The Relational Self in Heidegger, Zhuangzi, and Derrida

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Abstract

In Derrida, Heidegger, and Zhuangzi, there is a certain resonance to the idea of a self. Not the self, as an essential form or transcendental ontological concept, but a self, the instance of an individual being in a given time and space. Where and when we are determines, to a large extent, who we are, in that we are products of our social and historical environments. Since these social and historical environments are constantly changing for us, then we to must be constantly changing within these new times and spaces. The instance of a self, then, is contingent on its social and historical contexts. However, throughout all these contexts, there remains one thing that is determined by them: the self. This self is the intersection of social, historical, and ontological contexts, and is constituted by the relations between these concepts. The shifts in these relations are traced through the works of Heidegger, Zhuangzi, and Derrida, and their conceptions of the self all come to a similar conclusion, that, as Werner Heisenberg puts it, “modern man confronts only himself”, and to some degree humans have always primarily confronted themselves, because we are only here as ourselves. However, we also have potential, we change, and then we cease to exist. This change occurs mainly according to our colloquial descriptions, when we say that someone really put his or her self out there, or when one invests one’s self in an endeavor, or again in the general description of selflessness. Strictly speaking, existentially, we never step outside or leave ourselves, but our sense of self expands as we allow ourselves to take part in life’s changes. This putting of ourselves into relation with our own changes is the most authentic way of being in the world.
The Relational Self in Heidegger, Zhuangzi, and Derrida

Can you afford to be careless?

-Zhuangzi, Section 4: In the World of Men

In Derrida, Heidegger, and Zhuangzi, there is a certain resonance to the idea of a self. Not the self, as an essential form or transcendental ontological concept, but a self, the instance of an individual being in a given time and space. Where and when we are determines, to a large extent, who we are, in that we are products of our social and historical environments. Since these social and historical environments are constantly changing for us, then we to must be constantly changing within these new times and spaces. The instance of a self, then, is contingent on its social and historical contexts. However, throughout all these contexts, there remains one thing that is determined by them: the self. This self is the intersection of social, historical, and ontological contexts, and is constituted by the relations between these concepts.

The contexts that shape the self can be distinguished and divided into innumerable categories, but the three mentioned above are broad enough that any conception of self must encounter them if it is to give an adequate account of selfhood. The ontological context of the self is the specific kind of existence that characterizes a self and differentiates it from the existences other selves and things that exist without selfhood (if such a claim can be made). The historical context of the self is its relation to temporality, including its capacity to sense and conceive of things as past, present, or future, and how these tenses affect the self. The social context of the self is its interactions with the world from which it is differentiated,
interactions that occur between a self and other selves or objects in the world. These three contexts all run together in the self, and become intertwined in such a way that they can barely be spoken of separately when describing the self. This running together ultimately leads to the characterization of the self in terms of its relation to change.

**Heidegger**

Being on its own is not the ontological ground of our existence, the manifestation of our being in the world. Rather, it is a certain kind of conceptualization of being as beings, a mode of existence that we call the self. Heidegger refers to the kind of being-in-the-world that we as human beings are as Da-sein, and in his analysis of Da-sein, notes

Da-sein is never “initially” a sort of a being which is free from being-in, but which at times is in the mood to take up a “relation” to the world. This taking up of relations to the world is possible only *because*, as being-in-the-world, Da-sein is as it is. This constitution of being is not first derived from the fact that besides the being which has the character of Da-sein there are other beings which are objectively present and meet up with it. These other beings can only “meet up” “with” Da-sein because they are able to show themselves of their own accord within a *world*.¹

In all cases, Da-sein is fundamentally in a world in which it shows itself and is presented with other beings. If a thing exists, it cannot be absent from the world as a whole, though it may not be entirely present or evident. By placing the word “relation” in quotation marks, Heidegger is noting the inadequacy of the definition of Da-sein with which the passage opens. Specifically, it falls short in its limited understanding of a relation, as a sort of “meeting up” “with”. This is one aspect of

relationality, but it presupposes the worldliness of the beings that take part in such relations. Beings being-in-the-world is the condition of possibility for all relations between beings and the world.

Heidegger also mentions that the way in which beings enter into a relation of presence with other beings as one “of their own accord”. This claim is intuitive enough if one thinks of beings as having a kind of consciousness or will with which they can choose to hide or make themselves present. This line of thought however, is precisely what Heidegger has just disowned; a relation to the world is not something that a being can enter in and out of as it pleases, and this concept of the relation can apply not only to the being of Da-sein, but to any kind of being-in-the-world at all. Thus we have the curious attribution of a kind of intentionality to all things in the world. Insofar as they are in the world and present to us, they can be there “of their own accord”, even if they beings that we would usually categorize as objects, such as furniture.

However, the distinction for Heidegger is not between objects and subjects, but between kinds of being. Da-sein, first of all, “does not express [this being's] what, as in the case of table, house, tree, but being”. That is, Da-sein as being-in-the-world is concerned with the being-in-the-world of beings. It is this relation, rather than one of consciousness or intentionality, that is accorded by beings in their entering into a relation of presence with other beings. It is important to reemphasize that this view does not attribute any kind of consciousness or intentionality to everything that is, but describes the way in which beings interact in

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the world. We cannot speak of the Da-sein of a table, house, or tree, because of the “ownness” of Da-sein. Heidegger writes, “to something objectively present its being is a matter of ‘indifference,’ more precisely, it ‘is’ in such a way that its being can neither be indifferent nor non-indifferent to it...When we speak of Da-sein, we must always use the personal pronoun along with whatever we say: ‘I am’, ‘You are.’”3

Tables, houses, and trees are things that we usually think of as objectively present, and so we do not refer to them in the same way that we do to other subjects.

