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Shared Finitude: Intergenerational Death Awareness

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Abstract

This article develops the notion of intergenerational death awareness through a relational reading of finitude. I begin by discussing the different ways in which the philosophical canon has understood the relationship between death, subjectivity, and otherness. Drawing on an interview study with bereaved life partners and their experiences of 'losing part of oneself' following the death of the other, I seek to deconstruct this divide and illustrate how vital aspects of our experiences of finitude are inherently shared. In the present case, these others are often – apart from the lost partner – first and foremost the children one is responsible for. As a single parent, the primary source of relating to one's own death is intergenerationally mediated through worrying and the sense of absolute responsibility for staying alive.

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Shared Finitude: Intergenerational Death Awareness

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Introduction

> *Alfred: Do you think more or differently about your own death following the death of Michael [Clara's life partner]?*
>
> *Clara: Yes. And no. If I allowed myself to think of it, I would probably do so, since it would be a disaster, not because I am afraid of dying, but for my children it would be a disaster.*

Clara is a mother of three. Until the day her husband, Michael, died, these children had lived their lives in the loving yet perplexing light that is the perspective of *two* parents. The parental gaze comes as a paradigmatic example of how the borders between 'I' and 'we' are transgressed in the life of a family. In families with two parents, children are interchangeably seen by the unity of the parents and by each one of them. In this case, parenthood is singular *and* plural (Nancy 2000). For Clara and her children, the structure of this generational alternation between otherness and sameness was fundamentally altered by Michael's death. For her children, their mother's gaze is, from now on, identical with the parental gaze. Michael's death has made Clara into a single mother. At our first interview, she tells me that this situation has turned her entire life upside down – including her role as a parent. 'When Michael was alive, I could have said, "*I* have three children", without having to say, "*We* have three children." Now, "we" and "I" are different.'

Clara was the first of fifteen bereaved life partners that I interviewed as part of my PhD project, *Relationality and Finitude – A Social Ontology of Grief* (Sköld 2021a).[1] Clara is in her fifties and, as such, formed part of the middle-aged group of interviewees; the other two groups comprised men and women in their thirties and seventies, respectively, who had lost their life partners no longer than six months before the first interview. The study was conducted in Denmark and the cultural background reflects a European middle-class segment. Twelve of the informants were female and three were male. The informants had signed up voluntarily and had agreed to be interviewed on three occasions over the course of one year. With two exceptions, the interviews took place in the interviewees' own homes. which was meant to provide a secure environment where they could speak freely. Likewise, it

1 The PhD was part of the interdisciplinary research project 'Sorgens kultur' (The culture of grief) (2017–2022) at Aalborg University (www.sorg.aau.dk). It studied the contemporary understandings of grief and suffering.

provided me with a welcome opportunity for a more embodied understanding of their lifeworlds and what had been the physical surroundings of their life previously shared with a partner. Before this study, I had anticipated that the death of a close loved one would encompass an intensified degree of reflection and relating to one's own death – hence the question that I posed to Clara as reflected in the quote above. In short, I expected that grief would be the primary route to death awareness (Sköld 2021b). This expectation proved to be only half true.

Even though the death of a loved one is necessarily related to finitude, the question of *which* death plays centre court is far from clear. When struggling with grief, death is often on one's mind all the time. Day and night, one struggles to fathom the fact that the person one loved the most is dead. Death – the ultimate humiliation of human reason (Bauman 1992: 15) – looks back at us like a 'pure question-mark', in Emmanuel Levinas's (2000: 14) words. 'What do we know of death? What is death?', he asked (Levinas 2000: 11). That these questions come without prospect for any clear answers – that the aporic structure of death (Derrida 1993) excludes any possible solution – does not, on the other hand, seem to make us speechless. Through grief, mourning, and commemoration, we do *respond* to the death of another in multitudes of ways and, in this article, I describe how the response of a bereaved life partner both separates and amalgamates different generations. The preoccupation with death following the death of a partner seems to be mediated partly by the imagined consequences that it would have for the ones still living – in particular one's children. In ways that I expand on further throughout this article, finitude seems to be a *shared* condition – and death less individualising than often presumed.

