

[TYPESETTER NOTE. ALL OCCURRENCES OF 'XBeingX' IN THE TEXT SHOULD BE SET AS THE WORD 'Being' CROSSED OUT WITH A SUPERIMPOSED 'X'.]

The Grammar of Being

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Introduction

In contemporary philosophical circles, it is common to distinguish between analytic philosophy and continental philosophy. To what extent there is a real difference between these two sort of philosophy, rather than simply a matter of linguistic style and idiom is a substantial issue. I am inclined to think that there is not. This essay may go a little way towards showing this, but that is not the topic that I have on the agenda here.¹

It is clear that people such as Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein, Carnap are paradigmatically in the analytic camp; and that Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, and Derrida are paradigmatically in the continental camp. Now, logical grammar plays a highly important role in the thinking of the first bunch of philosophers just mentioned, as is witnessed by the other essays in this volume. It plays a much less obvious role in the philosophers of the second bunch. It does play a highly significant role in at least one of these philosophers, however, Martin Heidegger. His inquiries into *being* lead him straight into grammatical issues; and these had a singular importance on the trajectory of his work. The importance of grammar was clear to Heidegger right at the beginning of his work. *In Being and Time*, he says, for example (1996: 34):²

With regard to the awkwardness and 'inelegance' of expression in the following analyses, we may remark that it is one thing to report narratively about *beings* and another to grasp beings in their *being*. For the latter task not only most of the words are lacking but above all the 'grammar'. If we may allude to earlier and in their own right altogether incomparable researches on the analysis of being, then we should compare the ontological sections of Plato's *Parmenides* or the fourth chapter of the seventh book of Aristotle's *Metaphysics* with a narrative passage from Thucydides. Then we can see the stunning character of the formulations with which their philosophers challenged the Greeks.

The first main point of this essay is to locate these grammatical considerations in Heidegger's thought. I should say straight away, that Heidegger's thought is rich and complex, and it is only a part of it that will concern us here—though it is a

central, if not the most central, part. I note also that I am concerned, here, to expound Heidegger's views, not to defend them. I will, though, try to present them in as plausible a light as possible.

The constraints of logical grammar lead the early analytic philosophers into paradoxical conclusions. Think, for a moment, of Frege on the concept *horse*, and of Wittgenstein saying the unsayable in the *Tractatus*. Heidegger's grammatical cogitations lead him to exactly the same place. Explaining this and noting its significance, is the second main point of this essay. This will be intertwined with the first.

The Question of Being

Heidegger wrote much in his life, but the central point of his philosophy, around which all else turns, is what he called 'the question of *being*'.³ The question was announced at the beginning of *Being and Time* and pursued till his very last writings. His views on the question took an important turn in the mid-1930s (a period sometimes referred to as the *Kehrer*). The turn is itself related to grammatical issues, as we will see in due course.

What, then, is the question of being? Everything that there is has being—exists if you like, as long as you do not read any particular import into this notion, spatial, temporal, material, etc. But what is it to be? That is the question of being. As Heidegger puts it (1996: 4f.):

What is *asked about* in the question to be elaborated is being, that which determines beings as beings, that in terms of which beings have always been understood no matter how they are discussed.

The question of being was, according to Heidegger, a central issue of early Greek philosophy; but after Plato and Aristotle the question became lost, until we now find it difficult to hear it as an important question at all. In the introduction to *Being and Time*, Heidegger points out three reasons as to why it might be thought to be a non-issue—that it is the most universal property, that it is therefore indefinable (by genus and species), that its meaning is self-evident—and rejects all these as good reasons, quite rightly. In particular, as Heidegger points out, you must have some understanding of the notions involved in a question before you can even ask it, but that does not show that this understanding is an articulated one (1996: 4):

As a seeking, questioning needs prior guidance from what it seeks. The meaning of being must already therefore be available to us in a certain way. We intimated that we are always already involved in an understanding of being. From this grows the explicit question of the meaning of being and the tendency towards its concept. We do

not *know* what ‘being’ means. But already when we ask, ‘What is being?’ we stand in an understanding of the ‘is’ without being able to determine conceptually what the ‘is’ means. We do not even know the horizon upon which we are supposed to grasp and pin down the meaning.

