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Interpreting Heidegger

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Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift. London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015. xx + 349 pp.

There is a familiar story about the course of Heidegger's thought: *Being and Time* launched the *Seinsfrage* by beginning with a phenomenological analysis of (human) Dasein as a preliminary approach to the meaning of being. Then the *Kehre* announced a turn from Dasein to an account of being itself, its historical manifestations, and a concentration on the difference between being and beings. Then the ontological difference came to be reserved for metaphysical conceptions of being (for instance, matter as the beingness of beings in materialism), as opposed to difference thought *as* difference, as that which grants the being of beings, which was named with words like *Ereignis* and *Lichtung*. Accordingly, "being" and the phenomenology of Dasein no longer had pride of place in Heidegger's thinking.

Tom Sheehan's remarkable book, *Making Sense of Heidegger*, challenges this story and the supposed eclipse or subordination of being and Dasein. Sheehan maintains that a phenomenological approach to the being-question was always at work in Heidegger's writings, and that being should be understood as the "meaningful presence [of things] within worlds of human interests and concerns" (xii). This is a "paradigm shift" because it dispenses with any supposed Super-X that hypostasizes being or difference beyond the horizon of meaning in human existence—whether in terms of some post-ontological X like *Ereignis* or the retention of "being itself" as synonymous with *Ereignis* and other post-metaphysical terms naming the wellspring that grants the beingness of beings and that is *independent* of any particular manifestation of being.¹ According to Sheehan, notions such as *Ereignis*, *Lichtung*, and *Sein selbst* are simply "formal indications" of how meaning comes to presence and is made possible in human life (16–23). The "how" shows that being, for Sheehan, is not actually

1 An example of the latter approach that retains the primacy of "being itself" in Heidegger is found in the work of Richard Capobianco. See *Engaging Heidegger* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010) and *Heidegger's Way of Being* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2014).

the last word in Heidegger's investigations. The meaningful presence of things (being) is the subject matter, but the ultimate goal of Heidegger's questioning concerns that which makes meaningful presence possible, and this turns out to be the "open clearing" of Dasein's "thrown projection," which should be seen to run through both the early and later writings, and which is not some Super-X independent of meaningful presence (13–25).

The book is structured in the following way: an important preparatory Forward; an Introduction; three parts spanning eight chapters, and a concluding chapter on critical reflections. Part One covers Heidegger's readings of Greek philosophy, with two important chapters focusing on Heidegger's engagement with, and movement beyond, Aristotle's phenomenology. Part Two takes up *Being and Time*, with three chapters addressing 1) Dasein as being-in-the-world, 2) Dasein's thrown projection as the open clearing that anticipates later notions such as *Ereignis*, and 3) authentic existence. Part Three covers Heidegger's writings after *Being and Time*, with a chapter on the continuity of the early phenomenology and the later thought (except for Heidegger's discovery of the intrinsic hiddenness of the open clearing), a chapter on the so-called *Kehre*, and a chapter on the history of being.

The key to Sheehan's analysis is the distinction between meaningful presence (being)—say, the engagement with a tool in a purposeful task—and the open clearing of disclosedness that is always already in play as the background allowing an implicit understanding of the tool *as* suitable for the task at hand. This open clearing is a "thrown appropriation" because Dasein must already be shaped by it before any particular element of meaning can be opened up (20–21). The distinction between what makes *possible* any *actual* case of meaning does not entail anything "other" than meaningful human existence, and this accounts for Sheehan's attention to an ambiguity in Heidegger's deployment of *Sein* and *Dasein*. Dasein indicates on the one hand human beings and their meaningful projects—concrete *existentiell* occasions of life—and on the other hand, Dasein's "essence" as the thrown-open-clearing—the *existential* structure that makes human projects possible and intelligible (xvi). For many scholars, Dasein is restricted to human existence in the open clearing, while the open clearing itself is something different from, and independent of, Dasein—understood as *Ereignis* or *Sein selbst*. For Sheehan, however, the open clearing is not something different from Dasein (23).

