

Measure-taking: meaning and normativity in Heidegger's philosophy

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Published online: 11 September 2008
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Abstract Following Marc Richir and others, László Tengelyi has recently developed the idea of *Sinnereignis* (meaning-event) as a way of capturing the emergence of meaning that does not flow from some prior project or constitutive act. As such, it might seem to pose something of a challenge to phenomenology: the paradox of an experience that is mine without being my accomplishment. This article offers a different sort of interpretation of meaning-events, claiming that in their structure they always involve what the late Heidegger called “measure-taking” (*Maß-nehmen*)—that is, an orientation toward the emergence of normative moments thanks to which what apparently eludes phenomenology becomes accessible in its inaccessibility. This is shown, first, on the example of conscience in *Sein und Zeit* and then on the example of the poetic image (*Bild*) in Heidegger's later essays.

Keywords Meaning · Event · Claim · Measure · Normativity · Conscience · Ground · Poetic image · Saying

1 Phenomenology as a philosophy of meaning

What are the limits of phenomenology? To answer this question is to address the scope of the concept of meaning (*Sinn*), which, in my view, marks out what is most distinctive about phenomenology.¹ In this article I would like to approach the question of the limits of phenomenology by taking my cue from a term introduced

¹ See Crowell (2001a).

by László Tengelyi: *Sinnereignis* (meaning-event).² According to Tengelyi, meaning-events pose, in their structure, a certain challenge to phenomenological method. But this challenge might well seem somewhat paradoxical if one reflects on the two elements of the term.

First, *Sinn*: how do we locate the appropriate concept of “meaning”? Analytic philosophy since Frege restricts its attention to linguistic meaning, but phenomenology has always operated with a wider notion, construing meaning as something belonging to all intentional content. This wide concept of meaning is specific to phenomenology; it cannot be found in any previous philosophy, ancient or modern. Indeed, one could characterize the difference between phenomenology and metaphysics as a distinction between a philosophy of meaning and a philosophy of the entities given in terms of meaning. It is hard to see, then, how meaning-events could pose a challenge to phenomenology.

Second, *Ereignis*: Are we to understand this term as a kind of event, something that takes place in world-time, an occurrence for which causes may be sought? How could an event of this sort pose any challenge to phenomenology? Even if we think of it as an enabling condition that somehow escapes phenomenological scrutiny, there are many such conditions—physical, neurological, evolutionary, perhaps even theological—and phenomenologists have never held that such conditions pose a serious challenge to the very possibility of phenomenology. The notion of “event” here must thus be taken in some specifically phenomenological sense.

The claim that meaning-events pose a challenge to phenomenology is paradoxical, then, precisely because we must engage in phenomenology even to *identify* them. Otherwise, we simply postulate logical or causal conditions that seem to be entailed by our experience. And if meaning-events can be identified only within phenomenology, they must be accessible to phenomenology. Where, then, is the challenge?

To see how the challenge arises we must recall the distinctive role that experience plays in phenomenological thought. Experience is not merely a source of phenomenological themes; it designates the essentially first-person character of phenomenological method as such. In its approach to meaning phenomenology refuses the lure of speculation and construction, insisting instead on reflecting the way meaning is experienced just as it is experienced. This insistence defines a sense in which all phenomenology is a “philosophy of the subject”: since the phenomenological concept of experience has, originally, a methodological sense, it is nonsense to talk about an experience that would not be *je-mein*, a free-floating “event” with which I would become acquainted only contingently. Though the nature of the “I” may remain ever so opaque here, the fact that experience is always “owned” allows us to pose the challenge to phenomenology somewhat more precisely—and to begin to overcome it.

If the owned character of experience is understood as a kind of meaning-giving (*Sinn-gebung*) then a meaning-event could be defined as “a spontaneous meaning-

² Tengelyi (1998). Translations from this and other German sources where no English translation is available are my own. In cases where English translations exist—for instance, when citing from Heidegger’s work—I have consulted them, but have made my own emendations without further comment.

formation [*Sinnbildung*] that cannot be traced back to a meaning-giving.”³ One motive for introducing such a notion arises wherever phenomenology reflects upon what is often called “radical alterity.” The meaning that inhabits religious experience, or the ethical encounter with another person, or our own embodiment as such, seems to outstrip the resources of classical phenomenology, with its commitment to a meaning-giving “subject.” Both Husserlian intentional analysis and Heideggerian existential analysis might seem to ignore, efface, or neutralize those sources of meaning that remain inaccessible from the standpoint of subjective reflection. At the same time—and this shows that we are dealing with a phenomenological paradox and not a contradiction—such meaning-formation cannot be thought as altogether foreign to experience and reflection either. We have already mentioned how easy it is to postulate any number of physical, metaphysical, or biological “conditions” on meaning that, as such, are beyond the reach of phenomenology. But the meaning-events that concern phenomenology all somehow *belong to* experience. In Levinas, for instance, the radical alterity of the other is not a postulate; it is experienced, in an originally ethical register, as a challenge to the world constituted through my freedom. And Tengelyi has shown that what breaks up the flow of one's life narrative is not some hidden force or fate but rather the stirrings toward meaning found in the inchoate, elemental, and emergent.⁴ But then, this *sens se faisant*, as Marc Richir terms it, that upsets the well-ordered everyday world must be someone's, must be *experienced*.

