

Heidegger and Ordinary Language Philosophy

Wayne D. Owens

One scarcely explored area of common interest characterizing the contemporary traditions of Anglo-American and Continental philosophy is *language*. Although the interests in language that characterize these two traditions are in many ways quite different, in at least some respects they converge. One interesting convergence concerns attention to ordinary language.

Let me begin with a couple representative statements from the Anglo-American tradition. In 1959, in a paper called "Phenomenology and Linguistic Analysis," Sir A.J. Ayer wrote, "Description . . . of the ordinary, or for that matter extraordinary, use of words, needs to be undertaken in the service of some theory or with the aim of elucidating some philosophical puzzle; otherwise it soon turns out to be a bore."¹ Four years later, speaking of "ordinary-language" philosophers in the introduction to his *Philosophy and Ordinary Language*, Charles E. Caton wrote, "the distinguishing characteristic of this group of analytic philosophers is their taking special and systematic account of the role played by ordinary language in the genesis and resolution of philosophical problems."²

I hope to demonstrate that Ayer's quite reasonable requirement concerning the description of the ordinary or extraordinary use of words and Caton's characterization of ordinary-language philosophers apply to a part, but an important part, of the philosophical work and hermeneutical practice of Martin Heidegger. To do so—and thus to elucidate one interesting convergence of the two traditions—I shall, first, briefly discuss the issue in the service of which Heidegger's interest in and concern with the description of the ordinary/extraordinary use of words arose, namely, his constantly rehearsed *Seinsfrage* and in particular the so-called *Destruktion* of the history of ontology. From the latter I shall draw an example of Heidegger practicing a sort of ordinary-language analysis, namely, his work on Aristotle's word "*ousia*." I shall conclude by returning to Ayer's requirement and briefly discuss the philosophical

puzzles and theory to which Heidegger's work on the word "ousia" relates.

I.

Heidegger's guiding, perennial philosophical issue was first formulated as "the question of the meaning of being" ("die Frage nach dem Sinn von Sein") and later shortened to "the question of being" ("Seinfrage"). The question of being concerns, first and foremost, the ground of all our existential relations to things in the world, to others, and to ourselves. These relations are, Heidegger thought, shot through with some sort of meaning of being which we usually "understand," to use his word, only implicitly, i.e., without explicit conceptual awareness. Some meaning of being and the conceptual or pre-conceptual "understanding" we have of it in fact function in all our activities, being a condition of their very possibility.

What is not always recognized is that the being-question was, for Heidegger, not just another interesting philosophical question. Its importance arose in part out of an analysis and understanding of what we might call our contemporary situation and some characteristics of it which Heidegger was not at all the first to articulate. In the present age, according to Heidegger, we hold too tightly to a technological, utilitarian relation to the world, involving the injurious neglect of things, and are thoughtless and rootless.³ In his *An Introduction to Metaphysics* (1935) he wrote of "the darkening of the world, the flight of the gods, the destruction of the earth, the transformation of men into a mass. . . ."⁴ The way to confront these problems, Heidegger thought, is to seek out the origins of the meaning and understanding of being that sustain and perpetuate them *and* to look forward to a new and different meaning and understanding of being, a new rootedness, a new thoughtfulness, a new beginning, as he called it. He wrote, "We ask the question 'How does it stand with being?' 'What is the meaning of being?' *not* in order to set up an ontology on the traditional style. . . . We are concerned with something totally different to restore man's historical being-there (*Dassin*)—and this always includes our own future being-there . . . —to the domain of being. . . ."⁵

Heidegger's search for the origin of the understanding and meaning of being that sustain and perpetuate the problems of our contemporary

situation was first (in *Being and Time*) called the "destruction [*Destruktion*] of the history of ontology" and later simply rethinking or recollection (*Andenken*). He wrote of the goal of the "*Destruktion*": "We understand this task as one in which by taking *the question of Being as our clue*, we are to *destroy* (i.e., destructure, take apart) the traditional content of ancient ontology until we arrive at those *primordial experiences* [emphasis added] in which we achieved our first ways of determining the nature of Being—the ways which have guided us ever since."⁶ The "primordial experiences," he thought, are where the latent, tacit, implicit meaning and understanding of being that have ruled in one way or another from the ancient Greeks to the present are to be found in their incipient forms.

The question is, how does one get at those primordial experiences in which we achieved our first and, according to Heidegger, current ways of determining the nature of being? The short, general answer to the question is, through hermeneutical, interpretive work on ancient philosophical texts. And, for Heidegger, an important element of this interpretive work was attention to the role and effects of ordinary (in this case, ordinary Greek) language in determining the nature of being. Although Heidegger rarely put it in such terms, his interpretive practice shows that this is by no means the wrong way to put it.⁷

II.

Although many examples of attention to the role and effects of ordinary (Greek) language in Heidegger's efforts to uncover the latent meaning and understanding of being behind Greek philosophical terms could be offered (*physis*, *logos*, *eidōs*, for example), one that is particularly well-developed as well as important is his work on Aristotle's word "ousia," usually translated in English as "substance."

