

The Place-Being of the Clearing and Language: Reading Thomas Sheehan Topologically

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ABSTRACT: I elucidate Heidegger's understanding of the "place-being" of the "question of being." My premises are: 1) Heidegger's "question of being" can be appropriately made sense of as the "question of language." 2) The "question of language" requires a topological approach that looks into the link between the place-nature of language and the open-bounded essence of human existence. First, I explain the topological underpinnings of Heidegger's later thought of being as the clearing and language; second, I examine Sheehan's phenomenological reading of Heidegger by focusing on the relationship between *alētheia* and appropriation (*Ereignis*). In the first section, I explain the correlation between place and language within the context of the "question of being" and display how understanding the former is crucial in having a more complete perspective for the latter. In the second section, I examine Sheehan's acknowledgment of Heidegger's idea of place (*topos*) in his understanding of the nature of human existence in relation to *Ereignis*, while criticizing the "metaphorical" reading of the "place-being" of the clearing.

KEYWORDS: clearing, language, place, topology

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With *Being and Time* . . . the “question of Being” . . . concerns the question of being qua being. It becomes thematic in *Being and Time* under the name of “the question of the meaning [*Sinn*] of being.” Later this formulation was given up in favour of that of “the question of the truth of being,” and finally in favour of that of “the question concerning the place [*Ort*] or location of being” [*Ortschaft des Seins*], from which the name topology of being arose [*Topologie des Seins*]. Three terms which succeed one another and at the same time indicate three steps along the way of thinking. MEANING – TRUTH – PLACE [*topos*]. If the question of being is supposed to become clarified, what binds together the three successive formulations must necessarily be disclosed, along with what distinguishes them.

– “Seminar in Le Thor 1968” (GA 15: 344/FS 47)

In order to counter this mistaken conception and to retain the meaning of “project” [*Entwurf*] as it is to be taken (that of the opening disclosure), the thinking after *Being and Time* replaced the expression “meaning of being” with “truth of being.” And, in order to avoid any falsification of the sense of truth, in order to exclude its being understood as correctness, “truth of being” was explained by “location of being” [*Ortschaft*] – truth as locality [*Örtlichkeit*] of being. This already presupposes, however, an understanding of the place-being of place.

– “Seminar in Le Thor 1968” (GA 15: 335/FS 41)

I. WHEREFORE TOPOLOGY?

Without a doubt, Heidegger's thought concerns itself with "being" (*Sein*), yet there is still much confusion as to what to understand from this philosophically loaded concept. Heidegger's own obscure use of the word "being," a point that he acknowledged in the 1950s (GA 12: 105, 112/OWL 20, 26), reflects the inherent difficulties of attempting to understand the core issue of "being." We will all remember Heidegger's opening reminder in *Being and Time* via Plato's *Sophist*. Perhaps owing to this general difficulty, Heidegger's way into the *Seinsfrage* did not always stay the same from the mid 1910s up until 1976, as Heidegger took up different paths in order to illuminate the question of "being." Nevertheless, it was for him the fundamental issue of thinking. One way of approaching Heidegger's idea of "being" is to take up the question of language, and this is not a matter of philosophical taste, but an attempt of returning to where we already find ourselves in thinking, which concerns the essence and the ground of hermeneutic phenomenology.

The question of language was always in the background of Heidegger's thought. It was already a concern for him as early as in the 1915 dissertation "Duns Scotus' Doctrine of Categories and Theory of Meaning," the 1921 course *Phenomenology of Intuition and Expression* (GA 59), section 34 in *Being and Time*, and the 1934 lecture course *Logic as the Question Concerning the Essence of Language* (GA 38) (see GA 12: 86–9/OWL 6–8). After the mid 1930s and onwards, however, the issue started to appear on its own terms. Insofar as the final issue of Heidegger's philosophy turned out to be what he called the "topology of being," understanding the place from which we can trace how both "meaning" (*Sinn*) and "un-concealment" (*alētheia*) co-determine one another as relevant concepts and steps in Heidegger's investigations into the "question of being" is crucial. Here when I mention "topology," it simply refers to the philosophical study of space and place on hermeneutic grounds. When I use the word "topological," I mean the kind of approach that thinks in terms of *place*. The expressions "place-being" and "place-nature" are various translations of the German *Örtlichkeit*. Thus, when I concern myself with "topology of language," I imply

the place-oriented, onto-ethical and hermeneutic investigation of our experience of being and dwelling in and with language. As such, what follows is an attempt to rethink Heidegger's understanding of "being" via the notions of "place" and "language," and specifically to point out how language appears as the place of human experience. Engaging with the "place-being" of Heidegger's question of language can provide a new perspective for bringing into closer view the very core issues of the "question of being" and problematizing the very ground of hermeneutic phenomenology.

The following passage from Heidegger and his Japanese colleague Professor Tezuka's partly fictitious dialogue (1953/54) can help us situate the "question of being" in its proper context in Heidegger's later thought:

- I: It did, however, become the occasion for very great confusion, a confusion grounded in the matter itself and linked with the use of the name "Being." For this name belongs, after all, to the patrimony of the language of metaphysics [...]
- J: The fact that this dispute has not yet got onto the right track is owing – among many other motives – in the main to the confusion that your ambiguous use of the word "Being" has created.
- I: You are right: only, the insidious thing is that the confusion which has been occasioned is afterward ascribed to my own thinking attempt, an attempt which on its own way knows with full clarity the difference between "Being" as "the Being of beings," and "Being" as "Being" in respect of its proper sense, that is, in respect of its truth (the clearing).
- J: Why did you not surrender the word "Being" immediately and resolutely to the exclusive use of the language of metaphysics? Why did you not at once give its own name to what you were searching for, by way of the nature of Time, as the "sense of Being"?

