

Mortality, Time, and the Lessons of Silence: A Hermeneutical Analysis of Give and Take

Dedicated to the Memory of Thomas Ryan (1972-2021)

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Abstract

The following will provide a hermeneutical examination of two experiences of time: time as taking-away and time as giving. It will attempt to address the interrelated issues of death, time, and the time of silence in order to see whether time should be viewed as an inevitable force that devours all before it, or whether another concept of time should be considered, one which comes from the other as the gift of time. It will be argued that the gift of time is only fully audible in the time of silence and that gratitude is the most well-attuned response to such a time and to the time that precedes and exceeds us.

Keywords

death, otherness, time, gift, gratitude, silence

James Risser's article "Speaking from Silence: On the Intimate Relation Between Silence and Speaking" (Risser, 2019) got me thinking about a whole host of things, but one thing that kept cropping up was the issue of whether or not silence has something to teach us about our experience of time and mortality, and if it does, what is the content of the lesson. The questions that will guide the subsequent analysis are the following: Does silence contain a message about the nature of time and finite human life? And is this message all too easily missed when we mistakenly view time as something that takes away, rather than gives?

Two questions initially emerge when one reflects on the time of human life: Is time our enemy? And if so, are our reflections on time experienced as historical struggles that face inevitable defeat?

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The following reflections will seek to respond to these questions and to address some of the responses to these questions that we encounter in the western philosophical tradition.

Formulating such questions could appear, however, as an exercise in futility. After all, we know all too well that time is far more than an enemy because, unlike most enemies, it is by definition invincible. Be that as it may, not addressing the above questions amounts to little more than contenting ourselves with analyses of anxiety or foreboding and overlooking what I take to be the truth that is implicit in the time of human life and in the time of silence. Time is something that is given and not simply something one has at one's disposal or something one has an insufficient amount of. Moreover, side-stepping the above questions means being resigned to defeat by an enemy that might not deserve the epithet, invincible.

The following will take a hermeneutical approach to time and temporality that starts not by trying to describe phenomenologically what time is from a methodologically disinterested point of view, but instead to understand and interpret the experiences we have of time and in time. This approach will neither seek to grasp time as a fundamental structure of conscious experience or as belonging to the objective world of measurement and calculation, nor will it seek to take a step back from time through methodological abstention. Approaching the above questions hermeneutically means following a course of analysis which does not focus on epistemological concerns or on invariant structures of consciousness or perception, but rather on life as experienced understandingly and interpretively and on the limits of such understanding.

If, beyond the concept of lived experience, time is a reality that facilitates our comings and goings, then the analysis of time requires extra attentiveness in order to understand and interpret the manner in which time both gives and takes. It also requires that we analyze how we participate in this process dialogically, and how we come to see ourselves as partaking in something always more than ourselves and the time of our lives. The hermeneutic approach is one that I take to be more apt when it comes to harmonizing the often-irreconcilable time of human life and time of the world, the time that seems to give and the one that seems to take.

A hermeneutic approach to this theme is not only best suited because it can offer itself as a dialogue with time, but also because it is best placed to address the experience of silence and its role in revealing the nature of time as neither simply the time of human life nor the time of the world. This is the case because silence is the condition of the possibility of dialogue and understanding, and by extension the possibility of encountering time and letting time make itself felt in its transcendence. The following will thus not offer an account based on incontrovertible evidence or logical argument, instead it will opt for a dialogical or rhetorical approach that is both theoretically and existentially plausible and in keeping with the experience of time, mortality, and silence.

The Time that Takes-Away

It is arguable that the first silence we experience in time appears to be the silence of loss. It is the silence of the other who no longer responds. Such silence is what remains when our words fail and have no power to bring the one, who we love and have lost irreplaceably, back to life. The unhealable wound of time reveals itself here in the silence of the one whom we have lost, in their inability to respond, in their inability to be and in our struggle to come to terms with the

impossibility of conversations to come. The emptiness of this kind of silence is experienced as unfathomable speechlessness at someone having been stolen from us, consigned to the nothingness of death and the unintelligible silence of the grave.