The phenomenological paradox of meaning-events, then, is the paradox of an experience that is mine and yet not my *accomplishment*. And the challenge that confronts us is to understand how phenomenology can think meaning-events without becoming something other than phenomenology. I will take up this challenge in light of Heidegger's thought; more specifically, in light of his phenomenology of the claim, which is found both in his early analysis of the call of conscience and in the “experience with language” that he later attributes to poetic saying. In both cases, one finds a meaning-formation that is not reducible to meaning-giving. In the former case, this is best seen in the way the term “ground” (*Grund*) functions; in the latter, it is embedded in the notion of “image” (*Bild*). My aim is not merely to demonstrate a structural overlap between earlier and later Heidegger, however, but to argue for a thesis suggested by this overlap, namely, that meaning-events always involve what the late Heidegger calls “measure-taking” (*Maß-nehmen*)—a normative orientation through which what apparently eludes phenomenology becomes *accessible in its inaccessibility*.

2 The call of conscience as meaning-event

In his analysis of the chapter on conscience in *Sein und Zeit* László Tengelyi recognizes that the call has the structure of a meaning-event, as is evident from two

³ László Tengelyi, from the “Reflections on the Program” of the Internationalen Tagung der Deutschen Gesellschaft für phänomenologische Forschung, which took place October 5–8, 2005, at the Bergischen Universität Wuppertal. A German version of the present paper was delivered at this conference.

⁴ Tengelyi (1998, p. 43).

apparently competing considerations that inform Heidegger's approach. There is, first, an "approach through the analysis of responsibility," according to which responsibility is an ontological determinant of Dasein's being and not a contingent property of certain acts. But second, Dasein is characterized ontologically as "delivered over" and thus, in a certain sense, as *not* responsible for its being.⁵ Conscience, then, cannot be a meaning-giving, but must exhibit the inaccessibility of meaning that is characteristic of a meaning-event. The question remains, however: "how can a meaning that emerges from what is inaccessible be combined with the freedom of self-responsibility"?⁶ Heidegger's answer, according to Tengelyi, can be summed up in a kind of magic word: Dasein is "ohnmächtige Übermacht." In the collapse of its everyday narrative identity, Dasein comes to experience that "the self, which as such must lay the ground for itself, can *never* get that ground into its power and yet has to take over being a ground existingly."⁷ But this does little to explain why Dasein's "factual being delivered over" does not negate the possibility of freedom and responsibility, or why its "existential ability to be," its ontological responsibility, does not simply cover up the reality of death and finitude.⁸ According to Tengelyi, Heidegger fails to maintain equilibrium here: The analysis of fate reintroduces narrative continuity to the self, while the inaccessibility of meaning is subordinated to the meaning-giving contained in resolute Dasein's choice.⁹

There is no doubt that much in Heidegger's text supports this reading, and I shall not tackle all the issues here. But it seems to me that the concept upon which this analysis turns—that of "taking over being a ground"—permits a different conclusion if we approach it with the "diacritical" method that Tengelyi himself advocates; that is,

a procedure of holding apart, within their belonging together, phenomena that apparently coincide and are factually never detachable from one another. In such a case, one can speak of an appropriate [*sachgemäßen*] separation of the apparently inseparable and factually mutually belonging only if the differentiation that one undertakes is anchored in a *situation* that *requires* it, while at the same time providing insight into the apparent inseparability and factual belonging together of what is to be held apart.¹⁰

The term "ground" in the phrase "taking over being a ground," points to just such a phenomenon, enshrined in the age-old ambiguity between grounds-as-*causes* and grounds-as-(justifying)-*reasons*. In Dasein's being this ambiguity becomes an issue. More specifically, the situation that requires us to make such a distinction, and

⁵ Tengelyi (1998, p. 109).

⁶ Tengelyi (1998, p. 105).

⁷ "Das Selbst, das als solches den Grund seiner selbst zu legen hat, kann dessen *nie* mächtig werden und hat doch existierend das Grundsein zu übernehmen." Heidegger (1977, p. 284). Henceforth, cited in the text as SZ, according to the pagination given in the margins of GA 2.

⁸ Tengelyi (1998, p. 116).

⁹ Tengelyi (1998, pp. 30, 115).

¹⁰ Tengelyi (1998, p. 37).

in which insight is gained into the apparent inseparability and factual belonging together of grounds-as-causes and grounds-as-reasons, is precisely the one analyzed by Heidegger as the call of conscience. If we fail to recognize the diacritical character of ground as it functions here, we will miss the meaning-formation that belongs to conscience; it will seem as though we must choose between a meaning that belongs wholly to the inaccessibility of facticity and one that arises purely through the meaning-giving of Dasein's resolute self-projection.

