



Aporias

Jacques Derrida , Thomas Dutoit (Translator)

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"My death—is it possible?"

That is the question asked, explored, and analyzed in Jacques Derrida's new book. "Is my death possible?" How is this question to be understood? How and by whom can it be asked, can it be quoted, can it be an appropriate question, and can it be asked in the appropriate moment, the moment of "my death"? One of the anorectic experiences touched upon in this seminal essay is the impossible, yet unavoidable experience that "my death" can never be subject to an experience that would be properly *mine*, that I can *have* and *account* for, yet that there is, at the same time, nothing closer to me and more properly *mine* than "my death."

Aporias Details

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Marissa Perel says

I found this easier to read than *The Gift of Death*. Transcendent and problematizing in the best way - in only a way Derrida can do, he opens up the concept of the limit and the beyond, bringing the reader to a place of possibility in life, love, art, language.

Alex Obrigewitsch says

An interesting investigation into the aporia or non-passage of the passage that is dying; the crossing (or non-crossing) of the limit of death that is no limit; the ever shifting border or margine dividing/uniting life and death, the proper and improper (eigentlich and enteigentlich).
Heidegger meets Derrida awaiting him at the end, just as he finds himself, and Derrida himself and the other.

Richard says

The good: Interesting and compelling from an ethical perspective. Where Wittgenstein early in his career proposed the "dissolution" of insoluble philosophical problems, Derrida's overall point seems to be that doing philosophy mandates an ethical commitment to experiencing those insolubilities, to simultaneously going in circles and being stuck, and admitting it.

The bad: Repetitive, and English translation clearly suffers from the lack of evocative translations of not only various French but German terms as well, since it's primarily a riff on Heidegger. In particular, there's a distinction between "dying," "demising" and "perishing" that doesn't work very well in English, especially if you're accustomed to the American legal English usage of "demise" as a verb.

Aaron Records says

I chose to read this book for my final research paper in an upper level existentialism and phenomenology course at my college. We had read some of Derrida's *Negotiations* earlier in class, as well as some Heidegger, and I found myself very interested in aporias, Dasein, 'nothing,' and *différance*.

If you enjoy -- perhaps it would be better to say if you are interested in -- Heidegger's philosophy and want Derrida's opinion on Heidegger, this is the book for you to read. It is not terribly long, but it is best read slow, like most Derrida and Heidegger is. I'd advise taking detailed notes to review later since Derrida I believe actually gave this book as a talk for a conference, so it can sometimes be repetitive or ordered in a confusing way. Notes will help you to navigate the messy parts.

Derrida is mainly concerned with borders, limits, and the idea of death in relation to a broad ontology of borders, and much more. Of course, it is far more complicated than this, but death is the main subject in the book. I would suggest reading John Russon's essay "The Self as Resolution: Heidegger, Derrida and the

Intimacy of the Question of the Meaning of Being" as well as consulting the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's Derrida and Heidegger pages so that ideas like *aporia*, *differance*, the *arrivant*, and all the Heideggerian jargon do not overwhelm you. Russon's essay helps lay a solid basis for many of the ideas I just mentioned. You can also read Hakhamanesh Zangeneh's essay "An Impossible Waiting—Reading Derrida's Reading of Heidegger in *Aporias*" as a supplemental text to help distill Derrida's main points about Heidegger. After all, it would be a shame to read this book and forget most of what it says only a few days later.

I hope my suggestions help, since I know continental philosophy can be some of the most cryptic subject matter. But I really believe that if you are interested in Heidegger this is a great book to both test your knowledge of his philosophy and expand your perspective on that titanic work of 20th century philosophy, *Being and Time*.

Tread carefully!

Abdullah Ba?aran says

One of the best of Derrida's corpus. [Others are *Margins of Philosophy* and *On the Name*]

sologdin says

Point of departure is an incidental remark of Diderot's regarding Seneca: "The defect of letting oneself be carried by the interest of the cause that one is defending beyond the limits of truth is such a general defect that Seneca must sometimes be pardoned for it"(2). Is the "limit" an indication that 'truth is finite,' or that 'truth is finished' (1)? (All of the RSB fans of course are now chuckling about 'IS NOT TRUTH INFINITE?' Bakker may actually have this text in mind.)

Diderot had been commenting on a particular passage of Seneca, which D summarizes as:

we would discover that this discourse on death contains, among many other things, a rhetoric of borders, a lesson in wisdom concerning the lines that delimit the right of absolute property, the right of property to our own life, the proper of our existence, in sum, a treatise about the tracing of traits as the borderly edges of what in sum belongs to us, belonging as much to us as we properly belong to it. (3)

This consideration develops into the crossing of "the ultimate border" (8):

What is it to pass the term of one's life? Is it possible? Who has ever done it and who can testify to it? The 'I enter,' crossing the threshold. This 'I pass' (*perao*) puts us on a path, if I may say, of the *aporos* or of the *aporia*: the difficult or the impracticable, here the impossible, passage, the refused, denied, or prohibited passage, indeed, the nonpassage (id.)

D prefers "perishing" over "dying" because it "retains something of *per*, of the passage of the limit, of the traversal marked in Latin by the *pereo*, *perire*" (31).

