

Heidegger and Baudrillard on Death, Posthumanity, and the Challenge of Authenticity

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Abstract: Using insights from Jean Baudrillard and Martin Heidegger, this work explores the possibility of re-imagining the relationship between death and authenticity in the age of information technologies. It begins by discussing how Baudrillard argues that we have entered the posthuman age where the self identifies itself as data in the hyperreal world of cyberspace. Next, Heidegger's insights on angst, death, and authenticity, while providing an ontological purview for examining the ontical permutation of being human, will be re-imagined and re-interpreted, and then used as a lens with which to understand how posthuman subjectivity possibly experiences inauthenticity, angst, and mortality in the present context. This posthuman scenario reduces the self into an amalgam of virtual personas that try to conform itself to the demands of the hyperreal. When this happens, the self becomes ontically fractured and its experience of finitude, its call to wholeness is substituted by the appeal of further segmentation and dispersion. It will finally be argued that it is in this very condition that Dasein can once again recover its essential sense of self as the obscenity of cyberspace only heightens Dasein's sense of anguish as it tries to navigate a place that is both nowhere and everywhere.

Keywords: death, authenticity, posthuman, hyperreality

Being-towards-Death and the Nothing

In Heidegger's philosophy, Dasein's awareness of its existence as being-towards-death grounds the very possibility of its wholeness. In temporalizing its existence in accordance with the demands of the genuine moment, Dasein begins anew, as it were, retrieving and creatively

repeating its historical destiny to find its authentic place within the thrownness of a historical tradition that calls for genuine care (*Sorge*) and solicitude (*Fürsorge*). The work of authenticity takes as its point of departure the anxious confrontation with one's ineluctable mortality. Awareness of one's finitude is tantamount to grasping one's existence as a whole. This also brings about Dasein's awareness of time not simply as an external entity, but of time as the very element which makes up its own existence as both temporal and historical. Without this understanding, Dasein exists oblivious of its own essential meaning as being-in-the-world-with-others. To recognize temporality in oneself and in others simultaneously concretizes the individual and communal reality of human existence. Therefore, death, in all its glorious and tragic reality, is not to be evaded, but embraced resolutely by Dasein if it wants to understand its own existence in the world. Anticipatory resolve in the face of one's death brings Dasein face to face with the Nothing—the concealed unraveling of beings in time; the most fundamental truth of existence, no less. As Werner Marx expounds:

Out of all the various kinds of concealment, there is one that gathers the utmost concealedness of Being within itself. This is death, and it is for this very reason that Heidegger conceives of it by means of the image of a "shrine" in the lecture "The Thing." This means that death is as such *lēthē*; but it is not only as such *lēthē*. As the "shrine of Nothing," it is also the *lēthē* of Nothing. Nothing is therefore *lēthē*, the mystery, only because and insofar as it is a form of death. Death is the form in which Nothing confronts man. It confronts him specifically in the anxiety arising in the face of death, a conviction that Heidegger already held in *Being and Time* and also, though no longer explicitly, in "What Is Metaphysics?" At that point, Heidegger was convinced that man can uncover the essence of Nothing, which confronts man in anxiety as what is other than all beings, as the veil of Being.¹

Nothingness, *the Nothing*, is fundamental in Heidegger's understanding of what it means to be Dasein. In "What is Metaphysics?," Heidegger says that "The essence of the originally nihilating nothing lies in this, that it brings

¹ Werner Marx, *Is There a Measure on Earth? Foundations for a Nonmetaphysical Ethics*, trans. by Thomas J. Nelson and Reginald Lilly (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 107.

Dasein for the first time before beings as such.”² The Nothing is the very movement of nihilation, the slipping-away of Being itself as experienced in existential dread or *Angst*. In anxiety, and also in other so-called fundamental moods like boredom, Heidegger claims that Dasein is able to experience the wonder of Being in its bare *is-ness* simultaneously with its own undeniable *there-ness* in the world. One can even say that it is in such fundamental moods that death shows itself happening in the world as such, including to oneself. It is in the very experience of the finitude of Being that Dasein comes to grips with the manifest reality of its existence as a being entrusted with its own completion. In other words, the experience of nothingness (the virtual annihilation of self and Being) paves the path for Dasein’s resolute understanding of itself as such.

