

## LANGUAGE AND LATER HEIDEGGER: WHAT IS BEING?

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Concepts, just like individuals, have their history and are no more able than they to resist the dominion of time, but in and through it all they nevertheless harbor a kind of homesickness for the place of their birth.—Kierkegaard

What are we supposed to hear when Heidegger says “Being”? In the following, I propose an interpretation of Heidegger’s later philosophy. The interpretation has a number of purposes. First, it attempts to explain Heidegger’s guiding question and the meaning of phrases like “the power of Being” and “the mystery of Being” while also confirming that “Being” is not a “super-being,” an atemporal “essence” or deity.

Second, it attempts to resolve some mysteries in other interpretations. It does not aim to show that they are wrong, but rather to explain some (true) claims that are left hanging. For example, in an essay by Charles Scott, one finds the statement: “Heidegger finds that there is no way around the canons of Western culture. The clearing comes through them and by their means.”<sup>2</sup> This point is left without any explanation of, or justification for, Heidegger’s position. Why does the “clearing” only come through Western thinkers? It becomes even more mysterious when a few pages later, Scott says, “Heidegger’s thought is attuned to the otherness, the difference of beings’ occurrences, to the uncapturable quality in their lives as he attempts to carry over their eventuation into the specificities of written and

<sup>1</sup> Many thanks to John McCumber, who first drew my attention to Heidegger’s doctrine of “basic words.” And thanks to Greg Mulberry, Ashley Biser, and an anonymous reviewer for this journal for thoughtful comments on earlier versions of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> Charles Scott, “Introduction,” *Companion to Heidegger’s Contributions to Philosophy*, ed. Charles Scott, Susan Schoenbohm, Daniela Vallega-Neu, and Alejandro Vallega (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 2001) 3.

meditative expression.”<sup>3</sup> The obvious question is, if Heidegger is seeking difference and otherness, why not look outside the Western tradition? These questions will be addressed in due course.

My interpretation will take as central the point that is left hanging by Scott: Heidegger’s emphasis on the Western tradition. Closer on this point is Rainer Marten’s statement that: “Heidegger’s great theme is the relationship between man and Being. . . . ‘Man’: this does not extend any farther than Western civilization . . . For him, mankind itself means only the West.”<sup>4</sup> Marten is correct, but his interpretation fails to explain how this point arises within Heidegger’s philosophy because Marten brings in a discussion of language very late in his essay, in a way that is entirely disconnected with his earlier remarks about the West.<sup>5</sup> In the interpretation offered here, the limitation of Heidegger’s philosophy to the Western tradition is integrally tied up with his views on language.

Third, I aim to situate Heidegger’s place in the history (*Historie*, not *Geschichte*) of philosophy. This entails describing Heidegger’s views in non-Heideggerean terms. This raises three potential problems. First, there is the possible problem that the interpretation does not use language in a Heideggerean way, even though it claims that Heidegger’s view of language is central to his later thought. Second, I will disregard Heidegger’s distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte* in my (historical) approach. The implications of these two issues for the possible success or failure of the interpretation will be discussed at the end. Third, much of the later Heidegger will be omitted, but I believe that what is omitted will be best understood against the background of the points sketched here. This includes such Heideggerean topics as technology, art, the fourfold, and Nazism.

On my proposed interpretation, Heidegger’s later philosophy is summed up in three ideas:

1. the historicity of words;
2. basic words; and
3. words (attempt to) express an experience.

Under these headings, I offer a reconstruction of Heidegger’s later thought. It might be considered a “rational reconstruction” in the sense that I hope to make sense of Heidegger’s texts and ideas. It is not a “rational reconstruction” in the sense of presenting a deductive formulation. I thus use the term “corollary” in a loose sense.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid: 7.

<sup>4</sup> Rainer Marten, “Heidegger and the Greeks,” *The Heidegger Case*, ed. Tom Rockmore and Joseph Margolis (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1992) 167.

