

Being-Excellent as the Horizon for a Heideggerian Ethics

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1 Outlining the need for a Heideggerian ethics

As a consequence of Martin Heidegger's tendency to re-understand various words and concepts in a pre-Modern fashion, many of his most value-neutral ideas have been interpreted as ideals of a moral system. This has led to a lot of reckless speculation about Heidegger's ethical position, most of which attributes to his words the very meanings he was trying to move away from. As a result, the fundamentally radical and emancipatory nature of Heidegger's ontology is overlooked. I hope to demonstrate that it is this ontology, rather than any equivocation over the intent behind his terminology, that should inform any attempt at assigning an ethical position to his work.

Heidegger repeatedly asserts throughout *Being and Time* that ideas which we are accustomed to considering as having a certain objective moral value should, in the context of fundamental ontology, be viewed with no such presentiment¹. This leaves the question, then,

¹Spatiality and why the "vulgar" understanding still has merit: "The perplexity still present today with regard to the interpretation of the being of space is grounded not so much in an inadequate knowledge of the factual constitution of space itself as in the lack of a fundamental transparency of the possibilities of being in general and of their ontologically conceived interpretation." [BT 113]

The relationship between authenticity and inauthenticity: "[T]he inauthenticity of Da-sein does not signify a 'lesser' being or a 'lower' degree of being. Rather, inauthenticity can determine Da-sein even in its fullest concretion, when it is busy, excited, interested, and capable of pleasure." [BT 43]

The positive function of gossip: "The expression 'idle talk' is not to be used here in a disparaging sense. Terminologically, it means a positive phenomenon which constitutes the mode of being of the understanding and interpretation of everyday Da-sein." [BT 167]

A sentimental perspective on getting wrapped up in things: "This term [entanglement], which does not

of what part of Heidegger's philosophy makes an ethical claim, or if ethics is even possible in such a purportedly valueless system. It is true, of course, that the aim of his project is itself a value claim: that it is necessary to get to the meaning of being in order for any engagement in philosophy to even be possible. Heidegger is careful, however, to never claim that having these understandings can dictate how a person should think or act. This is because, from a perspective of fundamental ontology, prescription can not be the shape of ethics. The reasons for this will reveal themselves as we investigate how Heidegger's understanding of truth differs from that of the western metaphysical tradition.

The conception of truth around which western metaphysics operates is that of *Λόγος*. This is the idea of direct correspondence with a catalogue of fact, that one can compare a claim to a reference point of knowledge and deduce its correctness². The conclusion that a thing is only ever either true or false follows from this premise.

Heidegger instead argued that, before Plato and Aristotle cemented this idea of truth, another understanding of truth was held alongside it. For this he used another Greek word for truth, *Ἀλήθεια*, which he translated as "unconcealment". Instead of a well-defined, whole, and rarefied expression of absolute fact, truth is a sort of pulling back of the curtain, gaining a perspective on something while at the same time covering part of it over [Undelivered Lecture (XII) Section 4, p.179-181]. This is not a lesser or deficient form of truth, but rather a representation of how anything like truth can exist in a phenomenological methodology. When one's access to a "thing itself" is one's relationship with it, truth is something revealed in that relationship.

The ramifications of this approach for ontology are a matter of obsession and consterna-

express any negative value judgment, means that Da-sein is initially and for the most part *together with* the 'world' that it takes care of." [BT 175]

²"At the beginning of Western thinking, what is...all-important is catching sight of what is named by 'Being' (*Φύσις*, *Λόγος*, *Ἔν*) by sighting it in an appropriate manner. The appearance thus arises that this Being of beings is merely 'identical' with beings as a whole, and as such is that which most is." [Undelivered Lecture (XII) Section 1, p.176]

tion well beyond the scope of this paper. Instead we shall look to its influence on the field of ethics. Namely, that it is not the job of ethics to prescribe action according to an objective truth, but that ethics must instead guide action according to the relationships beings have with each other. We will explore these relationships in depth later, but not before we look at the kind of ethics that results from the conception of truth as Λόγος.

2 Kantian ethics and the shift to Da-sein

The most developed example of western metaphysical ethics comes from Kant. The idea of treating people as something other than a means to an end³, the point that good actions are good not because of the action but the intent behind them⁴, and the necessity of behaving according to a rule that should be applicable to anyone⁵ are central notions in Kant's ethics. These ideas are variously justified or annihilated by Heidegger's fundamental ontology of Da-sein, as we shall see.

