

THE CONCEPT OF AUTHENTICITY IN HEIDEGGER'S *BEING AND TIME*:
THOUGHTS AND REVISIONS ON A CRITICAL THEME

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF ARTS

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(History)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

December 2007

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Abstract

Addressing the meaning of Martin Heidegger's much-discussed concept of 'authenticity', this study challenges the view, put forward by Charles Guignon and others, that that concept chiefly concerns the significance that an individual life can acquire. Emphasizing the crucial distinction between relational and transcendent meaning, the study sees that distinction as critical to Heidegger's treatment of authenticity, and, more broadly, to the manner in which authenticity figures in the situating of *Being and Time* in the general context of nihilism and belief. Drawing on arguments put forward by Hubert Dreyfus, and especially attuned to Kierkegaard's influence on Heidegger, the study repositions the concept at the point where Heidegger's existential analytic and the all too human desire for deeper meaning meet. The result serves at once to clarify the concept and refine understanding of its place in larger histories.

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If a human being did not have an eternal consciousness, if underlying everything there were only a wild, fermenting power that writhing in dark passions produced everything, be it significant or insignificant, if a vast, never appeased emptiness hid beneath everything, what would life be then but despair?

Søren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*¹

¹ Kierkegaard, Søren, *Fear and Trembling Repetition*, trans. by H. & E. Hong, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 15.

Human beings seek meaning. We look for meaning behind events, actions, aspects of our lives as we live them. We look for reasons why people do things, why events in the natural world occur. We see omens and portents that signify things. In language we convey meanings. Words mean something. Someone who communicates well clearly conveys what they mean. When we are children, our parents tell us to do what they mean, not what they say.

We also look for so-called “deeper meanings.” In religion and philosophy we seek meaning beyond day to day significations. In these human pursuits we seek the grander and overall “meaning of life,” whether we find it in God, or the good, or some sense of “how things should be.” We are creatures who want and seem to need such meanings. The greatest overall theme in the history of human thought has been the question of such ultimate meanings as “the meaning of life.” The following exposition in no way pretends to offer such deeper meanings or even attempt to find them. Rather, this paper is an account of a certain episode in the history of European thought where the existence of these greater and deeper meanings, which humans have sought, arguably, as long as we have recorded records, came into question.

The specific episode that I am looking at is the appearance of the groundbreaking path of thought and constellation of ideas that is Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. I am arguing that the path of thinking that is contained in and awakened by this book leads directly to this issue: that is, the question of the existence of these deeper meanings that are “beyond” day to day significations (hence: “transcendent meaning”). If we follow the line of thought that Heidegger presents in this work, we arrive at a confrontation with the question of transcendent meaning. The complicated concept of authenticity, in *Being and*

Time is the device by which Heidegger attempts to engage in this confrontation and solve the problem of the questionable existence of transcendent meaning.

Though I am not the first to note Heidegger's interest in the question of ultimate meaning or ultimate meaninglessness, the focus and approach I take here is novel. By focusing on the distinction between what I for now will simply call "everyday" meanings, and transcendent meaning, I arrive at a description of the concept of authenticity in *Being and Time* that sheds new light on the issue. By looking at authenticity in terms of transcendent meaning we are able to see the concept's significance in terms of the structural role that it plays in the overall project of the work as well as within the greater context of the question of "deeper meaning" in general, the exploration of which, the project of *Being and Time* is involved.

The thinkers who discuss Heidegger's concept of authenticity in *Being and Time* in relation to meaning do so in what Taylor Carman describes as more or less "optimistic" or "pessimistic" terms.² Charles Guignon, for instance, is optimistic about the kind of meaning that an "authentic" human life can have. He sees the living-out of one's life as producing a sort of life-text that can be read from the end in order to see what a particular person's life meant (that is, discover its coherent meaning). Carman quotes Guignon, describing this sort of narrative meaning, saying that an authentic life, "like a well-crafted story, [has] a beginning, a development, and an ending that gives the whole its *point*."³ Hubert Dreyfus, on the other hand, as Carman points out, is pessimistic

² Carman, Taylor, *Heidegger's Analytic: Interpretation, Discourse, and Authenticity in Being and Time*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 271.

³ Guignon, Charles, "Philosophy and Authenticity: Heidegger's Search for a Ground for Philosophizing," in Wrathall, M. & Malpas, J. (Eds.), *Heidegger, Authenticity, and*

about the possibility that someone's life could have any sort of coherent meaning at all. As we shall see later on, Dreyfus' account comes far closer to the sort of focus and direction that I take here, but differs in its ultimate conclusions.

Carman situates himself in this debate between Dreyfus and Guignon, agreeing with the former that a human being's life cannot have a coherent meaning, insisting that "what distinguishes Heidegger... is his radical rejection of any conception of [the human being] as a finished, or in principle finishable self, an integrated whole, a complete occurrent entity."⁴ But at the same time, Carman believes that we do have "a kind of boundary condition or limit point past which we cannot in principle continue to lose ourselves, or lose track of ourselves."⁵ In any case, what these discussions miss is the crucial distinction between individual meanings (in this case, the subject-dependent meaning of an individual human being's life) and transcendent meaning that is beyond such particularities. It is through just this distinction that I want to look at Heidegger's concept of authenticity.

In this exploration, I will touch on a number of issues as I move along a path that is marked in advance by *Being and Time* itself. I will begin with a brief explanation of Heidegger's overall aim with this work and then turn to the place that authenticity has within this project. I will stress the structural role that the concept of authenticity plays, both within the existential analytic itself, and in defending the aim of the project against the nihilistic criticisms that seem to arise from the analytic itself. As this project progresses I will attempt to convey a sense of the import and significance of the

Modernity: Essays in Honour of Hubert L. Dreyfus, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2000), p. 85.

⁴ Carman, *Heidegger's Analytic*, p. 266.

⁵ *Ibid*, pp. 295-296.

confrontation with the question of transcendent meaning, and, finally, end with a discussion of certain unquestioned standards of evaluation that underlie Heidegger's response to this question. It is at this point that the greatest difference between Dreyfus's analysis of the situation and my own will become most clear, for it is here, that Dreyfus' pessimism can be surpassed, exactly at the point that Heidegger's own pessimism can be.

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The concept of authenticity, as used in *Being and Time*, is powerful and evocative, but it is also problematic, complex, complicated, and, in many ways, considering its various interpretations, elusive. What does the powerful and evocative concept of authenticity signify? What does it mean? And what does it do? My answer here is that Heidegger's use of the concept of authenticity in *Being and Time* offers a description of a way to have transcendent meaning without having to believe in God; it is a way of conceiving of transcendent meaning that does not require faith. Once this statement has been made, more questions of course arise, the two most important being:

- 1) How does this way of conceiving of transcendent meaning that does not require faith (the concept of authenticity, as depicted in *Being and Time*), work? That is: What is it? What, in Heidegger's terms, is its way?

And:

- 2) How did Heidegger arrive at such a state that this mental mechanism (the way that is the concept of authenticity in *Being and Time*) was desired/needed?

Both questions require a certain kind of specifically historical thinking in order to adequately arrive at answers. And, both questions, to a certain degree, must be answered together. These questions and their possible answers form a thread, not just in Heidegger

studies, or the history of philosophy, or, more broadly, of thought, but in the history of belief or the history of the ability to believe (of faith and, as we shall see, of nihilism).

In order to understand Heidegger's concept of authenticity as it appears in *Being and Time*, we first have to look at the overall project of the work itself and then determine what structural role the concept plays within this overall project, as well as the concept's features, aspects, and provenance. We need to know what Heidegger means in *Being and Time* when he uses this term and we need to understand how this concept that he invokes works.

Heidegger's project in *Being and Time* is to explore the meaning of being. He wants to question the meaning of the "is," what it means *to be*. As he notes in *Being and Time*'s introduction, this question is often disregarded as at once "the most universal and" at the same time, "the emptiest concept," which "resists every attempt at definition." It may, in fact, not need definition largely because "everybody uses it constantly and also already understands what is meant by it."⁶ Yet, despite the seeming obviousness of the concept, Heidegger contends that in fact, the question of being is "*the most basic and at the same time most concrete question.*"⁷ It is the most primary and essential question. According to Heidegger the question plagued the ancient Greeks, but has subsequently been ignored and replaced by the belief that the meaning of "being" is something at once obvious, indefinable, and irrelevant. Heidegger contends that things have gone so far that the question itself has been forgotten. Not only do we not wonder about the question of

⁶ Heidegger, Martin, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), p. 2.

*All references to *Being and Time* refer to the German pagination, which is printed in the edition and in both the Stambaugh and Macquarrie/Robinson translations.

⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 9.

the meaning of being any more, but we no longer even remember how to ask about it. It is Heidegger's goal to recall and renew this questioning. But many things stand in the way.

Heidegger's way in to the question of the meaning of being is to look at a particular being, or type of being. This being is the human being, which unlike all other sorts of beings, thinks about and is concerned about its being. Physical objects are, ideas are, animals are, each type of being *is*, and animals are even aware of the existence of things (other animals, objects, etc.), but only human beings conceive of *being itself* and are concerned about it. As the sort of beings that we are we are concerned with what it means for us to be. Most of us do not spend much of our time consciously thinking about being, but, nevertheless, concern for one's being, even on a pre-theoretical level, exists as a part of our own being. How Heidegger can claim that this is so can be better understood if we stop for a moment and consider how he believes we can begin our ontological exploration.

If, as Heidegger tells us, we have not only forgotten to ask the question of the meaning of being, but even *how* to ask this question, how can we even begin? That is, how can we recall something that has been forgotten? And, how can we say that human beings have concern for and knowledge of their being as part of their being? Part of the answer is that even the mode of deficiency is based on existence. That is, to say something is lacking is not to say that what is lacking does not exist, rather it is to say that it exists in a deficient mode. The other part of the answer refers to pre-theoretical knowledge. We do not spend our time contemplating the meaning of being, but that is not to say that we have no sense of it at all. In fact, all of our thinkings and dealings

presuppose some sense of what it means for things to be. We have a sense of the meaning of being, but we do not explore it. What Heidegger proposes is that we begin by considering this pre-theoretical sense and move on from there to deeper and deeper levels of exploration and interpretation. There are however, some problems that arise when we try to do this. Several things get in the way of the sort of analysis that Heidegger hopes to begin.

One of the major stumbling blocks impeding the recall of the question of being is the problem of what Heidegger calls "Cartesianism." By Cartesianism, Heidegger does not only mean the philosophy of Descartes, but rather a general and pervasive trend in the history of philosophy of which the thought of Descartes is a particularly important instance and clear and representative example.

Cartesianism, as a problem for the aims of *Being and Time*, presents being as enduring presence. It depicts *the human being* as a thinking subject that looks out at a world of objects. Physical objects are corporeal things that are constantly present, the essence of which is extension (physical proportion), while objects of thought, apprehension, contemplation, etc. are, similarly, seen as things outside observed by the thinking subject.

The first problem with this outlook is its unquestioned and entirely unexamined ontological base. Because the Cartesian outlook takes the question of being to be inessential and passes it over, that outlook rests on an untested ontological foundation. Not only does its conception of being as enduring presence go unquestioned (focusing on the *cogito* and ignoring and leaving unexplored the meaning of the *sum*) and thus miss the more essential question, but it is also a wrong position. According to Heidegger being

is never just the enduring objective presence of things, and can only be seen as such when we put ourselves into a detached, theoretical mode of thinking and looking at things that is far from the way we actually experience being in everyday life.

In his commentary on division 1 of *Being and Time*, *Being in the World*, Hubert Dreyfus rightly points to the overcoming of Cartesianism as, necessarily, one of the project of *Being and Time*'s central concerns.⁸ He points to the absolute necessity of overcoming this pervasive outlook, which impedes the project of reawakening the question of the meaning of being both by passing over the question, but also, at the same time, inadvertently projecting an incorrect conception as its answer. Part of the problem of the Cartesian outlook is that it focuses on the human being, which is Heidegger's starting point for his ontological project. Another part of the difficulty is the fact that the Cartesian outlook uses the reasoning of the mathematical sciences to justify itself, a reasoning that carries a lot of rhetorical weight.

In order to avoid Cartesianism's pitfalls, Heidegger attempts to come up with a novel, non-Cartesian way of thinking about human being. Here he has to avoid the conception of human being concerned with a thinking subject that looks out at a world of objects, the being of which is enduring presence, and begin with an exploration of the pre-theoretical sense of being that human being has, and dig down into deeper hermeneutic levels from there. In order to capture this non-Cartesian conception of human being Heidegger uses the term "Dasein," already, at the time of *Being and Time*'s publication, a common term in philosophical parlance, meaning "existence," or, "the existing human being," or "life." Heidegger took it to signify more, and at the same time

⁸ Dreyfus, Hubert L. *Being in the World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division 1*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991).

something more specific. Through a characteristic use of familiar words to signify a new (or revived) meaning, and at the same time, to retain a sense of the familiar meaning, Heidegger emphasised the components of the term, *Da* and *sein*, meaning “there” and “being” and used it to signify that the human being was an instance of being-there, which pointed, in a rough and compact way, to the nature of this being.

While Dasein was not a thinking subject, looking out at a world of objects, it was, as long as it existed, always and already in a world. But by “world” Heidegger did not mean Descartes’ world of physical objects objectively present, nor of the inside and outside of subject and object in general, but rather, a world of meanings and relations. For Heidegger, as long as Dasein exists, there will be also a physical world of physical objects, with other beings, some like Dasein, some not, and there will at the same time be, as a *sine qua non* of Dasein’s being, a positioning of it already in a world of meanings and relations without which the “stuff” of the physical world would be indifferently objectively present.

A crucial aspect of Heidegger’s conception of Dasein that is often overlooked is that the being of this being is always in motion. Heidegger’s conception of Dasein includes a sense that Dasein is always *doing*. There is a sense of constant motion. Dasein is alive and in action. And the crucial term for my exploration here comes into Heidegger’s description when he says that while we are alive and doing, we are always doing either authentically or inauthentically, or else we are in a state of modal indifference.⁹ But before we go on to explore what Heidegger means within the context

⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 42-43.

of *Being and Time* when he says this, it will be worthwhile to pause for a moment and think about what the words themselves mean.

The German terms used by Heidegger that are translated as “authenticity” and “inauthenticity” are *Eigentlichkeit* and *Uneigentlichkeit*, the “un” of “*Uneigentlichkeit*” being a negation, as with the “in” of “inauthenticity.” The “lich” and the “keit” of the two German words are the equivalent of the English “-ly” and “-ness” making the adjective “*eigentlich*” into a noun, as with the English “-icity.” In common English parlance, the adjective “authentic” means “original,” or “genuine,” or of something “really proceeding from its reputed source.”¹⁰ The German term “*eigentlich*” in common parlance means, “real,” or “actual,” but has the adjective “*eigen*” as its root, which means “own” as in “one’s own,” or “separate.” It is derived from the Greek *ιδιος*, meaning “one’s own,” “personal,” “private,” or even “strange,”¹¹ and is related to *ιδιοτη*, which in Aristotelian logic is a property of something that “cannot belong to anything else.”¹²

The appropriateness of the English translation becomes more apparent when we note its own Greek root (the “auto” of authenticity, referring to one’s self and also present in “author”). Like *ιδιος*, the Greek root *αυτος* means “one’s self,” “personal, by oneself.”¹³ The main difference, important to bear in mind, is that both the Greek *ιδιος*, and the German *eigen* carry a stronger connotation of ownership than do *αυτος* and *auto*, although the sense is still present here as well.

¹⁰ Simpson, J. A. & Weiner E. S. C. (Eds.), *The Oxford English Dictionary Vol. 1*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p. 796.

¹¹ Morwood, J. & Taylor, J. (Eds.) *the Pocket Oxford Classical Greek Dictionary*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 161.

¹² Peters, F. E. *Greek Philosophical Terms: A Historical Lexicon*, (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 93.

¹³ Morwood, *Pocket Oxford Classical Greek Dictionary*, p. 58.

By using the term *Eigentlichkeit*, as he does with “Dasein,” Heidegger wants both the familiar, common meanings and connotations and the stranger, etymological significations and associations to come to mind. In regard to “Dasein” (in later translations, at Heidegger’s insistence, the term was hyphenated as Da-sein to draw attention to its compound nature), Heidegger tells us that “the term” is being used as “a pure expression of being,”¹⁴ emphasizing its strict sense as indicating “being-there” (see for instance Heidegger’s further discussion of how Dasein always *is* its “there”¹⁵). In regard to “*Eigentlichkeit*” and its negative or deficient form “*Uneigentlichkeit*” (inauthenticity), he says that “these expressions are terminologically chosen in the strictest sense of the word.”¹⁶

Heidegger introduces the concept of authenticity under the heading *The Theme of the Analytic of Dasein*. This work intends to get at some sense of the meaning of being itself. Authenticity and inauthenticity, as possible modes of Dasein’s being, first come up as Heidegger describes the task of the preparatory stage of the analytic.

