

NIHILISM IN HEIDEGGER'S *BEING AND TIME*

SIBY K. GEORGE

This paper looks into *Being and Time*- that fascinating book by one of the just passed century's tallest philosophical minds, Martin Heidegger - from the homestead of a specific sense of nihilism, i.e., partial nihilism. This whole exercise is dedicated to the conclusion that there is such nihilism deeply breathed into the very texture of *Being and Time*, if subtly, and that it is possible to make sense out of this dark wood of partial nihilism. Towards this purpose, I have divided my paper into four parts. The first part discusses the question of the type of nihilism found in *Being and Time*. The second part focuses on the aspect of the negation of absolute frameworks for meaningfulness in *Being and Time*. The third part dwells on the possibility of self-created meaning. In the final portion of this paper, I deal with the question of the legitimacy and significance of such a partial sense of meaningfulness.

I use the term 'nihilism' here in the sense of meaningfulness from a relative and not an absolute standpoint. 'Nihilism' is not used here in the sense of the philosophical claim that nothing actually exists or even that there is actually no meaning at all in human existence. I, rather, use this term to mean that human beings can make their existence meaningful, but not in reference to something everlasting and all-good, like the concept of God, but in reference to one's own self, one's individuality. It involves the claim that we need not look for eternal and non-temporal reference points to make our lives meaningful, but we can, as questioning and ontological realities (that is, as a Being for which its own being is an issue), make our lives meaningful by questioning and challenging ourselves to possibilities

which are better according to our ontological scale of priorities. In this kind of nihilism, we do not stand by the position of absolute absurdity or absolute nothingness, but by a relative absurdity, namely, that there is no absolute reference for meaningfulness, and by a relative nullity, namely, that by death it shall all come to pass. This nihilism is indeed partial, bold and heroic. It denies meaning only to assert it from another reference frame, namely, the individual. I shall henceforth refer to this sense of nihilism as partial nihilism in the forthcoming discussion, and even when the term 'nihilism' is used without the qualification 'partial' it should be read in that sense.

I

The type of nihilism that we find in *Being and Time* can be best traced to the tempestuous writings of Frederick Nietzsche. As regards the fallen predicament of Dasein, Heidegger's *Being and Time* brings in memories of St. Augustine and Blaise Pascal. As regards the anxious awareness of this lost status of Dasein, Kierkegaardian writings could be thought of as precursory. However, most significantly, with regard to the bold assertion of one's authenticity and freedom in this situation, and the daring assertion of meaningfulness therewith, despite the chaotic and partially absurd modern situation, nothing matches *Being and Time* than the spirited, if provocative, writings of Nietzsche. The Nietzschean spirit has so much permeated *Being and Time* that when people began to raise eyebrows because of the clandestine nihilistic elements in the great book, Heidegger wrote sarcastically in his defensive "Letter on Humanism": "Because we refer to the word of Nietzsche on the 'death of God' people regard such a gesture as atheism. For what is more 'logical' than that whoever has experienced the death of God is godless?"¹

Even to a casual reader, *Being and Time* strikes as a systematic work - a product of laborious effort. Nevertheless, as in most great books, certain things in it are left unsaid. The reader should get into the pulse of the work and know those tacit but important allusions in the book if he were to have any insight into its message. If you do not get at it, you lose the way into the otherwise tightly woven text. The underlying Nietzschean spirit in *Being and Time* is of that nature. We do not find in it words like

'nihilism', 'atheism' or 'absurdity'. We do not even find in it Nietzsche's famous phrase 'God is dead', which Heidegger often quotes in his later writings. However, the reader breathes the air of modern nihilism while he is engrossed in *Being and Time*.

Heidegger's effort in *Being and Time* may be termed as redeeming Nietzsche in certain important sense. In many respects he picked up from where Nietzsche had left off. He was deeply involved in the Nietzschean findings, but was aware that Nietzsche pinpointed only the problem and not its solution. Heidegger strove to give a direction to Nietzsche. In this effort he accepts nihilism as a modern fact that cannot be explained away or easily done away with. He accepts it as something that has come to stay in every European home, nay, in the world over. As William Barrett observes, Heidegger's was the most thorough going attempt at rethinking Nietzsche in the twentieth century. He writes that Heidegger was "engaged in nothing less than the Herculean task of digging his way patiently and laboriously out of the Nietzschean ruins, like a survivor out of a bombed city."²

Since it is a nihilism that has become a way of life for modern man, it is not necessary to dwell on it so much. Heidegger assumes that what Nietzsche did was enough in that direction: God is dead and together with that concept all supposed ethereal realities are also buried. Instead, *Being and Time* guides the reader out of modern nihilism. It does not deny that there is nihilism, rampant and certain, but tries to answer the question 'if so, what next?' Anyone who carefully goes through the text of *Being and Time* becomes aware that there is an intricately woven framework of heroic authenticity in it, despite the modern fact of nihilism.

