

Totalitarian Inauthenticity: Heidegger and the Politics of Being-Toward-Death

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In division II, part II of his Being and Time, Martin Heidegger develops an account of being-toward-death which he confines to the ontological analysis of Da-sein. In the course of this paper I shall argue that this account has a political relevance, one which opposes the sort of totalitarian politics which Heidegger briefly and infamously endorsed as a member of the National Socialist party.

The argument of the paper shall proceed in two parts. In the first, I will defend the negative claim that totalitarian politics and authentic being-towards-death are mutually exclusive. To this end I shall first attempt to demonstrate that Being and Time can be legitimately approached as a normative work, drawing from the work of Heidegger scholar Karsten Harries to defend the ethical and political relevance of “fundamental ontology.” From here I shall proceed to the influential account of totalitarian politics elaborated by Hannah Arendt in her Origins of Totalitarianism, focusing specifically on the trends of de-individualization and the trivialization of death which she understands to have enabled Nazism in Germany. I shall then reconstruct the relevant aspects of Heidegger’s descriptions of “everyday-being-toward-death” and of Da-sein’s potential for authentic being-toward-its-end, arguing that these taken together represent a powerful indictment of totalitarian political orders.

In the second stage of the argument, I shall defend the positive claim that the project of an authentic being-towards-death requires an emancipatory political response. Drawing critically from Dennis Schmidt’s commentary on Heidegger’s later work, I will argue that it is precisely death which radically resists the technological tendencies that have historically enabled attempts at totalitarian closure in political field, forcing political orders to conserve space for the free, unbidden appearance of the new.

Normativity in Being and Time

One crucial objection to the arguments outlined above must be met at the outset: is not Being and Time an explicitly non-normative work, one which self-consciously avoids moral and political questions in the interest of what Heidegger terms “fundamental ontology” which is to be derived from a strictly “existential analysis of Da-sein”¹? Heidegger’s insistent division of “ontological possibilities” and “’ontic (potentialities)-of-being”² would seem to suggest just this. If so, any attempt to extract a moral-political content from being-toward-death will prove unsuccessful.

However, as Karsten Harries points out³, Heidegger does not manage to preserve as neat a distinction in detail as his more architectonic comments suggest. Just as Kant before him was forced to construct his critical philosophy out of the anthropology and psychology from which he distinguished the analysis of reason in its pure and practical aspects, Heidegger cannot and does not attempt to conduct a strictly a priori investigation of Da-sein:

Da-sein has proven to be what, before all other beings, is ontologically the primary being to be interrogated. However, the roots of the existential analysis, for their part, are ultimately existentiell—they are ontic. Only when philosophical research and inquiry themselves are grasped in an existentiell way—as a possibility of being of each existing Da-sein—does it become possible at all to disclose the existentiality of existence and therewith to get hold of a sufficiently grounded set of ontological problems.⁴

Even “fundamental ontology,” then, must begin with the raw ontic material of human experiences and projects. An important part of these experiences and projects is normativity, the

¹ Heidegger, Martin. tr. Stambaugh, Joan. Being and Time. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996. p 11

² Heidegger BT 246

³ Harries, Karsten. “Heidegger as a Political Thinker.” in Murray, Michael ed. Heidegger and Modern Philosophy: Critical Essays. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978. p 308

⁴ Heidegger BT 11

kind of consideration of what agents should and shouldn't do that frames existentiell modes of thinking and acting for "each existing Da-sein." Regarding the question of authenticity, Harries helpfully points out that Heidegger reflects on this very point in some depth: "Does not a definite ontic interpretation of authentic experience, a factual ideal of Da-sein, underlie our ontological interpretation of the existence of Da-sein? Indeed. But not only is this fact one that must not be denied and we are forced to grant; it must be understood in its positive necessity, in terms of the thematic object of our inquiry."⁵ "Ontic interpretations" and "factual ideals"—concepts of an explicitly moral nature—are in this way shown by Heidegger himself to orient the allegedly non-normative ontological analysis of authenticity. Thus it is that "the purity of fundamental ontology [is shown to be] an illusion"⁶ because "we cannot divorce ontological inquiry from the concrete stance adopted by the inquirer"⁷.

