

The Point of Language in Heidegger's Thinking: A Call for the Revival of Formal Indication

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In *Being and Time*, Heidegger insists that philosophy is not the discovery of free-standing facts or truths that can ground inferences in unadulterated, fixed foundations. Philosophy can only work within already operating elements (practices, social relations, language uses, and inherited traditions) that cannot be put aside in thinking about the world. Philosophical reflection, therefore, is “interpretation” of pre-reflective elements of Dasein’s world-involvement. In section 32 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger calls interpretation the articulation of Dasein’s pre-ontological understanding of being; and articulation is then fleshed out in Sections 33 and 34, which deal with assertion (*Aussage*), discourse (*Rede*) and language (*Sprache*). Interpretation therefore is essentially a matter of language, and in particular a matter of philosophical language.

For Heidegger, language indicates (*anzeigt*) and points out or shows (*zeigt*) something in the world. In a later work Heidegger tells us that “man is that being who has his being by pointing to what is, and that particular beings manifest themselves as such by this pointing” (GA 8: 153/149). The essence of language is a “saying as pointing,” which cannot be captured by signification, since all “signs” emerge out of this more original indicative showing (GA 12: 242/OWL 123). Philosophical language can exhibit a comparable pointing function with respect to Heidegger’s notion of formal indication (*formale Anzeige*), which I think is one of his great contributions to philosophy.¹

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger does not offer any explicit discussion of formal indication, yet the importance of this notion for his phenomenology has been made clear by the explicit accounts in lecture courses surrounding the publication of *Being and Time*.² For Heidegger, all philosophical concepts are formal indications (GA 29/30: 425/293), “formal” in gathering the focal meaning of lived experiences, and “indications” in pointing to (*an-zeigen*) engaged circumstances and practices that cannot be fully captured in, or exhausted by, formal concepts. Philosophical concepts themselves arise out of “factual life experience” and then point back to tasks of performance (GA 60: 8–9, 62–63/6–7, 43).³ Formal indications mirror the contingencies of facticity and accordingly are not “exact” but rather “vacillating, vague, manifold, and fluctuating” (GA 60: 3/3). Such notions are therefore shot through with the finitude of existence, and so philosophical concepts cannot be construed as *a priori* necessary structures or fixed universals that can ground thinking for demonstrative techniques (GA 63: 80/62).⁴ A formal indication, such as care (*Sorge*), is a verbal experiment in sense-making that simply *shows* a region of existence, in a manner that does not operate according to traditional conceptual criteria that are presumed to govern or ground thinking (definitions, universals, necessary and sufficient conditions). Rather than *giving* sense to otherwise inchoate experience, formal indications are meant to gather the already implicit sense of factual experience.⁵

Although factual life is both the origin and destination of philosophical thinking, everyday tendencies present obstacles to the emergence of philosophy (GA 60: 15/11). Ordinary understanding is given in moods and practical familiarity, and here things are known by acquaintance (*bekannt*) but unrecognized (*unerkannt*) in their being because we *lack* concepts (GA 3: 232–34/159). The everyday understanding of being blocks philosophical insights because of its pervasiveness, constancy, indeterminacy, and unquestionableness (GA 3: 234–35/160). Philosophy amounts to an illuminating disruption of factual life by interrogation, and philosophical questioning as such does not arise by “argument” but by its own factual experience of

primal moods such as anxiety and wonder.⁶ Such moods present a radical disorientation that nevertheless prepares the possibility of a reorientation through the formation of concepts that 1) articulate the determinate significance of factual experience (that is to say, interpretation), and yet 2) retain the elements of finitude given in factual life and the interrogative openness of philosophy's own inception. In summation, philosophical concepts (*Begriffe*) are "comprehensive concepts" (*In-begriffe*) that comprehend (*begreifen*) – at once – both something "whole" (*Ganz*) and human "philosophizing existence," which comes from being "gripped" (*er-griffen*) by the import of philosophical questions in primal moods (GA 29/30: 9-13/7-9).

It is important to recognize that Heidegger's early phenomenology insists upon both the necessity and the limitations of philosophical concept formation. For Heidegger, "philosophy is something living only where it comes to language and expresses itself," and the language of concepts is the "essence and power" of philosophy (GA 29/30: 422/291). Yet once expressed, concepts are prone to a fundamental misunderstanding. Because of the reflective "idleness" of philosophy, concepts can be taken as something *vorhanden*, as ascertainable entities in and of themselves, rather than formal gatherings of a "specifically determined and directed questioning" having to do with a "transformation of human Dasein" (GA 29/30: 423, 426/292, 294). Heidegger clearly states that "formal characterization does not give us the essence" (GA 29/30: 425/293). The remedy for this problem is to understand formal concepts as indications of the *task* of philosophy that can only be exhibited and played out in life. Traditional philosophy can be diagnosed as fixing on the formal content of concepts without their indicative character (GA 60: 62-63/43), and the danger of this tendency, Heidegger tells us, is a persistent possibility to which *everyone* is prone, including those who, with Heidegger, are trying to expose the danger (GA 29/30: 429, 433-34/296, 299-300).

