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The Methodological Role of Angst in Being and Time

Katherine Withy
Georgetown University

Abstract: Heidegger’s analysis of the mood of angst is usually understood in terms of its contribution to the account of authenticity in Division II of Being and Time. I approach the analysis of angst from a different direction, by working out its methodological function in Division I. I distinguish inauthentic falling from the structural phenomenon of falling, and argue that the latter poses a methodological problem for Heidegger: if we are essentially entity-directed, how can we get the unity of our being in view? Heidegger overcomes this difficulty by analysing a mood that tunes us into the ontological: angst. I explain how angst provides this ontological insight, and show how analysis of it leads to questions of truth and reality. This provides a warrant for the placement of the analysis of angst in Division I.

I. Why angst?

As John Haugeland reminds us, one of the primary exegetical tasks in reading Being and Time (SZ) is to account for the presence of ‘existentialist’ notions in this book about being.¹ In addition to familiar (and not so familiar) ontological concepts, Heidegger discusses angst, death, conscience, guilt and authenticity. These are ethical-existentialist concepts: they
concern the riskiness and fragility of human life, and how we go about living in the face of this.² What do they have to do with ontology? Haugeland and others have stories to tell about the ontological significance of death, and with it authenticity, conscience and guilt. Such stories typically work by interpreting the risk in question as a specifically ontological risk: a fragility in meaning. Authenticity is accordingly a way of standing towards ontological risk. Angst is usually understood as part of such a story.³ It is a mood that reveals ontological risk, and our response to this mood makes us either authentic or inauthentic. On this kind of reading, angst belongs in SZ because it is connected to the ethical-existentialist concepts.

This interpretation attracts two worries. The first is textual: Heidegger analyses angst near the end of Division I, and not in Division II where he works out the other ethical-existentialist concepts. This problem is sometimes solved by imaginatively moving the analysis of angst and treating it as if it occurred in Division II. Dreyfus, for example, does this.⁴ While this is a legitimate last resort, perhaps there is a way to account for the analysis of angst that makes good sense of its textual location.

The second worry is conceptual: the relation of angst to the ethical-existentialist concepts – particularly authenticity – is far from clear. Although Heidegger mentions authenticity and inauthenticity in the analysis of angst, and mentions angst throughout the opening chapters of Division II, he does not clearly spell out the ethical-existentialist significance of angst. It is not straightforwardly deducible from the analysis itself. When we try to understand the relation of angst to the other ethical-existentialist concepts, we end up with a nest of problems. (I mention some of these later). Perhaps there is another set of concepts in terms of which angst is better understood.
It might be helpful to approach angst without starting from its ethical-existentialist resonances. Heidegger claims that the analysis of angst plays a methodological role in SZ (SZ181,182,184,185,190). We analyse angst because it has to do not with how we lead our lives generally, but specifically with how we do philosophy. This is plain when Heidegger discusses moods and philosophising elsewhere. He links angst to philosophising in other texts, and more generally stresses the importance for philosophising of being in a proper mood or attunement. This is curious. Why is experiencing a mood like angst necessary for Heidegger’s kind of philosophising?

Part of the answer is that by ‘angst’, Heidegger does not mean what we normally mean by ‘anxiety’. On a common view, anxiety is a psychological-physiological condition that is related to fear, nervousness and worry. While anxiety can focus our attention, it primarily confuses and distorts. It inhibits everyday functioning to a greater or lesser extent, depending on its severity. Performance anxiety, for example, is often mild and manageable; generalised anxiety is debilitating and pathological. Anxiety of any severity is to be avoided, we might think, or at least managed. That we can and do experience anxiety is held to be a lamentable – even if necessary or useful – fact about us.

Like anxiety, Heidegger’s angst is a rupture in a life. It is a crisis of the everyday. In the experience of angst, my ordinary life collapses – but not in the sense that it falls to pieces and I have to put it back together again. Rather, my life collapses away from me. Engagement in my daily tasks and concerns is suspended, and the day-to-day of life shrinks into insignificance. But unlike anxiety, angst has a positive valence. This breakdown is a legitimate revelation. Where I ordinarily see the myriad tasks ahead of me and the particular entities before me, in angst I see my life as a life, and the whole world as a world. Angst is
an experience within a life that provides genuine ontological insight into what it takes to lead a life.

Such a crisis experience has consequences for how we lead our lives; it has ethical-existentialist significance. But in Division I, this experience is important because it changes our lives in a very specific way: it changes how we philosophise, or what is possible for our philosophising. It reveals something that we cannot access otherwise, and which is crucial for Heidegger’s phenomenological project. In what follows, I explain why Heidegger considers angst to be a necessary part of his philosophising. In brief, the claim is that by ‘angst’, Heidegger means something like ‘the philosophical attitude’. What he means by this is quite specific. To understand this, we have to understand what Heidegger has done in Division I, what he wants to do at its close, what methodological problem he faces, and how angst is supposed to address this problem.

II. Falling
Near the close of Division I, Heidegger encounters a methodological problem created by the structural phenomenon of falling: “Our everyday environmental experiencing, which remains directed both ontically and ontologically towards entities within-the-world, is not the sort of thing which can present Dasein in an ontically primordial manner for ontological analysis” (SZ181). Angst is supposed to solve this problem. What is the problem, and how does it arise?