Unlike Camus, Heidegger does not say that absolute absurdity is our modern fact and despite this we can choose meaningfulness in freedom. Rather, he says that Dasein is an ontological reality and so it basically questions itself by taking issue with its own Being. As far as this questioning is concerned, no other supersensible reference frame is necessary. The compact ontology of my Being-there, as Being-in-the-world, with 'Care' constituting my Being and 'temporality' as that into which I am projected, I can authentically 'be'. My authentic 'Being' is my meaningfulness. I do not contrive a meaningfulness out of absurdity, but my 'Being' in itself is

already meaningful without reference to anything else. Unlike Sartre, Heidegger does not say that we find ourselves condemned to be free in an already given but antagonistic world, and that we create our meaning, holding on to this flicker of freedom. But he says that though it is true that we find ourselves thrown and fallen into the world, the ontological fact of our authenticity is prior to this fallenness by significance, that is, ontologically. Dasein is special because it is already a being for which its own Being is an issue and it can possibly make its authentic Being real, just as it can make other possibilities real for itself. Dasein is projected into the temporal framework of numerous possibilities, among which the most significant one is its own authentic Being. It may or may not seize hold of this possibility. But if it does, Dasein tides over the nihilistic currents and becomes whole. Thus Heidegger chooses a truly middle path between absolute nihilism and absolute meaningfulness.

The tendency to read Heidegger's *magnum opus* from a staunchly nihilistic perspective should be resisted. Instead, it should be insisted that Heidegger tread a middle path between total nihilism and absolutism. One evident reason for such biased reading of *Being and Time* is the traditional and conceptually coherent and simple notion that we can find meaningfulness truly only from an absolute standpoint. The strong religious edifice of the traditional society was singularly responsible for this view. Upon the background of this sublime and totally even realm of things, every difficulty of life is made meaningful, every enigma of existence is evened out, every problem is adequately explained. In this manner, human mind began to be conditioned to think in terms of making everything partial in life to be whole by projecting it against the backdrop of an absolute world of complete and perfect realities. No better and imaginative picturization of such a view of things is available in Western thought than Plato's 'world of pure forms.' No doubt, Heidegger's *Being and Time* brushes aside the great edifice of absolute meaningfulness by the simple claim that the Being of Dasein is temporality. He doesn't explain and demonstrate like Nietzsche about how civilizations groomed the idea of absolute meaning. He does not tell us whether it is the case that absolute meaning is possible or not. He just tells us that the historical Dasein of his contemporary times was bereft of such an idea and that it is possible to think human being from a different

paradigm.

In the same breath, it must be added that the other extreme tendency to view in *Being and Time*, vague and concealed absolutism should be resisted. The abundant use of Heidegger by theologians, both Protestant and Catholic, should be considered the chief reason for the prevalence of this view. However, it should be remembered that theologians are using the Heideggerian framework in their discipline without claiming any absolutism in it. They only creatively theologized the new philosophy as the liberation theologians did of Karl Marx. It would not be said, except for humour, that Marx believed in God since theologians borrowed from him.

II

How does nihilism in the above sense come through in *Being and Time*? This happens in a variety of ways, of which the following may be considered significant.

First of all, *Being and Time* is built on the existentialist assumption that existence precedes essence. In its radical form, as Sartre later showed, this principle implies that there is no God-given or whatever a priori essence in humans, before each person creates her own essence. This, in a clean little sweep, puts the idea of eternal soul substance aside. Humans find themselves thrown into the world as Being-in-the-world. The question of how this 'throw' comes to happen is not addressed. There is only the probing into human being. Such a view is nihilistic because the foundational moorings of humanity are swept aside by it. However, it should be remembered that Heidegger is analyzing the human being from a particular aspect - as Dasein. This word, Dasein, could be translated as Being-there or Being-here. The point in using the term Dasein is precisely to treat its 'worldliness', that is, humans as immediately present here, humans in their flesh and blood concreteness and matter-of factness. So, really speaking, whether Heidegger believed in the eternal nature of the human spirit is an open question. But *Being and Time* is nihilistic because while saying so many profound things about this being, it put aside that eternal aspect of it, not even bothering to address it. For Heidegger, the 'Daseinness' of humans is a question that he is addressing methodologically, and from the ambit of this method, the spiritual aspect of humans is absent. And yet, this approach

