

A CONFUSION OF CATEGORIES: WITTGENSTEIN'S KIERKEGAARDIAN ARGUMENT AGAINST HEIDEGGER

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Abstract

A mysterious remark to Friedrich Waismann on 30 December 1929 marks the only occasion where Wittgenstein refers to both Heidegger and Kierkegaard. Yet although this has generated much controversy, little attention has been paid to the charge of nonsense that Wittgenstein here appears to bring against Heidegger; thus, the supporting argument that may be latent has not been unearthed. Through analysis of this remark, Wittgenstein's arguments in the *Tractatus* and 'A Lecture on Ethics', and Heidegger's account of anxiety (*Angst*) in *Being and Time*, I argue that we can extract an argument against the central question of Heidegger's philosophy: the question of being. To understand this, I examine the Kierkegaardian ideas employed by Wittgenstein and Heidegger and attempt to show that this argument can be partly understood in Kierkegaardian terms. I further argue that examining what Heidegger means by 'being' (*Sein*) shows that Wittgenstein's argument does not meet its target.

Introduction

In the following remark made to Friedrich Waismann on 30 December 1929 we see the only occurrence in Wittgenstein's remarks of both Heidegger's and Kierkegaard's names (and the first of only two references to Heidegger¹):

To be sure, I can imagine what Heidegger means by being [*Sein*] and anxiety [*Angst*]. Man has the urge to run up against the limits of language. Think for example of the astonishment that anything exists. This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and

¹ The second was in December 1932 (Wittgenstein & Waismann, pp. 69-77).

there is no answer whatsoever. Anything we might say is *a priori* only nonsense. Nevertheless we run up against the limits of language. Kierkegaard also saw this running up against something and he even referred to it in a similar way (as running up against the paradox) (WWK, p. 68).²

This remark has generated much controversy.³ Little attention, however, has been paid to the charge of nonsense that Wittgenstein appears to bring against Heidegger. This is my central point of examination.

Anxiety and ‘the astonishment that anything exists’

After saying he “can imagine what Heidegger means by being and anxiety” (*ibid.*), Wittgenstein invites us to think of “the astonishment that anything exists” (*ibid.*). We might understand this as Wittgenstein’s characterisation of anxiety. Looking at how Heidegger describes anxiety, this looks like a possible characterisation.

Heidegger, following Kierkegaard, distinguishes between anxiety and fear (*Furcht*). For Kierkegaard, fear is focused, as it always refers to some definite object(s), whereas anxiety is unfocused fear, as it does not refer to specific object(s) in the world, but is brought about in the face of myself as a free being (CA, p. 42). For Heidegger, fear is always directed at entities within the world, whereas anxiety is Dasein’s state of mind brought about not by any entity within the world, but “in the face of” “*the world as such*” (BT, p. 230-1/H.186). This ‘disclosure’ or ‘disclosedness’ (*Erschlossenheit*) of ‘*the world as world*’ reveals to Dasein the true nature of its being: being-in-the-world (*In-der-Welt-Sein*) (BT, p. 232/H.187, cf. p. 230/H.186). In anxiety Dasein is hence “brought before itself and becomes disclosed to itself” (BT, p. 225/H.180), because anxiety “bring[s] Dasein face to face with its world as world, and thus...face to face with itself as Being-in-the-world” (BT, p. 233/H.187). Again, following Kierkegaard, for Heidegger anxiety is brought about through Dasein’s confrontation with *itself* (as being-in-the-world). Moreover, Heidegger connects anxiety with freedom: the disclosure in anxiety awakens Dasein to its possibilities – that its courses of action are not dictated by others.

² My translation.

³ In the debate concerning this remark, see Cooper 1997, Conant 2001, Hacker 2003 and Richter 2007.

Anxiety, for Heidegger, like Kierkegaard, thus discloses an important aspect of the human condition and calls upon the subject to take up the issue of their existence. For Heidegger, to take up this issue is for Dasein to raise the question of being (cf. BT, p. 32/H.12). This is for Dasein to reach its *authentic* (*eigentlich*) mode of being. Through the disclosure in anxiety Dasein is able to raise this question. Anxiety, therefore, acts as a catalyst for Dasein's raising the question of being, clearing the path for authenticity (*Eigentlichkeit*).

