

Existence and Ability: The Aristotelian Insights Behind Heidegger’s Conception of Dasein

Introduction

My dissertation aims to give a new, more textually and philosophically sound reading of Heidegger’s temporal interpretation of human existence (what he calls ‘*dasein*’), in response to the shortcomings of the three most pervasive readings on offer in the scholarly literature on this topic. In the chapters of my dissertation prior to this paper, I have already given an initial gloss on the aim, structure and basic details of Heidegger’s ontological analysis of human existence (what he calls the ‘existential analytic of *dasein*’) in Division I of *Being and Time*. I have also explained, and then raised textual and philosophical objections to, the three most pervasive readings of human existence’s temporal form (a form of time Heidegger calls ‘originary temporality’ [*ursprungliche Zeitlichkeit*]).

Now, in this paper, I do some important preparatory work for giving my own reading of Heidegger’s claims about originary temporality. In particular, I offer up some textual evidence for understanding human existence in terms of the possession, maintenance and exercise of an ability, specifically, the ability to live out a human way of life by taking what I call ‘existential

responsibility’ for that way of life (I explain the notion of existential responsibility in my discussion below). The point of addressing this textual evidence at such length is to motivate a new way of thinking about what it is to be human, one that does not figure in the background of my opponents’ readings of Heidegger’s claims about originary temporality. That, in turn, will provide a new way to make sense of the ‘originary’ temporal form that, on *Being and Time’s* account, constitutes human existence’s ontological structure and intelligibility, because my reading uncovers a more convincing explanandum for which originary temporality is meant to be a philosophically illuminating explanans. On my reading, originary temporality is to be understood as the temporal form of the activity that is ontologically distinctive of human beings—again, an activity in which we strive to possess, maintain and exercise the ability to live out a human way of life by taking existential responsibility for that life.

In order to defend my claim that human existence is to be understood in terms of such an ability, I turn to Heidegger’s most detailed discussion of what it is *to be able*, to *have* an ability or capacity, in general; this occurs in his lectures on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* Θ 1-3.¹ I begin by explaining the main features that characterize rational capacities, on Aristotle’s account as read by Heidegger. I then show that structurally analogous features characterize the capacity for human existence, on my reading of Heidegger’s conception of *dasein*. The two main upshots of my reading are (1) to make better sense

¹ *Aristotle’s Metaphysics Θ 1-3: On the Essence and Actuality of Force*, trans. Walter Brogan and Peter Warnek (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1981)

of Heidegger’s existentialist notions of authentic existence, death, anxiety, uncanniness, conscience, responsibility (or ‘guilt’ [*Schuldigsein*]) and anticipatory resoluteness and, with this in view, (2) to set up a more fruitful way of understanding the notion and explanatory role of originary temporality in Division II of *Being and Time*.

In the following and final chapter of my dissertation, I will go on to explain how we can understand the distinctively human capacity for existential responsibility as something that has a temporal form. I first elucidate the notion of a temporal explanation, by pointing out the structural features involved in our making sense of ordinary causal and practical phenomena in terms of specific sorts of temporal contrast; and then I show that Heidegger intends for his notion of originary temporality to provide a structurally analogous form of explanation for the phenomenon of human existence, in terms of its own unique sort of temporal contrast. I conclude by giving and defending my own reading of the eight central claims Heidegger makes about the temporality of human existence, in terms of the form of temporal explanation I have elucidated.

I. Aristotle’s Account of Rational Capacities

To be Rationally Capable is to be Responsible for Ruling Out Contraries

Heidegger begins with Aristotle’s statement that rational capacities are “of contraries.”² What Aristotle means is that rational capacities enable an agent to act toward either of two incompatible ends—for example, he says, a doctor’s medical skill enables her to bring about either health or sickness in her patients. What makes such a capacity *rational* is that it consists in a systematic understanding of what it is for a patient to be (in this case) healthy, in terms of which the doctor can give and have *reasons* explaining what she does or what she must do in order to heal patients who are sick in various ways. Understanding what it is to be healed or healthy, the doctor thereby understands what it is to *lack* health, to *fail* to be healed, for these simply consist in the negation or denial of the conditions for health and healing. Thus, to be a contrary in this case is to be a deficient or lacking state of a medical patient’s health, a state in which the conditions for full health are not fully satisfied. Confronted with such a patient, the skilled doctor knows what it would be to either succeed or fail at bringing those conditions about, and in that sense her rational capacity enables her to act toward either the end of health or its contrary.

Heidegger then elaborates on this idea, using his own example of a capacity to produce clay mugs. He says,

The entire process of producing mugs, from the preparation of clay, through determining the moisture of the clay and regulating the turning of the wheel, up to watching over the kiln is, so to speak, interspersed with alternatives: this, not that; in that way and not in another way.

² Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Θ.2 1046b4-7

Production, in the way of proceeding that is appropriate to it, is in itself a doing and leaving undone—a doing something and leaving its contrary alone.³

Here, Heidegger does two things. First, he extends Aristotle’s notion of a contrary to cover not just the end one aims at in exercising a rational capacity, but also the *means* one takes toward achieving that end. In this case, it is not only mugs but also the instrumental stages of producing mugs—preparing clay, turning the wheel, firing the kiln—that admit of contraries. Being ‘contrary’ in this latter sense would involve, it seems, being a way of obstructing or destroying one’s instrumental progress toward achieving the relevant end, or in other words, being a way of violating whatever standards of good practice govern the proper exercise of the capacity in question, be those standards explicit rules or just implicit rules of thumb. An agent with a rational capacity, therefore, understands not only *what* end she aims to achieve, but also *how* to properly achieve it, and her understanding guides her pursuit of that end by giving her reasons to use certain means rather than their contraries.

Heidegger’s second move is to offer an ontological explanation for this thought about the role of contraries, an explanation of how contraries help constitute someone as *being* rationally capable of something. He says,

Every production of something, in general every [*dunamis meta logou*], prepares for itself, and this necessarily, through its proper way of proceeding, the continually concomitant opportunity for mistaking, neglecting, overlooking, and failing; thus every force carries *in itself* and

³ Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* Θ 1-3: *On the Essence and Actuality of Force*, pp. 116-117

for itself the possibility of sinking into *un-force*. This negativum does not simply stand beside the positive of force as its opposite but haunts this force in the force itself, and this because every force of this type according to its essence is invested with divisiveness and so with a “not.”⁴

He soon follows up by concluding,

Why does there belong to a force the ‘in the right way’—and this means ‘in the not right way,’ ‘in an indifferent way’? Why does there belong to a force necessarily the ‘in each case such and such,’ in general: the *how*? Because force as [*dunamis meta logou*] is from the bottom up *doubly* directed and *bifurcated*. And because, then, the force which is directed by discourse [i.e., by what Aristotle terms ‘*logos*’] is in an original sense *of the not* [*nichtig ... ist*], that is, shot through with this not and no, for this reason the how is not only altogether essentially necessary but consequently always decisive. For such a force, that is, for such a capability, the how belongs in the governing realm of that of which the force is capable. The how is not a concomitant property but that which is co-decided in the capability and with it.⁵

What Heidegger means here is that contraries are essential to both being and having a rational capacity, for the following reason: When an agent exercises a rational capacity, she must draw upon an understanding that *takes into account* the relevant contraries threatening her success at each stage, by recognizing them as such and leaving them “alone” and “undone.” Thus, the skilled mug-maker *intentionally* centers her clay with the wheel at one-quarter speed rather than at some faster speed that would send everything splattering; removes her mug to cool only when the kiln has fully dried, and not at an earlier time when the clay still risks fissuring; uses an

⁴ Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* Θ 1-3: *On the Essence and Actuality of Force*, pp. 131-132

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 134

appropriately moist or dry clay that will neither crumble nor slurry; and so on. Just as the doctor understands certain medical prescriptions and procedures as indeed conceivable ways of exercising her medical skill upon patients, but ways that would leave or produce a lack of health and thus be contrary to her desired end, so too does the mug-maker understand certain actions as conceivable exercises of her mug-making skill—certain ways of moistening, throwing and firing clay, say—but exercises that would be wrong or inappropriate, moving her instrumentally away from rather than towards her end of producing a usable mug. The *ontological* claim here is that there must be such conceivable but contrary means and ends if an agent is *to be* rationally capable of something—for it is precisely by countenancing and yet *ruling out* contrary possibilities that her systematic understanding is able to give reasons that *explain* her activity and *guide* it towards, and not away from, her desired end. It is in virtue of this explanatory and practical power that an agent has what Aristotle calls a ‘*dunamis meta logou,*’ a capacity with *reason* or with an ‘*account.*’

This implies, furthermore, that an agent’s rational capacities constitute him as *responsible* for achieving their ends. For, when he desires those ends, he has reasons, and thus motivations, to do certain things rather than their contraries, if he is to succeed. The desire makes contraries *matter* to what he does, insofar as these are just what must be ruled out—avoided, anticipated, corrected for—at each instrumental stage of his action. To fail to do so would be (barring circumstances outside of his control) to act *wrongly*, to make an

instrumental error, to break with the rules of good practice, to be mistaken about what he was doing or how he ought to do it. Thus, to be rationally capable of something is to be responsible for ruling out its contrary at each stage in the exercise of that capacity.

Rational Capacities are Distinctively Present Through an Agent's Commitment to Ruling Out Contraries

Having described *what* it is to have a rational capacity, Heidegger then interprets Aristotle's account of *when* an agent is actually capable in such a way. He begins by pointing out that the expression “ ‘Actualization of a capability’ itself has a multiple meaning: (1) the capability is simply there; (2) it is in its enactment; (3) it presents itself by means of that which it produces in the enactment.”⁶ This means that, first, someone has a capacity when she has *gained* it by having been sufficiently trained in its successful exercise—as Heidegger puts it, by her “having genuinely come into practice.”⁷ In this case, she is capable by simply *having* the capacity, possessing the skill and maintaining it, holding it at the ready. Second, someone can be capable by exercising the capacity, by ‘practicing’ that skill for which she has come to be ‘in practice.’ In this case (as in the following, third case), her capacity is manifest publicly, out in the world, and so we can understand her as *being* capable *in* (that is, *through* or *by way of*) the

