

Increasingly it seems that our political energy is directed at personalities. Instead of making decisions about our values and needs and then supporting (and holding accountable) the politicians who make decisions that align therewith, we seem to live in a world where everyone has selected their fighter and commits to supporting whatever that person tells them to. This backwards method is exactly what leads to fascist hero worship on the right and craven celebrity cult among liberals. Hero worship in politics, as we have often seen, leads with remarkable consistency to totalitarian behavior.

This shift—from personal ideals to hero worship—evokes for me many of the important lessons I learned reading Heidegger. This is not just because of his own frightful alignment with Nazism (which I do not consider essential to his philosophy but have no interest in ignoring), and not just because I am enamored with his philosophical work and bring it up all too often, but because of how his philosophical project shines a light on how these positions are connected and how it relates to the ways we see ourselves.

It is with overwhelming joy and contrition that I tell you I will need to explain a lot of the concepts in Heidegger's philosophical project in order to explain this. His work is notoriously challenging not simply due to its complexity and ambition but because it demands that we develop new understandings of every concept, however fundamental. The main goal, which we won't be chasing to its end, is to find non-circular ways to ask about the meaning of being. In contrast to much of the philosophical canon of his day, for whom existence was a matter of objectively-understood presence in the universe, Heidegger's approach is decidedly first-person.

A useful example of this is the early philosophical obsession with finding a categorical definition of humanity that supports our perceived primacy in nature. Sociality, rationality, emotionality, even featherless bipedalism have all been used to set us apart from other beings and each time it was an effort to prove a desired outcome rather than any kind of sincere or rigorous analysis.

So instead of finding the category into which "human beings" can be cast, think of all questions about existence as emanating from not just the fact of your existence but also your experience of it. Where Descartes discovers his own existence with logic and posits a benevolent God to bring the rest of his world into view, Heidegger takes the experiencing self as the given because for the person asking about being their own being is not in doubt, and furthermore it is only that experience which can tell us anything at all about itself. I'm going to try to avoid jargon for readability's sake, but "Dasein" is the term that Heidegger uses to describe what is, in every case, yourself asking questions about being. This word is kind of inescapable, and its literal translation ("being-there") is more awkward and misleading than leaving it untranslated, so please bear with me and try to get accustomed to reading it. It just means you, the reader, in this specific context.

What about the other "objects" in the world, then? There is a compelling materialist model for these: we are used to saying that our eyes collect light, our ears process vibration, etc. but is that how we experience them? If we look at a telephone, instead of seeing a suffusion of color that we interpret as a shape that our memory tells us is a telephone, we immediately see it in terms of our ways to interact with it. A telephone is calling your parents, it's ordering a pizza, it's receiving bad news, etc. A chair is a place to sit, or something to stand on to change a light bulb, or a place to leave these papers that I'm definitely going to file later, etc. Our experience of the world, while it can be explained as raw sense data and while we are building machines that start from that understanding and can simulate some of our behavior with it, is fundamentally grounded in ways to be *with* things. Our being, or more properly the being of Dasein, is *in a world*.

A classic problem of philosophy, in fact the very problem that led Descartes to employ his *Deus ex machina*, is that of solipsism. We experience ourselves, and we experience the world, but we can never experience another person's consciousness. Indeed, the scientific perspectives that follow from this thinking cannot even identify what consciousness is or how it exists. How can we break out of ourselves? Descartes was desperate to escape the possibility that the world was a deception, that an evil genius had captured his thinking self and was feeding him contrived data, or that a demon had poisoned his understanding such that he could only see a perverse interpretation of things. When all you have is thought and sensation this is not a prison you can escape without an appeal to divine authority.

This solipsism is a lonely and frustrating problem, and for Heidegger it requires something of a leap of faith (more on this later): we experience other people as carrying out the same behavior that we are, and

understand them as being like ourselves and therefore beings we exist *with* in a world. Kant described this as a difference between something being a means to an end and something being an end in itself. His version of this, if I may be extremely charitable, is that when you examine why you want and do everything in your life and follow it to its end you will find a principle that has no basis, something that for you is simply true and essential: Kant's famous "categorical imperative". For him this is a logical principle from which you build your ethical world, but for Heidegger we instead turn to the difference in how we relate to objects with useful purpose (suitability, utility) and other beings that exhibit the same kind of being that we recognize as our own (care, concern).

