

Heidegger on Selfhood

Jesús Adrián Escudero

Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona

Facultad de Letras

Departamento Filosofía

Campus UAB, E – 08192 Cerdanyola del Vallés, Spain.

&

University of Phoenix

Southern Arizona Campus

300 S Craycroft Rd

Tucson, AZ 85711 / USA

Abstract

The relationship that a person establishes with his or her world—the ways in which the self tries to gain a genuine understanding of itself—is a central question in Heidegger’s thought. “Being and Time” is largely an account of what it means to be a self. Keeping in mind the question of the self, the present essay develops the following three issues: First, the Heideggerian notion of the self is situated in the context of contemporary theories of selfhood. Second, the practical dimension of Dasein’s existence is analyzed. Each individual lives in a significant network of productive relationships that are projected toward the future and are constitutively defined by the structure of care. Third, the phenomenological and existential dimension of Dasein is examined by highlighting the irreducible character of the first-person perspective manifested in the phenomenon of the call of conscience.

Key words: self-discovery, selfhood, one-self, discourse, collapse, call of conscience, constancy of the self.

*Heidegger on Selfhood*¹

Being and Time is largely an account of what it means to be a self. Each *Dasein* is a self. Selves are neither fictions nor are they artificial constructs fabricated by anxious creatures. *Dasein* possesses a certain understanding of the sense of its being and of being in general which is determined by a peculiar kind of self-generating temporality. Temporality broadens the horizons in which things, situations, other people, and even ourselves can manifest in various ways. Since we exist as temporality, the inquiry into the sense of being must begin with an inquiry into the sense of our own human existence. *Being and Time* demands that the reader undergo for him- or herself his or her own journey of self-discovery. It outlines a path of self-discovery and self-analysis.²

We have to deepen our own self-understanding by becoming free from traditional prejudices. Thus, the relationship that a person establishes with itself—the way in which *Dasein* is capable of gaining a genuine understanding of itself—is a central question in Heidegger’s thought.³

¹ The present essay contains some of the research results reached in the frame of the Fellowship for Advanced Researchers awarded by the Humboldt Foundation.

² See Michael Zimmerman, *The Eclipse of the Self: The Development of Heidegger’s Concept of Authenticity* (Athens, OH, 1981), pp. 333-35.

³ This question, despite constituting one of the most important aspects of human existence, has commonly been discarded by the history of philosophy. A history more focused on establishing the conditions of human knowledge than on taking care of oneself. See, among others, Juliusz Domanski, *La philosophie, Theorie Ou Maniere de Vivre?* (Paris, 1996), Michel Foucault, *L’Herméneutique du Sujet* (Paris, 2001), Pierre Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life. Spiritual Exercises from Socrates to Foucault* (Oxford, 1995), and Martha Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, NY, 1994).

For him, *Dasein* is “related to its being, it is entrusted to its own being.”⁴In other words, *Dasein* is a being whose existence is always at stake. This kind of self-relationship is clearly expressed in the well-known difference between authenticity and inauthenticity.

As pointed out in *Being and Time*, we are in front of two modes of existential self-fulfillment: one inauthentic, expressed as “one-self” (*Man-Selbst*), and another authentic, expressed as “genuine self” (*eigentlichesSelbst*)⁵. In fact, *Dasein* already lives in the oscillation between inauthenticity and authenticity; its existence unfolds in this intermediate space. No wonder that, in the lectures *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (1927), Heidegger insists that the real philosophical problem is the unity of the concept of being.⁶

In this sense, Heidegger formulates a question that determines the course of modern philosophy. It is a question raised by Descartes, Kant and many other authors. It also touches on one of the core issues in both Neo-Kantianism and Phenomenology, two traditions that Heidegger knew in depth. Heidegger takes an active part in this debate in his early Freiburg lectures, in particular *The Idea of Philosophy and the Problem of Worldview* (1919), *Basic Problems of Phenomenology* (1919/20), *Phenomenology of Intuition and Expression* (1920), *Observation to Karl Jasper’s ‘Psychology of Worldview’* (1919/21), and *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle* (1921/22). During these years he develops what is known as a “primordial science of life” within the framework of a hermeneutic transformation of phenomenology.

Thus, Heidegger already tackles the problem of the self (*Selbst*) and selfhood (*Selbstheit*) as early as 1919. His philosophical efforts are mostly oriented toward a question that has been, and still is, central to contemporary philosophy, namely: to what extent do our experiences contain a reference to an “I” or a “Self”? If this is the case, how does it manifest itself? Is it possible to investigate selfhood in a reflective manner without distorting its primordial givenness (*Gegebenheit*)? To put it differently, can selfhood be grasped and described phenomenologically at all, or is it only approachable in a negative way?

Keeping the question of the self in mind, I would like to focus my attention on the following three issues. *First*, I situate the Heideggerian notion of the self in the context of contemporary theories of selfhood. *Second*, I analyze the practical dimension of *Dasein*’s existence. *Dasein* lives in a significant web of productive relationships that are projected toward the future and are constitutively defined by the structure of care. *Third*, I examine the phenomenological and existential dimension of *Dasein* by highlighting the irreducible character of the first person perspective manifested in the phenomenon of the call of conscience.

