Does Heidegger Need Irony?[1]

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Abstract: By way of Thomas Nagel's «The Absurd» an apparent lacuna is revealed in Martin Heidegger's existential system in *Being and Time*. Whilst there have been a plethora of interpretations giving content to Heidegger's notion of authenticity, there has been a critical lack of discussion on inauthenticity. Irony is presented as an answer to both this lacuna, and as a beginning to giving content to Heidegger's use of inauthenticity.

Thomas Nagel and Martin Heidegger, two philosophers rarely mentioned in the same breath, are the protagonists of this essay. In *Being and Time* Heidegger's main task is to find the essential structures of being-human. In the course of this project the meaning of our life and the world figures prominently. Thomas Nagel's 1971 essay "The Absurd" also deals with meaning. The general philosophical background framing the present analysis is decidedly Existentialist. The first two sections concern the common ground of the two philosophers to set the stage for the third section. Following this, in the third section, I analyze and compare their seemingly opposed suggested responses, particularly focusing on the ability of Nagel's irony to fill the gap in Heidegger's system. Insofar as Heidegger makes it a structural inevitability that we continue to fall into *das Man* after anxiety, whilst he also claims that we cannot do so as before but never discusses how falling into *das Man* is experienced after anxiety, we find a lacuna. The fourth section expands on the appropriate notion of irony, whilst the last section returns to authenticity.

I. The Common Epistemological Enemy

Nagel and Heidegger have in common a rejection—a denial of what for simplicity's sake can be called Cartesian Epistemology: the idea that we need an indubitable base of knowledge or beliefs upon which we are to make our choices in life.[2] Of particular

relevance is the application of this idea to the meaning of entities—that their meaning comes from our beliefs about and knowledge of them. In the seventh reply Descartes compares his method in the Meditations to that of an architect.[3] Just like the architect clears the soil for a ground that is a solid foundation to build a house on, Descartes wants to start with this foundation upon which to build his home of knowledge. Critical to the search for these is the rejection of any dubitable beliefs due to their inability to constitute the desired solid foundation; indubitability is the only criterion for solidity. Out of this process arises a clear distinction between the subject and the object. The isolatable subject relates to the world by being spatially *in* the world. Descartes challenges the subject to find indubitable knowledge about the world. As for the architect, this can act as the firm foundation upon which to build through inferential reasoning and logic to build up our comfortable home of knowledge.

Nagel explicitly rejects the possibility of finding ultimate indubitable justification for what we do—"[w]hat sustains us, in belief as in action... is *not* reason or justification" but rather "the inertial force of taking the world and life for granted".[4] Nagel notes that we do not look or wait for such a justification for the choices we make in life, from mundane ones to "in the broadest terms what to pursue".[5] If we did, none could be found and we would be left incapacitated.

Any proposed ultimate justification faces three possible responses when we inquire why *that* should be the ultimate justification. Either we justify it being the firm foundation to build on using independent reasons, in which case we find ourselves in a *reductio ad infinitum*.[6] Alternatively, we can justify its finality circularly. Lastly, we let it end *somewhere* since no indubitable justification can be expected.[7] From our inability to find firm ground we conclude that in order to live seriously, to make decisions, we must be taking *something* for granted and letting justification stop somewhere. Therefrom follows a further conclusion that the system of justification we use to make our choices "rest[s] on responses and habits that we never question".[8] The meaning of life and entities in the world, by implication, come from elsewhere. Nagel's philosophical absurdity comes precisely from a clash between this inability and the recognition of it, whilst living a life that seemingly pretends or presumes such indubitable justification exists. In the serious life, we justify our choices but ultimately there can be no end to justification.

Closing his remarks on our living life 'seriously,' Nagel describes life as "a full-time occupation, to which everyone devotes decades of intense concern".[9] Whilst to Nagel this aptly summarizes preceding remarks on how we live, for Heidegger *concern* is an important concept, denoting the primary way in which we are in the world—unlike water in a cup, a spatial 'in', we are

primarily in the world not by being *in* it, but by being concerned *with it*. Heidegger's radical anti-Cartesian claim is that our primary way of relating to things in the world, and thus the source of their meaning, is not forming justified beliefs and knowledge about them, but rather, their status as equipment—our relationship of use to them. Yet we do have beliefs about entities and the world: the result of a secondary theoretical intentionality, as opposed to the primary concernful one, instigated by equipmental *breakdowns*. For Heidegger, "[i]f knowing is to be possible… then there must first be a deficiency in our having to do with the world concernfully".[10] Only after a breakdown in our ordinary equipmental relations with entities do we relate to them theoretically. This is a reversal of the Cartesian epistemic picture where theoretical intentionality comes first, upon which concernful intentionality is built.

This section is preparatory work for the later sections. I wanted to emphasize herein two points: First, Nagel and Heidegger posit us as a 'subject' making choices and having beliefs which are not based on indubitable justified beliefs, but instead rely on taking the world for granted, a world in which we always find ourselves. Secondly, meaning comes from our engagement with the world, not from having beliefs and knowledge. Heidegger makes these moves more explicitly than Nagel, but the view is fundamentally at work in Nagel's

work too. Next, we will turn to Nagel and Heidegger's identification of a moment of loss of meaning.

II. The Common Diagnosis of Meaninglessness

Nagel and Heidegger have in common also a diagnosis of a loss of meaning in our life. According to Nagel, life has the permanent universal condition of being absurd, which he distinguishes from the ordinary usage of 'absurd,' where absurdity arises out of a "discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality." If *life* is absurd, however, "it must arise from the perception of something universal." There must be a way in which "pretension and reality inevitably clash for all of us." Nagel believes such a clash or discrepancy does indeed exist, namely, between "the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary".[11] The purpose of this essay is not a detailed exposition of Nagel's thesis; as such, the following remarks will be brief.

