

Senior Project: Death and the Other

My premise for this project was borne out of my frustration with a certain chapter of Heidegger's work 'Being and Time', in which he addresses the fundamental issue of Dasein's wholeness being unattainable in life along with the possibility of experiencing the death of Others. I will thoroughly explain Heidegger's viewpoints throughout his proposals and highlight the areas in which I believe his logic begins to derail. My aim is to bring to light what I view as a small contradiction in this chapter of his writing that eventually may become a larger issue moving forward through his text. This small issue is Heidegger's position on the death of Others. I believe that Heidegger leaves a very significant portion of his theory uninvestigated. I will make the point that Heidegger misinterprets death as we can experience it by putting the emphasis on our own deaths, even though the only death we can truly experience is that of Others. And since the death of Others is inherently linked, in his theory, to the possibility of wholeness within Dasein, I believe that this inconsistency will snowball into a larger problem within Heidegger's theory for the ultimate wholeness of Dasein.

Heidegger begins his chapter on Being-Towards-Death with reminding the reader of Dasein's modality of *Being towards* certain possibilities, in this case, *Being towards* as an important aspect of Being-a-whole. Heidegger will continue on with this thought more thoroughly, but for now reminds us that Dasein exists for the sake of itself; there is always something left to do for Dasein. He explains that even if Dasein were to be overcome with hopelessness, it does not tear Dasein away from its possibilities. The hopelessness is just one

way it may approach a certain situation. An essential part of Dasein is that “there is always something still outstanding...a lack of totality signifies that there is something still outstanding in one’s potentiality-for-Being.” (Being and Time, p.236) Heidegger uses this introduction to inform his explanation of Dasein’s Being-a-whole by stating that when Dasein is no longer wanting, that it effectively has reached its annihilation of itself, it is *no-longer-Being-there*. For Heidegger, death and its relation to time is what colors our life, it is what gives meaning to the actions we make and the possibilities and opportunities we take. Dasein lacks, and death is what allows Dasein’s possibility of Being-a-Whole, providing it with an end in which it has no other choice but to conclude. By understanding this reality within wholeness, an authentic Dasein can take part in the freedom of possibility it brings forth. To get a better grasp of this concept, Heidegger poses the question of whether a wholeness within Dasein can exist at all, as well as the possibility of experiencing the death of Others. In that we cannot experience our own deaths, Heidegger offers that the death of Others may act as a substitute. When one experiences the coming-to-an-end of Others Dasein, one can experience Dasein at its whole.

When Dasein reaches its wholeness in death, it simultaneously loses the Being of its “there”. By its transition to no-longer-Dasein, it gets lifted right out of the possibility of experiencing this transition and of understanding it as something experienced...In the dying of the Other we can experience that remarkable phenomenon of Being which may be defined as the change-over of an entity from Dasein’s kind of Being (or life) to no-longer-Dasein. (Being and Time, p.238)

Here I have compiled two quotes from this chapter that I see as a cohesive narrative that, for me, hits a dead end and is not further investigated to its conclusion. In these quotes,

Heidegger is making the point that since Dasein is defined by its Being-there, at the moment of



its death it is no longer *there* and can no longer be Dasein, therefore, it cannot experience the transition to its completeness and encounter its own death. Just a few sentences later, Heidegger then suggests that the death of the Other may provide a substitute for the experience of our own death and a glimpse of the experience of this transition. However, on the subject of substitution, Heidegger completely rejects this notion of experience through Others Dasein as it is inherently *his* and cannot be substituted for another.

Heidegger then goes on to explain that even after

Dasein has transitioned over to a Being-just-present-at-hand-and-no-more, even its corpse is not just another corporeal thing but still something more; “...we encounter something *unalive*, which

has lost its life.” (Being and Time, p.239) He makes an allowance for the uncomfortable in-

between of an object that is ready-to-hand but once was something more; an object of ‘concern.’

This leads to the concept of being-with the dead. Heidegger surmises that we can continue

Being-with the deceased but that implies that both Dasein are Being-in-the-world together and

since this cannot be as the no-longer-Dasein has passed on, it is an inauthentic experience.

Dasein can experience the loss and suffering of the death of Others but as long as it is still

Dasein, cannot genuinely gain the sense of coming-to-an-end. “...the suggestion that the dying

of Others is a substitute theme for the ontological analysis of Dasein's totality and the settling of its account, rests on a presupposition which demonstrably fails all together to recognize Dasein's kind of Being." (Being and Time, p.283) Heidegger is making the point that Dasein is a Being in which its *coming to an end* plays an integral role and cannot be removed from itself or else ceases to be Dasein. And since one cannot physically die for another by taking the Other's death away from them, genuinely having that experience is not within Dasein's grasp. "By its very essence, death is in every case mine...death signifies a peculiar possibility-of-Being in which the very Being of one's own Dasein is an issue." (Being and Time, p.241) So, granted, death cannot be experienced by anyone for anyone else but what is the personal experience of death?

