

Heidegger on Anxiety and Normative Practice
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Abstract: I offer a new interpretation of Heidegger’s analysis of anxiety in *Being and Time* as an account of the relationship between individual agents and the public normative practices of their communities. According to a prominent recent interpretation, Heidegger’s discussions of anxiety, death and the “call of conscience” together explain how we can respond to the norms of our practices as reasons and subject them to critical reflection. I argue that this is only part of the story. Anxiety is an occasion for Dasein to take responsibility for its ongoing activity of interpreting the possibilities for living and acting made available by the normative practices of its community, which is presupposed and overlooked from the perspective of everyday Dasein. Public normativity underdetermines Dasein’s conception of what it would mean to take up any of the possibilities available in its world as a way of living its own life.

And we can also say: When you say “I love my love” the child learns the meaning of the word “love” and what love is. *That (what you do)* will *be* love in the child's world; and if it is mixed with resentment and intimidation, then love is a mixture of resentment and intimidation, and when love is sought *that* will be sought. When you say “I’ll take you tomorrow, I promise”, the child begins to learn what temporal durations are, and what *trust* is, and what you do will show what trust is worth. When you say “Put on your sweater”, the child learns what commands are and what *authority* is, and if giving orders is something that creates anxiety for you, then authorities are anxious, authority itself uncertain...And what will the day be like when the person “realizes” what he “believed” about what love and trust and authority are? And how will he stop believing it?

Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason*, 177

1. Introduction

What is the relationship between an individual human being and the normative practices of her community? Heidegger’s engagement with this question takes up a substantial portion of *Being and Time*, an investigation into the “meaning of being,” by way of understanding our being as Dasein, “Being-in-the-world.” We are entities that, by our nature, make things intelligible. In Dasein’s world, things have the significance that they do in the context of practices that give them meaning, possibilities for living and acting that are taken up by agents. We are each “thrown” into a meaningful world of practices that we did not design, and which set out the ways of being a person that are available in a particular cultural context. It is natural to think of these possibilities as roles that a person can occupy: doctor, teacher, parent, podcaster, skateboarder. For each of us,

what it means to be any of these things is largely given by existing practices and the social norms that govern them: what one does, if one is a concerned citizen, a supportive partner, a college athlete, or a “cool person.”

Heidegger refers to “the Self of everyday Dasein” as the “one-self” or the “‘they’-self” because the meaningfulness of its world is determined by these normative structures, the way that things have been “publicly interpreted” (SZ 129/167).¹ But in the transition between Division I and Division II, Heidegger’s focus seems to shift from an account of the intelligibility of our shared world in terms of public, inherently social normative practices, to a discussion of existentialist themes in the life of a solitary individual. The fulcrum of this transition is his introduction of the concept of “anxiety,” an experience of disruption in Dasein’s everyday relation to its world, which thereby brings an aspect of its own being into view that had been hidden by its “absorption” in its usual projects. “Inauthentic Dasein” is then contrasted with “authentic Dasein,” who, despite the public articulation of possibilities for being that are independent of itself, is somehow able to take up its “ownmost potentiality-for-Being” (SZ 300/347).

Recently, readers of Heidegger in the analytic philosophical tradition have found in *Being and Time* an alternative to more familiar Kantian pictures of our agency.² For a Kantian, the important contrast for understanding human agency is between the way that a non-rational animal responds to incentives in its environment, and the human capacity to act for reasons. While the good of an animal is given by the nature of its species, a human being must determine for herself

¹ For citations of works by Heidegger, I will use the abbreviation *SZ*, followed by the page number in the original German and then in the Macquarrie and Robinson translation for *Being and Time*, and the abbreviation *P*, followed by the page number for *Pathmarks*.

² Early proponents of the view include John Haugeland (1998; 2000), Steven Crowell (2007a, 2007b, 2013, 2015, 2020) and Quill Kukla (writing as Rebecca Kukla) (2002). More recently, its insights have been taken up and developed into a cluster of related positions by scholars such as Denis McManus (2015a), Sacha Golob (2014, 2020), David Egan (2021) and Matthew Burch (2010), among others.

the conception of the good at which she will aim, and so what counts as success in acting.³ Rational agents have the capacity to critically reflect on apparent incentives, asking whether there is good reason to pursue them. Human agency is thus characterized by the capacity to take a consideration as a normative reason for acting, a principle that explains what makes some action justified and worth doing.

For Heidegger, the important contrast for understanding our agency is not between rational agents and non-human animals, but rather between the normativity internal to human practices, and the way that these norms are taken up into the life of an individual human being. We are brought up into a social world by learning a “first language,” a “natural language,” which is, as John McDowell describes it, “a store of historically accumulated wisdom about what is a reason for what” (1996: 126). For these recent interpreters, the account of our agency that Heidegger offers explains how these rational relations can have normative force in the life of individual agents. Heidegger’s puzzling discussions of anxiety, death, and the call of conscience illustrate the conditions under which we are responsive to normativity, so that the norms of our community’s practices show up for us as reasons. Authenticity describes the way that, living in cognizance of these conditions, we are able to act “in light of” norms, and not merely “in accordance” with them.⁴

This “transcendental reading” of Heidegger is widespread, and plausible.⁵ It is also a powerful alternative to the Kantian picture to think that human agency and selfhood is achieved, in Steven Crowell’s words, by Dasein’s “overcoming its anonymity to take responsibility for its own self as

³ Consider, for example, how a contemporary Kantian theorist of autonomy, Christine Korsgaard, contrasts the way in which humans and animals relate to their own good. While the good of a non-rational animal is determined by its nature as an animal of a certain species, “A human being has a life in a different sense from this, for a human being has, and is capable of choosing, what we sometimes call a ‘way of life’ or, following Rawls, a ‘conception of the good’” (2009: 128).

⁴ This contrast has its source in Kant’s *Groundwork*. For example interpretations which make use of this Kantian distinction to understand Heidegger’s analyses of anxiety and authenticity see Crowell (2013) and Golob (2020).

⁵ This way of reading Heidegger has been called the “transcendental approach” by William Blattner (2013); I will borrow his language to call it the “transcendental reading” throughout this essay.

a task” (2013: 260). However, it seems to me that the story that this interpretation tells about an individual’s relation to public normativity is incomplete. It focuses on one problem: of explaining how it is that we relate to the norms that govern our shared practices as reasons. But it has much less to say about another problem: that each of us must decide who to be, from the available possibilities for living and acting. It is important to Heidegger that this is determined for us neither by “the ‘they’” (“*das Man*”) nor by objective features of human nature. While the transcendental reading can explain what it means for us to take responsibility for the norms that govern our conduct, it does not fully explain how we take responsibility for them as our chosen ways of living, at the exclusion of the other ways that we might have lived. My aim in this essay is to sketch a new reading of Heidegger on the individual relation to public normativity, which is sensitive to the latter feature of our agency while retaining the insights of the transcendental approach.

My approach is centered on a claim that might seem trivial at first. The breakdown that characterizes anxiety, in its association with death, “individualizes” Dasein as Being-towards-death. I suggest that in such an experience, Dasein confronts itself as having a life, which is its own to live and to figure out how to live. The “call of conscience” describes the indefinite normative demand that this confrontation makes upon Dasein: it relates to its own activity with concern for ‘getting it right,’ but without a determinate conception of what this would amount to. Anxiety is an occasion for Dasein to take responsibility for its own understanding of what would count as success in living, by taking responsibility for its ongoing activity of interpreting what it would mean to take up any of the available possibilities for living and acting as its way of living its only life.⁶ Dasein appeals to its interdependent conceptions of self and world in order to choose

⁶ That this ongoing interpretive activity is prior to, and presupposed by, Dasein’s having made any particular way of living its own is a disagreement with transcendental readers, who hold that we subject our conceptions of what it means to be the sort of person that we have already chosen to be to ongoing evaluation and revision.

a way of living for itself; that it has such a “basis” for its choice of who to be is overlooked by everyday Dasein, but revealed in anxiety.⁷ Heidegger’s explanation of the conditions on Dasein’s responsiveness to normativity, and so its capacity to subject these norms to critical reflection, comes as part of this story. Making good on this suggestion, though, requires that I depart from familiar ways of reading Heidegger’s analyses of the central concepts of these sections. Rather than focus on just one, I’ll sketch my proposed interpretation of anxiety, death, the call of conscience, and resoluteness to show that my approach is plausible and philosophically attractive.

