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WHAT A TIME TO BE ALIVE: THE PHILOSOPHICAL
UNDERPINNINGS OF HEIDEGGER AND NIETZSCHE IN *THE
POSTMORTAL*

Jaclyn Boyer

The revolutionary thinker William Penn once wrote, “Time is what we want most, but what we use worst” (Penn). Mankind curses and mourns time’s passing yet we do not seize it in the present. Instead of taking advantage of time, we tend to deceive ourselves into thinking that we are going to live forever, or at least long enough to accomplish all we want in life. So when we get to the end of our time, whether it is in a day, in a certain stage of life, or in our entire existence, we would do anything to just have more time.

In Drew Magary’s novel, *The Postmortal* (2011), he describes a futuristic society, which has developed a “cure” for humanity’s shortcoming, with the promise of infinite time, immortality. However, as we observe through the never-ending life of the protagonist, John, immortality proves to be more of a problem than a solution, as he is forced to witness the deaths of all of his loved ones, which causes his life to transform into a meaningless expanse of time. Therefore, with the struggles the protagonist endures as a result of his immortality, Magary’s novel provokes philosophical thought about the relationship among time, religion, and humanity.

German philosopher Martin Heidegger claimed that the pressing knowledge of the inevitability of death completes the existence of man, while Friedrich Nietzsche proposed that as time progresses, man will shift away from religion and toward rationalism. While Magary’s *The Postmortal* is commonly read in First-Year Seminar courses due to its presentation of pressing societal issues, the text raises philosophical questions regarding the status quo of humanity that begs the reader to excavate the hidden philosophical, theological and epistemological messages looming beneath the lines of the text.

In Martin Heidegger’s profoundly important work, *Being and Time*, he seeks to explain the meaning of being as well as the problems of existence. Heidegger refers to the human existence with a term he created, Dasein, which can be roughly translated from German as ‘existence.’ He talks extensively about the elements of the Dasein that constitute its existence, as

well as the elements of necessity in order for Dasein to exist and live as it is meant to. Particularly, Heidegger stresses the importance of Death, claiming that, “Death completes Dasein’s existence” (Wheeler). However, since an individual cannot possibly experience their own death, Heidegger supports his argument by claiming that the Dasein has the ability to understand death through experiencing the death of others as well as by acknowledging that Dasein’s own death is inevitable, the “possibility of the impossibility of an existence at all” (*Being and Time* 53: 307). Therefore, Heidegger is arguing that not only is the realization of Death a crucial component of the existence of mankind, but also that this awareness of an omnipresent Death “illuminates” the individual, stating, “When I take on board the possibility of my own not-Being, my own being-able-to-Be is brought into proper view” (Wheeler). It is this concept of being-able-to-Be that is presented subtly in the cracks of *The Postmortal*.

Heidegger’s argument that the possibility of Death essentially betters the existence of Dasein is highlighted in *The Postmortal* as Magary portrays the consequences of living a life of infinite time. With the above quote about not-Being bringing the being-able-to-Be into “proper view,” Heidegger is essentially claiming that Death is a driving force that gives us meaning in our lives. Therefore, if that possibility of not-being is removed, or in the case of this Postmortal society, cured, individuals freed of the inevitability of Death tend to live meaningless lives. Magary demonstrates the dangers of living a meaningless life through the transformation of John’s life after he gets the cure. Slowly, we see John’s life progress towards having no purpose as he quits his job, refuses to marry his true love, and decides not to be in his son’s life. Also, because he has given his life infinite time, he cruelly subjects himself to witnessing the death of every person he loves since while the cure freezes a body at its cure age, it does not guarantee immortality through invincibility.

He experiences the death of others, while ignoring the possibility of his own, therefore not completely, but rather hindering his existence as well as exposing the dangerous shortcoming of the cure, “people mistakenly hoped the cure would end not only death but also the anguish of processing death... [but] they have to spend much longer dealing with their grief” (Magary 262). Consequently, living long enough to experience so much Death and living without meaning, ultimately drives John to desperately find some purpose in his life, which leads him to a life of immorality. Since the ultimate consequence, death, is no longer a pressing issue and all meaning diminishes with time, John has no choice but to turn to immoral living as it is the only thing left. Near the end of the novel, after he has lost the last person he loved and has nothing left in life, John agrees to become a hard end specialist, saying, “I have my purpose,” (Magary 292) which is to kill people. In terms of Heidegger’s thinking, this could be a way for John to force an awareness of

Dasein onto himself. By making a career out of bringing people to their deaths, John is constantly exposing himself to Death, face to face with the Dasein.

Another philosophical underlying of Heidegger's modern thinking demonstrated in *The Postmortal*, is the questioning of traditional values. Since within the Postmortal society, the "cure" enables individuals to live without the possibility of Death looming over their entire lives, we are able to truly see the lives they willingly chose to live. Therefore, the initial desires and actions of the individuals with the cure bring to light philosophical concerns about the free will of mankind. Throughout the novel, the status quo is constantly being questioned as traditional values such as going to college, getting married, having a family, and working up until retirement become restraints to one's free will. With all of the time in the world, these individuals no longer desire to accomplish milestones in life, but just want to party. This is demonstrated in the chapter when John and his friends go to Vegas. Although this chapter may make readers initially think that John and his friends are simply wasting their life away partying, the chapter actually shows philosophical depth as it symbolizes true human nature. John claims that this infinite amount of time, "just means you have more time to do what you enjoy or find what you enjoy" (Magary 39). So if this is true, then it seems that the genuine nature of man is not to enjoy the traditional values we hold so dear now, but to enjoy a life free from these values, escaping them. Since these Postmortal individuals have an infinite amount of time to do what they enjoy in life, they decide to do the opposite of what we think constitutes a "life well lived" now. This idea challenges the way we define a "good" life today. Thus the horrifying possibility emerges that maybe we, as a society, have constructed a way of living that is not how we are intended to live. In the mortal society we presently live in, it seems life is a race in which we are hastily trying to fit everything we are "supposed" to have into our life span before our time runs out. The inevitability of our death, or finite time can be seen as a way to manipulate us into becoming slaves to societal standards, as we feel when we reach a certain age or stage in our lives, we have to have a certain life event completed or else we have failed to live a "good" life.

