Ability and Finitude: The Aristotelian Concepts Behind Heidegger’s Account of Human Life in *Being and Time*

*Introduction: Motivating a New Reading of the Meaning, Finitude and Temporality of Human Life in Being and Time*

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger argues that our humanity is not a status but a task. Being human, on his view, means being *able to be* human. This ability, he says, is “essentially an issue” for us,\(^1\,\,^2\) in the sense that we must strive throughout our lives to acquire and maintain a grip on it. That is because this ability is *finite* in the sense that it can break down for reasons beyond our control. At any time, we may find ourselves incapable of successfully exercising it, or worse, find that we have radically misunderstood what it takes to possess it, in the first place. So the task of being human is most fundamentally the task of preparing ourselves to somehow recognize and respond to this possibility of breakdown, which he calls ‘death.’ \(^3\) In doing so, Heidegger says, we take responsibility for understanding our actions, our lives and our identities as our own; he calls this ‘being towards death.’ \(^4\)

The meaning and truth of these claims, however, are still widely contested among readers of *Being and Time*, for Heidegger elucidates the notions of death and being towards death in mostly oblique and enigmatic ways, giving no concrete examples of what such phenomena might be like in detail. Thus, there are about as many different readings of ‘death’ and ‘being towards’ as there are readers of *Being and Time*. This leaves it an open and unsettled question what, if anything, we have to learn about human life from reading *Being and Time*.

\(^1\) *Being and Time* (tr. Macquarrie and Robinson (Oxford: Blackwell, 1962)), pp. 84/116-117
\(^2\) Note: I follow the convention of citing the page numbers from the 1993 German edition of *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993)) first, followed by the page numbers from Macquarrie and Robinson’s English translation.
\(^3\) Ibid., pp. 250-251/294
\(^4\) Cf. ibid., pp. 24-25/294; 324/370-371
While I cannot claim to settle this interpretive issue once and for all in just these few pages, I do want to make a case for a rare but fruitful way of approaching it—namely, through the lens of Heidegger’s lectures on Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* Θ 1-3. In those lectures, Heidegger presents his reading of Aristotle’s views on what it is to be rationally capable of something (to possess a ‘dunamis meta logou’). Here, I focus on just one part of those views: Aristotle’s account of the finitude of rational capacities.

After briefly explaining the notion of a rational capacity, I go on to explain the three central senses in which rational capacities are finite, on Aristotle’s account (as read by Heidegger). Next, I argue that in *Being and Time*, Heidegger conceives of human existence in terms of a kind of capacity—what he calls an ‘ability-to-be’ (*Seinkönnen*)—that is characterized by structurally analogous sorts of finitude. I then show how these existential senses of finitude allow us to draw out a more detailed reading of his notions of death and being towards death. I give some concrete examples that illustrate how these notions can be plausibly brought to bear on our own lives, and then conclude by pointing out two broader, interpretive benefits of this reading: First, I argue that if we pay closer attention to the Aristotelian concepts behind *Being and Time*’s view of what it means to be a human being, we can better appreciate the sense and insight of Heidegger’s claim that our ability-to-be is ‘essentially an issue’ for us. Second, I briefly indicate how this, in turn, can open up a new, more textually and philosophically sound way to make sense of Heidegger’s cryptic claims at the end of *Being and Time* about the temporal unity and structure of human life, claims that are just as crucial to *Being and Time*’s argument—and just as contentious among his readers—as his claim that we fully express our humanity through being towards death.

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For Aristotle, a Rational Capacity is a Skill at Ruling out Contraries in Pursuit of an End

Among the various sorts of capacities things have to effect or undergo some change, engage in some activity or otherwise attain some end, what is distinctive of rational capacities, on Aristotle’s view, is their bi-directionality, their being “of contraries.” Aristotle explains this by claiming that rational capacities empower an agent to act toward either of two incompatible ends—for example, he says that a doctor’s medical skill is a power to bring about either health or sickness in her patients. Heidegger finds a deeper point implicit in this view, namely, that contraries play a constitutive role in the rationality of such capacities. For, the doctor heals rationally when she understands which patterns of symptom and treatment indicate, preserve and restore health, which do not, and why. This understanding gives her reasons that explain, motivate and justify her doing certain things as opposed to others, for the sake of her patients’ health. That is to say, the explanatory, practical and justificatory force of those reasons depends upon general principles of medicine that permit or even demand some of the conceivable courses of action then open to her, while ruling out others as being incompatible with her aim of health and healing. In this sense, her understanding is just as much of sickness as it is of health, and her reasons are just as much reasons not to do something contrary to health as they are reasons to do something conducive to health.

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6 Aristotle, *Metaphysics* Θ.2 1046b4-7
7 For his account of this point, see Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* Θ 1-3: On the Essence and Actuality of Force (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995), pp. 116-117 and 131-134.
8 John Haugeland explains this thought using the example of the rational capacity to acquire empirical knowledge through the practice of natural science. He writes, “In order to let entities be, dasein must somehow discover them—which, in science, generally means to observe or measure them. But observation and measurement only make sense if there is, in principle, some way to distinguish between correct and incorrect results. Now, some invalid results may be detected by flagging technical errors or equipment failure. But the only fundamental way to establish that something must be wrong is to show that some plurality of results are not mutually compatible. And that, finally, presupposes antecedent constraints on what combinations would and would not be possible—which is to say, laws … The crucial role of laws is to restrict what there can be by ruling out various conceivable combinations [of results of observation]. Only by virtue of that restrictive function can subsumption of particulars under laws render the actual intelligible—that is, explain why one thing happened rather than another. And I take this to be the scientific version of what Heidegger means more generally when he allows that understanding entities is projecting them onto their possibilities” (“Letting Be,” in *Transcendental Heidegger*, Steven Crowell and Jeff Malpas, eds. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2007), pp. 100-101).
Grasping these reasons in terms of her general understanding of medical craft, she knows what it would be to either relieve or deepen her patients’ ailments, empowering her to bring those patients either away from or further toward a state of full health.

