

# 7

## Death as Challenge

### DEATH IN HEIDEGGER AS THE RADICAL POSSIBILITY OF EXISTENCE

THE MOST ENDURING BOOK of Martin Heidegger (1889–1976), *Sein und Zeit* (1927), is aimed at working out “the question of the meaning of *Being*,” examining “time as the possible horizon for any understanding whatsoever of *Being*.”<sup>1</sup> The hermeneutical keys to understand the meaning of being will come from the union of being and time.

The clarification of the meaning of being is, however, eclipsed, as Heidegger remarks, by the historical development of Western philosophy, which has obscured question about being. In characterizing being as the most universal, as the indefinable, and as the self-evident, metaphysics has veiled both the answer and the question concerning the meaning of being. However, “every questioning is a seeking,”<sup>2</sup> and the question about the meaning of being appears as a task for whoever may formulate it, since “all ontology, no matter how rich and tightly knit a system of categories it has at its disposal, remains fundamentally blind and perverts its innermost

1. Heidegger, *Being and Time*. For the original German text, cf. *Sein und Zeit*.
2. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 3.

### Part 3: Questioning as Salvation

intent if it has not previously clarified the meaning of being sufficiently and grasped this clarification as its fundamental task.”<sup>3</sup>

The confusion between the entity and the being of the entity constitutes a serious obstacle for the proper formulation of the question, even more so if we realize that the one asking the question is actually an entity. In this way, posing the question about the meaning of being involves making an entity (the one that is questioning) become transparent in its being. The entity that wonders about the meaning of being is *Dasein*, and questioning is a possibility of *Dasein*, of the being-there which has been thrown into the world, but it is not just any kind of possibility, since “understanding the meaning of being is itself a determination of being of *Dasein*.”<sup>4</sup>

The question about the meaning of being reflects the centrality of questioning for *Dasein*. The act of questioning is essential to all sciences, and “the real ‘movement’ of the sciences takes place in the revision of these basic concepts, a revision which is more or less radical and lucid with regard to itself. A science’s level of development is determined by the extent to which it is capable of a crisis in its basic concepts,”<sup>5</sup> as it has happened in twentieth-century physics, with the introduction of quantum mechanics and the theory of relativity. According to Heidegger, “fundamental concepts are determinations in which the area of knowledge underlying all the thematic objects of a science attains an understanding that precedes and guides all positive investigation.”<sup>6</sup> Fundamental concepts enable us to comprehend a science before achieving specific results. The particular aspect of the entity that is *Dasein* is that the act of understanding being (the task for which it poses the question about the meaning of being) cannot be separated from that of determining the being of *Dasein*. *Dasein* is not an ordinary entity that simply occurs among other entities. The burden of posing the question about being and searching the understanding of its meaning is carried by *Dasein*, in such a way that it is impossible to understand being without understanding *Dasein*.

However, “*Dasein* always understands itself in terms of its existence, in terms of its possibilities to be itself or not to be.”<sup>7</sup> This ontic-ontological primacy of *Dasein* for the understanding of being in general and the mode of being of every entity in particular is assimilated by Heidegger to Aristo-

3. Ibid., 9.

4. Ibid., 10.

5. Ibid., 8.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., 10.

tle's statement that "the soul is, in some way, all things."<sup>8</sup> *Dasein* is an entity capable of considering any class of entities, and this is the reason why the mission of formulating the question about the meaning of being, and of looking for the understanding of being, falls upon *Dasein*.

To interrogate *Dasein* and to elucidate its existential analytic are necessary steps in order to adequately pose the question about being, because, as Heidegger remarks, the question about being cannot be artificially disconnected from the question about the being of *Dasein*. The goal of Heidegger's extensive study of the existential analytic of *Dasein* in *Being and Time* is to offer a hermeneutical foundation for the question about the meaning of being, which needs, first of all, to be asked about the form in which being determines itself in *Dasein*. The key for the understanding of being resides in the being of *Dasein*, and this assignment has to be carried out, according to Heidegger, within the horizon of time, for *Dasein* has temporality as its own being.

