Max Deutscher

Martin and Willard on Air
[Un Petit Conte Philosophique]

BIOGRAPHY

Max Deutscher is an Emeritus Professor of Philosophy, Macquarie University, and an Adjunct Professor of Philosophy, The University of Queensland
THE BEST AUTHENTICATED ACCOUNT OF THE DETECTION OF THIS ENCOUNTER PLACES ITS ORIGIN IN WHAT WAS SCRIBBLED DOWN BY A HAM RADIO OPERATOR IN THE MURRAY MALLEE WHO, SOME TIME IN THE MID TO LATE NINETEEN-FIFTIES PICKED UP SIGNALS THAT LATER SHE (OR HE?) MANAGED TO DECIPHER. IT IS WELL KNOWN OF COURSE HOW HEIDEGGER WAS AN ENTHUSIAST FOR RADIO FROM THE OUTSET OF ITS BEING PART OF THE LIFE OF TECHNOLOGISED DASEIN. SCHOLARS MIGHT OBSERVE THAT IN THE PERIOD OF HIS THOUGHT MARKED BY THE PUBLICATION OF HIS SEIN UND ZEIT (BEING AND TIME) IN 1927 HE WAS AHEAD OF HIS TIMES IN NOTICING RADIO COMMUNICATIONS AS SIGNIFICANT FOR HIS PHILOSOPHY OF DE-SEVERANCE:

In Dasein there lies an essential tendency towards closeness. All the ways in which we speed things up push us on towards the conquest of remoteness. With the ‘radio’ for example, Dasein has so expanded its everyday environment that it has accomplished a de-severance of the ‘world’—a de-severance which, in its meaning for Dasein, cannot be visualised.

Indeed, one would have had to wait almost forty years for the next significant treatment of the radio broadcast by Jean-Paul Sartre within a major philosophical work. Heidegger’s cited words make some sense of why radio transmission might have been the way they could begin to overcome the severance between them. Sartre’s point relates the significance of us (via our assiduous radio ham in the Australian bush) overhearing their discussion. When you say things you might not be able to when ‘close up,’ the same distance that achieves this for you makes your messages vulnerable to others:

The important point is not [only] whether a particular radio listener possesses his own transmitter and can make contact ..with some other listener, in another city or country: the mere fact of listening to the radio, that is to say, of listening to a particular broadcast ..establishes a serial relation of absence between the different listeners.

Sartre himself was inspired as early as 1932 by Raymond Aron’s report back from Germany about the new phenomenology ‘You can talk about this cocktail and make philosophy out of it!’ So he comes to respond to the theme of a ‘wireless’ dissemination of signals that distances us even as it makes connection.

How Quine had gained an interest in radiobroadcast technology as a means of philosophical communication is less clear but there are elements of the history of his experiences during the Second World War in a high position in Navy Intelligence that would make his access to radio equipment not surprising. So much for capability and opportunity. As to Quine’s motive in initiating the contact (it appears from the record that his is the opening signal to Heidegger) we can only conjecture along the lines suggested by J.L. Austin who reminds us that we are all, always already too ready to begin meddling with even the most primordial of the ontological categories and distinctions that our tradition has bequeathed us. We can only imagine, then, that on one of those Austiniän wet and quiet Sunday afternoons Quine was exploring some of the less familiar frequencies on an unofficial band of the much-travelled airwaves between the U.S. and Germany in those post-war cold-war days. At such times, as Austin so astutely observed, it can seem imperative to rearrange something more than the furniture. To dissipate nausea at the sheer existence of a Sunday afternoon in the middle of the last century one had to shake up a few fundamental categories. Whether, to this end, Quine aimed the bone of his antenna specifically at Heidegger’s, or whether it was by chance that he found himself talking to an erstwhile enemy now surviving hand-to-mouth in intellectual no-man’s land we shall never know. What we have in fragmented and unreliable form, however, is what happened when two ships of express prejudice were brought up side by side. The words of each were grappling irons for the other. Their vessels locked together, each is forced from time to time onto the deck of the other’s vessel.

On that question of an originating motive for Quine’s initiating the encounter (or for continuing, if it did arise by chance) I can myself attest that Quine, when visiting Australia in the late fifties, evinced a powerful (though negative) attachment to things Germanic. One may dislike what gets under the skin, but there is no standing off and surveying it from a distance. So I was intrigued, some years later, to find these notes. At the time I met Quine in Australia I was studying the paths of philosophy that lead from the British Empiricists to twentieth century figures like Russell, Wittgenstein, Ryle, Carnap and, yes, Quine himself. On hearing (and arguing with) him at close quarters I had begun to wonder, privately, what he would say to Heidegger. (Before changing to philosophy I had, while ostensibly reading physics and chemistry during long hot afternoons, discovered Jaspers, Gertrude Stein, Heidegger, Kafka, Sartre and Heidegger. The titles of their books leapt out at me. In my
memory these provocateurs are still located to the left of the sciences.)