Accordingly, the time of silence is not primarily known through the activity of prolonged concentration or reflection, in the form, say, of monastic prayer or meditation, or even the silence of idleness as one stares at the ceiling. It is rather most acutely felt in the form of absence, separation, interruption, and loss. The other's death, and the marked silence that follows it, is, as Derrida puts it, "the world after the end of the world" (Derrida, 2005, p. 140). This silence is in effect more like a wound in the world, a tear in the fabric of everyday life, often invisible to others, and felt in the sudden realization that nothing will ever be the same again, everything is shaken. And yet a future remains there for me, I must go on, and I must face it (Moules et al., 2004, p. 102). I am without this other, and yet their words are still in me, perhaps I even continue to speak to them, but they do not reply.

Thus, offering a hermeneutic analysis of the time of silence means finding oneself at the centre of a seemingly irresolvable conflict between the time of our lives and time as such, time as giving and time as unapologetically taking away, and speaking and awaiting a response that might never come¹. We are seemingly faced with the certain and irreversible dominion of time, and it is because of this that human life is precarious and replete with suffering. Time understood primarily as taking-away is in essence a time that tears, leaving us speechless, wounded, often unable to go on, and in search of an understanding that might well never arrive (see George, 2017, p. 3). More than desire and its frustration, more than love and its disappointments, the silence of death, of loss, is unbearably painful. It marks the disappearance of a life, its being-gone once and for all, and with that, the disappearance of the other's future words and deeds from the world. It is the disappearance of their unique ability to respond, to speak for themselves, in the flesh and blood of interpersonal discourse.

Viewed in the above terms, the time of silence appears to be the time of speechlessness and loss, which perhaps contains within it, with the passing of time and with persistent mourning, a valuable and consoling message. It instructs us perhaps to make good use of the time we have, while we still have it, deciding on who and what is worth our time and on who and what is to be avoided. Hence, confronting our mortality means making sense of it, or at least stabilizing as many meaningful pillars of it as possible and recognizing that while time takes away, it also allows us to reflect on what is truly valuable in our lives.

The Time that Gives

However, confronting our mortality means more than simply focusing on our own end or on the ends of others as alerting us to the urgency of a life lived with meaning. It also signifies focusing on the time that is granted or given to us by others. By doing so, one can in fact modify the horizon in which life and death are understood and made sense of. This would mean not only focusing on time as something to be used correctly and not wasted, or enjoying life to the utmost, but making time for others who are inevitably going to die, especially those who gave you time in the first place. Death itself, understood as our own unique and non-substitutable departure from time and in time, forces us to confront a perplexing lifespan, allocating to the human being the responsibility

to engender life, and at the end to leave behind the gift of time to those who remain. Therefore, without wanting to side-step the absolute incomprehensibility of our own slipping away into non-being, what Levinas terms, inverting Heidegger², “the impossibility of possibility” (Levinas, 1987, p. 70), there is nonetheless a paradoxical form of continued persistence in the shared meaning of a lifetime, which was given to us, even when our own life has ended. The upshot is that not even death can annul the meaning and value that life has had for people, insofar as those who remain carry the memory of and endorse the shared values and meanings that the lost and irreplaceable loved one participated in and lived by. In this sense, we are bound together and co-implicated in the shared and enduring meanings that live on in those who remain, in those who bear the imprint or carry the trace of those who have passed and the time that they made for us (see George, 2017, p. 5). The point which needs to be reinforced here is that time is not simply something that takes away, it is also something that gives or furnishes us with life sustaining meaning and value, offering us the space of possibility and its continued actualization.

