

Simulated Histories

The Consequences of Reading *Being and Time* in Light of *Origins of Totalitarianism* Histories

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Hannah Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* can be productively read as an historically concrete examination of and response to Heidegger's thought in *Being and Time*. However, while Arendt's description of totalitarianism functions within the overall scope of Heidegger's philosophy, certain aspects of her account threaten to push his notions of history and truth towards unforeseen and ultimately undesirable consequences. *Being and Time* formulates the concepts of history and truth in such a way that simulated histories can proliferate without any way to verify their correspondence to an absolute reality. Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* demonstrates this problem in a real world situation, wherein the propaganda machines of totalitarian governments create a world where historical facts and reality no longer coincide. Although Arendt's historical account of totalitarianism exposes serious problems for Heidegger's philosophy, she offers no explicit answer to this dilemma. Nevertheless, Arendt insists that individuals' ability to start anew guarantees that totalitarianism will never permanently dominate a society. In what follows, I will present Heidegger's concepts of historicity, historiography, and truth in order to examine how these elements manifest themselves in the totalitarian society described by Arendt. While Arendt does not directly confront the problems of Heidegger's philosophy, she does appear to accept the problematic nature of postmodern thought in a way that is heedful of the threats posed by totalitarian governments.

I. Heidegger's Concept of Historicity and Historiography

Before we get to history, let me define its basis because, without human existence, history and historiography would be irrelevant. For this reason, Dasein is the central term of *Being and Time*, and it translates literally as "Being here" [Da-sein]. Da Sein (un-hyphenated) would mean "the to be," because Sein is the infinitive of the verb "to be." Heidegger's project in *Being and Time* is to interrogate the meaning of being. This is done by uncovering the fundamental structures of the being for whom being is a question. Heidegger terms the being for whom being is a question "Dasein." Heidegger claims, "This being which we ourselves in each case are and which includes inquiry among the possibilities of its being we formulate terminologically as Dasein" (BT 6). To put it simply, all human beings have the quality of Dasein, "being here," and Dasein can come into presence when humans ask about their own existence. Any inquiry into human exist-

ence is, for Heidegger, an inquiry into what makes Dasein appear here and now, in the world.

Heidegger uses the term "historicity" to designate an existential structure of Dasein. Historicity, as defined by Heidegger, "means the constitution of being of the 'occurrence' of Dasein as such" (BT 17). Historicity involves looking back into the past at the possibilities that other moments and occurrences of Dasein have chosen to take up and take possession of. Dasein is constituted by its historicity because Dasein is temporal in the very ground of its being: "whether explicitly or not, it is its past" (BT 17). According to Heidegger, Dasein never exists simply in a moment, but rather stretches itself along by projecting possibilities into the future that it has drawn from its past. Historicity is the space in which "...we must ask whence in general can the possibilities be drawn upon which Dasein factually projects itself?" (BT 350). Historicity is always existentially prior to history because historicity is the condition that allows for anything like a historical event to occur.

Authentic historicity involves looking at the possibilities of existence that have-been in order to project our own being towards death, resulting in an authentic retrieve of the past. However, "since factual Dasein is absorbed and entangled in what it takes care of, it initially understands its history as world history" (BT 356). This means that Dasein initially constructs its history from how it takes care of the world that it finds itself in. Historiography is thus done for the most part in an inauthentic way; historians do not focus on existential structures, but rather upon the beings that Dasein takes care of. Historians thus become bogged down in events and facts, forgetting that the most important aspect of their research lies in presenting possibilities for existing Dasein to project into the future. Most historical accounts cover over the question of being and make it so that Dasein's existence is not involved in a resolute constancy towards death. Nevertheless, this does not mean that authentic historiography is impossible.

Authentic historiography is a seemingly very difficult activity for Dasein to engage in, but it is a process that is rooted in Dasein being essentially historical in the ground of its being. The initial compulsion to perform historiography is always authentic: "...the central theme of historiography is always the possibility of an existence that has-been-there," but historiographical research keeps "to its authentic theme in vary-

ing degrees of nearness." This means that while recording possibilities that have-been is an authentic activity, most historians do not perform this activity in a way that remains faithful to the ontological structures of Dasein. Heidegger goes so far as to say that "historiography strives to alienate Dasein from its authentic historicity" (BT 361), meaning that the general tendency of historiographical research is inauthentic. Dasein is always already historical without having complex historiographies and it seems as if authentic historiography is unnecessary for authentically existing Dasein.

