

## The Ontological Skeleton of *Sein und Zeit*

Consider the following example of a “concrete and natural perception” that Heidegger gives in 1925: “...a chair which I find upon entering a room and push aside, since it is in my way.” (HCT: 29) This is an extraordinary example for an act of perception – compare this dynamic encounter, with Descartes static, disinterested, staring at the piece of wax.

The chair can be in Heidegger’s way because he is heading somewhere. He can be heading somewhere, he can be on-the-way-to, ahead, towards this or that task because he is already-in some organized meaningful situation, in some context of tasks and involvements. He is already-ahead and this temporal dynamism opens up a *present* in which a chair can appear *as* this or that (in this case, *as* an obstacle.)

Temporal clearing, the upshot and horizon of much of Heidegger’s thinking in those years, is already here in this little example. But the road to the climactic section on temporality in SZ (section 65) is outrageously torturous. Is it really necessary to get to the clearing of the *sich-vorweg-schon-sein-in* (ahead-of-itself-already-being-in) by way of death, conscience and guilt? Put another way, why is a work that seems to be a confrontation with Kant and Aristotle suddenly turn to Kierkegaard, Augustine and Saint Paul? Is this strange alchemy between ontology and ‘personal dramatic philosophy’ necessary? Our question is not genealogical. The mystery of SZ - of this “astonishing torso” (as Theodore Kisiel calls it) - is not its missing head but in this disjointedness, that splits the two divisions almost neatly around the notion of *AUTHENTICITY – Eigentlichkeit*.

*Eigentlichkeit* is most literally owned-ness, from *Eigen, Eigentlich* – own, proper, actual, real, authentic (in the sense of the Greek *autos*, ‘done by one’s own hand’). Heidegger uses the term to designate a primary mode of human existence – an ontological, not a romantic notion [Dasein is somehow in a mode of owned-ness, it owns-up to itself, it’s authentic.]. Here’s a synoptic view: human existence as a moment-to-moment process, activity, and task – what Heidegger calls ‘Dasein’, is what it is not because of some pre-existing essence. Rather, Dasein is what it understands and interprets itself to be. One is a “shoemaker, tailor, teacher, banker”, HCT: 244.) These are *Seinkönnen*, possibilities for one to be, roles one plays in the *world*, and one understand oneself from out of these (*worldly*) possibilities and *is* this understanding. This structure that defines Dasein as self-interpreting, as understanding and self-understanding, is at the core of Dasein’s Being which Heidegger calls *EXISTENCE (Existenz)*.

But, says Heidegger, there is a way for Dasein to understand itself not from the world. Not from such a worldly *Seinkönnen* as being a tailor or a teacher. From what then? What else is there but ways of being in the world? There’s really nothing. And, astonishingly, Heidegger tries to make sense of a self understanding based on nothing, or rather, *the* nothing (nullity, ‘not-ness’) that

permeates human existence in its most extreme 'futural' possibility (being toward *non-being*) and 'past' possibility (*not* being its own ground). This is called owned or authentic (*eigentlich*) existence.

A strange notion. But even more perplexing is its prominent, organizing role in SZ. Consider: Division I is an articulation of the being of Dasein as care after characterizing it as being-in-the-world and considering the various components of this unified phenomenon *in the mode of average everydayness* –i.e. in what we usually think of as life, the life in which one perceives and understands things, and understands oneself as part of this understanding.

Division II begins by stressing, or rather, stipulating the necessity to establish *eigentlich*, i.e. owned, authentic, existence as a possibility of Dasein. Heidegger is suddenly trying to appropriate such Christian notions as guilt and conscience to show that this obscure, and rather poorly articulate *Seinkönnen*, is not a philosophical fancy... Whether it is successful is heavily disputed. Once this is done (chapter 3, division II), Heidegger moves to the real upshot of the book: the grounding of human existence in temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) – arguing, or seeming to argue, that establishing the possibility of authentic existence was a necessary stage towards *Zietlichkeit*. Again, an obscure, disputed, claim. The rest of the book attempts to retrieve the structures of everyday existence in terms of the notion of temporality attained.