Heidegger begins by telling us that Dasein is always I myself. That is, the being of this being, through which Heidegger hopes to get at being in general, is not *any* being, it is specifically, and “always, *mine*.”¹⁷ And, as mentioned, “in the being of this being it is related to its being,” and “as the being of this being it is entrusted to its own being about which this being is concerned.”¹⁸ How we *are* is partially determined by us, by what we do. Throughout our lives we not only make decisions about what we do and say,

¹⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 12.

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 132-133.

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 43.

¹⁷ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 41.

¹⁸ Ibid. pp. 41-42.

but also how we interpret things, ourselves, and being. From this Heidegger comes to the conclusion that “the ‘essence’ of this being [Dasein] lies in its to be.” He says that “the whatness (*essentia*) of this being must be understood in terms of its being (*existential*),” that is, “*the ‘essence’ of Dasein lies in its existence.*”¹⁹ What Heidegger means by this is that we are *essentially* possibilities, our *essence* lies in the possible ways we can be.

As this being (Dasein), my possible ways to be are of great concern to me. Heidegger says that “Dasein is my own, to be always in this or that way.” And, as long as I exist, I have “always already decided in which way Dasein is always my own.” He also says that, “the being which is concerned in its being about its being is related to its being as its truest possibility,” and that, “Dasein *is* always its possibility.”²⁰ As the beings that essentially *are* the possible ways that we can *be*, as we enact them, and as the beings that *reflect* on this, or have knowledge of, concern for, and relation to our being, we are essentially *self-reflexive*. That is, our essence is how we *are* and how we relate to this being. Heidegger is telling us that the self-reflexive task of relating to being (what it means to be) is our truest possibility (which, as a possible way to be, that is, as a *constant possibility*, is an essential existential aspect of Dasein).

Authenticity makes its first appearance when Heidegger says that “because Dasein is always essentially its possibility, it *can* choose itself in its being.” He goes on:

It can win itself, it can lose itself, or it can never and only ‘apparently’ win itself.

It can only have lost itself and it can only have not yet gained itself because it is essentially possible as authentic [note the discussion above], that is, it belongs to

¹⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 42.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

itself. The two kinds of being of *authenticity* and *inauthenticity* -- these expressions are terminologically chosen in the strictest sense of the word -- are based on the fact that Dasein is in general determined by always being-mine.²¹

Some of the confusion about authenticity and inauthenticity arises from not paying close enough attention to this initial mention of the concept. One of the crucial distinctions in *Being and Time* is between the *ontic* and the *ontological*, between beings (things that are), and being itself (what the “are” means). In his analytic, Heidegger distinguishes between features of Dasein that pertain to its being, which he calls “existentials” and ways that it can or can not be, which he calls “existentiell.” Existentiell aspects are the possible ways that we can be, while existentials are aspects of Dasein that are always and already there as long as Dasein exists. It is extremely important to note that in the above quotation Heidegger stresses that the Dasein is “essentially possible as authentic.” This is an existential. That is, as long as we exist, we always have the *possibility of being authentic*. It is the *possibility* that is an existential, whereas the actual modes of authenticity and inauthenticity are existentiell. It is always possible for us to be authentic, but we are not always already authentic. But what does this mean?

What does it mean to be authentic or inauthentic? When we discussed the etymology of the words we noted connotations of genuineness and reality, but we also saw that Heidegger seems to intend something closer to the more strict etymological sense of “self-owned,” involving the connotations of possession. What does it mean to “possess” one’s self? What does it mean when Heidegger says that we can always

²¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 42-43.

possess ourselves, that we always have the possibility, but that we may not? What does it mean to not possess oneself, to have “lost” or “only ‘apparently’” won oneself?

Later in the project Heidegger comes to the conclusion that the being of Dasein is care. We already know that, as the sort of beings that we are, we have concern for that being as an essential aspect of our being (an existential), but Heidegger now says that *our being itself* can be described as *care*. By using the term “care” Heidegger means to describe our being in structural terms. “Care” is a structure. A description of the care-structure represents a structural description of Dasein’s being.

Heidegger sums up the care-structure, the structure of Dasein’s being, in the following formula: Care is “*being-ahead-of-oneself-already-being-in (the world) as being-together-with (innerworldly beings encountered)*.”²² This is an ontic/ontological structure, in that it refers both to ontological aspects of Dasein’s being (existentials), while at the same time pointing to the existence of (and the importance of not forgetting the existence of) ontic, existentiell particularities. The hyphenated components refer to existentials. Dasein is always already being-in, meaning that Dasein is always already in a world in the sense mentioned above. “The world,” and the “innerworldly beings encountered” point not just to the fact that each individual Dasein has its world, and that there are other beings in this world (things, animals, ideas, other people), but that each Dasein’s world and the innerworldly beings that it encounters are particular and its own, and yet shared. But what of this “being-ahead-of-oneself” and the significance of the existential “being-together-with?”

²² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 192.

“Being-together-with” signifies the fact that, as long as Dasein is it is always in its world with other beings. There are things, objects, tools, plants, animals, ideas, concepts, and other human beings as well. The importance of this existential attribute is profound. In all of our dealings and doings, throughout all of our lives, we are interacting with these other beings. But we are also learning from them. From childhood on we are taught by these other beings, *but not just any other beings*, rather, the specific beings (again, things, ideas, concepts, social structures, roles, other human beings, and especially interpretations and ways of thinking) of the specific particular place in time and space into which we are born and live. Our thinking is conditioned by the beings we have access to (and, arguably, by the time and the way in which we encounter them). The specific set of beings we encounter and the specific spacio-temporal situation of each individual Dasein determine the potential ways in which we think and interpret things, including ourselves and being itself. This specificity is the concrete situation in which we find ourselves. But what of “being-ahead-of-oneself?”

Dasein, as long as it is, is always looking ahead. It looks ahead in and to future projects, because Dasein is always engaged in projects. As temporal beings, beings that exist in time, or better, that exist temporally, as we do, as beings that *do*, we are always engaged in projects, and, in fact, we are always *projecting*. This is the essence of the existential described as being-ahead-of-oneself. We are always projecting ahead, in the projects that we are engaged in, to future projects, and essentially and fundamentally, to being Dasein. As beings that *experience* time we look ahead and are always looking ahead. As Magda King puts it in her *Guide to Heidegger's Being and Time*, using a strangely gendered terminology, “Dasein is never merely here and now like a thing, but is

constantly out beyond himself, relating himself, in the first place, not to other beings, but to his own ability to be.”²³

But *who* is Dasein? Heidegger tells us that the being of Dasein is always my own. This being is always I myself, and always has the potential for being self-owned. For the most part, though, Dasein is in fact not myself, though I always have responsibility for my own Dasein, the being of which is always my own. That the issue of the “self” of Dasein as depicted in *Being and Time* can cause confusion is clear. While Dasein is always mine (it always has the kind of being of mineness *Jemeinigkeit*), its essence is borne out in its existence. The self of Dasein at any given time is something like its essence *at that time*, as manifest in what it is doing and how it is doing it.

Dasein interprets. As long as Dasein is, it is always and already interpreting. And Dasein interprets everything, including its self. Dasein interprets what it means to be Dasein, and to be the particular individual Dasein that it is. But it *is*, for the most part, this interpretation, by acting it out (living it, *doing* it). Because Dasein’s essence lies in its existence it is self-determining, what self it *is* at any given moment is based on its interpretation of itself. But, we must remember *where Dasein gets its possibilities for interpretation*. Dasein’s possibilities for interpretation come from the world in which it finds itself, or, better, the world in which it always and already *is*. Therefore, while Dasein is self-interpreting and thus, self-determining, the actual ways in which it interprets its self, and therefore *is*, are selected from a pre-existing set of options.

²³ King, Magda, *A Guide to Heidegger’s Being and Time*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001), p. 98.

So, according to Heidegger, we are beings that are essentially self-determining, but only to a point. Our self-determining is an act of *determining* between a range of options, rather than a making of ourselves wholesale; it is a matter of making a selection, rather than creation. But all the while, as this constantly goes on, without end, until we are no more, Heidegger says that we also always have the potential for being “authentic,” which is something like being self-owned. But the fact that the self that we determine comes from a limited set of options that we are presented with, which are not within our control, but rather come from the particular time and place in which we exist, seems to limit the scope of this authenticity, of this self-owning. We seem to not be able to be self-owned from the ground up, as it were. And if this is the case, why does Heidegger deem the authenticity/inauthenticity determination necessary at all? There are, I believe, two main answers to this question, and they are related. The first answer is that authenticity plays an important structural role in the project of *Being and Time*, because, as Dreyfus points out,²⁴ Heidegger needs to find a state in which Dasein can be, where its being comes into view for it in something like its totality. But this first answer will make more sense once we explore the second.