Contrary to Hegel, Heidegger thinks that the realm of universal history has no centrality for the understanding of the historical being. It is the "historicity [*Geschichtlichkeit*]" of *Dasein* that founds any possible universal history. Historicity is one of the possibilities of *Dasein*: the hermeneutical primacy belongs to the existential analytic of *Dasein*, not to universal history as the scenario in which *Dasein* is inserted. Knowledge about history [*Historie*] is only possible as a mode of being of *Dasein* in its being questioned. The historicity of *Dasein* founds the being of history, which seems to be a projection of individual existence rather than a substantive reality. According to Heidegger, the historicity of *Dasein* belongs to its fundamental ontological constitution, and it makes possible an ontic understanding (concerning entities) of universal history. The historicity of *Dasein* founds the possibility of historical understanding [*historisches Verstehen*]: the scientific interpretation of history is the result of the historicity of *Dasein*, not of the intelligibility of the historical process as such.

*Dasein* is an entity that constitutes itself as being-in-the-world [*in-der-Welt-sein*]: being-in-the-world is essential to any characterization of *Dasein*. As an entity that is in the world, *Dasein* shows a series of fundamental structures that, according to Heidegger, are centered upon the idea of "openness [*Erschlossenheit*]." The totality of this structure of *Dasein* appears as "care" [*Sorge*]: world, openness, and care are the three basic categories in the Heideggerian understanding of individual existence. *Dasein* is a temporal entity that is in the world, and as such, it

8. Cf. Aristotle, *De Anima* G8, 431b 21.

### Part 3: Questioning as Salvation

opens itself to other entities and takes care of itself. This “taking care of itself” has a primary moment: that of “anticipating itself” [*Sich-vorwegsein*], what means that *Dasein* exists for its own sake and, while existing, it always behaves in relation to its being-able. There is a permanent state of incompleteness that belongs to the fundamental constitution of *Dasein*. This incompleteness means that *Dasein* is always a “being-able-to,” and the notion of anticipation concerns the disposition by *Dasein* of its own possibilities of existence. Anticipation means that *Dasein* does not have an existence alien to its intrinsic possibilities of existing, but, rather, it exists in being turned to them.

Possibilities and existence cannot be separated in *Dasein*. Through anticipation, *Dasein* actualizes its possibilities of existence, taking the lead in its own life. Anticipation expresses the state of incompleteness, of being-able, that defines *Dasein*. It means that *Dasein* can never achieve its integrity while it is: it cannot reach its plenitude if it does not cease to be a “being-in-the-world,” if it does not lose its determination as an entity in the world, open to other entities, and taking care of itself. Behold the tragedy of *Dasein*: its integrity demands its death, and *Dasein* has to lose the *da* of its *sein* in such a way that it is no longer an entity thrown into the world but a being which is not “there,” because it has lost its “rootedness” in the world. Since the question about the meaning of being is linked to the meaning of *Dasein*, ceasing to be in the world is the only way for *Dasein* to reveal the meaning of its own being and, therefore, of being as such. As human beings, we experience the death of other people, not their “act of dying,” which belongs to the most intimate dimension of every *Dasein*. We can witness death, not the very act of dying: we can never know the nature and meaning of death. In many actions, one *Dasein* can act in the place of another. This is not the case with death: my death is mine. The death of *Dasein* entirely belongs to it. No one else can assume it. While it is, *Dasein* is a “not-yet.” However, the accomplishment of its end means that it no longer exists [*Nichtmehrdasein*], and reaching its end is an irreplaceable way of being: the act of dying is unique for every *Dasein*.

On the basis of the former remarks, how should we conceive of the death of *Dasein*? Is it the consummation of a process? Death cannot be imagined as the act of reaching an end [*Zu-Ende-sein*] but as the state of being turned to the end [*sein zum Ende*]. There is no life without death and the constant anticipation of death as the supreme possibility of *Dasein*. According to Heidegger, his analysis of death does not necessarily lead to a decision capable of elucidating whether there is an afterlife. Rather,

it is intended at clarifying how death becomes present within each *Dasein*, as a reality that reveals the possibility of *Dasein* in its most radical form. Death reveals the true possibilities of *Dasein* and moreover, its most radical possibility: the possibility of the radical impossibility to exist [*Daseinsunmöglichkeit*]. Death is a task that *Dasein* has to assume. Otherwise, it will fall into inauthenticity. Death should not be the object of a mere empirical certainty (we are all going to die) for we need to be existentially convinced about death.

