of these absolute extremes is love itself . . . (Lectures, III.124–5)

Christ’s death, he adds, ‘may be represented as a sacrificial death, as the act of absolute satisfaction’ (III.126).

The dialectic manifestation of human love promises that profound sense of completion in the other, the sublime transcendence of ‘bad infinity’ which also entails a loss of the self:

Love is a distinguishing of the two, who nevertheless are absolutely not distinguished for each other. The consciousness or feeling of the identity of the two – to be outside of myself and in the other – this is love. I have my self-consciousness not in myself but in the other. I am satisfied and have peace with myself only in this other – and I am only because I have peace with myself; if I did not have it then I would be a contradiction that falls to pieces. This other, because it likewise exists outside itself, has its self-consciousness only in me; and both the other and I are only this consciousness of being-outside-ourselves and of our identity; we are only this intuition, feeling, and knowledge of our unity. This is love, and without knowing that love is both a distinguishing and the sublation of the distinction, one speaks emptily of it. (III.276)

This affirmation of unity is eloquent yet completely vulnerable to being unbound by the death that Hegel has so enthusiastically, radically, embraced in its making.

Was Hegel an atheist? Alexandre Kojève, in the most influential modern interpretation of his work, believes so. He concedes that, in a general sense, Hegel’s philosophy is a secularized Christian theology, and insists that Hegel knew this too. But for Kojève the crucial difference is that Hegel embraces a concept of death that denies immortality, which means also that his is a ‘philosophy of death’ (or, what is the same thing: of atheism). (‘The Idea of Death’, pp. 154, 124). Robert Solomon also believes that Hegel was essentially an atheist, since his Absolute ‘is in no interesting sense, God’ (p. 630). In contrast, Stephen Houlgate interprets Hegel’s philosophy as profoundly Christian (p. 227).

The dispute revolves round issues of interpretation which are unlikely ever to be settled. For our purposes it hardly matters, since the significant point is that Hegel does not rationalize death in the Enlightenment sense of trying to demystify it; rather, he reworks Christianity’s paradoxical and even disturbing idealization of death. Further, through the dialectic, he takes death not only into finitude through Christ – that being acceptable and even required by an orthodox Christianity – but also into what supposedly redeems death (God, Eternity, the Infinite), thus pre-empting the Christian quest for a spiritual transcendence of death in that absolutely different order of reality. He is so confident that spirit is able to affirm an ultimate unity that he willingly takes division and death into the heart of what traditionally was thought, of its very metaphysical nature, to exclude them.

Arguably, at least for us, now, the Hegelian Absolute can never contain let alone reconcile contradiction and division. We – and that mostly includes even those who would repudiate psychoanalysis – are closer to Freud than to Hegel in believing that reality is recalitrant, forever disrupting our attempts to replace division with unity. Jacques Lacan says, alluding to Hegel:

A brief aside – when one is made into two, there is no going back on it. It can never revert to making one again, not even a new one. The Aufhebung [sublation] is one of those sweet dreams of philosophy. (Feminine Sexuality, p. 156)
This is nowhere more true than with death. It is as if, to borrow Ariès's terms, Hegel's idealizing rationality seeks to 'tame' death through incorporation, only to discover that this containing of death (for others, later) renders it 'wilder' than ever, because now more 'inside' thought than ever before. And, if we cannot share Hegel's rationalism or his confidence, the fact remains that philosophically speaking there is no going back; thus embraced, thus internalized, the contradictions may at last be irrevocable.

And yet in another sense Hegel has taken us back: once again death has been discovered to be the essence of life, or rather thought. And if the supreme rationalism of his system could follow only from a hubristic privileging of human reason and consciousness, it is also true that in this same system consciousness ends up being dialectically sublated into Spirit or Absolute Being; in a sense it disappears. And when later thinkers turn away from the idea that Spirit or Absolute Being exists at all, let alone the capacity for ultimate synthesis, consciousness does not resume its former autonomy; in the most important philosophical writing after Hegel, consciousness will never be able to divest itself of the death and otherness which he inscribed within it.

We know we are going to die; we know everyone dies. Yet, argues Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), we tend to know this truth only inauthentically; we acknowledge it, but in a way which forecloses on its full significance for how we live. Our social existence conspires with this evasion; we exist within the confines of 'average everydayness', gradually wasting our life in the self-deceptions of the collective 'they'. Such an existence 'provides [besorgt] a constant tranquillization about death' (Being and Time, p. 298). To live authentically we must realize that death is not the eventual end of life but the inner possibility of Being or Dasein. Death 'is a phenomenon of life' in the sense that, just as Dasein is already and constantly the not-yet of death, so 'it is already its end too . . . Death is a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is. "As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die"' (pp. 289–90).

