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Anxiety, the Most Revelatory of Moods

John Thomas Whalen

Abstract: *This paper sets out to explore what, for Heidegger, gives anxiety such revelatory power. I would especially like to pay attention to Heidegger's distinction of anxiety and fear, to further stress anxiety's unique revelatory power. Furthermore, I will address how Heidegger's analysis of anxiety and moods generally (an ontological analysis) is distinct from what is understood by moods in the empirical (and ontic) discipline of psychology. Heidegger's analysis of anxiety in Being and Time bridges the first half of the work with the second half of the work. In short, Heidegger needs a mood to allow for an analysis of Dasein, Heidegger's technical term for the kind of being that humans have, in its wholeness, not simply in its inauthentic, everyday existence, as is examined in Division One of Being and Time. The world as a whole stands before Dasein in anxiety like in no other mood, for all other attunements aid Dasein in its engagement with the world, not in pulling away from it. The structures of Dasein Heidegger describes in the latter half of Being and Time, particularly guilt, the call of conscience, and resoluteness, manifest themselves through anxiety. As Heidegger further refines and reformulates Dasein's existential structures in the second half of Being and Time, we see anxiety manifest in one of Heidegger's most well-known concepts: being-towards-death.*

Anxiety, it becomes apparent in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, has an enormous importance for understanding Dasein's most fundamental existentials, considering that that these existential structures and characteristics (everything

from guilt to being-towards-death) manifest themselves through anxiety. This paper sets out to explore what, for Heidegger, gives anxiety such revelatory power. I would like to pay close attention to Heidegger's distinction of anxiety and fear, to further stress anxiety's unique revelatory power. Furthermore, I will address how Heidegger's analysis of anxiety and moods generally (an ontological endeavor) is distinct from how psychology, an empirical (and ontic) discipline, understand anxiety. Anxiety is the most important mood in transitioning Dasein from everyday fallenness to authenticity. While anxiety does not fully disclose Dasein in its being it is vital for allowing "adequate preparations" for this full disclosure to be done by bringing Dasein before itself.

Being and Time sets out to examine the question of the meaning of being by explicating the being of Dasein, the very being which can make this inquiry. In Chapter Six of *Being and Time*, Heidegger establishes the problems and inquiries that lead to his account of anxiety. These problems surround the question: "how is the totality of the structural whole that we pointed out to be determined existentially and ontologically."⁹⁴ After describing Dasein in its average everydayness—"entangled-disclosed, thrown projecting being-in-the-world"—Heidegger asserts that this structure is inadequate for presenting Dasein "ontically and primordially for ontological analysis."⁹⁵ Dasein is disclosed to itself in existing, specifically through attunement and understanding, which are the substructures which allow for disclosedness. Attunement, or mood, is essential for Dasein in disclosing the world; mood makes

⁹⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, (New York, SUNY Press, 2010), 175.

⁹⁵ *Being and Time*, 176.

“intentional directedness possible”⁹⁶In fact, Dasein is always mooded, whether it is largely indifferent to its surroundings, or in love.

Heidegger’s account of moods allows us to understand the ontological significance of anxiety. Elsewhere, in the philosophical tradition, mood is treated as kind of “epiphenomenon” that is transitory and which guides a subject’s apprehension of the world, but is nevertheless secondary to intelligence or theoretical understanding.⁹⁷That moods for Heidegger, are not so much possessed as they are lived (we don’t really have a mood, but *are* a mood), and are responsible for making engagement with the world possible at all, aids in understanding what is so significant about anxiety for understanding Dasein. If moods are absolutely vital for understanding Dasein’s everyday engagement with the world, then it makes sense to question whether there is any mood (“understanding attunement”) of the most “far reaching” and “primordial sort” which discloses Dasein in a distinctive way⁹⁸. Hubert Dreyfus states this concept simply and effectively: “in order to do fundamental ontology. . . [Heidegger] needs to find a special method for revealing Dasein’s total structure.”⁹⁹In short, Heidegger needs a mood to allow for an analysis of Dasein in its wholeness, not simply in its inauthentic, everyday existence.

