

How To Undo Things With Words: Wittgenstein and Heidegger on the Dissolution of Philosophical Problems

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I. Introduction

Although they worked in different philosophical traditions, and seemed mostly ignorant of one another's work,¹ the Wittgenstein of *Philosophical Investigations* and the Heidegger of *Being and Time* exhibit striking similarities, in terms of both their aims and method. These similarities are all the more striking when we consider how different they are from one another on the level of style: Wittgenstein's terse aphorisms in plain language seem a world apart from Heidegger's difficult prose, loaded with allusions to the mighty dead of the philosophical canon, coinages that forge their own new jargon, and divagations into Greek, Latin, and German etymology.

And yet the similarities are there. Both Wittgenstein and Heidegger see themselves not as advancing new theories or models, but rather as trying to retrieve an understanding that we already have, but have somehow lost sight of. This understanding is lodged within our everyday lived experience, and retrieving it is difficult precisely because we are so embedded in it, like the proverbial fish who has no conception of water. Heidegger: "That which is ontically closest and well known, is ontologically the farthest and not known at all;

¹ I am aware of only three instances in which Wittgenstein or Heidegger refers to the other. The best known is Wittgenstein's remark "On Heidegger" in *Ludwig Wittgenstein and the Vienna Circle* (Waismann 1979, 68–69), which presumably is a response to "What Is Metaphysics?" (and not *Being and Time*, as the editor's footnote suggests), which Carnap had recently attacked. The other two are brief remarks by Heidegger, one in *Heraclitus Seminar* (Heidegger and Fink 1993, 17), in which Heidegger makes passing reference to Wittgenstein to illustrate a point about extricating oneself from the hermeneutic circle, and the other in "Seminar in Le Thor 1969" (Heidegger 2003, 35), in which he misquotes the *Tractatus*.

and its ontological signification is constantly overlooked” (*BT* 43/69).² And Wittgenstein: “Something that one knows when nobody asks one, but no longer know when one is asked to explain it, is something that has to be *called to mind*. (And it is obviously something of which, for some reason, it is difficult to call to mind)” (*PI* §89).

If their aim is not to tell us anything new, but rather to remind us of what we already know, what stands between us and the proper acknowledgment of these reminders cannot be a lack of information, the sort of thing that could be straightforwardly supplied by assertions. Properly speaking, what stands between us and what we need to be reminded of is we ourselves: we are complicit in a kind of blindness that prevents us from seeing clearly what we already know, and part of the trouble is that we don’t even notice that we’re blind. For Wittgenstein, we persistently talk nonsense without noticing that we are talking nonsense. For Heidegger, we have lost sight of what it means to be, and we relate to the world around us, to each other, and to ourselves, as if we were primarily objects of knowledge whose properties can be discerned through scientific investigation. For both, traditional forms of philosophical investigation and expression are deeply implicated in this blindness, such that the problem is not simply that philosophy has traditionally provided the wrong answers to its questions, but that it has framed its investigations in such a way that it has asked the wrong questions. They aim not so much to *solve* philosophical problems as to *dissolve* them.³

² References to *Being and Time* will be given as *BT* with the page number of the original German edition followed by the page number in Macquarrie and Robinson’s translation. I will use the following abbreviations to refer to other texts of Heidegger’s: *HCT* for *History of the Concept of Time*, *BP* for *Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, and *PIA* for *Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle*. References to Wittgenstein will be given with section numbers, and with the following abbreviations: *PI* for *Philosophical Investigations*, *OC* for *On Certainty*, and *Z* for *Zettel*.

³ See e.g. *PI* §133: “For the clarity that we are aiming at is indeed *complete* clarity. But this simply means that the philosophical problems should *completely* disappear.” And *BT* 206/250: “The ‘problem of Reality’ . . . turns out to be an impossible one . . . because the very entity which serves as its theme, is one which, as it were, repudiates any such formulation of the question.”

In other words, and despite the radical stylistic differences I remarked on above, their unusual and distinctive styles have similar aims: both Wittgenstein and Heidegger need to find words not of persuasion but of transformation. They don't want to win us over to a particular point of view, but to change our sense of what it means to have a point of view. As Rush Rhees reports Wittgenstein telling him, "I don't try to make you *believe* something you *don't* believe, but to *do* something you won't do" (Rhees 1970, 43).

What Wittgenstein and Heidegger try to do is quite radical, and very difficult: if they think there is something wrong with philosophy to the extent that we have to ask behind the traditional ways of framing problems, they need not only the insight to see behind these framings, but also the language to get behind them. Furthermore, they need language that will bring their readers with them. There is a frequent temptation—I speak from my own experience as a reader as much as in criticism of anyone else—to try to understand them in terms that are more familiar, more easily grasped, and this temptation often results in assimilating them to particular positions within the philosophical dialectic they are trying to get behind.⁴ They also face the constant danger of using language that vindicates the suspicion that they are in fact taking up a particular position within a dialectic they purport to be getting behind. And therein lies a challenge: they have to find a form of expression to get behind the problems they have inherited, and it has to be a form of expression that tempts neither them nor their readers into interpreting them as contributing to these problems instead.

To telegraph the point I am moving toward, I think Wittgenstein is more successful in this regard than Heidegger. And despite the striking similarities in method that I've remarked upon, I think Wittgenstein's greater success is due to a difference in method. One way to highlight this difference in method is to note a difference in each philosopher's

⁴ Wittgenstein frequently invokes the language of temptation, especially in dialogue with his interlocutor. And if Cavell (1976, 71) is right in reading the *Investigations* in the confessional mode (and I think this way of reading Wittgenstein is indeed quite fruitful), Wittgenstein is as much subject to the temptation to assimilate his views to familiar problematics as his readers.

