

Being-Excellent as the Horizon for a Heideggerian Ethics

George Moffitt

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1 Outlining the need for a Heideggerian ethics

Martin 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 presentiment. In his writing we find terms like “vulgar”, “authentic”, “gossip”, and “entanglement” that suggest normative value, when in fact Heidegger is asserting that this normative value is a misunderstanding of these concepts in their most primordial meaning. But, as a consequence of this 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. 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 equivocation over the intent behind his terminology, that should inform any attempt at assigning an ethical position to his work.

This leaves the question, then, of what part of Heidegger’s philosophy makes an ethical claim, or if ethics is even possible in such a purportedly valueless system. The aim of his project, of course, can itself be considered a value claim: that it is necessary to get to the meaning of being in order for any engagement in philosophy to even be possible¹. What this shows us is not the axiom around which to build a prescriptive ethics, but the priority of what

¹ [[11]BT

is “always already the case” in Heidegger’s work. What few ethical statements he made show an almost ascetic devotion to the act of inquiry and the work of philosophical investigation², and by following this priority of questioning and investigating the being that questions we will be able to get a perspective on ethics that is properly grounded in Heidegger’s philosophy.

Before this is possible we must clarify the most fundamental and influential aspects of Heidegger’s thought against the philosophical traditions he sought to unravel. In order to avoid misunderstanding primordial ethical concepts as normative value judgements, we must first understand how Heidegger’s concept of truth differs from other Western thinkers.

2 Theories of Truth

Traditional interpretations of truth have their roots in Plato and Aristotle, who supposed respectively that truth was either an ideal concept from which our experiences of beings in the world are cast³ or simply the agreement of a claim or proposition with “what is”⁴. These understandings led to what is now called the correspondence theory of truth, since it relied upon the idea of direct correspondence with an external catalogue of fact⁵. Within this theory one must compare a claim to a reference point of knowledge to deduce its correctness.

Kant considered this definition absurdly tautological, and instead supposed that one’s ideas needed merely to be consistent with one’s rational and sensory experiences, since there is no way to verify their correspondence⁶ to anything else. As long as a claim to truth is coherent with what we know of the world then there is no way to argue against its correspondence.

²Heidegger famously said that “. . . questioning is the piety of thought” (QCT 35) and expressed wariness of “expedients and detours that drive [man] away ever anew from experiencing that which is” (QCT 97).

³Republic VI, esp. 511 d-e

⁴Metaphysics 1011b25

⁵Their perspectives differ in that Plato considers the world we experience to be a deficient reflection of what really is, but both philosophers indicate a belief that true statements are those which correspond to what is.

⁶Introduction to Logic, not sure which page

For Heidegger, the correspondence theory of truth results from a misunderstanding of the meaning of Being⁷ and the coherence theory is attempting to reconcile a dichotomy (that of the physical and the cognitive) that Heidegger’s ontology never creates. His concept of truth is radically different from those grounded in Λόγος, drawing instead from another Greek word for truth, Ἀλήθεια, which he translated as “unconcealment”. Instead of the permanent, written, objective inclinations of λόγος Heidegger looked to λέγειν, the spoken word between beings. Rather than an attempt to express absolute fact, truth as Ἀλήθεια is like pulling back the curtain that conceals, gaining a perspective on something while at the same time covering part of it over⁸. 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 consternation 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 result from the conception of truth as coherence grounded in Λόγος.

3 Kantian ethics and the shift to Da-sein

Kant’s ethical system was grounded in his own coherence theory of truth. The idea of treating people as something other than a means to an end, the point that good actions are good not

⁷“At the beginning of Western thinking, what is...all-important is catching sight of what is named by ‘Being’ (Φύσις, Λόγος, Ἐν) 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]

⁸Undelivered Lecture (XII) Section 4, p.179-181

because of the action but the intent behind them, and the necessity of behaving according to a rule that should be applicable to anyone are central notions in Kant's ethics⁹. These ideas depend on Kant's conception of human beings as defined by their capacity for rational thought, and are variously justified or annihilated by Heidegger's fundamental ontology of Da-sein, as we shall see.

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 self¹⁰, 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". Aristotle¹¹ and Kant¹² both set apart human being from any other kind of being on the grounds of humans' capacity for rational, deductive thought, and as such when they talk about humanity they are doing nothing other than discussing being as Λόγος. Both philosophers are careful to consider the wider breadth of human possibility, but have already presupposed that rational thought, behavior, and discourse are necessarily possible for humans, and indeed this necessary possibility is identical with human beings within their systems.

Heidegger's approach was to abandon all presupposition of which beings ought to interest his investigation and instead address the particular behavior that mattered to his project:

⁹See GMM 66-67, 3, and vi respectively.

¹⁰"... *the* being we inquirers in each case are." (BT 7)

¹¹Nicomachean Ethics Book I, 1098a

¹²GMM 65

being interested in one's own being. In asking and thinking about its being, the being that questions exists both ontically, in that it is defined by its existence¹³, and ontologically, in that its own existence is an issue and a question for it¹⁴. 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-sein¹⁵.

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 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 there¹⁶. It is therefore inappropriate to think of it in rarefied terms, and Heidegger dubbed it Da-sein (being-there) to emphasize the fundamental characteristic of (the event of) its disclosure. The epistemological roadblocks of the Cartesian subject are not an obstacle for Da-sein, since Da-sein encounters its world in terms of its possible ways of being rather than objectively collected data. This difference in approach signals a difference in perspective for ethics.

