

The Danger of Dialogue

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A Dialogue On Language; between a Japanese and an Inquirer has a simple plot on the surface. As the subtitle tells us, there are two characters, an Inquirer who is clearly Heidegger, and a Japanese character who knew of Heidegger from his teacher Count Kuki and has translated some of Heidegger's work.² The German for "Inquirer," *Fragender*, comes from the word for question (*Frage*). That Heidegger names himself the "questioner" suggests the importance of the question to the character of the philosopher when he is in dialogue. Since Heidegger is not a questioner the way Socrates is, he does not expect only short answers, but he is still placing himself in a tradition of philosophers who work through questions that goes back to Socrates.

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metaphysics, and the possibility of dialogue between people of different cultures and languages. There is no indication that this dialogue takes place before other people; it is the private communion of two thinkers that follows from earlier such informal conversations that Heidegger had with Count Kuki. Heidegger describes the earlier generation of dialogues in a way that applies to this dialogue too:

One of the themes that stands out at the beginning of the dialogue is the danger of dialogue. Needless to say, if we are interested in dialogue, any suggestion of danger is worth listening to. The danger mentioned initially is the possibility that a dialogue taking place in a European language could fail to capture Japanese experience. In other words, the language of the dialogue might confine what can be said to distinctions and concepts of that language. Heidegger suggests that his earlier dialogues with Count Kuki may have failed because they tried to apply Western aesthetics to the Japanese experience of art. This is not necessarily a danger only to dialogue, but with multiple characters who come from different linguistic and ideological backgrounds this danger is often more apparent in dialogue.

The danger exists at a deeper level. Certain subjects, especially the nature of language, cannot be grasped in the usual philosophical ways. It is more than a question of the translation of experience in one language to another. Heidegger wants to discuss that from which all languages spring, if there is such a nature. There is a danger that such a discussion might be limited by the language of the discussion, in this case German. It might equally be limited by other limitations of Japanese. Discussing language in German, it is hard to avoid the Western metaphysical concepts that are part of the language even though they might not be adequate to the nature of language.

More specifically, Heidegger's characters agree that defining is a way of pursuing what is sought that can damage it for thought. Defining something fixes it as an object of study which may not correspond to its nature.³ The danger is illustrated by the language used by the characters. They talk about defining as “grasping.”⁴ There is an implied violence to these ways of approaching that which one seeks to understand.

³ Right at the beginning the Japanese notes that Western aesthetics provided Japanese philosophers like Count Kuki with the concepts to grasp what concerned them. The Japanese language didn't have such concepts, which is why people like Kuki travelled to Germany to study. Western concepts met a lack in Japanese of “the delimiting power to represent objects related in an unequivocal order above and below each other.” (Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 2) The Inquirer, needless to say, asks if this is a “deficiency.” The suggestion is that the delimiting power of Western concepts is a limitation when discussing the nature of language. It is something peculiar to Western languages, not essentially part of the nature of language. The problem in a discussion in German is how to avoid falling into the metaphysical language of definitions and concepts.

⁴ Hints, on the other hand, are an alternative designed to be sensitive to the sought (from which they come). The Japanese talks about how Heidegger's hint for language, *house of Being*, “touches upon the nature of language without doing it injury.” (p. 22) Compare this to page 45 where Heidegger says, “European science and its philosophy try to grasp the nature of language only by way of concepts.” The tactile imagery is not unique to this dialogue. In *The Nature of Language* (p. 60) Heidegger “converses” in an unscientific fashion with a poem by Stephan George entitled *The Word*. I concatenate a few lines of the poem here to show the connections:

Wonder or dream from distant land/ I carried to my country's strand/ And waited till the twilit
norn/ Had found the name within her bourn-/ Then I could grasp it close and strong.../ And
straight it vanished from my hand, .../ Where word breaks off no thing can be.

In this poem we find naming, finding, and grasping are associated. Once the name of a wonder has been found then one can grasp it and bring it back, which would be defining it. Unfortunately this named wonder vanishes when so grasped and brought home. It is interesting that Heidegger appropriates from the poets a tactile, poetic language both to critique the metaphysical approach and then to replace the metaphysical language. He does not discuss definition by introducing further concepts, but by metaphorically associating it with violence.

I only know one thing: because reflection on language, and on Being, has determined my path of thinking from early on, therefore their discussion had stayed as far as possible in the background.⁵

The first use of dialogue that we will approach is that of ineffable dialogue where that which cannot be said is brought close. Plato is not the place to start a discussion about such dialogue, not because his dialogues are any less exquisite than others, but because the rich scholarly debate that surrounds them would distract us from the issue here: is there a sense of dialogue that cannot be defined? There are fortunately, dialogues to turn to other than Plato's. Despite the impression that serious philosophical dialogue writing ceased with the death of Plato, there is a long tradition of this kind of writing from which to draw insight. One such work belongs to our time: Heidegger's excellent *A Dialogue On Language*. In it the characters frequently pause to reflect on their dialogue and what can and cannot be said. This makes it a good place to start the discussion because it is a self-conscious work that reflects back on dialogue from a perspective not far from ours. It is also a good start because it opens the question of the limitations of definition. It suits as an introduction to thinking about the subject by warning us of the dangers of definition ahead. It approaches that about dialogue which cannot be said without forcing the issue.

Before looking for answers to our questions about dialogue, we need to ask how a particular written dialogue might answer our questions. It is unlikely we will find an authoritative definition of dialogue. For one thing, the words of a dialogue are addressed not to us, but from one character to another. We cannot, therefore, treat that which is said as unambiguously addressing our questions. Nor, to be honest, do we want definitive answers at this point; we want suggestions from the dialogue that will guide this discourse and frame it. How then will dialogues speak to our concerns?

⁵ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 7.