Even before reading enough Heidegger to place the epigram, I had heard on the English ayer that this Heidegger who was made to sound so ‘mad, bad and dangerous to know,’ held that the nothing noths. [You find Quine giving (ironic) voice to the same citation.] In the nineteen fifties, that epigram struck me as a just description of the state of being, on just about any Sunday afternoon in Adelaide that a solitary student had to endure. In the larger scheme of things, too, Heidegger’s utterance (and others scarcely less recherché) seemed intriguing, attractively absurd in the way of Lewis Carroll rather than in the fashion of shysters. It was Alfred’s cake, rather, that gave off the odours of charred philosophy.

Further deciphering of the notes scribbled down from distorted and fragmented signals is currently in hand. Noise, interference, static and blurring of sound were part and parcel of radio transmission then. But our listener in that remote area was alert to something else – interruptions breaking into the discourse that one might think of, with theoretical licence, as a leakage of signals from later decades of the nineteen hundreds. She seemed to hear signals that would have been emitted two or three decades after Willard confronted Martin.

When I hear of such strange shifts in the temporal phase of signals I think of how Socrates would become transfixed and silent when he came to an impasse in argument. As if from another time and place, he would eventually recount a ‘dream’ he had received. Perhaps it is not too great a stretch of the imagination to think of messages from the nineteen eighties and nineties being temporally refracted to modulate and interfere with the short-wave signal that carried these conversations each way across the Atlantic.

**PROGRAM NOTES**

Willard Van Orman Quine and Martin Heidegger each took ontological commitment as urgent business for philosophy. In March and May of nineteen forty-eight Quine delivered lectures at Princeton and Yale Universities that were published later in that same year in the *Review of Metaphysics* under the title ‘On What There Is.’ Much earlier, in nineteen thirty-seven before the hiatus of the Second World War, Quine had published more detailed and technical solutions to the problems about what there is and what there is not. During the hiatus of the war Quine acquired a more direct and simple mode of presentation. After that enforced break he writes with the power to make the most general questions of ontology accessible. He presents the most general question of ontology tersely: ‘What is there?’ With equal brevity and candour he replies, ‘Everything,’ admitting wryly that ‘there remains room for debate over cases.’ From that elemental ground he proceeds to enrich and complicate the texture. Like Heidegger, he looks back to the Greeks for his first clues and inspiration. Plato’s *Theaetetus* and *Sophist* record the embarrassment of the legendary Socrates at the implications of denying the existence of anything whatsoever. There is nothing of which it can be said that it does not exist. If something ‘does not exist’ then what are we speaking of when we say that it does not? Quine was keen to attack the ideas of one ‘McX’ who says that it must be of the idea that we deny existence. Against this, Quine points out that we do not deny the existence of the idea of Pegasus. We accept the existence of that. The scathing tone of Quine’s rejection of McX’s dim-witted move is nothing, however, compared with the aggression he displays against ‘Wyman.’ This ‘wily’ theorist says that though Pegasus does not exist (not being found in space and time) still he has being. Because he has being we can deny existence of him.

Quine’s tone in speaking of being as something that precedes existence – that of which existence is predicated – may remind us of Berkeley’s tone when he denied the existence of matter. Not enough that matter does not exist. Matter is ‘stupid, inert, unthinking, unnecessary and unintelligible.’ So too for Quine, it is not enough that he denies this being that precedes existence – this being that can be given the luxury option of existence, equipping it for travel on the world’s highways. In Quine’s words, being is part of a ‘bloated’ universe, a ‘tangled Plato’s beard’ that dulls the ‘razor’ Ockham had honed to excise entities multiplied beyond necessity. Quine’s language is remarkable. The ‘overpopulated universe’ of being is ‘unlovely.’ Its ‘slum of possible [existences]’ is a breeding ground for disorderly elements.’ It is a ‘rank luxuriance.’ Let the dank vegetation quiver; let the unruly slum-dwellers tremble: ‘It is time to think about taking steps.’

Quine takes a fine track through what lay crisp and even, still falling from logic to ontology. He places his boots where good Russell trod, breathing the freshness of every dawn an explorer delights in before the complications of the day set in. Let us, he says, no longer write ‘Some horses do exist,’ as it to suggest that some winged ones do not. When we write that some things do exist, existence is not some extra fact about them. ‘Horses exist’ tells us that at least one thing is a horse. By the same token, ‘Winged horses do not exist’ tells us, of everything there is, that it is not both winged and a horse. In neither case do we need to posit some prior being ready to accept or refuse the mantle of existence.
Quine sketches a similar approach to ‘universals’ – the ‘justice’ that is supposed to make just actions what they are, or the ‘brownness’ that is supposed to make a brown paper bag brown. When we say that roses are red, says Quine (in lyrical vein as he departs the ‘unlovely slums’ of Wyman’s being) we are ‘committed to the existence’ of roses. That they are red does not commit us, nonetheless, to the existence of redness. For that commitment we should have had to take redness rather than roses as our topic of discourse. (As in the play, The Subject Was Roses. It would have been a very different – arcane – drama that warranted a title The Subject Was Redness). To be committed to the existence of redness we should have to assert ‘There is at least one thing which is redness.’

