

The Structure of Meaning of Work: Existential Analysis of Care Through *Being and Time*

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*The question of the meaning of work, inseparable from the meaning of life, remains a persistent concern in human existence. Despite the centrality of work in modern life, many individuals experience their work as lacking meaning. This suggests that the meaning of work cannot be adequately understood as merely concrete achievements or psychological states, but must be approached as a structural horizon within which meaning becomes intelligible. This study begins with the question, “What is the meaning of work?”, and subsequently reformulates it as “What makes the meaning of work possible and necessary?” While empirical research provides valuable insights, it remains limited in addressing this deeper question. Drawing initially on Wilhelm Dilthey’s interpretation of life, the study highlights its limitation at the ontical level, as critically noted by Martin Heidegger. It then turns to *Being and Time* to explicate the ontological conditions of the working individual, understood as Being-in-the-world. Within this framework, care (Sorge) is articulated as the fundamental ontological structure that makes the meaning of work possible. Care is further analyzed through its interconnected modes—concern (Besorgen), solicitude (Fürsorge), and self-care (Selbstsorge)—through which the structure of meaning is disclosed. Finally, the study develops an ontological–ontical return by integrating Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, enabling the interpretation of work and life meaning in concrete situations. It is concluded that an ontological–ontical framework of life interpretation provides the necessary foundation for understanding and interpreting the meaning of work in concrete life experience.*

Keywords: *Meaning of life, care, Being-in-the-world, hermeneutic, experience*

The Inquiry of Meaning of Work

In the existential analytic of Dasein presented in *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger reveals that the human individual is a being for whom its own Being is always at issue. That is, Dasein is a being that is fundamentally concerned with its own existence and its possibilities (Heidegger 1962, p. 67). If the individual is, in each case, concerned about its own existence, then the working individual must also be concerned with its Being as it is enacted in work. Following Heidegger’s fundamental question concerning the meaning of Being, this study begins by raising a parallel and guiding question: *What is the meaning of work?*

Before proceeding with this inquiry, however, it is necessary to step back and ask a more basic question: *Why does the meaning of work matter at all?* For most people, work occupies a substantial portion of life—often more than half of one’s waking hours. Despite this centrality, contemporary evidence suggests a widespread crisis of meaning in the workplace. According to a 2025 global workplace survey

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conducted by Gallup, approximately 58% of the workforce report that they are struggling in their careers; among them, 40% experience frequent stress, while more than 20% report feelings of anger, sadness, and loneliness (Gallup 2025).¹

Regardless of differences in income levels, job types, or career stages, individuals repeatedly express dissatisfaction and raise questions about the meaning and value of their work. When individuals find themselves situated in conditions marked by uncertainty, pressure, and a lack of fulfillment, their questioning does not remain confined to work alone. Rather, it extends to a more fundamental inquiry into the meaning of life itself. This suggests that the meaning of work and the meaning of life are not separable domains but are deeply intertwined and mutually constitutive.

To be sure, over the past century, human living standards and health conditions have improved significantly through industrialization and the development of free-market capitalism. Nevertheless, it is striking that the dominant organizational forms of work under capitalism have often reduced or even eliminated opportunities for non-material satisfaction and the pursuit of a genuinely good life (Schwartz 2015, p. 2). In more extreme cases, as John Burnett observes, “for most, work was taken as given, like life itself, to be endured rather than enjoyed” (Burnett 1974, p. 15).

The issues of work dissatisfaction and the search for work meaning have been widely addressed in fields such as psychology, management, and organizational behavior. Within these empirical disciplines, the meaning of work is typically conceptualized in terms of need fulfillment or subjective psychological states, often derived from achievements associated with discrete tasks or work-related events. Consequently, scholars operationalize work meaning through constructs such as job satisfaction, work engagement, or subjective well-being.

Despite the abundance of empirical findings and practical recommendations aimed at improving work conditions, the persistence of dissatisfaction remains evident. The same Gallup survey indicates that more than 80% of the global workforce is not fully engaged, which strongly correlates with low levels of job satisfaction. If we accept that empirical approaches have not effectively resolved the problem of work meaning, then it is plausible that they have not adequately grasped what the meaning of work fundamentally is. This raises a critical question: *Can philosophy provide a more adequate framework for understanding the meaning of work?*

Since ancient philosophy, the human quest for meaning has been a persistent and recurring endeavor, in which “each generation seems to go through the same process” (Classen 2018). While it is generally acknowledged that meaning is manifested within life, the meaning of life itself has been interpreted differently across various philosophical traditions (Letsch 2019). Importantly, the meaning of life is always situated within the broader context of historical life.