In keeping with the hermeneutical principle mentioned in the Introduction (that we should try to interpret dialogue according to the interpretive suggestions of dialogues) we should listen to a suggestion in Heidegger's dialogue that what we can expect are hints. A hint is not an answer to a question. It only emerges when one comes bearing questions and then it encourages appropriate thought on the subject. This can be especially useful where there is no satisfactory statement that could answer a question, or where the appropriate response in the face of the ineffable is silence. Another feature of Heidegger's hints are that they come from the direction of the object of your seeking and beckon back towards it. So already we have our first hint from his dialogue: if we come bearing questions, we can expect hints, not answers. In other words, our approach to Heidegger's dialogue (and others) should be one of framing serious questions on which we wish to think, and remaining open to hints that guide our thought.⁶

Beginning with Questioning

A Dialogue On Language; between a Japanese and an Inquirer has a simple plot on the surface. As the subtitle tells us, there are two characters, an Inquirer who is clearly Heidegger, and a Japanese character who knew of Heidegger from his teacher Count Kuki and has translated some of Heidegger's work.⁷ The German for "Inquirer," *Fragender*, comes

⁶ There is a circularity to this approach, one which cannot be avoided when trying to interpret any work according to one's interpretation of its interpretative suggestion. In my defense, I believe this approach will be justified later when we examine the relationship between author and reader/interpreter of dialogue.

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Confirming the importance of the question to dialogue, the Japanese talks (near the end) about the "movement of questioning that is called for here...".⁸ The characters agree that the type of speaking that is adequate to the issue of language cannot be found in expository writing like the scientific dissertation. The dissertation is for them a congealing of the movement of questioning.⁹ Dialogue, on the other hand, can represent the movement. By that I presume they mean that a dissertation contains a single complex and consistent answer to a single complex question. In taking one moment in a larger movement of questions and answers, the dissertation freezes the movement for elaboration. In a frozen moment one can expect consistency; each part of the answer can be consistent with the others. By contrast, in a dialogue characters often change their minds as they are questioned; their later answers can be inconsistent with earlier ones.

The movement of questions can be said to provide the impetus to the dialogue and the plot. Heidegger's dialogue is driven by questions posed by the Inquirer and the Japanese; indeed, one could survey the dialogue by charting the questions asked. This movement of questions also suggests a movement in the questioner. Just how the Inquirer, or Heidegger

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⁸ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 50.

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the Questioner, moves through questions we will discuss later. Let us summarize the first hint we have drawn from the dialogue:

The approach to dialogue begins with questions.

Danger

The two characters begin their dialogue remembering the deceased Count Kuki and his interest in aesthetics. This leads them gently to talk about language, hermeneutics, metaphysics, and the possibility of dialogue between people of different cultures and languages. There is no indication that this dialogue takes place before other people; it is the private communion of two thinkers that follows from earlier such informal conversations that Heidegger had with Count Kuki. Heidegger describes the earlier generation of dialogues in a way that applies to this dialogue too:

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The language of questioning brings dangers to the investigation.

Hesitation

The two characters respond to this danger inherent in philosophical language and method with a number of interesting gestures. The most obvious reaction is a hesitation on the part of both characters to answer the questions posed. Both hold back their thoughts for fear that their answers be grasped as definitions. This gives the dialogue its tentative and teasing character. Heidegger asks, "What does the Japanese world understand by language?"¹³ on page 23 of the English translation. The Japanese "closes his eyes, lowers his head, and sinks

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¹³ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 23.

into a long reflection."¹⁴ Four pages later he can "hardly withhold" the word. Needless to say, this throws Heidegger into "a state of great agitation," which he deals with by exchanging roles, and then answering at great length an earlier, postponed question about hermeneutics. It isn't until page 45, near the end of the dialogue, that the Japanese responds to Heidegger's question, "after further hesitation."¹⁵

Not surprisingly Heidegger's characters explicitly discuss their hesitation: "We understand only too well that a thinker would prefer to hold back the word that is to be said, not in order to keep it for himself, but to bear it toward his encounter with what is to be thought."¹⁶ Hesitation is the thinker's tactic; it leaves him/her time to reflect before speaking. The Inquirer goes on to say, "It (hesitation) is done truly when slowness rests on shy reverence."¹⁷ The hesitation takes on a sacred character when one respects what one thinks and discusses. Given the respect for the truth this hesitation is understandable; both characters hold back, preparing the other, in order that their thoughts be taken in the right way.¹⁸

¹⁴ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 23.

¹⁵ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 45.

¹⁶ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 26.

¹⁷ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 28.

¹⁸ It is tempting to draw a parallel between hesitation and Socratic ignorance. Both Heidegger, the hesitating Inquirer, and Socrates are reluctant to talk about that which they do not know or believe is too complex to be dealt with without a supporting context. Both have thought deeply on the subjects they are the most reticent on, and both recognize the need to avoid hasty opinions about these subjects. Socratic ignorance is the honest appraisal of the state of one's knowledge that is expressed by the admission of ignorance - knowing that you do not know. Heidegger's hesitation comes from the same knowledge of limitations, both his own, and that of the interlocutor with whom he might share his thoughts.

The hesitations give the dialogue its gentle wandering character. The dialogue can be described as a set of related themes starting with a question, and winding their way through each other to the end. Each theme surfaces a number of times throughout the dialogue, transformed each time by the intervening discussion. Each surfacing reminds us of the question and hints at answers. The hesitant character might not satisfy the contemporary philosopher expecting to find answers, but it is thought provoking.

With hesitations dialogue wanders closer to the sought.

Hints

Given the inadequacy of definition to thinking about language, the Inquirer proposes hints as an alternative.¹⁹ Question and hint replace the definition as the way of this informal inquiry.²⁰ The key to understanding the hint is that its rhetorical purpose is not to answer a question, and thereby end discussion, but it is intended to promote thought and dialogue. A hint, if listened to, can change the question one had in mind, refining it or replacing it with a more appropriate one; hence the movement of questions.

