

The World Wide Web's shadow of opportunity

A Heideggerian perspective of authenticity in the information age

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The relevancy of Heidegger's analysis of existence and investigation of technology for the information age

Before examining the Web's relationship to *Dasein* and the opportunities and challenges it presents to *Dasein's* authentic being in the world, we will first consider the relevancy of Heidegger's early analysis of existence and whether living life authentically has validity in today's world. This paper combines an existential interpretation of early Heidegger's exploration of *Dasein's* relationship to itself, to others, and to the world without reference to technology as articulated in *Being and Time* (Heidegger, 1962 translation of 1927) with his later investigation of technology and how it affects people without reference to being and existence as presented in *The Question Concerning Technology* (Heidegger, 1977) to examine the Web's effect on being oneself, being with others, and being in the world. This paper conflates themes that Heidegger, himself, did not connect, is constructed from a small sampling of his philosophical writings and is in no way intended to represent an exhaustive articulation of Heidegger's perspectives. Throughout the paper "*Dasein*" will be anthropologically interpreted to mean the locus of being-there of human existence. Information technology (IT) in general and the Web in particular provide a means for *Dasein* to encounter its world; they present representations of our world to us, connect us to others, and function as tools to perform tasks. This paper introduces an investigation of the existential implications of the Web as an IT tool. Whereas the Web as a "technological device" allows us more opportunities to access, communicate, and disseminate information, we must also examine its effects on those who use it.

Heidegger's later work depicts technology to be more than a collection of tools for the service of humanity; it posits technology as a structuring mechanism that has its own being. Technology pervades our daily life and thus

structures, organizes, and mediates how we relate to and engage the world and others through our projects. Thus, because the Web has the potential to shape the way we understand ourselves, our relationships to others, and our relationship to the world, it is appropriate to consider it as a technological paradigm that affects our existence.

Being and Time presents *Dasein's* struggle to live authentically in the world. The world consists of nature, people, technology, artifacts, and ideas, each of which has a being in itself that can be used to facilitate *Dasein's* goals. *Dasein* exists as being in the world where its experience is always an experience of something. Heidegger addresses the primacy of *Dasein's* relatedness to itself, others, and the world and rejects defining the self as a constant substance. He defines the self to be a dynamic absence that allows *Dasein* to manifest itself in the world. Being is open and dynamic rather than static. *Dasein* engages the world through projects and tasks, which, in turn, influence the way that the world discloses itself to *Dasein* both as possibility and as equipment. *Dasein* first engages in activities and then distances itself to analyze and study itself and its situation.

Dasein discovers its authenticity by encountering the world and others appropriately – in its own way and for itself. *Dasein* strives to discover the proper disclosure of its world from which it gains a proper understanding of itself and its ability to act appropriately. *Dasein* becomes authentic by “reconquering” what is properly its own from the They’s field of inauthentic possibilities. The They is a collective *Dasein* that determines the possibilities for each individual *Dasein*. (This will be discussed further later in the paper.) *Dasein's* appropriate way of being changes as the world changes through time (history). *Dasein's* possibilities change when through political action, technological advances, and social customs, the world changes.

Heidegger considers technology to be important, because it structures and organizes the way that *Dasein* relates to and engages the world through its projects. Technology has being, and also reveals some ways of encountering the world while concealing others. One of Heidegger’s concerns was that *Dasein* would form an improper, inauthentic relationship to technology and attempt to define itself technologically, hence cutting itself off from its authentic way of being in the world. This misunderstanding of both its being and the being of technology would cause *Dasein* to inappropriately and unconsciously attempt to “take on” the structure of technology in order to make sense of and justify its own existence.

Dasein's struggle for authenticity must be understood, contextualized and reinterpreted for each historical “present”. Today, the Web provides us with a new context for being with others, with ourselves, and with the world that makes our struggle for authenticity different from times past. We will consider whether the Web provides increased potential for inauthentic being. In addition, we will examine whether the Web in any way endangers our authentic being, by making it more difficult to discover what is properly one’s own. After investigating these potential hazards, we will explore how in this “altered

world” we can be responsible for creating an authentic life. The struggle to attain authentic being in the world remains constant while the particular form of *Dasein's* challenge changes throughout history. Thus, Heidegger's themes of human existence and technology are as relevant today as when they were first published.