The importance of the notion of anticipation lies in its special conceptual condition: it is not simply one possibility among others of *Dasein* but it is the expression of the incompleteness of *Dasein*, of its not-yet, which should be regarded neither as an appended moment to be added, as one step more to be overcome, nor as something that has not become accessible yet but as a proper “not-yet” that *Dasein* needs to be at every time. As an entity thrown into the world, *Dasein* is a “not-yet,” and the only way to cease to be a “not-yet” is to lose its character of *Dasein* with the advent of death. Anticipation allows *Dasein* to be turned to its end and become convinced about its inexorability. Anticipation is therefore a sign of authenticity. An authentic existential project is based upon the understanding of death: it is not based upon the attempt at escaping it. The fact of being turned to death does not mean, according to Heidegger, that *Dasein* has to commit suicide in order to exist in an authentic way but that it needs to understand the power of death, as a radical possibility, by anticipating itself to it. Anticipation is necessary for *Dasein* to understand that death is an ineluctable reality that expresses its fundamental ontological constitution as care. Death, for Heidegger, vindicates *Dasein* in its singularity, since it can only be assumed by every *Dasein*.

The proper meaning of “care” appears in temporality: temporality determines the being of *Dasein*. Because it is temporal, *Dasein* can achieve its integrity by anticipating itself to the end through resolution. However, this act of anticipating itself can only be based, as Heidegger highlights, upon the future: one can only anticipate what is to come. Future is, above all, the future of *Dasein*. Future is the realm of projection that reflects the possibilities of *Dasein*. Future enables *Dasein* to envision the meaning of its being as a temporal reality and to understand itself as care turned to its end, which is death. *Dasein* is the “in-between” that links birth and death: it is a finite project developed over time. Although *Dasein* has been thrown, it is capable of turning to its end, interlacing the origin (the fall, the act of having been thrown) and the end (death) through care, which

### Part 3: Questioning as Salvation

allows it to anticipate itself. Temporality is the foundation of the historicity of *Dasein*.

By rooting history in the historicity of *Dasein*, Heidegger is actually assimilating it to worldliness. The historicity of *Dasein* is, essentially, historicity of the world. History, just as the world, responds to the condition of “having been thrown into the world” that defines *Dasein* as being-in-the-world. From this perspective, the question about the meaning of history loses its power, for history has been dissolved into historicity, and moreover, into the worldliness of *Dasein*. If history is not independent from the possibilities of *Dasein*, the question must be referred to the meaning of *Dasein*, not to the meaning of history. However, *Dasein* is an entity that has been thrown into the world, and it is turned to death: the meaning of *Dasein* is death as its radical possibility, because it is the only way for *Dasein* to achieve its integrity as a finite being.

#### THE CHALLENGE TO DEATH

The distressing presence of death in the horizon of the human existence has not necessarily inflicted upon humanity a sentiment of defeat. Rather, the vacuum and nothingness of the sudden cease of life, which we cannot escape, have actually stimulated our constant will to create a world and a history.

Humanity has not surrendered to death, nor has it wasted its energy in trying to cope with the fear that it generates. Rather, it has tried to transform its existence in the world into a creative scenario, into the life of the spirit, of the human action projected onto the infinite and unlimited: death has been the gate of the true being of mankind. In this sense, no one “dies,” since death has opened mankind to being and to the horizon of its deepest quest. Death is the first fruit of *ulterioritas*.<sup>9</sup>

9. We do not know what will happen after death in its dimensional projection (in space and time), but we do know (in the most genuine sense of knowing: the knowing of mankind in its awareness of its vocation to being) that everything that happens cannot be alien to the horizon of being. Where does death come from? What establishes it as the frontier of the temporal human existence? Death is imposed by being; death is the border between concretion and radical openness; it is the very frontier between being perceived as mystery and being perceived as absoluteness, between mankind limited in its openness to the absolute and the overcoming of each limit in being as such, in the dynamic-absolute: death is the link between being and non-being, the fundamental identity, the gate to trans-being and to non-trans-non-being, the inaugural entrance to *categoria*, to absoluteness ever transcended and transcendent, to the totality which overcomes and overcomes itself. Why to live and

