

Quine and Heidegger: Against Reductionism
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Comparing two thinkers from opposite philosophical traditions may initially seem like an impossible and fruitless task, a sort of culture clash two cultures cognitively thousands of miles apart. It should be easy to find the points of departure between Quine and Heidegger¹, but what I'm more looking forward to here is what seems to be an eerie agreement on a few key topics, in particular reactions against science: a move back towards accepting metaphysics, against the dominant trend of their time. And a move away from a reductionist approach and towards a more holist view of knowledge.

Their seeming agreement here is almost as if two wanderers have hiked up a mountain from opposite sides, eventually arriving at the same peak. And when two very different thinkers end up at similar positions, at the very least I think we should have a look.

It makes sense to take a look at Quine first, because he represents a tradition which Heidegger is reacting against. Being from the analytic philosophical tradition, Quine sees his work as a continuation of the philosophical tradition initiated by Descartes (modernism). A tradition that strives for exactness in methods and in its own writings, seeking clarity and concision². This all seems well and good coming from the point of view of science, however this tradition has been criticized for being too focused on language and science, too sterile and academic, and consequently for ordinary people, not only inaccessible but sadly irrelevant for them.

Quine himself wouldn't argue that science should be so closely tied to philosophy: in Quine's view, philosophy somewhat cohabitates with science³. And sometimes philosophy is even secondary, as something that comes along afterwards in order to clarify and clean up little messes and points of ambiguity that science has left behind.⁴

How can we even begin to understand the world with this approach? For science, phenomena is king: it is from phenomena that we get observation sentences, which are foundational for scientific understanding:

“Typical observation sentences are about bodies: 'This is a table,' 'This table is square,' 'The cat is on the mat.'. Always the situation that makes an observation sentence true will be a situation that is intersubjectively observable; that is, it will be the sort of situation to which multiple witnesses could, if present, attest.”⁵

It's important to note here that this methodology distinguishes between witnesses and bodies; between subjects and objects. Unfortunately this disconnect has led to many problems for this philosophy and its descendants: subjects can never have direct access to objects⁶. Consequently there is always an untraversable distance between us and our world; the extreme of this being external world skepticism, that we can never be sure we have knowledge of the world as it *really* is in itself. This troublesome view seems to be confirmed by the “progress” of philosophy through the centuries: philosophical frameworks are confidently built up only to be later gleefully destroyed in a seemingly endless churn.

What is the nature of reality? Who knows, but the next generation of philosophers will surely have a different answer. This long and seemingly unsuccessful churning of philosophy was one of the reasons for Descartes' radical questioning, and wanting to rebuild philosophy on firm foundations.⁷

Yet science cannot afford to endlessly doubt, sit still and not make progress, and so it must start somewhere. The best science can hope for is a sort of pragmatic approach: to aggregate multiple observation sentences from multiple subjects (the “multiple witnesses” in the statement above), and hope that the observations agree. For a philosophy based on science, these observa-

tions end up being foundational for all meaning and knowledge. This leads to a logical extreme, the verification theory of meaning, the theory that "...the meaning of a statement is the method of empirically confirming or infirming it."⁸. In other words, an extreme approach which *reduces all meaning down to merely scientific observation sentences*.

Quine reacts against this view in his most famous paper, Two Dogmas of Empiricism, and it's here that we find strange similarities to Heidegger's views in Being and Time.

But more on this later, since first we need to consider Heidegger's own approach.

Heidegger himself comes from the continental philosophical tradition and sees his work in opposition to Descartes in many ways. We would say he represents a sense of anti or post-modernism. Some would also accuse him of being obscure and difficult to understand, in many cases purposely unclear and imprecise⁹. Also, some might see Heidegger's stance as anti-science¹⁰, though this is a mischaracterization, at least of the Heidegger of Being and Time, which is my focus here.

For Heidegger, philosophy is clearly the starting point for knowledge, that which must be made clear before examining other domains such as the sciences¹¹¹². Heidegger's project is actually similar to Descartes' in the sense that both are looking for a foundation, a starting point from which to begin philosophy. Descartes looks to build from a firm *epistemic foundation*, obsessed with certainty: starting from the only thing which he can't reasonably doubt: that he exists. The famous cogito ergo sum: "I think, therefore I am".

