Fall 2021

Being-Towards-Death: COVID-19 and the Mismanagement of Existential Anxiety

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the University Honors Scholar

Designation

11/30/21

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COVID-19 is far and away the most harmful pandemic since the 1918 flu pandemic, and arguably constitutes the most disruptive series of events in the 21st century. As of January 14th, 2021 it is believed to have killed 5,518,343 people and infected 318,648,834 people (World Health Organization, 2021). Apart from its massive toll on the healthcare systems of many countries, it has damaged the global economy and intensified political instability. What's worse, media coverage of the related carnage and death has been similarly unprecedented. As such, it is not surprising that the average share of American adults reporting symptoms of anxiety increased from 11% in 2019 to 41.1% in 2021 (Panchal, Kamal, Cox, & Garfield, 2021). Clearly, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly increased levels of "stress [and] anxiety" (CDC, 2021) in the general population.

Martin Heidegger was a prominent continental philosopher of the early 20th century, and *Being and Time* is his most celebrated work. The text outlines his unique vision of human existence most completely, and it is also the work where he expounded most fully on his theory of existential anxiety. Heidegger's "solution" to this existential anxiety is *Being-Toward-Death:* a mode of being where the individual fundamentally accepts and faces the inescapability of their mortality, becoming *authentic* and united with themselves. The COVID-19 Pandemic, as a ubiquitous existential threat, brought *most all of humanity* face-to-face with the fact of their finality. While there is no dearth of

therapeutic methods and handbooks available, I believe that most of what is being offered is only effective in a palliative sense.

Heidegger is appropriately characterized as a phenomenologist. Briefly described, phenomenology is a school of thought developed by Edmund Husserl to "study the structural features of experience and of things as experienced" and "primarily a descriptive discipline...undertaken in a way that is largely independent of scientific, including causal, explanations and accounts of the nature of experience." (Internet *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, para. 1). Phenomenology involves the practice of what Husserl called "bracketing" – effectively putting in parentheses (or suspending) all of one's assumptions, presuppositions, and beliefs about the world (i.e., the so-called "natural attitude").The phenomenological method is one that I will employ in the present project. The effects of COVID-19 are indeed global. However, the way they manifest themselves in different populations, subpopulations, and individuals can vary widely. I find that it is appropriate to employ a method that prioritizes the pure experiences of the individual even as we consider our collective experience with Covid as an aggregate phenomenon.

As the COVID-19 Pandemic is clearly a significant historical event, there is a need for additional research examining the lived experiences of individuals impacted by it. Adopting Heidegger's ontology as a conceptual frame, I designed an original study examining pandemic-related narratives generated by college students. In this essay, I will present and analyze the findings of this study, as well as analyze the CDC's approach to treating pandemic-related stress and anxiety from a Heideggerian perspective.

College Students' Experience with Covid-19: An Original Study

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected the life of students at a small liberal arts college in New England? To explore this question, I recruited 27 students at the University of Maine, Farmington. The average age of participants was 19, and 78% identified as female, while the remaining 14.8% identified as male, and 7% did not identify with either male or female. All participants were asked to respond to a series of questions assessing their responses to the pandemic and their sense of meaning in life. All questionnaires are included in Appendix A.

One question asked participants to describe how "the COVID-19 Pandemic has affected your sense of self". Responses varied in both length and content. Seven participants focused on the theme of *isolation*. For some, a sense of isolation intensified their struggle:

"The pandemic has been isolating and has made me a significantly more anxious person than I would say I was before. To a degree it feels like everything and everyone else has changed, so I'm never entirely certain of how anything will go. I find myself feeling out of place more often and have a hard time making long term plans."

"Covid 19 led me to the darkest point in my life. I really started to feel what isolation was like. I battled depression and it got far more worse than it had ever

been.

For others, isolation seemed to be the catalyst for self-discovery and development:

"The isolation that covid has caused has given me a lot more time to reflect and

introspect than I ever had before, so it's been a positive environment for

self-development in a way"

"Covid has made me realize who I am and has gotten me closer to who I want to

be. The isolation was and is hard for me but helped me get to where I am now."

"It has made me more aware of who I am and allowed myself to focus on the

importance of my mental and physical self."

Still other participants reported mixed experiences with pandemic-related isolation:

"It made me more comfortable with my self because I was spending so much

time alone I picked up home gym exercises and running so I was comfortable

with myself. At the same time it was hard being alone in my own thoughts for so

long."

"Honestly, pretty well. I had time to reflect on what I wanted from life, and

recognize bad habits I have. However, the isolation was very difficult to deal

with."

Those who felt that the pandemic improved their sense of self, reported that their

increased opportunity to introspect was most helpful in producing this change:

"I think during the lockdowns and being forced to spend more time alone caused

me to introspect more and think about what my goals are."

"Covid has helped me better understand myself and has helped me confront a lot

of personal problems due to all the solitude. I am the most confident I have ever

been in my whole life."

"I believe the pandemic affected my sense of self by making me do a lot of self

reflection and I now overthink a lot more also. I had to reinvent myself as a result

of this."

For some, the accumulation of self-knowledge was accompanied by an increased

appreciation for the *Other*:

"For me it has helped me figure out who I am. When the lockdowns first started

my parents wouldn't let me go anywhere. So what I did was research topics such

as black lives matter, stuff about politics, women's rights, the LGBTQ

commuunity, etc. It really helped me find out my beliefs and know where I stand

about these topics."

"I have become more aware of myself in relation to others around me."

> "It has made me realize how interconnected we all are, and how little control I have over what other people do. It has made me realize that we can't solve global problems through individualistic mindsets."

On the whole, the majority of participants reported experiencing some sort of significant change in their sense of self due to the pandemic. All participant responses are presented in Table 1. For the purposes of analysis, I sorted these responses into three "change" categories based on the content of the open-ended response. As can be seen in Table 2, the substantial majority of respondents considered the pandemic to have resulted in a positive change in their sense of self.

Table 1: Responses to the question "How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your sense of self?"

Response	Category
I don't believe the COVID-19 Pandemic has really affected my sense of self. At least I haven't noticed anything that has changed.	1
COVID-19 at first gave me sadness because I couldn't see my friends and then I started playing more video games and I became a couch-potato.	2
I forgot how to exist in the world in the quarantine period	2
Honestly, the pandemic has positively affected my sense of self, as it gave me time to dive into my world. I found out more about who I am as a person and was better able to focus on what I enjoyed	3

The pandemic has been isolating and has made me a significantly more anxious person than I would say I was before. To a degree it feels like everything and everyone else has changed, so I'm never entirely certain of how anything will go. I find myself feeling out of place more often and have a hard time making long term plans.	2
I think during the lockdowns and being forced to spend more time alone caused me to introspect more and think about what my goals are.	3
The isolation that covid has caused has given me a lot more time to reflect and introspect than I ever had before, so it's been a positive environment for self-development in a way	3
I have felt more isolated, yet have had time to reflect on myself and question why I may act the way I do, along with my identity as a whole. I'm more at peace with myself as an individual, though I don't feel as though I am significant.	3
During COVID a [sic] started to feel actually better about myself. I was able to focus on things I liked like makeup and get better at things I was terrible at. Sometimes it was bad, but I came out of it with higher self esteem	3
It hasn't done much long term at the start I was depressed scared and confused I thought it was the end of the world. I'm doing alright so I would say there was no long term effects on me	1
Honestly, pretty well. I had time to reflect on what I wanted from life, and recognize bad habits I have. However, the isolation was very difficult to deal with.	3
Covid 19 led me to the darkest point in my life. I really started to feel	2

what isolation was like. I battled depression and it got far more worse than it had ever been.	
The Covid-19 Pandemic has only slightly affected my sense of self. Being in quarantine really pushed me into a shell, but now that classes are in person I feel much more like myself, instead of a zombie that has no real meaning in their life.	1
It made me more comfortable with my self because I was spending so much time alone I picked up home gym exercises and running so I was comfortable with myself. At the same time it was hard being alone in my own thoughts for so long.	3
Covid has helped me better understand myself and has helped me confront a lot of personal problems due to all the solitude. I am the most confident I have ever been in my whole life.	3
I've had time during quarantine to reflect on myself and my values more.I'd say that I value my time with family and friends more. I feel like I have had time to get to know myself as well [sic] and become more aware of who I am.	3
It's made me more aware of the things I do, as well as the actions of others around me. I think I realized that I might have a lot more common sense than a lot of my friends wheen it comes to staying safe and protecting myself and my family.	3
It's made me a stronger, more knowledgeable person and I think learning from home for the [indecipherable] from college	3
I have become more aware of myself in relation to others around me. If I get a cough I know others will turn and look at me silently thinking what if she has covid. I am also more aware of the potential	1

