

Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and Skepticism

By Edward Minar

IT IS NOT UNCOMMON TO SEE BROAD-STROKE LIKENESSES BETWEEN *BEING AND Time*, Martin Heidegger's early masterpiece of existential phenomenology, and Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*—to find, for example, strains of pragmatism, holism, and contextualism in both. Some, however, view the effort to trace genuine similarities between late Heidegger, the thinker of Being and its withdrawal, and late Wittgenstein, the philosophical therapist who would “bring words back from their metaphysical to their everyday use” (*PI* §116) implausible and surprising. I think, to the contrary, that there are striking and particular affinities, similarities that can deepen our understanding of both. In this essay, I begin the process of taking up Stanley Cavell's long-standing (but largely unexplored) suggestion that late Heidegger and late Wittgenstein respond in comparable fashion to

the threat of skepticism about the grounding of our ways of dealing with the world. In doing so, I hope both to propose a framework within which both thinkers can fruitfully be approached, and to cast light on the significance of skepticism—on why, despite its apparent

incredibility and a litany of alleged “refutations” directed against it, skepticism still seems to present or maintain a threat to some central aspects of our self-conceptions. Generally, Heidegger and Wittgenstein try to recover the world from the clutches of a ‘representational thinking’ that renders the intimacy of our relation to the world problematic. Both—to say much the same thing—point us toward the recovery of our capacity to word the world by showing us how to refuse a posture of reflective detachment from the world that threatens to deprive us of our voice in it. Skepticism is the name that this threat has in modern philosophy. Far from being a

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A recent and thought-provoking essay by Terry Pinkard, "Analytics, Continentals, and Modern Skepticism," sets up a dialectical framework of post-Kantian responses to a "very modern skepticism and the threats, both intellectual and cultural, it poses."² Pinkard's narrative, which extends from Fichte through Hegel and pragmatism to Heidegger and Wittgenstein, centers on the question of what makes the norms that govern our practices—including those that govern our practices of assessing our beliefs—authoritative. After Descartes and Kant, it becomes difficult to maintain—what is anyway of dubious coherence—that the world, regarded as an unconditioned reality, dictates how it should be represented. What we hold fast is in an important sense 'up to us'. As far as our beliefs go, that is, "what we decide to keep and what we decide to jettison can only be determined by some reference to what our interests are."³ But who is the 'we' in question? If 'we' refers to a particular, independently identifiable group, then the credentials of that group to fix what must be accepted can always be challenged. Any way of specifying a characteristic of such an empirical 'we' that is meant to account for its authority is liable to be problematic. We can always ask, that is, why the particular feature specified is to be taken as ensuring the legitimacy of the group's imprimatur. Appeals to the shared insight or expertise of group members, for example, simply raise the question of who determines what counts as insight or expertise. On the other hand, to answer the question, "Who constitutes the 'we' whose say-so we must heed?", by asserting that it is *just* we, just the members of *this* community, without offering a ground for our putative authority, seems pointless. No doubt it is *true* that for the most part we simply go as our community goes and that the accepted practices of the community (or of those of its members it counts as authoritative!) are not normally taken to be open to question. But nothing in this fact gives the slightest indication of why shared community practices and standards should have normative force. The appeal to the accepted practices of normal members of our group looks like dogmatic self-insistence. Despairing, then, of the available means for picking out an empirical 'we' in an appropriate and relevant fashion, we may be tempted to posit a transcendental one, idealized in such a way as to guarantee that what *this* 'we' says represents a genuine entitlement. Such a move, however, merely replaces the suspicion of dogmatism with an aura of mystery.

Pinkard's skeptical problem concerns whether any 'we' has suitable credentials to justify its own ways of going on in the world. This problem would comprise a challenge to our self-image as well as to the self-assurance of our claims and standards. If, in the end, it remains an open question whether our ways of evaluating our beliefs reflect mere prejudices, then even those aspects of ourselves that we see as distinctively expressive of our claim to rational autonomy—such as our capacity for detached, objective self-criticism and our entitlement to treat ourselves as authoritative—may not rise above the "local and parochial."⁴ The problem looks both intractable and serious. It brings in tow the vivid and troubling issue of whether each 'we' is trapped inside its own perspective and is thus debarred from access to the world as it really is. No 'we', it seems, can be in a position to assure itself of the objectivity of its own perspective.

