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Why Wrestle with Being and Time? A Justification of Heidegger's Methodology of Obscurantism and Obfuscation

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Abstract

It seems that complaints about Heidegger's style of writing are common fare in secondary literature and the classroom. This paper argues that both Heidegger's obtuseness and obscurantism work as methodological devices for effectively communicating and demonstrating his thought. By obfuscating, he forces breakdowns, which pulls the reader out of her ready-to-hand mode of reading/revealing, which otherwise threatens to fall into comprehending via reference from one's average everydayness. By being obscure in some passages where taking the meaning in multiple ways will not interfere with the main points being made, Heidegger enables his students to form personal (existentiell) interpretations, allowing for the possibility of authenticity. Therefore, one of the most hated aspects of B&T is actually the demonstrative reification of its key concepts. Whether purposeful or not on the part of Heidegger, this methodology proves essential for understanding his thought.

Introduction: Why wrestle with *Being and Time*?

Many classes, lectures, or books on Heidegger's work will, in their introductory remarks, apologize for his writing style. These apologies typically take the form of a disclaimer. This paper proposes an apology as well, but in the rarer and more literal sense of the word: a defense.¹

Although Heidegger is notorious for his infuriating writing style, he remains one of the most influential thinkers of the 20th century. Many students turn to *Being and Time*

¹ Oxford English Dictionary: "The pleading off from a charge or imputation, whether expressed, implied, or only conceived as possible; defence of a person, or vindication of an institution, etc., from accusation or aspersion."

(B&T)² at some point in their studies to only return perplexed, if not angry. While frustration is no doubt merited, the challenge of undertaking such a project is guaranteed to be worthwhile for many reasons, a few of which will be discussed in this introduction.

Known for opening new dimensions of thought in its own right, B&T also works as a gateway to some of the most important thinkers of the 20th Century. However, recent controversies over Heidegger's Nazi affiliations raise healthy concerns that may deter some students from seriously grappling with B&T. It is therefore important to point to the fact that Heidegger's own moral deficiencies catalyzed those ethical thinkers to follow, who themselves, as Heidegger's most penetrating and insightful critics, cannot be understood without first knowing to what it is they are responding to. As Levinas said, "Even if one frees oneself from the systematic rigors of [Heidegger's] thought, one remains marked by the very style of [B&T's] analyses, by the 'cardinal points' [i.e. finitude, being-there, being-toward-death, etc.] to which the 'existential analytic' refers."³ If one has an interest in thinkers such as Levinas, Arendt, Jonas, Marcuse, Derrida, Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty, Sartre, or Foucault, just to name a few, it must be realized that Heidegger acts as the gatekeeper to their thought. As Iain Thomson has so convincingly argued concerning Levinas,⁴ to bypass B&T results in a fundamental impairment to reading those it influenced.

Why does Heidegger stand as the gatekeeper to these thinkers? What is it about his thought that made so many of his students' contributions to their various fields so influential? I will be arguing that the process of studying Heidegger itself acts as a mental reconfiguration that provides access to entirely revolutionary orientations of one's own way of being-in-the-world; in other words, instead of cluttering one's thoughts with additional knowledge to be heaped upon or against pre-existing assumptions, the study of B&T *clears* a region for authentic thinking in a less obstructed light.⁵ Even when, with someone like Foucault, the influence is less obvious, one can reasonably doubt that his work would have provided such a novel perspective if not for Heidegger's clearing. Indeed, near the end of his life Foucault gave credit to Heidegger as always being his "essential philosopher."⁶

² Although much of what will be argued in this paper can and probably does apply to his later work, this paper focuses on B&T as the essential Heidegger text.

³ Levinas, Emmanuel. *Ethics and Infinity*, Richard A. Cohen. (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 41.

⁴ Thomson, Iain. "Rethinking Levinas on Heidegger on Death," *The Harvard Review of Philosophy*, Vol. XVI (Fall 2009), pp. 23-43.

⁵ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie and Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 167.

⁶ Elden, Stuart. *Mapping the Present: Heidegger, Foucault and the Project of a Spatial History*. (Bloomsbury Academic: 2002) 1.

