

**“Making sense of the world:
A different take on spirituality & philosophy”
Lawrence Berger and Serge Prengel
on Zoom June 23, 2022**

Transcription by Katarina Halm revisions by Lawrence Berger

Audio recording Lawrence Berger and Serge Prengel

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Lawrence Berger and Serge Prengel discuss how we make sense of the world and our place in it, i.e. what is usually called philosophy or spirituality.

We approach this from somewhat different perspectives:

- One emphasizes a connection with a sense of something greater than ourselves in which we can find meaning and purpose (“there’s nothing more important than why we’re here”).
- The other emphasizes the moment-by-moment process of finding meaning and purpose as we live (“I get in touch with my sense of meaning and purpose as I face life moment by moment.

Lawrence Berger, PhD, is a long-time practitioner of mindfulness and has taught philosophy at several universities. He is working on a book entitled *The Politics Of Attention & The Promise Of Mindfulness*.

Serge Prengel, LMHC, is a graduate of France's Sorbonne University and HEC Business School. He is certified in *Focusing*, in *Core Energetics* and in *Somatic Experiencing*. His work also draws from *Systems-Centered theory*. He is a co-founder of the *Integrative Focusing Therapy* training program. You can find Serge here <https://proactivechange.com/>

Serge Prengel is a therapist and explorer of creative approaches to mindfulness. He is the editor of Active Pause and is developing a course on Polyvagal-informed mindfulness.

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LAWRENCE BERGER & SERGE PRENGEL**MAKING SENSE OF THE WORLD: A different take on spirituality & philosophy”****June 23, 2022****SERGE PRENGEL**

Welcome to our discussion. Larry and I are going to each talk a little bit and then start the discussion and at some point we are going to invite you to share your questions or comments to enrich the discussion.

Larry and I have talked quite a bit about this topic and we have both a lot of things in common, which makes a discussion possible, and differences, which make a discussion interesting.

This is not a debate in the sense of trying to win an argument. It is a way, first, to continue the kind of discussion that he and I have been enjoying. And to share that with other people in the hope that hearing some arguments, hearing the way we each think, and trying to delineate some positions - some similarities and a lot of differences - will actually stimulate you in articulating how you feel about this topic.

So without further ado I am going to give the mic to Larry.

LARRY

Thanks a lot, Serge. I really appreciate being here. I am grateful to you for putting together this session on this very rich topic.

We are supposed to be representing different perspectives, but I think Serge would agree these positions are very close.

Serge seeks meaning by living in the moment and I think meaning is ultimately how we fit in the grand scheme of things. These things are not incompatible. In fact I would argue that staying in the moment, or mindfulness, is how we connect with something higher. So they are very much related.

Another way to think about the two perspectives is in the relation between eastern and western philosophy. I assume most of you are well acquainted with eastern, but perhaps not so much with western philosophy. My focus is on how that can help us understand why mindfulness can open us to the divine, although the truth of this is hardly apparent in today's chaotic world. Well, we here know the truth, and because we experience it I believe it is our duty to our fellows, particularly in these perilous times, to try to educate them. That is what western philosophy offers - a way to provide reasons for why things are the way they are. We need spiritual leadership and I think philosophy can help.

The approach I find most promising is that offered by phenomenology, with thinkers such as Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger.

Husserl is famous for what he calls the epoché, or the bracketing of beliefs about the ultimate nature of things, so we can focus on what actually takes place from moment to moment. That sounds a lot like Serge's perspective.

Husserl's famous student, Heidegger, is in my view the ultimate spiritual philosopher, even though lots of people see him as an atheist and a Nazi. Mindfulness is very important for Heidegger and he attracted a lot of eastern philosophers because his approach could be more convincing to those who prefer to think for themselves rather than relying on authorities.

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One thing Heidegger argues is that we belong here, that we are not accidentally placed in the cosmos, although Serge may differ a bit on this issue.

One way to argue this is that the universe produces and sustains us, so we are already part of something greater than ourselves. My approach is to define mindfulness as acute and sustained attentiveness and define attention as our presence in the world. Our presence.

As such, attention transcends any dichotomy between self and world because we are in the world. Ecstatic is the term that Heidegger uses. We transcend any dichotomy, mental or physical, self or world.

The point is that we are not stuck in our minds. There is no wall between us. There is no barrier between us and the world, or rather the very core of our being is spiritual. It moves freely from our lived bodies to the outer. I would argue that the core of our being, that presence, is spiritual. It is an invisible presence in the world.

