GROUNDING ETHICAL NORMS IN HEIDEGGER'S *MITSEIN*

Tea Logar

University of Primorska
Primorska Institute for Natural Sciences and Technology
Muzejski trg 2, 6000 Koper, Slovenia
tea.logar@upr.si

Abstract:

While Heidegger didn't seem much interested in ethical norms in his Being and Time, more recently Frederick A. Olafson has argued that Heidegger's conception of Mitsein yields some fundamental insights for a grounding of morality. Olafson proposes an account in which truth as a partnership among people can establish a link between Mitsein and primary moral notions, such as responsibility and trust. My concern with Olafson's account is twofold: first, I am not convinced that Mitsein really grounds people's mutual commonality to the point he wants it to take – the point that seems to suggest that we conceive of ourselves almost as interchangeable with any other member of our "world", at least to the extent to which we value our own experiences and interests over those of others. My second worry has to do with the fact that Mitsein, even if it indeed does ground ethical constraints for those who share a "world", gives us no grounds to extend these same constraints to those outside it, and a lack of commitment to establishing moral duties that can be universalized seems to be a serious weakness in any moral theory – even in one that does not attempt to produce moral rules as objective and absolute.

Key words: Heidegger, Mitsein, Frederick A. Olafson, Ethical norms.

1. Introduction

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger is not interested in articulating issues that deal directly with morality; he shows interest neither in such concepts as standards of right vs. wrong, or good vs. bad, nor is he especially concerned with any resulting ethical constraints and obligations.[1] However, one of the notions he introduces in this book seems quite pertinent to ethics: this is the phenomenon of *Mitsein* or "our being in the world together with one another", which is discussed in Chapter IV of *Division One*. It seems that anyone who has attempted to talk about Heidegger's philosophical work in connection with moral issues so far has centered on this concept of our "being with others", as well as the surrounding notions of solicitude, authenticity, resoluteness, and responsibility.

Moral inquiry in connection with Heidegger is interesting for two reasons: first, an attempt at revealing possible normative implications of such a widely discussed and disputed text is certainly a reasonable enterprise to undertake, as much for a Heidegger scholar as for someone interested in ethical theory in a broader sense. Second, Heidegger's own life was overflowing with actions and beliefs that many today find morally problematic, to say the least – he was an avid supporter of Nazism, and the question has been posed many times whether any sort of connection can be found between Heidegger's philosophical writings and his political views. Do ideas in *Being and Time* propagate beliefs that are supportive of Heidegger's political behavior, or are they in sharp contrast to it? And, of course, there is the third option: can any connection between the two be drawn at all, considering that Heidegger did not address ethical questions at all in this most famous of his texts? Obviously we must first find out whether *Being and Time* can at least be interpreted as grounding any ethical norms, if the initial question is to make sense at all, and for this the notion of *Mitsein* or "Being-with" seems most appropriate.

In *Heidegger and the Ground of Ethics – A Study of Mitsein,* Frederick A. Olafson introduces an attempt to ground moral norms in Heidegger's no-

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[1] All references to *Being and Time* are from Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1962, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson.

tion of "Being-with."[2] Olafson's project is to show that the concept of *Mitsein* understood as essential for our being yields a fundamental insight for ethics that Heidegger himself did not develop; his aim is thus to reveal ethical potentialities of the concept in question and to show that the resulting theory is compatible both with Heidegger's writings and our own general conception of how moral norms and constraints come to play such an important role in our lives. Olafson's central thesis is an analogy between the importance *Mitsein* has for our relation to the truth (or knowledge) on the one hand, and our ethical relationships on the other. He uses the term "truth as partnership" to direct attention to the fact that we do not gain knowledge of the world by ourselves, but rather through a joint project of disclosing the world and its entities together with other people who are in an important sense like us. Most of the implications of *Mitsein* rely heavily on the notion that we understand other human beings to be very similar to us – we do not perceive ourselves as separate from them, but rather as "one among many". Only if we understand our relationship to others in this way can we make sense of the fact that we take other people's experience of the world to be just as important to determining the truth as our own perceptions are.