Since Plato in *Phaedo* defined philosophy as an art of dying (*melete thanatou*, what later became *Ars Moriendi*), death has played a significant role within this field. That there is no final *Aufklärung* (enlightenment, resolution) in the case of death only serves to prove that, paradoxically, it is precisely that which escapes and even humiliates thought that makes us think. The question one might ask in this context is: Which death are we talking about? In his deeply influential *The Hour of Our Death: The Classic History of Western Attitudes toward Death over the Last One Thousand Years*, Phillipe Ariès (2008) points to how the contemporary Western focus on the bereaved is a relatively novel phenomenon, heavily intertwined with the process of secularisation. Where belief in an afterlife is widespread, the post-partum worrying seems rather to focus on destiny and on what is assumed to be the prolonged journey of the dead. Even though such beliefs tend to surge up in the confusing time of mourning, the reckoning with death that we find in contemporary Western societies, including Denmark, lies in the hands of the ones still living. 'Death', as Norbert Elias (2010: 3) writes, 'is a problem for the living. Dead people have no problems' – and the twenty-first

century might be aptly described as 'the century of grief' (Jacobsen, Lund and Petersen 2021: 161).

The existential tradition, however, has predominantly talked about *my death*. For Martin Heidegger (2008), it is through the confrontation with finitude, which he refers to as 'being-towards-death' (*Sein zum Tode*), that I truly become who I am (*Eigentlich*). Death is the key demarcation line which institutes an irreducible 'mineness' (*Jemeinigkeit*), separating Dasein from all the others – 'The They' (*Das Man*) where 'everyone is the other and no one is himself' (Heidegger 2008: 124). No matter how intensely I wish to take upon myself the death of the other – no matter if I sacrifice my own life for her – I cannot relieve the other from her death. When leaving the graveside, Søren Kierkegaard (2009a: 83) writes, we often do so with an ambivalent feeling of being very much alive – 'This very day!' In the existential perspective, then, all forms of sharing stop at death. Death cannot be shared. 'If something radically impossible is to be conceived of – and everything derives its sense from this impossibility – it is indeed dying for the other in the sense of dying in place of the other' (Derrida 2008: 43–44).

In the works of Levinas and Simon Critchley, we find a radically different route to finitude where death is, first and foremost, the death of the other. Finitude is *experienced* in the encounter with 'the face of the other', where her vulnerability is exhibited through an ethical demand of not taking this particular life. Just as ethics, for Levinas (1991), is 'first philosophy', the other's death is always the 'first death'. Death is both relational and mediated by an infinite otherness. Whilst death 'is not the object or meaningful fulfilment of an intentional act' (Critchley 1997: 26), we do *feel* the effects of death when people we love leave this world behind through death. Differing from the existential position briefly sketched above, death is not so much a possibility for mastering individuality as it is an experience of otherness, dependency, and the existential and ethical limitations implied herewith.

In this article, I begin with an analysis of the experience of 'losing part of oneself' and suggest a third reading that complicates the distinction between the two disparate readings sketched above. In various ways, the informants participating in my grief study testify to being shattered at a deep, personal level following their partner's death, which evokes questions such as the following: How can we understand the relationship between selfhood, ethics, and sharing following the death of another? What notions of subjectivity and intersubjectivity are needed in order to conceptualise how the death of another can affect my very being? The argument developed in this article is heavily guided by the assumption that any understanding of what it means to *lose* presupposes an understanding of what it means to *have* (Butler 2006). The notion of shared finitude that conceives of our relation to death in a relational light thus presupposes a notion of shared life. Just as we fade into being through the relational strings that we are given over to and depend upon,

we fade out of life when these strings falter. Life is *ours*, which can be learnt through the painful prism of losing what we once had. I thus begin by outlining the necessary backdrop of what a shared life with a life partner comprises before developing the notion of shared finitude. In the last part of the article, I develop the notion of intergenerational death awareness more carefully, focusing specifically on the daily interactions between family members of different generations and the ethical quandaries arising in the wake of death.