Even though his project was to get to the meaning of being—a far more elaborate project than justifying an ethical system—Heidegger's demonstration of Da-sein and being-in or -with is groundbreaking for discussion of “human” motivation and will. Indeed, Heidegger's principal work is often criticized for being more anthropology than a work of ontology[cite! Husserl? wikipedia says: “See Edmund Husserl, *Psychological and transcendental phenomenology and the confrontation with Heidegger (1927-1931)* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1997).”]. Again, that debate is for another paper, but it demonstrates how close Heidegger's work has already come to ethics, merely avoiding the value claim that traditionally cements an ethical

³“The Practical Imperative will...be as follows: *Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.*” [GMM 66-67 (96)]

⁴“A good will is not good because of what it effects or accomplishes—because of its fitness for attaining some proposed end: it is good through its willing alone—that is, good in itself.” [GMM 62 (3)]

⁵“Every one must admit that a law has to carry with it absolute necessity if it is to be valid morally—valid, that is, as a ground of obligation; that the command ‘Thou shalt not lie’ could not hold merely for men, other rational beings having no obligation to abide by it—...” [GMM 57 (vi)]

argument.

If we are to continue at all we must address one of Heidegger's most fundamental concepts: that of Da-sein. For the purpose of simplicity the reader can always take Da-sein to refer to his or her self, but the reasons for and consequences of this term must be understood if any progress is to be made.

In general, attempts at defining humanity are critically flawed. This is mostly because they are simultaneously completely founded on an assumption and blatantly tautological. The assumption is that there must be some characteristic of humanity that is unique among all beings, however they may be defined, and the tautology is that, whatever distinction one uses as justification for this assumption, it can only ever function within an argument as a stand-in for "humanity".

Heidegger's approach was to abandon all presupposition of which beings ought to interest his investigation and instead address the particular behavior that was of interest to his project: being interested in one's own being. In asking and thinking about its being, this being exists both ontically, in that it exists in the world, and ontologically, in that world exists with and for it, in that it questions its own existence[BT 12]. No assumption is made about whether all humans have this kind of being, just as no assumption is made about whether any other "species" of life has it. In exploring its relationship with its world, however, we find that neither issue is of any relevance at all, since it is always more productive to keep the discussion in terms of Da-sein⁶.

What *is* relevant, and what is fundamentally different from the traditional Western metaphysical approach, is that this being cannot be separated from its world. The entire stage

⁶"Thingliness itself needs to be demonstrated in terms of its ontological source in order that we can ask what is now to be understood *positively* by the nonreified *being* of the subject, the soul, consciousness, the spirit, the person. All these terms name definite areas of phenomena which can be 'developed.' But they are never used without a remarkable failure to see the need for inquiring about the being of the beings so designated. Thus we are not being terminologically idiosyncratic when we avoid these terms as well as the expressions 'life' and 'human being' in designating the beings that we ourselves are." BT 46

of modern epistemology, where the subject is cut off from a world of objects and has experiences based on sense data, has been removed from the picture. In its place we have this being, which is always in a there. It is therefore inappropriate to think of it in rarefied terms, and Heidegger dubbed it Da-sein (being-there) to emphasize that its defining characteristic is (the event of) its presence. The ramifications of this approach will reveal their relevance as our departure from Kant unfolds.

Kant defined humanity as the capacity for reason and deductive thought, and he therefore looked to logic as the horizon for ethics. By emphasizing the need for internal consistency, Kant was able to require various behaviors in order to preserve a system wherein the self could continue to behave rationally. As a result, any rational being must be treated as the goal of ethics. Hence, people must be treated as ends in themselves rather than as means to ends.

This ideal arose partly out of Kant's preconception of what a proper ethical system should look like⁷ and partly out of reverence for logical justification (arbitrariness)[GMM 69, Footnote 2]. Kant's project is a deductive proof of why a deductive system must preserve and revere beings with the capacity for deductive reasoning, but this approach values people only insofar as they behave deductively. In Kant's words, "Rational beings,...are called *persons* because their nature already marks them out as ends in themselves..." [GMM 65 (96)]. People are people because their rationality is to be preserved in order to have a rational universe. How can we establish this without all these presuppositions? What are other people for Da-sein?

