

Beyond Subjectivity: Kierkegaard's Self and Heidegger's *Dasein*

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Abstract

In the following paper, I analyse and contrast the thoughts of Kierkegaard and Heidegger concerning the problem of existence. I undertake the analysis by first examining how these two thinkers distinguish themselves from the metaphysical tradition. As finite and temporal entities, Kierkegaard's self and Heidegger's *Dasein* mark a radicalisation over the notion of subjectivity in the metaphysical tradition. This gives philosophy a new way to acknowledge the limits of our finite existence instead of merely engaging in a purely conceptual and theoretical analysis. However, I conclude that Kierkegaard is still partly confined to the metaphysical conception when he fails to distinguish the *existentiell* aspect of the self from the *existential* aspect. I contend that Heidegger's *Dasein* is a further radicalisation over Kierkegaard's self in that the former is uniquely characterised by the openness of its way of Being.

Keywords: existence; finitude; temporality; *Dasein*; self

Introduction: Against the Tradition

Kierkegaard and Heidegger both call into question the traditional idea in philosophy that we can more or less adequately understand ourselves theoretically. Instead of treating philosophy merely as a conceptual analysis, they bring to light the concrete situation in which we find ourselves and from which we always carry out a finite task. In this paper, I begin by discussing how Kierkegaard and Heidegger break away from the previous philosophical tradition through the notion of 'existence' (or 'spirit' in Kierkegaard). I thus elucidate their formulation of existence, which marks the fundamental characteristic of the self and *Dasein*. In explicating the way in which the self and *Dasein* mark the radicalised conception of finitude and temporality, I also show where the self as expounded by Kierkegaard becomes problematic. There is an unavoidable inconsistency in the way Kierkegaard conceives of the self. Hence, the thesis of my comparative

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analysis is to demonstrate that Heidegger radicalises beyond Kierkegaard's self with his notion of *Dasein*, whose mode of Being is profoundly open and rightly undetermined as that which makes its own Being an issue for itself.

Excessive adherence to the theoretical approach often leads to formalism because such an adherence entails objectivity, abstraction, and infinite validity (as long as all the conditions remain the same). Formalism in this sense is an attitude of, or approach to, theorising something more concrete and particular. In other words, it is strictly about formulating a general concept or theory out of the particular entities in question. Until the end of the Enlightenment, this sort of formalism dominated the philosophical scene. We can, for instance, see such formalism in Descartes who famously argued that our essence lies in our state of being conscious (Descartes 1985: 127; Descartes 1986: 18, 54). According to Descartes, we are distinguished from other extended objects such as plants and animals by our having a mind. He thus tells us that each of us is essentially a thinking being (*res cogitans*) compared to, for example, a book which is just an extended thing (*res extensa*). The method by which Descartes demarcates us from other extended things is the same method he employs when he discerns other extended things (Descartes 1986: 30). As a finite substance, whether we possess one property or the other determines and defines *what* we are. His method of discernment virtually remains the same for both *res cogitans* and *res extensa* despite having made such a distinction. Descartes therefore failed to delineate into and explicate that which is fundamentally characteristic of *res cogitans*. This is why Heidegger comments:

With the '*cogito sum*' Descartes had claimed that he was putting philosophy on a new and firm footing. But what he left undetermined when he began in this 'radical' way, was the kind of Being which belongs to the *res cogitans*, or—more precisely—the *meaning of the Being of the 'sum'*. (Heidegger 1962: 46)

Descartes' formalism stipulated that mind is merely a category or property which distinguishes human beings from other entities. Mind is simply a formal criterion for Descartes.

Kant also indulges in this formalism as he deduced the faculties of the mind by analysing the way the mind constitutes experience (Kant 1968: 59). Based on the presupposition that we have experience of objects, he sought to elucidate how the mind makes such an experience possible. If an experience of objects is unified under the singular subject, as Kant thought, then it

is a precondition that the experiencing subject is self-conscious. Without this unity of consciousness, one can neither become aware of one's own experience nor be said to be self-conscious. For Kant, being self-conscious implies having experience and recognising that as one's own (ibid.: 152-153). Based on his analysis, Kant thus arrived at the transcendental unity of apperception as the highest function of the mind which unites one's experience under one subsisting subject. Though Kant's exposition is quite different from that of Descartes', he still maintains the idea that formal deduction provides legitimate knowledge for us (ibid.: 13-14, 25-26). Kant's project was simply epistemological rather than ontological. What is common to both of them and many other philosophers is the *mode of investigation* by which they expound themselves. They all engage in the same formal mode of inquiry, which is abstract and theoretical, for they impose the same categorical schema on us as they do to all other objects and treat us just like any other object of their inquiry.