Hyperreality, Posthumanity, and the Negation of the Nothing

Situated, however, in the current epoch of Jean Baudrillard’s world of hyperreality, the totally positively-charged world (all is appearance, all is seen) granted by the obscene operations of the hyperreal, it may be argued that nothingness itself is obliterated, disallowed to bear the truth of existence as such as finite. In a world where no one is allowed to be bored anymore (due to the unmitigated and cancerous growth of things to see and do whether here or in cyberspace), the total illumination of Being ironically results in Dasein’s blindness from that which reveals itself not to the eyes, but to one’s being-towards-death. In this context, Robert Mugerauer correctly says that, “Overnight, everything primordial is flattened down as something long since known. Everything gained by a struggle becomes something to be manipulated. Every mystery loses its power. The care of averageness reveals, in turn, an essential tendency of Da-sein, which we call the leveling down of all possibilities of being.”³ Inauthenticity manifests itself in the age of the hyperreal as a leveling down of possibilities by way of ironically actualizing all imaginable possibilities. When all mysteries are exposed to the blinding light of information technologies and every unknown is configured to be part of the known through the model, boredom by excitement becomes the primary comportment of Dasein. As Leslie Thiele elucidates:

Abandoning the present for the future and the near for
the far—killing time and conquering space—we

² Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?,” in *Pathmarks*, ed. by William McNeill, trans. by David Farrell Krell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 90.

³ Robert Mugerauer, *Heidegger and Homecoming: The Leitmotif in the Late Writings* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 34.

embrace technology as a means of escaping boredom. Lives chiefly consumed by technological diversions become immune to the philosophical wonder at Being itself. Overstimulated by technological wizardry and deafened by the noise of the media (which, Heidegger observes, its “almost take[n] for the voice of God”), contemporary humanity becomes bored with “the simple.” The enigma of our earthly being ceases to merit reflection. The task of seeking a home in this mystery is abandoned.⁴

The Nothing, the concealment of Being itself as such, revealing itself to Dasein in Angst snatches Dasein away from the thoughtlessness of inauthenticity back to its essential place in relation to Being. As being-towards-death, Dasein has access to the reality of the mystery of existence—to the question of why there is something rather than nothing. Without a sense of mortality, Dasein’s existence would be no different from animals or other beings who are in the world, but are not *really in the world*. It is therefore existentially necessary that this sense of one’s finitude be preserved in Dasein because it is what gathers Dasein; it is what keeps Dasein from going astray from itself.

Cyberspace, as originally coined by William Gibson in his novel, *Neuromancer*, points to a nowhere space, a space between two existing realities traversed by way of digital informational networks and virtual reality. Cyberspace, or the internet as we know it, is a deterritorialised virtual place that ironically holds the world of the real in place, or hostage even, essentially keeping it from falling apart. In other words, now, more than ever, it is the hyperreal, i.e., the world of ICT, simulacra, and cybernetics that provides vital structural support for what we perceive to be real politics, real economics, real culture, etc.

According to the renowned posthuman thinker N. Katherine Hayles, “The posthuman subject is an amalgam, a collection of heterogeneous components, a material-informational entity whose boundaries undergo continuous construction and reconstruction.”⁵ While it is a phenomenological given that the human person is always already considered to be an existential nexus of various biological, social, cultural, and historical events that essentially form the foundation of his identity, posthuman thinkers like

⁴ Leslie Paul Thiele, “Postmodernity and the Routinization of Novelty: Heidegger on Boredom and Technology,” in *Polity*, 29, no. 4 (1997), 508.

⁵ N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 3.

Hayles bring to our attention a noticeably different way of being in the world of man in the digital age. With the uninterrupted flow of information in real time coursing through smartphones, for instance, are we not also physically and neurologically evolving our thought patterns and decision-making processes to keep up with the perpetual deluge of information that essentially keeps our eyes glued to small two-dimensional images that appear on 6-inch screens we carry around everywhere we go?

