

# Death and Organization: Heidegger's thought on death and life in organizations

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Dr Patrick Reedy (corresponding author)	Dr Mark Learmonth
<b>Address</b> Nottingham University Business School Jubilee Campus Wollaton Road University of Nottingham NOTTINGHAM NG8 1BB United Kingdom	<b>Address</b> Nottingham University Business School Jubilee Campus Wollaton Road University of Nottingham NOTTINGHAM NG8 1BB United Kingdom
<b>Telephone</b>  +44 (0) 115 846 6680	<b>Telephone</b>  +44 (0) 115 846 8072
<b>E-mail</b> patrick.reedy@nottingham.ac.uk	<b>E-mail</b> mark.learmonth@nottingham.ac.uk

## Author Biographies

Patrick Reedy is at Nottingham University Business School, teaching mainly organizational theory. His main research interests are to do with the ethics, politics and sociology of management and work. His writing has covered academic and management identity, the history of self-organization, utopias, and alternative organizations.

Mark Learmonth is at Nottingham University Business School where he teaches research methods and public sector management. He spent almost 17 years doing health services management and now writes about organizational issues in this sector - though with increasingly regular forays elsewhere.

# **Death and Organization: Heidegger's thought on death and life in organizations**

## **Abstract**

Mortality has not been given the attention it deserves within organization studies, even when it has been considered it is not usually in terms of its implications for our lives and ethical choices. In particular, Heidegger's writing on death has been almost entirely ignored both in writing on death and writing on organizational ethics, despite his insights into how our mortality and the ethics of existence are linked. In this paper we seek to address this omission by arguing that a consideration of death may yield important insights about the ethics of organizational life. Most important of these is that a Heideggerian approach to death brings us up against fundamental ethical questions such as what our lives are for, how they should be lived, and how we relate to others. Heideggerian thought also re-connects ethics and politics as it is closely concerned with how we can collectively make institutions that support our life projects rather than thwart or diminish them.

## **Keywords**

Heidegger, Death, Ethics, Choice, Organization

## **Introduction**

Death is not only universal, it is, arguably, the most feared of human experiences. In modern societies, death has become highly institutionalized as well as increasingly the object of management and organization (Bauman, 1992; Howarth and Jupp 1996; Karl 1989; Seale 1998; Smith 2006). The management of death in modernity has resulted in what Giddens (1991) has termed the sequestration of death from our everyday lives (see also Clark 1993; Rees 2001; Willmott 2000).

Although such sequestration has not resulted altogether in the absence of death from organizational studies (see Barton Cunningham 1997; Carr and Lapp 2006; Gabriel 1999; Grant and Wade-Benzoni 2009; Sievers 1994; Smith 2006; Willmott 2000, for example) death still tends to be presented in organization theory in ways that limits its disruptive power to enable us to think about our own existential choices and our relations to others. Indeed, we are critical of much writing about personal mortality and organization as it is framed in ways that we believe still evades the 'brutal fact of death' (Glaser and Strauss 1965: 3) and fails to see death as a reason for fundamentally questioning the purpose of organizations and our place in them.

Heidegger's philosophy, which he produced from the 1920s to the 1960s, has had a profound effect on contemporary thinking including psychology, theology, linguistics and modern theories of the text. As such he has been a major influence on thinkers such as Ricoeur, Sartre, Gadamer and Derrida and is considered by many to have been one of the most pivotal and original thinkers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Kearney 1994). Despite this, as Sköldböck (1998) also notes, he is relatively neglected within organization studies even though, as we argue below, his writing on technology and

on ethics is directly relevant to it<sup>1</sup>. However, our primary focus in this paper is to highlight his thinking on death and its role in the ethics of existence – as we argue that this has important implications for the ethics of organizational life. The almost total neglect of his writing on death by organizational theorists (though, again, see Sköldbberg 1998) is puzzling given the centrality of death to his analysis of the nature of human being. As Cohen has argued ‘no thinker has analyzed human mortality with greater precision, made it more central to human existence, given it more prominence for thought, especially the thought of Being, than Heidegger’ (2006: 21).

