

Mortality as Jest: A Philosophical Meditation on Death's Paradoxical Nature as a Democratising Power

Alvin Servaña¹*

*Corresponding author E-mail: alvin_servana@dlsu.edu.ph; aservana@pup.edu.ph

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the paradoxical nature of human mortality through the lens of existential philosophy, grounded in poetic meditation and lived experience. Drawing from the immediacy of near-death encounters and the quotidian reality of death, its omnipresence, it argues that mortality functions as both cosmic jest and profound truth, inviting an embrace of contradiction rather than a search for resolution. By reframing death as a transformative process rather than a terminal event, the work shows that mortality's "joke" lies not in falsity but in its capacity to simultaneously reveal and conceal existential truths. Synthesising existential dread, satirical awareness, and contemplative acceptance, the meditation proposes a philosophy that honours terror and comedy alike, suggesting authentic response lies neither in denial nor morbid fascination but in a meditative wonder that holds multiple truths in productive tension. Methodologically, the paper integrates phenomenological analysis, interdisciplinary empirical findings, and poetic exegesis to bridge abstract theory and embodied experience. It examines how proximity to death sharpens perception, dissolves hierarchies, and democratises being by exposing shared vulnerability across species and social strata. It is this democratising function that provides the ethical foundation from which the paper's implications for moral solidarity, compassionate care, and public philosophy proceed. The argument advances implications for ethics, aesthetics, and end-of-life practice, proposing that recognising death's transformative role can foster creative living, compassionate care, and public philosophy that engages communities. Ultimately, the paper contends that mortality's paradoxical character is a source of wisdom: a destabilising jest that, when attended to with humility and curiosity, deepens meaning and cultivates a more generous, attentive way of living. It invites readers to live more fully in each fragile present moment now.

Keywords: Systematic Philosophy of Mortality, Philosophy of Death, Philosophy and Poetry, Philosophical Poetry, Thanatoptic Vision

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¹ Department of Philosophy, De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines; General Education, Polytechnic University of the Philippines-San Juan, Philippines



Introduction

The confrontation with mortality stands as perhaps the most universal yet intensely personal aspect of human existence. Every philosophical system, religious tradition, and cultural framework has grappled with the fundamental questions that death poses: What does it mean to exist knowing that existence will end? How do we live authentically in the shadow of inevitable termination? Why does the awareness of death simultaneously paralyse and liberate us?

This paper approaches these ancient questions through a deliberately unconventional lens, proposing that mortality functions as a kind of cosmic joke—not in the sense of being false or meaningless, but in the way that jokes operate by subverting our expectations, revealing hidden truths through unexpected juxtapositions, and forcing us to laugh even when we would prefer to cry. The jest of mortality lies in its capacity to make the most serious thing simultaneously absurd, the most final thing perpetually present, and the most universal thing utterly particular to each individual consciousness that contemplates it. Rather than seeking to resolve the paradoxes that mortality presents, this meditation embraces them as the very source of death's peculiar wisdom. We will explore how the proximity of death reveals life's true textures, how the certainty of ending illuminates the uncertainty of meaning, and how the democratic equality of death exposes the hierarchies we construct in life as simultaneously necessary and absurd.

Mortality Philosophy in Retrospect

The philosophical treatment of mortality has experienced renewed scholarly attention over the past two decades, with contemporary approaches diverging significantly from classical existentialist frameworks. This literature review examines current trajectories in mortality philosophy, situating this paper's "death as constitutive other" framework within the broader discourse while demonstrating its advantages over traditional being-toward-death paradigms.

Martin Heidegger's influential account of Being-toward-death in *Being and Time* (1927) has dominated philosophical thanatology for nearly a century, positioning death as Dasein's "ownmost" possibility that individualises existence and enables authentic living. (Heidegger, 1990, pp. 290-267) As Bernard Schumacher observes in his comprehensive study *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy*, Heidegger's framework radically separates ontological analysis from ontical concerns, treating death as a fundamental existential structure rather than an empirical event. (Schumacher, 2011, pp. 61-84) Recent scholarship, particularly Iain Thomson's *Rethinking Death in and after Heidegger* (2024), has shown how Heidegger's phenomenology of existential death directly precipitated his abandonment of fundamental ontology, revealing internal tensions within the being-toward-death framework itself. (Thomson, 2024, pp. 3-73) Thomson's analysis demonstrates that Heidegger's account, while groundbreaking, ultimately proves unstable when confronted with the full phenomenological complexity of mortal experience.

Contemporary psychosocial research has challenged purely philosophical approaches through Terror Management Theory (TMT), which posits that awareness of mortality drives humans to construct cultural worldviews and pursue self-esteem as anxiety-buffering mechanisms. (Solomon, Greenberg, & Pyszczynski, 1991) Recent applications of TMT to serious illness contexts have revealed how mortality salience affects healthcare decision-making and quality of life, suggesting that philosophical frameworks must engage empirical findings to remain relevant. (Perry, et al., 2024)

However, TMT's reductionist tendency to frame mortality consciousness primarily as a threat requiring psychological defense mechanisms fails to capture the creative and generative dimensions of mortal awareness that this paper emphasises. Thus, the friction between Heidegger's ontological account and the trajectory of empirical thanatology is worth making explicit. Heidegger's being-toward-death is a *formal existential structure*, not a psychological state variable. It cannot, by design, be confirmed or disconfirmed by empirical research because it operates at the level of ontology rather than ontics. Yet this methodological separation becomes philosophically costly when empirical findings—about how people actually experience mortality salience, how death proximity affects decision-making, how near-death experiences restructure temporal self-understanding—gesture toward dimensions of mortal consciousness that the purely formal ontological analysis leaves untouched. I do not claim here that empirical research refutes Heidegger; rather, that a philosophy of mortality adequate to the full range of mortal experience must be permeable to the findings of disciplines that attend to mortality as it is actually lived, not merely as it is formally structured.

The multidisciplinary turn in mortality studies has produced significant recent publications exploring mortality awareness through cognitive neuroscience, clinical psychology, and phenomenological analysis. Kuylen *et al.* "Mortality Awareness: New Directions" (2024) brings together experts from philosophy, neuroscience, and psychiatry to examine how death consciousness affects decision-making and future planning, concluding that policy decisions about assisted dying must be compatible with the neuroscience of mortal awareness. (Kuylen, et al., 2024) This integration of philosophical inquiry with empirical research represents a promising direction, though one that risks subordinating philosophical insight to neuroscientific frameworks.

Alternative philosophical approaches have emerged that resist both Heideggerian ontological reduction and psychological reductionism. Sami Pihlström's pragmatist thanatology argues for understanding mortality through the lens of self-control and meaning-making practices rather than fundamental ontology, suggesting that "controlling death" involves practical engagement with mortal conditions rather than theoretical resolution. (Pihlstrom, 2015) While valuable, pragmatist approaches often remain too focused on instrumental rationality, missing the paradoxical and transformative dimensions of mortality that exceed practical management. Notably absent from much contemporary literature is sustained attention to death as a dialogical relationship rather than a unidirectional destiny. Heideggerian frameworks, despite their sophistication,

ultimately position death as that toward which Dasein moves, maintaining a teleological structure that this paper critiques. Terror Management Theory similarly treats death as a threatening terminus requiring defensive responses. Even recent phenomenological work tends to preserve the subject/object dichotomy when analysing mortality, treating death as something consciousness encounters rather than something with which consciousness engages in ongoing creative dialogue.