LANGUAGE AND BEING

Since the essence of philosophy is conceptual language, a key question concerns the relation of language to being. In “Letter on Humanism,” Heidegger indicates his conviction in the later thought that language is the “house of being” (GA 9: 313/239), which omits any radical distinction between language and being, since language is “the clearing-concealing advent of being itself” (GA 9: 326/249). Heidegger’s early writings seem less radical in that language in *Being and Time* is presented as *one* of Dasein’s fundamental existential bearings (along with understanding and mood), and since various analyses of assertoric truth seem to differentiate the language of assertions from a more original experience of being-in-the-world. But I am not convinced that such a periodic shift on the question of language is as pronounced as we might think.

In section 33 of *Being and Time*, Heidegger discusses assertion (*Aussage*) as a derivative mode of interpretation. Here he seems to confine the analysis of assertions to the theoretical sense of propositional judgment (*Urteil*). Heidegger delineates three elements of an assertion: pointing out (*Aufzeigen*), predication, and communication (*Mitteilung*), the last of which is called a “speaking forth” (*Heraus-sage*). He then states that assertion is thoroughly embedded in concerned being-in-the-world, the various kinds of factual fore-having that make assertion possible. He reiterates the *zuhanden-vorhanden* dynamic and says that assertions turn *zuhanden* entities into *vorhanden* “objects” of reference. In this way the existential-hermeneutical as-structure of being-in-the-world is modified into the apophantical as-structure of discrete things with properties, cut off from the wider field of concerned involvements (GA 2: 210/SZ 158).

This section of the text immediately precedes the section on language (§34), and even the analysis of assertion in section 33 brings up language in a manner relevant to my discussion. Heidegger writes that *in between* wholly absorbed concerned dealings and propositional assertions about *vorhanden* entities there is a range of “intermediate assertions about the happenings in the environment.” And these spoken

sentences cannot be traced back to theoretical propositions because they have their own disclosive meaning in those contexts (GA 2: 210/SZ 158).⁷ It is clear that language is a pervasive force throughout Dasein's being-in-the-world, because in section 34 Heidegger tells us that only from an analytical standpoint do we *now* come to the question of language, because obviously it had already been operative in all the previous discussions of mood, understanding, interpretation, and assertion. Language as communicative discourse is *equiprimordial* with all other elements of Dasein's disclosedness (GA 2: 213/SZ 161). The hermeneutical as-structures preceding apophantical as-structures cannot be non-linguistic if the hermeneutical is a matter of interpretation, which is a matter of articulation in language. Indeed, not only is language equiprimordial *with* understanding and mood, at one point Heidegger says that understanding and mood are "determined equiprimordially" *by* language (GA 2: 177/SZ 133).

Heidegger reiterates this discussion of language in *Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics* (GA 29/30: 492-507/339-49). In line with the intermediate assertions mentioned in *Being and Time*, Heidegger talks of "spontaneous utterances" (e.g., "the board is badly positioned") in which we "speak out of" disclosive "wholes" in everyday contexts of meaning, which function "without any instruction or theoretical reflection," in other words, "specific contexts" of speech that logic and epistemology overlook (GA 29/30: 502-504/346-47). These contexts display Dasein's "pre-logical being open for beings, *out of which* every logos must speak," a "pre-logical manifestness of beings *in* the logos" (GA 29/30: 505/348, em). The ambiguity about language is clearly shown in these two passages: a pre-logical openness to being *out of* which language speaks, together with this openness manifested *in* language. As I read him, Heidegger in *Being and Time* is not radically differentiating language and disclosedness of being, because a more original *orientation* toward language allows for bridging the difference, even and especially with respect to the question of truth, understood as disclosure or unconcealment. If I am right, then Heidegger's espousal of a primal "pre-propositional" truth is *not* something pre-linguistic.⁸

Pre-propositional truth can involve immediate speech acts that are therefore not prior to language, but rather prior to the conversion of living utterances into abstract, theoretical references called “propositions.” This would help explain the mixed messages in Heidegger’s discussion of assertion in *Being and Time*. In a concrete circumstance, the utterance “The hammer is too heavy” gives a primordial interpretation “not in a theoretical statement but in an action of circumspective concern.” Yet this action is something “expressed,” a linguistic act that need not be construed as an “assertion” in a technical propositional sense (GA 2: 209/SZ 157). Heidegger suggests a non-technical sense in referring to an experiential “holding” (*Behalten*) of an assertion that is not a representational procedure, but “is itself a way of being-in-the-world” (GA 2: 83/SZ 62). In direct situations of communicative speech, language can be immediately world-disclosive in a “non-propositional” sense, without our wondering about the relationship between propositions and things. If someone says to me, “This is the right tool to use,” the effect of disclosiveness here does not follow a correspondence-linkage, but rather appropriate showing or pointing out, *in* language.⁹ It helps to notice Heidegger’s claim that *in practice*, language in general and even signs can operate in a *zuhanden* manner of immediate disclosedness (GA 2: 109–10, 214, 296–97/SZ 82, 161, 224).¹⁰ We are told in another early lecture course that linguistic expression (*Sprachausdruck*) “need not be simply theoretical or even object-specific, but is primordially living and experiential [*erlebend*]” (GA 56/57: 117/98).¹¹ Assertions (*Aussagen*) are *acts* of meaning (*Bedeutungsakte*), which are an “expressedness” (*Ausdrücklichkeit*) of lived experiences or comportments (*Verhaltungen*) – *by way of* their meaning (GA 20: 74/56). An example would be an assertion “in and for a practical function” (GA 21: 156/131), as in the tool example above.¹² Accordingly we can summarize by saying that a hermeneutics of factual life includes a pre-propositional dimension of *factual language*. Likewise, formal indication can point not only to factual being-in-the-world but to factual language as well, which I will expand upon shortly.

