A Heideggerian Deconstruction of Understanding

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INTRODUCTION

Beyond any cloud of doubt, Heidegger is one of the pioneering thinkers in the science of deconstruction. Indeed, he has succeeded in sprinkling a different scent and aroma of giving “meaning” of reality. ¹

A good example of Heidegger’s deconstructive efforts is his analysis of understanding and potentiality. Usually, understanding is understood in a subject-object paradigm where the knower comes to terms with the essence and accidents of a particular object. The object in-turn becomes a poor victim of human knowledge or understanding. It is, so to say, robbed of its “privacy” to retain and sustain its being what it is without being disposed to the danger of being abstracted of its essence in order to become a particle of knowledge and be stocked in the human mind. In the case of potentiality, Aristotle,² St. Thomas Aquinas, and the Scholastics, hasten in telling their audience that potency is derived from the verb ‘posse’ whose meaning is “to be able” or “to have power.”³ But Heidegger refuses to go with the path carved out by the Scholastic philosophers. He constructs his different and unique way of looking at reality.

To Heidegger, “understanding is neither a ‘mental state’ nor a ‘possibility’ to be seen in terms of ‘actual possibilities;’ rather, it is the ground for the ‘possibility’ of possibilities.”⁴ Understanding, then, is construed by Heidegger as that which is “expressive of [human] Dasein’s active comportment towards possibilities or projects. Heidegger says that [human] Dasein’s understanding is altogether permeated with possibilities which means that [human] Dasein is always confronted with the ‘possible.’”⁵ In Being and Time, Heidegger writes: “Understanding is the existential Being of Dasein’s own potentiality-for-Being; and it is so in such a way that this Being discloses in itself what its Being is capable of.”⁶

There are two standpoints that he is trying to draw in the foregoing quotation: (1) Understanding from the standpoint of disclosure; and (2) Understanding from the standpoint of potentiality-for-Being.
From the standpoint of disclosure, Heidegger explains that "understanding always pertains to the whole basic state of Being-in-the-world."⁷ Here, the authentic human Dasein realizes that he is a Being-in-the-world. Such realization is bloated by a deeper cognizance that it is in the world where he could glean at the depth of the ambience of his possibilities. As a Being-in-the-world, the authentic human Dasein does not engage in a romance with the beauty of the world; the human Dasein, rather, positions himself to reach out to the wide array of the possibilities available to him. Here, Heidegger notes that in understanding, the human Dasein normally takes the world as the locus of service and welfare. The human Dasein takes the world for its own sake. Says Heidegger:

Dasein is its "there", is equivalent to saying that the world is 'there'; its Being-there, is Being-in. And the latter is likewise 'there', as that for the sake of which Dasein is. In the "for-the-sake-of-which", existing Being-in-the-world is disclosed as such, and this disclosedness we have called "understanding".⁸

In the context of understanding as disclosure, the human Dasein realizes that it is the "world" that discloses itself before him. And that its disclosure enables him to affirm that he is a being who is bundled with possibilities. The "world," thus, is significant to the human Dasein as it discloses itself. Heidegger posits his contention, thus:

The disclosedness of understanding, as the disclosedness of the "for-the-sake-of-which" and of significance equiprimordially, pertains to the entirety of Being-in-the-world. Significance is that on the basis of which the world is disclosed as such. To say that the "for-the-sake-of-which" and significance are both disclosed in Dasein, means that Dasein is that entity which, as Being-in-the-world, is an issue for itself.⁹

From the standpoint of potentiality-for-Being, Heidegger explains that: Understanding is the Being of such potentiality-for-Being, which is never something still outstanding as not yet present-at-hand, but which, as something which is essentially never present-at-hand, 'is' with the Being of Dasein, in the sense of existence. Dasein is such that in every case it has understood... that it is to be thus or thus. As such understanding it 'knows' what it is capable of – that is, what its potentiality-for-Being is capable of.¹⁰

In Heideggerian thought, the human Dasein is in every case what he can be and in the way in which he is always his possibilities. An authentic human
Dasein understands himself as a possibility — a privilege which the entities (vorhanden or present-at-hand and zuhanden or ready-to-hand) he encounters in the world do not possess.

