

Meaning, Excess, and Event

Richard Polt

Thomas Sheehan's contribution to this inaugural volume is his latest and perhaps best effort to promote a "paradigm shift in Heidegger research."¹ It is difficult to gauge the trends in the large quantity of such research that is produced every year, so I do not know whether a new paradigm is emerging, but there is no doubt that Sheehan's voice is one that deserves to be heard. With extraordinary erudition and care, always keeping in mind Heidegger's grounding in the ancient and medieval traditions, Sheehan makes a strong case for understanding the "question of being" as a question about *meaning*. This approach has immediate advantages over several others. As opposed to interpretations that immerse themselves only in Heidegger's treatment of this or that particular topic, Sheehan always keeps in view the guiding theme of Heidegger's thought. In contrast to some readers who repeat the shibboleth "being" without ever venturing to interpret it, Sheehan provides a powerful *Vorgriff* that fruitfully opens up the texts. Sheehan's approach is also a salutary counterbalance to quasi-theistic readings that hypostasize "Big Being."² While very few readers explicitly violate Heidegger's warnings against identifying being with God, too many interpretations do seem to speak of being as if it were a supreme entity or extramundane force that acts upon humanity. In Sheehan's reading, being is nothing more and nothing less than the meaningfulness of things in our world—their significant availability, their discoveredness within the disclosure of the open. Heidegger, as Sheehan reads him, attends to this meaningful openness and finds its source not in some

higher and hidden thing, but in our own finite nature as beings who are both thrown and projecting.

While I find Sheehan's paradigm genuinely illuminating, I will make the case here that the paradigm should be expanded in order to address two further elements of Heidegger's question of being: excess and event.⁵

First, Heidegger explores various ways in which meaning stands in relation to non-meaning. He does not simply show us that beings are meaningful; he also recognizes that beings are more than just meaning, and that the threat of meaninglessness lurks just around the corner. Meaning is exceeded by the difference of beings from interpretation and by the possibility of interpretive collapse – and these issues, too, are part of the question of being. I will use the term “excess” to refer to such ways in which the question of being concerns not only meaning but also what is other than meaning, or exceeds it. One main kind of excess is the *existence* of beings: in addition to having meaning, beings *are* (there is something instead of nothing). But since the word “existence” has been used in various more specific senses – from *existentia* as presence at hand to Heidegger's own *Existenz* – that could distract from our present discussion, I will prefer the broader and less freighted “excess.”

Secondly, Sheehan's description of Dasein's nature as involving thrown projection *a priori* does not account for the proposal that Heidegger makes at least in his so-called middle period, the 1930s: *das Seyn west als das Ereignis*, “be-ing essentially happens as the appropriating event,” and more precisely as “the event of the grounding of the there.”⁶ There seem to be a particularity and a founding character in *das Ereignis* that do not fit comfortably with interpretations of the human condition as structured *a priori*. If Dasein is the entity whose own being is an issue for it, we could speak of *das Ereignis* as the event in which our own being *becomes* an issue for us. This event is itself a sort of excess, an excess unlike the existence of beings. *Ereignis* is not itself an entity, but it is not being as meaning either. It is the meaning-less or self-concealing *giving* of being as meaning.

Excess and event are crucial to historicity. Encounters with excess can develop into crisis points, historical events in which meaning is refreshed or transformed; such events open new realms of meaning that, in turn, make it possible for us to encounter excess afresh. From the inconspicuous tremors that make small adjustments in our world to the ultimate event that would found a “momentous site,”⁵ the happening of history cannot be understood purely in terms of meaning.

It has to be said at the outset that just as a scientific paradigm cannot be justified simply by the observed facts, an interpretive paradigm for philosophical texts cannot be justified simply by the words in those texts. Philosophy demands that we think for ourselves about the issues at stake, and that we bring our own thoughts to the texts in order to learn from them. A discussion of a paradigm for reading philosophy is itself already philosophy, and for that reason it can always be contested.

MEANING

Being and Time announces from the start that it is asking about “the meaning of ‘being.’”⁶ But this announcement is rather unclear. Is it simply the *word* “being” that is Heidegger’s topic? Or is his topic the theme that the word indicates? If so, are the quotation marks meant to suggest that the word “being” is less than adequate to this theme? Or is the theme not being itself, but the *meaning* of being? What, then, does “meaning” mean? The thesis of the work, the answer to its question, is that time is the horizon for any possible understanding of being. Is time, then, “the meaning of ‘being’”? But what is time, and what is a horizon?⁷

Heidegger fleshes out some of these formal indications when he explains being phenomenologically: at first and for the most part, being does not show itself—that is, it is not revealed thematically or directly, but lies in the background of the overtly self-showing phenomena. However, being can be thematized: it can be revealed as having already been unthematically showing itself as the “meaning and ground” of the overt phenomena, and as “belonging” to these phenomena.⁸

The term “meaning” (*Sinn*) is not explained until §32, where Heidegger defines it as that in terms of which something can be understood.⁹ Here “understanding” does not primarily mean a cognitive representation, but an ability to discover the possibilities of things in terms of our own possible ways to be.¹⁰ Asking about the meaning of something, then, is the same as trying to understand the thing, to discover it in its own proper possibility. For example, the meaning of a shoe as such is its specific kind of equipmentality, its usability for the protection of our feet. This usability makes it possible for the shoe to show itself to us as a shoe. The shoe’s usability would then constitute its being.

One of Heidegger’s favorite techniques for revealing being is the interpretation of certain overt phenomena as “deficient modes” of a more fundamental phenomenon. For example, the absence of historical research is a deficient mode of historicity; indifference to others is a deficient mode of caring for them.¹¹ These are exceptions that prove the rule: their function is to extrapolate an ontic concept (such as history or care) into an ontological one. Heidegger hopes that his re-description of the ontic negatives (lack of history, lack of caring) as deficient ontological positives will draw our attention to underlying, background phenomena that have always already been making it possible for the overt positive and negative phenomena to show themselves. Then “care,” for instance, no longer refers to a particular state that we may or may not be in, but to the human condition as such, and we may recognize that it is only thanks to this condition that we can become careless, carefree, or uncaring. (A shoe is neither caring nor uncaring, but altogether lacks ontological care.)