It should be noted that Heidegger takes being to be both the being of existence and the being of predication. To say that an object is, and to say that it is something, both attribute *being* to the object. Here, for example, Heidegger is clear that being is the *is* of existence (Heidegger 1996: 5):

Everything we talk about, mean, and are related to is in being in one way or another. What and how we ourselves are is also a being. Being is found in thatness and whatness, reality, the objective presence of things [*Vorhandenheit*], subsistence, validity, existence [*Da-sein*], and in the ‘there is’ [*es gibt*].

And here the *is* of predication (1996: 3):

‘Being’ is used in all knowledge and predicating, in every relation to beings and in every relation to oneself, and the expression is understandable ‘without further ado.’ Everybody understands ‘The sky is blue.’ ‘I am happy,’ and similar statements.

We may take it, then, that the general form of an assertion is ‘x is [y]’ (where the y is optional); and that ‘is’, which expresses being, is, for Heidegger, the generic logical predicate.

One final preliminary point. The question of being is asked, and asked only, by people. Their nature, *Dasein*, has therefore a very special relationship to the nature of being. That this is so is quite explicit in *Being and Time*, and what this relationship is, was, again, to occupy Heidegger in one way or another throughout the whole of his writings.

The Incredible Ineffability of Being

So much for the question of being. What is its answer? Early on, Heidegger came to the view that this could not be answered, at least, not in any straightforward fashion. What stand in the way of an answer are simple grammatical considerations. Heidegger gives two arguments (that I am aware of) as to why the question cannot be answered. The first appeals to the fact that being is not itself *a* being (1996: 5):

The being of beings ‘is’ not itself a being. The first philosophical step in understanding the problem of being consists in avoiding

telling the *mython tina diegeisthai*, in not ‘telling a story’, that is, not determining beings as beings by tracing them back in their origins to another being—as if being had the character of a possible being.

But if being is not a being, it follows that one cannot say anything about it. For to say anything of the form ‘Being is [so and so]’ would be to attribute it being, and so make it a being, which it is not.

If Heidegger's reasoning is unclear here, it is possible to elucidate it with a similar argument that appears in Frege. According to Frege, one needs to distinguish between objects (the ontological correlates of names) and concepts (the ontological correlates of predicates). The crucial difference is that concepts are ‘unsaturated’ (inherently gappy). Frege needs to appeal to this fact to explain the unity of the proposition.⁴ We need not go into this here. The important point for the nonce is that it is a consequence of this view that it is a logical mistake to suppose that concepts are objects of a certain kind. In particular, one cannot refer to them by means of a noun-phrase at all. In the same way, for Heidegger, beings are objects, things, and being is a concept. Indeed, as I have already noted, ‘is’ is the generic form of predication. One cannot, therefore, refer to being, since it is of the wrong logical category. *A fortiori*, one cannot say anything about being. For to say anything about being one would have to say something of the form ‘Being is ...’. And so treat it as an object.

Nothing

Heidegger's second argument for the ineffability of being is spelled out at greatest length in his essay ‘What is Metaphysics?’. To understand this, we have to take what will appear at first to be a digression, and talk about *nothing*.

For Heidegger, *nothing* is a thing, and a very important one at that. It sometimes gets the honour of a definite article, *the nothing*; and it even does things: nothing nihilates (1977b: 105). This will strike many contemporary philosophers as a simple confusion. In modern logic, ‘nothing’ is a quantifier phrase, not a noun phrase. *Nothing* is not therefore a substantive. Heidegger was criticised on just this point in a very famous attack by Carnap. Referring to ‘What is Metaphysics?’, Carnap says (1959:70):

The construction of sentence (1) [‘We seek the Nothing’] is simply based on the mistake of employing the word ‘nothing’ as a noun, because it is customary in ordinary language to use it in this form in order to construct a negative existential statement... In a correct language, on the other hand, it is not a particular *name*, but a certain *logical form* of the sentence that serves this purpose.