To clarify, it is not simply a case of time being in essence the annihilator of what matters to us, time as a thief, time as absurdly and indiscriminately ruthless. If time is understood simply as a destructive and inescapable element that pulverizes and liquidates all before it, then time as taker becomes our default understanding. Viewed thusly, death is seen as a force that turns life into a mere that, “in which all ‘what’ dissolves into dust” (Heidegger, 1992, p. 21)³. Instead, if viewed as something that grants us the world and a world with others, we can reconceive such a gift and commit ourselves to what matters most and to those who matter most to us, seeking to intensify and elevate this time to a fulfilled time where and when possible. We do this by making time and giving time to those we love and by dedicating ourselves to what we love with equal measure. Hence, time should not be understood as a fatal foe and yet our early experiences are nonetheless those of time being taken away, or of time dragging, along with the anxiety and boredom that one faces in such moments. Due to the force and pain of such early experiences, what is often overlooked in this account, however, is that time is both the gift and giver of our existence with others and time is what is given by another before we feel it dragging or slipping by.

Jacques Derrida has stated that the giving of time, as a unique gift, is however not gratuitously given. This is because the gift of time also demands that the gift be restituted in time, and thus time in this instance makes demands of its own. Or as Derrida writes, “*There where there is gift, there is time*. What it gives, the gift, is time, but this gift of time is also a demand of time” (Derrida, 1992, p. 41). However, the real obstacle in outlining the nexus between time as such and the giving or gift of time is not that between a person who is obligated reciprocally to another person, but the eventual, unpredictable, and definitive annulment of such a gift and of the time one has been given by another.

We have to distinguish here between two situations. The first is a situation in which two people give or make time for one another reciprocally and in which time is given in a manner that is nonetheless still gratuitous. It is for the sake of the other and both parties make and give time without factoring in any repayment of this time. In this sense, the gratuitousness of the giving is reconcilable with reciprocity, with the reciprocity of the interpersonal relation irreducible to the economy of exchange or pure self-interest. It is rather the freedom to give to the other what the

other deserves and needs, to recognize the value of such giving as a good in itself, and to make time for the other that is the ultimate gift.

The second situation is a real problem and one more difficult to elucidate. This is the situation in which the givenness of time is terminated by death, and often far too soon. Starting from this situation, death seems to have the last word, and the gift of time, which was experienced, relished, and taken for granted, appears as a gift that has been rescinded or revoked. Here the gratuity of the gift has been replaced by the unfeeling authority of time, with time appearing as holding dominion over our life with others, or as a power above which nothing greater exists. Time as such both gives and takes, and we appear powerless before its untouchability, unable to persuade or implore it to do otherwise.

Still, the real enemy is not death. The real obstacle is not time as the finite duration of our lives, but rather the experience of pain or suffering. The experience of pain is one that closes off one's entire being from others and imprisons one in the immanence of an unbearable time, in which one calls out for an end to the suffering as soon as possible. Here time is experienced as both an enemy and as an element which will liberate the person from such unbearable suffering. And it also appears thusly to those who love the person in pain and often pray that the time of their suffering will pass as swiftly as possible.

However, I want to claim that even such tragic situations of human suffering, which nobody wants to diminish or downplay, do not turn time into a heartless enemy, which is all too easy and understandable to believe, or into a master who loves to give and take at will and whim. It is important to consider that the givenness of time, while potentially filled with love, passion, and concern, is fragile and runs the risk of becoming a time that tears us from the present, inflicts violence, and leads to unhappiness. Yet it is important not to identify time with some sort of malign force or death-sentence from which none will escape. More than this, by reflecting on the strength one has to muster in order to confront such a risk, by suffering and by recovering from such suffering in time, one can reconceive the givenness of time as an element that elevates and renews the world of meaning and value, and not simply puts pay to it.

