



*Death in Hip-Hop.*  
**An Existential Analysis**

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**M**any of us feel anxious when we think about death. We worry about when we will die, how we will die, and whether our deaths will be peaceful, painful, or tragic. In fact, many people avoid thinking about death (and, indeed, avoid circumstances that would cause them to think about death) for this very reason. The phenomenon of death not only induces anxiety, but also stretches our imagination. My death is my non-existence, but how can I imagine my own non-existence? If I imagine the year 3030, I imagine myself existing in that year. On the other hand, we know that we will die and find it important to think about our lives in light of this fact. We say things like “Life is short,” “You only live once (YOLO),” and “I’ll rest when I’m dead.” Though we would rather not think about death, we know that we must contemplate our non-existence, at least sometimes.

Hip-hop is filled with thoughtful meditations on death. We need only look to the Notorious B.I.G.’s *Ready to Die* and *Life After Death*, as examples. Perhaps unsurprisingly, academic philosophical discussions of death largely ignore the perspectives of hip-hop artists. This work represents an attempt to correct this unjustified oversight, bringing hip-hop artists into conversation with academic philosophy.

We can understand this conversation as aimed at answering two questions: “What is the correct way to think about death?” and “How should our thinking about death

shape our lives?” Several philosophers in the Western tradition have offered compelling answers to these questions. Epicurus takes it that death should be of no concern to us because we can only suffer harm if we are alive (Diogenes Laertius, 1925). Nothing can harm us in death and, as such, death itself is something we need not worry about. Thomas Nagel disagrees, arguing that death harms us in relation to what we could have been, or could have had (Nagel, 1970). Martin Heidegger, on the other hand, believes that an appreciation of what death actually is puts us in a position to live more authentically (Heidegger, 2008).

While each of these three answers is compelling and worthy of scrutiny, Epicurus, Nagel, and Heidegger philosophize from a perspective that is radically distinct from that of many hip-hop artists. Epicurus and Nagel, it seems, assume that life is a good thing, such that coping with its end calls for philosophical reflection. Additionally, Heidegger offers a philosophy for persons who are mistaken about the nature of death, persons who implicitly conceive of death as something that happens to others and view their own deaths as a far off event.

However, many hip-hop artists view (or write from the perspective of persons who view) life not as something to be cherished and preserved, but rather as something that one must endure. As Nas raps, “Life’s a bitch, then you die” (Nas, 1994). Additionally, many hip hop artists view death not as some far off event, but as a persistent possibility, one that will violently actualize itself at or before age twenty-five. Here I will

explore the question of how philosophical reflection on death changes once we give up certain assumptions common in the Western philosophical tradition. I also seek to examine the ways in which hip hop artist's reflection on death may enrich that tradition. In section 1, I explicate the Epicurean take on death and in section 2 I outline Nagel's response to Epicurus. Section 3, explores the ways in which hip-hop artists challenge or explicitly reject assumptions shared by Epicurus and Nagel. Section 4, provides an interpretation of Heidegger on death and authenticity. In section 5, I explore the ways in which some hip-hop artists both embrace Heidegger's conclusions and extend their thought beyond them.

As we shall see, considering discussions of death in hip-hop highlight the importance of considering both our life circumstances and the circumstances of others when philosophizing about death. Epicurus, Nagel, and Heidegger appear to presuppose that they are in a position to talk about death as it is or should be for all persons. Their philosophizing, at least as they seem to conceive of it, is general and context-free. On the contrary, the discussions of death in hip-hop are explicitly embedded in a context. Hip-hop artists tend to provide a full picture of themselves and explain, sometimes implicitly, how their lives shape their conception of death.

Additionally, we can read many of the discussions of death in hip-hop as a social commentary. Hip-hop artists press us to think about why their conceptions of life are so grim, and why their understandings

of authenticity seem to be shaped—or even forced—by their environments. Hip-hop, then, offers not merely idle speculation about life and death, but an implicit call to action for those of us who are disturbed by the phenomenon of ghetto poverty. A close exploration of the theme of death in hip-hop will allow us to express a more thoughtful, and context-sensitive understanding of the role of death in human life.

## 1. Epicurus on Death

In his "Letter to Menoeceus" Epicurus offers a famous argument for the conclusion that persons should not fear, or be apprehensive about, death. Epicurus writes:

Accustom thyself to believe that death is nothing to us, for good and evil imply sentience...Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer (Diogenes Laertius, 1925, p. 651).

The aim of Epicurus's argument is therapeutic. Persons tend to fear death and Epicurus believes that persons can alleviate this fear by recognizing it as irrational.

In *The Therapy of Desire*, Martha Nussbaum reconstructs the Epicurean argument in the following way:

- 1. An event can be good or bad for someone only if, at the time when the event is present, that person exists as a subject of at least possible experience, so that it is at least**

possible that the person experiences the event.

2. The time after a person dies is a time at which that person does not exist as the subject of possible experience.
3. Hence the condition of being dead is not bad for that person.
4. It is irrational to fear a future event unless that event, when it comes, will be bad for one.
5. It is irrational to fear death (Nussbaum, 1994, p. 201-202).