⁶ Ibid., p. 163

⁷ Ibid., p. 159

purposive activity in which she is currently and skillfully engaged. Third and finally, someone can be capable of something by achieving the end that the capacity strives for, for instance, by having brought a sick patient back to full health. Here, Heidegger claims that we should understand her capacity as ‘present’ neither in her trained preparedness nor in the purposive activity, but rather in the “[*pragma*]” itself, in the outcome or effect or that she, as agent, improves, repairs, settles, accomplishes or otherwise brings into being as patient. Though a mug, say, may not itself be capable of making clay mugs, it expresses, indicates or bears the mark of the mug-maker’s capacity and thereby ‘presents’ the mug-maker’s *being* capable, in what Heidegger would call a ‘worldly’ way. (Sometimes, of course, the second and third senses coincide, as when the outcome or effect of someone’s ability to perform a certain action just is the skilled performance of a purposive activity such as juggling.)

Heidegger then goes on to explain why the first sense in which a rational capacity can be present has, on Aristotle’s view, ontological and explanatory priority over the second and third senses. The view can be put like this: The presence of a rational capacity in the third sense presupposes its presence in the second sense (but not vice-versa), and the presence of a rational capacity in the second sense presupposes its presence in the first sense (but not vice-versa). The argument for this view is as follows: Someone *cannot* achieve a capacity’s end (skillfully) without already having been engaged in the activity (in which she’s skilled), though she *can* engage in the

activity and yet fail to have achieved the end; and similarly, she *cannot* engage in an activity skillfully without already having been trained in the skill, though she *can* be trained in a skill even while she hasn't exercised that skill just now or recently. Furthermore, certain outcomes or effects can come about by nature, by chance or by some means other than skillful purposive activity (as when my haphazard dart throw strikes the bulls-eye), and people can engage in certain activities without doing so skillfully (as when I flail about on the dancefloor). Thus, when it comes to being capable of something, both ontological and explanatory priority proceed from the first sense through to the third: A given outcome or effect neither presents nor makes sense as an indication of my being capable unless I have been acting skillfully, and a given action neither presents nor makes sense as an expression of my being capable unless I have been trained in the skill. As Heidegger states the conclusion, “The being present of a capability is to be understood as being in practice; as such, it expresses precisely the most distinctive actuality [*eigenste Wirklichkeit*] of capability as capability.”⁸

In the most basic sense, then, someone is rationally capable of something when she is trained and prepared to exercise that capacity. But given Heidegger's views on the essential role of contraries in this exercise, we must understand the notion of preparedness more richly, as an ability not only to reliably achieve some end, but furthermore, to do so *by* reliably recognizing and responding to the contraries that threaten that achievement

⁸ Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Θ 1-3: *On the Essence and Actuality of Force*, p. 160

at each instrumental stage. If a rational capacity makes an agent responsible for ruling out contraries to the success of her action, then her preparedness to do so—and thus, her actually possessing that capacity—should consist in her *taking* such responsibility, whether by anticipating, acknowledging, confronting, avoiding, correcting for or simply understanding the relevant contraries as such. Furthermore, to do so reliably is to *maintain* her responsibility throughout many different exercises of her rational capacity, a kind of consistency that, I suggest, we can understand as a *commitment* to her responsibility, a refusal to take it lightly, let it slacken or degenerate into a lack of motivation and skill to rule the contraries out. To paraphrase Heidegger’s conclusion above, then, a rational capacity is present most distinctively through an agent’s commitment to the responsibility bestowed upon her by that capacity.

Rational Capacities are Finite in Three Ways

After arguing for the basic, distinctive sense in which a rational capacity is present, Heidegger turns to Aristotle’s views on when such a capacity is lacking or absent. He points out three central ways in which an agent can fail to have a rational capacity, which in turn reveal three central senses in which rational capacities are *finite*.

First, we can lack a certain capacity when it is *simply impossible* for us to ever have it, given the kind of entity we are. So, for instance, human

beings lack the capacity for metamorphosis—a capacity that caterpillars do have—simply because the possession and exercise of that capacity is not a constituent feature of human life, not among the set of capacities whose possession constitutes one as a human being. This way of lacking capacities shows that which capacities we *do* have—whether actually, as capacities we’re currently prepared to exercise, or potentially, as capacities we can become trained and prepared to exercise at some future time—is not up to us to determine; it’s simply a brute fact we must live with, given the kind of entity we are.

Second, we can lack a certain capacity due to the absence of *enabling conditions* necessary for its exercise in the present moment, conditions like the presence of a patient upon which to act or, when applicable, a medium through which to act. So, for example, someone may have the capacity for sight, generally speaking, but may currently lack it in the sense that there are no visible objects to be seen or there is no light through which to see them, as when one closes one’s eyes or turns off the light before taking a nap. This shows that our capacities are finite in the sense that it’s not fully up to us to determine when, or upon what, we are able to exercise them.

Third, we can in particular cases happen to lack out capacities to various degrees, or even at all—and this in two main senses. In the first sense, someone may, for instance, be unable to see as well as human beings typically do, or may be blind altogether. This shows that our capacities are finite in the sense that we cannot guarantee their endowment or longevity.

