

HEIDEGGERS LATE PHILOSOPHY OF LANGUAGE

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[This talk focuses on Heidegger's late work, especially his 1959 collection of essays *Unterwegs zur Sprache* – On the way to language. It is broadcasted online as the 4th episode of the philosophy podcast *The Rabbit Hole of Ideas*:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHPS5WRaV1U>

I thank Leonard Weiß for having me on his podcast and for comments and corrections.]

Those familiar with Heidegger usually know him as a key figure in phenomenology, a philosophical method focusing on the *appearance* of things and the way we *experience* the world and ourselves. For the founder of this movement and Heidegger's teacher, Edmund Husserl, the path to investigate appearance, is our *conscious perspective* on the world. But Heidegger left this path which had dominated philosophy since Descartes and Kant. According to his analysis, this tradition was all about a *thinking subject's* view of itself and the world as having certain *objective* properties and relations as they are presented in a theoretical outlook.

In Heidegger's eyes, this seemingly natural starting point for all common thinking in philosophy and science is not original. For him, our existence is primarily *embedded* and *engaged in* the world before it acquires a theoretical point of view and starts to bring the world *before* itself as an object. Existent, we find ourselves as being involuntarily responsible for ourselves, for things and other beings we deal with; we are drawn into numerous affairs, we are faced with problems and adversities we must cope with; we are captivated by moods and the ambience of our surrounding. Therefore, *Existence* for Heidegger, is not primarily tied to being an isolated *subject*, *observing* the world. Instead, Existence originally belongs to a being Heidegger calls *Dasein* – that is German for *Being*

There – and this *being there* is characterized by its *involvement* in the world. Each of us is such an individual Dasein.

Let us now have a closer look at how Heidegger spells out this revolutionary and intuitively appealing philosophical idea in his early work, *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time) and why he eventually came to realize that an even more radical departure from the Western tradition was required. As I hope, this will pave the ground for approaching the difficult but interesting ideas of Heidegger's later period.

Let us see now how our pretheoretical involvement in the world is structured according to the early Heidegger. For the early Heidegger, the everyday mode of our worldly engagement is called *Besorgen*, that is German for: taking care of one's affairs, getting something done or looking after something. This mode-of-existence is the ordinary one, characteristic of our everyday life. Here, things do not appear as persistent substances that have certain properties or as objects of observation. Instead, they are presented to us regarding their appeal and significance, or in terms of how they can be coped with and what we can make out of them for the sake of integrating them adequately into our lives. Now, as Heidegger notes, such *Besorgen* can collapse when things do not work as they should, when they are broken or refuse to fit our expectations. In such cases, the theoretical perspective comes in and the mode of how things appear changes. For instance, if a doorknob is stuck instead of working smoothly as usual, we suddenly see it in a different light; we observe its intrinsic properties and how it relates to other things in an objectifying way. That is, we start to think *about* it in a systematic fashion. However, in taking this stance of observation, Heidegger notes, our worldly involvement does not become ineffective: it only loses its everyday inconspicuousness and becomes visible as such. Dealing with ordinary things like doorknobs, coping with the situation we find ourselves engaged in, remains the prevalent background condition of our behavior.

This is the *first* conclusion Heidegger draws from his analysis: the theoretical mode of being springs from the engaged mode and not the other way around, as it is traditionally thought. Disengaged theoretical thinking and its correlate, the world as an object, is only a derivative and special mode of how things look. Thus, in Heidegger's eyes, to regard the objective mode of appearance as primary or even Dasein-independent is a naïve or

intellectualistic misunderstanding, a misunderstanding that haunted philosophy throughout its history.