<sup>5</sup> I also disagree with Marten’s views on the relationship between Heidegger’s philosophy and Nazism, but this issue is outside the scope of the present essay.

## I. THE HISTORICITY OF WORDS

Traditionally, philosophy avoids taking words or language to be important. Traditionally, it is not words that count, it is the (timeless) meanings or forms behind them; it is not words that count, it is the mind that uses them. In the twentieth century, philosophy came to see the importance of language, although what that importance is is highly contested. It is safest to say: thought is intimately related to language. If we accept that there are no timeless forms or meanings, and that minds are not centers of meaning, then when we are thinking and communicating, we have to consider words: their physicality and histories. This is what Heidegger calls “listening to language.”

Given the importance of the physicality and history of words, Heidegger takes the translation of words to be major events in the history of philosophy. From Greek to Latin, from Latin to German, something comes across but much is lost. In attending to their physicality, Heidegger uses words in ways which highlight their root meanings (clusters of words with a common root); because univocity is ahistorical, he uses words and phrases with multiple meaning (he especially likes phrases using both subjective and objective meanings of a genitive), and he favors sentences which reverse their terms: “The truth of essence is the essence of truth.” “The principle of reason (*grund*) is the ground (*grund*) of principle.”

*Corollary 1.1:* Words are not entirely within our control.

We have a “passive” relation to language. We grow up within a language, using words with physical, historical being. They are not controlled by our intentions, which are not themselves produced or controlled by a center of meaning. We find ourselves within language; we do not make it up ourselves and usually do not pay much attention to which words we use. But this “passivity” is not to be contrasted with hard work. One can work very hard on a poem and come up with something banal. So: to be original, one has to immerse oneself in the tradition. One has to reach a point of loss of self to be original. “Listening to language” sounds passive (in the usual sense), but refers to working hard doing philosophy, thinking.

*Corollary 1.2:* The importance of origin.

Words are historical. Meanings are derived from/depend on what came before: and so on, back to the beginning or origin. Heidegger is thinking about being within a tradition: “Whatever and however we may try to think, we think within the sphere of tradition.”<sup>6</sup> So it is helpful (up to a point) to think about a specific tradition when thinking about Heidegger. To explain Heidegger, let us take as an example: rock ‘n’ roll. The practice of rock ‘n’ roll revolves around origins. Songs

<sup>6</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Principle of Identity,” *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (New York: Harper & Row, 1969) 41.

may be originals or cover versions, and bands may be originals or tribute bands. And some originals are more original than others. There are subgenres ("Beat-lesque") and revivals ("neo-garage") which turn on their indebtedness to a source. And there are series of periods (epochs): rockabilly, British invasion, garage, singer/songwriter, Glam, progrock, heavy metal, punk, New Wave, grunge, indie, goth, emo, etc. All of these are or were somehow "in" the origin.<sup>7</sup>

There is a lot more in the origin than can be expressed initially. As an ongoing tradition, there is more in the origin still to draw from; it has yet to be exhausted. And what exactly was the origin of rock 'n' roll? Was it Chuck Berry or Little Richard or Carl Perkins? Bo Diddley or Elvis or Jerry Lee Lewis? Some or all of them? It is quite mysterious, even if we have all of their recordings, and not mere fragments.

To do something original requires then that one returns to the origin, mysterious as it may be, and interpret it in a new way. (The word "original" takes on the sense of "returning to the origin," a clear example of Heidegger's use of the physicality of words.) The clearest example of this is punk (because it specifically conceived of itself in this way), which aimed to return to a certain rawness and energy, which had been covered up and forgotten. But everything original does this, because it remains within the tradition. Something totally original would start a new tradition.<sup>8</sup>

