

# Heidegger's notion of "being towards death" and its role in his philosophy of temporality---How does it relate to human existence and our experience of time?

Ziyu Gong

## Abstract:

Investigates how the Being is understood by individuals about temporality and the connection between authentic human experience and their experience and time. It suggested that Heidegger's accounts of Being-towards-death coincide with the individual experience of the time course, and human, authentic experience of existence is further influenced by the experience of time. We accounted that the understanding of Death, as an end on the other side of time, contributes to understanding human Being, that we are not a real substance in this world but consists of the authentic experience and our projection to the future, in which choice, value, and anxiety from death make up the authentic experience of our Being and our understanding of Being.

**Keywords:** Death, human's Being, Being, human, authentic experience

Martin Heidegger is one of the most influential philosophers who has ever discussed the issue associated with human existence. In his work *Being and Time*, he emphasized that it is imperative to repetitively contemplate the question of Being. He recognized that "Being" is the most universal and the emptiest of concepts" (SZ 21), emphasizing the significance of the question of Being to reveal the fundamental nature of existence and provide a basis for understanding the world. Heidegger introduced the concept of "Being-towards-death", which cannot be concerned with actualizing death (SZ 306), and it further challenges conventional perceptions of human mortality.

First, Heidegger proposed two different phenomena of the sense of an ending (Dasein): death (Tod) as a possibility of the impossibility of Being and demise (Ableben) as an event of death in certainty. In other words, Heidegger did not define the destruction of the physical body and withdrawal from this world as death, as the general public thinks of it. In contrast, he took death as a possibility of possibilities, and he provided an open end of existence even though the endpoint would possibly be going out of the world. Regarding his essential argument, our first hurdle would be how his concepts of death challenge conventional views on death.

Second, as the understanding of death is unrevealed to people, Heidegger mentioned two authentic modes of being toward death in temporality, running ahead and anticipation. He argued that anticipation running ahead is "headlong onto it (death)," but not "waiting for death," "dwelling upon it," or "actualizing it before it comes" (SZ 307), which is about the authentic experience. In contrast,

anticipation was "no more than ontological projection" (SZ 358), which lies on psychological presentation of being and picturing the image of the death. Heidegger argued that both modes allow an authentic understanding of the future, which characterizes temporality in general. As human existence is in finitude of temporality, the individual's understanding of death comes not only from the present moment but also from expectations toward the future, so the connection between human existence and the perception of time has been raised as our second hurdle.

Finally, Heidegger suggested that the authentic experience involves a transparent understanding of one's resoluteness in an existential manner, while "Dasein is constantly ahead itself" but "inconsistently anticipatory about its existential possibility" (SZ 337), the uncertainty and unpredictability of the future requires one's running ahead to open up the possibilities and experience authentically as it fails to portray the death in the anticipation. Thus, our third hurdle would investigate how the understanding of death shapes human's authentic experience as individuals. When death is always "there" in the unknowable and unseen, the discussion of the individual's existence pales in comparison to the discussion of the individual's existence because, in the context of the infinite, the differences between each possibility will not be apparent. In contrast, on the contrary, when the finite temporality characterizes the existence, it is not possible to understand the one's existence. Especially when one perceives the temporal scale, death becomes a "visible but inexperienced" endpoint of the scale, while the other

endpoint is the authentic experience, the “visible and experienced endpoint,” and how the past and present shape one’s perception of his existence and his being towards death is worth discussion.

This paper argues that Heidegger’s concept concerns the end of life and investigates essential human experience and existence in the possibility of death, which is instrumental to comprehending Being about temporality. In other words, understanding the connection between human existence and time should be an authentic experience for individuals.

### **Section 1. How Heidegger’s concepts of death challenge conventional views on death**

In the account of Heidegger, Dasein is an entity characterized by its beings (SZ 42) – various phenomena of being to the end, and it goes beyond the physiological and biological collapse of human bodies. It fundamentally is “mine,” as he described the Dasein as “in each case mineness” (SZ 42), meaning that the kind of Being that belongs to Dasein is of a sort that any of us may call our own, namely, individualized. Meanwhile, the being of Dasein is also “a matter of indifference” (SZ 42), indicating that it resembles and is indifferent to every individual and that any particular thing or object does not determine it. It seems that Heidegger set Dasein as a path toward personal experience and existence instead of termination of life.