I feel that it is at this point that Heidegger derails his own investigation into the death of Others concerning the wholeness of Dasein. Obviously, the goal for Heidegger is to further examine the Being-a-whole of Dasein; to insist that being the entity that Dasein is, it can only be completed by its own annihilation, unable to authentically take part in anyone's death but its own. But in this investigation, I believe Heidegger glosses over an important aspect of the query he poses, the inherent existential nature of death and Being-in-the-World. By Heidegger's own supposition he suggests that death is something not possible to experience as Dasein since once Dasein comes to an end it is no longer Dasein. So, although death is *my own* and it is an integral part of what makes Dasein, hence Being-towards-Death, it is an experience that we do not and cannot experience as Dasein since we will no longer be Being-there. From this I must conclude that the only true understanding of death Dasein can actually experience is through the death of Others. Heidegger allows for the idea that Dasein in Being-in-the-World can substitute itself in daily life tasks, essentially taking on other roles for the sake of Being-in-the-world-with-others.

But delineates his point that this representation is not changing Dasein or becoming other Dasein, it is just a necessary way for us to be in the world together. This is because Dasein's possibility-of-Being cannot be touched by this representation and is essential for Dasein's coming to an end. I understand Heidegger's assertion here, that death is the completion of Dasein, it is what motivates its possibilities and therefore is its most vital aspect. However, there is an issue I must confront, an issue Heidegger actually brings up himself, about the problem with death as an existential phenomenon.

“Dying is not an event; it is a phenomenon to be understood existentially; and it is to be understood in a distinctive sense which must be still more closely delimited...The only remaining possibility for the analysis of death as dying, is either to form a purely existential conception of this phenomenon, or else forgo any ontological understanding of it.” (Being and Time, p.241)

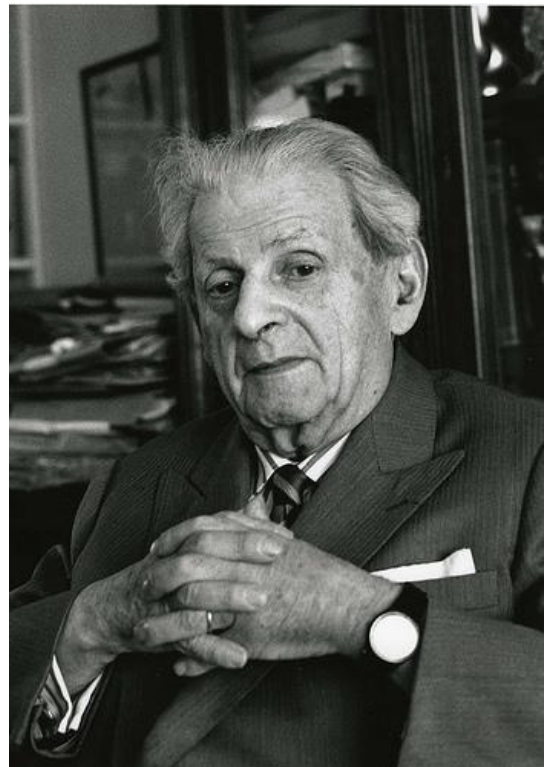
This is where Heidegger effectively leaves the subject, and where I wish to continue. I see the only logical direction to take this query is through existential means. Dying and death are fundamental and inescapable parts of human existence, and they make a major impact on our lives. Heidegger does the job of explaining why dying our own deaths impact our lives so dramatically not only later in life, but all throughout our lives. However, I believe he leaves the experience of the death of Others too soon and with too little exploration. As Dasein is Being-there, its relation to death in its most authentic form is insignificant as it will never “live” to see it. With this in mind, Dasein's experience of death as opposed to coming-to-an-end is inherently Othered. Dasein's only genuine experience of death as it is still Dasein is the experience of the death of Others, it is the only death Dasein will be able to digest. Heidegger claims that the death of Others cannot truly be experienced because it is *his* Dasein and not ours, and that is true, in

the sense that Dasein is coming-to-an-end, but to be present to watch another Dasein come to their own end cannot be insignificant. With the death of Others, Dasein may get a glimpse, or several, of what coming-to-an-end in this world may be and be reminded of the anxiety of their own death, making for an actually tangible experience. A real-world example of death's interpretation being through that of the Other, is what we are all currently and unavoidably wrought with every day with the Covid pandemic, getting sick. As I sit here with the knowledge that my husband has just tested positive for covid I am faced with my own experience of anxiety-towards-death. However, the anxiety is not for my own death but that of my partner's or my other family members. When one is faced with their own mortality, one tends to think less of themselves and more of the Other. Since, as Heidegger suggests, Dasein always has something left to do, what is there to do when there is nothing left? If Dasein has reached its most completeness, as far as it can get before death, it has no other choice but to look outward.

