A Review on Heidegger's "Authenticity"

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Introduction

Martin Heidegger, one of the most influential philosophers of the modern age, devoted much of his career to a single question: "What is 'being'?" In *Being and Time*, he developed various concepts and terms to explore or extend it. "Authenticity"—*Eigentlichkeit* in German—is one such term that he uses to refer to "a possible way of life or mode of existence for humans, a life that reveals what it is to be human in a privileged way"[1].

Even with this definition, it remains unclear *how* a life might be viewed as authentic, or, conversely, as inauthentic. Therefore, in this essay, I will a) explicate Heidegger's view in Section 1, b) raise key objections in Section 2 and c) propose my own evaluation in Section 3. In assessing the concept, I draw on the views of McManus, Guignon, Crowell, Adorno, and Dreyfus.

Section 1: Heidegger's Conception of Authenticity

Authenticity, or "authentic" in its adjectival form, is commonly used in everyday language to mean "the quality of being real or true"[2]. Applied to a life, it asks whether one has lived truly — i.e., in accordance with one's own desires or values. Inauthenticity, by contrast, signals a failure to do so. Heidegger's term, however, is *Eigentlichkeit*. Though standardly translated as "authenticity," its literal sense is closer to "ownedness," "being-one's-own," or "properness." It derives from *eigen*—meaning "own" or "proper to oneself"[3]. Thus, while everyday "being real" and Heideggerian "being one's own" are related, they are not identical. Crucially, the entity to which Heidegger applies this concept is not the human being as traditionally conceived, nor any ordinary being, but *Dasein* — "everyday human existence" in

[1] (Guignon 2014:1)
[2] (Cambridge University Press, n.d.)
[3] (Varga, Somogy; Guignon, Charles 2024)

colloquial German[4]. To grasp what an authentic (or inauthentic) existence is for Heidegger, we must first situate the concept within the broader ontological framework.

Heidegger's fundamental concern is the question of *Being* — i.e., how we are able "to make sense of our ability to make sense of things." [5] He argued that a right entity as an example for inquiry is necessary to formulate the question correctly:

> Thus to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity — the inquirer — transparent in his own being. […] This entity […] we shall denote by the term "*Dasein*". [6]

Because Dasein inquires into the possibilities of its Being, "Being is an issue for it" [7]. This way of being is what Heidegger called "existence."[8] "Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence — in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself." [9] Therefore, Dasein is an entity that understands itself through the possibilities of to be itself or not.

Heidegger analyses Dasein's existence as consisting of two interrelated structures: thrownness and projection.[10] *Thrownness (Geworfenheit)* is the fact that Dasein "always finds itself already having some given content and concerns." [11] These given conditions—such as culture, family—open certain possibilities for being Dasein while closing off others. While thrownness describes Dasein's past and present facticity, *projection* (Entwurf) concerns how Dasein relates to its future. "Since Dasein is what it does, it is always projecting on, i.e. acting on, some such possibilities [of its way of being]." [12]

Dasein can therefore be described as a thrown projection. It is fundamentally characterized not merely by what it is, but by what it is not yet. "[Dasein] itself, being

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[4] (Dreyfus 1991: 13)
[5] Ibid. p. 10
[6] (Heidegger, M., 1962: 27)
[7] Ibid. p. 32
[8] (Dreyfus 1991: 299)
[9] (Heidegger, M., 1962: 33)
[10] (Dreyfus 1991: 299)
[11] Ibid. p. 299
[12] Ibid. p. 300

a basis, is a nullity of itself."[13] This nothingness is constitutive of Dasein's nature. It also means that every choice I make is made "on the basis of taken-for-granted practices that I can never fully grasp, yet for whose consequences I am fully responsible."[14]

Anxiety (Angst) discloses this nulity. Unlike fear, anxiety is not directed toward any object; instead, it reveals Dasein's radical finitude and freedom. "Anxiety discloses an insignificance of the world; and this insignificance reveals the nullity of that with which one can concern oneself." [15] The structure of this anxiety becomes clear when we consider death. Since Dasein understands itself through possibilities, "death, as the end of Dasein, is Dasein's ownmost possibility"[16] Yet death is also the possibility of having no more possibilities. The anxiety surrounding death stems from the fact that, at that moment, all possibilities collapse, and everything appears meaningless.