Inasmuch as understanding is rooted in concern, it follows that the relatedness of human Dasein to entities affects his possibilities because things or entities in the “world” have a part in the realization of the human Dasein’s possibilities. Concern, then, is the foundation of understanding.¹¹ Hence, Heidegger stresses that:

The Being-possible which is essential for Dasein, pertains to the ways of its solicitude for Others and of its concern with the ‘world’, as we have characterized them; and in all these, and always, it pertains to Dasein’s potentiality-for-Being towards itself, for the sake of itself.¹²

Hence, the authentic human Dasein considers understanding as source of root of his ability-to-be. On the contrary, the inauthentic one misses the point of understanding. He is “gone astray” from the core of his self. In a word, he is not dead serious of his existential intrinsic asset of knowing who he is in terms of his possibilities. But this can be cured in the human Dasein’s resolve to find itself again in the province of his possibilities. Says Heidegger:

And only because Dasein, in understanding, is its “there”, can it go astray and fail to recognize itself. And in so far as understanding is accompanied by state-of-mind and as such is existentially surrendered to thrownness, Dasein has in every case already gone astray and failed to recognize itself. In its potentiality-for-Being it is therefore delivered over to the possibility of first finding itself again in its possibilities.¹³

1. Projection

While understanding means the making of Dasein “to be able to be,” or as Dasein’s “potentiality-for-Being,” projection means Dasein’s “throwing-forward” to the “world.”¹⁴ Projection is a function of understanding. This is the reason why understanding is a disclosure of possibilities of human Dasein. Heidegger posits this query: “Why does the understanding — whatever may be the essential dimension of that can be disclosed in it — always press forward into possibilities?”¹⁵ For this, Heidegger opines: “It is because the understanding has in itself the existential structure which we call projection.”¹⁶

Projection, as cited above, has for its basic meaning as “throwing” something “off” or “throwing” something “away.”¹⁷ In ordinary German usage, and often in the way Heidegger uses it, projection means “designing” or “sketching some project” which is to be carried through and through.¹⁸ In Being and Time, Heidegger argues:
The character of understanding as projection is constitutive of Being-in-the-world with regard to the disclosedness of its existentially constitutive state-of-Being. . . . Projecting has nothing to do with comporting oneself towards a plan that has been thought out. . . . Dasein is already projected itself, as long as it is, it is projecting.\(^{19}\)

In sum, in Heidegger’s analysis of understanding he sketches some important remarks: (1) Human *Dasein* projects himself into his possibilities; (2) The human *Dasein* projects his possibilities to things which he comes across.\(^{20}\) In other words, “the ‘world of things’ and the ‘world of Human *Dasein*’ meet by way of serviceability and usability...”\(^{21}\) Hence, the human *Dasein* in this regard can express his authentic existence by giving meaning to things he encounters.

There is really no hard and fast rule when it comes to the human *Dasein*’s actualization of his possibilities, specifically in the context of understanding and projection. We cannot afford to charge Heidegger with espousing and glowering at us with “wait-till-you-get-there” kind of attitude. To finish off our business in understanding projection, Heidegger eagerly delivers some heavy dosages of not just a shard but a considerable quantum of his thought. To Heidegger, in projection the authentic human *Dasein* realizes that he is not a finished product. The human *Dasein* is engrossed with a sublime realization that it is not enough that he is a human being.\(^{22}\)

Because of the kind of Being which is constituted by the *existentiale* of projection, Dasein is constantly ‘more’ than it factually is, . . . But *Dasein* is never more than it factically is, for to its facticity its potentiality-for-Being belongs essentially.\(^{23}\)

