

CHAPTER THREE

The Mystery of Conscience and the Turn to Language

Why Schelling, why should he enter into the forefront of Heidegger's creative exchange with the philosophical tradition? It is incumbent for us to ask this question in the course of the present chapter. On the surface, the easiest response is that Heidegger acknowledges Schelling as an important counter thrust to the tradition through his emphasis on being over thinking.¹ Indeed, Schelling describes the opposite tendency to "give priority to thought over being" as the "general affliction" of modern philosophy.² There are two elements of Schelling's philosophy which typify this critical orientation: 1) his appeal to nature as including a nascent tendency toward order, as we have already noted and 2) his emphasis on myth as an adjacent matrix of concern and meaning which lends further depth to philosophical inquiry. As Otto Pöggeler indicates, Schelling is the philosopher of myth par excellence.³ For Heidegger, myth will prove significant by offering the space into which thought can enter in order to be struck by what otherwise withdraws from the philosophical tradition, the grandeur of being's mystery. If we imagine that diverse ways are hidden within the tradition, then these can unfold only by taking a detour around the rough edges of our concepts, a detour supplied by myth. As the counter pole to the *logos*, myth preserves the trace of heterogeneity, the differentiation of patterns, which interjects novelty into the genesis of new meaning(s).

While Schelling's importance can hardly be denied, it is not self-evident how his approach can complement Heidegger's given the divergent angles from which each addresses similar issues. Indeed, the vocabulary of each philosopher is so different that the attempt to find an index to correlate diverse terms, e.g., evil/absenting character of being, proves far more difficult than in Heidegger's dialogue with other thinkers like Kant and Nietzsche. In these two cases, Heidegger links more symmetrical terms such as temporal finitude/sensibilized reason, or resolve/will to power. During his Schelling-lectures, Heidegger recognizes that the self-guidance which had propelled hermeneutics to uncover deeper patterns of meanings must sacrifice its own claim of independence. Only by admitting what is antithetical to it can thought elicit more fertile ways of speaking, and abide in the creative tension of various discourses.

To be able to cultivate this asymmetry, hermeneutics must discover the modest beginnings of pre-Socratic thought, particularly, Heraclitus, as well as modern analogues. The Heraclitean oscillation of opposites distinguishes the “not” or negativity within the organization of *logos*. Ironically, for Schelling, too, the identity of *logos* must originate by incorporating the tension of opposites; and thereby he appeals to “intuition” as the indeterminate power to adjust to this asymmetry.⁴ Though we need to explore this methodological overlap, its importance lies in illustrating Heidegger’s newly found concern for the intricacies of style, the subtleties of attunement.

The hermeneutics which Heidegger envisioned must now undergo a transmutation, which makes its plurality accessible through a deferral toward and return to a more original site. According to him, language marks that site, insofar as it qualifies as the wellspring to elicit the most subterranean aspects of experience. Indeed, language resounds from the depths in order to upset the univocity of conventional meanings. In enduring the tension of asymmetry, our attunement to language acclimates us to the dramatic tone and primitive gestures of mythic narrative. Hermeneutics thereby recedes before a more original vortex in order to unravel different levels of meanings, the impetus toward differentiation itself. Heidegger describes this movement as one of responding to the “twofold,” which marks the expanse of the hermeneutic relation, the circularity between being and Dasein.⁵

In returning to Heidegger’s theological beginnings, we must ask if there is a way to mark the appearance of language as *logos*, to bring its own special dynamics to self-showing in a phenomenological way. The theological emphasis would build upon and remain conversant with the ambiguous relation to *mythos*. In the course of developing hermeneutic phenomenology, however, Heidegger becomes increasingly suspicious of this mythic relation to the point of “formalizing” in *Being and Time* key religious motifs like “falling” and “guilt.” Subsequently, in the 1936 Schelling lectures, Heidegger takes an opposite path to counter balance this purified stance. In the process, he reaffirms the heterogeneity of myth and recalls the parallel between *logos* and the divine word of the Gospels. Can we retrace the stages in this development which were set forth in the prior chapter, albeit in a way that shows how Heidegger’s description of conscience retrieves primal Christianity as the attempt to locate the abysmal character of the self in the silence of language? In methodological terms, the further development of Heidegger’s analysis of conscience involves a shift from a phenomenology of religion back to a more “demythologized” outlook as buttressed by Kant’s emphasis on finitude. Accordingly, Heidegger’s attempt to expand Kant’s treatment of the relation between finitude and freedom necessitates a return to a deeper understanding of Christianity—albeit refracted through the lens of myth—as outlined in his 1936 lectures on Schelling. Ultimately, we must establish how the coordination of

