

UNDERSTANDING HEIDEGGER'S ONTOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE I N RELATION TO TEMPORALITY AND TIME

Peter Iorhom Akunoko, Ph.D

Department of Philosophy

Benue State University, Makurdi

akunoko.peter@gmail.com/pakunoko@bsum.edu.ng

ABSTRACT

In his quest to unravel the mystery behind the meaning of Being, Heidegger discovered that the manner in which this question was raised in traditional ontology is the reason for the forgetfulness of Being. So it became pertinent for Heidegger to do something new by moving away from the traditional method of raising the question of Being in order to rescue Being from its forgetfulness. In establishing a new ontology Heidegger identified a particular kind of Being that its understanding can provide an inroad into the understanding of Being in general. This Being Heidegger designates as *Dasein*. In an attempt to understand the Being of *Dasein*, Heidegger holds that the knowledge of this Being is only possible through carrying out an explicit distinction between Being and beings. This kind of distinction Heidegger calls 'ontological difference'. For Heidegger this distinction is only possible in relation to temporality and time because time constitutes the horizon for the understanding of Being. Taking Heidegger's phenomenological insights even further, this paper considers the question of ontological difference and the relationship between time and temporality. What we intend to explain in this paper is the distinction between Being and beings and to establish whether temporality can simply be referred to as time. With Heidegger, this paper submits that the Being of *Dasein* is intrinsically connected to temporality and time. The Being of *Dasein* is that of existence and existence is only possible within the framework of time. *Dasein* also defines time and its temporal moments. *Dasein* is a being that creates history through its actions on the world. The performance of any kind of action at all is always the present action of *Dasein* aims at affecting the world. These human actions are projected in the future perfect tense. In this light, time becomes more than the mere flowing time of the clock but acquires a new meaningfulness defined by human actions.

Keywords: Being, *Dasein*, temporality, time, ontological difference, existentielle, ontic.

INTRODUCTION

The main goal in Heidegger's ontology is the study of Being. In his quest to unravel the mystery behind the meaning of Being, Heidegger discovered that the manner in which this question was raised in traditional ontology is the reason for the forgetfulness of Being. So it became pertinent for Heidegger to do something new by moving away from the traditional method of raising the question of Being in order to rescue Being from its forgetfulness. In establishing a new ontology Heidegger identifies a particular kind of Being that its understanding can provide an inroad into the understanding of Being in general. This Being Heidegger designates as *Dasein*. This is a Being that is capable of understanding itself and other beings around it. In an attempt to understand the Being of *Dasein* Heidegger holds that the knowledge of this Being is only possible through carrying out an explicit distinction between Being and beings. This kind of distinction Heidegger calls 'ontological difference'. For Heidegger this distinction is only possible in relation to temporality and time. This is because time constitutes the horizon for the

understanding of Being. It may appear so simple to say that ontological difference is simply an explicit distinction between Being and beings but Heidegger's goal is far more than such a simplistic explanation. What Heidegger had in mind was to establish the prime place of *Dasein* in understanding the question of the meaning of Being in general. Heidegger intended to show that the three modes of being are fundamentally structured by modes of time and temporality. It is within the framework of time that *Dasein* is able to establish its ontic-ontological priority over other beings. Heidegger also shows that the varieties of time are bound up together by the complex relations of degeneration and dependence. Ordinary time is seen as a degenerative form of world-time, and world-time a degenerative form of originary temporality. It is precisely in these relations of degeneration that the distinction between time and temporality is resolved.

UNDERSTANDING THE 'ONTOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE'

For one to properly understand Heidegger's ontological difference one has to first of all understand an important distinction he made between the ontological and the ontic. Heidegger (1962) writes “understanding of Being is itself a definite characteristic of *Dasein's* Being. *Dasein* is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological.” The ontological in this regard refers to the Being of a particular being, while the ontic refers to what a particular being can do or does. *Dasein*, for instance, is different from other beings ontically because its ontological nature makes it possible for *Dasein* to question its own Being. This questioning of the meaning of Being which is peculiar to *Dasein* has established *Dasein* as having ontological priority of the question of the meaning of Being over other sciences. However, for Large (2008, 25-26) the most important reason why Heidegger thinks we should treat this question seriously is the ontic priority of the questioner.

