

# A Life Well Lived is a Life Completed: A Heideggerian Account of a Good Life

**Rosalie Looijaard**

University of Toronto

## I. Introduction

Heidegger determines the average everydayness of his concept of Dasein as follows: “entangled-disclosed, thrown-projecting being in the world, which is concerned with its ownmost potentiality in its being together with the “world” and being-with-with others” (175). In simpler terms, this means that as human beings, we are primarily concerned with living up to our own potentiality given the possibilities accessible to us, and we seek to do so in solidarity with the world and the people around us. Heidegger thus describes the necessity for us to reach our true potentiality to live a good life, but does not give us a clear account of how to achieve this.

In this paper I will deduce a practical account of a life well lived in which we achieve our ownmost potentiality from Heidegger’s ontology. I argue that under a Heideggerian ontological view, a life well lived is a life completed, in which there is authentic being-towards-death marked by peace with the prospect of death. Authentic being-towards-death can be achieved through the sufficient fulfillment of one’s ownmost aspirations. These aspirations can be fulfilled by taking an active and resolute stance within one’s existential possibilities, thus giving us an account of a practical and attainable theory of a life well lived.

First, I will define and interpret some crucial Heideggerian terms I will be using throughout the paper. Then, I will lay out the relevant parts of Heidegger’s ontology, which will form the foundation for my argument. In particular, I will begin by explaining where Dasein initially finds itself in the world, and how it relates to itself and others. I will then explain how this state of Dasein shows us what Dasein needs to act on to live well. Then, I will outline Dasein’s relationship with death and anxiety, and how peace with the prospect of death is necessary for completion. Then, I will elaborate

on what I mean by fulfilling aspirations, as well as how it relates to authenticity. Heidegger's notion of authenticity will be central to my argument, precisely because Heidegger intended for authenticity to be value-neutral, and previous notions of a "good life" have often been entangled in moral judgements, such as Aristotle's concept of human flourishing as Eudaimonia, which requires being a virtuous person. Instead, authenticity and completion are value-neutral. Next, I will give my account of completion and how it can be attained. Lastly, I will briefly consider plausible objections to my argument as well as some practical implications of my argument for the field of ethics.

## II. Defining Terms

Heidegger's philosophy relies inherently on his use of the German language, and as such English interpretations of his word choices vary. I will thus explain why I opt to use the original German for some of his terms in lieu of English translations, and the particular interpretations of these terms I will adhere to. Before I briefly do this, I will give the relevant interpretation of Dasein; a core concept of this paper and Heidegger's work and one that has been left almost universally untranslated to maintain its meaning.

There exists significant debate as to how the entity that Dasein designates should be understood, but for my argument the most important component of Dasein is the description it gives us of human persons and their activity in the world. Thus, I will use Haugeland's interpretation of Dasein (as reiterated by Rouse) as my working definition: Dasein is a way of living that embodies an understanding of being (Wrathall 206). The components that are most relevant to my argument are as follows: Dasein's essence lies in its existence, meaning that its own existence is of crucial concern to it; it is inherent to Dasein to always be concerned with its own being (Heidegger 41, 185). Furthermore, Dasein always defines and understands itself in terms of the possibilities that it is (Heidegger, 44).

As stated, I will utilize some of Heidegger's original German terms in cases where there exist significant differences between scholars on what terms to use. Most notably are *Befindlichkeit* and *das Man*. *Befindlichkeit*, typically translated as state of mind, affectedness, or disposedness, is the term Heidegger

uses to describe where Dasein finds itself in the world. It is closely related to the concept of being-in-the-world, which denotes Dasein's existence as inherently and inseparably being part of the world and its environment. *Befindlichkeit* will be explored more in-depth in section VI, and since there is a lack of scholarly consensus regarding its most accurate translation, I will opt to use the original German throughout this paper.

Das Man has been translated as "the They," "the anyone" and "the One." Dreyfus gives a compelling argument for using "the One," as Heidegger's original concept was not meant to only denote "the other," but rather social norms: "one pays one's taxes (Dreyfus 158). On the other hand, "the They" is often used to emphasize the external societal pressures and norms that are being put on Dasein and Dasein's potential to become lost in "the They." Both translations are criticized for failing to capture the full meaning of das Man, which Heidegger intended to denote an abstract conceptualization of humanity's social reality that Dasein itself is also part of. Throughout this paper, I will thus opt to use the original German das Man. There will be a handful of other Heideggerian terms throughout the paper, but their definitions are less complex and will thus be defined when relevant.