Nagel's absurd condition essentially comes down to reason's inability to find an ultimate independent justificatory ground for what we do. Nagel's thesis, universal absurdity, rests on three assumptions. First, everyone must be capable of the required skepticism to continuously doubt any justification we give for what we do. Secondly, he must make the further assumption that the way in which we live our life presumes, gives us the illusion, or pretends that a

good ultimate independent justification is available for what we do. This is necessary since he describes absurdity as coming from "two inescapable viewpoints collid[ing] in us." If one of those viewpoints is one where we "recognize what we do as arbitrary" resulting in "doubts that we know cannot be settled," then the other must be a viewpoint that either *is* or entails what we do is neither arbitrary nor open to doubt.[12] Once Nagel establishes life's absurdity from the possibility of doubting everything, he is implicitly making the third assumption that it would require an indubitable justification for our choices to not be arbitrary. There is no middle ground, a non-arbitrary justification that is not also an ultimate, independent justification.

In finding absurdity Nagel also draws attention to how pursuits in life have always already been chosen against a background of unquestioned responses, habits, and customs. Life loses its meaning when we step back and realize that we can only live our life seriously because of a "system of justification… that we should not know how to defend without circularity".[13] This conscious loss of meaning, the result of a discrepancy between what we thought our life was like and what we find to be the case, is most important for our purposes. When realizing that indubitable justification for our choices is unavailable, all of a sudden everything we do, will do, and have done, seems less meaningful than under the assumption that we do so with good

justification. Nagel's response to this loss of meaning is simply continuing to live like before as if an ultimate justification is available, only henceforth ironically.

Heidegger shares with Nagel a diagnosis of meaninglessness, albeit a different one. For Heidegger, very simply, *anxiety* is the recognition of how our concerns and projects were determined: through *das Man*.[14] John Richardson defines das Man as "the common and shared comportment, carried out as common and shared".[15] We defer to this 'common and shared comportment' when deciding what ends to pursue or choices to make. *Das Man* is neither the sum-total of every person, nor the average of everyone – rather, it is the shared set of things that each of us makes recourse to. Ordinarily, when we think of what to do, we think of *what one does (was man tut)* — the same way we are given responsibilities to take on and roles to fulfill. How do I decide what internship to apply to? Given that I want to go to law school, applying for a law firm internship is simply *what one does*. When doing this, we are consistently oriented towards the other, trying to align ourselves with a general standard. Since all fellow pre-law students seem to be looking for internships at law firms, I have to do so too, and if we notice ourselves falling behind, "[we] want to catch up in relationship to them".[16] Through doing this "[a]s they-self, the particular Dasein has been dispersed into the "they", and must first find itself".[17] That is, in our ordinary being we aren't our-self: the 'who' of 'who am I'

is *das Man*, not *I*, because when we fall into *das Man* we are not making our *own* choices. Anyone else drawing on *das Man* could do, in fact, *would* do the same thing as I. Thus we are lost in *das Man* and left replaceable. The journey to authenticity starts with *finding our-self* in this dispersed mass of *das Man*. Whilst seemingly peripheral at first, the phrase "must first find itself" is critically important to the later argument that we must always return to *das Man*. After all, if Heidegger suggests we *find* ourselves, then we must ask: where?

Anxiety is a state-of-mind (*Befindlichkeit*). It is important to understand what Heidegger means by 'state-of-mind', as the English translation is lacking. This translation misses the core part of the German word: *finden,* to find. Be-, -lich, and -keit, are all transformations of this core word. Thus, *Befindlichkeit* first and foremost has to do with us finding something. The prefix *be-* implies a passivity on the part of the agent, that it is something that happens to us, whilst the *–keit* conveys the English 'state', and thus that a *Befindlichkeit* is a *state* we find ourselves in. It is also important not to confuse *Befindlichkeit* with representational content of any sort: it is a state we find ourselves in by being the agent who experiences it, like a mood.[18]

Anxiety is a moment of loss of meaning because *das Man* loses its power. Nagel's loss of meaning comes from our recognition that meaning in life isn't structured in the expected way; in Heidegger's anxiety we recognize

our own fundamental freedom to make choices and for self-conception and understanding, what he calls our *potentiality-for-Being-its-self*. A large part of this is being confronted with our own death and guilt, two concepts we will focus on in the next section. We recognize this potentiality to be our-self, whilst at the same time realizing that all this time we have merely been a they-self. Life feels less meaningful because *das Man* loses its grip on us; it is no longer satisfying and comfortable as a way of making choices in life.

Reminiscent of Nagel's distinction between his philosophical notion and the ordinary use of 'absurd,' Heidegger distinguishes anxiety from fear. Both describe a difference between universal and particular phenomena: fear is felt 'in the face of' an entity within-the-world, it "reaches what is threatened." A fear reaches a *particular* project or end. In anxiety "one does not encounter this thing or that thing which, as something threatening, must have an involvement".[19] Anxiety does not threaten any particular project. "[E]veryday familiarity collaps[ing]" is anxiety's most important feature, referring to the usual way in which the world is meaningful—fundamentally dependent on our falling into *das Man*.[20] Once anxiety confronts us with the true structure of our self, a thing with "the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself," these ordinary ties to the world are broken.[21] We recognize that our freedom to choose the ends and projects we pursue has been neglected all along. Anxiety "deprives *das Man*

of its tranquilizing effect," resulting in an "inability to reattach myself" to my projects, because what yoked me to them before, giving us the necessary 'tools' to care about, invest, and find meaning in the world, lay in das Man. As such it is a universal breakdown in our concern, not of a particular project.