Language and being, therefore, are not separate spheres. Not only does language enact the as-structures that articulate the fore-structures of Dasein's understanding, even an "experience" of something without speaking carries articulation with it if it is a meaningful experience (GA 2: 198-99/SZ 149). Even our "simplest perceptions," Heidegger says, are

already expressed, even more, are *interpreted* in a certain way. . . . What is primary and original here? It is not so much that we see the objects and things but rather that we first talk about them. To put it more precisely: We do not say what we see, but rather the reverse, we see what one says about the matter. (GA 20: 75/56)

We can grasp this idea more deeply if we consider child development and language acquisition, which help shape a child's meaningful engagement with the world.¹⁵

THE *KEHRE*

Heidegger clearly takes *Being and Time* to be a philosophical work that aims for a conceptual grasp of the meaning of being (GA 2: 9-10/SZ 7). The famous *Kehre* announcement in "Letter on Humanism" can be understood in the context of conceptualization. The "failure" of *Being and Time* is attributed to its *language* and not its underlying project; and the failure was not exactly its language but its participation in the language of metaphysics (GA 9: 327-28/249-50). Later in the essay Heidegger says something more: *Being and Time* was laboring to draw out a radical "phenomenological seeing," but in order for his work to gain traction and be "understandable for existing philosophy," it could *only* be expressed "within the horizon of existing philosophy and its current use of terms" (GA 9: 357/271). Moreover, he says that the conceptual language of *Being and Time* was attempting a thinking that is "more rigorous than the conceptual" (GA 9: 357/271). But he came to believe that his terminology would lead "inevitably into error," for the most part because the concepts were not "rethought" by *readers* according to the particular *Sache* of the work; the concepts were read

only “according to the established terminology in its customary meaning” (GA 9: 357/271).

Although Heidegger does not say so specifically, it seems clear to me that the *Kehre* in some respects had to do with the failure, not of his early philosophical concepts, but of his effort to have these concepts read as formal indications (as a conceptual language pointing to a “more rigorous” phenomenological apprehension of non-conceptual factual life). Accordingly, one way to understand Heidegger’s account of the “end of philosophy” is his capitulation on the project of formally indicative concepts; and we should recall his early admonition that anyone, including his own circle, can lapse into the seduction of formal concentration at the expense of the indicative force of concepts.

In this light perhaps we can better understand Heidegger’s subsequent path that shifted in the direction of “poetical thinking.” Although poetry and thinking are not identical, they belong together as a reciprocal “Saying” that tries to bring to language the pre-theoretical meaning of human dwelling in a finite world, as well as that which withdraws and conceals itself in the finite advent of being (GA 7: 196–97/218). Thinking takes up where philosophy leaves off and it is intimately joined with the power of poetic imagery to embody a (factual) concreteness that concepts by nature cannot directly express, even if revised as formal indication (could we call poetry “material indication”?). With terms like *Ereignis*, the Fourfold, giving, and thanking, Heidegger experiments with a language of thinking that shifts from conceptualization to poetic resonance.

In the *Protokoll* to the 1962 text *On Time and Being* (GA 14: 33–66/25–54) – which is called an experiment (*Versuch*) meant to open up the *Sache* of the lecture, *Ereignis*, by way of a *conversation* between participants – we hear that ontic “models” in the lecture (e.g., words such as “extending” and “giving”) in relation to the matter of *Ereignis* are “that from which thinking must necessarily take off as a natural pre-requisite,” because “the language of thinking can only start from [*ausgehen*] natural speech” (GA 14: 60/50, tm).¹⁴ The relation between natural language and the language of thinking requires an “essential interpretation” of language (GA 14: 60/50, tm). Heidegger gives priority

to natural language over formalized language, as long as “natural” is understood not naturalistically but according to the self-manifesting character of *phusis* (GA 12: 252/OWL 132). Although language in principle has an ontic character, ontological thinking must use ontic models because it can only make something manifest through words. We need a language that can speak the “simplicity” (*Einfache*) of language, in such a way that “the language of thinking precisely makes visible the limitations of metaphysical language.” Natural language

is not at first metaphysical. Rather our interpretation of ordinary language is metaphysical, bound to Greek ontology. But man’s relation to language could transform itself analogous to the change of the relation to being. (GA 14: 61/51, tm)