Where do Heidegger and Wittgenstein stand with respect to this skeptical problematic? Neither is concerned to ground the 'we' or to demonstrate from an

external vantage point the accuracy of our views and the validity of our procedures for assessing them. Instead, both challenge the sense of the problem, ultimately suggesting that the project of grounding the 'we' begins from a position where world and we have been artificially and as it were prematurely separated. It is as if the world had first to be stripped of the taint of meaning before it could again be rendered an hospitable environment for the dwelling of mortals. What, ask Heidegger and Wittgenstein, motivates the philosophical picture that renders such prior alienation of us from the world, of the world from us, inevitable or mandatory?

Let us look first at Wittgenstein. His stance on the problem of the 'we' emerges in his treatment of rule-following in *Philosophical Investigations* and *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. There, he shows that nothing in the mind fixes the proper interpretation of what a rule dictates, because every interpretation hangs in the air and seems itself subject to interpretation; there must (if a rule is genuinely to determine a particular way of going on) be a way of understanding the rule that is *not* an interpretation (v. *PI* §§198, 201). Wittgenstein links this understanding to our common agreement in judgment (*PI* §242). Pinkard finds in this agreement a kind of *grounding* of our linguistic practices: "We orient our particular judgments about what the rule means and requires of us...by what Wittgenstein calls 'the common human mode of action' or 'form of life,'" in which the practice of following the rule is embedded; behind this commonality, Pinkard continues, "there is nothing else more normatively fundamental."⁵ Thus, he has it: "The 'common human mode of action', the human 'form of life' is the 'whole' in terms of which we locate our individual judgments in order to secure them as meaningful and as right. The human form of life is normatively authoritative for us although in a groundless fashion; we cannot give any further normative account of that form of normative authority."⁶

This more or less standard reading yields a picture on which, while Wittgenstein sees our form of life as a groundless ground for what we do and refuses to countenance any demand for something deeper, the skeptic's conception of grounding remains intact. Wittgenstein's refusal hardly seems to yield a satisfying response to skepticism. True, our eyes are shut to the skeptic's doubts (v. *PI* p. 224); however, in the skeptic's eyes, we have deliberately avoided a perfectly legitimate effort to question the credentials of our taken-for-granted ways of proceeding. All we have provided is a less than reassuring reminder that, as a contingent matter of fact, we are absorbed in our form of life; we have given no indication as to why we should not be concerned with whether the resultant 'orientation' is, on account of its 'parochiality', radically out of tune with things. Skepticism, in other words, harbors a fear that 'form of life' provides a merely conventional or for that matter a merely natural basis of our ways of going on, neither of which can account for its putative normative force. At bottom, appealing to an "underived but not self-grounding" form of life⁷ does nothing in the skeptic's eyes to banish the specter of arbitrariness that haunts grounds such as these. Pinkard's Wittgenstein seems to represent a Wittgenstein viewed through skeptical lenses.

An alternative interpretation is available, on which Wittgenstein invites something like the standard interpretation but contests its terms. He writes, "What has to be accepted, the given, is—so one could say—forms of life" (*PI* p. 226). This pronouncement does not dictate a complacent acceptance of a conventional or natural basis for our practices; rather, our human forms of life *comprise* our practices,

are constituted by our responses and agreements within them. Our necessities are internal to the practices that make up our forms of life; form of life does not explain them. And if we cannot make sense of what our responses, agreements, and necessities *are* except from within our practices, then there is no place outside them from which a coherent, uniform demand for their overarching justification can be raised. Wittgenstein's attempt to teach us "not, to dig down to the ground" but, "to recognize the ground before us as the ground" (*RFM* VI 31) is intended to get us to see that the normative authority of our form of life cannot present a general problem to be resolved once and for all, on pain of skepticism. This is hardly to say that there are no circumstances in which the normative authority of the 'we' is at issue. Rather, 'we' are those to whom we can talk; to whom we can talk, and about what, are ongoing questions, ones that we work out only in talking. In other words, whatever normative authority there is is our own; particular issues concerning with whom I can find my capacity to make sense may always arise. As form of life—it is tempting to say, with the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, as Being-in-the-world—we are always already situated, in the sense that our interests in things, our responses to them, and our abilities to communicate about them are already in play, even when they are up for grabs. Seen in this light, skepticism is revealed as an impulse to move outside our agreements, an expression of dissatisfaction with the human. As such it remains a standing possibility, a reminder that we may at any point fail to find ourselves in our agreements and necessities as they stand.⁸

