

# ONTOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN *ZAI*(在) AND *SHI*(是): A NEW BASIS FOR POST-SUBJECTIVE ONTOLOGY

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper reconstructs the foundations of ontology by introducing a fundamental distinction between *zai*(在) and *shi*(是) – two Chinese concepts roughly meaning “presence” and the predicative “is” – as a new basis for post-subjective metaphysics. We undertake a dual critique of Heidegger’s fundamental ontology and the dialectical legacy of subject-centric philosophy from Kant to Hegel. We show that Western philosophy’s reliance on the unitary concept of “Being” (Sein) conflates the ontological sense of *presence* (*zai*) with the logical operation of predication (*shi*), thereby obscuring the difference between unforced presence and predicative determination. This conflation, we argue, underlies persistent metaphysical dilemmas and fuels the modern technological drive to control and categorize reality. By contrast, *zai* denotes a primordial, non-predicative mode of being characterized by absolute contingency and unconditioned presence, which precedes and grounds the predicative “is” (*shi*) of judgment and logic. *Shi*, in turn, represents the realm of determinate being – a realm marked by lack, mimetic structuring, and metaphysical overreach in its attempt to impose necessity and identity. We demonstrate how *shi* incessantly mimics *zai* in a misguided effort to achieve the solidity of presence, resulting in self-undermining paradoxes of subjectivity and an ever-deepening technological crisis of meaning. Only by restoring *zai* – the humble, ordinary “thereness” of beings – to primacy can we overcome the closures of subject-centric ontology and open new possibilities for human existence in the technological age.

**KEYWORDS:** Ontology; Being; *zai* (presence); *shi* (predication); Subjectivity; Heidegger; Hegel; Technology; Contingency

## INTRODUCTION

Modern Western philosophy has been dominated by what may be called the paradigm of subjectivity – the turn to the self or subject as the ground of meaning

and knowledge. Since Descartes and especially post-Kant, philosophy “makes the subject the starting point and end point of all discussion,” defining the principle of the modern world as the freedom of subjectivity. Hegel explicitly recognizes this when he writes that in modernity, reason “knows itself to be all reality” and that “ultimately, the principle of the modern world is the freedom of subjectivity, such that all aspects of Spirit must be allowed to develop fully”. Twentieth-century thinkers attempted to overcome this subject-centric tendency. Martin Heidegger, for example, critiqued the Cartesian tradition of metaphysics and strove to reawaken the question of Being in *Being and Time* (1927). Yet even Heidegger’s “fundamental ontology,” centered on the analytic of *Dasein* (the human being as the locus of the understanding of Being), retained a tacit subjectivist streak. Others, like Wittgenstein in his later philosophy, moved away from explicit idealism yet still privileged the *linguistic* or *contextualized* subject (the language-user or form of life). Despite these efforts, the imprint of subjectivity on ontology has not been fully erased. Many post-humanist or post-structuralist trends describe phenomena without thoroughly uprooting the latent ontological primacy of the subject or *subjectum*.

This paper argues that a more radical rethinking of the meaning of “being” is required – one that reaches back to the basic terms and distinctions underlying Western metaphysics. We contend that the Western tradition has been limited by an implicit conflation: it has treated “Being” primarily in terms of what we will call *shi* (是), the predicative or logical “is,” thereby neglecting *zai* (在), the accidental *presence* of things. These two notions – *zai* and *shi*, roughly corresponding to **being-as-presence** versus **being-as-predication** – are not distinguished in Indo-European languages, which use a single verb (Latin *esse*, English *to be*, German *sein*, Greek *einai*, etc.) to cover both existence and predicative linking. By contrast, the Chinese language (and our transliteration of its terms) highlights a *dual ontology*: *zai* (在) signifies to exist or be present (as in *you zai* 有在, “there is/exists”), whereas *shi* (是) functions as the copula “is” (as in “X is Y”) and by extension signifies being in the sense of *being something* (identity or predicative determination).

Our thesis is that *zai* and *shi* denote two fundamentally different dimensions of being, and that Western philosophy’s failure to separate them has led to enduring metaphysical confusions. Traditional ontology from Parmenides and Aristotle through Kant and Hegel largely operates within what Heidegger called

the “ontological difference” between beings and Being – but we will show that even Heidegger’s own analysis did not recognize the deeper duality between *presence* (*zai*) and *predication* (*shi*). By *zai* we mean a primordial, contingent **thereness** – the sheer presence of something that *simply is*, prior to any judgment about *what* it is. By *shi* we mean the act of saying *what* something is – the attributive, identifying, or logical *is* that connects subject and predicate in a proposition (*S is P*). Western metaphysics, we argue, has consistently privileged *shi* – the realm of essence, definition, and logical necessity (“S is P”) – over *zai*, the mute fact that something *is there* without further qualification. This privileging takes its ultimate form in the metaphysical drive to secure an absolute ground or *First* that bestows necessity and meaning on all that is. Yet that very drive, we suggest, is a symptom of *shi* – a predicative logic that, in attempting to legislate reality, inadvertently “forgets” or obscures the more basic unforced presence of things (*zai*).

To develop this argument, we proceed in four stages. First, we revisit Heidegger’s fundamental ontology, arguing that in his attempt to renew the question of Being, Heidegger *misses the mark* by remaining within the horizon of *shi* (the logic of the questioning *Dasein*) and never asking *why Being must be questioned at all* – a why that points to *zai*. Second, we critically examine the structure of subjectivity in modern philosophy (especially in Kant and Hegel) to reveal a series of paradoxes that arise when *being* is reduced to the self-confirmation of the subject (i.e. when *shi* is absolutized). Hegel’s dialectic of the subject aimed to overcome the finite versus infinite split by making infinity an internal, self-transcending process, yet we will see that this only internalizes the problem and leaves unresolved contradictions. Third, we introduce the *zai/shi* ontological difference explicitly, drawing on linguistic and historical analysis. We show how the Greek concept of *to on* (Being) already blended the meanings of *presence* and *predication*, and how Chinese draws a clear line between the two. We develop *zai* as a concept of “absolute contingency” – a mode of being that is **prior to logic and prior to the subject**, on which all predication depends – and contrast it with *shi* as the realm of “logical determinacy” – the tendency to *make* something be this or that. Finally, we examine the *mimetic* or *拟态* relation between *shi* and *zai*: although fundamentally different, *shi* continuously imitates or “mimes” *zai* in an effort to appropriate its stability and fullness. This mimicry accounts for the

proliferation of metaphysical systems (the elevation of various ultimate beings or principles – e.g. Plato’s Forms, Aristotle’s *ousia*, God, the transcendental Ego, or even computational AI – to stand in as surrogates for Being itself). We argue that this second-order mimicry (of *shi* by a supreme *being*) is ultimately an extension of the first-order mimicry (of *zai* by *shi*). The result of millennia of such *shi*-driven thinking is a technological civilization bent on turning all contingency into controllable necessity – a project both doomed and dangerous. Our conclusion is that only by re-centering ontology on *zai* – the ordinary, “insignificant” yet inexhaustible presence of beings – can we escape the vicious cycle of crisis and “patchwork” solutions that characterize the age of technology, and open up a new space for thought and life.

#### HEIDEGGER’S FUNDAMENTAL ONTOLOGY AND ITS LIMITS

Heidegger’s *Being and Time* famously aimed to reignite the question of the meaning of Being (Sein) – a question he thought had been forgotten by the metaphysical tradition. In doing so, Heidegger drew a pivotal distinction between *Sein* (Being) and *Seiendes* (beings), arguing that Western thought had lapsed into merely ontic investigations of beings and forgotten the ontological inquiry into Being itself. He proposed that only the human being (*Dasein*), as the one for whom Being is an issue, can pose the question of Being. Thus *Dasein* became the locus of his fundamental ontology: the analysis of *Dasein*’s existential structure was supposed to illuminate the horizon of meaning for any understanding of what it means “to be”. Crucially, Heidegger insisted that we must not ask “What *is* Being?” as if being were an entity or attribute, but rather ask *how* Being shows itself – an approach that shifts focus from abstract definition to the phenomenology of *presence*. In other words, Heidegger wanted to understand Being through the way it *appears* or *unconceals itself* (the famous *aletheia*), rather than as a highest being or predicate.