Yet one cannot talk *about* this (*darüber reden*). It can only be decided performatively, “by whether such a saying succeeds or not” (GA 14: 61/51, tm).¹⁵ We are told that the lecture on *Ereignis* can only “point” to an *experience* (GA 14: 33, 63/25–26, 54). Heidegger often addresses such a matter as an experience of *language*, which in another text is called a transformation of our *relation* to language, not the creation of new words or phrases (GA 12: 255/OWL 135). Yet appropriate words and phrases can indicatively *point* to the *Sache* of thinking.

LANGUAGE AND THE QUESTION OF BEING

I now want to connect the discussion of formal indication and factual language with Heidegger’s ongoing investigation of the *Seinsfrage*. From early on Heidegger wanted to penetrate and overcome traditional conceptions of being – wherein being was understood as present-centered, as a reified reduction to beings, as captured by rational universals, or as an empty generality – in favor of a more original conception of being understood as the finite temporal emergence of factual meaning. Yet it is important to ask how traditional ontology came to its conceptions. Among Heidegger’s treatments of this question, the most relevant for my purposes is given in *Introduction to Metaphysics* (GA

40), particularly Chapter Two, “On the Grammar and Etymology of the Word ‘Being,’” which has not received much attention in the scholarship, and which will help develop my previous suggestion that formal indication can involve a pointing to factual language.¹⁶

Right before this chapter, Heidegger says: “For us the question about *being* will be most intimately intertwined with the question about *language*” (GA 40: 55/56). Indeed, Heidegger elevates language to such an extent that earlier in the text ontology itself is called “the effort to put being into words” (GA 40: 44/45). At the start of the chapter in question, Heidegger tells us that the grammatical analysis will give a hint or indication (*Hinweis*) of how to understand the history and meaning of philosophical words (GA 40: 56/57). Although grammar has become a regulation and reification of language, an investigation of the word “being” must *begin* with a grammatical account, which is not a barren or irrelevant game, because it leads us to open up the essential relation between being and language, yet in a way that cannot be reduced to grammatical forms (GA 40: 56–58/57–59). The philosophical concept of being, *das Sein*, is the result of converting a verb (which is temporally tensed) into a noun (like *das Gehen*), a verbal substantive derived from the infinitive form (in English, literally “the to be”).¹⁷

The verbal infinitive is crucial for Heidegger’s analysis. Grammatical inflections of verbs and nouns identify and formalize the different facets of word usage that reflect the various ways in which things, actions, and temporality are engaged.¹⁸ The “declension” of verbs names a “decline” or deviation from a standard form (first-person singular) that “stands” as a reference point for grammatical specifications. The infinitive is a unique kind of declension compared to other kinds that can express specific forms of speech (such as person, number, tense, voice, and mood). The infinitive (from the Latin *infinitivus*) expresses no specific form; it is non-finite or in-definite, thereby rendering the general meaning of the verb in the abstract, independent of specific uses (GA 40: 69–73/72–75). The verbal substantive completes the abstraction by identifying a verb (*sein*) as a noun by way of the definite article (*das Sein*).¹⁹ The indefiniteness of the infinitive thus becomes *fixed* in

isolation from the verb inflections and their temporal character (GA 40: 73-74/76). The nominal isolation of the verbal meaning of being provides a linguistic background that made possible the traditional conceptions of being that Heidegger is interrogating – and that adds weight to his own efforts to correlate being and time, since being is originally a temporal (verb) construction.²⁰ The verbal substantive “being” (*das Sein*), as an “object” of inquiry, allows a reification of being and a shift away from particular uses of the verb “to be” that mark its more factual meaning – I am tired, you were wrong, and so on.²¹

Continuing this line of analysis, Heidegger offers an etymological investigation of the word being/*Sein* (GA 40: 75-79/77-81). From Sanskrit and Indo-Germanic roots, Heidegger suggests the original notions of living, emerging, and abiding as three stem meanings of the word being.²² When the verbal substantive fixes and objectifies the abstract character of the infinitive, it affords a covering up (*Verwischung*) of the verb’s “definite modes of meaning,” which completes the evacuation of the three original stem meanings from the word “being.”

In Chapter Three of the text, “The Question of the Essence of Being,” Heidegger’s linguistic venture comes to a head. He asks: Should the abstract “emptiness” of the philosophical word “being” turn us away from it toward particular beings? The answer is no, presumably because that would remain caught in the transformation of the verb form into a nominalization that now can take the name of a “being” (an entity that “is”). The purported emptiness of being stems from a linguistic manipulation, which has shaped the grammatical fate of a *word* “that is worn out, yet remains full” (GA 40: 84/87).

