



## **Heidegger's Question of Being: Ontology as Fundamental Inquiry**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this paper is to explore Martin Heidegger's conception of care. Through the notion of care, he interprets Dasein. Dasein is the basic way in which human existence relates to the world. Heidegger uses phenomenology to explain the question of being. For Heidegger, the question of being is not an abstract metaphysical discovery, as traditional philosophers mostly consider. Heidegger utilizes phenomenology as a form of investigation into fundamental ontology. It is a discovery of "who am I" apart from how we know the world in totality. For Heidegger, Being means Dasein. This is the way of human existence that is experienced as "being there" in the world, apart from something abstract and detached from the world.

The question of being in the world is closely associated with the structures of care. We can understand Dasein's (human being's) everyday existence through the three aspects of care—thrownness, projection, and fallenness. These three aspects of human being together reveal how one finds oneself already in a world, actively engaged with it, and often absorbed in it. Human existence in the world is always related to care. The notion of care provides a unified way of understanding human life. Heidegger is interested in human existence and self-understanding, in contrast to Edmund Husserl. For Husserl, phenomenology is the study of consciousness and captures the essence of knowledge in totality. The second part of this paper offers a critical reflection on whether Heidegger's idea of carefully captures the complexity of human existence.

**Key Words:** Martin Heidegger, Existential Phenomenology, Facticity and Freedom, Care, Dasein, Human Existence.

### **Introduction**

Martin Heidegger was a German philosopher whose major works are closely

connected with phenomenology and existentialism. As David R. Carbone explains, Heidegger's phenomenology is guided by what

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he calls “fundamental ontology,” which centers on the question of Being.<sup>1</sup> For Heidegger, the question of Being is different from the idea of pure or abstract being that exists outside space and time. His understanding of Being is expressed through the concept of Dasein, a German term composed of “Da” meaning “there” and “sein” meaning “being.” Dasein therefore, refers to human existence as “being-there” in the world.

Heidegger argues that “being-in-the-world” forms the basic structure of Dasein’s existence. We understand Dasein and its relation to the world through the structure of care. Heidegger uses care as a phenomenological method because knowledge arises from our involvement and concern with the world around us. Unlike Edmund Husserl, who used phenomenology mainly to develop a theory of knowledge and to ask how we know the world. Heidegger utilizes phenomenology in an ontological sense to address the deeper question of human existence: “Who am I?” Through the structure of care, Heidegger also provides a temporal interpretation of Dasein.

This paper discusses Heidegger’s interpretation of care as the foundation of Dasein’s being-in-the-world. In section 1, I will present Heidegger’s conception of care and its three structures. In Section 2, I will critically examine this notion of care.

### Section 1: Notion of Care and its Three Structures

Care represents the complete ontological structure of Dasein. It expresses concern and involvement, revealing how human existence is always connected with the world. For Martin Heidegger, Dasein does not simply possess care as one quality among others; rather, care itself defines the very nature of Dasein’s being. Heidegger explains this structure of care through three interconnected dimensions that together reveal the temporal character of human existence. These dimensions are: ahead-of-itself, already-in-the-world, and being-alongside entities within the world. Each of these aspects helps us understand how Dasein exists and relates to itself, others, and the world around it.

**Ahead-of-itself:** “Dasein is always ahead of itself in so far as it is always projecting itself in terms of some for-the-sake-of or other.”<sup>2</sup> Heidegger argues that Dasein is always “ahead of itself” because human existence is essentially oriented toward the future. A person is never completely fixed or fully defined by what they already are. Instead, human beings constantly project themselves toward possibilities, goals, and ways of becoming. As David R. Cerbone explains, we understand ourselves more through possibilities than through completed realities. This means that identity is never entirely settled; human existence remains open and unfinished.

When Heidegger states that Dasein “is not yet,”<sup>3</sup> he means that human life is always moving

<sup>1</sup> Cerbone, R. David. *Understanding Phenomenology*, p. 41

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 54.

toward future possibilities that have not yet been realized. These possibilities are not guaranteed outcomes, nor are they impossible dreams. Rather, they are ways in which a person may shape and understand their existence. Thus, projection becomes an essential feature of Dasein. Human beings continually interpret themselves in terms of what they may become in the future.

### **Already-in-the-world**

At the same time, Dasein is always already situated within a world. Heidegger describes this condition through the idea of “thrownness.” Human beings do not choose the circumstances into which they are born. No one chooses their family, culture, historical period, or social conditions before coming into existence. We simply find ourselves placed within a particular world that already shapes our understanding and experiences.

Heidegger relates this condition of a human being with mood and anxiety. According to him, mood is not merely a psychological feeling but a fundamental way in which the world is disclosed to us. Through moods, we become aware of our situation and our relation to the world. Heidegger refers that “Anxiousness as a state-of-mind is a way of being -in-the-world; that in the face of which we have anxiety is thrown Being-in-the-world.”<sup>1</sup> Anxiety, in particular, reveals that our existence is uncertain and grounded in conditions we did not create ourselves.