We now understand what anxiety reveals, and why it "both motivates falling into inauthenticity — a cover-up of Dasein's true structure — and undermines this cover-up, thus making authenticity possible"[17] Authenticity is not chosen in a simple act of decision; rather, Dasein must "press[es] forward into possibilities"[18]. If Dasein accepts its powerlessness, confronts the anxiety of its nullity, it "find[s] itself already embarked upon a new, authentic way of life."[19] Before this disclosure—whether because anxiety has not yet been encountered, or because everyday norms continue to cover it up—Dasein remains in inauthenticity.

In sum, Heidegger's conception of authenticity emerges only against the background of Dasein's ontological structure. Dasein is a "thrown projection": shaped by factical conditions it did not choose yet always oriented toward possibilities it must take responsibilities. Anxiety reveals the null basis of these possibilities. Authenticity, therefore, is not a matter of expressing an inner "true self," but of lucidly owning one's finite situation, whereas inauthenticity consists in fleeing from this insight into the tranquillized norms of the everyday.

[13] (Heidegger, M., 1962: 330)
[14] (Dreyfus 1991: 307)
[15] (Heidegger, M., 1962: 393)
[16] (Heidegger, M., 1962: 303)
[17] (Dreyfus 1991: 315)
[18] (Heidegger, M., 1962: 184)
[19] (Dreyfus 1991: 320)

Section 2: Objections to Heidegger's Conception of Authenticity

Despite the depth and power of Heidegger's account, it has attracted sustained criticism. Two objections in particular have proven especially influential and damaging: (1) the "closure" or "fixity" objection, and (2) the charge that authenticity is empty, purely formal, and ultimately ideological.

The Closure Objection

The first significant objection concerns what Denis McManus identifies as the "closure objection."[20] According to this critique, Heidegger's resoluteness appears to require a fixed, determinate commitment or standpoint, yet such fixity is incompatible with the genuine openness to concrete situations that Heidegger himself insists upon.

They argue that resoluteness (*Ent-schlossenheit)*, properly understood, must involve openness to concrete situations in all their particularity and complexity. Yet if authenticity requires holding to a determinate standpoint—a chosen project or commitment—then authentic Dasein seems paradoxically closed off from the responsiveness to circumstance that genuine openness demands. If my authenticity depends upon owning a particular standpoint or life-project, critics contend, then I appear committed to maintaining that standpoint even when concrete situations call for re-evaluation or flexibility. In Crowell's sense, this would "mask the autonomy of my choice with a fiction."[21] This would contradict Heidegger's insistence that authentic existence exhibits *Ent-schlossenheit* — literally, being "un-closed" — and thus suggests an internal inconsistency in Heidegger's framework.

The Emptiness and Formalism Objection

The second significant objection is that Heideggerian authenticity is radically empty and formalistic. Theodor Adorno, in his *The Jargon of Authenticity*, argues that Heidegger's entire vocabulary—words like Eigentlichkeit, Entschlossenheit,

[20] (McManus, Denis 2018: 1185)
[21] (Crowell, Steven 2004: 69)

Entscheidung, Geschick, Erbe—functions as a pseudo-sacral “jargon” that creates an illusion of profound content while remaining completely void of any determinate meaning.

What Adorno finds most pernicious is that the jargon makes the mere tone of solemn inwardness the sole criterion of authenticity. As he writes: “the jargon makes it seem that without this surplus of the speaker the speech would already be inauthentic, that the pure attention of the expression to the subject matter would be a fall into sin."[22] In other words, what matters is not whether what I say or do is true, just, or rationally defensible, but only that I say or do it with the correct posture of resolute “ownedness.” The content is irrelevant; the aura alone is decisive.

This emptiness is not innocent. Because the concept contains no material criteria whatsoever—no reference to reasons, consequences, social reality, or ethical substance—it can be filled with anything at all. As he writes: “Like the empty phrase of idealism, authenticity, in projecting its existentialism right from the beginning, sides with want, over and against satisfaction and abundance. In spite of its eager neutrality and distance from society, authenticity thus stands on the side of the conditions of production, which, contrary to reason, perpetuate want.” [23] The word “authenticity” pretends to name something concrete and exalted, yet it names nothing—and in that very emptiness lies its dangerous seductive power.

