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A Voice that is Merely Breath

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‘Anxiety is there. It is only sleeping. Its breath quivers perpetually through Dasein’
(Martin Heidegger, ‘What is Metaphysics?’)

Anxiety, breath, being
Heidegger had made a similar connection between anxiety and breath a few years earlier, in Being and Time (1927): ‘[Anxiety] is oppressive and stifles one’s breath’ (BT231/186). Anxiously gasping for air, we are struck dumb: ‘Anxiety robs us of speech’ (WM89/112).

For Heidegger, all moods, and anxiety in particular, are revelatory, even if what they reveal is the mundanity of the most everyday object. Most other moods reveal entities (Seienden) in a certain aspect; but anxiety brings us face to face with being (Sein).

Is it possible to describe this ‘being’ only in the gasping and halting breaths that escape us in the grips of anxiety, when we can barely speak at all? If this were so, then it would not be the first time in the history of philosophy that being spoke in a voice that was merely breath.

The etymology of ‘being’ in ‘breath’
Jacques Derrida notes that both Ernest Renan and Friedrich Nietzsche trace the etymology of the word ‘being’ back to the word ‘breath’ and, in this instance, language tells us something essentially true (Derrida 2001 [1967], 173–4/203–4).1 There is, for the tradition we shall be concerned with here — the one that runs between Aristotle and Martin Heidegger — an essential connection between being and language: for Aristotle and Martin Heidegger — an essential connection between being and language: for Aristotle, being is ‘said in many ways’ (Aristotle, Metaphysics 1003a–b), which is to say, as soon as language lays hold of that-which-is, what it means to be assumes a number of different senses. We shall identify three distinct understandings of being, and in each case, we shall show that the language used to speak of them involves a particular employment of the breath.

This connection between being and breath will ultimately allow us to clarify the epigraph with which we began, and the course of the article will reveal something of just how rich such an apparently innocuous passage can prove to be.

Being and language: the propositional form
Western language has from its inception assumed the form of the proposition. The proposition or the ‘judgement’ involves a subject and a predicate, joined implicitly or explicitly by the ‘copula’ — ‘is’ and its cognates: in other words, being. This at least gives us a hint as to why we might say that whenever we speak, whatever we speak about, we will always have to invoke the notion of being, almost without meaning to. Being speaks — in a manner that is often both glaring and discreet — in the ‘is’ of copulation.

By linking subject and predicate, the copula, ‘being’, or simply the proposition, reveals the subject to us in a certain respect. ‘S’ is revealed to be ‘p’. Assuming that one has many different aspects, one’s ‘being’ can be revealed only
gradually: thus, being, or appearing (for they are the same) is a \textit{process}, an event, whereby the entity is gradually revealed to us in its truth. Since language is nothing but the revealing of an entity’s being, the Italian philosopher, Giorgio Agamben, a heterodox follower of Heidegger, has gone so far as to define ‘being’ as the very ‘event of language’, its taking place in the form of \textit{speech}.

But it is very rare for speech \textit{explicitly} to draws attention to itself, and hence language is unaccustomed to marking the fact that being speaks within it (perhaps indeed it came as a surprise to the reader to witn the self-effacing \textit{copula} dragged so unwillingly into the limelight, a moment ago). To speak of being as such — what contortions would language need to undergo in order to express the very gesture that language makes quite naturally almost every time we open our mouths, so often and so pervasively that we fail almost altogether to notice it? What form of language would be up to the task of speaking about being and nothing besides?

Well, a language that is nothing but \textit{breath}.

**Primary and secondary \textit{ousia}**

To begin to explain this idea, let us turn to Aristotle. His theories of being and of language should allow us to bring out the interrelation between language, breath, and being.

The Greek word for ‘being’ which interests us here, is \textit{ousia}. Aristotle distinguishes between two senses of this term:

1. the singular real thing — which we might call a ‘substance’; and
2. the generic characteristics which are then applied to it — which we might call ‘essence’: the species and genus into which the individual is sorted: Aristotle called the most general forms of these properties, the ‘categories’.

Aristotle named the first of these, ‘primary \textit{ousia}’, for the individual substance was more real, more truly ‘in being’, than anything else, and certainly more so than what he called ‘secondary \textit{ousia}’, the categories that may be predicated of it, since no attribute can exist without a substance to which it might be attached.