In contrast to psychological and managerial approaches that tend to treat work experience and life experience as separate domains, Wilhelm Dilthey conceives life as the foundational basis of the human sciences, constituted as a meaningful and unified whole (Dilthey 1985, p. 223). More precisely, an individual’s lived experience (*Erlebnis*) gains its meaning within the temporal course of life as a whole (Dilthey 1988, p. 150). This temporal and holistic structure provides the ground for understanding specific experiences, including those related to work.

¹Gallup has conducted this global survey consecutively over 50 years, where the overall work satisfaction presents a downward trend. More detail, see: *State of the Global Workplace: 2025 Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.gallup.com/workplace/349484/state-of-the-global-workplace.aspx>

From this perspective, work experience is not an isolated event but a moment within the broader continuum of life. Individuals acquire work experiences through their engagement with tasks and interactions with others, and these experiences contribute to the constitution of their overall life experience. Dilthey further characterizes life as a dynamic and interconnected nexus—a rich and ongoing interplay among cognitive, emotional, and volitional processes (Dilthey 2002, pp. 87-88). In this sense, every individual is a living source of value, a creative force that contributes to history and imbues life with meaning (Dilthey 2002, p. 275).

Accordingly, Dilthey's conception of life and his hermeneutics of life provide an important philosophical pathway for understanding both the meaning of life and the meaning of work. However, as will be shown, this approach remains limited in addressing the deeper ontological conditions that make such meaning possible.

In contrast to Dilthey, Martin Heidegger is not primarily concerned with defining the meaning of life. Instead, he asks a more fundamental question: *What makes life experience possible at all?* While Heidegger agrees that life is the starting point for understanding meaning, he shifts the focus toward the question of *how* life is lived and *who* lives it (Farin 2012).

Heidegger argues that Dilthey's conception of life and lived experience remains at the ontical level, treating life as something present-at-hand rather than interrogating its ontological structure (Heidegger 1962, p. 150). As a result, Dilthey's approach, while insightful, is limited in its capacity to address the question of the Being of life itself (Heidegger, 1962, p. 72). Moreover, Heidegger contends that Dilthey's emphasis on subjective lived experience cannot overcome the presuppositions that condition our intelligibility of experience in the first place (Heidegger 1962, p. 195).

Departing from Dilthey's hermeneutics of life, Heidegger turns to the existential analytic of Dasein in order to uncover the ontological conditions of human existence. Accordingly, the guiding question of this study is reformulated: *What makes the meaning of work possible and necessary?* This study seeks to address this question by explicating the ontological conditions of the working individual grounded in *Being and Time*. Following Heidegger's emphasis on practical involvement, the concept of care (*Sorge*) is articulated as the fundamental ontological structure that makes the meaning of work both possible and necessary, while also allowing it to be experienced concretely at the ontical level.

Ontological Conditions of Working Individual

The question, "*What makes the meaning of work possible?*", entails an inquiry into both the *what* (work itself) and the *who* (the being who comprehends meaning). In pursuing this inquiry within *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger adopts a phenomenological approach that interprets the Being of Dasein as the meaningful presence of entities to human existence (Sheehan 2014). In this sense, the focus of the inquiry is not work as an abstract object, but the working individual as the being who is always already engaged in work.

Given that factual life is inherently dispersed, fragmented, and highly variable across individuals (Heidegger, 1984, p. 137), Heidegger develops an analytic that addresses how Dasein negotiates the tension between unity and disunity in its existence (Aggleton 2016). At the same time, his project of fundamental ontology seeks to dismantle entrenched metaphysical assumptions—such as the subject-object

dichotomy and the primacy of theoretical knowledge over practical engagement—that block our understanding of human existence. In this regard, Hubert Dreyfus identifies five assumptions Heidegger aims to overcome: explicitness, mental representation, theoretical holism, detachment and objectivity, and methodological individualism (Dreyfus 1991, pp. 3-9).²

Through the existential analytic of Dasein, Heidegger explicates the fundamental structures of human existence, the most basic of which is *Being-in-the-world*. From this perspective, the meaning of work does not originate from an external object (as if the individual were a detached subject), nor from internal mental states (as if meaning were purely subjective). Rather, it arises from the working individual's situated and practical engagement within the world.