So far, Heidegger’s *Sein* seems to correspond most closely to the Greek εἶναι or οὐσία as used to mean a pregiven nature or essence—“being what it was” (τὸ τί ἦν εἶναι), in the Aristotelian phrase.¹² But Heidegger understands essence phenomenologically: the essence (οὐσία) of something allows it to *present* itself as itself (παρουσία). The essence makes it possible for the thing itself to be shown as what it is. Since things must be displayed *to* someone, without Dasein there is no

possibility of display, and thus no essence (or meaning or being) in the phenomenological sense.

Accordingly, Heidegger claims that without Dasein, there would “be” no being (more precisely, being would not be given)¹⁵ and that without Dasein, there would be no meaning: meaning is the “framework” of *Dasein’s* disclosedness.¹⁴ Similarly, Heidegger emphasizes that there cannot be anything further that lies hidden “behind” being.¹⁵ Being is not a manifestation of the nonmanifest, but rather what enables the manifestation of beings. If there were no manifestation, then being would not go into hiding, like an undiscovered entity, but simply would not occur at all.

Since being not only enables ontic phenomena to show themselves, but is itself a phenomenon, it too stands in need of a meaning—a context that makes it possible for being to display itself. This is *time* as the “horizon” for being. Time is the ecstatic temporality of Dasein: its pressing ahead into possibilities that are drawn from its factual thrownness, thereby disclosing a world and encountering entities within it. The term “horizon” in *Being and Time* seems to serve as a more technical equivalent to “meaning”: it is that in terms of which something is capable of being understood. When Heidegger calls time a *transcendental* horizon, he implies that it is the *sole* and *necessary* meaning in terms of which we must understand being.¹⁶

The guiding question and thesis of *Being and Time* have now come into focus. To seek “the meaning of ‘being’” and to find the “horizon” of being in time is to reveal, in terms of our temporality, that which is always already allowing us to reveal things as what they are.

So far, Sheehan’s paradigm works very well. The being of an entity is its meaning, that is, the appropriate context that enables us to discover the entity. More fundamental than any particular such discoveries is the disclosure of the world, or the overall context of significance;¹⁷ and that disclosure is made possible by time, that is, the thrown projecting of Dasein—the finite nature of the human condition.

In the present essay, Sheehan draws on Heidegger’s 1929–30 lectures on the being of animals to illuminate our condition. Like (other)

animals, we strive to reach out beyond the immediate. The human projection of possible ways to exist resembles animal drive. In both cases, striving discloses things: the animal's desires reveal things to it as desirable or undesirable; the human projection of possibilities reveals things to us in *their* possibilities. The mystery of being, it seems, is grounded in the humble reality of our living flesh.

The 1929–30 lectures are notable for their sensitive attention to living things other than Dasein and for their respect for empirical science. Sheehan has shown that we still have much to learn from these lectures. However, he presents the phenomenology of animals somewhat more positively than Heidegger does. Without in any way resorting to an evolutionist reductionism, which is all too popular today, Sheehan leaves room for evolution and points out legitimate analogies between humans and beasts. Heidegger, however, calls animals impoverished.¹⁸ His lectures remain true to the suggestion in *Being and Time* that the being of Dasein must be interpreted first, and the being of animals must be interpreted privatively.¹⁹ Their very life is, as it were, a deficient mode. Heidegger concludes that animals are not open to beings *as beings* at all, but only to beings as disinhibiting triggers for drives.²⁰

What is it, then, to be open to beings as beings? Animals do discover beings—but they do not seem able to appreciate the fact that beings are there to be discovered in the first place. An animal can be startled, but not astonished. In astonishment, the familiar loses its self-evidence and becomes surprising—not as something new, but in the very wonder of its original givenness. In part, as Sheehan puts it, astonishment is wonder at the fact that “things make sense!” But there is also wonder at the fact that things *are* there at all—and this experience may actually be provoked most effectively when things *stop* making sense smoothly and we are plunged into an insight into our own ignorance.

Celebration . . . is self-restraint, is attentiveness, is questioning, is meditating, is awaiting, is the step over into the more wakeful glimpse of the wonder—the wonder that a world is worlding around us at all, that there are beings rather than nothing, that things are and we

ourselves are in their midst, that we ourselves are and yet barely know who we are, and barely know that we do not know all this.²¹

This too is part of the question of being: the wonder that *there is* something at all, that *there are* beings instead of nothing, including ourselves, even if the meaning of these beings is fragile or absent. The “being of Dasein can burst forth as a naked ‘that it is and has to be.’ The pure ‘that it is’ shows itself, but the ‘whence’ and the ‘whither’ remain in darkness.”²²

This side of the question of being involves what I will call excess and event. These will prove to be indispensable elements of what, above all, sets humans apart from animals according to Heidegger: history.

EXCESS

The being of an entity, as its essence or meaning, is not itself that entity. This is the famous “ontological difference.” Interpreted phenomenologically, it tells us that meaning enables the self-showing of entities, but those entities are other than meaning, or exceed it. A shoe is not the meaning of a shoe; the meaning of a shoe permits the shoe to show itself both as meaningful and as exceeding meaning. If there were no shoe to be found, then the horizons within which we interpret shoes would be, in Husserlian terms, unfulfilled intentions—meanings without anything that showed up in their light.

In this regard, the ontological difference is linked to the distinction between essence and existence. To explore the essence or meaning of a thing is one project; to determine whether it exists is another. It might seem, then, that we could neatly separate the two issues; the first is ontological and the second is ontic, or the first is a question of meaning and the second a question of fact.

However, in Greek, words such as εἶναι and οὐσία are used in both contexts—both for so-called “essential” questions and for “existential” ones.²³ According to one of the founding doctrines of analytic philosophy, a doctrine that ultimately stems from Kant, this dual usage is

nothing but a confusion.²⁴ Words such as “being” in Indo-European languages are dangerously ambiguous, as they are used both in predication (that is, the attribution of meanings) and in the affirmation of existence. If we clearly separate these logical functions, the “problem of being” as traditionally understood will dissolve.

