
Heidegger's World and Dasein's Death: The Significance of Being-in-a-world in Relation to Death

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In *Being and Time*, Heidegger's existential analysis of death describes the structure and the ways in which Dasein can comport itself to its own death. In his essay *Heidegger on Death*, Paul Edwards objects to this existential-structure offering eight critiques. I however, will only take on the first two sections. Though his arguments are complex, Edwards' objections are often based on two basic conclusions. Either what Heidegger says is false or his arguments are platitudes and fail to say anything new or insightful. Edwards clearly says if he finds an argument or assertion to be a mere platitude it would make the argument pointless and invalid in a loosely logical way. In the first section, Edwards attacks the idea that all people die alone. In the second, Edwards objects to Heidegger's belief that death is untransferable. I believe Edwards has misinterpreted Heidegger because his criticism fails to address the significance of Dasein's *being-in-a-world* and *being-with-others*. Furthermore, he places his focus on the wrong part of Heidegger's analysis.

In section 1 Edwards takes issue with the idea that Heidegger and Heideggerians claim that *all* people die alone. Though Heidegger never says this explicitly, Edwards argues that Heidegger's 'non-relational' aspect of death implies this as a fact. Heidegger defines death as: "*Dasein's ownmost possibility – non-*

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relational, certain and as such indefinite, not to be outstripped."ⁱ Edwards cannot accept the idea that all people die alone, "simply as a consequence of their mortality," but that means he must clearly define 'dying alone'. He outlines three possible ways someone could die alone and, based on these definitions, concludes Heidegger is wrong. A person can be said to 'die alone': 1) "If no other human being is with him when he dies," 2) "if there are no other human beings near him with whom he has any strong emotional bonds," 3) If he is the only one dying as opposed to "dying together."ⁱⁱ Based on these definitions, it cannot be said that *all* people die alone. In the first scenario, many people in the world die surrounded by people who are taking care of them. In the second, many people die with their loved ones at their side. In the third definition, sometimes people die, tragically, in a group. Therefore the idea that *all* people 'die alone' is clearly false

What has happened, says Edwards, is Heidegger has redefined dying alone "so as to be logically equivalent to 'dying.'"ⁱⁱⁱ The way in which "dying alone," is written in Heideggerian philosophy is grammatically equivalent to "dying in poverty," or "dying in bed." "In both these cases," says Edwards, "we clearly have a synthetic relation: 'dying in poverty' means more than 'dying' and the same is true of 'dying in bed'" and "dying alone."^{vi} The problem with Heidegger's assertions is that if dying alone means just "dying," then it boils down to saying that all people die someday, making his arguments platitudinous, i.e. failing to be insightful or be a discovery of anything new. If, on the other hand, 'dying alone' means more than just dying, in the same way that dying in poverty and dying in bed mean more than 'dying', then it is clearly false based on the three ways Edwards defines 'dying alone'. 'Dying alone,' *does* mean more than 'dying', therefore Heidegger's idea that *all* people die alone is false.

Edwards' critique misinterprets Heidegger's notion of death as a non-relational possibility. The non-relational aspect of death doesn't refer to Edwards' definitions of 'dying alone', but to two significant aspects of Dasein's being. *Being-in-a-world* and *being-*

with-others are so significant to Dasein's existence that they must be included in a discussion on death. Thus Heidegger carries these ideas from the first division throughout *Being and Time*. *Being-in-a-world* must be carried into the discussion of death in order to juxtapose death as an existential possibility of not being-in-a-world.

Death is a possibility-of-Being which Dasein itself has to take over in every case. With death, Dasein stands before itself in its ownmost potentiality-for-being. This is a possibility in which the issue is nothing less than Dasein's Being-in-the-world. Its death is the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-there. If Dasein stands before itself as this possibility, it has been *fully* assigned to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being. When it stands before itself in this way, all its relations to any other Dasein have been undone. This ownmost non-relational possibility is at the same time the utter most one.^v

Edwards, however, fails to include a discussion of how Dasein's being-in-a-world relates to its death, i.e. it's no-longer-being-in-a-world. Dasein's being is grounded in being with other people, e.g. friends, family, co-workers. In being-with-others-in-a-world Dasein is forced to have a relation towards others: a spatial relation, an emotional relation etc. "Being with Others belongs to the Being of Daseins, which is an issue for Dasein in its very Being. Thus as Being-with, Dasein 'is' essentially for the sake of Others."^{vi} This is unavoidable since Dasein is thrown into a world. Thrownness requires Dasein to take attitude towards the world and other Daseins.