But Heidegger takes him to task for not digging deep enough: "he leaves the 'sum' completely undiscussed, even though it is regarded as no less primordial than the cogito."¹³ This "sum", the "I am", is what Heidegger calls Dasein, the study of which he thinks should be prior to all other study. Dasein isn't a what but a who. Dasein is *us*, something that is mysteriously

close and yet far: “that which is ontically closest and well known, is ontologically the farthest and not known at all”¹⁴. Heidegger thinks we should not start with epistemology as Descartes did, but with metaphysics, specifically with the *fundamental ontology* of Dasein.

Here the method of examining Dasein might strike us as very unusual, because the very nature of Dasein refuses to be categorized as any other object that has properties to be examined, like Descartes' “thinking substance”. No, Dasein is something strange and is not like other beings: it cannot be talked about as a what but as a *who*¹⁵, as a living-through experiences¹⁶, of intentional actions¹⁷. It's not something which we can study with our scientific toolbox, the world of subject and object. (Note that we need not throw out the idea of subject/object entirely, only when discussing Dasein¹⁸).

Also, there is no problem of not being able to see *things in themselves* for Heidegger. There is no untraversable distance between subject and object with Dasein, because there is no subject/object distinction. Dasein *experiences things as they are in themselves*, albeit in a different way than the Kantian sense.

Note that we cannot also apply science's familiar reductionist strategy here: Dasein is not some object to be broken into parts which can then be classified and understood individually¹⁹, then added up again to understand Dasein as a whole.²⁰ One of the reasons being that it's problematic that we would even know how to “put the world together again”²¹ - that already-knowing-how is exactly what Heidegger is trying to uncover: trying to “get behind” or get “prior” to this already-knowing-how to put the pieces back together.

Yet we can still talk about Dasein's structure²² in what Heidegger calls “existentialia”: various ways of describing states of Dasein's Being²³, perhaps most importantly for our discussion: Dasein being-in-the-world (in a sense the world is “embedded”, but in a different way than

things are usually “being-in” each other – it's difficult here to avoid the subject-object language we're usually accustomed to²⁴). Being-in-the-world and other structures of Dasein turn out to be equiprimordial: they are prior and impossible to “get behind”, so much so that they must be presupposed and cannot be questioned²⁵.

What's vital to understand here is that it's impossible to take any of these “existentialia” out of the world and look at them in isolation, then look at them individually as if in a petri dish; the scientific approach of reducing our world down into smaller, more understandable parts. These structures of Dasein can only be examined in relation to each other as part of a whole, as a part of a holistic understanding. To examine in isolation is to examine away from its natural habitat, and thus what Heidegger would call an “inappropriate” study that yields no understanding. Instead of examining parts in isolation, Heidegger's “hermeneutical circle” approach is both an attempt at expressing this difficult holism and also an explanation of Dasein's ontological understanding of itself²⁶.

Coming back to our comparison with Quine, it may be very difficult at this point to see where Heidegger might have any points of agreement at all. Heidegger in a sense seems to have jumped into the deep end of metaphysics, starting philosophy at the farthest point away from empiricism (science). And from everything I've outlined above, we may think that Quine would here be on the front lines defending science against these strange speculative metaphysics of Dasein. But the reality turns out to be quite different.

In his well-known Two Dogmas of Empiricism, Quine goes on the attack against the logical positivists, an extreme group of empiricists who fundamentally believed that all truths can be *broken down into pieces* that end up being either analytic (such as mathematical proofs) or synthetic (such as scientific statements)²⁷. Both points of Quine's attack end up forcing us out of this

extreme reductionist view and into a position that forces us to embrace a sort of holism, in a very different sort of way than the traditional scientific reductionist view.

Quine's first point of attack is against a distinction that goes back to Kant: that truths are either analytic or synthetic:

1) Analytic sentences: propositions “grounded in meanings independently of matters of fact”²⁸ - such as “all bachelors are unmarried”, which are supposedly able to speak for themselves in complete isolation, like mathematical truths.

2) Synthetic truths: propositions that we must go out into the world to find out about – sentences such as “bachelors are lonely people“. These are the sorts of truths uncovered by empiricism (science).

Quine attacks this distinction by explaining that it's impossible to even explain how analytic sentences have meaning in isolation. For instance, how do we know that “bachelor” is equivalent to “unmarried man” - don't we have to consult a dictionary or have some prior knowledge to make such a statement? We also must have some idea of synonymy *beforehand*, to understand the very meaning behind something like “A is the same as - is synonymous with - B” in order to understand a sentence such as “all bachelors are unmarried”.

It turns out that “pure” analytic sentences are not so pure after all: in every case it's impossible to understand the sentence in isolation, without appealing to some wider body of knowledge. In each case, as Heidegger might say, there is *always-already an idea of synonymy*, and for that language speaker, always-already an understanding of the meaning of “bachelor” and “unmarried”.

