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Heeding the Call of Being: Heidegger on Attention and Authenticity

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The thought of Martin Heidegger has little relevance for international politics. Heidegger did not write about international politics and his Being-in-the-world cannot be mapped onto any of the beings in the world which scholars of international relations study. And yet, as we will argue below, Heidegger's philosophy developed in close interaction with themes discussed by social thinkers of his day — a proximity which often is concealed by the technical vocabulary he uses — and his Dasein is for that reason never only a timeless abstraction but also a historical construction. Heidegger writes about life in modern society, about a modern predicament, and as such he too is a social thinker of sorts. Indeed, some of his main themes — the discussion of moods such as boredom and anxiety, the problem of mass society, and the challenge of how to live an authentic life — were very much discussed by his contemporaries too. However, Heidegger's conclusions differ radically in crucial respects, and this, we will argue, is precisely why he should be of interest to us. It is because his thought tells us nothing about international politics that he is relevant to international politics.¹

In order to unpack this rather gnomic statement, we need first to consider the historical background. In the decades prior to Heidegger's *Being and Time*, 1927, Europe had gone through a quick process of modernization, not least in the case of Germany. In the short span of a few decades, rural, agricultural, society had been transformed into an urban, industrial, society. In the new cities people often felt lost and lonely, yet

¹ A kindred argument is Thiele, “Heidegger on Freedom.”
everywhere they found themselves the members of crowds. As one face among many in a mass society, contemporary observers argued, people were quite indistinguishable from each other and most of them passively conformed to social norms and received opinions. People were like sleepwalkers, it was often noticed; they were passive and suggestible and they lived perfectly inauthentic lives. The solution most commonly advocated — indeed the remedy universally prescribed — was to tell people to “strengthen their will” and to “assert themselves.” The themes of will-power and self-assertion were discussed as matters of individual psychology, not least in a slew of self-help books and manuals on “physical culture” and calisthenics. But they were also discussed as matters of political action. A passive and weak-willed person could assert himself by means of physical force; he could strengthen his will by engaging in heroic actions — by going to war, for example, or by going off to fight the natives in some far-flung colony. This is how the rhetoric of self-assertion through military action came to permeate European societies in the first decades of the twentieth-century, creating an affective environment in which wars were more likely and the rhetoric of bellicose dictatorships more persuasive. Self-assertion led to genocide.

Heidegger, however, drew completely different conclusions. Although his themes — when recast as sociology — were much the same as those of his contemporaries, “the will” was not an important category for him, and “self-assertion” could never be a matter of asserting a self which existed primordially and in opposition to society. In contrast to Nietzsche, Heidegger described no Übermensch and no “will to power.” Although he diagnosed the social malaise in much the same manner as his contemporaries, that is, his remedies were entirely different. Heidegger is irrelevant to international politics since his philosophy has no bellicose or aggressive implications, but this is precisely why he should be of interest to us. Heidegger provided an alternative solution to the problem of life in modern society, and thereby another solution to the problem of how human beings can learn to live with each other and with the earth they inhabit.

As we will argue in what follows, instead of self-assertion, Heidegger emphasized
the importance of attention. Attention too was a topic much discussed during the first decades of the twentieth-century and it was treated at great length by the leading psychologists of the day, not least in Germany. In modern society, in contrast to life in traditional society, you were constantly forced to pay attention — to the fast pace of city life; to the machine which you worked at; to instructions from school teachers and government officials, and so on. It is consequently not surprising that attention features prominently in Heidegger's thought too. Indeed, it is more than anything by studying how attention flags, is distracted or overwhelmed, that we can find Dasein stripped of all its psychological and sociological characteristics. The challenge concerning how to construct an authentic life can from this point of view be understood as a question of how to pay attention to Being. Attention understood as heeding, we will argue, is a solicitous looking out for; it is to attentively keep one's eyes on the horizon. As human beings we have the remarkable opportunity to be present when Being presents itself. Paying heed to this event is to live an authentic life.

Moods and the search for Being

A discussion of moods is the best place to start. In our everyday vocabulary of affect, references to moods are often freely mixed with references to emotions and to feelings. We “feel” a certain way, we say, meaning that we have certain “emotions” or that we are in a certain “mood.” However, a more careful use of these terms distinguishes between different uses. Basically, emotions have cognitive content whereas moods do not. Emotions are about something or someone whereas moods concern a more general attitude or stance. Moods are not affective states which we have as much as affective states which we go through and experience. This gives moods a curiously impersonal and objective quality. We find ourselves in a certain mood, we say. Thus understood, moods are features of the situation in which we are placed rather than of our mental

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2 See, for example, Carroll, “Art and Mood”; Ratcliffe, “Heidegger’s Attunement and the Neuropsychology of Emotion”; Ratcliffe, “The Feeling of Being.”
make-up, or perhaps rather, they are features of the interaction between a person and a situation. The mood is a question of whether, and how, we fit into a certain situation; it is a question of how we are attuned to the world.\(^3\) When somebody asks us how we feel, we tell them — “I feel rootless,” we say, “worried,” “hopeful,” “pensive” or “over the moon.” Answers such as these provide a report on the mood we are in.

