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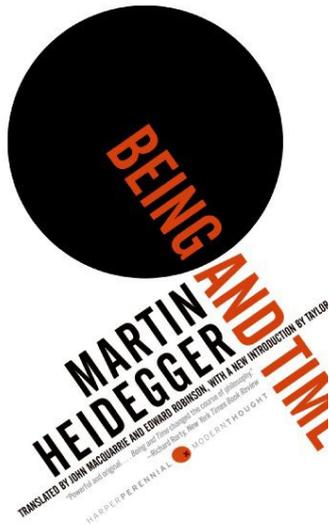
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WHAT CAN EXISTENTIAL PSYCHOLOGY LEARN FROM HEIDEGGER'S DASEIN? PART I: TWO DISTINCTIVE FEATURES



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“ IT IS HUMANS ALONE THAT ARE CONCERNED WITH WHAT IT MEANS TO BE, WITH WHAT IT MEANS TO EXIST. ”

DASEIN

Dasein is a philosophical term that was popularized in the ground-breaking *Being and Time* [Sein und Zeit], an existential treatise written in 1927 by the prominent twentieth-century German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Dasein is a German word that directly translates to being-there. But Heidegger adamantly warns against our understanding of Dasein through this translation, specifically in its use as a mere substitute for consciousness (Dreyfus, 1990, p. 13). As Heidegger said,

“Any attempt [...] to rethink *Being and Time* is thwarted as long as one is satisfied with the observation that, in this study, the term ‘being there’ is used in place of ‘consciousness.’ As if it were simply a matter of using different words! [...] ‘Being there’ names that which should first of all be experienced, and subsequently thought of, as a place, namely, the location of the truth of Being.” (Heidegger, 1943, p. 213)

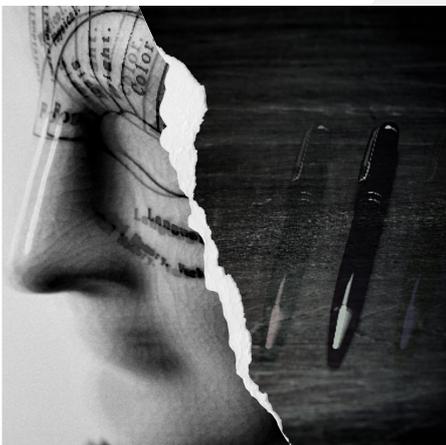
To understand Dasein then, we must look toward something more basic than ‘mental states and intentionality’ (Dreyfus, 1990, p. 14). Dreyfus recommends that Dasein should be understood as the distinctive Being that is particular to the human being (Dreyfus, 1990, p. 14). But this raises the question: What features characterize the Being that is particular to the human being? There are two important features of Dasein. Continued...

1. The First Feature: The Question of its own Being

First, Heidegger intuitively recognizes that out of the totality of different beings that are known to exist—atoms, photons, and quarks; tables, chairs, and houses; asteroids, planets, and stars—it is only for the human being that the question of its own Being arises, becoming its issue.

“Dasein [...] is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 32). It is humans alone that are concerned with what it means to be, with what it means to exist—sticks and stones and all other objects are utterly indifferent to their being a stick or a stone or an object (Mulhall, 1996, p. 15). Why, then, is Dasein concerned with its own Being?

To understand the concern that Dasein has toward its own Being, it is necessary to make the distinction between the essence of Dasein and the essence of non-Dasein beings (e.g., motorcycles, water molecules, iPhones, and so on). This draws upon one of the most fundamental claims in the school of existential thought, that for Dasein—the human being—existence precedes essence. And for non-Dasein beings, this equation is reversed such that their essence precedes their existence. A simple way to conceptualize this distinction is to compare an object with a human being. Right now, I am holding a pen in my hand. Within my mind, I can begin to describe the necessary and sufficient conditions of what it means to be a pen. It is a narrow instrument that writes with ink, it is typically cylindrical, it has a ballpoint, and so on. Eventually, I will hit upon the essence of pen-ness, namely, in having laid out its constituent features. Now, let us imagine that all pens suddenly vanished from existence. In this case, the entities that we call pen no longer exist—yet, the essence of pen-ness remains within our minds, as a mental model built from its constituent features. If I were to then construct a pen, I could build it from this mental model (i.e., the essence of the pen). In such a case, the essence not only preceded the existence of the new pen but guided the production of the pen itself, aiding in its coming into existence.