If committed to roses, one writes, in the language of the predicate calculus, ‘There is an x such that x is a rose.’ A variable stands to an expression that can refer to something, as an algebraic ‘x’ stands to a numeral that signifies a number. We ‘bind a variable x when we create statements such as ‘There is at least one thing, x, which satisfies a description, F’ (singular quantification) or ‘For anything, x, it is F’ (universal quantification). We ‘bind’ the variable by choosing a quantity (‘some,’ ‘just one,’ ‘all,’ ‘none’) and claiming that some chosen description applies, within the limits of that quantity. Thus appears the epigram for which Quine became famous and infamous, ‘To be is to be the value of a bound variable.’

Writing a decade before Quine’s first approaches to being ‘from a logical point of view,’ Heidegger himself had been busy making an end to a post-scholastic metaphysics of universals, particulars, individuals and time. He had turned back to re-examine the pre-Socratic and Socratic/Platonic discourse about being itself. Heidegger’s ontology is committed to the theme, but not the existence, of being. Only beings exist. For Heidegger, being could not be the value of any bound variable (in Quine’s terms) since we talk of being itself precisely by omission of all predicates. Were we to introduce a predicate we would be talking about kinds of things – beings. The quest for being would have been short-circuited. For Quine (and for Heidegger) there is a being just so long as there is at least one thing, x, which satisfies at least one predicate. For Quine and for Heidegger, to be a being is not a predicate. But Heidegger wants to recall us to the thought, ‘every being has being.’ It is the ‘meaning’ of this for which he searches. The question is whether Quine’s criterion of ontological commitment makes a wild-goose chase of Heidegger’s quest. (This is what Paul Edwards has argued in his vitriolic Heidegger’s Confusions).

Quine’s epigram ‘To be is to be the value of a variable’ signals a test of ‘ontological commitment’ that we apply whether we are speaking of everyday particulars like roses and people, abstract entities (if such there be) like numbers and sets, theoretical entities like electrons and quasars, or metaphysical categories such as properties, relations, universals or being itself. The beauty of this device is that after familiarisation it is childishly simple to understand and to employ. If we could make, in Quine’s terms, Heidegger’s ‘ontological difference’ between beings and being we would express our ontological commitment to first, beings, and then to being. We would commit ourselves to beings by stating ‘There is at least one thing that satisfies at least one predicate.’ But it seems impossible, in Quine’s terms, to commit oneself to being as other than one more being. One might try, ‘For any being, it has being.’ But inevitably we fail to ‘bind a variable’ since we have supplied no predicate. So the question becomes whether Quine’s formulations of ontological commitment expose Heidegger’s quest beyond coherent statement, or whether the evident urgency of his question of what it is to have being demonstrates the inadequacy of Quine’s language. These notes cannot resolve that issue but we may hope to hear something in what they let loose at each other that takes us beyond our own first prejudices at least.

David Krell in his introduction to Basic Writings: Martin Heidegger tells us that ‘Heidegger began to formulate the question of the meaning of being during lectures and seminars of 1924,’ and the manuscript which developed from this was published as Sein und Zeit (Being and Time) in the February of 1927. From then until the cataclysm of the war, he lectured and wrote on Kant and German idealism, Hegel’s Phenomenology, very extensively on Nietzsche, and, most significantly for the confrontation between him and Quine, on Plato. Not only the familiar Republic but also the logical dialogues called Theaetetus and Sophist.

Where Quine imputes to his imaginary figures, McX and Wyman the errors and confusions from which he would escape, Heidegger works from within his own terrain – an entangled mesh of inherited tradition and idiomatic language whose common terms mingle the roots of many languages with those from classical Greece. The world of this heavy undergrowth of language might, itself, appal Quine as ‘bloated,’ ‘overpopulated,’ liable to ‘tangle Ockham’s razor,’ a ‘slum’ that is a ‘breeding ground for disorderly elements.’ In Philosophical Investigations Wittgenstein has something to say about ideals of language:

An ancient city: a maze of little streets and squares, of old and new houses, and of houses with additions from various periods; and this surrounded by a multitude of new boroughs with straight regular streets
Heidegger revisits the figure of unplanned congestion and complication by evoking the dense wood of Germanic and Nordic tales. To find being is to find a clearing in this darkness, and then, to construct ‘pathways.’ Where Quine imagines his opponents about ontology as giving the wrong answers to the same questions he asks, Heidegger feels he is surrounded by a darkness in which those around him have forgotten to ask in any fashion about being. ‘The question of being has today been forgotten.’ We shall not be surprised to find Heidegger disturbing Quine out of the briskness of his ‘What is there? Everything!’ Heidegger would hear that clarity as superficiality. It leaves the darkness un-illuminated and unexplored. What he says in the Introduction to Being and Time is particularly significant:

[Though] our time considers itself progressive in again affirming ‘metaphysics’...we believe we are spared the exertion of rekindling a ‘battle of the giants concerning being.’...A dogma has been developed which not only declares the question of the meaning of being to be superfluous but which sanctions its complete neglect. It is said that ‘being’ is the most universal and the emptiest concept.

Heidegger nominates three truisms that obstruct the recovery of this ‘question of the meaning of being.’ ‘Being’ is the most ‘universal’ concept and is always already contained in everything we apprehend in beings. Secondly, ‘the concept of being is indefinable [because of] its highest universality.’ Finally, ‘Being is a self-evident concept that is used in all predicating, in every relation to beings and is understandable without further ado.’ These apparent truisms dull our desire to question the ‘meaning of being.’ In deconstructing them he shares common ground with Quine’s analysis in ‘On What There Is’ – an analysis of what prevents one from speaking of being as a kind of being. At the same time, the terms in which Heidegger articulates the qualms of his contemporaries about addressing the question of meaning signal his own approach to it.

That ‘the universality of being is not that of a genus or kind’ has implications for the second ‘truism’ about being. It is basic to his new enquiry that being is not a being, but it is not a universal either. The universality of being is not that of the most general genus. As to the third ‘truism,’ Heidegger agrees that we have a practical grasp of being. In every statement from the most mundane to the most theoretical we handle statements that involve the word ‘being.’ This familiar grasp does not displace or explain the ‘meaning of being,’ but underscores the enigma of being within every assertion of what there is. Paul Edwards sees Heidegger as blundering unaware of a meaningless ‘quest for being.’ Heidegger shows himself to be already aware of the kind of objections Edwards makes.

To question the meaning of being is to seek for it, Heidegger suggests: ‘every seeking takes its direction beforehand from what is sought.’ In finding a direction for one’s questioning, one must ‘interrogate’ the quarry – ‘the meaning of being must already be available to us in some way.’ Here, Heidegger learns from an impasse in Plato’s Meno. Socrates, while claiming to know nothing, has been searching for knowledge. Meno asks him how he would recognise knowledge even if he were to come upon it. Socrates will have to distinguish kinds or levels of knowing. Heidegger, too, must know something of the meaning of being. He claims a practical familiarity with being. Know-how is less than full understanding but this practical familiarity is vital to the search: ‘This vague average understanding of Being is still a Fact,’ Heidegger says. He ‘interrogates’ this prior ‘vague’ familiarity to make it more clear and explicit.

Proceeding from familiarity to articulation suggests another possible congruence between Heidegger and Quine’s approach to talking about being. Being is not some special super-being or universal-being whose nature we might discover. For Heidegger as for Quine, too, being is not some prior thing about which we predicate existence. The ontological difference between them is that Heidegger persists in finding a problem to be unbounded set of statements of what there is. Heidegger’s question is not answered. Rather, it disappears. It is addressed. Suppose that we ask only Quine’s ontological question, ‘What is there?’ We find the answer in the Introduction to Being and Time is particularly significant:

...the ontological difference between them is that Heidegger persists in finding a problem to be unbounded set of statements of what there is. Heidegger’s question is not answered. Rather, it disappears. It is addressed. Suppose that we ask only Quine’s ontological question, ‘What is there?’ We find the answer in the Introduction to Being and Time is particularly significant:
This is why Heidegger teases Quine with his neo-gram ‘How do you be?’ Since he denies that being exists and yet pursues its meaning, he disturbs the anodyne ‘How do you do?’ or ‘What’s with you?’ or ‘How are you going?’ He asks Quine about his being: ‘How do you be?’ As will appear, Quine’s wit shows that when pushed he can package his own language to demonstrate a ‘hands-on’ appreciation of Heidegger’s.

**ON AIR**

When off-duty, on air, these illustrious figures are as informal in their names and puns for their colleagues and historical figures as they are to each other. The intercept began as ‘Willy’ had received confirmation that some ‘Mart’ had picked up his signal. The transcript we have begins with this Mart’s greeting. Heidegger (as we can tell after a few words) was, she says, in speech ‘round, sententious but not pompous.’ She suggests Australians could liken his voice to the patrician, classically educated sometime prime minister of Australia, Gough Whitlam. That of ‘Willy’ (Quine) is more larrikin. Think of Bob Hawke (another prime minister) she suggests. He intensifies the nasal quality of his voice to signify rational authority and the finality of his commonsense.