The framework developed in this paper—death as constitutive other—offers distinct advantages over these alternatives. Some clarifications are deemed necessary to forestall any misreading. To say that Heidegger’s being-toward-death risks collapsing existence into its movement toward termination is not to say that Heidegger is blind to the experiential richness that mortal consciousness opens. He is not. Being-toward-death, in Heidegger’s account, is precisely what discloses the *Weltlichkeit* of Dasein or the very textures of lived experience, including encounters with beauty, with transformation, with the strangeness of one’s own being, are illuminated by the anticipatory structure of finitude. I take that concern is structural, not phenomenological. Heidegger’s framework individuates through death: death is *always mine*, *Dasein’s ownmost*, *non-relational*, *not-to-be-outstripped* possibility. This means that being-toward-death ultimately functions as a **solitary** confrontation—the *das Man* (the “they”) must be overcome for authentic existence, and death is the horizon of that individuation. What this forecloses, or at least renders philosophically secondary, is the genuinely **dialogical** and **communal** character of mortal existence: the way consciousness engages with death not as its final and privatising horizon, but as a constitutive presence woven into relationship, creativity, and shared meaning. The “constitutive other” framework does not contradict what Heidegger illuminates—it re-situates death from the grammar of destination to the grammar of encounter.

Now, unlike Heidegger’s being-toward-death, which risks collapsing existence into its movement toward termination, the constitutive other framework preserves consciousness’s integrity and creative capacity while acknowledging mortality’s formative role. Where TMT reduces mortal awareness to anxiety requiring management, this approach recognises mortality consciousness as generative of meaning, beauty, and authentic relationship. Against pragmatist instrumentalism, it embraces the irreducible paradoxes and mysteries of mortal existence as sources of wisdom rather than problems requiring solution.

Furthermore, this paper’s emphasis on transformation rather than termination, and on dialogue rather than destination, allows for a more nuanced account of how mortality shapes temporal experience, aesthetic sensibility, and ethical obligation. By positioning death neither as ultimate reality (Heidegger) nor as threat to be managed (*i.e.*, TMT), but as a constant companion in the choreography of existence, this approach enables philosophical reflection that honors both mortality’s terror and its capacity to reveal truth.

The synthesis of existential phenomenology with poetic meditation and lived experience provides a methodological richness lacking in approaches that remain confined

to either pure ontological analysis or empirical psychology. Ultimately, understanding ourselves as beings *with* death rather than beings *unto* death offers a more complete account of human existence—one that neither denies mortality's reality nor reduces life to its movement toward ending, but instead reveals how the ongoing dialogue between consciousness and mortality generates the creative possibilities that make human existence both meaningful and mysterious.

Notably even, this philosophical exploration emerges from the intersection of lived experience and reflective contemplation, grounded in the understanding that authentic philosophy about death cannot remain purely abstract but must engage with the visceral, immediate, and often overwhelming reality of mortality [2] as it manifests in actual human experience. The paper proceeds through poetic meditation, literary exegesis, and systematic philosophical reflection to construct a framework for understanding mortality that honors both its terror and its strange comedy.

What I deem to contribute with this essay, especially to the existing thanatological discourse is threefold. First, it offers a methodological innovation: the systematic integration of original poetic exegesis, anchored in a poem emerging from first-person near-death experience and with phenomenological and philosophical analysis, demonstrating that the boundary between doing philosophy and doing poetry is itself a site of philosophical significance.

Second, it develops the “constitutive other” framework as a structural alternative to both Heideggerian teleology and the reductionist tendency of Terror Management Theory, one that can accommodate the relational, communal, and ritual dimensions of mortal experience that both frameworks subordinate.

Third, it proposes that mortal wisdom understood as the capacity to hold mortality's terror and comedy simultaneously without dissolving either as it constitutes a distinctive form of philosophical insight that can be cultivated practically, not merely theorised abstractly.

These three contributions are inseparable, and the form of this paper— meditation, exegesis, systematic reflection— is itself a philosophical argument for why they must be pursued together.

Poetic Exegesis

“Mortality is a joke”[3]

Mortality is a joke.

I didn't say untrue, unreal.

I said, a joke.

It's most ticklish to the keen.

It's most flirtatious to the trembling.

Here s a truck of white chickens.
Filthy now.
Carcass tomorrow.
Meal in a while.
Over the steeled flames.
Having intercourse with other dead ingredients.
So those that more greatly dread.
Will suspend death.
I mean,
Live the life licked
by the tongues of Thanatos.
So, the truck belches,
Whilst the poor poultry rest
On their health-buffs-favoured-breasts.
The wheezing wheels drove our driver
To shout.
The tricycle, courted by the truck
Under the hands' bloodshot eyes
And suddenly,
The five of us choked
On smoke and mirrors
—present dying : suggested ending—
Past flashing before our very eyes
In the singularity of the moment
Before one says Goodbye.

Earlier, there was another three-wheeled bike.
Honking its horn.
Unblinking its beam.
The passenger inside?
In passing: our eyes, this life—
A mother young child
Bathing in blood breathing bravely
Their last—or perhaps.

Chickens.
Drivers.
Trucks.
Tricycles.
People.
Us. Passengers.

Mortality s host.
Mortality s feast.
In fear.
By fate.
Through faith.
The lack of the former
Or the late.
I don t know.
But I can t anymore
But can t help still though
To raise my brow
In convolution
Or amazed imagination:
Mortality is a joke.
In its reality.
In its truth.

But the meditative me
Nags silently
Inquiring if the

Chickens
Trucks
Tricycles
People...s

Are the sacrifices and the altars
That can ever mediated be.

Oh, how great and promising and lamenting this life and existence be
When its end can be as felt as crushed pinky—or just the nail, give or take.

One of my most recent poems on contemporary urban experience and encounter with the finitude of my existence, “Mortality is a joke” functions as both philosophical statement and experiential document, capturing the moment when abstract awareness of mortality crystallises into immediate, visceral understanding. The opening declaration “Mortality is a joke” establishes the central paradox that drives the entire meditation: death is simultaneously the most serious reality we face and the most absurd condition we inhabit. As one of its facets, this approach, I am convinced, lends poetry much closer to philosophy—the former an application and manifestation of the latter: for greater, more significant human experience awareness, phenomenological living, and grounded pedagogy even. All these constitute to what I call doing public philosophy.

1. Exegetical Analysis: Unpacking the Jest

The careful clarification that follows—“*I didn’t say untrue, unreal. / I said, a joke*”—performs crucial philosophical work by distinguishing between falseness and absurdity. This distinction opens space for understanding mortality as genuinely real while acknowledging its capacity to subvert our expectations and reveal the fundamental incongruities of existence. The joke of mortality lies not in its being fictional but in its power to make our entire framework of understanding suddenly seem inadequate, like a punchline that recontextualises everything that came before.

The subsequent lines develop this theme through the recognition that mortality affects different temperaments differently: “It’s most ticklish to the keen. / It’s most flirtatious to the trembling”. Here we see how death’s approach generates responses that seem almost inappropriate—tickling the intellectually sensitive, flirting with those already afraid. This suggests that mortality has a kind of personality, an agency that plays with human consciousness in ways that can seem almost mischievous.

The image of the truck carrying white chickens provides the poem’s central metaphor, grounding abstract philosophical reflection in concrete, sensory reality. These chickens represent the universal trajectory from life through death to transformation: “*Filthy now. / Carcass tomorrow. / Meal in a while.*” The progression captures how death functions not as termination but as metamorphosis, with each stage containing its own reality while pointing beyond itself to the next transformation.

