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Natality and mortality: rethinking death with Cavarero

Alison Stone

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Abstract In this article I rethink death and mortality on the basis of birth and natality, drawing on the work of the Italian feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero. She understands birth to be the corporeal event whereby a unique person emerges from the mother's body into the common world. On this basis Cavarero reconceives death as consisting in bodily dissolution and re-integration into cosmic life. This impersonal conception of death coheres badly with her view that birth is never exclusively material but always has ontological significance as the appearance of someone new and singular in the world of relations with others. This view of birth calls for a relational conception of death, which I develop in this article. On this conception, death is always collective, affecting all those with whom the one who dies has maintained relations: As such, our different deaths shade into one another. Moreover, because each person is unique in virtue of consisting of a unique web of relations with others, death always happens to persons *as* webs of relations. Death is relational in this way as a corporeal, and specifically biological, phenomenon, to which we are subject as bodily beings and as interdependent living organisms. I explore this with reference to Simone de Beauvoir's memoir of her mother's death from cancer. Finally I argue that, on this relational conception, death is something to be feared.

Keywords Beauvoir · Birth · Cavarero · Death · Mortality · Natality

1 Introduction

Many contemporary feminists are exploring the philosophical significance of birth.[1] Often these authors present their orientation towards birth, life, and beginnings as an

[1] They include Battersby (1998), Guenther (2006, 2008), Irigaray (1991), Kristeva (1986), Mullin (2005). This list is far from exhaustive.

A. Stone (✉)
Department of Philosophy, Lancaster University, Lancaster LA1 4YG, UK
e-mail: a.stone@lancaster.ac.uk

alternative to philosophy's long-standing preoccupation with death, endings, and last things. However, feminist ideas about birth may instead be taken as opening up possibilities for rethinking death and mortality in relation to birth, as I shall attempt to do here. I will put forward a natal conception of mortality according to which death, like birth, is an entirely relational phenomenon. This view of mortality is implicitly feminist, insofar as I will interpret mortality and death starting from the feminist recognition that we are completely constituted by and dependent upon our relations with one another, beginning with our first relations to those who care for us in our infancy. Based on this view of mortality, I shall argue that each of us has grounds to fear death: firstly on one's own behalf, because death marks the end of the unique and irreplaceable web of relations of which one consists, and secondly on behalf of the others with whom one is in relation, because one's death is also the death of a part of those others.

I will develop these arguments through an engagement with the work of Adriana Cavarero, one of the main contemporary feminist thinkers of birth, whose work (as I will explain in Sect. 2) is important because it is deeply grounded in Hannah Arendt's ideas but transforms them in a feminist direction. However, I do not follow, but rather criticize, the particular birth-oriented view of death which Cavarero herself presents in her book *In Spite of Plato* (hereafter *Plato*), originally published in Italian in 1990. Approaching death in relation to birth understood as material emergence from one's mother's body, Cavarero interprets death not as personal annihilation but the process of one's material reintegration into the cosmic life-cycle. In Sect. 3 I will argue that this account of death actually conflicts with Cavarero's view of birth. On this view, birth is an event that is never solely biological but always also has the ontological significance that through it a unique person appears in the shared world amongst a plurality of others. Thus birth is at the heart of Cavarero's 'ontology of uniqueness': her account of the human condition as inescapably singular and plural—as relational.[2]

In Sect. 4 I argue that, from this birth-oriented perspective, death must be relational, not merely an anonymous biological process. Someone's death is their departure from the shared world and from the relations with others that have constituted this person. Consequently, I will argue—with critical reference to Heidegger's claim that death radically individuates *Dasein*—a person's death is never solely their own. It is always their death *as* termination of the plurality of relations of which that person has been constituted, so that death is always shared, a collective event of loss afflicting all those involved in these relations. Reciprocally, I will argue, the deaths of others are part of each person's own death: Our different deaths are continuous with one another. With these arguments, I aim to understand mortality in a way that does justice to the depth of our attachments to one another and to the ontological significance of bereavement, which on my relational view is no less significant in human existence than each person's 'own' death—because self and others, bereavement and death, are indissociable.

[2] Cavarero (2008, p. 148).

Moreover, for Cavarero, we are natal and relational beings *qua* living bodies. Thus, it is as a corporeal, and indeed biological, phenomenon that death is relational. Our deaths are continuous with one another as physical occurrences, because we depend on one another, are vitally entwined with one another, as living bodies. To develop these ideas, I shall draw in Sect. 5 on Simone de Beauvoir's 1964 memoir of her mother's death, *A Very Easy Death*. Finally, in Sect. 6, I will suggest that from a relational perspective it makes sense for us to fear death, for our own sakes and those of our loved ones.

2 Cavarero on natality

The starting-point for Cavarero's conception of birth is Arendt's concept of natality. But Cavarero transforms the meaning of this concept, reinterpreting natality as our condition of being materially born from our mothers' bodies. This transformation is important because it goes together with Cavarero's rejection of the hierarchically gendered contrast between public and private which structures Arendt's thinking of natality. In this way, Cavarero's re-interpretation of natality aligns this concept with contemporary feminism.

In *The Human Condition*, Arendt defines natality as 'the fact that human beings appear in the world by virtue of birth.'[3] For Arendt, 'appear' has a partly technical meaning in relation to her reinterpretation of the public sphere as the 'space of appearance.' In this connection, to 'appear' is to actively disclose oneself to a plurality of others by interacting with them through words and deeds, an interaction that constitutes public space. One discloses oneself to others as the unique person that one is by the distinctive and the unprecedented character of one's deeds and words. This self-disclosure is possible because we, human beings, are each unique, not only sociologically in terms of our historical-cultural locations, but principally in a phenomenological sense: Each of us is a unique existence, one amongst others in a common world, but a unique opening onto that world, an opening no one else can ever occupy.