Conditions of being-in-the-world and modes of existence

Heidegger posits three conditions for being in the world: facticity, existence, and fallenness. Facticity comprises the conditions in which *Dasein* finds itself that affect its possibilities. *Dasein* finds itself “thrown into” situations such as the historical time in which it lives, its culture, its family and socio-economic conditions. These “facts” affect the possibilities open for expressing one's being. Existence occurs when *Dasein* transcends its immediate present and projects itself into the future by identifying and committing to future possibilities. These future possibilities organize and structure *Dasein's* present. Fallenness describes *Dasein's* struggle in the present. *Dasein* has the structural tendency to become absorbed in its world; when it becomes absorbed in and involved with its world, *Dasein* loses sight of its being. (Fallenness will be considered in more detail later in this paper.)

Dasein strives to create its own life-story narrative from the montage of thoughts, images, and possibilities that make up its experience. *Dasein*, through its being, unifies its past, present, and future. *Dasein* becomes engaged in the world and involved with its possibilities through care. Although it was thrown into its life conditions, *Dasein* cares for its past by unfolding it properly, and contextualizes its present life appropriately given its circumstances. *Dasein* also exhibits care in the future by opening itself to appropriate possibilities and by planning for its future and by concerning itself with what it does in the present. Against these three ways that *Dasein* exhibits care, Heidegger posits three modes of existence: undifferentiated, inauthentic and authentic.

In undifferentiated mode *Dasein* lives its life without questioning the circumstances of its life. In inauthentic mode *Dasein* conforms its life to fit the expectations of the They by attempting to force its existence into pre-articulated roles and structures. In authentic mode *Dasein* contacts its ownmost self to take appropriate action in its world. We will further investigate the concepts of inauthenticity and authenticity.

Inauthenticity

Dasein's natural state is one of inauthenticity where it tries to conform its life to the expectations of the They and fallenness where it becomes absorbed in the immediacy of its world. *Dasein* lapses into inauthenticity when it defines itself in terms of the roles prescribed by the They. *Dasein's* environment of social practices, norms, and possibilities forms the backdrop against which it lives and creates meaning. The inherent difficulty is that *Dasein* makes sense of itself by relating to what it concerns itself with; it is easier to “take-on” pre-defined roles and ways of encountering the world than to struggle to discover what is

authentically one's own. When *Dasein* attempts to give meaning and purpose to its life from outside itself its authentic possibilities are concealed from itself.

Through its absorption with its world, *Dasein* tends to interpret itself and its possibilities from an egoistic perspective that conceals what the world discloses as authentic possibilities; this limits *Dasein's* possibilities and distorts its interpretation of the world. In this condition, *Dasein* attempts to manipulate others, things, and its circumstances for its own purposes. *Dasein's* perception of itself as "something" rather than "dynamic absence" causes it to take on projects that make it feel secure in its world. Paradoxically, while stemming from a desire to be authentic this inauthenticity conceals *Dasein's* appropriate openness and relatedness to its world. In the next section, we will observe how *Dasein* can employ the framework of inauthenticity to disclose its authenticity.

Authenticity

Dasein finds itself engaged and acting in a world where the They determines all of its possibilities. Although *Dasein* inauthentically "lives out" externally conferred roles that obscure its authentic way of being, this field of "They possibilities" presents *Dasein* with the opportunity to discover its ownmost possibilities. When (and if) *Dasein* awakens to its inauthenticity, it discovers that everything in its life – its roles, language, and customs, have been pre-defined by the They. From this awareness *Dasein* perceives and feels the emptiness and nothingness of its being. It is at this point that *Dasein* has the potential to begin its struggle for authenticity. By accepting its emptiness and powerlessness, and by not attempting to compensate for them, *Dasein* opens itself for the possibility of authentic being, calling forth by its choices and actions its ownmost possibility of existence. There are no prescriptions or guidelines about how to undertake the process of reconquering what is one's own out of the possibilities of the They. *Dasein* discovers its ownmost possibility for its life when it realizes that it will die and that it has a limited amount of time to live. With this deep existential awareness of its own death as a foundation, *Dasein* can call forth the possibility of living its life authentically. From this openness, *Dasein* perceives the unique demands of its situation in the world, understands what is appropriate, and does it; its choices are made on the basis of internal, self-actualizing criteria rather than for externally imposed reasons. Once engaged in the process of determining what is proper for its life, *Dasein* contextualizes its choices and actions in its life story. *Dasein's* narrative confers further meaning to its actions and further constructs a self that exists beyond the roles it plays; thus, *Dasein* makes what is not its own its own, through this process.

