

BEING-NOT BEING

Authored by
mohammad looti

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Philosophy (Existentialism, Phenomenology), Existential Psychology

1. Core Definition and Existential Foundation

The concept of **BEING-NOT BEING** captures the profound existential dilemma faced uniquely by human beings: the awareness of their own finitude and the intrinsic fear or anxiety associated with mortality. It is the fundamental metaphysical question--why there is something rather than nothing--translated into a personal, immediate crisis concerning one's continued existence in the world. This contemplation is not merely an abstract philosophical problem but an innate human motivation, driving countless behaviors, cultural practices, and psychological defenses aimed at negotiating the ultimate cessation of self.

In essence, **BEING-NOT BEING** serves as a direct paraphrase for the concern over dying and the worry of no longer participating in the world, an experience known in existential thought as Angst or existential dread. Unlike other organisms that merely live and perish, humanity possesses the unique capability for self-reflection regarding future non-existence. This awareness creates a constant tension between the current state of **Being** (presence, life, experience) and the inevitable potential of **Not Being** (absence, death, nothingness). The relationship between these two poles is dynamic, as the possibility of Not Being defines and gives urgency to the meaning of Being itself.

This inherent duality compels the individual to confront their provisional status. The continuous movement toward Not Being, symbolized by the passage of time and the decay of the body, frames all human projects. Consequently, the psychological weight of **BEING-NOT BEING** forces individuals to seek meaning, structure, and permanence in a universe characterized by contingency and ultimate annihilation. This recognition is critical for understanding fundamental human motivation, particularly in fields concerned with identity formation, anxiety disorders, and the search for ultimate values.

2. Historical Context: Heidegger's Introduction

The formal philosophical introduction and rigorous analysis of the dilemma of **BEING-NOT BEING** are credited primarily to the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), particularly within his seminal 1927 work, *Being and Time* (*Sein und Zeit*). Heidegger sought to re-engage with the question of Being (*Sein*), which he argued had been forgotten by Western metaphysics since the ancient Greeks. For Heidegger, the only entity through which the question of Being could be posed was human existence, or **Dasein**.

Heidegger approaches **BEING-NOT BEING** not as a biological inevitability but as an intrinsic

structure of Dasein. Dasein is defined by its being-toward-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*). Death is understood as Dasein's "ownmost possibility"--a possibility that is non-relational (it cannot be shared), certain (it will happen), and indeterminate (its timing is unknown). The recognition of this possibility of **Not Being** is what structures Dasein's temporality and enables authentic existence. By anticipating the end, Dasein is pulled back from immersion in the everyday world of "the they" (*das Man*) and confronted with its singular responsibility for its own existence.

The anxiety (*Angst*) that arises from this confrontation is fundamentally different from fear, which always relates to a specific object. Existential anxiety, in the Heideggerian sense, is the feeling of being confronted by Nothingness (**Not Being**), revealing the complete lack of foundation or external justification for Dasein's existence. By enduring this anxiety, the individual is able to grasp the significance of their freedom and the urgency of choosing how to be, thereby moving away from inauthentic, distracted living toward genuine **Being**.

3. The Relationship to Dasein and Authenticity

For Heidegger, **Dasein** (literally, "being there") is the human mode of existence characterized by understanding and care. The concept of **BEING-NOT BEING** is inextricably linked to Dasein's structure because Dasein is defined by its ability to project possibilities, one of which must inevitably be its own cessation. The ultimate possibility is death, which signifies **Not Being**. This constant potentiality of non-existence is not an external threat but an internal, structural feature that makes Dasein temporally finite.

The core struggle involving **BEING-NOT BEING** manifests in the choice between authentic and inauthentic modes of existence. **Inauthentic Dasein** attempts to flee the terrifying confrontation with **Not Being**. It does this by becoming absorbed in the preoccupations of the social world, engaging in idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity--ways of living that pretend death is a general event that happens only to others. This evasion is a failure to take ownership of one's own mortality and hence, one's self.

Conversely, **Authentic Dasein** achieves a resolute acceptance of **BEING-NOT BEING**. Authenticity is realized when Dasein anticipates death without fleeing, allowing the knowledge of ultimate non-existence to illuminate the urgency and preciousness of its current possibilities. This resolute confrontation with **Not Being** frees Dasein to choose its own projects and assume responsibility for its thrownness into the world, thereby truly achieving **Being** in a meaningful sense.

4. Psychological Manifestations: Anxiety and Motivation

The philosophical concept of **BEING-NOT BEING** has profound implications for existential psychology, most notably in the work of figures like Irvin Yalom and Rollo May. Within this

psychological framework, the concept is viewed as the primary source of existential anxiety, which is considered a fundamental, healthy aspect of the human condition rather than a pathological symptom to be eliminated.

Psychologically, the awareness of **Not Being** motivates the development of defense mechanisms aimed at buffering mortality terror. These defenses can range from the healthy (e.g., striving for symbolic immortality through legacy, creativity, or children) to the neurotic (e.g., compulsive workaholism, excessive material accumulation, or narcissistic inflation). The anxiety stemming from the tension between **Being** and **Not Being** fuels the individual's search for meaning and purpose, pushing them to establish enduring values in the face of inevitable collapse.

Therapeutically, engaging with the reality of **BEING-NOT BEING** is crucial for overcoming generalized neurosis. Existential therapists help patients recognize that many psychological problems are rooted in the evasion of ultimate concerns, particularly death. By assisting the client in confronting their mortality and recognizing the limits of their control, the therapist facilitates a shift from defensive living to authentic engagement with life, harnessing the anxiety of non-existence as a powerful catalyst for change and self-actualization.