Let me begin my argument for these claims by recalling the situation that comes to phenomenological expression in Heidegger's analysis of conscience. That situation is a very particular one. Conscience does not characterize the everyday being of Dasein, the One (*das Man*), as practical absorbed coping in the world: all action is essentially conscienceless.¹¹ Nor does it characterize authentic Dasein, for resoluteness is itself also a mode of practical engagement (SZ 299), at most a "wanting-to-have-a-conscience" (SZ 288). Conscience, in contrast, belongs to that liminal mode of being characterized by a *breakdown* of all practical engagement in the world; indeed, Heidegger's ontological concept of conscience is nothing but the articulation of the way that self and world are disclosed in the situation of breakdown. Tengelyi defines such a crisis situation as an "interregnum" in which the ongoing narrative of life collapses and we experience a "withdrawal of meaning" while simultaneously "another meaning begins to emerge".¹² Two things distinguish such a crisis: the "splitting" of the self, and the "inaccessibility" of the meaning that struggles to emerge. In conscience, the split is not that between the authentic and the inauthentic self but between the practically engaged self and the genuine first-person.¹³ But what sort of meaning strives to emerge in this situation? This question can be answered only by recalling Heidegger's analysis of the full care-structure.

The call of conscience is a mode of discourse, one of three equiprimordial aspects of care as the being of Dasein. In particular, "discourse is the articulation of the intelligibility" (SZ 161) that emerges in the interplay of disposition (the affective disclosure of facticity as how things bear upon me, "matter" to me) and understanding (my projective ability to be, the practical abilities I possess that allow things to show up as significant in specific ways). In both everyday and authentic existing, intelligibility is a function of my abilities and of the "for-the-sake-of" (*Worumwillen*), the practical identity or understanding of myself, that is embedded in the social roles, customs, and institutions that shape all practices. But what sort of intelligibility can conscience articulate, if it belongs to a mode of the care-structure in which practical identity breaks down? The very idea contains a paradox:

The mode of disposition that characterizes the breakdown of the care-structure is *Angst*, and in *Angst* *nothing* matters: the world and everything in it "has the character of total insignificance" (SZ 185). In turn, the sort of understanding that

¹¹ At SZ 288 Heidegger speaks of the "essential consciencelessness [*Gewissenslosigkeit*] within which alone consists the existentielle possibility to *be* 'good'." I take the emphasis on "be" here, used specifically in relation to Dasein's mode of being as *Existenz* or *Zu-sein*, to refer to all practical activity, all existential "projections".

¹² Tengelyi (1998, pp. 36–37).

¹³ See Crowell (2001b).

belongs to Angst is an *inability* to be: I can no longer act, no longer press forward into possibilities. Heidegger captures this in his ontological definition of death as “the possibility of the utter impossibility of being-there” (SZ 250). Death is not the demise of the organism but the mode of understanding, the for-the-sake-of-which, that belongs to Angst. Thus, while it is clear that the situation of breakdown involves a withdrawal of meaning, it is hard to see what other meaning struggles to emerge. “What is *given to understand* in each case of the call of conscience” (SZ 280)?

The first step out of this paradox is to recognize the precise way that the self is “split” in conscience. Both the everyday self and the authentic self are *agents* who discover themselves in their actions: “In immediate and passionate engagement in the world itself, the self of Dasein appears reflected back from things.”¹⁴ Because all such self-discovery is mediated by the typicality of social practices, my self-awareness has an aspect of third-person anonymity to it. It is this that succumbs to the withdrawal of meaning in Angst. Even when I can *do* nothing further, however, I do not cease to *be*; I still enjoy a first-person self-awareness unmediated by social roles. What is the nature of such awareness? What does it mean to experience myself as “I myself”? Systematically, Heidegger’s phenomenological analysis of the call is meant to articulate the ontological character of the first-person perspective as such. And in the meaning that struggles to emerge here we find the diacritical structure of a meaning-event.

Such emergent meaning is not something like a new life plan. To articulate the first-person stance is not to discover, behind my current involvements, a practical identity that I was always “meant” to be, since all such plans belong to the everyday intelligibility that has collapsed. Heidegger captures this point in his claim that “the call speaks in the uncanny mode of *keeping silent*” (SZ 277). For the same reason, if what conscience gives to understand is my guilt, such guilt cannot be traced back to the transgression of any “ought or law” (SZ 283). I may be the author of blameworthy deeds, yet those deeds, and the norms that establish them as blameworthy, have, in Angst, become matters of indifference to me. The “guilty!” that I acknowledge in conscience shows up, rather, “as predicate of the ‘I am’” as such (SZ 281). Thus, Heidegger’s phenomenological “formalization” of guilt, which yields the ontological meaning of responsibility (*Verantwortlichkeit*), is meant to articulate the intelligibility of the “I am.” Ontological responsibility does not concern the choice of this rather than that; instead, conscience discloses the “I am” both as *responsiveness* to a *claim* and as *answerability*, the demand that I *account* for myself. It is this dual structure that shows conscience to be a meaning-event, one through which the genuine first-person stance becomes possible when I begin to take the measure of things by acknowledging the very possibility of measure. Conscience is Dasein’s opening to the normative as such.

These points are inscribed in Heidegger’s description of what the call gives to understand, namely, that “the self, which as such must lay the ground for itself, can *never* get that ground into its power and yet has to take over being a ground

¹⁴ Heidegger (1975, p. 227).

existingly” (SZ 284). We should now be in a position to recognize the diacritical structure of this use of “ground.”

