

compos mentis

Birth, Natal Anxiety, and Possibility

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ABSTRACT

In Heidegger's philosophy and especially outlined in "Being and Time," death delineates the possible for Dasein. Once Dasein understands the unavoidable nature of death, it becomes a freedom toward death whose possibilities are given meaning. However, it is a mistake to look only at one end of Dasein, its death, and not also give attention to the birth of Dasein. Just as there is an anxiety about death, there is an anxiety over one's birth, that one was born at all, and that there was once a time before one was born. Heidegger mentions birth in "Being and Time" but it does not prove to be much at all. Philosopher Anne O'Byrne's work gives us some resources to discuss Dasein's birth. Ultimately, I want to argue that Dasein's birth is individualizing as Dasein's death.

KEYWORDS

Heidegger, Natality, Dasein, Death, Anxiety, Anne O'Byrne, Being and Time, Freedom Towards Death

Martin Heidegger's chief philosophical project is an investigation of the meaning of Being. He believes that it is of utmost importance as it is the grounding for all studies, from the ontical sciences to other areas of philosophical inquiry. This question is often framed as "Why is there something rather than nothing?" (O'Byrne 2010, 26). In *Being and Time*, he frames Dasein as the focus of ontological or metaphysical study. This is because Dasein is an entity who is concerned by Being. Any insight into Dasein would give an insight into the meaning of Being itself. Heidegger moves onto an exploration of Dasein's death so that he can understand the whole of Dasein. Death emerges as a possibility that is unavoidable and unique to every Dasein. And once Dasein realizes that death is its ultimate fate, it becomes a freedom towards death whose possibilities are given meaning by death. However, it would be a mistake to focus only on one end of Dasein without giving an adequate analysis of the other end of Dasein. While Heidegger gives a cursory glance over Dasein's birth, Anne O'Byrne gives a much more thorough account of birth in the chapter entitled "Historicity and the Metaphysics of Existence: Heidegger" in her book *Natality and Finitude*. In this chapter, we are introduced to the concept of natal anxiety, an analogue of Heidegger's anxiety, in that it is a realization of Dasein's orientation around its birth. Dasein can get lost in the question of why it was born in the first place, just as easily as it can when it faces the reality that it will one day die, but once it realizes this lack of reason behind why it was born, it can then create possibilities. O'Byrne ultimately gives a more compelling and richer account of birth than Heidegger does and her concept of natal anxiety seems more pertinent to answering the question of Being than Heidegger's anxiety about death. However, while O'Byrne seems to get much correct about how we ought to think about the birth of Dasein, she is mistaken in saying that birth does not individualize Dasein.

Heidegger introduces Dasein as the object of study to understand the meaning of Being. Dasein is differentiated from all other living beings in that it is inherently concerned not only about the question of Being, but also the question of its own Being. He says, "Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being is an issue for it" (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 32). When he says Dasein is ontically distinguished, this is to say there is something factually, within its existence as a physical being, that makes Dasein ontological or concerned with its Being. He then asserts that Dasein is aware of its ontological character because of its ontical character. He says, "Dasein always understands itself in terms of its

existence--in terms of possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself" (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 33). Here, Heidegger hints at how Dasein's possibilities are indeed made possible by its existence.

Heidegger believes that the whole of Dasein ought to be studied to understand the meaning of Being. The whole of Dasein implies an investigation of the ends of Dasein and one end of Dasein is death. For Heidegger, death is the ultimate possibility for Dasein that enables all other possibilities. This is because, even though Heidegger asserts Dasein as being-with-others in that in any possible action, another Dasein can perform the same action, no Dasein can die for another. He says, "Thus death reveals itself as that possibility which is one's ownmost, which is non-relational, and which is not to be outstripped" (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 294). Here, Heidegger establishes the characteristics of Dasein's death. Death is non-relational in that while we can imagine another Dasein in our place as we perform any other action, another Dasein cannot die for us. This non-relational characteristic thus individualizes Dasein (Heidegger, 308). Death can also not be "outstripped" in that it is inescapable. Dasein cannot choose to not die and no one can take death away from it. Finally, death is Dasein's "ownmost" in that it is only possible for that particular Dasein (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 307).