So already we have an understanding of self, of world, and of other beings like us, all of which differ in profound ways from the scientific measurement of atomic placement that Modern thought has ingrained in us. What can this tell us about how to live and make decisions? Now that we have some concept of a distinction between ourselves, other people, and the world of objects that we live in, how do we navigate and understand their interactions? It is time to talk about the most misunderstood concept in existentialism: authenticity.

Existing as we do in a world with other beings, we share our lives constantly with one another. Our projects and cares are intertwined in ways that bring us joy and sadness. But there is one single thing that Dasein does entirely alone: die. The certainty of death gives us a perspective to return to, a context for our decisions that brings us back to those things that are most important to us. It is a mistake to think of authenticity as an ethical ideal, but the truth is that the inevitability of death looms over our entire lives as authenticity. Authentic behavior is then not the outpouring of something essentially your own, but instead behavior that is guided by the knowledge that you are dying. We make decisions every day that are guided by everyday concerns that we know mean nothing in the grand scheme of things. Authenticity guides us to make decisions about what really matters to us, which things we will look back gladly at having done in the moment of our death. It brings Dasein back to itself.

Inauthenticity, then, is not a "lesser" mode of being. It is when we spend time sharing our lives with each other and making decisions together, or navigating decisions of immediate concern that are not important to the project of our lives. A purely authentic life would be lonely and harsh, anxiously getting our lives over with. A purely inauthentic life would be frivolous and forgettable, what Heidegger called "entanglement in the they". Doing what "they" do, thinking what "they" think, dissolving all responsibility to yourself in the everyday.

No, a healthy and happy life means being able to live across all of these possible ways of being. Here is where Heidegger's language threw me when I first read *Being and Time*. I mentioned earlier that we would be reunderstanding a lot of concepts, and nowhere is this more jarring than it is with conscience and guilt. With both words we are used to a moral judgement on ourselves, but this judgement always takes the form of our failure to live up to the expectations of a deity or group. Conscience, we are told, is the angel on our shoulder telling us what this external, objective force wants us to be doing. Guilt, we are told, is a feeling of debt to this force when we do not heed this.

What Heidegger is doing here isn't establishing some Nietzschean will to power, where our moral decisions are made according to our whims and the strength to apply them. Instead he is asking ethical questions in the context of his main question about being. Guilt isn't a moral debt to an authority, but instead a debt of existence to one's self! We feel guilt when we have failed to live up to our authentic goals in life, when we betray what is most important to ourselves. Conscience is not the voice from outside telling us what is desired of us, but crucially a voice from *within* that calls us back to our own most important values, informed by the knowledge that we are dying. Instead of the angel on your shoulder, conscience is a reaper!

Now we are equipped to look at the problem that opened this essay: people are listening to their chosen political figures as external moral authority instead of listening to their own call, determining their values. This is not to say that political views are essentially determined and not subject to positive change, indeed through inauthentic being we grow and learn in ways that enrich and alter the trajectory of our authentic lives! But without ever heeding the call back to ourselves we are entangled in views and behavior that we do not, on introspection, feel right about.

Here is where I'd like to continue Heidegger's analysis by considering a related topic: faith. The usual

understanding is that of faith in God, or in the existence of a being who is responsible for being itself. This is in fact the very problem that we encountered earlier: we needed God to exist so that the world could be real, so that our senses could be trusted, so that other people could be real to us despite their experience being their own. Instead of another being who experiences things for us, faith properly understood is in those very beings we share the world with. The leap from solipsism has always been a matter of faith, and instead of an objectively present deity we need only turn to the wonder of each other.

Our faith must not, then, be a giving-over of ourselves to another's will. We must learn to exist with others in a way that does not lose ourselves, to make decisions for and with others that does not enable them to lose themselves. When we have faith in another, we have faith in their ability to support us and fail us, because this faith is not in their authority but in our mutual being-with. This means that faith is not simply receiving the other person in our world, but in joining their world and bringing ourselves to it. Because our initial experience of each other is not one of instrumentality but of shared project, we remain responsible for ourselves and must heed the call of conscience that calls us back to ourselves. Dasein's faith is not in a powerful leader but in mutual understanding.