This is not the case for Dasein. For Dasein, existence precedes essence. Indeed, the what-ness—the necessary and sufficient features of a thing—cannot be laid out for a human being (Mulhall, 1996, p. 15). Dasein evades a preceding what-ness altogether, insofar as Dasein is born before he or she is defined. Consequently, Dasein is not a what but a who, whose essence is shaped only through the choices he or she makes while existing through time (Critchley, *On Mineness*, 2009).

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**A SWORD OF DAMOCLES, DEATH IS THE ALWAYS
POSSIBLE IMPOSSIBILITY OF DASEIN, ETERNALLY
ENDING DASEIN'S PROJECT OF ESSENCE DEFINING.**

”

Dasein partakes in the project of what itself is and what itself will become—a project that is alien to ordinary objects (Mulhall, 1996, p. 15). A pen is a pen and does not partake in becoming a pen. In short, Dasein’s essence is contained within his or her possibilities and choices. At every moment, Dasein has a multiplicity of possibilities—an array of possible ways of being—and in choosing from this multiplicity, Dasein becomes (Mulhall, 1996, p. 15). Thus, Dasein’s project of essence defining serves as an answer to our previous question: Why is Dasein concerned with its own Being? Unlike other beings (e.g., pencils, books, water) who have a definitive essence, Dasein must strive to create one in its very existing. Because of this fact, Dasein’s concern must be tied up with its possibilities and choices, insofar as that is where its essence will be derived. Dasein must decide for itself what it ought to become (i.e., should I be this or that?)—not only a question it must ask itself, but a question that cannot omit the issue of Being (Mulhall, 1996, p. 15). The second reason for Dasein’s concern for the question of its own Being is death. Death always hangs over Dasein. A Sword of Damocles, death is the always possible impossibility of Dasein, eternally ending Dasein’s project of essence defining. At death Dasein is defined. Consequently, Dasein also has to wonder when it will cease to be (i.e., “I could die at any moment—right now, tomorrow, or in ten years!”) “As soon as man comes to life, he is at once old enough to die” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 289). This ought for what Dasein will become and this wondering for when Dasein will cease to be are both inextricably linked to Dasein’s concern for its own Being.

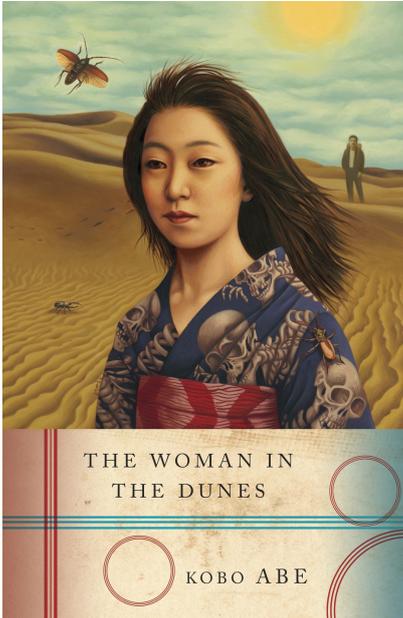
2. The Second Feature: Mineness

Second, Heidegger stresses the concept of mineness [Jemeinigkeit]. This feature of Dasein refers to the fact that the Being of Dasein is always experienced as an experience that is mine (Critchley, *On Mineness*, 2009). This means that each individual’s experience of being human occurs through the lens of the first person. And, these questions of What ought I to become? and When will I cease to be? are always an issue for only me. The former question is resolved through only my existence, and the latter question is my ownmost possibility—in other words, only I can die my own death, no one can choose to die for me.