As *Being-in-the-world*, Dasein's essential structures are grounded in *disclosedness*, which is articulated through existentialia such as *state-of-mind* (*Befindlichkeit*) and *understanding* (*Verstehen*) (Heidegger 1962, p.203). The hyphenated expression "Being-in-the-world" signifies a unified phenomenon—a structural whole that cannot be reduced to separate components (Heidegger 1962, p. 78). Nevertheless, for analytic purposes, Heidegger allows us to examine its structure from three interconnected perspectives:

1. the *world* (here, the work world),
2. the *who* (the Being of the working individual who cares about its own Being), and
3. *Being-in* (the relational constitution of Dasein, including its being-with others).

We elaborate these structural dimensions in turn.

At the ontical level, the work world may be described as comprising jobs, tasks, tools, materials, organizational systems, and workers—namely, a totality of concrete entities. However, if Being-in-the-world is understood as the meaningful presence of entities to human existence, then the work world must be grasped ontologically as a structured whole with an a priori character that makes such disclosure possible (Heidegger 2000, p. 93). In this sense, things in the work world do not primarily appear as detached, present-at-hand objects. Rather, they are encountered within a *referential totality* of significance (Heidegger 2000, p. 99). To clarify this, we must examine Dasein's everyday dealings or engagements with things.

In factual work life, our engagements with things are dispersed across various modes of concern (Heidegger 2000, p. 95). When we adopt a theoretical attitude—stepping back to observe or analyze—we implicitly assume a separation between subject and object. Heidegger rejects this as a derivative mode of engagement. Instead, Dasein primarily relates to entities through *practical involvement*, encountering them as *ready-to-hand* (*Zuhandenheit*) within circumspective concern (Heidegger 2000, p. 99).

Such practical engagement presupposes a prior familiarity with the world, grounded in a referential totality of involvement articulated through the structures of the "in-order-to" and the "towards-which" (Heidegger 2000, p. 109). That is,

²We do not intend to offer Heidegger's detailed critiques on traditional assumptions pertaining to study of human in *Being and Time*. While Dreyfus provides a concise summary of those traditions as well as Heidegger's rejections referring to *Being-in-the-world: A commentary on Heidegger's being in time* (1991), 3-9.

entities are encountered in terms of their *serviceability* within a system of references. In this way, the work world can be understood as an all-encompassing referential system in which the working individual is always already situated (Gorner 2007, p. 44). Heidegger writes that the “wherein” of understanding—the context within which entities are encountered—is precisely the phenomenon of the world, and its structure constitutes the *worldhood* of the world (Heidegger 2000, p. 114). Accordingly, every practical activity presupposes an implicit understanding of a pre-given totality of involvement.

Furthermore, in every act of engagement, Dasein assigns itself from a “for-the-sake-of-which” toward a “with-which” of involvement, thereby forming a network of references (Heidegger 2000, p. 115). These interconnected assignments constitute what Heidegger calls *significance* (*Bedeutsamkeit*), which is the ontological condition for meaning (Heidegger 2000, p. 120). Thus, the working individual, through its *familiarity* with this referential totality, discloses things as meaningful within the context of its practical involvement through understanding and interpretation (Heidegger 2000, p. 121).

To explicate the ontological conditions in terms of the *who*, we must examine the Being of Dasein, its essential characteristics, and its possibilities. For Heidegger, the Being of Dasein is neither reducible to epistemological knowledge nor definable as a fixed essence. Rather, it is a mode of Being that is fundamentally concerned with its own Being—that is, it is characterized by *care*.

In contrast to philosophical traditions that prioritize scientific knowledge structured around subject–object relations, Heidegger argues that such approaches address only particular “regions” of beings while neglecting the broader context in which understanding occurs (Inwood 1997, pp. 13,20). As he emphasizes, Being is not a genus or category of entities but pertains to every entity while transcending them (Heidegger 2000, p. 62). Accordingly, uncovering the Being of the working individual becomes essential for understanding the ontical meaning of work.

When Heidegger claims that Dasein is a being for whom its Being is at issue, he refers to the individual in its *mineness* (*Jemeinigkeit*) (Heidegger 2000, p. 68). This indicates that existence is always individually owned and cannot be generalized as a collective abstraction. Moreover, Dasein is characterized by an understanding of Being, which is intrinsic to its disclosedness (Heidegger 2000, p. 32).