While Heidegger’s turn from the abstract “What is Being?” to the method of uncovering the *disclosure of Being* was innovative, we contend that he stopped short of the most radical implication of his own insight. Heidegger identified that any inquiry into Being involves a triadic structure: (1) the *object* of inquiry – Being (or the meaning of Being), (2) the *reason* for the inquiry – why we are moved to ask, and (3) the *inquiring entity* – the one who asks (*Dasein*). However, in *Being and Time*

and subsequent works, Heidegger quickly centers the analysis on (3) – the existing *Dasein* who has an understanding of Being and through whose existential structures (being-toward-death, temporality, etc.) Being is “revealed.” In doing so, Heidegger effectively presupposes that *only* a being like *Dasein* (a finite, questioning subject) *can* inquire into Being – and thus that the question of Being is inseparable from the question of human existence. This move is evident when Heidegger states that the meaning of Being *in general* must be approached via the being for whom Being matters (*Dasein*). As a result, Heidegger reformulates the question of Being into: “How does Being become accessible *as such* to *Dasein*? What is the mode of *disclosure* of Being for *Dasein*? ” This line of inquiry, while profound, *leaves unasked another question: why must Being be questioned at all – why is there a need for an inquiry into Being in the first place?* Heidegger assumes it is *necessary* for *Dasein* to raise the question of Being (indeed he calls this *Dasein*’s distinguishing trait), but he does not adequately explain *why* this necessity exists. He simply observes that we always already have some understanding of Being (even if pre-ontological) insofar as we use the word “is,” and thus the question can be meaningfully posed. Yet, by focusing on the structure of the questioner (*Dasein*) and the process of questioning, Heidegger *shifts the emphasis away from Being itself*.

From our perspective, Heidegger’s analysis remained confined to the horizon of *shi* – the predicative or *meaning-giving* aspect of Being – at the expense of *zai* – the simple *thereness* of Being that might not need to be “given meaning” through questioning. Heidegger’s *Dasein* is essentially the entity that asks “*Ti estin?*” (“What is ...?”) of beings; in his framework, *Being* becomes that which “solicits” the questioning and is revealed only in relation to a questioner. But one can counter-ask: why must Being *solicit* a question at all? Could there be an aspect of being that simply *is*, without posing a riddle to be solved by *Dasein*’s understanding? Heidegger’s approach, by privileging the *ontological difference* (Being vs. beings) grasped through *Dasein*’s existential analytics, effectively merges the question of *Being* with the perspective of the *being who asks*. This leaves a blind spot: a failure to consider that perhaps **Being need not be interrogated by a subject to manifest; perhaps Being can just be there.** In other words, Heidegger did not pursue the idea that *Being* (as *presence*) might be so fundamental that it does not require, or even allows, the kind of “why”

questioning he engages in.

To illustrate this limit in Heidegger, consider how he formulates the necessity of the question of Being. He argues that whenever we ask anything, we implicitly operate with some understanding of “is” – for example, any judgment “S is P” involves the copula *is*, indicating we have a pre-conceptual grasp of Being. From this he concludes that the question of Being is unavoidable and that *Dasein*, being the entity that inquires, always already dwells in an understanding of Being. Heidegger then focuses on *Dasein*’s *way of Being* (existence, temporality, care, etc.) as the site where the meaning of “is” can be unveiled. But the *unasked question* remains: why is this *copula* or *is* so essential? Why must “S is P” at all be possible or necessary? Could it be that **there is a mode of being that does not enter into predicative judgments at all?** Heidegger’s framework assumes that to be (even *to be at all*) means to stand in some relation to *Dasein*’s understanding (this is the essence of his claim that *being (Sein) is always the being of some being (Seiendes), disclosed to some Dasein*). As a consequence, he inadvertently perpetuates a subtle form of correlationism: Being is tied to its intelligibility for us.

Our critique is that Heidegger, by too quickly inserting *Dasein* (the subject who asks) into the core of the ontology, *misses an even more primordial horizon*: the possibility that Being *could be meaningful in itself without reference to a subject*, or that the meaning of Being might lie in *not having to be raised as a question*. In effect, Heidegger *leapfrogs* from the need to question Being directly into *how Dasein questions Being*, without pausing to examine if Being in its most fundamental sense (*zai*) might be **that which does not require justification or “making sense”**. The irony is that Heidegger accused the tradition of the “forgetfulness of Being,” yet one can argue he succumbed to a different forgetfulness – a forgetfulness of *pure presence* – by always insisting on the lens of *Dasein* and its questioning. He thus remained under the sway of *shi*: for *shi* as we define it is precisely the mode of being that is in question, that is determined or disclosed through an active *interpretation* (a predicative or hermeneutic act). Heidegger never fully escaped the paradigm of *Being = meaningful presence to a subject* (however “non-subjective” he tried to make *Dasein*, its very definition is being-the-site-of-meaning).

To put it succinctly: Heidegger’s approach answers the question “How is Being disclosed?” with “Being is disclosed through *Dasein*’s existential structure.”

What it doesn't answer is "Why must Being be disclosed (by anything or anyone) in order to be?" The latter question points to an ontological dimension where being would not depend on disclosure – a dimension of *just being there*, prior to the subject-object division of disclosed and disclosed-to. This dimension is what we call *zai* (presence). As long as one assumes that Being must *show up* or *stand forth* in a clearing (Lichtung) established by Dasein, one is already giving primacy to *shi* – the "making manifest" of essence – and overlooking *zai*, the possibility that something simply *is* without need of manifestation.

Our aim is not to diminish Heidegger's achievement – indeed, his identification of the hidden role of the copula and the need to think Being beyond beings is a crucial step. However, we argue that to truly overcome the subjectivist closure of modern ontology, one must go a step further than Heidegger: one must posit an ontological starting point more originary than *Dasein*'s understanding of Being, one that even precedes the need to ask the question of Being. In later sections, we will identify this starting point with *zai* – the plain fact of *being there* that does not in itself ask "why?" (In Heideggerian language, one might say *zai* is "Being itself" in its most banal, which Heidegger perhaps too hastily declared inaccessible except via *Dasein*.)

Before developing *zai* vs. *shi*, however, we must further diagnose the problems that arise when *shi* (predicative, subject-dependent Being) dominates ontology. For that, we turn to the inherent contradictions in the philosophy of the subject, which will reveal why a turn to *zai* is necessary.

#### THE PARADOXES OF SUBJECTIVE BEING: HEGEL, KANT, AND THE DIALECTIC OF *SHI*

The modern philosophy of subjectivity – from Descartes through Kant to German Idealism – attempted to ground all reality in the self or in consciousness. Kant famously made the "*I think*" (the transcendental apperception) the condition of possibility for any experience of objects, essentially declaring that the structure of the subject's cognition provides the framework in which anything can be said to be. Hegel went even further: he claimed that the substance of reality is actually Subject – "Substance is essentially Subject" – meaning that the entire cosmos is the process of a Subject (Geist) coming to know and realize itself. In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the culmination is that Spirit recognizes that "itself is

reality” and that “everything actual is none other than it itself”. Thus the truth of being, for Hegel, is found in the self-relating process of the Concept or Spirit.

While Hegel sought to overcome the oppositions left by Kant (such as phenomenon vs. noumenon) by asserting an absolute Subject that encompasses all differences, the project of grounding *being* in *self-being* (the subject’s being-for-self) is riddled with tensions. These tensions can be viewed as paradoxes that arise when *shi* – the determinative “is” that the subject uses to constitute the world – is taken as ultimate. We identify at least four interrelated paradoxes in the structure of subject-centric ontology, which highlight *shi*’s inherent **lack** in comparison to *zai*’s fullness:

**(1) Self-Certainty vs. Self-Negation:** The first paradox is that the subject’s drive for self-certainty requires it to negate or nullify itself. The philosophy of the Cogito began by seeking an indubitable foundation: Descartes found that while he can doubt everything, he cannot doubt the existence of the doubting self – *cogito ergo sum*. Yet this “I” that is certain of itself is, in Descartes, a thinking thing devoid of content, cut off from the extended world – effectively a *void* except for the act of thinking. Modern subjectivist philosophies continue this pattern: the subject attempts to *confirm its own existence*, to make itself the ultimate ground (as *Substance=Subject* in Hegel, or the transcendental ego in Kant). However, to claim absolute self-certainty, the self must distance itself from all concrete content (since content could be false or contingent). This means the self must in a sense *empty itself out* or *make itself nothing* in order to be purely self-referential. In Kant, the “I think” is not an intuition but a mere form that accompanies representations – it has no content except the act of combination. Thus the paradox: **the more the subject strives to posit itself as truly being**, the more it must negate any given being *within itself*, rendering itself an emptiness. Hegel saw this clearly: every attempt of consciousness to find itself in some content (some object or state of being) is undermined, and the truth of self-consciousness is a kind of negativity. The *self* in seeking to be absolute ends up as a restlessness or a process, never a stable being. In our terms, *shi* (the subject’s positing of “I am X”) reveals itself as hollow because the very condition of asserting a necessary *is* (absolute self) is to strip away the *zai* (the brute existence) of the self. The result is that self-certainty turns into an existential void. Hegel’s *unhappy consciousness* and the endless dialectic of recognition in the master-slave parable exemplify this: the self only gains

certainty of itself by being mirrored by another, negating its independent existence – hence it is never at peace. In short, **the attempt of the *I* to be leads it into a loop of self-negation**: to be absolute it becomes nothing, and thus cannot actually *be* in the sense of concrete presence. The self's being is revealed as a lack.