Posthuman subjectivity has been so dependent on its existence in cyberspace that its real counterpart becomes a mere function of its virtual existence as a social media profile, a recorded voicemail, a website, etc. In other words, it is in harnessing the deterritorialised terrain of cyberspace that individuals gain social, political, and economic traction in the real world. This is why multi-billion dollar companies spend millions of dollars in cybersecurity to protect themselves from hackers, because essentially, their business would not survive without the support of a cyber-apparatus. One can therefore say that Dasein, in the current age of hyperreality, is a networked self.

A networked self, as Manuel Castells would call it, is a self that is constantly plugged in to data streams and information flows. It is a self that thrives in what Castells calls a world of “timeless time,” where time is experienced as a series of instants, lacking any real coherence in terms of narrative or history. A Twitter or Facebook feed is an example of how timeless time manifests itself in the perception of subjectivity. It is an endless train of information that chugs on and on even while one is offline. David Bell explains Castells’ notion of timeless time:

So instantaneity is one form of timeless time. Another is called by Castells desequencing: as a result of living in a multimedia age with limitless access to streams of live and archived material, as well as ever more wondrous ways to predict or imagine the future, we are exposed to a montage of instants wrenched from temporal context: past, present and future are disassembled and reassembled for us. Without the anchoring temporality, we live, as some postmodern commentators argue in a perpetual present: the future arrives almost before we’ve thought of it, the past comes back at us in soundbites: we live in the encyclopedia of historical experience, all our

tenses at the same time, being able to reorder them in a composite created by our own fantasy or our interests.⁶

In timeless time, subjectivity loses its sense of temporality and lives within a matrix of an undifferentiated series of now's. The prevalence of the word "update" in tech and social media parlance perhaps reflects this experience of the contemporary subject—updated software, updated Facebook status, updated live streams, etc. As David Berry observes, "Today, we live and work among a multitude of data streams of varying lengths, modulations, qualities, quantities and granularities. The new streams constitute a new kind of public, one that is ephemeral and constantly changing, but which modulates and represents a kind of reflexive aggregate of what we might think of as a stream-based publicness which we might call riparian-publicity. Here, I use riparian to refer to the act of watching the flow of the stream go by."⁷

The montage perfectly exemplifies the obscene devastation of temporality by timeless time. In a montage, various images and scenes are juxtaposed and lumped together without any necessary logical sequence, thereby undermining the ordinary rules of narrativity. It compresses time and tries to deliver a series of messages in bursts and condenses information into miniature glimpses of things. What if reality is now experienced as a montage by posthuman subjectivity? What then becomes of its relationship with authenticity, which is primarily grounded in resolve that is grounded upon temporal coherence?

When the self is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, temporal and trapped in the present, finite and death-defying, all at the same time, it becomes obscene. Obscenity is the loss of scene, the pornographic eclipse of the distance between subjectivity and the object, the implosion of the real and the virtual. The posthuman cybernetic self, with all its technological connections to cyberspace and its growing number of replicants in social media is on the verge of losing itself completely at the hands of the hyperreal (or hasn't it already?). Subjectivity is reduced to a model in a series, seemingly helpless at the hands of the demands of its own virtual projections. As Baudrillard had claimed, subjectivity in the age of hyperreality is schizophrenic:

⁶ David Bell, "Castell's Key Ideas," in *Routledge Critical Thinkers: Cyberculture Theorists Manuel Castells and Donna Haraway* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 75-76.

⁷ David M. Berry, *The Philosophy of Software: Code and Mediation in the Digital Age* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 144.

The schizophrenic is not, as generally claimed, characterized by his loss of touch with reality, but by the absolute proximity to and total instantaneousness with things, this overexposure to the transparency of the world. Stripped of a stage and crossed over without the least obstacle, the schizophrenic cannot produce the limits of his very being, he can no longer produce himself as a mirror. He becomes a pure screen, a pure absorption and resorption surface of the influent networks.⁸

The posthuman subject is both itself and not itself all the time, plunging it into an abyss of manic confusion and paranoia. This current trend essentially espouses self-cloning. Cloning oneself through the digital matrix of cyberspace estranges oneself more and more from the tempo-historical conditions of one's selfhood. Mirrors at least don't exactly show one one's double because it inverts the real and projects the image as an Other that looks back at the spectator. Virtually cloning oneself in cyberspace, on the other hand, abolishes subjectivity by reducing it into a code, totally transparent to itself, manipulable, reproducible, viral, hackable, lacking history in being completely identical with itself in real time.