5. Philosophical Interpretations Beyond Phenomenology

While Heidegger provided the foundational analysis, the theme of **BEING-NOT BEING** is central to broader existential thought. Jean-Paul Sartre, building upon phenomenology, conceptualized the tension differently, focusing on the concepts of the **Being-in-itself** (*Être-en-soi*)--unconscious, determined existence--and the **Being-for-itself** (*Être-pour-soi*)--conscious, free, and self-defining existence.

For Sartre, consciousness (the Being-for-itself) is characterized by a "hole" or **Nothingness** (which approximates Not Being) at its core. It is perpetually defined by what it is not yet, perpetually reaching toward the future and away from its fixed past. This Nothingness is the source of human freedom but also the cause of profound anguish (*angoisse*). The ultimate **Not Being** (death) is seen by Sartre as the point where the Being-for-itself ceases to project and is turned into the passive Being-in-itself, fixed forever as history or object.

Earlier figures, such as Søren Kierkegaard, addressed the same existential concern through the lens of faith and despair. Kierkegaard argued that despair is the sickness unto death, the refusal to acknowledge the self's necessary relationship to God. The failure to accept the self as a finite, composite entity (a tension between the infinite and the finite, the temporal and the eternal) leads to spiritual **Not Being**--a profound loss of selfhood that precedes physical death. Thus, the confrontation with finitude is a necessary step toward genuine spiritual **Being**.

6. Key Characteristics of the Concept

The understanding of **BEING-NOT BEING** can be summarized by several distinct characteristics that define its philosophical and psychological significance:

The Ultimate Limiting Condition: It is the boundary condition that defines all human existence, structuring temporality and meaning by providing a definitive end point.

Source of Authenticity: The resolute acceptance of Not Being is the prerequisite for moving beyond inauthentic, conventional living toward genuine self-realization.

Universal Motivation: The concern over Not Being acts as a fundamental driver for human behavior, influencing cultural institutions, religious beliefs, and individual striving.

Relationship to Anxiety: The tension between Being and Not Being generates existential anxiety (Angst), an unavoidable feeling that reveals the contingent nature of existence.

The concept is characterized by its immediacy; while death is a future event, the possibility of **Not Being** is always present in the moment of **Being**. It is not something we merely await, but something that perpetually structures our understanding of time, freedom, and responsibility. Because **BEING-NOT BEING** is non-transferable--each individual must face their death alone--it underscores the absolute isolation and uniqueness of individual consciousness.

Furthermore, the term highlights that human life is defined by care (*Sorge*). Care is the way Dasein is concerned about its own **Being**. This concern is inherently directed toward the future, constantly projecting possibilities, but the greatest possibility--death--constantly reminds Dasein that its current projects may be meaningless if not undertaken resolutely. Thus, the duality forces a constant evaluation of what it means to be alive.

7. Significance in Existential Psychology

In the therapeutic context, the concept of **BEING-NOT BEING** provides a framework for understanding and addressing the major categories of ultimate human concern. Yalom identifies four such concerns derived from the existential framework: death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness. All four are directly related to the central crisis of **BEING-NOT BEING**.

The awareness of death (**Not Being**) is the most obvious manifestation. Freedom, defined by the lack of external structure or foundation, necessitates the individual creating their own meaning, a task made urgent by the finiteness imposed by Not Being. Existential isolation stems from the recognition that one must face death alone, regardless of interpersonal bonds. Finally, meaninglessness arises from the realization that if existence ends in **Not Being**, perhaps the struggle for **Being** was ultimately futile.

The significance lies in the therapeutic goal of shifting the patient's relationship with mortality from

denial or terror to acceptance. By integrating the reality of **BEING-NOT BEING**, individuals often report a heightened sense of vitality, appreciation for the present, and a renewed commitment to authentic living. It transforms death from a paralyzing threat into a structuring force that maximizes the potentiality of the present moment.

8. Debates and Criticisms

While foundational to existential thought, the conceptualization of **BEING-NOT BEING**--particularly as defined by Heidegger--has faced several criticisms. One major critique centers on the perceived pessimism or morbid focus inherent in defining human existence primarily through the lens of death. Critics argue that this emphasis undervalues the positive aspects of human community, joy, and creation, suggesting that life can be meaningful without the constant looming threat of non-existence.

Furthermore, philosophical challenges have been raised regarding the coherence of "Nothingness" or **Not Being** as a distinct philosophical entity. Logical positivists and some analytic philosophers argue that **Not Being** is merely the logical negation of Being, lacking the ontological status Heidegger attributes to it. They suggest that treating Nothingness as something that can "happen" or "reveal itself" reifies a linguistic concept unnecessarily.

Another area of debate concerns the universality and cultural specificity of existential anxiety. While **BEING-NOT BEING** is presented as a universal human concern, anthropological evidence suggests that different cultures employ radically varied metaphysical systems and social structures to mitigate or integrate mortality, leading to diverse manifestations of existential concern that may not fit neatly into the highly individualized, anxious model presented by Western existentialists. Critics sometimes view the concept as culturally bound to post-industrial anxieties rather than a true structure of universal human existence.

Further Reading

[Martin Heidegger](#) (Wikipedia)

[Dasein](#) (Wikipedia)

[Being and Time](#) (Wikipedia)

[Existentialism](#) (Wikipedia)

[Irvin D. Yalom](#) (Wikipedia)