

What Do I Do Now?—Heidegger & Existential Anxiety

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Introduction

Authenticity possesses something of a mystical character in Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Much like the Eastern notion of enlightened existence, authenticity evades definition while remaining the goal around which Heidegger's descriptions of inauthenticity and *Das Man* revolve. Working with Heidegger's vocabulary, we can sketch a loose conception of authenticity as *a resolute facing-up to oneself and taking up one's ownmost potentiality-for-Being*. This formulation is admittedly vague; intuitively understanding what is meant by authenticity, and giving a precise formulation of authenticity, may not be as closely related as they might seem. A formulation, or definition, of authenticity might further be construed as a *recipe* for authenticity, and this idea that such a recipe exists—universal and unbending, one-size-fits-all—is one of the many places where trouble begins. But a greater trouble, it seems, is with the force motivating one to look for a set of instructions toward authenticity, and that is *anxiety*. Although it doesn't guarantee authenticity, anxiety is most certainly a prerequisite for Dasein's even seeing that authenticity is a possibility, and perhaps the ideal goal, of existence. In this essay, I want to examine anxiety and what it reveals to Dasein, and to expose a serious problem facing the notions of authenticity and existential freedom: namely, the threat of Dasein's defeat in the face of anxiety. Thomas Merton speaks of anxiety as a "psychic and spiritual cramp" that can lead one to the brink of despair, and of suicide, and that it is at this brink when a final possibility is offered "to prefer life even in defeat."

Thus it happens that the man on the edge of suicide may in fact also be on the edge of a miracle of hope that saves him in spite of himself, pulls him out of the cramp. If he can understand what has happened, he may completely revise his idea of what constitutes "defeat" and what bestows freedom and fulfillment....¹

¹ Merton, Thomas, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (NY: Doubleday 1965) 203-206.

This essay will follow Dasein from its inauthentic starting-point and through anxiety, in an attempt to tease out the dilemma hiding in Merton's statement "*If he can understand what has happened...*" and to see what lies beyond anxiety. The situation of anxiety seems far more complex than its existential function of revealing that "authenticity and inauthenticity are possibilities of [Dasein's] Being" (235/H.191).

1. *Inauthenticity & The "They"*

The picture Heidegger paints of human existence can be at once both compelling and disturbing; Dasein is Being-in-the-World as a thrown falling projection for whom "authenticity and inauthenticity are possibilities of its Being" (235/H.191). In fact, the possibilities for Dasein are that of *becoming authentic*, or of remaining inauthentic, for inauthenticity seems for Heidegger to be the "default position" in which each Dasein arrives on the scene. Heidegger notes early in his work that inauthenticity "does not signify any 'less' Being or any 'lower' degree of Being," but this may be in part because although inauthenticity is the starting-point from which Dasein is able break free, Heidegger does not, it seems, want to support the notion that all humans are "born bad." It is perhaps when inauthenticity, as absorption in the they-world, causes Dasein to become "comfortably numb," complacent, and forgetful of its own Being, that inauthenticity takes on a less than appealing character.

But we must not forget that authenticity is a possibility and that Dasein can break free of its absorption in the they-world. The picture is compelling because Dasein finds itself "securely" situated in a world; Heidegger has done away with the traditional conception of the self as a bare 'I' which continually struggles to firmly establish itself in an object-world. Also, we see signs of hope and freedom for Dasein in the possibility of authenticity. But the picture is just as disturbing, because the world into which Dasein is thrown is not of its own making, and because as Dasein falls through this world—that is, *lives out* its life—the tranquilizing, distracting ways of dealing with the world offered by *Das Man* ("the they") are always available to Dasein. Part of the problem is that *Das Man's* way of being is ultimately unfulfilling for Dasein; doing as "they" do threatens Dasein's character, because it is a way of neglecting, or refusing, to make

one's own choices—falling into *Das Man*'s interpretations of life and the world is a way to choose no way. The other part of the problem is that, upon casting aside the interpretations offered by *Das Man*, Dasein finds itself in a peculiar state of individuality in which the burden of interpretation and choice falls upon Dasein itself. Dasein cannot look toward *Das Man* for *positive* answers (although the inauthentic nature of *Das Man* might provide *negative* hints as to what *isn't* authenticity); discovering or constructing an authentic interpretation of oneself and the world, and choosing authentically, are projects which sit squarely on Dasein's shoulders and nowhere else.

