

Being as floating signifier—notes on *Heidegger on Being Self-Concealing*¹

One could likewise say. . . that the function of notions of the *mana* type is to oppose the absence of signification without itself bearing any signification in particular.²

Thomas Sheehan writes, “[W]e are the entities who have *logos*. As thrown into living forward, we break into the solid, dark compactness of things and bring light to bear. We open up a sphere of dynamic intelligibility within which those things can be distinguished one from the other and subsequently brought together again.”³ In evident agreement Katherine Withy says, “as disclosing or illuminating, we destroy the darkness as soon as we encounter it.” ‘Destroy the darkness’ in the sense that we bring entities to meaningful presence: “*were it not for my comporting towards it*, the entity would remain in the darkness of unintelligibility. When I do comport towards it, I lift it out of this darkness: I un-cover it, make it intelligible.”⁴

There are two moments here – the *simul* and the *seriatim*.⁵ First moment is the all-at-once *Einbruch*:⁶ “The picture is something like this: Though the ether is filled with vibrations, the world is dark. But one day, man opens his seeing eye, and there is light [*und es wird hell*].”⁷ Second is the step-by-step moment of comportment: distinguishing this from that, reconfiguring (articulating), then on to the next entities; lifting this out of darkness, then that, the next, and so on.

Lévi-Strauss saw the same two-part structure *sub specie linguae*, viz: “Whatever may have been the moment and the circumstances of its appearance in the ascent of animal life,

¹ Katherine Withy, *Heidegger on Being Self-Concealing* (Oxford U. P. 2022).

² *On pourrait dire pareillement, en schématisant la conception qui a été proposée ici, que la fonction des notions de type mana est de s’opposer à l’absence de signification sans comporter par soi-même aucune signification particulière.* Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction à l’œuvre de Marcel Mauss* (1950): http://palimpsestes.fr/textes_philo/levi_strauss/surmauss.pdf ; p. 32, fn. 34.

³ Thomas Sheehan, “Heidegger’s *Being and Time* Paraphrased and Annotated” (2022; incomplete draft) 8.

⁴ *H. on Being Self-Concealing* 89, 31; her italics.

⁵ Or, to anticipate, the paradigm and the syntagm. “The associative [alt. ‘paradigmatic’] plane has evidently a very close connection with ‘the language’ [*la «langue»*] as a system [i.e. *Bedeutsamkeit*], while the syntagm is near to speech [*la parole*] [i.e. *Anwesenheit*].” Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (tr. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith 1967) 59.

⁶ “With the existence of human beings there occurs an irruption into the totality of beings, so that now the being in itself first becomes manifest, i.e., as being, in varying degrees, according to various levels of clarity, in various degrees of certainty.” Martin Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics* (5th ed. enlarged, tr. Richard Taft 1997) 160. *Mit der Existenz des Menschen geschieht ein Einbruch in das Ganze des Seienden dergestalt, daß jetzt erst das Seiende in je verschiedener Weite, nach verschiedenen Stufen der Klarheit, in verschiedenen Graden der Sicherheit, an ihm selbst, d.h. als Seiendes offenbar wird.* GA 3:228: www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=3&pg=228

⁷ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (tr. G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte; rev. 4th ed. Hacker and Schulte 2009) II.vii, § 55.

language can only have arisen all at once [*tout d'un coup*]. Things cannot have begun to signify gradually [*se mettre à signifier progressivement*]. In the wake of a transformation which is not a subject of study for the social sciences, but for biology and psychology, a shift occurred from a stage when nothing had a meaning to another stage when everything had meaning [*d'une stade où rien n'avait un sens, à un autre où tout en possédait*]."⁸

But, he goes on, this radical change (*changement radical*) "has no counterpart in the field of knowledge [*la connaissance*],

which develops slowly and progressively. In other words, at the moment when the entire universe all at once became *significant* [*significatif*], it was none the better *known* [*connu*] for being so . . . [T]he two categories of the signifier and the signified came to be constituted simultaneously and interdependently, as complementary units [*sc. as la langue*]; whereas knowledge, that is, the intellectual process which enables us to identify certain aspects of the signifier and certain aspects of the signified, one by reference to the other . . . only got started very slowly [*parole by parole, so to speak*]."⁹