consequences. I want to keep my family and friends safe so I still wear a mask in most stores even though it is no longer required because I fear passing something on to them that I don't yet know I have.	
It has made me realize how interconnected we all are, and how little control I have over what other people do. It has made me realize that we can't solve global problems through individualistic mindsets.	3
Covid had me at home everyday in the beginning, at the time I was a weed user, I would crawl on my floor looking for pieces just to not feel the pain of being at home with my mother, I eventually started mowing the lawn for my dad because I was out of work, due to covid, and spending all that money on weed, when school came back around I could not even go because my social anxiety and trauma overwhelmed me completely, I spent my money on 3 grams of dabs a week to not feel anything, now I am so disassociated I don't know if I will ever be back here, I quit 2 months almost 3 ago though, but now I have to eat all the time or sleep to keep my thoughts away.	2
For me it has helped me figure out who I am. When the lockdowns first started my parents wouldn't let me go anywhere. So what I did was research topics such as black lives matter, stuff about politics, women's rights, the LGBTQ commuunity, etc. It really helped me find out my beliefs and know where I stand about these topics.	3
I believe the pandemic affected my sense of self by making me do a lot of self reflection and I now overthink a lot more also. I had to reinvent myself as a result of this.	3
Covid has made me realize who I am and has gotten me closer to who I want to be. The isolation was and is hard for me but helped me get to where I am now.	3

|	
When the pandemic hit, I was forced to learn about myself moree. I lost my friends, had to learn from home, learned how to cook/bake, and sew. I also have realised that things we considered normal pre-pandemic are actually gross, like drinking from water fountains.	3
Relatively little	1
It has made me more aware of who I am and allowed myself to focus on the importance of my mental and physical self.	3

Category 1: The respondent's sense of self changed minimally (or not at all) as a result of the pandemic

Category 2: The respondent's sense of self changed negatively as a result of the pandemic

Category 3: The respondent's sense of self changed positively as a result fo the pandemic

Table 2

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your sense of self?
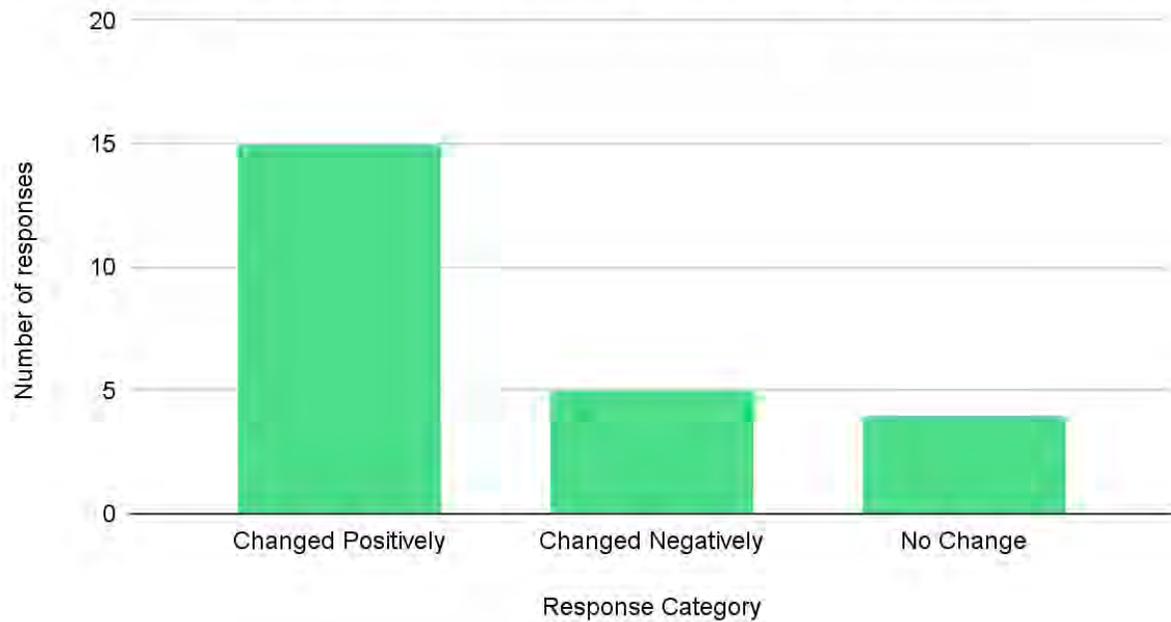
A second question assessing responses to the pandemic asked participants to describe how "the COVID-19 Pandemic affected your sense of mortality (or understanding of death)?" Approximately half of the participants experienced a change in their sense of personal mortality. Many of those not reporting such a change did mention an increased fear of *others* dying:

"I was not afraid of death before the pandemic, and I am still not very afraid of dying. However, I am more afraid of losing the people I love to death."

"I no longer fear my own death, but now the thought of losing someone close to

me is something I think about and fear often"

"There hasn't been a huge effect. I realize that a lot of people were getting sick

from covid and I definitely didn't want any of my grandparents getting it. So it

made me more cautious and aware."

Others reported considerable stability in their sense of mortality, and did not seem

especially concerned about death:

"I was taught that death is natural and nothing to fear when I was little and I have

always thought that. Death is sad, but not scary or anything"

"For me the idea of death has always been the same. It's scary yes, but a part of

life. No one knows what waits for us really, so I have to see it to believe it. The

way I die freaks me out more than actually dying."

"Covid hasn't changed much about this for me. Death is something that will

eventually happen but all we can do is enjoy the time we are given to enjoy life,

the people around us, and make as big of an impact on those around us."

"It has not had a great impact on my sense of mortality. I have thought a lot about

death/existential thoughts long before COVID. Death and life are two sides of the

same coin."

Of those who *did* report a change in their understanding of their mortality, the realization of death as a possibility for them was stark:

"Covid is definitely an indication of the constant possibility that anyone could die. It has at times made me more afraid of dying."

"I started to understand that death can really happen at any point in time. I thought about my own family and how closely they were affected as well. Death isn't something you can avoid."

All participant responses are presented in Table 3. As can be seen in Table 4, approximately half of the participants reported that the pandemic produced a change in their sense of mortality.

Table 3: Responses to the question "How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your sense of mortality (or understanding of death)?"

Response	Category
I am much more aware now of how decisions I make can impact others (going to school before the pandemic, even if I wasn't feeling well). I worry a lot about the health and safety of my grandparents.	3

I understand we all die at some point and I don't fear my death nor do I want death to happen. I want to know what happens after we die	2
It's made [me] more scared of death, just more aware of it. Circle of life, dude	1
I was not afraid of death before the pandemic, and I am still not very afraid of dying. However, I am more afraid of losing the people I love to death.	2
The pandemic has given me a more anxious relationship with mortality. When I was young I was pretty anxious about the concept of dying for a few years. As an adult I didn;t think of dying beyond driving safely or not parking in unlit parking lots. Since the pandemic the concept of death has been incredibly taxing. Death has strangely gone from the end of life to a concept that hinders living.	1
The COVID-19 Pandemic has made me think about mortality more and what things I spend my time on	1
Covid is definitely an indication of the constant possibility that anyone could die. It has at times made me more afraid of dying	1
I don't think it has changed at all	2
For me the idea of death has always been the same. It's scary yes, but a part of life. No one knows what waits for us really, so I have to see it to believe it. The way I die freaks me out more than actually dying. I'd rather not go out being chopped to pieces.	2
I no longer fear my own death, but now the thought of losing	3

someone close to me is something I think about and fear often	
It emphasized how fragile life is. Before this, I only really experienced, older relatives dying, but when some of my classmates got sick, it put death in a new perspective. I've struggled with suicidal thoughts before covid, so it was less a revelation about my own mortality than it was realizing how fragile my loved ones are.	1
I started to understand that death can really happen at any point in time. I thought about my own family and how closely they were affected as well. Death isn't something you can avoid.	1
Because I have not lost anyone I know to covid, the pandemic has not really affected my understanding of death. I already knew that pandemics caused mass death, aas they have throughout history, so I figured it was just another part of my life that would be remembered in the future	2
I think it has impacted my sense of mortality especially with my mom working in healthcare and seeing it and how it affects everyone so easily. It makes it feel a lot more real.	1
Not much. I was taught that death is natural and nothing to fear when I was little and I have always thought that. Death is sad, but not scary or anything	2
There hasn't been a huge effect. I realize that a lot of people were getting sick from covid and I definitely didn't want any of my grandparents getting it. So it made me more cautious and aware.	2
It has brought death and fear of death closer within my	1