Thus far, Heidegger has sketched a picture of Dasein, the entity that each of us is and which is distinguished by the fact that it understands being or is open to entities in their being. This is to say that things show up to us meaningfully; we are entities for whom things
are intelligible, or who are open to intelligibility (being). Heidegger focusses on how things are meaningful in our ‘everyday environmental experiencing’ – using equipment, interacting with others, having moods, and so on. In analysing everydayness, Heidegger shows us what we must be like in order to make sense of entities in the ways that we do. He identifies the structures, which he calls ‘existentialia’, that make this possible. The existentialia are aspects or dimensions of our being – it is by virtue of these that we are what we are.

In the final chapter of Division I (I.6), Heidegger wants to do something new. He wants to step back from the various structures of our openness that he has identified and work out their unity, which he will call ‘care’. Here, Heidegger encounters a methodological problem: in everydayness, we are ontically and ontologically directed towards entities. We are ontically directed towards entities in that we are entities (people) engaged with entities (tools, other people, ourselves, fearsome things, and so on). We are ontologically directed towards entities in that what is most ontologically salient to us in our everyday going-about in the world is the being of the entities we proximally deal with – especially readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand. So analysing our everydayness reveals us insofar as we are entity-directed.

The problem is that in everydayness we are not directed towards ourselves. This does not mean that we lack self-awareness, or that we do not reflect on ourselves and our lives. We do this in therapeutic situations, when dealing with life changes, in making daily choices, and so on. In everydayness, we are often ontically directed towards ourselves – directed towards ourselves as the particular, concrete entities that we are (at various degrees of abstraction). But even in this, we are not directed towards ourselves ontologically. We are not directed towards ourselves (as entities) in such a way that our distinctive being, in its
unity, is in view for us. We are so immersed in leading our lives and dealing with entities that we do not, and cannot, see what it takes to lead a life and for entities to show up.

Since the unity of our being is not in view for us in everydayness, an analysis of what shows up in everydayness cannot reveal the unity of our being. This follows from the hermeneutic character of Heidegger’s phenomenology, which is always a matter of drawing out our implicit understanding of being. In everydayness, our understanding of our own being as care is obscured by our directedness to entities (including ourselves). Our being is “concealed” from us; “Dasein is ontically ‘closest’ to itself and ontologically farthest” (SZ16). To grasp our being in its unity, Heidegger needs to analyse human life in a special kind of experience – one in which we are revealed to ourselves as the kind of entity that we are. Only in such an experience do we show up as entities (ontic) in such a way that our unified being (ontological) is manifest and available for analysis. Only such an experience ‘presents Dasein in an ontically primordial manner for ontological analysis’.

Before exploring this experience, notice that this methodological problem stems from our constitution. We are amidst (bei) entities, and this obscures (our) being from us. First, Dasein is essentially entity-directed. Heidegger puts this by saying that we are absorbed or immersed in entities. ‘Absorption’ is not to be taken too literally. Whether I am engrossed in a puzzle, listlessly waiting for the bus, or staring out of the window on a rainy afternoon, I am directed towards, open to, absorbed in entities. Heidegger sometimes calls this being amidst or absorbed in entities ‘falling’ (e.g. SZ175). This is not always what he means by ‘falling’. Often, by ‘falling’ Heidegger means inauthentic falling, which is one mode – the inauthentic mode – of being amidst entities. But occasionally, Heidegger uses
‘falling’ to name the structural or existential phenomenon of our being amidst, absorbed in, or directed towards entities.⁸

Calling this ‘falling’ is a little odd. In both English and German, ‘falling’ or ‘Verfallen’ has a theological resonance. Heidegger stresses that he is not describing the loss of some ideal human state (SZ179). What seems to appeal to him about the term is its sense of movement. Falling, he says, is a kind of ontological motion (SZ180). I take it that the metaphor of ‘motion’ expresses the dative structure of our openness.⁹ As an intentional comportment is always ‘about’ something, and our ontological understanding is always an understanding ‘of’ entities (in their being), openness is always an openness ‘to’ entities. With a little imagination, we can express this ‘to’ as a movement – towards. As always an openness to entities, openness is (as it were) pulled or drawn out towards entities. (Compare the metaphor of consciousness ‘reaching out’ to objects). Putting this motion on the vertical plane gives the motion of a fall. Stones fall through space towards the earth; openness falls ontologically towards entities. It is in this metaphorical sense that Heidegger calls our entity-directedness ‘falling’. It is crucial, then, not to import a negative evaluation into our understanding of the term when Heidegger uses it in this sense. Falling is a neutral motion; it is the ‘movement’ of openness out towards entities. It is the fact that openness has a dative structure, or is an openness to.

If we are comfortable expressing openness metaphorically as a movement towards…, then we can go one step further and see it as a movement from…. Heidegger does this when he glosses falling as a ‘flight’ (SZ229): openness flees from something to entities. This expresses the fact that in being immersed in entities (being open to), there is a correlate covering over (flight from). To use a different metaphor: paired with the opening
up is a closing off. The point is that, as essentially entity-directed, (our) being is obscured from us.