Therefore, one could argue against Heidegger and say that Death is not a necessity for completing the human existence, but rather hinders it, and is just a way to keep humanity in line.

Magary expresses this idea by literally titling one of the chapters in his novel, "Death is the only thing keeping us in line." However, the chapter is not exclusively about Death, but rather the relationship between Death and religion, "religion as insurance against death" (Magary 13). What this chapter introduces, and what we will observe throughout the rest of the novel, is that Death and religion are synonymous in that they are ways, though one is

natural and the other is constructed to keep individuals in line, specifically within the status quo. This concern Magary provokes alludes to the thoughts of the German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche, who is famously recognized for rejecting traditional philosophical reasoning by claiming that, “God is dead,” specifically “in the hearts and minds of modern men” (Friedrich). Nietzsche believed that values are essential for the survival and growth of humanity but argued that; “the exemplary human being must craft his own identity through self-realization and do so without relying on anything transcending that life—such as God” (Friedrich). Therefore, Nietzsche controversially named mankind as the killer of God, for as time goes on, and new ideas about science and knowledge as a whole emerge, traditional beliefs will be challenged, resulting in a societal shift away from faith and towards rationalism. However, Nietzsche also warns that this ending of long-established values that set standards for morality and purpose, will lead to the dangerous emergence of a nihilistic society. A society which although lives without the constraints of faith, also lives with a belief in nothing, living essentially a meaningless life.

Nietzsche’s thoughts regarding the relationship among time, religion, and man are emphasized in *The Postmortal* by the corruptness and dangerousness of the Church of Man. In this futuristic world, science has advanced so greatly that individuals now have the power to essentially freeze time, putting off Death, and therefore making the concept of religion obsolete. Magary expresses this idea that Death does not only keep us in line but also provides meaning to religion, by the pleading words of the pope, “Death is what makes us humble before God—knowing that our lives will come to an end and that when the end arrives we will be forced to answer for them” (Magary 12). But now that the advancement of the cure has prolonged death, the cure gets rid of the value of faith and a belief in God, demonstrating what Nietzsche referred to as the societal shift from faith to rationalism that caused the death of God. In *The Postmortal*, I think Magary shows this shift with the emergence of the Church of Man. Now that this society has shifted towards rationalism or something tangible to believe in, themselves, there is no need to worship a God, for the cure essentially makes the post mortals their own God.

The death of God is supported by Nietzsche’s idea that as time goes on, values will continue to be brought into question that were once thought as “absolute.” However, Nietzsche also states that, “the acceptance that God is dead will also involve the ending of long-established standards of morality and of purpose,” (Friedrich) resulting in the emergence of a nihilistic society. Nietzsche warns about Nihilism, or a belief in nothing, for it will leave people to live their life with no purpose, which is reminiscent of Heidegger’s philosophical ideas. Therefore, Nietzsche proposes that a new set of values are established by the creation of the “Superman.” He saw the “Superman” as

the answer to nihilistic rejection of all religious principles, a hero “that reflects the strength and independence of one who is liberated from all values” (Friedrich). In parallel with Nietzsche’s idea of the “Superman,” Magary creates the Church of Man in which the members do not worship God, but rather themselves, deviating from the status quo. When trying to convert John to the church, his son David says that, “[the church] teaches us that the goodness and selflessness of man will always rise to the surface,” (Magary 216). This supports Nietzsche’s stance that when religion becomes obsolete, then the exemplary human can emerge, however as we see throughout the novel, this is not in fact how the Church of Man acts. As Magary demonstrates, it does not matter if you get rid of religion and its constraints, because true human nature will always find a way to emerge. The Church of Man preaches that it highlights the goodness of mankind and enables its members to live freely, yet because they are human, they still find ways to control others, limiting what their members can eat, drink, and do with their lives.

In conclusion, while Magary’s *The Postmortal* is typically read among first-year college students because of its presentation of current societal issues, the text contains underlying philosophical messages that bring into question the status quo of humanity. Martin Heidegger proposed that the existence of man is not complete without Death, or at least the impending knowledge of one’s own death. Friedrich Nietzsche predicted that the death of God comes about when a society has become so scientifically advanced that it shifts away from faith towards rationalism. Throughout the novel, Magary presents these issues through the immortal, drawn out life of the protagonist. John questions the status quo in nearly every aspect, including marriage, career, family, and religion. Although in some ways this deviation from the status quo can be liberating, what we see as a result in the novel, is that John lives a tragic and meaningless life. What Magary may be highlighting here, is that society’s constructed status quo, like Death and religion, may constrict humanity, but it is necessary. For without the set status quo, life becomes this great abyss without any light to guide us in the right direction.

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