terms of criticism, to borrow an expression frequently used by Stanley Cavell. Heidegger’s language of deficient, inauthentic, or levelled off forms of understanding differ markedly from Wittgenstein’s confusions and temptations: his criticisms are more condemnatory, the prospect of redemption seems more remote.⁵ One expression provides a particularly striking contrast: where Heidegger frequently appeals to more authentic modes of apprehension as being “covered up” (*verdeckt*) and looks to what phenomenological investigation can “uncover” (*entdecken*), what Wittgenstein aspires to uncover isn’t truth but nonsense: “The results of philosophy are the **discovery** [*Entdeckung*] of some piece of plain nonsense and the bumps that the understanding has got by running up against the limits of language” (*PI* §119).⁶ In describing his phenomenological method, Heidegger claims that “[c]overed-up-ness [*Verdecktheit*] is the counter-concept to ‘phenomenon’” (*BT* 36/60), and says that the phenomenon “is something that lies *hidden* [*verborgen*]” (*BT* 35/59), whereas, for Wittgenstein, “nothing is concealed [*verborgen*]” (*PI* §435). For Heidegger, there is *something* more primordial, more authentic that we need to discover, whereas for Wittgenstein, discovery consists in exposing *nothing* where we thought we saw *something*.⁷

The differences I remarked upon in the previous paragraph—not only their differing sense of what their investigations uncover, but also the greater pessimism implicit in Heidegger’s terms of criticism—stem, I think, from Wittgenstein’s greater faith in ordinary language. For Heidegger, ordinary language is complicit in the cover-up of the more primordial understanding of being that he seeks to bring to light: his own difficult prose seeks precisely to dislodge the prejudices we inherit from our ordinary forms of speech and

⁵ I want to draw attention to differences in their terms of criticism, but I should also note that there are similarities: both find forms of expression or understanding empty and frequently call attention to misunderstandings. Heidegger’s critical talk of indeterminacy and undifferentiation is similar to Wittgenstein’s emphasis on noticing differences between things that seem superficially the same.

⁶ For emphases within quotations, I use italics to preserve the author’s own emphases and boldface for my own emphases.

⁷ Consider also *PI* §133: “The real discovery [*Entdeckung*] is the one that enables me to break off philosophizing when I want to,” or *PI* §126: “The name ‘philosophy’ might also be given to what is possible *before* all new discoveries [*Entdeckungen*] and inventions.”

understanding. But for Wittgenstein, our deliverance lies precisely in ordinary language, and in a perspicuous grasp of how it is *used*. Where Heidegger tries to jolt us out of our confusion by speaking in unfamiliar language, Wittgenstein's therapeutic work proceeds *within* ordinary language.

In drawing out these proposals, I will start by considering the way that Wittgenstein and Heidegger attempt to dissolve one of the perennial problematics in modern philosophy: the conflict between realism and idealism. Both see this conflict as requiring dissolution rather than solution: the alleged conflict between rival positions only arises through misunderstanding. Wittgenstein sees the conflict in terms of each side insisting on a different form of expression, with no practical difference between the two. For Heidegger, the conflict relies on a subject-object model that cannot arise if we acknowledge Dasein as always already being-in-the-world. Unlike Wittgenstein's approach, however, Heidegger's embroils him in the difficulty of saying something positive about Dasein while also eschewing positive assertions. I will argue that his method of formal indication carries distinct disadvantages in contrast to Wittgenstein's use of dialogue and contrast.

2. Dissolving the Problematic of Realism and Idealism I: Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein remarks only briefly on the "dispute" between realism and idealism at *PI* §402 as part of a discussion of solipsism and the self.⁸ The thread that leads to this remark begins at *PI* §398, where Wittgenstein responds to the insistence of an interlocutor that she⁹ has a distinctive kind of ownership over her own imaginings. By pushing on this

⁸ These topics receive more extended treatment in the *Blue Book*, but the discussion there strikes me as more limited. In the *Blue Book*, Wittgenstein focuses almost exclusively on the idea that realists, idealists, and solipsists are insisting on different forms of expression, and on the different uses of "I" as subject and object. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein engages in a more nuanced and sympathetic dialectic with his interlocutor. This footnote is a good moment to commend Minar 1998, which offers a subtle reading of these passages, and a more detailed one than I provide here.

⁹ In order to avoid occasional ambiguities, I will use feminine pronouns to speak about Wittgenstein's interlocutor.

insistence, Wittgenstein reaches a point where purported theses of realism, idealism, and solipsism cannot clearly express a substantive difference from one another.

PI §398 begins with the interlocutor's insistence that "when I imagine something, or even actually *see* objects, surely I have *got* something which my neighbour has not" (*PI* §398). But, Wittgenstein claims, none of her words do the work she wants them to do: "can't one add: 'There is here no question of a "seeing"—and therefore none of a "having"—nor of a subject, nor therefore of the I either?'" (*PI* §398). To speak of "having" a visual experience makes the connection between the self and the experience too weak. My relationship to my experience, unlike my relationship to my shoes, or even to my feet, is not one of having, since to talk about having something, it must be conceivable that I not have it. I can cease to have *this* visual experience—by turning my head, for instance. But when I turn my head, the visual experience does not then slip out of my possession as I might cease to have a penny if it falls out of my pocket. The visual experience has no existence independent of my having it, and so the transitivity of the verb "to have" is misleading.

Similarly, to the extent that speaking of experience in terms of ownership is confused, so is it confused to speak of an *owner*. Conceiving of the visual experience of a room as the "visual room," Wittgenstein writes: "I can as little own it as I can walk about it, or look at it, or point at it" (*PI* §398). Wittgenstein's interlocutor gets muddled early on when she insists on having something "which [her] **neighbour** has not." I may stand next to my neighbour, but visual experiences do not have neighbours. I cannot pick out visual experiences the way I can pick out shoes, saying that *these* ones are *mine*, but *those* ones are not. The visual room is an entirely different kind of thing from the sorts of things—physical rooms, for instance—that can stand in an owner-owned relationship: "One could also say: surely the owner of the visual room has to be of the same nature as it; but he isn't inside it, and there is no outside" (*PI* §399). Not only are talk of "I" and "having" confused, but the familiar dichotomy of inner and outer lacks clear sense when we deal with a neighbourless experience that has no "outside."