Authenticity is a process rather than a state. After glimpsing many times what is truly appropriate for it, *Dasein* becomes absorbed back into the activities in its world. *Dasein* is called back into the world by caring. Through its commitment to act appropriately, *Dasein* collects its experientially dispersed being and authentically bridges its past to its future through its present involvements. By temporally transcending the immediacy of its life, *Dasein*

gains authentic perspective on its life, and from its openness, discovers what is appropriate for itself given the circumstances.

We must struggle with the following questions: What does it mean to be “authentic” in an information society? How can we, as information persons, find our appropriate and “natural” relationship to the Web? How can we curb the temptation to “over-informate” ourselves? How can we meaningfully integrate our excessively large span of awareness into our relatively limited span of action?

***Dasein's* challenge to live authentically in the information age**

Dasein's challenge is to create a self and to take responsibility for its life choices that constitute its self. These ideas pertaining to *Dasein* discovering its authentic way of being in the world and the pitfalls that it encounters in the process have much to say to us at the end of the twentieth century where part of our world consists of the “always-everywhere-already” overlay of the Web. The Web enables *Dasein* to encounter tremendously more possibilities than it could without it. The breadth of available choice is staggering, and increases daily. In light of the continuing removal of economic and technological barriers that once functioned to limit our encounters with the Web, now we can expose ourselves to as much information as we want. Humanity's challenge is to construct a world that will both reveal to *Dasein* appropriate use of this technology. Against this backdrop, we need to grapple with what it means to use this vast resource judiciously. We need to expend the effort to articulate the challenges the Web presents and their consequences from a human perspective. If we understand the Web solely as a tool and not as a paradigm which has the potential to shape our possibilities for existence, we abdicate our responsibility to determine its appropriate use. We also need to consider the possibility that these problems and their consequences may be impervious to technological “fixes”. *Dasein's* struggle to live authentically in the world occurs in the present, where it must become aware of the constraints of its past, and authentically invest itself in its future projects and reconquest its unique possibilities. Finding what is appropriate for oneself requires a discipline for finding choices with which we are comfortable. The danger with the Web's level of choice is that *Dasein* will not choose what is most proper for itself, but will take on externally imposed predefined roles. When *Dasein* becomes aware that no one else can know what is appropriate for its life, it takes on the responsibility to properly live its life.

Three conditions of fallenness: idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity

Dreyfus (1991) clarifies Heidegger's distinction between fallenness as a structural tendency and fallenness as a psychological temptation. *Dasein* has a structural tendency to fall into the world and to lose contact with its primordial sense of what it is by becoming immersed in its present projects and activities. *Dasein's* engagement with the world absorbs its attention and draws it away from its primordial existence. Thus, rather than being a static condition, falling

is a dynamic activity that entices *Dasein* to involve itself in the world in such a way as to forget about its challenge to live authentically.

A psychological temptation to flee the responsibility for its life occurs when *Dasein* refuses to accept the truth about itself; the realization that its existence is emptiness and nothingness drives *Dasein* into anxiety. To deny this awareness and to assuage its anxiety, *Dasein* diverts its attention from its open, dynamic absence and attempts to escape by filling itself with distractions. Heidegger terms this dysfunctional immersion into the present "fallenness" which entails three conditions: idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity, all of which prevent *Dasein* from encountering its authentic possibilities.

Zimmerman (1986) sums up *Dasein's* plight of being alienated from itself. *Dasein* forgets about its freedom by getting lost in what the They presents as possibilities. *Dasein* then either defines life mechanistically and tries to dominate its circumstances or withdraws into fantasy, delusion and self-pity.