|	
community. Death on a large scale within my community was never something I really thought about before- it was only singular deaths that you would really hear about. It feels like the closest i've been to encountering something that could potentially cause death	
It has made me more aware of mortality and it has also made me appreciate more the time I spend with others.	1
Before covid I had not thought much about my grandparents passing as they are both healthy and not yet in their 70's. But when covid hit I could no longer see them and had to start thinking about what could happen to them.	1
It has not had a great impact on my sense of mortality. I have thought a lot about death/existential thoughts long before COVID. Death and life are two sides of the same coin.	2
It has not really affected me in that way. I want to die a lot of the times but I am here trying to live so I don't hurt my brother, or boyfriend. I don't really fear death, I just want it to come painlessly.	2
I understood just how close death could be. I understood now that anyone in my life could be there and then be gone the next day. I knew this before but it was happening more and more because of covid. Many people I knew got it and a member of my family died from it	1
Covid hasn't changed much about this for me. Death is something that will eventually happen but all we can do is enjoy the time we are given to enjoy life, the people around us, and make as big of an impact on those around us.	2

COVID-19 has made me realize that death happens more often than we think. When watching the news they kept showing how many more people were taken by COVID	1
Relatively little	2

Response categories:

1: The pandemic produced a change in the participant's sense of mortality

2: The pandemic did not produce a change in the participant's sense of mortality

3: Indeterminate (not classifiable)

Table 4

How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected your sense of mortality (or understanding of death)?
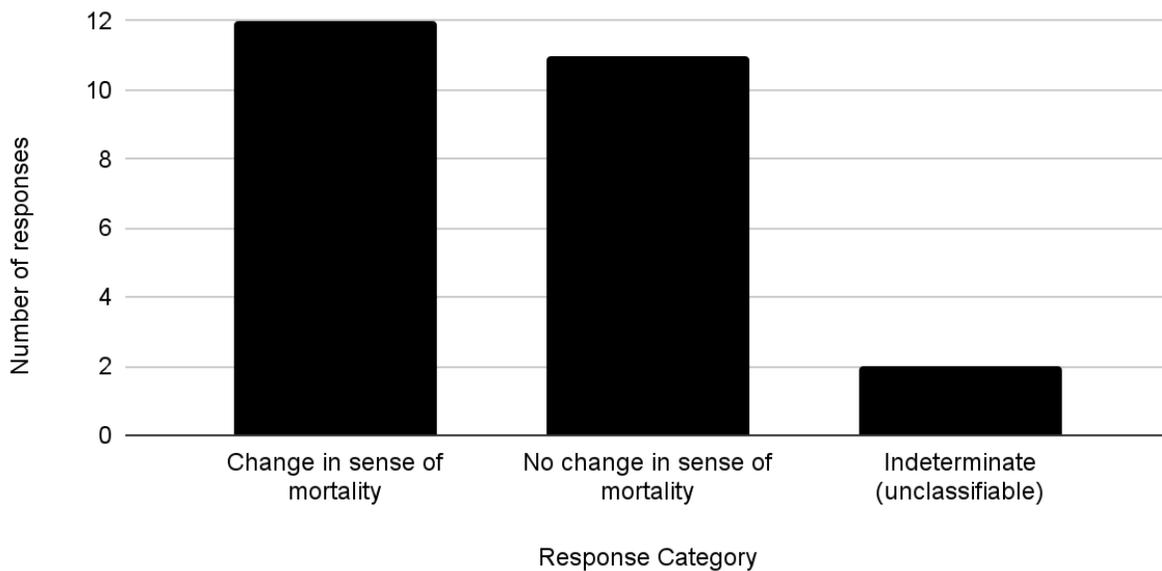
Participants were also asked to rate (on 7-point Likert scales) the extent to which (a) they perceived Covid to be a threat and (b) they perceived the world as becoming more strange, uncanny or 'off' since the pandemic began. Both questions (and response scales) are copied below:

How significant of a threat is COVID-19 to your way of life?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not a threat			Moderate threat			A significant threat

Has the world or life in general felt strange, uncanny, or "off" to you since the pandemic began?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
It feels almost entirely the same			It feels somewhat different			It feels completely different

Responses to the question assessing perceptions of COVID as a threat ranged from 2 to 6, with a mean of 4.07 (SD =1.4). This suggests that many, if not most, participants do indeed feel that COVID-19 posed some threat to themselves or the people they loved. Responses for the question assessing perceptions of the world as more strange, uncanny, or "off" ranged from 2 to 7, with mean of 5.38 (SD = 1.38). This data suggests that the majority of respondents felt that the pandemic had a notable affect on how they perceived the world. This "strangeness" was qualified by their responses to the prompt encouraging them to explain their answer. Many cited restrictions and regulations, e.g. mask-wearing and social/physical distancing for

producing feelings of uncanniness, both when they were first implemented *and* when they were stripped back. In fact, being near others *without* masks was frequently cited as a "weird" experience for participants. Others cited vague fluctuations in the way time passed or how the world generally "felt". All participant responses to this question are recorded in table 5 below.

Table 5: Has the world or life in general felt strange, uncanny, or 'off' to you since the pandemic began?

Response
I think wearing a mask and trying to limit interactions with my grandparents were the biggest changes for me. When I do watch the news this feeling that things are off does get stronger, but quite honestly I've usually forgotten by the next day or whatever it was that made me uneasy was replaced by something new.
I got a job a month after the pandemic began in the US and I feel like going back to not wearing a mask is going to feel weird to me and see peoples faces and not just their eyes.
Nothing is okay or the same, everything got worse. Life has been strange
Everything about the way I live life around people has changed, and I can't do anything without considering how it would affect me in terms of being potentially exposed to COVID-19.
The ease that life used to have has gone away and most things seem hard and anxiety inducing.

Especially in the beginning of the pandemic things felt very uncanny with lockdowns. But now things are still different but they feel more normal.
The whole world has changed and it doesn't seem like it will ever be the way it was before the pandemic.
While it feels "back to normal" now with restrictions lifted it feels weird. Almost wrong that I'm doing the things I'm doing now. It's like it pushed a sense of fear in me now.
I feel like I had more fun before, I was more creative and enjoyed doing things more before the pandemic.
Everything has felt almost dreamlike since quarantine. It still feels like I'm going to wake up tomorrow in my bed in 2019. Days tend to blend together more now.
It hit me when I was thinking about how theres no where in thee entire world you can go to escape this. Everything feels completely different.
It did at the start, but now it is feeling more normal again
At first it felt really weird but now this is like the new normal and it's hard to remember what it would be like without masks or worrying about everything
It felt really weird at first but now I've adjusted. It was odd not seeing people everywhere
It felt really off at first. Quarantine felt like a zombie apocalypse. Couldn't go anywhere or ee anyone. The following year, being at school with masks was still weird but better. Now I am more used to wearing the masks and people self quarantining.

Now especially, more than last year, we're doing the same things, just in different ways. Everyone wearing a mask seems "off", and evaluating my friends' social interactions with others before letting them into my house is certainly weird. I really miss being able to eat food in class.

With all the mask wearing, social distancing, life is moving along as [indecipherable] it can.

It is constantly in the back of everyone's minds. When I moved back home last summer, I felt strange leaving my room to go to the bathroom. I realized that because on campus, if I was leaving my dorm I has to have a mask, I felt weird walking around my own home without one.

I think it feel somewhat different because it seems to be all that people talk about, and it makes me realize how fragile our system is.

It just is not the same at all, I miss when people were happy and seeing people's faces, hugging my relatives.

Before the pandemic I have always thought that Americans would bind together to fight anything that could be a threat to us. But after seeing the amount of people that won't wear masks, geet vaccinated, or do anything to help this go away, I feel like it was a lie. I feel betrayed by what we have been taught about our country since we were kids.