The astonishment that anything exists is brought about not by phenomena *within* the world – what Heidegger calls ‘ontic’ phenomena – but by the existence *of* the world – ‘the world as such’. Such astonishment is a response not to anything ontic, but to the *ontological*. To draw on a *Tractarian* distinction, it is a response not to *how* the world is, but *that* it is (TLP, §6.44). Accordingly, if Wittgenstein is seeking to characterise anxiety by inviting us to think of the astonishment that anything exists, this seems like a possible characterisation.⁴

An Unanswerable Question

The passage just drawn upon from the *Tractatus* begins to illuminate the reasons why Wittgenstein claims “This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question” and “Anything we might say is *a priori* only nonsense”. The full passage reads:

It is not *how* things are in the world that is mystical, but *that* it exists (*ibid.*).

That the world exists was held by the early Wittgenstein to lie in the domain of ‘the mystical’ (*das Mystische*): where things cannot be said but only shown. In reaching the mystical, we reach the limits of language. The proposition ‘The world exists’ is nonsense because it fails to meet with the *Tractarian* bipolarity condition: for propositions to make sense, they must be capable of being true or false.

The reasons for this are made clear in Wittgenstein's ‘Lecture on Ethics’, given only a month before the remark on Heidegger. Wittgenstein describes his experience of “*wonder at the existence of the world*”, and the inclination “to use such phrases as ‘how extraordinary that anything should exist’” (LE, p. 41). He argues that “the verbal

⁴ I am not claiming that Wittgenstein had Heidegger in mind in the *Tractatus*.

expression which we give to such experiences is nonsense” because we wonder at something we cannot conceive to not be the case, and “To say ‘I wonder at such and such being the case’ has only sense if I can imagine it not to be the case” (*ibid.*). According to Wittgenstein, for an expression of wonder at the existence of something to make sense, we need to be able to conceive of the non-existence of the object of wonder. As he puts it: “I could of course wonder at the world round me being as it is”, “But it is nonsense to say that I wonder at the existence of the world, because I cannot imagine it not existing” (LE, pp. 41-2).⁵ It makes sense to express wonder at *how* the world is – the ontic, but it is nonsense to express wonder *in the face of the world as such* – that the world is – the ontological.

It is nonsense because we cannot deny the existence of the world, since we cannot imagine its negation – what we might call ‘nothingness’: the complete non-existence of absolutely everything.⁶ We can imagine the non-existence of ontic phenomena so long as we retain *something* that we imagine; we can perhaps even imagine away the contents of the universe to the point where we imagine the universe as only a vacuum: a blank, black void consisting only of space and time. We cannot, however, go the further step and imagine the complete non-existence of *everything*. For imagining is forming a mental image of something: something must *be imagined* for us *to imagine* in the first place. If a mental image cannot in principle be formed, then it makes no sense to speak of ‘imagining’. One could *try* to imagine nothingness (just as one could try to imagine a round square), but this will always end in failure, because, as Bede Rundle points out, to ‘imagine nothing’ is in fact to fail to imagine, to not imagine at all (Rundle 2007, p. 111). The very act of imagining cancels out the possibility of imagining nothingness; when we attempt to imagine ‘nothing’ we are always left with *something* (*ibid.* p. 110). Nothingness is inconceivable, therefore, because it is logically impossible to imagine. ‘Imagining nothingness’ is, therefore, contradictory; it is to try and conceive of the inconceivable. As Rundle concludes, “There is just no alternative to being” (*ibid.* p. 112).

What is expressed by the negation of the proposition ‘The world exists’ is, therefore, inconceivable. The inconceivable is beyond the

⁵ Wittgenstein also discusses this with Waismann in January 1930 (WWK, 77, 93). Norman Malcolm also writes “I believe that a certain feeling of amazement that *anything should exist at all*, was sometimes experienced by Wittgenstein, not only during the *Tractatus* period, but also when I knew him” (Malcolm 2001, pp. 58-9).