So we are not reduced to something physical. We are more like beings of light. Who, then, is to say we do not belong here, because what would the cosmos be without light? In fact my own view is that attention is the divine spark.

That position resonates with Meister Eckhart and Judaic thought, among many others.

Now attention is very important in our daily lives and in many academic disciplines, so my approach is to argue that it is how we experience anything at all. Then, when we gather our attention, which is the essence of mindfulness, a real space opens. This is not just an experience in our minds. No, we are in the world and we are real, so when we hold open a space - we hold and clear a space - that is a real event. That is what Heidegger calls a 'Being Event'.

And what that enables... the political implications are large. People talk about public space in political philosophy. So if we hold open real space, that is where the core of community, our core, joins. In that space we can bond together and therefore pursue visions of the common good.

That in my view is why so many groups are forming where people engage in mindfulness to deal with trauma, community issues, or just to connect on a deeper level with others. I think that is our best hope to prepare for a difficult future. We are stronger when we bond together and work for the common good.

Thank you. Now I will turn it back to Serge.

SERGE

Thanks Larry. So the different perspective, almost literally, is for me the difference between looking from the top down versus from the bottom up.

I am a therapist and like many therapists these days have been very influenced by trauma-informed perspectives which themselves have had a lot to do with all the research in neuroscience and evolutionary psychology.

The phrase 'top down vs bottom up' is one we use a lot in my milieu, to make a difference between what traditional psychology was at best -- a sense of human exceptionalism, a sense of cognition driving what it is like to be a human being.

In contrast, the 'top down' version is how there is continuity between other animal forms and us and how essentially a lot of how we function has to do with simple, implicit, unconscious processes. Essentially that is the 'top down' part.

It is not a question of saying it is all top down as opposed to all bottom up, but simply recognizing the importance of the bottom up vs the top down.

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So from that place, as a therapist, you really do not just use ideas in abstraction. You practice them because when you see and work with clients the perspective you have is something used moment by moment to make sense of what is happening.

So the perspective I am suggesting in terms of philosophy and spirituality is more of a bottom up perspective, which is that a lot of the way we make sense is not in an intellectual top down way, by adjudicating ideas and trying to make sense of them in some intellectual way. Essentially a lot of the making sense is something that happens implicitly and unconsciously in our bodies.

Now I include the brain in the body. I am not making a distinction between body and mind. I mean the whole organism, just using 'body' as opposed to talking simply about the brain or the mind or psyche trying alone to make sense of the world.

But a lot of what happens essentially is that our organism, like all organisms, interacts with the world. Everything is interaction, and most of that interaction happens at an unconscious implicit level. A great example of that is, say you take a sunflower. The sunflower orients with the sun. It does not need a mind or willpower to do that. A lot of our functioning has these kinds of bottom up processes.

Now our brain gives us an ability to actually go further than that and to complement the information that we get through these processes. A lot of what we do with the brain is also to have access to these processes. The brain essentially monitors the information that we get through our senses and derives from that a sense of being in the world.

I am not going to talk much more because we are going to discuss, to have an exchange of ideas between Larry and me, but I wanted to first articulate that the big difference is one of perspective. When I think about philosophy or spirituality I think of it essentially as pretty much derived from our being in the world and a lot of it is for us to become aware of what is happening implicitly.

Once we do that does not mean we take it for granted. If we simply took our senses for granted we would think the world is flat. So we do give attention to other sources of knowledge to balance that. But I am saying that a rich foundation for understanding our place in the world, whether from a philosophical or spiritual point of view, is derived from paying attention to what is happening implicitly in our body through these bottom up processes.

Back to you, Larry.

LARRY

Whoa. I am going to have to reconsider here. That was quite a profound statement, Serge. Funny, we have not touched on this issue at all yet. I think it is quite a coincidence that you raise the top down versus bottom up notion because I am writing a book on all this and that is exactly what I am working on now.

I am engaged in the debate between Dan Zahavi, who is one of the most prominent thinkers in phenomenology, and Martin Heidegger. Zahavi is one of the top Husserl interpreters in the world, so it really is still the debate I mentioned earlier, but I am going to argue that Zahavi puts forward a bottom up perspective which I think fails in philosophy and in physics.

The idea in physics is to find those elementary particles and build up to the whole. That does not work because when they go to the quantum level they have no idea what is going on. The physicists do not know what the physical is, because when they dig deep to find the fundamental particles all they find are things that violate the Newtonian laws. They find that everything is entangled, everything is related and you talk about how we interact with the environment. So it fails in physics, and mathematics cannot be complete, by Gödel's Theorem.