What work there is on death in organization studies tends to largely (though not exclusively) focus on the way in which fear of our approaching death is ameliorated by minimising our contact with its manifestations (Smith 2006). Other work treats death as a metaphor as in organizational demise (Barton Cunningham 1997) or seeks to delineate the impact of death, loss and mourning on organizations (Lapierre 1989; Ritzer 2000; Wolfram Cox 1997). Another stream of literature seems to us to reduce a consideration of death to simply another managerial way of seeing the world, framing mortality ‘useful’, a method of analysing organizations from the viewpoint of managerial control. Others, in contrast, have written of the way in which modern forms of organization were implicated in the technologized mass slaughter of the holocaust (Bauman 1989; Burrell 1997). Finally, a vast library of related work in the health sciences prescribes how grief and mourning should themselves be ‘managed’ (Cooper and Mitchell 1990; Mohan 2001; Olson, et al. 2001; Williams 1966, for example).

Whilst we will review some of this work in more detail below, our primary concern will be with organizational ethics, particularly the way in which facing up to our mortality reframes the purposes and nature of organization. Following Heidegger’s thought we thus aim to demonstrate that death, and our attitude to it, is a neglected but significant issue within debates on what would constitute a worthwhile life as lived out with others in organizations; furthermore we argue that our response to death has implications for what kind of organization might facilitate such a life. We suggest therefore, that a Heideggerian approach to death, stimulates thinking about ethical questions such as what our lives are for, how they should be lived, how we relate to others and how we can collectively make institutions that support our life projects rather than thwart them. We argue that such questions are rarely at the centre of debates in organization studies but that this neglect is problematic as much of our lives are lived in and through organizations of various kinds.

So we begin our discussion with a brief evaluation of how death is conceptualised within current work on organization studies, going on to contrast these conceptualizations with an approach we base upon Heidegger. We argue that a Heideggerian approach has much to offer organization studies – both in his thinking on mortality and in his ethics of resolute facing up to death – ideas that are more likely to stimulate radical thinking about our lives within organizations than ideas about death currently in the organizational literature. Thus we hope to make a contribution to more critical work on organizational ethics, particularly those which argue that the neglect of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophers, including Heidegger, has led to

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<sup>1</sup> There is, however, a related fairly substantial body of literature on existentialism broadly defined going back for the last thirty years (Manning 1973; Kallinikos 1992a; Kallinikos 1992b) and we draw on these resources in our later discussion of the implications for Heidegger’s thought for organization studies.

an unwarranted exclusion both of politics and broader existential issues from their needful consideration in organizational ethics (Parker 2003). We believe that Heidegger is a particularly appropriate thinker in the task of reconnecting ‘What should I do?’ with the question ‘Who am I?’ (Weaver 2006: 344).

## **Death and Organization Studies**

To begin our brief review of how death tends to be invoked in organization studies, we consider the most common invocation of death – death as a metaphor (Cornelissen and Kafouros 2008): as species extinction, for example, within population ecology perspectives. This metaphor is typically employed in understanding how organizations can adapt to their environments within strategic management theory (Frishammar 2006). Similarly, a metaphorical use of death is apparent in writing on ‘career death’ (Barton Cunningham 1997; Lapierre 1989) or the loss of organizational identity attendant upon mergers (Wolfram Cox 1997). The difficulty for us of thinking of death as a metaphor is that it distances us from its brute materiality and so from facing up to the fact of our own physical death. In other words death is normalized within a familiar and comfortable academic discourse and so loses its capacity to make us face fundamental ethical questions about how we live our lives.

This metaphorical tradition contrasts sharply with work broadly inspired by Freud, a thinker who has been an important influence on writing concerning death within organization studies. Such work has the advantage, from our perspective, of treating death as something more profound than merely as a metaphor (Carr and Lapp 2005; Fotaki 2006; Lapierre 1989; Menzies 1960). It also stresses the way in which the fear and subsequent repression of death can lead to the identification of individuals with their organizations in ethically problematic ways. Of particular relevance to organization studies is the idea that individuals shore up a fantasy of immortality by identifying with institutions that promise to outlive them. Institutions thus become a symbolic substitute for personal immortality (Bauman 1992; Clark 1993; Sievers 1994) and are seen as an idealised version of ourselves (Carr and Lapp 2005; Feldman 2004; Schwartz 1987).

This identification of ourselves with organizations and the issues that arise when they fail to deliver symbolic immortality is a theme examined by a number of writers in organization studies. Lapierre (1989) argues that this identification on the part of senior managers may give rise to unwarranted feelings of omnipotence. For other organizational members, identification may lead to strong feelings of grief and loss when organizations fail, change or perhaps when we fail to progress, or lose our place, in them (Barton Cunningham 1997). Barton Cunningham (1997) goes on to propose an essentially therapeutic response to this symbolic death: how can managers guide organizational survivors through the stages of grief suggested by the ubiquitous Kübler-Ross (1970) framework? Lapierre (1989) also suggests that the terror of death may be incorporated into managerial roles, that the successful leader can integrate loss and a sense of powerlessness into their leadership practice and so enhance their effectiveness.

