

Being & Time: Don't Worry, Be Uncanny

Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* is an expansive and, one may argue, exhaustive journey through what makes us, as "the Being that questions its own Being", how we are. His study into the human experience leaves us with various comportments or ways of being that provide explanations for our many ways of being-in-the-world. One such way of being is *Being-towards-death*, our awareness of our own finitude, and the possibility of our own impossibility. Heidegger contends that our state-of-mind in light of this being is one of *Anxiety*. In a way this is detached from our ordinary usage of Anxiety, but I believe that Heidegger's notion provides us with a perspective that combats our everyday conception of Anxiety and challenges the way in which discussions about mental health are carried out.

With Heidegger it is difficult to perform an analysis of one topic without delving into his entire project – an aspect of his that one may praise or critique – but in the interest of saving time, and a full analysis of *Being & Time*, I shall limit myself to three terms: *Being-towards-death*, *Anxiety*, and *temporality*.

These need fleshing out because of Heidegger's particular use of language. In an attempt to unconceal the nature of language as a tool for use, Heidegger's language can be described as "violent" (in his own terms). In reading his works there is a struggle – both in the ordinary sense due to his writing style and word use, and a "phenomenological struggle" as we encounter ideas that seem to attack our everyday conceptions. Dasein " *is ontically closest to itself and ontologically farthest; but pre-ontologically it is surely no stranger*" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 37). Dasein's everyday comportment is as proximal as a "mode of being" can be, and yet our understanding of the "Being of Dasein" seems clouded. In spite of this, if 3000 years of philosophy has taught us anything, it is that we can still perform analyses – this refers to the "*pre-ontological*", the "Being of Dasein" is clouded but not totally unattainable. This requires some work against the current, to challenge the work of the *They* is met with discomfort. Heidegger's response to the leviathan of "phenomenological violence" against his project is a violent juggernaut of his own – a poetical language of attempted

authentic discourse. This language is aware of itself as language, and in its manipulation of meaning hopes to unconceal something fruitful.

*Being-towards-death* comes as a consequence of a discussion of wholes. Division I is an analysis of Dasein's structure, starting with everydayness and revealing notions about the existence. But to truly understand something, Heidegger contends, it must be "*in such a way as not to miss the unity of those structural items which belong to it and are possible*" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 275). To understand the unity of Dasein, we must understand it as a whole.

Dasein is not infinite. Dasein is born, lives, then dies. Death is the background that gives the foreground meaning – Division I built up this foreground, the content of Dasein, but how is this all understood? Its end.

Integral to Dasein is that it must die. We know this. We have made up platitudes to "console" ourselves – "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away", "live everyday like it's your last", "death comes for all of us" – these indicate is our non-conscious immediate understanding of Death, but not an explicit focus. We know it is coming; we know it is everywhere, but we flee. This is the tranquilising comfort of the everyday – inauthentic Being-towards-death is "*one of these days one will die too, in the end; but right now it has nothing to do with us*" (Heidegger, 1962, p. 297) – this is still a mode of *being-towards-death* that highlights its nature. We are always on our way to an end; death is indefinite and everywhere. The possibility of impossibility could literally lie around the corner, and when faced with this our possibility is revealed. That is to say Dasein can view itself as the Being of possibility – "we only have one life, better make it count".

To flee Death is never the answer - the authentic mode of Being-towards-death is one of "anticipation". Fleeing from Death is Dasein's response in its everydayness. This can come out in many ways: from consoling with the notion of an afterlife, a "better place", to distraction and the maintenance of an ignorance of the future ("what happens, happens, it is out of my control!"). The inauthentic Being-towards-death of everyday Dasein in the face of *Anxiety* is one of tranquilisation, of consoling.

Yet this is an unrealistic response. People do not confront the danger of the outside world with glee at the sheer possibility lying before them. They are *Anxious*. *Anxiety* is not to be confused

with fear: when Dasein is afraid, it is afraid of something. There is always an object to fear – that big spider, a scary science teacher, clowns – but *Anxiety* lacks such an object. *Anxiety* is anxious about no-thing – it is *Anxiety* “*in the face of death*”. This is a manifestation of Dasein’s concern; *Anxiety* reveals Dasein’s Being as one of Care (concern with itself, projects, and others), but ultimately also as a Being of potentiality. “*Anxiety is anxious about its potentiality-for-being*” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 310), *Anxiety* is primordial to Dasein, it is essential to our being Dasein, but not only this: it serves a purpose in “*disclosing the uttermost possibility*” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 310). *Anxiety* is essentially being-towards-death, although *Anxiety* could be said to be the state of mind associated with this comportment.

*Anxiety* is not, as one can see in their own lives, always oriented towards death explicitly. It is a state of mind that finds itself in many aspects of life, but its roots always lie in our being-towards-death – with death as “*not to be outstripped*” and “*indefinite*”. *Anxiety* brings Dasein face to face with itself, much to the chagrin of our everyday Being, incurring a violence. Our outwards perception of ourselves and our lives (as everyday and, for the most part, inauthentic) is met at loggerheads by the revelation of Dasein as the being of possibility. And we may flee or confront.

