SESSION ONE INTERVAL

Hints: Ontological Distinctions

The Forum achieves its result through the development in dialogue of what Werner Erhard calls distinctions. In traditional education, based in an epistemological model in which the goal is to increase or enhance what is known, information—concepts, ideas, processes—are communicated through definition and explanation. The Forum, however, develops an ontological model of education, in which the goal is not an increase in knowledge but an experience of Being. In this model, the elements of the course content are distinguished.

The nature of distinctions will be addressed at length by Erhard later in The Forum. But here, early on the first morning, the development of distinctions is already under way. Erhard is beginning to employ an aspect of his methodology that, according to Martin Heidegger, is central to ontological communication: the use of hints to communicate what cannot directly be spoken, thereby providing access to the content as lived rather than as merely understood.

Heidegger introduced the idea of hinting as a way of communicating Being in his 1959 essay, “A Dialogue on Language” in OWL), which provides an account of his conversation with a Japanese scholar who shared his interest in ontological inquiry. The interaction, presented in the form of a transcript, occurs as a stately conversational dance, a linguistic minuet. Each move is made with great care, so the interaction proceeds at times with excruciating deliberateness. At one point Heidegger (referred to in the account as the Inquirer) poses a question—“Do you have in your language a word for what we call language?”—to which the scholar arrives at a tentative answer only after twenty-three pages of thoughtful circumnavigation in and around the topic.

In response to a remark by the Japanese about language’s “essential being,” Heidegger refers to his often-quoted characterization of language as “the house of Being.” The phrase, he says, “gives a hint of the nature of language” (“DL” in OWL 26). As the two men’s dialogue continues, the extraordinary attentiveness given to each word reveals a respect for the nature of hints. Hints, Heidegger observes, “belong to an entirely different realm of reality… they are enigmatic. They beckon to us. They beckon away. They beckon us toward that from which they unexpectedly bear themselves toward us” (“DL” in OWL 26).

In his conversation with the Japanese scholar, Heidegger is distinguishing hinting, which is to say that he is hinting at the nature of hints. The Forum’s development of distinctions is likewise a process of hinting.

In hinting, words are spoken in such a way that “each word in each case is given its full—most often hidden—weight” (“DL” in OWL 31). What is not spoken, but communicated in the background, is allowed to reverberate. In this way a space is allowed to develop around each utterance:

“Inquirer]: Hints need the widest sphere in which to swing…
[Japanese]: where mortals go to and fro only slowly.
[Inquirer]: This is what our language calls “hesitate.” It is done truly when slowness rests on shy reverence. And so I do not wish to disturb your hesitation by urging you on too rashly.
[Japanese]: You are more helpful to me in my attempt to say the word than you can know. (“DL” in OWL 27–28)

Further, although each distinction has a rubric for its topic—in this dialogue, the topic is the nature of language—in developing distinctions the aim is not to arrive at a correct verbal articulation of the rubric. On the contrary, the goal is to avoid such a resolution:

[Japanese]: We Japanese do not think it strange if a dialogue leaves undefined what is really intended, or even restores it back to the keeping of the undefinable.
[Inquirer]: That is part, I believe, of every dialogue that has turned out well between thinking beings. As if of its own accord, it can take care that that undefinable something not only does not slip away, but displays its gathering force ever more luminously in the course of the dialogue. (“DL” in OWL 13)

In this conversation, Heidegger and the Japanese scholar may be seen as enacting the methodology of The Forum: the dialogic development of distinctions through a process of hinting. Being cannot be verbalized. Being is in language, but it is not in the words that are spoken. It lives in the unspoken background, and in a conversation for Being, that background must be made present. Hints are an appropriate form for bringing a background to presence because they direct our attention toward something we had not noticed, something which they at the same time bring forward to meet us.

Ontological hinting is not an easy form of communication to master, and by characterizing it here as an element of The Forum’s “methodology,” we have fallen prey to one of its pitfalls. When Heidegger says to the Japanese scholar that calling
language “the house of Being” gives a “hint of the nature of language,” the scholar immediately recognizes the danger: “I fear that to call your ‘house of Being’ a hint might tempt you and me to elaborate the notion of hinting into a guiding concept in which we then bundle up everything” (“DL” in OWL). Heidegger concurs, but adds that this error can “never be prevented in the sense of being totally excluded,” since “the mode of conceptual representation insinuates itself all too easily into every kind of human experience” (“DL” in OWL 25).

A relevant observation by the senior author: during my years of participation in Erhard’s work, the distinguishing of distinctions has remained a source of fascination, challenge, and even mystery for me. I have observed conversations between Forum leaders—people for whom the development of distinctions is central to their professional practice—in which the speaking occurred to me as a kind of shorthand. Elements of everyday interaction—details, transitions, connections—seemed to be missing. On one occasion, a statement by one Forum leader elicited this response from another: “You’re explaining it. Distinguish it.” I found myself struggling to recognize the difference being referred to.

An extensive hint at the nature of distinctions is found in Heidegger’s later work, where he turned his attention increasingly to the ontological possibilities of art, and specifically of poetry. Poetry, he said, is projective saying—that is, a kind of saying which projects a clearing for Being by speaking the unspoken. “Projective saying is saying which, in preparing the sayable, simultaneously brings the unsayable as such into a world” (“OWA” in PLT 71). But such saying is not limited to the speaking of the poet, because “Language itself is poetry in the essential sense” (“OWA” in PLT 72). Indeed, “everyday language is a forgotten and used-up poem, from which there hardly resounds a call any longer” (“L” in PLT 205).

The thinker, says Heidegger elsewhere, confines his thinking to a single thought (PLT 4). Heidegger’s single thought was the question of Being. A similar single-mindedness characterizes the poet, and so Heidegger’s description of the poet’s relation to the unsayable is useful:

“Every great poet creates his poetry out of one single poetic statement only. . . . The poet’s statement remains unspoken. None of his individual poems, nor their totality, says it all. Nonetheless, every poem speaks from the whole of the one single statement, and in each instance says that statement.” (“LP” in OWL 160)

Therefore all of Heidegger’s writing and all of Werner Erhard’s work, as well as all the poetry of Dickinson or Rilke or Wallace Stevens, may be seen as bodies of hints for the Saying of what is essentially unsayable.