In a second, further sense, given that rational capacities are present only when we are trained and prepared to exercise them, we can lack such capacities to the extent that we lose our grip on this preparedness, fall out of practice and need remedial or recuperative training to once more be able to exercise them properly. As I read Heidegger’s interpretation of Aristotle, this would amount to a failure of commitment, a failure to maintain our responsibility for ruling out the contraries that constitute us as having the capacity in question. Thus, someone who is too negligent, lazy, stubborn, naïve or clueless to reliably recognize and respond to the various ways of failing to make a useable mug would for those reasons be capable of mug-making in a deficient way at best. To win back his capability, he would have to bring himself to understand why the relevant contraries matter to his success and what to do about them. This way of failing to have a rational capacity, which I will soon argue is central to Heidegger’s analysis of human existence, shows that our capacities are finite in the sense that they are not immutable but can *degenerate* into incapacity if we do not commit to maintaining the responsibility they bestow upon us.

II. Heidegger’s Aristotelian Account of Human Existence

To be Human is to be Able to Take Existential Responsibility for the Viability of One’s Way of Life

Having surveyed the central features of rational capacities, on Aristotle’s account as read by Heidegger, I will now read Heidegger’s own analysis of human existence in *Being and Time* through the lens of the foregoing Aristotelian insights. My goal is to show that reading Heidegger in this way will allow us to properly grasp the phenomenon for which his notion of originary temporality is meant to provide an illuminating philosophical explanation—the phenomenon I will call ‘existential responsibility.’ Thus, my aim in the rest of this chapter will be to show that Heidegger characterizes the ability to take existential responsibility as having structurally analogous features to those that, on (his reading of) Aristotle’s view, characterize rational capacities—namely, taking contraries into account, being present most distinctively through a kind of preparedness, and being finite in the senses I have elucidated above. First, though, I will need to say a few words about the special sort of capacity Heidegger has in view in his phenomenological investigation into human existence at large.

As I read him, Heidegger understands what it is to be human along broadly Aristotelian lines, in terms of the possession, maintenance and exercise of a distinctly human ability. For Aristotle, it is the capacity for rational activity or understanding at large that distinguishes the human soul from those of all other ensouled entities. Particular human beings may lack this or that rational capacity, such as the capacity to make mugs, to heal sick people or to do philosophy, but they must possess *some* rational capacities—or at the very least, the potential to acquire such capacities—in order to

count as human *at all*. For Heidegger, I will argue, it is the capacity to take existential responsibility that distinguishes human from non-human ways of being. Particular human beings may lack the capacity to take existential responsibility in certain ways or to certain degrees, but they must possess *some* ability to take existential responsibility, however latent, dormant or weak, in order to count as human *at all*. In other words, to be human at all is to have at the very least the potential to acquire, maintain and exercise the ability to take existential responsibility, and to fail to maintain this ability is to be deficient with respect to one’s humanity. As I explain further below, the sense in which this *is* an ability we can either maintain or else lose our grip on means that our being fully human is not a guaranteed fact about us, a property we possess necessarily, but is rather a kind of *achievement*—and a hard-won achievement, at that.

If the notion of existential responsibility is to be understood in terms of the possession, maintenance and exercise of a distinctively human kind of ability, it’s best to begin by describing the sort of end and contrary that characterize it. According to Heidegger, human existence “*is* as an understanding ability-to-be that, in its being, makes an issue of that being itself.”⁹ This dense statement asserts three main claims about what it is to be human—first, being human is to be understood not as a property we possess but as a *capacity* we have, namely, the ability *to be* human, the capacity to exist in a human way, to live out a viable human way of life;

⁹ *Being and Time*, p. 231/274 (translation modified)

second, we have such a capacity when we are able to *understand* our activity—our purposive engagements with useful equipment and other people in the world—as the living out of such a life; but third, to understand our activity in this way is ‘an issue,’ a form of intelligibility which it is our *responsibility* to achieve. That is to say, on this view, it is not guaranteed that our worldly activities do in fact manifest and make sense in terms of the capacity to live out a viable human way of life, and thus our most distinctive human end is *being human*, itself, achieving and maintaining this intelligibility—as Heidegger himself puts it, we exist ‘for the sake of ourselves.’¹⁰ To exist for the sake of ourselves is to strive to achieve and maintain our own humanity by taking responsibility for the viability of our ways of life—in short, to take *existential responsibility*.

To be Able to take Existential Responsibility is to be Prepared to Take Death into Account

This conception of being human as ‘an issue’ for us directly implies that there are *contraries* to the ability to live out a viable human way of life, ways of failing to achieve the intelligibility of human existence, which it is our responsibility, insofar as we are human, to *take into account*. The most extreme possibility of such failure is what Heidegger calls ‘*death*.’ He describes death as the utter lack or loss of our distinctive human capacity,

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 143/183

the possibility of “no-longer-being-able-to-be-human” ([*Nicht-mehr-dasein-könnens*]), which, again, we are to understand as our no longer being able to live out a viable human way of life.¹¹ Heidegger’s term for taking the possibility of death into account is ‘being towards death.’ He writes,