In the first place “ground” signifies the dimension of facticity: Dasein's thrownness, which “does not lie behind it as something that has happened,” is its own self insofar as it has been “delivered over.” In this sense, the grounds in whose “weight” Dasein “rests” and which “its mood makes manifest to it as a burden” (SZ 284), include all those properties that a third-person viewing can attribute to Dasein, grounds as the inaccessible causes and conditions of my being. I can manipulate my situation, anticipate its causal implications, and so on, but its sheer givenness ultimately escapes my power.¹⁵ We might say that such givens provide reasons for what I do (third-person explanations) but can never, as such, be *my* reasons. On the other hand, Dasein is not identical to its facticity; it is also existentiality or projection. This “also” does not express an indifferent side-by-side but an inseparable mutual implication. Heidegger expresses this by saying that Dasein “exists... as this thrown ground [only] insofar as it projects itself upon the possibilities into which it is thrown” (SZ 284). As caught up in human existence, causal conditions are never merely causally efficacious, never simply operate *upon* Dasein. Dasein is “released to itself from the ground” (SZ 285)—not in the sense that causality ceases to operate, but in the sense that such operation belongs to an entity that is “ontologically distinguished by the fact that in its being this very being is an *issue* for it” (SZ 12). This ontic distinctiveness derives from the very imperative that is articulated in the call of conscience: I “must” *take over* being a ground. To be aware of myself as I myself is thus, on this analysis, to respond to a *claim*.

Before asking about the nature of this claim, we must be clear about what “ground” means in the phrase “taking over being a ground.” This cannot mean that I simply register the fact that I find myself in a particular causal-historical situation; nor can it mean that I myself become one more cause within it. The meaning of “ground” here must be understood diacritically as both inseparable from the notion of explanatory cause and distinct from it. Heidegger's account of existentiality as projection of possibilities suggests what this might mean.

Conscience, writes Heidegger, is “that mode of being contained in the ground of Dasein, through which it *makes* its factic existence *possible*” (SZ 300). This cannot mean that Dasein causally enacts its own factic existence; but then, what does it mean? I claim that it can only mean that one takes the measure of one's factic existence. To “be” a ground, existentially understood, is to “possibilize” one's factic grounds, to see them in a normative light—that is, to stand toward them not as mere givens but as *potentially justifying reasons*, reasons that I must avow or reject. In taking over being a ground my natural inclinations, my social situation, and my historical co-ordinates are taken up into the space of reasons, they become “my”

¹⁵ It should be noted that, strictly speaking, such given “grounds” are not the particulars that can be identified scientifically or sociologically, etc., since these are already taken up into certain projects—namely theoretical ones—and are thus already meaningful. The factual as such is the *totally inaccessible*, that is, that which eludes all intelligibility. See Crowell (2002).

reasons. This elevation of factic grounds into the possibilized space of justifying reasons is not something I *do*; it is a kind of hearing in which my being is subordinated to a claim, one in which I take the measure of my being, thereby making ordinary “responsible” acts possible. To take the measure of my being in this way just is to see grounds-as-reasons, that is, as something that speaks for my actions or beliefs. This, in turn, means that authentic existence is not simply a matter of resolute commitment to some particular way of life but involves accountability, answerability: I must be prepared to give an account of myself. I give an account of myself when I treat factic grounds as avowable or disavowable reasons; that is, when I engage in the practice of giving and asking for reasons by saying what speaks for what I do. The call of conscience, then, is that meaning-event in which the measure of my being is taken such that factic grounds become meaningful through a relation to the normative.

The following objection could be raised to this interpretation: The diacritical reading of ground depends on assuming that conscience involves orientation toward a measure. But *Sein und Zeit* explicitly rejects the idea that conscience depends on any “ought and law,” and it seems to say nothing about other normative notions. To this, we can begin to reply by noting that Heidegger returns to these issues in the 1928 essay “Vom Wesen des Grundes,” where the kind of normative orientation implicit in the self-understanding, the for-the-sake-of-which, of conscience becomes explicit. Specifically, he appeals to Plato’s *agathon* as *epekeina tes ousias* to gloss Dasein’s transcendence: “The essence of the *agathon* lies in the power over oneself as *hou heneka*; as the for-the-sake-of, the [*agathon*] is the source of possibility as such.”¹⁶ Though this entire passage requires careful interpretation, we limit ourselves to one point: Here, Heidegger expresses a connection between the “power over oneself”—that is, the *hexis* (WG 158) that we previously identified as taking over being a ground—and the normative idea of the good. This does not mean that whatever Dasein chooses is “good,” thanks to some decisionistic meaning-giving. Nor does it mean that Dasein *knows* what is good. Rather it means that “possibilities” arise because Dasein’s transcendence (*hexis*, *Umwillen*) is a response to something like normativity or measure: Because I can grasp myself in light of what is best (as Plato would say), I can also see *things* in terms of normative standards, or satisfaction conditions, that alone establish them “as” something. It is this orientation toward measure—“beyond beings”—that makes the being (that is, meaning) of entities possible.