In works published in the 1920s, Heidegger discusses two examples of moods at some considerable length — anxiety, \textit{Angst}, in \textit{Being and Time}, 1927, and boredom in \textit{The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics}, 1930.\(^4\) What he engaged in here is not a psychological investigation but a phenomenological. He is not interested in people, how they react or how they feel, but in what their reactions and their feelings can tell us about the human condition, about the world and our selves. Take boredom. In \textit{Fundamental Concepts}, Heidegger discusses three examples of boredom, going from the most mundane case to the most profound. He finds himself sitting in a train station, he begins by telling us; he has missed his train and he has nothing to do while waiting for the next train to show up.\(^5\) He tries to read a book, but the story does not interest him; he draws circles in the sand outside the station; he looks at his watch; counts the trees along the road; looks at his watch again. He is suffering from \textit{Langeweile}, “long while,” indicating the way time itself seems to have been lengthened and started to drag. Boredom here is an emotion; he is bored by the situation.

Heidegger provides a second example.\(^6\) He has been working successfully all day, he tells us, when a friend invites him to a dinner party. Reluctant to go at first, he eventually decides that he needs a distraction and accepts the invitation. Eating and engaging in chit-chat, he enjoys himself well enough, yet, when he returns home and looks at the work which is waiting for him for the next day, he changes his opinion. It is as though there were two selves: one self that went off enjoying himself, and another

\(^3\) Ratcliffe, “The Feeling of Being.”
\(^6\) Ibid., 119–120.
self that stayed at home, impatiently waiting for the second self to come back and resume his life. Returning home, he returns to himself, as it were. Although he had not been bored at the time, he now realizes how distracting the distraction had been, and thereby how boring.

To be bored by a train station, or to be bored with a dinner-party, are both emotions, but there is also, says Heidegger, a third form of objectless boredom which properly can be described as a mood. In what he calls “profound boredom” we are not bored with this or that but with the entirety of our existence. Life itself is drained of meaning and we are completely unable to engage with the situations in which we find ourselves. It is life itself which drags; life itself is a “long while” which we cannot fill with any content. In this state, time loses any sense of direction and our very identity begins to fall apart. In profound boredom, “we are equally removed from despair and joy, and everything about us seems so hopelessly commonplace that we no longer care whether anything is or is not.”

Compare anxiety. Picking up on themes originally introduced by Søren Kierkegaard, Heidegger’s section on anxiety in Being and Time draws a first distinction between anxiety and fear. Fear is an emotion, it has cognitive content — there is something of which we are afraid — but anxiety does not work that way. Anxiety does not concern any specific object or person but describes instead a mood of object-less unease. Since there is nothing in particular that we are anxious about, there is no specific action we can undertake in order to alter or improve our mood. What we are anxious about is existence as such, and since human life always and necessarily projects itself into the future, what we are anxious about is more than anything what will become of us. Dasein is relentlessly being pushed, without any reassurances whatsoever, towards a

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7 Svendsen, A Philosophy of Boredom.
10 Heidegger, Being and Time, 179–182.
11 Heidegger, Being and Time; See further Dreyfus, Being-in-the-World.
future in which the only certainty is our own deaths. Of course we are anxious. “[T]hat in the face of which we have anxiety,” as Heidegger puts it, “is thrown Being-in-the-world.”

These investigations of what Heidegger refers to as Grundstimmungen, “fundamental moods,” are a counterpart of sorts to the phenomenological reduction introduced by his teacher, Edmund Husserl. Husserl looked for a way in which ordinary experiences and social facts could be stripped away from human experiences of the world in order to reach philosophical insights. His question was not “are you in pain?” but instead “does pain have a temporal dimension?”; not “why did you do that?” but “does action have cognitive antecedents?” These, according to Husserl, are objective, scientific, questions, but ones which only can be settled through introspection of the kind which a phenomenological reduction provides. Yet, as Heidegger saw it, Husserl's reduction required detached reflection of the kind which necessarily was going to transform, and thereby distort, the experiences in question. Heidegger's investigation of moods aims to provide a more a more engaged, more immediate, and thereby more convincing method. But just as Husserl, he is interested in ontology. His question is not “what are human beings?” but “what is Being as such?”