**Aristotelian Rational Capacities are Finite in Three Senses**

Heidegger says that, according to this Aristotelian view, there are three ways in which a rational capacity can be “actual” or “present.” These are (1) in an agent’s active *exercise* of the capacity; (2) in the outcomes or *effects* of that exercise; and (3) in an agent’s having ‘come into practice,’ being trained and prepared with the *skill* to exercise it successfully in the appropriate circumstances, whether those circumstances currently obtain or not. Even before he makes this point, however, Heidegger turns to the three senses in which Aristotle thinks an entity can *fail* to be rationally capable of something. These three ways of failure, in turn, reveal three senses in which rational capacities are *finite*.¹⁰ (I will follow Heidegger in using the example of the power of sight to illustrate these three senses of finitude.¹¹)

First, on Aristotle’s view, an entity can fail to have some rational capacity if possessing that capacity is *simply impossible* for entities of its kind. Rocks, for example, lack the power of sight altogether because sight is no part of what it is to be a rock. The non-trivial point for us human agents is that the possibility of possessing any rational capacities at all is not a product of our

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⁹ Ibid., pp. 162 ff.
¹⁰ I draw my discussion here from ibid., pp. 91 ff.
¹¹ One might object that this example is inapt, since we share the power of sight with other animals that are, on Aristotle’s view, not endowed with rational powers at all. It is, however, plausible to regard the power of sight as rational in its use to view works of art; to read; to interpret blueprints, charts, graphs, maps and other diagrams; to make natural-scientific observations and to form judgments based on visual perception, more generally. In these cases, there are ‘contrary’ ways of seeing that fail to bring us toward the end of seeing in the right way, with the right outcome—squinting, crossing our eyes, dimming the lights, wearing glasses that distort our vision, glancing sporadically instead of staring intently, scanning in the wrong direction, and so on—and we possess the relevant visual skill insofar as we understand how to recognize, avoid and correct for these contraries. For defenses of the stronger claim that *all* cases of human perception involve the exercise of a rational capacity, see Matthew Boyle, “Additive Theories of Rationality: A Critique” (unpublished manuscript) and John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1994), p. 64.
decision or a matter of our control. It’s simply a brute fact we must live with, given the kind of entity we are.

Second, an entity can lack some rational 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 or context in 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 present or there is no light through which to see them, as when one stares up into the depths of outer space or when one closes one’s eyes and 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, an entity can in particular cases happen to lack some rational capacity to various degrees, or even at all. For instance, someone may have poor vision or be born blind. This shows that our capacities are finite in the sense that we cannot guarantee their endowment or longevity. But there is a further sense in which this sort of finitude characterizes rational capacities, which I will argue is crucial for grasping what Heidegger means by ‘being towards death’: Recall Aristotle’s claim that we acquire rational capacities through training, in virtue of which we understand how to skillfully attain those capacities’ ends. Given this, it follows that we can lack such capacities to the extent that we lose our grip on that training, fall out of practice and need remedial or recuperative training to once more be able to exercise them skillfully. Thus, to riff on a different example of Heidegger’s, a potter who is too negligent, lazy, stubborn, naïve or clueless to reliably produce useable mugs 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 better understand what makes for a good mug; how to produce one consistently; and how to anticipate, avoid and correct for the various ways of

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12 Ibid., p. 159
producing faulty ones. This way of failing to have a rational capacity shows that our capacities are finite in the sense that they are not immutable but can degenerate into incapacity if we do not take responsibility for maintaining them.\(^\text{13}\)

\textit{For Heidegger, to be Human is to be ‘Able-to-be,’ Capable of Taking Responsibility for Our Own Lives}

Having introduced these Aristotelian notions of rational capacities and their finitude, I now want to introduce Heidegger’s notions of human existence\(^\text{14}\) and its finitude, in order to begin drawing an analogy between the two philosophers’ views that will help us better understand what it could mean to ‘be towards death.’ By understanding the phenomenon of death as a kind of ‘contrary’ that makes human existence finite, we can better understand Heidegger’s claim that the possibility of death makes our ability to be human ‘essentially an issue’ for us. Getting clear on the meaning of that claim, in turn, will provide us with a new basis for making sense of Heidegger’s conclusions about the unique temporal structure and unity of human life.

In \textit{Being and Time}, Heidegger explicitly describes human existence in terms of the possession of a capacity. He writes, “Dasein \textit{is} as [2] an understanding [1] ability-to-be \textit{Seinkönnen} [3] for which, in its being, this being itself is an issue.”\(^\text{15}\) This dense description asserts three main claims about what it is to be human:

(1) First, on his view, our humanity is not some essential property that we possess without effort and without fail, in the way that, say, gold or water possess their atomic structures. On the

\(^{13}\) The same can of course be said of the biological capacities of animals, insofar as these depend upon maintaining the health and fitness of the body and its organs. In my dissertation, I argue that Heidegger’s account of being towards death as a kind of ‘self-constancy,’ through which we maintain the intelligibility of our actions and lives as our own, should be read as an existential analogy to Aristotle’s biological account of living creatures’ self-maintenance, through which they strive to maintain their form (or characteristic form of life) both in and through the movements of their organic bodies.