The phrase “*having intercourse with other dead ingredients*” deserves particular attention for its bold anthropomorphisation of the cooking process. By describing the combination of dead chickens with other ingredients as intercourse, the poem suggests that death does not end relationship but transforms it. Even in death, there remains a kind of mingling, a continuation of connection that transcends the boundaries of individual existence. Then, the poem pivots to explore how awareness of mortality shapes the experience of living. Those who “more greatly dread” death paradoxically “suspend death” by living “*the life licked / by the tongues of Thanatos*”. This image captures the paradox of how death consciousness can lead to more intense life awareness, as if the proximity of ending makes every moment more vivid and immediate.

The narrative structure shifts dramatically with the introduction of the near-accident, moving from philosophical meditation to immediate crisis. The wheezing truck, the courting tricycle, the driver’s shout—all create a soundscape of mechanical mortality, a symphony of the ways human beings have mechanised both transportation and death. The moment when “*The five of us choked / On smoke and mirrors*” brilliantly captures how mortality confronts us with both literal danger and metaphysical confusion.

The parenthetical phrase “—*present dying : suggested ending*—” creates deliberate ambiguity about the reality status of the experience being described. This uncertainty reflects how encounters with mortality often feel simultaneously real and unreal, immediate and distant, actual and metaphorical. The colon between “dying” and “ending”

suggests a relationship between process and culmination that resists simple linear understanding.

As I used cataloguing: “*Chickens. / Drivers. / Trucks. / Tricycles. / People. / Us. Passengers.*” creates what we might call a “democracy of mortality”. All entities, regardless of their status in life’s hierarchies, become equal participants in mortality’s feast. The progression from animals to vehicles to humans to the speaking self creates a kind of chain of being that mortality both respects and transcends.

The acknowledgment “*I don’t know*”—that agnostic claim near the poem’s end performs important philosophical work by admitting the limits of understanding while maintaining the compulsion to continue questioning. This epistemic humility opens space for genuine wonder rather than false certainty about mortality’s meaning.

The final image of mortality feeling “*as felt as crushed pinky—or just the nail, give or take*” captures the poem’s central insight about scale and immediacy. The vast metaphysical reality of death can be as present and particular as minor physical pain, suggesting that mortality is not primarily an abstract concept but a lived reality that manifests in countless small moments of awareness.

A Systematic Philosophy of Mortality: The Jest Unveiled

1. The Paradox of Mortal Knowledge and the Dance of Transformation

Human beings occupy a unique position in the natural world as creatures who know they will die. This knowledge, which we might call mortal consciousness, creates a fundamental paradox that shapes every aspect of human existence. We live as if we will continue indefinitely while knowing with certainty that we will not. We make plans that extend beyond our lifespan while experiencing time as limited and precious. We invest meaning in temporary arrangements while recognising their temporality. This paradox generates what we might call the comedy of mortality—not because death is funny, but because the condition of knowing we will die while being unable to truly comprehend what that means creates situations that have the structure of jokes. Like jokes, encounters with mortality often involve unexpected reversals, sudden shifts in perspective, and the revelation that our normal ways of understanding are inadequate to the reality we face.

The jest of mortality operates through several mechanisms that mirror the ways jokes function in human discourse. First, mortality creates incongruity by juxtaposing the temporary with the permanent, the particular with the universal, the meaningful with the meaningless. Second, it involves timing, often appearing precisely when we least expect it or are least prepared to handle its implications. Third, it requires a kind of double consciousness, an ability to hold contradictory truths simultaneously without resolving the tension between them. Yet perhaps the deepest aspect of mortality’s jest lies in how it reveals the inadequacy of our traditional conceptual frameworks for understanding what death actually is. Western thought has often conceived of death as a discrete event that marks the clear boundary between being and non-being, existence and void. This binary approach, while offering certain psychological comforts through its apparent clarity, obscures the more complex reality that death functions as a process of transformation that begins long before biological death and continues in various forms afterward.

The transformative understanding of death emerges with startling clarity in the poem's image of chickens progressing from living creatures to carcasses to meals to integrated nutrition in other living beings. This progression reveals death not as termination but as metamorphosis, a change of state that preserves certain aspects of what existed before while enabling new forms of existence to emerge. The chickens do not simply cease to exist but become something else, their substance and energy entering into new patterns of organisation that extend their existence in transformed ways. [4] [5] This processual view of death has profound implications that ripple through every aspect of how we understand both individual mortality and the broader patterns of existence. [6] If death is transformation rather than termination, then the fear that drives much of our mortal anxiety—the fear of complete annihilation, of absolute nothingness—rests on a fundamental misunderstanding of death's actual nature. What dies is not existence itself but particular forms of existence, making way for new forms to emerge in patterns that suggest continuity within change rather than simple ending. The transformative understanding reveals something even more radical: we are dying and being reborn continuously throughout our lives, making mortality not an event that happens once at life's end but an ongoing process that characterises existence itself. The person we were yesterday has, in important senses, died to make way for the person we are today. The cells in our bodies are constantly dying and being replaced in cycles that completely renew our physical substance every few years. The thoughts and experiences that constituted our consciousness moments ago have given way to new thoughts and experiences, creating a stream of awareness that maintains continuity while constantly changing its content.

To describe death as transformative rather than terminal is not to claim that the phenomenological weight of finitude is diminished. The boundaries remain genuinely, irreversibly real at the level of lived experience: the particular consciousness that loves, creates, and wonders does not simply **change form** in any experientially continuous sense. What transformation names is an ontological re-description of the **kind** of negation death enacts—not its affective or existential force. The urgency remains. The loss remains. What shifts is the conceptual grammar within which we interpret that urgency and that loss. To say that a candle transforms rather than merely ceases is not to say that the darkness is any less dark, or that the light's having been present matters any less. It is to say that existence does not operate on a binary of being and void, and that consciousness, even as it confronts the absolute singularity of its own ending, participates in patterns of continuation that are philosophically significant—not as consolation, but as description.

From this perspective, death appears not as the opposite of life but as life's essential mechanism: the process by which existence maintains itself through constant transformation. This insight generates a kind of ontological vertigo, a dizzying recognition that what we call "life" and what we call "death" are not separate phenomena but different aspects of a single transformative process that encompasses both continuity and change, being and becoming, presence and absence. The implications of this transformative understanding extend far beyond individual psychology to encompass our relationships with others, our engagement with creative work, and our participation in cultural and social institutions. If transformation rather than termination characterises mortality, then our connections with others do not simply end when death occurs but continue in modified forms through memory, influence, shared projects, and the ongoing effects of relationship that ripple through time in ways we can barely comprehend.

Similarly, our creative works participate in this transformative process by carrying aspects of our consciousness forward into new contexts and relationships long after our individual awareness has ceased. The poem itself exemplifies this process—emerging from particular moments of mortal awareness to become a vehicle for ongoing dialogue between consciousness and mortality that transcends the specific circumstances of its creation. This recognition that death functions as transformation rather than termination does not eliminate the reality of loss or the legitimate grief that accompanies separation. Rather, it places loss within a larger context that reveals both its reality and its limits. What we lose when someone dies is the particular form of their presence, the specific quality of relationship that their unique consciousness made possible. What continues is the more general influence of their having existed, the ways their presence has shaped the ongoing patterns of existence in which we participate.

