

# Donagan and Heidegger: Two Conflicting Ideas of Authenticity

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While some are inclined to search more deeply than others for the most appropriate way to lead a human life, any person who takes up the question "how should I live?" exhibits a kind of ethical concern. Further along the line of inquiry into how one should live one's life, one may ask, "what is my nature as a human being?" "what is the good in a human life?" or "what, if anything, is required of me as a human being?" To inquire even more deeply and indeed more philosophically, one may ask, "how is it even possible that I can *understand* what we call the ethical?"

A collision of thoughts on these questions is presented in Alan Donagan's *The Theory of Morality*. At the end of Chapter Four, Donagan briefly levels what appears to be a deft and important criticism at what he takes to be existentialist doctrine. Donagan uses R. G. Collingwood's concept of "corrupt consciousness" to describe the kind of mentality of which he believes the existentialist thought of Heidegger and Sartre is an expression. Donagan believes that existentialist doctrine requires only one thing of man: that he see "through the pretense that anything is required of man as such, other than that he act in full awareness of the fact that he is mortal and that nothing is required of him" (*Theory of Morality*, 142). In terms of existentialism, this paper is concerned not at all with Sartre but mainly with Heidegger. With respect to Heidegger, it is not part of the project of his phenomenological explication of human existence to uncover or create a prescription for a way of living a moral life.<sup>1</sup> But this does not necessarily mean that because of his phenomenological findings in which he did not bring forth any ethical requirements

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for living that he does not see that man is free from ethics and free to do whatever he wants. That Heidegger does not bring forth a binding ethical requirement in *Being and Time* does not warrant the criticism that his is an expression of corrupt consciousness. To get these concerns clear, first, one must understand Donagan's conception of human beings as rational creatures, and the kind of morality which follows from valuing rationality as an intrinsic good. Then I will bring out his comments on Heidegger. Once Donagan's criticisms of authenticity are clear, it will be necessary to understand Heidegger's conceptions of conscience, authenticity, and his thoughts on moral requirement or obligation. My goal is to make a good and fair assessment of the legitimacy of Donagan's criticisms of Heidegger's thought.

Although Donagan conceives of human nature as consisting in our moral and intellectual fallibility, he also sees rationality as *the* fundamental part of our nature. Donagan's formulation of what he takes to be traditional Judeo-Christian morality rests on the intrinsic value of rationality.<sup>2</sup> According to Donagan, although traditional Judeo-Christian morality is not necessarily theologically-dependent, it is a system of laws or precepts binding on rational creatures as such, and the content of this morality is ascertainable by human reason. The fundamental principle of traditional Judeo-Christian morality as Donagan eventually formulates it is that one must respect rationality in all rational agents such that "it is impermissible not to respect every human being, oneself or any other, as a rational creature" (Donagan, 66). Donagan establishes this principle by appealing to reason itself: to be rational and to act rationally is to accept this fundamental principle; to reject the fundamental principle is to reject rationality as an end in itself.

Donagan arrives at the fundamental principle in this way: if one respects one's own rationality then it follows that one must respect it in all others since rationality is not a property exclusive to oneself. Donagan argues that this fundamental principle is accessible to all humans in virtue of their rationality; the fundamental principle is, in the Cartesian sense, clear and distinct to rational thought. Since the fundamental principle is accessible to all rational creatures, the principle and its subsequent moral

precepts are binding on all rational creatures because of the intrinsic value of rationality: in virtue of the fact that one values one's own rationality, it follows that one values it in others because rationality is a property held by all rational creatures. Thus, by the fundamental principle of morality, one is morally bound to respect the rationality in all rational creatures, including oneself. In this sense, insofar as one is rational, one is *required* to respect other rational creatures.

Donagan's conception of conscience also plays a role in the way one understands the permissibility or impermissibility of one's own actions and one's own culpability or inculpability as a rational actor. For Donagan, conscience is reason's apprehension of its own principles, or to put it more colloquially, it is the part of one's consciousness which says "According to my principles, as I understand them, I think this is right." Donagan seems to agree with the Thomistic conception of conscience: "the verdicts of conscience derive from a disposition of ordinary human reason,"<sup>3</sup> (Donagan, 134) where conscience has the character of a kind of "court of justice," in the Kantian sense (Heidegger, 293). [Page references in Heidegger are to the standard German edition of *Being and Time*, Ed.] This disposition, in the Thomistic sense, is developed through a kind of moral education, or, in other words, through incorporating the fundamental moral principles into one's consciousness. According to Donagan, since the fundamental principle is clear and distinct to reason, and since conscience gives a kind of verdict for what one ought to do, then it is an appeal to determine how one ought to act. So in all cases it is "culpable to act against conscience" (Donagan, 138). The verdicts from conscience determine the permissibility or impermissibility of an action and whether or not we act according to that verdict determines our culpability.

