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**Man's Finitude as an Essential Factor in his Freedom:  
Examining anxiety, death, and freedom in Heidegger's *Being and Time***

"Modern philosophy turns away from things in the world and zeroes in on the human self that grasps them in thought and transforms them in action. The self becomes the repository of both their truth and their ultimate purposes" (Hoffman, pg.195).

**I. Introduction:**

When searching for an appropriate definition of the "self" and also a supportable description of the "world" as it relates to my life, I continuously find myself turning to Heidegger. In this project, I plan to trace a portion of his philosophy from *Being and Time* to a justifiable conclusion concerning a limited but accurate definition of the "self," which ultimately finds meaning through death. This is my hope. I would like to start by pointing to section 25 in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, where he provides the suggestion that Dasein's Being-in-the-world is a unitary phenomenon. Initially, Heidegger approaches this phenomenon by questioning: "who is it that Dasein is in its everydayness?" Later in *Being and Time*, Heidegger continues beyond this question and towards an answer by describing certain equiprimordial structures that characterize Dasein's Being-in-the-world (Heidegger, pg.149). My major focus for this essay is to evaluate Heidegger's ultimate correlation between the primordial, existential structure of Dasein (as understood through the concept of *Mitwelt*, which is used to indicate this "everydayness" or Dasein's fundamental Being-with) and also Dasein's authentic modification of this fundamental mode of Being. On my interpretation, it is authentic

behavior that makes possible Dasein's capacity for choice and furthermore, a freedom to be responsible for choices.

## **II. Initial distinctions, definitions, and overall direction:**

Heidegger famously claims at the beginning of section 9 in *Being and Time* that the essence of Dasein lies in its existence (Heidegger, pg.67). The "there-being" indicated by Heidegger's term "Da-sein" points to a fundamental state of "being-in-the-world." As an initial distinction, the term "existents" has been used frequently to include all those things one comes across in the world. However, the use of this term in Heidegger's work doesn't accurately reflect the fundamental differences between Dasein and those other objects found in the world. As another introductory note, taken again from section 9 in *Being and Time*, Heidegger points out that the Being of any such entity (Dasein) is *in each case mine* (Heidegger, pg. 67). This concept of "mineness" is also one of great importance for Heidegger's analysis. From the internal and self-reflective awareness of my own existence, I discover structures of this existence that are universal and applicable to all Dasein. This Being is in each case mine because the procedure for an analysis of Dasein is this hermeneutic self-reflection (Gelven, pg.50). What is even more significant, however, is that this "mineness" of Being denotes that it is "my own." In light of being my own, or my ownmost, a further introspection into the original German language of Heidegger's philosophy should produce the term *eigentlich*, which translates to "authentic." It is this concept of authenticity, stemming from *eigen*, or "own," which is central to Heidegger's analysis (Gelven, pg.50). A final distinction to be made is that authenticity's counter term, inauthenticity, is that most fundamental mode for Dasein in which one is not aware of one's own existence. When one lives

inauthentically, secure in the ambiguity and idle talk of our fundamental, at-home existence, one necessarily loses oneself in the chatter. Again, my interest for this project will focus on the authenticity that Dasein experiences in moments of freedom, which are only made possible by this separation from the inauthentic “they-self.” Ultimately, I hope to show that through authenticity Dasein is most aware of its mood and deeply introspective about unique possibilities. In the self-examination of mood and one’s unique possibilities, Dasein eventually confronts death. Through this confrontation, I believe Dasein comes to understand true freedom and the special meaning of life.

### **III. Describing Authenticity:**

According to Hoffman’s essay *Death, time, history: Division II of Being and Time*, the aim of Heidegger’s project in *Being and Time* is to investigate the meaning of being in general, and since the meaning of being in general is disclosed by Dasein, the ultimate clarification of the meaning of being demands an appropriately ultimate (“primordial”) interpretation of Dasein. In other terms, we must achieve the grasp of Dasein as a whole in order to grasp being as a whole (Hoffman, pg.196). Hoffman continues to say that this existential analysis of Dasein requires insight into both the totality and the authenticity of Dasein and furthermore, that the authentic life is one in which the individual aspects of Dasein come to expression as a whole. Dasein is not free to understand “possibility,” at the very least the range of unique possibilities, until this authenticity is realized. To address the major components of this modification of the fundamental inauthentic mode, I will turn to a more in-depth analysis of “authenticity” in attempt to ultimately show how Dasein’s authenticity requires the “lucid” acceptance of

one's death, and that this acceptance shows how Dasein's totality can be revealed only in its being-towards-death, as disclosed through anxiety.