** Willy! How do you be? **

O.K. Mart then. Bound like a variable.

‘Bound’? And gagged? Let being be. Let being speak.

You asked me, not being. Wait for being to say it, you’ll grow old waiting. Better you wait for Hannah to send you a word. She might give you the time of day.. didn’t mention you in The Human Condition but.

[A silence here. Perhaps ‘Willy’ must have realised he had gone too far with that. With his next sentence he’d done with the jeering tone.]

Well, she did speak to you again after it all.. after all.. didn’t she? More than a moment’s warmth at last in this cold war.

[Another silence, then Heidegger speaks.]

We’re always already losing the pathway. Where’s your clearing in being? Sometimes you make like a behaviourist; you declare ‘no line between philosophy and science.’ You content yourself with beings – even your pure numbers and sets are no more than things. I tell you something. Being is found in language, the house of being. When you wait on being, language speaks.

Steady on, Marty. I know others think we can’t even talk to each other. It feels as if between America and Europe there’s love or hatred in philosophy but never friendship.. But I can recognise what I read when you’re setting up Sein und Zeit – title sounds like a newspaper though. As y’say, we can’t ask ‘What is being?’ and expect an answer that describes it. If you give a description you’re talking about beings or kinds of things. And like you I can’t go along with guys who are saying still that metaphysical questions are meaningless.. I sometimes wonder, though, whether you ever read your own Frege? And what Bertie made of Frege, with his stuff about descriptions and names? In 1927 he’d have been young like you then. Gottlieb and Bertrand both of them would have gone spare if they’d tried out your question of ‘the meaning of being’ in their versions of logic. Think about it. Imagine they tried to question you on whether we can search for being. … … The ‘meaning of being.’ Do you mean a difference there? What would they have made of being or its ‘meaning,’ since your being is not a kind and not a thing? They might have tried out, ‘Is there something such that, for any concept or description, that concept or description does not apply to it?’ It’s not just that ‘What is being?’ is outside scientific enquiry, and answers won’t be strictly verifiable or falsifiable. The problem is, the sentence falls apart when you look at what it tries to ask. And if you said it was the meaning of being you were after, they’d have referred you to a dictionary for ‘being’ and to the logician’s rubbish bin of history as the right place for being ‘itself.’

Steady on yourself. I got onto ‘On What There Is’ a while after Hannah made a chink for me in the Cold War Ice. [Our witness notes that ‘Marty’ sounded half-annoyed and half-pleased.] I agreed with you against that schmuck McX who reckons that something must be, just so that we can say of it that it doesn’t exist. He’s never darkened the portals of the House of Being. I’m not him. I want to talk about being in terms of all the different
You don’t know where I’m going, but I’m going on. Pathways, you know. I want to get back to the main story. A philosopher has to ask ‘What is being?’ and a philosopher must understand he cannot answer the question directly. It takes a bit of lateral thinking. Like you, I work ontology in with phenomenology – what we do instead of your ‘epistemology.’ I got most of it from poor Edmund; the great Edmund, I know. I feel bad about not coming out for him when he got the push. Anyway he was so dogged he couldn’t see I had got so much from him. I wanted to go further on, not plough his phenomenological fields of essences in circles so that it got to be an infinite path to track before you could say anything about anything. I was saying. I got the idea from his phenomenology that its no use doing ontology without some words for what and who you are and where you’re coming from and what you’re standing on and reaching for when you form the ontological question. So you’d say I do epistemology and ontology in the one hit, I don’t see why people won’t notice that in my version of all the manifold ways of being, being is always the being of some being. [‘It’s Gilles D. can’t you hear me about the Fold yet?’ leaked in again through some static.] The people who won’t read me think I’m about making a mystery of being. Can’t they read me? Being is being-approached through what we know; knowing is right there in amongst our ways of being.

