The Sense of Phenomenology

A response to Tarek Dika

Gregory P. Floyd
Seton Hall University
floydgre@shu.edu

I. Dika’s Critique of Heidegger

Professor Tarek R. Dika has provided a thoughtful engagement with the sense of the manifold senses of being in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. He opens his analysis with a threefold distinction between the sense of being in general, Heidegger’s particular understanding of the *Seinsfrage*, and the “path” Heidegger proposes for answering it. Heidegger’s novelty, he suggests, is not in directing our attention toward the question of being in general. The manifold senses of being and the question of their possible relationship are at least as old as Aristotle and have as their more proximate exponent, Franz Brentano’s dissertation, *On the Several Sense of Being in Aristotle*, that was so influential for the young Heidegger. The Heideggerian novelty, rather, resides in the second and third distinctions enumerated above. First, in Heidegger’s idiosyncratic understanding of the question of being, its structure and manner of exposition. Second, in raising the question of the right type of access *[Zugangsart]* and starting point *[Ausgang]* for such an inquiry, i.e., phenomenology as fundamental ontology and its *Daseinsanalytik.*

—

Dika’s principal critique, developed in conversation with the work of Claude Romano, is that, “Heidegger’s interpretation of time does not establish the focal sense of being, but only mutually irreducible senses of being.”\textsuperscript{2} Heidegger provides penetrating phenomenological descriptions of Zuhandenheit, Vorhandenheit, and Existenz, but in the end, contends Dika, we are left with “only mutually irreducible senses of different entities.”\textsuperscript{3} These ontological investigations “do not disclose a focal sense that encompasses them all.”\textsuperscript{4} Of course, Heidegger suggests this is precisely what Being and Time has accomplished through its analysis of time as the sense of being and the horizon of its manifestation and investigation. Dika knows this well. He proposes two counter-arguments to Heidegger, which also support his principal thesis. First that, “Heidegger does not demonstrate the prior givenness of the sense of being in the understanding of being. In other words, Heidegger does not satisfy the phenomenological criterion of evidence.”\textsuperscript{5} In conjunction with this first claim Dika argues that, (i) it is presupposed rather than argued that “the question of being should be framed in terms of the concept of ‘Sense’”\textsuperscript{6} and (ii) that there should be a “focal” or primary sense of being at all. His second counterargument is that even if we grant these presuppositions, Heidegger’s analysis of time does not disclose a focal sense of being.

The inescapable, though never stated, conclusion of this argument is that the meaning of being is merely equivocal, or at least that is all we are entitled to conclude upon a careful rereading of Being and Time. As a corollary we must reject Aristotle’s pros hen—often translated “focal meaning”—manner of philosophical investigation as the lone palimpsest of the history of ontology to survives Heidegger’s otherwise radical Destruktion.

Dika is certainly correct that the analysis of time is central to Heidegger’s investigation of the sense of being in Being and Time. In the book’s second introduction Heidegger writes, “Our treatment of the question of the meaning of being must enable us to show that the central problematic of all ontology is rooted in the phenomenon of time, if rightly seen and rightly explained, and we must show how this is the case.”\textsuperscript{7} Heidegger indicates that this is principally a question of leading back the concept of time (Zeitbegriff) to its foundation in temporality.

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{4} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{5} Dika, “Heidegger’s Concept of ‘Sense,’” 46.
\textsuperscript{6} Dika, “Heidegger’s Concept of ‘Sense,’” 41.
\textsuperscript{7} Heidegger, Being and Time, H18.
(Zeitlichkeit)\textsuperscript{8} or Dasein’s experience of time. This suggests in an anticipatory way that not only temporality, but Dasein itself, will prove essential to the question of the meaning of being, that \textit{Existenz} is at once the starting point and the manner of access to beings and to being.

I would like to consider the first of Dika’s two counter-arguments and its corollaries and then reflect on the possible implications of that analysis for the second “procedural” critique of \textit{Being and Time}, that is, that having stated his intention, Heidegger does not proceed to supply the evidence necessary to fulfill it.

