

HEIDEGGER ON PHILOSOPHY AND LANGUAGE

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explain why Heidegger's thought has evoked both positive and negative reactions of such an extreme nature by focussing on his answer to *the* central methodological question "What is Philosophy?" After briefly setting forth Heidegger's answer in terms of attunement to Being, the centrality to it of his view of language and by focussing on his relationship with the word 'philosophy' and with the history of philosophy, the author shows how it has led Heidegger to construct his own work, itself linguistic, as a self-referential union of form and meaning. It is suggested that, from a Heideggerian perspective, this gives his work added argumentative force but, conversely, allows the critic no point of entry into his hermeneutical circle – hence the extreme reactions. This observation is then applied to address a related critical question; it is used to make sense of the apparent distinction, in Heidegger's work, between talking *about* attunement to Being and actually effecting such an attunement. The author argues that, for Heidegger, there is actually no distinction and that his apparent descriptions of attunement to Being at once describe and effect such an attunement. This union can therefore be conceived as one dimension of the intimacy, previously observed, between form and content and which is recognised to be a feature of Heidegger's work by both the acolyte and the critic.

I

My purpose in this paper is to consider the nature of Heidegger's later thought, more specifically, the thought expressed in his work written in the 1940s and '50s. It is not to defend Heidegger's views but rather to explain why his work has evoked the extreme reactions recorded by Steiner, who observes that Heidegger is seen as:

a prolix charlatan and poisoner of good sense or, on the contrary, a master of insight, a philosopher-teacher whose works may renew the inward condition of man...Let me repeat: there seems to be no other example of so absolute a difference of judgment in the whole range of the history of Western thought since Socrates (1992, p. 6).

I think that part of the reason is the way in which Heidegger responds to a methodological question, namely, the way in which he conceives the very nature of philosophy, a conception closely related to his views on language. I begin by outlining Heidegger's view of this relation drawing mainly on a lecture delivered in 1955 whose *English* title (we shall return to this point) takes the form of the central philosophical methodological question, "What is Philosophy?"

Cardinal, here, is Heidegger's notion of the 'ontological difference' which the lecture's translators render as the distinction between 'Being' and 'being'. Unlike Julian Young (2002, pp. 10ff.), who uses the same typographical device to distinguish between senses of '*Sein*' (or, in some cases, between '*Sein*' and '*Seyn*'), the translators of this lecture have in mind the distinction between '*Seiendes*' and '*Sein*' – between what is (perhaps, even, the sum total of what exists) and the mystery, 'It', which 'gives' what is, the condition for there being anything (Young 2002, p. 17).¹ Since Plato and Aristotle, according to Heidegger (1958, p. 53), philosophy has concerned itself with the question 'What is being [*das Seiende*]?', a question which is '*en route*' to what Heidegger (1958, pp. 54-5) regards to be the real business of philosophical enquiry, the Being of being, being with respect to Being. Following the reading of Heidegger provided by Young (2002) and Cooper (2005) we may express the business of philosophy, just described, as a way of regarding beings [*Seiendes*] as an epiphany of or gift from Being [*Sein*], mystery.

Heidegger's (1958, p. 69) term for the way in which philosophers should concern themselves with this business is 'co-respondence' [*Entsprechung*]. The answer to our methodological question is a correspondence that responds to the Being of being. Steiner's gloss on this term is helpful: "a response, a vital echo, a 're-sponion' in the liturgical sense of a participatory engagement" (1992, p. 29). What underwrites the term 'correspondence' is what Steiner calls an 'answerability' to the question of Being, a dimension of transformative personal involvement,² of receptivity to Being, which Heidegger believes to have been systematically excised from Western philosophy after

¹ I follow their convention in this essay and use the words 'being' and 'beings' interchangeably to refer to Heidegger's '*Seiendes*' and 'Being' to refer to his '*Sein*' (or '*Seyn*').

² "The path of our discussion must, therefore, be of such a kind and direction that that of which philosophy treats concerns us personally, affects us and indeed, touches us in our very nature" (Heidegger 1958, p. 23).

Socrates and which I now outline. For Heidegger (1978, p. 240), owing to the mystery and ineffability of Being, Being must be “thought on the basis of beings” which can only be ‘lit up’ for humanity *via* our meaningful structures of being-in-the-world. Thus philosophy is about cultivating a certain kind of comportment towards Being *via* beings and towards beings with respect to Being. It is about attuning oneself to an experience of beings as a mysterious ‘gift from’ or ‘epiphany of’ Being (Cooper 2005, p. 136). It is about attuning ourselves to an experience of the ‘world’ itself (with which, in our being-in-the-world, we are interdependent) as mysterious. I now examine the way in which Heidegger believes that this attunement is effected in philosophy through language.

