

Heidegger on Sinn

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Abstract

This paper is an exegetical study of Heidegger's concept of Sinn (meaning). Heidegger's comments regarding the notion is analysed from three different perspective: In the first section, the relationship between Sinn and worldhood is analysed. The conclusion is that an entity can have Sinn for Dasein, only insofar it can enter into the network of functional relations constituting the world. Since the world is constituted by social practices and customs, Sinn is also derivately thus constituted. In the second section, the relationship between Sinn and understanding is analysed. The conclusion is that Sinn is a specific conceptuality that functions as the background of understanding. In the third section, the relationship between Sinn and language is analysed, with the result that Sinn is a conceptual scheme. It is concluded that Sinn is a socially and historically constituted conceptual scheme, which functions as the background of all understanding.

At the first page of *Sein und Zeit*, the one piece of work that has secured Martin Heidegger's place in the philosophy of history, the author declares that the purpose behind the work is to explicate the "meaning of being", or "dem Sinn von Sein". (SuZ p 1)¹ There is however no clear consensus among Heidegger scholars of what this is supposed to be. Indeed, there is not even a clear consensus of what Heidegger means by "meaning", or "Sinn" as the German term is.² On the contrary, the interpretations have little in common except being about Heidegger. This paper is an exegetical study of Heidegger's notion of Sinn. My main contention is that Sinn is a socially and historically constituted conceptual scheme, which is necessary for all forms of understanding. This will probably seem like a startling contention to many readers of Heidegger, but there are, or so I shall argue, good textual and philosophical reasons which make this a plausible interpretation.³

Many philosophers would agree that Sinn has something to do with understanding. Hubert Dreyfus for example, claims in his influential commentary on *Being and Time* that Sinn refers to "our background familiarity with each domain of being – a familiarity that enables us to cope with beings in that domain",⁴ which means that Sinn is "the ungrounded practices that make possible all intelligibility".⁵ This however squares badly with what Heidegger himself claims in certain passages, so Dreyfus claims that Sinn also refers to "the structure of the

¹ All references to the work of Heidegger will be made in the text. *Sein und Zeit*, (Will be referred to as SuZ), *Prolegomena zur Geschichte des Zeitbegriffs*, (GA20), *Logik. Die Frage nach der Wahrheit*, (GA21), *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, (GA24), *Ontologie (Hermeneutik der Faktizität)*, (GA63).

² For the sake of clarity, I will refer to the German term when the reference is to Heidegger's notion, and reserve the term meaning for our ordinary concept of meaning, whatever that may be.

³ A caveat: I shall mainly restrict my interpretation of Heidegger to what he says about Sinn, language and understanding. It is quite possible that Heidegger's theory of Sinn presupposes ontological assumptions that he is denying at other places. This may for example be the reason that Dreyfus reaches a different conclusion regarding Sinn; he may be attempting to reconcile Heidegger's theory of Sinn with his ontological assumptions.

⁴ Dreyfus 1991

⁵ Ibid p 223

general background that can never be fully objectified but can only be gradually and incompletely revealed by circular hermeneutic inquiry”.⁶ Dreyfus’ Sinn is thus both a meaning-giving practice, and the formal structure of that practice.

Some philosophers claim that Sinn is related to Dasein’s capacity to lead an authentic life. This is the case in a paper of George J. Stack. Just as Dreyfus, he claims that Sinn is in reality two different notions, but that is where the similarities end. Stack’s starting point is that Sinn is an existential, which means that only Dasein can have Sinn, and that Dasein has Sinn by necessity. Stack concludes from this observation that Sinn is a prerequisite for understanding. Stack also claims that it is in the encounter with objects that have Sinn, which makes Dasein’s realisation of its authentic existence possible. And if I understand Stack correctly, this means that Dasein can realise Sinn in an individual life. But this notion of Sinn is thus different from the notion earlier introduced, since this “Sinn” is something that Dasein can have, only insofar as it is authentic.⁷

Yet a third possible interpretation is presented by another Heidegger-scholar, Andreas Graeser. He puts the spotlight on Heidegger’s claim that Sinn is the realm in which the understanding of something is to be found, without explicitly being focused. According to Graeser, this means that Sinn is a secondary object for our understanding, and that our understanding of something, is always an understanding that stands under a certain description. This description is moreover a function of the relational context that Dasein finds the object in. In order for something to have Sinn, the object must in other words be found in such a relational context.⁸

Even though the explicit purpose of *Sein und Zeit*, as introduced on the very first page, is to analyse the “Sinn von Sein”, Heidegger does not bother in explaining his notion of Sinn until more than half of the first part has passed, in §32 at page 151. And when he does introduce the notion, he does it in a very intense passage:

Wenn innerweltliches Seiendes mit dem Sein des Daseins entdeckt, das heißt zu Verständnis gekommen ist, sagen wir, es hat *Sinn*. Verstanden aber ist, streng genommen, nicht der Sinn, sondern das Seiende, bzw. das Sein. Sinn ist das, worin sich Verständlichkeit von etwas hält. Was im verstehenden Erschließen artikulierbar ist, nennen wir Sinn. Der *Begriff des Sinnes* umfaßt das formale Gerüst dessen, was notwendig zu dem gehört, was verstehende Auslegung artikuliert. *Sinn ist das durch Vorhabe, Vorsicht und Vorgriff strukturierte Woraufhin des Entwurfs, aus dem her etwas als etwas verständlich wird*. Sofern Verstehen und Auslegung die existenziale Verfassung des Seins des Da ausmachen, muß Sinn als das formal-existenziale Gerüst der dem Verstehen zugehörigen Erschlossenheit begriffen werden. Sinn ist ein Existenzial des Daseins, nicht eine Eigenschaft, die am Seienden haftet, ’hinter’ ihm liegt oder als ’Zwischenreich’ irgendwo schwebt. Sinn ’hat’ nur das Dasein, sofern die Erschlossenheit des In-der-Welt-seins durch das in ihr entdeckbare Seiende ’erfüllbar’ ist. (SuZ p 151)⁹

⁶ Ibid p 222

⁷ Stack 1973 p 260ff. Stack presents roughly the same argument in another paper. See Stack (1978).

