

The links between Husserl and Heidegger on semiotics and what this means for therapy

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Summary

If Daseinsanalysis and allied existential psychotherapy are built on the phenomenological philosophy of Martin Heidegger, then they need to understand his approach to meaning. It is the usual policy of Daseinsanalysis and existential therapy to situate the interaction between client and therapist in the context of the classical themes of an existential reading of Heidegger's *Being and Time*. The classical themes are many. Some of them are the backgrounds of love and death, anxiety and guilt, self and others, so on and so forth. This paper does not claim that this reading is incorrect. However, it does argue for a different reading. One that focuses on Heidegger's themes of phenomenology and a particular type of semiotics. The paper tries to present a case for understanding the phenomenology of Husserl and Heidegger as semiotics, the study of signs. The paper states the case for the centrality of signs in *There-being's* manner of existence. This is intended to be an addition to other hermeneutic strategies and specific interpretations of Heideggerian philosophy.

The paper has two halves. Firstly, the theoretical understanding is argued for in Husserl and Heidegger. Phenomenology has its own rules and themes, but it should be open and non-dogmatic in its approach to researching about signs. Secondly, the practical implications of the stance of semiotics are emphasized as a general principle for a general existential phenomenological approach. In short, Heidegger writes that any experience, object, emotion or event can be understood within its context. Because *There-being* has a world and is its world, all innerworldly beings, all that exists for *There-being*, is in that world - in a particular way. Because *There-being* has the ability to understand any person or event as a sign, as meaning something, within the context of the referentiality of all persons and some things. It is the principle of the relatedness of a specific object, taken-as-a-sign, with respect to the totality of those objects taken-as-signs, that meaning occurs for *There-being*. I will argue that this occurs primordially at a non-verbal form of human existence at the time of *Being and Time*. What Heidegger is trying to say, I feel, is that *There-being* understands, primordially and pre-reflexively without words and before the conscious intellect has turned fully to consider and describe in language, the object that appears to an I who dwells and focuses on it.

This paper makes four major points concerning this thesis about semiotics in *Being and Time*. I will be presenting the background to the creation of Heidegger's theory of phenomenological semiotics. I aim to provide psychotherapy with a basic semiotic understanding of human being. Heidegger's understanding focuses on pre-reflexive experience in a historical, temporal and contextual social world. After a philosophical introduction, a general discussion of psychotherapy interventions and the factors inherent in "psychological change" form a practical focus. Before going on to see how a semiotic perspective operates in practice, let us consider in what way Husserl's phenomenology was semiotic. Of course, history is the absolute context in which human worlds find themselves as the ultimate context for the retrieval, repetition and comparison of meaning.

Phenomenological semiotics

Point 1: Husserl's version of phenomenology contained semiotic themes.

Rudolf Bernet, a Director of the Husserl Archives in Leuven, has access to the material of *Husserliana XX*, a set of not yet published alterations to the Sixth Logical Investigation written in 1914 (1988). In the papers, Husserl took his introductory analyses of the intention to speak in the Logical Investigations editions, of 1901 and 1913, a step closer to a fuller, even "Heideggerian" analysis, similar to those in *Being and Time* (§§15, 17, 33, 34). According to the text of the second edition of the Investigations in 1913, the main object of Husserl's analysis is to focus on speech. A semiotic attention begins as early as 1891 when speech is described as being capable as acting as a sign for an actual object described (1891, p 216). The same theme was present in Husserl's work of 1894 where he first noted that we do not hear words as a sound, but as specific meanings (p 179). In 1901 he noted again the relation between the signifier (support or vehicle) and the signified, is that there is a peculiar asymmetry between the two, where the signifier is not fully apparent and the signified is immediately understood as meaningful. Accordingly, we can see that Husserl's understanding of intended speech is semiotic, meaning is understood as a fusion between expressing and the expressed, particularly in a definitive sense:

We thereby employ the term 'expression' restrictively: we exclude much that ordinary speech would call an 'expression' from its range of application... Such a definition excludes facial expression and the various gestures, which involuntarily accompany speech without communicative intent, or those in which a man's mental states achieve understandable 'expression' for his environment, without the added help of speech.

Hua XIX/1, p 30-31.

In 1913 Husserl is fixed on his idealistic analyses in the *Ideas, First Book* and the ambition to relate meaning to higher intentional acts of the ego and the will (see mentions of the sign in sections 10, 43, 99, 102 and 124).

