Chapter 35

Martin Heidegger:
The Ontology of Dasein and the Concept of Truth

Key Words:
Phenomenological ontology, Destruction of tradition, Dasein, thrownness, being-with, authentic existence, in authentic existence, disposedness, fallen-ness, aletheia, forestructures of understanding, phenomenological hermeneutics.

In the previous chapter we have seen the two important aspects of Heidegger’s phenomenological ontology, which were proposed as a means for overcoming the forgetfulness of Being; the destruction of the tradition and the recovering of the original existential ways of conceiving of the phenomenon of human existence. Heidegger conceives Dasein as the destination of Being and hence its existential analytic is important in the phenomenological ontology proposed by him.

The term Dasein refers both to the human being and to the type of being that humans have. The root meaning of the noun is “being there” or “being here”. According to Heidegger the primary objective of phenomenology of Dasein is a hermeneutic in the primordial signification of this word, where it designates this business of interpreting. It is through this interpretation the authentic meaning of Being, and also those basic structures of Being which Dasein itself possesses, are made known to Dasein's understanding of Being. (Being and Time, p. 62) It explores where experiences occur and for whom they occur and all these come under the scope of an existential analytic of Dasein.

The analytic of Dasein is a central feature of Heidegger’s thought. Dasein becomes important because of its peculiar ontological structure. It is characteristically different from other entities, as it has an understanding of Being and can raise the question of Being. In other words, in its being, this being itself is an issue for it. Heidegger says that Dasein understands itself in its being. Another feature that distinguishes Dasein from other entities is the fact that it is a being-in-the-world. Dasein finds itself in the world, but in a very different way than other entities are in it.
Dasein’s comporting to the world is different. It understands the world as a range of possibilities and it always has understood itself in terms of its possibilities.

This factor makes Dasein’s engagements with the world and its entities very different. It cannot escape from the world, as its facticity and throwness are inevitable and inescapable. But again, as mentioned above, its relationship with the world is also different. Unlike other entities it needs a world populated with entities for it to engage with. Heidegger says that Dasein is constantly more than what it factually is. He adds:

The essence of Dasein lies in its existence. Accordingly those characteristics which can be exhibited in this entity are not 'properties' present-at-hand of some entity which 'looks' so and so and is itself present-at-hand; they are in each case possible ways for it to be, and no more than that. . . . So when we designate this entity with the term 'Dasein', we are expressing not its 'what' (as if it were a table, house, or tree) but its Being. [Being and Time, 67]

Again by being-in-the-world and engaging with the entities in the world, Dasein is essentially Being-with-others. This aspect is therefore an ontological component of Dasein. Dasein and the world are internally related. Heidegger says that the fact that the world is not created by Dasein and it is not merely a factual world that exists independent of us, but we too are contributing to its creation, Dasein’s relationship with it is significant. It is a world, which is created by others as well. Other people have a role in deciding the structure of the world. Hence others play a very crucial role in deciding what I am. Dasein inhabits the world along with other beings like itself. Heidegger says that “Everyone is the other, and no one is himself. [Being and Time, p.165]

Others thus play a crucial role in Dasein’s constitution. What Dasein works upon is provided by others. What it produces is destined for others. We shall elaborate this with an example. If I am a painter, the institution of the art of painting is produced or sustained by others and my painting is for others to appreciate. The “where-of” and the “towards-which” aspects of my engagements with the world are necessarily related to the work-world of other people. Again, the readiness—ready-to-hand of objects for me is not merely their readiness-to-hand for my Dasein alone. It is a world, which is outside there as a common platform, with which others also engage them in their day-to-day life.

All these factors determine Dasein’s ontological constitution and Dasein is essentially a being-with. Its orientation towards ready-to-hand objects is characterized by concern or solicitude for others. All kinds of relating with the world, its entities
and other people reflect this concern, which is rooted in Dasein’s ontological constitution. According to Heidegger, even attitudes like indifference, hostility etc., reflect this solicitude.

A close examination of Dasein’s ontological constitution brings out its essential structure, which is determined by the aspects of “there-being” and “being-with”. On the other hand, there is the aspect of “mineness” as well. Dasein is at the same time mine and being-with, or subjectivity and intersubjectivity. The they, according to Heidegger, is therefore, ontologically relevant in determining Dasein’s existential structure. In Being and Time [27: 165-6], Heidegger says that, the “…..they”, which supplies the answer to the question of the “who” of everyday Dasein, is the “nobody” to whom every Dasein has already surrendered itself in Being among-one-another”.