Following Aristotle, Heidegger says that being is not a genus, of which individual beings would count as examples. Yet Heidegger does allow that the word “being” is a general or universal name (*allgemeiner Name*), and understanding the meaning of this word is an “incomparable” task of the highest necessity (GA 40: 86/89). Its generality or universality should not turn us simply toward particulars: “We should remain there, and raise the uniqueness of this name and its naming to the level of knowledge [*Wissen*]” (GA 40: 86/89). This is an important

moment in the text. The grammatical transformation indicated in the word “being” is not rejected or regretted; yet as a *name* it will be redirected back toward its namesake, the verb “to be” and its inflections.

Heidegger tells us that the meaning of being is correlated with the *word* “being” in all its inflections, in a manner that is “essentially different from the relation of all other nouns and verbs in language to the beings that are said in them” (GA 40: 94/96). He illustrates with various sentences: the lecture is in the auditorium; the peasant is in the fields; the book is mine; he is dead; the enemy is in retreat; the dog is in the garden; “Over all the peaks / is peace.” What is evident are the many different *meanings* – from the everyday to the poetic – gathered in the word “is,” which are really evident only if we take the “is” not in a formal manner as having something like a predicative or existential function, but in a concrete manner pertaining to real usage in life (which I earlier called “factual language”). As Heidegger says, the meaning of the “is” in those sentences emerges only if we engage the word “as it actually happens, that is, as spoken each time [*jeweils*] from out of a particular situation, task, and mood, and not as mere propositions and stale examples in a grammar book” (GA 40: 95/97). Heidegger offers that in each of those sentences “being opens up to us in a manifold way” (GA 40: 96/98).²³ Such openings are more in line with the three root meanings of “living,” “emerging,” and “abiding” than with an abstract concept of being. In this respect being is *not* an empty word, because “the ‘is’ evinces in its saying a rich manifoldness of meaning” (GA 40: 97/99). Without our having to meditate on the philosophical meaning of being, the “is” in its manifold meanings “simply wells up in our saying,” and not in an arbitrary manner.²⁴

Then Heidegger asks what he calls a decisive question (GA 40: 97/99): Is the manifold meaning of the “is” based simply on the different meanings expressed in each sentence, or does the “is” – as *being* – itself make *possible* our access to those meanings? He indicates that for now this question can be left open. But it is obvious that the second option is what drives Heidegger as a thinker. At the end of *Being and Time*, after the phenomenological treatment of Dasein’s being-in-the-world, care, being-toward-death, and temporality has been filled out,

Heidegger asks if this has prepared us for an understanding of the meaning of being in general, as that which makes *possible* Dasein's disclosive understanding of being (GA 2: 576/SZ 437). Here Heidegger is following a familiar philosophical agenda of searching for a singular term that can assume some kind of primary, fundamental position.²⁵ For me, this is where the trouble starts.

It was only after I learned about formal indication that *Being and Time* opened up to me in a powerful way. I have never been able to understand why Heidegger did not provide an explicit treatment of formal indication in *Being and Time*, as he did in some of the surrounding lecture courses. In any case, what I have to say may amount to a departure from Heidegger's thinking, but that remains to be seen. I read every basic concept in *Being and Time* as a formal indication. Some concepts are nothing more than indications of something factual, while others gather a focal *meaning* of factual experience. Language (*Sprache*), for instance, simply indicates language uses, while *Rede* gathers the important sense of communicative talk. Care (*Sorge*) likewise carries a focal meaning, particularly the twofold sense of caring and anxious worry (GA 2: 264/SZ 199).

I also want to say that "being" is itself a formal indication, which came to me more clearly reading the two chapters from *Introduction to Metaphysics* treated in this essay. When Heidegger affirms both the verbal substantive "being" and the manifold meanings of the verb "to be" covered up by that grammatical substantive, it seems to me that such a conjunction perfectly fits the notion of formal indication.²⁶ The word "being" can simply *point* to the various uses illustrated in the sentences cited earlier, thereby pointing not only to factual life but factual language as well. Yet this indicative function would not be sufficient because Heidegger's phenomenology always presses on to bring out a deeper meaning of being opened up by temporality, anxiety, and being-toward-death – namely that the meaning of being is radically finite, in the sense of being interwoven with nonbeing, absence, and concealment.²⁷ But any such deepening of the meaning of being would still involve an indicative relation to a factual *experience* of, and *encounter* with, finitude – including factual *linguistic* annunciations of

finitude in real-life uses of the verb “to be” (think of the impact in 1963 of “President Kennedy is dead” – compared to the lifeless logical deployment of the proposition “All men are mortal”).

