

On Self-Transformation in Heidegger's Later Philosophy¹

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Abstract: The objective of this paper is to elucidate the notion of self-transformation in Martin Heidegger's later philosophy. It characterizes his later understanding of self-transformation as a "releasement" (*Gelassenheit*) into the truth of being—an experience that cannot be achieved through willing or intentional effort, but only when even the trace of willing has disappeared. In this sense, self-transformation does not result from an individual's attempt to adopt a different relation to oneself. What is crucial, rather, is preparing for self-transformation. Such transformation becomes possible only through silent waiting and attentive listening to what has already been near to us in concealment—beyond willing—so that it may eventually speak, or rather, show itself. Focusing on the becoming of a human being into a poet, this paper highlights the singular character of human self-transformation in Heidegger's later philosophy.

Keywords: Heidegger, releasement, self-transformation, the truth of being

It is not difficult to find the idea of human self-transformation in Martin Heidegger's philosophy. First, in *Being and Time*, he states that the specific human mode of being is Dasein, describing its two modes as authenticity and inauthenticity. The transition from inauthenticity to authenticity occurs in anxiety because, therein, Dasein raises the question about its ownmost possibility, and thus lays the foundation for its being. Freed from taking care

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of innerworldly beings, Dasein lays the foundation for its existence. It is not difficult to find Heidegger's thinking around the self-transformation of a human being in *Being and Time*.

It is, however, a well-known fact that *Being and Time* is Heidegger's major work in his early period. Given this, was the self-transformation of a human being crucial after the so-called turn (*Kehre*)? In Heidegger's later philosophy, of course, such self-transformation is an essential theme. However, it differs from the transition from inauthenticity to authenticity. The self-transformation in Heidegger's later thought means, as to be reviewed below, becoming a poet. Of course, unlike the transition from inauthenticity to authenticity, anxiety and death do not play essential roles in the self-transformation of becoming a poet. Instead, it is critical to listen to the language of being, become attuned to it, and correspond with it. Such correspondence is not achieved through an act of will, but through a self-transformation in which even the trace of willing is extinguished. The objective of this paper is to shed light on the self-transformation of becoming a poet.

Self-transformation in Heidegger's later philosophy: becoming a poet

Regarding poetizing, Heidegger says in *What is Called Thinking?*, "Thinking (*Denken*) and poetizing (*Dichten*) are in themselves the originary, the essential, and therefore also the final speaking (*Sprechen*) that language speaks through the mouth of man."² He also says, "Between these two [i.e., thinking and poetizing] there exists a secret kinship because in the service of language both intercede on behalf of language and give lavishly of themselves."³ Of course, this language is the language that lets something be said to us or the correspondence corresponding to the appeal of being.⁴

Human beings can assert sentences such as "the hammer is heavy" based on their a priori understanding of the being of the object of the

² Martin Heidegger, *What is Called Thinking?*, trans. by Fred. D. Wieck and J. Glenn Gray (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 128, translation modified; see Martin Heidegger, *Was Heißt Denken?*, GA 8, ed. by Paola-Ludovika Coriando (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2002), 132–133, for the original German.

³ Martin Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. by Jean T. Wilde and William Kluback (London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 95.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 91. In *What is Philosophy?*, Heidegger says this correspondence is philosophy. However, as already noted, between philosophy as thinking and poetizing, there exists a secret kinship.

assertion. However, this being is “what-being”⁵ (*Wassein*) or the beingness (*Seiendheit*) of beings, i.e., the traditional metaphysical concept of being. What needs to be considered is that the truth as unconcealment is concealed as beingness. The unconcealment cannot be expressed in such assertions⁶. Then, is there any language in which the interplay of concealment and unconcealment is expressed? The answer is poetry; as Heidegger says, “Art [...] is the creative preservation of truth in the work. Art happens as poetry.”⁷

Of course, poetizing is possible only when a poet has first experienced the interplay of concealment and unconcealment. In “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” Heidegger says:

[B]efore he [i.e., the human being] speaks the human being must first let himself be claimed again by being, taking the risk that under this claim he will seldom have much to say. Only thus will the pricelessness of its essence be once more bestowed upon the word, and upon humans a home for dwelling in the truth of being.⁸

The word upon which the pricelessness of its essence is bestowed is poetry, and poetry is a home for humans who dwell in the truth of being. However, before the human being speaks or poetizes, he must first let himself be claimed by being, taking the risk that he seldom has much to say under this claim. What does this phenomenon mean?