For Heidegger we are fully free only when we have understood what death means. Then and only then do we fully comprehend our possibilities and potential. This profound, disturbing comprehension of the truth of death allows us to grasp, as never before, the possibility of understanding one's owmmost and uttermost potentiality-for-Being — that is to say, the possibility of authentic existence' (pp. 298, 307). All this inevitably occurs in a way which leaves us essentially and ineluctably anxious. Thus Heidegger speaks of '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' (p. 311). Heidegger takes up the old idea that death is not the event which ends life but a profound reality which in-forms it, and he seeks to take this truth so fully into our being that we are
compelled to embrace authentic existence and leave the world of false sociableness. Death is what bestows meaning upon life, and, far from being the ultimate negation of human freedom, it actually makes such freedom possible.⁵

Existentialists will find in Heidegger a crucial inspiration (albeit one from which he dissociated himself): becoming aware of our death, which is to say of our finitude, we also become aware that we are not predestined to be anything, and that we do not have an abiding essence which dictates what we should be and do in the world. As Jean-Paul Sartre was to put it in Being and Nothingness (thus reversing a priority hitherto fundamental in Western metaphysics), existence precedes essence, not vice versa: ‘Freedom is existence, and in it existence precedes essence’ (pp. 567–8). Authentic existence is possible only through and after this realization, which for Sartre would also become the philosophical foundation for a radical ethical and political commitment to praxis.

Koève and nothingness

Heidegger’s philosophy is built around a single central concept, Dasein. Yet it is not possible to say clearly what he meant by Dasein, except that it has an agonizing relation of proximity and distance to nothingness or non-being. Hegel has argued that Being presupposed non-being, and now Heidegger tightens the paradox: ‘Dasein means: being held out into the nothing,’ while ‘nothing is the negation of the totality of beings; it is nonbeing pure and simple’. Nothing is not the indeterminate opposite of beings, but belongs to the Beings of beings. Hegel is right: ‘Pure Being and pure Nothing are therefore the same (Science of Logic vol. 1).’ So there is a radical affinity between Being and nothingness.⁴ So fundamental is nothingness that for Heidegger the most profound question becomes ‘Why are there beings at all, and why not rather nothing?’ (‘What is Metaphysics?’ pp. 105, 99, 110, 112). This has struck many as strange, but, as we shall see, this concept of nothingness comes to play a crucial role for subsequent thinkers like Sartre and, before him, Alexandre Koève. In the 1930s, in Paris, Koève gave a course on Hegel, the text of which was published in 1947. Though partial and, in the view of some, erroneous, the influence of Koève’s interpretation of Hegel was extensive, and can be discerned in most of the significant developments in French philosophy in the postwar period, including existentialism, the diverse forms of post-structuralism, and through to post-modernism.⁵

The Heideggerian conviction that man is truly free only when he embraces his own finitude is not only about confronting one’s finite existence; it is also about humankind’s nothingness — our no-thingness. In developing this second aspect of finitude, Koève took further Heidegger’s view of the relation of being to death. Man is distinguished from the rest of nature in virtue of his self-consciousness. This is of enormous consequence, not least because to be self-aware is already a kind of disturbance and alienation; what one is aware of is not so much one’s self, but one’s separateness from the rest of the world, and what one introspects is not a self-evident essence or identity, but an emptiness or no-thingness which is the basis of desire — the desire to become, to possess, to be recognized. Koève defines ‘the I of desire’ as ‘an emptiness greedy for content’; ‘Man’, he says, ‘must be an emptiness, a nothingness’ (Introduction, p. 38). This emptiness is inseparable from a capacity for negation and negativity which includes the negating of that which is given, in order to create what does not yet exist:

the I of Desire is an emptiness that receives a real positive content only by negating action that satisfies Desire in destroying, transforming and ‘assimilating’ the desired non-I. (p. 4)

Man, says Koève, is ‘Negativity incarnate, or, as Hegel says, “negative-or-negate-ive-entity” (das Negative). It is only by comprehending Man as Negativity that we [can] comprehend him in his “miraculous” human specificity’ (The Idea of Death, p. 131).⁶ Moreover, this negativity is nothing less than the essence of a human freedom which ‘manifests itself in its pure or “absolute” state as death’ (p. 140). In Koève’s insistence on this point the influence of Heidegger is apparent:

If, therefore, on the one hand, freedom is Negativity, and if on the other hand, Negativity is Nothingness and death, there is no freedom without
Hegel’s ontology of death

The entirety of philosophy centers on the concept of death. For Hegel, the human being is defined by its relationship to death. The philosopher’s task is to understand the nature of death and its implications for our understanding of existence and the universe. Hegel believed that death is not just an end, but a key to unlocking the true meaning of life. He argued that by understanding death, we can gain insight into the nature of the world and our place within it.