Some writing within organization studies, however, does take a more critical ethical standpoint on death. Denhardt writes that ‘the relationship between the master and slave may well be rooted in the efforts of masters to seek their own fortunes (their

own immortality) at the expense of the slave's identity and aspirations' (1987: 531). Extending this insight to organizations he argues that 'some managers today conceive of their relationships with subordinates in a way consistent with the master-slave archetype' (Denhardt 1987: 536). Similarly, Schwartz (1987) argues that the identification of individuals with the 'immortal' organization leads to organizational totalitarianism. Furthermore, Sievers (1994) sees the repression of our knowledge of death as leading to oppressive social relations and the domination and exploitation of those at the bottom of the hierarchy. He argues that, as a result, organizations make extreme demands on their members in terms of obedience and sacrifice whilst at the same time restricting decision-making and knowledge to the most senior executives thus infantilizing those at lower levels (see also Stavrakakis 2008). For Feldman (2004) the feelings of invulnerability on the part of senior managers that arise from the successful maintenance of a fantasy of immortality lie at the root of corporate scandals such as the collapse of the Enron Corporation.

We find this more critical writing insightful in explicating how the avoidance of an awareness of our mortality leads to various forms of oppression and domination and so poses a useful warning of the dangers of over-identification of ourselves with organizations, for example through management approaches such as attempts to mould organizational culture (Hancock 1999). In this sense it is congruent with Heideggerian thinking on death. However, there is little sense that there is anything that individuals or groups might do to change this situation. Rather 'in order to maintain that social life we have to conceal from ourselves the fact that the illusion [of immortality] is an illusion, the result is, inevitably, totalitarianism' (Schwartz 1987: 53). These writers are clearly engaged in an ethical critique of the way our irrational natures tend to limit the identity of ourselves and others within relations of domination and fear, however, there is no suggestion of a remedy to this problem other than an understanding of it leading to greater acceptance that this is how things must be.

To summarise the review, we believe that some of the existing work on death in organizational studies does suggest a number of useful insights about organizational life. However, there are also some serious limitations associated with it. We would argue that much work, either unproblematically harnesses these insights in the service of managerialism or, where an ethical dimension is present, offers no remedy to the problems of aggressiveness, self-destructiveness, domination, guilt, shame and loss in organizations because they are seen as inherent in our psychic development. It is for this reason that we now turn to Heidegger's thinking on death – a literature about which organizational studies is largely silent. Whilst Heidegger's thought shares with more critical organizational work on death the conviction that immersion in institutions serves as a way of avoiding confronting our finitude (see Denhardt 1987; Schwartz 1987; Willmott 2000; Smith 2006), it demands a very different response.

## **Heidegger and Death**

In this section we outline Heidegger's writing on death drawing attention to its ethical implications. We draw predominantly on his major and perhaps most influential work *Being and Time* (1926/1962), not least because his analysis of what constitutes authentic being hinges on the significance of death for our lives. We also draw on some of his later writing where he develops his ideas on the effects of

technological rationality on human existence as this has particular implications for the ethical dimension of organization. Before we begin our analysis it is also worth noting that although Heidegger introduced important ethical concepts such as 'Being with', 'solicitude', and 'authenticity' (1926/1962), he was extremely reluctant to develop them in any systematic way (Hodge 1995). Indeed there are many seeming contradictions in his discussion of these ideas that make any straightforward retrieval of an ethics from Heidegger extremely problematic (Olafson 1998). In this sense, in our discussion we are drawing on a *Heideggerian* ethics (which is to say an ethics inspired by his thought) rather than an ethics explicitly stated in Heidegger's writings.

It is clear, however, that Heidegger places ethics, freedom, choice, and relations to others at the heart of what it means to be a human being (Manning 1973). It is also possible to argue, as we do below, that Heidegger's ethics of finitude might provide a foundation for resistance to what is seen as the increasing encroachment of managerialism on the way we define ourselves (Hancock and Tyler 2004; Learmonth, 2009). This convergence of ethics with selfhood begs the question: what kind of organization might facilitate the practice of the Heideggerian virtues of resoluteness and the mindful pursuit of our own life projects?