Although he is no analytic philosopher, Sheehan too strives for a clear, unambiguous focus that will obviate some of the traditional ambiguities in the word “being.” For Sheehan, Heidegger “placed the problematic of being squarely within the parameters of meaning,” so that we can simply replace *Sein* with *Sinn*. Elsewhere Sheehan has even stated that Heidegger’s “focal topic never was ‘being’ in any of its forms.”²⁵

Heidegger does have moments when he loses patience with the word *Sein*, but typically he insists that he is retrieving the ancient question of being, reviving its original impetus in the face of the distortions of the tradition.²⁶ This suggests that Heidegger would prefer to preserve the ambiguities of εἶναι—that he sees the ancient complex of problems as having some integrity that is worthy of thought.

Let me briefly make an independent, non-Heideggerian case for that integrity.²⁷ Two main points militate against a complete divorce between meaning and excess, a distinction that would treat these as completely separable issues. (At this point I am concerned primarily with the fact that beings exist, as we would normally say—but as explained above, the word “existence” is over-determined, so I prefer “excess” as a more neutral and broader term for non-meaning.)

(a) Although excess is not meaning, it presents itself to us in terms of meaning: there are *meanings of excess*. There is always some meaningful way in which something is “there” for us or “given” to us. (As Sheehan puts it, “if we cannot make any sense of something, we cannot meet it.”) What is other than meaning *is* for us meaningfully. For example, I find a shoe I was looking for: “Here it is!” Even though the shoe is not a meaning, and the meaning of shoeness in no way guarantees that I will find a shoe, when I find that there is a shoe there, this “is” has a meaning (in this case, something like lying there available and ready). Even the bare and abstract existential quantifier, the $\exists x$

of symbolic logic, has meaning; its meaning is simply kept silent in logic.²⁸ In short, it makes a difference to us that there *is* a being instead of nothing—or rather, it makes a variety of meaningful differences to us that there are beings instead of nothing.

(b) Conversely, the meaning of being always points beyond itself to what exceeds meaning, to what cannot be exhausted by meaning. The differences it makes that there is something instead of nothing point us back to the sheer “that there is.” When I say, “Here it is!” I mean not only that the shoe lies ready, but also that something other than meaning is showing up now—something that is available for me to wear it, name it, and talk about it, but is not reducible to the meaning it has for me. There is an interesting paradox here: “is” carries meaning, but part of its meaning is precisely that what *is* cannot be exhausted by any meaning, but exceeds it. Again, if I say “the hammer is heavy,” to use one of Heidegger’s favorite examples, I am affirming that something other than the mere meanings of hammerness and heaviness, something that exceeds meaning—an actual something that I can call a heavy hammer—is here. Note that this observation is not simply a point about assertions; in nonlinguistic action, when I simply pick up the hammer and feel its heft, I also recognize excess.

In short, excess and meaning bleed into each other: that which is, is (a) meaningful to us, yet simultaneously (b) presents itself as exceeding meaning, and this excess is itself part of its meaning as a being. Beings show themselves as being more than how they show themselves.²⁹ They are meaningfully given as other than meaning.

The question of being should then involve both meaning and excess. This is not to say that meaning and excess are both instances of some overarching category of “being,” but that the problematic of being ought to consider both meaning and excess, in their various relations. Furthermore, if we forget that meaning is entangled with excess and treat it as a self-contained domain of its own, we run the risk of letting it stagnate. While meaning will still serve to let things display themselves, this display is likely to be a stereotyped semblance—a rigid “Egyptianism.”³⁰ An intimation of excess keeps meaning sharp and nimble.

But how does the question of being involve both meaning and excess in Heidegger's own texts? In several ways.

First, Heidegger takes the question of being broadly enough to include "that-being." He often mentions the *Daß* or "that-it-is" as a topic worthy of thought. Often this thought takes the form of exploring the meanings of excess—my point (a) above. "Even 'givenness' already represents a categorial determination," as he puts it in his *Jugendschriften*.⁵¹ "What does *es gibt* mean?"⁵² The meanings of givenness, or excess, have included the medieval *existentia*,⁵³ the "in itself,"⁵⁴ and Kant's *Position* or positing.⁵⁵ Heidegger explores the genealogies of these concepts in order to question meanings that have become calcified and are taken for granted. Once we articulate the meanings of *existentia* and the like, we can deconstruct them. These meanings have remained unnoticed and unthreatened; they have tacitly interpreted excess without letting the excess call them into question. Instead of genuinely acknowledging excess, such concepts surreptitiously impose a concept of being—usually, being as presence at hand.

In order to avoid such calcified thinking, the philosophical project of making sense of being needs to be aware of the limits and fragility of sense. The breakdown of meaning may be a particularly valuable stimulant to thought, as when Heidegger writes that we must let the mystery of Dasein's being emerge so that we can *fail* more genuinely and raise deeper questions.⁵⁶ When significance pales and trembles, when meaning is revealed as contingent and vulnerable, excess hits us and makes us capable of fresher philosophical insight. At such moments, excess shines through within meaning, calling that very meaning into question. "A 'ground' becomes accessible only as meaning, even if it is itself the abyss of meaninglessness."⁵⁷

Accordingly, Heidegger is interested in a variety of situations where meaning falters in the face of excess. In the 1919 war emergency semester, for instance, he considers experiences of *unfamiliar things*. A Senegalese tribesman faced with a lectern might take it as a magical thing, as a shield, or simply as something he doesn't know what to make of (something he can't get started with, in the German idiom).⁵⁸ This raw

experience of “something” is never a sheer absence of interpretation; some meaning must always be operative in order for us to encounter “something” at all. But in these limit situations, when meaning struggles and totters, the sheer “there is” – the difference between something and nothing – comes alive. The *es gibt* is at its most powerful, and life is at its most “intense,” when we shift from one world to another or when we experience a moment passionately, rather than being settled firmly and comfortably within a world.⁵⁹

This is especially the case in regard to the meaning of *one’s own being*. When the sense of my being trembles in anxiety, the excess of my being is disclosed, in a way that makes it possible for me to become deeper or more authentic. Anxiety discloses the naked “that it [Dasein] is and has to be.”⁴⁰ Anxiety allows me to encounter my thrownness, which is ineluctably enigmatic – resistant to meaning.⁴¹ That is, all the possibilities I have for interpreting my thrownness (such as a religious interpretation in terms of creation and fall, or a scientific interpretation in terms of evolution) are possibilities that I project on the *basis* of thrownness, and must remain indebted to the raw experience that “here I am.” This “facticity” is not an ontic fact – which becomes available only *within* an interpretation.⁴² Facticity exceeds all interpretation, all meaning.