It is especially in and through language that we become attuned to Being in the experience of ‘correspondence’ which, in Heidegger’s view, it is the business of philosophy to effect.³ The very word ‘*ent-sprechen*’ includes the word ‘*sprechen*’ (‘speaking’) and this signifies for Heidegger that philosophy as ‘correspondence’ is “in the service of language” (1958, p. 93).⁴ This subversion of the common view of the relationship between philosophy and language is a variation on his well-known claim that ‘language speaks’. This claim can be interpreted in the terms of Heidegger’s discussion of the nature of language, a discussion whose subject-matter is, he tells us, “the possibility of undergoing an experience with language”; these last words, he insists, were carefully chosen to highlight the fact that “we mean, specifically, that the experience is not of our own making” (1971, p. 57).

As Heidegger suggests, speaking is, ‘in advance’, a hearing; we are only able to speak because “we have already listened to language. What do we hear there? We hear *language speaking*” (1978a, p. 411).⁵ The source of the ‘saying’ to which Heidegger exhorts us to listen is Being. But Being is not distinct from this ‘saying’ – it would be more accurate, Cooper suggests, to say that Being “*is a ‘Saying’*” (1996, p. 84).⁶ As Heidegger puts it, “We are trying to listen to the voice of Being” (1958, p. 89), where the word ‘of’ is used with care owing to the intimacy of

³ Language, in other words, is the medium of philosophy. Heidegger explicitly makes the connexion between correspondence and attunement; he writes: “[c]orrespondence...is in an attunement” (1958, p. 77).

⁴ We shall return to the justifiability of the etymological mode of argument in play here.

⁵ My emphasis.

⁶ Emphasis in original.

language and Being which Cooper highlights: language is, Heidegger tells us, the “language of Being” as clouds are the “clouds of the sky” (1978, p. 265).

The point here, as Cooper (1996, pp. 84ff) points out, is an intimate connexion between the interdependence of words and speech on the one hand and that of reality and its source on the other. The way in which beings (on the basis of which, recall, Being must be thought) are lit up for us is, for Heidegger, essentially linguistic (this is what Steiner calls the “language-condition” (1992, p. 7) of human existence), but words designating beings are not just arbitrary signs imposed upon the world. Rather they are inseparable from, interdependent with, the ‘saying’ whose source is Being, or, better, which *is* Being. Thus the integration of beings into our linguistic understanding is primarily receptive, “not wholly our product” (Cooper 1996, p. 86); it consists, for Heidegger, in a receptive listening to the voice of Being.

This ‘saying’ then ‘arrives at’ human speech or ‘language’ (the media of philosophy and poetry) which, insofar as it is attentive to the ‘saying’ of Being upon which it is dependent, must be conceived as its ‘reiteration’ (Heidegger 1978a, pp. 418, 423). Philosophy as correspondence is just such a ‘reiteration’; it is, to mirror Gabriel Marcel’s phrase,⁷ ‘receptive creativity’. On the one hand, attunement to Being is not, as we have just seen, ‘caused’ by human speech but is rather “handed over...from Being” (Heidegger 1978, p. 217). On the other, however, the philosopher and the poet can, indeed must, bring the manifestation of Being to language and maintain it in language through their speech (Heidegger 1978, p. 217). To put it another way (for propositions will never be wholly adequate here) “language...is appropriated by Being and pervaded by Being (Heidegger 1978, p. 237). To quote Heidegger once again: “Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells” (1978, p. 217).

Steiner glosses this statement in a way that highlights the strictly inseparable creative and receptive dimensions to the philosopher’s task. He expresses the receptive dimension to the philosopher’s task by saying that “it is not man who determines Being, but Being that *via* language discloses itself to and in man” (Steiner 1992, p. 128). But there is a kind

⁷ Gabriel Marcel (1889-1973) is a neglected French philosopher, playwright and musician whose thought is difficult to categorise, though he is sometimes called (against his own wishes) a ‘religious existentialist’. He was a contemporary of Heidegger’s and met him in Fribourg in 1946.

of creative obligation entailed by the acceptance of this. It is man's duty as the language-animal to 'shelter' the truth of Being in language by reiteration; his duty is one of "custodianship, answerability to and for" Being (Steiner 1992, p. 32). "It is *as if*, when speaking, we are hearkening to and translating signs which have been given us" (Cooper 1996, p. 86).⁸ It is this inseparability of creative and receptive dimensions that, I think, Heidegger is getting at when he famously states that man is the "shepherd of Being" (1978, p. 234).

