

The Ontological Necessity of Mood, or Vice Versa

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ABSTRACT

The paper begins by emphasizing the importance of so-called complete philosophical works on ontology to include ideas on mood and emotions, noting the lack of this inclusion in many texts. Next, it uses and dives into Heidegger's *Being & Time*, as an example of an ontological work that aptly includes explanations of mood & emotions, or "attunement" in Heideggerian terms. It is also noted the critical difference between Heidegger's approach to these topics and the approach taken by psychologists and those in similar fields. Finally, the paper concludes by arguing for the importance of *Being & Time*, Heidegger, and ontological work on mood.

Keywords: Attunement, Heidegger, Mood, Ontology

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I. INTRODUCTION

Sometimes I feel as if I am living a double life. Not in a material or cool way, as if by day I was a college undergraduate and at night a government spy or famous musician. My double life consists of this: all day I spend studying thought and rationalist philosophy, and also all day I am a human being with emotions. Everyday, this dual existence feels ludicrous. I spend most of my time attending lectures, reading works, and writing papers that mainly attempt to characterize how people think, whether the specific topic is Kant and his categories or a recently published cognitive science article on how many objects humans can visually process at once. All of these theories on thought assume that if thinking is not entirely rational then it is at least rational rather than emotional by a wide margin. While everything I have learned in college about thought is not necessarily incorrect, it doesn't reflect how I think. While I would like to think that the choices I make are the most rational ones, I know that my decisions are heavily influenced by my emotions. I assume, from experience and projection of myself, that everyone's choices are influenced by their emotions (regardless of whether they would agree or not).

So I went through most of my college courses, learning about thought with the theorists either ignoring emotion or posing it as the opponent of rational thinking. That was until I read *Being and Time* by Martin Heidegger. Heidegger did not shy away from writing on emotions as part of being a thinking human as most cognitive scientists do, or characterizing emotions as detrimental to prosperity and removable with practice like the Stoic philosophers. Rather, Heidegger in his groundbreaking work on fundamental

ontology, the study of being, posited that attunement (his diction for, "being in a mood") as, "ontically," or rather what living life is actually like, "most familiar and an everyday kind of thing" [1]. This statement by Heidegger came as a great relief to me, as I realized not all philosophers had been ignoring emotions or casting them as the antagonist to rational thought. I will continue in this essay to explicate parts of how Heidegger characterizes attunement and occasionally present examples from my own experience to strengthen his characterization. If his work is supposed to explicate being as it is without presuppositions, then his best support must come from examples of being.

II. NOTES ON PSYCHOLOGY IN RELATION TO *BEING AND TIME*

Prima facie field which deals the most with attunement is likely psychology, as psychologists study the emotional factors (and what are moods if one's emotional state of mind?) which guide individuals' behavior and decision making. However, Heidegger notes that he is not writing on attunement, on moods, in the way psychologists wrote in his time (which when *Being and Time* was published in 1927 was the late Freudian era and being of a general belief in behaviorism¹). Rather, Heidegger was writing on attunement "as a fundamental existential", or put in more common terms: an ideal structure that governs our being within the world [1]. Writing on attunement as an existential means that Heidegger was not attempting to place pass moral judgements on attunement or different modes of attunement (mood) or theorize why and how emotions exists; instead he provided a normative structure of the attunement of Dasein (people) as it persists in the world².

¹ Behaviorism is a psychological theory that argues against the existence of thoughts and feelings. It instead asserts that all behavior can be explained via conditioning.

² "World" being used in an existential sense.

Heidegger also takes care to note that, “psychology of moods... [is] a field which... lies fallow” [1]. In modern phrasing this is to say that psychology is an underdetermined scientific discipline. Heidegger’s designation of the field still rings true as mood disorders are diagnosed only by one having a few of the symptoms (which are “symptoms” only in psychologies presupposed taxonomy) and no cures for any such disorders exist.