In the Latin of the Middle Ages, these two forms of being (substance and essence, the singular and the generic) were sometimes named \textit{existence} and \textit{essence} — two equally plausible translations of \textit{ousia}, which capture very well the two most important senses of the word ‘being’: an entity (’\textit{a being}’) and its Being.

But these two senses are intimately related to — and we might even say a strict consequence of — a certain structure of \textit{language}. Existence and essence correspond to the two parts of any well-formed proposition: the subject and the predicate.

**Realism and nominalism**

Let us focus on the notion of essence for a moment — the \textit{category} that is \textit{predicated} of the grammatical subject and hence of the \textit{non}-grammatical \textit{substance} which is ultimately being spoken of. The most general category that may be attributed to a substance is a class to which \textit{all} entities may be said to belong, and that is being itself. This substance, and every imaginable substance, \textit{is}. Thus, ‘being’ is the most universal term that we have, applicable to everything we can know and bespeak. It was often said to have such a universality that, in fact, it transcended the generality of all the other categories and hence was not even counted as a ‘genus’ at all; rather it would be described in these cases as ‘\textit{trans}-categorial’ (beyond and traversing the categories) or simply ‘transcendental’ (that which transcends and makes possible the categories along with all of the substances subsumed beneath them).
But what is most important for our purposes is that such universal categories (which were often called simply called ‘universals’ — ‘universal’ because they described properties shared by everything belonging to that class) were conceived by the history of philosophy in one of two ways, very roughly aligned with the two founding fathers of philosophy:

(a) Platonism, which affirms the real existence of universals, and is hence known as ‘realism’. For Platonists, there really is such a thing as the ideal or perfect human being, the human ‘itself’ (or the animal or plant...); and

(b) Aristotelianism, which denies any ‘objective’ reality to the universals, or at least denies that general properties may exist in separation from the singular substances to which they belong. Universals would be abstractions made from our empirical experience of individual substances and thus ultimately creatures of our own reason. Universals were mere words in the end, simply ‘names’, and hence the term ‘nominalism’ which was employed to describe this position.

It is in the pages composed by the mediaeval representatives of this latter position that we find the phrase we have taken as our title: when a nominalist spoke of being, the most universal of all the universals, or something yet more lofty, they did so with a ‘flatus vocis’, a ‘voice that is mere air’ or a voice that is merely breath and nothing more.

Much later on, Nietzsche was to articulate this nominalist idea by stating that being, as a notion, was nothing but vapour, an ethereal result of the sublimation of real things. Being was such a nebulous and airy notion that to invoke it was to emit nothing but ‘hot air’, and to become known as a ‘windbag’ or ‘gasser’. One may perhaps hazard the conjecture that anyone who speaks of the metaphysicians and their inheritors among those continental philosophers who wish to overcome metaphysics, critique, or develop it in some other way, as ‘charlatans’, is speaking much the same language, and often for similar reasons.

This was the ultimate truth of the etymology of ‘being’ as ‘breath’: Nietzsche’s well-known ‘overturning of Platonism’ — Being as a mere respiration of the earth.

The mystical breath of the singular substance
To speak of being (as a universal) is thus to speak in a voice that is mere breath. At least, if one is a nominalist, like Aristotle, like the mediaevals from Roscelin to Abelard and Ockham, and eventually, like Nietzsche. And if one is speaking about being in its secondary sense, as essence. But in truth, things are not so very different if one employs ‘being’ in its primary sense, as substance or existence.

Imagine we could speak of the singular substance itself: to do this one would have to speak of a subject before anything determinate had been said of it. This would not be easy, because one predicates properties of such a bare substrate (in Greek, hypokeimenon) precisely in order to allow that entity to become manifest — to appear to our interlocutor from a certain perspective. It is only thus, thanks to the propositions we enunciate, that the entity is allowed to be something, to be anything at all. Without a subject and a predicate, one does not have a proposition or sentence, and hence one does not produce any determinate meaning: one does not reveal anything. What sort of speech could forego predication? One might as well have said nothing at all.

The thing in itself remains ineffable and mute, a ‘mystical’ object. One intended to speak, but broke off before beginning, cognisant of the fact that anything one said would only betray that to which one wished to lend a voice. Thus, one
merely breathes — in resignation, satisfaction, frustration, or even ecstasy — and remains silent.

