

HEIDEGGER AND ST. THOMAS: TRANSCENDENCE AS SIGNPOST TO THE DEBATE ON LANGUAGE AND THE QUESTION OF BEING

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Language is the house of Being (Heidegger 1977, 193). It is the place where Being presents itself to *Dasein* (There-Being); *Dasein* is the place where Being makes itself accessible to man. Language, in this sense, is constitutive of man's being-in-the-world (Ballis 1993, 357). Man, as *Dasein*, has the fundamental character of thrownness, of being thrown into the world. It is through man whereby the Being of beings becomes manifest, or whereby Being is known. Metaphysics, says Heidegger, is the basic occurrence of *Dasein* (Heidegger 1977, 112). For Heidegger, *Dasein* dwells on the disclosure of Being through the nothing (the unsaid in human speech), which stands as its groundless ground and source of meaning. The nothing, Heidegger says, makes possible the openness of beings (Ibid., 105). This openness comes to man in language, for Being "is perpetually under way to language (Ibid., 239)."

St. Thomas, on the other hand, views the human language differently. For him, language is the means whereby Being as the ultimate cause of all beings is made known to the human intellect; it is an activity of man, to be mastered and perfected like any other craft, and not as a response to the address of Being (Caputo 1982, 165). Thus, Being does not unfold in language; instead, it is affirmed through language by way of causal participation. Man, as being, participates in Being by sharing in the latter's pure act of existence. St. Thomas's understanding of language accounts for the ultimate root of man's intrinsic act of existence that directs him to a transcendent source, God as Being.

Language and The Problem of Being

Before we go deeper into the relation between man and Being, it is necessary to trace back Heidegger's analysis of the problem of Being, an analysis out of his fascination with the word "is." The question of Being, he says, is something we keep within the understanding of the

For Heidegger, it is through the nothing that the openness of the meaning of beings is revealed. Nothingness opens up the possibilities of being human and reveals what it means for man to exist. As a source of meaning, it brings forth the different possibilities of being-in-the-world, which are shed light in language, for language reveals the truth of being-in-the-world. This is because language, as the house where Being dwells, is the same place where meaning is. In this regard, it reveals the reality of *Dasein* as being-in-the-world.

Now, we ask: what is in the human language that allows the possibility of saying? If it is the place where Being comes into light, then there must be something in it that allows this coming-to-presence and self-concealing as its source or ground. For Heidegger, in whatever is said, a hidden plenitude is left unsaid (Deely 1967, 172) that enables the possibility of saying. This plenitude refers to the nothing—the unsaid in speech—which “presuppose[s] the possibility of saying, of disclosing (Ballis 1993, 358),” Heidegger says,

The nothing comes to be the name for the source not only of all that is dark and riddlesome in existence which seems to rise from nowhere to return to it but also of the openness of Being as such and the brilliance surrounding whatever comes to light (Heidegger 1977, 93).

This nothing is the veil of Being (King 1964, 11). As conceived by ancient metaphysics, it is a non-being, that is, an unformed matter that cannot take form as an informed being (Heidegger 1977, 109). Thus, for a long time, nothing has only one meaning: *ex nihilo nihil fit* – from the nothing, nothing comes to be (Ibid., 109).

But Being and nothingness belong together, for Heidegger says “the Nothing functions as Being” (Heidegger 1949, 353). What does this mean? The Nothing is an abyss, a groundless source of meaning where the reality of being human is made manifest. He says, “if man is to find himself again into the nearness of Being, he must first learn to exist in the nameless” (Heidegger 1977, 199). The nameless is the silence in human speech that presupposes one has something to say. But science and mathematics have dismissed the nothing as meaningless, as a nullity. Thus, for these two fields, what should be examined are beings alone, and beyond that nothing (Ibid., 97). Science rejects the nothing precisely because its language requires methodical objectivity: the scientist sees the nothing as empty and devoid of any objective sense. Thus, for science, the silence of the nothing does not say anything. Science conceals the nothing from man and mutes his possibilities in the realm of silence.

But silence is not all silence. Silence opens up the possibilities of saying something about what still remains hidden. The truth of being human dwells in the nothing, for Being is encountered in this silence. If truth dwells in silence, we must actually experience it. So where do we find this silence? Heidegger says that: "If the nothing itself is to be questioned as we have been questioning it, then it must be given beforehand. We must be able to encounter it" (Ibid., 100).

The nothing, according to Heidegger, reveals itself in anxiety, (Ibid. 103) which makes man silent; because of anxiety what humans have to say falls silent, making beings slip away. But what is anxiety? It is not a kind of grasping of the nothing (Ibid., 104). It refers to the state of mind that brings humans to the indeterminate possibilities of their existence. In speech, this state of mind points to the indeterminate possibilities of saying. What anxiety reveals to man is that beings come into light through the nothing, that they are beings and not nothing. Anxiety, then, opens up the meaningfulness of beings for humans. Hence, the dismissal of the nothing by science implies the annihilation of the Being of beings. The rejection of the unsaid means the dismissal of the meanings still concealed in such silence. The dismissal of silence, of nothing as nothing is a dismissal of what it means to be human.