### III. Being-in-the-World: *Befindlichkeit* and das Man

I will now give the relevant aspects of Heidegger's being-in-the-world and its relationship with das Man to illustrate the initial state of Dasein from which it must act out its life. According to Heidegger, the most basic level of the world in which we carry out our lives is fundamentally a meaning-filled context, and everything in it exists in reciprocal interdependence to us (Guignon & Pereboom 192-195). Each individual person's life is made their own by where they find themselves, their *Befindlichkeit*. We are thrown into a pre-existing environment that is filled with possibilities. In *Befindlichkeit*, Dasein finds itself confronted with its current, future, and past possibilities; it reveals what situation we were thrown into (Heidegger 238). I argue that we as human beings receive our sufficient conditions for completion from this nexus of possibilities. This nexus of possibilities is anxiety inducing. Dreyfus explains this sort of anxiety in *Befindlichkeit* as the idea that "social action now appears as a game which there is no point in playing since it has no intrinsic meaning" (180). The "meaning of life" might

almost seem like an illusionary conspiracy made up by society if Dasein loses itself in das Man. In order to feel complete, Dasein needs to authentically project itself towards some sort of social action or role that Dasein cares about and thus experiences as meaningful. If Dasein's social actions and roles seem meaningless and pointless, Dasein will not feel complete. Dasein's anxiety can thus be dissipated by searching within the existential - practically attainable - possibilities to find those towards which Dasein is authentically projected.

With this basic ontology of Dasein's initial existence, we can begin to examine what Dasein needs to find fulfillment before we identify a path to achieve said fulfillment. I am using "fulfillment" here as a measure for completion, as the average person will often describe having lived a life well lived as having lived a fulfilling life. As stated earlier, one of the core characteristics of Dasein is that it cares about its own being. Dasein is also characterized by the need to do and undertake practical actions. I thus deduce that Dasein needs to engage in activity projected towards something it cares about to feel fulfilled. I will henceforth refer to what Dasein cares about and seeks to engage in projected activity towards as aspirations, for the sake of brevity.

To understand how Dasein can find its aspirations among the existential possibilities, we first need to take a look at Heidegger's concept of the self. Heidegger's definition of the self (or selfhood) is different from many traditional conceptions of the self (e.g. as psychological identity). Wrathall states that for Heidegger, the self is a disclosive function that an individual acts out (66). This particular individual has "specific projects, dispositions, skills, and practices" that determine how the world shows up for them and how they act in response: we are thus continuously influenced by das Man, and rarely our ownmost self (Wrathall 66). For most people, it will thus be difficult to find one's self within society. Dasein's self as a particular is often dispersed, and sometimes lost, in das Man (Heidegger 258). Dasein typically primarily understands itself in terms of norms that were decided by das Man (Wrathall 643). Das Man maintains itself in its everydayness by remaining in the ontic, factual realm, and only concerns itself with beings as objects, rather than ways of beings, staying within preconceived boundaries of social norms. Regardless, it is impossible to exist completely separate from das Man due to the nature of Dasein

as being-in-the-world. It is thus crucial that Dasein finds itself within das Man. Dasein will derive a significant amount of its roles and interpretations of what it means to be human from das Man (Dreyfus 158), but to truly feel complete, I argue that Dasein must find among these roles the role that is grounded in authenticity and the self, rather than only in das Man. This requires that Dasein is shown to itself in its possible authenticity while it is lost in das Man (Heidegger 258). As stated earlier, the self is a disclosive function, and if the self is a disclosive function, then it is pivotal in disclosing aspirations among the existential possibilities.

#### IV. Being-towards-Death and Anxiety

If this disclosure lies in the self, but the self is also inseparably tied up in das Man, then we must show the self can nonetheless disclose its ownmost aspirations. The key to this lies in anxiety. As stated in the previous section, anxiety arises when we are confronted by the vast amount of possibilities. In Heidegger's analysis of anxiety, we learn that anxiety reminds us that our time is limited for our lives are finite, and we are ultimately responsible for our actions and thus in control of our own potentiality-for-being. Anxiety makes us aware that we have this responsibility to shape our own life before we are faced with death. Anxiety confronts Dasein with its freedom for authenticity of its being as a possibility. In doing so, anxiety shows Dasein its conditions for authenticity: it makes one aware of how one is (Heidegger 182). The conditions of authenticity will be explored further in a later section.