This second answer, and the main thrust of my argument here, is that Heidegger needs the concept of authenticity in this fundamental ontology that he is creating. He needs authenticity in order to combat another large scale problem that gets in the way of the path of thinking that he wants to pursue and is in part strengthened by consequences of exploring the initial steps along this path. The concept of authenticity is necessary in order to combat the problem of nihilism, and specifically the nihilist critique that can be

²⁴ See Dreyfus, *Being in the World*, pp. 303-304.

levelled at and in part derived from the description of existence that Heidegger begins to put forth in *Being and Time*.

In later works nihilism becomes a term that signifies the forgetfulness of being for Heidegger, and in *Being and Time* it is a major problem for the overall project of discovering the meaning of being. Heidegger's *very question*, concerned with the meaning of being, *cannot abide nihilism*. Therefore, dealing with nihilism (neutralizing it) *must* be a central concern for the project of *Being and Time*. Scholars have pointed out the fact that Heidegger is trying to combat nihilism in *Being and Time*, but not enough attention has been drawn to the brute fact that he *must* do so.

But "nihilism" itself is a problematic term. It has been used to denote a wide range of positions and attitudes, sometimes with only loose and stretched relational connections between them. The root of the word is the Latin "nihil," meaning "nothing," and while some uses of the term stress *negation*, I am using it to signify *absence* (nothing, not being there). I generally agree with Karen Carr, who notes that "nihilism is better described as an outlook or a perspective" rather than "a philosophical position."²⁵ I am concerned here with what she terms "*existential or axiological nihilism*," which "is the feeling of emptiness and pointlessness that follows from the judgement 'Life has no meaning.'"²⁶

Carr points out that existential or axiological nihilism is generally a sort of second stage nihilism that arises from an initial discovery that there is no truth, or knowledge, or

²⁵ Carr, Karen L. *The Banalization of Nihilism: Twentieth-Century Responses to Meaninglessness*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 22.

²⁶ *Ibid.* p. 18.

God, etc. and therefore there can be no meaning.²⁷ Carr attempts to draw out some of the strands in the larger, and as yet insufficiently explored overall story of the history of nihilism, which we unfortunately do not have space to expand on here, though a few points can be noted: the term came into use during the late eighteenth century, “coextensive, in other words, with the emergence of the Enlightenment,” and was initially pejorative, used against those who drew attention away from God as the absolute source of meaning. It first received sustained philosophical attention in the first decade of the nineteenth century in the debates about the implications of German idealism,” where it was again used to criticise a philosophy that, by “focusing on the subjective conditions for the possibility of knowledge,” dissolved “the reality of the external world into ‘nothingness.’”²⁸

Another point to note is the importance of Nietzsche for this story. While despair over the meaninglessness left by the death of God obviously points to Nietzsche,²⁹ his own position on nihilism was more complex. Nietzsche described Christianity itself, rooted in the belief in a God, as a sort of nihilism, because it turned the real world in which we live into nothing in comparison with a projected world after death. He links this nihilism to the “mendacity of the whole Christian interpretation of world and history,” terming it “a backlash from ‘God is truth’ into the fanatical belief ‘Everything is false.’”³⁰

The sort of existential, or axiological nihilism that becomes a problem for Heidegger’s thought seems in fact to arise from it. Heidegger’s fundamental ontology

²⁷ Carr, *The Banalization of Nihilism*, pp. 19-20.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

²⁹ See for instance: Nietzsche, Friedrich, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 23.

³⁰ *Ibid.* p. 83.

seeks to get at the meaning of being by looking at the being of Dasein (that being that has concern for and knowledge of its being as part of its being), but in doing so, it leaves God out of the equation. It does not so much bypass the question of the existence of God, which seems, at least in terms of traditional expectations, to be required by a fundamental description of Dasein's being, but rather gets behind it. According to Heidegger, an exploration of the ways in which Dasein *is*, is prior to any sort of theology. With the question of being Heidegger aims "at an *a priori* condition of the possibility not only of the sciences which investigate beings of such and such a type [like theology which investigates God, or less literally, but more apt in this case: Christianity] -- and are thereby already involved in an understanding of being; but it aims also at the condition of the possibility of the ontologies which precede the ontic sciences that found them."³¹ Fundamental ontology precedes thought about God or Dasein's relation to God, but this is precisely where the problem arises.

Heidegger's project in *Being and Time* is a fundamental ontology. This project seeks to get at the meaning of being, and as a *fundamental* ontology, that lies beneath and precedes all other ontologies (and sciences based on ontological posits like theology), its centre cannot be God. But the same charge that users of the term "nihilism" laid against enlightenment thinkers can be laid against this: it leads to meaninglessness, for how can there be meaning without God? It is a charge, though, without weight, for, as we shall see, Heidegger's descriptions in *Being and Time* are far from positing existence as meaningless, rather, they depict existence as replete with meaning.

³¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 11. See also pp. 10-11, and pp. 49-50.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger posits existence, and the world as *meaning laden*. It is not that, without God in the equation, there is no meaning in and of being and existence, but rather, that meaning is everywhere, and, indeed, primary to any questions about God. The very sense of the world in which Dasein always already is, is a sort of relational web of meanings and significations. Heidegger describes the essence of Dasein's world as its "worldliness," and describes this "worldliness of the world" in terms of "relevance and significance."³² As long as Dasein exists it is always and already in a world, and the worldliness of the world is relevance and significance.

Heidegger tells us that, "relevance is the being of innerworldly beings," and that, "beings are in each case relevant." Relevance is that what-for and wherefore of beings. It represents how Dasein interprets them. This relevance of beings, which beings always and already have, is related to a totality of references that is the world. "Which relevance things at hand have is prefigured in terms of the total relevance." And, "the total relevance itself... ultimately leads back to a what-for which *no longer* has relevance, which itself is not a being of the kind of being of things at hand within a world, but is a being whose being is defined as being-in-the-world, to whose constitution worldliness itself belongs [Dasein]."³³ The world itself is a complex web (comprised of complex webs) of relevance; everything in it *is* relevant to and for Dasein.

This relational relevance of the world is in turn related to an overall *significance*, the term that Heidegger uses to describe the "relational totality." As he puts it, "these relations are interlocked among themselves in a primordial totality. They are what they

³² Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 83-88.

³³ *Ibid.* p. 84.

are as this signifying in which Dasein gives itself to understand its being-in-the-world beforehand.” Significance then is a sort of overall meaning that represents the totality of relational relevance. “It is what constitutes the structure of the world, of that in which Dasein as such always already is.”³⁴ So it seems, then, that the charge that nihilism arises from the schematic of existence that Heidegger puts forward in *Being and Time* is unfounded. Existence is not meaningless, but full of meaning. But even this appreciation of matters misses the complexity and severity of Heidegger’s account.

The overall significance is based on our understanding of being, which we draw from our own being in the world, which means that it is relational. Signifying occurs in an act of understanding. Significance is only clear to us in understanding. And yet, “if the kind of being of being-in-the-world essentially belongs to Dasein, then the understanding of being-in-the-world belongs to the essential content of its understanding of being.”³⁵ Dasein, which, as self-interpreting and self-determining, in the sense already mentioned, *is* this interpretation which it picks up from the world, which in turn is the choice that determines significance. We pick it up from the world, where there is an abundance of potential meanings (potential interpretations, or, simply, possibilities). And, if overall significance, a sort of greater, or, overall meaning, is chosen from amongst an abundance of possibilities, derived from the world, then meaning becomes dependent on our choice.

Heidegger’s exploration of this sort of “subjectivity” and relational meaning owes a great debt to Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard described the human being as spirit, and spirit as “the self.” Heidegger also described Dasein in terms of a self. In Heidegger’s conception, the self, that Dasein is at any given time, is determined by Dasein itself, in a

³⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 87.

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 86.

self-determining act of interpretation: the self, then, is determined as a relation of Dasein relating itself to itself. For Kierkegaard, “the self is a relation that relates itself to itself or is the relation’s relating itself to itself in the relation; the self is not the relation but is the relation’s relating itself to itself.”³⁶ That is, the self of a human being is an entity that is the relating of the relation between itself and itself, and, for Kierkegaard, the relation between finite being (its temporality) and an infinite soul, which stands in a relation to God; but again, the self is not some part of this relation, but the relation itself.

What is important for both Heidegger and Kierkegaard’s relational views of the self is that neither thinker is describing a singular instance. Rather, both Kierkegaard and Heidegger see the determination of the self as a constantly occurring process; as something that, so long as Dasein *is*, is always and already going on (even if, as especially for Kierkegaard, for the most part in the deficient mode of not being a self, or lacking selfhood). This is a conception of the human being *in motion*, and, fundamentally, *in time*. Significance, in Heidegger’s conception, is not a static thing, but is always *being established*, at all times, as long as Dasein *is*. Thus Heidegger speaks of “signifying” and “Understanding”³⁷ stressing the verbal character of these concepts, their being in motion, in time, their temporality. This relation that is the self of Dasein is always and already relating.

