

# **Ongoing from Death**

**Loss and Immortality in Interrelationality**

Lee Shevek

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## Personal, Impending Loss

I am writing this piece sitting near my 14-year-old dog, Paws, who I am going to have to say goodbye to soon, potentially as soon as tomorrow. It is a subject in philosophy I've been wanting to tackle and write on for a long while now, and with this lovely soul beside me, and near to departing, writing this seems suddenly imperative.

Paws has been with me for more than half of my life, and I am not exaggerating when I say that she has saved my life multiple times by the virtue of her existence and unbounded love. I grew up in violence, abuse, and fear, and often she was the only living being that reliably showed me the warmth of love without pain or manipulation. I have only been apart from her for the span of two weeks, six years ago, and one week, two years ago, in the entirety of the 13 years she has been with me. She has worked with me for half the jobs I've had since I was 16, and I am in my mid-twenties now. She has always gone everywhere with me, and all who have known me have known me with Paws at my side.

I truly cannot conceive of a life without her. When I have to say goodbye to her, I know I will carry the loss in my heart for the rest of my life.

So as I tackle this subject, I am going to speak of Paws. Some who read this may find it a bit melodramatic to be writing about the philosophy of consciousness, death, and loss from the perspective of losing a pet, but I ask that you withhold your judgment on this point. What I am speaking of here, in the truest sense, is the loss of a fellow consciousness that one is interrelated with. I am alienated from a deeply abusive family and, with that, alienated from the place most people experience their first and often deepest formations of interrelationality. For me the oldest and safest consciousness that my own consciousness has related to is that of my 14-year-old border collie mix. My best, oldest, and kindest friend. I can think of no better or more worthy subject of life, consciousness, and a form of interrelated mortality than Paws. However, what I write about here is not just applicable to the loss of a pet. I dearly hope that if you have experienced/are experiencing the loss of a beloved fellow consciousness that you find something in this that provides you the kind of solace that doesn't do you the disservice of trying to fill in the space of your grief. I hope instead to here honor that grief by adding to it something sacred, without resorting to the otherworldly to do so.

Beyond that point: I feel that I owe it to her to meaningfully interweave her with the work that I am creating now. I don't believe I would be alive to do so if not for her. This piece is a work of celebration: of a life well lived, a life that changed mine, and a life changed by me. This piece is a work of remembrance: an acknowledgement that we don't need to have certainty in a spiritual life after death to find comfort in the truth of a different, more tangible, life after death.

This piece is also a work of grief. Paws will live on within me, but there is so much of her I will lose. This is the time and place to hold both realities.

## Solitary Confinement and Consciousness as a Network

In her book *Solitary Confinement: Social Death and Its Afterlives*, Lisa Guenther draws on and then expands the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl as she examines the experiences of prisoners in solitary confinement in America. This text not only details the excruciating torture that such confinement inflicts upon the victims of the carceral system, but also suggests a new un-

derstanding of what human consciousness requires to remain consciousness. That instead of the standard understanding of our consciousness, that we are more or less perceiving beings independent of one another, our consciousness and understanding of being-in-the-world is dependent on our relationship to other perceiving beings. Guenther writes, “This multiplicity of perspectives is like an invisible net that supports the coherence of my own experience, even (or especially) when others challenge my interpretation of “the facts.” These facts are up for discussion in the first place because we inhabit a world shared with others who agree, at the very least, that there is something to disagree about.” (Guenther, 146)

In this perspective, I seek out social interaction not only because I am a social animal, but because being around other beings who also perceive and interact with the world holds the reality of that world into place for me. I can only perceive the world from the central point of my body. I can only view something like an apple from one side of a time, but the possibility that there could be an Other—a “there” to my “here”—perceiving the other side of that apple, holds that reality into place for me. Guenther goes into detail about how people who are held in solitary confinement almost invariably begin to lose their grip on that reality when that relationality is taken from them. An example of this can be found in the writings of Jack Henry Abbott, who was held in a solitary blackout cell in a US prison with absolutely no light for 23 days, “I heard someone screaming far away and it was me. I fell against the wall, and as if it were a catapult, was hurled across the cell to the opposite wall. Back and forth I reeled, from the door to the walls, screaming. Insane.” (Guenther, 37)