The *second* conclusion concerns the constitutive role of our *Dasein* in such engagement. As Heidegger observes, things have what can be described as a *drift* towards us: As soon as things appear, they become significant for *us*. They concern *me* in my being there. This relation of concern, their meaningfulness, cannot be derived from neutral facts “out there” – instead, it is conditioned through the more basic relation we have towards ourselves. Heidegger calls this relation “*Sorge*” or *self-care*. As a fundamental experience and primary involvement, we are faced with the task to make something out of our finite lives; in this sense our existence has the character of a question posed to itself: who am I and what I am supposed to do with my time? Ontologically, this impulse reveals that our self-relation turns out to be a constant *source of opportunities*. For Heidegger, this source is a temporal structure that is peculiar to the temporality of human existence: we are constantly *ahead* of our ourselves, awaiting our own becoming, and our ending in death. In this possibilistic sense of future, things are *open*: that is both ready to be taken, accessible and indefinite, on-going. This living towards the future (the open) is complemented by a constant *recourse* to the past because our opportunities for living are inherited, they are already *given* and adopted. Both concepts, our world’s *Openness* and *Givenness* are two important features to be re-defined in Heidegger’s late work, as we will see. Ultimately, however, the *early* Heidegger believes that any such openness and givenness originates from the individual *Dasein* itself and not from an overarching framework in which our Being there is itself integrated. Consequently, for Heidegger, things become visible to us in the light of self-related meaningfulness, – and this light emerges from our very own, individual existence.

That being said, Heidegger soon recognized that these conclusions from his early masterpiece were on the wrong track. The track of *Sein und Zeit* opened a new landscape for thinking but finally lead [*lädd*] back to a metaphysical path he wanted to leave. And this time, as we shall see now, Heidegger left it for good.

So let us see why this is the case and what kind of alternative Heidegger develops.

To sum up the main thesis of Heidegger's ontology so far, we saw that he regards existence as *involvement in open matters*. This is what characterizes human life. However, Heidegger soon came to reject his own, earlier version of this idea. This is because, for Heidegger, the philosophy of Dasein still rests on a deeply *metaphysical* framework. Metaphysical thinking, as Heidegger extensively examines in his later work, has a characteristic feature: It attempts to grasp things systematically, and to this end, it reduces a totality of being to one, special entity as the center of this whole. Accordingly, metaphysics is always defined by two features: It is 1) reductionist or centralistic and 2) total or systematic. The great metaphysical projects want to *determine* and *embrace* things, eliminating the openness. Plato, for instance, describes the world in its totality and ties this whole to a ruling entity, the idea of the good. In the same spirit, other metaphysical designs share such holistic claims and ascribe the center of the world: to God, to a final cause, the conscious subject, or to physical matter. Unfortunately, as we saw, Heidegger's Dasein joins this list because Openness is projected by the individual existence and limited by its death, thus things are primarily there to be taken care of.

Consequently, in the 1930s and 40s, Heidegger gave up the idea that Dasein projects itself into the world; Instead he suggested that in our being in the world, there always is *something else* in play, something that involves me, that astonishes me, takes me aback, touches me and urges me to respond. Think of the way we experience nature, a work of art, a historical event, someone else's glance, word, or gesture... Such things do not only appear as exploitable resources for my individual life-project, – instead, they themselves entertain a certain primacy in which they *speak* to me *before* I start to regard them according to their usefulness. Being in the world, I take part in a more general framework that goes beyond me and draws me in its sphere... And this sphere is intrinsically *open*, we cannot *oversee* it from a totalizing perspective and reduce it to a special kind of entity found within this sphere, as metaphysics claims.

One may wonder what exactly Heidegger means when he speaks of this overarching framework.

For the later Heidegger, inspired by poetry and works of art, it is *language* which plays the role of this framework. In this context, language figures not only as a set of signs or a tool for communication, as it is widely held today, and even by the early Heidegger himself; Instead, language constitutes our very involvement with reality. It structures the

openness and *givenness* of our situation. Such a strong claim about the role of language certainly requires some further explanation, and I'll try to show how Heidegger came to endorse it in the following. So what motivates Heidegger's unusual account of language?

At first, Heidegger starts with the seemingly trivial observation that language *speaks*. The way Language "speaks", in a public and non-private sense, is not primarily defined by an instrumental understanding of words, as if they were mere *tools* for our individual handling of things or for expressing mental ideas. Contrary to this widely held view, what speaking does, according to Heidegger, is *showing things, letting them appear*. Therefore, Heidegger interprets the essence of language as the *Zeige*, which roughly means the showing or the pointing. Let me spell out this idea using an everyday example, namely wishing somebody good night. As I hope, this example will allow me to outline two aspects of what I think captures language as Heidegger understands it: language as the *responsiveness* and *institutionality* of our worldly involvement.

