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The Importance of Heidegger's Question

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Claremont McKenna College

The Importance of Heidegger's Question

submitted to

Professor James Kreines

by

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for

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Abstract

In this thesis I present a strong and universally compelling case for the importance of Heidegger's question, namely, the question of the meaning of being. I show how the being-question has been obscured and forgotten over the past two millennia of western philosophy. I attempt to raise this question again, and elucidate why it is an important one to examine, not only for philosophy as a discipline, but for any human endeavor. My aim is to reach those of you who would normally not come across, or might even dismiss, Heidegger's work. I hope the arguments I make will convince you, hard though it may be, that reawakening ourselves to the question of being is a task that we must undertake.

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Ever since being introduced to philosophy, during the second semester of my first year at CMC, my life has never been the same. Because of this discipline, I have gained so many profound insights about the world, and have developed so much as an individual. I will carry this with me for the rest of my life, and for that I am eternally grateful. Thank you to everyone who made this experience possible.

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Introduction

In his 1927 work *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger seeks to “raise anew the question of the meaning of being,”¹ which he believed to have been deeply misconstrued by the preceding two millennia of western philosophy. Alluding to the the tradition started by the Greeks, he begins *Being and Time* with a quote from Plato’s *Sophist*: “For manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression ‘being’. We, however, who used to think we understood it, have now become perplexed.”² Heidegger uses this passage to convey an important point: The problem of being, at first, doesn’t even seem like a problem to us. But when we actually try to articulate what we mean by being, that is when we get into trouble. The issue for us, which Heidegger seeks to clarify, is to overcome our natural disposition to think that we already understand everything. This disposition, driven by our desire to master reality, masks a deeper anxiety over our challenge of existing as finite beings in a world that resists our life goals.³ Heidegger wants us to come to terms with our anxiety and let go of our desire to master reality, and he begins this endeavor with the being-question.

In this paper, I attempt to explain the controversial notion of what exactly Heidegger meant to ask. I defend his asking of this question, and elucidate why it is an important one to examine, not only for philosophy as a discipline, but for any human endeavor, especially in modern times. While my primary focus is *Being and Time* and the arguments therein, I draw significant inspiration from several secondary texts as well, the first of which is John Haugeland’s *Dasein Disclosed*. Haugeland offers an especially

¹ B&T 1

² B&T 1

³ ONT 1

distinctive and compelling interpretation of Heidegger's philosophy. A recurring theme for Heidegger, throughout his works, is an attempt to get at what is most fundamental. I think Haugeland's reading of Heidegger embodies this aim, perhaps going further than Heidegger himself. Mathew Halteman's *Ontotheology* is another secondary text that provides support to my writing. Halteman's explanation of Heidegger's project is uniquely straightforward, and as such, it influences several of my arguments.

Thus, in drawing inspiration from Haugeland, Halteman, and several other Heidegger scholars, I intend this paper to make a strong, universally compelling case for the importance of Heidegger's question. My aim is to reach those of you who would normally not come across, or might even dismiss, Heidegger's work. I hope the arguments I make will convince you, hard though it may be, that reawakening ourselves to the question of the meaning of being is a task that we must undertake.

A quick note on Heidegger's much criticized cameo into politics: "Heidegger was born; he was a Nazi; he died,"⁴ as Haugeland concisely puts it. Heidegger spent close to a decade involved with the Nazi party. Undoubtedly, this fact is highly disturbing. One might question how such a well renowned intellectual could commit such a grave mistake, and rightly so. This might even discourage some from engaging with Heidegger's philosophy at all. However, I maintain that the issues taken up in this paper have no bearing on Heidegger's politics. And as such, this is the first and last time I mention it. Alright, let's discuss being.

⁴ DD 85

Why Discuss Being?

Why is being even worth discussing? What it means to be, to many, is starkly obvious. To be just means to exist, right?⁵ If something has being, it appears that all we mean is that it exists, it is something, rather than nothing. What is the point of asking about the “meaning of being,” if being is so obvious to us already? For Heidegger, this is exactly why we should be asking this question.

Let’s start by considering a few examples of the many different ways in which we use “be”.⁶ For instance, trees can *be* - a seed germinates, a tree grows, it wilts, and it dies – ceasing to *be* anymore. Thanksgiving dinner *is*, while I uncomfortably sit across the table from my extended family, sharing small talk and eating too much food. It ceases to *be* when everyone attending “...give[s] it up...”⁷. A diamond *comes to be* when carbon atoms assimilate under specific conditions, and it persists as a diamond until this atomic structure breaks down. A number also *is*, even with no mass or location in space-time. Some might argue that it always *was* and always *will be*. We use these various senses of the word “be” with an implicit understanding of their difference. Yet, each time we use it, we are covertly implying that something *exists*. The tree, thanksgiving, a number, all must first *exist* somewhere, in the world, in my mind, before I can refer to them with words. While there are many different ways in which we use “be,” there also appears to be a certain consistency in this variety. This peculiarity is enough, at least for now, to warrant further investigation into the meaning of being.

⁵ Existence has a distinct meaning for Heidegger which we will consider later; for now, let’s interpret it traditionally.

⁶ Haugeland’s examples on DD 89 serve as an inspiration for the examples I use here.

⁷ DD 89

When Heidegger discusses being, it is important to note that he is not only discussing about the word “being”, but also about our understanding of being. Being reveals itself, although only obscurely, not only when one uses words like “is” and “am,” but also, “in any way of comporting oneself towards entities as entities...”⁸. Entities themselves are anything and everything that has existed, currently exists, can and will ever exist. Cars, humans, paintings, physics, iPhones, language, laughs, smiles, thanksgiving, and even God are all entities. When I talk about entities, I already possess an understanding of being. Even when I am not speaking, and just driving my car for instance, I already possess an understanding of being. The car, the road it is on, the place I am headed to, are all available to me as entities. And because they are, I already possess an implicit understanding of being – although I may not be aware of this.

