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Heidegger's "Being-towards-Death" and Its Ethical Implications

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Abstract. This essay interrogates the ethical dimensions of Martin Heidegger's concept of "Being-towards-Death" (Sein-zum-Tode) as presented in Being and Time. While Heidegger's framework offers a powerful account of achieving authentic existence through confronting one's own finitude, it is simultaneously marred by a profound ontological egoism that sidelines ethical obligations to others. This paper critically examines Heidegger's position and juxtaposes it with Emmanuel Levinas's ethics of the Other. It contends that Levinas's altruistic ethics provides a necessary counterbalance to the intensely inward-focused self-awareness in Heidegger's thought, thereby preventing the latter from devolving into an extreme egoism. The conclusion suggests that a dialectical synthesis of these perspectives can foster a more holistic equilibrium between individual authenticity and ethical responsibility.

Keywords: Heidegger, Levinas, Being-towards-Death, Ethics, Individuality, Das Man, Authenticity

1. Introduction

In Being and Time (1927), Martin Heidegger introduces "Being-towards-Death" as the pivotal means for Dasein (human existence) to break free from the constraints of "Das Man" (the "they") and attain an authentic mode of being. This transformation hinges on recognizing death as one's "ownmost" possibility. However, the deeply introverted and individualistic orientation of Heidegger's theory gives rise to significant ethical concerns. We must ask whether his emphasis on the self potentially fosters an ontological egoism that undermines our ethical responsiveness to others. This paper argues that while Heidegger's ontological insights are profound, they lack a comprehensive ethical dimension. By engaging critically with Emmanuel Levinas's ethics, which prioritizes the face of the Other over self-interest, a new possibility emerges: one that reconciles the authenticity of self-awakening with a fundamental ethical concern for the Other.

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2. The heideggerian path: the individualization of death

2.1. Escape from "the they"

Heidegger's concept of "Das Man" describes a state of inauthenticity where individuals lose themselves in the anonymous, normative pressures of the public sphere. Within "Das Man," thought and action are dictated by what "one" does and thinks, erasing the unique potential of Dasein. Nowhere is this more evident than in the domain of death. "Das Man" neutralizes the terror of death by treating it as a vague, universal event that happens to "one"—always "but not right now." This trivialization severs the intimate connection between the individual and their own mortality, fostering a state of "falling" (Verfallen) where Dasein busies itself with everyday concerns to avoid confronting its own finitude. Consequently, the escape from "Das Man" is not a rejection of daily life per se, but an ontological liberation—a conscious decision to face one's own potentiality and mortality head-on.

2.2. The three characteristics of death

For Heidegger, death is not merely a biological endpoint but a mode of being that permeates life, characterized by three ontological features that serve as the foundation for authentic awakening.

2.2.1. Ownmost (Jemeinig)

Death is the one possibility that is intrinsically and irreplaceably my own. No one can die in my place. This "mineness" (Jemeinigkeit) strips away social roles and relationships, confronting me with the naked fact of my own existence and its ultimate, non-transferable possibility [1].

2.2.2. Non-relational (unbezüglich)

Death is non-relational in that it severs all of Dasein's relations to others and its world. It shatters the web of significance that constitutes everyday life, forcing an individual to confront their being in isolation from worldly distractions [2]. This is an ontological, not merely social, solitude.

2.2.3. Unsurpassable (Unüberholbar)

Death is unsurpassable; it is the absolute limit that defines the horizon of all other possibilities [3]. As the one possibility that makes all others possible by framing them within finitude, it is final and unavoidable, imposing a profound weight on Dasein's existence.

2.3. Authentic awakening through anxiety

Anxiety (Angst) is the affective catalyst for this awakening. Unlike fear, which has a specific object, anxiety arises from confronting the groundlessness of one's own being and the nothingness that underpins existence [4]. It dismantles the familiar world of "Das Man," revealing Dasein's "thrownness" (its facticity of being in a world it did not choose) and its potentiality-for-being. By facing this anxiety and the inevitability of death, Dasein is jolted out of its complacency. This confrontation fosters "resoluteness" (Entschlossenheit)—a decisive commitment to choose oneself and project onto one's own authentic potential, fully accepting one's finitude [5].

