

## Orientation as the Source of Life's Meaning

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### Abstract

In this article I explore an uncharted facet of the meaning of life: the constitution of meaning itself. The thesis posits that the meaning imbued in life is fundamentally connected to orientation in the world. The objective is to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon by analyzing how meaning-as-orientation arises within three overarching contexts: being-in-the-world, being-with-others, and being-with-oneself. To identify orienting meaning across these contexts, Heidegger's technical concept of "something-as-something" or as-structure from *Being and Time* is employed, particularly because it unfolds as openclosedness. Interestingly, the way it unfolds as openclosedness varies in each context. Since orientation also invariably carries an existential dimension, this unfolding and its impact are illustrated. Moreover, Heidegger's somewhat elusive yet pertinent differentiation between sense and significance is examined, with Levinas and Jean-Luc Nancy regarding them as two complementary and interacting sources of orientation.

**Keywords:** meaning in life, orientation, Heidegger, as-structure as openclosedness, sense and significance, Jean-Luc Nancy

### Introduction

In this article I examine the concept of "meaning" within the compound term "meaning of life," positing that meaning fundamentally provides orientation in the world. This perspective offers a complementary approach to prevailing philosophical views. Research on meaning in life typically focuses on the good life, responses to historical disenchantment, or analytical explorations of conceptual boundaries, conditions for meaningfulness, and evaluative criteria (Wolf 2010; Metz 2013; Calhoun 2018). The crucial orientating function of meaning, though, has been largely

overlooked. As an exception stands Charles Taylor (1989), articulating the connection between meaning and one's ability to situate oneself within a moral framework. Werner Stegmaier (2019) further illuminates this domain, though not explicitly aligning with meaning-in-life studies. Both Taylor and Stegmaier, grounded in phenomenology, offer detailed narratives on life's trajectory and meaning-finding within a world teeming with unsettling paradoxes. For Taylor (1989), moral decision-making stems from this orientation, while Stegmaier (2019, XI) views orientation as an ongoing process of rediscovery, integrating paradoxes to successfully finding paths. They conceptualize the world as offering clues for individuals to construct coherent patterns for orientation. Stegmaier posits that orientation precedes cognition and action, focusing on its structure, conditions, and processes, whereas Taylor delves into moral implications. I similarly conceive of orientation as foundational to meaning but diverges from the prevalent focus on daily decision-making. The central inquiry explores the constitution of this orienting meaning, emphasizing the reciprocal interaction between humans and their socio-natural environment.

Three contexts frame this study: being-in-the-world, being-with-others, and being-with-oneself. To unify the multiplicity of orienting meaning within and across these contexts, Heidegger's concept of *Auslegung* (interpretation) or "something-as-something structure" is crucial (Heidegger 1967). This concept is comprehensible through the lens of *Aufgeschlossenheit* (disclosedness) embodying a paradoxical simultaneity of openness and closedness (Heidegger 1967, 75).<sup>1</sup> This phenomenon is examined from an existential perspective, as open-and-closedness invariably affects us. For meaning to guide effectively, it must impact us by radiating discernible relevance.

An additional focus of this article is the distinction between significance and sense. While these terms are typically employed in linguistic-philosophical contexts, their meaning in this setting is notably different. Emmanuel Levinas (2006) and Jean-Luc Nancy (1997) Nancy, who implicitly emphasize the relationship between meaning in life

and orientation, elucidate how orientation should be understood as an inherent and dynamic interaction between sense and significance. Both explore the interplay from different scopes and perspectives. Roughly speaking the central focus for Levinas (1969) is on a rather specific instance; the gaze of 'Other'. This represents a sense that interrupts our perception of this person, even if only momentarily. The perception, based on our worldview, is considered to pertain to the domain of significance. This perception can be both implicit and explicit. Nancy's theme is broader and compasses the world, made up of both sense and significance and argues that sense is – albeit in an undefined way – always present alongside significance, while simultaneously and paradoxically asserting its priority (Nancy 1997).

Regrettably, since scholars rarely use orientation as their primary framework for studying meaning in life, and even among those who do, the insights of Levinas (1969, 2006) and Nancy (1997) have not been fully acknowledged or integrated into their work. My objective is not to introduce this theme into meaning-in-life studies, nor to discuss the mental and behavioral impact of *sense* as an interruption – both of which have been addressed elsewhere<sup>2</sup> – but rather to theoretically understand how to differentiate between sense and significance. Why does Levinas equate sense with interruption, and why does Nancy consider sense both an interruption and something that is always there as a background? As both scholars draw upon Heidegger, exploring his work may offer further clarification.

In this article, I aim to provide a theoretical response to two key questions by drawing on Heidegger's *Being and Time*. First, how does meaning-as-orientation come into being? Second, if orientation functions as an interaction of two distinct sources, how can one clearly delineate them? To address these questions, I identify three contexts in which Heidegger serves as an appropriate theoretical foundation. It is important to note that approaching Heidegger's *Being and Time* from an orientation perspective is less common, as most scholars engage with the text primarily for its discourse on being (Sheehan 2016). Following Sheehan's interpretation,

this study proposes that Heidegger's central concern is meaning as "the intelligent appearance of something to someone," which is intrinsically connected to orientation (Sheehan 2016, 270). The approach to the second question—delineating the two sources of orientation—is similarly less common within the field.

## 1. Theoretical delineations

The meaning of life emerges through the manifold contexts of our existence. These orienting contexts encompass broader environments that shape individual existence. Three such contexts are delineated, roughly following the structure of *Being and Time*. The first, "being-in-the-world," unfolds into three subcontexts: innerworldliness (the realm of everyday actions), interruption of daily practice (instances of disrupted routines), and objective presence (navigation of subjective beings within an objective world). The second context, "being-with-others," examines the dynamics of interpersonal relationships. The third, "being-with-oneself," explores the internal landscape of self-revelation.

