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THE ABYSS COLUMN

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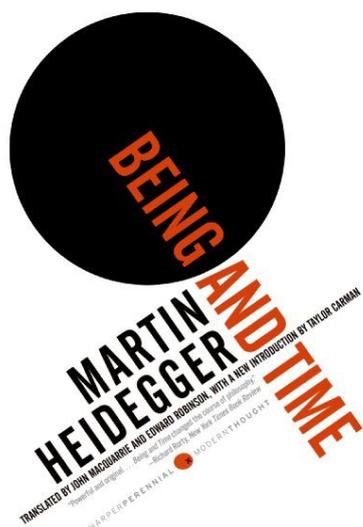
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WHAT CAN EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY LEARN FROM HEIDEGGER'S DASEIN? PART II: BEING-IN-THE-WORLD, DEATH, ANXIETY, AND AUTHENTICITY



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“ THIS UNDIFFERENTIATED ANXIETY PRODUCES AN OVERWHELMING FEELING OF NO LONGER BEING AT HOME IN THE WORLD—WHAT HEIDEGGER CALLS AN UNCANNY (UNHEIMLICH) FEELING

”

THE WORLD

According to Heidegger, our conceptualization of Dasein must refrain from decontextualizing Dasein from its world. This is to say that we must not isolate Dasein from the place in which it lives. The Being of Dasein is also the world, such that “the world is part and parcel of [its] Being, of the fabric of [its] existence” (Critchley, *On Being-in-the-world*, 2009). This is because Dasein’s essence manifests from out of the choices that Dasein makes—and to make choices is to necessarily be contained within a world where choices can be made. Without a place for Dasein to exercise its capacity to choose and thus actualize its possibilities, the essence of Dasein could never be realized. This is the grounds for Heidegger’s idea of being-in-the-world [In-der-Welt-sein]. Dasein is thrown [geworfen] into a context, history, and world of contingencies where it must manifest its essence through existing. Dasein and the world are inextricably linked—this is a fact. And yet, the contingent context, history, and time of the world serve to set the parameters for Dasein’s possibilities—we never get to choose when we are born, yet, we immediately adopt the rules of the prevailing culture, strive after conceptions of success defined by our culture, adopt the contemporary dialect, and so on.

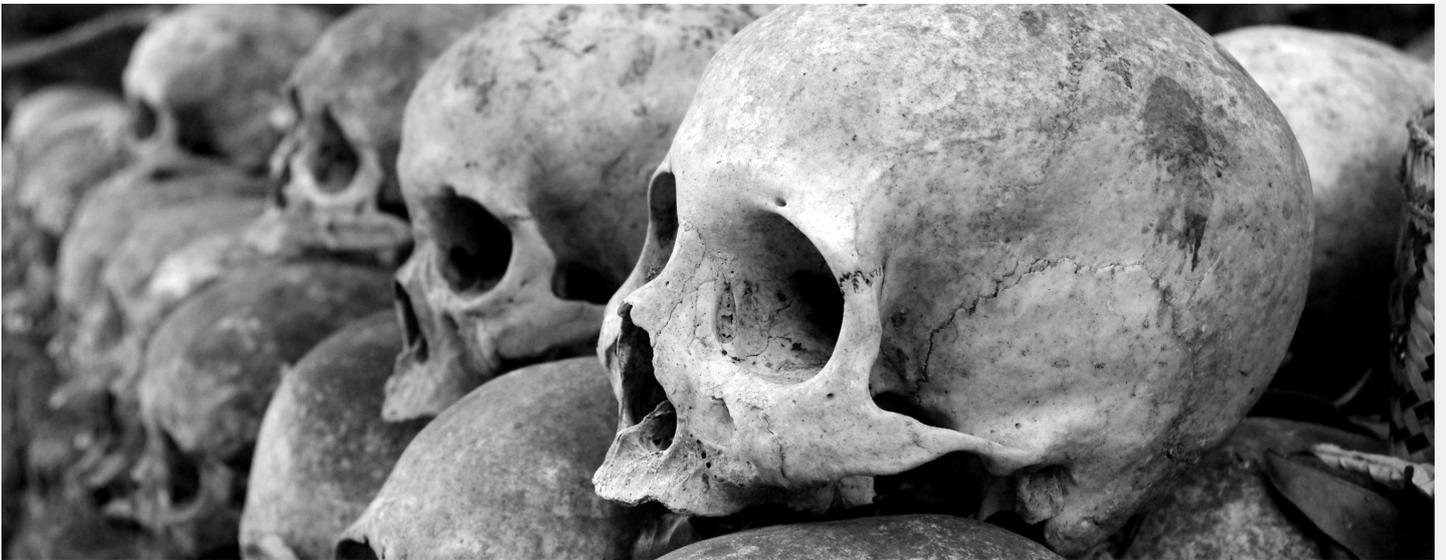
It is important to note that the mood [Stimmung] Dasein has toward the world is not one of indifference. As a consequence of Dasein's engagement with the world, in its effort to work out its essence through time, Dasein's mood must be one of care [Sorge]. More precisely, we cannot help but create and execute plans and projects that both make use of the objects in the world and act in an awareness, consideration, and involvement with other people (Critchley, *On Being-in-the-world*, 2009).