Losing part of oneself

> *Clara: I have lost part of myself. It's like part of me has been ripped off.*

What does it mean to lose part of oneself following the death of another? Beginning with the 'part of' of this quotation, it is essential to note that the person with this experience – in this case, Clara – is still alive. Grief presupposes a griever. In fact, grief is often an experience of feeling extremely alive – of being so close to, and for that reason so far from, death. The world Clara wakes up to every day is an empty world, but she does wake up. There are days where the first brief moments after waking up are coloured by a belief that life is like it used to be before, like it's supposed to be. For the blink of an eye, she thinks that Michael is sleeping beside her, or has gone off to work – until she realises that things are not like that anymore, that Michael is dead, that she is left alone.

The bereaved has lost someone or something – be that another person, a loved object, or an ideal (Freud 2005). Although grief is increasingly perceived from an intrapsychological perspective (Granek 2010; Kofod and Brinkmann 2017), it is ontological in the sense of being necessarily related to what or whom one has lost. Despite the fact that grief affects me, it is the death of the other that lies at the origin of this experience. *Grief is defined by its object.* Since bereavement often encompasses the intense wish to be with the dead (which would amount to being dead), this experience of being alive following a loss comes as a two-edged sword. In her analysis of the responsive structure of grief, Line Ingerslev formulates the death of the other as 'a call':

> *What calls is the death of the other, we might say: I myself am called into question by this death; why must I live on without you, why must I live at all, how can I go on? [...] Being called into question by the death of the other is a matter of being called by death oneself;* how can I not not-die with you? *(Ingerslev 2018: 350, emphasis added)*

In Ingerslev's perspective, grief turns what one took for granted into an open question that is both ethical and existential. With what right and in what way

can I go on existing in a world where you are not? The notion of shared finitude developed later proceeds from the relational nexus that lies at the heart of this experience. Despite the fact that grief actualises the most paradigmatic of all differences – the one between the living and the dead – and despite Clara's first-person perspective remaining indisputably hers, she is likewise referring to an experience of being personally shattered following Michael's demise. The threads of relationality that tied her to him do not wither into thin air the moment he stops breathing. How, then, can the experience of losing part of oneself shed further light on the notion of shared aspects of finitude?

To better comprehend the experience of losing part of oneself, we might begin by noticing how subjectivity is intimately related to a certain way of living. Grief, I argued above, always points to the loss of something. In the case of an adult person losing their life partner, what is lost – apart from the life of this person – is a mutual and shared life. Compared to friends, colleagues, and other family members apart from children, a life partner is someone who is very much around – they often constitute the backdrop against which the rest of one's life is lived, the main character of what Irving Goffman (2008) called the backstage domain. What is lost when a life partner dies is not only another person but a certain form of living that was entirely dependent upon a shared life with this other person. A life partner is, as the name suggests, a partner in life. How could we describe this partnerhood-way-of-living? Whilst there most certainly is a very broad range of how monogamous partnerhood is orchestrated around the world, the following themes have evolved from the current study and one might suspect that similar experiences would be at least partly generalisable to cultural contexts similar to Denmark.[2]

First of all, the vast majority of partnerhood takes place in everyday life. Given that one lived together (which was the case for all informants in the current study), partnerhood constitutes the perpetual backdrop of most of one's other endeavours. In a time where the backstage domain is continually shrinking due to technological developments in general and social media in particular, partnerhood still constitutes the place one returns to, thus the home. Although this home is a mental and spiritual entity, it does find its *space* somewhere, which is the domestic setting one cohabits together with a life partner. Theresa, an informant in the younger group who unexpectedly lost her husband in a motorcycle accident, says: 'He [Daniel] is here, in the house that is ours. We bought this house sixteen, no, seventeen years ago, and this is where we have had everything, right? *This is our entire life*.' The meaning of this home is co-constituted by the people living there and one's life partner is, needless to say, a very important person in this regard (Jacobsen 2009).

2 This section can be read as a condensed version of the phenomenological reading of partnerhood provided in Sköld (2021a: 89–149; 2021c).

Partnerhood is further comprised by a loving gaze and a strong sense of weness. The gaze of one's partner constitutes a source of safety and inspiration for courage and motivation to do things that one otherwise would have refrained from doing. When I ask my informants what they miss the most, they often mention the lack of this gaze as a constant source of sadness. When asked what Oscar's gaze did to her on a personal level, Nina – likewise a participant in the younger group – tells me that 'in his eyes, I could do anything'. The range of possibilities grew smaller following Oscar's death. On a different yet related note, Felicia speaks of having lost a life witness, 'someone you do not have to begin with Adam and Eve every time'.