We must thus first carefully lay out the role of death before we can get into the functional use of anxiety. Heidegger states that "death signifies a peculiar possibility-of-Being in which the very Being of one's own Dasein is an issue. In dying, it is shown that mineness and existence are ontologically constitutive for death" (Heidegger 247). In other words, Death is the moment in which our existence becomes finalized, and in this finalization, our own being and our own life becomes an issue for ourselves. We are always aware of the impending nature of death. We are always being-toward-death, and this reveals to us our own potentiality-for-being. In death, Dasein is manifested as everything it ever was, is, and ever will be. Heidegger gives us a succinct definition of the ontological concept of death to keep in mind as we wrestle with its role: "as the end of Dasein, death

is the ownmost, non relational, certain, and, as such indefinite and insuperable possibility of Dasein" (248). Death is inevitable and yet unique to every individual. It sums up Dasein's life in its totality, and as such death is Dasein's ownmost possibility.

It is important to note that by death, Heidegger does not simply mean physical and biological death. Thomson points out Heidegger's distinction between "demise" and "death" by explaining that demise is the ordinary physical death and complete annihilation of experience that we typically think of, and that death is the existential phenomenon that implicitly shapes our experiences with demise (Wrathall 218). It is death as this existential phenomenon that gives us this anxiety, for it marks our eventual inability to change anything about our existence.

The mindset of a person who has not had a life well lived but faces death is laid out by the character Inez in Jean-Paul Sartre's play *No Exit*: "One always dies too soon- or too late. And yet one's whole life is complete at that moment, with a line drawn neatly under it, ready for the summing up. You are- your life, and nothing else" (Sartre 24) Whether peace with the prospect of death is present or not, one recognizes that life is complete when death occurs, in the sense that it has ended and nothing can be added to it. It is completed in the sense that it has been finalized: concluded and exhausted. However, completion as I use the term throughout this paper entails a certain satisfaction and peace. Completion is something that can be achieved before death, that entails that there is nothing left one aspires to be or have.

To further understand this, and to play into Heidegger's emphasis on everydayness, we can examine an analogy. There is a more everyday manifestation of anxiety similar to that which we have towards death. Take the dynamic between wake and sleep. At the end of a day well lived, it is often easy to go to sleep. At the end of a day not well lived, the prospect of ending the day by sleeping is often filled with anxiety. You might consider the day wasted, and feel anxious that you did not do or be everything you aspired to do or be with the time allotted to you in the day. This is akin to the anxiety we feel in being-towards-death. The key difference between this everyday manifestation of anxiety and its total manifestation is final, barring concepts of reincarnation, there is no more



time that comes afterwards that matters for the totality of one's life. The anxiety surrounding death is thus much greater than that surrounding sleep, but they are of a similar kind. Anxiety also entails feelings of unsettledness that mark that there is something missing or disturbed, detaching Dasein from its own being-in-the-world, which is integral to its very being. The perseverance of this anxiety until the point of death is an obstacle to Dasein's ability to live a life completed. However, anxiety is first necessary to identify what matters most to Dasein. Anxiety causes a breakdown that reveals to Dasein its own nature and that of the world around it. It thus reveals that Dasein has no control over what already is, thereby revealing that Dasein is dependent on a pre-existing public environment that it had no hand in producing (Dreyfus 177). Nonetheless, it must find in this pre-existing environment those existential possibilities that it can make its own. By accepting anxiety, Dasein can respond to the situation it finds itself in.

I argue that by accepting and responding to this anxiety in being-towards-death that Heidegger describes, Dasein will be able to project itself to what matters to it; its aspirations. When Dasein does this, anxiety will diminish and completion in the absence of unfilled aspirations and thus peace with the prospect of death can be achieved. This is also what differentiates peace with the prospect of death from a death wish or suicidal idealization. When life feels complete, we are filled with a sense of peace and tranquility. When we wish to die or have suicidal ideations, we are instead filled with anxiety, hopelessness, or emptiness. The anxiety that has been present throughout life is still there in suicidal idealization, but diminishes in peace with the prospect of death. To find this peace then, we must examine what fulfills Dasein. Inherent to Dasein is that it cares about its own being and will project itself towards what matters to it. Without something that matters to it and that it can act towards, Dasein is reduced to a passive, antithetical version of itself.