The loss of the comfort of das Man results in the world feeling fundamentally meaningless. Anxiety as a state-of-mind (mood) engenders the characteristic feeling that "the world has the character of completely lacking significance" where "entities within-the-world are not 'relevant' at all" — indeed, "completely indefinite".[23] We *have* to choose, and, though concealed by it, falling into das Man is one inferior way of dealing with that choice.[24] Anxiety shows us our freedom and thereby gives us a sense of responsibility for ourself, which falling into *das Man* neglects. We must now actively *do* something to overcome this loss, endowing our life with meaning and significance. As alluded to before, this starts by finding ourselves in *das Man*, it involves a process of becoming *authentic* where Heidegger thinks we can relate to the world in such a way that the who is no longer *das Man*, but I myself.

III. Irony contra Authenticity?

On the surface it appears that Nagel and Heidegger have opposite and mutually exclusive recommendations in response to the loss of meaning. Whilst Nagel thinks there is nothing we can do in response to the loss,

Heidegger is hopeful that meaning can be restored—*our* meaning. Whilst the recommendations are opposite, a more comprehensive discussion of in particular Heidegger's *authenticity* will show how Heidegger's system needs irony.

Nagel draws a comparison between the questioning of the seriousness with which we live our life and philosophical skepticism. In philosophical skepticism we doubt the truths of ordinary beliefs given the lack of a sufficient reason to dismiss an incompatible possibility. We can only dismiss possibilities such as solipsism on "grounds in those very beliefs which we have called into question." But, as a result of this skepticism we do not "abandon our ordinary beliefs," it just "lends them a peculiar flavor." Specifically, "[w]e return to our familiar convictions with a certain irony".[25] Analogously, despite recognizing our inability to justify the seriousness with which we live life, we nevertheless return to it—life is not abandoned (though some might). Instead, whilst unable to "escape the absurd," we should return to our serious life with a certain sense of irony.[26] I know there is no ultimate independent justification for my habits, cultural customs, or religion, but I will nevertheless continue to take the projects and decisions dependent on them seriously. Whilst not changing *what* we do, the seriousness is not quite the same as before our recognition of absurdity: from the outside it looks the same, but from the inside it is lived

with the acknowledgement of its pretense, and thus, in irony.

Nagel thinks this conclusion follows from the very realization that our life is absurd: "If *sub specie aeternitatis* there is no reason to believe that anything matters, then that [the absurdity of life] doesn't matter either".[27] The absurdity of our life is not a major problem: we can simply return to living our serious life, albeit ironically. But this is an unsatisfying answer: it's not clear why the situation is so grim. Is there no viable alternative between giving an independent, reason-based justification that stands on its own and absurdity, meaninglessness?

Unlike Nagel, Heidegger thinks there is a significant problem due to its implications concerning our selfhood. The problem is our recognition (or experience) of where meaning came from; the dependence of meaning on *das Man* is concerning for us. Unlike Nagel, Heidegger thinks there is a way out which restores this lost meaning. Nagel has shown that reason cannot give meaning back. Heidegger suggests a non-arbitrary criterion, not determined by reason, to choose what ends to pursue and what to take for granted. But this will not result in having ultimate independent justificatory grounds satisfactory for Nagel—it will not be able to give anyone's life meaning. Authentic choice will depend on new ways of relating to our *own* death and guilt which anxiety confronts us with, thereby making our pursuits and what we take for

granted *ours*. The claim cannot be that we will choose to do never-done-before things. Rather, we change *how* we choose what we do—rather than deferring to *das Man*, we choose in the face of our own death and despite our own guilt. Thereby we choose what to be concerned with, what *matters* to us.

Heidegger asks us to re-think death. Ordinarily, death "is perverted into an event of public occurrence which the «they» encounters," something to be actualized.[28] Considered as an event, much can be said to keep death as far away as possible and therefore out of our minds: for most of our life it is unlikely to happen any time soon, and there are many health-related recommendations to delay it. Thereby *das Man* gives us a tranquilizing way of coping with death as we are able to ignore it, but this prevents us from relating to death in the 'proper' way. Instead we ought to understand, as anxiety forces us, death as our ultimate possibility. When considered thus, we notice that it is our ownmost possibility, though not entirely disjointed from event-hood, for three reasons. It is "*non-relational, certain and as such indefinite, [and] not to be outstripped*". [29]

Insofar as my death involves only myself, it is non-relational: when I die, *I* die. Granted, the factual event of death is relational due to the mourning of loved ones. But, as a *possibility*, death concerns only myself: no one can die for me, and it is a possibility that exists *independent* of anyone else. Other possibilities are all relational in virtue of their dependence on

others and society. Death is also a certain possibility as we know that everyone dies. This distinguishes it again from other possibilities, which are not certain. Heidegger thinks that if we consider the certainty of death *as a possibility* we must also recognize that "[a]long with the certainty of death goes the *indefiniteness* of its "when"".[30] Lastly, death is 'not to be outstripped': death is the outer boundary to our life which no other possibility can outlast or go beyond.

An important observation is made about death: namely "[d]eath, as possibility, gives Dasein nothing to be 'actualized,' nothing which Dasein, as actual could itself *be*".[31] Ordinarily, possibilities are thought of as something to be actualized. I apply to an internship to get the internship, which is pursued to get a job, which itself aims at another actualization—earning money, helping others, buying my dream house or vacation, and so on. This is a mistaken way of understanding our possibilities, projects, or ends. Facing death as my ownmost possibility forces me to recognize what matters in possibilities—that they are *my* possibilities. Heidegger describes proper relating to death as 'anticipation.'[32]

Let us now turn to our 'guilt' and our proper way of relating to it; resoluteness.[33] Guilt consists of two nullities: first, a nullity in every possibility chosen, since whatever possibility someone chooses, "it constantly is not other possibilities".[34] For everything I am, I am *not* many other things. Whilst a philosophy

major, I am not a history or design major. The second nullity dives deeper.[35] From the first moment we are able to make choices, we are thrown into a world with projects and ends, habits and responses, never able to escape being "subjected to the past".[36] We can never control who we are, our understanding of the world, and the moods we are in from the ground up. Guilt is ordinarily conceived as "an indebtedness which has 'arisen' through some deed done or left undone,"[37] whereby we are able to ignore our proper guilt by addressing concrete infractions. Properly relating to guilt means facing it resolutely. Important is noticing our inability to have complete control over who we are and the situation we find ourselves in, indeed we have "been determined by [our] ownmost Being-guilty both *before* any factical indebtedness has been incurred and *after*".[38] Only addressing concrete infractions misses our continued Being-guilty afterwards. It is clear, then, that the process of becoming authentic consists not in building ourselves from the ground up, but rather, in finding, cultivating, and nourishing a self out of *das Man*.