The important point for us to grasp for now, is that the meaning of being is worthy of further investigation. In fact, Heidegger claims that the being-question, “must be *formulated*... it must be made transparent, and in an appropriate way...”⁹. The fact that we all possess an implicit understanding of being, the fact that being obscures itself,¹⁰ the fact that we use being in so many different contexts, the fact that we think being is plainly obvious – that is all enough to justify further investigation into this question. As such, as philosophers, we must make an attempt at clarifying our “...vague average understanding of being...”¹¹.

⁸ B&T 23

⁹ B&T 25

¹⁰ Admittedly, we do not yet adequately understand how being *obscures* itself.

¹¹ B&T 25

The Structure of Inquiry & The Ontological Difference

The being-question, just like any other, is a form of inquiry. Heidegger writes, “Every inquiry is a seeking... [It is] guided beforehand by what is sought.”¹² Inquiry is a guided seeking, that, by virtue of being a guided seeking, possesses three characteristics. First, there is a “that which is *interrogated*,”¹³ which constitutes the domain in which the seeker is inquiring into. A distraught mother inquiring into the whereabouts of her son during school hours, would not, if she were seeking the truth of the matter, be asking the barista at a Starbucks in the next town over. Unless, of course, she had reason to do so, which would thus alter the domain of inquiry. Before the mother can inquire, she must be *familiar* with this domain: her son, the phone, the school, the barista, and so on. Second, there is a “that which is asked *about*.”¹⁴ In this case, that would be the mother’s son, not her daughter, for example. Third, there is a “that which is to be *found out* by the asking,”¹⁵ which constitutes what is intended by the inquiry. In our example, this would be the location of the mother’s son. When this end is reached, our inquiry reaches its goal. By first understanding the structure inquiry takes in general, we can then apply this to the being-question.

Just like the inquiry of the mother, the being-question is a form of inquiry. Conceivably then, it follows the same structure. In this case, what are we asking *about*? Well, being of course. Before we can do so, we must be *familiar* with being. As we noted earlier, we possess an “average understanding of being,” so we have that covered.

¹² B&T 24

¹³ B&T 24

¹⁴ B&T 24

¹⁵ B&T 24

Although it is not a clear understanding, it is enough for us to perform our inquiry. What do we intend to *find out*? That would be the meaning of being. So far so good. But we must still *interrogate* something. What are we going to interrogate? Before we can answer this question, we must understand a crucial distinction that Heidegger makes. The being-question, although it follows the same structure as the mother's question, is fundamentally unique.

While the mother's *ontical* question is one about entities, the being-question is not about any such entity. The being-question is *ontological* in that it is concerned with being, not entities. Heidegger writes, "Being – that which determines entities as entities... 'is' not itself an entity."¹⁶ Being, in some sense, is more fundamental than entities, and is not itself an entity. Being grounds entities, it is what "determines" entities as entities, and enables us to understand them as such. This difference, between being and entities, is what Heidegger coined the *ontological difference*: ontological inquiry is concerned with being, while ontical enquiry is concerned with entities.

But if entities comprise all that exists, and being is not an entity, *is* being nothing? Strictly speaking, yes. There *is* no such thing as being, according to Heidegger. But this does not mean that there is no issue at stake. When we ask the being-question, rather than ask about any particular entity, God for instance, we are asking about why that entity is the entity that it is in the first place. Heidegger writes, "Being lies in the fact that

¹⁶ B&T 26

something is, and in its Being as it is...”¹⁷. When we ask the being-question, we are moving past the mere ontical, into the ontological.

Notice the capitalization of “Being” in the quote above. In his text, Heidegger differentiates between ontological inquiry qua *Being* and ontical inquiry qua *beings* or *entities*. To make things easier, for our purposes, I associate ontological inquiry with *being* and ontical inquiry with *entities*. Except when I directly quote Heidegger, this will be our convention going forward.

¹⁷ B&T 26

Interrogating Dasein

Now that we have an understanding of the ontological difference, we can return to the structure of inquiry that frames the being-question. We are already *familiar* with being, so we are able to ask *about* it, in order to *find out* its meaning. But what are we going to *interrogate* in order to get this answer? We know we must interrogate an entity, as they comprise everything that exists. But which entity? Given the ontological difference, how can any entity possibly help us understand being? Heidegger answers:

If to Interpret the meaning of Being becomes our task, Dasein is not only the primary entity to be interrogated; it is also that entity which already comports itself, in its Being, towards what we are asking about when we ask this question. But in that case the question of Being is nothing other than the radicalization of an essential tendency-of-Being which belongs to Dasein itself – the pre-ontological understanding of Being.¹⁸

Dasein, literally translated as “being-there,” is the term Heidegger uses to refer to us, both individually and collectively. “...we *are* it, each of us, we ourselves...,”¹⁹ Heidegger writes. What determines Dasein as Dasein is that it is capable of asking the being-question, and as such, Heidegger argues that we must interrogate Dasein, in order to clarify this question.

We are still very much interrogating an entity. One might doubt how interrogating any entity at all can give us a clue into being. But Dasein is not just any entity. Heidegger

¹⁸ B&T 35

¹⁹ B&T 36

explains, “Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it *is* ontological.”²⁰ Dasein is a special entity, whose being is constituted by the fact that its own being matters to it. No other entity possesses such a characteristic – a rock does not ask itself which way to be. By clarifying the being-question via Dasein, we are “radicalizing” or making explicit our “pre-ontological” and “vague average” understanding of being.

One might object to Heidegger’s choice to interrogate Dasein for various reasons. For instance, critics might ask: How does understanding Dasein’s specific being help us understand being in general? Is Heidegger providing a philosophical account or an anthropologic investigation? Is Heidegger falsely reducing being to the being of humans? These are all valid concerns. I will consider and respond to these worries more extensively in Chapter 11 of this paper. For now, all we need to know is that Heidegger is interested in us, in Dasein, only insofar as we are capable of asking the being-question. Because of Dasein’s special ability to do this, compared to that of a rock for example, interrogating Dasein will be our way forward in our investigation of being.