Ontology is the study of being, or of what it means for something to be what it is. Heidegger contrasts ontology with ontic investigations, which are studies of particular beings, rather than their being. To an extent, then, what other sciences do cannot be referred to as ontology without qualification. The investigation of other sciences can best be referred to as regional ontologies that deal with particular aspects of Being. There is only one being, however, who asks the question in the first place—and that is *myself*. No doubt, I can be treated as though I were like any other being (this is what the sciences such as psychology and anthropology do) but I am also very different from other beings because I am the only being who is capable of asking what other beings are (Large, 2008:26). What Heidegger means here is that it is only *Dasein* that tries to understand itself and the totality of existence.

Of course, Heidegger's concern was not to clarify the being of particular things. It was to understand the meaning of being in general, or what it means to be at all. But, in order to properly ask this question, he first had to answer another: What does it mean to be human? Fernandez (2018, 27) notes that for Heidegger, we need to articulate the essence of human existence before we can properly inquire into the meaning of being as such. This is because human beings are the ones who ask ontological questions in the first place. Human beings are “pre-ontological”, because they already have some vague understanding of what it means to be. The question is, how does Heidegger approach the distinctive ontology of the human being? In *Being and Time*, he aims to discover and describe the basic “structures” of human existence. These are “not just any accidental structures, but essential ones which, in every kind of Being that factual *Dasein* may possess, persist as determinative for the character of its Being” (Heidegger 1962, 38). By “factual *Dasein*,” he refers to a particular human existence, a human being with a concrete history, situation, and so on (Fernandez 2018, 29). In other words, Heidegger's goal is to discover those structures of human existence that hold across all particular human beings.

Heidegger goes on, then, to make a clear distinction between the **existential** and the **existentielle** in his attempt to establish *Dasein's* ontic-ontological priority for a clearer explanation of

ontological difference. Existence for Heidegger is completely individual. Only I can live my life. However, my life is characterised by the possibilities of choices. These choices I make in my life—which are mine even if I disavow them—are described by Heidegger through the neologism “Existentielle” (Large, 28). It means that the ontic categories of *Dasein*, all that *Dasein* does, together constitute existentielle. Heidegger, on the other hand, refers to the ontological categories—the Being of *Dasein* as care, as always being with others and as futural—as the existential nature of *Dasein*. The understanding of the existential nature of *Dasein* is only possible through the existentielle. The opposite of the existential understanding of Being is the categorical. The categorical understanding of Being relates to those beings which I encounter in the world (Large, 28). These categorical beings are particular entities we encounter daily in our existence. They are objects of concern. Heidegger does not dismiss these categorical beings, rather he argues they are utterly inadequate to investigating the existential meaning of Being (Large, 28).

Dasein is a Being that is thrown into a world with historical circumstance and projects itself in that world towards possibilities. *Dasein* is born (thrown) into a time and culture which he does not choose. In existing in the world, *Dasein* exists with some limitations which he nevertheless may overcome because of his interests and concerns about the world in which he exists. This means that *Dasein* is thrown in the world with other entities which are not of the character of *Dasein*. However, *Dasein* is a Being that cares about its Being and other beings because of its existential character. *Dasein* comports itself towards itself and toward beings. This comportment is possible for *Dasein* because of the ecstatic character of temporality which makes it possible for *Dasein* to deal existentially with others and other beings that are either handy or extant. Temporality makes it possible the understanding of Being and it is only in the light of this understanding of Being that *Dasein* can comport itself toward its own self and toward others as beings.

