

World, Language, and Intelligibility: the Social Context in Wittgenstein and Heidegger

I. Introduction: Language, Non-foundationalism, and World

Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* and Heidegger's *Being and Time* can both be seen as philosophical discussions of the role of social context and disclosure in determining meaning. By rendering the relation between communication, meaning, and intelligibility not a particular and causal but rather a fluid and "equiprimordial" phenomenon, both Heidegger and Wittgenstein avoid the problem of giving a strict account of reference that separates meaning from our everyday actions in the world.

Comparing Wittgenstein and Heidegger is by no means a new idea. Richard Rorty claimed in the early seventies that "Just as no one in the nineteenth century could go on doing philosophy without coming to terms with Kant, so no one in our century can go on doing philosophy without coming to terms with Wittgenstein and Heidegger" (qtd. in Guignon 649). As the most influential figures of their respective (albeit ambiguously defined) branches of philosophy, both thinkers offer new and different ways of looking at the world, radically different from the ideas of their predecessors, that we must struggle with before we can understand the background out of which later twentieth century analytic and continental philosophical thought has sprung.

In *Wittgenstein, Heidegger, and the Reification of Language*, Richard Rorty claims, "these two great philosophers passed each other in mid-career, going in opposite directions" (339). He claims that Wittgenstein moved toward a relativistic, pragmatic view of philosophy just as Heidegger moved away from such a view and toward an "escapist mood... attempting to

regain in ‘Thought’ the sort of sublimity that the younger Wittgenstein had found in logic.”

While their specific focuses are somewhat different, both use a similar everyday approach to philosophical inquiry wherein “by describing everydayness in detail, they lead us away from the tendency to think of ourselves as subjects or minds distinct from a world of brute objects, and they thereby suggest a new way of grasping the sources of intelligibility that are already present in our lives” (Guignon 654). This paper will examine briefly these “sources of intelligibility” in the principle works of the early Heidegger (*Being and Time*) and the later Wittgenstein (*Philosophical Investigations*) in an attempt to show the tenability of a “relativist,” non-foundationalist account of intelligibility rooted in everyday social context.

Early Heidegger and late Wittgenstein set aside the assumption (common to their respective predecessors, Husserl and Frege) that social practice –and in particular the use of language- can receive a non-causal, specifically philosophical explanation in terms of conditions of possibility. More generally, both set aside the assumption that philosophy might explain the unhidden on the basis of the hidden, and might explain availability and relationality on the basis of something intrinsically unavailable and nonrelational. (Rorty, 347)

Working outside the Platonic model of fundamental, universal truths underlying our understanding of the world, Wittgenstein and Heidegger examine “world” phenomenologically, in terms of everyday life. Their philosophies are not epistemologies -neither seems particularly interested in accounts of an outside physical world that independent minds somehow live “in”- but rather accounts of different aspects of the everyday behavior of humankind. Both seem to contend that the difficult philosophical puzzles one is left with in traditional epistemology arise due to the assumptions of the traditional representationalist model (Guignon 654).

On this common anti-foundationalist basis, Heidegger and Wittgenstein tackle very different philosophical projects: Wittgenstein’s arguably pessimistic *Investigations* limits itself to

a careful yet non-systematic examination of meaning and reference in terms of our use of language, while Heidegger's *Being and Time* focuses on our interaction with the 'equipment' of the everyday world in an attempt to explain the fundamental ontological question of what it means to Be. Despite these very different fields of inquiry, the concerns of Wittgenstein and Heidegger can be seen in a similar light "to the extent that the basic question for both is how we are able to understand the world, or how intentionality is possible" (Guignon 657). A brief analysis of each's approach to the question of intentionality and world will be followed by an attempt to show how similar and persuasive these non-traditional accounts might be.