To understand this, compare ordinary absorption in an activity, such as writing on a computer. True absorption in writing involves a blindness to what makes it possible – the operation of the software, the motion of one’s fingers on the keyboard, and so on. Part of being absorbed in writing is not seeing how it happens. This ‘how’ is too close to be seen, like a pair of glasses. Similarly for our absorption in, or openness to, entities. We are immersed in that to which we are open (entities) and overlook or look through what makes this possible: our own openness, our being open to being. Thus we also overlook being itself. We are caught up in meaningful things, and notice neither meaning itself nor our own meaning-articulating and meaning-responsive character.

So the grammar of the term ‘falling’ expresses a great deal about how openness to entities works. In being open to entities, we are closed off from (our) being. There is revelation (of entities) only with a covering over (of (our) being); the movement towards (entities) is at the same time a movement from ((our) being). In Heidegger’s language of the introduction to SZ: what we are is ontically closest to us, since we are it, but precisely for that reason it is ontologically furthest (SZ16). Our being, and so being itself, is too close to see. Falling, being amidst entities, means that we are ontologically far from ourselves.

That we fall in this sense presents a serious methodological problem for Heidegger. How can he phenomenologically reveal the unity of our being, if it is necessarily hidden from us? The object of his analysis is hidden from our view. The difficulty is much like that of trying to see your contact lenses, or to look at the light in a room rather than the
illuminated objects. To see our openness itself, in its full structural unity, we need a way to bring it out of its hiddenness and into our view.

III. Philosophy and Mood

The structural phenomenon of falling is our being open to entities at the expense of being open to our own openness. This constitutive self-concealing is a ‘flight’ of sorts from ourselves, towards entities. In order to see our own openness in a way that reveals its unity, we need an experience that disrupts or arrests this flight. To seek this, Heidegger asks: “Is there in Dasein an understanding findingness in which Dasein has been disclosed to itself in some distinctive way?” (SZ182).12 Angst is supposed to be this experience. “[I]n angst Dasein gets brought before itself through its own being, so that we can define phenomenologically the character of the entity disclosed in angst, and define it as such in its being” (SZ184). Why think that there is such an experience, and what must it be like?

At the outset of the analysis of angst, Heidegger distinguishes our flight from ourselves from the fleeing involved in fear. When we are afraid, we ‘shrink back’ from some particular, threatening entity (SZ185). We move away from a growling dog or painful memory, whether through spatial, psychological or other distancing. This differs from the flight or movement involved in falling because falling is not a flight from any particular entity. It is not ontic, but ontological: we flee or overlook (our) being. We do this by fleeing towards entities, by being amidst entities. Falling “does not flee in the face of entities within-the-world; these are precisely what it flees towards” (SZ189). The movement is not from one entity towards another, but from the ontological to the ontic.

As falling, we are ontologically far from ourselves. Nonetheless, pre-ontologically we are not strangers to ourselves (SZ16). Just as we have to see or hear a barking dog in
order to step back from it, so too Dasein must be disclosed to itself in order for it to conceal itself from itself. In order to obscure, conceal, overlook or look through our own being, we must have an implicit grasp or non-thematic awareness of it. “Only to the extent that Dasein has been brought before itself in an ontologically essential manner through whatever disclosedness belongs to it, can it flee in the face of that in the face of which it flees” (SZ184). This suggests that it is possible to reveal what falling covers over. If falling is a fleeing or turning away from ourselves that contains or presupposes a view of ourselves, then there might be a way to get this view into focus. We cannot undo or reverse falling – we cannot divest ourselves of our constitutive entity-directedness and self-concealing. But we can perhaps disrupt it in some way, by arresting the movement towards entities and turning towards ourselves (SZ185). This would involve a certain suspending or bracketing of that to which we are open, such that our openness can show itself.

Both this methodological problem and its proposed solution depend on our peculiar ontico-ontological character. We are open to entities in their being, or understand the being of entities. In making things meaningful or being open to the intelligibility of things, we span the ontological difference between being and entities, between things and their meaning. We move, as it were, between the ontological (being) and the ontic (entities).  

‘Falling’ captures this motion in one direction: the overlooking of being and hooking into entities (in their being). Movement in the other direction is ‘transcendence’: we move beyond (meta) entities (ta phusika) to being, or grasp the being (of entities). This dual motion is what we are. To solve the methodological problem that falling poses, we need to make the reverse motion salient – we must experience ourselves as transcending. We do this in metaphysics, or philosophising, which is the experience in which we hook into the
ontological. At this point in SZ, Heidegger is encouraging us to make this philosophical move. The experience through which he solves the methodological problem is in some sense a philosophical experience.

How do we make this movement of transcendence? What does it take to disrupt falling? Recall that I compared falling being-amidst-entities to ordinary cases of being absorbed in an activity. In these cases, it is possible for my absorption to be disrupted and its conditions to come into salience. This can happen in one of two ways. The first is a breakdown. My software glitches, my typing produces bizarre characters, or my glasses break. This forces me to turn my attention from my writing or from objects in my visual field, towards what allows me to write or see, which has now become ‘conspicuous’ (SZ73).