EXISTENTIALISM IN THE SAND

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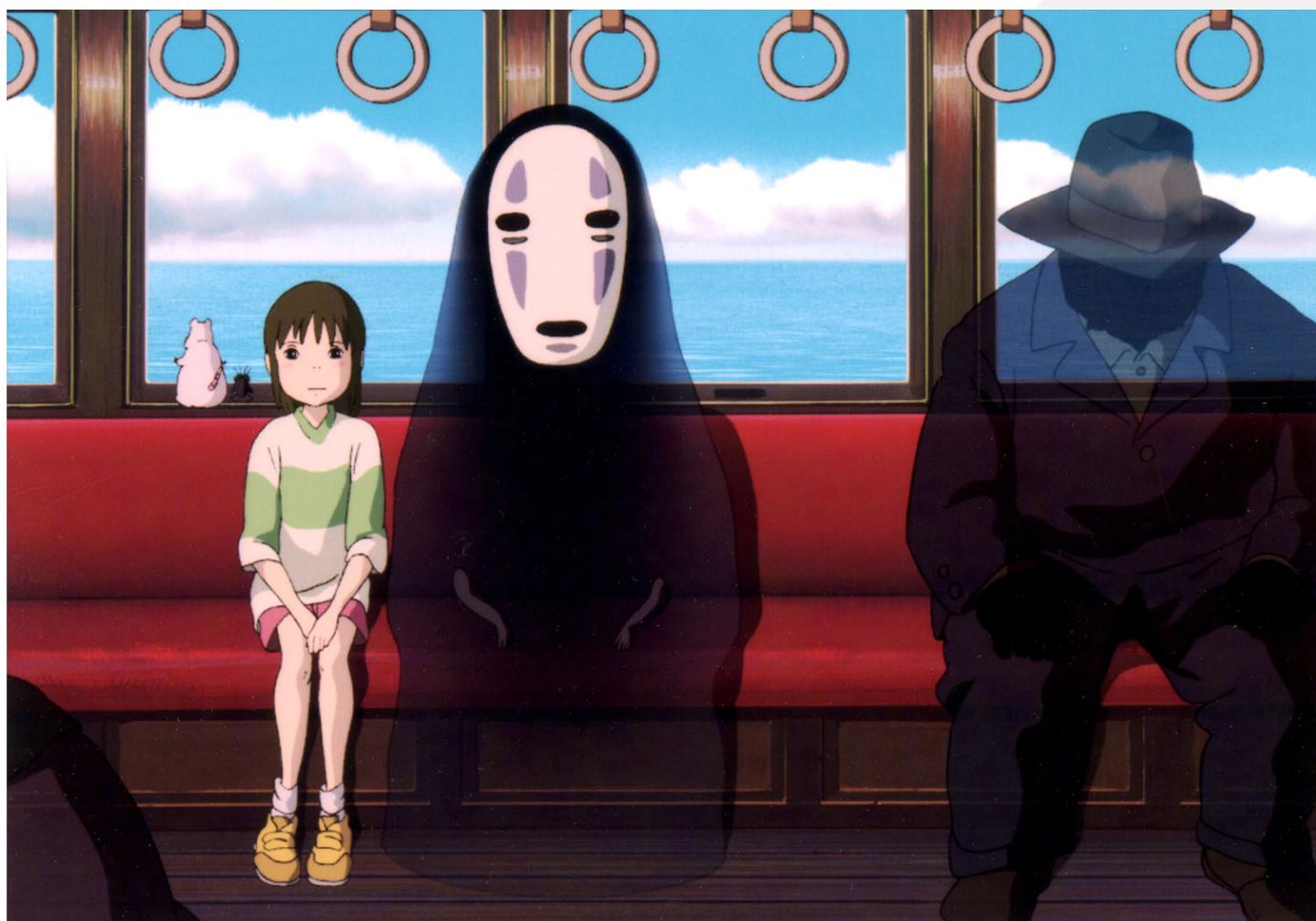
“ HE IS SO AFRAID OF
MONOTONY THAT HE IS
WILLING TO CAUSE CHAOS IN
ANYTHING AND WITH ANYONE. ”

Wait... what did I just experience?