While Nussbaum's reconstruction of Epicurus's argument is helpful, it is not correct. It is important to be clear that Epicurus means to tell us something about the state of being dead, not the event that is our dying. There are many reasons to fear dying. Dying can be a painful and stressful process, both for the person who is dying and for that person's family. We would interpret Epicurus uncharitably in interpreting him as arguing for the claim that the event that is our dying should not be feared.

Rather, Epicurus is better interpreted as advancing a conclusion about the state of being dead, that this state, or being in this state, should not be feared. Accordingly, we should understand Epicurus as putting forth the following argument:

1. **Being in a certain state can be good or bad for someone only if it is possible that that person experiences being in**

that state.

2. After a person dies, when that person is in the state of being dead, that person cannot experience anything, and, a fortiori cannot experience being dead.
3. Hence, the state of being dead is not bad for that person.
4. It is irrational to fear being in a state that is not bad for one.
5. Therefore, it is irrational to fear being dead.

To be clear, as I understand Epicurus, he is not committed to the claim that being in a certain state is only bad for one if one is currently experiencing (in the sense of being consciously aware of) being in that state. This view would be absurd. The state of being a disgraced political leader is certainly bad for the disgraced leader even if he is asleep or in a coma from which he will recover. One's attention to the badness of being in a particular state is not a necessary condition for that state's being bad for one. Also, as should be clear, Epicurus assumes that death is the end of all possible and actual experience. Death for Epicurus is the unequivocal end of all sentience.

Epicurus means to tell us that when we are alive, we are not in the state of being dead, and when we are in that state it is not bad for us. Recognizing this truth, Epicurus thinks, will cause us to be less apprehensive about our deaths. There is, Epicurus believes, nothing about death that warrants fear.

In assessing Epicurus's position, it is helpful to think about the position he wishes to counter. Particularly, it is helpful to think about the type of person who would hold such a position. Who, we may ask, would fear death, and for what reason(s)?

At first blush, it appears that Epicurus's imagined interlocutor believes that being dead is painful or otherwise harmful. Epicurus, then, can be read as reminding his interlocutor that there is no pain in death because death is nothingness. But, clearly Epicurus isn't of the belief that persons are misguided about their ability to feel pain, sorry, or grief while dead. Epicurus, it seems, wishes to attack the theory of value that leads persons to fear death.

The person who fears death, it seems, values not just pleasurable experiences, but life itself. We can thus imagine Epicurus's interlocutor holding the belief that life, regardless of its experiential content, is to be valued. For this interlocutor, the unpleasurable parts of one's life do not diminish its overall value. Epicurus, then, should be read as encouraging his interlocutor to accept hedonism, the theory that only pleasurable experiences have intrinsic value. On this view, life itself and the absence of life cannot, in themselves, be assigned a value. But, let's think further about the person who values life itself. What reason could a person have for valuing life (or his or her life, in particular)? While it's not irrational or inconsistent to value something for no reason, most people value life because they take life, in the abstract and in their own case, to be pleasurable, or to present

opportunities for pleasure, or achievement, or self-fulfillment, or something of that sort. In short, most people value life because their lives are, for the most part, good. Epicurus, it seems, aims to counsel persons whose lives are, for the most part, worth living.

We should keep this conclusion in mind in assessing Nagel's response to Epicurus. In section 3, we will see how philosophical reflection on death changes once one gives up the assumption that life is good and, with Nas, concludes that "life's a bitch."

## 2. Nagel's Argument

In "Death," Thomas Nagel famously argues that the state of being dead is in fact bad for the person who is in that state, contra Epicurus (Nagel, 1970). Nagel considers whether it is a "bad thing" to die and, alternatively whether "death in itself is an evil" (Nagel, 1970, p. 74). If we are to understand Nagel as engaging with Epicurus at all, we must understand him as considering whether being dead is a bad thing, or is in itself an evil.

Nagel takes it that being dead is bad because it constitutes a permanent deprivation of the good that is life. One cannot both be dead and experience the good that is life. Thus, Nagel takes issue with the first premise of Epicurus's argument.

Nagel believes that Epicurus wrongly assumes that the only states that can be bad for a person are those that the person can experience as bad. Nagel claims that there are relational harms that can befall a person. Nagel writes:

**There are goods and evils which are**

**irreducibly relational; they are features of the relations between a person, with spatial and temporal boundaries of the usual sort, and circumstances which may not coincide with him in either space or time (Nagel, p. 78).**

For Nagel, the harm that befalls a person need not occur during the time in which that person exists. The relational harm, as Nagel explains, is bad for the person not because he experiences it as bad, but because it is related to him in a certain way.

Nagel offers several examples of relational harms. The person who is betrayed by his friends suffers a relational harm, even if he never finds out about the betrayal. The harm, Nagel thinks, consists in the fact that the man is betrayed; the relationship between the man and his betrayal constitutes a harm.

