

Review of George Pattison, *Heidegger on Death: A Critical Theological Essay*

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George Pattison's *Heidegger on Death (HD)* aims at critically assessing Heidegger's analysis of death included in his magnum opus *Being and Time (BT)* (1927). Given the peculiar status of Heidegger's analysis, tightly interwoven into a complex argumentative narrative touching on an array of foundational issues in philosophy, Pattison must first of all spell out for his reader Heidegger's overall project in *BT* and show how Heidegger's analysis of death fits in it. As the author makes clear, *HD* isn't meant to be a piece of Heidegger scholarship but rather '... an essay about death that uses Heidegger ... as a way of thinking about the question of death in a Christian and theological perspective' (*HD*, p. 12). This self-imposed task places a second burden on Pattison, i.e., to draw on theological premises to examine Heidegger's analysis of death and find it ultimately wanting. An implicit third burden, which the author only occasionally seems to intend to meet, is to state in exactly what sense the said premises are Christian and theological; although Pattison draws on a wealth of religious writers including Augustine, Luther, Franz Rosenzweig, Gabriel Marcel, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and (above all) Kierkegaard, it is not always clear it is the religious dimension of this material that does the critical job intended by Pattison.

The book is divided into six chapters and an introduction. In the Introduction, Pattison motivates his focus on death by the centrality of the topic in human experience, and his focus on Heidegger with his claim that the German philosopher is one 'who has offered the most intellectually consistent and rigorous account of death in modern philosophy' (*HD*, p. 13). Pattison should have warned his reader that Heidegger's account of death is not so much the most consistent and rigorous in modern philosophy as being virtually the only one: there are systematic reasons why death has not been a serious topic of discussion in philosophy (modern or otherwise), and omitting these reasons can mislead the reader into thinking that Heidegger is a choice among many. The truth is that Heidegger's focus on death is highly idiosyncratic, matching the highly

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idiosyncratic nature of his project in *BT*, which takes us back to Pattison's need to spell out this project for his reader.

In 'Chapter 1: Running Towards Death,' Pattison does precisely this job. Putting aside what can be called inaccuracies at best and serious misinterpretations at worst (since it is no exaggeration to say that these are common to almost any introductory account of Heidegger's *BT*), one can object to Pattison some sloppiness in capturing the argumentative thread that goes from Heidegger's first move, i.e., his claim for the need to 'explicitly restat[e] the question of Being' (*BT*, p. 2), to his motivating the analysis of death based on the claim that only the phenomenon of death allows us to bring into sight Dasein 'as a whole' ('Dasein' is of course Heidegger's term of art in reference to human beings); for instance, Pattison skips (or brings inordinately late into the picture) Heidegger's step (crucial by any standards) of defining Dasein in terms of existence (*BT*, p. 42). Although this chapter is largely expository, Pattison anticipates what is going to be his leading criticism to Heidegger in the book, i.e., that Heidegger is not "wrong" from a religious point of view because he denies an afterlife ... but rather because of how he portrays the defining characteristics of human Dasein in the here and now' (*HD*, p. 14). This criticism makes it more urgent for Pattison to spell out in exactly what sense his attack is theological, since the same criticism has arguably been made from philosophers coming from atheistic quarters (classically Jean-Paul Sartre in *Being and Nothingness* (see Subsection E: 'My Death', in Section II: 'Freedom and Facticity: the Situation', Chapter 1, Part 4.))

In 'Chapter 2: Death and I,' Pattison makes an original move and connects Heidegger to German idealism (Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel) to show 'how running towards death is both an act of freedom and the revelation of how and who we really are' (*HD*, p. 35) ('running towards death' has emerged in Chapter 1 as Heidegger's terminological choice to refer to the only possible authentic relation towards death, something like 'being constantly aware that death is one's own most defining possibility'). Although Pattison's discussion is valuable, it's not totally clear how the particulars at various points are relevant for its overall thrust (for instance, pp. 42 and 43 on Fichte's *Science of Knowledge* seem unnecessarily prolix). Pattison then draws on Kierkegaard and France Rosenzweig to question Heidegger's making the connection between the notions 'Dasein' and 'whole'. Of course, Heidegger denies the possibility of Dasein's ever becoming a whole, but Pattison suggests that this denial is otiose, since theologically, 'the religious relationship of Creator-creature already undermines Heidegger's basic project of wanting to understand Dasein as a whole' (*HD*, p. 81).

In 'Chapter 3: At the Scaffold,' Pattison draws on Dostoyevsky to question 'the plausibility of the notion of anticipatory resoluteness at the level of concrete existentiell life' ('anticipatory resoluteness' is the existential attitude corresponding to 'running towards death,' whereas 'existentiell life' is our factual life as opposed to the ontological structures that determine it, which Heidegger distinguishes with the term 'existential').

In 'Chapter 4: Guilt, Death, and the Ethical,' Pattison objects to Heidegger for misreading his theological sources, specifically Luther and Kierkegaard. A focus on these sources is motivated by Pattison by the strangeness of portraying Dasein's being towards death in terms of *guilt* (as Heidegger does).

In 'Chapter 5: The Death of Others,' Pattison focuses on the death of others, an aspect of death that, he argues, has strong ethical implications and which undermines

Heidegger's attempt both at canceling out ethical questions with respect to death and at radically individualizing death by making it relevant only to the person who dies. Pattison responds that the deaths of others may be 'more existentially provocative than thinking of my own death' (*HD*, p. 112). Pattison's point seems plausible, but his reasoning behind it, i.e., my own death is only possible whereas the death of others can be actual, is unlikely to have impressed Heidegger, for whom the very same reasoning is instrumental to argue that only one's own death can be experienced as a *possibility*, a point that is crucial in Heidegger's whole analysis of death and that explains why only one's *own* death is his focus of analysis.

In 'Chapter 6: Language, Death, and the Eternal,' Pattison connects the topics of language and death drawing on Heidegger's 'linguistic turn,' which puts language (*logos*) at the center of Dasein's condition. Pattison's criticism to Heidegger in this respect is not having addressed 'a structure of answerability and other-relatedness' (*HD*, p. 129) present in language as much as in 'the ethical relationship' (*HD*, p. 129).

On the whole, George Pattison's *HD* raises enough points to make a case for the view that there is something (interestingly) flawed in Heidegger's analysis of death, that only a Christian and theological position can succeed in showing. From a philosophical perspective, Pattison's case suffers a bit from some lack of accuracy in terminology as well as of clarity in the argumentation at some points (examples are too numerous to cite here).