

ARTIKKEL

SEIN ZUM TODE

AN ARISTOTELIAN INTERPRETATION OF HEIDEGGER'S BEING-TOWARDS-DEATH

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In the following I will attempt an interpretation of Heidegger's concept of being-towards-death (*Sein zum Tode*), as it is expounded in div. II, ch. 1 of his magnum opus *Sein und Zeit*.¹ The interpretation will acquire its productive prejudices from viewing being-towards-death as a possible explication of Aristotle's definition of the end of practical intelligence (*phronēsis*) as 'to live well as a whole' (*eu zēn holōs*) (*EN* 1140a25–28), or more precisely of the 'as a whole'.² This procedure is part of an attempt to establish structural similarities between Aristotle's concept of practical intelligence and Heidegger's concept of authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*), of which a particular mode of being-towards-death is an essential component.

The account of being-towards-death is introduced by Heidegger as an attempt to ensure that his phenomenological explication of Dasein – man designated with regard to his being – is based upon the complete phenomenon, not merely a convenient part. The existential analysis aims to determine phenomenologically the being of man, and must ensure that the phenomenal basis for this determination is adequate. In div. I of *SZ*, Heidegger has already arrived at a provisional definition of the being of Dasein as 'care' (*Sorge*), of which a fundamental constituent is 'existence', which harbours the proposition that Dasein is always 'ahead of itself' (*sich vorweg*) by virtue of its projective understanding. This trait now appears to pose a problem, insofar as the wholeness of Dasein must be appropriate to its kind of being, i.e. existential, and hence the project encounters the apparent obstacle that the understanding is invariably one step ahead. The question arises whether and how one may interject a limit to existence. Death offers itself up as the natural solution. If death is to limit Dasein existentially, however, it must be understood as something Dasein itself relates to, consequently the analysis centers on the concept of 'being-towards-death'. As it turns out, being-towards-death contains not only the clue to the adequacy of the existential analysis, but holds as well, in its capacity for setting limits, the key to the existentiell mode of authenticity.

Death is something possible. At first glance, the thought may easily suggest itself that death, as the end of Dasein, would correspond to the practical end (*telos*) in Aristotle. Thus Heidegger does a comparison between death and ripeness as the end of the fruit, and finds that there is in fact a structural similarity: 'The "not-yet" has already been included in the very Being of the fruit, not as some random characteristic, but as something constitutive. Correspondingly, as long as any Dasein is, it too is already

its "not-yet".' (*SZ* 244) This appears to affirm that both fruit and Dasein has a *teleological* kind of being. Still, death is not a fulfilment (*Vollendung*) of Dasein in the same way as ripeness is it in the fruit. If we look once more at 'living well as a whole', we notice that if there is a reference to fulfilment in the phrase, it is to be found in the 'well' – fulfilling the teleological nature of life – rather than in the 'as a whole', which is rather a *qualification* of the 'well'. Furthermore, 'fulfilment' would have to be used in a very particular sense even here, for Heidegger notes that '[f]ulfilling is a mode of "finishedness", and is founded upon it. Finishedness is itself possible only as a determinate form of something present-at-hand or ready-to-hand.' (*SZ* 245) On the whole, death as a possibility is to be kept as far apart from any notion of possible *actuality* as may be: 'In accordance with its essence, this possibility offers no support for becoming intent on something, "picturing" to oneself the actuality which is possible and so forgetting its possibility.' (*SZ* 262) What then, are the positive characteristics of death as an existential phenomenon?

The full existential conception of death is: '[D]eath, as the end of Dasein, is Dasein's ownmost possibility – non-relational, certain and as such indefinite, not to be outstripped. Death is, as Dasein's end, in the Being of this entity towards its end.' (*SZ* 258–259) Here we have five definitive features of death, in addition to a characterisation of the mode in which it is disclosed. We will attempt to get to terms with them by considering them in connection with Dasein's supposedly authentic way of being towards death. This authentic being-towards signifies that Dasein can not flee death, nor can it cover it up by fleeing it, nor again give a new explanation (*umdeuten*) for it in accordance with the common sense of *das Man* (*SZ* 260).

