

Martin Heidegger

Country Path Conversations.

Translated by Bret W. Davis.

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The problem of phenomenological indication is in large part a problem of language, of finding a way of speaking that does not distort the matter under discussion. From the 1920s onwards, a *leitmotif* of Heidegger's work concerned the limitations of propositional statements with regard to the possibility of indicating basic ontological and temporal phenomena. Heidegger's works explore multiple different approaches to the 'things themselves': academic treatise, investigations in the history of philosophy, essays, lectures public and academic, poetry, and reflections on art and poetry. *Country Path Conversations* consists of a series of three imaginary conversations in which the participants discuss truth, thinking, technology, and language. Although the conversational form is comparatively rare in Heidegger's work, it is not unique to this collection. It is also employed in the better known 'A Dialogue on Language' which these conversations predate by roughly a decade. They were written in the winter of 1944/ 5 and, with the exception of a fragment from the first conversation, had remained unpublished in the original German until 1995. This translation by Bret W. Davis is the first full English language edition of this work.

The first and longest conversation is called 'Αγχιβασίη: A Triadic Conversation between a Scientist, a Scholar, and a Guide.' It can be read as documenting a transformation in the participants with regard to their understanding of thinking, willing and truth. The conversation opens with a discussion of the essence of cognition. The methodological assumptions that initially drive the conversation are that the participants must gain a clear view of the initial problem and that they must pursue and carry pertinent possibilities of investigation before grasping and defining the thematic object (19). The participants take their characterisation of their method of inquiry as also pointing towards the essence of cognition as such.

However this method is constantly frustrated by the conversation which, apparently of itself, turns away from the matter under discussion to other, seemingly tangential topics. In the first sixteen pages alone the conversation moves from considerations surrounding the essence of cognition, to the modern investigation of nature in physics, to technology, to the annihilation of the human essence, to reflections on what the human essence is, to the relation between a question and an answer. These abrupt changes in the direction of the conversation provoke disorientation, perplexity and frustration, particularly on the part of the Scientist (16).

Yet the Guide, who articulates claims familiar to readers of the later Heidegger, suggests that the problem is not so much the course of the conversation as the participants' preconceptions about what course it should take. He suggests that to will a pre-determined end from the conversation is in fact to close oneself off from what shows itself in their speaking. As he says: "... it seems to me as though in a proper conversation an event takes place wherein something

comes to language” (36). Rather than willing, waiting is perhaps the appropriate comportment to conversing:

Yet a conversation first waits upon reaching that of which it speaks. And the speakers of a conversation can speak in its sense only if they are prepared for something to befall them in the conversation which transforms their own essence.” (37)

If the conversation is guided by what comes to presence in their speaking rather than the rigorous striving of the participants to a thematic object to light, then this suggests that thinking cannot be identified simply with a will to or with a striving for clarity. When asked what he wills in the conversation, the Guide replies “I will not willing” (33). This not-willing is neither passivity nor self-denial. Rather it is the “thoughtfulness of surmising,” an engaging with and following what comes to presence in thinking and conversing (53).

The second and third conversations develop themes indicated in the first. The second conversation between a Teacher and a Tower Warden contrasts thinking as surmising with the scientific or metaphysical inquiry that seeks grounds. Both of these respond in different ways to what presences itself (nature). Metaphysical representation is characterized by “representing, producing and ordering [which] are, as acts of consciousness, in the human.” These “are ways in which what presences reveals itself to us in its presence” wherein we seek “in each case to substantiate what presences” through fathoming its ground (117). However, before the view that human beings take of what presences, we are “in the view of what presences” (118). Fathoming the ground of something, substantiating it, representing and ordering it already presuppose that “that which presences [already] views us” and our already being held by it (118). When we follow intimations or presentiments we respond to this presencing, however much such surmising appears ungrounded or unsupported to metaphysical representation. The transition to thinking as surmising is not so much a shaking or questioning of metaphysical or scientific representation but rather showing that it “swings within an older, sturdier bringing to rest” (127).

The third conversation is between a younger and an older man in a prisoner of war camp in Russia. The previous two conversations had considered the complicity between metaphysical and technical rationality and contrasted this with a meditative thinking that surmises rather than seeks grounds. This conversation is in large part a meditation on evil. This important topic, so often neglected in interpretations of Heidegger’s work, was investigated by him in his 1936 interpretation of Schelling’s treatise on the essence of human freedom, is implicit in his 1945 ‘Letter on Humanism’, and is frequently alluded to in his post war writings.

The conversation opens with the younger man describing how, on the march to the workplace, “from out of the rustling of the expansive forest I was overcome by something healing” (132). To understand such healing means understanding the devastation that has taken place and not simply “by an enumeration of instances of destruction and the obliteration of human lives.” It is suggested that “the devastation of the earth and the annihilation of the human essence that goes with it are somehow evil [*das Böse*] itself” (133). The “essence of evil” is “the rage of insurgency, which never entirely breaks out” (134). This rebellious self-assertion is tacitly present in the metaphysical representation of the world, where the human “rises up to base himself on himself and to assert himself as the ground and measure of what is actual” (154). The

originary essence of thinking, rather than being fundamentally tied to volition and self-assertion, “perhaps consists in pure waiting and the ability to wait” (143). Pure waiting, as opposed to an awaiting that attaches itself to something waited, “wait[s] upon nothing” (140). As such it releases itself to what presences itself and “what is healing draws near” (142).

One of the great merits of this work is that they provide perhaps the clearest illustrations of the transition from metaphysics to post-metaphysical, meditative thinking characteristic of Heidegger’s later work. Heidegger constantly places this manner of thinking in dialogue with the metaphysical tradition, not least with Socratic *Elenchus*. This latter typically involves Socrates questioning his interlocutor’s initial claim to know what, for example, virtue, piety or justice is and then being refuted when shown to be advancing claims inconsistent with his original definition. In these conversations rather than being “pin[ned] down to particular words” “we see to it that we move freely in words” (76). And while Socratic dialogue nominally consists in a striving for a determinate end, such as a definition of a specific term, what becomes of paramount importance in this conversation is becoming “mindful of what brings itself near yet also at times, or even very often, distances itself” (47). The third conversation is of particular interest as regards the critical reception of Heidegger’s work as it is one of the very few occasions where he breaks his silence on National Socialism, placing it in the broader context of a philosophical reflection on evil, the history of metaphysics and the logic of self-assertion (133, 153). The work also leaves open a number of questions. If the relation between metaphysical and meditative thinking cannot be represented metaphysically then how is it to be understood? What is it that has made metaphysical thinking so compelling? And does the logic of insurgency belong always and necessarily to metaphysical thought?

Bret Ellis, who has also written a study of the theme of willing in Heidegger’s philosophy, provides a thoughtful, clear and highly readable translation of these conversations. He includes key German terms in the text and occasionally provides a brief discussion of the resonances of certain German terms likely to be unfamiliar to even those readers with second language German. His informative introduction places the work in the context of Heidegger’s biography and philosophy as well as within the work’s social and historical context.

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