

First Chapter

The Question Concerning the Essence of Language

We begin with the question of the essence, therefore, with the fore-questions. We ask: Whither does something like language belong? Is there such a thing like language anywhere?

§ 7. Language—preserved in the dictionary

We said in the previous lesson, language is captured and preserved in the dictionary. Indeed, a dictionary is something of language, namely, an enormous amount of individual pieces and shreds of language. We say *Wörterbuch* [dictionary], there are in it words [Trans.: or “terms”: *Wörter*] and not words [*Worte*], nothing spoken. These words are now, however, not isolated at all, not in disorder, chaotically muddled; they are ordered in the sequence of the alphabet, compared to which the spoken word sequence is certainly something entirely different. This sum of words in the dictionary belongs in a certain sense to language.

If we now, however, concede that this sum of words belongs to the stock of language—how large is the scope? Are all words in the dictionary? Is it possible to confine language to a specific number of words? Or does language form ever new, and sheds, on other the hand, spoken words and words that then suddenly disappear? Which condition of language shall be actually grasped in a dictionary? Is not a dictionary like an ossuary at the cemetery, where bones and remnants of bones of different humans from long ago are neatly piled up so that precisely through this arrangement the whole destruction becomes manifest?

§ 8. Language as event in the dialogue

It is clear: We do not find language in the dictionary, even if the whole stock is registered there. Language is only there, where it is spoken, where it happens, that is, among human beings. We will here look around in order to experience where and how a language is as language.

So, the one speaks with the other; they enter into conversation. Forthwith, they part and speak no longer. Does language now cease to be? Or perhaps in the meantime, somewhere on another occasion, other human beings speak with one another? Language leaps over thus to a certain extent from one group to another, [it] is thus constantly in change. There will always be many who are not speaking when others are speaking. When and where now is this language? Perhaps only there, where all human beings of a language community speak at the same time? Is language here whole and actual? Or can a language never be actual in this sense, but always only fragmentarily, so that [it] does not happen at all that a language is?

Let us suppose that the case happens that all human beings of a language community speak this language at the same time. Would it be thereby guaranteed that now too the whole language is spoken, that the whole language comes up for discussion? Presumably, indeed, most certainly, much would thereby remain unspoken; language would be spoken only in special respects, for example, as colloquial language. As poetry, for example, language would remain entirely unrealized; it would thus again not be itself in its full being.

But, even assuming this: Language would be actually spoken according to all of its directions and possibilities, and were the thrust of an earthquake now immediately to take place so that the whole community was numbed mute by fear, would language then cease to be?

Is language only then, when it is spoken? Is it not, when one is silent? Or is a language not at all, but arises again and again at the moment of speaking? Then it would be constantly becoming and passing, [it] would have no being, but would be a becoming. It remains then, to be sure, to question whether this becoming is not precisely also a being. Assuming that we must address all that is not nothing, as what is or [as] being [*als ein Seiendes oder Sein*], then language also *is*, even if it itself constantly *becomes*.

Where, when and how is a language? We said of our own accord: first there, where it is spoken, first then, when it is spoken. We see now that this declaration is ambiguous to the highest degree, [it is], above all, worthy of question.

If we look around in the philosophy of language and there perhaps search for explanation in the individual systems, [of] how one thinks the being of a language, then we search in vain for the answer, for the question is not at all posed there. The neglect of this fore-question is why the speculation over language in the philosophy of language hovers around groundlessly and hacks around in the void; precisely this neglect leads to a series of familiar fictitious problems.

§ 9. Language—determined from the kind of being of the human being. The answer of metaphysics

Against our objection that the being of language is unquestioned and undetermined, an opposition arises. One replies, the kind of being of language is already secured. We have, after all, ourselves sufficiently secured where we search for the being of language. Language is a human activity. The kind of being of this activity will be determined from the kind of being of the human being, for the human being alone, as distinguished from stone, plant and animal, speaks. The being of the human being holds in itself the being of language.

And what is the human being? That one knows for a long time. The human being (says Greek philosophy) is ζῷον λόγον ἔχον. The Latin says: *Homo est animal rationale*, the human being is a living being, that is, a rational one.

The human being is, therefore, in this mode of being, firstly as living being, distinguished from all the inanimate (from mere matter), as something animate. He has, in some sense, the mode of being of life. However, he is, in distinction from something animate, distinguished within what is animate (plants, animal), namely as rational (λόγον ἔχον). The human being is that living being that has language at his disposal, that possesses language. This to us long since familiar, but faded determination of the essence of the human being was thus achieved with the Greeks with regard to language, with reference to the fact that language distinguishes the being of the human being.

But what now? We just said after all: the being of language, which is enigmatic and dark, shall be clarified from the being of the human being. Now we say conversely, the being of the human being is determined with reference to the being and essence of language. That is a very awkward situation; that is evidently a turning-oneself-in-a-circle.

And, if we now do not evade this circular movement and do not remove it with some paltry information, if we rather put this peculiar fact of the circle into effect, we come in time to a distinctive draft that arises around the circle. This circling gradually becomes a vortex. This vortex draws us slowly into an abyss, but only just then, when we do not evade from the start this moving in a circle. We can do that of course; nobody can hinder us. We still have the choice. We can dodge, entirely unhindered, the question of what the human being is, [we] can, at the same time, perhaps still guess with others, chatter with others about the essence of the human being, [we] can, at the same time, attend to our sciences and make sure that we are being heard and pass our exams, [we] can execute our duties and become a useful member of the community of the *Volk*.

In doing this, we can encounter the opinion that a questioning in which the human being looks behind itself is sick, that it is now rather the time to free oneself of reflection and to start acting. To be sure: Such questioning is an obstacle, it disturbs the sleep, and nothing is better than a healthy sleep. [Heavy stomping.] [Trans.: The previous brackets appear in the original text.] For what do we need to know and to question what the human being is? The human being is, anyway, entirely laden with knowledge. The human being is precisely he who knows. The human being is in the manner of knowing—and does not know what he himself is.

We can take that as a simple assessment and can go over to the everyday course of the day. We can, however, also sense from this assessment that the human being knows and does not know who he himself is; an uncanny judgment. An uncanniness that loses nothing by the fact that those who are the happy-go-lucky human beings have no inkling of it. We can let the question rest, but we can also ask the question: Both are in our power because it rests in our freedom. The decision passes one way or another, depending on whether we take seriously or not that which we are as human beings.

If we now ask the question concerning the essence of language, we are asking about the essence of the human being. We see already now more clearly that this question concerning the essence of language is in fact no question of philology and of philosophy of language, but a need of the human being, assuming that the human being takes the human being seriously.

By deciding for this question, we are not outside of the predicament of the formulation of the question, outside of the remarkable circle. Is there any way here to make headway in the discussion of this connection?

Perhaps we do not need at all to pose the question concerning language beforehand as a separate one, but can take together human being and language and ask about the human being as the speaking human being. This starting point hits after all in a certain way upon the proper facts of the being of the human being. We thus investigate, accordingly, what sort of a being is the human being.