To say, then, that we appear in the world by virtue of birth is to say, Arendt clarifies, that 'men are equipped for … making a new beginning'—publicly performing new actions, interacting in new ways, and thereby constituting new configurations of power—'because they themselves are new beginnings and hence beginners.'[4] Here Arendt effectively equates being a 'beginner' with acting politically and equates the 'beginning' that makes being a 'beginner' possible with the coming into existence of a new, unique someone: '[W]ith each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. With respect to this somebody who is unique it can be truly said that nobody was there before.'[5] In acting politically I activate my unique existence. I can do so fully only in acting politically, for Arendt in *The*

[3] Arendt (1958, p. 211).

[4] Arendt (1958, p. 211).

[5] Arendt (1958, p. 178).

Human Condition, because my uniqueness is relational. To be unique is to differ from others, so that I can be unique only because I am constitutively in relations with others, one of a plurality. The political sphere is the proper home of uniqueness because it is, inherently, the space constituted of interactions among plural actors.

Although in *The Human Condition* birth as beginning is always the beginning of someone embodied, nonetheless Arendt considers birth in abstraction from the physical process of being born. She does not define beginning in terms of physically emerging from one's mother's womb and body—as being born *of* or *from* someone, one's mother. Neither does Arendt define beginning as receiving existence from one's mother. Peg Birmingham has shown that in earlier writings, Arendt had defined natality as involving both the capacity for new actions *and* the givenness of one's existence.[6] But in *The Human Condition* Arendt splits these two dimensions across a series of oppositions: on one hand, physical birth (reproduction) from a mother, givenness and necessity, sameness, and the private household where reproduction takes place; on the other hand, natality, uniqueness, action, politics, and plurality. This hierarchically gendered series of oppositions is problematic from a feminist perspective (as numerous critics of Arendt have pointed out).[7]

It is this oppositional framework that Cavarero transforms by redefining birth as 'a coming from the mother's womb.'[8] To be born is still to appear as someone unique amongst others—as a 'who,' as Cavarero often says following Arendt, not (or not only) a 'what'—but one appears *in* physically emerging from one's mother's body. It is in being physically born that one appears in the common world and, simultaneously, becomes manifest, or 'exposed,' to this world's other inhabitants as the new, unprecedented existence that one is. Because coming-into-existence is physically coming into the world as a body, one's uniqueness as it appears to others coincides with the uniqueness of one's body and voice, for instance with 'the sound of the "vibration of a throat of flesh" … Alive and bodily, unique and unrepeatable.'[9] Cavarero reunites natality—existing uniquely amongst plural others—with physical birth. Consequently, novelty, action, and power cease to be confined to the political realm in the way that they were in *The Human Condition*, and Arendt's sharp public/private contrast is broken down. Consequently, too, one's unique existence amongst others is always a *corporeal* existence with others, an intertwining of plural bodies. Cavarero sums up: 'Our condition is that of corporeal, unique, vulnerable human beings, dependent on one another and reciprocally exposed.'[10]

In uniting what Arendt had split apart in *The Human Condition,* Cavarero reconnects natality, appearing into singular and plural existence, with being given the uniqueness of one's socially situated body. The embodied situation in which I

[6] See Birmingham (2005).

[7] See inter alia Honig (1995). The contributors to this volume discuss this feminist criticism of Arendt, but they also complicate it and put forward productive feminist rereadings of Arendt's work.

[8] Cavarero (1995, p. 6).

[9] Cavarero (2005, p. 2).

[10] Cavarero (2008, p. 137).

begin life is an unchangeable fact. Furthermore, I receive it *from* my mother. I have this body, in this place and time, because of who my mother is or was, because of her unique embodied situation through which she has transmitted my unique situation to me. Thus, I not only (firstly) receive my living bodily existence from my mother, but I also (secondly) inherit from her a unique cultural location. Moreover (thirdly), Cavarero claims that I am *given* my existence by my mother. We might question this. Perhaps I receive existence and inherit cultural circumstances from my mother without her intending to give these to me. Certainly the gift of birth is a peculiar kind of gift. As Lisa Guenther points out, what the mother 'gives' in giving life is not any finite thing or property but rather the conditions under which the child can receive any particular things or properties at all.[11] And the mother 'gives' a uniquely new life that she herself never possessed—no simple transfer of property occurs here. Nonetheless, perhaps understanding birth as a gift makes sense if we see physical birth, as Cavarero does, as only the beginning of the more extended process of early care-giving generally undertaken by mothers. Mothers (or other carers) typically do experience this giving of care as, precisely, a giving, although not exactly as voluntarily undertaken but rather as immediately elicited by the child in his or her need.[12] This means that for mothers gestation and birth all along have significance as anticipating this post-natal care-giving, and from that perspective birth does, by anticipation, count as a gift.

Cavarero further suggests that I am given my existence not only by my mother but also by a chain of foremothers, the members of my maternal genealogy. This is because my mother's singular existence has been given to her by her own singular mother, whose existence was given to her by her mother in turn, and so on.[13] What about fathers? For Cavarero, it seems that genealogy is properly maternal because birth gives each of us existence and birth is inescapably from a mother: '[M]aternity is the matrix of the arrival of humans into the world.'[14] Admittedly, this is so only in principle; in practice, most cultures disavow the importance of the maternal line, passing names and goods along the paternal line, and taking the father to be the true parent while construing the mother as mere container. From Cavarero's perspective, all this reverses the real primacy of maternal genealogy. This privileging of maternal genealogy is problematic. Since Cavarero believes that I receive my existence and inherit my cultural conditions *from* generations of foremothers through my mother, it is inconsistent of her to deny that I can also, through my mother, receive my existence and cultural inheritance *from* my father. But perhaps Cavarero gives mothers, and by extension entire lines of maternal descent, genealogical primacy because, since it is mothers who physically give birth, they mediate whatever fathers hand down to their children. Nonetheless, fathers do hand things down. So we should qualify Cavarero's privileging of the maternal line, to

[11] Guenther (2006).

[12] See for instance Baraitser (2009).

[13] Cavarero (1995, p. 60).