Heidegger treats death as an occasion for ethical choices in pursuit of an authentic life. In *Being and Time* (1926/1962), he turns to the philosophical question of Being or existence. The nature of Being in general is approached through investigating our own human being, what Heidegger calls *Dasein*. Heidegger sees human being as essentially temporal: we are thrown into the present by our pasts and we make choices from the possibilities afforded to us by our present and thus we shape our futures. To be human, therefore, is always to choose, albeit our choices are constrained by our historical location, individual circumstances and our past decisions. Existence is therefore always provisional and changing and we are always oriented to our future choices (Mulhall 1996; Polt 1999).

As we have mentioned above, Heidegger was very reluctant to prescribe how lives should be lived, but his writing does suggest an ethics of existence through the concept of authenticity, a general orientation to how choices should be made. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger develops the concept of authenticity through a discussion of death. Beginning from the uncontroversial idea that death ends the temporal succession of possibility, Heidegger points out that it also simultaneously enables a whole life to be seen in its totality, for the story is now complete and no more changes to the plot or protagonist are possible (Heidegger 1926/1962). He also writes that as a result 'death reveals itself as that possibility which is one's ownmost' (1926/1962: 294).

How can the event which brings all possibility for me to an end also be my 'ownmost possibility'? What Heidegger is alluding to is that death points to two essential existential properties of *Dasein*. One is the 'mineness' of existence. No-one can die my death for me. In the end, career or organizational 'death' is not the same as *my* death and so the writing on death in organizational studies that conflates the metaphorical with our personal mortality serves as an unethical distancing of ourselves from our own finitude. Even saving someone's life by giving my own cannot prevent them from dying their own death; it can merely postpone or alter it. In this sense our death strips away all relations to others and isolates us in our own

unique, irreplaceable, singular selves (Derrida, 1995; Mulhall, 1996). The second aspect of death as ownmost possibility relates to the seemingly paradoxical idea of death as possibility rather than absolute certainty. This idea is related to the apprehension that every moment of our lives could be our last; indeed Heidegger proposes that we should live our lives and make our choices in the full awareness that this is the case. We should resolutely look our finitude in the face because to do so shakes us out of a refusal to make choices.

Most of the time we avoid confronting the fact of our deaths and choose not to choose, we prefer to conform ourselves to dominant norms and not reflect on the choices that we make in everyday life. To simplify a little, such norms are characterised by Heidegger as *das Man*, (translated as the 'they' or the 'anyone'). In other words, despite the possibility of choice, we mostly allow ourselves to become the passive consumers of dominant discourses (Kearney 1994). As Heidegger himself put it:

It is already a matter of public acceptance that 'thinking about death' is a cowardly fear, a sign of insecurity on the part of Dasein, and a sombre way of fleeing from the world. The 'they' does not permit us the courage for anxiety in the face of death. (1926/1962: 298).

To acknowledge that only we can die our deaths leads, he argues, to the realisation that only we can live our own lives. Thus Heidegger insists that an authentic life resides in facing up to these choices and not allowing ourselves to be absorbed by trivialities or placing ourselves in self-imposed servitude to the 'they' (Mulhall, 1996; Polt, 1999). This is not to say that Heidegger is suggesting a disengagement from everyday being-in-the-world. Indeed he characterises engagement with the world and others as a more authentic state than a detached theorising about the world. Existential choices do not therefore preclude unreflective absorption in pleasurable activities, the freedom from the ego that comes from immersion in the present flow of events (Mainemelis 2001; Sudnow 1978). However, from a Heideggerian perspective one should still consciously choose which of these activities one will pursue rather than others on the basis of the sort of life we wish to have.

Heidegger believes that we suppress our knowledge of our own mortality because it is unimaginable to us and generates fear and anxiety. However, he believes that we can and should face up to our deaths with resoluteness in order to find the freedom to make our own choices. Levinas (1947/1987), in the development of his ethics of alterity, criticized Heidegger for what he saw as a subsequent over-individualization of human existence. The authentic individual can appear to be a solitary hero who makes decisions independently of others (ten Bos 2002). However, Heidegger's attitude towards sociality has been argued to be more complex than this (Olafson 1998; Vogel 1994). Heidegger's concept of *Mitsein*, or 'being-with' suggests that a shared resoluteness in the face of death leads to a liberating solicitude, 'a posture in which one feels an obligation to respect the dignity of other persons and compassion for the suffering of others' (Vogel 1994: 9). Thus one can extend the concept of authenticity to the 'We', when each feels that she belongs to a common project yet encourages the others to pursue the project in a way that attests to their own individuality.