One might wonder why they cannot just derive the basic gist of B&T from a secondhand account? This paper will show why only a firsthand reading can truly disclose Heidegger's key insights. B&T does not have pieces of information to dump into the mind of its readers; it is an activity that must be undergone for understanding. The means by which Heidegger conveys ideas is itself the process that reveals his key insights to be what they are. My thesis is that without being both obscure and obtuse⁷ B&T would have only been able to *tell* what it meant, but with its style as it is, the essential insights are shown firsthand. In other words, if my thesis is correct, then to be spoon fed Heidegger's conclusions by a secondary source alone will not provide a sufficient demonstration of how his phenomenology maps to reality, but will instead need to be taken on faith (a leap many will understandably not be willing to take).

Therefore, this paper is not meant to be a secondary source that explains B&T, but rather a primary defense of its methodology, meant only to encourage and redirect the reader back to the project at hand. Rather than arguing about the validity of any given claim made by Heidegger, therefore, the point of this paper is to show that his style *works*, in a sense, to prove the overarching ideas put forward in B&T.

Average everydayness, and the readiness-to-hand of language

“Language is the house of Being. In its home human beings dwell.”⁸

A central accomplishment by Heidegger in B&T is in how he illuminates the way that average everydayness flattens/restricts (hitherto 'levels') Dasein's possible ways of being in the world, alienating us from the way things actually are or can be. Language, and the preontological⁹ interpretations that come with it, forms the structure of this average everydayness.¹⁰

Heidegger spends half of chapter three in B&T establishing that Dasein's world¹¹ is a relational totality of *significance*, which is the very structure of Dasein's world.¹² We are so absorbed in our worlds that significance itself is always familiar to us (which

⁷ Heidegger is much more obtuse (difficult) than obscure (ambiguous). Indeed, most obscurities are due to translation or plays on words that don't necessarily detract from what is being presented.

⁸ Heidegger, Martin. *Pathmarks: Letter on "Humanism."* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). 239.

⁹ In this case meaning the presuppositional understanding of the Being of beings.

¹⁰ Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie and Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 213.

¹¹ When we speak of “world” here, we will be referring to the worlds of our understanding, practical involvements, care and concern (otherwise, if we mean the world as is typically thought, we will put it in quotes as Heidegger does (B&T p. 93): ‘world’).

¹² *Ibid.*, 120

means its presence is least obvious¹³); it is by this familiarity alone that we are able to understand and interpret in the first place. “Upon these [significations which Dasein discloses], in turn, is founded the Being of words and of language.”¹⁴

Therefore, Dasein’s house of being is language, and language’s being is founded on significations which are disclosed by Dasein in the first place. Dasein discloses worlds, and “Dasein is its world existingly.”¹⁵ This means that we *world* as a verb: “Dasein is its disclosedness.”¹⁶ All of this is to say that language, and our interpretations/disclosures of the world are absolutely fundamental to Dasein.

As empowering as this may at first sound, the meaning brought to light by these facts takes us for a darker turn. For language, and the prediscovered interpretations it is founded on, is not something any single Dasein creates for itself; for it is, in essence, a very public thing. We do not choose our first language, historic position (with its consequential preontological understanding), nor the conceptual frameworks we have found ourselves thrown into.

The meaning signified by language deteriorates over time with use, and is then built upon less than carefully, with little to no consideration of its origins or to the phenomena with which it was originally concerned.¹⁷ Heidegger thinks this diminution of language leads to a leveling in Dasein’s possibilities for being¹⁸, and an inevitably widening separation from what *is*.¹⁹ This is why Heidegger’s method is hermeneutics grounded in phenomenology (i.e. reviving/reclaiming meaning through rigorous and careful interpretation with special attention given to both the development of language through history and its relation to the phenomena itself under question).

Average everydayness situates Dasein in the world. Dasein’s primary mode of dealing with entities in the world is ready-to-hand, while its derivative mode of encounter is present-at-hand.²⁰ When Dasein engages entities as ready-to-hand, Dasein is absorbed

¹³ Ibid., 69. “That which is ontically closest and well known, is onto-logically the farthest and not known at all ; and its ontological signification is constantly overlooked.”

¹⁴ Ibid., 121

¹⁵ Ibid., 416

¹⁶ Ibid., 171

¹⁷ Ibid., 213. “The fact that something has been said groundlessly, and then gets passed along in further retelling, amounts to perverting the act of disclosing into an act of closing off. For what is said is always understood proximally as ‘saying’ something—that is, an uncovering of something. Thus, by its very nature, idle talk is a closing-off, since to go back to the ground of what is talked about is something which it *leaves undone*.”