So, we may conclude that whether one speaks of an absolute singularity or an absolute universality, ‘being’ is enunciated with a voice that is (as yet) merely breath. In both cases, being is involved in a kind of saying which is in some way incomplete on its own, as if the words were frozen on our lips or caught in our throats such that we could merely gasp without being able truly to communicate.

These are the first two conceptions of being and of breath that we invoked towards the beginning. They constitute the two most rigorously opposed ontological positions that the Aristotelian tradition has offered us for over two thousand years.

**Heidegger’s Being-Breath**

Heidegger set himself the task of thinking a sense of being which was neither of these, and which was unheard of in the Aristotelian tradition. His aim was nevertheless to explain how the curious word, ‘ousia’, within that tradition, could refer to both existence and essence, the singular and the generic. This involved Heidegger in the attempt to conceive of being in such a way that it could in no way be mistaken for an entity or substance, as something which could be present. Neither the immediate empirical presence of a singular entity nor the hyper-presence to the intellect of the Platonic idea would do.²

And funnily enough, the alternative conception of being which Heidegger proposes is not without a certain relation to breath. On this point, Heidegger’s words will in truth have been the inspiration for this piece from the very start and they have tacitly guided our interpretation of all the ideas we have engaged with.

**Breath and Anxiety**

Our epigraph reads: ‘Anxiety is there. It is only sleeping. Its breath quivers perpetually through Dasein’ (WM93/117).

There are at least two places in the Heideggerian corpus where breath is related if not directly to being then to the next best thing: the mood in which we are confronted with it, when all significance has drained away, and every entity we might cling on to has slipped from our grasp: anxiety (Angst, in German).

In *Being and Time* (1927), anxiety is said to be ‘oppressive and stifles one’s breath’ (BT231/186). Anxiety leaves us breathless, and this absence of breath is somehow expressive of our experience: an encounter with what Heidegger calls ‘the nothing’ (*das Nichts*). This nothing is the absence of all entities, their utter meaninglessness and refusal of themselves. But if we cease to view this nothingness from the standpoint of that which has been annihilated, it reveals itself to us in a new and positive form, as *being* (*das Sein*).

Breathless anxiety bespeaks an encounter with ‘utter insignificance’ (BT231/187), and this is intimately related to the oppressive, constricting character of anxiety: ‘What oppresses us is not this or that [not an entity that could positively be present …;] it is rather the possibility of the ready-to-hand in general; that is to say, it is the world itself’ (BT231/187). What distresses us in anxiety is *being*.

Heidegger implies that being in its purity, as we find it in anxiety, cannot be spoken of during the encounter. It is so shocking, so unaccustomed, so wonderful in its way, that it strikes the air from our lungs. What rendered the early Greeks speechless with amazement (*thaumadzein*) and perplexity (*aporia*), the very fact that things are — the advent of their being — is today encountered in anxiety. Or perhaps being has accrued a different sense today, and provokes a correspondingly different
reaction. Any attempt to describe what the experience of anxiety is like, and to say what was revealed to us in anxiety, can be done only in hindsight, retrospectively: ‘When anxiety has subsided…’, Heidegger says.

When anxiety has subsided, then in our everyday way of talking we are accustomed to say that “it was really nothing”. And what it was, indeed, does get reached ontically [i.e. in terms of entities \{ta onta, in Greek\}, from the standpoint of their presence] by such a way of talking. (BT231/187)

From the perspective of beings as a whole, being really is nothing, but this nothing punches a hole in a terrain which we formerly understood to be constituted entirely of presence, and therefore this void cannot but attract our attention. To capture something of the ‘negativity’ of being, Heidegger inverts the traditional image of the Platonic sun (a metaphor for the highest idea, the idea of the good, which exists more truly than anything else — ‘being’, for the realism of Platonism). He speaks of the ‘clear [or bright] night of the nothing [hellen Nacht des Nichts]’ (WM90/114).

As if blinded by the sun, or struck dumb by its sudden eclipse, we have nothing to say, so accustomed are we to speaking the language of entities — the language of the proposition.

**Anxiety in ‘What is Metaphysics?’**

Shall we ever speak of anxiety and being — once things have calmed down and our eyes adjusted to the dark? To clarify the question of the language we might use to speak of being, let us turn to Heidegger’s ‘What is Metaphysics?’ (1929). Here, just two years after *Being and Time*, something has subtly changed in the account of anxiety.