The acceptance of death as the genuine horizon of every human being constitutes an abnegated capitulation to the world. Life consists of a constant struggle for the preservation of a realm of autonomy, in opposition to a material world that continuously threatens our independence. The vulnerability of life, its deepest tendency towards death, is perhaps its most important feature. However, consciousness cannot merely admit

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why to die? Why death, after all? The power of the question is almost invincible, as it was in Unamuno's *Sentimiento trágico de la vida*, but it takes us to the horizon of existence and death, which is ulteriority. Is not, by any means, the absolute precisely the "trans," the "not-being-itself" and tending towards itself, the inscrutable power of that which separates and joins, of non-being and being, of the "beyond," of the possibility of constantly formulating questions that may constitute (in themselves) the absoluteness, as the perennial possibility of extending the space of what is unknown and becomes known in the act of questioning? However, if the absolute is also totality and plenitude, how and to what can it open itself? A similar aporia appears in our own individual life: if we are already, in a certain way, absoluteness and greatness, why should we live? What else can we do if we already exist, if we are already situated in the realm of being, so that, in the very act of existing, we have already achieved some sort of eternity, since we are already participating in something that cannot be annihilated (the truth about our having existed; a similar consideration can be found in the thought of Spinoza, as Gilles Deleuze has shown in a series of lectures: *Spinoza: immortalité et éternité*). However, we live in order to ask, and this is the beginning of our salvation. We live in order to open openness itself, and to discover that the absolute is being conceived as questionability, as tendency to the trans-absolute and to transcending trans-absoluteness. What is undetermined is not susceptible to proof (for a proof is a determination). Therefore, the non-existence of a limit in thought and progress is not susceptible to demonstration, if by it we understand the presence of a hypothetical-deductive argument, starting from clear, well-known premises and arriving at a universally valid conclusion with regard to its premises. Such a degree of clarity is alien to the power of questioning, which is above any further clarification. What we state, or moreover, presuppose (as an ontic postulate that gathers the conditions of possibility for mankind to apprehend the display of being) is that thinking is infinite and infinitesimal and reason, the human being, and reality project themselves onto ulteriority, onto the capacity for a "beyond," onto progress. Otherwise, we would be setting a limit without any legitimacy to do so. It is necessary to make a decision. Culture, thought, philosophy, and religion have tried to prepare us for it throughout the centuries, but it is the personal task of each individual. However, if a more convincing argument were needed (even though such a "demonstration" would always be limited, for conscience has the last word, and it is not always convinced by the evidence of the logical discourse but by the ineffable power of that which conscience itself wants to assume), Gödel's theorem might serve as an orientation, because it proves that no single axiomatic system can be both consistent and complete. No single axiomatic system can justify itself. It is necessary to bring about another system that may offer a justification, but this process goes on ad infinitum: we need this potential infiniteness in order to give meaning to the world and our mind. Plenitude can only be given in the fact of transcendence itself, which unifies any opposition in progress: in the entatic quest. Death needs to be arrogated by everyone.

### Part 3: Questioning as Salvation

the inexorable nature of death. Consciousness has to affirm itself through an attempt to challenge the irrevocable character of death. Consciousness represents a perpetual challenge to that which we have called the “sameness of the world,” the fact that the vastness of phenomena which take place in the visible universe only reinforce the primacy of the inexorable laws of nature. No novelty, no purity, no real imagination, no authentic challenge to the cyclic reiteration of matter and its incessant transformation can happen within the world. The most severe expression of the sameness of the world is death. The struggle against death is the quest of freedom and purity: the search for something that may be unconditioned. The longing for permanence is the will of life, the endeavor to create. The edification of history is the result of this ambition to commit oneself to something that may transcend the “mediation” of the world.