The second is not mentioned by Heidegger. It is perhaps most familiar at the end of the work day. When the last task is complete or 5 o’clock approaches, I step back from my work and survey what I have done and how I have accomplished it. I look around my workspace, tidy up a few things, and notice the tools of the trade. Such pauses also occur unbidden in the midst of work or ordinary absorption. While typing, I see that the letter ‘s’ has worn off my keyboard; I catch my reflection in a store window and notice my glasses once again. In such moments of suspended activity, I look at the tools that I use and the work in which I was absorbed in a new way. The tools have not broken down, but I am no longer absorbed in the work. The tools, which I ordinarily overlook or look through, come into view – if only for a moment. Let me call this ‘tool noticing’, in contrast to ‘tool breakdown’. Since each allows the conditions of absorbed engagement to come into salience, what disrupts falling must be analogous to one or the other of these.
We can reconstruct the kind of reasoning that might have brought Heidegger from an analogy with the disruption of ordinary absorption, to the mood of angst. (I do not claim that this is the path that Heidegger followed, or that the reasoning is watertight, but only that there is a conceivable passage). First, since our absorbed entity-directedness is constitutive for us, we cannot put entities out of play by our own volition. Like tool breakdown and tool noticing, tuning into the ontological is not actively accomplished, but happens to us. What happens is that a new attitude or perspective ‘comes over’ us. This is a matter of mood. ‘Mood’ is to be understood in a broad and deep sense, as the affective atmosphere that pervades the mise-en-scène of human life, through which we are attuned to ourselves and our world in a particular way. (Compare the idea of ‘mood music’). In a fearful mood, for example, we are tuned into potential threats and safe havens; certain dimensions of ourselves and our situation are salient or matter, while others are not or do not. For the ontological to become salient, a special kind of mood must come over us – one that tunes us into the ontological rather than the ontic.

The arising of this mood is a result of either ‘breakdown’ or ‘noticing’. On the analogy with tool breakdown, our openness to being misfires or malfunctions: a particular understanding of being shows itself to be untenable. This is an ontological crisis of the sort that Thomas Kuhn identifies prior to scientific paradigm shifts, or that Jonathan Lear draws out in the collapse of a culture. In ontological breakdown, we are forced to reassess and reevaluate our particular understanding of being. We turn from the entities we were dealing with and assess the adequacy of that in terms of which we make sense of them. We see that we were operating with a particular understanding of being, and so that we are ontological entities.
On the analogy with tool noticing, the ontological comes into salience without calling for reassessment and reevaluation of a particular understanding of being. It is a gestalt switch. I take this to be the paradigm case of tuning into the ontological. It strikes us *that we make sense of things*. There is no revealed fragility or inadequacy in our understanding of being, and no particular recalcitrant entity, that sets this off. We come to a moment, or a moment comes to us, when we notice or tune into ourselves as understanders of being, and so notice or tune into to being itself. This might happen while reading Kuhn or Lear; it might happen while reading Heidegger. It might happen while walking down the street on a sunny Wednesday afternoon. It might happen often, or rarely. It might not happen at all, in which case, I am one of those people who ‘just don’t get philosophy’ – one of those people who will not, or cannot easily, tune into the ontological.

In either case, we are looking for a mood that turns us towards being. It is not set off by any particular ontic event or experience, it puts entities out of play, and in it (our) being shows up to us. It is a mood, then, that is not *about* any particular entity or entities (as fear is *about* some fearsome entity). It is about no particular thing – about *nothing* (SZ187). It is an affect without an (ontic) object. Angst presents itself as a candidate for this mood, since angst can be understood as fear that lacks an object, and has been associated in philosophy with insight into the human condition.¹⁷

So angst is the name for an experience in which I come to see not the entities to which I am open, but that I am open. By analysing what is revealed in this experience, Heidegger can work around our constitutive self-concealing and explore the nature of our openness. Angst thus allows Heidegger to pass phenomenologically from a characterisation
of our everydayness to a characterisation of our being as care. This is why the analysis of angst occurs in Division I: it solves the methodological problem created by falling.

IV. Angst

What happens in angst, and how does this allow us to grasp the unity of our being? Heidegger describes the experience of angst:

[A]ngst brings Dasein back from its falling absorption in the ‘world’ [i.e. entities]. Everyday familiarity collapses. Dasein has been individualized, but individualized as being-in-the-world. Being-in enters the existential ‘mode’ of the ‘un-at-home’ [Un-zuhause]. Nothing else is meant by our talk about ‘uncanniness’. (SZ189, translation modified)

The first sentence names angst’s methodological function. The following three sentences describe what happens in angst, and so what is distinctive about this mood. Familiarity collapses, Dasein is individualised, and it is uncanny or not-at-home. Let me take each aspect in turn.

First, everyday familiarity collapses. Heidegger has previously explained that “[i]n angst, what is environmentally ready-to-hand sinks away, and so, in general, do entities within-the-world” (SZ187). This ‘sinking away’ of entities is the ontic being put out of play or losing its salience. This is the flipside of the disruption of falling qua turning towards the ontological. Entities sink away just as what I am writing slips away from me when my computer malfunctions or when I pack up my workspace.

It is somewhat misleading to express this as a collapse of familiarity. It is not that things become unfamiliar or defamiliarised, showing up to me as strange or alien.¹⁸ Nor
does the world lose its structural articulation, leaving only a seething mass (as happens in Sartre’s *Nausea*). Rather, entities (including myself and my life) withdraw or recede – they collapse *away* from me. They fall out of view, as it were. Thus “[t]he ‘world’ [i.e. entities] can offer nothing more” (SZ187) in the sense that entities do not solicit me to engage with them. Engagement with entities becomes impossible, because I have been turned away from them. My entity-directedness has been suspended.