LANGUAGE, FORMAL INDICATION, AND THE *SACHE*

There is a primal matter for thought, a *Sache*, that runs through Heidegger’s entire course of exploring the *Seinsfrage*, which I would characterize as follows: being understood as the temporal structure of the emergence of meaning, which is finite in being infused with absence, concealment, and limits, which is gathered in language, and which exceeds beings, ourselves included, as the processual environment *in* which human beings find themselves and dwell in disclosive understanding. It is the excessive character of being that prompted Heidegger to look past human subjectivity and announce the processual environment with words like *Ereignis*, *Lichtung*, and *Gelassenheit*. With adequate acclimation to the *Sache*, I think that any of these words will do, even the word “being.”²⁸ I say this because any such word is simply *indicative* of the *Sache*, along with the factual world and experiential engagement that (I would hope) can never be separated from Heidegger’s project of thought, even the most meditative musings in the later writings. In other words, I want to say that any of the keywords mentioned above should be read as formal indications – which means that such notions are *nothing more than words*, understood as “gathering points” that gesture away from themselves toward the full sense of the *Sache* as I have described it.

As noted earlier, Heidegger had warned about the danger of missing the indicative function of philosophical concepts by getting absorbed in formal concepts alone – a warning that applied to his own efforts as well. I want to reinforce this warning with respect to some tendencies in the later Heidegger and in our own posture as Heidegger scholars. Inspired by Heidegger’s grammatical investigations in *Introduction to Metaphysics*, I want to examine the way in which the grammar of Heidegger’s sentences (and our own) can prompt a regrettable divergence from the indicative character of philosophical words.

From the start, Heidegger's investigations insisted on the "ontological difference" between being and beings, which at least in the early phenomenology carried a twofold sense: 1) being pertains to meaning and not entities per se; and 2) meaning is constituted by a negative dimension that exceeds beings and meaning, which shows the radical finitude of being. The ontological difference prompted Heidegger to search for a language that could give voice to the difference, which is named in words or phrases such as "being itself," "being as such," "being as being," and "beyng," followed by later words such as *Ereignis* and *Lichtung*.²⁹ In any case, the difference between being and beings naturally prompts us to put our attention on being as *distinct* from beings. But Heidegger was usually careful to say that whatever can be said of being, it is always the being *of* beings, that being is not some sphere unto itself. The being *of* beings disciplines us to always remain within the sphere of factual existence. Yet the force of grammatical nominalization can encourage or tempt us to ask if being itself "is" in any way something unto itself, or at least to abide with scholarly focus on nominalized terms for the purpose of locating the most original one and laboring over the task of its proper characterization.

It is this domain of thinking that I am trying to interrogate critically. For me, it is the *Sache* described earlier that matters for thought, and as long as the *Sache* is in view it does not matter what term we assign to it, so long as it is appropriately indicative of the *Sache*. Hence I am calling for "term limits," which will warn us against hypostasization or getting bogged down in scholarly arcaneness. But I am especially calling for caution about Heidegger's tendency to talk about being or *Ereignis* making "possible" our access to things, or "giving" or "sending" advents of meaning to us. Unless such notions are significantly restricted in certain (poetic?) ways, I want to resist. For me, being does not make anything possible, or give or send anything. If I am wrong from an exegetical standpoint, then so much the worse for Heidegger. I prefer to say that being or *Ereignis* are *words* that *point* to the *Sache* and its factual significance. Rather than making something "possible," such words can help make something *intelligible*, or gather its meaning, or open us to its radiance.

I am comfortable with a sentence like this from “Letter on Humanism”: “Everything depends on this alone, that the truth of being come to language and that thinking attend to this language” (GA 9: 344/261). I get uncomfortable with sentences like these from *Time and Being*: “The sending of the destiny of being [is] a giving in which the sending source keeps itself back, and thus withdraws from unconcealment” (GA 14: 27/22); “Man belongs to *Ereignis*” (GA 14: 28/23); *Ereignis* is “the extending and sending which opens and preserves” (GA 14: 26/20). To maintain discipline in this matter, it would help to add to, or hold implicit in, any such usage the following construction: “The word (or phrase) X points to *sachlich* condition Y.” So with “Man belongs to *Ereignis*,” we would mean “Human beings belong to what the word *Ereignis* indicates.” Or with “Being itself withdraws from unconcealment,” we mean “The phrase ‘being withdraws’ points to the excess of finitude in every emergence.” Or the phrase “The sending of being is a giving” points to a receptive bearing that can remedy the humanistic myopia of a technological age. I realize that such a maneuver can seem finicky or even a deflation of the power of Heidegger’s language. Yet I worry that some of his sentences display something more than the crucial matters of thought in question or the necessary grammatical modulations required for such thinking. Too often the tenor of Heidegger’s later language sounds more monastic than philosophical, more a dwelling in a precious domain of meditation than an indication of factual existence. Perhaps the disaster of Heidegger’s factual interests in the 1930s caused him to drift into a kind of cloistered disposition – which is the only way I can account for some of his embarrassing talk of the “essence” of something exceeding any factual instance – as in the essence of homelessness versus the need for housing (GA 7: 163/PLT 158–59), or the “essential” sameness of mechanized agriculture and the manufacture of corpses in concentration camps. I confess that I do not readily understand what Heidegger was talking about, but if there is something to learn here, I still don’t see the point.

