

Reading Brandom Reading Heidegger

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While brilliance and originality surely top the list of qualities shared by Brandom and Heidegger, another commonality is a tendency to treat their predecessors as partial and sometimes confused versions of themselves. Heidegger, therefore, could hardly be indignant on principle if Brandom finds a fair bit of *Making it Explicit* in the first division of *Being and Time*. Nevertheless, some details may deserve a closer look. Here I will concentrate on the more recent of the Heidegger essays reprinted in *Tales of the Mighty Dead*: 'Dasein, the Being that Thematises'.

The basic premise of the essay is that '*Being and Time* can be understood as propounding a normative pragmatism' (Brandom 2002: 324). That, in turn, is cashed out as comprising two distinctive commitments. First, that the normative is to be understood as conceptually and explanatorially prior to the factual; and second, that the norms implicit in social practice are similarly prior to those made explicit as rules.

While these two commitments will certainly be familiar to any reader of *Making it Explicit*, extracting them from *Being and Time* is a more delicate matter. 'Norm' is not one of Heidegger's words, nor particularly is 'practice' (though each does occur a few times). That doesn't mean, of course, that normative pragmatism cannot be read into the text. Indeed, as Brandom justly notes, I was myself, some years ago, one of the originators of such a reading. But, while I still think there's *something* to that, it no longer seems to me to shed much light on what Heidegger himself is really up to.

In particular, it scarcely connects at all with the principal aim of the work, which is to reawaken the question of the sense of being; nor does it make more than incidental contact with important topics like anxiety, care, truth, death, conscience, authenticity, resoluteness, historicity, and time. Thus, much that is central to Heidegger's own purposes is entirely missed by this exegetical strategy.

Arguably, however, these larger and later issues are irrelevant to the more focussed concerns of 'Dasein, the Being that Thematises'. Yet, before turning to specifics, we might be puzzled by that title itself. The most important distinction in early Heidegger is that between being (*Sein*) and entities (*Seienden*)—soon to be called 'the ontological difference'. Macquarrie and Robinson (the translators Brandom mostly relies on) are quite scrupulous in marking this distinction with the above contrasting terms. Yet, in the present conspicuous instance (the title is actually lifted from the text—Heidegger 1927: 363), Brandom departs from their consistent practice, and renders '*Seiende*' with 'being'.¹ Why?

It's hard to say; but I suspect it's connected with an even more troubling confusion that begins on his second page. There, he explicitly takes 'dasein' to denote not an entity but rather a kind of being. In other words, he gets it on the wrong side of the ontological difference. Here is an illustrative passage:

Heidegger sets out these commitments in the form of an account of the relations among three fundamental ontological categories, or more officially, regions of being within which different sorts of entities are disclosed: *Dasein*, *Zuhandensein*, and *Vorhandensein*. *Dasein* is the kind of being we ourselves have. (Brandom 2002: 325)

Of course, if that were correct, then Heidegger himself should have written '*Sein*' instead of '*Seiende*'. But he didn't—and rightly not.

While I can't be certain, I do have a conjecture about what's going on. Unlike many readers of *Being and Time*, Brandom is commendably sensitive to the fact that 'dasein' is not only not synonymous, but not even coextensive with the ordinary term 'person'. Indeed, the grammar is different: unlike 'person', 'dasein' is not used with what Quine called 'the apparatus of divided reference' (indefinite articles, the plural, and so on). But, similarly, the term '*Sein*' and its derivatives '*Zuhandensein*' and '*Vorhandensein*', are not used with that apparatus either. So '*Dasein*' would seem to fit right in with them (indeed, even etymologically).

All the same, it does not. Without question, *dasein* is not a kind of being, but rather an *entity*. There are many ways in which this could be documented; but the quickest and most conclusive is that the *grande finale* of Division I (§42) is a specification and articulation of *the being of dasein*. In particular, the being of *dasein* is care, and its articulation is existence, facticity, and falling. But being 'is' always and only the being of some (possible) entity or entities. So, *dasein* is an *entity*.

Yet, there remains something peculiar about this, as Brandom may be sensing. It is beyond question that *dasein* is somehow intimately connected with people. It's Heidegger's basic technical term for whatever it is that's special about us. But if it's neither an ontological term for our being, nor an ontical sortal that denotes precisely us, then what is it? And, in the meantime, if not 'dasein', then what *are* Heidegger's terms for people and their being?

The official term for people is '*others*' (oneself included) (Heidegger 1927: 118, 126); and the *being* of others is *co-dasein* ('*Mitdasein*': Heidegger 1927: 118, 120, 125, 140; Heidegger 1975: 396). Unlike 'dasein', therefore, 'co-dasein' is an ontological term: it names the being of people. The key to understanding this correctly is to appreciate that others (which is to say, we people) are *intra-worldly* entities. That is, we show up to each other as entities within the world, much as do available equipment and occurrent things. Of course, we ourselves are neither available nor occurrent entities, but rather *co-dasein* entities.