Idle talk cuts *Dasein* off from concrete experience and hence from authentic encounter with the world. In this condition *Dasein* employs pre-articulated terminology without applying the effort needed to understand it. Discourse occurs at the level of ungrounded abstraction where minimal content is conveyed through the use of cliches that conceal rather than reveal reality; reality for Heidegger is a category of interpretation rather than brute facticity. Here *Dasein* equivalences the use of "second-hand" terminology with understanding and confuses the "articulation of" an experience with the experience itself.

Curiosity uproots and distracts *Dasein* from its purposeful action in the world. *Dasein* desires to experience exotic new possibilities not for the purpose of understanding them, but for the purpose of distracting itself. Curiosity uproots *Dasein* from where it is into a foundationless "nowhere". Here *Dasein* attempts to experience new ideas and sensations without attempting to understand them and integrate them into its being.

Ambiguity entails *Dasein* confusing talk about something with doing it. *Dasein* looks to others to interpret and define situations and to articulate what it should do. With many perspectives on an issue, and because *Dasein* is cut off from its authenticity, it is incapable of recognizing an appropriate possibility and taking committed action to realize it. *Dasein* becomes diluted and is ineffective in this condition.

The being of technology

A technological worldview structures all aspects of our life and reveals them to be "projects" for improvement (Heidegger, 1977). Technology exists for *Dasein* not so much as a tool, but rather as a paradigm for revealing the world. The pre-technological way in which the world was disclosed, itself, is concealed by its disclosure as something to be mastered through technology (Zimmerman, 1990). Technology no longer functions as the means to accomplishing something; rather it shapes the ends of society (Winner, 1986).

Heidegger (1976) became concerned about information technology's emphasis on efficient functioning and on knowing more. When "information" becomes reduced to "logistics", ideas that do not conform to that "structure" become devalued and invisible. Heidegger remarked that "...everything essential and great originated from the fact that man had a home and was rooted in tradition" (Heidegger, 1976, p. 277) while simultaneously observing that technology "uprooted" *Dasein* because *Dasein* inauthentically attempted to define itself in accordance with technology's requirements. He did not believe that technology could be controlled or managed, yet through thinking and being-with, *Dasein* could "achieve an adequate relationship to the essence of technology" (Heidegger, 1976). Difficulties arise when *Dasein* allows tools and its technological environment to decide the possibilities that are open to it.

The World Wide Web

The Web has revealed space and time to be less constraints than conditions to be overcome. In some ways, the Web seems as though it was designed for *Dasein's* dysfunctional "fallenness", as it can facilitate the conditions of idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity very well. Like any form of technology, the Web has being and resists our attempts to control it. So perhaps now is the time to approach it with an attitude of "emptiness" and openness, silently awaiting its disclosure of being to us. What does the Web reveal about the way we need to relate to it, to information, and to others?

Whereas the Web is "always-everywhere-already", we are not. We experience it in very small fragments unfolding through time. We also must contend with our limited attention, short-term memory, and assimilation abilities. Although it is "artificial", we need to relate to the Web in a natural way; one that is respectful of both the Web's being and our "authenticity". Both "beings" become diminished when their "revelation" is ignored. Rather than retreating from it (rejecting it) or getting lost in it, the Web challenges us to "be" with it. We must be more thoughtful with our use of the Web because it, being part of the world, impacts our being. The Web does not threaten a self that is already constituted and self-consciously knows what is proper for itself. The Web may actually assist those individuals to encounter a broader range of possibilities for actualizing their proper self. However, the Web may present problems for those who have not yet constituted themselves and are easily distracted from or unaware of their responsibility to create their proper life. The Web is so pervasive we may forget our responsibility to construct our authentic self. By being aware of this temptation, we can safeguard ourselves against it and proceed building a new world for understanding and making sense of the new opportunities that are available to us.

The Web as a technological paradigm presents us with new opportunities for encountering what is appropriate for ourselves; however, at the same time we are challenged to construct a human world that will sustain this cyber-sphere. We begin to create this world by grounding the Web-based disclosure of the world, others, and ourselves with meaning.