Nagel also claims that a man who, due to some mental disorder, is reduced to the mental age of two is harmed even though, in his current state, he feels no mental anguish because of his disorder. For Nagel, the man is harmed in relation to what he would have become absent the mental disorder (Nagel, p.78).

Clearly, it is possible for one who is betrayed by his friends to experience being one who has been betrayed. Being in this state does not exclude the possibility of one's experiencing being in the state. The betrayal example, then, is not inconsistent with the first premise of Epicurus's argument. Nagel's second example is more troubling for Epicurus's argument. While it is possible to experience being a person with a mental

age of two, it does not seem possible to experience being a 40-year-old man with a mental age of two. One can be in this latter state, but one cannot, it seems, experience it as such. Presumably, the experience of a 40-year-old man with a mental age of two is the same as the experience of a two year-old with a mental age of two.

If it is the case that being a 40-year-old man who has suffered a severe mental degeneration is bad for the 40-year-old man, and the 40-year-old man who is in this state cannot experience it as such, then the first premise of Epicurus's argument is false. Nagel, then, successfully undermines the Epicurean position. But, also, Nagel shares an assumption with Epicurus's interlocutor: that life is a good thing.

Nagel, it seems, gives us a reason to fear our own deaths and to lament the deaths of others. But, these sentiments only make sense on the assumption that life is good and thus worth preserving. In the next section, I consider the philosophical implications of abandoning this central assumption.

### **3. Hip-Hop on Life**

In order to get a picture of the ways in which many hip-hop artists challenge the value of life, I analyze Naps' "Life's a Bitch," Tupac Shakur's "Only Fear of Death," and the Notorious B.I.G.'s "Suicidal Thoughts," and "Everyday Struggle," among other songs. As we shall see, many hip-hop artists view life itself as difficult and welcome death. Many of these artist do not seek to avoid death, but to live such that they will be

remembered and honored in death.

"Life's a Bitch," consists of two verses: one performed by Nas and one by AZ. With resignation, AZ admits that conventional morality will not stand in the way of his goal: to make as much money as he can before he dies. He tells us that his reason for having this goal, and only this goal, is that life is a bitch, that life is generally hard. Given life's challenges and inherent badness, AZ reasons that the only reasonable response is to both get high and have as much fun, with as much money, as possible. The chorus is telling, "Life's a bitch, and then you die. That's why we get high. Cause you never know when you're gonna go" (Nas, 1994).

Naps' verse is more positive. The verse takes place on his 20th birthday. Because he lives in a violent neighborhood, his 20th birthday was by no means guaranteed. Thus, Nas sees this birthday as a "blessing," and decides to start to make wiser decisions because he can now imagine his life extending past age twenty. He used to say "fuck tomorrow," but now he realizes that buying weed and alcohol may not be the best use of his money. While twenty-year-old Nas has decided to reform his ways, he implicitly accepts the rationality of his old way of life. If life is indeed hard and meaningless, only to be followed by death, then spending money recklessly and abusing drugs and alcohol makes perfect sense.

Because life is hard, and necessarily so, AZ and Nas' teenage selves do not fear death. They view death as the inevitable end to undesirable set of experiences.

While Epicurus and Nagel struggle with the question of whether death is to be feared, Nas and AZ shrug their shoulders in the face of death. They are simply concerned with making life less miserable.

Tupac gives further content to the idea that life is necessarily miserable in "My Only Fear of Death" (Tupac Shakur, 1997). Tupac tells us, unapologetically, that his only fear of death is coming back reincarnated. In other words, he doesn't fear death at all, but instead fears having to live (his?) life over again. Throughout the song, Tupac expresses the paranoia and stress caused by the belief that he will die soon, and violently. He worries that he may be taken out by gang members, that he will be setup by the woman he's sleeping with, and that the police will eventually arrest and incarcerate him. Tupac imagines his funeral—which no one attends—and realizes that people wonder if he is destined for hell, replying "... well, hell can't be worse than this, cause I'm in hell now" (Tupac, 1997).

These worries are punctuated by the song's final message: Tupac's only fear of death is coming back incarnated. He has nothing to live for, his life is characterized by violence, paranoia, and lovelessness (no one will attend his funeral). Death, for Tupac, offers salvation from his miserable life. His only fear, then, is that death is but the end of his current life and the beginning of a new one.

The Notorious B.I.G. ("Biggie") takes up a similar stance toward death in "Suicidal Thoughts" and "Everyday Struggle" (Notorious B.I.G., 1994). In the former song,

Biggie tells us that his desire to commit suicide arises, in part, from his low opinion of himself. He lacks self-esteem and feels that he doesn't deserve to live or experience joy in the afterlife. Biggie raps, "[w]hen I die, fuck it, I wanna go to hell, cause I'm a piece of shit, it ain't hard to fuckin' tell" (Notorious B.I.G., 1994). Biggie's low self-esteem stems from multiple sources. He has stolen money from his mother, and has impregnated both his girlfriend and his girlfriend's sister, and is derided by persons in his community because he sells drugs. Like Tupac, he wonders if anyone would mourn his death. The song ends with Biggie's suicide.

