

Reflections on the Heideggerian notion of Death.

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Death “resists interpretation” and easy understanding¹, says Heidegger. It is difficult to deny the fact that every living being will eventually come to an end of its life. For it is, at least the experience we have had all our lives, especially in the contemporary universe of mediatized images and infinite flows of information. It is difficult to imagine a day where we are not confronted by death: caused by global politics, irrationalities of nature or sheer improbable accidents.

Death, it is universally agreed, is the necessary end of every birth. The problem, however, is that we can only understand death as it happens to another, for the very meaning of death is that our conscious existence will end with it. ‘We’ will no longer *be there* to experience it. Even still, or perhaps for this very reason, death remains a central concern for Heidegger in *Being and Time*. Furthermore, and this is vital, that death is capable of giving a clue to find an answer to the central concern of his inquiry in *Being and Time*, i.e., finding an answer to the question of the meaning of Being. It is not primarily an attempt to understand death as an experience of our social existence, as we experience every time when someone departs from our life. It is necessary, therefore to begin our inquiry by keeping in mind that the central concern of Heidegger is to analyse death as an existential analysis. It is through this line of inquiry that one is able to clearly delineate death as the impossibility of completeness.

Let us begin by trying to trace the basic argument that Heidegger develops before he begins his discussion on death. Accordingly, I shall begin with a rough introductory sketch of the three most important Heideggerian notions at the base of his analysis of death: ‘Dasein’, ‘Being-in-the-world’ and ‘care’.

At the beginning of *Being and Time* Heidegger claims that his objective is to find an answer to the question of the meaning of Being. The first decision to make in this regard, he notes, is selecting an entity whose analysis would give us a clue about the Being of entities in general. There is infinity of possibilities, since “anything we can think about, speak about, or

¹ Heidegger, 1962, p290

deal with involves beings in some way”². Out of these possibilities, he decides to analyse the Being of the entity which alone is capable of asking this question of Being, i.e., ourselves as the inquirers and thereby introduces, perhaps, the most famous of Heideggerian notions: Dasein. The reason for selecting this neologism is the fact that all the terms generally used to designate this entity, like the Human Being, the Subject or ego, always presupposes some knowledge about this entity, which he does not want to carry along.

According to Richard Polt, “one of [Heidegger’s] most important other expressions for Dasein’s Being [is]: Being-in-the-world”³. Let us focus briefly on this crucial concept. Heidegger warns his readers that this should not be confused with Dasein is *in* the world like, say, water is *in* a glass⁴. Here Heidegger gives the brilliant example of a chair ‘touching’ a wall⁵. He says that even if the space between the wall and the chair is zero, one cannot ‘touch’ the other. Why does he claim that? Imagine a chair placed besides a wall. From the point of view of physics, for example, we know that even if the ‘human eye’ cannot perceive it, there is no ‘gap’ between the chair and the wall because the air between the two entities is made of atoms and so are the chair and the wall. If some one who can perceive the world through atoms were to observe it, he or she would even find it difficult to distinguish between the chair and the wall since everything might look like a big mix of moving atomic particles. In this way, it becomes meaningless to say that chair only touches the wall, even if the gap between them is zero, since neither of those entities encounters each other *as* entities. Only someone who is in a context of a meaningful universe, or in a “world”, can ‘touch’ another entity. Being-in-the-world means this experience of living within a horizon of meaning which gives us the ability to distinguish entities as entities.

Heidegger says that this “*totality* of Being-in-the-world as a structural whole has revealed itself as care”⁶. This means the totality of Dasein’s Being-in-the-world has three interrelated aspects; “*existentiality, facticity, and Being-fallen*”⁷. Taken together, these three aspects encompass the notion of ‘care’.

Existentiality means that for Dasein, in its Being, that very Being is an issue. How do we understand this? At every moment, we are faced with various possibilities from which we

² Polt, 1999, p2

³ Ibid, p46

⁴ Heidegger, 1962, p79

⁵ Ibid, p81

⁶ Ibid, p274, emphasis added. It should be noted that Heidegger does not really give a clear cut account of this term although he repeatedly claims that this is crucial to understand his analysis death. The general idea, however, is not very difficult to grasp

⁷ Ibid, p235

choose one as our own. I can spend the whole day tomorrow on the bed, go to the university, study at home, go to the cinema or, at a broader level, I can plan my life to become an army soldier, a guerrilla fighter or a NGO activist fighting for peace. What I call ‘myself’ will always be determined by this dimension which is, in a way, ahead of me because it is ‘not-yet’ realized, something always outstanding. However, this ‘not-yet’ part has a real impact on my self *qua* Dasein and, thus, has a Being of its own. This future potentiality is that, sake of which I live as I am or, in much more radical sense, I *am* this ‘not-yet’. Heidegger calls this Dasein’s “*Being-ahead-of-itself*”⁸.