However, in 1914 Husserl concludes that there are three fundamental categories of signs:

1. Natural, physical signs which show a natural independence between the cause, or identity, of the signified. For instance, between a symptom and an illness. Small red spots which are itchy indicate chicken pox. Smoke indicates there is a fire. Dark skies indicate there is rain or snow about to fall. Oddly, Husserl also classed psychological and emotional signs and writing as natural signs (Bernet, 1988, p 19). Possibly Husserl is referring to the case of the free expression of emotions without learned inhibitions. Bernet informs us that the revision of the *Investigations* in 1914 makes use of insights gained about the links in the types of intentionality involved in speech and empathy generally (Ibid, pp 19-20).

2. Genuine signs are considered as non-lingual, artificial codes and conventions of the individual will or ego in relation to the general codes of culture and society. These genuine signs point to thought, memory, imagination and meaning-intentions concerning established, shared codes. For instance, a red flag by a beach means that it is too dangerous to swim. The colour of traffic lights indicates how the road junction should be used.

3. The signs of speech are classed as "artificial" lingual signs, which have a genuine mode of pointing, all the same. For instance, speech signifies without a material object, but through the production of sounds by the mouth. The speaker focuses on the meaning for the listener and the meaning that is intended to be passed on.

Husserl particularly favours the internal dialogue of a faithfully describing phenomenologist who is involved in soliloquizing. This is the act of one person speaking about universal and ideal aspects of the forms of internal dialogue or imagined speaking. This is a central case for Husserl he believed that there is a potentially universal relation between the words used, the ideal signified meaning, and the consequent pointing to an idealised object of the world. This desired one-to-one correspondence occurs between a careful choice of words, with respect to the reduced, genuinely immanent object in the speaker's experience.

In 1914 Husserl classifies speaking with another person as a form of empathy where the other's speech signifies the other's meanings and intentions. The interaction of speech with another "intimates" the other's meaning-intentions. Of course, the actual meaning in the experience of the other, that the other intends, possibly may not appear for the listener. But, the principle is that there is an adding, *Mitgegenwärtigung*, of sense occurring between two or

more people in mutual contact. Specifically, in referring to the spirit and lived bodily unity of another person, Husserl writes that:

It is just like reading a newspaper: the paper imprinted with sensory-intuitive marks is unified with the sense expressed and understood in the word-signs. Likewise is the case for any other literary offering, whether it be spoken, written, etc. It has as it were a sensuous Body for a spiritual meaning that is grasped by way of understanding; "Spirit" and "Body" are unified in a particular way in terms of appearances ...all such comprehensive unities refer back to the unity of Body [Leib] and spirit in the ordinary and most proper sense...

Hua IV, p 320.

The quotation has a strongly semiotic aspect to it which would suggest that any specific sign between an instance of the other's consciousness, portrayed through their Leib, makes sense with respect to the universe of such empathic experiences gained so far. For Husserl, the body is a cultural, public object. Cultural objects are given meaning and exist within cultural codes of meaning. When considering the apparent unity of the two regions of private and public meaning, the nonverbal behaviour and presence of the other in relation to their intersubjective sense, or 'code,' shows a unity between the expression and the expressed. This is a conclusion about syntheses, perception and the empathic appresentation to the bodies of others, which are the root of the empathic synthesis, which partly constitutes intersubjectivity. It is also a comment on, and the understanding and recognition of, the understandability of other persons in the natural attitude. By extension it also refers to other aspects of understanding which are carried out in the apprehension of any object.

Point 2: Heidegger's version of phenomenology is more fully semiotic.

Although volumes have been written about Heidegger's *Being and Time*, I claim that most readings miss the point that the author was trying to make. Particularly ineffective understandings are created by those interpreters who read *Being and Time* as argument or epistemology, without noticing the rich influences of Husserl. Of course, there are very many themes in the book, but in the main Husserl's ideas are recapitulated in an attempt to criticize and develop them.

Heidegger develops Husserl's semiotic theory from a critical reading of the *Logical Investigations* and Husserl's investigation into the fundamentality of temporality at the base of pre-reflexive self-presence. *Being and Time* is a reaction to the *Time Lectures*, *Philosophy as Rigorous Science*, *Ideas: Second Book* and contact with Husserl. *Being and Time* can be read

succinctly if attention is given to the formulation of the philosophical problem to be solved (§§1-6). The overall perspective taken in understanding There-being's connection to others and the world is a semiotic one (§17). The referentiality, or semiosis, of any one sign occurs within the context of its referentiality to the totality of all possible signs (§18). It is the case that any innerworldly being can be a meaningful sign for There-being. In short, such a meaningful and sign-using perspective is maintained by the centrality of There-being's world (§13). The change from pre-reflexive understanding and interpreting-as to speech is an important topic for understanding the sense of anything, which acts as a sign (§§32, 33). Eventually, Heidegger solves his philosophical problem in section 69. At this point in his work Heidegger does not consider that language is "in" perception. Understanding co-occurs with perception, and language follows what is immediately there, as any experience is understood. The answer is that temporality constitutes the sense of the world, which frames the understanding of any specific sense of being or beings that appear for There-being. Although the text is very rich, I claim that the above are the most significant sections, which show Being and Time to be a cohesive semiotic phenomenology.