So again, and everything in this synopsis is very rough: why is the notion of Authenticity so central that the book is literally arranged around it? Is it necessary? Should we accept it as a necessary aspect of the idea of existence (*Existenz*)? Why and how is *Eigentlichkeit* connected to the role the nothing, or not-ness, plays in human existence? Is it necessary to stipulate (and then go through dubious acrobatics to establish) *Eigentlichkeit* as possible mode of human existence in order to understand the role that *Zeitlichkeit* plays in it?

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*[Now we'll go SLOW. For people who know Heidegger this might be, at least, initially, trivial. But bear with me. We will get to something non-trivial at the end.]*

*Something about Being [Sein] and the ontic / ontological distinction in SZ.* What does Heidegger mean by *Sein*, Being? What is the being of an entity? Three kinds of entities are considered in SZ: the present-at-hand (Vorhandene,– e.g. stone), the ready-to-hand (Zuhandene, the ready– e.g. hammer) and Dasein (Heidegger's radical re-working of human subjectivity).

There are other types of entities of course: NUMBER. HISTORICAL EVENT. A SYMPHONY. – All have different kinds of BEING, *Sein* –different ways of TO BE. They are different ONTOLOGICALLY.

Kant's table of the categories is an example of the "basic determinations of the Being" of the present-at-hand. That is, the present-at-hand is determined *ontologically* by such categories as 'substance', 'causality' or **being-in**, in the sense of spatial containment. **Ontically**, an entity is further determined as a stone, a mountain or a moon – but ontologically all these entities are the same.

The Being-structure of the ready-to-hand is determined *ontologically* as being 'in order to...' – *Um-zu* – (I'm taking the compact *Um-zu* to stand for... *Bewandtnis* – deployment, functionality. Involvement in a meaningful referential totality that includes tasks and other tools etc...)

This (still empty) 'in-order-to...' defines the ready-to-hand ontologically in its Being (*Sein*). Every tool is already determined by this 'character of Being'. Which specific tool it is, if it's a hammer or a traffic sign, for example, is a possible *ontic concretions* of that which is already understood as having the ontological structure of being in-order-to... and being part of some referential totality.

**SUM UP: Ontological determinations vs. Ontic determination.**

**Drawing: Vorhandenheit – Presence ... Zuhandenheit – ready... Existenz – Existence – Dasein.**

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Let's link to KANT for a moment.

Being, *Sein*, for Heidegger, is intimately linked to 'the understanding of Being'. We have to already possess an understanding of what a present-at-hand thing is in order to encounter a present thing. We have to already possess an understanding of ready-to-hand-ness (Zuhandenheit, equipmentality, in-order-to-ness) is in order to encounter a tool. It is in that sense that SZ is a text in the transcendental tradition. When Heidegger talks about a pre-ontological understanding of Being he has something not dissimilar to the pre-possession of the pure concepts of the understanding (the categories) in Kant, concepts of an object in general.

BUT HEIDEGGER EXTENDS KANT IN TWO WAYS one: Kant only focuses on the present-at-hand, the type of entities dominated by the category of substance and cause. Heidegger extends his transcendental treatment to the ready-to-hand (tools) AND more significantly to Dasein itself AND THIS IS WHERE IT BECOMES REALLY INTERESTING...

Another way in which Heidegger extends Kant is that for Kant knowledge is intimately linked to propositional knowledge (consider the affinity between the table of categories and the table of forms of judgment). For Heidegger knowledge is, most fundamentally, practical know-how, e.g. knowing how, that is, having the ability to, drive a car. *Understanding people*, for example,

means knowing how to deal with people, e.g. being able to head a research group, to handle a management crisis... etc. Understanding as *können* – ability.

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### **We compared to Kant. Let's now focus on Dasein.**

“**Dasein**”. Literally **Da Sein**. Being there. There, in a world, in a situation. As opposed to the ‘here’ underlying the understanding of mind as a thing that represents. The ‘There’ in the sense of ‘There I was, in trouble again...’ – there in a situation. But in ordinary German Dasein simply means ‘existence’.

In the *Trial*, Kafka writes that K. said something – while standing there waiting for his boss to finish a call – “um sein unnutzes Dasein nur ein wenig zu entschuldigen”. The translator renders it as “in order to at least somewhat excuse just being there (for no reason).” But “unnutzes Dasein” – just being there, with no use, also has the double meaning of “useless existence.”