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3. Ethical dilemma: the risk of ontological egoism

3.1. Focus on the self

Heidegger's analysis operates within a fundamentally self-centric framework. The entire project of "being-towards-death" is designed for the individual's attainment of self-truth. In this schema, the Other, often mediated through "Das Man," is predominantly viewed as an impediment to authenticity—a source of distraction and alienation [6]. Authenticity is achieved through a process of disengagement from the collective. This raises a critical ethical question: how can a self-awareness cultivated through such a deep, inward-focused process, which defines itself against the "they," subsequently generate a proactive ethical concern for others? For Heidegger, anxiety leads to a awakening of the self, not necessarily to responsibility for the Other. As Jean-Luc Nancy and others have noted, what Heidegger gestures toward as an "original ethics" remains an ethics of the self, concerning its own existence, rather than an ethics for the Other [7]. This intense individualism risks an extreme interpretation that sidelines interpersonal ethics.

3.2. The death of the other

This ontological egoism becomes particularly apparent in Heidegger's treatment of the death of others. Within the "being-towards-death" framework, the Other's death primarily serves an instrumental and symbolic function for the self. Its significance lies not in the unique, irreplaceable loss of the Other, but in how it jolts me into a deeper awareness of my own mortality [8]. By emphasizing that I cannot truly die another's death, Heidegger's framework marginalizes the ethical and emotional experience of mourning. Grief and sorrow are relegated to the status of inauthentic psychological phenomena, lacking the ontological weight of one's own confrontation with death. Contemporary phenomenologists have critiqued this view, arguing that it strips the Other's death of its inherent ethical charge, reducing it to a mere catalyst for self-awakening [9]. The Other's death matters only insofar as it contributes to my ontological project.

4. Levinas's ethical reply: the priority of the other

4.1. Ethics as first philosophy

Emmanuel Levinas directly challenges Heidegger's ontological primacy by positing ethics as "first philosophy." For Levinas, the fundamental relation is not with Being but with the Other ("Autrui"). We are ethically implicated by the Other's presence even before we constitute ourselves as conscious subjects [10]. This pre-ontological ethical relation is the foundation upon which all else, including our sense of self, is built. The encounter with the "face" (le Visage) of the Other is central. The face is not a visual object but an ethical epiphany—it is vulnerable, mortal, and issues the primordial command: "You shall not kill" [11]. This command is not based on reciprocity or social contract; it is an unconditional, asymmetrical demand that precedes my freedom and choice. This encounter fundamentally reorients the subject, founding a subjectivity based not on "I think" but on "Here I am!"—a declaration of availability and responsibility for the Other [12].

4.2. Responsibility for the death of the other

For Levinas, this responsibility is infinite and asymmetrical. It is not limited by my capacities, nor does it demand reciprocity. My responsibility for the Other even extends to being responsible for the

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Other's death [13]. This is not a causal or culpable responsibility for their biological demise, but an ethical obligation to be answerable for the Other's vulnerability and mortality. This radical responsibility defines the subject, who is, from the outset, a "hostage" to the Other.

5. Critical dialogue and synthetic possibility

At first glance, Heidegger's individualized "being-towards-death" and Levinas's radical ethics of the Other seem irreconcilable. However, a growing body of scholarship suggests the potential for a dialectical synthesis rather than a strict dichotomy [14].

Levinas's call for infinite responsibility presupposes a self capable of giving. Yet, a self that is entirely dissolved into the collective "Das Man" may engage in sacrifice not as an authentic gift, but as a form of social conformity. Here, Heidegger's imperative for individualization becomes crucial. The process of becoming an authentic self through confronting finitude can be seen not as the adversary of ethics, but as its necessary precondition [15]. A robust, non-conformist self is required to undertake a genuine, responsible relationship with the Other, rather than a selfless act that is merely a product of social pressure.

Thus, one might argue that Heideggerian individuation provides the foundational "self" that can then be given in a Levinasian ethical encounter. The confrontation with one's own finitude can become the very ground for recognizing the finitude and vulnerability of the Other, thereby fueling ethical responsiveness [16]. The two philosophies, rather than being mutually exclusive, can be seen as addressing different moments in a single existential-ethical arc: from the constitution of the self to the responsible gift of that self to the Other.

6. Conclusion: toward a dialectical synthesis

In conclusion, while Heidegger provides an indispensable framework for understanding individual authenticity, his philosophy risks ethical solipsism without the corrective offered by Levinas's ethics of the Other [17]. Conversely, Levinas's focus on infinite responsibility, if taken to an extreme, might undervalue the necessity of a formed, authentic self as the agent of that responsibility [18]. A dialectical synthesis proposes that authenticity and ethical responsibility are co-constitutive. We require Heidegger's inward turn to forge a self capable of responsibility, and Levinas's outward turn to ensure that this responsibility is directed rightly toward the Other [19]. The possibility of a genuinely authentic self that is also an infinitely responsible subject hinges on recognizing that selfhood and responsibility are intertwined aspects of a fully realized human existence [20, 21].

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