I refer to Guenther’s work here, and her expansion of Husserl’s phenomenology, because it offers an understanding of consciousness rarely seen in philosophy: consciousness is a network, rather than something that exists in a localized, boundaried, unit. This perspective might sound familiar to those of us that have studied David Hume’s bundle theory of the self, which he articulates in his work *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in which the mind (or self) is “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement” (Hume, I, IV, VI). However, Hume’s bundle theory still articulates the self as more-or-less a contained unit to which our experiences, perceptions, impressions, ideas, etc., refer to and are processed within. When we look honestly at Guenther’s account of prisoners trapped in solitary confinement, however, the self as a solitary unit of perception falls like sand through our fingers. We cannot hold reality into place without at least the possibility of other perceiving subjects to interrelate to that reality and to reflect it as real. We construct it together, and not just with other human consciousnesses.

Quarantined in my apartment with my two dogs and cat for company, were I to throw my ceramic mug to the floor and shatter it to pieces, these three other perceiving subjects would instantly reflect the reality of my action to me. The cat would flee the room in a blink, Paws would—as quickly as her old bones allow—dart to her favorite place of safety under the bed, and my 7 month old too-brave puppy would step off a couple feet and then immediately run back to investigate the shattered pieces. Just knowing this holds that reality into place for me without me actually having to break my favorite mug and scare the wits out of my animals to prove it. But, were I to drop my ceramic mug to the floor and not a single one of the three animals reacted in the slightest, I would very likely find myself immediately questioning my own perceptions. I’d wonder if I was hallucinating far before I would ever consider that three other perceiving consciousnesses all at once lost their ability to perceive. A simple, uninterrelated

bundle theory of the self cannot account for this in its entirety. My impressions alone cannot hold my understanding of reality into place.

We see this need clearly expressed in the actions of the victims of solitary confinement. Many of us have encountered the trope of “crazed” prisoners who violently self-harm, attack guards, and even throw their own excrement. Most depictions of this encourage us to infer from this that it is right to keep these individuals locked up for our safety. We are supposed to think “I don’t want to be around that kind of violent behavior!” and be grateful that the State does us the “service” of locking them away. However, let’s keep in mind our new understanding of a networked, interrelated, interdependent consciousness, and see what it is that it has to tell us. Guenther delves into this very subject in detail in *Solitary Confinement*:

Prisoners who throw their own shit at officers are using one of the last means of resistance, their own bodily wastes and the slots in their “cellular embodiment,” as weapons against their keepers, saying, in effect, “If I’m nothing but a piece of shit, then you can eat my shit—and you can clean it up, too.” Not only do they spray officers with their filth, posing both a symbolic and a biomedical threat of contamination by another person’s bodily fluids, but they also make something happen, initiating a whole series of actions that will ultimately rebound against the prisoners themselves with the violence of retaliation and punishment but that nevertheless exert an ambivalent kind of agency. Shitthrowing prisoners recruit the bodies of guards as unwilling proxies for their own bodies, which remain locked in cells and blocked from almost all significant action. (Guenther, 188)

When all other avenues of affirming reality are taken from you, when you have nothing so convenient as a ceramic cup to smash and nothing so interrelated as animals to watch flee the sound, when you call to the only living consciousnesses near you and they are instructed to ignore your calls to the point of acting like you never spoke at all, what else is there to do but to resort to the only actions that will promise to hold together a decomposing reality? Severed from the network that holds our own consciousness to reality, we would all resort to any means necessary to be touched by that network again, even if it caused only pain.