II. Wittgenstein

Wittgenstein's ideas on social context and language can be seen most clearly in his remarks on rule following, found (roughly) in aphorisms 198- 240 of the *Philosophical Investigations*. In the somewhat cryptic fashion that characterizes all of the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein gives an account of rule-following rooted in social context. Because rules are customs, it is not possible for only one person to obey a rule only once. Rules are established because they are used by many people more than once, and because they occupy an important place in daily life: "to obey a rule, make a report, give an order, to play a game of chess, are *customs*, (uses, institutions)" (199). For Wittgenstein, following a rule is a paramount example of a custom: a particular way of doing something rooted in a social context. We do not get to arbitrarily determine our customs, or to find ways of making our actions "fit" with some interpretation of some rule. Rather, the customs and institutions by which we live are already constituted for us. In a characteristic aphoristic "dialogue," Wittgenstein writes,

“ ‘Then can whatever I do be brought into accord with the rule?’ –Let me ask this: what has the expression of a rule –say a sign post- got to do with my actions?

What sort of causal connexion is there here? –Well, perhaps this one: I have been trained to react to this sign in a particular way, and now I do so react to it. ‘But that is only to give a causal connexion; to tell how it has come about that we now go by the sign post; not what this going-by-the-sign really consists in.’ On the contrary; I have further indicated that a person goes by a sign-post only insofar as there exists a regular use of sign posts, a custom” (198)

Customs, like signposts, require no outside criterion according to which they are followed. Put more simply, we are able to follow signposts because we have a custom of following signposts. Social context is constituted by the customs that we share in everyday life, and these customs themselves are based in basic human behaviors. These behaviors are common to all human beings: they are the “common behavior” upon which customs and practices are built, “the way in which we interpret an unknown language” (206).

For Wittgenstein, using language is analogous to following a rule: it is a custom necessarily rooted in a social context: “it is not possible to obey a rule ‘privately.’ Otherwise thinking one was obeying a rule would be the same as obeying it” (202). Rules are thus always public, and always subject to change and reinterpretation by society. Wittgenstein is careful to point out that the relation between these rules and our action has no regular form; rather, as he makes explicit in his earlier discussions of language games, these rules are always changing, new ones are constantly appearing and unused ones being forgotten. Thus, the particular *way* in which a custom refers to the world is not important; rather, what matters is *that* it refers at all. In fact, we may not be able to determine exactly how the reference works: for Wittgenstein, the meaning of words is determined not by their definition (this would amount to merely substituting a series of words for a single word) but by their use. Words get their meaning from the ways we use them in social contexts. They are essentially customs, defined simply by the ways we use them in the course of our everyday lives with others. Because of this, language cannot exist outside of social context, nor can there be any regular, consistent way in which words and the

world are related to one another, but only a shifting relationship comprehensible not because of our ability to name its particular parts but through the ways in which we understand the relationship between them.

To illustrate the variety of ways in which a language can work, Wittgenstein asks us to imagine people in an unknown country who speak (or signify, or write, etc.) a language we cannot understand. Their simple actions and behaviors seem to make sense, and they undergo tasks much as we do, but try as we might, we cannot find a regular way in which their words connect to their actions. Commenting on the sounds uttered by these unknown people in what appears to be their own language, Wittgenstein writes, “these sounds are not superfluous, for if we gag [them], it has the same consequences as with us; without the sounds their actions fall into confusion –as I feel like putting it” (207). To say that their actions “fall into confusion” is not to claim that they cease to be engaged in the everyday behaviors Wittgenstein described earlier. Rather, their customs, the ways in which they acknowledge, coordinate, and make sense of their basic actions, dissolve without a basic means of public expression.

Customs (the most obvious and pervasive of which is language) thus allow us to make sense of our world by keeping our actions from “falling into confusion.” Without them, we cannot have a “world” in any meaningful sense. Customs like language allow us to order and refer to our world even as they create the context that constitutes that world. As Wittgenstein’s example shows, the common behavior of mankind has no meaning without the necessary context of customs. This is most clearly illustrated by his discussion of language and meaning-as-use.