Heidegger argues that as death emerges as Dasein's inescapable and unique possibility, it ought to embrace it. He calls this proper orientation towards death "anticipation" (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 306). Dasein should not flee from death as it will never be able to do so. Dasein should instead embrace death as the only sure possibility in its life. In a word, it should anticipate its inevitable death. Only then can Dasein achieve a "freedom towards death" (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 311). What does anticipation and a freedom towards death do for Dasein? Heidegger argues that not only is death the ultimate possibility of Dasein, it makes all other possibilities meaningful for Dasein. He says, "Only by the anticipation of death is every accidental and 'provisional' possibility driven out" (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 435). This is not to say that death makes all other potentiality possible for Dasein. Rather, out of all the possibilities in front of Dasein, death shines a light on the possibilities worth pursuing. The possibilities that remain after this filtering effect death has proven to be meaningful because it is what Dasein chooses to do in its finite existence.

This conception of death as the utmost possibility of Dasein does work for Heidegger in terms of understanding Dasein's temporality and its Being. However,

there ought to be more investigation in whether he privileges one end of Dasein more than the other. Death is one end of the whole of Dasein, but it would be a mistake to think of this end as the death of Dasein, the end of its factual existence. When we draw a line segment from point A to point B, we can say that point B is one end of the line segment. But it would also be correct to say that point A is the other end of line. To bring this analogy to Dasein's factual existence, point A would be Dasein's birth. Heidegger himself addresses Dasein's birth. He says, "Understood existentially, birth is not and never is something past in the sense of something no longer present-at-hand... Factual Dasein exists as born; and as born, it is already dying, in the sense of Being-towards-death" (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 426). Here, Heidegger introduces the concept of birth to illustrate historicity and thrownness. We should understand birth as thrownness because it parallels birth in the following quote: "Thrownness and that Being towards death in which one either flees it or anticipates it, form a unity; and in this unity birth and death are 'connected' in a manner characteristic of Dasein (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 426–427). Here, "thrownness" parallels "birth" and "Being towards death" parallels "death". Every present moment of Dasein is shot through with its past and stands before its future. Dasein's past is thrown into every moment and certainly, its birth is also in its path. Thrownness is an essential characteristic for Dasein to have possibilities that will then be made meaningful by its death.

But is Heidegger correct in this characterization of Dasein's birth as making way for Being towards death? In this conception and just in the amount of pages he dedicates to his discussions of birth and to his discussion of death, birth seems to less important than death. O'Byrne gives us resources to develop the birth of Dasein. She first establishes birth as the source of Dasein's thrownness and then "natality--the condition of our having been born--appears as that thrownness" (O'Byrne 2010, 16). The concept of natality then seems to be opposed to Heidegger's concepts of anxiety and anticipation. Anxiety and anticipation are Dasein's state of minds as a result of death standing before it as a possibility. They are a result of Dasein's facticity which effect its ontology as the fact Dasein will die enables it to question its Being and then makes its possibilities meaningful. As she terms the state of mind of Dasein that is a result of its birth, O'Byrne prepares us for importance of Dasein's birth for its ontology. So when O'Byrne then takes issue with Heidegger's framework, as outlined above, how birth is ultimately incorporated into the picture of Dasein as a Being towards death

(O'Byrne 2010, 17), she wants to highlight how birth has a power, independent of death, on Dasein. She says, "our being thrown into a world is overshadowed by our thrownness toward death" (O'Byrne 2010, 17). She will argue that the impact of our thrownness is discounted by Heidegger. It should be given a thorough exploration.