We have seen that death as a possibility is not to be authentically conceived as a possibility pictured in its actualisation. Heidegger terms the proper way of relating towards death as 'Vorlaufen in die Möglichkeit' (*SZ* 262), i.e. a running ahead and anticipating death as a possibility. *Vorlaufen* is a form of disclosedness (being-in), and is as such constituted by 'Befindlichkeit' and 'Verstehen'.³ In *Vorlaufen*, death as a possibility is to be preserved as a possibility. In a difficult, but potent passage, Heidegger writes:

Death, as a possibility, gives Dasein nothing to be 'actualized', nothing which Dasein, as actual, could itself be. It is the possibility of the impossibility of every way of comporting oneself towards anything, of every way of existing. In the anticipation of this possibility it becomes

‘greater and greater’; that is to say, the possibility reveals itself to be such that it knows no measure at all, no more or less, but signifies the possibility of the measureless impossibility of existence. (SZ 262)

Death is preserved as a possibility when any attempt to define it and make it a concrete happening – something to be ‘reckoned with’ – is given up, and when the consequences of such a possibility being constitutive for the wholeness of Dasein are brought to bear upon existence as such. This means that if the end of Dasein is measureless, and if Dasein always ‘projects itself upon possibilities’ and as such exists *as* a potentiality-for-being (*Seinkönnen*), anticipating death will disclose Dasein as a measureless potentiality-for-being. Indeed, we seem to be a long way from the *defined* character of authentic existence anticipated above. What this signifies, however, is that any attempt to procure an ideal conception of a complete human life, as a narrative totality with beginning, middle, and end, represents a forcing of Dasein into an ontological framework within which it does not belong. Such a convenient measure for the good life is in actual fact not in touch with reality. It does not represent what is possible for *me*. Hence, it does not measure up to the highest and most original determination of character (*ēthos*), where one has attained a true self as a basis for an actual choice. This represents an obstacle for the kind of theoretical ethics which sets out to communicate general, ideal guidelines, to be ‘applied’ later to the concrete situation of the individual. Even that kind of ‘Aristotelian’ ethics which fills the major premiss of the practical syllogism with a pre-conceived plan of the individual good life would seem to go down with the onslaught of death anticipated. The situation within which man deliberates about what is good and advantageous to his own life as a whole has a very different character. If ‘good’ and ‘advantageous’ are still to remain meaningful, this character has become all the more mysterious.

Death is Dasein’s *ownmost* (*eigenste*) possibility (SZ 263). As understanding, Dasein discloses possibilities, in terms of which it is itself a *Seinkönnen*, a potentiality-for-being. As its ownmost possibility, in terms of death, Dasein’s ownmost *Seinkönnen* is revealed, ‘in which its very Being is the issue’ (SZ 263). In other words, death reveals the ‘function’ (*ergon*) of man, and it reveals it as a task handed over to individual Dasein, it reveals Dasein as a *Selbstseinkönnen*, as capable of determining the character of its own being, *as* a self. As *Vorlaufen* is ‘what first *makes* this possibility *possible*, and sets it free as a possibility’ (SZ 262), and as this is a possibility of the understanding as

a projection (*Entwurf*) upon possibilities, anticipation of death amounts to reason freeing itself from the oppressing necessity of a standard foreign to itself. In other words – if we may exploit Aristotle’s tripartite division of the practical end – *Vorlaufen* brings down the tyranny of the pleasant (*to hēdy*) and the merely advantageous (*to sympheron*), that which I may profit from in the future, that which suits a man of *my* occupation, *my* birth, *my* station in life, etc. – all the givens of worldly significance – and prepares the way for the coming of the new king, bearing the royal standard of reason (*logos*) and the noble stamp of ‘*to kalon*’ – what is noble as an end in itself.⁴ Now, we must appreciate the fact that this does *not* necessarily entail that the worldly givens, such as those just mentioned, are of no value, or that they are not really *given*. After all, Dasein is intrinsically being-in-the-world – *thrown* as such – and cannot escape this fundamental framework. The decisive feature of the anticipation of death is rather that they are no longer taken for *granted* as what lends significance to any and everything as *such*, i.e. that they are mistaken for the primary for-the-sake-of-which (*Worumwillen*); and more precisely that the *meaning* of these givens is not uncritically inherited from *das Man*. This signifies *caring for the choiceworthiness of the end*. By this I mean that the ultimate end in terms of which one sheds light on one’s present situation – namely *oneself* projected as one *should* be – is opened up for criticism and thereby for the intrinsic worth of its particular constitution. Presently it remains to be investigated whether reason in fact is capable of providing its own standard, whether there is room for an other kind of measure, given the ‘measureless impossibility of existence’.