The unity of death and guilt allows for authenticity by achieving wholeness. There is no room for a detailed exposition of why and how Heidegger unites them, but it suffices to say that he thinks their unity is important: "[r]esoluteness is authentically and wholly what it can be, only as anticipatory resoluteness".[39] With them combined, "there is attested with it an

authentic potentiality-for-Being-a-whole which belongs to Dasein".[40] Reaching simultaneously as far back as possible by resolutely confronting guilt and as far forward as possible by anticipating death achieves wholeness. In contrast to ironic living, this imbues our life with more intense meaning than before by giving us a non-arbitrary criterion for choice. The criterion is our ability to intend in the face of our own death and guilt, a point Heidegger makes by claiming that in authenticity, the person "exacts anxiety of itself".[41]

Yet it is not the case that I conclude whether or not a given choice is authentic through a deliberative process, imagining myself confronting anxiety. At one point, Heidegger describes a state-of-mind as "*Bringing* Dasein *face to face* with the "that-it-is" of its own thrownness—whether authentically revealing it or inauthentically covering it up".[42] Each state-of-mind, then, is either authentic or inauthentic. Since it reveals our thrownness, anxiety is authentic. But its uncanniness is debilitating, leaving us unable to do anything. If the uncanniness of anxiety is contrasted with the "tranquillized self-assurance—'Being-at-home'" of average everydayness, then our authentic state-of-mind must have more in common with the 'Being-at-home' of average everydayness than the uncanniness of anxiety, despite its commonality with anxiety in revealing our thrownness.[43] The particular way in which we feel ourselves to be at home likely differs from the 'tranquilizing self-assurance' in average

everydayness, but important to note is that when I speak of there being a 'criterion' for authenticity, I do not intend something deliberative. It might be more accurate to speak of it as a 'requirement': a requirement for doing something authentically is being able to face our own death and guilt: to be able to exact anxiety of ourselves for that choice or whatever we are doing in that moment.

Thus, unlike Nagel, Heidegger thinks there is a substantial non-arbitrary criterion for choice. Nagel sees no option but withdrawing from the absurdity of life and continuing to live as before, albeit with irony. Heidegger demands the opposite: rather than turning our back, we choose our projects *in the face* of their groundlessness, recognizing how we are thrown into them. Only by constantly projecting to my outermost possibility, death, instead of mere ends, whilst at the same time recognizing the limit on the other end, our inability to build our self from the ground up, is wholeness achieved. Importantly, this is not an independently grounded justification of the sort Nagel rules out. Instead, justification ends where I can say: this I choose or accept *even though* it is groundless and *even though* no end might be actualized. This is the process of finding ourselves in *das Man*: by identifying those things which we can properly embrace to make *ours,* I am as it were picking up and collecting lost pieces in *das Man*.

Heidegger offers no justification for what we are already doing. Instead, he recognizes the continued need to make choices, asking: how do we make them meaningful? Since Nagel merely acknowledges groundlessness, only an ultimate independent justification applicable for everyone appears satisfactory. By also looking ahead to death, Heidegger identifies a criterion already more meaningful than doing nothing about it, providing a criterion for determining what choice *I*, not *das Man*, want to make. Traces of Nagel's not seeing a determined place for justification to end can be found. Thus he claims "[n]o further justification is needed to attend an exhibit of the work of a painter one admires, … [n]o larger context or further purpose is needed to prevent these acts from being pointless".[44] Nagel recommends we return and justify what we do precisely thus: "I admire this painter so why not go?" For Nagel, that this is what one does suffices as an end for justification. If one admires a painter, going to their exhibition is what one does. Here the contrast between the thinkers could not be starker, as Heidegger exhorts us, *No! Justification does not stop with* das Man.[45] Doubting must go to the end of our possibilities: our death. If I die right after going to the exhibit, would I look back and exclaim: 'Yes!'?

I have already alluded to why we must continue to resort to *das Man* even after becoming authentic. Two interconnected justifications for this ought to be made

explicit: first, part of the concept of guilt is our inability to fully ground who we are, in effect this is a constraint on authenticity. Secondly, becoming authentic involves *finding* ourselves, to which the immediate question follows: where do we find ourselves? Considering our inability to get fully behind ourselves, and the dependence on *das Man* for rudimentary understandings of the world, the social roles, positions, and norms available, it must be *das Man* in which we find ourselves. As further evidence, consider Heidegger's description of language: "the public way in which things have been interpreted" and our access to this interpretation is "decisive even… for the basic way in which Dasein lets the world "matter" to it. The "they" prescribes one's state-of-mind, and determines what and how one 'sees'".[46] As we are unable to escape the use of language, we must, at the least in this sense, also be unable to escape *das Man*.

