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What Is Living and What Is Dead in Attention?

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Abstract

The goal of this article is to outline a triangular nexus between life, death, and attention. Not only does the act of attending animate or enliven consciousness in the passage from inactional and indeterminate potentiality to the actional determination of a noema but it also coincides with intentionality, itself the form of life proper to consciousness. Upon outlining the “enlivening” element in attention and the overlap between attention and psychic life as such, I will discuss its deadening aspects understood both in terms of the petrification resulting from a fixed, attentive, captivated gaze and, more positively, in terms of the potentiality of the inactional mode, in which consciousness lies dormant.

Keywords

attention, intentionality, consciousness, life, death

Is there any part of life [μέρος του βίου] excepted, to which attention does not extend?

Epictetus, *Discourses*

I am so afraid of distracting you from life, from everything that awaits you, from everything that the others desire from you . . .

Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard*

At the source of psychic life, attention animates consciousness. In statements such as this, phenomenology sets itself apart from psychology and resists the seductions of the cognitivist method and its operationalized vocabulary called forth to illuminate and eliminate philosophy’s metaphysical excesses. Since Husserl and Heidegger, we have known that in order not to lapse into a crude psychological empiricism, the phenomenology of consciousness ought to be executed as an ontology, as an inquiry into the mode of being unique to consciousness or, more generally, to Dasein. By implication, any phenomenology of attention worthy of the name must keep to an ontological method. If

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phenomenologists adopt this barest of guidelines, then the debates on the correctness or incorrectness of Husserl's technical definition of attention as a ray of meaning-bestowal emanating from the regard of the pure ego will recede to the background of their concerns.¹ Concomitantly, Husserlian insights into this mental process should be grafted onto the onto-existential framework of pure phenomenology and should, thereby, disclose something about the very being of consciousness.

The ego 'lives' (*lebt*) in its acts,² and this is not just a turn of a phrase or a manner of speaking. Although psychic life is merely one kind of living among many others, it is—allegedly—the only life that is wholly and finally alive in the absolute actuality of the pure present that hinges upon the inner folding of subjectivity ("I hear myself speak"). While being-alive is one of the most crucial ontological attributes of consciousness, the conjunction of attention and this self-assured life is complex, manifold, overdetermined. Not only does the act of attending animate or enliven consciousness in the passage from inactional and indeterminate potentiality to the actional determination of a noema, but it also coincides with intentionality, itself the form of life proper to consciousness. Upon outlining the "enlivening" element in attention and the overlap between attention and psychic life as such, I will discuss its deadening aspects understood both in terms of the petrification resulting from a fixed, attentive, captivated gaze and, more positively, in terms of the potentiality of the inactional mode, in which consciousness lies dormant.

I. Attentional Animation

Husserl conceptualizes attention in *Ideas I* as an act that singles out a noema from the "obscurely intended horizon of indeterminate actuality" surrounding the luminous sphere of consciousness. Still in the world of the natural attitude, "I can send the rays of the illuminative regard of attention into this horizon with varying results. Determining presentations, obscure at first and then becoming alive [*verlebendige Vergegenwärtigungen*], haul something out for me."³

¹ For an example of such examinations, see P. Sven Arvidson, "A Lexicon of Attention: From Cognitive Science to Phenomenology," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 2 (2003): 99–132.

² Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, First Book. trans. F. Kersten (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1983), 225. (Hereafter, *Ideas I*.)

³ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 52.

Attention marks an internal shift in the dark halo of indeterminacy that surrounds consciousness with an unsurpassable horizon. Thanks to the illuminative rays it sends, a particular region, which was only “obscurely intended” before, comes alive in my first comportment to it as a noematic object, permitting consciousness itself, as the consciousness *of* this noema, to pass into the actional mode. In other words, there is no consciousness of... without attention to...; attention needs to be understood as a kind of proto-intentionality that, in the literal sense of the German *Aufmerksamkeit*, pre-delineates, marks, or metes out the noetic-noematic correlation it conjures from the dark halo of indeterminacy.⁴ Hence, the initial enunciation of the paradox of attention: a concrete mental process, it simultaneously acts as a non-transcendental condition of possibility for the universal medium of consciousness, namely, intentionality.

To be sure, the ego’s illuminative regard is unable to dissipate the darkness of indeterminacy *in toto*. It is possible to speak, at best, of displacements in the focus of the look that sheds eidetic light onto a particular region of the dark halo and wrests it from provisional obscurity for a finite period of time. As the direction of the regard changes, turning toward another cross-section of the halo and temporarily lighting it up, the previously illuminated region drifts back into indeterminacy. (The faculties of retention and protention that presuppose a reflux or a projection of attention can do little to prevent this relapse into obscurity.) When in the famous paragraph 92 of *Ideas I* Husserl contemplates the “noetic and noematic aspects of attentional changes [*attentionalen Wandlungen*],” he hints, precisely, at these displacements, shifts, and modulations. In a recent perceptive study, Natalie Depraz conceptually translates this feature of attention into “a concretely embodied ‘modulator’ inherent in every intentional act.”⁵ The description of the attentional modulation of intentionality as “concretely embodied” points in the direction of *somatic* and *kinetic* life, of a bodily taking-position toward a newly illuminated region by physically turning one’s regard in its direction. But the shifts that define the act of attending to... are equally relevant to *psychic* life, whose liveliness derives from the temporal flow of alterations in “the distribution of attention and its modes,” or to put it differently, from the changes in the “self-distribution” of

⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty corroborates the near identity of intentionality and attention, when he writes in *Phenomenology of Perception* [trans. Collin Smith (New York: Humanities Press, 1964)] that the “still ‘empty’ but already determinate intention... *is* attention itself” (28).