¹⁹ “They (hints) are enigmatic. They beckon to us. They beckon *away*. They beckon us *toward* that from which they unexpectedly bear themselves toward us.” Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 26. Hints are related to gestures and bearing. The image of the *No*-player conjuring up a mountain with a gesture on page 18 prepares us for hints. The irony is that the English word “hint” is derived from “Hent” which meant to lay hold of, to grasp, or to seize. (Oxford English Dictionary, s. v. “hint”)

²⁰ I am reluctant to call the hint a method, because Heidegger does not want to formalize the hint into a philosophical tactic. Heidegger instead talks repeatedly of the path or way of thought. Movement down this path is achieved through posing questions, thinking about the responding hints. At times on the path one might plod along methodically, but the way one moves is determined not by a predetermined method but by the beckoning hints of that which one seeks.

Let us remind ourselves how a simple hint works, like the hints one gives a child who wants to know where a gift is hidden. The first thing to note is that a hint surfaces in response to a question or some desire to know. We don't provide hints when a child is uninterested in the question (or answer). Second, a hint is only heard when the person who wants to know stops to listen. The recipient of a hint has to open up to it for it to work. Third, the hint doesn't touch the target or answer the question. It points in the direction of the sought like a gesture. The gestures of the actor in the *No-play* are one of the images Heidegger leaves us with of how the hint works.²¹ Fourth, a hint is generally designed to encourage the recipient to think along productive lines. A hint recognizes that the recipient may be lost or perplexed and encourages thought in a direction likely to bear fruit. A hint is not an answer that ends investigation. The recipient must still make his way once beckoned. Finally, a hint comes not from the inquirer, but from the sought, which is where this analogy breaks down. In Heidegger's view the hint comes from the sought not some third party like the parent in this analogy. The philosophical hint is the way in which that which is sought reveals itself to the thinker so that the thinker can approach. It comes from the sought and beckons back.

In the dialogue we are given examples of hints. The phrase "house of Being" is a hint towards language which Heidegger feels became a "catchword."²² It beckons us to think about language in the context of Being, and what it means to be at Home. It reminds us of the phrase "house of God." We are warned, however, that we should not build hints into a

²¹ The image of the gesture of the actor of a *No-play* is itself a superbly crafted written gesture. We do not even see the actor gesturing up a mountain on page 18. We read about the gesture, which in turn conjures up the mountain. It is a gesture twice-removed from the signified, but it works none the less.

²² Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 27.

“guiding concept in which we then bundle up everything.”²³ That is a danger we will risk for a moment.

What is striking about the language of hints, gestures, and bearing which Heidegger introduces to supersede names, definitions, and concepts, is that this language reverses the movement of understanding. Definition is a way of reaching out and grasping something. It is a willful act of the thinker to grasp the unknown. Unfortunately in reaching out to grasp, the thinker projects himself onto the target. By contrast, hints come from the sought towards the thinker who waits. The movement of understanding is reversed. The hints move toward the questioner, beckoning them in the direction of fruitful thought. The thinker is guided by that which he seeks to understand, not the other way around.

The discussion of hints as alternatives to definitions is a hint to the reader as to how to read the dialogue. Heidegger does not want his work read like an encyclopedia, full of “information in the form of theorems and cue words.”²⁴ He wants us to enter into dialogue with him by bringing questions and listening to the appropriate hints — a dialogue through which the voice of the nature of language might be heard prompting us to think about what really matters.

Hints come from that which is questioned, beckoning us back to thought.

Definition of Dialogue

In the reversal of roles between the inquirer and that which sought lies a hint that speaks to our question of definition:

J: Thus we have indeed stayed on the path of the dialogue.

²³ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 25.

²⁴ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 54.

I: Probably only because we, without quite knowing it, were obedient to what alone,
according to your words, allows a dialogue to succeed.

J: It is that undefined defining something ...

I: ... which we leave in unimpaired possession of the voice of its promptings.

J: At the risk that this voice, in our case, is silence itself.

I: What are you thinking of now?

J: Of the Same as you have in mind, of the nature of language.

I: That is what is defining our dialogue. But even so we must not touch it.

...

J: For if it is necessary to leave the defining something in full possession of its voice, this
does in no way mean that our thinking should not pursue the nature of language. Only the
manner in which the attempt is made is decisive.²⁵

Instead of the characters defining language, their dialogue is described as being defined
by the nature of language. Heidegger's dialogue is an approach in which thinkers can let their
discourse be defined by the sought rather than their defining it. There is a release of control
on the part of characters that allows the voice of the sought to be heard.²⁶

Heidegger doesn't tell us whether the release of his characters is paralleled by a release by
the author. We would have to go outside the dialogue for definitive evidence, which would
run counter to the spirit of this search. However, it would be difficult for Heidegger, as
author, to maintain control of the subject when his characters agree that there is little
difference between the written and spoken dialogue.²⁷ Heidegger, I suspect, felt the author

²⁵ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 22.

²⁶ Release is one of the initial themes of Heidegger's other dialogue, *Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking*. The dialogue starts with the three characters considering how one can understand thinking by looking away from thinking. This leads to a discussion of willing and the conclusion that, "So far as we can wean ourselves from willing, we contribute to the awakening of releasement." (p. 60)

²⁷ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 52.

should release control to the hints from the sought when writing dialogue just as his characters do when in dialogue. The release of the control by the author would include release of control over his characters so that they can speak "in character." For the moment let us take this as a hint that the release applies equally to the author of a dialogue.