⁸ Graeser (1993) , p 565f. As far as I know, Graeser is the only previous commentator that has claimed that Sinn by necessity is something linguistic. In this respect his interpretation is similar to mine.

⁹ ” When entities within-the-world are discovered along with the being of Dasein – that is, when they have come to be understood – we say that they have Sinn. But that which is understood, taken strictly is not Sinn but the entity, or alternatively, Being. Sinn is that wherein the intelligibility of something maintains itself. That which can be Articulated in a disclosure by which we understand, we call “Sinn”. The *concept of Sinn* embraces the formal existential framework of what necessarily belongs to that which an understanding interpretation Articulates. *Sinn is the point of direction’ of a throw in terms of which something becomes intelligible as something; it gets its*

Two comments are natural at this point. The first comment concerns Heidegger's use of the notion of Sinn. We are told that Sinn is the realm in which understanding can be found, that in understanding which can be articulated, an existential, and that Dasein can only have Sinn insofar as its world "can be filled-in". Needless to say, this entails that Heidegger's notion have few or no similarities with Frege's and Husserl's notion of Sinn. The second comment concerns Heidegger's methodology in introducing the concept. He defines the concept in terms which have a very specific meaning within the context of Heidegger's own phenomenology. In order to elucidate Heidegger's notion of Sinn, we thus have to explain the meaning of the other terms.

There are in particular three features of Heidegger's elucidations that are worthy of a closer look. The first concerns Heidegger's conception of Sinn in terms relating to his theory of worldhood. The second concerns his conception of Sinn in terms relating to his theory of understanding. The third concerns his conception of Sinn in terms relating to his theory of language. All three notions will be dealt with in separate sections. The problem is however that these terms are defined in terms of each other too, so the full picture of each section will not emerge until the conclusion.

Sinn and World

In the long quote above, Heidegger defines Sinn in terms of being-in-the-world. We are told that Dasein has Sinn, only insofar as "die Erschlossenheit des In-der-Welt-seins durch das in ihr entdeckbare Seiende 'erfüllbar' ist". (SuZ p 151)¹⁰ What does it mean that the entity must fill a place in the world, in order to have Sinn? In this section I shall advance two claims. First of all that an entity can only have Sinn for Dasein if it can be apprehended within the relational nexus that constitutes the world. Secondly, I will argue that the world is not something that Dasein creates *ex nihilo*, but rather that it is a socially shared world that it inherits from others.

Heidegger seems to operate with more than one notion of worldhood, but it is clear from context that in the quote discussed, he is referring to world as an existential. The world as an existential must be kept separate from other notions of worldhood, such as the concept of the world as the sum of all things, or a mind-independent reality. While Heidegger does not deny that the world might be plausibly described as a mind-independent reality, the concept of the world as an existential is quite a different notion. In the following, we shall only discuss the world conceived of as an existential.

An existential is in Heidegger's philosophy a constituent in the structure characterising Dasein. This does not mean that Heidegger's notion of worldhood is idealistic. It does however mean that Heidegger's concept of world, is the world as constituted. Heidegger's notion of world resembles in this sense Husserl's notion of *Lebenswelt* – though there are important differences that we need not delve into at this point. According to Heidegger, to be

structure form a fore-having, a fore-sight, and a fore-conception. In so far as understanding and interpretation make up the existential state of Being of the 'there', 'Sinn' must be conceived as the formal-existential framework of the disclosedness which belongs to understanding. Sinn is an *existentiale* of Dasein, not a property attaching to entities, lying 'behind' them, or floating somewhere as an 'intermediate domain'. Dasein only 'has' Sinn, so far as the disclosedness of Being-in-the-world can be 'filled in' by the entities discoverable in that disclosedness". All translations from *Sein und Zeit* are based upon MacQuarrie's and Robinson's English translation, but I do not follow them in all details and in some passages not closely at all. Translations from Heidegger's other works are my own.

¹⁰ "Dasein only 'has' Sinn, so far as the disclosedness of Being-in-the-world can be 'filled in' by the entities discoverable in that disclosedness"

in a world, always entails being related in various ways to various entities. These relations are such that they ultimately derive their character from Dasein's various projects.

Being-in-the-world is thus far more than being an entity alongside other entities. It means that Dasein is engaged by, and related to, these entities. Tools are for example encountered as entities that can be used in various projects. The hammer is perceived as something that one can drive nails with, driving nails is something that is to be comprehended within the larger project of building, which is comprehended within the even wider project of creating a shelter, and so on. The point is that Dasein is always existentially related to the entities that it encounters within the world.

We can best conceive of Heidegger's notion of world as a kind of relational nexus in which the entities of the world, at least partially derive their nature from the relations that they enter into. The relations that tie the world together, are in their turn always related to Dasein's various projects. Heidegger's point is that Dasein always apprehend entities with regard to their possible functional value for Dasein's various practical activities. The relational network constituting the world is very much a functional network, in which the functional roles of entities depends upon the functional roles of other entities and ultimately of the practices in which Dasein is involved in.

