

Dictatorship of They Existential Tension in Dasein

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ABSTRACT

The fundamental ontology of Heidegger is an investigation into the ontological conditions of dasein's ways of being in the world and not building any ethical theory. The absence of any ethical theories, however, does not mean that his thinking has no space for ethical concerns. Heidegger did not develop any ethical theories but was probably more interested in questioning what made ethics possible? The paper tries to show that dasein's ontological structure of being-in-the-world works as the facilitating ground for the possibility of ethical living. It is argued that more than any ethical theory Heidegger's merit lies in the phenomenological insights into the human conditions where one tries to escape the ontological question of "what it means to be."

INTRODUCTION

It is questionable whether Heidegger undertook any theory of ethics in his entire pursuit of thinking. In *Letter on Humanism*, he gives us this account of ethics: "Along with "logic" and "physics," "ethics" appeared for the first time in the school of Plato... Thinkers prior to this period knew neither a "logic" nor an "ethics" nor "physics." Yet their thinking was neither illogical nor immoral."¹ However, the absence of any ethical theories does not mean that his thinking has no space for ethical concerns. Heidegger's interest was to investigate the ontological conditions of dasein's ways of being in the world and not building any ethical theory.

Heidegger's ontological approach provides insights for thinking about relational ways of being in the world. So the first task Heidegger has taken up in *Being and Time* is to deconstruct the detached and neutral standpoint about the world and establish that in everyday existence, we are not spectators, but *engaged actors*. That is best expressed through *dasein is being-in-the-world*. It means we are always engaged with beings immersed in a living context. This context includes things, people, other living beings, culture, etc. The content of this context may differ from person

¹ Martin Heidegger "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, ed. by D.F. Krell (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993), 256.

to person and it must vary because each person's possibility in a particular context may vary. Nevertheless, a defining characteristics of our existence is we are at all-time actively engaged in our world.² What does it mean for us? It entails that if *dasein* is being in the world and the world itself is part of the essential constitution of our existence to consider that we are free floating selves is a contradiction to our very nature. The world, rather, is part and parcel of what it means to be human.

Secondly, the world we live in is always interpreted by us as we engage in various activities; that is why he calls humans hermeneutical beings. It is always possible that the original existential discoveries and disclosures can get covered up in the tradition and become absorbed into the general consensus. So, throughout his thinking he raises questions like: 'What it means to be a human?', 'What it means to dwell' 'What is equipment?' 'What is art?', 'What is technology?' 'What is thinking?', 'What is language?', etc. The most profound phenomenon which remains hidden is *Being* as providing the ground of the beings (entities) which show themselves. Questions such as these are attempts to bring a new kind of ontological thinking that are often forgotten or taken for granted in our normal discourse.

Heidegger approached these issues by making a distinction between ontic and ontology in his methodology. Ontic is concerned with facts about entities and the ontology is concerned with the meaning of *Being*. Ontic concerns are pertaining to the distinctive nature of beings as such, it is the concern of the particular sciences, like, humanities, science, specialized sciences, etc. Whereas ontological concerns are the basis on which any such ontic knowledge could be constructed. Ontology discusses about the conditions of the possibility of such sciences, namely, how entities are intelligible as entities.

Heidegger calls his investigation fundamental ontology. The fundamental ontology of Heidegger is an investigation into the conditions of possibility of not only the ontic sciences but also the regional ontologies that found them, for example, politics, ethics, epistemology, etc. This being the orientation in Heideggerian thinking there is no wonder why Heidegger did not develop any ethical theories but was probably more interested in questioning what made ethics possible? The paper tries to show that *dasein's* ontological structure of being-in-the-world works as the facilitating ground for the possibility of ethical living.

² Being-in-the-world is the first among the existentials that Heidegger analyzes. The order of presentation of these existentials tells us that his analysis flows from the general awareness of the way in which the world presents itself to us to the specific existential that most adequately reveals to *dasein* its own existence: care (*Sorge*)

DASEIN AS TEMPORAL BEING

Time is an important condition for our way of being in the world. In Heidegger's language, it is "the primordial ontological basis" of human's existentiality. Time is a unitary phenomenon of future, past and present where each referring to the other which Heidegger prefers to call as *ecstatic*, in the sense of standing out of itself or reaching out beyond itself.³ This *ecstatic* nature of time is very foundational to human's way of being; that is, we stand out into our future possibilities, into a past heritage, and into a present world. The enigma of everyday life of our time is that we have forgotten the basic ecstatic nature and confined ourselves with only the *present* while the future is the primary dimension of our existence. So, there is a serious problem when we fail to see our own existential possibilities. The claim is very simple that we are not defined by what is present alone. The true being of humans is actually a kind of absence since many dimensions of our being withdraw from our view as we look at it. The same logic can be extended to equipment and the world we exist. Since humans and things can never be directly or completely present to us we are always more of interpreting than seeing. We may progress in perfecting our scientific seeing and yet be blind to our own conditions that would make us fixated in the ecstasy of *present*.