Section 3: Responses and Evaluation

Heidegger's conception withstands both objections when read carefully, especially through the lens of Hubert Dreyfus's interpretation. Far from revealing fatal flaws, the criticisms highlight how easily the account can be misunderstood if one imposes a traditional subjectivist framework onto it.

Response to the Closure Objection

The closure objection trades on the assumption that authentic resoluteness must lay on a determinate self-interpretation that is held fixed against future revision. Taylor

[22] (Adorno, Theodor 1973: 9)
[23] Ibid. p. 112

Carman offers a decisive response: resoluteness is not the choice of any particular content, but an internal resistance to the constant gravitational pull of falling — a resistance that must be sustained while one continues to fall.

Authentic Dasein does not commit itself to a specific identity or story and then dogmatically defends it; rather, it maintains attention to its own finite particularity and ecstatic temporality. As Carman puts it:

> Authentic resoluteness is not a self-sufficient mode of existence standing outside Dasein's essentially self-evading inclinations. It is instead a kind of internal resistance to the obfuscating tendencies inherent in the generic drift of discourse, which constantly turns Dasein away from an explicit, problematic attention to its own ecstatic temporality and finite particularity. [24]

Because resoluteness is this ceaseless counter-pressure, it is the very opposite of closure. It is the condition that keeps Dasein un-closed to the concrete situation in its unrepeatable particularity. The moment one relaxes the resistance; one falls back into the undifferentiated “one” and loses the openness that the objection wrongly attributes only to irresoluteness. The closure objection therefore collapses, there is no determinate content that could possibly “close” Dasein off, because resoluteness is nothing but the sustained effort to remain open.

Response to the Emptiness and Formalism Objection

Adorno’s critique is powerful rhetoric but not philosophical persuasive once we see that Heidegger is not offering a normative ethics. Heidegger is doing fundamental ontology: he is describing the formal-existential structures that make any meaningful life possible in the first place. Authenticity is a transcendental condition of there being a “mine” to one’s existence, not a prescription for what to do with that mineness.

Adorno reads Heidegger as promoting a cult of inwardness or heroic decisionism that can be filled with any content, including fascist content. But this stays at the ontic level. At the ontological level, the resolute anti-fascist who risks everything for justice is structurally just as authentic as the resolute Nazi — and that is the point. Heidegger is not telling us *what* to be resolute about; he is showing that without resoluteness we are not even agents in the full sense. Adorno’s demand that

[24] (Carman, Taylor 2000: 28)

ontology deliver material normative content is a category mistake: it confuses “ontological” with “ontic”.

Moreover, Adorno’s own position threatens to be self-undermining. If every appeal to “ownedness,” “decision,” or “commitment” is merely ideological jargon, then he lacks the conceptual resources to call for resistance, solidarity, or emancipation — all of which require exactly the kind of resolute stance he dismisses as empty aura.

My Own Stance

I side fully with Heidegger, as interpreted by Dreyfus and Carman, and take the two major objections as symptoms of the same misunderstanding. The closure objection is, I think, fully answered once we recognise that resoluteness is not a commitment to a fixed standpoint but the ongoing, situation-responsive owning of one’s thrown groundlessness. There is no determinate identity to cling to, so nothing that could generate the supposed “closure.” Likewise, Adorno’s emptiness charge only bites if one demands that authenticity deliver substantive moral content—a demand that confuses the ontological with the ontic.

Still, his worry gains some traction when viewed through a Wittgensteinian lens: Heidegger’s vocabulary can indeed appear overly technical, inviting the impression that profundity is generated by jargon rather than by phenomenological insight. But this does not show that authenticity is empty or formalised; it shows only that its proper interpretation requires resisting any inflated, mystified reading and returning to the ordinary, practical sense of Dasein’s being-in-the-world. Understood in this way, Heidegger (as Dreyfus emphasises) offers the most honest accurate account of what it is to be fully “there” in a situation—the momentary shining of Dasein’s ownmost capacity to be.

Conclusion

Heidegger’s conception of authenticity, when freed from misreadings, survives its strongest critics intact. Properly grasped through Dreyfus’s non-egoic, practice-oriented interpretation, authenticity emerges as the lucid appropriation of our finite,

groundless freedom—the only mode in which human being can fully show up as what it most profoundly is.

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