Heidegger's concept of "*etwas als etwas*" (something-as-something) serves as a comprehensive framework for orienting meaning in this context (Heidegger 1967, 68). While Heidegger's work closely associates this concept with *Auslegung*, thereby constraining it to the selection of a particular given, this study extends its application to describe the orientation of meaning across all contexts. The justification for this broader application is as follows: The process of selecting a particular given occurs, for instance, when one identifies one's own child among a group of children at a school gate. Within this scenario, the group of children (*etwas*) is transformed into a specific entity (as *etwas*) – one's own child – shifting from a generality to a specificity. However, this identification process necessitates a prior ability to perceive 'the entities moving on the playground' (*etwas*) as 'children' (as *etwas*). It is from this broader interpretation that the analysis employs the "something-as-something" structure.

The description of orientating meaning encompasses an additional dimension: the consideration of orientating's impact on us, manifesting in how it influences what we perceive as relevant. Central to this is the fact that the orientating impact invariably unfolds through a paradoxical state of open-closedness, occurring both to us and through us. While taking place in multifarious ways, the orientating impact always emerges – whether implicit or explicit – when we simultaneously appropriate the orienting context, rendering it comprehensible (openness), yet struggle to grasp the orienting content within that context (closedness). This intricacy can be further elucidated through the notion of “sight.” In Heidegger's philosophy, orientating's impact – understanding that a specific situation is relevant for us – is understood through *Sicht*, or “sight,” a concept that transcends mere visual perception to encompass forms of intelligence beyond our conceptualizing faculty (Heidegger 1967, 148-49). Thus, its relevance can be perceived through sight, but remains, to a certain extent, always elusive to cognitive capacity.<sup>3</sup>

Heidegger's usage of “sight” varies contextually. I emphasize two specific types: *Umsicht* and *Durchsichtigkeit* (ibid., 75). In subcontexts such as innerworldliness and interruption of daily practice, the as-structure is comprehended as an existential openclosedness through *Umsicht*, while in the context of being-with-oneself, it is perceived through *Durchsichtigkeit*. *Umsicht* is often translated as “circumspection” and *Durchsichtigkeit* as ‘transparency’ (literally “seeing-through”). This investigation retains the German terms, emphasizing the concept of sight (*Sicht*), which is consistently underlined, as it is integral to a comprehensive understanding of the subject.<sup>4</sup>

In conjunction with the as-structure and its inherent openness and closedness in various manifestations, the insights of Levinas and Nancy suggest that a comprehensive understanding of orienting meaning must incorporate the dynamic interplay between significance and sense. Scholarship in Heideggerian studies address this distinction primarily from a philosophical-linguistic perspective. It is crucial to note here that these scholars differentiate between

“meaning” and sense, whereas this approach adopts Levinas's division into “significance” and “sense.” This distinction serves to mitigate potential confusion: ‘meaning’ is employed as an overarching conceptual construct encompassing the entirety of orienting meaning, while ‘significance’ and ‘sense’ represent the two constituent sources that collectively form this whole.

From a philosophical-linguistic perspective, Heidegger's differentiation between meaning and sense primarily addresses the genesis of meaning – the meaning-generating process – without explicitly emphasizing the orienting aspect. Sense denotes an overarching background awareness, accentuating the indeterminate nature of it. Through the processes of articulation and jointedness – described as “the process of imposing order by developing and dividing up” (Inkpin 2021b) – we attain significance. Jointedness predominantly refers to a predicative process while articulation pertains to the thematic process of generating significance (Inkpin 2021a). Consequently, sense represents “what is articulable” (Inkpin 2021b, 479), whereas significance constitutes “the articulated of what is articulable” (Inkpin 2021b, 479). Inkpin underscores the relevance of the as-structure in this framework. Sense possesses a pre-structure that is pre-interpretative, functioning as “a pattern of differences (...) in which constituent parts are not yet picked out distinctly with an as-structure” (Inkpin 2021a). The as-structure becomes operational during interpretation, facilitating the isolation of individual elements. There is clearly a relationship between sense and significance: since significance emerges from sense, it invariably refers back to it. Alternatively, from the perspective of sense as a fundamental structure, a phenomenon can yield countless possible interpretations. Thus, they do not “contrast as distinct semantic properties but are closely linked aspects of an expression’s meaningful constitution” (Inkpin 2021c).

Inkpin clarifies the additional, more existential connotations of sense, distinguishing them from the linguistic perspective. He invokes concepts such as “directedness”; “an everywhere sense of purpose” and “something making sense” (Inkpin 2021c). Furthermore, he references Heidegger's

association of sense with a path and highlights the etymological connection between *Sinn* (sense), *Besinnen* (contemplate), and the Old High German *sinnan*, which encompasses notions of traveling, striving for, taking a direction, or being guided in the right direction. Within this framework, sense is conceptualized as the “*Weg, der alles bewëgende Weg*,” portraying the path that propels all movement (Inkpin 2021c, 673).

From the vantage point of orienting meaning, and through the demarcation of the three contexts, I will now address the two central questions: first, how orienting meaning arises by systematically exploring the *as-structure* and the influence of openness and closedness; and second, how the two sources of meaning – sense and significance – can be delineated, taking into consideration existing demarcations while refining the boundaries. I begin with an analysis of the first context, being-in-the-world.

## **2. The meaning-orienting context of Being-in-the-world**

The being-in-the-world context is broadly conceived and includes three sub-contexts, innerworldliness, interruption of practical engagement and objective presence. The first two describe the coming about of physical-practical orienting meaning, the latter the mental appropriation of the world as a source of orientation. While staying close to Heidegger’s insights, I believe that the perspective of meaning as having an orientational capacity offers some fresh observations.

