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Abstract

In *Being and Time*, the philosopher Martin Heidegger portrays the conscience in a different sense from another common, characterization of the conscience, where the conscience acts as a guide to satisfy a moral code. Instead, for Heidegger, the conscience calls the human to 'take up,' or accept, the "who" that the human is, without measurement to an external, "ethical," code. In "The Call," I affirm Heidegger's distinctive characterization of the conscience. I adjust Heidegger, however, to argue that we may understand the call of conscience as a call toward the ethical if we both understand Heidegger's description of the call as different from our own and adjust our understanding of the "ethical" to reflect Heidegger's different depiction of the call. I believe this adjustment is significant for ethics because it broadens the understanding of "the ethical" to include an acceptance of the internal self.

The Call: Heidegger and the Ethical Conscience

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Abstract

In *Being and Time*, the philosopher Martin Heidegger portrays the conscience in a different sense from another common, characterization of the conscience, where the conscience acts as a guide to satisfy a moral code. Instead, for Heidegger, the conscience calls the human to ‘take up,’ or accept, the “who” that the human is, without measurement to an external, “ethical,” code. In “The Call,” I affirm Heidegger’s distinctive characterization of the conscience. I adjust Heidegger, however, to argue that we may understand the call of conscience as a call toward the ethical if we both understand Heidegger’s description of the call as different from our own and adjust our understanding of the “ethical” to reflect Heidegger’s different depiction of the call. I believe this adjustment is significant for ethics because it broadens the understanding of “the ethical” to include an acceptance of the internal self.

The conscience in Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* responds to what Heidegger perceives as the loss of individuals in societal generality (which Heidegger characterizes as “the they”). Turning away from this “inauthentic” loss, Da-sein, or the human being, heeds a call of conscience to resolutely face its true orientation toward death in “authentic” Being-toward-death. Heidegger is quite clear that, in the sense of a specific moral prohibition or the sense of an instrument of chastisement, the conscience is not ethical. I develop Heidegger’s characterization of the conscience to argue that we may indeed characterize the call of conscience as an ethical call if we both understand Heidegger’s description of the call as different from our own and adjust our understanding of “ethical” to reflect Heidegger’s different depiction of the call.

A developed understanding of the use of the conscience in Heidegger first involves a discussion of “the they” from which the voice of conscience breaks. The experience of “the they” in *Being and Time* correlatively occurs with an experience of a sense of loss¹

¹ I say “sense of loss”, because Heidegger makes it quite clear that Da-sein is not eliminated as a not-ness by its absorption in the ‘they’. Instead, Da-sein’s ontic experience of selfhood is taken over by the “they.”

Quote: “In these characteristics of being which we have discussed—everyday being-among-one-another, distanciality, averageness, leveling down, publicness, disburdening of one’s being, and accommodation—lies the initial ‘constancy’ of *Da-sein* [emphasis added]. . . Existing in the modes we have mentioned, the

of Da-sein as “it itself *is* not; the others have taken its being away from it.” (*Being and Time* 126)² Loss occurs because as Da-sein itself becomes absorbed in the concerns of indefinite others (Kierkegaard’s public), a “neuter” ‘who,’ “*the they*” (*Being and Time* 127), and as “*the they*” “dissolves one’s own Da-sein completely into the kind of being of the ‘others’ in such a way that the others, as distinguishable and explicit, disappear more and more.” (*Being and Time* 127)

Da-sein’s falling prey to the “they” occurs as the opposite of the authentic care which it expresses in authentic Mitda-sein, a caring for things by letting them be encountered as they appear (*Being and Time* 115). In falling prey, Da-sein instead abandons its own cares and concerns and, with this abandonment, the particularity of its own situated state and expectations. Da-sein assumes the expectations and situation of the indefinite general public, and, as a result, the seemingly positive (as in presence) action of assumption, of taking up the concerns of “the they,” actually occurs as an apparently negative (absent) activity which alters the “ontic” (particular) individuality of Da-sein—“the *leveling down* of all possibilities of being” (*Being and Time* 127).

We may begin to identify the relevance of Heidegger’s description of the conscience in our everyday world by observing whether we use words to describe a similar phenomenon and what those words signify for us. An example of lostness in “the they” occurs when, as Heidegger observes, our actions implicitly signal our use of the neuter voice ‘one’. *The Importance of Being Earnest* incessantly jabs at the “One must” which its Victorian public employs to replace the ethical conscience with a fear of social stigma, but this same “one must,” though not mentioned with identical phrasing, also appears in our contemporary world. The politicized language of the national “we” who bring democracy to the nations, our preoccupation with the latest “socially conscious” fads, and the increase of mass media and instant communication, reveals a growing and a heightened absorption in the “they” of the public.³ The “we must” comes to mean what the Victorians called “one must,” and, with this equivalence, evidences the Heideggerian “they.”