In “A Dialogue on Language: between a Japanese and an Inquirer,” Heidegger, as the inquirer, says that “saying” (*sagen*) is the same as “showing” (*zeigen*) in the sense of letting appear (*erscheinenlassen*) and letting shine (*scheinlassen*).⁹ What then is the meaning of letting appear and letting shine? In Hölderlin’s *Hymns “Germania” and “The Rhine,”* Heidegger says that “nothing can ‘speak’ more insistently to us than the prevailing of nature in its greater and in its smallest aspects.”¹⁰ Moreover, Heidegger continues, “That

⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Logic as the Question Concerning the Essence of Language*, trans. by Wanda Torres Gregory and Yvonne Unna (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009), 31.

⁶ For a detailed discussion of this point, see Suh-Hyun Park, “The Language of the Ineffable: Poetry and Imageless Thought in Heidegger’s Later Philosophy,” *Kritike*, 16:3 (April 2023), 182–184.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, “The Origin of the Work of Art,” in *Off the Beaten Track*, ed. and trans. by Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 48.

⁸ Martin Heidegger, “Letter on ‘Humanism,’” in *Pathmarks*, ed. by William McNeill, trans. by Frank A. Capuzzi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 243.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, “A Dialogue on Language,” in *On the Way to Language*, trans. by Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 47.

¹⁰ Martin Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymns “Germania” and “The Rhine,”* trans. by William McNeill and Julia Ireland (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 68.

is to say, we will not succeed simply by placing nature with its absence of language and human beings who speak alongside one another as different kinds of things.”¹¹ Saying is the same as showing; what appears and shines in showing or saying is nature. The prevailing of nature speaks and, in the Heideggerian perspective on language, one should not place nature without language and human beings who speak alongside one another as different kinds of things. But then, why does Heidegger say that nature speaks? What is the language of nature?

In “The Fieldpath,” Heidegger says that “the message of the Fieldpath speaks only as long as there are human beings who, born in its air, are able to hear it.”¹² The language of nature, including the message of the Fieldpath, speaks only if there are human beings who can hear it. In other words, the language of nature needs human beings; furthermore, it is expressed in and through the human saying as the saying of the poets. “[B]ecause [...] ‘nature’ as beyng founds itself in saying, the saying of the poets as the self-saying of nature is of the same essence as the latter.”¹³ Here, nature as beyng is not the object of study in natural sciences. Instead, it appears and shows itself in and through the saying of the poets. Then, how does nature as beyng show itself in and through the saying of the poets?

First, it is noteworthy that beyng is the term that Heidegger used in his later period to differentiate his concept of being from beingness. What does Heidegger mean by beyng, and how does it appear in poetry? There is a clue about what is poetized in “Hegel and the Greeks.” Elucidating the phenomenon of unconcealment, thought in a Greek manner, Heidegger says:

[T]he human being is the sayer (*Sagende*). Saying (*Sagen*), in Old High German *sagan*, means showing, letting appear and letting be seen. The human being is a being that, in saying, lets what is present (*Anwesende*) lie before us in its presence (*Anwesenheit*), apprehending what lies before. Human beings can speak (*sprechen*) only insofar as they are sayers.¹⁴

¹¹ *Ibid.*, Also, in *Logic as the Question Concerning the Essence of Language*, Heidegger says that “the loveliness of the valley and the menace of the mountain and of the raging sea, the sublimity of the stars, the absorption of the plant and the ensnarement of the animal [...] all that is language” (emphasis in original). See Heidegger, *Logic as the Question Concerning the Essence of Language*, 140.

¹² Martin Heidegger, “The Fieldpath,” trans. by Berit Mexia, in *Journal of Chinese Philosophy*, 13:4 (1986), 456.

¹³ Heidegger, *Hölderlin’s Hymns “Germania” and “The Rhine,”* 233.