The transformative understanding of mortality also illuminates why encounters with death often generate profound creativity and insight. The proximity of transformation—whether our own or that of others—reveals the fluid, dynamic nature of existence that ordinary consciousness tends to obscure through its focus on stability and continuity. When mortality moves from background awareness to foreground reality, we glimpse the deeper currents of change and transformation that are always operating beneath the surface of apparent permanence. This glimpse of transformation in process often produces what we might call mortal inspiration—creative insights and energies that emerge specifically from engagement with mortality consciousness. Artists, writers, musicians, and thinkers frequently report that their most significant work emerges from periods of intense awareness of mortality, as if proximity to transformation generates creative possibilities that are not available through other means.

The paradox here is that awareness of death as transformation, rather than diminishing the significance of individual existence, actually enhances it by revealing how each moment of consciousness participates in larger patterns of meaning and creativity that transcend individual boundaries while remaining grounded in particular experiences. The jest of mortality lies partly in this discovery that what seemed to threaten meaning—the fact that everything changes and nothing lasts forever—actually creates the conditions within which meaning becomes possible.

The Democracy of Mortality and the Paradoxes of Time

One of mortality's most remarkable and unsettling features is its absolute universality, creating what we might call the democracy of death—a fundamental equality that transcends all the hierarchies and distinctions that organise social existence. [7] Death comes to all living beings regardless of their social status, moral character, intellectual capacity, or material wealth, establishing a common ground that simultaneously terrifies and comforts by revealing both our vulnerability and our shared condition.

The poem's democratic catalog: "Chickens. / Drivers. / Trucks. / Tricycles. / People. / Us. Passengers." captures this leveling quality by placing all entities within the same grammatical structure, suggesting their equal participation in mortality's feast. The progression from animals to machines to humans reflects how mortality extends beyond biological death to encompass all forms of change and dissolution, creating a vast community of finite beings that includes everything capable of transformation. This

democratic dimension of mortality generates a complex emotional response that exemplifies mortality's jesting nature.

On one hand, the universality of death terrifies because it means that none of our achievements, possessions, relationships, or carefully constructed identities can ultimately protect us from the common fate. The most powerful rulers and the most impoverished subjects, the most brilliant minds and the most simple hearts, the most beloved individuals and the most isolated souls—all face the same ultimate destination regardless of the vast differences that separate them in life.

Yet simultaneously, this democratic quality provides profound comfort through the recognition that we share the most fundamental aspect of our condition with every other conscious being that has ever existed or will exist. In our mortality, we join a vast communion that stretches across time and space, connecting us with every human who has ever wondered about the meaning of their finite existence, every animal that has felt the approach of death, every form of consciousness that has grappled with its own impermanence.

The democracy of mortality also reveals both the necessity and the absurdity of the social hierarchies we construct and maintain throughout our lives. These hierarchies serve crucial functions in organising social cooperation, distributing resources, and enabling the complex cultural developments that make human civilisation possible. Yet from the perspective of mortality, they appear as temporary arrangements that death will ultimately dissolve, revealing their contingent rather than absolute nature. This double vision—seeing hierarchies as both necessary and absurd—exemplifies the kind of double consciousness that mortality requires. We must take social structures seriously enough to function effectively within them while maintaining sufficient perspective to recognise their ultimate relativity. This balance requires what we might call existential sophistication—the ability to engage fully with life's practical demands while retaining awareness of their provisional character.

The democratic insight deepens further when we recognise that mortality creates not just equality in ending but equality in the fundamental condition of living with awareness of that ending. Regardless of our other differences, we all face the same basic existential situation: knowing we will die while being unable to fully comprehend what that means, needing to create meaning within temporal limitation, forming attachments that mortality will inevitably sever, and seeking purpose within conditions that appear to make all purpose ultimately questionable. This shared existential condition generates what we might call the ethics of mortal solidarity—moral obligations that emerge specifically from our common participation in the human situation of conscious mortality. These obligations extend beyond simple sympathy for shared fate to include responsibility for helping others navigate the complex challenges that mortality consciousness creates, for creating cultural forms that enable authentic engagement with mortal conditions, and for developing wisdom that can guide meaningful living within finite circumstances.

The temporal dimensions of mortality create their own set of paradoxes that interweave with its democratic aspects to generate some of the deepest puzzles of human existence. Mortality creates a unique relationship to time that involves multiple contradictions that resist simple resolution. The knowledge that our time is limited makes each moment both precious and ordinary, both significant and fleeting, both urgent and suspended.

We experience what we might call “temporal vertigo” (vs. ontological vertigo) or that simultaneous awareness of time’s relentless passage and its apparent suspension in moments of intense experience. [8] Clock time moves forward with mechanical regularity, yet lived time expands and contracts according to the quality of our engagement with experience. Moments of profound significance can feel eternal while entire years can seem to pass in an instant, creating a disconnect between measured duration and experienced temporality.

The poem captures this temporal complexity in the phrase “*In the singularity of the moment / Before one says Goodbye*,” where the word “singularity” suggests both the uniqueness of each mortal moment and its quality of containing infinite depth despite finite duration. This moment before goodbye becomes a kind of eternal present that encompasses past, present, and future in a single experiential unity, [9] revealing how mortality consciousness can collapse temporal boundaries in ways that transform our ordinary understanding of duration and sequence. This temporal paradox helps explain why encounters with mortality often feel simultaneously rushed and suspended, immediate and distant, real and dreamlike. [10] The normal flow of temporal experience becomes disrupted when mortality moves from background awareness [11] to foreground reality, creating what we might call mortal time—a unique temporal dimension that operates according to different principles than ordinary duration.

Mortal time explains the frequently reported phenomenon of life “flashing before one’s eyes” in near-death experiences. This suggests that mortality consciousness can compress the entire trajectory of biographical time into a single moment of awareness, making all experiences simultaneously present rather than sequentially ordered. The linear progression of ordinary temporal experience gives way to what we might call archetypal time, in which all moments exist simultaneously in a kind of eternal present that transcends chronological sequence.

The recognition of these temporal paradoxes reveals that mortality consciousness does not simply exist within time but participates in the creation of time through its engagement with finite existence. Each moment of mortal awareness generates its own temporal quality, its own rhythm, its own relationship to past and future that cannot be reduced to mechanical measurement. This suggests that time itself might be more complex and multidimensional than our ordinary experience suggests, with mortality consciousness serving as a kind of lens that reveals temporal possibilities not available to beings who lack awareness of their finite nature. The intersection of mortality’s democratic and temporal dimensions creates particularly rich philosophical territory. The fact that all conscious beings share the condition of living in mortal time creates connections that transcend the usual boundaries of species, culture, and historical period. A medieval peasant contemplating mortality and a contemporary urban dweller facing the same existential situation participate in the same fundamental temporal experience, despite the vast differences in their external circumstances. This shared participation in mortal time generates what we might call trans-temporal solidarity—recognition that the basic structures of mortal consciousness create connections across historical boundaries that complement the connections mortality creates across social boundaries. The democracy of mortality operates not just synchronically, linking all beings who are currently alive, but diachronically, connecting us with all beings who have faced or will face the same fundamental condition of conscious finitude.

The Aesthetics of Mortality

Mortality possesses its own aesthetic dimension, a particular kind of beauty that emerges from the intersection of transience and significance. This mortal beauty differs from other forms of aesthetic experience because it incorporates the knowledge of impermanence as an essential element [12] rather than an external threat. The image of chickens resting “On their health-buffs-favoured-breasts” while being transported to slaughter captures this mortal aesthetic perfectly. The chickens appear simultaneously beautiful and pathetic, dignified and absurd, natural and artificial. Their beauty is inseparable from our knowledge of their fate, creating a complex aesthetic experience that cannot be reduced to simple categories of beautiful or ugly, tragic or comic.