\(^{14}\) (my translation of his term \textit{dasein})

\(^{15}\) \textit{Being and Time}, p. 231/274 (translation modified)
contrary, it is a kind of end that we pursue, in our life-long effort to become—and thereby to be—someone, to live out a life that is our own. This effort, on my reading of Heidegger’s view, takes the form of striving to go on acting in ways that embody and preserve our identities as family members, co-workers, citizens, participants in various ethnic and religious communities, and all the other social roles and broad forms of self-understanding that provide unity, meaning and basic motivation to our lives.\textsuperscript{16} To be human, then, is to be \textit{able to be} such a person, to be skilled, competent, prepared, and committed to live up to the standards constitutive of such a life lived well.

(2) This implies that possessing such an ability involves being able to \textit{understand} ourselves as the subject and source of those actions through which we live out our lives in a shared, public world.\textsuperscript{17} We do not simply react to the circumstantial demands that the world and society thrust upon us; we strive to make our actions our own, to identify with and take responsibility for what we do. This involves not only endorsing the reasons for our actions and owning up to the consequences of what we have done, but also taking a stand on what it means to be the person whom we both find ourselves and put ourselves forth as being. In the first instance, this means defending and sticking to those ways of acting, thinking and feeling that are permitted or obligated by our identities, as well as refusing to accept or perform actions that are prohibited, ruled out or otherwise ‘contrary’ to our self-understanding, however strongly we may find ourselves motivated to do so. In this sense, to be able to be someone is to know how to \textit{fail} to be such a person, and to actively care about \textit{not} failing.

(3) And yet even this does not suffice to make our actions and identities our own. When Heidegger says, thirdly, that our ability to be is ‘an issue,’ he means that our claim to human agency is fraught with a risk of failure more profound than our contravening or falling short of the


\textsuperscript{17} Heidegger elaborates on this point on pp. 143-144/183-184 of \textit{Being and Time}. 
standards and ideals of behavior we inherit as we are acculturated into various social roles. As I will explain in the next section, Heidegger thinks our lives and actions are truly our own only to the extent that we are able to take responsibility for the possible breakdown of those very standards and ideals, themselves. In such a case—which he calls ‘death’—we would not only fail to go on being who are, but would find ourselves incapable of understanding what it could even mean to go on, perhaps even questioning whether we are in fact who we had taken ourselves to be, all along. (A ‘crisis of faith’ is one example that quickly makes this a vivid possibility; I will mention others below, when I discuss the senses in which our ability-to-be is finite.)

The rest of my discussion will focus on elucidating this idea of death as a radical breakdown in our self-understanding. My aim is to explain in detail just what it could be, on Heidegger’s view, to take responsibility for the possibility of death. So far, however, my point has been to give prima facie textual evidence for thinking that Heidegger’s conception of human existence is analogous to Aristotle’s conception of a rational capacity, insofar as both are notions of (1) a capacity (2) that involves understanding and (3) that can fail in certain ways that make it finite. My main task in the rest of this paper, then, will be to elaborate on this analogy in the following ways: First, I will expound upon Heidegger’s conception of death as a profound breakdown in our ability to understand ourselves as human agents living out lives of our own. This will spell out how our ‘ability-to-be’ is, like Aristotle’s rational capacities, characterized by a kind of ‘contrary,’ and is thus finite. Second, I will explain Heidegger’s conclusion that our lives are most fully our own—and in this sense, most fully expressive of our humanity, our ability to be in a human way—when we relate ourselves to the possibility of death by ‘being towards’ death. This will specify what it means to understand ourselves as the agents of our own lives, in terms of taking what I will call ‘existential
responsibility’ \(^{18}\) for these lives’ vulnerability to internal breakdown. Third, I will then apply Aristotle’s three senses of the finitude of rational capacities to the existential context of Heidegger’s discussion of human existence in \textit{Being and Time}, in order to draw out a more detailed picture of being towards death as the full expression of our humanity. This will set me up to briefly explain, in my conclusion, why the phenomenon of human life has a different kind of structure, unity and standards of success and failure than most of Heidegger’s readers have appreciated.

\textit{Death, as an ‘Inability-to-Be,’ is a Contrary that Constitutes Human Existence as Finite}

If, as I have been suggesting, the ability to be someone, to live out a life of our own, is analogous to the possession of a rational capacity as Aristotle conceives of it, it follows that we are ‘able-to-be’ insofar as we not only understand the difference between living our own lives well and the ‘contrary’ case in which we fail to do so, but furthermore, take responsibility for recognizing, avoiding and responding to the threat of finding ourselves on the wrong side of that divide. That is a generic account of the characteristic ‘end’ of human existence, on Heidegger’s view. This account gets specified in various ways, depending upon the particular ‘world’ in which an agent lives, by which Heidegger means the types of roles, actions, equipment, institutions, and so on, that articulate some form of life into a structure of possible actions, means, ends and contraries to those ends.

Now, Heidegger writes that “[t]he ‘end’ of being-in-the-world is death. This end, which belongs to the ability-to-be—that is to say, to existence—limits and determines in every case whatever totality is possible for dasein.” \(^{19}\) He says that death is “a possibility in which the issue is


\(^{19}\) \textit{Being and Time}, pp. 234/276-277
nothing less than dasein’s being-in-the-world … the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-be-
human.”  

But he does not mean to say (as many readers have interpreted him) that death is the ‘end’ of human existence in the sense that we are merely mortal or that the stories of our lives and our culture’s history will one day reach their conclusion. Nor, of course, does he mean that the very point of human life is to somehow complete ourselves by bringing about our own death. These readings misconstrue death as a kind of event, something that could and will happen—a thought that Heidegger patently denies. On the contrary, the notion of death is better expressed as a breakdown in the very idea of something’s happening, a kind of limitation beyond which we would be incapable of understanding anything as a deed, a life, of our own. Hence, Heidegger’s sense of death as a ‘contrary’ to human existence, a kind of inability-to-be, goes radically deeper than Aristotle’s sense of, say, illness as a contrary to health, the end of medical craft. Death is not a matter of living one’s own life poorly; it’s a matter of not being able to live a life of one’s own, at all.