2. Anxiety as a source of critical distance

The “transcendental reading” of Heidegger’s analysis of anxiety and authenticity is motivated in part by charges of irrationalism made against him in the 20th century.⁸ The problem is that *Being and Time* describes two ways in which Dasein relates to the norms of its community, neither of which is satisfactory as an account for rational agency. On the one hand, in everyday life, Dasein relates to norms inauthentically, in blind, unreflective conformism, simply going along with what “one” does or what “they” do, without any role for critical reflection on these practices to play. On the other hand, authentic Dasein takes certain norms to be authoritative on the sheer strength of its commitment. When anxiety disrupts our unreflective acceptance of the norms which govern our conduct and make our world intelligible, we must “choose ourselves” without rational basis. The

⁷ Heidegger writes that in response to the “call of conscience” Dasein “must take over Being-a-basis” (“Grundsein”) (SZ 284/330). On the transcendental reading, Dasein recognizes that to must take certain considerations as justifying reasons for its actions, rather than as determining conditions for which it is not responsible. See Crowell (2013: 187-190). I will argue instead that this discussion explains that Dasein is the source of its rational basis for choosing between ways of living and acting available to it, through its ineliminable, but largely unnoticed, background interpretation of its possibilities. Crowell translates “der Grund” as “ground,” while I follow Macquarrie and Robinson in using the translation “basis.” While “ground” seems closer to the original German, both “basis” and “ground,” in English, are open to being read as indicating the normative support for choice in general, as well as for some particular choice. I use “basis” because it seems to me more suggestive of the latter connotation.

⁸ For a helpful discussion that positions the transcendental reading as a response to 20th century criticisms, see the introduction to Burch and McMullin (2020).

“decisionism charge” criticizes Heidegger’s account of authentic choice for its arbitrariness: when we make an authentic choice about how to be, and what sort of life to live, it is for the sake of having decided.⁹ The second charge, which I will call the “mere conformism charge,” claims that Heidegger does not have the resources to explain how we can have the needed distance from norms to subject them to critical reflection, and so to count as acting not merely “in accordance” with norms, but “in light of” them.¹⁰

The transcendental reading responds to both of these charges by positioning anxiety as Dasein’s way of bringing the whole of public normativity under reflective scrutiny. Anxiety is described as an experience of “alienation” from activities and objects that have their significance in the context provided by the norm-governed practices of Dasein’s community. Some readers interpret Dasein’s alienation in anxiety on analogy with normative skepticism. Anxiety is a perspective on the totality of norms from which no justification can be found, and so it reveals the ultimate groundlessness of our practices. The result is an experience of these practices as “insignificant.” Nonetheless, it is an occasion for a deep anti-skeptical response, which recognizes the “truth in skepticism” and allows for an authentic return to the world of public normativity.¹¹ This sort of skeptical reflection is often associated with our capacity for autonomous agency, as in Christine Korsgaard’s influential argument for autonomy as the “source” of normativity. Korsgaard argues that norms are such that they have authority in our lives as reasons, and can motivate us to act, when they are able to withstand scrutiny from our own perspectives in reflection.¹²

⁹ Ernst Tugendhat criticizes Heidegger’s conception of authentic choice as “decisionism”—a choice made, simply for the sake of choosing; see Tugendhat (1986: 175). Responding to this charge has been an explicit aim of some transcendental readers, including Burch (2010) and McManus (2015a).

¹⁰ For a concise formulation of this criticism, see Pippin (1997: 387).

¹¹ For this kind of reading, see McManus (2015a) and Egan (2021).

¹² This account is also Korsgaard’s response to normative skepticism: it explains when and why I should act as a purported normative claim suggests, or requires. See Korsgaard (1996).

This approach answers the mere conformism charge by explaining that anxiety enables Dasein to take responsibility for the norms that govern its conduct, and can subject them to ongoing evaluation and revision. It jettisons the decisionism charge by showing that what is at stake in anxiety is not choice as we would usually understand it, but rather whether to reaffirm one's commitment to living a life which has its meaning in the normative practices of one's community, in light of anxiety's "disclosure" of the conditions of its intelligibility.¹³ But on the transcendental reading, what is disclosed in anxiety, and how?

Anxiety is a disruption to Dasein's "Being-in-the-world" as it usually proceeds. "Entities," for the most part, show up for us in the context of "involvements," the activities in which we make use of them. Within these involvements, they are intelligible as the things that they are. Consider an amateur carpenter who has the project of making a bedroom set for her daughter.¹⁴ A hammer is intelligible as a hammer for the carpenter in her workshop. Her skills as a carpenter, using the hammer to affix legs to a nightstand, "let" the hammer "be" what it is, a tool of a certain sort. Just as equipment is intelligible for Dasein in the context of the activities in which one is involved, these activities are intelligible in the context of projects, which are related to each other as parts of a teleologically structured whole. The carpenter's hammering is part of the larger project of building a nightstand, which is, in turn, intelligible as part of the higher-order project of building furniture for her daughter. Ultimately, everything in our world is intelligible due to the teleological structure of a "'towards-which' in which there is no further involvement," which Heidegger calls Dasein's "for-the-sake-of-which" (*SZ* 84/116). An agent's "for-the-sake-of-which...pertains to the

¹³ McManus (2015a), in addition, describes anxiety as a "test" of one's commitment to the particular life that one has chosen.

¹⁴ I chose a complex example to illustrate that neither Heidegger nor the transcendental reading is limited to characterizing Dasein's possibilities in terms of stereotypical or discrete social roles, but rather can capture the rich intricacy of a person's commitments, and the way that they relate to structure her activity.

Being of *Dasein*, for which, in its Being, that very Being is essentially an *issue*" (SZ 84/117). Often for transcendental readers it is identified with her self-understanding as taking up one of the possibilities for being that is available to her, occupying a social role. The carpenter's furniture-making is "for-the-sake-of" being a devoted parent with a carpentry hobby.

This approach treats the "towards-which" and "for-the-sake-of-which" relations that structure *Dasein*'s world as rational relations of justification that hold between our projects. Making furniture gives the carpenter a reason to hammer when she does, and her reason to make furniture comes, in turn, from the project of maintaining carpentry as her hobby. That she makes furniture for her daughter reflects what her role as a parent means for her self-understanding as a carpenter. "What is a reason for what" is partly determined by shared, cultural understandings of these practices: in the form of skills passed down between practitioners, for example, and the values at which these practices aim. Yet, these norms structure the carpenter's world, governing her conduct, because she has taken up the projects that they constitute, and because the projects matter to her.¹⁵ Living inauthentically, *Dasein* takes the rational relations between its activities as a matter of course. What it has a reason to do, is determined by what "one does" if one is a certain sort of person, in a certain situation. Just as the carpenter's knowledge of furniture-making gives her reason to use a hammer and nails to join two pieces of wood, the expectations for parents in her community give her reason to spend a certain amount of time, and no more, in her workshop.