Normative concepts—messy, imprecise, and ontic though they be—constitute a "positive necessity" which grounds ontological investigation. The political and moral relevance of such Heideggerian concepts as authenticity, everydayness, and being-toward-death would seem secured in this way. In Harries' language, "Being and Time can be read as an edifying discourse disguised as fundamental ontology... [which] calls its readers to authenticity, that honest acceptance of man's own being"⁸.

Arendt, Individuality, Death, and the Origins of Totalitarianism

In her 1951 The Origins of Totalitarianism, Hannah Arendt elaborates a complex sociological, economic, and psychological account of 20th century totalitarian politics. Central to

⁵ Heidegger BT 286

⁶ Harries "Heidegger" 308

⁷ Harries "Heidegger" 307

⁸ Harries "Heidegger" 306-7

this account is the phenomenon of what Arendt terms the “masses,” a demographic category characterized by a lack of structured class allegiance of the sort which guaranteed the stability of 19th century western liberal democracies⁹: “The term masses applies only where we deal with people who either because of sheer numbers, or indifference, or a combination of both, cannot be integrated into any organization based on common interest, into political parties or municipal governments or professional organizations or trade unions”¹⁰. Two qualities attributed to the masses by Arendt are especially relevant to our present analysis: de-individualization and the trivialization of death.

Arendt claims that “completely heterogeneous uniformity is one of the primary conditions for totalitarianism”¹¹. The masses are essentially undifferentiated: without ties of economic interest, religious commitment, or traditional forms of hierarchy, old forms of identity and solidarity dissolve, reducing subjects to a state of uprooted fragmentation in which classical concepts of autonomy and responsibility erode. The concomitant “radical loss of self-interest”¹² leaves the masses existentially desperate, unable to intend and execute individual projects and susceptible to political movements which make super-individual appeals to racial or national destinies.

Arendt identifies a second, related trend in the psychology of the masses which she takes to have enabled totalitarian movements:

Self-centeredness... went hand in hand with a decisive weakening of the instinct for self-preservation. Selflessness in the sense of that oneself does not matter, the feeling of being expendable, was no longer the expression of individual idealism but a mass phenomenon. The old adage that the poor and oppressed have nothing to lose but their chains no longer

⁹ Arendt, Hannah. The Origins of Totalitarianism. New York: Meridian Books, Inc. 1958. p 317

¹⁰ Arendt OT 311

¹¹ Arendt OT 322

¹² Arendt OT 316

applied to the mass men, for they lost much more than the chains of misery when they lost their interest in their own well-being: the source of all the worries and cares which make human life troublesome and anguished was gone.... Himmler, who knew so well the mentality of those whom he organized, described not only his SS-men, but the large strata from which he recruited them, when he said they were not interested in “everyday problems” but only in “ideological questions of importance for a great task which occurs but once in 2,000 years.” The gigantic massing of individuals produced a mentality which, like Cecil Rhodes some forty years before, thought in continents and felt in centuries.¹³

Stripped of the sense of individuality and accountability characteristic of the old class system, the masses began to regard even their own lives as something “expendable,” and their deaths as unremarkable occurrences. This “cynical or bored indifference in the face of death or other personal catastrophes”¹⁴ makes the masses vulnerable to the sorts of large-scale violence—whether in the form of ambitious social engineering projects or reckless military ventures—which characterizes totalitarian regimes.

It is important to note the Arendt is here writing in explicitly sociological terms. Her project constitutes what Heidegger calls “ontic research,” a “scientific” undertaking which “(leaves) the meaning of being in general undiscussed”¹⁵. It may be tempting to identify her concept of the masses directly with what Heidegger designates “das Man”—but this must be avoided, as the former represents an ontic category associated with particular historical developments, while the latter represents a transcendental ontological mode constitutive of Da-sein at all places and times.