- 1: How is one to give a name to what he is still searching for? To assign the naming word is, after all, what constitutes finding (GA 12: 103–4/OWL 19–20).

Accordingly:

1. “Being,” in the sense of the “being/substance of beings,” is a word of metaphysics, which has its original place in the history of ontology between Plato-Nietzsche. This is not the understanding of “being” that is the main *Sache* of Heidegger’s thought. Furthermore, Heidegger explicitly writes, “being only remains the provisional word” (GA 7: 234/EGT 78).
2. “Being” (in the sense of the “clearing,” the open) is Heidegger’s own contribution to the question of “being,” which is the main *Sache* of Heidegger’s thought. Thus it is possible to abandon the word “being,” and simply employ the “clearing” (*Lichtung*).

Of course, the fact that “being remains the provisional word” does not mean that our issue is no longer about “being,” just as it does not mean that only the word “being” is appropriate in problematizing the issue of being. Yet, we must not disregard or underestimate the fact that Heidegger views the “clearing,” which is apparently a place-related term, as a word that hints at a non-metaphysical way of thinking that can help us better grasp what is at stake. This is why a topological inquiry is suitable to delineate what “being” comes to mean for Heidegger, since the promise of topology is not to cling to various sorts of subjectivism or metaphysics, but to explicate the situated nature of human existence and its horizontal being.

First it will be useful to specify a few important implications of Heidegger’s “topology of being.” Otto Pöggeler was one of the first in Heidegger scholarship who used the term “topology” in relation to Heidegger’s thought.¹ Joseph Fell is another important figure who investigated the ontological sense of place in Heidegger’s thought of being.² Of course, there are many other important figures, such as Edward Relph and Stuart Elden, whose works offer careful examinations of Heidegger’s idea of space, place and dwelling in different registers.

Nonetheless, in the most recent scholarship, a comprehensive understanding of “topology of being” has been fostered by Edward Casey, and especially by Jeff Malpas, whose works on space and place offer the most encompassing explorations and interpretations of Heidegger’s place-oriented thought.⁵ In a nutshell, Malpas suggests that topology (as a composite of Greek *topos* and *logos*) can be understood as the kind of endeavor that looks into the “saying” and “gathering” that ontologically connects human beings to the place in which the experience of the world emerges.⁴ Malpas argues, “The happening of world occurs first in the calling of language, in the gathering of the thing, in the opening up of the time-space that is also the ‘taking-place’ of place.”⁵ Indeed, philosophical topology appears as a hermeneutic project that investigates the very emergence of the sense of things in the world from our “emplaced” situation. In that sense, topology can also be seen as a hermeneutic way of making use of phenomenology, since it is concerned with examining the very “relation” between the part and the whole and their dynamic interaction, as this relation must always be grasped as a “situated” one. In that regard, one of the crucial tasks of philosophical topology is to show the hermeneutical underpinnings of the essence of the human existence in place.⁶

In general, the idea of place that is at issue here concerns the ontological *situation* (or situatedness) of the human being *as* the human being vis-à-vis the presencing (*Anwesen*) of phenomena. This ontological “situated-ness” implies that the human being opens up to the world in experiencing phenomena in and of place. Here we must distinguish at least three correlated senses of place in Heidegger’s thought:

1. Place (*topos*, *Ort*, *Ortschaft*; but also *die Lichtung*) as the “open-bounded” clearing within which the experience of the world emerges for the finite human being. It is open, because it is where one goes beyond oneself, opening up to the world, yet at the same time it is bounded, since the openness that is at issue is not an infinite one, but one that is horizontally determined. The openness of place which allows one to move in a certain field or region also demarcates the limits of this movement. Thus, being

in place means being open to the world while being delimited by the conditions and circumstances to which one belongs which constitute the horizon of the clearing at issue.

2. Place as a locality or a site within which things are gathered, disclosed and inter-connected in their distinctiveness. For instance, the fourfold (*Geviert*) is an example of such an understanding of site or locality where distinct entities (or regions) of the same world co-determine one another by constituting the same context of referentiality or inter-relationality.
3. Ontic, “real” place(s) or locations (*Plätze, Stelle*) in space: for instance, Germany, Athens, Heidegger’s hut in the Black Forest, the classroom, the drawer in which we find the hammer.

When we think of place, we usually think of the third, ontic designation of it. However, we must not forget that these “real” and precise places and locations are possible for human experience as the places that they *are* if and only if the two former dimensions are already disclosed. This threefold understanding of place, as well as the correspondent terminology that Heidegger employed, are by no means consistent, as they vary depending on the context and different periods of Heidegger’s thought. A more detailed understanding of the particular relationship among *topos, Ort, Ortschaft, Stelle, Platz* (as well as *Aufenthalt*) requires its own systematic study, which is beyond the limits of this essay. Unless stated otherwise, the notion of place that concerns my argument here refers to the first one, that is, place as the “open-bounded,” which indicates the topological essence of the clearing.