In an experience of anxiety, the teleological structure of agency breaks down, and the norms that had allowed *Dasein* to make sense of its world lose their grip. Nothing that had mattered before

¹⁵ Steven Crowell compares Heidegger's understanding of *Dasein*'s "for-the-sake-of-which" to Korsgaard's concept of a "practical identity," an agent's teleologically structured self-representation, of the standards by which she aims to excel insofar as she understands herself under this identity. An agent appeals to her practical identity as a principle, to decide between one course of action and another. A practical identity is a representation both of what it means to be a certain sort of person in a particular time and place—to be a parent, a carpenter, a partner, and a citizen—and of who a particular agent, constituting herself in identification with this representation, is trying to be. See Crowell (2007b; 2013; 2015).

the moment of collapse seems to matter anymore: “The world has the character of completely lacking significance” (SZ 186/231). Dasein’s experience of total alienation comes about due to the distinctive phenomenology of anxiety. While fear is the apprehension of the danger posed by something in particular in one’s experience, anxiety is characterized by unease, a sense of danger, that does not identify anything as its object: “That in the face of which one has anxiety is not an entity within-the-world” (SZ 186/231). Dasein has an experience in which “entities within-the-world are not ‘relevant’” (SZ 186/231). Such an experience “tells us that entities within-the-world are of so little importance in themselves that on the basis of this *insignificance* of what is within-the-world, the world in its worldhood is all that still obtrudes itself” (SZ 187/231).

The world seems drained of its significance because Dasein’s engagement in the normative practices in the context of which its activity was intelligible is disrupted; they seem meaningless, insignificant, or as if they don’t matter. This is often interpreted as arising from a confrontation with the fact that they are unjustified.¹⁶ “Equipment” no longer shows up as “ready-to-hand” because the “involvements” in which it had been put to use are threatened by Dasein’s recognition that there is no reason to pursue them. They show up as unjustified because Dasein’s “for-the-sake-of-which” turns out to be unjustified. All of Dasein’s activities in the world seem pointless, no longer worthwhile, without the ultimate end that had been their point.

Dreyfus and Rubin argue that anxiety is an experience of global meaninglessness, which reveals that none of our projects really matter; Dasein responds authentically to anxiety by “holding on” to this realization, facing brutal reality in a way that is “clear-sighted and fearless.”¹⁷

¹⁶ This way of interpreting anxiety has much in common with Thomas Nagel’s (2006) reflections on absurd experience.

¹⁷ Dreyfus and Rubin (1990: 315; 317). Dreyfus and Rubin claim that what is disclosed to Dasein in anxiety is that the possibilities available in its culture do not ultimately matter to it, and that it has no possibilities of its own, due to its nature. Authentic Dasein makes no choice, but simply accepts that choice is impossible and is transformed by anxiety’s revelation of meaninglessness. See also Bracken (2005) for an extended critique of Dreyfus and Rubin’s interpretation of Heidegger’s account of anxiety. Similar to the interpretation I will go on to offer, Bracken argues that

By contrast, on the transcendental reading, anxiety does not reveal the truth about the meaninglessness of cultural possibilities, and Dasein's lack of any possibilities of its own. Instead, when Dasein recognizes the "groundlessness" of the normative practices in the context of which it has made sense of its life and its world, this provides an occasion for Dasein to take responsibility for its responsiveness to the normative principles that govern its conduct, by revealing the conditions under which they have normative authority in the life of an agent. The rational relations that characterize public, shared normative practices have normative force for me just in case it matters to me that I excel by their standards.

Transcendental readers address the mere conformism charge by showing that Dasein's authentic response to anxiety enables it to relate to normative claims as reasons, and so subject them to ongoing rational evaluation and revision. Dasein takes responsibility not only for its own responsiveness to norms, appealing to them to justify its own actions, but also for its understanding of what it means to be, for example, a teacher, doctor, or parent with a carpentry hobby. Steven Crowell argues that in anxiety, I find that who I thought I simply *was*, is someone that I am trying to be—that I act "for-the-sake-of" being such a person—when I become aware of myself apart from any self-understanding constituted by public normativity. I am thus in a position to acknowledge that I take the standards which constitute my identity to be authoritative over my conduct because I *care* about excelling by them; it matters to me. This enables me, furthermore, to take responsibility for my conception of what these standards are, and to be open to rethinking what they should be.¹⁸

anxiety does not reveal the worthlessness of all possible projects; rather "*everyday mattering*" slips away "opening Dasein up to possibilities interpreted in terms of 'its own kind of mattering'" (2005: 546).

¹⁸ See Crowell (2013), chapters 8-13 for his development of this position. Jonathan Lear (2011) emphasizes that "irony," a similar moment of disruption of our ongoing agential activity can be an occasion to take a distinctive kind of responsibility not only for taking on a certain social role governed by given standards, but also for one's conception of the standards that govern one's conduct in virtue of occupying that role. What it means to be a teacher, or a parent, or an engaged citizen of a democracy, is at stake in irony. This is also a feature of the transcendental reading. However,

Other recent proponents of the transcendental reading compare Heidegger's analysis of anxiety to Wittgenstein's remarks on rule-following.¹⁹ Anxiety is an experience which seems to demand a justification for our practices that is, ultimately, a fantasy: it cannot be provided, but it is not needed. On this reading, too, anxiety is an occasion for us to take responsibility for their normative authority, by taking responsibility for the projects in the context of which things in the world usually show up as significant.

This approach contrasts the lack of normative pull that projects and practices have on us in anxiety, which manifests as the "insignificance" of equipment, with the usual experience of them as justified and worthwhile. What this reveals, is that our pursuits were only intelligible as worthwhile (as having a "point") because it matters to us to dedicate ourselves to the projects that we have chosen. Public normative standards have authority in our lives because it matters to us to excel by the standards that determine what counts as success as being the sort of person that we have chosen to be. We live authentically in recognition that our responsiveness to normativity depends on our existential, lived commitment to making sense of ourselves in light of some set of norms or another. The seemingly autonomous rational relations that constitute our practices have authority in the life of an agent when they become the structure of her autonomous agency; she understands herself as answerable for them, and so is prepared to explain or justify them and their application. It is part of Dasein's authentic "trying to be" a certain sort of person, that what it means to be such a person is at issue for it. Dasein is accountable to itself and to others for its

Lear (2011; 2015) extends the idea of "taking responsibility" for one's conception of one's social role to sources of unconscious unity within the self, an insight from psychoanalysis. See Crowell (2015), where he criticizes this thought and argues Heidegger diverges from it; what is revealed in Heideggerian anxiety is nothing more than Dasein's bare concern with normativity, its "orientation toward measure," not an "*independent* source of psychic unity" in the form of unconscious desire (2015: 232-33).

¹⁹ McManus (2015a) and Egan (2021) both make this comparison.

understanding of what being a doctor, or a teacher, or a parent with a carpentry hobby, gives it reason to do.

If Dasein recognizes in anxiety that it is not identical to any of the possibilities for being that it might take up, then anxiety also seems an experience in which the question of *who* to be arises. This is the feature of the experience that gives rise to the decisionism charge: Dasein must choose a way of Being-in-the-world to take up as its own, but lacks a rational basis for this choice. On the transcendental reading, however, the question who to be is not at stake in anxiety. Rather, what is at stake is Dasein's capacity to respond to reasons, as reasons, and Dasein's responsibility for evaluating and potentially revising the normative standards that govern the projects that it has already. If this is right, then an interpretation of anxiety need not answer the decisionism charge. Part of what makes this plausible, is that the decisionism charge really does seem intractable. If the "choice" of oneself in anxiety is between one way of living and another, then it would have to be made without a rational basis from a perspective in which all of the ways that Dasein might be show up for it as insignificant.²⁰ Many transcendental readers see an experience of anxiety as an occasion to reaffirm one's commitments to particular ways of living. But if in anxiety Dasein genuinely confronts that its way of living is not required by its nature or its world, then it would be just as arbitrary to return to the same life as to choose a different one.