A central theme in *SZ*: the philosophical tradition has always misunderstood the being of the entity that we ourselves are (Dasein) because it always approached it as a thing, a *res*, a substance (The prevailing materialism of today is, of course a much more literal and crude descendant of this tendency.)

As oppose to this, *SZ* is a tour de force attempt to replace traditional approaches to human subjectivity by rendering human existence as a dynamic, ek-static, happening, ever out for... ever on the way to..., *a not yet*, an **openness** (again, as opposed to a thing that mirrors, or represents) a **potentiality** determined through and through by its possibilities onto which it projects itself and out of which it understands itself (more on this below). Human existence, human subjectivity, should be understood using radically different set of categories than that of the present-at-hand (substance and accident in the case of a stone), and as part of the overhaul, Heidegger introduces a new notion so as to rid us of the burdens of the tradition. This is ‘Dasein’. We sometimes speak of ‘human Dasein’ but it’s important not to confuse it with a ‘human being’ – a human being has, for instance, some essential attributes of a cellular organism. Dasein doesn’t (just like consciousness can be imagined as free of the cellular.) To get a handle on what Heidegger means by Dasein think of consciousness insofar as it is intentional, insofar as it understands and is attuned and already in a situation (world) in which it is capable of... and understands itself as... etc. This might suggest a process of some kind – Dasein is certainly more process-ish than thing-ish, but this is also misleading, a process is *in* time Dasein is not in time, Dasein somehow *times* (we will touch on this below). Human beings can Dasein – as a verb – i.e. ‘be-there’ – in a world. Or they can be said to be ‘*Daseining*’, an English phrasing unavailable in German that can account for this entity’s moment-to-moment-ness (*jeweiligkeit*).

So how is this OVERHAWL achieved? As we said, in a Kantian manner. Heidegger will articulate the CATEGORIES that ontologically characterize Dasein (Just as Kant does the categories of the present-at-hand). He calls those categories **Existentials** (but we will keep calling them categories in order to stress the affinity with the Kantian project). For example Dasein's being-in (*In-sein*) has the character of being absorbed in, being familiar with, residing, dwelling, whereas the being-in of a stone (*Sein-in*) is just that of spatial containment (SZ: 54) [The stone is in jar in a different way in which I am at work, I'm in a situation...] **Understanding** is an Existential ! Just like the stone is determined by the categories of substance and causality so Dasein is radically determine by the category (existential) of understanding. We will elaborate on this in a second.

So. Let's consider the ontic/ontological difference when it comes to Dasein. Understanding, or Being-in in the sense of being absorbed-in, are categorial-**ontological** determinations of Dasein's. **Ontic** determinations of Dasein are called Existentiell determinations (I'll keep calling them ontic). For example: Dasein can be European of the 20<sup>TH</sup> century or a tribesman in Africa twenty thousand years ago. It can be a 'shoemaker, tailor, teacher, banker.' Dasein, as a self interpreting, self understanding, entity, 'determines itself' (bestimmt sich, SZ: 42) as this or that. Dasein has no essence, no 'what', in the way that a proton, or a stone, or a hammer, or a traffic sign have them. "*The 'essence' of Dasein lies in its existence*" [SZ: 42] (**existence is the Being of Dasein**) and this is meant in the sense that:

All the being-as-it-is [So-sein] which this entity possesses is primarily Being [Sein] (SZ: 42)

This is crucial and is even the reason for the term 'Dasein' itself – which was chosen as "a term which is purely an expression of its being [reiner Seinsausdruck]" (SZ: 12)

It's as if there was a *tool that can be any tool* and we would just call it tool, or ready-to-hand, for its categorial-ontological structure, that is, for its Being [Sein], and leave it completely ontically undetermined!

It is this defining peculiarity of Dasein that will prove to be the key to understanding the centrality of the notion of authenticity in SZ.