I noted above that Heidegger's ontology finds Dasein "securely" already in a world, for unlike the Cartesian self, Dasein bears an *a priori* relation to the world, as Being-in-the-World, where *world* is not to be mistaken for the totality of objects (or entities, the 'world') Dasein encounters, but rather as the *wherein* in which Dasein finds itself. This formulation is tantamount, for Heidegger, to a rejection of the problem of the external world, for the reason that any attempt to prove the existence of the external world presupposes an encapsulated "I" and thus shatters the *a priori* nature of Dasein as Being-in-the-World. By taking Being-in-the-World as his starting point, Heidegger sets aside the "wrong-headed" Cartesian problems in exchange for a study of Dasein's existence within this world, the *wherein*, and this is just about where the "security" of already being in a world becomes *not-so-secure*, and exposes a new set of difficulties for Dasein.

To uncover these difficulties, it will be useful to look briefly at Dasein's temporal structure as a thrown falling projection. As *thrown*, Dasein finds itself already in a world, already "there." Dasein has a history, or a past, which informs Dasein's actions in the present. Heidegger suggests that Dasein is thrown not only into the world, but also "thrown proximally right into the publicness of the "they" [*Das Man*]" (210/H.167). In this public they-world, Dasein exists in the mode of "average everydayness," which is to say, in its normal "undifferentiated" way. In its average everydayness in the public world, Dasein takes on certain preexisting characteristics, such as a specific language and manner of interpreting the world, itself, other Dasein, and the things in the world—Dasein learns to act and to think as "they" do. In one respect, this

conformity to the “they” is necessary so that Dasein can function as an interacting member of the public world, but in another sense, this seeing things as “they” do affects Dasein’s *falling* so as to make falling inauthentic. By taking up the interpretations and understandings of the “they,” Dasein becomes absorbed in the public world; this absorption occurs because Dasein is concerned with, *fascinated* by, and curious about the world, and because “Being-in-the-World is itself *tempting*” (88/H.61, 221/H.177). *Das Man* offers Dasein “ready-made” ways in which Dasein can engage itself in the world. These interpretations arrive in the mode of idle talk, which is “the possibility of understanding everything without previously making the thing one’s own.” (213/H.169). That is, *Das Man* offers an average, or “dumbed-down” understanding of things. Combined with Dasein’s curiosity, idle talk leads to an inauthentic understanding that passes from one item to the next, leveling off complicated matters, averaging information to a “pop” status, and glossing over or covering up the details, so that “[in] publicness everything gets obscured, and what has thus been covered up gets passed off as something familiar and accessible to everyone” (165/H.127).

The problem with publicness and Dasein’s absorption in the they-world is that existing in this average everydayness imposes severe limitations on Dasein’s understanding of itself. The “they” gives Dasein the illusory impression that “one is leading and sustaining a full and genuine ‘life,’” and this impression “brings Dasein a *tranquility*, for which everything is ‘in the best order’ and all doors are open” (222/H.177). This so-called tranquility and this sense of freedom could hardly be further from the truth of the situation because the interpretations of the “they” barely scrape the surface of Dasein’s ownmost potentiality-for-Being. By tacitly conforming to the social norms of the “they,” Dasein flees from its own possibility of authentic existence, and turns away from the possibility of projecting its own understanding onto the world and of taking up projects other than those which simply fall into its lap via its tranquilizing involvement in the public world. The threat of falling into the “they” is that one falls away from oneself by refusing to take up one’s own possibility of authenticity, and *refusing to think for oneself*.

Furthermore, the inauthenticity of going along with the “they” allows for Dasein to neglect and forget certain truths of its own Being; it creates for Dasein a false sense of security,

while covering up the utter contingency of Dasein's Being. To put it another way, inauthentic falling covers up the fact of one's own death—"the fact that Dasein exists as thrown Being *towards* its end" (295/H.251). The coming to awareness of one's own contingency, and that one is Being-towards-Death, seems to be the paradigmatic situation in which Dasein experiences *anxiety* about its own existence. Having given a general background of Dasein's inauthenticity (as its starting-point en route, hopefully, to a more authentic existence), I will now turn to an analysis of anxiety and what it reveals to Dasein about itself.