Olafson proposes an account in which truth as a partnership among people can establish a link between *Mitsein* and primary moral notions, such as responsibility, trust, etc. The fact that we recognize Others as being very much like us grounds the experience of other people's beliefs and perceptions as being of a similar kind as our own beliefs and experiences, and are as such relevant to our own knowledge. In a very similar way this experience grounds our awareness that other people have interests that are as important to them as ours are to ourselves. We are further aware that our choices affect other people's interests, and that, given the specific character of *Mitsein*, we cannot think of our own interests as having a priority over the interests of others. For Olafson, our recognition of another human being as complementing our own being is prior to the definition of substantive normative rules that guide our relations with others.

My concern with Olafson's account is twofold; first, I am not convinced that *Mitsein* really grounds people's mutual commonality to the point he wants it to take – the point that seems to suggest that we conceive of ourselves almost as interchangeable with any other member of our "world", at least to the extent to which we value our own experiences and interests over those of others. It just seems that, no matter how badly mistaken the dualist approach to personhood is, there is nevertheless a vital difference between my access to my own mental states as opposed to the access I have to the mental states of other people, and this regardless of how very "like myself" other people are. My second worry has to do with the fact that *Mitsein*, even if it indeed does ground ethical constraints for those who share a "world", gives us no grounds to extend these same constraints to those outside it, and a lack of commitment to establishing moral duties that can be universalized seems to be a serious weakness in any moral theory – even in the one that does not attempt to produce moral rules as objective and absolute.

I will first introduce Heidegger's concept of *Mitsein* as presented in *Being and Time*, and then proceed with a more detailed explanation of Olafson's account. I will then present my concerns surrounding Olafson's attempt at grounding morality in *Mitsein* more thoroughly.

2. Dasein and Mitsein

Before introducing the concept of *Mitsein* or "Being-with" in Chapter IV of *Being and Time*, Heidegger explains his understanding of human beings as essentially embedded in the world they inhabit – "Being-in-the-world" is the central concept in his thought. He uses the term *Dasein* ("Being-there") in order to express the notion that human beings cannot be understood unless they are seen as existing "in the world", i.e. "there". *Dasein* (understood generally as 'human beings') is essentially grounded in the world: it is *thrown* into the world, and it thus finds itself in the setting of its experience. "Being-in-the-world" is therefore a basic state of our being, and as such co-determines its every mode.

Heidegger understands the world as an environment in which one dwells; rather than representing the entire universe of all human beings, it corresponds to the world of our everyday concerns in which we get familiar with the entities that inhabit it.

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[2] Frederick A. Olafson, *Heidegger and the Ground of Ethics: A Study of Mitsein*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

In this world – our environment – we encounter entities that are either ready-to-hand or present-at-hand – depending on our dealing with them, namely whether we unreflectively use them merely as equipment (more basic relation to objects), or whether they become objects of contemplative investigation. These are objects or things whose mode of being is essentially *unlike* that of *Dasein*. However, in the world we also encounter entities that are rather *like* ourselves, namely other people. But others do not merely disclose themselves to us: our being is essentially *intertwined* with theirs. Just as *Dasein* is never without the world's physical objects, so it is never without its existential subjects – we always share our world with others: Being-in-the-world *involves* Being-with-others. To put it in more familiar terms: the essence of human existence is inseparable from the social and natural world which surrounds it.