Heidegger’s notion of *temporality* is *ecstatic*. Once again this is not in the ordinary sense. It is best understood through its Latin origin ex-stasis: a “standing outside of itself”. Dasein’s understanding of time is not one mere moment, it isn’t just future, present or past oriented, but all at once. It is an ecstatical unity – we do not experience time as mere moments that pass never to be considered again, we are *beings in time*. Time is not a succession of past to present to future. These occur simultaneously, Dasein engages with its past in the present to inform its future, it can look ahead to possible futures or back to pasts that could have been.

Further this commingles with the rest of his theory. Take Understanding, an existential that reveals Dasein’s Being to itself as one of possibility through its projective nature. In this project making Dasein is “ahead-of-itself”. Another mode of Dasein being “ahead-of-itself” is *Anxiety* - Death is a “not-yet” becomes the focus of Dasein’s attention. But this anxiety can often lie in an inauthentic futural mode of being of Dasein. Dasein can understand itself as a being of possibility in its finitude, but can nonetheless await Death, as a moment yet to come, as present-at-hand yet far off.

This is a fleeing. To await death is to separate it from one's being in the present – it is eventual but not relevant now.

Anticipation is the authentic mode of being-towards-death, which in ordinary terms may sound a little sadistic, but “anticipation” here is the knowledge not just that death is that which marks the end of the being of possibility, but that this is indefinite. To flee this is never the answer - fleeing is the everyday urge in the face of death. This comes out in ways such as: consoling with the notion of an afterlife, a “better place”, or distraction and an ignorance of the future (“what happens, happens. It is out of my control”). The inauthentic Being-towards-death of everyday Dasein in the face of *Anxiety* is one of tranquilisation, of consoling.

Death is everywhere at all times, the possibility of no-thing lurks everywhere at all times. Living with this mind forces one to mitigate the panic around death – this is resoluteness in *anxiety*: a steadfastness in the face of what is all around and yet to come, and taking up of possibility as a result.

Anxiety in an ordinary<sup>1</sup> sense steers clear of metaphysics, as do people for the most part. The term has become physiological in its use, being less about the state of the individual and more about the symptoms it confers. The American Psychological Association provide a handy definition of anxiety as “*an emotion characterized by feelings of tension, worried thoughts and physical changes like increased blood pressure*” (American Psychological Association, 2021) which, if one excludes the “emotion” ascription, is remarkably similar to the effects of high blood pressure or a heart attack. Anxiety is a symptom to be cured, an unnecessary interference that gets in the way of functioning and an ordinary life.

Ironically, Heidegger would no doubt agree with this in a sense – it is an interference in everyday life, and that is precisely where its value lies. Heidegger's perception of an authentic life is not an easy life, this is where we can see that his ascriptions of authentic and inauthentic do not stand

---

<sup>1</sup> I will use ordinary to denote the sense in which terms are used in an un-philosophical sense. I would use the word “everyday” here, but because of Heidegger this word is laden with alternative meaning. I shall also distinguish between “*Anxiety*” and “Anxiety” – the former Heideggerian, and the latter ordinary language.

in for good and bad – in a lot of ways an authentic mode of being is a difficult one, it does not necessitate happiness or pleasure. Heidegger's authentic mode of being for Dasein is one that takes up *Anxiety* resolutely. It does not flee, or attempt to fix it, because that would be to view *Anxiety* as an affliction, a symptom of a problem. And while it is a symptom, the underlying cause is Being – to try and rid oneself from *Anxiety* is to flee from Dasein's Nature.

To explain this dramatic difference in notions, I wish to draw from Heidegger's Question Concerning Technology where he discusses the notion of "technological enframing". His idea is that technology reveals the natural world to us in a certain way, that way being one of "*standing reserve*" (Heidegger M. , 1977). *Standing reserve* has the character of "to be used", it shows nature as "a resource at our disposal". But it is not only in this sense that we are technologically enframed, this enframing encompasses our mindset too – we think in a technological way. This way is one of means and ends, production lines and purposes. We are alienated from things in themselves, and in this Dasein is alienated from itself – we become the organisers of standing reserve, "*Enframing [...] banishes man into a kind of revealing which is ordering*" (Heidegger M. , 1977, p. 27).

Where this is relevant to the discussion at hand is Dasein's technologically enframed view of itself. I wish to contend that contemporary mental health discussions, in general, have been technised, and in the case of Anxiety, there is a tendency to view *Anxiety* in a technological way that sends us further down the rabbit hole and, hence, further from an authentic being-in-the-world.

To phrase this in a potentially clearer light, I believe the current ethos of mental health is one that actually further alienates Dasein from its Being than *average everydayness* already does. *Anxiety* is viewed as a flaw, a weakness in functioning. It is viewed in much the same way as a broken part of machinery. The language around this topic mirrors my point: an extremely anxious person may view themselves as "broken" or afflicted by "mental illness" as if this comportment of Dasein was, to the mind, what blocked arteries are to the heart, a malfunctioning part in need of repair.