[14] Cavarero (1995, p. 59).

say that we are all children of our mothers *and* fathers, albeit mothers first and fathers second.[15]

Despite these qualifications, Cavarero's philosophy of birth remains insightful and important because she recognizes that birth has ontological significance—it is one of the fundamental conditions structuring and shaping human existence, not a bare material process. At the same time, going beyond Arendt, Cavarero recognizes that this ontological significance inheres in birth *as* the corporeal process of emerging from the body of one's mother. In its nature as corporeal process, birth has the existential or ontological significance that it always initiates the one who is born into the human condition of natality, of appearing uniquely new in the world shared with others. Birth and natality are one.

3 Cavarero on mortality

Based on her reconception of birth as natality, Cavarero at the end of *Plato* outlines a distinctive approach to death and mortality. But this approach, I shall argue, is unsatisfactory. Moreover, contrary to Cavarero, this approach coheres badly with her own conception of birth: Her views of birth and death actually conflict. This conflict means that Cavarero unfortunately misses the opportunity to develop her view of birth in its full richness, as opening up a relational conception of death.

In *Plato*, Cavarero redefines death in contrast to birth as she has understood it. Since birth is coming into existence from *somebody*, not appearance *ex nihilo*, reciprocally death is not annihilation, passage into non-existence, but passage in*to* new bodily form: '[F]rom the point of view of … living matter, one's own death is a metamorphosis.'[16] This passage into new bodily form occurs as one's body loses its organization and its material members break down into component elements that disperse and become incorporated into new material processes and forms. Cavarero interprets this disorganization and re-incorporation of bodily matter to be a participation in cycles of super-individual, cosmic life. To die is to physically pass into life's impersonal, ever-ongoing cycle, and to supply this cycle with fresh materials.[17] At death I will go, not into nothingness, but back into the anonymous cosmic life from which (across the threshold of my mother's birth canal) I came.

Cavarero's ideas here are inspired by Clarice Lispector's 1964 novel *The Passion According to G.H.* The protagonist G. H. attempts to kill a cockroach; having watched its insides ooze out with revulsion, she feels drawn into (what she now sees

[15] I lack space to ask how this picture accommodates genealogies that are social rather than biological—adoptive families, surrogacy, sperm donation—where the biological and social parents come apart. We might ask, too, why Cavarero assigns ontological significance to birth (thus mothers primarily) and not conception (thus mothers *and* fathers). This is, I think, because birth marks the entrance into the *common* world alongside plural others. One might object that the developing foetus already begins to participate in this world in a form mediated by the mother—hearing sounds, tasting tastes, detecting changes in light. But perhaps we only understand this to be participation in a shared world by extrapolating from the existing-in-common with which we are familiar post-natally, so that such understandings of pre-natal existence would already presuppose the ontological centrality of birth.

[16] Cavarero (1995, p. 114).

[17] Cavarero (1995, pp. 115–117).

as) the single immemorial process of life going on within and through the cockroach. Embracing this life-process, G. H. says:

> The narrow passage had been the daunting cockroach … And I had ended up, all impure myself, embarking, through it, upon my past, which was my continuous present and my continuous future—… and my fifteen million daughters, from that time down to myself, were also there. My life had been as continuous as death. Life is so continuous that we divide it into stages and call one of them death. … I had always been in life.[18]

G.H. (and/or Lispector)—and Cavarero after her—take the life-process to be one super-individual, hence 'neutral' process, yet also to be female in that it proceeds through females giving birth to females who give birth to females, and so on. Ultimately, for Cavarero, each person's death is part of this cosmic life-process. Dying is 'conquered' by life, she thus writes.[19]

Cavarero suggests that if this view of death became accepted, then we would cease to have reason to fear death. This fear has been pervasive in the West, she suggests, only because Western culture has ignored birth and defined death without reference to birth, hence not as passage into new living forms but rather as passage into non-existence, as annihilation—which is something to be feared.[20] Once this fear of death as annihilation was installed, philosophers and theologians became obliged to alleviate it by postulating the soul's immortality or other forms of post-mortem survival. If death were seen to be not personal annihilation but one phase in life's overarching cycle, then it would no longer elicit fear and anxiety—or as Cavarero puts it, 'since there is no nothingness in the incessant and internal labor of life's metamorphoses' we would experience a 'disinvestment from death'—a 'conciliation' with it.[21] We would accept that on death we will not cease to exist but be reincorporated into something larger than us.

G.H. suggests something similar: That our membership in infinite life tends to be concealed from us *qua* organised bodies. Totally identified with her organised bodily form, ignorant of the larger life that this form organizes, G.H. is 'afraid to understand, the matter of the world frightens [her], … with its cockroaches.'[22] G.H. fears death, falsely believing that with it she will lose 'everything I have had … what I am.' But when she comes to embrace the deeper life-process suffusing her, her fear gives way to joy.

Cavarero's view of death is, I believe, implausible. Firstly, as she herself says, the human fear of death has been so pervasive (pervading even our efforts to deny and avoid confronting death) that it has motivated the formation of entire traditions of religious doctrine and practice concerning life after death. It seems implausible that such an all-pervasive and apparently fundamental human fear could have resulted merely from the error of thinking about death in isolation from birth. To

[18] Lispector (1988, p. 57).

[19] Cavarero (1995, p. 116).

[20] Cavarero (1995, pp. 99–100, 105).

[21] Cavarero (1995, pp. 114, 119).

[22] Lispector (1988, p. 59).

have been so pervasive, this fear must have deeper grounds in the structure of human existence. Secondly, approaching death impersonally as Cavarero advises seems impossible and inappropriate given that (for Cavarero herself) we are relational beings, thoroughly shaped by and therefore constitutively attached to our relations with particular others. What begins to emerge here is the conflict between Cavarero's relational ontology and her view of death.