¹⁴ Martin Heidegger, “Hegel and the Greeks,” in *Pathmarks*, ed. by William McNeill (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 334, translation modified; see Martin Heidegger,

Letting what is present be seen in its presence is to unconceal the presence in the appearing of what is present. In other words, it is to unconceal both the presence and what is present simultaneously. This is the reason that what is poetical, as Heidegger says in "Dialogue on Language," is "the welling-up (*Quellen*) of the message of the two-fold's unconcealment."¹⁵ This two-fold unconcealment is inconspicuous, and poetry makes it shine. "True and high poetry only ever accomplishes one thing: it makes the inconspicuous shine."¹⁶

This shining is none other than what Heidegger calls the language of nature, which the poet poetizes. However, it is first required for poetizing to be silent to listen to the language of nature. This is why Heidegger says in his *Hölderlin's Hymns "Germania" and "The Rhine"* that "language itself has its origin in silence,"¹⁷ and in *Being and Truth* that "the ability to keep silent is therefore the origin and ground of language."¹⁸ The poet can poetize the language of nature, or, as Heidegger says in "What is Philosophy?," "the appeal of being"¹⁹ (*das Zuspruch des Seins*) or "the voice of being"²⁰ (*die Stimme des Seins*) only through the poet's correspondence with the voice of being. "The correspondence listens to the voice of the appeal. What appeals to us as the voice of being evokes our correspondence. 'Correspondence' then means: being de-termined, *être disposé* by that which comes from the being of beings."²¹

From the Heideggerian perspective, poetizing, which results from the correspondence, is only possible through "[t]he transition from willing into releasement (*Gelassenheit*)."²² As said in the "Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking," one cannot let oneself into releasement by willing:

"Hegel und die Griechen," in *Wegmarken*, GA 9, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1976), 442–443, for the original German.

¹⁵ Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language," 46.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, "The Language of Johann Peter Hebel," in *The Heidegger Reader*, ed. by Günter Figal, trans. Jerome Veith (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009), 295.

¹⁷ Heidegger, *Hölderlin's Hymns "Germania" and "The Rhine"*, 199.

¹⁸ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Truth*, trans. by Gregory Fried and Richard Polt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), 84, emphasis in original.

¹⁹ Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?*, 75, translation modified; see Martin Heidegger, "Was ist das – die Philosophie?," in *Identität und Differenz*, GA 11, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 2006), 21, for the original German.

²⁰ Heidegger, *What is Philosophy?*, 77, translation modified; see Heidegger, "Was ist das – die Philosophie?," 21, for the original German.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Martin Heidegger, "Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking," in *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. by John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1966), 61.

Such relinquishing no longer stems from a willing, except that the occasion for releasing oneself to belonging to that-which-regions (*Gegnet*) requires a trace of willing. This trace, however, vanishes while releasing oneself and is completely extinguished in releasement.²³

Relinquishing the willing still requires a willing at first; however, even the trace of willing is completely extinguished in releasement.²⁴ It is impossible to poetize without transforming human existence from willing into releasement. This transformation is what might be called becoming a poet.²⁵

The singularity of self-transformation in Heidegger's later philosophy

One thing to note is that the transformation of human existence centers on preparing for a correspondence that listens to the voice of being. In "Letter on 'Humanism,'" Heidegger says that "... in the claim [by being] upon human beings, in the attempt to make humans ready for this claim, is there not implied a concern about human beings?"²⁶ The focus of the preparation, therefore, is readiness for the claim of being. In other words, it is

²³ *Ibid.*, 80. That-which-regions (*Gegnet*), as the older form of the "region" (*Gegend*) (*Ibid.*, 66), is different from the horizon in which beings lie. Human beings represent their a priori understanding of the beingness of beings in the horizon as the "field of vision" (*Ibid.*, 63). However, "[t]he region gathers, just as nothing were happening, each to each and each to all into an abiding, while resting in itself" (*Ibid.*, 66). Gathering each to each and each to all into an abiding is different from representing human beings' a priori understanding of the beingness of beings in the horizon. Gathering means that a human being abiding in the region and letting herself into releasement experience the appearing of what is presented gathered with its presence, or "the presence of the two-fold, being and beings." Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language," translation modified; see Heidegger, "Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache (1953/54): Zwischen einem Japaner und einem Fragenden," in *Unterwegs zur Sprache*, GA 12, ed. by Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1985), 112, for the original German. This two-fold (*Zwiefalt*) is different from "the being of beings represented metaphysically." Heidegger, "A Dialogue on Language," 26, translation modified; see Heidegger, "Aus einem Gespräch von der Sprache (1953/54)," 112, for the original German.

²⁴ This is the reason that, as paradoxically said in the "Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking," "[W]hen we let ourselves into releasement to that-which-regions, we will non-willing," in Heidegger, "Conversation on a Country Path about Thinking," 79.

²⁵ Of course, the poet most emphasized in Heidegger's later philosophy is Friedrich Hölderlin—the poet whose work, for Heidegger, marks the second inception of Western thinking. Yet such poetry would have been impossible for Hölderlin to write without undergoing a profound self-transformation. While it is evident that such a transformation is nearly impossible for us, as ordinary people, it is not entirely beyond reach. From the perspective of Heidegger's later philosophy, then, self-transformation remains a vital task demanded of human beings.