However, it is only in existence that *Dasein* understands beings and comports itself towards beings. Heidegger holds that it is in existence that the difference between Being and beings is located. He remarks:

The distinction between Being and beings is there (ist da), latent in the *Dasein* and its existence, even if not in explicit awareness. The distinction is there; that is to say, it has the mode of Being of the *Dasein*: it belongs to existence. Existence means, as it were, to be in the performance of this distinction (1982, 319).

This means that the Being of *Dasein* is different from any other being which is not of the character of *Dasein*. It is only *Dasein* that really exist and has the capacity to understand its Being and other beings around it in its existence. This implies that the difference between Being and beings is in *Dasein's* existence. However, according to Heidegger this difference becomes manifest on the basis of temporality because it belongs to the *Dasein's* existence the immediate unity of understanding of Being and comportment towards beings.

For Heidegger only because this distinction belongs to existence can the distinction become explicit in different ways:

Because when this distinction between Being and beings becomes explicit the terms distinguished contrast with each other, Being thereby becomes a possible theme for conceptual comprehension (Logos). For this reason we call the distinction between Being and beings, when it is carried out explicitly, the ontological difference. (1982, 319)

This quotation shows that the whole question of ontological difference lies in the explicit distinction between Being and beings. The ontic claim of ontological difference is the distinction of Being and beings, by claiming that it applies to all the ontological different ways of Being. Thus, there is an ontological difference between *Dasein* and ready-to-hand entities (*Zuhanden*); between lives (like animals or plants) and present-at-hand entities (*Vorhanden*); between abstract objects (like numbers) and *Dasein*. Since they enjoy different kinds of Being, there is an ontological differentiation among them (Gandellini, 2018, 146).

The major position of ontological claim of ontological difference is that *Dasein* is different from present-at-hand and ready-to-hand entities. This establishes the peculiarity of *Dasein*, namely its understanding of Being. The decisive phenomenon we have met is the original fact in the essence of *Dasein* itself, the fact that we understand something as Being or, more clearly, that we make distinction between beings and Being of beings. Understanding of Being is the possibility of the realization of this distinction between beings and Being or, shortly, the possibility of the ontological difference (Gandellini, 2018, 147). Ontological difference shows the distinction between Beings and being, which allows *Dasein* to understand Being in the proper sense. This distinction we have seen lies in existence as the basic character of *Dasein*. It is precisely in this distinction between Being and beings that Heidegger brings out clearly the objectification of positive science (science of beings) and transcendental ontology or science which is the science of Being. In this objectification, Heidegger also establishes a distinction between temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) which has to do with the science of beings and temporality (*Temporalität*) which is actually the temporality of Being rooted in existence as the basic character of *Dasein*.

Scholars have argued that Heidegger's ontological difference goes beyond just the explicit distinction between Being and beings which rest on the ontic claim but added the meta-ontological dimension to deepen the understanding of ontological difference. *Meta-ontological claim* (MOC) expresses the traditionally overworked idea that Being "is" something different from beings. Since Being "is" what determines beings as beings, it must not be a being itself (in order to avoid the infinite regress). Being must be something different from beings. Something *is* if it is an entity, so one missed the point of ontological difference by saying that "Being *is*", because he would treat Being as an entity. Therefore, a plausible rephrasing of (MOC) is "Being is *not* an entity, a being" (Gandellini, 2018, 145-146). This is a *meta-ontological* claim because it ranges over the "ontological" domain and the "ontic" domain, by ensuring a distinction among them: indeed, the one between Being and beings. Gandellini (2018, 146) further notes that by separating Being from beings, OD succeeds in defining the reference environment of both ontology and metaphysics. In other terms, it provides the *epistemological* criterion that distinguishes ontology (the inquiry on Being) and metaphysics (the science of beings as such).