The majority of what appears in Heidegger's re-working of semiotic themes in the Investigations is by way of emphasizing contextuality and pre-reflexive understanding as There-being's manner of existence or being. Heidegger expands the scope of the analysis to refer to pre-reflexive understanding of being in There-being's being. The same is called "passive processes" in Husserlian terms. Of course, Heidegger does not, and cannot, use such a terminology, as he is fixated on being and removing being from inaccurate understanding in the natural world as his first priority.

Heidegger thus surpasses Husserl's analysis and makes a general sketch of a theory of the interrelations between what appears for one person, and how it can be genuinely communicated with others, so that all may share an experience, or something like it (Hua XIX/1, p 99-100, GA 20, p 342, GA 2, p 35).

In order to understand Heidegger's approach to semiotics we need to attend to his examples on the use of the hammer and car indicators (GA 2, 78-79). Allow me to provide one example of his basic principle:

Motor cars are equipped with an adjustable red arrow whose position indicates which direction the car will take, for example, at an intersection. The position of the arrow is regulated by the driver of the car. This sign is a useful thing, which is at hand not only for the heedfulness (steering) of the driver. Those who are not in the car - and they especially - make use of this useful thing in that they yield accordingly or remain standing. This sign is handy

within the world in the totality of the context of useful things belonging to vehicles and traffic regulations. As a useful thing, this pointer is constituted by reference.

GA 2, p 78.

This is an example of Heidegger's principle, that any object can carry meaning for There-being. Any object gains its meaning through its relation to the overall totality of objects which have meaning.

Point 3: Semiotics is a central part of Heidegger's phenomenology. Specifically, the self-understanding of life, or any aspect of it, is understood as a process of meaning creation, change and destruction within a semiotic whole of possibilities and actualities. Any specific event or emotion has its meaning in its place amongst others and the whole.

The principle of signs having their meaning with respect to the whole also applies for the "pure," or historical analyses of meaning, in the latter part of the Being and Time. These more philosophical analyses are predicated on There-being's ability to have meaning and understand signs automatically, pre-reflexively, before the intervention of egoic thought or speech. Overall, phenomenological semiosis means attending to what objects and persons mean within the overall context of a person's world. For instance, in a two-person relationship, the one person who is speaking produces words, gestures and emotions with certain meanings against the background of various contexts. The listener understands meanings through the projection of their own world. In either case, meanings occur as forms of signification within the totality of semiosis and the interrelations between speech, gesture, voice tonality, pitch, rhythm, so on and so forth. Meanings occur through utterances being able to be contextualised within differing referential wholes or worlds.

An allied point is that if we look closely at what Heidegger is asserting in his analyses there is a focus on the differences of meaning at various levels. The most fundamental are the primordial understanding and the primordial interpretation (GA 2, p 157). These are non-verbal awarenesses before verbal thought and spoken language, for the individual. A higher level of occurrence of personal meaning occurs which is different from either the primordial pre-reflexive occurrence or the shared meanings held by others.

Practical application: Interventions and change

If our task is to help clients unfold themselves, de-alienate and reassess themselves, then how is our work structured by the primordial understanding of semiosis that Being and Time

describes? Or stating this question in a different way: How do we help clients get meaning in their lives through our understanding of how meaning accrues and can be valued positively or negatively? Indeed, if we accept semiotics as the genuine theoretical way of understanding Heidegger's early philosophy, what does this mean for the practice of psychotherapy and Daseinsanalysis? A fully semiotic understanding that follows Heidegger's approach in *Being and Time*, sections 17 and 33, is one which realises that the fundamental manner of existing of There-being in the world is a pre-reflexive one where the senses of the cultural world are already inscribed in connections and movements of the body (GA 24, p 397-9). Semiotic codes of difference and sameness occur within the power play between individuals in their social contexts. But speech and non-verbal bodiliness are not the only signs through which meaning occurs. There are many more ways in which an object or event takes up meaning by being situated within or between codes of meaning. Of course, single, multiple and multiply stable meanings occur also through the course of time and through an interplay of meanings for the individual, family, culture and society. Now it is possible to turn to the actuality of psychotherapy practice.

