

# Heidegger and the restoration of meaningfulness in Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*

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## 1 Meaning and concern

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the struggle of the main character Billy Pilgrim is that of being “unstuck in time” (29). What does this mean for him? In a sense it is a threat to his very humanity, his existence, as humans are used to defining themselves in terms of their past as well as their potential future. By taking away Billy’s familiarity with and grounding in time, Kurt Vonnegut makes Billy vulnerable. According to Heidegger’s account of existence and what it means *to be*, Vonnegut may as well have taken away Billy’s humanity.

The goal of Heidegger’s project in *Being and Time* is to redefine existence. According to Heidegger, ontology, as studied by Western philosophers from Plato onwards, has glossed over the problem of defining existence, assuming that it was either obvious or that such a question was already answered. Vonnegut’s theme and Heidegger’s project share the same goal up to a certain point: the removal of an absolute view of the meaning and purpose of existence. However, Heidegger continues on where Vonnegut seems to have explicitly left off, building back up a new explanation of existence where he has torn the old one down. As Charles Guignon explains, “*Being and Time* attempts to combat the ‘groundlessness’ of the contemporary world by uncovering enduring values and meanings within the framework of ‘worldliness’ and human finitude” (Guignon 322). The meaning that is restored does not consist of fabricated teleology or meta-narrative; it is contextual and derived from the self. Even though Vonnegut stops short of a positive project to rebuild hope in

the future, Existentialist themes resound through the pages of *Slaughterhouse-Five*. The meaningfulness of life emanates not from an overarching narrative but from the concern of humans with their own existence and their understanding of their historical situation.

Human beings, Heidegger says, are distinguished from everything else in that they are concerned with their own being (*Being and Time* 36). They notice and care about the fact that they exist. Heidegger recognizes that humans seem to be the only beings with this quality. This concern does not always manifest itself in conscious contemplation of the fact that we exist, but is at least an occasional subtle recognition. In Kurt Vonnegut’s novel *Slaughterhouse-Five*, the main character Billy Pilgrim experiences tumultuous external influences and in some situations loses awareness of his own humanity. When he falls out of this more authentic mode of being, a certain meaninglessness about life creeps in. Only when Billy gains his composure and tries to understand himself does a sort of sanity return to his world. In Billy’s circumstances—being tossed back and forth through time—it is impossible for him to define his own existence in reference to what he perceives as the external world, because he has become “unstuck in time” (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 29). As the novel progresses, and Billy learns more about his predicament, he learns to replace the meaning previously given by the world with a very Heideggerian being-towards-death. Heidegger claimed that only by accepting and internalizing a concept of their own death can a being understand the meaning of its own life. By finally defining his existence in its totality, Billy achieves a

complacency and a grounding that give his life authenticity.

Heidegger's concept of care also describes the way human beings interact with the world. They are shaped by their circumstances but also shape the world with how they experience it. For Heidegger, there is a very soft distinction between the mind and the world. On top of the obvious fact that the mind is part of the world, Heidegger thinks that the world changes based on what is important to the minds perceiving it—what these beings are concerned with. In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy Pilgrim's experience of his world is very much a phenomenological one. Instead of interpreting his world through the lens of an overarching theory and accepting the narratives given by others, he simply takes in the sensations as they come. Being unstuck in time and transported back and forth, he really has no other choice. Sensations come as unanticipated surprises to Billy.

## 2 Being-with and war

*Slaughterhouse-Five* is a book about death. It is a book about humans' favorite form of death: war. For Vonnegut, war has no meaning whatsoever. As Michael Crichton observes in his review of the book, "There are just people, doing what people usually do to each other" (35). Even though there may be certain countries contending against one another and certain ideologies being fought for and against, Vonnegut—at least in his role as author of and character in *Slaughterhouse-Five*—sees nothing except the brute facts: lots of death. Vonnegut doesn't think that these brute facts can be papered over with the meaningfulness of political struggle. But meaning doesn't have to come from the top down, propagated by institutions of power: for Heidegger, the meaning in a person's life can come either from them or from the others around them.

According to Vincent Barry, "the 'death' of Heidegger's 'being-towards-death' is not the biological termination that awaits us all at some indefinite time in the future. Rather, it is the ever-present certainty of the uncertainty of our existence" (63). Our interactions in the world are colored by the existence and

temporal uncertainty of our death. To Heidegger, one of the most significant sources of meaning is an individual's death itself.

How is it existentially possible for this constant threat to be genuinely disclosed? All understanding is accompanied by a state-of-mind. Dasein's mood brings it face to face with the thrownness of its that it is there. [...] In this state-of-mind, Dasein finds itself face to face with the "nothing" of the possible impossibility of its existence. (*Being and Time* 310)

In what Heidegger sees as an inauthentic mode of existence, Dasein—the term Heidegger uses for a being concerned with its own existence—carries out its being-in-the-world along a path determined by others, a path that may be very insignificant in the long run. When living in the world, amongst other beings, "Others are encountered as what they are; they are what they do" (163), and thus "being-with-one-another dissolves one's own Dasein completely into the kind of being of 'the others'" (164). Thus, we come to behave in accordance with projects and possibilities appreciated by others, and our image of ourselves is defined by what they see when they look at us. This is the state we naturally fall into, and it takes a particular focus to discover our own way.