In "Everyday Struggle," Biggie speaks from the perspective of a drug deal—really, his former self. He first tells us why he's dealing drugs. He has a baby on the way and "mad" bills to pay. While Biggie revels in the amount of money he's making in his illicit business, he is depressed by the fact that so many of his friends have succumbed to the violence associated with drug dealing. For Biggie, this life is a struggle and he views death as the only escape. Amid the tales of drug dealing, Biggie returns to the line "I don't want to live no more" (Notorious B.I.G., 1994). From Biggie, then, we get a picture of a life plagued with struggle that gives rise to misery, low self-esteem, and suicidal thoughts.

The sentiments expressed by Nas, Tupac, and Biggie are not uncommon in hip-hop. The genre was created by young, economically deprived black and Latino men and women. The struggle that Biggie speaks of is all-too-common in the inner

cities of America. Epicurus's hedonism entails that persons should neither fear nor look forward to death, but for persons living in the conditions that Nas, Tupac, and Biggie rap about, it seems perfectly reasonable to look forward to death given that life is inevitably miserable.

Nagel, it seems, provides a framework in which we could understand the rationality of hopefully anticipating death. Death, for persons who live inevitably miserable lives, is a good in relation to the misery that is life. Nagel, however, does not consider this possibility, in part, because he does not write for or about persons who live in neighborhoods plagued by poverty and violence. Artists like Nas, Tupac, and Biggie provide a fresh, yet sobering perspective on the phenomenon of death.

While many hip-hop artists view an early, violent death as either inevitable or welcomed, many of these same artists see the fact of death as a reason to live life such that they will be honored in death. Tupac, for instance, lives as a gangster, a "thug life," and wants to be remembered as such. He raps, "Even when I die, they won't worry me. Mama don't cry, bury me a G" (Thug Life, 1994).

This theme is repeated in "The Funeral," by Clipse. Malice (who was an actual drug dealer), instructs his friends and family on how to conduct his funeral after he is murdered (Clipse, 1999). He doesn't want the details of his murder to be discussed, but instead would like the funeral attendees to talk about the women he was able to sleep with, the clothing he wore, and the



expensive cars he drove. In short, he would like to be remembered as someone who found a way to find moments of joy and luxury despite his harsh surroundings.

In the first part of "Sing About Me, Dying of Thirst," Kendrick Lamar raps from the perspective of a young gang member whose brother has recently been killed (Kendrick Lamar, 2012). The gang member is attempting to make sense of his brother's murder. He refers to his neighborhood as an "orphanage" and realizes that his brother's murder, while personally upsetting, is a routine occurrence. He realizes that he must avenge his brother's death because "piru shit" is a part of who he is. He's a Blood and must play a part in a cycle of violence that he realizes is pointless, but inevitable. At the end of the verse, he asks Kendrick to tell his story. The song's chorus repeats this desire beautifully: "When the lights shut off/ and it's my turn to settle down/ my main concern/ Promise that you will sing about me/Promise that you will sing about me" (Lamar, 2012). The gang member is murdered at the end of the verse, mid-sentence.

Finally, Rick Ross cleverly illustrates the theme of being remembered in death in his verse on Pusha T's "Hold On" (Pusha T, 2013). Ross, who takes on the persona of a drug dealer, raps, "Young king, bury me inside a glass casket. Windex, wipe me down for the life after" (Pusha T, 2013). Before this line, Ross recounts the experience of seeing a friend buy a new car, a Porsche Carrera, and two weeks later having to serve as that friend's pallbearer. People who make money in the drug trade face a constant threat of

death. When Ross asks to be buried in a glass casket, he expresses his desire to die as luxuriously as he lives. A glass casket is rare and ornate. Most importantly, it will allow everyone to see Ross shining one last time. Additionally, Ross is clear that he wants the casket to be extremely clean, just like a new car or new pair of sneakers. Like Malice, Ross wishes to live such that he is remembered as successful despite his life's circumstances.

We see, then, that far from being fearful about death, many hip-hop artists view an early death as welcomed and inevitable. This perspective allows them to develop a distinctive perspective on life. "If I will inevitably die a violent death at a young age," they reason, "I should live such that I will be remembered as a fearless gangster or a baller, or both."

In the next section, we will see that Martin Heidegger also believes that reflection on death should cause persons to think about life differently. Like Epicurus and Nagel, however, his perspective on life itself leads him to conclusions that are distinct from those reached by many hip-hop artists.

#### **4. Heidegger on Death**

Heidegger writes for an audience that has become complacent about the fact of death. Heidegger believes that his contemporaries are either unwilling or unable to face death as the phenomenon that it is. People, Heidegger thinks, tend to view death as something that happens to someone else. They believe that grandmothers die, soldiers die, celebrities die, but not themselves.

Of course, everyone knows that he or she will die, but Heidegger believes that we too often think of death as an event reserved for the distant future. We know we will die one day, but usually believe that we will die in old age, surrounded by loved ones. In short, Heidegger believes that we have removed ourselves from death, that we view death as something foreign and distant. While we know that this is false—we know, that is, that we will die and could die at any moment—we live as if death is not an issue for us. Or, so at least Heidegger thinks.