One of the earliest steps Heidegger takes in his account of anxiety is to distinguish it from the related mood of fear. He will continue to contrast these moods throughout his discussion of anxiety. While fear is partially a revelatory mood, it does

not open Dasein’s wholeness and is yet another mood which aids in Dasein’s concerned engagement with innerworldly beings. In fear, Dasein is always fearful of an innerworldly being or event, whereas anxiety is not about any innerworldly being. This idea contrasts greatly with how many psychologists have viewed anxiety. Freud, for example believed that anxiety ultimately *stemmed* from fear. While anxiety has a more indefinite quality to it, it is ultimately based on a fear—though perhaps unconscious— of an innerworldly being or situation. Heidegger takes the opposite perspective, believing that anxiety is ontologically prior to fear.¹⁰⁰ What Dreyfus alludes to here is that, so often when one faces anxiety, one attempts to lift the burden of anxiety through fear. To avoid anxiety, one can develop phobias; in one sense, fear is a more comprehensible mood, because it is directed at an innerworldly being. The indefinite quality of anxiety is oppressive because it is impossible to flee from or conquer (at least in the way one does with innerworldly beings).

Others, who do not necessarily accept Freud’s account, believe that anxiety and fear act more on a spectrum, and that they are not as clearly distinguishable as Heidegger claims they are; the mood of anxiety cannot be fully separated (in terms of its significance) from other moods according to this viewpoint. For example, while we might designate the mood of fear to a person who encounters a stranger on a street at night and call my uncertainty regarding how my philosophy paper will turn out anxiety (because I am not so much fearing the paper itself but its uncertain outcome) this difference is one of degree and not of kind. My anxiety regarding the outcome of the paper, while not directed at an innerworldly *thing per se*, is ultimately

96 Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time* (Cambridge, The MIT Press, 1999), 174.

97 Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?” (New York, Harper Collins, 1993), 100.

98 *Being and Time*, 176.

99 *Being-in-the-World*, 181.

¹⁰⁰ *Being-in-the-World*, 182.

grounded in a specific innerworldly *situation*. According to this line of thinking, there is still something—while not a substance—in the world which is affecting my mood.

One reason that Heidegger avoids ontic, psychological descriptions of anxiety is that he is not exactly describing anxiety as it is commonly understood, which I claim helps to surmount the above arguments. While anxiety is often associated with darkness and morbidity, fretting and despair, this is not exactly what Heidegger means by anxiety, though anxiety can potentially manifest itself in this way. One of the central difficulties in evaluating Heidegger's concept of anxiety is understanding exactly what Heidegger means by this term. While in English Heidegger's term *angst* is often translated as anxiety, some argue that dread is a more appropriate term. As one further engages with the meaning of anxiety and angst, one realizes that, part of the reason that so many objections could be made regarding Heidegger's conception of angst is that Heidegger has a rather technical conception in mind.

Anxiety, for Heidegger, is an extremely rare phenomenon. It is likely that Heidegger would agree that much of what is described as anxiety is really a form of fear, but this does not in any way discount the phenomena that he calls anxiety. Heidegger also admits that there are similarities between fear and anxiety—for why then would he devote so much thought to distinguishing them?—but this does not mean that “there structural characteristics are fused.”¹⁰¹ Heidegger also is aware of the confusion surrounding these terms—“fear, which everyday understanding mixes up with anxiety.”¹⁰²

The tension between the Heideggerian conception of anxiety and the psychological is part of a greater

disagreement in how to examine moods. This greater disagreement can, in turn, be expressed onto an even more general stratum: Heidegger's entire project will seem dubious (identifying structures of Dasein through an existential analytic as opposed to empirical observation) to those of a naturalistic disposition. My last phrase—that naturalists are *disposed (or attuned)* to something—however, leads into an interesting counterargument. First, while mood manifests ontically in emotions—the domain of psychology—they have not been accounted for in an ontological sense, (though this talk of moods will undoubtedly be viewed by a naturalist with scorn.) The very fact that the naturalist takes up empirical projects implies that he is mooded. We can call this mood a calm devotion to knowledge and progress. Thus, we need to account for this attunement toward scientific examination and projects. We must ask what makes Dasein's engagement of scientific investigation (especially regarding moods) possible. This cannot be examined through an empirical project, for this (Dasein's taking up empirical projects) is exactly what we are examining. The psychologist, in looking to investigate the emotion empirically, already presupposes Dasein's inherent attunement, which makes such empirical engagement possible.

For Heidegger, anxiety does not come only at life's darkest moments. Anxiety, in fact, occurs during Dasein's heedful engagement with the world, when Dasein is caught up in everydayness and acts on the prescribed meaning of *the they (das man)*. Thus, it is important when discussing the entangled everydayness of Dasein to recall that Dasein has as its fundamental constitution being-in-the-world: concerned, practical engagement with the world. In this absorption, Heidegger claims that Dasein is fleeing from itself, in that its possibilities (and its being-

¹⁰¹ *Being and Time*, 327.