2. Interpretation

Interpretation is part and parcel of the whole web of wisdom knitted by Heidegger in his analysis of *Dasein’s* Being-in-the-world. It is an indispensable segment of the nexus of Heidegger’s thought whose function is as intricate as the nature of human *Dasein*. As has been elaborated, the human *Dasein*, in his efforts to understand the world, projects his possibilities. Heidegger explains that: “This Being-towards-possibilities which understands is itself a potentiality-for-Being...”\(^{24}\) To Heidegger, human *Dasein’s* act of projecting its possibilities through understanding has its own possibility, i.e., that of developing itself.\(^{25}\) It is here where Heidegger introduces the import of interpretation. Writes Heidegger:

This development of the understanding we call “interpretation.” In it, the understanding appropriates understanding that which is understood by it. In
The character of understanding as projection is constitutive of Being-in-the-world with regard to the disclosedness of its existentially constitutive state-of-Being. . . . Projecting has nothing to do with comporting oneself towards a plan that has been thought out. . . . Dasein is already projected itself, as long as it is, it is projecting. 19

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This development of the understanding we call “interpretation.” In it, the understanding appropriates understanding that which is understood by it. In interpretation, understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself. 26

According to Heidegger, interpretation necessitates an advertent study of its correlative concepts, namely: (1) As-Structure; (2) Fore-Structure which entails a discussion of “fore-having,” “fore-sight,” fore-conception; and meaning.

In Being and Time, Heidegger explicates that interpretation is “the working out of possibilities projected in understanding.” 27 This means that projection is an end in itself. The human Dasein has to “work out” for the realization of his possibilities. It is the authentic human Dasein that strives hard towards the actualization of his possibilities. In this regard, interpretation is engaged in an active interplay both with understanding and projection. As clarified by Heidegger, understanding operates or functions through projection. It is the function in turn of interpretation to “work out,” or to make explicit, the possibilities of human Dasein that projection projects or reveals to the human Dasein.

One of the points we underscored in our discussion of understanding is that the “world” appears and discloses itself to human Dasein as ready-to-hand. In Heidegger’s own words: “In terms of the significance which is disclosed in understanding the world, concernful Being-alongside the ready-to-hand gives itself to understand whatever involvement that which is encountered can have.” 28 It is, therefore, the “world” that the human Dasein has to understand because it is the locus of the projection of his enormous possibilities. So, if it is the “world” that the human Dasein has to understand what is it that human Dasein must interpret? Heidegger’s answer is categorical, that is, the world. He maintains: “the ‘world’ which has already been understood comes to be interpreted. The ready-to-hand comes explicitly into the sight which understands.” 29

Now, it is proper to delve into a discussion on “as-structure,” “fore-structure,” and “meaning.” These three are, according to Heidegger, the indispensable aspects of interpretation.

2.1 As-Structure

According to Heidegger, the human Dasein’s working out of his possibilities which are projected in understanding—which he calls interpretation—is better appreciated when it is pursued in the ambit of “as-structure,” “fore-structure,” and “meaning.” In Being and Time, Heidegger explains that as-structure pertains to human Dasein’s interpretation of entities in the world relative to their purpose or utility. The human Dasein knows that entities lie in the world. “The ready-to-hand comes explicitly into the sight which understands.” 30 It is, then, human Dasein’s as-structure 31 to appropriate
their service, purpose, and use in relation to the realization of his possibilities. Here, Heidegger advises the human *Dasein*, however, to really consider objects as objects or something as something. He writes: “That which is understood gets articulated when the entity to be understood is brought close interpretatively by taking as our clue the ‘something as something’.\(^{32}\)

In view of the fact that entities are understood by human *Dasein* as such, the human *Dasein* takes the “world” environmentally\(^{33}\) as ready-to-hand. The “world” is ‘there’ ‘in-order-to’ make man avail of the fulfillment of his possibilities. In interpretation then, the human *Dasein* makes explicit the ‘thereness’ of the world. The human *Dasein* takes the world’s objects as integral part of the accomplishment of his project – his possibilities. Says Heidegger:

> ... we take apart in its “in-order-to” that which is... ready-to-hand, and we concern ourselves with it in accordance with what becomes visible through this process. That which has been circumspectively taken apart with regard to its “in-order-to”, and taken apart as such - that which is explicitly understood–has the structure of something as something.\(^{34}\)

