

Man Alone

By WILLIAM A. HARPER

Of late it has become increasingly difficult for man to become aware of his unique existence. He is constantly being categorized, functionalized, labeled, and numbered. He is a passive witness to the demise of his own uniqueness and to the extinction of his own being. Man is handing over his personal identity in exchange for the comfort and security afforded him in the Heideggerian *they*. It is this notion of personal identity with which I am here concerned, a notion that can be likened to asking the question: "Who am I, really?" It is the intention of this article to demonstrate that because the asking of the question "Who am I?" presupposes *that I am*, it is first necessary to become aware of my existence (that I am) before I can consider answering the proposed question of personal identity. And it will be suggested that man's relative aloneness in sport can provide an opportunity for seizing upon the awareness of one's own unique existence.

The surrendering of one's self can be no better explicated than by reference to the "official dossier" as char-

acterized by Marcel,⁴ in which the essence of a human being is reduced to a few pages of paper: pages indicating his name, his address, his financial standing, his vocation, and his physical characteristics:

The point here is not only to recognize that the human, all too human, powers that make up my life no longer sustain any practical distinction between myself and the abstract individual all of whose "particulars" can be contained on the few sheets of an official dossier, but that this strange reduction of a personality to an official identity must have an inevitable repercussion on the way I am forced to grasp myself. . . . What does a creature who is thus pushed about from pillar to post, ticketed, docketed, labeled, become, for himself and in himself?^{4:36}

The submerging of the individual identity attains an even more crucial position in the metaphysics of Heidegger,² where I (*Dasein*) am absorbed and hiding in the everyday world of the *they*. *Dasein* is captive in the everyday through the phenomena of idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity whereby I tend to seek anonymity in holding the public values and championing the everyday knowledge:

In utilizing public means of transport and in making use of information services such as the newspaper, every Other is like the next. This Being-with-one-another dissolves one's own *Dasein* completely into the kind of

About the Author

William A. Harper, B.A., is a Ph.D. candidate and a teaching assistant in Physical Education at the University of Southern California. A graduate of San Fernando Valley State College, Mr. Harper is specializing in philosophic enquiry in his doctoral program.

being of the "Others," in such a way, indeed, that the Others, as distinguishable and explicit, vanish more and more. In this inconspicuousness and unascertainability, the real dictatorship of the "they" is unfolded. We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* (man) take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the "great mass" as *they* shrink back; we find "shocking" what *they* find shocking.^{2:164}

The I is lost in the averageness of the *they*, in the publicness of the Other. And this publicness controls the way in which everything (both the world and I) is interpreted; it is never wrong. For Heidegger, "everyone is the other, and no one is himself."

And still another voice adding support to the case for the "surrendering of self" and the difficulty in maintaining one's personal identity, is that of Jean-Paul Sartre.³ The everyday man, according to Sartre, who is in a state of self-deception (bad faith) by public demand, abandons his own unique individuality in fulfilling a particular function:

Let us consider the waiter in a cafe. His movement is quick and forward, a little too precise, a little too rapid. He comes toward the patrons with a step a little too quick. He bends forward a little too eagerly; his voice, his eyes express an interest a little too solicitous for the order of the customer. Finally there he returns, trying to imitate in his walk the inflexible stiffness of some kind of automaton while carrying his tray with the recklessness of a tight-rope walker by putting it in a perpetually

unstable, perpetually unbroken equilibrium which he perpetually reestablishes by a light movement of the arm and hand. All his behavior seems to us a game. He applies himself to chaining his movements as if they were mechanisms, the one regulating the other; his gesture and even his voice seem to be mechanisms; he gives himself the quickness and pitiless rapidity of things. He is playing; he is amusing himself. But what is he playing? We need not watch long before we can explain it: he is playing *at being* a waiter in a cafe.^{3:255-256}

For Sartre, society (Heidegger's *they*) demands that he fulfill his function and that he limit himself to his function. Self-deception is maintained when man is not what he is.