The conflict becomes apparent in Cavarero's recent book *Horrorism*, first published in Italian in 2007. In it, she identifies a class of acts of horrific violence, acts carried out in war or by 'terrorists'—'horrorists,' for her—which dismember and disfigure human bodies. In dismembering bodies, these acts are attacks, precisely, on the uniqueness of persons insofar as this is directly expressed in their bodies and bodily forms. For Cavarero, every act of this class 'overshoots the elementary goal of taking a life and dedicates itself instead to destroying the living being *as* singular body.'[23] Following Arendt, Cavarero also describes the extreme violent dehumanization which the Nazi concentration camps inflicted on their inmates as an assault on their embodied singularity. Strikingly, she adds that the 'horrorism' perpetrated by the death camps 'also takes away from them [the inmates] their own death.' She endorses Arendt's claim that the camps made the murder of these people into an event 'as impersonal as the squashing of a gnat.' The inmates' deaths were reduced to merely impersonal, biological, processes or occurrences. This implies, contrary to *Plato*, that human deaths in their proper ontological character are never merely impersonal biological processes. Rather, following the terms used in *Horrorism*, our deaths must always have 'personal' meaning for us, such that each human person's death is 'their own.' On one side are the human, the meaningful, the personal, and death as in each case one's own—on the other the animal, the meaningless, the impersonal, and the anonymous. Contrast this to *Plato*, in which Cavarero urges precisely that death should be viewed as reintegration into 'impersonal' life.

That conclusion, it turns out, conflicts with Cavarero's own understanding of human singularity, according to which our singularity entails that we cannot relate to our deaths impersonally. To be denied a meaningful relation to one's own death, as the camp inmates were, is to be radically dehumanized. The relation to one's own death as to the end of one's singular existence is not merely an illusion stemming from Western culture's neglect of birth. Rather, this relation is an irreducible concomitant of our very status as singular and natal beings.

These are rather Heideggerian-sounding suggestions about death and mortality—recalling that for Heidegger, 'death … individualizes *Dasein* down to itself.'[24] So does Cavarero's view of natality actually support a Heideggerian view of death? Not necessarily. For her reference in *Horrorism* to each person's death being their 'own' is in tension with her insistence upon the depth at which our relations with others constitute us *in* our singularity. One's singular existence never is solely one's 'own'

[23] Cavarero (2009, p. 12; my emphasis).

[24] Heidegger (1962, p. 308).

but is constituted all along in a crucible of relations with plural others.[25] We need, then, to reconceive death as *relational* rather than exclusively either personal or impersonal. Neither radically individuating nor straightforwardly antithetical to singular personhood, death obtains in some sense between or amongst persons. To think about this, I shall return to Cavarero's relational ontology and tease out how it bears upon death and mortality.

4 Relational mortality

Within the general terms of Cavarero's ontology, we can interpret her as understanding our singularity to be relational in weaker or stronger senses. We find some support for both interpretations in her 1997 book *Relating Narratives*. In the weaker sense, relations obtain between singular beings; these relations, we might say, are *inter*-personal. These relations constitute who we as singular beings are by constituting the meaning of actions and lives that are in each case a singular person's 'own,' theirs and no one else's ('a unique being is such in the relation, and the context, of a plurality of others, … likewise unique themselves, [who] are distinguished reciprocally').[26] This 'ownness' arises because each person comes new, irreplaceable, unrepeatable, insubstitutable, into the world at birth. Although the content, the concrete shape, of who he or she is as a person will unfold only over time through this person's interactions with others, it remains a fact that he or she is this unique person and no one other from birth. The newborn, Cavarero says, is totally unique at once, a unified new person[27] who will remain the same self throughout his or her life.[28]

Alternatively, we could take Cavarero to be saying that we singular beings are constituted, *in* our singularity, of relations. On this reading not only do relations hold between singular beings; also, each singular being, within itself, is the holding-together, the concrescence, of a determinate and in each case unique set of relations. In addition to obtaining inter-personally, then, relations are *sub*-personal: They constitute each of us as singular persons. The sub-personal is not impersonal: Sub-personal relations *make* us into in each case singular persons rather than dissolving us into anonymous impersonal life. Thus, my life and actions are 'mine' because they express the unique concrescence of relations that constitutes me.

Cavarero suggests this when, having in *Relating Narratives* said that the newborn is totally unique at birth, she then explains that this is so only because, firstly, with birth each newborn begins to participate in a unique web of relations with others[29];

[25] Moreover, Cavarero's philosophy of birth conflicts with Heidegger's philosophical privileging of *Dasein*'s being-towards-death as the ground of its orientation towards its birth. See Heidegger (1962, pp. 425–427, 442–443). Whereas Heidegger makes mortality the ground of natality, Cavarero (following Arendt) reverses this ordering.

[26] Cavarero (2000, p. 43).

[27] Cavarero (2000, p. 38).

[28] Cavarero (2000, p. 73).

[29] Cavarero (2000, pp. 38–39).

and, secondly, because each newborn appears in a unique place within a web of familial, social, cultural relations, inherited through the mother, condensed in the newborn's name[30] and embodied in their corporeal form and voice.[31] Thus, 'the ontological status of a who is *always* relational and contextual.'[32] The self is unique at birth not because of anything mysteriously 'new' but because birth is the conclusion of the process by which a unique set of relations has cohered into, and as, the gestating fetus. With this conclusion, the new being becomes corporeally independent of its mother—and simultaneously begins to participate in new relations with other persons-as-webs-of-relations—an always unique set of other persons because of each newborn's genealogically specific entry-point into the world.[33] I favor this more strongly relational reading of Cavarero because it acknowledges more fully the depth at which we are constituted by others, a chain of constitution that begins with our constitution by our mothers at and immediately after birth. As such, the relational reading also better acknowledges the significance of birth *from* the mother.

What does this imply regarding death? If someone's birth is their entrance into a shared world with others, then their death must equally be their irreversible departure from this *shared* world. The significance of someone's death to the extent that they anticipate it, then, is not that they will cease to be there as such, but that they will cease to be there *with these others*, with the particular others with whom this person has been related, in the particular places and contexts that they have shared. Of course, with death each person will lose contact with all others, not only the particular others who matter to them. But it is the loss of contact with those others who matter and have mattered to them over time that is significant to a person anticipating their death. After all, although we are constituted by our relations with others, we are not constituted by our relations with all the others in the world but with a particular set of others, a set comprised initially of those amongst whom we find ourselves placed by birth, and then taking in those through whom we come into contact via complex chains of action and causation arising out of our initial set of natal relations. On death I will no longer be exposed to *these* others, and will no longer be in the world specifically *as* a world shared with these particular others. In this sense, one's death as anticipated is constitutively social.

