

## **A CRITICAL APPRAISAL OF ONTIC-ONTOLOGICAL DISTINCTION OF BEING IN HEIDEGGER**

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### **Abstract**

Heidegger, interpreting notion of Being from a phenomenological standpoint declares that it is that which discloses itself exactly as it is. Being is not merely Being for its own sake, it is always the Being of some entity. And there is a being whose task it is to so define Being. That is *Dasein* – the entity to whom the question of meaning of Being is posed, contemplated and rendered. Being is definable by *Dasein* because it (*Dasein*) is both ontically and ontologically constituted. But what does ontic and ontological composition of *Dasein* mean? How does the nature prepare *Dasein* for definition or interpretation of Being? What does the interpretation portend for Reality or the world? This essay applies critical and analytical methods of philosophical inquiry to respond to these questions.

**Keywords:** Being, *Dasein*, Ontic, Ontology, Phenomenology

### **Introduction**

Heidegger is popular for interpreting notion of Being phenomenologically. Accordingly, he declares that Being discloses itself exactly as it is. In the disclosure, Being is not merely Being for its own sake, it is always the Being of some entity. But why is that so? Heidegger asserts that it is because there is a being or an entity whose task it is to define Being itself. That being is *Dasein*. *Dasein* is the entity that poses (or is posed), contemplates, and renders the question of meaning of Being. No other being is so characterised and saddled with the task. *Dasein* engages with question of Being because it is both ontically and ontologically constituted. Yet, what does ontic and ontological composition of *Dasein* mean? How does the composition prepare *Dasein* for definition or interpretation of Being? What does the interpretation portend for Reality or the world? This essay applies critical and analytical method of philosophical inquiry to respond to these questions.

To realise the objective, i.e. the critical appraisal of the ontic and ontological distinction of notion of Being in Heidegger, it is important

to establish beforehand some useful background notes that would elucidate the discussion. Accordingly, the first note is the clarification that one of the authors, Otto Dennis, has already analysed Heidegger's fundamental ontology in ways that share close affinity with the current endeavour. These are evident in his works titled "An Analysis of Martin Heidegger's Notion of Being," and "An Expository Analysis of Martin Heidegger's Quest for Meaning of Being." Given this, it immediately appears irrelevant for the author to engage in current discussion as it is presumably already embedded in the previous works. But the necessity of the current endeavour cannot be over-emphasised as it resides in the fact of its specificity on appraisal of one existential structure of *Dasein*. That is the ontic-ontological distinction. While the previous works merely gloss over the Heideggerian notion to give rudimentary explanations of his entire sense of metaphysics, they do not particularly appraise what it means for *Dasein* to be ontically and ontologically distinctive from other entities. This essay does so. Second, focus on the subject matter of this essay is necessitated by centrality of the concerned existential structure to meaning-making nature and meaningfulness of *Dasein* or Being. Without the existential structure, as Heidegger would have his readers understand, *Dasein* cannot be distinguished (stand-out or stand-away) from other entities. Third, this essay does not only rely on Heidegger's literatures as its primary research materials to make its point, it also relies robustly on the two previous rudimentary expositions of Otto Dennis.

With regard to the afore-stated methods of this inquiry, it is important to clarify that philosophic 'criticality' involves deliberate engagement in disbelief that a claim, view, or position is absolutely true (Etokudoh 48, Adegboyega and Obioha 56). It is the refusal to accept any view except on verifiable, evidential, and rational grounds (Dennis, "Critical Reasoning" 14-16). Criticism raises questions, especially against dogmas (i.e. unverified beliefs or claims) in order to establish truth (Dennis, "Empiricism" 37; "Idealism" 82). Philosophic 'analysis,' on the other hand, involves "rational act of breaking down constituent notions, concepts, and/or terms involved in a statement into the least possible and familiar notions or ideas in order to have better grasp of the statement" (Etokudoh 47). Analytical approach to discussions reduces or completely removes ambiguities in statements or propositions such that they offer adequately understandable representation of ideas inherent in them (Dennis, "Empiricism" 37; "Idealism" 82). It clarifies concepts to offer meaningful theories, practices, and problem solving (Umotong 12). A conjoined application of the methods in the essay (as critical analysis), therefore, means that all complex concepts associated with the Heidegger's idea are broken down to simpler terms for clear rudimentary explanations, and the general view established from the explanation is also subjected to cogent debates so as to arrive at an overall clearer view of what the subject-matter of focus consists.