Nature’s being as excess can also strike us, in a way that provides a deeper glimpse into the nonhuman than we are usually afforded. In *Being and Time*, nature is primarily considered as material for ready-to-hand entities (timber, leather, etc.) or as a present-at-hand object of scientific fact-gathering. Clearly the former sense of nature is more primordial than the latter, for Heidegger, but that is not to say that it is ultimate. Nature as ready-to-hand is a phenomenon typical of everydayness, and is thus subject to the superficial and clichéd sort of revelation that everydayness promotes. In one passage, Heidegger alludes to a further, more poetic sense of “the *power of nature*.”⁴⁵ Later he proposes that nature can be contrary to meaning (*widersinnig*): natural catastrophes can intrude absurdly into Dasein’s sphere of significance.⁴⁴ While *Being and Time* does not spell out the connection

between poetic and non-sensical nature, I would suggest that poetic interpretations of nature are deeper than the standard practical, technical, and theoretical interpretations precisely because the poet is open to the mystery of nature as exceeding meaning. That mystery cannot be reduced to any interpretation; it shows us its interpreted aspects only the better to hide itself.

As we saw, Heidegger wants us to wonder not only at the givenness of particular beings, at our individual facticity, and at the senselessness of nature, but also at the existence of *what is, as such and as a whole*—its difference from nothing. The most powerful passage along these lines may be the opening pages of *Introduction to Metaphysics*. With Leibniz, Heidegger asks why there is something instead of nothing; unlike Leibniz, he does not seek a ground for all entities in a supreme entity and in the principle of sufficient reason, but takes the question as an occasion for inquiring into the meaning of being. This meaning, however, never becomes simply an exposition of what beings mean, but remains linked to the astonishment at the fact that beings exist in the first place. That wonder at being as excess is essential to keeping being as meaning in question, to challenging the very boundary between what counts as something and what counts as nothing.⁴⁵

On similar grounds, after the publication of the completed portions of *Being and Time*, Heidegger becomes uneasy with that text's emphasis on meaning and understanding. As he sees it in retrospect, the project ran the risk of transcendental thinking⁴⁶—that is, Dasein, like a Kantian subject, seemed to set the limits of what could count as a being for it, so that apart from this set sphere of meaning, nothing could become manifest. To counter this risk, Heidegger now stresses facticity, which he had defined in *Being and Time* as a condition in which a being can understand its own destiny as tied up with the beings that it encounters.⁴⁷ Human beings are plunged not only into a meaningful openness, but into a given opacity; they belong not only to being as meaning, but also to beings, for they themselves are beings. Heidegger first proposes to explore this condition in his suggestive sketch of “metontology” (1928); metontology would fully recognize

that the entity for whom beings have meaning is itself an entity, and finds itself amidst entities.⁴⁸

Heidegger eventually articulates this condition in “The Origin of the Work of Art” as the strife between earth and world. Meaning or illumination (world) always depends on and refers to an uninterpreted excess (earth)—a *λήθη* that shadows *ἀλήθεια*. This is why truth is a “robbery,” a “struggle.”⁴⁹ In the artwork (and at other privileged sites), truth takes place as the clash of earth and world.⁵⁰ It is difficult to define earth precisely, but that is the point: earth is resistance to definition, resistance to discovery, resistance to sense and essence. It conceals itself at the same time as it sustains the world of sense that tries, yet inevitably fails, to interpret it. (This point echoes the reference to nature as *widersinnig* in *Being and Time*. “Earth” is, among other things, the deeper non-sense of nature.) Meaning always has its points of friction with the non-meaning on which it is based. Only when that friction enters our awareness—when the world struggles against the earth and recognizes that it fails—is a culture alive and creative.⁵¹

EVENT

As we have seen, Sheehan identifies Heidegger’s “being” with meaning. But what is Heidegger asking with regard to meaning? What is the *Seinsfrage*? In Sheehan’s reading, the Heideggerian project is not simply to articulate meaning, but to discover its ground. “The basic question of Heidegger’s thinking concerns how *Sein/Anwesen* comes about, i.e., comes to be disclosed *a priori* in human being.”

I have just argued that meaning stands in various relations to non-meaning, and that Heidegger’s *Seinsfrage* is broad enough to include those relations. But, following Sheehan’s paradigm, we can still ask: how does the meaning/excess complex—the whole dynamic of relations between sense and non-sense—come about? I have found this paradigm to be a very helpful guiding thread in interpreting Heidegger’s texts from every period.

However, Sheehan's phrase "comes to be disclosed *a priori*" raises a question. Does being actually *come* to be disclosed, in a happening or event? Or is it disclosed *a priori*—is it always in effect, so that we are looking not for an event but for an essence?

In his present essay, Sheehan uses a good deal of event language. "With the appearance of human being, meaning dawned in the universe." Then things "became meaningfully present. . . . Once man is possessed by the Promethean fire of intellect and language, human history begins as a complex unfolding of meaningful lives."