If the essence of Dasein lies in its existence, then Dasein is always its own possibility. It can exist authentically or inauthentically, depending on whether it takes ownership of its possibilities (Heidegger 2000, p. 68). Applied to the working individual, this means that one’s engagement with work is not merely determined by external conditions but is also shaped by one’s understanding and appropriation of one’s possibilities. In this sense, the working individual possesses a fundamental freedom to choose and interpret its engagements within the work world.

Returning to the structure of referential totality, when an individual engages in practical activities or social interactions, each involvement is oriented toward a “towards-which,” grounded in a “for-the-sake-of-which.” While particular involvements may refer to further involvements, the ultimate “for-the-sake-of-which” points back to Dasein’s own possibilities (Heidegger 2000, pp. 116–117). Thus, the structure of meaning in the work world is ultimately grounded in the Being of the working individual itself.

The ontological conditions articulated through the structure of *Being-in* reveal both Dasein’s thrownness into the world and its essential relation to others. Heidegger characterizes Being-in as a fundamental state of Dasein’s Being. It does not denote

a spatial containment but rather signifies existential modes such as “residing alongside,” “being familiar with,” and “encountering other beings” within the world (Heidegger 2000, p. 80). These expressions indicate that Being-in is not a relation between two separate entities but a structural feature of Dasein’s existence, describing how Dasein is always already involved in a meaningful world.

Such diverse meanings of Being-in can only be understood in terms of the structural relationship between Dasein and the world in which it is situated. Dasein finds itself thrown into this world without prior choice or consent; it is always already delivered over to a set of conditions not of its own making. Heidegger refers to this condition as *thrownness* (*Geworfenheit*), which constitutes the *facticity* of Dasein (Heidegger 2000, p. 174). Thrownness implies that Dasein does not first exist and then enter the world; rather, it always already exists in a world. Applied to work, the facticity indicates the work world has already existed before the working individual enters it. Through its state-of-mind, Dasein becomes attuned to this condition and is brought face to face with its facticity—its situatedness in a world, its Being-there, and its coexistence with others.

In the context of the working individual, encounters with entities in the work world must be understood through the structure of worldhood. That is, the relationship between the individual and things in the work world is not external or detached but is grounded in the meaningful totality of involvements that constitute the world (Heidegger 2000, p. 94). At the same time, the relationship between the working individual and others introduces a further dimension of Being-in, namely

Being-with (*Mitsein*), which requires more detailed clarification. Dasein always exists in relation to others in its everydayness. Because Dasein is essentially Being-in-the-world, others are encountered not as isolated objects but within the context of practical dealings. The Other, understood as *Dasein-with* (*Mitdasein*), shares the same ontological structure as Dasein itself; it is not a corporeal object but a being that also exists in the mode of Being-in-the-world. Consequently, the world is always already a shared world. The very concept of Dasein implies Being-with, and thus the world is fundamentally a *with-world* (*Mitwelt*). In this sense, Being-in is always already Being-with others (Heidegger 2000, p. 155). Importantly, Being-with does not depend on the physical presence of others. Even when no concrete other is present, Dasein remains in the mode of Being-with, since *Being-alone* is itself a deficient mode of Being-with (Heidegger 2000, p. 156). This indicates that sociality is not an optional or secondary feature of human existence but an essential ontological condition.

Dasein’s everydayness refers to the way in which it exists for the most part and most of the time. Within this everyday mode of Being, the question arises: who is the subject of Dasein’s existence? Heidegger’s answer is striking. The “who” of everyday Dasein is not a particular individual, not oneself as a distinct subject, nor a collection of individuals. Rather, it is the anonymous and neutral “they” (*das Man*) (Heidegger 2000, p. 164). The “they” does not refer to specific others but to the impersonal social norms and conventions that shape everyday life. In this sense, anyone can stand in for the “they.”

The “they” operates as a pervasive and often unnoticed influence that is internalized within personal existence. It represents the average, socially shared understanding that governs behavior, expectations, and interpretations. Although it constitutes the everyday mode of Dasein’s Being, it does not represent Dasein’s authentic self. Instead, it corresponds to an inauthentic (*uneigentlich*) mode of existence, in which

Dasein is absorbed into the norms and practices of the social world (Heidegger 2000, p. 164).