I propose that it is not our own deaths alone that provide the anxiety that goes along with Being-towards-death but that experiencing the death of Others, as it is our only knowledge of death, plays a large role as well. My proposition does not discount the validity of Dasein's *Being-towards-Death* in its pursuit of wholeness, rather I am more concerned with how that wholeness is achieved. As Dasein is always Being-there, being present in its most authentic form, there is no way Dasein could ever authentically take part in its own demise as it would have already ceased to be Dasein. At its completion, as it becomes whole, Dasein is not present, so it cannot authentically experience death in any form if, as Heidegger suggests, the death of the Other cannot be seen as an authentic experience of death for Dasein. Yet, Dasein would have no understanding of death to the point where it would almost be seen as a myth if it had never seen

the death of Others. After all, we would have nothing to judge death against, it would just be a faraway idea, if we had never seen another die. This is another integral issue within Heidegger's assertion for the death of the Other. Our anxiety in which Being-towards-death stems from would have no tangible meaning for Dasein if it were just a spoken concept and not a clear, digestible experience in which other Dasein could take part.

One of Heidegger's most notable critics, Emmanuel Levinas, authored a book by the name of "God, Death, and Time," in which he proceeds to heavily dismantle and analyze Heidegger's Being and theorize about the truth of the Other. Levinas challenges Heidegger's *being* completely by asserting that rather than one being one's most authentic self within the preoccupation of one's own death, it is precisely the opposite, that the caring for the other goes "beyond-being," as the most authentic self is the most selfless, and therefore, most ethical



self. Levinas argues that what is most authentic is one's own sense of moral agency and responsibility in which one cannot move, change, or escape, that reveals one's own true individuation. His claims lie heavily on the ethics of *being* rather than Heidegger's more staunchly phenomenological approach rooted in experience.

“Time is not the limitation of being but its relationship with infinity. Death is not annihilation but the question that is necessary for this relationship with infinity, or time, to be produced. The same problems are posed when one speaks of death as my death. The relationship to my own dying does not have the meaning of knowledge or of experience, even if this had only the sense of a presentiment, of prescience. One does not know, one cannot be present at, one’s annihilation...” (God, Death, and Time, p.19)

Here, Levinas is unpacking the issues I have brought up with Heidegger’s Being and its associated impact with time. However, Levinas is going further to question death’s role as an annihilation in the first place. He purports that one’s own death, rather than being an experience, is nothing since it is an unknowable act. It cannot truly be a personal experience since we cannot be there for our own annihilation. “My relationship with my death is noknowledge.” (God, Death, and Time, p.19) In *being*, our only true knowledge of death is that which we see in others, since we cannot experience our own death, the relationship we have with the death of the other is the only knowledge we can attain about death. “This is a nonknowledge that translated into experience through my ignorance of the day of my death, an ignorance by virtue of which the “me” writes checks on an empty account, as if he had eternity before him.” (God, Death, and Time, p.21) Levinas, pushes back against Heidegger’s claims of Dasein having an integral relationship with its own death by stating that death is always impersonal to us, we will always be disconnected from the experience since, although it is our own death, the experience is not for us know. Heidegger appears to work from the assumption that the concept of death is self-evident, however, death comes into our world through the death of others. As children we have no way to grasp the construct, we are so totally oblivious to mortality that we must be taught

what death is and what it means. The concept of death is a learning experience, something that takes not only time to understand, but others to teach it. This brings about the question of the alienation of Dasein, how it's isolated from the Other, and the issue of wholeness.