In *Being and Time*, as we have discussed, relevance and significance, that is, meaning in existence, come from this relating; they come from the self of Dasein, which

³⁶ Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Sickness Unto Death*, trans. by, Hong, H. & E. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 13.

³⁷ See, “Relevance and Significance: The Worldliness of the World,” in Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 83-88, esp. pp 86-87 [emphasis mine].

is this relation, in its *relating*. Dasein's interpretations are what constitute the self, or, better, Dasein's *interpreting* is constantly *constituting* the self. But, as we have mentioned, Dasein gets its possibilities for interpretation from the world in which it always already is, and yet, the significance of this world, which constitutes the worldliness of the world and represents the relational totality of relevance, "the meaning of the world" at any given point, if you will, is determined by Dasein's interpreting. One could then charge that this "meaning" is "merely relational," and that there seems to be no meaning outside of the relational circle of interpretation. "Is there any meaning beyond this?" the nihilist could ask. Certainly if there is *a* "meaning of being," as Heidegger tells us he is seeking, and not an infinite number of possible and equally valid and invalid meanings, there must be, but Heidegger's thought seems to lead us directly to this "nihilistic" question.

If there is *a* meaning of being to be pursued, then there must be meaning that is beyond the seemingly infinite range (given the multiplicity of possible meanings for a multiplicity of individual Daseins) of relational meanings. There must be a sort of meaning that transcends the relational; there must be *transcendent meaning*. But can Heidegger find a way to conceive of transcendent meaning given the path of thinking he has embarked upon? This is the central question that *absolutely must* be answered in the affirmative for the project of *Being and Time* to "mean" anything.

Kierkegaard finds transcendent meaning in God, through the leap of faith. His world of relational meaning has a way out as it were. It has an ultimate transcendent meaning that is still available and can be found through a specific relation: to the Christian God. But it is not as though the place of the Christian God is as it had been.

Kierkegaard rejects the idea that God is something that can be found in the world as if God were merely an objectively present thing (to use Heidegger's terminology). In Kierkegaard's relational world, this sort of "objectivity," the "objective truth" of a God that supplies ultimate meaning self-evidently, is an inessential and ultimately meaningless truth. For Kierkegaard, the realities of subjectivity, of subjective truth cannot derive their meaning from checking them against something objectively present in the world; in fact, they cannot derive their meaning from anything that makes objective sense at all. As he puts it:

When the question about truth is asked objectively, truth is reflected upon objectively as an object to which the knower relates himself. What is reflected upon is not the relation but that what he relates himself to is the truth, the true. If only that to which he relates himself is the truth, the true, then the subject is in the truth. When the question about truth is asked subjectively, the individual's relation is reflected upon subjectively. If only the how of this relation is in truth, the individual is in truth, even if he in this way were to relate himself to untruth.³⁸

Temporal, human meanings can give us no certainty of the existence of God, rather, the opposite is the case. God is the only source of transcendent meaning, but God is not proved. For Kierkegaard there can be no proof for God; we cannot think our way to God. But for Kierkegaard there is still a way out of the nihilism of Godlessness: through a leap

³⁸ Kierkegaard, Søren, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to Philosophical Fragments*, Trans. Hong, H. & E. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 199.

of faith. God must be reached through faith, and “faith begins precisely where thought stops.”³⁹

Heidegger cannot resort to God, because the nature of the overall project forbids it. But if he cannot look to God for transcendent meaning, where can he turn in this world of strictly relational significance and relevance? Can he look to “truth?” “Truth” is just as problematic *in objective terms* for Heidegger as it is for Kierkegaard, and “subjective truth” returns again to the relational world.⁴⁰ Where then can he turn? He turns to authenticity. But then a question arises: does authenticity confer meaning at all, let alone transcendent meaning (that is, meaning that is beyond strictly relational meaning)? In order to answer this question we first need to know how authenticity works in Heidegger’s account.

Authenticity, as it is presented in *Being and Time*, is a movement. Heidegger presents Dasein as a temporal entity. We are finite; we are born and we die. As long as we *are*, we are in time; we are always *verbal*, in the sense that we are always *doing*. That is, we are always doing until we die, and then we *are* no longer. Heidegger also posits Dasein as always and already being in a world. As long as we *are* we are in a relational web of significance and relevance. We are also self-determining, in the sense described above, and we obtain our possibilities for interpretation, from the relational world in which we always already are: the self that we are is always therefore a relation, or, better,

³⁹ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 53.

⁴⁰ Because of these problems with the traditional concept of truth, Heidegger begins to work out his own understanding of truth as “unconcealment.” See Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 219, and Heidegger, Martin, *The Essence of Truth*, trans. by, Sadler, T. (New York: Continuum, 2002), and Heidegger, Martin, “Plato’s Doctrine of Truth (1931/2, 1940)”, in *Pathmarks*, trans. by McNeill, W. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 155-182.

always the relating of relation. But we always also have the possibility of being authentic and, indeed, at any given time, we are always either authentic or inauthentic, or in some sort of undifferentiated state between the two: "Dasein exists always in one of these modes, or else in the modal indifference to them."⁴¹

When we pick up possibilities for interpretation, we can either do so in a way in which we take possession of our self (in creating the self of the moment) or in which we do not. We can either be self-owned or not. The transcendent meaning that is authenticity comes from this ownership, or rather, this act of taking possession.

In the conception of Dasein that Heidegger posits in *Being and Time*, we are *thrown* into being. This means that the world of possibilities for interpretation in which *we find ourselves* is neither of our own creation nor of our own choice. Dasein is thrown "into its there" and "it is thrown in such a way that it is the there as being-in-the-world." This is a complicated way of saying that everyone is born in a certain, specific time and a certain, specific place. "The expression thrownness is meant to suggest the *facticity of its being delivered over*."⁴² And the particularity of the world into which we are always already thrown gives us a limited number of actual possibilities for interpretation and action, for ways of living and interpreting our lives. As Kierkegaard puts it, only "fools and young people say that everything is possible for a human being. But that is a gross error."⁴³ We are limited in our possibilities by the particularity of our birth. But there is also another great and ultimate limit for us: our death.

⁴¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 53.

⁴² *Ibid*, p. 135.

⁴³ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 44.

As we have already mentioned, human beings are temporal and finite (which amount to roughly the same thing: to be finite is to be temporal, and vice versa). According to Heidegger “the primordial ontological ground of the existentiality of Dasein... is *temporality*.”⁴⁴ By this he means that the basis of our existence is its finite temporal nature. But this very basis, our finitude, terrifies us, and so we flee from it. And we flee, not just from the thought of our death, but from the finitude that is conditioned by *both* our birth *and* our death, *the very particularity of our individual existence*. But where can someone flee to from his or her own finitude, which, in fact, is that which is *most our own*? The answer is that we flee towards that which is not our own. We flee into the waiting arms of what Heidegger calls “*das Man*.”

Das Man, or “the they” as it is generally translated, is the non-specific neuter descriptor: “one.” Heidegger uses *das Man* to describe the average intelligence always available to Dasein in its world. “The they” is the average way of doing anything; “the they” is the average way of interpreting anything. It is anyone, everyone, and no one in particular. In fact, it is *fundamental non-particularity*. And for the most part we do, see, and understand things according to its guidelines. According to Heidegger:

This being-with-one-another dissolves one’s own Dasein completely into the kind of being of ‘the others’ in such a way that the others, as distinguishable and explicit, disappear more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the they unfolds its true dictatorship. We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way *they* enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature and art the way *they* see and judge. But we also withdraw from the ‘great mass’ the way

⁴⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 234.

they withdraw, we find ‘shocking’ what *they* find shocking. The *they*, which is nothing definite and which all are, though not as a sum, prescribes the kind of being of everydayness.⁴⁵

“The *they*,” as this average intelligence *that is always available to us*, is an existential. We do, see, and interpret things as everyone does because in this way we can avoid our own particularity and therefore our own finitude. In interpreting and doing as everyone does we *become* everyone for the most part and evade our own limits.