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I think Heidegger offers a relational holism that incorporates everything you are talking about. It incorporates relationality. You talk about the body and brain interacting with the world. That all fits, but we need more. I think you are getting to that place in saying we need these perspectives, but in order to understand our world I do not think we can build up from these structures to get to some vision of the top. That is really what I think stands in the way of more openness to spirituality. We think everything can be explained by components. Attention is described as a brain mechanism. This is the way it is understood in science and it pervades the whole way science is understood, as a simple brain mechanism and not unified phenomenon.

In fact though, the perspective that we live, from the phenomenological, the whole picture perspective, the top down if you will, is that attention is what unifies us. We are scattered. We live our lives scattered and dispersed in worldly activity, but if we were to gather ourselves and become whole... I think we aspire to become whole and attention can do that.

So we get the exact opposite picture regarding what attention is when we understand that we can gather ourselves. That is what we want to do in the world.

Now I also love everything you say about implicit and of course we are both fellow Gendlin admirers. Gendlin is all about coming to a whole understanding of our situation. That is what the 'felt sense' is, that we understand our situation and move towards articulating it.

So we have barely scratched the surface here because I just want to say I agree with everything you said. That just shows there is much fertile area here for further discussion.

SERGE

Yes. So you are pointing out that we run into a wall if we try to reduce everything to understandable material components. If we try to make sense of the world the same way we take an engine apart and set aside all the pieces and from there derive an understanding of how cars work. I am not talking about that, about separating little units to find an understanding.

You mention the 'felt sense' and Gendlin. Gendlin's focusing found the notion of the 'felt sense' to be giving us human beings a perception of the situation as a whole. I think neuroscience has essentially confirmed that insight, that through the 'bottom up' processes our body and brain, our organism, perceives the world and starts articulating an implicit, unconscious response to it. As we are in touch with the 'felt sense' of that, we are implicitly connected to the response of the body to the situation outside. That is not a unit by unit description of how we respond to it. That is actually a great simplification.

One of the things we are becoming more familiar with, with the brain and mind, is the mind essentially is oriented to making decisions. The brain did not evolve to be a study group trying to write some kind of white paper on the meaning of things. It is action oriented. People talk about the predictability of the brain. The function of the mind is to identify the most likely successful response to any given situation. Fortunately most of the time it works. But it works best in situations that are more similar to those in which we evolved our current capacity. When we are faced with situations that are of a different order, more complex, like situations in civilized life, these predictions are often not necessarily accurate because they correspond to a different environment.

I digress a little bit here, but the point I am trying to make is that our functioning through the mind is essentially trying to have a predictive ability. That is simplifying things. You do not want fifteen options, or three or two. You just want one, like 'move forward' or 'go away'.

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Obviously we have more options when a situation is safer, but the more intense and dangerous a situation is the more there is a narrowing of choices, the more it is One thing. So essentially there is a profoundly unifying quality to what we get from these bottom up processes. That is a situation which is overly simplified in order to permit action right in the moment.

I am not talking about analyzing and cutting down in pieces. I am talking about connecting to that incredibly super-simplified reaction that we get from the bottom up processes, being in touch with it and then being able through mindful thinking to complement it.

But the base of our foundation of how we orient ourselves in the world is that biological way of responding autonomically.

LARRY

Well, what you describe is exactly in my parlance how we attend to the world. There are various possibilities that we have and depending on how emotionally charged they are that definitely gets us to focus on whatever is needed. So I could not agree with you more about that whole intricate bodywork that exists and guides us in making our path in the world. We are certainly 100% clear here.

But again, your perspective is more therapeutic while I am looking for how to explain this to others. Getting back to the question of meaning, where do we find the meaning in our lives? We are all on a quest and we are in difficult times, so how do we explain to people what the promise is of all this?

That is what I think the role of philosophy is. We have this intricate network, the body environment as Gendlin calls it. It has tremendous intelligence, but we are out of touch with it. We are obviously not living lives very intelligently. So we have this vast intelligence that you are talking about that we need to get in touch with, yes. But how do we explain to others the need for this?

Heidegger says there are no component parts which build up to the cosmos as a whole. That fails. So where is the answer? How do we explain what this intricacy is in which we live, because it is not physics. We have to start with where we are in the cosmos, which is what Heidegger does. He gives us a global understanding which I think complements your approach. They are both very important, and it is the relation between the two which capture that. Relationality is rock bottom, not component parts. We are part of a whole and all the entities within that whole are related to one another.

