

Historical Finitude

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The late chapter on temporality and historicity (*Geschichtlichkeit*) is one of the most obscure parts of *Being and Time*. Most commentators pass over it in silence, while several others dismiss it as confused, or worse. The challenge is to make sense of it at all. In this chapter I claim that Heidegger's distinctive notion of the *existential situation*, understood as a modality of death, is the exegetical key. A general situation (*Lage*) is one situation among others within a historical form of life. An existential situation (*Situation*) is a situation in which the viability of a historical form of life as a whole is at stake – a situation, that is, in which the very possibility of a general situation hangs in the balance. This reading places the finitude of death within a historical frame, hence my title.

The paper falls into six sections. In section 1, I introduce Heidegger's project in *Being and Time* (hereafter 'SZ'). In section 2, I sketch the central idea of ontological understanding. In section 3, I discuss the sense in which this understanding is structured by the finitude of death, and proceed to elaborate this finitude by outlining Heidegger's appropriation Kant's conception of the finite intellect. This all sets the stage for the contrast between general situations and existential situations (sections 4 and 5), which I then apply to Heidegger's theorization of 'the basic constitution of historicity' (section 74 of SZ). I conclude by briefly suggesting how my interpretation addresses two natural questions about finitude that often arise for readers working through SZ.

1. *The project*

What is Heidegger's project in SZ? The project is to reawaken the question of the sense (*Sinn*) of being. Being is the intelligibility of what is; there can be little doubt that this is the notion of being that interests Heidegger:

“And if we are inquiring about the sense of being, our investigation...asks about being itself insofar as being enters into the intelligibility of Dasein” (152).¹

‘Entity’ (*Seiend*) is Heidegger's term of art for that which is: “everything we talk about, everything we have in view, everything towards which we comport ourselves in any way” (6-7). ‘Being’ (*Sein*) is “that which determines entities as entities, that on the basis of which entities are already understood (*verstanden*)” (6). While the sense of being is an ancient and venerable philosophical problem, the problem has fallen dormant, *as a problem*, and thus needs reawakening. We are thus being invited by Heidegger to consider with fresh eyes, as one commentator has recently well put it, “the truly remarkable and singular fact that sense is made of anything, and to try and make sense of that.”²

The question, then, asks about what it takes to understand entities *as* entities, that is, what it takes to make sense of them in terms of their being. Heidegger's obsession with approaching this task “concretely” is rich and many-sided. The demand, in the first instance, is to focus squarely on the one for whom things *actually* make sense, namely Dasein. Dasein's distinctive feature is to understand being (*Seinsverständnis*), which is a capacity or an ability. This, however, is not one ability among others that Dasein might happen peculiarly to have. For unlike being able to tie one's shoes or being able to speak (say) English, understanding being is an ability that is definitive of Dasein as the kind of entity that it is: “Dasein is ontically distinctive in that it *is* ontological” (12). Hence Heidegger's characterization of this

¹ This passage may be taken to represent the link between being and intelligibility in terms of Heidegger's topic of inquiry, insinuating the possibility of some other notion of being, a different topic, not linked to intelligibility. Heidegger forecloses this possibility at SZ 183.

² A.W. Moore, *The Evolution of Modern Metaphysics: Making Sense of Things* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 472.

fundamental ability not as an ability one “has” but as an “ability-to-be.” Understanding being – the ability to make sense of things as such – is the mark of the distinctively human.³

Heidegger calls his account an “existential analytic of Dasein,” an exercise self-consciously offered after Kant’s transcendental analytic in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. ‘Dasein’ is a successor term for what Kant and the German idealists tended to call ‘the subject.’ Using ‘Dasein,’ Heidegger wagers, guards against various myths and *aporia* wrapped up with some traditional uses of the term ‘subjectivity,’ and so is less risky. One conspicuous piece of baggage is an interiorized conception of the human being as a self-contained “cabinet of consciousness” cut off from any worldly existence. Heidegger is himself happy, at least at times, to characterize his orienting theme as “the ontology of the subjectivity of the subject.” However, he usually adds the qualifier, “in the well understood sense.”⁴

2. *Ontological understanding*

If to be Dasein is to be “in the business” of making sense of entities, what precisely is this business? To make sense of an entity, in the relevant sense, is to understand its being. To

³ Heidegger does not consider the empirical question of whether any non-human beings are possessed of an understanding of being. Nothing he says, if I understand him, precludes that possibility. If they are out there, they fall under Heidegger’s account. So in the sense that interests Heidegger, such beings would belong within the scope of the extension (whatever it is) of the ‘we’ in the sentence “we are ourselves the entities to be analyzed” (41). This sense of being “one of us” must be a more expansive and open-ended sense of *the distinctively human* than the taxonomical sense employed in empirical biology as specimens of *Homo sapiens*. Does Heidegger therefore adopt an intensionalist procedure for specifying the meaning of ‘Dasein’? That would be compatible with there being no existing Dasein among the entities that there are, which is incompatible with the ontical priority of the question of being. See SZ 13 on the “roots of the existential analytic” in the personal self-reflection of an existing entity. Heidegger’s inquiry does not fit well into either an intensionalist or an extensionalist approach to ‘Dasein’. See Wayne Martin’s searching discussion in his chapter of this volume, “The Semantics of ‘Dasein’ and the Modality of *Being and Time*.”

⁴ For example, Heidegger (not Bultmann, it is thought) characterizes his project shortly after the publication of SZ, as follows: “The basis of this problematic is developed by starting from the “subject” properly understood as “human Dasein,” such that, with the radicalizing of this approach, the true motives of German Idealism come into their own.” See the entry “Heidegger, Martin; Lexicon article attributed to Bultmann” in Theodore Kisiel and Thomas Sheehan (eds.), *Becoming Heidegger: On the Trail of His Early Occasional Writings, 1910-1927* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 329. I am grateful to George Pattison for calling my attention to this passage.

understand the being of an entity (including oneself) is to understand the ways that entity can be – and no less, cannot be. Heidegger accordingly characterizes the understanding at issue as “the projection of entities onto their possibilities.”⁵ Lizards and babies inhabit their respective environments. An adult human being, by contrast, understands its world. What is the difference that makes the difference? An adult’s understanding of the world is a matter of appreciating what is possible and not possible with the actual entities towards which it comports. More precisely, the human adult comports towards entities *as* actual or real in virtue of understanding the possibilities in terms of which those entities are what and how they are.

