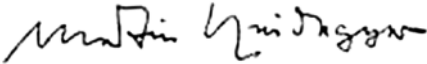


# The Constitution of Meaning in the Writings of Martin Heidegger between 1919 and 1927

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*“Meaning is that wherein  
the intelligibility of  
something maintains itself.”*



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## Introduction

THE GOAL of this study is to discuss the way in which the structure of meaning is constituted, considering the phenomenon of significance as a first moment of this process. But if this is the case, then what are the other moments? We shall try to answer this preliminary question with a recourse to the existentials of the there, showing how the phenomenon of significance is equi-primordially Understanding. But firstly we must argue the statement given above, regarding significance as the first moment in the process of constituting meaning.

We shall start with a formal indication: meaning is “defined” by Heidegger as a structure of Being, or in other words, a mode of presence in which the intelligibility of something (as something) can maintain.<sup>1</sup> This is where the phenomenon of significance comes into play: proximally and for the most part, our worldly experience dwells in a heedful dealing with equip-

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ment and the way in which we come across equipment is by no means a theoretical, but more likely a practical one (circumspection). The equipment is always ready-to-hand (*Zuhandene*) for the concerned dealings of our day to day life, and the kind of Being it possesses is readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*).<sup>2</sup> However, every “piece” of equipment (this hammer here) refers to other “pieces” of equipment (nails, wood etc), thus constituting a totality of equipment. This totality of reference-relations (“in order to...,” “what for”) ultimately refers to *Dasein* and is “for the sake of” *Dasein*, thus the whole of these reference-relations is what Heidegger calls significance.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, innerworldly entities are discovered, proximally and for the most part, by *Dasein*’s concerned dealings with equipment. However, at the very level of the environmental world, not only the Being of equipment is disclosed, but also the Being of the others and the Being of *Dasein*. Such a thing is possible precisely because *Dasein*’s proximal way of encountering the world consists of its concern for things and, because at the very level of the environmental world the others and also the self of *Dasein* are discovered, significance can be regarded as the initial moment of the structure of meaning. Yet the obvious question arises: if significance is only a moment, then what are the others? In answering this question we will turn our attention to the description of the Being of the there.

## Disclosure and Facticity

**A**S WE have established, *Dasein* discovers the innerworldly equipment, the others and itself through significance. Circumspection (*Umsicht*) grasps the totality of reference-relations present in the environmental world and consequently the Others and the self of *Dasein* are also revealed, although non-thematically. However, the Being of *Dasein* is not the same as the Being of equipment, thus the adequate way of grasping the *Dasein* of the Others and the self of the *Dasein* is not circumspection, but considerateness (*Rücksicht*) with regards to Others, and transparency (*Durchsichtigkeit*) with regards to the self.<sup>4</sup> Thus it becomes clear that concerned dealings with things do not suffice for structuring the whole of Being-in-the-world. The fact that *Dasein* is from the outset understanding of the world as a whole, and not just certain “regions” of it, gives testimony to the fact that *Dasein* cannot be discovered (only things can), but only disclosed. This pre-ontological “availability” of the world is what Heidegger calls the disclosure of *Dasein*. Yet what does it mean for *Dasein* to be disclosed? In order to answer this question we must turn our analysis towards the Being of the there.

The pre-ontological indication that *Dasein* is, from the outset, Being-in-the-world and that it has a certain understanding of the world as a whole, must come to be ontologically clarified. Thus, Heidegger describes the disclosure of *Dasein* as a threefold existential structure, formed by Attunement<sup>5</sup> (*Be-findlichkeit*), Understanding (*Verstehen*) and Discourse (*Rede*).