This is not to say, however, that a careful engagement of Arendt’s account of totalitarianism in Heideggerian terms cannot prove fruitful. If Harries’ aforementioned argument concerning the value-laden existential foundation of Heidegger’s project stands, then the ethics

¹³ Arendt OT 315

¹⁴ Arendt OT 316

¹⁵ Heidegger BT 9

of authenticity developed in the ontological analysis of Being and Time can be legitimately deployed against inauthentic political structures. Though “the mass” and “das Man” remain conceptually distinct, the project of authenticity might prove to involve a similarly overcoming both of them.

Heidegger and Authentic Being-toward-Death

Heidegger makes many claims regarding authentic being-toward-death. Two of these are relevant to the treatment of totalitarian politics at hand, and will be treated in this section: first, that being-toward-death individualizes Da-sein in a uniquely existentiell way; and second, that the attunement of Angst which being-toward-death involves forces Da-sein to confront its own potentialities for being.

According to Heidegger, the individual Da-sein often finds itself in situations in which it can (or must) exchange places with other Da-seins. Heidegger calls this process “representation,” emphasizing its social component:

The broad multiplicity of ways of being-in-the-world in which one person can be represented by another extends not only to the used-up modes of public being with one another, but concerns as well the possibilities of taking care of things limited to definite circles, tailored to professions, social classes, and stages of life... representability is not only possible in general, but is even constitutive for being-with-one-another. Here one Da-sein can and must, within certain limits, “be” another Da-sein.¹⁶

Through representation, Da-sein thus loses sight of its own individuality, recognizing its interchangeability (and in some contexts, dispensability) vis-à-vis others. Representation might in this way be thought of as the vehicle of the “complete heterogeneous uniformity” by which old identities are broken down and a mass mentality is constituted in the totalitarian situation.

¹⁶ Heidegger BT 223

Unique among Da-sein's potentialities, Heidegger identifies mortality as that which is exempt from relations of representation and forces Da-sein to come to terms with its own individuality:

(The) possibility of representation gets completely stranded when it is a matter of representing the possibility of being that is the coming-to-an-end of Da-sein and gives it totality as such. No one can take the other's dying away from him.... Insofar as it "is," death is always essentially my own.. In dying, it becomes evident that death is ontologically constituted by mineness and existence.¹⁷

Approached in a properly ontological fashion, death proves to be a helpful antidote to the totalitarian dynamic of de-individualization. This theme is developed in Heidegger's discussion of authentic being-toward death: by disclosing Da-sein's "own most potentiality-of-being" as essentially "non-relational," death "(tears) [Da-sein] away from the they" and "individualizes Da-sein down to itself"¹⁸. In confronting its radically singular mortality, Da-sein is reminded of its own radical singularity—clearly, a totalitarian politics which attempts to reduce subjects to "expendable" units in relations of representation cannot represent an authentic response to being-toward-death.

In addition to individualizing Da-sein, Heidegger argues that being-toward-death fosters an attunement of Angst which discloses Da-sein's existentiell possibilities:

In anticipating the indefinite certainty of death, Da-sein opens itself to a constant threat arising from its own there... (The) attunement which is able to hold open the constant and absolute threat to itself arising from the ownmost individualized being of Dasein is Angst. In Angst, Da-sein finds itself faced with the nothingness of the possible impossibility of its own existence.¹⁹

The aforementioned "cynical boredom or indifference in the face of death" which characterizes totalitarian mass psychology clearly represents no authentic response to Da-sein's

¹⁷ Heidegger BT 223

¹⁸ Heidegger BT 243

¹⁹ Heidegger BT 245

finitude. Such an orientation amounts to a “constant tranquilization”²⁰ typical of everyday interpretations of mortality, one which attempts to evade the Angst which haunts Da-sein at every moment and confronts it with its own possibilities for being. Angst “reveals to Da-sein its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility to be itself, primarily unsupported by concern taking care of things, but to be itself... free of the illusions of the they, factual, and certain of itself”²¹. Authentic being-toward-death involves allowing oneself to be not fearful but anxious (in Heidegger’s precise terminology,) constantly sensitive to the impossibility of one’s own existence and the existentiell prospects which it affords. In so far as a totalitarian political order obstructs this kind of attunement with various forms of public interpretedness of death, it cannot permit authenticity.