The Foreword to the book is crucial because Sheehan there establishes his use of terms and translations of Heidegger's German terms. He declares that Heidegger was "sloppy" with his terminology, thus failing to sustain clear distinctions that would have intercepted mistakes in scholarly interpretations (xiv–xvii). For instance, Sheehan lists eight notions—such as appropriation,

thrown-openness, and the essence of human being—that he will (without notice throughout the book) substitute for any version of “being itself” that has caused confusion. Moreover, Sheehan puts full weight on the concept of *Dasein*, which he claims should be taken as central to Heidegger’s entire thought, but which has been sidelined or misread because Heidegger did not always distinguish between *Dasein* as referring to concrete existentiell cases of human life and *Da-sein* as the existential “essence” that makes possible any case of human meaning. To accommodate both senses of *Dasein*, Sheehan decides to deploy the single term “ex-sistence” throughout his analysis (which is also meant to capture the Heideggerian sense of *ek-stasis*, understood as being-in-the-open-clearing). Such terminological choices are important because Sheehan is able to sustain his paradigm shift and ward off any alternative rendition—which might come across to some as a padded advantage. In fact Sheehan overtly decides not to directly engage the vast scholarly literature on the topics at hand (xiii), so the book is a concentrated and sustained attempt to advance a particular interpretation. But at least the reader has been alerted to this strategy and can follow Sheehan’s own argument—which is buttressed by massive citations from Heidegger’s works, the volume of which is truly astounding.²

Early on (5), Sheehan cites a conversation with a Japanese scholar, where Heidegger admits the ambiguity in his use of the word “being,” which can denote both the “being of beings” and “being itself” as the clearing which opens up the being of beings. Sheehan highlights this problem of ambiguity by noting 56 different ways in which *Sein* and its cognates have been expressed in Heidegger’s writings (5–8). He maintains that all of this confusion can be clarified and sorted out by taking “being itself” to denote 1) simply the subject matter of Heidegger’s questioning (the meaning of being) and 2) a formal indication pointing to the clearing/ex-sistence that allows the being of beings to unfold, which thus provides an *answer* to the question concerning being. We are told that these two senses should not be confused with each other, and that neither one connotes some Super-Being in itself beyond the being of beings (18–23).

Making Sense of Heidegger is a tour de force, exhibiting an admirable mastery of the scope and details of Heidegger’s vast output. The tsunami of citations covering every significant point was humbling for this reviewer (I have

2 There are over 1200 footnotes, most with multiple references to Heidegger’s texts. All citations, with the exception of *Sein und Zeit*, are given with the *Gesamtausgabe* numbers without title, which the reader can check in the bibliography. But there are so many citations that memorizing the titles can be needed to avoid continual checking on the list. Since the composition dates are not given in citations, questions concerning the periodic placement of a text would need the reader’s extra attention as well.

to imagine that Sheehan has some special apparatus that spits out strings of *Gesamtausgabe* references following any coded prompt). The book has already caused a stir among scholars and will continue to do so. The key question concerns the proffered paradigm shift, especially the claim concerning the persistence of phenomenology in Heidegger's thought. The shift entails that the meaning of being should not be elevated to something independent of Dasein, of meaningful human existence. I suspect that Sheehan would accept being called a humanist—not in the reductive metaphysical sense critiqued by Heidegger, but in the following two senses: 1) that the being question can never be separated from human concerns, and 2) that Heidegger scholars should move beyond immersion in the texts to consider how various human concerns can be rethought in the light of Heidegger's philosophy (xii, xix, 208–210).

I am enormously impressed by, and sympathetic with, Sheehan's work. But as a reviewer I am grabbed by two distinct questions about the book:

- 1) Is it a successful *exegetical* revision of how to understand Heidegger's texts? Or
- 2) Is it a cogent *hermeneutical* venture concerning what *we* should focus on and take from Heidegger's thought as philosophers?

These are not identical questions, and the distinction seems evident in this passage from the Foreword concerning the paradigm shift, which Sheehan argues:

[I]s necessary in order to understand [Heidegger's] whole corpus, to take on board its positive contributions to philosophy, and to throw overboard what may be of no help. I may not have gotten any of that right, but it's the best I can do at this point. . . . I welcome any and all criticism of this effort, suggestions on how it may be improved, and alternative interpretations that will make better sense of Heidegger's work as a whole and show a clearer way beyond him. (xix)

This sounds more in line with second question posed above, but most of the book seems pitched along the lines of the first question, as an exegetical correction of scholarly misreadings of Heidegger. For myself, I am more comfortable reading Sheehan's work as a *hermeneutical* shift rather than an exegetical shift in the full sense.³

