

Logos and Psychoanalysis:

The Role of Truth and Creativity in Heidegger's Conception of Language¹

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In recent years increasing interest in the relationship between language and psychoanalysis has gained influence in both philosophical and psychoanalytic publications. Yet, relatively little has been said about Martin Heidegger's important contribution to our understanding about the relationship between language and clinical practice, and the role that creativity lends to this endeavor. My aim in this essay is to explore the relationship between truth and creativity through the lens of Heidegger's conception of language, while exploring the enigmatic power of speech and the manner in which it is experienced by psychoanalysts and their patients.

According to Heidegger, human creativity should be understood as an act of revelation. The artist, for example, paints or writes in order to reveal something about the truth of our existence. The creative impulse is a means of unveiling what is ordinarily hidden from everyday awareness. Similarly, psychoanalysis is a means of revealing what is hidden, by chance or design, from ourselves — including the things that unbeknownst to ourselves, we conceal from ourselves and each other. The creative act in psychoanalysis enables us to touch the mystery of our existence by disclosing something about its nature. In the main, this is achieved by means of telling stories. The kind of storytelling this entails, however, doesn't require a special skill or even a predisposition to employing words in a particular fashion. According to Heidegger, the tradition of storytelling to which each of us belongs requires nothing more from us than simply talking to each other. The act of self-disclosure that this entails isn't as simple, however, as it sounds, because it requires talking in a certain way with a specific purpose in mind. First I shall explore how Heidegger's conception of

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language helps to explain its liberating function, and then turn to his views on creativity and its relevance to psychoanalytic practice.

Heidegger rejected the view that words merely serve to “represent” things in nature, a conception of language that reduces the function of speech to a composite of signs and symbols, rules of grammar, and forms of syntax. Moreover, the representational conception of language emphasizes subjectivity to such a degree that the use of language becomes inherently self-referential, epitomized by contemporary education. In the context of science, for example, it is impossible to abandon oneself to language and to experience what it is about because words are systematically “appropriated” in order to serve utilitarian goals. Heidegger insisted that if we hope to grasp what language is about we need to approach it from an altogether different perspective, by *undergoing* an experience with language in the act of using it — in the manner, for example, that you and I are doing at this moment.

According to Heidegger, the essential purpose of language is to reveal ourselves to each other. In other words, we use language to determine what we are about, to each other as well as ourselves. That we are already always doing this anyhow (though we may not know it) helps explain why we already know how to participate in psychoanalysis the first time we try, because it entails the ordinary use of words that everyone employs each day of their lives. But what does it mean to actually undergo an experience with language? Does such experience occur automatically? or is it something we have a hand in, that we are able to engage, heart and soul, or resist? Finally, what role does experience play in the act of invoking language? Is our experience of language merely a means to an end, or is there something about the nature of experience that lends to language its power to transform? Heidegger (1971a) addressed some these questions with the following:

To undergo an experience with something — be it a thing, a person, or a god — means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us. When we talk of “undergoing” an experience, we mean that the experience is not of our own making; to undergo here means rather to endure it, suffer it, receive it as it strikes us and submit to it. (p. 57)

This highly condensed passage suggests something about the nature of experience and, in turn, how ones experience of language may be conceived. But what does it tell us about the nature of language itself, and what does it tell us about the nature of experience if our relationship with language is indeed rooted in experience and not in a theoretical formulation of it? For one thing, the above passage suggests that experience, whatever the nature of that experience

Heidegger's Conception of Language

may be, never occurs “automatically.” Moreover, it implies that it is possible to *evade* an experience of a thing, person, or god — or, I might add, of language. On the other hand, if we undertake to undergo an experience with language, we will be obliged to approach it from an unsettling perspective, by *submitting* to it. In so doing, we are “struck” by it, then suffer and endure it until we find ourselves overwhelmed and eventually transformed by it.