The goal of Heidegger's discussion of death is to bring his reader to a more authentic relation to the phenomenon. Heidegger tells us that death is "that possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped" (Heidegger, 2008, p. 294).

For Heidegger, death is one's ownmost possibility in that one's death cannot be distinguished from oneself as can one's upcoming birthday or one's upcoming vacation. The birthday is an upcoming event, one that can be planned for or forgotten. Additionally, vacation plans can be forgotten or abandoned while the person who abandons those plans stays intact. In short, for Heidegger, one can think of one's birthday and one's vacation as distinct from oneself.

On the contrary, Heidegger believes, one's death is part of one's existence. As such, one can't speak of a human life, a human existence, without also implicitly speaking of death. Human beings are such that they will die. One's death, then, is not

some far off event, but part of one's essence. Persons, for Heidegger, are such that they will die and can die at any moment. This point, Heidegger thinks, is one that persons can easily fail to grasp.

Heidegger claims that one's death is non-relational, meaning that no one can die for another person in the sense that doing so would cause that other person to live on forever. My death, Heidegger explains, really is my death, and no one else's. As such, one's death is something that one must come to terms with for oneself. In a sense, then, one's death cuts off the relations one has with others. Neither my friend, nor my mother, nor my spouse can face my death for me. The phenomenon of death, Heidegger thinks, reveals that we are, in fact, individuals.

Finally, Heidegger claims that death is not to be outstripped. By this he simply means that death is unavoidable. One can choose to run away from home, to become a doctor, not to vote. But, no one can choose to not die. No matter how one chooses to avoid the fact of death, death itself is a metaphysical necessity for human beings. There is, then, no way to cheat death.

Heidegger believes that contemplating the fact of death for what it is should bring persons to think about themselves and their lives differently. A proper understanding of death, for Heidegger, will bring persons to live more authentically. Heidegger writes: Authentic being-towards-death cannot evade its ownmost non-relational possibility, or cover up this possibility by thus fleeing from it, or give a new explanation for it to

accord with the common sense of the “they.” (Heidegger, 2008, p. 304-305).

For Heidegger, the authentic person does not ignore or attempt to evade the fact of his or her death. Nor does the authentic person attempt to re-describe or reimagine the fact of death in order to gain the approval of the masses, the “they.”

Heidegger believes that facing death for what it is allows persons to gain a certain amount of self-knowledge. He writes:

**In the anticipatory revealing of this potentiality-for-Being [Death], Dasein discloses itself to itself as regards its uttermost possibility. But to project itself on its ownmost potentiality-for-Being means to be able to understand itself in the Being of the entity so revealed—namely, to exist (Heidegger, 2008, p.307)**

Persons are essentially finite. By recognizing one’s finitude for what it is, one gains an authentic understanding of oneself. An inauthentic attitude toward death, then, reveals a lack of self-knowledge. Heidegger claims that in gaining the self-knowledge that comes from recognizing death for what it is, persons thereby recognize themselves as distinct from the crowd—the “they.” Heidegger claims that in truly recognizing one’s death, one is “wrenched” away from the “they” (Heidegger, 2008, p.307). Recognition of death reveals to the individual that he or she is lost in the “they-self,” or the self that lives for and responds to the commands and expectations of others. Authenticity, then, would involve rejecting the “they” and the “they-self” in favor of one’s own self.

And this, it seems, must involve adhering to values and taking up projects of one’s own design.

Heidegger’s argument from death to authenticity is subtle. Heidegger first claims that death individualizes. It makes us recognize ourselves as individual persons because any individual’s death is his or her death, and no one can die for another. This revelation, Heidegger claims, is liberating. He writes:

**When, by anticipation [of death], one becomes free for one’s own death, one is liberated from one’s lostness in those possibilities which may accidentally thrust themselves upon one; and one is liberated in such a way that for the first time one can authentically understand and choose among the factual possibilities lying ahead of that possibility which is not to be outstripped. (308).**

We know that for Heidegger human beings are essentially finite. From this he appears to conclude that all choices, values, and projects that persons take up are accidental. One can give up a project, or denounce his or her religion, but one cannot evade death. Because the fact of death makes vivid the distinction between a one’s essence and one’s accidental features, Heidegger claims that death also allows one to free oneself from those values and projects that have masqueraded as essential, but are merely reflections of the “they.”

Heidegger, then, expresses a sentiment that is similar to that expressed by the

popular African-American saying, "I don't have to do nothing but stay black and die." For Heidegger, persons need not be members of the Catholic Church, or be politically active, or take on occupations that are approved by their communities. All we have to do, Heidegger claims, is die. In this way, Heidegger claims that true reflection on death will lead to greater self-knowledge and a life characterized by authentic self-direction rather than submission to the values and expectations of the "they."