## V. Authenticity and Aspirations

In section II I noted that Dasein seeks to undertake projected activity towards that which it cares about: that what Dasein cares about through projected activity I refer to as aspirations. I also briefly noted in section IV that anxiety reveals to us our aspirations, and I will now give a more complete account of what constitutes our authentic aspirations and how we

go about acting to fulfill them. As human beings, we throw ourselves into social roles that reflect what matters to us: "In throwing myself into the life of a scholar or a brewer, I respond to what matters, what is significant or important, in this way of life. Dasein's being matters to it, and so it is called by its being to its being" (Wrathall 206, 138). Our aspirations are thus often tied to social roles and projects we seek to fulfill because we care about them in our being. It is important to differentiate these aspirations from social roles or projects we seek to fulfill for some external reward: such as social expectations rooted in *das Man*, or financial prospect. Through this differentiation, we can also identify what our ownmost authentic aspirations are. Our authentic aspirations are those that do not come solely from *das Man*.

Before I give an account of authentic aspirations, I will briefly interpret Heidegger's notion of authenticity itself more closely. It is important to note that Heidegger avoided making explicit value judgments and intended for his notion of authenticity to be largely amoral. As such, it is difficult to reconcile authenticity as being essential to a good life, a concept often inherently associated with happiness, virtuosity, and other value judgments. However, I aim to avoid this problem by supposing authenticity as a prerequisite for completion, a value-neutral concept. It is then merely the case that a life well lived constitutes a life completed, in the sense of contentedness, rather than moral-adjacent judgments such as a good or bad life.

Authenticity is best explained in contrast to inauthenticity. To be authentic, Dasein must avoid facticity. Facticity is the aspect of inauthentic Dasein which suggests that what Dasein already is, is an established fact. For example, if one is employed in a certain career, then that is an established fact for them, marking a sort of unalterable state. Dasein is thus inauthentic when it is completely swallowed up and determined by *das Man*. To become authentic entails taking responsibility for one's own existence and not falling into *das Man*. This requires adjusting one's comportment in correspondence to authenticity. This does not necessarily mean changing careers (although it can), but can mean changing how one comports oneself towards one's career. Authenticity entails seizing the roles one has in society and making them one's own in the Heideggerian sense of *Eigentlichkeit* - owning oneself.



Authentic aspirations then are the existential possibilities that Dasein, through anxiety, identifies as being its ownmost. Dasein needs to take a resolute stance towards its existential possibilities and project itself into its ability-to-be. Calling upon Heidegger's emphasis on doing, aspirations are then fulfilled by engaging in activity. To illustrate my account of authentic aspirations, take the example of a person who aspires to become a painter. They want to paint for painting's sake. They do not want to paint simply because society tells them painting is valuable, or will make them rich (these can be secondary motivations, but should not be the primary reasons for the aspiration). The painter encountered art in the vast array of existential possibilities and identified this, through anxiety as noted in section IV, as one of their ownmost authentic aspirations. This aspiration is then fulfilled by doing and taking responsibility for their actions. They need to actively and physically handle the paint and the brush. They can only fulfill their aspiration to be a painter by picking up the tools and engaging in the actions of a painter. By seizing upon this particular possibility that they have found and engaged within their *Befindlichkeit*, they can achieve fulfillment and move towards completion. Completion is thus marked by a fulfillment of aspirations and peace with the prospect of death. However, fulfilling all of one's aspirations can be near impossible. For completion, one only needs to fulfill a sufficient amount of existentially possible aspirations, meaning that they fulfill those aspirations most important and most accessible to them. Other aspirations must be distanced from. If you aspire to become a painter, but you are severely allergic to all forms of paint, you must distance yourself from this aspiration and identify an existentially possible aspiration to fulfill instead - this may be a different form of artistry, or a different kind of aspiration altogether.

It is also not the case that one must only work towards their authentic aspirations. Oftentimes, engaging in other aspirations and obligations is necessary to function within society. What matters is that alongside these extrinsic actions, one acts towards the fulfillment of their own aspirations. Otherwise, Dasein will simply become stuck in *das Man*. This is reflected in how we often characterize working a dead-end job simply to survive as an unfulfilling existence. The need to make money and stay afloat in society is rarely part of our authentic aspirations. Regardless, this is necessary for us to survive in the