is nihilistic because the whole idea that the reader gets while labouring through the many pages of *Being and Time* is that bold assertion that even if humans had an eternal spirit, it was not important to be discussed. This does not mean that without the metaphysical absolutes there cannot be meaning or value, but that without them there is no absolute meaning or value. *Being and Time* holds by this relative value by the proposal of the concept of authenticity, about which we will deal in the next section. Traditionally, meaningfulness of human destiny and values of human life have been absolutized, from an absolute and eternal framework. Since Heidegger overlooks this framework, his proposal is nihilistic to that extent. This does not mean that partial nihilism is negative, because while overlooking the metaphysical absolutes Heidegger did not say that human life is absurd and that no sense can be made out of it. But he says that by authentically owning up one's Being, one's life can be made meaningful. We shall see later, if this proposal of the individual as the paradigm of value could itself turn negative.

Secondly, the whole discussion on Dasein is centred on the idea of finitude. Dasein is finite and limited. Therefore, it will come to a finishing point. The word 'finite' is related etymologically to the idea of a finish. It is this idea that comes through when Heidegger says that Dasein's Being, in a primordial sense, is temporality. Humans live, move and have their Being within the finite framework of temporality. However, we should once again remember that Heidegger is discussing Dasein and not human being as such. And so we cannot say that *Being and Time* has closed its doors to life after death. For instance, while elaborating on his exposition of death, Heidegger insists:

If "death" is defined as the 'end' of Dasein - that is to say, of Being-in-the-world-this, does not imply any ontical decision whether 'after death' still another Being is possible, either higher or lower, or whether Dasein 'lives on' or even 'outlasts' itself and is 'immortal'... But our analysis of death remains purely 'this-worldly' in so far as it interprets that phenomenon merely in the way in which it *enters into* any methodological assurance in even asking what *may be after death*, only then can we do so with meaning and justification.³

Heidegger was unwilling to enter into any argument about such questions

in *Being and Time*. He preferred the hermeneutico-phenomenological approach of revealing by 'looking' and 'seeing'. Nevertheless, may be in some unguarded moments, he states that all philosophical arguments so far produced about the eternal nature of humans is to be considered unsatisfactory, nay, no argument at all:

That there are 'eternal truths' will not be adequately proved until someone has succeeded in demonstrating that Dasein has been and will be for all eternity. As long as such a proof is still outstanding, this principle remains a fanciful contention which does not gain in legitimacy from having philosophers commonly 'believe' it. (BT, p. 169-70)

Hence, it may be safely said that *Being and Time* is agnostic about the eternal soul substance and its proposal of the relative value theory has this as an underlying belief.

Thirdly, nihilism in *Being and Time* is closely tied to the very important concept of nullity. In simple words this means that the Being of Dasein is permeated with an inescapable nullity, a primordial "NOT". Nullity of Dasein implies three important 'nots': (i) Dasein's basis, its thrownness, is, first and foremost, null. To quote Heidegger: "It is never existent *before* its basis, but only *from it* and *as this basis*. Thus "Being-a-basis" means *never* to have power over one's ownmost Being from the ground up. This "*not*" belongs to the existential meaning of "thrownness." It itself, being a basis, *is* a nullity of itself." (BT, p.330) (ii) One of the basic characteristics of Dasein is its openness towards possibilities signified by the term 'projection'. This means that while choosing some possibilities Dasein "constantly is *not* other possibilities (BT, p.330). This again is nullity. (iii) Factually every Dasein is inauthentic in its average everydayness. This is again due to nullity, that is, Dasein is *not* able to raise itself above the inauthentic mode of existence to an authentic mode of existence. Hence, as such, Dasein is 'falling'. Heidegger writes: "In the structure of thrownness as in that of projection, there lies essentially a nullity. This nullity is the basis for the possibility of *inauthentic* Dasein in its falling, and as falling, every inauthentic Dasein factually is." (BT, p.331)

Heidegger's notion of ontological guilt is built around the concept of nullity. Dasein is guilty in its very Being because it is null. I *cannot* have power over its thrown basis, it *cannot* have power over all its projected

possibilities, it cannot have power over its mode of existence factically. Hence, guilt itself is defined as "*Being-in-the-basis of nullity*." (BT, p.329). It is important to stress the point of nullity with adequate emphasis, because Heidegger comes to a conclusion that though Dasein in its very Being is 'care' (that is, an entity which takes issue with its own Being), it cannot completely tide over the strong currents of falling inauthenticity because 'care' itself is permeated with nullity through and through.