What does this necessary presence of other human beings imply? Surely not only their *mere presence*: the way in which we perceive other human beings is essentially different from the way in which we perceive entities that are ready-to-hand or present-at-hand; we encounter the Others through their "*Dasein-with*" in the world. The Others are not understood as completely external objects, but rather as beings we relate to; we are together in the world with them in a mode of disclosing both them and other entities, and in this their (as well as our own) being differs from the existence of mere objects, while at the same time it makes us and other beings more similar to each other. The Other has the same kind of Being as *Dasein* which discloses it. Because of this important similarity, the sense of the 'other' includes ourselves – *Dasein* is essentially connected with others:

> By 'Others' we do not mean everyone else but me – those over against whom the 'I' stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does not distinguish oneself – those among whom one is too.[3]

This kind of entity thus has the feature of turning up both as self (Ego) and as other (Alter). The Other is in some sense recognized as "a duplicate of the self".[4] Like ourselves, these Others have a subjective

relationship with the same world we do, the phenomenon which is experienced as co-presence.

Heidegger proceeds with explaining that the Being of *Dasein* is to be interpreted in general through the phenomenon of care. *Dasein* reveals itself through care in its being with entities, as well as more generally in its Being-in-the-world; being with things thus entails being concerned with them or taking care of them. Given that the other human beings which we encounter and comport ourselves toward do not have the kind of Being which belongs to entities that are ready-to-hand, other people are not objects of concern, but rather of *Fursorge*.[5] (*Fursorge* can be either authentic, i.e. one that liberates, or inauthentic, i.e. one that dominates.) Since *Dasein* is essentially "Being-with", its understanding of Being as such necessarily implies the understanding of the Others' Being as well. And because *Dasein* so understands others, it is concerned with them – it is not merely "with them" in some crude sense of people finding themselves next to each other in a limited space; rather, the entities that stand in this relation of co-presence are, according to Heidegger, "for the sake of one another". Everyday *Dasein* is not merely "I" myself – we are with others, therefore *Dasein* is essentially *Dasein-with*, and the world of *Dasein* is essentially a "with-world" (*Mitwelt*).

3. Olafson's Thesis

In *Heidegger and the Ground of Ethics*, Frederic A. Olafson draws on Heidegger's concept of *Mitsein* in order to show that the idea that human beings are essentially "being with one another" can make an important contribution to our understanding of the whole ethical aspect of our lives. For Olafson, a grounding of ethics depends essentially on the ontology of human nature: a ground of ethics is a distinctive relation between human beings rather than a supreme moral truth from which one can deduce rules of conduct. The mode in which human beings are in the world together with one another is, according to Heidegger, one of disclosing both other entities and themselves. This is a special character of

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[3] Heidegger, p. 154
[4] Ibid., p. 162

[5] The notion of *Fursorge* means literally "caring *for*", and is translated as "solicitude" in Macquarrie & Robinson. Olafson, however, suggests "caring *about*", which supposedly encompass the phenomenon Heidegger had in mind more accurately.

the relationships among individual human beings that is, for Olafson, of central importance for moral philosophy. His thesis is that "our being for the sake of others" follows from "being-with" which is a relation of co-presence, or, as he terms it, reciprocal presence. According to Olafson, a recognition of other human beings as complementing one's own being precedes the definition of substantive rules of conduct; also, a philosophical account of *Mitsein* can help us achieve a better understanding of the sense in which human beings are said to generate the constraints to which they themselves are subject, and why incoherence results if we attempt to reject the rules to the formation of which we have contributed ourselves.

Mitsein and truth

Olafson's aim is to show that there is a fundamental insight in Heidegger's account of *Mitsein* that Heidegger does not develop, but it nevertheless contains promising potentialities for a grounding of ethics. Olafson starts his story by first introducing the special character of *Mitsein*, without trying to connect it to moral rules right at the beginning, but rather to present its importance for our process of gaining knowledge. The notion of "being-with" makes apparent the fact that we identify and understand other beings like ourselves in pervasively purposive terms. We see others as beings who are dealing with the same world we ourselves are dealing with, and through this we learn to understand ourselves as well. Furthermore, our relationships to others are characterized by dependence, since the beings with whom we are primarily dealing are "defined by their capacity to satisfy needs we cannot satisfy ourselves".[6]