Let us here briefly put the historical development of Heidegger’s explicit topological thinking in context. 1) Heidegger already had in mind a sophisticated idea of the “place-being” of the human existence via the conception of Dasein in *Being and Time*. The essence of existence is its being-in-the-world, always being emplaced in a particular world-situation. 2) In the period between 1934 and 1942 (marked by the *Germania and the Rhine* lecture course and *The Ister* lecture course) Heidegger started to thematize his notion of place *qua* place via the notions of *Ortschaft/Ort*, however still without a well-defined

understanding of these terms in relation to the question of being. When engaging with Heidegger's philosophy from the mid 1930s and 1940s, we must not forget that in this transitional phase of his thought Heidegger incorporated nationalistic elements in his thinking of "place," being influenced by the romanticist and nationalist ideas of the populist *völkisch* movement, which gained much popularity in Nazi Germany. Before he abandoned this approach, he attempted to engage with the "political" dwelling of a particular "people" in a particular region via his interpretation of Hölderlin's poetry, whose success is very disputable. However, he eventually came to see that such an engagement with "place" in nationalistic terms could play no role within the framework of the "question of being." 3) As Heidegger delved deeper into the place-nature (*Örtlichkeit*) of "language," which became explicit for the first time in the "Letter On Humanism" with the statement that "language is the house of being," it was clear that the primary question was the "dwelling" of human existence, and not the dwelling of Germans or a particular people. In that regard, the shift from mere *Ort* and *Ortschaft* to *Örtlichkeit* signifies a very important development in Heidegger's understanding of the issue of place, which is a transformation that is most remarkably noted in the essays included in *On the Way to Language*. This is why the ideas of the "place-being" of the clearing and language are bound together.⁷ After the mid 1940s and early 1950s and onward, first he turned to a poetic idea of dwelling (*wohnen*) via the notion of the fourfold (*Geviert*), which can be seen as an elaboration of his project of the topology of being. Later on, Heidegger's explicit concentration on the question of dwelling, and the link between appropriation (*Ereignis*) and the essence of language (*sagen* as saying), brought him to his mature *Topologie des Seins*.⁸ In that vein of thinking, when we are considering the "place-being" of language, the very world-forming nature of language is our concern, and not the disclosure of a certain worldview via language. That means that Heidegger's later notion of language ventures to explore the nature of the primordial dwelling place of human existence in which the "being" of phenomena appears. For the later Heidegger, language as *Sprache* is the region of human

existence where the acts of language, such as listening, speaking, communicating, understanding, interpreting and remaining silent, appear. Being more than a mere sum total of these acts of language, language is essentially where the human being is brought back to its mortal essence. This broad existential understanding of language took a more concrete form when it came to be designated as the “house of being.” Within that context, it will be useful to consider what Heidegger writes in the *Letter on Humanism*:

The reference in *Being and Time* (p. 54) to “being-in” as “dwelling” is not some etymological play. The same reference in the 1936 essay on Hölderlin’s word, “Full of merit, yet poetically, man dwells upon this earth,” is not the adornment of a thinking that rescues itself from science by means of poetry. The talk about the house of being is not the transfer of the image “house” onto being. But one day we will, by thinking the essence of being in a way appropriate to its matter, more readily be able to think what “house” and “dwelling” are. (GA 9: 358/272).

This passage shows the basis for, and one of the most explicit expressions of, Heidegger’s appeal to a topological mode of thinking that must acknowledge *place* and place-related notions without disregarding them as “metaphors” or “symbols.” In that regard, the notion of “language” (*Sprache*) figures in three interrelated senses, which can be taken to correspond to the threefold understanding of place:

1. Language as the open-bounded place (the human being’s dwelling-place, i.e., the house that belongs to the clearing) in which any phenomenon can meaningfully appear as the phenomenon that it *is*. This is where the human being’s encountering of the meaningful presencing of phenomena in and from stillness (*Stille*) takes place through listening and hearkening. When I am using the word “language” as such without further explication, it is always this first sense of language that I am employing.

2. Language as the discursive movement in and through which the human being brings words (*Worte*) from stillness into the sounded words (*Wörter*). This is where the poetic actions of language such as “naming” (*nennen*) and “saying” (*sagen*) happen.
3. Language as spoken languages such as English, Greek, and Chinese. This is the ontic sense of language that we are most accustomed to in our everyday experience, where written or oral communication, self-expression and such transpire via the articulation (*Verlautbarung*) of sounds associated with meaning. The third dimension of language is dependent on the availability of the first two, while the former two can show themselves only through the third. In that sense perhaps we could even add a fourth sense of “language” as *Rede/logos*, which is the simultaneous taking place of these three registers of language, though Heidegger dropped the notion of *Rede* in his later thought, and explained the essential matter of language with “saying.”

I have argued that language is the place in which the essence of human existence is brought back its proper dwelling place, where humans are capable of finding a relation to their mortal essence. Let me unpack this idea. In *On the Way to Language*, in specifying human existence’s relation to the manifestation of phenomena, Heidegger makes use of the notion of *Ereignis* in a quite particular way.⁹ As Heidegger admits himself, in *Being and Time* he “ventured too far and too early” with the question of language (GA 12: 89/OWL 7); thus we can argue that the full implications of appropriation as the movement in and of language did not appear in the 1920s. In the essay “The Way to Language,” Heidegger brings into view the meaning of “way-making movement” (*Be-wägung*) by drawing on this word from the Swabian-Alemannic dialect of German to elucidate the relationship between the clearing and what becomes apparent in/to the clearing. Expounding on the “appropriation” of language, Heidegger puts forward the etymological connection between “way” (*Weg*) and movement (*Bewegung*). The word *Be-wägung* signifies a way that clears up the field and indicates the very sense of movement that opens up space (GA 12: 249–50/OWL 129–30). In other

words, “movement” is the happening of the “way” which shows forth the openness, namely the clearing. For Heidegger, “saying” amounts to the act of moving in and with language, which opens up the way (the way that extends between the thing and its sense) to bring the meaningful manifestation of phenomena into words while also disclosing the boundaries of the clearing itself. “The way-making of Saying into spoken language is the delivering bond [*das entbindende Band*] that binds by appropriating” (GA 12: 251/OWL 131). Words (*Worte*), though, do not amount to the mere agreement of vocal sounds and signs. In fact, words emerge from the stillness (*Stille*) of language, as our *saying* traverses the site of meaningfulness via the act of speaking, being delivered to the sounded words (*Wörter*). Words arise from the stillness of language because all authentic saying first listens and hearkens before it comes to “speak.” In that, words belong to the region of the stillness (*Stille*), not in the sense of mere muteness, but in the sense of the tranquil openness of listening and hearing, where responding can arise as a possibility in the first place.