⁶ I will use ‘nothingness’ in this way throughout.

limits of thought; and, for the early Wittgenstein, the limits of thought *are* the limits of language (TLP, p. 3). Therefore, the proposition ‘The world exists’, given by the that-clause in §6.44, doesn’t meet with the bipolarity condition, since its negation goes beyond the limits of language; so the proposition is nonsense.

Given that this expression of wonder is nonsense, it cannot be expressed in the form of a question: for where something cannot be said, questions cease to make sense, as Wittgenstein states:

When the answer cannot be put into words, neither can the question be put into words.

[...]

If a question can be framed at all, it is also *possible* to answer it.

(TLP, §6.5)

[A] question exists...only where an answer exists, and an answer only where something *can be said*.

(TLP, §6.51)

For Wittgenstein, it makes no sense to raise certain questions concerning the existence of the world because they go beyond the limits of language. For example, the question ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’: if ‘nothing’ here is taken to mean *nothingness*, this question may demand that we conceive of the inconceivable. In which case, the question would be nonsense.⁷

When we consider, in light of these arguments, the relationship Heidegger draws between anxiety and the question of being, if Wittgenstein seeks to characterise anxiety as the astonishment that anything exists, we see a possible reason for his claim that “This astonishment cannot be expressed in the form of a question, and there is no answer whatsoever”. What Wittgenstein may have in mind is Heidegger’s question of being. We might understand Wittgenstein as arguing that the question of being is nonsense because it is the attempt to say what can only be shown: the attempt to express an experience that lies in the domain of the mystical as a question. For Wittgenstein, in anxiety we run up against the limits of language, so the practice that should perhaps be adopted is that recommended in the *Tractatus*: silence (TLP, §7). This seems to be the opposite to what Heidegger prescribes,

⁷ I discuss this at greater length in Beale 2010*b*.

since he claims that in anxiety we ought to raise the question of being, in order to reach authenticity.

A Confusion of Categories

Wittgenstein also compares his view on the limits of language to Kierkegaard's central category: paradox. The paradox, for Kierkegaard, is that which reason cannot accept – that which cannot be thought. To run up against paradox is for reason to reach its limit – what Kierkegaard calls the 'Unknown': "the limit to which the Reason repeatedly comes" (PF, p. 35).⁸ To attempt to grasp the paradox with reason is what Kierkegaard calls a confusion of categories,⁹ since it is ungraspable by reason, but graspable through faith. What is required in the face of paradox is what Kierkegaard calls 'a leap of faith'. The paradox is, for example, Christ's incarnation: Christ as *both* man and God (this is Kierkegaard's most important paradox – what he calls the 'absolute paradox').

We run up against the limits of thought, for Kierkegaard, in running up against paradox, and for Wittgenstein, in running up against the limits of language. This suggests a reason for Wittgenstein's comparison between the limits of language and paradox.

Later in 'A Lecture on Ethics' Wittgenstein employs a Kierkegaardian category distinction, and appears to further draw upon Kierkegaard's notion of paradox. Following his argument concerning wonder at the existence of the world, Wittgenstein discusses two experiences he considers to be of a similar kind: 'the experience of feeling *absolutely* safe' – "the state of mind in which one is inclined to say 'I am safe, nothing can injure me whatever happens'" (LE, p. 41), and the experience 'of feeling guilty', "described by the phrase that God disapproves of our conduct" (*ibid.* p. 42). He then says:

[T]he three experiences which I have mentioned to you... seem to those who have experienced them, for instance to me, to have in some sense an intrinsic, absolute value. But when I say they are experiences, surely,

⁸ Waismann footnotes this quote to Wittgenstein's 1929 remark (WWK, 68).