What we ontologically have in view by attunement is ontically something very common, and that is the fact that we are always in a particular mood. Through its moods *Dasein* is delivered over to its Being-there, brought before the pure fact “that it is.” However, the “whence” and the “whither” of existence remain in obscurity, and this is what Heidegger calls the thrownness<sup>6</sup> of *Dasein* into its there. Thrownness suggests nothing other than the facticity of its being delivered over to itself. What attunement discloses is *Dasein*’s thrownness, which is prior to (and beyond) any belief or knowledge. It doesn’t matter if *Dasein* is assured in its belief about the “whither” or supposes to know (through rationality) about its “whence,” because thrownness remains an “inexorable enigma” in which *Dasein* is delivered over to its Being as facticity (the fact that “it is and must be”). Cognition’s possibilities of disclosing *Dasein* always fall too short when compared to the way in which moods disclose its Being-there. This means that disclosure is prior to discoveredness: only a Being-in-the-world with moods can discover something threatening, obtrusive or obnoxious—in general terms, something significant. Moods are the possibility of being affected, particularly seen in the way in which things “matter” for *Dasein*. Michel Haar conceives these moods not “as a vague sentiment or a simple atmosphere, but always a *Grundstimmung*, a fundamental attunement, at once determined and determining for the epoch.”<sup>7</sup> This means that the concerned dealings of *Dasein*—the complex of significance—can be disrupted, altered or modified by moods (especially bad ones). This is obvious when we consider that: “It is precisely when we see the ‘world’ unsteadily and fitfully in accordance with our moods, that the ready-to-hand shows itself in its specific worldhood, *which is never the same from day to day*”<sup>8</sup> (emphasis added). Thus, the totality of ready-to-hand equipment, articulated as significance, changes its *specific* worldhood (its mode of Being) along with *Dasein*’s unsteady and fitful moods.

The Being of the there is equiprimordially determined by understanding, which has its own mood, just as attunement has its own understanding. Considering it existentially (ontologically) we must not confuse understanding with a particular form of knowledge, but rather realize that knowledge and explanation are derived modes of the former. The understanding of the “for the sake of” and of significance equiprimordially discloses the world as such, pertaining to Being-in-the-world as a whole.<sup>9</sup> As a Being that represents an issue for itself, *Dasein*, whose potentiality-for-being lies existentially in understand-

ing, is essentially Being-possible. However, it is the very way in which Heidegger conceives possibility that is very important here, because it is not the possibility of logic, thus not a free-floating potentiality-for-Being, but thrown possibility.<sup>10</sup> But what does thrown possibility mean? Nothing but the fact that *Dasein* is, from the outset, in certain possibilities, choosing some, and letting others go. *Dasein* is Being-possible which has been delivered over to itself and this is what Heidegger calls the facticity of its Being. *Dasein* understands what its potentiality-for-Being is capable of, not in the way of an immanent self-perception, but rather in a factual way. However, the disclosure which is proper to understanding, as possibility, pertains to the world as a whole: the entities in the world are freed for their own possibilities, thus the totality of involvements is revealed as a possible intertwining of the ready-to-hand. The fact that understanding always presses forward into possibilities reveals its existential structure called projection.<sup>11</sup> The thrownness of *Dasein* is throwing into projecting, and understanding never grasps thematically that upon which it projects (in this sense “project” does not mean a well built plan which somebody would follow), but throws forth possibility *as* possibility. This projective character of understanding represents the Sight (*Sicht*) of *Dasein*, a threefold unity (above mentioned) proper to each “region” of the world: the circumspection (*Umsicht*) of concern, the considerateness (*Rücksicht*) of solicitude and the transparency (*Durchsichtigkeit*) of Being a self.