According to the formulations of Descartes and Kant, it does not matter *who I am as an individual* but only *what I am* (a human being), which is indicated by the properties and conditions theoretically constructed by them. The latter question neglects existence. This is why Heidegger comments, "In taking over Descartes' ontological position Kant made an essential omission: he failed to provide an ontology of *Dasein*" (Heidegger 1962: 46). While Descartes and Kant occupied themselves with the notion of *cogito* or self-consciousness, existence escaped from their vision. This is precisely because formalism cannot account for the conditions related to existence because they are contingent, finite, and temporal, as oppose to formal conditions which are necessary, infinite, and universal. Thus to suppose that Reason can grasp the whole of our Being is to assume ourselves as a mere entity, for in that case, "The whole existence of the human race rounds itself off as a perfect, self-contained sphere" (Kierkegaard 1983: 68). But as the Enlightenment drew to a close, philosophy began to steer away from such formalism and to include other aspects of our Being.

Both Kierkegaard and Heidegger subvert the idea that Reason dictates the whole of reality including ourselves.¹ In response to this obsessively formalistic tradition, Kierkegaard and Heidegger deny the idea that our self-understanding consists in a pure concept that abstracts from our finite conditions. We are often inclined to accept and assert ourselves as if we are just another entity; for instance, when we define ourselves biologically as bipeds or things with two legs (as if we are no different from quadrupeds except for the number of legs). But such a difference is not what is crucial about our existence and this is the sense in which Kierkegaard and

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Heidegger react against the term 'metaphysics.' The latter indeed remarks about 'the forgetfulness of Being' of the metaphysical (or onto-theological) tradition, since such an assumption:

[B]locks our access to those primordial 'sources' from which the categories and concepts handed down to us have been in part quite genuinely drawn. Indeed it makes us forget that they have had such an origin, and makes us suppose that the necessity of going back to these sources is something which we need not even understand. (Heidegger 1962: 43)

We must therefore re-examine existence and subjectivity. Instead of separating concepts from thinking activity, thereby fabricating the irreconcilable rift between Reason and existence, Kierkegaard and Heidegger ground our knowledge on the very finite and temporal conditions which we ourselves are. Kierkegaard's self and Heidegger's *Dasein* therefore mark the reversal of the ontological priority in that it is not the foundation of our knowledge (validity of knowledge) to which we must look, but the manner in which we as unique individuals engage in and delve into an activity such as a quest for knowledge. Hence they incorporate in their pursuit of knowledge the preoccupation of understanding ourselves, our way of Being. In turning away from the strictly theoretical approach to philosophy, Kierkegaard and Heidegger converge in a number of defining moments which bring to light a radicalised conception of existence. It is in this context that I wish to analyse and tackle the following questions: (i) How is *Dasein*, as designated by Heidegger, similar to and different from the self of Kierkegaard?; and (ii) Does *Dasein* really describe and capture our Being-in-the-world better than Kierkegaard's self, as Heidegger stipulates in the endnote to *Being and Time* (ibid.: 494)? As Kierkegaard bears the notion of 'self' while Heidegger distinctively defines the characterising individual as '*Dasein*,' my aim in this paper is to bring to the fore the crucial disparity and radicalisation made by Heidegger which distinguishes *Dasein* from Kierkegaard's self in spite of their similarities.

I. Self and *Dasein*

Existence marks the departure from the philosophical tradition which was predominantly occupied with the construction of the foundation of knowledge. In pursuing the purity and validity of knowledge, the tradition

in fact misses the point; as Kierkegaard puts it, “For all this positive knowledge fails to express the *situation* of the knowing subject *in existence*” (Kierkegaard 1968: 75; emphasis added). By shifting the focus away from Reason and knowledge towards reason and existence, Kierkegaard, whom Heidegger follows, attends to our situation which is finite and temporal.

In *The Sickness unto Death*, Kierkegaard defines ‘self’ (*Selv*) as “a relation which relates to itself” (Kierkegaard 2004: 43). Since this formulation is rather obscure, it would be helpful to see how Kierkegaard distinguishes ‘self’ from ‘human being.’ According to Kierkegaard, ‘human being’ is a synthesis which is “a relation between two [factors]”² (ibid.), or alternatively it is defined as the relation of two factors which he calls ‘synthesis.’ One can here recognise the difference in the way Kierkegaard understands the human being and the self. *A relation between two factors* (human being) is not yet *a relation which relates to itself* (self); Kierkegaard thus suggests from this that “a human being is not yet a self” (ibid.). This may sound quite counter-intuitive as most of us who are human beings also consider ourselves a self, but his point is that a human being qualifies as a self in varying degrees. Human being as a synthesis is constituted by psyche and body (Kierkegaard 1980: 85), but self is marked by the third factor which Kierkegaard calls ‘spirit.’ In this way, a positive relation which relates to itself is united by the third factor, spirit; on the other hand, a negative relation which “the two relate to the relation, and in the relation to that relation” (Kierkegaard 2004: 43) either lacks or has very little contribution made by this spirit.

