

Christos J. Gianopoulos

Consulting to Individuals and Organizations

818 North River Road, Greene, ME 04236 207-946-5267

E-mail: christosg@roadrunner.com Web: www.christosg.com

Ground of Being

*We are too late for the Gods
and too early for Being.
Being's poem, just begun, is man.*

*Martin Heidegger
from the Introduction to Being and Time*

This essay serves as an introductory piece for the seminar, ***Become What You Are***. Pindar, the Greek Poet, who was famous for congratulating winners at the Olympic games, first proclaimed this notion. We of the human species tend to think of ourselves as who, not what. There are several important philosophical terms within the theme, the first of which is become.

To Become: carries with it the notion of active, intentional growth, to strive to reach some state that cannot be attained simply by letting oneself go and allowing the world to have determinative power over your future.

A counterpoint to becoming is being; **Being-in-the-world:** according to Martin Heidegger, this is the natural state of mankind. Our stance toward the world is crucial for being able to determine what the truth is. We have lost our vital connection to the world, says Heidegger, because so much of our thinking is shaped by a western scientific view that arrogantly and falsely maintains we are masters of nature. If we could see reality more clearly, we would realize that “being” exists prior to thought and makes thought possible.

What is the second important word in the exhortation by Pindar. We tend to think of ourselves as who, but there is a huge constituency to our makeup that is not only impersonal, but it is also primordial, instinctive, archetypal and common to all of humanity.

Then there is the **you are** part. Who are you? Are you a real person who thinks for himself or are you caught up in the game of validating your existence by adopting another's criteria for determining your worth. This is not meant as an accusation, but it points to the difficulty that an individual encounters when she takes seriously the question of who they are, who they want to be with, and what they are up to.

A little bit of existential philosophy will help us get down to the level of existence. Existential philosophers, such as Heidegger and Sartre, maintain that man is estranged from his essential nature because he/she loses contact with essences. Man has lost his ability to be with things the way they are (being), and the way things were meant to be. Knowledge of the ideal is forgotten, and that memory cannot be recovered. God is no help because he is dead, and man is left alone to fend for himself and to stumble in the dark to find her purpose. This condition of being torn away from one's source Heidegger calls "thrownness." In this alienated state, man loses his internal rudder and experiences fear. As a result of being disconnected from the source of life, he falls into inauthenticity.

Confronted with the enigma of being, I flee from myself. I lose myself in anxiety, and in order to escape that anxiety I cease to be myself and become one of them. I misinterpret my place and think of myself as an object. I become a thing just like all the things around me that are used as tools. My worth is justified by telling others how useful I am and how much I can accomplish, as if I as a person were merely a working asset, a production unit, an instrument or a beast of burden.

I adopt an everyday self that allows me to cope with the loneliness of being cut off from my real self, but that inauthentic way of being has more power over me than I realize. I relate to others from this fallen place, a place of inauthenticity, and I find myself playing a role that meets social requirements. Not wanting to confront the question of being makes it impossible to find my true self. There is a scene in Tolstoy's *Death of Ivan Illyich* where Ivan, the unconscious social climber, is pleased with the way his house has been carefully redecorated by his wife, but what he doesn't realize is that his house now looks exactly like all the other houses that are owned by people in his social class.

This is a stronger interpretation of the tragedy of the human condition than simply saying everyone one of us adopts what psychology would call a persona. Yes, we all adopt personas, but the problem becomes severe when we cannot remove a mask that is fashioned to please others. It is a functional face that I put on to fit my need to impress others and get ahead. I don't know who I am but, I know it is important to look good in the eyes of the "they" who are watching. *Nice looking tie, those are neat designer jeans you have on, I pay attention to the scoreboard and nothing else.*

This impersonal way of being, says Heidegger, is not sustainable. Inauthenticity brings with it a sense of the absurd, and man looks out into the world of "them" and concludes that it has no meaning for him. This is an unbearable conclusion that generates anxiety and nausea. Anxiety individualizes a person, because it has no object. Everybody is anxious for no particular reason, and when I realize this fundamental fact of the human condition, I can accept my own anxiety. It is at this point that the fundamental question can no longer be avoided. Who am I? The answer is that I am myself. Whatever else I am, I am that.