It is not that *presence* is insignificant, rather, though, presence is rich and complex it does not exhaust the meaning of our way of being. Prioritising certain mode of temporality, that is, understanding the being of things and human only in terms of the present, and experience it as the ideal is an inauthentic mode of being-in-the-world. If my description of the world is limited by what is only present it takes into consideration only what is actual. However, both actuality and possibility are needed to make it complete. There are instances in the past and present where intellectuals, activists, designers, politicians, entrepreneurs, all have tried to reduce to the one mode of existence at the cost of the other. It has devastating consequences for sustainable living. The attraction for this is that it is much easier to stay in one mode than being grounded in the temporality of our Being.

FALLENNESS AS ONTOLOGICAL FEATURE OF DASEIN

Fostering only one way of being or being regulated by *das man*⁴ implies allowing oneself to be dictated by one particular mode which goes against the very nature of dasein's being. Heidegger calls it a fallen state. Fallenness is "a quite distinctive kind of Being-in-the-world – the kind which is completely fascinated by the 'world'." The term, fallenness does not express any negative

³ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 377 & 329.

⁴ *Das Man* is a dasein who refuses to face his being fully.

evaluation, in the sense of anything deplorable or any state of moral degradation. It is a definite existential characteristic of *dasein* where it gets absorbed in the demands of the present, and forgetting its rich inheritance as well as its projection into the future.⁵ Heidegger calls this mode of fallenness “everydayness”. In everydayness *dasein* experiences its present mode of existence as everlasting and forget the real nature of its being – *being-towards-death*.⁶ To be lost in everydayness is falling away from its own potentiality for being a constant unfinished quality. Becoming blind to one’s own real self is an inauthentic way of existence, according to Heidegger. In everydayness no one is himself or herself but is completely dictated by the averageness.⁷ Averageness is an ontological state of *dasein* where one gets absorbed in the demands of the *they* - one’s self is lost to the general consensus. In fallen state one refuses to face one being and assume the responsibility, rather, hides in the false security and peace provided by the *they*. Heidegger calls it levelling or averageness a “being lost in the publicness of the ‘they’”.⁸

It is the normal situation where we often find ourselves in – a falling back to conventions, despite the fact that every *dasein* is potentially her or his own “project”. Think of the way we describe ourselves in terms social classifications and the roles we play. It is quite unavoidable yet not genuine self, according to Heidegger. It amounts to the refusal of ones own being in its fullness and constrict oneself to be an average. Neither better nor worse than others, but lingering around the average! The *they* determines *dasein*’s possibilities in the sense that its everyday decisions are made on the standard set by the *they*. That is, *dasein* not only lost awareness of itself but also tries to understand itself in terms of others. Heidegger writes, “We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they [man] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as they see and judge ... we find ‘shocking’ what they find shocking. The ‘They’, which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness.”⁹

In short, fallenness is not used in the Biblical sense of “the Fall”, or in any other religious sense but it simply means “falling” back into conventional ways of “being-in-the-world”¹⁰ and thereby becoming blind to our own authentic self. The everyday conventions of *Dasein* conditions its ecstatic temporality and in a way level it possibilities.

⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 220.

⁶ Heidegger is not interested in the physical death of a person but death signifies our radical possibility, one that is always beyond our grasp; but it remains for us an ever-present “not-yet.” It is a constant unfinished quality lies in the constitution of *dasein*, as “not- yet”. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 298

⁷ Michael Inwood, *A Heidegger Dictionary* (Oxford: Blackwell Publisher, 1999), 212

⁸ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 220

⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 164

¹⁰ Bert Olivier, “Heidegger and today’s ‘everydayness’,” <https://thoughtleader.co.za/bertolivier/2014/03/16/heidegger-and-everydayness-today/>, posted on 16 March 2014 in *Thought Leader*, accessed on April 20, 2020.