This structure implies that the social world is a world of both others and I and the essential intersubjectivity of Dasein in its everydayness characterizes its subjectivity. The relationship between subjectivity and intersubjectivity determines Dasein’s everyday mode of existence, which can either be authentic or inauthentic. The loss of authentic individuality is a possibility in average everyday existence, because Dasein is determined by both “being with” and “mineness”.

**Dasein’s Existence in this World**

As mentioned above, according to Heidegger, Dasein has possibilities of both authentic and inauthentic existence. The word authentic is derived from the Greek word autos, which means, done by one’s own hand. In this sense, to be authentic is to be something of its own. Since being authentic and inauthentic are Dasein’s possibilities, it is important to find out how man attains the possibilities of authentic existence.

To understand Heidegger’s position we need to understand how Heidegger ontologizes the idea of authenticity. It basically deals with the question of “being in a certain way”. Heidegger says that, to be Dasein is to ask certain questions concerning the problem of Being and also of one’s own existence. These questions become issues only for an authentic Being. Hence to exist authentically is not to exist as an ontic entity among other entities. It is not to be a static being, but to be a being who constantly asks, searches, and becomes.
The German word *eigentlich*, which is the equivalent of the English word authentic means real or proper and the German word for inauthentic is *uneigentlich*, which means not literal or figurative. Since both are *Dasein*’s possibilities, *Dasein* is sometimes authentic and sometimes not. Heidegger says that, *Dasein*’s authenticity is hidden but nonetheless given beforehand, as it is not a substance with an essential nature and with properties or accidents and its potentiality or possibility is prior to its actuality. In other words, *Dasein* is not a definite actual thing, but the possibility of being something. Hence, it is affirmed that *Dasein*’s way of being involves the capacity to choose among several possible ways of being.

Another important feature of *Dasein* is that, it needs to be addressed with a personal pronoun, you or I. Therefore, Heidegger asserts that, “*Dasein* is mine”. It’s being is different from the being of other entities, which according to him, are merely present at hand. Owing to this unique feature of its being, *Dasein* can take charge of its own being. In other words, we may say that the being of man is whatever it decides or has decided to be. Such decisions or choices of man are based on one’s possibilities of being. Therefore, asserts Heidegger, *Dasein* is its possibility. Hence, to be authentic is to have a room of one's own, have a mind of one's own and being one's own master. This is to be true to one's own self, to be one's own person and to do one's own thing.

But interestingly, Heidegger never equates *Dasein* with human being. He says that there is a *Dasein* of man. The meaning of the term *Dasein* is relevant here. The *Da* in *Dasein* refers to the disclosedness of Being. To understand this, we need to examine the other possibility of *Dasein*; of inauthentic existence. Inauthenticity refers to the average everyday mode of *Dasein*. Here the “mineness” of *Dasein* takes the form of the “they”. Hence the self is a they-self and consequently, *Dasein* looses in the they.

The implication of this loss is that, it prevents man from relating with the world and understanding it in its own ways. Instead, man understands the world in the way the “they” make it available to it. This will also take away from man the possibilities of authentic self-understanding. Consequently, man accepts the prevailing opinions and conforms to what the *they* does and thinks. As a result, one’s own *Dasein* gets completely dissolved into a kind of Being of the others.

The possibilities of authentic human existence are to be explored and this amounts to the regaining of one’s authentic being. Heidegger here reminds us that this
regaining needs to be materialized, not by isolating oneself from others, as “being-with” is not a limitation or a constrain, but the very way of man’s being. Being-with is therefore, a typical human way of being. Here to be authentic is to relate oneself with others and with the world differently.

Heidegger further explicates how authentic human existence needs to be attained. He affirms that, since *Dasein* is essentially a being-in-the-world, the “being-with” aspect is inescapable and it has to be with others. It has to occupy with others in a practice and will have a definite role in the practice, which happens in a context where others are constantly encountered. Heidegger says that, these practices are not *Dasein*’s creations, but are socially defined and culturally inherited. To participate in such a social-cultural world and engage with several tasks in it are necessary for us as human beings. We need them for realizing our possibilities.

*Dasein* is therefore, placed in an interpersonal context of various practices. This context is impersonal because, others can also occupy definite roles and engage in such practices. Heidegger stresses that one’s self-understanding starts with understanding oneself by relating to such impersonal contexts. I relate myself to a function that anyone can perform, in order to understand myself, for example, the function of a poet. This function presupposes a socially created and culturally inherited institution, which is created and shared by the “they”. In other words, the “they” creates these practices and roles. I can attain my possibilities as a poet only by participating in this institution. In other words, I can attain it only with the “they-self”.

Heidegger thus argues that authenticity is an achievement. *Dasein* has to attain it by discovering the world in its own ways, different from the they-self. Its understanding of the world as well as self-understanding are related to its possibilities of authentic and inauthentic ways of existing. Since to be inauthentic is also *Dasein*’s possibility, Heidegger says that I also own my inauthentic being. In inauthentic existence I refuse to take responsibility of my actions.