II. Sense and Evidence

Does Heidegger select an arbitrary starting point when he begins by asking the question of the meaning [\textit{Sinn}] of being? Or must phenomenology approach the question of being in terms of “sense”? It would seem the second scenario is the case, at least if the analysis is to remain \textit{phenomenological}. Husserl’s principle of all principles,\textsuperscript{9} in suggesting that intuition gives something to be thought, implies an understanding of “sense” as the toward-which (Woraufhin) of conscious intentionality. Heidegger expresses this same understanding prior to \textit{Being and Time} as “hermeneutic intuition.”\textsuperscript{10} This concession does not yet settle whether a single focal sense of being has been given; however, it is an essential first clarification. For Heidegger, sense is in the indication of a direction: “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, a fore-conception.”\textsuperscript{11} In other words, it is because Dasein discovers itself always already within a world that is meaning-laden that understanding occurs. Phenomenology is the clarification of such prepredicative givenness. Meaning is therefore logically prior in the structure of interpretive understanding—it is both the towards-which and on-account-of-which of our projecting understanding. To ask whether this entire structure of meaning (\textit{Sinn}) and understanding (\textit{Verstehen}) might have been otherwise, is an interesting question, but it is not a phenomenological one. The evidence for the phenomenological starting point is the fact that we are directed toward meaning at every level of our conscious living, even, as Merleau-Ponty demonstrates, our preconceptual forms of perception are “already inhabited by a meaning which gives

\textsuperscript{8} “Here we must make clear that this conception of time and, in general, the ordinary way of understanding it, have sprung from temporality” (\textit{Being and Time}, H18).


\textsuperscript{11} Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, H151.
[them] a function in the spectacle of the world and in our existence.” Thus, the sense of an entity and, *a fortiori*, of being, is *heuristic*, an anticipatory indication of a direction of inquiry. As Daniel Dahlstrom explains, “sense is constitutive of the projection, grounding it, and making it possible and intelligible.” This is one reason why fundamental ontology requires a *Daseinsanalytik*, i.e., because sense is a process not a product, a projecting and a projected at (*das Woraufhin*), sense and existence, experiencing and experienced. For this reason, Heidegger argues that “‘meaning’ must be conceived as the formal-existential framework of the Disclosedness which belongs to understanding.” In other words, meaning (*Sinn*) is both the self-disclosing of the world and the dative of that disclosure, Dasein itself. Therefore, for phenomenology at least, Dasein can only formulate the question of being as a question of sense and therefore as a question of “the meaning of being.”

A second distinction might also be helpful here. Dasein’s world—the only world it could ever question or be curious about—is meaning-laden. However, precisely because meaning is a process of discovery and clarification, it is not “given” simply, but rather gradually uncovered and discerned. This has implications for how we understand the role of *Evidenz* in phenomenological description. For phenomenology, *evidence* is task word not an achievement word. The recognition that an object is given with “intuitive fullness” is most often a gradual, even painstaking, process of accomplishment. Husserl’s focused elucidation of the phenomenological notion of evidence in his *Formal and Transcendental Logic* is contrasted to the common understanding of evidence “conceived as an *absolute apodicticity*” and proposes instead a definition of evidence as, “…that performance on the part of intentionality which consist in the given of something-itself…it is the universal pre-eminent form of ‘intentionality,’ of ‘consciousness of something.’”

Phenomenological evidence, moreover, possesses “different modes of originality.” Heidegger retains this notion of evidence as an ongoing task and one that is often arduous. He also broadens it to include the sedimented traditions of interpretation in the wake of which our facticity develops and which present certain theses about being as “self-evident.” Put simply, we could say that, for Heidegger, the evidence of beings and of being is ambiguous and it is a first achievement of his hermeneutic phenomenology to return us to that primordial ambiguity in order that the question of the meaning of being revisit us as a question. He beings by rejecting the

---

16 Ibid.
presupposition that being is the most “self-evident” of concepts at the outset. These distinctly phenomenological understandings of “sense” and “evidence” suggest that Heidegger would not be distressed at Dika’s contention that, in Being and Time, “the dependence of the understanding of being on the sense of being is presupposed but not demonstrated.” The only route to discovering if there is adequate evidence for the meaning of being is to clarify the experience of beings in their various modes of givenness.