Nevertheless, Heidegger claims, death ‘belongs’ to the end of human existence in a way that is still structurally analogous to the relationship between illness and health in the Aristotelian context. In his lectures on Aristotle, he says that “the force which is directed by discourse [i.e., rational capacity, *dunamis meta logou*] is in an original sense of the not [nichtig … ist], that is, shot through with this not and no [mit … Nicht und Nein durchsetz] …”; and in *Being and Time* he writes

20 (This latter term is clunky and unorthodox, but I think it is the most appropriate translation of Heidegger’s term ‘Nicht-mehr-dasein-könnens’ for this context.) Ibid., p. 250/294 (third translation modified)
23 Heidegger denies this explicitly on p. 261/305 of *Being and Time*.
24 Heidegger writes, “Dying is not an event” on p. 240/284 of ibid.
25 This idea, expressed in chief Plenty Coups’s claim that “when the buffalo went away … [a]fter this nothing happened,” sparks off Jonathan Lear’s haunting reflections on the near collapse of the Crow Indian way of life in *Radical Hope* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2006), p. 2.
26 *Aristotle’s Metaphysics Θ 1-3: On the Essence and Actuality of Force*, p. 134
that our way of being as human agents is “in its essence permeated with nullity through and through [durch und durch von Nichtigkeit durchsetzt].” 27 As I argued above, what he means is that in both cases, the contraries to our ends help to constitute the explanatory, practical and justificatory force of our reasons for acting in certain ways as opposed to others; and it is in terms of this distinction between our ends and their contraries that we are able to understand our reasons, and hence our actions, to be our own. In the case of human existence, then, our ability-to-be will be constituted most fundamentally by our commitment to recognize and respond to the possibility of death, the contrary that threatens the continued intelligibility and integrity of our own lives. The thought here is that, although death is not some kind of outcome we can produce or event we can bring about, it is still a phenomenon we can understand in some way, and this understanding is a condition of the possibility of being anyone at all.28 Clarifying just what this understanding comes to will be my main concern in the rest of this paper.

Heidegger uses a number of terms to refer to our understanding of the possibility of death, in virtue of which we are able to take ownership of our lives. Here, the three terms I want to focus on are ‘being towards death,’ ‘anticipating’ death and ‘authenticity’ (or ‘ownedness,’ picking up on the root ‘eigen’ in the German ‘eigentlichkeit’ 29). For, Heidegger’s use of these terms corroborates the structural analogy I have been drawing to Aristotelian rational capacities and their finitude. Heidegger writes that human existence “does not have an end at which it just stops, but it exists finitely”; 30 that “[i]n anticipating the indefinite certainty of death, dasein opens itself to a constant

27 Being and Time, p. 285/331 (translation modified); Cf. p. 306/354
28 Hence, Heidegger writes, “Existential nullity has by no means the character of a privation, where something is lacking in comparison with an ideal which has been set up but does not get attained in human existence; rather, the being of this entity is already null as projection; and it is null in advance of [vor] any of the things which it can project and which it mostly attains” (Ibid., p. 285/331).
29 John Haugeland pushes this translation in “Truth and Finitude” (Cf. p. 62 ff.).
30 Being and Time, p. 329/378
threat arising out of its own ‘there’ [the ‘Da’ of ‘dasein’]”; 31 and that “[a]nticipation proves to be the possibility of understanding one’s most own and most extreme ability-to-be [eigensten äußersten Seinkönens], that is, the possibility of authentic existence,” in which human existence is “[f]ree for its ownmost possibilities, which are determined by the end and so are understood as finite [endlich].” 32

This textual evidence suggests that we can get a clearer picture of what it means to anticipate death if we bring into focus the particular ways in which our ability-to-be is finite. And we can do that, I am suggesting, by following through the analogy to Aristotle’s three senses in which rational capacities are finite. So I will turn to this task next, in an effort to extrapolate beyond the rather general and abstract characterizations Heidegger metes out to us in the text of Being and Time, such as the following: “Being towards this possibility [of death] enables dasein to understand that giving itself up impedes 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 tenaciousness to whatever existence one has reached.” 33 This passage is provocative, but it raises more questions than it answers—what is anticipation like in particular cases? what does it mean to say that we can understand what it would be to ‘give our existence up’? what is the source and nature of this ‘tenaciousness’ that Heidegger alludes to? This passage, with all the questions it raises, will be my ‘leading clue,’ as it were, which I will use to seek out a more substantial account of what it means to ‘be towards death’ and why this enables us to most fully express our humanity.

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31 Ibid., p. 265/310 (Cf. p. 261/306, where Heidegger describes anticipatory being towards death as disclosing, understanding, cultivating, putting up with and thereby comporting ourselves towards death as a possibility.)
32 Ibid., p. 263/307, 264/308 (translations modified)
33 Ibid., p. 264/308 (translation modified)
The Three Senses in which our Ability-to-be is Finite Characterize Three Aspects of Being Towards Death

Aristotle’s first sense of finitude, recall, is the sense in which it is not up to us which capacities we do have, given the kind of entity we are. For Heidegger, this sort of finitude is revealed to us most starkly in an experience of what he calls our ‘thrownness’ into existence—the brute, contingent, uncanny, inexplicable, burdensome and vulnerable fact of our ability to be in a human way, at all. He 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.”