Our past experiences, traditions, and historical situations therefore play an important role in shaping who we are. However, the past is not something dead or inactive. It continuously influences how we understand ourselves and how we project our future possibilities. In this sense, Dasein is historical. Human existence is always connected to a lived history that shapes both present understanding and future choices.

### **Being-alongside-within-the-World**

Being-alongside corresponds to what Martin Heidegger calls “falling.” Falling refers to Dasein’s absorption in its everyday activities and engagements. Human existence is always involved in some activity, concern, or practical involvement within the world. In this sense, Dasein is constantly occupied with the things it does in daily life. These activities are not separate from Dasein’s existence; rather, they arise from the ways in which Dasein projects and understands itself.

As David R. Cerbone explains, “my current activity is informed by the self-understanding in terms of which I am projecting myself.”<sup>2</sup> This means that our present actions are shaped by how we understand ourselves and by the possibilities toward which we direct our lives. Mood and state of mind also influence our involvement in the world, because they shape the way we experience and respond to our current situation. Thus, Dasein is always immersed in its present activities and concerns.

<sup>1</sup> Heidegger. Martin, *Being and time*, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> Cerbone. R. David. *Understanding Phenomenology*, p.55.

These three structures of care—ahead-of-itself, already-in-the-world, and being-alongside—together form Heidegger's conception of a human being. These structures of care also reveal the temporal aspect of Dasein. Projection toward possibilities reflects the future; thrownness and state of mind are connected with the past; and falling represents Dasein's involvement in the present. In this way, Heidegger interprets human existence through the unity of future, past, and present.

For Heidegger, Dasein's mode of being as care is fundamentally different from the traditional philosophical understanding of being as a fixed substance. Human existence cannot be understood as something static or complete. Rather, Dasein is always open to possibilities and constantly shaped through its temporal existence. Care therefore becomes the basic structure through which we understand ourselves and the world.

Our practical involvements, relationships, and projects are all expressions of care. Since being-in-the-world is essentially structured by care, being-alongside entities can also be understood as concern. Heidegger further distinguishes between authentic and inauthentic existence of human being. Authentic existence of human being arises when Dasein recognizes its own possibilities and freely chooses to live according to them. Such a person accepts responsibility for her/ his existence and consciously shapes her/his life.

In contrast, inauthentic existence of human being occurs when Dasein simply follows social conventions and lives according to the expectations of others. Heidegger explains this condition through the idea of *Das Man* or "the They." In this state, a person abandons their own possibilities and becomes absorbed in the anonymous standards of society. Instead of living according to one's own understanding, one lives as "people generally live."

Thus, understanding and state of mind become central structures of care. Through our practical involvements and experiences, we interpret both ourselves and the world around us. Care does not describe only one aspect of Dasein; rather, it expresses the entirety of human existence. For this reason, Heidegger ultimately defines care as "ahead-of-itself-being-already-in-the-world as being-alongside entities encountered within-the-world."

## Section 2: Critical Examination of Notion of Care

Heidegger's conception of care appears paradoxical in many respects. Hans-Georg Gadamer critiques Heidegger's hermeneutics of facticity by arguing that it contains an inherent paradox.<sup>1</sup> Because, on the one hand, Dasein (a human being) exists within specific historical, social, and personal circumstances. Moreover, no one can choose his or her specific historical and social conditions. Therefore, human existence is conditioned by facticity or "thrownness in the world." A human being is

<sup>1</sup> Panneeraseselvam, "Gadamer's critique of Heidegger's Hermeneutics of Facticity," *Indian Philosophical Quarterly* xxx No 4 Oct. 2003, p. 496.

born into a particular world, culture, and situation that shape one's understanding and possibilities. On the other hand, we can see that Heidegger interprets Dasein as a human being who is always "ahead of itself," in the sense of free choice or projection, in that one always possesses freedom in the form of future possibilities. Heidegger argues that Dasein is both free and determined at the same time. For example, a human being is not completely determined by one's circumstances or conditions, but is also capable of interpreting oneself and choosing among different possibilities of existence.

There is always a conflict and paradox between Dasein's future possibilities and factual conditions because a human being is never entirely independent of one's factual situation, background, and experiences. These historical conditions influence the range of possibilities available to one. In other words, a human being has the freedom to project oneself toward future possibilities. However, this future projection is always shaped and limited by the conditions into which one has been thrown or born. Therefore, Heidegger's conception of Dasein, or a human being, contains a tension between possibility and facticity. This tension

makes one's understanding of existence both complex and philosophically significant.

### Conclusion

We understand human existence in the world through Heidegger's phenomenological method of care. The notion of care is the foundation of fundamental ontology. It gives an understanding of one's own self. Heidegger defines Dasein as care. Through the structures of care, Dasein has to be interpreted in terms of the temporal aspects of past, future, and present. Heidegger interprets that being can only be there through care; and as long as he lives, he lives with care. The notion of care not only provides the ontological ground of human existence, but also reveals the anthropological existence of being. This understanding of being is different from the notion of abstract/pure being (universal concept, indefinable, self-evident).

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