

Rage Against the Dying of the Light: Herbert Marcuse and the Politics of Death

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Herbert Marcuse and Students, Berlin, 1968

The powers that be have a deep affinity to death; death is a token of unfreedom, of defeat. . . . In contrast, a philosophy that does not work as the handmaiden of repression responds to the fact of death with the Great Refusal. . . .

– Herbert Marcuse

In a speech made at a memorial service for Hans Meyerhoff in 1965, Herbert Marcuse honored his old friend's critical spirit by citing a few lines from the poet Dylan Thomas, lines that in fact serve as an epigraph for Marcuse's own philosophy: "do not go gentle into that good night . . . / rage, rage against the dying of the light."¹ The only true response to death, Marcuse claimed in his requiem, is revulsion. This was not only a philosophical point for Marcuse, but a crucial lesson from the horror of National Socialism, from the failure of 1920s German *Existenz* philosophy, and even from his own past. From 1928-1933, Marcuse studied with leading existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger at Freiburg University. While much has been written on Marcuse's "Heideggerian Marxism" of this period, one crucial piece of the story has not been told. It was, in fact, still lingering in the air during Meyerhoff's service: Marcuse's enduring struggle with Heidegger's conception of human being (*Dasein*) as being-toward-death.²

Death is the ultimate horizon of life and thought. To ask what a philosopher thinks about death is to uncover the basic axioms around which his or her thought pivots. In the following pages, I attempt a reinterpretation of the foundations of Marcuse's critical theory based on his engagement with Heidegger and the problem of mortality. Death is a crucial boundary concept in Marcuse's thought; by focusing on his sometimes explicit, though more often implicit, battle with Heideggerian being-toward-death, we can gain access to a neglected aspect of Marcusean critical theory by way of what it labors to exclude. Seen from this perspective, Marcuse's critical theory is a defiant, yet tenuous, raging against death – death as political ideology and as philosophy. In the late 1930s, Marcuse began to see history as the solemn march of renunciation, guilt, asceticism, and the prohibition of sensual and erotic desires. This theory crystallized at the height of the Cold War in what Marcuse called the "ideology of death." Throughout

¹ Herbert Marcuse, *The Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, Vol. 1: *Towards a Critical Theory of Society*, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1998), 110.

² Other detailed comparisons include John Abromeit, "Herbert Marcuse's Critical Encounter with Martin Heidegger, 1927-33," in *Herbert Marcuse: A Critical Reader*, eds. John Abromeit and W. Mark Cobb (New York: Routledge, 2003), 131-151; Seyla Benhabib, introduction to *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, by Herbert Marcuse (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), ix-xi; Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 38-69. As my reading of *Eros and Civilization* will show, my own position is closer to that of Andrew Feenberg in *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (New York: Routledge, 2005). Feenberg argues persuasively that the influence of Heideggerian phenomenology can be seen in Marcuse's work well into the 1970s.

the 1950s and into his later career, Marcuse developed an oppositional ideology of life that could invert Heidegger's fatalism. To understand *Eros and Civilization*, the fullest expression of Marcuse's ideology of life, we need to read it as his answer to Heidegger's *Being and Time*, especially the second division on death and authenticity. Thus, once we peer through the Heideggerian looking glass, we see that Marcuse was not simply a Freudian Marxist, as he has most often been received, but was also deeply engaged in the ancient philosophical tradition inaugurated by Socrates, and taken up again by later thinkers like Montaigne: philosophy as the inquiry into the right way, and therefore also the wrong way, to die. Marcuse argued that humanity must rage against the dying of the light, refuse the political domination inherent in ontological figurations of death, and, most importantly, recognize human mortality as a "biological fact" that humanity can, and must, master in order to achieve full liberation from the realm of necessity. Ultimately, though Marcuse formulated valuable critical tools with which to disarm the political rhetoric of death, fear, and sacrifice, we should be wary of a reductionist view of mortality that, in a moment of denial, upholds a future socialist utopia so affirmative, so rooted in joy and fulfillment, that it cannot help but reproduce death's dark shadow – the inexorable Other that it can never assimilate.

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In Socrates' jail cell, where the man esteemed by many as the wisest and most just was condemned to drink poison hemlock, two traditions came together in what was for Marcuse the most dangerous of unions: *philosophia* and necrophilia, the love of wisdom and the love of death. After listening to his forlorn companion Crito plea for him to escape from prison, Socrates became, in Marcuse's view, the mouthpiece of state authority, reasoning in the voice of his condemners that fleeing from his sentence would be a deep moral violation. "Be advised by your guardians," Socrates tells himself and Crito as he impersonates Athenian law, "and do not think more of your children or of your life or of anything else than you think of what is right."³ Throughout *Crito*, the man who pestered Athenian society like a gadfly now reasons that what is right, and what

³ Plato, "Crito," in *The Collected Dialogues of Plato Including the Letters*, eds. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns, trans. Hugh Tredennick (New York: Bollingen, 1961), 54b.

justifies the denial of one's own life and of all earthly attachments, is unwavering submission to the state and its juridical order. It is no mere coincidence, Marcuse held, that an equally profound renunciation accompanies this capitulation of philosophy to state power: the denial of the body in the name of reason. In *Phaedo*, another dialogue that takes place in the jail cell, we learn of Socrates' doctrine that the body diverts the intellect from a pure pursuit of knowledge, and that the true philosopher therefore "frees his soul from association with the body, so far as is possible, to a greater extent than other men."⁴ The promise of death, for Socrates, is freedom from the double incarceration of the jail cell and of the flesh. To pursue the love of wisdom is to abandon the empty shell of the body and follow the beloved joyfully into a netherworld of pure contemplation, leaving earthly power undisturbed. In Marcuse's words, for Socrates "the progress of truth is the struggle against sensuousness, desire and pleasure. . . . The glorifying acceptance of death . . . carries with it the acceptance of the political order."⁵