With the above originators in the position of the Presocratics, we can think of the Beatles as being like Plato, who started as a Socrates tribute (or cover) artist, only to return to the origin (Parmenides) in order to blossom into something original; so must proceed all who wish to advance a tradition. Working within a tradition, one is in dialogue with the origin, keeping in mind that one is not a self-contained unit in the dialogue but already in-formed by/in-fluenced by the tradition. Even if the Beatles, also like Plato, were influenced by currents from India, they wove them into their own tradition. Their music is not a hybrid, but straightforward rock 'n' roll. For Heidegger, an example of reaching back to the origin in terms of the historicity of words would be the word "truth," which he claims now means "correctness"; Heidegger contends that the Greek word *aletheia* meant "unconcealment." (One can take "unconcealment" to mean: "meaningfulness of words," "allows beings to appear," and/or "determination of truth and falsity.")

<sup>7</sup> The questions of how to describe the relation of what comes later to the origin are very tricky ones, which I have glossed over in the above formulation.

<sup>8</sup> It may be thought that Heidegger's thinking here is tautologous. I think this is correct, but would not have been seen by him as an objection. Heidegger aspired to tautology, hoping that his "Appropriation appropriates" would be as productive a tautology as Parmenides' "Being is."

The musical analogy helps to understand Heidegger by pointing out that traditions run without theoretical deliberation. Kids immerse themselves in the music, learning how to play it, and doing so continuously, until some try to produce something like it of their own. The origin is a paradigm shift.<sup>9</sup> Rockers cannot tolerate what came before (crooners). Disputes within the tradition can be resolved by discourses within the tradition, but some disputes challenge the tradition as a whole. Is hip-hop a type of rock or an entirely different kind of music? To try to solve these disputes, we could turn to a meta-discourse, whether musical (mash-ups, e.g., Girl Talk or Jay Z's "Grey Album") or discursive (music theory). But here the limits of the analogy with rock are reached. There is no meta-discourse to talk about or settle disputes concerning the tradition as a whole. There is no position outside the tradition to think about the tradition, so one needs to use words derived from the tradition. (For example, one might wish to examine the word "tradition" as a word that arises within the Western tradition.) If one can move forward at all, it is only through scrupulous examination of each text and word. This discussion of the absence of a meta-discourse explains

*Corollary 1.3:* Expression of philosophy is not independent of its content.

Everything said so far applies to philosophy, as it has no ahistorical viewpoint that exempts it. We have to be very careful in how we express ourselves; that is, listen to language while doing philosophy.

## II. BASIC WORDS

Basic words are those with cognitive and emotional overload—words that people take to have the answers: truth, beauty, being, art, knowledge, history, freedom, science, God.

Basic words are those that provide the lens by which we see and experience the world. They guide our thought and action and future direction; basic words "ground history now and in the times to come in accordance with the interpretation of them that comes to prevail."<sup>10</sup> In this quotation, Heidegger takes the word "Grund" in the phrase "basic words" in a double sense. It means both basic and ground, as they are said to "ground history."

<sup>9</sup> In "The Origin of the Work of Art," Heidegger refers to the "unmediated character of the beginning, the peculiarity of a leap out of the unmediable." *Basic Writings*, revised and expanded ed., ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1993) 201. Also: "To originate something by a leap, to bring something into being from out of its essential source in a founding leap—this is what the word "origin" [*Ursprung*] means." (202).

<sup>10</sup> Heidegger, *Nietzsche, Volume 1: The Will to Power as Art*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, 1979) 144.

*Corollary 2.1* (from 2 and 1): What the basic words are and mean is not a matter of personal choice—it is historical.

An example would be the word “form,” which runs from Plato to Aristotle (more precisely, in translation of *eidos* and *idea*), to Kant (space and time are *forms* of intuition, categories are *forms* of thought), to the ordinary distinction of form and content. Given the importance of origin, as discussed above, every use of the term goes back to Plato.

*Extrapolation of 2*: Basic words have a basic word: Being.

“Being” is the most general word: everything we think and talk about is a being; every time we say something is or was, our sentence contains a reference to Being.