We can approach Heidegger’s conception of ontological understanding by reminding ourselves that we, unlike lizards and babies, hold things to standards. Consider the following three brief examples to illustrate the phenomenon. To be a hammer is to be able, when well wielded, to drive in nails (among other things). The field of possibilities for being a hammer has developed through history by human agents engaging in the practice of carpentry. If one picks up a hammer to discover that it is made of butter, one has been taken in. It is a gimmick, or maybe a work of art. The “hammer” is flouting the functional standards that make hammers what they are, and so *could not* be a real hammer. Those who understand carpentry, and so make sense of hammers *as* hammers, appreciate this fake hammer for what it is, and would insist on its unreality if challenged. To be a real or actual hammer, after all, is to accord with certain ontological, in this case, functional, standards.

To be a rook is to move and capture in the appropriate ways. Those ways are specified by the rules of the game of chess, which lay out the field of possibilities for being, among other pieces, a rook. For example, if a rook is moved diagonally, like a bishop, something is awry. The “rook” in this case, thanks to a wayward chess player, is flouting the standards that make

⁵ See esp. sections 31 and 32 of SZ, especially the sentence, “In the projecting of the understanding, entities are disclosed in their possibility” (151).

a rook what it is, and so, at least at this moment, *could not* truly be a rook.⁶ Those who understand chess, and so make sense of rooks *as* rooks, would rule this move out, and then no doubt proceed to try and coax the piece back into the field of play. To be a rook, after all, is to accord with ontological standards, in this case the rules of the game.

To be an ordinary perceptible thing is to behave in more or less stable and predictable ways. The “laws” of ordinary medium-sized things lay out the field of possibilities for being such things. For example, if one were to see an object, say a rock, that pops in and out of existence depending on whether one is looking at it, something would be awry, and would be recognized as such by any competent perceiver. The “rock” would be flouting the standards of substantial independence and persistence that hold for objects, and so *could not* be any such thing. Those who understand objects, and so make sense of them as such, would find themselves compelled in this situation to look again, and might very well worry that they have been drugged. For to be an ordinary perceptible thing is to accord with certain ontological standards.

Heidegger is suggesting then, with great plausibility, that entities must “live up” to standards in order to count as being. Such standards are accordingly ontological standards, standards concerning what it is for entities *to be* as opposed *not* to be. Ontological standards are, one might say, the “groundrules” of the real. To comport towards actual entities oriented by the standards that frame their possibilities – an orientation without which, Heidegger claims, there would be no comportment towards entities *as* entities – is to understand being. To understand being is thus to be able to appreciate, and look after, the distinction between the being and non-being of the entities. The possession of such understanding constitutes the human ability-to-be.

⁶ If, by chance, the player is using a rook figurine to serve the bishop role, then the piece is a bishop, not a rook.

The totality of what is does not make up a homogenous structure. The totality of what is, rather, divides into regions of being. Three ontological regions figure prominently in SZ: the being of equipment, the being of substance (“mere things”) and the being of Dasein. Heidegger also discusses the regionalization of being from a lower altitude, in terms of “subject-matters” (*Sachgebiete*). Several examples are offered: “history, nature, space, life, Dasein, language, and the like” (9). These regions or subject matters are constituted in terms of basic concepts or categories (*Grundbegriffe*) that articulate the forms of intelligibility at work in the respective areas of that which is. These concepts or categories are “basic” because they lay out the basic constitution (*Grundverfassung*) of an entity *qua* occupant of its respective region of being. In the terms used above, the categories articulate the ontological standards that structure and govern the ways in which entities are intelligible.

Heidegger inherits the idea of ontological categories that fund the intelligibility of entities, and therewith the project of making sense of them, from a long tradition of philosophical reflection. The inheritance, however, does not bow to tradition. Previous philosophers tended to inquire into the following kinds of questions: What are the categories of being? How precisely are the categories constitutive of the being of entities? Are there relations of priority, in some sense, among categories? How are regions of being individuated? Do regions of being stand in relations of hierarchy and inclusion? What principle unites the respective regions: what makes the regions of being all regions of *being*? Heidegger is seriously interested in these questions and puzzles, particularly the last question. But he takes as basic, as previous philosophers did not, the way in which ontology demands reflection on human life. Approaching the inquiry into human understanding concretely, he asks: What is it to *live by* ontological categories in engaging in our characteristic endeavor, namely making sense of things? With this question, ontology in effect takes a reflexive turn: what categories are proper to the entity whose charge is to make sense of entities? In short: what is the ontology of the distinctively human form of life?

Heidegger is suggesting that, amid the variation and diversity in forms of intelligibility across distinct regions of being, there lies a more formal notion of ontological understanding that is at work “across” the regions. Any regional understanding of being is a species of the more formal notion, the subject of which is the human “ability-to-be” as such. The subject of an existing (deformalized) regional understanding of being is what Heidegger calls a “factual ability-to-be.” Typically, an individual person – a ‘Dasein’ in its use as a count-noun – participates in multiple factual abilities-to-be any given time, at least in the modern world. So if Sam is a practicing chemist, he lives out what one might call the “chemistry ability-to-be.” If Sam fixes cars too, he lives out the “auto mechanic ability-to-be.” If Sam is a teacher, he lives out the “teacher ability-to-be.” These are distinct factual abilities-to-be, which embody their own respective (regional) ontological understandings, and so are instances of the human ability-to-be. A factual ability-to-be is roughly what one might call a *form of life*. Heidegger does not enter a discussion, at least in any detail, of what makes one factual ability-to-be distinct from another. His inquiry is primarily devoted to the structure they all share in virtue of being forms of human life that embody an understanding of being.⁷

The categories of Dasein are dubbed ‘existentialia’, leaving the traditional term ‘category’ for the ontology of entities, no matter the region, other than Dasein. The point of introducing the piece of jargon is to remind the reader that Dasein has its own distinctive ontology. The reason for this particular piece of jargon is to stress that any particular existientiale under scrutiny will amount to an unfolding of the sense of the initial title reserved to designate the being of Dasein, namely ‘existence’ (42). And the guiding claim of the existential analytic as a whole is that existence – the way of being of human mindedness such that it is capable of understanding being – has a distinctive temporal form. The task is to elucidate the temporal form of human existence and thereby explain the ability to make sense of entities.