Unlike the work on death within organizational studies evaluated above, our reading of Heidegger therefore suggests a much more active ethical stance towards our membership of organizations that calls for a constant evaluation of our purposes and actions within them in the face of the ever present possibility of our deaths. According to the ethics of authenticity we always remain responsible for ourselves and our choices. This implies a high degree of wariness towards the pursuit of status, power and careers available within organizations, because they frequently act as a seduction towards conformity, which in turn preventing the individual from making self-conscious and responsible choices. Heidegger's work implies that the organizations we interact with ought ideally to enable us to work-alongside and with others without being forced to conform to norms that tranquilise our understanding of ourselves and the world. The challenge therefore that Heidegger's thinking on death has for organization scholars is whether and how work organizations could provide productive ways of being-alongside-with-others without inducing a dull conformity or overly restricting our freedom.

Heidegger argues that repression of the knowledge of our mortality gives rise to problematic relations with each other and leads to our absorption in organizations which then prevent us living truly human lives for ourselves and others. But where Heideggerian thought differs from the work reviewed above is that it does not accept that this is inevitable. Rather it suggests that we have a responsibility to choose a self project in the light of our mortality that has implications for relations to others and to the organization of work. In the next section we relate this ethical position to more critical approaches to business ethics exploring how it might extend and facilitate a life worth living.

### **Heidegger and the Ethics of Choice**

In recent years a number of organizational scholars have been highly critical of mainstream business ethics and have proposed alternative ethical approaches. This work rejects the dominant conceptualisation of organizational ethics as the construction of codes of conduct in favour of considerations of 'the essence of the ethical relation in general' (Jones 2003: 225). Parker's (2003) critique of code based business ethics identified a disconnect between business ethics, existential issues and politics that arises from its neglect of 20<sup>th</sup> century philosophy. He also notes that even where business ethics invokes what might be thought to be intrinsically more politically oriented ethical frameworks such as virtue ethics it does so in a 'de-socialized' manner. A manner that takes the ethical out of ethics, constructing codes of conduct that negate the need for individual ethical choices concerning what might constitute a life worth living. One simply follows the rules laid down by others.

Heideggerian ethics shares this antipathy to codes of conduct rather 'ethical enquiry has the form of *praxis*, transforming the identity of the enquirer' (Hodge 1995: 17). For Heidegger the point of ethics is to uncover 'how human beings are to flourish' (1995: 14) and this uncovering is only possible if we face up to our finitude and so accept that what it is to be human is always temporary and in transition. Heidegger, in his *Letter on Humanism* (1946/1993), elevated thinking and questioning as key ethical virtues, ones that will lead us to understand what we are; the starting point for deciding what we should do.



More radical work on organizational ethics echoes the Heideggerian insistence on the centrality of being conscious of our choices through constant questioning and thinking. ten Bos, for example, suggests that we should permanently question ‘the experience in which we find ourselves’ (2002: 60). To express this in Heideggerian terms, ethics consists in listening to the call of conscience and freeing ourselves from absorption in the ‘they’ by invoking our ability to choose for ourselves – thus ‘morality concerns choice first of all’ (Clegg, Kornberger and Rhodes 2007: 111). These are choices that are rooted in ‘the unwillingness to comply, the refusal to acquiesce, to fit ourselves in the practice through which we understand and rule ourselves and each other’ (ten Bos 2002: 60). Where a Heideggerian ethics goes beyond such calls is in its linking of individual refusal with care for the other, a linkage that is constructed from a shared sense of finitude.

A combination of individual questioning with care for the other is required if the predominantly individualised aesthetic formulation of refusal found in critical organizational ethics (see Hatchuel 1999; Chan 2002; Barratt 2004) is not to amount to a form of selfishness, one that is powerless to bring about institutional change. For we see such refusal as no solution in itself to the disconnect between business ethics and politics noted above. Additionally we have the problem of deciding how one can refuse one discourse of identity (say that of corporate man/woman) without simply enslaving oneself to another (say that of a critical management academic). In other words, how does one know that in making such choices one is in fact free – and how might one differentiate between the value of different choices?