This withdrawal is paired with a revelation. When entities lose their grip on me, what stands revealed is what makes this possible: the world in its worldhood (that is, in its character as a system of interrelated practices, values and possibilities, in terms of which particular entities show up as the entities that they are). This is analogous to the moment when I survey my workspace, seeing it as that in which I accomplish my work. When Heidegger analysed worldhood earlier in SZ, he illuminated this system of meanings from a localised, entity-centric point of view. He did not show the network of meanings itself, but instead showed how meaningful entities (say, a hammer) are caught up in it (by referring to nails and wood, to the project of fastening, to the goal of shelter (SZ84)). Heidegger’s analysis of the indicator on a car, for example, radiates out from the indicator to other entities and human behaviours, displaying the context of meaningful relations by following it from entity to entity (SZ78). To use an imperfect image, this is like working from pearl to pearl to see the string on which they are strung. To see the string itself in its totality, we have to take the pearls off (or at least, view the entire necklace). So too, to grasp the world itself in its worldhood, we need to directly experience the network of meaningfulness as such, as a totality viewed in itself rather than glimpsed through a particular entity or subset of entities.
The experience of angst allegedly provides this. In it, the receding of entities is paired with
the revelation of the world itself.

Along with entity-withdrawal and world-revelation comes a life-withdrawal and self-
revelation. This is expressed in Heidegger’s third sentence: in angst, I am individualised as
being-in-the-world. As entities sink away, all of the ontic (or rather, ‘existentiell’) particulars of my life – my personality, my goals, all of the large and small details – drop out of view. I see not what my life consists in, but that it consists in such things: that a human life is a complex matrix of matterings and projects. With this dimension in focus, it is not me who is at stake in angst, but some ‘one’.¹⁹ This ‘one’ is not the anonymous public ‘one’ (das Man, as in ‘one boards the train here’), which I typically am. It is the ‘one’ implied by Heidegger’s ‘je’ (‘in each case’): a case of Dasein, just insofar as it is such a case. I am revealed to myself as a case of Dasein – as thrown projection, as a site of meaning-articulation and meaning-responsiveness. This is individualising in two ways. First, it individuates me as the kind of entity that I am, in distinction from other kinds of entities. I am a case of Dasein, rather than some other kind of entity. Second, it individualises me, since being a case of Dasein is not an indifferent fact that attaches to me. Dasein is mine to be. So being revealed to myself as a case of Dasein calls me, and no other, to the responsibility of being this. (Filling out this responsibility will amount to giving an account of authenticity). In sum: I am revealed to myself as a case (as this case) of Dasein (of this way of being).

As with the revelation of the world, this self-revelation goes beyond what Heidegger’s analyses have thus far been able to expose, making the analysis of this experience methodologically fruitful. Previously in Division I, Heidegger revealed Dasein’s
being by working from particular dealings with entities back to the specific structures that make them possible. By starting with everyday ontic phenomena, we get a window onto a particular ontological structure. By considering further aspects of our dealings in the world, we get more windows onto more structures. But no matter how much we multiply these windows and add to our list of essential structures, what does not (and cannot) come into clear view by this method is the totality and unity of the essential structures. To see this, we need to do something other than make a series of localised moves from the ontic to the ontological. We need to suspend, and to some extent escape, the ontic entirely. That is, we must disrupt falling. Angst gives us this direct line of sight into our unified being.

So the experience of angst involves the withdrawal of entities and the revelation of the world in its worldhood, as well as the withdrawal of my life and the revelation of my being as Dasein. The more difficult part of Heidegger’s description of angst is his claim that in this, we are ‘un-at-home’ [un-zuhausel] or ‘uncanny’ [unheimlich].

V. Uncanniness

If we are going to call moments of ontological insight ‘angst’, then they had better involve something recognisably ‘angsty’. Heidegger locates this in a threat, which he calls ‘uncanniness’ (SZ188-189). He spends much of the analysis trying to identify this threat. But, other than easing his appropriation of the term ‘angst’, it is not clear why Heidegger would need something to play the role of a threat at all. On the story that I have told, Heidegger’s search for a threat in angst begs for explanation.

The threat is supposed to explain why we fall. Assume, to begin with (and consistently with my story thus far), that the structural phenomenon of falling is at issue. We
can talk about this phenomenon in two ways: as absorption (being amidst entities), and as flight (the correlate concealing of being). In seeking to explain the former, we ask: Why are we amidst entities? What makes it possible for entities to show up meaningfully? Part of the answer lies in the character of the flight from being: being is concealed even as it is revealed. As both revealed and concealed, being shows up to us mediately – through, or as, meaningful entities. But we need to go deeper to explain this connection: Why is (our) being concealed, even as it is revealed? Why do we flee (cover over) being? This question seeks an account of falling *qua* flight. On this reading, the threat – uncanniness, that from which falling flees – is what accounts for the concealing of the ontological.

*That* being must be covered over is relatively easy to understand. If we are to engage with meaningful entities, then being – understood as meaning or intelligibility – cannot be in focus. To see entities as meaningful, we must overlook or look through their meaning. This is analogous to the transparency of tools in ordinary cases of absorption. We can be amidst entities only if being is, in this sense, concealed. Being must withdraw into the background, as that in terms of which entities show up as what they are. Bringing this background into view, as happens in angst, comes at the expense of our immersed engagement.