## **The Implications of a Networked Consciousness**

Guenther’s articulation of consciousness as a network has implications far beyond the torturous cells of solitary confinement (though we must never forget and never cease fighting for the liberation of the people we have thus far abandoned to that torture). Immense is the notion that I require others to reflect reality as they also need me to do the same. We are not only necessary to one another, but intrinsically interrelated. I not only need others, but I *am others*. Were it just about need, then I would need to be surrounded by others constantly to know what is real. I would require there to be a living being in the room at all times to know if I really did drop and break my ceramic mug, but instead it is sufficient that there *could* be. I need at least occasional true, living others to reflect reality to me, but even in solitude (not the extreme, unalterable solitude of solitary confinement, but the simple solitude of being a room with no other living beings in it) I carry potential Others within my own consciousness. I drop the mug in a room with no other humans or animals in it and therefore there is no one but me to react, but I have enough times shared the experience of reacting to a loud noise or something breaking with Others that I carry that experience with me. I can know the mug is real, and really broken, because of this.

Further, this phenomenological account is not the only perspective that lends itself to the possibility that our consciousness is an interrelated network. To confirm this, we need only look at the proof to be found in history, in culture, in language, and down to the minutest details of our lives. I—as Hume would agree full-heartedly with in his bundle-theory—am mostly a complicated conglomeration of all my personal experiences, of all the things I’ve learned, of all the feelings I’ve felt. I am the result of my victories, my failures, my traumas, and my recoveries. Not only this, but all of these feelings, all of these lessons learned, all of these life events, are inherently intertwined with *others*. I interrelate with others, as they do with me, and our experiences and histories interact and synthesis into a shared experience. Even when I am not interacting with a living other—such as when I read a book of someone who is long dead—their consciousness affects me and changes me. Speaking even broader than that, it is not just the author of the book in this example who is affecting me, but *every single consciousness they every related to*. Every moment of their life, every heartbreak, every accomplishment, perhaps even a dog that saved their life just by being there, that lead to them writing the book that I read now, interacts with and entangles in my own consciousness. I, such as there can even be a singular *I*, am the historical product of untold consciousnesses in the dynamic, ever-unfolding act of interrelation.

Such is the part I play as well. In this network, not one of us has ever lived who didn’t affect another. Even if I speak to someone only once, and even if they never consciously think of our conversation again, I have left at least a small part of my consciousness with them. There is no undoing of relationality. Perhaps knowing this will allow us all to hold our words, our actions, and even our simple presence with more intention than we often do.

## **Interrelated in Life, Ongoing from Death**

Here then, is our moment to consider death in the face of an interrelationality that extends beyond lifetimes. It would be easy, I think, to use this as a sort of denial of death, and that is far from my aim. Death is a real, inescapable truth that is unhealthy to deny. There are theories and faiths abound that lay claim to knowledge of what happens after death, but there are many of us that lends no solace to. Regardless of our individual beliefs, what lays beyond death can only ever be a speculation, a faith, or a hope. It is my contention, however, that this need not leave us feeling barren or that the ones we love vanish completely from the face of the earth the moment their life departs us. If we lend credence to the idea that our consciousness is part of a network of interrelationality, then we truly do carry those we intimately interrelate with within us, even after the subject of that relation has left us.

Finally, here I will speak of Paws again. About time, too. I can feel her—the parts of her that live in me at the very least—wondering when exactly I was going to bring her into this piece as I so thoroughly promised. The real her, on the other hand, is breathing pretty heavily on my floor, watching me lovingly in the same way she has every day we’ve spent together these 13 years. I am contemplating her death and it’s a such a heavy thing to think of. As she’s gotten older over the years, I’ve always had at least a glimpsing eye to her inevitable mortality, accompanied by a horrible feeling of dread. At the end of summer last year I saw her struggling to go on even a short hike with me and had a creeping feeling that I wouldn’t have her with me much longer than the end of the following Spring. I’ve had the slight touch of the prophetic in me on multiple occasions through my life and, looking at her panting now near the end of Spring, I want to curse