Death in the posthuman epoch happens as the disintegration of subjectivity by its constant disentanglement from itself as its multiple virtual counterparts are absorbed by the event horizon of cyberspace. The screen is a black mirror. It does not reflect, but deflects the gaze of the self towards the world of the hyperreal, where death does not occur. Having been alienated from its reflection, subjectivity loses itself as it loses its memory in a perpetual present, continuously refreshed in real time.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger says, "When in everyday being with one another, we encounter things that are accessible to everybody and about which everybody can say everything, we can soon no longer decide what is disclosed in genuine understanding and what is not. This ambiguity extends not only to the world, but likewise to being-with-one-another as such, even to the being of Dasein toward itself."⁹ He adds, "In their ambiguity, curiosity and idle talk make sure that what is done in a genuine and new way is outdated as soon as it emerges before the public."¹⁰ Heidegger's intimations concerning the element of ambiguity involved in Dasein's falling-prey are

⁸ Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in *The Ecstasy of Communication*, trans. Bernard Schütze and Caroline Schütze (South Pasadena: Semiotext(e), 2012), 30.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), 162.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 163.

reflected in Baudrillard's ideas concerning the schizophrenia of contemporary subjectivity. As early as the 1920s, Heidegger already saw how Dasein is susceptible to the appeal of novelty and volume. Both the "new" and the "more" attract and distract Dasein from what is nearest and what is worthiest of his concern—its own inescapable mortality in relation to Being itself. Ambiguity mixes and confuses the temporal order and prioritizes the novelty of what is common and the value of what makes most sense to everyone. The posthuman is essentially the product of ambiguity; the reduction of the self to neural feedback and its constant immersion in the data streams of cyberspace makes it perfectly adept to the uninterrupted flow of real-time. Uncertainty appears to be diminished by the constant flow of information which passes from the screen to consciousness, providing Dasein with the sensation of stability in the midst of an otherwise chaotic cycle of substitutions between the new and the old. In other words, in its fallenness, Dasein recognizes ambiguity as clarity because it understands itself to be the main server, so to speak, that essentially creates, relays, processes, and understands information as it happens in real time. But in reality, inside the eye of this tornado of information, contemporary subjectivity becomes a mere relay, an access point through which information stays for a split-second and then patched and shot to another relay point in the next.

The Possibility of Authenticity in the Wasteland of Hyperreality

It is, to my mind, precisely in the midst of this vortex of information that Dasein gains the possibility of experiencing genuine Angst. Heidegger says that it is in Angst that "the nothing and the nowhere become manifest."¹¹ Cyberspace is nowhere. It is neither here, nor there. It is a concrete symbolic manifestation of the place-lessness and rootlessness of the nomadic character of Dasein's current condition in the epoch of the hyperreal. The more Dasein finds itself immersed in this nowhere place, the greater the possibility that Dasein becomes aware of its fragmented condition. To be completely immersed in an electronic screen is to be present and absent at the same time in the world. It is to be held hostage by the staggering presence of beings that exist in a realm where their relevance is extinguished by their very presencing. As Heidegger says, "The nothingness of the world in the face of which Angst is anxious does not mean that an absence of innerworldly things objectively present is experienced in Angst. They must be encountered in such a way that they are of no relevance at all, but can show themselves in a barren mercilessness."¹² Cyberspace is the virtual crypt of Dasein where its

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹² *Ibid.*, 315.

capacity to be aware of its essence as being-towards-death is entombed and therefore also the place where it can be resurrected. To be completely held hostage in cyberspace is essentially to be buried alive. Seen in this light, the obscene self of cybernetics holds within itself the possibility of encountering this barren wasteland of simulation along the data streams of information.