Time as the Gift of Love and Care

From the biological and the biographical perspective, the one who gives birth to us makes it possible for us to exist. They are the ones who bring us into the light of the world and into the time of life. It is difficult to say, then, whether such an event is simply caused or whether it is willed, whether we are simply supported materially or loved, and whether the origin of our being in the world should be called "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*) as a "nullity" (*Nichtigkeit*), following Heidegger (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 330-331), or instead being awaited, welcomed, or expected. Yet from the point of view of a fully actualized life, the time we have is truly opened up only when someone gives to us their time and in so giving, becomes the self they are. In this moment, the person giving us time is simultaneously entering into a temporal relationship with themselves that involves a giving and a receiving of self. In this sense, even if one is brought into the world by accident, even if one's arrival is unplanned, it remains true that one is delivered into a world of care and concern, which is distinct from claiming that "care itself, in its very essence, is permeated with nullity through and through" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 331). I do not want to claim that

Heidegger's analysis is simply wrong; it most certainly is not. Yet it is partial and overlooks the manner in which one's impulse to become who one is and to take up the frequently unbearable weight of one's responsibility and freedom, even if it arrives years after one's biological birth, is tied to being cared for, being welcomed. It is recognizing others as having given you the gift of their time, and of having brought you into the time of the world as relational time⁴.

More specifically, being in the world reveals itself most intensely when someone, usually out of love, though sometimes out of duty, too, opens up the time of possibility for us beyond the pain of isolation that closes off possibilities of existence and in so doing closes us in on ourselves and on our own immediate wants and appetites. The other then helps us overcome the pain of time, and with that the eventual pain of loss – especially so if this loving other is the one you lose – and opens us up to a future time that is other than the time of one's eventual vanishing from the world; to a time that is filled with the promise of happiness. This experience of a time that is filled with promise is a time born of love, care, and devotion, and it is given to us by the other. Here it is necessary to recognize that being human as being-in-the-world is not only opened up fully by anxiety and guilt, or that uncanniness brings us face to face with the nothingness, which is at the same time the possibility of authentic existence, as Heidegger has it (Heidegger, 1962, pp. 390-393)⁵. The point instead is that being-in-time must not be linked purely to being-towards-death as essentially non-relational, ownmost, and absolutely singular in nature, but also to the other that brings us into the world of time, speaks to us and for many years speaks for us, and by doing so gives us time. Or as Lisa Guenther puts it, "The gift of time does not originate in me; it is not something that I "have" first and "give" later. Rather, the giving of time to the Other is made possible by the Other" (Guenther, 2006, p. 102).

Consequently, the time we are dealing with is also an embodied time, since the hands of the other that hold us before we know how to support ourselves, and the warmth of their embrace, are tied fundamentally to finite human existence as an expression and outpouring of care⁶. This other is present as embodied care and devotion, protecting us from the agony of isolation and in this way giving us time and ensuring that what takes place takes place in the fullness of time and at the right time. It is these hands that guide, point, and encourage. It is these words of devotion that help us, in turn, to see the need in others, and to give time to others. It is this which is contrasted with the time of our own singular and non-relational death⁷, of our ineluctable fall into nothingness and the unshareability of such a fall. With this contrast, I do not want to negate the importance of our individual mortality and of our need to reflect on our own lifetime as unavoidably finite and uniquely mine. It is thus also imperative not to conceal the fact that "The horror of seeing our own life candle is like a flaring up of the innermost anxiety that is given with the certainty of being alive" (Gadamer, 2019, p. 70).

However, again I want to emphasize that it is only possible to think about one's own mortality starting from a reflection on time as giving or taking, as indicating a sense of gratitude towards the other or a sense foreboding in the face of the unintelligibility of death, of "the flickering of the candle on the verge of burning itself out" (Gadamer, 2019, p. 70). The difficulty, however, is that on reflection one soon discovers that time is always already given to us by others, before I can know it, measure it, or have it, and it is intensified and renewed by love and devotion as the origin of time given, not taken. From this perspective, death does not appear as a natural exit point from

time, or as an anxiety inducing transition into mere nothingness and unintelligibility. Moreover, recognizing this is not tantamount to fleeing in the face of anxiety or of talking myself out of my own nothingness. If time is given by another, one capable of love and devotion, then death does not have the same origin as time.