Granting the accuracy of Arendt’s account, it seems certain that authentic being-toward-death must resist, rather than compliment, totalitarian politics. The masses’ interpretation of death in the totalitarian situation, denying as it does the radical individuality and existentiell possibilities disclosed by mortality, shows itself a deficient mode to be overcome in the project of authenticity.

Totalitarian Techne and the Politics of Machenschaft

An important question might be asked at this point: does authentic being-toward-death, beyond opposing certain (by now outmoded and widely condemned) oppressive forms of political organization, positively require an emancipatory politics? Such matters, and those related to them, will be taken up in the remainder of this investigation.

²⁰ Heidegger BT 235

²¹ Heidegger BT 245

Already I have outlined Arendt's ontic, sociological account of totalitarianism; here I shall reconstruct relevant aspects of the ontological account of technologized politics which Heidegger would come to develop subsequent to Being and Time and the experience of the Second World War. The full political relevance of authentic being-toward-death can be most clearly appreciated only against this background.

Dennis Schmidt helpfully elucidates Heidegger's account of technology and its political implications²². Key to this account is the distinction between two modes of being which Aristotle identifies at the beginning of Western philosophy: "physis" is characterized by "appearances that come into being without our bidding, without our doing," usually in the realm of nature, on the one hand; and "techne," the "other reason appearances come into being... more readily intelligible for us because it is an event, a process in which we participate," the ontological mode of the workshop, on the other²³. Heidegger came to think that it is the ascendance of techne over physis – an orientation he terms *Machenschaft* – that defines modernity: the former "as a form of knowledge that we have at our disposal and which we presume is transparent to us, comes to govern, to dominate, our understanding of all appearance – even what we do not make, even physis – as well as our understanding of ourselves"²⁴.

Characteristic of *Machenschaft* is an emphasis on control, manipulation, representation, and – perhaps most importantly - calculation²⁵. The technological approach goes hand-in-hand with the reduction of all being to commensurable, quantified relationships: "In the empire of *Machenschaft*, everything is displaced in so far as the realm of appearances is colonized by the

²² Schmidt, Dennis J. Lyrical and Ethical Subjects: Essays on the Periphery of the Word, Freedom, and History. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005. pp. 163-190

²³ Schmidt LES 177

²⁴ Schmidt LES 177

²⁵ Schmidt LES 177

logic of calculability. Calculation becomes the standard determination of appearance”²⁶. In typical Heideggerian fashion, this displacement is also understood to entail a kind of concealing. Physis, the realm of the unbidden and unproduced, comes to be covered over – *Machenschaft* involves the violent, obscuring gesture of the “indifferent and blind denial of the incalculable”²⁷. (The relevance of this concealment to the public interpretedness of death in modern societies, and its political ramifications, is a theme to which I shall return shortly.)

The hegemony of *Machenschaft* bears important consequences for all areas of cultural and social life, perhaps most catastrophically in the political field. Heidegger names “power” - the root of “the essential nature of *Machenschaft*”²⁸ – as the force which comes to dominate the operation of modern politics. The same emphasis on representation and calculation and the repression of the incalculable which first gain footing in natural science comes to contaminate political life, with disastrous results. Schmidt claims that

It is no accident that the truth of *Machenschaft* becomes clearer to Heidegger during (the) years in which the struggle for power dominates the space of every appearance and in which the space of political life... had been closed. Naked violence now occupied that space. Power and violence were wed at this historical moment, and Heidegger understands this wedding as the end point, the destiny, of an interpretation formulated the moment of the incipience of Western culture”²⁹

Totalitarianism is thus revealed in its ontological dimension as the ascendancy of *Machenschaft* in the political realm. The technologized instrumentalization of political relations and political subjects themselves grounds the ontic catastrophes of social engineering and genocide which Arendt described.