III. CONTINUITY OF ATTUNEMENT

As previously stated, Heidegger wrote that attunement is familiar to Dasein in that it is the sort of thing which occurs in them everyday. This statement is unlikely to receive practical critiques, as most people are familiar with being in a mood, easily remembering days during which they are sad, happy, anxious, or feeling any other emotion. Yet, Heidegger goes on to make the even stronger claim that not only is attunement an everyday occurrence; rather, “Dasein is always already in a mood” [1]. By this Heidegger means that attunement is not just a habitual phenomenon for Dasein, but rather it is a continual, unalterable constituent of their existence. Heidegger attempts, and I believe successfully, to validate this claim by stating that the, “always already [of being] in a mood” is shown by, “the fact that moods can be spoiled and change[d]” [1]. If moods can be described, as they commonly are, as changing or being ruined it is implicit that a continuity of being in a mood (attunement) exists. If attunement were to not be continuous then one’s mood would not itself change, rather some time in which there was not any mood would take place. The changing and spoiling of moods can be easily observed in one’s own life. For myself, the most common instance of my mood being spoiled (and thus changed) is when I receive emails notifying me that one of my assignments has been graded. Regardless of my previous mood, my mood immediately changes to a state of anxiousness and fear. My mood has been spoiled.

While I concur with Heidegger’s contention that attunement is continuous, he anticipates a potential counterargument to his position and answers it. The counterargument consists of the feeling Heidegger describes as a, “persistent, smooth and pallid lack of mood, which must not be confused with a bad³ mood” [1]. Feeling as though one lacks mood appears to contradict Heidegger’s view that attunement is continuous. I am unsure of what exactly Heidegger means by this “lack of mood” as he gives no other or more substantive description of it, but his illustration of lacking mood resonates with how I feel when I am depressed [1]. I do not mean “depressed” as in sad, which is obviously a sort of mood. I mean depressed in the sense of having a brain empty of thought, desire, and motivation, and feeling as though it is difficult to get out of bed since there seems to be no reason to do so. At first glance this lack of mood, or feeling of depression, seems to adequately rebut the continuity of attunement. However, Heidegger responds by stating that this feeling, “is far from nothing”, it is when, “Dasein becomes

tired of itself” and a “bad mood... manifest[s] as a burden” (131). Heidegger means that what may appear as having no mood is actually a severe form of a bad mood, so severe that the mood itself is no longer apparent and rather one feels nothing but the burden of their own existence. This explanation answers the potential counterargument, and may also serve as an explanation of why the feeling of depression (as I described it above) is often associated with the feeling of sadness (what I believe Heidegger means by “bad mood”) even though they are two distinctively different feelings.

IV. THE UNANSWERED “WHY” OF ATTUNEMENT

The natural question, I and apparently Heidegger as well believe, that follows from his view that the feeling of having no mood is actually a manifestation caused by an extremely bad mood is: Why would this manifestation occur? Heidegger provides an unhelpful answer to this question, which seems to avoid the question entirely: “One does not *know* why...and...cannot know why” [1]. Heidegger goes on to explain what he means. He states that we cannot know why we feel our existence as a burden when in drastically bad moods, “because the possibilities of disclosure belonging to cognition fall far short of the primordial disclosure of moods in which Dasein is brought before its being as the there” [1]. By “the possibilities of disclosure belonging to cognition”, Heidegger means the revealing of the way things actually are (i.e., phenomena, “what shows itself”) that our minds are capable of revealing and thus knowing [1]. Similarly, what Heidegger intends by saying, “the primordial disclosure of moods in which Dasein is brought before its being as the there”, is the original revealing of moods which allow us to be as we actually are, as moods describe how we are doing⁴ and thus our moods themselves bring our being to where it currently is⁵ [1]. Utilizing my previous elucidations of Heidegger’s words, he is arguing that we cannot know why we occasionally feel as though we are burdens to ourselves because our minds are incapable of revealing to us how our moods determine where⁶ we are, even though this determination exists. I agree with Heidegger’s explanation in terms of our moods establishing our being; it is reminiscent⁷ of what I wrote in my introduction on making emotionally influenced choices. However, I question why Heidegger states that our thinking will always “fall far short of the primordial disclosure of moods” [1]. I wonder why a future understanding of this disclosure is not possible. Yet, I will not critique Heidegger on this point as *Being and Time* does not aim to explain why things are the way they are, rather the text attempts to explain things in their actuality.

