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Groundless Grounds: A Study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger.

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Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger are key figures in the analytic and continental philosophical traditions. Wittgenstein was designated by Bertrand Russell to be his philosophical heir, and his work shaped the course of the analytic tradition of philosophy by influencing first the logical positivists and then ordinary language philosophy. Edmund Husserl, meanwhile, predicted that the future of phenomenology was in Heidegger's hands, and he continues to be an inspiration to continental philosophers. While the gulf between the analytic and continental traditions seems as wide as ever—as Braver observes, the only thing many philosophers educated in one of the traditions knows about the other tradition is that it's a waste of time learning anything else about it—one of the objectives of this book is to build a “load-bearing bridge” between the continental and analytic traditions in philosophy. The material for the bridge is provided by focusing on Wittgenstein and Heidegger's rejection of traditional metaphysical philosophy. On Braver's reading, they have a similar diagnosis of what's wrong with philosophy, and they offer a similar cure.

The overall plan of the book is to focus first on the sources of Wittgenstein and Heidegger's discontent with philosophy, then to consider their more positive recommendations. Each of the five chapters and the conclusion begins with a theme or doctrine from the early Wittgenstein which serves as representative of the metaphysical tradition opposed by the later Wittgenstein and the early Heidegger (the later Heidegger makes only brief appearances in this book).

According to Wittgenstein and Heidegger, the source of traditional philosophical problems and theories is disengaged philosophical reflection: a kind of *staring* at the objects and activities of everyday life in an attempt to discover the essence hidden beneath their external form. This in turn requires transcending the contingent and limited perspective imposed by culture and human finitude in order to see the world as it is in itself. In order to account for our capacity to think and talk about the world, the early Wittgenstein is lead to postulate a logically perfect language underneath the messiness of natural languages. For Heidegger, the philosophical impulse to discover the essence of the world leads to the “present-at-hand” stance towards things, a theoretical perspective in which ordinary things are viewed in isolation and treated as substances with essences that are independent of the role and purpose those things have in our lives.

But rather than revealing the essence of the world, this sort of investigation alienates us from the things we first wanted to understand and generates skeptical problems and paradoxes. Philosophers then respond with arguments and theories designed to solve these problems; and the corpses of those theories now litter the history of philosophy.

According to Braver, Wittgenstein and Heidegger have similar responses to philosophical problems and theories: each suggests that the problems are not real and that moreover, the theories designed to solve them merely produce more confusion. The reasons for this harsh

assessment can be elucidated by using three themes of their thought that Braver highlights: *holism*, *original finitude*, and *groundless ground*. According to Wittgenstein and Heidegger, disengaged philosophical contemplation wrenches the item under investigation—a mathematical rule or an ordinary object like hammer—out of the context in which it is used and considers it in isolation. But from their holistic perspective, this sort of approach is guaranteed to produce confusion: concepts and things can't be understood in isolation because what they are (their being) is defined by the network of relations they have to other concepts, things, and activities. The essence of a hammer cannot be disclosed by the present-to-hand perspective because its nature is determined by its relation to other things and activities: nails, boards, carpenters, and building projects. What it is to follow a rule can only be understood against a background of intentional agents using, teaching, and following rules.

One of the more seductive ideas of traditional philosophy is that philosophical progress can be made only by transcending our intellectual and cultural limitations, so that we achieve a more objective view. Failure to do so results in distortions and contaminates our theories with contingent, subjective impurities. Braver uses the idea of original finitude to emphasize not only that finitude is a fundamental feature of being human (229), but also that our finitude should not be contrasted with infinity (9). The attitude that Wittgenstein and Heidegger are urging is one of “metaphysical humility”, a view that refrains even from claiming that “from a God’s-Eye View there is no God’s-Eye View” (231).