Hegel's solution to this in the *Phenomenology* was to transform the static notion of self-certainty into a dynamic process: the *true infinite* is not a fixed self, but the process of self-overcoming that never ends. He calls this “*true infinity*” – an infinity that is not the abstract infinite beyond the finite, but the infinite that consists in the finite continually going beyond itself. In Hegel's Science of Logic, this is captured by the idea that the finite is sublated in an endless process; the *in-itself* becomes *for-itself* ad infinitum. While this move embraces the paradox (acknowledging that the self is essentially a self-negating movement), it also *elevates* it to a principle: Hegel celebrates the fact that the subject finds its infinity in an internal dialectical movement rather than an external absolute. In doing so, however, one could say Hegel “confused limit and boundary” – the subject is indeed finite (limited), yet Hegel treats the absence of an external boundary (the ability to always move further) as if it were true infinity. Kant had given the very metaphor Hegel needed: Kant likened our reason to a sphere – finite in area yet without edge, so we can roam indefinitely without encountering a border. Hegel turned this finite-but-unbounded roaming into a principle of absolute Spirit. Nonetheless, from our standpoint, this “solution” is still firmly within the realm of *shi* – it is a *logical/dialectical* overcoming of the contradictions of the subject, not an escape to a more fundamental mode of being. Hegel essentially says: yes, the subject is a paradox; but this paradox *aufhebt* (sublates) itself through an internal logic, yielding the self-development of the Concept. The cost of this maneuver is that it keeps the subject in a perpetual state of becoming, never allowing it the simple rest of *being*. In our language, Hegel embraces that *shi* (predicative being) is inherently restless and lacking, and asserts that reality as a whole is this restless process. He thereby *conflates being with becoming*, presence with the endless toil of self-realization – again, leaving no room for *zai*, the possibility of something that just quietly *is*.

**(2) Purpose and Closure:** The second paradox of subject-oriented ontology is the conflict between the subject's self-confirmation and the teleology

or closure of that process. If the subject sets as its *telos* to achieve absolute knowledge of itself or to fully actualize itself, what happens when (or if) that goal is reached? In any teleological structure (as many modern philosophies are), the attainment of the end both validates the process and nullifies the process. For example, if the purpose of philosophical or spiritual striving is to become one with the Absolute (as in Hegel's absolute knowing), then once that is achieved, the entire prior process is in a sense erased or completed – it loses independent significance except as a means. Hegel was aware of this issue: in a purposive process, the intermediate stages derive their meaning from the end and are cancelled when the end is realized. Now, in subject-centric terms, if the subject finally *confirmed itself* completely (achieved absolute self-knowledge or self-identity), the entire striving (history, dialectic) that led up to it would be both fulfilled and extinguished. But if, on the other hand, the subject never reaches closure – if, as the first paradox suggests, it *cannot* complete the process – then it remains forever in a state of *lack*, never attaining the purpose that alone would give its efforts meaning. Thus the subject is caught: either an achieved self-actualization that collapses the dynamic (leading to a kind of self-erasure or boredom of completion), or an endless striving that never truly justifies itself with an arrival. Hegel's notion of "true infinite" tries to claim a resolution by saying the striving itself is the satisfaction – the infinite is the very process – but this is intellectually ingenious at best; existentially, it means the subject is in a hamster wheel of constant negation without a final rest. In metaphysical terms, the paradox is that the subject *as a being* wants to *be*, yet its being lies in a future fulfillment that, if realized, negates the very movement that constitutes the subject. The "meaning" of all prior stages is cancelled once the goal is met. This is akin to what in Eastern philosophy might be described as "samsara": the subject generates an endless series of actions to achieve something, but the actions lose meaning if the achievement occurs, and if it never occurs, the actions are never vindicated.

In practical terms, modern subjects often cope with this paradox by internalizing the goal: rather than a final static state, they conceive the goal as an *ongoing progression*. The subject's purpose becomes not a fixed endpoint but an ever-evolving growth (e.g. the open-ended progress of knowledge or the endless pursuit of freedom). This indeed aligns with Hegel's view and with much of modern

thinking (for instance, notions of infinite progress in science or the never-ending revolution in political theory). But an “endless progress” can also be seen as a *deferred closure* – a closure that is always postponed, leaving individuals or epochs in a state of permanent transition. The lack of closure can induce a sense of meaninglessness just as much as a too-quick closure can (in the latter case, once everything is achieved, what then?). Thus, subjectivity’s teleology oscillates between the despair of never arriving and the emptiness of having arrived with nothing left to strive for. Both outcomes point to a deficiency in the framework itself: *being* conceived as the pursuit of being (the subject trying to secure its being through a project) is inherently unstable. It suggests that *shi* (the subject’s “**being X**” through some purpose or content) is always conditional, always something that can fail or succeed, rather than an unconditional *is*.

**(3) Necessity and the Erasure of Possibility:** A third paradox concerns the relation between the subject’s self-assertion and possibility. If the subject manages to establish itself as the totality (as in Hegel’s Absolute knowing, or even in Kant’s Idea of an omni-determining God for the sake of systematic unity), then all genuine *possibility* (in the sense of things being able to be otherwise) vanishes. To *confirm* itself fully, the subject would have to eliminate any contingency that is not assimilated into its concept of itself. For example, a truly all-knowing, all-powerful Subject (God or an Absolute Spirit) leaves no room for indeterminacy – everything that exists is and could only be an expression of that Subject. In Kantian terms, the understanding seeks to subsume all intuitions under concepts; the only “possibilities” it recognizes are those that can eventually become actual under rules. Kant sharply distinguished between *phenomena* (which obey the categories and thus are necessarily structured) and *noumena* (things in themselves, which for Kant remain unknowable but effectively represent “possibilities” beyond our cognitive grasp). He concluded that “*being*” is not a real predicate precisely to deny any *extra* possibility to things beyond their concept – existence for Kant is merely the positing of a thing, not a feature that adds to its concept. In doing so, Kant acknowledged that the human subject can only grasp what falls under its rule (conceptual or categorical determination); anything truly aleatory or outside the rule is dismissed as unknowable *noise*. Hegel, dissatisfied with Kant’s acceptance of a residual unknowable (noumenon), effectively posited that *all* possibilities must be absorbed by the Absolute: what *appears* as contingency or

“external” to reason is, in truth, a moment in the self-unfolding of the Concept. For Hegel, Spirit ultimately finds no brute facts left unexplained; even contingency is sublated as a subordinate aspect of necessity (as “external necessity” or relative negation that Spirit overcomes). Thus both Kant and Hegel – each in their way – reflect the subject’s intolerance for radical possibility (*contingency* that cannot be domesticated). Kant cordons it off as noumenon; Hegel devours it in the Concept. In both cases, the full affirmation of the subject’s knowledge/being means the denial or assimilation of genuine otherness or “might not have been.” In our terms, *shi* strives for **inner necessity** – it wants every “S is P” to be necessarily so, grounded in an exhaustive system of reason. Anything merely *accidental*, from the standpoint of *shi*, is an anomaly to be explained away or a temporary ignorance to be resolved. As Hegel defines *contingency*: something is contingent when “the ground of its existence lies not in itself but in something else”. The project of philosophy (for Hegel and much of Western thought) is to *overcome contingency* by finding a total ground where nothing exists “for no reason”.

The paradox (or rather, the cost) of this elimination of contingency is that it also eliminates the very *freedom* and *novelty* that the subject initially cherished. If everything the subject encounters is ultimately an extension of itself or its concept, then the subject is trapped in a hall of mirrors – nothing genuinely new can appear, and all potential alternatives are either impossible or illusory. Hegel’s absolute Spirit leaves no room for fundamental surprise; Nietzsche’s critique of Hegel could be phrased as: an absolute that explains everything explains nothing new. In existential terms, if the subject’s being is fully determined (either by an internal essence or by an external plan like a divine will or an infallible rational structure), then the openness of *possibility* – which is a key part of lived experience – is denied. On the other hand, if we assert that there *are* real possibilities beyond what the subject can incorporate (as Hume did by highlighting the uncertainty of induction, or as existentialists did by emphasizing radical freedom), then the subject must live with insecurity and *lack* of complete self-knowledge. The modern solution, especially in science and technology, has been to convert as many “external” possibilities into controlled “internal” possibilities as possible – e.g., through probabilistic reasoning, contingency planning, simulations, etc., thereby internalizing contingency as something we can manage (turning it into

what we might call *pseudo-necessity* or regulated randomness). But as we will argue in a later section, this attempt to subsume contingency (*zai*) under rules (*shī*) generates an overload – an acceleration of change and complexity that the human subject actually cannot keep up with, producing a new kind of crisis.