However, projection has the possibility to develop itself through interpretation (*Auslegung*<sup>12</sup>) and “in interpretation understanding appropriates understandingly that which is understood by it.”<sup>13</sup> When saying that circumspection discovers, this means that the world which has been already understood comes to be interpreted; discovering the world is interpretation. The way in which *Dasein* accomplishes its everyday dealings (preparing, fixing, and improving), renders explicit the ready-to-hand in its “in-order-to,” its involvement. This explicit grasping of the ready-to-hand in its “in-order-to” has the structure of something *as* something (*etwas als etwas*). What *Dasein* sees by means of circumspection when dealing with the ready-to-hand, is something *as* a table, or *as* a door etc. The “in-order-to” of equipment is never fixed or determined (like a property) and could more likely be conceived in terms of ‘appropriate’ or ‘inappropriate’ (for the purpose of the every day domesticities). We never see a mere spatial object, with an extension and with certain physical traits only to have a certain signification glued to them afterwards, but rather: from the outset, we understand something as “good for this” or “in the way of” and so forth. A table is understood as a place to eat or a place to work, a door is understood as prevention against the weather or as protection from strangers. This is a clear indication that readiness-to-hand is an ontological structure (a

possibility) and not an ontical one. But doesn't this point of view have a major flaw? What if a certain *Dasein* has no idea of the involvement of a thing? Doesn't this mean that the "as" structure of Interpretation is relative to a certain socio-cultural background? Confronted with this problem, Heidegger gives a remarkable example<sup>14</sup>: if a primitive man were to enter the classroom and look at the desk what would he see? Since he knows nothing about the desk *as* the place of the teacher, wouldn't he then see it just as a spatial object with physical characteristics? At this point, Heidegger's answer is extremely insightful: he would see the desk *as* something that has to do with magic or *as* something behind which he could take cover or even *as* something that he has no idea what to do with. Either way, he understands the desk *as*... something, whatever that may be (appropriate or not). Perceiving an object by means of his spatiality and physical traits is something which is proper to theory, and in this respect is a totally artificial way of seeing. This means that, from the outset, *Dasein* has already understood the world and interprets it factually (by means of the totality of involvements, by means of the purposes of its actions and so on) according to the "as" structure.

As we have seen, the ready-to-hand is understood in terms of the totality of involvements disclosed as such. However, this totality is never fully grasped, but rather remains undifferentiated, undetermined. Interpretation appropriates what has been understood in this undifferentiated way "under the guidance of a perspective which fixes that with regard to which what has been understood is to be interpreted."<sup>15</sup> This is what Heidegger calls *fore-having* (*Vorhabe*). But every interpretation is also grounded in something seen in advance—fore-seeing (*Vorsicht*)—which is a definite way in which our sight takes the first cut (a first differentiation) out of what has been taken into fore-having. Also, what has become available by means of fore-having and fore-seeing becomes conceivable through interpretation. The conceiving of an entity can be drawn from the entity itself (appropriate) or it can force the entity under a concept which does not suit it (inappropriate). This grasping in advance is what Heidegger calls *fore-conception* (*Vorgriff*). Any interpretation of something as something is founded essentially on the fore-structure (*Vorstruktur*).<sup>16</sup> Having, seeing and conceiving in advance determines the structure of what was earlier called the a priori of understanding. *Dasein* is never in a point of pure apprehending of the world, lacking any presuppositions. Essentially thrown and projective, *Dasein* is always already understanding and interpreting the world—since it is never "in possession" of an origin that foregoes it—according to its existential possibilities. Since *Dasein* is always already in the world (thrown and projective) understandingly, to imagine a 'Subject' that constitutes the 'Object', the others and the world is not only very artificial (this is the traditional pattern which phi-

losophy followed, even Husserl's phenomenology), but also represents a theoretical distortion and veiling of *Dasein's* facticity.