The 1938 essay "On Hedonism," written after Marcuse had fled Nazi Germany and joined the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in exile in the U.S., shows Marcuse working out alternatives to an intellectual tradition that proscribes political claims to happiness and bodily satisfaction. Moral rationalism from Plato to Kant, Marcuse argues, has located happiness and freedom in cognitive domains alone, thereby contributing to the formation of passive political subjects who, accustomed to internalizing and abstracting the search for justice, "will not be easily induced, even under extreme wretchedness and injustice, to struggle against the established order."⁶ On the other hand, the ancient hedonists opposed the dominant trends of Greek rationalism that relegated sensuality to the status of "a lower, baser human faculty, a realm lying on this side of true and false and of correct and incorrect, a region of dull, indiscriminating instincts" (OH 170). Hedonism aligns with Marcuse's own emancipatory project by

⁴ Plato, "Phaedo," *Collected*, 64e.

⁵ Herbert Marcuse, "The Ideology of Death," in *The Meaning of Death*, ed. Herman Feifel (New York: McGraw, 1959), 68. Hereafter cited parenthetically as ID. It should be noted that Marcuse underwent a rationalist turn in the mid-30s (see Kellner, *Marcuse and the Crisis*, chapter four), after which he developed several positive readings of Socrates as the embodiment of critical reason. See *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon, 1955), 256; *Negations* (Boston: Beacon, 1968), 197; *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1964), 124-125; and *Reason and Revolution* (Boston: Beacon, 1960), 243-245.

⁶ Herbert Marcuse, "On Hedonism," in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1968), 181. Hereafter cited parenthetically as OH.

“demanding that man’s sensual and sensuous potentialities and needs, too, should find satisfaction” (OH 162), and by gesturing toward a theory of the external, material conditions of happiness. “In the principle of hedonism,” Marcuse explains, “in an abstract and undeveloped form, the demand for the freedom of the individual is extended into the realm of the material conditions of life” (ibid.). Despite his reservations about the failure of hedonism to account for the social and historical nature of happiness, Marcuse believes that the philosophy nonetheless preserves a truth that is indispensable in the struggle against what he would later call the “ideology of death,” the institutional and philosophical culmination in modern society of Socrates’ equation of the good with political submission, disembodied rationality, and necrophilia. It is hedonism that “has preserved the demand for happiness against every idealization of unhappiness” (OH 173), and therefore it is hedonism that contains the kernel of Marcuse’s own conception, following Max Horkheimer’s earlier essay “Egoism and the Freedom Movement” as well as Marx’s valorization of the senses in the *Paris Manuscripts*, that true liberation must be concrete, sensual, bodily, and joyous.

Marcuse develops his position on death and the philosophical prohibition of sensuality most fully in *Eros and Civilization*, a text based on the author’s lectures at the Washington School of Psychiatry in the early 1950s. In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse responds to a number of philosophical, political, and cultural traditions that, taken together, are foundational for his emancipatory project. Nietzsche had claimed in *The Genealogy of Morals* that “wherever there have been philosophers . . . there has prevailed a special philosopher’s resentment against sensuality.”⁷ This resentment against sensuality, according to Nietzsche, constitutes an “ascetic ideal,” an inveterate fear of the will to power and of a happy, strong, adventurous, sensually intense existence. Expanding on Nietzsche, Marcuse claims that the long tradition of philosophical asceticism has weakened the faculty most vital to the preservation of happiness, sensual gratification, and the promise of a transfiguration of human life that reaches down into the very fiber of being: memory. What Marcuse names “memory-training in civilization” has directed individuals “toward remembering duties,” like in the case of Socrates’ strict

⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. Francis Golffing (New York: Anchor, 1956), 241.

loyalty to the state, and has made it so that “unhappiness and the threat of punishment, not happiness and the promise of freedom, linger in memory.”⁸ It is Marcuse’s task in *Eros and Civilization* to provide a theoretical and political grounding, based on a rereading of Freud’s instinct theory, for the radical happiness and freedom that civilization has banished from memory. Marcuse counters the ideology of death with an ideology of life, one that both continues and breaks the intellectual trajectory of his Institute colleagues Max Horkheimer and Theodore W. Adorno. Equally important, *Eros and Civilization* would be Marcuse’s most systematic rebuttal, albeit an ambivalent one, to Heidegger’s notion of being-toward-death. This most ambitious and problematic of Marcuse’s works, I will argue, must be read as an indirect polemic against both *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and *Being and Time*.

Eros and Civilization begins in the wake of the critique of instrumental reason, a paradigm shift in critical theory inaugurated in 1944 by Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.⁹ Marcuse claims in his preface that “if the individual has neither the ability nor the possibility to be for himself, the terms of psychology become the terms of the societal forces which define the psyche” (EC xxvii). Drawing on the Institute’s reading of Max Weber, as well as on his own earlier essay “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology,” Marcuse seems to assume that the postwar “affluent society” (Galbraith) has become a technological monolith, a thoroughly rationalized system that absorbs the formerly autonomous liberal subject into its smooth, logical, and efficient operations. Marcuse’s blurring of analytical differences appears to be founded on the view that the existential distance between individual and society has been bridged, and that there now exists only a single technological universe whose logic can be read off the psyches of its assimilated inhabitants. In this way, the fusion of psychoanalysis and political philosophy restages the crisis, revealed most strikingly in

⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon, 1955), 232. Hereafter cited parenthetically as EC.

