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Do AIs Have *Dasein*? A Heideggerian-Girardian Answer¹

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Abstract. This paper is one (among many) approach to the question, “are AIs persons or are they conscious?” from a Heideggerian perspective. Here I argue for two claims. First, I argue that René Girard’s mimetic analysis of *mitsein* (being-with), one of Heidegger’s foundational concepts, illuminates what Heidegger takes *mitsein* to be. Second, I claim that this Girardian analysis gives us a way to answer the question of whether AIs have *Dasein*, to which I argue that the answer is negative. Specifically, I claim that *Dasein* requires *mitsein*, and *mitsein* (according to Girard’s analysis) requires *mimesis*. Moreover, *mimesis* requires that the mimetic being finds truth in the mimetic object, that is, it comports in a meaningful way toward the unconcealed object being imitated by *Dasein*. But since AIs cannot comport in meaningful ways toward the object of imitation, i.e., they are not truth-apt, they cannot engage in mimetic behavior, hence cannot have *mitsein*. But, necessarily, *Dasein* is being-with-others, Therefore, AIs cannot have *Dasein*. If we assume (as I think Heidegger would) that every person has *Dasein*, we may justifiably conclude that AIs are not persons, at least from a Heideggerian ontology.

Keywords: Artificial Intelligence – AI – *Dasein* – *Mitsein* – *Mimesis* – Heidegger – Girard

As our knowledge of artificial intelligence keeps advancing, many philosophical questions arise. One question that philosophers are tackling against the background of artificial intelligence is whether such machines are or can be persons, i.e., whether they can be conscious. In this paper, I begin to scratch the surface of such a complicated topic from a Heideggerian-Girardian perspective.

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According to Heidegger, individual human beings have a special kind of being which he calls *Dasein*. Thus, under Heidegger's theory, the question "Are AIs persons?" would be to ask, "Do AIs have *Dasein*?" In this essay, I attempt the beginning of an answer to the latter question. For this task, I aid myself by pointing to Girard's analysis of being-with, or *Mitsein*, one of the essential features of *Dasein*. The answer I propose to give to the question "Do AIs have *Dasein*?" is negative. AIs are not apt to be open to truth, I will argue, in the Heideggerian sense, which is a necessary condition for a being to engage in being-with and, therefore, to participate in *Dasein*.

1. *Dasein* and *Mitsein*

Let me start by delineating what I take Heidegger to be saying about *Dasein* and *Mitsein*. Let 'being' refer to any object that exists. Humans, rocks, quarks, and so on have or engage in being. It is an extremely interesting feature that only one kind of being (for all we know), namely human beings, can ask and reflect on what it is for a thing *to be*. Thus, even though rocks exist, it is not within their nature to ask what it is for a thing to exist, obviously enough, since rocks are not conscious to begin with. Still, primates, dogs, and other conscious animals cannot enter this reflective process of asking the question of being (or at least evidence strongly suggests that this is so). Heidegger was fascinated by this, and at least a big part of his magnum opus *Being and Time*² was devoted to give a philosophically rigorous theory of what kind of being is that being that can ask, reflect, and theorize about, not just what is being a particular being to be, but about Being.

The Being that a living being can ask about is *Dasein*. For our purposes, *Dasein* refers to the nature of the Being upon which an individual existing being can reflect. Assuming only

² Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Malden: Blackwell, 1962).

human beings can do this reflecting, *Dasein* refers, moreover, to what it is that human beings can do, not as a whole or kind, but *each* one of them can do. That *Dasein* refers to these beings does not mean that is all there is to it. What we have done is to identify a unique feature of a *Dasein* so that each time we use the word *Dasein* it refers to all and only those beings that can reflect on the question of Being.

In fact, Heidegger thought that there are other features essential to *Dasein*, that constitute its very existence. For example, *Dasein* is also *in-der-Welt-sein* (“being-in-the-world”) and *Sein-sum-Tode* (“being-toward-death”).³ In my view, these are features of *Dasein* that *constitute* it, i.e., that make *Dasein* what it is. One such feature that is constitutive of *Dasein* is *Mitsein*.⁴ The word *Mitsein* means “being-with.” But the Heideggerian concept attempts to capture an essential feature or mode of existence of *Dasein*, namely, what Schatzki calls “co-existence or “sociality.” According to Schatzki, “Sociality denotes the fact, and character, of the presence, or better bearing, of others (other entities of the sort each of us is) in or on a human life.”⁵ Intuitively, it is an essential feature of *Dasein* that we exist and live with other beings that have *Dasein*.