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To say that we have to be something with an ability-to-be is to say that we simply find ourselves thrown into the task of becoming someone in particular, even if we cannot explain why this is so. In order to live out any kind of human life at all, we must be able to recognize ourselves in our deeds; we must be able to understand our actions as embodying some identity to which we are committed; and we must be able to find our world to be a place in which our lives can in fact be lived out successfully and acknowledged by others as socially legitimate. But as I argued above, any intelligibility we win for our actions, lives and identities is in part constituted by the contrast between this intelligibility and its contraries. Those contraries are various ways of failing to possess, exercise and maintain our ability-to-be; and the most extreme contrary is death, the utter breakdown of our ability-to-be, altogether. Thus, being towards death in this most general sense is a matter of somehow acknowledging this basic feature of what it is to be human, owning up in some way or

34 Ibid., p. 276/321 (translation modified)
taking some form of existential responsibility for our lives’ vulnerability to failure, illegitimacy and collapse—as opposed to simply ignoring this possibility, refusing to accept it or explaining it away.  

In the remainder of this section, I will argue that the second and third senses in which our ability-to-be is finite help to spell out specific forms that this general notion of existential responsibility can take, giving us a more detailed account of what it could mean, on Heidegger’s view, to fully express our humanity by being towards death.

The second sense in which our ability-to-be is finite follows from Aristotle’s claim that rational capacities depend upon certain enabling conditions necessary for their successful exercise. Heidegger writes that “[i]n existing, [dasein] is thrown and, as thrown, answerable over to entities [an Seiendes überantwortet] that it needs in order to be able to be as it is … .”  

The point here is that our ability to be someone depends in part upon the world’s ‘doing us a favor,’ so to speak. For, our identities are social, our world public; and so we cannot simply hope, stipulate, intend or insist that we are who we put ourselves forth as being. In the absence of certain tools, institutions, shared practices and fellow agents, we would be incapable of embodying our identities in the world. Thus, a second aspect of what it means to be towards death involves our being prepared to recognize and respond to a lack or loss of those necessary enabling 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, the farmers’ self-understanding seems to be intact in a thin or narrow sense: they know what it would be to go on living off the land, if only they still had access to the resources.

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35 So, Heidegger writes, “The factical ‘knowledge’ or ‘ignorance’ which prevails in any dasein as to its ownmost being-towards-the-end, is only the expression of the existentiell possibility that there are different ways of maintaining oneself in this being. Factually, there are many who, proximally and for the most part, do not know about death; but this must not be passed off as a ground for proving that being-towards-death does not belong to dasein ‘universally.’ It only proves that proximally and for the most part dasein covers up its ownmost being-towards-death, fleeing in the face of it. Factually, dasein is dying as long as it exists, but proximally and for the most part, it does so by way of falling,” which he then reiterates is “a fleeing in the face of one’s ownmost being-towards-death.” (Ibid., pp. 251-252/295-296)

36 Ibid., p. 364/416 (translation modified)
necessary for doing so. But in the full-blooded sense, they are unable to exercise this ability to be a farmer, for they lack the enabling conditions necessary for them to embody this self-understanding through action. In that sense, it becomes an open question what it could mean to be a farmer in a situation such as this, when the land has turned barren. Through this possible deprivation of resources, death as a limitation to agrarian life may show up to these farmers as a serious threat, calling for a drastic response, if they are to maintain their self-understanding and way of life as a viable possibility for themselves. And in cases where this 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 professional identity is simply not an intelligible part of our world. The death of this way of identifying oneself would have shown up, for instance, to someone whose applications for new operator jobs were systematically declined or simply not recognized by any employers. This case of death could also be experienced by 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 be able to go on living that professional way of life.

To anticipate death in these forms is, therefore, to prepare oneself for the possibility of having to resuscitate, reimagine or perhaps even renounce an identity and way of life that have been (to follow William Blattner’s use of the term[^35]) ‘outstripped’ by a lack of enabling conditions in the world. In doing so, we acknowledge that (1) there is a non-arbitrary distinction between truly and

[^35]: In [Heidegger’s Being and Time: A Reader’s Guide](New York: Continuum, 2006), pp. 150-151, 160-161
falsely putting ourselves forth as living out some way of life, that (2) insofar as we are human, it matters to us which side of this divide we find ourselves on, and yet that (3) this is not fully within our control.

The third and final sense in which our ability-to-be is finite follows from Aristotle’s claim that we can lose our grip on our rational capacities as they slacken or degenerate over time. Heidegger’s point here is stronger and more surprising than Aristotle’s, which was simply that we can fall out of practice and lose our skill at recognizing and responding to the contraries that threaten the successful pursuit of our ends. This can happen through neglect, misfortune, biological corruption or cognitive lapse over time. But in many cases, it seems we can win back our grip on those capacities rather straightforwardly, with a sufficient amount of remedial training. Heidegger, for his part, thinks that our ability-to-be is not the kind of thing we can ever safely take ourselves to possess or to rehabilitate from deterioration. For him, the question of whether we do in fact possess an ability-to-be is ‘an issue’ that constantly lurks in the background, as we strive to embody our identities—even when things seem to be going well and smoothly. In the remainder of my discussion here, I will explain this sense in which death makes our ability-to-be ‘an issue’ for us and propose an example to illustrate what it could mean to anticipate death in this guise. I will conclude by suggesting how this interpretation should orient our reading of the explanatory role Heidegger intends for his notion of originary temporality to play in the last published chapters of his analysis of human existence in Division II of *Being and Time*.