As earlier stated, through projection, understanding discovers the innerworldly entities according to their possibility, corresponding in each occasion with the kind of Being of the entity which is understood. The reference relations, constituting the whole of significance, which have been tied in advance, project (free) the entities upon this whole. In discovering, what is then understood is said to have a meaning. But what is truly understood is not meaning, but the entity itself, or accordingly Being. In this respect Heidegger writes:

*Meaning is that wherein the intelligibility [Verstandlichkeit] of something maintains itself. That which can be Articulated in a disclosure by which we understand, we call "meaning." The concept of meaning embraces the formal existential framework of what necessarily belongs to that which understanding interpretation Articulates. Meaning is the "upon which" of a projection in terms of which something becomes intelligible as something; it gets its structure from a fore-having, a fore-sight and a fore-conception.<sup>17</sup>*

Given the fact that meaning is the formal structure of the disclosure which is proper to understanding, it becomes obvious that one cannot assimilate meaning to a particular signification, but rather conceive it as the structure making possible the articulation of such determined significations. Yet how are we to conceive these significations? What relationship do they have with significance and meaning? These questions bring about the phenomena of language and Discourse, the third existential of the there.

## Meaning and Language

IT IS a generally accepted fact that meaning is expressed by way of language. Each and every word that we use (signifier) stands for a certain idea (signified), and this idea is precisely meaning. However, when we ask ourselves what is the nature of the signified, things become very complicated. Does it have a mental existence, or maybe a real one? Yet, what does real mean, as opposed to mental? Often enough meaning is considered to be what we know about something (its characteristics). Usually when we are wondering about the meaning of something we look up its definition, thus the definition of something is its meaning. Furthermore, a definition consists of a subject (the *definiendum*) and a predicate (the *definiens*) and in this respect a definition may be regarded as an assertion. But aren't we already pre-determining meaning by encom-

passing it in the realm of epistemology? Is meaning a theoretical construct which becomes available by way of assertion? Heidegger's view on these problems is very different and somewhat more insightful. To begin with, he "defines" assertion as a "pointing-out which gives something a definite character and which communicates."<sup>18</sup> Although it is a derivative form of interpretation, assertion 'has' meaning, but this meaning is not something that is found in the actual judgment along with the judging itself. Pointing-out (as *apophansis*) is what primarily brings the thing into our sight (and not a representation of the thing). Any pointing-out is a fore-having (the first cut mentioned above is this pointing-out) of what has already been disclosed and given a definite character. But giving a definite character entails a fore-seeing, a definite way in which what is taken over in fore-having is determined according to a particular aspect (a predicate). Furthermore, any articulation of what has been pointed-out is an articulation in accordance with the complex of significations, thus any assertion operates with a fore-conception, a definite way of conceiving things. Only on the basis of this appropriation of a thing can it be determined (in a traditional-metaphysical way) according to the subject-object scheme. By considering the thing a subject (*subjectum*, *ipokeimenon*) which possesses certain properties (its predicates) we limit our seeing and give a definite character to what was from the outset manifest (the thing). This is how *Dasein* goes from a practical-circumspective way of dealing with things to a theoretical way (leaving the 'essence' of what has been determined as *ipokeimenon* in obscurity). In the circumspective dealing with things *Dasein* discovers the equipment in its readiness-to-hand (as a "how"), according to significance. On the other hand, when an assertion is made about a certain equipment ("the hammer is heavy"), the thing is not seen in its specific involvement in the world, but is rather seen as something present-at-hand which the assertion sees as a "what" and can, subsequently, become available in a definite way. The shift from the "as" of circumspective interpretation (hermeneutical "as") to the "as" of the definite character of the presence-at-hand (the apophantical 'as') is the reason for affirming that assertion is a derivative mode of interpretation.

Since the late Greek ontology the structure of the apophantical "as" has been approached in various ways. The innerwordly entities were seen as present-at-hand, and the way in which these entities were brought together in manifestation by a succession of words (*logos*) was conceived as Being-present-at-hand-together.<sup>19</sup> Aristotle's view of *logos* as being simultaneously *synthesis* and *diairesis* was indeed a more radical way to bestow the problem, but he did not carry out the question further. In the light of our analyses so far, *synthesis* may be conceived as the non-thematical totality of involvements (significations) understood by interpretation, while *diairesis* may be conceived as the pointing

out (differentiating) which is proper to assertion. This is also the viewpoint of J. N. Mohanty when he speaks of an identity-cum-difference structure in Heidegger's approaches to the theory of judgment.<sup>20</sup> At this point we can gain a better understanding of the definition by *genus proximus et differentia specifica* by way of this *synthesis-cum-diairesis* structure of *logos*. In this respect *genus* should be conceived as the undifferentiated totality of involvements (to avoid an infinite proliferation of genera), while *differentia specifica* as the pointing-out of the fore-structure. Even though these two traits can be positively reinterpreted, the Being of *logos* is still in need of a rethinking in accordance with the approach of fundamental ontology. Yet how does Heidegger understand to do so?