⁷ Of course there will be overlap among the above mentioned factual abilities-to-be and the regions of being with which they are correlated, especially if Sam is a university chemistry teacher that makes use of automobile engine parts as illustrations of chemical principles.

3. *Death as ontological fragility*

Death, in Heidegger's systematic ontology, is an existentiale. It marks a sense of radical futurity characteristic of existence. While Heidegger is not the first to draw a constitutive link between death and human understanding – Hegel is one notorious predecessor – no philosopher has given death a more fundamental place. By 'death' Heidegger does not mean biological death or croaking ("perishing"). Nor does he mean the biographical death of the obituary ("demise"). Death is no impending storm, for it is not an event at all: "[Dasein] does not have an end at which it just stops, but it *exists finitely*" (329). Death for Dasein is "a way of being that one takes over as soon as it is" (245).

Death, that is, is no more and no less than "being towards death." To be towards death is to live in a manner that is oriented by the possibility of one's own impossibility, the possibility of "no-longer-being-able-to-be-there" (254). Being *able* to be there, in Heidegger's technical use of that phrase, is being able to render the entities *there*, in the world, intelligible in their being. This is to live out a determinate factual ability-to-be. To be, for Dasein, is to be a sense-maker, and thereby possess ontological understanding. So the possibility of one's own impossibility – the possibility of being *unable* to be – is the possibility of the comprehensive breakdown of the understanding in terms of which entities make sense. This would coincide with a breakdown in one's self-understanding. For the shape of who one is, the sense of one's life as meaningful, is given by the possibilities of making sense that participation in a form of life makes available. Death is the essentially threatened character of human understanding. The threat is one of unintelligibility, of a wholesale failure or loss of sense. To be *towards* death, then, is to live in the acknowledgment of the *fragility* of one's form of life. Heidegger

characterizes this fragility as the possibility of having to “take it back”, to “give up” on one’s ability-to-be, rather than sustain allegiance to it as a basis for pressing on (308, 391).

Before turning to discuss how this conception of death stands in the legacy of Kant’s conception of finitude, it is worth noting that this sense of limitedness applies across the traditional distinction between theory and practice. Heidegger repeatedly expresses suspicion about this distinction, partly because any form of life that embodies an understanding of being is inseparably both. Moreover, both acting and judging are, in Heidegger’s sense, forms of comportment: both amount to something we *do* as ways of making sense of things. Thomas Kuhn gave us the classic philosophical-cum-historical account of the crises and revolutions characteristic of theory in its empirical scientific setting.⁸ Heidegger was surrounded during his time by various crises in the sciences at the foundational level of their basic ontological concepts. This destabilizing, or “tottering,” was the first concrete reason offered for his raising anew the question of the sense of being in the first introduction of SZ.⁹ Jonathan Lear has recently offered us a transcendental anthropological account of the breakdown of the traditional Crow form of life in North America. As their nomadic hunting life of intertribal warfare came under threat by white settlers, the central concepts that structured traditional Crow life and made it intelligible came to be unlivable. The opportunities that essentially enabled the exercise of those concepts, and indeed some of the objects (e.g. the coup-stick) to which those central concepts applied, ceased to be.¹⁰ Though more practically inflected than Kuhn’s case studies, the breakdown of the field of possibilities for making sense in this case,

⁸ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, second edition (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1972).

⁹ See section 3. A key passage of the section: “The real movement of the sciences take place when their basic concepts undergo a more or less radical revision which is transparent to itself. The level which a science has reached is determined by how far it is *capable* of a crisis in its basic concepts. In such immanent crises the very relationship between positively investigative inquiry and those things themselves that are under investigation comes to a point where it begins to totter” (9).

¹⁰ See Jonathan Lear, *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006), esp. pgs. 32-33, and 56-57. The philosophical program to which this book is a contribution is originally set out in Lear’s influential 1986 essay “Transcendental Anthropology” reprinted in his *Open Minded: Working out the Logic of the Soul* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998). The coup-stick is a ready-to-hand entity *par excellence*. For it to lose its functional role is for it to cease to be.

as narrated by Lear, is no less fundamental. What unites empirical science and native American warrior culture – what makes them both distinctively human enterprises – is that both are forms of life that embody an understanding of being. Death is the *riskiness* of any such understanding: any projection of a space of possibilities for making sense of things stands *exposed* to being disabled by the course of a recalcitrant reality, and hence brought down as a sustainable form of sense-making practice.

Kant made the finitude of human understanding the cornerstone of his system. This was, for Heidegger, a decisive insight.¹¹ The Heideggerian finitude of death stands in the legacy of Kant's conception of finitude. While this legacy introduces a large set of thorny issues, it is worth briefly outlining it to shed light on the idea of death as ontological fragility.

Kant distinguished finite sensible intuition from infinite ordinary intuition.¹² Infinite intuition creates or produces its objects. (God said "Let there be light" and there was light.) Finite intuition, by contrast, is given its objects from without, and thereby must be affected by objects to know them. So whereas an infinite intellect is wholly self-sufficient, a finite intellect is dependent on existing objects that are *already there*. Expounding Kant, Heidegger says:

The finitude of human cognition does not lie in humans' cognizing quantitatively less than God. Rather, it consists in the fact that what is intuited must be given to intuition from somewhere else – what is intuited is not produced by intuition. The finitude of human cognition consists in being thrown into and onto entities."¹³

Heidegger proceeds to appropriate this Kantian distinction as a notional contrast. His interest is not at all in the question of whether a divine intellect possessed of infinite intuition actually

¹¹ See GA3 and the associated lecture course, GA25, esp. section 5.