The longevity of partnerhood further means that one often has the curious experience of not only sharing space but also time (Schutz 1967) and, thus, having a common history. A life partner has often witnessed one's life trajectory through a number of sometimes rather different periods of life from a distance closer than most others. Depending on one's age, the experience of growing (and not growing) older together is broadly shared by the informants in my study. At a young age – for the participants in their thirties – this aspect is primarily constituted by the sudden absence of potentiality. Overnight the dreams and plans for the future are turned into stardust. At an older age, depending on the duration of the relationship, much of this life has been lived and shared already. The pain of losing is then often accompanied by feelings of gratitude and thankfulness which, however, do not remedy the pain and existential bewilderment of having lost a person that has been part of one's life for decades.

Based on this brief picture of shared life in partnerhood, we return to the question posed: How can we understand the experience of 'losing part of oneself' along the lines of losing the possibilities for living a certain life (Sköld 2021c)? Certainly, other forms of life are still possible – in fact, one could even argue that a crucial aspect of grief is living on in light of what has been (Ingerslev 2018). That said, the particular life shared with *this* person is lost. More than most other phenomena, grief exhibits the singularity or numerical identity that characterises human relationships (Mammen and Mironenko 2015; Brinkmann 2018; Sköld and Brinkmann 2021). 'But I need Oscar, I need Oscar to be here,' Nina tells me. She is in her early thirties and had given birth to son Martin eight months before Oscar's death. Despite the fact that Nina's future will hopefully comprise love relations to other people, perhaps even by finding a new life partner, this will be a different form of shared life. 'It was *our* life,' she tells me, looking back at what she had together with Oscar:

> *And it was difficult, I'm completely lost [...] Who am I? I was part of this family and we had a plan. This was how it was supposed to be. For the rest of our days. And now it suddenly isn't like that.* What now? What now?

Staying with Nina's bewilderment, we can conceive of grief as a boundary situation in the Jasperian sense (Jaspers 1970; Fuchs 2013). In short, boundary situations are situations where the toolbox we have for handling the challenges of life proves to be insufficient. Whilst many forms of suffering could be classified as boundary situations, the confrontation with death is paradigmatical: 'a wall we run into, a wall on which we founder' (Jaspers 1970: 178–179). Along a similar metaphor, Judith Butler (2016: 22) understands intense mourning as a situation where the most fundamental of human abilities, to stand straight, is heavily contested and 'one finds oneself fallen'. Part of grief is often characterised by the intense wish to be with the dead and the very act of standing up serves as an incontestable reminder that one is still amongst the living. Many accounts of the body in grief (Brinkmann 2019; Riley 2019) likewise paint a picture of the body lying horizontally with eyes turned away from the world of the living.

'What now?' A major part of grief might be characterised as the desperate attempt to come up with a liveable reply to the 'What now' question, as Nina poses it here. What to do and how to live on when the person one used to share life with is no longer around? This question can be tormenting in and of itself and can be further complicated by the fact that the very perspective from which it is posed is radically unknown. In grief, the 'what' question often coverts into a 'who' question. Who am I when you are no longer here? The lesson learnt from partner bereavement (and, in different ways, from other forms of loss) is that any radical distinction between being and doing becomes difficult to uphold. When asked about what she considered to be the very core of her relationship with Daniel, Theresa replies in almost scholastic tone: 'The substance of our relationship was all the minutes, hours, and days spent together.' What Theresa is indicating with her words is that human beings not only share time but that we *are* time (Arendt 1978: 42). When 'giving an account of ourselves' (Butler 2005), we necessarily do so with reference to the lives that we carry out – and these lives are, more often than not, carried out in company with significant others. To this extent, we are the lives that we live (Sköld 2021c). The logical consequence of this vitalist understanding of selfhood is that even a minimal alteration of one's way of living necessarily encompasses a subsequent alteration of who one is. Loss makes it indisputably true that 'I have lost "you" only to discover that "I" have gone missing as well' (Butler 2016: 22).

