

Anxiety and Death: An Exploration of the Human Condition in Early Heidegger pgs 1-12.

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Abstract

Heidegger's description of the human condition in *Being and Time* seems to be paradoxical. According to him, Dasein as Being-in-the-world is Being-towards-Death. Death he argues is Dasein's way to be and this is a condition which Dasein assumes from the first instance of its existence. Hence in Heidegger's view, death is Dasein's *ownmost* possibility. In his existential analysis of Dasein, Heidegger emphasises the centrality of anxiety and death in the understanding of the human condition. While prima facie, such description might seem contradictory, Heidegger is quick to differentiate between fear and anxiety, demise and death. Nonetheless, one would wonder, if death is the way to be Dasein, is the human condition utterly meaningless? Does finitude exclude the transcendental horizon? Does Heidegger portray the helplessness of human existence? I shall argue that death as the existential condition of the human person according to Heidegger does not imply the meaninglessness and hopelessness of human existence but entails that human mortal condition provokes the desire of the human spirit for self-realisation and transcendence. So Heidegger's account of anxiety and death as characteristic of human existence is not an account of doom and gloom. Although it might sound controversial, a comprehensive understanding of Heidegger's account of the human condition must take into consideration Heidegger's Christian foundation and his philosophical formation in mediaeval philosophy. The subtle Christian influence is manifested in Heidegger's account of guilt and the call of conscience.

Key words: Anxiety, Death, Dasein, Being-in-the-world, Being-towards-death, Human Condition, Mortality, Falling

Introduction

Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* argues that Dasein is the fertile ground for an exhaustive exploration of the meaning of being (Sein). This is because Dasein is the being (entity) that most manifests being since it is also very being that raises the question of being (Sein). Hence, he contends that 'an analytic of Dasein must remain our first requirement in the question of Being.' (Heidegger 1962:37). Such analytic of Dasein according Heidegger does not amount to an anthropology but fundamental ontology (Heidegger 1999). However, regardless of Heidegger's argument, it is arguable that *Being and Time* is an existential analysis of the human condition. At the heart of the analysis is the exposition of Dasein as

Being-towards-death whose primordial state of mind is anxiety since Dasein as Being-in-the-world is a being in time.

In this paper, I shall explore the centrality of anxiety and death in the understanding of the human condition in *Being and Time*. I shall argue that although the human mortal condition seems to be the limit situation in the quest for the self-realisation of Dasein, death (Tod) in Heidegger's understand is not an obstacle towards self-realisation. Rather, death is the condition that energises Dasein towards authentic existence. Besides, the uncanniness or anxiety that provokes the human person to pay attention to his or her existential condition is not a negative phenomenon but a catalyst that challenges the human person towards authentic existence and self-actualisation. In other words, finitude is not a support for naturalist argument but the horizon that provokes the human person towards self-transcendence and the realisation of the eros of the human spirit (Lonergan 1971:13).

Anxiety and Death in Human Existence

Heidegger in *Being and Time* argues that anxiety and death are central phenomena for the ontological and existential constitution of Dasein. The close relationship between anxiety and death in the quest for the understanding of the human condition is founded in the fact that Dasein's anxiety is not directed to a particular thing, to a this or a that, as it is the case with fear since anxiety has no object (Heidegger 1962:231). Rather, the human existential *angst* is always anxiety in the face of death, that is, an anxiety that arises because of one's ontological and existential condition. This implies that Dasein's anxiety is not seasonal, and death is not an event. To highlight the non-seasonal character, and the intrinsic relationship between anxiety and death Heidegger writes:

Thrownness into death reveals itself to Dasein in a more primordial and impressive manner in that state-of-mind which we have called "anxiety". Anxiety in the face of death is anxiety 'in the face of' that potentiality-for-Being which is one's ownmost, non-relational, and not to be outstripped... Anxiety in the face of death must not be confused with fear in the face of one's demise. This anxiety is not an accident or random mood of "weakness" in some individual; but, as a basic state-of-mind of Dasein it amounts to the disclosedness of the fact that Dasein exists as thrown Being towards its end (1962:295).

Prima facie, it would seem that Heidegger's understanding or articulation of anxiety and death is negative. Hence some commentators like Hubert L. Dreyfus and Jane Rubin have chosen such interpretation. According to them, anxiety results from 'the realization that [one's] life has no "ultimate meaning"' (Blattner 2006:161, Dreyfus 1990:180-181). However,

Heidegger's understanding of anxiety and death is different from ordinary everyday use of the terms especially as he distinguishes anxiety and death from fear and demise respectively. It is pertinent therefore that his understanding of the concepts be further explored.

