

MARTIN HEIDEGGER ON BEING-TOWARDS-DEATH

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Prior to “Division Two: *Dasein* and Temporality”¹ of *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger has employed hermeneutic phenomenology to ontologically analyze Being, yet, without the introduction of time. The Heideggerian hermeneutic circle, however, necessitates that understanding a phenomenon as a whole is possible through understanding the parts constituting such phenomenon and vice versa. Understanding *Dasein*, ontologically and phenomenologically as a whole, therefore, cannot be accomplished without understanding one of its key aspects; death. In this paper, I shall discuss Being-towards-death, as the result of the introduction of temporality, its relation to *Dasein* and, particularly, its relation to the existential authenticity of *Dasein*. In doing so, I shall use *Being and Time* as my guide.

Dasein is temporal and finite. The being of *Dasein* is care/*sorge*.² *Dasein* was thrown into its existence and is projected towards the future. *Dasein* finds itself already in the world, such world has meaning for *Dasein* and *Dasein* is Being-ahead-of-itself. *Dasein*, out of care/concern, has to come to meaning. *Dasein* confronts its situatedness in the world as possibilities of Being-in-the-world. Therefore, even in its present, *Dasein* is projected towards the future as Being-ahead-of-itself. Being in such a situation, *Dasein* is incomplete and its completion is death. *Dasein* is, thus, Being-towards-death.

As a result, *Dasein* is confronted with an existential predicament. *Dasein* cannot understand the whole meaning of its ontology since it's projected towards the possibilities of the future and is always incomplete. When *Dasein*'s existence is complete, on the other hand, *Dasein* does no longer exist to understand it. For *Dasein*, therefore, to completely understand its existence in totality is problematic. Heidegger agrees that *Dasein* can never experience its own death, but he suggests that it's possible to have a limited taste of it through the death of others as Being-with-others:

When *Dasein* reaches its wholeness in death, it simultaneously loses the Being of its “there”. By its transition to no-longer-*Dasein*..., it gets lifted right out of the possibility of experiencing this transition and of understanding it as something experienced. Surely this sort of thing is denied to any particular *Dasein* in relation to itself. But this makes the death of Others more impressive. In this way termination...of *Dasein* becomes ‘Objectively’ accessible. *Dasein* can thus gain an experience of death, all the more because *Dasein* is essentially Being with Others. In that case, the fact that death has been thus ‘Objectively’ given must make possible an ontological delimitation of *Dasein*'s totality.³

Death is personal. Even though *Dasein* can experience another's death in relation to its own being, or even its own dying, *Dasein*, still, cannot experience death. *Dasein* can only relate to the death of others, however, *Dasein* cannot exactly experience another

Dasein's experience in death. What's experienced is only the passing from being to non-being of another. Death is, thus, *Dasein*'s ownmost possibility.

Death ends *Dasein* uniquely. Heidegger uses the ripening of a fruit, as a comparative metaphor, to signify the death of *Dasein*.⁴ Death completes *Dasein*'s existence like the ripening of the fruit completes its life cycle. Very differently, however, death is not the completeness of *Dasein* in the sense that *Dasein* dies unfulfilled. *Dasein*'s possibilities have not been exhausted. One such possibility is *Dasein*'s death. *Dasein* is Being-towards-death, here, because *Dasein* is projected towards death as a possibility because of the notion that *Dasein* cannot experience the actuality of death. *Dasein*'s relation to death can be existentially understood during life and not during the very instant of death.

Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of *Dasein*. Thus death reveals itself as the possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped.⁵

Since death is the death of an individual *Dasein*, my death is mine. It is when my being ends, when my relationships end and when my possibilities are no longer. This non-relational aspect is my ownmost. This death, as the impossibility of my own being, brings my own being into authenticity by making it central and crucial. Being authentic, on the other hand, allows for the possibility of facing my own death a certain way: I am certain of my death, my death is unavoidable, my death is a non-relational possibility and the end of my being always ahead of myself.

Dasein as Being-towards-death is, essentially, in its being towards life. It is in *Dasein*'s Being-in-the-world primordially temporal. "Death is the backdrop against which we see life."⁶ It is a way to be; not a way to end. Being-towards-the-end is a way of being towards death. Being-at-an-end is, thus, the non-existence of *Dasein*. It is in Being-towards-death that *Dasein* can have the freedom to be what it, truly, is. Death, here, rescues *Dasein* from the inauthenticity of the "they" and allows it to become what it, fully, is:

Authentic Being-towards-death can *not evade* its own-most 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".⁷

Dasein, thus, exists to its full potentiality engaging in all the possibilities of its humanness. This, for Heidegger, is possible through anticipation.

