REVISIONING HEIDEGGER: EXISTENTIELLI CRS AND THE QUESTION OF THE MEANING OF BEING

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"Before my highest mountain I stand and before my longest wandering; to that end I must first go down deeper than ever I descended—deeper into pain than ever I descended, down into its blackest flood."

—Friedrich Nietzsche, Thus Spoke Zarathustra

The Heideggerian philosophy of Being and Time, properly conceived, is a pilgrimage. It is an attempt to pave a way into the uncharted territory of the fundamental ontological question of what it means to be. The question has thus far remained uncharted not only because it has been neglected and "covered over" by Western thought, but also because its pursuit requires confronting the very reality we spend our lives avoiding: Death. The fundamental ontological question becomes an issue, Heidegger argues, only if we are responsive to the intimation of nothingness disclosed in angst.

What angst reveals is not some abstract conception of nothingness which Dasein may objectively evaluate; rather, it confronts Dasein with its Sein-zum-tode (Being-towards-death), with its own liability to nothingness, with its own possibility of the impossibility of its being. Thus, the primary presumption we have about ourselves—that we are—is undermined by an intimation that reveals that we are not to be. Such intimations are ordinarily not embraced by Dasein, they are repressed, swallowed by our busy concern with everyday affairs. But Being and Time is profoundly under the sway of these intimations and may be read as a beckoning of the reader to overcome the desire to avoid them. The conversion Heidegger beckons us to make is one from inauthentic everydayness, which is most distinctly characterized by its ontological

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1 I specify this because of the well-known and controversial issue of Heidegger's "turning" from the "early" Heidegger of Being and Time to the "late" of his subsequent writings. For an argument on behalf of this distinction, see Rorty, R. Essays on Heidegger and Others. Cambridge: Cambridge Press, 1991; esp. pp. 50-66. For an argument against it, see Barrett, W. Irrational Man; pp. 206-238.

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somnambulism, to the authentic, in which we resolutely grasp ourselves as Being-towards-death. And, as Jerome Miller explains, “because Being and Time as a whole has principally in view the undoing of avoidances, it is not just about dying but an exercise in dying” (Miller, p. 207).

But dying in what sense? What does it mean to die? Can, for example, the reading of a text be a death? Can the loss of a loved one or the collapse of a project to which one has devoted one’s life be a death? Can any of these events prompt, as only death can, an experience of nothingness capable of awakening the fundamental ontological question in such a radical way that it reaches far beyond the mere forming of an interrogative to the very depths of our being?

William Barrett answers this question negatively when he writes, “man can surmount all other heartbreaks, even the death's of those he loves, but his own death puts an end to him” (Barrett, p. 225). Sartre, in a different manner than Barrett, argues that such events cannot be understood as deaths insofar as we never experience death, but we do experience the various “heartbreaks” described. Sartre, in direct opposition to Heidegger’s assertion that death is our “ownmost possibility,” takes the Epicurean stance that death is “really nothing, for so long as we are, death has not come, and when it has come, we are not.” Even Heidegger insists that such experiences are merely existentiell crises and do not open us to the fundamental ontological question. To enforce his claim, Heidegger develops a complex nomenclature to distinguish between ontic/ontological experiences and existentiell/existential self-awareness, devotes section 47 of Being and Time to arguing against the possibility of angst being spawned by the death of an other, and points out that, for

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2 Barrett’s statement seems to me to suffer from an inappropriately “literal” reading of Heidegger. Against such a reading, Jerome Miller asserts that: “a literal reading of Heidegger can mislead one into thinking that an encounter with death occurs only when one faces one’s own physical demise. Being and Time is, among other things, an argument against just such literality; the encounter with death it describes occurs whenever one’s world is shattered, irrespective of the event which triggers it” (TW, n. 212).