With the experience of the openness of stillness, which constitutes the boundary of meaningfulness, the “way-making” of the clearing becomes apparent. The “way-making” constitutes the two-fold relation between the clearing (the essence of “being”) and the way in and through which the being of beings occurs (GA 12: 112/OWL 26). As such, Heidegger looks into our experience of language, which for him occurs from the clearing in “ringing stillness” (GA 12: 241/OWL 121–22). The correspondence (*Ent-sprechung*) between stillness and signs takes place via saying, that is, by our “naming” the words. This brings to the fore the space and spacing in and by which we traverse the open expanse of the interval. The way-making *movement* (*Be-wägung*) that *appropriates* and situates the human existence in its proper place is the core issue of language (GA 12: 249/OWL 129).

In Heidegger’s thought, human beings fulfill their humanness in saying. Without language, the world in which we exist would never come to touch us, for we would be deprived of the “being” of things. What makes us the kind of beings that we are is precisely our *openness* to understanding things in their being. For instance, when I learn the

meaning of the word “flower” in a different language-world, its sense hints at the source of a distinct experience of the “being” of flowers. For example, while we are used to thinking the concept of “language” via words such as *glossa*, *lingua*, *language*, *tongue*, for the Japanese it can also come to mean the blossoming of the petals of plum or cherry flowers from stillness, as the word *koto ba* indicates according to Heidegger’s own interpretation (GA 12: 134/OWL 45). Here we must be careful. What primarily concerns us is not some particular “meaning” (*Bedeutung*) of language that we have now discovered and whether it “really” means the “blossoming of the petals of plum or cherry flowers,” as if this meaning could be a linguistically “verified” definition by a native speaker. Of course, this does not imply changing or interpreting the common sense of words at will, and we must admit that some of Heidegger’s re-constructive attempts with ancient Greek, or in this case with Japanese, can be read as bold interpretations that force the boundaries of linguistic sensibility. Nevertheless, the chief aim remains to reconsider our relation to words by giving them room, letting them “take place,” so that new meanings or new interpretations can emerge. As such, what allows us to experience language is not the dictionary meaning, or even the so-called poetic sense of a word that we learn, but the way of language that leads us to the disclosure of the fact that signs can never exhaust the meaning (*Bedeutung*) of the phenomena that they signify, which only hearkening to the word can help us find out. Following the traces that language leaves on the path of thinking would be undergoing a poetic experience with language, in the sense of going along with it. Words are doomed to “fail” (*ver-sagen*) every single time they are *said*. However, human beings are bound to continue searching for new ways of “saying” and coming to an understanding of things, since this is how they “exist.” This is where we find the true sense of language as the clearing, as well as the “house of being.”

Language is where we always find ourselves as the kind of beings we are, where our relation to the existential situation to which we belong comes to appear. This characteristic of language is concealed in everyday speech, where language is used as an instrument of communication. We simply overlook the ways in which we “dwell” because

it is so near and we are so “accustomed” to language that it escapes our attention. Thus we must take seriously the hermeneutic implications of the correlativity (which is established in and of language) between entities that are meaningfully present and the horizon of understanding within which entities emerge. This is why Heidegger calls language (as world-moving saying) “the relation of all relations” (GA 12: 203/OWL 107). In a certain sense, without maintaining language, we would have no “relation” to the clearing, meaning that there would be no experience of things *as* things to be experienced. Language, as the *appropriated* place of existence, provides room for the *gathering* in which things and the world open up to one another in a meaningful way, long before language comes to mean mere speech that gets communicated via dictionary-words, concepts and other linguistic processes of signification. In other words, in and with language, we find the first possibility of “sensing” things not as neutral, irrelevant objects, but as things that matter to us.

II. READING SHEEHAN TOPOLOGICALLY

In this section what I want to achieve is to include Sheehan in my ongoing discussion of Heidegger’s topology of being and language by inquiring into the topological underpinnings of his phenomenology.¹⁰ Although at first one might not think of Sheehan as a topological writer, his hermeneutic-phenomenological analysis of Heidegger could be read as a topological inquiry that asks concerning the place in which human experience of the world occurs, which is nothing but Heidegger’s “question of being” as the clearing. In Sheehan’s account or in general, we should not understand topology simply as a certain type of phenomenology. Insofar as topology is an engagement with the “place” and “place-being” of human existence, it sits at the very core of the phenomenological project in determining the correlation between the understanding of human beings and the way in which phenomena meaningfully appear. Nonetheless, the topological aspects of his accounts may remain implicit to the reader that does not think in place-related terms. In that vein of thought, the very significance

of Sheehan's phenomenological interpretation comes to the fore in a much clearer way with a topological mode of thinking. Dealing with Sheehan's account in this way can show us what the primary and final matters of Heidegger's phenomenological project were, namely the question of language and the clearing.¹¹ Lack of attention to the correlativity of "meaning" and "place" results in interpretations that lose track of Heidegger's original and final philosophical concerns. The fact that Heidegger's thought moves from meaning to truth to place, and that place is the last step of his line of thinking, makes it equally important to inquire where Sheehan's account stands within the context of the meaning–truth–place trifold that Heidegger highlights in the *Le Thor* seminars.