But Heidegger is not confused. He is well aware that ‘nothing’ may be a quantifier. But it may also function as a perfectly legitimate noun-phrase as well. For example, in his essay ‘The Metaphysical Foundations of Logic’, he says (1992: 3):

‘Thinking about nothing’ is ambiguous. First of all, it can mean ‘not to think.’ But logic as the science of thinking obviously never deals with not thinking. Secondly, it can mean ‘to think nothingness,’ which nonetheless means to think ‘something.’ In thinking of nothingness, or in the endeavour to think ‘it’, I am thoughtfully related to nothingness, and this is what thinking is about.

And Heidegger is right about this. ‘Nothing’ can be used as a substantive. If this is not clear, merely ponder the sentence ‘Heidegger and Hegel both talked about nothing, but they made different claims about it’. ‘Nothing’ cannot be a quantifier here. Or consider the sentence (1): God brought the universe into being out of nothing. This means that God arranged for nothingness to give way to the universe. In (1) ‘nothing’ cannot be parsed as a quantifier. If we do so, we obtain: For no x did God bring the universe into existence out of x . And whilst no doubt this is true if God brought the universe into existence out of nothing, it is equally true if the universe has existed for all time: if it was not brought into existence at a time, it was not brought into existence *out of* anything. And the eternal existence of the universe is, in part, what (1) is denying.

Nothing, then, may indeed be a thing. But, according to Heidegger, it cannot be talked about (1992: 98f.):

What is the nothing? Our very first approach to the question has something unusual about it. In our asking we posit the nothing in advance as something that ‘is’ such and such; we posit it as a being. But that is exactly what it is distinguished from. Interrogating the nothing—asking what, and how it, the nothing, is—turns what is interrogated into its opposite. The question deprives itself of its own object. Accordingly, every answer to the question is also impossible from the start. For it necessarily assumes the form: the nothing ‘is’ this or that. With regard to the nothing question and answer are alike inherently absurd.

One cannot, therefore, say anything of *nothing*. To say anything, whether that it is something or other, or just that it is, or even to refer to it at all, is to treat it as an object, which it is not. *Nothing* is the absence of all objects.⁵ One might note, though, that though one cannot have knowledge by description of nothing, one can, according to Heidegger, have knowledge by acquaintance. It is precisely in the experience of anxiety, that a person (*Dasein*) comes face to face with *nothing*.

Being and Nothing

What has this to do with the ineffability of being? Simply, that for Heidegger being and nothing are identical. If *nothing* is ineffable, so, then, is *being*. Heidegger states the pertinent identity as follows (1992: 110):

‘Pure Being and pure Nothing are therefore the same.’ This proposition of Hegel's (*Science of Logic*, vol. I, Werke III, 74) is correct. Being and the nothing do belong together, not because both—from the point of view of the Hegelian concept of thought—agree in their indeterminateness and immediacy, but rather because Being itself is essentially finite and reveals itself only in the transcendence of Dasein which is held out into the nothing.⁶

Heidegger's reason for supposing that being and nothing are the same is difficult to discern, but as far as I understand it, it can be summed up in the simple argument:

Being is what it is that makes beings be.
Nothing is what it is that makes beings be.
Hence, being is nothing.

The first premise is true by definition. The conclusion follows validly, assuming that *nothing* is a substantive here. Only the second premise, therefore, needs to be discussed. The reason for this claim, essentially, is that a being is, and can only be, because it is not a nothing. It stands out, as it were, against nothingness. If there were no nothing, there could be no beings either. As Heidegger puts it (1977b: 105):

In the clear night of the nothing of anxiety the original openness of beings as such arises: they are beings—and not nothing. But this ‘and not nothing’ we add in our talk is not some kind of appended clarification. Rather it makes possible in advance the revelation of beings in general. The essence of the originally nihilating nothing lies in this, that it brings Da-sein for the first time before beings as such.