You, Willy, you must have been raised on your share of René D. Perhaps we can start from there, and where the phenomenology I learned from the great Edmund took off from. Old Hussel (he never would). He thought he had security in René’s ‘I think, I am.’ He thought, ‘Just put a no entry sign where d’cart took the wrong turning onto a dualist highway. Stay with what’s evident and become a transcendental-nik in the fields of phenomena. That way Hassel could keep body and soul together instead of colours and thoughts and all that in one place, leaving in some other place a bare objective world that couldn’t be sensed. But it was a lion’s den Des walked into. The young Cart-horse thought he was secure there with ‘I think’ and all the certainties he thought went into. That what he thought was absolutely his. But the moment of clarity when he thought ‘I do indeed exist’ is one and the same with the surrounding darkness where he couldn’t even say what his thinking is or his existence. Could only say what his ‘thinking existence’ wasn’t – not weighty stuff. But Edmund got to see how Kant’s manual for the limits of metaphysics had raised up its own ‘mythical constructions’ – the prior structuring of the world that was supposed to make the world of appearance intelligible. The workings of a noumenal self upon the Ding an sich! I ask you. So Edmund did sort of hustle after all, trying to make everything nice and phenomenological, apparent, showing its being on its face. But his transcendental friendship with Immanuel wasn’t close enough to break his folie à deux with René. I had to break with Edmund because he couldn’t get it – that if you start out putting all you say and write under ‘I,’ then twist and turn as you like you can’t make the ‘special thing’ you thought you’d picked out become the object of your own attention. So you can’t bring what you refer to by ‘I’ within your phenomenology. [A longer silence is indicated here. Quine made some restless sounds but still said nothing.] Well. anyway.. his writing about the ‘ego-pole’ from which is subtended all phenomenological experience and meaning is great imaginary geometry though.
It’s like Gibber Ryle’s elusive self that can’t stand on its own shadow, the child who can’t catch the wave he makes as he reaches out to touch it. Old Gibber Plains... he wrote a good review of me you know, even if he lost the plot as he went further into it. Without the war maybe we could have worked together... kept reading each other’s stuff. [Another silence. Quine’s restless noises had subsided.] Anyway. Some of your positivist émigré US enthusiasts found my language about being and ways of being so offensive... some of them your teachers I’ve heard... they think my ‘modes of being’ are obscure? What about the bare objective being they seek, as it would be known from nowhere, as presented to a mind that was no kind of subject? That’s not obscure? What they grope for as objectivity could not be for any kind of being in the world... ... Husserl started out right but went off the track too. Yes he saw from where René ended up that he had to walk away from the division between the world itself and our subjective take on it. Yes? But we don’t discover experiences as had by a unique and absolute ego. We discover a world in relation to our being in it, with it, and all that. Well, that’s where the Des went wrong, mistaking ‘I can’t think that I don’t think’ as finding that only non-matter could think. This must have been an old tale for you too as you set out before the war to talk about ontology.

Not quite. I can’t guess all the rest of it. [Quine came back in, talking as if he’d been responding all along.] I hadn’t heard it from that direction before, to tell the truth. Hmm. Truth. ‘S’truth. That might be a sticking point. When you discover how things are... how things have been all along... it can seem as if the truth is a sort of uncovering. Waking up to it and all. But being true isn’t the same as being uncovered. That might be the sticking point between us. [We are told that Quine’s tone changed while he was making the next few remarks. Harder, more nasal.] ... What about Tarski on truth? If only you’d read the Poles instead of bombing them.

Don’t put the war on me. I’ve sworn to myself to say nothing about any of it. I’ve been bucketed enough since it ended... ... So what did Tarski say? ‘Snow is white’ is true if snow is white. Big deal. Short task-I would say. Doesn’t tell anyone how language stands in relation to being. I like to read logicians who see logic as part of ontology and who do not leave the epistemology for later. That’s why I thought it might be worth it for us to talk. But why should I pay you compliments. ‘Our mothers bore us’ is the best you can do to enlighten ambiguity. You want to regiment language so that the ambiguities that make for thought don’t appear anymore. It’s the mothers who bore us, is it? What about the mother tongue that enables us to say it... I’m thinking thanking you after all. Hadn’t thought about the tongue and the mother when I had it as language that did the talking through the yellow(ed) pages of philosophy. Regiment the mother tongue? When you root that out you’ll be the one who’s silent.

Don’t talk trendy to me Martin Heidegger. Pulling phrases out of other people’s language houses... [The radio operator notes interference – scraps of words and phrases ‘Lips speak together,’ ‘sex’ ‘not one,’ Luce, lucid Luce.] to cloak your pseudo-politics of non-involvement. [The operator records that after this effusion Quine’s tones seemed to be of suppressed agitation.] My lips are speaking together of their own accord.

[The both fell silent for some moments, according to the notes. For my part, I can imagine Quine embarrassed at the words that had begun to start from him and how they had taken him over. I think of Heidegger being visited by painful memories of Hannah and how, so as to forget her and cover up her being and her inspiration he wrote of the ways of being but without uncovering the truth of the people like her who’d had their ways of being with him... her ways with him and how she’d had her way with him. He wrote around that fact. And his vaunted asexuality of da-sein. Who had he been trying to kid? And why did so many of his readers want to be kidded. Anyway, there was this long silence until Martin spoke.]

It’s too late baby now. Others are going to have to sort out that stuff.