Traditional views of being and death differ from Heidegger’s ontological analysis of being and death. Before Heidegger, traditional Greek philosophers interpreted Being as a “universal” and “undefinable” concept that could be defined by anyone’s self-evidence and experience (SZ 21) as the realm of eternal and unchanging Forms or Ideas, while the human soul is immortal. In this case, the problem is that anyone could have their explanation toward Being while no one can answer what it is in a generally convincing way. On the other hand, previous philosophers explained “death” as momentary actions. Thomas Aquinas viewed “Being” as an entity, while death (Dasein) is a “distinctive entity” (SZ 34), which argues that death is the separation of the soul from the body and that the soul continues to exist after death. Thus, conventional views on death as the end of life, which is likely an action of withdrawing from the being, so that being toward death was considered as a switch of situations from Being to Not-to-Being.

Although previous generations have had a uniform default definition of death, there would be two questions: (1) If death is considered a certainty that has to happen and is

the same for all people, then where do the differences in people’s fear of death or other emotions come from? (2) If death is seen as the certain end of Being, how is it that Beings as different entities or beings defined by the individuals themselves have consistent endings? It follows that the variability and consistency of Dasein does not produce a direct correlation with Being, in other words, meaning that Dasein is not subordinate to Being, that Dasein is itself, that it has its Being.

If Dasein is indifferent to anybody, why is it “mine” in Heidegger’s account? Heidegger emphasized that “in each case Dasein is mine in one way or another” (SZ 68), meaning that the Being of Dasein is not a mere object of study, but it is already involved in the world with its existence. The Being of different individuals shapes its existence, so “my Dasein’s Being” does not resemble “your Dasein’s Being” due to the different issues encountered, different experiences it has been through, and different triggered feelings. The individual’s constant awareness of Dasein is characterized by his existence in the world and his projection of existence toward the world. In other words, Dasein is not just a “what” (like a table or a tree) but a “who” that is already engaged in the world. Therefore, Heidegger challenged traditional views of “death” by emphasizing that “Death (Dasein) has its Being” and that its existence was shaped by individual consciousness.

### **Section 2. The connection between human existence and time based on the understanding of Being**

As a central theme in “Being in Time,” Being was recognized as a fundamental human existence of itself by Heidegger, “All the Being-as-it-is (Sosein) which this entity possesses is primarily Being” (SZ 68) and “That Being which is an issue for this entity in its very Being” (SZ 68), suggesting that Being is neither an issue that defined by its relation to any object, nor a substance that exists independently of human existence. Accordingly, based on Heidegger’s definition of Being, human beings are unique in their ability to reflect on their existence and ask questions about its meaning.

In Heidegger’s argument, “Understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of Dasein’s Being” (SZ 32), meaning that the understanding of Being is not an issue that can be grasped through objective analysis or scientific investigation but rather a constant possibility that must be approached through a phenomenological examination of human existence. In other words, understanding Being is intimately tied to how human beings experience and interpret the world around them.

As Heidegger argued, human existence or Dasein is fundamentally temporal (SZ 458); how humans perceive and understand the “temporality” is critical for understanding the Being. He proposed the “now,” the “then,” and the “on the former occasion,” which refer to the present, the past, and the future, respectively (SZ 459). In his argument, humans are always situated in a particular temporal context, and our past, present, and future possibilities shape our understanding of the Being. Our understanding of Being seems to be retrieving the paths of experience, context, and results of our present actions and projection toward the moment yet to come. Therefore, our understanding of time is intimately tied to our understanding of Being, and the authentic experience of human existence must consider the temporal nature of our being in the world.