3 I too have suggested a hermeneutical shift, which I believe is compatible with Sheehan's account. See my forthcoming article, "The Point of Language in Heidegger's Thinking: A Call

Sheehan's exegetical project apparently wants to rescue Heidegger from himself, from his sloppy confusions that need sorting out—where being will be limited to meaningful presence and anything like “being as such” will simply be indicative of the clearing of ex-sistence that renders being possible. But Heidegger's supposed carelessness could be due to an ongoing ambiguity he was wrestling with, where “being itself” was indeed something more than Dasein (and meaningful presence) while still implicated with Dasein. The ambiguity continues in the later writings when being seems restricted to metaphysics and yet post-ontological expressions tend to fluctuate between terms like *Ereignis* and *Sein selbst*. Sheehan may be right that Heidegger's language was confused at times, but Heidegger was an extremely careful writer and it is possible that apparent ambiguities are an “accurate” expression of something that *cannot* be clearly delineated with precise distinctions. Or perhaps we can read ambiguity as the result of ongoing “experiments” with language that issued variable articulations.

If there is such an inherent ambiguity operating in Heidegger's investigations, this would explain why passages abound that can support both Sheehan's approach and standard readings he wants to correct. Regarding the latter, there are many occasions where Heidegger seems to render something like *Ereignis* or *Sein selbst* as independent of Dasein and human meaning. One example:

The history of Being is neither the history of the human being nor the history of the human relation to beings and to Being. The history of Being is Being itself.⁴

Yet Sheehan is able to find many passages supporting his reading, and there-with anything like *Ereignis* and *Sein selbst* are taken as formally indicative of ex-sistence—as the clearing-allowing-meaning, not something independent of Dasein. One way to articulate this debate concerns the status of “transcendental phenomenology” in *Being and Time*, which the standard view has Heidegger abandoning in favor of the history of being that exceeds any grounding in meaning structures of Dasein. Sheehan concedes the turn from a transcendental to a *seinsgeschichtlich* orientation but not the departure from the *phenomenology* of Dasein (195 and Chs. 8–9).

for the Retrieval of Formal Indication” in the 2016 edition of *Gatherings: The Heidegger Circle Annual*, Volume 6.

4 GA 6.2: 447. This and other comparable passages are discussed by Capobianco in *Heidegger's Way of Being*, 14–25.

Sheehan maintains that the meaning of being, for Heidegger, is formally the same as metaphysical conceptions of the beingness of beings (xii). This seems questionable, at least for the early works. At the end of *Being and Time* (section 83), Heidegger suggests that the phenomenology of Dasein is preparatory for investigating the meaning of being *in general*, or fundamental ontology. For Sheehan, any such inquiry is not really a matter of being, but rather the open clearing that makes possible the disclosure of being. But there is enough in early texts to suggest that Heidegger sustained the use of the word “being” at this deeper level of inquiry. A significant case is the 1929 essay, “What is Metaphysics?” Here, I think, Heidegger began to expand Dasein’s experience of anxiety (the recession of meaning) in *Being and Time* into a deeper meditation on how anxiety opens up the general meaning of being in terms of the relation between being and nothing—how the nothing illuminates the primal marvel *that* beings are, which is to say, *not* nothing. In other words, the being of beings is not simply their meaning, but their unfolding out of the nothing, which exceeds meaning. And Heidegger seems to align this being-nothing excess with a sense of being that is not restricted to meaningful presence—where being and nothing are the “same” in the sense of belonging together as opening up the meaning of beings.⁵

There is (again) an ambiguity in the triadic structure of nothing-being-beings, and so Sheehan can say that the nothing-being relation applies not to the being of beings but to the open clearing as the source that makes the being of beings possible, which is precisely how he interprets fundamental ontology (133–35). Yet the nothing-being relation could also point to “being itself” as something distinctly fundamental in ontology. Sheehan does mention that the 1929 essay takes a step toward articulating the open clearing; also that the 1930 essay, “On the Essence of Truth,” consummated talk of the nothing with the following major insight: The open clearing is essentially *hidden*, an “absence” making meaningful presence possible (224). The “double negative” structure of the being-nothing relation therefore prepares Heidegger’s account of truth as un-concealment, drawn from the Greek word *alētheia*. Sheehan provides an enormously helpful analysis of *alētheia* (73ff) with the following distinctions that show the derivation of standard conceptions of truth from the more original domain of the open clearing: *alētheia* 3, as the agreement of a statement with a state of affairs; *alētheia* 2, as the pre-propositional meaningfulness of entities that makes agreement possible; and *alētheia* 1, as the thrown-open-clearing of ex-sistence from which meaningfulness unfolds, but which itself cannot be accessed and therefore remains a mystery or absence in the midst