An instance of being held out into the nothing in speech occurs when a man travels to a far place and bids goodbye to a beloved. During the anxious moment of his saying goodbye, the girl says nothing and remains silent. But her silence opens her Being; it reveals that she wants to say something. It discloses something about her as a human being, as a girl who is in love with someone who will be leaving her, and it opens up what the departure means to her and to their relationship. Thus, *ex nihilo omne ens qua ens fit* (from the nothing all beings as being come to be) (Ibid., 110).

St. Thomas: Being as Source

For St. Thomas, Being is not the lighting up process but the *ipsum esse subsistens* that renders beings their being by way of causal participation. Every being (*ens*) is a being insofar as it participates in *esse*. Being, for St. Thomas, is the cause of the act of existence in beings. This distinction between Being as *ipsum esse subsistens* and beings as *ens* is closely related to Heidegger's distinction between Being and beings. The reason for this, according to John Caputo, is that *ens* derives its meaning from *esse*. A being is a being insofar as it is referred to the act of existing which, in its unparticipated state, is pure act. St. Thomas, then, Caputo says, cannot be accused of forgetting the ontological difference between Being and beings.

St. Thomas's metaphysical inquiry on language begins with the question "Can we use any words to refer to God?" (Aquinas 1969, 195). In this respect, language, for St. Thomas, addresses differently the question of Being from that of Heidegger. For him, it acts as a bridge that enables humans to discover a metaphorical insight into Being. What is grasped is only metaphorical because man does not have a direct knowledge of Being; all of man's knowledge of Being is only by way of negation (Clarke 1972, 139). Humans know through God's effects that God is, that He is the cause of other beings, and that He is super-eminent over other things (Aquinas 1955, 30). Thus, when we say, "God is good" what we mean is that "God is good, but not in the way we are." To say that God is good means that goodness as perfection is present in man but only in a finite way; God as the ultimate source of this perfection is infinitely good. Any knowledge of God can be based only on metaphorical resemblance with beings as his effects. St. Thomas's concern, then, is to know how, for instance, goodness can be predicated literally of God.

What does God as Being mean for St. Thomas? We have seen in Heidegger that Being is the Being of beings that makes them manifest. But since metaphysics, for St. Thomas, is a metaphysics of causality which takes into account the causal relationship between Beings and beings, between God and human, then Being is the *ipsum esse subsistens* that renders beings their *esse* or existence. Here, metaphysics is a metaphysics of creation, which makes *esse* the principle of human beings' existence; it is *esse* that makes humans be. In this sense, Being is the ultimate source of man, who is a being by virtue of his participation in *esse*. Being, as the unlimited source of existence, is present in all beings, not as part of the essence or nature of beings but as an agent present to that upon which it acts (Clark 1972, 62).

How does language bring man to his knowledge of Being? How does any word describing Being become meaningful? St. Thomas contends that any language dealing with Being is used to signify a transcendent, but we make such language meaningful by demonstrating from effects that Being exists, for as we shall observe, any language about Being is derived from them (Gilby 1969, 259-261). By this, any language that deals with God is finite, and since the finite subject is a creature of God, there must be a way for the finite language of beings to describe God. In the *Summa Theologica*, St. Thomas asks, "Are words used univocally or equivocally of God and creatures?" (Aquinas 1969, 205) On the one hand, the univocal predication of God and creatures is impossible, for every effect falls short of what is typical of the power of its cause (Ibid.). Any language that deals with God cannot have a univocal meaning, for God is totally distinct from man. On the other hand, any language that deals

with God cannot be equivocal, for "we never use words in exactly the same sense of creatures and God" (Ibid.). Hence, the solution according to St. Thomas, is that:

In this way some words are used neither univocally nor purely equivocally of God and creatures, but analogically, for we cannot speak of God at all except on the language we use of creatures, so whatever is said both of God and creatures is said in virtues of the order that creatures have to God as their source and cause (Ibid.).

God as Being gives perfection to man, and therefore, He is both like and unlike man. Thus, when we speak of Being as the ultimate source of human existence we have to use analogical language by virtue of this resemblance. Man is like and unlike God in view of his participation in *esse*. Any word then that describes God results from man's being created in His image and likeness. St. Thomas is concerned to maintain that we can use words to mean more than what they mean to us: that we can use them to understand what He is like, and that we can reach out to Him with our words even though they do not circumscribe what He is (Aquinas 1969, 293). Thus, to say "God is good" does not mean we go beyond the meaning of the word good. Rather, it is entering into the deeper meaning of the word to find in it a trace of God's presence in man. To go deeper into the meaning of the word means to transcend the finitude of this word. To transcend this finitude means to trace the presence of God as Being, as primordial source of being, in man.