Heidegger's Conception of Anxiety

What then is anxiety according to Heidegger? The first point to be made when considering Heidegger's understanding of anxiety is that his conception is not the same as it is used in common everyday use. In common understanding, there is the tendency to equate or confuse anxiety with fear. Hence it is common to hear a student say: I am anxious about the final examination. Anxiety is sometimes also confused with depression or nervousness. Thus 'the expression "anxiety disorder" is common' among psychologists (Aleke 2015:26). The fact that the common understanding of anxiety is marked with the tendency to confuse the concept with other concepts like fear or nervousness is manifest in the definition of anxiety in the Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary. It defines anxiety as 'the state of feeling nervous or worried that something bad is going to happen' (2010:55). From this definition, it could be inferred that everyday understanding of anxiety is ambiguous. The consequence of the ambiguous nature of the common understanding of the term anxiety is the tendency to misunderstand and so misinterpret Heidegger's conception of anxiety regardless of the fact that he is clear that anxiety and fear are not interchangeable since fear always has an object- that which threatens- while anxiety has no specific object. He argues his position thus:

That in the face of which one has anxiety is not an entity within-the-world. Thus it is essentially incapable of having an involvement. This threatening does not have the character of a definite detrimentality which reaches what is threatened, and which reaches it with definite regard to a special factual potentiality-for-Being. That in the face of which one is anxious is completely indefinite. Not only does this indefiniteness leave factually undecided which entity within-the-world is threatening us, but it also tells us that entities within-the-world are not 'relevant' at all. Nothing which is ready-to-hand and present-at-hand within the world functions as that in the face of which anxiety is anxious (Heidegger 1962:231).

If the conception of anxiety according to Heidegger is not the common understanding since it is not synonymous with fear because of its lack of specific object, what then is anxiety according to Heidegger? In his view, anxiety is Dasein's basic state-of-mind that discloses to it its ontological and existential condition (1962:228-231). In other words, it is the mood that accompanies one's realisation that one is a Being-in-the-world and as Being-in-the-world a Being-toward-death. Because anxiety discloses to Dasein its existential condition as Being-in-the-world, Heidegger argues: 'That in the face of which one has anxiety is Being-in-the-

world itself'(1962:295). Although Heidegger makes efforts to be consistent in maintaining that anxiety is a vital existential mood. His description of anxiety is sometimesparadoxical (not contradictory). For instance, despite his contention that anxiety unlike fear has no object, he sometimes seemsto argue that anxiety has an object though an indefinite object. He writes: 'Anxiety is not only anxiety in the face of something, but, as a state-of-mind, it is also *anxiety about* something. That which anxiety is profoundly anxious [sichabängstet] about is not a *definite* kind of Being for Dasein or a definite possibility'(1962:232).

The paradoxical description of anxiety leads some commentatorsto interpret Heidegger's notion of anxiety in a negative manner. Dreyfus gives suchinterpretation of anxiety. He affirms:

Anxiety is thus the disclosure accompanying a Dasein's preontological sense that it is not the source of meanings it uses to understand itself; that the public world makes no intrinsic sense for it and would go on whether a particular Dasein existed or not. In anxiety Dasein discovers that it has no meaning or content of its own; nothing individualizes it but its empty thrownness (1994:180).

While there is no difficulty in agreeing with Dreyfus that in anxiety Dasein discovers 'that it is not the source of meanings it uses to understand itself', it is difficult to infer from that that such discovery entails that Dasein 'has no meaning or content of its own'. To be the source of meanings is one thing and to have no meaning is another. So 'there is neither logical nor existential-ontological foundation to conclude that Dasein has no meaning of its own just because it is not the source of the meaning' that it uses to understand itself (Aleke 2015:27).

