

The importance of the nothingness of what we care about

*Die Sorge selbst ist in ihrem Wesen durch und durch von Nichtigkeit durchsetzt.*¹

Robert Pippin opines that “what we need to understand [is] what has happened to us.”² Nothing special has happened to us; rather, something outré in the history of life has happened, and that something is us: οὐδὲν ἀνθρώπου δεινότερον; *Homo abyssus est; der Mensch in seinem Wesen selbst eine καταστροφή ist.*³ As Svante Pääbo expressed it to Eilizabeth Kolbert, “We are crazy in some way. What drives it? That I would really like to understand. That would be really, really cool to know.”⁴ Given the nature of his research commitment⁵ Pääbo might agree that ‘Nothing about our craziness makes sense except in the light of evolution.’⁶

Heidegger’s thinking and the extended evolutionary synthesis⁷ taken together converge on a formal indication of this phenomenon of sublime/depraved⁸ madness—in a word, ‘deconstraint.’⁹ Deconstraint is our ‘species form’:—ontological ἀνομία, ἀναρχεία.¹⁰

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* 285: <https://www.beyng.com/pages/de/SeinUndZeit/SeinUndZeit.285.html> .

² Robert B. Pippin, *The Culmination: Heidegger, German Idealism, and the Fate of Philosophy* (2024) 219, fn. 17.

³ Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlins Hymne »Der Ister«*; *Gesamtausgabe Band 53*: 94: <https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=53.00&pg=94> .

⁴ Elizabeth Kolbert, *The Sixth Extinction: An Unnatural History* (2014) 252. Anthropogenic extinction is no more unnatural than that of the Great Oxygen-release Event. The difference is that the precipitating organism may well also extinguish **itself** this time around.

<https://asm.org/articles/2022/february/the-great-oxidation-event-how-cyanobacteria-change> .

⁵ <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/medicine/2022/press-release/> .

⁶ Theodosius Dobzhansky of course said “nothing in biology.” Our craziness is ‘in’ biology.

⁷ *Evolution, the Extended Synthesis* (ed. Massimo Pigliucci and Gerd B. Müller 2010).

⁸ “man can sink lower than any animal. No animal can become depraved in the same way as man [*der Mensch tiefer sinken kann als das Tier; dieses kann nie so verkommen wie ein Mensch*].” Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude* (tr. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker 1995) 194; GA 29/30: 286: <https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=29.30&pg=286> .

⁹ Deconstraint enables evolvability. “The capacity of a process to evolve, that is, to generate nonlethal functional variation on which selection can act, may be termed the evolvability of a process. . . . Evolvability is itself a biological process, and has undergone its own evolution under selection.” John Gerhart and Marc Kirschner, *Cells, Embryos, and Evolution: Toward a Cellular and Developmental Understanding of Phenotypic Variation and Evolutionary Adaptability* (1997) 614. The importance of deconstraint gets emphasis in Kirschner and Gerhart, “Evolvability,” 95 *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the U.S.A.* 8420 (1998); and ‘facilitated’ is a synonym for ‘deconstrained’ in their “The theory of facilitated variation,” 104 *PNAS* 8582, 8584 (2007). See also their *The Plausibility of Life: Resolving Darwin’s Dilemma* (2005).

¹⁰ Cf. Max Scheler, *The Human Place in the Cosmos* ([1928] tr. Manfred S. Frings 2009) at 20-21: “this effectiveness of the associative principle means that an organic *individual* is increasingly *detached* from the ties it has to its species and from the rigidity of instincts devoid of a capacity for adaptation. It is because of the progress of this principle that an individual is able to adjust to *new* situations, which are no longer typical for the species concerned.” Discussed in David W. Bates, *An Artificial History of Natural Intelligence: Thinking with Machines from Descartes to the Digital Age* (2024) 214-216.

Pippin notes that human animals, like all others, “have a biological species form.” We are air-breathing, terrestrial, flightless, bipedal, omnivorous, etc. But, he goes on, “that does not determine the world for Dasein;” i.e., “for a Dasein whose primordial mode of being is care (*Sorge*), a practical investment in the world, attuned to and sensitive to significance, importance, and mattering, all implicit in our comportments with beings, deeply familiar, and unthematic;” “we can say that the background world for any possible accessibility and for their own individuation is a historical world . . . openness, a clearing (*Lichtung*), not a species form.”¹¹ Pippin stresses that “Heidegger does not deny that we can also consider ourselves ‘rational animals,’ but the phenomenological claim is that this is not primary in our experience; our being is not at stake for us as rational animals but as ‘the basis of a nullity.’”¹²

As Heidegger puts it, ‘care’ (Dasein’s being—*das Sein des Daseins ist die Sorge*) “means, as thrown projection, Being-the-basis of a nullity (and this Being-the-basis is itself null) [*das (nichtige) Grund-sein einer Nichtigkeit*];”¹³ “It itself, being a basis, is a nullity of itself [*Grundseiend ist es selbst eine Nichtigkeit seiner selbst*].”¹⁴ Care is the null basis of a nullity.

