Heidegger’s Secular Fall: How to read das Man

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Abstract: Many commentators are extremely critical of Heidegger’s ambiguous conflation of Being-with and das Man in Being and Time. The text of Division One, Chapter Four shifts between an ethically neutral and ontologically necessary account of Dasein’s Being-with-others and an ethically saturated and contingent account of the same phenomenon, leaving the reader confused as to whether Heidegger is accepting sociality as a necessary and inescapable condition of human existence or a pervasive yet ultimately contingent impediment to authentic existence. In this paper, I identify the point of confusion in Heidegger’s text and survey the dominant exegetical treatments of the text, which usually only takes one of Heidegger’s two contradictory claims as true. I then posit an alternative hybrid reading of the text in which the two dominant readings are integrated. I argue that, though Heidegger’s text is confused, the underlying idea is consistent, and what manifests as a logical contradiction in the text masks what is evidently Heidegger’s actual claim that the human condition is inherently in conflict. Dasein is necessarily fallen, yet necessarily strives for authenticity.

“And so I believe in improvisation and I fight for improvisation.
But always with the belief that it’s impossible.”

-Jacques Derrida.

Bracketing any differences between Derrida and Heidegger, and focusing on their similarities, Derrida’s claim about improvisation aphoristically captures the internal tension in

83 http://www.derridathemovie.com/readings.html
Heidegger’s *das Man* quite nicely. In its open and clear contradiction it plainly demonstrates the internal tension stemming from the struggle between social existence and improvisation, and yet Derrida’s willingness to express this internal tension seriously suggests that the concept at hand is not *entirely* unstable, though in considerable tension. For Heidegger, this tension stems from the seemingly unintentional equivocation within the text of an existential/ontological *das Man* that structures intelligibility and communication, and an existentiell/ethical *das Man* that acts as a barrier to becoming an authentic Dasein. The reader is left unsure as to whether to interpret *das Man* as a necessary, positive condition of Dasein, or as a contingent and undesirable hindrance to authentic existence. Are we to condemn or embrace *das Man*?

I do not deny that the writing of Chapter IV of *Being and Time* on Being-with and *das Man* is unmistakably confused, and even contradictory as it stands; nevertheless I do believe that a consistent theory of *das Man* can be extracted from the text which incorporates both the existential/ontological reading of *das Man* and the existentiell/ethical reading. The resulting picture of Dasein illustrates a kind secular fallenness in the human condition. Not in Heidegger’s sense of the word, but “fallenness” in the Judeo-Christian sense—a necessary characteristic of Dasein against which it must fight aggressively in order to exist authentically, though this is a task it can never fully complete. For Heidegger, the human condition is fundamentally *sick*, though salvation paradoxically presents itself as a possibility.

Heidegger writes Chapter IV in order to flesh out more fully the character of Dasein, his stand-in term for human existence. The provisional characteristics that Dasein (1) is able to question its own Being and (2) that it exhibits ‘in each case mineness’ were only provisional indicators of a general familiarity we had with Dasein, and now that Being-in-the-world has been phenomenologically described in greater detail, a fuller account of the “who?” of Dasein can emerge.

But how are we to begin to ask the question of the ‘who?’ of everyday Dasein? What preestablished and uncontroversial knowledge can we import? Heidegger initially entertains a Cartesian approach, positing the givenness of the ego in self-reflection. Surely this is indubitable? But the problem Heidegger finds with this approach is that in its *everydayness*, Dasein-qua-ego is far from indubitable; in fact, it is almost absent to awareness: “In clarifying Being-in-the-world we have shown that a bare subject without a world never ‘is’ proximally, nor is it ever given. And so in the end an isolated “I” without Others is just as far from being proximally given.” (*BT* 152/116)

Having discarded any kind of isolated Cartesian ego as a starting point for discovering the ‘who of everyday Dasein,’ Heidegger has taken one step backward; another potential starting point has been discarded. Where to begin? Heidegger suggests that the foregoing phenomenological account of the equipmental totality may provide us a clue: “In our ‘description’ of that environment which is closest to us—the work-world of the craftsman for example—the outcome was that along with the equipment to be found when one is at work, those ‘Others’ for whom the ‘work’ is destined are encountered too.” (*BT* 153/117) If this equipmental totality is so basic that it establishes the very framework of significance for Dasein84, then it seems that this ready-to-hand network is a fundamental, inextricable structure of the Being of Dasein. To bracket out the ready-to-hand from an account of Dasein would be to bracket the very source of significance and intelligibility. The remaining ‘Dasein’ would be

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84 “We have interpreted worldhood as the referential totality which constitutes significance.” (*BT* 160/123)
Beyond recognition. So Dasein is inextricably bound with its existential network of ready-to-hand equipment, as it coordinates the very topology of intelligibility.