Crowell takes the further step of denying that the question of who to be can arise from an anxious perspective, which means that there is no sense in which Dasein makes an arbitrary choice, in choosing itself. While Crowell explains that Dasein's responsiveness to normativity depends on its concern with "measure," which is presupposed by its concern with any particular measure, he denies that this could itself be a source of normative standards. "Care," as the structure of Dasein's

²⁰ See Crowell (2013) for a clear statement of this thought: "Here [in anxiety] deliberation is impossible because the everyday world on which it depends 'has the character of completely lacking significance'" (2013: 203).

being, “admits of normative success or failure...only to the extent that these norms govern the way that I live my concrete practical identities” (Crowell 2013: 254). If Dasein is responsible for the choice of who to be, it is in the same way that it is responsible for any other choice within-the-world, from the position of already “trying to be” someone in particular; what is at stake in anxiety, and in Dasein’s authentic choice of itself, is in the way that it makes some particular identity its own.

I will seek an account of anxiety that explains how Dasein might take up the question who to be from an anxious perspective, instead of one that shows it does not arise. In doing so, I will take different approach to the decisionism charge, which does not dismiss it. Why might such an account be preferable to the one offered by the transcendental reading? First, I think there is more to say about the way that anxiety counters the anonymity of everyday Dasein. Heidegger writes that anxiety “individualizes” Dasein (*SZ* 187/232). But, on a reading where anxiety is an occasion to take responsibility for the normative force of reasons, it is not easy to see the place of “individualization” in the story. In fact, if I confront myself in anxiety apart from my distinctive projects, it seems just as natural to say that anxiety “de-individualizes” Dasein in order to reveal the general conditions on normative responsiveness. A Kantian, for example, might be inclined to say something along these lines. If everything that makes some particular Dasein distinct lies in what it is “trying to be,” how does an experience of anxiety, in which it dis-identifies with what it is trying to be, individualize Dasein?

Second, if Dasein cannot take up the question who to be in anxiety, it would seem that an answer to this question is always presupposed by Dasein’s investigation into how it is to live. Dasein’s Being-in-the-world is such that it is always someone in particular. If this is because it is only Dasein’s self-understanding as someone in particular that could be a source of reasons for

choice and action, then this fact is taken to be a reason to think that the question who to be cannot be meaningfully posed until Dasein's set of "attunements," which can serve as a source of practical reasons, has been established. By placing this topic, which intuitively matters to us, outside of the scope of Dasein's responsibility, it seems to me that the transcendental reading responds to the decisionism charge with an evasion that attributes to authentic Dasein a feature that Heidegger associates with "irresoluteness": it "never resolves upon anything" but "has always made its decision" (SZ 299/345).²¹ While the possibilities available to Dasein, and much about what it means to take them up, are given as part of the world into which it is "thrown," the particular path that Dasein charts for itself through these available ways of living and acting is another matter. It is not obviously given to Dasein along with its world.²²

I contend that a fully satisfying account of what it means that Dasein confronts "its ownmost potentiality-for-Being-in-the-world" will explain how Dasein might, in anxiety, take responsibility for the non-arbitrary choice between ways of living. To offer such an account, I propose that we should reconsider the phenomenology of anxiety and its resulting disruption to the ordinary structure of human agency.

3. "The world has the character of completely lacking significance"

The association between Dasein's alienation from its projects in anxiety, so that it is an experience in which nothing "matters" to Dasein, and the disruption of Dasein's justification for its activities, so that it can no longer see their "point," suggests that when Dasein encounters its world as

²¹ This remark is open to interpretations which are compatible with the transcendental approach, and so is not decisive evidence against even the aspect of the view highlighted here. I will develop this criticism in the remainder of this paper, especially in section four.

²² *Pace* Blattner (2015), for example, who explains that Dasein's "thrownness" is thrownness into a set of "attunements" associated with being some particular sort of person: "Attunement discloses our thrownness as a burden; we must carry burdens. I am not free to be anyone I would like because I am already someone determinate" (2015: 118).

“lacking significance,” it seems meaningless in the sense of being worthless or unimportant. In “What is Metaphysics?” he describes anxiety as an experience in which “all things and we ourselves sink into indifference” (P 88). One way to account for this is to say that although in some sense we can note the differences between various possibilities for living made available to us in and by public normativity, they are indifferent with regard to their value: they all show up as equally worthless. If we think of the structure of human agency in terms of the justificatory relations between our projects, then an experience of worthlessness is what you would expect when these relations break down. The reasons that we have to pursue the activities that we do come from “higher-order” projects and explain why they are worth doing. If there is no reason to pursue the higher-order projects—that is, if we are without an explanation of what makes them worth doing—then everything justified with appeal to them will seem worthless.

There is reason to think, though, that an interpretation of the phenomenology of anxiety as such an experience of “value collapse” explains why Dasein seems unable to take up the question of who to be from an anxious perspective. It gives rise to what Denis McManus has called the “Motivation Problem.” I either have a reason to return to my everyday life from the alienated perspective in which I find myself, in which case anxiety is not truly liberating, since I defer to this consideration; or I have no reason, in which case my choice to take up my projects once again would be arbitrary and so not authentically my own (2015a: 166). If nothing “speaks” to Dasein, if it has no real interest in any of the available ways of living and acting, then any appeal to a reason would be *mere* deference to public conceptions of “what is a reason for what,” or else, arbitrary. This problem arises because the differences between Dasein’s available possibilities for being do not matter to it, so it is neither motivated to choose one way of living over another, nor has a basis for such a choice.

Heidegger's analysis of anxiety offers the resources, though, for an alternative reading of the claim that in anxiety our projects show up as "lacking significance," on which their intelligibility, and not their value is at stake. Anxiety is central to Heidegger's investigation whose question is the "meaning of being"; it connects Division I of *Being and Time* with the existentialist themes taken up in Division II. An interpretation of anxiety as a breakdown in intelligibility seems worth attempting. If, in anxiety, things show up as "uncanny," not absolutely incomprehensible, in what sense is their intelligibility at stake?

On my proposed alternative, the breakdown in significance that Heidegger describes does not result, in the first place, from a failure in the justification of Dasein's ultimate "for-the-sake-of-which."²³ It is, instead, a consequence of the observation that anxiety is not "about" anything in particular, in the sense that it fails to single out any "entity-within-the-world" as its object. This is the central point of contrast between anxiety and fear: while fear is a response to something determinate in the world that threatens us, anxiety is a pervasive sense of unease, characterized by "indefiniteness" which "tells us that entities within the world are not 'relevant' at all" (SZ 186/231). When Heidegger concludes this sentence that "the world has the character of completely lacking significance," he seems still to be referring to its significance in and for the situation in which Dasein finds itself (SZ 186/231).