**SUM UP: We said something about the ontological vs. the ontic. We said that Heidegger is engaged in a Kantian-like caterorial (existential) analysis of this entity, Dasein. And we said that Dasein is peculiar for being in some sense purely ontological.**

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**Now let's talk about UNDERSTANDING.**

The Being of Dasein is variously articulated as Being-in-the-World or Care but all these structures have the forms of the ALREADY-AHEAD alluded to in the initial example. An already-ahead that opens a present. It's a temporal-like extension of intentionality. A complicated structure described variously as Dasein being *factually-existing, thrown-projecting, attuned-understanding*.

Each of these variants has a "past"-ish and a "future"-ish component. Let's look at THROWN – PROJECTING. Dasein is thrown into a world, into a set of possibilities not of its own making (a time, a society, family, language, custom...) And it is *tasked* to make this life its OWN. Heidegger says that Dasein PROJECTS itself onto POSSIBILITIES. What does that mean? What is possibility in the existential sense?

It is possible for me to do run down the street and perform an elaborate rain-dance, naked. It's logically possible, and physically possible. But it's not really possible for ME to do this in the sense that it is inconsistent with WHO I am. That's possibility of in the existential sense. The WHO of Dasein is its ontic concretion (me vs. you), just as the WHAT of a thing is the thing's ontic concretion (a stone vs. a star).

[NOTE HOW ONTOLOGICALLY NEAT THE WHOLE TREATISE IS. WHO/WHAT. ONTIC/ONTOLOGICAL and thus we have to understand AUTHENTICITY in this vain. So a reminder: we want to understand why Division II suddenly treats DEATH, CONSCIENCE, GUILT etc.]

Dasein is thrown into a set of possibilities and constantly project itself onto possibilities (moment-to-moment: I go to work or I stay home, I buy this or I buy that car etc. I understand myself as a lawyer, make choices – or neglect to make them, drift along – within the space of the possible associated with that role). Dasein understands and defines itself by possibilities:

"Dasein is nothing but being-possible. I am = I can..." (HCT: 298)

"Dasein is in each case what it can be and how it is its possibility." (SZ: 143).

"To understand means... to project oneself upon a possibility (BP: 277)

"...the activity of understanding existentially implies Dasein's kind of Being as *Seinkönnen*" (SZ: 143).

*Seinkönnen*: ability-to-be, potentiality of being, can-be. Teacher, banker, shoemaker are *Seinkönnen* of Dasein – things Dasein 'can be'.

"Existing, it [Dasein], understand itself in such a way that this understanding does not just grasp something, but constitutes the existenziell [=ontic] being of its factual *Seinkönnen*" SZ 325.

This means that: Dasein (ontically) is what it understands/interprets itself as: One understand oneself (interprets oneself) as the the black sheep of the family and this is *who* he or she is! And this WHO, this ROLE, is not captured by this understand but it IS this understanding. This is why understanding is an existential – a category of Being of Dasein and why Heidegger can say, dramatically:

Understanding is the Dasein's fundamental mode of happening [BP: 277]

*[Just as an aside to people more versed with the text: what I was doing, is focusing on the role of understanding as the key component in Dasein's ontological structure, its Being. The structure is in fact more complex – it's attuned-understanding, it's an already-ahead which opens a present, etc. But Heidegger claims that the futural part is the dominant one; that's why existence is taken sometimes as a term for the whole of the Being of Dasein, and sometimes just for the 'futural' element. There is further proof in the methodological section 63 of SZ, that Heidegger takes understanding and self-understanding as the key to the idea of existence. But I will not get into this now.]*

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Now let's introduce AUTHENTICITY – EIGENTLICHKEIT, literally OWNEDNESS.

Dasein mostly understand/interprets itself according to the possibilities of the 'they' 'the attainable, manageable, viable' [SZ: 261], the 'familiar, respectable, the fitting [SZ: 194]. – professions, roles, etc. "Dasein understanding itself in terms of the horizon of taking care of things" 293. Later Heidegger will call this irresoluteness: surrendering to the prevalent *interpreted* of the 'they' 299. **Angst, anxiety** is, of course, the antidote for this: It takes away from Dasein the possibility of understanding itself from the world. 187.