In a troubling movement evidenced by socially conscious ads, the “I” may soon join, or already have joined, the “one” and the “we” as the impersonal pronoun of the “they.” One recent press release, out of many, indicates this combined identification in its advertising technique:

self of one’s own Da-sein and the self of the other have *neither found nor lost themselves* [emphasis added] . . . On the contrary, in this kind of being Da-sein is an *ens realissimum* [no emphasis added], if by “reality” we understand a being that is like Da-sein.” (*Being and Time* 128)

² Citations are from the side notations.

³ “Socially conscious” functions as a telling phrase *eo ipso*.

“Synergy beads, the hot new Eco-Zen bracelets, goes international.”

Quote: “The new company is truly breaking ground in record time. Within its first two months of existence, the fashionable bracelets found their way into a Nashville charity VIP gift bag that included some of country music’s biggest names as recipients. Vision Magazine’s June 2009 edition, the chic holistic California magazine, said, “When you wear a Synergy Beads bracelet, you are supporting a conscious company, receiving a blessing to shift your perception, and helping to heal the Earth. What more could you ask for?”⁴

The release identifies environmental responsibility with personal gratification via trendy conformism and highlights the modern era’s identification of the “I” with the “they.” We are disparately encouraged both to seemingly promote our individual selves by the promotion of individual freedoms or by the instant gratification of our own desires and to adjust our individual selves to adopt a universal notion of freedom or to align with universal trends. The voice of our individual conscience becomes numbed.

Da-sein’s absorption in the “they” appears to detach itself from personal responsibility, the role of the conscience. Da-sein converts its “I said,” where the “I,” must take responsibility for speech and action, to the “they said”, which “can most easily be responsible for everything because no one has to vouch for anything.” (*Being and Time* 127) War crimes trials often reveal this conversion from the “I” to “we” to “the they,” where the defendants are quick to blame their actions on the “they” of their superiors, and the guidelines for who should assume responsibility appear indeterminate. The “they” tranquilizes, as Da-sein becomes comfortable with simply assuming its understanding which is itself a farce. “Fundamentally it remains undetermined and unasked *what* is then really to be understood” (*Being and Time* 178), Heidegger observes.

It is this response to the “they,” I think, that we want to address when we introduce the conscience in our everyday sense as a refusal to go along with the crowd. “Stand up for what is right,” we are urged. We sense in the conscience a sense of self which is different from the undifferentiated “they.” In contrast with Heidegger, however, what we term “what is right,” often simply signifies what is already determined by the “they” to be an inflexible rule, and, perhaps, even a moral law which we are obligated to follow.

In this sense, our everyday understanding of the conscience occurs as different from Heidegger’s. We often uphold an impossibility of two extremes: in the one, we

⁴ Ancira, Adam. “Synergy Beads, the Hot New Eco-Zen Bracelets, Goes International.” June, 2009. Synergy Beads. Web. <<http://www.bignews.biz/?id=802799&keys=eco-international-fashion-spiritual>>

privilege what Kierkegaard calls the “dogmatic,”⁵ as we see the essence of the conscience as a touchstone of response to established moral norms of behavior which we identify with the ethical. When we discuss the activity of the conscience, however, we characterize it simply as an indefinable “inner voice” which, in its unpredictability and apparent ambiguity, offers itself as an indeterminate guide for behavior because of its contrast with these norms. Perhaps Heidegger does not identify his conscience with the ethical due to these two conflicting understandings. I believe, however, that Heidegger’s interpretation may offer a third, and a more appropriate, understanding of the conscience than these two understandings, and one which may restore our understanding of the conscience and of the ethical.

Heidegger terms this position of being taken in by the “they,” disclosed in idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity, “the *entanglement* of Da-sein.” (*Being and Time* 164) Da-sein has fallen “*away from itself*” (*Being and Time* 176; more on this later) and into a groundlessness, as Da-sein becomes absorbed with fleeting and changing interests (curiosity) and chatter (idle talk), which distract it from what it is primordially concerned about—Being-toward-death. Da-sein, although still present as existing Being, moves from authenticity to in-authenticity, from one kind of integrated being-in-the-world to another kind where it is absorbed by the world. In the second kind, Da-sein still exists, as salt dissolved into saltwater still remains salt, but its individual identity is covered up.

One notable distinction, however, between the saltwater example and Da-sein’s falling prey exists: Da-sein is always already in the world, whether authentically or inauthentically. The authentic mode of being-in-the-world both enables Da-sein to authentically “find itself” and does not separate Da-sein from the world as a subject from an object. “Da-sein initially finds ‘itself’ in *what* it does, needs, expects, has charge of, in the things at hand which it initially *takes care of* in the surrounding world” (*Being and Time* 119). In authenticity, Da-sein does not lose the world; it instead encounters the world as the world is.

