

Heidegger: Death and Resoluteness

Primary Sources:

Sartre, *The Wall*, pp. 1-17 (Handout)

Background:

With these and the next reading, we are concerned with the role of death in leading people to become authentic persons. The leading commentator on this topic is Martin Heidegger. Like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, Heidegger is concerned that in our “average everydayness”, we fall in with “the crowd”, “the public”, or *das Man*, as Heidegger calls it. The natural capacity humans have for doing this Heidegger terms “fallenness”. As fallen beings, individuals easily lose their individuality in everyday activities, letting *das Man* dictate the terms of their existence (or rather, by robbing their existence and replacing it with an essence). Individuals are reduced to mere tools used to fulfill the ends of *das Man*. This is what Heidegger calls an inauthentic mode of individual existence. Death is one of the things *das Man* tries to hide from us (in hospitals, rest homes, etc...), but awareness of our own death makes the authentic mode of existence possible. An authentic person rises out of the crowd, seizes his own existence, and directs it towards the ends it determines.

What compels a person's flight into *das Man* as fallenness? An individual is tempted into the lostness of *das Man* by the tranquility which disburdens him from having to face his ownmost potentiality-for-Being [*i.e., what things I think I can do or become*]. In his inauthentic tranquility, a person compares himself with everyone and thereby drifts along towards an alienation in which his ownmost potentiality-for-Being is hidden from him. The fallen person engages in a downward plunge in which he becomes closed off from his authenticity and possibility. A person, as fallen, is characterized by idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity which involves a leveling down of all possibilities of his Being. In idle talk, *das Man* closes off the hidden meaning and ground of what is talked about. In curiosity, a person is constantly uprooting himself and concerned with the constant possibility of distraction. As ambiguous, *das Man* acts as though it “knows everything”, yet, at bottom, this understanding is superficial in that nothing is genuinely understood. *Das Man* is essentially death-evasive in that it conceals a person as Being-towards-death.

[*The significance of death:*] Death is a way of existing which a human takes over as soon as he exists. “Dying” therefore, stands for the way of Being in which the human being is towards its death. Death, as “Being-towards-the-end”, is defined by Heidegger in terms of the basic state of human existence. Death is “the possibility of the absolute impossibility” of someone. Death reveals itself as that “possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped”. An individual stands fully before himself as assigned to his ownmost potentiality-for-Being as death, the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there. Moreover, a person will die alone – death cannot be shared – and, finally, death cannot be avoided. Anxiety, as state-of-mind, discloses human existence as thrown Being towards its end. Yet, proximally and for the most part, people cover up their Being-towards-death by falling.

How does a person, when lost in *das Man*, “cover up” its Being-towards-death? *Das Man* does not deny death, but, instead, understands death in the “indifferent tranquility” in

which death is seen as an actuality rather than as possibility. *Das Man* covers up what is peculiar in death's certainty: ***that it is possible at any moment***. By assigning definiteness upon death (i.e., "I will die someday"), everyday Being-towards-death evades the indefiniteness of the "when" of the certainty of death. When death is understood authentically, it is understood as the possibility of not having any more possibilities. In anticipation, a person is an authentic Being-towards-death by treating death as a real possibility. When we are closest to our death, it is as far as it will ever be as an actuality. If an individual makes death an actuality, then it is no longer death [***it is just some "actual" event on the calendar, but right next to the 12th of Never***]. An individual cannot understand death in terms of the world as *das Man* – for death is the possibility which radically individualized a person in that death can only be taken up as his own possibility [***das Man does not die – it is not a individual person – hence it cannot help us cope with death***]. Death discloses what an individual cannot have: All the possibilities.

Being-towards-death is essentially anxious. Anxiety is the attunement (or mood) of anticipation, and, being so, becomes a way for someone to understand himself in an authentic disclosure of his existence. Anxiety reveals to a person his lostness in *das Man* in that he is unable to understand himself in terms of the world as concerned solicitude [***anxiety is then important because it makes us aware of our being lost in das Man, showing us that das Man cannot help us with death***]. As lost, an individual can be brought back to himself since, as fallen, a person has neglected to choose itself [***since we have chosen to fall in with das Man, we can choose to leave it***]. Authenticity is a manner of existing. In terms of its possibility, a person is already a potentiality – for-Being-its-self, but he needs to have this attested. This attestation is disclosed as the call of conscience.

Conscience is the call from a person's ownmost self to his *das Man*-self which recalls the individual from his lostness back to his ownmost, authentic self. In the state-of-mind of anxiety, a person is wanting-to-have-a-conscience [***that is, our authentic self (our "conscience") is trying to contact our inauthentic self and warn us of our lostness in das Man***]. The call discourses in the mode of silence [***the conscience really cannot tell us anything, it can only give us an unsettled feeling or anxiety***]. As reticent, a person is disinclined from engaging in the idle talk in which he fails to hear himself. The call tells us nothing. It is the voice which the person, as "lost in the manifold 'world' of its concern", finds as the "alien" voice of the self which has been individualized down to itself in its uncanniness [***again, the call saying nothing, per se, just giving us strange feelings***]. The call of conscience calls out "Guilty!" in recognition of existence as a null basis [***that is to say, we are guilty (understood as responsibility) of their being big "no-s" or "no-s" in our existence***]. There are two ways existence has a null basis: (1) that the person is in the process of "not" being any more possibilities and must, therefore, eliminate choices whenever it makes a choice [***when we choose something or a course of action, their remains those choices we said "no" to or did "not" do***] and (2) a person is revealed as thrown, as delivered over to Being without Being the author of itself [***that is, we have been thrown into the world at birth, and we thus have "no" control over these things and cannot change them***]. Yet, as this null basis, a person is his own basis. Conscience calls us to appropriate ourselves as the kind of Being that we are [***despite these "no-s" we still must seize control of our lives***].

A person is authentic in his **resoluteness**: a “reticent self-projection upon one's ownmost Being-guilty, in which one is ready for anxiety.” In resoluteness, a person is most fully disclosed to the kind of Being that he is. Resoluteness brings a person into solicitous Being with others alongside things as one's ownmost self, not as *da Man*. An individual's authentic self is uncanny, therefore, pursues an individual and threatens *das Man* in which it has become lost. A person, at first, understands itself in terms of its concerned solicitude as *das Man* in which it understands itself as **a thing**. This familiarity, however, covers up an individual's true existence and his primordial understanding of himself as uncanny [*yeah, I know this is tough, but I will explain things in class*].

Questions:

- Is death what confers meaning on life, or what removes all meaning from life?
- Are these two interpretations totally opposed, or fundamentally the same?