

## THE LANGUAGE OF BEING

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This presentation is a dialogue between Martin Heidegger and Maurice Merleau-Ponty regarding the language of being. For Heidegger, “Reflection tries to obtain an idea of what language is universally.”<sup>1</sup> For Merleau-Ponty, “Reflection opens in the depths of our being.”<sup>2</sup>

Language is an expression throughout the world, a view of the world, the objects in it and the place of our own personal existence in it. We speak from a view that illuminates the world for others to see it as it exists for us, as it illuminates our own understanding of it.

Speech is the primary humanism of understanding and communication. Our intersubjectivity is an institution developed upon the foundation of speech. For Heidegger, “Language speaks. Its speaking speaks for us in what has been spoken.”<sup>3</sup> We move through the world in taken-for-granted shared meanings and with full confidence of being concretely understood. For Merleau-Ponty:

Here, as everywhere, it seems at first sight true that consciousness can find in its experience only what it has itself put there. Thus the experience of communication would appear to be an illusion. A consciousness constructs – for  $x$  – that linguistic mechanism which will provide another consciousness with the chance of having the same thoughts, but nothing really passes between them. Yet, the problem being how, to all appearances, consciousness learns something, the solution cannot consist in saying that it knows everything in advance. The fact is that we have the power to understand over and above what we may have spontaneously thought. People can speak to us only a language which we already understand, each word of a difficult text awakens in us thoughts which were ours beforehand, but these meanings sometimes combine to form new thought which recasts them all, and we are transported to the heart of the matter, we find the source.<sup>4</sup>

Thought is not, despite appearances a detached activity or product of the brain nor even a sole and pure relation between intellect and phenomenon. It is involved with one’s living self as a whole and in its turn a continuous flow of self-construction, be it personal or communal. We take up the other’s thought through speech, as the other in ours.

There is a dialogue implicit between silence and speech. Silence is the backdrop against which speech may be understood. In expression of the self

in any communication at all, silence provides us with the space for words. It is simultaneously presented through our presence. As we speak the primordial silence races along ahead of thought and much ahead of the spoken word, laying out the space for the embodiment of thought and word, it trails along behind, closing up the gaps left in it by the puncturing of words.

Silence provides the context in which meaning can be formed, as the arrangement of space provides the context in which our existence comes to be embodied. Language is co-constituted expression coming into being. Words create images that catch a perpetually moving reality giving understanding through a willed metamorphosis. For Heidegger, "It is in words and language that things first come into being and are."<sup>5</sup> As Being, we are a living metaphor. Metaphor attains the co-constitution of Being-in-the-world.

Spontaneous action of immediate experience is that which throws before us something we come to see through reflection. We bring into being a verifiable sense and accepted reality through the power to inspire physical actions that come to symbolize originality. Its visibility is shown in the action that human beings undertake. Merleau-Ponty indicates that this form of embodiment takes place through its expression as a *word*. The phonemic structure of that word as human beings utter it gives it body, shape, form and of course sound which is accessible for the human hearing apparatus.

Words are the expressions and receptacles for thought in a parallel way as is the human body the field for expression and reception for human existence. The body is 0<sup>0</sup> coordinates for being according to Merleau-Ponty, it is the beginning point for its own unfolding powers. Words, the physical bodies of thought bring into being those expressions that we have named as values and symbols that represent historically and socially ascribed limits and boundaries.

The human being stretches out in aware and responsible ways toward that which one cannot imagine and yet which demands an attempt through the power made available for one to transcend that limit. One is born and comes to find oneself as free within situated possibilities. Our experience carries us into what eventually comes to be a running into our own limits in a way which offers the freedom to transcend this boundary as an essential expression of being.

From the view of consciousness the literary endeavor is the verbal transcription of a coherent human experience, not a static verbal pattern. A writer's act of consciousness is the act of literature. Awareness of existence and the manner of expressing this awareness is the utilization of the writer's perceptions and skill to conceive a new, purely literary figure, the incarnate

writer whose experience gradually takes form in the text. The dwelling place of being human is the spring source of expression and the literary hunting ground for the language of being. For Heidegger, “Language is the house of Being.”<sup>6</sup>

Through our stillness, our dwelling comes the appeal of the world to our very humanity. This gives a pre-understanding that is felt and expressed, the skirted edge of knowledge. This is Being in our words. As Heidegger says:

In order to be who we are, we human beings remain committed to and within the being of language, and can never step out of it and look at it from somewhere else. Thus we always see the nature of language only to the extent to which language itself has us in view, has appropriated us to itself.<sup>7</sup>

The concepts which fill minds are given forth as expressions of being, they are re-introduced into one’s world through the temporality of existence, eventually re-structuring the very perception of that which exists. The idea trains the eye to see what is not there, as it exists. The dwelling place of being human is certainly the crux of understanding and movement in new knowledge.

As we become socialized, pre-organized, so goes our thought. Language organizes not only thought then but also perception itself. What would we do if we saw something new?<sup>8</sup> Name it, label it, orient it in the world, give it a place but what of the initial experience of it? What effect does its name have upon its future? The importance of naming cannot be ignored or relegated to an incidental place, as identities are created so they are expressed. For Merleau-Ponty, “thought tends toward expression as towards its completion.”<sup>9</sup> For Heidegger, “The naming calls.”<sup>10</sup>

There is a vision that precedes speaking and from it speaking and writing originate. Just as a person comes to existence through embodiment, so does the thought, the idea, exist, exist in the word. Language opens up the world of living to horizons that posit existence as true, the affirmation of life as it is lived is, as it is experienced. For Heidegger, “The calling, gathered together with itself, which gathers to itself in the calling, is the peeling as the peel.”<sup>11</sup> In this calling, which is a naming, that which precedes itself reaches back and gathers itself, only to move forward again. For Merleau-Ponty, “The denomination of objects does not follow upon recognition; it is itself recognition.”<sup>12</sup> This is a process that stretches and releases, giving rise to the birth of meaning. As Merleau-Ponty says, “*thought in speech*.”<sup>13</sup>

In this dwelling language, the juxtaposed pre-known thoughts speak to

us in a language beyond the conceptual realm, that of the already understood. For Merleau-Ponty, “the process of expression brings the meaning into being.”<sup>14</sup> Expression creates as it transports us to the heart, to the source, bringing forth new meaning.

#### Notes

- 1) Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 189.
- 2) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1962), p. 208.
- 3) Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought, op. cit.*, p. 210.
- 4) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception, op. cit.*, p. 178.
- 5) Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1959), p. 13.
- 6) Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter Hertz (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), p. 135.
- 7) Heidegger, *Ibid.*, p. 134.
- 8) This presupposes that you can see something new only within the context of something familiar.
- 9) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception, op. cit.*, p. 177.
- 10) Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought, op. cit.*, p. 198.
- 11) Heidegger, *Ibid.*, p. 207.
- 12) Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception, op. cit.*, p. 177.
- 13) Merleau-Ponty, *Ibid.*, p. 179.
- 14) Merleau-Ponty, *Ibid.*, p. 183.