Further, if *nothing* negates itself, it produces what it is not: something. Thus, a being is exactly nothing nihilating itself.⁷ Being is, then, nothing operating on itself, as the final sentence of the following quotation suggests (1977b: 106):

The nothing is neither an object nor any being at all. The nothing comes forward neither for itself nor next to beings, to which it would, as it were, adhere. For human existence the nothing makes

possible the openedness of beings as such. The nothing does not merely serve as the counterconcept of beings; rather it originally belongs to their essential unfoldings as such. In the Being of beings the nihilation of the nothing occurs

At the heart of each being is exactly nothingness. That is its essence, that is, being. And since one cannot say what nothing is, one cannot say what being is.

Writing Under Erasure

For two reasons, then, one can say nothing about *being*. The very grammar of our language makes it impossible to do this. The only way we have of talking about being is, in fact, to treat it as *a* being. This obfuscation is one of the central things that Heidegger means by the pejorative term ‘metaphysics.’

Heidegger discusses the problem (amongst other things) in his essay ‘The Question of Being’. The central topic of this is what calls ‘the crossing of the line’. Exactly what this is, need not concern us here. All that one needs to know is that it is what needs to be done to address properly the question of being. Bearing this in mind, one can understand the following (1959a: 71):

What if even the language of metaphysics, and even metaphysics itself, whether it be that of the living or of the dead God, as metaphysics, formed the barrier which forbids the crossing over the line...? If that were the case, would not the crossing of the line necessarily become the transformation of language and demand a transformed relation to the essence of language?

The rhetorical questions are then answered in the affirmative (1959a: 73):

...the question of the essence of Being dies off, if it does not surrender the language of metaphysics, because metaphysical conception forbids the thinking of the question of the essence of being.

Language, at least the language of metaphysics—and we have no other—just cannot do what is required.

Struggling with the problem in the same essay, he tries to get around it by the technique of writing under erasure: writing something and crossing it out. The problem with *being* is that it is not a thing. It exists only in its relation to beings and, in particular, to Dasein. Each, in fact, exists only in as much as it relates to the other. Heidegger describes the relation of being to Dasein anthropomorphically as ‘turning towards’. Bearing this in mind, one can understand the following passage (1959a: 81):

If turning-towards belongs to Being and in such a way that the latter is based on the former, then 'Being' is dissolved in this turning. In now becomes questionable what Being which has reverted into and been absorbed by its essence is henceforth to be thought of. Accordingly, a thoughtful glance ahead into this realm of 'Being' can only write it as XBeingX. The drawing of the crossed lines at first only repels, especially the almost ineradicable habit of conceiving 'Being' as something standing by itself and only coming at times face to face with man... Nothingness would have to be written, and that means thought of, just like XBeingX...

Heidegger goes on to explain that the crossing out does not only have a negative function; it also has a positive function. The crossing of the arms of an 'X' indicates a pointing. Crossing out 'being' thus indicates that *being* points to *Dasein*. The two are inextricably connected. Again, these things need not concern us here. I quote these passages simply to show Heidegger's struggling with the problem of talking of *being*.

The Limits of Description

We have not finished with Heidegger yet, but it is now time to take up the second point of this essay. Heidegger's arguments would appear to present him with a problem that is all too evident. He has shown that being is such that one cannot say anything about it. Yet it is clear that one can say things about it. The quotations from Heidegger that I have made are littered with assertions about being, as even a casual perusal suffices to verify. Even Heidegger's technique of writing under erasure does nothing to solve the problem. Whether one likes it or not, even XbeingX appears to refer to being—or how are we to understand what Heidegger is on about? To add injury to insult, even Heidegger's own explanation of writing under erasure, which I quoted in the last section, refers to the notion of being in the old way.