What did "ousia" mean in everyday, ordinary Greek parlance? Heidegger noticed that, as he put it, "Disposable [*verfügbar*, available] possessions and goods, property, are beings; they are quite simply that which is, the Greek ousia. In Aristotle's time . . . this expression ousia was still synonymous with property, possessions, means, wealth. The pre-philosophical proper [i.e., ordinary] meaning of ousis carried through to the end."⁸ He also noted, "At the time when this word (*ousia*) had already become a name for the dominant concept of philosophy, it still

retained its original meaning: *hē hyperchousa ousia* (Isocrates) signifies present property status."⁹

So far, it might be thought, there is nothing new. Even in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* article on "Substance and Attribute," D.J. O'Connor states, "It is interesting to note that the principal term for substance in the writings of Aristotle is *ousia*, a word which in earlier Greek writers means 'property' in the legal sense of the word, that which is owned." He goes on to say, "There is, however, little of philosophical importance to be learned from the etymology [I would say, the ordinary use] of the term in which problems are formulated and discussed."¹⁰ Ordinary-language philosophers would surely disagree with O'Connor, and what he says surely does not apply to Heidegger. Heidegger did not point out the ordinary meaning of "*ousia*" because it is a linguistic curiosity. Rather, he was interested in elucidating the fact that one of the most important words in the history of philosophy contains implications or suggestions or connotations that reveal something about the source of the understanding and meaning of being in the historical and cultural milieu wherein it arose, implications that, according to Heidegger, clung to the word as a philosophical term through all its translations and use right up to today.¹¹

But what was the existential horizon of the word "*ousia*"? What was the primordial experience from which this category or concept was drawn? What sort of tacit orientation did Aristotle have when he transformed "*ousia*" from its ordinary use to its philosophical use? What was he looking at? What was the understanding of being that lurks behind and remains implicit in the word? What relation did the philosophical meaning of "*ousia*" have to its pre-philosophical, ordinary meaning? Heidegger's answer to these questions goes something like the following.

It was human productive behavior and things of use that Aristotle had in sight when he chose the ordinary Greek word "*ousia*" to name the most important category. What is significant about those things named with "*ousia*" in its ordinary Greek use (possessions and goods, property, means, wealth) is that they have to be produced, shaped, configured, formed, made. Heidegger wrote, "But to *pro-duce*, to place-*here*, *Herstellen*, means . . . to bring into the narrower or wider circuit of the

accessible, here, to this place. . . . so that the produced being *stands for itself* on its own account and remains able to be found there and to *lie-before there* [*vorliegen*] as something established stably for itself."¹² However, he continues, "That which first of all and constantly lies-before in the closest circle of human activity and accordingly is constantly disposable [*Verfügbare*, available] is the whole of all *things of use*, with which we constantly have to do, the whole of those existent things which are themselves meant to be used on one another, *the implement that is employed* and the constantly used products of nature: house and yard, forest and field, sun, light and heat."¹³

Both the ordinary and the philosophical meaning of "*ousia*," Heidegger went on to point out, "lay more stress on the producedness of the produced" in the sense of "what is present at hand, house and yard, the *Anwesen*, as the German has it—property as the present premises—the extant as what is present in that way."¹⁴ Finally, a more philosophical point: "With regards to its presence at hand, the extant is conceived ontologically not so much by referring to the disposability [*Verfügbarkeit*, availability] for use or by reverting to the productive and in general practical mode of activity, as, rather, by reverting to our *finding present* [finding there before us, *Verfinden*) what is thus disposable [*Verfügbaren*, available]."¹⁵

Thus, in this small part of his *Destruktion* of the history of ontology, which I stress is merely one—albeit an important—example, Heidegger believed that he had uncovered the primordial experience (human productive behavior) from which the category or concept *ousia* had been drawn. What is important for us here, now is to see that his access to this primordial experience in which we achieved one of our first ways of determining the nature of being was analysis of the meaning of "*ousia*" in ordinary (Greek) language.

If, as we heard Charles Caton say, the distinguishing characteristic of ordinary-language philosophers is their taking special and systematic account of ordinary language, then Heidegger's work on the word "*ousia*" certainly qualifies him as an ordinary-language philosopher, at least in part.

III.

I would like to conclude by returning to what A.J. Ayer said about the value of the description of the ordinary and extraordinary use of words: "It needs to be undertaken," he said, "in the service of some theory or with the aim of elucidating some philosophical puzzle." How does this requirement apply to Heidegger's work on the word "*ousia*"? Since a theory is not the same as a philosophical puzzle, we should sort out Ayer's call for theory from his call for elucidation of philosophical puzzles. In both cases, only suggestive remarks can be made here.

