

Being-in-the-Void: A Heideggerian Analysis of Skydiving

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Philosophy of sport as a field of study brings philosophy and sport together. This can be done in various ways. What I do in this article may seem like a daring project. I let Heidegger, one of the great thinkers of the 20th century, throw light on one specific sport activity—skydiving¹. My hope is that some of this light reflects back and illuminates certain aspects of Heidegger's views. This is not only a daring but also an ambitious project and it may fail. In that respect it resides within the spirit of both Heidegger and skydiving, where daring and failing have not been uncommon². My focus will be on Heidegger's early philosophy, primarily *Being and Time* (12;13;14;15). In his early works Heidegger did not give many examples of phenomenological analysis. When he did, he typically described daily life in a living room, an office, or a workshop. We know that Heidegger was active in sport when he was young and that he was interested in sport all his life³. In his writings, however, there is almost nothing about sport. This does not mean that his early philosophy is irrelevant for an understanding of human involvement in sport. Quite the contrary. In this article I will explore a few basic ideas which are relevant.

1. The first is related to how humans in general deal with the world. In his earlier works Heidegger gave detailed analyses of our practical way of dealing with the world and using equipment within a context, exemplified by the carpenter working in his workshop. From here Heidegger develops the notion of a "world" as the totality of practical references inside which humans (*Dasein*) live⁴. I contend that humans deal with equipmental environments also in sports.
2. Heidegger also showed how the world, falls apart, slips away, and disappears in certain situations and mind states like anxiety. I think the perfect situation to analyze how the world disappears and how anxiety floods the mind is when a novice makes his/her first skydive. The experience of anxiety and a disintegration of the world is common to situations of high risk both in sport and outside sport. But nowhere is this experienced more directly and concretely than during the first skydive. The first part of this article will explore more in detail how the contextual reality and the *Dasein's* world are

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taken off their hinges during the first skydive. One is not only touching a void but falling through a void.⁵

3. Heidegger maintains in the second part of *Being and Time* that Dasein has a tendency to fall into an average public understanding of oneself. Dasein thereby comes to live an inauthentic life. We tend to do what the others do. We follow “One” (das Man) and we do what One typically does. In anxiety, however, we become, aware of our finitude and our own “being-toward-death”. We have the possibility of experiencing the original situation of being thrown into a world where we are not at home. From here it becomes possible to pursue one’s innermost and authentic projects. The second part of the article will explore how the first skydive is a confrontation with the possibility of death. The anxiety brings one back to the original situation. It is then meaningful to ask whether certain risk sports may facilitate authentic living. Or is authentic living rather totally independent of situational factors and circumstances like sport involvement?

Heidegger has not appeared in many recent discussions in philosophy of sport. Early sport philosophers like Slusher (23) focused on the “existentialist” aspects in Heidegger. Morgan (20) explored temporality in sport from a Heideggerian perspective. Recent contributions by Moe (18) and Breivik (3) have discussed Heidegger’s relevance for understanding skillful coping in sport. These discussions have been triggered by Dreyfus’ use of Heidegger in developing an understanding of skill and expertise in daily life and in sport (6;7). The concept of authenticity, which is central in this article, was discussed by Paul Standish (24) in his overview of Heidegger and sport.⁶ In early Heidegger the problem of authenticity is central (4;6;8;9). It is time to bring authenticity more into focus also in philosophy of sport discussions.

As mentioned I will bring together two themes that I think are interconnected: equipmental coping with the environment and coping with situations where we encounter anxiety, the possibility of death, but also opportunities for authentic living. There are several reasons for choosing skydiving as a sport that is well-suited as focus for a phenomenological exploration. First, skydiving is an activity where one not only figuratively, but quite literally is “in-the-void”. One is falling through empty air. Furthermore I have personal experience of skydiving and have conducted empirical studies of skydiving and skydivers. Thus I have experienced the phenomenon, which I hope is an advantage for describing and analyzing it correctly. My analysis will proceed through a series of steps, starting with an interpretation of the use of equipment in daily life and in sport, and how we establish a world of references and meaning. The next step will be to describe the circumstances under which that world is disrupted. I claim here that the most dramatic disruption and in a sense disappearance of “world” is experienced during the first sky dive. In this section Heidegger’s notions of anxiety and being-toward-death are in focus. But when novices gradually become more experienced, the equipmental context becomes re-established on a new level. The last part of the article discusses how the problem of authentic living may be solved by continually seeking out extreme situations.

Dasein's Daily Dealing With the World— The Workshop and the Sports Field

The life-long goal of Heidegger's philosophy was to understand the meaning of Being. In *Being and Time* and in other early works he tried to reach this goal by starting with an analysis of the human mode of Being since it is only human beings who have an understanding of Being in general and of their own being in particular (13;14;15). Even if few philosophers have been willing to follow up on his question of Being, many agree that he has made a substantial contribution to modern philosophy by overcoming the subject-object dichotomy and by focusing on the human practical involvement with the world. Our primary involvement with the world is not theoretical understanding; we are not isolated from the world but intermeshed with it. As an illustration of "the tremendous contribution of Heidegger" Charles Taylor takes us right to sport: "We can draw a neat line between my *picture* of an object, and an object, but not between my *dealing* with the object and that object. It may make sense to ask us to focus on what we *believe* about something, say a football, even in the absence of that thing; but when it comes to *playing* football, the corresponding suggestion would be absurd. The actions involved in the game can't be done without the object; they include the object. Take it away and we have something quite different – people miming a game on the stage, perhaps." (26:*p.12)

The human mode of being which Heidegger calls "Dasein" is therefore defined simply as "Being-in-the-world".⁷ Following Brentano and Husserl, Heidegger maintains that Dasein is linked to the world in a primordial manner. There is no world without Dasein.⁸ Since Dasein has an understanding of what it means to be, it can understand not only itself but also other beings in their Being. Heidegger analyzes two modes of being in *Being and Time*, that of human beings and of things. Things are primarily and most of the time met not as pure objects but as equipment. Things are available for use for different purposes. This instrumental aspect of things is more basic than their objective characteristics, which come in focus only when we passively stare at them, describe them, decompose them into parts and analyze them as de-contextualized objects. This can happen in various situations, science being the most advanced way of relating to things as pure objects.