This distinction between objects and subjects is not a deep enough distinction to get at Heidegger’s idea of selfhood. The personal pronouns of Da-sein are indicative of something that is not indifferent and that is engaged with its own being in a certain way. For Heidegger, the subject-object distinction fails to make inroads on the self because “the ontological concept of the subject does not characterize the selfhood of the I qua self, but the sameness and constancy of something always already objectively present”4. The subject is always in a relation of presence and absence to other subjects and objects, but this does not say anything about what is made present or absent, only that the self as a subject is something constantly present among objects and to other subjects. In order to gain insight into the self, Heidegger refers to the being of Da-sein, noting that “when Da-sein has itself in view ontically, it fails to see itself in relation to the kind of being of the being that it itself is”5. As a subject, Da-sein is objectively present and thereby constant, but it is also indifferent to its being as Da-sein.

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5 Ibid, 296.
The relation that Heidegger presents to us as Da-sein viewed as selfhood is care: “existentially, selfhood is only to be found in the authentic potentiality-of-being-a-self, that is, in the authenticity of the being of Da-sein as care”⁶. What is authentic in this case is the being of a self, of a Da-sein’s own “I” as opposed to the world that it is being in. Again, putting the problem in terms of care is not the same as putting it in terms of a consciousness or intentionality, and the subject is not sufficient as a grounding of the self because it is not concerned with its own being, but with its place in being-in-the-world. The self understood as a subject “flees from itself to the they”⁷, and care is given inauthentically to kinds of being besides Da-sein.

The person who would care for the world without caring for his or her own self could not exist as a being in the world. Heidegger observes that “when one is absorbed in the everyday multiplicity and rapid succession of what is taken care of, the self of the self-forgetful ‘I take care of’ shows itself as what is constantly and identically simple, but indefinite and empty”⁸. The self in this case still exists, but only in terms of what is taken care of. The self here is a subject, unchanging and concerned only with other subjects and objects. Removing Da-sein from the subject-object opposition and putting in terms of being, Da-sein is not indifferent to its own being, as an object might be, nor is it concerned only with its being as it relates to

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⁶ Heidegger, Being and Time, 296.
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Ibid.
the world, like a subject, but it "is a being which is concerned in its being about that being", that is, it cares⁹.

For Heidegger, the self is not fundamental (nothing is grounded on it), but is the structure of care in Da-sein¹⁰. The self is the potentiality of Da-sein, brought about by care. This bringing about is the temporality of Da-sein, and so the self can be thought of as the actualizing of Da-sein in existence, as opposed to existing indifferently, or without awareness of one's own being. Heidegger also characterizes the self-awareness of care in Da-sein as authenticity, and so the indifference to one's own being would be described as inauthenticity. An inauthentic person would be someone who simply got around in the world, leading an existence more akin to and motivated by surviving than thriving. In both surviving and thriving, inauthenticity and authenticity, care can be posited as a structural necessity for the temporality of Da-sein, but this temporality is not the same as time measured by a clock. For Heidegger, care and self are qualities of Da-sein’s spatial and temporal being.

Zhuangzi

The writings of Zhuangzi do not outline a formal ontology, but offer insights through anecdotal and aphoristic narratives. It is probable that a single historical figure named Zhuangzi was not responsible for the whole work, but the writings collected over several centuries in the work that bears this name reflect a distinct

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⁹ Heidegger, Being and Time, 179.
¹⁰ Ibid, 297.
enough mode of thinking that it has been around for over 2,000 years\textsuperscript{11}. The
\textit{Zhuangzi} promotes a mode of Daoist thinking that, compared to its contemporary
schools of thought in China, is “mystic and indescribable”\textsuperscript{12}. This description,
however, does not do justice to its accessibility through the use of familiar, everyday
situations and problems. The \textit{Zhuangzi} is similar to works like Aesop’s fables or the
Bible in that it examines the world through common and familiar examples,
recycling characters and motifs from the \textit{Analects} of Confucius, Chinese history, and
the Daoist religion, and reappropriates them in order to undermine the traditional,
everyday understanding of them. The \textit{Zhuangzi} is subversive in its radical
reappropriation of Chinese religion and philosophy.

\textit{Zhuangzi’s}\textsuperscript{13} view of the self focuses on its spatial and temporal limitedness,
and the harmfulness of privileging the self as a personal domain that must be
preserved. Focusing on the preservation of one’s own worldview leads to a lack of
understanding, a kind of provincial selfishness that can ultimately lead to the
destruction of the self that one would seek to preserve. Zhuangzi writes, “little
understanding cannot come up to great understanding; the short-lived cannot come
up to the long-lived”\textsuperscript{14}. Viewing the world in terms of a self limits one’s
understanding of life, and places spatial and temporal limits on one’s existence that