What do we gather from this talk about nullity, guilt and an air of inevitability attached to them? This talk points to our basic human sense of incompleteness. It should not, however, be mistaken that this sense of incompleteness is the same as the religious notion of human immanence vis-a-vis God's transcendence. Heidegger's talk of nullity and guilt contributes to nihilism in *Being and Time* because there is no way of transcending it. There is no projection of a paradise of completeness. As Karsten Harries points out, Heidegger's message is that all search for a stable and secure place for humans is ultimately doomed to futility.⁴ Later, Heidegger would begin to speak of the radical homelessness of humans - "a homelessness in which not only man but the essence of man stumbles aimlessly about."⁵ If so, the question now is: what can be made out of this profound message? Is it a bleak picture of merely negotiating with this vast ocean of radical meaninglessness?

III

Heidegger chooses the term Dasein in his ontology of the human being to stress five points: (i) the entity under investigation is 'each of us is himself', (ii) it 'includes enquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being', and (iii) we cannot define its essence 'by citing a 'what', (iv) its essence lies in the fact that 'in each case it has its Being to be', and (v) it has this "being to be" as 'its own'. (BT, pp.27 & 32-33) If each of us, as enquiring and open-ended beings, always at the threshold of possibilities which are our very own, is destined to encounter our homelessness as our very own, what do we make out of it? How do we enquire into it? What possibilities do we embrace, if we are so entirely engulfed in nullity?

In reference to these questions the important distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity in *Being and Time* should be given attention

to. These are the two *mods* of Dasein's existence. Of these two modes, authenticity is more primordial, prior and ontological than inauthenticity, according to Heidegger. Here there is a difficulty: factual Dasein already finds itself inauthentic, but still authenticity is prior. How? It is prior from the ontological perspective of significance to Being. Inauthenticity is eliding the possibilities which are truly one's own and embracing the possibilities of 'the-they,' which is but a characteristic feature of Dasein, and not individuals other than Dasein. We come to know of the possibilities which are our own by 'understanding' the totality of our projection, that is, what is projected in our understanding. Inauthenticity is eliding understanding itself and authenticity is understanding which entails possibilities that are our very own. In this schemata of projected possibilities, there is one possibility that we cannot do away with. It is necessary and absolute, and it gives a finite totality and completeness to our Being. This possibility is our own death. From the backdrop of this inescapable possibility, other possibilities which are not necessary and absolute can gather meaning. How do we choose these other possibilities? There is neither criterion nor rule for this act of choice. It has to be individually decided by every Dasein on the basis of the completeness with which it can see itself, if it cares to choose its own death as its very own and final possibility. Hence human authenticity in the Heideggerian framework consists in radically committing oneself resolutely to a project or choice upon the finite background of one's own death. If in this background ethics comes as that choice, it is fine, if it is a lack of ethics, it is equally fine. What matters is the authenticity of the choice itself and not its content.

This open content could easily lead to moral nihilism, again in the sense of a relative nihilism. By making individual the paradigm of moral values, all absolutes of morality are rejected. There are still moral values but they are relative to individuals and their act of choice. This proposal is at once heroic and suspicious. Heroic because humans are freed from all systems of morality and are given the responsibility to think, feel and choose to act according to their own internal resources. This proposal is also suspicious, because it does not take sufficient care of human frailties and the social nature of their Being. In present Heideggerian scholarship the whole question of this openness of content of human authenticity in

Heidegger's thought and its possible link with his own political action of supporting the inhuman reign of the Third Reich for a time, are hot questions.