This mortal aesthetic explains the particular poignancy of many human experiences: the beauty of aging faces that show the passage of time, the bittersweet quality of seasonal changes that mark the earth’s continuous cycle of death and renewal, the special intensity of experiences we know we will not repeat. Mortality consciousness creates a heightened aesthetic sensitivity that finds beauty precisely in the conjunction of significance and transience. The mortal aesthetic also helps explain why art that deals explicitly with death and mortality often achieves particular power and resonance. Such art does not simply represent mortality but creates aesthetic experiences that embody the temporal paradoxes and emotional complexities that mortality generates. The greatest mortal art achieves what we might call aesthetic immortality—not by denying death but by creating forms that seem to transcend temporal limitation while remaining grounded in mortal experience.

The Ethics of Mortal Existence

Dabashi’s *After Savagery* posits the genocide in Gaza as an epistemic and moral rupture so profound that it demands a fundamental reorientation of philosophy and politics. This paper has argued that Dabashi’s work successfully establishes Gaza/Palestine as a decolonial categorical imperative, an absolute obligation to think, witness, and act from the perspective of the most brutalized. By unmasking the “metaphysics of barbarism” underlying Western civilization’s universalist claims, he demonstrates that the savagery in Gaza is not an aberration but a logical culmination of a colonial modernity perfected in the Zionist garrison state. In response, Dabashi charts a path for consciousness after savagery by recentering knowledge production within Palestine as an epistemic world, championing a liberatory poetics of survival that transcends Adorno’s Eurocentric despair, and formulating a new set of imperatives: to witness contrapuntally, to decolonize thought, to forge planetary solidarity, and to liberate memory from Zionist instrumentalization.

However, as critical reflections indicate, this powerful framework is not without tensions. The totalizing critique of “Western philosophy” risks a Manichaean overcorrection that may obscure internal counter-traditions. Declaring “Palestine is the World” courts an inverted universalism that could marginalize other sites of atrocity.

Furthermore, reliance on European theorists such as Agamben to dismantle Eurocentrism reveals a persistent discursive entanglement, underscoring the need for deeper engagement with Indigenous and Southern epistemologies. Most pressingly, the transition from a powerful philosophy of critique and witness to a concrete program of political and material reconstruction remains under-articulated. Nevertheless, Dabashi's imperative stands as an indispensable provocation. It asserts that the meaning of life after savagery must be rebuilt from the ground zero of Gaza. This mandates a post-Western consciousness forged in planetary solidarity and an ethics born of shared vulnerability. The ultimate challenge is to move beyond the necessary unmasking and poetic resistance. This effort endeavors to establish the tangible institutions and political structures essential to prevent the recurrence of such savagery. In doing so, it elevates the imperative from a simple demand for witness to a tangible blueprint for liberation.

Mortal Consciousness and Authentic Existence

The awareness of mortality creates possibilities for authentic existence that would not otherwise be available. When we fully acknowledge our finite nature, we become capable of making choices that reflect our genuine values [13] rather than the expectations or pressures imposed by social convention or unconscious habit. Mortal consciousness generates authenticity through several mechanisms. First, the knowledge that our time is limited forces us to prioritise what truly matters to us rather than allowing ourselves to be distracted by superficial concerns. Second, the recognition that we will die makes it impossible to maintain illusions about our ultimate control over existence, fostering a humility that enables more honest self-assessment. Third, the universality of mortality creates a perspective from which social roles and identities appear as temporary costumes rather than essential aspects of the self.

However, authentic mortal existence requires more than simply acknowledging that we will die. It demands what we might call mortal integration—the ability to live fully while maintaining awareness of mortality without being paralysed by that awareness. This integration involves developing what the poem calls the capacity to “raise my brow / In convulsion / Or amazed imagination” in response to mortality's paradoxes. Mortal integration also requires accepting uncertainty as a fundamental aspect of the human condition. The poem's confession “I don't know” reflects not intellectual failure but authentic recognition of the limits of human understanding when confronted with mortality's mysteries. This epistemic humility opens space for genuine wonder and continued questioning rather than false certainty or cynical dismissal.

The Ritual Dimensions of Mortality

Human cultures have always developed ritual responses to mortality, recognising that encounters with death require ceremonial attention that transcends ordinary social interaction. The poem's suggestion that “Chickens / Trucks / Tricycles / People...s / Are

the sacrifices and the altars / That can ever mediated be” points toward the ritual dimensions of mortality that operate even in apparently secular contexts.

Modern technological society has obscured many of the ritual dimensions of mortality by medicalising death and removing it from everyday experience. Yet the poem reveals how ordinary activities—transportation, food production, daily commuting—function as unconscious mortality rituals that connect us to the larger patterns of death and transformation that govern existence. [14] Here lies, perhaps, the most substantive point of departure from Heidegger’s framework: more decisive than any purely ontological reformulation. For Heidegger, authentic being-toward-death requires a kind of solitary resolve: *das Man*— the anonymous “they” of social existence that covers over the individualising disclosure that death provides. The funeral rite, the communal lament, the shared memorial, the cultural elaboration of mortuary practice— all of these, for Heidegger, risk being modes of evasion, social buffers against the radical singularity of one’s own death.

But I find this reading to be imposing a false opposition between authentic individuation and communal meaning. The social rituals that human cultures have universally developed around death are not merely psychological defenses or collective denials, rather they are **philosophical achievements** demonstrative of accumulated wisdom, passed across generations, about how to dwell with mortality in ways that honor both the reality of loss and the continuity of meaning. The wake, the dirge, the feast following burial, the annual commemoration are not evasions of mortal truth but engagements with it, shaped by the recognition that mortality is never merely a private matter between an individual consciousness and its own ending. It is always already relational, always embedded in webs of meaning that exceed the individual. To position social ritual as authentically philosophical— rather than as mere *das Man* evasion— is to claim that the wisdom of mortality is not exhausted by the solitary thinker’s confrontation with finitude, but is genuinely constituted by the communal practices through which mortal beings have always tried, together, to make sense of what it means that they will die. In this sense, the “constitutive other” framework— death as companion rather than destination— finds its most concrete expression not in individual philosophical reflection but in the ritual life of communities that have learned to live *with* death rather than merely toward it. Thus, in these expressions, we “[Let be be finale of seem \[as\] The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream](#)”. [15]

The ritual understanding of mortality suggests that our encounters with death require ceremonial attention that honors both the reality of loss and the continuity of existence. This ceremonial dimension need not involve traditional religious frameworks but might take the form of what we could call secular mortal rituals—practices that acknowledge mortality’s significance without requiring specific theological commitments.

The ritualisation of mortality also serves psychological functions by providing structured ways to process experiences that exceed ordinary conceptual understanding. Rituals create containers for emotions and insights that might otherwise overwhelm

individual consciousness, enabling communities to maintain continuity while acknowledging change and loss.

Death as ‘Other’ rather than Destiny

The perspective developed in this paper suggests a different understanding: we are not beings unto death but rather beings with death as our constitutive other. This distinction, while subtle, has profound implications for how we understand consciousness, relationship, and the nature of authentic existence. The difference is not that Heidegger’s framework fails to illuminate existence, *au contraire* as it illuminates it profoundly, but that it does so from within a structure that is fundamentally teleological and individualising. What the constitutive other framework opens is the space for a *relational* account of mortality, one in which death shapes consciousness not by serving as its ultimate singular destination, but by functioning as the ever-present, almost inexorable other against which consciousness defines, questions, and creates itself in ongoing dialogue—as an ongoing dialogue. To understand ourselves as beings with death as our other means recognising that mortality functions not as our destination but as our constant companion, [16] *i.e.*, a presence that shapes every aspect of experience while remaining fundamentally different from consciousness itself. Death is not something we move toward but something we dance with, not our ultimate purpose but our eternal dance partner in the choreography of existence.