1. Theories of Selfhood

The contemporary discussion of the self is highly interdisciplinary in nature and shows the complexity of this phenomenon: we can analyze the self from an experiential, linguistic, dialogical, embodied, social, ethical, ecological, and narrative perspective. But, independent of the approach, it seems clear that self, world, and others are closely intertwined. In the wide field of Consciousness Studies, which range from Phenomenology, Psychology, and Buddhism to Neuroscience, Analytical Philosophy, and Cognitive Sciences, we can distinguish three basic positions regarding the phenomenon of selfhood.⁷

1.1 Functionalist and Buddhist Approach: The Self as a Representation and Illusion

One exponent of the functionalist approach is Metzinger, who offers, in his book *Being No One*, a representationalist analysis of a conscious self.

⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen, 2006), p. 42 (BT, p. 41). In subsequent references to *Sein und Zeit* the following abbreviations will be used: SuZ for the German edition, and BT for the English edition.

⁵ See Heidegger, SuZ, p. 129/BT, p. 125.

⁶ See Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (Frankfurt Main, 1975), pp. 218-251.

⁷ See, for example, Shaun Gallagher and Jonathan Shear (Eds.), *Models of the Self* (Thorverton, 1999), and Mark Sidertis, Evan Thompson, and Dan Zahavi (Eds.), *Self, No Self? Perspectives from Analytical, Phenomenological, and Indian Traditions* (Oxford, 2011). For a more historical approach to the question of the self see Jerrod Seigel, *The Idea of the Self. Thought and Experience in Western Thought* (New York, NY, 2005), and Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989). For his part, Ricoeur shows five interesting ways of tackling the question of the self, which could be formulated through the question “who?” and respectively analyzed by five specific disciplines. We can ask “who speaks” (Semantics), “who acts” (Pragmatics), “who experiences” (Phenomenology), “who tells” (Hermeneutics), and “who is the subject of imputation” (Ethics). See Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris, 1990), chap. 1.

He reaches a quite unmistakable conclusion: “No such things as selves exist in the world. Nobody ever was or had a self.”⁸ Thus, for all scientific and philosophical purposes, the notion of the self can be eliminated. It is a theoretical entity that has no explanatory function. It is just a representational construct.

Whenever we speak of a “self”, we commit what he calls the phenomenological fallacy: we confuse the content of an ongoing self-representational process with a real existing entity.⁹ All that really exists are certain types of information-processing systems engaged in operations of self-modeling. Thus, the classical definition of the self, which states that the self is an ontological substance that exists in isolation from the rest of the world, is a mere representation.

In a similar way, although from a different perspective, we find the Buddhist approach of Albahari. In her book *Analytical Buddhism*, she claims that the self is an illusion. From her point of view, the self has been mistakenly understood as an unchanging essence, a continuously persisting subject, who is the owner of experiences and the agent of actions.¹⁰ But, as she points out, there are cases of depersonalization. In this pathological case we come across feelings and thoughts that the subject experiences in a unique manner but without any sense of personal ownership.¹¹ Here, the sense of self is not supported by an actual existing independent self-awareness; rather, the only thing that really exists is a plethora of emotions, thoughts, and perceptions. The illusory nature of the self is due to the fact that the self does not have any kind of ontological independence. The reality of the matter is that the self is created through repeated acts of identification accompanied by a sort of witness-consciousness.

1.2 Hermeneutic Approach: The Self as a Narrative Construction

This is quite a different way of conceiving the self. It takes its point of departure in the fact that human beings possess some kind of self-comprehension and self-understanding. As Taylor has pointed out, human beings are self-interpreting animals.¹² To have a self, or even better, to be a self, is something in which one is existentially involved. According to this view, the self is not something finished and transparent to itself—it is not a static and unchangeable thing—but rather something constantly evolving; something that is manifested through one’s projects. The self, so to speak, is the product of conceiving and organizing one’s life in a certain way. When confronted with the question “Who are you?” we tend to tell a certain story that defines who we are and presents us to others for recognition and approval.¹³ We build a narrative self, which involves a complex social interaction; we construct an identity that starts in early childhood and continues for the rest of our lives. Who we are depends on the story we and others tell about ourselves. One cannot be a self on one’s own, but only together with others, as part of a linguistic community. I might be both the narrator and protagonist when I tell a story about myself, but I am not the only author. In the end, who I am depends on the stories told about me, both by myself and by others. Our narrative is composed by multiple and diverse authors.¹⁴

The narrative self is, consequently, an open-ended construction that is under constant revision. In order to gain a solid self-understanding it is not enough to think of oneself as an I—narrative is required.¹⁵ This is because human activities are comprehensively articulated through narrative discourse.

⁸ Thomas Metzinger, *Being No one* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), p. 1.

⁹ See Metzinger, *Being No One*, p. 268.

¹⁰ See MiriAlbahari, *Analytical Buddhism: The Two-Tiered Illusion of Self* (New York, NY, 2006), p. 3. Here is not the place to discuss Metzinger’s and Albahari’s very limited sense of the self. In part, both remain committed to the rather classical definition of the self as an ontologically distinct conscious subject, an unchangeable substance that could exist all by itself.

¹¹ See Albahari, *Analytical Buddhism*, p. 55.

¹² See Charles Taylor, “Self-interpreting Animals,” in *Human Agency and Language. Philosophical Papers*, Charles Taylor (Cambridge, Mass., 1985), pp. 45-76.

¹³ See Paul Ricoeur, *Temps et récit III: Le temps réconté* (Paris, 1985), pp. 442-443, and Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris, 1990), pp. 167-191.

¹⁴ For a social account of the self, see Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue. A Study in Moral Theory* (London, 1985), pp. 210-222.

