

Finding the Self through Meaninglessness

Anxiety in Heidegger's *Being and Time*

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In its attempt to elucidate a concrete description of the nature of Being and of self-aware existence, Heidegger's *Being and Time* differs greatly in its emotive focus from standard Western ontological philosophy. Whereas the ontological tradition had long considered persons to be fundamentally *rational* and dependent on logic for self-awareness, Heidegger stood apart in his focus on the importance of moods for the understanding of both the self and the world in which it is oriented. For Heidegger, the source of all knowledge is to be found in the disclosure — *Erschlossenheit*, literally COMPREHENSION — of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world. This awareness of oneself as an entity in the world is realised in various ways, and while logic is a form of disclosure, Heidegger determined moods to be a more primordial and widely applicable kind.

Moods are an essential component in Heidegger's investigation into the nature of *Dasein* largely as an effect of the world, as understood as our horizon of experience rather than the physical Earth, and as such not existing as a physical thing. The 'there' part of *Dasein* (BEING-THERE) is synonymous with the world — the world is a facet of our existence, and moods are our access point to both the world and understanding of *Dasein*. Emotions such as love, happiness, fear, and boredom all project a particular kind of perspective on the world, but ANXIETY happens to be the mood of foremost interest to Heidegger. The reason for this is anxiety's particular ability to cause a kind of

re-disclosure of *Dasein*, which, in the context of Heidegger's project to comprehend *Dasein* at its most fundamental level, is hugely valuable.

Anxiety features in Division Part VI of *Being and Time* as a case study of fundamental states of attunement: moods that reveal the essence of *Dasein*. *Dasein* can be understood as existence within our capacity for comprehending it, as embedded in one's particular worldly horizon. Anxiety is the prime mood for this accessing of *Dasein*: it tells us about the world in a very particular way that highlights our own being in respect to it.

That about which one has anxiety is being-in-the-world as such. How is what anxiety is anxious about phenomenally differentiated from what fear is afraid of? What anxiety is about is not an innerworldly being. What anxiety is about is completely indefinite. (Heidegger 2001, 186)

Anxiety proves useful to Heidegger because it is disconnected from everyday Being-in-the-world, to which other emotions cling. Heidegger's anxiety does not resemble the word's commonplace definition; rather than a state of fretful worrying, it presents itself as a serene, if uncanny, mood. Anxiety differs from fear, a seemingly similar mood, in its repulsion of 'nothing' rather than 'something' in particular. That nothing is the *world*, as distinct from the various things and activities that populate it. Heidegger describes fear in comparison as "angst that has fallen prey to the 'world', angst that is inauthentic and hidden from itself," (Heidegger 2001, 189). While fear projects meaning onto the surrounding world, anxiety *strips* meaning from it; anxiety 'individuates' *Dasein*, dislodging it from the roles and responsibilities that cling to it and presenting itself instead as 'being-possible.'

Heidegger assigns particular "philosophical significance and disclosive power" to moods, in that they can help us understand the world into which we have been thrown and our own being as a consequence. In particular, anxiety offers a perspective from which our everyday, piecemeal occupations retreat, the world itself becoming totalised as though one were observing its goings-on from far away (Weberman 1996, 394). However, it is important to note that Heide-

gger does not intend to have this be interpreted as a sort of existential disconnect from the world, as will be illustrated further along in the concept of *Sorge*, or CARE.

[Attunement] is at the same time of fundamental methodological significance for the existential analytic because of its disclosure. Like every ontological interpretation in general, the analytic can only listen in, so to speak, on beings already previously disclosed with regard to their being. (Heidegger 2001, 140)

Anxiety is observed as a particularly unique kind of attunement, as it both is caused by and discloses Being-in-the-world. It is through anxiety that the essence of *Dasein* can be observed most clearly, as the observable, that which is already disclosed, mirrors the cause of the attunement. Anxiety comes into play with respect to the 'fallenness' of everyday life, revealing the manner in which *Dasein* is absorbed in the world at the expense of it coming to see itself as distinct from that world's conventions. While 'falling' is an necessary part of everyday life, *Dasein* is inclined to bury itself so utterly in the world as to be entirely repulsed by the idea of the unsettling yet profound experience of anxiety (Polt 1999, 77). This fleeing from the uncanniness (*die Unheimlichkeit*) of one's own being renders *Dasein* inauthentic and incapable of independent agency, a state of being referred to by Heidegger as 'THE ONE' or 'THEY-SELF'. As they-self, *Dasein* sacrifices its capacity to choose its own path from amongst the various options open in 'being-possible'.