What sort of beginning is this? Sheehan's discussion of animals suggests that he has in mind the gradual evolution of *homo sapiens*, an evolution that at some point in the distant past brought us to the tipping point where meaning surpasses animal desire. Now that we have passed that point, meaning is a given, and it will be given as long as we remain human. As Sheehan puts it in an earlier essay, "Without us, there is no open at all; but with us, the open is always *a priori* operative. . . . being-open is the ineluctable condition of our essence . . . it is our 'fate,' the way we always already are."⁵² Consequently, "If we can call *Ereignis* an event at all, it is the '*a priori* event' of the opening up of the open."⁵³

In my view this interpretation of *Ereignis* is not "eventful" enough, at least in regard to Heidegger's thought in the thirties. Sheehan has proposed that a proper reading of the *Beiträge* could lead us to demystify Heidegger, to focus on our "always-already-operative . . . openedness," and to eliminate "all the apocalyptic language . . . the cosmic drama, the mystical metaphors, the Teutonic bombast."⁵⁴ But this reading would surely go against the grain of the *Beiträge*—an apocalyptic, mystical, and bombastic text if there ever was one. Whether or not its rhetoric is to our taste, we should consider the possibility that for Heidegger, at least at that stage in his thinking, the rhetoric is necessary in order to do justice to the *Sache selbst*.⁵⁵

What is at stake, then, in the text subtitled *Vom Ereignis*? Twenty-two years after the publication of the *Beiträge*, English-speaking interpreters cannot even agree on whether *Ereignis* should be translated as "event."⁵⁶ Heidegger himself has made the question more difficult

by denying, in several postwar texts, that *Ereignis* is an occurrence (*Vorkommnis*) or happening (*Geschehen*, *Geschehnis*).⁵⁷ But in 1935 he had characterized his development after *Being and Time* as a move *vom Seinsverständnis zum Seinsgeschehnis*,⁵⁸ and the *Beiträge* describe *Ereignis* as “the greatest happening,” “the happening of owndom.”⁵⁹ I have argued elsewhere that, at least in its external presentation, Heidegger’s thought oscillates between emphasizing universal structures (*Being and Time*, some late texts) and emphasizing unique events (the earliest lectures, the *Beiträge* and other texts of the 1930s).⁶⁰ Since Heidegger’s way of presenting his thought may not always be candid, the hermeneutical problem is difficult. But we can at least say that it is not necessarily fair to judge the “middle Heidegger” of the 1930s in terms of the “late Heidegger’s” writings.⁶¹

What, then, does it mean to shift “from the understanding of being to the happening of being”? We can approach this shift in terms of Heidegger’s treatment of time.

Being and Time addresses being through Dasein’s understanding, that is, in terms of Dasein’s temporality as the horizon that allows the phenomenon of being to display itself. Temporality is presented here as an essential structure; the text does not raise the question of how time itself might begin. In fact, it might seem that this very question is a category mistake: how could there be a temporal origin of temporality? As Heidegger says in 1927, “*Time is earlier than any possible earlier* of whatever sort, because it is the basic condition for an earlier as such.”⁶² It would seem that, as Sheehan puts it, “the genesis of the space of meaning” is “the structure of care” – a *structure*, not an event.

But as Heidegger becomes dissatisfied with the transcendental tendencies in his thought, he turns toward a more eventful genesis. “What does it mean here to say that time is a horizon? . . . we do not have the slightest intimation of the abysses of the essence of time.”⁶³ When we stop treating time as transcendental horizon, it becomes possible to seek the event in which time begins. “The primal fact . . . is that there is anything like temporality at all. The entrance into world by beings is primal history pure and simple.”⁶⁴ “Can one ask, ‘How does time

arise?” Heidegger increasingly believes that one can, but he cannot give the traditional metaphysical answer: “through the deformation and restriction of eternity.”⁶⁵

In order to address the question of the origin of time, Heidegger needs a distinction between “beginning” (*Beginn*) and “inception” (*Anfang*). “The beginning is left behind as soon as it occurs, it disappears as the happening progresses. But the inception, the origin, is first manifested in the happening, and is fully there only at the end.”⁶⁶ According to the 1941 text devoted to this theme, *Über den Anfang*, “‘beginning’ . . . means a distinctive position and phase in the course of a process. But . . . here the word ‘inception’ is supposed to name the essence of be-ing [*Seyn*] . . . The inception that seizes is the appropriating event. [*Der An-fang ist Er-ignis.*]”⁶⁷

The inception is the time when time and history come to be. “Ever since time arose and was brought to stand, since then we *are* historical.”⁶⁸ “Why is this sudden moment of ‘world history’ essentially and abysally other than all the ‘millions of years’ of worldless processes? Because this suddenness lights up the uniqueness of be-ing . . . The ‘moment’ is the origin of ‘time’ itself.”⁶⁹

Heidegger is not talking about a process in the distant past when *homo sapiens* emerged; an inception can happen now or in the future. His entry into politics in 1933 was clearly intended to contribute to an inception—the genesis of (genuine) history, (genuine) time, and a (genuine) clearing. As he sees it then, being is not always already granted to “us” as members of a species; it is granted (or genuinely granted) only when we wrestle with *who* we historically are and, by *working out* the meaning of things, do our share in allowing being to happen. “The essence of beings comes to the light of day only when human beings, rooted in their heritage and vocation, *put* essence to *work* [*das Wesen erwirkt*].”⁷⁰

During the course of the 1930s, Heidegger’s enthusiasm for political “work” wanes and sours, but he insists all the more urgently on a founding inception—now thought primarily in *poetic* terms. “Poetry is the basic happening of being as such. It founds being and must found it.”⁷¹ “The poet is the grounder of being.”⁷² Poetry happens at the times

when time itself happens most intensely – moments that Heidegger, following Hölderlin, calls “the peaks of time.”⁷³

In this holding-sway-forward of what has been into the future, which, pointing back, opens what was already preparing itself earlier as such, there holds sway the coming-towards and the still-essentially-happening (future and past) at once: originary time. . . . This originary time transports our Dasein into the future and past, or better, brings it about that our being as such is a transported being – if it is authentic, that is. . . . In such time, time “comes to be.”⁷⁴

The *Contributions* give this inception of time and being the name *das Ereignis*, which is short for “the event of the grounding of the there.”⁷⁵ In this event, we would be seized or appropriated by the emergence of meaning. The appropriating event would take place at a “site of the moment” where “time-space” would open as an “abyssal ground” that would inaugurate a domain of unconcealment, yet would deny this domain any absolute foundation.⁷⁶ We need to put all this in the subjunctive because it is unclear when, or even whether, such an event has happened with the radical depth that Heidegger ascribes to it. It is at least clear that it does not happen constantly: “be-ing is at times” (*das Seyn ist zuzeiten*).⁷⁷

The intent of Heidegger’s spelling *Seyn* is murky both in his texts and in most of the secondary literature. This is where I have found Sheehan’s paradigm to be particularly helpful. We can interpret *Seyn* (a mildly old-fashioned spelling that we can conveniently render as “be-ing”) as the source of *Sein* – that is, *Seyn* is the giving of the meaning/excess complex in terms of which things are manifest to us. The search for *Seyn* is precisely what Sheehan indicates as the basic question of Heidegger’s thought. Be-ing is the genesis of meaning.