⁵ Natalie Depraz, “Where Is the Phenomenology of Attention that Husserl Intended to Perform? A Transcendental Pragmatic-Oriented Description of Attention,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 37 (2004): 14.

the ego, which remains in attendance insofar as it does not come detached from the rays it sends to its surrounding world.⁶

The pre-delineation of the noema in attention corresponds to Heidegger's notion of pre-interpretation whereby all phenomena that show themselves to Dasein do so with a modicum of sense. Attentional animation bestows meaning on a cross-section of the dark halo of indeterminacy that surrounds consciousness and holds in reserve—but does not withhold—meaning and sense prior to a full-fledged intentional comportment. In Heidegger's formulation, “man never simply regards purely material things, or indeed technical things, as such but rather ‘animates’ [*beseelt*] them.”⁷ Aside from the animist connotations that force Heidegger to call this way of speaking “somewhat misleading,” the animation or, indeed, the ensoulment of things is the upshot of bringing consciousness to life. The ego's personal attendance at the ray of meaning emanating from it does not cease even when it strikes its object,⁸ which, thereby, imbibes its living presence. Freud's word for this process is *cathexis*—the initial investment of psychic energy into an object, to which a certain quantity of the libidinal flow “binds” itself—underpinning the fragmentary psychoanalytic theory of attention sketched out in the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (1900). The quasi-magical quality of the animated object allows it to retain a trace of the attentive ego-regard that singled it out against the horizon of determinable indeterminacy and rendered it significant.

The underside of my attendance at the site to which I attend is the dispersed manner of my being in the world. With the shifts of my regard from one object of concern to another, the sites of my personal attendance multiply exponentially without affording me an opportunity to dwell in or on any single one of them. The ego's “self-distribution” through attentional modifications evokes Heidegger's scathing critique of curiosity in *Being and Time*. Unlike the changes in attention that perpetually modulate any given intentional comportment, those that single out new noematic objects seem to partake of the “restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty” characteristic of curiosity. Yet, strangely enough, these same characteristics apply to distraction: “In not tarrying along, curiosity is concerned with the constant possibil-

⁶ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 223.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, trans. W. McNeill and N. Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 204.

⁸ “The ray of attention presents itself as emanating from the pure Ego and terminating in that which is objective, as directed to it or being diverted from it. The ray does not become detached from the Ego; on the contrary, it is itself an Ego-ray, and remains an Ego-ray” (Husserl, *Ideas I*, 225).

ity of *distraction* [Zerstreuung].”⁹ The vivacity of psychic life indebted to rapid attentional shifts proves to be illusory, as Heidegger bitterly remarks on the next page: “Curiosity, for which nothing is closed off, and idle talk, for which there is nothing that is not understood, provide themselves . . . with the guarantee of a ‘life’ which, supposedly, is genuinely ‘lively’ [*lebendigen Lebens*].”

It is true that there can be no dispersion of obscurity and indeterminacy, however local and circumscribed its effects might be, without a certain degree of self-dispersion, of being in the world alongside the things of my practical concern. Attention requires some measure of distraction, but this is not to say that it is indistinguishable from its opposite. The attentional animation of consciousness must be recognized for what it is: the first, albeit relentlessly repeated, demarcation of the intentional field or a pre-interpretation of the noema that demands a further deepening and, perhaps, a different kind of attention (call it “attentive,” as opposed to “attentional”) capable of tarrying along with the intended singularity. Although the enlivening of consciousness by the attentional regard is a necessary precondition for egoic life, this life cannot be reduced to its initial moment, which opens up a passage to the actional mode but does not entirely coincide with it.

Such non-coincidence reminds us of the extent to which the animating role of attention is anchored in finitude; it enlivens, so to speak, from the side of death. What is entailed in attentional animation “from the side of death”? If attention both isolates noeses and demarcates noemas in anticipation of the intentional comportment, if it “precedes” those explicit psychic acts in which the ego lives, then it refers to a non-actional act beholden to the halo of indeterminacy *qua* indeterminacy and incompletely disengaged from the grip of death. In referring to attentional animation as “the passage to the actional mode of consciousness,” I have indicated my hesitation to subscribe to its wholesale identification with psychic life. As long as the passage to the actional is not accomplished (and nothing guarantees its accomplishment), the “sending” of the attentive rays will be in vain, since in and of itself it does not dissipate indeterminacy but contributes to its consolidation in the manner of the erratically shifting disco-lights that do not dwell on anything they illuminate.

More dramatically still, in Husserl’s own words, “the ‘field of attentive regard’ embracing everything which appears is not infinite [*mein ‘Blickfeld’ der*

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1962), H 172. Page references will be preceded by H, indicating the German page numbers given in the margins of this text.

Aufmerksamkeit, das alles Erscheinende umspannt, ist nicht unendlich”.¹⁰ The totality of what appears is finite because it does not present itself to an abstract and disembodied subject (e.g., God). The ego simply cannot attend to everything, which is another way of saying that it cannot be present, in attendance everywhere, all the time. The finitude of the field spanned by the ego-regard depends on the fact that, incapable of dissolving the dark halo of indeterminacy once and for all, attention merely traverses one exceedingly limited cross-section of the halo at a time. But its inability to encompass everything in a single attentive glance need not cause a panic of the “centered and motionless” gaze, which “cannot envisage the entirety of the visible.”¹¹ Rather, the challenge is to situate psychic life in an infinitely larger field of death and inactionality breathing with possibility.¹²

II. Attention and Life

In the first volume of *Logical Investigations*, Husserl effectively equates attention to thinking and, subsequently, to intentionality itself: “The unitary sense to talk of ‘attending’ . . . ranges beyond the sphere of intuition, and embraces the whole sphere of thinking. . . . Ultimately it extends as far as the concept: Consciousness of something.”¹³ The mistake of those who hold a more narrow, cognitivist view of attention is that they consider it to be a kind of selectivity latched onto the general field of consciousness, as though, initially, this field could exist in the form of an internally undifferentiated medium. On this view replete with unstated ontological assumptions, when the process of differentiation occurs, consciousness comes to contain particular mental contents it has selectively acquired through a focused, attentional grasp. The problem, however, is that the cognitivist approaches to attention uncritically model the being of consciousness and of its contents after the being of physical space and spatial objects it contains.¹⁴ Conversely, the broad definition of attention as

¹⁰ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 99.

¹¹ Jean-Luc Marion, *The Crossing of the Visible*, trans. J. K. A. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press), 9.

¹² I take up this strand of thought in greater detail in Section III of the current paper.

¹³ Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations*, trans. J. N. Findlay, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 2001), 274–75.