The fact that anxiety is an unpleasant, disorienting confusion for everyday *Dasein* does not make it a meaningless undertaking, as it might appear to be on the surface. Rather than being "meaningless" in the sense of 'trivial,' anxiety involves "a deep crisis of meaning" (Polt 1999, 77), which gives perspective to the 'groundless' social constructs attributed so great a value in everyday life; such roles are in the end just 'what one does,' and beyond their cultural importance, they hold no meaning. For the most part, *Dasein* is invisible to us as it is obscured by our involvement in The One; it is only in anxiety that we notice it in its true form, rather than in the illusory version presented by our particular time and place in the world.

Dasein's absorption in the 'they' and its absorption in the 'world' of its concern, make manifest something like a fleeing of Dasein in the face of itself – of itself as authentic potentiality-for-being-itself. (Heidegger 2001, 184)

The 'inauthentic' falling of everyday life is *Dasein's* typical state. Conversely, anxiety is the rare recognition of the uncanniness of the human condition, which Heidegger begins to define in terms of *Sorge* at this point in *Being and Time* (2001, 184). Anxiety is "*unheimlich*" (alienating, literally 'not at home'); it is not just a crisis of our world's meaningfulness, but of our own personal meaningfulness too (2001, 184). It is worth noting that Heidegger presents the alienation of anxiety as "the more primordial phenomenon" in comparison with ordinary, everyday dwelling, as the belonging found in society is fundamentally *synthetic*. Anxiety engenders a feeling of radical distinction between ourselves and the world in which we are found; it is only in this experience that *Dasein* truly individuates itself from life at large, becoming self-aware.

Nothing which is ready-to-hand or present-to-hand within the world functions as that in the face of which anxiety is anxious. Here the totality of involvements of the ready-to-hand and the present-to-hand discovered within-the-world is, as such, of no consequence; it collapses into itself; the world has the character of completely lacking significance. (Heidegger 2001, 186)

It is integral to Heidegger's concept of *Dasein* that its disclosure as "*solus ipse*" does not entail a separation from its worldliness, as in Husserl's transcendental reduction. It is impossible for *Dasein* not to be defined in terms of its world; by definition, *Dasein* 'must already dwell in the meanings given by The One.' At the same time, *Dasein* suffers, made anxious by The One as 'no meanings in the world refer to any individual *Dasein*,' (Dreyfus 1991, 177).

Anxiety individualises and thus discloses *Dasein* as "*solus ipse*". But this existential "solipsism" is so far from the displacement of putting an isolated subject-thing into the innocuous emptiness of the worldless occurring, that in an extreme sense what it does is precisely to bring *Dasein* face to face with its

world as world, and thus bring it face to face with itself as being-in-the-world.
(Heidegger 2001, 188)

In the experience of anxiety, “intra-worldly beings” lose their significance; however, the world in and of itself still looms large, a worldliness, Heidegger says, that “obtrudes itself” in the same fashion as a tool-being found to be missing when needed. The world is embraced by *Dasein* as a turning-away from its ‘pre-ontological sense of unsettledness,’ and when anxiety strips meaning from worldly activity, the “circumspection [which] comes up against emptiness” accents the fact of *Dasein* itself.

Anxiety’s effect on *Dasein* is to dissolve its usual ‘inauthentic’ understanding of itself: as the world withdraws from *Dasein*, the groundlessness of both becomes apparent. The *for-the-sake-of-whiches* upon which everyday society is based upon appear as constructs, as a kind of “cultural conspiracy to provide the illusion of some ultimate meaning motivating action,” (Heidegger 2001, 178-180). As already noted, the fact that this system of roles and activities is available for use by any *Dasein* which happens to exist means that the world has no essential relation to any individual *Dasein*. Without the prescribed meanings of the world, *Dasein* finds itself with no defining content or purpose; nothing but the fact of its thrownness (Heidegger 2001, 178-180). Anxiety is a reaction to the realisation that, although our various accoutrements in the world are useful in the course of our everyday life, our life has no defined purpose in and of itself (Dahlstrom 2013, 15).

[I]n anxiety there lies the possibility of a disclosure which is quite distinctive; for anxiety individualises. This individualisation brings *Dasein* back from its falling, and makes manifest to it that authenticity and inauthenticity are possibilities of its Being. These basic possibilities of *Dasein* (and *Dasein* is in each case mine) show themselves in anxiety as they are in themselves – undisguised by entities within-the-world, to which, proximally and for the most part, *Dasein* clings. (Heidegger 2001, 235)

Anxiety, however, is not itself an endpoint. Rather, it is an ontological tool of disclosure that exists for *Dasein's* comprehension of itself. It is fundamentally neutral, and can serve as a conduit for either authenticity or inauthenticity. The experience of anxiety brings the awareness of authenticity to mind, where existence had formerly only been known through inauthenticity. In the necessary return to everyday life, one can either lapse back into the everyday, lacking individual choice and dictated by societal expectations, or throw oneself with purpose into an active realisation of *Dasein's* capacity for change (Fell 1900, 36). Taking the insight of anxiety back into the world does not enhance life by way of giving it new meaning, as of course authentic living is the acceptance of the absence of innate meaning in the world, but it does bring a transformation to the context in which one acts on various possibilities in the world (Magrini 2006, 83).