The humanist, fascinated with the possibility of genius, will argue that it is the mastery of the author that gives the impression of absence of control, but does that match the hints we have from the authors themselves? Why not believe Heidegger when he talks about releasing control to the voice of language? The image of the author Heidegger presents is of the rhapsode, which he inherits from Plato's *Ion*. The rhapsode bears the "tidings of the poets' word,"²⁸ who in turn are the "interpreters of the gods."²⁹ Inspiration, or in this context, definition, flows from the gods through the poets to the interpreters. The author is a messenger for the defining power of the sought. What greater mastery is there than the ability to let another voice be heard through yours?

That which one seeks to understand defines dialogue in more than one way. First, it defines the scope of what is understood in the dialogue. The hints of the sought do not pinpoint answers but beckon us in one direction, not another. They narrow the scope of what is thought about. Second, the defining power of the sought promises that a work is a dialogue not a conversation. Conversation is animated by the speakers, dialogue by that which the speakers wish to understand.

This hint is not a definition of dialogue in the traditional sense. The hint reverses the definition. The dialogue is not defined by its formal character, but by the authority animating it. It is a genre defined not by us the makers of dialogues, but by that spoken about in

²⁸ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 29.

²⁹ This is a quote from Plato's *Ion* (534e) lifted from Heidegger's dialogue, p. 29.

dialogue. The paradox is that, given the gripping character of definition, only when we are not defining dialogue can dialogue be defined (by that which should animate it). Nor is this definition a static thing; where there is dialogue there is defining constantly coming. The definition does not freeze dialogue but animates it. The defining power of the sought is the response to the movement of questions by the Inquirer.

Heidegger challenges us to abandon our search for a traditional definition and to think about what is important. The hints beckon us away from our initial concerns towards thinking and the nature of language. We need to be sensitive to the limitations of definition and find ways to let the sought speak through and do the defining.

When there is a release of control, the voice of the sought can be heard, defining dialogue.

Dialogue in History

Abandoning a formal definition of dialogue means that we cannot easily say what is a dialogue or not. We cannot measure surface characteristics like the number of speakers or absence of plot. The Japanese interlocutor understandably asks whether “Plato’s *Dialogues* would not be dialogues.”³⁰ He is asking if they are dialogues in this ineffable sense, not the formal sense of being representations of conversations with two or more characters. If we redefine dialogue in this ineffable way then what has been called dialogue in the traditional sense as belonging to a genre of writing may no longer be called so. Plato’s dialogues, the paradigmatic philosophical dialogues, might have to be reevaluated. Heidegger doesn’t pass judgement on Plato’s work, but he does suggest that we are each in dialogue with those before and those who will follow.³¹ It is typical of Heidegger to turn a concern about the

³⁰ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 52.

³¹ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 31.

interpretation of canonical works on its head and suggest that what is important is not whether Plato's dialogues are really dialogues, but whether we can enter into dialogue with Plato. If we apply Heidegger's definition of dialogue to such a conversation with Plato, the conversation would be redefined as dialogue by a voice other than ours or Plato's. In the dialogue with Plato would be heard the voice of that which we seek to think about, responding to questions we bring to Plato.

Heidegger is at pains to distinguish the dialogue with thinkers, past and present, and "mere busywork."³² He wants to distinguish the "historical nature of every thinking" from "those enterprises which, in the manner of historiography, report things from the past about the thinkers and what they have thought."³³ There is a clear challenge in Heidegger to concentrate on what is important and avoid the tempting busywork.³⁴ What he means by the historical nature of thinking is beyond this study, but we are interested in some of the histories that run through the dialogue and the ways in which dialogue gathers histories.

First, the dialogue shows Heidegger in dialogue with a particular Japanese professor. I have noted how the foreignness of the Japanese character is important, but we should also note that Heidegger places this dialogue in the context of a larger one with a series of Japanese thinkers. These thinkers come from a different intellectual history. Our attention is drawn to the fact that the dialogue is between two markedly different traditions (histories). The

³² Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 31.

³³ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 31.

³⁴ In Heidegger's other dialogue, *Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking*, there is more of a treatment of the difference between the scholarly treatment of the past and the philosopher's. This can be seen in the names of the characters, Scientist, Scholar, and Teacher. On one level the three are representatives of three approaches to thinking. On another, the teacher, who is the closest to Heidegger, brings the other two into a dialogue on thinking where their respective inclinations have a limited place.

dialogue is a story of the gathering together of these different histories. The difference between the histories is, on the one hand, a source of danger, and on the other hand, the source of the success of the dialogue.³⁵ The difference allows the two to escape their parochial problems, problems inherent in their respective traditions and not relevant to what is sought. Heidegger is trying to escape the tyranny of metaphysical thinking while the Japanese is trying to escape the fascination with Western thought that delegitimized his native thought. For each the otherness of the other is the lever with which to move beyond their intellectual history. The fact that the dialogue is successful is an answer to the question of whether different languages, like German and Japanese, have the same nature. The success of the dialogue is due to the other voice that comes through, the voice of the nature of language.

The second history worth noting is the intellectual autobiography that Heidegger presents around the answer to the question about his use of “interpretation.” Running through the dialogue is the story of the movement of Heidegger’s thought on the nature of language up to the moment of the dialogue. The story begins with Heidegger’s philosophical beginnings. The “quest of language and of Being” defined Heidegger’s path though discussion of the issues stayed in the background because of their importance. Heidegger admits that when he did “venture forth” in *Being and Time*, it was too early. On language he remained silent until 1934, when he gave a course on *Logic* that was really about *Logos*. As he describes it, he was then silent on the issue for another ten years. The story leads up to the dialogue itself. It is in this dialogue that he finds his voice, or that of the nature of language. The dialogue is a story

³⁵ The Japanese makes a point of the value of otherness: “As far as I am able to follow what you are saying, I sense a deeply concealed kinship with our thinking, precisely because your path of thinking and its language are so wholly other.” (Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 31.) What is left unclear is whether Heidegger’s otherness is in relation to his German contemporaries or his Japanese friends.

that gathers within itself other stories, especially that of the way of Heidegger's thought on language.³⁶