¹⁴ “Dazed by the confusion between object and mental content, one forgets that the objects of which we are ‘conscious’, are not simply *in* consciousness as in a box”. (Husserl, *Logical Investigations* 1: 275). This, in turn, will be Heidegger’s refrain in *Being and Time* that defines the non-geometrical mode of Dasein’s being-in-the-world.

intentionality accounts for the originary psychic differentiation and selectivity, in each case preceding the formation of consciousness. Beyond bringing consciousness to life, attention is, thus, the very being of this life.¹⁵

The three decades that separate the publications of *Logical Investigations* and *Cartesian Meditations* see a slight narrowing down in the scope of attention. In the later work, the “all-embracing life” must make itself known *a priori*, before an active attentive comportment on the part of the ego: “The all-embracing cogitatum <of reflection> is the all-embracing life itself, with its openly endless unity and wholeness. Only because it already appears as a total unity can it also be ‘contemplated’, in the pre-eminent manner characterizing acts of paying attention and grasping, and be made the theme for an all-embracing cognition.”¹⁶ But, given this new emphasis on the “total unity” of life as a cogitatum, does Husserl undersign the theory of the abstract non-differentiation of consciousness, which he rejected so vehemently in 1900? To answer this question in the affirmative is to miss the most crucial nuances of *Cartesian Meditations*. In its unity, the all-embracing psychic life is always already a product of the peculiar synthesis, which does not boast a genetic starting point. Further, the work of this synthesis is not spatial but temporal, in that its “fundamental form” is internal time-consciousness.¹⁷ What does this mean for the phenomenological conception of attention? If the act of paying attention thematizes the cogitatum of the “all-embracing life” and allows “an all-embracing cognition” to take a hold of this cogitatum, then its role is hardly marginal or secondary. Its unstated significance is that it formalizes the noetic-noematic correlation of psychic life and its “contemplation,” without sacrificing the richly differentiated unity of this life (i.e., without neglecting the kinds of psychic living that stand out or become prominent against their overarching background). The inward-turning trajectory of the mental regard imposes yet

¹⁵ At this point the difference between the Husserlian and the Bergsonian views on attention is at its sharpest. For Husserl, attention belongs on the same level of psychic life as intentionality; it is responsible for the continuity of all “individuated” conscious experiences. According to Bergson, however, the “broken line” of attention give us the illusion of rupture and discontinuity: “The apparent discontinuity of psychical life is then due to our attention being fixed on it by a series of separate acts: actually there is only a gentle slope; but in following the broken line of our acts of attention [*en suivant la ligne brisée des nos actes d’attention*], we think we perceive separate steps” [Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, trans. A. Mitchell (London: MacMillan, 1912), 3].

¹⁶ Edmund Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations: An Introduction to Phenomenology*, trans. D. Cairns (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1988), 43.

¹⁷ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 43.

another exigency on attention divided between the exteriority to which it attends and the whole of conscious life that furnishes this regard with a temporal horizon.

An astute interpreter of Husserl, Levinas recognizes in attention a “subjective modification” of intentionality. According to the *Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, “[a]ttention . . . is not a distinct type of act, as perception is distinct from will, but is a possible mode of all acts. . . . Within each type of intentionality, attention expresses the manner in which the ego relates to its object. In the act of attention the ego lives actively; it is in some manner spontaneous and free.”¹⁸ It is worth mentioning that the title of the chapter in which this passage appears is “The Phenomenological Theory of Being: The Intentionality of Consciousness,” and attention lies at the very core of phenomenological being. As the “possible *mode* of all acts” and the “manner in which the ego relates to its object,” it expresses the *how* of intentionality considered under its noetic aspect. It is what renders ego-life lively and active.

In his own phenomenological project, Levinas takes over and extends the Husserlian insights into the workings of attention. *Totality and Infinity* reaffirms the initial commitment to the scope of the act that, in its breadth, rivals intentionality: “Attention and the explicit thought it makes possible are not a refinement of consciousness, but consciousness itself [L’attention et la pensée explicite qu’elle rend possible, sont la conscience même et non point un affinement de la conscience].”¹⁹ The copula binding together the subject and the predicate in this sentence is a tribute to Husserl’s general and “unitary” theory that refuses to accept as valid the common-sense understanding of the act of attending in terms of the hyper-sensitivity of consciousness, or in terms of its *a posteriori* selectivity. Rather, attention is the condition of possibility for explicit thought—its animating, enlivening factor—and, at the same time, conscious life itself.

Thus far, Levinas has only restated his hermeneutical position vis-à-vis Husserl’s implicit phenomenology of attention. This avowal notwithstanding, he departs from the letter, if not from the spirit of his predecessor’s phenomenology in spelling out the meaning of attentive psychic life. But, despite their parting of ways, there is no complete disagreement between the two thinkers. Levinas subscribes to the view that associates attention and being-in-atten-

¹⁸ Emmanuel Levinas, *The Theory of Intuition in Husserl’s Phenomenology*, trans. A. Orianne, 2nd ed. (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1995), 46.

¹⁹ Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, trans. A. Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1969), 99.

dance of a speaking being at the site of speech's production and manifestation.²⁰ The link between presence and life, awaiting the advent of Derrida's reading of Husserl, remains undisturbed. What does undergo a radical alteration, however, is the monadological view of the life of the ego that fundamentally attends only to itself even when its regard is directed to the surrounding world. I wish to isolate two features of this alteration: the constitutive breach (the origin) of interiority and the ultimate recipient (the final destination) of the attentive comportment.

Levinas supplements the nod of approval he has given to the Husserlian broadening of the scope of attention with a double rejoinder: "But the eminently sovereign attention in me is what *essentially* responds to an appeal. Attention is attention to something because it is attention to someone [L'attention est attention à quelque chose, parce qu'elle est attention à quelqu'un]. The exteriority of its point of departure is essential to it: it is the very tension of the I."²¹ First, my attention and the consciousness life it animates are constituted in response to the appeal of the other, which emanates outside of me. Given that in his earlier interpretive work Levinas has performed a reading of intentionality as the self-transcendence of consciousness driven by that *of which* it is, in each case, conscious, the extension of the same argument to attention should not come as a surprise. If the act of attending *is* the act of intending, then the former revolves around the axis of transcendence to the same extent as the latter. The breach of my interiority by an external call that demands an attentive heeding constitutes this interiority as mine and as "eminently sovereign." The entire sphere of my psychic life is not only attuned to but also convoked by alterity, which is at the source of "the very tension of the I."

Second, the interface between attention and the liveliness of conscious life is sustained by a reduction of the recipient of attentive comportment to the "whoness" of the other person.²² When I attend to something, I do so, *in the last instance*, for the sake of someone, for the sake of the other, who both founds my attentional comportment and overflows any determinate noema I might form. (For instance, in attending to a broken chair, I pay attention to someone who will sit on it, since I wish to prevent his or her fall; in attending

²⁰ Ibid., 98.