It is important to realize that we do not depend on others simply in a very direct sense, as if they were mere providers for our most basic needs: they also have access to experiences and facts we ourselves do not have access to. Since they are dealing with the same world as we are, but are familiar with the aspects of our common world we ourselves are not familiar with, we depend on them for information about our own world. As we encounter one another, we see in another human being someone whose observations are in principle just as relevant to the determination of truth and falsity as our own

observations are. We even learn to understand the kind of entity we ourselves are through this relation to other like beings. This understanding of the world which depends essentially on others who are very much like us is therefore a constitutive element in all our perceptions and thoughts about the world. It is thus exactly the notion of *Mitsein*, or "being-with-others", which provides the necessary condition for all further understanding of the world we dwell in. The whole enterprise of any kind of knowledge thus depends on this sort of partnership with others.

Olafson explains this codependent relationship between us and others as a sort of balancing between identity (ourselves) on the one hand, and difference (others who are like us) on the other; as a pairing of Ego and Alter. When one so understands *Dasein* through *Mitsein*, it becomes clear that the lines separating 'mine' from 'yours' are not that well defined in this system of "prudential cooperation" but are rather abstracted from an underlying condition of "being-with". Ego soon becomes aware that its actions affect the Alter and its world; also, Alter has the status of a co-discoverer of the truth, and as such cannot be consistently denied a role in the discovering of what Ego is doing. This reciprocal character of our presence between other beings which are significantly like us constitutes *the domain of truth*.

How is all this directly relevant to the project of grounding ethics? Olafson believes that the same line of thought that has led to the conclusion that the presence of other beings that are like us is a necessary condition for our being able to gain any knowledge of our world can be extended in such a way as to yield a characterization of the way we co-exist with one another. Namely, people do not turn to each other merely for information, but also for support in their active undertakings. We not only have cognitive abilities, but also volitional and active ones, and in this latter relation actions are means to the ends produced by one's volitions. It seems that the kind of cooperation which involves such dependence among individuals would be impossible if there were no normative standards for actions that affect other people. But Heidegger's writing leaves a void around the questions that concern the role of *Fursorge* in its ethical implications; the notion of "authentic responsibility" is another concept that has important implications for ethics, yet Heidegger does not address these. Olafson believes that an amplification of Heidegger's entire account of *Mitsein*, as well as its surrounding notions, is needed if one is

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[6] Olafson, p. 23

to show their ethical import. For Heidegger, we achieve authentic responsibility by choosing "choice" as our governing modality; Olafson wants to show that "the choices human beings make can be subject to ethical constraints from which we cannot release ourselves simply by choosing to do so."[7]

Responsibility and trust

In Heidegger's account, a conception of responsibility derives from the fact that each of us must respond to the situations we find ourselves in by taking some action (inaction is a matter of choice just the same). According to Heidegger, in such situations one acknowledges that whatever action he takes it is hisUnless the author specifically intends the masculine, standard usage would be the feminine.

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I am not sure what is missing here. Maybe 'facts'?

Standard usage would be the feminine, here, unless the author specifically means the masculine.

See note 4

This is my best guess at the meaning of this sentence.

Where does this quote end?

own and no one else's. We have a responsibility to choose, and taking this responsibility is a condition of achieving authenticity in one's actions and choices. The question Heidegger does not pose, but is of interest for Olafson, is whether it is possible to be responsible without taking into consideration anything except our own preferences. For Olafson, a negative answer follows simply from the nature of *Mitsein*. It is namely a fact that my choice represents my own interests, and both my choices and interests stand in some relation to other people's interests: a responsible person must therefore have a reason for the priority of hisUnless the author specifically intends the masculine, standard usage would be the feminine.