In ‘What is Metaphysics?’ anxiety is said to rob us not of breath, but of speech, and in such a way as to leave us nevertheless in possession of a certain kind of breath — a jittery breath, frozen on the threshold of language, just prior to the articulation of fully-fledged speech. If it amounts to any kind of speech at all, this gasping for breath is an entirely empty speech which conveys nothing of what the speaker is really undergoing.

Let us read this long, fascinating passage, which does not fail to stress the retroactive character of a revelatory speech when it comes to anxiety:

All things and we ourselves sink into indifference. This, however, not in the sense of mere disappearance. Rather, in this very receding things turn towards us. The receding of beings as a whole that closes in on us in anxiety oppresses us. We can get no hold on things. […]

Anxiety makes manifest the nothing.

[A]nxiety […] induces the slipping away of beings as a whole. This implies that we ourselves […] slip away from ourselves or lose our grip […]

Anxiety robs us of speech. Because beings as a whole slip away, so that just the nothing crowds round, in the face of anxiety all utterance of the ‘is’ falls silent [propositional talk, with its famous copula, will do us no good here — ML]. That in the malaise of anxiety we often try to shatter the vacant stillness with compulsive talk only proves the presence of the nothing. […] [W]hen anxiety has dissolved[,] [in] the lucid vision sustained by fresh remembrance we must say that in the face of which and concerning which we were anxious was ‘properly’ — nothing. (WM88–9/111–12)
But the breath that is left to us, as our gabbling attempts to say something intelligible trail off into silence, is not simply our breath. Something, here, is breathing through us, attempting perhaps to achieve expression: Heidegger goes so far as to say that it is anxiety itself which breathes — it even sleeps, the state in which, as Aristotle was the first to notice, we breathe most deeply.

Heidegger is speaking of

the nothing that only anxiety originally unveils. But this implies that the originary anxiety in Dasein is usually repressed. Anxiety is there. It is only sleeping. Its breath quivers perpetually through Dasein, only slightly in what makes us ‘jittery’, imperceptibly in the ‘Oh, yes’ and the ‘Oh, no’ of men of affairs; but most readily in the reserved, and most assuredly in those who are basically daring. (WM93/117–8)

Breath, anxious breath, rustles through us and our speech becomes tremulous. Might this alien breath be the incipient voice of something that is trying, as yet inarticulately, to speak through us? Anxiety’s breath animates us, urging us to speak in spite of our anxiety, but it seems that the only language we have at our disposal in such a state remains inadequate to it.

Only later, when one has regained control of one’s breathing and had a chance to reflect can this affective experience become revelatory, or perhaps it is only then that its formerly mystical revelation can be shared. Only afterwards can we understand the void of actuality (presence) as the space of possibility. Being comes to us in anxiety, but we cannot speak of it straightaway; it takes the opportunity to seize hold of our errant breath, while we can only pant.

In contrast to Heidegger’s earlier account, anxiety does not rob us of both speech and its prerequisite, breath, but rather instils in us a new breath, the silence of which we shall come to understand as the rich potentiality of another speech, another language, which tells not of being but of being.

When Heidegger relates anxiety with breath, and breath with being, he is by no means speaking arbitrarily: he never does. We should hear this deprivation of speech in favour of an insignificant jittery breath, a wind blowing from elsewhere, disturbing us at first, as an allusion to a language which has not yet achieved a determinate signification or propositional form — viewed not from the perspective of some meaning it might eventually attain, but rather from the standpoint of the pure potential-to-signify that precedes it. Being inspires us with a language which is thereby restored to a state of pure potentiality — and for Heidegger, being itself is nothing but potential, possibility, rethought and rescued from its traditional subordination to actuality: substance and presence.