Heidegger writes:

By ‘Others’ we do not mean everyone else but me-those over 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. This Being-there-too [Auch-da-sein] with them does not have the ontological character of a Being-present-at-hand-along-‘with’ them within a world. This ‘with’ is something of the character of *Dasein*; the ‘too’ means a sameness of Being as circumspectively concerned Being-in-the-world.⁶

We are inherently social, just as chimpanzees are, but also it goes beyond that.

³ Heidegger, 78; 80; 293-4.

⁴ Heidegger, 153-155.

⁵ Theodore R. Schatzki, “Early Heidegger on Sociality,” in *A Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Malden: Blackwell, 2005), 234.

⁶ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 154.

Another way to see what Heidegger means by it is by knowing what *Mitsein* is not. First, *Mitsein* is *not* a spatial relation (though it could be). When we share an office with a coworker we are “with” some other. But I need not be in the same communal space with someone to be with them. Second, perceptual relations do not exhaust *Mitsein*. I can be with someone by being perceptually related to him, as when I call my friend and I hear his voice in our conversation. But this perceptual relation does not capture what we mean by *Mitsein* either. Lastly, merely interactional relations, although they cover a lot of the concept of *Mitsein*, they do not exhaust it either. When you are contacting your philosophy professor via email you are with them though you are not spatially nor perceptually related to them. But again, there are ways in which we are with some others without interacting with them.

Examples of *Mitsein* that do not involve spatial, perceptual, or interactional relations are, for example, relations through artifacts. I am “with” the shoemaker in virtue of being the owner of a pair of shoes she made. Though I may have never interacted with the shoemaker, I co-exist with her through the shoes. The concept of *Mitsein*, then, extends to relations generated by the influence of beings that have *Dasein* in a world that is (i) *shared* by them and (ii) present to them in similar manners. Therefore, as one being participating in *Dasein* has an influence on the world, it co-exists with me and I with him. Put simply, *Dasein* is necessarily a co-existent “with” others as far as they influence a shared world.⁷ Thus, we might say that I co-exist or bear a non-trivial connection to the fisher who caught the fish I bought at the market through our influence in the world.

2. Girard’s Analysis of *Mitsein*

⁷ Schatzki, “Heidegger on Sociality,” 234-236.

Just as we can ask about the ontological (essential, necessary) constitution of *Dasein*, we can also ask about the ontological constitution of one of its ontological constitutives. Put simply, where *x* is an essential feature of *Dasein*, we can ask about *x*, what is its ontological constitution? *Mitsein* is one of the features that ontologically constitutes *Dasein*. Therefore, we can ask, what is the ontological constitution of *Mitsein*? Let's explore one answer to this question next.

In his essay *Peter's Denial and the Question of Mimesis*, Girard analyzes the gospel narrative of Peter's Denial using it as an example for his claim that *Mitsein* at least requires a mimetic component.⁸ In this section, I present Girard's argument and consider whether we should accept mimesis as identical to *Mitsein* or just as a constitutive part of it.

The story of Peter's denial, from Girard's perspective, reveals a truth about the ontological constitution of *Dasein*, i.e., about what and how we are essentially. Here is part of the story: "And when some there had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and had sat down *together*, Peter sat down with them. A servant girl saw him seated there in the firelight. She looked closely at him and said, "This man was with him." But he denied it. "Woman, I don't know him," he said."⁹ Note that the story begins focusing on the fact that a group of people had sat *together* around a fire. Girard sees this togetherness as an instance of *Mitsein* and goes on to analyze what constitutes the *Mitsein* in this story to then give a generalized account of the constitution of *Mitsein*.

Girard identifies three features that he thinks are essential of *Mitsein*, one of which is *mimesis*. An act or state of affairs is *mimetic* just in case it *imitates* or *simulates* something real.

⁸ René Girard, "Peter's Denial and the Question of Mimesis." *Notre Dame English Journal* 14, no. 3 (1982): 177–89.