freedom with the experience of truth as *aletheia*—the key to a postmodern stance—culminates in reviving Meister Eckhart's notion of "letting be" as *Gelassenheit*. Heidegger's initial orientation to language prefigures the emergence and transformation of his hermeneutics in those stages.

As we will discover, his subtle analysis of language as embodying the call of conscience provides a kaleidoscope through which to view the transformation of his path of inquiry and methodology. Despite the singleminded character of his inquiry into being, there remains a trace of heterogeneity which tells the untold story of Heidegger's struggle to balance the freedom of philosophical investigation with a revival of the perennial concerns of the Christian faith. Indeed, his treatment of the call of conscience combines Kantian, Aristotelian, Lutheran, and Eckhartian themes to name just some of the sources. Heidegger's ability to retrace his steps back to primal Christianity and yet still uncover the existential roots of such religious notions as guilt/conscience inaugurates a new era in theology. Within the amorphous realm of faith, theologians like Tillich and Rahner can seek a new focus of concreteness as chiseled from more expansive phenomenological treatments of care, language, and disclosedness (*Erschlossenheit*). As O'Meara points out, Heidegger provides Tillich with a "terminology for life before the cross," for the "courage to be" in face of the inordinate challenge which Christ's example of suffering provides; and for Rahner, Heidegger offers a vocabulary to express the "incarnation or the kingdom of God."⁶

Through his thought-experiments and provocative turns of phrase, Heidegger provides a new rallying point for what theologians had intuited all along, namely, that language is not simply an incidental human capacity but instead is a disclosive event which serves as the catalyst for any new self-understanding. As an inroad into the phenomenon of language, the analysis of the call not only traces the curvature of the hermeneutic circle, or the doubling of the inquiry. Even more radically, that description involves an appeal to the evocative roots of language as epitomized in its middle-voiced enactment. Language speaks in the call of conscience through a mode of double reflexivity, as if embodying the power to disclose by deferring attention from itself. Thus, as Heidegger emphasizes in *Being and Time*, conscience speaks by "remaining silent."⁷ Because the call of conscience points back to the inception of the "site" for inquiry itself, Heidegger's analysis of the call serves as a marker within the destructive landscape, thereby helping to radicalize further his own philosophical investigation as it springs from its roots in primal Christianity. In carrying out this destructive-retrieval in his 1936 lectures on Schelling and in his essays on Hölderlin's poetry, Heidegger discovers that silence marks the juncture between the negativity of truth as concealing-revealing and its locus in the self-effacing advent of language—the power to evoke new meanings.

This chapter will be divided into two sections. The first section examines the voice of conscience as providing a clue to Dasein's participation in the disclosive power of language. The second section reconnects the thread of language as it is interwoven into the utterance of myth as the word of God, and points to the intersection between freedom as "letting be" and truth as unconcealment. At the close of this chapter, we will find that Schelling's idiosyncratic inquiry into the prerational depths of human freedom—in displaying the tension between *mythos* and *logos*—provides a new locus to unfold the heterogeneity of language's power to speak. The question as to the relation between *mythos* and *logos* will provide the crucial stepping stone for the next stage of our inquiry into the Sacred.

