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Heidegger and the Ontological Status of Nothing

In this paper, I examine Heidegger's conception of the vulnerable self by discussing Dasein as primarily guilty and constituted by a fundamental lack. My argument is that such lack and guilt condition the very possibility of Dasein as a being who interprets both itself and the Being of beings. Moreover, such interpretations of both Dasein and Being can never be wholly mastered and thus these interpretations preserve and showcase, within Dasein, a kind of primordial impotency and further highlight the necessity of nothing's positive "ontological status."

Heidegger addresses the nothing of the self's vulnerability, in *Being and Time*, in his discussion of the ontological meaning of Dasein's *being-guilty* as an existential or ontological foundation to ontic being-in-the-world. That is, in this particular section of *Being and Time*, Heidegger's concern is to uncover the root structure of guilt that lies at the core of Dasein that would then condition the very possibility of any ontic or particular experience or conception of guilt. It is here that Heidegger stumbles upon a unique definition of Dasein in its vulnerability, namely as a kind of groundless ground, an abyss (*Ab-grund*), what is often translated as a "null basis of a nullity" (*nichtige Grundsein der Nichtigkeit*), which is perhaps better rendered simply as an "abyss of Nothingness" or even paraphrased a "a ground that is itself a void."

In considering Dasein as a *nichtige Grundsein der Nichtigkeit*, Heidegger simply means that Dasein is constituted by a fundamental lack, due not only to its thrownness (that is, that Dasein finds itself already

in a world of meaning and of possibilities that are not its own), but also its own self-project. Dasein is a *thrown-project*, meaning it finds itself *already* in a world from which it must take over possibilities as possible ways for it to be. In other words, Dasein, as the being whose Being is an “issue” for it, such that its Being is “to be” and thus constituted by care, Dasein is a Being that interprets itself; yet, the condition for the possibility of such self-interpretation is that Dasein must be constituted by a lack.

In perhaps one of the opaqueness passages of *Being and Time* Heidegger details precisely how such an existential lack or “not” (*Nicht*) constitutes Dasein and conditions its own freedom for self-interpretation:

In being a ground – that is, in existing as thrown – Dasein constantly lags behind its possibilities. It is never existent *before* its ground, but only *from* and *as this ground*. Thus “Being-a-ground” means *never* to have power over one’s ownmost Being from the ground up. This *not* [Nicht] belongs to the existential meaning of “thrownness.” It itself, being a ground, *is* a Nullity or void [Nichtigkeit] of itself. Nullity does not signify anything like not-Being-present-at-hand or not subsisting; what one has in view here is rather a “not” which is constitutive for this *Being* of Dasein – its thrownness. The character of this “not” as a “not” may be defined existentially: in being its *self* Dasein is *as a self*, the being that has been thrown. It has been *released* from its ground, *not through* itself but *to* itself, so as to be *as this ground*. Dasein is not itself the ground of its Being, inasmuch as this ground first arises from its own projection; rather, as being a self, it is the being of its ground. This ground is never anything but the ground for a being whose Being has to take over its being a ground.¹

Here Heidegger is concerned with Dasein’s thrownness, or the *thrown* part of the *thrown-project* that is Dasein. As we have already noted, Dasein’s thrownness is simply that Dasein finds itself in a world that already has been interpreted, that already has meaning, and that Dasein must take over these interpretations and meanings as possibilities for itself. But this means that Dasein effectively always “lags behind” itself and its possibilities and thus is not the “ground” of itself, but rather must become its own ground. Here ground can be understood as basis, but also as cause or reason. Dasein, as thrown, is not the basis for itself; that is, it is not the cause of itself, but rather is caused and determined by others, by others’ possibilities. Dasein nevertheless must take over its Being a ground; that is, it must determine itself despite its already having been determined by another. I take Sartre’s reading of Heidegger here to be perhaps most accurate: though we did not cause our own existence or

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1979), 284–284. Translation mine, however I have largely relied on Macquarrie and Robinson’s translation (see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, transl. John Macquarrie & Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 330–331).

ask for it, we are indeed responsible for it. Moreover, though we did not choose our specific existential context (e.g. this race, gender, sex, class, etc.), we are responsible for it. Yet, even though we are responsible for it, we are *not* it. That is, we are not our cause or ground, but we nevertheless must *own* it. However, there is a sense in which we can never own that which we are required to own, since we can “never have power over our Being from the ground up.” It is in this sense then that Dasein’s thrownness *ipso facto* makes it continually guilty (in the existential-ontological sense), for Dasein finds itself thrown, that is, lost in *das Man*, and thus is not itself, and nevertheless is responsible for itself. Dasein is therefore guilty.