### **2.1. Innerworldliness**

The subcontext of innerworldliness encompasses the domain of ordinary human activities, wherein individuals are immersed in their daily routines. Here, there is no dichotomy between a subject independent of the world and a world independent of the mind – a tacit dichotomy that still underpins mainstream thinking. Meaning in this context emanates from a pre-predicative understanding of everyday actions. It is noteworthy that this context is not devoid of

language; rather, language is always implicitly assumed. Orientation is attained through practical engagement, specifically because both Dasein (human existence) and the world mutually shape and define the orientational framework of the world.

How can we discern the orienting meaning in this context? How can we identify the manifestation of the as-structure? And how does the openclosedness occur? As previously discussed, the as-structure facilitates the transformation of something indeterminate into something specific. Although Heidegger does not fully expatiate on this aspect, its manifestation is nevertheless evinced in several instances.

One of it is the practical utility of the door. At a rudimentary level, the configuration of planks in a wall, conjoined with a spherical metallic handle (representing something indeterminate), will likely be perceived as a door (something specific for usage intended for ingress and egress). Understanding of such structures is attained through *Umsicht* (circumspection) rather than detached observation, accentuating practical utility wherein the tool's purpose is discerned through engagement (Heidegger 1967).<sup>5</sup> Within this pragmatic milieu, an item in the world is invariably interpreted *as* a table for dining, a door for entry or closure, or a vehicle for transportation (ibid., 149).

The disclosure of orientating meaning is characterized by an openness and closedness. Heidegger articulates this phenomenon through various formulations, all of which emphasize the intrinsic entanglement between world and Dasein. In the context of the aforementioned example, this entanglement implies that when Dasein interacts with a door, a reciprocal movement invariably ensues: the door, from within itself, comes closer within the dealing with of Dasein (ibid., 67).<sup>6</sup> This observation suggests a certain autonomy of the world, implying an almost imperceptible non-appropriation by Dasein. Consequently, the intertwinement simultaneously encompasses both a complete appropriation of the act alongside a non-appropriation.



The as-structure of practical-spatial orienting meaning can be conceptualized in terms of something (X) being up, next to, or behind something (Y). The orienting meaning (up, next, behind) is similarly entangled in a dynamic of openness and closedness. Firstly, there is the world's self-presentation as the proximity of the surrounding environment; secondly, Dasein's facilitation of such encounters allow "what presents itself to us" to draw near, thus enabling the proximity to occur (Heidegger 1967, 97). Spatial orientation occurs through the reciprocal interaction of *Umsicht* enabling spatiality to manifest, and spatiality allowing *Umsicht* to de-distance it. This process is intrinsically mutual, with each aspect referencing and facilitating the other.

The dual usage of *Anweisen* epitomizes this dynamic, denoting both pointing to and reliance. By pointing to the world, Dasein internalizes it, ostensibly comprehending it entirely. In its passive form, *Angewiesen-sein*, Dasein relies on something beyond its complete control. What cannot be fully controlled cannot be wholly appropriated. In this fundamental interplay of openness and closedness, full appropriation and yet non-appropriation, Dasein finds and orients itself.<sup>7</sup>

An additional question that arises is: how does the transmission between the world and Dasein occur within the dynamic of openness and closedness? How is this communication facilitated? Heidegger subtly describes this transmission without explicitly emphasizing it, and its discernibility emerges only through meticulous examination of specific passages. An illustration of this can be found in his discussion of the interaction between a traffic sign and *Umsicht*. The observation is that the sign "*wendet sich an die Umsicht des besorgenden Umgangs, so zwar, daß die seiner Weisung folgende Umsicht in solchem Mitgehen das jeweilige Umhafte der Umwelt in eine ausdrückliche 'Übersicht' bringt.*" He adds, "*Ein Zeigen (...) ist ein zeug das ein Zeugganzes ausdrücklich in die Umsicht hebt.*" (Heidegger 1967, 79-80).

In analysis, it is noted that firstly, the sign turns itself towards *Umsicht* (*Es wendet sich an die Umsicht des besorgenden Umgangs*). Secondly, it accomplishes this by explicitly lifting (*heben*) the meaning of the of sign into

*Umsicht*. At this point *Umsicht*, that follows the sign's guidance, is enabled to bring the actual aroundness of the surrounding world into an explicit "overview."

What Heidegger wishes to convey here is what might be called the point of "synaptic transfer." There is a passing of signals, creating a conjunction (the Greek *synapsis* means conjunction) in which the offering of the meaning of the sign is received by the receptor, while modifying into orienting meaning, facilitating a comprehensive overview of the surrounding world (ibid., 74). Furthermore, this orienting meaning can be possessed and sustained as an intelligibility (*Verständlichkeit*), not through concepts but an intelligibility in which we reside, becoming a part of our lived experience. In other words, the conveyed information enables us to naturally find our place within that world.

For transmission to be orienting, it must evoke concern rather than indifference. It must exert an "impact" in the etymological sense of the term – "to press closely into something;"<sup>8</sup> – without this, it cannot orient us. How is this relevance communicated within such an intricate exchange? Heidegger once again emphasizes the intertwining relationship, noting that orientation emerges because humans possess the ability to attune to the world (note the direction from humans to the world) and, conversely, because the world can affect humans (observe the direction from the world to humans). The impact is formed through this reciprocal interaction: its relevance is imparted to me – it affects me by pressing into me – while, simultaneously, I acknowledge and emphasize its relevance by being open (attuned) to it. In this case, the "pressing" of the impression is subtle yet theoretically significant.

If the as-structure and its openclosedness are acknowledged as the underlying elements of orienting meaning, a consequential inquiry emerges: how can we theoretically differentiate between the two conceptualized sources of orientation, namely significance and sense? Building upon established distinctions wherein sense is construed as a background awareness – a foundational awareness of existence – and significance as the manifestation

of elements within that existence, this section elucidates with greater precision how sense functions as an orientating force, and provides a cogent argument for its consideration as a source of orienting meaning.<sup>9</sup>

## 2.2. Interruption of daily practice

Within the framework of innerworldliness, a secondary orienting context exists: the interruption of daily practice. This context, frequently revisited in Heidegger's work, warrants brief discussion due to its distinctive manifestation of orientating meaning. Rather than emerging from the intertwining of Dasein and the world, it manifests through a disturbance of practical engagement. Notably, this manifestation is ephemeral in duration. This insight suggests that orientation does not invariably involve long-term activity; it can also be momentary, with its impact contingent on both duration and intensity, varying according to the specific context.