Regardless of the paradoxical nature of Heidegger's articulation of anxiety, it is against the spirit of Heidegger's conception to interpret his understanding of anxiety purely in negative terms. Anxiety according to Heidegger does not only have disclosing function, it also has the function of bringing Dasein back from the state of fallenness, that is, back from 'its absorption in the 'world' to authentic existence (Heidegger 1962:233). When the disclosing and bringing back functions of anxiety are taken into consideration, it becomes manifest that Heideggerian anxiety cannot be reduced to a negative interpretation – Dasein's discovering of its meaningless. Even when 'anxiety individualizes Dasein...[and brings] Dasein face to face with its world as world, and thus brings it face to face with itself as Being-in-the-world' (1962:233) it does not imply that it has pronounced the death sentence that Dasein has no meaning. Rather what anxiety does in disclosing the ontological and existential condition of the human person is that itacts as the catalyst which provokes the human person to come to

the awareness of its true identity. ‘That is to say that in anxiety, Dasein realises that its core meaning does not arise from its social contacts and relationships, family ties, social position and status. Anxiety discloses to Dasein that as a Being-in-the-world, it is a Being-towards-death; therefore, it is in its attitude toward its death that it understands its [Dasein’s] core meaning’ (Aleke 2015:27). Piotr Hoffman’s interpretation of Heidegger’s anxiety acknowledges its function as a catalyst. He writes: ‘[...] For my first-person sense of death establishes my life not only as a *totality*, but also as uniquely *mine* – that is, not as an intersection of social and natural roles and functions that I share, or may share, with others’ (1993:198).

If it is problematic to interpret anxiety in purely negative terms (or even purely as positive), as I contend, how then could Heidegger’s conception be interpreted in order to avoid any reductionist interpretation? Rather than approaching anxiety in a positive or negative mentality, its interpretation could be considered from other perspective, for instance, psychological and existential-hermeneutical perspectives. William Blattner’s interpretation ‘seems to be from a psychological perspective’. This is because he contends ‘that “anxiety” as used by Heidegger is similar to depression’ (Aleke 2015:29, Blattner 2006:141-142). Such interpretation is important because it acknowledges ‘the “crippling” and paralyzing effects that accompany anxiety’ since it sometimes have stifling effect on the human person just as depression does (2015:29). However, there is still danger of viewing the psychological interpretation as purely negative if Heideggerian anxiety is identified with depression. Hence, I prefer an existential-hermeneutical perspective in which anxiety is considered to be ‘similar to the phenomenon of “crisis” which serves as *kairos* – time of grace – because it provokes Dasein to make a fundamental choice of accepting death as its ownmost possibility or of living in denial of the existential-ontological reality of death’ (2015:29). In this sense, the primary function of anxiety is revelational in that it discloses to the human person his or her existential condition and challenges it to live in accordance with his or her nature and vocation.

Heidegger’s Concept of Death

If the disclosing character of anxiety lies in provoking the human person to realise that as Being-in-the-world, it is a Being-towards-death, what does death mean to Heidegger? Two points are important to note when considering Heidegger’s understanding of death. Firstly, his conception of death is not equivalent to the ordinary everyday use of the term. Secondly,

he presents his conception of death in a paradoxical manner. The paradox arises because even though Heidegger argues that death is not an event, sometimes he gives the impression that it is. For instance, he affirms at the same time that: 'Death is a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is' (1962:289); and that: 'Dasein's death is the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there' (1962:294). These two affirmations seem contradictory. This results in the tendency to equate Heidegger's concept of death with biological end.

Regarding the first point, in order to avoid the reduction of his concept of death to everyday understanding Heidegger differentiates perishing (*Verenden*) and demise (*Ableben*) from death (*Tod*). According to him, perishing is the cessation of living organisms expected for Dasein, since in his view Dasein 'does not simply perish' and 'never perishes' (Heidegger 1962:291). In other words, perishing is the biological end of living things. He affirms: 'In our terminology the ending of anything that is alive is denoted as "perishing" [*Verenden*]' (1962:284). Although Heidegger contends that Dasein does not simply perish, it does have its biological end which is an event at the end of its life. This is what Heidegger calls demise [*Ableben*] (1962:291).

In distinguishing between perishing, demise and death, Heidegger's intention is to point out that his understanding of death is not identical with the biological end. Hence he argues that while perishing and demise are events, death (just like dying [*Sterben*]) is a phenomenon. Because death is an existential phenomenon and not an event, he argues that: 'Death is a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is' (1962:289). In order to further clarify that death according to him is not an event and so should not be interpreted in a reductive manner, Heidegger asserts that: 'Death is Dasein's ownmost possibility. Being towards this possibility discloses to Dasein its ownmost potentiality-for-Being, in which its very Being is the issue. Here it can become manifest to Dasein that in this distinctive possibility of its ownself, it has been wrenched away from the "they" [*das Man*] (1962:307)