But there is something that naggingly points back to our finitude and particularity. It is the fundamental mood of *Angst*. Heidegger sharply differentiates *Angst* from fear, which is always a fear of something (even if that something is as vague as “the unknown” for instance). Rather, *Angst* is anxiety over being-in-the-world itself, over one’s own particularity and finitude. For the most part we flee our particularity and finitude expressly by fleeing *Angst* itself, which discloses our particular and finite nature. Again, to put it in Heidegger’s words:

What *Angst* is about is being-in-the-world itself. What *Angst* is about is the potentiality-of-being of Dasein absolutely. *Angst* about death must not be confused with a fear of one’s demise. It is not an arbitrary and chance ‘weak’ mood of the individual, but, as a fundamental attunement of Dasein, the disclosedness of the fact that Dasein exists as thrown being-*toward-its-end*.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 126-127.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 251.

For Heidegger, being in a state of *Angst* is not a fear of death, rather, it is being in a state of awareness of our finitude and particularity.

Here too Heidegger borrows heavily from Kierkegaard, this time actually noting the debt, which generally goes unacknowledged. He is especially attuned to Kierkegaard's relation of *Angst* to finitude, where Kierkegaard compares *Angst* (anxiety) with dizziness:

He [says Kierkegaard] whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down. Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs to this dizziness.⁴⁷

For Kierkegaard, the next step from anxiety is a realization of our sin. A leap of faith is again required in order to realize the guilt that lies at the heart of our being. When the leap is made, "in that very moment everything is changed, and freedom, when it again rises, sees that it is guilty."⁴⁸ This Christian conception, that we are, at heart, a lack, that we have sin and guilt at the core of our being, is something that Heidegger carries over into *Being and Time*, albeit in a de-Christianized form.

Heidegger's concept of guilt (*Schuld*) is directly tied to the potential for self-owning that is authenticity. We are thrown into the world, a particular world, and thus

⁴⁷ Kierkegaard, Søren, *The Concept of Anxiety*, trans. by Thomte, R. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 61.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

into a limited set of potential possibilities, as self-determining beings, but we are responsible for the self that we determine by our choice of which potential possibility for interpretation we take up. Part of what we flee when we evade the uncanniness of *Angst* is the responsibility we have for self-determining; we flee the knowledge that *we ourselves alone* are responsible for the choice that we make in self-determination and the ultimate meaninglessness that this seems to signify. And yet, as noted, our options are limited and not our own, we are thrown into them. Thus we are in the position of being responsible both ultimately (*Schuld* also means “responsibility”) and yet within limits. We are responsible for taking up the situation as we find it. *Angst* reveals this responsibility.

In the fundamental mood of *Angst* we are presented with our responsibility for self-ownership, for taking over our existence, and yet, we can never fully take up our existence from the ground up, because of our thrownness. As Heidegger puts it,

Dasein exists as thrown, brought into its there *not* of its own accord. It exists as a potentiality-of-being which belongs to itself, and yet has *not* given itself to itself. Existing, it never gets back behind its thrownness so that it could ever expressly release this ‘that-it-is-and-has-to-be’ from *its being* a self and lead it into the there.⁴⁹

Dasein must be the ground of its existence, and yet it cannot ever fully become this ground. Dasein therefore exists as a lack, or a nullity, which is the essence of the notion of existential guilt that Heidegger puts forward in *Being and Time*.

⁴⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 284.

Heidegger tells us that Dasein is the “ground of its potentiality of being,” which means that we are the responsible core of the choices that we make, and yet, “Because [Dasein] has *not* laid the ground *itself*, it rests in the weight of it, which mood reveals to it as a burden.” He goes on to ask: “And how *is* Dasein this thrown ground?” And he answers:

Only by projecting itself upon the possibilities into which it is thrown. The self, which as such has to lay the ground of itself, can *never* gain power over that ground, and yet it has to take over being the ground in existing. . . . It is never *before* its ground, but only *from it* and *as it*. Thus being the ground means *never* to gain power over one’s ownmost being from the ground up.⁵⁰

As the sort of beings that we are, then, we have much that is in fact closed off to us. Far, in consequence, from describing Dasein as a radically free creature, Heidegger posits it as bound by necessity.

And even as doors are closed to us by nature of the particularity of our individual existence, we are also ourselves constantly closing them as long as we exist. As we choose and take up some possibilities we are also always not choosing others. We are constantly not taking up possibilities, just as we are constantly taking them up. We are essentially beings that constantly close off options as we move through life, and as our lives progress towards their inevitable end, our options continue to dwindle. In describing our limited freedom of and for choice Heidegger again stresses our particularity. He notes that, “freedom *is* only in the choice of the one, that is, in bearing the fact of not having

⁵⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 284.

chosen and not being able to choose the others,” and goes on to stress that this nullity of possibility and potentiality “is the ground for the possibility of the nullity of *inauthentic* Dasein,”⁵¹ in that we, as a matter of course, cover over this particularity and these limits.

The fundamental mood of *Angst* lets Dasein hear what Heidegger calls the “call of conscience,” by which he does not mean that little voice in one’s head that tells us not to be wicked, but rather the existential aspect of our being that allows for the possibility of any such ideas as good or bad in the first place. Thus Heidegger does not present an ethics, but rather, in line with the objectives of his analysis, sticks to fundamental structures of Dasein’s being. For Heidegger, the call of conscience is essentially Dasein’s knowledge, however pre-theoretical and pre-reflective in general it may be. That call represents existential guilt, the fact of a kind of incapacity or lack. It has Dasein in fact calling to itself; it “gives Dasein to understand that Dasein itself -as the null ground of its null project, standing in the possibility of its being- must bring itself back to itself from its lostness in the they, and this means that it is guilty.”⁵² Dasein is aware of its existential guilt, and yet, for the most part, it attempts to cover this over and flees into “the they.” It evades this knowledge by giving up the responsibility that we not only have, but *are*, and by doing things and interpreting just as “they” do. This is precisely what Heidegger means by inauthenticity.

When we are authentic, we keep ourselves open to the knowledge of our own finitude, limits, and particularity, terms which in many ways mean much the same thing. Authenticity means essentially remaining in guilt. To be authentic, “Dasein need not first

⁵¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 285.

⁵² *Ibid.* p. 287.

burden itself with 'guilt' [in the common understanding of the term,] through failures and omissions; it must only *be authentically* the 'guilty' that it is."⁵³ In the fundamental mood of *Angst* we are aware of this "guilty" that we are, seeing it as disclosed by the call of conscience. Being authentic means staying in this state, staying in angst and staying aware of our existential guilt. "Then the correct hearing of the summons is tantamount to understanding oneself in one's ownmost potentiality-of-being, that is, in projecting oneself upon one's *ownmost* authentic potentiality for becoming guilty." This is how we take up ownership of ourselves. "Understanding the call, *Dasein* listens to its *ownmost possibility of existence*. It has chosen itself."⁵⁴

The proper response to this knowledge, this keeping oneself in *Angst*, is what Heidegger calls "resoluteness." It is a stance, a way of being-in-the-world in which we, bearing our guilt, particularity, finitude, and limitations in mind, carry on. Keeping ourselves in this knowledge grants a certain enhanced perspective on the situation at hand at any given moment. Because we are constantly bearing our limitations in mind, we are more aware of *what our actual possibilities are*. Heidegger says that, "in resoluteness the most primordial truth of *Dasein* has been reached, because it is *authentic*." He continues: "The disclosedness of the there discloses equiprimordially the whole of being-in-the-world –the world, being-in, and the self that is this being as 'I am,'" stressing that this involves an understanding of "the actual totality of relevance" which is significance.⁵⁵

Heidegger notes that "in understanding significance, *Dasein*, taking care of things, is circumspectly referred to the things at hand encountered," that is, to the actual concrete

⁵³ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 287.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.* p. 297.

situation in which we find ourselves. “The understanding of significance as the disclosedness of the actual world is again grounded in the understanding of the for-the-sake-of-which, [the why of what we are doing,] to which discovering the totality of relevance goes back.”⁵⁶ And all the while, “factically dependent on a definite ‘world,’” we can become lost in “the they.” “But *authentic* disclosedness then modifies equiprimordially the discoveredness of ‘world,’” that is, our thrownness.⁵⁷ In this disclosedness, when we are resolute, we are engaged in what Heidegger calls “authentic being a self;” we are making good on our potential for being authentic.⁵⁸

We are now in a position to clarify the often confused nature of the ontic and ontological features that such existential and existentiell terms as authenticity, inauthenticity, being a self, the they, and the they-self signify. Authenticity, *as a possibility*, is ontological; that is, the possibility of authenticity is an existential; it is an aspect of Dasein’s being that is always present. We are always capable of being authentic. The corollary of this statement is that we are also always capable of being inauthentic; this possibility of inauthenticity is, as an existential, a constant feature of Dasein’s being. Some confusion arises from the fact that, though both authenticity and inauthenticity are always possible, they are not always actual; actually *being* authentic, and *being* inauthentic, are therefore ontic, that is, existentiell modes of Dasein’s being; they are ways we can be or not be.