The over individualisation of such a formulation of ethics may be countered by the development of Heidegger’s notion of *Mitsein* or ‘being-with’ (Heidegger 1926/1962). Lewis has argued that death plays a foundational role in the construction of a link between a Heideggerian ethics of the authentic individual and our relations to others ‘necessitated by the presence of a being-with of mortals’ (2005: 3). Lewis goes on to identify two Heideggerian forms of being-with, the inauthentic ‘in-order-to’ (2005: 20), an instrumental use of individuals for our own ends, with the authentic ‘for-the-sake-of-which’, where we recognise the mortality of the other. Modern technocratic organizations encourage the former rather than the latter thus ‘we encounter beings as actualities in a calculative businesslike way’ (Heidegger 1946/1993: 223) and so close ourselves off to the mystery of being and the potential to become fully human. However, shared awareness of our own mortality rather leads to a sense of responsibility towards the other that we should enable the other to come into a full awareness of their existence and so our freedom depends upon their freedom.

According to Heidegger ‘being with’ does not involve the incorporation of the other into ourselves (Olafson 1998). Rather it involves letting the other be in their freedom for their own possibilities, leading to an authentic form of ‘we’ ‘when each feels that he belongs to a common project yet encourages the others to pursue the project in a way that attests to their own individuality’ (Vogel 1994: 79). *Mitsein* therefore implies a challenge to the Master-Slave dialectic that was noted above (Denhardt 1987) which arises in organizations as a result denying our mortality and pursuing fantasies of immortality. Heidegger insists upon a moral claim that we should recognise that the other has their own answers to the question of what is right for them. We may not impose our own choices onto them. Imposing our will repudiates

the equivalence with which individuals should stand in relation to one another and so prevents the establishment of a moral community (Olafson 1998).

Heidegger believed that questioning and thinking as regards our existential choices was being made ever more difficult as a result of modern forms of technological organization which prevent us from reflecting on who and what we are in favour of an immersion in non-reflective activities. Humanity as it has become ever more dependent upon and organized around modern forms of technology and technical organization becomes itself technologized, moulded by the requirements of its own creations. Thus technological humanity, far from flourishing, is reduced to a form of animality (Heidegger 1946/1993). Thus 'we must free ourselves from the technical interpretation of thinking....a process of reflection in service to doing and making' (1946/1993: 218). Technology then strengthens the hold of the 'they' on us, 'we are so filled with "logic" that anything that disturbs the habitual somnolence of prevailing opinion is automatically registered as a despicable contradiction' (1946/1993: 250). An awareness of death, however, can restore a sense of ourselves as autonomous moral agents 'death presents technology...with an event that points towards something in excess of the actual, something that cannot be made effective or profitable' (Lewis 2005: 85). This admittedly precarious and uncomfortable emancipation is based on the restoration of the possibility of an existence not entirely subsumed within the dominant discursive formations of organizational life, particularly the death-denying enterprise of the self (du Gay 1996) for such an enterprise relies on the unconscious acceptance of life as an ever-upward progress of individual development.

What then are implications of the Heideggerian ethics of finitude for organizations? What would constitute a community of authentic selves, one in which technology and the 'they' do not prevent life projects being constructed in the light of ourselves as beings-toward-death? These questions may be answered both at an individual and an organizational level. To begin with the individual, a resolute facing up to death confronts each of us with what it means to have a unique, finite life and underscores the need to decide what our lives are for. Such an awareness requires that we place our working lives in a wider context than is often the case in current organizational theory where 'much of the research that is focussed on perceptions and practices in particular organizations neglects what is not immediately visible....the broader historical, cultural, institutional and political influences.' (Alvesson, et al. 2008: 11). Such a facing up to death, although painful, may be emancipatory. The unthinking regulation of our selves via the pursuit of individual success or personal appearance is weakened as we contemplate death: both the high level of physical agency and the ability of our bodies to respond to such cultivation declines as we approach our deaths.

In addition, an awareness of our ageing and dying bodies potentially limits the power of certain discourses of the organizational self. It is hard to avoid a sense of futility when building our identities around consumption, appearance, status, and stable, predictable, institutionalised routines when one confronts death (Willmott 2000). Death reminds us that lives spent in the cultivation of our social position, perhaps via career success, or pursuing compensation for bodily decay through the achievement of powerful positions in organizations, are ultimately doomed – they are simply rearguard actions in a relentless defeat. This being so, a consideration of death may

free us from the allure of many characteristic discourses of a consumerist or careerist modernity – and so suggest one way in which such disciplinary norms may be resisted. du Gay (1996), for example, has argued that the discourse of individual success is the dominant way in which modern individuals construct their identities within work organizations. As such resolute facing up to death has the potential to cause profound disruption to our usual conformity to such powerful discursive influences. For death encourages a more intersubjective view of our relations to others in organizations shifting our attention to how we would like to be remembered by those most important to us. Facing up to death thus restores the link between existential ethics and the politics that underlie the cult of individual success within modern societies.