However, so far, death still seems, even if it always has a social character, to be a person's own: *that* person's departure from the shared social world, no-one else's. This reminds us again of Heidegger's position in *Being and Time*. For him, death is experienced in crucially different ways by different parties: I experience the death of others as events or occurrences in my life, but I can never, even in dying, experience my own death in this way. Thus, my own death is not properly an event or occurrence as are the deaths of others, although we tend to lapse into treating our own deaths in this inauthentic way. Properly, my death is the limit of my life—a limit absolutely exterior to my life, yet simultaneously internal insofar as it

[30] Cavarero (2000, p. 21).

[31] Cavarero (2000, p. 34).

[32] Cavarero (2000, p. 90; my emphasis).

[33] For a similar strongly relational reading of Cavarero, see Perpich (2003).

constitutes my life as the incomplete, temporal, finite life that it is. Hence my death radically individuates me, placing me into my unique and limited time, place, and circumstances, for which I alone am responsible. From this perspective, death cannot be shared because my death and those of others differ in kind. Thus Heidegger describes my death as my 'ownmost possibility [which] is *non*-relational' (*unbezüglich*), which necessarily is mine alone (existentially, even if empirically others surround me when I am dying).[34]

Cavarero's relational ontology, when read strongly relationally, suggests a different picture. If I am constituted of a web of relations with others, then when I die, these relations end, relations that were equally parts of the webs of relations that constituted each of those other people. So something of each of those people *does* die at the same time. Conversely, when others die part of me dies; our deaths are not separate from one another. But are the 'deaths' in question here merely metaphorical? Let me try to suggest not, with reference to Cavarero's account of life-stories in *Relating Narratives*.

Cavarero understands story, and narrative, to be central to who each of us is. Through narratives, others communicate (to me, to one another) who I am. I can only learn who I am from others; this is because I only am the person I am in relation to those others in the first place. Who I am coincides with the story of my life and my actions, as others recount and articulate this story in a plurality of narratives. A story, which begins for each of us at birth, can thus only exist if there is both the one whose story it is and the plurality of others to whom that someone appears. The notion of a story brings together the connotations of history and of fiction, the imaginative conferring of meaning on events. In this case, then, what takes place—the events of someone's life—only takes place *as* those events insofar as others confer meaning upon them: '[T]he identity of the self [and its life and actions] … is totally constituted by the relations of her appearance to others in the world': As one appears to others, so one is.[35] The meaning of the self/life/actions, though, need not be articulated in explicit narrative, symbolic, form—hence Cavarero's distinction of story from narrative.[36] For her, meaning emerges from and between our bodies before it is articulated in language: There is a prior, broader, domain of pre-linguistic meaning or significance.

On this picture, a person's death cannot be separate from the deaths of others. If this person *is* their story, and if this story only exists in that it appears to (and is narrated by) multiple others, then, whenever any of the others before whom the person has been appearing die, part of this person ceases to exist too. When these others die, part of the person's story is lost, and so, since that person *is* their life-story, part of them has died. One might object that the person loses nothing of him- or herself here, only the possibility of gaining *access* to part of him- or herself by hearing the other speak about that part and reveal its meaning. Indeed, we might think that not even this is entirely lost: A bereaved person, remembering the other who has died and the ways that she tended to view things, can remember the

[34] Heidegger (1962, p. 308; my emphasis).

[35] Cavarero (2000, p. 36).

[36] Cavarero (2000, p. 28).

meanings that his past actions had in that other's eyes and can anticipate the meanings that his still-ongoing life would likely have in the other's eyes were she still here. Yet real others are not reducible to those others as we remember, anticipate, or otherwise experience them. Moreover, the meanings of our lives and actions always remain indefinitely open to new interpretations and perspectives.[37] As such, in losing an other with whom I have been related, I lose real possibilities of meaning that were in the process of unfolding within my own life as lived before that other—and this is to lose a dimension *of* my life and actions, a strand constitutive of their richness and significance as incomplete and temporally lived. I cannot recover that dimension by anticipating how the lost other might have seen me or remembering how they saw me, for this can only ever be *my* anticipation or remembrance, not the other's perception from the perspective of their alterity.

Even if I have indeed lost part of my life here, have I thereby undergone any part of my death? It might seem that I have 'died' here only in an extended, metaphorical, sense of death as loss. But, I suggest, Cavarero's ontology discloses a way in which I have literally undergone part of my death. I have lost one of the relations, or strands of relational history, that have been constitutive of me and have contributed to making me the singular individual that I am. I have lost a constitutive part of what I was. If my death is the end of my existence *as* the unique concrescence of relations that I am, then for one of those relations to end is for me to undergo, already in life, part of my death. In that case, our deaths are not separate from but comprise parts of one another, feeding over time into the final death of what remains of someone after successive losses that they have undergone through bereavement.[38] A person's death is never solely his or her own, then, because it is never the case that *only* this person who dies, dies. Always it is *we* who die: a death shared, communal, collective.

However, on this view, it appears that deaths are still always the deaths of different persons, even though these different deaths affect and feed into one another. If so, then every death is shared only in that it is *both* some singular person's death *and* also part of the deaths of other persons. If death is always 'ours,' nonetheless this 'ours' still seems to consist of 'mine' *and* 'yours.' After all, the one who dies ceases to exist altogether, whereas the others caught up in this death only suffer the partial loss, the attenuation, not the complete end, of their existence.

When read as strongly relational, though, Cavarero's ontology implies a further way in which deaths are communal: that each 'I' is already, internally, a 'we,' for each person comprises a web of relations. To amplify this idea we can draw on

[37] Cavarero (2000, p. 38).

[38] For Heidegger, in contrast, it makes no sense to say that a bereaved person exists less than they did. Rather, for Heidegger, the bereaved person is still in the world, but as a world from which the other has gone, or in which the bereaved is with that dead other only *as*-dead. But the bereaved person has not herself died at all; she hasn't died with the dead person, who necessarily died alone. Heidegger's views here reflect the ultimate priority that he gives to (individual) being-there over being-with: After all, for him, 'The world *of Dasein* is a with-world' (1962, p. 155; my emphasis)—the world is primarily *of Dasein*. Having said this, there is a question about how it is possible for someone bereaved to exist less than they did before. I address this in Sects. 5 and 6.