Heidegger's notion of world is thus very much a holistic notion. The intraworldly entities are what they are due to the functional relations that tie them together. Nails cannot be comprehended in separation from hammers, and hammers cannot be comprehended in separation from planks, and so on. In order for an entity to fill a place in the world, it is thus not sufficient that it occupies a spatiotemporal part of the world. The entity has to enter into the relational nexus constituting the world. It must enter into relations with other entities and at least derivatively into relations with Dasein. By implication, in order for tools to have Sinn for Dasein, they must be able to find a place in the relational context that constitutes the world in which Dasein finds itself. If a tool cannot find such a place, it will lack Sinn for Dasein.

But Heidegger's notion of Sinn is far more complex than this, even though Heidegger's own examples are so often drawn from practical contexts that one gets the impression that the purpose of *Sein und Zeit* is to answer the question of the Sinn of the hammer rather than of the Sinn of Being. Heidegger's notion is however also devised – at least implicitly – in order to account for how other humans also can have Sinn for Dasein. Unfortunately, Heidegger does not give more than the barest of sketches of how his theory of world as an existential can help elucidate the nature of social practices. Indeed, Heidegger does not offer much of an explication at all, save for his insistence that Dasein's relation to other Daseins is not to be understood on a par with Dasein's relations to tools

Let us now turn to the second of my contentions with regard to the notion of worldliness. Even though Heidegger is none too clear about the nature of social practices, he is quite explicit in emphasizing the social character of the constitution of the world. According to Heidegger, Dasein enters a world that is constituted by others. The world is not only socially shared, it is socially constituted. This is for example clear when Heidegger describes the nature of *Bedeutsamkeit*, or worldhood. *Bedeutsamkeit* is according to Heidegger the structure of the world, because it is the totality of relations between various intraworldly entities. (SuZ p 87) *Bedeutsamkeit* is constituted by the "others": "Diese mit dem Mitsein vorgängig konstituierte Erschlossenheit der Anderen macht demnach auch die Bedeutsamkeit, d.h. die Weltlichkeit mit aus". (SuZ p 123)¹¹ On a similar note, we are told that Being-with-others constitute "die faktischen Möglichkeiten der Weite und Echtheit der Erschließung der Welt". (GA 24 p 421)¹²

¹¹ "With their Mitsein, their disclosedness has been constituted beforehand; accordingly, this disclosedness also goes to make up *Bedeutsamkeit* – that is to say, worldhood".

¹² "the actual possibilities of the scope and authenticity of the disclosure of the world."

This is a point Heidegger returns to when he discusses the existential *das Man*. It is important to note that this existential has two different functions in Heidegger's phenomenology.¹³ On the one hand, it performs an essential role in Heidegger's analysis of authenticity. This role will not be analysed here. I will on the contrary focus on the constitutive role of *das Man*.¹⁴ We are for example told that *das Man* regulates all possible interpretations of the world and of Dasein. (GA20 p 239f) Moreover, *das Man* articulates the indication-relations that constitute the worldhood of the World, or *Bedeutsamkeit*, for Dasein. In its everyday life, Dasein lives in accordance with the understanding of the world being laid out by *das Man*. (SuZ p 126ff)

It is against this background that Heidegger's insistence that Dasein exists as thrown thrownness must be understood. According to Heidegger, Dasein is always thrown into a given world. This means that Dasein inherits a world that is already pregiven with possibilities and ways of understanding, viz. in essence a historical world. Dasein does not start from scratch, and Dasein is certainly not a *tabula rasa*. By implication, Dasein's capacity for understanding, is a capacity that is to some extent determined by the historicity of the world: "Die Geworfenheit aber ist die Seinsart eines Seienden, das je seine Möglichkeiten selbst *ist*, so zwar, daß es sich in und aus ihnen versteht".¹⁵ (SuZ p 181) There is no escape for Dasein from its thrownness; Dasein can never entirely escape from the way of understanding being laid out by *das Man*.

One plausible interpretation of this is that Dasein inherits its world partially because it learns from others plausible ways of explicating the world. But, perhaps even more importantly, the world is shared by others – note that we are discussing the world as an existential in this context. The practices that Dasein is involved in, normally involves other Daseins as well. But in order for a socially shared practice to work, Dasein has to assign roughly the same functional role to the various entities as other Dasein's do. In short, Dasein's world must be constituted by the same kind of relational network that is constitutive of the relational network of other Daseins.

So far we have noted that the world is socially and historically constituted, and that it consists of functional relations that hold between intraworldly entities. Moreover, it is from a given world, that Dasein ultimately understands itself. Dasein is tied to the world, by being involved with entities and other Dasein's in it, and is in that way meaningfully related in the world. Being related to, means in this context to be involved with, without necessarily reflecting on the nature of the relation.