THE MYSTERIOUS DEPTHS OF THE SELF

I. *Situating the Discussion of Conscience*

Whether in the form of an oracle at Delphi, or as the spark in the individual who receives the Holy Spirit, human beings have always required the power of an intermediary in order to attain higher wisdom. The prospect of bearing witness to the divine message requires the reciprocal invitation of a response, as in the guise of a *testimonial* of faith. From Luther to Kierkegaard, theologians have recognized that the personal character of the "God-relationship" can only be granted to a self who takes possession of its own uniqueness. As Bultmann remarks, "Belief in the almighty God is genuine only when it actually takes place in my very existence, as I surrender myself to the power of God who overwhelms me here and now."⁸ But the Biblical decree that God helps those who help themselves harbors a double edged sword. While it is true that the individual attains enlightenment only in the presence of God, he/she must also display a proportional degree of the commitment of faith.

To grasp the nuance of this experience as a possibility, Heidegger appeals to the self's potential for "ownedness" (*Eigentlich*), or in the familiar parlance of translation, "authenticity." As a phenomenon, authentic existence implies a double relation in its own right 1) as conveying in ontological terms the disclosure or "truth of existence"⁹ and 2) as embodying the temporal particularity of the individual as such, the unique set of his/her possibilities (*qua mine*). The lived, uniquely situational aspect of authentic existence, which coordinates its ontic and ontological moments, proves to be the call of conscience.

Like its Biblical analogue, the "call" functions more as a preverbal gesture which transmits its meaning by example and thereby is discreetly interwoven into the worldly context of praxis, into the practical domain of daily comportment. For Heidegger, the call as a mode of discourse is closely linked to the dispensation of the *power* to act. Speaking and doing arise in delicate tension with each other.

Thus an "utterance" is equally a decree or testimonial, i.e., an *attestation* as to "who" one is and hence how one's actions bear witness to the truth of existence, the "fittingness" of one's relation to the integrity of being-human. Heidegger's analysis of conscience, then, begins by plumbing the depths of that phenomenon insofar as it incorporates the ambiguous senses of righteousness, truthfulness, and certainty about oneself.

If the call of conscience is to serve as a de-structive marker, it must elicit those connotations which are contrary to the conventional ones ordinarily ascribed with a metaphysical context. As such, the call embodies a gesture that beckons on several levels at once, as if permitting the distribution of various nuances of meaning which exhibit the deeper ancestry hidden away and sheltered in the conventional usage. In Heidegger's analysis of conscience, then, we discover an instance or illustration of an "archaeology" of sense, the "etymological" strategy which will become evident in the mid-1930s with a more radical orientation to language. Moreover, conscience stands forth as the listening capacity par excellence. As such, the call both illustrates the middle-voiced octave in which language speaks, and points to the convergence between the deeper nexus of language and the activity of speech as a disclosive event. Only because language supplies an avenue for unconcealment can the unraveling of etymologies, the un-building of sense, recapture the subtlest intimations of meaning including for the most perennial of all concepts, "being." Heidegger upholds this possibility of hermeneutics when he states in *Being and Time* that the primary aim of philosophy "is to preserve the basic force (*Kraft*) of the most elemental words."¹⁰

In its own inconspicuous, discreet way the call of conscience traces the repetitive movement, the vacillation between presence and absence, which displaces the Cartesian focus of self-certainty (pure presence). Ironically, the German word for conscience (*Gewissen*) has 'certain' (*gewiss*) as one of its derivatives and hence implies a way of becoming-certain (*Gewisswerden*).¹¹ Yet Heidegger predicates conscience's existentiell mode of "holding for true" on the dynamic advent of truth as concealing-revealing, in stark contrast to Descartes' view of truth as correctness. In one of his earliest allusions to this phenomenon in the *History of the Concept of Time* (1925), Heidegger describes conscience as the self's readiness to cultivate death as a possibility. "Forerunning [toward death] is the choice of willing to have a conscience."¹²

By prefacing the claim of mortality, the call of conscience redirects the philosopher to his/her immersion within the flux, to the enigmas spawned by the practical concern for factual life. In this light, Heidegger's intricate analysis of conscience can be recast as forming a key stage in the destructive transition from Descartes's restricted vision of being within the narrow horizon of the self as constant presence (i.e., the *cogito*) to Aristotle's wider ontological inquiry into the self's temporal emergence through praxis.¹³ The analysis of conscience replicates

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