It is important to point out that this reading does not presuppose a certain understanding of selfhood other than as a minimal form of relational being – encompassing that our lives take place in a social and collective space where others are not only distant observers but directly involved. The 'I' we are referring to here refers more to a form of living than an individual substance. That the experience of losing part of oneself relies upon a shared way of living does not, on the other hand, only imply that finitude enters the scene

preceding a particular loss. Relationality and finitude are, as I argue in the following section, dialectically intertwined. Not only is grief only conceivable in the light of a former sense of belonging. Equally, this belonging depends upon finitude as an ultimate horizon for shared lives. Finitude is a shared condition from the very beginning.

Shared finitude

As mentioned in the introduction, Heidegger conceptualises our relationship to death as being-towards-death. Existentially, death cannot be understood exclusively with reference to mere 'perishing' (*Verenden*). That life might end at any moment is a risk we share with animals and all living beings, and this organic understanding of death is, according to Heidegger, insufficient when it comes to grasping human finitude. For Dasein, dying (*Sterben*) structures existence all the way through. Death becomes infused in the very movement of living: 'As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die' (Heidegger 2008: 277). Whilst it is undisputedly clear that, for Heidegger, this death is one's very own and that this death cannot be taken over by anyone else, both Derrida (2006) and Ruin (2018) have argued that we might locate kernels that would allow a less individualising understanding of finitude in Heidegger's famous death analysis in §47 of *Being and Time*:

> *In such Being-with the dead [*dem Toten*], the deceased himself is no longer factually 'there'. However, when we speak of 'Being-with', we always have in view Being with one another in the same world. The deceased has abandoned our 'world' and left it behind. But in terms of that world [*aus ihr her*] those who remain can still be with him. (Heidegger 2008: 282)*

What does it mean to be with the dead? Is not the line between the living and the dead the most paradigmatic of all demarcations, the point where we are everything but 'with'? What Heidegger calls 'being-with the dead' can be fruitfully understood along the lines of continuing bonds (Klass et al. 1996), one of the more influential theories within contemporary grief research. The theory of continuing bonds has contributed to a widespread abandonment of earlier static and delineated understandings of grief, where it is seen as a successive process with a clear ending, often conceptualised as synonymous with parting (Sköld 2021d). In significant ways, the concept of continuing bonds has better accommodated the experiences of many of a continued relating to the dead – through internal and external dialogues, through rituals, and simply by living on. The important flipside of the mutual relationality and distributed subjectivity, which lies at the heart of experiences of losing part of oneself, seems to be that remnants of dead loved ones linger around in various ways. That our social world is full of traces of the generations living

before us, and our lost loved ones retains a form of ghost-like agency after death is conceptualised by Derrida (2006) along the lines of *hauntology*. The challenge and question that the bereaved person must respond to somehow is, then, 'to learn to live with [these] ghosts' (Derrida 2006: xvii-xviii).

The ethical predicaments of the situation that Clara, Nina, and Theresa find themselves in, where the social world is equally shared with past (and future) generations, comes with a great degree of undecidability. We weep 'over what happens to us when everything is entrusted to the sole memory that is "in me" or "in us"' (Derrida 1989: 34). The ongoing dialogue that many a bereaved person has with the deceased is more often than not of ethical character: 'What is the right thing to do in this situation?' What constitutes a good way of living in light of this loss? How to balance honouring what once was and grasping the possibilities of living on? Derrida's (1989) concept of impossible mourning takes as its point of departure that a proper balance in this peculiar relationship to the dead cannot be found. As survivors, we are consistently torn between betrayal and forgetting. Even though one shared the majority of one's life with the person who is now dead and knew this person better than anyone else, there is no guarantee that one's understanding of what the other might have wished for is anywhere near correct. The sharedness characterising bereavement is one where otherness and unknowingness play an increasingly important role.

For Derrida, as for Heidegger, the prospect of death is always already there. The fact that I would mourn you if you die is part of what ties me to you in the first place. In this way, grief is not exclusively a casually determined 'reaction' to loss. Rather, the relational structure that ties us to each other is, from the very beginning, coloured by a vague anticipatory loss. The only thing we know for sure when encountering another human being is that one of us will die before the other (Derrida 1989). In the case where a relationship is being established, this implies that one of us will be left grief-stricken. Being included in the sphere of what Butler (2016) calls the 'grievable' can equally be seen as a precondition for love, solidarity, and care. In this way, our shared world is necessarily mortal; *your* mortality is *my* problem from the very beginning.