²⁰ B&T 32

Dasein as Being-In-The-World

Dasein the entity, has a unique way of being, which Heidegger refers to as *existence*.²¹ This is constituted by the fact that in its very being, Dasein's being "is an *issue* for it."²² At the outset we sought to reawaken the being-question. We then learnt of the ontological difference and the priority beings take over entities. We have now arrived at Dasein, this special entity, as the correct means to move forward with our investigation into the meaning of being.

So what form does Dasein's being take? I consider myself as an example to illuminate this answer. I *exist*, for Heidegger, as my being is an *issue* for me. As such, I must address this issue and figure out who *I am*. At times I am a student. At other times, I am a friend, a brother, a son, and so on. In entering into these different roles, I am in a world, and come across various entities in this world that are part of that role. As a student, I am in a world where I come across professors, classes, books, laptops, and the like. Heidegger writes, "...Dasein's Being takes on a definite character... the state of Being which we have called '*Being-in-the-world*'..."²³. Dasein's being, that of being-in-the-world, is necessarily part of Dasein. The "world" here does not refer to just entities: the outside world, or objects in space-time, or even space time-itself. Rather, the "world" is, "an ontological term, and signifies the Being of those entities..."²⁴. It refers to the

²¹ B&T 32

²² B&T 32

²³ B&T 78

²⁴ B&T 93

being of those entities encountered by Dasein: the meanings those entities have for it. Crucially, this world also determines how Dasein can act, given that set of meanings.²⁵

Dasein's being as *being-in-the-world* conveys that we are necessarily engaged in certain situations, where entities and others show up, and we are constantly involved with them. The ways in which we can be involved are determined by the being of those entities – what determines entities as the entities they are. These situations we are engaged in change from time to time, and from person to person. For instance, when I am in math in class, I am engaged in that situation. Calculators, other students, calculus concepts, the creaking fan, all show up, and I am involved with them. I am in this world because I am in such a way that these aforementioned things matter to me, and they allow me possibilities for acting in certain ways with them. While I am in math class, I am also Indian, an atheist, a friend, and so on – all of these ways of being-in-the-world, of existing as Dasein, are necessarily possible for me, and it is my responsibility alone to choose which way to be.

²⁵ This idea about Dasein's ability to act will be expanded on in the next two chapters.

Ready-To-Hand & Present-At-Hand

As Dasein is fundamentally part of the world, and not a separate free-floating entity, it necessarily possesses a relationship with the world. Understanding this relationship, and the forms it takes, will enable us to better understand Dasein's being, helping us clarify the being-question. Illuminating us on this relationship, Heidegger writes, "All these ways of Being-in have concern as their kind of Being."²⁶ Dasein's being constitutes what Dasein is concerned with, or involved with. Dasein asks how something or some entity concerns it, or what use it has for that entity. These entities with which we have concern, Heidegger calls *equipment*. He says, "The kind of Being which equipment possesses-in... we call '*readiness-to-hand*'."²⁷ For example, Heidegger writes, "In our dealings we come across equipment for writing, sewing, working, transportation, measurement..."²⁸. All these entities are things that we have a use for. We relate to the concern we have for them, to their *readiness-to-hand*. We do not relate to the entity in itself. We relate to a hammer in terms of its ability to hammer things, for example.

In contrast to our *ready-to-hand* understanding of entities, we also possess what Heidegger calls a *present-at-hand* understanding.²⁹ He explains, "*existentia* is tantamount to *Being-present-at-hand*, a kind of Being which is essentially inappropriate to entities of Dasein's character."³⁰ Heidegger's term *present-at-hand*, in contrast to *ready-to-hand*, refers to the simple observation of the properties or characteristics of an entity. For instance, this table in front of me is present-at-hand in that it is presented to me, it shows

²⁶ B&T 83

²⁷ B&T 98

²⁸ B&T 97

²⁹ B&T 100

³⁰ B&T 67

up for me in the world I am in. I can observe its color, its weight, its size, its smell, and the like. It is also ready-to-hand for me, insofar as I use it to rest my laptop on, to spread across it various research materials, and to sit across from my friend, for instance.

Importantly, for Heidegger, scientific investigation is primarily concerned with a present-at-hand understanding of the entities that it studies. A physicist studying the atom relates to it as ready-to-hand insofar as she is *using* the atom to gain knowledge, to write a dissertation, or to feed her curiosity, for instance. She regards the atom as present-at-hand when she *observes* its makeup of protons, neutrons, electrons, quarks, and so on. She might even calculate its mass and its velocity. And in doing this, she thinks she is getting a better understanding of what makes the atom what it *is* – its being. For Heidegger, this is a misguided notion. In conceiving of ready-to-hand entities as present-at-hand, we are not getting any closer to the being of those entities. In fact, we are moving farther away from being, fooling ourselves into thinking we are getting closer. This is not to say that physics, or any science for that matter, is not beneficial for us. We know much more about our environment because of these endeavors, and should be grateful for the advances humanity has made because of them.

The point is that science can never tell us about an entity's being. Heidegger writes, "Ontological inquiry is indeed more primordial, as over against the ontical inquiry of the positive sciences."³¹ Scientific research is ontical, unlike investigation into being, which is ontological. Scientific investigation always proceeds with certain assumptions about the being of the entities that it studies. Our physicist takes for granted that

³¹ B&T 31

electrons, neutrons, protons and quarks exist, and have a certain way of being. She is able to improve a limited aspect of her understanding of the world, namely the present-at-hand, but she misses out on the larger context which allows her to do this in the first place. But this is not a problem, as long as we reserve our present-at-hand way of understanding entities to endeavors like scientific investigation.