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own interests over those of others. This kind of responsibility is, according to Olafson, implicit in the relationship in which we stand to other people simply at the level of co-disclosure of our common world. Just as is the case with the project of discovering the truth, we are concerned to produce an understanding of what is the case that we all can share when it comes to choices about our actions as well. But are the quests for "what is true" and "what is right" really that similar? Here is what Olafson has to say on the subject:

> When we are trying to determine what is the case, that is, *true*, the outcome of such an inquiry must be the same for everyone. When it is a possible *action* under consideration, the consequences of that action will differ widely from one person to another. But if it can be shown to be preferable to any other in terms of the way it affects people's lives, then there is a sense in which consequences will be the same for all; and in that respect it will be like truth. […] *Mitsein* commits us, in the field of action, to an attitude toward others that is in its essence comparable to that toward our partners in the search for truth.[8]

Olafson's thesis is, then, that although there is no preceding truth about what we are to do, we can use the disclosure of truth as a model for the disclosure of our actions and choices. "What makes this a valid parallelism is the fact that we are dealing with other human beings whose relation to what is the case as well as to what might be the case is in principle the same as ours."[9]

Responsibility is thus understood as the foundational concept for ethics. Furthermore, my "being responsible" entails responsibility *to* someone, therefore that someone must be able to rely on me. It is clear that what is disclosed in the world by human beings cannot become a resource for others in the relevant sense unless "there is a disposition to rely

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[7] Ibid., p. 49

[8] Olafson, p. 54 (emphasis added)
[9] Ibid., p. 55

upon it on the part of the human being to whom it is made available."[10] Since people's interests may be affected by the truth or falsity of what they are made to believe, truthfulness is clearly an ethical disposition. So, the person I am responsible to must be able to rely on me; *trust*, coupled with responsibility, thus constitutes the partnership out of which specific modes of ethical relations (e.g. obligations) arise. So far it seems as if the only ethical obligation we have is to be truthful – but Olafson points out that there are other modalities of ethical relation that involve responsibility and trust: "What is required is help – one form or another of assistance that enables us to achieve something or to avoid some bad outcome that would otherwise occur."[11]

Olafson's objective seems to be that there are worse and better ways to "be with others", and that some implicit responsibility is assumed on the part of any member of a society to play by the rules that will enable an optimal level of cooperation. Promise-keeping is thus present both in direct cases where an explicit promise has been made, as well as in expectations that one will not harm others and will help them – and the practice of promise-keeping is possible only because the participants share a common understanding of what is required of them. Both truth-telling and promise-keeping (understood widely as a guarantee of behavior that will not harm others and possibly support them in their undertakings) have a character of the relations that are self-imposed, yet binding. For Olafson it is thus ultimately through *Mitsein* that our moral obligations to others arise. According to this view, it is an indisputable fact that our being is essentially "with others"; with other people we are, at least by default, in the relationship of mutual responsibility and trust. To deny this distinctively human commonality with one another by treating people as if they were not partners in *Mitsein* is fundamentally wrong: it is unjustifiable to treat a person as someone who has no claim to any considerations in decisions we make about how to act.[12]

On this view, an obligation to act in a certain way arises from the fact that we are in a relation to other beings that are like ourselves. *Mitsein* namely restricts our choices in fulfilling our own needs by putting before us constraints generated by other people's interests. Olafson argues further that there is an important correlation between the conditions of human happiness and ethical behavior grounded in *Mitsein*. As our being, our own *well*-being is also embedded in *Mitsein*, and is therefore as such pre-ethical. Because of this, "what is good for me" can only be constituted through my relations to others, and as such cannot be independent of ethical considerations – and this yields a further conclusion, namely that what is morally right is far from being necessarily against individuals' own interests.

4. Shaky Grounds for Ethics

As noted above, I have two different sets of worries concerning Olafson's approach to grounding ethical norms in *Mitsein*. While these two sets of worries apply to two distinct levels of Olafson's account, they are nevertheless connected to each other. The first worry is more general and concerns my opinion that the implications of *Mitsein* are taken too far by Olafson; this concern has to do with what seems like an essential confusion about the relationship individuals have to their own interests, as opposed to the interests of others. The second worry deals with the suspicion that *Mitsein*, even if it succeeds in grounding moral obligations among people who share the same "world" in Heidegger's sense, poses no obligation on us to expand this treatment to people who are removed from our world, so that it can be said that they do not really share the same world we do.