For example, if two friends have a fight and decide never speak to one other again they have not ended their relationship. All they have done is changed the way in which they relate to one another. Their relationship has gone from love to hate, or from a desire to be with one another to the desire to not be around each other at all. Their spatial separation and emotional disdain for one another does not constitute a severing of relations, merely an alteration. So long as one of them is living they

will relate to one another, even if they never think about each other ever again. This is hard to see but consider that their lives would have been fundamentally different if they had remained friends, or if they had ended their friendship at a different time in their lives. Because Dasein is thrown into a world and is fundamentally for-the-sake-of-others we cannot avoid relating to the other in some way. Our relationships with others affect who we are, what we choose to care about and how we choose to act. So long as we are alive we exist alongside-others with some kind of attitude towards them and this comes with being in a world.

In death, *Dasein can no longer comport itself towards other Daseins in any way*, because Dasein goes from being-in-a-world to not-being-in-a-world. Since being in a world requires Dasein to take up an attitude towards the world, not-being-in-a-world would quite naturally entail the opposite. Hence death is a *non-relational* being. Non-relational means an inability to comport oneself to the world and to others in *any way*. In other words, Death is the real end of Dasein's relation to others and the world. In death Dasein cannot hate, love, talk to, not-talk to, shun, or embrace other Daseins. Other Heideggerians do choose to interpret this as 'dying alone' but it is not the type of loneliness that Edwards has in mind, it is much more dense than that. Edwards' first definition of 'dying alone,' comes the closest to what Heidegger really means, however, even if there is no one around at the end of a person's life, that person can still relate to the world and all the people he has ever known. What 'dying alone,' really means is dying into loneliness, going from being-in-a-world to no-being-in-a-world. Since this happens to everyone, *all* Daseins be said to die alone. Because Edwards has left out the worldliness of Dasein and its essential being-with-others he misses the unique sense in which Dasein non-relational being can be construed as dying alone.

Edwards would probably maintain his objection saying that this non-relational 'state' is only present after Dasein dies. When Dasein is 'dying' however, he or she can still be with other people. Heidegger would be forced to concede this point. However, Edwards would still be failing to fully appreciate the idea of no-

longer-being-in-a-world and how fundamental that is to Dasein, something that he continually fails to take into account when attacking Heidegger

Section 2 of Edward's critique takes on the "untransferability" of death and once again fails to give credit to Dasein's worldliness. Furthermore, his critiques are based on examples that misunderstand the meaning of death as untransferable. The idea that Dasein's death is untransferable or in other words, one Dasein cannot stand in for another Dasein's death in order to gain an ontological understanding of death, comes from section 47 of *Being and Time*. Edwards' critique of this idea doesn't fully grasp what Heidegger attempting to do. The main goal of section 47 is to establish that we cannot come to an ontological understanding of death in observing the death of others. But above all, the suggestion that the dying of Others is a substitute theme for the ontological analysis of Dasein's totality and the settling of its account, rests on a presupposition which demonstrably fails altogether to recognize Dasein's kind of being. This is what one presupposes when one is of the opinion that any Dasein may be substituted for another at random, so that what cannot be experienced in one's own Dasein is accessible in that of a stranger.^{vii}

Edwards is guilty of making this presupposition because he fails to acknowledge the significance of Dasein's 'worldliness'. Though Edwards agrees with the idea that we cannot get an ontological sense of death through the death of Others, Edwards argues that the untransferability of death only asserts that no one can keep another person from dying – in other words, a mere platitude. Furthermore, his failure to recognize the importance of death being the end of Dasein's being-in-a-world and being-with-others leads him to the assertion that one can substitute another in death like a teacher's assistant standing in for the professor.

Edwards uses the example of lecturing to argue that death is *transferable*. He imagines that a situation arises where he is unable to deliver a lecture, in responses he sends his assistant to deliver the lecture he had planned on giving. He says his assis-

tant's ability to stand in for him is exactly like one Dasein being able to represent another Dasein in death.

Now, I wish to insist that Blau's substitution for me in the matter of dying is, in all relevant respects, *exactly*, parallel to his substituting for me at New School for Humanistic Studies. He substituted at the New School by lecturing and discussing the topic that I would have discussed if I had gone in. He produced certain effects upon the students analogous to those I would have produced.^{viii}

If he sends his assistant to substitute him at an execution, he will experience the same feelings, that Edwards would feel and he will suffer the way that Edwards would have suffered. Perhaps Edwards is correct about the scenario in which his assistant must lecture, but he is wrong in saying that this scenario is analogous to his death. In Edwards' example, his assistant remains in the world after he has finished the lecture. He can come back to the office and share his experience with Edwards: who asked questions, how comfortable or uncomfortable he felt delivering the lecture etc. — his relation to other Daseins persists. However, Edwards does not take the time to flesh out a scenario that would explain how substitute teaching is analogous to death and that takes Dasein's being-in-a-world into account. If he did, he would have found that the two scenarios look completely different.