As regards the elucidation of philosophical puzzles, Heidegger's work on the word "*ousia*," first of all, illuminates something important about the whole metaphysical tradition descending from Aristotle. "Being, being-actual, or existing, in the traditional sense," Heidegger wrote in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, "means presence-at-hand,"¹⁶ the meaning of "*ousia*" his ordinary-language analysis of the word yielded. He also wrote, "the Greeks define the mode of access to the extant [i.e., to the present-at-hand] primarily as an *intuitive finding present*, a beholding perception, *noein*, or even *theorein*. This activity is also called *aisthesis*, aesthetic beholding in the proper sense, . . . purely contemplative perception of the extant."¹⁷ In the same work and other, Heidegger went on to show how the whole metaphysical tradition from the Scholastics to Husserl reverted to the Greek understanding of being as presence-at-hand and producedness and to the mode of access to it defined by the Greeks. Secondly, Heidegger asked, can the Aristotelian notion of *ousia* be made the basis of a universal ontology? Does it characterize all beings? His answer to this question is No. Human being—what Heidegger calls *Dasein*—cannot be adequately thought in terms of presence-at-hand or producedness or substance, due to its essentially temporal character. Finally on the matter of philosophical puzzles, although Heidegger himself never said so, it seems to me that a whole slew of philosophical puzzles was generated by uncritically taking over Aristotle's concept or category—and word—*ousia* (as substance) and the mode of access to it the Greeks defined. Among them are puzzles like the problem of identity, the mind/body problem, subjectivity and objectivity, language and reality (reference), ego/self/personhood, to name but a few.

Turning now to Ayer's call for some *theory* in the service of which the description of the ordinary or extraordinary use of words finds its value, we should recall that the general "theory" that guided Heidegger's philosophical efforts was that some meaning and understanding of being function in all human activities and that our current plight—the technological, utilitarian relation to the world, including the destruction of the earth, the transformation of men into a mass, etc.—has its roots in an understood meaning of being that first appeared among the ancient Greeks. Now, we must ask, does Aristotle's word "*ousia*" relate to our contemporary situation? The answer to this question is found in Heidegger's ideas about the domineering prevalence of modern technology. "The power concealed in modern technology," he wrote in *Discourse on Thinking*, "determines the relation of man to that which exists."¹⁸ The essence of modern technology he called "Gestell," which has been translated as Enframing and Composition. "In Enframing (*Gestell*), he wrote in "The Question Concerning Technology," ". . . the work of modern technology reveals the real as standing-reserve (*Bestand*)."¹⁹ That is to say, the meaning and understanding of being prevailing in the present age are oriented toward *finding present things of use*. In this, there are clear echoes of Heidegger's much earlier ordinary-language analysis of Aristotle's word "*ousia*" and suggestions of a strong connection between the meaning and understanding of being articulated by Aristotle and Heidegger's description of our contemporary situation. Although he never came out and said it, Heidegger seems to have thought that it is the understanding of being that is linked to the constant availability of things of use that has got us into the fix we are in.

But, as mentioned before, he also thought that our attention should be turned to the future, to new and different possible meanings and understandings of being, to a new beginning. So, we ask in conclusion, did Heidegger have a prescription for the ills of our contemporary situation? Did he offer a solution to the puzzles created by uncritically taking over "*ousia*" as substance or presence-at-hand or producedness? On these questions, Heidegger had only suggestive things to say. We might, he suggested, turn to poets and artists for hints about a possible new meaning and understanding of being. His best shot at a prescrip-

tion/solution was his rather mysterious idea of the Fourfold (*Geviert*), which is the recommendation of a sort of paradigm shift away from a technological world orientation to one in which earth and sky and gods and mortals "mirror," to use his word, each other. Basically though, Heidegger counseled waiting for being to give itself in a different way and an alertness to the certainty that it will in the future give itself differently than in the past or the present. At any rate, as he put it in *What is Called Thinking?*, "It would be a mistake for us to take the view that Being of beings meant merely, for all time, the presence of what is present."

NOTES

1. Sir A.J. Ayer, "Phenomenology and Linguistic Analysis," *Analytic Philosophy and Phenomenology*, ed. Harold A. Durfee (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), p. 242. This essay first appeared in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volume 33* (London: Harrison, 1959).
2. Charles E. Caton, Introduction to *Philosophy and Ordinary Language*, ed. Charles E. Caton (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963), p. v.
3. See, in particular, Martin Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1966), pp. 45 and 49-50, and Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), p. 45; see also, p. 4.
4. Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, 1961), p. 31.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
6. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), p. 44.
7. Heidegger occasionally speaks of the importance of ordinary language. See, for example, Martin Heidegger, *Early Greek Thinking*, trans. David Farrell

Krell and Frank A. Capuzzi (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1979), pp. 28 and 31-2.

8. Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), p. 108.
9. Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, p. 162.
10. D.J. O'Connor, "Substance and Attribute," *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 8, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1967) p. 14.
11. Interestingly, in "A Plea for Excuses" J.L. Austin said, "A word never—well hardly ever—shakes off its etymology and its formation. In spite of all changes in and extensions of and additions to its meanings, and indeed rather pervading and governing these, there will still persist the old idea." *Ordinary Language*, ed. V.C. Chappell (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1964), p. 61.
12. Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, p. 108.
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*, p. 109
15. *Ibid.*
16. *Ibid.*
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110
18. Heidegger, *Discourse on Thinking*, p. 50.
19. Heidegger, *The Question Concerning technology*, p. 21.
20. Martin Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*, trans. J. Glenn Gray and F. Wieck (New York: Harper & Row, Publisher, 1968), p. 235.