

Twins Philosophically Separated at Birth?

A Review of *Groundless Ground:*

A Study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger

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Review

Groundless ground: A study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger

Lee Braver

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Groundless grounds is all we have ever had, which proves their adequacy.

Lee Braver, 2014, p. 215

The modern scientific project aimed to get things right using proper names that could be mapped on to foundational knowledge, yielding what Hillary Putnam (1981) critiqued as an unattainable “God’s eye view” of reality. Both born in 1889, both initially seduced by a philosophical dream of articulating foundational reality, and each to become one of the 20th century’s most influential philosophers, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger are typically regarded as having very different philosophical projects, though each attacked science’s purported “ground.” Wittgenstein, protégé of Bertrand Russell, took logical positivism to what many saw as its analytical apex, only to later quite publicly abandon this approach for a view of meaning grounded in “language games.” Heidegger, protégé of Edmund Husserl who had been aiming to make a

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science of subjectivity with his phenomenology, reformulated subjectivity as “being,” invoking temporal, contextual, relational engagements and performances. In their respective intellectual journeys, both Wittgenstein and Heidegger took head on the notion that science and philosophy could correctly name and map the foundations of reality.

My personal interest in Braver’s (2014) *Groundless Grounds* relates to how interpretive ideas can be adapted to frontline helping practices. I have grown increasingly concerned about how philosophy of science arguments keep being used to suppress an interpretive and relational approach to practice (e.g., Strong & Busch, 2013). Modern “R”ealist science is alive and well, promising practitioners and the public that human problems can be correctly named and mapped on to foundational knowledge from which prescriptive solutions are warranted. Underpinning scientific arguments of this kind is a view that objective (i.e., untainted by human meaning and contact, see Daston & Galison, 2007), knowledge is obtainable and should trump any forms of knowing developed through human interaction. This particular philosophy of science is antithetical to any notion that interpretive, relational work could be ethical, valid, or helpful. Without strong counter-arguments to bolster an interpretive and relational approach to helping, such notions of helpfulness can seem easily discreditable in these days of evidence-based practice. Needed by the modern science approach, it seems, are “how-to” scripts and foundational knowledge to guide one’s helping; less important are the pragmatic immediacies of humans relating and understanding. My understanding of the postmodern and social constructionist upheavals in late 20th century human science and service work was that different, relational grounds were becoming accessible to family and narrative therapists like myself. However, in the early stages of self-identifying in this way, I felt inadequately grounded in interpretive ideas that could shore up a compatible philosophy of science that supported this approach to practice, and so I read (Lock & Strong, 2010). My reading inevitably brought me to Wittgenstein and Heidegger as key thinkers whose ideas had applicability to my preferred ways of practice.

Lee Braver’s *Groundless Grounds* is an ambitious and groundbreaking volume for making rigorous comparisons of two intellectual giants seldom juxtaposed. This would not be a good introductory book to the thinking of either Wittgenstein or Heidegger (see Monk, 1990 or Richardson 2012, for their respective biographies), and is targeted more for those who have been rewarded by reading Wittgenstein’s (1953) *Philosophical Investigations* or Heidegger’s (1962) *Being and Time*. As any reader of their books can tell you, the challenging prose of each book is compounded by the counter-intuitiveness of their revolutionary ideas. Many readers are unaware of how steeped they are in the foundational grounding of modern science, that reading either (later) Wittgenstein or Heidegger can initially leave them feeling their intelligence is being insulted, until unrecognized, bedrock assumptions, get dislodged with vertigo-inducing consequences. It is the comprehensiveness and brilliance with which both Wittgenstein and Heidegger took on their respective philosophical projects that makes them the 20th century’s most influential philosophers. Braver’s project, which in my estimation succeeds well, is to bridge what each thinker was doing, finding parallels in Wittgenstein and Heidegger where former scholars saw distinct, possibly incommensurable, ideas and approaches.