An investigation of moods is a promising method for finding an answer to such questions since moods are affective environments with the potential to reveal philosophical insights. Moods, we said, are affective states in which we find ourselves. In most everyday moods, however, Being is concealed by all kinds of social facts and psychological baggage. This is not true of anxiety and boredom, Heidegger suggests, which, in their most intense versions, are moods that strip us of all our individualizing features. When pushed to the limit, Being appears. Anxiety and boredom both confront us with the nothingness of Being, as it were. Yet given that these moods are quite different, Being appears quite differently in the two cases. Although anxiety can be debilitating, it has the potential to wake us up — wake us up to the contingency and mystery of life. If we

12 Heidegger, Being and Time, 235.
13 Zahavi, “Phenomenology of Reflection.”
only can stare it down, as it were, an anxious mood has the potential to amaze and
enrich us. Profound boredom, by contrast, is more likely to put us to sleep. Profound
boredom inhibits thought, dulls our feelings and makes us uninterested in everything
around us and finally also in ourselves.

Attention

Consider the crucial role which attention plays in Heidegger's account.\textsuperscript{15} To attend to
something is “to direct one's mind or energies towards” something — from the Latin \textit{ad}-
meaning “to” and \textit{tendere} meaning “to stretch.”\textsuperscript{16} To pay attention is not to passively
perceive something but to stretch our minds towards a certain object; to attend to a
person is to care for that someone. To pay attention, we could say, is to give, pay or
take “heed,” as when we heed a call, a warning or a piece of advice. Yet, as we know,
complete attention is difficult to sustain for more than a few seconds at a time. In order
to help us we often rely on the presence of a \textit{Gestalt} which provides us with an overall
pattern or structure of some kind. While we quickly grasp the \textit{Gestalt} as a whole, the
individual components which constitute it remain unknown. We pay attention since we
want to see, hear or feel what is about to be revealed; since we want to know how the
story, the piece of music or the film, is going to end. We are entrained, as it were.\textsuperscript{17}

Compare Heidegger in the station. He is stretching his mind towards the objects around
him — the book, the figures in the sand, the row of trees — but nothing catches his
attention. These are \textit{Gestalts} to be sure but they promise to reveal no interesting
details. His attention flags and entrainment fails; there is nothing which holds him and
carries him along.

Attention is often accompanied by a “loss of self.”\textsuperscript{18} We cannot pay attention to
everything at once and by paying attention to one thing we will necessarily be distracted

\textsuperscript{15} Arvidson, \textit{The Sphere of Attention}, 86–114.
\textsuperscript{16} “Attention”; Cf. Gurwitsch, \textit{The Field of Consciousness}.
\textsuperscript{17} Nobre and Coull, \textit{Attention and Time}, 323.
\textsuperscript{18} Csikszentmihalyi, \textit{Flow}, 62–66.
from others. If we concentrate sufficiently intently on the music or the play, we will
come become absorbed by it, enter into it, and in the process we will leave our ordinary selves
behind. Attention leads to a dissociation of consciousness. Or perhaps better put:
attention reveals the dissociated state of consciousness which we ordinarily struggle to
conceal.\textsuperscript{19} Compare Heidegger’s dinner party. He was absorbed by the \textit{Gestalts}
presented by the food and the conversation to the point where he lost himself in them.
But such episodes of self-absorption do not add up to attention to one’s life as a whole;
life as such becomes boring if all it contains are these kinds of distractions.\textsuperscript{20}

Profound boredom, from this point of view, is the inability to perceive any \textit{Gestalts}
of any kind. The world has no overall patterns; there are no particulars to be discovered
or revealed, and entrainment fails. Try as we might, we cannot force ourselves to pay
attention; there is nothing whatsoever that can capture us, hold us and carry us along.
Compare anxiety. When we are in an anxious mood the problem is not a lack of available
\textit{Gestalts}; there are indeed \textit{Gestalts} and they do attract us, but our attention cannot be
sustained. Our attention-span is contracted to close to zero; we are too restless to let
our selves be captured, held and carried along. In anxiety, the world itself has become
\textit{unheimlich}, as Heidegger puts it.\textsuperscript{21} The \textit{unheimlich} is the “un-home-like,” the inability to
find ourselves at home in the world, or, more radically, the feeling that even our home
has become alien to us.