²⁶ Schmidt [LES](#) 178

²⁷ Schmidt [LES](#) 178

²⁸ Schmidt [LES](#) 179

²⁹ Schmidt [LES](#) 179

Death and Physis

Heidegger describes at least one aspect of Da-sein which is constitutively exempt from such technologized relations of representation: this is of course death, Da-sein's "ownmost... nonrelational... possibility" which "lays claim on it as something individual"³⁰. A totalitarian order, however refined its operations of *Machenschaft*, can never fully account or systematize death, the radically incalculable potentiality that discloses Da-sein's freedom (this is, importantly, not to deny the infamous totalitarian manipulations of what Heidegger calls "perishing," the cessation and destruction of merely biological function³¹ to which the terrible technical efficiency of the German death camps attest.) Death, as the ultimate unbidden, subverts and destabilizes all attempts at the technological closure of the political field.

As such, Schmidt claims, an authentic being-toward-death may serve as the starting point for a "recovery of physis," a project to which Heidegger devoted increasing attention late in his career³². By reminding us, in its radical particularity, of Da-sein's "ecstatic (being,)" that it is "not defined by an 'I,' a subjectivity or by any form of identity," death forces us to "start from the experience of having always already exceeded what we might eventually construct into a self"³³. Totalitarian *Machenschaft*, with its characteristic attempts to securely pin down political subjects and their relationships with a metaphysics of subjectivity, must always be frustrated by the death which confronts Da-sein with its own radical potentiality and non-coincidence with itself, in Heidegger's language "(shattering) all one's clinging to whatever existence one has reached"³⁴.

³⁰ Heidegger BT 243

³¹ Heidegger BT 229

³² Schmidt LES 183

³³ Schmidt LES 187

³⁴ Heidegger BT 244

Authentic being-towards-death thus opens up a space of physis, not (as some ecologically-inclined Heideggerians are likely to suggest) in the realm of nature (Aristotle's original physical site,) but in the heart of the political itself. Because mortal, ecstatic Da-sein "is this being through which the event of appearance [of physis] can happen"³⁵, a community of authentic being-toward-death must recognize the radically free, unbidden possibilities of political life, conserving them against the encroachment of technology that would seek to render it one more calculable, manipulable sphere of being subject to power. Schmidt describes this project variously as the "preservation of the space of the appearance of difference"³⁶ or the "[opening of] a space for appearance beyond what we can control"³⁷. It is only this kind of emancipatory politics, one that secures the radical ecstatic freedom of its equally mortal and vulnerable subjects, that is fully congruent with Heidegger's account of authentic being-toward-death, and that can "[permit Da-sein] the courage to have Angst about death"³⁸.

To be certain, it is far from clear what kinds of institutional forms such a politics of physis should (or could) take. That a formalistic liberalism, with the troublesome baggage of its own metaphysics of subjectivity, is capable of sustaining a politics of physis seems doubtful. A more promising approach seems to be offered by Lacanian post-Marxism, which, in the language of one exponent, is interested in "the possibility of enacting symbolic gestures that institutionalize social lack, that is to say incorporate the ethical recognition of the impossibility of social closure"³⁹ – the same impossibility which, I have argued, Heidegger prefigures in his

³⁵ Schmidt LES 187

³⁶ Schmidt LES 189

³⁷ Schmidt LES 189

³⁸ Heidegger BT 235

³⁹ Stavrikakis, Yanis. Lacan and the Political. London: Routledge, 1999. p. 134

account of being-toward-death developed in Being and Time. This and related questions, though beyond the scope of this paper, strike me as important ones worth investigating.

Conclusion

Negatively, I have argued that the ethics of Heidegger's account of being-toward-death are incompatible with totalitarian politics of the sort described by Arendt. The strongly normative notion of Da-sein's authentic being-toward-death, with its emphasis on existentiell individuation and Angst, is opposed to the trends of de-individualization and the trivialization of death which characterized National Socialism in Germany, among other 20th century movements. It would seem that, after all, Heidegger furnishes resources in his account of authenticity which can and should be deployed against the kinds of politics with which he became notoriously entangled.

Positively, I have further argued that a politics of authentic being-toward-death demands an emancipatory project. Death, as that which both radically individualizes Da-sein and discloses its ecstatic possibilities for being, compels us to conserve space for unbidden physis on the field of the political. Far from merely grounding an ontological critique of totalitarian structures, Heidegger's account of being-toward-death in this way demands a perpetual struggle for human freedom – a conclusion that might well have surprised Heidegger himself.

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