Concurrent to its role in unfolding an authentic orientation of *Dasein* towards the world, anxiety additionally serves as a tool to deconstruct *Dasein* into its base elements of existentiality, facticity, and fallenness (Dahlstrom 2013, 16), the 3 primordial aspects of being that Heidegger collectively labels 'care' (Mulhall 2013, 111). Anxiety involves Being-in-the-world in 2 distinct ways: it is anxious in the face of Being-in-the-world, as it confronts *Dasein* 'with the determining and yet sheerly contingent fact of its own worldly existence'; and it is equally anxious for the sake of Being-in-the-world. "[I]n effect [...] anxiety plunges *Dasein* into an anxiety about itself in the face of itself." This confrontation has the effect of peeling back the layers of everyday pretence, presenting *Dasein* plainly as 'thrown projection fallen into the world.'

Firstly, there is *Dasein's* 'Being-ahead-of-itself,' or existentiality, our need to determine our own future. Anxiety can have a revitalising effect on one's everyday life, as it 'reveals this task of choosing who I am,' a revelation which can be turned to our own use, either to change course to better suit our true ideals or to reinforce the choices that have already been made. Secondly, there is *Dasein's* 'Being-already-in-the world,' or thrownness, the reality that we already exist in the world and are not simply pure possibility. While anxiety brings

this thrownness into question, it does not negate it, as we cannot 'radically disengage' from the world into which we have been thrown; we must exist on the basis of what we already are. Thirdly, there is *Dasein's* 'Being-at-home-amid,' or absorption, the everyday state in which one is completely oblivious to both existentiality and thrownness. In the alienating state of anxiety, it becomes apparent how deeply one takes the world for granted in everyday life (Polt 1999, 79).

The centrality of care as the commonality linking these 3 states of being is tied to the fact that we are always invested in our 'own Being and the Being of other entities.' Heidegger emphasises that true detachment is impossible, that we are so tied into our past, present, and future that philosophical ideas of separation from the world are impotent. Unlike animals, we do not have a fixed association to the world, one of plain survival; we are predisposed towards an alienation from the world from which animals do not suffer, but we conversely bestow deep meaning upon our plane of existence. *Dasein's* belonging to the world is most palpable in the nature of its living historically within it; we are always oriented towards future events in respect to the past. To live historically as is typical, and authentically as is not, *Dasein* is compelled to embrace anxiety as a chance to re-evaluate and improve one's approach to one's arbitrary belonging to a particular time and place (Polt 1999, 78.). In Division II of *Being and Time*, it is clear that historicity, amongst other things, form a "tissue of meanings that are fragile, contingent and subject to reinterpretation."

Anxiety individuates *Dasein* to its ownmost being-in-the-world which, as understanding, projects itself essentially upon possibilities. Thus along with that for which it is anxious, anxiety discloses *Dasein* as being-possible, and indeed as what, solely from itself, can be individualized in individuation. (Heidegger 2001, 188)

As noted by Richard Polt in his interpretation of *Being and Time*, "by putting the familiar in an unfamiliar light, anxiety gives one the opportunity to come to grips with one's life, to dwell in the world clear-sightedly and resolutely," (Polt 1999, 78.). Anxiety illustrates a

principle previously alluded to in the case of non-functioning ready-to-hand entities: “when things fail us, we appreciate their importance,” (Heidegger 2001, §16). It proves useful in its ability to “rescue *Dasein* from its fallen state,” from the inauthentic and aggregate belonging to the ‘they’, and to highlight instead *Dasein’s* capacity for individuality. (Mulhall 2013, 112). Accepting this groundlessness goes against all our everyday inclinations, as these are bound up in the security provided by the status quo. But resisting the urge to flee is vital to truly align *Dasein* with the limits of Being-in-the-world (Magrini 2006, 85). An acceptance of the insignificance of the world as we have created it is essential for a true realisation of one’s nature as *Dasein*. Anxiety is an experience that belongs to “nothing and nowhere,” that exists in a complete contrast with the rest of our experiences, yet it is a rejuvenating and revelatory experience, without which *Dasein* is lost to the world.

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