Heidegger makes our falling into *das Man* a structural inevitability, whilst encouraging us to overcome it. We overcome falling and become authentic in certain places and parts of life, but not in all. I may intend what to study, embrace my role as a son, and dedicate thousands of hours to a hobby, authentically. These I intend despite the groundlessness thereof and even if no end within those projects were ever to be reached. Yet, there are also things I would not look back on as worth doing if I were to die tomorrow, such as small talk with acquaintances on university campus. Unless

it results in a significant end being actualized that matters in the pursuit of an authentic project, it is not be worth doing in and of itself, the way in which pursuing a tenure position in a philosophy department, earning money from my hobby, or conversation with a good friend will be worth having done in and of itself even if that end is not actualized. This is a standard theoretical interpretation of falling and authenticity: that, in the words of Taylor Carman, "Falling is… a perpetual pull away from authentic existence" and thus that we are authentic not as a whole, but rather with regards to 'parts and places'.[48]

Theoretically we never completely abandon *das Man*. Richardson's claim of an "inability to reattach" to *das Man* from anxiety must not be understood as a complete inability but rather an inability to do so in the same way. At least that seems to be the implication of *das Man* losing its tranquillizing effect. That begs the question: how *do* we return to *das Man*? What *is* falling into *das Man* like after anxiety? The phenomenon of falling as making recourse to our 'shared and common comportments' does not change, but we cannot be doing so as seriously as before. To provide necessary context: Heidegger's project in *Being and Time* is finding what the essential structures of our being are: anxiety, falling, and authenticity are all such essential structures (*existentiale*). However, if those are, then is there a particular character to *das Man* after anxiety that is an *existentiale* too? Could it be *irony*? To be sure,

there would be an intuitive appeal to this. Returning to the previous example of talking to an acquaintance on campus: this is a choice I make, namely, to converse with them, which I certainly do not make authentically. However, once I am talking to them, I am doing it, in Nagel's words, seriously! All the while, however, I know I could not authentically choose it. Therefore, I am doing it ironically.

IV. Irony as an Experience

Despite its importance Nagel is spectacularly sparse in his comments on his use of irony. Irony ought to be the 'pervasive' response to an identified problem, yet Nagel says no more than an analogy with the epistemological skeptic. According to Nagel, the skeptic sees the outside world constantly with a grain a salt- a hesitation to fully believe in what he sees. Yet nothing radically different is done, he goes on to live a life like the non-skeptic. Nagel envisions a similar response to the absurdity of life: a pervasive ironic attitude is appropriate. To any serious reader this is an unsatisfying response, leaving open a host of questions. In the present section I want to develop a notion of irony as I see fit. The analysis will be guided by the need of answering two questions in particular. First, is this irony experienced, in the first person, or a condition observed from the third personal perspective? And secondly, what is the scope of this irony?

The concept of irony is immensely ambiguous, at least in part due to the long history of extensive inquiry and study it has enjoyed. Immediately we can list a series of different types of irony: literary, verbal, performative, tragic, and romantic. My purpose here is not to provide a glossary of the various notions of irony encountered in the history of philosophy and literature. Regardless, verbal irony is perhaps the most familiar in our everyday use. Let's start with an example: in the Greek tragedy *Agamemnon* by Aeschylus, the eponymous protagonist returns from winning the Trojan War to be assassinated by Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus. Upon his return his wife pronounces the following: "Let him find a faithful wife in his home,/ just as he left her, the watchdog of his house,/ loyal only to him, an enemy to his enemies./ I have not changed. In all this time/ I've kept our promises, never broken our seal." The discrepancy between what we know and what she says urges us to describe these lines of the play as 'ironic.'

By 'irony' I do not mean verbal irony which arises from something said. However, it is the most familiar kind of irony, and thus serves us well to make two important points. Neither is controversial, in need of vigorous argument and defense. First: irony always requires a context. Only when considering that Clytemnestra will murder her husband does her current praise and claims to faithfulness appear as ironic. Without the relevant context of what she intends or is about to do, there is

no irony. Secondly, I want to introduce a distinction between irony as a first personal experience, and as a third personal ascription. This is merely an analytic distinction which should not be interpreted as a dichotomy. On the one hand, if Clytemnestra is aware of her plans to kill Agamemnon, then she experiences the irony in what she says. On the other hand, the spectator in the audience merely observes the irony, ascribing a property of 'ironic' to what is said, or to the scene as a whole. The spectator, too, however, can only ascribe this irony from the third personal point of view if they have available to them the necessary context.

The distinction allows a specification of my intended use of irony as there is no set of possible facts that would provide the necessary context for someone to say that I am doing something, or using language, in an ironic way. Instead, a necessary complement to authenticity is that we *experience* irony. It is fundamentally an *experience*, because the necessary context for this irony is something to which the agent has privileged, if not exclusive, access. We have already seen that anxiety is a state-of-mind, hence not a propositional fact or observation, nor the result of a deliberative process. Instead, as a state we find ourselves to be in, irony engenders certain attitudes or relations to things in the world and what we are doing. A requirement for intending something authentically is a state-of-mind which authentically reveals our thrownness. In authentic states-of-mind we are able to walk past our

own guilt and death, asserting our willingness to act in the face of it whereas in anxiety the floor collapses underneath us. By contrast, in inauthentic states-of-mind our throwness is covered up. The unfulfillment of the requirement of authenticity is the necessary context for irony in this case. Our response to death and guilt is not an assertive overcoming, but rather a kind of submission. I accept I cannot intend it authentically, yet carry on. As a matter of appearance it all looks the same: I am *doing* the same thing. What changes is how I *intend* the thing. The agent has privileged access to the relationship in which it stands towards what it does due to its dependence on a state-of-mind. Only I can find what state-of-mind I am in. Of course, that does not exclude the possibility of others experiencing my actions as ironic *if* they interpret them as such. Yet they are confined to, bar a verbal announcement of my state-of-mind, conjectures. To this extent my use of irony strongly overlaps with Colebrook's claim that irony allows authors to "use all the figures and conventions of a context while refraining from belief or commitment".[49] Irony allows me to maintain an appearance whilst withholding the 'commitment' it seemingly implies.