Similarly, the inauthentic mode of being-in-the-world of falling prey does not result in Da-sein existing more “in the world” than in the authentic mode. Da-sein, instead, becomes undifferentiated as it loses its awareness of its individual facticity—its given situation which provides the objects, situation, and people it encounters that enable it to discover itself in its interests. A person walks into the room and engages me in conversation. I discover that she has a slapstick sense of humor. Assuming that I have never encountered this type of humor before, I am surprised to discover that I appreciate her jokes. My friends, however, have a different sort of humor, and are quick to dismiss hers, so I go along—“How silly! Who would ever think *she’s* funny?” In

⁵ Which I also am not so eager to discard—I agree that the dogmatic as Kierkegaard understands it must be relinquished, but I am hesitant to say that this is all the dogmatic is.

both my hasty and pressured dismissal and my groundless gossip I have, without realizing it, fallen prey to the “they.”

Heidegger’s language of inauthenticity, falling away, “temptation” (*Being and Time* 177), and guilt, may suggest to Western ears an Augustinian, or, at the very least, a Christian soteriology, where the self is called by the outside voice of the divine to the restoration of divine goodness and to the living of a moral life. Heidegger, however, distances himself from this Christian reading of ethics as he is unwilling, unlike the Christians, to move the locus of both the fall and the restoration away from Da-sein, situated in the world. The possibility of idle talk and falling prey does not exist apart from Da-sein, Heidegger asserts, rather, the temptation comes from Da-sein itself. Similarly, Da-sein “brings itself back from the they” (*Being and Time* 268), not an outside voice apart from Da-sein. The discussion of Da-sein is, importantly, a discussion of the self-in-the-world.

Here we must further adjust an understanding of ethics as a system of moral laws to reflect Heidegger’s discussion. As Kierkegaard observes, the problem of ethics occurs when dogmatic as an outside law evidences its insufficiency in the ethical, as ethics “points to ideality as a task and assumes that every man possesses the requisite conditions” (*The Concept of Anxiety* 16). We have stepped from the outside ideal “Love at all times” to “Anika does not love Flor after Flor enters into a room to complain about everyone outside of it.” This appears to be one instance, but the more Anika thinks, “I must love at all times to be a complete person,” the more she realizes the impossibility of this love, for she knows that she cannot love at all times. If we identify falling prey as “falling away from” an outside law, then we will perpetually be confronted with a paradox as we attempt to abstract Da-sein from its reality as Being-in-the-world. Instead, Heidegger’s discussion of Da-sein as being-in-the-world may enable us to begin to understand the problem of the ethical and the dogmatic.

It is the conscience, a “phenomenon of Da-sein” (*Being and Time* 269), which brings Da-sein back from this falling prey as it modifies the “they-self” “so that it becomes *authentic* being-one’s-self.” (*Being and Time* 268) Where before, Da-sein did not choose for itself, but yielded the choice to the “they”, Da-sein now restoratively assumes its choice and “*makes possible*, first and foremost, its authentic potentiality-of-being” (*Being and Time* 268).

In Da-sein’s assumption of the choice to live authentically, where it finds itself primordially, conscience is revealed as existing “in the kind of being of Da-sein” (*Being and Time* 269). The word “in” does not depict conscience as an inner voice (or set of voices) apart from Da-sein as represented in some caricatures, where the devil and the angel each on a human shoulder and whisper advice to the unwitting subject. Instead, “in” differentiates the phenomenon of the conscience from “out”, and indicates

that conscience does not occur as an outside voice which calls Da-sein. Conscience, revealed as a call (*Being and Time* 269), calls from within.

In this inwardness, conscience calls silently. Heidegger earlier paradoxically describes keeping silent as a possible mode of discourse, which is articulation. Heidegger, I believe, has describes a resonant truth. When we “hearken” (*Being and Time* 163), we first adapt ourselves to our given surroundings. We become aware of noises and voices other than that or those which we listen for. In our attentiveness, we are more ready to understand than to seek to be understood. Keeping silent holds what is to be said, as “in order to be silent, Da-sein must have something to say,” (*Being and Time* 154), and keeping-silent unfolds the something to being-with-others in hearkening.

When we have discovered a truth that resonates with us, we are often eager to share it with everyone in a natural activity of delight, where we hasten to invite others into its disclosure. At some point, however, we may come to realize that a silent listening for the truth to further reveal itself invites a fuller disclosure than our immediate rush to blurt out our ‘understanding.’ We learn to listen and to wait for the voice to further speak as the “*apophansis*” (showing forth) of statement (*Being and Time* 154) occurs in a silent hearkening.