\textsuperscript{11}Benjamin Schwartz, \textit{The World of Thought in Ancient China} (Cambridge: Harvard
\textsuperscript{12} Zhuangzi, \textit{Zhuangzi: Basic Writings}, trans. Burton Watson (New York: Columbia
University Press, 2003), 3.
\textsuperscript{13} Following Watson, I will defer authorship of the text to the figure of Zhuangzi,
“not to a specific individual known to us through history, but to the mind, or group
of minds, revealed in the text called \textit{Zhuangzi}” (3). At any rate, the text in its present
state has been produced, assembled, and translated by a group minds spanning two
millennia.
\textsuperscript{14} Zhuangzi, \textit{Zhuangzi}, 24
reduce living to an incomplete level. Zhuangzi compares the mythical travels of an immense bird, the Peng, to those of a quail, who dismisses the Peng’s flight in his own lack of understanding: “Where does he think he’s going?” Analogously, “a man who has enough wisdom to fill one office effectively...has the same kind of self-pride as these little creatures.” Zhuangzi seeks to illuminate a mode of being that does not offer an escape into a higher realm of being that transcends our everyday existence, but that allows us to move beyond our preoccupation with the incidental facts of our lives to embrace living. In moving beyond these incidental facts, we reach an underlying unity of things that is referred to as the Dao, or the Way.

Zhuangzi must deal with skepticism towards this worldview, because it is not intuitively clear that there is such a level of understanding the world as the Way, that is accessible to human beings, or that it is advisable to live according to the Way. After all, the greater understanding of the Peng is that of a mythical beast, and the limited understanding of the quail is not necessarily because of self-pride, but simply because it lacks the capacity to reach the heights of the Peng. Zhuangzi, for his part, believes that humans have a capacity for greater understanding, when he writes, “the Perfect Man has no self; the Holy Man has no merit; the Sage has no fame.” This claim leaves us to wonder what is perfect about a man who has no self, or holy about a man who has no merit, or what is sagely about a man whom no one knows as a sage. This passage is a move from smaller to greater understanding, as we realize that it is puzzling because we are focused on what we can know about

15 Zhuangzi, Zhuangzi, 25.
17 Ibid, 26. Watson’s footnote on this passage notes that these are “not three different categories but three names for the same thing”.
another person who is perfect, holy, or a sage. The official who is satisfied with his sufficient wisdom is analogous to we who accept the self, merit, and fame as essential characteristics of the Perfect Man, the Holy Man, and the Sage. But just because a man has a self, merit, or fame, does not mean that he is necessarily perfect, holy, or a sage. Therefore, there is no reason to believe that the relations Zhuangzi is challenging are necessary. Perfection, holiness, and sage-hood do not precede the man, nor does he bring them about; they proceed through him. It is this proceeding that gives us instances of the Perfect, the Holy, and the Sagely, and not the interaction of metaphysical concepts like perfection and the self.

No one is always perfect, and it is not evident that we can be entirely perfect in a single instance. It is still unclear, then, what we are referring to in this proceeding and instantiation. Another example from Zhuangzi may serve to deepen our thinking on this problem:

Zhuangzi and Huizi were strolling along the dam of the Hao River when Zhuangzi said, “See how the minnows come out and dart around where they please! That’s what fish really enjoy!”
Huizi said, “You’re not a fish-how do you know what fish enjoy?”
Zhuangzi said, “You’re not I, so how do you know I don’t know what fish enjoy?”
Huizi said, “I’m not you, so I certainly don’t know what you know. On the other hand, you’re certainly not a fish-so that still proves you don’t know what fish enjoy!”
Zhuangzi said, “Let’s go back to your original question, please. You asked me how I know what fish enjoy-so you already knew I knew it when you asked the question. I know it by standing here beside the Hao”¹⁸

This passage illustrates clearly the greater level of understanding that characterizes the Way, and its inscrutability to our smaller understanding. Huizi’s presupposition in his initial question might seem to be a semantic triviality, and

¹⁸Zhuangzi, Zhuangzi, 111.
Zhuangzi’s responses never dispute the fact of Huizi’s initial claim that Zhuangzi is, in fact, not a fish. It is Huizi’s question that gets him into “trouble”, and it is not that he asked the wrong kind of question that allowed Zhuangzi to turn his words back on him. Huizi seeks to understand why Zhuangzi might have made the claim that he did, and that prove to be his “undoing”- or more precisely, the undoing of the limitations of his kind of understanding. It is clear that Huizi, in asking the question of Zhuangzi, wished to clarify and expand his understanding of the world, though we might have expected that to occur at the expense of Zhuangzi’s understanding.

What Huizi’s question overlooks is the fact that he could even ask it of Zhuangzi at all. It makes perfect sense that Zhuangzi could not know what the fish enjoyed any more than Huizi could know what Zhuangzi knew about fish, and it might even be granted that Huizi could know much more about Zhuangzi than Zhuangzi could ever know about the fish. However, the definition of knowledge is played around with in this example. Zhuangzi takes Huizi’s question and turns it back to him in order to demonstrate that his assumption that knowing is a subjective phenomenon, that only fish can know what they enjoy, precludes him from questioning what Zhuangzi knows, because he and Zhuangzi are also independent subjects. Huizi maintains his distinction, and Zhuangzi explains that insofar as Huizi can make any statement about another subject’s knowledge, he knows what they know in the same way that Zhuangzi knows what fish enjoy. The content of the knowledge is not what Zhuangzi wishes to make clear, but rather the possibility of knowledge at all. When he says that he knows simply “by standing here beside the Hao”, he is not giving a reason for a claim he makes about the fishes’
mental state, but for the ability to make a claim about fishes’ mental states at all. In
the same way that Zhuangzi knows what fish enjoy, Huizi knows that Zhuangzi
doesn’t know what fish enjoy. Huizi may be able to expand further and prove
logically that Zhuangzi cannot know in a proper sense what fish enjoy, but they both
start from the same place, strolling along the Hao River, not making any claims to
any sort of knowledge at all.