### 5. Hip-Hop on Authenticity and Death

Authenticity is a major theme in hip-hop. Rappers encourage one another to "keep it real," to stay true to themselves and their backgrounds. As we know, the real or professed backgrounds of many rappers are filled with violence. This violence has made it the case that not only death, but the prospect of an early death, has also become a theme in hip hop. Kanye West raps "We wasn't supposed to make it past twenty-five, but joke's on you, we still alive" (Kanye West, 2004). Many hip-hop artists rap from the perspective of persons who are not misguided about the nature of death, but who face the prospect of death early on in life.

Many of these artists presuppose Heidegger's conclusion, that one need not aim to live up to the values and expectations of others—especially white others—and that the only necessity is death. In the song "8th Light," Talib Kweli raps "There's so much to life when you just stay black and die"

(Black Star, 1998). Here Kweli expresses the attitude that an existence as black, with all of the struggles, defeats, and triumphs thus involved, is in itself authentic and worthwhile.

For many hip-hop artists, authenticity involves not acting as if one has forgotten one's background. "Keeping it real" often involves upholding the values and attitudes necessary to survival in an impoverished neighborhood. These attitudes, I argue, are consistent with Heidegger's understanding of authenticity, but extend beyond it. In this section, I explore different ways in which hip-hop artists have attempted to live authentically given their acknowledgement of not only death's necessity, but also its proximity.

In "Represent," Nas grapples with the dual themes of death and authenticity (Nas, 1994). In the first line, Nas tells us that for people in his neighborhood, an early death is not only possible, but probable: "Straight up shit is real and any day could be your last in the jungle" (Nas, 1994). Nas tells us that he fears not only the neighborhood criminals, but also the police. Given this, his authenticity is connected to his survival. The authentic way to be-toward-death, for Nas, is to take on attitude that will allow him to survive, to live past age twenty-five.

Nas tells us that he's given up on a belief in the divine ("...won't even run about gods, I don't believe in none of that shit, your facts are backwards), in favor of a persona aimed at survival (Nas, 1994). Nas deems himself the "rebel of the street corner," who "love[s] committing sins" (Nas, 1994). The chorus is

simply a repetition of the word “represent,” signaling that the correct way to represent, to be an authentic resident of Queensbridge Houses (Naas’s neighborhood) is to project a persona that rejects conventional morality and religion in favor of toughness and violence aimed at survival.

For Nas, then, authenticity cannot be divorced from the conditions of survival. Nas does reject the they-self, in the form of morality and religion, but he does not believe that this rejection frees him to craft a version of authenticity that is divorced from his material circumstances. Though Nas takes himself to be constrained, he also embraces the persona that makes his survival possible. Instead of lamenting his restrictions, he celebrates his rebel status.

Jay-Z expresses similar themes in “Can I Live?” (Jay-Z, 1996). In the introduction, Jay-Z tells us that he “hustle[s] out of a sense of hopelessness” (Jay-Z, 1996). Because he lives in poverty and the most probable outcomes for his life include either an early, violent death or a life of poverty, he believes that risking his life to escape poverty is rational. Jay continues, “...we feel we have nothing to lose, so we offer you, well, we offer our lives” (Jay-Z, 1996). Like Nas, Jay-Z’s authenticity is intimately connected with the conditions of his survival. What he is, what he must be, is someone who survives.

Because his authentic self aims at hustling to survive, Jay-Z has become addicted to the pursuit of wealth. He tells us that he’d “rather die enormous than live dormant” (Jay-Z, 1996). Like Nas, Jay-Z’s survival requires a rejection of

conventional morality. He sells drugs, is suspicious of women, and lacks respect for (state) authority; “Me and my crew commit atrocities like we got immunity” (Jay-Z, 1996).

However, Jay-Z also pleads for understanding. We can see “Can I Live?” as a plea to his critics. He takes himself to be essentially a person who hustles. As such, his “living” involves his hustling. In asking “Can I live?” Jay-Z can be seen as asking others to allow him to be his authentic self without criticism or interference. In this way, he sets himself apart from the they-self, but also pleas with others to understand his situation and to leave him be. We must understand this plea, however, in relation to his understanding of his life prospects and the proximity of his death.

We see this same theme repeated in Tupac’s “Stay True,” and “Str8 Ballin” (Thug Life, 1994). Tupac’s authenticity cannot be separated from his means of survival. Take, for instance, the chorus of “Stay True”: “We live a thug life, ya’ll know the rules, gotta do what we gotta do (stay true)” (Thug Life, 1994). Tupac believes that the thug life, the life of crime and violence, is necessary for those who wish to survive ghetto poverty. But Tupac also believes that his authentic self is a thug. “Thug life” is tattooed on his stomach.

In “Str8 Ballin,” Tupac directly connects his authenticity to his understanding of life and death. Tupac raps, “You shaking the dice, now roll ‘em. If you can’t stand pain, better hold ‘em” (Thug Life, 1994). Here Tupac uses dice rolling as a metaphor for

life. Life itself, for Tupac, is a gamble. He then offers a warning: if you're afraid of pain, don't live, don't attempt to survive. For Tupac, any attempt to survive ghetto poverty involves a risk of pain, and even death. He continues, "Cause ain't no tellin' what you might roll, you might fold...Best to live your life to the fullest" (Thug Life, 1994). Tupac believes that living life to its fullest involves an attempt to "ball," to live a life filled with material wealth. And ballin' requires that one live as a thug. Like Jay-Z, Tupac does not lament the fact that he must hustle to survive. He celebrates the thug life and views it as expressing his authentic self.