Third, there is the dialogue with past thinkers in the Western tradition like Plato. It is interesting how the dialogue form allows Heidegger to deal with such thinkers in a less formal fashion that keeps us focused on the sought rather than distracting us with historiographic completeness. Heidegger takes advantage of the fact that in conversation one can make passing references without there being the expectation of scholarly thoroughness. This does not mean the work is sloppy; it has a scholarly poetry. The references are gestures, like those of the *No-play*, which, with minimal movement, allow the other to appear and contribute to the dialogue. These gestures let the other shine through instead of freezing them with a critical comment. The reference to Plato's *Ion* is a good example, as the reference is an example of what it is a reference to. In the *Ion* Socrates presents us with an image of poetic inspiration as a magnetic power transmitted from the Gods to the poets and then to the rhapsodes. That inspired image is itself transmitted from the poet Plato to the interpreter Heidegger through to us.

³⁶ He does this for two reasons. On the one hand he wants to correct misinterpretations for which his early thought is responsible. On the other hand he is presenting the Japanese and his reader with a larger text on language by pointing out his development and works on the way that we should read. *A Dialogue On Language* is almost an annotated table of contents to a larger text made up of a selected history of works. Heidegger gathers and comments on his previous work (and that of others) providing a "hypertext" that encompasses and redefines the reading of the other works.

One could use the dialogue as the gathering point for a course on Heidegger's discussion of language, branching out to the indicated works. Or one could treat the dialogue as the story of Heidegger's thought on the nature of language, a story that concentrates on the path of his thinking. This saga leads up to *A Dialogue On Language* itself, and his reasons for choosing the form.

Heidegger's approach to the past and future history of thought is more than a de-emphasis of scholarship. Heidegger's vision of our relationship to this history is dialogical. As he describes it, we should not report about the past but prepare conversations with it. To paraphrase Heidegger, we stave off the danger of our work's degenerating into mere busywork as long as "we ourselves make an effort to think in dialogue."³⁷

The thinking that wishes to listen to the sought must understand itself and that involves a dialogue with one's personal intellectual history, one's intellectual tradition, and with the other. The three types of history we have briefly described here are not gratuitous to that which is sought or to the dialogue. To hear the defining voice of language Heidegger needs to move through his history, and his tradition. An encounter with a foreign tradition provides the occasion. The dialogue at hand gathers these movements which are themselves dialogues and brings them to the encounter with the reader who can enter into a dialogue with the text as history. Dialogue is recursive. There are dialogues within dialogues and so on.

Heidegger's dialogue gathers and carries within it reasons for its nature in the form of a story. The story of Heidegger's disenchantment with metaphysical concepts and scientific dissertation leads to the choice of the dialogue genre. The dialogue has a special relationship to its history, one of gathering and not just responding. The dialogue is not just a frozen picture of Heidegger's thought at a given time; it gathers his movement of questioning up to that point. Heidegger turns to dialogue to show the movement up to a decisive moment in his path of thinking about language and to point beyond.

Dialogue gathers its history so as to move beyond.

³⁷ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 31.

Saying a Dialogue

So far we have concentrated on hints having to do with the dialogue form. This ignored Heidegger's hint that accompanies the reversal of definition; true dialogue is animated not by any subject of enquiry, but by the nature of language itself.

“Wherever the nature of language were to speak (say) to man as Saying, *it*, Saying, would bring about real dialogue...”³⁸

Heidegger is arguing that there is only real dialogue when the nature of language as Saying speaks to us. It seems peculiar to confine dialogue to one subject matter, ignoring all the dialogues, including Plato's, that are about other subjects. Either Heidegger had a very narrow view of what could animate a dialogue, and therefore, what was a dialogue, or he did not consider the nature of language to be a subject of enquiry like any other. Closer examination of Heidegger's thought on the nature of language is called for, though we can hardly match the artistry of an entire dialogue dedicated to this matter.

The word Heidegger proposes as the best hint as to the nature of language is *Saga*, translated "Saying" in the sense of "there is an ancient Saying that goes ...". A *Saga* is a story or legend that, while it may not be factually true, contains a deeper truth. The events in a *Saga* need not have happened — it is a speaking to questions that cannot be answered. It prompts thought on the undefinable. As with our word "Saying" there is also the suggestion that it is oral at its origin, although Heidegger deemphasizes the distinction between the oral and written dialogue.³⁹

³⁸ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 52.

³⁹ “[I]t would remain of minor importance whether the dialogue is before us in writing, or whether it was spoken at some time and has now faded.” Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 52. Students of Heidegger like Derrida are less inclined to deemphasize the distinction between the oral and written. I think this passage in

For our purposes a Saying is, first, not a neutral medium for any content. Inherent in the idea of a Saying is the suggestion that it contains a particular type of content and that that content is a truth (and not something false or trivial). Second, a Saying is a voice from the past with no definite author. Nobody owns Sayings. The anonymity of Sayings could be due to their antiquity, but I suspect Heidegger feels the anonymity is due to their coming from a source other than a particular person. Third, a Saying is an activity. The word Saying has the same ambiguity as the word "dialogue"; it can refer to the activity or the transcript of the activity. For Heidegger it is important that a Saying exists by virtue of the saying of such a Saying.

How can Saying understood in this threefold way be the nature of language? First, we should understand "nature" in its etymological sense of "birth." The nature of language is its source, not in the anthropological sense of the cause of humanoid speech, but in the sense of that which animates language. Heidegger is suggesting that language is animated by such Saying which comes from beyond our will.

A second suggestion also resonates through the dialogue. Without using religious terminology, Heidegger treats the nature of language with a reverence and awe that point to religious interpretations. While Heidegger avoids religious conclusions, his language and trajectory point to mystical interpretations. The hint for language, "house of Being," for example, suggests the phrase for a church, "house of God." The suggestion is that the source of language is a sacred space in which discourse takes place. When we are attuned to the silence of the space our discourse can bear the message of the gods.