When Heidegger explains how Da-sein exists with other beings in the world, a distinction is made between how Da-sein interacts with useful things, tools, and how Da-sein interacts with other people. The former is understood in terms of in-order-to and what-for, and is

⁷"The sole aim of the present Groundwork is to seek out and establish *the supreme principle of morality.*" [GMM 60]

taken as a matter of “care”, whereas in the latter case Da-sein recognizes others as being like itself and treats them with “concern”, which we will explore later in more detail. While these other beings are understood in how they are like Da-sein, they can not accurately be called “Da-sein”. To Da-sein, they are those beings with whom one is in the world, and they are called “Mitda-sein” (“being-there-with”) [BT 123 (115-116)]. This interaction, and the concept of Mitda-sein, are significant aspects of any attempt at Heideggerian ethics, and show how the Kantian distinction between “ends in themselves” and “means to ends” is now both ontologically justified and ontically clarified by Heidegger.

3 Asking the fundamental question of ethics

Despite the consequences of Heidegger’s philosophy for traditional ethical theories, there is much ethical territory that Heidegger did not directly cover. To fill these gaps we will attempt to approach the fundamental aspect of ethics in the same way Heidegger did the fundamental question of being: to discover what understanding of ethical behavior Da-sein always already has but cannot express. As with being, we will be able to highlight this understanding throughout metaphysics while detailing how it came to be misrepresented.

In a foundational work of western metaphysical ethics, Plato’s *Republic*, the pivotal question was asked: do we behave justly for its own sake or for the worldly rewards? Plato supposed that, were one able to turn invisible and act without fear of consequences, one would steal, rape, and murder without restraint [Republic II 359-360]. His solution was an elaborate analogy between the justice of an individual and the justice of a city, a thought experiment culminating in his assertion that just behavior leads necessarily to a healthy soul, and is therefore necessary for happiness [Republic IV 444-445]. This split omitted an important possibility: that relationships with people are valuable in their own right, not as servants of an objective moral principle, but as Mitda-sein.

One must take care now not to start attaching a value to the idea of “relationships with people” in such a way as to orient rules of ethical behavior around it. I bring it up not to chase after it as the seed of a logically determined and arbitrary system, but to demonstrate that it is possible for the aforementioned worldly rewards to be the kindness of others, or for it to feel good to make another happy. To suddenly treat kindness as a selfish behavior may seem cynical, but we are not necessarily treating this relation as one between a subject and object. Kant was trying to get away from this, but his system did not allow for any other kind of relation. Heidegger offers us the chance to look at benevolent behavior as an act of connection and familiarity. Kant wanted people to be considered ends in themselves, but Heidegger’s contribution is to remove them from the system of means and ends entirely. Mitda-sein are accomplices, other beings of the same kind as Da-sein. In them Da-sein can see its own possibilities.

The field of ethics seems largely interested in expressing formally something Da-sein always already understands. Liberated from the need to express it formally, we are now free to examine this understanding that Da-sein always already has. [BT 124 is key here, and all of sections 26 and 27] In being-with Mitda-sein, Da-sein understands the need to be excellent-with Mitda-sein. The formal ethics of Kant et al. are attempts to live according to certain rules of action, but as you can see there is nothing in being-excellent which determines any particular right or wrong action. The emphasis here is on the interests of Da-sein and Mitda-sein, on what they want or need and what they are willing to do for one another.

It is beneficial at this point to elaborate on the role of Mitda-sein in the constitution of Da-sein, since it is such a radical departure from the solipsistic foundation of Descartes. For Heidegger, others are not understood as something distinct from the self, alien and separate, but rather as “...those from whom one mostly does *not* distinguish oneself, those among whom one is, too.” [BT 118] In this way Da-sein understands its being-in-the-world as a being-with others. “...the world is always already the one that I share with the others. The

world of Da-sein is a *with-world*. Being-in is *being-with* others. The innerworldly being-in-itself of others is Mitda-sein.” [BT 118]

4 The ethics of inauthenticity

Over time this relation can lose its distinctiveness. As Da-sein compares itself to Mitda-sein, it takes on a pressure to equalize its difference from others. As this occurs, the specific “who” of Mitda-sein dissolves into a “they”, into das Man (note that this “they” is in actuality a “we”). This relationship promotes “averageness”, an equilibrium which discourages anything but acquiescence to what is familiar and accepted. This is variously referred to as degenerate, levelled down, and public [BT 126-127].