Four principles for authentic being with the Web

Table I summarizes how the four principles for authentic being with the Web that are introduced below can address the three modes of fallenness.

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Respect for human processing limitations

We all face the realities of wasted time and information overload whenever we use the Web. Using the Web as a substitute for “life” causes people to reveal themselves in inappropriate ways, by trying to conform to a technology of which they are constitutionally incapable. We need to acknowledge and be respectful of our spatial, temporal, and intellectual limitations, and be respectful of the Web itself. While keeping aware of the realities of information anxiety and information overload we must answer the following questions: Why are we accessing information? How much information do we truly need? Why are we creating information? How much do we truly need to express? How can we be deliberate and considerate in articulating and disseminating our idea?

Considered thought

This principle counteracts “idle talk” and pertains to creating and disseminating information. With exhaustless capacity for dissemination, how can we publish our ideas meaningfully for ourselves and others? How can we integrate our ideas into the pre-existing mass of ideas, or at least allow them to co-exist with it? Creating useless or unconsidered information wastes other people’s time and dilutes the quality of public discourse. The cost of unconsidered thought can be seen when it drives those “with wisdom” from the public sphere and into hidden private discourse. We must humbly remember that accessibility to information is not equivalent to being able to competently use it. We must be honest about our limitations. If we are incapable of intelligent discourse on a subject, perhaps we must first listen and work hard to achieve a degree of knowledge before entering into conversation. Perhaps “lurking” is thus justified.

Clarity of purpose

This principle counteracts “curiosity” and pertains to accessing and retrieving information. In the shadow of this burgeoning information resource that gives us access to masses of information, we must keep in mind that the answer is not

Mode of fallenness	Considered thought	Principle for authentic being			Respect for human processing limitations
		Clarity of purpose	Assimilation		
Idle talk	✓				✓
Curiosity		✓			✓
Ambiguity			✓		✓

Table I.
Principles for authentic
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of fallenness

“out there”. Instead of becoming ubiquitous and scattered, we are challenged to recall our future possibility and from this foundation encounter the Web. If we do not purposefully use the Web’s massive information resource, the quality of our lives is diluted. When we intend a purposeful encounter with others and their ideas, we approach the Web with integrity and with an openness to discovery. We must be mindful that our “answers” require the interaction of our purposeful and thoughtful articulation of a question. Only then we can examine and interpret the information that is “attracted” to our context. When we pause and reflect on its purpose, we imbue our relationship to the Web with our uniqueness.

Assimilation

This principle counteracts “ambiguity” and pertains to the responsibility one has in understanding information. Usually, the bulk of our time on the Web is spent looking for and obtaining information, and not pondering and assimilating it. With the Web, as with any information repository, the “answers” are not instantaneously accessible. In order to find suitable information, we must sift through much that is useless and irrelevant to the inquiry at hand. Understanding, interpreting, assimilating, and integrating information into our “body of knowledge” is hard work and cannot be delegated to a computer or to someone else. This is time that is spent off-line.

Conclusion

Drawing from Heidegger’s account of being, we can conclude that the Web is an expression of being, as well as a mechanism that provides a way of being-in-the-world and being-with others. At the same time we may observe that the Web presents ample opportunity for dysfunctional fallenness and the non-realization of authentic being in three ways:

- (1) seeing more value in the format rather than in the content;
- (2) pursuing intellectual sensation rather than understanding; and
- (3) “talking the talk without walking the walk” – collecting information without doing anything with it.

Four activities seem appropriate to avoid these:

- (1) accounting for human processing limitations;
- (2) opening our electronic mouths only when appropriate;
- (3) asking electronic questions only if we have reasons to ask them and are serious about making beneficial use of the answers, because we have a pre-defined purpose; and
- (4) spending more time off-line than on-line, more time digesting and assimilating information, and less time surfing for more.

These four principles for authentic being with the Web are not intended to be exhaustive, but rather they are a first step at guidelines for authentically using

the Web. They attempt to reflect realistic assessments of both *Dasein* and the Web with the intent of preserving both kinds of being. Whereas it is possible to endlessly flit about in cyberspace, *Dasein*'s authentic "presence" requires stability and rootedness in that artificial world.

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