Sheehan's comprehensive analysis of Heidegger is extremely important mainly due to its precision in highlighting the existential situatedness of Da-sein in making sense of things. Of course, what is at issue here is an inquiry into the way in and through which phenomena appear to mortals. Sheehan convincingly makes his case that the question of "being" is not a question concerning some sort of a deity, a metaphysical beyond, or a driving force or energy of nature. It is a question concerning the *correlation* between phenomena and the mode of existence for which there *are* something like *phenomena* in the first place. In light of Heidegger's indications, Sheehan makes the important distinction between "being as beingness" (*Sein* as *Seiendheit*) and "being" that refers to the clearing. The former notion of "being" signifies the account of "being" as substance that was never the issue of Heidegger's thought, while the latter indicates the site of the correlativity of human existence and the un-concealment of phenomena.¹² Thus Sheehan suggests that the *Ur-phänomen* of Heidegger's thought was *die Lichtung*, namely the "opened clearing" (or the "world of meaning") that makes space for the appearance of the sense of things (MSH 20). The conception of the clearing in Sheehan's account is the primary topological thought, which remains implicit and thus needs to be explicated.

According to Sheehan, the hermeneutic sense-making capacity of the human existence is *the source of the understanding* of the realness of things. In the history of western philosophy, various names have

been assigned to the ground and essence of all that exists, such as *idea*, *ousia*, God, absolute mind, will, will to power, etc., which has been the kind of approach that Heidegger sought to fix. Yet, Heidegger's main issue was not putting forward a theory concerning the ground (as the foundation) of things "out there," but rather bringing into view the "is-ness" of "is." In other words, Heidegger's thought is about the source of the existential conditions of the intelligibility of phenomena, which is accessible to our understanding through the phenomenological mode of inquiry, as phenomenology is an investigation of "relations" (MSH 10).

A particularly important example of what I consider Sheehan's implicit topology can be found in his comparison of early and late Heidegger: "His earlier work stressed *ex-sistence* insofar as its thrownness has always already opened up the clearing and holds it open (*Da-sein*), whereas his later work stressed the *clearing as held open* by thrown-open *ex-sistence* (*Da-sein*)" (MSH 22). The second proposition means: the human being does not *make* the open, but maintains its openness. In other words, without human existence, which Heidegger famously calls the "shepherd of being," the openness in and from which the realness of things can issue would remain undisclosed and unintelligible. Sheehan here underlines the word *Da* (there), which he takes as the "openness" or the "clearing" within which the sense of things appears for the human understanding. He writes:

In Heidegger's telling, the correlativity of man and being has long been known to philosophy. However, the open space (*Lichtung*) which makes such correlation possible, as well as the opening up (*Lichten*) of that space – or better, its ever-openedness (thrown-openness) – has long been overlooked by metaphysics because of the intrinsic hiddenness of that openness. (MSH 158)

Here what I take to be the topological vein in Sheehan's reading becomes all the more clear. He claims that the "sought-for" of Heidegger's thought is not only the *whence* of beings, but the "whence and how is there the open" (MSH 69) that is, *Ereignis*. In other words, Heidegger asks concerning the *site* of this manifestation by bringing to the fore

the astonishing fact that things are accessible to us as meaningful things. Our access to the meaningful presence of things is a result of our *appropriated* (*er-eignet*) existence as the *openness* of the “being” of phenomena. This is the meaning of *Da* as the always already cleared-openness, which defines the essence of the human being. Without the *Da* (the clearing) that the human being maintains, there is no disclosure of the *Sein des Seienden* (the Greek *on*, or the being of beings). In other words, the *Sein* of things occurs only in cases where *Da* is available, open, that is, when it is appropriately sustained. What Heidegger called the “oblivion of being” (*Seinsvergessenheit*) in *Being and Time* in fact could be renamed as the “oblivion of appropriation” (*Lichtungsvergessenheit* or *Ereignissesvergessenheit*) (MSH 259), which also indicates the oblivion of the place-nature of the issue. Hence Sheehan asserts that “being” as the clearing denotes “disclosedness-to-understanding,” and the key point in Heidegger’s thought is that he problematizes the *site* from which the “presencing” of meaningfulness arises.

Sheehan understands the situated nature of the human existence as thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), in light of early Heidegger’s philosophy. *Da-sein* is *thrown* (projected) into its future possibilities of existence, always ahead of itself in the world. “The open” signifies the “always-already opened up space” (MSH 20), which is the disclosedness of the intelligibility of things and its accessibility for human experience. Secondly, without the “thrown” nature of the human being’s situatedness in the world, which also signifies the *finite* essence of the human existence, there would be no relation to that open site (because in each and every case the human being *finds* itself “bound” to the “there”). There is neither an agency nor a natural power that literally “throws” the human being into the world from a mysterious “yonder,” but the human being finds itself in the world, “thrown” into a particular history, society, and geography, that is, always emplaced into its own situation. Accordingly, for Sheehan *Ereignis* and *Geworfenheit* amount to the same thing, since *appropriation* is precisely what designates the taking place of the proper situation of the human existence.