Some definitional matter:

Aporia, rather than antimony: the word *antimony* imposed itself up to a certain point since, in terms of the law (*nomos*), contradictions or antagonisms among equally imperative laws were at stake. However, the antimony here better deserves the name of aporia insofar as it is neither an ‘apparent or illusory’ antimony, not a dialectizable contradiction in the Hegelian or Marxist sense, not even a ‘transcendental illusion in a dialectic of the Kantian type,’ but instead an interminable experience. (16)

More definitional matter:

It is not necessarily a failure or a simple paralysis, the sterile negativity of the impasse. It is neither stopping at it nor overcoming it. (When someone suggests to you a solution for escaping the impasse, you can be almost sure that he is ceasing to understand, assuming that he had understood anything up to that point.) (32)

D traces the term *aporia*, a “tired word of philosophy and of logic” (12) through its use by Aristotle inter alia (for Aristotle, it simply means “I’m stuck”). This develops into a critique of Heidegger, who diagnoses “in the whole tradition, from Aristotle to Hegel, a hegemony of the vulgar concept of time insofar as it privileges the now” (14), which D wants to work over as “the Aristotelian-Hegelian aporetic of time” (15). Heidegger becomes vulnerable to D when he “suggests a delimitation of the borders of existential analysis” (which latter term is kinda the cool kids’ way of referring to misanthropic rightwing phenomenology, I guess), which delimitation “is always the argument of presupposition” (28). For H, anything involving “the span of life and about the mechanisms of death presupposes an ontological problematic” (id.), which as we all know is the great villainy of heideggerianism, kinda how like officious intermeddlers are the great villains for the ancient common law, ultra-left trotskyite deviationists, for Stalinism, and lumpenized antisocial nihilists, for me.

H wants to ensure that the ontic is controlled by “an ontology of *Dasein*, an ontology that is itself preliminary, ‘superordinate,’ prior to an ontology of life” (29). Therefore “the existential analysis of death is, in turn, subordinate to a characterization of *Dasein*’s basic state” (id.). The existential analysis of *Dasein* is accordingly “an absolute priority”; the ontology of *Dasein* is “presupposed by an ontology of life” (id.). (We are solemnly informed that H uses ‘*Dasein*’ “because he does not yet allow himself any philosophical knowledge concerning what man is as animal rationale, or concerning the ego, consciousness, the soul, the subject, the person, and so forth, which are all presuppositions of metaphysics or of ontical knowledge, such as anthropo-thanatology” (id.). Oh, of course H does not yet allow himself any presuppositions! FFS.) All of these superordinate and subordinate “ontological regions” are “legitimately separated by pure, rigorous, and indivisible borders” (id.).

H is jittery that we think “what the death proper to *Dasein* is” (30), “the proper and authentic being-able of *Dasein*” (id.) (I know, right?). This develops from the somewhat silly to the outright asinine: “Demise (*Ableben*) is thus proper to *Dasein*, in any case, to what can properly die but it is not dying (*Sterben*). *Dasein* presupposes dying, but it is not death, properly speaking. ‘*Dasein* never perishes. *Dasein* however can demise only as long as it is dying.’ [internal citation to H omitted]” (38). After referring to H’s “paradoxes and chiasmi,” D pulls the motherfucking rug out from under our NSDAP greaser:

This articulated set of distinctions (between perishing and dying, but also, within the existential field of *Dasein*, between death properly speaking and demise) thus presupposes *Dasein*. (40)

Down my way, we refer to this type of aporetic as *Boom Headshot*. As though that weren’t sufficient, D continues: problematic closure occurs when “the same methodological presuppositions concern the ‘metaphysics of death.’ The existential analysis of death is also anterior, neutral, and independent with

regard to all the questions and all the answers pertaining to the metaphysics of death: the questions and answer that concern survival, immortality, the beyond, or the other side of this side” (52). H will have already dogmatically declared that “the ontological interpretation of death precedes all ontical speculation operating beyond, on the other side” (54).

It is impossible to overemphasize the importance of what is being decided, so authoritatively and so decisively, at the very moment when what is in question is to decide on what must remain undecided. (54)

D notes two things here: declaring existential analysis superordinate has “no limit” (54), and it is insufficient to point out that H privileges “the ‘this side,’” but rather “it is the originary and underivable character of death, as well as the finitude of the temporality in which death is rooted, that decides and forces us to decide to start from here first” (55). This “decision to decide from the *here* of this side is not simply a methodological decision, because it decides on the very method” (56).

Fairly sure that the ‘ultimate aporia’ (56) is that “death is also for Dasein, Heidegger ultimately says, the possibility of an impossibility” (68). Glad that’s cleared up!

Recommended for the absolute arrivant, readers who add the conceptual demarcation to the problematic closure and the anthropological border, and persons who think the possibility of impossibility as aporia.

Patrice says

Well, sort of read...

I bought this book because it was assigned for a class I was going to take on Freedom and Mortality. After reading the first book on Mortality I dropped the course. I was in no mood to dwell on the inevitable. Which actually was the point of the book...we deny death and act as though we're immortal. Yes! OK by me!

Although I knew Derrida was supposed to be hard I thought I'd give him a try. After all, how could a hundred page book defeat me? HA!

I made it through 11 pages! I consider myself defeated. Maybe one day I'll give it another try, hopefully with someone who can explain it to me.

Ryan says

I recently finished this quick book (funny to call anything by Derrida "quick). He begins a treatment of what it means to "live" poststructural philosophy and takes as his starting point the idea of death and the trace. Fascinating book, but it makes you contemplate your own life.

Lorraine says

Interesting book. I completely agree with his take on Heidegger. I especially liked the end (but I won't spoil it for you)