Like Wittgenstein, Heidegger turns his back on the skeptical problematic of grounding the 'we'. For Heidegger, as Pinkard says, "we are just *situated*, we are never self-situating."⁹ For both early and late Heidegger, this means that no 'we' achieves the requisite priority to what it might be taken to underwrite to play a constitutive or normative role. There is just our "primordial orientation" that has "already laid out the possibilities of the kinds of things one would find meaningful and not meaningful."¹⁰ This orientation is not a fixed, privileged attitude toward, or

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point of view on, the world that assures its availability. Rather, that the world is already *there* as meaningful indicates that we already have to do, in some way or another, with the particulars of the situations in which we find ourselves. Heidegger wants to make our *actual* responsiveness to things—not

the very possibility of such responsiveness, as would be rendered doubtful by the skeptic—the focus of thoughtful concern. (The issue of responsiveness is, for him, the question of whether we are, as yet, *thinking*.)

This focus comes to the fore in Heidegger's essay "The Thing," which tries to lay out a conception of the thing in itself that does not put it inherently beyond our reach. In doing so, Heidegger is, as Cavell has pointed out, renegotiating "the Kantian bargain with skepticism (buying back the knowledge of objects by giving up things in themselves)."¹¹ What *is* the thing in itself, such that we can make

sense of it in its “self-supporting independence” (T 166)? The thing things, Heidegger tells us; in thinging it gathers the fourfold of earth and sky, divinities and mortals, thereby tying together the world in which we dwell. Being reminded of the thing’s thingly character brings us back to who we are:

If we let the thing be present in its thinging from out of the worlding world, then we are thinking of the thing as thing....Thinking in this way, we are called by the thing as the thing. In the strict sense of the German word *bedingt*, we are the be-thinged, the conditioned ones. We have left behind us the presumption of unconditionedness (T 181).

Here there is no intelligible question of our first gaining access to world and *then* dealing with the things in it in ways established or grounded prior to our actual encounters with them. That conception would invite the skeptic’s questions of why world in Heidegger’s sense really amounts to more than a subjective framework in which things are presented to us. On Heidegger’s alternative description of what we might as well call experience, things in themselves, not mere appearances within a particular framework, are that with which we have to do in experience. Insofar as there is any intelligible ‘we’, that ‘we’ is the ‘who’ that is already engaged in making things intelligible in the way that we do—by, that is, responding to them.

Heidegger’s account of the thing is bound to seem alternately peculiar and trivial—no doubt because he conceives of what he is doing as trying to recollect an aspect of our experience that is, for the most part, lost to us. Three particular aspects of his stance merit closer attention:

1. The thing gathers the fourfold of earth and sky, divinities and mortals. Describing the thing as it enters into our dealings requires us to relate it to each of these dimensions of the world. Each thing has its diverse cultural uses and significance (mortals), its symbolic resonances (including its possible reference to divinities), its relations to the space and time in which mortals live (what I take to be sky), and its way of drawing on the material from which it is formed (earth). Each thing’s identity is determined by its actual and possible relations to the different elements of the fourfold as they are brought together in this particular thing. For the thing to be a thing is for it to be capable of supporting this kind of understanding, for it to hold all of these varied elements together. In allowing ourselves to describe our experience of the thing in these Heideggerian terms, we avail ourselves with apparent impunity of a rich vocabulary, the use of which seems to carry ontological commitments far beyond those that skepticism would allow us to take for granted. Odd though the vocabulary of the fourfold may seem, a part of Heidegger’s point is quite simple. In describing our relations to the thing, we cannot step back from our actual worldly involvements. But these involvements themselves cannot be described in isolation from our relations to things. We are always already encountering—dealing with, experiencing, representing, conceiving—things in a context that presupposes their potential accessibility. Our terms for making sense of the world cannot in other words be supplied by a prior, self-contained subjective framework. It is *things*, and not our categories for conceptualizing them, that gather world. These claims certainly cry out for argument. The considerations Heidegger advances in their favor are broadly speaking phenomenological: Again, we cannot without loss describe ourselves or our world except in thingly terms, or our experiences of things except in worldly terms. Nor is there any a priori reason why such a

stripped-down understanding of the world should be required. To think otherwise is prematurely to adopt a skeptical stance toward the world.