In undermining Huizi’s claims to knowledge, Zhuangzi’s project is twofold:
first, he seeks to establish the limitlessness of knowledge about the world, and
second, he seeks to put life in its proper relation to knowledge about the world. The
correlation of long life and greater understanding reflects a view in which one takes
part in the world through knowledge and other means, and the main limit to
knowledge is mortality, the beginning and end of an individual’s taking part in the
world. As an individual, one can only take part in the world for a limited amount of
time, but the world goes on without regard for individuals. Surviving in the world,
one is mindful of the temporal limits of life, but in order to thrive in the world, one
must take part in it through knowledge and forget about the temporal limits of life.

Derrida

Jacques Derrida takes up this notion of something fundamental and yet
ineffable by way of *différance*. The underlying unity of things, their being qua being,
is for Derrida characterized by the play of *différance*. He writes,

...The signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient
presence that would refer only to itself. Essentially and lawfully, every
concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the
other, to other concepts, by means of a systematic play of differences. Such a
play, *différance*, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general.\(^{19}\)

The difficulty of Derrida’s position is to use a word, *différance*, to refer to something that is not inscribed in a system of words, to a thing which shies away even from the most general designations, such as “thing”. To write or speak *différance* is to use a placeholder, an empty designation that can only be hinted at by contextualization in a process or system. For Derrida, this is also true of language in general, but what makes *différance* out of place in language is that it designates the non-linguistic aspect of language, the play that makes language possible.

This *différance* as the possibility of a system is also not entirely present in Derrida’s conception of being. It is the possibility of presence in being, a system of *différance*, in which one thinks of “presence- and specifically consciousness, the being beside itself of consciousness- no longer as the absolutely central form of Being but as a ‘determination’ and as an ‘effect.’ A determination or effect within a system which is no longer that of presence but of *différance*…”\(^{20}\). The self, as a concept of consciousness, or any kind of concept at all, is susceptible to the play of *différance*. Even if we try to designate the self as something non-conceptual, as something relational between concepts, we still presuppose the relations between concepts and the possibility of things like concepts and relations. To describe it as relational is to get at the alterity of the self, the ground on which we begin to build it. As we are in the world, our self is never finished, perfected, or entirely present, but in the process of becoming, of forming new relations.


Derrida recognizes that any linguistic or ontological designations will fail to say what he wishes to say, and *différance* is no exception. Though Derrida uses *différance*, he recognizes that “there is no name for it at all, not even the name of essence or of Being, not even that of ‘différance,’ which is not a name, which is not a pure nominal unity, and unceasingly dislocates itself in a chain of differing and deferring substitution”\(^{21}\). Though it is impossible to designate, the movement of this dislocation, differing, and deferring can be traced. We can speak of it as an “effect”, track it through a unified system or through a random scattering of associations, pick out a line of thinking and, rather than attempt to remove it and sanctify it outside of a tangle or weave (where it would lose all meaning), trace its movements through the possibility of its own existence.

The deconstructive effects in *différance* are brought to bear on the being of consciousness as meaning or identity, a presence of the self to itself. How is such a thing possible, if *différance* is also not entirely itself? If it is inscribed in the movement between conceptual and non-conceptual, among philosophemes, as something iterable, then to label something as “*différance*” is to expose it to the workings of deconstruction. Even deconstruction, “deconstructs itself. It can be *deconstructed. [Ça se déconstruit.]* The ‘it’ [ça] is not here an impersonal thing that is opposed to some egological subjectivity. *It is in deconstruction* (the Littré says, ‘to deconstruct it-self [se déconstruire]...to lose its construction’)\(^{22}\). So where does that leave us? The construction and deconstruction of meanings seems to be

\(^{21}\) Derrida, “*Différance,*” 75-76.

haphazardly governed by a play of forces which brings one iteration and then another into prominence. Derrida has clearly demonstrated that we cannot act or speak without exposing ourselves to this play, which carries our words and actions away from our intentions into a multitude of possible interpretations. The question for us now is: how do we move forward on such unstable ground?

The ‘it’ that is in deconstruction, not “opposed to some egological subjectivity”- what does that mean, to not be opposed to such a thing? “It is in deconstruction”. The “it”, the other that I would place outside of my concept of self, in opposition to my own self, is also caught up in deconstruction, in the non-conceptual forces that are exerted on it. These forces do not find their source in me, in the privileged term of the hierarchical opposition of self/other, since I am equally susceptible to them. The source of these forces is deconstruction, which is to say, these forces are inscribed in language and ultimately in an experience that is limited by virtue of our temporally and spatially limited perspective. When I say that “I” am susceptible to the forces of deconstruction, I am acknowledging my own ontological status in the opposition being/not being, but not necessarily my equality with all the things encompassed by these concepts, nor with the residue of this opposition which nevertheless remains operative as a set of forces in its own right, displacing and reversing this ontological opposition.