In the scope of Heidegger's work, only Dasein is capable of "standing out" or standing back from its own occurrence in the world and observing itself; this "standing out" separates Dasein from everything *other*, which are merely present-at-hand or ready-to-hand objects (Gelven, pg. 48-49). This "standing out," which will be discussed in more detail later, is an important feature in Heidegger's project. Accordingly, Dasein is an entity "in" the world, whereas all other objects and equipment present-at-hand are merely categories for Dasein's use and concern. So there exists an important distinction between existentials and categories in our world for Heidegger's *Being and Time*. Because of this "standing out," Dasein is altogether and fundamentally different than those items "present-at-hand." This distinction also contrasts Dasein with those items ready-to-hand, such as equipment regularly encountered in the world. The main distinction to note, however, is that Dasein remains unique and in ways, an autonomous and self-aware being. Most interpretations of Heidegger's work suggest that Dasein understands its own existence by way of reflecting on that existence. Naturally, continuing to examine this self-reflection (standing back/ authentic behavior), which at first glance seems strangely ambiguous, marks the beginning point of understanding who or what Dasein is.

According to Heidegger, Dasein's authentic mode is grounded in "unique possibility." In authenticity, Dasein becomes the grounding for its existence, capable of understanding possibility and the "there" of its Being (Fell, pg. 59-60). This contrasts with Dasein's most fundamental inauthentic mode, which is grounded in the actuality of

the “theyself” world. Dasein’s authentic existence can only be thought of in terms of transcending the “they-self.” Importantly, there are numerous possible ways for Dasein to be. There is this fundamental and inauthentic mode of being that marks all Dasein as thrown into a world having limited and socially influenced possibility. In contrast, it is Dasein’s “standing back,” which illuminates other unique possibilities for Being and allows a transcendence of this primordial inauthenticity. It is Dasein’s “standing back” that illuminates freedom in choice and autonomy. On this note, I will posit that an understanding of Dasein’s unique and authentic possibilities can be found in the examination of Dasein’s moods and that ultimately, *anxiety* as a state of mind and moreover, an attunement, discloses death as Dasein’s finitude. It is in this illuminated finitude, where Dasein finds an ultimate freedom and furthermore, where talk of being free takes on a new meaning.

#### **IV. Introduction to moods:**

For Heidegger, the use of such moods as fear, guilt, solitude, and anxiety do not constitute a brooding or nihilistic view of humanity; they are simply factual moods that do occur in man. In the examination of these moods, it is possible to understand Dasein’s mood (often referred to as one’s state-of-mind) as somewhat or somehow descriptive of his existence (Gelven, pg.50). As stated, I believe the understanding of Dasein’s moods unquestionably results in the disclosure of freedom and also, Dasein’s finitude in death. Therefore, if Dasein’s moods are in fact somehow descriptive of one’s existence, it seems likely that the examination of those moods will point to the importance of freedom and death in defining that very existence.

The first step in this further analysis of mood might be Dasein's call to conscience. This call to conscience, as highlighted in Heidegger's work, is primarily rooted in a state-of-mind or mood (as I shall refer to it) called guilt. For Heidegger, a number of intriguing aspects concerning the self are made aware through guilt. First, Dasein's reflection upon itself as something capable of being held responsible serves to facilitate authenticity. This reflection is not a constituent of Dasein's fundamental inauthenticity. Dasein's responsibility emphasizes, on my account, the importance of choice. For Heidegger, free choice can necessarily be found in Dasein's authentic reflection. Furthermore, Dasein is capable of choosing again to deny or admit this guilt found in the call to conscience. It is in this choice that the mood (state-of-mind) becomes extremely important in the analysis of Dasein. By choosing to avoid the significance of one's guilt, Dasein is also avoiding the awareness of the self as being capable of choosing freely to question existence and embrace "possibility."

In contrast, accepting and confronting guilt make Dasein aware of its autonomy in choice and on whole, the authentic self (Gelven, pg. 159). The call to conscience and the confrontation of this guilt often result in Dasein's understanding and attunement to its "thrownness." In this understanding, Dasein reaches for its autonomy and falls away from the "they-self" and into the authentic self. While this statement may seem problematic, I choose to interpret it as an accurate description of Dasein's falling from the security of the inauthentic self into the authentic self, in which Dasein is capable of reflecting on both inauthentic and authentic modes of existence.