This is part of the explanation of how we can be amidst entities. The explanation asserts that being amidst entities requires the concealing of being. But it does not explain *why* this is so, and so does not *explain* why we fall in the sense of fleeing – why being must be covered over. What is the inner logic and necessity of this concealing? What drives or governs the play of background and foreground? More specifically: what is it about being that requires that it be concealed in order for entities to show up in light of it? Why is the metaphor of background / foreground appropriate? Why, that is, does the analogy with
ordinary absorption hold? It is one thing to say *that* this must be the case, it is another to spell out the logic behind it. This would amount to explaining the nature and necessity of the connection (the hyphen) in our character as ontico-ontological.

Understood as the question of the logic of being’s concealment, the question of that from which falling flees is not quite as novel or unfamiliar as first appears. Although Heidegger wants to distance himself to some extent from traditional Western philosophising (which he finds phenomenologically misleading and ontologically suspect), we can nonetheless locate versions of this question in it. Plato worries about this issue, or could have done so, when he touches on our forgetting of the forms at birth. If it is clear *that* we have forgotten our knowledge of the forms, it remains an open question *why* this should be the case. What is it about this knowledge that requires it to retreat when we enter the material world? In the Biblical tradition, we find the same question-structure (but perhaps not the same question): if it is clear *that* we are in a post-Lapsarian condition, we can still ask by what logic this must exclude the direct presence of God. Why can we not interact directly with God? Why can we not have full access to the forms? Why must meaning or intelligibility withdraw in order for us to be absorbed in the way that we are?

Understanding Heidegger’s question as at least resonating with these traditional questions allows us to explain some of what happens in I.6. So let me prescind from their important differences and treat them all together. If we are gripped by something like the question of the withdrawal of meaning, then we are worried about the relationship between the ontological and the ontic – between meaning and entities, between things and the sense that they make. At least two further issues lie in this general vicinity. First, if we place emphasis on the fact that we are meaning-directed (are ontological, have access to the forms,
have access to God), then we might worry about the ontological status of what is ‘out there’ that the withdrawal of meaning allows to show up. Is the material world or the earthly realm real, or a mere shadow of reality? Are meaningful entities not just a product of our meaning-giving? This is the question of the reality of the external world, which Heidegger addresses (and dissolves) shortly after the analysis of angst. Second, what about the connection between us and what is ‘out there’ – if meaning has withdrawn, how can we be sure that we are getting things right? This is the question of truth, which Heidegger discusses next. Although Heidegger thinks that these questions are poorly formulated pseudo-problems, it is no accident that they go together and that Heidegger discusses them shortly after analysing angst. They are problems that (seem to) arise when we try to figure out what links the ontic and the withdrawn ontological.

The proper approach to clarifying the logic of being’s withdrawal – that is, to identifying that from which falling flees – is analysing angst. Angst reveals what is ordinarily concealed from us; it reveals the ontological. Thus angst will reveal whatever it is about being that accounts for the fact that it is concealed. Angst will reveal the threat from which falling flees. (Further, since the methodological necessity of angst rests on the fact that being is concealed, in revealing why being must be concealed, angst will reveal the source of its own methodological necessity). Unfortunately, Heidegger does not address the problem of being’s withdrawal in the analysis of angst in SZ. He does not approach it directly until 1929’s ‘What is Metaphysics?’, where he first describes being as finite and considers the nothing. Here we see that our ‘flight’ from being towards entities is not ‘motivated’ in any psychological sense; it is not something that we do or for which we are responsible. It belongs to the nature of being or intelligibility: being is intrinsically self-
concealing (nihilating). Being’s self-concealing or self-withdrawing receives its first serious treatment in ‘On the Essence of Truth’ (1930), which is usually taken to mark a turning point in Heidegger’s thought. In Heidegger’s later vocabulary, the question becomes: what is the lethē at the heart of alētheia, and whence its deprivation (a-)? This question haunts Heidegger for the rest of his career. It is prefigured (‘announced’ is too strong) in the analysis of angst in SZ.

It is not clear to me that Heidegger has an answer to this question, or a clear sense of how to approach it phenomenologically. What is clear is that he does not pursue it in SZ. Instead, he changes the topic. Rather than explaining why being must be concealed, or even why we are entity-directed rather than not, Heidegger explains why some of us are more mired in our everyday environmental experiencing than others, and so do not or will not (or would rather not) experience angst and recognise (our) being. That is, he explains why being is concealed in an aggravated way in some cases. Schematically, instead of explaining why human nature is x, Heidegger explains why some of us are more x than others. (A theological analogy: explaining original sin vs. explaining why some people are especially sinful).

The ground for this switch is prepared earlier in the discussion of falling, where Heidegger persistently collapses the structural phenomenon of falling (being amidst entities) and its aggravated, inauthentic form (inauthenticity) (e.g. SZ175). This allows Heidegger to covertly recast the methodological problem that angst is supposed to solve in terms of inauthenticity. The problem, recall, is that we are “directed both ontically and ontologically towards entities within-the-world” (SZ181). This is an existential feature of human life itself, but it also takes an exacerbated, inauthentic form. Since we are ontologically directed
towards entities within-the-world, and since our being is concealed, there is a tendency built into human life to misunderstand what we are. We take ourselves to be kinds of tools, objects, or natural entities. This goes beyond the fact that our being is hidden from us, since it builds on top of this hiddenness a positive self-misunderstanding. This is, or is part of, inauthentic falling, and it is a further difficulty that the existential analytic must overcome.