Kierkegaard describes negative unity in *The Concept of Anxiety* as: “In innocence, man [i.e. human being] is not qualified as spirit but is psychically qualified in immediate unity with his natural condition. The spirit in man is dreaming” (Kierkegaard 1980: 41). We can thus see that Kierkegaard does not qualify a human being whose spirit unites negatively in innocence as a self. Spirit for Kierkegaard denotes existence which empowers the synthesis to relate to itself and it therefore marks the degree to which a human being is a self by its ‘degree of reflection,’ as Kierkegaard writes:

There being here some degree of reflection, there is also some degree of heed paid to one’s self. With this certain degree of reflection begins that act of separation in which the self becomes aware of itself as essentially different from the environment and the external world and their effect upon it. (Kierkegaard 2004: 85)

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In this manner, Kierkegaard is providing a definition and criteria for those *existential* characters which determine the extent to which a human being qualifies as a self. To be a fully existing individual is to make our own existence as the object of our thinking and this forms a positive unity. Let us at this point turn to Heidegger and his conception of self and existence.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger intends to raise the question of the meaning of Being (*Sein*) which the onto-theological tradition has always failed to recognise. Instead of engaging in a theoretical inquiry, ontology has always devolved into the ontic analysis of beings (*Seinden*) and was never investigated far enough to carry out the fundamental ontology, that is, the ontological analysis of Being. On the one hand, our understanding of Being is *self-evident* because we must always already have understood Being pre-conceptually; on the other hand, our understanding of Being is *obscure* because we take it for granted or fail to penetrate it ontologically. According to Heidegger, 'Being' is "that which determines entities as entities, that on the basis of which entities are already understood [...]. The Being of entities 'is' not itself an entity" (Heidegger 1962: 25-26). He writes elsewhere that "We are able to grasp beings [(i.e. entities)] as such, as beings, only if we understand something like [*Being*]" (Heidegger 1982: 10).

It is Heidegger's ingenuity even in asking this question regarding the meaning of Being, what it means to *be*, because as he denies in the first section, Being is not a concept which we can take for granted by assuming that it is universal and indefinable. Heidegger recognises that in this very question, what is implied and presupposed is the entity that can raise such a question. That is to say, the very question reveals something more than the question itself, namely the inquirer. He therefore makes the following claim:

Thus to work out the question of Being adequately, we must make an entity—the inquirer—transparent in his own Being. The very asking of this question is an entity's mode of *Being*; and as such it gets its essential character from what is inquired about—namely, Being. (Heidegger 1962: 27)

This unique entity which raises the question of Being is not a chair, a fork, or a tree; it is rather the sort of entity that can make Being as its concern and Heidegger calls this entity '*Dasein*.' *Dasein* is distinctive in that it is "an entity which does not just occur among other entities. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that, in its very Being, that Being

is an *issue* for it” (ibid.: 32). The Being of a chair is not and cannot be an issue for the chair. *Dasein* is defined as the entity whose mode of Being is precisely to raise its Being as an issue for itself; its Being can be and is an issue for itself.³ This self-referentiality of the self, which Kierkegaard designated as spirit, is guided by ‘*existence*’ (*Existenz*) for Heidegger, as Pöggeler comments: “To have a relationship to Being means (according to Kierkegaard) to have existence, to be determined by existence. Heidegger calls the Being or ‘essence’ of *Dasein* ‘existence’” (Pöggeler 1987: 35). As “*The ‘essence’ of Dasein lies in its existence*” (Heidegger 1962: 67), what allows for and makes possible that unique feature which *Dasein* has, the self-relating character, is existence. As such, Heidegger states that “That kind of Being towards which *Dasein* can comport itself in one way or another, and always does comport itself somehow, we call ‘*existence*’” (ibid.: 32). This means that *Dasein* comports itself in its existence, and in doing so “*Dasein* always understands itself in terms of its existence” (ibid.: 33). As the above quotes have stipulated, Being is presupposed in any dealings with entities. But since we do make ourselves an issue and deal with entities in the world, what is therefore implied is that in *Dasein*’s mode of existence, Being is already in some way understood by *Dasein*. For otherwise *Dasein* would not be able to distinguish that which *is* from that which *is not*.⁴ To bring to light our finite condition of Being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-Sein*), Heidegger carries out an ontological investigation of *Dasein* which he calls ‘*existential analytic*.’

II. Finitude and Temporality

What distinguishes these two thinkers is their penetration into our finite and temporal conditions, as Kierkegaard writes, “Temporality, finitude – that is what it is all about” (Kierkegaard 1983: 49). While the formal tradition, exemplified by thinkers like Descartes and Kant, made numerous efforts to grasp our essences, it maintained the same attitude and approach of seeking common qualities amongst all human beings. Despite having categorised us as a *finite* substance, Descartes did not understand finitude in the primordial sense. Since his approach remained infinite, his judgement that we are *finite* as a substance essentially implied that we are *infinitely* a finite substance. Likewise, while Kant attempted to display the boundaries of reason, which are in a certain sense ‘finite,’ his perspective still remained infinite when he lays out the faculties of cognition. Such accounts fail to grasp and express our basic state of finitude because seeking a common ontic character is a task of the infinite and does not account for our situational character.