We can think of the \textit{unheimlich} too in terms of attention. A home-like mood, lets
suggest, is more than anything a result of the fact that we know in advance what we are
going to encounter. At home life is predictable and we are prepared for whatever comes
towards us. A place characterized by a \textit{heimlich} mood is thus a place where attention
can be paid mainly in terms of well-established habits and well-honed skills. There can
be no anxiety here since our projectedness into the future takes place within the confines

\textsuperscript{19} Cf. Thompson, \textit{Mind in Life}, 349–359.
\textsuperscript{21} Withy, \textit{Heidegger on Being Uncanny}; “The uncanny” was of course another concept much
discussed at the turn of the twentieth century. See Royle, \textit{The Uncanny}.
of a home which our habits allow us to fit into both comfortably and comfortably. For the same reason we are unlikely to be bored. To explain why, consider a task as simple as walking across the floor. In order to successfully do it, we have to pay attention to thousands of variables indicating the position of our bodies in space, the movement of our limbs, the condition of the floor and the room, and so on. Here our attention is automated — off-loaded to habits lodged in the body, as it were — and it is only when something goes wrong — as a result of neurological damage, for example — that we become aware of the immense complexity of the task involved. In activities where we can rely on our skills rather than on conscious attention, as Heidegger explains, the distinction between subject and object seems to vanish and only the experience of the ongoing activity remains.

Such un- or semi-conscious attention explains why we are unlikely to be bored at home. As long as our habits are appropriate to the situation in which we find ourselves, simple tasks such as walking, sitting, eating and sleeping will capture our attention — even if only semi-consciously so — and thereby hold us and carry us along. When the world becomes unheimlich, by contrast, these habits too break down. An unheimlich world is a world where our habits no longer apply and where our skills have been made redundant. At the limit even our basic motor skills will stop being applicable. From the point of view of people who effortlessly are captured, held and carried along by their habits, this will appear as a perfectly psychotic condition.

Modern attention

Heidegger’s discussion thus far has been philosophical and presumably timeless, yet beginning already in Fundamental Concepts and continuing in works published in the 1930s, he applied a historical perspective to the discussion of moods. Moods are no

22 Compare Heidegger’s notion of wohnen, to “dwell.” Heidegger, “Messkirch’s Seventh Centennial.”
24 Heidegger, Being and Time; Dreyfus, Being-in-the-World.
25 He was at the time, said Heidegger in 1966, occupied with “fundamental questions of thought.
longer trans-historically given categories, that is, but instead historically grounded and determined; a mood describes a certain society at a certain time and place. In *Fundamental Concepts* Heidegger talks about boredom as the *Grundstimmung* of our age, and in *Contributions to Philosophy*, 1936-38, about the basic mood of classical Greece as that of *Staunen*, "to wonder." In fact, boredom and anxiety, as Heidegger discussed them, could never have been other than modern moods. He operated with a strong, if never explicitly argued for, distinction between modern and pre-modern societies, typical of authors — Ferdinand Tönnies and Émile Durkheim come to mind — of the generation preceding him. People in traditional society, as Heidegger saw them, were at home in the world; things were at-hand; they had skills which were appropriate to the tasks they were facing and their habits made their lives perfectly *heimlich*. This, after all, is the very definition of a "traditional society."

In modern society, by contrast, such a life is no longer possible. The processes of industrialization and urbanization as they took place in the latter part of the nineteenth-century brought about profound changes in the way people paid attention; what they paid attention to and how. Most obviously, in modern society there were many more things to pay attention to than in traditional society. In fact, you had to pay explicit attention just crossing the street; and you had to pay explicit attention to many more things besides — to rules and regulations, to clocks and to the latest news; to orders from bosses and instructions from teachers, to government officials, commanding officers, social workers and policemen; and machines, the factory-workers discovered, constantly had to be attended to. Much explicit attention was also directed towards other people. Since city-dwellers regularly interacted with people they did not know, social success depended on their ability to judge others, their character and intentions, but they also had to pay more attention to themselves, to how they presented themselves and

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26 Haar, "Attunement and Thinking."
“came across.” Self-directed attention made people in modern society more self-conscious and more self-aware.

Not surprisingly, attention was a topic treated by the leading psychologists of the day, including Théodule Ribot and Edward Bradford Titchener, and it was discussed at great length in William James' *Principles of Psychology*, 1890, and in Germany by Wilhelm Wundt. Attention was also a staple of the new science of experimental psychology. What interested researchers was what kinds of phenomena that attracted people's attention; for how long attention could be sustained, why attention flagged and how it could be improved. This research often had practical implications. School teachers wanted to know how to improve the attention of their pupils; employers how to improve the attention of workers; politicians the attention of the people; and advertisers what it was that made consumers pay attention to some ads and not others.