¹² Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), B72.

¹³ GA25: 86/59; translation modified.

exists. Nor is the interest in whether we are required to postulate a divine intellect by the demands of reason in either its theoretical or practical application (or both). And the interest is certainly not in measuring the power of a finite intellect according to a standard set by a divine intellect. Heidegger's primary interest in the Kantian contrast lies in its promise to offer an illuminating *entrée* into appreciating the basic metaphysical condition of human understanding. The condition of divine understanding is to produce or create its objects, and thereby be conditioned by nothing other than itself; its condition is to be unconditioned. The condition of human understanding, by contrast, is to be dependent on, and therewith conditioned by, objects that exist independently of it.¹⁴

Heidegger, moreover, *generalizes* the range of finite comportment towards entities beyond cognition. For Kant, human understanding is fundamentally the capacity to judge, the function of which is to acquire knowledge. For Heidegger, human understanding is the ability to make sense of things. This ability crucially includes the capacity to judge but is far from exhausted by it.¹⁵ Sense-making is at work in the simple act of picking up a hammer to scooting by someone in a crowded pub. Heidegger offers a list to indicate the multiplicity and diversity of sense-making: "having to do with something, producing something, attending to something and looking after it, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing, evincing, interrogating, considering, discussing, determining" (56). Ways of comporting oneself towards entities – these types, and many

¹⁴ Where Heidegger's position places him on the question of whether, in the end, a divine intellect is intelligible, or at least fully intelligible, is a difficult question. Such an intellect must at least be minimally intelligible for it to serve as one side of a contrast. In his notes on Odebrecht's and Cassirer's critiques of his *Kantbuch*, which appear as appendix V in that volume, Heidegger writes: "What ought we to find, or do we want to find, from the comparison of our knowing with the absolute? Simply to explain what is meant by the finitude of *our* knowing, where its finitude can be seen. Absolute knowing is a merely constructed idea, that is, it comes from our knowing, in which the specifically finite has been separated and its essence has been freed. The actual knowledge of the actual being-at-hand of absolute knowledge – which is to say, the being of God himself – is not needed here" GA3: 298/208.

¹⁵ I discuss the place of judgment in Heidegger's phenomenology in my essay "Judgment and Ontology in Heidegger's Phenomenology" in *The New Yearbook for Phenomenology and Phenomenological Philosophy*, VII (Seattle, WA: Noesis Press, 2007).

more – are so many modes of living out the rich and complicated enterprise of finite making sense.¹⁶

More importantly, Heidegger *deepens* the sense of finitude characteristic of human understanding in addition to generalizing it. Kantian finitude has to do with objects in our relation to them. This sense of finitude does not dig deep enough. Heidegger wants to place Kantian finitude within a more comprehensive finitude, a finitude to do with being and our understanding of it. Kant is blind to this sense of ontological finitude. For Kant, the basic framework of possibilities for making sense of the world is fixed and invulnerable. The contours of intelligibility delivered by critique are advertised as “complete” and “certain.”¹⁷ The finitude of death, the fragility of ontological understanding, is foreign to Kant’s thought.¹⁸

However, from the finitude that Kant rests content with, the finitude of intuition, there is only a short step to the finitude of death. This is so even if death, so construed, does not figure in Kant’s thought. Kantian finitude is in effect the recognition of the distinction between the sensibility through which objects are intuitively given and the understanding that thinks those objects. An intellect for which there is no such distinction, a divine intellect, is an intellect for which the distinction between the possible and the actual does not apply. The latter distinction, as Kant says, “would not enter into the representation of such a being at all.”¹⁹ After all, for such an intellect, to think something possible just is for that something to be

¹⁶ Compare Wittgenstein’s formulation of Kantian finitude in terms of the will rather than the intellect: “The world is given to me, i.e. my will enters into the world completely from outside as into something that is already there.” Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Notebooks 1914-1916*, eds. G.H. von Wright and G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1961), pg. 74.

¹⁷ Kant, *Critique*, A13.

¹⁸ See Robert B. Pippin’s “Necessary Conditions on the Possibility of What Isn’t: Heidegger on Failed Meaning,” in his *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 64. According to Heidegger, this blindness to ontological finitude is a consequence of (i) Kant’s neglect of the problem of being, and, with this neglect, (ii) Kant’s failure to offer an ontological analytic of the subjectivity of the subject (i.e. Dasein). See SZ 24.

¹⁹ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews, ed. Paul Guyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 273.

actual; the realm of the possible and the realm of the real coincide. Since anything that is thought possible is thereby *guaranteed* to be actual, there is no sense to actuality *thwarting* this intellect's sense of the space of possibilities. And since the divine intellect is not in a position to be thus threatened by unintelligibility, the burden of its possibility is not to be shouldered. Things are otherwise for the finite intellect, for whom the distinction between the recognizably possible and the actual, and the threat that distinction engenders, is the medium of its existence.

The finitude of death, on Heidegger's view, has its characteristic mood, namely anxiety: "being toward death is essentially anxiety" (266). Heidegger first introduces Dasein as being-in-the-world, in his "preliminary sketch," as an entity that is "at home" in the world.²⁰ Much has been made of the way in which this preliminary depiction of human existence stands opposed to the modern skeptical representation of our condition offered paradigmatically by Descartes in the first of his *Meditations on First Philosophy*. While there is clearly something right about this focus of interpretation, it must also be recognized that as one proceeds further into SZ beyond the preliminary sketches, it becomes exceedingly clear (starting at section 40) that Dasein's being-in-the-world is always and everywhere informed by the possibility of the "not-at-home" (189), or uncanniness, made available by the anxiety of finitude. Anxiety is "always latent" (189) in being-in-the-world. And only because Dasein is "anxious in the very depths of its being," (190) Heidegger claims, is it so much as possible to be in the world. Hence death's status as Dasein's "ownmost (*eigenste*) possibility" (263).