Heidegger explains this phenomenon by identifying something in our being – call it death, guilt or uncanniness – that is difficult for us to face. This motivates some of us to misunderstand our being. It is in angst that we have to face up to what we are, and so angst that solves the secondary methodological problem of inauthentic falling. It disrupts inauthenticity, bringing us towards authenticity. Angst becomes a version, or part, of conscience, and enters the arena of the ethical-existentialist concepts. But it does so ambiguously. Since it is in angst that we first encounter the threat that motivates inauthenticity, angst must also occasion becoming inauthentic. On this reading, then, angst has the dual role of explaining both authenticity and inauthenticity – and so it explains neither. Further, the placement of the analysis of angst in Division I now becomes problematic, and its relation to the truth and reality discussions unclear.

Accordingly, uncanniness – the threat revealed in angst, from which falling flees – is an ambiguous concept in SZ. If angst is the mood that motivates inauthentic falling (and brings us to authenticity), then uncanniness is whatever finitude – death, guilt or similar – belongs to our being, to which it is difficult for us to face up. If angst is ontological revelation, then uncanniness will be quite different. It will belong to being, as the principle of its withdrawal: the play or logic of presencing and absencing, foreground and background, which accounts for the fact that being shows up only as withdrawn. Heidegger
speaks of uncanniness in similar terms in later texts. But he does not speak this way here, so determining precisely what uncanniness is requires a separate investigation. There are many questions remaining, including: how is this a threat? In what sense does this make angst *angsty*? Why call it ‘uncanniness’? Although these questions are posed in the terms of the analysis of angst, answering them would take us well beyond the resources of *SZ*.

So the analysis of angst is confused. Heidegger jumps around between addressing falling and addressing inauthenticity, and so between thinking angst in terms of the structural phenomenon of falling and in terms of inauthentic falling. Because of this, there are serious difficulties for reading angst in either way. My claim is that there is interpretive payoff in understanding angst in terms of the structural phenomenon of falling, and so as a methodologically significant ontological revelation. This approach makes good sense of angst’s methodological role and its placement in Division I.

**VI. Conclusion**

I have suggested that the analysis of angst in *SZ* is initially motivated and in part driven by an ontological-methodological, rather than an ethical-existential, conception of angst. There is more to be said about what angst is like, and there is more of the analysis to be accounted for. But in terms of its methodological role and placement in Division I, angst can coherently be understood as an ontological revelation that disrupts our methodologically problematic entity-directedness. This reading illuminates angst in a compelling way, even if Heidegger also uses angst to illuminate authenticity and related concepts. Among other things, it makes for a more natural transition to the I.6 discussions of the external world and truth, and shows how Heidegger is phenomenologically entitled to move from his analysis...
of everydayness to a consideration of the unity of our being. Given his hermeneutic project of bringing to light what is constitutively hidden from us, Heidegger has a methodological need for an ontological insight that takes place as a change of mood, in which entities recede or are put out of play.

This angst is not teen angst, or ‘existential angst’, or a midlife crisis (although it bears resemblances to each of these insofar as they involve ontological insight). It is not primarily of ethical-existentialist significance, although it will have ethical-existentialist consequences. Perhaps the best way of describing angst, which captures what Heidegger needs from it methodologically, is as an ‘epiphany’ (in the Christian sense) or ‘apocalypse’ (in the Greek sense). Angst is the direct revelation of the ontological, which disrupts our falling being-amidst-entities.

Angst is thus a distinctly philosophical mood. What is important about angst in SZ is that it allows us to go further in our philosophising (even if we do not do so when we experience it). If even scientific investigation has its own mood (SZ138), then we should not be surprised to find that phenomenological philosophy also has one (or perhaps several).24 A genuine openness to the ontological, a certain constellation of matterings and saliences, is crucial for engaging in philosophy beyond a certain point. We notice this most frequently when we teach students or speak with friends who ‘just can’t think philosophically’ – who cannot seem to get themselves into the right headspace. It is this philosophical attitude that Heidegger begins (but ultimately fails) to thematise in the analysis of angst in SZ.
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Notes


2 By speaking of the “ethical-existentialist” dimension of SZ, I do not mean to imply that Heidegger develops an ethics. I use “ethical” in a broad sense: whatever belongs to how we stand, in a lived human life, in relation to the way things are. I use the slightly awkward “existentialist” to call to mind traditional existentialist philosophy, without evoking Heidegger’s technical use of the term ‘existential’.
Placing angst with the other existentialist concepts is such a pervasive tendency in the scholarship that no example stands out as exemplary. For particularly compelling accounts of angst along these lines, see Hubert L. Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-world: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I.* (Cambridge: The MIT press; 1991); and William Blattner’s *Heidegger’s Temporal Idealism* (New York: Cambridge University Press; 1999) and *Heidegger’s Being and Time: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Continuum; 2006).