⁹ For representative accounts of the critique of instrumental reason, see Helmut Dubiel, *Theory and Politics: Studies in the Development of Critical Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT P, 1985), 69-97; Seyla Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia: A Study of the Foundations of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 147-185; Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 106-130, and *The Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1, *Reason and the Rationalization of Society*, trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1981), 366-399.

Dialectic of Enlightenment, of the normative foundations of critical theory. If society has become the closed universe of total rationality, then the immanent critique of political economy, which starting with Marx endeavored to diagnose the capacity for crisis and revolution in capitalism, has lost its potency.¹⁰ The more the productive apparatus develops the conditions for its own crisis, Marcuse believes, the more monstrously and destructively it lurches back and consolidates its power (EC 4). Marcuse must apparently turn, then, like Horkheimer and Adorno before him, to sources of critique and emancipation that escape the orbit of the totally rationalized world. Yet while his “philosophical inquiry into Freud” indeed finds its normative standards in the utopian moments encoded in repressed instincts, and not *solely* in the imminent critique of economic processes, Marcuse never completely accepts (nor rejects) the thesis that technological society forestalls all resistance. Building on Horkheimer and Adorno’s conclusion that the history of the Western subject is “the history of renunciation,”¹¹ Marcuse discloses this history more concretely, and, I think, finds an alternative to his colleagues’ profound pessimism.

The key, Marcuse holds, lies in the “hidden trend” in psychoanalysis. Freud posited that all advanced social organizations require that individuals repress the pleasure principle, the manifold of instinctual desires for intense and immediate gratification, for the sake of the weaker, yet more reliable and socially productive, pleasures of the reality principle. But since the pleasure principle can never be fully broken, the reality principle must constantly be enforced anew, and for Marcuse this means repression, instead of being rooted in the primordial origins of Western subjectivity, is historically variable and always undergoing a process of negotiation based on conditions in political economy (EC 16, 35, 132). Freud himself considered repression necessary because of the supposed inevitability of scarcity. He could not anticipate, Marcuse notes, that the productive power of postwar capitalism (automation) would render scarcity obsolete. In a society that has the capacity to end the competition for limited resources, repression becomes “surplus repression”: the implementation of “*additional* controls over and above those

¹⁰ Benhabib, 158-159.

¹¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodore W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 43. Hereafter cited parenthetically as DE.

indispensable for civilized human association” (EC 37). Repression belongs not to the original structure of subjectivity, as Horkheimer and Adorno concluded, nor to the eternal prerequisites of civilization, as Freud thought, but rather to the history of political domination and ideology. While it masquerades as biological necessity or as the singular moment of human identity formation, repression is ultimately “a historical phenomenon. The effective subjugation of the instincts to repressive controls is imposed not by nature but by man” (EC 16). By classifying repression as such, Marcuse implies (indirectly) that even Horkheimer and Adorno’s view is a species of the ideology of death, a morbid reification of historically and economically specific patterns of political oppression. Contemplating the correct relationship to death, Horkheimer and Adorno fell into a kind of zombie theory of modernity, as though the survivors of the Holocaust were nothing but the living dead: “Only when the horror of annihilation is raised fully into consciousness are we placed in the proper relationship to the dead: that of unity with them, since we, like them, are victims of the same conditions and of the same disappointed hope” (DE 178).

In a remarkable chapter titled “The Dialectic of Civilization,” Marcuse outlines an account, drawing from a critique of political economy, of the potentially emancipatory tendencies of rationalization – a possible dialectic of the dialectic of enlightenment. It is precisely rationalization, the standardization and quantification of the labor process that Lukács described in *History and Class Consciousness*, which has defeated scarcity, and along with it the material foundations of surplus repression:

The culture of industrial civilization has created a social wealth sufficiently great to transform this instrument into an end in itself. The available resources make for a *qualitative* change in human needs. . . . Technology operates against the repressive utilization of energy in so far as it minimizes the time necessary for the production of necessities of life, thus saving time for the development of needs *beyond* the realm of necessity. (EC 93)

The more rationalized and efficient the economic process becomes, the more it allows individuals to desire, and to make concretely possible, the dramatic reduction of socially necessary labor and the unleashing of hitherto repressed instinctual needs. Or, in terms of

the classical Marxist categories that Marcuse never quite relinquishes, the forces of production have produced, and are now fettering, radical new relations of production. The fight to actualize these new relations, however, cannot be rooted in the “masses” nor in experiences of class exploitation, for the subjective recognition of the need for qualitative change is available primarily to a minority of individuals who experience it at an existential, even biological, level. If it has been the ideology of death and surplus repression that have forestalled liberation, then it must be the flowering of life itself, a charged release of aesthetic sensibilities, pleasure, happiness, playfulness – in a word, Eros – that overwhelms the existing order and reconfigures the economy and social relationships. Moreover, only the full emancipation of Eros in a post-scarcity, post-capitalist society, according to Marcuse, could reach deep enough into humanity’s physiological core to recover non-dominative relationships with nature and a sensual, non-instrumental, rationality (EC 189-196).