Gelven is quick to point out, in his commentary on Heidegger's work, which one must keep in mind through an interpretation of this consciousness, that two things result

from Dasein's being guilty. Since conscience has been interpreted as a call from the inauthentic self to the authentic self, there must be a meaningful choice for Dasein.

Dasein can either be the self or not be the self. It is this latter possibility that is grounded in guilt. In being guilty, Dasein is forced to focus on its own Being. In focusing on its own Being, Dasein understands its fundamental inauthenticity, but reaches for the authentic "possibility." This call to conscience is a call of care, which summons Dasein to itself, away from the averageness of the "they."

As we have seen, Dasein's call to conscience results in authenticity. The call to conscience, by way of guilt, has served to introduce another of Dasein's moods. In showing great care for its life and those objects objectively present in the world, in being authentic, Dasein sometimes experiences a feeling of "uncanniness." In these strange moments of "angst," as Heidegger describes them, Dasein is removed from its concern for the things happening around it. And in so doing, this mood allows Dasein to focus and reflect upon our own stark and terrifying existence (Gelven, pg. 115). Anxiety, which can be understood in contrast with fear, does not have the definitive object of fear. In the case of fear, Dasein knows exactly what is to be feared. But Dasein cannot say what it is that bothers so terribly in the case of anxiety. In saying that there is no specific thing that bothers Dasein, it can be inferred that what bothers Dasein is "nothingness."

I've interpreted "nothingness" as Dasein's inability to escape the annihilation of one's existence. Death as an inescapable "possibility" is realized in the projected fields of authentic behavior. This being anxious about "nothingness" suggests for certain that Dasein has finally become aware of this finitude; Dasein has become aware that his utmost possibility, the possibility that will forever define his life, is the annihilation of

that life and those authentic “possibilities.” Death is disclosed to Dasein through this mood of anxiety, in which finitude is finally announced and fully realized. In one’s understanding the “nothingness” of this experience, one’s own *existence* is called into question. Dasein knows that he will die. The “possibility” of death becomes evident and provides, upon reflection, anticipation for the forthcoming annihilation of one’s possibilities.

Accordingly, the strangeness of this feeling cannot be compared to any other form of human experience. One reason seems to be that there is no definite reference and no “experience of anxiety” structured in time. Dasein does not know when death will come. In the experience of fear, a continuation of one’s existence plays an essential role. The “nothingness,” which characterizes the object of Dasein’s anxiety, illuminates Dasein’s finitude. For in death, Dasein truly finds this “nothingness.” According to Gelven’s commentary, “That existential which makes us aware of nothingness is dread. Dread is a state-of-mind. This means, as we have seen, that we are made aware of what *is*, as opposed to the mode of understanding that makes us aware of what could be... insofar as we see dread as a state-of-mind, it reveals to us how we *are* in a world” (Gelven, pg. 117). Herein, it should be seen that we *are* in the world as finite beings.

But anxiety does not merely present Dasein with its Being-in-the-world. The world is, during moments of anxiety, entirely alien to Dasein. This is where the “uncanny” feeling of discomfort and not-at-home comes from. Anxiety focuses on Dasein as a completely unique individual. In this individualization, Dasein again contemplates its own authentic possibilities and can realize true freedom. With freedom, Dasein becomes aware of two distinct possibilities. Through moments of anxiety, we are



able to genuinely choose ourselves or conversely, to lose ourselves again in the comfort of the “they-self.” Most importantly, through anxiety Dasein cannot avoid one’s confrontation with the self. “That’s what dread is. It is the uncanny awareness of the self as free to be either authentic or inauthentic” (Gelven, pg. 118).

Through anxiety, we have seen Dasein fly in the face of “nothingness.” Because Dasein’s basic mode of being is care, Dasein shows great concern for this finitude, which is illuminated in Heidegger’s concept of “nothingness.” A final intriguing aspect of anxiety, on Heidegger’s account, is that the uncanniness of angst brings Dasein face to face with its place in the world. Anxiety brings Dasein face to face with its thrownness. By understanding this thrownness and also the awareness of the self to be either authentic or inauthentic, Dasein is shown its true place in the world. Choosing authenticity allows the numerous aspects of Dasein to come to expression as a whole. In this totality, or complete expression, Dasein is free to embrace autonomy and choice.