The implications of this way of looking at language and reference are extremely important: they always imply a necessary social context. For Wittgenstein, all language is always public. It makes no sense to talk of a private language, because having such a language

would serve no purpose. Experiences which are entirely private need no signification at all, and thus to say we had a word for a particular feeling that we never told to anyone else would be misleading. For Wittgenstein, words derive meaning from their use in the world, not from within some closed-off inner space or “mind.” Wittgenstein’s philosophy “moves from plain features of our lives to the background conditions that make those activities possible. The notions of language games, grammar, and forms of life may be seen as identifying those general (if not exactly “essential”) characteristics of our lives which make our activities possible” (Guignon 653).

In relating Wittgenstein’s ideas of the social to the context of social science, Thomas Schatzki makes an interesting (and potentially useful) distinction between basic and non-basic actions. Basic actions are the simple, physical behaviors that form the basis for anything we do. Non-basic actions are the more complex tasks which we fulfill (or undertake, etc.) through basic actions. Schatzki writes, “a basic action is an action, typically a bodily one, that an actor performs directly and not by way of performing a different one” (99). Pressing a button, for example, is a basic action, a behavior we all do at some time or another and thus an example of “the common behavior of mankind” from aphorism 206. Writing an essay, however, is a non-basic action: it necessitates a social context that has created a custom (in this case, the practice of writing essays, or more generally the concept of the essay itself).

Just as the unknown people’s language helps them to go about their daily lives without confusion, so does the custom of essay writing give meaning to the repetitive pressing of buttons on a keyboard. This is why the meaning of “essay” is not determined by a particular definition (indeed most people cannot even agree on what defines a good essay) but rather by the way in which the word “essay” is used: its social context. The common behavior of mankind, like

button-pushing, can be seen as a basic action. Even this action, however, is not possible outside of some social context: we must first live in a society in which people use and refer to buttons. Thus, while nonbasic actions and complex customs and institutions may be contingent on a complex social context, even the most basic actions (and behavior) necessitate some social context. Wittgenstein tells us at the end of the description of the unknown people, “Are we to say that these people have a language: orders, reports, and the rest? There is not enough regularity for *us* to call it ‘language’” (207, my italics). But we, as unknown observers, are not a part of the foreign people’s social context. We cannot expect to understand the ways in which their reference works well enough to recognize its regularity as language. Their customs are different than ours, and we don’t share a social context.

For Wittgenstein, our shared world is constituted by the “everyday behaviors of mankind.” Customs, especially language, make sense of our basic behaviors, allowing us to undertake meaningful action and providing us the social context in which to establish meaning. The totality of these shared behaviors and customs at any given time constitutes our world, and because there is no single way in which they must correspond to it, this world is never a complete whole: customs are always changing, and thus our world is not something of which we can ever claim to have a complete or final picture. It is a world constituted not by definitions, but customs: institutions that order and make meaningful basic shared behavior, thus constituting the basis for our world.

III. Heidegger

In terms of meaning, Heidegger seems to offer a similar account in his discussion of disclosure in *Being and Time*. Heidegger uses “disclosure” very specifically in the sense of making apparent, uncovering, and (especially in terms of language) telling. Since in its everyday state Dasein is not an individual but rather a they-self, constituted by our everyday use of equipment and Being-in-the-world, this is not necessarily disclosure in the sense of talking to another (Heidegger calls this a “special case” of communication) but rather the disclosing of everyday entities in equipmental context that makes Dasein possible.

This conception of disclosure is fundamental to Heidegger’s account of Being-in-the-world because for him disclosure-as-such is the ontological basis of Dasein and the world. Disclosure allows for signification, the articulation of an entity’s equipmental use that shows us its context. Dreyfus writes, “When I pick up a hammer and hammer with it, I pick out or articulate one of its significations, i.e., the fact that it is used to pound in nails; if I use it to pull nails, I articulate another” (1997, 215). Without disclosure, there could be no signification, because there could be no field of significance, no context in which entities could be used, at all. Furthermore, disclosure-as-such always entails “someone” disclosed to: namely, Dasein, just as the very presence of Dasein entails disclosure, because it must be grounded in a field of significance. “In so far as it marks the birth of significance and the genesis of being, disclosure-as-such or world-disclosure is the reason why any specific entity can have meaningful presence at all” (Sheehan 313). Sheehan uses disclosure-as-such to illustrate Heidegger’s claim that the disclosedness of Dasein needs no underlying basis. In Dasein’s Being, disclosedness is already present: “By its very nature, Dasein brings its “there” along with it. If it lacks its ‘there’, it is not factually the entity which is essentially Dasein; indeed, it is not this entity at all. *Dasein is its disclosedness*” (Heidegger 171).