In the late 1960s, Marcuse considered the young radicals of the New Left to be the embodiment of his conception of life-affirming sensuality and needs, the “Great Refusal” of the ideology of death. As Marcuse writes in the preface to the 1966 edition of *Eros and Civilization*, anticipating his later comments on the New Left in *An Essay on Liberation*, “it is [the youth’s] lives which are at stake, and if not their lives, their mental health and their capacity to function as unmutated humans. Their protest will continue because it is a *biological necessity*” (EC xxv; emphasis added).

However, for all his differences with Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse was never free of their inheritance. Ideas often slipped back and forth into their opposites within the mind of this great dialectician. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse states his contradictory thinking bluntly, admitting that he “will vacillate throughout between two contradictory hypotheses: (1) that advanced industrial society is capable of containing qualitative change for the foreseeable future; (2) that forces and tendencies exist which may break this containment and explode the society. Both tendencies are there, side by side – and even the one in the other” (xv). These antithetical hypotheses not only show themselves in Marcuse’s eventual ambivalence toward the New Left, but are already present in *Eros and Civilization*. For while Marcuse claims that the subjectivity and instinctual desires that ground revolution still arise within technological society as its

own dialectical mutations, thus anticipating the emergence of the new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, he also suggests that the normative content of critical theory lies marooned somewhere in a past that may or may not have ever occurred. “All reification is forgetting,” wrote Horkheimer and Adorno in the notes and sketches at the end of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (191). *Eros and Civilization*, not to mention several other later texts, falls in and out of this same conclusion. Technological society may triumph in its ability to obstruct revolutionary change if, through the “memory training” enacted by ideologies of death and renunciation, it persuades the agents of change to forget the promise of a qualitatively different life. Revolutionary Eros thus recedes into the past as memory, maybe even illusory memories from prehistory, and the possibility of social transformation is now eclipsed by a mythical struggle between memory and temporality in which the victor is never certain. Marcuse’s position on memory reveals, more than any other, the contours and intractable dilemmas of his philosophy as it pushes up against the limits of temporality, mortality, and Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.

2

When Marcuse was asked in a 1977 interview about the role death plays in Heidegger’s philosophy, he suggested that his former teacher’s magnum opus shows traces, visible only in retrospect, of perhaps the most philosophically insidious defense of renunciation:

If you look at his view of human existence, of being-in-the-world, you will find a highly repressive, highly oppressive interpretation. I have just today gone again through the table of contents of *Being and Time*, and had a look at the main categories in which he sees the essential characteristics of existence or *Dasein*. I can just read them to you and you will see what I mean: ‘idle talk, curiosity, ambiguity, falling and being-thrown into, concern, being-toward-death, anxiety, dread, boredom’ and so on. Now this gives a picture which plays well on the fears and frustrations of men and women in a repressive society – a joyless existence: overshadowed by death and anxiety; human material for the authoritarian personality. It is for example highly characteristic that love is

absent from *Being and Time*. . . . I see now in this philosophy, ex post, a very powerful devaluation of life, a derogation of joy, of sensuousness, fulfillment.¹²

If Marcuse is correct in his judgment of Heidegger, then *Being and Time* is the radical inversion of Marcuse's thought, its dark shadow. *Eros and Civilization*, with its vigorous invocations of the life instincts, pleasure, and erotic satisfaction, turns out to be Marcuse's attempt, recalling Marx's famous criticism of Hegel, to stand Heidegger's "powerful devaluation of life" on its head – to forge a powerful *revaluation* of life, to resurrect being-toward-life from being-toward-death. But one can never jump over one's shadow, as the German proverb tells us. Being-toward-death shakes *Eros and Civilization* to its very core. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Heidegger represents the inheritance Marcuse's politics and philosophy of Eros can never exorcize, the specter haunting utopia, its absolute Other. At stake in the encounter with Heidegger is one of the most, perhaps even *the* most, fundamental of questions for Marcuse's project: can life ever really triumph over death?

Jürgen Habermas has remarked that "whoever fails to detect the persistence of categories from *Being and Time* in the concepts of Freudian drive theory out of which Marcuse develops a Marxian historical construct runs the risk of serious misunderstandings."¹³ A careful reading of *Eros and Civilization* affirms Habermas's observation. Granted, *Eros and Civilization* is not a work of ontology, and Heidegger surely would have considered it yet another erroneous installment in the history of the metaphysics of subjectivity, an investigation which focuses not on Dasein in its primordial being-in-the-world, but instead on the human as a present-at-hand (*vorhanden*) ego or psyche. Nonetheless, even though *Eros and Civilization* employs the concepts of psychoanalysis over those of ontology, it remains, at the very least, negatively engaged with *Being and Time* in its commitment to penetrating the experiential basis of political domination, which Marcuse considered to be a glaring

¹² Herbert Marcuse, "Heidegger's Politics: An Interview," in *Heideggerian Marxism*, ed. Richard Wolin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 170.