Mehlman comments that "whereas the linguistic totality (of meaning) must have come into existence (as structure) all at once, that which we *know* has been acquired progressively. . . . This dissymmetry between the synchronic (structural) nature of the *meant* and the diachronic nature of the *known* results in the existence of [quoting Lévi-Strauss] 'an overabundance of signifier (*signifiant*) in relation to the *signifiés* to which it might apply.'"¹⁰ This overabundance (*surabondance*) gives rise to the 'floating signifier' (*signifiant flottant*), the "semantic function," says Lévi-Strauss, "whose role is to allow symbolic thought to operate despite the contradiction inherent in it."¹¹ The contradiction that meaningfulness is everywhere and always yet knowledge is fragmentary and fallible; that we scarcely know what we're talking about.

So on one reading Withy's analysis of the self-concealing of being sounds in linguistics, in particular the work of Saussure and Jakobson; and suggests that, under this aspect, this usage of the term is of the *mana* type insofar as being is, like *mana*, a floating, or zero, signifier. This reading has application as well to her first book, *Heidegger on Being Uncanny* (2015). For 'uncanny' is likewise a zero-signifier. "Mauss cites a most profound remark of Father Thavenet about the Algonquian notion of *manitou*:

⁸ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Introduction to the Work of Marcel Mauss* (tr. Felicity Baker 1987) 59-60.

⁹ *Id.* 60.

¹⁰ Jeffrey Mehlman, "The 'floating signifier': from Lévi-Strauss to Lacan," 48 *Yale French Studies* 10, 23 (1972).

¹¹ *Introduction* 63.

It more particularly designates any being which does not yet have a common name, which is unfamiliar; of a salamander, a woman said she was afraid: it was a *manitou*; people laughed at her, telling her the name salamander. Trade beads are *manitou's* scales, and cloth, that wonderful thing, is the skin of a *manitou*.¹²

'*Manitou*' ranges through 'unfamiliar, odd, exotic, bizarre' to 'uncanny (thus frightening).' Retrieving additional examples from outback Brazil, uptight America, and urban France Lévi-Strauss concludes,

"always and everywhere, those types of notions, somewhat like algebraic symbols, occur to represent an indeterminate value of signification; in itself devoid of meaning and thus susceptible of receiving any meaning at all; their sole function is to fill a gap between the signifier and the signified."¹³

Resuming now Withy's new book—What darkness? "Any phenomenon of *unconcealing* entails a correlate phenomenon of concealment. . . . any *unconcealing* or *unconcealment* makes essential reference to a concealment that it presupposes and overcomes."¹⁴ Even this early in her analysis structural linguistics speaks up.¹⁵ In Saussure's view, "A language is a system in which all the elements fit together, and in which the value of any one element depends on the simultaneous coexistence of all the others."¹⁶ Yet certainly not on the simultaneous **copresence** of all. The Cheshire Cat asks Alice: "Did you say *pig* or *fig*?" Jakobson now: "In the common code of the Cat and Alice, i.e. in spoken English, the difference between a stop and a continuant, other things being equal, may change the meaning of the message."¹⁷ A phonemic distinctive feature – the /p/ in 'pig' – occurs only by essential reference to its presupposed but non-present alter – the /f/ in 'fig.' "[T]he inherent feature is identified only through the comparison of the alternative present in the given position with the absent alternative."¹⁸ So also the difference in a Wonderland 'fig' and the Vegas 'vig': unvoiced versus voiced fricative. Garver: "This method [distinctive feature analysis] is based on a complex presupposition: that

¹² *Introduction* 54; quoting *Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie*. For a contemporary *manitou* see *Destiny Turns on the Radio* (dir. Jack Baran 1995).