### 2.2 Fore-Structure

Heidegger speaks of “fore-structure of understanding” and “as-structure of interpretation.”\(^{35}\) Now, since interpretation is embedded in understanding we can as well pursue Heidegger’s explanation of the meaning of fore-structure in the context of interpretation. This position is affirmed by Heidegger’s statement that “whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception.”\(^{36}\) This means that the aforesaid triple points, viz.: fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception are considered by Heidegger as foundations of interpretation in the context of the human *Dasein*’s interpretation of the world in the context of as-structure, i.e., the human *Dasein* interprets something as something. With a view to lump these three points, we can also say that the human *Dasein*’s interpretation of the “world” as ready-to-hand is firmly anchored on fore-structure. Unfortunately, Heidegger gives only a terse explanation of his views on the aspects of fore-structure, which can be understood as human *Dasein*’s relatedness to the world as ready-to-hand.

#### 2.2.1 Fore-having

According to Heidegger, in the interpretation of the world, the human *Dasein* is loaded with a postulate of his prior awareness (fore-having) relative
to the function and purpose of the entities in the world in order that as-
structure becomes clear and explicit. Writes Heidegger:

The ready-to-hand is always understood in terms of a totality
of involvement. This totality need not be grasped explicitly...
this is the very mode in which it is the essential foundation
for everyday circumspective interpretation. In every case, this
interpretation is grounded in something we have in advance –
in a fore-having.37

Fore-having enables the human Dasein to establish order and propriety of
the entities in the world. The human Dasein has inherent knowledge and
awareness – explained by Heidegger as a priori in the existential structure of
Dasein – of an entity’s functions or purposes for him as a Being-in-the-world.

2.2.2 Fore-sight

Heidegger remarks: “In every case, interpretation is grounded in
something we see in advance – in a fore-sight.”38 Before we proceed to clarify
the meaning of fore-sight, it must be understood first how Heidegger analyzes
sight or the act of seeing. Heidegger asserts: “We must, to be sure, guard
against a misunderstanding of the expression ‘sight.’ It corresponds to the
‘clearness’... which we took as characterizing the disclosedness of the
‘there.’”39 Heidegger explains what he means by seeing:

‘Seeing’ does not mean just perceiving with the bodily eyes,
but neither does it mean pure non-sensory awareness of
something present-at-hand in its presence-at-hand. In giving
an existential signification to “sight”, we have merely drawn
upon the peculiar feature of seeing, that it lets entities which
are accessible to it to be encountered unconcealedly in
themselves.40

In the above quotation, Heidegger elucidates fore-sight. To Heidegger,
fore-sight is the inseparable half of fore-having. Both fore-having and fore-sight
precede the human Dasein’s concentration and focus regarding its as-structure.
Heidegger maintains: “Anything understood which is held in our fore-having
and towards which we set our sights ‘foresightedly’ becomes conceptualizable
through the interpretation.”41 Further Heidegger remarks: “This fore-sight
‘takes the first cut’ out of what has been taken into our fore-having, and it does
so with a view to a definite way in which this can be interpreted.”42

As the human Dasein has prior awareness or prior knowledge (fore-
having) of the function, purpose, and service of the entities in the world, the
human Dasein, likewise, “sees in advance” (fore-sight) something relative to
the same. In this vein, both fore-having and fore-sight are avenues through
which the existential possibilities of Dasein, to be creative and productive, can
find satisfaction. Heidegger opines that the “world” is “there” “in-order-to” make the human Dasein realize his potentialities. In fact, Heidegger contends: “The ready-to-hand comes explicitly into the sight which understands. All preparing, putting to rights, repairing, improving, rounding-out...” are gestures of human Dasein out of which fore-having and fore-sight find their respective places and roles. How can the human Dasein plunge into such activities as preparing, putting to rights, repairing, improving, rounding-out and the like if the human Dasein does not have intrinsic possession of fore-having and fore-sight? Indeed, both fore-having and fore-sight explain the “existence” of civilization, culture, or progress and development in the context of advancing human knowledge. Had it not have been the case that the human Dasein was never existentially equipped with the structures of fore-having and fore-sight, humanity would have always been as primitive and as poor as it was.