2. But what is it for things to gather world? In gathering the fourfold, Heidegger says, the thing things. Our descriptions of our encounters with the thing reveal its genuine independence: The thing as thing is not exhausted by our categories, it cannot be absorbed into our conceptualizations, and it may always call out for some as-yet unanticipated responses on our part. As thing, that is, the thing outstrips the possibilities that our ways of coping with and talking about it have envisioned. Although the thing always *shows up* in a world and for us, its thingly, inexhaustible character comprises all the independence from us that we can legitimately demand—*this* is what its being a thing-in-itself means. For something to call on us as a thing is for it already to *be there* as itself, open to our response. Conversely, for us to be in the world is for us to be “called by the thing as a thing,” conditioned. That is:

3. We are the bethinged. This is later Heidegger’s way of reinscribing his earlier claim that Dasein, human being, is Being-in-the-world—the basic thesis of Division I of *Being and Time*. Being-in-the-world is what we, *as* the bethinged, *are*. In emphasizing this point, Heidegger wants to block the idea that some sort of idealism is the price we have to pay to guarantee the availability of the world. There is, again, no coherent conception of a potentially non-involved, non-thing-oriented ‘we’ that can constitute a framework that operates prior to and independently of actual dealings with things—there are just our particular orientations to them. The sort of idealism that supposes that the framework in which we make sense of things must be constituted by a prior ‘we’ if this framework is to be hospitable to the meanings we find in things is a kind of recoil from skepticism: It registers the sense that the world of things is in itself already lost. Thus it shares a picture with the skepticism to which it would react; this skepticism, in positing a setup on which we and the world of things in themselves can be pried apart, expresses a kind of resistance to the openness to things that is a condition of our encountering the world as meaningful.¹²

Reading “The Thing” in this way—as pointing toward a response to the skeptic’s investigation into the grounds of our ways of Being-in-the-world that questions the sense of his initiating picture of the relation between us and world—brings out several substantial affinities between Heidegger and Wittgenstein. First, both try to lead us to see the ground before us as the ground. (In *What Is Called Thinking*, Heidegger writes: “A curious, indeed unearthly thing that we must first leap onto the soil on which we really stand” [*WICT* 41; cf. *RFM* VI 31].) Seeing things aright here is not resigning ourselves to the ‘parochiality’ of our ways of looking at things. While neither our particular ‘agreement in judgment’ (Wittgenstein) nor our letting ourselves be called by particular things (Heidegger), is backed up by some general justificatory framework, there is no global perspective from which this can be deemed a lack, from which the capacities involved in responding to things and speaking of them can be judged groundless. The openness to individual things that Heidegger recovers is what allows them to count for us in the first place. This responsiveness is comparable to what Wittgenstein calls “a way of grasping a rule which is not an interpretation, but which is exhibited in what we call ‘obeying the rule’ and ‘going against it’ in actual cases” (*PI* §201). This understanding, which underlies the agreement in judgment that makes communication possible (*PI* §242), is not based in anything deeper than the rule-following practices

it informs. We must *accept* some concrete actions as following rules or going on in the same way; similarly, in being called by things, we must *accept* particular judgments and actions as responsive to them.

A second point is closely related. In refusing the skeptic a ground on which he can take his stand, Heidegger and Wittgenstein move away from depictions of our relation of the world as one of confinement (from the world as it really is, to our framework or perspective). They reject, that is, the idea that we must *get over* to the world from a purely subjective starting point. As we saw, in describing what it is for us as being tied to be situated in the world, later Heidegger does not hesitate to employ the ontologically inclusive, thing-laden vocabulary of the fourfold. Similarly, Wittgenstein is unwilling to forswear his use of full-blown, presuppositional descriptions and explanations of our linguistic practices in favor of preserving the possibility of some mythic, philosophically purified, basis for them.¹³ Both think that employing less than the available means to describe our situation would impoverish and distort the phenomena, and neither finds it necessary to absorb this loss for the sake of seeking an allegedly more secure ground for our dealings. For both, that is, the only motivation for impoverishing our means of self-description would be a prior endorsement of the skeptic's attempt to depict our situation as one of isolation from the world.