**(4) Isolation and Nihilism:** The fourth paradox is that the culmination of the subject's self-affirmation is the disappearance of the subject *as an intelligible reality*. This sounds counter-intuitive – how can confirming the self lead to the self's disappearance? Consider Descartes' outcome: *cogito* yields the certainty of "I think, therefore I am," but this "I" is immediately stripped of any content except thinking, and everything else (the world, other people, even the body) is rendered uncertain or secondary. The result is a *solipsistic* point – a dimensionless ego that is "certain" but of almost nothing. It becomes a lone point of thinking, with the entire world cast into doubt or treated as extension devoid of thinking. In effect, the subject's triumph (I alone am indubitable) is its tragedy (I am now isolated from all that is not-I). Leibniz's monads, each a windowless self-mirroring substance, and later solipsistic tendencies in idealism, reflect this outcome. Pushing it further: if the subject alone truly *is*, then nothing else truly *is*; but a subject without others or a world is itself *nothing* – it lacks any content or meaning to its existence. Hegel notes this problem in the *Lordship and Bondage* dialectic: a self-consciousness can only be certain of itself by encountering another self-consciousness; a completely isolated Master with no slave to recognize him would not actually achieve self-consciousness. Thus absolute subjectivity that denies otherness collapses into emptiness. In 20th-century terms, this is the nihilism that haunts the completion of metaphysics: Nietzsche proclaims "the death of God" (the external absolute), but also sees that man *as the measure of all things* can lead to a void of meaning – ultimately, the *Last Man* who is unable to create meaning and just lives a trivial life. The technical mastery of the world by the subject (modern science and rationality) has led to unprecedented power, yet also a sense of existential drift. The more the subject *succeeds* in making everything an object or expression of will, the more it finds itself alone in a wasteland of its own making, without inherent meaning. This is because by eliminating any independent or transcendent source of meaning (reducing being to what the subject constitutes), the subject saws off the branch it sits on – value, purpose, significance must all be self-generated and can appear arbitrary or futile.

Hegel's Absolute Spirit was an attempt to avoid this by asserting that the “other” the subject negates is really itself (so in knowing the other, Spirit knows itself). But such Absolute knowing can also be interpreted as a monologue – Spirit only ever encounters itself. If nothing genuinely *other* exists, Spirit's self-knowledge risks being tautological and trivial (“I am that I am”). This is why some critics see Hegel's absolute as a nihilism in disguise – everything is Spirit, so nothing matters except the abstract self-development of Spirit. In simpler terms, when the subject is *everything*, nothing is *important*, because importance (value) arises from something outside or beyond that calls us. A self-enclosed subject with no outside has no horizon of meaning. This is one way to understand the existential crisis of modernity: having made humanity or reason the measure of all things, we found the measure empty or shifting.

Summarizing these paradoxes: The subject as conceived by modern metaphysics is **structurally self-defeating**. Its effort to establish a secure *being* (through self-reflection, logic, and control) leads to loss of being in various guises – endless striving, meaninglessness of fulfillment, elimination of freedom, and isolation in a void. We can trace all these to a single root: *Being* (the sense of truly or solidly existing) is sought within the framework of *shi* – i.e. via *logical determination* and *self-positing*. But *shi* by its very nature is *never self-sufficient*. It always points to a predicate, a reason, a ground. It says “*is thus*” or “*is because*” – it makes being conditional (even if the condition is internalized). In contrast, what the subject ultimately lacks in these paradoxes is the unconditional *there-ness* that would end the infinite regress of conditions. That unconditional aspect is precisely what we call *zai*.

Hegel glimpses the need for an unconditional when he speaks of the “**most solid and complete**” being as the Absolute. But Hegel assumes this completeness must express itself as an all-encompassing logical necessity – hence his Absolute takes the form of the total logical system. We suggest the opposite: the most solid and complete being would be one that *needs no justification or determination*. In other words, what if the true **Absolute** is not an all-determining *logos* (*shi* raised to infinity), but rather an *abyssal presence* (*zai*) that simply *is* – and precisely by not having to be any particular way (*not* having to satisfy the subject's desire for identity or necessity) it cannot be negated or overcome? This would be an Absolute as *absolute contingency* – a notion diametrically opposed to the

traditional absolute as absolute necessity.

The paradoxes above indicate that the attempt to ground everything in necessary *shi* (the subject's self-posed structures) leads to an ever-recurring "groundlessness" in experience – crises that force the subject to question its prior certainties, leading to new "patches" or replacements in the metaphysical edifice. Indeed, the history of modern philosophy can be seen as a series of such crises and patches: each system (rationalist, empiricist, transcendental, idealist, materialist, etc.) is eventually deconstructed (by internal contradictions or by external critique), and a new system arises to "mend" the tear, only to produce a new tear. Nietzsche's proclamation of nihilism ("the wasteland grows") is an articulation of this cycle reaching a breaking point. In the 20th century, philosophies of "deconstruction" and "difference" (Derrida, Deleuze, etc.) reflected the implosion of the grand *shi* systems, while still often remaining on the plane of describing their breakdown rather than articulating a new ground. The persistence of these crises suggests that a *qualitative shift* is needed – not another reconsolidation on the same level (another *shi* substitution), but a turn to a different understanding of what it means to be. We propose that understanding the distinction between *zai* and *shi* provides exactly this shift.

Before turning to that distinction explicitly, let us summarize: Western metaphysics' subject-centered approach corresponds to an elevation of the predicative "is" (*shi*) to the status of the real. The subject is essentially that which says "I am" or even "I am that I am," and in a broader sense, that which says of everything "it is (such-and-such)." The failure of this approach to secure a non-paradoxical ontology hints that the **copulative "is" cannot bear the weight of absolute Being.** In scholastic terms, *ens qua ens* (being as being) was treated as something like *is-ness* (often tied to God's self-definition as "I am that I am"), but modern critique has shattered the credibility of a single supreme *is*. What remains often is a void in which multiple "isings" compete (pluralism, relativism), or an insistence that only particular scientific "is-statements" are valid (positivism), leaving the existential question of Being unaddressed.

All these outcomes share the initial assumption that *Being* = *shi* – that to be is to be something or other (to satisfy some predicate or concept or condition). We are suggesting instead that *Being in its most basic sense is zai – to be there* without any further qualification. In the next section, we delve into the *zai/shi* distinction,

showing how it emerges linguistically and philosophically, and why *zai* must be regarded as ontologically prior to *shi*. This will allow us to construct a new framework in which the “logic of contingency” replaces the “logic of necessity” as the ground of ontology.

### *ZAI* (在) VS. *SHI* (是): BEING AS PRESENCE AND BEING AS PREDICATION

**Linguistic and Historical Clues:** The ambiguity of the word “being” in Western languages has long been noted by philosophers. In Greek, the verb *einai* (“to be”) and the noun *to on* (“being” or “what is”) carry multiple senses: existence (*being there*), copula (*A is B*), identity (*A is A*), truth (*to be so*), etc. Aristotle identified “being in many senses” (*to on pollachos legetai*) – e.g., being as substance, being as truth, being as presence (in *Categories* and *Metaphysics*). Indo-European languages generally fuse two main functions of “to be”: (1) the existential “there is” and (2) the predicative “is” that links subject and predicate. In English, for instance, “is” can mean *exists* (“There is an apple on the table”) or serve as a mere logical link (“The apple is red”). In logic, these are separated: one might use “ $\exists$ ” for existence and “=” or “ $\in$ ” or other relations for predication/identity. But in ordinary language, they blur. Philosophers from Kant to Frege tackled this issue. Kant famously argued that “being is not a real predicate,” meaning that “is” used to assert existence adds no content to a concept but posits the concept as instantiated. In a judgment “S is P” Kant saw the “is” as expressing the *connection* of the subject concept with the predicate concept under the unity of apperception – essentially an act of combining representations according to the rules of the understanding. Thus for Kant, the copula has a unifying function: it weaves a necessary link so that a judgment yields objective knowledge (the unity of concept and intuition in experience). Frege later distinguished between *Sinn* (sense) and *Bedeutung* (reference) to explain why “a=a” is trivial but “a=b” can be informative – in essence, he introduced a third realm (sense) to account for how “is” statements can convey information. But this solution, as our analysis noted, leads to an infinite regress of mediators (senses of senses, etc.).