### **Implications for Organization Studies**

The redirecting of ethics in response to an awareness of death has many implications for the work of organization scholars. If, as Manning (1973) argues, social theory has failed to explicate our lives for ourselves, then Heidegger directs us back from this indifference to the existential issues that matter to us. For example, much work within organization studies uncritically stresses the need for ever greater identification with them, extolling the value of teamwork (Finn, et al. 2010) or the need to participate in a ‘strong’ culture (Latta 2009). Whilst critical organizational scholars have pointed out the potentially oppressive effects of such identification (Willmott 1993; Costas and Fleming 2009) they have not indicated how it might be escaped. According to Heideggerian thought, a resolute facing up to death provides for the possibility of emancipating ourselves from the hegemony of such ideas which are seen as a way of enslaving ourselves to the ‘they’. This gives organization studies an impetus to conceptualize both the difficulties and possibilities of freedom from over-identification.

Heidegger raises a number of additional ethical imperatives for organizational scholars. If we ourselves are facing up to our deaths we will be constantly evaluating what our work is for and who it serves. Does it contribute to the fostering of organizations that exist ultimately for the satisfaction of human needs and human flourishing or to the maintenance of the avoidance of our ethical choices through conformity to the ‘they’? Does our research focus on narrow self-referential abstractions designed to increase our standing within our own route to death-denying individual success within the academy or does it seek to increase a sense of human solidarity illuminating the lives of others in organizations in empathetic ways (Rorty 1989)? To what extent do we exhibit in our writing and practice a treatment of others that reflects the principle of ‘for-the-sake-of-which’ (Lewis 2005: 20) discussed above? Does our engagement with management students and managers seek to inculcate the Heideggerian virtues of thinking and questioning, as well as a liberating solicitude for others? Such questions suggest in turn empirical lines of enquiry such as whether and how the experience of death or near death leads to instances of greater solicitude or to re-doubled efforts to deny the reality of mortality? This implies studies that investigate what Sköldbberg terms ‘existential limit situations’ (1998: 87) that involve anxiety, guilt and death. In many ways our own experiences and reflections give us the most direct access to such situations rather than the traditional role of objective detached researcher.

These implications link the individual ethical choices of organizational scholars and organizational members to the nature of organizations themselves. If a resolute facing up to death raises the possibility of giving us a place to stand that is beyond the reach of many modern discourses of self (as if we were already dead (Derrida 1996)) it also suggests a way of reconnecting relations to the other and a wider politics. As we have already noted according to Heidegger living our lives in the full awareness of our mortality leads to solicitude for the other, a mortal like ourselves. A reflection on death thus prompts us to reconsider the highly individualised conception of modern identities that informs much organization theory (Giddens 1991; Hepworth 1986; Lasch 1980; Rose 1999; Sennett 1998) and encourages us to consider a more inter-subjective view and the need for organizations to act as mutually supportive communities (Parker 1998, 2003). Extended to the institutional level then, organizations should enable both our individual freedom and the exercise of responsibility to the other.

A further implication is that the formulation, discussion and critique of what such ethical organizations might be like should be a central concern of the discipline. One implication of the work reviewed above is that hierarchy and the pursuit of career success within it are responses to and further encourage the avoidance of our own finitude. Manning (1973) suggests that the ability to escape conformity to the 'they' is inherently political arguing that researchers should consider how superordinate groups are able to restrict the choices of others in considering their life projects. We would go further than Manning by arguing that we need to move beyond critique to proposing how organizations could produce goods essential for practical human needs whilst at the same time enabling a broader diversity of choices regarding our existential needs. Indeed we argue that such questions ought to become the central problematic for organizational studies.

Reframing the political aims of critical organizational studies as the proposal of alternative models of organization would contrast strongly with the essentially negative character towards which much critical writing on ethics has tended (Parker 1998). Heideggerian ethics implies organizations whose members have a right to fundamentally question their organizations' purposes and actions; where reflection on whether an organization is fostering human flourishing or not is a persistent feature of it rather than the submergence of such questions in the rush to produce and consume; where community and individual freedom are worked out with others all of whom have an equal right to determine their own answers to such questions. There is a small but growing strand of organizational studies that is studying organizations whose primary purpose is that of human flourishing (Parker 1997; Parker 1998; Parker 2002; Reedy 2002; Fournier 2006; Parker, et al. 2007; Reedy and Learmonth 2009). The ethics suggested by this paper can be seen as a call for wider attention to be given to such work and to comparisons with those organizations whose sole purpose is the generation of wealth or high status for a few successful individuals within them. In other words there are opportunities for empirical work in organizations where a Heideggerian praxis is being enacted that could provide organizational studies research with alternative and potentially emancipatory models of organization.

