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The concept of "Being-towards-death" lies at the heart of Heidegger's Being and Time. It confronts us with the inescapable limit of our existence—death—and the temporal nature of our being. Understanding this concept compels us to ask: why, in the face of our finitude, should we choose sobriety over abundance? Wouldn't an uninhibited life, free from constraints, be a more authentic response to our finite existence?

The Dasein and Its Relationship with Death

Heidegger's notion of Dasein refers to the human being as an entity uniquely aware of its own existence and its inevitable end. Dasein is always "thrown" into the world, existing dynamically in relation to its environment. Unlike other beings that merely "live," humans comprehend the limits of their existence. This awareness of death as the ultimate, unsurpassable possibility distinguishes human life and shapes our choices. For Heidegger, Dasein's projection into the future is inherently finite—it is always bounded by death, which acts as a constant presence in all our endeavors. Recognizing this finitude allows us to confront the existential condition of being "at the limits" and embrace our status as temporal beings. This realization offers the potential for a more authentic existence, but it also raises the question: how do we live authentically within these limits?

Authenticity and the Role of Sobriety

Heidegger differentiates between authentic and inauthentic ways of living. To live authentically means acknowledging and embracing one's finitude, rather than avoiding it through distractions or conforming to societal norms. Inauthenticity, by contrast, occurs when we lose ourselves in the daily routines and expectations of the "They" (or "the They-self"), which refers to the impersonal, conformist pressures of society. Modern societal expectations, particularly over the past fifty years, have largely revolved around consumption and abundance. To be seen as successful often entails owning more, traveling extensively, and indulging in material excess. Sobriety—a deliberate moderation in consumption—runs counter to these norms. However, if authenticity involves resisting social conformity, then choosing sobriety could represent an authentic response to our existential condition. Sobriety offers a way to transcend the superficial attachments of materialism and focus on what truly matters. By rejecting the excesses of consumerism, the Dasein aligns itself with an existence that reflects an understanding of its finite nature. In this context, sobriety is not merely about reducing consumption; it is an existential practice of prioritizing the essential over the superfluous.

Sobriety as Acceptance of Finitude

Confronting our mortality often evokes anxiety, yet it can also lead to a quiet acceptance of life's limits. Choosing sobriety is not about denying death or living in fear of it. Instead, it reflects a serene acknowledgment of the human condition. It integrates death as a fundamental aspect of existence, not something to be feared or denied, but accepted as an intrinsic part of life. This form of sobriety encourages a life attuned to the essential, one that resists the frantic distractions of inauthentic

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existence. Rather than seeking to avoid death through endless consumption or futile attempts at permanence, it invites a harmonious alignment with our finitude. In the face of being-towards-death, sobriety emerges as a profound and authentic response to our existential reality. It allows the Dasein to live in harmony with its finitude, shedding the inauthentic trappings of consumerism and embracing a life focused on the essential. By accepting the limits of our existence, sobriety becomes not a constraint but a liberation—an affirmation of what it means to truly exist.

On Sobriety

The Latin *sine ebrietas* refers etymologically to the absence of drunkenness (Rey, 1998). To be in sobriety would thus mean not being *ebrius,* not drunk, and, by extension, not excessive or immoderate (Boulenger, 1931). Sobriety implies enjoying goods while avoiding their excess or hypertrophy (Illich, 1973). Put differently, it enacts the principle of the *just measure* (*Ethics to Nicomachus*, Aristotle, 2009); it stands at the antipodes of a certain radical autonomy that allows one to do anything, paying no heed to the needs, desires, aspirations, rights, or freedoms of others (Ellul, 1954). It is worth noting that the Latin *sobrius*, meaning "sober" or "moderate," likewise designates a person or behavior free from excess—not only in the sense of being free from drunkenness, but also, more broadly, as a way of life or an attitude marked by restraint, moderation, and self-control (Rey, 1998).

The Greek *sôphrosunè*, which can be interpreted as sobriety or moderation, refers to self-control, self-mastery, temperance, or the wisdom of the mind (Plato, *Charmides*, 158c–176d; Hadot, 1995). Derived from the adjective *sophron*, its meaning is twofold: a solid and healthy mind, but also a mind capable of bending its desires and impulses, that is, tempered and moderate (Brisson, 2004). In Greek philosophy, sobriety is an essential virtue meant to counter a major vice, *hubris*, or excess (Dodds, 1951). Greek mythology (Icarus, Prometheus, Tantalus), poetry (*Theogony* by Hesiod), and literature (*The Iliad*) are replete with characters punished for their *hubris* against the gods (Vernant, 1989). The madness of Sophocles' heroes (Oedipus, Antigone) or of Aeschylus' (the Atreids in the *Oresteia*), blinded by their passions, leads them to excess; divine punishment (*nemesis*) then falls upon them (Lloyd-Jones, 1994). This is why sobriety is the object of moral discourse in the earliest philosophical treatises and represents an essential virtue for the Greeks (and later for the Romans), allowing them to "live better", that is, not to submit to all their passions (Hadot, 1995). Unsurprisingly, this concept emerges in ancient Greece, where sobriety is associated with *askesis* (asceticism), temperance, moderation, frugality, and restraint (Foucault, 1984). In other words, sobriety carries within itself the seeds of ancient wisdom. Through temperance, sobriety is understood as something one imposes upon oneself (Plato, *Republic*, IV, 430e–432a). Like *askesis*, it is a deliberate effort to go against one's natural desires, deemed harmful or extreme (Hadot, 1995).