Fore-having and fore-sight are ontologically necessary for the progress of human civilization and culture.

Nature per se is not intelligent enough to provide all the overlapping, intricate, and so variedly complicated needs of human Dasein. As a result, what nature cannot provide, the human Dasein provides for himself through the aid of fore-having and fore-sight. Thus, invention owes its “existence” to human Dasein’s fore-having and fore-sight.

2.2.3 Fore-conception

As the third foundation of interpretation, fore-conception is taken by Heidegger as “something we grasp in advance.” Like fore-having and fore-sight, fore-conception is a priori in the structure of the existential analytic of human Dasein. “Fore-conception functions in terms of a conception [or an interpretation] by which the as-structure will be made explicit.”

Finally, Heidegger lumps all these three-fold foundations of interpretation as he notes: “Whenever something is interpreted as something, the interpretation will be founded essentially upon fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception.”

In our discussion of interpretation, we see the tacit depth and scope underneath Heidegger’s critical and radical analysis of human existence. It is submitted as a postulate, however, that the impetus for such analysis of human existence is his undying love of Being. He designs the existential analytic of human Dasein to clear the path of human Dasein as he pursues the unconcealment Being. Part of this task of “clearing the way” for Being is human Dasein’s authentic interpretation of the world. And undeniably, this authentic interpretation includes the authentic inculcation and nourishment of human Dasein’s fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. Needless to say, one of the apexes of the development of authentic interpretation is invention.
In Heideggerian parlance, invention means transformation of present-at-hand entities to become ready-to-hand entities. The eventual founding or discovery and advancement of science and technology all draw their resources from fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. Expressed differently, science and technology emanate from authentic human Dasein’s understanding, projection, and interpretation.

Thus, even in scientific research, which is a *conditio sine qua non* in discovery, Heidegger sees the glaring presence of fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception (as a whole, interpretation) especially when a sort of philosophical attitude is given its way relative to an ontological interpretation of discovery. This indispensable presence of interpretation in any discovery is apparent in such different fields of learning as physics, chemistry, biology, medicine, zoology, industry, agriculture, among others. This presence is emphasized by Heidegger in the context of philosophical attitude on the part of the physicists, chemists, biologists, physicians, zoologists, industrialists, agriculturists, in their respective discoveries. In Richardson’s observation, Heidegger is driving home the point that without interpretation all these sciences can never have a rightful and an authoritative claim in their discoveries since what they embrace as discoveries are dependent on their attitudes that should always be philosophical.

**Conclusion**

Based on the foregoing presentation, it can be argued that this philosophical attitude is ever present in Fleming when he discovered penicillin; in Priestly when he discovered oxygen; in Roentgen when he discovered X-ray; in Finlay and company when they discovered terramycin; in Lippershey when he discovered television; in Bundy when he discovered time recorder or bundy clock; in Mitterhoffer when he discovered the typewriter; in Taylor and Young when they discovered radar; in Niepse, Sr. when he discovered photography; in Laennec when he discovered the stethoscope; in Goodyear when he discovered rubber; in Edison when he discovered the movie machine; in Nobel when he discovered dynamite; in Aspdin when he discovered cement; in Pascal when he discovered the adding machine; and in Bushnell when he discovered the submarine.

What all these scientists discovered are nothing other than beings, the entities in the world, the “something as something” in the world; in a word, the as-structure of human existence.

Earlier, we cited Jacques Derrida’s contention about the meaning of meaning, which is traceable to its root that signifies ‘opinion’ or ‘intention.’ Also, in Aristotelian, or classical, or traditional logic, we are told that all words are terms, but not all terms are words. Those words which are called
syncategorematic (or co-significant words), e.g. “at,” “on,” “in,” “the,” “a,” and the like, are, indeed, words but they do not have the privilege to be called terms. On the contrary, those words that are intrinsically pregnant with meaning or those that truly signify or represent reality are called categorematic, e.g. house, rock, pen, apple, car, among others. In this regard, meaning is had only in the context of categorematic terms.