But Heidegger recognizes that even prior to this network of ready-to-hand equipment, there is a concept of Others: “The Others who are thus ‘encountered’ in a ready-to-hand environmental context of equipment, are not somehow added on in thought to some thing which is proximally just present-at-hand; such ‘Things’ are encountered from out of the world in which they are ready-to-hand for Others [emphasis added].” (BT 154/118). For every piece of equipment, there is an antecedent undifferentiated Other, as its creator, as its user, as its designer, etc. The ready-to-hand cannot be understood independent of Others. It follows then, that if the network of ready-to-hand entities, the existentiale source of significance and intelligibility, is equiprimordial with Being-with, then Being-with is an inextricable existentiale structure of the Being of Dasein. Dasein is necessarily a public being; it is always already with Others. Phenomenally, ‘Others’ manifest a presence more loudly than any isolated ‘ego’ of Dasein itself. The ‘Others’ are prior to Dasein’s reflective self in everyday comportment.

But since we form a part of the ready-to-hand totality, and since the roles Daseins play in this network are interchangeable, ‘Others’ are not differentiated from each other nor ourselves. “By ‘Others’ we do not mean everyone else but me—those over and against whom the ‘I’ stands out. They are rather those from whom, for the most part, one does not distinguish oneself—those among whom one is too.” (BT 154/118) In fact, rather than some indubitable ego, the who of everyday Dasein is “encountered proximally and for the most part in terms of the with-world with which we are environmentally concerned. When Dasein is absorbed in the world of its concern—that is, at the same time, in its Being-with towards Others—it is not itself.” (BT 163/125). Later on Heidegger reveals that “the Self of everyday Dasein is the they-self...In terms of the “they” and as the “they”, I am ‘given’ proximally to ‘myself’” (BT 167/129). Heidegger is claiming that in everyday coping we understand ourselves from the point of view of society, as an undifferentiated constituent, rather than a unique ‘I’. We act, view ourselves, and judge our actions based on the perspective of the ‘they,’ rather than a selfsame ‘me.’

Heidegger describes three interesting phenomena that illustrate Dasein’s discovery of itself in its everydayness as das Man: distantiality, averageness, and levelling-down. Together they are called publicness. Distantiality is a constant, impulsive, and unconscious reference to the norms of das Man that Dasein uses to gauge the propriety of its actions: “In one’s concern with what one has taken hold of, whether with, for, or against, the Others, there is constant care as to the way one differs from them...The care about this distance between them is disturbing to Being-with-one-another, though this disturbance is one that is hidden from it” (BT 164/126). Averageness results from distantiality, and is its ultimate goal: “The “they” has its own ways in which to be. That tendency of Being-with which we have called distantiality is grounded in the fact that Being-with-one-another concerns itself as such with averageness, which is an existential characteristic of the ‘they’” (BT 164/127). These first two are presented as value-neutral existentiale by Heidegger. For Heidegger they are neither to be celebrated nor condemned.

Levelling-down is the outlier in this laundry list of existentiale of das Man. Whereas distantiality and averageness were described in value-neutral language, Heidegger’s tone promptly switches to poetic sorrow and even disgust in describing leveling-down:

In this averageness with which it prescribes what can and may be ventured, [das Man] keeps watch over everything exceptional and thrusts itself to the fore. Every kind of priority gets noiselessly suppressed. Overnight, everything that is primordial gets glossed over as something that has long been well known. Everything gained by a struggle becomes just something to be manipulated.
Every secret loses its force. This care of avergeness reveals in turn an essential tendency of Dasein which we call the “levelling down” of all possibilities of Being. *(BT 165/127)*

There is an unmistakable ethical import here. *Das Man* is not value-neutral in Heidegger’s eyes with respect to leveling-down. Individual human excellence is reduced to mediocrity, and true improvisation is reduced to mimicry of the norms inscribed by hegemonic *das Man*. Levelling-down renders human potential uninteresting, superficial, and pre-choreographed. This lament of leveling-down prompts Heidegger to introduce “authenticity” and “inauthenticity” into the text as ethical modes for Dasein to relate to *das Man*. Dasein is diffused into *das Man* and lost to itself in its everydayness.