¹³ Jürgen Habermas, "Zum Geleit," in *Antworten auf Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968), 10-11; quoted in Wolin, *Heideggerian Marxism*, xi.

oversight in Heidegger's phenomenology.¹⁴ The engagement, however, is not merely negative. For in Marcuse's notion of Eros lies more than just a psychological category – it is a mode of being, or rather “a fundamentally different experience of being” that structures “a fundamentally different relation between man and nature, and fundamentally different existential relations” (EC 5). In a nationalist moment in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, a work which Heidegger may have imagined as a companion to *Being and Time*, Heidegger asks: “what if it were possible that man, that nations in their greatest movements and traditions, are linked to being and yet had long fallen out of being . . . and that this was the most powerful and most central cause of their decline?”¹⁵ If the guiding concern of Heidegger's philosophy is this falling into oblivion of being (*Seinsvergessenheit*), then it is the falling into oblivion of being conceived as *Eros* that sets the trajectory – not nationalist but no less revolutionary – of *Eros and Civilization*. Ever since he read Marx's *Paris Manuscripts* in the early 1930s, after studying with Heidegger in Freiburg, Marcuse held fast to a vision of Marxism as the revolution of “human essence” and “human reality,” that is, as a fundamental restructuring of human being through radical praxis.¹⁶ Thus, it is only fitting for Marcuse to write in 1955 that “a new basic experience of being would change the human existence in its entirety” (EC 158). Throughout *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse anticipates this new mode of being awaiting humanity on the other side of revolution, indicates how the cult of instrumental reason in modern society has already inadvertently begun to channel

¹⁴ See for example Marcuse's comments in “Heidegger's Politics”: “How does the individual situate himself and see himself in capitalism – at a certain stage of capitalism, under socialism, as a member of this or that class, and so on? This entire dimension is absent. . . . Heidegger focuses on individuals purged of the hidden and not so hidden injuries of their society” (169).

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), 37. For the importance Heidegger placed on this text in relationship to *Being and Time*, see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 17. Hereafter cited parenthetically as BT. In a late interview, Marcuse acknowledged the influence of Heidegger's project of “recovering” what is essential but has been forgotten: “He taught me a great deal about what real phenomenological ‘thinking’ is, about how thinking is not just a logical function of ‘representing’ what *is*, here and now in the present, but operates at deeper levels in its ‘*recalling*’ of what *has been forgotten* and its ‘*projecting*’ what *might yet come to pass in the future*” (emphasis added); Herbert Marcuse, “The Philosophy of Art and Politics: A Dialogue between Richard Kearney and Herbert Marcuse,” in *The Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, vol. 4, *Art and Liberation*, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: Routledge, 2007), 234.

¹⁶ Herbert Marcuse, “New Sources on Historical Materialism,” in *Heideggerian Marxism*, 90.

and set it free, and searches for its residue in the subterranean utopian content of philosophy, memory, and the work of art.

Yet Marcuse's conception of being as Eros casts a long shadow – the shadow of Thanatos. In no place is this more apparent than in “Eros and Thanatos,” the penultimate chapter of *Eros and Civilization*. In the previous chapters, Marcuse tried to counter Freud's thesis on the impossibility of non-repressive society, a view founded on Freud's belief that the disappearance of regimes of repression would unhinge all that is savage in human nature, the most ominous of which is the death instinct.¹⁷ Adapting Freud's own conception of the “libido economy,” Marcuse responded with the dubious claim that allowing fuller expression of the life instincts would naturally weaken the death instincts, and vice-versa, as though the libido were a kind of measuring scale and all one needed to do was tip it in the desired direction (EC 44, 80, 234-235). Moreover, as Marcuse recognizes, this answer alludes to a more basic philosophical problem: beyond the psychoanalytic concepts of pleasure and aggression, the vision of a world without repression meets its ontological and temporal limit in mortality. Death haunts even the most free and gratified life; even the socialist utopia will not be without its *memento mori*. “The brute fact of death,” Marcuse concedes momentarily, “denies once and for all the reality of non-repressive existence” (EC 231). The ontology of Eros has locked Marcuse into a cosmic struggle between life and death, happiness and time. Since joy naturally seeks to extend itself, since it strives for eternity, “time [is] the deadly enemy of Eros” (EC 233). With enemies this great, it is difficult to see how Eros can ever triumph.

Marcuse offers two solutions to this dilemma, both of which express legitimate political concerns yet are nonetheless philosophically problematic. First, memory can become the champion of Eros by guarding it against time. Memory, cultivated through aesthetic education, is the potential storehouse of past happiness, though Marcuse never clearly distinguishes between real and symbolic memories.¹⁸ At the heart of Marcuse's

¹⁷ Freud writes: “men are not gentle, friendly creatures wishing for love, who simply defend themselves if attacked, but . . . a powerful measure of desire for aggression has to be reckoned as part of their instinctual endowment. . . . Their neighbor is to them not only a helper or a sexual object, but also a temptation to them to gratify their aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without recompense, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and kill him.” Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (New York: Dover, 1994), 40.

¹⁸ Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality* (Berkeley: Berkeley University Press), 235-236.

theory of memory is the repudiation of the ideology of death, a tradition, stretching in Marcuse's mind directly from Socrates to Heidegger, that trains individuals to forget happiness, to learn that "every pleasure is short, that for all finite things the hour of their birth is the hour of their death" (EC 231). Those who have fallen under the yoke of the ideology of death and its memory training become bereft of critical spirit; they are "resigned before society . . . oblivious to the better past and the better future" (ibid.). Yet the joyful past, in a moment of Hegelian *Erinnerung* (re-collection), can return to consciousness from its refuge in memory, where it has crystallized in the imagination and thus escapes the fate of everything else under the sun: "remembrance alone provides the joy without the anxiety over its passing and thus gives it an otherwise impossible duration. Time loses its power when remembrance redeems the past" (EC 233). At least as long as one lives and retains the power to use it, memory remains a domain with its own temporality, and it does indeed possess redemptive power. When the flame of a great love dies out, or when a family member passes on, we are sometimes left with joyful memories which persist despite their incompatibility with the current state of affairs. By preserving the joys of the past, memory also makes a claim on the future for the rebirth of what it considers too precious to abandon in the oblivion of forgetfulness, and too captivating to consign to posterity alone: "the liberation of the past does not end with its reconciliation with the present. . . . The *recherche du temps perdu* becomes the vehicle of future liberation" (EC 19). Marcuse suggests that the ground of political agency, and the foundation for a mode of being rooted in Eros-against-death, must be this same persistence against defeat that draws its power from the special redemptive temporality of memory.