**The Self and the World**

From the analysis of the three thinkers above, we can draw a few characteristics of the self that carry over between them. The self is something with an existence limited primarily by space and time, and thereby also in experience,
knowledge, and existence. Perhaps as a consequence of this, the self is also subject to evaluation by itself and by other selves. A self-aware person knows, among other things, that they have a limited amount of time to exist as a self, and that for all practical purposes the world that they can perceive and sense is also limited. Yet our understanding of the world is of something that is infinite, that extends beyond ourselves by virtue of the fact that we can always have new experiences. How is this possible?

We must return to the initial quote from Heidegger, where he stated that “This constitution of being is not first derived from the fact that besides the being which has the character of Da-sein there are other beings which are objectively present and meet up with it. These other beings can only ‘meet up’ with Da-sein because they are able to show themselves of their own accord within a world”23. In order to understand this idea of world, we must contrast the world as if it was for Da-sein with a world as subjects and objects. Accounting for the world in terms of subjects and objects allows us to categorize things in the world as they relate to each other, but also takes the world for granted. The world of Da-sein is shaped by care, so from that perspective what we perceive and sense in the world is what we care about.

However, what Da-sein cares about is the being of its own being. Therefore, what Da-sein encounters in the world is its own being, though it does not always recognize it as such. Authentically, Da-sein recognizes everything that it encounters in the world as its own, something that it cares for, but when it is inauthentic it “

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from itself to the they”\textsuperscript{24}, dividing itself into subject and object. The world as it appears to Da-sein is always for that Da-sein; this description is not an ignorantly or maliciously egocentric worldview, but a simple recognition of the fact that in order to view the world in any other way, we must first abstract from ourselves. The abstract limits of spatiality and temporality appear to us as our own selves. Werner Heisenberg, writing about the effects of modern science and technology, sensed this characteristic of Da-sein when he said, “it would not be too crude an oversimplification to say that \textit{for the first time in the course of history modern man on this earth now confronts himself alone}”\textsuperscript{25}.

Heisenberg’s statement is an oversimplification, but it accurately reflects a trend that he senses in modern science where “\textit{the object of research is no longer nature itself, but man’s investigation of nature}”\textsuperscript{26}. Such statements were in line with Heisenberg’s famous uncertainty principle, where it was theorized that scientific experimentation could not be completely objective, because nature was set up and recorded by observers as if it were occurring without human intervention. His contemporary Heidegger sensed and responded to a similar current of thought in philosophy, where the revaluation of values advocated by Nietzsche had anticipated a questioning and overturning of preexisting systems of thought. Both Heidegger\textsuperscript{27} and Heisenberg\textsuperscript{28} recognized in Eastern philosophy modes of thought that had been

\textsuperscript{24} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 296.
\textsuperscript{26} Heisenberg, \textit{Nature}, 24.
once considered totally other, but which could contribute to the further development of Western thinking.

This recognition of Eastern philosophy on the parts of Heidegger and Heisenberg is illustrative of the recognition of something that was their own, something familiar in those modes of thought. The possibility of such an association, while not improbable, calls into question the differentiation of human behavior. Heidegger notes early on that, “As ways in which human beings behave, sciences have this being’s (the human being’s) kind of being. We are defining this being terminologically as Da-sein”\textsuperscript{29}. This further clarifies the way in which we encounter ourselves in the world, but it raises the problem of responsibility. We can differentiate between different kinds of human behavior, but what enables us to make distinctions within our own being, such as authenticity and inauthenticity?

**Authenticity of the Self**

The failure to recognize the self in the being of Da-sein, but instead to seek it “in the everyday multiplicity and rapid succession of what is taken care of” makes the self inauthentic because it “shows itself as what is constantly and identically simple, but indefinite and empty”\textsuperscript{30}. It has no identity in itself, but plays the role of a subject interacting with objects. This identity of the self is what at stake when Derrida problematizes the being of Da-sein that is expressed in terms of the structure of care as a being concerned about its own being. For Derrida, this postulation of Da-sein as a being made present to its own being through concern or care is problematic because identity is then defined by “the absolute privilege of this

\textsuperscript{29} Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 10.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid, 296.
form or epoch of presence in general that is consciousness as meaning in self-presence"\textsuperscript{31}, i.e., identity as the being of consciousness made present in relation to Being (existence, presence) as meaning. The worry is that the self, thought of in these terms, will easily fall back into the subject-object opposition, and that if consciousness as meaning is what defines the self, then its identity it once again lost in the “everyday multiplicity...of what is taken care of”.

Heidegger addresses this problem of a reduction of the self to subjectivity directly:

If the ontological constitution of the self can neither be reduced to a substantial I nor to a ‘subject,’ but if, on the contrary, the everyday, fleeting saying-I must be understood in terms of our \textit{authentic} potentiality-of-being, the statement still does not follow that the self is the constantly objectively present ground of care. Existentially, selfhood is only to be found in the authentic potentiality-of-being-a-self, that is, in the authenticity of the being of Da-sein \textit{as care}.\textsuperscript{32}

In this formulation of the structure of care, we never experience the self as something fully actualized or complete, but only in terms of authentic potential. Neither care as the temporality of Da-sein nor the self as the being of Da-sein can be limited to “consciousness as meaning in self-presence”, because while we can speak of being present in the world, this presence is fleeting. We can only continue to exist in the world if we are concerned with the future, what is potential. The “they” to which the self flees in inauthenticity is situated in what is not a potentiality-of-being-a-self, but is merely taken care of in the present.