The trouble for us arises when we attempt to understand Dasein's being, via science, as present-at-hand. We are inclined to do this, as in seeing the success of science with respect to the present-at-hand, we falsely think this success will transfer over to the study of being. However, unlike present-at-hand entities, Dasein being is not a thing to be observed or measured. Dasein is an entity, just like the atom, but its being is that of *existence*. For instance, I am 190 pounds and 6 feet tall. I am also a homo sapien, a vertebrate, and a multi-cellular organism. To a sociologist, I am a social agent. These reductions, however beneficial they may be to us, do not capture *who* I am, they only capture me as present-at-hand. With great advances in science we are building up a stockpile of data about how Dasein is present-at-hand, but none of these advances capture what it means to *be* Dasein. In addition, neither is Dasein's being ready-to-hand. I am not how useful I am, to me, or anyone else. This is also a limited conception of Dasein's being. My being can only be understood as my having to choose which way to be – the fact that my being is an *issue* for me in the world that I am in.³²

Understanding Dasein requires understanding how Dasein is being-in-the-world. As I mentioned before, Dasein is not a free-floating "I". Rather, Heidegger says, "the

³² B&T 32

world is always the one that I share with Others. The world of Dasein is a *with-world*. Being-in is Being-with Others.”³³ Dasein’s everyday being is shared with others. Dasein’s being is its relation to other entities in its world. This aspect of Dasein’s being, of our being, is crucial to understanding how we are able to forget the being-question in the first place.

We’ve seen why we falsely believe we understand being i.e. by thinking a present-at-hand understanding of an entity captures its being. In the next chapter, we will explore how this failure of Dasein occurs and why it persists. And in doing so, we will improve our understanding of Dasein’s being, thus helping us clarify the being-question itself.

³³ B&T 155

The They & Falling

Heidegger's aim is to, "raise anew the question of the meaning of being."³⁴ The fact that this question must be raised anew is telling. It means that we have forgotten it. Why so? Since Dasein's being is its relation to other entities in its world, Heidegger claims that Dasein can easily lose itself in these entities, and is actually naturally inclined to do so. I will explain further.

In its "Being-with-one-another"³⁵ Dasein loses itself and starts "Being of the Others"³⁶. Heidegger expands, "Being-with-one-another concerns itself as such with averageness, which is an existential characteristic of the *'they'*."³⁷ The "they" is Heidegger's term for the collective social conventions, values and set of meanings that confront Dasein in-the-world it finds itself in. In its attempt to be-with-others Dasein conforms to the societal values that the "they" presents it, resulting in "averageness." For example, when I go to the barber to get my haircut, I choose to make my hair look good – whatever this may be. I choose this based on what I think looks good, but this conception of good is not actually my own. It is how *they* look: what is societally considered a good look. Even if I want to not look like what is conventionally considered good, and get my hair dyed purple for instance, this is still in response to the "they." I am now succumbing to a different "they," one might say, the "they" of counter-culture. It appears as if there is no escape from the influence of the "they." Insofar as Dasein is-in-a-world, Dasein's being is necessarily influenced by the "they."

³⁴ B&T 1

³⁵ B&T 164

³⁶ B&T 164

³⁷ B&T 165

They “they,” apart from determining Dasein’s possibilities to be,³⁸ affects Dasein in another profound way. Heidegger explains, “This care of averageness reveals in turn an essential tendency of Dasein which we call the *‘leveling down’* of all possibilities of Being...”³⁹. The “they” causes the “leveling down” of possibilities of being because it closes off to Dasein the ability to authentically be itself. “This very state of Being, in its everyday kind of Being, is what proximally misses itself and covers itself up,”⁴⁰ Heidegger adds. Dasein’s tendency is to conform to the “they.” Even in trying to choose for itself, authentically, the choices presented to Dasein are those dictated by the “they.” As such, in its everyday being, Dasein naturally “misses itself” and its authenticity, while reaching for the “they.”

The results of this “leveling down” are far reaching and dangerous. This is why reawakening the being-question in us is so hard. And this is why present-at-hand, scientific understandings of being carry so much force – as they are backed by the “they.” “Dasein, tranquilized, and ‘understanding’ everything... drifts along towards an alienation in which its ownmost potentiality-for-Being is hidden from it. Falling Being-in-the-world is not only tempting and tranquilizing; it is at the same time alienating,”⁴¹ explains Heidegger. Dasein gets lost in the publicness of the “they,” falls away and alienates itself from its authentic potentiality for being, thus closing itself off to the being-question. By “Being-in-the-world” and completely occupied by the world of others in the “they,” Dasein becomes occupied with the entities in its world, it becomes occupied with ontical inquiry, qua science for instance, and it seeks to gain control over

³⁸ More will be said about Dasein’s possibilities of being in the next chapter.

³⁹ B&T 167

⁴⁰ B&T 168

⁴¹ B&T 220

reality, rather than open itself to the being-question and the implications of it. In this fallen state, Dasein is eager to do whatever is ordinary, distracting itself from the difficulties of authentic thought.

The “falling” of Dasein remains hidden from itself. Dasein is unaware that it is alienating itself from its “potentiality-for-Being.” Heidegger writes, “this plunge remains hidden from Dasein... it gets interpreted as a way of ‘*ascending*’ and ‘*living correctly*’.”⁴² The “they” influences Dasein in the form of societal values, norms and expectations that Dasein then conforms to. This hides the fact that Dasein is actually falling and hence alienating itself from being, and the possibility of understanding it. The possibility of authentic being remains hidden from Dasein because, unaware, it falls into the “they.” Dasein does not perceive this as a falling because it is covered up as an “ascending” or a “living correctly.”