Thus, the 1928 essay attests to the first moment of conscience as responsiveness to measure as such. But it also supports our claim that such responsiveness involves accountability, the practice of reason-giving. Heidegger delineates three aspects of “grounding” that reflect the three aspects of the care-structure (WG 163). Corresponding to discourse—and so to conscience as call—is grounding as justification, that is, demonstration (WG 167). Demonstration is reason-giving or legitimation (WG 169), that is, the “introduction of an entity that thereby announces itself as, for instance, ‘cause’ or ‘motivation’ (motive) for an already manifest context of entities.” Thanks to this ordinary taking something as a reason “Dasein

¹⁶ Heidegger (1978a, p. 159). Henceforth cited in the text as WG.

can in its factic demonstrations and legitimations *fail* to supply reasons, suppress all claim to them,” and so on (WG 167).¹⁷

Thus, taking over being a ground is a meaning-event wherein factic grounds are elevated into the space of justifying reasons, a meaning-formation thanks to which beings can be given as the things they are. Does this mean, as Tengelyi argued, that the inaccessibility of factic grounds, their radical alterity, has been displaced by Dasein's autonomous meaning-giving? This would be the case if taking over being a ground transformed factic conditions into transparent first principles. If, for instance, to treat a factic inclination as a reason means that it becomes something originally “posited” by me (Fichte), or something whose claim is to be measured against an absolute law of “my own” reason (Kant), then my response to the call might constitute a kind of meaning-giving. However, in *offering* grounds-as-reasons I do not transform the givens of my situation into something they are not; they are no more in my power, cognitively or practically, than they were before. Rather, in “possibilizing” them I render them *accessible in their inaccessibility*. I acknowledge their inaccessibility by standing toward them not as toward something constituted by me but as something I must avow or disavow in light of what is best.

The meaning-formation found in *Sein und Zeit* is thus of a peculiar nature: it is not the emergence of something new and definite from an *apeiron* of “incoherent” meaning; rather it is (to follow the Platonic trope) a step “into the light.” Taking over being a ground, as meaning-event is essentially *measure-taking*: it achieves orientation toward normativity, toward the possibility of better and worse, as such. Of course, serious questions remain. For instance, if conscience, as a response to a call, yields a kind of obligation, what is the source of the call and what claim does it have on me? In what sense, exactly, “must” I take over being a ground? Rather than address this question from the standpoint of *Sein und Zeit*, however, I wish to show how the structure we have uncovered reappears in Heidegger's later notion of poetic saying. In a concluding section, we shall return to the question of how we are to understand the “must,” the obligatoriness—or normative force—of this obligation.

3 The diacritical structure of the poetic image

In Heidegger's later work, the figure of the poet—or rather, of the poetically dwelling mortal—displaces talk of authentic existence. Nevertheless, a core of phenomenological insight links earlier and later conceptions. For instance, central features of the call of conscience—its silencing of everyday chatter, the hearing that registers this silence as a normative claim, and the response that takes shape as a kind of discursive grounding—reappear in Heidegger's phenomenology of a distinctive “experience with language.” Thus, it is not “we” who first of all speak, but language itself, and it does so as the “silent peal of stillness.”¹⁸ To hear such a “silent peal” cannot mean simply to register sound with the ear, nor to understand a

¹⁷ For a more developed version of the foregoing interpretation of conscience in *Sein und Zeit*, see Crowell (2007).

¹⁸ Heidegger (1959, p. 262). Henceforth cited in the text as US.

sentence silently, in *forum internum*. Like that which conscience gives to understand, “hearing” here indicates a more intimate experience with language, one that, like the call, is neither an act nor merely something we undergo: “We can be hearers [*Hörende*] only insofar as we belong [*gehören*] within the saying” of language (US 257). Heidegger’s juxtaposition of the terms *hören* and *gehören* here is meant to emphasize a relationship between the passivity of belonging to the Saying of language and the activity of listening *into* it. And finally, this belonging hearing is also obedient, craven (*hörig*); that is, we are *called upon* to respond. As with conscience, where “a free-floating call from which ‘nothing’ ensues is, seen existentially, an impossible fiction” (SZ 279), hearing is simultaneously a kind of speaking, a co-responding or answering: “Every spoken word is already an answer.” Indeed, the mortal “belongs” to language as the one who makes the word “re-sound”: “The appropriation of mortals into the Saying releases the essence of man into the usage in which man is used in order to bring the silent saying into the sounding of language” (US 260).

Despite these structural similarities between the call of conscience and the experience with language, there is one obvious difference: the answer that the mortal gives to the peal of stillness does not take place as reason-giving. Nevertheless, if we look closely at Heidegger’s phenomenology here we find that the response that gives voice to the silent Saying exhibits the diacritical structure found in the concept of ground, in which meaning emerges through our orientation toward measure.

Such an orientation already informs Heidegger’s remarks about the Saying (*die Sage*), which is what, from the point of view of human answering, has always already spoken in the speaking of language. It is tempting to think of this, with Gadamer, as something like tradition. As Gadamer insisted, tradition involves is a certain authority, a normativity not derived from reason. But the term “tradition” is too wide to capture what Heidegger thinks in “the Saying,” which might be said to designate just the element of normativity itself. Something of this sense is found in the English term itself, “sayings,” which are handed down as normative path-markers that make a claim to direct us. The famous chorus from the *Oresteia*—“wisdom comes through suffering”—is such a saying, for instance. Sayings take the measure of things; they do not describe but illuminate things in terms of what is best. This seems to be the sense of Heidegger’s claim that the Saying is essentially showing (*Zeigen*)—not a reference of one thing to another but a pointing the way in which “all radiant appearance and fading away rests.” If the Saying just *is* “the gathering that joins all radiant appearing of the in itself manifold showing” (US 257), it is no mere collection but a kind of *ordering*, an “owning [*Eignen*]” that “brings [*er-bringt*] what is present and what is absent into its own in each case.” In the Saying one experiences a “bringing-owning,” that is, an “Ereignen” (US 258). In this way, the homely idea of sayings is linked to the *Urwort* of Heidegger’s late thought.