²¹ Ibid., 99.

²² The emphasis on the "who" in relation to the alterity of the other is a recurrent theme of *Totality and Infinity*: "To the question *who?* answers the non-qualifiable presence of an existent who *presents himself* without reference to anything, and yet distinguishes himself from every other existent. The question *who?* envisages a face [*voise un visage*]" (177).

to the words I am writing on this page, I ultimately “keep in mind” the reader I do not know and the need of rendering his or her reading process easier, etc.) The implication of this Levinasian axiom is that, stripped of the capacity to reduce the noematic “what” of attention to the founding “who,” psychic life itself will ossify due to the absorption of intentionality in the lifeless contents it animates by sense-bestowal. Reductively to uncover the lower stratum of attention is not to conflate it with care but to awaken “a life that self-evidence absorbed and caused to be forgotten.”²³

What had begun as a confirmation and a reiteration of the essential relation of attention to conscious life has now turned into a problematization of this link. Although Levinas still defends the apodicticity of the subjective moment, on which “the liveliness of life [*la vivacité de la vie*]” hinges,²⁴ he questions the stricture that results from the circumscription of the subject and psychic life to consciousness.²⁵ Such questioning does not veer on the side of a vitalistic conception of life, in contrast to the transcendental-phenomenological notion. Instead, it picks up a strand that is already apparent in Husserl’s phenomenology, precisely when it comes to the gray area of actionality pertaining to what was lived but not regarded as such *with attention*. *Ideas I* offers the example of rejoicing to illustrate this point:

The first reflection in rejoicing finds it as actually present now, *but not as only now beginning*. It is there as *continuing* to endure, as already lived before, but not looked at. That is, there evidently exists the possibility of tracing the past duration and mode of givenness of what is pleasing, of paying attention to earlier phases in the theoretical course of thought . . . ; on the other hand, there exists the possibility of paying attention to the rejoicing advertence to it and, by contrast, to seize upon the lack of regard adverted to it in the phenomenon which has run its course. . . . [This] mak[es] even more effectively clear the difference between a rejoicing which is *lived*, but not regarded [*erlebter aber nicht erblickter*] and a *regarded* rejoicing.²⁶

The experience that has been lived but not regarded entails a non- or pre-intentional hyletic animation, prompting Levinas’ recurrent insistence on the need to uncover the non-intentional structures of consciousness. The noetic-noematic correlation of rejoicing and that in which it rejoices may well be lived without my attentional or intentional comportment. Such would be the

²³ Emmanuel Levinas, *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, trans. R. Cohen and M. B. Smith (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1998), 156.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

²⁵ “Must the liveliness of life be interpreted on the basis of consciousness?” (*ibid.*, 175).

²⁶ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 176.

experience I “have” without first taking possession, appropriating, or choosing it—the experience, without which no intentional directionality will have been possible. Far from slumbering in the dormant potentiality of the dark halo of indeterminacy that surrounds the luminous sphere of conscious activity, the un-regarded rejoicing stands for the non-actional actionality devoid of attention whose animating function is, henceforth, not exclusive.

Now, the second-order experience intentionally and attentively repeats the lived but not regarded rejoicing. Husserl invokes attention twice in this brief passage: the first time, in the context of a reflection that arises in the course of a lived experience that had commenced un-regarded, and the second, in the context of a completed experience viewed retrospectively. Whether or not the feeling of rejoicing is still present in my immediate psychic life, attention enters the phenomenological scene under the banner of theoreticism (“in the theoretical course of thought” pays homage to Aristotle’s idea of perfection, “thought thinking itself”), which is the preferred object of criticism Heidegger and Levinas level against Husserl. Consistent with the accusations of theoreticism, attention objectivates the ongoing experience and the one that has run its course alike, but this objectivating effect does not require its decoupling from psychic life, in which it is still active, albeit in a derivative way. It merely provides us with the tools for the preliminary diagnosis of a split at the heart of life between its intentional and non-intentional modalities.

Husserl himself would not refute the charge that theoreticism is rampant in his treatment of attention. For instance, in *Ideas II*, attention is the centerpiece of paragraph 3, undertaking an “analysis of the theoretical attitude.” Husserl writes: “It is one thing to see, i.e., to live through at all [*zu erleben*], to experience [*zu erfahren*], to have something in the perceptual field, and it is another thing altogether to perform attentively the act of seeing in the specific sense, to ‘live’ [*zu ‘leben’*] in the seeing in a pre-eminent way.”²⁷ As soon as seeing undergoes an attentional modification, the verb “to live” is placed in quotation marks and, therefore, reduced. While seeing is still present, I no longer live “in” the act of seeing; I make a transition from that which is lived but not regarded to that which is regarded but not immanently lived (the pure ego now lives in the acts of judging, contemplating, or thinking about the *meaning of seeing*). By virtue of adjoining the original act, attention operates as a concrete reductive force that practically objectivates non-doxic

²⁷ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy*, Second Book, trans. R. Rojcewicz and A. Schuwer (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989), 5.

materials and strips them to their sense at the price of the lived experience *qua* lived experience.

In keeping with the example of rejoicing in *Ideas I*, attentional modification accompanies all acts performed in a “specifically intentional [*spezifischen meinend*] way.”²⁸ The adverb “specifically” and the adjective “specific” that recur five times in this short paragraph in connection with attention and intentionality²⁹ perhaps hold the key to Husserl’s unease or ambiguity concerning the extent of this modification. On the one hand, the non-theoretical lived experience could be pre- or non-intentional, scattered, dispersed, distracted, devoid of attention. In light of this alternative, intentionality would be *specific to* my attentive comportment to an object of the theoretical attitude. On the other hand, attention could involve a different kind of intentionality, a *specific* directedness toward an object that thrusts into sharper relief a more general and diffuse intentionality prevalent in the merely lived experience. Husserl rules out neither of the two mutually exclusive possibilities responsible for the friction between attention and life, as well as for the tension between the various modalities of life thematized by phenomenology.