MANIFESTATIONS OF FALLENNESS

Heidegger in *Being and Time* elaborates various manifestations of fallenness in the world such as Idle talk, Curiosity, Ambiguity.¹¹ Idle talk is not just about conversation but an unexamined ways of being of dasein and could be compared to the prisoners in Plato's Allegory of the Cave. In Idle talk we automatically think and see; "the 'they' prescribes, and determines what and how one 'sees.'" The slave in Plato's caves is very comfortable about their living condition because they have no responsibilities to think for themselves and all they need to do is to sit down, relax, and conform to what is believed. This is the dictatorship of the *they*. In the process, one loses ones identity and self-awareness. WhatsApp forward culture of simply passing on with a noncommittal *like* for what we have heard or seen without examining the meaning for ourselves is only an expression of this deeper syndrome. Gelven cites another form of idle talk when he refers to "those who constantly present a great number of facts and statistics as substitute for rational inquiry, as if through some magic a more exact statistical rendering of what is an obvious fact will somehow generate of itself an understanding of what the problem is or what ought to be done."¹²

Curiosity is a search for novelty and endless stimulation rather than belonging or dwelling. It is another form of privileging disengaged observation over engaged interaction. At surface level, modern web-surfing is an example which is commonplace but at a deeper level we can gather a lot of examples from today's everyday life. An extreme form of curiosity in our time is the instance where crowd gathers to watch human suffering on roads without being concerned about it. Often such events are looked at as 'media worthy' and voyeuristically photographed.

Ambiguity is a loss of sensitivity to the distinction between genuine understanding and superficial chatter. It is the effect of accumulated idle talk and curiosity. We get so loaded up with these non-genuine ways of awareness that "it soon becomes impossible to decide what is disclosed in a genuine understanding, and what is not".¹³

Most of us live as though being dictated by the *they* which is manifested through Idle talk, Curiosity, Ambiguity. Much of contemporary ways of living exemplify this condition. In fact fallenness manifest itself in every era in a way that is peculiar to that age. Heidegger's interest in showing the fallenness in very concrete forms of our everyday inauthentic existence should not be taken as moralizing. He is only using his phenomenological insights into the human condition

¹¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 210 -219.

¹² Michael Gelven, *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1989), 107

¹³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 217

to show how in such inauthentic moments one tries to escape the ontological question of “what it means to be.”

RETURN TO AUTHENTICITY: THE CALL OF CONSCIENCE

How shall one choose an authentic life? Does authenticity mean, for Heidegger, achieving a self-sufficient way of being in this world. Is it possible to detach oneself from *they*? Interestingly, for Heidegger, an authentic life is not about being isolated from others, but rather about finding different ways of relating to others such that one is not lost to the *they-self*. He writes, “authentic Being-one’s-Self does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the “they”; it is rather an existential modification of the “they” — of the “they” as an essential existentials.”¹⁴ Inauthenticity is our common, socially normative state. One moves away from inauthentic state to authentic when one experiences guilt. In our normal understanding experience of guilt stems from law-breaking, may be moral, religious or civic. Heidegger reverses the order. That is, he talks about existential guilt, which is different from moral guilt and then claims that the experience of guilt is the basis for our ethical motivation. This goes well with his fundamental ontology.

A Kantian would claim that given an ethical situation reason instructs what one ought to do. That is, treat all human beings as ends and not merely as means, and all actions must be universalizable. While in the case of a utilitarian what one ought to do is answered in terms of its future consequences. Questions such as what action makes the life better by increasing the amount of happiness is weighed in the second case. Guilt occurs in either of this case when an ethical principle is violated. Heidegger, however, goes one step deeper. He asks why would one ask ‘what one ought to do’ unless there is already a kind of persuasion in the very structure of human consciousness that pushes one to ask such question.¹⁵ And Heidegger tries to explore that source neither teleologically nor deontologically, but in terms of an already existing existential awareness of authenticity which he calls guilt.