Freud's view that 'the character of the ego is a precipitate of abandoned … object-choices.'[39] Freud was led to this view by his analysis of the identificatory mechanism involved in melancholia, whereby the melancholic person reacts to the loss of a loved one by mentally taking that lost 'object' into him- or herself. Freud then recognized that this identificatory mechanism underpins psychical formation much more broadly. Each individual's psyche forms through successive identifications with the different figures—primarily mother- and father-figures—to whom the individual relates in infancy, childhood, and beyond. These internalized figures become the different sub-systems that collectively comprise the individual's psyche (for instance, paradigmatically, the internalized authoritarian father becomes the nucleus of the super-ego and the ego-ideal). Thus, each psyche takes shape as a complex system of agencies, stratified in relations to one another that reflect the relations the individual has had with real others. Our emotional dispositions, and our typical patterns of action and response to others, distill our past histories of relations, carrying those pasts forward into and as the present of new interactions. This is particularly evident in the phenomenon of transference, in which the analysand re-enacts and re-creates with his analyst his ingrained modes of relation to past significant figures, putting the analyst in the position of his imagined/remembered/fantasized mother, father, or other significant figure. At the same time, we remain constantly open to others in their uniqueness: New others respond to us in unpredicted and unprecedented ways, provoking shifts or transformations in our mental configurations, so that the present constantly re-shapes the past sedimented within each of us. The web of relations of which each person consists is thus constantly shifting in relation to unique external others, while equally it shapes the character of those present relations. This psychoanalytic view provides one way to expand on the idea that we are entirely constituted by or of our relations with others.

Someone's death, then, in addition to being not only their own but also part of the deaths of others, is the death of multiple others precisely *in* being that person's own. When the person dies, what ceases to be is a particular web of internalized relations. This is still the end of that unique person: Just as sets of relations coalesce into unique persons in their singularity, reciprocally when a set of relations comes to an end, this is always the end of a unique person. However, the death is not that person's own in the way that Heidegger maintains, where their own death is sharply differentiated from the deaths of others. Rather, each person's death segues into the partial deaths of multiple related others, and each person's death just *is* the end of a set of relations with others—relations that had been continuously unfolding between that person and others external to them. As such, the death is best characterized not as being the person's own as opposed to those of others, but rather as being that person's own only *because* it is the end of a set of unfolding histories that had been maintained between that person and others, histories none of which were simply that person's own. Ultimately, Cavarero's view of birth implies a conclusion not unlike Derrida's in *Aporias* when he writes that: 'The death of the other, this death of the other in "me," is fundamentally the only death that is named in the syntagm "my

[39] Freud (1984, p. 368).

death."'[40] Insofar as I relate in advance to my death, what I anticipate is the termination of multiple strands of interaction and history shared with others, and I fear the loss of this shared history as a loss to all those involved in it. Those strands of interaction were ours rather than narrowly mine, insofar as they unfolded between the self and real external others.

Cavarero's ontology implies, then, that death is relational in the following ways. Firstly, distinct deaths intertwine; the death of A affects and feeds into the death of B, or *vice versa*; the loss is shared, collective. Secondly, each death befalls a collectivity, the unique collectivity that each person is, so that that the death is only ever that person's own insofar as it is the end of a set of relations *not* owned solely by the one who dies. These are two faces of the mortality of intertwined selves.

Insofar as I do relate in advance to the prospect of my death, I fear not only (as I put it earlier) the prospect of ceasing to be in a shared world with particular others. I also fear the prospect of this particular web of others (which I am) ceasing to be in the world: partly in that the relevant others will thereby lose part of their own being; partly in that these others will cease to be carried forward as dimensions of me. Admittedly, when one fears death the experience often presents itself as if what is feared is one's own personal, absolute annihilation, one's own no-longer being-there. Yet if each person is at root a web of relations, then what someone who fears their annihilation ultimately fears must be—whether it is immediately apparent to them or not—the dissolution of this web. My relation to the prospect of death places me into the depths of my attachments to others.

Does this relational view of death open up a possibility of post-mortem survival? It might appear to do so. If, after someone's death, others remember that person (and commemorate them, relate narratives about them, maintain them in their psyches, maintain their habitual ways of having responded to that person), then that person seems still to be appearing to these others and thus would be being kept in some kind of presence within the shared world—not entirely dead after all.[41] I am not convinced by this line of thought. If birth is always the arrival of someone uniquely new, new in virtue of being a unique concrescence of relations, then when somebody dies there must, reciprocally, be an irreplaceable loss. Certainly, aspects of the formerly living person can be and generally are taken up by others—those who are bereaved take over the possessions, the home, the habits of body and mind, of those who have died. But inevitably, when others engage in this work of mourning, they incorporate these aspects of the dead person into the unique webs of relations that they in each case are. These surviving others cannot maintain these aspects as the facets of that *particular* web that constituted

[40] Derrida (1993, p. 76). Derrida says this partly with reference to Freud's view of the personality as a precipitate of relations with others. But Derrida also means that I can only anticipate my death (from *within* my life) as an occurrence of the order of the deaths of others. This is because, necessarily, my death as my constitutive limit is not something I can anticipate or bring within my compass at all. Thus here Derrida wishes to turn Heidegger's distinction between my own death and those of others against his account of anticipatory resoluteness and authenticity. In doing so, though, Derrida still operates within Heidegger's conceptual framework, whereas Cavarero follows Arendt in building a positive philosophical alternative to Heidegger, an alternative that prioritizes natality and sociality over mortality and individuation.

[41] For a version of this argument see Guenther (2008).

the now-dead person. Necessarily, these aspects assume new meanings for those who take them over (not least in that they tend to make reference back to the now-dead person—a meaning of commemorating or remaining faithful to that person, or of rebellious insistence on reshaping the dead person's legacy). If each person is a singular concrescence of relations, then nothing of them can survive the loss of this whole concrescence.