## **Heidegger's Approach to Meaning of Being**

In attempting to answer the question – what is Being or *ti to on?* – Heidegger encounters a great difficulty. That is that “Being” or *to on*, as a term, has several nuances. He notes that the lack of one specific way to define the term is a reason that philosophers, both before and after him, are continually puzzled by the question. Aristotle, one of the philosophers who attempted to answer the question before him, for instance, is credited with the observation that the question “...will always be raised and will always be a matter of perplexity” (Heidegger, *Being and Time: Introduction* 45). Regarding the attempt for him to proffer one essential meaning of the term, it failed as he ended up postulating numerous interpretations rather than one. In spite of the Aristotle’s failure, Heidegger observes that he (Aristotle) however succeeded in establishing a direction through which a plausible meaning of the term can be derived (*Being and Time: Introduction* 46-47). That direction is Ontology – the science or account (*logos*) of *Onta* (the Being of beings). This is why, for Heidegger, Ontology translates as the science that studies being insofar as it is Being (*Being and Time: Introduction* 47).

Following the Aristotelian guide and also having been equipped with knowledge of Phenomenology from Edmund Husserl, Heidegger starts to work out his own meaning of Being. His intension is to give a concrete meaning of Being. There is very little to wonder here since Heidegger himself was an existentialist, hence the need to treat and answer the question of Being concretely by looking at the being of man – the *Dasein* (Ignatius 189). Accordingly, he reckons that the first task is to answer the question: where and with what being should the question “what is Being?” begin (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 26). In response, he asserts that the respondent, seeker of knowledge, examiner, or researcher of meaning of Being must begin with an interrogation into Being of the question itself, then transit to inquire about Being of the questioner (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 24-27). This means that for any question, doubt or insight concerning existence to be properly addressed, it is fundamentally important for its interrogator to start by interrogating the way the question is framed or articulated, and afterward proceed to interrogate nature of the interrogator of meaning of Being (Umotong and Dennis 57). The importance of this exercise is hinged on Heidegger’s consideration that “every inquiry is a seeking. (And) every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought... An understanding of Being is already included in conceiving anything which one apprehends as an entity” (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 24). In other words, the question of meaning of Being which ought to be able to inquire about the Being of any being is often raised in a certain familiar way and by a certain being (Umotong and Dennis 57). But our concern in this essay is specifically about Being of the questioner or interrogator, and not Being of the question itself. This is because it is the questioner that is characterised by the ontic-ontological distinction that the essay seeks to discuss. To properly focus on our task, therefore, the following questions become imperative: which being is it that raises question of

meaning of Being, and familiarly too? What makes the question familiar to the being? Why is the being concerned with the question in the first place? What fundamentally motivates the being to be engaged with the inquiry?

Heidegger has answers to all the questions. For the first one, his response is that it is only human beings that raise question of meaning of Being, and familiarly too. This is because “looking at something, understanding and conceiving it, choosing access to it – all these ways of behaving are constitutive for our inquiry, and therefore are different modes of Being for those peculiar entities which we (human beings), the inquirers, are ourselves” (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 26-27). In other words, it is only mankind that engage themselves with question of meaning of Being (Umotong and Dennis 57). No other being or entity does so apart from them. Furthermore, insofar as it is human beings that raise questions concerning meaning of Being, it is essential that attempts to interpret the meaning should begin with an elementary analysis of the Being (existence) of the concerned being i.e. human being. In other words, the question: “what is being?” cannot be properly answered except through a fundamental interrogation of existence of the human individuals that are its inquirers (Umotong and Dennis 58).