Nevertheless, Heidegger draws on Nietzsche to explain how authentic historiography can be accomplished. Authentic historiography arises from the unity of the monumental, the antiquarian, and the critical. Monumentality involves the initial retrieve of possibilities, antiquarian historiography is required for "reverently preserving the existence that has-been-there" (BT 362), and critical historiography is when the present is evaluated on the basis of the other two forms of historiography. Critical historiography "suffers itself to become detached from the entangled publicness of the today" (ibid.), meaning that authentic historiography is always in a struggle with both the past and the present. It chooses certain possibilities from the past to record, and then criticizes popular interpretations of phenomena based on these possibilities. According to Heidegger, this is not a 'subjective' process because it is based in the disclosure of beings, but it is not strictly 'objective' either because historiography can only arise out of the historicity of individual Dasein.

Heidegger is attacking the view that history is a vast interplay of forces that man has only a small part in. For Heidegger, history is not a deterministic and impersonal force that uses humans as pawns in its greater schemes. Heidegger is writing against versions of historicism which were popular at the time that saw man as essentially determined by the forces of history. One example of this type of historicism is seen in Leo Lowenthal's account: "the stronger will of history is indifferent to the innermost will of individuals, often involving persons and powers despite themselves, in her murderous game" (Wren 112). Such a view of history would require something like a god's eye view for it to be realized. Inauthentic historiographies attempt to view history as an object in the world, or perhaps, as the manifestation of the world itself.

In contrast, Heidegger argues that, "The question of whether

historiography only has as its object a series of unique, 'individual' events, or whether it also has 'laws,' is radically mistaken" (BT 360). Heidegger's conception of authentic historiography is unable to be either 'relativistic' or 'objective' because it is only concerned with critically examining the possibilities of existence that Dasein in the past have disclosed. However, even inauthentic historical accounts cannot live up to claims of universality because they too arise from the historicity of individual Dasein.

For Heidegger, historiography always arises from the existential structures of Dasein, meaning that history can never take on an existence independent from the existences of individual Dasein. It is only through Dasein that history can have any significance. Therefore, any historical account that treats history as a separate entity that oversees or controls human existences should be dismissed as inauthentic. However, these historical accounts are often accepted as fact and used to bolster certain ideologies, which can result in alienation from Dasein's own existence.

II. Inauthentic Historiography in Hannah Arendt's Conception of Totalitarianism

Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* explores the manifestations of inauthentic historiographies in a society. Totalitarian governments terrorize their citizens with versions of history that are the very image of the inauthentic versions of history that Heidegger attacks:

People are threatened by Communist propaganda with missing the train of history, with remaining hopelessly behind their time, with spending their lives uselessly, just as they were threatened by the Nazis with living against the eternal laws of nature and life, with an irreparable and mysterious deterioration of their blood. (OT 345)

The mass man, as Arendt defines him, views history as something that lies objectively beyond his reach, but that he could take part in if he joins the movements of totalitarianism. The individual is completely effaced by these magnificent movements of history, and the ruling parties use an overwhelming logic to impress these views: "If you don't confess, you cease to help History through the Party, and have become a real enemy" (OT 473). An individual's specific birth, life, and death were insignificant facts in the greater workings of

historical processes. As a result, historical documents were only seen as justifications for larger ideologies; the origin of the document was inconsequential.

According to Heidegger's philosophy, the threats of totalitarian historiography are completely groundless. History cannot pass Dasein by because history itself is not something objective. One is not a part of history; rather, one is history, in that historicity grounds one's very being. There are no objective laws that govern the movements of history, but instead there are only possibilities that have-been which Dasein either denies or chooses to take up. Therefore, totalitarian historiographers can be answered by Heidegger in this regard. Their versions of history are inauthentic historical accounts that individual Dasein can reject by taking up their own existence in an authentic way. The nature of totalitarian historiography does not in itself pose any problems for Heidegger's philosophy; it is the extent to which totalitarian governments are able to construct an entirely new world that begins to show cracks in Heidegger's philosophy.