Heidegger's world is ultimately a world consisting of, and constituted by, social customs, or, perhaps more to the point, of social practices, which involve other Dasein's. The notion of practice is here conceived of as an intersubjective interaction which prescribes certain ways of acting and understanding the world in given situations. These prescriptions are not formalised, and need not even be consciously accessible. They are simply taken for granted – in the same way that Heidegger claims that the relations that bind the intraworldly entities together are taken for granted. It is a background which forms the context in which we make sense of other people and things, and a background on the basis of which we understand ourselves and which options are open to us in a given situation.¹⁶

What does that mean in the context of the nature of *Sinn*? Well, as we have seen, Heidegger

¹³ This is implicit in *Sein und Zeit*, but explicit in one of the posthumously published texts. Thus, we are told in *Ontologie (Hermeneutik der Faktizität)* that "das *Man* hat etwas bestimmtes Positives, es ist nicht nur Verfallsphänomen". (GA63 p 17) ("das *Man* has something decidedly positive, it is not only a sign of decay")

¹⁴ My analysis is indebted to, but differs in some details from, Dreyfus' analysis in Dreyfus (1991), ch 8

¹⁵ "But thrownness, as a kind of being, belongs to an entity which in each case *is* its possibilities, and is them in such a way that it understands itself in these possibilities and in terms of them, throws itself upon them",

¹⁶ Cf Taylor (1995), p 68f

claims that something can have Sinn for Dasein, only insofar as it can be filled within the disclosure of the world. (SuZ p 151) This means that an x can only have Sinn for Dasein, insofar as x can be contextualized and ordered into the structure that is the world. Since the world is something intersubjectively constituted, it follows that Sinn is also intersubjectively constituted. The world is moreover something that Dasein by definition is in. But this does not entail that an object x must be filled within Dasein's own world. Note that the criterion is that it suffices if x can be filled in a world. Thus; Dasein does not need to be related herself to x. It suffices if Dasein can represent to herself what it would be like to be related to x. This opens up the possibility of understanding radically different cultures, since Dasein can in principle imagine what it would be like to live in another world, and that way understand what Sinn something has for its inhabitants.¹⁷

Sinn and Understanding

Heidegger claims numerous times that Sinn is the *Woraufhin*, or the point of direction, of the throw (Entwurf). Thus, we are told in §32 that "*Sinn ist das durch Vorhabe, Vorsicht und Vorgriff strukturierte Woraufhin des Entwurfs*". (SuZ p 151)¹⁸ This definition raises three separate problems. The first problem concerns the nature of the throw. The second concerns the nature of the point of direction of the throw. And the third concerns the nature of the prestructure of understanding, viz. of forehaving, foresight and foreconception. In the course of elucidating these problems, will advance two claims. First of all, I will argue that Sinn is that which enables the understanding, not that which is understood. Sinn is on this account a kind of non-thematized pre-understanding. Secondly, I will argue that an entity has Sinn, only when it has been conceptualised by Dasein.

Let us start with the first problem. We are told that the throw is to be found in the existential structure of understanding. This is what enables Dasein to grasp its existential possibilities, i. e. its possible ways of being, in any given situation. But the throw is not something that Dasein consciously reflects or elaborates on. Neither is the object of the throw, an object of reflection (SuZ p 145) This does not mean that it is in principle impossible to thematically reflect on this understanding. It is on the contrary possible to do so through an *Auslegung*, or interpretation, of the understood, in which the understanding reached through the throw is articulated. (SuZ p 148)¹⁹

We are also informed by Heidegger that Sinn is constituted by the throw and at the same time that wherein the understanding of something dwells. This means by implication that interpretation also dwells in Sinn. "*Der Begriff des Sinnes umfaßt das formale Gerüst dessen, was notwendig zu dem gehört, was verstehende Auslegung artikuliert*". (SuZ p 151)²⁰

This is not to be understood as though there is a separate Sinn associated with the interpretation. The interpretation is on the contrary rooted in the throw, in the sense that the

¹⁷ Even though Heidegger claims that we are always in the circle of understanding, since the circle belongs to the very structure of Sinn, he also claims that we have to enter the circle in the right way. (SuZ p 152) This has confused some commentators, most notably Dreyfus, who finds it mindboggling that Heidegger can claim that there is a right way of entering the circle, when we already are in the circle. Dreyfus (1991), p 200f. But this is as we can see a pseudoproblem. We are already in the circle of our world; understanding a different world requires us to in a certain sense leave our circle and enter a foreign circle. But this is quite a different matter, and one that Heidegger has no radically new idea of solving.

¹⁸ "*Sinn is the through fore-having, a fore-sight, and fore-conception structured point of direction of a throw*"

¹⁹ Cf. Dreyfus (1991), p 195f. Heidegger's own phenomenological method is for example one of interpretation. (SuZ p 37)

²⁰ "The *concept of Sinn* embraces the formal existential framework of what necessarily belongs to that which an understanding interpretation articulates"

interpretation presupposes some “hidden” throws, which enables a specific type of understanding. The understanding being reached by the throw is thus a kind of pre-understanding.

This is expressed clearly when Heidegger analyses the notion of *Sorge*. *Sorge* is usually taken to be something like a Heideggerian notion of intentionality, albeit of a practical rather than cognitive nature, and permeates Dasein’s way of being. For complicated reasons that we need not go into, Heidegger claims that an interpretation of Dasein, presupposes a throw directed upon that which constitutes *Sorge*. So any interpretation of *Sorge*, would have to investigate the nature of the throw that constituted Dasein’s understanding of itself, viz. a disclosure of what the throw is directed upon:

Diese freilegung verlangt methodisch, dem einer Auslegung zugrundeliegenden, meist unausdrücklichen Entwurf so nachzugehen, daß das im Entwerfen Entworfene hinsichtlich seines Woraufhin erschlossen und faßbar wird. (SuZ p 324)²¹

Interpretation is thus an activity which is constituted on the basis of unthematized throws. These throws are taken for granted within the context of an interpretation.²²

This does not mean that there are throws which cannot in principle be thematized through an interpretation. It only demonstrates that interpretations are always constituted by unthematized throws. And this is something that also applies to Heidegger’s own existential-ontological investigations. By implication, *Sinn* is something that lies in an unthematized background when we understand something.