The Time of Silence

It should have become clear by now that the allotted time of one's life should not be understood as an imminent threat, something that can be revoked by the random brutality of an indifferent nature, or as an unbearable 'doing time' until your time is up. Alternatively, time should be thought in terms of the time of silence. This is not, of course, the time of unintelligible speechlessness because the time of silence still speaks insofar as it expresses something urgent, something understandable to others and as such shareable, and yet not simply conveyable in ordinary language. The time of silence both springs from and awaits a response from the other which can reveal the full sense of our shared existence, giving me the opportunity not simply to sit with the silence, but also to subsequently break the silence and attempt to put the uncanniness of my experiences into words which are by definition understandable by another. As Risser puts it aptly, "the silence of listening that holds open the possibility for the return of speech within dialogical speaking that is to say, it holds open the articulating of speech that can issue in a communicative understanding" (Risser, 2019, p. 7).

Rather than understanding time as something that limits and delimits us, something that confines or imprisons us without hope of reprieve, time should be seen, I think, as something one enters into with others, but more originally because of others. The time of silence brings to the fore an awareness of the limits of incontrovertible certainties, as well as the importance of truthfulness understood as *being there* for others as a genuine mode of being myself. This is hence not the withdrawn silence of the mystics, or the silence of isolated meditation or mindfulness, but the silence that draws others closer to you because you are there for them in giving them time. This understanding of silence is neither the silence of self-withdrawal from the world nor the silence that often precedes and alerts us to an imminent threat. It is not empty or uncanny, and in this experience of silence one learns to listen to the fullness of time, what it has to tell us, rather than to measure it, bemoan its slipping away, or lament it dragging on interminably.

What is it that I can learn from listening to time? Well, firstly I can come to the freeing realization that I alone do not have to carry the world on my shoulders, that the world will go on without me, but the meaningfulness that I have received from others and in turn bestowed on the world will live on in that world. Its message is that I am not absolute, that I am a relative being because I am essentially who I am in responding to another who has given me time. Here being relative does not mean being irrelevant, it means rather, as Gadamer puts it, "that I can and must think beyond myself, that I can and must think myself away" (Gadamer, 2016, p. 69). It means seeing oneself in a free relation with the world and as mattering to others because I have been freed by another to be my own possibility and yet to recognize that the world and others in the world will outlast me. The time of silence, and the time of listening to this silence, means recognizing that the silence is both an openness to others, being-together in silence, and something which is opened for me by

another who always precedes me. This is the other who cares for me, speaks to me and for me, before I know myself as myself.

Seen in the above light, instead of viewing silence as the speechlessness one falls into in the face of the absurdity of existence, one can view time through a different lens and rethink the nature of silence as other than speechlessness in front of the absurdity of it all. The alternative is to see the time of silence and to listen to the time of silence as that fragile horizon of sense that comes from the other, from the world, bringing me closer to the other, and freeing me for more horizon-widening understanding in the future. This is not, however, about grasping or knowing something better, this is not about the cognitive mastery of my existence. It is rather something akin to disclosing the limits of my understanding and seeing such limits as freeing and making possible a continual understanding otherwise. The risk of not listening to this time of silence is that one falls into hopelessness in the face of existence taken as brute and unforgiving, a time which is continually being stolen away from us, and in so doing forgetting what is beyond ourselves and our immediate and immanent wants and needs. Instead of turning a deaf ear to the time of silence, instead of taking existence as filled with insuperable meaninglessness and suffering, one needs to turn towards this silence, not as retreat from the world, but as genuine engagement with the fragile meaningfulness of the world and its origin in a time that is given to us by others. I am not claiming that this move will eliminate the important distinction, as individuating principle, between my time and the time of the other. I am simply claiming that one must recognize that time has its roots in another's time and in the devotion that others practice by giving us that time.

The time of silence is hence not the proverbial silence of the tomb, which awaits each and every one of us. It is an answer to these questions: To whom do I belong? And to whom do I owe my existence? It is a silence that awaits these questions and one that is capable of responding to them. Yet no one can ask these questions for me, these questions must be asked by me because of my unique relation to such silence and its time for me. Accordingly, the time of silence does have a message. And the kind of response one receives, however, is such that one is freed from becoming consumed with knowing and controlling the world around me. One is freed to focus instead on belonging fully to the world of time and meaning, being in it as participative and receptive, and recognizing that such time and meaning comes to me from others and from the otherness of the world. In this way, we are faced with orienting ourselves in a world truthfully and recognizing the debt we owe to others in enabling us to be truthful and to belong to something which is greater than ourselves. Or as Dennis Schmidt puts it, faced with the immeasurability of death, I "recognize that I am wedded to something larger than that which is at my disposal and which I define. I find myself belonging to an alterity beyond representation, beyond measure" (Schmidt, 1997, p. 197).