Heidegger holds that with the factual existence of the *Dasein*, beings are always already unveiled. Furthermore, in the understanding of Being that goes with them Being is also already unveiled. In this factual existence of the *Dasein*, two essential fundamental possibilities of objectification are posited. Despite this objectification of Being and beings, they are manifestly related to each other regardless of their fundamental diversity. Heidegger (1982, 321) remarks:

Because the carrying out of the distinction between Being and beings is always already proceeding in the *Dasein*'s temporality, temporality is the root and the ground for both the possibility and properly understood, the factual necessity of the objectification of the given beings and Being.

This is to say that temporality is that of *Dasein* and it is when Being is unveiled that beings can be unveiled. The objectification of that which is (beings) in which the positive sciences variously constitute themselves has its centre in the projection of the ontological constitution of the beings

which are to become objects. This projection of the ontological constitution of the region of beings, which is the essential nature of the objectification that is foundational for the positive sciences, is nevertheless not an ontological investigation of the Being of beings in question. However, there is still pre-ontological awareness in the positive sciences, because what gives the positive sciences their validity relates pre-ontologically to the Being of beings. Yet this does not mean that the positive sciences have entered the domain of ontology.

What then is the kind of science that rightfully occupies the domain of ontology? This kind of science is what Heidegger refers to as “temporal science” (1982, 323). This is because all truths of ontology are temporal propositions. Their truths unveil structures and possibilities of being in the light of temporality. This is a kind of science that is transcendent where *Dasein* surpasses itself in transcendence. This means that transcendence makes possible existence in the sense of comporting oneself to oneself as a Being and to others as beings. However, this transcendental science is rooted in temporality which provides it with its horizon. Time then becomes the primary horizon of transcendental science or ontology.

It is important to note that the analysis so far shows that in *Dasein's* existence there is an essentially twofold possibility of objectification of the given. This *Dasein's* existence establishes two basic types of science which are the objectification of beings as positive science and objectification of Being as temporal or transcendental science, ontology or philosophy. No understanding of Being is possible that would not be rooted in a comportment toward beings. Understanding of Being and comportment to beings are readily present by means of temporality. This method of ontology is nothing but the sequence of the steps involved in the approach to Being as such and the elaboration of its structure.

TEMPORALITY AND TIME

Heidegger is of the opinion that his interpretation of *Dasein* does violence to the everyday understanding of human existence. He says that originary temporality explains time, and for that reason it deserves the title of originary time. Explaining Heidegger's originary temporality William Blattner (2005) states that:

So, when we have shown that the “time” that is accessible to *Dasein's* intelligibility is not originary and, what is more, that it arises out of authentic temporality, then we are justified in accordance with the proposition, *a posteriori fit denominatio*, in labeling temporality, which has just been exhibited, originary time (316).

Time as we encounter it in our everyday experience is not originary. Heidegger distinguishes, in fact, two kinds of everyday time, world-time and time as ordinarily conceived. Time as we ordinarily conceive it is time as the pure container of events. World-time is the sequence of meaningfully articulated, everyday times e.g. bed time, dinner time, etc. World-time differs from ordinary time in that the times of world-time are overtly defined in terms of their relation to human interests, whereas ordinary times are conceptualized as independent of human interests. Thus, the distinction between ordinary time and world-time shares some of the contours of the distinction between the available and the occurrent. The available (*Zuhanden*) is the paraphernalia of human life, all of the things that are what they are in virtue of the way they are involved in human practices. The occurrent (*Vorhanden* or present-at-hand), however, is what is independently of human practices.

According to Heidegger, the world is that in which factual *Dasein* lives (1962, 93). This world is articulated temporally, that is, things happen in the world and they can be measured in part by when and for how long they happen. These are the contentful, meaningful times in terms of which

we lead our lives, and they make up world-time. Ordinary time, however, is the pure flow of clock-time, meaningless, empty and potentially precise. It is, as Heidegger says, a “pure succession” (1962, 474). The characteristic datability and significance of world-time are missing. One might infer from all this that ordinary time is somehow more real than world-time, because it is more independent. Whereas world-time depends crucially on human practices in order to be what it is, ordinary time does not seem to do so. However, for Heidegger, no time is completely independent of *Dasein*.