By the term “human being,” it is imperative to clarify that means the inquirer, whose inquiries, investigations, questions, or discussions on existence in general always already has some vague average understanding of Being in general Heidegger (*Being and Time* 22-27). This inquirer is what he renames technically as *Dasein* (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 27). And his objective of the rechristening is to avoid in his entire analyses the categorical or fixed physical properties that characterise conventional interpretations and understandings of “human being.” Heidegger, according to Krell, considers that mankind – as an inquirer – is not fixed (19). An individual “...is always – in no matter how vague a way – aware of his being in the world... (He) questions his own Being and that of other things in the world” (Krell 19). *Dasein*, for Heidegger, is largely and fundamentally a transcendental being; devoid of categorical properties. Consequent upon his reasoning that question of meaning of Being must begin with interrogation into Being of its interrogator, and only human beings or *Daseins* are the interrogators, his quest for interpreting meaning of Being becomes an exercise in critical analysis of *Dasein* or *Dasein-analytik* (German translation of *Dasein* analysis). This is the “phenomenological interrogation of nature of human being or existence as an inquirer of question of Being in order to understand and respond adequately to the question” (Umotong and Dennis 58). *Dasein* is the only entity that is capable of and demonstrates mastery and rationality which enables him to take disclose or take other entities out of their concealment (Ignatius, et al 76).

Our second question is addressed by Heidegger through his reasoning that the inquirer or *Dasein* always already has some vague average understanding of Being in general. This is because familiarity of *Dasein* with question of meaning of Being means, for him, that whenever *Dasein* expresses concern in any way about Being it always conducts or comports itself or its activities in some prior understanding of Being (*Being and Time* 24). Even if it pretends that it does not know what Being is or tries to cast doubt on some interpretation of existence, Heidegger avers that *Dasein* always has within it some vague average understanding of what Being is (*Being and Time* 25). This is because when, for instance, someone asks the question: "what is Being?" or "does a being exist?" or, even in some doubtful way, utter that Being does not exist, it is implied in his or her interrogation that he or she already has a vague average idea of the being which he or she asks about or doubts. That "vague average understanding is itself a fact" (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 25). Question of meaning of Being is raised, therefore, not because *Daseins* do not have some vague average understanding of it, but because that understanding is shrouded in some sense of darkness and needs clarification (Umotong and Dennis 57). Questioning makes manifest the fact that "in any way of comporting oneself toward entities as entities – even in any Being toward entities as entities – there lies a prior enigma" (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 23 and 25).

Having established that meaning of Being resides in meaning of *Dasein*, and that is because only *Dasein* raises question of meaning of Being – as an inquirer – Heidegger consolidates the position with his response to our third question. Accordingly, as to why *Dasein* is concerned with question of meaning of Being in the first place, he submits that it is because only *Dasein* interrogates or is interested in interrogating meaning of existence. No other entity engages or sustains engagement in such interest. For our fourth question (i.e. what fundamentally motivates *Dasein* to engage in the question of meaning of Being?), Heidegger postulates that human beings are motivated to engage in the question because it is in their being (or nature) to do so. That nature is not only that of being inquirers – as already elucidated above – but also that of being ontic-ontologically different from other beings. Indeed, in Heidegger's *Dasein-analytik*, being an inquirer (as a character of *Dasein*) also implies being ontic-ontologically distinct from other entities. Following the Heideggerian responses to our questions so far, this essay presently acquires adequate insight to refocus on the main set of questions directing its objective. And for emphasis, the questions are restated thus: what does ontic and ontological composition of *Dasein* mean? How does the nature prepare *Dasein* for definition or interpretation of Being? What does the interpretation portend for Reality or the world? We turn next to respond to them.