Death is a phenomenon of life. Because death exists, renewal inside the sphere of nature is possible. Nevertheless, death emerges as an “insurmountable horizon” which plants the seed for its own challenge. Death is the condition of possibility of any *potential will* to challenge that which is given. Life involves the ineluctable orientation towards death. The awareness of this fact, the precise understanding that our destiny is death, reintegration into a silent nature, rubricates authenticity: the recognition that we are a “limit.” In death we discover our “truth,” our condition of natural beings that have received the “gift” of the highest existing complexity, but are nonetheless bound to the cycles of life and death. The finite character of our existence grants us the chance to expand the energies of life and to assume a vivid longing for life. Because existence is inextricably linked to time and space, because existence is finite, we learn to love life and its profoundest treasures: love, beauty, and wisdom. Because existence is finite, we truly become individual beings, whose vocation is no other than leaving their most genuine trace in the paths of life. Because existence is finite, time and space are meaningful for us, so that can we feel the exhortation to enlarge the frontiers of thought.

In an infinite existence, no commitment to broadening the scope of life and thought would be felt. Dissipation would prevail, a disdainful attitude towards time and space. Within infiniteness, everything is old, the vestige of a seed which has been already planted. In finiteness there is room for novelty, freshness, and youth. We can dream of infinity and we can seek an inexhaustible realm of purity, free from the concatenation of causes and effects (the concourse of wills of power and the inexorable cycles of nature) which darkens our finite existence.



A being whose destiny is death anxiously longs for permanence. The understanding of our finite nature opens the possibility for challenging death. We know that death cannot be defeated. We know that we must die. However, we feel the most powerful calling to challenge death through creation. By grasping our finite nature, we realize about the tyrannical character of the frontier that we face. We therefore feel committed to challenging such an indolent limit. There is no room for “more” within infiniteness, for every *plus* has been diluted into that which is unlimited. In a finite existence it is possible to long for “more.”

The acceptance of the inexorability of death is captive to the solitude of consciousness. Self-satisfied consciousness will trumpet the merit of having understood its intrinsically mortal nature. Turned into “heroic consciousness,” its courage will generate before death. However, heroic consciousness will not lose its passion for life, its commitment to the transformation of the world, and its consecration to humanity. Self-satisfied consciousness believes that the goal of life resides in achieving happiness and the mitigation of suffering. Pleasure (not a selfish pleasure which inspires indifference towards the world but a wise *hedone*, the awareness that the highest aspiration of the human life cannot be alien to obtaining the greatest degree of fruition and personal satisfaction) and the edification of a different future, emancipated from the chains of the present, will be regarded as the aims of existence. Apathetic consciousness will accept death as the inevitable destiny of life. However, it will show no commitment to creation. Apathetic consciousness will feel no fascination for life and history. It will experience no vocation for changing the world and leaving its most genuine trace. Its life will be enslaved by the rhapsody of phenomena that fall upon it. Apathetic consciousness will deprive itself of any attachment to life and any longing for creation. It will not seek to challenge death and finiteness. It will not look for *novum*.

Distressed consciousness will attack, with no piety, all those who want to challenge death. Absorbed by its own and tormented solitude, distressed consciousness seems to accept death guided by the spirit of humble resignation (although the truth is that it is possessed by a deep fear towards death and its dissolution into the vastness of the universe; distressed consciousness conceals this profound fear behind the mask of maturity and courage). Also, distressed consciousness looks with malice and rancor to all those who wish to “defeat” death (even if subjugated by a delusory longing) through creation. Distressed consciousness will proclaim that any project of “transcending” the *hic et nunc* of present

### Part 3: Questioning as Salvation

existence is vain, the manifestation of candid naivety, the expression of self-incurred immaturity. The creative will, the wish for planting the seed of freshness, wonder, and ineffability, is the principal enemy of distressed consciousness. In suicidal consciousness, its courage will allow it to assume its mortal nature through the anticipation of death. Deprived of any attachment to life, suicidal consciousness will discover death as a radical possibility, as the eminent symbol of existential authenticity. Suicidal consciousness will answer that which Camus called “the only truly serious problem of philosophy.”<sup>10</sup> The shadow of meaninglessness encourages suicidal consciousness to look for a “meaning”: death, its dilution into the enormity of the world; its return to the arcane fountains of being, matter, and transformation. Suicidal consciousness will turn death into its “life.” It will anticipate its ineluctable end by rejecting the horizon of possibilities that life can offer. It will renounce its power in space and time, the displaying of its vital energy, in order to submerge itself into being, the vastness of the world and the dissolution of any vestige of its individuality. Suicidal consciousness will not commit itself to creation, *novum*, the *orientation* of the multiple paths that life can take towards the growth of world and thought.