Or, in Heidegger's version, in modern society life is set before us in the form of a picture, a *Bild*. Once life is represented to us rather than simply lived, we are separated from the world to which we previously belonged, and instead of relying on well-established habits we rely on explicit procedures — of which the natural sciences provide the best examples. The world is *gesteld*, "enframed," and presented as raw material to be exploited for whatever purposes we come up with. As a result, the fusion which bound subject and object together is pried apart, and the self that previously was lost in skillful activity reappears. Yet, as Heidegger goes on to argue, we soon lose ourselves again. This time, however, attention is not attracted by everyday tasks or by things at-hand but instead by the images that are presented to us. The most concrete example is provided by television. When he looked around at the rooftops of the houses in his native town of Messkirch in 1961, what Heidegger saw were endless rows of TV antennas. "What do these signs point to?," he asked, addressing himself to his fellow townspeople.

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29 Lears, "From Salvation To Self-Realization," para. 15–19.
31 Heidegger, "The Age of the World View."
They point out that men are precisely no longer at home in those places where, from the outside, they seem to “dwell.” Rather, by the day and the hour people are being pulled away into strange, enticing, exciting, at times also entertaining and educational realms. These realms, to be sure, offer no abiding, reliable resting-place; they change unceasingly from the new to the newest. Captivated and absorbed by all this, man “moves out” as it were.\textsuperscript{32}

It is more than anything the requirement to pay attention which has made boredom and anxiety into the \textit{Grundstimmungen} of the modern age. People in agricultural, traditional, society were not bored and they were not anxious. They were not anxious since they felt at home in their world and they were not bored since comparatively few tasks, and little of their time, required their conscious attention. For most purposes, long-established habits and well-honed skills were adequate and, without ever quite realizing it, they were caught, held and carried along by the tasks before them. Boredom was the outcome of a transition to a society were attention was explicit, conscious, and constantly required, and where tasks were carried out according to procedures which were explicitly devised for the purpose. Since conscious attention, in contrast to sub-conscious, easily flags and easily is diverted, boredom was a constant threat.

This is also why people in modern society were anxious. In modern society, the future was uncertain – anything could literally happen – and people's fates seemed to be entirely determined by their own actions, and by their luck. Yet these two moods, we said, are not the same and they reveal Being in different ways. While anxiety has the potential to awaken you to the preposterous fact that you are alive, profound boredom is more likely to entrance you and put you to sleep. Heidegger worried that humanity's capacity for anxiety was declining while the mood of profound boredom spreads.\textsuperscript{33} Even the death of God – once an outrageous realization full of distressing implications – is by now old news.

\textbf{Authenticity and will-power}

If we have followed Heidegger's instructions up to this point we should now be in a

\textsuperscript{32} Heidegger, “Messkirch's Seventh Centennial,” 43, 45.
\textsuperscript{33} Thiele, “Postmodernity and the Routinization of Novelty,” 503.
position where the question of Being once again can be raised. The moods we have investigated — boredom and anxiety — have finally put us in a position where we can pay attention to Being unencumbered by sociological or psychological facts. Yet how to do this is far from clear. After all, Being is not a Gestalt that can capture our attention; it has no shape that we can grasp and it reveals no particulars that will hold us and carry us along. Instead we are likely to be what Heidegger in his discussion of profound boredom calls gebannt, “entranced” — a state of awe in which the mind, according to Edmund Burke's famous definition, “is so entirely filled with its object, that it cannot entertain any other, nor by consequence reason on that object which employs it.”

Unable to pay sustained attention to Being, we are instead likely to fall back into the world. We flee from the question of Being and take our refuge in the crowd, in the indistinct multitude and in its many mundane preoccupations, fads, peeves and received opinions. We are hanging with das Man, as it were, with “the they,” despite the fact – or rather because – we know that there is no being-there there. Together we chat idly about this and that and, much as the good people of Messkirch, we spend a lot of our time watching television.

We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as they take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as they judge; likewise we shrink back from the “great mass” as they shrink back; we find “shocking” what they find shocking.

By doing what everyone else does, we learn to control our anxiety; by distracting our attention, we are never bored. But by falling in this way, and by fleeing from the question of Being, we come to live perfectly inauthentic lives.

Although Heidegger shunned sociological language, his argument in this respect is substantially the same as that of a long list of nineteenth-century commentators for whom a self which is submerged in the crowd is lost and a self without a unique identity

34 Or rather, to be precise, this is Burke’s definition of “the sublime.” Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry, 41–42.
35 Heidegger, Being and Time, 127:164.
is a nobody.\textsuperscript{36} “One whose desires and impulses are not his own,” as already John Stuart Mill explained in \textit{On Liberty}, 1859, “has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character.”\textsuperscript{37} By the 1890s, suspicion of the crowd was the received wisdom among all educated people.\textsuperscript{38} Self in society, Gabriel Tarde pointed out in \textit{The Laws of Imitation}, 1903, is suggestible and easily manipulated. “The social being, in the degree that he is social, is essentially imitative”; society “began on the day when one man first copied another.”\textsuperscript{39}