However, this should not lead us to the conclusion that Dasein is an isolated entity whose only relation, so to speak, is with the future potentiality. On the contrary, this “*Being-ahead-of-itself*” is always tied to the *Being-in-the-world*. Dasein is *always already* thrown into a world of meaning. Heidegger’s notion of ‘facticity is aimed at this experience of “*Being-already-in-the-world*”⁹(*ibid*, p236) and this makes him extend his hyphenated phrase further: “*ahead-of-itself-in-already-being-in-a-world*”¹⁰

For Heidegger this does not yet exhaust all the aspects of Dasein. Not only I am a future possibility thrown in to a world as a *Being-in-the-world*, I am always ‘fallen’ into the everyday world, in the sense that I live alongside other entities, which I take for granted. I have an identity, given to me by the world I have fallen into – Heidegger calls it the “*they-self*” which should be opposed to “*the authentic Self*”¹¹. This way Heidegger completes his three interrelated aspects of Dasein as care: “*ahead-of-itself-Being-already-in-(the-world) as Being-alongside (entities encountered within-the-world)*”¹².

Now we are sufficiently equipped to focus our attention to the Division II of *Being and Time* where Heidegger gives his detailed attention to the question we are mainly concerned with in this essay: death as a possibility. We already have a certain sense about the question of possibility in the above discussion about existentiality. What is not yet realized but still hangs merely has a possibility in Dasein’s existence has a real role in its life, for it determines its present choices.

Heidegger begins this part reminding the reader of the overall objective of his endeavour, i.e., to find an answer to the question of the meaning of Being. Since he has

⁸ *Ibid*, p236

⁹ *Ibid*, p236

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p236

¹¹ *Ibid*, p167

¹² *Ibid*, p237

approached this goal by analysing the Being of a particular entity, Dasein, he faces a further complication of not giving a complete enough account of it, sufficient to reach a general conception of Being. As Piotr Hoffman puts it, “the ultimate clarification of the meaning of Being, demands an appropriately ultimate... interpretation of Dasein”¹³.

So far, he has only analysed Dasein in its average everydayness, and he is asking himself if this is enough to claim that he has interpreted Dasein as whole. The reader is reminded of his preliminary conclusion where he says that care is the totality of the structural whole of Dasein’s constitution ¹⁴. However, he quickly points out a certain incoherency in using the word ‘totality’. As mentioned above, one aspect of Dasein’s Being as care is existence and this means the condition in which at each moment we are faced with many possibilities, potentialities-for-Being or, in other words there is always something *in* Dasein which is ‘not-yet’ realised. In this sense his analysis of Dasein so far has failed to give a complete interpretation of it as a *whole* or as a *totality*, because when we say that an essential aspect of Dasein’s totality as care is existence, we admit that there is always something ‘outstanding’ in it which makes it *not* - whole¹⁵.

Does Dasein have the potentiality to be a complete whole? It is clear that, as long as Dasein exists, it will always have something outstanding, a possibility yet to come. Here, however, Heidegger makes an important observation: the ‘end’ of Dasein, i.e., its death itself is a one of these possibilities which is also the absolute limit of “whatever totality is possible for Dasein” hinting that in this phenomenon of death one can find an answer to the question of completing Dasein ¹⁶. Dasein’s potentiality-for-Being always reaches its limit in death.

He quickly points out the paradox of taking ‘death’ as the point from which one can take Dasein as whole. In death, as the end of the Being-in-the-world, Dasein loses its very existence. It is no longer ‘there’ to experience the completion of its Being. Here Heidegger turns his attention to the possibility of experiencing the death of others. Although we cannot experience our own death, we can, nevertheless, experience the death of others. We can objectively access the phenomenon of death. We can mourn for the deceased, we can write about him or her in order to contextualise the contribution he/she made to the world as war

¹³ Guignon, 1993, p196

¹⁴ Heidegger, 1962, p275

¹⁵ This is, once again, not the only problem he poses himself; his analysis of Dasein so far could hardly lay any claim for *authenticity*. In his analysis of the ‘they-self’ he makes a passing reference to the ‘authentic self’ (ibid, 167), but never really illustrates this further because, as mentioned above, he has mainly concerned himself with Dasein in its average everydayness. Taken together, this lack of ‘wholeness’ and ‘authenticity’, keeps his analysis of Dasein incomplete, and, as a consequence, his quest for the meaning of Being in general, unfulfilled