Death is *non-relational* (*unbezüglich*) (SZ 263). Death is a possibility which exists for *me* alone. ‘It makes manifest that all Being-alongside the things with which we concern ourselves, and all Being-with Others, will fail us when our ownmost potentiality-for-Being is the issue.’ (SZ 263) Other Dasein cannot stand in for me when it comes to death; things encountered cannot come to my aid. The encounter with death in *Vorlaufen* exposes Dasein as a *Seinkönnen* which has a unique power, a power which may be left unused, but which no one and nothing can relieve it of. Dasein is marked out as a *definite* someone, the path to its *primordial* qualitative differentiatedness is unfolded, it is disclosed as occupying a unique position in the History of Being. Thus ‘[d]eath does not just “belong” to one’s own Dasein in an undifferentiated way; death *lays claim* to it as an *individual* Dasein.’ (SZ 263) With this

unique possibility, follows responsibility.

Death is *not to be outstripped (unüberholdbar)* (SZ 264). This signifies that death is the ‘uttermost [äußerste] possibility of [...] existence’ (SZ 263), which is to say that any other possibilities of existence that are projected as transgressing the bounds of death, are in fact impossible for one’s own Dasein. They can never become the ground of a *Können*. If we may turn once again to Aristotle, he portrays the most extreme example in the course of his distinction between *resolution* and *wish*: ‘[R]esolution does not pertain to that which is impossible, and if someone were to say that he resolves upon some such thing, he would appear stupid. Wish, on the other hand, pertains to the impossible, e.g. immortality.’ (EN 1111b20–23) However, immortality is what is implicitly assumed in the resolutions upon the possibilities of *das Man*. This is not necessarily immortality in the sense of eternal life, but first and foremost the denial of the characteristic possibility of one’s *own* death. The generalising ideals circulated by *das Man* are the ideals of ‘no one’, and tend to overcloud the noble possibilities of *oneself*. If immortality in this sense is what is at bottom presupposed in inauthentic existence, a more concrete understanding of the lack of *Vorlaufen* may be gained from Aristotle’s next observation: ‘And wish also concerns what can in no way be accomplished by oneself, e.g. that an actor or an athlete should emerge victorious, while no one *resolves* upon such things, but only upon things he believes may be brought about by himself.’ (EN 1111b23–26) What presupposes the indefinite postponement of one’s own death cannot be determined to be a possibility fulfillable by oneself, hence it cannot be the object of an enlightened resolve. But there is more: The disclosure of death as one’s *ownmost, non-relational* possibility is at the same time the disclosure of the possibility of oneself as a *defined character*, it is ‘a way in which the ‘there’ is disclosed for existence’; in fact, it ‘throws Dasein back upon its factual “there”’ (SZ 385) where Dasein factually is *not* an actor, is *not* an athlete, but where it *is* something quite concrete, though this may not be exhaustively captured by the social and professional categories of *das Man* and of the world, and their pre-defined teleological content. One cannot begin with one’s profession and from there reckon the best course of action. Adding together such partial ends will never reach that wholeness which may be the sole arbiter among the infinite abundance of wordly possibility. How may the anticipation of death, which ‘includes the possibility of taking the whole of Dasein in advance in an existentiell manner’ (SZ 264), define existence in such

a non-relative manner that it ‘discloses also all the possibilities which lie ahead of that possibility’ (SZ 264)?

Death is *certain (gewiß)*. In this feature of death we encounter the differentiated concepts of *alētheia* (truth) and *alētheuein* (to uncover truth). Certainty is a concept equiprimordial with truth. It signifies to hold something for true as something true (*als wahres für wahr halten*) (SZ 256). The primary category of truth is the disclosedness of Dasein, the condition for the possibility of all derivative forms of truth. *Vorlaufen* is an expression of this primordial phenomenon of truth, inasmuch as disclosedness is the disclosedness of Dasein as its ‘there’, as a possibility. ‘The possibility is disclosed because it is made possible in anticipation.’ (SZ 256) The truth of death depends upon the manner of its disclosure, and so does its certainty, holding it for true.