Hegel’s concept of death is closely linked to his philosophy of history. For Hegel, history is a process of dialectical development, with death playing a pivotal role in the resolution of contradictions. Death is not a passive event, but an active force that shapes the course of history.

Hegel’s ideas on death have influenced many subsequent thinkers, including Marx and Nietzsche. However, Hegel’s concept of death has often been misunderstood, with some interpreting it as a negative force. In reality, Hegel saw death as a necessary component of life, a means of testing and refining our understanding of the world.

Hegel’s philosophy of death is a complex and nuanced exploration of the nature of existence, and it remains a topic of ongoing debate and discussion. In this book, we will explore Hegel’s ideas on death and consider their implications for our understanding of the human condition.
consciousness – especially human consciousness – whereas being-in-itself refers to that kind of being which is devoid of consciousness – simply *that which is*, that which is self-identical.

Being-for-itself is defined in terms of lack, always requiring, and always in search of, something to complete it. At one level this is a lack of, and hence a desire for, being in the second sense (the self-identical). But consciousness can never become being-in-itself ‘without losing itself as for-itself’. For that reason alone, human existence will always entail suffering (*Being and Nothingness*, p. 90). Following previous philosophers like Descartes and Hegel, Sartre argues that consciousness is always consciousness of something, and this in a radical sense: there is not first consciousness and, second, consciousness of something; rather, consciousness just is this consciousness of. And to be conscious of is always to be conscious somewhere – to be positioned within, and in relation to, the world. Likewise with desire, itself inseparable from consciousness: there is not first desire and then a thousand particular desires; desire is these desires (p. 565). And consciousness is always of what it is not: what I ceaselessly aim towards, says Sartre, is that which I am not, or not yet; I aim towards my own possibilities.

This confers on consciousness two further attributes: negation and nothingness. Negation refers to the fact that to discern that *this* is the case is necessarily to realize that something else is *not* the case; to discern a particular presence is simultaneously to discern the possibility of its absence; to make this choice is not to make others. And this means, for Sartre, that ‘the necessary condition for our saying not is that non-being be a perpetual presence in us and outside of us, that nothingness haunt being’ (p. 11). As he graphically puts it shortly after, ‘Nothingness lies coiled in the heart of being – like a worm’ (p. 21). Man is the being who is his own nothingness, and through whom nothingness comes into the world; man’s freedom is strangely dependent upon being ‘paralysed with nothingness’ (p. 45).

‘Fundamentally,’ says Sartre, ‘man is the desire to be.’ This desire is nothing more and nothing less than a lack: ‘desire . . . is identical with lack of being’. This idea of lack is crucial, embodying as it does two barely compatible ideas: on the one hand emptiness, vacancy and permanent incompletion; on the other freedom, agency and responsibility:

The for-itself is defined ontologically as a lack of being . . . The for-itself chooses because it is lack; freedom is really synonymous with lack . . . the for-itself is the being which is to itself its own lack of being. (pp. 565, 567)

Being-for-itself desires completion in this other kind of being: ‘human reality is the desire of being-in-itself . . . It is as consciousness that it wishes to have the impermeability and infinite density of the in-itself’ (p. 566). At the same time, it ceaselessly desires to ‘nihilate’ this other kind of being, since to actually become it would entail the demise of itself.

Consciousness is haunted by an impossible contradictory desire which is nevertheless its fundamental project: to attain the ‘pure consciousness’ which would come of a union of the for-itself and the in-itself – that is, a consciousness devoid of lack and nothingness because now founded on and identical with itself, complete and self-sufficient as consciousness: an in-itself which is still a for-itself. In other words, ‘To be man is to reach toward being God. Or, if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God’ (p. 566). The euphoric humanism of Feuerbach sought to take God back into man on the grounds that God was only ever a projection of man’s best self (see below, Chapter 15). Now the existential humanist is characterized by an impossible desire to be the God who does not exist. That this later humanism is full of anguish does not make it less hubristic than its earlier counterpart: hitherto humanism had taken God back into itself; now it takes the absence of God into self, construing a philosophy of freedom or agency out of lack, absence and nothingness.