Then, responding to the idea that the visual room constitutes a discovery (*Entdeckung*), Wittgenstein struggles to find a more appropriate characterization, ultimately settling on “conception” (*Auffassung*: *PI* §401). Wittgenstein frequently uses *Auffassung* and its cognates to talk about a way of conceiving of a matter where other options are available, and no absolute criteria for correctness compel a particular choice. For instance, in exploring the uses of “simple” and “composite” in relation to one another, Wittgenstein writes that we needn’t think of the smaller parts as simple and the larger as composite, but that “we are sometimes even inclined to conceive [*wir . . . geneigt sind . . . aufzufassen*] the smaller as the result of a composition of greater parts, and the greater as the result of a division of the smaller” (*PI* §48).¹⁰ His interlocutor’s visual room is not a *something* that she has *got*, but rather constitutes an alternative way of speaking, which we can take or leave, but we shouldn’t confuse it for a discovery.

Step by step, Wittgenstein works to dismantle the language with which his interlocutor struggles to give expression to her impulse. Revealingly, however, Wittgenstein does not try to shut down or refute his interlocutor, but actively encourages the dialectic: “I understand you” is his initial response at *PI* §398. Note that Wittgenstein does not say, “I understand *what you are saying*.” His interlocutor doesn’t herself know what she’s saying: what he understands isn’t the sense of a proposition, but an impulse that finds words in a confused manner.

It’s true I said that I knew deep down what you meant. But that meant that I knew how one thinks to conceive this object [*wie man diesen Gegenstand aufzufassen . . . meint*], to see it, to gesture at it, as it were, by looking and pointing. I know how one stares ahead and looks about one in this case—and the rest. (*PI* §398)

¹⁰ See also *PI* §§2, 4, 20, 28, 29, 38, 58, 201, 520, 539, and 557.

Rather than shut down the interlocutor's confused impulse, Wittgenstein teases it out. The endgame is not to make his interlocutor agree with him, but to help her see that they didn't disagree about anything substantial in the first place.

This dialectic with the interlocutor drives the investigation forward. Wittgenstein's initial "I understand you" precedes an attempt to give clearer expression to the interlocutor's insistence, and the block quotation in the previous paragraph leads Wittgenstein to the coinage of the "visual room." When, in *PI* §402, his interlocutor expresses dissatisfaction with the use of "have" in characterizing our visual experiences, Wittgenstein tries to rephrase this dissatisfaction, suggesting that his interlocutor misplaces the blame in finding something suspect about our ordinary way of speaking. In this way, Wittgenstein prods his interlocutor's initial impulse to the point where it moves from a sense of discovering new facts to a feeling of discomfort with our ordinary forms of speaking.

Only at this point does Wittgenstein bring in the isms of philosophical debate:

For *this* is what disputes between idealists, solipsists and realists look like. The one party attacks the normal form of expression as if they were attacking an assertion; the others defend it, as if they were stating facts recognized by every reasonable human being. (*PI* §402)

For Wittgenstein, the point at which confusion creeps in—the "decisive movement in the conjuring trick" (*PI* §308)—is not in formulating theses of philosophical idealism, solipsism, or realism, but in the discomforts, inclinations, temptations, and pictures that accompany our ordinary use of language. His response is to work through these difficulties with his interlocutor to the point where the temptation to advance them as substantive philosophical theses subsides.

By reframing the temptation toward one or another philosophical thesis in terms of a dispute over forms of expression, Wittgenstein pushes us to see that, on any question of substance—on any question where actual moves in a language-game are at stake rather than disputes over the rules by which the language-game is played—realists and idealists do not disagree. He discusses this point in *Zettel* §§413–14:

One man is a convinced realist, another a convinced idealist and teaches his children accordingly. In such an important matter as the existence or non-existence of the external world they don't want to teach their children anything wrong.

[. . .]

But the idealist will teach his children the word “chair” after all, for of course he wants to teach them to do this and that, e.g. to fetch a chair. Then where will be the difference between what the idealist-educated children say and the realist ones?

Won't the difference only be one of battle cry?

In contrast to *PI* §§398–402, where Wittgenstein engages with an interlocutor struggling to give coherent expression to an impulse, the passage in *Zettel* imagines two antagonists who think they have full-blown philosophical positions to communicate. But in terms of what they actually *do*—and teach their children to do—they are no different. The difference between them boils down to empty sloganeering.

In both cases, Wittgenstein does not only not try to *refute* his interlocutors—which would be contrary to the spirit of his investigation, as it would admit that they had advanced a positive thesis that could be contradicted—but he actively encourages them, working with the interlocutor of *PI* §§398–402 toward some articulation of her view and imagining a life for the realist and idealist of *Zettel* §§413–14. This encouragement is central to Wittgenstein's method: he doesn't play the role of language police, telling people to stop saying the wrong things, but rather develops what they're saying to the point where it loses

the force it initially appeared to have. Only by working through these views can we emerge with a clear sense of how little they amount to.

And indeed, only by working through these views can we get a clear sense of where the confusion lies:

But is it an adequate answer to the scepticism of the idealist, or the assurances of the realist, to say that “There are physical objects” is nonsense? For them after all it is not nonsense. It would, however, be an answer to say: this assertion, or its opposite is a misfiring attempt to express what can't be expressed like that. And that it does misfire can be shown; but that isn't the end of the matter. We need to realize that what presents itself to us as the first expression of a difficulty, or of its solution, may as yet not be correctly expressed at all. Just as one who has a just censure of a picture to make will often at first offer the censure where it does not belong, and an *investigation* is needed in order to find the right point of attack for the critic. (*OC* §37)

For Wittgenstein, both the nature of the confusion, and the method of resolving the confusion, emerge in a dialogue for which there is no clear starting point and no pre-determined ending. Terms of criticism like “nonsense” or “misfire” are not in themselves sufficient, but rather emerge in a dialectic in which the appropriate terms of criticism are not given in advance.