This alternative understanding emerges clearly from the poem’s imagery of mortality as host and feast, as the context within which life unfolds rather than the goal toward which it progresses. The chickens in the truck are not fundamentally oriented toward their slaughter but are living creatures whose vitality exists in relationship to mortality without being reduced to it. Similarly, human consciousness exists in relationship to death without being essentially defined by that relationship.

The distinction between being unto death and being with death as other has several important implications. First, it preserves the integrity of consciousness as something more than merely temporary existence. While consciousness is indeed mortal, it possesses qualities—creativity, love, wonder, meaning-making—that transcend its temporal limitations even while remaining grounded in them.

Second, it recognises that our relationship to mortality is dialogical rather than monological. We do not simply move toward death but engage with it, question it, resist it, accept it, transform our understanding of it, and are transformed by it. This ongoing dialogue between consciousness and mortality generates the rich complexity of human existence that cannot be captured by viewing death as simply our ultimate destination.

Third, it acknowledges that mortality consciousness, while important, is not the only or even the primary source of authenticity and meaning in human life. Our capacity for genuine relationship, creative expression, moral action, and spiritual experience

emerges from the positive qualities of consciousness itself, not merely from our awareness of the limitations consciousness— all winding unto “mortal love”.

The Comedy and Tragedy of Mortal Love

Perhaps nowhere does mortality’s jest appear more clearly than in the realm of human love and relationship. We form deep attachments to other mortal beings knowing that these relationships will be severed by death. We invest tremendous emotional energy in connections that are, from the perspective of cosmic time, extremely brief. We experience the deepest meanings of our lives through relationships that mortality makes both precious and painful. This creates what we might call the tragicomedy of mortal love—relationships that are simultaneously the most meaningful and most vulnerable aspects of human existence. The knowledge that we will lose everyone we love, either through their death or our own, colors every intimate relationship with a bittersweet quality that intensifies both joy and sorrow.

Yet this temporal limitation also creates love’s special intensity and significance. If relationships were permanent and guaranteed, they might lack the urgency and preciousness that mortality provides. The fact that our time with others is limited makes each moment of genuine connection more valuable, each expression of care more significant, each experience of mutual understanding more remarkable. The mortal dimension of love also reveals the courage required for deep emotional investment. To love knowing that loss is inevitable requires a kind of heroism that faces mortality directly rather than seeking security through emotional withdrawal. This mortal courage enables the formation of bonds that create meaning precisely because they exist within temporal limitation rather than despite it. Thus, this “mortal love” inevitably proceeds “mortal wisdom”.

Toward a Mortal Wisdom

The philosophy of mortality that emerges from this meditation points toward what we might call mortal wisdom—a way of understanding and living that embraces mortality’s paradoxes rather than seeking to resolve them. This wisdom involves several key insights that emerge from sustained engagement with mortality’s jest.

First, mortal wisdom recognises that the most profound truths about existence often take the form of paradoxes that cannot be dissolved through logical analysis but must be lived through experiential engagement, [17] The contradictions that mortality generates are not problems to be solved but conditions to be inhabited with as much grace and awareness as possible.

Second, mortal wisdom cultivates what we might call ‘comfortable uncertainty’ or that ability to acknowledge the limits of human knowledge without being paralysed by those limits. The confession “I don’t know” becomes not a failure of understanding but an

opening to continued wonder and questioning that keeps consciousness alive and responsive to new experience. [18]

Third, mortal wisdom develops appreciation for the ordinary miraculous—the ways that everyday experiences contain profound significance when viewed from the perspective of mortality. The fact that consciousness exists at all, that we can form relationships with other mortal beings, that we can create meaning within temporal limitation, appears as an extraordinary gift rather than a natural entitlement.

Fourth, mortal wisdom maintains simultaneous engagement with life's serious demands and recognition of existence's fundamental absurdity. This double consciousness enables both responsible action and playful detachment, both deep commitment and philosophical humor about the human condition.

Finally, mortal wisdom embraces what the poem calls “amazed imagination” as an appropriate response to mortality's mysteries. This amazement involves neither denial nor morbid fascination but rather sustained wonder at the fact that conscious beings exist who know they will die yet continue to create meaning, form relationships, and engage with existence as if it mattered ultimately even while knowing it matters only temporarily.

1. The Wisdom of Mortal Acceptance

This philosophy of mortality I am offering emerges from this extended meditation points toward what we might call the wisdom of mortal acceptance—a way of living that embraces our condition as beings with death as our constitutive other without being overwhelmed by that condition or seeking to escape it through denial or fantasy. This wisdom involves several key elements that emerge from sustained engagement with mortality consciousness.

First, it requires developing what we might call existential flexibility—the ability to move gracefully between different levels of understanding and different temporal perspectives without getting trapped in any single viewpoint. This flexibility enables us to plan for the future while remaining present to the immediate moment, to take our projects seriously while maintaining perspective on their ultimate significance, and to invest deeply in relationships while accepting their temporary nature.

Second, mortal acceptance involves cultivating what the poem calls “amazed imagination” as a fundamental stance toward existence. This amazement emerges from the recognition that conscious existence within mortal conditions is itself extraordinary—not because it transcends mortality but because it represents such a remarkable emergence within mortal conditions themselves.

Third, this wisdom requires developing tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity as permanent features of mortal existence rather than problems to be solved. The poem's confession “I don't know” reflects not intellectual failure but the recognition that the deepest truths about mortality cannot be captured in conceptual knowledge but must be lived through ongoing experience and relationship.

Fourth, mortal acceptance involves recognising that our dialogue with death as other is not a problem to be solved but a creative relationship to be cultivated. This means

approaching mortality consciousness not as a burden to be minimised but as a source of insight, creativity, and authentic engagement with existence.

Mortal wisdom cannot content itself with the affirmative dimensions of mortality consciousness— with wonder, with jest, with the generative dialogue between consciousness and its constitutive other. The jest of mortality is not only comic; it is also uncanny. Heidegger's analysis of *Unheimlichkeit*, that not-at-home-ness that anxiety before death discloses, points to a dimension of mortal experience that the language of transformation and dialogue must not be allowed to soften. There is something in the proximity of death that does not merely tickle or flirt, as the poem acknowledges, but unnerves: it displaces the self from its familiar coordinates, exposes the groundlessness beneath ordinary certainty, and renders the world strange in ways that resist resolution through humor or wonder alone. Pain belongs here, too, not merely as the physical signal of mortality's approach, but as a mode of experience that strips the philosophical subject of the very capacities (*viz.*, reflection, articulation, creative engagement) that I take to be as mortality's contingencies, gift if to be granted even. Terror is not merely the failure of courage before death; it is a legitimate phenomenological response to the encounter with non-being, one that no philosophy of mortality can claim to have **answered** without dishonesty. The "constitutive other" framework does not dissolve these dimensions. It insists, rather, that the full range of mortal experience: from laughter to terror, from wonder to anguish, from creative inspiration to the silencing that pain imposes. They must be held within the same philosophical embrace. The jest of mortality contains the grotesque alongside the comic, the uncanny alongside the beautiful—sublime, Romantic, though need not macabre. This is mortality's very face: a portrait that's worth a lifetime to stare—to petrify as that of Medusa's or to horrify as that of Dorian Gray. Nevertheless, an Other, as that of Levinas'.