¹⁵ Ricoeur has tried to clarify the internal dynamic of the concept of narrative identity by distinguishing two further concepts of identity: identity as sameness (*mêmeté*) and identity as selfhood (*ipseité*). Unlike the abstract identity of the modern concept of subjectivity, the narrative identity can include changes and mutations within the cohesion of a lifetime.

In other words, our actions achieve intelligibility in a narrative sequence which provides insights on our character traits, the goals we pursue, the values we endorse, and our different ways of living. In the frame of this narrative and temporal sequence, the story of a life continues to be reconfigured by all the truthful or fictive stories that a subject tells about him- or herself. Our life undergoes a constant process of reconfiguration. Life itself, as Ricoeur poetically formulates it, is a “cloth of woven stories”.¹⁶

1.3 Phenomenological Approach: The Self as an Experiential Dimension

Recent studies in phenomenology link a basic sense of self to the first-person givenness of experiential life.¹⁷ Phenomenologists such as Husserl, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, and Henry would agree that we are immediately directed at real, existing objects. We cannot be conscious of an object (a seen tree, a touched piece of leather, a tasted cookie, or a smelt rose) unless we are aware of the experience through which this object is given to us (through sight, touch, taste, or smell). The object becomes real through the experience; if there is no awareness of the experience, the object does not appear at all. For example, a fresh and juicy strawberry exists for me, through my tasting it. The given experience is not itself an object (like the strawberry), but instead constitutes the access to the appearing strawberry. The object is given through experience. As Zahavi phrases it, “experiences are not objects, but rather, they provide us with access to objects. I perceive the objects through the experiences. Experiential properties are not properties like red or bitter; they are properties pertaining to these various types of access.”¹⁸

Whereas my wife and I can both perceive the exact same strawberry, each of us have our own distinct perception of it. My wife may sympathize with my fatigue after a triathlon race, but she cannot actually feel my fatigue in the same way. Expressed in phenomenological language, we say that my wife has no access to the first-person givenness of my experience. This first-person givenness of experiential phenomena entails a built-in self-reference, a primordial experiential self-referentiality. This first-person givenness, implicit in any experience, makes up the core of what is called “minimal self”.¹⁹

On the other hand, although the various modes of givenness differ in their experiential properties, they also share certain features. One common feature is the quality of mineness (*Meinheit*), the fact that each experience immediately reveals itself as mine—it is I who am having the experience. When I feel the fatigue in my legs after a triathlon race, the experience in question is given immediately, primarily, and non-inferentially as mine. Obviously, this form of self-reference must be distinguished from any explicit I-consciousness. The mineness is not something perceived; it simply forms a subtle and pre-reflective background. Thus, the self is not something that stands opposed to the stream of consciousness, but rather is immersed in conscious life. It is a constitutive and intrinsic part of its structure. In fact, on the pre-reflective level of consciousness there is no explicit awareness of the experience being mine. Sartre, for example, offers a closer analysis of how the notion of pre-reflective self-consciousness is related to the idea that experiences have a subjective feel to them, that it is a kind of awareness we have before we reflect on our experience. Sartre is quite explicit in underlining that this kind of self-consciousness is not a new consciousness—it is not an additional mental state—but rather an intrinsic feature of the experience.²⁰ In other words, a direct phenomenological description of lived consciousness can be made without referring to an abstract ego or principle of unification. The structure of lived pre-reflective consciousness does not include the ego. As long as we are absorbed in the experience, no ego will appear.

¹⁶ Ricoeur, *Temps et récit III: Le temps raconté*, p. 443.

¹⁷ See, among others, Dan Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood. Investigating the First-Person Perspective* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008), pp. 115-132; Shaun Gallagher, and Dan Zahavi, "Phenomenological Approaches to Self-Consciousness", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2010 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL=<http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2010/entries/self-consciousness-phenomenological>.

¹⁸ Zahavi, *Subjectivity and Selfhood*, p. 121.

¹⁹ In recent years, neuroscientists like Damasio have argued in a similar fashion. For example, he claims that a sense of self is an indispensable ingredient of the conscious mind. Thus, my conscious life is characterized by a constant but quiet and subtle presence of self that could be identified with a “core self” or “protoself” (Antonio Damasio, *Self Comes to Mind. Constructing the Conscious Mind* (New York, NY, 2010), pp. 190-205). A similar line of argumentation is becoming more and more common in contemporary analytical philosophy of mind. See, for example, Jose Luis Bermúdez, *The Paradox of Self-Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), and Uriah Kriegel, “Consciousness and Self-Consciousness,” *Monist* 87 (2004), pp. 182-205.

²⁰ See Jean-Paul Sartre, *L'Être et le néant* (Paris, 1943), p. 20.

This only happens in cases of dysfunction, abnormality, or disruption that force us to adopt an objectifying attitude to the experience in question and reflect upon it. In a similar way, Heidegger claims that life articulates itself. Life has pretheoretical character, with no reference to an active subject.²¹

1.4 Heidegger's Account of the Self

What is Heidegger's approach to the question of the self? He also speaks of a particular mineness, the way my modes of existence are in each case mine (*Jemeinigkeit*). The ways we take care of the others or the different forms of coping with the world are in each case mine. When I hammer a nail into the wall, I am athematically and pretheoretically aware of myself. The modes of being are given, at least tacitly, as my modes of being, as modes of being that I am undergoing. They refer to a self that manifests itself either in an inauthentic or an authentic way. Whenever I do, understand, or experience something, my own self is somehow co-present and co-implicated. Heidegger speaks here explicitly of a "self" (*Selbst*) rather than an "I" (*Ich*).²²