Don’t soft-soap me, Heidegger. You’re still trying to set the scene your way. I thought we were going to talk to each other about being. What did you say at the beginning – ‘How do you be?’ Well, what are we going to do about this ‘being?’ To start. There are beings – people, games, vegetables, and stars. There are things that happen. Wars, affairs, conversations and the inventing of inventions. My lot over here have been arguing about whether these ‘events’ are ‘things’ too, alongside... additional to... the rest. The point for philosophy is to decide, on the best reasons you know, which variables you’re going to bind. There is at least one star. Right? Then it implodes. It’s enough to say that it is a star (that’s the thing you’re committed to) that imploded (and that’s what happened to it). Or you could choose events over objects and say there is at least one star-implosion. Why quantify over star-implosions as well as imploding stars? But however many things of various kinds you find you have to recognise as entities (‘beings,’ to you) none of them require you to recognise those by-Parmenides-accursed universals that Partstrong in the Great Southern Land tried to import. Trying to plant them in the colony was like the way they planted polished rice and expected something to grow. But what’s with your being itself that every being has?
Willard, Willard. How you recognise what there is and the choices you make doesn’t come out in the same way for me – in my house of being. With my ontological difference of being and beings, and my letting being speak from amongst the myriads of modes of being that I describe in the big book, I’ve declared an end to metaphysics of that sort. I’m not dividing things up into particulars and universals, as if beings are the particulars and being the great universal – the most general genus. I want to let being emerge in my setting forth the ways we approach, grasp, question, fall, take care and authenticate. These are modes of our da-sein – of our being there. Being here, if you like. But I can imagine more distinctly now, after all our talk, that if you translate my non-concatenations into your ‘bound variable’ schemata you’d say that to recognise the diverse ways of being I’d have to quantify over ‘being-there’ – recognising it as a thing. I can’t do it that way. Ways of being are the ways in which we recognise that there are ‘things.’ Things are a standing reserve we can call upon if the need arises – already ready-to-hand as we use them in our comportment. That language is my style. You reminded me that our mothers bore us, that the mother tongue I felt a while back was a readiness – a different sort of standing reserve if it now strikes me – as if ready-made for making up those concatenations I need. . . . I’ve got a funny feeling of someone.. Paul?.. called Towards me from decades later. He can’t understand why my ‘obscure’ language hooks people in.. says it’s a kind of ‘glossolalia’ – as if that would be an easy thing to bring off. But talking to you I come to say a thing or two about how I ‘recognise’ the various elements of my ontology without turning them into yet more ‘things’ over which I quantify. What about Bertie’s and your stuff on syncategoramatic expressions? How can we recognise that we do things for the sake of something else without ‘countenancing’ ‘sakes’ (or ‘for the sake of’) as if they too were things. Fancy. I do that myself, hyphenate ‘for-the-sake-of-which’ in order to deal with the ‘will,’ which is not the entity that the noun suggests. In the same fashion I search for being in searching for the meaning of being and do this – though the being that has this meaning isn’t anything. If I wrote ‘in being there we discover the ready-at-hand and the-ready-to-hand’ I wouldn’t be saying there was a thing called ‘being there’ rather than somebody. I wanted to emphasise that we discover and experience things within the ways we comport ourselves in the world. I needed expressions that put the ways we are into relief. Your picture of sensations being filtered through a web of theory still shares Descartes’ egocentric fixation. His ego becomes your spider at the centre of its theoretical web, feeling the ‘world out there’ as a trembling series of tugs on the net. Philosophy that works alerts people to how they’re placed in the world. It creates disturbances within the net of language. I’m talking about the way we are, not a thing, when I talk about da-sein.

I’m getting sick of this, Heidegger. There you go again, trapping yourself in one of the dungeons of your castle rather than living without clutter in a house with clear views. You say you liked Russell’s treating as syncategoramatic words that we need but which don’t refer to anything. Why don’t you start writing that way yourself?

I’d like to have written [Heidegger sounded like he was musing, then became excited as he went on.] ‘In being-there we be in the world, and in this being-in-the-world we be in a world of the ready-at-hand and the ready-to-hand and so on.’ That Johnny-Paul tear-jerker like Johnny Ray don’t like him but when he lets his langue get the better of him it gets interesting. His ‘l’estre’ is ‘the to-be.’ No reification there. Why not a new alignment of both of us with the French? Infinitives in place of abstract nouns, reification supplanted by syncategoramatic expressions, and shared canonical notation to help us with a common language.

I don’t know what to call you any more. Marty. Mart. Martin. Heidegger. Martin Heidegger. You take yourself so seriously – and trying for this harmony is too trying. You think that with just a syntactical trick you’ll make Being and Time desired reading for me and mine. Do you think I’m going to leave my desert landscapes for your jungles of falling, care, solicitude and your precious Sein-zum Tode? I’ll regiment your being and chainsaw your growths whether they stand up like entities or lie down like the incomplete expressions that they are.