More specifically, the “they” exerts an inconspicuous form of domination, shaping Dasein’s possibilities in subtle and often unrecognized ways. Under its influence, Dasein may relinquish its ownmost possibilities and conform to socially prescribed modes of being. As a result, Being-with-one-another in everydayness can lead to a leveling effect, in which individual distinctiveness is diminished and one’s own Dasein is dissolved into the anonymous Being of “the Others” (Heidegger 2000, p. 164). In this condition, the working individual may lose sight of its own authentic possibilities and instead operate within the unexamined norms of the work world.

Care as the Structure of Work Meaning

If we agree that Dasein is the being that is always concerned with the meaning and unity of its own Being, we may then ask: which structure of Dasein’s Being accounts for this condition? In terms of the meaning of Being, we have explicated several structures of Dasein that condition the meaningful presence of things to the human individual. In addition to Being-in-the-world, worldhood, disclosedness, Being-with, and the “they,” temporality is another fundamental structure that renders Dasein possible and intelligible (Heidegger 2000, p. 370). Temporality is formally defined as “the phenomenon which has the unity of a future which makes present in the process of having been” (Heidegger 2000, p. 374). In this sense, temporality signifies the ontological unity of future, past, and present.

With regard to the unity of Being, Heidegger shows that apparent dichotomies—such as the opposition between theory and practice—can be understood as derivative modes grounded in a more primordial unity. For example, Dasein’s primary mode of engagement with entities is not theoretical observation but practical, concernful involvement. Circumspective concern operates in an inconspicuous and familiar manner; however, when equipment breaks down or becomes unavailable, entities are thematized as present-at-hand and become objects of theoretical examination. Thus, grounded in temporality, the theoretical attitude emerges from practical involvement, and the unity of the practical and theoretical is preserved (Heidegger 2000, pp. 406–408). These prior analyses prepare the way for Heidegger to grasp the structural whole of Dasein—namely, care (*Sorge*), which constitutes the primordial Being of Dasein itself (Heidegger 2000, p. 167).

To account for the “meaningful presence of things,” Heidegger argues that Being-in-the-world always expresses itself as Being-alongside entities encountered within the world, addressing and engaging them in concern (Heidegger 2000, p. 458). In this regard, the phenomenon of care not only unifies the total structure of Dasein ontologically but also provides an ontical indication that renders this structure intelligible. Heidegger formulates care as “ahead-of-itself—Being-already-in (a world) as Being-alongside (entities encountered within-the-world),” whose constitutive elements are existentiality, facticity, and fallenness (Heidegger 2000, p. 364). Care signifies that Dasein exists in a world, encounters entities and others, and projects itself toward its own possibilities. Furthermore, temporality makes possible the unity of these elements and thus constitutes the totality of care (Heidegger 2000, p. 376). Accordingly, “temporality reveals itself as the meaning of authentic care” (Heidegger 2000, p. 374).

If care signifies that the working individual encounters both things and others, then it becomes necessary to explicate the ontological relations between individual-things and individual-others. In other words, the working individual encounters things, others, and itself within the work world. If Being-in-the-world is essentially care, then a deeper analysis of care allows us to understand these relations ontologically. Following Heidegger, care can be articulated in terms of *concern* (Besorgen), *solicitude* (Fürsorge), and *self-care* (Selbstsorge) (Heidegger 2000, p. 237), corresponding respectively to Being-alongside, Being-with, and Being-one's-Self (Heidegger 2000, p. 167). It is important, however, to maintain the unity of care throughout this analysis.

Since Being-in-the-world is essentially care, Being-alongside entities that are ready-to-hand takes the form of concern as a mode of Being-in (Heidegger 2000, p. 237). That is, Dasein engages with things through caring involvement. Its facticity disperses into multiple concrete modes of Being-in, such as producing, accomplishing, or using. All such activities share concern as their fundamental mode of Being (Heidegger 2000, p. 83). Because concernful dealings are primarily practical, two modes of concern can be distinguished: the everyday practical mode of readiness-to-hand and the derivative theoretical mode that arises when disruptions occur (Heidegger 2000, p. 201). Moreover, every act of concern presupposes a "towards-which" and a "for-the-sake-of-which," which structure the purposiveness of action (Heidegger 2000, p. 112). These purposes form a totality of involvement that ultimately points back to Dasein's own possibilities (Heidegger 2000, p. 116).