In the book *The Little Prince*, this kind of interaction with so many people whose roles are completely interchangeable is expressed through the allegory of a rose garden. The prince has previously met a rose who has told him that she is unique, but he finds out how replaceable and generic she is:

And he was overcome with sadness. His flower had told him that she was the only one of her kind in all the universe. And here were five thousand of them, all alike, in one single garden! (Saint-Exupéry ch. 20)

Heidegger uses the term 'das Man' to indicate those beings in the world alongside which Dasein finds itself (*Being and Time* 167). It means both "the one" and "the they" interchangeably, because the 'other' in

which Dasein can lose itself is both a crowd and an individual: it is many people together, all of whom are alike to us, despite their physical and mental differences (Steiner 92). Being alongside others in the world can be like being among thousands of beings all alike. When Dasein falls into modes of existence determined by others, it encounters individuals not as such, but as tools to accomplish tasks:

“When, for example, we walk along the edge of a field but ‘outside it’, the field shows itself as belonging to such-and-such a person, and decently kept up by him; the book we have used was bought at So-and-so’s shop and given by such-and-such a person, and so forth. [...] The others...are thus ‘encountered’ in a ready-to-hand, environmental context of equipment.” (*Being and Time* 153-4)

Encountering many others in a war while engaged in the mode of existence of a soldier may mean that those many faceless others are to be killed, whereas if one defines one’s projects authentically according to the totality of one’s own life and rejects the meaning (projects, possibilities) imposed by others, one will begin to see actual humans again.

Death, according to Heidegger, doesn’t work the same way that absorption of others’ projects and possibilities does. “The dying of others is not something which we experience in a genuine sense; at most we are always just ‘there alongside’” (*Being and Time* 282). Death is something which each person has to encounter on their own. The fact is that nobody has experienced death and can describe it; each person must face the unknown completely alone. If Heidegger’s assessment of death is to be believed, then the observation of critic William Rodney Allen that “life comes out of death, as surely as Billy survives the bombing of Dresden in a slaughterhouse” (Allen 14) is a bit vapid. Surely life and death can exist in the same world together, but they have really no connection. Death is neither a cause nor a supporting factor, because death is the end of cause.

In *Slaughterhouse-Five*, Billy confronts the possibility of death on many levels in order to understand

his own humanity. He faces World War II fighting action, old age and the suffering that comes with it, a plane accident, as well as his actual death at the hands of a vengeful former comrade. He is shown his history and future by the Tralfamadorians who want to help him cope with his condition of being “unstuck.” By being given a perspective on his own totality, Billy is freed from the modes of being of ‘the they’. In his life up to that point, Billy seemed to live in a daze. Beneath his hapless wandering in the snow behind German lines was a disconnectedness from his own existence. Billy didn’t want to know what was going on; he wasn’t trying to become conscious of what was happening to him in German captivity. Billy encountered the world as a “listless plaything of enormous forces” (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 208). He wore a ridiculous jacket that was so small and crumpled that it looked like a “large black, three-cornered hat” (103), just because it had been handed to him. Even the narrator had to conclude that “everything was pretty much all right with Billy” (200). But eventually he learned to see things the Tralfamadorian way, as a series of “marvelous moments” (112). Granted, the Tralfamadorians were as emotionless as shock-stricken Billy, but they were that way for a different reason: solemnity.

Up to a certain point in the novel, the meaningfulness of Billy’s life depends upon his being able to live in the mode of being of a soldier—to be what it is to be a soldier, as Heidegger might describe it. Living up to this expectation leaves him quite awkwardly situated. He doesn’t know how to fight, much less walk quietly or bundle up or find food to survive. Billy is lost in a world that is completely defined by others’ meanings: who he should fight, who he should be scared of, and who he should talk to (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 68). Another soldier traveling with Billy, Roland Weary, has successfully absorbed what it is to be a soldier. Jerome Klinkowitz observes that “Weary is possessed by images” (Klinkowitz 90). He calls the group the “Three Musketeers,” he wields brutal weapons, and he lugs the contents of multiple care packages around on his person wherever he goes, but does no more actual fighting than Billy. It is clear that inauthentic figures

such as Weary are intended by Vonnegut to be one of the absurd features about a war. The aspiration to others' modes of existence is formally rejected by Vonnegut in the first chapter. When discussing his ideas for the novel with his friend Bernard V. O'Hare, O'Hare's wife becomes worried that he will write it as if the war was glamorous, with John Wayne-like characters awaiting praise for their glorious activities (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 18). Vonnegut reassures her that he is actually planning to make it sound like as foolish an activity as a children's crusade—the prime example of an inauthentic event if there ever was one. The lesson, if any, to be learned from war, is that once its overarching meaning is taken away and it is examined authentically, it appears quite different.