Left with just Heidegger's depiction of Dasein and its pursuit of wholeness, it is clear that Heidegger did not believe wholeness was possible for itself. "Death is the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein. Thus death reveals itself as that possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped." (Being and Time, p.294) Heidegger does not allow for an absolute wholeness for Dasein to ever be achievable because it can never meet itself in death. I believe this wholeness cannot be found within Heidegger's work because, as Levinas so astutely points out, Heidegger removes Dasein's personhood too greatly away from other Dasein. When Heidegger remarks on the authenticity of Dasein, he essentially creates a state in which Dasein cannot be authentic or "pure" if it is in the world interacting with others. He insists that within the world, Dasein cannot be its truest self, whereas when Dasein is alone, that is the only time Dasein can connect with its own mortality and unlock its freedom to be authentic. Heidegger claims that mortality is key to individuation and self-awareness, the key to authentic being of oneself. Yet, Heidegger asserts that, "Death does indeed reveal itself as a loss, but as a loss such as is experienced by those who remain. In suffering this loss, however, we have no way of access to the loss-of-Being as such which the dying man 'suffers.'" (Being and Time, p.282) Here, I believe Heidegger has taken the issue of the death of the Other and individuated it to a point where he has forgone his own concept of Dasein mainly being a Being that spends most of its time Being-in-the-world. Whether authentically or inauthentically, Dasein is a Being that, for most of its existence, spends its time Being-with-others, and while this does not change Dasein at its core, it does affect it. Whereas the dying man truly *cannot* suffer the loss

of his own Dasein, as his Dasein has come to an end, neither can the Dasein experiencing his death not be affected by it.

Even when we look to Plato's "Phaedo," it is clear that, besides the discourse on the soul Socrates puts forth, Plato is making a point of death being a communal experience. An experience in which its attendance is just as important as its outcome. Socrates understood that on his death bed the experience of his death was not only his own but one for his loved ones. He goes about comforting and rationalizing with his friends as a way to ease their experience of his own coming-to-an-end. Of course, it can be speculated that Socrates was also attempting to comfort himself in his last moments, but he appears to know this self-comfort to be in vain because, as Heidegger would imply, there was nothing left for him to do, his Dasein was coming-to-an-end. Socrates, also, with his last dying words makes a point about death and how he believes it should be perceived by saying, "Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius; make this offering to him and do not forget." (The Trial and Death of Socrates, p.58) As cocks were sacrificed to the god Asclepius to find a cure for illnesses, we can surmise that Socrates believing he *owed* a sacrifice to this god meant that he had been blessed with a cure, death, the cure for life. I believe there is a broad parallel in Socrates perception of life and death with Heidegger, as Socrates states that life is just "...pleasures of the body and its ornamentation..." (Socrates, p.55) while wisdom can only be found in death. From the Heideggerian perspective, this sounds as though Socrates is making a point for fallenness, or the inauthentic Being only being brought back to authenticity, wisdom, and freedom in death.

So, if we allow that we have made a valid point for the death of the Other holding a more significant role than the death of oneself, what is to be said about Dasein's wholeness? Let's break down a rebuttal for Heidegger's basis for Being before we explore the issue further. Heidegger denotes that Dasein is characterized by three specific aspects of *care* that color its Being in the world by either authentic or inauthentic, and all of this is the main affectation towards Dasein's possible wholeness. One of these aspects is the concept of *thrownness*, the idea that when we are born, we are thrown into a world in which we have no control. We are thrown into Being-towards-death, into Being-in-the-world, into our potentiality, and thrown into death itself. These are things in which we have no control, our race, our status, social norms, and with which we need to learn to cope with. In Being-towards-death, Heidegger asserts that this thrownness can affect Dasein in two ways. In its authentic perspective, the thrownness of Dasein conceives of the anxiety it feels towards death, accepting it as an inevitable possibility and thus, unlocking the freedom of Dasein's potentiality. Conversely, in Dasein's inauthentic thrownness, it is succumbed to fear, as Dasein's understanding of death is left ambiguous. "Proximally and for the most part the Self is lost in the "they." It understands itself in terms of those possibilities of existence which 'circulate' in the 'average' public way of interpreting Dasein today." (Being and Time, p.435) So, if Dasein is lost in the "they" and everydayness of existence, it cannot see the truth of itself and is wrought with fear from ignorance. This inauthenticity leads into Heidegger's other aspect of care, fallenness. As with the aforementioned example, fallenness is what occurs when Dasein becomes distracted from its Being, lost in the "they," meaning lost in the daily monotony that has no real meaning to a Being such as Dasein. Fallenness is a distinctly inauthentic mode of Being for Dasein, an automated way of Being that has Dasein doing what

social norms dictate instead of Dasein taking charge of itself. However, Heidegger offers a way out of this inauthentic Being-in-world by claiming that all one must do is to be Being-towards-death. For when one is aware of one's own mortality this brings Dasein closer to its potentiality-for-being, once Dasein is aware of its death, it takes control of its potential and is free to live an authentic life driven by Dasein instead of the "they."