In addition to embracing the persona of the thug or hustler, many hip-hop artists have expressly lowered their life expectations because they believe that death is "around the corner." For these artists, a life characterized by low expectations is an authentic life. In "Book of Rhymes," Nas raps "My people be projects or jail never Harvard or Yale" (Nas, 2002). And, of course, Nas could have added that many of his people expect to die at a young age. Attending an Ivy League school just isn't a real option for people who grow up in Naas's neighborhood.

The theme of lowered expectations is expressed vividly in Ice Cube's "It Was a Good Day" (Ice Cube, 1993). In the song, Ice Cube recounts his good day. The theme of death appears in the song's first verse. Ice Cube wakes up in the morning and feels he must thank God. We find out why praise is due in a later verse. After eating breakfast, Cube leaves the house and wonders if he'll

live for another twenty-four hours. Since he could be gunned down any day, this good day itself is a blessing.

Ice Cube stops his car at a red light and notices that no one is waiting to steal his car at gunpoint. Later a police car rides past him without incident. Ice Cube tells us that this is surprising because "just yesterday them fools tried to blast me" (Ice Cube, 1993). Later in the verse, Cube tells us that no one was killed in South Central, LA. This too is surprising given the violent character of the neighborhood. Ice Cube concludes the song by recounting another surprising and fortunate fact: he didn't have to use his AK-47. Ice Cube implies that on the typical day he has to use is gun to defend his life.

That Ice Cube feels it necessary to recount facts that would seem mundane to an outsider allows us to infer that he has low expectations for his days and, indeed, his life. For those not living in South Central, LA, not being harassed by the police or carjacked is expected and unremarkable. But for Ice Cube and others living in an impoverished, crime-filled area, the absence of violence and misfortune is quite remarkable and unexpected. Ice Cube has learned to expect nothing more than bare survival. His low expectations reflect an authentic attitude toward life and perhaps the only attitude that he can rationally embrace.

Jay-Z also expresses an authentic attitude in "If I Should Die" (Jay-Z, 1998). In the song, Jay-Z anticipates his untimely death. He tells his friends that they should neither mourn nor seek to avenge his death because his life has been "one hell

of a ride." Jay-Z was twenty-nine years old when the song was released. By that age, he had escaped his life as a drug dealer in Marcy projects to become one of the most successful hip-hop artists. This course of events is way more than Jay-Z ever expected given his reasonable expectation that he would die before age twenty-five. Just as Ice Cube's low expectations for his days frame his attitude toward his "good" day, Jay-Z's low expectations for his life frame his attitude toward death. Given his previous expectations, Jay-Z believes that his violent death at age twenty-nine should not be taken as sad or tragic.

If for Heidegger death individualizes and empowers, for Nas, Ice Cube, and Jay-Z, death limits, and forces persons to live with lowered expectations. For these artists, to live in the expectation of old age, an Ivy League education, or traditional success is to live inauthentically. Authentic living, for these artists, requires an honest reflection on one's life circumstances and the formulation of reasonable expectation given those circumstances. Additionally, living a life with low expectations allows these artists to appreciate aspects of their lives that differently-situated persons would not. For instance, it is not clear that a philosopher like Heidegger would have any reason to celebrate his not being gunned down by a carjacker.

Reflecting on life and death at an early age can not only lead to lowered expectations for life, but it can also generate confusion. Most teenagers are not in a position to formulate sophisticated

conceptions of authenticity, moral integrity, or being-toward-death. Many hip-hop artists write from the perspective of persons urgently struggling to "find themselves" given that death is proximate.

In "Respiration," Talib Kweli speaks of the toughness of New York City, where one could get "murdered over a glare" (Black Star, 1998). Kweli raps "It's a paradox we call reality. So keeping it real will make you a casualty of abnormal normality....Some cats be emceeding to illustrate what we be seeing. Hard to be a spiritual being when shit is shakin what you believe in" (Black Star, 1998). Kweli tells us that where he's from, attempts to live authentically—to keep it real—can, paradoxically, lead to death. Additionally, Kweli believes that the realities of inner city poverty and violence can make it hard for young people live honest, faithful lives. The existence that Kweli speaks of is paradoxical. It leads to confusion.

Kendrick Lamar expresses this same confusion in "Kush and Corinthians (His Pain)" (Kendrick Lamar, 2012). The title of the song itself reflects confusion. Marijuana and the book of Corinthians make an odd pair, but not for persons in Kendrick's position. The song's hook tells the listener that he should just "ride to it (the song)," because at any point he could be gunned down and thus "die to it" (Lamar, 2012). Kendrick's audience, of course, is constituted by persons who fear random gun violence. The hook tells the listener to just relax and enjoy the song because he could die while listening.