#### **V. Freedom and the relationship to authenticity and moods:**

To begin, Gelven’s commentary on *Being and Time* provides a remarkable example from *The Brothers Karamazov*, by Dostoevsky, in which the great struggle between freedom and security, which ultimately separates authenticity from inauthenticity in Heidegger’s work, is powerfully portrayed. In his example, Dostoevsky’s writing brings to mind the fundamental problem with providing one his/her own freedom. In a chapter titled “The Grand Inquisitor,” the cardinal of the church condemns the reincarnated Christ for offering the people of his church freedom instead of the security and blanket salvation that the cardinal daily preaches. Similar to Heidegger’s writing this great literary masterpiece serves to highlight the twofold characteristic of

freedom: first, that it places a terrible burden on the free man, often forcing him to seek almost any means to avoid its full significance; and second, that it isolates the free man from the comfort and security of an ordered existence. This security, spoken of by both Heidegger and Dostoevsky, is the comfort of the “theyself.” Furthermore, it is suggested that a loss of freedom is coincident with a loss of one’s authentic character (Gelven, pg. 156-157). For Heidegger and Dostoevsky, the inauthentic self is most confident of having solved all its problems when it covers up that which it really is, something capable of choice. This example, to be taken as a further explanation of the difference between Dasein’s authentic mode and conversely, the everyday inauthentic mode, should once again highlight a number of other important aspects in Heidegger’s work.

Dasein is fundamentally inauthentic. Dasein doesn’t exist in constant reflection of his/her ownmost, unique possibilities. This reflection exists only as an authentic modification of the fundamental comfort and safety Dasein finds in the “idle talk” and ambiguity of the anonymous “they.” As illustrated in the above example, authenticity isolates the free man from the comfort and security of an ordered existence. You might be wondering, “Why would Dasein choose to be isolated from the comfort and security of ‘averageness?’” Dasein is called toward this isolation in the call to conscience. Finally, Dasein’s isolation is made fully aware through one’s attunement to and understanding of the moods. The better question might be, “Where does this lead us?”

#### **VI. Resoluteness towards “That-which-is-not-yet”:**

According to Gelven, “to be authentic is to be resolute” (Gelven, pg. 166). Resoluteness, which I will touch on briefly, focuses upon an individual’s unique assertion of his own existence, freely grounded in responsibility and guilt. The resolute man

knows that he is guilty; he wants to have a conscience (Gelven, pg. 166). Being resolute requires a situation. It requires an authentic existence. Resoluteness is a willingness of Dasein to project itself into situations, or possibilities, in which Dasein may feel guilty for not having taken great care in its existence. It is in this resoluteness that Dasein experiences the appeal of authenticity. In resoluteness, Dasein understand some measure of freedom and choice; “It does suggest a clear awareness of the self as a self, and a realization that one alone is responsible for the way one exists, and it avoids the slavery of the they-self” (Gelven, pg. 166). In Dasein’s realization of its existence and its full range of authentic “possibility,” Dasein begins to anticipate “that-which-is-not-yet.” In this anticipation, Dasein unmistakably finds death as the annihilation of “possibility.” Through authenticity and resoluteness, Dasein is made aware of choice. At the same time, in these moments of projected possibility, Dasein finds itself incapable of choosing an alternative to death. In this sense, death limits Dasein’s freedom. And unfortunately, Dasein’s embracing “possibility” in such a manner is invariably facilitated by the experience of dread (anxiety).

### **VII. Death and totality:**

Returning once more to Hoffman, “As long as a human individual is alive- as long as he continues to take a stand on what it means to be- his identity is not a settled matter, for it is open to constant revision and reinterpretation” (Hoffman, pg. 196). In other words, while Dasein is alive, totality will never be reached. As mentioned earlier, Dasein’s totality can only be understood in the authentic mode, in which the individual aspects of Dasein come to expression as a whole. It is in view of this totality that

Dasein's existence becomes a settled matter. To shift back to Heidegger's terminology for a connection, on pages 279-280 in *Being and Time*, he writes:

The 'ahead-of-itself', as an item in the structure of care, tells us unambiguously that in Dasein there is always something *still outstanding*, which, as a potentiality-for-Being for Dasein itself, has not yet become 'actual'. It is essential to the basic constitution of Dasein that there is *constantly something still to be settled*. Such a lack of totality signifies that there is something still outstanding in one's potentiality-for-Being... As long as Dasein *is* as an entity, it has never reached its 'wholeness'. But if it gains such 'wholeness', this gain becomes the utter loss of Being-in-the-world. In such a case, it can never again be experienced *as an entity* (Heidegger, pg. 279-280).