What is the existential characteristic of this guilt that forms as the foundation of ethics? It is shown above that human being is always understood as a *being to be* – “as long as Dasein exists, it must in each case, as such a potentiality, not yet be something. Any entity whose Essence is made up of existence, is essentially opposed to the possibility of our getting it in our grasp as an entity which is a whole.”¹⁶ Heidegger says, this constant unfinished quality which constitute human nature is also a burden since it brings in a *lack*. There is always a burden of being somebody and

¹⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 168

¹⁵ Gelven, *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, 161

¹⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 276

not someone else built into our existence. We, nonetheless, choose ourselves into certain possible ways of life. Our choices also brings in a lack because when following a certain path, we inevitably cut ourselves off from other possibilities. It makes one aware of the un-lived lives, in the form of a burden, lack, responsibility or indebtedness. Heidegger would say that this tension in effect reveals a kind of guilt. No individual can escape from this. It is primordial.¹⁷

In our everydayness one tries to escape from this guilt by fancying oneself as an *average, uncommitted, anonymous they*. The other option is becoming aware of the guilt which Heidegger calls *the call of conscience*. Conscience is not a whispering of God or any other moral entity outside but me talking to myself- dasein calling to itself. So, existentially, conscience is becoming aware that one is called back from anonymous self. It is a faceoff between a self "that has lost the comfortable feeling of belonging with the crowd" and "the self that has been lost in the they-self".¹⁸ It is something that calls one away from one's inauthentic immersion in the homely familiarity of everyday life. The "they" tempts and tranquilize dasein to flee from death rather than facing it. Death is dasein's "ownmost possibility" because it has to face death absolutely alone, and no one else can substitute one's death. In guilt dasein takes the courage to face its being-towards-death. It makes dasein aware of its immersion in the inauthentic existence

Dasein with guilt experiences that it is responsible for what it is. When dasein faces its own very being, it allows to see the different possibilities it has, which the *they* has concealed from it. In guilt dasein also realises that it is no longer protected by the loudness of 'they'. It was very comforting for the slaves in platonic cave to listen to the clang of their chains because that assured them of their illusionary security. The chief mode of inauthentic existence is loudness, the chatter of the world, the hubbub of moral advice or instructions, discourses of religion.¹⁹

As opposed to this, authentic existence is characterised by resoluteness.²⁰ Resoluteness focus on individual's freedom to choose the manner of one's existence, freedom to accept ones ways of being as well as to reject them. So authenticity is not about being isolated from others, but rather about finding a different way of relating to the world such that one is not lost to the *they-self*.

¹⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 332

¹⁸ Gelven, *A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time*, 163

¹⁹ Simon Critchley, "Being and Time, part 7: Conscience", (Monday July 20, 2009) [https:// www. The guardian. com/ commentisfree/belief/2009/jul/20/heidegger-being-time-critchley](https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jul/20/heidegger-being-time-critchley), retrieved on April 12, 2020.

²⁰ "Resoluteness" is a translation of *Entschlossenheit*, which also means "decision", "resolve," "having made up one's mind," etc.

A resolute person is not absorbed in the present but constantly lives in anticipation of the future. Heidegger prefers to call it *ecstatic*, in the sense of standing out of itself or reaching out beyond itself. This *ecstatic* nature of time is very foundational to human's way of being; that is, we stand out into our future possibilities, into a past heritage, and into a present world. There is a serious problem, as mentioned earlier, when we fail to see our own existential possibilities and confined ourselves with only the present.

THE DILEMMA

Heidegger claims that ethics and morals emerge from an understanding of guilt rather than the other way around. Guilt, then, as an existential is the foundation of morals. This is somewhat in opposition to the traditional view, which usually interprets guilt as dependent upon an already established moral code.

On the one side morality and ethics belong to the inauthentic realm of *das Man*. Morality and ethics inform *dasein* how to act in terms of showing how one must act. In this regard, ethics can only be inauthentic. If morality and ethics consists in a particular set of rules and regulations that are meant to guide over human behaviour, then there simply can be no authentic ethics. On the other hand, we also encounter the more suppressed tendency to identify the problematic of guilt and conscience as the genuine origin of morality and ethics. There is thus a conflict between ethical normativity, whose origins lie in inauthenticity, and ethical motivation, which has its source in authenticity.²¹

Is it at all possible to reconcile the tension between these two origins of morality without illegitimately sacrificing one of them? Our ethical existence is torn between ethical regulations and ethical motivations. Heidegger's central contribution to ethics consists in the insight that this tension is irresolvable.²²

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²¹ Saulius Geniusas "The Question of Ethics in Heidegger's Being and Time," in *Existential Philosophy and Ethics*, ed. by H. Feger and M. Hackel, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2013) 327

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