⁹ St. Luke 22: 55-57, New International Version, my italics.

In Peter's Denial, Peter tries to be with the fire people by imitating them. Thus, he crouches and bends over the fire, extends his hands, and the like; in other words, he acts like one of them. In fact, his mimetic behavior leads him to deny that he was with Jesus as one of the people who was around the fire would do. If the servant would have asked one of the people, "are you one of them?" naturally they would have answered negatively. What allows, then, for individuals to exist (together) "with" others is its capability of imitating the desire of another with respect to an object. To co-exist with other *Dasein*-participating individuals is to desire to simulate/imitate at least some things with respect to a shared object.

An important note here is in place. Girard thinks that there are mimetic facts which hold independently of voluntary action. This implies that, even if there are some voluntary actions that bring about mimesis (because we voluntarily imitate such-and-such), others are not brought about by our fiat. Girard writes:

Only most superficial forms of imitation are voluntary. However hard Peter tries, he must always speak like a Galilean. He is an adult and he cannot change the way he speaks. This is the reason the matter of his accent is brought up at this point. The more Peter speaks, the more he betrays his real identity. He betrays himself and, in order to counter this self-betrayal, he is forced more and more into the betrayal of Jesus.¹⁰

This is important because if sociality (*Mitsein*) is essentially mimetic, then some social groups are open just insofar as others can adequately mimic their way into the group. But if it is not up to us (at least not all the time) whether we imitate or not a certain group, and if it is out of our control *how* we imitate it, then a group might be closed to others. In the case of Peter, it was within his control to mimic the fire people, but it was not within his control how he could mimic them—he could not, for example, get rid of his Galilean accent which maintained him excluded

¹⁰ Girard, "Question of Mimesis," 183 (my italics).

from being with the fire people. Thus, mimetic acts are not a creation of our wills though sometimes we can create them and bring about mimetic states of affairs.

This is Girard's Thesis: *Mitsein* has some essential features, one of which is mimesis. This feature partially constitutes what it is for someone to be "with" others; it is to imitate others with respect to an object which determines who can and cannot be with them. Whether or not one agrees with Girard, I think there is an interesting consequence of his thesis relating to artificial intelligence, a point to which we turn next.

3. AI, Mimesis, and *Dasein*

Philosophers debate what is AI and I do not have the space to argue for a definition here. For our purposes, "artificial intelligence" is the property of machines to behave or think either humanly or rationally.¹¹ Note that, since humans can act in ways that are uniquely human but non-rational, "humanly" and "rationally" have different extensions. The purpose of this section is to explore whether we can affirm that AIs co-exist (*Mitsein*) with others. In other words, do AIs have *Mitsein* and thus exemplify an essential feature of *Dasein*?

Recall that *Dasein* refers to the Being that a living being can ask about. But we also saw that this term might refer to the features essential and unique to *Dasein* so that, whenever we pick *one* of the properties in the cluster, we can count or identify a being that has *Dasein*. Thus, allowing ourselves to affirm truthfully of AI-machines that they are together "with" us has the consequence of affirming that such machines have *Dasein*. I will argue that AIs do *not* have *Dasein* by arguing that one of the essential features of *Mitsein*, namely mimesis, has an essential

¹¹ Selmer Bringsjord and Naveen Sundar Govindarajulu. "Artificial Intelligence," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, edited by Edward N. Zalta. Stanford, 2022. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/artificial-intelligence/>.

feature that is absent in AIs. Consequently, I conclude that AI-machine cannot co-exist and, therefore, not have *Dasein*.

The feature of mimesis that I have in mind is an important concept in Heidegger, namely, the concept of truth. For Heidegger, truth is not just a matter of correspondence; it is a matter of unconcealment (*Unverborgenheit*). A thing is unconcealed when I can properly comport myself towards it and use it: “All comportment is grounded in this [open/unconcealed] bearing and receives from it directedness toward beings and disclosure of them”.¹² In this manner, we say that I have the truth of that being. What makes imitation (mimesis) what it is; what makes *Dasein*-participating being imitate such and such a thing, is its finding a truth within a certain being, a being that is available for comportment and, hence, unconcealed. What this means is that truth is the determination of our behavioral constitution of mimetic being, thus rendering *Mitsein* possible just because there is a truth towards which we can comport. In other words, togetherness or *Mitsein* is possible only if there is a *truth-directed background* towards which one can comport and, thus, imitate since that background will make possible the togetherness of *Dasein* via the availability of an unconcealed object.