¹³ *Id.* 55-56.

¹⁴ *H. on Being Self-Concealing* 7, 9.

¹⁵ 'Structural' in the sense of a system of differences and their relations. "In the language itself, there are only differences. . . . A linguistic system is a series of phonetic differences matched with a series of conceptual differences. . . . The whole set of phonetic and conceptual differences which constitute a language are . . . the product of two kinds of comparison, associative and syntagmatic. . . . This set of habitual relations is what constitutes linguistic structure and determines how the language functions." Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics* (tr. Roy Harris 1983) 118, 126; Saussure's emphasis.

¹⁶ *Id.* 113.

¹⁷ Roman Jakobson, "Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances" in Jakobson and Morris Halle, *Fundamentals of Language* (4th ed. 1980) 72-73.

¹⁸ *Fundamentals* 38.

nothing is linguistically significant (or real) unless it contrasts with something else, that what it contrasts with is an alternative possibility within a systematic array of possibilities, and that the possible alternatives are determined by binary (sometimes ternary, positive/negative/neutral; or at any rate finitary) alternation along a finite number of dimensions, called ‘features’.”¹⁹

Heidegger’s term for ontologically prior concealment is *lēthē*: “a darkness that is overcome through privation [*Unverborgenheit, a-lētheia*], as un-concealment arises out of it.”²⁰ Withy wants us to see *ongoing* concealing as well. “Put crudely: the hiddenness that comes ‘before’ un-concealing must be distinguished from that which happens ‘at the same time’ as it.” This simultaneous concealing “is often discussed [by Heidegger] positively as a sheltering. . . . [e.g.] ‘In such sheltering there first emerges the unconcealed as an entity.’ (*Parmenides*: 133/GA54: 198).”²¹ Too bad the Master was a slob at keeping these notions sorted; using as he did *Verbergung, Verbergen* (properly ‘simultaneous concealing’) and *Verborgenheit* (properly ‘prior concealment’) “to refer to both the activity of concealing and the concealment that is produced;” which “sloppiness precludes him from using these terms to track the distinction” that Withy is marking. So to distinguish “this preserving and simultaneous concealing from *lēthē*, concealment,” Withy designates it *kruptesthai*, ‘self-concealing,’ or *kruptein*, ‘other-concealing.’ These latter terms serve to indicate that “both the revealing and concealing take place in a single gesture.”²² Like the phenomenon of the distinctive feature—*expressio unius exclusio alterius est*.

What, then, are entities? “[T]here is nothing to entities beyond their meaningful presence to us.” “To *be* an entity is to be so discovered or unconcealed by us.”²³

In Withy’s schema (building on Wrathall’s²⁴) disclosing entities occurs as second-plank (hermeneutic) and first-plank (apophantic) unconcealing. She observes that “In addition to overcoming a prior concealment, discovering the entity as that and what it is also simultaneously conceals, in various ways.” She urges us to notice that “when I comport towards an entity as x [second-plank unconcealing], I at the same time conceal it as y (where x and y are contraries of an appropriate sort).” “To shelter the entity within its being as x is to conceal the entity as y. The concealment of the entity as y—and as p, q, and r—means that there is a withheld abundance of intelligibility in entities: an abundance of ways in which entities might be

¹⁹ Newton Garver, *This Complicated Form of Life: Essays on Wittgenstein* (1994) 62-63; considering Aristotle’s *Categories* as distinctive feature analysis.

²⁰ *H. on Being Self-Concealing* 12; my supplement in brackets.

²¹ *Id.* 12; my supplements in brackets. <https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=54&pg=198>.

²² *Id.* 13.

²³ *Id.* 42, 7.