Care’s freedom for possibility sounds in *Nichtigkeit*: “The nullity we have in mind belongs to Dasein’s Being-free for its existentiell possibilities [*Die gemeinte Nichtigkeit gehört zum Freisein des Daseins für seine existenziellen Möglichkeiten*].”¹⁵ The nullity of care deconstrains the human animal as ‘free radical’ to form world, and continually to expand and transform world:—“greater in range, far more extensive in its penetrability, constantly extendable [*größer an Umfang, weitergehend an Eindringlichkeit, ständig nicht nur umfänglich vermehrbar*].”¹⁶ To rip a page from Frege, care is unsaturated (*ungesättigt*).¹⁷

Lacan teaches implicitly that desire is to Freud as care is to Heidegger; i.e., ‘lack in being.’¹⁸ Lacan says that “The Freudian world isn’t a world of things, it isn’t a world of being. It is a world of desire as such [*ce n’est pas un monde des choses, ça n’est pas un monde de l’être, c’est un monde du désir en tant que tel*]. . . . Desire is a relation of being to lack [*un rapport d’être sans doute à un manque essentiel*]. This lack is the lack of being properly speaking [*manque d’être à*

¹¹ *The Culmination* 39.

¹² *Id.* 130, fn. 2.

¹³ *Being and Time* (tr. Macquarrie and Robinson 1962) 331; *Sein und Zeit* 285: <https://www.beyng.com/pages/de/SeinUndZeit/SeinUndZeit.285.html> .

¹⁴ *Id.* 330; SZ 284.

¹⁵ *Id.* 331; SZ 285.

¹⁶ *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* 193; GA 29/30: 285: <https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=29.30&pg=285> .

¹⁷ See Richard G. Heck, Jr. and Robert May, “The Function is Unsaturated” in *The Oxford Handbook of The History of Analytic Philosophy* (ed. Michael Beaney 2013); <https://rkheck.frege.org/pdf/published/FunclisUnsat.pdf> .

¹⁸ The translation of *Schuldigsein* in Thomas Sheehan and Corinne Painter, “Choosing One’s Fate: A Re-reading of *Sein und Zeit*, § 74,” 28 *Research in Phenomenology* 63 (1999).

proprement parler]. It isn't the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists [*rapport d'être à un manque par quoi justement il existe*]."¹⁹

Care, like its congener desire, is a sink. Heidegger avers that the basic structure of care, *Grundstruktur der Sorge*, is the poverty-deprivation-need (*die Darbung, das Entbehren, das Bedürfen*) which underlies our unceasing being-out-for-something, *Auf-etwas-aus-sein*.²⁰

Heidegger characterizes the authentic self as 'a free existing,' *ein freies Existieren*.²¹ For a non-negligible part of its time Dasein takes itself as deprived of freedom, in need of deliverance, out for liberation. Harry Frankfurt remarks a frequently-arising puzzle in this species of *Aussein*:

"The suggestion that a person may be in some sense liberated through acceding to a power which is not subject to his immediate voluntary control is among the most ancient and persistent themes of our moral and religious tradition. . . . The idea that being rational and loving are ways of achieving freedom ought to puzzle us more than it does, given that both require a person *to submit* to something which is beyond his voluntary control and which may be indifferent to his desires."²²

An associated and no less remarkable phenomenon is submission-**switching**. Conversion from one normative practice to another is abundantly attested. Such switchability—ontological plasticity—is the nullity of care holding us open to *existenziellen Möglichkeiten*. *Nichtigkeit* enables plasticity of response, the ontological reaction norm. Heidegger's thematic commitment was to *Verwandlung*, transformation.²³ And transformation sounds in *Nichtigkeit*. If we were not essentially nothing our worlds could not, as Heidegger claims they can, transform into practically anything.

Steven Crowell cites the difference between

¹⁹ *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis, 1954-1955* (tr. Sylvana Tomaselli 1988) 222, 223: <http://staferla.free.fr/S2/S2%20LE%20MOI.pdf> 208, 209.

²⁰ GA 20: 408-409: <https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=20.00&pg=408> .

²¹ "Resoluteness constitutes the loyalty of existence to its own Self. As resoluteness which is ready for anxiety, this loyalty is at the same time a possible way of revering the sole authority which a free existing can have-of revering the repeatable possibilities of existence." *Being and Time* 443. *Die Entschlossenheit konstituiert die Treue der Existenz zum eigenen Selbst. Als angstbereite Entschlossenheit ist die Treue zugleich mögliche Ehrfurcht vor der einzigen Autorität, die ein freies Existieren haben kann, vor den wiederholbaren Möglichkeiten der Existenz.* SZ 391: <https://www.beyng.com/pages/de/SeinUndZeit/SeinUndZeit.391.html> .

²² Harry G. Frankfurt, *The importance of what we care about: Philosophical essays* (1988) 89.