These two features of death – anxiety and ownmost possibility – come together by appreciating that the anxiety of death is the anxiety of responsibility. Division II of SZ, following its opening chapter on death that sets the agenda for the rest of the extant book, is a somewhat tortuous account of the existential structures at work in taking responsibility for

²⁰ See section 12 of SZ.

one's ontological understanding. These existential structures together constitute an overall stance Heidegger titles *resoluteness*. Resoluteness is a matter of facing death head-on. It is a kind of openness to its possibility, marked by the etymology of the German word (*Entschlossenheit*). Irresoluteness, by contrast, is a way of acknowledging finitude by backing away from it, a way of being closed off to its possibility, and therewith a falling away from the resolute stance.

'Ownmost' means constitutive of being a possessor of ontological understanding. Ontological understanding is fragile because it can fail, as we have seen, to be what it promises to be, a viable form of making sense. The anxiety of death discloses the burden of responsibility this fragility incurs. Anxiety "fully assigns" Dasein to its "ownmost ability-to-be," then, because one does not merely "possess" one's understanding of being. One also *sustains* it. Or better, ontological understanding is possessed *by* being sustained. Finite intelligibility does not take care of itself and it does not come with a guarantee. One's ownmost ability-to-be is accordingly to be *a sustainer of intelligibility*. And we come into our own as anxious but "resolute" because this stance expresses the vigilance of a lucid and responsible self-understanding: the sustainability of any finite intelligibility is *on me*. It is of course not on me alone, for any understanding of being is embodied in a collective form of life, but that makes it no less *my* concern.²¹

Which brings us to the third relevant feature of death, namely its disclosing to Dasein the possibility of existing as a "*whole-ability-to-be*" (264). Much of Division II is taken up by this

²¹ The relation between what I am calling the anxiety of finitude and Stephen Mulhall's proposal for understanding our being not-at-home raises a number of questions that a more comprehensive investigation of the theme of *Unheimlichkeit* would need to address. See Mulhall's 2005 preface to the second edition of his *Heidegger and Being and Time* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, 2005) for one programmatic expression of his interpretive approach, one that puts the not-at-home at the center of his reading. I have made a start on distinguishing the various senses of existential negativity in my "Varieties of Non-Being in *Being and Time*"(manuscript).

problematic of the “whole” (*Ganze*).²² While there is much to say about the issue, understanding death as ontological fragility at least allows us to place the “whole” in the right setting. Many commentators construe the relevant whole as the *narrative* whole of a biographical life from birth to death. Heidegger *does* raise an issue about biographical unity in the opening of chapter V of Division II. However, he does not raise this issue in his own voice. He indulges that notion of the whole only to reject it, for it is a response to a question he believes to be the wrong question to be asking.²³ The relevant whole made available by the anxiety of finitude is the whole of one’s factual ability-to-be, that is, the form of life *as a whole* that embodies one’s understanding of being. This is the whole that is operative at any moment in the midst of living that form of life.²⁴ The anxiety of finitude is the unsettledness that is constitutive of taking responsibility for the sustainability of one’s form of life as a whole. This unsettledness comes to a head in what Heidegger calls an existential situation, to which I will turn after first sketching its contrast, namely the general situation.

4. *General (everyday) situations*

Heidegger endorses Kant’s rejection of the givenness of entities to human understanding as a brute impact.²⁵ However, Heidegger disagrees with Kant about the best starting point for bringing the receptive character of dependent human understanding into view. The

²² The issue is raised in the opening the division, it is inscribed in the very title of the opening chapter, “Dasein’s possibility of being-a-whole, and being-towards-death,” as well as the title for chapter III, and it returns to open our chapter V on temporality and historicity.

²³ As Steven Crowell aptly notes in his paper, “Authentic Historicity”, David Carr and Chan-Fai Cheung (eds.) *Space, Time, and Culture* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2004), 57-71.

²⁴ There is also the more formal and generic whole of what I earlier called the human ability-to-be as such, i.e. the whole of Heidegger’s topic, which raises difficult methodological issues.

²⁵ See section 12 of SZ for the introduction of the idea that entities “encounter” us. For Wilfred Sellars the givenness of entities as a brute impact is an epistemological myth about the rational justification of judgments of experience. For Heidegger, following Husserl, the givenness of entities as a brute impact is a phenomenological myth about the way in which things show up to subjects who are *in-der-Welt*. I consider the place of reason and rationality in SZ in my essay “Are we essentially rational animals?” in Joseph K. Schear (ed.) *Mind, Reason, and Being-in-the-World: The McDowell-Dreyfus Debate* (Abingdon, UK: Routledge, in press).

Heideggerian successor to the Kantian exposition of the structural forms of our sensibility is the description of the structure of our everyday being-in-the-world (which includes spatiality and a form of time). The latter, Heidegger submits, serve as the more faithful and fruitful point of entry for capturing the modes of givenness of entities, and thereby discerning the concrete shape of finite human understanding.

Entities are first and foremost given to us in everyday being-in-the-world by figuring in contexts of purposive engagement, or contexts of “significance”. These contexts are generally articulated by a nexus of entities upon which we rely throughout the course of our activity. In the carpentry workshop, the chemistry lab, meeting a friend at a cafe, or cooking at home, we *find ourselves* amidst meaningfully configured entities. The entities so configured are internal to the temporally extended activity; without the anchoring of the entities, the activity could not carry on as it does. This dependence on entities is the most immediate manifestation of the Kantian finitude characteristic of our ability-to-be. Hence Heidegger’s characterization of our Kantian finitude, in the above passage expositing Kant (section 3), as our being “*thrown into and onto entities*”.