Christianity, and later Protestantism, largely maintained this representation of sobriety until the eighteenth century (Weber, 1905). This control of sobriety by the Church provided citizens with a framework—a guide on how to behave, given how easily one might fall into excess (Weber, 1905; Foucault, 1984). But from the moment "God is dead," what remains to tell us how we should act? (Nietzsche, 1882). As one of the Karamazov brothers says in Dostoyevsky's novel: "Everything is permitted, since God is dead" (Dostoyevsky, 1880).

The growing industrialization and the rise of capitalism revived the debate concerning the issue of excess. The entry into modernity disrupted traditional economies and moral values, provoking significant opposition (Polanyi, 1944). With the emergence and development of intensive capitalism, the question of sobriety became marginalized and, in effect, transformed into a form of activism, a political proposition (Illich, 1973; Ellul, 1954). This shift is clearly reflected in the work of the American Transcendentalists, such as Emerson and Thoreau, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Buell, 1995).

Consumerist alienation under capitalism has continued to intensify, and in 1958 Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition*, wrote: "Our whole economy has become a waste economy in which things must be devoured or discarded almost as quickly as they appear in the world, so that the process itself does not come to a catastrophic halt" (Arendt, 1958, p. 152). At that point, the idea of sobriety was perceived as subversive since virtue was aligned with consumption and material growth (Arendt, 1958). Only marginal, sometimes even confidential, thinkers such as Ellul (1954) and Illich (1973) continued to maintain a critique of consumer society while developing a thought close to sobriety (Ellul, 1954; Illich, 1973). This is also the case of Richard Gregg in 1936, who was the first to use the term "voluntary simplicity," which he described as "having a single purpose, of sincerity and inner honesty, as well as an avoidance of external superfluity, of multiple possessions that have no relation to the main purpose of life" (Gregg, 1936). Gregg observed that the notion of "simplicity" varied across countries and historical periods, comparing what was considered necessary in India and in the United States (Gregg, 1936). In his essay, he emphasized the need to change not only patterns of consumption but also of production, notably through decentralization (Gregg, 1936). He proposed a different approach to the control of large-scale production, land, distribution, and currency, and called for a non-violent program to achieve this social change (Gregg, 1936). Without using the term "sobriety", since there is no exact equivalent in English, he advocated for moderation in both production and consumption.

Since the 1980s, the notion of "degrowth" has emerged, with authors in the United States such as Duane Elgin. His book *Voluntary Simplicity*, published in 1981, established a link between environmental sustainability and a critique of economic growth, proposing a search for *well-living* in simplicity, closely connected to the spiritual roots of sobriety (Elgin, 1981). The argument is often economic but is sometimes also related to well-being or happiness, which many believe they pursue through consumption. This perspective echoes the *Easterlin paradox*, named after the economist who demonstrated that in countries which have already reached a certain level of wealth, an increase in wealth, measured

by GDP growth, does not necessarily lead to an increase in perceived well-being (Easterlin, 1974).

To conclude this first point, it is essential to keep in mind that there is no clear or definitive definition of what sobriety is. Broadly speaking, it concerns temperance and self-mastery, but it remains subjective and relative. Sobriety fluctuates between ecology and well-being, between production and consumption, between the individual and the collective. In a consumerist, capitalist, and liberal society, where *having* is more important than *being*, I have wondered what might lead us toward sobriety—especially since we are not naturally inclined to embrace this philosophy of restraint. On the contrary, we are caught in the materialistic sphere. The evidence is clear: nothing really changes in our habits regarding the major issues we face, such as the climate crisis, even though we know that we should consume less, fly less, become vegetarian, and so on. Put bluntly, it seems that the saying "after me, the flood" still applies. So, what would actually make us change? To explore this, I propose to draw upon Heidegger's concept of *being-towards-death*.

Facing Being-toward-death: why sobriety?