Contrary to entanglement in das Man is the idea of authenticity, the mode of being of Da-sein in which Da-sein is aware of its *ownmost* potentiality-of-being. This is the reason that Da-sein is always one’s self, because authentic Da-sein is this always-mineness:

And because Da-sein is always essentially its possibility, it *can* “choose” itself in its being, 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, that is, it belongs to itself. [BT 42-43 (40)]

Authentic Da-sein is attuned to its ownmost potentiality-of-being, and is consequently not caught up in the everyday. But even authentic Da-sein does not simply remove itself from publicness. “*Authentic being one’s self* is not...a state detached from the they, *but is an existentiell modification of the they as an essential existential.*” [BT 130] The “*with-world*” is not a mode of the world, nor is it a derivative and vulgar conception of world. It is world in which Da-sein behaves authentically or inauthentically, that is to say, authentic Da-sein is Da-sein that is attuned to the they in a particular way. This is a precise distinction, but one that speaks volumes about how Da-sein understands and relates with others.

We have here an analysis of the different ways Da-sein understands Mitda-sein, and how those affect Da-sein's understanding of its world. There is no reason to conclude that any of this is grounds for a systematic ethics. It does, however, provide us with the horizon for a new approach. Da-sein's understanding of the other in terms of its sameness contributes both to Da-sein's understanding of itself and levelling down of itself. This is the span of human relationships in which something like ethics becomes possible.

In being-excellent, Da-sein behaves ethically in the most primordial sense of the term. Whatever the particulars, Da-sein is behaving conducively to the good of its being-with-others. It's dangerous to think of this as behavior that promotes entanglement, or that gives up the potential for authenticity. Being-excellent is not a sacrifice of one's own interests or a plunge headlong into entanglement in das Man. Being-excellent is Da-sein's recognition that when it is in a world with others, just as it is thrown together with Mitda-sein its interests, too, are thrown together with those of Mitda-sein.

As you can see, this does not fall anywhere between resoluteness and entanglement. Excellence is not an aspect of Da-sein, but a mode of concern. As Heidegger points out for us, there are two possible extremes of concern. The first is to leap in for Mitda-sein and take its "care" away from it, to use or manipulate it in ways seen or unseen [BT 122]. The second is to leap ahead of Mitda-sein, to give his care back to him. This is concern about authentic care, about Mitda-sein's existence, and not about the things it takes care of [BT 122].

Our goal lies not between these extremes, but across them. In having concern for Mitda-sein, Da-sein is constantly treating it in all of these ways and more. Being-excellent-with-Mitda-sein is not a matter of maximizing behavior of a particular kind, but of establishing alliance. Being-excellent is a looking-out-for, it is Da-sein carrying Mitda-sein along with it. In having allies, Da-sein can authentically appreciate their influences or inauthentically fall prey along with them. As allies, Da-sein and Mitda-sein can leap in to protect one another

or leap ahead to release one another.

5 The call of conscience

Heidegger uses the term “conscience” to explain how Da-sein disentangles itself from das Man and realizes its authentic potentiality of being. For Heidegger, conscience is not what calls Da-sein to ethical behavior or “doing what’s right”, but instead it is quite specifically calling Da-sein back to itself, out of entanglement and back to authenticity. Even guilt, for Heidegger, is ontological. Guilt is the lack, the not-yet, of Da-sein’s being. Da-sein’s progression toward its end is “put off” by entanglement, its awareness of the inevitability of death is “tranquillized” by das Man. As constantly communicating, das Man covers over Da-sein with talk. Conscience calls Da-sein back to its possibility of authenticity through reticence, allowing (but not forcing) Da-sein to come forth from das Man [BT 271-274]. In understanding this call, in choosing itself and becoming free for the call, Da-sein is aware of the putting off of its end and wants to have a conscience, wants to be called back to its ownmost potentiality of being [BT 287-288].