Derrida himself is not entirely satisfied with any definite conclusion on the question, but he understand the movements in Heidegger’s thoughts on being in

\textsuperscript{31} Derrida, “Différence”, 68-69.
\textsuperscript{32} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 296.
terms of his idea of *différance*. For Derrida, “it is the determination of Being as presence or as beingness that is interrogated by the thought of *différance*”33. The connection between Da-sein and Being, put in terms of Heisenberg’s idea of man encountering himself in the world, is this thought of *différance*, the possibility of a distinction between Being and beings, and yet it is something more. Derrida notes that “since Being has never had a ‘meaning,’ has never been thought or said as such, except by dissimulating itself in beings, then *différance*, in a certain and very strange way, [is] ‘older’ than ontological difference or the truth of Being”34. The cautious bracketing and quotation marks allude to the difficulty of describing the mechanism that allows for “a being which is concerned in its being about that being”35.

The idea of the authenticity of the self encounters *différance* in its opposition to inauthenticity as the fleeing of the self “from itself to the they”. This is expressed further in terms of the constancy of the self: “The *constancy of the self* in the double sense of constancy and steadfastness is the *authentic* counter-possibility to the lack of constancy [*Unselbst-ständigkeit*] of irresolute falling prey. Existentially, the *constancy of the self* [*Selbst-ständigkeit*] means nothing other than anticipatory resoluteness”36. This aspect of constancy seems to coincide with a kind of presence that does not flee, but instead is a further expansion of the structure of care and the self in which *différance* is at play. We speak of the constancy of the self as an authentic counter-possibility to a lack of constancy only insofar as we cannot speak of the self as something objectively present, but as our own being. Existentially

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34 Ibid, 75.
36 Ibid, 297.
speaking, we can speak of the quality of anticipatory resoluteness that others might have, but authenticity can only occur in relation to one’s own sense of self. That play of *différance* is what separates authenticity, as a determination or effect of being, from objective presence, mere existence. Additionally, *différance* is at play among the singular determinations and effects of being among beings, and within beings themselves.

**The Self Beyond Being**

This play is always portrayed well in Derrida’s works, but perhaps the best portrayals of such an existential play are contained within the works of Zhuangzi. David Hall gives one possible reason for this in his own analysis of Daoist and Derridean philosophy:

The absence in classical Chinese of any notion of Being as existence per se means that there is no notion of Being as ontological ground and no need for a metaphysical contrast between Being and beings. In the language of postmodernism, one need not seek to overcome the logocentrism of a language of presence grounded in ontological difference if no distinction between Being and beings, or beings and their ground, pertains. For the Chinese, a language of presence is a language of making present not the essence of a thing or event but the thing or event itself.37

This apparent sidestepping of such a central issue is a continuation of our investigation into the nature of selfhood, as far as we can speak of it. We exist in the world as selves, limited in our perspective by time and space. The world as we know it is entirely our own world, and in order to relate it to other people we must resort to abstraction, moving beyond our own physical, self-aware experience of the world to a metaphysical realm of ideas that points back to the reality of a worldly

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existence. For Hall, the uniqueness of classical Chinese language in philosophy is that it recognizes that it does not dwell in the metaphysical, as something objectively present, but instead points from one selfhood to another.

We have already been exposed to this in the story of Zhuangzi, Huizi, and the fish on the Hao River. The possibility of referring to another selfhood cannot be thought objectively, in terms of an objective reality that actually is, because there is no way for Zhuangzi to be in the world as a minnow, or for Huizi to be in the world as Zhuangzi. Knowledge is making sense of the world as one experiences it, not with the aim of reaching an end of knowledge in a comprehensive system, but with the aim of situating oneself in the world as it changes. Hall notes, “The order of the world is, thus, neither rational nor logical, but aesthetic. This is the case since there is no transcendent pattern determining the existence or efficacy of the order”38. The play of *différance* among Being and beings, and the value of authenticity, can thus be explained in aesthetic terms in Daoist sensibilities. For Zhuangzi, the minnows are joyful in his own experience of the world, and Huizi recognizes the authenticity of this sentiment in his own experience of the world, but he cannot logically put himself in Zhuangzi’s position and be affected by the fish in the same way. He can only take in his experience of Zhuangzi as a whole and make sense of this experience in his own terms.

*Différance* thought with respect to being traces a pattern in a manner similar to that of Zhuangzi’s aesthetic order of the world, insofar as *différance* cannot be named, as “this unnameable is the play which makes possible nominal effects, the

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relative unitary and atomic structures that are called names, the chains of
substitutions of names in which, for example, the nominal effect *différance* is itself
*enmeshed*, carried off, reinscribed, just as a false entry or a false exit is still part of
the game, a function of the system”39. This pattern is not a transcendent order
through which things are determined, but the possibility of determination
immanent to a system. If we think of this possibility of determination not in terms
of being, but as an effect, as Derrida has already suggested, then we find “*différance*,
a system that no longer tolerates the opposition of activity and passivity, nor that of
cause and effect, or of indetermination and determination, etc.”40. This system of
collapsed oppositions is echoed (in our own experience of it via this paper;
historically, with respect to experiences that temporally preceded this paper, the
aforementioned system is also anticipated) by the “state in which ‘this’ and ‘that’ no
longer find their opposites…the hinge of the Way”41.