Other people's interests

Olafson explains ethical constraints and obligations to others as originating from the fact that we recognize other people as being essentially like us in an important way – we learn about ourselves through understanding others, and vice versa. One of the constitutive elements of all our perceptions of the world is this kind of "pairing" of one's own being with a real or a putative other – the Ego and the Alter. We perceive other humans as entities that share the same perceptions and experiences of the world that we do. Olafson's thesis depends on a rejection of the dualist view of a human being as a compound of two disparate parts - a body and a mind. If one accepts a dualist premise, then one is committed to a view that we can only observe other

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[10] Ibid., p. 61
[11] Ibid., p. 65
[12] Ibid., p. 69

people's actions and behaviors (their bodies), but have no access to their thoughts and motives. By contrast, Olafson claims that accepting his view of a human being as a *unitary* entity yields the conclusion that the mode of Being of the "body" is the same as that of "its owner", and that we can therefore understand others' motives through their actions; we do not need an additional access to their "minds". Olafson's claim is that there really is no such thing as "the problem of other minds": we can understand others' thoughts and motives by observing their behavior. Even on many occasions where we actually cannot gain access to what is going on in other people's heads, the reason is *not* that "anything is hidden in the way the dualistic argument supposes."[13]

I do not intend in this place to propose an argument against Olafson's position on this specific topic; let me just note that his view about our access to others' mental states seems at least counterintuitive. Even if Olafson is right in rejecting the dualist perception of a human being, it is not clear why it should follow that the unitary character of our being entails that our access to other people's thoughts is not nevertheless essentially different from the access we have to our own mental states and thought processes. One of our earliest and most stubborn experiences seems to be that our relation to our own mental processes, such as thoughts, beliefs, desires, motivations, interests etc. is *direct*, while the relation to everyone else's is *indirect*, and as such much less reliable. While Olafson is not suggesting that the two experiences are exactly the same, he is certainly unwilling to grant the difference between them the significance it seems to bear:

> [W]hile the privacy of certain thoughts and motives cannot be denied a certain role in our relations with one another, it is by no means the fatal barrier to understanding that it is sometimes taken to be.[14]

However, this is a task for the philosophy of mind. Yet, Olafson's account becomes pertinent to moral philosophy the very moment he makes an analogy between our access to others' thoughts on one hand and our relationship to their interests on the other. After posing the question of whether *Mitsein* would

even be possible as a phenomenon of "reciprocal presence" if everyone only considered their own preferences as feasible motivations for their actions, he appeals to the very nature of "*Dasein* which is essentially *Mitsein*". Since we are essentially with others, we cannot be simply ignorant of or oblivious to the fact that things matter to others just as they matter to us, although they might be different things:

> To leave others and their needs out of the account in the choices we make would thus require either a pretense that we are not effectively making a choice for them as well as for ourselves or an attempt to justify the different weight that is given to one's own preferences over theirs by showing that the action in question serves their interest as well as ours.[15]

But to do the former is to deny the whole concept of *Mitsein* – we cannot be consistently aware of our own interests without being at the same time aware of the interests of others that will be affected by our actions. An authentic choice is supposed to represent the true interests of the one who makes the choice – but our interests always stand in some relation to the interests of others, and a responsible person will have to offer persuasive reasons for the chosen action's serving his interests rather than those of others, and it must be above all "compatible with some wider form of life in which there is a place for others that is arguably consistent with their interests."[16]