The key point is: **European languages allowed a conflation of existence and predication in the single word “is.”** This has deeply influenced Western ontology. When Greek philosophers asked “What is X?” (*Ti esti?*), they implicitly slid between “what is X *really* (what is its essence)?” and “in what manner does X exist?” The word *ousia* (being, substance) in Aristotle, for

example, blends “that which is present” (literally, the participle *ousia* comes from *einai*, being) with “that which answers to what a thing is” (substance as the *whatness* that persists). Thus *ousia* meant substance in the sense of the underlying entity, but also presence in the sense of something standing there. Over time, the predicative aspect (what a thing is in definition) tended to dominate – medieval Scholastics spoke of *essentia* vs *existentia*, but even that was an attempt to disentangle what was intertwined in the original *ousia*.

In contrast, the Chinese language has distinct terms: *you* (有) or *zai* (在) for existence/presence, and *shi* (是) for the copular “is.” Classical Chinese ontology (e.g. Daoist and Buddhist-influenced thought) did not develop a single unified notion of Being as in Greek philosophy – some scholars even claimed Chinese lacks “ontology” in the Western sense. But this “lack” can be reframed as an *advantage*: Chinese implicitly avoids confusing predication with existence. One either says something *is present* (存在) or that something *is [such-and-such]* (是). There is no single term that covers both. Indeed, early 20th-century Chinese philosophers debated how to translate “Being” – some opted for **shi** (是), others for **you** (有, “have/there is”), others for **zai** (在). As one scholar, Chen Cunfu, notes, neither “是” nor “有” in Chinese fully captures the breadth of the English/Latin *be*. “是” functions as a copula and carries the sense of *asserting something to be the case*, whereas “有” (have/exist) directly indicates existence. The fact that Indo-European *to be* fused these meanings means that Western philosophers often “**chased**” a concept of Being that oscillated between presence and predication. For example, when Parmenides said *esti gar einai* (“for it *is* to be”) and denied that “what is not” can be, he was arguably treating the *is* of predication (truth) and the *is* of existence as one and the same – thus forbidding speaking or thinking of non-being at all. Plato’s theory of Forms can be seen as elevating *true predication* (“X is Y truly”) to the level of separate *existents* (the Forms). Aristotle tried to sort the senses of being but ultimately still anchored them in the idea of substance as *that which is in itself* and supports predicates. Throughout, the ambiguity persisted.

Heidegger was acutely aware of this linguistic tangle. In *Introduction to Metaphysics* (1953), he analyzes the German *sein* (“to be”) and traces it to various Indo-European roots: *es* (the root meaning “to be” in the sense of *to dwell or remain*), *bhu* or *be* (meaning *to grow, emerge, or become* – related to Greek *physis*), and *wes*

(related to *dwelling, staying*). He shows that even in its roots, “to be” carries both the dynamic sense of *active presence* and the static sense of *enduring presence*. Notably, Heidegger remarks that the original meaning of the Greek *einai* (through *eimi*) was “to occur or to hold true” – an *active* meaning (“to effect, to cause to be”). This sense got diluted into a mere copula. When philosophers later took “Being” as a noun (e.g. *to on, das Sein*), they had already abstracted it from the living verbal senses. Thus Heidegger tries to recover *Being* as *presence* (hence his emphasis on *Anwesen*, coming-into-presence, etc. in later works). However, even Heidegger continued to speak of the “truth of Being” and the need for *Dasein* to *uncover* Being – which, as we argued, keeps a foot in the predicative camp (Being as something that must show itself correctly, not just be there).

With these clues, we can now articulate the ontological distinction:

**Zai (在)** – means literally “to be at” or “to be present at a place.” In extended sense, *zai* denotes **presence, existence, actuality in the here-and-now**. It implies an *unquestioned thereness*. Something that *zai* is simply *there*, whether or not it has a name, a definition, or a purpose. Importantly, *zai* does not itself specify any attribute or any action; it is almost grammatically a placeholder (in Chinese, one often says e.g. “he *zai* here” meaning “he is here”). We call *zai* a *non-predicative being*. It is being *without* saying *what* one is. It can be likened to the scholastic concept of *esse* (act of existence) as opposed to *essentia* (essence), except we stress that *zai* is not an *act* or *given by another*; it is a self-subsisting presence. One could also relate *zai* to what Meister Eckhart and later Heidegger hinted at as *Istigkeit* (“is-ness” in the sense of the simple fact that *it is*). But using Western terms too much risks smuggling in *shi* aspects. The cardinal qualities of *zai* we propose are: **contingency, spontaneity, fullness, passivity, and ordinariness**.

*Zai* as **absolute contingency** means that whatever is *zai* could be otherwise or *not at all*, and crucially, it does not require a reason *in order to be*. In scholastic terms, it has no sufficient reason – and that is fine. It exists *without why*, like Angelus Silesius’s rose. This is not a deficiency but the very mark of its absoluteness. A *necessary being* (in the traditional sense) always begs the question “why must it be so?” – which lands one in further explanations (*shi* logic). But an absolutely contingent being – something that just is, with no necessity – cannot be derived

or negated by reason; it simply stands. It does not contradict itself by not having a reason; instead, it defies the framework that demands reasons. As a result, *zai* is **irrefutable**: one cannot argue a brute fact out of existence. If one tries to negate an absolutely contingent fact, one is performing an operation within a logical system – but *zai* lies outside that system, so the negation doesn't reach it. For instance, imagine pure existence “o” that has no properties. Logic can't even formulate an internal contradiction about it; one can only say “it is (or isn't).” If it is, no further reason can make it not be (except an external cause, which just moves the contingency elsewhere). Thus *zai* has a solidity precisely because it is *uncaused and unforced*.

*Zai* is **spontaneously self-grounding** (*zai* literally means “to exist *by itself* there”): it does not perform an action to exist; it *just exists*. In Chinese classics, *ziran* (自然, “self-so-ness”) captures a similar notion – the way things exist spontaneously without external compulsion. *Zai* aligns with *ziran*: it is *being-so-of-itself*. This entails a kind of **non-action (wu-wei 无为)** or passivity: *zai* does nothing in order to be – it is *nonteleological*. It does not *strive* to be or to become; it is not “trying to achieve” anything by being. In this sense, *zai* exhibits **wu wei** (effortless existence) and *poise*.

*Zai* is **full and complete (wanman 圆满)** in that, lacking nothing, it simply is wholly what it is. This is not “perfection” in the moral or qualitative sense, but in the sense of *not being deficient relative to some standard*. *Zai* is so basic that concepts like perfect/imperfect do not apply – those belong to *shi*, where something can fail to meet an ideal. Whatever is *zai* is, in that moment, complete as itself. One might connect this to the idea of *suchness* (in Buddhism, *tathata*). Every suchness is equally such – trivial or grand doesn't matter. This leads to the next quality:

*Zai* is **banal or ordinary (fan庸 or pingdan 平淡)**. We emphasize this because *zai* does not distinguish *what* a thing is; it treats a worm and a star as equal in being-present. The “most banal” existence – a cup, a stone – is as much *zai* as the most exalted. In fact, *zai* tends to highlight the everyday: it is the unnoticed background existence of things. Heidegger's later notion of letting beings be (*Gelassenheit*, “releasement”) – simply allowing

the tree to be a tree – is resonant with appreciating *zai*. There is a certain **quietness** or *silence* to *zai*: because it does not speak (it doesn't say "I am this or that"), it is tacit. As the Chinese phrase goes, "*the Dao of Heaven is mundane*" – reality in its fundamental way is unassuming.

*Zai* implies **individual suchness (ge ti du hua xing 个体独化性)** – each thing in its *zai* is uniquely itself. Because *zai* doesn't reduce things to general categories (that would be *shi*), it allows each entity to be *just that*. It doesn't fuse things into a totality or system. In a field of pure presence, each being shines with its singularity. They don't need to be integrated into "One" or "Totality" to have being – they each have *zai* on their own. This counters the metaphysical impulse to subsume individuals under universals or parts under wholes; *zai* is pluralistic in a deep sense – being as a **plurality of presences** rather than a single unified structure. The unity of *zai* is simply the fact that each shares in *existing*, not that they form a logically or hierarchically ordered whole.

In sum, *zai* can be termed **pre-logical, pre-predicative being-as-presence**. It is the *matrix* in which things appear without filters of reason. It aligns with what mystics sometimes describe as "Is-ness" beyond words, but here we present it not in mystical terms but ontological: *zai* is the *ontological foundation* that does not further ground itself in any logos or subject. It is *Being as such in its simplest announcement: that it is*.