¹⁰² *Being and Time*, 328.

in-the-world generally) do not gain their significance from itself but from *the they*. Anxiety occurs often when nothing out of the ordinary is occurring, during Dasein's everyday engagement with the world. Anxiety can manifest itself in a person when he is sitting in his favorite chair, at a party with friends, or eating in the college cafeteria.

As stated earlier, there is no innerworldly being that Dasein faces in anxiety, thus, "what is threatening is nowhere" and "what anxiety is about is completely indefinite."¹⁰³ In anxiety, "no way of being" has intrinsic meaning for Dasein. Thus, Heidegger, formulates that "that which one has anxiety for is being-in-the-world as such."¹⁰⁴ The meanings that have been defined by the they no longer have significance for Dasein. Hubert Dreyfus interprets Heidegger's account of the anxiety as bearing resemblance to Heidegger's account of the breakdown of ready-to-hand innerworldly beings. When a hammer, for example, breaks or becomes too heavy, it becomes obtrusive. The world—the system of referential meanings—itsself can be viewed as a tool. In anxiety, "Dasein experiences the world as an instrument that has failed to do its job."¹⁰⁵ The world as a whole stands before Dasein in anxiety like in no other mood, for all other attunements aid Dasein in its engagement with the world, not in pulling away from it.

This, however, does not mean that the world loses its definition as a referential chain of meaning; Dasein still sees innerworldly beings as having inherent meanings (having in-order-tos). Meaning—properly understood—has not been lost; significance has. In other words, the world as "the totality of relevance" is not lost, but

becomes *insignificant*¹⁰⁶. Because all individual worldly things have lost significance for Dasein, all that is left for Dasein is the world as a whole. Like with Husserl's phenomenological epoché—where all but the thesis of the natural attitude remains in our phenomenological account of intentional states—the world remains "there" for the anxious Dasein even though significance has been lost.¹⁰⁷ That the world is still there—not, it is important to note, as an objectively present thing (the world as the totality of innerworldly beings) as examined in the sciences—"leaves anxious Dasein in the face of the world as such"¹⁰⁸ We see bikes to ride, and pens to write with, and activities to accomplish with the same ease as ever before but none of these activities now seem relevant or important.

This is where a central characteristic of anxiety occurs—uncanniness. Dasein no longer dwells in the world comfortably because the world becomes viewed "as if from the outside."¹⁰⁹ If we were to view the disclosedness of anxiety as a structural whole, the understanding component of the structure would be uncanniness (Dasein seeing itself as not-at-home), whereas the attunement is the mood of anxiety (the loss of meaning for Dasein). Because anxiety deprives Dasein of understanding itself through "the public way of being interpreted," and also from seeking comfort from (now alien) innerworldly beings, Dasein is fundamentally alone¹¹⁰. This is why Heidegger states that "anxiety individuates Dasein to its *ownmost* being in the world."¹¹¹ Heidegger refers to the

¹⁰³ *Being and Time*, 180.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁵ *Being-in-the-World*, 181.

¹⁰⁶ *Being and Time*, 180.

¹⁰⁷ Bruce Ballard, *The Role of Mood in Heidegger's Ontology* (Lanham, University Press of America, 1999), 52.

¹⁰⁸ Ballard, *The Role of Mood*, 52.

¹⁰⁹ *Being-in-the-World*, 179.

¹¹⁰ *Being and Time*, 184.

¹¹¹ *Being and Time*, 182.

nakedness of Dasein throughout his examination of anxiety. It must be noted that the “existential solipsism” that Dasein undergoes in anxiety—the individuation of Dasein—is not the rise of a worldless subject totally distinct from the other; rather, Dasein is alone because “no way of being” has intrinsic meaning for Dasein anymore¹¹².

Along with the fact that Dasein is anxious about being-in-the-world as such, anxiety also discloses the various possibilities open to Dasein and even the possibility of Dasein at all. Once Dasein understands that the significance of the world has been prescribed from the they, Dasein realizes that it has not authentically chosen its possibilities. However, this, as James Magrini notes, is not necessarily negative, for “anxiety frees Dasein to hold of its existence by throwing it back upon which it is most anxious about—its own potentiality for Being-in-the-world—provoking Dasein to reflect upon that which matters most in its existence.”¹¹³

The structures of Dasein in the latter half of *Being and Time*, particularly guilt, the call of conscience, and resoluteness manifest through anxiety. Guilt, which manifests through anxiety, is Dasein’s realization that it is responsible for its possible ways of being. A related concept is the call of conscience. It is Dasein in its uncanniness (Dasein’s not being at home with *the they*) where Dasein “hears” this call, from no specific direction, but which summons Dasein to take hold of the grounding of its own being, actively taking responsibility for its projects. Heidegger then describes resoluteness, where Dasein embraces its guilt and takes on its possibilities as its own; Dasein understands

that it is responsible for its choices. What is most important to note of these structures for my argument is that anxiety, as it were, opens up the door for them. While fear allows Dasein to take a stand regarding innerworldly beings, this mood does not allow Dasein to reflect on itself as Dasein or seek authenticity (to take a stand on Dasein as Dasein).