When we adopt this paradigm, many of Heidegger’s statements are illuminated – in a way that emphasizes the *event* of the genesis of meaning. *Seyn*, *Ereignis*, and *Anfang* are very closely linked in

Heidegger's private writings of the late 1930s, indicating that meaning originates in a happening. The intricate vocabulary and problematic of the *Beiträge* and related texts emerge from this central thought.⁷⁸ Here I can give only a few examples of how I interpret Heidegger's statements "eventfully."

"Be-ing is what is rarest because it is the most unique, and no one appreciates the few moments in which it grounds a site for itself and essentially happens [*west*]."⁷⁹ At these unique moments, a community is given its world, its sphere of meaning. History bursts forth at these times. The fact that there is something instead of nothing now makes a difference to this community – a difference that can be both cultivated and challenged.⁸⁰

"All inceptions ... elude the historian, not because they are supratemporally eternal but because they are greater than eternity: *the shocks* of time, which furnish [*einräumen*] being with the openness for its self-concealing."⁸¹ Time-space, or the leeway we have to pursue possibilities for ourselves and other things, originates in a wrenching moment, the moment when meaning and excess come into play. The traditional notion of eternity ossifies meaning while forgetting excess and the inceptive event.

The reference to "shocks" (*Stöße*) brings us to the theme of urgency or emergency (*Not*). "Emergency, assailing us in its essential happening – what if it were the truth of be-ing itself? What if, with the more originary grounding of truth, *be-ing* also came to *happen more essentially* ... as event?"⁸² The inception is the event in which our own being, and being as a whole, becomes a burning issue for us. We are indebted to an event of estrangement – a disquieting event in which we are distanced from ourselves, so that we are faced with the *task* of being ourselves. We then become a "who," a problematic and historical being for whom beings have meaning. "Dasein itself essentially happens as *emergency*, authentically initiates [*setzt*] emergency itself and thus first founds the 'where' of the 'there.'"⁸³ Dasein is not *homo sapiens*; humanity needs to be de-ranged (*ver-rückt*) into the condition of Dasein by an emergency.⁸⁴ ἀ-λήθεια is ἀπο-κάλυψις.

One last point about *Ereignis*: if it is the event in which meaning is given, then *das Ereignis* itself does not have meaning—it is the ultimate *excess*. The giving of the sense of givenness cannot itself be given, as it is not subject to that sense. The origin of significance cannot itself be significant. This is to say that *Ereignis* cannot be understood, revealed, or interpreted in the way beings and their meaning can. It remains intrinsically opaque, or at least resistant to ordinary comprehension. “The excess [*Über-maß*] is ... the self-withdrawing from all appraisal and measurement. But in this self-withdrawing (*self-concealing*), be-ing has its nearest nearness in the clearing of the there, in that it appropriates being-*there*.”⁸⁵ If *Ereignis* were a structure, it would be a meaning that could be brought out through phenomenological interpretation. But as the event that grants meaning, it is ineluctably esoteric. We can glimpse it only indirectly, and can think of it only through delicate and tentative efforts, even though it founds and sustains our every effort. To risk an ontic analogy, thinking of *Ereignis* is like inferring the presence of a black hole from the activity at its event horizon. But *Ereignis* is not a hidden yet present entity; it is the excessive event at the still-resounding inception of meaning. And it does not lie in distant space, but lurks as an intimate obscurity at the heart of our own thought and experience.

*

If Heidegger’s thinking involves excess and event, this does not invalidate Sheehan’s paradigm—it simply means that the paradigm ought to be expanded into a still more fruitful interpretive approach. Heidegger does draw our attention to the phenomenon of meaning, but also to its points of friction with excess, and in this way his thought incorporates the range of problems and tensions that the term “being” has traditionally brought with it. Heidegger does seek the basis of meaning, and does find it in our thrown projection, but he also tries to think of the event in which such thrown projection first gets established. Yes: Heidegger finds the source of meaning in human finitude. More fully: he finds the source of the complex of meaning and excess in the finite condition of

having one's own being as a problem—a condition that might arise in a unique, excessive event, the inception of history.

If Heidegger comes into better focus through this paradigm, his limitations will also come into view more clearly. For example, the Levinasian critique now proves to have missed some important features of Heidegger's thought, but ultimately to be in the right. Heidegger is not a thinker of totality; he does not envelop all beings in the meaning of being, but allows meaning to be exceeded both by the givenness of beings and by the enigmatic giving of meaning itself. But Levinas is right to argue that Heidegger does not do justice to the face of the other. Heidegger acknowledges the excess of my own being, of nature, of beings as a whole, and of the inceptive event—but the excess of the other individual who faces me, and the event of the encounter with that other, do not get adequately articulated in his thought. This flaw plays a part in his atrophied ethics, his misunderstandings of the political sphere, and his tendency to judge all human phenomena from an impersonal and remote point of view. However, the excess and event in Heidegger's thought can help us learn from him as we develop ways of thinking of being that respect human beings.⁸⁶