Donagan brings out a human complication for acting according to conscience when, in light of the thought of Collingwood, he asserts that "the moral conscience may be vitiated by a corrupt consciousness" (Donagan, 141). It is at this point in his book that he criticizes existentialist doctrine as being an expression of a corrupt consciousness. For Donagan, the corrupt consciousness consists in rejecting what Donagan posits as the truth of one's moral requirements as a human being, i.e. regarding the

fundamental principle as not really binding on all rational creatures. According to Donagan, existentialism is an expression of a corrupt consciousness because it alleges that nothing is required of man except that he "see through the pretense" that anything moral is required of him. The corruption of consciousness is a possible psychical phenomenon because according to Donagan, "a man will be aware or not aware of what is presented to his consciousness according as he pays attention to it or not, and that it is in his power to withdraw attention from most of what is presented to him" (Donagan, 139). In Donagan's thought, even in matters of conscience wherein every human knows in some deep part of his or her soul that he or she is morally bound or obligated to respect rationality in all humans and so live according to the fundamental principle, a human can nevertheless control what appears to his or her consciousness. Consequently, one may shirk that which one most deeply knows to be morally required of him or her. What needs to be shown is that Donagan is not justified in criticizing Heideggerian thought in the manner in which he has understood it. Is it actually Heidegger's thought that nothing is required of man other than that he recognize his own mortality?<sup>4</sup> Donagan's criticisms of Heidegger reveal his misunderstandings of Heidegger. Now I will turn to understand Heidegger so that one may better see what Donagan did not see so clearly.

Donagan has a certain idea of what existentialist doctrine consists in and, more specifically, he has his own idea of what authenticity means: existentialist doctrine requires human beings to be authentic which "consists neither more nor less than in seeing through the pretense that anything is required of man as such, other than that he act in full awareness of the fact that he is mortal and that nothing is required of him" (Donagan, 142). It is understandable that one could conceive of existentialism in these terms and make the following criticisms of it: it tends to undermine ethics; it necessarily leads to nihilism; those who espouse existentialist doctrine do so by shirking their inherent moral responsibility as human beings. One may also further conclude justly that these existentialists then share in common a corrupt consciousness. If one grants that Donagan's interpretation of Heidegger's conception of authenticity is accurate and that Heidegger's thought is representative of existentialist doctrine, then

by all means Donagan's criticisms of each are warranted. But has Donagan conceived of authenticity in a way faithful to what Heidegger meant by it? Is Heidegger actually formulating existential doctrine? Does Heidegger actually say that a moral requirement or obligation is a "pretense"? Moreover, does Heidegger ever say that humans are required to see through this pretense or be or do anything at all? What does Heidegger say concerning moral requirements or obligations?

Authenticity is an important and incidentally an easily misunderstood concept in Heidegger's thought since its meaning appears deep and manifold. As Donagan understands it, authenticity represents a way of living in which one understands oneself as being required to do nothing else but see one's selfhood as consisting in absolute freedom,<sup>5</sup> and that man be nothing else but true to himself about his actions and mindful of his own mortality. Donagan would seem to think that in being authentic, one places more value on being true to oneself than on being moral. This understanding of authenticity is very limited and in many ways not even faithful to what Heidegger meant when he used the term. What I take authenticity to mean in the way Heidegger uses the term is as follows: *authenticity is the mode of being to which Dasein is called by conscience out of inauthenticity to a recognition of one's own being in the world which consists in attesting to one's primordial guilt and understanding death as the ultimate possibility of life.* Heidegger uses "authenticity" as a phenomenological description of a certain mode of being; it is not an evaluative term--being authentic entails no necessary moral implications one way or the other. Now, it is understandable that Donagan may criticize the lack of moral implications of authenticity. Donagan may think that the amoral nature of the concept of authenticity implicates it as an expression of a corrupt consciousness; in other words, for Donagan, this means that by being morally neutral, the authentic mode of being would purport to slough off the moral requirements which bind all rational creatures. But Donagan's criticism may be better addressed once we have understood Heidegger's concept of conscience.

In terms of conscience, authenticity is a kind of condition for the possibility of Dasein's understanding a moral injunction. Only on the basis of authenticity does an ethics even become

possible for Dasein. In the preliminary analysis from *Being and Time* of conscience and guilt, Heidegger makes explicit the three negativities of Dasein and these negativities are what constitute the nullity of Dasein. Dasein is a nullity in that Dasein lacks in three ways:

1) With respect to the past, Dasein is fraught with a sense of lacking because Dasein was thrown into the world without having chosen to be put in the world. Heidegger writes, "In the structure of thrownness. . . essentially lies a nullity" where thrownness is a kind of abandonment which Dasein senses in being in the world (285).