²⁴ Mark A. Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Truth, Language, and History* (2011).

discovered in our comporting towards them.”²⁵ So also for first-plank unconcealing: “an apophantic statement makes some feature of the entity salient while concealing others. In saying ‘This is x,’ I conceal the entity as y (where x and y are suitably opposed).”²⁶

For the sake of the ultimate point to come later in Withy’s analysis we should see this withheld abundance of intelligibility—y, p, q, r, etc.—as the ensemble of an entity’s ‘contrast cases.’ “Being unable to access what something is *rather than* amounts to a concealing because it is a failure to wholly uncover that thing in contrast to what it is not.”²⁷ But in principle at least we can always access what entity x is (now) *rather than*: it’s rather than y, p, q, r, etc. Entity x, or an apophantic statement disclosing it, has contrast cases in y, p, q, r, and so on. Sheehan imagines camping in the woods, where “I might experience a large stone I run across in a number of different ways: first of all as an ersatz hammer for pounding in tent pegs (since I forgot to bring along a mallet); later as a paperweight to hold down my map in the wind; and later still as a missile for driving off a bothersome critter. Phenomenologically speaking—that is, experientially—in the space of a couple hours that stone will have gone through three distinct ways of being.”²⁸ To ‘run across’ the stone is to experience/disclose its ‘that it is.’ To experience/disclose its ‘what it is’ is to take it as a, rather than b or c; then as b, rather than a or c; then as c, rather than a or b.

Withy’s contrast cases are in what Saussure called ‘associative’ relation, just as are Sheehan’s various uses of the rock. “Syntagmatic relations hold *in praesentia*. They hold between two or more terms co-present in a sequence. Associative relations, on the contrary, hold in *absentia*. They hold between terms constituting a mnemonic group.”²⁹ ‘Mnemonic group’ we take as Withy’s ‘withheld abundance of intelligibility.’ Syntagmaticity in Heidegger’s phenomenology manifests as the involvement-chains of *Wozu* and *Wofür*, which always terminate in Dasein as every syntagm’s ultimate *Worum-willen*; viz.:

²⁵ *Id.* 30, 31, 32; my supplement in brackets.

²⁶ *Id.* 67.

²⁷ *Id.* 141.

²⁸ “Heidegger’s *Being and Time* Paraphrased and Annotated” 2.

²⁹ *Course 122*. The nomenclature post-Saussure is all over the map. “Since Saussure, the analysis of the associative plane has undergone considerable development; its very name has changed: we speak today, not of the associative, but of the *paradigmatic* plane, or, as we shall henceforth do here, of the *systematic* plane. . . . It is possible to use a subsidiary terminology: syntagmatic connections are *relations* in Hjelmslev, *contiguities* in Jakobson, *contrasts* in Martinet; systematic connections are *correlations* in Hjelmslev, *similarities* in Jakobson, *oppositions* in Martinet.” *Elements of Semiology* 59. “Where Barthes opposes *system* and *syntagm*, the corresponding contrasts in Lévi-Strauss are *metaphor* and *metonymy* or sometimes *paradigmatic series* and *syntagmatic chain* . . . Although the jargon is exasperating, the principles are simple. As Jakobson puts it, metaphor (system, paradigm) relies on the recognition of similarity and metonymy (syntagm) on the recognition of contiguity.” Edmund Leach, *Lévi-Strauss* (1970) 48; citing “Two Aspects of Language” at 81.

“The fact that it has such an involvement is *ontologically* definitive for the Being of such an [*innerweltlichen*] entity, and is not an ontical assertion about it. That in which it is involved is the ‘towards-which’ [*das Wozu*] of serviceability, and the ‘for-which’ [*das Wofür*] of usability. With the ‘towards-which’ of serviceability there can again be an involvement: with this thing, for instance, which is ready-to-hand, and which we accordingly call a ‘hammer’, there is an involvement in hammering; with hammering, there is an involvement in making something fast; with making something fast, there is an involvement in protection against bad weather; and this protection ‘is’ for the sake of [*um-willen*] providing shelter for Da-null—that is to say, for the sake of a possibility of Da-null’s nullity. . . . But the totality of involvements itself goes back ultimately to a ‘towards-which’ in which there is no further involvement This primary ‘towards-which’ is not just another ‘towards-this’ as something in which an involvement is possible. The primary ‘towards-which’ is a ‘for-the-sake-of-which’ [*ein Worum-willen*]. But the ‘for-the-sake-of’ always pertains to the nullity of *Da-null*, for which, in its nullity, that very nullity is essentially an *issue*.”³⁰