Science is a textbook example of this phenomena. We think it gives us answers into being – into why entities are the way they are. Everyone praises scientific advancements for doing this. But this is a “fallen” notion caused by the “they.” Science, while excelling in the realm of the present-at-hand, does not help us understand being. And with the influence of science, with the influence of the they, it becomes really hard to actually buy into raising anew the being-question. This isn’t even presented to Dasein by the “they” as a possible way to be, that is, to be open to the being-question. Rather, Dasein stays engaged with the issues, beliefs, practices, norms, and so on, that are offered to it everyday – and *tranquilized* it *falls* into them, falsely thinking it is *ascending*.

⁴² B&T 223

Death, Anxiety, Authenticity & Resoluteness

We see now why reawakening the sense of being in us is so hard. Dasein naturally *falls* – into the “they” and the meanings it presents. The “they” naturally masks this paramount question for Dasein, as Dasein becomes concerned with average everydayness, and not authentic being.⁴³ Once Dasein has fallen, it becomes *tranquilized* and thinks it understands everything already – because, never challenged, Dasein exercises control over the entities it encounters in its everydayness. Heidegger wants us to awaken from this slumber, to the question of being. How are we to do so?

Dasein is able to overcome “falling” because of anxiety, explains Heidegger. This anxiety is caused by Dasein’s potential for authentic being, which it realizes in light of its mortality. The reality is that we are all finite entities. All of us will die one day, it is just a matter of when. In everyday existence we tend to ignore this looming possibility. But, at times, we come face to face with it – resulting in anxiety. Heidegger explains, “Anxiety thus takes away from Dasein the possibility of understanding itself, as it falls, in terms of the ‘world’ and the way things have been publicly interpreted. Anxiety throws Dasein back upon that which it is anxious about – its authentic potentiality-for-Being-in-the-world.”⁴⁴ Anxiety in the face of one’s finitude, a particular way for Dasein to be-in-the-world, is no doubt a difficult thing to experience. That is why it is so powerful – it shakes Dasein out of its fallen, average, easy-going state of being. And because anxiety is such an uncomfortable experience, it is easy to see why “Dasein prepares for itself a constant

⁴³ Although we have already briefly spoken of authentic being, this idea will now be explored in greater detail.

⁴⁴ B&T 232

temptation towards falling.”⁴⁵ Everydayness is just easier and more tempting. But when Dasein realizes its finitude, through a near death experience, or through the death of a loved one for instance, the anxiety Dasein thus experiences allows it to grasp for itself the significance of its own life. This anxious Dasein stops trying to understand itself in terms of what is “publically interpreted,” in terms of the “they,” and sees the possibility of authentic existence as an available and enticing proposition.

Why is it that confronting death, confronting Dasein’s mortality, is able to provide such a profound realization? Yes, the anxiety experienced in light of this fact is powerful, no doubt. But why does that make Dasein want to be authentic? I can fathom that one might experience a deep, nihilistic sorrow if one realizes that their life is finite and insignificant in the larger context, resulting in the dismissal of this call to authenticity. For Heidegger, this occurrence would be a result of Dasein’s falling, where Dasein understands its being, and its death, in terms of the “they.” Death, for Heidegger, is “the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all.”⁴⁶ And, as we already know, Dasein’s being is the issue for it, as it must necessarily choose a possible way to be. Under this paradigm, death then, significantly limits Dasein’s possibilities. In ceasing to exist, Dasein can no longer choose one possibility or another. This is what death results in – and it is always a possibility for Dasein; a necessary one at that.

Crucially, and this will help us answer the question posed in the previous paragraph about Dasein’s call to authenticity, Heidegger explains, “Death is Dasein’s *ownmost* possibility. Being towards this possibility discloses to Dasein its *ownmost*

⁴⁵ B&T 221

⁴⁶ B&T 342

potentiality-for-Being, in which its very Being is the issue.”⁴⁷ Unlike death, other possibilities are ones that I can choose or not choose, and ones that can be chosen by others or not, as well. But death is a possibility that is *necessarily* my own. No one else can experience my death, nor I theirs. In my mortality being my own possibility, and in me having to necessarily confront this mortality, I realize the fact that my possibilities are limited. The anxiety caused by grasping the limited nature of my life pushes me to choose possibilities for myself that I believe in and can get behind – *authentic* possibilities.

Authentic existence entails Dasein “choosing to make this choice,”⁴⁸ in contrast to inauthentic existence, in which Dasein chooses based on what’s easy, what’s convention, or what’s expectation. Crucially, even authentic existence is influenced by the “they,” as new meaning cannot just be fabricated by Dasein. Dasein is already in-a-world with a set of meanings. Dasein’s existence is authentic insofar as it chooses a possibility provided to it by its world, and acts in that world based on that choice. Consider the example of our visit to the barber. Even if I authentically choose to get the *good looking* haircut, or authentically choose to dye it purple – these options presented to me are a result of the “they.” They have the meanings they do for me because they have appeared to me as options to choose, as a result of the “they.”

We see now that Dasein has the possibility to be authentic, and the impetus to choose to do so. It’s worth briefly noting at this juncture, that in being authentic, Dasein has, you and I have, preliminarily opened ourselves to being. We have raised the question

⁴⁷ B&T 307

⁴⁸ B&T 313

anew, just as Heidegger wanted, and are dealing with the implications of it, namely, authentic being.

But what does authentic being actually entail? Heidegger explains, “Resoluteness, as authentic Being-one’s-Self, does not detach Dasein from its world... And how should it, when resoluteness as authentic disclosedness, is authentically nothing else then *Being-in-the-world*? Resoluteness brings the Self right into its current concerned *Being-alongside* what is ready-to-hand, and pushes it into solicitous *Being with Others*.”⁴⁹ Resoluteness entails coming to terms with our anxiety and owning up to our responsibility to choose our own existence. Insofar as we avoid being resolute, as it is difficult to do so,⁵⁰ we are lulled into a false sense of comfort and a feeling that we are in control of our being. But in becoming resolute, we develop a clearer conception of our being. Following this, we are able to authentically choose this possibility or that, in light of this clear, resolute conception of our being. The entities which we encounter as ready-to-hand show up in light of this resolute conception of being as well. Their uses, for Dasein’s purposes, become plainly apparent – because Dasein is now resolutely aware of its own being. Dasein no longer seeks to master present-at-hand reality, or ontically calculate and measure it, because it is now more aware of its own being. Dasein’s world is no longer a they-world; it is one of authentic existence alongside others.