The working individual not only encounters things through concernful dealings but also interacts with others through mode of solicitude. Dasein typically understands itself in terms of its world, and the Dasein-with of others is encountered within the context of practical engagement. If the world of Dasein is a with-world, then Dasein's relation to others is likewise constituted as Dasein-with (Heidegger 2000, p. 155). Heidegger contends that Being-with is an essential structure of Dasein's Being, within which the disclosedness of others already belongs (Heidegger 2000, p. 160). More precisely, Dasein's understanding of its own Being always already implies an understanding of others (Heidegger 2000, p. 161). Accordingly, solicitude, as a fundamental mode of Dasein's Being, signifies care for the existential possibilities of others. Being-with operates within environmental circumspection and is guided by understanding; thus, solicitous concern is always shaped by what we are concerned with and how we understand it. Only insofar as Dasein has the essential structure of Being-with can it encounter others as Dasein-with (Heidegger 2000, p. 157).

There are multiple ways in which individuals relate to others. According to Heidegger, solicitude manifests in two primary forms: deficient modes and positive modes. For the most part, Dasein exists in deficient modes of solicitude, which are characterized by indifference, distance, or even negativity. Being against one another, passing one another by, or not mattering to one another are all possible expressions of such modes (Heidegger 2000, p. 158). These are not absences of Being-with but rather diminished or weakened forms of it. Heidegger emphasizes that these deficient modes dominate everyday Being-with and contribute to Dasein's inauthenticity.

In contrast, the positive modes of solicitude are divided into *leaping-in* and *leaping-ahead*. Leaping-in represents an extreme form in which one takes over the other's concern, thereby depriving the other of autonomy and responsibility. In such cases, one's care becomes absorbed into concern with things, effectively displacing the other's capacity for autonomy and taking responsibility (Heidegger 2000, p.

158). By contrast, leaping-ahead constitutes authentic solicitude: it helps the other become transparent to themselves in their care and frees them for their own possibilities (Heidegger 2000, p. 159). This mode of solicitude offers support and understanding while preserving the other's capacity for choice. Accordingly, the modes of solicitude can be understood as a spectrum ranging from deficient forms, through leaping-in, to leaping-ahead.

Dasein always cares for itself; its Being is, in each case, at issue for it. This means that Dasein is not a fixed entity but an ongoing concern—a being whose existence is characterized by questioning, projection, and possibility. Self-care is not an inwardly isolated activity but is always directed outward toward the world, manifesting itself in both concern and solicitude. For this reason, these modes are constitutive of care, and Heidegger's concept of care is best understood as "*concernful-solicitous care*" (*besorgend-fürsorgende Sorge*) (Inwood 1999, p. 36). Self-care signifies that Dasein exists in a world, encounters entities and others, and projects itself toward its own possibilities.

However, in its everydayness, Dasein is for the most part not itself but is lost in the *they-self*, an existentiell modification of the authentic self. To retrieve its authenticity, Dasein must be individualized through anxiety, which disrupts its immersion in the everyday world and calls it back from its fallen condition (Heidegger 2000, p. 233). In this process, Dasein no longer dwells in the tranquil familiarity of publicness nor escapes into the "at-home" of the "they" (Heidegger 2000, p. 234). Instead, it is brought face to face with its ownmost possibilities. This individualization makes manifest that both authenticity and inauthenticity are possibilities of Dasein's Being (Heidegger 2000, p. 235).

Thus far, concern, solicitude, and self-care have been explicated separately. However, these are not independent components but are structurally unified within the totality of care (Heidegger 2000, p. 235). Moreover, the primordial unity of care is grounded in temporality, and "temporality reveals itself as the meaning of authentic care" (Heidegger 2000, pp. 374-375). In this sense, the ontological structure of care constitutes the necessary condition for the temporal working individual to experience the meaning of work.