Sheehan explains the “taking place” of *appropriation* in six points (MSH 20), where the first and the third points specifically concern us:

1. To think or act dis-cursively entails “running back and forth” (*dis-currere*) between the thing and its meaning, or the tool and the task, as we check out whether this thing actually does have that meaning or whether in fact this tool is suitable for that task. (...)
 3. But we *can* think and act discursively only by metaphorically “traversing the open space” between the tool and the task, or the thing and its possible meaning.
- (MSH 21)

Here two notions need to be addressed: a) *discurrere* in the sense of “running back and forth *between*” and b) “traversing the open space,” and its so-called “metaphorical” essence. Here what we first find is another hint that appeals to us to think the *place*-nature of “being” (the occurrence of the clearing), as the idea of “traversing” that Sheehan draws on links up the issue with the phenomenon of “relation” and “between-ness.” When topologically thought, that which is “traversed” must be situated between the two “ends,” which means that the act of traversing takes places in the “between.” We know that in Heidegger’s thought the idea of “the between” (*das Zwischen*) is particularly crucial in thinking the essence of hermeneutics.¹⁵ The between is not some empty space that stretches between two “points” in space, but two opposites or ends which appear as regions insofar as the middle space relates them to one another, by letting them co-exist in the same expanse. In other words, it allows them to constitute a whole, namely an inter-relational site of presencing in which things can emerge and remain correlated. This means that that which “the between” connects cannot be thought as mere presences, but rather as relations. As such, “the between” is not a mere space of empty passage, but rather a recurrent emergence, for it establishes the correlating *movement* between things by providing the required space and the spacing for them. Therefore “space” always implies “spacing” in its essence (*Wesen*) and essencing

(*Wesung*), in the sense of the “opening up” of space. Put differently, the essence of space (*Raum*), namely spacing, occurs as space making (*einräumen*).

Sheehan’s understanding of *Ereignis* is tied to his reading of *alētheia* as the un-concealment of phenomena, which Heidegger temporarily called the “truth of being” in the 1930s and 1940s, although he abandoned this designation in the 1950s. The notion is central to Heidegger’s philosophy, since it served as the bridge from “meaning” to “place.” First, let us look to Sheehan’s trifold explanation of *alētheia*:

Alētheia-3: The correctness of a statement, namely the correspondence of intellect and thing.

Alētheia-2: The pre-propositional meaningfulness, as the disclosedness of things.

Alētheia-1: The “un-disclosed” open *place* of the thrown-open.

Sheehan claims that it is *Alētheia-1*, as the occurrence of the open region of meaningfulness, that makes possible 2) the pre-propositional availability of the unfolding of things as (true or false) things to understanding, and 3) the apophantic correctness of things. Without the taking place of the openness in which the sense of things can be gathered and disclosed, the correctness of our representations could not even become a matter of thought. What nevertheless must be noted is that the openness that is at issue does not indicate some sort of “infinite openness,” but a finite one bounded by the limits of the human existence. This also means that human existence marks the “limit” of *Alētheia-1*, just as *Alētheia-1* de-fines and de-limits that field of human existence. The finite nature of human existence (as mortals or being-towards-death) is bound to the “place-being” of the manifestation of phenomena. According to this scheme of thought, *Alētheia-1* is the most fundamental instance of un-concealment, indicating the “open space” in which the individual human being can take things “as” something in their meaningful presence (MSH 74–75). I suggest that *Alētheia-1* can be taken to mean the “occurrence of the clearing,” indicating the gatheredness of the two sides of the interplay between the “to-which” and

the “from-which.” Un-concealment always occurs in and of place for the kind of being that maintains this *openness*. Therefore, the question concerning the clearing is about the opening up of the “region” (*Gegnet*), which encompasses the two-way movement and encountering of the disclosure of phenomena and the “thrown-open” human existence.

From this we can infer that the human being is essentially a “placed” being, “thrown” into the world as the “open-bounded.” It is “finite” in that it is moving towards its own death through the present moment, yet the utmost possibility of existence within the limits of its being-there is “open,” as *Da-sein* exists futurally as “e-ject.” If so, it follows that *appropriation* situates the correlation between *Da* and *Sein* into its proper site. At issue is neither *Dasein* nor *Dasein*, but rather *Da*↔*sein*, which is one of the reasons why after the *Beiträge* the notion almost always appears hyphenated.¹⁴ *Appropriation* signifies both the place (world) and the taking place of the disclosure of the “being” of phenomena in their mutual, gathered and two-way movement. Things appear meaningfully via the appropriating movement, that is, *appropriation* that makes space for the back-and-forth movement between the *Da* ↔ *Sein*, finitude and openness. Here “↔” can be taken to be the mark of the appropriating movement that arises in the “thrown-open.” The happening of appropriation transforms the appropriated clearing so that it becomes the open-bounded in and by which the disclosure of phenomena can occur and be gathered. In this way, human existence can become itself (its *own/proper*), that is, the openness that it *is* via the appropriating movement.

Sheehan states that the open (the world, the clearing, *topos*) is the discursive space where existence takes place (MSH 103). In other words, we “sustain the space within which the discursive understanding of things can take place” (MSH 104). As I have mentioned earlier, I consider this space that we sustain language. Sheehan does not discuss the topic of language *qua* language (or the idea of dwelling) in his major work.¹⁵ Nonetheless, there are a few instances where Sheehan touches on the relation between *logos* and *alētheia* (MSH xviii), which indicates an equivalence between *Alētheia*-1, 2, 3 and *Logos*-1, 2, 3.