Philosophically, Being is at the origin. Parmenides said: Being is, what is cannot not be. Tautologies are supposed to be empty, but Parmenides felt that this one was (or these two were) extraordinarily profound. The tremendous surplus of meaning in the tautology generated the entire Western philosophical tradition.

Socrates continually posed the question “What is x?”, which presumably is why Heidegger refers to him as the purest thinker of the West.<sup>11</sup> A philosophical/metaphysical theory interprets basic words by asking “What is truth?”, “What is art?”, “What is knowledge?”, etc. These theories express the conception of an epoch: each epoch can be said to be part of the history of Being. A metaphysical theory is thus a general theory in which a philosopher tries to say what is and the theory expresses an interpretation of Being. We can take this latter phrase, “interpretation of Being,” in two ways, according to the double genitive: (1) an interpretation of what is and (2) Being “speaks” in this interpretation. The latter follows from the considerations discussed under (1.2) the importance of the origin.

Being is the most general word, but also the most enigmatic and paradoxical. We are supposed to hear these paradoxes in the word “Being”:

Paradox 1: An approach to Being is both completely unproblematic—every time you say or think that something is—and completely problematic—we only come across beings, not Being; we can only have a particular interpretation of Being.

Paradox 2: Being contains its contrasts/others: nothingness, becoming, seeming, thinking, and value. They contrast with Being but also *are*.

Paradox 3: Being is specific to Western history (back and forth movement of retrieval and sending, which makes up the sequence of epochs) versus Being as everything that is.

Anyone who has read the least bit of Heidegger knows that he incessantly harps on the first paradox throughout his career, which is known as the “ontological difference.” The second paradox is explicitly spelled out in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, although Heidegger’s pursuit of it is not limited to that book. His focus shifted over time, from more attention to one of Being’s contrasts, nothing, in his earlier work, to others such as thinking, in his later work. The pairing of Being and thinking is given a privileged position in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, with more space devoted to it than to all of the other contrasts combined, and also has another major work, *What is Called Thinking?*, devoted to it.

The third paradox derives from the fact that the Western tradition is a radical break with what came before. Given the primacy of language and historicity, and the specifics of Heidegger’s account of historicity, one cannot say unproblematically, and possibly one cannot say at all, that basic words (such as “human” or “Dasein”) translate across to non-Westerners, nor even that they have traditions with the structure of historicity. Only Western cultures, whose grammars and basic words derive from and refer to “Being,” can be said to experience Being. Being is tied to the word “Being” even more closely than any other word is to that word’s own referent:

... in the word “Being,” in its meaning and its inflections, and in everything that lies in the domain of this word, the word and its meaning are bound more originally to what is meant by them—but also vice versa. Being itself relies on the word in a totally different and more essential sense than any being does.<sup>12</sup>

The third paradox never received the attention it deserved either from Heidegger or Heidegger’s commentators. However, it is at work throughout Heidegger’s writings. Heidegger always believed that one could never learn anything essential from another tradition.

### III. WORDS (ATTEMPT TO) EXPRESS AN EXPERIENCE

Expressed in this way, this third idea may seem to be a commonplace. However, taken with the first two ideas, there are some distinct differences between the usual conception and Heidegger’s. First, language is used to express experiences not merely in sentences, but also in words used to name things. Second, there is always a surplus of what is experienced to what is expressed. Finally, according to the usual conception, only present experience is expressed. Given the historicity of language, current experiences and their expression are shaped by the past. Because of the

<sup>11</sup> *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968) 17.

<sup>12</sup> Heidegger, *Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Gregory Field and Richard Polt (New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2000) 92–93.

importance of the origin, current experiences and their expression are affected by and reflect the originary experience of the tradition and its expression.