Third, Heidegger and Wittgenstein make available similar diagnoses of the attractions of the skepticism from which they want us to recover. For Heidegger, each thing, in thing-

ing, calls out a representative range of our ways of making sense of the world. Imagining that the thing things is envisioning a situation in which the thing speaks to us and we hearken to it; this is what it is for us to

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make sense of things. If this is right, skeptical questioning of whether in general our ways of making sense are valid expresses a posture of refusal—a suspicion of receptivity or responsiveness that amounts to a denial of our very capacity to make sense. Similarly, for Wittgenstein, the skeptical insistence that the normativity of our ways of going on have to, but cannot, be grounded in some deeper aspect of the world or in some self-validating aspect of our subjectivity represents a kind of suppression of the real issues surrounding our capacity to mean. What is genuinely at stake for us is not what gives the community authority, but with whom we are in community. Both Heidegger and Wittgenstein can be read, then, as finding behind the philosophical entanglements that grow out of skepticism an impulse to repudiate the attunements that inform our ways of interacting with things and each other. Insofar as this repudiation finds expression in the demand that we seek a ground for our ways of talking, it makes sense to regard skepticism as a denial of our entitlement to language. And insofar as placing this demand questions our capacity to respond to *things*, skepticism is a sign of a kind of deadening of the world, an unwillingness to allow things to speak to us (responsiveness) as well as a denial of our need to listen

(responsibility).¹⁴

The skeptic's discomfort with the idea that our mutual intelligibility rests on nothing deeper than our form of life is understandable. It evinces the permanent possibility that our agreements and responses will run out and that we will in fact not make sense of our world, of each other, and of ourselves. Skepticism intellectualizes the discomfort, transforming it into uncertainty about whether our perspectives on things ever rise above the 'local and parochial' to give us a genuine grip on them. For Heidegger as for Wittgenstein, there is no a priori testament to our community or to our access to things; there are guarantees of neither success nor failure. Finding a common voice is the ongoing task of responding in kind to things, and, as Cavell puts it, "the recall of things is the recall, or calling on, of humanity."¹⁵ ∅

Abbreviations

The texts of Heidegger and Wittgenstein have been referred to in the text by the abbreviations given below, followed by page or section numbers as appropriate:

- WICT* Heidegger, Martin. *What Is Called Thinking*. New York: Harper Colophon, 1968.
T ———. "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York: Harper Colophon, 1971.
PI Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. New York: Macmillan, 1953
RFM ———. *Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983.

Notes

1. On representational thinking, see *WICT* 37-47 and *T* 181. James Edwards, *The Authority of Language: Heidegger, Wittgenstein, and the Threat of Philosophical Nihilism* (Tampa: University of South Florida Press, 1990) brings Heidegger and Wittgenstein together as critics of representational thinking but (largely, I would say, because Edwards does not explore how they work to distance themselves from the skeptical problematic of grounding our practices) leaves both more ensconced in the metaphysical tradition that embodies such thinking than either should or need be.

The figure of recovery is a theme of Stanley Cavell, "Texts of Recovery (Coleridge, Wordsworth, Heidegger...)," in *In Quest of the Ordinary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988), 50-75.

2. Terry Pinkard, "Analytics, Continentals, and Modern Skepticism," *The Monist* 82, 2 (1999): 212.

3. Pinkard 192.

4. Pinkard 212.

5. Pinkard 204.

6. Pinkard 205.

7. Pinkard 208.

8. I have defended in detail the interpretation of Wittgenstein suggested in this paragraph in Edward H. Minar, "Wittgenstein and the 'Contingency' of Community," *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 72,3 (1991): 203-234. The idea that Wittgenstein's writing is meant to depict skepticism as an expression of the standing possibility of dissatisfaction with our agreements—a conception of skepticism that the skeptic himself will not recognize—is explored in great depth in Stanley Cavell, *The Claim of Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

9. Pinkard 208.

10. Pinkard 209. Pinkard's very brief remarks on Heidegger are, where specified, concerned with

Being and Time. Properly transposed, however, they fit with the way of looking at later Heidegger I propose here, and they help to point to the resemblances to Wittgenstein that I want to highlight.

11. Cavell 65.

12. The understanding of "The Thing" on which the last several paragraphs draw is laid out and defended in my "The Thinging of the Thing: A Late Heideggerian Response to Skepticism," *Philosophical Topics* (forthcoming).

13. For the 'presuppositionessness' of the descriptions of rule-following that Wittgenstein proposes to offer, v., e.g., *RFM* VII 26.

14. Readers of Cavell will note the indebtedness to his writings of the conception of skepticism offered here. Part of my intention has been to suggest specific ways in which the comparisons between Heidegger and Wittgenstein drawn here illuminate this conception.

15. Cavell 67. I am grateful to David Cerbone and Randall Havas for comments.

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