The Aristotelian concept of ‘*hexis*’ may here prove itself useful. ‘*Hexis*’ can be translated ‘habit’ or perhaps better ‘disposition’, and virtue (*aretē*) is by Aristotle determined as a *hexis* as regards its being (EN II.5). The intellectual virtues are also *hexeis*. ‘*Hexis*’ is related to the verb ‘*echein*’, which has a stem ‘*hex-*’, and which means ‘to have, to hold, to possess’. In relation to the intellectual, truth-disclosing dispositions, ‘*hexis*’ will point to the ‘possession’ of knowledge, in virtue of which we *are* in a certain way. Heidegger in his lectures on the *Nicomachean Ethics* frequently refers to the ability of the intellectual virtues to ‘disclose and *preserve*’ the principles (*archai*) of the beings to which they are related. E.g. when interpreting Aristotle’s exhortation regarding the two separate faculties of thought (‘So we must endeavour to grasp which is the best *hexis* of each of these [faculties].’ (*Lēptēon ara hekaterou toutōn tis hē belistē hexis.*) (EN 1139a15–16)), Heidegger says: ‘[W]ith regard to each we are to discern what is its *belistē hexis*, its most genuine (*eigentlichste*) possibility to uncover beings as they are and to preserve (*verwahren*) them as uncovered, i.e., to be towards them as dwelling with (*Sein bei*) them.’ (1992, p. 30).⁵ There is nothing in the Greek text corresponding to the word ‘preserve’, and the function of the faculties of thought is by Aristotle strictly determined to be truth (EN VI.2), so the paraphrase must be an interpretation of ‘*hexis*’, and a not altogether unreasonable one. Consequently, we can observe the link between *preserving* (*Verwahrung*), and being certain and *holding-for-true* (*Für-wahr-halten*). Neither should we overlook the use of ‘*Sein bei*’, an expression used in SZ to express the peculiar way Dasein is *in* the world, encountering entities with a different kind of being (SZ 54). Everyday Dasein dwells in a characteristic cer-

tainty of the beings by which it is surrounded, insofar as they are determined by ‘involvement’ (*Bewandtnis*). Still, as is revealed by the uncanniness (*Unheimlichkeit*) effected by anxiety (SZ § 40), this certainty is not authentic, the everyday world is not where Dasein is truly at home, it is not where Dasein finds its *oikeion ergon*, its own, proper, homely way to be.

Hence the certainty which was appropriate enough to the kind of disclosure prevailing in everydayness, where Dasein confirms itself by simply working out the possibilities projected by *das Man*, will not correspond to the being of death as authentically disclosed. The disclosure of *Vorlaufen* has a different character; in consequence, so has its object, and so has its proper certainty. Death is disclosed as the ‘measureless impossibility of existence’. This lack of measure entails that certainty and preservation cannot be gained by setting it up as the measure of a practical goal to be actualised, neither can it be attained by looking at it more closely, nor can it be confidently assumed on the ground that once disclosed it will not change. Rather, ‘to maintain oneself in this truth – that is, to be certain of what has been disclosed – demands all the more that one should anticipate’ (SZ 264). We must not read this as if Dasein were to go through life as a sequence of ‘now’s, anticipating *now*, again *now*, again *now*, every moment checking up on death, to make sure it has not changed, or if it has, as it will be prone to do all the time it is utterly unique, to confirm its novel shape. Due to the uniqueness of death, such a reading is tempting, and factually the idea is probably true: As Aristotle remarked, the man who goes through life possessing virtue without ever doing anything, will never be *eudaimōn*; hence one good deed does not suffice. But this is not the level at which Heidegger is presenting *Sein zum Tode*. The demand made by the certainty of death is a demand to *not let go*, but rather *intensify* the anticipation, and this means to *hold oneself* in death, i.e. in what is disclosed in death: The openness of the ‘there’. To hold death for true means to maintain oneself in the possibility afforded by the situation in which one finds oneself, to take this possibility seriously. ‘As such, holding death for true does not demand just *one* definite kind of behaviour in Dasein, but demands Dasein itself in the full authenticity of its existence.’ (SZ 265) It is not for measureless death to demand *a* definite action of Dasein, this responsibility is handed over to the

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factual situation; what death demands is definite action *as such*, and defined on the basis of death’s withdrawal of the in principle free-floating, partial measuredness of inauthentic concern. In this way alone may Dasein attain the stability of *hexis*, and truly a *hexis* of its own.

Death is indefinite (*unbestimmt*). Together with its certainty, death is indefinite as regards its ‘when’ (SZ 265). Everyday being-towards-death does not take this indefiniteness seriously, but slips between the present and the point of death the accomplishment of all its everyday tasks. In this way they *make* it definite (SZ 258). Heidegger may be exaggerating the indefiniteness of the ‘when’. To a large extent, we can be *certain* that we will not die the next minute, and it would be foolish and make life impossible if one were to regard *every* moment as one’s last. But again this cannot be what Heidegger intends. He does not expect us to consider the possibility that we may die any moment, and then to go on to decide a course of action. We cannot deduce how we are to live from death. Rather, the indefiniteness of death is what allows us to *care* about the end – any practical end – in the first place. It is what lets us care about the choiceworthiness of the end, and it effects this by disclosing the practical end as such as uncertain and in need of determination.