However, Dasein as guilty due to its thrownness and therefore its lostness in *das Man* amounts to only one half of the equation of Dasein as a thrown-project. What of projection? That too, for Heidegger, is constituted by a lack. Heidegger writes:

Dasein is its ground existently – that is, in such a manner that it understands itself in terms of possibilities, and, as so understanding itself, is that being which has been thrown. But this implies that in having a potentiality-for-being it always stands in one possibility or another: it constantly is *not* other possibilities, and it has waived these in its existentiell projection. Not only is the projection, as one that has been thrown determined by the nullity of being a ground; as *projection* it is itself essentially null [*nichtig*] [...] what we have here [...] is something existentially constitutive for the structure of the Being of projection. [This] nullity [...] belongs to Dasein’s being-free for its existentiell possibilities. Freedom however *is* only in the choice of one possibility – that is, in tolerating one’s not having chosen the others and one’s not being able to choose them.

In the structure of thrownness, as in that of projection, there lies essentially a nullity. This nullity is the ground for the possibility of *inauthentic* Dasein in its falling; and as falling, every inauthentic Dasein factually is. *Care itself, in its very essence, is permeated with nullity through and through.* Thus “care” – Dasein’s Being – means, as thrown projection, being the null ground of a nullity. This means that Dasein as such is guilty [...].²

Dasein, in projecting (that is, in projecting itself ahead to and upon future possibilities), is thus also null (*nichtig*), meaning, in one sense at least, that Dasein’s process of self-interpretation involves the nullifying of possibilities, namely possibilities it has decided against. Dasein cannot thus radically self-interpret according to every possibility, but must rather, in choosing possibilities, negate other possibilities. Thus, the activity of projection is itself a nullification and Dasein is again guilty; this time guilty of *not* having chosen every possibility.

² Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 285.

The very process of freedom then, for Heidegger, is itself a kind of negation or nihilation, which in turn is conditioned by Dasein's being a negation or nihilating ground itself. This is what Heidegger means then when he writes that "care itself in its very essence is permeated with nullity through and through." Care is thus a *nichtige Grundsein der Nichtigkeit*, a non-ground of a void or nothingness. Yet it is precisely here that Dasein's being guilty goes beyond the simple negation of possibilities in its projections, and the simple inability to own its own ground, in that what conditions these very aspects of Dasein as a thrown-project is its Being constituted by a lack, a void.

In order for Dasein to care, in order for it to have its Being "to be" as an issue, Dasein must be *voided*; that is, Dasein must be something different from the world of nature, something that can differentiate itself from the natural world and negate it. Not only that, Dasein must be able to differentiate (or negate) itself from itself, in order to project possible selves into and upon the future. Dasein thus, as thrown, both *is* and *is not* its thrownness; it *is* insofar as it must become (some) of those very possibilities into which it has been thrown; it *is not* insofar as it can never actually *be* these very possibilities since it is always guilty and thus always has to reconstitute itself through projecting itself ahead, or as Simon Critchley calls it, "throwing of its thrownness."³ In sum then a two-fold nihilation (qua distancing or differing) must occur in the essence of Dasein: (1) a distancing and differing of Dasein from the causal series of nature, and (2) a distancing and differing of Dasein from itself. Thus, in order to care about our own Being, in order to be free, we must be constituted by a lack; we must be permeated with nothing, as this nothing is what enables the space to open up not only between ourselves and the world, but also between and within ourselves.

Additionally, it is this space of nothing or lack within Dasein that enables genuine thought itself, for in order to think a being in its Being (essence), Dasein must pass beyond or transcend that being to its Being(ness); such transcendence, as a kind of *meta-ta-phusika*, is made possible only by the nothing that nihilates between a being and its Being, between a thing and its intelligibility. Thus, the upshot of Heidegger's famous lecture *What is Metaphysics?* concludes that meta-physics is, in fact, Dasein, as the being that passes (*meta*) beyond beings to their Being. Furthermore, value or meaning itself arises in the same fashion, in and through the process of transcending beings to their Being, which in turn enables a world (as a context of meaning) to *world* (or open up). Thus, this nihilistic lack constitutive of Dasein enables the meta-physical nature of Dasein as the being who transcends beings to their Being, and

³ Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless* (London: Verso Press, 2012), 193.

thus as the being that can *think* Being itself, and in turn allow meaning to unfold.

However, a problem appears to arise: the very thing that makes possible Dasein's freedom – its lack, its guilt, its nullity – at the same time paralyzes Dasein and renders it impotent. That is, Dasein's lack as *not-ness* means that Dasein is continually burdened by the necessity of freedom. Dasein is always transcending itself and projecting itself into and onto future possibilities and thus can never fully *be* any of these possible ways to be. Dasein can never gain power over its own Being "from the ground up," meaning that it can never wholly take over its own thrownness. In Sartrean terms, nothing and something can never come together; rather, for Sartre, we are always in bad faith, meaning that the very condition for my own self-interpretation – my being constituted by a nothing – immediately undermines itself. In other words, I can never fill the lack that I "am" by becoming any one possibility I take up; rather I must continually "throw off" my thrownness and project myself ahead of myself. My nothing can never actually *be*. Thus, the nothing that conditions the very possibility for self-interpretation also annuls it, since it *is* the activity of annulling itself. I am then in a sense *enslaved* to my own freedom.