⁴⁹ B&T 344

⁵⁰ Being resolute is difficult because it involves facing up to our anxiety in the face of our mortality. It involves coming to terms with the fact that we don’t have complete control over our being. As such, we usually only experience moments of resoluteness, according to Heidegger. But he also speaks of “anticipatory resoluteness,” (B&T 351) which is not covered here, but is a way for us to maintain being resolute, in a certain sense.

Dasein's Finitude & Temporality: Reawakening to Being

It is our understanding of possibility, that is, Dasein's possibility of authentic existence, which deepens our understanding of Dasein's being. Specifically, it is Dasein's resoluteness that enables it to be authentic, and become awake to the being-question. Heidegger's project is not yet finished, however. Resoluteness is not enough, but it as a clue - it is resoluteness in the face of death that will enable us to better understand what Heidegger calls the "ultimate foundation"⁵¹ of Dasein's being: *temporality*.

We have already been speaking of Dasein *choosing* to be this way or that. We have been speaking of Dasein's ownmost *possibility*, that of death: the possibility of having no more possibilities. We also spoke about Dasein's being-in-the-world as the *concern* it has for the entities that it encounters. We spoke of Dasein's *finitude* as well. These ideas presuppose a notion of temporality, within which Dasein chooses a possibility, or is presently concerned with some entity, or within which Dasein is finite.

Ordinarily, we think of time in terms of a clock or a timeline. There is the present moment, which we experience, and an infinite series of past and future moments behind and ahead of us. For Heidegger, this conception of time is faulty – it is present-at-hand. This faulty conception of time is due to our falling, due to the fact that all we deal with in our day to day lives are entities. So how are we to correctly understand time, and how does this relate to Dasein's resoluteness and the being-question? I will explain.

Much like our fallen understanding of time, Heidegger's conception of time still consists of a past, present and future. However, for Heidegger, these aspects of time are

⁵¹ B&T 351

deeply linked to how Dasein experiences them. He writes, “By... ‘futural’... We have in mind the coming in which Dasein, in its ownmost potentiality-for-Being, comes towards itself.”⁵² Future, for Heidegger, is Dasein’s potential, its projection, its possibilities to be. As we saw earlier, these possibilities are affected by various factors, including the they, anxiety, and crucially, Dasein’s mortality. Unlike our fallen conception of the future, which is infinite, for Dasein, its future is always finite. Of the past, Heidegger writes, “...[It is] *being* Dasein authentically as *it already was*... Taking over over thrownness...”⁵³. Past, in this sense, is Dasein’s being thrown – into a world already constructed with certain meanings, values, norms, and so on. Lastly, the present involves revealing and action. Heidegger writes, “Only as the *Present* in the sense of making present, can resoluteness be what it is...”⁵⁴.

Under this paradigm, the future, past and present are all inexorably linked. Given Dasein’s past, the situation it was *thrown* into, it has a certain set of future possibilities it can *project* into. And in its present, Dasein is faced with a world, one that reveals itself as the way that it is because of Dasein’s past and future. Let’s examine an example to get a better understanding of how Dasein relates to its past, present and future. Consider a teenage boy who was born in a shanti town in Sao Paulo, Brazil. As you might know, soccer is exceedingly popular throughout this country. Our boy has played, and still loves to play soccer every day, with his friends after school. He has hopes of playing professionally one day – he wants to *be* a professional soccer player.⁵⁵ He cannot change his past, the world he was thrown into. But his past, undoubtedly, effects his future, his

⁵² B&T 373

⁵³ B&T 373

⁵⁴ B&T 374

⁵⁵ Whether this choice is authentic or not does not matter for now.

possibilities to be. He has dreams of playing soccer professionally because he grew up playing it, in a country that loves the sport – this is a result of the “they.” Also, given his economic status, his future possibilities to achieve this dream are affected no doubt. Our boy the soccer player, as his being is an issue for him, in his present, he is faced with soccer balls, soccer teams, referees, watching soccer on TV, following his favorite team, and so on. This present world is the way that it is because of our boy’s, Dasein’s, past and future. As such, Dasein’s understanding of its being is grounded in temporality, in its past, future, and present.

It is in the present, but crucially also because of the past and future, that Dasein can be resolute in the face of death. While it is true that we do not go about our lives thinking of our impending death every second, we are faced with this thought at times. And when this happens, we experience anxiety. And as Heidegger has made clear, in the face of this anxiety, it is imperative that we take a resolute stance about our reality as finite beings thrown into a world, and projecting into certain possibilities. In taking this resolute stance, and choosing to be authentically oneself, we open ourselves to being and experience an “...unshakable joy...”⁵⁶.

In this moment, after much tribulation, we have “raise[d] anew the question of the meaning of being.”⁵⁷ This is so hard for us because of our tendency to think of Dasein’s being, of our being, vis-à-vis science, as present-at-hand. Due to the “they” and our falling into the everyday entities that we come across, and our tendency for easy-going average everydayness, we begin to lull ourselves into thinking of ourselves in the same

⁵⁶ B&T 358

⁵⁷ B&T 1

way as these entities we encounter. It takes the anxiety caused by the realization of our finitude, and a resolute response to this anxiety, along with an un-fallen understanding of temporality, to truly shake us from this hypnosis.