We shall draw from this reference to Ereignis only two points that allow us to recognize its connection with the call of conscience. First, just as the call cannot be located in “the continual succession of lived experiences” (SZ 291), so Ereignis is not any kind of factual event. It can only be *undergone*: “Ereignis can be thought

neither as an event nor as an occurrence; it can only be experienced as what preserves in the showing of Saying" (US 258). Second, such undergoing has a normative content, which Heidegger refers to as "the tender law" (*das sanfte Gesetz*). He immediately adds that Ereignis is not a "law in the sense of a norm that hovers over us somewhere; it is no ordinance that orders and rules a succession of things" (US 259). Nevertheless, just as the call of conscience "yields no 'practical' directives" (SZ 294), but rather opens Dasein to the very experience of responsibility, so "Ereignis is *the* law, insofar as it gathers mortals into their essence and holds them there" (US 259). It is thus the condition of anything being an ordinance or rule.

To listen into the Saying is thus to attend to the tender law that brings things, mortals included, into their essence—that is, makes it possible for things to show up *as* something. But like conscience, this experience of a claim demands a response. The responsive speaking appropriate to the call of conscience is reason-giving, but what sort of speaking belongs to an experience with language as the tender law? Heidegger's reflection on poetic saying provides the answer: "The co-responding, in which man authentically listens to the address of language, is the kind of Saying that speaks in the element of poetry."¹⁹

In approaching this matter, we take our bearings from Heidegger's commentary on Hölderlin. In doing so, we must be careful to distinguish poetic saying from the broader question of poetic dwelling. Though closely related, the comparison with conscience requires that we recognize the meaning-event that is distinctive of the former as a mode of language. As Heidegger puts it, poetic saying is the "metric (*metron*)" of poetic dwelling (VA 70).

In Heidegger's Hölderlin-inspired phenomenology the term "dwelling" displaces the term *Existenz* as a name for the character of human *being*. Thus the question of the meaning of being, raised in *Sein und Zeit* as a question of Dasein's being, becomes the question of what it means to dwell. What was formerly designated "world"—the meaningful context in which things show themselves as the entities they are—is termed, in this new phenomenology, the "Dimension." The Dimension is characterized as "the between of sky and earth." But there is a Dimension not because there is something between sky and earth in the sense of a spatial configuration; rather sky and earth are held together precisely in their distinctness thanks to the Dimension, the meaningful space that is "allotted [*zugemessen*] for the dwelling of man." In *Sein und Zeit*, the world, as totality of significance, is opened up through Dasein's projects; here the meaningful space, or Dimension, is opened up by a kind of "estimating [*durchmessen*]." And "man is man at all only through such estimation" (VA 69).

Comparing this picture to the analysis of *Existenz* in *Sein und Zeit*, much is familiar. Earth recalls the aspect of facticity: not the things that show up in everyday practices (the "tending and cultivating" by which man becomes "full of merit" [VA 65]), but the mark of their alterity and inaccessibility, the resistance that makes toil necessary. Sky, on the other hand, recalls the aspect of transcendence, the "projection of possibilities": man is able "to look up toward the divinities" beyond

¹⁹ Heidegger (1967, p. 64). Henceforth cited in the text as VA.

the region of toil and merit while nevertheless remaining “down below, on earth” (VA 68–9). Facticity and transcendence remain inseparable. In Heidegger’s earlier work, this belonging together was mediated by an orientation toward the normative, or measure: conscience makes world possible since by its means I make myself accountable, measure myself in light of what is best, and so “possibilize” my facticity, grasp givens as potentially justifying reasons. In Heidegger’s new idiom man “estimates the between of sky and earth”—and so dwells among things that can show up as what they are—because he first measures *himself* against “the godhead” (VA 69). This brings us to the decisive point, for the response to the experience of such measuring is poetic saying, which supplies the metric for estimating the between allotted for the dwelling of man (VA 70). And just as in “Vom Wesen des Grundes,” where seeing things in light of what is best (*to agathon*) does not entail a cognitive grasp of “the good,” so measuring oneself against the godhead does not consist in appeal to some dogmatic revelation or absolute knowledge. Rather Heidegger emphasizes that “God is, as the one who He is, unknown for Hölderlin, and it is precisely as this unknown one that he is the measure for the poet” (VA 71).