After Blau is killed he cannot come back to the office and tell Edwards what he felt. This may sound trite or obvious but only if someone doesn't fully appreciate Dasein's being as being-in-a-world. The result of Edward's example would look ridiculous if one could actually transfer one's death to another Dasein and remain consistent with the idea that death takes Dasein out of being-in-a-world. If Edwards were to die, naturally his family would mourn him. In this case, according to Edwards, he has transferred his death to his assistant and therefore his assistant would die Edwards' death. Therefore, after Blau dies Edwards' family should begin to mourn as if Edwards had actually died. Edwards would probably burst in on the funeral and wonder why everyone was ignoring him and weeping Blau's body while

calling him 'Paul'. This is obviously a ridiculous scenario because Edwards *is* still in the world and can still comport himself to the world and others. He can still talk to his family, he can love them or hate them, stand alongside them, and continue to change or maintain a relationship with them. This would be impossible in death.

Again Edwards could retort with, "all that you've shown is that I am not dead," which is true but once again a failure to see the point. What I've shown is how being-in-a-world is essential to Dasein and that death takes away this essential being. In doing so I've demonstrated the significance of being-in-a-world as related to death. Edwards' objection fails because it doesn't take into account the way in which Dasein is being-in-the-world and being-with-others, and how in death this being ends for the deceased. Heidegger's arguments are not trite because he is asserting more than everybody dies, he is showing how death individualizes us based on our relationships in the world and the way we are being-in-a-world.

Edwards' conclusions have clearly failed to recognize a very important aspect of Dasein. But why is it that he has left out a discussion of Being-in-a-world and its relation to death? I wonder if his failure to talk about being-in-a-world comes from a conscious decision not to discuss how one can be authentic in relation to one's own death.

I have also not undertaken an analysis of the slippery concept of "authenticity" and I have not attempted an evaluation of the contention by various Heideggerians that enormous benefits would accrue to the human race if people started thinking about death "authentically."^{ix}

This choice, in my opinion, is a mistake because it fails to address the reason Heidegger delves into an analysis of death. Edwards often objects to Heidegger's arguments only because, as he says, they fail to make a significant discovery or bring something new to an understanding of death. However, if one were criticizing Einstein because general relativity failed to bring something new to an understanding of the speed of light, they would look

ridiculous because they are choosing to criticize the wrong part of the discussion. Edwards critique fails to look at the part of Heidegger's analysis that is more interesting and far more unclear, inauthentic and authentic being-towards-death.

In talking about inauthentic and authentic being-towards-death one must also take into account Dasein's being-in-a-world because both these modes of being-towards-death require one to think about Dasein acting in its world with others. Leaving out this part of Heidegger's analysis would result in a failure to see how significant being-in-a-world is for Dasein. The closest Edwards comes to a discussion of authenticity and death is in section 3 where he critiques our being-towards-death. His argument is that Heidegger is once again making a platitudinous statement, i.e. everyone dies and humans know they are going to die. Furthermore he interprets Heidegger as saying "all human beings are dying all the time." Heidegger does say that Dasein is always dying, "Factically, Dasein is dying as long as it exists, but proximally and for the most part, it does so by way of *falling*."^x But this is only to say that Dasein moves closer towards its death with every passing moment. Furthermore, because Dasein is always ahead-of-itself in terms of directing itself towards future projects and goals, meaning that it also runs towards its own death, since its death is in the future. However, this does not touch upon what Heidegger truly means by being-towards death.

In the same way Dasein must take up an attitude towards the world and others, it must take up an attitude towards its death. "In Being-towards-death, Dasein comports itself towards itself as a distinctive potentiality-for-being."^{xi} This amounts to much more than saying Dasein is aware of its own mortality. Being-towards-death means that Dasein's actions disclose its attitude towards its own death. This can either be authentic or inauthentic. In an inauthentic being-towards-death one flees death, and turns it into something in the world that is to be feared. Authentic being-towards-death, on the other hand is an anxious anticipation of death. Being-towards-death goes beyond just knowing you are going to die; it is a way of acting out your knowing.

For example, someone could react to their own death in the following inauthentic ways. If they shut themselves up in their home unwilling to go out and engage with others in the world, they have taken up the fearful attitude towards death, wanting to remain safe and runaway from dangerous situations. On the other hand, if someone constantly goes out to bars and engages in self-destructive behavior, they have also revealed that they have turned death into a fearful entity because they want to experience all the frivolity of the world and not think about their death, i.e. ignore it by remaining externally active and never being intellectually critical.