The schizophrenia of the contemporary subject, its seemingly forlorn wanderings in a cybernetic sojourn, may very well be a sign of a collective anguish brewing within humanity today. Relentlessly assaulted by the merciless avalanche of information, it has no other choice but to retreat towards itself, while maintaining its social existence through a cyber-apparatus that slowly annihilates its being. However, it is in this bleak and miserable condition that Angst itself may remind Dasein of its mortal nature. The very non-mortality of one's screen avatars is the new locus of Angst. It is precisely because one cannot die that one may once again recall the reality of mortality as well as the necessity of restoring the scene of death in the obscenely effervescent world of the hyperreal.

Posthuman existence, with its fixation with controlling the mechanisms of biological existence through cybernetics, consequently reducing subjectivity to an amalgam of organs and nerve impulses, raises the very possibility of reflexively asking the question why we are running away from death in the first place. It is perhaps precisely in avoiding death that we are closest to it than we think. Maybe it is this very obsession with multiplying and curating one's identities that signals the posthuman experience of the Nothing; the desolation that accompanies the feeling of losing one's way and being alienated from oneself within the vortex of possibilities opened not only in the real world, but in the virtual world as well. Perhaps the anguish of posthuman subjectivity is manifested precisely in its ever-growing yearning for something *more* real than the real. The fractalization of identity, its reduction to a self-repeating code seeking refuge in real time within virtual worlds is a possible optical symptom of the current form of inauthenticity. Instead of trying to hide from oneself in the tranquilized company of the public, the obscene self virtually assimilates the public by becoming more public than the public. It subverts the dictatorship of the they by answering to a dictatorship paradoxically orchestrated by itself and imposed upon itself as a virtual brand that seeks no other thing than its recognition as unique. Maybe alienation in the obscene epoch no longer takes place as a distancing of oneself from oneself, but as an absolute proximity of oneself to oneself. When one swallows one's mirrors, one essentially becomes alien to oneself.

One may argue that the so-called Nietzschean wasteland has never been as vast than it is today. It is not a wasteland because there is nothing in it, but because there is too much of everything in it. The world as we know it

has become unbearably positive with information and communication. The world has become obscenely unconcealed. But it is precisely this pornographic hyper-exposure that simultaneously reveals the radical emptiness and desolation of the imploded world of the virtual—the emptiness that reveals itself in the fullness of one’s virtual existence which brings the possibility of experiencing the anguish of being too immediately present to oneself brokered by the contiguity of screens with one’s identity. As Baudrillard intimates, “Nothing (not even God) now disappears by coming to an end, by dying. Instead, things disappear through proliferation or contamination, by becoming saturated or transparent, because of extenuation or extermination, or as a result of the epidemic of simulation, as a result of their transfer into the secondary existence of simulation. Rather than a mortal mode of disappearance, then, a fractal mode of dispersal.”¹³

What, then, have we gained from initiating a dialogue between Heidegger and Baudrillard about the meaning of personhood in the epoch of the obscene? On the one hand, Baudrillard was able to show that we may have indeed entered the posthuman age where the self identifies itself as data to be uploaded in cyberspace. Heidegger’s insights, on the other hand, while providing an ontological purview for examining the ontical permutation of being human in the age of obscenity was also re-interpreted and re-applied as a lens with which to understand how posthuman subjectivity possibly experiences inauthenticity, angst, and mortality in the present context. It was shown that one’s sense of self in the epoch of the hyperreal is actually designed and crafted by the apparatus of networks and data streams, forging a self that fits within the matrix of codes and algorithms. This so-called posthuman scenario reduces the self into an amalgam of virtual personas that try to conform itself to the demands of the network. When this happens, the self becomes ontically fractured and its experience of its finitude, its call to wholeness, is substituted by the appeal of further segmentation and dispersion. It is in this very condition that Dasein can once again recover its essential sense of self as the obscenity of cyberspace only heightens Dasein’s anguish as it tries to navigate a place that is both nowhere and everywhere.

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¹³ Jean Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil: Essays on Extreme Phenomena*, trans. by James Benedict (London: Verso, 1999), 4.

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