In these [diffused] modes one’s way of Being is that of inauthenticity and failure to stand by one’s Self…The Self of everyday Dasein is the they-self, which we distinguish from the authentic Self—that is, from the Self which has been taken hold of in its own way…If Dasein discovers the world in its own way and brings it close, if it discloses to itself its own authentic Being, then this discovery of the ‘world’ and this disclosure of Dasein are always accomplished as a clearing-away of concealments and obscurities. [emphasis added] *(BT 166/128-129)*

Here it is clear that Heidegger advises “clearing-away of the concealments and obscurities” imposed by *das Man*, and an autonomous discovery of the world “in its own way” independent of *das Man*’s hegemony. But what are we to make of Heidegger’s earlier efforts to show that *das Man* is a necessary and inexorable existentiale of Dasein? How could we claim independence from a necessary structure of Dasein? How are we to treat this advice?

The traditional reading of *das Man* is an “existentialist,” ethical reading. This reading highlights the Kierkegaardian influence in *Being and Time*. *Das Man* becomes an elaboration on Kierkegaard’s “the truth is never in the crowd.”*85* This reading takes seriously the strong ethical language Heidegger uses to describe levelling-down, and they adopt Heidegger’s advice to actively resist the conformist leveling that *das Man* enforces, and to independently and authentically “take hold” of their Being “in their own way.” Advocates of this reading, such as Frederick Olafson, recognize that this reading cannot be maintained if one takes seriously Heidegger’s claim that *das Man* is an inextricable existentiale of Dasein that governs all intelligibility. To solve this, Olafson seeks to undermine Heidegger’s argument for the equiprimordiality of ready-to-hand and Being-with. He claims that Heidegger has not shown that *Being-with* is an existentiale:

[Heidegger’s claim] would have to take into account such facts as that what I uncover as a hammer, say, has been previously used [and thus uncovered] as hammer by others and it is normally from these others that I have learned what a hammer is and how to use one.”*86*

In the phenomena Olafson is identifying, the individual exists prior to the socialization of practices, and so *Being-with* *das Man* is a supplement that must be added on later, rather than a necessary existentiale of Dasein. But this is a bad example. Olafson’s criticism cannot undermine the primordial social practices that are not explicitly taught, such as gender performativity and distance standing. Olafson’s critique of the primacy of *Being-with* is unsatisfactory.

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85 qtd. In Dreyfus 143.
Recent exegetical work of Hubert Dreyfus and Taylor Carman seeks to question the purely negative and ethical reading of das Man. In contrast, they choose to preserve Being-with as an existentiale and abandon its link to inauthenticity. Dreyfus in particular sees das Man as dictating and negotiating the shared social practices into which Dasein is unconsciously socialized. Dreyfus focuses on the numerous passages in which Heidegger emphasizes that authenticity has no ethical import. He sees strong textual evidence that das Man is the ultimate source of meaning and intelligibility, focusing on passages such as “The ‘they,’ as the ‘nobody,’ is by no means nothing at all. On the contrary, in this kind of Being, Dasein is an ens realissimum, if by ‘Reality’ we understand a Being that has the character of Dasein” (BT 166/128). Here, Heidegger is identifying the social authority of God with the reification of das Man—an idea similar to Durkeim’s “God is society, writ large.” In other words, das Man, as the outgrowth of Being-with, governs and writes the highest-order of truth available to Dasein (or any Being). Dreyfus sees passages like this making the same claim that Wittgenstein makes when he posits the ultimate grounding of knowledge on shared practices. Dreyfus advocates the abandonment of the existentiell/ethical component of das Man as the reading most charitable to Heidegger’s initial project as an existential analytic of Dasein.