Dasein's daily life is filled with busy occupation where things are encountered and used as equipment. We use equipment (*Zeug*) to write, to work and to drive (*Schreib-zeug*, *Werk-zeug*, and *Fahr-zeug*). In the carpenter's workshop, items of equipment are ready at hand to be used: hammer, nails, and planks. The equipment is used "in-order-to" do something. A hammer is used to hammer with; nails are used to fasten the planks; the planks are used to build the house; the house is a place to live; and to live is that what it is all about. The pieces of equipment thus refer to each other in a referential context. The goal toward which the equipment is used is ultimately human living, being-in-the-world.

In their daily use equipment disappears into context. A piece of equipment does not exist by itself and in isolation. It only exists as a piece of equipment in a totality with other pieces of equipment, organized around something that needs to

be done, for instance to build a house. In our daily dealings things or equipment are always located somewhere. They have their place and their neighborhood. They belong somewhere, in a proper distance from us. The proper distance is not too far away and not too close, but in an average distance where we can reach out and have the equipment ready to hand. By organizing our dealings with the world in this way we reduce distance.

It is easy to see how things are used as equipment by the carpenter or the tailor, but Heidegger extends equipmentality to include the design and use of the clock in the church tower or the roof above the railway station. Equipmentality is thus a wide concept that includes all forms of use of something for some purpose, all the “for which”, “in-order-to” “toward-which” and “for-the-sake-of-which”.

It seems therefore reasonable to extend the concept of equipment to equipment in sport contexts, but introduce discriminations that highlight differences between equipment used in different contexts, like sport and work. Some types of equipment cut across such distinctions. A sailboat can, if necessary, be used to transport goods and to win races. Similarly with cars. But specialization makes racing cars different from family cars. Therefore most types of equipment used in sports are closely linked to its specific function in a sport. Even if a soccer ball can be used for several forms of unorganized play, its primary function is on the soccer field where it is a necessary piece of equipment for the game to take place. The players can then develop the advanced skills with the ball that include dribbling and scoring goals. The equipment used in sport thus represents a special category of equipment, different from equipment used at work. In sports the purpose is not to change the world, but rather to play with it, explore its possibilities and let it be.⁹ Heidegger does not distinguish between different types of instrumentality at work and sport. It is however relevant for more fine-grained phenomenological analyses pertinent to sport.

According to Heidegger Dasein most of the time goes about what s/he has to do without being aware of how equipment functions in instrumental totalities. In work as well as in sport contexts, both single pieces of equipment and the instrumental totality become apparent only when something is missing or goes wrong. The hammer is usually inconspicuously available as a tool and it functions without being identified as such. It becomes apparent only when it is missing or does not function any more. Then the whole context lights up. Similarly when I have no time to do the work or when a piece of equipment is not available, the whole totality presents itself as something that needs to be done but cannot be done. When players meet on the field and a football is not available, then the necessity of a football for the game to function suddenly becomes apparent. Heidegger maintains that it is in circumstances where the equipmental functioning breaks down that we become aware of the phenomenon of a world. The world is that wherein Dasein lets things be encountered as equipment. The world is the totality of all the functioning equipmental totalities and contexts. It is that wherein Dasein lives and moves. It is the totality of references and meanings.

When equipment breaks down, not only the specific surrounding world becomes apparent as such. The equipment changes from being available to being simply an object with certain characteristics and properties. At the same time we change our attitude toward the object from practical application to theoretical inspection. We focus on more objective features. The hammer looks so and so, it

has physical characteristics, this shape and weight and so on. Our stance toward it switches from handling it as a piece of equipment invisibly functioning in an equipmental totality to seeing it as a separate individual entity with a certain shape, color, weight, hardness etc. This switch can happen in three ways:

1. A piece of equipment may show itself to be damaged or unsuitable. When unusable, it becomes *conspicuous* as an unsuitable tool. It becomes something present-at-hand. And “it shows itself as an equipmental thing that looks so and so, and which, in its availability as looking that way, has constantly been present-at-hand too” (13: p. 73).¹⁰
2. In our concerned dealing we not only find equipment that is unsuitable, but also equipment that is simply missing, not at hand. Heidegger calls this *obtrusiveness*. The more pressing the situation is, the more the unavailability of the missing equipment becomes visible. The whole equipmental structure almost turns into something present-at-hand. The equipmental character is fading and we stand helpless, unable to continue our concerned dealings.
3. The last deficient mode of readiness-to-hand is when the ready-to-hand becomes unready-to-hand, not by being unusable or missing, but by standing in the way of our concern. This happens when we have no time for a project because there is another project that needs to be taken care of first. This shows the *obstinacy* of that which has to be done first and thereby makes the wanted project not presently ready-to-hand.