## Ontic-Ontological Nature of *Dasein* and its Preparedeness for Interpreting Meaning of Being

To the first question: what does ontic and ontological composition of *Dasein* mean?, we are called to analyse the meaning of Being of *Dasein*. And to do that satisfactorily, it is first necessary to analyse meaning of *Dasein* as a term. While such exercise ought to involve an extensive Heideggerian deliberation because it comprises virtually all of his *Dasein-analytik*, for purpose of this essay we limit it to simplified definition of *Dasein* in connection with its ontic-ontological nature. Accordingly, Sheehan guides extensively that the term is a compound word comprising two German terms: *Da* and *Sein* (184). The “*Da*” of *Dasein* translates in English language as ‘there’ and ‘open.’ This means that *Dasein* is both a ‘there-being’ or ‘being-there’ (of presence) as well as an ‘open-being’. The openness is to be understood as ‘the possibility of taking-as’ and thus as a pre-intellectual bareness to Being, which is necessary for human beings to encounter beings as beings in particular ways (e.g., practically, theoretically, or aesthetically). The “*sein*” of *Dasein*, on the other hand, translates in English language as ‘having-to-be’ or ‘being in constant process,’ which differs from ‘occasional or contingent’ presence. These dual features of *Dasein*, when conjoined, lead to its characterisation as “the having-to-be-open”. In other words, according to Sheehan, *Dasein* cannot help but be constantly open (in the sense of being bare) (184). This connotes a helpless *a priori* structure of human existential constitution. It is not an exercise of will, which individuals operate with a meaning-making capacity of taking-other-beings-as this or that entity (according to their decision). *Dasein*’s openness is that which informs its vague average understanding of entities whenever it comports itself to inquire about them, and no matter how dim the entity inquired may be (Dennis, “An Analysis” 75).

Because *Dasein*’s presence entails a kind of Being toward which it always comport itself in one way or another to ask questions and seek understanding, it (*Dasein*) exists (Dennis, “An Analysis” 75). Its presentness makes it an existent or *existenz* (as Heidegger terms it in German). “In existing,” according to Vallega-Neu, “*Dasein* occurs... as a transcending beyond beings into the disclosure of being as such, so that in this transcending not only its own possibilities of being [our first route] but also the being of other beings [our second route] is disclosed” (12). Vallega-Neu goes on to explain that ‘existence’ translates as *ek-sistence* in German. And this means ‘a standing out’ (12). Consequently, *Dasein* always stands out. The ‘standing-out’ occurs in two ways: first, it stands back or ‘out’ from its own occurrence in the world and observes itself. Otto Dennis explains that this underscores the reason human beings are capable of asking and answering questions about themselves (“An Analysis” 76). It is the reason that individuals introspect. Second, Vallega-Neu posits that

*Dasein* stands out in an openness-to and an opening of Being (12). And Dennis explains that this is why human beings ask and answer questions about fellow human beings. It is the reason for contemplations about the world in general ("An Analysis" 76).

Ultimately, as *existenz*, *Dasein* is a distinctive kind of entity (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 27 and 32). And the distinction is in comparison with other entities such as stones, trees, animals, and so forth, other than itself. *Dasein*'s distinction with other entities occurs in a number of ways. First, it has ontical priority over other entities (Dennis, "An Analysis" 76). This means that "*Dasein* is an entity which has a determinate character of existence" (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 34). In other words, it has fixed properties, which it can be described – as this or that entity – just as other entities. But it is distinct from other entities and occurs before them in terms of its fixed properties because its being has a determinate character of existence (Dennis, "An Analysis" 77). Second, it also has ontological priority over other entities (Dennis, "An Analysis" 76). This means that "*Dasein* is in itself ontological because existence is [for it a]...primordiality" (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 34). In other words, over and against other entities, *Dasein* – as an inquirer of Being – has capacity to assess and understand its general everyday structure of existence (Dennis, "An Analysis" 77). No other entity is so endowed. With such distinctive capacity, *Dasein* therefore occurs before other entities because existence is determinative for it. Third, *Dasein* has a dual primordial ontic-ontological priority over other entities (Dennis, "An Analysis" 76). This means that "*Dasein* also poses as constitutive for its understanding of existence an understanding of being of the entities of a character other than its own" (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 34). In other words, *Dasein*'s existence involves raising questions about and understanding the Being of other entities as well as that of itself (Dennis, "An Analysis" 77).