If all of this is entailed in what it means to genuinely experience something, does this imply that some people have never *really* experienced language, though they use it every day? As shocking as this may seem, this is precisely what Heidegger is saying. When we use language to describe, order, and calculate — even when we use it to express our innermost feelings, in the context of psychotherapy or psychoanalysis — we’re not necessarily “submitting” to language and, hence, experiencing it as such. Instead, we are often simply using it to deal with things that we typically hold at a distance. As a matter of fact, we are necessarily obliged to hold language at arm’s length in order to use it. Of course, language is used by each and every one of us in a functional sort of way every day of our lives. It would be madness if we lost the ability to do so, for the loss of functional usage of words is a common feature of schizophrenia. But this inherently utilitarian function of language, useful though it may be, is a relatively impoverished relationship with language when compared to the kind of experience with language we are all capable of having.

Undergoing an experience of this nature is not an esoteric affair that only the privileged few can obtain. Neither does it require specialized knowledge or training. Yet, the technical languages learned at universities and institutes, including medical, psychological, even psychoanalytic, are even further removed from the kind of experience with language that Heidegger is talking about. Instead, he is referring to a dimension of language that each of us *already* inhabits, though we don’t necessarily realize it. When we undergo an experience with language in the manner that each of us is perfectly capable of doing, *language shows itself to us and envelopes us*. At such moments we no longer use language in the conventional sense, but enter “into” language by inhabiting it and succumbing to its power. According to Heidegger (1971a):

If it is true that man finds the proper abode of his existence in language whether he is aware of it or not then an experience we undergo with language will touch the innermost nexus of our existence. We who speak language may thereupon become transformed by such experiences, from one day to the next or in the course of time. (p. 57)

In other words, it is impossible to really experience language by merely using it as a vehicle for information or communication, however sophisticated or

complex such communication may be. Being disturbed by something that language conveys when informing us about it, as when we hear a distressing piece of news, for example, isn't the same thing as undergoing an experience with *language*. In order to experience language one must be touched by language itself, not the information it conveys. As Heidegger reminds us, when we experience language we necessarily suffer and endure it because, once experienced, nothing is ever the same. Though most of us have never thought about language in these terms, we are no strangers to its effects upon us. We all intuitively share a sense of this dimension to language when we acknowledge, for example, the degree to which we fear the hold language has over us. Because language is able to disturb the slumber of our existence without warning, we typically hold it back by employing a variety of ways of ignoring what it has to say. Our intrinsic anxiety about language and the words it prompts us to divulge without warning is a feature of every analytic treatment, especially when it circumvents our resistance to revealing more about ourselves than we intend.

How are mere words capable of such power in the first place? And even if we manage to overcome our fear of it, how is it possible to beckon language forth, putting our resistances aside by inviting it to take us on a momentous journey of self-transformation? According to Heidegger (1971a):

In experiences which we undergo with language, language itself brings itself to language. One would think that this happens anyway, any time anyone speaks. Yet at whatever time and in whatever way we speak a language, language itself never has the floor. Any number of things are given voice in speaking, above all what we are speaking about: a set of facts, an occurrence, a question, a matter of concern. Only because in everyday speaking, language does not bring itself to language but holds back, are we able simply to go ahead and speak a language, and so to deal with something and negotiate something by speaking. (p. 59)

In other words, language has to hold itself back in order for us to take from it what we require. Because language is always hovering on the periphery of our awareness, we find ourselves involved in a continuous dialectic of eliciting its presence through its absence, waiting for the proper moment to invite us in. Heidegger asks:

But when does language speak itself as language? Curiously enough, when we cannot find the right word for something that concerns us, carries us away, oppresses or encourages us. Then we leave unspoken what we have in mind and, without rightly giving it thought, undergo moments in which language itself has distantly and

Heidegger's Conception of Language

fleetingly touched us with its essential being. But when the issue is to put into language something which has never yet been spoken, then everything depends on whether language gives or withholds the appropriate word. (p. 59)

If language were simply comprised of words then the moment it escapes us would be when it is furthest away. But Heidegger proposes just the opposite: it is when words are most fleeting that the presence of language is felt. Though our experience of language occasions words, language cannot be reduced to words alone. That is why our experience of language is most poignant when words elude us, because that is precisely when it takes hold of our attention in a manner we cannot ignore.