Why is our very possession of an ability-to-be ‘an issue’ that is always in question for us? On Heidegger’s view, this follows from the fact that human beings tend to live out their ways of life more or less as anyone else does, in normal, publicly recognized ways.\(^\text{38}\) While this tendency toward conformism is important for coordinating our lives in a shared, public world, it also harbors a more

\(^{38}\) See his description of ‘the anyone’ [*das Man*] in *Being and Time*, pp. 126-128/164-166.
pernicious tendency to slide into what he describes as an *inauthentic* (or ‘unowned,’ ‘uneingentliche’) way of
existing. To exist inauthentically, he says, is to understand oneself in a way that 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’.” 39 Inauthentic existence, in other words, takes for
granted that one is in safe possession of the ability to be someone. This means that, in taking for
granted that the possibility of death has been definitively anticipated or foreclosed, one assumes that
one can safely go on embodying one’s identity, and furthermore, that one has already been able to do
so, all along. But this is precisely the ‘tenaciousness to our existence’ (the ‘hardening’ of our self-
understanding also connoted by Heidegger’s term ‘Versteifung’) that is ‘shattered by the anticipation of
death,’ according to the passage I quoted above. When we exist inauthentically, we disown our
responsibility for anticipating death, in a way that leaves us particularly vulnerable to the threat of
death in its deepest guise, which I will refer to as ‘empty pretense.’ 40

Empty pretense characterizes the failure of an individual or community to embody the
identities they purport to be living out, where this failure is both concealed and yet reinforced by their
conventional understanding of what it means to live out that identity, itself. The pretense of self-
understanding here is ‘empty’ in that it amounts to ‘self-understanding’ in name only. It is the
hollowing out of a way of life into a mere semblance of what it purports to be, a deterioration of one’s
ability-to-be into a mere sham, a busyness and bustle that only seems to embody a viable human life—
much as fool’s gold only seems to be gold, or a corpse only seems to be a human body.41 Most

39 Heidegger says this of inauthentic existence under the guise of what he calls ‘idle talk’ and ‘ambiguity’ (Ibid., p.
177/222).
40 My use of this term, as well as many of the points that follow, are inspired by Jonathan Lear’s discussion of
Kierkegaard’s notion of irony and ‘ironic existence’, see his “Becoming Human is Not That Easy,” the first of his 2009
41 Anton Ford calls such phenomena “alienated species” of whatever genus they purport to be members of. His point is
relevant to my argument here concerning the finitude of rational capacities, for he argues that alienated species are
recognizable ‘contraries’ to the proper, full-fledged manifestations of the genus in question. (See his discussion in *Action
dramatically, the emptiness of this pretense can even extend to one’s understanding of what it means to responsibly anticipate a lapse into empty pretense, itself!

If, as Heidegger suggests, this form of death is a kind of contrary that constantly holds open the question whether we do in fact possess the ability to be who we take ourselves to be, then no amount of conventional training, rehabilitation or so-called ‘anticipation’ can guarantee that we have settled this question once and for all. Thus, our ability-to-be is finite in this deepest sense insofar as it may slip from our grasp at any time, despite our best efforts to maintain a grip on it. Whether this happens in a flash or by slow and hidden atrophy, we may suddenly find ourselves at a loss about what any of our actions have to do with who we are striving to be. So, what is most deeply ‘an issue’ for us is whether we are able-to-be in this fullest sense of understanding what it means to responsibly anticipate death, itself, especially in the guise of empty pretense. Being towards this form of death, in turn, is a matter of anticipating the breakdown of our very understanding of anticipation. Heidegger intimates this self-reflexive nature of anticipation when he writes that “Being towards death is the anticipation of an ability-to-be of that entity whose way of being is anticipation itself.” 42

But what could such a thing possibly be like? Are there recognizable examples of empty pretense and ‘authentic,’ existentially responsible responses to this pretense that could make Heidegger’s suggestion plausible? Arguably, yes. Suppose 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 interests and influence of a privileged minority. Someone may be so unhappy with the policies resulting from a recent ‘democratic’ election that he wonders what any of his efforts to vote, canvass, lobby and engage in political discourse have to do with true

42 Being and Time, p. 262/307 (translation modified)
participation in a democratic form of life. He may take himself to have lost his grip on what it means to go on acting as a democratic citizen. Now, one conceivable response to this loss would be for him to rehabilitate his ability to be a democratic citizen in some conventional way, perhaps by finding new outlets to engage in political conversations, new approaches to lobbying or protesting, a new party and platform to get behind. Or, he may set out to garner support for bold new legislation, make unprecedented economic or civil demands of his government and thereby change the shape of political life. In this thought experiment, however, none of those conventional forms of political change, however diligently pursued, would truly embody the identity of a democratic citizen. For, this is a situation in which the concept of ‘changing the shape of political life’ has become an idle wheel, in which the very notions of representation and suffrage have become pretense, have failed to get a grip on how the political world actually operates. Lobbying, protesting, persuasive speech about political issues—all these activities in their conventional forms have become uprooted from the true source of political power and change.

Heidegger’s claim here would be that anticipating death authentically would involve a readiness to call out and confront this emptiness of meaning, even if it meant profoundly disrupting and disorienting one’s sense of the meaning of one’s own life.\textsuperscript{43} This may involve radically reimagining what it could mean to go on being a democratic citizen,\textsuperscript{44} or it may involve giving up on one’s efforts to go on participating in what is no longer a possible form of political life. And which of those options, if any, would disclose the truth about what it means to live democratically would be a matter of heated debate, contested interpretations and the test of historical time.

\textsuperscript{43} On my reading, this is part of what Heidegger understands by ‘answering the call of conscience’; Cf. §§58-60 of ibid., pp. 280-301/325-348.