**Shi (是)** – in contrast, *shi* is **being-as-determination**. Grammatically, it is a verb meaning "to be (the case that...)" or "is indeed so." It functions to assert identity or predicate a property: "X *shi* Y" says "X is Y." Philosophically, *shi* represents everything that goes into answering *what* something is or *that* something is so. It is the *active* aspect of being – making connections, establishing identities, enforcing logical relations. The qualities of *shi* can be seen as mirror opposites of *zai*'s qualities: **it introduces logic, purpose, lack, and striving** where *zai* has silence, aimlessness, plenitude, and repose.

*Shi* entails a **logical determination or making**: to say "is" in a predicative sense is to *create a link* or impose a rule. In "S is P," *shi* works like glue holding subject and predicate, implying that S falls under a concept P (or equals P). This is why *shi* inherently contains what we call the "**making-so**" (**shiran 使然**)

**aspect.** It *makes* something be something. In Aristotle's terms, *shi* corresponds to *energeia* (actualization) of a form in matter, or more abstractly, to the *principle of identity* ( $A = A$ ). *Shi* is thus tied to **activity, effect, and enforcement**: it asserts, it brings into conceptual being. The Greek root *bhu* (to grow, emerge) and *es* (to dwell) that Heidegger noted are dynamic – *shi* carries that dynamic forward as the *power* of synthesis. Kant saw the copula as enforcing the unity between intuition and concept (bringing manifold under apperception). Hegel elevated “ $A = A$ ” (the law of identity) to a driving force with an “impulse and desire” for self-return – he recognized that behind the mere formal identity lies the *shi*-impulse: a striving for unity and coherence that is *willed*. Thus, *shi* is **active** and even **agonistic** (it can be seen as a will to bring differences into unity). It is never content to let things be unconnected; it reaches out to connect and define.

*Shi* embodies **intrinsic lack and futurity**. Because *shi* connects difference, it implies that on its own it is incomplete. The very statement “ $X$  is  $Y$ ” shows  $Y$  was not identical to  $X$  until asserted; there was a gap that *shi* had to fill. *Shi* thus always addresses a *lack of unity* and tries to overcome it. In the subject's case, *shi* is the “I am *this*” which strives to cover up the void of “I am \_\_\_\_.” Hegel noted that the law of identity “ $A = A$ ” secretly contains “ $A \neq A$ ” insofar as one  $A$  is subject, one is predicate – *shi* tries to compensate this non-self-sameness. We can say *shi* is *hungry*: it yearns to *determine*, to capture *zai* in concepts, because left alone it has no content. This manifests as what the Chinese text calls “**lack (kuifa 匪乏)** and **greed (tan'ai 贪婪)**”. *Shi* is lack in that a predication always needs fulfillment (the predicate fulfilling the subject or vice versa), and greed in that it always wants more – more coherence, more inclusivity (ultimately the *totalizing impulse* to bring everything under one coherent “is”). We see this in metaphysical systems that pile definition upon definition or in totalitarian ideologies that cannot tolerate ambiguity. *Shi* is behind the rationalist drive that “nothing should be left undefined or ungrounded.” This is a **mimetic hunger**: *shi* seeks to mimic the self-sufficiency of *zai* by accumulating as many determinations as needed to appear self-grounded. But because its nature is to depend on structure, it never achieves the solidity of *zai* – hence endless striving.

*Shi* operates with **teleology and purpose**. When a being is defined by *shi*, it often comes with an idea of *what it is for*. Aristotle linked being to function (the

*telos* of a thing defines its essence). Modern subjectivity linked being to *purposeful consciousness* (the subject's will or project). *Shi* tends toward seeing things as *means to ends* (because *shi* itself is a means – a means to make something intelligible or useful). In the realm of *shi*, things are not allowed simply to be; they must *be* something *for* something – if not for an external goal, then at least for the goal of completing the system of knowledge. We saw this in the subject's self-teleology: the subject's *is-ness* is always in order to achieve self-certainty or world-domination, etc. Thus *shi* correlates with **behavior, construction, and control** – the notion that to be is to be doing or to be made. Indeed, *shi* as *xingwei jiangou* (行为建构) – “activity construction”. The world under *shi* becomes a **project** – something to shape, mold, and systematize. The *meaning* of being, in *shi* terms, is always something like “to serve as X” or “to realize concept Y.” Heidegger's critique of technology fits here: modern technology enacts *shi* by ordering everything as *Bestand* (standing-reserve), i.e. as something that is not allowed to simply be present, but must be available for use. The ultimate form of *shi* in our era is the computational or mechanical framework that treats even humans as data or resources – the replacement of God with Machine.

*Shi* reaches for the **extraordinary and total**. Unlike *zai*, which is content with the ordinary, *shi* is often fascinated by the *extraordinary* (feifan 非凡). Why? Because *shi* defines meaning through distinction – something is meaningful if it stands out, if it is *marked* by a predicate that elevates it. In metaphysics, *shi* chases the highest being, the most perfect entity, the ultimate ground (the *summum ens*). In everyday terms, *shi* makes us value the special, the ideal forms over the mundane instances. It also seeks **totality** (*zongti* 总体): since *shi* wants to resolve all difference, it tends toward constructing a *whole* in which everything is subsumed (e.g. Hegel's Absolute Spirit or even the notion of a Theory of Everything in science). We call this “*overall-individual construct*” (总体-个体建构) – *shi* creates structures linking the universal and particular, whereas *zai* lets each particular be. Thus *shi* is always in tension with *zai*'s pluralism: *shi* is centripetal (gathering into One), whereas *zai* is centrifugal (each thing rests in itself). The “extraordinary” nature of *shi* also means it's not sustainable: it's like a high flame that eventually burns out, whereas *zai* is the steady glow. We will see in the next section how *shi*'s extraordinary feats lead to crises that require recovery in *zai*.

To crystallize: **zai** is the **meta-ontological realm** (prior to and encompassing logic without being reducible to it) – we call it “meta-logic” (元逻辑) as its foundation – whereas **shi** is the **logical-ontological realm** (the realm of categories, definitions, identities). The essence of *zai* is *solidity and fullness* (it needs no further support), while the essence of *shi* is *lack and grasping*. *Zai* operates by **self-occurrence without acting** (自历无为 – self-happening, no deliberate action) whereas *shi* operates by **constructive doing** (行为建构). *Zai* manifests as the **ordinary and singular**, *shi* as the **extraordinary and systematic**.

Crucially, we assert an **ontological priority of *zai* over *shi***: *zai* is the *condition for the possibility* of *shi*. Any act of predication or determination (*shi*) presupposes that there is *something there* (*zai*) to be determined. We can formulate two fundamental principles:

**All beings (entities) insofar as they are determinate (“is-able”) involve *shi*.** In other words, whatever *is something* must partake in *shi*. This is basically saying that if you have an entity, it has some intelligible form or property – even if the property is just “being itself.” This principle echoes Aristotle’s notion that beings are knowable or have form, and Heidegger’s idea that every *Seiendes* (being) has an aspect of *Sein* (Being) that we can speak of. Another way: “No thing is without an *is*.” This captures the fact that the realm of *shi* (meaning, definition, relation) pervades the world of entities – things present themselves as something.

**All *shi* (every act of being-is or predication) requires *zai*.** That is, whenever “is” operates (connecting S and P, or asserting existence), there must already be a substratum of presence in which this operation takes place. The copula itself does not conjure beings from pure nothing; it works on a canvas of *there-ness*. As Heidegger might put it: the *disclosedness* of Being (which *shi* attempts) still relies on *Being* being there to disclose. Or simply: you can’t predicate about what isn’t there. Thus *zai* is *ontologically earlier*. “**凡是 (Every) ‘is’ must [already] have ‘zai’**” – *shi* is an imitation or later development within *zai*. We might compare this to the medieval notion that *esse* (to be) precedes *essentia* (essence) in God, but here we apply it generally: existence precedes essence (a phrase made famous by Sartre

in a different sense).

These principles reframe the ontological difference: **Heidegger's "ontological difference" between Being and beings corresponds, in our terms, to the difference between *shi* and beings-as-determined (the gap between the concept of Being and particular entities).** But **the more primordial difference is between *zai* and *shi*.** Traditional metaphysics from Aristotle onward dealt with a *second-order difference*: the hierarchy of *some beings* (e.g. God, Forms, etc.) over others. Heidegger moved to a *first-order difference*: Being (*shi*, in our view) vs. all beings. We are moving to a *zero-order difference*: *zai* vs. *shi*, where *zai* is even prior to what Heidegger called Being. If this zero-order difference is not seen, Heidegger's difference remains "a semblance" – as he still treated Being (*Sein/shi*) as the ultimate, forgetting *zai*. Likewise, the classical idea of an ultimate being (God) vs. creatures is a "second-order semblance" resting on a specific *shi* (God as highest "is") taken as absolute. Only with *zai/shi* distinguished can we fully understand the failures and partial truths of those earlier philosophies.