III. Totalitarian Simulated Histories; Problems Presented for Heidegger's Philosophy

Arendt exposes how totalitarian governments use history to reinforce the ideology that supports them, but it does not matter if these histories are based on objective fact or if they were invented by the government:

They were not particularly outraged at the monstrous forgeries in historiography of which all totalitarian regimes are guilty and which announce themselves clearly enough in totalitarian propaganda. They had convinced themselves that traditional historiography was a forgery in any case, since it had excluded the underprivileged and oppressed from the memory of mankind. (OT 332-333)

Traditional histories are seen as just as fraudulent as any other invention and this opens the door for a wave of lies and fabrications that the populace had no problem stomaching. According to Arendt, totalitarian reality became defined not as a world of lies as opposed to a world of truth, but instead as a world in which truth and falsity are categories that no longer exist; everything is a lie (OT 474). Arendt describes life under totalitarianism as "a totally fictitious world, (in

which) failures need not be recorded, admitted, and remembered. Factuality itself depends for its continued existence upon the existence of the nontotalitarian world" (OT 388).

The grand fictions of totalitarianism would have been cast out in normal society, but in a society where fact and fiction are indistinguishable these inventions become new possibilities to be projected into the future. One example of this can be found in the fictitious Protocols, which Hitler had supposedly learned by heart, that told of a farcical worldwide Jewish conspiracy. Arendt argues that, "The delusion of an already existing Jewish world domination formed the basis for the illusion of future German domination" (OT 360). The future becomes fantastically idealistic in such a situation where, in Heideggerian terms, Dasein retrieves possibilities from a fictional past and projects them into the future.

This would not be problematic for Heidegger's philosophy if Dasein had an effective method to verify the factuality of a given history, but Heidegger's theory of truth offers no absolute way to verify fact with reality. Truth [aletheia], for Heidegger, arises out of Dasein's being. Truth does not simply arise from a correspondence between an object and the mind's perception of the object: "To say that a statement is true means that it discovers beings in themselves" (BT 201). At the same time that Dasein is in the truth, it is also in untruth, meaning that as Dasein discloses beings it must also necessarily cover over them. In Heidegger's words, "Because it essentially falls prey to the world, Dasein is in 'untruth' in accordance with its constitution of being" (BT 203, original emphasis). Thus, the truth of a certain version of history is not necessarily dependent on how faithfully it adheres to the way events actually occurred. A historical account is an object that is present-at-hand and the only way to verify whether the account actually occurred would be to compare it to other objects present-at-hand:

When the statement has been expressed, the discoveredness [truth; aletheia] of beings moves into the kind of being of innerworldly things at hand. But to the extent that in this discoveredness, as a discoveredness of?, a relation to things objectively present persists, discoveredness [truth; aletheia] in its turn becomes an objectively present relation between objectively present things (intellectus et res). (BT 206)

Thus, the only answer Heidegger can give to the totalitarian threat of simulated histories would be to compare these histories to other accounts of history or to objects left in the world from that period of time. For Heidegger there can never be an objectively correct version of history, and this means that invented histories have the possibility of becoming a serious problem for Heidegger's philosophy. Heidegger's main concern is not whether a historical account adheres to reality, but rather whether history discloses the existences of Dasein that have-been in a manner that allows us authentically to retrieve these possibilities towards our individualized deaths.

Simulated histories have the possibility to contain just as much "truth" for Heidegger as histories based on actual events because both have equal power to disclose beings in their mode of being. Even so, Heidegger does not completely throw all forms of verification out the window. The traditions that are handed down should still be compared with other historical accounts and objects in the world in order to discover if the accounts were, in fact, invented. However, there is no absolute way to determine if a specific history was simulated, and this concern is always secondary to the question of the meaning of being that the tradition discloses. Dasein's position as the locus of truth allows for simulated histories to function in practically the same way as histories drawn from real events. It is important to note that most of Heidegger's "historical" work draws on philosophers and poets, people whom one can study with little regard to the factuality of their existence. Whether or not Socrates actually existed is a question of little importance to Heidegger. What matters are the questions concerning being that his life discloses and the fateful retrieve of these questions that we must take up as our own.