3 I’ve for some time now been grappling with why Heidegger drives such an uncompromising wedge between ontologically disclosive experiences and ontic/ existentiell experiences. In an obvious way, he is developing rigid distinctions between the ontic and the ontological because he holds that confusion between the two was precisely what led Western ontology astray. Further, Heidegger is acutely aware of how we often allow the drama of crisis to divert us from the fundamental
Kierkegaard, the focus on existentiell problems greatly impeded his understanding of fundamental ontology (*BT*, p. 494). Heidegger argues that the loss of loved ones, the reading of “world changing” texts and the failure of life-long projects, like any other events within the world, are ontic occurrences—sources of potential existentiell crises. Rather than advancing the pursuit of fundamental ontology, they actually hinder progress by drawing us into the world and diverting us from the “uncanniness” of angst which reveals us as not-at-home within the world.

Thus, the consensus among these thinkers is that existentiell crises do not and cannot raise the fundamental ontological question of what it means to be. Instead of being ontologically disclosive, their powerful impact on our lives evidences how severely we take the question for granted. But are all existentiell crises fundamentally the same? Are they all so easily homogenized within the framework of our everyday existence? Could it be that some of these events disrupt our lives so radically, shatter us so completely, that no aspect of our lives remains untouched and that Being itself is revealed as profoundly foreign and, for the first time, questionable? In short, is it reasonable to affirm that while existentiell crises are generally events that happen within our world, some are so devastating that they can only be adequately discussed as happening to our world? It is my claim, and the burden of this essay, that it is not only a reasonable affirmation, but a necessary one. Those who find this assertion incompatible with the Heideggerian philosophy of *Being and Time*, I will suggest, do not take seriously enough either Heidegger’s phenomenological analysis of what it means to be-in-the-world, or how significantly this “basic state of Dasein” grounds our everyday ontological presuppositions which, in principle, must be shaken if we are going to ask the fundamental ontological question.

In his discussion of the “worldhood” of the world, Heidegger illustrates the pre-positional situation of thrown Dasein by under-
scoring the prepositional condition of our being-in-the-world-with-others. Countering the modern cogito, Heidegger argues that we are not isolated subjects who are aware of our existence through an awareness of the internal activity of our thinking and who must, therefore, make a leap (of faith) over an abyss to reach the external world. Rather, Dasein is "Being-there." We originally find ourselves amidst the world. Arguing against the Cartesian and Kantian conceptions of the world, Heidegger asserts that the "world" is neither res extensa nor is it merely a collection of objects, that is to say, the sum of its parts. The "worldhood" of the world, what makes it a world as such, is that it is more than this sum. The world is an horizon of meaning in terms of which all objects encountered are interpreted (BT, pp. 91-148). Each given object encountered by Dasein is meaningful only in terms of its relation to its place in the totality, and the totality itself is given coherency by this horizon of meaning. But this horizon of meaning is neither given nor arbitrary; it blossoms forth from our involvement in the world. This is no minor distinction. For, as Dasein, who exists primordially as being-in-the-world-with-others, and who is "fallen" amidst the world in average everydayness, we are susceptible to seduction by the "things" we encounter within the world. In fact, any given object within the world has the potential to astonish us and pull us under its sway so completely that it comes to mean the world to us. Falling in love, it seems to me, is an extremely accessible example of this, and its exploration may help draw our inquiry into phenomenological focus.

Falling in love is truly a falling in that it pulls the ground out from under us and shatters the compass which governs the direction of our everyday routines. In a very literal sense, love sends us "head over heels." Fascinated by the beloved, everything else within the world seems to fall away as we draw nearer and nearer to her. Duties once taken so seriously somehow seem far less important; schedules once adhered to without question are suddenly broken with abandon; finances once shrewdly dispersed only on essentials are now spent with spendthrift extravagance on the most impractical of gifts.

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4 See TW, pp. 79-100 for a detailed account of the phenomenological structure of "Worlds." Also, see Habermas, J. The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Cambridge, Ma.: MIT Press, 1987; pp. 131-160 for a provocative discussion of "world" as "the key term of fundamental ontology" (p. 147) and its significance in modern/postmodern discourse and controversy.
Everything around us reveals itself in a new, unfamiliar way. Our world is in flux; nothing appears as it did before; the meaning of every aspect of our life is transforming. And as the beloved settles in as the center of our life, all other objects encountered and all other events engaged once again draw near, but they approach differently. Being that they are objects and events occurring within our world—which is an horizon of meaning, not a collection of things or mere spatial extension—they are now interpreted in terms of this new horizon. And this horizon is determined by the other whom we find at its center.