Consciousness that abandons the roughness of its solitude commits itself to the creative capacity of life: it shows a creative acceptance of death. Creative consciousness offers itself to a goal which transcends its narrow limits, thereby contemplating a vast ocean of possibilities, a task, a vocation: that of broadening the horizons of being and expanding the energies of life. It does not reject death, nor does it try to elude its presence. Creative consciousness accepts the reality of death. This is the reason why it seeks to challenge death. Creative consciousness does not hide itself from something that will eventually happen. Rather, it learns to look to death in a different way. It is no longer afraid by death or possessed by resignation: it is moved by the longing for tasting all the possibilities of life. Its desire is focused on creating. Because of having contemplated death as challenge instead of inexorability, creative consciousness takes advantage of all its possibilities in each moment of its existence. To challenge death is equal to delving into life. To drain the cup of life demands the longing for beauty, love, and wisdom. Pleasure is the rubric of life in its most genuine nature. The most iridescent manifestation of the gift of life shines in thought, for the act of thinking allows us to become aware of the possibilities of life.

10. Cf. the beginning of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* by Albert Camus: “Il n’ya qu’un problème philosophique vraiment sérieux: c’est le suicide.”

Thought is already a victory over the imminence of death. Through thinking, we open ourselves to the infinite space of being. Thinking is therefore the *fundamentum* of our salvation, greatness, and dignity.<sup>11</sup> We must challenge death through creativity, through our quest of a real *novum*; of purity, limpidness, and inexhaustibility: through our search for love, beauty, and wisdom. We challenge the finitude of life when we commit ourselves to goals that do not demand a further “reward”: love, beauty, and wisdom. Even if constrained to finitude, even if condemned to perish with the destruction of our material world, by seeking them we have shown faith in the idea that life and creativity are worthy, because they allow us to contemplate signs of love, beauty, and wisdom: we have believed in an “ultimate end,” in that which is worth being sought for its own sake, even if the shadow of annihilation darkens its future and inundates our souls with the waters of nostalgia and the tears of melancholy.

11. The greatness and dignity of the human being are beautifully expressed by Leibniz: “A single spirit is worth a whole world, because it not only expresses the whole world, but it also knows it and governs itself as does God. In this way we may say that though every substance expresses the whole universe, yet the other substances express the world rather than God, while spirits express God rather than the world. This nature of spirits, so noble that it enables them to approach divinity as much as is possible for created things, has as a result that God derives infinitely more glory from them than from the other beings, or rather the other beings furnish to spirits the material for glorifying him. This moral quality of God which constitutes him Lord and Monarch of spirits influences him so to speak personally and in a unique way” (*Discourse on Metaphysics*, 36). The relationship between totality and singularity, infiniteness and infinitesimalness, reaches one of its culminating points in the work of Leibniz, especially in his idea of “monads without windows,” of an autonomous universe that contains in its own notion the totality of its possible determinations (*praedicatum inest subiecto*: an intellect knowing the subject in its “selfness” might deduce all the predicative determinations to follow, in Leibniz’s view). Mankind therefore appears as *un petit dieu*. In order to be coherent with that which we have said about anteriority and the transfinitization of being we must hold Leibniz’s idea to be incomplete, because the deduction of any possible predicate from the analytic apprehension of the subject meets the following ineluctable difficulty: being is displayed in the ontic space, which transcends any previous ontic space; being “broadens itself,” it “grows,” it is subject of dynamism, and it creates new possibilities in the context of *categoria*, which integrates both being and non-being (being goes beyond being, it *progresses*).