5 Corporeal mortality

I now want to make this sketch of an account of relational death more concrete by re-reading Beauvoir's short narrative of her mother's death from cancer. This will also enable me to elaborate on the corporeality of death: For, since birth has ontological significance as the particular kind of corporeal event that it is, likewise the relationality of death must inhere in what death is corporeally. I will argue, too, that deaths are corporeal processes that affect us as living bodies, and specifically as mutually entwined, interdependent, organisms; and that this is what makes it possible for us partly to die along with one another—to exist less the more we are bereaved.

Beauvoir criticizes Heidegger's connection between mortality and authentic existence in her 1944 essay *Pyrrhus and Cineas*.[42] Nonetheless, in *A Very Easy Death* she inclines to the Heideggerian belief in a sharp distinction between one's own death and the deaths of others such that death is, as Heidegger says, non-relational.[43] 'The misfortune,' Beauvoir thus declares, 'is that although everyone must come to this, each experiences the adventure in solitude. We never left Maman during these last days … and yet we were profoundly separated from her.'[44] Yet this belief of Beauvoir's eventually succumbs to a rather different view—in effect, the view that death is relational, and is relational in its corporeal, and specifically biological, character.

The memoir begins with Beauvoir's mother admitted to hospital after a fall. The doctors discover that she has intestinal cancer, on which they operate. Beauvoir is frustrated that the doctors persistently deceive her mother about her condition and prolong her mother's life with drugs and operations although she is terminally ill and in great pain. Beauvoir longs to seize (benevolent) control over her mother's death from the doctors: to project some meaning onto the impending death so that it would cease to be merely a physical process befalling a 'defenseless carcass,' which is how the doctors insist on treating it.[45] Yet something stops Beauvoir from exerting control: 'One is caught up in the wheels and dragged along, powerless in

[42] de Beauvoir (2004, p. 114).

[43] In *Pyrrhus and Cineas* Beauvoir does not reject that distinction as such (indeed, she does not mention it). Rather, what she rejects in Heidegger's account of death is his view that authenticity must be grounded in the assumption of one's mortality, for (anticipating Derrida) she denies that one can have any anticipatory relation to one's death as such. She instead grounds the possibility of authenticity in our ambiguous transcendence. See de Beauvoir (2004, pp. 113–115).

[44] de Beauvoir (1966, p. 87).

[45] de Beauvoir (1966, p. 10).

the face of specialists' diagnoses, their forecasts, their decisions.'[46] Finally her mother dies unwillingly, painfully unable to breathe, having declared that she does not want to die.

In the face of this event, Beauvoir affirms the Heideggerian view that we each die alone, ontologically. But her narrative undermines these claims. Immediately after making them, she writes of how closely bound up in body with her mother she has always felt. Her mother's body was her first love; it was her mother as a body with whom the infant Beauvoir was identified. Unconsciously, she remains caught up in this early loving identification with her mother: In her dreams Mme Beauvoir 'blended with Sartre, and we were happy together.'[47]

The movement of the text then reveals how this continuing identification overcomes the purported solitude of Mme Beauvoir's death. Mme Beauvoir resists death, doggedly clings to life—a *bodily* clinging, which for Beauvoir is rooted in her mother's intense organic vitality: '[S]he clung ferociously to this world, and she had an animal dread of death'; 'Her vitality filled me with wonder.'[48] Correspondingly, it is the *physical* process of dying that her mother resists, the process that Beauvoir, faithful to her mother's perspective, describes in meticulous, gruesome detail: Her mother's 'flayed body was bathing in the uric acid that oozed from her skin'—'rotting alive.'[49] Actually, Beauvoir professes both repugnance and admiration for the vitality with which her mother defies these processes, but admiration prevails. This is because, she tells us, it is rooted in her identification—her unconscious, enduring, bodily identification—with her mother: '[I]n every cell of my body I joined in her refusal, her rebellion' against death.[50] Beauvoir continues, has always been continuing, her mother's vitality: Her own resistance to the death *is* her mother's bodily resistance continuing in and through her own body, so that just when Beauvoir is bemoaning her mother's existential loneliness in the hospital, she finds her face copying her mother's movements, crying her mother's tears—'I had put Maman's mouth on my own face … Her whole person, her whole being, was concentrated there.'[51]

Death is, again, relational: With Mme Beauvoir's death (and resistance) a part of Beauvoir is dying (and resisting) too—the death, and the battle against it, is *theirs*, shared. For the relations that constitute selves are equally their relations as bodies. My life, actions, are lived and performed bodily; the story others narrate to me is the story of who I am as a body. The concrete others with whom I interact, parts of whom I continually take in, are bodily others. When someone dies to whom I was exposed, I lose part of the person that I have been—in that the death affects me as someone exterior to the dead person; and in that the dead person takes part of me away with him or her within his or her bodily interior.

[46] de Beauvoir (1966, p. 50).

[47] de Beauvoir (1966, p. 89).

[48] de Beauvoir (1966, pp. 14, 17).

[49] de Beauvoir (1966, pp. 71, 73).

[50] de Beauvoir (1966, p. 91).

[51] de Beauvoir (1966, p. 28).

This loss is corporeal. It 'undoes' a person, inflicts on them a—more-or-less partial, more-or-less temporary—disintegration of the body, the concrescence of relations in bodily form, that that person is.[52] This is possible because our bodies are biological—although, to be sure, they are not merely biological, and their expressive and relational qualities are not reducible to their biological properties. It is along such lines that Beauvoir distinguishes in her earlier work (notably including *The Second Sex* of 1949) between our bodies as lived—our bodies as we directly experience them, with expressive significance sedimented within our corporeal habits and dispositions—and those same bodies considered merely as biological systems, the objects of a scientific perspective that abstracts from lived experience. In making this distinction Beauvoir is not denying that our bodies have biological properties or that they are systems of biological processes. She is arguing that when studying human life we must re-situate the biological facts (*faits*) within the field of human relations and projects which gives them concrete significance (*sens*), building further levels of expressive meaning into them. In turn, our biological features affect what relations and projects we can embrace and what particular habits and attitudes we can assume corporeally—although these effects are already mediated by the prior levels of concrete significance with which these biological features have become infused over time.[53]