One may ask: if *zai* is prior and so important, why did philosophers not clearly articulate it? The answer is hinted above: **because *zai* is ordinary, unspectacular, and conceptually elusive, it has been persistently overlooked or "forgotten."** Philosophers always reached for *shi* – for something that can be *said* or *defined* – when trying to grasp Being. *Zai* eludes direct discourse; when one tries, one often ends up converting it into *shi*. Thinkers "initially attempt to apprehend *zai* but repeatedly fall into understanding *shi*," because *zai*'s very solidity gives them "no foothold for words," whereas *shi* lends itself to conceptual elaboration. This explains why *Being* in Western thought became identified with things like form, idea, act, will, etc. – those are all *shi*-inflected notions. *Zai*, being mute, was either assumed implicitly or ignored. It remained present as an unthematized background (for how could it vanish? everything happens in *zai*), but it was *misused* in that philosophers *applied shi* thinking to it. They projected *logical necessity* onto *zai*, distorting it into concepts like "pure act" or "absolute substance" that still carry the *shi* structure. This is what we call the state of "using *shi* to replace *zai*" (以是代在) – a twisted condition where genuine presence is approached only via the lens of predication. The result is a double mistake: **forgetting *zai*** (ignoring pure presence) and

**misusing *zai*** (applying the wrong category to it). Western metaphysics did both: it forgot the *presence* aspect by fixating on essence/meaning, and yet it implicitly relied on *presence* (since one can't actually banish it) but in a distorted way, e.g. treating *presence* as a predicate (like existence as a property).

Chinese thought, lacking a single term for Being, by default granted a subtle acknowledgement of *zai*. In Daoist and Chan Buddhist writings, one finds respect for the “nameless” reality and warnings against the trap of names – arguably an appreciation of *zai* over *shi*. The  *starts: “The Dao that can be spoken is not the constant Dao” – this can be interpreted as distinguishing *zai* (the silent Way things are) from *shi* (the articulated way we speak of them). However, Chinese philosophy did not formalize this as an ontological doctrine; it was more a linguistic and intuitive tendency. Our task here is to explicitly articulate this difference in a way digestible to international philosophical discourse.*

Having set out the distinction, we must investigate how *shi* interacts with *zai*. For, clearly, our world is not split into two separate domains – every concrete situation involves both aspects. The next section will examine the *mimetic relationship*: how *shi* continuously tries to appropriate *zai*, and what consequences this has – particularly in the context of technology and modern crises.

### THE MIMETIC STRUGGLE: *SHI'S* IMITATION OF *ZAI* AND THE METAPHYSICAL CRISIS

Although we have analytically distinguished *zai* and *shi*, in reality they are intertwined. *Shi* cannot operate without *zai*, and wherever *zai* manifests, *shi* attempts to “frame” it. This interconnection can be characterized by what we call **mimesis** (拟态): *shi* is essentially an imitation of *zai*. It tries to *model* or *represent* the simple fact of being through complex structures of determination. To use an image: think of *zai* as a calm, unhewn rock of existence. *Shi* is like a sculptor who carves the rock trying to make a statue that captures the rock's presence. But in carving it, *shi* also chips away pieces of the rock. The statue is an imitation of the rock's being, but it is not the rock – it is form imposed on the rock, and some of the original material is lost (or hidden inside the form). In an analogous way, *shi* attempts to *affirm and repeat* what *zai* simply *is*, but does so in a mediated, constructive way that inevitably distorts and truncates *zai*.

In formal terms, consider the identity statement “A = A.” We earlier noted

two understandings: one, *A affirms itself and repeats itself* (which is a quiet, circular self-coincidence – essentially *zai* manifesting as the same again). Two, *A = A* as an explicit *assertion of identity in difference* (the left *A* and right *A* are conceptually distinguished and then equated). The first is like *zai*'s perspective: it's tacit (the thing just is itself, in reality there is no second *A*, only the one *A* continuing). The second is *shi*'s perspective: it makes an overt claim “*A is A*” which presupposes separating *A* from itself to then join it – an act of making explicit something implicit. we provides a diagram-like exposition of this (two modes of “*A=A*”). It states clearly: the second mode is a *simulation* of the first. In the first, *A*'s self-identity is *silent and potential*; in the second, it is *conceptual and kinetic*.

Philosophers, especially German Idealists, leaned toward the second mode: they gave that identity a “force and will” – the drive of *A* to become itself by going out of itself and back (which is essentially Hegel's take on identity). But this interpretation already is a *shi* interpretation of what might just be *zai* (*A* is trivially itself without needing to do anything). We can thus interpret the entire dialectical apparatus as *shi*'s attempt to simulate *zai*\*: the restful self-being of *A* is reimagined as a dynamic process (thesis-negation-synthesis) in order to account for how *A = A* is true despite difference. That whole process is unnecessary if one stays at *zai*: *A* is itself by simply being itself, no further logic needed. Yet Hegel & co. thought such a “tautology” was empty – and indeed, to the logic of *shi*, it is empty, because *shi* thrives on difference and movement, not on tautology. So they *enlivened* identity with desire and negation, creating the immense drama of the Concept. But from a *zai* perspective, that drama is a self-imposed illusion – a very elaborate mimicry of the straightforward fact that each thing is identical to itself until some external factor changes it.

However, \**shi*'s mimicry is not done in bad faith or simple error; it arises from \**shi*'s own lack and dependency on *zai*. Since *zai* always precedes *shi*, *shi* finds *zai* already “secretly at work” within any of its operations. The presence that *shi* tries to capture is in fact enabling *shi* from within. For example, in any judgment “*S* is *P*,” the subject *S* must *exist* (be present) at least as an intelligible subject for the judgment to happen. That presence (even if only in thought) is *zai* lending itself to *shi*. So *shi* never actually disconnects from *zai*: *zai* “descends” into *shi* to allow *shi* to work. we describes a two-way movement: *shi* tries to climb into *zai* (to achieve the stability of presence – this is adaptation or *seeking balance*), and *zai* “fills

into” *shi* (allowing *shi* to perform unity by providing some content of presence). It likens this to a cyclic or swirling motion where *shi* continually feeds on *zai* and *zai* permeates *shi*. If *shi* did not have *zai* inside it at all, *shi*’s constructs would be completely empty – pure formalism. If *zai* did not express via *shi* at all, *zai* would remain entirely mute and we (as reasoning beings) wouldn’t talk about it. So in reality, *zai* and *shi* co-operate in a sense – but it’s an uneasy cooperation, because *shi* tends to pretend that it alone is doing the work. It tends to convert whatever *zai* it harnesses into more *shi* (e.g., treat an existential brute fact as if it were just another logically derivable fact).

This interplay explains why *shi* is never stable: it *must constantly cannibalize its own content to accommodate more zai*. It suggests that *shi*, recognizing its lack, keeps sacrificing or trimming its previous determinations to open space for new influxes of *zai*, which it then converts to more structure. This cycle is endless because *shi* can never fully *be zai*, it can only chase it. And each time it captures some presence in a concept, presence slips away into another form or new situation. In philosophical history, this appears as the progression of systems: each system of thought (*shi* structure) eventually encounters something it can’t explain (an anomaly, a contingency) – essentially *zai* breaking the system’s completeness. The system then either collapses or expands to include that anomaly, but in doing so it must alter itself (sacrifice some previous rigid dogma). The new system has a new shape, but eventually meets another *zai* that it can’t digest, and the process repeats. This is very much what we see: from Scholastic Aristotelianism confronted by Galileo’s empirical findings (a contingency breaking a closed system), to Newtonian determinism confronted by quantum randomness, to so many other paradigm shifts. Each time, reality’s sheer *thusness* in some aspect defies the reigning *shi*, requiring *shi* to morph.

It notes that 20th-century philosophy realized something was wrong with the endless “replacement of *shi* by *shi*” – hence movements like deconstruction, which is the event of a crisis (questioning the previous framework) followed by an attempt at reconstitution. It uses the terms “appearing in the name of deconstruction” and “ending in the name of mending” for each crisis cycle. This maps onto how *shi* experiences its own lack as a crisis (things fall apart, meaning is lost – deconstruction), then scrambles to patch it with a new *shi* (a new theory, a new structure – reconstruction). But, *each new patch is harder to apply*, because the

crises accelerate and deepen. *Shi*'s “greed for *zai*” leads to an **overabundance** – a “surplus crisis”. In our technological world, this is evident: we have an overload of information (content turning into sheer form, “content becoming highly virtual”), changes happen faster than we can adapt (human adaptability lags behind, causing “a strong adaptive crisis”). Essentially, *shi* – in the form of modern rational-technical systems – has devoured so much *zai* (transformed so much of life and environment according to its schemes) that now it produces changes beyond what the finite subject (or communities) can absorb. The world of *shi* becomes self-undermining: climate change, for instance, is a byproduct of imposing industrial *shi* on *zai*, now threatening the basis of that *shi* order. Social media info-tsunamis erode coherent understanding. We are flooded with “formalized content” to the point content loses meaning (e.g. deep fakes, hyperreality – content divorced from stable presence). All these are symptoms of *shi* overshooting – what we call “*content's evolution speeding up, leaving no time for humans to adapt*”.