There is of course much to say about these entities and our relation to them. The crucial point for our purposes is that these everyday entities are given to us as *world-involving* – a point marked by Heidegger’s very title for such entities, “intra-worldly entities.” Consider one of Heidegger’s favored examples, an item of equipment, to bring out the point. A tool is what it is for. To be what it is requires having a place, or a part to play, within an interconnected web of tools. The hammer, for example, is essentially a part bound together with other parts (nails) “working together” in appropriate ways within a particular nexus of engagement. However – and here is the crucial point – the even wider whole that situates any local context is the

everyday world. After all, hammers have their point and significance within a “wide” world of contexts structured by the pursuit of carpentry projects.²⁶

Accordingly, to comport towards a hammer *as* a hammer in a concrete context of significance – that is, with understanding – is to appreciate the tool’s potential situatedness in *other* contexts of significance in which the tool would find its appropriate place. In Heidegger’s terms, our concerned *absorption* in a concrete context always already involves a sense of orientation beyond that context, towards other appropriate contexts, thanks to our *familiarity* with the world (86). The world so understood is the space of possibilities onto which these entities are projected in their being: “[This] familiarity, constitutive for Dasein, goes to make up Dasein’s understanding of being” (86).

There is, accordingly, an inherent generality at work in our situational engagement with things: such engagement essentially positions us within a broader field that reaches beyond the here and now that absorbs one’s immediate concern. The familiar world is the prior unity in terms of which any concrete context of significance finds its place. Heidegger aptly characterizes the world as a “categorical whole” in the following passage:

“Not only is the world, *qua* world, disclosed as possible significance, but when that which is intrawordly is itself freed, this entity is freed for its own possibilities. That which is ready-to-hand is discovered as such in its *serviceability*, its *usability*, and its *detrimentality*. The totality of involvements is revealed as the categorical whole of a *possible* interconnection of the ready-to-hand” (146).²⁷

An analogous structure can be seen in Heidegger’s analysis of our relations with one another. People are encountered first and foremost in concrete contexts of everyday significance. They

²⁶ In Heidegger’s terminology, any environment (*Umwelt*) is situated within a world (*Welt*) (66).

²⁷ And as Heidegger goes on to immediately add, nature too is a unified whole of possibilities in terms of which natural entities are understood in everyday (say) experimental comportment.

are encountered in terms of they *do*, or what they are called upon to do, within such contexts. We might call this one's "social role." To comport towards another person *as* an other in a particular context of significance – that is, with understanding – is to appreciate what the other is doing as more or less the *kind* of thing she would do, given her role, in *other* contexts of significance in which her respective role finds purchase. Our engagement with others, our "being-with" them, always already involves an orientation beyond the context at hand, towards others contexts, thanks to our comprehending participation in a wider social practice. Once again we see the inherent generality at work in our situational engagement with entities in context. For who others are, including who oneself is, is first and foremost is a matter of rendering concrete, by participating in, a social practice. A social practice – more or less what Heidegger characterizes as "the anyone" (*das Man*) – is the prior whole in terms of which others, including oneself, make sense.²⁸

No matter the entity, and whatever the style of comportment, to engage with entities understandingly is to be oriented with a wider whole of possibilities in terms of which those entities make sense. Everyday situations are thus characterized as "general situations" (*allgemeine Lage*, 300) by Heidegger precisely to register the sense of generality at work in our absorbed engagement within them. A situation is general not because it is not particular or concrete. It is general because the concrete situation is essentially integrated with and opens out onto a wider setting of other concrete situations within a form of life. An everyday context *is* in such a way as to *lead* to more of them. The one situation (yet another faculty meeting) ushers in another (a seminar) in more or less familiar ways as one lives out a factual ability-to-be (being a teacher). So we should hear the modifier 'general' in 'general situation' along the lines of ordinary, hum-drum, or to use Heidegger's preferred term, *average*. Any such situation, to be sure, is a particular set of circumstances that affords its own unique and fine-grained nuance. But it is, more fundamentally, a recognizable *excerpt* of how things

²⁸ For individual persons as "concretions of *das Man*," see SZ 129.

generally stand within an ongoing form of life, the basic terms of which are framed in advance by one's orientation in the space of intelligible possibilities.

Heidegger asks his readers not to lose sight of the spatial overtone of the term 'situation' (299). Following that lead, consider as a rough analogy the parts of space within the whole of space that Kant describes. As Heidegger explains in his lectures on the first *Critique*, space as a *unitary* whole is not a result of adding together determinate regions of space. For regions of space are not independent components that could exist by themselves. Rather, any region of space is only possible as part of the prior whole of space. A region of space is thus a "delimitation," as Kant puts it, of the whole of space.²⁹ Compare the generality of an everyday situation. An everyday situation essentially finds its place *within* the whole of an ongoing form of life. And like the way a determinate region of space opens out onto more space, the average everyday situation opens out onto more everyday situations. An everyday situation, akin to a determinate region of space, is a part of a whole that cannot be understood or identified independently of that whole. One might therefore call an everyday situation a "delimitation" of a form of life.

Public practices, including of course language, serve as reservoirs of intelligibility funding engagement in general situations, no matter the region of being. As Heidegger says, "the one" prescribes that way of interpreting the world and being-in-the-world which lies closest" (127). Our participation in normative public practices thus deserves the status of a *source of intelligibility*.³⁰ Here we see that not only are we thrown into and onto entities, we are, as individuals, thrown into and onto the terms in which such entities are to be made sense of. This elaboration of Kantian finitude is one consequence of Heidegger's starting with everyday being-in-the-world as the point of departure for discerning the givenness of entities. The self that comports towards entities in the everyday mode is titled the "anyone-self" (*Man-*

²⁹ Kant, *Critique*, A25/B39. For Heidegger's analysis, see GA25: 117/81.

³⁰ H.L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991).

selbst) by Heidegger to register the point. The anyone-self engages in general situations, maintaining itself in the “public interpretedness” afforded by the public practice into which one has been inducted.

Two crucial features of this everyday sense-making practice in general situations are worth noting before turning to the contrasting existential situation. First, the anyone-self is *dispersed* into the objects of concern that articulate general situations. By this, Heidegger means that in everyday comportment towards entities, as we are “on our way,” we are occupied by what needs taking care of, and *not* by the whole space of possibilities in terms of which entities make sense. This is a matter of course. After all, one’s comportment towards entities as entities is enabled by the understanding of their possibilities. Public practice is a reservoir of this understanding: thanks to one’s induction into public practice, one finds oneself going about one’s business in the relatively fluid manner characteristic of day-to-day life (at least for the most part). There is nothing therefore more natural than *relying* on that understanding as we make our way about general situations. In its everyday functioning, then, ontological understanding operates in the background, making “dispersed” situational engagement possible in the self-effacing manner appropriate to its role. The categorial whole of ontological understanding is *drawn upon*, rather than *at stake*. There is, as Heidegger remarks, a kind of security and comfort in this (384).