Since Heidegger's exposition of death shows that it is not equivalent biological end but an existential phenomenon, what exactly is death in simple terms? Heidegger's concept of death can simply be understood as human mortal condition, that is, the existential condition in which human existential project can be defined and situated. In other words, death as Dasein's way to be highlights the limits of its ontological constitution as being-in-time. It is when death is understood as human mortal condition or mortality and not as demise, that the

relation between anxiety and death in Heidegger is better explained. In this sense, anxiety reveals to the human person that its existence is marked by limitedness of time, since it is finite or mortal; and as such there is always an urgent need for it to decide to live authentically or to live inauthentically by absorbing oneself in the world and thus drowning oneself in the they (*Das Man*). It is in this light that Heidegger argues: ‘Anxiety makes manifest in Dasein its *Being towards* its own potentiality-for-Being – that is, its *Being-free for* the freedom for choosing itself and taking hold of itself’ (1962:232). Anxiety and death then are not an obstacle or limit situation for the human person. They do not manifest the closing down of possibilities for Dasein. They are primarily the horizon for the self-actualisation or rather the realisation of the human person who though finite yearns for the transcendent. Judith Wolfe (2013) seems to interpret human condition in *Being and Time* in terms of transcendental yearning. She argues: ‘At its simplest, Heidegger’s account in *Being and Time* is “eschatological” because it envisions the possibility of authentic existence as dependent on a certain (existential) relation to one’s future’ (2013:118).

It is arguable whether Heidegger’s exposition of anxiety and death permits one to interpret them in terms of self-realisation and human yearning for the transcendent. A commentator of Heidegger who understands death as a limit situation would argue that such interpretation is nothing but putting words into the mouth of Heidegger. However, a careful reading and study Heidegger’s analysis of anticipation makes the interpretation of anxiety and death within the context for the yearning for the transcendent possible. He writes:

Anticipation discloses to existence that its uttermost possibility lies in giving itself up, and thus it shatters all one’s tenaciousness to whatever existence one has reached. In anticipation, Dasein guards itself against falling back behind itself, or behind the potentiality-for-Being which it has understood. It guards itself against ‘becoming too old for its victories’ (Nietzsche) (1962:308).

So one can argue that it is not anxiety and death that stifles and restricts human projections. In other words, anxiety and death are not condemnation for Dasein, it is rather the rejection or denial of the centrality of anxiety and death in the human existential-ontological constitution, that is, the fallenness and fleeing of Dasein, that leads to hopelessness or even meaninglessness of human existence. It is because of detrimental character of the fallen state that anxiety has the function of disclosing to Dasein its lostness in the they (*Das Man*), and thus brings it back from inauthentic to authentic existence. The disclosing and bringing back functions mark the connection between anxiety and anticipation since ‘*anticipation reveals to*

*Dasein its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concerned solicitude, but of being itself, rather, in an impassioned **freedom towards death**—a freedom which has been realised from the Illusions of the “they”, and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious’(1962:311).*

It is because of the inescapability of the human mortal condition, that Heidegger argues that ‘death reveals itself as that *possibility which is one’s ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped [unüberholbare]*’ (1962:294).

It is worth noting that when Heidegger says that death is a possibility or even the ownmost possibility of Dasein, he refers to what he calls existential and not logical possibility – which he describes as the merely possible. He contends that while logical possibility ‘signifies what is not *yet actual* and what is *not at any time necessary*’ (1962:183), existential possibility on the other founded on actuality. Because Dasein’s possibility is not a logical possibility, he concludes that existential possibility ‘is the most primordial and ultimate positive way in which Dasein is characterized ontologically’ (1962:183).

From our exploration so far, one could argue that Heidegger’s existential analysis of the human condition in *Being and Time* is not based on purely philosophical investigation. It is influenced by some latent theological underpinning. In other words, Heidegger’s exposition is not purely a philosophical anthropology but a philosophico-theological anthropology. The theological or Christian anthropological influence in Heidegger’s exposition is manifest in some of the key terms – death, falling, guilt, anticipation and call of conscience – that he employs in his exposition.