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For these traditional accounts which are based on substance ontology, either there is nothing essential in each of us as an individual, or even if there is something unique to each of us, such uniqueness does not matter when it comes to understanding our essences. We must precisely for this reason look to individuals whose finite characteristic is designated by spirit and existence. This is why Heidegger's analysis of our everydayness is distinctive in that it is a realm which most philosophers had not been investigating, because everydayness is our situational way of Being-in-the-world. Heidegger looks at the ways in which we relate to the world in our ordinary mode of existence. Formalism misses the fundamental manner in which we relate to the world and to ourselves since such an attitude and a practice only make sense to us *in existence*. Determining our essence without accounting for our existence is to transgress our finite boundary. Our essence lies first and foremost in existence and thus is undetermined. It is an essence that is to be determined in existence, not the other way around. We must therefore reconsider the denouncement of our subjective perspective expressed by previous thinkers.

By redefining spirit, Kierkegaard can and does distinguish himself from those others who "transpose the whole content of faith into conceptual form" (ibid.: 7). Hence Kierkegaard is reacting to and criticising those who subsume the individual into the universal. As our understanding is dependent on the spirit which we ourselves are, everything is fundamentally subjective. Spirit is always involved in any given situation because "Every subject is an existing subject, which should receive an essential expression in all his knowledge" (Kierkegaard 1968: 75). Hence this self is always involved whether it is concerned with geometrical proofs, religious statements, or what to have for breakfast. However, in emphasising the subject or subjectivity, Kierkegaard is in no way committing himself to a form of transcendental idealism, according to which view a transcendental subjectivity constitutes the reality (as ideality) of the world (Husserl 1970: 95-100; Kant 1968: 72, 77-78, 130, 153). On the contrary, what is important for Kierkegaard is to acknowledge our finite condition of the self for whom each and every moment is a unique situation. To subsume this aspect of subjective engagement into a rational systematic thought as the tradition has done is problematic, for it would exclude any non-objective ground from the self. This is precisely why Kierkegaard mentions the paradox that "the single individual as the single individual is higher than the universal" (Kierkegaard 1983: 62).

Along the same line of thought, existence does not simply mean that we are a finite substance which subsists through time with a certain set

of qualities as the tradition has assumed. As philosophers like Descartes and Kant neglected spirit, they occupied themselves with a synthesis that unites negatively. We can now say that such a negative unity here denotes actuality, identity, and substantiality. Caputo's analysis of Kierkegaard is very helpful here. Kierkegaard is criticising the notion of metaphysics which "is an exercise in disinterested *nous* looking on at the spectacle of *eidos*" (Caputo 1987: 32). Where these philosophers get it wrong is the idea that actuality (presence) is all there is. Just like no one can define and measure who I am without first acknowledging the self that is always partaking in a given situation, existence also means that I am not simply made up of things like *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. We who are existing beings cannot be entirely explained by and reduced to something else as if we were rocks, walls, or chairs. We are essentially *involved* in our very existence; that is to say, even the fundamental questions which concern ontological characteristics like 'who am I' and 'what does it mean to exist' must be understood in relation to a particular self or *Dasein*. In other words, to be a self means one is fully becoming aware of oneself. That is why we are characterised by the self-referential structure of existence and the degree of reflection it designates. Emphasising the significance of personal and subjective aspects, Kierkegaard writes:

[A]lthough there have lived countless millions of such 'selves,' no science can say what the self is without again stating it quite generally. And this is the wonder of life, that each man who is mindful of himself knows what no science knows, since he knows who himself is [...] (Kierkegaard 1980: 78-79)

It is therefore due to our own awareness that we are able to make ourselves an object of our concern. Each individual as a self-conscious individual sets and defines for oneself who one is. This connection between existence and the subjective attitude is made explicit by Kierkegaard elsewhere: "In all his thinking he therefore has to think the fact that he is an existing individual" (Kierkegaard 1968: 314). Spirit and existence mark our finite condition as well as the self-referential function. In the finitude of existence, we relate to ourselves. Finitude and the subjective here become a focal point. Since we do not and cannot fully attain the infinite perspective through which we can obtain complete knowledge, our finite perspective is bound to be subjective and temporal. Instead of rejecting our subjective aspect, we must for this reason come to acknowledge and admit its role in our finite condition.