Society may therefore be defined as a group of beings who are apt to imitate one another, or who, without actual imitation, are alike in their possession of common traits which are ancient copies of the same model.\textsuperscript{40}

Tarde compared imitation to the influence of hypnosis, a wildly popular, turn-of-the-twentieth-century, fad. “The social like the hypnotic state is only a form of a dream,” he concluded, “a dream of command and a dream of action”; “[s]ociety is imitation and imitation is a kind of somnambulism.”\textsuperscript{41} “[A]mong the special characteristics of crowds, there are several,” as Gustave Le Bon notoriously put it in \textit{The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind}, 1896,

such as impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgment and of the critical spirit, the exaggeration of the sentiments, and others besides — which are almost always observed in beings belonging to inferior forms of evolution — in women, savages, and children, for instance.\textsuperscript{42}

Clearly, the members of the crowds needed help, and, happily, help was at hand. According to the predominant diagnosis, it was more than anything their weak and irresolute wills which had made people suggestible, somnambulic and inauthentic;

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{36} Recent surveys of the literature include Ginneken, \textit{Crowds, Psychology, and Politics}, 1871-1899; Borch, \textit{The Politics of Crowds}.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Mill, \textit{On Liberty}, 108.
  \item \textsuperscript{38} Borch, \textit{The Politics of Crowds}, 34–47.
  \item \textsuperscript{39} Tarde, \textit{The Laws of Imitation}, 11, 28.
  \item \textsuperscript{40} Ibid., 68.
  \item \textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 77, 87.
  \item \textsuperscript{42} Le Bon, \textit{The Crowd}, 17.
\end{itemize}
Europeans were suffering from a *maladie de la volonté* of epidemic proportions. The solution was consequently to teach them how to reassert themselves; how to strengthen, and then how to exercise, their will-power. In the first years of the twentieth-century, advice on how this could be done was offered in a large number of psychological treatises and self-help books where readers usually were advised to begin by taking charge of their bodies. Compare the contemporary boom in callisthenics, Swedish gymnastics, nudism, yoga and physical fitness regimes of all kinds; or compare the interest in vegetarianism and other specialized diets. The next step was self-assertion through action. Acts of the will were imaginary acts, Henri Bergson explained, expressions of the free life of the spirit; the ideal life was a self-creation, like a work of art, devised and then executed by an artist. All it took, as Friedrich Nietzsche had suggested, was the will-power and the courage to do it.

Self-assertion requires some material on which the self can be asserted; you need some malleable clay, as it were, which you can mold into your own preferred shape. Nature is an obvious place to turn to for these purposes. Nature is far easier to influence than an urban or social environment, and even a weak-willed man, who never would dare to stand up to his boss, can learn how to cut down a tree or shoot a deer. Adventure stories set in natural settings — such as the new genre of the “cowboy story” — provided vicarious ways in which the inhabitants of modern society could assert themselves, but many took to the wild in person — like the Wandervögeln in Germany, the boy-scouts in England, or the visitors to the newly opened national parks in western parts of the United States. But self-assertion also took far more lethal forms. Non-European parts of the

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45 See, for example, the chapter on “the will” in James, *Principles of Psychology*, 2:486–592.
47 Bergson discussed in Cowan, *Cult of the Will*.
48 The first decades of the twentieth century was also when Nietzsche gained a Europe-wide cult following. See Aschheim, *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany*, 17–50.
world often provided a suitable setting where the Europeans could exercise their will. In the colonies uncultivated land and an abundance of natural resources were theirs for the taking, and they could live like lords, with servants and natives paying deference to them. The fact that the natives often objected to such expressions of the will could easily be dealt with by any European who possessed a gun and sufficient rounds of ammunition.

Or you could go to war. When Theodore Roosevelt pushed for war with Spain in 1898, the rationale was not only geopolitical but also socio-psychological. The inhabitants of the large cities on the American east-coast, Roosevelt was convinced, had grown weak and effeminate and a war would do them good. And when the First World War broke out in the summer of 1914, it was greeted with enthusiasm by all those who saw war as a cure for what was ailing modern society. The young men who were gassed in the trenches had originally set off for their respective fronts hoping for a life of heroic, self-assertive, glory. Despite the world war — or indeed because of it — the same affective environment remained well into the 1920s, and this explains how the rhetoric of aggressive dictatorships could find an enthusiastic hearing. The Germans had been weak-willed and divided, Adolf Hitler insisted, but now they were going to reassert themselves. The quest for authenticity was genocidal.

**Heeding the call**

But these were not, and they could never have been, Heidegger’s solutions. Heidegger – at least once we secularize his language and turn him into a social scientist – discussed the very same processes; his diagnoses were identical; but the remedy he prescribed was entirely different. He never believed self-assertion and will-to-power could be the solutions to the problem of inauthenticity; in fact, he was profoundly sceptical of both.