Since language is philosophy's medium all of this has major implications for the actual practice of philosophy. Unsurprisingly, these implications may most clearly be seen to be at work in Heidegger's relationship with the very word 'philosophy'. It is Heidegger's belief that Western philosophy after Socrates has, for the most part, been inattentive to the voice of Being owing to both an inadequate instrumentalist conception of the language in which it is couched as an objectifying instrument of dominion over beings and a forgetfulness of the receptive dimension to authentic speaking to which, we have seen, Heidegger is trying to draw our attention afresh.

At times Heidegger (1978, p. 265) sets up 'philosophy' and 'thinking' as almost opposites and seems to regard the former to be so enmeshed with a faulty view of language as to be unsalvageable. Thus he often seems to prefer the word 'thinking' as a description of his own project. It seems legitimate to ask, on his own terms, whether it wouldn't be simplest for Heidegger just to abandon 'philosophy' altogether, since the tension between Heidegger and his 'philosophical' critics is such that each believes the (at best misguided and at worst downright pernicious) views of the other to be a function of a misguided relationship with language.⁹

However Heidegger's relationship with 'philosophy' is ambiguous. He does think that the history of philosophy, correctly viewed, can transmit the voice of Being. Being can appropriate even the language of the 'metaphysicians' to make its 'saying' heard – we only need to read it correctly, that is, with receptivity to Being's voice. With characteristic insistence on the union or non-differentiation between passive and active, receptive and creative,¹⁰ Heidegger tells us that we must be "in

⁸ Emphasis in original.

⁹ See Carnap (1978) for the kind of critique I have in mind throughout this paper.

¹⁰ This is expressed, elsewhere, as "beyond the distinction between activity and passivity" (Heidegger 1966, p. 61).

conversation with” [*im Gespräch mit*] (1958, p. 71) the history of ‘philosophy’ in order to attain correspondence through it. This attainment depends both on Being deigning to ‘speak’ through the philosophical tradition and our reading of that tradition in the correct way. If this is right, there are, for Steiner (1992, pp. 29-30) at least, important implications for academic practice if philosophy or thinking is to remain an academic enterprise. Owing to the ‘thoughtless’ or ‘unthinking’ tendencies evident in the history of philosophy, the academic’s business should not be primarily to transmit summaries of, or even to ‘understand’, the writings of the philosophers of the past but rather to appropriate the historical tradition of philosophy as something in and through which the voice of Being can be heard.

Thus, for Heidegger, the advantages of maintaining some relationship to ‘philosophy’ can outweigh the disadvantages. Although the history of philosophy has been made subject to systematic misinterpretation it could perhaps become a powerful way in which man can attain correspondence, attunement to Being.¹¹ Heidegger writes:

Should we not rather suffer a little while longer those inevitable misinterpretations to which the path of thinking in the element of Being and time has hitherto been exposed and let them slowly dissipate? (1978, p. 248)

It is this optimism, I think, which, despite his pejorative use of the word ‘philosophy’ by the 1940s,¹² led Heidegger to retain the word in (and even in the title of) his lecture of 1955. But we can discern even here in the title the gentle, persuasive attempt to hasten the dissipation of misinterpretations and the necessarily ambivalent relation to ‘philosophy’ which it implies and to which Heidegger has, at least at this stage of his life, resigned himself. Steiner describes the ‘subtle twofold effect’, lost in translation, of the German title of the lecture, *Was ist das – die Philosophie?*:

by setting off *die Philosophie*, by compelling a hiatus and pause between the most general form of ontological query (namely, “What is

¹¹ It is worth noting that Heidegger’s openness to ‘philosophy’ is not reciprocated by the kind of critic I have in mind who does not think that Heidegger, correctly viewed, can make a significant contribution to ‘philosophy’.

¹² See Heidegger 1978; Cooper 1996, p. 86.

this or that or anything?”) and the object actually in view, Heidegger ... makes the notion “philosophy”, of which we might have claimed an everyday, confident control, somewhat strange and distant; and he makes it dependent on, ancillary to, the greater, more pressing question and notion of “isness” and “whatness.” (1992, p. 20)

Owing to the inevitably linguistic nature of Heidegger’s work (which it shares with ‘philosophy’), it is only by explicitly and self-referentially drawing our attention to the ambiguous relationship to the word ‘philosophy’ that Heidegger can avoid his own work from being misinterpreted as just another contribution to the history of philosophy, which amounts, for him, to the history of ‘metaphysics’.¹³ It is only once this pitfall has been avoided, and Heidegger’s cue has thus been given, that the misinterpretations of the history of ‘metaphysics’ can be allowed to slowly ‘dissipate’ and be replaced, as the historical philosophical tradition is re-appropriated by an attentiveness to the voice of Being. It should by now be clear that the way in which Heidegger avoids this pitfall is by making the linguistic medium of his work essential to the message in a tightly-woven, self-referential union.