Heidegger expounds on this concept through the renowned example of hammering. When Dasein is engaged in the act of hammering, interruptions can occur due to various factors, such as the hammer breaking. This principle similarly applies to the previously mentioned sign; if it were to break, its function would be rendered invisible. According to Heidegger, Dasein then gains access to the concatenation to which the sign pertains: the sign, in its function of providing direction, also references other signs, streets, vehicles, and our navigation towards familiar destinations. It is within these interruptions that Dasein attains insight into the reference structure of the as-structure, ensconced within an expanding framework of the in-order-for. The sign, as an "*etwas-um-zu*" (something-in-order-to), creates a concatenation, which Heidegger slightly modifies into the reference "*von etwas auf etwas*," from something to something (Heidegger 1967, 68).<sup>10</sup>

The as-structure unfolds in an open and closed manner. As Heidegger prompts us to consider: the concatenation is always present and has already been disclosed through *Umsicht* as it aligns with it. Surprisingly, *Umsicht* has no access to it whatsoever. Heidegger argues that it naturally

focuses on the sign in terms of its utility, noting that it simply is not interested in this underlying structure (ibid., 75). *Umsicht* perceives but does not feel concerned. Reframed, we could say that there is a moment of merely seeing the concatenation (having due access to it) and simultaneously a letting-go, closing off this access for itself. It is through openclosedness that the orientation information is transmitted. While Heidegger does not explicitly stipulate this action, one could argue that, in a subtle manner, the occasional emergence of this concatenation serves as a gentle reminder in terms of re-minding- reorienting the mind towards this fundamental orientation, only to subsequently recede.

Regarding the distinction between the two conceptualized sources of orientation, sense and significance, the question arises of how to comprehend the dynamics of interruption and the perception of concatenation. Indubitably, the apprehension of the concatenation through *Umsicht* is intrinsic to orienting as sense and corresponds to an understanding of its pre-structure. Concerning interruption: at that moment, the hammer/sign is illuminated as a tool, reminiscent of the process of breaking down the background sense into constituent elements, which would then pertain to significance. Given that even in this instance a hammer or a sign is perceived as an integral component of this coherent concatenation, it appears more apposite, at this stage, to conceptualize the entire moment (interruption plus "sight" of the concatenation) as part of orienting sense. A further argument corroborating this interpretation will be expounded below, while the conclusion will ultimately revisit and refine this distinction, providing a more nuanced understanding of the interplay between sense and significance in the context of orienting meaning.

### 2.3. Objective presence

The inquiry now proceeds to the third sub-context in which orienting meaning emerges: objective presence. This context presents yet another complex mode of establishing orientation, alongside an underlying structure that can be

discerned within this multiplicity. Most importantly, it allows us to articulate a more refined distinction between significance and sense. Objective presence, unlike the preceding contexts, marks a significant departure by transcending pre-linguistic and pre-predicative realms, shedding light on how an individual exists objectively within a mind-independent world. This shift necessitates a transformation of the "as-structure" of innerworldliness (Sub-context 1), a concept that Heidegger explores in detail and which I summarize here concisely.

In the act of using tools, individuals often engage in self-dialogue, exemplified by statements such as "the hammer is too heavy" (Heidegger 1967, 154). In such moments, *Umsicht* remains attuned to its practical utility while simultaneously signaling a shift towards an attitude of objective presence. Indeed, the assertion that a hammer is too heavy draws attention to its weight, establishing a linkage (*Glieder*) between a grammatical subject (hammer) and a grammatical predication (too heavy) (ibid., 157). This initial step fosters a fundamental opening towards definedness. Rather than engendering a broad conceptualization typical of definedness, this process initially directs attention specifically to the hammer. By momentarily constraining perception, definedness liberates the predicate from its inherent determinacy, paving the way for a free grasp. This transition marks a shift from utilizing a tool for a particular purpose to discussing or describing the tool in verbal terms (ibid., 156f). Words are articulated and retained, ultimately leading to the potential for substance and generality. In the absence of innerworldliness, objects are defined by their properties and viewed as isolated substances. The hammer is no longer simply "too heavy;" upon observation, it is perceived as comprising distinct properties such as wood and iron.

Delineating how orienting meaning arises, the "as-structure" manifests, wherein something (e.g., a self-evidently utilized tool) is apprehended as something else (an object possessing properties). While Heidegger does not extensively address the issue of open-closedness, subsequent philosophers have explored this theme. Philosophy of science, for instance,

has demonstrated that definitions, including those of the material universe, are invariably provisional, incomplete, and from certain perspectives, inaccurate (Van Brakel and Van Den Brink 1988). Nancy, adopting a philosophical stance, emphasizes the ongoing evolution of word meanings. He posits that upon reflection on a word – when we distance ourselves from it – its meaning is already in flux (Nancy 1997b). Badiou et al. (2016) offer a compelling illustration, demonstrating that the term "people"-seemingly unambiguous in one context – carries numerous, even contradictory, connotations when examined across diverse contexts. In such instances, the concept eludes precise definition. The orienting meaning we are provided (and simultaneously construct) is, therefore, far from unequivocal.