**Dasein’s Ontological Structure and the Question of Truth**

Contrary to the dominant traditions of modern philosophy, Heidegger proposes a conception of truth, which can be understood not by explicating the epistemological structure that defines normal human cognition. Instead, he does this with an account of the ontological structure that determines human situatedness. This ontological shift
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radically differentiates Heidegger’s account of the nature of truth and knowledge from the account suggested by the dominant paradigm of modern philosophy. It understands truth as a process of unconcealment.

Before we try to understand this concept of truth we have to reflect upon the ontological structure of Dasein, which differentiates Heidegger’s concept of truth from other notions. The ontological structure of Dasein is primarily understood as disclosedness or care. Heidegger asserts that temporality is an existential feature of Dasein. Therefore, Dasein is interpreted in terms of the three temporal dimensions of past, present and future. The past is important because of the aspects of thrownness or disposedness that determines Dasein’s being. The present is characterized by fallenness and the future by projection or understanding.

Heidegger says that, Dasein is characterized by its thrownness. This is because, it finds itself always in a world. The aspect of disposedness too is crucial, as Heidegger says that Dasein’s receptiveness is manifested in different moods. Accordingly, the world discloses to me differently. Every concrete situation, states Heidegger, offers a range of possibilities for acting in which Dasein projects itself in the light of its different possibilities. In such projections of possibilities, Dasein comports itself to the world of objects and in understanding Dasein projects itself onto such possibilities. Among these possibilities lie the two fundamental possibilities of authentic existence and inauthentic existence.

The possibility of authentic existence lies in the fact that whatever is grasped by Dasein results from an act of comporting. The specificity of Dasein is important here. Dasein’s ability to realize its genuine possibilities from the context of the average everyday existence decides the nature of its existence in the world. Heidegger talks about the feature of “fallen-ness”, that is characteristic of the existence of all Daseins. Each individual Dasein is fallen into the world and is fallen away from itself as an authentic potentiality for being its self. The possibilities of inauthentic existence are manifested in idle talk, curiosity and ambiguity and they involve a closing off or covering up of any real understanding of the world. In other words, both these possibilities—of authentic as well as inauthentic existences—are rooted in Dasein’s ontological structure, which enables it to comport with the world in different ways.

Heidegger thus makes this ontological structure as a determining feature of the being of man. To further clarify the importance of this concept, he elaborates his concept of truth, where the latter is conceived as a process of unconcealment.
Heidegger argues that the ancient Greek philosophers conceived truth in this sense. It was the Scholastic and modern philosophies who have corrupted this original notion.

According to the traditional concept, which is mostly Scholastic and modern, Truth is conceived in terms of the conformity between our judgments and facts. It is a notion attached to propositions and their correspondence with states of affairs. Heidegger states that, this traditional understanding of truth is derivative from a more fundamental understanding of truth as self-manifestation, revelation, disclosure etc., as according to him, such a correspondence between propositions and states of affairs presupposes a field of intelligibility within which entities may be found. In other words, prior to all cognition and assimilation of truth, there exists in us a horizon of meaning that facilitates their cognition. Such a prior field of intelligibility establishes the essential element of unconcealing present in all cognition and assimilation of truth. In other words, according to Heidegger, unconcealing is an a priori, transcendental condition for propositional truth.

The idea that truth is to be primarily understood as unconcealment is justified by citing the ancient Greek conception of truth, where the term for truth is *aletheia*. The Greek word *aletheia* means dis-closing, un-covering, dis-covering, revealing or making manifest that which in some sense lies hidden. Such processes require a pre-given context to which things are disclosed or unconcealed. Heidegger says that *Dasein* with its peculiar ontological structure is that context. It thus becomes the source of intelligibility. Therefore, truth is not a transcendently given reality in his framework. It presupposes a background of intelligibility in *Dasein*.

Hence, truth as unconcealing is possible only because there is *Dasein* and without *Dasein* there would be no truth. Entities require *Dasein* in order to be intelligible; in order to be recognized as entities that are capable of entering into states of affairs that may correspond to propositions. Hence the propositional conception of truth—the representationalist ideal—is derivative of the more fundamental notion of truth as unconcealment.

In the process of *Dasein’s* comporting with things, the latter are made intelligible and they acquire meaning. Things show themselves in many ways, depending on the modes of access we have to them. In other words, they acquire meanings through *Dasein’s* acts of comporting to them from its ontological rootedness. Hence according to Heidegger, philosophical enquiry is both ontological as well as phenomenological. It should begin with an examination of the ontological
structure of *Dasein*, as it is in this context things acquire meaning and appear as meaningful. Heidegger argues that, meaning is located in the entity’s mode of appearing, as things do not appear themselves, but are always uncovered to someone. In other words uncovering presupposes not only what is being uncovered, but also another being to which this being is uncovered. This being is the being of man or *Dasein*.