With clarification of meaning of ontic-ontological composition of *Dasein*, the next subject to attend is how the nature prepares it for definition or interpretation of Being. And for successful accomplishing of that task, it is imperative to first clarify the nature of "how-question." Accordingly, we state that a question of "how" is a question of method or technique. It seeks for the way, approach, or skill through which a task is carried out. Following this clarification, therefore, this essay is presently saddled with the task of elucidating the method, technique, way, or approach through which ontic-ontological composition of *Dasein* prepares it for definition or interpretation of Being. And reasoning in line with Heidegger, we take on by positing that *Dasein* is imbued with the ontic-ontological priority over other entities because it is the only entity that thinks (Heidegger, *Letter on Humanism* 193-194). Other entities do not think.

Thought, for Heidegger, is not cognition that always involves a subject who engages in an *a posteriori* (sensual) activity about a different, separate, and distant object, with the aim of characterising

attributes of the object (Dennis, *A Heideggerian Paradigm* 190). It does not also cause actions or draw logically pure deductions from clear, distinct and eternal *a priori* (non-sensual) principles of an object. Thought is an activity in itself (Dennis, *A Heideggerian Paradigm* 191). It does not dichotomise object and subject of cognition. The subject of thought (i.e. *Dasein*) acts intuitively in thought – as thinking acts insofar as it thinks (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 193-194). *Dasein* is thought and thought is *Dasein* (Dennis, *A Heideggerian Paradigm* 191). “Thinking involves a transcendence, which accomplishes the relation of Being to the essence of man. All working or effecting lies in Being and is directed towards Being...thinking brings this relation to Being solely as something handed over to it from Being” (Heidegger, *Being and Time* 193-194). It is as thought that individuals typify their inquiries about their being (as human entities) and other beings (as non-human entities), with a view to establishing meaning about life (Dennis, “Critical Reasoning” 10). This is why human beings can be said to exist, and non-human beings do not exist (Dennis, “Critical Reasoning” 10). Thinking is the attribute that accords Being existence. Human beings engage in active creating and re-creating of themselves; legislating, editing, organising, and re-organising the world through questioning, which is thought par excellence (Dennis, *A Heideggerian Paradigm* 191). But non-human entities just lie around the world in a passive way of existing (Dennis, “Critical Reasoning” 10).

Being is not an entity, rather, in its thinking activity it ‘determines’ entities as entities; it is the basis for which entities are already understood. Ontic facts are a derivation of ontological truths (Ignatius, et al. 77). And when applied to describe *Dasein* in the sense of its “ontic” categories (i.e. what each *Dasein* does in the light of the Being of their being), Heidegger refers to them as “existentielle.” On the other hand, *Dasein*’s “ontological” categories (i.e. Being as care, always with others, futural, and so forth) is referred to as ‘existential’. “Ontically” or “existentially,” therefore, one may engage in reading, for instance, but that is because “ontologically” or “existentially” one is always already in a world where there is a set of involvements such as reading. The point made by Heidegger here is that one needs to think the difference between the two in order to simultaneously understand that one is always both – your “ontological” care, for instance, is always filled with “ontic” concerns. *Dasein* is also ontico-ontologically distinct from other entities because, given its understanding of its own existence, the Being of all other entities is discernible. This is why Heidegger writes that “the ontical distinction of *Dasein* lies in the fact that it is ontological” (*Being and Time* 12). The “ontological” here refers to the Being of a particular being, while the “ontic” refers to what a particular being (e.g. *Dasein*) can or does do. Furthermore, what differentiates *Dasein* from all other particular beings (ontically) is that it takes up the question of its Being (ontologically).