⁹ See, for example, Kierkegaard's *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, p. 31. Genia Schönbaumsfeld discusses this in an excellent account of Kierkegaard's influence on Wittgenstein and the affinities between their conceptions of philosophy and religious belief (Schönbaumsfeld 2007, p. 35). For a critical assessment of Schönbaumsfeld's arguments, see Beale 2011.

they are facts; they have taken place then and there, lasted a certain definite time and consequently are describable. And so from what I have said...I must admit it is nonsense to say that they have absolute value. And I will make my point still more acute by saying ‘It is the paradox that an experience, a fact, should seem to have supernatural value.’ (*ibid.* p. 43)

‘It is the paradox’ is, as Genia Schönbaumsfeld notes, ‘a very Kierkegaardian turn of phrase’ (Schönbaumsfeld 2007, p. 24, *fn.* 62). Moreover, the idea that an experience – what Wittgenstein calls in *Tractarian* style a ‘fact’ – could have supernatural value is the kind of phenomenon that could fall under the Kierkegaardian rubric of paradox. A fact is, as Wittgenstein says, ‘describable’, meaning that it lies within the domain of language. The supernatural, as that which is paradoxical, lies beyond the limits of thought, and so beyond the limits of language. This explains why “‘It is the paradox that an experience, a fact, should seem to have supernatural value’.”

The discussion after this also carries a Kierkegaardian tone. Wittgenstein argues that if we witnessed an extraordinary event – to use his example, a case where ‘one of you suddenly grew a lion’s head and began to roar’ – we face two mutually exclusive ways of seeing this: either as a miracle, or something to be explained scientifically (LE, p. 43). If we were to fetch a doctor and have the zoomorphized person vivisected, we would not see this as something miraculous:

For it is clear that when we look at it in this way everything miraculous has disappeared; unless what we mean by this term [‘miracle’] is merely that a fact has not yet been explained by science which again means that we have hitherto failed to group this fact with others in a scientific system. This shows that it is absurd to say ‘Science has proved that there are no miracles.’ The truth is that the scientific way of looking at a fact is not the way to look at it as a miracle. (*ibid.*)

The miraculous, for Kierkegaard, is the paradoxical.¹⁰ Only what lies within the domain of reason can be scientifically investigated. Since the miraculous is beyond these limits, it is not subject to scientific investigation. It would, therefore, be a confusion of categories to try and scientifically investigate the paradoxical. It may be this Kierkegaardian category distinction that Wittgenstein draws on here.

¹⁰ See, for example, *Philosophical Fragments*: ‘the Paradox is the Miracle!’ (PF, p. 42).

The pertinence of this to the argument against Heidegger becomes clear in the sentence immediately after:

And I will now describe the experience of wondering at the existence of the world by saying: it is the experience of seeing the world as a miracle. (*ibid.*)

The experience of wonder at the existence of the world, described as the experience of a miracle, is the experience of *paradox*: hitting the limits of thought (and thus, for Wittgenstein, language), since we wonder at something we cannot conceive to not be the case. In expressing this wonder as a question we run up against the limits of language. This may be precisely how Wittgenstein views Heidegger's question of being. Given that Wittgenstein sees the wonder that anything exists as the experience of a miracle, if he indeed characterises anxiety in this way, and sees the question of being as Heidegger's attempt to express this as a question, then he may see Heidegger's raising and addressing this question as akin to the scientific examination of a miracle – a confusion. His argument may be that to raise and address the question of being is like asking for a scientific explanation of a miracle: it is to attempt to push reason into the Unknown, or to say what can only be shown.

Responding to Wittgenstein

The crux of Wittgenstein's argument is *conceivability*: that the question of being, in asking about being – the existence of the world – demands that we conceive of the inconceivable, and is therefore nonsense (given that the limits of language are the limits of thought). It is not clear, however, whether this finds a target in Heidegger's question of being. As stated, a question that this argument may show to be nonsense is the question 'Why is there something rather than nothing?' To be sure, this question is clearly germane to Heidegger's philosophy: it appears on numerous occasions, and at some points Heidegger even appears to suggest that this *is* the question of being.¹¹ However, I will argue that even if we can understand Heidegger's question in this way, it still does not fall prey to Wittgenstein's argument, because the question of being

¹¹ See, for example, *What is Metaphysics?* (Heidegger 1998) and *Introduction to Metaphysics* (Heidegger 2000). Stephen Mulhall has recently argued that the question of why there is something rather than nothing can be understood as a *thematization* of the question of being (Mulhall 2009).

does not demand we conceive of the inconceivable. This is illustrated when we look at what Heidegger means by ‘being’ (*Sein*).