Anticipation, for Heidegger, signifies an authentic mode of existence towards death. This lies in accepting death, being ready for it since it's unavoidable, but at the same time not to over anticipate it by actualizing it as a result of suicide or becoming obsessively attached to it. Such anticipation should give life an authentic importance. This being, after all, is *Dasein*'s own. It cultivates appreciation for life, for the possession of life and, thus, making it meaningful.

Death is, furthermore, certain and indefinite. *Dasein* is mortal. While anticipating its mortality, *Dasein* is to authentically actualize its humanity as much as possible. Even though *Dasein* anticipates its mortality, *Dasein* cannot know when it will come. Such certainty and indefiniteness of death causes anxiety/*angst* for *Dasein*. Anxiety is the result of the unknown existential and temporal nature of the actuality of death that is always lurking around *Dasein*'s temporal corner. It's just a matter of time before the possibility of death is an actuality facing *Dasein*. For *Dasein* to authentically be, however, is not to let such anxiety develop into a fear of death, which would cripple its life and paralyze the actualization of its humanity. *Dasein*, thus, anticipates death as an omnipresent immanent possibility into which *Dasein* is thrown.

Dasein's Being-in-the-world has to be its own and not that of the "they;" *das Man*. Being-with-others, here, is given an authentic mode because *Dasein*'s being is authentically anticipating its non-being. This, for *Dasein*, is projecting onto for-the-sake-of-itself. An authentic Being-towards-death is when *Dasein* relates to its own being to hold open the possibility, be responsible and live an individual genuine life and not evade the actuality of mortality by any means including being inauthentic. The crucial key for *Dasein*, here, is to realize that no choices, nor consequences, are external to its existence; *Dasein* is in charge and responsible:

We may now summarize our characterization of authentic Being-towards-death as we have projected it existentially: *anticipation reveals to Dasein its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concerned solicitude, but of being itself, rather, in an impassioned freedom towards death—a freedom which has been released from the Illusions of the "they", and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious.*⁸

Heidegger, when it comes to the authentic existence of *Dasein*, speaks of resoluteness as an accompanying aspect to anticipation. He introduces conscience to his ever unconcealing hermeneutic circle. It is conscience that allows our potentiality-for-Being to be the potentiality-for-Being-ones-self. The "they," through their idle talk, corrupts *Dasein* into fleeing in the face of death and awaiting its future instead of projecting towards it. As mentioned in the previous quote, the "they" leads *Dasein* to be lost away from its own being. *Dasein*, therefore, loses itself in the "they" and loses its ability to be in charge. Conscience, however, suspends the "they" to allow *Dasein* to have a say in its own authenticity. This takes *Dasein* from the irresoluteness of the "they" to the resoluteness of its authenticity.

As authentic Being-towards-death is characterized by anticipation, authentic potentiality-for-Being is characterized by resoluteness. Authentic potentiality-for-Being-a-whole is anticipatory resoluteness. Resoluteness in Being-guilty testifies to the possibility of *Dasein*'s potentiality-for-Being. All possibilities are, nonetheless, possibilities until the end. Anticipation of *Dasein*'s end is its Being-towards-death. This unconceals *Dasein*'s potentiality-for-Being. Authenticity, thus, is anticipatory resoluteness.

I am authentic, thus, I am Being-guilty. This is due to my openness to the call of my conscience. Such call of conscience releases me from inauthenticity, or being intrigued by its temptations of false necessities, towards my death and, therefore, towards my authenticity.

As a conclusion, *Dasein* can choose to be authentic or inauthentic. This depends on whether its projected possibility is its own or not. For, *Dasein* to be authentic, it has to reveal itself. *Dasein* is temporal and spatial. *Dasein's* being is care. The structure of care has temporal characteristics. There are possibilities of the future. These possibilities are possible because of the thrownness of the past. Looking at the having been of such a past, projecting towards such a future and looking back constitutes the now of the present.

I am authentic and not lost in the “they” because of anticipatory resoluteness. I cannot avoid death and this death is mine. I anticipate my death by projecting its possibility, which allows me to realize my authentic being when I look back. I am, however, always with others in the world and tempted to be lost among them, away from revealing my own being, and to be concealed in their shadows. I must be, resolutely, called back into my authenticity. Through Being-guilty, I nullify the possibility of being lost in the “they” to be able to be authentic. I do so because my conscience calls for it.

Notes:

1. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962, p. 231).
2. *Ibid.*, p. 275.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 281.
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 287,288.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 294.
6. Direct communication during a phone conversation with James W Kidd, Ph.D. Daily City, CA, 2003.
7. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, *op. cit.*, pp 204, 205.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 311.