Death is a being-possibility that *dasein* has to take over in each case. With death, *dasein* stands before itself in its most distinctive [*eigensten*] ability to be. In this possibility, what is at issue is *dasein*’s very being-in-the-world [*sein In-der-Welt-sein schlechthin*]. ... [I]f being-towards-death has to disclose understandingly the possibility which we have characterized, and if it is to disclose it *as a possibility*, then in such being-towards-death this possibility must not be weakened: it must be understood *as a possibility*, it must be cultivated *as a possibility*, and we must *put up with* it *as a possibility*, in the way we comport ourselves towards it.¹²

Now, this account structurally parallels Aristotle’s in the following way: Heidegger takes our capacity for human existence to be present in three basic ways—first, in its exercise (that is, in our purposive activities that manifest the living out of a viable human way of life), second, in its results or ‘*pragmata*’ (that is, in the useful equipment and fellow human beings playing an intelligible role in those activities),¹³ but third and most fundamentally, in our *preparedness* to recognize and respond to its contraries—most

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 250/294 (translation modified)

¹² *Op. cit.* (translation modified); *Ibid.*, p. 261/306

¹³ Heidegger asserts these first two claims by writing, “Anticipatory resoluteness discloses the current situation of the ‘there’ [*des Da*] in such a way that active existence concerns itself circumspectively with what is factually, environmentally ready-to-hand. Resolute being-amidst what is ready-to-hand in the situation—that is to say, actively letting show up whatever presents itself environmentally, is possible only in a *making-present* of these entities. Only as the *present* in the sense of making-present can resoluteness be what it is: letting show up undisguisedly whatever it engages actively” (*Ibid.*, p. 326/373-374 (translation modified)).

importantly, the contrary possibility of death. For Heidegger, to be prepared to take death into account is to *anticipate* this possibility *resolutely*. Anticipatory resoluteness is one of Heidegger’s terms for *authenticity*, human existence in its fullest manifestation.¹⁴ Just as he calls being in practice “the most distinctive actuality [*eigenste Wirklichkeit*] of capability as capability,” he says that “[a]nticipation proves to be the possibility of understanding one’s *most distinctive* and most extreme ability to be [*eigensten äußersten Seinkönnens*], that is, the possibility of *authentic existence*.”¹⁵ And just as he describes rational capacities on Aristotle’s view as being constituted by contraries in being “*of the not* [*nichtig*]” and “shot through” with a “not and no” [*mit ... Nicht und Nein durchsetzt*], he argues that the being of human existence is “*in its essence permeated with nullity through and through* [*durch und durch von Nichtigkeit durchsetzt*].”¹⁶ So, to elucidate the notion of resolutely anticipating the contrary of death, as the most basic sense in which we are capable of human existence, I will first explain the meaning of ‘anticipation’ at some length, before returning to the meaning of ‘resoluteness.’

Anticipating Death in Terms of the Three Ways in Which the Capacity for Existential Responsibility is Finite

¹⁴ His other terms include ‘resolute being towards death,’ ‘understanding oneself in terms of one’s most distinctive ability,’ ‘wanting to have a conscience,’ ‘readiness for anxiety,’ ‘self-constancy,’ ‘freedom,’ ‘the ability to be a whole’ and ‘primordial truth.’ **[Refs.]**

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 263/307 (translation modified)

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 285/331 (translation modified); Cf. p. 306/354

Heidegger describes the anticipation of death by writing, “Being towards this possibility enables dasein to understand that giving itself up impends for it as the most extreme possibility of its existence. ... Anticipation discloses to existence that its most extreme possibility lies in giving itself up, and thus it shatters all one’s tendentiousness to whatever existence one has reached.”¹⁷ What he means here is that to anticipate death is to acknowledge the possibility that we might not only fail to achieve the end of this or that purposive activity, but more deeply, that our lives may break down in such a way that the responsible response is to give them up entirely.

Before I move on to discuss the meaning of resoluteness, I will first illustrate this notion of ‘giving up’ a way of life by considering the three senses in which rational capacities are finite, on the Aristotelian account, applying these senses to the context of Heidegger’s account of anticipation. I will then return to the notion of resoluteness in order to explain why giving up a way of life is not the only possible way of taking existential responsibility.

¹⁷ *Being and Time*, p. 264/308 (translation modified). A small terminological point is worth noting: On Heidegger’s reading of Aristotle, contraries help constitute someone’s being capable of something because they are what necessarily ‘*occur with*’ [*das Bei-läufige*] the ends that capability strives to achieve; while, on his existential analysis of human existence, we most fully possess the ability to live out a human way of life when we are prepared to *anticipate* [*vorlaufen*] the possibility of the death of that way of life. Using the etymological metaphor of running, we might say, then, that contraries ‘running along with’ possibilities of success help to constitute the explanatory and practical power of a rational capacity, while anticipation ‘runs ahead’ of any specific exercise of that capacity in the sense of preparing the agent to recognize and respond appropriately to the distinction between successfully and unsuccessfully exercising that capacity.

The first sense of finitude, recall, is the sense in which it is not up to us which capacities we do have and which responsibilities those capacities confer upon us. For Heidegger, one way in which we are prepared to acknowledge the possibility of death is through an experience of *anxiety*. In anxiety, we find ourselves confronted with the brute fact that we are indeed capable of human existence at all—and so, we find ourselves responsible for achieving and maintaining that humanity—even though we did not decide upon this fact and, indeed, this fact might never have obtained in the first place. This experience discloses what Heidegger calls our ‘*thrownness*’ into existence, which matters to us in an ‘*uncanny*’ way because it is a “burden” we are simply saddled with, something that “stares [us] in the face with the inexorability of an enigma.”¹⁸ Heidegger writes,

As something thrown, dasein has been thrown *into existence*. It exists as an entity which has to be as it is and as it can be.