The Generative Power of/within Mortal Dia-/Mono-logue

When we understand death as our constitutive other rather than our ultimate destiny, we begin to see how the dialogue between consciousness and mortality generates the creative tensions that make human existence uniquely rich and complex. This dialogue operates through several mechanisms that deserve careful attention.

First, the presence of mortality as other creates what we might call existential urgency without existential despair. Rather than leading to nihilistic conclusions about the meaninglessness of temporary existence, the awareness of mortality enhances the significance of each moment by making it irreplaceable. This urgency emerges not from rushing toward death but from the recognition that our time for creative engagement with existence is limited and precious.

Second, the otherness of death generates what we might call ontological humility—the recognition that consciousness, however remarkable, is not the master of existence but rather one participant in a larger mystery that includes both being and non-being, presence

and absence, continuity and change. This humility enables authentic relationship with other beings and with existence itself because it acknowledges our interdependence rather than asserting our autonomy.

Third, the dialogue with mortality as other creates possibilities for transcendence that remain grounded in finite existence. Rather than seeking to escape mortality through denial or to embrace it through morbid identification, consciousness can engage with death as a teacher, a challenger, a revealer of hidden truths, and a generator of creative possibilities that would not exist without this fundamental relationship.

The generative power of this dialogue appears clearly in the poem's movement from abstract philosophical reflection to immediate experiential crisis and back to deeper philosophical understanding. [19] The encounter with the possibility of death in the near-accident does not simply confirm the truth of mortality [20] but generates new insights into the nature of time, relationship, and meaning that were not available through purely abstract contemplation. This generative quality of mortal dialogue helps explain why encounters with mortality often produce profound creativity in human beings. Artists, writers, musicians, and thinkers often report that their most significant work emerges from engagement with themes of mortality—not because they are obsessed with death but because the dialogue with mortality as other generates insights and creative possibilities that are not available through other means.

1. The Ethics of Mortal Dialogue

Understanding death as our constitutive other rather than our ultimate destiny also generates a different approach to ethics and moral responsibility. Rather than deriving ethical obligations primarily from the shared fact of mortality, this approach recognises that our ethical relationships emerge from the creative possibilities that the dialogue with mortality opens up. The poem's democratic catalog of mortal beings—chickens, drivers, trucks, tricycles, people—suggests not just that we all die but that we all participate in the ongoing dialogue between consciousness and mortality that generates meaning, beauty, and moral significance. This participation creates obligations that extend beyond simple solidarity in the face of shared fate to include responsibility for nurturing the creative possibilities that emerge from mortal dialogue. This understanding generates what we might call an ethics of creative mortality—moral obligations that emerge from our capacity to transform the encounter with death into sources of meaning, beauty, and connection rather than simply sources of terror or despair. These obligations include the responsibility to help others engage productively with mortality consciousness, to create works and relationships that honor both the reality of death and the creativity of life, and to develop wisdom that can guide authentic living within mortal conditions.

The ethics of “creative mortality” also recognises that our moral obligations extend beyond our own individual mortality to include care for the ongoing dialogue between consciousness and mortality that continues beyond any individual life. This means taking responsibility for cultural creation, for the preservation and transmission of wisdom, for

the nurturing of conditions that enable future generations to engage productively with mortality consciousness.

1.1 Temporal Complexity and Mortal Presence The poem captures this temporal complexity in the phrase “In the singularity of the moment / Before one says Goodbye”. This moment is not simply the last moment before death but a unique temporal dimension that contains the entire trajectory of existence within itself. It is both utterly particular and completely universal, both momentary and eternal, both ending and beginning. This temporal complexity suggests that mortal consciousness does not simply exist in time but participates in the creation of time through its ongoing dialogue with mortality. Each moment of mortal awareness generates its own temporal quality, its own rhythm, its own relationship to past and future that cannot be reduced to mechanical duration.

The recognition of temporal complexity helps explain why experiences of mortality consciousness often feel simultaneously rushed and suspended, immediate and distant, real and dreamlike. These experiences reveal the inadequacy of ordinary temporal categories for understanding the full richness of mortal existence and point toward the need for more sophisticated approaches to temporality that can accommodate the paradoxes that mortality generates.

The Paradox of Mortal Meaning

Perhaps the deepest insight that emerges from understanding death as our constitutive other is the recognition that mortality generates meaning precisely through its capacity to limit meaning. This paradox—that the very condition that makes all meaning temporary also makes meaning possible—captures the essential jest of mortality that the poem identifies. The paradox of mortal meaning operates through several mechanisms. [21] [22] [23]

First, the limitation of time creates the necessity for choice, and choice is the fundamental condition within which meaning emerges. If we had unlimited time, no choice would be significant because all possibilities could eventually be realised. The limitation of mortality forces us to choose what matters most, and these choices create the patterns of significance that constitute meaningful existence.

Second, the reality of loss makes love and connection precious in ways that they could not be if they were guaranteed to be permanent. The knowledge that we will lose everyone we love, either through their death or our own, creates an urgency and intensity in relationships that generates profound meaning even while acknowledging the temporary nature of all human connection.

Third, the certainty of death makes creative action significant by ensuring that what we create represents irreplaceable contributions to the ongoing dialogue between consciousness and mortality. Each work of art, each act of love, each moment of authentic understanding represents a unique response to mortal conditions that will never be exactly repeated.

The paradox of mortal meaning reveals that the appropriate response to awareness of our temporary existence is neither despair at the futility of all action nor frantic attempts to create permanent monuments to ourselves, but rather grateful engagement with the creative possibilities that emerge from mortal conditions themselves.

Conclusions

1. Living the Jest

This philosophical meditation on mortality concludes where it began—with the recognition that mortality is indeed a joke, but a joke of the most profound and serious kind. Like the best humor, mortality's jest reveals truths that straightforward analysis cannot capture, creating insights through unexpected juxtapositions and sudden shifts in perspective that reframe our entire understanding of existence. The wisdom of mortality lies not in resolving its paradoxes but in learning to dance with them, to live fully within the tension between significance and transience, meaning and absurdity, connection and separation that defines the mortal condition. This dancing requires what we might call existential agility—the ability to move gracefully between different levels of understanding without getting trapped in any single perspective.

Perhaps most importantly, the philosophy of mortality reveals that our knowledge of death, rather than diminishing life's significance, creates the very conditions within which significance becomes possible. Without mortality, there would be no urgency, no preciousness, no need to choose what matters most. The jest of mortality lies in the discovery that what makes life most difficult—the knowledge that it will end—also makes it most meaningful.

Yet as we deepen our understanding of mortality's nature, we must be careful not to fall into the trap of what might be called existential reductionism—the tendency to define human existence primarily in terms of its movement toward death. This reductionist approach, while offering certain insights into the urgency and authenticity that mortality consciousness can provide, ultimately misses the more complex relationship between consciousness and mortality that this meditation has attempted to illuminate.

The philosophical tradition has often characterised human beings as fundamentally oriented toward death, as if our essential nature could be captured by understanding ourselves as beings whose primary defining characteristic is our movement toward non-existence. This view, while recognizing the importance of mortality consciousness, makes a subtle but crucial error by positioning death as the central organizing principle of human existence rather than recognizing it as one pole of a more complex relationship.

2. The Continuing Jest

As this philosophical meditation draws to its close, we return to the central insight that mortality is indeed a joke—but a joke that reveals rather than conceals the deepest truths about existence. The jest of mortality lies not in its being false or meaningless but

in its capacity to generate meaning through the very mechanisms that seem to threaten meaning, to create significance through the conditions that make all significance temporary, and to reveal the extraordinary nature of ordinary existence by showing us that it will not continue indefinitely.