To put it more schematically, to imitate there must be *that which is imitated*. This thing, call it A, can be either a simulation or not. If it is, then there is a further thing, B, such that A imitates B or not. If these cannot go to infinity, it must bottom out in some state of affairs that is being imitated which itself is not an imitation of something else. Thus, mimetic acts necessitate non-mimetic acts or states of affairs. Moreover, these states of affairs must obtain. It wouldn't make sense to say that I am imitating something that does not exist; one necessarily imitates

¹² Martin Heidegger, “On the Essence of Truth,” in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Kell (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 131.

something that *happens*. But truth, for Heidegger, is a relation that captures the dynamics of an object or state of affairs that allow me to comport toward it in a way that is useful; knowing that something is true makes it handy (*Zuhandenheit*) for me. Therefore, imitating requires the truth against which I can comport. It is comportment toward a certain being that constitutes my imitating such a being.

Mimesis requires truth or unconcealment. This implies that we can comport toward the thing that is unconcealed to us. This requires that (i) I can comport toward that object and (ii) that the object is able to be unconcealed to me. These two features are absent in AIs. AIs cannot comport toward things and objects are not able to be unconcealed to them. The latter would be like trying to surprise a rock; there is nothing there to surprise! If a machine “learns” something it is just insofar it has been unconcealed for her through participating in *Dasein*. Moreover, to comport (*Verhalten*) toward the unconcealed object is to have a “particular practical stance (*Haltung*), a way of being primed and ready to respond to the world.”¹³ Practical stances involve *meaningful* ways (to *Dasein*) in which an individual influences and carries out actions in the world, something lacking in the actions of and for an AI-machine.

Since AI-machines cannot comport toward objects and objects cannot be unconcealed to them, they are not *apt* to truth in the Heideggerian sense. Since they are not apt to truth, an ontologically constitutive of mimesis, then it cannot be said truthfully of them that they imitate. Since they cannot partake in mimetic acts, they do not co-exist; and if they do not co-exist, they do not have *Dasein*. AI-machines, no matter how complex, are just another being unable to reflect on the question of Being.

¹³ Mark A. Wrathall, “Comportment,” in *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon*, ed. Mark A. Wrathall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), entry 39.

One might object that this argument works under the assumption that AIs are not conscious. Conscious AIs would be truth-apt; thus, it is unjustified to conclude that AIs don't have *Dasein*. Let me conclude by addressing this objection. First, I could just accept the objection and say that my argument only applies to non-conscious AI. But if we want to address the objection more deeply, we need to have at least a grasp of what we mean when employing the concept of consciousness. As philosophers of mind have shown, it is extremely hard to pinpoint what consciousness is. For our purposes here, however, it will suffice to say that consciousness is the what-it-is-likeness of mental states or internal life of some being.¹⁴ Thus, x is conscious only if there is something it is like to be x. Rocks are not conscious because there is nothing it is like to be a rock. Bats, on the other hand, are conscious. With this understanding we can reply to the objection above.

I am skeptical that there is something it is like to be an artificially intelligent machine just as I am skeptical there is something it is like to be a computer or an Xbox. Change in degree of complexity of behavior does not change that. And if AI machines are just more complex computers embodied in whatever material resembles, say, a human body, these do not cause them to be conscious. Moreover, the fact that an AI can behave *like* a human being does not tell in favor of their being conscious. My shadow or reflection in the mirror is not conscious; and many things that do not behave like me are conscious. This is why I am skeptical that AI machines *can* be conscious. But suppose I am completely wrong. I think Heidegger would still push back against the claim that AIs have *Dasein* even if they are conscious. This is because comportment toward the unconcealed thing requires *meaningful* and robust interaction with it. And even if there is conscious AI, it is far from obvious that they could behave in meaningful ways toward

¹⁴ Nagel, Thomas. "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" *The Philosophical Review* 83, no. 4 (1974): 435–50.

the unconcealed (e.g., respond with irony to a request, judge a joke as funny, etc.). For these reasons I am skeptical of there being AIs that have *Dasein*.

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