### 3 Time and the Tralfamadorians

A person is defined by the events in their life. These events, both unanticipated and unforeseeable, make us who we are. In a sense, the intuition that we are moving through time defines our very existence. We travel through time with our memories and our meanings. Billy Pilgrim is different because his memories of the past are more distinct. There's no difference between the immediacy of his past, present, and future. With no accurate historical context, Billy's being in the world is atemporal. Everything floods in at random and is unintelligible. The reason is that our existence, our projects and possibilities, are defined by our situation in the world. Billy's unstuck-ness removes the significance of his historical context, but since he has no authentic projects to replace them with, he becomes lost.

For the Tralfamadorians who kidnap Billy, existence is an entirely different concept. Not being trapped linearly in time, their culture is radically different. For example, a Tralfamadorian novel is one that is read all at once:

There is no beginning, no middle, no end, no suspense, no morals, no causes, no effects. What we love in our books are the depths of many marvelous moments seen all at one time. (*Slaughterhouse-Five*, 112)

When Billy is captured and asks them, “why me,” their response is one of perfect passive acceptance of the way things are:

Billy...inquired at last: ‘Why me?’  
 “That is a very *Earthling* question to ask, Mr. Pilgrim. Why *you*? Why *us* for that matter? Why *anything*? Because this moment simply *is*. Have you ever seen bugs trapped in amber?” (97)

In his Confessions, Augustine asks, “O Lord, since you are outside time in eternity, are you unaware of the things that I tell you? Or do you see in time the things that occur in it?” (Augustine 253). Vonnegut's Tralfamadorians are very close to being “outside time.” They can see the past and the future, they can predict events, and they can see the moment of their deaths. “[They] can look at all the different moments just the way we can look at a stretch of the Rocky Mountains, for instance” (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 34). There is nothing in the novel, however, to indicate they are actually outside of time. Events in the future still ‘will happen’ to them. Billy Pilgrim, later in his life, has a sappy inspirational prayer posted on the wall of his office. It asks God to “grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom always to tell the difference.” Billy reads the prayer differently than most people: “Among the things Billy could not change were the past, the present, and the future” (77). Humans (and similarly-sentient Tralfamadorians) are still defined by past circumstances and future possibilities. For Heidegger, it is difficult to understand what it is *to be* outside of time. George Steiner observes that “we do not live ‘in time’, as if the latter were some independent, abstract flow external to our being. We ‘live time’; the two terms are inseparable” (Steiner 78). Just like being (*Sein*) can't be seen from afar but must actually be experienced, time (*Zeit*) must be participated in to be understood (79).

### 4 The style of writing in *Slaughterhouse-Five*

The traditional interpretation of Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five* is that of a rejection of

meta-narrative. Literature in the Western tradition from the Iliad onward has been characterized by *themes*, fragments of morals, lessons, and higher purposes (teleology) that run below the surface of the actual narrative. These types of meta-narratives were rejected by Vonnegut and other writers of his time out of the fear that the morals we live by, the meta-narratives that have been taught to us, are the cause of great violence in our society—especially tragedies like World War II. However, the meta-narrative of morals and teleology that is rejected by Vonnegut’s novel could be said to have been replaced by a meta-narrative of rejection. Similar to a preacher preaching against preaching, the absurd of post-modernism reveals itself in this inherent contradiction, which it then embraces. Whether this rejection is truly a rejection or just a new narrative is what the critical theorist Derrida might characterize as an undecidable proposition: the text can be interpreted both ways. Many examples of this contradiction are scattered throughout the novel. On some pages of the book, Billy Pilgrim is the protagonist, a character who the audience is concerned with, while in other places he is a wretched being, so insignificant as to be of no concern. For part of the novel, the time travel episodes seem to be hallucinations, as evidenced by the forum he chooses to present his claims and the ridicule he faces from his daughter (*Slaughterhouse-Five* 37), but then there are circumstances where Billy expects to have to “act in” the next stage of his life to which he is transported (29). The implication is that he is actually there. In one sense, Billy’s abduction could simply be seen as a symptom of insanity, but how else would he know the time of his death if he hadn’t been shown it? This undecidability is identified by Derrida as an essential quality to every text. It is a consequence of “the Heideggerean destruction of metaphysics” (Derrida 280). He observes that in these contradictions, “language bears within itself the necessity of its own critique” (284). This undecidability seems to also be a quality explicitly acknowledged by Vonnegut.

We learn from Heidegger that “every seeking gets guided by what is sought” (*Being and Time* 24). We

learn from Vonnegut that despite the meaning we seek in life, there are “no morals, no causes, [and] no effects.” Vonnegut and Heidegger both ask a form of the question, “Where does meaning come from?” While Heidegger then builds back up what is left of this philosophical inquiry when he tears it down, Vonnegut fails to supply a positive answer and instead “answers” with a narrative, a unique story that appears to lack all meaning of its own. The suggestion of postmodern interpretations of this work is that Vonnegut wanted no interpretation to be drawn from it at all. The suggestion of existentialism is that this is where interpretation begins.

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