III. Conclusion

We are now prepared to assess Dika’s second argument against Heidegger, namely, that his analyses are unable to disclose a “focal sense” being through his analysis of time. This also points us back to Heidegger’s second innovation according to Dika’s opening set of distinctions: the question of the correct beginning and form of access to examine the meaning of being. Our foregoing distinctions help us appreciate the path Heidegger follows. Because phenomenological sense is a process that always already implicates Existenz (Dasein), we cannot ask about the meaning of anything, including being, without simultaneously asking about the meaning of ourselves. The various “tissues” or strata of the Heideggerian concept of sense are perhaps more clearly elaborated in Heidegger’s earlier courses which speak about a “context of sense.” That context includes, content-, relational-, and enactment-senses (Gehaltsinn, Bezugsinn, Vollzugsinn) and later a temporalizing sense (Zeitigungssinn). Our tendency is to prioritize the content-sense and relation-sense of an experience and miss the dynamic dimensions of constitution implied in its enactment-sense and temporalizing-sense. Because sense is the product of constitution and constitution is the dynamic of Dasein’s concourse with the world, the being of Dasein (Existenz) is always implicated. That is what the enactmental and temporalizing dimensions of meaning are meant to indicate to us. This means that, if the meaning of being can only be accessed in an experience of being and only Dasein is capable of such an experience, then the meaning of being, if there is one, will be a particular experience of Existenz. Therefore, if time is the horizon of Dasein it will necessarily be the horizon of any understanding of the meaning of being.

What Heidegger claims to have shown by the abrupt end of Being and Time is that because meaning is at once in the world and also always for Dasein the meaning

---

17 Heidegger, Being and Time, H.4.
18 Dika, 46.
19 Martin Heidegger, Phenomenology of Religious Life, trans. by Matthias Fritsch and Jennifer Anna Gosetti-Ferencei, (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 63.
of anything including being will be subject to the temporal ecstases that characterize Dasein’s being-in-the-world.\footnote{"...the meaning of Dasein is temporality..." \textit{(Being and Time, H.331).}} Is this enough to secure a “focal” sense for being? The answer is unclear. I think Dika’s framing is a fruitful one, but its conclusion seems less certain than he suggests. I will conclude with three further pertinent questions to be considered were we to pursue the question further.

First, what exactly is meant by “focal meaning”? It is not a term that appears in \textit{Being and Time} and Dika does not provide a formal definition of it. He does cite Heidegger’s approving reference to Aristotle as someone who, “himself knew the unity of this transcendental ‘universal’ [i.e., Being] as a \textit{unity of analogy}...”\footnote{Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time, H3}.} The language of unity suggests the search for something like a focal meaning, but the qualification of “unity by analogy,” which is a more capacious category of relation than focal meaning, suggests there may be other possibilities. Alternatively, perhaps a particular understanding of focal meaning would illuminate what Heidegger’s analysis—whether it is successful or not—intends. Aristotle scholar Michael Pakaluk, for example, defines focal or “central case” meaning in Aristotle as the relationship that obtains between unrelated beings that are nonetheless “all oriented toward a single goal.”\footnote{Michael Pakaluk, \textit{Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics}, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 31.} Applied to Heidegger’s analyses, \textit{Vorhandenheit, Zuhandenheit} and \textit{Existenz} would not be united by sharing some overlapping characteristic, but precisely through their distinct relations to a goal that transcends them.

Second, does not Heidegger’s—admittedly elliptical—definition of being as “the \textit{transcendens} pure and simple”\footnote{Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, H38.} suggest that the type of unifying meaning will be something other than a conceptual definition? Might temporality as revealing the disclosive character of all three modes of being unify them in virtue of this dynamism? Is this a \textit{via media} between the alternatives of a conceptually unified meaning of being and its ineluctable equivocality?

Third, does this suggest about Dasein, in virtue of its temporalizing appropriation, in relation to the focal sense of being? Is Dasein in some sense the focal sense of being? If this were the case, it would not be self-evident that “time...enjoys priority over being as the foundation of its sense,”\footnote{Dika, “Heidegger’s Concept of ‘Sense,’” 47.} precisely because, as Dika points out, “power” understood as Dasein’s potentiality or ability-to-be is equiprimordial. It is Heidegger who reminds us at the start of \textit{Being and Time} that, “higher than actuality stands possibility.”\footnote{Heidegger, \textit{Being and Time}, H38.}