Interpretation of Work Meaning

We begin with the guiding question, "*What is the meaning of work?*" Drawing on empirical research and evidence, we recognize that the meaning of work is a significant concern for most working individuals. To be sure, empirical fields have provided extensive explanations regarding work meaning. However, the persistent reality is that many individuals remain in conditions of dissatisfaction at work. We therefore turn to Dilthey's interpretation of life as a way to understand the meaning of work experience. From the perspective of Heidegger, however, Dilthey's account remains confined to the ontical level and thus lacks an explicit ontological grounding. Accordingly, we reformulate the original question as: "*What makes the meaning of work possible and necessary?*"

Through *Being and Time*, we explicate the ontological conditions of the working individual as the ground for ontical meaning. In particular, we argue that the holistic structure of care—articulated in terms of concern, solicitude, and self-care—constitutes the ontological structure underlying the meaning of work. In this sense,

the preceding analysis has addressed the question of the *structure* of work meaning. Nevertheless, we may take a further step by returning to the initial question and asking what the meaning of work is at the ontical level. If the ontological conditions of the working individual disclose the meaningful presence of entities in relation to its concerns, then such meaningfulness must also be experientially accessible in factual life. More precisely, if we accept that the human individual is primordially and intentionally involved in a meaningful work-world (Blok 2015), then all practical activity is grounded in a prior structure of meaningfulness (*Bedeutsamkeit*) (Heidegger 1992, p. 167). In this regard, Heidegger makes a decisive claim: if Being-in-the-world is a fundamental state of Dasein, especially in its everyday mode, then it must also be something that has always already been experienced ontically (Heidegger 1962, p. 86).

However, the movement from ontological conditions back to ontical experience remains underdeveloped in *Being and Time*. This gap opens a space for further articulation in the present study. The question then becomes: how can this ontological–ontical return be accomplished in interpreting the meaning of work? We propose to approach this task by integrating Heidegger’s method of formal indication with Dilthey’s interpretation of life, while taking Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics as an intermediate framework. It is important to note that Gadamer’s hermeneutics operates across both ontological and ontical dimensions and has been widely developed in both theory and practice (Wilson 2022). Grounded in the idea that understanding is a mode of Being, Gadamer extends Heidegger’s ontology into a historical and dialogical hermeneutics mediated by language. Moreover, Gadamer emphasizes that understanding always involves application; the interpretation of any concrete situation is an integral moment of understanding itself (Gadamer 1975, p. 319).

Drawing on Dilthey’s conception of the continuity and structural coherence of life, Gadamer maintains that life presupposes a unity of meaning expressed through its parts (Gadamer 1975, pp. 227–228). At the same time, he affirms that life possesses a hermeneutical structure in which “life interprets itself” (Gadamer 1975, p. 229). Taken together, these insights provide both the conceptual orientation and the possibility for carrying out an ontological–ontical interpretive movement.

The methodology of formal indication, implicitly operative in *Being and Time* (Streeter 1997), offers a hermeneutic approach that accompanies life experience without distorting it through excessive theoretical abstraction (Kisiel 1993, p. 376). Rather than fully capturing primordial phenomena in conceptual language, it provides directional guidance toward the pre-theoretical horizon of existence. For example, the modes of solicitude—deficient modes, leaping-in, and leaping-ahead—may be understood as formal indications of I–Thou relations. In a parallel manner, Gadamer’s distinction between objectifying, reflective, and dialogical relations can be interpreted as a hermeneutic concretization of these ontological structures within the domain of understanding (Gadamer 1975, pp. 366–370). Although these two frameworks are not strictly identical, they display a clear structural affinity: objectifying relations correspond to deficient modes, reflective relations resemble aspects of leaping-in insofar as they subordinate the other to the self, and dialogical relations parallel leaping-ahead in their openness and enabling of the other’s self-understanding. In this way, Heidegger’s concept of solicitude can be seen as providing the ontological ground that guides Gadamer’s account of hermeneutic experience.

Once Gadamer's historical and dialogical hermeneutics is adopted, the ontological–ontical interpretive project can be completed by transforming Dilthey's notion of lived experience through a hermeneutic framework at the ontical level. For instance, grounded in the ontological structure of solicitude and hermeneutic experience, Dilthey's method of life interpretation can be appropriated to understand the meaning of life and work in concrete situations. The hermeneutic circle of part and whole allows particular work experiences to be interpreted in relation to the broader context of a person's life. At the same time, Dilthey's account of life as constituted by cognitive, emotional, and volitional dimensions provides further guidance for interpreting the specific meaning of work experiences.

Moreover, the hermeneutic circle need not be limited to the traditional part–whole relation but can be extended to the relation between ontical and ontological levels, as well as between pre-structure of understanding and interpretive articulation. In this way, the proposed ontological–ontical return enables a concrete interpretation of work meaning without reducing ontology to psychology or anthropology.

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