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Insofar as existence is that which characterises the self and *Dasein*, any mode of investigation is always an accomplishment of the individual. Furthermore, a self-referential character marks the relation we have towards the world. We relate to ourselves in and through the relation we establish with the world. Existence therefore has a sense of projection or passion which propels us to reach beyond ourselves, as Heidegger states, "Existence, instead, always already means to step beyond or, better, having stepped beyond" (Heidegger 1982: 300). Self or *Dasein* as a self-relating entity relates to that which is not itself. While the Being of *Dasein* is to relate to itself through itself, it transcends itself in its own Being. Thus Heidegger gives a following description of *Dasein*: "Only a being with the mode of [Being] of the *Dasein* transcends, in such a way in fact that transcendence is precisely what essentially characterises its [Being]" (ibid.: 299). As a transcendent entity, however, there remains the question of how we are to understand our openness to Being. Heidegger writes: "It could be that the 'who' of everyday *Dasein* just is *not* the 'I myself'" (Heidegger 1962: 150). By extending out of itself towards that which is not itself, *Dasein* finds itself influenced and shaped by the objects and other *Dasein* it encounters in the world. In doing so, *Dasein* is constantly undergoing change for which the tradition failed to account. As Caputo puts it "In philosophy, becoming is always getting subverted by being" (Caputo 1987: 13).

Philosophers have tried to enclose and to reduce us to a formal concept, when our basic mode of existence contains an irreducible movement of becoming. In this sense, our mode of existence lies in a movement not between actuality and possibility as philosophers have assumed, but between necessity and possibility. In other words, we are not at first present and then inhabiting the future, rather we are both necessary and possible at once in actuality. Kierkegaard therefore contends that "the self is just as much possible as necessary; although it is indeed itself, it has to become itself. To the extent that it is itself, it is necessary; and to the extent that it must become itself, it is a possibility." (Kierkegaard 1989: 65-66). To relate to ourselves is to reach outside of ourselves to that which transcends us; thus our mode of Being must contain that which is necessarily inexhaustible and indeterminate. As an entity whose essence is existence, *Dasein* is 'ahead-of-itself' (*Sichvorweg*) as something which cannot be determined in totality (Heidegger 1962: 279-280). Something always remains indeterminate in *Dasein* as 'not yet.' For Kierkegaard and Heidegger, our mode of Being is therefore fundamentally characterised by its temporal displacement of possibility as much as the temporal determination of necessity. Accordingly, we must re-conceptualise time and discover authentic temporality.⁵

Kierkegaard rightly speaks of ‘repetition’ as a forward movement in contrast to the Greeks who believed in recollection, which is a backward movement.⁶ Kierkegaard designates spirit as that which leads us forward. Indeed our self-referential character of spirit and existence marks our way of projecting ourselves towards a possibility. In Heidegger’s words, each *Dasein* is a ‘Being towards a possibility’ (*Sein zu einer Möglichkeit*) (ibid.: 305). Caputo asserts that “The actuality is transcendent to the possibility, not determined, enclosed, precontained by it” (Caputo 1987: 20). The question still remains: how can we better understand ourselves if we are profoundly opened to and shaped by that which is not ourselves? Is our self-understanding unattainable because we are wholly exposed to the other?

As a Being-towards-a-possibility, *Dasein* exists with its possibilities to project itself in one way or another. Indeed *Dasein* does constantly relate to itself by means of projection whether willingly or not. At the same time, it is only because *Dasein* does exist that its non-existence can ever arise as an issue for it. What then becomes important is the point at which *Dasein* encounters the impossibility of projecting itself. Heidegger recognises that it is possible for *Dasein* to foresee and anticipate not existing. The state in which we can no longer project ourselves towards a possibility is what Heidegger calls ‘death’ (*Tod*). Just as Kierkegaard and Heidegger have postulated that only self and *Dasein* exist while other entities simply are, only the former have any possibility of anticipating and facing their own death. Only those that exist can die. Hence the projection of *Dasein* contains within itself “the possibility of the impossibility of any existence at all” (Heidegger 1962: 307). Thus according to Heidegger, death should not be treated as something which comes after the termination of physiological functions, but rather as *Dasein*’s absolute inability to project its possibility. *Dasein*’s mode of Being is such that the impossibility to project its possibility is a possibility for *Dasein*. As such, death does not simply await or impend *Dasein* as that which is yet to be. On the contrary, death actually stands before *Dasein* as its concrete possibility, as indicated by the expression ‘Being-towards-death’ (*Sein zum Tode*) (ibid.: 294).⁷ It is by anticipating its own death as the absolute deprivation of all possibilities that *Dasein* encounters itself authentically. Since each *Dasein* must encounter itself through itself, such an encounter must be a personal one. In place of all the abstract ideas which the philosophers of the tradition occupied themselves with, Kierkegaard and Heidegger have rectified the focus in these ways that we now have a clearer understanding of who we are and our way of Being-in-the-world.