That it is factically, may be obscure and hidden as regards the “*why*” of it; but the “*that-it-is*” has *itself* been disclosed to dasein. ... This finding [*Befindlichkeit*] brings dasein, more or less explicitly and authentically, face to face with the fact “that it is, and that it has to be something with an ability to be as the entity which it is.” ... Uncanniness reveals itself authentically in the basic way-of-finding [*Befindlichkeit*] of anxiety; and, as the most elemental way in which thrown dasein is disclosed, it puts dasein’s being-in-the-world face to face with the “nothing” of the world; in the face of this “nothing,” dasein is anxious with anxiety about its most distinctive ability to be.¹⁹

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 134-136/173-175

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 276/321 (translation modified)

We might respond to this inexplicable fact, that we are here and able to live out human ways of life at all, with wonder, joy, depression, bewilderment or dread. But in any case, the simple fact that we could have utterly failed to exist—and *still* could utterly fail to exist—offers us the deepest and most serious motivation for committing to take existential responsibility for our lives. That is to say, anticipating death means, in the first sense, recognizing the brute fact that we are entities whose existence stands or falls with our ability to take existential responsibility for our lives. If we cease to be open to this fact, we fail to be fully prepared for the possibility of death and thereby fail to fully understand what our being human amounts to.

The second sense in which our capacity for human existence is finite is that it depends upon certain enabling conditions necessary for its successful exercise. Thus, a second way in which we can be prepared to take death into account is by recognizing and being ready to respond to a lack or loss of those conditions. So, for example, it's possible that we simply run out of the material resources our lives depend on, as when an agricultural community's crops are struck by an irremediable blight, drought or flood. Here, while the farmers' self-understanding is intact—they know what it *would be* to go on living off the land—they lack the enabling conditions necessary for them to understand themselves in this way *actively*, by exercising their capacity to live their agrarian lifestyle. Through this possible deprivation of resources, death as a contrary to agrarian life may show up to them as a serious threat, calling for a drastic response, if they are to keep their self-understanding and

their way of life viable. And in cases where the threat is overwhelming, there may simply be no way of going on living off the land. Enabling conditions can also be lacking in the form of defunct social institutions and practices no longer recognized by the community at large, as when the profession of the switchboard operator became obsolete with the advent of automatic telephone exchange systems. In this case, changing technological equipment and practices have made it so that *there are no* switchboard operators anymore; this way of life is simply not a part of our world. The death of such a way of life could then show up, for instance, to someone whose applications for new operator jobs were simply not recognized by any companies, or to a former switchboard repairman whom everyone has come to regard as more of an antiquarian than a tradesman. In this case, the operators' self-understanding cannot survive the changing times intact; it's not clear there is any way to go on living that professional way of life. To anticipate death in these forms is, therefore, to prepare oneself for the possibility of giving up a way of life that has been 'outstripped' by a lack of enabling conditions in the world. (I will return to elaborate on these examples of responding to the possibility of death in the next section, where I discuss the notion of resoluteness.)

The third and final sense in which our capacity for human existence is finite is that, as a commitment to maintaining our ability to take existential responsibility, it can slacken or degenerate in such a way that we lose our grip on that ability. Heidegger's point here is stronger and more surprising

than Aristotle's, which was simply that we may, through neglect, misfortune, biological corruption or cognitive lapse over time, fall out of practice, lose our skill at recognizing and ruling out contraries in the pursuit of our ends and thereby fail to maintain our rational capacities. This view seems to imply that, in many cases at least, we can win back our grip on those capacities rather straightforwardly, with a sufficient amount of remedial training. Heidegger, for his part, thinks we cannot *ever* safely take ourselves to actually possess the capacity for existential responsibility; for him, this question of possession is 'an issue' that constantly lurks in the background as we go about trying to live out viable human ways of life. He thinks this because, on his view, human beings tend to live out their ways of life more or less as anyone else does, in normal, publicly recognized ways;²⁰ but there is always a possibility that our ways of life, as conventionally understood, are either no longer viable (unbeknownst to us) or else viable only if we can find unprecedented ways to go on living them. That is to say, Heidegger takes existential responsibility to involve facing up to a dramatic and unsettling possibility, namely, that the sense we strive to make out of our activities, our world and ourselves, in terms of the ways of life we understand ourselves to be living, may end up being nothing more than empty pretense.²¹ Even our sense of ourselves *as* existentially responsible for our lives may turn out to be mere pretense; this is part of Heidegger's implication in claiming, as I

²⁰ See his description of 'the anyone' [*das Man*] at Ibid., pp. 126-128/164-166.