Willy old fellow, you can be one Dummkopf. It’s the Sein-zum-Tode bit that gets you off balance. You and your ‘eternal sentences.’ You and your people like to borrow from Minkowski – deal with time and objects as phases in a four-dimensional continuum. That way you can make it sound as if things didn’t pass away – temporal phases stand firm in their order forever fixed as earlier and later. You forget tense, and its creeping past, present and future. And as you forget being you forget our ways of being that makes it possible for us to represent changing things as unchanging phases. You fancy that you can look out from theory at a temporal world – as if from nowhere and no when. As if you were outside the representation that seems to achieve pure objectivity. Heraclitus was already onto that over-reaching in theory. Being, our ways of being, all our language, our science and its mathematics too, all our stratagems for representing time – they’re all within the flux. For each user of these systems the flux is their gathering pace towards that horizon where we will each,
alone, each for ourselves, drop off the edge. The world of existence is flat. The horizon doesn’t keep on receding as you go on and on until finally you come back to where you were. As you come to the edge of the Fall the river and everything else and you with it will disappear as you go over. Whether we are sections of a space/time worm or Leaves that briefly eddy on the River of Time makes no difference. Your ‘eternal sentences’ won’t protect you against the singularity we call death. No use bringing ontology and logic together once more if you lock your lips against that obscenity.

[Our notes record that Quine sounds ill-at-ease and then spaced-out at what he finds himself saying.]

I have to tell you.. smart Jack in the Great Southern Land he’s not a universals man he’s going to try to warn them there against a ‘baleful influence’ I’m supposed to be having on their good minds. What’s happening to me? ... Why am I going on like this? ... He doesn’t know the half of it. ... God its getting worse.. Language is speaking me. ... He thinks that the worst effect is what you say about truth – as if the truth of what is cooking consists in disclosing what’s in the frying pan. But it’s what Partstrong’s doing to my influence that’s worse. He really can’t stay my landscape – makes out I’m sticking my head into the sand not to see his universals. He wants special entities to ‘make’ my predicates true. I don’t stoop to conquer. I look out to the horizon. I look up and see things that have a lot in common and a lot that’s different, yes. I don’t need mediating universals to bind like things together. I don’t have to take apart the concatenations ‘having-something-in-common’ and ‘differing-in-some-way.’ I can make the points and distinctions I need without binding ‘things in common’ and ‘things that differentiate’ as values for variables. The trouble between you and me has a different flavour. It isn’t really about truth. You can say what you want about waking up to the truth and all that ‘hiding’ and ‘uncovering’ stuff. You can weld it on to Tarski’s formula if you want. Snow is white is true if and only if snow is white – that puts ‘being true’ right up there on the scene. You can go on to colour it in with your phenomenology, as you like. ... No. My trouble with you comes from the way you raise up being and nothing as themes. You’re going to end up reifying them. I know. You deny they are things. But then how are you thinking of being and nothing when you raise them up as themes? Let me quote me about you:

An indefinite singular term whose ambiguity has especially invited confusion, real or feigned, is ‘nothing’ or ‘nobody.’ As tired humor the device is quite familiar; Gershwin’s “I got plenty o’ nothin’” ... Locke ... humourlessly succumbed to this confusion ... arguing that if an event lacked a cause it would have nothing for its cause. Heidegger, if we may read him straight, was beguiled by the same confusion into his dictum ‘Das Nichts nichtet’. ... What is troublesome about the indefinite singular term ‘nothing’ is its tendency to masquerade as definite.

The same confusion could arise with ‘something,’ but ‘something’s there’ promises that we might find out what it is and that leaves no question hanging about the ‘something’ as other than the particular thing it turns out to be. We have no urge to raise ‘something’ into a category so that as well as the things in the world there is a Something that is present in the presence of every thing. That’s what you must have done with being. The question of being is not the same as any series of questions about beings. I get it. But that doesn’t mean that your precious being is something other than any being. You might as well say that something is something other than any particular thing.

You’re starting at shadows. [Heidegger’s tone has become more assured.] Shadows that are cast as language speaks us. The line between the everyday and the ontologically momentous is always unstable. I know Lewis Carroll nonsense when I see it. The question you should ask, since we agree that being is not some marvellous general category that could be defined, is how I could write a book on being. What could there be to say? If you look you’ll see how I’ve managed it. I bring the voice of being onto the stage of the book by talking about the ways of being that exhibit it. Being waits, perpetually in the wings. Or, to go from theatre to terror, I can write about being because in writing about every way of being I place being on the horizon of the field. Being lends a gravity and intensity ... ...

[The notes indicate that signals continued long after this point. It will take time to decipher them. There was increasing interference; see page of messages from other time zones.]

REFERENCES


v Ibid., 22-23.

vi Edwards, *Heidegger’s Confusions*.


viii Ibid., 32.