In a developmental perspective, it is important to point out that human infants are not innately equipped with an understanding of finitude – neither their own nor that of significant others (Sköld 2021b). At some point during early childhood, children's play will often circle around and thematise death in various ways. Children also try to come to terms with the fact that everything we become attached to can and will be lost and the realisation of parents' or care persons' mortality is potentially 'traumatic' to any child. In his existential reading of the oedipal complex, Johan Eriksson (2017) argues that one of the central insights of the youngster is the fact that his or her care persons are mortal and might die at any moment. The aggressive and inces-

tuous wishes and impulses that are often predominant during this period are seen as defences against a deeper form of anxiety – the horror of being a separate and finite being, increasingly responsible for conducting life in a certain manner.

Needless to say, most aspects of this drama also go the other way, a point that is highly relevant for this article. Many a parent has tried to alleviate a child's worries by claiming immortality: 'Yes, other people might be dying, but I will be here for ever (or at least until 100).' Given that parenthood neither equips one with omnipotence nor immortality and that parents – like all of us – can do nothing but hope that they wake up the next morning, it would be equally ill-suited to demand that they shared this truth with their offspring at any given time. A certain degree of 'bad faith' seems to be part of the impossible art of parenthood. Jean Laplanche (1991) has masterfully analysed how adults, in their interactions with children – a situation he refers to as 'the fundamental anthropological situation' – necessarily transmit a great degree of insecurity through their otherwise rational discourse (enigmatic messages). Whilst parents always fall short in their attempt to explain who we are, why we are here, and what we ought to do with our lives, death strikes as the most difficult challenge. The pure question mark that is death seems ill-suited for omnipotent education. When a parent dies, however, this question *is* posed and must be responded to.

Intergenerational death awareness

The death of a parent enforces a structural reorganisation of the remaining family. Whereas the most significant form of difference used to be the one between adults and children, it is now between the living and the dead. The surviving parent suddenly finds herself *on the same side* as the children and their attempt to reckon with the death of the other parent is, at least partly, a joint mission. Testimonies from the interview study suggest that the surviving parent and the children often continue to tell stories and recapture the memories of the deceased and that this functions as narrative glue for family life. The art of remembering and mourning the dead is, simultaneously, an individual and a mutual endeavour. Through sharing memories, thoughts, and feelings, the family tries to stand together, supporting each other through a very difficult time. On the other hand, losing a parent and a life partner are two very diverse forms of losses and even though the death of the same person lies at the root of their grief, the significance of this loss, as its consequences, are of radically different nature. Whilst grief does unite the living in various ways, it can equally be an experience of distance and alienation. In this section, I empirically approach the question of how these different forms of losses coexist in light of earlier discussions of shared life

and finitude. The guiding question is how intergenerationality and finitude are related to one another.

Sitting in a university lecture one day, Nina suddenly becomes aware of a strange-looking man who is sitting not far from her. Her immediate thought is: 'He has no business in here.'

> *I thought: 'Shit, he's got a bomb! I have to leave, now!' Because who will pick up Martin at kindergarten? Or what if he gets an allergic reaction and they don't know what to do? It will take them like twenty minutes in an ambulance to get out of here (sighs).*

Nina is attending university lectures as part of her master's. As her reaction here shows, her thoughts are primarily with Martin – her son who is too young to have nothing but vague memories of his father. When I visit Nina for our third and final interview, Martin is about to turn three years old and has just started *børnehave* (nursery school). Nina tells me that her stories of how Oscar loved to play the guitar have turned into stories of Martin's father having been a rockstar.