The two planes (Jakobson calls them ‘axes’) of syntagm and association (paradigm) are linked, as Barthes puts it, “in such a way that the syntagm cannot ‘progress’ except by calling successively on new units taken from the associative plane.”³¹ So the syntagm that is Sheehan-camping cannot ‘get it done’ except by successively calling on the rock to be a new entity taken from its withheld abundance of intelligibility. In other words, except by successively unconcealing the rock as this one or that of its contrast cases.

Third plank – ontological – unconcealing is another matter altogether. For being is not an entity. “So, what is being?”

“The being (*Sein*) of an entity (*das Seiende*) is whatever happening we note when we use a form of the verb ‘to be’ (*sein*). When we say of an entity that it *is*, we are flagging that something is happening such that there is an entity there rather than not (i.e., its being *that* it is) and such that the entity is of some sort rather than another (i.e., its being *what* it is).”³²

A happening by double contrast: presence rather than *lēthē*; and as x rather than another of its cases from the withheld abundance of intelligibility. Moreover, “Dasein’s disclosing and the being of entities are correlated happenings, which always happen together and which each

³⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (tr. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson 1962) 116-117; *Sein und Zeit* 84. Translation modified.

³¹ *Elements of Semiology* 59.

³² *H. on Being Self-Concealing* 78.

need the other in order to occur themselves. 'Worlding' is an intermediate term that invokes both and can be identified with either side of the correlation: worlding is Dasein's disclosing, and worlding is the being of entities."³³ So, too, for *Ereignis*: "*Ereignis* is the interfacing between disclosing and being, the two correlated dimensions of third-plank unconcealing. These two phenomena need each other in order to occur, and their coming-into-relationship is the event that allows third-plank unconcealing to obtain: *Ereignis*. Or rather—the coming-into-relationship of being and disclosing, *Ereignis*, is the happening of third-plank unconcealing."³⁴

Withy says being, or its shining out, is "an unconstrained, upsurgent appearing—an unbounded bounding forth."³⁵ Can disclosing then be conceptualized as forming entities by constraining and bounding – articulating – this upsurgent appearing? Rather as "the production of speech-sounds requires the simultaneous presence [the coming-into-relationship] of two basic components: *initiation*, or the production of a flow of air, and *articulation*, or the formation of some kind of obstacle that modulates the airflow to generate a specific type of sound."³⁶ Such a conceptualization would violate the rules of Heidegger's language game, a game in which being is no entity. In the grammar of that game 'being' can behave like entities do in other language games ('it grants,' 'it appears,' 'it bounds forth') but without being an entity, however that's supposed to work. How **does** it work?

"Being—disclosing, worlding, presencing—in some sense 'comes to presence' when entities do."³⁷ 'Comes to presence' but in a way 'cloaked.' I.e. there's a scotoma or agnosia inherent in third-plank unconcealing. Withy begins by noting this special difficulty:

"Exactly what Heidegger is asking in his interrogation of being appears to shift as his thought develops and he comes to new preoccupations and insights. One of these insights, however, does not merely shift the sense of the question of being but suggests why being might be question-worthy in the first place. It also indicates why asking 'What's up with being?' might run into special difficulty. This is the insight that being is self-concealing."³⁸

It is the content of this insight that Withy means to illuminate: "Determining what Heidegger means by 'the self-concealing of being' is my task in this book." She goes about this task "by surveying various candidates for the self-concealing of being and eliminating what is not a

³³ *Id.* 77.

³⁴ *Id.* 130.

³⁵ *Id.* 149.

³⁶ J. C. Catford, *A Practical Introduction to Phonetics* (1988; repr. with corrections 1994) 17.