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Conclusion: *Dasein* over Self

While Kierkegaard and Heidegger share many points of agreement, there is also the point of their departure. This brings us to one of the only three references to Kierkegaard which Heidegger makes in *Being and Time*: “Kierkegaard explicitly seized upon the problem of existence as an *existentiell* problem [...] But the *existential* problematic was so alien to him” (ibid.: 494; emphasis added). According to Heidegger, though Kierkegaard rightly deals with the problem of existence, his understanding is confined to the *existentiell* aspect. An ‘*existentiell*’ refers to a kind of characteristics which pertains to an individual *Dasein* (ontical), whereas an ‘*existential*’ is a kind which pertains to and concerns the very Being of *Dasein* (ontological). In recognising the *existential* aspect and making such a distinction, Heidegger contends that Kierkegaard falls short because his account is limited and confined to the preceding tradition.

What this implies is that Kierkegaard fails to identify the sort of Being of an entity to which the problem of existence itself pertains. In other words, he fails to fully grasp our way of Being as opened up to the world with possibilities, for he ultimately gives primacy away to that power “which has established the whole relation [of the self]” (Kierkegaard 2004: 43). If anxiety for Kierkegaard really meant “freedom’s actuality as the possibility of possibility,” (Kierkegaard 1980: 42) as he claims, then he cannot speak of the power which has established the self without undermining his own account because that would close off the possibility of having a possibility. The degree of reflection of which Kierkegaard speaks will therefore lose its ground because we would ultimately be related not to ourselves but to that power which has established our own self-referential character (God).⁸ For Kierkegaard, the self is fundamentally the ‘theological self’ (Kierkegaard 2004: 111). He therefore states that “the self cannot by itself arrive at or remain in equilibrium and rest, but only, in relating to itself, by relating to that which has established the whole relation” (ibid.: 44). To be fair, Kierkegaard certainly does try to direct himself towards the *existential* analysis of self when he distinguishes anxiety from fear (Kierkegaard 1980: 42), as Heidegger similarly does (Heidegger 1962: 391-394)⁹, but his account is not coherent as a whole. The power which has established the self should not affect the way in which the self or *Dasein* is Being-in-the-world because “As something thrown, *Dasein* has been thrown *into existence*. It exists as an entity which has to be as it is and as it can be” (ibid.: 321). Regardless of who threw us into existence, we are primordially who we necessarily are (facticity) and who we project to be (possibility).

This is why Heidegger distinguishes himself from Kierkegaard when he utters: “man’s ‘substance’ is not *spirit as a synthesis of soul and body*; it is rather *existence*” (ibid.: 153; emphasis added).¹⁰ Heidegger consciously draws here the distinction between spirit and existence. What appeared to function in the same manner as Heidegger’s notion of existence turns out that it no longer does so. This neglect is further shown by the way Kierkegaard poses and argues for what would be the superior way of life.

Unlike Heidegger, Kierkegaard reifies the sort of life that is ideal. He clearly interprets and argues that there is a qualitative unity of the self which is designated by the power which has established it. On the one hand, Kierkegaard argues that the more appropriately the self relates to itself, the greater the self is. Indeed this degree of self-referentiality determines his famous ‘spheres of existence’ by which he distinguishes the self into three categories of existence: aesthetic, ethical, and religious. However, in distinguishing the ‘theological self’ (infinite) from the ‘human self’ (finite), the religious sphere is defined precisely as the relation in which the self ultimately relates itself to the power which has established it. Hence, as Kierkegaard depicts in *Fear and Trembling*, it is about wholly giving up ourselves to that power which has established us. Thus the degree of reflection breaks down when the self no longer establishes a finite relation to oneself through oneself, but instead the self is ‘before God’ and establishes an infinite relation to God as the absolute (Kierkegaard 2004: 109; Kierkegaard 1983: 70). In such a manner, Kierkegaard concretely posits the sort of life that would be the best one in general. As Dreyfus puts it, Kierkegaard only gives “one coherent way to fit the factors together” (Dreyfus 1991: 300).

Inconsistency thus arises when the question is ‘what is the best life to live in general’ to which the answer may be ‘it is to do X, Y, and Z,’ because the former is an *existential* question whereas the latter is an *existentiell* solution.¹¹ Thus even if X, Y, and Z do help me attain the best possible life (*existentiell*), that doesn’t translate into ‘everyone will have the best possible life with X, Y, and Z’ (*existential*). Yet this universalisation is precisely the way Kierkegaard argues because he does not recognise the *existential* aspect to the problematic of existence and that “he remained completely dominated by Hegel and by ancient philosophy as Hegel saw it” (Heidegger 1962: 494). Pöggeler gives the following remark on this point:

Kierkegaard [offers] more an ‘ontical’ than an ‘ontological’ instruction; [he] saw decisive matters in an ‘ontical’ manner,