The beloved becomes the axis of meaning around which the “global” circumference of our circumspective concern spins. And if this is the case, then the blossoming of this horizon of meaning cannot be correctly understood as an ontic occurrence happening within our world; for it is the very foundation of the worldhood of our world. It must be conceded that what is happening is happening to our world. Thus, if to be is to be-in-the-world-with-others and the parameters of this world are governed by the other whom has become its center, then death, which according to Heidegger “mean[s] going-out-of-the-world, and losing one’s being-in-the-world, occurs “not when objects disappear but when [our world’s] fundamental structures of meaning ... are undermined” (BT, p. 281; WS, p. 194). With this understanding of what it means to be-in-the-world, it then seems clear that the founding of our world cannot reasonably be relegated to the purely ontic; it cannot be understood in terms of studying the particular person, object or project which has become the center of our life. Likewise, neither can the deconstruction of our world, via the collapse of its center, be properly understood as simply an existentiell crisis; it cannot be appropriately explained in terms of the absence of an object within the world. These experiences are, rather, the construction and deconstruction of the base on which we rest our understanding of what it means to be.

Ordinarily, in our average everydayness, we find ourselves comfortably situated in a world which has blossomed forth for us and which, since this blossoming, we have come to take for granted. We feel “at home” within this world and easily maneuver throughout it, casually engaging with the objects within our circumspective concern as they lend themselves as ready-to-hand instruments for use in our various projects. Our understanding of Being itself is
grounded in and delimited by our perspective within this world. This becomes painfully evident when our world falls apart.

When we lose the other, who has come to mean the world to us, we lose the axis of meaning in terms of which we understood our life as a whole. Having lost this other, nothing makes sense. For, "here the totality of involvements of the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand discovered within the world is ... of no consequence; it collapses into itself; the world has the character of completely lacking significance" (BT, p. 231). Our daily chores, once done without question in order to keep our world together, now induce nausea with their banal absurdity. Joy now seems possible only for the naive. We feel that despair is the only true glimpse of reality, though it is never black enough to be pure. We are not only depressed but morally offended. The tragedy is experienced not as one event among others, but as an affront to existence as it is meant to be. We contemplate, and may even commit suicide, preferring physical demise over confronting the fact that Being is proving itself to be radically other than what we thought it was.  

But just as we may be shaken from our comfortable use of ready-to-hand materials by a disruption in this use (e.g., the car breaks down), and thereby be forced to understand these objects in an entirely new way (as present-at-hand), we may also be awakened from our ontological somnambulism by a crisis so devastating that it refuses to be understood in terms of our world (BT, pp. 102-107). A crisis of this depth and magnitude cannot be homogenized within the framework of our circumspective concern as one event among others, because it undermines the structures of meaning which enable all possible events to be understood.

Thus, to hold fast that these supposedly existentiell crises are

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5 That suicide is the refusal to throw one's self and one's ontological assumptions into question, rather than the fundamental question itself, refutes Camus' claim that "there is but one truly philosophical problem, and that is suicide." Properly speaking, suicide is not a problem but a supposed solution to which one may come only after "judging whether life is or is not worth living." The Myth of Sisyphus. New York: Vintage Books, 1955; p. 3. The fundamental, or "truly serious," problem, to which suicide purports to be an answer, is the question of the meaning of Being. What I am suggesting is that suicide is not an answer to the question but the refusal to ask it. For a remarkably creative response to Heideggerian ontology, Camus' absurdist position and the futility of suicide, see Levinas, E. Time and The Other. trans. Robert Cohen. Pittsburgh: Duquesne Univ. Press, 1987; p. 50, passim.
necessarily excluded from ontological discourse overlooks the realization that the truly radical of these events happen to and not within our world and, therefore, dismantle the structures which enabled us to understand anything, including Being. This exclusion presupposes that those who experience such a crisis have a conception of the meaning of Being that transcends the parameters of their everyday concern. But, as our phenomenological sketch of the loss-of-our-world indicates, in our average everydayness, the boundaries of our ontological understanding are strictly delimited by that which has become the center of our world. This being the case, only the loss of the center of this horizon of meaning can precipitate the sort of ontological uncertainty characterized by Heideggerian angst. It is precisely this uncertainty that prompts a mortifying questioning which, if not repressed, will undermine our ontological presuppositions and allow the fundamental ontological question of the meaning of Being to be raised anew, in all its dreadfulness. The marginalizing of these supposedly ontic events closes off and restricts from ontological discourse the very breach in our ontological assumptions which, if pursued, will result in a radical rethinking of what it means to be. Rather than plunging us into this breach and compelling us to confront the dreadful questions that crisis raises about our lives, this marginalizing restricts these events to the ontic level. Consequently, against Heidegger's intent, it "helps to keep one's ownmost non-relational possibility-of-being completely concealed" (BT, p. 298).