Robert Bernasconi has said that Heidegger moves away from appeal to “primordial experience” in his later writings: “What might be meant by a ‘primordial experience,’ what our access might be to such primordial sources, was far from clear in *Being and Time*. The appeal to such experiences gives way in Heidegger’s later writings to the notion of ‘trace’ (Spur). . . .”<sup>13</sup> The conceptual problems with the concept of “primordial experience” which Bernasconi refers to are very real, but I do not see that Heidegger drops the concept in his later writings, nor that the concept of “trace” in any way excludes or replaces it. In *What is Called Thinking?*, from the early 1950s, Heidegger says:

Presence does demand unconcealment, and is a rising from unconcealment—though not generally but in such a way that presence is the entry into a duration of unconcealment. The Greeks *experience* such duration as a luminous appearance in the sense of illumined, radiant self-manifestation.<sup>14</sup>

And in “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” one of Heidegger’s last writings, he also speaks in terms of the experience of the early Greek philosophers, as will be shown in the quotation below concerning Parmenides. In that essay, Heidegger says that the task of thinking is “to say something to the present that was already said a long time ago, precisely at the beginning of philosophy and for that beginning, but has not been explicitly thought.”<sup>15</sup>

What was the originary experience of the Greeks that is the task of thought to uncover? Although the broad sweep of Heidegger’s answer(s) is difficult to discern, the core of his view is remarkably clear: first, the early Greeks experienced being as dynamic, rather than as static or atemporal, or in Heidegger’s terms, as “presencing” rather than as present. (They then interpreted beings in terms of presence and persistence, and this interpretation becomes “metaphysics” when the difference between Being and beings is forgotten, and this interpretation is applied to Being.) Second, they experienced “truth” as unconcealment, as expressed in the Greek word *aletheia*. On Heidegger’s reading, the initial alpha is to be taken as privative, with the word meaning then “unconcealment.” Truth as unconcealment means that there is no ahistorical or atemporal foundation for truth or meaning; meaning and truth only arise within the dynamic sending and retrieval

<sup>13</sup> Robert Bernasconi, *The Question of Language in Heidegger’s History of Being* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities P, 1985) 43.

<sup>14</sup> *What is Called Thinking?*: 237, emphasis added.

<sup>15</sup> *Basic Writings*: 437. It is true that in this essay, Heidegger seems to concede that *aletheia* was interpreted originally as representation (447). This is a rather tricky point, but a discussion would be too complex for this sketch. I would note here that I do not think this affects my interpretation.

(“presencing”) of Being. So at this point it is actually unnecessary to ask what the originary experience was, as it was the dynamic process of sending and retrieval, which was described in the first two parts of this essay.

*Corollary 3.1:* (3 plus 2.1 and extrapolation of 2): Because Being applies to everything, basic words express a totality experience. To do philosophy, thus, is to attempt to express such a totality experience, an experience of Being. Such a totality experience was expressed by the early Greeks in a set of basic words: “It is from out of the thoughtful experience of the *ἑόν* of the *ἑόντα*, nonconceptually spoken, that the fundamental words of the early thinking are said: *Φύσις* and *Λόγος*, *Μοῖρα* and *Ἔρις*, *Ἀλήθεια* and *Ἐν*.”<sup>16</sup>

*Corollary 3.2:* historical movement is indebted to and guided by the original, totality experience: current experience is guided by and indebted to the experience of Being of the Presocratics expressed by Parmenides. Getting on the right track requires that we do so explicitly: “Strangely enough, we cannot even ask these questions, always neglected in philosophy, as long as we have not experienced what Parmenides had to experience: *aletheia*, unconcealment.”<sup>17</sup>

*Corollary 3.3:* (3 combined with 1 and 2) this indebtedness is covered over by intervening interpretations of Being and translations of basic words. This “covering over” is exacerbated by ideas of historical progress, which lead people to think that later interpretations must be superior to the origin.

*Corollary 3.4* (3 taken with its corollaries): Primary presencing is that of Western history (*Geschichte*). Heidegger’s word for this presencing is *Ereignis*. *Ereignis* is the ordinary German word for “event.” “Event” is a temporal, dynamic, historical word. It also contains a play on “*eigen*” or “proper,” “one’s own.” The fact that we are embedded in and permeated by history, as discussed under “the historicity of words,” is captured by this aspect of the word *Ereignis*.