V. KNOWLEDGE & DISCLOSURE

Heidegger continues on from the previous explanation to state that “to be disclosed does not mean... to be known” [1]. With this line, he means that to have something revealed to one in its reality is not equivalent to one’s having knowledge

³ I wanted to note that I do not believe Heidegger is passing moral judgements of “good” or “bad” on different types of mood. Rather, I believe this use of “bad” is a colloquial way of saying that one feels unhappy or sad.

⁴ This use of “mood” as a description of “how we are doing” can be empirically seen. We regularly ask each other “how are you?” meaning to know how the other person is feeling.

⁵ “Is” and “there” in this context do not indicate what is commonly thought of as “location”, rather these words are to indicate the ontological state in

which one is. Heidegger uses words that usually denote location in this way throughout *Being and Time*.

⁶ The prior footnote on words indicating state of being rather than location applies again to “where”.

⁷ Reminiscent yet not identical as Heidegger would not contend that our being is defined by the choices we make. This is especially true as in *Being and Time*, he is referring to our being in a phenomenological sense of structure.

of the thing. This disconnect between disclosure and knowledge applies to attunement as, “Dasein is always already disclosed in accordance with its mood...[yet these moods] remain unnoticed as [they are] what is supposedly the most indifferent and fleeting in Dasein” [1]. Heidegger is expressing that our moods are always disclosed, revealed to us as the current moods we live in, but we usually do not acknowledge this disclosure of moods. I believe that this difference in the disclosure and knowledge of attunement can easily be seen in daily life. For example, I am currently writing this paper and unaware of what my mood is. Since I concur with Heidegger’s thoughts on attunement, I surely have some sort of mood which is determining my being and thus likely also influencing this paper. Yet, as Dasein, I am not pursuing a determination of what my current attunement is nor am I interested in discovering the knowledge that the acknowledgment of my current mood would bring me. Before I wrote this section, I was not actively ignoring my attunement (as I am now), I was simply focused on finishing this paper, and thus did not think about my mood. Still, or at least according to Heidegger, the entire time I have been writing tonight, my being has been determined by⁸ this unknown mood; it is disclosed in my being, my existence, my action yet it is a stranger to me.

VI. CONCLUSION

There is certainly more that can be written on Heidegger’s thoughts in *Being and Time* about attunement, but I believe the parts of his notion of attunement which relate to experiencing emotion have been adequately explained. Heidegger believes that we are always in some sort of mood (even if we think we lack one), and that mood determines our existentiell being-in-the-world even if we consciously or unconsciously refuse to acknowledge it. As I have previously stated, and illustrated by giving my own examples to Heidegger’s ideas, I agree with his determination of attunement.

Even if you disagree with Heidegger and myself about these ideas on attunement, I believe there to be an implied critical take away from this section of *Being and Time*. Philosophy has long overlooked the importance of individuals having moods in an ontological and transcendental sense, throwing away emotions to the uncultivated field of psychology. This throwing away is a mistake. If ontology is as commonly defined the study of being, our being, and each day as we live we experience moods, all ontologies must take note of emotions, of attunement. This is not to say all ontological theories must agree with Heidegger’s characterization of moods, simply that all complete ontological theories must take mood into account.

When the young Heidegger wrote *Being and Time*, he aimed to revolutionize philosophy, and he did. He did not do this by achieving his goals of disclosing a complete ontological system, but by disclosing and forcing the acknowledgment of moods as a necessary part of ontological theories. In doing this, Heidegger has also given me new faith in the potential of philosophy to disclose truth, or rather, the rationality of being as what is actual.

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- [1] Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*. Blackwell, pp. 120-138 2013.



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Ms. Frissell is also the current CEO of the eta mu chapter of Kappa Alpha Theta, and was awarded the Cynthia Cox Memorial Award from Occidental College in Spring 2020. (Author photograph was taken and provided by Oliver Killeen)

⁸ It is important to note that this determination is in our goings-about in the world (our existentiell dealings); this is not determination in the sense that we are reducible to our moods.