Heidegger strays away from any moral arguments, making his assertions about authentic being-towards-death unclear. Edwards could have attacked Heidegger's notion of authentically being-towards-death on the grounds that Heidegger is unclear as to what "anticipating," one's own death means. In section 53 Heidegger says:

*Anticipation reveals to Dasein its lostness in the they-self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concerned solicitude, but of being itself, rather, in an impassioned **freedom towards death**—a freedom which has been released from illusions of the "they", and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious. ^{xii}*

However, Heidegger doesn't specify what exactly this would look like. One could argue that this is a serious problem since 'anticipation' has a similar connotation as expecting one's death, which would be an inauthentic way of being-towards-death. Heidegger says, "Expecting is not just occasional looking-away from the possible to its possible actualization, but is essentially a *waiting for that actualization*"^{xiii} In expecting, one is always wondering when they will die and how, and in this way of being one conceptualizes death as an actuality not as a possibility, ultimately mischaracterizing their own death. Anticipation itself, sounds like a synonym of 'expecting' and because Heidegger only gives an abstract definition of anticipation, it's hard to fully understand what exactly Heidegger means. Since Heidegger's analysis

is all for the sake of describing how we act towards our own death, and he cannot give one concrete example of what authentic being-towards-death would look like, his argument is suspicious at best.

It's possible however, to say that anticipating one's own death manifests differently for every Dasein. Authentic being-towards-death sounds like a call for people to take responsibility for who they want to be and what they want to do and in each case that being will be unique. In an 'anticipating' all our actions are done in relation to the fact that we are finite mortals. Therefore we must keep death in front of us in making a decision as to who we want to be and what we want to do with the limited time we have. This requires a moral statement if one were to understand how one could be 'excited' about the possibility of death. Authentic being-towards-death requires one to act in such a way that takes Dasein's mortality into account. Knowing that you will die calls one to do something that is meaningful for oneself, regardless of whether that behavior belongs to a pre-developed set of values endorsed by a group in society. What meaningful act Dasein chooses to make its possibility will differ from one Dasein to another.

Paul Edwards' objections in section 1 and 2 fail because he does not address Dasein's being-in-a-world. In section 1 he takes death's non-relational aspect to mean all Dasein's die alone. However his definitions do not capture the aloneness that is meant in 'non-relational'. Dasein exists in a world and thereby always has a relation to the world and to others in it. In dying those relations are severed because Dasein loses its being-in-a-world. Because Dasein loses its relation to the world one *can* say all Dasein die alone. In section 2 Edwards says that the 'untransferability' of death simply means that everyone dies, making the assertion a mere platitude. Once again Edwards fails to recognize Dasein's being-in-a-world. Because every Dasein has its own world it can only lose its specific relationships to Other Daseins and *its* world. To take away someone's death is to take away his or her being-in-a-world which is impossible even if someone is executed in place of another. The Dasein who lives

still maintains his relationships with Other Daseins because he maintains his being-in-a-world.

Ultimately Edwards' critique fails because he chooses to focus his attention on the Existential structure of death rather than on the more significant aspect of Heidegger's analysis of authentic being-towards-death. Edwards does critique being-towards-death but again misinterprets what being-towards-death really means. Just like how Dasein has a world that to which it must relate, it must relate to its own death in some way, and this can be done either authentically or inauthentically. Because Heidegger doesn't make a moral statement concerning authentic versus inauthentic being-towards-death his analysis feels incomplete which would have allowed Edwards to give stronger objections. Death inevitably calls for a moral statement because it begs the question what should I do with the time I am given. If one wants to be authentic then the answer can only come from Dasein itself.

Notes

- i. Heidegger, Martin, John Macquarrie, and Edward Robinson. *Being and Time*. New York: HarperPerennial/Modern Thought, 2008. 303
- ii. Edwards, Paul. *Heidegger on Death: A Critical Evaluation*. Ed. Eugene Freeman. La Salle, IL: Hegeler Institute, 1979. 7-8
- iii. *Ibid*, 9
- iv. *Ibid*
- v. Heidegger, 294
- vi. *Ibid*, 160
- vii. *Ibid*, 283
- viii. Edwards, 15
- ix. *Ibid*, 3
- x. Heidegger, 295
- xi. *Ibid*, 296
- xii. *Ibid*, 311
- xiii. *Ibid*, 306

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- Edwards, Paul. *Heidegger on Death: A Critical Evaluation*. Ed. Eugene Freeman. La Salle, IL: Hegeler Institute, 1979.
- Heidegger, Martin, John Macquarrie, and Edward Robinson. *Being and Time*. New York: HarperPerennial/Modern Thought, 2008.