Levinas intensifies the indeterminacy haunting the nexus of attention and life, when he describes a certain feigned blindness and inattention inherent in human action: “The lines of meaning traced in matter by activity are immediately charged with equivocations, as though [*comme si*] action, in pursuing its design, were *without regard* for exteriority, without attention.”³⁰ Levinas does not argue that activity transpires inattentively, without regard for the exteriority of the other who, in the last instance, is the target of attention. Rather, he points out a certain theoretical fiction, similar to the Kantian “*als ob*,” where I carry out my projects *as if* I were inattentive and blind to alterity. I do not even explicitly recognize as something other the simple exteriority of matter that serves as a vehicle for the realization of my projected designs. Feigning the attitude of inattention, I take support from the very objects I neglect in the course of my active life, presumably incompatible with an attentive comportment.³¹ The pretense of a heedless immersion in one’s affairs, minding one’s

²⁸ Ibid., 5.

²⁹ In addition to the “specific sense” featured in the first quotation and the just mentioned “specifically intentional way,” the other three instances include: 1) “a ‘believing’ and a judging, as an Ego in the specific sense”; 2) the Ego’s attitude to an object “to be directed in a specifically *intentional way*”; and 3) my performance of “an act in the specific sense” (ibid.).

³⁰ Levinas, *Totality and Infinity*, 176, Levinas’ emphasis.

³¹ Such is also the conclusion of Jean Starobinski [*L’Oeil Vivant: Essai* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961)]: “Mais cette inattention prend appui, si l’on peut dire, sur les objets mêmes qu’elle néglige” (11).

own “business” from which the fabric of “life” is woven, practically installs an idealist delusion in the subject, who disavows the material substratum in which its objectified intentions are etched.

The action that unfolds as though it were inattentive to exteriority replicates the real lack of attention, defining, according to Heidegger, animal life. The permanent captivity (*Benommenheit*) of animality—a prototype for the more fluid and ephemeral fascination of Dasein who retains the possibility of a lucid self-gathering in anxiety—denies the animal “the possibility of attending either to the being that it itself is or to beings other than itself.”³² Or, as Heidegger notes in the discussion of “world-formation”: “only where there is the manifestness of beings as beings, do we find that the relation to these beings necessarily possesses the character of *attending to* . . . whatever is encountered in the sense of *letting it be* or *not letting it be*. . . . Nothing of this kind is to be found in animality or in life in general [*in der Tierheit und im Leben überhaupt*].”³³ Posited in the excluded middle between the worldless thing and the world-forming Dasein, the animal “poor in the world” is neither completely closed off nor entirely open to its environment; it is neither attentive nor inattentive—only non-attentive. The limits of its emergent intentionality do not allow it to manifest as a being, let alone to thematize and objectivate, the target of its “driven directedness” that falls short of an intentional comportment vigorous enough to function as the scaffolding of experience. This deficiency of intentionality, complementing the absence of attention “in animality or in life in general,” moderates Taminiaux’s thesis on the Aristotelianization of phenomenology,³⁴ since phenomenological research does not *de facto* ascribe a teleological structure to “life in general.” The “manifestness of beings as beings” that calls for an attentive attitude is an exception from the general rule of mere life—it is inconsistent with the complete absorption of a living being in its environment.

It might seem self-evident that theoreticist objectivation is a possibility proper to psychic life and that, as such, it has nothing in common with the mere life devoid of attention. Where one is a highly mediated mental state that identifies and, to some extent, manifests the being of consciousness, the other knows nothing of the being it is and is unaware of the beings that could manifest themselves to it. Nonetheless, both mere life and theoreticist

³² Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 248.

³³ Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 274.

³⁴ Jacques Taminiaux, *Lectures de l’Ontologie Fondamentale: Essais sur Heidegger* (Grenoble: Millon, 1989), 59.

objectivation signal the closure of consciousness and of the animal to exteriority and, therefore, preclude experience in the transcendent sense of the term. Whether this closure results from the (unsustainable) monadological seclusion and reflux of consciousness back onto itself, or whether it stems from the captivation of a living being in the circle of its “driven directedness,” it impedes psychic life that nourishes itself on and is animated by the attention it pays to exteriority. Although a reversion into the animal state of *Benommenheit* is hardly a plausible alternative available to Dasein, the feigned inattention to *and* the fascinated absorption in the world of its concern replicate the formal structure of captivation. If it is to remain active and alive, the attentive psychic life must negotiate the tension between the poles of theoreticist objectivation and an imitation of mere life, without succumbing to either extreme.

III. Attention and Death

A life lived with attention is not a mere life of pure immanence and captivation; it is emphatically not a feature of animal existence “neither bored nor painful.”³⁵ But what is not a “mere life” is, therefore, not merely alive. The element of death is inseparable from living attention, or to state it more precisely, the act of attending cannot be decisively wrenched from the clasp of death, on which it draws as its own condition of possibility. When Husserl meditates on inattention as a negative and non-actional modality of attention, he jealously guards the synthetic unity of the phenomenon, but, thereby, firmly grounds psychic life in “dead consciousness”: “Those [the ‘just barely noticed still’ and the ‘completely unnoticed’] are indeed different modes belonging specifically to attention as such. Among them the group of *actionality modes* are separated from the *non-actionality modes*, from what we call complete inattention, the mode which is, so to speak, dead consciousness of something.”³⁶ At the most basic level, a non-actionality mode, such as complete inattention, is not the other of consciousness but its ownmost potentiality. I may pay no attention whatsoever to a book stacked at the very bottom of the pile on my desk but this inactional and negative mode of relating to it does not prevent me from freely turning my regard toward and retrieving the buried book on a future

³⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Untimely Meditations*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 60.

³⁶ Husserl, *Ideas I*, 224.

occasion. On the contrary, it anticipates such a situation, in that my “dead consciousness” of the book retains the possibility of coming to life by way of an attentive animation that explicitly directs itself toward its noema.

Husserl’s expression “dead consciousness of something” is intriguing, and as such, it deserves a more detailed analysis. First, even in treating the state of inattention, Husserl refuses to fall into the trap of psychic non-differentiation and to posit a general and amorphous “dead consciousness.” “Of something” pre-defines not only that toward which this consciousness will be directed in light of the internal shift from its non-actional to its actional modality, but also the *being* of the dormant noetic structure itself that derives its unity from noematic differentiation. In addition to encircling the living and enlivening attention with an unsurpassable horizon, dead consciousness is a deeper source of mental life—the source to which all modulations, changes, or broken lines of attentiveness perpetually return and which they tirelessly retrace. It comprises the negative modality of attention itself (“belonging specifically to attention as such”) and, therefore, denotes the unavoidable contamination of psychic life with death. Dead consciousness, thus, dwells in the living attention as much as it envelops attentive comportment from the outside.