Heidegger's predicament is a familiar one in the history of philosophy. In *Beyond the Limits of Thought* (Priest 1995), I argued that there are certain limits of thought that are dialethic, that is, truly contradictory. There is a boundary which thought cannot cross, and yet which it does. The boundaries in question are of several kinds (the limits of expression, iteration, cognition and conception/description), but in each case, a certain object must be within a fixed totality (the Closure Condition), but must also be without it (the Transcendence Condition). The book gives several arguments for the dialethic nature of the limits in question, but a major one is based on the repeated and persistent phenomenon of philosophers who analyse such limits, and who are driven, willy nilly, into contradiction (Priest 1995: 249f.). (If the limits are contradictory, what else would you expect?) Heidegger is not discussed in the book, but it is now

clear that he fits the pattern too. Being is a notion that is beyond the bounds of the describable (Transcendence); but it *is* describable (Closure): Heidegger shows how.⁸

Heidegger fits the pattern in another way. Many philosophers, once they have realised their situations have tried to get out of the problem by making an appeal to some non-literal notion of expression (such as metaphor or analogy); without exception, such moves do not work.⁹ Heidegger, too, appeals to a non-literal mode of expression with his appeal the notion of writing under erasure. As we have seen, it is no more successful than other appeals of this kind.

I do not wish to repeat the details of *Beyond the Limits of Thought* here, but let me mention briefly two of the philosophers who figure in it, and whose work is particularly germane here. The first of these is Frege. As we noted, Frege's doctrine of concept and object means that one cannot refer to concepts by means of noun phrases. But we can refer to them in this way; we do so when we say, e.g., 'the concept *horse*'. As I have already shown, Frege's problem about concepts is closely allied to Heidegger's about *being*.

Frege realised that he was in trouble. He insisted that, despite appearances, phrases such as 'the concept *horse*' and its like do not refer to concepts, appearances notwithstanding. The cost of this move is that it makes a nonsense of too much else of what Frege claims.¹⁰ In desperation he says (1970: 54):

I admit that there is a quite peculiar obstacle in the way of an understanding with my reader. By a kind of necessity of language, my expressions, taken literally, sometimes miss my thought... I fully realize that in such cases I was relying on the reader who would be ready to meet me half way...

One cannot fail to be reminded of Heidegger's own words about the inherently misleading nature of language, which I quoted in the last section.

Frege was driven to his views about the nature of concepts in order to give an account of the unity of the proposition. In the *Tractatus*, what provides for this unity is the logical form of a proposition. The inexpressability of the concept *horse* and its kind metamorphoses, in that work, into the inexpressability of the notion of logical form.¹¹ Wittgenstein's solution to this was, famously, his doctrine of saying and showing. The form of a proposition (and many other things) cannot be described, but they can be shown. In the end, then, the doctrine of showing did not solve the problem, since Wittgenstein did, after all succeed in saying the things that can only be shown, as Russell wryly remarked in his introduction to the English translation of the *Tractatus* (Wittgenstein 1961: xxi).

But enough of this. Back to Heidegger.

Aletheia and the Law of Non-Contradiction

The arguments for the indescribability of being I explained above are all from Heidegger's writings in the period before the *Kehrer*, the methodological turn in his thought, after which his approach to being takes a very different shape. Heidegger's response to the fact that you cannot describe being is, in its way, not unlike that of the *Tractatus*. Being cannot be said, but it can be shown—or revealed, unconcealed, as he is more wont to put it. It is art, and especially poetry, that can show us beings in their being, and hence reveal *being* to us. In this way we can *think* being, as he puts it, appropriating the word 'think' for his own purpose.¹²

It is for this reason that Heidegger insisted on translating the Greek *aletheia*, not as 'truth', as it would normally be translated, but in a literal way, as unconcealedness. For poetry reveals being, the *aletheia* of being. As he puts it in (1977a: 389):

It is not for the sake of etymology that I stubbornly translate *aletheia* as unconcealment, but for the sake of the matter which must be considered when we think adequately that which is called Being and thinking. Unconcealment is, so to speak, the element in which Being and thinking and their belonging together exist.

But why does Heidegger not simply accept the fact that that is staring him in the face—that he can speak of *being*, that is, *nothing*, albeit inconsistently? This is, of course, quite compatible with poetry showing us being as well: what can be shown can often be said. (I can show you that it is raining, or tell you.) He addresses this point explicitly in his essay *An Introduction to Metaphysics*. He says (1959b: 23):

He who speaks of nothing does not know what he is doing. In speaking of nothing he makes it into a something. In speaking he speaks against what is intended. He contradicts himself. But discourse that contradicts offends against the fundamental rule of discourse (*logos*), against 'logic'. To speak of nothing is illogical. He who speaks illogically is unscientific. But he who goes so far as to speak of nothing in the realm of philosophy, where logic has its home, exposes himself most particularly to the accusation of offending against the fundamental rule of all thinking. Such speaking about nothing consists entirely of meaningless propositions.