This is the technological crisis foreseen by Heidegger: when *Gestell* (enframing) reduces everything to a resource or a calculable bit, eventually even the human self is threatened as it cannot keep up or find a sense of *being* in this system. We find ourselves in what we call a “*loss of zai*” crisis (失在的危机) – an apt phrase meaning the crisis of *losing presence*. People feel that despite all connectivity and knowledge, something essential (the *being* of things, meaning or value) is lost. We have more power and information (*shi* success) than ever, yet greater alienation and precariousness – a gap from *zai*. This confirms the thesis: *shi* alone cannot sustain a world; without *zai*, it collapses or becomes destructive.

Given this dire analysis, the remedy suggested is straightforward in concept: **to re-balance by restoring *zai* to its primacy**. The conclusion of our argument is that we must “return to the simplicity (plainness) of *zai*” and “acknowledge the everyday banality of Being”. Only by doing so can we see the *limits* of *shi*'s extraordinary projects and reclaim a space for genuine human existence in the technological age.

This does not mean abolish *shi* – that would be impossible and undesirable (we need predication to think and communicate). It means **humbling *shi***, preventing its imperialistic takeover, and appreciating *zai*. In practical terms, this could align with calls for a more *letting-be* attitude (echoing Heidegger's

Gelassenheit), a focus on direct experience and presence (as some existential phenomenologists and spiritual traditions suggest), and a caution against the totalizing ambitions of technology and ideology. It also involves a new ontological language: one that can speak to *being* without immediately turning it into a mere object or predicate. Perhaps philosophy needs to develop ways of pointing to *zai* (much like some Eastern philosophies use paradox, poetry, or silence).

**“Only by returning to *zai*’s simplicity and admitting the ordinariness of ‘Being’ can we reflect on the limits exposed by *shi*’s extraordinary ambition, and thereby open a new space of possibilities for human existence in the technological era.”** In other words, we must recognize that Being is ultimately *prosaic*, not something abstract and far away – it is the simple presence of the real, which we have taken for granted and subordinated to grand designs. By valuing the *ordinary*, we counteract the alienation caused by chasing the *extraordinary*. This, in turn, gives humans a chance to **reorient our relationship with the world**: rather than as dominators or constructors (pure *shi* stance), we return to being dwellers and appreciators of presence (*zai* stance).

Such a shift could alleviate the metaphysical confusion – because we would no longer be trying to force one concept (*shi*) to do the work of two – and mitigate the technological crisis – because we would set self-imposed limits on the drive to control, allowing space for things to be. It opens a new horizon where technology and reason exist, but within the context of a more fundamental *letting-be*. In sum, a post-subjective ontology founded on *zai* and *shi* in proper distinction promises a reconciliation: it lets us maintain the insights of Western logic and science (*shi*’s gifts) while grounding them in a deeper acceptance of reality’s contingency and givenness (*zai*’s truth).

By explicating the *zai/shi* difference, we hope to have provided a framework that truly *goes beyond* the subject-object dichotomy. It shows that what lies “beneath” or “before” the subject (and object) is not another object or transcendent subject, but the event of presence itself (*zai*). With *zai* recovered, the subject can relax its frantic self-assertion, and thinking can find a home in the cosmos again – a *cosmos* understood not as a fully ordered system (*shi*), but as the open-ended *happening of presence* which forever exceeds and sustains any order.

## CONCLUSION

Through a critical engagement with Heidegger's fundamental ontology and the modern philosophy of subjectivity, we have uncovered a deep ontological distinction between *zai* (presence) and *shi* (predication) that has been implicit yet obscured in Western thought. Heidegger attempted to overcome the metaphysics of presence by focusing on Dasein's disclosedness, but we found that he remained within the orbit of *shi* – narrowing Being to the horizon of a subject's existential interpretation. Meanwhile, the subject-centered tradition from Descartes to Hegel sought to establish the self or Spirit as the ground of being, only to entangle itself in paradoxes of self-negation, nihilism, and totalization. These failures, we argued, stem from elevating the logical/copulative *is* (*shi*) to the role of first principle, thereby conflating the *meaning* of being with the *fact* of being.

By introducing the *zai/shi* distinction, we emphasize that *zai* – a pre-conceptual, pre-subjective *thereness* – is the **original mode of being**, the ontological “absolute” that precedes and undergirds all determinate beings (*shi* and *the beings that have shi*). In this view, *zai* is the wellspring of *Being* that Western ontology missed: the plain existence that does not need to be earned or imposed. Western philosophy's “error,” as illuminated by the Chinese linguistic perspective, was to treat the dual nature of “Being” (presence vs. predication) as a single mysterious entity – thereby “forgetting *zai*” while enthroning various exalted forms of *shi*. This led to what we identified as metaphysical confusion: an oscillation between viewing being as something *given* (presence) and something *made* (predication) without recognizing the difference. The Chinese term *zai* captures the given aspect – an “unforced presence” – whereas *shi* captures the made aspect – a “logical positing.”

Our analysis revealed that *shi* (the domain of logic, definition, and representation) invariably tries to **mimic and supplant** *zai* (the domain of simple existence), and that modern technological rationality is essentially an extreme case of this *mimetic drive*. Through science and technology, humans have attempted to convert contingency into necessity – to turn every *zai* (random or unscripted event) into a *shi* (planned, measured outcome). This project, however, results in what we called a “surfeit of *shi*” and a corresponding *poverty of zai*\*: the more we impose order, the more we feel the loss of genuine presence, leading to alienation and instability. The **technological crisis** of the current age –

ecological disruption, informational overload, loss of meaning – is interpreted, in our framework, as the inevitable outcome of privileging *shi* to the point of **metaphysical overreach**. *Shi* has overstepped its bounds, attempting to cover the entire field of reality, and in doing so it has hollowed out the very sense of *Being* it sought to secure.

The solution we advocate is a philosophical reorientation: a deliberate *revalorization of zai*. This means recognizing the **limits of shi** – acknowledging that not everything need (or can) be caught in our conceptual net, and that there is a virtue in things simply abiding in their own way. By “admitting the banality of *Being*”, we invert the Western metaphysical bias that equated true being with something sublime or exceptional. *Being* is most fundamentally *ordinary* – the quiet persistence of the real. This does not degrade ontology, but rather grounds it. When we accept *zai* (the *suchness* of each thing and moment) as the true foundation, we can **critique shi**’s pretensions more effectively. We see that every grand system (*shi*) is provisional, that the diversity of existence cannot be exhausted by any totalizing identity (*shi* always leaves out the manifold “otherness” of *zai*).

Embracing *zai* also opens a path to heal the rift between humanity and nature (or technology and life). It suggests an ethos of *letting-be* and *receptivity* rather than constant *enframing*. In practical terms, this could manifest as technologies and social structures that respect spontaneity, locality, and the unplanned – in contrast to rigid top-down regimes of control. It also encourages individuals to find meaning in direct engagement with the real – the tactile, present, and living – as opposed to retreating into abstract representations or virtual simulations. In short, **to “return to zai”** is to return to the world sincerely, shedding the armor of excessive conceptualization and domination.

In conclusion, by delineating *zai* and *shi* as two irreducible dimensions of being, we offer a framework for a **post-subjective ontology** that avoids the twin pitfalls of classical metaphysics and modern subjectivism. It shows that beneath the subject-object divide lies a more fundamental split between presence and predication. Western philosophy’s *Being* (with a capital B) was a confused amalgam; splitting it into *zai* and *shi* clarifies why metaphysics oscillated between viewing being as *what is there* versus *what is true*. With this clarification, we can reconcile insights from both Eastern and Western traditions: the appreciation of

*being-so-of-itself* from the former and the rigor of logical articulation from the latter. By giving *zai* its due and restraining *shi* within its proper scope, ontology can move beyond the age of the sovereign Subject into an age of Being as co-presence – a more humble, and perhaps more enduring, configuration for thought. Such a re-founded ontology not only resolves long-standing theoretical confusions but also provides a renewed basis for humans to inhabit the world in a way that is meaningful, sustainable, and free.

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