One can see that I have not followed Heidegger’s use of language in my interpretation in that I have not noodled around with the physicality and historicity of each word (although I did hyphenate “in-formed” and “in-fluenced”), nor have I stuck to a Heideggerean vocabulary. I believe that I have “followed” Heidegger’s use of language in that I have paid attention to it and made it central to my interpretation. My interpretation explains Heidegger’s approach to language, and, in corollary 1.3, notes why Heidegger would demand that philosophy, and presumably an interpretation of his philosophy, be done in this way. Nor need we accede to

<sup>16</sup> Heidegger, “Anaximander’ Saying,” in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge UP, 2002) 265.

<sup>17</sup> Heidegger, “End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking,” *Basic Writings*: 445.

Heidegger's demand until we are satisfied that his approach to language is correct. As for whether an interpretation can be written in a non-Heideggerean mode, the proof can only be in the pudding. The above interpretation is offered as such a proof.

One can also see that, as I noted at the beginning of this essay, my goal is to place Heidegger in the history of philosophy, not to treat him in terms of "*Geschichte*," according to his distinction between *Historie* and *Geschichte*.<sup>18</sup> As with Heidegger's conception of language, I do not feel it is incumbent on us to accept this distinction until we are convinced of its validity and significance. I have instead tried to treat Heidegger historically, as I understand the term. I have tried to present his views in a way that allows the reader to situate them in broader currents in the history of philosophy. I have also tried to present them in a way that makes plain the differences between his theory of language and other theories. And I have not tried to interpret Heidegger's views in ways that omit or downplay what I find objectionable. But rather than present a critique, which I leave to future work, I have tried to present them in a way that makes them seem as plausible as possible.

I have also tried to leave open questions that are left open by Heidegger's texts themselves. For example, one key question is: what does Heidegger think are the implications for our thinking and acting once we have uncovered and absorbed the originary experience? This would be an extremely complicated question to address, involving questions of interpreting his views on these matters, then trying to determine whether Heidegger's views changed between his earlier "activist" phase and his later "quietist" phase. One would also have to establish the significance of the "other beginning" Heidegger refers to, and try to determine whether his claims to "epochal" significance are justified, and what such epochal significance amounts to. Is Heidegger's "*Ereignis*" simply another interpretation of "Being" (i.e., just another philosophical theory), or does his philosophy have the greater significance that he claims for it? An aspect of these questions can be formulated as follows: Once we have retrieved the originary experience, and have freed ourselves from metaphysics, what is supposed to happen to the three paradoxes of Being? Are they dwelled upon, explicated, unfolded, added to? Are they surpassed, transformed, superceded, left aside, replaced? I do not think that any definite answers to these questions can be found in the texts.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup> Heidegger's distinction between *Geschichte* and *Historie* is rather complex. For present purposes, one can say that *Geschichte* (which is the ordinary word for history) means history conceived as having the dynamic temporal structure described above, including the need to return to the early Greeks.

<sup>19</sup> I think that there is an analogy of the problem of determining what Heidegger thinks happens after one retrieves the originary experience to the problem of determining what Heidegger thinks happens after one experiences one's being-toward-death in an authentic way in *Being and Time*.

One indication of the success of the interpretation offered here is that we can answer the questions raised by Scott's essay with which we started. The entirety of the interpretation, centering on the historicity of words and the primacy of the origin, explains why in Heidegger's philosophy one can only proceed by working through Western texts. As explained in the third paradox of Being, for Heidegger, thinking can only be pursued while Westerners work within their/our own tradition. Scott's claim that "Heidegger's thought is attuned to otherness . . ." is liable to be misleading, since the otherness can only arrive from the origin of one's own, Western, tradition.

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