

THINGS MAKE SENSE



With the appearance of human being, meaning dawned in the universe, and nothing has been the same since. For the first time in the 13.7 billion years of the cosmos, things were no longer just “out there” but instead became meaningfully present (*anwesend*).

As far as we know, only human beings can question things, recognize them for what they are in themselves, name them, talk about them in soliloquy or dialogue, and even talk about that talking. Once man is possessed by the Promethean fire of intellect and language, human history begins as a complex unfolding of meaningful lives.

Heidegger's philosophical focus never strayed from *die Sache selbst*, the astonishing fact that with human existence sense irrupts into an otherwise meaningless universe. Throughout his career he remained fixed on the twofold question of (1) the meaningful presence (*Anwesen*) of things, and (2) above all, what *lets* such meaningful presence happen (*das Anwesenlassen*).

The latter is what Heidegger called his basic question or

Grundfrage. If philosophy begins with astonishment, then the ἀρχή – the origin and ordering – of all Heidegger's thought was the wonder of all wonders: that things make sense.

The back story of this essay has been argued in recent publications and, given the necessary brevity of the present text, cannot be detailed here. The main point is that Heidegger's work unfolds with unprecedented clarity, simplicity, and force once one realizes that by equating *Sein* with *Anwesen* and by casting his thought in the mode of phenomenology and hermeneutics, Heidegger himself placed the problematic of being squarely within the parameters of meaning.

For example, in 1919, during his first course after the Great War, Heidegger asked what it is we immediately encounter in lived experience.

Is it blanched out "beings" that only later acquire the hue of meaning? No, what we first encounter and always live with is:

the meaningful [*das Bedeutsame*] – that is what is first and immediately given to you without any mental detour through a conceptual grasp of the thing. When you live in the everyday world [*die Umwelt*], everything comes at you loaded with meaning, all over the place and all the time.

Everything appears within a meaningful context, and that context *gives those things their meaning*.

And in 1924 he remarked:

For a long time, I have been designating the being character of human existence as *meaningfulness*.

This being-character is the primary one in which the world is encountered.

Again in his 1925 – 26 course on *Logic* he signaled the centrality of meaning to human being:

Because by its very nature existence is sense-making, it lives in meanings and can express itself in and as meanings.

A year later, in *Being and Time*, Heidegger declared that the hermeneutics of Dasein was the indispensable basis for the doctrine of meaning (*Bedeutungslehre*) that he presented there.⁹ The center of that doctrine of meaning is being-in-the-world. But the essence of world is meaningfulness (*Bedeutsamkeit*). Therefore, we may interpret being-in-the-world (*In-der-Bedeutsamkeit-sein*) as man's thrown-projective engagement-with-meaning. In addition, throughout his career Heidegger

interpreted the pre-Socratic thinkers as proto-phenomenologists focused on the conjunction (τὸ αὐτό) of meaningful presence (εἶναι) and human apprehension of it (νοῦς). And when it came to Plato and Aristotle, Heidegger read οὐσία, the Greek word for "being," as παρ-ουσία, meaningful presence in and to λόγος. No λόγος, no παρουσία.

The danger of hypostasizing *Sein* – always a Heideggerian temptation – readily dissolves once we understand that human existence is *for the sake of meaning* (early Heidegger) or is *a priori appropriated into the meaning-process* (later Heidegger). Meaning is the *raison d'être* of human being. “The clearing grants Dasein as such.”

In this shift to an emphatically phenomenological-hermeneutical way of reading Heidegger, the *Da-sein / Sein* correlation is transformed into the *Dasinn / Sinn* conjunction: man as the only “place” where meaningful presence or *Anwesen* occurs.

We can read the *Da-sinn / Sinn* conjunction from either side: No man, no meaning (Heidegger i), or no meaning, no man (Heidegger ii). The crux of the reversal (*Kehre*) between the earlier and later

Heidegger is the recognition that human beings do not generate the space of meaning *sua sponte* but are pulled into it *a priori*. In the final analysis, to fail to see that sense-making is the most basic thing that human being is and does, is to entirely miss the point of Heidegger's thought.

In this paper I argue that Heidegger's extensive corpus from beginning to end remained a hermeneutics of *Dasein* or an analytic of human existence, in which Heidegger, like Theseus, made fast the guiding thread of all philosophical inquiry at the point where it *arises* and to which it *returns*, namely, human being. This entails that all the key terms in Heidegger's lexicon – *Ereignis*, ἀλήθεια, *Lichtung*, even *Sein* –

are existential precisely in the sense that the early Heidegger gave this term: necessities and abilities that *a priori* determine the human way of being.

In Heidegger's world, apart from the fact of *Da-sinn/Sinn*, there is no further, higher level where things like *Seyn* and *Ereignis* carry on their business. That would be metaphysics in its worst form (even though it is frequently peddled about as "Heidegger's thought"). Heidegger remained on one level only, that of the man-meaning conjunction, and everything in his corpus is about that. No matter how wide his thinking ranged or how deep it reached, Heidegger never got beyond human being, and never intended to. Nor did he need to. This may be a *scandalum piis auribus*, but so be it. The only *pietas* philosophers should respect is that of thinking *qua* questioning.

The questioning that this essay pursues is twofold, even though I can only sketch out the second part: (i) How do human beings make sense of the things they encounter? And (ii) What does this have do to the basic question (*Grundfrage*) of Heidegger's thought?