³⁷ *H. on Being Self-Concealing* 106.

³⁸ *Id.* 1.

self-concealing and what is not a concealing of *being*. What remains should be the self-concealing of being.” As her survey proceeds she presents the findings in a series of *r* by *c* tables.³⁹ Her completed taxonomy is available here:

https://katherinewithy.weebly.com/uploads/6/2/9/4/62947365/the_complete_taxonomy.pdf.

The characterization ‘self-concealing’ tells us that Heidegger’s insight was in some sense an ‘inverse’ one, in Lonergan’s term.⁴⁰ Withy’s prize is to explicate that sense. Her explanation is that we comport ourselves towards entities by way of contrast cases, whereas we have no access to being’s contrast case, if any. She quotes a passage from *Basic Questions of Philosophy* in which Heidegger claims an “essential insight {*wesentliche Einsicht*}: the clearing in which entities are, is not simply bounded and delimited by something hidden [*Verborgenes*] but by something *self-concealing* [*Sichverbergendes*].”⁴¹ Withy comments,

“[B]eing is ‘bounded and delimited by something hidden’—in its inaccessible edges, or *others than*. This hidden boundary conceals itself, and this self-concealing is what produces the hiddenness of being’s *other than, rather than*, and its *being other than*. That is, this is another way of saying that *lēthē* is repelling, that being has no ground and is self-grounding, and that we cannot draw the distinction between being and entities. It is this concealing of its *other than, rather than*, and its *being other than*, I suggest, that distinguishes being’s appearing from that of entities and that renders it distinctively self-concealing.”⁴²

Withy’s account excels at highlighting the differentializing dynamic of Heidegger’s thought. Extended example:

³⁹ Withy acknowledges that “Heidegger might be taken to reject my classificatory approach as too calculative.” *Id.* 3 fn. 2. Indeed the *r* × *c* table is a ‘technology of the intellect’ in Jack Goody’s phrase. He notes that “many anthropologists appear to view ambivalence and ambiguity as unacceptable to the ‘savage mind’, as having to be eliminated by classification or smothered by taboo. Could such an approach, so inimical to the analysis of much poetic speech, be a result of *our* tables rather than *their* thoughts?” *The Domestication of the Savage Mind* (1977) 65. Insofar as middle and later Heidegger aspired to *poiesis* perhaps the tabular canons of univocity, discreteness, consistency, surveyability, etc. do not apply to that work, or change it by their application. Goody refers us to Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, where we read “I . . . shall think relevant to my subject any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language.”

⁴⁰ “While direct insight grasps the point, or sees the solution, or comes to know the reason, inverse insight apprehends that in some fashion the point is that there is no point, or that the solution is to deny a solution, or that the reason is that the rationality of the real admits distinctions and qualifications. . . . For an inverse insight has three characteristics: it supposes a positive object of inquiry; it denies intelligibility to the object; and the denial runs counter to spontaneous anticipations of intelligence.” *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan, Volume 3; Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* [5th ed.] (ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran 1992) 44, 78.

⁴¹ *H. on Being Self-Concealing* 147 (my supplement in curly brackets); GA 45: 210:

<https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=45&pg=210>.

⁴² *Ibid.*

“In asking, ‘Why are there entities at all rather than nothing?’, angst asks after the ground (*qua* impetus) of disclosing (‘why’) and contrasts that disclosing to its alternative, *lēthē* (nothing). . . . the *rather than* of disclosing is *lēthē*. *Lēthē* is the absence of the illumination of Dasein’s disclosing. . . . [T]o understand something completely requires grasping that thing in light of the alterity of a contrast case or alternative. . . . If disclosing cannot grasp its alternative in *lēthē*, then there is a sense in which it remains concealed from itself. . . . *Lēthē*, or what ‘What is Metaphysics?’ calls ‘the nothing’, ‘does not remain the indeterminate opposite of entities but unveils itself as belonging to the being of entities’ (WM: 94/GA9: 120) as its *rather than*. Since *lēthē* belongs to being and cannot be brought into the scope of being as unconcealing, its inaccessibility amounts to a concealing of being. In this sense, being is ultimately inaccessible to unconcealing *qua* disclosing. And since it is the very happening of being that renders its *rather than* inaccessible, this is a form of self-concealing—third-plank *kruptesthai*. . . . Perhaps surprisingly, I think that it is this inability to access being’s *rather than* that commentators are trying to get at when describing being’s backgrounding in terms of its pervasiveness, familiarity, and atmospheric quality (§ 14). These descriptions all (more or less explicitly) tried to express the fact that we cannot get a contrast case for being into view.”⁴³