As she is sitting in lectures this day, it is only a small jump from seeing a potentially dangerous man to the thought of Martin becoming an orphan. Just as *his life* is her problem, *her death* becomes his problem. The most important question for Nina is who would pick up Martin at kindergarten or treat his allergic reactions if she were blown to pieces following a terrorist attack. This thought is unbearable and only with a substantial degree of willpower does she manage to stay in the lecture hall until the class is finished. The thought of Martin being left alone often troubles Nina and she finds this 'really, really difficult to cope with':

> *I've been thinking about writing it down, make some deals with people in case I would die. But people would think that I am crazy if I would ask, 'Do you want Martin if I die?' That is a strange question to ask.*

It is, indeed, a strange question to be asked whether one wants the responsibility of a child in case their parent would die. Yet it does not prevent Nina from spending a considerable amount of time worrying about what would happen and who would be responsible for Martin's wellbeing if she died. When Oscar was alive, these thoughts seldom bothered her. She misses what she, at our first interview, refers to as a 'feeling of immortality' that was an integral part of her life with him. Even though the we-ness characterising partnerhood is constitutively vulnerable and subject to both internal and external threats at any given time (Hägglund 2019), this way of life strikes Nina as *less mortal* than life as a single parent. There seems to be a life-affirming form of bad faith at the heart of human relationships in general and par-

enthood in particular where we, momentarily at least, manage to hide from the innumerable reminders of mortality that everyday life offers. The part of human subjectivity which is distributed to our being-with might be said to be less mortal than the Heideggerian 'mineness' that keeps me at an unbridgeable distance from others.

On the one hand, our only assured form of continued existence is the memories of others and the mark we have all made in the world. The sharedness that lies at the root of existence means we are carried onwards and remain present in history after our individual death. On the other hand, the same sharedness implies that my death will spread like rings on the water, causing irremediable wounds for the people close to me. Given that you and I were only minimally related, the coordinates of my life will be altered following your death – and, in light of the intimate relationship between life and death sketched above, so will the meaning of my death. In the case of Nina, we see how her death has acquired a whole new meaning after Oscar died. The ways in which she *feels* mortal are now increasingly intergenerationally anchored and mediated by her role as Martin's only care person. When asked specifically about how she reflects upon her own death in light of her recent loss, she tells me that she does so 'in relation to Martin'. If she dies, she tells me, 'there will be nobody left. I'm not afraid of dying, but I am afraid of leaving Martin all by himself'.

For families with children older than Martin, the worries go in the other direction. Alicia's son, Mark, has just turned nineteen – and after having lost his father at a young age, the risk of his mother dying is not foreign to him. Mark stands on the threshold to adulthood and the steps he must take during the years to come, he suspects, would be inhibited if he lost his mother as well. After having lost her life partner, Edward, to cancer, Alicia notices Mark's increased worry and the close attention he pays to her physical health. She knows all too well that she 'must be there':

> *I don't say, 'I have this little spot in my eye'. I would not say that without an explanation. It would just lead to a number of questions: 'Have you seen the doctor?', 'What did the doctor say?', and so on.*

Even though Alicia has lost two life partners at a relatively early age and is far from unfamiliar with the thought of death, she has been spared from more serious health issues, which allows her to downplay this risk in relation to her son. She considers that the best way of supporting Mark in his early adulthood is to downplay this risk and to give him a temporary impression of immortality.

Theresa, who has two children, aged eighteen and fifteen, has chosen a distinctly more outspoken strategy and has set up a concrete plan about what should happen if she died. Importantly, the impetus for doing so did

not come from her. Unlike in Alicia's case, Theresa's children have repeatedly asked how they would deal with the situation were their mother to die, and after 'the kids asked for the hundred and third time what would happen if I died as well', Theresa sat down and made a plan for her two children, Felix and Caroline:

> *Felix will adopt Caroline or be responsible for her. He is eighteen and they will stay in the house, which has been paid off. Grandma can move in and help if she wants to. Yep, that's the plan. They needed to know in case something would happen.*

This rather resolute way of approaching the risk of Therese dying has provided some solace in an otherwise difficult situation. Although Nina, Clara, Alicia, and Theresa have very different strategies when it comes to *how* to handle the worrying that they and their children experience, their ways of relating to death are mediated *through* their care for their children. Just as there is a feeling of absolute responsibility for *being there* – an imperative of staying alive shared by most care persons – they know all too well that this is something that cannot be taken for granted. There is, in other words, an intergenerational aspect of finitude that deserves more attention in the discussion of how we understand death and dying.