On the basis of this disclosure-as-such, Heidegger goes on to discuss the disclosure of our world through the disclosure of entities in a context. Entities are always disclosed in the world *as something*, not as abstract objects but as familiar pieces of equipment. An example might help to explain this concept. When a stone is disclosed, it is never simply *a stone*, standing alone outside of context. Rather, it is always disclosed to us within a context, with a signification: it is the stone *as decoration or for throwing or as a weight*.

The reason entities are disclosed in context is not merely arbitrary. For Heidegger, the “totality of significations,” the context of everything disclosed to us, constitutes world. Entities must be disclosed in a context because they only exist within a context. It is for this reason that Heidegger talks of our interactions with entities in the world as “the use of equipment.” Like Wittgenstein’s “common behavior of mankind,” the use of equipment is the fundamental way in which our being is constituted, and it is always in a totality: equipment is always part of the context of the totality of equipment that makes up our world. The hammer is a piece of equipment insofar as it is related to the nail, the wall it will be driven into, the drawer into which it will be placed after use, etc. The context of the totality of significations constitutes our world, and this world is disclosed to us, as is Dasein, only within a context. For Dasein, meaning can only occur within this disclosed context: “a sign’s signifying must take place *in a context*, and it signifies, i.e., it can *be* a sign, only for those who *dwell* in that context” (Dreyfus 102).

For Heidegger, human discourse is the most explicit form of disclosing; it is what makes Being and the there (our sense of Being-in-the-world) explicit to us. It is important to recognize that Heidegger’s conception of language and discourse is somewhat different from that of Wittgenstein. While Wittgenstein insists that signs, symbols, etc. in some sense “keep unconfused” the common behavior of mankind, Heidegger uses the term *rede*, translated by

Macquarrie and Robinson as “discourse” or “talk,” to explain the ways in which the world is explicitly disclosed to Dasein. *Rede*, discourse, is the way in which our Being-with-others and Being-in-the-world is made explicit. In Heidegger’s words, “discourse is existentially equiprimordial with state-of-mind and understanding” (204).

Heidegger claims that while disclosed Being-with is still the fundamental existential structure, it cannot be known to us explicitly until it is given signification through *rede*. Although our Being-in-the-world already “is” because of disclosure, *rede* allows Being-with and being-in-the-world to be explicitly examined and articulated by Dasein. Heidegger writes, “Dasein-with is already essentially manifest in a co-state-of-mind and a co-understanding. In discourse [*rede*] Being-with becomes ‘explicitly’ *shared*; that is to say, it *is* already, but it is unshared as something that has not been taken hold of and appropriated” (205). In this sense, *rede* does not constitute Dasein per se, but it makes Being-with something we can recognize, analyze, and make sense of: it allows us to “interpret” (in the Heideggerian sense) Dasein and thus to give it specific meaning.

This Articulation constitutes for Heidegger at best an interpretation of some particular aspect of Being-in-the-world, and at least an example of “telling” (Dreyfus’s preferred translation for *rede* in his commentary on *Being and Time*), which makes clear our being-with-one-another. When we take hold of and appropriate our Being-with, *das Man* becomes intelligible, and our use of equipment and its context, made possible through disclosure, are fully evident.

IV. Conclusion: Two accounts of a Social Context based Model

Both Heidegger and Wittgenstein can be seen to offer an account of social context as the necessary background for meaning and daily life. Wittgenstein's reliance on language to keep our actions from "falling into confusion" might be compared with the necessity of disclosure for Dasein and the world. While not identical, both accounts seem to present a picture of meaning and reference that would make primordial human behavior meaningless to us without some conception of a shared, social context by which our customs and institutions could be made intelligible.