current state of our society, but it does not ultimately determine completion and will thus not ensure we feel we have lived our lives well. By focusing too much on the necessary means we need to survive, we fall deeper into *das Man* and cloud our perception of our own aspirations. The painter might never be able to fully fulfill his aspiration to paint if he becomes stuck in the notion that he needs to make money to survive and focuses solely on this by, for example, taking an office job. However, the painter might feel a lot more comfortable in this office job making enough money to survive even if it means not fulfilling their own aspirations. As Heidegger points out, *das Man* is comforting, and functioning in it and with it is necessary for our survival, but remaining solely in *das Man* will not diminish our anxiety towards death. The painter will still feel a much more unsettling existential anxiety in the office job, preventing him from finding peace with the prospect of death. Thus, our need to survive in *das Man* and our need to fulfill our own aspirations need to be balanced. However, our anxieties towards the former will seem almost frivolous in the face of death, and thus ultimately will not matter nearly as much for our ability to feel peace with the prospect of death.

In order to attain a life completed, one thus needs to (a) disclose, take responsibility for, and act towards one's ownmost authentic aspirations, and (b) distance oneself and let go of all other and not existentially possible aspirations. When this is done, a lack of unfulfilled aspirations is what evokes the feeling of peace with the prospect of death and marks a life well lived. It will not seem like death has come too soon, or too late. Instead, the person who experienced a life well lived is in a sense ready to face death.

## VI. Completion

I have unpacked the relevant parts of Heidegger's ontology and its implications, and have given my account of aspirations. I will now give a brief overview of my account of the necessary conditions for completion and my account completion itself. What constitutes completion will be different for each individual, as each person's life is made their own through the terms of their *Befindlichkeit* as outlined in section III. However, we can nonetheless outline a generalized path towards completion. The necessary condition for completion is that *Dasein* feels peace with the prospect of death. This is

achieved by the sufficient fulfillment of aspirations. Dasein finds itself as being-in-the-world, on the edge of falling into Das Man (or alternatively, already having become lost in Das Man). Regardless of its initial position, Dasein will find itself surrounded by possibilities and will experience existential anxiety. It must project itself towards the existential possibilities, and Dasein's anxiety will reveal to it what it cares most about. In revealing that which Dasein cares most about, its ownmost aspirations will be disclosed as well, as these aspirations will be rooted in that which Dasein cares about. Once these aspirations are disclosed, Dasein can take a resolute stance towards them. This resolution entails making authentic choices that seek to fulfill Dasein's aspirations. In fulfilling its ownmost aspirations, Dasein will achieve a sense of completion, and anxiety will dissipate. This completion of aspirations and absence of anxiety will lead to a feeling of peace with the prospect of death. Once Dasein is content and at peace with its own manifestation of totality as death, Dasein is authentically being-towards-death. Under Heidegger's ontology, a practical characterization of a life well lived can thus be summed up as a life completed, in which death simply marks the totality of an ownmost authentic existence, made up of the fulfillment of aspirations through resolutely making sufficient authentic choices. When Dasein feels a serene peace with the prospect of death, this is thus a consequence that its ownmost aspirations have been fulfilled, and its existence has reached totality - completion.

## VII. Objections and Responses

One might object that a value-neutral conception of a life well lived is inherently flawed, as within a society living well also entails ethical conduct towards others and thus being an ethically "good" person. This is also implied by Heidegger's statement that Dasein's ownmost potentiality is also determined in its being-with with others (175). To this I respond that my account does not rule out that one should also strive to be a moral person in regards to other's potentiality-for-being. As such, the conditions I outline for a life completed are necessary, rather than sufficient. Someone may fulfill all of their aspirations for their own potentiality-for-being, but still feel anxiety towards death, due to moral faults they made throughout their life. In fact, Heidegger's ontology similarly implies that we have certain ethical obligations in respecting other's potentiality-for-being, but outlining these is outside of

the scope of this paper.

Another plausible objection is that aspirations may be volatile, or someone may have bad aspirations. To the latter, a similar response can once again be given that Heidegger's ontology implies that we should respect others' potentiality-for-being. To the former, aspirations are to an extent contingent, in that they depend on the environment in which one finds themselves. Dasein's aspirations will always be dependent on the available existential possibilities and the way that Dasein is socialized. I also account for the fact that someone can lose the notion that their life is complete by uncovering a new possibility, and thus the prospect of life ending too late rears its head, and anxiety returns. Regardless, by virtue of being ownmost to Dasein, authentic aspirations will not be volatile to the point that they change so often that they inhibit Dasein from finding sufficient fulfillment. Dasein need not fulfill every single aspiration it ever had and ever will have, but simply enough to attain peace with the prospect of death, and thus a sense of completion.

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