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52 For a similar discussion, see Thiele, “Heidegger on Freedom.”
The reason is that Dasein’s world, right from the very start, is a world which is shared
with others. “The world of Dasein is a with-world, Mitweld,” as Heidegger puts it.
“Being-in is Being-with Others. Their Being-in-themselves within-the-world is Dasein-
with.” We are socialized “all the way down,” a sociologist might say; there is not, and
there could never be, some pre-existing someone who stands apart from other human
beings and identifies herself in opposition to the social world to which she inescapably
belongs. Heidegger is no John Stuart Mill. In fact, on Heidegger’s account, falling and
fleeing are natural inclinations of Dasein. Sociability is thus simultaneously what makes
us into human beings and what makes us inauthentic. The problem of authenticity is
more than anything the problem of how to make a life for yourself in the face of these
facts.

Heidegger, likewise, refused to give much credit to the notion of a “will,” and if
there is no independently existing will, there can be no “will-power” that needs to be
“strengthened.” It is not will but mood which is the “primordial kind of Being for Dasein,”
and it is in moods that Dasein is disclosed to itself prior to all cognition and volition. It
follows, as a point of logic, that if we want to alter a mood – such as a mood of anxiety
or of profound boredom – we can never do it through acts of will alone. “[M]oods are
overcome and transformed always only by moods,” and as a result, we can never be in
control of the affective environment in which we find ourselves. Since the affective
environment has a profound influence on us, we are not in control of ourselves. No self-
assertion or will-strengthening can change this fact.

Instead the will, according to Heidegger, finds its place only within the structure of
Sorge, or “care.” Sorge, in Heidegger’s usage, is a distinguishing feature of Dasein, a

55 Carman, “Must We Be Inauthentic?”
56 Heidegger, Being and Time, 136:175.
57 Nietzsche, Vol. 1, 99; Quoted in Thiele, “Heidegger on Freedom,” 497; See further Sluga,
“Heidegger’s Nietzsche.”
58 Although Heidegger in the 1930s became an attentive reader of Friedrich Nietzsche, he rejected
the doctrine of a will-to-power. Sluga, “Heidegger’s Nietzsche.”
being which has “made itself an issue”: “[e]ssentially ahead of itself, it has projected itself upon its ability to be before going on to any mere consideration of itself.”59 Care too can be understood in terms of attention. More than anything, care is attention understood as “heeding,” as in the heeding of a call, a warning or a piece of advice. Heed has an proto-Indo-European root, *kad*, meaning “to protect,” which we find expressed in words such as “hood,” a garment which protects our heads.60 To pay heed is consequently to pay attention with care; it is not just to look, but to “look out for,” meaning to observe the things we encounter in terms of the effects they are likely to have on us and our concerns.61 But heeding is also a physical posture. When heeding something, we render ourselves to the situation in which we find ourselves in a certain manner. We make ourselves available to the situation much as Vladimir and Estragon in Samuel Beckett’s play made a *rendez-vous* with Godot.52 In heeding, we take up an attentive stance – like a watchman in a watchtower who is looking out for rising smoke on the horizon, an approaching ship or a foreign army.

What we heed more than anything is a call – although heeding occurs in all sensory modalities. As Heidegger intimates, someone or something more authentic, more fundamental and more real is calling out to us. In *Heimweh*, “homesickness,” we are “called back to our homes.”63 Likewise, in anxiety we can experience Being as something other than everything that is, but we must not “shut our ears to the soundless voice which attunes us to the horrors of the abyss.”64 In profound boredom, we are “compelled to listen” in the sense of “that kind of compelling force which everything properly authentic about Dasein possesses …”65 What we heed in all cases is the call of Being.

61 Compare the difference between “looking for dodgy street vendors” and “looking out for dodgy street vendors.” "Look Out."
62 "Nous sommes au rendez-vous, un point c’est tout. Nous ne sommes pas des saints, mais nous sommes au rendez-vous." The text of Beckett’s play was of course originally written in French. Beckett, *En attendant Godot*.
63 Heidegger, "Messkirch’s Seventh Centennial," 49.
65 Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 30:136; Again there is an etymological
The role of the mood is to issue these calls. We are summoned by the mood; moods such as anxiety and profound boredom “wake us up.” And when we have received the message, our task is to respond in some fashion. Heeding, from this point of view, is a matter of an interaction, a dialogue, and the interaction takes place in a situation which is characterized by a certain mood. In order to make sense of this idea, consider the way ordinary moods too may solicit actions from us. Consider, for example, the mood of a place of religious worship. Sacred places teach not by verbal communication but by inducing a mood which draws its visitors into a sense of reverence and awe. We bow our heads and pray since this, clearly, is what the situation requires. Or consider the proverbial theater which is on fire. The reason we run for the door is not that we first assess the situation and then consider how to react to it; what we react to is instead the generalized mood of panic which quickly spreads throughout the building. There is suddenly no time to think and we intuitively know how to act. For these situations to solicit us in this way, we must attune ourselves to the moods they express. We must pay heed to the mood; render ourselves to the situation.