all that is prophetic and mortal and inevitable. The reality of her mortality is no longer something down the path, but in the room with me. It looms so large it feels like it sucks all the air from my lungs. It feels like a dagger through my heart. I want to scream. I want to resist. I want to grasp onto her life so tightly that when it finally slips away from me I'll at least always carry the scars of the rope burn. But... I owe her more than that. I took it upon myself to look after the interests and well-being of a little, fluffy, wonderful living other who is entirely vulnerable to me, and that responsibility and power includes making the choice to end her life when her suffering is too great for her to enjoy it. I want the entirety of her life to be one of joy, even the end.

Did you know that the word euthanasia originates from the Greek words "eu" which means goodly or well, and "thanatos" which means death? The goodly death is, all things considered, a worthwhile last adventure for me to accompany this wonderful other consciousness on. Even though there is, I know and dread, a point on that path where she'll have to continue on without me.

Loss, especially the loss of a fellow consciousness we have intimately interrelated to over a long time, is a *rending*. Anyone who has known that kind of loss can speak to this feeling. It's like a sudden vacancy in your heart where there was once a dynamic, living, love. Many have no other words to explain it other than to say, "it feels like I've lost a part of myself." Indeed, if we take our conclusions about consciousness as a network, we *do* lose a part of ourselves. Maybe in recognizing this we can even better honor our grief and honor more deeply the ones we grieve for. We leave parts of our own consciousnesses in every other consciousness we interrelate with, and the longer and deeper that interrelation the more of ourselves we leave there, and so other consciousness do with us. In violence, this results in trauma. In love, it can result in transcendence. So, when death comes calling for the ones we interrelate to intimately, it takes away any possibility further interrelation. It takes away the joy of dynamic, unfolding possibility and leaves in its wake the starkness of finitude. We feel it in the farthest depths of our selves that something of *us* has been torn away also. It is what of us we gave to them in relation.

Further, I believe we feel that loss all the more intensely because they have also left so much of *them* in *us*. Their impact on our consciousness, and in fact part of their *actual consciousness*, does not leave us. We feel its presence, screaming an imperative: *reunite, continue to interrelate, I am NOT done creating!* It is here that our culture most fails us in our grief. We are pressured to move along the process, to "get over it", as if one can deal with the shock and loss of having a part of their entire understanding of what it means to be-in-the-world as easily as crossing a bridge over a stream. When we try to do this, we in effect attempt to snuff out the living remanence of the other consciousness inside us. We are being asked to commit—at least on a consciousness level—a murder-suicide within ourselves. We know this is a violence and a contradiction in action that we cannot actually meaningfully commit ourselves to, so it never does anything for us in our grief besides adding more trauma. What we need instead is to find ways to honor what we still hold within ourselves after loss. We need to cry, to rage, to truly *grieve* the loss of continued, dynamic relating while at the same time finding joy and a sense of the sacred in what of them we still carry with us. What we may find in that path, I hope, is that when we acknowledge the parts of others that live in us, and us in them, we will find that we can keep parts of all interrelated beings we cherish alive through continuing to relate to others.

For me, that means that every day I live, Paws will live on. My sweet, joyful little companion of 13 years. Part of her consciousness is in me and will go on with me still. Just as part of my consciousness will leave with her to wherever she goes on to, even if the only place she goes on

to is to the earth (there is something holy even in that, I think). I live because she was in my life. I will live in gratitude for her gift to me. I will carry part of her on with me always, and give parts of her consciousness out to others, intertwined with mine in the giving. We will both live on in that way. And in that way we will never be fully separated.

Onward to whatever is beyond this place, sweet one. I will do my best to see you there safely. I will make sure your last moments are ones of love. I will send you on your way with a precious part of me and I will keep the part of you you've entrusted me with safe and close to my heart. Thank you, Paws, for seeing me as far on my path as you have. I love you.

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