As a general matter the contrast case that has historically been hardest to get into view is the one linguists designate by ‘zero’ (or ‘null’).⁴⁴ Lévi-Strauss describes certain observations which present anomalies for the theory of dual organization of societies, and then notes,

“But it would not be the first time that research would lead us to institutional forms which one might characterize by a *zero value*. These institutions have no intrinsic property other than that of establishing the necessary preconditions for the existence of the social system to which they belong; their presence—in itself devoid of significance—enables the social system to exist as a whole. Anthropology here encounters an essential problem, one which it shares with linguistics, but with which it does not seem to have come to grips in its own field. This is the problem posed by the existence of institutions having no function other than that of giving meaning to the society in which they are found.”⁴⁵

⁴³ H. on *Being Self-Concealing* 137-138, 139-140, 141-142: <https://www.beyng.com/gaselis/?vol=9&pg=120> .

⁴⁴ Brief, skeptical review of the concept in Kenneth L. Pike, *Language in Relation to a Unified Theory of the Structure of Human Behavior* (2nd rev. ed. 1967) § 14.53, ‘On Zero,’ pp. 561-564. Sympathetic micro-review in *Elements of Semiology* III.3.3.B.1. ‘Privative oppositions,’ pp. 76-78: “the zero degree testifies to the power held by any system of signs, of creating meaning ‘out of nothing.’” ‘Zero-signifier’ as zero-signifier.

⁴⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, “Do Dual Organizations Exist?” [1956] in *Structural Anthropology* (tr. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf 1963) 159.

Not the first time because six years earlier Lévi-Strauss had revised on this very basis Marcel Mauss's characterization of *mana*.⁴⁶ Although Lévi-Strauss does not put it this way, it's as if Mauss and ethnographers before him had taken their informants' *paroles* all too concretely, and set out looking for *mana* lurking in the bush like a *manitou*—something with beady scales and clothly skin, perhaps. And Mauss thought he'd found it. "If we analyse magical ritual," he wrote, "in order to reveal the practical applications of these different notions [the elements of magic], we shall always find that there is something left over, a residue, which the magician himself is also aware of. . . . And we have reason to believe that it will be here that we shall find the real basis of these beliefs."⁴⁷ That real basis, according to Mauss, is *mana*, "an impersonal force." "While there is an infinity of *tindalos*, we have come to believe that the different *manas* are but one and the same power, not fixed in any way but simply shared out among beings, men or spirits, objects, events, etc.;" "the spirit which contains all efficacy and all life. It cannot be experienced, since it truly absorbs all experience;" "*mana* is both supernatural and natural, since it is spread throughout the tangible world where it is both heterogeneous and ever immanent."⁴⁸ Magic, then, is the body of arts for accessing and directing—constraining and bounding—*mana*; like Jedis do The Force .