¹⁸ Ways of being for Dasein encompass both thought and action, a division Heidegger avoids most of the time, but that I mention for the sake of clarity.

¹⁹ Ibid., 165. “By publicness everything gets obscured, and what has thus been covered up gets passed off as something familiar and accessible to everyone.”

²⁰ Ibid., 121

in the relational continuum of its projects and world of concern. When Dasein encounters entities as present-at-hand they are treated as isolated and divisible objects opposed to an inquiring subject. Subsequently, presence-at-hand is the mode through which objects are encountered in scientific and logical analyses. Reductive analyses of this type, which subject “the manifold to tabulation” through systematic categorization and comparison, can reveal *aspects* of an object’s constitution, but Heidegger argues this form of understanding is prone to cover up understanding of the more fundamental ready-to-hand character of beings.²¹ For example, does one come to a better understanding of a bicycle’s meaning by reading its user’s manual, or by getting on and riding it? The former way of understanding is the present-at-hand mode of being, whereas the latter, being engaged with the bicycle riding activity itself, is the ready-to-hand.

Breakdowns

Throughout one’s average everyday engagements one typically remains in the mode of readiness-to-hand unless there is a breakdown. For example, a student engages her bicycle as ready-to-hand as she rides from school to work. While riding, the individual parts of the bicycle are of no immediate concern so long as the bicycle is functioning properly. Indeed, the bicycle is acting as a prosthetic, meaning that at its best it functions in the background. If the chain slips off and jams, then the bike stops functioning as ready-to-hand and becomes unready-to-hand, which means it poses a problem. Thrown off track and out of the ready-to-hand, she is now forced to either fix the bike or jog to work.

When such a breakdown occurs and one is thrown out of the ready-to-hand, this is typically when one goes into the present-at-hand mode of analysis.²² With our cyclist, for example, if she decides to fix the chain, then she will have to first pull out of the engaged absorption in the world of her concern to assess the immediate situation. Doing so involves analyzing the bicycle as a distinct object made up of divisible parts, taking into consideration how the pieces relate, zeroing in on the problem's source, and then working it out until the chain is back on track. In short, breakdowns light up problems that, if attended to, allow us to get back on our way.

Remember that we find ourselves thrown into a world of existing language and interpretations. The interpretations of the They²³ forms the bedrock of assumptions upon which all subsequent analysis or theorizing arises (the ‘preontological,’ which is

²¹ Ibid., 77

²² Ibid., 103. “Anything which is un-ready-to-hand... enables us to see the obstinacy of that with which we must concern ourselves [before we can] do anything else.”

²³ For our purposes, one can think of the “They” as any given person’s cultural norms/standards/average possibilities.

basically one's implicit understanding of being, mediating experience before theory has been thought). This bedrock of assumptions is the accrued sediment of inferred meaning which we find ourselves thrown into and under before we have ever considered the possible contingencies and theory-laden-meanings entailed by our historic position in the world. This structures our average everydayness, which is primarily ready-to-hand.

What does this all have to do with the actual style of writing Heidegger utilizes?

Because this bedrock laid by language structures our average everyday way of being in the world, and therefore our possibilities for interpreting phenomena, the need to get outside of language is made clear. But language cannot be transcended, and is prone to being ready-to-hand. Like with a prosthetic operating at its best, language falls to the background of our conscious life by means of habituated familiarity. Even when some words fail us, we analyze their breakdown with language. Language is, therefore, akin to a bicycle we cannot get off.

If language is a circle from which we cannot be extricated, and with which we constantly fall back into a ready-to-hand relationship, then what is the best method for arriving at a freer relationship with it? One possible way is to carefully work from within the circle of language to develop a more sophisticated standpoint from which to gain perspective and insight; but doing so efficiently requires the best-possible severing from our current standpoint's entanglements, or else all will be self-referential to our imbedded preontological understanding.

This is where Heidegger comes in. With his infamously tedious reclamation and appropriation of language, he carefully tends to the construction of a hermeneutic circle that will give us a better understanding of the phenomena with which language is concerned.

To summarize thus far: average everydayness is primarily experienced in the mode of readiness-to-hand, with presence-at-hand being a secondary possible mode of encounter when breakdowns occur. Therefore, in order to get outside the entrapments of average everydayness and its thinking, which is habitually ready-to-hand, Heidegger forces breakdowns to occur.