The art of presence making itself felt through absence is the kind of experience with language that psychoanalysts take for granted whenever they admonish their patients to speak with no particular aim in mind when invoking the fundamental rule of analysis.² The “emptiness” of experience this admonition engenders lends to language its latent power as a therapeutic agent and accounts for its power to transform. This is why Heidegger’s views about language more closely approximate the conversations that occur in a psychoanalytic consulting room than the verbal conventions we typically employ in “polite” conversation, for example. Heidegger and Freud alike argued that civilized society has circumvented the latent power of language to disclose what we are about with customs of interpersonal discourse that inhibit spontaneous disclosure. What’s more, over the course of the past three centuries the evolution of science and technology have had such an incredible impact on culture that we have gradually lost something of the power words have traditionally enjoyed in the theatre and literature, for example. These age-old vehicles for self-awareness have been modernized and marginalized by a frenzy of electronic and other media that are hypnotic and mind-numbing in their ability to lull what is left of our minds into a slumber that we mistake for self-edification and self-knowledge.

This is one of the reasons why the means through which contemporary culture usurps the power of language occupies such an important role in Heidegger’s philosophy.³ Some of these developments are relatively recent, while others can be traced back to the etymological roots of words that are so familiar we seldom give them a second thought. Whereas some of the modern

²For a more thorough exploration of this technical principle, see Thompson, 1998.

³For a more thorough discussion of Heidegger’s conception of language and its relevance to psychoanalysis, see Thompson, 1985, pp. 150-192.

corruptions of language have been effected by so-called instruments of communication, entertainment, and education, others go back to the Latinization (and in Heidegger's view, corruption) of concepts that were Greek in origin. There is no better example of what Heidegger is referring to than when we look at the etymological roots of the English "word" and the respective applications that Greek and Roman cultures derived from this term.

The term "word," for example, derives from the Old English *wordig* which in turn comes from the Latin *uerbum* and *verbum*, both of which give rise to verb, verbatim, and proverbial. The Latin *verbum* is also cognate with the Latin *legere* which literally means "to gather." More colloquially, *legere* is a collection of words, or a story or legend. A legend is literally a gathering or collection of words that produces a story. The words lesson, legible, intellect, and collect are also derivatives of *legere*, each of which pertain to how words come together to establish meaning. According to Heidegger, the Latinization of the Greek *legein* (from which *legere* is derived) has fostered an intellectual bias in the term that is evident, for example, in the English words lesson, legible, and intellect, all of which emphasize the cognitive and scholarly use of words, which we now associate with modern education — much, in Heidegger's view, to our detriment.

Now I shall compare what we have gleaned from the Latin *legere* with the Greek *legein*, from which it derives. The Greek *legein* gives rise to the word *Logos* which plays a pivotal role in Heidegger's late philosophy. English words that are derived from the Greek *legein* and *Logos* include analogy, apology, eulogy, dialogue, and surprisingly, the word "saying." Compared with the words that are cognate with the Latin *legere* — such as intellect — the Greek *legein* suggests terms that emphasize the simple utterance of words, often addressed to a group of people. Though the Latin *legere* and the Greek *legein* each literally means "to gather," the Latin emphasizes the relationship between words and mentation whereas the Greek emphasizes the purpose for which words are generally gathered or grouped together in the first place: in order to be heard. A legend, for example, is a story — a gathering of words — that is told to a gathering of people; a story that is typically handed down through generations.

Heidegger was also struck by how the term *Logos* was used in the days of Heraclitus, who lived around 500 B.C. Usually translated as word, thought, or saying, in Heraclitus's day *Logos* also meant to lay down, to lay in order, to arrange, to gather oneself, or to lay asleep. So how did the notion, "to lay," come to mean saying, talking, and discourse?

When we lay down to sleep, we gather ourselves before falling to sleep, in the same way, for example, that a diver gathers him- or herself before taking a plunge. Gathering isn't the same as merely amassing or jumbling things together, as in stuffing a bag of groceries. Gathering involves a selection and a

Heidegger's Conception of Language

sorting of that which we gather together. This explains why the words “laying” and “telling” both derive from the Greek *legein*, because when telling a story the appropriate words fall into place, without our having to *think* them.

Heidegger suggests that the essential relationship between words and language is disclosed in one of the most famous and enigmatic fragments of Heraclitus’s writings. This fragment was the first in a collection of a hundred or so surviving sayings from which the entirety of his philosophy as we know it today is derived. The fragment reads:

When you have listened, not to me but to the *Logos*,
It is wise to agree that all things are one.