Whereas Dreyfus acknowledges that there are some undeniably negative consequences of das Man, Carman attempts to suggest that das Man is ethically harmless and impeccable. He suggests “Being ‘lost’ in the one and not being able to find oneself and grasp one’s self as one’s own sound like inauthenticity, and indeed it sounds like something bad. But in fact, as we have seen, in normative contexts Heidegger draws not a twofold but a threefold distinction between authenticity, inauthenticity, and an “undifferentiated” average everydayness.” Carman here claims that das Man has no ethical content, that the hegemony of das Man has no impact on one’s authenticity. However, he goes on to say with regard to the “leveling” and loss-of-Self in das Man that “we might say civilization is founded on an act of violence—in this case the mundane violence involved in fitting my own self-understanding into the, as it were, ‘one-size-fits-all’ concept of personhood.” So clearly even on Carman’s value-neutral reading of das Man, there is some lamentable impact on Dasein’s freedom of expression and individuality. Neither reading, the existentielle/intelligible nor the existentiell/ethical, has been able to fully distance itself from the other, and thus the contradiction remains. It seems as though Heidegger is making a claim that can only be read as Dasein expressing a necessary contradiction.

It seems to me that the best that we can do with this contradictory text is to step in for Heidegger and suggest a hybrid of his two conflicting das Mans, preserving as much from both as we can. Hopefully, this will reduce the contradictions in the text to carelessness and reveal what Heidegger actually believed, and would have said in moments of greater clarity. I suggest the following:

Olafson, Dreyfus and Carman claim that neither reading of das Man can incorporate the other without contradiction, but it seems to me that these interpreters are dogmatically unwilling to entertain the idea that the human condition may be internally contradictory. A sharp distinction should be made between a logically contradictory theory and an observation that Dasein’s condition is in conflict with itself. Perhaps we can reduce the former in the text to the

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87 (SZ: 167, 175–6, 179; GA 20: 378; GA 24: 228)
88 Wittgenstein: “Giving grounds [must] come to an end sometime. But the end is not an ungrounded presupposition: it is an ungrounded way of acting.” (Wittgenstein, On Certainty, n. 110.)
89 Carman, 287.
90 Carman, 295.
latter. One desires to smoke despite desiring to be healthy, one desires to eat more than one’s fill, and one desires recreation more than a productive work schedule allows. Could it not also be true that one chases the specter of authenticity even though the human condition necessarily denies complete access to it? This would suggest that Dasein is born fallen, and can only marginally save itself, though never completely.

Das Man is the source of inauthenticity, but not the essential characteristic of it. Conformity, a natural quality we inevitably exhibit as social creatures, is the source of conformism, a dogmatic and panicked unreflective and unconscious adherence to the contingent expression of das Man in our particular society. However, becoming authentic, it seems Heidegger believes, is not to overthrow the fetters of essential conformity, but contingent conformism. We can never step out of the background of shared social practices that structure intelligibility and significance. What we can do is recognize the contingency of the particular form that das Man takes within our social world instead of taking it as dogmatically and unreflectively correct. This makes the most sense of Heidegger’s closing claim that “Authentic Being-one’s-Self does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the ‘they;’ it is rather an existentiell modification of the “they”—of the “they as an essential existentiale [emphasis original]” (BT 168/130). This would mean that authentic Dasein stays within the realm of conformity—and thus within Being-with, significance and intelligibility—but that it actively resists its tendency to solidify into dogmatic conformism, continually recognizing the contingency of shared social practices, and thus allowing itself some space for potential relative uniqueness and relative improvisation; though to completely overthrow shared social practices and to purely improvise from scratch would be ultimately impossible. One can only press against that limit inscribed by das Man.

As I have shown, Heidegger’s text on das Man is internally contradictory as it stands. Heidegger posits Being-with as a necessary existentiale of Dasein’s existence and then asks authentic Dasein to step outside of it. Both the existentiell/ethical and the existentiale/intelligibility readings have not been able to eliminate this contradiction. I suggest that we make a distinction between conformity to das Man and dogmatic conformism as an attitude toward das Man. Heidegger recognizes the necessity of the former, but condemns the latter, though he does not make this adequately clear in the text. Recognizing this deflated claim, we can reduce Heidegger’s contradictory claim to a claim about the internal tension in Dasein’s paradoxical condition—Dasein’s fall from grace.

Works Cited