²¹ I owe this term and its connotations to Jonathan Lear; see his "Becoming Human is Not That Easy," the first of his Tanner Lectures, "Irony and Identity" **[Ref.]**.

quoted him above, that anticipation “shatters all one’s tendentiousness to whatever existence one has reached.” He claims that such a tendentiousness (in the form of what he calls ‘idle talk’ and ‘ambiguity’) pretends to “guarantee to dasein that all the possibilities of its being will be secure, genuine and full ... [and] that one is leading and sustaining a full and genuine ‘life’.”²² But if this mere pretense of meaningfulness and viability is an ever-live possibility, then no amount of conventional training or re-training *can* guarantee that our activities truly do manifest existential responsibility for our lives. Our capacity for human existence is finite, therefore, in the sense that we can fail at any time to maintain the capacity for existential responsibility, fail to sustain the commitment that holds this capacity in preparedness, at the ready—and fail to do so, despite our best efforts. That is what I meant in alluding to the end of being human as a hard-won achievement, at the start of my discussion of Heidegger’s view.

To be sure, the failure to undertake or sustain such a commitment is a distinct sort of contrary from the contrary that is death, for it is conceivable that human beings continue to live out a viable way of life, but in an existentially irresponsible and uncommitted way (indeed, Heidegger coins the term ‘*inauthenticity*’ to name this very phenomenon).²³ Nevertheless, both sorts of contrary ultimately pose the same risk that is to be taken into account in anticipation, namely, the risk that our ways of life fail to be viable

²² *Being and Time*, p. 177/222

²³ Heidegger discusses inauthenticity in §38 of *Ibid.*, pp. 175-180/219-224.

in the ways we take them to be, and so we can understand them as contraries to one and the same distinctively human capacity.²⁴

I will try to illustrate this startling aspect of Heidegger’s view with a thought experiment. Suppose—*per impossibile*, of course—that the majority of some 21st-century society be mistaken in understanding themselves as responsible, however indirectly, for the regulation and distribution of power and resources through a democratic form of government, when in fact the relevant political and economic decisions result (whether through active conspiracy or through the sheer inertia of the status quo) from the actions and interests of a privileged minority. Someone may be unhappy with the policies resulting from a recent ‘democratic’ election, to the extent that he wonders if his political action really *is* the participation in a democratic form of life. He may thus take himself to have lost his grip on his ability to live out such a life, and may think that he simply needs to do more research, more canvassing, voter registration and lobbying in order to win back and maintain his responsibility as a democratic citizen. In this thought experiment, however, no amount of those conventionally-recognized activities, however diligent, would actually manifest or resuscitate the responsible living out of a democratic way of life, for the very notions of representation and suffrage have become pretense, have failed to get a grip on how the political world actually operates. Heidegger’s claim, in this case, would be that anticipating death involves a readiness to call out and confront

²⁴ See Heidegger’s discussion of anticipatory resoluteness as both ‘certain’ and ‘indefinite’ on pp. 307-308/355-356.

this emptiness of meaning, and, perhaps, to give up on one’s efforts to go on participating in what is now a dead way of political life, recognizing that it is impossible to win back any sort of existential responsibility for it. (On my reading, this is part of what Heidegger understands by ‘answering the call of *conscience*’).²⁵

²⁵ See §§58-60 of *Ibid.*, pp. 280-301/325-348.

Resoluteness is a Commitment to Maintain One's Responsibility for the Viability of One's Way of Life

So far, I have illustrated the notion of anticipation with examples that involve giving up a way of life threatened with the possibility of death. At this point, I must turn to the notion of resoluteness, for the foregoing discussion has made it sound as if we are existentially responsible, on Heidegger's view, simply insofar as we are prepared to just abandon our ways of life at the first or slightest threat of death. But truly responsible existence, as he sees it, does not merely anticipate death, it does so *resolutely*. Heidegger writes that one exists resolutely when one “*holds oneself free for the possibility of taking it [i.e., one's self-understanding, the way of life one takes oneself to be living out] back,*” even as this self-understanding “*resolves to keep repeating itself.*”²⁶ This is to say, taking existential responsibility can and should involve a *commitment to maintain* one's capacity to exist, an effort to respond to a recognized threat of death by finding ways to ‘repeat’ one's way of life in the sense of going on living it as a viable possibility.

Returning briefly to the examples above, then, the ‘materially outstripped’ farmers, if resolute, might try to raise some other crop better suited for their fraught environment, or else they may break off geographic ties and make their living somewhere else with a more favorable climate, all in the name of upholding their commitment to being responsible for the

²⁶ Ibid., p. 307-308/355

viability of their farming way of life. More dramatically, they may co-opt with a large industrial corporation in order to engage in a new, albeit unfamiliar, way of living a farming life using technologies and facilities built to withstand the unpredictable weather. In some cases, however, to go on living one’s way of life may involve a deeper sort of flexibility in one’s self-understanding. Thus, the obsolete switchboard repairman may have to find a thinner or broader source of meaning for his activities, perhaps going on to understand himself as someone involved in ‘the world of communication’ at large, in order to accommodate a new vocation as a directory assistance operator.