2. *I Got Anxious and Ran Headlong into Myself...*

Because Dasein's continual falling takes place in a public world (for the most part, or when Dasein is in its average everydayness), Heidegger calls this falling-in-with-the-"they" "a *fleeing* of Dasein in the face of itself—of itself as an authentic potentiality-for-Being-its-Self" (229/H.184). Why would Dasein do such a thing as turn away from its own possibility of an authentic existence? *Why does Dasein flee from itself?* The brief answer seems to be that *authenticity is difficult*, and that it is all too easy, in its immediacy, to turn to the "they" for solutions and directions as to how one should live.

Anxiety hits Dasein when things *seem* wrong—that is, when something is wrong, but Dasein can't say what it is. Unlike *fear*, which refers to a definite entity as its source, anxiety "is completely indefinite" (231/H.186). But even this indefiniteness is not quite the correct characterization of anxiety; it merely *seems* right to Dasein because of Dasein's absorption in the they-world. In fact, anxiety is being anxious about oneself as Being-in-the-World. The sense of indefiniteness, of not knowing what anxiety is about, is a symptom of one's inauthenticity and of *not knowing oneself as separate from the "they."* Anxiety forces Dasein out of its absorption in the 'world' (of things) and brings it face to face with itself, *as a Self that has thus been individualized out of its comfortable inauthenticity.* It is in anxiety that Dasein first sees itself as a potentiality-for-Being-its-Self, and in so doing, being authentic.

But none of this description is to say that anxiety comes simply as a ‘wake-up call’ to Dasein. Although it is not wholly incorrect to view anxiety as a ‘wake-up call’², such an interpretation would be to overlook what anxiety reveals to Dasein about its existence—namely, that beneath the false threads of the ‘they’s tranquilizing comfort, there is a seeming groundlessness to Dasein’s existence. Here I am speaking of what Heidegger calls ‘real’ anxiety—the kind which cannot be explained away by the ‘they’ and which Dasein cannot quickly recover from, and declare, ‘it was really nothing’ (231/H.187). This ‘rare’ (or, *true*) anxiety not only reveals Dasein’s turning-away from itself but also causes Dasein to feel as if all its projects and activities are ultimately meaningless. Heidegger remarks, ‘Here the totality of involvements of the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand discovered within-the-world, is, as such, of no consequence; it collapses into itself; the world has the character of completely lacking in significance’ (231/H.186). The ‘they’ tends to give Dasein the impression that the *world* is no more than a ‘world’ (of things), and in anxiety, which directs Dasein toward itself, this ‘world’ of stuff ceases to have any meaning. ‘Anxiety...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 by the world’ (232/H.188). The subject-object manner of viewing the world and things breaks down in anxiety when Dasein finds itself to be both the ‘subject’ and the ‘object’ of its own anxiety. But surely this split in the self is a false notion, for Dasein experiences itself as *one*; whether Dasein is able to consciously recognize for itself the falsity of the subject-object duality, anxiety forces Dasein into itself, and into its own unity as Being-in-the-World. Dasein is individualized by anxiety, not only as this unity of Being-in-the-World, but also as something separate from the ‘they.’

‘Even rarer than...‘real’ anxiety,’ says Heidegger, ‘are attempts to Interpret this phenomenon according to the principles of its existential-ontological Constitution and function’—which is to say it isn’t often that anxious Dasein attempts to figure out what in the world this anxiety means and what one is to do about it (234-5/H.190). The rarity of an existential interpretation of anxiety may stem from the ‘they’s attempts to give an inauthentic

² Or, as Heidegger calls it, the charge of ‘Guilty!’ that comes from Dasein’s conscience. (See *SuZ*, Div. II, Ch. 2.)