“The they,” or *das Man*, is, like the possibility of authenticity, an existential; it is ontological. As long as Dasein is, the they, which is the average intelligence of the

⁵⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 297.

⁵⁷ Ibid. pp. 297-298.

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 298.

anyone, “the way one normally does or thinks about...” is always there as well and always available to Dasein. The they-self, as the mode of being in which we allow the average public interpretations of the they to become our own without resolutely choosing ourselves is, like *being* authentic, an existentiell or ontic feature of Dasein’s existence. We can either be the they-self or not. The same goes for the authentic self and the state of modal indifference between the two, which Heidegger sadly does not expand upon or explain.⁵⁹

We have discussed how the concept of authenticity describes a certain aspect of Dasein’s being, how it works, and how it refers to a state where Dasein owns up to the seemingly meaningless nature of its existence, as that existence obtains beyond the relational. We have, however, yet to adequately come to terms with how authenticity could possibly grant any sort of meaning at that point, that is, any sort of transcendent meaning. But, in order to discover how the concept of authenticity, as presented, can confer transcendent meaning we need to briefly pause to think about what “transcendent meaning” might actually mean. Traditionally, what we are calling “transcendent meaning” was conceived of as meaning that “transcends” the human world; this meaning, as in Kierkegaard’s account, was said to derive from God, as an ultimate ground for meaning. We have been using the term here to indicate meaning beyond the human world, but also, bearing in mind the sense of world in terms of worldliness, meaning beyond relational relevance and significance.

⁵⁹ For an account of what this “modal indifference” might look like see: Dostal, Robert J. “The Problem of ‘Indifferenz’ in Sein und Zeit,” in, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Vol. XLIII, No. 1, September 1982, (Providence: The International Philosophy Society, 1982), pp. 43-58

What is “transcendent” in Heidegger’s terms is the world itself. But transcendence is also Dasein’s way of being, first of all, because Dasein is its world. As Heidegger puts it in a particularly compact summing up:

Dasein exists for the sake of a potentiality-of-being of itself. Existing, it is thrown, and as thrown, delivered over to beings that it needs *in order to* be able to be as it is, namely *for the sake of* itself. Since Dasein exists factually, it understands itself in this connection of the for-the-sake-of-itself with an actual in-order-to. That *within which* existing Dasein understands *itself is* “there” together with its factual existence. The wherein of primary self-understanding has the kind of being of Dasein. Existing, Dasein *is* its world.⁶⁰

The key here is to focus on the temporality that Dasein is, and the movements of this temporality that are always already going on, regardless of whether we are in a state of authentically holding ourselves in *Angst* or not.

As the sort of being that it is, Dasein is always looking to the future; it is always looking forward in project, or, better, always *projecting*. But as we noted, all of our possibilities (and concurrent limitations) come from our historical particularity (the specific time and place into which we are born and live). Hence, as we are constantly projecting, we are also constantly casting back to the past for possibilities, which we act upon in regard to future projects, in the present. It is because of this that Heidegger says Dasein is *ekstatisch* (ecstatic, or more aptly: ex-static); it stands outside of itself. We are never merely here and now in the present; we are in a sort of constant temporal motion,

⁶⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 366.

looking forward in project and back for possibilities while acting in the present; a motion Heidegger describes as the “temporalizing of temporality.”

This movement, as should be clear by this point, can either be authentic or inauthentic; that is, we are always making this movement, always temporalizing, but we can do this (and indeed, always have the possibility of doing it), in an authentic, self-owning manner or in an inauthentic manner in which we take on “the they-self.” The authentic temporalizing of our temporality is none other than authenticity itself, now fully conceived in terms of Dasein’s temporal nature, where we simultaneously bear in mind the nothingness of our thrownness into concrete particularity and finitude and, as we do that, also enact the movement, and bear the structure itself in mind. The inauthentic mode is, likewise, the abandoning of the choice of interpretations (including those of time and temporality itself) in favour of the ways that one usually sees things. Authenticity, as the way of being that discloses the *actual possibilities* best, and thus allows us to more effectively *do* what we do, seems an excellent way to proceed, but does not yet seem to give us any meaning beyond the relational.

Heidegger’s path of thinking in *Being and Time* seems to lead to a conception of human existence without transcendent meaning in anything like the sense we usually see that term as involving. It seems, as we noted early on, that Heidegger’s thought here leads to existential or axiological nihilism. Dreyfus and Jane Rubin take up the trail, seeing it as leading off both from this conclusion and from the use of authenticity for effective doing. They propose that even a way of life that is *ultimately* meaningless but realizes that it is so can in fact even “if not just, fulfilling, holy, mature, or even satisfying—since these evaluative terms all reflect our culture’s worldly search for an ethical standard or

ground- nonetheless [be] worth living.”⁶¹ In the appendix Dreyfus and Rubin explore briefly what this “joyful way of being” of Dasein might look like.

They see Dasein, recognizing that everything is *ultimately* meaningless, that there is no *ultimate ground for meaning*, as freed from having to worry about this. Only the common “knowledge” of “the they” in our culture makes us think that we *need* an ultimate ground for meaning at all. We do not, and freed from the search for transcendent meaning, we are *freed for*, and able to pursue, relational meaning; Dasein is free to throw itself into the *actual* (relational) significance of the world, as disclosed by authenticity, in its real and actual possibilities and limitations. As Dreyfus and Rubin put it: “Precisely because resolute Dasein is clear that it can have no final meaning or settled identity it is clear-sighted about what is actually possible.”⁶² The authentic person would then live out his or her life just like anyone else, and in fact would be indistinguishable from everyone else. Of the authentic person -- as of Kierkegaard’s knight of real faith -- one could say: “Good Lord, is this the man, is this really the one -- he looks just like a tax collector!”⁶³ Again, in Dreyfus and Rubin’s words: “For Heidegger, the transformation to authenticity signals a transformation in the *form* of my everyday activity, leaving the *content* unchanged. I enact my authenticity in all my absorbed involved activity.”⁶⁴

What Dreyfus and Rubin argue puts an extremely interesting light on the existential or axiological nihilism that arises from Heidegger’s path of thought in *Being and Time*, but it is not Heidegger’s account; it is, after all, a projection on what such an

⁶¹ Dreyfus, *Being in the World*, p. 316.

⁶² Ibid. p. 320.

⁶³ Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, p. 39.

⁶⁴ Dreyfus, *Being in the World*, p. 322.

authentic, yet nihilistic existence *might* look like. Heidegger does not venture to offer such a description. Dreyfus and Rubin note this fact, and it is worth quoting what they say about it at length. They say that,

There is no reason for Heidegger to draw back from the nihilistic conclusion that, given the levelling of the one and the meaning-undermining effect of anxiety, there can be no meaningful differences among projects, and that therefore we must base the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity on the form or style of activity only, not upon its content. Yet, as we shall now see, Heidegger does draw back.⁶⁵

Here Heidegger is in the same position as Kierkegaard (although, as Dreyfus and Rubin point out, there is a gulf between the two thinkers that has to do with their understandings of the issue of intentionality); he is faced with a world that is *ultimately* meaningless without a leap of faith.

Dreyfus and Rubin point to Heidegger's discussion of Dasein's historicity as "introduc[ing] a culture's history as a source of *superior* possibilities."⁶⁶ They tell us that there are certain possibilities -- what they term "*marginal practices*" -- "that have *resisted levelling*" by the they. According to Dreyfus and Rubin, these practices (such as so called "primal Christianity" or Greek mentoring, etc.), by the very nature of the fact that they are not carried out very often by many people anymore, "offer fresh ways of responding to the situation" as opposed to the levelled mainline ways of the they. These practices would "therefore attract authentic individuals," providing specific content for

⁶⁵ Dreyfus, *Being in the World*, pp. 327-328.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p. 328.

resolutions.⁶⁷ But here Dreyfus and Rubin have not yet told us *why* their “marginal practices” (a term and concept that Heidegger does not employ in *Being and Time*), are superior to any other possibilities, and, indeed, they do not sufficiently explain this, except by pointing to “their *difference* from what is generally done” and the “fresh” perspective that this offers.⁶⁸

Here I would like to add to Dreyfus and Rubin’s account of Heidegger’s discussion of historicity. As I see it, Heidegger *does* indeed believe that some possibilities from the past are superior to others, but this is based on *the degree to which they are appropriate to the current concrete situation*. Authentic Dasein, that is, an individual operating in the mode of authenticity, as a being with a better view of the actual factual concrete situation, will be better able to determine which of these possibilities are indeed *most appropriate*, which is *the* criterion for a possibility’s superiority or inferiority. It may in fact be that for a given situation, the most appropriate possibility is actually “the way one normally does or sees things.” And, in fact, in much of our daily dealings and doings these ways are *exactly the most appropriate* (think of our dealings in the work world, or using a tool, etc.). But Dreyfus and Rubin do not get their specific focus on marginal practices from nowhere; rather, these certain possibilities hold a special place in Heidegger’s conception of historicity.