Without *Alētheia*-1 and *Logos*-1, there would be no language as discourse or speech, which means that the world would never come to the fore *as* the world. Sheehan remarks that for Heidegger *Rede* (speech, discourse) does not mean the correspondence of meaning with sounds or the linguistic system of signification-communication (MSH 150), arguing that in *Being and Time* worldly “ex-sistence” (the essence of Dasein) and *logos* amount to the same thing. I interpret this as follows: in *existing*, that to which we first respond as the meaningful occurrence of the clearing is language. Within the boundaries of this primary sense of language, our everyday spoken languages appear. In other words, language as the open-bounded is the site in which human beings can “be made to remain” (*sistere*) and comport themselves to the disclosure of phenomena from and out of (*ex*) their particular “place.” Without it, they would remain captivated in their own subjectivity, not being able to open up to the world and thus not encounter the opening up of the world.

The core issue of Heidegger’s thought is the emergence of the interrelation between that which becomes manifest (phenomena) and the openness that can make sense of this manifestation (Dasein), in the very site as which appropriation takes place (language). This threefold interrelation is precisely what constitutes the basis of Heidegger’s “question of being” as the clearing. “Being” implicates the very gatheredness of these three distinct elements. Thus the core matter of Heidegger’s later thought, i.e., the clearing, is possible only if the openness that is at issue is *appropriated* in and with and as *Alētheia*-1 (or *Logos*-1). For Sheehan, this means that the human being does not remain open to the clearing as if the clearing is some other space (MSH 24). It is an opening that emerges where we always already *are*. The essence of the human existence and “being” are not two different “beings” that are connected by an external bridge (language), precisely because “being” is not just an entity (*Seiendes*) or a metaphysical life force (such as God) simply out there. In turn, in order for an understanding of “being” to exist so that we can thematize its “meaning” and “disclosure,” there needs to be the open-bounded place (*Ortschaft, topos*) from which such

an understanding can emerge. This place is where the origin of the “ontological difference” is groundlessly grounded in that we can distinguish “being” from “beings,” just as we can distinguish what grows in a field from the field itself. For the later Heidegger, *Ereignis* is not just another name either for “being” or the individual human being. *Ereignis* is what belongs to the existential structure of the understanding of being, a place of gathering where the possibility of differentiating phenomena from the site of disclosedness in which they appear (*alētheia*) occurs. This is why the clearing and language point to the *same* open-boundedness in their distinctness.

I hope to have shown thus far how and why I proposed to read Sheehan topologically, and why Sheehan’s phenomenological interpretation of Heidegger is a very cohesive one due to its receptivity of the topological Heidegger. Nonetheless, as is the case in most studies on Heidegger, even though Sheehan examines notions such as “field,” *topos*, “openness,” “clearing,” “the thrown-open clearing,” “the open region of understanding,” and “the realm of disclosedness in relation to site of *meaningfulness*” (MSH xviii, 9, 12, 20, 92), he does not explicitly ask *why* Heidegger sought to explain the matters by such space- and place-related notions. For Sheehan, the focus always remains on *meaningfulness*, but not so much on the “place-being” of place. One of the reasons why Sheehan does not pay close attention to the place-nature of *Ereignis* on its own accord is related to the fact he considers the “place-being” of the clearing a metaphor. To say the least, this is in contrast with Heidegger’s own understanding of metaphors, especially considering Heidegger’s study of Hölderlin’s poetry in the *Ister* lectures (GA 53: 17–32/16–27). Sheehan writes, “Metaphorically speaking, as thrown-open (i.e., appropriated), human being is the ‘open space’ or clearing within which the meaningful presence of things can occur. (The previous sentence is Heidegger’s philosophy in a nutshell.)” (MSH 15). Sheehan indicates that the human being is not the source of *appropriation*, but it is that which is *appropriated* and brought to its *proper* place. This is certainly true, yet this is also why the matter must be investigated beyond a simple metaphor-literal dualism. Asking whether the clearing at issue is a “real” clearing in a “real” forest or not would imply that our thinking of the issue is still influenced by

the viewpoint of Platonist meta-physics, one that divorces the ideal from the real, the sensuous from the non-sensuous. According to this account, the so-called ontological clearing exists only in our conceptions, yet the clearing in the woods is the “real” phenomenon. Connecting the two by means of an analogy indicates that we are transferring the image of the latter onto the former. However, this is not how Heidegger understands the clearing, which is related to his idea of language.

Since Heidegger does not see language as a “rule governed system of signification,” words cannot be considered as mere signals that signify objects in the world that correspond to the signifier. The main function of words is to bring the meaning of the signified into discourse in and from silence by *saying* it. Since words can never simply exhaust the meaning of a phenomenon, they must be seen as the hints of whatever phenomenon that we are trying to think, interpret, and name. Just as the idea of the “house of being” is not an image of the conception of language (GA 12: 107, 111–12/OWL 22, 26), the image of the clearing in the woods is not a spatial symbol of *alētheia* either. *Alētheia* is not an objectively present fact in the “real world” “represented” by the image of the clearing, or the “open space” in the woods, attached to it *post facto*. Likewise, we should consider the sign “the clearing” a *beckoning*. It hints at the occurrence of spacing and lighting that is at issue with *alētheia* and that requires our naming and saying in language. We are not simply “connecting” the clearing as “being” with a clearing in a forest by means of “signs” in our minds: they already *beckon* us to the same matter, that is, the same “occurrence,” before we can ever come to re-connect them with the help of an analogy. In the essay *Why Poets* Heidegger writes:

If we go to the fountain, if we go through the woods,
we are already going through the word “fountain,”
through the word “woods,” even if we are not saying
these words aloud or have any thoughts about language.