O'Byrne gives a characterization of a "natal anxiety" (O'Byrne 2010, 26) analogous to Heidegger's concept of anxiety. It is precisely this state of mind that is constituted by Dasein's having been thrown. She says, "Natal anxiety is the experience of the groundlessness of our finite existence. It is one thing for Dasein to grasp that it will one day die but another for it to understand that it once came into existence... It is the difference between realizing that Dasein's existence is limited and realizing that it might never have existed at all" (O'Byrne 2010, 26). Heidegger's anxious Dasein is concerned by its inevitable and inescapable death. It is a realization that its "existence is limited" and this limitation makes its possibilities meaningful. However, natal anxiety points us in the other direction. Not that Dasein will one day die, but that it might not have the chance to die in the first place. The fact that Dasein had to first come into existence opens up the idea of a world without this particular Dasein and then the scenario where it "might never have existed at all". There is the questioning of why this Dasein came into being. O'Byrne says this question can be asked as "'Why was I born?'" which she notes is just the "existential version" of one of Heidegger's formulations of the question of Being, "'Why is there something rather than nothing?'" (O'Byrne 2010, 26). With the question "Why was I born" so closely resembling the question of Being, and this question stemming from natal anxiety, then it seems as if an exploration of birth rather than death would have served Heidegger better.

Anxiety of death led Heidegger to the concept of freedom towards death and the limiting of possibilities. Where does natal anxiety lead us? O'Byrne says, "being-toward-death might drive us to a project, to have or concoct possibilities for ourselves, but it is our being in the world--a world that was there in all the variety and complexity of its being and having been before we came--that is the wellspring of those possibilities" (O'Byrne 2010, 32). Now, this idea that birth opens up an infinite range of possibilities does not seem at all different from what Heidegger had to say about the birth in Being and Time. But O'Byrne wants to argue that not only does birth give us the range of possibilities, it also lets us choose. She reappropriates the "moment of vision" that "Heidegger describes

the moment when Dasein pulls itself back from falling" (O'Byrne 2010, 33). The moment of vision for Dasein is when it realizes death as its utmost possibility and becomes a freedom towards death. This is the product of Heidegger's anxiety. The result of natal anxiety would be a moment of vision also, where instead, Dasein pulls away from the fact that it once did not exist and that it might not have existed at all. She says, "the moment of vision is the moment of openness in which newness becomes possible. It makes it possible for us each to be born, for there to be new beginnings, for each of us to act" (O'Byrne 2010, 33). Dasein in the moment of vision does not become consumed by the wonder of the question of why it was born, but instead, realizes that things can come into being. There is the possibility for things to be "new". When we are born, we come into being and are new in the world. Dasein can then act as it realizes it has the ability to make "new beginnings" for itself.

O'Byrne then illustrates how in birth Dasein is with others, while in death, Dasein is separated with others. When Dasein chooses and acts on its possibilities, with its creative power of making possibilities into new actualities, it "disrupts" the world (O'Byrne 2010, 34). Dasein's birth and its actions disrupt the world because it is born into a world that has been given meaning by others (O'Byrne 2010, 34). While disrupt may seem like a negative connotation, it seems to just mean the emergence of new things which were previously not there. Birth and natal anxiety then contribute to the idea of Dasein as Being-with-Other in that it emphasizes when Dasein historicizes, it does so in a world, old with already present meaning. She also says, "Death may Dasein's ownmost non-relational possibility, separating Dasein from all others, but birth is precisely what puts us in relation with others since, while we each may die alone, we could not have been alone at birth" (O'Byrne 2010, 35). Her argument for birth over death is that birth empathizes Dasein as Being-with-Others. Death individualizes and separates Dasein from all other Dasein because no other Dasein can die for another. In that sense, Dasein dies alone. However, O'Byrne argues that birth has the opposite effect. When Dasein is born, it is immediately thrown into a world with meaning constituted by others. Furthermore, we get the sense that Dasein cannot have been factually born alone while we can indeed imagine Dasein dying alone, away from other Dasein. A mother, another Dasein, gives birth to Dasein. It is thus impossible for a Dasein to be alone at birth.