Notes

- 1 Parts of this article are drawn from my essay, “The Hurdle of Words: Language, Being, and Philosophy in Heidegger,” in *The Hermeneutical Heidegger*, eds. Ingo Farin and Michael Bowler (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2016), 262–82.
- 2 In *Being and Time*, Heidegger occasionally uses variants of *formale* and *Anzeige* in different ways, without the precise phrase (GA 2: 237, 417/SZ 179, 315). The specific phrase “formal indication” is used a number of times (GA 2: 153, 307, 415/SZ 114, 231, 313). In one case, when discussing selfhood in terms of the “I,” Heidegger distinguishes between a *merely* formal, reflective awareness of the “I” and phenomenological attention to the function of the *word* “I,” which is to be “understood only in the sense of a non-binding *formal indication*” – especially as this leads in the direction of Dasein’s selfhood understood as a *who* rather than a *what* (GA 2: 155/SZ 116). In a letter to Karl Löwith (August 20, 1927), Heidegger comments on the tacit function of formal indication in *Being and Time*: “Formal indications . . . [are] still there for me even if I do not speak of them now.” He warns against a hasty deployment of expressions from the lecture courses. Yet later in the 1929–30 lecture course (GA 29/30), Heidegger will present one of his most detailed treatments of formal indication (section 70), and something of that sort would have greatly facilitated a comprehension of *Being and Time*. For helpful discussions of formal indication, see Daniel Dahlstrom, “Heidegger’s Method: Philosophical Concepts as Formal Indications,” *Review of Metaphysics* 47: 4 (1994), 775–95; John Van Buren, “The Ethics of *Formale Anzeige* in Heidegger,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 69: 2 (1995), 157–70; and Theodore Kisiel, *The Genesis of Heidegger’s Being and Time* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).
- 3 Facticity is not the “factual” in the modern sense of objective reality or causal explanations; it is marked by historical contingency

- and enactment (GA 60: 9/7). Factual life experience is not a “what” but the meaningfulness (*Bedeutsamkeit*) of life concerns and *how* such concerns are engaged (GA 60: 11–12/9).
- 4 Heidegger specifically distinguishes formalization from generalization (GA 60: 57–65/39–45): Generalization constructs a set of common properties drawn from ontical procedures of collection and division; formalization is a non-theoretical gathering of the *sense* of specific differences drawn from concerned dealings and geared toward tasks of enactment (see also GA 29/30: 12/9).
- 5 There are other early lecture courses that explain and utilize formal indication. See especially GA 59, which deploys formal indication extensively. Dahlstrom’s article cited in note 2 provides the numerous page references for that text (784n34).
- 6 See “What is Metaphysics?” in GA 9 and GA 45.
- 7 Section 34 actually emphasizes *Rede* (usually translated as “discourse”) over *Sprache*, or language. It is better to take *Rede* in its specific sense of “talk,” face-to-face conversation. *Rede* is connected with *logos* (GA 2: 34/SZ 25) and is called the precondition for *Sprache*, so that “language” is understood as specific expressions of speech as distinguished from concrete practices of talking. Face-to-face talk also includes various “non-verbal” elements of speech, such as gesture, facial expression, intonation, rhythm, silence, listening, and responding (GA 2: 215–16/SZ 162–63).
- 8 A recent account presuming a pre-linguistic sense of truth is Mark Wrathall, *Heidegger and Unconcealment: Truth, Language, and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), Ch. 2.
- 9 It is crucial to stress the communicative element of speech here because the cogency of such an example shines in depicting speech *partners* pointing-out, speaking-out (*aussagen*) to each other in immediate circumstances of disclosive conversation. *Rede*, as the practice of communication, is therefore always an understanding-with (*Mitverstehen*), in line with the *Mitsein* character of being-in-the-world (GA 2: 215/SZ 162). For a helpful essay on language

- and communication in Heidegger, see Jeffrey Powell, “Heidegger and the Communicative World,” *Research in Phenomenology* 40 (2010), 55–71.
- 10 *Zuhandenheit* should not be restricted to mere instrumental conditions because it covers the full range of Dasein’s immersion in pre-reflective engagement with its environment, including things like house and yard, even natural phenomena such as sunlight and heat (GA 24: 152–53, 431–45/108, 303–13). See also GA 2: 90–102/SZ 66–76 and GA 20: 259–69/191–98.
- 11 One way to understand unconcealment in relation to correspondence is that the normal functioning of speech presupposes a tacit *trust* in appropriate disclosure (“truth” is etymologically related to “trust”). Correspondence cannot capture this tacit functioning, but can come into play once the trust in speech is broken or disrupted in various ways. Without such background functioning of disclosive trust, human existence could never get off the ground, and Heidegger’s concept of unconcealment as disclosure is meant to indicate this background.
- 12 In GA 21 Heidegger indicates that formal propositions of the kind “S is P” are withdrawn from lived involvement and concerns (GA 21: 153–58/129–33). With the spoken assertion “This chalk is too scratchy,” it is not a matter of describing an object with properties; its meaning is that there is an *obstacle* to writing.
- 13 See my discussion in *Ethics and Finitude: Heideggerian Contributions to Moral Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 33–34.
- 14 All translations from *Time and Being* are my own.
- 15 At one point in *Being and Time*, Heidegger acknowledges the circularity of his own text as interpretation: It cannot engage in “proof,” but only an “allowing to come into words” of an understanding of being, from which readers can discern for themselves whether the text’s “formal-indicative sketch” is disclosive of understanding or not (GA 2: 416–17/SZ 314–15). In other words, there is no free-standing measure for the success of a text.