Secondly, in an ambivalent move that exposes his fundamental conflict with Heidegger, Marcuse attempts to intervene in the philosophical understanding of death, or rather, to strip it of philosophical status. In order to buttress his position against the deployment of death for creating docile political subjects, Marcuse tries to reformulate the meaning of death altogether. He maintains that the ideology of death rests on a conceptual sleight of hand: the trick of making what is really just the biological termination of life appear as a fundamental ontological category. With Heidegger in mind, Marcuse claims that "theology and philosophy today compete with each other in

celebrating death as an existential category: perverting a *biological fact* into an ontological essence” (EC 236; emphasis added). Later, in “The Ideology of Death,” Marcuse would clarify his position:

In the history of Western thought, the interpretation of death has run the whole gamut from the notion of a mere natural fact, pertaining to man as organic matter, to the idea of death as the *telos* of life, the distinguishing feature of human existence. . . . In contrast [to the latter] one might construct some kind of ‘normal’ attitude toward death – normal in terms of the plain observable facts. . . . In itself, finiteness is a *plain biological fact* – that the organic life of individuals does not go on forever, that it ages and dissolves. But this biological condition of man does not have to be the inexhaustible source of anxiety. It may well be (and it was for many philosophical schools) the opposite, namely, the stimulus for incessant efforts to extend the limits of life, to strive for a guiltless existence, and to determine its end – to subject it to human autonomy, if not in terms of time, at least in terms of quality. (64, 74; emphasis added)

There are at least two ways to read this passage. I will take up just one here, saving the other for my conclusion.

Despite his otherwise firm opposition, alongside other members of the Frankfurt School, to Weberian fact-value distinctions, Marcuse reduces death to the bare bones of an empirical datum. Only as such can death be “normal” – an odd normative category for a thinker like Marcuse, but one that follows from an ontology of Eros that charges itself with the task of defeating death. For this enemy is overwhelming, and therefore the first thing to be done must be to demystify it, to reveal that behind the terrifying specter of death lie only ideological smoke and mirrors. Only once death has been reduced to its bare materiality can it then be “subject . . . to human autonomy,” as Marcuse says. Death must be made to materialize before the gaze of science so that humanity can devote its greatest energies to studying it, mastering it, and thereby bequeathing to the individual of the future technological utopia the ability “to determine his dying as the self-chosen end of his living” (ID 66). The ultimate horizon of Marcuse’s philosophy and politics of Eros is thus revealed: death is the absolute substratum of the realm of necessity, the final

necessity. The realm of freedom therefore belongs not merely to liberated labor nor to reclaimed species being. “Man is only free,” Marcuse posits, “if he has conquered his death” (ibid.).

Given the history of Heidegger’s disastrous experiment with National Socialism, Marcuse’s position deserves sympathy. In 1933, Marcuse saw what to him seemed to be the seamless transition of ontological accounts of death into a foundation for philosophical or “spiritual” Nazism. As Heidegger praised Alberto Schlageter, a student martyr mythologized by the Nazis, for “not [being] permitted to escape his destiny so that he could die the most difficult and greatest of all deaths with a hard will and a clear heart,”¹⁹ the love of wisdom appeared to have reversed course. For Marcuse, Heidegger made the change seem natural. In his mind there was a logical progression from Heidegger’s ontological definition of Dasein as being-toward-death, to the individualistic and morally ungrounded moment of making death one’s own (*Eigentlichkeit*), to the denial of joy and fulfillment in the name of resoluteness and sacrifice, and finally, to the acceptance of the given historical situation.²⁰ Moreover, Marcuse was not alone in this judgment. His is, in fact, the standard interpretation held by many critics of Heidegger’s politics, and it normally follows something like the proceeding script. Heidegger, a true “German Mandarin,” conceived of Dasein as submerged in the dull conformism and mindless chatter of public life, or what he called the domain of the “they.” In a heroic gesture of self-affirmation, authentic Dasein frees itself from the rabble by stealing back its identity, a task that draws its existential fortitude from Dasein’s coming to grips with the singularity of its impending death. Now, standing firm in the whirlwind of total freedom, the authentic Dasein generates its own meanings according to the ambiguous call of “destiny.” Transfer this account from Dasein in the singular to German Dasein in the plural and one has, so the interpretation goes, the ingredients for National Socialism.²¹

¹⁹ Martin Heidegger, “Schlageter,” in *The Heidegger Controversy*, ed. Richard Wolin (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1993), 42.

²⁰ See Herbert Marcuse, “Heidegger’s Politics,” 171-172. Marcuse’s general critique of existentialism, which includes similar criticisms of Heidegger and others, is also relevant here. See Herbert Marcuse, “The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State,” in *Negations*, 31-42; “Sartre’s Existentialism,” in *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, trans. Joris De Bres (Boston: Beacon, 1972), 157-190.