Most read the "*insignificance* of what is within-the-world" that is revealed here as unqualified, if potentially transient: the world, and everything in it, seems absolutely insignificant in some respect, i.e., not just insignificant relative to some particular context or situation (SZ 187/231). But even though the insignificance that Dasein experiences in anxiety is global, it is open to us to read it as an extension of qualified uses of "significance" and "insignificance." It is familiar that we

²³ Pace, for example, Egan (2021).

have experiences for which some of the things around us are relevant, and others are not: an affect like fear causes one object—a bear or a deadline—to loom while others recede. “Nothing” in the world is significant for Dasein’s experience of unease, in the sense that nothing is “relevant.” Anxiety, then, is not “about” the worthlessness of the world. It is not “about” a breakdown in justification of Dasein’s for-the-sake-of-which. It is about something else, which is “nothing and nowhere”: “*That in the face of which one has anxiety is Being-in-the-world as such*” (SZ 186/230).²⁴

Dasein, then, finds itself in a situation for which nothing in the world can offer any help. Recognizing this puts us in a position to think differently about anxiety’s characteristic breakdown of significance. Heidegger describes the way that the “Being” of equipment comes into view when it can no longer be put to use: “*when an assignment has been disturbed*—when something is unusable for some purpose—then the assignment becomes explicit” (SZ 74/105). When a piece of equipment breaks down, it reveals the skillful activity by which Dasein “lets” it be the sort of thing that it is. In anxiety, significance breaks down in the manner of equipment, revealing its “assignment.” “Equipment” is intelligible for us in the context provided by our skills for making use of it. A hammer is a tool only for someone who can use it to build or fix things. In anxiety, “significance” becomes unfit for its purpose, and that purpose obtrudes. But what is its purpose?

²⁴ Heidegger tells us that anxiety is about nothing. On the transcendental reading, it is about nothing *other* than the authority of the norms in the context of which our lives and our world are intelligible. I am suggesting that we should look elsewhere for the “topic” of anxious experience; anxiety is not simply a manner of “reflecting” on our projects. This is consistent with approaches, like Katherine Withy’s (2014; 2015), that emphasize the role that anxiety plays in Heidegger’s philosophical methodology. Withy proposes that the breakdown that occurs in anxiety solves a methodological problem for Heidegger: in order for us to do philosophy, the entities which populate our everyday experiences must fade from view for their Being, and for Dasein itself, to show up and become a topic for investigation. In anxiety my attention shifts from the entities themselves to my openness to entities (2015: 50). By contrast, in everyday life, our openness, and so our own being, is concealed, which “encourages us to understand ourselves not as distinctively open but as just like the entities that are ordinarily in view for us—as kinds of tools, objects or natural entities” (2015: 51).

Significance is “equipment” for “understanding”; it is “that on the basis of which the world is disclosed as such” (SZ 143/182). Understanding is Dasein’s activity of making sense of itself, which is, in turn, the ability to “project” itself into different possibilities. It characterizes Dasein’s way of relating to these possibilities: “Dasein is such that in every case it has understood (or, alternatively, not understood) that it is to be thus or thus. As such understanding it ‘knows’ *what* it is capable of—that is, what its potentiality-for-Being is capable of” (SZ 144/184). “Significance,” then, is what Dasein makes use of in understanding its available possibilities for living and acting, in “letting them be” what they are.²⁵ Indeed, Heidegger explains that this is what Dasein is unable to do, because of the breakdown of significance in anxiety: “anxiety...takes away from Dasein the possibility of understanding itself, as it falls, in terms of the ‘world’ and the way things have been publicly interpreted” (SZ 187/232). This is how anxiety “individualizes Dasein for its ownmost Being-in-the-world, which is as something that understands, projects itself essentially upon possibilities” (SZ 187/232).

For the most part, Dasein makes use of public normativity, shared, cultural conceptions of “what is a reason for what” to project itself onto possibilities for living and acting. Dasein understands itself as a particular sort of person, and can reason about what one should do, given that one is such a person, in the situation in which it finds itself. Public normativity, as “significance,” is Dasein’s equipment for Being-in-the-world; that Dasein is engaged in this activity, by doing all of the things that it does, is revealed in its breakdown. When Dasein recognizes that it is not identical to what it had understood its ultimate “for-the-sake-of-which” to

²⁵ John Haugeland emphasizes the importance of the “skills” of participants in practices for “letting” the equipment for these practices be what they are. See Haugeland (1998; 2007). The novelty of my proposal is that Being-in-the-world is a skill in itself, intelligible apart from Dasein’s having projected itself onto any particular possibilities, which “lets” the possibilities available to it “be” the possibilities that they are. It will emerge that Dasein’s skill at projecting itself onto possibilities allows them to be possible ways of living its own life.

be, it discovers that it is engaged in the activity of projecting itself into possibilities, in finding that it is no longer able to do it.

Anxiety, then, reveals that Dasein's "sole authentic 'for-the-sake-of-which...'" is Being-in-the-world, its own Being as "Being-possible" (SZ 84/116-117). Dasein's "ownmost potentiality-for-Being-in-the-world" is the ongoing activity of projecting itself onto possibilities, which is usually hidden from Dasein's view by whatever possibility "within the world" that Dasein had used to understand itself. It sounds strange to say that everything Dasein does is "for-the-sake-of" projecting itself onto possibilities; this would be a bizarre justification for being a parent, or a teacher. It is less strange to say, though, that Dasein projects itself onto possibilities *by* taking up projects and social roles, and so that these activities relate to Dasein's Being-in-the-world as constitutive means. "Entities within-the-world" are not "relevant" to this activity, because none of the norms internal to any practices can decide for me *which* involvements to take up.

While there are justificatory relations that hold between our projects—a carpenter's end of making furniture does give her reason to, for example, affix the top of a nightstand to its legs and frame—they also relate to each other as nested exercises of skill. A carpenter's knowledge-how to make a nightstand guides her to use a hammer and nails for some tasks, and screws and an electric drill for others. Practices do not autonomously, in themselves, constitute "equipment" as what it is; even a game, like chess, does not consist in rules that stand in rational relations to each other that determine what is called for of their own accord, but rather depend on the activity of skilled practitioners engaging in the practice. Practices determine "what is a reason for what," and what things are, by providing rules that guide skilled practitioners at "telling" both what is going on, and what counts as success in engaging in the activities.²⁶

²⁶ Haugeland (1998) explains that following a rule requires that one has learned when various kinds of performance are called for by the situation, which requires that one possess the skill of "telling" when the relevant conditions are

Anxiety involves a breakdown in the skill that Dasein engages by doing all of the things that it does, thereby revealing that such a skill is in exercise. It is up to Dasein to “tell” the differences between possibilities that are available to it, to choose which to take up, and to know how to take them up in each case. Inauthentic Dasein’s fantasy is that there is no skill in exercise here because the “significance” of available ways of being is simply determined by public, culturally-received conceptions of “what is a reason for what.”

Rather than think of the phenomenology of anxiety along the lines of the anhedonia character of depression,²⁷ it seems to me more apt to say that in anxiety, Dasein gets the “yips” about living. Like an athlete who finds herself unable to exercise the basic motions of her sport, Dasein finds that it is unable to exercise the skill in which all of its other activities had been embedded. In sports, the “yips” can come when the sudden onset of self-consciousness makes otherwise smooth, natural movements—in which I can ‘forget’ myself—impossible. They obtrude when I realize that there is *something* that I am doing. Similarly, in anxiety, I find myself unable to exercise the skill of projecting myself onto possibilities, which means that I cannot “tell” the relevant difference between the potential ways of living and acting available to me in my world: the difference between them, I’ll go on to suggest, as possible ways of living my life.

This interpretation of anxiety places the question of who to be at the center of the experience, for *being someone* is what I find that I am, somehow, no longer able to do. It is no longer avoidable that we address it. But the phenomenology of anxiety, on my reading, isn’t characterized by the sense of worthlessness that made the question seem intractable.²⁸ Nonetheless, it is characterized

met. Participating in a rule-governed practice requires that one possess “*constitutive* skills... resilient [abilities] to tell whether the phenomena governed by some constitutive standard are, in effect, in accord with that standard” as well as “*mundane* skills... the resilient abilities to recognize, manipulate and otherwise cope with phenomena” (1998: 323).

²⁷ E.g. Blattner (2006).