Once this question is asked and confronted, a new attitude is created that is more congruent with the true self. Heidegger calls this (Sorge) care, and this caring self is brave enough to attempt to understand the world from a subjective point of view. I start making careful distinctions based upon my own experience to see myself rightly in relation to objects and others.

In other words, I see the difference between subject (me) and object (the other), while at the same time it dawns on me that there may well be an objective reality. One aspect of the awful truth is the realization that I am going to die, so it is up to me to resolve my questions about identity and purpose, and I don't have all the time in the world. I am a being-towards-death. If I choose to be responsible for my own existence as a being in time, I am no longer just "thrown," and I catch my first glimpse of authenticity.

"Man is, indeed, a project which possesses a subjective life, instead of being a kind of moss, or a fungus or a cauliflower. Before that projection of the self nothing exists; not even in the heaven of intelligence: man will only attain existence when he is what he purposes to be."

-Jean-Paul Sartre

Man must make his own essence, discover one's own uniqueness, and develop the means to comprehend this grave situation. It is not an easy task. All the things that get in the way of creation of a real self must be confronted and in the process, a certain image of one's self is chosen. These are not trivial obstacles because mental barriers emanate from the depths of our own personalities and from the myth we hold about the nature of reality. There are now psychological terms for these barriers, but before we created the discipline of psychology, philosophers handled these questions.

Barriers to the Self

- One of these barriers is inauthenticity: living in a confused world where there is no meaning for oneself creates a condition of alienation in which I am separated from what matters to me.
- Another barrier is getting lost in the illusion of time: thinking that your life goes on indefinitely creates the false sense of security and relieves the existential tension that needs to be in place to create or achieve something in real time.

"The average man, who does not know what to do with his life, wants another one which will last forever."

-Anatole France

- Another corollary to the issue of being in time is the radical realization that human beings will not muster up the will to do something or change something, if it looks like the matter is already settled. Heidegger calls for anticipatory resoluteness in which one aims to create a future that was not going to already happen. Ariana Huffington talks about the stunting effect of polls on participatory politics because politicians want to win so they read and follow the polls, but citizens don't trust them because they don't have enough confidence to speak their mind. Because people don't trust politicians, they don't take the political process seriously enough and devote more of their attention to the economy over which they have even less influence.
- An inability to be alone, to suffer the pain of separation and to experience the guilt of causing an estrangement. Many people cannot bear the thought of actually being out of step with the reference group that they consider most important. While we all need others to help us in our search for ourselves, we also need to realize that we are structured within to commune with ourselves. Man has a centered self, and it is through our ability to experience solitude that we are able to find a place to go, a "clearing" as Robert Frost would call it, to find our own answers and not be lonely.

*Good art speaks truth, indeed is truth,
Perhaps is the only truth.*

Iris Murdoch

A Way to Get There: Bearing the Responsibility of An Authentic Existence:

How does one get there from here? Maybe Heidegger and Murdoch are right; that it takes the temperament of a philosopher and the sensibility of a poet to escape the fate of estrangement from being and to create a more solid ground of being. The answer rests in the creative process to open up a space, a clearing in the thicket, a somewhere for the truth about you to take root and to grow into something like an identity you know is your own. This is the way to authenticity; this is what Sartre calls acting in good faith.

In order to become what you are, there are some fundamental questions to consider. They do not have to be answered immediately, and the answers may come to you when you least expect them. I will keep the questions simple, but please note the emotional reaction that may be provoked within you as you consider and come to terms with them:

- What matters to you? Make a list and classify it by noting what your active & passive interests are, and notice whether there is any sense of commitment to take action on what matters to you?
- Who do you want to be with? Who are those people? Do you give them enough of your time? What kind of feeling comes up for you when you think of them?

- Do you notice a feeling of concern for the cosmos that grows within yourself as you become more aware of the truth of your own existence?
- What are you up to? Can you begin to articulate a sense of purpose for yourself?
- Are these philosophical ideas from Existentialism helpful to you?

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