Second, we might wonder about the points of intersection and convergence between the Husserlian “dead consciousness of something” and the Freudian notion of the unconscious.³⁷ Beside the “royal road” that our dreams pave toward our unarticulated wishes, desires, and anxieties, we obliquely catch a glimpse of the unconscious processes in the slips of tongue and pen, the forgetting of words, the misplacement of objects and other minor psychopathologies prevalent in everyday *life* (*Alltagsleben*). These footpaths and minor bypass roads to the unconscious function as the modulators of attention that redirect it from a consciously intended action to a tacit motivation formerly unknown to someone who has presented for analysis a case of parapraxis.³⁸ It will be the task of the analyst to reconstruct and follow up the direction of the modulation in the therapeutic setting, at the very minimum calling attention to attentional shifts that, by definition, are not perceived in parapraxis: “we

³⁷ For a background discussion of this topic, see Rudolf Bernet, “Unconscious Consciousness in Husserl and Freud,” in *The New Husserl. A Critical Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), 199–219.

³⁸ In this “therapeutic” context, Edward Casey [“Attending and Glancing,” *Continental Philosophy Review* 37 (2004)] highlights “the enormous psychological value of the process of becoming attentive. The emphasis is less on what one encounters in this process—as in therapies in which discovery and insight are valorized—than on the very experience of gaining and holding attention in new and unexpected ways” (103).

must not be aware in ourselves of any motive for it. We must rather be tempted to explain it by ‘inattentiveness’, or to put it down to ‘chance’.”³⁹ The analyst, then, supplants the internal shift in the attention of the analysand from the inactional to the actional mode in the hope that this external modulation will be gradually reintegrated into the psychic life of the analysand.

In a fairly indirect way, the instances of parapraxis reveal the excess of meaning and intentionality over the sphere of our awareness, masking themselves behind the explanations that depend on “inattentiveness” and “chance” (it is not by chance that Freud confines these two words in quotation marks⁴⁰). Do they exemplify what Husserl calls the “dead consciousness of something”? Or, alternatively, are “dead consciousness” and the non-actional mode as a whole but variations on the exuberance of unconscious psychic life, whose intentionality overflows all conscious directedness-toward? And, finally, what is living and what is dead in psychic everyday life?

Let us take a closer look at the promising parallelism between the completely inattentive dead consciousness and the unconscious intentionality of parapraxis, whose ostensible source—the one we are “tempted” to pinpoint—is inattentiveness. Dead consciousness of something owes its strangely differentiated character to the fact that all phenomenal givenness is a co-givenness, or, to put it more bluntly, that whatever appears in my perceptual field always maintains an interconnection with a myriad of other phenomena, many of which are just barely noticed, while others are completely unnoticed yet minimally tethered to consciousness in the very possibility of showing themselves.⁴¹ Heidegger expresses this Husserlian idea in the term “totality-of-significations” (*Bedeutungsganze*),⁴² Gurwitsch refers to the “margin of consciousness”,⁴³ and

³⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, trans. J. Strachey, in vol. 6 *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (London: Hogarth, 1953–66), 239.

⁴⁰ Indeed, in his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* [trans. J. Strachey, vol. 15 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (New York: Hogarth, 1953–66)] Freud rejects the attention theory of parapraxis (*Aufmerksamkeitstheorie der Fehlleistungen*) as incapable of accounting for a deeper symptomatology of the slips of tongue, bungled actions, etc. (34ff).

⁴¹ “Reality, the reality of the physical thing taken singly and the reality of the whole world, lacks self-sufficiency... Reality is not in itself something absolute which becomes tied secondarily to something else; rather, in the absolute sense, it is nothing at all; it has no absolute essence whatsoever” (Husserl, *Ideas I*, 113).

⁴² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H 161.

⁴³ Aron Gurwitsch, *Studies in Phenomenology and Psychology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966). See also P. Sven Arvidson, *The Sphere of Attention: Context and Margin* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006), passim.

Derrida encrypts it in the chain of “traces”.⁴⁴ The attentive gaze either illuminates a cross-section of the totality, leaving most of it in provisory obscurity, or traffics psychic contents from the margin to a centered spotlight of its thematic concern. Dead consciousness of something describes the transcendental possibilities inherent in the margin *qua* margin and in the non-illuminated portion of the totality-of-significations as such.

Topographically, one can imagine the Freudian unconscious as dispersed in the totality-of-significations or decentered on the margins of conscious, thematized concerns. Grafted on this plane, it entirely overlaps with the Husserlian dead consciousness of something, even though it differs from the latter in one crucial respect. It scarcely needs mentioning that, on Freud’s view, certain (traumatic, repressed, tabooed) parts of the totality and whole stretches of the margins will remain dimmed down and marginalized due to the repressive apparatus that prevents us from directing the spotlight of attention onto them. What is less clear is that, in everyday life, the passage of these repressed elements to the mode of actionality still transpires without their explicit thematization, outside of the subject’s intentional grasp and attentive comportment. That is not to say that inattention is ultimately responsible for the flaring up of parapraxes; rather, they express a symptomatic *diversion of attention* from that which is consciously intended to an associated region of the dead consciousness of something repressed.⁴⁵ In every case of parapraxis, dead consciousness passes to the mode of actionality *qua* dead consciousness, *qua* a symptom lived but not regarded as such: hence the obdurate persistence of death in the midst of psychic living. In turn, the psychoanalyst facilitates the exercise of the analysand’s *hyper-attention* (the exigency of attending to what exceeds conscious thematization) in an attempt to retrace the clandestine passage to actionality.

Freud confirms the phenomenological unity of attention in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, where its “wandering” in the process of reading aloud does not affect a correct reproduction of the text notwithstanding the reader’s inability “to give any account of what he has read.”⁴⁶ He insists that, contrary to Wundt’s explanation, there is no diminution in the quantity of attention; instead, we witness a “*disturbance of attention (Aufmerksamkeitsstörung)* by an

⁴⁴ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. G. C. Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), 70.

⁴⁵ “[T]he phenomena [of parapraxis and chance actions] can be traced back to incompletely suppressed psychological material, which, although pushed away by consciousness, has nevertheless not been robbed of all capacity for expressing itself” (Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 277) (Freud’s emphasis).