However, this kind of self-reference is not to be understood as an experience of an isolated and worldless self. To have a self-experience does not mean interrupting the experiential interaction with the world and others in order to strive for a detached and ontological self-contained self. On this view, the self is not taken to be something that exists independently of, or separate from, the experiential flow. Although my experiences do not contain any explicit reference to myself, it is nevertheless the case that the experiences exist for me and are also part of my life.²³ On the contrary, self-reference is the self-reference of a world-immersed self. As Heidegger shows, the phenomenological notion of self is fully compatible with a strong emphasis on the fundamental being-in-the-world of each self. We find ourselves primarily as a worldly situated self²⁴, as already living in the world.²⁵

Here we are faced with quite a different understanding than the traditional conception of what it means to be a self. The self is not some kind of ontologically independent and invariant principle of identity that stands apart from, and above, the stream of changing experiences. It is neither something that remains entirely unaffected by language acquisition, social interaction, personal goals, and traditions.²⁶ From a phenomenological point of view, we are neither confronted with a pure and detached I nor an abstract epistemological subject. Heidegger plainly rejects the traditional concept of selfhood. Self is often interpreted as the substantial core which gives identity to the manifold experiences of a human life. The self is thus the unchanging inner reality of the person. Heidegger rejects the idea of self as substantial core because it objectifies and deworlds human existence. On the contrary, *Dasein* has always stepped out from itself: it is always in the world. We are immediately involved with the world. My experience of myself is a worldly experience, for I cannot escape the world. As Heidegger claims, the disclosure of the self entails a co-disclosure of the world in its meaningfulness. Disclosing the world is always already self-disclosure and self-finding. What we really come across is the co-givenness of self and world.

For Heidegger, life-experience (*Erlebnis*) is not a chaotic and incomprehensible principle, but rather intentionally structured and imbued with meaning. It has a hermeneutic structure, that is, a spontaneous and immediate self-understanding, an inner articulation and rationality. This is why it can be interpreted from itself. Phenomenology as an original science of life is ultimately built on the familiarity that life already has with itself. A true phenomenological description is something that is rooted in factual life-experience itself. The categories of life are not logically empty structures, rather they have their own mode of access that comes from life itself.

²¹ For a closer analysis of the pretheoretical dimension in Heidegger's early hermeneutics of factual life, see Jesús Adrián, *Heidegger y la genealogía de la pregunta por el ser. Una articulación temática y metodológica de su obra temprana* (Barcelona, 2010), pp. 374-380, and Antonio Cimino, *Phänomenologie und Vollzug. Heideggers performative Philosophie des faktischen Lebens* (Frankfurt Main, 2013), pp. 150-162.

²² See further Einar Øvereng, *Seeing the Self: Heidegger on Subjectivity* (Dordrecht, 1998).

²³ See Martin Heidegger, *Die Idee der Philosophie und das Weltanschauungsproblem* (Frankfurt Main, 1987), GA 56/57, pp. 68-69.

²⁴ See Martin Heidegger, *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie* (Frankfurt Main, 1992), GA 58, p. 258.

²⁵ See Heidegger, *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, GA 58, p. 34.

²⁶ Influenced by Dilthey, Heidegger also points out that human life involves a continual self-interpretation from within a specific and limited historical context. Thus, the real "subject" is not an abstract and purely formal ego which lives outside of time and change, but the concrete and historically situated living human being who is always engaged in trying to give meaning to its own life. It is clear that human life is a process, change, and becoming. To be an authentic self is to elect those specific possibilities which are uniquely one's own. Authenticity, as shown later, requires that one be just who one already is: finite transcendence.

Life's basic familiarity with itself does not take the form a reflective self-perception or a thematic self-observation. On the contrary, we are immersed in a process of lived self-acquaintance whose distinctive feature is its non-reflective character, and which must be understood as an immediate expression of life itself.²⁷

Thus, if one wants to find and analyze the self, one should start looking to our worldly experiences instead of searching inside our consciousness for some kind of abstract I. This is very clear in Heidegger's early Freiburg lectures.

For example, *The Idea of Philosophy* (1919) offers an enlightening phenomenological description of the surrounding world experience (*Umwelterlebnis*), like the one of the chair.²⁸ On Heidegger's account, our experiential life is world-related, and there is a presence of self when we are engaged with the world. When it comes to the study of pure life-experience, traditional categories such as inner and outer, and immanence and transcendence, are all misplaced. This is why Heidegger repeatedly speaks of phenomenology as a "primordial science of life"²⁹ or an "original science of life."³⁰ Life cannot be adequately grasped with the classical subject-object model. Life is world-open in contrast to the isolation of the modern concept of the subject. Life is integrated in a worldly meaningful totality.³¹

Phenomenologically speaking, self-experience is neither a question of an inner perception, nor a conglomerate of acts and processes, nor a detached I-object or a self-reflection. Instead, I experience myself immediately in what I do and in what I accomplish, in my concerns and in my relations with others. The disclosure of the self does not respond to an objective process (*Vor-gang*), where the subject is situated in front of the objects, but rather to an appropriation (*Er-eignis*). In appropriation, factual life is somehow present and implicated with all its intentional compartments.³² The disclosure of life belongs to the intentionality as such. As pointed out later in the lecture courses *Prolegomena to the History of the Concept of Time* from 1925, when the world is disclosed in its fullness of meaning, *Dasein* itself is also discovered in its immediate caring involvement with the things and people that surrounds it. Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that Heidegger operates with a form of self-acquaintance that precedes reflection, and that he, like Sartre, acknowledges the existence of an immediate pre-reflective self-comprehension.