To make a point for the possibility for Dasein's wholeness, fallenness and authenticity seem to be key. Heidegger appears to cling to the idea of Dasein always being trapped in inauthenticity when dealing with the "they." However, I assert that Heidegger has missed an opportunity for an in-between. Dasein is either not being itself, inauthentic and lost, or it is consumed in itself, self-assured and free, but could there be a place in which Dasein could be itself within the world? Why must authenticity be relegated only to isolation? I can't say for sure what Heidegger's rebuttal would be to my inference since he chooses not to examine this aspect of the subject much further, however, I think he would remind us that, "Dasein itself must, in its Being, present us with the possibility and the manner of its authentic existence..." (Being and Time, p.277) With this Heidegger reminds us that Dasein's authenticity comes from itself, being itself, freeing itself. All that is authentic with Dasein is already within Dasein. Part of the thrownness of Dasein is its recognition that it cannot exist without the world, and the world does not exist without it. Being-in-the-world is an integral part of what makes Dasein, therefore the world is part of Dasein, and the Other Dasein in it are just as essential to making up what Dasein is. So if the world is part of Dasein, and what is part of Dasein is always true and authentic to Dasein's Being, how could the Other be so easily dismissed as an afterthought in Dasein's existing in the world?

Death is a part of life, not just the anxiety towards death but the actual experience itself. I would argue that the death of the Other *can* complete Dasein, not in a physical way but in the way of wholeness. Heidegger seems to seek wholeness for Dasein only in an inward capacity and I believe that is why he is left skeptical if Dasein can at all every be whole. In this way I don't think it would be possible for Dasein to find an existential kind of wholeness in and of itself, it must take a more *authentic* part in the world to find it. In as long as human beings have had the means to express themselves, they have expressed the experience of the death of others. Through



music, poetry, fashion, and especially art, death has played a very big part in life and expression. It has been a fascination for artists such as Francisco Goya, Vincent Van Gogh, Pablo Picasso, and many others, and serves as a way to

connect themselves in a genuine way to this concept, death, that usually appears to be quite far from the everydayness of life. History shows us that it is the death of others that colors our experience of the phenomenon of death as a whole. When Maxim Vorobiev, a Russian painter who usually painted peaceful landscapes, lost his wife suddenly, he painted a work he named 'Oak Fractured by Lighting.' This painting depicts Vorobiev's shock and pain in his current state of grief, revealing the very literal impact this death has brought to his life. Clearly, this is not a fleeting experience for this artist, although this death was not his own, it will affect him for the rest of his life. Pablo Picasso was another artist that brought the concept of death into his art with

his cubism painting named 'Still Life with Skull, Leeks and Pitcher.' This painting portrays a very common subject matter for still life, items from everyday life, a pitcher and leeks. However,

Picasso evokes a sense of *memento mori* by adding in a human skull sitting alongside the other commonplace items. This concept has been a trope of artists for centuries especially in times of war.



Picasso painted this piece in 1945, during the time of the second World War and this commonplace skull speaks to the pain and loss of life that the entire world shared at that time, but also the reminder that death comes for us all, even after the war has ended.

The death of Others may not make Dasein whole, only its own death can do that, so it is not a valid substitution. But recognizing the validity of the death of Others being Dasein's only experience of death as it still remains Dasein, could provide a possibility for Dasein to have a genuine experience with Others, without need for alienation or individuation to gain authenticity. As Heidegger asserts, Dasein is not only thrown into the world but part of it, Being-in-the-world is essential to Dasein's existence, therefore, the Other should be more than a passing 'concern' to Dasein. Wholeness could be achieved existentially for Dasein before its annihilation but experiencing the completeness of another's Dasein. Maybe the actual experience of one's own death is not what is to be seen as most important in Heidegger's theory on death, but his

insistence on the remembrance of it. What is most important for Heidegger's Dasein is the authenticity of Being that awareness of mortality brings forth. The experience of one's own death doesn't seem to be of great importance, just the precursor of the idea to produce the anxiety Heidegger knows to be relevant to Dasein's living authentically. But can we not live authentically through experiencing the death of Others? Is it not a universal pain that snaps us all out of the mundane, everydayness, and reminds us that one day we must die? If Heidegger were to discount everything I have stated thus far, the one thing he could not argue is that the experiencing of the death of the Other is a sobering one. Out of all of life's experiences, this is the one that forces one to come back to authenticity, to remember one's potential, to examine one's Being-in-the-world. This is the one experience that truly evokes memento mori.

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