5 GA 9: 113, 120, 307.

of presence. Yet Sheehan maintains that Heidegger often (mistakenly) used expressions that tend to hypostasize the hidden clearing and encourage talk of *Ereignis*, *Lichtung*, or *Sein selbst* as something independent of the unfolding of meaning—that is, expressions such as the clearing “hiding itself” or “bestowing” epochs of being (224ff). Even though I share Sheehan’s aversion to hypostasization, I am not so sure that Heidegger did not at least lean toward some kind of hypostasization, some *an sich* that exceeds the phenomenology of meaning.

As I see it, in addition to ambiguities in Heidegger’s language there was also an *ambivalence* in his thinking owing to a tension between the following orientations: 1) a phenomenological method that places certain constraints on what can be thought and that mandates attention to factual human life; 2) a long-standing impulse to zero in on a focal reference to capture the core of what is thought—for instance, being, being itself, *Ereignis*, or *Lichtung*—which follows a typical philosophical penchant to *unify* thought and expression;⁶ 3) an insistence on the historical nature of being, which exceeds any particular occasion or epoch of being;⁷ and 4) a certain religious disposition evident at the beginning of his career but which he never lost, even when moving away from his early Christian roots and challenging the onto-theological ground of Western philosophy—that is to say, a disposition of reverence for, and yielding to, some fateful granting power.

I think Heidegger was prone to all four orientations and their tension, thus the ambivalent ambiguities in his work. Both Sheehan and his adversaries can latch onto different citations stemming from this tension. Sheehan seems driven to sustain a phenomenological focus on the human world, and for this I applaud him. Yet his critics can worry about the trap of humanism, certainly a central target of Heidegger’s later thought. I find myself somewhere between Sheehan and standard readings in the following way: I want nothing separate from human existence, yet I want to honor Heidegger’s worries about humanism. Indeed, my (perhaps wishful) interpretation of Heidegger’s occasional talk of “independence from human beings” involves a certain phenomenological *realism*—as opposed to any kind of humanism, subjectivism, transcendentalism, or constructivism—as well as attention to crucial implications in the radical finitude of being.

6 Denis McManus provides a useful analysis of Heidegger’s search for a unified conception of being, along with the difficulties faced in such a project in the light of standard philosophical constructions. See “Ontological Pluralism and the *Being and Time* Project,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 51 no. 4 (2013): 651–673.

7 Sheehan offers an excellent summary of *seinsgeschichtlich* thinking on pages 27–28.

I read the “ontological difference” in terms of the radical finitude of being. The difference between being and beings is a twofold correlation: 1) being pertains to the meaningfulness of beings rather than the objective presence of beings per se; and 2) the meaningfulness of beings is caught up in a “negative” dimension of absence or privation—in everything from a breakdown of equipment to *Angst* and being-toward-death. In this way the meaning of things is structurally related to a de-meaning, if you will, or what I call “contraventions” of meaningful engagements (malfunction, resistance, obstacles, mistakes, absence, lack, danger, failure, loss, and termination). But contravention is not the opposite of meaning because it *illuminates* meaningfulness by abnegating or imperiling it. As Heidegger says, “[e]verything positive becomes particularly clear when seen from the side of the privative.”⁸ And it is being-toward-death that opens up the meaning of life: “Just as every loss first really allows us to recognize and understand the value of something we possessed before, so too it is precisely death that illuminates the essence of life.”⁹ Moreover, temporality itself is understood as a co-mingling of presence and absence.¹⁰ Accordingly Heidegger proclaims that being is “essentially finite,”¹¹ which means much more than spatial, temporal, or cognitive limits, because an absence or limit is *intrinsic* to the meaning of something—which is why a metaphysics of presence amounts to nihilism. This helps us understand Heidegger’s claim in *Being and Time* that *Sorge* is a unitary phenomenon with a twofold structure, a “double meaning” (*Doppelsinn*) issuing a positive and negative strand—caring and anxious worry—in a *single* conception.¹² The meaning of being, then, *includes* what “exceeds” meaning and presence, particularly when new or renewed meanings *emerge* out of engagement with this excess. Such excess *in* finite being seems missing in Sheehan’s formulation of being as “meaningful presence.” Specifically, *finite* being in this sense seems quite different from metaphysical conceptions of the beingness of beings, which Sheehan apparently takes to be coextensive with being.