Danach ist *Sinn* das, worin sich die Verstehbarkeit von etwas hält, ohne daß es selbst ausdrücklich und thematisch in den Blick kommt”. (SuZ p 324)²³

It is important in this context to distinguish between *x* having *Sinn* for Dasein, *x* as interpreted, and that the *Sinn* of *x* is interpreted. When *x* is interpreted, *x*:*s* *Sinn* is that which enables the interpretation, but *x*:*s* *Sinn* is not itself interpreted.

Wenn innerweltliches Seiendes mit dem Sein des Daseins entdeckt, das heißt zu Verständnis gekommen ist, sagen wir, es hat *Sinn*. Verstanden aber ist, streng genommen, nicht der *Sinn*, sondern das Seiende, bzw. das Sein. *Sinn* ist das, worin sich Verständlichkeit von etwas hält. (SuZ p 151)²⁴

Hence, even though an entity can be explicitly understood, its *Sinn* is that which enables the understanding, not that which is understood.

With regards to the second problem, Heidegger at one point defines the point of direction of the throw as the disclosed. (SuZ p 324) The disclosure of the world is however tantamount to understanding. (SuZ p 143) So the point of direction of the throw is nothing but understanding

²¹ “To lay it bare in this way requires methodologically that we study the throw (usually a tacit one) which underlies an interpretation, and that we do so in such a way that what has been thrown in the throwing can be disclosed and grasped with regard to its point of direction”.

²² For a passage that supports this interpretation, see Heidegger’s comments on natural science, in which we are told that physics is constituted on the basis of a mathematical throw of nature. (SuZ p 362)

²³ “Accordingly, *Sinn* is that wherein the understandability of something maintains itself – even that of something which does not come into view explicitly and thematically”.

²⁴ “When entities within-the-world are discovered along with the being of Dasein – that is, when they have come to be understood – we say that they have *Sinn*. But that which is understood, taken strictly is not *Sinn* but the entity, or alternatively, Being. *Sinn* is that wherein the intelligibility of something maintains itself.”

outright. This interpretation is further reinforced by Heidegger's insistence that understanding dwells in Sinn. So when we understand something, we have Sinn for it. And that is the point of direction of the throw.

The third problem is more complicated and has caused commentators severe headaches. We are told that Sinn is constituted by a prestructure of the understanding consisting of a forehaving, a foresight and a foreconception. (Vorhabe, Vorsicht und Vorgriff) (SuZ p 151) This prestructure in its turn constitutes the throw. Hence there can be no understanding without the prestructure.

Forehaving is the first of the three elements constituting the prestructure. According to Heidegger, forehaving functions as the way of coming to understand an already understood "context of familiarity" (Bewandtnisganzheit) (SuZ p 150) This seems to entail that understanding is always understanding from within an already given world. This interpretation is supported by Heidegger's definition of the concept in his lectures on ontology from 1923, in which we are told that the forehaving means that Dasein always is in the world. (GA63 p 80) That all understanding is characterised by the forehaving thus implies that the understanding is always constituted by a pre-given world, where Sinn is once again comprehended as a structured relational whole. But this, of course, will come as no news, since it was a conclusion we reached in the previous section.²⁵

The second element of the fore-structure is the foresight.

Die zueignung des Verstandenen, aber noch Eingehüllten vollzieht die Enthüllung immer unter der Führung einer Hinsicht, die das fixiert, im Hinblick worauf das Verstandene ausgelegt werden soll. Die Auslegung gründet jeweils in einer *Vorsicht*, die das in Vorhabe Genommene auf eine bestimmte Auslegbarkeit hin 'anschneidet'. (SuZ p 150)²⁶

This shall not be interpreted as a kind of sight in the sense of perceiving. (SuZ p 147) The passage rather indicates that an interpretation is always constituted on the basis of a point of view (Hinsicht), which is thus, since it is pre-given, coined a "foresight" ("Vorsicht") in this specific case.

Heidegger discusses the notion of sight in his expositions on the throw. In that section we are told that the sight is made possible by the throw, and that we are here dealing with a sight that characterises Dasein's concerned circumspection (Umsicht) and caring consideration (Rücksicht). Or, as Heidegger summarises the discussion, the notion of sight that is relevant here, has to do with the enlightenment that characterises Dasein's disclosedness (SuZ p 147) Less eccentrically put, this means that the Sight characterises Dasein's ability to practically comprehend the world. This interpretation is further supported by Heidegger's claim that the concerned circumspection is the kind of sight Dasein has when practically relating to entities in the world. (SuZ p 69)

Now, if Heidegger is employing the same notion of sight in these contexts, this entails that the sight is a kind of prethematic understanding that Dasein has when interacting in certain practices. The foresight is by implication a kind of anticipation or pre-understanding that Dasein has on that which shall be understood. This however, means that the foresight is not in any interesting way different from the forehaving since we bear the world with us through the

²⁵ Cf Dreyfus, who interprets the forehaving as a background that is taken for granted. The background in its turn "circumscribes the domain in question and thus already determines possible ways of questioning". Dreyfus (1991), p 199.