In Lévi-Strauss's view the notion of *mana* is an artifact of speakers sustaining their system of signification. This insight was evoked by his reading of Roman Jakobson and János Lotz's paper of 1949 (and no doubt through discussions with Jakobson, whom he had befriended in New York during the war). In that article the authors state that "Modern orthoepic French distinguishes 36 phonemes" and they list them in IPA notation; the last in the list is [ə]; i.e.:

"A ZERO-PHONEME . . . opposed to all other French phonemes by the absence of any distinctive features and of any constant sound characteristic. On the other hand, the zero-phoneme ə is opposed to the absence of any phoneme. In the initial prevocalic position this phoneme is known under the name 'h aspiré'; although under emphasis it can be performed as an aspiration, usually it is a lack of sound, but acts in the sequence as the French consonants do. The vocalic variant of the zero-phoneme appears in the other positions, is then called 'e

⁴⁶ Marcel Mauss (avec Henri Hubert), *Esquisse d'une théorie générale de la magie* (1902); republished in 1950 in a collection of Mauss's works entitled *Sociologie et anthropologie* for which Lévi-Strauss wrote the introduction.

⁴⁷ Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic* (tr. of 1950 ed. by Robert Brain 1972; repr. 2001) 120, 131.

⁴⁸ *Id.* 136-137. Cf. "Aztec metaphysics maintains there exists just one thing: the sacred energy-in-motion that is teotl. The cosmos and its inhabitants are not only constituted by but also ultimately identical with the sacred electricity-like force of teotl. Reality is defined by process, becoming, change, impermanence, and transformation. As teotl's ongoing 'flower and song,' the cosmos and all its inhabitants are teotl's grand, artistic-shamanic, kaleidoscopic self-presentation, teotl's ongoing work of performance art." James Maffie, *Aztec Philosophy: Understanding a World in Motion* (2014) 62. And: "Being [is] the temporal-spatial emerging/unfolding 'way' (or ontological process) wherein and whereby all beings issue forth and come to be." Richard Capobianco, *Heidegger's Being: The Shimmering Unfolding* (2022) 54. And even "an unconstrained, upsurgent appearing—an unbounded bounding forth."

caduc' and alternates between lack of being pronounced and a vowel. (The conditions of this alternation—as style, speed, etc.—will not be discussed here.)”⁴⁹

Lévi-Strauss extends phonemic zerohood to a semantic function, calling it a *floating signifier*, thereby to explain

“the apparently insoluble antinomies attaching to the notion of *mana*, which struck ethnographers so forcibly, and on which Mauss shed light: force and action; quality and state; substantive, adjective and verb all at once; abstract and concrete; omnipresent and localised. And, indeed, *mana* is all those things together; but is that not precisely because it is none of those things, but a simple form, or to be more accurate, a symbol in its pure state, therefore liable to take on any symbolic content whatever? In the system of symbols which make up any cosmology, it would just be a *zero symbolic value*, that is, a sign marking the necessity of a supplementary symbolic content over and above that which the signified already contains, which can be any value at all, provided it is still part of the available reserve, and is not already, as the phonologists say, a term in a set.”⁵⁰

In light of Withy’s account self-concealing being can be taken in this very way—as a zero symbolic value in the ontology-system: opposed to – *other than* – all things in its lack of thinghood; and yet opposed to – *rather than* – the absence of all things, to nothing. As for ‘the thing itself,’ its *being* other than:—*glotta kruptesthai philei*. And what is hidden – for the sake of the system, for *la langue* – is Heidegger’s first, best, inverse insight: that Dasein is “the null basis of its own nullity,” *der nichtige Grund seiner Nichtigkeit*.⁵¹ The generator of language, the sense-making speaker, is a floating signifier; an absence of any particular meaning (so able to take on any, to be so variously ‘called’) opposed to the absence of all meaning.

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⁴⁹ R. Jakobson and J. Lotz, “Notes on the French Phonemic Pattern,” 5 *Word* 151, 155 (1949): <https://doi.org/10.1080/00437956.1949.11659496>. After quoting from this article Lévi-Strauss appends the sentence quoted in my footnote 2 above, beginning *On pourrait dire pareillement*. Baker omits this sentence from her translation.

⁵⁰ *mais pouvant être une valeur quelconque à condition qu’elle fasse encore partie de la réserve disponible, et ne soit pas déjà, comme disent les phonologues, un terme de groupe*. *Introduction* 63-64.

⁵¹ SZ 306.