- 16 One significant treatment is Gregory Fried, “What’s in a Word? Heidegger’s Grammar and Etymology of ‘Being,’” in *A Companion to Heidegger’s “Introduction to Metaphysics,”* eds. Richard Polt and Gregory Fried (New Haven, CT: Yale, 2001), 125–42.
- 17 The English word “being” is a gerund, a verbal noun that is not inflected, as in “My being here is a mistake.”
- 18 As Heidegger says in an early lecture course, “the categories of grammar in fact originate in those of living speech, in those of the imminent speaking of life itself” (GA 61: 83/63).
- 19 The same procedure is found in the Greek *to einai*.
- 20 In *Being and Time*, language itself is constituted by temporality (GA 2: 462/SZ 349–50).
- 21 As Heidegger indicates (GA 40: 68/70), the grammatical objectification of language was made possible by writing (in Greek, *grammata* referred to written letters), where words become fixed in space as stable entities, as opposed to the impermanent flow of speech. Factual language is best understood in its oral aspect rather than its written form. Note Heidegger’s remark in the Preface: “What is spoken no longer speaks in what is printed” (GA 40: xi/xiv). The way in which the orality-literacy distinction contributes to the questions at hand is a significant area that has not received much attention.
- 22 Fried indicates that modern linguistics supports Heidegger’s account (Fried, “What’s in a Word?” 131).
- 23 In the “Protocol” to *Time and Being* (GA 14: 47–49/38–40), a set of poetic lines from Trakl and Rimbaud are cited as instances of “simple language” that can better show the force of “is” and “there is” (*es gibt*): for example, “It is a light that the wind has extinguished,” and “There is a clock that does not strike.”
- 24 For a helpful sketch of how Heidegger’s account compares with familiar approaches to the function of the word “being” (e.g., as a copula), especially how a “veridical” sense advanced by Charles Kahn overcomes the claim that ontology is only a matter relative to particular languages, see Fried, “What’s in a Word?” 136–41.

- 25 Denis McManus provides a useful analysis of Heidegger’s search for a unified conception of being, along with the difficulties faced in such a project in the light of standard philosophical constructions. See his “Ontological Pluralism and the *Being and Time* Project,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 51: 4 (2013): 651–73. There is a sense in which Heidegger’s ontological agenda compares with that of Aristotle, who saw the need to articulate the meaning of being in a primary sense, or being understood *as* being. Unlike Plato, for Aristotle being (*ousia*) is not a genus or a universal. It has a referential unity in the manner of its “focal meaning” (*pros hen* equivocity), where the word *ousia* gathers the different kinds and modes of being without unifying them according to some common characteristic (see *Metaphysics* 1003a33–1003b19). But there *is* a “metaphysical” sense of *ousia* with respect to the causal function of the unmoved mover. See Enrico Berti, “Multiplicity and Unity of Being in Aristotle,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 101: 1 (2001): 185–207. Short of the unmoved mover, the focal meaning of being is like the hub of a wheel that gathers different spokes together while giving each spoke its own space – which in my estimation carries an “indicative” function.
- 26 In GA 61 Heidegger provides a grammatical analysis of the nominal term “life” as a formally indicative gathering of factual uses of the verb “to live” (GA 61: 79–99/61–75), which is also conjoined with the concept of being (GA 61: 84/64), thus forecasting the association of being and living in *Introduction to Metaphysics*.
- 27 In Chapter Three of *Introduction to Metaphysics*, Heidegger notes that one way in which being can exhibit a kind of definiteness as opposed to empty generality is in its relation to nonbeing (GA 40: 83/85).
- 28 Richard Capobianco has argued that the question of being runs through Heidegger’s entire career. See his *Engaging Heidegger* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012). I owe some of my characterization of the *Seinsfrage* to his formulation on pages 4 and 50. My review of the book is published in *Gatherings* 1 (2011):

86–93. There is even a sense in which the later Heidegger remained within the sphere of his own version of phenomenology. See GA 15: 288, 301, 305, 320–22/11, 19, 22, 31–32.

- 29 The later terminology seems to go further than being, as that which “gives” being. Yet Capobianco has suggested that here “being” names metaphysical conceptions of the beingness of beings, and that something like *Ereignis* is still within the orbit of primal being. See his helpful organization of this point in *Engaging Heidegger* (8–9).