

# FACTICITY AND THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN DASEIN AND VORHANDENSEIN



One of the fundamental theses of Heidegger's *Being and Time* is that the manner of being of the entity he calls Dasein is radically distinct from the mode of being of other entities. The analytic of Dasein is developed from the beginning by contrast to the mode of existence Heidegger calls *Vorhandensein*:

*Ontologically, existentia means objective presence [Vorhandenheit], a kind of being which is essentially inappropriate to characterize the being which has the character of Dasein.*

*We can avoid the confusion by always using the interpretive expression objective presence [Vorhandenheit] for the term existentia, and*

*by attributing existence [Existenz] as a determination  
of being only to Dasein.*

The term “existence” (Existenz) designates the manner of being appropriate to Dasein, to entities for whom being is a question, while the other categorical modes of *Vorhandenheit* and *Zuhandenheit* are reserved for other entities. The way in which Dasein is in a world is distinct from the inner-worldliness of other entities. This distinctive characteristic of Dasein is one Heidegger will repeatedly insist on, claiming that to understand Dasein as one objectively present entity among others is to completely overlook Dasein’s essential ontological determination: “Dasein is never to be understood ontologically as a case and instance of a genus of beings as objectively present [einer Gattung von Seiendem als *Vorhandenem*]” .

Of course, such a misunderstanding is always possible, and if kept within its proper boundaries, it would not necessarily be a misunderstanding. Just as biology identifies a certain class of entities (*Gattung von Seiendem*) as biological objects for investigation, anthropology or neurophysiology could single out the human for theoretical investigation. But Heidegger insists that in so doing what is distinctive about Dasein’s mode of being is either lost or ignored.

Dasein is distinguished ontically from other entities by the fact that an understanding of being is constitutive of its existence: “Understanding of being is itself a determination of being of Dasein. The ontic distinction of Dasein lies in

the fact that it is ontological” .

Treating Dasein as a mere object among other existent objects would obscure this ontological possibility. However, there is an important ambiguity here, since Dasein is also an entity. Dasein is an ontic being among others, factually thrown into the world just as other entities are contingently thrown into the natural world. Up to a point, Heidegger accepts the identification of the brute factual existence of Dasein with an objective entity such as a lump of coal: “More precisely, they can be understood within certain limits and with a certain justification as something merely objectively present” .

However, Heidegger immediately adds that “to do this, one must completely disregard or just not see the existential constitution of being-in” . While there is a way in which Dasein exists as objectively present among other entities, this can be appropriate only if kept within “certain limits.” I take Heidegger to mean here that if one thinks that this mode of being is exhaustive of what it means to be Dasein, it would remain inappropriate and reductive. This is because one is either reducing or eliminating the existential mode of being-in that distinguishes Dasein from a stone or a table. While Heidegger admits that in terms of the question of reality Dasein is present (and real) among other present, real entities, thinking along these lines will lead us astray from the goal of fundamental ontology, the goal of thinking through the ontological constitution of Dasein:

*Like other beings, Dasein is also objectively present as real. Thus being in general acquires the meaning of reality.*

*Accordingly, the concept of reality has a peculiar priority in the ontological problematic. This priority diverts the path [Dieser verlegt den Weg] to a genuine existential analytic of Dasein, it also diverts our view of the being of innerworldly things initially at hand [Zuhandenen].*

That is, it not only obscures the fact that Dasein is in the world in a particular way through its circumspective concern and engagement with entities, but also that the objects encountered in a world are primarily encountered as useful entities within a context of significance, as handy (zuhanden). So the problem with the view of Reality as a heap of factually existing entities is that it simply ignores or “skips over the phenomenon of worldliness [Überspringen des Phänomens der Weltlichkeit]”.

But Dasein is also factually thrown into a world among other entities. This singular being-thus and not otherwise is what Heidegger designate by Dasein’s facticity. One may think that the facticity of Dasein, its being thrown into the world (Geworfenheit) in some way, designates a mode of being that Dasein shares with other beings. However, this is not the case, and Heidegger goes to great pains to distinguish between the factuality and contingency of the objectively present and Dasein’s facticity, reserving the term Tatsächlichkeit for the former and Faktizität for the latter.

Just as there is a contrast between the modes of being (existence, objective presence), there is a contrast in their modes of thrownness as facts (facticity, factuality): "And yet the 'factuality' of the fact [die 'Tatsächlichkeit' der Tatsache] of one's own Dasein is ontologically totally different from the factual occurrence of a kind of stone. The factuality of the fact [Die Tatsächlichkeit des Faktums] of Dasein, as the way in which every Dasein actually is, we call its facticity [Faktizität]."

Of course, there is some form of "facticity" to the being of a stone – its "thatness" or its existing in the very way that it does exist (and not otherwise). But as Agamben and others have noted, this mode of existence has traditionally been understood through the concept of contingency (Zufälligkeit), which Heidegger differentiates from Dasein's mode of contingent existence, designated by Faktizität.

The manner in which Dasein "falls" into the world (Geworfenheit, Verfallenheit) is not the manner in which stones fall (Zufälligkeit) into the world. Agamben is thereby correct to stress that for Heidegger "the difference in modes of Being is decisive here."

This difference is so decisive that almost every time Heidegger returns to the problem of Dasein's facticity in *Being and Time*, he goes out of his way to repeat this distinction just in case the reader has forgotten it: "Facticity is not the factuality of the factum brutum of something objectively present, but is a characteristic of the being of Dasein taken on in existence"

This distinction is reiterated so often throughout the book that it could properly be considered a refrain or motif of Being and Time. Each time Heidegger further elucidates Dasein's being-in-the-world and articulates a new existential structure, he insists on the difference between factical existence and factual objective presence. For example, when developing the phenomenon of conscience, he observes: "As a phenomenon of Dasein, conscience is not a fact [Tatsache] that occurs and is occasionally objectively present. It 'is' only in the kind of being of Dasein and makes itself known as a fact [Faktum] only in factical existence [ faktischen Existenz]".

He returns to it when describing the temporality that is proper to Dasein and distinguishing it from the way in which objective entities are "in" time: "Evidently Dasein can never be past, not because it is imperishable, but because it can essentially never be objectively present. Rather, if it is, it exists [sondern weil es wesenhaft nie vorhanden sein kann, vielmehr, wenn es ist, existiert]".

From the standpoint of this repetitive and resolute attempt to distinguish Dasein from Vorhandensein, it becomes surprising to read the closing paragraphs of Being and Time, where Heidegger questions this very distinction:

*The distinction between the being of existing Dasein and the being of beings unlike Dasein (for example, objective presence) may seem to be illuminating, but it is only the point of departure for the ontological problematic;*

*it is nothing with which philosophy can rest  
and be satisfied [ist doch nur der Ausgang der ontologischen  
Problematik, aber nichts, wobei die Philosophie  
sich beruhigen kann].*

A book that involves repetitive attempts to delineate the proper mode of being of Dasein by differentiating it from the being of other entities ends, it seems, by problematizing this very project. The distinction upon which the proper being of Dasein was articulated is something of a heuristic starting point, but not something that we must remain settled with.