Abstract: This paper seeks to investigate the importance Others play in Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s theological work Ethics in comparison to the role of individual existence according to Martin Heidegger’s ontology Being and Time. Both Bonhoeffer and Heidegger wrote before and during World War II, and shed light on the individualism that was promoted by Nazi Germany, but overall sought to transform Germany into a nation of a perfect, totalized collective population. Martin Heidegger published his work Being and Time in 1927, and focused on Da-sein as highly individual. Although Heidegger changed his egocentric ontology presented in Being and Time with a new concern of human mechanization in his 1955 essay, A Question Concerning Technology, Heidegger’s philosophy continued to fail to recognize the Other. During the War, Dietrich Bonhoeffer balanced his theological work Ethics between the importance of the Other in relationship to the individual, and how Others allow human beings to fulfill a dutiful Christian life. Bonhoeffer thus provides a significant account of the Others’ involvement in the individual’s life that gives human beings the capability to take care of the penultimate before reuniting with God in the Ultimate.

Comparing Views of the Other from the Perspectives of Dietrich Bonhoeffer and Martin Heidegger From Pre to Post World War II

Dietrich Bonhoeffer provides a historical account, social critique, and ethical guide in his work Ethics. Writing during World War II, Bonhoeffer critiqued German society by examining the modes in which human beings existed. While the Nazis promoted a culture that celebrated the power of the individual, their social agenda resulted
in de-humanizing the individual, and reduced her to become a source of utility. Without delving into a hermeneutical endeavor of Nazi Germany’s views on the individual, Germany had managed to create a nation of mechanical animals with the façade of human vitalism.

During the time in which the Nazis took power over Germany, Martin Heidegger had just published his ontology, *Being and Time*. This work critiqued the ways in which human beings first understood the world in terms of science and objective fact, when in reality human beings exist in the world before we come to know it scientifically. His philosophy during this period moved away from the particular individualized object, and focused on an all-encompassing worldview – much like the Nazis demonstrated whilst celebrating their society as a whole.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer on the other hand, developed a theological position that challenged Nazi ideology. A vigilant anti-Nazi, Bonhoeffer criticized the harsh polarity Nazism presented consisting of human vitalism opposed to mechanization, and argued that human beings ought to strive for the natural. According to Bonhoeffer the natural aimed for balance between content (vitalism) and form (mechanization), both needed for human life to
flourish.¹ One of the ways that Bonhoeffer believed this equilibrium could be maintained was by preparing the way for the Ultimate - when human beings are once again united with God - by taking care of the penultimate - everything that comes before the Ultimate. Bonhoeffer thought that one of the ways that human beings take care of the penultimate is by taking care of one another to sustain human life.

This paper will be examining the ways in which Dietrich Bonhoeffer opposed Nazi Germany by promoting the importance of the Other. While Martin Heidegger believed that human beings were always “being-in-a-world-with-others,” he fails to mention the obligation I have in relation to Others. Bonhoeffer explains our obligation to others as an individual responsibility, and it is in this responsibility that human beings are able to express themselves as individuals while preserving human life collectively in the penultimate.

Both Heidegger and Bonhoeffer refer to human beings as creatures that act. In Being and Time, Heidegger states that Da-sein (his preferred nomenclature to describe humans’ being) is a being that is concerned with the world

through its everyday projects. As a part of these projects, human beings live in a world of possibilities. In order to prevent from being overwhelmed with possibilities, Da-sein must remain free-for, which means to be able to have an attitude towards its possibilities that can have different interpretations. Bonhoeffer writes similarly on human freedom, stating that human beings are free to act outside of a given template – i.e. specific vocational occupations.\(^2\) However, Bonhoeffer believes that our actions ought to be committed as responsible deeds to sustain life, where as Heidegger maintains a highly selfish model on one’s own concern for one’s own projects.