However, in all this rhetoric of the authentic and inauthentic Dasein, what is evident is that there is nothing as absolute as our own death. That is the end of the show, but the show itself could be made colourful and entertaining if you accept the fact that the show does not go on. If this show fails, there is no other chance to make it fine on another stage. This important understanding will aid you to design the costume, the stage and the role itself for this first and last show. This is the partial meaningfulness that there is. If you look for another, there isn't. If you look for a better certainty, you don't find. The totality of your end in death and the authenticity of what content you want to give to your Being - in these two depend your meaningfulness. Though there is no absolute meaningfulness of the traditional mold, there is a partial meaningfulness, which comes to you, if you are courageous enough to encounter it. Such is the message of the nihilistic elements of *Being and Time*. As Karsten Harries points out, this is "a heroic nihilism, a faith in the meaning of life in spite of, or perhaps rather because of a lucid awareness of the nothingness that governs human existence and that dooms man and all his projects to establish a secure dwelling place for himself to certain defeat."⁶

IV

In his nihilistic rhetoric Heidegger presumed that nihilism had become 'world destiny'⁷ and that European nihilism had become 'a planetary phenomenon'.⁸ This assumption itself needs to be analysed thoroughly, but the scope of this paper does not permit such an analysis. However, we may point out that just as there is no satisfactory basis for believing in a supersensible basis for reality, there is also no satisfactory basis for believing that there is none. It is just that some minds are spiritually bent and others not, some cultures radically this-worldly and others radically other-worldly, some civilizations are promoters of rationalism and others of spiritualism. Since the days of the darkness-dispelling enlightenment and renaissance, the West has leaned heavily on the role of reason and science. This is what Heidegger, by his hermeneutico-phenomenological digging into the consciousness of historical Dasein (this digging is also, nay primarily, into Heidegger's own Dasein, since Dasein is in each case we ourselves are),

reveals as the nihilism, homelessness and nullity permeating the modern humans. This finding has tremendous importance, if what tradition has specified as the spiritual realm of things were merely a fantastic product of human imagination. If so, it could be that at a point in history humans have grown beyond their mere imagination and have realized the truth of how things are actually placed. But as it is, we have no way of knowing how things actually stand. Heidegger's picturing of the western human's embracing of the meaningfulness of nihilism as all-embracing itself calls for radical questioning. Heidegger writes:

Nihilism is the 'strangest' of all guests because it is the unconditional will to will complete homelessness. There is no point in trying to show this guest the door, since this guest has already invisibly gone right through the household... No one of insight would today deny that nihilism in the most various and hidden forms is the normal state of human beings.⁹

However, what we in the East are sure of is the fact that despite the West's colonization through information blitz, market of dazzling goods and attempt to make our planet a global European village, we cannot yet say that nihilism 'has already invisibly gone right through the (our) household.' We cannot also deny that the trend is being seen, albeit in sporadic bursts. But still more, we need to be surprised at the strength of the spiritual moorings of our civilization, despite the irresistibly compelling Western onslaught. There is also a need for in-depth questioning to ascertain whether an authentic hermeneutico-phenomenological ontology of the human being can do without the spiritual-religious aspect of human consciousness.

Nevertheless, one single fact vouches for the value and significance of Heidegger's exercise. Today, people are increasingly finding it easier to live meaningful and serene lives while staunchly denying the ethereal world of metaphysical realities. One important concern in this regard would be about the possibility of ethics in such people's lives. But they concretely and heroically manifest how unbelief and ethics go hand in hand. Ethics has become a pragmatic and natural choice even for the ungodly. No wonder, more and more ethical and even theological reworking of the Heideggerian approach is always on the cards.

NOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," *Basic Writings: From Being and Time (1972) to The Task of Thinking (1964)*, trans. David Farrell Krell, (New York : harper Collins, 1993), p.249
2. William Barrett, *Irrational Man : A Study in Existential Philosophy*, (New York : Doubleday and Company, 1962), p. 205
3. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, (Oxford: Basil and Blackwell, 1973), p. 292. Henceforth, all references to this work will be made by indicating 'BT' and the page number within parenthesis at the end of the reference in the text itself.
4. Karsten Harries, "Fundamental Ontology and the Search for Man's Place," *Heidegger and Modern Philosophy: Critical Essays*, ed. Michael Murray, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), pp 65-79
5. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," *Basic Writings*, p.218
6. Karsten Harries, *op. cit.* 78
7. Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism," *Basic Writings*, p.243
8. As quoted in Joanna Hodge, *Heidegger and Ethics*, from "The Question of Being" from p. 71. Author's own translation.
9. *Ibid.* 9