3. Dissolving the Problematic of Realism and Idealism II: Heidegger

My reading of Wittgenstein emphasized his attitude of encouragement rather than refutation in response to his interlocutor, and the way that this encouragement aims to uncover what seems to be a dispute about metaphysical facts as in fact a dispute over forms of expression, which has no bearing on what the disputants actually *do*. The text of *PI*

§§398–402 bears out this tenor of criticism: in the spirit of encouragement, the text is replete with the second person singular (Wittgenstein addresses his interlocutor with the familiar *du*) and question marks. And in drawing out the emptiness of his interlocutor's seeming assertions, Wittgenstein writes that her words “serve no purpose” and “lose [their] sense” (*PI* §398). Wittgenstein's approach, in this instance at least, consists primarily of questions rather than positive assertions: the “discoveries” (*Entdeckungen*) that he registers amount to less than his interlocutor supposes.

In Heidegger, we find more of a mix. He, too, characterizes the debate between realism and idealism as empty rather than false: the “‘problem of Reality’ . . . turns out to be an impossible one . . . because the very entity which serves as its theme, is one which, as it were, repudiates any formulation of the question” (*BT* 206/250). Heidegger characterizes idealism as constructing an interpretation of reality “in a vacuum” (*BT* 207/251),¹¹ and of realism he says that “it cannot even be said that it is untenable, because it has not yet even pressed forward at all into the dimension of philosophical problems, the level where tenability and untenability are decidable” (*BP* 167). He frequently charges the philosophical tradition with unclarity and indefiniteness in its formulations, suggesting an affinity with the Wittgensteinian criticism that these formulations are guilty of lacking sense rather than stating something definite but false.

On the other hand, the language of Heidegger's criticism conveys the strong impression that the tradition is confused because there's *something* that it fails to apprehend: what is “ontologically decisive” gets “covered up” (*verdeckt*: *BT* 204/248), and Heidegger uses words like “concealed” (*verdeckt*), “hidden” (*verborgen*), and “buried” (*begrabt*) to describe Dasein's deficient (*defizient*) ontological understanding. Of this deficient understanding,

¹¹ Translation modified. Macquarrie and Robinson have “the Interpretation of Reality which idealism constructs is an empty one,” which would support this line of argument even better. But the German reads “baut er [Idealismus] die Interpretation der Realität ins Leere,” where what's empty is clearly not the interpretation of reality itself, but the space within which the idealist tries to construct an interpretation of reality.

Heidegger says that “it **lacks something which it actually has** and would have to have as a world” (*HCT* 219). Heidegger aspires to “uncover” (*entdecken*) and “disclose” (*erschliessen*) something more “primordial” (*ursprünglich*), a “basis” (*Boden*) or “the basic state [*Grundverfassung*] of the ‘subject,’ Dasein, as Being-in-the-world” (*BT* 204/248).

Wittgenstein engages critically only with the words of his interlocutor, but Heidegger’s criticism also invokes the positive analytic of Dasein that provides the ontological basis from which we can clearly see the futility of the realism/idealism debate.

Let me offer a brief sketch of this analytic so as to explain how and why Heidegger thinks that it undermines the debate between realism and idealism. The deficient ontological understanding that Heidegger criticizes centrally imagines the world as an empty container furnished with entities, each one subsisting independently and entering only accidentally into relations with other entities. The subject, according to this picture, is a detached knower whose primary relation to the entities in the world is a cognitive one, reaching out with the senses from within the prison of the mind. Our understanding of the world, then, consists primarily of knowing truths about individual entities in the world, which find paradigmatic expression in the form of assertions.

Heidegger doesn’t deny that we ever encounter entities as present-at-hand—that is, as distinct objects to which properties can be predicated as a result of unengaged contemplation and investigation—but rather insists that this is just *one* way of encountering entities, and a deficient way of doing so. Couching this form of encounter within a broader context of engagement with the world does not just supplement the view of the world as consisting essentially of present-at-hand objects, while adding a few extra pieces to a hitherto incomplete account. Rather, Heidegger takes himself to be revealing a radically different and more primordial conception of what it so much as means to exist. First, he observes that we encounter entities primarily (Heidegger frequently uses the phrase “proximally and for the most part”) not as present-at-hand objects but rather as ready-to-hand equipment: a hammer is a hammer not by virtue of being composed of certain

materials with certain properties, but by virtue of our using it to achieve ends that connect it to a broad network of other equipment, projects, and social relations. And second, we exist, and encounter others as existing, not as present-at-hand entities, but as Dasein, a being whose being is an issue for it. Division I of *Being and Time* provides an analysis of Dasein's existence as "being-in-the-world": Heidegger emphasizes that Dasein is not the isolated human subject studied by anthropology, psychology, or biology, but is rather the "clearing" (BT 133/171) in which a meaningful world emerges. The world as a meaningful totality of equipment, projects, and other Dasein is not already there, waiting for Dasein to discover it, but rather emerges as a meaningful totality through Dasein's engagement with it. Division I culminates in a discussion of care: Dasein and its world of ready-to-hand equipment find articulation as an intimately connected whole in which Dasein pursues projects that it cares about. The sorts of scientific investigations that characterize entities as present-at-hand are possible only within the broader context of a Dasein that cares about the outcome of these investigations, and for whom these investigations are one part of an existence whose whole needs adequate characterization before we can understand the significance of the results of these investigations.

Heidegger characterizes scientific investigation as an *ontic* investigation, and emphasizes the difference in kind from his own *ontological* investigation: ontic investigations inquire about entities whereas ontological investigations inquire into the *being* of those entities, investigating the intentional structure within which entities can so much as show up as the entities that they are. That we can encounter hammers *as* hammers, as opposed to simply as bare hunks of matter, we must encounter them as part of an equipmental totality that's directed toward ends we can project in a world we share with others. Where ontic investigations are knowledge-generating, the phenomenological investigation that Heidegger characterizes as fundamental ontology consists of descriptions and reminders—terms that should be familiar to readers of Wittgenstein—that draw our attention to the deeper context and presuppositions within which ontic investigations unfold. And this

phenomenological investigation reveals the limitations of treating the world as a container for present-at-hand entities: our capacity for encountering entities as present-at-hand is founded in a world in which other forms of encounter are prior, such that present-at-hand encounters involve a withdrawal of concern or engagement. And, Heidegger claims, whereas his phenomenological description can account for how we encounter entities as present-at-hand, a present-at-hand ontology cannot account for readiness-to-hand or the care-structure of Dasein's being-in-the-world.