²³ The word *Verwandlung*, Sheehan observes, "is a constant drumbeat throughout Heidegger's work, a call to personal and social transformation." Thomas Sheehan, "Rewriting Heidegger," May 13, 2023: <https://www.beyng.com/papers/HC2023Sheehan.html#VOLLZUGSSINN> . 'Thematic commitment' as in Gerald Holton, *Thematic Origins of Scientific Thought: Kepler to Einstein* (rev. ed. 1988).

“Dasein’s being at stake in existing and life’s being at stake in a struggle for survival. In the former case, but not the latter, the stakes are determined only insofar as I make myself beholden to a measure of success or failure – and that means, to act not only in conformity to such a measure (as the animal acts in conformity to the measure of survival) but to act in light of it *as* a measure, that is, to take my measure *by* it. . . . To the extent that I act as ‘one’ does, I cannot essentially be distinguished from an entity who acts in conformity to norms though not in light of them [sc. a nonhuman animal].”²⁴

The capacity to take a norm *as* norm carries with it the potential of apostasy, the capacity to drop that norm, to stop taking one’s measure by it, to forsake one Law for another. And this norm-switching is possible for Dasein because “In the structure of thrownness, as in that of projection, there lies essentially a nullity,”²⁵ a nonfixity.

Peter Trawny writes that “One can assess the action of an individual according to moral criteria, consider it in normative terms as the instantiation of the moral law.” In such case we are “relating to freedom as the criterion of a moral action.” This he calls the freedom for a principle, a *principled freedom*. “Principled [i.e., normative] freedom organizes our economy of guilt and forgiveness with normative claims [*mit normativen Ansprüchen*].”²⁶

Or one can (is free to) understand the action (*die Handlung*) of an individual “as the depiction [*die Darstellung*], as the history of a life, in order to acknowledge it as exemplary or reject it as without significance [*um sie als beispielhaft anzuerkennen oder als bedeutungslos zu verwerfen*].” This Trawny calls an-archic freedom—*An-archie*, “the inception of a freedom that is nothing besides itself [*die nichts ist außer sie selbst*]: an ‘abyss of freedom’ [»*Abgrund der Freiheit*«], a freedom of the unanticipatable inception [*des unvordenklichen Anfangs*]. An inception is always an appropriative event, a rupture, an upheaval [*ein Ereignis, ein Bruch, Aufbruch*].”²⁷

Nothing other than itself, and itself an abyss; in Heidegger’s alternative usage, *Nichtigkeit*. “For Heidegger,” Trawny says, “there is no moral law [*kein moralisches Gesetz*] from which human reason could proceed, beyond the appropriative event of truth and the experience of it in

²⁴ Steven Crowell, *Normativity and Phenomenology in Husserl and Heidegger* (2013) 218-219.

²⁵ *Being and Time* 331. *In der Struktur der Geworfenheit sowohl wie in der des Entwurfs liegt wesentlich eine Nichtigkeit*. *Sein und Zeit* 285: <https://www.beyng.com/pages/de/SeinUndZeit/SeinUndZeit.285.html> .

²⁶ Peter Trawny, *Freedom to Fail: Heidegger’s Anarchy* (tr. Ian Alexander Moore and Christopher Turner 2015) 20, 21.

²⁷ *Ibid.*; for ‘abyss of freedom’ citing GA 95: 81: <https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=95.00&pg=81> .

thinking.”²⁸ Accord Crowell re die Frage nach dem existenzialen Sinn des im Ruf Gerufenen:²⁹—Der Ruf calls ‘guilty’ (*schuldig*); which guilt, Crowell says, “cannot be explained with reference to any law, whether conventional, rational/moral, or divine.”³⁰

Heidegger locates *der Ruf* in care. (Again, *Sorge* is *das Sein des Daseins*.) “Conscience manifests itself as the call of care: the caller is Dasein [**Das Gewissen offenbart sich als Ruf der Sorge: der Rufer ist das Dasein**].”³¹ But care is the null basis of a nullity; there lies in the structure of *Sorge*, *Geworfenheit*, and *Entwurf* essentially a nullity, *Nichtigkeit*. It’s as though *der Ruf* is, at base, an hallucination, an ontological tinnitus. Which is not to deny it has real effects. Heidegger points to these effects with his doctrine that Dasein is the being which *um es selbst geht*.³² Substituting—as we’ve seen we may—*Nichtigkeit* for *selbst*, this amounts to saying that Dasein is the entity which orbits about nothingness. The focus whereby we ex-sist is *Nichtigkeit*, deconstraint, *An-archie*, *Abgrund der Freiheit*.

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²⁸ *Freedom to Fail* 24.

²⁹ *Sein und Zeit* 281: <https://www.beyng.com/pages/de/SeinUndZeit/SeinUndZeit.281.html> .

³⁰ *Normativity and Phenomenology* 204-205.

³¹ *Being and Time* 322. *Sein und Zeit* 277: <https://www.beyng.com/pages/de/SeinUndZeit/SeinUndZeit.277.html> .

³² *Dasein ist Seiendes, dem es als In-der-Welt-sein um es selbst geht*. *Sein und Zeit* 143: <https://www.beyng.com/pages/de/SeinUndZeit/SeinUndZeit.143.html> .