Going into this book, I knew that 2021 was the Year of Japan (for me). For one reason or another, my aim has been to up the number of Japanese books that I read. This meant that, sooner or later, I was bound to yield to the Goodreads algorithm once again. It was time to tackle *The Woman in the Dunes*. It didn't hurt that the cover looked unbelievably gorgeous. What I was not expecting was possibly the best fictional existential book I have read so far. I knew something was up, and so I looked at the back of the book: the author biography mentioned that Kōbō Abe studied medicine, alongside studying Poe, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Jaspers, and Kafka. And just like that, it started to make sense.

This hit me like a train, which is a metaphor from *Spirited Away* that I used while reading this book to help me gather my thoughts, and it is one that I will come back to at the end of my review. The main character, Niki Jumpei, goes on an excursion to a sandy area of Japan in order to spend some time doing what he enjoys as a hobby: insect collection and inspection. The situation is slightly awkward, and he finds himself having to spend a night in a town that is surrounded by sand dunes. The hut of the eponymous “woman” is offered to him as a viable option, and he accepts, grateful for the opportunity. And that is where the fun begins.

I think I will stop there in terms of the plot. Our main character's philosophical musings get dialed to 100. He is surrounded by menial labour and sand. Lots of sand. The sand is everywhere. It never stops. It is always blowing in, always pouring in, always finding a way in, always in nooks and crannies and crevices that he does not appreciate. I chose to look at the sand as a great symbol for the passing of time. Maybe this is why the presence of the sand irks him so. Our main character is 38. In the most basic way, then, he could be said to be having an early-ish midlife crisis. The signs are all there – wild hobbies, sudden desires, long rants on the relationship between the sexes, and the sand. The sand is constant.



Looking underneath the hood, however, reveals a deeper set of concepts: Death. Freedom. Isolation. Meaninglessness. Niki Jumpei is constantly outrunning death. The anxiety of finality is unbearable for him. To think of wasting time without working towards fulfillment is to have a panic attack. Freedom is an obvious key here – he is physically and mentally trapped. But is he able to use freedom as the land of milk and honey that it is often conceived as? He is also alone, but deeply lonely. He is not content in being solo. These all contribute to a deep sense of ennui and listless movements in his daily life – he is so afraid of monotony that he is willing to cause chaos in anything and with anyone. He is willing to pull apart the perfect latticed structure of millions of grains of sand, each 1/8th of a mm in diameter.

Where does the train come in? Well... it doesn't. But Niki Jumpei does talk about tickets. I thought of them as train tickets. To you, they might be bus or plane tickets. I will let his words speak for themselves as we finish off:

“These days people caught in the clutches of the one-way ticket never sing it like that. The soles of those who have only a one-way ticket are so thin that they scream when they step on a pebble. They have had their fill of walking. “The Round-Trip Ticket Blues” is what they want to sing. A one-way ticket is a disjointed life that misses the links between yesterday and today, today and tomorrow. Only the man who obstinately hangs on to a round-trip ticket can hum with real sorrow a song of a one-way ticket. For this very reason he grows desperate lest the return half of his ticket be lost or stolen; he buys stocks, signs up for life insurance, and talks out of different sides of his mouth to his union pals and his superiors. He hums “The One-Way Ticket Blues” with all his might and, choosing a channel at random, turns the television up to full volume in an attempt to drown out the peevish voices of those who have only a one-way ticket and who keep asking for help, voices that come up through the bathtub drain or the toilet hole. It would not be strange at all if “The Round-Trip Ticket Blues” were the song of mankind imprisoned.”