²⁸ Later, in Heidegger’s discussion of “guilt,” he distinguishes the “nullity” of Dasein’s projection onto possibilities from the “property” of being “worthless” or “inconsequential”: “Not only is the projection, as one that has been thrown, determined by the nullity of Being-a-basis; *as projection* it is itself essentially *null*. This does not mean that

by a sense of disorientation that is at least as profound. We find, in anxiety, not that we have no reason to do anything at all, but that we have no reason to do one thing rather than another. This is because I cannot “tell” what counts as success at Being-in-the-world.

What is the phenomenology of such an experience? Heidegger writes that “the mood brings Dasein before the ‘that-it-is’ of its ‘there’, which, as such, stares it in the face with the inexorability of an enigma” (SZ 136/175). In a mood like anxiety, Dasein confronts its own being as enigmatic, and as a result, all of the available possibilities for living and acting show up for it as “enigmatic,” that is, as potentially significant, but mysterious. I don’t know what it would mean for me to project myself onto any of the available possibilities, because I do not know what it would mean for me to project myself onto possibilities in general. I do not know what I am doing. There seems to be no right move.

In this way, the phenomenology of anxiety is characterized by a collapse in intelligibility, in which the world shows up as “uncanny.” While things are intelligible insofar as public normative practices give them their meaning, in anxiety none of these culturally-given possibilities for living and acting are intelligible as ways that I might live, without the exercise of the “skill” that anxiety reveals. I cannot “see” myself in them: although it is given what it would mean for *one* to occupy any available role, or undertake any available kind of project, it is incomprehensible that I could occupy such a role or undertake such a project. What would it mean for me to be a teacher or a parent? They do not “speak” to me in this sense, not because they have no appeal.²⁹ This reveals

it has the ontical property of ‘inconsequentiality’ or ‘worthlessness’; what we have here is rather something existentially constitutive of the structure of the Being of projection” (SZ 285/331). On the account that I am developing, in anxiety, Dasein confronts its own activity of projecting itself onto possibilities, as having enigmatic normative significance, i.e., it matters to Dasein to succeed at this ongoing activity, but it does not know what success would amount to.

²⁹ Consider the following remark by David Egan (2021): “Anxiety does not simply call into question this or that project. In anxiety, it ceases to be clear how *any* project could possibly be worth pursuing” (2021: 572). Because an anxious experience does not single out any of my projects, it also does not give me a reason to do anything in particular. If I question, from this perspective, whether I am living as I should, no appeal to the features of my projects can answer

the conditions on my taking up possibilities for living and acting, and come to see that the intelligibility of my world depends on a capacity for “telling” what things are, and “telling” what counts as success at Being-in-the-world, a skill that deserts me in the breakdown of anxiety.

My proposed reading of anxiety has its own version of the motivation problem. If I cannot “tell” the difference between the possibilities available to me, then I cannot appeal to those differences in order to decide between one way of living and acting and another. However, my “solution” to the motivation problem does not deny that the question who to be is at stake in anxiety, but rather explains how we can take responsibility for the rational basis on which we make such a choice. What Dasein must overcome to respond authentically to anxiety is not alienation from life and the world, but rather the enigma that they present: they are intelligible, but not yet understood. Anxiety is thus an occasion for Dasein to take responsibility for its interpretation of its world, in exercising its skill of projecting itself onto possibilities. In taking responsibility for this, I also take responsibility for the rational basis of my choice of who to be. Part of what it takes to understand what it would mean for me to pursue any of the available possibilities for living and acting, is to understand what it would mean for something to be worth pursuing *for* me, and so what counts as success at living my own life.

4. “Being-towards-death” and Having a Life

In what kind of experience does “Being-in-the-world” itself become threatening? How might someone come to feel that they don’t know how to live, when a moment before it had seemed there

it decisively. Thus, it seems that I am doubting *that* any project is worth pursuing. However, if we shift the emphasis of Egan’s formulation from “any” to “how,” it is open to a different, and I think more plausible reading. I confront my own ignorance: I don’t know *what it would be* for any project to be worth pursuing. I do not know what it would be for anything to be significant or valuable, what it would be for me to have reason to do anything. That is, I realize that I do not know how to live.

was nothing to know? I used a metaphorical comparison with the “yips” to capture the sense that anxiety comes out of nowhere, disrupting experiences that are otherwise innocuous and routine. But what about anxious experiences makes them so disruptive?

Heidegger explains that anxiety is Dasein’s experience of *death*, which is puzzling because Dasein can live through an anxious experience; characteristically, Dasein returns from anxiety to live more authentically. This, along with Heidegger’s distinction between “death” and “demise,” when Dasein meets its end, has led interpreters to argue that “death” is an experience of “world collapse,” with only a metaphorical relation to our ordinary notion of death: it is “as if” one has died, because Dasein cannot project itself into possibilities.³⁰ This is a natural thought, given an interpretation of the phenomenology of anxiety as an experience of alienation, in which nothing in the world seems to matter: Dasein is unable to project itself into possibilities in such an experience because they are as if ‘closed’ to it.³¹ However, this description is less illuminating as an explanation of how Dasein gets the “yips” about living. I’ll suggest instead that Heidegger’s discussion of death can help bring into view what it might mean that Being-in-the-world is something that Dasein is doing.

Our ordinary understanding of death mostly concerns phenomena that fall under Heidegger’s concept of *demise*. Dasein’s life comes to an end in its demise, and when we experience the death of another Dasein, what we experience is their demise. But Dasein’s own demise is not an event that it can ever experience, within its life, because it does not persist through it: “The *end* of the

³⁰ Thomson (2013) critically discusses this kind of position for its loose connection between Heidegger’s concept of death and what we ordinarily think death is. However, it seems to me that the analogy that he draws also renders the phenomena overly heterogenous: like proponents of the “world collapse” reading, Thomson holds that death is something that Dasein can “live through.”

³¹ See Blattner (1994; 2006), for an example of this kind of reading on which the experience of “world collapse” is particularly closely related to the experience of the world as worthless in anxiety.

entity *qua* Dasein is the *beginning* of the same entity *qua* something present-at-hand” (SZ 238/281). In what sense could death be experienced in life?

It seems to me that death could be something Dasein experiences, without being something that Dasein can live through, thereby preserving a robust sense in which, in relating to death, Dasein relates to the end of its being. While Dasein’s demise is an event that happens at a certain moment in historical time, death is a possibility for Dasein, which it “anticipates”; this is Dasein’s characteristic relation in the present to a possibility that is essentially future. As long as Dasein is, death is “not yet” (SZ 233/276). Dasein relates inauthentically to its death insofar as it relates to the eventuality of its demise as an event that will happen in its future (whether I remind myself that it could happen today, or reassure myself that it won’t happen for years), and authentically insofar as it relates to “the possibility of the impossibility of every way of comporting oneself towards anything, of every way of existing” as a real possibility for itself (SZ 262/307). On my proposed reading, Dasein’s experience of its death is not to live through an event of “world collapse,” but rather to project itself onto the possibility of its death in the present by anticipating it, and to experience this anticipation as anxiety; recall that anxiety is not the fear of something in particular, here one’s demise (and one’s no longer existing as its aftermath).³²

But death is unlike the other possibilities onto which Dasein projects itself, in a way that illuminates why, in relating authentically to this possibility, Dasein “has been *fully* assigned to its ownmost potentiality-for-Being” (SZ 250/294). The “ways of Being-in-the-world” that are possibilities made available to Dasein by its social world are characterized generally, insofar as

³² McManus (2015b) interprets the difference between authentic and inauthentic Being-towards-death in a way that recognizes that an authentic relation to our own death is as *anticipated*, but emphasizes that an inauthentic relation to death involves “postponing” it, imagining that it will happen at some point in the future, but not yet. As long as we think of an event in historical time at all—even if we fear, morbidly, that it will happen *today*—I propose that our relation to death is inauthentic.