Thus, for Heidegger there remains always something *inauthentic* about the *authentic* in that I always lag behind my possibilities and am thrown back upon my thrownness even after throwing it off in a resolute projection (e.g. in resolutely anticipating my death). In other words, even when I own myself I am nevertheless still owned. I am therefore continually and ever guilty; what I can hope for is only an owning of this guilt, an owning of myself as lack; in short, I can own my own impotency, my own vulnerability. Heidegger's existential analysis here amounts to the fundamental insight of Martin Luther (whom Heidegger read quite carefully),⁴ namely that my ownmost guilt, impotency, and vulnerability are the necessary conditions for faith. Since Heidegger's analysis never extends to the ontic or particular, but rather merely to the ontological, Heidegger has no way of resolving the apparent nihilism of Dasein's radical impotency in some concrete projection. However, such resolution was never Heidegger's task in *Being and Time*, which was simply to uncover the meaning of Being itself. There is nevertheless an insight into the Being of beings here in Heidegger's analysis of Dasein's guilt, one that is taken up subsequently by Heidegger in his later lectures (particularly in *What is Metaphysics?* and *The Essence of Ground*), namely that the lack or nihilistic character in the Being of Dasein extends outward to the Being of beings itself. That is, Being, for Heidegger, is shot through with

⁴ See Duane Armitage, *Heidegger's Pauline and Lutheran Roots* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2016).

nihilation and lack. Conversely, nihilation and lack must in some sense *be*. Nothing, that which *is not* – difference itself even – must *be*, otherwise there would be only Being and absolute sameness (as Parmenides noted). However, with absolute sameness, and thus no difference (i.e. ability to make distinctions in Being and thus between beings), meaning itself would collapse, for meaning is conditioned upon difference and negation (as Spinoza says “every determination is a negation”). In other words, the condition for the possibility of meaning is that nothing must have real ontological status. Nothing must in some sense *be*, that is, it must exist; thus, Heidegger later writes, “Nothing does not remain the indeterminate opposite of beings, but reveals itself as belonging to the Being of beings.”⁵

Vulnerability and guilt, in the ontological sense, reside then not in the human being only, but in Being itself; that is to say, the fundamental lack that renders Dasein capable of interpreting itself also occurs in Being itself and renders Being able to be interpreted. Being becomes meaningful precisely because it is at the same time nothing, or, at least, identifiable in the sense of being shot through with nothing. It seems then that interpretation itself, whether of Dasein or of Being itself, is conditioned by vulnerability and lack.

Returning to Dasein, does Heidegger really mean that it is ultimately impossible to self-interpret? Is Dasein really completely impotent? I don’t think so. Rather, perhaps Heidegger means simply that it is impossible for Dasein to ever fully settle into an interpretation of itself, since it is continually thrown back into its thrownness; yet it also remains impossible for Dasein to fully settle into its thrownness, since it is constituted by a lack that weighs upon it in the existential experience of guilt.

Heidegger’s upshot then is the fragility of Dasein, which renders Dasein unable to wholly master itself, unable to wholly and fully interpret itself – and thus unable to wholly master and interpret Being. This guilt or humility of Dasein (and of Being) is precisely what is missed by reductionist metaphysics and scientism that seem to reduce the meaning of the human being and of Being to one meaning. Indeed, Heidegger’s entire project, in its attempt to think the meaning of Being, in a very real sense then, is nothing more than an attempt to consider the guilt, fragility, and vulnerability of both the human being and Being itself; and such an attempt requires an owning of the fundamental lack that resides in the human being and in Being itself – as it is only out of this fundamental lack that *is* in both the human being and Being, that meaning itself comes to be. In short, Dasein is guilty precisely because Being is “guilty,” in the sense that the latter, like the former, is constituted by a lack, by nothing

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1993), 108.

itself, such that Being itself *is* nothing. Nothing therefore must have Being; nothing must have real, actual “ontological status.”

Finally, I think Heidegger’s insights here regarding our fundamental powerlessness point to the necessity of faith – in the Lutheran and Kierkegaardian sense – as the only plausible way of somehow grappling with ourselves as a thrown-project. Otherwise, existential readings of Heidegger, particularly Sartre’s and Camus’s, appear to be accurate in their characterization of the human self as not only vulnerably, but ultimately Sisyphean in its attempts to exist and find meaning. It is possible that Heidegger’s ontological analysis of guilt in *Being and Time* is an attempt, as Rudolf Bultmann noted, to describe the human condition pre-faith in terms of faith’s conditions for possibility. In sum then, without faith, the human being is a “double zero” (another Critchley term) hung between the two nothings of thrownness and projection, wholly impotent to finally interpret itself and find meaning.⁶

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Summary

This paper examines Heidegger’s thoughts on vulnerability by focusing on his conception of Dasein as fundamentally guilty and constituted by a lack. The argument put forth is that this guilt and lack condition the possibility of Dasein as a being who interprets both itself and Being. Such interpretations showcase Dasein as a being of primordial impotency and highlight the necessity of nothing, and nothing’s positive “ontological status,” as constitutive of such impotency, guilt, and lack.

Keywords: Heidegger, Being, Nothing, Vulnerability, Guilt

⁶ Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless*, 191.