²⁶ "When something is understood but is still veiled, it becomes unveiled by an act of appropriation, and this is always done under the guidance of a point of view, which fixes that with regard to which what is understood is to be interpreted. In every case interpretation is grounded in *something we see in advance* – in a *fore-sight*."

forehaving. The foresight thus does not appear to add anything different to the prestructure.²⁷

The fore-conception is in its turn constituted by the forehaving and the foresight: "Vorhabe und Vorsicht zeichnen dann zugleich die Begrifflichkeit vor (Vorgriff), in die alle Seinsstrukturen zu heben sind". (SuZ p 232)²⁸ The foreconception is thus a kind of conceptual apparatus which characterises all kinds of understanding. In order for anything to be understood, we have to conceptualise it. This conceptualisation can however be more or less suited to the object of understanding."Die Auslegung kann die dem auszulegenden Seienden zugehörige Begrifflichkeit aus diesem selbst schöpfen oder aber in Begriffe zwingen, denen sich das Seiende gemäß seiner Seinsart widersetzt". (SuZ p 150)²⁹ Heidegger also points out that this conceptualisation also permeates perception. We do not first receive a sensorial stimuli which in a second stage is interpreted. It is already given as conceptualised. (SuZ p 149)

We are now at a position in which we can summarise Heidegger's claim that Sinn is the point of direction of the throw. The throw is a kind of preunderstanding which is not thematized but a necessary prerequisite for any thematized understanding, viz. interpretation. The throw is constituted by a prestructure. The essential features of the prestructure are the forehaving, which means that the prestructure is always constituted by a particular worldhood, and a specific conceptuality, which conceptualises the object of understanding. In order for the object of understanding to be understood, it is thus necessary that it be structured by the worldhood of the forehaving and conceptualised by the foreconception. Sinn is by implication the structured and conceptualised context which is the point of direction of the throw. But it is important to note that the relation between forehaving and foresight on the one hand, and foreconception on the other hand, is one of constituting and constituted. On my interpretation, this means that Sinn is the through forehaving and foresight constituted prethematized conceptuality which forms the background against which the objects of understanding are understood. Sinn is not a foreconception *in addition* to the foresight and the forehaving. This reading makes sense, because Heidegger also claims that Sinn can be articulated, and while concepts can be articulated, most notions of worldhood lack that peculiar feature. They can only be described. This is also the topic of the next chapter.

Sinn and Language

So far, we have analysed Sinn in the contexts of understanding and world. But Heidegger also assigns Sinn a critical place in the context of language:

Rede ist die Artikulation der Verständlichkeit. Sie liegt daher der Auslegung und Aussage schon zugrunde. Das in der Auslegung, ursprünglicher mithin schon in der Rede Artikulierbare nannten wir den Sinn. Das in der Redenden Artikulation Gegliederte als solches nennen wir das Bedeutungs ganze. Dieses kann in Bedeutungen aufgelöst werden. Bedeutungen sind als das Artikulierte des Artikulierbaren immer sinnhaft. (SuZ p 161)³⁰

²⁷ Heidegger's own methodological considerations seems to endorse such a reading since he claims that the forehaving in his existential-ontological investigations is the whole of that entity which shall be understood, and that the foresight corresponds to the unity of that entity. (SuZ p 232)

²⁸ "Forehaving and foresight then also indicate the conceptuality (Fore-conception) into which the structures of being are to be raised"

²⁹ "The interpretation can conceptualize the entity from concepts drawn from itself, or force the entity into concepts to which it is opposed in its manner of being."

³⁰ "Speech is the Articulation of the understanding. Therefore it underlies both interpretation and assertion. That which can be Articulated in interpretation, and thus even more primordially in speech, is what we have called

Sinn is thus what can be articulated, in speech, but it is clearly distinguished from what actually is articulated. What is articulated is on the contrary *Bedeutungen*, which are in their turn *Sinnhaft*, or impregnated with Sinn. In this section I shall attempt to unravel these seemingly odd statements and offer a plausible interpretation. My main contention will be that these statements are only comprehensible if Sinn is conceived of as a conceptual schema and that particular concepts, at least partially get their content from their place in the schema.

Since Sinn is that wherein the understanding of something resides, Heidegger could in the above quotation be interpreted as claiming that Dasein can only articulate what it can understand. But Heidegger is after bigger game. As we have seen, Dasein can only have Sinn, insofar as that which shall be understood can “fill-in” the world, which in its turn is constituted by socially and historically constituted practices. And Heidegger’s point is precisely that these practises delimit what can be understood in any given situation.

Heidegger repeatedly insists that Dasein is thrown into a world in which *das Man* has constituted the framework for understanding. In §35 Heidegger explicitly declares that Dasein’s capacity for understanding and speech, and, by entailment, what Dasein can articulate, is constituted by *das Man*: “In ihr und aus ihr und gegen sie vollzieht sich alles echte Verstehen, Auslegen und Mitteilen, Wiederentdecken und neu Zueignen”. (SuZ p 169)³¹ In a lecture from 1924, Heidegger declares that being with others is first and foremost linguistic in character, but that in “Miteinandersprechen [...] liegt jeweils die Selbstausslegung der Gegenwart, die in diesem Gespräch sich aufhält”. (BZ p 8).³²

So it is only what makes sense *given a particular social practice* that can be articulated. This is also coherent with Heidegger’s analysis of *Bedeutung* – that notion seems incidentally to have as little with the Fregean notion to do as Sinn does. We have seen that what is articulated is the *Bedeutung* of a word, and that this is *Sinnhaft*. But this means more than the somewhat trivial statement that *Bedeutung* has something to do with understanding. Heidegger is apparently claiming that social practices constitute an intersubjective field of meaning, of Sinn, which in its turn is a specific ground for processes of conceptualisation.