Beauvoir retains a similar approach to the corporeal in *A Very Easy Death*. As we have seen, she describes both her mother's death and her resistance to death as biological processes. But they take on significance in terms of her mother's attachment to her relations with others, including her daughter's—an attachment that Beauvoir reciprocates, so that the breaking of these relations pervades and unsettles her body's biological processes in turn. If we can be corporeally undone by one another's deaths, then, this is because we are biological beings whose biology becomes enfolded within the context of our mutual relations. Our mutual appearance is our bodily entwinement with one another *and* our vital dependence upon one another. Our entwinement together as bodies enfolds our biological properties, shaping the concrete context in which those properties exist and work their effects, so that we become vitally invested in and organically dependent upon our mutual relations. To die, too, is to undergo a biological process—one in which the bodily organism that one has been undergoes dissolution (as Beauvoir mercilessly documents with respect to her mother, and as Cavarero rightly says in *Plato*; her fault there is to take death to be exclusively biological and not simultaneously existential and relational). Because death is a biological process, the transition from life to death is generally graduated. If one loses an important other, then one may well take some of the first steps along this transition: The bodily organism that one is may cease to perform some of its vital functions, lose some of its vital hold on life—as if one had suffered a physical blow. It is in this way that bereavement can reduce or attenuate someone's existence, by stripping away some

[52] Butler says: 'We're undone by each other' when we lose one another to death (2004, p. 23). Cavarero (2009, p. 8) tells us that to 'undo' formerly meant to viscerally disfigure or dismember.

[53] de Beauvoir (1988, pp. 66–67).

of the relational conditions on which that person has become vitally dependent, reducing their power to persist in their bodily being.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Beauvoir answers her self-addressed question 'why was she so moved by her mother's death?' by writing first of her unconscious identification with her mother and then of their shared vital spirit, their corporeal intertwining. All this leads her to concede that death is not so solitary after all: '[L]ove, friendship or comradely feeling overcomes the loneliness of death.'[54] From *A Very Easy Death* it emerges that death is relational *as* a corporeal phenomenon that befalls human beings as bodies entwined organically. One person's death is part of another's insofar as they have become entwined as organisms, so that the loss of the one disables the other physically, makes their biological functions seize up and collapse, more-or-less temporarily. The continuity between our deaths corresponds to our physical interdependence as living beings.

6 Fearing death

As Beauvoir describes it, her mother was 'quite worn out' and 'of an age to die.' Yet her death was not 'easy'; she met it *un*willingly, holding to life with all her remaining, still considerable, force. This returns us to Cavarero's suggestion, in *Plato*, that if we understood death as biological re-incorporation into life then we would cease to have grounds to fear death and would instead be reconciled to it. Once we recognize that Cavarero's philosophy of natality actually calls for a different view of mortality from the one that she explicitly adopts, we also see that, on this relational view of death which I have sketched, we do have grounds to fear death.[55]

There are two main grounds for fear. Firstly, we each have grounds to fear our own deaths because these will mark the end to the unique webs of relations of which we are constituted, and to which we are necessarily attached because these relations constitute us. Secondly, we have grounds to fear death on behalf of the related others who will also be caught up in the death, because my death is also the death of a part of those others. We feel fear on behalf of these related others just because, again, we are attached to them in our very being. Thus, we have grounds to fear our deaths not merely on our own behalf but also on behalf of the others who will partly die along with us. Indeed, even in fearing my own death as the loss of the unique set of relations that I am, I am fearing, precisely, the end of this set of relations. What is feared cannot be specified without reference to the multiple others who have shaped the unique world of significance that these relations make up. I fear my death as the end of a set of shared attachments, meanings, histories; a web of remembered and anticipated events shared with particular others; of stories exchanged and re-worked with successive others over time.

[54] de Beauvoir (1966, p. 91).

[55] I say 'fear' (contrary to Heidegger's distinction of fear from anxiety) because from my perspective, it *is* death as a phenomenon with corporeal and biological dimensions that we as living beings have reason to fear.

But still, why should we be attached to the relations that constitute us? In terms of Beauvoir's memoir, it is as an organism that Mme Beauvoir wishes to persist in being. She is attached to her own organic form, and, because in human beings biology is socialized through and through, this means that she is attached in her body to the particular series of relations that has coalesced into her. Consequently, to convey the nature of this attachment, Beauvoir offers us a brief history of her mother's life—her natal family, her marriage, children, relationship to the church, etc.—at the same time as she conveys the vital nature of this attachment and its opposition to the gruesomely physical process of her mother's death.

This recalls Lispector's suggestion that each organism is necessarily attached to its own form. Presumably, an organism can remain so even when (as in Mme Beauvoir's case) it has reached the end of its narrowly biological life-course—that is, in Lispector's terms, when anonymous life is pressing beyond the finite form in which it has been temporarily contained. For the strictly biological functions of a human organism invariably become entwined with the psychical functions that make up its personality, the set of social relations congealed within it. Human life (if not life as such) conflicts with itself: It tends to adhere to its own finite relational forms even when the biological structures that are entwined with them have become exhausted. Or, in Cavarero's terms in *Plato*: If cosmic life rearranges, scrambles, and unscrambles elements into ever-new combinations and relations, then any living concrescence of relations will nonetheless be apt to try to persist in the form of the particular concrescence that it has become. Life conflicts with itself; cosmic life conflicts with the finite forms that it constantly produces. Eventually in each case, the conflict ends with cosmic life dissolving these forms. But for the most part, too—that is, barring terrible illness, pain, sorrow, repeated or overwhelming bereavement—these finite living forms resist death: They resist the efforts of cosmic life to break through them.

In being attached to the sets of relations with others through which we have lived, we are equally attached to our own organic forms as these have come to be, forms that are never merely biological but always biological-cum-social. The disintegrations that we fear are our disintegrations as organisms. Our finite, bodily, nature is such that we *cannot* readily embrace re-incorporation into neutral life in the way that Cavarero proposes. To view death in light of birth is to appreciate that death is to be feared.[56]

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