The continuing jest of mortality operates through the ongoing dialogue between consciousness and death that generates new insights, new creative possibilities, and new forms of meaning that could not exist without this fundamental relationship. Each generation of mortal beings must discover anew what it means to exist knowing that existence will end, and each individual must find their own authentic way of engaging with this fundamental condition.

The jest continues because mortality consciousness is not a problem that can be solved once and for all but a creative relationship that generates new possibilities as long as conscious beings exist. Each work of art that emerges from engagement with mortality, each relationship that deepens through awareness of its temporary nature, each moment of authentic living that acknowledges both significance and transience, contributes to the ongoing jest that reveals the remarkable nature of existence itself.

In this light, we can understand that the appropriate response to mortality is neither the grim seriousness that treats death as the ultimate reality nor the desperate levity that tries to laugh away the reality of loss, but rather the kind of serious playfulness that can engage fully with mortal conditions while maintaining perspective on their ultimate mystery. We are neither beings unto death nor beings who can escape death, but beings who can dance with death as our constitutive other, finding in that dance both the terror and the beauty that make conscious existence such an extraordinary emergence within the cosmos.

The jest continues, and we are both its audience and its performers, both those who laugh and those who provide the occasion for laughter. In accepting this double role with grace and humor, we find perhaps the closest thing to wisdom that mortal beings can achieve: the ability to live fully while dying continuously, to love deeply while losing constantly, to create meaning while acknowledging absurdity, and to maintain wonder in the face of the ultimate mystery that is our own existence as beings who know they will die yet continue, against all logic and evidence, to find life worth living.

The final wisdom of mortality may be that there is no final wisdom under the sun—only the continuing dialogue between consciousness and its mortal conditions that generates new insights, new creative possibilities, and new forms of meaning as long as conscious beings exist to engage in this fundamental conversation. The jest of mortality lies in the discovery that what seemed like a limitation reveals itself as the very condition that makes creativity, love, and meaning possible. In learning to live with death as our constitutive other rather than our ultimate destiny, we discover not the secret of how to escape mortality but the secret of how to live authentically within mortal conditions—how to find in the temporary the seeds of significance that transcend temporality even while remaining grounded in it. And so the jest continues, as it must, for as long as

conscious beings exist who can contemplate their own mortality and find in that contemplation not only terror but also wonder, not only ending but also the endless creativity that emerges from the encounter between consciousness and the mortality that makes consciousness both possible and precious.

Notes

- [2] Cf. Fonseca and Testoni (2012) and their “The Emergence of Thanatology and Current Practice in Death Education” in OMEGA. They note how “early philosophers and poets were perplexed by the very idea of death” and discusses interdisciplinary approaches. Comp. “‘Death is Not the End’: Thanatology Today” in Contemporary European History by Nally, 2025 as he examines contemporary death studies as interdisciplinary practice.
- [3] Original and unpublished poem by A. Servaña, 2023
- [4] Cf. Evan Thompson (2017) “Death: The Ultimate Transformative Experience” in his discussion of death as transformative rather than terminal, examining how dying involves “gaining new experiences” that are “epistemically and personally transformative.”
- [5] In “Modernity and the Existential Metaphysics of Life and Death in Kafka's Metamorphosis”, Pavlos E. Michaelides (2017) analyses death as “metamorphosis par excellence” and transformation.
- [6] That is, akin to Vargas et al. (2016) in their notion of the transformative process of palliative care professionals: The metamorphosis. Here, they used metamorphosis as metaphor for understanding death-related transformation.
- [7] Díaz-Cobacho and Molina-Pérez, 2024 discuss death's democratic function across philosophical traditions, whereas Nally, 2025 looks into death studies across cultures and historical periods, emphasising death's universal character and Davies, 2024 explores how death creates equality across social boundaries.
- [8] Cf. “How mortality awareness regulates intertemporal Choice” published in Consciousness and Cognition examines how death awareness affects temporal experience and decision-making (Peng Wang et al. (2024).
- [9] Just as L.A. Paul, 2010 analysed he “what-it's-like character of phenomenology has as much to do with temporal experience as with qualitative experience” and discussed experiences “as of nowness” in “Temporal Experience”
- [10] See Shardlow, 2023: “Temporal Perspectives and the Phenomenology of Grief” in Review of Philosophy and Psychology. Here, he examines how loss disrupts temporal experience through perceptual, agential, and narrative perspectives. Comp. Ratcliffe, 2022: “Towards a Phenomenology of Grief: Insights from Merleau-Ponty.”

- [11] Baretto (2025), Borjigin et al. (2024), Greyson (2015) and Belanti et al. (2008) all look into this phenomenology of near-death experiences (NDE) in comprehensive depth.
- [12] Cf. Saito, 2007; Riggle, 2022, and Kernbauer, 2017 discuss, reflect, and analyse decay and transience as forces that create unique aesthetic experiences.
- [13] Vaškovic's "A path to authenticity: Kierkegaard and Dostoevsky on existential transformation" in *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* explores how mortality awareness facilitates authentic existence (2020).
- [14] Both Appleford, 2024 and Kellehear, 2007 examine the ritual dimensions across historical periods and social context. See also Vulliamy, 1926 in Servaña, 2022 towards his conclusion on the need for an ontological grounding for morality in relation to death as universal phenomenon.
- [15] The revolt in the tone of this poem by Wallace Stevens perfectly intersects and intertextualises with the recognition of how death, albeit a severance of the one who died, is an ever lingering entwinement of the memory that departed one always infuses to the bereaved. N.B.: "Emperor of Ice Cream" serves as a euphemism for the one who died, as in some countries, ice cream is served during mourning rites (e.g., Turkey, Greece, Balkan Countries, and indeed, in some parts of the U.S. and Canada).
- [16] See Thomson (2024) demonstrates "internal tensions within the being-toward-death framework" and explores alternatives to Heideggerian teleology in *Rethinking Death in and after Heidegger* (Cambridge UP) and Schumacher (2011), examining how Heidegger's framework "radically separates ontological analysis from ontical concerns" in *Death and Mortality in Contemporary Philosophy* (Cambridge UP).
- [17] "Existential Perspectives on the Fear of Death" (2024) by Ispas discusses how existential philosophy emphasises living with rather than resolving death's contradictions.
- [18] Gorman (2024) on Frankl examines how accepting limits creates space for authentic meaning-making.
- [19] Thomson, 2017 even notes the "proximity to transformation... reveals the fluid, dynamic nature of existence" and generates creative insights. See his "Death: The Ultimate Transformative Experience".
- [20] Cf. Perry et al. 2024. "Application of Terror Management Theory to End-Of-Life Care Decision-Making" in *OMEGA* and his exploration of how mortality salience affects consciousness and behavior.
- [21] Gorman, 2024. "Viktor Frankl's Existentialist Conception of Meaning in Light of Human Mortality" in *Journal of Philosophy of Life* examines how death creates rather than destroys meaning.
- [22] Kuylen et al. 2024. "Mortality Awareness: New Directions" in *OMEGA—Journal of Death and Dying* explores how mortality awareness affects decision-making and meaning construction.

- [23] Chia, 2024. examines how mortality awareness promotes introspection and meaning-making across cultural contexts in “The Psychosocial Developmental Phases of Death (Mortality) Awareness: What Educational Therapists should know when working with Terminally Ill Clients”

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