This collapse of oppositions acknowledges the power of revaluation in a
world ordered by aesthetics. An individual seems to have complete power over the
world by virtue of the singularity of his or her own perspective. At the same time, as
Huizi finds in challenging Zhuangzi’s perception of the minnows, one has no power
over the perspectives of others, because there is no transcendent metaphysical
structure by which one can access the selfhood of another. In this world, the divide
between one’s self and other selves is bridged by “the torch of chaos and doubt- this
is what the sage steers by. So he does not use things but relegates all to the

39 Derrida, “Différance,” 76.
40 Ibid, 69.
41 Zhuangzi, Zhuangzi, 35.
constant. This is what it means to use clarity”\textsuperscript{42}. This paradoxical formulation first of all acknowledges the chaos and doubt that characterize a self trying to get around the world with only its own perspective. Using clarity means using chaos and doubt, but somehow this is not using things, but relegating them to a constant. Looking back again to the minnows, it is clear that Zhuangzi has some sort of power in his perspective of the Hao that enables him to make a distinction between what Huizi thinks he says and what he actually means. If we think of this power in terms of a capacity, we can refer back to Heidegger’s formulation of the “authentic potentiality-of-being-a-self” and the “\textit{constancy of the self}” as “anticipatory resoluteness”\textsuperscript{43}.

How can this Heideggarian formulation be reconciled with the Daoist paradoxes? In bringing together clarity with chaos and doubt, Zhuangzi is taking the position of a self that finds itself in the midst of chaos and doubt, where the world’s usefulness is not evident. In anticipating this chaos and doubt by making it one’s perspective on the world, one can reevaluate the chaos and doubt in terms of an aesthetic order, and in doing so one is constantly becoming a self authentically. Hall writes, “The Daoist world is not to be seen as a Whole but as many ‘wholes.’ Because there is no sense of being as a common property or a relational structure, the world lacks a single coherent pattern characterizing its myriad processes”\textsuperscript{44}. The unity of the Being of beings cannot be spoken of properly because it has no perspective, no place to take. For the Daoist perspective, Being is an absence.

\textbf{Social, Historical, Ontological}

\textsuperscript{42} Zhuangzi, \textit{Zhuangzi}, 38.
\textsuperscript{43} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, 296-297.
\textsuperscript{44} Hall, “Deference,” 252.
Having brought together the ideas of self in Heidegger, Derrida, and Zhuangzi, we can now begin to trace the social, historical, and ontological contexts that are brought into play in the formation of a self. The ontological aspect of the self has been the most thoroughly drawn out thus far, perhaps because we started the inquiry in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. The self certainly exists, but its existence is of a kind that is limited in its perspective and knowledge of the world. The limits of the self are spatial and temporal, but also ontological in that a self is separated from an understanding and experience of being as a whole. Being as a whole can only be understood through abstraction from one’s selfhood, but since this abstraction is always coming out of a self, the truthfulness and usefulness of the concept of Being is debatable.

We have examined how the self has taken part in history through Heidegger’s structure of care, “being-ahead-of-onceself-already-being-in (a world) as being-together-with (innerworldly beings encountered)”\(^{45}\). Expressed in this formula is the kind of being which has the potential to care for or be indifferent to the world it encounters. The temporality of Da-sein is expressed in care because it is only through the structure of care that Da-sein can exist in the world and be aware of its own being. The self is also limited in the temporality of being, and so it can only encounter so much of the world.

Finally, the social context of the self has been limited by its temporality and its ontological status. The identity of a self as a self is never entirely present; it cannot care for itself without also fleeing from itself, it can never be conscious

\(^{45}\) Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 292.
without also being unconscious of something. These movements indicate that the self is determined by the world it encounters, but that world is entirely its own, from the perspective of the self.

In order to clarify the relations between the three philosophers whose views on the self have been the focus of this paper, we will take one more look at the structure of care. Heidegger’s structure of care as the motivating principle of the self is an ingenious way to account for the everydayness of being in an ontologically consistent manner. Derrida encounters it only insofar as it is existentially formulated in the being of beings, and his critique in “Différance” is primarily concerned with how such a structure could operate, rather than the possibility of its existence. Zhuangzi also speaks of care in several places, and although this coincidence of translation does not assume a direct correlation, in the chapter entitled “The Secret of Caring for Life”, Zhuangzi lays out a model of care that helps to clarify Heidegger’s structure and its relation to selfhood.

The example of Cook Ding is one of an excellent individual, a superbly skilled cook working for a king. He relates his approach to the carving of an ox in a way that is also a meditation on approaching life.

Cook Ding laid down his knife and replied, “What I care about is the Way, which goes beyond skill. When I first began cutting up oxen, all I could see was the ox itself. After three years I no longer saw the whole ox. And now—now I go at it by spirit and don’t look with my eyes. Perception and understanding have come to a stop and spirit moves where it wants. I go along with the natural makeup, strike in the big hollows, guide the knife through the big openings, and follow things as they are. So I never touch the smallest ligament or tendon, much less the main joint.”

\[46\] Zhuangzi, Zhuangzi, 46.
This phenomenon of expertise reveals a way in which the self seems to be something necessary for existence but unnecessary and even an inhibitor of living well. In the colloquial sense, it is a fault to be described as “selfish,” meaning preoccupied with one’s own wellbeing, and “selflessness” is a greatly esteemed quality, “self-sacrifice” a commendable action. The value of the self appears to be realized only after it has been devalued. A closer examination of Cook Ding’s example reveals that this is not the case.