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but [he] would not have been able to arrive at an adequate
'ontological' conceptualization. [He] therefore '[edifies] all
the more compellingly,' where [he speaks] with the 'least
degree of conceptualization.' (Pöggeler 1987: 31)

In arguing in the *ontical-existentiell* sense that each self is fully responsible for his or her own life and that each self must choose itself, Kierkegaard contradicts his own position when he argues for the power that established the self. By establishing an objectively valid solution, Kierkegaard therefore ends up rejecting our way of Being as projection of ourselves towards possibilities in the world since he already assumes that the problem of existence adheres to our relation to the external power. In this way, it is not so much the matter of elucidating the conditions for the possibility of projection for Kierkegaard; it is simply a matter of the self to confront and act in the face the synthesis (world) and before God. This is precisely the reason why Kierkegaard emphasises absolute passion and unconditional commitment, because the self is related to and judged by the absolute and the eternal.

Accordingly, this means that Kierkegaard understands spirit only as the characteristic by which the self relates to itself and not as that which makes such a relation possible. Kierkegaard therefore does not make the distinction between *Dasein's* mere possibility of making decisions (*existentiell*) versus the conditions for *Dasein's* possibility of making decisions (*existentiale*).¹² As such, Kierkegaard does not recognise the *existential* analysis of the self which concerns the Being of the self in existence. He instead carries out an *existentiell* analysis through which the self is explicated as an entity whose essence as spirit is already presupposed. Kierkegaard therefore analyses what matters to the self as an individual. This is why his account becomes evaluative and ethical, because he deals with the way in which a self decides and acts in face of the world.¹³ In other words, his concern lies in the actual choice, decision, and action of a particular self.

The reason why ontology cannot be evaluative and ethical for Heidegger is clear. For one thing, such an ontology seems to posit an infinite perspective and absolute judgement, which then entails a return to the metaphysical tradition. More importantly, however, we are not always our own self because *Dasein* is involved and absorbed in Being-with other *Dasein* and Being-in amongst entities. Indeed Heidegger avoids Kierkegaard's error by making the distinction between *existentiell* and *existential*, thereby grasping existence in a more genuine way. Heidegger states as follows:

Dasein always understands itself in terms of its existence— in terms of a possibility of itself: to be itself or not itself. *Dasein* has either chosen these possibilities itself, or got itself into them, or grown up in them already. Only the particular *Dasein* decides its existence, whether it does so by taking hold or by neglecting. The question of existence never gets straightened out except through existing itself. (Heidegger 1962: 33)

This is why for Heidegger, self-ownedness is crucial because *Dasein* is in every instant choosing to be, whether that action is that of engagement or renunciation. Heidegger employs the terms ‘care’ (*Sorge*) and ‘mineness’ (*Jemeinigkeit*). These neologisms capture our personal and caring affinity we have towards ourselves. Because *Dasein* is always about *mineness*, it can be authentic or inauthentic, as Heidegger remarks: “As modes of Being, *authenticity* and *inauthenticity* [...] are both grounded in the fact that any *Dasein* whatsoever is characterised by mineness” (ibid.: 68). The mode of *Dasein*’s Being cannot be determined and established generally prior to its existence, because it is precisely in its existence that *Dasein*’s Being becomes an issue for *Dasein*.

When Heidegger speaks of *Dasein*’s ability to make decisions towards its own possibility, he does not just mean that we simply choose out of all the possibilities available but rather that our very ontological structure lies in the possibility of such a possibility to choose for itself. Thus it is the condition for the possibility of existence that concerns Heidegger. Furthermore, it is from this open possibility that *Dasein* relates to the world and can choose its own way *to be*. Heidegger therefore states that “This entity carries in its ownmost Being the character of not being closed off” (ibid.: 171). What is implied then is a sort of clearing (*Lichtung*) or disclosedness (*Erschlossenheit*) which characterises indeterminacy and openness of *Dasein* in its existence (ibid.). Just as Kierkegaard went beyond the metaphysically-confined notion of subjectivity and arrived at his spiritual self, Heidegger overcomes even Kierkegaard’s spiritual self by being faithful to the openness of *Dasein* cleared by our finite way of Being-in-the-world.