The world had many controversial topics come about and change many things while we stayed home/worked the majority of the time. People became quite opinionated during this time and either became very isolated or I've also seen people become

| ignorant or aggressive. Everyone's changed is [sic] some way shape or form. |
| The years feel like they've gone by faster. COVID felt like it happened a year ago but it originated in 2019-2020 and now it's almost 2022. |

Participants were also asked to complete the Life Attitude Profile Revised (LAP-R) developed by Gary Reker. The LAP-R is comprised of 48 items measuring six distinct aspects of meaning in life. Participants responded to each item on a seven point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree; 7= strongly agree), and average scores were computed for each of the following subscales:

- *Purpose* (e.g., "My past achievements have given my life meaning and purpose."; M = 4.26; SD = 1.14)

- *Coherence* (e.g., "I have the sense that parts of my life fit together into a unified pattern"; M= 4.01; SD=1.26)

- *Choice/Responsibility* (e.g., "My life is in my hands and I am in control of it"; M=5.14; SD=.668)

- *Goal Seeking* (e.g., "I am determined to achieve new goals in the future"; M=5.32; SD=.817)

- *Existential Vacuum* (e.g., "I feel that some element which I can't quite define is missing from my life"; M=4.25; SD=.893)

- *Death Acceptance* (e.g., "Death makes little difference to me one way or another; I accept death as just another life experience; I think I am

generally much less concerned about death than those around me, etc.;

M=4.07; SD= 1.30)

The Death Acceptance subscale warrants further discussion as it is especially relevant

to the existential threat posed by COVID-19 and Martin Heidegger's conception of

Being-toward-Death. Death acceptance here is defined as "fearlessness of death and

its acceptance as a natural aspect of life" (Dagach, Brotfield, & Garcìa-Alandete, 2021).

As previously noted, the majority (59%) of participants reported a positive change

in their sense of self during the pandemic. A substantial minority (26%) reported a

negative change, and the remainder (7%) reported relatively little change. This result

was unexpected: perhaps students were more able than I expected to resolutely

confront death and come out on the other side of the pandemic as authentic individuals.

To explore existential correlates of positive change as a result of the pandemic, a series

of ANOVAs were performed with the *Self Change* category (*positive change* vs.

negative/no change) serving as the independent variable and the six subscales of the

LAP-R serving separately as dependent variables. These analyses failed to yield any

significant effects. However, a non-statistically significant tendency was observed for

participants who reported a positive change to also report greater "purpose" and

"coherence" in life. This is not surprising, as individuals who purported to emerge from

the pandemic with a more authentic sense of themselves would be expected to have a

stronger sense of purpose and feeling of coherence.

With respect to Covid-related mortality awareness, 44% of respondents reported

a change in their conception of mortality that involved some kind of confrontation with

the possibility of their own death (and that of others). The remaining 56% didn't indicate

a change (perhaps because they didn't confront their death during the pandemic or had already done so before the pandemic). To explore existential correlates of mortality awareness as a result of the pandemic, a series of ANOVAs were performed with the *Mortality Change* category (*change in mortality awareness* vs. *no change in mortality awareness*) serving as the independent variable and the six subscales of the LAP-R serving separately as dependent variables. This analysis yielded a significant effect of Mortality Change on Death Acceptance, $F(1,26) = 16.5$; $p < 0.001$. Specifically, the group that describe a confrontation with their mortality as a result of the pandemic reported a *lower* level of Death Acceptance (M = 3.1) than those who did not experience such a confrontation (M=4.8; See Table 6).

Table 6

Death Acceptance as a Function of Change in Mortality Awareness
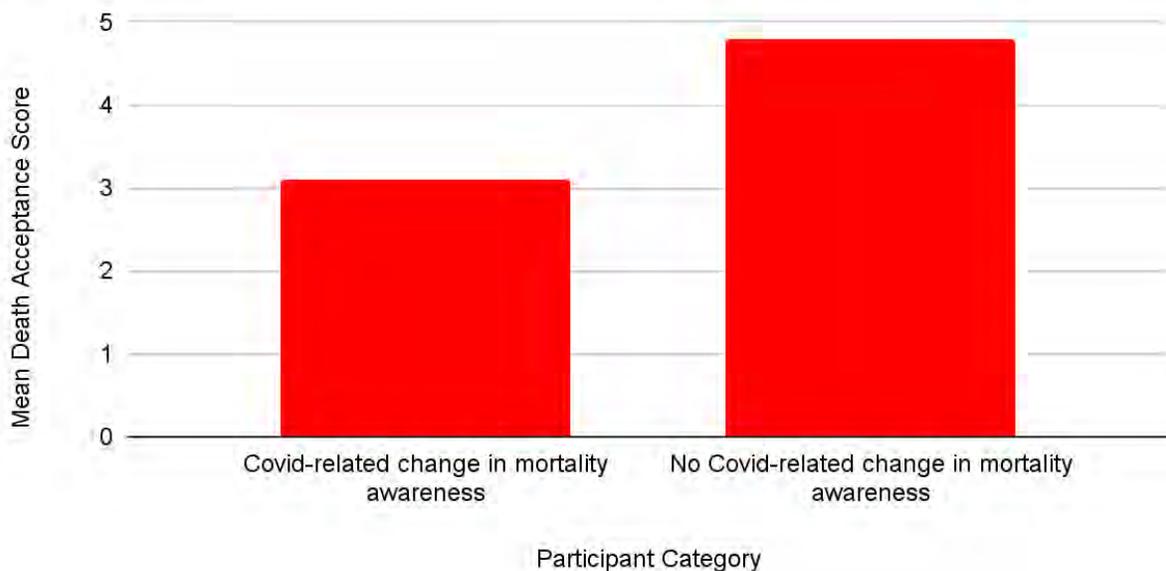
II - A Heideggerian Approach

    A. Heidegger's Ontology

Heidegger's analysis of existence is well-equipped to characterize the plight of many individuals affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic. It can also address why certain behavioral patterns have been exhibited by many as a result of the pandemic.

Being and Time, Heidegger's most significant work, can be fairly characterized as a contribution to ontology, or the philosophical study of the nature of Being. What, precisely, is Being? Heidegger does not provide a straightforward answer. However, it can be said that Being is not an object. It might be better characterized by the *way* something is than by *what* it is. Humans, for Heidegger, are best described by the neologism Dasein (English: literally, "being-there"). This is because *as Dasein* we are accordingly *thrown* into the world, in that we are constantly "being delivered over" to our "there". Our "there" is the selfsame, embodied and in-a-space presence which we constantly occupy. Wherever you *are*, you always find yourself "there" (though it *feels* like "here"). This quality of being always-already "there" and inextricably immersed in the space constituted by our surroundings is called *Being-in-the-World*. This term denotes the fact that, for Heidegger, we are completely, inextricably immersed in the world from the moment we are born to the moment we die.

Heidegger posits that Dasein can maintain itself in two modes of "living" in the world. Dasein can exist either authentically or inauthentically, and Dasein's mode of

existing is determined primarily by how aligned with itself it is. If Dasein can be said to be itself in such a way that it owns up to itself *in the face of itself*, Dasein exists authentically. This involves, most crucially, an acknowledgement of one's mortality. However, if Dasein cannot do so, it flees from confronting the face of itself (which will shortly be discussed) to the realm of the They. In this case, Dasein can be said to exist inauthentically.

Heidegger discusses several states of being that exist in Dasein, notably those characterized as "Moods". The existential moods most pertinent to both Heidegger's arguments, and mine, are Fear and Anxiety (also called Angst to distinguish it from what feelings we normally refer to as "anxiety"). Dasein can always find itself in a *mood*– a representation of "how one is faring" (p.173) that brings Dasein into the present realization of its thrown presence– its "there". Moods can also be described as one's perception of how they are *feeling* at any given moment.

Fear is one of Dasein's salient moods. What we fear, the fearsome, are things within the world which can be classified as "threatening" (p.179) to the existence of Dasein. Fear, for Heidegger, always has an object, even if the source of fear is cognitive and not really "present" in front of us. Though Heidegger strictly concerns himself with the fear which manifests in the face of fearsome entities alongside us at the moment, I posit that the fearsome can induce fear from the "past" and from the "future" in the form of fearsome thoughts. Though not "present", these thoughts which "have been" fearsome or "will be" fearsome have the ability to reach Dasein. Simply put, that which is "past" is *Dasein's* past, and that which is "future" is Dasein's possibility. Heidegger observes that "we do not first ascertain a future evil and then fear it" (p.180). Fear is not

simply the result of a cognitive process. Rather, what is fearsome in the future has

already been disclosed to us *as fearsome*.

More primordial than Fear, and what makes it possible, is Anxiety, or *Angst*.