Heidegger has an essay called Identity and Difference in that we have this gathering that can unite us all, but we are all individual, separate but related. I think that is the way to understand the global situation better, and that our duty is to gather ourselves by way of mindfulness in order to bond us to one another and to serve something higher, to enable the divine to be made manifest in the world by way of our presence in it.

SERGE

Yes. Obviously there is a lot of overlap in what we talk about. You are talking about meaning and being and also about attention. I would like to suggest, at least from my perspective, that I see notions like 'being' and 'attention' as two extremes, two sides of a continuum. I am not trying to say some kind of logical way they belong at extreme, but I am hearing them as two sides on a continuum.

When you talk about 'being' or 'meaning' I think of it as not quite metaphysical but very large questions that open the door to traditional philosophical or spiritual inquiries. Who are we? Where are we going? What is the meaning of life?

On the other hand, the other end of this spectrum that I am just creating for the purpose of this moment, attention is really focused in the moment. It does not exist outside of the moment. So in a way, the reason I am

creating this continuum, is to say when I am interested in questions of being or meaning I notice that what happens in myself is a shift into a more intellectual mode.

Again, there is nothing wrong with that. I love intellectual discussions. I am not making a point about intellectual being bad. But that is a different mode. I go into talking about ideas. When I shift more towards the pole of attention it is not something that exists in abstraction. It is I am paying attention to something. It is very concrete, very much in the moment. So when I am in the moment paying attention to something I have a different experience of myself.

When I am in the more intellectual mode of paying attention to what is being or what is meaning, I am more up here. And when I am paying attention I am more grounded, my body is slowing down, there is more breath and bandwidth of noticing little nuances of moment by moment experience. I am more focused on experience as opposed to thoughts.

Of course there is an interweaving. That is what makes us human. That is what makes this kind of thinking very wonderful and productive. But I am just highlighting what I see as a difference between those. I am curious to see what your perspective on that would be.

LARRY

I totally understand what you are saying that thinking in the abstract about being would lead to just intellectual, being brought up into the head and not being in the body. But Heidegger is well aware of this. He has a quote from Parmenides that he actually thought about over the course of his career, and in the end he has a book called *What Is Thinking*, where he says thinking is attention. The quote from Parmenides is that basically attention/thinking and being are the same. He equates thinking with attention. So they are the same.

His notion of being is overcoming the entire metaphysical tradition. One of the great things he does is present a whole history of metaphysics, which can indeed lead you down this path of just being intellectual and not really getting to the thing itself. A key way to think about this is, how do we relate them, being immersed in the intricacy and a holistic perspective?

Well, Heidegger's *Being in Time* put him on the world map in 1927. But he had another much more, I would say, difficult work in 1936 called *Contributions to Philosophy*. On the first page he says, "I want to speak from my being, not about it." In other words, we are not here to intellectualize. We want to be in that body, speak from the depths of our being. That is how we overcome metaphysics, by speaking from the things themselves instead of about them.

So you are equating the quest of being rightly with the metaphysical tradition. It has been an idea bounced around forever. But Heidegger comes from a spiritual perspective and a pragmatic, get it done, living in the world kind of approach. He is our friend in spirit, is what I am trying to tell you here.

But the key idea is speaking from. Then we are not being metaphysical. We are speaking from the body. We stay in the body and we speak from the sense and try to further articulate the intricacy of our lives and how we feel our situations.

Gendlin was a Heidegger scholar and he got his best reception as a philosopher from Heidegger scholars. So they are very closely allied.

SERGE

Okay, so the convergence is that sense of speaking from experience as opposed to about experience. Of course experience is embodied. It is not an abstraction. So speaking from experience also means speaking from being in touch with the body, with embodied thinking. From that place there is less, if any, difference between

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thinking and paying attention. In fact the whole notion of contemplative thinking is really a sense of allowing, that thinking is not necessarily cutting down into pieces but it can be really the sense of staying with contemplating and letting the awareness come from our implicit processes instead of just from abstract constructions.

So the convergence is we are talking about philosophy or spirituality in a sense of making sense of the world. We are articulating the notion of being in the world, of being with our felt sense of being in the world, of allowing the sense to form and of letting it inform us.

From that there is an emergence of making sense and an emergence of meaning as a felt sense. Not meaning as an intellectual construct but an emergence of meaning as something that comes from being with the world, being with ourselves and allowing that sense to emerge.

LARRY

Well said.