The traditional idea that conscience is the call back to just behavior is a misunderstanding of where the call comes from. The call does not come from outside of Da-sein. The caller is not defined by anything worldly, but is uncanny, thrown being-in-the-world, is Da-sein’s being-in-the-world itself. Not alien to Da-sein, the caller is alien to the average, everyday self of das Man [BT 276-278]. Conscience, calling Da-sein back to its possibilities, is what makes morality possible for Da-sein in the first place⁸. The “morality” of the understood call is Da-sein being responsible, letting “its ownmost self *take action in itself* in terms of its chosen potentiality-of-being” [BT 288]. The authentic responsibility of conscience is a

⁸“This being guilty first gives the ontological condition for the fact that Da-sein can become guilty while factually existing. This essential being guilty is, equiprimordially, the existential condition of the possibility of the ‘morally’ good and evil, that is, for morality in general and its possible factual forms.” [BT 286]

responsibility to one's own possibilities.

Let us take care not to forget that the ownmost self of Da-sein is not the ego cogito, but a being-in-the-world that understands its being as a being-with-others. Even authentic being-a-self is a modification of the they [BT 267]. What form does “self-love” take when the self is thus defined? It does not look at all like Plato's straw man that if one could keep others ignorant of our wrongdoings one might steal and rape. Being-excellent is the primordial ethics which the so-called “vulgar understanding of being [which] understands ‘being’ as objective presence” [BT 389], the Cartesian concept of the self as an isolated spirit, can only understand as self-love in Plato's sense. The action taken as Da-sein, in being-guilty, chooses its potentiality-of-being. Being-excellent is a love of the relationship Da-sein has with Mitda-sein, is the ethical imperative of concern.

In the wake of Heidegger's ontological work, we can start to outline the shape ethics takes for Da-sein. Just as with spatiality and temporality, the Western tradition of metaphysics, with its understanding of truth as $\Lambda\acute{o}\gamma\omicron\varsigma$, has covered over the possibility of ethics by assuming that behaviors must be morally calculable as independent, universal, objectively present principles. An ontologically-grounded approach to ethics does not designate correct factual action, but instead lays bare the role and meaning of Mitda-sein. In being-excellent-with Mitda-sein, Da-sein already understands being-excellent as concern, as the role of its being-with-others in its understanding of the call of conscience.

The problem of ethics has never been defining justice or goodness. These are degenerate forms of excellence, which is always already understood by Da-sein. The fundamental problem of ethics is recognizing what beings Da-sein understands as Mitda-sein. A vegetarian may recognize an animal in the mode of being-with where a carnivore does not, or where the carnivore understands its being-with the animal from a position of gratefulness to it for its sustenance. One person believes a barely-formed fetus to be Mitda-sein, and will thus react to an abortion in a manner very different from one who merely sees a thing at hand

and objectively present.

This approach is, perhaps, of little use in answering these problems. This is because for Da-sein the problem is already answered. Instead of debating what action is right while ignoring the fundamental disagreement, we can only try to convince each other of what beings deserve to be treated excellently, what beings are “a matter of concern” [cite BT]. It is only on this basis that we can begin to approach our most common ethical questions, and even then they can never be solved in the sense of western metaphysics. Instead of codifying rules of behavior, by being excellent Da-sein pulls back the curtain on the problem and approaches it based on the relationships of the beings involved.

[on to something] James’s parable of the squirrel [James 24] presents a perfect example of this situation. Presented with a pedantic argument whose settlement depended on demonstrating the conflicting understandings of a term involved, some disputants were determined to argue until one understanding prevailed. James’s point was that it made no practical difference which was used, so long as one understood both existed, and that by making such *ceteris paribus* analyses of disputes one might overcome all problems of belief. Our point is more delicate: that it is always possible that more understandings exist, so we must approach ethics in such a way that we are constantly prepared to adapt to these understandings. There is no shortcut that will account for this, since it is the nature of truth as *Ἀλήθεια* that a new perspective will both conceal and unconceal. Settling these disputes is not a matter of practical difference, as James supposed, but a recognition of the lack of any difference, of the need to accept these differences as a part of the being in question’s identity. There is no differential reduction toward truth, nor is there a fundamental objective seed of deterministic truth, but instead there is only the inevitability of the opposing view.

Thus we have less a set of ethical rules or guidelines by which to make decisions about our possibilities, and more a phenomenological method by which to ask ourselves the right questions about our possibilities. Heidegger’s philosophy, rather than setting forth any

ethical position at all, consistently and conspicuously avoids any such opinion at all in favor of a methodology that is constantly concerned with questioning. Ethics after Heidegger must move away from the combat of arguments and principles and toward the awareness...

Hmm. I've moved away from anything to do with fursorge and authenticity. How will I connect them? [maybe]