The Key to an Adequate Understanding of the Human Condition in Early Heidegger

The key to an exhaustive understanding of Heidegger’s exposition of the human condition is his theological background which is exemplified by his catholic Christian identity and his initial formation in theology as a candidate for the catholic priesthood. It would be naïve to underestimate the influence of Heidegger’s Christian identity in his existential analysis of the human condition. Heidegger’s concept of falling as one’s fleeing from the self and authentic existence in order to absorb oneself in the world of the they [*Das Man*] is loaded with the biblical notion of the fall and Christian concept of sin. It is not by coincidence that Heidegger’s articulation of falling is similar to concept of sin or fall as symbolically

exemplified with the biblical notion of the fall as described in the aetiological account of the fall of Adam and Eve. In fact, Heidegger's characterisation of falling has an undertone of Christian description of sin. In his articulation he affirms that 'temptation, tranquillization, and alienation are distinguishing marks of the kind of Being called "*falling*". As falling, everyday Being-towards-death is a constant *fleeing in the face of death*. Being-towards-the-end has the mode of *evasion in the face of it*—giving new explanations for it, understanding it inauthentically, and concealing it' (1962:298). A critical look at the distinguishing marks of falling shows a close parallel between Heidegger's conception of falling and the Christian notion of sin. The parallel can be summarized thus: Just as **temptation** leads to **sin** and the consequence of sinning is **alienation**, so also **temptation** leads to **falling** and consequently Dasein is **alienated** from itself and from authentic existence.

The Christian theological nuance in Heidegger's exposition of the human condition is not only limited to the parallel between sin and falling but also manifest in the role of the call of conscience and guilt when one is in the fallen state. He articulates the call of conscience and its role thus:

Conscience give us 'something' to understand; it discloses. By characterizing this phenomenon formally in this way, we find ourselves enjoined to take it back to the *disclosedness* of Dasein. This disclosedness, as a basic state of that entity which we ourselves are, is constituted by state-of-mind, understanding, falling, and discourse. If we analyse conscience more penetratingly, it is revealed as a call [*Ruf*]. Calling is a mode of *discourse*. The call of conscience has the character of an *appeal* to Dasein by calling it to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-its-Self; and this is done by way of *summoning* it to its ownmost Being-guilty (1962:314).

Although Heidegger maintains that his understanding of conscience is different from common sense understanding (1962:314), there is similarity between his conception and the Christian understanding of moral conscience. For instance, the Catechism of the Catholic Church states: 'It is important for every person to be sufficiently present to himself in order to hear and follow the voice of his conscience. This requirement of *interiority* is all the more necessary as life often distracts us from any reflection, self-examination or introspection' (CCC 1779). The centrality of self-presence or interiority when conscience and its call is the issue is also highlighted by Heidegger: 'If Dasein is to be able to get brought back from [the] lostness of failing to hear itself, and if this is to be done through itself, then it must first be able to find itself—to find itself as something which has failed to hear itself, and which fails to hear in that it *listens away* to the "they"' (1962:215-316).

Should one consider the Christian nuances in Heidegger's conception of falling and conscience a mere coincidence? I argue that it would be naïve to consider them as a mere coincidence. The origin of parallel between Heidegger's analysis of human condition and Christian doctrine is Heidegger's Christian identity and his knowledge of Mediaeval philosophy. Of course, a possible objection is that it could be argued that tracing the similarities between Heidegger's exposition of the human condition and Christian anthropology to Heidegger's Christian faith is a stretched analysis or explanation. However, to ignore the similarities in the name coincidence would be naïve and a betrayal to the "pure", 'unrestricted, detached and disinterested desire to know' (Lonergan 1992:404).

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that Heidegger's conception of anxiety and death are indispensable for the understanding of the human condition in *Being and Time*. This is because Dasein as a Being-in-the-world is a being in time and as such Being-towards-death. Hence what orientates human existence is one's understanding of human mortal condition. Nonetheless, finitude in itself does not imply the meaninglessness of human existence. In fact, it does not lend credence to the naturalist argument that there is no transcendental horizon. If the mortal condition of the human person were a guarantee that there should not be a projection towards the future, Dasein would not have been anxious in the face of death. It is when anxiety in the face of death is reduced to fear of demise that Heidegger's analysis is used as a support for denial of the transcendental dimension. On the contrary, it is the transcendental yearning that gives rise to anxiety in the face of death.

A fuller appreciation of Heidegger analysis of the human condition is possible when one goes beyond mere phenomenological analysis and acknowledges the role that Heidegger's Christian faith plays in his understanding of the human condition. The similarity between Heidegger's concept of falling and Christian understanding of sin (and biblical fall) and the role of conscience and guilt when one is in the states of falling and sin are clear indications of the Christian foundation of Heidegger's conception of the human condition.

So if Heidegger's exposition of human condition is a fundamental ontology and not just anthropological analysis as he argues, then his fundamental ontology is ontotheological. In that light, the analysis of anxiety and death in Early Heidegger should not be seen an

investigation into the meaninglessness of human existence because of human finitude but it must be placed within the context of the “mystery of being” (Marcel 1960).

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