Second, and consequently, we are, as individuals, *disburdened* by our dispersal into the everyday world. Heidegger characterizes this tendency as “depriving the particular Dasein of its answerability” (127). By this he means that in the everyday mode of sense-making, we take for granted the basic possibilities in terms of which entities, within general situations, present themselves (294). That is: we navigate these situations as though intelligibility is *taken care of* by the public practice into which we have been inducted, “supplied,” independently of one’s participation in that practice. As Heidegger puts it: Dasein, as the

anyone-self, get “lived by” by public practice (299). Such is the “irresoluteness” of the anyone-self in its “submission” to general situations. The anyone-self, in another formulation, “lives along abandoning oneself to one’s thrownness” (345).

5. *Existential situations*

The existential situation, by contrast, is one in which we are called upon to *take over* one’s thrownness, rather than be taken along by it. As such, the situation demands the resolute stance of the owned self in contrast to the irresolute “fallen” stance of the anyone-self immersed in general situations. Heidegger makes clear in multiple passages that the existential situation, which he also dubs (borrowing from Karl Jaspers) the “limit-situation,” has everything to do with the anxious anticipation of death.³¹ An existential situation is one in which the fate of a *whole* form of life, the understanding of being its embodies, hangs in the balance. Hence its status as a limit-situation, i.e. one in which the limitedness of one’s form of life has come to fore.

Consider the following two passages:

We have defined resoluteness...as a projecting which is reticent and ready for anxiety. Resoluteness gains its authenticity as anticipatory resoluteness. In this, Dasein understands itself with regard to its ability-to-be, and it does so in such a manner that it will go right under the eyes of death in order thus to take over in its thrownness that entity which it itself is, and to take it over *as a whole*. The resolute taking over of one’s factual there, means, at the same time, that the existential situation is one which has been resolved upon (282; translation modified, my emphasis).

³¹ ‘Limit situation’ (*Grenzsituation*) is a term borrowed from Karl Jaspers.

The temporality of the existential situation is marked by the “moment” (*Augenblick*) in contrast to the “present” of the general situation:

“[As] something which has been thrown into the world, Dasein loses itself in the ‘world’ in its factual submission to that with which it is to concern itself. The present, which makes up the existential meaning of “getting taken along”... gets brought back from its lostness by a resolution, so that the current situation and *thus* primordial “limit situation” of being-towards-death, will be disclosed as a moment which has been held onto” (348; translation modified; my emphasis).

What phenomenon is Heidegger identifying? Take the following example to illustrate. In Kuhn’s discussion of what is known as the “chemical revolution,” he describes the context of the discovery of oxygen announced in Lavoisier’s 1777 papers. These papers were the beginning of extended episode which eventually ushered in the oxygen theory of combustion in place of the now obsolete phlogiston theory. Lavoisier had apparently expressed anxiety about the phlogiston theory as early as 1772, depositing a sealed note with the Secretary of the French Academy. But by 1777, partly due to Joseph Priestly’s experiments, this sense that something was deeply awry had grown into the recognition that, in Kuhn’s terms, a major paradigm shift might very well be necessary – a recognition Priestly resisted to the end of his life. Where Lavoisier saw oxygen, Priestly saw dephlogisticated air. Given the fundamental role these purported items had in shaping the field of possibilities for chemical entities as such, Kuhn famously urged us to acknowledge that after discovering oxygen, Lavoisier “worked in a different world.”³²

³² Kuhn, *Structure*, 118. The description of discovery takes place in Kuhn’s chapter VI on “Anomaly and the Emergence of Scientific Discoveries”, esp. 53-57.

The situation facing Lavoisier was an existential situation. It does not matter that Lavoisier turned out to be right (so far as we know). And it does not matter that the situation was scientific.³³ What matters is the peculiar possibility of a concrete situation *within* a form of life that in a sense comes to contain the *whole* of that form of life. An everyday general situation, recall, is a “delimitation” of a form of life. It is one situation that leads onto others. An existential situation, while concrete, makes the whole of which it is a part an issue, *as a whole*. Hence the “fullness” of the existential situation: a whole, paradoxically, comes to be concentrated into one of its parts. An existential situation puts the whole at stake by pressing the question of whether the ontological understanding informing the form of life as a whole can be sustained. It is a situation in which the possibility of a general situation – whether *this* form of life can go *on* – is at stake. The existential situation stops one short, and calls upon one to interrogate whether the ability-to-be at issue is capable of pressing forward. As Heidegger puts it, the anxious anticipation at work in the moment of an existential situation “brings one face to face with the possibility of repetition (*Wiederholbarkeit*)” (344). The existential situation, in short, is the finitude of death *made concrete* in the midst of life.³⁴

³³ Compare Lear’s question “Was there a last coup?” (pgs. 26-34 of *Radical Hope*) in his narrative of the breakdown of traditional life of the Crow. The question arises in light of an episode in 1887 in which, as Lear puts it, “things came to a head.” The episode as interpreted by Lear was an existential situation. The fate of traditional Crow life was sealed, on Lear’s interpretation of events, in Plenty Coup’s “burial” of the coups-stick in Washington in 1921.