REFERENCES / NOTES

1/ [Making Sense improved AUDIO](#) “Making sense of the world: A different take on spirituality & philosophy” on Zoom June 23, 2022. Lawrence Berger and Serge Prenzel

2/

What is called thinking? is a book by the philosopher Martin Heidegger, the published version of a lecture course he gave during the winter and summer semesters of 1951 and 1952 at the University of Freiburg. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/What_Is_Called_Thinking%3F // Series of video excerpts at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-I6ptJflysc>

3/ Notes from Gisela Uhl

one would need a thousand, or many thousand years, to do justice to all relevant philosophers, ideas, literary expressions and poetry, and music (last not least !). I do have some notes on What is Called Thinking (“Was heißt Denken” — what the meaning of “Denken” really is. . .); but they are in German. To quote the text, I would need the English version, and it would take quite a bit of work! I am not able to do this!

But I have a few ideas in my notes I find relevant and easy to say.

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- Thinking is not reasoning that is instrumentalised for a purpose
- Thinking is to think what is relevant

Heidegger:

“Human beings can think once they are given the possibility to do that. But this possibility does not guarantee that we are able to do it. For we are only able to do what we like.....

Oh!?! Really..! It is all about our relationship with that what is being thought about....we are only truly capable of doing what we like (what corresponds to our inner being, to what we can relate well).....

When something is said, we need to listen to the tone of voice in which it is said, if we don't, we will misunderstand it.....

Heidegger:

what is alarming in our disturbing time is that we are not yet thinking. (Gisela's translation).

So far, some notes.....enough to think about !

— Gisela Uhl in conversation June 23, 2022

4/ Heidegger

Here is a good introduction to Heidegger's thought by Richard Polt: https://smile.amazon.com/Heidegger-Introduction-Richard-Polt/dp/0801485649/ref=sr_1_1?crd=2OBSEKVYC1Q0Y&keywords=polt+introduction+heidegger&qid=1657242595&prefix=polt+introduction+heidegger%2Caps%2C60&sr=8-1

Here are references to the two other texts of Heidegger's that were mentioned:

Being and Time: https://smile.amazon.com/Being-Time-Martin-Heidegger/dp/177464066X/ref=sr_1_2?crd=113XAKX7R6PD&keywords=being+and+time+martin+heidegger&qid=1657242467&prefix=being+and+time%2Caps%2C176&sr=8-2

Contributions to Philosophy: https://smile.amazon.com/Contributions-Philosophy-Studies-Continental-Thought/dp/0253001137/ref=sr_1_1?crd=T0XSMAAGTP9RC&keywords=contributions+to+philosophy+martin+heidegger&qid=1657242543&prefix=contributions+to+p

[hilosophy+martin+heidegger%2Caps%2C47&sr=8-1](https://smile.amazon.com/Contributions-Philosophy-Studies-Continental-Thought/dp/0253001137/ref=sr_1_1?crd=T0XSMAAGTP9RC&keywords=contributions+to+philosophy+martin+heidegger&qid=1657242543&prefix=contributions+to+p)

5/ Related discussions **July 4, 11. Aug 1, 2022**

Below are links to discussion pages ~ welcoming your thoughts!

* July 4, 2022, Gisela Uhl “The concept of Life — with comments about Aristotle, Gendlin's Process Model, and Human Life as inherently political” <https://thinkinginmovement.ca/gisela-uhl-life-aristotle-gendlin-2022/>

* July 11, 2022, Dave Young Liberation Focusing — Freedom from “unconscious social programming” as depicted by Gendlin <https://thinkinginmovement.ca/dave-young-liberation-focusing-2022/>

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* Aug 1, 2022, Mike McCullough “Self Organizing of Growing and Perceiving” Gendlin-Aristotle with comments in relation to Kauffman and Ellis <https://thinkinginmovement.ca/mike-mccullough-self-organizing-of-growing-and-perceiving-2022/>

And noting as requested for a possible later date into the Autumn
[Call for Change ~ Climate Emergency In relation to Gendlin’s Philosophy](#)

With appreciation and devotion to learning,
Katarina

Katarina Halm, M.A.
Feldenkrais® GCFP * Focusing CFT
Sounder Sleep System™ Assistant Trainer
Movement Intelligence Trainer
1 604 263 9123 (Vancouver BC Canada)
katarinalistens@gmail.com
thinkinginmovement.ca
feldenkraisinclusioninitiative.org
<https://sandyjahmi.com/focusing-mentors/>

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