Still, many will contend that even the most devastating of existentiell crises (e.g., our beloved abandons us, or a tumor is found in our child) are objects of fear, not angst in the face of nothingness. This contention holds that whereas angst is "already 'there' and yet nowhere, ... is so close that it stifles one's breath, and yet it is nowhere," fear is always of "a detrimental entity [or ontic event] within the world which comes from some definite region, ... is bringing itself close ... and yet might stay away" (BT, pp. 231, 230). This argument concludes that if our beloved returned to us, or our child's tumor were found to be benign—that is, if the danger were to "stay away"—we would remain placidly embedded within our world rather than radically uprooted from it, as occurs in angst.

The problem with this objection is threefold. Firstly, it fails to take seriously what it means to be-in-a-world and the central importance of the other, who establishes this world's axis. Secondly, it overlooks
the insight that an experience of nothingness, or the loss-of-our-world, occurs when the fundamental structures of our horizon of meaning are undermined. And lastly, it fails to see that an intimation of the frailty—the liability to nothingness—of what means the world to us transcends the fear of any particular object or event, and opens us up to our “ownmost possibility” insofar as it awakens us to the radical finitude of every person or thing, every possible world. We are intimated of the desolate nothingness pervading everything that could ever mean the world to anyone—even ourselves.

To the degree that these intimations and the questions they raise about Being are repressed, they may be relegated to the domain of fear because we refuse to allow them to touch our ontological presuppositions. Rather than drawing us away from our world, it is precisely this world and our position in it that is secured most adamantly. However, these intimations and the questions they raise need not be repressed. And to the extent that we allow them to rupture our ontological assumptions, we are open to the encounter with nothingness and our ownmost possibility of being able not to be. In short, if such questions are not repressed, we find ourselves radically dislocated, spiraling in the abyss, confronted with the inherent nothingness of what we always assumed was Being itself.

It is only in such a destitute position, I would like to suggest, that the fundamental ontological question of what it means to be can be authentically asked. For only in this barren state do we realize the uncompromising import of the question. And this question, as we have seen, is not only raised by an uncanny experience of angst, which oozes through and draws us away from our comfort in the world when everything is ontically normal and existentially placid. It may also be precipitated by an existentiell crisis which most Heideggerians, and Heidegger himself, would argue tends to draw us away from intimations of death as our ownmost possibility. Their argument is justified, I have claimed, insofar as we ordinarily recoil from these intimations and, quite often, divert ourselves from them with preoccupation in the drama of life’s crises. I have attempted to illustrate, though, that this contention takes for granted that existentiell crises always occur as events within our world. But what is passed over in silence is the possibility that a crisis which fractures the center of our world must be said to happen to it not within it. And because we ordinarily equate Being with the parameters of our world, the
shattering of this world can be understood as no less than the shattering of everything we thought was immune to deconstruction. Only when our sedimented structures of meaning have collapsed can the possibility of a new horizon be glimpsed. Only when everything we ever thought was Being itself is undermined, only when Being reveals itself as radically foreign—as radically beyond any and every understanding we may have had of it—can it become questionable in its very essence and compel the fundamental ontological question to spring to our lips ... and this is only the beginning...

WORKS CITED