To talk of the immergence of death as totalizing my life seems, at first glance, problematic. As long as I envision life and my own possibilities from my unique perspective, it should seem impossible to talk of a totality that I haven't yet reached. Again, it also seems nonsensical to talk of my life and its meaning after death. Although Dasein's identity, in principle, is incomplete while Dasein is alive, this authentic concept of finitude through death nevertheless has been shown, at least in part, to expose and define Dasein. It is at this point, when Hoffman provides a famous example concerning Dasein's possibility in finitude. Accordingly, Dasein can avoid individual possibilities in life. Dasein is free to choose from any number of possibilities. But there is no goal and no strategy that would allow Dasein to avoid a rendezvous with death (Hoffman, pg. 198-199). Here, it is understandable that Heidegger attributes to death the power of both totalizing and completely individualizing Dasein. In summary, if Dasein were not a finite being, our basic state of existence would not be care. The realization of my annihilation provides a context for my care and also, my responsibility to my own existing possibilities. On the other hand, if our basic state of existence were not care, our death would not be felt as threatening, but clearly our mortality concerns us.

The constancy and all-pervasiveness of death reveal its threat to Dasein in the most fundamental aspect of care; this is Dasein's being-ahead-of-itself. In this aforementioned mode of authenticity, marked by anticipatory resoluteness, Dasein is concerned for a projected field of possibilities. Death is constant insofar as it is the only actuality for Dasein's life (Hoffman, pg. 201). In the pure possibility of death, a threat is revealed to Dasein and in so doing, substantiates the powerlessness and the vulnerability of his condition. Dasein understands that he is limited in his freedom of choice. Finally, in this limitation, I believe Heidegger's conception of freedom finds a new significance.

### **VII. Conclusion:**

When speaking of one's Being, the question of how one *is* in a world seems most relevant. Through Heidegger's portrayal of Dasein's mood, I believe he has accurately pointed to the most significant attunement Dasein can find in a world that is initially and fundamentally foreign. We have seen that through Dasein's ability to self actualize and "stand back," almost in observance of his own inauthenticity, a freedom can be found in one's choice to pursue any number of authentic and truly unique possibilities. At the same time, this projected field of possibilities includes one seemingly inescapable death found in anticipation for the "not-yet," which has been shown to comprise Dasein's finitude. In Dasein's moods of guilt and anxiety, Dasein understands and contemplates the free choice of "choosing" oneself through authenticity or slipping again into the "idle talk" of the "they-self." While Heidegger conceptualizes anxiety as something "not-at-home" and "uncanny," one could argue that although this certain freedom of choice is a great burden when compared to that blind security offered by Dostoevsky's cardinal and the ambiguous *Das Man*, it remains the only possibility that offers autonomy.

“Possibility” in the truest sense of the word only seems to hold significance in a finite existence. “Possibility” naturally implies choice. And only through authenticity is Dasein capable of a free choice.

The concepts put forth by Heidegger concerning anxiety and the mood’s role as an attunement, which forces Dasein to confront oneself, have led me to a number of authentic realizations in my life. In those uncanny moments, when life and things seem much less real, we are forced to make a choice concerning any number of possibilities for our existence. In freely choosing a possibility, our lives, as Dasein, are defined and individualized. It does make sense to speak of Dasein’s most fundamental mode of being as inauthentic. But the significance of an inauthentic “mode” necessarily rests on the significance of an authentic mode. Without moods, which fundamentally always return to ideas of the conscience, Dasein would never be “called” from the “idle talk” and ambiguity of the “they.” I for one wouldn’t want to roam forever a world with no consequence. The authentic possibility of death, realized in the attunement of anxiety, gives choices and freedom consequence. By individualizing, anxiety forces Dasein to confront and determine the significance of freedom and choice in a world that would otherwise elicit no discernable response. And thus, through authenticity and a self-realization of Dasein’s finitude, one is capable of freely choosing a project in life. The moods tell us that life does mean something because it won’t last forever.

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