There is scope for human freedom here — a freedom entirely differently conceived than the freedom of Nietzsche’s heroic self-makers. We are not compelled to answer when the mood calls us, we are not forced to listen, but we might, and Heidegger suggests that we should. To pay heed to Being is more than anything to accept our existential homelessness and the anxiety it produces, but to make a life for ourselves in spite of these facts. What is required here is not resoluteness understood as a steely, Nietzschean, exercise of the will, but instead a quiet acceptance of our place. In this way, and in this way only, will we be able to witness the mystery of Being coming into connection here. Bannen, the term which Heidegger uses to describe the way Being is “entranced” in profound boredom, has a proto-Germanic root, bannana, which also may refer to “a summons” or to “calling people together.” “Bannen.”

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68 Ibid., 213.
70 Ibid., 284.
beings.

The relevance of Heidegger's irrelevance

Martin Heidegger's thought, we began by saying, has no relevance for the study of international politics. Heidegger did not write about the topic, and if there is anything at all we should have learned from reading him, it is surely that he objected to giving philosophy an instrumental value. It would not be right to enframe his thought as raw material waiting to be exploited for our personal ends. Saved by his irrelevance, there could, thankfully, never be such a thing as “a Heideggerian turn” in the study of international relations. Yet, as we have seen, Heidegger's philosophy developed in close interaction with themes discussed by social thinkers of his time, and as a result his Dasein is never only a timeless abstraction but also a historical construction. Heidegger writes about life in modern society, about a modern predicament, and as such he too is a social thinker of sorts. To historicize Heidegger's in this fashion will necessarily be regarded as an abomination by true Heideggerians since it seems to explain his thought as nothing but an expression of a particular time and place. Yet it is in the historical context of his time – rather than in his philosophy properly speaking – that we can find Heidegger's relevance – also for matters of international politics.

As we have seen, Heidegger was not alone in worrying about the effects of modernization, the impact of mass society, and the question of what it means to be an authentic human being. In fact, all social observers at the turn of the twentieth-century – psychologists, sociologists, medical doctors and philosophers – wrote about much the same topics. Their main conclusion, we said, was that life in modern society had made people passive and suggestible, irresolute and weak. The most commonly prescribed remedy was to get them to reassert themselves, to help them strengthen their wills. Yet, when translated into a political program, such rhetoric often had deleterious

71 Man, as Arendt summarized, quoting Heidegger, “does not think for the sake of any result whatever, but because he is a “thinking, that is, a musing being.”” Arendt, “Martin Heidegger at Eighty.”
consequences both in Europe and in various colonial settings. The rhetoric of self-assertion and will-power prepared the way for war and for dictatorship. The quest for authenticity was genocidal.

Although he shared the concerns of his contemporaries, Heidegger's conclusions were entirely different, and this is why he is relevant to us today. He rejected self-assertion and will-power since he could find no subject which could assert itself in relation to society and since the notion of a will was derivative, at best, from the structure of care. Heeding the call of Being requires a stance of attentive solicitousness which is radically opposed to all notions of self-assertion. To assert oneself is to lean forward, to impose oneself on others; to heed, by contrast, is keep one's eyes on the horizon and to prick up one's ears. The self-asserter is loud, impatient and acts out; the heeder is quiet, restrained and has time to wait.\footnote{72} Politics cannot help us here, and neither can philosophy, and there is no action we can take to change the mood of our time. Heidegger, at the end of his life, concluded that “only a god can save us,” yet this, he insisted, does not mean that we can go back to sleep. On the contrary, we have to be more vigilant than ever.\footnote{73} For a god to be able to save us, we have to take up the kind of stance in which we can be saved. We have to make ourselves “ready for the readiness of holding oneself open for the arrival, or for the absence of a god.” Paying solicitous heed in this fashion is to live an authentic life.\footnote{74}

\footnote{72 Heidegger, “Messkirch’s Seventh Centennial,” 53.}
\footnote{73 Heidegger, “Only a God Can Save Us,” 57.}
\footnote{74 “Even the experience of this absence is not nothing, but a liberation of man from what in \textit{Being and Time} I called “fallenness” upon beings. making [ourselves] ready for the aforementioned readiness involves reflecting on what in our own day ... is.” Ibid., 58.}
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