This fragment has spawned literally dozens of interpretations and even the translations from the original Greek into other languages are equally varied. The meaning that Heidegger gives *Logos* in turn formed his views about the nature of thought, poetry, and creativity. He interprets Heraclitus’s fragment as meaning that when you truly *listen* to what words (*Logos*) have to say, you will be in agreement with the “order of things” and feel at one with creation; i.e., with Being. In other words, when we are genuinely attentive to language what we hear isn’t literally conveyed “in” the words that are transmitted between us or even by the speaker him- or herself. Instead, there is a higher truth that we instinctively seek from each other whenever we engage in dialogue. Ultimately, what we seek is a form of salvation, the kind we sometimes experience when reading a work of poetry.

Yet, we spend most of our time denying the very thing we long for the most. Oftentimes we speak to each other in a way that virtually ignores the *Logos* — we talk “about” things but don’t speak to nor really hear anybody. Heidegger calls this way of talking “idle chatter,” or gossip. We pass words along with a complacency as to the truthfulness of what we are saying to each other. Moreover, we treat the words that we utter and that are uttered to us in turn as though they harbor no intrinsic significance. Instead of employing conversation to reveal what we mean to each other, we use it to distract ourselves from that which matters the most: mutual recognition.

What do these thoughts about the nature of language tell us about the nature of creativity, poetry and psychoanalysis? Poetry and language are inextricably linked in Heidegger’s philosophy and are fundamental to his views about the nature of art and the work art entails. But what is the “work” in question: the art object or the work entailed in creating the object? Remember that in Heidegger’s view the purpose of language is to reveal the truth about our existence. According to Heidegger (1971b):

M. Guy Thompson, PhD

The [art] work's createdness . . . can be grasped only in terms of the process of creation. Thus . . . we must consent . . . to go into the activity of the artist in order to arrive at the origin of the work of art. (p. 58)

In other words, the work of art, properly speaking, isn't the art object, *per se*, but the work that artists perform while creating the art work. Creativity is embodied in the act of creation rather than the "thing" created, or even the talent that is utilized in creating it. The work of the artist — that which is "at work" in the art work — is, according to Heidegger, an experience (*Erlebnis*), or a "happening;" not just any happening, but a happening of truth. This is why the truly creative person can never be reduced to someone who possesses a talent for painting pretty pictures or penning a catchy phrase, but rather someone who is able to say something truthful about what it means to be human.⁴ This means that the revelation of truth and the act of creativity are mutually interdependent. But what does this tell us about the nature of creativity itself? According to Heidegger (1971b):

To create is to cause something to emerge as a thing that has been brought forth. The work's becoming a work is a way in which truth becomes and happens. (p. 60)

How, then, does Heidegger's depiction of creativity complement one's capacity for undergoing an experience with language? For one thing, it deprives the artist of the illusion that he orchestrates the art work by acts of will. In the same manner that experiencing language entails yielding to what we hear language saying, artists similarly *serve* the work that their creativity calls on them to perform. In the same way that words beckon us to hear, the artist is called upon to disclose through his work that which he is able to see. In other words, creativity is a manner of seeing, and then speaking to what is seen.

Yet of all the arts, Heidegger believed that poetry was the highest because it exemplifies the achievement of what words, often in the most ordinary circumstances, are able to convey. Heidegger even proposed that all the arts are essentially "poetic" (i.e., *poesis*), regardless the medium employed.

All art, as the letting happen of the advent of the truth of what is, is, as such, *essentially poetry*. The nature of art, on which both the art work and the artist depend, is the setting-itself-into-work of truth. It is due

⁴For a more thorough discussion of Heidegger's conception of truth and its relevance to psychoanalysis, see Thompson, 1994, pp. 51-92.

Heidegger's Conception of Language

to art's poetic nature that, in the midst of what is, art breaks open an open space, in whose openness everything is other than usual. (p. 72)

Every art form endeavors to tell us something. But just as important as the speaking of that which we seek is the time we permit ourselves to elicit insight and inspiration. Art unfolds over time because it is a creature of time, evidenced not only by the eras to which we assign its treasures, but also our personal appreciation of art, based upon our constantly evolving interpretation of it. Moreover, we take pains as a culture to protect the art work over the passage of time and preserve it precisely because its relationship to time is so intrinsic to the value we confer upon it at a given moment.