Before going any further, we must note that our experience of Cook Ding is limited to a reading of a text, which is an experience of one’s own self. This does not take away from the value of Cook Ding’s example for understanding the self, because we are still encountering him as a innerworldly being, and because his being as a text is the being of a human behavior, the being of Da-sein. Whether or not Cook Ding was an actual historical figure or merely a literary figure does not affect our attribution of selfhood to him. This reveals an important aspect of the value of the self: if it can be attributed to activities not only of human beings, but to the fictional activities of a fictional character (and even a level further, for there is no certainty about Zhuangzi’s existence as an actual historical human being), then the presence of a self is steadily becoming less valuable as an existential distinction.

Cook Ding notes that at the peak of his skill, carving the ox is a spiritual experience, and “perception and understanding” fall by the wayside. Insofar as Cook Ding is the one doing the cutting, he can be said to be doing the action as a self, since he is interacting with the world. Moreover, because he himself is acting in the

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47 Heidegger, Being and Time, 10.
world, it appears to him in a way that is entirely his own, a way that cannot be
abstracted out to all beings. No one sees the world like Cook Ding does when he is
cutting an ox except Cook Ding. The self of Cook Ding is constant to itself in the
perspectives of our encountering another being as the self of Cook Ding in the world,
and in Cook Ding encountering the world as his own self.

In explaining his skill, Cook Ding beings by saying, “What I care about is the
Way, which goes beyond skill”. If we read this in Heidegger’s terminology, Cook
Ding orients his self towards the Way, rather than towards the authentic
potentiality-of-being-a-self. Rather than attempt to reconcile these two terms, let us
play out the being of a self oriented towards the Way. The Way has no simple
definition, but it is certainly something that “goes beyond”. Zhuangzi’s mentions of
the Way, and mentions of the Way in Daoism in general, are paradoxical and
obscure. One that is found in Zhuangzi and in the other foundational book of
Daoism, the Tao Te Ching, is the assertion that “If the Way is made clear, it is not the
Way”\textsuperscript{48}. This supports our assertion derived from Hall above that for Daoism, Being
is absence. However, that reading of Daoism takes place in the context of Hall’s
comparison with Derrida, and it would be very easy to lean towards equating the
Way with \textit{différance}, as a thing for which there is no name “at all, not even the name
of essence or of Being, not even that of ‘\textit{différance},’ which is not a name, which is not
a pure nominal unity, and unceasingly dislocates itself in a chain of differing and
deferring substitution”\textsuperscript{49}.

\textsuperscript{48} Zhuangzi, \textit{Zhuangzi}, 39.
\textsuperscript{49} Derrida, “Différence,” 75-76.
While they both take up ineffable, indeterminable notions of the conditions of possibility, Derrida and Zhuangzi employ these notions in different ways, thus further demonstrating the power of such a critique of thought. For Zhuangzi, the Way is an affirmation of life in the face of suffering\(^\text{50}\); if one can dissipate the self by “leap[ing] into the boundless and mak[ing] it your home”\(^\text{51}\), then one can escape the hardships of life. For Derrida, \textit{différance} is the undercurrent of Western thought to date, unquestioned but ubiquitous, the condition of possibility for systems of ontology and language. Both notions push our conception of the self beyond the limits of mere experience to the possibilities of what we might become.

The self evades any simple definition because it plays out at the level of the individual. It is difficult for us to even speak about our own selves, because we cannot account for much of what we do. To speak of the self in terms of care, the Way, or \textit{différance}, as Heidegger, Zhuangzi, and Derrida have done, is to reflect on one’s self through one’s self. Each of the philosophies examined in this work attempts to describe the world as real individuals perceived it. As Heisenberg noted, “modern man confronts only himself”\(^\text{52}\), and to some degree humans have always primarily confronted themselves, because we are only here as ourselves. However, we also have potential, we change, and then we cease to exist. This change occurs mainly according to our colloquial descriptions, when we say that someone really put his or her self out there, or when one invests one’s self in an endeavor, or again in the general description of selflessness. Strictly speaking,


\(^{51}\) Zhuangzi, \textit{Zhuangzi}, 44.

existentially, we never step outside or leave ourselves, but our sense of self expands as we allow ourselves to take part in life’s changes. This putting of ourselves into relation with our own changes is the most authentic way of being in the world.

**Conclusion**

What is the point of carrying out an incomplete investigation of meanings of this phrase, “the relational self”? We have certainly not covered and delimited the full meaning contained in this concept, and if our suspicions are correct, such a project could never come to completion. It illustrates the fact that in order to not flee away from the movement of deconstruction that Heidegger, Zhuangzi, and Derrida have all traced in the self, we must follow Zhuangzi’s advice and practice clarity. This clarity is transparent but not invisible; the workings of the world are open to us, if we take the time to investigate them. We must clarify ourselves, by acknowledging the affects of deconstruction on the self, by engaging in a constant questioning that opens up our own foundations of self-identity to alterity. We must explore the non-discursive forces in which we are already caught up, whether we want to acknowledge the fact or not. However, even though I start by saying, “we must”, clarity cannot be inscribed into a system of laws or an economy of exchange. It is necessary to arrive at clarity through a deconstructive movement, a taking place that affects our experience of the place. Finally, we must be clear about what remains unclear to us if we are to continue questioning in a way that opens us as selves to the possibilities of being in the world.
Bibliography