And it's here, I think, that normative pragmatism makes its closest approach to *Being and Time*. For, what norms and practices are all about is *intra-worldly*

entities—especially equipment and people; and (as Heidegger makes painfully clear) to be an entity whose being is co-dasein is—initially and usually—to live as a normal member of a norm-governed community. Yet, as I will explain momentarily, this cannot be the whole story, nor, in the end, even a major part of it. Rather, if I may venture a rough simile, normative pragmatism is to the central concerns of *Being and Time* something like what the capacity to acquire and instill reliable differential responsive dispositions is to the central concerns of *Making it Explicit*. That is, it's an enabling prerequisite for the main topic to get off the ground; but it is not itself part of that topic.

As already mentioned, Heidegger's main topic is 'the being-question'. The reason *dasein* gets so much attention is that, more or less by definition, it is the entity that embodies an *understanding* of being. But it is crucial to appreciate that this isn't a *stipulative* definition of, say, the term 'dasein'. When Aristotle 'defined' man as the talking animal, or, again, as the political animal, he was not laying down necessary and sufficient conditions for the correct application of a predicate. Rather, he was attempting to spell out, in a compelling and illuminating way, what is most characteristic of these conspicuously peculiar entities. And that, I suggest, is what Heidegger is up to as well, but with an additional level of analysis.

Dasein is neither people nor their being, but rather a *way of life* shared by the members of some community. It is ways of life, in this sense, that have the basic structure of being-in-the-world. (People certainly don't have that structure—they're *intra-worldly*.) Insofar as there is an understanding of being, it is embodied, initially and usually, in such a way of life—which is then dasein. And this is *why* Heidegger is so interested in anxiety, being-toward-death, and conscience, each of which *individualizes* dasein. The resulting individualization is what he calls authenticity or ownedness. *Dasein*, and more particularly the understanding of being that it embodies, is *owned by* some individual person—in the sense of taking responsibility for its tenability.

A pretty good analogy, one that Heidegger himself mentions several times, is language. Languages are, of course communal; but they are not to be identified with the communities in which they are spoken, nor with the individual speakers who speak them. Rather, languages are communally shared 'ways of speaking'. Similarly, dasein is a communally shared way of living of a certain specific sort—namely, one that embodies an understanding of being.

With these preliminaries in place, we can now turn to Brandom's exegetical arguments in more detail. He introduces his main thesis with a 'layer cake' metaphor. Each layer is a kind of being: dasein on the bottom, availability in the middle, and occurrentness on top. (Remember, he understands dasein as the being of people.) The idea is that the higher layers clearly presuppose those below them: availability is unintelligible without dasein, and so on. But whether the lower layers similarly presuppose the upper ones is less obvious. He grants, however, that dasein is unintelligible without availability; so the only remaining question is whether these two together presuppose occurrentness. And his answer is a resounding 'Yes!': you get *none* of the three without *all* three.

Yet the claim is oddly hedged. It's not that there couldn't be a normative community whose members understood themselves and each other as fellow members, and their paraphernalia as equipment (or something much like it), while understanding no entities as occurrent. That after all, it is what basic normative pragmatism accounts for (and besides, 'talking doesn't develop ex nihilo'—Brandom 2002: 334). The claim is rather that, *according to Heidegger*, unless those creatures *also* understand some entities as occurrent, they don't 'count as' or 'qualify as' *dasein* (Brandom 2002: 329, 330, 331, 332, 336). In other words, the point reduces to a *terminological* restriction. Heidegger himself, of course, never explicitly stipulates such a restriction—that's not his style. But Brandom maintains that he *implicitly* commits himself to it; and showing that this is so is the principal aim of the article.

There is one primary argument for this conclusion, plus two subsidiary variations. I will concentrate on the former. Brandom summarizes it in four steps (Brandom 2002: 331):

- (i) There can be no *dasein* without talk (*Rede*);
- (ii) There can be no talk without idle talk (*Gerede*);
- (iii) There can be no idle talk without language (*Sprache*); and
- (iv) There can be no language without assertion (*Aussage*).

The reason the final point is supposed to be sufficient for the intended conclusion is that, as Brandom says in a number of ways, 'the capacity to use assertional language ... essentially involves the capacity to treat things as occurrent' (Brandom 2002: 347; cf pp. 324, 327–332, 341f).