Braver helps readers move through some of the most obvious parallels accessibly and informatively. While Wittgenstein launched his philosophizing down the foundational path with his analytic philosophy classic, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, he abandoned this direction be-

cause of its idealizations, and lack of hubris (philosophers cannot articulate a foundational Ur-language of science). Like Heidegger (though there is only one cited instance of Wittgenstein mentioning him at a meeting of the Vienna Circle), both turned to how people did everyday life using means and terms that were real - *for them*. Each philosopher adopted an anthropological stance, focusing on in many cases what Polanyi (1967) would refer to as the “tacit dimension” of everyday life. In particular each was interested in how life was performed meaningfully (i.e., for the people so engaged) in taken for granted interactions. This interest is a striking departure from the atomistic views of prior thinkers, that discrete essences of meaning could be severed from the activities in which they find their immediate relevance and significance, and studied as foundational knowledge of material reality. Both Wittgenstein and Heidegger took up linguistic views of meaning based on how words were *used*, as moves in “language games” (Wittgenstein) or as “equipment” in teleological activities (Heidegger). Most important, however, for Braver, is their antifoundationalism.

It was this turn away from discoverable foundations which has drawn the greatest heat from critics. Charges of relativism and nihilistic semanticism have been the usual first line of attack on those taking up the ideas of Wittgenstein and Heidegger. It is, however, precisely here that a new kind of grounding – a socio-cultural grounding – is central to the arguments of both thinkers. The grounds are participatory, relational interactions that, over time, acquire the force of habit, customs to which we hold ourselves and each other. This extends to the language we communicate in our interactions, situated evaluations of what is proper or good, and the (“foundation-shaking”) disruptions caused when our interactions defy custom and expectation. The human world both Wittgenstein and Heidegger were pointing to cannot be atomized, its meanings and customs obtain through agreement and trusting perpetuation. There is a difference being inside and engaged with this human world than there could ever be if one took seriously the abstract, “objectively detached,” claims of the modern foundationalists, as Braver (2014) underscores:

This groundlessness would make thought viciously circular were we trying to enter it from the outside – if, that is, starting from the epistemological veil of ignorance, we were to try justifying the principle of seeking reasons. Fortunately, being has “graced” us by “throwing” us into this circle in the first place... Thrownness is a gift that enables, not an existential burden that compromises. (p. 202)

Braver is a clear and gifted writer, well up to the task of communicating the overlaps and complements he invites readers to find in the thinking of Wittgenstein and Heidegger, who, in his colourful prose, “dig up Descartes to kill him off” (p. 8) or were “weaning us off the hunger for explanations” (p. 152). He is not without mild criticism for either writer, seeing in Heidegger, for example, an obsession with phenomenological writing about “being” (Braver: “even a committed Heideggerian like myself must concede that his chronic invocations of being can approach self-parody, a kind of ontological Tourette’s syndrome”, 2014, p. 130). Wittgenstein imports an animalistic nature to account for human finitude, habitual interacting, and the animating impetus for such interacting (Braver again: “Wittgenstein wants to help us face the knotted squalor of the real, to force our heavenward gaze down to the detritus of practice”, p. 226). What Braver does best is set up previously unconsidered juxtapositions, like this one on Wittgenstein’s private language argument: “As Wittgenstein’s ‘private’- linguists can only introspect with public tools, so for Heidegger ‘knowing oneself is grounded in being with’” (p. 165).

Of course, there are differences between these two philosophical giants which are downplayed in Braver's book for the intended similarities and complementarities. Wittgenstein grounds his view of meaning in language games, and apart from referring to these as habit-like, disregards the kind of historicism and "care" one finds in Heidegger. Later Heidegger grew increasingly mystical and focused on poetic excellence, while Wittgenstein turned his attention more fully on errors he saw in the philosophy of science. What Braver has done is tapped obvious and not so obvious sources for key insights into where both men shared revolutionary projects of unsettling the much idealized ground of modern science. "Groundless grounds" does not refer to an oxymoron; it speaks to the historical and cultural arbitrariness and seeming durability of a relational ontology that interpretive and other scholars are still coming to terms with.

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