What makes Heidegger's phenomenological descriptions both difficult and subtle is that Dasein and ready-to-hand equipment are essentially transparent. For a hammer to be a ready-to-hand piece of equipment, I have to use it, and to use it, I have to keep my eye on the nail and my mind on the task at hand. My practical engagement with the hammer and nail refer to a broader context of house-building and shelter and the meaningful existence of which these things are a part, but to the extent that I want to hammer the nail and not my thumb, I'd better not give too much of my attention to this broader referential totality. And when I do detach myself from this broader referential totality and contemplate the hammer itself—either because I'm in a contemplative mood, or because some breakdown in my equipment has interrupted my work—I encounter it as present-at-hand. When we contemplate equipment in isolation, we encounter it as present-at-hand, and when we engage with it, we see right through the equipment to the task we are engaging in. As a result, we tend to characterize entities, and the world we find them in, as present-at-hand, since that's how they appear to us when we contemplate their nature and seek to characterize it.

For Heidegger, the dichotomy of realism and idealism can only take shape within this deficient present-at-hand ontology. The “problem of Reality” (BT 206/250) that realism and idealism seek to address presupposes a world made up of present-at-hand entities (the *res* of “reality”), and then asks about the relation between one of these entities—the subject—and the others. From such a starting point, any subsequent characterization of

Dasein as embedded in its world “always comes ‘too late’” (BT 206/249): such characterizations fumble toward an appropriate epistemology from within the wrong ontological framework. Ontology precedes epistemology for Heidegger: speculations about the self’s relation to the world are idle if we have not given an adequate analysis of the nature of that self and that world. An analysis of Dasein as being-in-the-world does not decide the dispute between realism and idealism, but rather shows that the dispute is founded “on the basis of a neglect”:

In elucidating these positions [of realism and idealism] it is not so much a matter of clearing them up or of finding one or the other to be the solution, but of seeing that both can exist only on the basis of a neglect: they presuppose a concept of “subject” and “object” without clarifying these basic concepts with respect to the basic composition of Dasein itself. (HCT 222–23)

If we do not neglect the existential analytic of Dasein that Heidegger pursues in *Being and Time*, the “problem of Reality” cannot find expression. Like Wittgenstein, Heidegger seeks not to solve the problem of realism and idealism, but rather to dissolve it.

But not entirely like. For Heidegger, realism and idealism come undone as a consequence of the existential analytic of Dasein that he develops over the course of Division I of *Being and Time*. Wittgenstein’s dissolution of the problematic doesn’t seem to rely on anything quite so involved. As I noted, their terms of criticism bear out this difference: Heidegger wants to uncover the overlooked being of entities whereas Wittgenstein only wants to uncover disguised nonsense. And I think this difference in terms of criticism is linked to a difference in the two philosophers’ conceptions of language, or more precisely, the difficulties they face in finding an appropriate language for their investigations. Heidegger faces a particular difficulty with regard to his own expression, and I will now turn to discussing that.

4. Assertion and Formal Indication

One main culprit in the cover-up that Heidegger diagnoses is our language itself. Our primary way of talking about the world is by means of assertion, but the form of the assertion risks distorting our sense of what we're talking about. Assertion constitutes a step back from concerned engagement with entities: "Something *ready-to-hand with which* we have to do or perform something, turns into something '*about which*' the assertion that points it out is made" (BT 158/200). As soon as we speak *about* an entity, we cease to be as deeply absorbed in the activity we were engaged in *with* that entity. Its readiness-to-hand becomes "veiled" (*verbüllt*), and presence-at-hand takes precedence over readiness-to-hand in familiar Heideggerian terms: "this **discovering** of presence-at-hand . . . is at the same time a **covering-up** of readiness-to-hand" (*die Zubandenheit verdeckenden Entdeckens der Vorhandenheit*; BT 158/200). Furthermore, the act of predication focuses our attention solely on the entity and a particular property or set of properties we predicate of it, withdrawing our attention from its more holistic "totality of involvements" (BT 158/200). Simply by dint of its form, assertion inclines us toward an understanding of the world in terms of present-at-hand entities that are related to one another only contingently.

For Heidegger, then, there is a second reason for eschewing assertions as a form of criticism. Besides the fact that, like Wittgenstein, he wants to dissolve philosophical problematics rather than provide assertable solutions to them, he also sees the form of the assertion as inherently problematic. But Heidegger does not condemn assertions as irredeemably limiting: he talks about "many intermediate gradations" between concerned understanding and the "extreme opposite case" of theoretical assertion (BT 158/201). In particular, *Being and Time* is a book full of assertoric sentences. Heidegger is not guilty of a performative contradiction here, and he is aware of the difficulty: "Whenever a phenomenological concept is drawn from primordial sources, there is a possibility that it may degenerate if communicated in the form of an assertion" (BT 36/60-61).