But what does *Dasein*'s ontic-ontological interpretation of Being portend for Reality or the world? This, being the third and final important question directing the objective of this essay, seeks functionality of *Dasein*'s ontic-ontological interpretation of Being. And in responding to it, we cannot help but recapitulate some of the points already established in the essay. This is because such re-emphases would not only affirm the points themselves, they would also help to properly situate the discussion within its Heideggerian existentialist context. Accordingly, we make the first point that *Dasein*'s ontic-ontological nature, which involves raising of questions about the Being of other entities as well as that of itself, seeks understanding of Being in general. Both the seeking and that which is sought are, helplessly, *Dasein*'s character. And it is as thought that the character is typified. Succinctly, this can be explained that human beings, which thinking nature it is to raise questions about reality or the world, ask the questions so as to acquire understanding about it. The second point is that, as *Dasein* seeks understanding of Being in general it engages in active creating and re-creating of itself; legislating, editing, organising, and re-organising the world (Dennis, *A Heideggerian Paradigm* 191). This means that the questions raised and understanding acquired by human beings about reality helps them to constantly find ways of organising life, society, or the world. Without an entity like *Dasein*, Being or reality would remain unorganised. Third, with success in organising reality, the world is rendered peaceful and habitable for all entities. Reasoning in this direction, Dennis observes that:

A peaceful disposition and environment is that which individuals and society need to actualize their potentialities. Even when the potentiality is "conflict", peace is a pre-requisite condition for its successful planning and execution. In other words, conflict needs an initial period of peace for all its permutations to succeed; and when it eventually succeeds - either in totally subduing its target or causing a renegotiation of previous positions (whatever the development) - the result is peace again ("Phenomenological Peace" 94).

This means that, although human attempts at organising society for peaceful co-existence of all entities sometimes results in conflict or war and, thus, peacelessness and suffering of the warring territories, peace remains the objective of any war at all (Dennis, "Ethics of Posterity" 64, 66-68). Indeed, peace is requisite for pre-war and post-war state of societal affairs. And human beings are its causal agents.

It is pertinent to note that one of the entities that is also concerned with the human thinking-interrogative nature is future generations or posterity. Although consciousness of this set of entity is sometimes engaged unconsciously by present *Daseins*, the determination of its state of being (i.e. the future) is nonetheless a constant ontic-ontological activity of present *Daseins* (Dennis, *A*

*Heideggerian Paradigm* 215-219). This then becomes the fourth point of *Dasein*'s ontic-ontological relevance to interpretation of Being, where condition of posterity (as an aspect of Being) is determined by *Dasein*'s ontic-ontologicality. Put differently, posterity is what it constantly turns out to be because of decisions and indecisions, actions and inactions of present thinking-interrogative human beings (Dennis, *A Heideggerian Paradigm* 217). And the decisions and actions are products of the ontic-ontological nature of *Dasein*.

## Conclusion

Our task in this essay was to critically appraise the ontic-ontological distinction of *Dasein* in Heidegger's notion of Being. Specifically, we set out to answer three vital questions, viz: what does ontic and ontological composition of *Dasein* mean? How does the nature prepare *Dasein* for definition or interpretation of Being? What does the interpretation portend for Reality or the world? We accomplished that by using critical analytic methods of philosophical discourses. And in responding to the questions, other questions were raised which sought to investigate meaning of *Dasein* as a term. We discovered that *Dasein* is a thinking being whose openness-to and opening-of Being renders it ontic-ontological in nature, making it raise questions about other entities as well as itself. With such nature, we conclude that *Dasein* - as *existenz* - is the only entity that is ever interested in understanding reality for reasons that include active creating and re-creating of itself; legislating, editing, organising, and re-organising the world.

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