Does this mean that life expresses some kind of inner nature or inner voice through articulating what we find within us? Can we understand Heidegger's proposal –as Taylor suggests– as an "epiphany of modernism", as an example of "romantic expressivism"?³³ Despite some formal similarities, I agree with Taylor Carman that Heidegger goes beyond the so called "expressivist turn."³⁴ Expressivism relies essentially on a normative ideal of completion, wholeness, totality, unity, and self-realization. For Heidegger, on the contrary, such an ideal of self-realization and completion is incoherent with and contradictory to *Dasein*'s openness and indeterminate mode of being. What distinguishes Heidegger from the expressivist tradition is the rejection of any concept of *Dasein* as a finished or, in principle, finishable self, an integrated whole, or an autonomous entity.

In what follows, I would like to focus on two features of the hermeneutics of the self that we can find in *Being and Time*. On one hand, Heidegger rejects both the ideas that the self is either constituted by cognitive relations directed towards the past or by actions fulfilled in the present.

²⁷ See Heidegger, *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, GA58, pp. 159, 257-258.

²⁸ See Heidegger, *Die Idee der Philosophie*, GA 56/57, pp. 70-73.

²⁹ See Heidegger, *Die Idee der Philosophie*, GA 56/57, pp. 95-99.

³⁰ See Heidegger, *Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, GA 58, pp. 38 and 79.

³¹ For an extensive analysis of Heidegger's hermeneutic phenomenology of life and its methodological significance, see Adrián, *Heidegger y la genealogía de la pregunta por el ser* (Barcelona, 2010), pp. 426-464.

³² See Heidegger, *Die Idee der Philosophie*, GA 56/57, pp. 73-77.

³³ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self. The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), pp. 368-390, 457-466.

³⁴ See Taylor Carman, *Heidegger's Analytic. Interpretation, Discourse, and Authenticity in Being and Time* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), pp. 265-268. This is difficult to see, since much of Heidegger's language echoes the expressivist tradition from which he departs. Heidegger's account of forerunning resoluteness has little in common with the romantic ideal of completion. When he talks about authentic selfhood, he has in mind something different from the kind of subjective integrity envisioned by philosophers like Rousseau, Hegel, Kierkegaard, and Dilthey. *Dasein* cannot be understood in terms of the ontological category of subjectivity, since "subject and object do not coincide with *Dasein* and world" (SuZ, p. 60/BT, p. 60).

Instead, the self is integrated in a network of practical and productive relationships projected toward the future. On the other hand, I pay special attention to the peculiar irreducibility of the first-person givenness manifested in the phenomenon of the call of conscience.

2. The Practical Dimension: Dasein as a Framework of Productive Relationships Projected Toward the Future

Heidegger's concept of authentic human existence unites, in a unique way, two of the major stands of Western philosophy:

The theoretical-reflective understanding of reality, and the practical-existential quest for self-understanding which results in deep changes in one's existence. According to Heidegger, beings who understand what it means for things to be, experience reality far more profoundly. Human existence constitutes the openness where beings can be revealed.³⁵ Without the openness which occurs only through human beings, other beings would persist, but they would not be disclosed. Heidegger's work involves a turning-back, a return to the beginnings of what is primordially given in our immediate life. This phenomenological attention to what is immediately given in our practical, surrounding and shared world can be traced back to Heidegger's early productive assimilation of Aristotle's philosophy, especially of his practical and political writings. A large part of the work dedicated to interpreting the writings of Aristotle concentrates on human life's question of being which, from the perspective of the young Heidegger, comprises the guiding thread of his own philosophical program and the central idea of his hermeneutics of facticity. How can one conceptually grasp human life without distorting and objectifying its true dynamic character? The Aristotelian model allows us to account for the theoretical as well as the poetic and practical behavior of life. This eminently practical dimension of life, and of the corresponding care that it shows for the surrounding things and the people, is perhaps the most productive element of Heidegger's appropriation of Aristotle's philosophy.

Therefore, the self is basically determined in a practical way by decisions and actions projected toward the future. In other words, the unity of the self is not based on the union of past and present states of affairs, but rather on the connection with the future. *Dasein* is constitutively always open and in the process of becoming. The unity of the self is the result of a dynamic interaction between projects and interpretations. Projects and interpretations establish a link with the future; they are constitutive elements of an always open and constantly unfinished unity. Heidegger formulates this peculiar human connection with the future as follows: "Project is the existential constitution of being in the realm of factual potentiality of being,"³⁶ or "*Dasein* is always already *ahead* of itself in its being. *Dasein* is always already beyond itself, not as a way of behaving toward beings which it is *not*, but as being toward the potentiality-for-being which it itself is."³⁷

Unlike the pragmatic interpretations of *Being and Time*, *Dasein's* existence is not primarily defined by involved coping,³⁸ practices,³⁹ or types of action,⁴⁰ but rather by interpretations, orientations, and projects in which we inscribe our actions and practices. For example, my teaching experience, my academic network, my philosophical knowledge, my research background, and my writing skills do not lead to an action for itself. The possession of certain skills and abilities is not enough for itself. Actions require projects. Projects are not mental realities; rather, they are carried out in practices, and, in turn, practices are the result of interpretations. In Heidegger's eyes, the constitution of *Dasein's* self-relationship takes place in the horizon of a circular structure of practices and interpretations projected towards the future.

³⁵ Heidegger's later turn tries to overcome any kind of residual subjectivism by claiming that authenticity is not so much self-possession as being-appropriated (*Ereignis*) by the disclosing event of Being,

³⁶ Heidegger, SuZ, p. 145/BT, p. 141.