Let me illustrate the semiotic perspective with an example of a phobia of heights. The phobic anxiety is the person's heart beating very fast, they sweat and feel they will faint or die through anxiety. This is their immediate pre-reflexive understanding, their attitude towards and connection with the world. This sense <<heart pounding>> is the signified sense which occurs, for example, in an immediate connection or proximity of the phobic person encountering a height, a cliff, a staircase, so on and so forth. The full temporal context enables the signifying connection to occur. At the pre-reflexive level, prior to thought, the experience or being of immediate understanding occurs through the connection of There-being to the world. Heidegger calls this the "existential-hermeneutical "as"" which means the phobic situation is immediately understood as fear and panic.

When reflected on and internally verbalised, spoken or discussed, the effect of putting the pre-reflexive understanding-experience into language narrows down the primary experience and converts it into a secondary sign of a higher, less primordial type. At this higher level, and still for the individual, the statements of speech such as "I can't do it," or "I'm frightened," all refer to the understanding-experience <<heart pounding>>. But this is now encountered in a different attitude. Heidegger calls this process of speaking about the primordial experience-understanding as the "apophantical "as"".

The understanding of the phobic situation can be found to change in a number of ways. If the client's ego is sufficiently willing to take themselves to the peak of discomfort that they can bear, they will find that the experience and its meaning will change and be

different. In this way, meanings and experience associated to themselves, from their past and imagined about their future, are found to be different and not necessarily fixed. The specific meanings that the experience-understandings have with respect to other contexts are also found to change and be at variance to negative anticipations. Therefore, change occurs with respect to a number of horizons or contexts.

As regards therapy practice, a basic principle is perhaps that any comment the therapist makes may make connections of meaning that have not been apparent to the client. Yet psychotherapy is not a forced influence or change of meaning. Any change of meaning within the client's life can only be done with their participation and permission. The therapist cannot and may not force issues onto clients or there will be resistance, which will harm the relationship in terms of its potential to cure. On the one hand, it is not ethical to manipulate the client's meaningful relations without their consent, nor to force new problems onto clients. On the other hand, there are times when clients do not know what is going on in their understanding of their life. At such times, from the perspective of the therapist, it is possible to provide something like an "interpretation" in the analytic sense. For instance, a client who is depressed and tearful yet does not know why, may want to know what is going on in their life. Through defences, the client has "forgotten" that a forced retirement from ill health and the loss of the work role, which was very important, is not connected to the immediate sense of loss and tearfulness. It is permissible to make connections for clients in such respects. What is the observable case for the therapists needs to be told to the client so that the client might consider the situation more fully.

A Daseinsanalytic, or generally phenomenological or existential, way of understanding human being is to attend to meaning. Accordingly a psychotherapy theory of the change of meaning would have to account for the ways in which meaning accrues and can be helped to change. In the non-existential discourses of therapy it is considered that there are four main ways of gaining "psychological" change, for better or for worse. Behavioural change is classed as changes in general behaviour and in behaving in relationships with other people. Systemic change occurs within the home-world of the social context of a person and concerns the balance between the roles and privileges of one person and others. Cognitive changes occur in the way that a person intellectually thinks, understands and speaks their internal dialogue, or interprets, rationalizes or justifies a feeling or event. There are also emotional changes in the attunement to self and others, which may be linked to a catharsis of accumulated emotion. For therapists who draw on Heidegger, these four categories are all aspects of the whole, a totality based on pre-reflexive existence. Therefore, in an understanding of Heidegger's phenomenology as concerned with semiosis, the focus becomes

how meaning can change for clients, in the context of a shared historical world and the many sets of codes of gesture and meaning.

In this semiotic view it can be seen that what psychotherapy does is that it changes the prior fixed connections between meaning and the experience-understandings that carry meaning at the most primordial level. Psychotherapy is the means of creating new meaning experiences. The place in which the process of change begins is the consulting room, but change also occurs outside of the therapy hour. The psychotherapist is a person who arbitrates between alternate meanings and codes of meaning within culture and society.

In closing

Heidegger dismissed ordinary conscious experiences of all kinds as being derivative of There-being's original pre-reflexive existence. The closest that contemporary psychology comes to appreciating the being of There-being is in its empirical investigations into pre-conscious, involuntary, automatic processes and implicit learning. There-being's being as understanding is already always existential-hermeneutical experience. If we are to have a psychotherapy that is connected to Heideggerian philosophy it must appreciate the semiotic understanding that is inherent in pre-reflexive existence, a mode of being consciousness, despite what Heidegger claims. I have decided to end with a question which I put to the reader.

Point 4: If we accept that it is the case that semiotics and an understanding of references within the totality of a referential world is the main thesis of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, then it remains a question as to how practice, theorise and research psychotherapy. This question may be answered by somehow relating the signs of suffering of clients to the way in which psychotherapy works with those signs.

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