they are constituted by public, shared normative standards. This means that the possibilities that Dasein takes up in its everyday Being-in-the-world cannot be Dasein's "ownmost":

The great multiplicity of ways of Being-in-the-world in which one person can be represented by another, not only extends to the more refined modes of publicly being with one another, but is likewise germane to those possibilities of concern which are restricted within definite ranges, and which are cut to the measure of one's occupation, one's social status, or one's age... In relation to this sort of Being (the everyday manner in which we join with one another in absorption in the 'world' of our concern) representability is not only quite possible but is even constitutive for our being with one another. *Here* one Dasein can and must, within certain limits, 'be' another Dasein. (SZ 239-240/283-284)

Because a representation of a way of being is constituted by general norms, it is both repeatable and timeless. Another Dasein could, in principle, take on exactly the same roles as I have, understood exactly as I have understood them, by representing itself as subject to the same normative standards in living and acting. When we take up the possibilities available to us in our social worlds, we must do so under such general representations, and in this sense must "'be' another Dasein." Considered as general, the roles that we take on are also timeless (even when they are historical): being a teacher, or a doctor, or a parent with a carpentry hobby, understood as a representation of a way of being, is something that Dasein can adopt in an indefinitely ongoing way, and it does not have an end represented internal to the possibility.

On my reading of anxiety, it is an experience in which Dasein discovers that there is something that it is doing, in doing all of the other things that it does: projecting itself onto possibilities. Heidegger tells us that "Being-towards-death is essentially anxiety" (SZ 266/310). Anticipating death, then, "individualizes" Dasein because it thereby recognizes that "Being-towards-death" is something that it is doing. Indeed, it is the activity that is most essentially its own, because the possibility of not being able to do it would be Dasein's own end. Being-towards-death is different from the other things that Dasein might do because it is neither general and repeatable, nor timeless. We each live not just for a finite amount of time but also, as Rilke puts it, "once and once

only” (1923: 67). In this way, anxiety, confronting Dasein with death as a possibility in anticipation, reveals to Dasein that it has a life of its own to live.³³

This proposal offers what Taylor Carman (2003; 2015) would call a “hyperbolic” or “uninteresting” interpretation of the claim that “factically, Dasein is dying as long as it exists” (SZ 251/295).³⁴ Nonetheless, the significance of death for Dasein is similar on my interpretation and Carman’s. He argues that when Dasein projects itself into a possibility, it is always at the exclusion of others, which Dasein at the same time projects into as “impossibilities” that define it negatively (2003: 218). Carman sees this suggestion as an explication of the analogy between Heidegger’s existential notion of death, and our everyday notion: what Heidegger means by death is that “our possibilities are constantly dropping away into nullity” (2003: 282). I emphasize, by contrast, that this is a consequence of what is revealed to Dasein in its anxious anticipation of death. An exercise of freedom is for us “only in the choice of one possibility—that is, in tolerating one’s not having chosen the others and one’s not being able to choose them” because we each have only one life to live (SZ 285/331). We don’t get to do it all again, or to live two lives, or infinitely many. This fact explains why Dasein projects itself into impossibilities, whenever it projects itself into possibilities, and is the source of a constraint on Dasein which is internal to its being: it can only take up a finite and compossible range of possibilities at any time.

Anxiety is an experience of death, in anticipation, which individualizes Dasein as having only one life to live. There is something that it is doing, projecting itself onto possibilities, that it is doing as long as it is; furthermore, it is doing this by doing whatever else it does. Authentic anxious anticipation of death is, on the proposed reading, tantamount to a reckoning with living our own

³³ We can associate Dasein’s “thrownness” with its having a life; Dasein’s thrownness means “that it is and has to be” (SZ 134/173).

³⁴ See Carman (2003: 282) and Carman (2015: 140).

finite lives. If so, death is not utterly different from the phenomenon as ordinarily conceived, and yet we can see how inauthentic fear of “factual demise” might be a defense against this deeper and more profound anxiety. Worrying about when my life will come to an end—as if this were the main problem—allows me to avoid acknowledging the stakes of having only one life to live, which I must figure out how to use, and which, I will argue, I am concerned I might misuse. The unicity of our lives forces a choice between ways of living. Public normativity cannot decide this for us, since we are not able to do everything that *one* has good reason to do in any situation in which we find ourselves. A gap opens between the question of how *one* should live, which can be answered with appeal to our shared understanding of what a person, in a certain situation, has reason to do, and the question of how *I* should live, which I cannot simply make use of public normativity in order to answer.

5. On Not Knowing How to Live

Recall that on the transcendental reading, anxiety is an experience of alienation from one’s projects, in which they seem insignificant, in the sense that they do not matter to one. This experience reveals the conditions under which Dasein is responsive to the norms that govern the normative practices of its community. “Conscience” is the name for these conditions, which are constituted by Dasein’s own being as “care.” Responding authentically to the “call of conscience” consists in recognizing that it is one’s own being as care that explains why one responds to public, shared norms as obligating. It enables Dasein to take responsibility for these norms by engaging with them critically, in ongoing evaluation and revision, so that what it means to be a teacher, or a doctor, or a parent with a carpentry hobby is genuinely “at issue” for Dasein.

By contrast, on my interpretation of the phenomenology of anxious experience, Dasein is not alienated from its world; rather Dasein experiences it as enigmatic. This is not only compatible

with Dasein continuing to be invested in living in its world, but arguably arises from that care. I will argue that in anxiety, Dasein confronts itself with a normative claim, albeit an indefinite one. “The call of conscience” explains how Dasein faces a normative demand placed upon it by its own individualized as Being-towards-death, of choosing which possibilities that it will take up, over all others. “Resoluteness” is Dasein’s taking responsibility for the “basis” for this choice, by taking responsibility for interpreting the “Situation” into which it has been thrown.

I want to begin my interpretation of the “call of conscience” by returning to the metaphor comparing anxiety and the “yips.” Why would becoming aware that one has been exercising a skill mean that one becomes unable to do it? I find a helpful comparison in the way Franz Kafka describes his own experience of the yips in his diary:

I can swim like the others only I have a better memory than the others. I have not forgotten my former inability to swim. But since I have not forgotten it my ability to swim is of no avail and I cannot swim after all (Kafka 1954: 297).

Kafka’s description of the “yips” has three moments. He distinguishes himself from those who take their ability to swim for granted: those who have forgotten their “former inability to swim.” His condition, by contrast, is to remain in touch with a prior moment, of not knowing how to swim. When he remembers that swimming is something that he had to learn how to do, he finds that he “cannot swim after all.” He can no longer take his swimming as inevitable, a matter of course.

These three moments correspond to the structure of the “call of conscience.” “Conscience summons Dasein’s self from its lostness in the ‘they’” (SZ 274/319), which is characterized by its having “already abandoned itself to definite possibilities” (SZ 270/315). Everyday Dasein pursues its projects without difficulty, allowing what it means to be a teacher, carpenter, or parent, for example, to determine how it should comport itself. All along, Dasein has been engaged in the activity of projecting itself onto possibilities. I have suggested that we should think of this as a

skillful activity, where the skill that Dasein uses is understanding; Heidegger says again in his discussion of the call that Dasein “‘knows’ what it is capable of” (SZ 270/315). As a “potentiality-for-Being,” and “an entity which has been thrown” (SZ 270/351), Dasein is, essentially, the potential to be any of the possible ways of being available to it, but in order to project itself onto these possibilities, it has to ‘know how’ to take them up. Dasein’s knowledge “what it is capable of” is its understanding of what it would mean to take up the possibilities available to it in the material, social and historical context into which it has been thrown as its own way of living.