Now, if we accept Heidegger's concept of *Mitsein*, we truly cannot deny that we understand that others have interests as well; we might not share all those interests, but it would be difficult to maintain that we do not understand that fulfilling their interests is as important to them as fulfilling our own is to ourselves. Further, we also cannot but be aware of the fact that acting according to our interests might be going against those of others, and that we therefore also make choices for others when we seemingly only make decisions for ourselves. Yet, there seems to be a world of difference between being *aware* that others have interests (and even exactly what they are), and taking those interests into *consideration* as if they were our own. A claim that others' interests carry as much weight *for our-*

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[13] Olafson, p. 35
[14] Olafson, p. 36
[15] Ibid., p. 52
[16] Ibid., p. 53

selves (that is, not only from the agent-neutral perspective, but also from the agent-relative one) as our own interests do seems to presuppose that, at bottom, "what works against your interests also works against mine", and that we should thus – even for prudential reasons! – take everyone's interests into consideration when making choices. Indeed it seems that this is a kind of mixture between utilitarianism and contractarianism to which Olafson's ethical views are committed. But does the fact of *Mitsein* really commit us to this kind of moral theory? It just seems that *Mitsein* fails to provide us with motivation in the way Olafson wants it to.

On the other hand, if Olafson's account does not rely on the premise that taking other people's interests into account will also be best for ourselves overall (although this interpretation of his account is less plausible, since he refers to *Mitsein* as a system of "*prudential* cooperation"),[17] but rather that we must take those interests into account simply in virtue of making responsible and authentic choices, then Olafson is presupposing what he is trying to prove: it is just not clear why making an authentic choice about my actions should depend in any way on how this will affect others. If the constraint is to be an ethical norm, it must *first* be shown why a chosen action would also be a *morally* right action to perform. Olafson's account thus fails to provide a necessary normative link between "authentic choice" and "moral choice", and as such fails to provide a convincing argument for his belief that "resoluteness" can be understood as Heidegger's version of autonomous moral agency.

The limits of Heidegger's "world"

My first concern with Olafson's account was about whether *Mitsein* can ground ethical constraints at all. The other, which I am about to introduce now, is a worry that, even if we succeed in grounding normativity of conduct in *Mitsein*, it might yield undesirable results, or at least fail to prevent them from occurring. Namely, *Mitsein* does not presuppose that we are "with" *every* human being alive. Rather, we are with people who are, together with us, "in-the-world", where the "world" pertains to our more or less immediate environ-

ment, not the entire planet. Olafson explains Heidegger's concept of the world in a footnote:

> The usual conception of what is meant by the word "world" makes it the totality of all the entities that exist. On this view, each of us would simply be one of those entities. By contrast, Heidegger understands the "world" as that in which one dwells as an entity that discloses other entities as well as itself. In this sense, the world is always an *Umwelt* – that is, that which surrounds the "clearing" that each *Dasein* constitutes.[18]

Mitwelt – the world we share with others – is a milieu common to the people who inhabit it and who exist in this world "with" each other. Since our environment is constituted only by a fragment of all the humans that live around the globe, it is only these people from our environment that we are "with" when we talk of ourselves as essentially "being-with". What implications does this have for ethics, if our moral conduct is to be grounded in *Mitsein*? Taking into account that Olafson conceives of the motivation for cooperation with others that we are with as having a *prudential* character, the question arises about the norms which are to guide our conduct around those that do not really inhabit "our" world and/or cannot serve our interests in any way. Since there are no objective, absolute, "pre-*Mitsein*" norms for Heidegger, there would be no sense in supposing that we can refer to some "upper-level morality" which would help us solve these "inter-world" conflicts by suggesting what the morally right thing to do would be. Heidegger writes:

> Being with one another is based proximally and often exclusively upon what is a matter of common concern in such Being. A Being-with-one-another which arises from one's doing the same thing as someone else, not only keeps for the most part within the outer limits, but enters the mode of distance and reserve.[19]

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[17] See, for example, Olafson p. 26

[18] Olafson, pp. 20-21, footnote 4
[19] Heidegger, p. 159

Since there is no morality outside the totality of such worlds, we can conceive of separated communities among which prudential cooperation takes very different, possibly mutually incompatible, forms. This is by itself not a problem for Olafson, who criticizes the whole conception of "values" as objective criteria for the guidance of our lives. Values, as well as norms, do not "exist" in some mode that would precede *Mitsein*; rather, it is our "being-with" through which all further norms are ultimately constructed. Since there are no absolute norms of cooperation and co-existence, there is no external criterion for judging certain practices wrong – all we can take into account when making such judgments is whether those norms function properly *within* a specific community.