Heidegger invites us to read his analytic of Dasein as offering what he calls “formal indications” (*formale Anzeigen*) rather than the sorts of assertions we might find in a scientific treatise. Formal indication does not have explicit prominence in *Being and Time*, but the concept plays a more prominent role in the lecture courses Heidegger gave in the early 1920’s—*Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle* in particular—as he was developing the ideas and method that find expression in *Being and Time*, and a number of scholars find in formal indication the hidden key to understanding what, if not making assertions, Heidegger is doing with the words of *Being and Time*.¹² Formal indication acts as a kind of “phenomenological definition” (*PIA* 17), where phenomenology points not to “just this entity or that, but rather the *Being* of entities” (*BT* 35/59). But the being of entities is not itself an entity (*BT* 6/26), so we cannot point it out the way we might point out an entity. Formal indication is “formal” in the sense of being empty: it does not indicate a specific content, but rather points “the ‘way,’ the ‘approach’” by which we might uncover “the mode *in which the object is originally accessible*” (*PIA* 17). For Heidegger, entities are originally accessible to us not through some sort of cognitive grasping, but through our comportment toward them (*PIA* 46): formal indication, then, does not try to *assert* anything about entities, but rather to direct our attention to the way that we originally comport ourselves toward those entities. Borrowing Austinian terminology, we might regard formal indication as having primarily perlocutionary, rather than locutionary, force.¹³

For instance, in characterizing Dasein as “in each case mine,” he claims that he has “indicated formally the basic characteristics of Dasein. . . . This definition *indicates* an *ontologically* constitutive state, but it does no more than indicate it” (*BT* 114/150). Heidegger is not trying to fix Dasein in a definition, but wants to direct our attention to the way that,

¹² See, for example, Kisiel 1993, Dahlstrom 1994, and Streeter 1997. I have also benefitted from reading an unpublished paper on formal indication by Stephen Reynolds. Kisiel (1993, 19) cites a letter in which Heidegger insists that formal indication remains crucial to *Being and Time* even though it receives less explicit attention there than in his earlier lectures.

¹³ See Austin 1975, 94f.

as Dasein, our existence is essentially a matter of concern for us, that we are always taking a stance toward our being-in-the-world. Reflecting on our comportment toward ourselves, we come to see that we do not—we cannot—comport ourselves toward ourselves as toward a present-at-hand entity, and that some more fundamental account of our existence is required than the one traditionally provided. Heidegger does not purport to *tell* us what Dasein *is* in the manner of assertion, but rather hopes that his words can direct us to an ontological understanding that will dislodge deeply held prejudices, but for which we lack a clear vocabulary.

To the extent that Heidegger's criticism implies that something needs to be uncovered, formal indication is Heidegger's principal tool for doing that uncovering. And what formal indication uncovers is not a new entity of any sort—Heidegger isn't trying to tell us anything *new*—but rather a way of being in which we are constantly engaged, but which we lose sight of when we try to reason theoretically. Where the assertions of science incline us to see the world in terms of discrete entities of detached contemplation, formal indication reminds us that this contemplation is simply one mode of being of an entity—namely Dasein—that is always already embedded concernfully in its world.

But Heidegger's conception of formal indication as uncovering a hidden phenomenological substrate grants too much substance to the realist and idealist positions he seeks to overcome. In order to uncover this substrate, there must be *something* that covers it over. And indeed, Heidegger does characterize realism and idealism as advancing "positions" that are "negated" by his own "assertion" (BT 207/251). He attributes to idealism "an advantage" over realism because idealism "**expresses** an understanding of the **fact** that Being cannot be explained through entities" (BT 207/251). Heidegger seems to grant that both realism and idealism are substantive positions, but positions that are limited by their lack of phenomenological sophistication. And in treating them as substantive positions, Heidegger also gives himself something to oppose: if he needs to negate false views, that leaves him with something positive of his own to advance. That formal indications take the

form of assertions, then, may not be simply an unhappy accident forced on Heidegger by the constraints of language. Heidegger's dialectic ultimately ends up taking a familiar form, albeit in unfamiliar garb: through formal indication, he advances a position that he takes to be superior to weaker alternatives.

5. Wittgenstein's Objects of Comparison

My reading of Wittgenstein cast doubt on the very idea that realism and idealism present substantive alternatives that we can oppose to one another. If that reading is correct, there is nothing that covers over our apprehension of the facts—and so also nothing substantive to uncover. A method like Heidegger's formal indication—of pointing *to* a something we have overlooked—cannot do the work Wittgenstein wants to do. As a counter-concept to formal indication, I want to suggest that Wittgenstein uses objects of comparison.

Like Heidegger, Wittgenstein is also concerned with the way in which an emphasis on assertion risks leading us astray philosophically. *Philosophical Investigations* opens with a discussion of “a particular picture of the essence of human language” according to which “the words in language name objects” and “sentences are combinations of such names” (*PI* §1). And although Wittgenstein does not find the form of assertion to be problematic in itself, we do find a parallel with Heidegger's concern that assertion inclines us to regard all entities as present-at-hand, and to miss the different kinds of being entities may have. Wittgenstein thinks that a conception of language that places primary or exclusive emphasis on assertion risks distracting us from the fact that there “are *countless* kinds” of sentences (*PI* §23). And where Heidegger wants to direct our attention to our original comportment with entities, Wittgenstein wants to direct our attention to the use of our words (*PI* §43), and to remind us that “the *speaking* of language is part of an activity, or a form of life” (*PI* §23). In a move that resembles the method of Heidegger's formal indication, Wittgenstein confronts

the picture of words as names and language as primarily assertoric by reminding us of the life that this language is a part of.

But here again, Wittgenstein's rhetoric is not of uncovering a more primordial understanding of being, but rather of uncovering nonsense. And once again, Wittgenstein's procedure essentially involves an interlocutor, to whom he speaks more in a voice of encouragement than of correction, prompting her to give a clear articulation of the initial "picture" that grabbed her.¹⁴ In these passages, at least, many of these prompts come in the form of language-games: Wittgenstein imagines more primitive languages than our own as points of contrast to illustrate what it means to talk about different kinds of words, and how these differences are manifest in the use of these words. Wittgenstein describes language-games as "**objects of comparison** which, through similarities and dissimilarities, are meant to throw light on features of our language" (*PI* §130). More generally, Wittgenstein's method frequently involves comparisons of various sorts.¹⁵ We do not find the same emphasis on language-games in *PI* §§398–402 as we find in the opening passages of the *Investigations*, but expressions of comparison occur throughout that discussion: Wittgenstein often proposes alternative forms of expression ("[o]ne could also say" in *PI* §399 and "one could even say" in *PI* §400), frequently uses "as if" to characterize the sorts of illusions his interlocutor is working with, and offers a contrast between rival pictures in speaking of "a picture in our heads which conflicts with the picture of our ordinary way of speaking" (*PI* §402). The invocation of "conceptions" (*Auffassungen*) that I discussed earlier falls into the same category of criticism.