BUT, SAYS HEIDEGGER, There is an authentic/ownmost *Seinkönnen*, sometimes called *Selbstseinkönnen* – Dasein's ability-to-be itself – a *Seinkönnen* not derived from the 'reflected light' of the world, or from public understanding of the 'they' – and Dasein is authentically itself (***eigentlich es selbst*** – literally itself in the mode of **owned-ness**) only to the extent that it "projects itself upon [i.e. understand itself from] its **owmost *Seinkönnen***, it's ownmost can-be." [SZ: 263]

***In plain English: There is a way for Dasein to understand itself not from the world (not from possibilities in the world) but, somehow, understand itself as what it itself actually (eigentlich) is. This is authenticity.***

Let's see how that works (and this is the heart of the matter):

Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence (*Existenz*), a possibility of itself, to be itself or not itself. (SZ: 12)

*Existenz* – Dasein’s Being, Dasein’s ontological structure – is somehow a possibility of Dasein. And Dasein can somehow understand itself in terms of this possibility, this can-be, this *Seinkönnen*.

“The entity that is concerned about its Being, comports itself towards its Being as to its ownmost possibility.” P. 42.

So Dasein’s *Being* is somehow its ‘ownmost possibility’ – it’s that special *Seinkönnen* we are looking for. The *Selbstseinkönnen*, the possibility to be itself, the authentic, ownmost can-be – derived not from the ‘they’ out of which Dasein can, and mostly does, understand itself, but from Dasein itself.

Dasein is out for its own Being; it is out for its very Being in order ‘to be’ its Being [um sein Sein ‘zu sein’]. (HCT: 294)

So what can that mean...? That Dasein’s Being, Dasein’s ontological structure (namely, *existenz*) is somehow a possibility of Dasein...? What is it for Dasein “‘to be’ its Being”? ‘To be’ here means to ontically (existenzielly) be, i.e. to understand itself as [remember: understand oneself as the black sheep...] And Dasein’s Being is fundamentally understanding [Dasein is ontologically an understanding *Seinkönnen*, an understanding can-be]. So for Dasein “‘to be’ its Being [Sein]” is for Dasein to somehow understand itself as a self understanding entity, or to interpret itself as a self interpreting entity – and nothing but that.

Put differently: Dasein is ontically (existenzielly) what it understand itself to be; so for Dasein ‘to be its Being’ means for Dasein to ontically be what it is ontologically.

AND THIS IS the real impulse and meaning behind the notion of authenticity and it’s centrality in the text.

Authenticity is not some romantic idea of keeping individuation against the overpowering current of the ‘they’... it is an ontological-structural idea where Dasein’s ontic *concretion* mirrors its ontological constitution understood as *Seinkönnen* – as possibility, as can-be.

[Another version: to understand oneself as possibility IS the ownmost possibility of that entity whose ontological structure is being possible.]

The idea is in fact quite simple. Instead of understanding myself as a teacher, father etc. (or philosophically, as a rational animal) I have to understand myself first and foremost as possibility – the possibility to be any of those things.

“Possibility is the most original, ultimate and positive determination of Dasein”  
(SZ: 143).

But what is it to understand myself as possibility – what is it to understand myself as an understanding *Seinkönnen*? For Heidegger understanding is not theoretical. It’s not that we read SZ and then understand ourselves as possibility. Understanding ourselves as *Seinkönnen* (can-be) has to be already expressed somehow in human existence. This is where death and guilt take center stage in this ontological treatise.

## DEATH / GUILT

Dasein is an entity whose Being-as-it-is (*So-sein*) is primarily Being (*Sein*). Think of the tool example, a tool that can be any tool and can be characterized only according to its category of Being (Readiness to hand. *Zuhandenheit*). Heidegger expresses this idea by saying that the essence of Dasein lies in its existence – where existence is the ontological structure of Dasein, the BEING of Dasein.

Now Being, is NOT itself a being (small b), i.e. not any entity or ontic way of being. This is an expression of what Heidegger calls ‘the ontological difference’. [This distinction, for Heidegger, is the beginning and end of philosophy, but I will not elaborate on it here.] What has death to do with that? To project myself upon the BEING that I am, to understand myself from it, is to understand myself NOT as any entity, NOT as any way of being in the world – NOT as father, NOT as Israeli, not as... not as... And what is death? Death, or, to be precise, being-towards-death, is the possibility of the impossibility of any (particular) way of being (in the world). So death, the role death plays in my existence, the fact that I can, and always somehow does, understand myself from my own mortality, IS an expression of an understanding of myself NOT from any ontic way of being in the world – which is what is sought!