To be ushered into a hermeneutic circle dealing with fundamental ontology is no easy task; it is similar to acquiring a new language, only with a dramatic difference: Whereas in acquiring a foreign tongue we relate the alien words to our current understanding, Heidegger's hermeneutic circle requires our being continuously knocked off course whenever we try too hastily to relate to our preconceived notions or revert to standard linguistic forms. Conventional language allows what is being given to be conveyed without the theoretic edifices behind the words themselves being brought out in the

open. By consistently breaking these conventions, Heidegger forces language to stop in its tracks—forcing us off track. Like a Zen master's Keisaku to the distracted novice's back²⁴, Heidegger's language is a baseball bat to the stained glass windows of our average everydayness.

Forcing breakdowns forces us to agonizingly read what is being said as present-at-hand over and over again until these alien concepts and ways of thinking can become familiar. The feeling of confusion and irritation when being tripped by an obtuse turn of phrase is the feeling of a breakdown occurring: being-forced-from-average-everydayness. Heidegger teaches stepping out of average everydayness and orienting oneself into his hermeneutic circle like a swimming instructor who throws her student into the deep end of the pool to either drown or intuitively find their bearings.

Heidegger's obfuscation is used to breakdown our average everyday mode of reading. His obscurity, when used, is most often wordplay. These flirtatious plays on words are complicated through translation, and it is regrettable so much nuance is lost for those of us restricted to the English translation. Important to remember is that the obscurities are never fundamentally important to the general thrust of his work. Heideggerian scholarship divides on interpretations about many things, but typically not the essential ideas.

Furthermore, authenticity as Heidegger sees it has to do heavily with interpretation. We fundamentally begin with the leveled interpretations of the They as our possible operating assumptions. B&T takes on the task of shedding light on Dasein's universal existential structures (existentials), as well as on the existential structures which can be personally modified for a more authentic existence (existentiells).²⁵ While he clearly wants us to get his 'general thrust,' I suggest that purposeful obscurantism may have been dealt in any place where multiple interpretations (a) are not harmful to the overall point being made, and (b) allow one to develop their own way of thinking about the matter at hand, so as to make it impossible for the pupil to literally subsume all of Heidegger's thought. In this way, being forced to interpret is being forced into authenticity. If true, then it should be of little surprise that so many of his students proved to be original and influential thinkers in their own right.

In summary

We all find ourselves thrown into average everydayness, which is itself situated in language which we habitually use as ready-to-hand. Heidegger's methodology throws us out of this average everyday understanding repeatedly. Being thrown out of our

²⁴ A 'Keisaku' is the stick used by Zen masters to swat their distracted or tired students back to awareness.

²⁵ Ibid., 168

average everydayness forces us to make *Being and Time* our most purposeful reading. Gaining anything from it requires that we truly commit.

Committing to this project yields the fruits promised by those who testify to its revolutionary nature. Or, perhaps better stated: undergoing the process of following Heidegger's thought eventually makes provides the distance needed to gain an entirely new perspective on both language and ontology itself. Because the hermeneutic circle is founded on phenomenology, this fresh outlook revolutionizes the way one engages one's world itself. But this does not mean one remains a Heideggerian forever after. Few of the students most influenced by Heidegger's work agreed with him on much, and many became his most insightful critics.

Although this entire paper has been a defense of obscurity and obtuseness in Heidegger's style, I do not mean to indorse obscurity or obtuseness *in general*. It seems apparent that Heidegger's style set off a trend, especially among certain French philosophers, of unnecessarily complex philosophical writing.²⁶ While aspects of my argument could be used in defense of, for instance, Foucault, Derrida, or Levinas, I believe the impact of these arguments would miss their mark if used for other thinkers. This is due specifically to the very phenomena Heidegger was grappling with. Average everydayness, readiness-to-hand of language, and forcing breakdowns to make the pupil contend with the ideas in a present-at-hand manner, are concepts repeatedly reified by Heidegger's very style. I make no claims about whether or not this style is necessary for revealing other phenomena. In fact, if anyone is getting any ideas about imitating this methodology, please, for the sake of your future readers, choose to write clearly.

²⁶ Springer, Mike. "Searle on Foucault and the Obscurantism in French Philosophy." Open Culture. July 1, 2013.
http://www.openculture.com/2013/07/jean_searle_on_foucault_and_the_obscurantism_in_french_philosophy.html.