A prominent theme of traditional philosophy is foundationalism, the attempt to provide some sort of ultimate explanation and justification for our beliefs and practices. But trying to justify everything threatens to generate an infinite regress, and the only way of halting the looming regress is an appeal to something self-justifying—Platonic forms, God, self-evident principles, or the immediately given in experience. But this only gives rise to a new regress, for what justifies the belief that the thing that halts the regress is indeed self-justifying? Wittgenstein and Heidegger acknowledge that there is a ground for our beliefs and practices, but this ground is *groundless*: it is not a foundation that we can speak of as justified (or true or rational), because then it would no longer be ground—the “ground” would now need a justification. The same anti-foundationalist point can be made using Braver’s Framework Argument (180): we cannot justify a belief system (or a form of life) by using criteria internal to that system because this would beg the question. But trying to justify it from an external perspective is quixotic, since this would amount to trying to justify it *ex nihilo*. Wittgenstein and Heidegger are confident that once the foundationalist project of providing an ultimate justification for our worldviews is exposed as incoherent, it will also be seen as unnecessary. The groundless grounds of our beliefs and practices are provided by human nature and cultural norms, and this is enough (174).

Braver’s account of both the early and late Wittgenstein is clear and illuminating. He also does a good job of making Heidegger more accessible to those on the analytic side of the divide, which is no mean feat given the difficulty of his thought and the opacity of his prose. One key difference between Wittgenstein and Heidegger that emerges from Braver’s study is that while the former wants to dissolve philosophical problems completely, the latter seems content to continue the metaphysical tradition, in the early phase by providing a fundamental ontological analysis of Dasein and in the later phase through an epochal history of being.

As Braver notes, the philosophical appetite for reasons and explanations is hearty and not easily satisfied with the mantra “this is what we do” (209). Consider Wittgenstein’s remarks concerning mathematics (from *Wittgenstein’s Lectures: Cambridge, 1932–1935*, ed. Alice Ambrose), which Braver discusses on page 181: “We must not suppose that with the rule we have given the infinite extension of its application. Every new step in a calculation is a fresh step. ... It is not in the nature of 23 and 18 to give 414 when multiplied, nor even in the nature of rules. We do it that way, that is all.” These remarks apparently mean that the fact that 19 is followed by 23 in the series of prime numbers is *not* in the nature of this series—we just develop the series in that way. Wittgenstein recommends that we stop there; his “that is all” indicates that we are at the groundless ground, the spade is turned. But if it is not in the nature of the prime number series, what makes it true that 23 is the next prime after 19? Wittgenstein would of course deny that such mathematical truths are reducible to biological facts about human nature or cultural facts about mathematical training (though such biological and sociological facts may provide causal explanations for why humans continue the series the way they do). But if this is not something in the nature of prime numbers, human nature, or culture, what is it that makes it true that 23 is the next prime after 19? To get at the issue in a different way, consider the role prime numbers may play in the search for extraterrestrial intelligence. If SETI received signals generating the prime number series up to the hundredth place, they would surely conclude that there are intelligent, rational beings at the other end of the signal, beings with the capacity to grasp mathematical truths. But then it seems that they are responding to something in the nature of the series of prime numbers, and that there is consequently some account of why the aliens develop the series the same way we do. Wittgenstein says that only a diseased philosophical mind would expect such an account, but to many, it seems like a perfectly reasonable question.

The image on the cover of the book is of a hammer and nails made of glass. This is a wonderful visual representation of Wittgenstein and Heidegger’s central point: that disengaged philosophical reflection on concepts and things produces deceptive transparency, an idealized crystalline perfection which renders them unusable and incomprehensible. Contemplating a glass hammer doesn’t yield insights into the nature of real hammers. The book is a pleasure to read, due both to its clarity and its humor. Braver has mastered a vast primary and secondary literature; the book is truly a scholarly tour de force. It is also rare to find a philosopher who is fluent in both philosophical traditions. This is a terrific book, and it is recommended for anyone interested in Wittgenstein or Heidegger, the analytic-continental schism, and twentieth-century attempts to overcome the traditional philosophical project.

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