2) In the present, Dasein is lacking because Dasein is ordinarily not his or her true authentic self; in fact, for the most part Dasein is *falling* from his or her own authentic self in that Dasein is most often taken in by the "they-self" where the they-self is characterized by being in such a way that one is not individual. One acts in the mode of being nobody in particular.

3) In the future, Dasein also lacks because he/she knows that in time he/she is not to *be* at all. In fact, Dasein knows that he/she is destined to die. "In the structure of...the project essentially lies a nullity" where project is a kind of throwing forth into the future and understanding of what is to come (285).

Because of these negativities, Dasein's being lies in nullity.<sup>6</sup> Because Dasein's being lies in nullity, Dasein is left with this primordial guilt without even explicitly knowing it.<sup>7</sup> What is the connection between guilt and lacking? ". . . [G]uilt is. . . necessarily defined as a lack, when something which ought to be and can be is missing" (283). What Dasein understands that he/she can be and ought to be is authentic.<sup>8</sup> To be authentic, Dasein must come back from the they-self to which Dasein ordinarily falls prey. It is in Dasein's recognition that he/she ordinarily falls from his/her own authentic self to the "they" that he/she is guilty.<sup>9</sup> What Dasein *could be* is authentic but since Dasein is for the most part falling into the inauthenticity of the they-self, insofar as Dasein lacks authenticity, he/she is guilty. Because

Dasein is primordially guilty amidst the three negativities it becomes possible for him/her to be called back in authenticity to recognize his/her nullity. In understanding the call of conscience back to being authentic, Dasein understands him/herself as wanting to have a conscience, in fact "Dasein calls itself to itself" (254). If Dasein did not want to hear a summons of conscience, Dasein could not understand a moral injunction. Let me explain further.

An "analysis of conscience reveals it as a *call*" (269). What is the "call"? The *call* is a call from oneself back to the authentic wherein one recognizes one's being as lacking in the way that I have described above. "Call" is a summons to attest to one's primordial guilt where, as clarified above, Dasein is called back to itself to recognize in authenticity its own guilt. Being able to "*Understand the summons* means: wanting to have a *conscience*" (265). In wanting to have a conscience Dasein wants to come back to authenticity instead of falling prey to the "they-self." How does conscience relate to guilt? Heidegger says, "*Wanting to have a conscience is rather the most primordial existential presupposition for the possibility of becoming factually guilty*" (288). Because Dasein wants to have a conscience which means that Dasein wants to be called back to authenticity, it is then possible for Dasein to be *guilty* about lacking authenticity. This primordial kind of guilt then precedes obligation, including moral obligation.

In another part of *Being and Time*, Heidegger characterizes "authentically understanding the call [to authenticity] as wanting to have a conscience" (272). In a primordial sense, Dasein wants a conscience. If it was not "given" (or factual) that Dasein is primordially guilty (what Heidegger calls *factually* guilty) then Dasein would not be able to hear the call of conscience. If Dasein did not experience this factual, primordial guilt, he/she would not be able to "hear" the call of conscience or any kind of a moral injunction. Being guilty avails the hearing of the call of conscience. Before any particular moral injunction comes, Dasein is factually constituted such that he/she is the kind of being that can hear a moral injunction: Dasein is fundamentally guilty because he/she falls away from his/her particular self to inau-

thenticity. Consequently, one needs to be called back to authenticity. Because Dasein falls away from authenticity, Dasein is guilty and so he/she *wants* to have a conscience.

Whether or not the authentic mode of being permits immorality or morality is not a question that one would ask if one has already understood the character of authenticity the way it is used in its primordial sense. My point is that the authentic mode of being is valuatively neutral, and not at all an existentialist requirement for living, as Donagan would try to conceive of it—authenticity is not morally prescribed by anything or anyone; being authentic is not a command. Properly understood, in an authentic mode of being, Dasein understands the call of conscience and in so doing it recognizes its wanting to be authentic; in hearing the call of conscience, Dasein is summoned to be guilty. As I am about to show in what follows, this guilt precedes indebtedness and obligation; because we are guilty, we can be obligated—in short, because of Dasein's primordial guilt, an ethics becomes possible. Now, one can begin to see a conception of authenticity which is quite different from Donagan's charge that authenticity requires that man see through the pretense of ethical requirements.