Because our own "world" that we share with others can be conceived as being utterly separate from certain other communities, a question (which is actually becoming more and more pressing in the era of globalization) arises: what norms are supposed to guide our conduct when we encounter people whose mode of being with others is utterly different from our own? If the ethical norms of my community have been established and are as such imperatively action-guiding for me, it would be naïve to suggest that the two communities should learn to establish a completely new reciprocal community, guided by norms that take into account everyone's interests. I have already been shaped by the norms of my world, and repudiating them for the sake of prudential cooperation with someone else would be clearly against my ethical norms, and as such obviously wrong. Such a suggestion would also pose a problem of taking moral normativity all too lightly, and it would certainly not be in agreement with Olafson's (and practically everyone else's) understanding of moral rules as something that are imperative for us and that we cannot release ourselves from just because we want to.

Because of these considerations, we seem to only have two options when encountering a community whose ethical norms are utterly different from our own: we can either try to compromise with them in order to achieve mutual understanding and cooperation, but this might easily pose the above-mentioned problem of repudiating our own moral norms or expecting that others will do so for our benefit. The other option is, of course, to keep our moral norms and then try to impose them on the members of the other community. There is,

unfortunately, no way to determine who would be right and who wrong in the event of the imposition of foreign moral norms, since there are no objective moral facts one could refer to in order to solve the problem. And since there is no concept reigning over the area of moral conduct towards those who are not with us in our "world", there are also absolutely no grounds for condemning those who impose their own ethical convictions upon others. This yields an undesirable consequence where norms have to be strictly followed within one's own community, but carry absolutely no weight outside its limits. Olafson himself mentions this kind of phenomenon, referred to as "amoral familism":

> In such a system, everyone who stands outside a particular circle of kinship is deemed ineligible for any relationship that carries with it a moral claim that someone within the circle has to acknowledge. […] Because that identity consists in members of the same family or clan, it is far narrower than, and very differently conceived from, the identity with one another that [is involved in Mitsein].[20]

Interestingly, Olafson does not seem to be aware that his account of ethics, while perhaps not encouraging it, does nothing whatsoever to prevent such occurrences, although on a different level: not among families and clans, but among different "worlds". This is my primary worry with theories that try to ground ethics in the fact that we identify with other people because they are similar to us in certain aspects, and should take this fact as a reason for treating them in the same way we would like to be treated. The main problem with such accounts is that they do not require a necessary standard for our identification with others which would encompass all human beings, and they therefore allow the possibility to identify only with those others with whom we share some arbitrary, but in our view essential, characteristics. Although it is obvious from Olafson's text that this is certainly not the state of affairs he wants his theory to produce, it is indeed questionable whether grounding ethics merely in *Mitsein* can prevent it.

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[20] Olafson, p. 75

As I mentioned in the beginning, one of the motivations for trying to find connection between Heidegger's philosophical texts and ethical theory is an attempt to shed some light on his open support of Nazism. Unfortunately, if this interpretation of ethical potentialities of *Mitsein* is accurate in the sense that it follows from Heidegger's ideas in *Being and Time*, then we must conclude that his own political views were not completely at odds with his philosophy.

References

Heidegger, Martin (1962). *Being and Time*, San Francisco: Harper & Row, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson.

Olafson, Frederick A. (1998). *Heidegger and the Ground of Ethics: A Study of Mitsein*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.