Conscience and the Aporia of Being and Time

Huaiyu Wang
The Pennsylvania State University

Abstract
In this article, I establish first the critical role of conscience in Heidegger’s Being and Time. As the call of care, conscience attests to the authenticity of Da-sein as it discloses and “accomplishes” Da-sein as the being it is delivered over to be. Heidegger’s interpretation of conscience also epitomizes the central aporias of Being and Time, which, with a view to revoking the Western metaphysical tradition, ultimately recalls it. At the heart of such aporias is the hermeneutic circle in the attestation of conscience, whose voice only “reaches him who wants to be brought back.” While the language of conscience and attestation was put away in Heidegger’s later writings, I argue that the question concerning conscience is a leading question that will continue to guide us to build our way back and forth.

Keywords
conscience, Heidegger, Being and Time, aporia, death

Beings and Time would belong neither to science, nor to philosophy, nor to poetics. Such is perhaps the case for every work worthy of its name: there, what puts thinking into operation exceeds its own borders or what thinking itself intends to present of these borders. The work exceeds itself, it surpasses the limits of the concept of itself that it claims to have properly while presenting itself. But if the event of this work thus exceeds its own borders, the borders that its discourse seems to give to itself… then it would do so precisely at this locus where it experiences the aporia—and perhaps its premature interruption, its very prematurity.

Derrida, “Finis”

The interpretation of the phenomenon of conscience plays a critical role in Being and Time. For Heidegger, conscience is the call of care that attests to the authenticity of Da-sein. The phenomenological analysis of conscience makes visible the unity of the existential structure of the being of Da-sein. It brings also the meaning and structure of conscience to an unprecedented clarity. Yet,

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Heidegger’s interpretation of conscience continues to be misunderstood. The persistent misunderstanding of the meaning of conscience reflects the aporia of Being and Time, which, with a view to revoking the Western metaphysical tradition, ultimately recalls it. In the phrase “the aporia of Being and Time,” thus, the genitive is to be understood as both genitivus subjectivus and objectivus. It refers both to the aporia that Being and Time poses in front of us and to the aporia implicated in the project of Being and Time itself. Such aporias are epitomized in the existential interpretation of conscience as a “double attestation.” For the voice of conscience attests not only to resoluteness as the authentic existentiell possibility of Da-sein’s potentiality-for-being-itself but also to the authentic anticipatory being-toward-death as the ontological possibility of Dasein’s potentiality-of-being-a-whole. Conscience discloses and “accomplishes” Da-sein as the being it is delivered over to be. But since the call of conscience only “reaches him who wants to be brought back” (SZ, 271), the attestation of conscience turns out to be moving in a circle. This circularity brings into question the very validity and possibility of the attestation, if this word is to be understood in its ordinary sense. In Heidegger’s later writings, thus, the language of conscience and attestation has to be put away (aufgehoben). Yet, the question concerning conscience, as I will show, refuses to be dropped out. As a summons that calls the mortals to think their homelessness and calls them into their dwelling, it continues to announce itself, however reticently, as a question that will guide us to build our way back and forth.

I. The Double Attestation of the Call of Conscience

Conscience, Heidegger says, is a call. The voice of conscience is the attestation (Bezeugung) of Da-sein’s authentic (eigentlich) potentiality-of-being (SZ, 268). An attestation, in its everyday sense, is a statement made under oath for the declaration of the truth of something. Truth is understood here as the correspondence of a statement with a thing in reality. What the voice of conscience attests to, however, is not a reality or actuality, but a possibility. “Higher than actuality,” Heidegger claims, “stands possibility” (SZ, 38). The attestation of conscience does not prove the truth of anything in reality, but discloses the truth of Da-sein. For “Da-sein is always its possibility” (SZ, 42). The truth that is attested in the testimony of conscience is not truth in its derivative sense of correctness but the primordial truth of disclosedness. Conscience discloses.

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2) Heidegger, Being and Time, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996); Sein und Zeit (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag GmbH, 2001); hereafter cited as SZ, followed by German pagination. Translations have been modified.