account of anxiety, which, in our present culture, might occur by labeling existential anxiety as a psychological disorder calling for a prescription of “happy” or “chill” pills. Dasein’s recognition of its own groundlessness emerges from the anxious realization that it cannot truly understand, or account for, itself in terms of the “they” or in terms of a ‘world’ of things. This is not merely a chemical imbalance within Dasein but is in fact an imbalance between the fundamental nature of Dasein and the manner of interpreting itself and its world which have been taken up from the public world. Dasein must look somewhere else for its own grounding and meaning, and the individualizing force of anxiety suggests that this search must start within Dasein itself.³ This is precisely where matters become truly messy, for it is at this point which Dasein must begin thinking and choosing for itself, lest Dasein simply fall back in with the “they.” I am thinking here of a most extreme variety of anxiety (which may be what Heidegger intends by “true” anxiety), for which falling back into inauthenticity is not only a cheap solution, but, if one is truly conscious of what this anxiety means, is tantamount to utter failure—and so, the Dasein who is now my concern is the one who, as Merton suggests, is anxious to the point of being “on the edge of suicide.”

3. *Death is Mine...and Not Mine (An Existential Paradox)*

In anxiety, Dasein is individualized out of its tranquilized, inauthentic falling and shown that authenticity and inauthenticity are possibilities of its Being, but even as Dasein is pushed out of its “average everydayness,” Dasein is still (always) falling. Towards what is Dasein falling? In a word, Death. In anxiety, Dasein finds itself faced with the task of filling in the answers to questions about its own meaning (because the “they” has failed to provide an adequate account). At the same time, by being brought face to face with itself, Dasein is likewise brought face to face with the fact of its own contingency. The urgency of anxiety may reside in this recognition of one’s own finitude, in the feeling that one’s “time is running out.” So, on the one hand, realizing the fact that one’s own Death is certain, that it can happen at any time, might serve as

³ Although, as will be discussed in the next section, this search must extend beyond Dasein (as Being-in-the-World). It is enough here to warn against an egocentric, or solipsistic, reading of this internal “search” for meaning, which would simply re-establish the anxiety we’re trying to overcome.

the motivating boost Dasein needs to actively look for a way out of its inauthentic rut. But on the other hand, the irony presented by death's certainty threatens to be a terrible blow to Dasein, which might lead to its fleeing from itself all the more hurriedly.

To return to our Dasein who is on the edge of suicide, I don't necessarily intend a person staring over the guardrail of the Brooklyn Bridge, but rather, one who in anxiety stumbles upon the idea of suicide—the recognition that suicide resides within one's own power. I don't think the idea of having such a thought is terribly far-fetched, but as we will see, it would be a crushing mistake to count suicide as no more than one of many options. I want to draw a definite distinction here between *planning* suicide and *contemplating* it, because the “contemplation of suicide” brings out the irony of death. That is, *what is there to contemplate?* As Heidegger writes, ‘Death, as possibility, gives Dasein nothing to be ‘actualized’, nothing which Dasein, as actual, could itself *be*. It is the possibility of the impossibility of every way of comporting oneself towards anything, of every way of existing” (307/H.262). We must remember that Dasein, as anxious, is seeking a way out of this anxiety, is seeking some sense of meaning or grounding, and discovering the truth of one's own death might cause this search to appear futile. Dasein has run up against itself and found itself to be *incomplete*: as long as Dasein exists “there is always something *still outstanding*” (279/H.236). The interpretations of the public they-world are utterly useless because they simply pass over the individual fact of each Dasein's death (as its ownmost potentiality-for-Being), and instead regard death “as a mishap which is constantly occurring... ‘Dying’ is levelled off to an occurrence which reaches Dasein, to be sure, but belongs to nobody in particular” (296,297/H.253). What Dasein is brought to realize in true anxiety is that not only is death certain (for each person), but also that death takes Dasein's Being away from itself, so that at the moment when it becomes complete ‘it has already become ‘no-longer-Being-there’” (280/H.236). What this implies is that, in a sense, Dasein is incapable of experiencing itself as complete, and Heidegger notes that the impossibility of experiencing oneself as a whole “does not lie in any imperfection in our *cognitive powers*. The hindrance lies rather in the Being of this entity [i.e., Dasein]” (280/H.236). What Heidegger says here seems true enough, for how can one imagine one's own nonexistence? But what is really quite troubling