¹⁶ Heidegger, 1962, p277

heroes but the more we analyse it the more we realise that there is no way we can actually *experience* the end of his or her Being *qua* Dasein. Furthermore, notes Heidegger, the relationship with the deceased is not exactly similar to the relationship a Dasein may have with a present-at-hand object. The lifeless body of ‘there’ that has lost its Being is something we will be-with, in a way different from the way we will be with other inanimate objects. In addition, it is the nature of Dasein to be in Being-with-one-another in the world. This particular nature of the Being allows one Dasein to be represented or replaced by another. In our everyday life, we constantly engage in roles where we are performing in someone else’s stead.

The problem remains, however, that no matter how unique this relationship that the living may have with the one who is no longer alive, we cannot experience the “the authentic Being-come-to-an-end”¹⁷. As Heidegger puts it “we have no way of access to the loss-of-Being as such which the dying man ‘suffers’”¹⁸. In other words, we do not know the meaning of death. The same applies to the issue of our possibility of Being with Being-with-one-another in the world. Although it is possible to replace one driver, for instance, with another, no one can replace one Dasein’s experience of dying. Even when someone sacrifices his/her life, that does not mean that the life of the person for which he/she sacrificed herself will be rid of the death. One’s death is something that will always be one’s own.

This analysis helps Heidegger to come to two important conclusions. First of all, “[b]y its very essence, death is in every case mine”, i.e., no one can represent my death for me¹⁹. Secondly, “death signifies a peculiar possibility-of-Being in which the very Being of one’s own Dasein is an issue”²⁰. In other words, as we have already seen, death should be understood existentially because it is one of the potentialities-for-Being, but now it becomes clear that it is different from other potentialities-for-Being as it is a potentiality which can *end* Dasein’s Being as Being-in-the-world.

This leads to the problematic nature of the terms used so far to conceptualize death as a potentiality-for-Being. Up to this point Heidegger has used expressions like ‘not-yet’ and ‘outstanding’ to designate this potentiality. But both these terms connote something that, although it is still missing, can be actualized, like a missing piece in a jigsaw puzzle. On the other hand, Heidegger has already shown the impossibility of experiencing death, which

¹⁷ Ibid, p 282

¹⁸ Ibid, p282

¹⁹ Heidegger, 1962, p284

²⁰ Ibid, p284

means, precisely, that it is not a potentiality that Dasein can actualize because it will no longer *be* there to experience this actualization.

If we cannot experience death and if we cannot understand it as a thing in the world, or as a 'presence-at-hand', how can we understand it?

Heidegger's answer is that it should be understood as "something *towards which Dasein comports itself... Death is something that stands before us – something impending*"²¹. It is a pure possibility that constitute an essential part of Dasein's Being which cannot be outstripped. Every human being dies and this means that death will always be the end towards which every Dasein exists. In the same way that what is outstanding and what is "not-yet" is always already a part of Dasein's being, death too is a necessary part. The moment we are born, we are moving towards death, as the destiny of our lives. This is why that too becomes a necessary part of our Being. Heidegger terms this as Dasein's 'Being-towards-death'. If a Dasein stands before itself facing this possibility, then it becomes clear that its relations to other Dasein's are not relevant with regards to this primordial Being-towards-death.

This does not mean that in the average everydayness, in its Being-in-the-world, Dasein lives his or her life in this anticipation. On the contrary, we try to run away from this fact and cover it up, postponing this radical encounter with our finitude to a distant future. But Heidegger does not see it as a problem, in fact he believes that this merely expresses one way of "maintaining oneself in this Being"²² although it is by no means the authentic way of doing that. On the other hand, if someone is willing to take the consequences of admitting that one's existence is this absolute finite singularity that should lead one to re-evaluate the meaning of his/her entire existence and by extension one's Being-in-the-world. Heidegger calls this authentic way of relating to one's own Being-towards-death anticipation. It does not mean one should go looking *for* death as this is not something you can actualize. Instead, we must understand it as a possibility, we must put up with it as a possibility, which means we must keep it *as* a possibility. Thus "[t]he closest closeness which one may have in Being towards death as a possibility, is as far as possible from anything actual"²³. In other words, one can say, when we are closest to death as a possibility we are closest to life as an actuality.

²¹ Ibid, pp293-294 (Heidegger's emphasis)

²² Ibid, p295

²³ Ibid, pp306-307

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