In the modes of conspicuousness, obtrusiveness and obstinacy that which is ready-to-hand loses its availability to a certain extent. Heidegger seems to think that it is only when the equipmental condition breaks down that the world becomes apparent as world. In the following I will describe what happens in situations where equipmentality breaks down in an even more serious manner, where assignments and references are torn apart and there is no structure and meaning. There is no longer a world.

The Radical Disruption of the “World”— Jumping out of an Airplane

Let us now look at what happens when novices jump out of an airplane for the first time. My first static line jump went like this: “Sitting in the small aircraft with an instructor and other novices, yet alone, absorbed in my own thoughts, bewildered, frightened, trying to concentrate, and rehearsing instructions. Suddenly, at exit altitude, the side door opens, there is a roar from the engines, moving toward the exit door, the wind blowing, a rush of fear, heavy breathing, sitting in the door frame, the legs being pulled to the side by the strong wind, emptiness below, a feeling of unreality, this is absurd, jumping out, falling, out of control, faster, counting, sudden stop, hanging, parachute above my head, flying, trying to grab the steering lines, yes flying and steering the parachute, a sort of control, emptiness below my feet, looking for the landing site, soaring like a bird, joy, pride.”¹¹

A static line jump is made from around 3000 feet, the parachute being automatically opened by a line fastened to a hook inside the plane. The jumper falls

approximately five seconds before the parachute is opened. Another method for beginners is Accelerated Free Fall (AFF) where the novice together with two instructors jump from 12000 feet and fall 40 seconds or so before the parachutes are deployed. The instructors stabilize the body of the jumper during the fall. My second jump was an AFF jump. Here the confusion and disorientation was even stronger since we jumped out backward from the doorframe of a larger plane. It was like a whale had opened its belly. Our exits were poorly synchronized, resulting in my falling out of control and totally disoriented, with nothing to grab on to, into a vast emptiness.

If the experiential description is made with greater phenomenological detail and analyzed in relation to notions of totality, reference, and meaning we see that the novice jumper sitting in the plane and waiting to do the first jump has no knowledge about what will happen in the air and what it will feel like. Both the knowledge and the qualitative feel come only when the jumper is in the air. In contrast to the familiarity of a workshop or a soccer field, empty air is totally unfamiliar. There is no equipmental context where pieces of equipment refer to each other and are organized in relation to a known goal. There is not even firm ground below one's feet, nothing to grab or hold on to, one is falling, disoriented and out of control. There is only emptiness. Between the time of jumping out of the plane and hanging in the parachute, one is falling thorough a void. The "being-in-the-world" has become a "being-in-the-void". The equipmental context is not only broken but absent—the reference structure is lacking. There is nothing to refer to, with which to orient oneself. There is no circumspection (*Umsicht*).

We have seen that Heidegger describes three ways in which the equipmental context or the equipmental ordering of our daily dealing with the world breaks down. According to Dreyfus (6), conspicuousness, obstinacy and obtrusiveness represent an increasingly serious breakdown. In all three cases however there is a problem with a specific piece of equipment that leads to the disclosure of the totality of the equipmental context and hence to the phenomenon of world. But how should we understand the situation where the novice skydiver jumps out of the plane and falls out of control through a void? It is not only a piece of equipment which is malfunctioning (conspicuousness). It is not only something else, something more pressing, which needs to be done (obstinacy). This is more serious than when something is missing completely (obtrusiveness) for two reasons. First it is not a specific piece of equipment that is missing. It is equipment as such. There is nothing to grab on to. And secondly there is no established context where a piece could be missing. The context as such is missing. There is no world, but only a void. There is only the jumper, the falling and the void. In many ways it is similar to what Heidegger calls "thrownness" (*Geworfenheit*), the fact of being thrown into the world where one just has to live. For Heidegger the original phenomenon of what it means to live is the wordless subject. Originally and at the depth of our being we are *solus ipse*. In a very concrete and real way the first skydiver brings the skydiver back to the original human condition. But as we shall see the meeting with a void not only brings the skydiver back to the original situation but also forward toward his/her own death.

We should note here that there is a temporal similarity between being thrown (*geworfen*), and jumping out of a plane. To establish a world takes time. Heidegger analyses the situation in the workshop where the carpenter is already

installed in his activities, already coping with the equipment. His coping has been established through a long learning process from being a novice carpenter to being an expert. The difference between learning to become a carpenter and learning to skydive is that the carpenter can gradually establish a familiarity with the surroundings, with the equipment and what needs to be done, while the skydiver starts by being abruptly thrown into a new situation. There is a rapid, discontinuous transition from being in the plane to being in the void. It is impossible to jump a little or gradually out of a plane. In this respect skydiving is like being born. When one is born, an abrupt and total transition takes place.

Being-in-the-Void: Is It Accompanied by Fear or Anxiety?

Since Dasein is thrown into the world, it finds itself already existing (Fakizität) and already attuned in a certain way and in a certain state of mind (Befindlichkeit). The daily dealing with the world is accompanied by various moods. Heidegger does not analyze the broad spectrum of moods that we experience in daily life, but concentrates on a few moods that play an important role in his analysis of the basic structures of human existence, such as fear and anxiety. Fear is a mood in which Dasein is afraid of something. Fear is directed in a specific direction, toward something specific that is experienced as fearsome. It could be a snake, a fire, or an approaching robber. And this fearsome something threatens Dasein in a specific manner. Heidegger says “When concern is afraid, it leaps from next to next, because it forgets itself and therefore does not take hold of any definite possibility” (14:p.392). In this situation the environment does not disappear but for Dasein, the environment “is encountered without his knowing his way about it any longer” (14: p. 342). As Dreyfus (6) correctly remarks, this is parallel to the missing or obtrusive tool. Dasein is not able to operate in a normal manner, dealing circumspetively with things. A missing or obtrusive tool or a paralyzing fear makes it impossible for Dasein to find its way in normal manner. In this way, the context as such, the equipmental totality, and in the last instance the phenomenon of world, becomes apparent as such.