is that he regards this problem of not being able to experience oneself as a whole as a *hindrance of Dasein's own Being*. This is not some minor trouble that anxious Dasein can easily resolve, but is in fact the revelation that Dasein's Being, because there is always something *still outstanding* in it, is essentially groundless in itself. Because Dasein is always falling, it is always *changing* until, in Death, there is nothing to be changed. And it would *seem* that in this continual state of change and incompleteness, Dasein's search for grounding and meaning is not only futile, but it perhaps ultimately absurd. Dasein exists, *thrown* into the certainty of its own Death, *falling* toward it, but cannot truly *project* itself onto this future possibility because, although death is Dasein's ownmost possibility, Dasein cannot, in a sense, *have* it. This existing toward the negation of oneself is what Heidegger refers to as *Being-the-basis-of-a-nullity* (329/H.283).

Suicide here becomes implicated in the dilemma presented by one's own death—as an act, it becomes ultimately paradoxical. Dasein is anxious over its own contingency, and the seeming meaninglessness contained therein, but it cannot look to its own death for relief, because upon death there will be nothing to be relieved. What Heidegger seems to pass over in *Being and Time* is the grossness of the realizations that come in true anxiety, and although as he points out, knowing death is not in Dasein's cognitive powers, there is still a threat that the recognition of this *hindrance* of one's own Being might leave the bad taste of absurdity in one's mouth. Anxiety opens the door not only to the possibilities of authenticity and inauthenticity, but also of despair—of feeling cheated by life—or what Kierkegaard calls “the sickness unto death.” “The torment of despair,” writes Kierkegaard, “is precisely this, not to be able to die...he despairs because he cannot consume himself, cannot get rid of himself, cannot become nothing.”⁴ And, for what should be obvious reasons, not even suicide is a remedy for this despair, or anxiety.

What Dasein must see to get beyond this anxiety is not only the certainty of its death or the groundlessness of its falling Being, but also that these are the existential *truths* of its being. This is not what one expects to discover precisely for the reason that the “they” has *covered up the truth of Dasein's Being*. Furthermore, what Dasein must see upon facing its death in anxiety,

⁴ Kierkegaard, Soren, “The Sickness Unto Death,” (excerpts) in *Existentialism: Basic Writings*, ed. Guignon & Pereboom, (Hackett 1995) 74.

is that anxiety has *freed* Dasein from the inauthenticity of the “they”’s manner of (mis)interpreting Dasein and the world, and that what anxiety offers Dasein is the *freedom* to realign its notion of *meaning* in a way that reflects Dasein’s situation—rather than trying to conform to a *static* “meaning of life” that demands certainty, grounding, and security, but which falls apart in the face of a single moment of genuine anxiety. Heidegger suggests that Dasein’s “fulfillment” cannot come in death anyway, in his use of the example of a fruit’s ripening as its fulfillment; just as the fruit is fulfilled in ripeness, although untouched it will rot away, so too, Dasein’s fulfillment is not simply its completion in death, but is perhaps to be realized in an authentic existence.⁵

This is all quite easy to *say*, but all else being equal, it is a tremendous amount to ask of Dasein. Hubert Dreyfus, in his own analysis of anxiety, asks, “Why, in short, are we the kind of beings that can’t face being the kind of beings we are?”⁶ His response at length:

The obvious answer would seem to be that human beings seek secure meaning. The truth about Dasein’s nothingness and meaninglessness as revealed in anxiety is, therefore, unbearable and one naturally wants to flee it. But the question returns: If anxiety reveals that Dasein is really a nullity, and if Dasein is called to manifest in its action what it is, why shouldn’t Dasein seek to live in a way that manifests its nullity, rather than to hide its nullity in banality and pseudocontentment? *Anxiety might well be unbearable to a self brought up in a society that does not understand how to make meaninglessness the foundation of a life worth living, but once Dasein has seen in a moment of transformation that nullity is its truth and that the truth gives equanimity and joy, why should Dasein flee it? (my emphasis in italics)*

What worries me about Dreyfus’ response is that it seems unlikely that there is *any* society that **does** “understand how to make meaninglessness the foundation of a life worth living.” Even if there were, it still seems that the meaning of *meaning* (and *meaningless*) has been made wrong

⁵ See *Being and Time*, 287-288/H.243-244.