We appear to have reached our goal. We have re-awoken, from a long and deep slumber, to the sense of being Heidegger considers so important. In doing so, we have faced up to our many shortcomings. Where does this leave us though? Do we now have an answer to the being-question? I'd say... *sort of*. Remember that Heidegger's aim, from the outset, was to "raise anew the question of the meaning of being."⁵⁸ Well, we have certainly been able to see how he does that. He never claims to give us an answer to this question – or to even aim to do so. We might think, after taking so much trouble to peel back layers and layers of Dasein's *baggage*, shouldn't we finally be left with an explicit understanding of being? That would be wrong. There is no explicit understanding of being. For finite Dasein, for us, there can never be one. More will be said on this in the next chapter.

⁵⁸ B&T 1

Is There an Answer to the Being-Question?

With the resolute acceptance of our finite being, there comes the revelation of infinite being in comparison to that. The infinite being here can be understood as the highest being, or the most fundamental being – that from which all other beings derive and share in common. Let's call it *general being*. Traditionally, this idea of general being is interpreted as present-at-hand. As you might have guessed already, Heidegger believes this notion to be misguided. For instance, Christianity interprets the general being as an omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent God.⁵⁹ Science interprets it as the big-bang in most cases, and as a multiverse in others, for instance. For those of you familiar with Continental philosophy, Hegel's "absolute spirit" is another way of interpreting this idea of general being, much like Nietzsche's eternal recurrence is as well.

All these ways of interpreting general being "depersonalize [it] into a first cause."⁶⁰ They explain this being, albeit in differing ways, as an entity outside an infinite regress of grounds. They forget, due to a fallen desire to master and understand all of reality, due to faulty ontological assumptions, that "being withholds and even conceals itself by nature because it is too rich to be fully revealed to finite human understanding."⁶¹ We have already shown that we *are*, that Dasein *is*, fundamentally finite. In falling, in avoiding anxiety through average everydayness, and in not becoming resolute in the face of our finitude, we forget, we ignore, this profound fact.

⁵⁹ ONT 2

⁶⁰ ONT 1

⁶¹ ONT 3

The reality is that, entities, although available plentifully for us to use and measure and calculate, always possess a relation to being. And in our finitude, this being can never be explicitly understood by us. This does not mean that we cannot be aware of, or awake to, this being. After all, that was Heidegger's aim. In being open to being, we realize that we will never actually understand it explicitly. We can know that being grounds our experience, grounds temporality, and opens a world for us where entities show up. We can avoid placing too much import on the present-at-hand, overcoming our desire to understand and master all of reality. But the human condition makes accepting all this very hard.

Humanity strives, through science, through philosophy, through theology, to attain an absolute understanding of reality. And in doing so, it strives to master reality and gain control over it – to mask our condition as finite beings. In the modern world, we are, relatively speaking, much closer to this ideal. A simple Google search can inform me of virtually anything that I want to know.⁶² In a matter of hours, I can be on the other side of the planet. Sitting at my living room, I can talk face-to-face someone from a different country. This is a huge leap from what used to be possible – we have indeed gained an unprecedented control over reality. Importantly however, for Heidegger, we have only changed our present-at-hand relationship to reality, to the entities we encounter. We have done nothing to improve our relationship to being. In fact, we falsely think we have, because of our success in mastering what is present-at-hand.

⁶² ONT 6

The truth is: there is no absolute truth⁶³ like what we strive for. For Heidegger, this archetype of absolute understanding that we strive for is fundamentally irreconcilable with our actual understanding, which is finite, and which depends on temporality. So, responding to the title of this chapter: No, there is no direct, explicit answer to the being-question. However, yes, there is an awakening that happens when this question is examined thoroughly, like we have done in this paper. What dictates whether this all matters is how Dasein, how you and I, go about living are lives having learnt what we have just learnt.

⁶³ This idea of absolute truth is much like the idea of general being I just spoke about.

Objections & Responses

At this stage I would like to consider and respond to what I take to be the strongest objections to the arguments I have just presented. My hope is to satisfy every critic, but I cannot promise to be able to do this. I hope that I am at least able to show you the advantages of accepting the arguments I defend – and in doing so, I hope that the importance of Heidegger’s question shines through.

The first objection I will respond to was briefly addressed in Chapter 4 of this paper. Heidegger’s move to interrogate Dasein as a means to clarify the being-question was criticized. The strongest objection to this part of Heidegger’s argument, in my view, notes the fact that the being of a particular type of entity, namely Dasein’s being, is interrogated in order help us understand the meaning of being in general. The critic might ask: why does Dasein’s being, one particular entity’s being, take priority over any other entity’s being in our investigation?

In response to this worry, I would first have to point to Heidegger’s account of the *ontological difference*. Remember that ontological inquiry pertains to being, while ontical inquiry pertains to entities. And remember also that we are looking for some entity to interrogate, as we are inquiring into being, and entities are all that exist. Which entity should we choose then? Given that we want to find out about being, whether about one particular entity’s being or about being in general, the best and only option for us seems to be Dasein. Specifically, this is because no other entity can inform us about being. No other entity possesses a relationship with being, or even thinks about being,

other than Dasein. As such, in this respect, Dasein rightfully takes priority over all other entities.

There was another criticism levied in Chapter 4 which I will now briefly address. The critic, responding to this same move made by Heidegger, asks: Is Heidegger providing a philosophical account or an anthropologic investigation? In focusing on Dasein, Heidegger is in no way giving up or losing sight of his goal, which is to reawaken the sense of being in us. This goal is driven by a metaphysical fact, namely, the fact that there *is* something, rather than nothing. In asking why, Heidegger begins his philosophical account. This leads him to Dasein for reasons I've just defended, but crucially, Heidegger is still very much doing philosophy.

The next few objections I respond to address Heidegger's account of authenticity. One potential problem I see with this account of authenticity is that it places a lot of significance on our individual selves, as we must be resolute in light of our finitude. This makes it hard to justify benevolent acts such as parenting, for instance. With parenting, one is putting all of one's resources into an entity, namely one's child, that one obviously hopes will live beyond one's own death. If I am to be resolute and authentic in the face of my individual death, it is hard to justify putting all my resources and energy into my child, who will most likely live beyond me, or so the worry goes.