This becomes clear if we take a closer look at the notion of *Bedeutsamkeit*. We have seen that *Bedeutsamkeit* is the structure of the world, the holistic notion of the meaningful relations that is apprehended as obtaining between intraworldly entities. Now we are also told that *Bedeutsamkeit* is a precondition for language:

Die Bedeutsamkeit selbst aber [...] birgt in sich die ontologische Bedingung der Möglichkeit dafür, daß das verstehende Dasein als auslegendes so etwas wie ‘Bedeutungen’ erschließen kann, die ihrerseits wieder das mögliche Sein von Wort und Sprache fundieren”. (SuZ p 87)³³

It is thus ultimately in virtue of being-in-the-world, viz. of partaking in social practices that Dasein is a linguistic being. Language is constituted on the basis of social practices.

Heidegger returns to the same theme in his lectures from 1925. In those we are told that language and speech belong to Dasein in virtue of the latter being-in-the-world and being-

“Sinn”. That which gets articulated as such in speech, we call the “totality-of-significations”. This can be dissolved or broken up into significations. Significations, as what has been Articulated, are *Sinnhaft*.”

³¹ “In it, out of it, and against it, does all genuine understanding, interpreting and communicating, all re-discovering and appropriating anew, are performed.”

³² “already in speaking with others [...] resides the selfinterpretation of the contemporary age, which resides in speech”

³³ “In significance itself [...] lurks the ontological condition which makes it possible for Dasein, as something which understands and interprets, to disclose such things as ‘significations’; upon these, in turn, is founded the Being of words and of language”

with-others. Moreover, on the basis of being-in-the-world and being-with-others, Dasein forms prefigured concepts which ³⁴in their turn constitute the ground for Dasein's self-interpretation. (GA20 p 342f) In the same lectures, Heidegger explains that in speech, the wholeness of the *Bedeutsamkeit* is expressed. (GA20 p 370) In *Sein und Zeit* Heidegger describes this as a process in which the *Bedeutsamkeit* is given expression in words. "Den Bedeutungen wachsen Worte zu. Nicht aber werden Wörterdinge mit Bedeutungen versehen". (SuZ p 161)³⁵

Conceptual content is thus constituted on the basis of the social practices in which the members of the linguistic community partake. We can explicate this notion by turning to an example presented by Charles Taylor in his paper "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man". Taylor compares the occidental practice of negotiation with the Japanese. In the occident, negotiations are characterised by the fact that they occur between two distinct parties, which enter the negotiations with two different sets of preferences, and seek to realise as many of those preferences as possible, no matter what the outcome turns out to be for the other part. In Japanese culture on the other hand, the negotiating parties value social consensus and unanimous decision making. Thus, Japanese negotiations are not characterised by parties attempting to realise as many of their preferences as possible.³⁶ According to Taylor, the practise of negotiation in the occident can be described in terms such as "entering" and "breaking off" negotiations, negotiating in "good faith" or in "bad faith", and so on. But these terms presuppose a clear-cut distinction between two distinct parties, which both negotiate in order to pursue different goals, and which seek to realize as many preferences as possible.³⁷

But these concepts would not be able to describe different kinds of negotiating practices. It is for example not at all applicable in traditional Japanese cultures of negotiations. Traditional Japanese culture on the contrary put such a high value on consensus and unanimous decision-making, that distinct parties rarely emerged. Their kind of negotiating practice included discussion and adjustment of difference, but it could not be described in terms of distinct parties or negotiating in "good" or "bad" faith", terms which presuppose the peculiar occidental form of negotiating. What this entails is that the conceptual apparatus we in the occident have for describing our form of negotiation, is not applicable outside of that context.³⁸ The conceptual apparatus is constituted by the social practice.

Now, what I am suggesting is that Heidegger has something similar in mind, but he does not give as examples cases from typical social practices but rather from physical activities. We can cope in a social practice, because the practice has *bedeutsamkeit* for us. *Bedeutsamkeit* is, remember, the functional-relational nexus of the entities in a given practice. The entities are related to each other by means of relations that *Bedeutend*. But as we have seen, conceptual content derives from precisely such relations: "Den Bedeutungen wachsen Worte zu." (SuZ p 161) So the kind of conceptual distinctions by means of which we understand ourselves as agents within a practice, and which we use to describe this practice corresponds to the functional relations that tie the world together. As such, the concepts obviously have to be *Sinnhaft*, since being able to place an entity in the world, that is, to conceive of an entity within the world, is for the entity to have *Sinn*, and stand in meaningful relations to other such entities. And since *Sinn* is constitutive of conceptual content, we can with Heidegger claim that *Sinn* is that which can be articulated, since concepts that were not *Sinnhaft*, would quite simply be empty, or not concepts at all.