This addresses the first question I set out to answer. At the start I raised a second question: what is the scope of this irony? The question of scope, to what it applies, is one that developed throughout history. Romantic irony introduced a way of understanding

irony with a far wider scope. Unlike in verbal irony, it no longer only applied to specific things we say; instead the Romantics "regard[ed] irony as something like a human condition or predicament".[50] It is pervasive in our life- in everyone's life. Life just *is* ironic. For the Romantic ironist there is a universal discrepancy, a feature of life, which makes our whole life ironic.

Such a universal discrepancy is reminiscent of Nagel's conception of the absurd. There too we were confronted with a universal discrepancy, but in that case leading to the condition of absurdity, not irony. We saw that absurdity for Nagel certainly would fall under what I would describe as a wide scope: it is not just a feature or property of an event, occasion, action, or verbal expression. Instead, Nagel's philosophical absurdity is *universal*. Philosophical absurdity is universal in so far that everywhere and always there looms a *potential* clash between two perspectives. Nagel does not think everyone is always and everywhere experiencing this clash: it is consistent with Nagel's universality that someone never experiences the clash at all. Yet their life too is absurd, because they have the mental capacity necessary for the clash to occur. I know my own life is absurd by recognizing the *universal potential* of a clash; not by seeing the clash in every detail of my life. What then, is the scope of irony is in Nagel's account? We know Nagel offers us irony as an attitude to have in response to this *universal* condition. If absurdity is

a universal condition, it might seem natural to assume that irony ought to be a universal attitude. This would be the wide scope reading of Nagel: that we are ironic, always, in everything we do and say. Is it universal in so far that we recognize it as the appropriate answer in each case? Alternatively, there is a narrow scope reading. Whilst absurdity is a universal condition, in particular instances and moments where we recognize this absurdity we respond with irony.

The conscious recognition of the absurdity of what we are doing or saying in a particular moment constitutes the context of irony in the narrow scope use. It is not clear, however, that we need to recognize the absurdity of a particular thing. Instead, we might harbor a pervasive irony towards life made possible by the general realization that anything is open to the kind of questioning necessary for absurdity. Going through the questioning to recognize a particular absurdity isn't required to have an ironic attitude towards it. I think Nagel intends his ironic attitude in the wide scope way: he tells us that after recognizing the absurdity of life (a general observation about everything we do) "our seriousness is laced with irony". This seriousness is the way in which we live our life. Nagel suggests "we return to our familiar convictions with a certain irony and resignation".[51] But we can't be aware of every conviction, so our ironic attitude presumably resembles Romantic irony: a pervasive attitude brought about through the recognition of a universal absurdity based on the

universality of a potential clash. In other words, this ironic attitude is developed by recognizing absurdity in a particular case, realizing that this clash could happen anywhere, and therefore that everything demands an ironic attitude.

When I use irony as a complement to authenticity, I intend it as a first person experience in the narrow scope. Irony is not a pervasive attitude towards being, life, or language. In fact some things we do, some language we use, we are using authentically and thus not ironically. It is what is left, the language which I cannot use, and those things that I cannot intend, authentically, to which I relate ironically. But the context required for doing so is one to which I have at least privileged access. Thus it is fundamentally a first personal experience. The narrow scope aspect comes from the fact that it is always experienced in particular instances; relative to particular ideals, values, identities, or parts of language- not to any of these in general.

V. Authenticity/Inauthenticity Revisited

There is a significant division in the interpretation of the structure of anxiety, inauthenticity, and authenticity. We can divide the interpretations amongst a structural and phenomenological camp, both of which agree, explicitly or implicitly, that anxiety is existentially primordial to both authenticity and inauthenticity. One group, the structural party, believes that anxiety is only existentially primordial, claiming that we are

inauthentic in our average everydayness. On the other hand the phenomenological interpretation claims that not only is anxiety existentially primordial to authenticity and inauthenticity, but also phenomenally. We need to *experience* anxiety before it makes any sense to speak of a Dasein as either inauthentic or authentic.

Heidegger's repeated emphasis on the ontological primordiality of anxiety settles the existential question. Heidegger claims that "*[f]rom an existential-ontological point of view, the "not-at-home" must be conceived as the more primordial phenomenon*".[52] Here, the "not-at-home" stands for anxiety, describing its collapsing of our everyday familiarity. Heidegger is unambiguous: existentially, anxiety is the primordial phenomenon. The existential priority is also clear in Heidegger's explanation of fleeing. Heidegger claims our existential structure is such that we flee in the face of the structure of our own being. But such a fleeing can only make sense "to the extent that Dasein has been brought before itself in an ontologically essential manner through whatever disclosedness belongs to it".[53] Only once we are aware of the deep existential structure of our being does it make sense to speak of Dasein as *fleeing* in the face of this structure. Thus Richardson claims that "anxiety is logically and intentionally prior to falling"[54] and Dreyfus that "[w]e shall see that anxiety both *motivates falling into inauthenticity*—a cover-up of Dasein's true structure—

and undermines this cover-up thus making authenticity possible".[55] Both Richardson and Dreyfus accept that at least logically inauthenticity comes after anxiety.

Heidegger entices us into an interpretation of average everydayness as inauthentic when he claims "the answer to the question of the "*who*" of everyday Dasein, is the "*nobody*" to whom every Dasein has already surrendered itself in Being-among-one-other" and "[i]t has been shown that proximally and for the most part Dasein is not itself but is lost in the they-self, which is an existentiell modification of the authentic Self".[56] Insofar as we are not ourselves by being lost in the they-self, which is distinctive of average everydayness, the natural conclusion that average everydayness *is* inauthentic looms large. Dreyfus buys into this picture when he claims that "[p]henomenologically one can think of the transformation from inauthentic to authentic existence as a gestalt switch"[57] and that "inauthentic Dasein is fully at home with things and 'can dwell in tranquillized familiarity'".[58] Heidegger himself, however, in the quoted section, is talking about average everydayness, not inauthenticity. It is indicative of Dreyfus' interpretation that he feels a direct substitution is possible.