Art, as the setting-into-work of truth, is poetry. Not only the creation of the work is poetic, but equally poetic, though in its own way, is the preserving of the work; for a work is in actual effect as a work only when we remove ourselves from our commonplace routine and move into what is disclosed by the work, so as to bring our own nature itself to take a stand in the truth of what is. (pp. 74-75)

Art invites us to see what is already in front of us and implores us to take the time to hear what is always in the process of being disclosed. This, I would argue, is the principal goal of psychoanalysis as well: to take the time we give ourselves to reflect on what our lives are about, by listening to what our words reveal to us about the enigmatic state of our existence.

To the degree that we are willing to allow, words hold the power to mesmerize, startle, bemuse, cajole, and ultimately deliver us to that singular form of experience that defines our discourse with others. For Heidegger, no one single individual epitomized the power that words are able to convey more persuasively than the German poet, Friedrich Hölderlin. Hölderlin possessed an extraordinary capacity to lure his audience into spaces that were metaphysical yet perfectly natural — the kind of spaces into which every psychoanalyst aspires to lure his patients. Among English-speaking poets, Yeats probably comes closest to inspiring a similar effect: to both mesmerize and liberate us, if only momentarily, from the startling pace of the modern and postmodern eras.

If poetry has a discernible function, Heidegger would argue that it is to help us ponder the unpredictable manner in which each of our lives unfolds, by dwelling on it. In one of Heidegger's most frequently cited poems, Hölderlin says (cited in Heidegger, 1971b):

May, if life is sheer toil, a man

Lift his eyes and say: so
I too wish to be? Yes. As long as Kindness,
The Pure, still stays with his heart, man
Not unhappily measures himself
Against the godhead. Is God unknown?
Is he manifest like the sky? I'd sooner
Believe the latter. It's the measure of man.
Full of merit, yet poetically, man
Dwells on this earth. But no purer
Is the shade of the starry night,
If I might put it so, than
Man, who's called an image of the godhead.
Is there a measure on earth? There is
None. (pp. 219-220)

Heidegger takes this to mean that our purpose on earth is to “dwell” on our existence and ponder its meaning in thoughtful consideration of the mystery that each person’s life entails. In order to appreciate what life is about and experience it at the deepest level we are obliged to let go of the willful conceits that characterize the we live in, by coming to terms with the unseen forces that manipulate and (to a degree we will likely never comprehend) determine our destiny. This device couldn’t be more out of step from the technology-ridden zeal that has come to characterize modern science, including medicine, psychology, and even psychoanalysis.

When Hölderlin proposes that “poetically, man dwells,” he doesn’t mean we are all poets, but that our existence and all it entails is basically a poetic affair . . . or at any rate, it can be, if only we take the time to dwell on it, without hubris. Poetry is the ultimate discourse because it captures what every attempt at discourse aspires to. In order for discourse to be poetic, we must permit the words that we utter assume a life of their own. Thus poetry, says Heidegger, “is not the deliberate action of a subject, but the opening up of a human being, out of its captivity in that which is, to the openness of Being” (p. 67).

The selection of words that are gathered into a composition of poetry is no more “willful” than the colors envisioned by a painter. Words “come” to us, from the outer recesses of experience, when we invite language to speak, and then getting out of its way. This also describes how words serve their function in therapy. Words cannot work their spell if we get in “front” of language by ordering it about with plans, agendas, and treatment strategies, no matter how clever or ingenious such stratagems are. The more will we expend in our efforts to change our patients by manipulating their thinking the more estranged from

Heidegger's Conception of Language

language they become and the less likely they will discover a way to reach an accommodation with their suffering.

People seek therapy because they are caught in a web of anxiety that they are no longer able to bear, but the answers they seek are evasive and the solutions they obtain are fleeting. Psychoanalysts, like poets, offer a space where we are invited to collect our thoughts and to ponder what our lives are about. We take some time from our impossible schedules and, with no specific purpose in view, dwell on the things that concern us. We engage in conversation, yet the things we say are of no intrinsic importance. What is important is that we take what time we permit ourselves to take stock of what experience has to say — and that we endure the angst of what it tells us for as long as we are able to allow.

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