Anxiety goes deeper than this. In anxiety the world as such glides away from under one’s feet. Anxiety is characterized by its indefinite character; it is nothing and nowhere. Anxiety does not come from a specific direction or in a specific manner. One does not know what one is afraid of, where the anxiety comes from and what one is concerned about. Heidegger maintains that in anxiety, Dasein is afraid and concerned about itself and in face of itself. “That in the face of which one has anxiety is Being-in-the-world as such.” (14: p. 186). Since anxiety is not related to something specific in the world like fear, it points to the possibility of having a world as such. “The obstinacy of the “nothing and nowhere within-the-world” means as a phenomenon that *the world as such is that in the face of which one has anxiety.*” (14: p.187). This means that the jumping out of the airplane and being-in-the-void with nothing to grab and hold onto is a situation of anxiety and not fear. Sky diving reveals a situation where “readiness-to-hand” and the equipmental circumspection and hence a “world” cannot be constituted. There is no equipment and no context. There is quite literally a void, a condition of nothing-

ness. Heidegger speaks of nothingness as the totally indefinite. What one is afraid of in anxiety is nothing specific, one does not know, it is nowhere, it is a nothing, a “nihil”. In the first skydive nothingness is experienced in a literal and bodily manner; one falls through the void, there is nothing to grab and hold on to, there is nothing to stop oneself from falling.

The short phenomenological descriptions of anxiety in *Being and Time* make it clear that Heidegger thinks that anxiety occurs gradually- things slip away, the ground breaks up, one does not understand what is going on, one is afraid of all and nothing (see 14). In skydiving the situation is different. There is a sharp transition from the situation in the plane with a surrounding world to the situation in the air where there is no world and only nothingness.

So far I have maintained that the situation of a novice falling through the void in his/her first skydive is accompanied by anxiety. But what about the situation in the plane before the jump? Is that a situation characterized by fear or anxiety? We know from empirical studies of novice skydivers that their heart rates rise continuously while the aircraft approaches exit altitude at around 12,000 feet. The average heart rate among novices at exit is around 170 beats per minute (2). This means that the physiological activation and the corresponding emotions are very intense and strong. The novices get extremely frightened just by sitting in the plane thinking about what is going to happen. Are they feeling fear or anxiety in Heidegger’s terminology? The novices in the plane are thinking about the approaching exit. They will meet something totally new, they will fall out of control, and they may have problems opening the parachute and have to perform an emergency procedure. They may fail to do the procedure correctly and fall to their death. Consciously and unconsciously they know this. They are also afraid of making a fool of themselves, to fail in the face of others according to their own expectations about themselves. There is also a probably innate biological apprehension about stepping out into a void where the nearest visible support is distant. No animal would do that. But is this fear or anxiety? One could argue that the situation in the plane before exit is one of readiness-to-hand and instrumental coping. But this is only related to the situation in the plane. What the novice is afraid of is the prospect of jumping out into the void. What causes the heart to beat fast and a feeling of apprehension is the thought of the unknown, falling through the void, and the possibility of death. Thus, in one sense, it is a specific fear of something specific that lies ahead. On the other hand it is a fear of the unknown, of falling in a void that will be experienced with anxiety. One could provisionally characterize it as a fear of the possibility of anxiety.

We should note here that Heidegger’s short phenomenological descriptions of anxiety seem to characterize anxiety as a mild mood that gradually creeps in and transforms one’s world into something uncanny (*unheimlich*). One is not at home in the world and one’s own life any more. Similarly he refers to places to happiness as a sort of light elation. We know however that both negative and positive emotion can be experienced both at low and high levels. In skydiving both fear/anxiety and joy/happiness can be experienced intensely, where the body and its physiological systems are running on high and the brain is flooded by substances like adrenalin, endorphins, serotonin and cortisol (1). Skydiving as a phenomenological focus here, places the analysis of fear and anxiety at the upper end of the physiological activation scale. Thus, both anxiety and happiness can come in

slow, continuous tempered versions, as in Heidegger's examples, and in fast, discontinuous and high-pitched versions.¹²

Anxiety, Death and Authentic Living

For Heidegger the self and the world are tied together in a unity. The human being is a being-in-the-world. But the self has a tendency to lose itself and become absorbed in the world in a way that makes it difficult to live an authentic life. The distinction between authentic and inauthentic living has a long tradition. Charles Taylor traces the idea to religious sources and shows how the idea of authenticity is a secular version of the idea of a God within (25). The ultimate truth is to be found inside each of us. Guignon (10) points out that the idea is central in modern philosophy. The idea of cultivating oneself and releasing the good in oneself is found in Emerson and Nietzsche. Bernard Williams, following Nietzsche, maintains that authenticity is one of the central ideas in his own thinking (27). It is the idea that some things are in an essential sense you, expressing what you are and others are not. Authenticity is a central to Stanley Cavell's account of moral perfection, whose goal is to release rather than to restrain the good (5).