⁴⁶ Freud, *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, 132.

alien thought which claims consideration.” In the phenomenological vernacular, a passage to the mode of actionality does not guarantee the transparency of meaning and sense but only ensures that the outward performance of an act is meaningful and sensible. The dead consciousness of the text coexists with a successful fulfillment of the reading intentionality that yields an accurate mechanical reproduction of the read material without animating or bestowing sense upon the noema. What, following a correct and fruitful intuition, Freud considers to be the “disturbance of attention” (*Aufmerksamkeitsstörung*) is a premonition of the synthetic unity of the phenomenon, of which dead consciousness partakes as its indispensable negative underside. It is not distraction that finally disturbs attention but another claim on my capacity for attending to something emanating from the fertile field of dead consciousness.

In a somewhat different vein, Derrida distinguishes a dead element in attentive concentration. If, schematically, the lively attentional shifts and modulations are insufficient to effectuate a passage to the actional mode of consciousness, they must be supplemented (and held in a tense combination) with the periods of tarrying along with that to which one pays attention. The physical expression of the supplement that rescues attention from sliding into curiosity is a fixed stare. But the “staring eye,” writes Derrida, “always resembles an eye of the blind, sometimes the eye of the dead, at that precise moment when mourning begins: it is still open, a pious hand should soon come to close it.”⁴⁷ Admittedly, empirical psychological research will question the assertion that the focused, attentive gaze is absolutely fixed. As Edward Casey reminds us, beneath the apparent immobility of the stare, there is a constant saccadic activity, a rapid movement of the eye “dashing from one position to another every few milliseconds.”⁴⁸ Yet, this qualification does not invalidate the conclusion of *Memoirs of the Blind* that extracts a framework of petrification from the most intense fascination and attentive rapture. The immobile staring eye that desires to arrest the object of its attention falls prey to—is captured or captivated by—the target of its intentionality. Mimetically borrowing the features of the noema, the attentive, fixed eye momentarily sheds its seeing function and becomes something seen, hence, something not seeing, something blind.⁴⁹ Derrida’s thought here echoes both Heidegger’s suggestion

⁴⁷ Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: Self-Portrait and Other Ruins*, trans. P.-A. Brault and M. Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 57.

⁴⁸ Casey, “Attending and Glancing”, 85.

⁴⁹ “. . . your eyes are not only seeing but also visible. And since they are *visible* (things or objects in the world [*choses ou objets dans la monde*]) as much as *seeing* (at the origin of the world

that when we stare at something present-at-hand, we exhibit a failure to understand it anymore and, at the same time, Freud's explanation of "primal repression" as fixation (*Fixierung*).⁵⁰ In order to reactivate the act of attending to . . . leave two spaces it will be necessary to "unfocus," to modulate the fixed stare, to reanimate the quasi-distracted pole of attention, and to re-establish a productive tension between movement and stasis that overrides any simple unity of the phenomenon.

Levinas reductive dream of awakening the life that self-evidence absorbed needs to be contextualized in this constitutive torsion, in which attention discloses itself. When "it is a question of descending from the entity illuminated in self-evidence toward the subject that is extinguished rather than announced in it,"⁵¹ then the subject's captivated gaze is disentangled from the animated entity that petrifies the attentive regard. Levinas recommends this "descent" (read: transcendence) for the sake of carrying on the infinite movement of attention to the exteriority of the other person. On the one hand, this is entirely consistent with Husserl's depiction of attention in *Ideas I* as piercing through the different strata of consciousness, be they purely perceptual, or remembering, or otherwise. On the other hand, Levinas adds the unreachable "stratum" of absolute alterity, to which, at bottom, attention is always directed. While, in its very phenomenal luminosity, objective self-evidence creates an opaque screen that hampers attentional directedness, the "ever-recommencing awakening in wakefulness itself"⁵² facilitates it.

To unpack this somewhat cryptic formulation: the lucidity of self-evidence is nothing but wakefulness, the ego's proximity to and attendance at the site of its noematic object by means of the ray of intentionality and sense-bestowal. But the state of wakefulness tends to sameness, to a hermetically sealed and vigilantly guarded circle of the ego's assimilation to its objects and the objects' assimilation to the ego. That is why the open-ended project of awakening to alterity, akin to the kind of "reactivation" that Husserl advocates in the *Crisis*, necessarily relies on attention that does not stop at the layers of self-evidence but aims beneath and beyond them. The ever-recommencing task of awakening within wakefulness is not incompatible with the recognition that the dead

[à l'origine du monde]), I could precisely touch them . . ." Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry [Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005], 3.

⁵⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H 149; Freud, "Repression", trans. J. Strachey, in vol. 14 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (London: Hogarth, 1953–66), 146–58.

⁵¹ Levinas, *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, 156.

⁵² Levinas, *Discovering Existence with Husserl*, 161. See also Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970).

element in attention is irreducible and that the descent toward the subjective life extinguished in self-evidence will have to bear the mark of a work in progress. It is not the purity of psychic life that Levinas wishes to rescue but, if I may paraphrase Nietzsche, the liminal and fragile dawn at high noon when attention to a “what” outstrips itself in attending to a “who.”

The myth of Medusa exhibits a reverse tendency, where the object of the ego’s regard petrifies the subject looking at it. Although a mere glance is usually taken to be fleeting and superficial, according to Casey, “[g]lancing is one of the major ways in which attending happens.”⁵³ Perhaps, then, a glance cast at Medusa turns into an attentive stare *par excellence*, while the myth itself fleshes out the possibility of becoming fixedly attentive inherent in any glance. A fixation on the object objectifies the subject of the regard when the “sight of Medusa’s head makes the spectator stiff with terror, turns him to stone.”⁵⁴ In Freud’s theoretical sketch, the moment of the spectator’s death following the absorption of his gaze in the object is a part of psychic life, in that this stiffness emulates the very erection that is threatened in castration anxiety, which the uncanny sight of the decapitated head both provokes and expresses. The spectator vicariously partakes of Medusa’s terrifying vigilance—the vigilance that qualitatively exceeds any notion of wakefulness—and crosses glances with her in an a priori doomed effort to repay her own undying attentiveness. The price of this transaction is exorbitant: one pays with one’s own death (petrification) for endeavoring to steal Medusa’s vigilance.⁵⁵ Suspended between a “who” and a “what,” Medusa’s head inflects living attention with death, or as Derrida writes in a different context, the “living attention here comes to tear itself toward that which, or the one who, can no longer receive it; it rushes toward the impossible.”⁵⁶ The unidirectional, asymmetrical rushing of attention, as much as of life itself, toward the impossible, without reflux or return, demands an indefatigable reiteration of the question, “What is living and what is dead in attention?”