The result of Quine's discussion is that it seems there is no distinction between analytic and synthetic propositions at all: there actually appear to be no true analytic sentences that can “stand on their own”.

The second prong of Quine's attack is more explicitly against reductionism in general, which is somewhat a continuation of his first attack. Where Quine was previously attacking isolated analytic sentences as incomprehensible, he also says it makes no sense to talk about synthetic statements being meaningful by themselves. No, observation sentences, of science and otherwise, only have meaning in relation to a larger body of observation sentences, an entire *web of belief*. And it turns out that one observation sentence might challenge the whole web of belief and force some beliefs to be rejected, while in other cases supporting other beliefs.

Each observation sentence affects the whole web of belief. Each observation sentence *has meaning only in relation to the whole web of belief*.

This should seem very similar to what we discussed previously in regards to Heidegger's hermeneutic circle approach, and his resistance to talking about any of the existentials by themselves, in isolation from the others. Just as Quine argued that one observation sentence by itself has no meaning, but only meaning in relation to the whole web of belief, so too does Heidegger argue that it's inappropriate to speak of the existentials of Dasein without understanding its activity, its being, in the whole of Dasein. That is to say, the whole hermeneutic circle approach.

Also, as it turns out, in the wake of Quine's attack on logical positivism, it once again becomes useful to look towards metaphysics, something science in general seems to try to shy away from. Where logical positivists were trying to shut the door on all metaphysics, Quine now puts his foot in the door, leaving open the possibility to talk about metaphysics:

“The same normativity which leads Quine to attack logical positivism ... encourages a more modest metaphysical attitude ... it would seem sensible to be liberal about the possibilities of speculative metaphysics. Quine blurs the boundary between speculative metaphysics and natural science...”²⁹

Leaving open the possibility for metaphysics is of course crucial, as all of Heidegger's philosophy starts with metaphysics: the fundamental ontology of Dasein. Yet of course Quine is still coming from perspective of the vastly different scientific different world, and would definitely not agree that philosophy should start with metaphysics like Heidegger does.

In a way, Heidegger has his own view about how we must approach philosophy, but he accommodates science and allows it to be useful and to exist in its own world as a regional ontology. And Quine, though coming from a scientific background, has his own view about how we must approach philosophy, his own argument moderates the extreme scientific view of the logical positivists and actually ends up accommodating metaphysics, keeping the door open for speculative metaphysics such as Heidegger's.