It follows that whether Heidegger succeeds or fails in attuning us to Being (or even in convincing us that ‘attunement to Being’ is a meaningful notion) after what he regards to be the systematic ‘forgetting’ that has characterised the history of the West, will depend to a large extent upon whether he is able to convince us of his view of the nature of language. As Steiner expresses this entrenchment in language of the ‘question of Being’ and thus the ‘forgetting of Being’:

If the “question of being,” the *Seinsfrage*, strikes us as vacuous, or as a mystical word-game, or as purely and simply nonsense...the reason is, literally, linguistic (1992, p. 45).

This will not suffice to convince those philosophers who, as Steiner (1992, p. 6) notes, regard Heidegger to be a ‘prolix charlatan’ who is simply and literally talking nonsense. As the previous quotation intimates, the view of Heidegger as one who is making a worthwhile contribution to thought (let alone, with Steiner, as one who is a ‘master of insight’) stands or falls with one’s view of language and its relation to

¹³ ‘Metaphysics’ is pejoratively understood as ontical as opposed to ontological enquiry, the immersion in beings at the expense of Being and their almost systematic confusion.

philosophy. It does not help that Heidegger's argument concerning this very relation itself makes use of language in the very way that critics find suspect. For example, both the Greek connexions of the word *philosophia* and the definition of philosophy as *ent-sprechung* which is in the service of *sprechung* in Heidegger's lecture depend on what Steiner calls "the most characteristic and disputed move in Heidegger's thought: the argument from and through etymology" (1992, pp. 21-2).

These arguments will not be persuasive for critics who deny that philosophy is in the service of language in the way that Heidegger claims. Further, this opinion, that the *Seinsfrage* is vacuous nonsense, is, as we have seen, based upon a view of language that has dominated, or at least been present in, 'philosophy' for most of its history. From Heidegger's converse perspective, and from that of those who do have time for his distinctive views on language, this is a function of 'philosophy's' faulty instrumentalist view of language which has placed language itself "under the dictatorship of the public realm, which decides in advance what is intelligible and what must be rejected as unintelligible" (1978, p. 221). Whilst I do not see any easy way of refuting one or other of these positions, it is clear that the reason for the tension between them is Heidegger's tactical incorporation of his beliefs on language into his very way of philosophising.

It is in this way that Heidegger's caution against the possibility of misinterpretation, which manifests itself as this incorporation, comes at a potential cost. If what he says about language, and thus the attunement to Being which I have argued that it amounts to, is well taken, Heidegger's argument will be all the more powerful since his claims are reinforced in more than one way, by the forms in which they are made. But for the very same reasons, a reader who is not convinced by Heidegger's view of language will find no 'way in' to his way of thinking, no point of entry into the hermeneutical circle. This reader will deny that Heidegger is doing 'philosophy' and, whatever he chooses to call it, he is, in any case, talking through his hat. But either way, it would be difficult to disagree with the comment made by Steiner which highlights the centrality of language, especially Heidegger's own, to his thought: "no aspect of Heideggerian thought can be divorced from the phenomenon of Heidegger's prose style" (1992, p. 9). It is for this reason, I think, that Heidegger's work has evoked the extreme reactions recorded by Steiner and noted at the outset.

II

I now want to address a critical question arising from the intimacy, just observed, between meaning and form in Heidegger's work. In the work I have been considering he seems to be trying to do two things. Firstly, as a philosopher himself, he is trying, *via* language, to attune his readers to, to bring about correspondence with, the mystery of Being as manifested in (or as) beings. But also, secondly, and which is surely a precondition, he is trying to change our relation to language, to move us away from the instrumentalist view according to which it is an "instrument of dominion over beings" and towards a view of language, insofar as it makes possible the meaningful experience of beings (as which Being epiphanizes, on the basis of which it must be thought), as the "advent of Being itself" (Heidegger 1978a, p. 425; 1978, p. 230) and towards an awareness of this view's receptive-creative implications for the conduct (irrespective of the name we use) of the 'thinker' or 'philosopher'. In other words, there would appear to be a distinction, even a tension, in Heidegger's work between his talking *about* the way in which the philosopher can and should attune his readers to the mystery of Being *via* language and his *actually* so attuning them (and the former, further, appears to be a prerequisite for the latter). How do we make sense of this apparent distinction? Are we to believe that in *all* those essays in which Heidegger outlines the roles of the thinker and the poet and discusses the way in which attunement to Being may be effected (a large portion of his work), he is doing nothing to give us a sense of Being? If he is writing for people who are already attuned to Being, then they are in no need of his writings and if he is writing for those who are not, why doesn't he get cracking straight away and attune them? As he himself writes: "everything first depends upon attaining a correspondence before we set up a theory about it" (Heidegger 1958, p. 69).