²¹ For the clearest articulations of this criticism of Heidegger, see Jürgen Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*, 131-160; Karl Löwith, *My Life in Germany Before and After 1933*, trans. Elizabeth King (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 32.

Without completely denying the plausibility of this reading of Heidegger, I want to suggest that neither Marcuse nor any other of Heidegger's critics have exorcized being-toward-death. Since there is *no a priori connection between the ontology of death and the ideology of death*, even if the two were forged in Heidegger's own life, rejecting the latter, as should be done, cannot entail rejecting the former. The issue can be greatly clarified if we return to the problems of death and authenticity. Heidegger's critics allege that his conception of death as a singular and essential feature of human life provides the basis for a politically dangerous understanding of subjectivity. The individual who acknowledges death supposedly breaks away from the inauthenticity of public existence and becomes isolated, self-contained, and resolved toward life choices that have absolutely no justification save for the fact he or she has authentically chosen them, without interference from the norms of the "they." This criticism contains truth, but it incorrectly locates the problem in ontology instead of in normativity.

Dangerous political consequences do not arise in *Being and Time* from the recognition of death as singular and essential to the human condition, for this recognition, contrary to the standard criticism, and even contrary to what seems to have been at work in Heidegger's own case, does not necessarily produce isolated and nihilistic subjectivity. There are, in fact, other ways of being authentic that Heidegger struggles to articulate in *Being and Time*. Though he writes, probably because of the influence of Kierkegaard, with rhetorical ambivalence, Heidegger nonetheless rejects the isolated subject as a basic existential category. Dasein, he explains, exists in a condition of thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), and this means that one can "*never . . . have power over one's ownmost Being from the ground up*" (BT 330). Furthermore, as being-with-others, Dasein can never simply bracket the "they" (*Das Man*) – a term that, as others have noted, should be translated as "the one" or "the Anyone" to capture Heidegger's emphasis on social normativity – because a public mode of being is constitutive of Dasein as such: "*The Anyone is an existentielle; and as a primordial phenomenon, it belongs to Dasein's positive constitution. . . . Authentic Being-one's-self does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the Anyone; it is rather an existentiell modification of the Anyone – of the Anyone as an essential existentielle*"

(167-168; translation modified). Being authentic is a particular condition (*existentiell*) that belongs to only some Dasein, but even then it adjusts, not transcends, the ontologically basic condition (*existentiale*) of being-with-others – and, crucially, of inauthenticity. As Heidegger states even more precisely in *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*: “authenticity is only a modification but not a total obliteration of inauthenticity.”²² Some Heidegger scholars have claimed that this means authenticity is a kind of skillful appropriation of generally accepted customs, an intuitive expertise so acquainted with background cultural practices that it allows for their imaginative modification.²³ Yet even this solution, while certainly more charitable, does not solve the real puzzle of Heidegger’s notion of authenticity. The political trouble starts not with ontological understandings of death, nor even with the call to be resolute in the face of death, but rather with the absence of normative justification in *Being and Time*. For without them one is unable to *justify* one’s course of action, and this is decisive (1) when one’s actions affect others, and (2) during political crises.

Yet the normative and political problems here should not be read back onto the ontological definition of death as inexorable consequences. For one can follow Heidegger and recognize the essential role death plays in life without becoming an intuitionist or a Nazi. Indeed, there is some bad faith in Marcuse’s claim that the notions of being-toward-death and authenticity are inherently fascist, since the criticisms of Heidegger he wrote in the 1930s were centered on the *ambiguity* of these categories, that is, they didn’t directly entail the radical leftist engagement that Marcuse himself supported.²⁴ But neither did they deny such engagement, and this is precisely why a Marxist like Marcuse – or more recently, Slavoj Žižek²⁵ – could read them so enthusiastically.

²² Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 171.

²³ See Hubert Dreyfus, “Could Anything Be More Intelligible than Everyday Intelligibility?”, in *Appropriating Heidegger*, eds. James E. Faulconer and Mark A. Wrathall (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 155-174.

²⁴ Herbert Marcuse, “Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism,” in *Heideggerian Marxism*, 16.

²⁵ See Žižek’s reappraisal of Heidegger’s political radicalism in “Radical Intellectuals, Or, Why Heidegger Took the Right Step (Albeit in the Wrong Direction) in 1933,” in *In Defense of Lost Causes* (New York: Verso, 2008), 95-156.

Though troubling, death is more than ideological hocus pocus. What is more fantastic are attempts to conjure death away by reducing it to a biological fact, or by consigning one's faith to memory, as though its special powers, too, were not ultimately beholden to time. Marcuse can never exorcize Heidegger's ghost, for being-toward-death can be eliminated only by overcoming humanity itself. Human death, as Heidegger maintained, is not the present-at-hand event of biological termination. This, too, happens to us, but also to fish, trees, and germs – what Heidegger called the “only living,” *das Nur-lebenden* (BT 284). Science certainly can greatly reduce death's power, as Marcuse sees happening in the future utopia, and has already been doing so in the industrialized world. But this is true only in the sense that extending the longevity of biological life staves off *biological* death, or what Heidegger calls perishing (*Verenden*), the death specific to *das Nur-lebenden* (BT 284).