This section elucidates the theoretical intricacy of distinguishing between sense and significance as dual sources of orienting meaning. Clearly, objective presence aligns with a Heideggerian understanding of significance as a process of differentiation and linguistic expression, culminating in the development of directional and manageable concepts, organized into a comprehensive *Bedeutungsganze* (a whole of significance) – a “reality” that is substantial and objectively present (Heidegger 1967, 202). A delineation with sense is then evidenced in the differentiation between “discussing an object in verbal terms” (objective presence) and “using it as a tool” (innerworldliness). Perhaps most salient is the nuanced separation between an *original* something-as-something structure and a structure *derived* from it. For Heidegger, objective presence is a derived mode, being literally cut off from the something-as-something structure of innerworldliness (Heidegger 1967, 158).<sup>11</sup> He also terms it “*apophantical*” (ibid., 158). In contrast, the as-structure of innerworldliness is designated “*existential-hermeneutical*” (ibid., 158). Despite sparse mention, Heidegger clearly envisions two distinct structures. From our perspective, the distinction 'original appropriation versus derivative appropriation' can serve as a considerable benchmark and appears to underscore the delineation of sense as an original orienting sources in the previous in the subcontexts of

innerworldliness and interruption of daily practice. As the inquiry transitions now to the second context, Being-with-others, where complementary forms of orienting meaning are established, the challenge lies in assessing whether this distinction upholds as a reliable metric.

### **3. The meaning-orienting context of Being-with-others**

In this meaning-orienting context of Being-with-others, particular emphasis is naturally placed on the human dimension. While this aspect of *Mitdasein* is well-documented in Heideggerian literature, exploring how orienting meaning manifests within a social milieu can offer fresh insights. Heidegger identifies three manifestations of orienting meaning in our inherent human interaction, albeit without explicitly naming them as such and without giving equal attention to each. Moreover, as he does not establish connections between them, I will aim to address this theme succinctly.

The first manifestation of orienting meaning, sparsely referenced, is an enhancement of the primary framework of innerworldliness. Whereas other people were not initially referenced, they now appear as *Mitdasein* within the realm of tool-use. This can be exemplified by a woman selling bread as a baker or a man tilling the land as a farmer (Heidegger 1967, 118). No further comment is provided on this matter. The second approach, by contrast, is extensively expounded upon and is described as everydayness or the average understanding of being-with-others. This setting is pivotal in constructing a pertinent world of *Mitdasein*, exemplified by phenomena like idle talk, curiosity, or ambiguity. Through it, individuals engage in a superficial understanding rather than earnestly seeking comprehension. As a result, discourse gradually takes on a different significance, with idle talk acquiring an authoritative character: information is accepted as true simply because it is said to be so (ibid., 169f).<sup>12</sup> This reality profoundly influences the existential dynamics of *Mitdasein*: individuals primarily perceive and engage with

each other based on the information they hear, convey, or know, shaping their responses and interactions accordingly.

Heidegger delicately introduces a third approach of being-with-others, termed the *Eigentliche Verbundenheit* (ibid., 122) or genuine connectedness. This concept represents a fundamental mode of being-with-others, occurring when individuals collectively commit to a shared cause. Due to its association with “*Das Volk*,” genuine connectedness often carries a negative connotation. For Heidegger, genuine connectedness is also evident in other contexts, which, phenomenologically speaking, are of greater interest here. He subtly alludes to this phenomenon in its intrinsic relation to average understanding; genuine connecting manifests audibly and is 'perceptible' through speech itself, through elements such as intonation, modulation, or the tempo of speech employed by the speaker (ibid., 162f). It can also manifest through the interlocutor, facilitated by engaged listening or maintaining silence, which Heidegger regards as the most elemental form of being-with. Furthermore, a dialogue can evoke genuine connectedness through in-depth conversations.

There are thus three orientational social settings which are not independent of each other. The first two can be understood as dynamically interwoven, with continual modifications in both directions: from being-with-others in the innerworldliness of tool use to a being-with-others characterized by average understanding, and vice versa. The third way, genuine connectedness, accompanies the second setting, average understanding of being-with-others. It seems clear that for Heidegger, the latter is not a peripheral form of connectedness, despite its inconspicuousness.

Turning now to an analysis; it is noteworthy that in all three settings of orienting meaning, a distinctive as-structure is present, where the other is perceived respectively “*as*” – *as* incorporated in tool use, *as* what others say of her or him, or *as* the other to whom one is genuinely connected. Heidegger only illustrates how the as-structure typically affects both in an open and closed way in average understanding. In average understanding one feels at home and reassured, as it represents the familiar terrain one inhabits (openness).



However, this mode of being-together can also reveal unsettling dimensions, with Dasein intuiting an undertone that subtly alludes to the possibility of more genuine ways of being-with (closedness). It is imperative to acknowledge that both open and closed pathways function as orienting forces. When an entity is familiar, it exerts an attractive influence and we are drawn *toward* it, whereas the unsettling dimension orients us *away* from that familiarity.

One may wonder: with what faculty does Dasein apprehend the open-closedness? As established, perceptual acuity is requisite for revelation. Heidegger introduces two additional forms of sight, consideredness (*Rücksicht*) and forbearance (*Nachsicht*), yet refrains from providing extensive elaboration on these. *Umsicht* still plays an essential role, as Heidegger underscores, for it facilitates the transition from being-with-others in innerworldliness to average understanding (ibid., 169).