The discussion of anxiety’s influence on Dasein’s understandings of its possibilities leads to one of Heidegger’s most important concepts, being-towards-death. Magrini observes: “When Dasein, uncanny and individuated, with its worldly relations severed, is brought before the utter possibility of its no-longer-being-able-to-be, its ownmost potentiality for being is revealed as Being-towards-death.”¹¹⁴ Being-towards-death raises a distinction between anxiety toward death and fearing toward death. While Being-toward-death is a unique concept (which allows us to examine Dasein in its wholeness), “Being-toward-death is essentially anxiety,” by which Heidegger means that Being-toward-death is a manifestation of a certain form of anxiety.

¹¹⁵One can fear biological death—perishing—which is a fear of an innerworldly occurrence. One can fear the pain that dying causes or can fear innerworldly things that may kill you, but this not a comprehension of death as an existential structure. The indefiniteness and insuperability of death only manifests through anxiety. This is because what one is anxious of in Being-toward-death is not directed at any innerworldly phenomenon, but, rather, an anxiety of the nothing: “the nothing reveals itself in anxiety—but not as a being.”¹¹⁶ In other words, Dasein fears the possibility of nothingness (or the possibility of

¹¹² *Ibid.*

¹¹³ James Magrini, “Anxiety in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*: The Harbinger of Authenticity” (2006). *Philosophy Scholarship*, no. 15, 79.

¹¹⁴ Magrini, “Anxiety in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, 80.

¹¹⁵ *Being and Time*, 254.

¹¹⁶ “Metaphysics,” 102.

impossibility), which cannot be, logically, attributed to any being.

All other moods “encourage” Dasein to engage in the world in some way; as Bruce Ballard, observes they “show things in the world in some more definite way of mattering.”¹¹⁷ When we pursue our various projects in everydayness we view the projects as mattering. This sense of “mattering” is no more the case than in fear, giving us another reason to reject anxiety as branching from fear. Far from innerworldly things not mattering to Dasein in fear, and far from being-in-the-world becoming transparent, Dasein immerses itself in the world in this mood; in fear, one sees specific innerworldly beings as very much mattering. One ascertains whether to flee or fight from a threatening innerworldly being. Dasein’s concerned engagement with the world in no sense stops in fear, but is actually heightened.

We can understand this ontically by examining that people in fear often act with a heightened, almost more automatic, circumspection. In fear, people are as engaged with the world as possible. In these situations one does not question their actions—wondering “why would anyone do that. . .”—as is very much the case with anxiety “where one stands back and looks for intrinsic reasons for one’s actions,” but finds none.¹¹⁸ Anxiety helps to make Being-in-the-world in some sense transparent, almost, as it were, revealing the trick of the magic act, but “fear is occasioned by beings taken care of in the surrounding world.”¹¹⁹ Heidegger explicitly supports this claim that fear is a mood that engages us in an even more circumspect way than usual with tasks at hand: “fear arises from the lost present of which fear is fearfully

apprehensive, thus *falling prey to it more than ever*.¹²⁰

Heidegger’s claim that the mood anxiety has such revelatory power—that it reveals such fundamental things about us and our world—might seem peculiar to many given that anxiety is such a specific phenomenon. Also, the very notion that it is through a mood that we can begin to examine the Dasein conflicts with the philosophical tradition. What I can say about this second concern is that Heidegger’s emphasis on affect is part of his general inclination to emphasize the axiological and practical over the rational and cognitive. Finally, Heidegger’s analysis of anxiety might seem strange if one does not realize that—complicated language aside—Heidegger is examining a very subtle phenomenon that occurs in everyday life. It is so subtle that a reader might not realize that Heidegger is describing something that she has felt.

¹¹⁷ Ballard, 51.

¹¹⁸ *Being-in-the-World*, 180.

¹¹⁹ *Being and Time*, 329.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*