Transcendence and Being Human

In *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay on Overcoming Metaphysics*, Caputo argues that St. Thomas remains oblivious to the radical role played by language vis-à-vis Being (Caputo 1982, 158). According to Caputo,

The idea never entered St. Thomas's mind that language opens up the field of presence in which we dwell, that language shapes the whole understanding of Being (Ibid., 164)

Caputo accuses St. Thomas of using language in a technical sense only and as a means of communicating the meaning of Being. Language simply has no role in the formation of meaning, and its value is reduced to being a sign of communication that human beings use. For Heidegger, Caputo argues, "language is Being's own way of coming to words into human speech," and this means that, "it is not the human being who

speaks but language itself" (Ibid., 159). It bids the coming-to-presence of things in the world. Thus, language does not only express the world, but it is also the light that makes the world a world for man. Language is not just a representation of meaning but it is that which gives meaning. It cannot be reduced to a mere means of communication. It is not just a sign that signifies something, but it is the very way by which the meaning of something comes into the open. Caputo further opines that language for St. Thomas does not possess this radical role because the latter is "innocent of the encompassing importance of language in bringing beings to appearance, in letting them be in their Being" (Ibid., 158).

Caputo's critique of Thomistic language simply proves that Heidegger's metaphysical understanding of language is different from that of St. Thomas's understanding. Analogical language is never alethiological, and alethiological language is never analogical. According to Fr. Norris Clarke, Heidegger, as a phenomenologist, "can only describe how Being actually appears in consciousness" (1994, 55). Therefore, he has not gone "to the necessary ontological conditions of possibility or intelligibility of what appears, not even to the intrinsic act of existence within beings" (Ibid.). In this regard, Heidegger simply imprisons man to the conditions of his finite existence. The reason for this is that Being, in Heidegger's sense, is only immanent, not transcendent (Ibid., 52). Now, this claim has an important implication for Heidegger's conception of language. He merely confines language to the conditions of man's finite existence. Therefore, language does nothing in addressing the problem of unity of man to a transcendent Being as the ultimate source of his being. In view of this, Heidegger may very well be accused of ignoring the importance of the analogical character of language that allows the possibility of transcending its finitude.

Heidegger has not gone deeper into the power of language to signify the causal relationship between Being and beings, between God and man. His conception of language does not allow humans to find a deeper context for their finite condition. Thus, when man is placed within the limiting horizon of existence, he will be unable to raise the question of a transcendent Being upon which his existence is rooted (Clarke 1994, 138). Heidegger forgets the capacity of language to trace the unity between Being and man in the intrinsic act of being, and he neglects the insight that analogy presupposes the ultimate source of intelligibility for the existence of creatures.

Heidegger's conception of language limits man to his finite possibilities. It does not answer man's quest for the ultimate root of the meaning of his existence. The problem is that *Dasein* merely waits for Being to manifest itself. *Dasein* cannot find any meaning beyond his

finite conditions because he has to wait for Being to reveal this meaning to him in language. In this sense, language owns the human being, and humans are forever imprisoned in their finitude.

St. Thomas's conception of language, on the other hand, enables man to transcend his finite condition and enter into his final unity with the Source. Language signifies the relationship between man and the ultimate source of his existence, God. This transcendence is impossible in the Heideggerian notion of language. Transcendence is not brought about by anxiety, which is a purely finite condition that can only reveal the reality of man's finitude. The meaningful context of transcendence is revealed to us, according to St. Thomas, only by our desire to know Being. This desire or love of truth reveals itself. St. Thomas's conception of language enables man to find the presence of Being in his own existence as the ultimate ground and source. The inadequacy, then, of Heidegger's conception of language lies in its inability to trace the ultimate ground of the intrinsic act of existence among beings.

Heidegger's problem then is that he does not answer the most important question raised by St. Thomas for metaphysics: "why is there something rather than nothing?" To answer such question is to account for the reason why beings exist. If raising the question of Being is important for metaphysics to retrieve it from the dust of tradition and scientific reasoning, then it is also valuable for *Dasein* to answer this question in order to quench his thirst for the ultimate meaning of his existence. Thus, *Dasein* is not enough. There is a horizon beyond the finite character of *Dasein*. Such horizon is the response to the question why being is and not nothing. This is the horizon of the transcendent Being, the ultimate source of all creation, the very reason indeed why beings are really real.

Finally, there must be an orientation not only to the presence of things, but more importantly to the deep drive that transcends the human being's mere consciousness of a world. Limiting ourselves to the horizon of the world does not end our infinite hunger for the ultimate meaning of human existence. Henceforth, man must cross the bridge that brings him to the ultimate meaning of his being. This is a bridge that St. Thomas offers us, a bridge that unites man to one transcendent Being as the ultimate ground and source of his existence.

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