In the “call of conscience,” Dasein ‘remembers’ that it once did not know what it was capable of. It addresses itself with an indefinite normative claim, from a perspective which is prior to having taken up any projects of its own. Dasein’s experience of this indefinite normative claim is its experience of itself as “guilty”; the phenomenology of this experience is anxiety. “Guilt” is “Being-the-basis for a nullity” (SZ 285/331). Dasein’s “nullity” is associated with its Being-towards-death: it has just one life to live, and to figure out how to live. Dasein’s being as care means that, in recognizing that it has one life to live, Dasein makes a demand upon itself, but not for anything in particular. Although it matters to me how I should live, I do not know what would count as success or failure at the activity into which I find myself “thrown.” Public normativity cannot help: our shared understanding of “what is a reason for what” cannot answer my question why I should live in one way, at the exclusion of all others. Dasein faces a normative claim which is both prior to and in excess of the claims made upon it by entities in the world: whatever one decides to do, it will be one’s way of living one’s only life.

The indefiniteness of the normative claim that Dasein confronts—that nothing in particular is required of it—explains why all of the possibilities available to Dasein show up as enigmatic. Because I do not know what living a life calls for from me, I am not in a position to appeal to

criteria to determine which of the possibilities available to me I should take up as my way of living. They “sink into indifference” because Dasein cannot tell the relevant difference between them. Recognizing that Dasein’s starting point for thinking about what to do is from a position in which it is unable to tell the difference between the possibilities available to it and to make use of its understanding of these differences to decide, enables Dasein to acknowledge its own interpretative activity in telling the difference between these possibilities, by which it ‘learns’ how to project itself onto them. What is at stake in the difference between “resoluteness” and “irresoluteness,” whether Dasein projects “upon possibilities of its own” or “has let such possibilities be presented to it by the way in which the ‘they’ has publicly interpreted things” (SZ 270/315), is whether Dasein has taken responsibility for its own *understanding* of what public normativity has made *intelligible*.

Inevitably, Dasein comes up with criteria for deciding between the possibilities available to it, by interpreting those possibilities. My understanding of what it means for *me* to be a doctor or a lawyer, for example, is more determinate than the conception of them that is captured by public normativity. That is because it is contextualized within an interpretation of what it would mean for me to take up this possibility as a way of responding to the indefinite normative claim that having a life to live makes upon me, and so amounts to a determination of that normative claim.³⁵ What anxiety, my experience of the call of conscience, allows me to do, then, is to take responsibility for the role that my own interpretative activity plays in determining what the possibilities available to me are, insofar as I might take them up.

³⁵ My conception of what it means for me to live as I should may remain implicit in my understanding of the possibilities available to me; furthermore, it is arguably provisional, liable at any point to anxious disruption, in which Dasein confronts itself again with an indefinite normative claim.

“Resoluteness” is the name Heidegger gives to Dasein’s having taken responsibility for its own understanding of the possibilities available to it, prior to having taken up any of them as its own way of being. “Resoluteness...is always the resoluteness of some factual Dasein at a particular time,” but this means just that Dasein is limited to those possibilities contingently available to it in its historical and social context, not that it already has commitments, which constrain its choice (SZ 298/345). Nor does resoluteness consist in choosing particular possibilities as one’s “ownmost”:

One would completely misunderstand the phenomenon of resoluteness if one should want to suppose that this consists simply in taking up possibilities which have been proposed and recommended, and seizing hold of them. *The resolution is precisely the disclosive projection and determination of what is factually possible at the time.* (SZ 298/345)

In order to respond to the indefinite normative claim that it confronts itself with in the “call,” Dasein must first interpret it; it does so by interpreting the possibilities that show up as enigmatic from the perspective of that claim. Anxiety is thus an occasion for Dasein to take responsibility for ‘having learned’ how to project itself onto possibilities: for the interpretative activity by which I come to understand what would count as living as I should, and what it would mean for me to take up any of the possibilities available to me, interdependently. It is easy to imagine someone who is unaware that she has any conception of what it means to live as she should, which informs her understanding of the possibilities available to her. Such a person has ‘forgotten’ that she ever did not know how to live, in the sense that she has forgotten that it is up to her to understand what public normativity makes intelligible as a way of living her own life. This forgetting is “irresoluteness,” “Being-surrendered to the way in which things have been publicly interpreted by the ‘they’” (SZ 299/345).

On my reading, Dasein “takes over Being-a-basis” by taking responsibility for its understanding of the possibilities into which it has been thrown. This is why “‘Being-a-basis’

means *never* to have power over one's ownmost Being from the ground up": Dasein is the source of its "basis" for the choice between ways of living and acting, because it must interpret the indefinite normative claim that living a life, as such, makes upon it, but it can only do so by interpreting the cultural materials available in its world. Dasein's task is to figure out what it means for it to live its life, in a particular time and place. Dasein's understanding of what it means to live its life cannot be separated from its understanding of the possibilities available: it is only "definite...in a resolution" (SZ 298/345). What Dasein resolves upon, though, is not a particular way of being, but an understanding of the set of possible ways of being available to it that overcomes their enigmatic character, differentiating between them in a way that puts Dasein in a position to decide.

Anxiety reveals that even though the ways that Dasein might be made intelligible by public normativity, "the 'they'" cannot understand these possibilities for it. Our shared conceptions of "what is a reason to what" underdetermine my answer to the question how to live. When Dasein gets the "yips," it is because it recognizes that it overcomes this enigma, in each case, by determining, roughly, what its life calls for. We return from anxiety to live more authentically when we recognize the ineliminable role that our own interpretative activity plays in making the possibilities constituted by public, shared normative practices available for us as ways of living our own lives.

5. Conclusion

I presented my interpretation of Heidegger's discussions of anxiety, death, and the call of conscience as an alternative to the transcendental reading. I will conclude by summarizing the differences between the two approaches. Transcendental readers and I both recognize that Dasein

is not the source of its possibilities, even when it is authentic. Instead, Dasein must appropriate possibilities available to it in its social world, and anxiety has an important role to play in an explanation of what Dasein does to make these possibilities its own. Dasein takes responsibility both for its responsiveness to the norms that govern these possibilities, as well as for those standards that articulate what it means to take them up: what it means to be a doctor, or a teacher, or a parent with a carpentry hobby.

Our approaches differ centrally in that I have suggested that Dasein's being as care does not just explain our responsiveness to public norms, but rather makes a normative claim on Dasein in its own right. On my reading, Dasein confronts itself with this claim in the call of conscience, and its experience of this claim has the phenomenology that I have proposed characterizes anxiety: all of the possibilities available to me show up as enigmatic. We face this indefinite normative claim because of what is revealed in anxious Being-towards-death: that we have just one life to live. It matters to us what we should do with it, and so we face a question that our shared conceptions of "what is a reason for what" cannot answer: no explanation of why *one* would be justified in pursuing a certain project, can explain why *I* should pursue it at the exclusion of others.

This treatment of anxiety allows that Dasein could take up the question who to be in anxiety, and addresses the decisionism charge. Anxiety reveals that Dasein has an active role to play, interpreting what public normativity makes intelligible: before Dasein "'knows' what it is capable of," it must in each case figure this out. So, while Dasein is not in a position to appeal to an already established principle as a reason for choosing one way of living over another in anxiety, it is an occasion for Dasein to acknowledge, and to understand itself as answerable for, its ways of understanding the possibilities available to it as purported ways of living its life well. It is Dasein's understanding of its world, and itself—the latter of which is considered now as the indefinite

normative claim that the unicity of its life makes upon it—that puts it in a position to differentiate between the possibilities available to it such that it can decide between them. I have argued that anxiety reveals that public conceptions of what it means to occupy some social role underdetermines any individual’s conception of what it means to take up that role, and with it, that there is an ineliminable role for Dasein to play in interpreting its possibilities in order to take any of them up.

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