BEING-TOWARDS-DEATH, AUTHENTICITY, & ANXIETY

The crux of Dasein, however, is found within its relation to death. Death, as previously stated, is the always possible impossibility of Dasein—the fact that at any given moment I could cease to be, that this cessation of the I that is wholly mine is an inevitability, and that only I can die my own death (Critchley, *On Death*, 2009). This represents Heidegger's concept of being-towards-death [Sein-zum-Tode].

There are two modes of being that Dasein can occupy in relation to death: authenticity or inauthenticity (Critchley, *On Mineness*, 2009). Heidegger says that authenticity [Eigentlichkeit] is a mode of being achieved through Dasein's experience of anxiety [Angst]. However, this is not the same anxiety spoken of in modern psychology. Dasein's anxiety is one that is directed at the inevitable possibility of a world devoid of Dasein's own existence (i.e., a world without me). However, a defining characteristic of Dasein's anxiety is that it is not anxiety of anything in particular—namely, it is not directed toward a definitive being (Critchley, *On Anxiety*, 2009). Instead, its object is that of nothingness, annihilation, or the cessation of possibility—it is anxiety of being-in-the-world as such (Critchley, *On Anxiety*, 2009). These are not things in the proper sense—the object of Dasein's anxiety is indefinite and found in “nothing and nowhere” (Critchley, *On Anxiety*, 2009). This undifferentiated anxiety produces an overwhelming feeling of no longer being at home in the world—what Heidegger calls an uncanny [unheimlich] feeling—insofar as the “everyday world slips away” and “our home becomes strange” (Critchley, *On Anxiety*, 2009).

Anxiety is a fundamental mood [Grundstimmung] for Dasein because it is through anxiety that the kind of being that Dasein is becomes disclosed—that our most essential possibility is death (I may become a psychologist, painter, or writer, but I will most certainly die). It is through this anxiety that Dasein reveals to itself that it is an individuating being (i.e., something different than other things) to the extent that it is not a thing with a definitive essence, but rather a finite being who is becoming—a who not a what (Critchley, *On Anxiety*, 2009). Awareness of this difference between Dasein with all other things manifests as a feeling of separation from everything else and the world itself.



Counterintuitively, this unsettling feeling we have toward death ought to be welcomed as a potentially transformative mood that can bring us into connection with what we truly are—a finite and free who (Critchley, *On Anxiety*, 2009). Heidegger believes that only through this understanding of who we are, may we achieve existential self-possession—namely, taking ownership of our actions, thoughts, and possibilities in order to be the author of our essence; this is the necessary step into authenticity.

Conversely, inauthentic [uneigentlich] Dasein expresses fear of death and strives toward distractions in the They [das Man] that prevent Dasein from becoming existentially self-possessed.

