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Published in:
The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon

DOI:
[10.1017/9780511843778.060](https://doi.org/10.1017/9780511843778.060)

IMPORTANT NOTE: You are advised to consult the publisher's version (publisher's PDF) if you wish to cite from it. Please check the document version below.

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:
2021

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Knowles, C. (2021). Dispersion (Zerstreuung). In M. A. Wrathall (Ed.), *The Cambridge Heidegger Lexicon* (pp. 240-241). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/9780511843778.060>

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DISPERSION (ZERSTREUUNG)

DISPERSION IS A condition that befalls DASEIN, in which it loses a coherent focus as it is drawn or attracted to the many and various possibilities of EVERYDAYNESS. In *Being and Time*, the German term for “dispersion” – *Zerstreuung* – is also translated as “distraction” and is used to describe Dasein’s everyday, inauthentic way of being in the “ANY-ONE.” Dasein’s inauthentic everyday self is absorbed in and distracted by the world around it.

Dispersion is first introduced at the end of chapter 4 of *Being and Time* in order to characterize the everyday kind of being of the anyone-self. Heidegger argues that “As an anyone-self, the particular Dasein has been *dispersed* into the ‘anyone,’ and must first find itself” (SZ 129). As we are told at the outset of *Being and Time*, Dasein can “‘choose’ itself and win itself; it can also lose itself and never win itself; or only ‘seem’ to do so” (SZ 42). As dispersed into the anyone, Dasein has not yet chosen itself. Rather than taking hold of itself in its own way, Dasein allows the anyone to dictate its way of being. The anyone is no one in particular, it is constituted by a multiplicity of norms, possibilities, and average ways of being, which do not necessarily hang together as a coherent whole. Accordingly, as an inauthentic anyone-self, Dasein’s way of being mirrors this structure of multiple and dispersed possibilities. Imagine someone in a clothes shop picking up a leather jacket, trying it on, and then discarding it in favor of a delicate floral dress, then discarding the dress and picking up a tailored tweed suit, and so on and so on. The dispersed self of everyday Dasein is characterized by its inconstancy and lack of commitment to a singular identity.

The idea of the flighty, inconstant dispersion of inauthentic everyday Dasein is brought out more strongly in Division II of *Being and Time*, where it is contrasted with the steady, constant self of authentic RESOLUTENESS (see AUTHENTICITY). In Division II the dispersed self of inauthentic everyday Dasein is presented as having “*los[t] itself in such a manner that it must, as it were, only subsequently pull itself together out of its dispersal, and think up for itself a unity in which that ‘together’ is embraced*” (SZ 390). This does not mean that Dasein cannot pair the floral dress with the leather jacket, as it were. Rather, it suggests that in more authentic modes of being Dasein must try and unite the disparate elements of itself in a more unified manner. Rather than rejecting one possibility in favor of another, Dasein must attempt to pull all the disparate threads of its life together.

The concrete way in which this dispersed, everyday way of being manifests itself is in terms of distraction – the second way in which *Zerstreuung* is translated. This analysis is elaborated in Heidegger’s discussion of CURIOSITY. Curiosity “does not seek the leisure of tarrying observantly, but rather seeks restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounters. In not tarrying, curiosity is concerned with the constant possibility of *distraction*” (SZ 172). Curiosity is a familiar aspect of modern life. When one sits down to write a philosophy paper it is easy to get distracted by checking one’s emails, looking at social media, browsing online newspapers, phoning a friend, . . . the list goes on. But distraction can also characterize our way of being more generally. Distraction is Dasein’s constant concern with “novelty” and

“new possibilities” (SZ 172). Those who are obsessed with the newest trend or the latest fad can thus also be said to be distracted. This constant concern with novelty in turn reflects Dasein’s absorption in “things.” Accordingly, dispersion and distraction are not only said to characterize specific instances of Dasein’s everyday way of BEING-IN-THE-WORLD, but are taken to be determinative of Dasein’s “concernful absorption in the world” more generally (SZ 129).

The characterization of Dasein’s concern with entities and everyday possibilities as itself a form of distraction, feeds into Heidegger’s analysis of FALLING and fleeing. Rather than concerning itself with the question of its own being, Dasein flees from this issue by distracting itself with entities and possibilities that are close at hand. In so doing, Dasein disperses itself into the anyone, falling away from its ownmost authentic potentiality for being itself, and instead perpetuating its existence as an inauthentic anyone-self. Dasein’s everyday dispersion and distraction is thus understood not simply as something Dasein falls into, but as a way of being Dasein itself helps to perpetuate. Heidegger argues that Dasein “tactically” presents itself with distractions and “seek[s] new ways in which its dispersion in its affairs may be further dispersed” (SZ 371).

Heidegger’s characterization of distraction and dispersion as bound up with falling away from one’s own “proper” unified self, references a wider philosophical and theological tradition that has its roots in Augustine (see Dahlstrom 2013b, 50). However, Heidegger can be read not only as endorsing this historical analysis of dispersion, but also as going beyond it. In his essay “Geschlecht,” Derrida (2001) argues that for Heidegger *Zerstreuung* is not simply something to be overcome. Rather, it should also be understood as an essential element of Dasein’s being.

In Heidegger’s ontology, Derrida claims, dispersion is not only the clarification of an inauthentic way of being, but is “marked *twice*, as a general structure of Dasein and as a mode of inauthenticity” (Derrida 2001, 71). *Zerstreuung* as a general structure of Dasein’s being is said to be an “originary dispersion” (*ibid.*, 65), which grounds Dasein’s ability to concern itself with a multiplicity of objects (*ibid.*, 65–66), explains its particular spatial and historical way of being-in-the-world (*ibid.*, 66), as well as being reflected in the structure and use of LANGUAGE (*ibid.*, 66). Turning our attention to the way dispersion manifests itself in these more “productive” ways, Derrida suggests, can give us a richer picture of how we understand ourselves and our way of being-in-the-world.¹

Although dispersion is central to understanding inauthentic everydayness – if not Dasein’s way of being as a whole – references to dispersion in *Being and Time* are few and far between. Much like the social world and the everyday way of being to which this term pertains, further analysis of *Zerstreuung* is absent from Heidegger’s later work.

Charlotte Knowles

REFERENCES IN HEIDEGGER

SZ 129, 172, 338, 347, 371, 389–90

DISPOSE (*FUGEN*). SEE FITTINGNESS (*FUG*).

¹ In “Geschlecht” Derrida’s particular concern is with sexual difference and how thinking the originary dispersion of Dasein may enable us to overcome our binary conception of sexuality.