On the part of Heidegger, the meaning of meaning is never anchored on the purview of ‘opinion,’ or ‘intention,’ or categorematic words. To Heidegger: “When entities within-the-world are discovered along with the Being of *Dasein*—that is, when they have come to be understood—we say that they have meaning.” In his analysis, when understanding comes to the fore, what is being understood by human *Dasein* is not the meaning of its object but the “object” of understanding itself, i.e. Being. Heidegger asserts: “But that which is understood, taken strictly, is not the meaning but the entity, or alternatively, Being.”

Along with his conviction that only the human *Dasein* exists and none other goes his firm contention that meaning matters only to human *Dasein*. There is no other grade of being which is, or who is, capable of and is conscious of meaning. Writes Heidegger: “*Dasein* only ‘has’ meaning, so far as the disclosedness of Being-in-the-world can be ‘filled in’ by the entities discovered in the disclosedness. Hence, only *Dasein* can be meaningful.”

Also, Heidegger clarifies that the concept of meaning is ontologico-existential. This means that outside the realm of human *Dasein*, meaning is debunked of meaning. Thus, to Heidegger: “This interpretation of the concept of ‘meaning’ is one which is ontologico-existential in principle.... all entities whose kind of Being is of a character other than *Dasein*’s must be conceived as unmeaning.” However, meaning is not an isolated issue of understanding. Rather, it is glued in projection and interpretation, with its inseparable foundations, viz., fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception. This is the reason why Heidegger writes: “Meaning is the ‘upon-which’ of a projection in terms of which something becomes intelligible as something. It gets its structure from a fore-having, fore-sight, and a fore-conception.”
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2 “To Heidegger, the Scholastic philosophers – most of who are Fathers of the Catholic Church – take Aristotle as a disguised Catholic cleric. Even Plato’s thoughts on Ideas are taken as tailor – made by the Scholastic philosophers in their attempt to explain the meaning of world-view.” See Eddie R. Babor, “An Essay on the Fate of Metaphysics,” Holy Name University (DWCT) Graduate School Journal, 10, no. 2, (March 1999): 40.


5 Ibid.


7 Ibid.

8 Ibid., 183-184.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid., 184.

11 As explained earlier, concern in Heidegger’s analysis does not pertain to the model of subject-object relationship of human *Dasein* and entities, therefore, we do not ascribe to the idea that in the disclosure of the human Dasein’s possibilities in the world, the world becomes an object of such actualization, nor do we submit here to the Scholastic theory of truth as coherence, i.e., conformity between judgment and reality. For further readings, see V. Vycinsas, *Earth and Gods: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Martin Heidegger* (Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff, 1969), 33.


13 Ibid., 184.


16 Ibid., 184-185.

17 Ibid., p. 185.
18 Ibid., 185 and n.1.

19 Heidegger, Being and Time, 185.

20 Ibid., 183.

21 Ibid., 184.

22 For further readings, see Eddie R. Babor, The Human Person: Not Real, But Existing, 5ff.

23 Heidegger, Being and Time, 185.

24 Ibid., 188.

25 See Ibid.

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid., 189.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid., 189.

31 See, Ibid., 190.

32 Ibid.

33 See Ibid., 189.

34 Ibid.

35 See Ibid., 192.

36 Ibid., 191.
37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.

39 Ibid.

40 Ibid., 187.

41 Ibid., 191.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.


47 Entities, seen from their aspect of use, are called ‘ready-to-hand or *zuhanden*’, while entities which become disengaged from our use with them are called ‘present-at-hand’ or *vorhanden*. For further readings see Robert Cavalier, “Lectures on Heidegger’s Being and Time,” in http://caae.phil.cmu.edu/cavalier/80130/part1/sect3/texts/Bourke.html.


52 Ibid., 192-193.
53 Ibid., 193.
54 Ibid.
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