In the song's first verse, Kendrick

reflects on himself. He raps, "look at me, I'm a loser, I'm a winner, I'm good, I'm bad, I'm a Christian, I'm a sinner...What I'm doing, I'm saying that I'm human" (Lamar, 2012). Kendrick wonders how his life will be judged and resolves to admit that he's merely human.

In the second verse, we find Kendrick involved in a drive-by shooting. As he and his friends look for their victim, Kendrick wonders why he feels compelled to seek revenge. "Is it human nature?" he asks. Before he can answer, he and his friends spot their victim and proceed with the shooting. Here Kendrick illustrates that his life is too hectic, too dangerous, and too fast to pause to reflect on philosophical questions. He literally has to shoot first and ask questions later.

Kendrick expresses his pain and anguish in the third verse. He opens the Bible and lights a blunt. His aim is to relax and contemplate his place in the world. He reflects on his life and sees "a condom, a rollie, pain, a fat blunt, and a Mac-11" (Lamar, 2012). His life is filled with casual sex, the desire for wealth, pain, marijuana, and violence. He raps "that's all I see in my life and they tell me to make it right" (Lamar, 2012). Kendrick's life is filled with hardship and he is constantly told (by the "they") to live righteously. The confusion this causes is a source of stress and leads him to contemplate suicide. Kendrick appeals to the song's hook. He has decided to try to enjoy his life, to "ride to it," because he could die at any moment.

In "Real," Kendrick further explores the

theme of authenticity. The song consists of three verses, the first two of which involve Kendrick addressing a young woman and man who, presumably, live in Kendrick's neighborhood. The woman Kendrick addresses searches for meaning in relationships, jewelry, clothing, and money. She "loves" these things. The young man turns to fast cars, women, money, and gang culture in his search for meaning. Addressing the young man, Kendrick raps "You love your hood, may even love it to death" (Lamar, 2012). He asks both the man and the woman, "But what love got to do with it when you don't love yourself?" (Lamar, 2012).

In the third verse, Kendrick addresses the woman, the man, and himself. He tells them that he loves them and what they represent. The woman is the type of woman he tends to attract. The man is much like his friends who are involved in gang culture. He then asks himself what this love could mean when he doesn't love himself. He asks further if he should really hate the things he loves: clubs, women, his materialistic friends, gang culture, and money. Kendrick concludes by asking if he should "hate the fact that none of that shit make me real" (Lamar, 2012).

After this verse, we hear a voice message from Kendrick's father. His father informs him that his friend has been shot and claims further that "real is responsibility. Real is taking care of your motherfucking family. Real is god, nigga" (Lamar, 2012). Death and hardship, then, are in the background of Kendrick's song. Kendrick



and his friends seek meaning in sex, money, and violence partly because their lives are treacherous and they don't have much to be happy about. Additionally, their treacherous lives have robbed them of self-esteem and self-love. How could one love oneself while living in poverty and facing daily violence? "Real," illustrates well the confusion felt by many young people attempting to live meaningful lives while also battling poverty and violence. The characters in the song are searching for something real, something worthy of their time and attention. Only Kendrick's father knows that a life characterized by responsibility, integrity, and faith is "real."

That Kendrick must receive this wisdom from his father highlights another important aspect of hip-hop artist's exploration of death and authenticity. While many people are not forced to think about death until old age, many hip-hop artists (and person in the communities these artists represent) must contemplate death in their teens and early twenties. Heidegger was thirty-eight years old when he completed *Being and Time*. By contrast, Nas was twenty-one years old when *Illmatic* was released and Kendrick Lamar was twenty-four when his first album, *Section.80*, was released. It is unsurprising, then, that an artist like Kendrick Lamar does not express a consistent conception of authenticity in relation to death. The persons that Kendrick represents in his music lack the experience and perspective that would allow them to articulate such a conception. In a sense, Kendrick and many artists like him can be interpreted as asking

for guidance and direction. These artists are not at all clear on how to think about life, death, and authenticity in the context of daily violence and poverty.

While Heidegger claims that honest reflection on death will put persons in a position to live more authentically, many hip-hop artists are already suspicious of the morality and religion of their parents and of white society—the "they." Many artists view death as an ominous reality and recognize that they must figure out what authenticity could look like given that death will come at, around, or before age twenty-five. Some artists identify authenticity with the struggle to survive, hustling. Others believe that authenticity require that they embrace lowered life expectations. Still others struggle to articulate a coherent conception of authenticity, and guidance in forming themselves and their values.

## **6. Conclusion**

We have seen that hip-hop artists have reflected seriously and profoundly on the theme of death. They have had to do so heroically, absent the luxury of an Ivy League education, a steady income, or the peace of mind that comes from knowing that one is not susceptible to random acts of violence. While neither Nas, Jay-Z, Tupac, nor Kendrick Lamar undermine the conclusions reached by Nagel or Heidegger, these artist's perspectives are worthy of serious scrutiny and reflection. Only then will we be able to articulate a thoughtful and comprehensive philosophical conception of death.



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