Heidegger's idea of authenticity follows this tradition yet is strongly influenced by Kierkegaard's views on the duality of our lives. We tend to live our lives in an average, superficial way and we need to be brought to a confrontation with ourselves to reach a deeper and more honest understanding of ourselves and the world. Following Kierkegaard, Heidegger maintains that Dasein "falls" into the world and understands him/herself in an inauthentic manner. Humans have a tendency to look at the others and do what they do. Guignon comments "Inauthenticity is characterized by "falling" and "forgetting". In the ordinary busy-ness of handling daily affairs, Dasein tends to become ensnared in its immediate concerns and to drift along with the take-for-granted practices of average everydayness. We hide behind social roles, enacting parts in familiar dramas and following the rules of socially approved games." (9: p. 227). We do what we are expected to do. We follow the average, the common, and the usual. Heidegger calls this abstract normative entity the One (*das Man*). We follow the One and thus the One influences what we do, what we think, and the norms we follow, although such norms and goals are not our own. Heidegger says that we do not live "eigentlich". "Eigen" in German means "own". We do not live according to our own deepest concerns but live in an inauthentic way, following the One. Only under certain circumstances, in certain situations, are we able to know and act from our own deepest concerns and goals, to find out what we really are and what we should do.

Situations of love, of boredom, and especially of anxiety are able to lead to a confrontation with ourselves. Anxiety leads to a confrontation with one's own finitude and death and is the key to an authentic living. What happens in anxiety is that both our surroundings and the things and entities discovered within the world lose their significance and become insignificant. The world collapses into itself. Dasein now becomes unsettled. It is no longer at home in the world. It is thrown back on itself. Dasein becomes *solus ipse*, Dasein is on its own. This means that in anxiety Dasein is brought back from the fall into the world and put face to face with its own finitude and death.

As Guignon maintains, it is important that authenticity does not detach us from the world.¹³ Authenticity is not getting in touch with deeper inner selves nor rising above the herd, but a confrontation with ourselves. “In the experience of anxiety, we are forced to confront our own finitude” (8: p. 229). We collect ourselves. “Facing death, one is pulled back from the dispersal, distraction, and forgetfulness of everydayness.” (8: p. 229). We instead focus on a limited range of possibilities which are determined by the end and so are understood as finite. We take over our situatedness with resoluteness. “Authentic self-focusing, understood as a resolute reaching forward into a finite range of possibilities, gives coherence, cohesiveness, and integrity to a life course.” (8: p. 229). Skydiving seems to be one such possibility for self-focusing and cohesiveness.

But the focus is difficult to uphold. Resoluteness evaporates. We continue to tend to fall into the average understanding of the One. In this transition, anxiety is transformed to fear according to Heidegger. Fear is derived from anxiety as an inauthentic mood. It covers up the pure naked *that* of existence by giving the anxious Dasein something specific to be concerned about, a specific fear about something.

From a Heideggerian perspective the situation after the exit from the airplane where one falls through the void, filled with anxiety, is the original situation. It reveals the naked human condition in the world. A specific phobia, like the fear of heights or fear of flying, is a specific modification of anxiety into a fear that one can handle by taking precautions and making oneself safe in various ways.

Anxiety is usually considered as something negative that should be avoided or treated, but for Heidegger it is an important and necessary condition for getting to know the deepest aspects of human existence¹⁴. Anxiety reveals that ultimately we are finite beings that have to relate in one way or other to our own death. For Heidegger being-toward-death is not related to the biological phenomenon of passing away as a physical being. Nor is it the simple event of one’s life being over, as it is sooner or later over for everyone. Instead, death is Dasein’s own last and definite possibility. It is the possibility of impossibility. It gives Dasein’s life a wholeness and totality. Death is something inside one’s life that one always has to relate to, either by covering it up or by facing its reality.

The situations where Dasein faces anxiety provide opportunities to relate authentically to the possibility of one’s own death and to choose from the deepest and most personal concerns and goals. Dasein is, however, not able to continue this authentic way of life but falls back to the world and the One and ways of doing things that cover up deeper possibilities. Most of the time our lives are lived in an inauthentic manner. It is worth noticing here that while it is possible according to Heidegger to improve and become an expert in the daily circumspective dealing with equipmental surroundings, irreversible progress in continuous authentic living is impossible. We always fall back into the “worldly” understanding of ourselves. There are authentic moments and situations but no continuous improvement. The novice skydiver may have glimpses of authenticity during the first free fall, but will soon fall back into the average understanding of the One.

How Experienced Skydivers Fall into the World and Become Inauthentic

The novice skydiver may decide to continue with skydiving after the first jump. S/he may gradually become more proficient and eventually become an expert skydiver. During this process one gradually learns to master the exit, and all the various positions and movements during free fall and landing. S/he learns how to use the wind pressure to perform wonderful movements in empty space: turns and twists, summersaults, vertical standing, horizontal tracking and so on. S/he becomes attuned to the void. S/he learns that there are gravitational forces and air pressures to maneuver on. Arms and legs become pieces of equipment to stabilize and steer the body. In this way the void becomes a world. The void becomes available as a “playspace”. At the same time undifferentiated anxiety gives way to specific fears of specific failures like a “line-over”, when the parachute cords twist around the canopy so that it does not properly fill with air. Then an emergency procedure must be performed to get rid of the main parachute and deploy the reserve.