First, the speech situation, me and the one addressed, must be already somehow *configured* to make "Good night" meaningful, that is to let it change the appearance of the situation. We already stand in a certain relationship of *responsiveness* to each other; Heidegger calls this *Gehören*, thereby playing on the dual meaning of this German expression, alluding to both *belonging* and *listening*.

Being responsive means to be *disposed to passively take up* the situational setting and the way things appear in it. I can follow, I get what the situation is about. Being responsive is also active in the sense that I *bring myself in* by uttering words and finding the right tone. Thereby I *enact* the relationship of belonging I entertain with both, another person to whom I address a wish, as well as to surrounding aspects of the situation such as the obscurity of night or the expected refreshment of sleep. Otherwise I would not already belong to the person and the setting, we both find ourselves being responsive to, the words would express a meaning that has nothing do to with us. Words, as Heidegger sees it, can only have this sort of significance because the *constellation* of the situation is already arranged by language as its deep structure. Language does not start with speech acts or mental ideas. To "use" language as a tool or to "communicate" ideas does not only call upon a more basic structure that paves the way for such interaction. This

instrumental view also underestimates how a *theoretical* modelling of language is already *embedded* into the complex situatedness of our being responsive to things and relies on such non-theoretical language.

Secondly, things in their phenomenality fit together in a peculiar way. Each situation appears in a complex but harmonious way. Heidegger calls this the “*Stimmung*”, which means ambience and tuning of an instrument. For a thing or a human to be responsive is to have its place in such configuration. In this sense, the openness and givenness of language is also essentially *integrating*, or “*versammelnd*” (gathering), as Heidegger has it. Integration invites individual contribution, plurality and change just as much as it provides for a far-reaching and stable framework. It is due to this integration, that almost anything can become meaningful, and hence appear at all.

Thirdly and finally, such a meaningful constellation has an *institutional* aspect. We find ourselves in an arrangement which has a certain order and involves a multitude of ways how things appear. How to say “Good night”, how to show myself, the one making a wish, the addressee and what is wished, are pre-arranged: When words are uttered, things take over a certain role and play together in a normative way. Heidegger calls this institutional trait of language *Ereignis*, which usually designates a staggering event and, in a more terminological sense, translates to “appropriation” and “allocation” of roles. Any world is characterized by not having a clear-cut order of how things appear, of what matters and what rests in the background. In such *ordering* of things, our world appears differently as opposed to, for example the world of the 18th century, and the world of science is contrasted with the world of a child. Two things are important to note here:

First, being normative and pre-arranged, these sets of appearance are not defined exclusively by one’s individual life; My life is meaningful because it is integrated in such public constellations and is assigned its role within them.

Second, as essentially integrating, they are not fixed or im’perative, but inclusive and inviting.

Taking together these points, the linguistic world-structures are *open* and *given*, as Heidegger understands these concepts now: the world's open paths are *inclusive, full of chances and accessible* to us, but at the same time, the possibilities of how things eventually turn out remain, to some extent, unclear and unsettled. Thus, our lifeworld is also open in the sense that it is *un-overseeable* and partly *in-transparent*. Being involved in this world, we do not know what we have gotten ourselves into.

Heidegger calls this the "ambiguity" of phenomenality. To speak, that is: to show, is to accept and realize this openness. Therefore, speaking is not, as metaphysics claims, primarily about the systematic representation or use of objects; Instead, it lets things appear in an ambiguous and open-ended fashion. Language is non-reductive and non-totalizing. It is thinking itself.

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This can only be a rough outline of what Heidegger says in his enigmatic and dense style. I hope it sparked your interest to read his late work yourself, especially *On the Way to Language*. Up to this day, its full substance is yet to be discovered, which might well be what Heidegger intended! After all, he held the view that a true thinker's task, is not to equip us with tradable opinions but to give us, instead, a pause for thought.