In this experience of time, there emerges the underprized nature of silence, not as a space of meditation, mindfulness, or tranquility, but as the "event of encounter" (Gadamer, 2007, p. 219) in which I understand, perhaps for the first time, that my time is constituted by the other who precedes me and opens the way for me. The silence, which I must learn to listen to, is an intimate silence in the sense that it lives and endures only insofar as it brings together, marks a time together, and lends an ear to those who have touched us and by doing so enable us to touch others.

Conclusion

One might object that the above analysis of time is purely a cunning form of human consolation that tries to exorcise our anxieties or talk ourselves out of our hostilities towards time by seeing it as a gift. This, it could be said, circumvents the tragic nature of human loss and the inexplicably precarious nature of human existence. Another objection might be that the above is a form of self-trickery that runs the risk of putting the time of one's life in the hands of others who might not be loving, devoted, or caring. That said, we know all too well that what is given to us, our human condition, specifically: body, mind, capacities, and experiences, are not static elements, given immediately, but are instead elements that need working out, working on, refining, and perspective on over time. Thus consolation, if this is the right word for my analysis, means elaborating on and interpreting the suffering of life, making sense of it, inserting it within a life-story, and recognizing that others are telling a story about me before I am aware of my own story. It also means learning from it and sharing it with others so as not to render human isolation inevitable and suffering meaningless. If this is what one understands by consolation, then I am happy to accept that label.

Moreover, and responding to the core of such hypothetical objections, if we are who we are, and are able to battle against time, seek to subdue, explain, or order it as much as possible in our lives, this nonetheless evinces that time was first put before us and is not something primarily taken away from us. As such, we are first given a multitude of possibilities by others and how we relate to such gifts, how we participate in this receiving, is part of becoming responsible for and grateful to something that precedes and exceeds us. Therefore, the feeling of time's rapid slipping away and the dread of it taking-away all that matters to us, needs to be translated into the time of silence as taking cognizance of the puzzle of our mortality: We have limited time to partake in what is in excess of our allotted time as always already given to us. In such taking cognizance, we do not so much negate human anxiety and speechlessness in the face of the absurdity of life as we do move towards gratitude and towards a hope that the truthfulness of my time will resonate with others and repay the gift that we first received from them. Drawing on Levinas, Guenther makes a similar point, claiming that "The gift of time uproots possession for the sake of a future that is not mine, but in which I may find hope" (Guenther, 2006, p. 107).

Perhaps in a different vein to Levinas, however, Fernando Pessoa puts things otherwise, writing: "The Gods give us little, and the little they give is false. But if they give it, however false it be, the giving is true. I accept it, and resign myself to believing you" (Pessoa, 1999). Again, no one can answer for another, and everyone must take it upon themselves to respond to the time they have been given in their own time. In this sense, Heidegger is correct when he writes, "No one can take the other's dying away from him" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 284). Nonetheless, the time of silence is also the time of gratitude and recognition, the possibility of which is given to us before we even know ourselves as ourselves.

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¹ The name and work of Levinas is a notable absence in this article. The following will take some inspiration from Levinas; however, in my analysis of time as given by the other and the time of silence as something that needs listening to, I will look to offer a more hermeneutically oriented model so as to understand the reciprocal and dialogical relation that exists between my becoming a self, the self that I am, and what it is that I receive from the other as gift, namely time, which is the invisible and often unrecognized basis of my becoming a self. As such, I will not be talking in terms of the radical heterogeneity of the other, or of the asymmetrical, infinite, and non-reciprocal responsibility to and for the other. I will instead be focusing on the relative and intimate alterity that gives us time and in so doing gives us the possibility to be a self and

to recognize this gift in the time of silence. I see this as playing out in terms of a reciprocal and symmetrical conversing with the other, even if this other gives me the gift of time before I know myself as myself.