As the skydiver becomes proficient and learns to cope with the situations in the void, a new situation of controlled equipmental dealing becomes established. The skydiver can handle the equipment and his body in the same way as a carpenter handles his equipment in his workshop. The skydiver becomes attuned to the “world” of the void. This also means that problems are not experienced as total and chaotic but as specific and limited. It is like the workshop where a piece of equipment may malfunction and become obtrusive. The altimeter may malfunction or the parachute may not function as well as expected. Or situations of obstinacy may occur. There is no time for skydiving, something more pressing needs to be done. Or a piece of equipment may be lacking and skydiving is made impossible. Specific problems with equipment correspond to specific fears of failures. But for experienced skydivers, problems can be handled and controlled like in other forms of circumspective dealing with the surrounding world.

Thus the proficient skydiver becomes absorbed in the “world of skydiving” and becomes less authentic. S/he does what one is expected to do in that world. S/he becomes guided by the One. S/he does not live from his/ her own deepest and most authentic concerns. S/he no longer needs to confront anxiety and the possibility of death and dying. It may seem strange that as the skydiver becomes settled in the skydiving milieu, becomes more proficient and masters the activity, s/he runs the risk of becoming less authentic. The point that Heidegger makes is that human dealing with the equipmental contexts leads to absorption in the environment. One ends up living in the everyday world in the same way as everybody else. That is true also for skydivers that become part of the everydayness of the skydiving milieu. This means that authenticity is not tied to skydiving as such but that it is an instrument or a specific way of facilitating experiences that lead to a more authentic life. But skydiving may also lead to inauthentic absorption a the skydiving routine.

Do Risk Takers Live More Authentically?

We are led to the somewhat paradoxical conclusion that the more a person becomes an experienced skydiver, the fewer possibilities there are for authentic living. And furthermore, if this person wants to live authentically s/he should expose herself to new and unfamiliar situations where s/he may experience a breakdown in equipmental handling and where the world glides away in anxiety. The skydiver is then thrown back on his/herself and what living is all about. The experience is once more one of a *solus ipse*, a worldless self. The world has collapsed and the self confronts a void where it is not at home any more. In Heidegger's expression the world has once more become "un-heimlich" ("un-home-like" or uncanny) (12: p. 188). Dasein is no longer at home in the world.

We know from empirical studies that "high sensation seekers" want strong stimulation and challenges and are more willing than others to take risks (1). They take chances in various areas of life and tend to get involved in risk sports. They are often portrayed as irresponsible, hedonistic, and selfish. But if the analysis above is correct they may rather be people who are living or trying to live a more authentic life. They are willing to take risks, to lose control and thus expose themselves to anxiety. In a quite literal way, they act to confront the possibility of their own imminent death. But perhaps this is too simple.

First, anxiety arises not only in skydiving and other activities with physical risk. Heidegger thought that it is impossible to predict and control when and where anxiety will surface. This is why anxiety is nowhere and everywhere, unexpectedly surfacing out of the blue. Second, the expert skydiver knows that the world of skydiving is never safe. Even they get into situations where the equipment fails partially or completely, as when both the main and reserve parachutes malfunction. The opening mechanisms may fail in which case one will fall through the emptiness to certain, unavoidable death. This means that danger is always lurking, and that anxiety inevitably lies beneath feelings of control able to erupt at any time. Even among experts, specific fears may explode into anxiety.

Underlying several of the arguments in this paper is a tension between a structural and a motivational account of anxiety and authenticity/inauthenticity. The structural perspective implies that Dasein has a tendency to fall into the world and understand itself from the perspective of a world of things. This absorption in the world is a necessary part of the human being-in-the-world. From this perspective both inauthentic and authentic living have the same "value" since they are necessary parts of the ways Dasein exists. A motivational account is added to this structural account in the second part of *Being and Time*, which gives this perspective strong normative overtones. Here Dasein flees from the nullity experienced in the face of anxiety. Dreyfus thinks that Heidegger's notion of anxiety as flight goes back to Kierkegaard, leading to contradictions. "Heidegger's secularized version of the antipathy of anxiety as repulsion in the face of meaninglessness makes no sense. If anxiety is the truth of Dasein's condition and the truth sets free, why doesn't Dasein seek anxiety rather than flee it?" (6: p. 334) Taylor Carman tries to solve this problem by interpreting what Heidegger calls authentic resoluteness (*Entschlossenheit*) as a resistance to the falling into the world. "Authenticity is conceivable, then, since it is possible for Dasein to resist the force of falling *while* falling, just as one can resist the force of gravity while remaining continu-

ously in its grip.” (4: p. 28) If we end up failing in our efforts, it is according to Carman because our bodily and psychological resources are limited. Inauthenticity is thus a result of Dasein’s inability to muster the necessary resources to counteract the inclination to fall.

Whether we accept the structural or motivational approach, the situation of novice skydivers is especially well suited a phenomenological analysis of anxiety. Skydiving triggers anxiety in novices in a way that easily leads to a serious rethinking of what life is all about and what one’s deeper life projects are and should be. One quickly comes to question whether one lives an authentic life or whether other people (the One) are really at the steering wheel. For many people, just to sign up for a skydiving course means to confront anxiety and to relate to the possibility of one’s own death.