I have two responses to this. First, it can be argued that in raising my child now, and putting effort into this endeavor, I am ensuring for myself a better life when I am older. I would still be acting resolute in the face of my mortality. I can see how this idea might be interpreted as slightly self-centered, leading me to my second response: What if

I authentically choose to be a sacrificial father⁶⁴, for instance? What if my being *is*, what if I *exist*, insofar as I *am* a sacrificial father? As long as I have chosen this role for myself, and not been levelled into it by the “they,” this is still a way for me to authentically be myself, while still being a loving, caring, benevolent, sacrificial parent.

The next criticism with regards to authenticity criticizes the weight Heidegger places on Dasein’s authentic existence, over and above the other modes of Dasein’s existence. Even Heidegger says that only at certain times does Dasein in fact act authentically, so why does he prioritize authentic existence if it is just one of the many ways in which Dasein can be? This is a valid concern, and one that requires understanding Dasein’s special way of being in order to address. Dasein *exists* as its being is always an issue for it. In this light, Dasein is thrown into a world that provides it various possibilities from which to chose, and thus project some particular possibility. As such, because this choice necessarily faces our finite Dasein, unlike any other entity – authentic existence is prioritized. This would not be the case if we were talking about present-at-hand or ready-to-hand entities, because they do not have to choose which way to be, and their being is not finite. Dasein is unique in this respect.

Stemming from this criticism, it dawned on me that we seem to be taking for granted, in our arguments, that Dasein posses free-will. Free-will seems to be a necessary condition of being an entity with Dasein’s way of being – as it must always *choose* among the possibilities available to it. I’m not sure a sceptic, or a staunch determinist for instance, would accept this premise, at least not without justification. So, as for a

⁶⁴ This example is inspired by a Hubert Dryefus lecture.

justification for Dasein's free-will, this is what I would say: Heidegger aims to capture the fundamental phenomena that we take for granted. He aims to make them explicit. As such, I think he would argue that this critic has succumb to the effects of falling, and is thinking about being with certain hidden ontological assumptions. I can't say for sure whether the determinist would agree with this, but I don't think Heidegger can do much more by way of argument to convince her.

In addition, it's worth mentioning to our determinist that Dasein, *essentially*, must be able to choose. It's being is constituted by the fact that it must take a stance on its own being.⁶⁵ As such, Dasein would not be Dasein if it were not able to choose. Admittedly, these choices might not be considered *free*, as they may be determined by the "they." But insofar as we accept that Dasein can act authentically, then we must also accept that Dasein is free – and I have just defended authenticity against several charges.

The last objection I will defend against is a rejection of the negative light Heidegger casts on our desire to master reality. Recall that we seek to achieve an absolute understanding of reality, and as such, gain complete control over it – this is to mask our anxiety over our finitude. Heidegger's critic might ask: Why is this bad? Why can't I just keep mastering reality, keep improving my present-at-hand understanding of it, and keep improving science and technology along with this? I'm fine the way I am now; why should I even bother opening myself to being?

This is certainly a strong criticism, as it requires that I convince the critic of the importance of examining Heidegger's question in the first place. This importance, as we

⁶⁵ B&T 32

have intimated, has to do with the fact that we, finite and fragile, constantly have the burden of choosing our being. Given that we constantly must choose, and given the reality that one day we necessarily can choose no more, we come to the realization that there is something *bigger*⁶⁶ than us finite beings out there. This being, let's call it *infinite being*⁶⁷ is not God nor a first cause, or any such entity. It cannot even be put into words – that's how obscure it is. All we know is that this infinite being is so fundamentally important, so hidden and obscure, that its value isn't contingent on anything. No positive argument can be made for this being, as any such argument would be making false ontological assumptions, and begin conceiving of this being as an entity.

We all know, even the critic I am addressing, that this infinite being exists. It is what grounds the entities I encounter every day, what grounds my finite temporal existence. Thus, in knowing that this infinite being necessarily exists, in truly knowing this fact of reality and in internalizing it, I'd ask the critic the following: How can you continue living the way you do, concerned with mastery of the present-at-hand, when you know that you are misguided in doing so? You are already aware of this being; I urge you to escape the clutches of the “they,” and be resolute about your existence.

Although I have tried to address what I consider to be the strongest criticisms to the arguments I have presented, there are no doubt many more objections I could address. I hope, though, that the responses I have provided convince you that the question of the meaning of being is not only an important one to ask, but also a vital one to examine the implications of.

⁶⁶ Note that this is a figure of speech. I do not mean bigger in any ontical sense.

⁶⁷ Although infinite being, or being in general, or absolute truth all fail miserably in capturing what this being is – we cannot even put it into words.

Conclusions

Our aim at the outset was to reawaken in us the sense of being that has become so confounded and forgotten. Being, we learnt, assumes a special relationship with us, with Dasein. Being depends on our understanding of it, but we also depend on being, as we are the entity who tries to understand being - by making our being an issue for us.

This issue, of us having to choose a possibility to be, is a situation we are necessarily and constantly faced with. In confronting our fragile reality as finite beings, anxiously, we realize that this possibility to be will one-day cease to be a possibility. But I myself realize this, for myself. And as such, I take a resolute stance on my being. I chose, in light of this resolute stance, an authentic way to be.

With the realization and acceptance of my finitude, resolute though I may be, I am also humbled, as I accept my understanding as inherently limited in relation to being. I have awoken to being in the sense Heidegger was arguing for. Its worth emphasizing that Heidegger, at no point, claims to provide a positive, explicit answer to the being-question. Rightly so, as there can be none – not for finite beings of our sort.

There is a sense in which one is fundamentally limited in being able to argue for the kind of conclusion Heidegger is shooting for. Any explanation of being that is comprehensible by us in mere language will demand a further ground. The best we can hope for is to understand being in light of our finite being, and accept the positive implications of this privileged view.

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