Since the DSM-V uses the same term to denote a certain symptomatic category of

mental illnesses, we shall use Heidegger's original German (Angst) to refer to his

conception of anxiety. One does not experience Angst in the face of just any*thing*. Angst

is decidedly unconcerned with Fear. In fact, "That in the face of which one is anxious is

completely indefinite" (p.231). Angst emerges precisely from "nowhere", and this

nowhere is everywhere. The utter insignificance and meaninglessness of the world as

such is the everywhere and nowhere which "individualizes" (p.232) Dasein and isolates

it from its inauthentic existence in the world which it is thrown into. The strange and

alien appearance of the world to a Dasein experiencing Angst comes from Angst's

uncanny character, making Dasein feel that it is "not at home" (p.234). Ultimately, Angst

lets Dasein "find itself face to face with…its Death" (p.310), letting it enter into a

confrontation with the face of a more authentic self.

The normal response to Angst is a fleeing of Dasein from itself to the inauthentic

world of entities and the They, and in doing so Angst is effectively *converted* into Fear.

Also connoted by the expression One (as in, "One must always…" or "When One does

this…"), the They is a hypothetical abstract subject which "prescribes the kind of Being

of everydayness" (p.164). By everydayness, Heidegger means the quality possessed by

a human being which consigns them to merely functional living, a kind of living which

thrives on appearances and generally does not question or investigate the self or its

experiences. This term also denotes the qualities that everyday things display *for*

humans when they live in this average way. Heidegger considers this type of "living" to be typical of the average person. This is not to say that humans are necessarily faulted for living in this way – it is merely the type of living we, as humans, are tempted to *fall* into. However, for Heidegger, continuing to dwell in the world of the They shouldn't be the aspiration of a truly authentic individual.

The way in which Dasein may confront Angst and become authentic is by heeding the *call of conscience*. The call allows Dasein to find themselves. The call itself is Angst, the sheer and shocking feeling of worldly mundanity which displaces Dasein from its "home" into what it feels is not its home (which is actually authentic Dasein, the self which it has originally been displaced from), and the caller is Dasein itself, calling itself back to authenticity. What the call "tells" Dasein is that it is *Guilty*. This is not ordinary guilt, like that which one would feel after stealing from a store or neglecting to return a call from their mother. Rather, this guilt is *existential*. Existential guilt commonly manifests in such deathbed exclamations as "I could have done more" or "I missed so many opportunities". This kind of guilt is felt when one realizes that they are choosing certain possibilities over others. As such, they come to grasp the vastness of themselves which *is not* in the form of possibilities which they have *not* chosen for themselves. In other words, existential guilt is felt when one realizes the different, infinite "paths of life" which could have been taken by them and are currently being presented to them at every passing moment. The choices which aren't chosen aren't "seized" and incorporated into the self, leaving a large gap in their own experience of Being. To despise and exclude these wants is the common, fleeing tendency. But to *want* and accept the want is to become "ready for anxiety" (p.343) and in doing so to be

authentic and *resolute*. Combine this with *anticipation*, the way in which Dasein

recognizes that death is its ultimate possibility (and lives their life with this recognition in

mind, and you have the character of a Dasein which has found itself, confronted the

Angst which resulted from being separated from itself, and has finally become

authentically one with itself. This is Dasein's Being-toward-Death: an authenticity that

recognizes the fundamental significance of death in the structure of existence and

guides one's decisions and attitudes in life with this fact in mind.

B. A Heideggerian Analysis of the Pandemic

From this Heideggerian point of view, we can further investigate and explain the

results of the study. The difference between death acceptance scores between the

"change in sense of mortality" and "no change in sense of mortality" groups might be

interpreted as a discrepancy of "resoluteness" between the two. The group that had a

higher death acceptance score indicated in their responses that they did not fear their

own death, with some respondents saying it was "natural" or "just another part of life" for

them. While this does not necessarily indicate an attitude of Being-Toward-Death

proper, it shows at least an understanding of human finality, and a level of comfort with

that finality. These participants may not have been especially concerned about dying

from COVID-19 (which can be dismissed as just one more cause of an inevitable

death). On the other hand, the group with a lower death acceptance score noted having

realizations about human mortality. One respondent noted that the pandemic showed

them that "death could happen to anyone at anytime...death is not something that you

can avoid". For these participants, Covid was indeed revelatory. It reminded them that

death isn't just an abstract possibility, but a condition of being that surrounds and

defines the human condition.

Interestingly, 75% of those reporting a covid-related confrontation with mortality

also noted positive changes in their perceptions of themselves during the pandemic.

Perhaps these individuals – already low in death acceptance – ultimately failed to come

to terms with their Being-toward-Death and concealed this failure with positive

self-evaluations. From a Heideggerian point of view, they successfully escaped into the

They-world (which grounds inauthentic positive self-perceptions). Alternatively, these

individuals may be on their way to becoming authentic. If this is the case, we might

anticipate improved death acceptance scores with time.

Explained by Heidegger's theory of existential moods, the emotional response

provoked by the presence of COVID-19 is a multifaceted one. It is composed of both

Fear and Angst. The response is phobic and fearful, because it has a discrete object:

the actual virus, COVID-19, and any vessel that carries it (this may vary by person:

perhaps it is any unmasked individual, a crowded place, a hospital, etc.). The

announcement of a deadly, unknown virus sends Dasein into shock. The ready-to-hand

(e.g., this computer) is no longer *for* any specific goal (e.g., writing this honors thesis).

Rather, all goals have been trumped by death. This leaves one confused and aimless

with respect to one's pre-established system(s) of meaning and value.

Of course, it is possible to respond authentically to this situation and hear the call

of conscience. Some individuals may have been authentic before the pandemic began.

Others may experience the pandemic as an opportunity to reconsider their existential

position. The difference between someone who has used the pandemic as an

opportunity for personal growth and someone who allows their anxieties to compromise

their existential well-being would seem to be the difference between the anticipatorily

resolute and those who are lost in the They-world: between the authentic and the

inauthentic. But this is not necessarily the case. Those compelled to steep themselves

in projects, reflections, and "introspections" may seem at peace with their finality, but

this flurry of involvement may have a protective function: a "healthy" distraction from

reckoning with their death (even as they seem to be quite comfortable talking about it).

By the same token, one who's anxiety has gotten worse as a result of the pandemic

may be in the process of answering the call of conscience and wrestling with the

uncomfortable realities of the human condition.

The key question, then, is whether one is able to confront their own death (as a

defining feature of Dasein) or whether they prefer to deflect, deny, and distract

themselves from the truth and reality of their mortality. Significantly, this "denial of death"

(Becker, 1973) is a salient theme in the Terror Management literature.

Terror management Theory (TMT) proposes "that humans are motivated to quell

the potential for terror inherent in the human awareness of vulnerability and mortality by

investing in cultural belief systems (or worldviews) that imbue life with meaning, and the

individuals who subscribe to them with significance (or self-esteem)." (University of

Missouri, 2008, para. 2). This implies that the "solution" to death anxiety isn't final, nor

does it necessarily involve any explicit confrontation with the idea of death. Rather, TMT

suggests that people participate in the Heideggerian They with all the more enthusiasm,

given the ready-made meaning systems offered by culture. These include an

established system of values, opportunities for self-esteem, and meaningful

interpersonal relationships (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon 1986). Indeed, this is

how some individuals navigate their lives within the They, minimizing encounters with

Angst and suppressing their authentic self.

Significantly, Terror Management theorists have recognized the Covid pandemic

as a full-scale existential crisis:

> "The personal, social, economic, and political costs of the COVID-19 crisis
> are unprecedented. From the perspective of TMT, the root cause of all
> these problems is glaringly obvious—the risk of dying from the virus.
> Regardless of how contagious and lethal the virus ultimately turns out to
> be, or what one consciously thinks about it, the possibility of dying from it
> is highly salient and evident in ever-increasing death toll statistics, vivid
> images of overburdened hospitals and makeshift morgues, and the
> testimonials of victims of the virus, both famous and unknown. The deadly
> disease is spawned by an invisible pathogen that is conveyed by droplets
> expelled in the breath of its victims and thus might be lurking almost
> anywhere." (Pyszcznski, Lockett, Greenberg, & Solomon, 2021, para. 6)

The root of the existential crisis for Terror Management theorists is that the pandemic,

and the corresponding collapse of human infrastructure, have "seriously undermined

major resources for managing the potential terror of death" (para. 8). However, people

may find other ways to manage death anxiety. For example, people will use cognitive

mechanisms to minimize thoughts about death or deny the reality of their mortality

(Arndt, Greenberg, & Cook, 2002; Arndt, Solomon, Kasser, & Sheldon, 2004; Burke et

al., 2010). Managed improperly, death anxiety may also intensify negative evaluations of potential threats (Holbrook, Sousa, & Hahn-Holbrook, 2011) and increase materialistic thoughts and impulses (Kasser & Sheldon, 2000).