Since truth is unconcealment and things acquire meaning in *Dasein’s* mode of accessing them, meaning is understood as involving interpretation or meaning is interpretation. Hence Heidegger links phenomenology with hermeneutics. He says that, before the questions of Being can be answered, one needs to ask who or what is raising the questions of Being in the first place. This leads to the analytic of *Dasein*.

Heidegger says that, things present themselves to us and such presentations happen in a manner, which is self-concealing. We encounter entities as beings that are in the world within which they can be encountered. *Dasein* understanding them in their process of unconcealment. Unconcealment happens to *Dasein*. It is not only part of the world but also the human condition itself. Things are not encountered as they are but always from the mode of being *Dasein*. Uncovering is a way of Being-in-the-world and is the way *Dasein* is disposed.

As mentioned above, when we comport ourselves and relate ourselves to the world, disposedness play a role. For example, when I relocate a book, which was lost long back, I feel happy and relieved. I relate myself to this book in a very different way than other people who may relate with it. The world is different for me in that mood, as it decides how I stand with respect to the world.

These moods, according to Heidegger, are not mere subjective feelings, as they are not the product of my purely subjective mind. The world of things outside too has a crucial role in the production of meaning here. But, it is not purely objective either, as the book which I relocated does not arouse the same feelings I have in everyone’s mind. Heidegger in this context argues that this disposedness is a kind of submission to the world and it discloses *Dasein* as a whole. But we have no choice over our disposedness, as it is not under our control.

This scenario makes the process of understanding extremely important in determining *Dasein’s* structure. Heidegger contends that understanding is a mode of *Dasein’s* existence, as it decides the structure of *Dasein’s* being. When we understand something we understand it always “as” something, as it reveals to us in accordance
with our relating ourselves with it. The above-mentioned example of the book clarifies this point further. In the context where I have relocated it, it is not just a mere book, but it has a definite meaning for me, which I alone have and hence its mode of appearing to me is also unique. My whole being is involved in my understanding of it.

This is because, as indicated above, understanding presupposes a background of pre-understood meanings, which Heidegger conceives as the forestructures of understanding. He adds that, without this preexisting context of meaning the world looks confusing. This context offers possibilities and it also imposes constrains. In short, understanding is related to us, our life, the way we use the world and hence to our ontological horizon. Here understanding is not conceived as a cognitive act. Instead, it is projection; a projecting upon possibilities. To understand something is to grasp the possible ways that it can be used. In this sense, the perspective of my preunderstood meaning is extremely significant.

With this phenomenological ontology and phenomenological hermeneutics, which respectively explores the ontological structure of Dasein and ties to analyze Dasein’s existential structure in terms of understanding, Heidegger presents a unique and different concept of the being of man. It is presented as an antithesis to the epistemological ideal that dominated modern philosophy. Dasein is never equated with a knowing mind, nor with the thinking substance. It is not separated from the world, as it is essentially a being-in-the-world. With this unique conception of man’s being and his notions of meaning and understanding, Heidegger introduces novel problems into philosophical thinking. He is undoubtedly one of the most important philosophers of 20th century and has influenced the thoughts of many philosophers including existentialists like Sartre, postmodernists like Foucault and pragmatists like Rorty.

**Quiz**

1. What does the term Dasein mean?
   (a) The essence of man  (b) Universal human nature  (c) The type of being humans have  (d) Humankind in general
2. To exist authentically is?
   (a) To exist as an ontic entity  (b) To be a static being  (c) To assert one’s “there being”  (d) To be a being who constantly asks, searches, and becomes.
3. What does the expression “Dasein is mine” mean?
(a) Its being is present at hand  (b) It can take charge of its own being  (c) It can exist without others  (d) It is autonomous.

4. What happens in inauthentic existence?
(a) Dasein exists in the world and engages with others  (b) Dasein realizes its mineness  (c) Dasein’s self becomes a they-self  (d) Dasein takes wrong decisions.

5. Which of the following is not part of the meaning of the Greek word aletheia?
(a) Unmanifesting  (b) Dis-closing (c) Un-covering  (d) Revealing.

Answer Key
1. [c]  
2. [d]  
3. [b]  
4. [c]  
5. [a]

Assignments

1. Discuss the ontological structure of Dasein.
2. Explain the notion of truth advocated by Heidegger.

References

Books


Web Resources


3. *Ereignis*, Information on the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)