Notes

- 1 Thomas Sheehan, "A Paradigm Shift in Heidegger Research," *Continental Philosophy Review* 34 (2001): 183–202; "Kehre and Ereignis: A Prolegomenon to *Introduction to Metaphysics*," in *A Companion to Heidegger's "Introduction to Metaphysics"*, ed. Richard Polt and Gregory Fried (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 3–16. See also the more recent publications Sheehan cites in note 5 of his article in the present volume.
- 2 Sheehan, "A Paradigm Shift," 189.
- 3 In this essay I can discuss excess and event solely in the context of Heidegger's work, and not as these concepts have been developed in French philosophy after Heidegger—for example, in Jean-Luc Marion's studies of the excess of "saturated phenomena," or Alain Badiou's theory of the event as a "multiple" that cannot be represented in terms of a particular order of being.
- 4 GA 65: 183, 247. These translations will be justified below.
- 5 *Augenblicksstätte*: e.g. GA 65: 387.
- 6 SZ 1. I will generally follow the Macquarrie and Robinson translation, but will not capitalize "being." In this case, Macquarrie and Robinson omit the quotation marks around the word.
- 7 On the ambiguities of "the question of being" as raised in the opening of *Being and Time*, see Jean Grondin, "Why Reawaken the Question of Being?" in Richard Polt, ed., *Critical Essays on Heidegger's "Being and Time"* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), 15–32.
- 8 SZ 35.
- 9 SZ 151.
- 10 SZ 143–5.
- 11 SZ 20, 121.
- 12 The "was" here is not to be understood simply as a reference to an earlier time, but as indicating ontological perfection: see Thomas Sheehan, "*Geschichtlichkeit/Ereignis/Kehre*," *Existentialia* 11:3–4 (2001), 241–51. Sheehan argues that, similarly, Heidegger's

Ereignis is not an event in time but “the structure of the ontological movement that enables all being-significant” (ibid., 249). But as I will explain below, I do not think it is feasible to divorce *Ereignis* from temporal events, at least in Heidegger’s middle period.

13 SZ 212.

14 SZ 151.

15 SZ 35–6, 152.

16 SZ 41. If time, in turn, can be understood, does time itself then need a further horizon in terms of which it can display itself? For a discussion of this problem, with its threat of an infinite regress, see GA 24: 396–7, 437–8, 462–3. Heidegger’s turn to *Ereignis* will stop the infinite regress because *Ereignis*, as we will see, is not horizontally understood; it is self-concealing. The same problem of an infinite regress of horizons is raised in the 1945 “Triadic Conversation on a Country Path,” GA 77: 93–5. Again, the problem points to a non-horizontal ground for all horizons—here, the “region” that both resists and enables all representation.

17 SZ 87.

18 GA 29/30: 309–10, 389–96.

19 SZ 50.

20 GA 29/30: 497–8, 509. However, this is not Heidegger’s last word on animals. See Andrew J. Mitchell, “Heidegger’s Later Thinking of Animality: The End of World Poverty,” 74–85 in the present volume.

21 GA 52: 64.

22 SZ 134.

23 For example, in a crucial passage in the *Theaetetus*, Socrates argues that the soul does not use the sense organs to grasp “the being [of the hard and the soft] and that they are” (οὐσίαν καὶ ὅτι ἐστὸν, 186b). Does the καί mark a distinction or an elucidation? In the anachronistic terms of medieval philosophy, it is not clear whether οὐσία here means essence as contrasted with existence, or whether it embraces existence as one of its dimensions. Heidegger’s

- commentary on this passage favors the more inclusive option and renders the phrase as “being, the what-being and that-being and so-being” (GA 34: 228).
- 24 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 598A/626B: “*Being*’ is obviously not a real predicate.”
- 25 Sheehan, “A Paradigm Shift,” 187. For other arguments against this claim see Richard Capobianco, “The Fate of Being,” chapter 1 of his *Engaging Heidegger* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010); Michael Steinmann, “Phenomenological Perspectivism: The Interweaving of Phenomenology, Hermeneutics, and Ontology in Martin Heidegger,” in *Proceedings of the Forty-Fifth Annual Meeting of the Heidegger Circle* (Marquette University, Milwaukee, 2011), 38–52.
- 26 For Heidegger’s final, insistent appeal to the question of being, see his 1976 letter to the tenth annual meeting of the Heidegger Circle, translated by Richard Capobianco in *Engaging Heidegger*, 31–32.
- 27 I make a more extended argument in “Traumatic Ontology,” in *Being Shaken: Ontology and the Event*, ed. Michael Marder and Santiago Zabala (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming).
- 28 According to Frege (who did not use a separate symbol for the existential quantifier but nevertheless laid the groundwork for modern symbolic logic), an existential claim asserts that a concept is “realized” or “not empty”: “On Concept and Object,” in *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege*, ed. Peter Geach and Max Black (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1952), 49. Compare Kant’s term *Position* (*Critique of Pure Reason*, A598–9/B626–7).
- 29 Compare Sartre’s concept of the “transphenomenality of being”: *Being and Nothingness*, Introduction, section II.
- 30 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, “‘Reason’ in Philosophy,” §1; *Sämtliche Werke, Kritische Studienausgabe*, Band 6 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1980), 75–76.

- 31 GA 1: 318.
- 32 GA 56/57: 67.
- 33 GA 24: 108–71.
- 34 The “in itself” is a kind of meaning and thus depends on Dasein: SZ 212. Heidegger’s suggestion that this meaning is rooted in the experience of the reliability of useful things is one of the less plausible, or at least less developed, claims in *Being and Time*: SZ 75–6.
- 35 GA 24: 35–107; “Kants These über das Sein,” in GA 9.
- 36 SZ 148.
- 37 SZ 152. As Steinmann puts it, “Sense itself opens the difference to what is not sense, without transforming it into another piece of sense”: “Phenomenological Perspectivism,” 48. On the fragility and finitude of Heideggerian *Sinn*, cf. Robert B. Pippin, “Necessary Conditions for the Possibility of What Isn’t: Heidegger on Failed Meaning,” in *Transcendental Heidegger*, ed. Steven Crowell and Jeff Malpas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 199–214.
- 38 GA 56/57: 72.
- 39 GA 56/57: 115.
- 40 SZ 134.
- 41 SZ 135.
- 42 See SZ 56 and 135 on factuality and facticity. Factuality is a flat set of “data” that are interpreted in terms of an unquestioned meaning of being. Meaning cannot be built out of or added onto putatively meaningless facts—there are no such things. But meaning can be stimulated by an encounter with the non-meaning of facticity.
- 43 SZ 70.
- 44 SZ 152.
- 45 See especially *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, 155. On the senses of “nothing” in this text see Richard Polt, “The Question of Nothing,” in Polt and Fried, *A Companion to Heidegger’s “Introduction to Metaphysics,”* 57–82.