The “hiddenness” of the clearing surely applies to finitude, but Sheehan appears to couch this in terms of the inaccessibility and unknowability of the “source” of meaning, of the clearing that makes meaning “possible” (3, 26–28). Sheehan ably takes “making possible” to mean not some hypostasized productive force; rather, whatever meaning humans might find, they must be *capable*

8 GA 24: 439.

9 GA 29/30: 387.

10 GA 24: 442–43.

11 GA 9: 120.

12 SZ: 199.

of finding meaning, and this capability itself is the hidden clearing (208–209). Yet what I find lacking here is the sense of “energy” in Heidegger’s correlative structure of meaning and excess. The “nothing” in anxiety, for instance, has generative force, wherein the human being “experiences the wonder of all wonders: *that beings are,*” that they are “*not nothing.*”¹³ The nothing is not an empty nothingness, but the “throw” that opens up a world of meaning, a *power* that “constantly thrusts us back into being.”¹⁴ What is ingenious about Heidegger’s account is that an absence of meaning is not the opposite of meaning but a possibility that is intrinsic to the very *emergence* of (finite) meaning. At one point Sheehan approaches this sense of finitude when he says that “making sense of things requires the imperfections and incompleteness of possibility” (241), but we need to hear more about the *dynamical* character of this process, which is a *bidirectional* movement between finite limits and the emergence of meaning, a *generative field* that is neither grounded in human meaning nor simply a hidden limit.

In Chapter 6 Sheehan does take up the finitude of being in terms of anxiety, being-toward-death, and authenticity. My impression of his account (which may be mistaken) is that the relation between meaning and excess is one of contrast, in that the absence of meaning in anxiety simply opens up its only alternative, the possibility of meaning-making in an authentic existence (162–66). This seems to hold meaning and excess apart, where meaning as “making sense” is simply the projected counter-move to the senselessness of death, which appears to me more in line with existentialism than Heidegger’s attempt to think meaning and excess *together* as a reciprocally generative whole.¹⁵ Such a correlative structure of meaning and excess, presence and absence, arrival and withdrawal, accounts for the torturous ambiguities in such keywords as *Ereignis* and *Lichtung*, which has caused so many exegetical difficulties.

I concur completely with Sheehan that Heidegger remained a phenomenologist to the end, although this is tricky. In late seminars Heidegger reasserted the centrality of “phenomenological seeing,” but he also emphasized a “phenomenology of the inapparent.”¹⁶ While I agree that meaningfulness was never superseded in Heidegger’s thinking, an over-emphasis on meaning can hide its intrinsic relation to a contravening excess. Sheehan has properly

13 GA 9: 307, 114.

14 GA 29/30: 433.

15 Sheehan tellingly deploys Sartre in his discussion (162–63) and seems to align *das Nichts* with Sartre’s conception of the absurd, which I think is problematic.

16 *Four Seminars*, trans. Andrew Mitchell and François Raffoul (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003), pp. 11, 19, 22, 31–32, 80.

warned against a hypostasization of being and something like its self-concealing withdrawal, but this need not entail a confinement to human meaning because un-concealment is an ever-oscillating dynamic that is fueled by, if I may, *Sinns Grenzen*, or limits of meaning. The limit-character of finitude points away from the hubris of human-centeredness. In Chapter 10, Sheehan provides a cogent analysis of *Ereignis* as a granting dispensation meant to counter the modern era of technological thinking, which *itself* is granted and which accordingly errs in its reduction to control regimes and suppression of other modes of disclosure. The notion of “granting” surely risks hypostasization, but we might retain it as a poetic metaphor counter-posed to a humanistic sense of sovereignty, and its “gifting” implication can capture the phenomenon of *gratitude* for a meaningful world. In that spirit I am surely grateful for the gift of Tom Sheehan’s book, which is one of the most bracing and luminous works of Heidegger scholarship I have ever read.

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