A consequence of this approach to Anxiety is that these individuals need to be "fixed". But let's unpack this term. To fix something implies that there is, first, something wrong, and secondly,

an ideal standard upon which this wrongness is based. This seems in direct contrast to Dasein's being as one of potentiality for being (how much potential can there be if there is a specific Dasein that Dasein ought to emulate?). Further this notion very much separates *Anxiety* from Dasein's being – not the most absurd notion in an ordinary sense, anxiety does feel like an affliction. This is an example of phenomenological violence. That *Anxiety* is not just some unfortunate tribulation that we can get away from, but a part of our very Being sends everyday Dasein into a state of discomfort.

The approach of ordinary mental health discussions is one of fleeing. Rather than acknowledge the underlying nature of Anxiety we want to write it off as a “fix-able” single event:

“Oh, I’m just a little anxious about exams.”

“I’m a pretty anxious person, so I get worked up about these sorts of things.”

The notion of an “anxious person” is very much tautologous to Heidegger. His response would be something along the lines of: “Of course you are anxious, you are a person!”. This doesn't sit well with the ordinary notion – how can we fix ourselves then? This indicates the very enframing the technological view conceals. In asking how to “fix” oneself, one demonstrates that one is inside the frame. We live in a society that tries to do away with anxiety (“here, have a Xanax”), to maximise the functioning of its members. This response is not one that comes out of concern, but Dasein as a resource. If, through *Anxiety* Dasein starts to become aware of its Being, then doubtless an awareness of the technological enframing would soon follow. Of course, there is a grey area where this anxiety seems to consume and destroy, my critique is aimed at the contemporary paranoia regarding anxiety.

The response then is “what is the right way to be?”. Which seems valid. If we are destined, as being-towards-death, to be *Anxious*, are we doomed to suffer in this manner? To follow the Heideggerian thread, I believe the response is that we must be aware of this frame. In no longer viewing *Anxiety* as an affliction, and instead as a primordial predisposition of Dasein, one can see that anxiety does not lie in the mere actions of which one is anxious. To repeat myself, *Anxiety is anxious in the face of death*. Dasein is anxious because of its finitude, we only have so much time to be, to do. There is an existential<sup>2</sup> panic that this entails, but if we can see that this panic is not merely

---

<sup>2</sup> Ordinary sense

because of the things themselves but because of Dasein as a being of projectivity, then what is before us is neutralised.

A critique of Heidegger's view is that this could send us into a state of inactivity. Since *Anxiety* is a natural comportment of Dasein, and embracing this is a part of being authentic, one could say that the way to be in light of this information is to simply accept one's *Anxiety* and live within this discomfort in some kind of constant panic-attack mode of existence, or maybe even just recede into a limbo of inactivity. But this is to misinterpret resoluteness and Heidegger's project in general. Resoluteness doesn't mean to suffer in silence through the discomfort of anxiety, but embracing it, and our being-towards-death, with anticipation. In moments of anxiety about seemingly menial things, to remind oneself that this is really an *anxiety* in the face of death, and to take up the possibility that one is and can be with this in mind is how one can be authentic. Anxiety is a necessary step in this process, it unconceals our very being to us in a positive manner, and we can then take it up. To flee from this is to flee from our Being as Dasein.

We live in a culture of technisation. Aspects of our being that are ontically closest to us have been nihilated unknowingly. One need only look at our everyday conception of time versus the notion of temporality: we have attempted to trap time as a finite resource, to allot moments and minutes to activities to organise our day, and we have alienated ourselves from the notion of Time, not as a ticking of a hand, as a passing of moments, a succession of events. In much the same way, the way mental health is dealt with, as a malfunctioning of the machinery of Dasein, we lose something. We lose an understanding of ourselves, an insight that, once understood, in a sense liberates. Anxiety is removed of its burdensome quality it possesses in the ordinary sense. It is removed from the category of "problem", or "affliction", and instead it becomes a tool of insight. Rather than simply fretting for the sake of it, being consumed by a sense of anguish, Heidegger's conception of *Anxiety* has the liberating quality of revelation. Just as an understanding of time beyond clocks and schedules gives us a different outlook, so too does this notion of anxiety – everyone is anxious, everyone will be anxious as long as they are Dasein.

## *Bibliography*

American Psychological Association. (2021, 04 23). *Anxiety*. Retrieved 04 23, 2021, from American Psychological Association: <https://www.apa.org/topics/anxiety>

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and Time*. (J. Macquarrie, & E. Robinson, Eds.) Oxford, UK: Blackwell.

Heidegger, M. (1977). The Question Concerning Technology. In W. Lovitt, *The Question Concerning Technology and other essays* (pp. 3-49). New York & London: Garland Publishing Inc.