Arendt's account of totalitarianism displays a disintegration of truth and falsehood in an historical situation. Truth becomes an external process under totalitarianism: "When the Nazis talked about the law of nature or when the Bolsheviks talk about the law of history, neither nature nor history is any longer the stabilizing source of authority for the actions of mortal men; they are movements in themselves" (OT 463). Arendt claims that the loneliness and isolation of the mass man caused him to feel that his own life is meaningless, giving force to the arguments of ideologies that preach the power of an overarching Nature or History. Such an overarching logic overwhelms the loneliness of mass man with the undeniable pressure of its greater significance. If truth

exists at all in the mind of the mass man, it lies in the movements of ideologies that are over and above individual human beings. Truth in a totalitarian state moves according to the will of these forces, but since the nature of these ideologies is movement itself, nothing can ever be pinned down as true or false.

Totalitarian governments did not place the locus of truth within individual Dasein, but instead placed truth as far removed from Dasein as possible; they placed truth in the eventual realization of an overarching ideology. In contrast to the totalitarian position, Heidegger claims Dasein is in truth in the ground of its being, making truth realizable in some sense for individual human beings. However, this places Heidegger's philosophy in a difficult position. Since Dasein is constituted by historicity in the ground of its being, it is necessary that Dasein be able to retrieve possibilities from its past to project into its future. Fabricated historical accounts have the possibility of revealing "truth" in the Heideggerian sense of *aletheia*: they can still disclose the existential structures of Dasein in an authentic way. This means that Heidegger's work contains no solution to the problem of simulated histories that is posed by totalitarianism; however, the question remains whether or not a final solution to the problem of simulated histories is even possible.

IV. Arendt's Final Stance on Truth and Totalitarianism: Parallels to Heidegger

At the end of *Origins of Totalitarianism* Arendt offers a tentative solution to totalitarianism, and to do this she must claim that truth resides in finite human existences, not overarching ideological explanations. Arendt recognizes that the overall goals of totalitarianism are ultimately unrealizable because with each birth there exists a new beginning that undermines the logic of totalitarian ideologies: "the suprahuman force of Nature or History has its own beginning and its own end, so that it can be hindered only by the new beginning and the individual end which the life of each man actually is" (OT 465). The truth of totalitarian ideologies will always be undermined by the fact that humans are born and then die. There is a new beginning and a new end with each life and this leads to a certain amount of freedom for each individual. Arendt argues that it is still possible that totalitarian organizations may re-emerge, but humans will always have the power to overcome this threat:

There remains the fact that the crisis of our time and its central experience have brought forth an entirely new form of government which as a potentiality and an ever-present danger is only too likely to stay with us from now on...But there remains also the truth that every end in history necessarily contains a new beginning...this beginning is guaranteed by each new birth; it is indeed every man. (OT 479)

This means that human finitude always has the possibility of saving human beings from the recurring threat of totalitarianism.

Arendt claims that truth is only realizable in the individual human being, a view that is practically identical to Heidegger's own philosophical position. Essentially, it is due to the finitude of Dasein and its place as the locus of truth that totalitarianism will never completely dominate a society. Thus, the problems of totalitarianism that are unanswerable by Heidegger are similarly unanswerable by Arendt herself. This is perhaps why she claims that the threat of totalitarianism is still with us. If the truth of a certain history comes from individual human beings, then there will never be a completely objective method to determine if a history is fabricated. Therefore, the threat of simulated histories will always exist, and, consequently, the threat of totalitarianism will always exist.

While Arendt's *Origins of Totalitarianism* does expose several dangers in Heidegger's philosophy, she does not directly refute any aspect of *Being and Time*. Arendt calls for a retrieve of the fundamental task of *Being and Time* by re-evaluating the problems involved with authentically taking up one's own existence as a finite being that already exists in a world with a given history. Arendt's work warns that Heidegger's thought is ultimately ineffectual at preventing the proliferation of simulated historical accounts, and also shows the risk that these simulated histories pose. While this is a problem for Heidegger's philosophy, it is a problem without an identifiable solution. Arendt concedes to the fact that totalitarianism will always be with us, so the threat of simulated histories will also continue to remain. Reading *Being and Time* in the light of *Origins of Totalitarianism* reveals the potential perils that Heidegger's position allows, warning us that terrible political situations are always possible. Arendt's work ultimately illustrates that simulated histories

pose a danger for any society, but that this danger can always be combated by the resoluteness of individual human beings. Goethe once said, "But where danger is, grows the saving power also." It is significant that this was also a favorite quote of Heidegger's.

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