Being-towards-death is a central concept in *Being and Time*, whose core issue is the question of the limit, articulated through death and its connection to temporality (Heidegger, 1927). This cannot be addressed without returning, evidently, to the notion of *Dasein*. Let us briefly recall that *Dasein* represents human existence or the specific being of humans, insofar as they question their own being (Heidegger, 1927). It is the specific way in which human beings exist and relate to the world (Heidegger, 1927). *Dasein* is always already "thrown" into the world; it does not exist outside of the world but is in a dynamic relationship with it, fundamentally tied to its environment (Heidegger, 1927). One of the defining characteristics of *Dasein* is its awareness of death, understood as the ultimate and unsurpassable possibility. Death is the limit (Heidegger, 1927). This awareness means that humans do not merely "live" as other beings do, but rather comprehend that their existence is finite, a realization that can lead to a more authentic life (Heidegger, 1927). Thus, *Dasein* is a movement of projection that is not infinite: it encounters its own limit in death. Death constitutes the ever-imminent boundary, constantly present in every project of being-in-the-world (Heidegger, 1927).

Being-towards-death, *Dasein* is finite temporality; human beings are "beings of the confines." This is the recognition of an irreducible finitude (Heidegger, 1927). And this realization troubles us in light of our previous reflections on sobriety: if we are *beings-towards-death*, *beings-of-limits*, then why choose sobriety? In other words, given the constraints seemingly imposed by sobriety and considering the inescapable limit of death, why not live a life of abundance, without restriction? Would that not, after all, be a form of recognition of the authenticity emphasized by *Dasein*? (Heidegger, 1927). *Dasein* raises the question of living authentically or inauthentically. To live

authentically is to recognize and embrace the finitude of one's existence, that is, the reality of death (Heidegger, 1927). Inauthenticity, by contrast, arises when *Dasein* loses itself in everyday concerns and in the *They* (that is, the impersonal and conformist way of living shaped by social expectations) (Heidegger, 1927). However, authenticity is not spontaneity. Is it truly an authentic life to live fully, without limits, spontaneously, that is, without reflection? This seems to have been the tendency of the past fifty years: to own, to travel by car or by plane, to consume, perhaps to overconsume, to display, even to exhibit (Han, 2014). As a result, in facing our finitude, has authenticity not been supplanted by spontaneity?

Put differently, this dynamic intertwining of *being-towards-death* and *Dasein* highlights the necessity of authenticity in the face of the material world. Such authenticity entails an attitude of moderation in consumption, a rejection of material accumulation, and a refusal of consumerist excess (Heidegger, 1927; Han, 2014). Sobriety in relation to material things could thus correspond to a more authentic existence, in which *Dasein* frees itself from superficial attachments to focus on what is essential, a "sober" life in harmony with the understanding of finitude (Heidegger, 1927). This attitude is expressed in the confrontation with death, which may provoke either anxiety or a form of calm acceptance (Heidegger, 1927). Authenticity emphasizes that, instead of succumbing to the fear of death or attempting to evade it through frenetic or inauthentic behaviors, a sober approach implies a serene acceptance of the human condition (Heidegger, 1927). It is a stance that acknowledges death not as an object of terror or denial but as a fundamental aspect of existence, and, above all, as a limit (Heidegger, 1927).

Conclusion

Sobriety, far from being merely an ecological or moral stance, emerges as an existential necessity in light of our condition as *being-towards-death*. This historical and philosophical journey through the concept of sobriety, from ancient virtues to the critique of consumerist modernity, reveals that the question of the *just measure* is not limited to resource management or individual temperance. It deeply engages the human relationship with its own finitude. Heidegger reminds us that *Dasein*, as *being-towards-death*, cannot avoid a lucid confrontation with the ultimate limit of its existence. This confrontation can lead to two opposing attitudes: either a flight into inauthenticity, characterized by accumulation, consumerist frenzy, and the forgetting of death; or an openness to authenticity, where the recognition of finitude invites a life refocused on what is essential, freed from excess and material dispersion.

Thus, sobriety takes on an entirely different meaning: it is no longer merely an economic or ecological imperative but an existential choice grounded in the understanding of our finitude. It asserts itself as an ethics of the limit—a way of living that refuses the flight into *having* in order to better dwell in *being*. In a world that elevates unlimited consumption as the model of success, sobriety

appears as a radically subversive gesture, reaffirming that human greatness lies not in infinite possession but in the capacity to give meaning to one's own finitude.

In this sense, in the face of *being-towards-death*, sobriety is not a deprivation but a power of affirmation: the choice of measure over excess, of the intensity of *being* over the proliferation of *having*, of presence to oneself and to the world over dispersion in the insatiable. In other words, sobriety becomes the very condition of an authentic existence.

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