[So we see the connection between the ontological difference + the fact that Dasein is just Being + and how Heidegger characterizes being towards death.]

Further, Death is a possibility, but from the first person, death gives me nothing to visualize as its actualization. We usually think of a possibility in terms of its actualization. [Possibility of X, we think of X]. But in thinking of my death, I can think of nothing actual. It’s a possibility that can and must be grasped as pure possibility so to speak. That’s why death – that is, my self-understanding as mortal, which is always somehow there in my existence, whether I face it or avoid it – can be an expression of me understanding myself as *Seinkönnen* – pure possibility, a

possibility not comprehended by reference to anything actual. My own most (that is, authentic) self as ontological can-be.

SCHULD translated as guilt or debt, is an expression of Dasein understanding itself as NOT being the ground of its own existence. Again, understanding myself as NOT, is closely tied to understanding myself as an entity determined only ontologically – i.e. not as any being (small b) or any way of being (small b). I will not expand on this further.

TO CONCLUDE: The not-ness, nullity, (nichtigkeit) in my outermost “futura” possibility, the possibility not to be (being towards death), and “past” possibility, not being its own ground, is closely tied to the ‘not’ of the ontological difference itself and the fact that Heidegger fundamentally think of Dasein as an entity determined only ontologically !! (QED...!)

**OPTIONAL: Indication of Temporality: the ahead-of-itself.**

Ontologically, being towards one’s ownmost *Seinkönnen* means that Dasein is always already ahead-of-itself [*sich-vorweg-sein*] in its being. Already ‘beyond itself’ (über sich hinaus), not as relating to other entities which it is not, but as Being towards the *Seinkönnen* which it itself is. This structure of Being... we shall denote as Dasein’s “Being-ahead-of-itself”. (SZ: 191-192)

The “ahead” does not mean the “in advance” in the sense of the “not-yet-now-but-later”. SZ 327.

Dasein is ahead-of-itself as being towards its ownmost *Seinkönnen* – which we saw, is the possibility of being it’s Being, understanding itself as an understanding *Seinkönnen* etc...

When Heidegger talks about always having something outstanding (which seems to prevent the ability to grasp Dasein as a whole), it is not because it has something outstanding tomorrow, but because the ownmost *Seinkönnen* is outstanding.

This later becomes the “letting-itself-come-towards-itself” which is the “primordial phenomenon of the future”.

The idea is that Dasein for the most part exists as an actualized possibility, so the extreme possibility of existing as possibility is that which is outstanding and that which should be somehow attained in order to attain the wholeness of Dasein.

Time, understood in the common way – e.g. the future in the sense of the not yet now – is somehow derived from the being-ahead-of-oneself and later the coming-towards-self (sich Zukekommen-lassen) – understood in that sense. Dasein is a possibility that always become

actualized (falls into the world) and this is a more original notion of temporality from which a future that always becomes a present is derived. Past, present, future --> necessity, actuality, possibility.

Dasein is always already thrown into certain possibilities, and it projects itself onto possibilities taken from the possibilities it is thrown into. So it's as if it's making its future its past... This is the existential, more original phenomenon from which the common notion of future that becomes the past is derived.

But these are just indication and handwaving...

What did we do? We tried to understand Authenticity, *Eigentlichkeit*, owned-ness in an ONTOLOGICAL way and to indicate how the heavily existential discussions of Division II (death, guilt) fit in this work of ontology.

A word about SZ as an extension of the Kantian transcendental project.

### **COMPARE TO KANT**

1. Transcendental frame / **understanding of Being**. Extending to many types of Being (Kant focuses on the present) and extending to practical knowledge. Heidegger, like Kant in the schematism tries to point to time as somehow being the source and ground of Dasein's understanding of Being.

2. BUT extends. Because applies to Dasein, and because of the ontological difference, and the fact that Dasein is just Being – i.e. NOT a being, and because Dasein is self understanding and so can understand itself as what it is (though usually it doesn't), we get these attempts to establish this not-ness at the limits of human experience (death, guilt) which go way beyond what can be considered a purely transcendental project.