He explains this in what he calls temporal idealism. Temporal idealism is the thesis that time depends on *Dasein* (1962, 377). Time depends on *Dasein*, insofar as it depends on *Dasein's* originary temporality. Primordial or originary temporality is a formal structure of *Dasein's* being and so, in this sense world-time and natural time (ordinary) depend on the being of *Dasein*. This means that time belongs to *Dasein's* Being. Blattner (2005, 318) notes that, for Heidegger, one cannot say “time is” because time is not an entity or a thing. Rather, it is more accurate to say that “time temporalizes itself” (*die zeitzeitigt sich*).

So, to say that time depends on primordial temporality is not to say that there will not be time if originary temporality were not. What this means is that originary temporality is the ground from which ordinary time and world-time spring from. Hence, by understanding what Heidegger means in writing that time arises out of originary temporality, we can see both what he has in mind by way of time's dependence on originary temporality and why he thinks that originary temporality is a kind of time. By 'arise out of', Heidegger refers to a kind of degeneration that is common in the field of ontology. For Heidegger (1962), the ontological source of *Dasein's* Being is not inferior to what springs from it, but towers above it in power from the outset; in the field of ontology, any 'springing-from' is degeneration (383). By degeneration here, Heidegger is referring to a condition of change that takes place when one form of time changes into another. When this change occurs, a certain form of time loses some basic characteristics that make it what it is. This kind of change is what Heidegger refers to as degeneration or leveling off. This is why Heidegger described ordinary time as leveled off world-time. World-time is leveled off into ordinary time, in that the datability and significance of world-time are 'covered up' so that time seems merely to be a pure succession of 'nows'. This shows that datability and significance are the basic characteristics of world-time that are lost as a result of this degeneration. 'Nows' are public in that they are not the private possession or horizon of an individual or group, but rather accessible to all as a horizon for measuring events. Ordinary 'nows' are spanned and public, but not datable and significant.

Just as ordinary time is a levelled-off version of world-time, so world-time is a leveled-off form of originary temporality. Heidegger holds that, *Dasein's* Being-amidst (*sein-bei*) inwardly entities belongs to the structure of care, and its temporal meaning is enpresenting (Blattner, 2005, 320). This means that *Dasein's* relation to the worldly entities and events that surround it, and thus to the meaningful time in which the events and entities take place and find their location, is but one element of the structure of originary temporality. The degeneration of originary temporality into world-time is a reduction in the sense of a disconnection, an abstraction, of the world-time now from its home in originary temporality. This abstraction of the now, however, should not be thought of on the model of the medieval conception of the standing now. The world-time now is not disconnected from its own past and future, that is, from other world-time 'nows'. The standing *now* was conceived as a 'now', a moment of time with no past and no future, asingular, isolated moment of time.

When Heidegger talks about the world-time now stretching from world-time past and world-time future he is referring to the way events which characterize world-time now are connected to the events which are past and those in the future. This world-time now is isolated from the originary

past and originary future. This is because the ecstasy of the original future is *Dasein's* pressing ahead to its possibilities which will never come to be present as an event. Likewise, the original past is *Dasein's* being already, and its horizon is the way things matter to *Dasein*, its attunements. These attunements are the drag that situates and concretizes the thrust of *Dasein's* projection towards possibilities. They do not belong to the sequential past as the various episodes of my life history. These attunements were not at one time present after which they slipped into a past. Rather these attunements always characterize *Dasein*. The world-time 'now' is intrinsically spanned or stretched from world-time past (no-longer-now) to a world-time future (not-yet-now). It is thus stretched, Heidegger argues, because it is a significant now, a now defined by the relations implied in the in-order to. The world-time now is inherently spanned or stretched from a before to an after. It is significant, datable, spanned, public, and sequential or successive.