Death anxiety allows for the "[alteration of] thoughts and behaviors" to bolster national, personal, and religious pride as well as a means to "defend one's world view" (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). In five studies conducted by Scott, Schimel, and Sharp (2021) it was demonstrated that reminders of one's mortality increased individuals' strength of belief in the "lastingness" of their country. This illustrates how nationalism was able to grow with rapidity and vigor during the pandemic, and how inaccurate beliefs about the virus that accompanied (and in most cases, bolstered) this nationalism were able to spread almost as well as the virus did. Couple this with the fact that, for example, out of 678 randomly selected tweets about the COVID-19 pandemic, 24.8% included misinformation and an additional 17.4% included information that was unverifiable, and the way is paved for individuals to hold their own (inaccurate) beliefs about the virus and hold them strongly (Kouzy et al., 2020). The ubiquity of information, legitimate or questionable, about the virus through various media is another concern: college students who used social media *more* during the pandemic "displayed increased concern for their future" and increased concern for society at large (Fraser et al., 2020).

Besides triggering death anxiety, the salience of mortality and death-related thoughts triggers a more generalized *state anxiety* (Juhl, 2019): Brooks & Schweitzer (2011) define state anxiety as "a state of distress and/or physiological arousal in reaction to stimuli, including novel situations and the potential for undesirable outcomes"

(p.48). This is defined in opposition to *trait anxiety*, anxiety that arises as part of a particular individual's personality and predisposition. Hu, He, & Zhou (2020) found that mortality salience induced by COVID-19 increases death-specific anxiety and "tremendous" generalized state anxiety. Mortality salience is the "awareness of the inevitability of one's death" (APA, 2020; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon,1986). Additionally, Hu, He, & Zhou (2020) found that anxiety was boosted more robustly by subjective thoughts of death rather than information about new cases, hospitalizations, and deaths. This is a testament to the individual nature of death – the fact that one can only die their own death, for themselves. This is an essential quality of death for Heidegger. Overall, the pandemic is indeed so overwhelming that when one is not worrying about the possibility of their own death and the death of loved ones, they are still stricken with a general worry and unease.

III – Managing the Pandemic

A. The CDC Approach

How should we be helping college students – and other adults – cope with the pandemic and its effects on mental wellness? Here are recommendations provided by the CDC (directly quoted from their webpage) describing ways to deal with pandemic-related "stress" and "anxiety".

- Take breaks from watching, reading, or listening to news stories, including those on social media. It's good to be informed, but hearing about the pandemic

constantly can be upsetting. Consider limiting news to just a couple times a day

and disconnecting from phone, tv, and computer screens for a while.

- Take care of your body

    ○ Take deep breaths, stretch, or meditate

    ○ Try to eat healthy, well-balanced meals

    ○ Exercise regularly

    ○ Get plenty of sleep

    ○ Avoid excessive alcohol, tobacco, and substance use

    ○ Continue with routine preventive measures (such as vaccinations, cancer

      screenings, etc.) as recommended by your healthcare provider

    ○ Get vaccinated with a COVID-19 vaccine

- Make time to unwind — Try to do some other activities you enjoy

- Connect with others — Talk with people you trust about your concerns and how

  you are feeling

- Connect with your community- or faith-based organizations — While social

  distancing measures are in place, try connecting online, through social media, or

  by phone or mail

  (CDC, 2021)

Apart from their patronizing, pandering character, these suggestions may not

actually treat the anxiety they claim to treat. While certain aspects of life may be

improved by implementing these ideas, the CDC ignores the possibility of

pandemic-related anxiety having a more existential origin. Taking up an exercise routine

can certainly improve one's mood and overall health, but no amount of exercise or any

other of the CDC's prescriptions can help someone successfully confront the reality of

The CDC's recommendations push individuals who have not already adequately

confronted death away from the possibility of doing so. While the first, avoiding the

consumption of too much media, is a good first step, and there are references to

practicing meditation (a welcome practice for Heidegger, who thinks that "the nature of

thinking... is fixed in releasement" (Discourse on Thinking, p.62)), their suggestions on

the whole are surface-level, vague, and too focused on the corporeal. Of course, who

can expect the CDC to dispense an "existential prescription" when therapeutic

approaches are myriad? This would additionally require a government institution to

formally "have the belief" that death anxieties (as angst) are unique in constitution and

need specific forms of therapy to treat them. This is precisely the prescription for them,

though. The distinction between fear and anxiety (Angst) isn't as enshrined in principle

as the differences between other mental afflictions are. Yet, this distinction is crucially

important not just for effective treatment of Angst (and the authentic flourishing which

should follow), but for our current global plight. Pre-pandemic, it was quite convenient

and relatively easy to avoid thinking about, seeing, or confronting your own mortality,

excluding personal circumstances like the death of a family member or pet. But the

discovery of COVID-19 was a massive, existential shock to death-avoiding strategies.

There is no foolproof escape into media, into conversation, or into activity without

incessant reminders of the possibility of one's death. On any local or national newscast,

there is daily information about case numbers, hospitalizations, and deaths[1], with the

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[1] One study participant noted that pandemic media coverage made them exceedingly aware of the frequency of death – "....[death] happens more often than we think. When watching the news they kept showing how many more people were taken by COVID"

occasional horror stories of clogged morgues. Any attempt to leave the house to do

something, anything (especially before vaccination) is met with personal assessments

of risk concerning the virus, e.g., should I wear my mask? Is it enforced in this shop? In

the park? Is this place too crowded to be safe? Even if one forgets that the pandemic is

ongoing, one sight of a face obscured with a mask reignites this process.

So an escape into the They, into true distraction seems significantly more difficult,

if not impossible without some sort of informational isolation. My postulation is that

individuals who had not reckoned with their mortality before COVID-19 became a threat,

started to exist in an "existential limbo" of sorts if one assumes a Heideggerian framing

of the situation. One cannot sufficiently distance themselves from death due to high

mortality salience, thus setting up a confrontation. But, as an individual begins to

approach their authentic self, the messaging that continues to be most prominent is that

of the CDC – e.g., *if you are feeling anxious, down, or depressed, don't forget to*

practice mindfulness, do yoga, hang out with friends, exercise, eat healthy, and relax!

The CDC reemphasizes the ubiquity of human fragility by reporting daily figures

concerning impacts from COVID-19 (directing one towards their death anxiety/hearing

the call of conscience) without providing adequate guidance for navigating a

confrontation with mortality and becoming resolute. As it does this, the CDC suggests

methods of avoiding this confrontation that are futile because of the inescapability of the

virus and the news of deaths that it has caused. The CDC acts with potent bad faith

here: they present material that is almost certain to rapidly elevate mortality salience

without offering relevant coping strategies. The coping strategies they *do* offer catapult

someone who may be struggling with Angst back towards a state of worldly distraction that they cannot enter into.

I posit that the worldwide disruption and disarray is a reflection of inner turbulence – the turbulence of wrestling with the notion and reality of one's finiteness without proper tools[2]. A battle that has been catalyzed by a virus that, when no protection was available, was a universal threat and possibilized death for every individual who knew of it. The inescapability of both the *image* and the *reality* of death, perpetuated by media, government restrictions, vulnerable family members, etc. barred Dasein from really escaping into the They. This would be good – *if* there were resources available promoted by the media and the government which helped individuals confront their death and become authentic. But because there are not, many are concurrently stranded in a position of having to confront their death while receiving information about how to not confront their death. Further, their Angst is being addressed as "anxiety" (really fear) by their main source of information, gloom, and solace, that being the CDC.

I am not positing that an escape into the They-world is impossible, but merely more difficult, and requires more delusion: enter nationalistic tendencies.The worst instantiation of ignoring the call of conscience is blatant denial, the kind that requires conspiracy and intellectual gymnastics to perfect. Current surges in American nationalistic attitudes and stronger belief in conspiratorial thought could be birthed out of (among other things) a higher general threshold for escaping the confrontation of one's mortality. This is due to the ubiquity of the pandemic and the mass death that follows it. The process of converting angst to "anxiety", or fear, is more difficult when death

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[2] It is not the case that the "right" tools were necessarily available when the pandemic wasn't a reality everyone had to contend with, but it is the failure of institutions to find adequate ones when mortality salience is so high that makes this a dire issue.

salience is so high, and so many possibilities have tinges of death and reminders of

mortality attached to them. Naturally, the effort one must expend to effectively convert

Angst into Fear increases, and this is what can lead to denying the existence or

deadliness of COVID-19. If the threat to my life isn't that much of a threat, it's

omnipresence won't be enough to catalyze a confrontation with my death. The

mismanagement of existential anxiety could be said to have resulted, more than mental

anguish, in the strengthening of forms of denial of the virus and its deadliness.