**Being’s Voice — The Call of Conscience**

Heidegger does indeed invoke a speech which is pure possibility: he does so, in his early works, in the guise of the ‘call of conscience’, to which anxiety is intimately related — conscience is said to ‘ready us’ for anxiety (BT342/296). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes conscience as the ‘origin of discourse’, the most original form of speech (ibid.). Conscience is a voiceless voice, a voice without voice, for it calls in the way of silence. It is a voice that talks to us rather than of anything in particular. It whispers to us in our solitude, warning us of a potential fault, or a debt already incurred, and ultimately of a certain lack in our being which we shall never be
able to restore — but here we must once again make the switch in perspective and tone, a shift of Gestalt, and to discern in this negativity not a lack of tangible actuality but an unfulfilled potential, yet to be unfolded: for conscience speaks to us in fact of a possibility so rich that we shall never be through with its actualisation. Conscience is a *memento mori* insofar as *death* is the model of a possibility that belongs to each and every one of us but which is never actualised for us, and so remains ‘always outstanding’, always inactual, but impending. Death is the purest possibility, and the hard task of conscience is constantly — but for the most part gently — to remind us of this fact, breathing somewhere close to our inner ear that there is still much to be done.

Much yet to *be*. If the breathy voice of conscience speaks to us of anything, it speaks of *being* in Heidegger’s sense. This is why Heidegger will later, having moved away from a straightforwardly ‘existential’ approach to being, centred around the human being, with its almost overwhelming stress on the need for ‘authenticity’, speak no longer of the voice of conscience but of the voice of *being*.³

**Atemwende**

The voice that bespeaks being says nothing. Because *being* is not an entity. From the standpoint of entities, and the words which designate them — but above all the propositional structure, so closely bound up with the metaphysics of substance — being is ‘nothing’. That which is not present: what could it be but sheer nothingness?

To an Aristotelian, is *being* even less than nothing, and the breath which carries and puffs up our empty words a mere semblance of language? Is the breath of Heidegger’s call still more empty than the *flatus vocis* of the nominalists? What sense of *being* and breath are we speaking of here?

Everything hangs on how we understand ‘breath’, and indeed on how we speak of it, if we can. All depends on whether we can make the shift from thinking of breath as an empty negativity to conceiving of it as the richest potentiality for speech, and indeed as the evocation of the very taking place of language from out of the purest but also the most pregnant of silences.

In Heidegger’s voice we should hear a breathing which is distinct from both of the senses of *being* and *breath* that we encountered in the Aristotelian tradition — the mystical voice of pure singularity, and the nominalist deflation of those pretentious Platonists with their heads in the clouds. The Heideggerian voice will need to be understood as a voice of pure potentiality — or even, as some have said, virtuality, which signifies a possibility that is not modelled upon any actuality and which will never be exhausted by any number of actualisations. Heidegger’s *being* is a possibility cut loose from the tyranny of the actuality it might eventually have become, or for which it would stand as the transcendental condition.

*Being* is thus neither a singular substance nor a generic essence, neither subject nor predicate, but the breath that must be exhaled before either part of the sentence can be articulated, and which no determinate proposition will in any case exhaust. *Being* is the singularity of the event of language, the event of a saying which is in each case unique, and which — if it is well said — will reveal entities anew every single time.

Heidegger thus gives us a new sense of breath, a new sense of emptiness and void, understood as the aether or clearing in which entities may show themselves without let or hindrance.

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Bibliography


Notes
1 See Škof (2015) for a reading of this and many other relevant passages. See also Nietzsche 1962, and Renan 1864.

2 To bring out the conception of being which they oppose, both Heidegger and Derrida will risk translating ‘ousia’ as ‘presence’, which has the merit of indicating that one of the connections between these two widely disparate senses is their mutual relationship with time, and in particular the ‘present’ rather than the past or the future — a matter which has gone largely unthought in the tradition itself.

3 Let us not look askance at such locutions: being has always had a voice or two. This Stimme of Heidegger’s is but a distant relative of those other ‘vox’s which so marked the mediaeval reception of Aristotle — we have met one before, in the guise of the flatus vocis, but we should not forget the debate regarding the unity of the many senses of being which, from Aristotle onwards, shuffles between synonymy (same word, same sense), homonymy (same word, different senses), and paronymy or the ‘pros hen’ (‘towards one’ overriding sense of being from which every other would be derived, or to which they would be ‘analogous’). These found their way into the Latin vocabulary in the guise of univocity, equivocity, and analogy (of proportion): the question was whether being speaks with one voice, two, or even more, throughout the various entities which are manifest to the intellect and senses in its light. Our question throughout has been as to the breath of this voice, and what it signifies. Heidegger will have his own response to this debate.