⁵³ Casey, “Attending and Glancing”, 83.

⁵⁴ Freud, “Medusa’s Head,” trans. J. Strachey, in vol. 18 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (London: Hogarth, 1953–66), 273. On a psychoanalytically inspired account of “fixed attention as a form of repression,” see also Teresa Brennan, *The Interpretation of the Flesh: Freud and Femininity* (London: Routledge, 1991), 125ff.

⁵⁵ The feat of Perseus is an exception, which corresponds to a paradoxical “reactivation”: an awakening within endless vigilance that spells out its final petrification.

⁵⁶ Jacques Derrida, *The Work of Mourning*, trans. P.-A. Brault and M. Naas (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 45.

IV. In Conclusion: Attending to Death

The act of attending refers itself, either positively or negatively, to six modalities of life and death. On the side of life, while attention 1) is lacking in animal existence and 2) feigns its absence from everyday engagement in the world, it 3) animates and coincides with the sphere of consciousness (or intentionality). On the side of death, it 4) entails the fixity of the attentive stare and 5) the subsequent absorption of the noetic moment in objective self-evidence, even as 6) its negative mode is confined to the field of inactionality, which governs the possibilities of psychic life. Further, these two sides are not strictly separate from one another, since living attention arises from the potentialities of dead consciousness, drifts away from mere life, harbors in itself the dead fixity of captivity, and scurries toward the instant of its petrification. Thus, an intricate pattern of life-death is formed in the phenomenal texture of attention. But what if the act of attending is, itself, directed toward death at the height of life's intensity? How to describe, phenomenologically, the extension of attention to a unique "object," which is my own or the other's death?

Does Heidegger's *being-toward-death* entail the—not yet formalized—existential attitude of *being-attentive-to-death*, which makes Dasein truly attentive for the first time in its life? In keeping with the method of *Being and Time*, the preliminary answer to this question emerges in factual life, where "[c]ases of death may be the factual occasion for Dasein's first paying attention to death at all [*auf den Tod aufmerksam wird*]."⁵⁷ The deaths of others first draw the attention of Dasein to a phenomenon, whose certainty is still devoid of an apodictic character, precisely because it empirically happens only to others. Such awareness with its tendency to understand mortality as though it were no different from any other absence of what is no longer present-at-hand, is, without a doubt, insufficient to shift perspectives from the ontic to the ontological level, in which death is Dasein's ownmost possibility. Nonetheless, since Dasein exists factually, the authentic relation to its own finitude will necessitate a modification of the inauthentic and "objective" observation regarding the mortality of others. The initial act of paying attention to death will remain determinative throughout.

The self-gathering of Dasein—in which anxiety functions as a catalyst—recalling it from its dispersed mode of being-in-the-world transpires when it faces death as its most proper possibility and refuses to flee from itself any longer. Dasein heroically and tragically eschews the distractions of falling,

⁵⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, H 257.

turns away from its fascination with everyday life, and pays attention to the crucial possibility of not being in attendance any longer, to its death, and, thus, to itself. It becomes attentive for the first time in its life by virtue of realizing this enabling finitude. In the phenomenological world rendered vacant by anxiety, there is nothing and no one (save for Dasein itself) that/who could stand out in the sphere of attention against the receding and disappearing horizon of dead consciousness, supplanted if not by the consciousness of death, then by its anticipation. And yet, before the intervention of anxiety, death exacts Dasein's attention in the passing away of others, however "inauthentic" one's treatment of this factual evidence might be.⁵⁸ We term the persistence of this approach in the affective register, "mourning."

In the analysis of the letters written by Freud in the first months of the year 1920, immediately after his daughter's death, Derrida draws a link between death, mourning and distraction. Freud distracts himself from the work of mourning with the theoretical psychoanalytic work ("I do as much work as I can, and am grateful for the distraction,"⁵⁹ he admits in a letter to Pfister between the time of his daughter's death and cremation). But, as Derrida himself notes, "[i]f the work is a 'distraction', it is that he is not just working on just anything"⁶⁰—he is working on *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* whose main thematic concern is the "death-drive." In other words, Freud distracts himself from the death of his daughter, Sophie, with the thinking of death as such; his distraction demands the keenest attention to the thing from which one cannot escape, given that life itself is now conceived in terms of the "ever more complicated *détours* before reaching the aim of death."⁶¹

Henceforth, when one attempts to avoid paying attention to death, one is forced to attend to it despite the unyielding character of avoidance (indeed, of resistance) that merely complicates the detour toward the evaded "object." Freud's flight from death experienced as a distraction and the real, yet-to-be-accomplished work of mourning circuitously bring him to a formulation of the death-drive in the course of a sublimated work of mourning that attends to the very thought he consciously skirts. To crave a distraction, as Freud does,

⁵⁸ From a different angle, in "Dying for..." Emmanuel Levinas affirms the primacy of the other's death (*Entre Nous*, trans. M. Smith and B. Harshav [New York: Columbia University Press, 2000], 207–18).

⁵⁹ Cited in Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 330.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. J. Strachey, in vol. 18 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works* (London: Hogarth, 1953–66), 38.

is not to be entrapped in the dead consciousness of death, but neither is it to face death tragically and heroically in the authentic mode of Dasein. In the postponement of mourning that “will no doubt come later,” as Freud writes in the same letter to Pfister, in the delay between the passing away of Sophie and her cremation, in the attentive distraction that complicates the circuitous detour toward death, Freud takes his time, that is, he gives himself the time necessary *to attend with care*. The apparent callousness of the father who continues to work notwithstanding his child’s death, acting *as though* he had no regard for exteriority and, hence, without attention, disguises a profound desire to know from what one distracts oneself (note that I am not saying, “from what one gets distracted”). His conclusion powerfully resonates with Heidegger’s:⁶² in the end, one distracts oneself from oneself because death—the factor of individualization or individuation—is the aim each organism reaches in a manner proper to it.⁶³ Whereas paying attention to death is turning back to oneself, the “evasive” trajectory of distraction consists in the detours of life strictly regulated by the particular path each follows to his or her death.

⁶² Most recently, the resonance between Heidegger and Freud on the question of death has been explored in Hari Cavel’s *Life and Death in Freud and Heidegger* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), esp. Part III, titled “Encounters between Freud and Heidegger.”

⁶³ “What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion” (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, 39).