B. Existential Epidemiology (A Heideggerian Alternative)

Heidegger's ontology suggests an alternative approach to managing the

psychological impact of the pandemic. Put most simply, we need to come to terms with

our mortality. But, the path to the acceptance of one's mortality doesn't have to be a

obscure and metaphysical one; it ultimately reduces itself to the practice of

self-knowledge.

To become authentic, we simply must hear our own call of conscience and heed

it when it calls us to be authentic, to accept our deaths. We must accept that we can

neither fulfill every possibility we have and *are*, nor outstrip our ultimate possibility that

must be fulfilled (our death). As no one chose to be born in the first place, so can no

one choose to not die in the second.

However, Heidegger's explication isn't adequate in itself as a "solution" to the

problem of our COVID-19-induced mental health pandemic, nor is the blanket

prescription to "accept your inevitable death and innate incompleteness as a human

being". Perhaps the question to ask here is one that ventures to find the best way to become *anticipatorily resolute*, the best way to hear the call of conscience in our time and our circumstances. I will propose several solutions.

1.Humility.   Perhaps the answer can be found in humility. Over six studies, researchers found that high levels of humility (and low levels of "psychological entitlement") was associated with lower death anxiety and concomitant defensive behaviors (Kesebir, 2014 p. 610). Additionally, a "humility mindset" decreased self-reported death anxiety and prevented "mortality thoughts from draining self-control" (p.619). Kesebir (2014) defines humility as involving "seeing and accepting the truth about the self" – knowing one's "strengths and weaknesses" and "coming to terms with one's imperfections" (p.620). This attitude precludes behaviors that attempt to cover-up or conceal the self from manifesting too redoubtably. More significantly, this also means "accurately judging the self's place within the larger context of existence" (p.619), specifically in relation to our finality.

This is not to say that one must deindividualize oneself or destroy the ego. This would be counterproductive for Heidegger, as "Dying is something that every Dasein itself must take upon itself….by its very essence, death is *in each case mine*" (*Being and Time,* p.284). Mineness, or the phenomenological primordiality of the world being centered around oneself instead of others, is "ontologically constitutive for Death"(p.284). Simply, death is each person's own, and no one else's. It must be confronted individually as well, and this is why Angst individualizes and removes the feelings of "homeliness" and familiarity from the world. It serves as a reminder that no

amount of external involvement or meaning-creation will exempt anyone from dying their own death and owning their finality *as an individual*.

Resoluteness, then, could be interpreted as a balanced mixture of conscious individuality and enormous humility. On one hand, one must acknowledge oneself as an individual, and be confident enough to stand as an individual in the clearing of ontological truth. On the other hand, they must also be humble enough to acknowledge that becoming the highest manifestation of an authentic individual involves a radical acceptance of one's incompleteness, fragility, fallibility, and finality. Indeed, the most (healthily) humble individuals are also the most authentic, and authentic humility is resolute Being-Toward-Death. Paradoxically, the quality of being humble allows one to listen to their own voice *more clearly*. The call of the authentic self is heard by the inauthentic self when it makes the decision to see itself without denial or deflection.

It is perhaps poignant, then, for Heidegger to designate the Being of Dasein, our fundamental constitution, is *Care, or Concern*– by default, we are always-already concerning ourselves with things, possibilities, and people. To be humble is to recognize oneself clearly as a being whose being is founded in *caring-about _____.*The most radical level of individuation catalyzes the most radical form of being concerned for others and the surrounding world.

2. Sartre's Existential Psychoanalysis. A contemporary of and successor to Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre was a french thinker who was most prominent in the existentialist movement of the early 20th century. His tome *Being and Nothingness*, heavily influenced by Heidegger's own *Being and Time*, explored the relationship

between presence, absence, and freedom, with the question of Being mediating the

metaphysical discussion. Towards the end of his work, Sartre provides preliminary

sketches of a kind of phenomenological therapy he terms "existential psychoanalysis".

In criticizing psychologists who reduce one's "complex personality to a few primary

desires, in the way in which a chemist reduces compound substances to...a

combination of pure elements" (Being and Nothingness, p.724), Sartre searches for a

"genuine irreducible" (p.727) that can accurately (and in good faith) characterize and

explain a person's behavior and psychological constitution. For Sartre, it is not playing

an empirical guessing-game of complexes and disorders, but "discover[ing] in each

tendency of the subject, and each of his ways of behaving, a meaning that transcends

it" (p.731). It is about seeing the *fundamental project* that each individual undertakes

and is. The aim of existential psychoanalysis is to "bring to light, in a strictly objective

form, the subjective choice through which each person makes himself a person, i.e.,

acquaints himself with what he is" (p.745). This involves abandoning traditional symbols

and having a "flexible" symbological system at hand for interpreting the project of each

individual, even one that alters itself for each and every patient to ensure that

interpretive schemes are not being "prescribed" to them. The therapeutic process, for

Sartre, should be as dynamic as individuals themselves and their projects (p.743).

　　　　An interesting proposal Sartre makes about these projects is that

"human-reality's fundamental project is to regard man as the being whose project is to

be God...God, as the value and supreme goal of transcendence, represents the

permanent limit in terms of which man becomes acquainted with what he is" (735).

Undergirding Sartre's existential psychoanalysis is a primordial God project that every

person pursues – why? God is the "supreme goal of transcendence", and the ultimate

familiar (God supposedly created man in his image) escape from the limits of the human

condition, *namely mortality*. So existential psychoanalysis therefore can be interpreted

as a process of understanding how the fundamental human project of becoming-God, in

the form of escaping-one's-mortality, manifests itself problematically in any given

individual. By understanding how one, through every choice and behavior, endeavors to

escape the reality of their death, these escape plans can be more robustly refuted. In

the case of the pandemic, existential psychoanalysis could help individuals understand

the unique "voice" of themselves calling them to authenticity, and similarly uncover the

best way to "be-resolute" in the face of death.

   3. Noematic Psychoanalysis. Sartre's account of an existential psychoanalysis,

in addition to the philosophy of Heidegger and Edmund Husserl, influenced the

development of my own psychotherapeutic method (Fisher, 2019) which I will here

outline as another possible solution or tool. I termed it "noematic psychoanalysis", after

the post-kantian concepts of *noesis and noema*, developed by Husserl in his

phenomenological project, *Ideas*. In the simplest terms, *Noesis* is "the meaning given"

(to objects, situations, idealities, etc. preemptively by the human mind; the interpretive

frame or tools, if you will), and *Noema* is "the meaning received" (the perceptive

significance of these objects, situations, idealities, etc. to the human mind; the

interpretation proper) (Husserl, 2015). In noematic psychoanalysis, the subject or

patient is asked to suppose "as if" the totality of their received experience (the complete

noema) is entirely representative of the projections of the unconscious mind, i.e., as

entirely symbolical. Thus, the unique noema received implicitly reveals, with the

interpretive work of both the therapist and patient, intentional heuristics, frames, and

tools (noeses) which allowed for the present noema (or, roughly, "meaning") to be

received in the first place, and which thus underly the problematic structure or condition

at hand. In other words, once the therapist understands the patient's unique systems (or

tendencies) of ascribing and perceiving meaning in any given environment, they also

have a better understanding of how (a) the patient's problem developed and how (b) it

can most effectively be treated and resolved. Similar to Sartre's sketches of existential

psychoanalysis, it is a way of enticing the patient to do phenomenology so their

underlying project can be uncovered and understood.