These examples, to be clear, are just my own extrapolations, for Heidegger himself gives no concrete examples in *Being and Time* of what resolute existence might look like, nor does he say anything about how flexible or attenuated a self-understanding can become in order to sustain itself in the face of death. He does allude to there being room for such an extreme interpretation of resoluteness when he claims, provocatively, that “[t]he level which a science has reached is determined by how far it is *capable* of a crisis in its basic concepts.”²⁷ But what, for instance, are we to say about the citizen whose political activity is a mere pretense of democracy? If it became materially or institutionally impossible to live a democratic life as hitherto understood, one may have to search for a political identity that embodies just the barest essentials of democracy—some novel

²⁷ To read this quotation in context, see *Ibid.*, p. 9/29.

sense in which one's views may continue being 'represented' by those truly in power, or some unprecedented sense in which the constitution of one's society still ensures one's 'personal liberty,' say. Jonathan Lear describes an even more radical sense of resoluteness in the case of the Crow Indians, who lost literally *every* conventional way of making sense of their activities as the living out of a Crow life, and whose self-understanding has been able to survive the threat of total collapse only thanks to a complete yet faithful reimagining of what it would be to live up to the virtue of courage (the so-called 'virtue of the chickadee') that has played a central role in conferring meaning, purpose and unity upon that way of life.²⁸ Heidegger, again, makes no mention in *Being and Time* of creativity or imaginative ways of going on living our lives in the face of death. This is just my best effort to explain how it could be possible for someone to exist resolutely, given the possible failure of all her conventionally-understood ways of going on. Heidegger grants that resoluteness involves resolving upon *something*, but then blanches by calling this something 'indefinite.' He writes,

Resoluteness, by its ontological essence, is always the resoluteness of some factual dasein at a particular time. ... On what is it to resolve? *Only* the resolution can give the answer. One would completely misunderstand the phenomenon of resoluteness if one should want to suppose that this consists simply in taking up possibilities which have been proposed and recommended, and seizing hold of them. *The resolution is precisely the disclosive projection and determination of what is factually possible at the time.* To resoluteness, the

²⁸ See his vivid and moving account in *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation* (Cambridge: Harvard, 2006).

indefiniteness characteristic of every ability-to-be into which dasein has been thrown, is something that necessarily *belongs*.²⁹

On my view, if resoluteness resolves upon whatever is ‘factically possible at the time’—whatever ways, if any, one may go on living in the face of death—and if this is not (always) to be done by drawing upon conventional recommendations by one’s training or community, then the only conceivable source for one’s resolution seems to be one’s own imaginative resources and experimentation, as when the founders of the United States struggled to figure out how to bring their political and religious ideals to life within a raw cultural milieu. Thus, when Heidegger describes human existence as ‘free,’³⁰ I take him to be referring to our ability to step back from the reasons for acting offered to us by our training or tradition, to question those reasons and in some cases to propose and defend new ones as more truly grasping what it is to live and understand ourselves as we do.

Conclusion: Authentic Existence Involves Understanding Oneself in Terms of the Distinctive Human Capacity

I want to say one more thing about anticipatory resoluteness, by way of conclusion. I have largely been explaining and illustrating these notions in terms of our capacity to take existential responsibility for particular ways of life, and so, our capacity to understand our activities *as* the living out of

²⁹ *Being and Time*, p. 298/345

³⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, pp. 188/232, 193/237, 266/311, 285/331, 366/417, 384/435-436 and 391/443.

those ways of life. But for Heidegger, there is an even more basic level of self-understanding at play in our commitment to maintaining existential responsibility for our lives, namely, understanding our activities *as human*, at all. On his view, to be fully human is to fully exercise the distinctively human capacity, and that involves making sense of ourselves and our world as manifesting the capacity for existential responsibility in general. Of course, understanding what it is *to be* human and understanding some particular *way* of being human go hand in hand. But Heidegger’s main aim in the published portions of *Being and Time* is to make ontological sense of human existence at large; and thus, I submit, we should understand his main conclusion there to be that human existence is constituted by the capacity for existential responsibility and maintained by a commitment to that responsibility. Thus, he writes,

“Resoluteness” means letting oneself be called unto the most distinctive *being*-responsible [*Schuldigsein*]. Being *responsible* [*Schuldigsein*] belongs to the being of *dasein* itself, which we have determined primarily as ability to be. ... In each case, the ‘responsible’ *is* only in the current factual ability-to-be. Being-responsible must, in belonging to *dasein*’s *being*, therefore be grasped as an ability-to-be-responsible. Resoluteness projects itself upon this ability to be, that is, understands itself in it. This understanding maintains itself, therefore, in an originary [*ursprünglichen*] possibility of *dasein*. It maintains itself *in it authentically* if resoluteness is what it originally tends to be.³¹

This says: The capacity for existential responsibility is the most basic or ‘originary’ notion in terms of which human existence is to be philosophically

³¹ Ibid., p. 306/354 (translation modified)

understood. When we exist authentically, anticipating death resolutely, we not only understand our activities in terms of this notion, as manifesting the capacity distinctive of human beings, but we also commit and strive to maintain this understanding in the face of the possibility of death and the finitude of that capacity itself.

If the capacity for existential responsibility, and the commitment that maintains this capacity throughout its various exercises, constitute the ‘originary possibility’ of human existence, then we should expect ‘originary temporality’ to constitute the temporal form of that capacity in its possession, maintenance and exercise. My task in the following chapter, therefore, will be to defend this claim by elucidating the meaning and explanatory role of Heidegger’s notion of originary temporality.