²⁶ Heidegger, "Letter on 'Humanism,'" 243.

the transformation of human existence so that one becomes attuned to the voice of being and thus corresponds to what appeals to one through it. This correspondence ultimately brings about a change in the human mode of being; however, such self-transformation does not result from an individual's effort to relate to themselves differently.

Becoming attuned to the voice of being is not merely a passive mode of self-transformation, for such attunement is possible only when one is able to correspond to it. Nevertheless, in the active-passive distinction, this transformation may be described as passive rather than active, since attunement to the voice of being is not simply the product of one's own effort. What is essential, in this regard, is the preparation for attunement—or correspondence—to the voice of being. Yet this preparation, by itself, cannot bring about attunement, for, as we have seen, attunement is never the outcome of one's own striving. All one can do, therefore, is prepare and wait. In this light, striving to relate to oneself differently, or engaging in self-care with the aim of transforming oneself from what one is, is of comparatively less importance.

Using the term “outside” to describe what a human being experiences when becoming attuned to the voice of being, the preparation for human self-transformation consists in letting oneself be released into the outside. This preparation is closely connected to Heidegger's overcoming of the modern notion of the subject or atomized self. In *Being and Time*, being-in-the-world is an existential determination of Dasein; the world, therefore, belongs to the very constitution of Dasein.²⁷ “It [i.e., Dasein] is always already ‘outside’ together with some being encountered in the world already discovered.”²⁸ And “even in this ‘being outside’ together with its object, Dasein is ‘inside’, correctly understood.”²⁹ In both early Heidegger and later Heidegger, Dasein is always already outside in its being-together with innerworldly beings. What changes between the two periods is the manner in which Dasein's self-transformation takes place.

In *Being and Time*, self-transformation centers on listening to the silent call of conscience in the mood of anxiety. Through this listening, Dasein transforms itself by resolutely choosing its ownmost potentiality-of-being. In Heidegger's later philosophy, however, Dasein is no longer called to resolve itself in this way but must instead allow itself to become attuned to the voice of being. That is, it must let itself be released into the outside. Such release indeed requires preparation, yet this preparation is not oriented toward the achievement of any determinate resolve. Rather, it is a preparation for

²⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time: A Translation of Sein und Zeit*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 1996), 60.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

waiting for “the ones that come toward us” (*die Zu-künftigen*) as “the future ones” (*die Zukünftigen*). What, then, are the implications of such preparation?

Conclusion

As shown above, in Heidegger’s later philosophy, human self-transformation can only be prepared for through listening to the voice of being and through letting oneself be released into the outside. For Heidegger, the self-transformation of Dasein is to let itself be released to experience the interplay of concealment and unconcealment or the truth of being as the outside. Therefore, Dasein must be prepared to experience the outside or be released into it. However, this experience is not the result of Dasein’s own willing to be released, even though it requires a willing first. In other words, the self-transformation of Dasein is not possible through only humanist practices but only when the trace of willing is completely extinguished.

Concerning the self-transformation of Dasein, however, there is an aspect of “resistance.” As already noted, relinquishing the willing still requires, at first, a willing. This initial willing could be interpreted as a form of resistance, since it involves releasing oneself from everydayness into belonging to that-which-regions (*Gegnet*), a release that initially demands a trace of willing. However, even though relinquishing the willing requires a willing at first, the self-transformation is possible only through the transition from willing into releasement and thus requires relinquishing of the willing itself.

What, then, are the implications of this self-transformation achieved through the relinquishment of willing itself? Above all, they lie in the fact that the newness born of such transformation consists in “the future ones” understood as “the ones that come toward us.” As Heidegger states in *Contributions to Philosophy*, the task is to prepare for the future ones, which ground the essence of truth.³⁰ Yet, the future ones are not something entirely new; rather, they are to be understood as the retrieval of what has long been concealed. Only by attentively listening to what has been concealed can genuine transformation occur. This suggests that transformation is possible only through silent waiting and attentive listening to what has already been near to us in concealment—beyond willing—so that it may eventually speak, or rather, show itself. And yet, are not such silent waiting and attentive listening precisely what modern human beings, living in the technological age, find themselves least capable of?

³⁰ See Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)*, trans. by Richard Rojcewicz and Daniela Vallega-Neu (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2012), 313.

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