We can grant the **first thesis**, that there is **no *dasein* without *Rede***, since, along with *Befindlichkeit* and understanding, *Rede* belongs to the constitution of being-in as such. The reason this doesn't settle the matter already is that, as Brandom points out, Heidegger means more by '*Rede*' than just talking or verbal communication. Also, and perhaps more fundamentally, *Rede* is characterized as the *articulation* of intelligibility or significance—where 'articulating' means something like 'carving at the joints', or, less figuratively, 'telling apart', and making relevant distinctions. So there remains a question whether it might be *only* in this latter sense that *Rede* is integral to being-in as such. The rest of the argument is intended to foreclose that possibility.

The **second step** is that there can be **no talk or telling without idle talk**. Brandom says that idle talk is just the everyday form of talking, and hence the 'background' for all other forms (Brandom 2002: 336). But that can't be right. In the first place, it would trivialize the claim that there is no talk without idle talk. But, more to the point, there's lots of everyday talking—most of it, I should think—that's not 'idle' at all: it's just ordinary and routine. Indeed, citing one of the connotations of '*Gerede*', Brandom says that the essence of idle talk is gossip; but surely he doesn't think that ordinary, everyday talking is all essentially *gossip*! On the contrary, *idle* talk is talk that is not performing its proper, ordinary function, and is therefore an incomplete or 'defective' variant. As the English

expression suggests, idle talk is talk that is 'idling'—like an engine that's disconnected from, and so not doing, the work it's really for.²

This leaves us with the question of what talking *is* 'really for'. Surely, it's 'for' communicating with others, sharing insights, coordinating activities, drawing distinctions, making plans, imparting understanding, and so on. But Heidegger says something more specifically philosophical, and by way of a direct contrast with idle talk.

Talking, which belongs to the essential being-make-up of dasein, and which co-constitutes the disclosedness thereof, has the possibility of becoming idle talk. As such, it doesn't so much hold being-in-the-world open in an articulated understanding, but rather closes it off and covers up intraworldly entities. (Heidegger 1927: 169, my translation)

So, at least part of what talking does for dasein, that idle talk fails to do, is 'hold being-in-the-world open in an articulated understanding' and uncover intraworldly entities.

Yet, the role of idle talk is far from entirely negative; for, on the same page, we also read:

This everyday way in which things have been interpreted [in idle talk] is one into which dasein has grown in the first instance, with never a possibility of extrication. In it, out of it, and against it, all genuine understanding, interpreting, and communicating, all rediscovering and appropriating anew are performed. (Heidegger 1927: 169)

There are two points here. First, when it comes to understanding and interpretation, we inevitably *begin* with what is implicit in idle talk; but second, and ultimately more important, idle talk *therefore* affords the requisite starting point for all *genuine* understanding, interpreting, and communicating. In other words, even though idle talk itself 'closes off' and 'covers up', it thereby *also enables* opening up and discovering.

How could idle talk simultaneously close off and cover up, on the one hand, and *enable* opening-up and discovering on the other? The answer is this: for all its promiscuity and shallowness, idle talk serves as a fundamental reservoir of conceptual resources and distinctions. It's one of the basic cultural mechanisms by which the practical and cognitive achievements of the past are preserved and propagated. The fact that they are typically preserved in a watered-down and ossified form is why they often 'cover up' and 'close off'; but the fact that they are preserved at all is why they also *enable* opening up and discovering anew.

Brandom's **third step**, that there can be **no idle talk without language**, is his most detailed and ingenious. The thesis might seem trivial, since, on the face of it, there could hardly be any talking at all—idle or otherwise—without some language to be 'talking in'. But that misses the point, because what's really at issue is whether *all* of what Heidegger calls '*Rede*' might be confined to articulative 'telling' (in the sense of distinguishing and telling apart), or whether,

on the contrary, at least some of it must be specifically declarative, and hence linguistic.

The reason Brandom makes this point first in terms of *idle* talk is that there happen to be several statements in the pertinent section of *Being and Time* (§35) that he can easily tie into the apparatus of *Making it Explicit*—and, in particular, to his beautifully elaborated version of the game of giving and asking for reasons. It is this remarkable connecting up of the two disparate texts that I find so technically impressive. Nevertheless, I will neither work through nor dispute the details, because I think it gets off on the wrong foot from the start, and thus misconstrues the whole discussion.

A pretty good colloquial characterization of idle talk would be: ‘blathering on without knowing what you’re talking about’. My purpose in mentioning this is that the phrase ‘knowing what you’re talking about’ is conspicuously ambiguous; and what I want to suggest is that, in effect, Brandom disambiguates it in one way, whereas Heidegger means it in the other.