Our awareness of this preferability of what we identify as a hearkening for the truth may in turn help us to understand what Heidegger means when we listen for the call of conscience.⁶ When we hear our individual calls, we do not rush out to share the call and our response. Instead, we silently listen in order to understand the call, and in this hearkening, partake in the call and become aware of it. We become aware of a call that comes “*from me, and yet over me.*”

This curious language of “from” and “over” illuminates another potential problem in this discussion of the conscience which has not yet been addressed. Being-in-the-world, Heidegger writes, “*initially*” occurs “in the mode of the they” (*Being and Time* 130). Heidegger’s language of falling prey and of the conscience as the primordial interpretation of Da-sein, however, also uses words which suggest a “prior” understanding as a “primordial, ontological interpretation of Da-sein” (*Being and Time* 233). “Which comes first,” we may ask, “the inauthentic ‘initially,’ or the authentic ‘primordial’?”

The question of “prior” may be resolved by our awareness of the paradox that Heidegger characterizes which our mortality presents. We, as mortal beings, are always already headed toward death, as to be human is to be mortal. Our entrance into the

⁶ I am comparing the attitude of listening in both situations, not identifying conscience as “the truth”. Conscience may be true, but I am not sure if that is all Heidegger means when he says we are “in the truth”.

world and assumption of humanity (not as a representation, but as an entering into being human—"being da-Sein") is, as a result, a taking up of a primordial anticipation of departure. We still, however, have a sense of a future in our Being-in-the-world, as we take up our own projects, plans, and possibilities in everyday life. When we encounter our mortality in Angst, we are brought up short as we are attuned to the reality of the uncanny—not-Being-in-the-world—which is in our world.

Although we are mortal, we are not always aware of our mortality, and here Heidegger's "initially" enters. Initially, before we become aware of our mortality, we are preoccupied with our lostness in the "they", and we "fall prey" as we fail to recognize the reality of our Being-towards-death. The conscience mediates between the "initially" and the "primordial" to call us to face our mortality, where we both acknowledge the lack or our initial lostness in "the they" in being-guilty" (*Being and Time* 287), and the conscience "is ready for Angst" (*Being and Time* 297) in resoluteness. Resoluteness "calls forth to the situation" (*Being and Time* 300) as we face Angst not helplessly, unable to act, but in care with an awareness of our Being-toward death. The conscience calls from Da-sein and over Da-sein as a preparation for the uncanny which Da-sein has not yet faced.

This understanding of the conscience as resoluteness offers a different approach to the earlier raised question of the contrasting depictions of the conscience. The conscience neither responds to an outside norm, for the call comes from da-Sein, nor occurs as undifferentiated, for it is a response to (or, better, "about") its own Being-towards death. As Da-sein, it neither abstracts the ethical from the "world" in a flight to rigid dogma nor removes the "world" from the ethical. Instead, the conscience functions as an activity of Being-in-the-world.

Perhaps Heidegger's dynamic portrayal of the conscience offers an approach to better understand the ethical as involving a state of being as becoming; we are called not so much to be ethical as to be living ethically. By this statement I mean that we are called to live with the developing ethical consciousness that is the conscience which these norms attempt to instill rather than to seek to conform to the norms themselves. A state of becoming cannot be rigid; in fact, it must be a making new. Levinas writes in *Reflection on the Philosophy of Hitlerism* of the Heraclitean flow of the changing river of the spirit.⁷ Perhaps the idea of a river includes an accompanying riverbed, and perhaps living ethically does similarly involve the living of an objectively experienced truthful principle, in this sense the dogmatic, but the primacy in thought is given to the

⁷ Levinas calls this "a melancholy" of "an illusory present", but I see understand the flow of the river as a vivifying flow which, as it introduces the living present, also carries traces of its past sources in its current. For a clear exposition of the living present and internal time consciousness, see Robert Sokolowski's "Introduction to Phenomenology".

flow of the river, and the principle, although necessary for the river's existence, is a living one with contours and bends, ever open to new discovery.

Here, though, I differ slightly from Heidegger. To live ethically is to follow the call of conscience which calls us to fall into the Heraclitean river, and, asymptotically, to always further release ourselves into its current. We are awaiting death, but this awaiting occurs in, in an addition to Heidegger, primarily as a release and secondarily as resoluteness, for we must release our control—our 'understanding' of the ethical as a static norm or principle, and our inauthentic ambiguity which we call understanding--before we can begin to live ethically, resolutely, and authentically towards death.

When we follow the call of the conscience, we follow the call to live ethically as living- and Being-in the truth. This is not disheartening constraint, it is, in fact, purest liberation, and as therefore, it is the most authentic realization of the choice which conscience offers to reclaim our own selves. Our authenticity is encountered in the united movement of the conscience with the ethical which is our Being-in-the-world. We engage in a process of becoming, authentically, the ethical conscience.

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