Heidegger thus makes it clear that the ineffability of being is required by Logic; and, specifically, the Law of Non-Contradiction. Thus either our descriptions of being go or Logic does. But there is a third possibility: that Logic is simply

mistaken about the Law of Non-Contradiction. True contradictions are entirely possible, and the Law is an historical mistake—just like the Euclidean ‘law’ that the whole must be larger than its parts. This is exactly what, of course, a modern dialetheist takes to be the case: the ‘Law’ is a mistake. Heidegger simply identifies Logic with the received logical theory of his day, forgetting that it, too, is a product of a fallible history. It is an irony that a thinker of the acuity of Heidegger, who was so critical of his historical heritage, should have been blind to the possibility that people had got Logic wrong, which logical investigations in the second half of the 20th century have shown to be a very real possibility. Perhaps if Heidegger had been writing later, with a full knowledge of developments in modern logic, he would have said that an adequate thinking of being requires, not simply aletheia, but dialetheia.¹³

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¹ For a start, the nomenclature is singularly misleading. ‘Analytic philosophy’ has virtually nothing to do with philosophical analysis. This was a philosophical method endorsed by Russell and Wittgenstein early in the 20th Century, and which was quickly rejected—even by Wittgenstein himself. ‘Continental philosophy’ is even more misleading. For a start, it refers, in a very British way, to mainland Europe; but much of what goes on there is not continental philosophy; worse, the origins of analytic philosophy come from the European mainland. (Think of Frege, Wittgenstein, the Vienna Circle, the Lwow-Warsaw School, and so on.) For a more detailed discussion of the distinction, see Priest 1999.

² Italics in all quotations are original.

³ Some translators capitalise the ‘B’ of ‘Being’. This can be a useful convention, but I will not follow it here.

⁴ For further discussion, and references to Frege, see Priest 1995, sections 12.1 and 12.2.

⁵ Even if one insists that ‘nothing’ can be only a quantifier, the situation is not that different, at least if one is a Fregean. For since it is a quantifier, it is a second level concept. Now, for Frege, all concepts have reference. So ‘nothing’ does refer to a thing, in that sense. But one cannot refer to this by a noun phrase, since it is not an object. One still cannot, therefore say anything about it, at least, anything of the form ‘Nothing is ...’. (Thanks to Richard Gaskin for pointing this out to me.)

⁶ And again: ‘Only because the question ‘What is Metaphysics?’ thinks from the beginning of the climbing above, the transcendence, the *Being of* being, can it think of the negative of being, of *that* nothingness which just as originally is identical with Being.’ (Heidegger 1959a: 101)

⁷ I am grateful to Jay Garfield for pointing out to me this interpretation of the text.

⁸ The situation can be put in terms of the Inclosure Schema (Priest 1995: 244). $\varphi(y)$ is 'y can be expressed in language', so that Ω is the totality of things that can be expressed; $\psi(x)$ is ' $\neg x = \Omega$ '; $\delta(\Omega)$ is a claim about being, say that being is what it is that makes beings be. Then, by Heidegger's arguments, we have $\neg\varphi(\delta(\Omega))$: this fact about being cannot be expressed; but Heidegger himself shows that $\varphi(\delta(\Omega))$ by expressing this fact.

⁹ See Priest 1995, esp. p. 251.

¹⁰ See Priest 1995, section 12.2.

¹¹ See Priest 1995, ch. 12, esp. p. 212.

¹² See, for example, Heidegger 1977c, and the essays in Heidegger 1971.

¹³ Ancestors of this paper were read at the Department of Philosophy, the University of Tasmania, and at a meeting of the Australasian Association of Philosophy, held at the University of Melbourne in 1999. I am grateful to those present for their helpful thoughts.