So far one may have an idea of how it is that guilt precedes obligation thus making a moral injunction understandable to the being of Dasein. But to grasp better what Heidegger means by this we must make a different attempt to understand guilt as the basis of a sense of indebtedness. Then subsequently it will become somewhat more explicit how on the basis of primordial guilt, obligation and, subsequently, morality become possible. Heidegger says: "*being guilty does not result from an indebtedness, but the other way around: indebtedness is possible only 'on the basis' of a primordial being guilty*" (284). In being primordially guilty, Dasein is in a certain way indebted. This indebtedness expresses itself as needing something. I established that because of Dasein's nullity, he is primordially guilty, and then because he is guilty he wants to hear the call of conscience. In a similar way because of his sense of guilt-based indebtedness, it is possible for Dasein to feel obligated. The fundamental lacking, which is just



factically part of being Dasein, means that there is a primordial guilt prior to being obligated. Heidegger explicates the primordial guilt which is a part of being in the world, and *primordial guilt makes it possible for Dasein to understand a moral injunction*. Because of primordial guilt, one can feel obligated and subsequently one can recognize an "ought." Perhaps this can be understood in the following question: How can a being recognize a moral injunction if it is not at first in some sense open to it? Dasein is open to be obligated because of his primordial guilt; this guilt begets indebtedness and thus makes moral obligation possible.

The authentic mode of being is necessary for the possibility of an ethics for Dasein. Dasein cannot hear the call of conscience amidst the "noise of the manifold ambiguity of everyday 'new' idle talk" of the inauthentic they-self. The call of conscience must call to Dasein in its authenticity so that Dasein may *hear* it. Thus, in this way, authenticity is a condition for hearing a moral injunction; away from the idle chatter of the inauthentic they-self, in silence, Dasein may hear a moral injunction. This is quite different from conceiving of authenticity as a call to see through the pretense of moral obligation.

In ending his criticism of authenticity, Donagan says: "...moral nihilism is but one more of the innumerable devices by which a corrupt consciousness may disguise from a man what he is, and how he is called to live" (Donagan, 142). What is important here in light of the prior discussion is Donagan's idea of how a man is "called to live." For Donagan, man is called to live in such a way that he is morally bound to value rationality as an end in itself, and respect rationality in all rational creatures. But how is it that man can understand what he is "called" to do by the fundamental principle of morality? *Where Donagan begins his theory of morality with a moral injunction in the form of the fundamental principle, Heidegger explicates how it is possible for any moral injunction to be understood at all*. Whence the need to turn to a universalized fundamental principle? Because Dasein already lacks. How is it that the fundamental principle can be understood as a moral injunction? It can be understood because Dasein is already guilty and subsequently indebted and disposed to being obligated. In his phenomenological explication of being in the

world, Heidegger describes how lacking is fundamental to Dasein. And this fundamental lack is what eventually makes an ethics possible.

The absence of a moral requirement binding on all human beings in his phenomenological explication does not mean that authenticity is an expression of a corrupt consciousness. To the contrary, Heidegger explicates authenticity in non-valuative terms for methodological reasons: he is trying to get Dasein clear on itself, so that it may be free from the distractions which characterize being lost in the inauthentic "they-self" so that in its own authentic mode of being it can recognize its own primordial guilt and hear the call of conscience, and thereby be open to understanding a moral injunction. Also important to note is that it is nowhere written in *Being and Time* that in being authentic anything moral or otherwise is required of a human being, not even "seeing through the pretense that anything is required of man" (Donagan, 142). Far from saying that moral requirements are pretenses, in an authentic mode of being Dasein can hear a moral injunction in a most primordial way. Because of conscience and authenticity, Dasein can be obligated and recognize a moral injunction. Finally, it is possible for Dasein to understand the meaning of the ethical, and Dasein may begin to discern how a life ought to be lived.<sup>10</sup>

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> An example of an ethical prescription of this sort is seen most clearly in Kant's conception of the categorical imperative in which one's own reason commands one to act morally.

<sup>2</sup> Conceived in this way, rationality consists in understanding the structures of means and ends and of being able to recognize and be dissatisfied with contradictions.

<sup>3</sup> *Synderesis* is the faculty from which verdicts of conscience proceed (Donagan, 132).

<sup>4</sup> I wish Donagan would have given a footnote indicating where in Heidegger's literature he found this claim that Heidegger says that man is only required to see through all pretenses that anything is required of man at all.

<sup>5</sup> I know this is plainly Sartre's conception but Donagan makes no distinction or specification of it one way or another. In fact, Donagan periously and erroneously conflates the thought of Sartre and Heidegger. The truth is that Heidegger's thought is original and unique and conse-

quently different from Sartre's. While Sartre defined his thought as existentialist, Heidegger said that neither his thought nor he himself were existentialist.

<sup>6</sup> The being of Dasein which is "care" is "itself in its essence thoroughly permeated with nullity" (285).

<sup>7</sup> "Being guilty is more primordial than any *knowing* about it" (286).

<sup>8</sup> Dasein understands authenticity as what he/she ought to be where the word "ought" is not used in any moral or normative sense. Dasein is just constituted such that he is primordially guilty because he characteristically falls short of authenticity by falling into the inauthentic *they*-self.

<sup>9</sup> "The calling back in which conscience calls forth gives Dasein to understand that Dasein itself—as the null ground of its null project, standing in the possibility of its being—must bring itself back to itself from its lostness in the *they*, and this means that it is guilty" (287).

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