² Heidegger's own phrasing is "Dasein finds itself face to face with the 'nothing' of the possible impossibility of its existence" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 310). While it is beyond the scope of this article, it should be noted that *Being and Time* is full of tensions when it comes to the phenomenological priority that seems to be accorded to non-relationality, being-towards-death, and extreme individuation. One such tension is to be seen in the following passage in which Heidegger appears to state that his analysis of authentic individualization is itself a propaedeutic to understanding how Dasein can exist authentically only by existing for the sake of others, or at least being for the possibility of others, writing: "As a possibility that is not shared, death individualizes but only in order, as the possibility that cannot be overtaken, to make Dasein understand that, as being-with, it is for the possibility-of-being of others" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 309).

³ Heidegger writes, "In being together with death everyone is brought into the 'how' that each can be in equal measure; into a possibility with respect to which no one is distinguished; into the 'how' in which all 'what' dissolves into dust" (Heidegger, 1992, p. 21).

⁴ Heidegger comes close to saying something like this in a 1925 letter to Hannah Arendt, writing: And still one would like to 'say' something and to offer oneself to the other, but we could only say that the world is no longer mine and yours—but ours—only that what we do and achieve belongs not to you and me but to us. And only that all kindness to others and every unforced, authentic act is our life. Only that joyful struggle—and the definitive commitment to something chosen—are ours (*Letters: 1925–1975*, p. 19).

⁵ It is important to be accurate with Heidegger's analysis and not turn it into a straw man. He is clear that anxiety in the face of nothingness is not fear in the face of the absurdity of my inescapable and future non-existence, but rather anxiety in the face of my unique ability to be the self I am towards an end which is mine and mine alone. He writes, "Anxiety in the face of death is anxiety 'in the face of' that potentiality-for-Being which is one's ownmost, nonrelational, and not to be outstripped. That in the face of which one has anxiety is Being-in-the-world itself. That about which one has this anxiety is simply Dasein's potentiality-for-Being. Anxiety in the face of death must not be confused with fear in the face of one's demise" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 295). It should be said that Heidegger's is in no way a nihilistic project, and neither is it a "philosophy of death" or nullity in the more absurd sense, a project in which the being of the human being is slowly reduced to a pure and empty negativity (GA 65, 283/223). If anything, it is just the opposite. One is not dealing with an attempt to reduce the human being to its ultimate and indeterminate death and nothingness, but rather with an attempt to reconceive being-toward-death starting from the essence of the human being grasped not so much as the basis of a nullity but rather as the site of the sudden opening of time. Or in Heidegger's own words, "... the issue is surely not to dissolve being human [*Menschsein*] in death and to declare being human an utter nullity. On the contrary, the task is to draw death into Da-sein...." (Heidegger, GA 65, pp. 285/224).

⁶ Or as Rudi Visker puts it, quite beautifully in fact, "in proximity I bear myself in my own hands – the Saying that only says itself and nothing else, says "here I am" and offers them to the Other – here I no longer have myself, so to speak, fully in hand. It is rather that my hands have me, or that I have become my hands. The tension between 'having hands' and 'being hands' has disappeared" (Visker, 2004, 87n.).

⁷ It should be added that Heidegger, in paragraph 74 of *Being and Time*, does indeed address the issue of the communal nature of death and dying, where commonality is to be located in our shared finitude, in which singular fates are thought and brought together as a common destiny, and in which death is reflected on and worked out communally. Without this mortal and communal context, death merely signals the end of all sense making. Instead, what Heidegger is looking for in his analysis of a community is one that, as

Walter Brogan writes, “sustains its being in common precisely by holding in question the closure of its own unity and holding its unity out toward and open to what has remained unsaid in its history” (Brogan, 2002, p. 245).