One indicator of an alternative Heideggerian approach to work organization is apparent from his writing on technology. Heidegger argued that technology has a

propensity to deaden our awareness of ourselves, resulting from what Kallinikos refers to as ‘the progressive narrowing of the functions and significations that pertain to the tool’ (Kallinikos 1992b: 130) but this deadening may be reversed by raising the status of work to that of art. There are many references in *Being and Time* (1926/1962) to handicraft and the workshop and Heidegger refers constantly to the importance of the poetic in his later *The Origin of the Work of Art* (Heidegger 1956/1993). Zimmerman, developing these themes, argues that for humanity to live authentically on the earth requires ‘a world in which the integrity of things is preserved. Such a world would be intrinsically ‘local’, bound up with place in a way wholly foreign to the planetary reach of modern technology’ (1990: 151). There are a growing number of organizations that exist to pursue aesthetic or existential objectives that are embedded in their local contexts but as yet few examples of their consideration within organizational studies. Thus the implications of an organizational ethics of finitude extend from individual resoluteness to the organization of work and the politics of global capitalism (see also Kallinikos 1992a).

All this, in the context of modern organizations and the current political economy may appear rather utopian. And yet, such organizations *do* exist where the flourishing of free individuals is a central rather than a peripheral concern (Parker, et al. 2007). Organizational studies, in particular, could pay much more attention to such organizations and present them as alternatives to the dominance of mainstream conceptions of how organizations can and should be (Reedy and Learmonth 2009). The choices we all make about what is worth writing about should also be influenced by our knowledge of our own deaths and the precariousness of our existence as well as our responsibility towards each other. All these thoughts return us to the opening question in this section: how we decide what our lives are for in the face of our mortality about which we now make some concluding reflections.

### **Some Concluding Reflections**

In this paper we have sought to redress the neglect of an essential aspect of our lives: that of our death and its implications for how we think about organization and our relations to them and to each other. In particular we have related Heidegger’s ethics of mortality to organization studies arguing that such an ethics makes an important contribution. It both fills the gaps in existing work on death as regards ethical possibilities for change, and provides one answer to the call of more critical approaches to organizational ethics to re-connect existential and political considerations with organizational life.

We have argued that it is all too easy to immerse ourselves in the minutiae of day to day organizational life, forgetting, until brought up short by reflecting on death, the broader existential, ethical and political questions that membership of organizations entail. It is also good to be reminded of the limitations of rational enquiry into the human condition – death may take place in and through organizations but it transcends organization as such. This transcendence tends to escape and confound our attempts to manage or even make sense of death including the discursive and symbolic systems that regulate and control death’s untoward, unruly and unsettling effects. These effects result in the denial of death and the maintenance of fantasies of immortality but this denial leads to various forms of domination and a deadening conformity to the ‘they’. On the other hand, to face up to death reframes all our projects, including our academic projects as a part of a wider but limited life where

relations to others and the world around us become the most important considerations when making choices about how to spend the always limited time at our disposal.

Perhaps inevitably and appropriately then, our exploration of death leaves us with many uncomfortable questions and thoughts. One of these is that, as the price of overcoming the repression of death is discomfort and fear, it is unlikely to be fully realised. We ourselves remain ambivalent about swapping comfortable illusion and distracting activity for exposure to the full terror of responsibility for ourselves: after all the very writing of this paper may be seen as one more instance of an inauthentic distracting immersion in our own organizations and careers.

Nevertheless, the paper has sought to open up a debate within organizational ethics about how we might make choices about our relations to organizations. How do we decide on what a worthwhile life is for us and others in the light of our finitude? Such questions can always be postponed – but we hope that this paper serves as a reminder that the time to think about such things is always shorter than we realise. Despite its terror for us, we believe that facing up to death may paradoxically free us from unthinking obedience to norms and enable us to seek more fulfilling forms of work and relations within organizations. For organization scholars we believe that mortality lays an ethical injunction on us to reconnect politics and ethics in the service of organizations that enable our freedom and support our shared frailty.

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