Heidegger's treatment of genuine connection with others – the third setting- is limited, but one can postulate how these moments affect us in a manner that is simultaneously open and closed. For instance, in in-depth dialogues, the active engagement of listeners coupled with the speaker's vivid elucidation of the subject matter engenders a shared experience that transcends individual egos. Indeed, Heidegger appears to suggest that these instances subtly reorient us by highlighting a mode of being together perceived as more authentic than the average understanding of one another. While the constitutional spirit of such encounters is comprehended in the experience, it is also sensed that it defies linguistic articulation of genuine connection with others – the third setting – is limited but we can imagine how these moments affect us in a manner that is both open and simultaneously closed. For instance, in in-depth conversations, the active engagement of the listeners together with the speaker's sparkling revelation of the subject matter creates a shared experience that transcends individual egos. Indeed, Heidegger seems to suggest that these instances subtly reorient us by highlighting a mode of being together that is perceived as more genuine than the average understanding of

one another. While the constitutional spirit of such encounters is understood in the experience, it is also sensed that it defies linguistic articulation. The way of understanding this orienting meaning is not through *Umsicht*, *Rücksicht*, or *Nachsicht*, but rather through *Durchsichtigkeit*, a seeing through.<sup>13</sup>

A final quandary can now again be addressed: the distinction between an orienting sense and orienting significance. How can the context of being-with-others be of help? Let us consider all three mentioned orientations. Innerworldliness, where practical interactions with individuals like bakers or farmers occur, can be seen as a manifestation of sense, resonating with the delineation of sense as a background. Of the third form, genuine connectedness, which emerges imperceptibly amidst foregrounded events (e.g., intonation, silence, in-depth conversation) Heidegger posits that these are original appropriations. I am inclined to also classify these phenomena as manifestations of sense as well. Due to their distinct nature, all require separate analysis. Focusing on intonation; the reason this can be identified as sense is that intonation can also be interpreted as a background, but here in relation to the words in the foreground, with the concept of background taking on a distinct meaning. Moreover, the background appears to convey a certain "meaning", albeit one that is difficult – or impossible – to clearly distinguish from the spoken word, as it accompanies the spoken word. If we take this into account, the orienting capacity of sense tends towards the additional interpretation mentioned above, sense as a path given to us.

As for the second orienting source, everydayness: speech and its resulting effect- where words take on an authoritarian character- align with the common interpretation of significance, as it constitutes an integral component of the *Bedeutungsganze*, embodying what is perceived as 'real' and thereby harboring meaningful substance. Here again, Heidegger identifies this phenomenon a derivative appropriation, underscoring orienting significance as derivative and sense as original.

Nonetheless, the relationship between the two orienting sources is more complex than it initially appears. Heidegger ambiguously contends that significance, despite its derivative manifestation, maintains its status as an original phenomenon inherent to Dasein's positive condition (Heidegger 1967, 129). This suggests an intrinsic primordiality for both sense and significance, despite of significance's derivative nature. I primarily understand this through their interplay. Significance's primordial status stems from its essential role in shaping the fabric of our existence, but it is also primordial as the medium through which orienting sense manifests itself. Nonetheless, in moments of sense-awareness (occurring almost imperceptibly in intonation), sense appears even more primordial, evoked in an unspoken "closed" manner. Thus, Heidegger can posit the primordiality of both significance and sense, given their mutual dependence. Sense manifests solely through orienting significance, whereas significance is invariably grounded in an orienting sense.

This inquiry now advances to the third and final context: the generation of orienting meaning in being-with-oneself. Following the previous analysis and the as-structure, this part explores yet another modality of orienting meaning generation. The context of Being-with-others further highlighted the distinction between significance and sense through its correlation with the derivative-original distinction. The question is whether this distinction will persist and how the interplay between orienting sense and orienting significance is to be understood from this perspective.

#### **4. The meaning-orienting context of Being-with-oneself**

This final section reveals significant parallels with Heidegger's established narrative on the authentic self. I reinterpret these insights from a different perspective, focusing on how the as-structure pertains to the self, how open-closedness is demonstrated in a markedly dramatic manner, and how the orienting impact is transmitted. In his discourse on the authentic self, Heidegger delineates two intersecting manifestations, explicitly highlighting their

dynamic interplay. Firstly, analogous to the dynamics of being-with-others, average understanding serves as the milieu that shapes one's self-conception. Within this sphere, Dasein primarily perceives itself through the reflective echo of ideas transmitted via idle talk, perpetuated through imitation and dissemination. It conforms to the norms and values prevalent in this milieu, envisaging from life what is conventionally expected. Within this framework, one perceives oneself as a "oneself," where the collective 'one' inherently intertwines with the "self."

In contrast, Heidegger delineates a state of being that he posits as more genuine in nature, one that manifests when individuals are gripped by fundamental anxiety (Heidegger 1967, 140). These instances are notably extreme, characterized by profound intensity and significant impact, as they entail a complete transformation of the environment: from the familiar to a state of radical strangeness. Attempts to evade this sense of strangeness prove futile, as *Umsicht*, acting as an inherent spatial given, inevitably de-distances, thereby rendering the environment, in its ominous guise, very close (Heidegger 1967, 141). We might be inclined to think that such a menacing environment no longer orients; it does orient though, in instilling fear. Conventionally, orientation is perceived as directed toward the object of orientation. Here, the inverse holds true: we are oriented away from the object of orientation; the menacing environment directs itself away from itself. Interestingly, Nancy, who has also examined this movement in his exploration of meaning, therefore invokes not only the notion of *à-venir* (being directed toward what is to come) but also incorporates the idea of *renvoie* (re-send), signifying a redirection away (Nancy 2013b). Orientation can thus take two directions: pointing toward, and pointing away, from a given entity.

The existential disruption precipitated by anxiety engenders profound implications, catalyzing a transformation within Dasein. Transcending its previous state of being solely "in" this world, Dasein assumes a position of "in and out," evoking the conception of an altered self. The emergence of this self is a complex process, manifesting as a tacit internal

dialogue. Initially, this dialogue appears to unfold between Dasein (as “one”self) and an existentially transformed actual self (Heidegger 1967, 130). Yet, upon closer scrutiny, Dasein surpasses itself in a dual manner: the silent conversation transpires between a “caller” and the invoked actual self. The chasm between these entities is deliberately amplified. While the actual self-liberates itself from the “one” in Dasein by allowing itself to be pro-voked (in the sense of being summoned) by the call, the caller is characterized as displaced, alienated, and indeterminate – a mere “it,” a “nobody” (ibid., 278). Heidegger posits that the utter incomparability of the caller's singularity redirects focus onto the call itself, rather than the caller's identity. In contrast to idle talk, this call is described as noiseless, devoid of vocal sound and utterance, communicating exclusively in the mode of silence.