- 1 In particular I want to compare the Quine of Two Dogmas of Empiricism and the Heidegger of Being and Time.
- 2 "In more general terms, I strive for clarity and brevity. It happens so often that by going over something and making it shorter I improve it." (W.V. Quine: Perspectives on Logic, Science and Philosophy, The Harvard Review of Philosophy, Spring 1994 p. 56)
- 3 "I think of philosophy as continuous with science, but philosophy differs by degree in various respects. Philosophy undertakes to analyze the general, basic concepts of science - the sort of concepts the practicing scientist will typically take for granted. These are such basic notions as truth, existence, and necessity. Also, philosophy investigates questions of evidence for science - that's epistemology." (W.V. Quine: Perspectives on Logic, Science and Philosophy, The Harvard Review of Philosophy, Spring 1994 p. 47)
- 4 "...I think 'tying up loose ends' [of science] is a good way of condensing philosophy's purpose." (W.V. Quine: Perspectives on Logic, Science and Philosophy, The Harvard Review of Philosophy, Spring 1994 p. 48)
- 5 Quine, Web of Belief pg 25
- 6 For instance, this object-in-the-world is basically the Kantian thing-in-itself, which we can only have indirect knowledge of.
- 7 "Philosophy has been pursued for many centuries by the best minds, and yet everything in it is still disputed and hence doubtful; and I wasn't so arrogant as to hope to achieve more in philosophy than others had done. Considering how many different opinions learned men may maintain on a single question - where at most one can be true - I regarded everything that was merely probable as being near enough to false." (Descartes, Discourse on Method)
- 8 Two Dogmas of Empiricism, The Philosophical Review, Vol. 60, No. 1, Jan, 1951, pg. 35
- 9 "At its best, it seems that American analytic philosophy tends toward a radically clear, taut style that one sees particularly in both your work and Nelson Goodman's. It reflects a very different spirit from the German philosophical prose of someone like Heidegger." (W.V. Quine: Perspectives on Logic, Science and Philosophy, The Harvard Review of Philosophy, Spring 1994 p. 56)
- 10 "[Richard Rorty's position in Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature] shows a bit of the anti-scientific bias that is more extreme in people like Derrida and Heidegger". The Harvard Review of Philosophy, Spring 1994 p. 57
- 11 "The existential analytic of Dasein comes before any psychology or anthropology, and certainly before any biology". (Heidegger, H. 45 Being and Time).
- 12 These other disciplines, such as the various sciences, are in Heidegger's terms called *regional ontologies*, and are all fine and good, but these regional ontologies must be preceded by a proper understanding first laid down in a fundamental ontology of Dasein, which is Heidegger's task in Being and Time.
- 13 Heidegger H. 46, Being and Time
- 14 Heidegger H. 44, Being and Time
- 15 "Here we are seeking that which one inquires into when one asks the question 'Who?' By a phenomenological demonstration(1) we shall determine who is in the mode of Dasein's average everydayness." (Heidegger H. 53 Being and Time)
- 16 "For Scheler, the person is never to be thought of as a Thing or a substance; the person 'is rather the unity of living-through [Er-lebens] which is immediately experienced in and with our Experiences—not a Thing merely thought of behind and outside what is immediately Experienced'." (Heidegger H. 47 Being and Time) Also see H. 48
- 17 H. 48
- 18 For Heidegger, it's perfectly fine to retain the subject-object distinction in regional ontologies such as science, where such terminology is useful in terms of that particular regional ontology.
- 19 "We shall not get a genuine knowledge of essences simply by the syncretistic activity of universal comparison and classification." (Heidegger H. 52 Being and Time)
- 20 "...[man's Being] is not something we can simply compute by adding together those kinds of Being which body, soul, and spirit respectively possess - kinds of Being whose nature has not as yet been determined." (Heidegger H. 49 Being and Time)
- 21 "So if one is to put various pictures of the world in order, one must have an explicit idea of the world as such. And if the 'world' itself is something constitutive for Dasein, one must have an insight into Dasein's basic structures in order to treat the world-phenomenon conceptually." (Heidegger H. 52 Being and Time). Also "In interpreting these entities within-the-world, however, we have always 'presupposed' the world. Even if we join them together, we still do not get anything like the 'world' as their sum." (H. 72)
- 22 "But while Being-in-the-world cannot be broken up into contents which may be pieced together, this does not prevent it from having several constitutive items in its structure." (Heidegger H. 53 Being and Time)
- 23 (Heidegger H. 54 Being and Time)
- 24 "But subject and Object do not coincide with Dasein and the world." (Heidegger H. 60 Being and Time)
- 25 As in the case of another existential, being-with: "Being-with is such that the disclosedness of the Dasein-with of Others belongs to it; this means that because Dasein's Being is Being-with, its understanding of Being already implies the understanding of Others. This understanding, like any understanding, is not an acquaintance derived from knowledge about them, but a primordially existential kind of Being, which, more than anything else, makes such knowledge and acquaint-

tance possible.” (Heidegger H. 124 Being and Time)

- 26 “From Heidegger’s point of view, the hermeneutical circle is not a method, rather, it is the existential character of human understanding, so, he describes the circle in terms of an existential grounding. The hermeneutical circle is the existential condition of human understanding and is an essential attribute of Dasein’s knowledge. Thus the circle of understanding is not a methodological circle, making it unnecessary for us at the end of the process of interpretation, but it describes an element of the ontological structure of understanding. An understanding is fundamentally circular. Heidegger appeals to the hermeneutical circle in order to express the existential fore- structure of Dasein - according to his view, understanding ontologically occurs in a circular manner. The world of Dasein is the mental horizon of Dasein that consists of its presuppositions, expectations, attitudes and beliefs.” (The Hermeneutical Reflections of Heidegger, Ahmad Vaezi, Transcendent Philosophy, Volume 3, Number 3, September 2002)
- 27 For synthetic truths, the empiricists believes in the verification theory of meaning, roughly the belief that "...every meaningful statement is held to be translatable into a statement (true or false) about immediate experience.” (Two Dogmas of Empiricism, The Philosophical Review, Vol. 60, No. 1, Jan, 1951, pg. 36)
- 28 Two Dogmas of Empiricism, The Philosophical Review, Vol. 60, No. 1, Jan, 1951, pg. 20
- 29 Heidegger and Quine on the (Ir)relevance of Logic For Philosophy, A House Divided, pg. 179