To speak of a “metric,” then, is not to invoke a standard that may be applied to the way one lives; if poetizing is measuring, measuring cannot be the application of a rule. Rather the phrase, “*poetizing* is measuring” should be heard as saying something about measuring itself: “In poetizing, that which all measuring is in the ground of its essence takes place” (VA 70). The “grounding act of measuring” is “that the measure is at all taken in the first place. In poetizing the taking of the measure occurs” (VA 70). Here, once more, we encounter language that recalls the structure found in conscience: measure-taking is a “taking that never grasps the measure itself but rather takes it in in the collective perceiving that remains a hearing” (VA 72). Through such perceiving (*Vernehmen*) human beings are introduced to measure as such, responsiveness to the normative: “the tender law.”

Though poetizing rests upon hearing, measure-taking is equally a kind of saying. If the experience that defines poetizing is an experience of the unknown God as unknown, what is the proper response to such an experience? Such a response is the poetic image, which, as I hope to show, exhibits the same diacritical meaning-structure we found in the concept of ground.

Heidegger first distinguishes between the essence of the image—“to let something be seen”—and derivative forms such as “copies and reproductions.” The poet is not in the business of creating fantasies; poetic “imaginings [*Einbildungen*]” are “glimpsed inclusions of the alien in the aspect of the familiar” (VA 74–5). In what sense is this a kind of measure-taking? When Trakl ends his poem, “Ein Winterabend,” with an image—“Auf dem Tische Brod und Wein”—can this really be seen as that whereby “man first receives the measure for the scope of his essence” (VA 70)?

When I treat some factic inclination of mine—say, an urge to visit a friend instead of finishing my paper—as a reason for what I do, it has become meaningful because I have subordinated myself to the very idea of measure, to the idea of what is best. I have let measure be *as* measure. This does not change the inclination into something else but lets what does not show itself—the measure—shine in it. This is

not something I *do*, not a meaning-giving; it is a meaning-formation (*Sinnbildung*) in which my response, the response of responsibility, is implicated. So also in the case of the poetic image. The measure that is taken in such images, and against which “man measures himself,” consists in the “radiant appearing” of the “unknown God as unknown through the manifestness of the sky” (VA 71). The manifestness of the sky, in turn, consists in that which is familiar to man: “Everything that shimmers and blooms in the sky and thus under the sky and thus on earth, everything that sounds and is fragrant, rises and comes—but also everything that goes and stumbles, moans and falls silent, pales and darkens” (VA 74). The question, then, is how the unknown God as unknown is supposed to appear in such things—for instance, bread and wine.

Their very familiarity provides the clue: On the one hand, bread and wine are simply beings that rest in themselves; that is, they are rooted ultimately in the inaccessibility of the earth. At the same time, however, they are there for us *as* bread and wine, *manifest, meaningful*. What makes them so? Heidegger no longer suggests that it is Dasein's projects, for those projects, too, are among the things that “shimmer and bloom in the sky and thus under the sky and thus on earth.” Nevertheless, it is still our ability to experience them in light of measure—to “name” them in the distinctive sense that Heidegger gives to this term—that accounts for their manifestness. To name bread and wine in a poem is not to describe them—“the poet does not describe the mere appearing of the sky and the earth” (VA 74); it is to invoke the way the alien—measure as the unknown God—is present in them. Without this sort of invocation (Saying as showing), this sort of meaning-formation, there could be no description. Bread and wine are just bread and wine, but this “just” cuts in two directions. As mere things they ultimately sink into their own inaccessibility, one that no meaning-giving can efface. Yet as familiar they always already harbor a relation to measure, to what they are *supposed* to be: bread and wine are “familiar” to us—we experience them *as* bread and wine—because the unknown God appears “in” them; that is, our experience includes an orientation toward measure as such. The poetic image thus has a diacritical structure of opposing moments that cannot be separated, and to name bread and wine in a poem is to prepare a situation in which this structure can and must be experienced, one that *requires* us to mark the distinction upon which all meaning depends.

Heidegger provides a wonderful example of the diacritical structure of the poetic image in his famous claim that “language is the house of being.” He insists that this is not a metaphor in the sense of transferring some literal meaning of the term “house” to something more abstract (language).²⁰ Rather, the house invoked here is experienced as “a glimpsed inclusion of the alien in the aspect of the familiar” (VA 74). That is, the familiar thing is seen in light of what measures it, what makes it what it is—namely, in light of dwelling. We do not understand what dwelling is by grasping what houses have in common; we understand which things *are houses* by perceiving them in light of their measure, dwelling. This is what the poetic image “says,” and because it does so we can come to see the way language belongs to

²⁰ Heidegger (1978b, p. 355).

dwelling: we dwell first of all in language, in the Saying, which in turn allows for some constructed entities to be houses. Language is thus “house” in the “literal” sense; our familiar houses are *images* of dwelling.

From this we can see, finally, that for Heidegger such meaning-formation never concerns simply some novel construction of meaning but is an experience of, and response to, “the tender law.” For the poetic image is not identifiable in the categories of literary theory but only in those situations—those perhaps rare “experiences with language”—in which its diacritical structure comes to the fore. As Rilke knew, such experiences contain an implicit challenge: “Du mußt dein Leben ändern.” That is what meaning-events ultimately involve: the ordinary is experienced in terms of the (unknown) measure that makes it what it is—something that is impossible if I do not, at the same time, measure *myself* against the “godhead,” take the measure of myself, as in conscience. To experience inclinations as reasons and to experience buildings as dwellings have the same source: our openness to the meaning-event of the normative.