Conclusion

Shared finitude rests upon the conjecture that our lives are intimately intertwined and that we must speak of subjectivity in the singular plural (Nancy 2000). Taking partnerhood as one example of how our lives collide, I have outlined one specific form of connectedness. *Being* a life partner means being given over to a certain form of living and *losing* one's life partner will inevitably encompass a partial loss of self. Experiences of 'losing part of oneself' was then utilised as a prism through which a notion of shared finitude could be extracted. Drawing on Heidegger and Derrida, I sought to show how experiences of being finite are often shared – not only with the person one has lost but, equally important, with the ones still living. For bereaved life partners, these others are often the children one used to co-parent together with the now dead partner. In the immediately preceding section, I developed the notion of intergenerational death awareness and argued that life partners who become single parents predominantly relate to their own death through the consequences that this death would have for their children. Simply surviving becomes a poignantly ethical endeavour. In concluding, I illuminate these ethical predicaments further.

Parenting is a confusing experience that shatters our normal understanding of what constitutes a subject (Baraister 2009). Pregnancy emblemises the experience of being two yet/in one. Whilst the physical bond

between mother and child is cut off shortly after birth, the symbolic bond between the child and its parents can only be broken with a significant amount of pain. The birth of a child constitutes an event in Alain Badiou's (2012) terms – an experience that installs a before and after in one's life narrative, an experience that alters the conditions and values of life itself. The birth of a child often encompasses an experience of having a life that is more important than one's own – the perpetual counterargument against Charles Taylor's (1982) proclamation, in *Ethics of Authenticity*, that modernity has left us with a world exempt of something worth dying for. Most parents would gladly give their lives for the survival of their children and the rupture of the generational order that a child's death comprises is tragic in ways that seem almost unbearable.

Parenthood can be seen as an ongoing and constitutively unfinished activity that demands the constant reorganisation of one's caring register. When it is assumed to be mastered once and for all, the child has moved beyond itself, old ways of relating and caring are outdated – and parents must renew themselves accordingly. In Kierkegaardian (2009b) terms, parental love can ideally be said to be the most genuine form of love – equally faithful, unselfish, and free. The responsibility that parenting comprises seems incompatible with leaving the child behind, which the different experiences of being a bereaved single parent, presented and discussed in this article, illustrate. 'Who would be there to take care of him?,' Nina asked. Upon a pragmatic note, Nina's question can be responded to by pointing to her supporting family and – in the part of the world where she lives – a well-functioning societal system that cares for orphans. But mentioning this to Nina in an attempt of comforting her and soothing her worries would overlook the core meaning of her experience. In Nina's perspective, she must stay alive – she *cannot* die. Just as she needs Oscar and no one else, Martin needs her and no one else. Her worrying is intimately related to the singularity and irreplaceability that characterises human relationships and comes to the fore in grief (Sköld and Brinkmann 2021). Even though he would most likely survive and, if all goes well, grow up and thrive in many ways, Martin cannot find himself a new mother.

The finitude that Nina relates to through her role as primary care person for Martin is a finitude equally shared with Oscar. After and through *his* death, their life was no longer *their* life; as a consequence, *her* life has become something fundamentally different. Oscar took the key to what they had together when he left and, by doing so, he altered the meaning of Nina's life and death. Illusions of immortality are long gone and she now relates to death primarily through Martin's survival. In this way, finitude winds back and forth between the three people involved in this drama: Nina, Oscar, and Martin. The sharedness of their lives transplants into a sharedness of death. That no one can unburden another person from death does not mean that the

experience of death is isolated to one person only. In Nina's family, death is a shared enterprise.

Nina's experiences illustrate how human beings are relationally and generationally anchored. Human beings are given over to the world and others from the day we are born until the day we die. In this way, vulnerability lies at the very heart of the human condition. If there is a lesson to learn from grief, it is that everything can be taken away from us at any time. Grief also teaches us that it does happen, that death is real, and that loss is integral to survival. Most days, though, we are spared from losing. The sons or daughters we put to bed last night most often do wake up the next morning. The mother or father they expect to pick them up most often does turn up exactly where and when they are supposed to. Side by side with the worrying, which is a direct consequence of shared finitude and equally characterises what I have called intergenerational death awareness, lies a substantial portion of gratitude for one more day.

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