¹⁴ I will not pursue a close reading of the opening passages of the *Investigations* as I did for *PI* §§398–402, but both Goldfarb 1983 and Cavell 2005 offer readings of these passages that emphasize Wittgenstein's engagement with—rather than refutation of—his interlocutor.

¹⁵ I should emphasize the limiting force of this "frequently." I don't mean to say that Wittgenstein has a method, which consists of using objects of comparison. Not only is Wittgenstein far more diverse in his methods than that, but he is also far too flexible in his thought to restrict himself to a single clearly demarcated method, or set of methods.

One upshot of these comparisons is to dislodge a confused way of thinking and speaking without replacing it with something else.¹⁶ Wittgenstein's contrasts present alternative ways of phrasing or conceiving of an issue such that the sense of necessity that attached to a particular form of words loses its hold on us: "I wanted to put that picture before him, and his *acceptance* of the picture consists in his now being inclined to regard a given case differently: that is, to compare it with *this* sequence of pictures. I have changed his *way of looking at things*" (*PI* §144). This change is not a change from the wrong view to the right view, but rather a change from regarding a view as expressing a truth about the world—say, the discovery of "a new object" or "a quasi-physical phenomenon" (*PI* §401)—to regarding that view as simply one way of looking at things—say, a "form of expression."

Wittgenstein's use of objects of comparison offers some obvious practical advantages over Heidegger's formal indications. To start with, Heidegger's commentators are not altogether agreed on *what* Heidegger means by "formal indication" but they are agreed that the concept remains obscure.¹⁷ Earlier I borrowed Austin's terminology to suggest that formal indication should be understood primarily in terms of perlocutionary, rather than locutionary, force, but I might extend the invocation of Austin to suggest that it's unclear just what kind of speech act a formal indication is. Heidegger gives us some sense of *what* formal indication is meant to do, but leaves us less than ideally clear on *how* formal indication does this work. What, ultimately, we should make of Wittgenstein's use of comparisons is neither easy nor straightforward, but when Wittgenstein invites us, say, to consider a disappearing chair (*PI* §80) or a shrinking and growing lump of cheese (*PI* §142), it is clear enough what Wittgenstein wants us to *do*. What formal indication is supposed to do is less clear.

Pointing at something else is easier than pointing at the same thing, but differently. "Point at a piece of paper," Wittgenstein writes. "And now point at its shape – now at its

¹⁶ I discuss Wittgenstein's use of pictures and objects of comparison in more detail in Egan 2011.

¹⁷ McManus (2013, 57) helpfully collects a sampling of scholarly head-scratching over Heidegger's meaning.

colour – now at its number (that sounds odd)” (*PI* §33). We feel a certain strain in trying to “mean” the same act of pointing in different ways. But, as Cavell (1979, 74–75) observes, pointing to the colour of an object normally doesn’t involve pointing at that object in some sort of special way, but rather pointing to another object that can serve as a sample of that colour. The analogy is imperfect in a number of ways, but I sense a similar strain with Heidegger’s formal indication. What is the difference between indicating “death” as a biological phenomenon and indicating it as “the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein” (*BT* 250/294)? There is a sense of strain as Heidegger attempts to use familiar—and sometimes unfamiliar—words to point behind the ways they are normally taken up. By contrast, Wittgenstein does not try to point to a “more primordial” conception of meaning; instead, he finds illuminating contrasts that allow us to drop confused ways of thinking about meaning without the strain.

Beyond the practical advantages of Wittgenstein’s approach, however, lies a more substantial point, which is connected to the differing uses we have seen in Wittgenstein and Heidegger of the language of covering and uncovering. Wittgenstein and Heidegger think traditional ways of speaking about reality are confused. But, to borrow a term from Wittgenstein scholarship, Wittgenstein is rhetorically *resolute* in his uncovering of nonsense: if what he uncovers is nonsense, then there is literally *nothing* being said that he can contradict, dig beneath, penetrate, or what have you. Nor can he present us with a “correct” view of a matter if there is no substantive incorrect view he wants to supplant: he cannot present us with an alternative if there is nothing that this “alternative” is an alternative to. He occasionally reminds us of what we are left with once the confusion has been cleared away—“It is not possible that there should have been only one occasion on which only one person followed a rule” (*PI* §199) or “‘I’ doesn’t name a person, nor ‘here’ a place, and ‘this’ is not a name” (*PI* §410)—but he doesn’t offer us anything quite as substantive as an existential analytic of Dasein.

Of course, Heidegger's analytic of Dasein isn't meant to be "substantive" in that sense either: he takes great pains to contrast his phenomenology with a science of positive assertions. And Heidegger does sometimes seem to share Wittgenstein's diagnosis, but he is far less resolute, rhetorically at the very least, in this diagnosis. His rhetoric of covering and uncovering suggests that *something* inhibits our view. And not just his rhetoric: the purpose of his formal indicative method is to help us do this work of uncovering. But then, despite himself, Heidegger places himself in a position of presenting *something* as an *alternative* to *something else*, and we seem to find ourselves back in the dialectic of replacing wrong views with right.

Because Wittgenstein doesn't sense that there's anything he needs to get behind, he is far more comfortable than Heidegger operating in and with ordinary language. Wittgenstein's method is a process of stripping away: he identifies a point of confusion and then engages with his interlocutor in an attempt to find the source of the confusion and the reminder, observation, or contrast that will dispel the confusion. His engagement with his interlocutor, his confidence in ordinary language, and his sense that nothing is hidden are all connected: rather than launching his own investigation, he speaks always in response to an interlocutor, and thus engages with the language his interlocutor provides. Heidegger, by contrast, unfolds his analytic of Dasein primarily in monologue, and takes this analytic as the basis upon which he can then dispel confusion.