4 The obligatoriness of obligation (normative force)

I can hardly be said to have proved my claim that meaning-events all involve measure-taking, that the emergence of meaning is phenomenologically tied to an orientation toward the normative. More than a conclusion, therefore, this paper calls for conversation with others who have pursued similar lines. Bernhard Waldenfels, for instance, proposes a theory of “responsive rationality” that, I would like to hope, is compatible with my account of conscience and reason in *Sein und Zeit*.²¹ But there is no time to pursue that conversation here. Instead I would like to add a kind of coda to my argument by returning to a question left hanging. That question, it may be recalled, concerned the *source* of the claim upon us and the nature of the obligation it imposed. And here *Antwortregister* might indeed be able to point us toward the beginnings of a Heideggerian answer.

As we saw, Heidegger’s phenomenology of measure-taking is articulated in a series of terms that generally remain ambiguous regarding the distinction between passivity and activity, make no reference to laws or norms, and achieve thereby a certain formality. Of this, Waldenfels writes: “the linguistic play with the acoustic similarity of ‘Hören, hörig, zugehörig’ is tempting, but also ambiguous and vague: Listen—to whom? Belong—to what end”?²² We may formulate the question as: What is the normative force of such listening and belonging? It has seemed to many that Heidegger has no sufficient answer to this question. Thus, Werner Marx attempted to supply one for him by arguing that one properly responds to the claim of being when one correctly lives up, or “co-responds,” to the measure it implicitly contains. Waldenfels, however, argues that this is to abandon Heidegger, not revise him: “If in thinking about such corresponding [*Entsprechung*] one keeps in mind that it involves an accommodating co-ordination and belonging-together, then an

²¹ Waldenfels (1994, p. 333f).

²² Waldenfels (1994, p. 579).

'incorrect' corresponding would say about as much as an untrue truth".²³ As we have seen, in Heideggerian terms orientation toward a measure cannot be construed as possession—cognitive, affective, or whatever—of any kind of norm, rule, or law, since it is the condition for anything *being* a norm, rule, or law. Thus, Waldenfels proposes that "the sought-after further development of Heidegger's idea of corresponding leads elsewhere, namely, in the direction of Levinas," whose "thought of the Other indeed no longer starts from any law [*Nomos*]"²⁴ But then, what kind of normative authority is at stake here, and how *far* beyond Heidegger must one go to establish it?

Though Heidegger's ontological discourse is often taken to be antithetical to Levinas's—certainly, Levinas himself thought it was—it seems to me that this exaggerates the issue. What matters is that we come to appreciate the character of a normative force that is neither socially nor physically coercive, nor the result of *Nomos*. Heidegger clearly has something of the sort in mind when he links *hören* with *hörig*. Erwin Straus explains the connection this way: "One is *hörig* when one must listen to another in such a way as to belong to him." To which Waldenfels comments: "It remains to ask what is to be understood by 'must' here".²⁵ Levinas provides an extensive answer to this question, but the phenomenon is widely recognized. Take this little bit of phenomenology offered by Christine Korsgaard:

If I call your name, I make you stop in your tracks.... Now you cannot proceed as you did before. Oh, you can proceed all right, but not just as you did before. For now if you walk on, you will be ignoring me and slighting me. It will probably be difficult for you, and you will have to muster a certain active resistance, a sense of rebellion. But why should you have to rebel against me? It is because I am a law to you. In calling your name, I have obligated you.²⁶

To many, however, it has seemed that Heidegger is precluded from appealing to this sort of account of the character of a non-nomological normative force, since the issuer of the claim to which I am *hörig* is (as Levinas put it) "faceless" being or language. There is certainly some truth to this, but the concluding passage of the essay we have been considering suggests that the idea is not entirely foreign to Heidegger either. For there he identifies a notable feature of measure-taking in Hölderlin's verse:

...So lange die Freundlichkeit noch
Am Herzen, die Reine, dauert, misset
Nicht unglücklich der Mensch sich
Mit der Gottheit...

Such kindness (*Freundlichkeit*) is what we might call a *dialogical* feature of measure-taking: it does not, according to Hölderlin, belong "in the heart" but "upon the heart," which Heidegger explains so: "upon the heart" means to have arrived

²³ Waldenfels (1994, p. 580).

²⁴ Waldenfels (1994, p. 580).

²⁵ Waldenfels (1994, p. 579)

²⁶ Korsgaard (1996, p. 140).

within the dwelling essence of man, arriving at the heart as the claim of the measure, in such a way that the heart turns toward the measure” (VA 78). Kindness—a distinctive relation to the other person—is not itself the measure, but rather the *claim* made by the measure, which allows one to turn toward the measure, that is, to establish an orientation toward normativity as such. The structure here mirrors Levinas’s proto-ethics, in which the face of the Other is registered as a claim that conditions all other obligation. This does not mean that Heidegger and Levinas are saying “the same.” But it does indicate that Heidegger too, when reflecting upon the normative force of the originary meaning-event, the orientation toward measure that makes all meaning possible, finds his way to relations between human beings. The measure of being is accessible only “as” the claim of kindness, a certain way of “hearing” and so “belonging to” the Other. The source of the obligatoriness of obligation is no more mysterious than this.

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