It is my suggestion that there is actually no distinction, that talking about attunement to Being (*via* language or otherwise) is actually partially constitutive of such an attunement. I want to argue that this is a specific dimension of the union of form and content that we have observed in Heidegger's work and which, I have been arguing, evokes equally vigorous responses from the acolyte and the critic. In this way, the observation of the union of form and content can be applied to and used to make sense of, a critical question arising from the apparent

tension in Heidegger's thought between what might be called first and second-order claims. This being the case we are quite at liberty to accept or reject Heidegger's views but the claim, on his own terms, that Heidegger is 'all mouth' cannot successfully be used against him by his critics.

The fact that we are unable to step outside language might lead us to think that the possibility of 'undergoing an experience with language' is itself brought to language every time we speak. In most cases, however, as Heidegger says, "language never has the floor" (1971, p. 59); instead, whatever we are speaking about occludes the experience of *language itself* as, for Heidegger, the 'house of Being'. In this way, insofar as Heidegger's remarks *on language* are linguistically expressed, his own remarks will, if he is right on this, consist in 'reiteration' of the voice of Being, the establishment of attunement and correspondence. Owing both to this fact and to the mystery of Being, some of Heidegger's uses of language are not, and cannot be, in the mode of 'assertion' or 'representation' (1978a, p. 424).

When the 'scientist' in Heidegger's *Conversation* (1966, p. 67) claims not to have understood the previous remarks about thinking, the 'teacher' (Heidegger's *persona*?) replies "I don't understand it either, if by understanding you mean the capacity to re-present what is put before us". In this sense, as Clark claims, some of Heidegger's work "cannot be read as being 'about' something in the familiar sense of making a conceptual model of it. They strive towards the status of thinking-in-action" (2002, p. 88). Thus Heidegger's writings, apparently 'about' language, have the ulterior motive of attuning us to Being. We are now, I think, in a position to understand the comment Heidegger makes at the very beginning of his lecture that the question "*Was ist das – die Philosophie?*" leads us "into a path" (1958, p. 21).¹⁴ Heidegger's *Conversation* is, as the title testifies, 'about thinking' but all the while the participants are walking along a country path. The translators make a suggestion as to the significance of this fact as follows:

We might think of it, metaphorically, as the activity of walking along a path which leads to Being. Certainly metaphorically, the conversation

¹⁴ Steiner (1992, p. 18) points out that peregrination is a favourite theme of Heidegger's. Many of his titles revolve around this theme: *Holzwege* [Off The Beaten Track], *Wegmarken* [Pathmarks], *Unterwegs zur Sprache* [On the Way to Language], *Der Feldweg* [The Field-Path] and so on.

along the path referred to in the Conversation symbolizes such an activity and in such a direction (Heidegger 1966, p. 22).

We get the impression that the teacher and scholar are trying to teach the scientist, who is more tied to 'representational thought', to employ the rhetoric of thinking, of attunement to Being. When he believes that he has finally been able to do this he claims, significantly, that what allowed him to do so was "more the course of the conversation than the representation of the specific objects we spoke about" (Heidegger 1966, p. 69). The perhaps inadequate Greek word that they agree upon to designate the, strictly ineffable, nature of thinking refers to the walk along the country path itself: "it is never the goal which counts, but only the journey" (Heidegger 1966, p. 89; Steiner 1992, p. 18).

In this way, though it cannot decide the issue, the observation that Heidegger incorporates his views on language into his very way of philosophising (or thinking), in a union of form and meaning, is of great importance. It is especially relevant to the crucial question of whether we regard Heidegger to be talking nonsense or providing a much-needed radical and transformative way of getting some grasp on the world, on ourselves and on that to which, if anything, we are ultimately answerable; whether Heidegger gives us a way which transcends the rules of 'logic' and 'good sense' and is answerable, instead, to the 'law of Being'. Further, if accurately made, the observation can also make sense of the apparent tension between Heidegger's insistence on attunement to Being as the task of philosophy or thinking and the fact that he spends most of his time apparently talking *about* such an attunement. The non-differentiation of these can thus be understood to be a mode of the union between Heidegger's form and meaning which, we have seen, is responsible for the equally extreme (and, I still think, equally irrefutable) positive and negative reactions to his thought.

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