For many, this facet of Heidegger's work is interpreted as a spiritual outgrowth. In this context, it facilitates an understanding of an alternative interpretation of the as-structure in terms of someone (“one” self) as someone else (a self, detached from the “one”), and the open/closedness of the self: simultaneously familiar and elusive, both “in” and “out” (ibid., 15). The latter can be elucidated by revisiting Nancy's work, particularly his depiction of an interaction that, although occurring in a different context, appears equally pertinent to this intricate relationship. As Nancy asserts, “[there is] an interruption in communication. Not an interruption of communication, but an interruption communicated in the midst of the uninterrupted flux of communication” (Nancy 2013a). Hence, the condition of being “out” of everydayness (in moments of anxiety) is communicated amidst an uninterrupted flow of being “in” everydayness. Another interesting element is that Heidegger's posits that the silent call – here considered the orienting meaning – emanates neither exclusively from the individual herself, (the actual self) nor solely from an external source (the call), but rather “both from me and from beyond and directed towards me” (Heidegger 1967, 274). While in a way referring to the “in and out”, it can also be interpreted as providing

information on how the orienting message is transmitted, from me and yet beyond me, but still directed towards me. There is on the one side a call (*Anruf*) and on the other understanding the appeal (*Anrufverstehen* or *Gewissen-haben-wollen*) (ibid., 288). While Heidegger elucidates this process in detail, the discussion will now turn to an intriguing statement by Nancy. His observation, more general in nature, describes this transmission with remarkable acuity while simultaneously adopting a rather abstract and technical approach. Nancy asserts that “(t)he appropriation of giving and the giving of the inappropriable configure the originary chiasmus of philosophy” (Nancy 1997, 52). Integrating Heidegger’s point, this implies an inadvertent action of both the recipient (actual self) and giver (caller), though our focus here remains on the recipient. The initial facet of the paradox, encapsulated in the “appropriation of giving” underscores the clear recognition by the receiver of the act of giving (distinct from a gift), and the recipient’s openness to this giving (letting itself be pro-voked). The subsequent aspect embodies the “giving of the inappropriable,” denoting the actual self’s awareness of the impossibility of appropriating the giving. A tacit understanding of the bestowal exists, albeit without a clear delineation of its content or origin.

Moreover, that the recipient is open to the given, implies its non-indifference; the orienting meaning has a relevance to us. Returning to Heidegger’s line of thought, this assertion aligns with the contention that it affects us (Heidegger 1967, 274), affording a privileged position wherein existence, or “ek-sistence” (standing out) – “lässt sich das ‘Wesen’ des Daseins denken” (Heidegger 1965), the core of Dasein can be thought. The orienting meaning beckons Dasein to embody its utmost self, transcending the confines of the “one” self and embracing singularity (ibid., 278).

Becoming one’s utmost self is not a straightforward task; the crux lies in recognizing its inherent unattainability. Dasein can never fully control this existential ground [in Nancy’s terminology: it has been given the inappropriable]. Moreover, since Dasein is, it is destined to grapple with its existence as a fundamental being [in Nancy’s formulation: as

an appropriation of the giving] (ibid., 284). Anxiety moments require us to discern that tension of openclosedness within, not through *Umsicht*, or the conceptual faculty of objective presence, but through extreme attention or *Durchsichtigkeit*.

We approach the conclusion of this complex analysis. Stepping back from the content (call-caller and orienting meaning), a final element to consider in our quest is: how can the above aid in distinguishing between sense and significance, which thus far was underscored by the distinction between original and derivative appropriation? In line with our reasoning, average understanding forms the foundation of significance, paralleling the context of being-with-others, as it constitutes the oneself and possesses a derivative nature. Extending this logic, sense must encompass the entirety of the moment during anxiety. Heidegger appears to suggest this when asserting that the ecstatic nature is sense (Heidegger 1965, 18). Sense, then, is interpreted as original – an authentic or actual self. Sense, moreover, is likewise a pathway, for in the moment of "in and out" a truth is experienced, yet a concealed one.

The context of being-with-onself also provides insight regarding the interaction of these two sources, generating a dynamic distinct to that observed in being-with-others. In the latter context, sense exists alongside significance; in an in-depth dialogue, a shared experience (manifestation of sense) coexists with spoken words (manifestation of significance), necessitating a discerning eye to distinguish between them. In the context of being-with-onself, sense emerges unvarnished, at the expense of significance, which undergoes a content shift at that moment. This allows its impact to be more consciously "perceptible" through *Durchsichtigkeit*. Still, the manifestation of significance in those moments is not diminished, as Heidegger alludes to a simultaneous being "in and out." In other words, there is a perpetual immersion in significance or the "one" of the oneself. Sense (the actual self), ever-present in the background, only becomes clearly perceptible for *Durchsichtigkeit* when the former breaks through that significance. While in Heidegger's case this situation is rather extreme, a similar phenomenological structure is employed by

authors such as Levinas, who meticulously describe how sense momentarily disrupts significance through the appeal of the other (Levinas 1961).

## 5. Conclusion

This paper explicitly investigated the conceptual understanding of meaning within the meaning-of-life discipline, in which meaning was considered to serve as an orienting dynamism. Three overarching contexts were delineated: being-in-the-world, being-with-others, and being-with-oneself. The structure of something-as-something and its existential openclosedness played pivotal roles as defining factors. In the three subcontext of being-in-the world this occurs respectively through the intertwining of world and Dasein (innerworldliness) the interruption of the activity (interruption of daily practice) and a change in perspective on the matter (objective presence). In the second context, being-with-others, orientation unfolds through an altered frame of reference – average understanding – and a deeper, more subtle orientation, accompanying the average understanding. In the third context of being-with-oneself, the everyday understanding becomes interrupted due to a state of anxiety, allowing for a deeper-sensed orientation to emerge.