This world-time now-structure is, however, embedded in originary temporality as merely one of the later's ecstasies. The structural unity of the ecstasies of the temporality of circumspective concern depends upon the unity of originary temporality. This is because originary temporality is the formal structure of *Dasein's* Being, and in this sense, world-time now and natural time depend on the Being of *Dasein*. The world-time now necessarily spans from the before to the after, because it is embedded in the structure of original temporality. Now we can recognize phenomenologically that the 'now' experienced in engaged everyday practice is part of a larger whole, the whole that is the care-structure of *Dasein*. Heidegger calls the structural unity of care originary temporality. When one considers this above, however, one quickly arrives at the question of why originary temporality should be thought of as a kind of time at all. Heidegger answers by showing how if we do classify primordial or originary temporality as a form of time, we are able to explain aspects of ordinary time that otherwise remain mysterious, such as its continuity. The continuity of natural time is the way in which natural times stretch back to their immediate past and forward to their immediate future. This continuity of natural time remains a brute fact about time and can only be explained metaphysically. For this reason, metaphysicians have long sought to do so, but always failed. Heidegger's suggestion is that, we can only explain the continuity of natural time as a reduced or leveled off form of the span of world-time. The spannedness of world-time is merely a leveled off form of the inherent unity of original temporality, the way in which the originary future and originary past are intrinsically bound up with one another and with the originary present, which opens up the now for us. In short, originary temporality should be called a form of time.

Heidegger, then, concludes that, the three varieties of time (originaltemporality, world-time and ordinary time) form a degenerating series. It is only when we understand ordinary time as a thinned out or reduced version of world-time, and we regard world time as a disconnected form of originary temporality that we can explain the continuity of time. It is only when we accept this account in terms of degeneration that we can refer to originary temporality as a form of time. However, primordial temporality cannot be regarded simply as time as it is ordinarily conceived.

CONCLUSION

The paper has shown that the Being of *Dasein* is intrinsically connected to temporality and time. The Being of *Dasein* is that of existence and existence is only possible within the framework of time. But why is it that the Being of *Dasein* is this important in Heidegger's attempt to understand the meaning of Being in general. This is because *Dasein* is the only being that tries to understand itself and other beings. *Dasein* tries to make sense of the world in which he lives. It is clear from the foregoing that *Dasein*, existing within the framework of time, also defines time and its temporal moments. *Dasein* is a being that creates history through its actions on the world. This means that history is as a result of the past actions of *Dasein*. The performance of any kind of

action at all is always the present action of *Dasein* aims at affecting the world. How then are these human actions conceived? They are projected in the future perfect tense. Actions have both because-motives and in-order-to motives. The because-motive propels *Dasein* to act with a *telos* in mind which constitutes the in-order-to motives. By and large, time is not the mere flowing time of the clock but the meaningful time of humans; human activity is what makes time *time*.

REFERENCES

- Blattner, W. D. (1999). *Heidegger's temporal idealism*. Cambridge University Press.
- Blattner, W. D. (2005). Temporality. In *A companion to Heidegger*. Eds. Hubert. L. Drufus, Mark. A. Wrathall. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
- Fenandez A. V. (2018). *Beyond the ontological difference: Heidegger, Binswanger, and the future of existential analysis*. Rowman and Littlefield.
- Gandellini, F. (2018). *The "Ontological Difference" again: a Dialectheic perspective on Heidegger's mainstay*. <https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2018-0011>.
- Large, W. (2008). *Heidegger's Being and Time*. Edinburgh University Press Limited.
- Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. Transl. John Macquarie and Edward Robinson. Harper and Row.
- Heidegger, M. (1982). *The basic problems of Phenomenology*. Transl. Albert Hofstadter. Indiana University Press.