(GA 5: 310–11/232–33)

In that sense, considering the space- and place-related notions that Heidegger employs in his philosophy as mere metaphors is simply

incompatible with Heidegger's idea of language, just as it is incompatible with a phenomenological reading of Heidegger, since our openness to language is where things appear to us *as* things. The metaphorical reading of the clearing opens up the question as to how we are to speak or think without these so-called "metaphors."¹⁶ If expressions such as "the open region" and "the openedness" are metaphorical, then what can we say about *Ereignis*, *Existenz*, *alētheia*, *Da-sein*, *Entwurf*? Subsequently we could suggest that language itself is a pool of metaphors all the way down, since words are never sensible objects (GA 12: 122/OWL 35), but this is precisely the metaphysical notion of language that Heidegger criticizes. For Heidegger, language is not a tool, just as a house is not one, because the issue of language concerns *our openness to saying*, just as a house indicates the place from which we are opened to the world. Language is the open-bounded *place* (*topos*) of meaningfulness (*Sinnlichkeit/Bedeutsamkeit*) from which the particular meanings of things (*Sinn/Bedeutung*) appear. Being open to language is where the essence of being human resides, just as fishness requires being in the water. Even the idea that language may not be our primary dwelling place or that we could "make sense" of things themselves without language is a *sense* that only *we* experience in and of language.¹⁷

NOTES

- 1 Otto Pöggeler, “Heideggers Topologie des Seins,” *Man and World* 2 (1969), 331–56; Otto Pöggeler, “Heidegger’s Topology of Being,” in *On Heidegger and Language*, ed. Joseph J. Kockelmans (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972), 107–47.
- 2 Joseph Fell, *Heidegger and Sartre: An Essay on Being and Place* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).
- 3 Edward S. Casey, *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Jeff Malpas, *Place and Experience: A Philosophical Topography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger’s Topology: Being, Place, World* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2006); Jeff Malpas, *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place: Explorations in the Topology of Being* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2012).
- 4 “Both “topology” and *Topologie* have a specific technical sense that refers to a branch of mathematical geometry that studies the nature of surfaces. Heidegger, however, drawing on the Greek roots that lie embedded in the term – *topos* and *logos* – takes it in the sense of a “saying of place” (*Ort-reden*): Malpas, *Heidegger’s Topology*, 33.
- 5 Malpas, *Heidegger’s Topology*, 306.
- 6 On the hermeneutic essence of topology, see Jeff Malpas, “Place and Situation,” in *The Routledge Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Jeff Malpas and Hans-Helmuth Gander (New York: Routledge, 2017), 354–66.
- 7 Concerning the difference between a historical-political notion of place and the place-nature of being, what Heidegger regrettably left unexplained are the hermeneutic and phenomenological relationships among the ontic, onto-ethical, and ontological registers of the meaning of “dwelling.” Heidegger did not worry himself much with the question as to how one’s dwelling in language manifests itself in everyday-practical situations, which led to the confused designations of Heidegger’s thought as “linguistic idealism.” The link between the actual history (and places) in

which we live and the onto-ethical register of place as language remained utterly untouched.

- 8 There are no perfect translations of *das Ereignis* in English. The main role of the translation is to bring us back to the original word, *Ereignis*, and not to cover the entire etymological background of the word in German. As long as we know that “appropriation” or “the event” indicates *das Ereignis*, our thinking will be on the right track.
- 9 Jeff Malpas notes that the notion is the key topological conception in Heidegger’s thought and provides the following explanation: “Etymologically ‘Ereignis’ has its roots in the now somewhat archaic term ‘eräugnen’ meaning to see or to be evident. Once again this is suggestive of a connection back to *Being and Time* – to the idea of the “moment of vision,” *Augenblick*, in which Dasein grasps its existential situation”: Malpas, *Heidegger’s Topology*, 215.
- 10 From here on abbreviated as MSH: Thomas Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2015).
- 11 The Crowell-Malpas debate on this issue encompasses particularly the link between phenomenology and subjectivity and topology’s place within that context. See Steven Galt Crowell, “Is Transcendental Topology Phenomenological?,” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 19 (2011): 267–76; Malpas, *Heidegger and the Thinking of Place*, 45–56.
- 12 “I try to make sense of Heidegger by showing that his work, both early and late, was not about ‘being’ as Western philosophy has understood that term for over twenty-five hundred years, but rather about sense itself: meaningfulness and its source” (MSH, xi).
- 13 “The expression ‘hermeneutic’ derives from the Greek verb *hermēneuein*. That verb is related to the noun *hermēneus*, which is referable to the name of the god Hermes by a playful thinking that is more compelling than the rigor of science. Hermes is the divine messenger. He brings the message of destiny; *hermēneuein* is that exposition which brings tidings because it can listen to a

- message. Such exposition becomes an interpretation of what has been said earlier by the poets who, according to Socrates in Plato's *Ion* (534e), *hermēnes eisin tōn theōn*, 'are interpreters of the gods'" (GA 12: 115/OWL 29).
- 14 Jeff Malpas, "Heidegger's Topology of Being," in *Transcendental Heidegger*, ed. Steven Crowell and Jeff Malpas (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007), 128–29.
- 15 For more on Sheehan's understanding of language, see Sheehan, "Sense, Meaning and Hermeneutics: From Aristotle to Heidegger," in *The Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, ed. Niall Keane and Chris Lawn (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell), 2016.
- 16 Wittgenstein argues: "278. The secondary meaning is not a 'metaphorical' meaning. If I say, 'For me the vowel e is yellow,' I do not mean: 'yellow' in a metaphorical meaning – for I could not express what I want to say in any other way than by means of the concept of yellow": Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe, P.M.S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009), 228.
- 17 Explaining how we would and could "sense" the world without language is no different from telling a friend what things I would and could do tomorrow if I stopped breathing today.