In interpretation, the intelligibility of what is understood is articulated, and this articulation is what Heidegger calls discourse.<sup>21</sup> What is articulated is the totality-of-significations (*Bedeutungsganze*) and, as previously seen, we must conceive these significations in a factual way, according to the totality of involvements disclosed by understanding. Only on the basis of this prior gathering up (the totality, *synthesis*), can the whole be broken up into particular significations (*diairesis*). This means that the significations are not conceived theoretically (as representations or ideations), but, on the contrary, in their dependence on the worldly dealings and concern. Yet what does it mean to say that every signification *Dasein* uses has its "roots" in the facticity of existence? The question is indeed important when considering that serious confusions may appear, this being also the case of J. N. Mohanty. In his paper, Mohanty acknowledges the fact that disclosure is prior to judgment, but only in the case of perceptual (or common life actions) and not in the case of scientific judgments. He states: "In a judgment about electrons, one does not have a pre-theoretical disclosure of the object-about-which: in verifying such a judgment, the disclosure comes afterwards as the 'fulfillment' of the meaning intention as an originally empty judgment."<sup>22</sup> Although his remark is correct, it is not necessarily true, for the following reasons: i) the fore-structure of an assertion about an electron is not pre-theoretical, but theoretical, yet, there is an horizon in which the concept of electron is understood as such, so there is a disclosure (of the theoretical system in which the concept of electron has a meaning) which is prior to the assertion—even if this disclosure is, in this case, an hypothesis; ii) any theoretical construct is possible only after a factual encounter with the world; iii) the use of the terms "fulfillment" and "meaning intention" seems very Husserlian, and I fail to understand how a disclosure can fulfill the meaning intention of an assertion. In summing up these remarks, I would have to say that disclosure (as meaning) underlies any assertion or signification (be it perceptual or scientific). This means that any pointing-out, as



determination and differentiation, by way of significations, is founded in the fore-structure (the horizon) of the disclosure articulated as meaning.

However, meaning is nothing else than that wherein the intelligibility of Being-in-the-world maintains itself, thus discourse articulates the intelligibility of Being-in-the-world. Meaning discloses the totality of involvements (totality of significations) and orients it (“upon which”). Discourse is the way in which *Dasein* articulates, according to significations, the intelligibility of Being-in-the-world. Thus, we must conceive discourse as the “ek-spression” of the intelligibility of Being-in-the-world. However, discourse at its turn, has the possibility of expressing through language. Language is always talking-about-something (a wish, a desire, a thing and so on). However, that which discourse is about is a structural item that could be formally indicated as constituting the disclosedness of Being-in-the-world. This means that discourse is never about something (some determined thing), but about the disclosure of what makes “something” available and manifest. More accurately, discourse is about the possibility of making “something” manifest and available for language. Since Being-in-the-world is primordially Being-with, Being-with-one-another is essentially discursive. This means that *Dasein* is not an encapsulated Subject which has to get out of its sphere of immanence to constitute the Other and the Object (in their transcendence), but rather *Dasein* is already Being-with, and its “inside” is always an “outside” (*Dasein* is transcendent, ek-static).

