

TITLE: Heidegger on Being Uncanny
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Abstract

Human beings make sense of themselves and their world. This openness (*Dasein*) to the intelligibility of things (being) puzzles Heidegger. Why is there such an openness, and what does it take to be thus open? Heidegger's project is to answer these questions. But his discussions of uncanniness are not normally understood as playing any significant role in this project. Heidegger's concept of uncanniness (*Unheimlichkeit*, unhomeliness) is either overlooked, glossed over or conflated with Freud's uncanny feeling. It is usually assumed to be an affective phenomenon. On such a reading, we are uncanny insofar as we *feel* uncanny, and we feel uncanny when the sense that we make of the world begins to teeter.

By reading Heidegger's three principal discussions of uncanniness as contributing to his ontological project, I show that what Heidegger means by 'uncanniness' is not a contingent affective consequence of how we make things intelligible. Although it is structurally similar to Freud's uncanny feeling, Heidegger's uncanniness is not an affective phenomenon at all. In brief, uncanniness is the mysterious self-grounding of our openness in its own finitude. This is Heidegger's version of the origin of consciousness, and the claim is that we are conscious because our self-consciousness does not extend to consciousness of our origin. Because uncanniness belongs to the nature of our consciousness, openness or sense-making, uncanniness is not a matter of *feeling* uncanny but of *being* uncanny.

Since this account of uncanniness is not explicit in Heidegger's texts, the core of my dissertation is a novel interpretation of Heidegger's primary discussions of uncanniness. Two of these are analyses of Sophocles' 'Ode to Man', and one is an account of the mood of anxiety. On the basis of my readings of these texts, I argue first that to be uncanny is for

our openness to intelligibility to be limited. Specifically, uncanny openness is *reflexively* finite, with respect to the intelligibility of its own ground or condition of possibility. This means that our ability to make sense of the conditions of sense-making runs out. I argue further that this uncanniness is the condition of possibility of openness. Openness must be limited in this way because it first becomes possible when it encounters its own finitude – when it tries to make sense of its ground and finds that it cannot. This inability to grasp its own ground is thus not a failure of openness, but its ground – the origin of consciousness. Crudely put, the claim is that it is because we are not entirely intelligible to ourselves that we are driven to *make* our lives, and the entities through which we lead them, intelligible.

This is a perplexing picture: uncanniness is *both* the ground of our openness *and* the absence of any intelligible ground of our openness. Exploring how an absence or finitude could be a ground, I show that the finitude at the ground of openness is not to be conceived as a lack, but as a condition of openness as a whole. Thus the 'absence' in which openness is grounded is a mode of openness itself. As grounded in this absence, openness grounds itself or makes itself possible. Further, how this uncanny self-grounding works is precisely that which openness cannot make intelligible about itself. Thus openness, or Dasein, is uncanny because it cannot make sense of its own uncanniness. So too, *we* cannot make this intelligible. But by grasping the uncanny self-grounding *as* something that we cannot make sense of, we encounter our own uncanniness – our reflexive finitude with respect to our ground. Thus we understand uncanniness only if we recognise that it cannot be fully understood.

My argument shows that while 'uncanniness' may be a minor vocabulary in Heidegger's corpus, it is not a minor theme in his thought. It names Heidegger's enduring topic of thought, which he addresses in multiple vocabularies throughout his career (notably, that of '*Ereignis*', 'the appropriating event'). This raises the question of why Heidegger would use the vocabulary of uncanniness, and how what he calls 'uncanniness' is connected to the uncanny feeling. I conclude by arguing that it is because we are essentially uncanny (in Heidegger's sense) that we can feel uncanny, and that uncanniness shares this feeling's (Freudian) structure of a reciprocal interplay between revelation (openness to intelligibility) and hiddenness (finitude). As finitely open to its own intelligibility, human sense-making *is* uncanny.