Alternatively, inauthenticity can be put on par with authenticity in its phenomenal position post-anxiety. If the phenomenal structure mirrors the existential structure then our average everydayness prior to

anxiety is neither authentic nor inauthentic. Heidegger seems to indicate as much when speaking of a third 'undifferentiated' mode: "[b]ut this *potentiality-for-Being*, as one which is in each case *mine*, is free either for authenticity or for inauthenticity or for a mode in which neither of these has been differentiated".[59] Such an interpretation is pursued by Taylor Carman, who identifies average everydayness with this undifferentiatedness.

By taking seriously the primordiality of anxiety over inauthenticity phenomenally too— for good reason considering the lack of any clear statement in Heidegger identifying average everydayness with inauthenticity— Carman is able to give a substantial role and content to 'undifferentiatedness,' unlike other interpreters. Yet Carman's novelty is not exhausted by this difference; Carman also suggests that Heidegger uses authenticity/inauthenticity in two distinct ways. According to this interpretation Heidegger uses authenticity and inauthenticity in a non-evaluative and evaluative sense. In the non-evaluative use, authenticity is a matter of Dasein "stand[ing] in a directly first-person relation to itself, in contrast to the second- and third- person relations," or in other words: "a comportment or understanding is authentic just in case it relates directly to the person whose comportment or understanding it is".[60] Inauthenticity, then, consists in standing in relation to oneself in the second- or third-person, in Carman's words "*qua* other". The evaluative

use is where Carman makes the three way distinction identified in the previous paragraph. Carman, however, sees this undifferentiated mode as totally distinct from authenticity and inauthenticity, a claim he commits to when stating that "Modal undifferentiatedness, or indifference, between authenticity and inauthenticity is what Heidegger calls Dasein's average everydayness," which is again neither good nor bad, but neutral".[61] This claim makes the same mistake as the structural interpretation, however, which is made clear by Heidegger's own claim that "[i]n starting with average everydayness, our Interpretation has heretofore been confined to the analysis of such existing as is either undifferentiated or inauthentic".[62] Heidegger's unambiguous statement condemns any interpretation of average everydayness as either always inauthentic or always undifferentiated, as the structural and Carmanian interpretations do respectively, to a misreading.

Yet I think Carman is basically right on both counts: average everydayness is not inauthentic, so phenomenally, too, inauthenticity is only intelligible after anxiety. Secondly, the distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity has two uses. But we have already seen that Carman's interpretation goes awry. In its stead I present my own interpretation of the two uses of the distinction. When discussing states-of-mind in section III, I quoted Heidegger's claim that a state-of-mind is either authentic or inauthentic if it

reveals or covers up our thrownness respectively. This dichotomous distinction, applicable to states-of-mind as well as understandings or comportments, each of which is either authentic or inauthentic, presents an intuitive answer to the 'inauthenticity' of falling into *das Man*. Thus, Heidegger claims that "[b]ecause Dasein has falling as its kind of being, the way Dasein gets interpreted is for the most part *inauthentically* "oriented" and does not reach the "essence"".[63] Applying Carman's labels of non-evaluative and evaluative, this is the non-evaluative use insofar as it does not yet judge Dasein itself as authentic or inauthentic. Richardson too alludes to this use of authenticity; "resoluteness [guilt] shares with anticipation [death] the same modes of discourse, reticence, and the same basic mood or self-finding, readiness for anxiety".[64] In other words, readiness for anxiety is the authentic mood that at same time constitutes an authentic intentionality. It shares with anxiety the revelation of our individuality, but it adds our readiness for facing it—as opposed to the complete collapse of a meaningful world in anxiety.

The evaluative use, on the other hand, is made with respect to our intentionality in doing something. Dasein *is* either authentic or inauthentic in what it does after anxiety; it either heeds Heidegger's demand or it does not. Consequently judging Dasein as inauthentic presupposes its being in an authentic state-of-mind, or using an authentic understanding.

This follows from inauthentic intentionality being an inadequate response to our individuality. As Carman puts it; "inauthenticity and irresoluteness simply amount to flagging in that effort and going along with the degeneration of authentic talk into idle talk." The effort Carman is referring to is the effort "to resist the drift of discourse into sheer superficiality".[65]

This interpretation illuminates one of Heidegger's most challenging passages, ignored by Carman: the claim that in average everydayness Dasein may either be undifferentiated *or* inauthentic. Average everydayness is undifferentiated prior to Dasein's experience of anxiety; though, of course, in average everydayness states-of-minds, understandings, and comportments are inauthentic insofar as they cover up individuality. Once we experience anxiety and perceive the choice, authentic intentionality and actions become possible. Yet, despite this insight we are able to recede into average everydayness. *Choosing* average everydayness, the they-self, in the face of our individuality is the inauthentic choice: "[i]n *choosing inauthenticity*, Dasein actively takes over the public practices of flight for-the-sake-of covering up its nullity".[66] Anxiety sets up the possibility of judging Dasein itself, as an agent, as authentic or inauthentic. Thus, our intentionality in average everydayness can indeed be either undifferentiated or inauthentic, and its status is dependent on its temporal relation to anxiety in a particular Dasein.