Heidegger's dialogue shows that Heidegger at least thought about the problem. His bias towards oral presence, if it exists, is not based on a lack of consideration of the problem.

What is important to this inquiry is that dialogue is not animated by any subject of enquiry, but by the source of language, Saying. Real dialogue, as opposed to idle gossip, need not have happened and yet it is an activity. It bears a truth to us from the nature of language.

Dialogue is animated by the saying of language.

Form and Content

This in turn shows us the danger of relying on the traditional form/content distinction. Heidegger is hinting that the dialogue form has a special relationship with what would traditionally be called a particular content - the nature of language. As Heidegger shifts his approach to the nature of language such that it is no longer a content in the definable sense, he also shifts his view of the independence of form and content. The interdependence is held in the idea of voice. A voice has both a form and a content of its own. There can be more than one voice in a dialogue. A dialogue could be said to have many forms and contents. With the author's release of control there is a polyphony of voices, through which the voice of language can be heard, as Saying. When we return to the definition of dialogue we will look at a definition that avoids the distinction of form and content. None the less, there will be times when it is convenient to use the distinction.

This hint as to the nature of dialogue also calls into question our understanding of the speakers. Traditionally dialogue is recognized by the presence of more than one speaker. If dialogue is that which is defined by the undefinable, does it matter if there is more than one speaker? This is the problem referred to above of whether works identified as dialogue on formal grounds are really dialogical. Indeed in Heidegger's dialogue the speech of one character often merges with that of the other. For example, in one place the Japanese interlocutor starts speaking, "It is that undefined defining something ...", and the thought is completed by the Inquirer, "... which we leave in unimpaired possession of the voice of its

promptings.”⁴⁰ As one reads the dialogue one frequently loses track of the distinction between characters as their thought runs in parallel. This communion creates a quickening to the reading. One doesn’t have to track the differences as the characters merge into one voice.

This in turn has implications for our understanding of where the written dialogue fits in any scheme of literature. If dialogue has no form of its own, it can hardly be called a genre of literature. Dialogue has traditionally been placed among philosophical genres, or with comedy. For Heidegger dialogue is not a genre of writing; in fact it is closest to the oral *Saying*. It is inspired by poetry. Such dialogue would not necessarily have characters, but be distinguished from scholarly philosophy by virtue of the other logos that is heard through it.

Dialogue escapes the distinction of form and content, through it speak voices.

The Language of Dialogue

The last set of hints we will look at lie in how Heidegger uses language and the story behind this use.

One of the things that stands out in Heidegger's use of language is that it is relatively free of jargon, with the exception of a few words which are amply explained. That does not mean that Heidegger is limited by everyday language. He chooses words as a poet would, using the ones that will resonate, not the ones tied to the metaphysical tradition.⁴¹ In the dialogue we see Heidegger moving towards words like "Saying", "hint", "bearing", and away from words from the metaphysical tradition like "language," "definition" and "Being." For example, in

⁴⁰ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 22.

⁴¹ In *Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking* the scholar admits that, "Of course I know that such (scholarly) terminology not only freezes thought, but at the same time also renders it ambiguous with just that ambiguity which unavoidably adheres to ordinary terminology." (p. 76)

the beginning they talk about "interpretation," a technical term inherited from biblical scholarship. By the end of the dialogue they are talking about the "messenger's course." The metaphysical jargon that was unavoidable in the beginning gets shed as they move through hints.

To a degree this movement back to "poetic" words is called for by the project he has embarked on. Given the danger that the metaphysical tradition might not be adequate to discuss the nature of language, he has to release the terminology of that tradition and embrace a language that will not have the congealing character of terminology. He borrows such an inspiring language from the poets.

One unusual feature is the introduction of a few choice Japanese words — words that are entirely outside the metaphysical tradition. Though only a few are introduced they are amply discussed and play a fundamental role in breaking the grasp of metaphysical concepts. The Japanese contribution *Koto-ba*, as a word for language, is as important to the dialogue as Heidegger's *Saying*. The foreignness of the word is important. The word cannot be molded as easily into terminology as *Saying* could be.

Another facet of Heidegger's use of language is the imagery running through the dialogue. Heidegger replaces arguments with philosophical imagery. I have commented on the image of the rhapsode as bearer of the message of the gods. This image of the philosopher as messenger closes the dialogue. This image is not an argument about what it is to be a philosopher; it is a thought-provoking hint. I have also mentioned the violence of grasping, and the image of the gesture of the mountain, an image of an image-maker. Then there is the metaphor of movement, return and gathering. Running through the dialogue there are references to the path of thought, as if thinking were comparable to walking down a

country path in the company of history.⁴² The dialogue itself reads like a quickening river of questions and hints. It can be considered an image of authentic philosophical activity. The images of philosophy and philosophical work that Heidegger introduces would be interesting to follow through his later work, but that is beyond the scope of the present movement of questions. It is enough to note the importance of imagery in the dialogue.

The inevitability of the shift in language and use of imagery is paralleled on a larger scale by the inevitability of the dialogue form (if we can use the word "form" in this case). It is not enough to avoid the metaphysical terminology. Heidegger needs a form that discourages traditional ways of reading. The dialogue frustrates the reader who is looking for Heidegger's answer to the problem of language. All that can be found are hints of uncertain authority which, if one comes bearing questions, can direct thought. For this reason all we have done here is to use the dialogue as a foil for questions, listening for preliminary hints that will be pursued in the chapters to come.

Etymology of Dialogue

A final way in which Heidegger played with language will serve as a conclusion to this chapter. We will take a hint from Heidegger's playful derivation of "hermeneutics" and listen to the etymology of "dialogue."