## Conclusion

**I**N THIS paper I have set out to argue that we can obtain a better understanding of the phenomena of meaning and significance with recourse to the existentials of the there. *Dasein* discovers the Being of the innerworldly equipment as a totality of involvements articulated by significance. *Dasein* is Being-in-the-world, which factually means that it is a Being delivered over to itself, thus disclosing the world as a whole through understanding. Essentially a Being-possible, *Dasein* articulates its understanding—as meaning—in accordance with possibilities. However, these possibilities are not conceived as being pure or transcendental, but rather factual ones: *Dasein*, in its thrownness, is never in a perspective-free point from where it can “see” all the possibilities in their pureness, since it has always already chose some possibilities, and let others go. Instead, one must conceive these factual possibilities as a totality (horizon) of interlacing possibilities articulating the projective existence of *Dasein*. However, this totality is never a rigid frame which can be fully grasped by understanding. The horizon of factual possibilities develops according to

the situational progress<sup>23</sup> of Being-in-the-world, which implies that meaning—as the articulation of intelligibility—is always “constituted” in accordance with the factual situation of *Dasein*. The significations that language uses are founded on the understanding of the totality of involvements (significance) which meaning discloses by means of concerned dealings. While significations are determined, meaning is essentially un-determined and in this respect, any worldview (be it logical, mathematical, physical, philosophical and so on) that is articulated by way of significations is founded on meaning as their “condition of possibility.” Yet, meaning can never be fully grasped (determined) by *Dasein*, since it is the factual horizon in which any understanding takes place—to attempt such a thing would be similar to trying to jump over your own shadow—therefore, meaning is not an ultra-signification that can be found in a meta-reality, but an ontological structure (a structure of possibility) designating the factual character of thrown projection.



## Notes

1. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 2002), 193.
2. Ibid., 101.
3. Ibid., 120.
4. Ibid., 186.
5. We shall use John Stambaugh’s translation of *Befindlichkeit* as “Attunement,” instead of “state of mind,” which is the translation given by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson.
6. Heidegger, 174.
7. Michel Haar, “Attunement and Thinking,” in *Heidegger Reexamined*, vol. 3, *Art, Poetry and Technology* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 160.
8. Heidegger, 177.
9. Ibid., 187.
10. Ibid., 185.
11. Ibid.
12. Besides interpretation, the term *Auslegung* can also mean “explicitation.”
13. Heidegger, 188.
14. GA 56/57, p. 72, apud Christian Ferencz-Flatz, *Obişnuit și neobişnuit în viața de zi cu zi: Fenomenologia situației și critica heideggeriană a conceptului de valoare* (Bucharest: Humanitas, 2008), 62.
15. Heidegger, 191.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid., 193.
18. Ibid., 199.
19. Ibid., 201.

20. J. N. Mohanty, "Heidegger on Logic," in *Heidegger Reexamined*, vol. 4, *Language and the Critique of Subjectivity* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 114.
21. Heidegger, 203.
22. Mohanty, 126.
23. For a thorough analysis of the concept of factual situation we recommend the above mentioned book of C. Ferencz-Flatz.

### **Abstract**

#### The Constitution of Meaning in the Writings of Martin Heidegger between 1919 and 1927

In this paper I shall discuss the way in which meaning (*Sinn*) is constituted, starting off with the concept of significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*) as it is found in the writings of Martin Heidegger between 1919 and 1927. For a thorough understanding of meaning and significance, our analysis must turn to the existentials of the there, namely *Attunement*, *Understanding* and *Discourse*. This will lead us to conceiving meaning not as an epistemological entity, but rather as an ontological structure articulated by way of *Dasein*'s factual existence. Considering the fact that meaning is the articulation of the disclosure of Being-in-the-world, I will argue that there is a structural difference between meaning and the significations of language: since the latter are conceived as being determined and differentiated and the former is considered undetermined and undifferentiated, we must consider meaning as the "condition of possibility" of any signification. However, the way in which Heidegger conceives possibility (as thrown possibility) renders inappropriate any attempt to interpret his approach as a transcendentalist one.

### **Keywords**

meaning, significance, understanding, attunement, disclosure, facticity