³⁷ Heidegger, SuZ, pp. 191-192/BT, p. 185. See further Ernst Tugendhat, *Selbstbewusstsein und Selbstbestimmung* (Frankfurt, 1979), p. 177, and Georg W. Bertram, "Die Einheit des Selbst nach Heidegger," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 61 (2013), pp. 203-204.

³⁸ See Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World. A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge, Mass., 1991).

³⁹ See John Haugeland, "Heidegger on Being a Person," *Nous* 16 (1982), 15-26.

⁴⁰ See Robert Brandom, "Heidegger's Kategorien in 'Sein und Zeit'," *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 45 (1997), 531-549.

However, this notion of “project” is too formal. By which practices are interpretations and projects carried out? Heidegger responds to this question by introducing the phenomenon of discourse (*Rede*). The public discourse is not *only* negative since it also provides some sort of security. My ideal of individuation, along with my attitudes, feelings and even desires, are learned from others. Heidegger points out that I easily attach to values and attitudes of the one (*Man*). This way I gain security and identity. I am one of “them”. This selfishness is the ordinary way in which I try to understand myself as “mine”. Starting from the fundamental possibility of being-together, Heidegger carries out an interpretation of *Dasein* which adopts Aristotelian rhetoric as its guiding thread. Coexistence or being-together is only possible within the framework of communicability or, as Ricoeur formulates it, in the inter-subjective and dialogical dimension of the public use of language.⁴¹

In this sense, rhetoric possesses a clear social aspect that refers to the space of coexistence that is inter-subjectively shared with others. In accordance with this interpretation, the element of reference of discourse is the realm of opinions and the communal system of beliefs which thus become the basic criterion for human understanding. In this way, opinion (*doxa*) and belief (*pistis*) contain, as does idle talk (*Gerede*), which Heidegger addresses in *Being and Time*, an eminently positive sense, insofar as they open up the world to us and reveal us to others through the common element of language (*logos*).⁴²

Besides affirming the equiprimordiality of attunement, understanding, and discourse, Heidegger points out that “discourse is the structuring of the attuned intelligibility of being-in-the-world.”⁴³ Thus, projects, practices, and interpretations are articulated in discourse. Practices express actions that are meaningful in the world. So, for instance, one shakes hands with colleagues or customers before starting a meeting. Heidegger insists on the fact that discourse –as articulation of intelligibility– does not have a simple verifiable character. In fact, discourse is the medium that expresses the meaningful disclosure of the world.

As is known, the formal structure of discourse (*Rede*) manifests itself first and foremost in the inauthentic phenomenon of idle talk (*Gerede*). One of the core problems in Heidegger’s *Being and Time* is how to solve the tension between the public-one (*Man-Selbst*) and the one-self (*Dasein-Selbst*), that is, between the anonymous authority of public opinions conditioning our identity and the authentic self running towards its death. In other words, how is it possible to establish and achieve a genuine and direct relationship with oneself if we are already thrown and fallen in the public-one primarily articulated in idle talk? This only can happen through a sudden break from everydayness, like the one we experience in anxiety (*Angst*). Anxiety is the revolving platform that methodologically enables the transition from Division I to Division II of *Being and Time*.⁴⁴ Once the collapse of the public-one is in place, we see a different form of authentically understanding ourselves through the phenomena of resolution and the call of conscience. To put it differently, the irreducible manifestation of first-person perspective is intelligible only in light of the singularization of anxiety, the phenomenon of death, the forerunning resoluteness and the call of conscience where oneself (*Dasein-selbst*) is opposed to any objective, impersonal, and thus, inauthentic, view of the public-one (*Man-Selbst*).

3. The Phenomenological and Existential Dimension: The Irreducibility of Conscience

Being and Time offers a double account of the self: Division One provides a detailed hermeneutics of the everyday self dispersed in the structures of public opinion, while Division Two outlines an alternative to the collapse of the everyday self in terms of what I like to call a “hermeneutics of the self.”⁴⁵

⁴¹ See Paul Ricoeur, *La métaphore viva* (Madrid, 1980), p. 49.

⁴² For a more detailed analysis of the positive aspects of discourse, see Heidegger’s phenomenological interpretations of Aristotelian rhetorics, in particular his remarks on the phenomenon of *doxa* (see Martin Heidegger, *Grundbegriffe der aristotelischen Philosophie* (Frankfurt Main, 2002), GA 18, pp. 100ff). See further Jesús Adrián, “Heidegger and the Role of Aristotelian Rhetoric,” *Gatherings. The Heidegger Circle Annual* 3 (2013), 1-17.

⁴³ Heidegger, *SuZ*, p. 162/BT, p. 157.

⁴⁴ From this point of view it is easy to recognize the inner structure of Part One of *Being and Time*: Division I analyzes *Dasein* in terms of average understanding of everydayness while Division II examines *Dasein* in terms of the temporality which makes everydayness possible. For the methodological importance of anxiety, see Jean-François Courtine, “Réduction phénoménologique-transcendentale et différence ontico-ontologique”, in *Heidegger et la phénoménologie*, ed. Jean-François Courtine (Paris, 1990), pp. 232-234, Barbara Merker, *Selbsttäuschung und Selbsterkenntnis. Zu Heideggers Transformation der Phänomenologie Husserls* (Frankfurt Main, 1988), pp. 153-193, and Jesús Adrián, *Heidegger y la genealogía de la pregunta por el ser* (Barcelona, 2010), pp. 465-486.