The result of the correct application of the therapy, and a favorable response

from the patient, is the (not absolute, but *functional*) coincidence of the meaning given

and the meaning received: the object's intention and the received intention are

minimally distant from each other. The patient thus understands from the inside the

structuration of their world and their Self, and something akin to a Hegelian attainment

of Reason comes into fruition. The person, ideally, reconciles with their alienated

authenticity through understanding the unique language of their call.[3]

Conclusion

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[3] Another possible way of helping individuals cope with the reality of death, especially given the universal nature of the pandemic, is to modify one of these approaches for group therapy. The Ernst Becker Foundation offers something akin to this, several "Mortality Awareness Preparedness" workshops and seminars designed to "familiarize individuals and groups with the way death anxiety can operate in human lives." (Ernst Becker Foundation, 2019)

It is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic is an inconceivably complex issue that will continue to be problematic after it has concluded. The same holds true for the mental health pandemic that has accompanied it. The present study offers a Heideggerian interpretation of our struggle with Covid-19, with a special focus on the experience of New England college students. The results suggest that COVID-19 had a significant impact on most students, with almost all reporting Covid-related changes in their sense of self (whether they were positive or negative), half reporting Covid-related changes in their sense of mortality awareness, and many agreeing that the pandemic made the world seem strange or uncanny. From a Heideggerian perspective, this suggests that the pandemic brought some students face-to-face with their mortality for the first time, and overall allowed students to consider their authenticity as a function of attunement with themselves. The qualitative nature of the study also allowed for students' subjective experiences with and insights about the pandemic to be brought to light and considered.

Further research should explore the implementation of different types of psychotherapy on individuals who have been adversely affected by the pandemic. This could be made more specific by implementing different types of psychotherapy on individuals who have reported death anxiety or adjacent concerns in light of the pandemic, and seeing which therapies have the most success. One might also try to compare the effectiveness of psychotherapy that uses a Heideggerian approach (or proceeds from Heidegger's understanding of anxiety) with another form that doesn't on patients with these concerns.

APPENDIX A: Measures

<u>Informed Consent Form</u>

I, _____, have carefully listened to and fully

understand the purpose of this research, the length of time I will participate, the procedures to be

followed, and any foreseeable risks, discomforts, or benefits of the research. I understand that

my records will be kept confidential, my participation is voluntary, and I may withdraw at any

time without penalty. If I have any questions about my rights as a subject or the manner in which

this research is conducted, I can contact the chair of the UMF Institutional Review Board, Donna

Karno (donna.karno@maine.edu). I fully understand the above and give my consent to serve as a

subject.

Are you at least 18 years old? _____

_____   _____

      (Date)   (Signature)

Life Attitude Profile-Revised (LAPR)[4]

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[4] Counterbalancing was implemented by distributing the LAP-R first and the COVID-19 survey second to half of participants, and distributing the COVID-19 survey first and the LAP-R second to the other half of participants.

LIFE ATTITUDE PROFILE-REVISED (LAP-R)

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This questionnaire contains a number of statements related to opinions and feelings about you and life in general. Read each statement carefully, then indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree by circling one of the alternative categories provided. For example, if you **STRONGLY AGREE**, circle **SA** following the statement. If you **MODERATELY DISAGREE**, circle **MD**. If you are **UNDECIDED**, circle **U**. Try to use the undecided category sparingly.

SA	A	MA	U	MD	D	SD
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	MODERATELY AGREE	UNDECIDED	MODERATELY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE

1. My past achievements have given my life meaning and purpose.   SA A MA U MD D SD

2. In my life I have very clear goals and aims.   SA A MA U MD D SD

3. I regard the opportunity to direct my life as very important.   SA A MA U MD D SD

4. I seem to change my main objectives in life.   SA A MA U MD D SD

5. I have discovered a satisfying life purpose.   SA A MA U MD D SD

6. I feel that some element which I can't quite define is missing from my life.   SA A MA U MD D SD

7. The meaning of life is evident in the world around us.   SA A MA U MD D SD

8. I think I am generally much less concerned about death than those around me.   SA A MA U MD D SD

9. I feel the lack of and a need to find a real meaning and purpose in my life.   SA A MA U MD D SD

10. New and different things appeal to me.   SA A MA U MD D SD

SA	A	MA	U	MD	D	SD
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	MODERATELY AGREE	UNDECIDED	MODERATELY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE

11. My accomplishments in life are largely determined by my own efforts.
    SA A MA U MD D SD

12. I have been aware of an all powerful and consuming purpose towards which my life has been directed.
    SA A MA U MD D SD

13. I try new activities or areas of interest and then these soon lose their attractiveness.
    SA A MA U MD D SD

14. I would enjoy breaking loose from the routine of life.
    SA A MA U MD D SD

15. Death makes little difference to me one way or another.
    SA A MA U MD D SD

16. I have a philosophy of life that gives my existence significance.
    SA A MA U MD D SD

17. I determine what happens in my life.
    SA A MA U MD D SD

18. Basically, I am living the kind of life I want to live.
    SA A MA U MD D SD

19. Concerning my freedom to make my choice, I believe I am absolutely free to make all life choices.
    SA A MA U MD D SD

20. I have experienced the feeling that while I am destined to accomplish something important, I cannot put my finger on just what it is.
    SA A MA U MD D SD

21. I am restless.
    SA A MA U MD D SD

22. Even though death awaits me, I am not concerned about it.
    SA A MA U MD D SD

SA	A	MA	U	MD	D	SD
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	MODERATELY AGREE	UNDECIDED	MODERATELY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE

23. It is possible for me to live my life in terms of what I want to do. SA A MA U MD D SD

24. I feel the need for adventure and "new worlds to conquer". SA A MA U MD D SD

25. I would neither fear death nor welcome it. SA A MA U MD D SD

26. I know where my life is going in the future. SA A MA U MD D SD

27. In thinking of my life, I see a reason for my being here. SA A MA U MD D SD

28. Since death is a natural aspect of life, there is no sense worrying about it. SA A MA U MD D SD

29. I have a framework that allows me to understand or make sense of my life. SA A MA U MD D SD

30. My life is in my hands and I am in control of it. SA A MA U MD D SD

31. In achieving life's goals, I have felt completely fulfilled. SA A MA U MD D SD

32. Some people are very frightened of death, but I am not. SA A MA U MD D SD

33. I daydream of finding a new place for my life and a new identity. SA A MA U MD D SD

34. A new challenge in my life would appeal to me now. SA A MA U MD D SD

35. I have the sense that parts of my life fit together into a unified pattern. SA A MA U MD D SD

SA	A	MA	U	MD	D	SD
STRONGLY AGREE	AGREE	MODERATELY AGREE	UNDECIDED	MODERATELY DISAGREE	DISAGREE	STRONGLY DISAGREE

36. I hope for something exciting in the future.   SA A MA U MD D SD

37. I have a mission in life that gives me a sense of direction.   SA A MA U MD D SD

38. I have a clear understanding of the ultimate meaning of life.   SA A MA U MD D SD

39. When it comes to important life matters, I make my own decisions.   SA A MA U MD D SD

40. I find myself withdrawing from life with an "I don't care" attitude.   SA A MA U MD D SD

41. I am eager to get more out of life than I have so far.   SA A MA U MD D SD

42. Life to me seems boring and uneventful.   SA A MA U MD D SD

43. I am determined to achieve new goals in the future.   SA A MA U MD D SD

44. The thought of death seldom enters my mind.   SA A MA U MD D SD

45. I accept personal responsibility for the choices I have made in my life.   SA A MA U MD D SD

46. My personal existence is orderly and coherent.   SA A MA U MD D SD

47. I accept death as another life experience.   SA A MA U MD D SD

48. My life is running over with exciting good things.   SA A MA U MD D SD

COVID-19 Survey

How has the COVID-19 Pandemic affected your sense of self?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

How has the COVID-19 Pandemic affected your sense of mortality (or understanding of death)?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

A friend of yours is deeply concerned about the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to fears for the well-being of his community, he is worried that he might contract the illness himself. How would you respond to this friend?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

How significant of a threat is COVID-19 to your way of life?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Not a threat			Moderate threat			A significant threat

Please briefly explain
your response:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

_____

Has the world or life in general felt strange, uncanny, or "off" to you since the pandemic began?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
It feels almost entirely the same			It feels somewhat different			It feels completely different

Please briefly explain your response:

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

Demographics Survey

For questions 1-3, please ***check*** the appropriate category.

1. Gender

___ Male

___ Female

2. What is your religious affiliation (please check one)

___ Jewish

___ Muslim

___ Protestant; please give denomination: _____

___ Catholic

___ None

___ Other; Specify: _____

3. How often do you participate in religious activities?
   (e.g., attend church, pray, etc.)

___ Never

___ Once a year to every few years

___ Once a month to twice a year

___ Once a week to twice a month

___ Twice a week to once a day

___ More than once a day

4. Please provide your age: _____

5. Please provide your college major: _____

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