Carman is wrong in claiming that "in its average everyday mode Dasein is neither especially inauthentic nor inauthentic".[67] We saw that one of Heidegger's main criticisms of *das Man*'s understanding of death and guilt is it's covering up of our individuality. This shared understanding, then, is a decisively inauthentic one which ought to be replaced with an authentic understanding of death—but a Dasein that has yet to have its individuality revealed to itself cannot be judged as authentic or inauthentic. Heidegger's authentic understanding of death, revealing our individuality, by no means guarantees that I respond to it as Heidegger demands we do (authentically). These are the two different uses of authenticity/inauthenticity in Heidegger: the first is a 'property' of a state-of-mind, understanding, or comportment, and the second concerns our intentionality and actions; *how* we *do* something. Importantly, Dreyfus reminds us that "[f]or Heidegger, the transformation to authenticity signals a transformation in the *form* of my everyday activity, leaving the *content* unchanged".[68]

Where does that leave irony? The first thing to note about irony as a state-of-mind is its authenticity. That is, irony reveals our individuality. The recognition of our individuality and what this demands of us constitutes the context for irony—without it there is no ironic state-of-mind, at least not of the kind I have characterized. Yet in intending something in an ironic state-of-mind I am doing so inauthentically.

This is a textbook example of inauthentic average everydayness; a deliberate surrender in the face of individuality, willfully retreating back into *das Man*. Irony, then, gives content to inauthenticity—it lays the first piece, upon which much more needs to be built and expanded. The content of authenticity has been heavily discussed, including predictable significant disagreement amongst interpreters. But inauthenticity is oft overlooked. Discussions revolve around falling and fleeing, and their status, yet no attention has been paid to substantializing and giving content to inauthenticity. This is the explanatory gap filled by irony. Given the constraints on authenticity highlighted in section III and irony's subsidiary position under inauthenticity analogous to anxiety's position under authenticity (in the non-evaluative sense), it likewise inherits the status as an existentiale.

Notes:

1. N.B. This is an abridged version of a longer essay.
2. This is not meant to be an exposition of the historical ideas or arguments of René Descartes.
3. "Throughout my writings I have made it clear that my method imitates that of the architect. When an architect wants to build a house which is stable on ground where there is a sandy topsoil over underlying rock, or clay, or some other firm base, he begins by digging out a set of trenches from which he removes the sand, and anything resting on or mixed in with the sand, so that he can lay his foundations on firm soil." The Philosophical Writings of Descartes:, Volume 2, 366
4. Thomas Nagel, "The Absurd", 724.
5. Ibid. 719.
6. Ibid. 717.
7. These are not mutually exclusive: we might start by justifying it independently, then resort to circularity, and finally just say: this is where it ends, and no justification is needed for it ending here, it is a brute fact that it does so.
8. Nagel, "The Absurd", 720.
9. Ibid. 720.
10. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time,* translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, 61.
11. Nagel, "The Absurd", 718.
12. Ibid. 719.
13. Ibid. 720.
14. The translation I used refers to this as the they. I have chosen to maintain the original German instead.
15. John Richardson, *Heidegger,* 372.

16. Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 126.
17. Ibid. 129.
18. I think this is made clear when Heidegger claims that "[p]henomenally, we would wholly fail to recognize both what mood discloses and how it discloses, if that which is disclosed were to be compared with what Dasein is acquainted with, knows, and believes 'at the same time' when it has such a mood." (Heidegger 135) In other words, the mood we find ourselves in, and what that 'tells' us, is wholly distinct from our representational or propositional content.
19. Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 186.
20. Ibid. 188-189.
21. Ibid. 187.
22. Richardson, *Heidegger*, 141-142.
23. Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 231.
24. The valuative judgment is intentional. Though Heidegger denied making any valuative judgments, it is clear to the reader that one is being made. Richardson breaks it down into two parts: first an epistemic judgment, from which follows a second valuative one. Epistemically, anxiety reveals to us a deep and important truth about ourselves. There is value in this, in that we ought to want to know the truth about whom and what we are. From this a valuative judgment follows naturally: if this is the truth about our structure, then from it follows a correct, or at least better, way of living than falling into das Man. (Richardson 138-139)
24. Nagel, "The Absurd", 724.
25. Ibid. 724.
26. Ibid. 727.
27. Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 253.

28. Ibid. 258.
29. Ibid. 258.
30. Ibid. 262.
31. "Our terminology for such Being towards this possibility is «anticipation» of this possibility" (Ibid. 262)
32. "By «resoluteness» we mean «letting oneself be called forth to one's ownmost Being-guilty»" (Ibid. 305)
33. Ibid. 285.
34. It "means never to have power over one's ownmost Being from the ground up" (*Heidegger* 284)
35. Richardson, *Heidegger,* 156.
36. Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 287.
37. Ibid. 307.
38. Ibid. 309.
39. Ibid. 309.
40. Ibid. 322.
41. Ibid. 340.
42. Ibid. 188-189.
43. Nagel, "The Absurd", 717.
44. What if our cultural norm was to (as it quite plausibly might) only look at online galleries of artists we liked? Nagel would tell us to just do that—there is, at least in "The Absurd," no reason to do otherwise, to do one or the other.
45. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 169-170.
46. Taylor Carman, "Must We Be Inauthentic?", 17.
47. N.B. Carman operates on a different interpretative plain from the majority of the secondary literature. For Carman, inauthenticity has the same relation to average everydayness as authenticity does: they are both merely existentiell modifications

of average everydayness, which in itself is a neutral state. For Richardson, average everydayness is inauthenticity, and thus not neutral.

48. Claire Colebrook, *Irony,* 5.
49. Ibid. 48.
50. Nagel, "The Absurd", 724.
51. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 189.
52. Ibid. 184-185.
53. Richardson, *Heiddeger*, 139.
54. Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World,* 313.
55. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 128 & 317.
56. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 317.
57. Ibid. 308.
58. Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 232.
59. Taylor Carman, "Authenticity", 285-286.
60. Ibid. 286.
61. Heidegger, *Being and Time,* 232.
62. Ibid. 281.
63. Richardson, *Heidegger*, 162.
64. Carman, "Must We Be Inauthentic?", 27.
65. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 315.
66. Carman, "Authenticity", 286.
67. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 322.

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