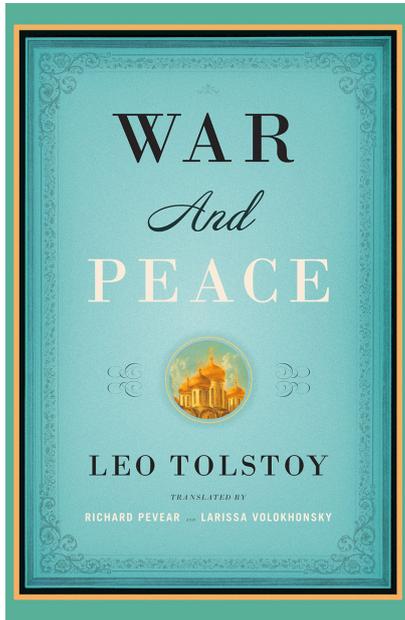
Heidegger tells us that fear is distinct from anxiety because fear has an object (e.g., violent storms, wild predators, and so on) (Critchley, *On Anxiety*, 2009). However, in being fearful of death, Dasein turns its own death into an event that occurs in the distant future, as opposed to what it really is, which is the always present possibility of Dasein's impossibility. In fear of death, the Being of Dasein is not disclosed as a being-towards-death, and as a result Dasein turns its back on its own finitude, tranquilizing itself from having to relate to its own death. Consequently, Dasein fails to open itself up to the multiplicity of possibilities, failing to achieve existential self-possession, freedom, authenticity, and authorship of one's essence.

But this is the nature of the inauthentic: to avoid ownership of one's actions, thoughts, and possibilities (i.e., to reject the existential responsibility that Dasein would otherwise have to uphold with an awareness of its freedom to choose—freedom that entails the unsettling feelings of anxiety and homelessness). Instead, inauthentic Dasein desires and strives to retain the comfort of existential ignorance and naiveté, allowing other forces to author one's essence.

WAR, PEACE, AND PSYCHOLOGY

ALAN KIAN

AUTHOR



“ THE ARBITRARY NATURE OF THE SHIFTING OF OUR BELIEFS IS HIGHLIGHTED, BEING CONTRASTED WITH DEEPLY EXISTENTIAL CONVICTIONS AND REALIZATIONS. ”

I am sitting here, staring at the blank word document, and I'm really having a “look at me” moment with myself. Ugh, it's so hard to write something about War and Peace. I'm huffing and puffing, getting up, pacing a bit, trying to get the creative juices flowing. Then a single thought comes to my head: “Imagine having had to write it buddy.” Fair enough, random voice. Fair enough. You know why? Because I cannot imagine writing something like this.

We can quickly get the disclaimer about the length out of the way. My edition was just over 1200 pages. I quickly realized that this was not a Dumas 1200-page affair, oh no. This was more Melville. That means you need to fasten your seatbelt, because it will be a bumpy ride as Tolstoy zooms in and out, alternating between the micro and the macro at will. You have chapters that are so unbelievably detailed in their description of battle tactics and the philosophy of war that they resemble the “Cetology” chapter of Moby-Dick. These are the chapters that come complete with a gold medal at the end if you manage to finish them while in bed. When you zoom out, you have chapters that concern themselves with the topics that only “Great Works” do expertly – the condition of humanity, the arbitrariness of war, the meaning of loyalty to a cause, the existence of free will, the merit (and illusion) of leadership, the dubious concept of genius, etc. When you juxtapose endless short chapters of this type, alternating between big and small, spread them across many parts and 4 volumes, you will have people buying this book and putting it on the shelf without reading it. I get it. At times, it is absolutely stop-start. This can make it a jarring experience. However, I personally think it's worth it.

Then there are the characters. How comfortable are you with Russian names? If very, then cool. Move on. If not? Get some sticky flags to mark the “Principal Characters” page that comes with your copy. Oh god, I hope your copy comes with this page. If not? Best of luck, try to find a list online. I am being slightly facetious, of course, but only slightly. Once you get into the flow of things, you develop a compassionate understanding of the charms and foibles of each character. They become old friends and foes – you get to know their presence before they speak. But seeing as you will probably not be finishing this in 3-4 days, you will be forgiven if you confuse the multiple characters and their host of first names, family names, patronymics, and nicknames. At your disposal, you have a host of characters to whom you can get attached. I chose Pierre. You can choose Natasha, Andrei, Sonya, Nikolai, or honestly anyone else. Seriously. You can pick Napoleon for all I care. All valid choices.