In this paper, the first skydive was made the phenomenological focus for two reasons: a) In a unique and concrete way, the first skydive opens the possibility of the world being replaced by a void, a kind of “void” that never was experienced or considered by Heidegger. An analysis of this void opens up a deeper understanding of the strong connection between the disintegration of world, anxiety, being-toward-death and hence the possibility of authentic living. The experience of anxiety and the possibility of imminent death, however, is not limited to this or any other sport situation. Disintegration of one’s world and loosing hold of one’s equipmental surroundings may occur when loosing control over one’s car on the race track or when falling in a difficult and exposed situation in climbing. What is special about the first skydive is that it exemplifies the phenomenon of void, i.e., the possibility of not only a disruption of one’s surrounding world but of a total disappearance of that world into void. Experiencing the first skydive, of course, is only one example of a more general experiential possibility. J. S. Russell has remarked on this common feature of risk sports: They are valuable since they facilitate “self-affirmation” and represent “an opportunity for confronting and pressing beyond certain apparent limits of personal, and indeed human, physical and psychological capacities in ways not afforded by other normally available human activity.” (21: p. 14). This “pressing beyond” is what makes deep aspects of our existence accessible. Risk sports make possible a confrontation with oneself and the possibility of more authentic living, which from a Heideggerian point of view, entails relating to one’s own death. We are thrown into the world and our exit from it is deadly. Risk sport reminds us of this in a very concrete way.

Conclusion

The purpose of this article was twofold. In the first part I wanted to show how Heidegger’s notion of the human “being-in-the-world” is in sharp contrast to a situation where one is “being-in-a-void”, as experienced during the first skydive. I showed how this situation is in radical contrast to, and a negation of, the ordinary situation where the self is tied to the familiar equipmental contexts of one’s world. For Heidegger the phenomenon of “world” becomes apparent when the equipmental context breaks down through failures of various kinds, such as when the equipment one needs is obtrusive or missing. The situation during the first skydive is most radical since both equipment and context are missing, and so the “world” is missing.

The second part of the article explained how the phenomenon of anxiety is causally related to the situation of being-in-the-void. Heidegger did not describe well enough how these two phenomena are tied together. For Heidegger breakdown in equipment leads to awareness of the context of a world with its references and assignments. At the same time anxiety is regarded as a phenomenon that may surface nowhere and everywhere. By using skydiving as phenomenological focus I tried to show how the radical disruption of equipmentality and the loss of a “world” are intrinsically linked to anxiety. I started the article by saying that Heidegger could throw light on skydiving, and that some light might reflect back, and I think it did. There is a tight connection between the disruption of the world and the experience of anxiety and this connection is phenomenologically supported by the example of novice skydiving. Furthermore, anxiety opens the way for an experience of being-toward-death. In this way skydiving is a good phenomenological example of a more general phenomenon, since skydiving makes the possibility of one’s own death very concrete and direct.

For Heidegger, the possibility of authentic decisions about one’s life projects is tied to the experience of anxiety and the resolute acceptance of one’s own death. This naturally leads to the question whether some situations of risk, uncertainty, and breakdown of the world are especially well suited as introductions to authentic living. Even if authenticity can only be experienced for short periods, we should consider seeking situations that facilitate it, and risk sports offer such situations. But being involved in risk sports does not mean that one is immune to inauthentic living. The skydiving example shows that as one continues with skydiving and becomes proficient, one gradually establishes a world of control, of references and assignments where the void is exchanged for a “world” of skydiving. The proficient skydiver masters the air so that it becomes her/his performance arena. Similarly when on the ground, s/he has become part of the skydiving community, absorbed in a way that results in an inauthentic following of the One. This development might be used to justify moving on to new, riskier versions of skydiving or to other dangerous sports where again the experience of anxiety and breakdown of worlds would open the door to authenticity¹⁵.

Breakdown of one’s world may happen in many ways. Some are willed and premeditated, others are unwilled and come as a surprise. As Heidegger emphasized, anxiety may surface anywhere and out of the blue and thus open up possibilities for confrontations with oneself. However, he says little about specific activities and places structurally designed to present us with the possibility of dying and thus for experiencing anxiety and self-confrontation, where one must “press beyond” to affirm oneself authentically. Risk sports in general represent such activities and situations. Of these sports, skydiving is exemplary, since as a novice one exposes oneself to a unique combination of a radical breakdown of world, being-in-a-void, the experience of anxiety, and being-toward-death, which according to Heidegger, should facilitate a more authentic understanding of what life is about.