Since the common denominator in the three aforementioned descriptions of the abrogation of the self is a state of being whereby man is as others wish him to be, it must now be relatively apparent that to seek an answer to the question "Who am I, really?" is a project guided by uncertainty, ambiguity, and mystery. The man who seeks an answer is condemned to struggle, sentenced to tentativeness. And yet the search goes on. Men want to know. Therefore, it would seem that the initial undertaking is by far the most crucial: man must *become aware* of his unique existence (that he is). Man must realize *that he is* before he can attempt an understanding of *who he is*. And it is in a state of aloneness, a state of solitary presence within-one's-self, that one may realize his uniqueness. Being alone is not dependent upon

physical isolation. I can be "with others" while locked in a closet, and I can be with myself in a room full of people. Being alone is, in a sense, a oneness; a singularity; a unity within one's self. And in being aware of this whole or total state one can truly understand *that he is*.

Man is alone in sport. When he is actively involved, his personal success or failure depends solely upon him. The man in sport cannot shirk being alone; he cannot defer this state in preference for a public substitution. His only choice is to play or not to play. If he chooses the former, he is condemned to solitude. However, an awareness of this single state is by no means guaranteed. True, the realization of his isolation belongs only to the participating man himself, but this awareness is not a cognitive, predetermined choice. The feeling is not easy to come by. Many times this revealing understanding comes about when a man does not fulfill his expected potential, an experience more than merely isolating:

For Manager Brown, getting along is making do with the material at hand—of which the best is schizophrenic Snoopy, who sometimes imagines he is an alligator but steals second base like a lion. A second worthy principle is tolerance. It is horrible, sure, to see easy fly balls muffed, but horribler yet to muff them yourself.^{7:46-51}

Only those who are less than perfect in the athletic endeavor can understand what it means to drop a fly ball, miss an easy lay-up, double fault on set point, or pull a six-inch birdie putt.

The experience is indeed individualizing.

Many other times it may be the acceptance of personal responsibility which opens one up to knowing that he is. And it is the *awareness* of this personal responsibility which characterizes the man who really knows he is alone in the sport experience. In his aloneness the obligation to himself distinguishes his sport experience from the "other" determined experiences of the everyday world. And it is this reliance upon his own special capabilities and potentials, and not the public panaceas, that allows the sport participant to realize his unique individuality. In an awareness of his personal responsibility, Rick Barry, a professional basketball player, says the following:

"There are a lot of guys who work hard at defense, they play you close and they make you work for every shot. But it all comes down to whether you can put them in or not. In the final analysis, it is not them stopping you but *you* missing it." He kept talking in the second person, but as he went on and expanded, the "you" seemed to contract more and more from the general to the personal.^{1:32-35}

In short, the occasion of this awareness may be any immediate happening. It may be the loneliness of the cross-country bicyclist; the suffering of the long distance runner; the pain and agony of the mile runner; the physical beating taken by the boxer; or the frequent "hits" received by participants in contact sports. It may also be the elation in winning; the deep despair of

losing; the nervous tension and excitement before a competition; the fear of an opponent; the battle against nature; the freedom of movement; or the frightening realization of one's mortality that comes in facing death:

Auto racers, they defy death. I stare it right in the face. I believe we were born dead. I did not ask to be put on earth. I have accepted the fact that dying is a part of living.^{5:60-70}

Evel Knievel, the motorcycle jumper who plans to jump the Grand Canyon on a jet propelled bike, went on to say, "My thing is a serious thing. . . . I'm awful nervous . . . [but] I'm really doing what I'm doing."

The occasions are many; the feeling is real. It is for man himself, in the end, to realize himself as man, to shake himself loose from his death grip on the averageness of the everyday, and to *be*. In the aloneness of sport man is potentially able to realize that he is—that he is unique—that there is no other person like him in the world. He is, and that in itself is important. One must imagine that Don Schollander, captain of the Yale swimming team and winner of four gold medals in the 1964 Olympics, has loosened his grip on publicness, when, in rejecting functionalization, he describes well the task before each man:

I don't call myself a swimmer at all. I'm a person who happens to swim. . . . Before you decide how you

want to live your life, you must look at yourself and *attempt* to know yourself. I look at myself as a person who is trying to develop as an individual. It's been important to me throughout my life to be much more than a student, to be much more than an athlete, to be much more than anything.^{6:24-34}

Whether he is hurling a javelin, soaring off a ski-jump, performing a double back flip off a diving board, or screaming towards earth in a free fall sky dive, man is alone. He is beyond the world of public determinations; of official identities; of functions; of self-deceptions; and of everydayness. And in the solitary state of oneness, man can meet himself. Whether he meets a friend or a complete stranger, he very suddenly knows *that he is*.

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