Death is *unbestimmt*. What makes ‘existentially possible’ the authentic disclosure of this feature is the fundamental mood (*Grundstimmung*) of *Angst* (SZ 266). I will conjecture that while other *Stimmungen* for the most part disclose Dasein in its factual ‘there’ as determined and definite – and to these correspond definite projections of the understanding – the *Grundstimmung* of anxiety attunes Dasein in a manner which makes it characteristically *unbestimmt*. It achieves this by the fact that instead of disclosing some particular worldly *thing*, it discloses the ‘there’ in terms of its ‘whence and whither’, where the uttermost ‘whither’ is the measureless impossibility of existence. Anxiety, as an expression of desire (*orexis*), goes hand in hand with reason (*logos*) freeing itself from a foreign standard, and is indispensable in drawing up the possible domain of the noble (*to kalon*) as an end in itself.

With this elucidation of the determinant features of authentic being-towards-death, we may perhaps appreciate Heidegger’s summary with more insight:

[A]nticipation reveals to Dasein its lostness in the they-

self, and brings it face to face with the possibility of being itself, primarily unsupported by concerned solicitude, but of being itself, rather, in an impassioned *freedom towards death* – a freedom which has been released from the illusions of the ‘they’, and which is factual, certain of itself, and anxious. (SZ 266)

Anticipating death, Dasein encounters the limit of its own being as a hidden determinant of its entire existence, as the possibility of impossibility shatters all pre-defined measures of the good life, thereby exchanging the everyday concept of the possible for a possibility to be determined by primary reference to oneself. Instead of applying to oneself a general notion of the good life, one applies oneself to the notion of a good life, revitalizing the goodness of the good. The present situation – the ‘there’ – goes from being an opportunity for accomplishing a set goal, to affording a ground for establishing more reasonable goals, even becoming an end in itself, as the real substance of exist-

tence. Instead of a relentless chasing after results, a turn towards the *quality* of the action over and above the result becomes possible, enabling what might be termed a more original, qualitative practical end, to which productive action is answerable. If this is implicate, at most, in the account of being-towards-death, Heidegger’s interpretation of *phronēsis* is highly reminiscent of essential elements in *Sein und Zeit*: ‘[W]hat *phronēsis* deliberates about is not what brings *praxis* to an end. A result is not constitutive for the Being of an action; only the *eu* [“well”], the how, is. The *telos* [“end”] in *phronēsis* is the *anthrōpos* [“human being”] himself.’ (1992, p. 51) Thus the ‘as a whole’ makes possible a distinctive sense of ‘well’ in the ‘living well as a whole’, without itself providing the concrete measure for good and bad. After all, *Vorlaufen zum Tode* is only *one* structural element of authentic existence.

NOTES

1 I will be employing the translation of *Sein und Zeit* by Macquarrie and Robinson (1962), but will refer to this work with the abbreviation ‘SZ’ and the page numbers in the German original (2001), as these are supplied in the margin of the English edition.

2 Translations of the *Nicomachean Ethics* are my own, and I will refer to this work with the abbreviation ‘EN’ and the Bekker pagination.

3 Translated as ‘state-of-mind’ and ‘understanding’ respectively in the standard English translation by Macquarrie and Robinson. The two are expounded in div. I, ch. 5, and are identified as existentialia, as essential categories of the being of Dasein, more precisely as equiprimordial, constitutive components of Dasein’s ‘disclosing’ way of being in the world. The term ‘state-of-mind’ is unsatisfactory, with its use of the un-Heideggerian ‘mind’, and failure to convey the reference to situatedness and being-there, but it may be the closest one gets in translation. It embodies the ‘thrownness’ of Dasein, and is thus more of a passive aspect of disclosedness than the understanding, which continues the movement by ‘throwing out’ a sketch or projection (Entwurf). Together they open up the particular situation of being-in-the-world and allow other beings to be encountered.

4 Aristotle’s distinction can be found at 1104b30–32 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

5 I use here the English translation by Rojcewicz and Schuwer (1997), but the page numbers refer to the German text, as they are furnished in the translation.

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