Notes

1. In this article I use the expression “skydiving” and not “parachute jumping”. In the beginning when the point was, under military and other operations, to get from a plane down to the ground in a safe manner one could talk about parachute jumping. Later when the activity developed as a sport and the point was to have an extended time in the air, a free fall, the notion of skydiving seemed more appropriate. The point was the free fall period and not the hanging in the parachute. Later new activities and forms of competition have developed where the point is to maneuver the parachute in advanced ways, either for acrobatic moves or precision landing.
2. Heidegger’s involvement with the Nazi movement has been much discussed. He never admitted his commitment to the Nazi movement but in his later work *Poetry, Language, Thought* (16) he went as far as to say “Wer gross denkt, muss gross irren.” (“He who thinks greatly, must err greatly.”)
3. When he was young he played left wing on the football team in Messkirch where he grew up. He was interested in football all his life. When he was at his cottage in Todtnauberg he used to visit neighbors to look at TV when Bayern München and his favorite player Franz Beckenbauer played (18). Heidegger was an avid skier and from his hut in Todtnauberg and elsewhere he took long hiking and skiing trips.
4. Following both the translation of *Sein und Zeit* (12) by Macquarrie and Robinson (12) and the commentary by Dreyfus (6) I will not translate the German term *Dasein*, which denotes the mode of being of humans, but will use the German word as a technical term. Heidegger opposed traditional ontology with its focus on static substances and things and instead introduced a dynamic way of looking at happenings and events. The human being is not a thing or a substance with certain characteristics but has a way of being that is *Dasein*, being both present (*Da-sein*) and there (*Da-sein*). Inherent in *Dasein* is that it stands out from other beings; it knows that it exists and cares about its own existence. Everything that *Dasein* does in the world is linked to this ultimate care or concern (*Sorge*).
5. In skydiving one is by purpose falling through the air. One may also by accident and unwillingly fall through the air in other air sports, like hanggliding or paragliding. In some other sports one is close to big vertical empty air spaces, like in big wall climbing, where one may also accidentally take a fall through the air and experience a sort of void. “Touching the void” is the title of the book of Joe Simpson who on his way down from peak Siula Grande in Peru took an uncontrolled fall that almost ended in tragedy (22).
6. Paul Standish (24) refers to Higuchi who points out that the idea of authenticity ultimately has its source in death and that the sudden death of a friend or a colleague may bring us out of the tranquilized reassurance of everydayness. It would be natural to think of risk sports as an even closer candidate for breaking the everydayness of normal life. But this possibility is not followed up by Higuchi or Standish even if “the sometimes fatal allure of dangerous sports” is hinted at (24: p. 268) Instead the focus is on the everydayness of sports and the finality that is experienced when being knocked out of a competition or beaten. I think “dangerous sports” present better opportunities than competitive failure to analyze what authenticity means.
7. In his fundamental ontology Heidegger defines the basic structures in *Dasein*’s existence. Heidegger introduces a distinction between ontological and ontic, where ontological denotes the fundamental structural aspects of concrete ontic instantiations. For instance, it belongs to human existence to have a world (ontological), but there are many different instances of world (ontic). Similarly the distinction between “existential” and “existentiell” implies that *Dasein* is always in a certain mood but there are many concrete instances (specific moods). Even if Heidegger tries to describe “objectively” the basic structural conditions of human existence he admits that it is easy to be inspired by certain ideals and subjective preferences. This is especially relevant for part II of *Being and Time* where the existentialist individualism comes to the fore. Heidegger

asks: “Is there not, however, a definite ontical way of taking authentic existence, a factual ideal of Dasein, underlying our ontological interpretation of Dasein’s existence? That is so indeed.” (14: p. 358). But he thinks admitting his presuppositions are no problem since they can be played out and penetrated in the further analyses.

8. Heidegger does not deny that there is an objective, independent universe, a natural environment that will continue to exist after Dasein has died. But the world is something that is constructed by the human mode of being. We have a reminiscence of this understanding when we speak about world history, which means the history of humans. We talk about the environing world (“Umwelt”) which means the close surroundings where we are occupied with our daily dealings. We talk about the work world and the sports world.

9. After the football game the world has not changed. However this is relevant only if work is taken as physical work to provide food or shelter. Work also includes entertainment etc. People can work; they can earn money by playing. Professional football players work and earn money through playing games.

10. Here Heidegger shows how presence-at-hand comes forth from readiness-to-hand. But the result is not pure presence-at-hand since a damaged item of equipment retains something of its equipment-character. After being repaired, it can be put into use again and disappear in the equipmental context.

11. We know from empirical studies that the subjective experience described here has a physiological and psychological underlying reality (2). Whereas novice skydivers have around 170 bpm at exit the experts have an average of 140 bpm which is still high considering that they sit still before exit. The adrenaline level reaches 6–12 times above normal and the level of catecholamines is high above normal. Endorphins flood the blood system. The novices experience fear and anxiety, disorientation, tunnel sight, and some get transmarginal inhibition. Most novices experience excitement and even ecstasy when they have landed safely on the ground. Typically around 80% of the novices quit skydiving after the first few jumps. This indicates that the experience is exciting but scary for most people.

12. Michael Apter (1) distinguishes between people who are excitement-seeking and people who are anxiety-avoidant. For the first type low arousal tends to be experienced as boring whereas high arousal is linked to excitement. For the other type low arousal feels pleasant whereas high arousal leads to anxiety. Sky divers tend to be excitement-seekers or high sensation seekers (2).

13. It is an ongoing discussion whether the common world or the individual has priority in the constitution of being-in-the-world. For Dreyfus the notion of a common world, of common institutions and practices are before the constitution of the individual. Randall Havas disagrees with this view. Following Nietzsche he states that it is “the category of the individual that should have pride of place in our reflections on the nature of intelligibility and not just any individual but rather the very one that is each of us” (11: p. 41) The reason is that it is the commitment of the individual and the right to make promises and take responsibility that is the foundation of a society. It is thus not attitude but rather commitment that characterizes the authentic person. According to Havas the difference between what “gets called authenticity and inauthenticity is surely not that an authentic person faces up groundlessness while his inauthentic counterpart flees it, but rather that the former takes responsibility for himself while the latter seeks to avoid it.” (11: p. 41)

14. Heidegger later changed his views on the role of anxiety (6). In his 1929 lecture “What is Metaphysics?” anxiety is not interpreted as a source of insight into the situation of Dasein but rather as an experience of the “oblivion of being” characteristic of the modern age. Anxiety is seen as a response to the rootlessness of the modern technological world. Later Heidegger went to the pre-Socratic philosophers to find sources for a view of where humans free from anxiety and at home in the world. He looked for a new rootedness that could counteract and make up for the modern rootlessness.

15. In this article the focus has been on the void and the falling through the air. However other risk sports can give experiences that are structurally similar to the “being-out –of-control” through the first skydive. White water kayakers experience situations in heavy white water where they are upside down, under water, out of control and have a feeling of being in a big washing machine. It is impossible to establish equipmental control and the structure and context of a “world”.

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