⁴⁵ I have developed this idea further in Jesús Adrián, “*Sein und Zeit* und die Tradition der Selbstsorge,” *Heidegger Studien* 29 (2013), pp. 195-211.

To phrase it in more phenomenological terms: Division One provides the self with identity criteria from the third-person perspective of an anonymous One (*Man*); in contrast, Division Two develops an alternative phenomenology of conscience that might be considered as an account of genuine first-person self-awareness.⁴⁶

Obviously, this does not mean that Heidegger goes back to a kind of self-referential consciousness since such consciousness is only a special mode of revealing the self. As Heidegger makes it clear in *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, a deliberative, reflective I-awareness is “only a mode of self-apprehension, but not the mode of primary self-disclosure.”⁴⁷ This latter is a self-awareness mediated by social practices. *Dasein* always finds itself in things themselves, immersed in the world, surrounded by other people because “*Dasein* gives itself over immediately and passionately to the world, its own self is reflected back to it from things.”⁴⁸

However, the “I” who is reflected back in this way is “the who” of everyday *Dasein*, and this, according to Heidegger’s existential analytics, is an inauthentic *Dasein*, it is not the “I myself.”⁴⁹ As Heidegger argues, “the self of everyday *Dasein* is the one-self.”⁵⁰ The same description of the one-self makes clear that it understands itself in light of a third-person perspective. Heidegger’s account of ontologically primordial self-awareness as a “reflection back” from the things in which I am practically absorbed is insufficient for an adequate account of self-awareness. Undoubtedly, this is one of the important gaps in the account of self-awareness in Division One that Heidegger tries to overcome in Division Two.

Thus, Division Two of *Being and Time* is concerned largely with the ontological irreducibility of the first-person point of view. How do we reach this level of irreducibility? Which phenomenon allows *Dasein* to move from the third-person perspective of the one-self (*Man-Selbst*) to the first-person perspective of the authentic self (*eigentlichesSelbst*)? This happens when the one-self collapses. The collapse of the one-self opens the possibility for first-person self-awareness through conscience. The breakdown of the one-self can lead to a genuine apprehension of self by canceling and putting in brackets the public authority and validity of the one-self itself. The collapse of the one-self allows, mostly in a *negative* way, for the discovery of ourselves, that is, it provides a condition of possibility of authentic selfhood. In this existential modification of our average existence the self discovers in the call of conscience a dimension of its being that is not determined by the one-self.

Heidegger is not using conscience in an ordinary sense. Conscience does not coincide with an unpleasant feeling of remorse, it has nothing to do with our ability of distinguishing good and evil. Instead, in its ontological sense, conscience makes our ordinary ethical notions of conscience possible. Heidegger’s existential account of conscience is an attempt to dig down beneath such distinctions by way of uncovering the conditions of their intelligibility.⁵¹ In fact, he suggests abandoning the envenomed circle of good and bad conscience by linking conscience and attestation (*Bezeugung*). And attestation, as Ricoeur suggests, is fundamentally self-attestation, the certainty of being both agent and patient.⁵²

Attestation is also a mode of understanding the silent voice of conscience as irreducible to any kind of explicit, thematic and reflective knowledge. The silence of conscience communicates an explicit recognition of the distinction between the everyday self of the one and the proper self: “The call is a summons of the one-self in its self. (...) Conscience calls the self of *Dasein* forth from its lostness in the one-self.”⁵³

⁴⁶ If expressed in these terms, one can establish a closer connection to Husserl. A connection, on the other hand, repeatedly denied by Heidegger himself and a wide sector of the Heideggerian literature. I agree with Crowell when he says that *Being and Time* carries out an implicit existential reinterpretation of first-person self-awareness. For a closer analysis of Heidegger’s proximity to Husserl reflections on intentionality and first-person perspective see Steven Crowell, “Subjectivity: Locating the First-Person in *Being and Time*,” *Inquiry* 44 (2001), pp. 435ff.

⁴⁷ Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, GA 24, p. 227. Therefore, Heidegger explicitly rejects what Dreyfus plastically has described as the “Cartesian cabinet of consciousness” with its mental representations that are supposed to be foundational for our access to the world (see Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, pp. 12 and 74-75).

⁴⁸ Heidegger, *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, GA 24, p. 227.

⁴⁹ See Heidegger, SuZ, p. 114/BT, p. 112.

⁵⁰ Heidegger, SuZ, p. 129/BT, p. 125.

⁵¹ See Heidegger, SuZ, p. 269/BT, p. 259. Actually, *Being and Time* proposes a demoralization of conscience similar to the one we find in Nietzsche’s *Genealogy of Moral*.

⁵² See Paul Ricoeur, *Soi-même comme un autre* (Paris, 1990), pp. 358-359.

⁵³ Heidegger, SuZ, p. 274/BT, p. 264.

The apparent foreignness of the voice of conscience, then, is neither an echo of some real transcendent power nor the effect of society and family.

Instead, it is a function of the relative unfamiliarity of the brute fact of one's existence as such, which is typically covered over by routine and everyday forms of intelligibility. Thus, authenticity consists in *Dasein's* freely choosing itself against a background of indifference and inauthenticity. Therefore, conscience is nothing more or less than *Dasein's* responsiveness to the fact of its own singularity. Authentic selfhood is just the fact of being appealed at its more radical mineness.