But is humanity only a thing that lives? Here we reach the limit of any philosophy of life, Marcuse's included. “The ontology of life,” Heidegger writes, “is accomplished by a privative interpretation” (BT 75). A naturalistic/biological category like “life” cannot capture a more fundamental feature of human existence, namely, our *radical openness to possibility*. Heideggerian death pertains to this basic human trait; this is why he defines the sort of death distinctive of humans – *existential*, as distinct from biological, death – as “*the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all . . .* [Death] is the possibility of the impossibility of every way of comporting oneself toward anything, of every way of existing” (BT 307). Death is thus the closure of all possibilities, the withdrawal of all chances from a being constituted by its openness and radical vulnerability to chance. In Marcuse's utopia, where humans will be blessed with erotically and sensually satisfying lives, protected from disease by the best medicines, fed and clothed and sheltered by a rational productive apparatus fully harmonized with nature, a cloud of uncertainty will still hang over existence. Machines might still malfunction, cables can still snap. Possibility itself, the contingency fated to a form of life that is, after all, only mortal, will persist in the face of even the greatest technological achievements – except one. If the genetic code is ever so thoroughly mapped and operationalized that science can save the human organism from every destruction and degeneracy, if humanity does finally achieve this freedom purchased with the defeat of

death, on that day only will being-toward-death vanish as an ontological category. On that day humanity will emerge from the wilderness of history; it will be freed from the tyranny of possibility; it will emerge as something entirely new. But on that day humanity will also vanish from the earth.

3

In an essay that shares several themes with my own, Karsten Harries notes that in light of “man’s final impotence,” or what Heidegger formulated as Dasein’s inability to be the ground of its own being, Marcuse’s attempt at utopia is a “proud,” “abstract,” and “inauthentic” refusal to accept the essentially limited human condition.²⁶ Despite Marcuse’s fierce resistance to ideological uses of death, this thinker in whose hands philosophy meant learning the right way to die – or rather, *not* to die – probably recognized the inevitable failure awaiting anyone charged with the task of defeating death. After the passing of his wife Inga, Marcuse slipped into a lyrical mode and penned the following verse:

Love is as strong as death
This nonsense
I never believed.
And remembering doesn’t help:
It is deathly sad.²⁷

Perhaps now, in a moment when death was so near to him, Marcuse acknowledged that profound weakness before possibility that belongs to us and the ones we love, and that not even memory can redeem. In such moments the principal flaw of an ontology of Eros becomes clearer than ever. As it formulates a radically joyous mode of being, as it pronounces that freedom prevails only after the triumph over death, the philosophy of life attempts to annihilate humanity’s radical contingency, the measureless oceans of space

²⁶ Karsten Harries, “Death and Utopia: Towards a Critique of the Ethics of Satisfaction,” *Research in Phenomenology* 7 (1977), 138-152.

²⁷ Herbert Marcuse, “On Inge’s Death,” *Art and Liberation*, 197.

between actuality and possibility into which each of us has been cast. But Hamlet was right. To be or not to be – that remains the question. No future utopia, even while offering forms of emancipation for which we certainly should strive, can ever close that yawning gap between Hamlet’s two infinitives.

But this criticism is also misleading. While Marcuse brings much of Harries’s (and my own) critique upon himself by calling for the *total* defeat of mortality, during his clearer moments Marcuse advocates something more defensible. Recall the passage above in which Marcuse suggests extending not just the duration of life, but its *quality*. Mortality, contingency, time – these will remain beyond human control. But between our ontological finitude and the specific (“ontic”) political and economic limitations binding us, there is an abyss. Marcuse should have said more clearly that to close this abyss is the true task of his critical theory – not the impossible task of breaking humans out of time and mortality (though biotechnology makes all of this uncertain), but rather to put these in their proper place, so to speak. Critical theory should aim at the critique of political regimes in which, for example, a grotesque number of children die not simply because death belongs to their ontological essence, but because they have no health care; in which people go hungry not merely because man is defined ontologically by lack, but because of the politics of food distribution and capitalist production for profit.

In fact, we can use Heidegger’s categories to strengthen this point. In his 1949 lectures at the Club zu Bremen, Heidegger observes:

Hundreds of thousands die *en masse*. Do they die? They succumb. They are cut down. Do they die? They become mere bits of material in the stockpiles for the manufacture of corpses. Do they die? They are liquidated inconspicuously in extermination camps. And even apart from that, right now hunger immiserates millions in China and reduces them to a state of mere perishing [Millionen verelenden . . . durch den Hunger in ein Verenden].²⁸

In this passage, Heidegger revisits his term “perishing” (*Verenden*), which in *Being and Time* is reserved for the sort of bare biological death that belongs to *das Nur-lebenden*.

²⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. 79, *Bremer und Freiburger Vorträge*, ed. Petra Jaeger (Frankfurt: Klostermann, 1994), 56.

When one is starving, Heidegger suggests, one cannot die with the dignity worthy of Dasein. A truly charitable reading of Marcuse sees him focused on this very condition of mere perishing, this premature, undignified, arbitrary end of human life, not mortality as such. For mortality, the dignity of dying like a human being, is actually a politically conditioned privilege. Only those with adequate wealth, housing, nutrition, etc., can die a dignified death, or at least *have the possibility to do so*. But this means that, until this “ontic” condition is challenged, only the privileged can truly be Dasein. Until this essentially political work is done, all talk of the essential nature of death risks conceding too much to arbitrary, contingent, and ultimately changeable political circumstances. We are only bandits in death’s empire, stealing back a moment here and there; but these moments can indeed make the difference between a life of dignity and a life of misery and regret. If this is what is meant by raging against the dying of the light, then let us follow Marcuse’s lead and cultivate a rage sober enough to recognize our finitude, yet daring enough to challenge its alleged frontiers.