- 46 E.g. GA 65: 250; cf. Richard Polt, *The Emergency of Being: On Heidegger's "Contributions to Philosophy"* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 47–9, 145, 158.
- 47 SZ 56.
- 48 GA 26: 199–202.
- 49 SZ 222; GA 36/37: 118.
- 50 E.g. GA 65: 349, 391.
- 51 One could read Heidegger's newfound emphasis on primordial silence in the 1930s as another aspect of this awareness of excess. See GA 36/37: 106–114; GA 65: 78–80; Richard Polt, "The Secret Homeland of Speech: Heidegger on Language, 1933–34" (forthcoming from Northwestern University Press in a volume on Heidegger and language edited by Jeffrey Powell).
- 52 Sheehan, "A Paradigm Shift," 194.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 198.
- 54 *Ibid.*, 200–201.
- 55 I do not take the *Beiträge* as the single authoritative solution to the Heidegger riddle. In my view the text is, as its epigraph says, a serious attempt to express deep currents in Heidegger's thought that he had long hesitated to follow—but it is not the final word. However, for my current purposes, it is enough to show that Sheehan's interpretation does not yield a convincing reading of this particular significant text and its close kin.
- 56 Parvis Emad and Kenneth Maly claim that the word "event" is grossly inadequate in the introduction to their translation of the *Contributions*, but the new translation by Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu uses "event" (rightly, in my view). Many interpreters, such as Miguel de Beistegui, seem to try to square the circle, so that *Ereignis* is "a primordial and forever recurring event": *Truth and Genesis: Philosophy as Differential Ontology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 112. This sounds more like an essence than an event to me.
- 57 "The Way to Language," in *On the Way to Language*, 127; "Summary of a Seminar on the Lecture 'Time and Being,'" in *On Time*

- and Being*, 20; “The Principle of Identity,” in *Identity and Difference*, 36.
- 58 GA 40: 219.
- 59 GA 65: 57, 320.
- 60 Richard Polt, “*Ereignis*,” in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark Wrathall, eds., *A Companion to Heidegger* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 375–91.
- 61 Heidegger claims in a little-known 1964 letter to Dieter Sinn that all of his postwar publications, with the exception of the essay “The Thing,” are couched in the language of metaphysics: Dieter Sinn, *Ereignis und Nirwana: Heidegger–Buddhismus–Mythos–Mystik; Zur Archäotypik des Denkens* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1991), 172. Since metaphysical language privileges structure over event, my own inclination is to trust the more “eventful” private texts of the 1930s as a better clue to Heidegger’s deepest impulses. For example, in the Greek interpretation of language as present at hand, “the emphasis is on exhibiting what is at all times the most constant and the most simple and enduring fundamental structure, in the sense of the Greek conception of Being”: GA 36/37: 102–3 = *Being and Truth*, 81. Heidegger wants to transcend that conception, or rather get behind it to the event that gives all conceptions. This is why he rejects the *a priori*: GA 65: 222–3.
- 62 GA 24: 463 = *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 325.
- 63 GA 29/30: 219–20 = *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 146.
- 64 GA 26: 270 = *The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic*, 209.
- 65 “Unbenutzte Vorarbeiten zur Vorlesung vom Wintersemester 1929/1930: *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik: Welt, Endlichkeit, Einsamkeit*,” *Heidegger Studies* 7 (1991), 9.
- 66 GA 39: 3–4.
- 67 GA 70: 9–10.
- 68 “Hölderlin and the Essence of Poetry,” in *Elucidations of Hölderlin’s Poetry*, 57.
- 69 GA 66: 113–14.
- 70 GA 36/37: 86–7 = *Being and Truth*, 70.

- 71 GA 39: 257.
- 72 GA 39: 33.
- 73 GA 39: 52, 56.
- 74 GA 39: 109.
- 75 *Das Ereignis der Dagründung*: GA 65: 183, 247. One can also translate *das Da*, with Sheehan, as “the open”; see “A Paradigm Shift,” 193. I prefer the sense of particularity that the word “there” conveys. The *Da* is not an indeterminate clearing, but a historically specific site for meaning, rich in heritage and potential.
- 76 GA 65: 379–88.
- 77 GA 70: 15. See GA 65: 492 for the provocative statement that “man has never yet *been* historical.” On the “future-subjunctive” tonality of Heidegger’s thinking in these texts, see Polt, *The Emergency of Being*, 98–107, 216–27.
- 78 GA 65: 58: “The inception—inceptively conceived—is be-ing itself . . . as event.” The present interpretation of the *Beiträge* depends on my reading in *The Emergency of Being*. See pp. 49–87 for an interpretation of the central slogan of the text, *das Seyn west als das Ereignis*. See Chapter 2 for the demands that the central thought places on our way of thinking; see Chapter 3 for various ramifications or “straits” of the issue.
- 79 GA 65: 255.
- 80 Was there not always history already—albeit in a deficient mode—before this authentic moment? This is certainly how *Being and Time* would have presented the issue, but in his middle period, for better or worse, Heidegger is deliberately avoiding the search for phenomenological essences.
- 81 GA 65: 17.
- 82 GA 65: 46.
- 83 “Die Unumgänglichkeit des Da-seins (‘Die Not’) und Die Kunst in ihrer Notwendigkeit (Die bewirkende Besinnung),” *Heidegger Studies* 8 (1992), 7.
- 84 GA 65: 372.

- 85 GA 65: 249. On the self-withdrawal of be-ing see Polt, *The Emergence of Being*, esp. 140–146.
- 86 For their comments on this essay I am indebted to Philip Chevalier and Gregory Fried. I also benefited from a lively discussion on the Heidegger Circle Forum in summer 2010—in particular from comments by Bret Davis, Charles Guignon, Lawrence Hatab, Theodore Kisiel, Reginald Lilly, and François Raffoul.