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Being Alone

Last summer, I spent a month traveling alone, and two catastrophic events took place: In Belgrade I ran out of books—except for Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time*—and in Sarajevo I got food poisoning. Which meant that I spent my last 72 hours in the Balkans, alone in my room, vomiting garlic-soaked lamb head, with nothing to do but read Heidegger. This was pretty much a terrible experience. But in the weird interplay between being alone and *Being and Time*, I came to believe it was terrible for a reason.

That reason has to do with Heidegger’s idea of authenticity: He was a rare breed of twentieth century German philosopher still into strict binaries like authentic and inauthentic. So he believed in authentic being and inauthentic being; authentic time and inauthentic time. Hence his title: *Being and Time*.

While in the Balkans, I’d developed a complicated relationship to those binaries. Weeks before the lamb-head was present-in-toilet and ready-to-flush, I was spending a lot of time alone. With only sparing interactions with locals, I would often pass days cut off in my mind. Eventually, I entered a swirling, detached mental state, somewhere between stoicism and hallucination. Objects that I normally interacted with fluidly became confusing and fraught. I remember eating polenta one caffeinated morning in Belgrade and being fundamentally unable to tell if it were delicious or rotten—which, looking back may have contributed to the food poisoning. Sunsets could become miserable; thunderstorms a symbol of peace. It was as if I could redesign my entire symbolic and emotional relationship to the world. First it was disorienting, then it was frightening.

Heidegger, strangely enough, was a big fan of this mental state. For him it signalled stepping outside “Das Man”: a social-conditioning force that translates literally to “the man”—as in I’m getting screwed over by “the man.” You can think of Das Man as an average opinion, as received logic. And Das Man is the key difference between authentic and inauthentic being. Heidegger thought that we mostly live inauthentically: We bumble along, believe in received logic—e.g. sunsets are pretty—and never think critically about what Das Man’s “idle chatter” is actually saying. Authentic being had something to do with being alone, with leaving all that chatter behind.

This was all very validating in a find-yourself-abroad I’m-on-my-GAP-YAR sort of way. But as the August weeks stretched on and I read further into *Being and Time*, reality was becoming flimsier, not clearer. Sure, lonesome travel hushed that verbose Das Man, but it also pared down the meaning of whatever was before me. My life’s slow pace allowed expansive looks at my past and future: Instead of just eating the polenta, I’d compare it to porridges I’d had before—and ones I’d soon see—a mild form of dissociation that could last for hours. It soon became second nature to relativize the present.

That’s where the time part of *Being and Time* came in. Heidegger thought those with authentic and inauthentic existences experienced time differently: each has its own so-called temporality. Inauthentic temporality occurs when we forget the past, passively await the future, and exist solely in the present. It’s what we have to do to get through our work days, our papers, our midterms. We must forget, await, and exist if we want to be well functioning members of society.

But that also leaves us defenseless against Das Man. When we live only in the present, we naturally accept the average opinion. We have nothing with which to compare it. Authentic temporality is just the opposite. It considers the millions of potential futures we may have, the way past experiences have shaped us and our world, and recognizes, with intense awareness, how those eras coexist to create us, right here, right now. It is active and personal; it sets our trajectory apart from Das Man. This sort of time tends to hit us at major events, like graduations, birthdays, and weddings. In those moments, we remember, we anticipate, and we examine. We can be critical or celebratory; we seem to flirt with transcendence. But if traveling alone let me do this to every bowl of polenta, why was I so miserable?

One reason, I think, is that I was addicted to the idle chatter of Das Man: I craved its social validation and social direction. I wanted to read on Yelp that the polenta tasted good; I wanted a travel guide to assure me that a Danube sunset is one of the best in the world. Heidegger was aware of how trying this process could be. He thought that if your angst spiral didn't involve thinking about death it wasn't working. (Hey--no one ever said authenticity was cheery!). That's always been the case. But I also believe that some things have changed: Recent technological triumphs have fed our natural addiction to idle chatter, letting us fill any moment of lonesome angst with Das Man. It's scrollable on Facebook, streamable on Netflix. The average opinion is always just a click away. We all used to wake up and go to bed with a good chunk of lonely, authentic temporality; these days we have to flee to the Balkans.

It's not just angst that we're missing out on, though: like most bad experiences--a workout, an exam, a tough conversation--there's an endorphin kick at the end of the spiral: Being alone might lead to contemplating death, but it also lets us renegotiate our relationship to Das Man. It does not escape the world of Netflix streams and Facebook scrolls, but it lets us spot it for what it is. So the end-goal is not isolation in a Sarajevo bathroom (thank god): Isolation is only that first step toward a more earnest and intentional relationship to those around us. We can never escape social determinism, but we can decide how to treat it.

"Overnight," Heidegger wrote, "everything that is primordial gets glossed over as something that has long been well known." I think what he meant here is that the most intense moments, the flashes of authenticity, will always flatten into a narrative, into normal life. I finished *Being and Time*, recovered from food poisoning, slowly tuned back into Das Man. But every morning, in the chilled Lowell courtyard, I hope to access that primordial mindset. I pause, take a sip of coffee, summon Sarajevo or housing day or graduation, and try to fuse past, present, and future into some kind of an authentic temporality: to remember that I will die, that I could have but didn't, that this is all unique and interconnected, that I am never really alone.