Any system of ethics is built on an understanding of truth and a conception of the being for which ethics is a problem. We see the influence of the coherence theory of truth in Kant's ethical system, but it likewise depends on his conception of humanity as a rational being.

¹³That is to say, it exists to itself and relates to itself (BT 12)

¹⁴BT 13

¹⁵"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

¹⁶That is to say, in a disclosive event in the world: "This being bears in its ownmost being the character of not being closed. The expression 'there' means this essential disclosedness." BT 132

Kant defined human will as the capacity for reason and deductive thought¹⁷, 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.

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..."¹⁸. 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, he distinguishes 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 taken as a matter of "care", whereas in the latter case Da-sein recognizes others as being like itself and treats them with "concern"¹⁹, 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"²⁰. To Da-sein, they are those beings with whom one is in the world, and they are called "Mitda-sein" ("being-there-with")²¹. 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

¹⁷GMM 36

¹⁸GMM 96

¹⁹BT 121

²⁰"The being which this being is concerned about in its being is always my own... In accordance with the character of *always-being-my-own-being* [*Jemeinigkeit*], when we speak of Da-sein, we must always use the *personal* pronoun along with whatever we say: 'I am,' 'You are.'" BT 42

²¹BT 123

ontologically justified and ontically clarified by Heidegger.

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. Unlike Kant's distinction between matter and spirit, Da-sein understands Mitda-sein in terms of how it reveals itself as distinct from tools. Mitda-sein is defined *from the outset* as precisely that which is *not* encountered in terms of a *what-for* relationship, but as a matter of concern. By not approaching beings in terms of their objective presence, Heidegger has made a clearing for them to reveal themselves. Mitda-sein are accomplices, other beings of the same kind as Da-sein, and in them Da-sein can see its own possibilities. Ontology is a question of Da-sein's relation to itself, but here we have set up Da-sein's relation to Mitda-sein in order to ask the question of ethics.

4 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 question 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 ethics, Plato's *Republic*, the pivotal question was asked: do we behave justly for its own sake or for the worldly rewards? Plato questioned whether, were one able to turn invisible and act without fear of consequences, one would steal, rape, and murder without restraint²². He sought to demonstrate that good deeds were good for their own sake, regardless of any worldly consequence. To do this he set forth an

²²Republic II 359-360

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 happiness²³. This split omitted an important possibility: that relationships with people are valuable in their own right, not as servants of an objective moral principle, not as scions of a particular behavior, but as *Mitda-sein*.

Of course it would not do 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 axiom 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.

The field of ethics is 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 has²⁴. 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. Instead of logical necessities of a rationally determined universe, *Da-sein* and *Mitda-sein* must make decisions with and for each other

²³Republic IV 444-445

²⁴“The disclosedness of the *Mitda-sein* of others which belongs to being-with means that the understanding of others already lies in the understanding of being of *Da-sein* because its being is being-with. This understanding, like all understanding, is not a knowledge derived from cognition, but a primordially existential kind of being which first makes knowledge and cognition possible.” BT 123-124

in a world of changing possibilities.

It is beneficial at this point to return to the concept of Mitda-sein and elaborate on its role 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.”²⁵ 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.”²⁶

Over time this relation between Da-sein and Mitda-sein 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”, since it is a part of the constitution of Da-sein itself). 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*²⁷, and when it is so entangled Da-sein is described as being *inauthentic*²⁸.

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

²⁵BT 118

²⁶BT 118

²⁷BT 126-127

²⁸The negative tone this terminology seems to establish should not be interpreted as a condemnation of the inauthentic: “[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

because it is essentially possible as authentic, that is, it belongs to itself.²⁹

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.*”³⁰ 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 fashion. This is a precise distinction, but one that speaks volumes about how Da-sein understands and relates with others: Da-sein is not primordially authentic and only afterwards drawn into inauthentic behavior, but is always already entangled. Authentic Da-sein is only possible as a modification of inauthentic Da-sein. But how is this modification possible?

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 is 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 Man³¹. In understanding

²⁹BT 42-43

³⁰BT 130

³¹BT 271-274

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 being³².

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 Man³³. Conscience, calling Da-sein back to its possibilities, is what makes morality possible for Da-sein in the first place³⁴. 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"³⁵. The authentic responsibility of conscience is a 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 they³⁶. 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 ethical relationship which the so-called "vulgar understanding of being [which] understands 'being' as objective presence"³⁷, the Cartesian concept of the self as an isolated spirit, can only understand as self-love in Plato's sense. In exploring the concept of being-excellent, the ethical imperative of concern, we can begin to understand ethics in a more penetrating and

³²BT 287-288

³³BT 276-278

³⁴"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

³⁵BT 288

³⁶BT 267

³⁷BT 389

originary sense.

6 The determination of *being-excellent*

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 his "care" away from him, to use or manipulate him in ways seen or unseen. 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 he takes care of³⁸.

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

³⁸BT 122

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.

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 sees a being to which it is indebted for sustenance, or perhaps merely a thing at hand and objectively present. 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 does not.

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*"³⁹. It is only on this basis that we can begin to approach our most enduring ethical problems, and even then they

³⁹BT 121

can never be solved in the sense demanded by 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.

William James tells a story⁴⁰ which 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 *cæteris 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 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 of the priority of the question.

⁴⁰James 24

References

- [1] Martin Heidegger. *Being and Time*. State University of New York Press, 1996.
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