Similarly, although Sartre’s claim that human reality ‘is by nature an unhappy consciousness with no possibility of surpassing its unhappy state’ (p. 90) is the pessimistic opposite of Feuerbach, it is no less self-affirming for that. At the end of the main text of *Being and Nothingness* Sartre apparently alludes to Feuerbach when he says, ‘man loses himself as man in order that God may be born’, and adds, ‘but God is contradictory and we lose ourselves in vain. Man is a useless passion’ (p. 615). Freer and more heroic in his uselessness
than in pseudo-divinity, Sartrean man now takes into himself the contradiction which was the fiction of God and grounds his freedom in it. Being-for-itself is characterized by nothingness. And yet out of nothingness – no-thingness – true freedom is born; not to be essentially anything is to be free to choose. In a sense we are always what we are not yet; we can always conceive of being other than that we are.

But freedom cannot embrace death. Despite taking so much from modern philosophers of death like Heidegger and Kojève, Sartre finally has to eliminate death from the finitude of being. He takes Heideggerian nothingness into self, making it the basis of freedom, but he also privileges selfhood in a way which Heidegger emphatically did not, and resists Heidegger’s embrace of death. Sartre knows that to take death so profoundly into being, as did Heidegger and Kojève, threatens the entire project of human freedom as praxis, which is the most important aspect of Sartre’s existentialism.

Certainly, for Heidegger, authenticity did not entail praxis, and in his ‘Letter on Humanism’ he actually repudiated Sartre’s attempt to derive from his work a philosophical rationale for existential engagement; so far as Heidegger was concerned, such engagement was only another version of inauthentic ‘social’ existence, a social evasion of the truth of Being. But was Heidegger’s own truth of Being ever more than a state of authenticity whose main objective is obsessively to know or insist on itself as authentic? For all his talk of freedom, there remains in Heidegger a sense in which authenticity remains a petrified sense of self, paralysed by the very effort of concentrating on the profundity of Being, which always seems to be also a condition of mystical impossibility: ‘Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein’ (Being and Time, p. 294).

Not so for Sartre. He recognizes the modern project whereby death is ‘interiorized . . . humanized [and] individualized’, and that Heidegger gave philosophical form to this process. On the face of it, this is an attractive development, since death as apparent limit on our freedom is reconceptualized as a support of freedom (Being and Nothingness, pp. 522–3). But, against Heidegger, Sartre argues that death, far from being the profound source of being and existential authenticity, is just a contingent fact like birth, and this, far from being a limit, is what guarantees one’s freedom. Heidegger’s entire account of death rests on an erroneous conflation of death and finitude; finitude is essentially internal to life and the grounds of our freedom – ‘the very act of freedom is therefore the assumption and creation of finitude. If I make myself, I make myself finite and hence my life is unique’ – whereas death is simply an external and factual limit of my subjectivity (pp. 546–7). Quite simply, ‘It is absurd that we are born; it is absurd that we die’ (p. 547). This perhaps entails a fear of death, since ‘to be dead is to be a prey for the living’: one is no longer in charge of one’s own life; it is now in the hands of others, of the living (p. 543). It is true that death haunts me at the very heart of each of my human projects, as their inevitable reverse side. But this reverse side of death is just the end of my possibilities and, as such, ‘it does not penetrate me. The freedom which is my freedom remains total and infinite . . . Since death is always beyond my subjectivity, there is no place for it in my subjectivity’ (pp. 547–8).

Sartre’s significance lies in his uncompromising emphasis on human freedom and responsibility. For a while, in the postwar period, his influence was considerable and worldwide. Yet he was eclipsed surprisingly quickly, even by the standards of intellectual fashion. And one of the main reasons was the anti-humanism of subsequent thinkers like Michel Foucault – in particular their wish to radically decentre man and the individual (a move which was more indebted to Heidegger than is sometimes realized). In order to affirm human freedom and responsibility, Sartre knew he had to break with that line of thought which tried to drive death so relentlessly into the heart of being and consciousness; he knew how inimical was the philosophy of death to the philosophy of praxis. But did he succeed in making that break? Not according to those who argue that his philosophy relentlessly incorporates nothingness, lack and impossibility within the self and makes desire always an unceasing – impossible? – quest for a kind of being that it cannot have. The result, says James Carse, is that Sartre’s philosophy posits human consciousness as ‘an unrelieved lust after death’ (p. 372; my emphasis).

I believe rather that the very contradiction which Sartre inscribes into conscious being involves a simultaneous embrace and exclusion of death. Existential freedom is stretched across this contradiction, whose tension became more enabling than not. As Cohen-Solal's