Although Heidegger acknowledges the Other as a part of an individual’s life, he believes that Others conceal Da-sein within a collective schema. Heidegger recognizes Da-sein as being-with Others, but the world is always referential to the ‘I’ that is Da-sein.\(^3\) Because the world is experienced individually by Da-sein, the Other becomes encompassed within a more general category. He describes this collective entity as “the-they,” which determines the ways that Da-sein is able to carry out its everyday

\(^2\) Ibid., 251.
\(^3\) Charles Marsh, "Bonhoeffer on Heidegger and togetherness" in Modern Theology 8, no. 3, 275-276.
projects. Heidegger writes, “The they, which is nothing definite and which all are, though not as a sum, prescribes the kind of being of everydayness.” The they is anonymous and determines our social context of Da-sein’s being-with-others. The they constitutes the way Da-sein is active in its projects, and covers Da-sein over. The individual is lost within a larger context of others, which perpetuates a mechanized collective, and results in restricting and suppressing the actions of the individual.

Bonhoeffer rejects this condescending attitude towards the Other, and offers a more positive approach to how Others allow the individual to act in such a way that expresses to God an individual’s responsibility for the penultimate. Bonhoeffer writes about human responsibility as a result of the Fall of humankind. Once human beings had gained moral knowledge and freedom, they were in disunion with God and therefore, responsible for protecting the natural against the unnatural. Bonhoeffer distinguishes the natural as life containing both reason and freedom as opposed to the unnatural that dominates and destroys life. Bonhoeffer writes, “The natural is the form of life

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preserved by God for the fallen world and directed towards justification, redemption, and the renewal through Christ,” and later, “Destruction of the natural means destruction of life,” suggesting that human beings are responsible for caring about the life of the Other.

Human beings can exercise this responsibility in the penultimate by acting for others. Where Heidegger believed that Others created a anonymous mass overpowering the individual, Bonhoeffer thought that individuals were able to freely move through the mob to express human responsibility and obedience to God. This responsibility extended throughout the natural and did not exclude an individual in taking care of a particular sect of people—or silo. Instead of repressing the individual, Bonhoeffer believed that this totalized view of responsibility enabled the individual to act more freely. Just as Heidegger describes the world as place where human beings exist within a realm of possibilities, Bonhoeffer attributes these human possibilities through his claim that responsibility for others is fundamentally vast stating,

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“responsibility is a total response of the whole man to the whole of reality.”

By acting in Christ for the Other, human beings are able to preserve the natural by living in balance between vitalism and mechanization. Although Heidegger’s early ontology *Being and Time* focused solely on the individual living in a totalized world (sounds pretty balanced between vitalism and mechanization, right?) his selfishness ultimately fails in the view of Bonhoeffer. Ironically, Heidegger later wrote *A Question Concerning Technology*, which was primarily concerned with the advancement of technology. Human beings were becoming too concerned with their everyday projects that the world was becoming solely a place of human utility and exploitation. Heidegger writes about the “greatest danger” in his essay describing the world becoming so mechanized that human beings become objects for human utility. By systematizing the world as human resources, human beings join this order themselves, and become standing-reserve. Human being are not limited as orderers only, but also become the very objects that are being ordered. This mindset leads human beings to establish

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6 Ibid., 254.
the world in such a way that human beings treat each other as well as raw materials.⁷

By taking Bonhoeffer’s stance on the significance of the Other, the concern for complete mechanization becomes irrelevant. Bonhoeffer writes that “mechanization draws its strength only from life and when it has killed all life it must itself collapse.”⁸ Without human vitalism to counterbalance mechanization, the world would destroy the natural by means of the unnatural, and consequently destroy the penultimate. By caring for the Other, human beings are able to maintain the natural within the penultimate by protecting life. Human relationships do not release the individual from the Other nor do they surrender the Other to its own alien autonomy, but the Other “allows the individual to be free for and with the Other.”⁹ Through acknowledging the responsibility human beings have for Others, human beings can care for human life as a whole while expressing their individual being through the freedom to act for Others in Christ.

Works Cited


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