6. Conclusion

This discussion likely strikes some readers as overstating the similarities between Wittgenstein and Heidegger: I have identified various similarities in aims and methods between the two philosophers without fully acknowledging just how different Heidegger is from Wittgenstein simply in terms of ambition. Wittgenstein does not purport to undertake anything as grand as an existential analytic of Dasein: he focuses primarily on confusions in our understanding of language and the mind and says nothing about anxiety,

guilt, death, or authenticity. Wittgenstein wants to undo confusions in the language that we ordinarily use, whereas Heidegger wants to uncover the ontological basis for that language, which requires a different kind of investigation. Wittgenstein shares Heidegger's sense that our ordinary forms of speech can lead us astray,¹⁸ but Wittgenstein attributes this confusion to a *misunderstanding* of "the workings of our language" (*PI* §109). For Heidegger, the workings of our language are themselves problematic, at least for the purposes of pursuing fundamental ontology. Ordinary language is simply not suited to this task:

With regard to the awkwardness and "inelegance" of expression in the analyses to come, we may remark that it is one thing to give a report in which we tell about *entities*, but another to grasp entities in their *Being*. For the latter task we lack not only most of the words, but above all, the "grammar." (*BT* 38–39/63)

Because he sees his project in terms of uncovering, Heidegger needs to find new ways of talking about what he wants to uncover.

In a discussion like this one that places Wittgenstein and Heidegger in dialogue, Heidegger's use of "grammar" to talk about the challenge he faces stands out. And although I don't want to make too much of the fact that Heidegger happens to use a word that has such significance in Wittgenstein's later work, a comparison between grammar and ontology is not altogether out of place. Where Heidegger draws a sharp distinction between the ontic and the ontological, claiming that much philosophical confusion arises from treating the former as the latter,¹⁹ Wittgenstein draws a sharp distinction between the

¹⁸ Consider, e.g., *PI* §115.

¹⁹ E.g.: "That which is ontically closest and well known, is ontologically the farthest and not known at all; and its ontological signification is constantly overlooked" (*BT* 43/69); and: "Behind this slight difference of signification [using the expression "*substantia*" with an ontical or ontological signification], however, there lies hidden a failure to master the basic problem of Being" (*BT* 94/127).

empirical and the grammatical, with similar claims.²⁰ And where Heidegger claims that his ontological investigations uncover the being of entities, Wittgenstein claims that “*Essence is expressed in grammar*” (*PI* §371) and that “Grammar tells what kind of object anything is” (*PI* §373).²¹

Characterizing his investigation as grammatical, Wittgenstein claims that “our investigation is directed not towards *phenomena*, but rather, as one might say, towards the ‘*possibilities*’ of phenomena. What that means is that we call to mind the *kinds of statement* that we make about phenomena” (*PI* §90). Wittgenstein does not pursue grammatical investigations—investigating how words are used, and the forms of life that call for their use—*instead of* ontological ones, but rather takes his grammatical investigations to *be* ontological investigations, when we properly apprehend the nature of the investigation. Cavell elaborates on this point eloquently:

In “learning language” you learn not merely what the names of things are, but what a name is; not merely what the form of expression is for expressing a wish, but what expressing a wish is; not merely what the word for “father” is, but what a father is; not merely what the word for “love” is, but what love is. In learning language, you do not merely learn the pronunciation of sounds, and their grammatical orders, but the “forms of life” which make those sounds the words they are, do what they do—e.g., name, call, point, express a wish or affection, indicate a choice or an aversion, etc. And Wittgenstein sees the relations among *these* forms as “grammatical” also. (Cavell 1979, 177–78)

²⁰ E.g. *PI* §85: “And now this is no longer a philosophical proposition, but an empirical one,” or *PI* §126: “The name ‘philosophy’ might also be given to what is possible *before* all new discoveries and inventions.”

²¹ Stephen Mulhall (2013) develops the connection between Wittgensteinian grammar and Heideggerian ontology in more detail than I do here.

In pursuing his grammatical investigations, Wittgenstein casts light not only on the ways certain expressions are used, but also thereby on the forms of life that give them a use. In doing so, he reminds us of the intimate connection between life and language, and that we cannot detach the question of what we talk about from question of what kind of life that talk takes place in.

That way of phrasing things places Wittgenstein in close proximity to Heidegger. The sections of *Philosophical Investigations* that I examined above lead into an investigation of the use of the first person singular, where one upshot is the observation that “‘I’ doesn’t name a person” (*PI* §410). In the sections leading up to this point, Wittgenstein distinguishes the ways we identify and pick out particular people from the sorts of things we say things of ourselves: “Now, which of them [i.e. the criteria for the identity of a person] leads me to say that *I* am in pain? None” (*PI* §404). If we bear in mind the Cavell quotation above, we can read Wittgenstein not simply as making a point about indexical reference—not simply telling us how “I” is used—but also telling us what “I”—what the self, what first personal experience—*is*. And he needs to remind us of this in the face of temptations toward misapprehension, in particular the temptation to regard ourselves as just one further piece of furniture in the world, to whose inner states we have peculiar and intimate epistemic access.

All this is very much in keeping with what Heidegger wants to do in his analytic of Dasein. He, too, is concerned that we tend to treat the self as one further piece of furniture in the world: “Dasein is never to be taken ontologically as an instance or special case of some genus of entities as things that are present-at-hand” (*BT* 42/67–68). In other words, Heidegger also wants to remind us that “I” doesn’t name a person. But where Heidegger thinks he needs to use formal indication to direct us toward the ontological basis for our use of the first person, Wittgenstein delineates the grammar of the first person by means of a dialogue with his interlocutor, where the right contrasts and questions bring out the futility of trying to talk about the self in terms of what Heidegger would call a present-at-hand

entity. Once that confusion is dispelled, Wittgenstein finds himself with no positive work to do, and so nothing to formally indicate.

If I am right in seeing a greater similarity in overall ambition between these two philosophers than normally meets the eye, my work here perhaps has one further benefit: it suggests that we can find in Wittgenstein's philosophy the same sort of transformative potential that many have found in Heidegger's invocation of authenticity.²²

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²² I argue precisely this in Egan 2013, and Cavell 1988 also explores this territory.

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