Diverse variations elucidating how the phenomenon of orienting meaning impacts human beings and its modes of transmission were presented. The way information is transmitted inevitably also affect the impact on the human being. The degree of impact is perhaps mostly notably when comparing open-closedness as interruption. Notably, reference is made to instances of interruption on two occasions: during the disruption of everyday practice (sub-context two) and the meaning-orienting context of being-with-oneself. To recall, in the interruption of daily practice of hammering or driving, when a hammer or sing breaks, the informational input – a concatenation – is registered by *Umsicht* yet not retained as contextually relevant. In it, as it were, again forgotten by Dasein. This is not the case in the last context of being-with-oneself. There, in the interruption of the world of everydayness, the implications are unmistakably perceived



through the faculty of *Durchsichtigkeit*, bearing an impact in both an open and closed manner.

Next to as-structure as open/closedness, a point to consider was the intricate distinction between two sources of orienting meaning: sense and significance. I initially adopted the stance that orienting sense is originary and orienting significance derivative. However, through examining the final two contexts – being-with-others and being-with-oneself – the intricacy and nuance of the relationship between sense and significance became more apparent, due to added interpretations of sense. Sense is not only a background from where significance arises, it is also considered a pathway that impels all movement. This interpretation requires us to shift in how we consider sense: not as a background, but, as most clearly visible in the last context of being-with-oneself, as a short yet impactful happening through which something more fundamental comes across. In the context of being with others, this can be understood as an original way of being connected prior to all other forms (which are derivative, yet equally primordially).

Interestingly, both Nancy and Levinas can be interpreted as illuminating these orienting sources. Both appear to regard sense as an original appropriation and significance as derivative. Levinas, in particular, highlights the interrupting nature of sense in intersubjective relations – especially in encounters with the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner (Levinas, 1969: 50). To focus here on one single case – a beggar – in most cases, the orienting significance is strictly delineated by societal views and the negative associations almost automatically evoked when encountering a beggar. In moments of being affected by a beggar's gaze, sense disrupts significance and reveals what could be called the person's "dignity" as an original meaning. Dignity, like sense, is a concept that defies precise definition and operates primarily on an evocative level.

Nancy, conversely, engages with Heidegger's broader and more complex understanding of the relationship between sense and significance. His starting point aligns with the one outlined here, sense and significance coexisting and

interacting in various ways. At certain moments, they converge, making the distinction between them almost imperceptible; at other times, they diverge, creating a noticeable gap. Nancy also points to aspects not mentioned in this paper, but taken up by Heidegger: the concealing role of worldviews, as orienting significance, suppressing sense because of solidification of significance (Nancy 2014). Also, for Nancy, drawing a definitive boundary between sense and significance becomes increasingly untenable, given their intrinsic and dynamic interplay.

Further scholarly investigation is imperative to illuminate the intricacies of these and many other forms of interaction. As should now be evident, a primary challenge in this endeavor stems from the disparate contexts in which the orienting interactions occur. Consequently, it will be crucial to demonstrate their convergence within a shared yet unmapped horizon. Nevertheless, expectations of structural consistency should be preemptively eschewed, as various examples will inevitably exhibit contradictions – for instance, the paradoxical capacity of sense to both interrupt and reinforce significance. Despite the nascent state of phenomenological research into a more thorough understanding of the distinction between the two sources and interaction, this should not preclude the introduction of this topic's relevance into mainstream discourse on meaning in life.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> *Aufschliessen -Aufgeschlossenheit* is literally composed of “open” (*auf*) and “to close” (*schliessen*).

<sup>2</sup> The Overlooked Role of Orientation in Meaning of Life; *Foundations of Science*: forthcoming. In collaboration with a colleague, we explore the interruptive impact of *sense within relationships*—reconceptualized as “a moment of genuine connecting”—and its potential to foster dignified forms of connectedness while transforming those that are undignified. Under review.

<sup>3</sup> This interpretation draws on the views of Levinas (1969, 2006) and Nancy (1997).

<sup>4</sup> In addition to *Verstehen*, *Befindlichkeit* (disposedness) and *Rede* (logos) play central roles in interpreting the something-as-something structure. While these three elements are inseparable, the focus here remains on understanding.

<sup>5</sup> Dealing with equipment is subject to the multiplicity of references of the “in order to”. The vision of such compliance is circumspection.

<sup>6</sup> In German: “(...) *wie es von ihm selbst her im Besorgen für es begegnet.*”

<sup>7</sup> Levinas further explores this tension, examining the concurrent dependence and independence on the world across various modes of existence such as enjoyment, dwelling, and labour. (Note 2014)

<sup>8</sup> Etymonline: Online Etymology Dictionnaire. “Origin and history of impact”. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/impact>

<sup>9</sup> It would be worthwhile to examine the role the distinction between jointedness and articulation plays in relation to the differentiation between sense and significance; however, this inquiry necessitates a separate study, which lies beyond the scope of the present context.

<sup>10</sup> In German: “*In der Struktur “Um-zu” hegt eine Verweisung von etwas aus etwas.*”

<sup>11</sup> In German: “*Es ist bezüglich seiner Möglichkeiten der Artikulation von Verweisungsbezügen von der Bedeutsamkeit, als welche die Umweltlichkeit konstituiert, abgeschnitten.*”

<sup>12</sup> Note that *Rede* (logos) as a basis for understanding and disposedness can also be limited in its connotation to assertion or to idle talk.

<sup>13</sup> Notably, Levinas employs a similar notion, termed “extreme attention” (Levinas, 1969: 178). Both Heidegger and Levinas aim to convey that, while a situation may be comprehensible through this faculty, its impact or relevance cannot be articulated through our cognitive faculty of re-presentation.

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