³⁴ Dreyfus claims that Heidegger is confused about the existential situation. In his paper delivered at the Inaugural Meeting of the International Society for Phenomenological Studies, Asilomar, California (July, 1999), “Could anything be more Intelligible than Everyday Intelligibility? Reinterpreting Division I in light of Division II,” (available at: <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~hdreyfus>) Dreyfus says that Heidegger fails “clearly to distinguish two experiences of the source, nature, and intelligibility of decisive action” (pg. 15). The first experience, according to Dreyfus, is “the primordial understanding of the current situation.” Dreyfus reads this in terms of his phenomenology of skill acquisition. The expert coper is better than merely competent because she is attuned to the distinctive character of the particular situation in all of its particularity, seizing the occasion, rather than relying on general rules and banal maxims to guide her. The second experience, according to Dreyfus, is the radical transformation described by St. Paul, Luther, and Kierkegaard, the “Christian experience of being reborn,” (pg. 14) that long interested Heidegger in the lead-up to SZ.

The reading of the existential situation I have offered allows a reply to Dreyfus’s charge of confusion. Heidegger *is* interested in the peculiar concreteness of the existential situation. However, its intensified concreteness consists in its pressing the issue of radical transformation. So understood, the existential situation is one coherent idea, not a confused conflation of two distinct ideas. The mastery that interests Heidegger is not the fine-grained coping that interests Dreyfus, but rather what one might call mastery of the art of being finite.

To face the “repeatability” question head-on is to own up to the finitude of one’s ability-to-be. One does not have to be Lavoisier, or a Plenty Coups, to enter into an owned relation to one’s ability-to-be. One does not have to be a history-maker to live ownedly or “authentically.” The sense of responsibility Heidegger is trying to capture leaves entirely open what one does in an existential situation, and how what one does is received, if one does anything at all.³⁵ Indeed, the notion of responsibility leaves entirely open whether one ever *actually* finds oneself confronting an existential situation.

The sense of responsibility is rather a certain form of commitment, understood as a way or manner of inhabiting one’s form of life. The resolute stance, in the first instance, is manifest in the ability to *identify* an existential situation for what it is, were it to present itself. It includes, moreover, not letting oneself, when potentially confronted by an existential situation, back away from it and remain “dispersed” in general situations, as if the very possibility of a general situation is not at issue. The stance therefore includes refusing to “disburden” oneself of one’s own answerability for the intelligibility of a form of life. Resolute responsibility is a matter of living in a way in which, as Heidegger puts it, one “holds oneself open” to the possibility of an existential situation. This, it should be clear, is not to compromise one’s allegiance or attachment to the viability of one’s form of life. It is rather to take responsibility for it in light of its constitutive fragility. The responsibility involves a standing readiness, in the background of everyday comportment, to take on the radical prospect of “giving up” (391) a form of life if it cannot be made to work. Heidegger calls this standing readiness being “free for death”, i.e. “finite freedom” (384).³⁶

The public practices into which we are inducted when we grow into an ontological understanding have a history. The possibilities for making sense have *come to be*, and in that

³⁵ “In existential analysis we cannot, in principle, discuss what Dasein factually resolves in any particular case” (383).

³⁶ Compare the remark, “Freedom makes Dasein in the ground of its essence, responsible to itself, or more precisely, gives itself the possibility of commitment” GA26: 247/192.

sense were born or founded. Heidegger calls these possibilities embodied in public practice, situated within the current of their history, a *heritage (Erbe)*. The resolute stance of responsibility includes the recognition of the historicity of one's heritage. This recognition is at once the acceptance of the authority of that heritage and a preparedness to identify the "repeatable possibilities of existence" that it makes available. So the acceptance of authority, insofar as the question of repeatability of internal to it, is no blind deference. Heidegger in fact calls any such inheritance a "reciprocal rejoinder." Owned recognition of one's heritage "hands" those possibilities "down to oneself in *anticipation*." For Dasein to enter into this form of relation to its own possibilities is for Dasein, as it were truly, to *happen*:

"Once one has grasped the finitude of one's existence, it snatches one back from the endless multiplicity which offer themselves as closest to one...and brings into the simplicity of its fate (*Schicksal*). This is how we designate Dasein's originary happening (*Geschehen*), which lies in owned resoluteness and in which Dasein hands itself down to itself, free for death, in a possibility which it has inherited and yet chosen" (384).

Dasein accordingly comes to recognize itself as historical *in its being*: its finitude is a historical finitude. And with this, we can see why Heidegger claims, in what is perhaps the guiding claim of Division II, chapter V, that:

"Owned being-towards-death is concealed ground of the historicity of Dasein" (383).

6. Let me conclude by noting one potential payoff of the foregoing interpretation. By this I mean answers to two questions that naturally arise for readers working through Division II of SZ. The first question: why is resoluteness a matter of *anticipating* death, as if running forward into it, to tap into the etymology of the German *vorlaufen*? This is an especially

puzzling question for traditional views of Heideggerian death that see it not as ontological fragility but rather as the terminal conclusion of an individual biographical life. The second question, no less pressing for the traditional view, is: why in the world would anyone, save the suicidal, *want* to press forward into death? Indeed, why isn't being towards death, as Heidegger puts it, a "fantastical exaction" (266)?

Heidegger's answer to the first question, as we have seen, is that by anticipating death one takes responsibility for ontological fragility. Compare "running ahead" into the facts about which you hold beliefs, i.e. vigilantly checking them, as a way of genuinely *holding* one's beliefs. To take such responsibility is "the loyalty of existence to its own self" (391) as a sustainer of finite intelligibility.

Which leads to an answer to our second question: If one is participating in a genuinely dying form of life, and if one has the courage of anxiety to identify the situation for what it is, anticipating the death of that form of life is at once the anticipation of one's rebirth in the founding of a new form of life. The prospect, while no doubt terrifying, could also be felt as exhilarating – at least for a being bent on a sustainably intelligible form of life, and so uniquely capable of fundamental change.³⁷

³⁷ The paper is dedicated to my late teacher and friend John Haugeland (1945-2010). He did not, in the end, have the time to work out an interpretation of the existential situation, a late Division II theme. The reading I offer here is pervasively indebted to his path-breaking interpretation. I am grateful to Bert Dreyfus, Mike Inwood, Wayne Martin, Adrian Moore, Stephen Mulhall, George Pattison, Robert Pippin, B. Scott Rouse, Kate Withy, Mark Wrathall, and Natasha Yarotskaya for helpful conversation and comments.