\textsuperscript{44} (Just as, Jonathan Lear argues in \textit{Radical Hope}, Chief Plenty Coups radically reimagined what it could mean to go on living as a member of the Crow Indian tribe after his people were confined to a reservation.)
To some, this is no mere thought experiment. In a recent op-ed for the *New York Times*, Bernard Harcourt claims that the Occupy Wall Street movement is a radical form of protest we should call ‘political disobedience.’ Political disobedience, he writes, is “a new type of resistance to politics *tout court*—to making policy demands, to playing the political games, to partisan politics, to old-fashioned ideology.” 45 “Civil disobedience,” he argues, “accepted the legitimacy of political institutions, but resisted the moral authority of resulting laws. Political disobedience, by contrast, resists the very way in which we are governed … .” 46 His suggestion seems to be that the very point of this movement is to draw attention to the emptiness of political life in 21st-century United States democracy. In particular, the claim is that no available course of political action presents an intelligible way of going on embodying the identity of a democratic citizen, that there has been a breakdown in the very concepts of democratic political action and change. This claim, though it may turn out to be false, presents a conceivable (and timely) example of being towards death in the guise of empty pretense.

**Conclusion: Originary Temporality Explains Our Possessing, Maintaining and Exercising an Ability-to-Be**

To be sure, this deepest sense of finitude, and our understanding of that finitude, goes beyond anything directly implied by the Aristotelian metaphysics of rational capacities that inspires and illuminates Heidegger’s account of our ability-to-be, as I read it. Nevertheless, I have drawn out the analogy between the two philosophers’ views in order to specify, with reference to Heidegger’s own text, the material, social, self-interpretive and general ontological limitations we would confront in striving to live out human lives of our own. Ontologically, it matters to us that we not fail to be able to go on embodying our identities, though the fact that this matters to us is not up to us to

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decide, insofar as we have to live the life of a human agent. Materially and socially, we depend upon certain enabling conditions that are necessary for us to embody our identities through action in a shared, public world shaped by culture and history; but it is not up to us to decide whether those conditions remain in place. Our ways of understanding who we are and what we are doing, finally, face a constant threat of degeneration into inauthenticity and empty pretense, and yet it is always possible that we have failed to recognize and respond to this threat, despite our best efforts to anticipate it vigilantly. Therefore, our ability-to-be is ‘an issue’ for us, in the sense that it is always an open question for us whether we truly are able to be who we both find ourselves and put ourselves forth as being.

In conclusion, I want to dwell upon this last point, in order to bring out an important consequence for understanding Heidegger’s view of the temporal structure of human life. For, my characterization of what it means to be able to be someone implies that our ability-to-be is ‘an issue’ for us in three ways at once. That is, each of our actions expresses a stance we take on the following three questions: (1) What does it take for me, here and now, to exercise my ability-to-be—that is, to go on embodying my identity through my own action? (2) What does it take for me, here and now, to maintain my ability-to-be—that is, to act in a way that not only expresses but preserves my existential responsibility, my commitment not to accept actions and circumstances that would be contrary, impossible or ruled out by the way I identify myself? (3) What does it take for me to truly possess my ability-to-be, given its vulnerability to internal breakdown—that is, to act in a way that vindicates or ratifies my claim to already being who I have put myself forth as being, all along? The

47 In *Self-Constitution: Agency, Identity, and Integrity*, Christine Korsgaard expresses this third issue in the following, Kantian manner: “[Y]ou can wholeheartedly endorse even the most arbitrary form of identification, treating its reasons and obligations as inviolable laws. Making the contingent necessary is one of the tasks of human life and the ability to do it is arguably a mark of a good human being. To do your job as if it were the most important thing in the world, love your spouse as if your marriage was made in heaven, treat your friends as if they were the most important people in the world—is to treat your contingent identities as the sources of absolute inviolable laws. [/] But why should we do that? I said a moment ago that these forms of identification are contingent, and we can walk away from them. Their hold on us
activity of living human lives of our own, then, can be thought of as the activity of exercising our ability-to-be in such a way that we both maintain that ability as well as vindicate our claim to possess it already. And given the unique way in which our ability-to-be is finite, this activity has a different temporal structure and different standards of success and failure than those activities characteristic of animal life, natural motion and even goal-directed intentional action.

Heidegger expresses this point by writing that “[d]asein must, as itself, become—that is to say, be—what it is not yet” 48 But he insists that the meaning of the terms ‘not yet’ and ‘already’ in the context of human life is distinct from the meaning of those terms as we ordinarily use them.49 It follows that the meaning of the terms ‘be’ and ‘become’ will be correspondingly distinct. A set of ingredients for a cake, for instance, is ‘not yet’ a cake in the ordinary sense, insofar as there are still steps of the recipe left to be completed by a baker. All the same, there can be a point in time when those ingredients will have become a cake just waiting to be eaten; and from that point on, this entity is ‘already’ a cake in the ordinary sense of having been produced through the baker’s successful completion of every step of the recipe in the proper order. Embodying a human identity, by contrast, is both ongoing and provisional, in that there cannot be a point in time when someone has ‘finished’ becoming who he is, such that he is safely and definitively ‘already’ that person, able to live out that way of life with existential responsibility.50 Because the existential sense of ‘not yet’ applies throughout

depends on our own endorsement of the laws they give us. We ratify their laws whenever we act in accordance with them,” p. 23.