⁶ Dreyfus, Hubert, *Being-in-the-World*, (MIT Press, 1991) 334-5.

here. The assumption appears to be that this *meaning* comes from a source external to Dasein, but to characterize this source as society is, I think, wrong. In Section 2 above, I claimed (with footnoted reservations) that this search for meaning must start in Dasein itself. The resolution of these two claims lies in the need for Dasein's search to extend outward *from* Dasein toward its relations and projects in the world—an extension that realizes Dasein in its wholeness as Being-in-the-World. It is from Dasein's local world, or society, that any projects or relations will come, but it is wrong to think that with them comes a ready-made meaning, supplied by society. Furthermore, Dasein doesn't simply "create" meaning *post hoc*, but rather, meaning emerges in the instant of choice. Dreyfus also mentions "a moment of transformation" in which Dasein recognizes its Being-the-basis-of-a-nullity, and that this *is* Dasein's truth, and this seems to echo Merton's claim, "If he can understand what has happened, he may completely revise his idea of what constitutes "defeat" and what bestows freedom and fulfillment." To despair over one's own contingency or the purely external groundlessness of one's existence is to miss the point—that it is the place of interaction between Dasein and its world where meaning emerges. This is not to promote relativism or pure subjectivity of meaning, for that would negate the fact that Dasein is in a public world. What must happen, if Dasein is to exist authentically, is that Dasein must enter this public arena while still maintaining its own sense of self, recognizing its finitude, and the fact that the responsibility for its meaning, or understanding, of itself is not something that anyone or anything else can *give* to Dasein, unless Dasein *chooses* to accept, and engage oneself, in the activity that resides alongside that specific meaning.

4. *A Brief Appendix—Lingering concerns about suicide*

My concerns are largely a riddle of questions that are in some ways only loosely connected to the bulk of this paper. First, what can we say about the person who recognizes the truths that emerge out of anxiety, and still chooses suicide, not simply as one of many choices, but as an end to the irony, or absurdity (whichever it may be)? (Or chooses suicide because, although not fully understanding, understands enough to know that a return to thoughtless inauthenticity will only perpetuate despair.) Since we cannot "imagine" our own death, is it even

conceptually possible for a human to take into account the full implications of such a decision? If the unknowability of one's own death is a *hindrance* of our Being, then how much more of a hindrance, or a threat, is possessing the ability to withdraw from life? I lack the space here to delve into any specific examples, although I have considered a few while putting together this paper (which is regrettably a bit more abstract than I had initially envisioned).⁷ I feel as if I have been somewhat manipulative of my "Dasein on the edge of suicide," in that suicide functions herein primarily as a more volatile angle from which to view death. But after consideration, I am still somewhat at a loss as to what is to be said if the "defeat" of anxiety is final. It seems trivial to call such a choice inauthentic, and uselessly clichéd to call it a tragedy. The thought of a "rational suicide" is a troubling notion that is either immediately dismissed or handled in secret with hushed voices. If suicide were decidedly, univocally irrational, then we could always resort to the insanity plea, and pile it into a different group of problems (abnormal psychology). I'm not quite asking whether an "authentic suicide" is conceptually possible, because I'm not sure whether the terminology of authenticity/inauthenticity can be correctly applied. My reasons for this hesitation are that even if suicide were decidedly inauthentic or *non*-authentic, it might seem wrong to cast that same vote upon the person who commits the act. Existential anxiety is not obviously something that "goes away," but rather continues to bring even authentic Dasein face-to-face with itself. And so, it seems, that neither anxiety nor perhaps suicide are one-time problems. But it may be that an account of suicide in this context runs up against similar difficulties as an account of death, and that understanding *why the thought ever occurs in the first place* will require an analysis of its history and place in the interpretations of the public they-world.

⁷ First and foremost was the character Ben (Nicholas Cage) in Mike Figgis' film adaptation of the John O'Brien novel *Leaving Las Vegas*, in which Ben is a "career alcoholic," who breaks all his ties with the world to move to Las Vegas and drink himself to death. Although my intuitions run one way in regard to his overall situation (as being inauthentic), there remains something disturbingly authentic (if I dare say that) about the manner in which he lives out the remainder of his life. I have also been working on a fiction in which the problems with suicide play a major part of the story.