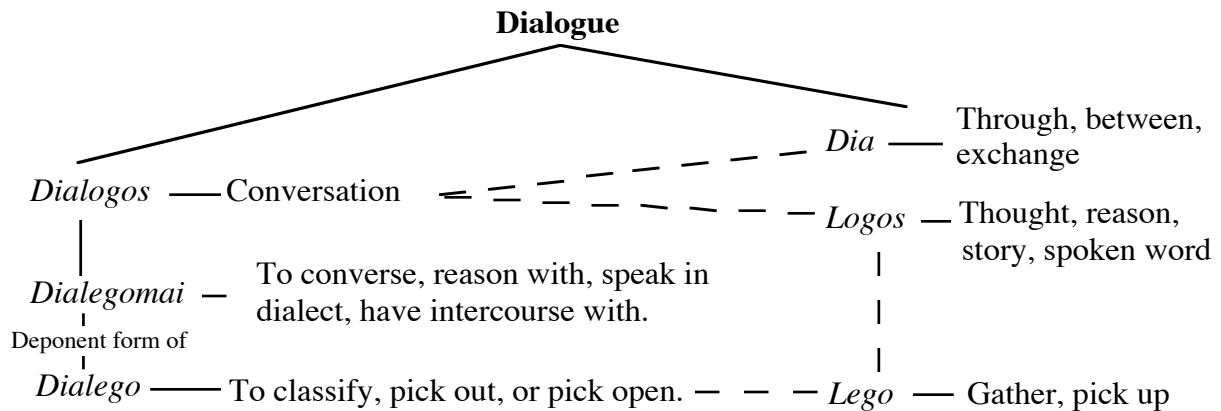
When asked to explain "hermeneutics," the Inquirer suggests looking at the etymological derivation. He traces the word back to the ancient Greek, *hermeneuein*, and from there to the name of the divine messenger, *Hermes*. He ends up suggesting hermeneutics "is that

⁴² This metaphor is taken further in *Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking*. The course of the dialogue is metaphorically linked to the course of the characters' way on a country path. The rural metaphors in Heidegger's dialogues have not to my knowledge been adequately explored.

exposition which brings tidings because it can listen to a message.”⁴³ He calls his philosophical derivation "playful thinking that is more compelling than the rigor of science."⁴⁴ The Inquirer is not interested in the philologically correct derivation but in the playful one that provides thought-provoking hints.

This tactic of playful derivation is inherited from Plato.⁴⁵ In his playful interpretation by derivation the Inquirer refers back to a Socratic play on the etymology of "hermeneutics" in the *Ion*. Heidegger places his character in a tradition of playful philosophical derivation. Such derivation is an alternative to definition that attempts to listen to the Saying in the history of a word. Derivation is the counterpart to the poetic use of words such that their original senses resonate. In Heideggerian fashion we will conclude with a playful derivation of “dialogue.”

Dialogue comes from the Greek noun, *dialogos* meaning conversation.



⁴³ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 29.

⁴⁴ Heidegger, *A Dialogue On Language*, p. 29.

⁴⁵ In the *Cratylus* Plato portrays Socrates spinning out etymological derivations for a number of words, though *dialogos* is not one elaborated on.

Dia-logos can be broken into two parts, *dia* and *logos*. *Dia* means "through," "by means of" or "between," as in an exchange *between* people. *Logos* can be translated as "speech," "discourse," "story," or "thought." A *logos* is either the spoken word that expresses thought or the thought itself.⁴⁶ Combining the two parts, one can see how *dia-logos* now means "the exchange of speech or thought."

If we play with the parts of the word we can generate some alternative derivations. The Greek word *logos* is derived from the verb *lego* which meant to arrange, gather, count, recount, and (eventually) any spoken communication. Likewise *dialogos* is derived from the deponent form (*dialegomai*) of the verb *dialego*. The deponent form *dialegomai* meant to converse, to reason with, to argue, to use a dialect or language, or to have intercourse. The verb *dialego* meant to pick out, classify, or to pick open a hole (escape).

Socrates is reported by Xenophon to have played with the connection between these senses, in particular *dialego* (having to do with classification) and *dialegomai* (having to do with conversation). Xenophon writes, "The very word 'discussion,' according to him (Socrates), owes its name to the practice of meeting together for common deliberation, *sorting*, *discussing* things after their kind: and therefore one should be ready and prepared for this and be zealous for it..."⁴⁷ The italicized words are the translator's. He uses "*sorting*, *discussing*" where, in the Greek, there is only one word *dialegontas*, a form of *dialego*.

From these etymological hints we can think of dialogue as a way of gathering and classifying through conversation. In Heidegger's dialogue we find a gathering of Heidegger's thought on the nature of language. We can also think of dialogue as a means of escape from

⁴⁶ Liddel and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon*, Abridged, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1977. The lexicon suggests this connection between the thought and word.

⁴⁷ Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, IV. vi. 1.

the dangers of traditional ways of philosophical discourse. The history that Heidegger presents is one of an escape from the metaphysical structures built into German, back to a closer understanding of language. Dialogue is the path of escape or return. There is also a hint of intercourse in the etymology. While Heidegger's work does not play with the sexual dimensions of dialogue, other dialogue writers certainly do. Further, we can see a connection between the suggestion that dialogue is a use of language and the title of Heidegger's dialogue; *A Dialogue On Language; between a Japanese and an Inquirer*.⁴⁸

We can also play with the senses of *dia*. Heidegger would be sympathetic with the idea of dialogue as that *through* which *logos* comes. Instead of understanding dialogue as an activity carried out *through* the spoken word, we can reverse the direction and suggest dialogue is that *through* which the Word flows. We do not reach out to grasp through dialogue; through dialogue we hear the voice of the nature of language. When it speaks through our conversation we have dialogue. This is the etymological derivation of dialogue that Peter Senge taught Vice-President Gore.⁴⁹

One of the most difficult suggestions of the derivation is the ambiguity in the *logos* of *dialogos*. *Logos*, as was mentioned above, can refer to either the thought or the audible expression of the thought. This ambiguity in *logos* is picked up by Plato. He has Socrates in the *Theaetetus* comment that thinking is an internal dialogue. "When the mind is thinking, it is simply talking (dialoguing) to itself, asking questions and answering them, and saying yes

⁴⁸ The relationship between "Dialogue" and "Language" in the title is better seen in the German; *Aus Einem Gespräch Von Der Sprache*. *Gespräch*, the German for conversation, is built on *Sprache*, for Speaking.