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(Endnotes)

- 1 Dorothea Frede also indicates this point in her commentary essay when she writes, “the mistake lies in the *theoretical* approach as such” (Guignon 1993: 58).
- 2 Just as Alastair Hannay employs ‘factor’ instead of ‘term’ in his *Introduction to The Sickness unto Death*, I alter his translation by substituting them.
- 3 Unlike Kierkegaard, Heidegger is less concerned with the class of species called ‘human being.’ The latter is instead examining the *existential* characteristics which do actually correspond to what we human beings uniquely have, but any entity that has these characteristics technically qualifies for and fits what he calls ‘*Dasein*.’ I do not mean to imply here that Kierkegaard employed the expression ‘human being’ in the biological sense, but my point is simply that the approach taken by Kierkegaard and Heidegger are quite distinct. It is clear from Kierkegaard’s writings that he is only talking about human beings. He thus leaves no room for allowing non-human beings to be qualified for what he calls ‘human being’ regardless of whether they satisfy the conditions or not. This is not the case for Heidegger.
- 4 Heidegger is here making a transcendental or Kantian turn as he provides the conditions for the possibility of relating or comporting to any entity, but not as an epistemological one but as an ontological one. The distinction between ‘beings’ and ‘Being’ Heidegger calls the ‘ontological difference’ (*die ontologische Differenz*) (Heidegger 1982: 17, 319). This ontological difference is crucial because Being is *that which makes beings possible*. This is why Being is not itself an entity because it is that which constitutes beings. Frede also suggests this when she writes that “The [Heidegger’s] analysis is transcendental in the Kantian sense that it unearths the conditions that make it possible for us to encounter whatever we do encounter in the way we make ‘sense’ of the phenomena” (Guignon 1993: 56). But for Heidegger, the ‘transcendental’ “does not pertain to subjective consciousness; instead, it is determined by the *existential-ecstatic* temporality of Being-here” (Heidegger 2000: 20).
- 5 Concerning the analysis into temporality, Merold Westphal rightly states both Kierkegaard and Heidegger as deploying temporality as the transcendental horizon of existence. He thus writes in the endnote to his book *Becoming a Self*, “One could argue that Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Derrida are radical Kantians for whom inescapable temporality is transcendental, the encompassing horizon for the finitude of all human experience” (Westphal 1996: 18).
- 6 Kierkegaard may here accuse Heidegger of engaging in a movement of recollection in seeking the meaning of Being. Heidegger suggests us to go back to the original phenomenon from which the traditions of the past have derived and constructed philosophical concepts. He proposes to carry out such a task by means of a phenomenological destruction (*Destruktion*) (Heidegger 1982: 23). I believe this is problematic for Heidegger because he is positing something

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which lies underneath the concepts we have inherited, when in fact, there might not be any original phenomenon. He thinks, for example, that the Greeks came closest to understanding Being (Heidegger 2000: 120-122) and thus suggests us to unconceal and retrieve the original experience that was available to the Greeks. As much as Heidegger, in this sense, can be seen as making a backward movement of recollection, he also ignores the hermeneutic situation of *Dasein* in positing the phenomenon that is 'original.'

- 7 It is worth noting that Heidegger's recognition of death was influenced by Kierkegaard, as Moran writes, "Influenced by Kierkegaard, Heidegger recognises the centrality of Being-towards-death (*Sein-zum-Tode*) in humans" (Moran 2000: 240).
- 8 I am quite aware that for Kierkegaard, the self relates to the power which has established itself in its own relation to itself (Kierkegaard 2004: 44, 114, 165). But insofar as he gives primacy to the establishing power, as he does most notably in *The Sickness unto Death*, such a double relation of the self does not solve the issue at hand. Furthermore, the superiority of the religious power over the human self is also evident in *Fear and Trembling* in which Kierkegaard explores the religious sphere of existence through the life of Abraham.
- 9 This also is an influence Kierkegaard has had on Heidegger, as Moran indicates: "In this sense, following Kierkegaard, Heidegger sharply distinguishes fear (*Furcht*) from anxiety (*Angst*)" (Moran 2000: 241).
- 10 Contrary to my interpretation, Hubert Dreyfus seems to interpret this passage as suggesting that Heidegger is actually supporting Kierkegaard's notion of the spiritual self (Dreyfus 1991: 299). From the context, however, I believe it is clear that Heidegger is here not expressing his agreement with Kierkegaard but a disagreement. This is shown by his earlier passages, particularly where he indicates: "But if the Self is conceived 'only' as a way of Being of this entity, this seems tantamount to volatilizing the real 'core' of *Dasein*" (Heidegger 1962: 153).
- 11 Indeed it is not completely clear if the *existentiale* should claim its primacy over the *existentiell*. This raises the issue of whether it is individual's relation to his or her own life that is most primordial, or the very possibility or way of Being which allows for such a relation to be presented to itself. In the former case, Kierkegaard's account will claim its primacy. In case of the latter, Heidegger's *existential* analytic has its primacy. For the current context, I have taken for granted that the transcendentality of *existential* analytic is ontologically prior to an individual life and I therefore subscribe to the view that it claims the primacy.
- 12 In speaking of such a distinction, Kierkegaard may perhaps accuse Heidegger of turning *Dasein* into a God, though I do not believe such a criticism stands.
- 13 John W. Elrod makes the following remark regarding this point: "Ethics and ontology are inextricably linked in Kierkegaard's thought, and we can therefore speak of his ethico-ontological outlook on the problem of human existence" (Elrod 1973: 223).