48 Being and Time, p. 243/287
49 He writes, “[N]either the ‘before’ [Vor] in the ‘ahead’ [Vorweg—dasein’s being ‘not yet’ in the sense of ‘being ahead-of-itself’ (Sich-vorweg)] nor the ‘already’ is to be taken in terms of the way time is ordinarily understood … . With this ‘before’ we do not have in mind ‘in advance of something’ [das ‘Vorher’] in the sense of ‘not yet now—but later’; the ‘already’ is just as far from signifying ‘no longer now—but earlier’,” Ibid., p. 327/375.
50 As William Blattner puts it, an ability-to-be is “unattainable” (see his Heidegger’s Temporal Idealism (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), pp. 81 ff.).
human life, the existential sense of ‘already’ is constantly in question, and so being a human agent amounts to a continuous struggle against the threat of failing to have been one, all along.51

Many of Heidegger’s readers have not fully appreciated this insight of his into the unique temporal structure (which he calls ‘originary temporality’ (ursprüngliche Zeitlichkeit)) that he thinks we must invoke in order to answer the question, ‘What does it mean to be a human being?’ To be sure, this is in part because Heidegger’s discussion of this notion of time, with its unusual senses of ‘past,’ ‘present’ and ‘future,’ breaks off right in the middle of his explication, as he rushed the manuscript of *Being and Time* off for publication. Thus, we are left with clipped and enigmatic glosses on these temporal notions that, to some readers, reek of paradox or outright nonsense.52 While most everyone agrees that the originary past, present and future are nothing like the ordinary tenses we invoke in order to give causal explanations of events in the natural world, there is still a tendency to assimilate those former notions too closely to our ordinary understanding of time. Some, for instance, read originary temporality as the timeline of an individual’s ‘life story’ or a culture’s narrative history,53 while others read it as the progressive structure of purposive, intentional action.54

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51 As Robert Pippin puts this point, “[T]he suggestion of such maxims as ‘become who you are’ is that … exercising your agency is always an active becoming, a struggle against some barrier, some temptation to conformism or forgetfulness or bad faith or inauthenticity (or some unavoidable contestation with others about what it is that one did, over whom one is revealed to be, or about whom one gets to be). This gap can either be some sort of real barrier to becoming who you are (such as a political barrier or some social convention), where that struggle is based on already achieved (if still provisional) self-knowledge, or it could be required because of a gap between self-image and self-knowledge” (“On ‘Becoming Who One Is’ (and Failing): Proust’s Problematic Selves,” in *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), p. 311).

52 Hubert Dreyfus remarks that when he initially worked up his commentary on *Being and Time*, “the whole of Division II seemed to me much less carefully worked out than Division I and, indeed, to have some errors so serious as to block any consistent reading” (*Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge: MIT, 1991), p. viii). Mark Okrent notes in his *Heidegger’s Pragmatism: Understanding, Being, and the Critique of Metaphysics* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988), “I have intentionally ignored much of Heidegger’s talk concerning the ‘ecstases’ of temporality and their ‘horizontal schema,’ because I take such talk to be a picture-thinking ultimately derived from Husserl’s emphasis on intuition and consciousness and thus, finally, out of place in Heidegger,” p. 212 n. 67. Margot Fleischer argues in *Die Zeitanalysen in Heideggers ‘Sein und Zeit’: Aporien, Probleme und ein Ausblick* (Würzburg: Königshausen and Neumann, 1991) that Heidegger’s notion of originary temporality is not only incoherent but superfluous for carrying out his main philosophical project of explaining the meaning and unity of the being of human existence. (References to these claims can all be found in Daniel O. Dahlstrom, “Heidegger’s Concept of Temporality: Reflections on a Recent Criticism” (*The Review of Meta-physics*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (Sep. 1995), pp. 95-115.).)

53 Again, see Guignon’s *Heidegger and the Problem of Knowledge* for an example of this sort of reading.
But again, these are all phenomena whose past and future involve, respectively, events that have ‘already’ happened in the ordinary sense and events that have ‘not yet’ happened in the ordinary sense. My purposive actions strive toward an end that, if all goes well, will be accomplished or achieved at some later point in time. My life story weaves all my deeds into a narrative sequence of beginning, middle and end. But Heidegger insists that “the [originary] future is not later than alreadiness [Heidegger’s term for the originary past], and alreadiness is not earlier than the present.”

These readings are driven by the right idea, namely that originary temporality is supposed to enable us to understand how an agent’s actions all hang together so as to constitute a unified human life that she lives out as her own. But they flatly contradict Heidegger’s text by interpreting this unity in terms of a successive, progressive or otherwise sequential relationship among actions and events. If, by contrast, we pay closer attention to the Aristotelian concepts at the core of Heidegger’s account of human life, this opens up a different reading. On this reading, as I have argued above, what is truly ‘an issue’ for us as we strive to live out unified lives of our own is not whether our actions achieve our purposes or tell a coherent story, but rather, whether they succeed in exercising, maintaining and vindicating our claim to possess an ability-to-be. I described an ability to be someone as, among other things, a kind of commitment—specifically, a commitment to go on acting in ways that are permitted or obligated by our identities; to refuse to act in ways that our identities prohibit, rule out or render impossible for us; and to take responsibility for the possible breakdown of those identities, themselves. Thus, our actions hang together in the relevant way insofar as they manifest, uphold and thereby vindicate such a commitment—which is to say, insofar as they manifest our existential responsibility for our own lives and identities. And the temporal

54 For an example of this sort of reading, see Mark Okrent’s *Heidegger’s Pragmatism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988).
55 *Being and Time*, p. 350/401
56 Heidegger introduces the notion of originary temporality by claiming that “Temporality gets experienced in a phenomenally originary way in dasein’s authentic being-a-whole, in the phenomenon of anticipatory resoluteness,” ibid., p. 304/351 (translation modified).
57 In a more Aristotelian spirit, we might say that the issue is whether our actions embody the ‘form’ of human life.
structure of upholding a commitment is arguably distinct from the ordinary way in which actions and events unfold in time.

Thus, I submit that the idea of such a commitment is the basis for a more textually and philosophically sound interpretation of the temporal structure and unity of human life, according to Heidegger’s view in *Being and Time*. Much more must be said in order to fully spell out and defend this view. But at the very least, I hope to have motivated its plausibility and promise, by explaining how it rests upon the Aristotelian notions of capacities and their finitude that lie at the heart of Heidegger’s account of what it means to be a human being.
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