⁴⁹ Peter Senge on page xiv of *The Fifth Discipline* quotes Vice-President Gore recognizing him for this derivation: "Peter Senge gave us the distinction earlier today between discussion and dialogue, and in his presentation on the etymology of the word *dialogue*, he defined it as a process by which meaning comes through." It is good to know that Heidegger is getting through to the Vice-President.

or no."⁵⁰ The word used is *dialegethai*. Socrates frequently presents his thoughts as conversations, for example in the *Crito* when Socrates presents a conversation between himself and the laws of Athens. The ambiguity of *logos* may have suggested the analogy between thought and conversation. This analogy may have then led to the choice of the written dialogue as the obvious form in which to put down one's thought. Socrates' presenting his thoughts as a conversation with the Athenian laws leads to Plato's recording his thoughts in the form of a Socratic conversation, which led to the ambiguity today between dialogue as an activity and as a written form.

What is clear is that the Greeks did not speak of dialogue except as audible conversation. They did not even have a word for the written dialogue. Aristotle writes in the *Poetics* that:

There is further an art which imitates by language alone, without harmony, in prose or in verse, and if in verse, either in some one or in a plurality of metres. This form of imitation is to this day without a name. We have no common name for a mime of Sophron or Xenarchus and a Socratic Conversation; and we should still be without one if the imitation in the two instances were in trimeters or elegiacs or some other kind of verse...⁵¹

That Aristotle doesn't have a name for the Socratic Conversation is worth noting for two reasons. First, he does not use "dialogue" because that refers to oral conversation, not the written art. Dialogue as a form of written work is a later use of the word. Aristotle may see some similarity among works we would now call dialogues, but he is unwilling to formalize the genre. By the time of Lucian we find the word being used about an accepted form of discourse. Once there was a body of works, Lucian of Samostata could make dialogue a character.

⁵⁰ Plato, *Theaetetus* 189e-190a. This image of thinking as dialogue is left unchallenged among the images of thinking raised in the *Theaetetus*.

⁵¹ Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1447a-b. For a discussion of this passage see Guthrie, *Socrates*, p. 11-12.

Second, it is interesting that Aristotle refers to dialogues as Socratic conversations. Today we are more likely to call them Platonic dialogues or the “dialogues of Xenophon.”⁵² We emphasize the author not the spirit represented. From Aristotle's perspective these works were similar by virtue of the voice that speaks through them, that of Socrates the philosopher. This spirit was for Aristotle and his contemporaries a philosophical hero about whom they recounted stories for inspiration and possibly for legitimacy as philosophers.⁵³ The identification of dialogues with Socrates suggests we have to look back at Socrates and dialogue, which is the subject of the next chapter.

The word dialogue began by meaning simply conversation, was applied to thought, and then to the written representation. In modern times it has been applied to just about any positive exchange. The medium of dialogue is no longer the spoken (and heard) word, nor is the exchange exclusively between individual people. The boundaries of what can be called a dialogue have expanded to include any welcome intercourse. Buber talks about dialogue with trees, animals, and God. He believes that we are defined by the *I-Thou* dialogue, not the other way around. Heidegger's redefinition of dialogue likewise directs us to that which comes through dialogue as the defining. Heidegger and Buber have inverted the definition of dialogue in a way that has trickled through to common usage now, making it difficult to ask just what dialogue is. That which makes a dialogue a dialogue cannot be described, or one would not enter into dialogue; it is either something that comes through or it is dialogue itself that is defining us (such that we could define at all.)

⁵² Grote, in *Plato and the Other Companions of Sokrates*, comments on how Plato's setting up a school provided a way for his writings to be transmitted accurately. (volume I, p. 134.)

⁵³ See Rossetti's *Aspetti della letteratura socratica antica*, for a thorough discussion of the explosion of written Socratic dialogues after the death of Socrates.

This elusive sense of dialogue should not prevent us from the more mundane task of asking about other senses of dialogue. In this chapter we have dealt with the ineffable dialogue and seen how it cannot, by definition, help us define dialogue; next it is time to look closely at the oral and written dialogue. The importance of the ineffable should warn us not to expect a definition that will grasp all aspects of dialogue, though I hope the definition proposed at the end of this book will not exclude reflection on the ineffable. In fact, I believe one can define dialogue in a way that helps us approach that which cannot be said.

To return to Heidegger's dialogue, we can imagine one answer to the question: Why have so many turned recently to dialogue? For Heidegger, dialogue is suited to the thinking that releases control to the nature of language so that its voice can be heard. One chooses dialogue when one wants to avoid the traditional lines of authority, by which I mean the traditional relationship between author who owns what is read, and reader who does not. In dialogue that is confused by characters. That is the release of control. One chooses dialogue when one is concerned with the voices of Philosophy, especially the voice of that which is sought. In a dialogue one gathers these voices so as to allow through another voice. This is the gathering of histories wherein something other can be heard. To use the image inherited through Plato's *Ion*, in dialogue is gathered and transmitted the inspiration of the gods. Choosing dialogue is choosing to be a messenger instead of an authority. Perhaps we turn to dialogue and call for it because we hope to let something meaningful through that cannot be defined in a way that it could be sought through a method or technology.