If so, how does our understanding of time connect to the understanding of Being? Heidegger argues that “Anticipation turns out to be the possibility of understanding one’s ownmost and uttermost potentiality for being, that is to say, the possibility of authentic existence” (SZ 307). In his suggestion, the anticipation of death is a fundamental aspect of human existence that shapes our understanding of the present and the future. Heidegger argues that the anticipation of death makes it possible for us to recognize the possibilities that are open to us in the present and make choices that are authentic and meaningful. He also suggests that the anticipation of death allows us to recognize the ultimate horizon of our existence and to understand the significance of our actions in light of this horizon. In this way, the anticipation of death is a crucial aspect of our understanding of the present and the future, and it shapes our understanding of the possibilities that are open to us in life.

Although Wrathall values running ahead over expectation when discussing the authentic way to open possibilities of Death, he proposed that “Expectation fails to see or acknowledge that death is a possibility that alters the significance of everyone on my possibility” (Warthall, 17). He believes the moment yet to come cannot be imagined or projected, so the present situation provides “opportunities to carry out a certain repertoire” (Warthall, 18). However, he misunderstands and fails to claim the interaction among the times, meaning that the past, the present, and the future consists of our expectations toward death and its possibility. It is precisely as a result of summaries of past experiences and future expectations that guide the actions and choices of individuals in the present moment that we construct an understanding of our existence. At the same time, we construct the meaning of death for ourselves.

### **Section 3. How the understanding of death shapes human’s authentic experience as individuals**

Our understanding of death not only opens the understanding of the possibilities of life but also affects our authentic experience as individuals. In Heidegger’s account, “authentic existence is not something which floats above falling everydayness; existentially, it is only a modified way in which such everydayness is seized upon.” (SZ 224). Accordingly, authentic experience in everydayness consists of ways we project our will and have an impact on this objective world - our choices, values, and existential anxiety in the present.

Heidegger argues that the anticipation of death allows us to recognize our existence’s finitude and understand the significance of our choices and actions (SZ 307). Pushing the example to the extremes, in a dueling tournament that never ends, the champion would not be given significant meaning because, in an infinite time scale, all winning champions would be temporary, and there would always be the possibility that the next person would overcome the current champion. Aligned with what Heidegger argued, authentic experience is grounded in an awareness of one’s mortality and the finitude of human existence (SZ 358). When one realizes the finite nature of time, that death will eventually come, he will prioritize the most valuable options and choices and cherish any positive or negative experience brought by this decision.

Nevertheless, Heidegger proposed that the anticipation of death can transform existential anxiety into a more authentic form of anxiety (SZ 312). Heidegger interpreted anxiety as “a basic state-of-mind of Dasein” and the fear of being “insignificant from the existential-ontological standpoint” (SZ 179), which amounts to the disclosed Ness of the fact that Dasein exists as thrown Being towards its end (SZ 296). It follows that he sees existential anxiety as due to the predictable arrival of endings of self-existence, a kind of dissatisfaction with existence, and fear of the unknowable other side of death.

However, in which situation do the predictable endings lead to existential anxiety? In my understanding, when one is forced to think of death, the gap between individuals’ summaries of past experiences and future expectations triggers various emotions that compose the anxiety. On the one hand, positive, authentic experience with achievement in the past life leads to fulfillment and satisfaction; in this case, people have higher expectations of future possibilities of better Being. Dasein will end this, thus causing falling resentment that turns into anxiety. On the other hand, one might argue that predictable Dasein releases individuals with unsatisfied or tragic pasts;

however, if sensing one's existence is one of the few invaluable experiences for whom with negative authentic experience, then Dasein foretells the end of the future and denies Being as himself.

Under the finitude, urgency, and limitation of time, Dasein, as a possibility of the impossibility of Being, does an individualized reshaping of one's authentic experience and informs one of which choices and values are priorities in the present moment as compared to the others, to get a better experience of one's Being in the world.

Overall, the paper investigates how individuals understand the Being about temporality and the connection between authentic human experience and their experience and time. We suggested that Heidegger's accounts of Being-towards-death coincide with the individual experience

of the time course, and human, authentic experience of existence is further influenced by the experience of time. We accounted that the understanding of Death, as an end on the other side of time, contributes to understanding human's Being, that we are not a real substance in this world but consists of the authentic experience and our projection to the future, in which choice, value, and anxiety from death make up the authentic experience of our Being and our understanding of Being.

### References

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