The importance of marginal practices as possibilities begins to become more clear when we begin to attempt to answer the question: “more appropriate for what?” in regard to the preceding discussion. To say that the superior possibilities are those that are most

⁶⁷ Dreyfus, *Being in the World*, p. 329.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p. 331.

appropriate for a given, real factual situation, that is, the best thing to do/think in a given particular time and place and set of particular circumstances begs this question. What makes these certain possibilities “more appropriate?” And, more appropriate for what? Towards what end?

Appropriateness is always an “appropriate for...”; it is always towards an end. Thus, Heidegger’s superior possibilities, which are more appropriate for the situation, must be appropriate towards some end. And this is where things move into another of Heidegger’s famous circles, because the only end that seems to determine the superiority of possibilities in this section is indeed promoting authenticity itself, which puts us in a better position to attempt to re-awaken the question of being. According to Heidegger:

All our efforts in the existential analytic are geared to the one goal of finding a possibility of answering the question of the *meaning of being* in general. The development of this *question* requires that we delineate the phenomenon in which something like being itself becomes accessible -- the phenomenon of the *understanding of being*. But this phenomenon belongs to the constitution of Dasein. Only when this being has been interpreted beforehand in a sufficiently primordial way, can the understanding of being contained in its constitution of being itself be grasped, and only on this basis can we formulate the question of being...⁶⁹

The mode of authenticity is the way of being in which Dasein has a clear view of the nature of its being. And, as something yielding a sense of the being that has knowledge of

⁶⁹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 372.

and concern for its being, a clear view of the being of Dasein is the first window into a view of being itself. Thus the practices of “the they,” which tend to be the practices that cover over this knowledge, tend to be, in general, those inappropriate to achievement of this end.

The structural role that authenticity plays in *Being and Time* is that of an instrument that shows us when we have reached a sufficient degree of primordiality in the existential analytic, that is, in our analysis of Dasein’s being, so that we can take a first step towards an understanding of being itself. The problem of Dasein’s historicity comes up when Heidegger asks: “Can Dasein be understood still more primordially than in the project of its authentic existence?” That problem arises from Heidegger’s attempt to get one last aspect of Dasein’s being into view, that of the connectedness of its birth and death.⁷⁰

This connectedness between Dasein’s birth and death turns out to be the further (and more primordial) elaboration of the movement of temporality between projecting, taking up possibilities and acting on them according to projections and the factual situation (the taking up of possibilities that we have been discussing). The most appropriate possibilities for an individual Dasein at a specific moment turn out, in a kind of determinism of possibility (though *not* of actuality), to be a kind of *fate* for Dasein. Authentic Dasein can see the most appropriate possibilities, which are its *fate*, whereas inauthentic Dasein cannot, and thus, by merely following the they, inauthentic Dasein is in fact carried along by events (even though it does not take up the question of fate)

⁷⁰ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 372.

rather than experiencing *its* choice, which, when viewed authentically, *is* its fate. As Heidegger puts it:

When Dasein, anticipating, lets death become powerful in itself, as free for death it understands itself in its own *higher power*, the power of its infinite freedom, and takes over the *powerlessness* of being abandoned to itself in that freedom, which always only *is* in having chosen the choice, and becomes clear about the chance elements in the situation disclosed.⁷¹

And, just as there is a fate for each of us, as individuals, that is the most appropriate choice of possibilities for the concrete situation, so too there is a common fate, which Heidegger calls “destiny,” for those born in our “generation” (that is our time/place/culture, etc.) it represents the most appropriate possibilities for this generation.⁷²

But again, this “appropriateness” that is fate and destiny, is always an “appropriateness for...” And for Heidegger, this “appropriateness for...” is defined by promoting ontological clarity, by promoting authenticity and awakening the question of being. But Heidegger does not address the greater question of the value of awakening the question of being itself. There is an unquestioned standard of the value of clarity in *Being and Time*, particularly in this section, that poses a problem for the arguments that Heidegger makes. The question is as pertinent as it is strange. Why is clarity preferable or superior? Dreyfus and Rubin’s conception of the joyfully aware Dasein also suffers from a failure to clarify this. *In social terms* for instance, the way of “the they,” seems to be the

⁷¹ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 384.

⁷² *Ibid.* p. 384-385.

most appropriate, *ad definitio*, as it is the way a given society deems most appropriate.⁷³

If we make social consensus the criterion then there is no need for the sort of clarity that authentic Dasein is supposed to have; we just do and think “what one does and thinks.” In a sense a sort of Kierkegaardian leap is required here.

Kierkegaard confronted what he viewed as an *ultimately* meaningless world -- that is, a world without meaning beyond the relational -- with the paradox of faith, which, by a leap, and through the absurd, chooses an ultimate meaning and makes an ultimate commitment to it regardless of how ridiculous this may seem. Ultimately, Heidegger, faced with the same situation, draws back from Kierkegaard’s drastic and total response, instead making move that is remarkably similar to but not identical to that which Kierkegaard made. Why indeed is it preferable to reawaken the question of being at all? Answering this question takes us beyond the pages of *Being and Time* and into other parts of the story.

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When thought arrives at a situation where the very existence of transcendent meaning comes into question we are faced with a situation where we no longer are certain of having something that human beings historically have seemed to need. Sources of transcendent meaning, whether they be God, the good, or some other broad and

⁷³ Here Julian Young’s defence of the heritage that is Dasein’s fate as a culture’s “morality” and “the values of one’s community” becomes practically indistinguishable from the common knowledge of the they, which he re-casts as a sort of action and opinion of society as opposed to this society’s “values,” creating a strange knowledge/practice binary that is not particularly convincing. See Young, Julian, *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*, (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 121, 123, & pp. 107-124 in general.

apparently capacious phenomenon, have traditionally fulfilled what seems to be the basic human need *for* such “deeper meaning.” The seeming absurdity and arbitrariness of life without transcendent meaning inclines us to search for other ways to find this kind of ultimate meaning when traditional sources come into question. Heidegger’s response to this situation is an example of this. Though he does “pull back,” from espousing ultimate meaninglessness, his thought leads to this nihilistic conclusion.

As Dreyfus and Rubin point out, this could be seen as intensely liberating. But it could just as reasonably be seen as -- as borne out traditionally by the seeming need for a different sort of “deeper meaning” -- profoundly sad and dispiriting. Here the quotation from Kierkegaard that I opened with comes back to us in all its significance: “what would life be then but despair?” This is why, I think, that Heidegger, unable to make the leap of faith, draws back from the harsh and total conclusion that it is the leap or nothing. The leap of faith is a last resort; it is an either/or, all, or nothing proposition. When faced with the totality of this conclusion Heidegger pulls back and attempts to find another way to conceive of transcendent meaning in order to continue to posit its existence without having to think in terms of the leap and what it signifies.

Heidegger finds meaning beyond the relational in a universal structural *a priori*. The only sort of non-relational meaning that transcends the arbitrariness that exists is essentially merely descriptive; it is clarity about the ways in which we always already operate. Heidegger’s attempt to imbue authenticity with some sort of meaning beyond this, by referring to the heritage -- in a move that seems to only lead us back to the valuing of specific content that discloses these structures anyway -- is unconvincing. It is no coincidence that death plays such a prominent role in Heidegger’s dealing with non-

relational meaning: death is *the non-relational in absolute*.⁷⁴ Transcendent meaning, which we traditionally associate with the “why?” of life, becomes, in Heidegger’s hands, the “How?” And while his descriptions are deeply fascinating, evocative, and intensely thought provoking, they seem to fall short of satisfying what seems to, at least traditionally, be a basic human need.

Where has this stream in the history of thought led us? Existence, it says, is pregnant with meaning; it swells with it. And overall significance -- as we create it by taking it up -- can come forth anywhere, at any time. But this pregnancy signifies nothing. Meaning is stillborn. Its own arbitrariness signals its demise before it has a chance. Life becomes “a tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing.”⁷⁵ We are in a post-death-of-God historical period, a post-death-of-God world, but we have not yet adequately dealt with the new realities of this situation, nor have we yet, it seems, faced the possibility that this is a loss to be mourned.

⁷⁴ See Heidegger’s description of the non-relational nature of death in *Being and Time*, pp. 239-242.

⁷⁵ Shakespeare, William, *Macbeth*, V, v, 27-28

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