In examining what Heidegger means by ‘being’, one of the most elucidatory passages in *Being and Time* is the following:

In the question which we are to work out, *what is asked about* is Being – that which determines entities as entities, that on the basis of which [*woraufhin*] entities are already understood... (pp. 25-6/H.6)

‘Being’ is that which determines entities *as* entities: that on the basis of which Dasein understands entities *as* entities. This is what is asked about in raising the question of being: the question of what it is for something, or anything, to be. Crucially, the question concerns the entity for which this kind of disclosure of being is a possibility: the entity that experiences the ‘as-structure’ – *Dasein*. This is why Heidegger’s method of addressing the question of being is a phenomenological analysis of Dasein.

By ‘being’, Heidegger is not referring to something such that we cannot conceive of its negation – for example, existence *simpliciter*, the negation of which would be nothingness. Rather, he is referring to *the world as disclosed by Dasein*. To understand the negation of ‘being’ we just need to conceive of entities *not* being disclosed *as* entities. To conceive of this is simply to conceive of the negation of the entity that discloses the *as-structure*. This is just to conceive of the world as not experienced by Dasein – for example, imagining the world millions of years ago, before any Dasein existed. The negation of ‘being’, as Heidegger uses it, is not, therefore, inconceivable.

It follows that even if we understand the question of being in such a way that Wittgenstein’s argument might meet its target – for example, as the question ‘Why is there something rather than nothing?’ (*viz.*, ‘Why being rather than no being?’) – that when we examine what Heidegger means by ‘being’, the question is not nonsense; for it does not demand that we conceive of the inconceivable. In asking this question we simply ask why or how it is that Dasein discloses the world; the greatest demand on our conceivability is to imagine the world as not disclosed, which is just to imagine no Dasein. Therefore, even if we understand the question of being in this way, the question does not demand that we conceive of

the inconceivable. Therefore, when we take into account what Heidegger means by 'being', Wittgenstein's argument has no force.¹²

Conclusion

We can extract an argument against Heidegger's question of being from Wittgenstein's 1929 remark when examining how this connects with his arguments in the *Tractatus* and 'A Lecture on Ethics'. This argument can be partly understood in terms of the employment of different Kierkegaardian ideas by both Wittgenstein and Heidegger. Through reference to Kierkegaard's notion of 'paradox', Wittgenstein argues that Heidegger's question of being involves conceiving of the inconceivable, and is therefore nonsense because it traverses the limits of language. This argument targets Heidegger's heavily Kierkegaard-inspired notion of anxiety. Wittgenstein therefore employs a central Kierkegaardian notion in arguing against Heidegger's employment of a central Kierkegaardian notion.

Wittgenstein's argument, however, misses its target. When we look at what Heidegger means by 'being' and read the question of being within the context of his phenomenological investigation of Dasein in *Being and Time*, we see that the question of being does not demand that we conceive of the inconceivable. Therefore, even if Wittgenstein's argument is sound, it does not find a target in Heidegger's question of being.¹³

¹² I am not suggesting that we should understand the question of being as the question of why there is something rather than nothing. I take this approach just to illustrate that when we take the most charitable reading of Heidegger's question of being for Wittgenstein's argument to meet its target, it still fails to do so.

¹³ This paper draws on my work in previous publications (Beale 2010a & 2010b). I am grateful to the publishers for the freedom to draw on my work therein. I am very grateful to Brian Feltham for comments, and to Severin Schroeder, Andrew Cutrofello and Lee Braver for comments on earlier drafts. I would also like to acknowledge the various conference participants at presentations of this material for their helpful points and feedback. The research for this was conducted with the help of a studentship from the Arts & Humanities Research Council.

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