Because Heidegger insists on its equiprimordiality, we can understand behavior *only* when it is disclosed. It would be meaningless to claim that behavior somehow existed before it was disclosed to us. We must understand disclosure not as showing something that was previously hidden, but rather as making evident to us the Being of the disclosed's referent. It makes no sense to give an account of behavior "before" disclosure, because disclosure is what initially makes behavior possible and intelligible.

The same basic concept applies to Wittgenstein's analysis of behavior as an underlying context. While "we" might in some sense have very basic behavior "before" the establishment of customs and institutions, it would have no meaning, would be "confused," and could not truly be "before" our customs in any meaningful sense because there would be no language in which we could talk about this behavior. The relationship between customs and "the common behavior of mankind" in Wittgenstein seems akin to that between disclosure of equipmental context (signification) and entities in the world for Heidegger.

While a fuller understanding of our behavior and equipmentality perhaps cannot be disclosed to us without a system of signs (ideally a formal language, though other forms of signification might function to some degree), forms of communication only exist because of the

common behaviors made possible through disclosure. Indeed, it is possible to regard *rede* itself as a peculiar example of the use of equipment: language (or signs, words, etc.) is the equipment with which all behavior (including its own) is explicitly disclosed in the everyday world. In Wittgenstein's words, *rede* might be considered a basic custom: the common practice of referring to things in the context of the social.

Furthermore, as Sheehan has noted, "disclosure as such lets an entity be present not in its eternal essence but only in its current meaning in a given situation." Because of its context-specificity, Heidegger's account of meaning, like Wittgenstein's, is rooted not in a rigid foundationalism of definitions or fixed references set in inner minds, but in a dynamic social context that is constituted by shifting usage and constant reinterpretation. Dreyfus writes, "Although Dasein's there is not a geometrical perspective, it is a moving center of pragmatic activity in the midst of a shared world. Since Dasein is not a mind but is absorbed in and defined by what it does, Heidegger can say that Dasein *is* its 'there'" (164).

Heidegger does not offer a specific account of exactly how signification works, but rather accepts that it can function in a variety of ways, focusing instead on the meaningful disclosure of entities as a totality of equipment that makes evident the social context of the They-self. In this respect, his account does not seem radically different from Wittgenstein's. While Wittgenstein roots his discussion in physical behavior in an outside world, he remains insistent that there can be no *meaning* and thus no "world" (in the Heideggerian sense) without language.

The importance of this similarity in both thinkers is that it constitutes a rejection of a foundational, fixed account of reference. Because of the fluidity and ambiguity of the context-specific ways we relate to our world, we are forced to find the basis for our shared world not in

abstract, individualistic conceptions of firm subject-object distinctions in distinct minds, but rather in the simple, undeniable, everyday presence of the social context itself.

I find the accounts of social context in the *Philosophical Investigations* and *Being and Time* to be much more similar than is normally assumed considering Wittgenstein and Heidegger's radically different philosophical approaches. By rejecting traditional foundationalist accounts and positing unfixed systems of reference that allow for change and ambiguity, both offer a re-examination of the way in which we understand and interact in our world, resulting in a radically different picture of metaphysics, epistemology, and ontology. While there are certainly many specific nuances that distinguish their philosophies, Heidegger and Wittgenstein's accounts of social context can be seen to offer the same basic account of meaning and what constitutes our world.

Indeed, while the myriad implications of such social context models are beyond the scope of this essay, the differing backgrounds and philosophical interests of these two thinkers only help to illustrate the vast areas of philosophy that have been influenced by their thought. Further focus on the basic concept of necessary social context in the work of these two philosophers from supposedly divergent schools of thought may help contemporary philosophers to realize that even in radically different philosophic projects, convincing arguments can be made for non-foundationalist accounts of our world.

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