In this sense, Heidegger's existential conception of selfhood is concerned primarily with the irreducibility of the first-person perspective.⁵⁴ The authentic self has nothing to do with theoretical self-knowledge or actions guided by norms, that is, the self is neither an epistemological subject nor a practical subject. The self is not intelligible to itself immediately in abstraction from its worldly involvement.⁵⁵ Instead, selfhood is an irreducible aspect of being-in-the-world that is itself interpretable only against a background already understood: the world. *Dasein* becomes itself only in its immersion and engagement with concrete situations, by confronting them, being thrown into assuming responsibility for itself, and pushing forward into possibilities.

Dasein is ontologically already a self. It is only because *Dasein* is already a self that it can exist either authentically or inauthentically, either as its own or not its own. In addition, it can fully appreciate the fact only *retrospectively*, from a forerunning-resolution point of view. Conscience is the sign that our temporal openness is dissatisfied with functioning deficiently. Forerunning resoluteness is a decisive disclosure of my possibilities. As resolute, I am open for my own possibilities.⁵⁶

However, for such resoluteness to be fully authentic, *Dasein* must disclose itself in terms of its most unique and individuating possibility: being-towards-death. *Dasein* only becomes fully resolute because it anticipates its own end. Any time I make a specific resolution, for example, to buy a new car, or to paint my house, I choose to actualize certain possibilities and to let others go. Resoluteness presupposes some recognition that I am limited. The practice of resolving leads to a deeper individuation and self-understanding.⁵⁷ Thus, anticipatory resoluteness is not a way to escape, fabricated for overcoming death, but lets me take over my life for the first time. It is a mode of directly assuming my own existence. For *itself*—that is, from the first-person point of view—*Dasein* is not reflected back from things but directly confronts the mineness of its existence as such. In conscience, we learn what it means to say “I myself.”⁵⁸

The call of conscience provides, so to speak, the necessary testimony to show that anticipation of death can occur. Conscience is an element in the authentic disclosure of one's finitude and mortality. This disclosure cannot be willed by an individual: “The call is precisely something that *we ourselves* have neither planned, nor prepared for, nor willfully brought about. “It” calls, against our expectations and even against our will. (...) The call comes *from me*, and yet *over me*.”⁵⁹ Also, because conscience calls without warning, we must be vigilant for it.

⁵⁴ But, as Carman correctly has pointed out, Heidegger's account of selfhood is not incoherent but incomplete. His analysis of the self is lacking the perspective from another. We are selves above all in the eyes of others, not just directly and authentically for ourselves. Heidegger was right to insist on the irreducibility of the first person to any impersonal generic concept of the self. But he was wrong to ignore those aspects of sociality that inevitably mingle our first-person understanding with our understanding of others, and with theirs of us. Heidegger does not call attention to the phenomenon of asymmetry in his account of authentic selfhood in *Being and Time*, at least not explicitly (see Taylor Carman, *Heidegger's Analytic. Interpretation, Discourse, and Authenticity in Being and Time* (Cambridge, Mass., 2003), pp. 268-269).

⁵⁵ As Heidegger mentions, Kant could not see the pure relation to existence, prior to knowledge or human praxis, because he did not see the phenomenon of the world (see Heidegger, SuZ, p. 321/BT, p. 306).

⁵⁶ The German word *Entschlossenheit* usually means “decisiveness” but derives from the verb *schliessen* meaning to latch, shutter or lock. *Entschliessen*, then, literally means to un-shutter or un-lock. Resolute *Dasein* is freed from its former bondage to the One (*Man*) because it has chosen to disclose its own finite existence.

⁵⁷ As mentioned before, self-understanding is not achieved through a neutral, distant and theoretical act of self-reflection, but rather through a constant process of re-appropriation of ourselves. This constant process of re-appropriation is a clear indication of the intrinsic temporality of human existence.

⁵⁸ Here we locate the place for the first-person in *Being and Time*. It is neither the one-self, nor the authentic self, but the hidden condition of both. And this hidden condition is temporality.

⁵⁹ Heidegger, SuZ, p. 275/BT, p. 265.

The self is not a self-grounding substance. The self is a way of existing which is always found in a worldly context. This context consists of temporal disclosedness. The inauthentic self lacks genuine “standing” because it flees from the truth; the authentic self is integrated and unified because it resolves to disclose itself.

Existentially, selfhood is only to be found in the authentic potentiality-of-being-a-self, that is, in the authenticity of the being of *Dasein* as care. In terms of care the constancy of the self (*Ständigkeit des Selbsts*), as the supposed persistence of the subject, gets its clarification.

(...) The constancy of the self in the double sense of constancy and steadfastness is an authentic counter-possibility to the unself-constancy (*Unselbst-ständigkeit*) of irresolute falling prey. Existentially, the self-constancy (*Selbst-ständigkeit*) means nothing other than anticipatory resoluteness. Its ontological structure reveals the existentiality of the selfhood of the self.⁶⁰

In other words, the inauthentic self is inconstant because its experience is a collection of fragmented moments. Because we like to believe that there is something uniting these moments, we often speak of the self as if it were a substance underlying the stream of experiences. Going against this classical misunderstanding, Heidegger claims that the self is a self-unifying temporality.

In summary, Heidegger distinguishes two senses of self: on one hand, self refers to the everyday I; on the other, self refers to the authentic way of existing as anticipatory resoluteness. Both these modes of selfhood are ways of being-in-the-world. The real self – existentially understood as care – is the self-unifying temporality which makes all experience possible, whether it be everyday and inauthentic or genuine and authentic. Heidegger makes it clear that selfhood is rooted in temporality. More fundamental than the personal ego or the rational subject is the temporality which generates itself (*sichzeitigt*).

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