From the very first pages, I decided to take notes in a separate notebook, noting the page number for things that stood out to me. I filled out several pages of the notebook, and I would love to go over some of the beauties of this book, if only for me to come back to in several years and see where my mind was at when I finished this:

1) Hemingway talks about Tolstoy’s deep knowledge of a battlefield. This knowledge, he says, puts to shame all other authors who write warfare as if they are describing a painting. The troops line up, “do war”, so to speak, and each side yields thousands of poor, dead souls. This is not what you get with Tolstoy. The host of psyches at play on the battlefield leave you at a loss for words. Different players in the scene are deep in thought, as you would be before (possibly) the end of your life. Thoughts of glory are abundant – originating from experience in battle or from sheer naivete. Courage is shown, whether through the acknowledgment of fear and a quiet resolve to bear it, or through sheer stupidity. Clearly, the “bit players”, the ones who are actually doing the killing and dying in real time, are not always synced up with the thoughts of the commanders and sovereigns. Why are the French fighting the Russians? Is it because Napoleon was offended by a perceived slight, or because a lowly soldier is wanting to be noticed by Alexander I? Heartbreaking to think about. I mentioned paintings, and this particular one by Louis-François Lejeune shows the Battle of Borodino – potentially the bloodiest of the Napoleonic Wars.



Definitely one of the highlights of the book.

2) The characters are often more real in their sum than most “real” people that I know – they show the best and worst sides of humanity when put together and looked at after the book is done. The volatility of human decisions and the inertia that results from them – unbelievable. A character may decide in a moment that he will marry a girl, and that is that. He didn’t even mean it, really. He was forced to do something by the pressure of the situation (there is the concept of free will again, one that Tolstoy plays with over and over throughout the text) and now he is stuck for years on end, dealing with the consequences of his decision. Snapshot decision after snapshot decision. Someone dives into Freemasonry, another decides that he is done with Napoleon forever, a look, a dress, a sight, a smell is enough to cause the most passionate of loves – do these not signify that the darker side of snapshot decisions are also just as arbitrary? Invade Russia, kill the young soldiers, take this route, burn that bridge... for what? The arbitrary nature of the shifting of our beliefs is highlighted, being contrasted with deeply existential convictions and realizations.

3) Tolstoy displays a superb mastery over his universe. I personally am guilty of using the “diving in” metaphor quite often, but it does feel like an ocean with Tolstoy as the almighty creator. Nothing that a character does (and as I mentioned, there are quite a few of them) is out of place. Nothing is unrealistic. Does it help that he is writing “historical fiction”? To an extent, sure, but I believe

that dismissing his craft due to this fact is a blunder. Writing something of this scope and keeping everything in check... phew. Control is the name of the game.

4) Finally (well, not final in my notes, but I don't want to ramble on forever), a quick glance back at the length. The length in itself, I believe, is helpful. I don't know how much of it was intentional, because it seems as though Tolstoy had designs to write something much shorter and much more concise about the Decembrist movement in Russia – and he may have gotten carried away, going back further and further until the very first hints of Napoleon's antagonistic nature with regards to Russia. Either way, throughout the journey that this absolute brick of a book provides, we get an even more nuanced picture of human truths and relativity. Those same charms and foibles that I referred to about the characters repeat themselves in predictable cycles – 1200 pages is enough real estate to allow you to do that as an author. These charms and foibles quickly became either the deepest virtues or the most raging flaws, when spread across time and space. Just another point for the rich cast.

Happy I finished this one. To end it off, I will swerve hard onto the road of cliché without even signaling by putting in one of the most overused (but still true) quotes of all time by Isaac Babel:

“If the world could write itself, it would write like Tolstoy.”

Amen.