According to the former—the gloss I’m putting in Brandom’s mouth—‘knowing what you’re talking about’ means having good evidence or justification for what you claim. And, bringing to bear the account of giving and asking for reasons, he can then produce an intricate reading to the effect that what’s wrong with idle talk is that appropriate justification is neither expected nor, as a rule, to be had. Moreover, in support of that reading, he can cite passages like:

What is said-in-the-talk as such, spreads in wider circles and takes on an authoritative character. Things are so because one says so. Idle talk is constituted by just such gossiping and passing the word along—a process by which its initial lack of grounds to stand on becomes aggravated to complete groundlessness. (Heidegger 1927: 168; Brandom 2002: 336)

But, in so doing, he ignores the far more numerous surrounding passages like:

Terminologically, [the expression ‘idle talk’] signifies a positive phenomenon which constitutes the kind of being of everyday *dasein*’s *understanding* and *interpreting*. (Heidegger 1927: 167)

And:

Idle talk is the possibility of *understanding* everything without previously making the thing one’s own. (Heidegger 1927: 169)

And:

Idle talk, which closes things off in the way we have designated, is the kind of being which belongs to *dasein*’s *understanding* when that understanding has been uprooted. (Heidegger 1927: 170) [Emphasis in each case added.]

All of these (along with both of my previous quotations) suggest that what's missing or defective in the idleness of idle talk is *not* evidence or reasons, but rather some adequate degree of understanding and/or appropriate interpretation. And this, of course, is the *other* way of hearing the charge: 'You don't know what you're talking about'. The allegation is not that the speaker is making *unjustified* claims, but rather (and perhaps worse) is making claims about something which he or she doesn't adequately *understand*. The relevant failing is not lack of evidence so much as being shallow, confused, and/or obtuse—what we sometimes refer to as 'just not getting it'. (Surely every teacher of philosophy is familiar with this phenomenon.) But if, as I suggest, it is the fundamental phenomenon of idle talk, then latching onto phrases like 'so because one says so' and 'passing the word along' is mistaking the salt for the soup.

By way of rejoinder, it might seem possible to maintain that *understanding* something *just is* the ability to make justified true assertions about it. But, whatever its intrinsic merits, that idea certainly *isn't* Heidegger's. On the contrary, he begins his own discussion of understanding with a reminder of the colloquial usage according to which it amounts to a kind of competence or ability-to-manage (Heidegger 1927: 143). And he then radically develops that into a more general account in terms of *projecting* entities (including but not limited to *dasein* itself) *onto their possibilities* (Heidegger 1927: 145). Whatever exactly we make of that, it's certainly not just a matter of checking one's premises.

The **fourth and final step** of Brandom's argument is: **no language without assertion**. One is tempted to ask: As opposed to what? . . . questions and imperatives? But the point is rather that *all* properly linguistic intentionality, regardless of the particular speech act, presupposes the articulation of giving and asking for reasons; and the essential tokens with which that game is played are ones with propositional content—paradigmatically assertions. In my own view, this is a slogan-sized capsule of a profound and powerful insight, and, moreover, one of of which Heidegger—not having read (say) Frege, Wittgenstein, and Sellars—could scarcely have had an inkling.

That leaves only the title topic of *thematizing*. According to Brandom, what Heidegger means by this verb is making assertions or stating rules (Brandom 2002: 324, 326, 327). But the definition in *Being and Time* is actually rather different:

The scientific projection of any entities . . . already lets their kind of being be understood explicitly and in such a manner that it thus becomes manifest what ways are possible for the pure discovery of entities within the world. The articulation of the understanding of being, the delimitation of an area of subject-matter . . ., and the sketching out of the way of conceiving which is appropriate to such entities—all these belong to the totality of this projecting; and this totality is what we call '*thematizing*'. (Heidegger 1927: 363)

Finally, lest anyone suppose that to thematize entities is to treat them as occurrent (something that Brandom often seems to do), consider this brief passage:

The idea of historiology as a science implies that the *disclosure* of historical entities is what it has seized upon as its own task. Every science is constituted primarily by thematizing. That which is familiar pre-scientifically in *dasein* as disclosed being-in-the-world, gets projected upon the being which is specific to it. (Heidegger 1927: 393)

Yet, if there is anything of which it is clear that ‘the being which is specific to it’ is *not* being-occurrent, it is ‘disclosed being-in-the-world’; and the historical entities that are disclosed therein cannot be far behind.

In sum then: there is no doubt that *dasein* as we know it thematizes; there is no doubt that it makes assertions; and there is no doubt that it treats some entities as occurrent. But it has not been established that any two of these three are the same; nor has it been established that any of them is prerequisite to ‘qualifying as *dasein*’.

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NOTES

¹ In the two places in the text where Brandom quotes his own title (Brandom 2002: 329 and 347), he subjoins ‘entity’ (in parentheses) after ‘being’. That seems only to compound the confusion.

² When Heidegger says: ‘The expression “idle talk” is not to be used here in a “disparaging” signification’ (Heidegger 1927: 167), he doesn’t mean, of course, that idle talk is just fine and dandy, but rather that his purpose in discussing it is not simply to denounce some commonplace human failing (like laziness or dissembling).

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