We have examined opposing illustrations of anxiety and what makes possibilities meaningful to Dasein. Heidegger's concept of anxiety makes death a sort of delineating power; that Dasein has a wide range of possibilities in front of it and that death helps Dasein see which among them is important. Natal anxiety gives Dasein a creative power. Dasein can choose from among the possibilities that come from its birth and turn the possibility into an actuality, something new in the world that other Dasein can interact with. Firstly, it seems very much that these two conceptions of anxiety are compatible. We can imagine death delineating what possibilities are before Dasein and then the creative power of natality allowing us to then actually act on these possibilities. But Heidegger set off on his exploration of Dasein's death to get an understanding of the whole of Dasein, so that he can then learn something about the meaning of Being. We can then think about whether birth or death is more helpful in answering the question of Being. When the question of Being is phrased as 'Why is there something rather than nothing?', then it seems to me that birth is the more helpful conception. We can also think about this question as "Why did something come to be rather not?" because something cannot be there unless there was an initial becoming. This strengthens the appeal of natal anxiety as answering the question of Being. Dasein's birth has the same mysterious question of why it was born rather than not being born. This is because birth is the threshold for Dasein of it having not existed and then it existing. Furthermore, the creative power of natal anxiety that gives Dasein the ability to act on our possibilities is based on a sort of understanding of the question of Being. There is something rather than nothing, things can come into being and be new things in the world, and we as Dasein can do this exact thing, create new meaning by acting our possibilities. This new meaning also builds on an old world of meaning that Dasein is born into. While this may be possible in Heidegger, it is made explicit in O'Byrne. Furthermore, birth has a priority over death. This may be obvious because one's birth comes before one's death. But before an anticipation towards death can delineate what is meaningful for Dasein, there must first be a wealth of possibility that stands before Dasein. Heidegger himself mentions that birth gives Dasein this infinite possibility, but as O'Byrne argues, it seems as if he prioritizes death to the extent that birth is swept away and made less significant.

However, while O'Byrne's conception of birth, natal anxiety, and how it relates to the question of Being is compelling, there is some worry about Dasein

as Being-with-Others at birth. The argument is that while death individualates Dasein, Dasein cannot be alone at birth due to its coming into a world made meaningful by others and also that a mother always birthed Dasein (O'Byrne 2010, 35). However, the argument for why death individualates Dasein can also show that birth individualates Dasein. Indeed, this is how it ought to be thought. As said many times above, Dasein's death is non-relational in that it "must be taken over by Dasein alone" (Heidegger [1927] 1962, 308). This is to say that a particular Dasein must face its death and cannot escape it. One Dasein cannot die for another. If a Dasein sacrifices its life for another, that Dasein will still die at some point in the future. This same argument can be made for Dasein's birth. Just as no one can die for me, no one else can be born for me. Dasein's birth must be unique because if another Dasein would be born in my place, there would be no 'me' to begin with, only this other Dasein. Every Dasein was born and that birth cannot be taken away from it. So, while O'Byrne's argument seems to be correct in that we are indeed born into a world of meaning constituted by others and thus we are with others in that sense, Dasein's birth remains its own in that no one else could have been born for it.

Heidegger ultimately turns to Dasein to understand the meaning of Being. To achieve a full picture of the meaning of Being, he would need a full picture of Dasein. He investigates one end of Dasein, its death, and establishes death as personal and inescapable for Dasein. Death then becomes critical for Dasein as it gives its possibilities meaning. While Heidegger briefly explores the other end of Dasein, its birth, it is only to establish the limitless possibilities that stand before Dasein that will then be filtered when Dasein becomes a freedom towards death. O'Byrne gives a more thorough picture of birth. She establishes birth as the source of Dasein's thrownness and rather than have birth be consumed in an anxiety about death, she appropriately characterizes an anxiety about one's birth. The anxiety about birth is the question of the fact that Dasein once did not exist and that it might not have come into existence at all. Rather than fall before this anxiety, Dasein learns that things can come into being and that it itself has a creative power. While O'Byrne gives a compelling account about Dasein's birth and how an anxiety about birth shines more insight onto the question of Being, she is wrong about how birth does not individualate Dasein like how death individualates Dasein. We may be born into a world of meaning constituted by

others, but no one can be born for us. My birth is my own and that constitutes my Being.

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