Dreyfus explicitly moves the analysis of angst to his discussion of Division II, citing a deep confusion in Heidegger’s conception of falling (*op. cit.* p226). I agree that falling is the problem, but think that it is so in a different way. Blattner (*op. cit. (2006)*) also moves the analysis in his commentary. Both Dreyfus (p176) and Blattner (p139, 143) mention the methodological role of angst in Division I, but neither pursues it in detail.


The phrase “collapses away” appears in Dreyfus, *op. cit.,* p179.

Thus Heidegger: mood “not only characterizes Dasein ontologically, but, because of what it discloses, it is at the same time methodologically significant in principle for the existential analytic. Like any ontological Interpretation whatsoever, this analytic can only, so to speak, ‘listen in’ to some previously disclosed entity as regards its being. And it will attach itself to Dasein’s distinctive and most far-reaching possibilities of disclosure, in order to get
information about this entity from these. Phenomenological Interpretation must make it possible for Dasein itself to disclose things primordially; it must, as it were, let Dasein interpret itself. Such Interpretation takes part in this disclosure only in order to raise to a conceptual level the phenomenal content of what has been disclosed, and to do so existentially” (SZ139). Heidegger then identifies this disclosure as the mood of angst.

8 I believe that this structural phenomenon of falling also differs from what Dreyfus identifies as the existential structure of falling (see Dreyfus, op. cit., Chapter 13: Falling).


10 That what is nearest to us is too close to be seen, and so in a sense far from us, is one of Heidegger’s most productive phenomenological insights. He later calls this “the law of proximity”: “We see first, strictly speaking, never the closest but always what is next closest. The obtrusiveness and imperativeness of the next closest drives the closest and its closeness out of the domain of experience” (Martin Heidegger, Parmenides. Tr. André Schuwer and Richard Rojcewicz. Indianapolis: Indiana University Press; 1992, p135). Ludwig Wittgenstein makes use of a similar insight in his Philosophical Investigations.

11 To the extent that Heidegger’s later interpretations of SZ are reliable, we find this confirmed in a passage from ‘Letter on Humanism’: “Forgetting the truth of being in favor of the pressing throng of entities unthought in their essence is what ‘falling’ means in Being and Time. This word does not signify the Fall of Man understood in a ‘moral-philosophical’ and at the same time secularized way; rather, it designates an essential relationship of
humans to being’s relation to the essence of the human being” (Martin Heidegger, ‘Letter on Humanism’. Tr. David Farrell Krell, in *Pathmarks*, *op. cit.* p253. ‘Entities’ substituted for ‘beings’).

12 I have substituted “findingness” for Macquarrie and Robinson’s “state-of-mind”, which is a notoriously misleading translation of Heidegger’s “Befindlichkeit”. “Findingness” is based on John Haugeland’s “sofindingness” (*op. cit.*); Dreyfus uses “affectedness” (*op. cit.*); Stambaugh uses “attunement” (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*. Tr. Joan Stambaugh. New York: SUNY; 1996). In this passage, Heidegger is asking whether there is a special mood in which we are revealed to ourselves in a distinctive way.

13 Heidegger later calls this movement, ‘oscillating’ (Heidegger, *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, *op. cit.*, p6).

14 Heidegger often glosses transcendence and / or metaphysics in this way. See, for example, Heidegger, *ibid.*, p39.

15 Heidegger speaks of mood as an atmosphere or tuning in Heidegger, *ibid.*, p67, and as allowing things to matter at SZ137.


18 Heidegger’s talk of ‘uncanniness’ is typically interpreted as expressing this strangeness, but I see no clear textual evidence for this reading.
Compare ‘What is Metaphysics?’: “[W]e ourselves – we humans who are in being – in the midst of entities slip away from ourselves. At bottom therefore it is not as though ‘you’ or ‘I’ feel uncanny; rather, it is this way for some ‘one’. In the altogether unsettling experience of this hovering where there is nothing to hold on to, pure Da-sein is all that is still there” (Heidegger, ‘What is Metaphysics?’, op. cit., p88-89. ‘Entities’ substituted for ‘beings’).

Heidegger, ibid., p95. In this text, Heidegger is clearly concerned to explain why we are amidst entities: “Only on the ground of the original manifestness of the nothing can human Dasein approach and penetrate entities” (p91); “In its nihilation the nothing directs us precisely toward entities” (p92). (‘Entities’ substituted for ‘beings’).


Why Heidegger does this is an interesting question, which I cannot pursue here.

A few examples: “As the unconditional gathering of such setting in place being does not disappear. It irrupts in a singular uncanniness. […]P]resencing presumably withdraws” (Martin Heidegger, ‘On the Question of Being’. Tr. William McNeill, in Pathmarks, op. cit., p313); “In the happening of uncanniness, entities as a whole open themselves up. This opening up is the happening of unconcealment. This is nothing other than the happening of uncanniness” (Martin Heidegger, Introduction to Metaphysics. Tr. Gregory Fried and Richard Polt. New Haven: Yale University Press; 2000, p178. ‘Entities’ substituted for ‘beings’); “What becomes manifest in these relations is the essence of uncanniness itself, namely, presencing in the manner of an absencing, and in such a way that whatever presences and absences here is itself simultaneously the open realm of all presencing and

In ‘What is Metaphysics?’, Heidegger also mentions boredom and joy (op. cit. p87). He discusses boredom at length in Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics... (op. cit.).