But it is important to note that Heidegger is not merely claiming that conceptual content

³⁴ Ibid

³⁵ "To significations, words accrue. But word-Things do not get supplied with significations"

³⁶ Taylor (1985) p 32f

³⁷ Taylor (1985), p 32ff

³⁸ Ibid

depends upon the nature of the world. The world according to Heidegger is more than merely the sum of its parts. It is essentially a holistic notion. But this is also the case with language. Words don't have their meaning in isolation from other words, and concepts don't have their content in isolation from other concepts. Understanding the world is according to Heidegger the case of understanding a *Bedeutungsganze*, which can be linguistically articulated. And language is on the same account, a *Wortganzheit*, which can be "shattered" (*zerschlagen*) in "occurent wordthings" ("vorhandene Wörterdinge"). (SuZ p 161)

On Heidegger's account, the world is constitutive not merely of simple concepts, but of a scheme of interrelated concepts, of a *conceptual scheme*. Concepts are thus constituted not merely by the worldhood of the world, but also by their place in a network of concepts, viz. from the way they are interrelated with other concepts. The meaning of the concept NEGOTIATION, for example, essentially depends upon the meaning of the concept NEGOTIATING IN GOOD FAITH, which depends upon the meaning of the concept NEGOTIATING PART; which in its turn depends upon the meaning of the other concepts, and so on. Heidegger's philosophy of language is essentially a holistic philosophy.

But where does this leave the notion of Sinn? On the reading that I am proposing, Sinn is not something that a particular concept has, but the conceptual scheme which makes a particular concept comprehensible. As such, Sinn can be articulated, since our only way of elucidating a particular concept is by using the concepts that constitute the network in which a particular concept gets its content. But in so doing, the articulated concept *qua* articulated, has a different Sinn, viz. stand in different conceptual relations, than the concept whose Sinn we are attempting to explicate. So while Sinn can be articulated, it is *qua* articulated not a Sinn, but merely *Sinnhaft*.

I believe that this account can also explain Heidegger's claim that the circle of understanding belongs to the very nature of Sinn: "Der 'Zirkel' im Verstehen gehört zur Struktur des Sinnes". (SuZ p 153)³⁹ Concepts are Sinnhaft, viz. they get their meaning from their place in the conceptual scheme, viz. from Sinn. The same is true of every concept in the schema – they are all Sinnhaft, and get their meaning from their place in the conceptual network. So, the concepts are circularly interrelated. By implication, it becomes impossible to grasp one concept in isolation from the others: the nature of a particular concept depends at least partially upon its relations to other concepts.

We should note how neatly this interpretation fits in with our earlier conclusions. Remember that we have seen that the worldhood of the world is co-constitutive of Sinn, and that Sinn is the prethematized context which forms the background against which the objects of understanding are understood. In this chapter we have seen precisely that the worldhood of the world is constitutive of conceptual content, and that, moreover, Sinn is the conceptual scheme which forms the background against which particular concepts get their meaning. So, if the account so far is correct, Sinn is quite simply the socially and historically constituted conceptual scheme which is constitutive of all understanding.

Conclusions

We have studied three of Heidegger's claims regarding the nature of Sinn. Heidegger's first contention is that an object of understanding can be placed in the world. I have argued that this means that an object can only have Sinn for Dasein if the object can be apprehended as having functional relations to other objects within the relational network constituting the

³⁹ "The 'circle' in understanding belongs to the structure of Sinn"

world. The world is however not to be conceived of as a solipsistic world, but very much as an intersubjective world which not only includes others, but is also partially constituted by social customs and practices.

The second claim that has been analysed is the notion of Sinn as the point of direction of the throw of understanding. This turns out to mean that Sinn is the prethematized conceptual context which is the background against which objects can be comprehended. But the conceptuality that Dasein brings with it when understanding an object, is very much a conceptual structure that is constituted by Dasein's world.

Heidegger's third claim is that Sinn can be articulated, and that the articulated always has to be Sinnhaft. This claim can only be comprehended within Heidegger's holistic view of language. I have argued that on Heidegger's account, concepts get their content from their place in a conceptual scheme and that the conceptual scheme is constituted by the world. Sinn is as we have seen the very conceptuality that is brought to bear in understanding. By implication, Sinn is simply the conceptual scheme that give concepts their content and that is the background of understanding. But we have also seen that concepts are constituted not only by their place in a conceptual scheme, but also by the world. Since concepts are also constitutive of the conceptual scheme, the conceptual scheme is also constituted by the nature of the world. So Sinn can be defined as the socially and historically constituted conceptual scheme which is constitutive of all understanding.

But what then is Sinn? And in particular what does it mean to investigate the Sinn of being, or of Sorge, or, as we have done here, of Sinn itself for that matter. Well, since Sinn is the background which makes objects comprehensible, investigating the Sinn of an object is quite simply tantamount to investigating the way an object is constituted for Dasein. So, when we are investigating the Sinn of being, we are investigating the way being is constituted by Dasein.

The meaning of being, to use the English terms, is hence the way we understand and constitute the category of being by our conceptual scheme. This reading can also help us understand two peculiar features in the philosophy of the late Heidegger. First of all, it helps explain why it became so important for the later Heidegger to investigate the history of being, and why in particular, Heidegger came to believe that this history manifested itself in the social and technological state of a particular historical society. Because if the Sinn of being is nothing more than the way in which we understand and constitute being, it follows that the Sinn of being will be constituted by particular historical and social factors. Sinn is as we have seen constituted by social practices. Now, if being is, as Heidegger believed, the most fundamental concept, it also explains his grandiose project of writing a history of being in order to elucidate the nature of being anew. Because if the conceptual scheme is changed, the social practice that it is related to, will also change.

Secondly, if the current state of history is characterised by *Seinsvergessenheit*, it is impossible to ask directly after the Sinn of being, since our current conceptual scheme does not allow that question. And this explains Heidegger's general philosophical strategy of creating a new conceptual repertoire, or, by reemploying an old conceptual repertoire, in order to give a more accurate description of Dasein and the world. The later Heidegger, for example, came to spell *Sein* in the old way as *Seyn*.

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