

## REVIEW

**Lee Braver, *Groundless Grounds: A Study of Wittgenstein and Heidegger* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2012), ISBN: 978-0262016896**

If I quote extensively from *Groundless Grounds* it is simply because it is so eloquently written. Lee Braver's aim is certainly ambitious: "If a load-bearing bridge can be built between Heidegger and Wittgenstein, perhaps this will facilitate dialogue between analytic and continental thinkers in general, making the traditions intelligible to each other, thus allowing a fruitful crosspollination" (2). Achieving this goal requires more than describing how both Heidegger and post-*Tractatus* Wittgenstein critique philosophical pseudo-problems rooted in atomistic ontology, Cartesian conceptions of the subject, or the traditional epistemological view that pure truth and pure meaning are static, unalterable essences. Braver does much more than this in his account of original finitude, an account uniting both philosophers in their approach to reality, perception, and knowledge. This particular idea of finitude moves us beyond the metaphysical assumptions of Frege, Russell, and the early Wittgenstein in which meaningful statements are correlated with simple objects (or states-of-affairs) in the world. Braver makes this point memorably: "It is here that language gets its meaning because it is here that words get linked to things, the primordial baptism of the world.... In principle, every sensible statement can be traced back via a semantic apostolic succession to a direct connection with the world" (54). It is precisely this direct connection with the world, in the formulation of meaning-objects, that the later Wittgenstein relentlessly interrogates. The connection assumes that the essence of an object is fully determined, that it does not change along with its material circumstances. The essence of a simple object determines once and for all certain basic possibilities, and these possibilities limit how we meaningfully and accurately describe such an essence. As Braver puts it, if we are going to talk sensibly about a piece of music, we can describe its loudness and pitch, but not its color or taste (56). The internal properties of an object never change; they are eternal. The ultimate function of language, then, is to serve as an accurate representation of such objects, essences, and internal properties.

Philosophers are especially tempted by this conception of language. It should come as no surprise that when we disengage ourselves from the world in order to study and contemplate it, we are thereby changing what we are most likely to discover about ourselves, reality, and truth: "Philosophical analysis distorts what it seeks to understand, precisely *by* its attempt to understand it" (67). In contemplation we naturally discover timeless essences, unchanging properties, and present-at-hand entities because these are the sorts of things that stand out to us when we eliminate, or try to eliminate, the influence of worldly distractions. We would like

to gaze upon the truth passively, to see it as it is, but this philosophical activity is one more prejudice among all the others. Not only does philosophy tend to produce the very thing it seeks to avoid, but it forgets that cultural and historical perspectives are integral to any experience of reality: “Philosophy tries to assume Nagel’s view from nowhere or Putnam’s God’s-eye view to see the way things are independently of any cultural, historical, or anatomical idiosyncrasies, without realizing that these features are essential to our ability to have any view whatsoever” (66). This may be an unsettling fact, but acknowledging it helps us to overcome the philosophical quest for incontrovertible truths, the expectation that there must be an ultimate epistemic justification for all of our beliefs. If there is an ultimate foundation, it is the sort of foundation that we simply assume in our everyday lives—not an epistemological ground. As Braver’s book title immediately suggests, it is an unproven, unsubstantiated, groundless ground. As finite creatures, we are thrown into the world and must make our way through it by way of interpretations, assumptions, and habits: “We cannot justify our language-games by appealing to Reality Itself because it is only through some game or other that we access reality in order to determine its significance” (178). Braver is of course sufficiently agile to avoid equating this position with relativism. Drawing from both Heidegger and Wittgenstein, he argues that being thrown into our understanding, into our world of understanding, simultaneously negates absolute knowledge—whether of simple objects or transcendent reality—as well as epistemic relativism. There is no assurance that what we believe is a pure reflection of truth, but we are thrown into the world in such a way that we must nevertheless affirm this or that particular mode of life: “Heidegger’s existentialism tells us that we are what we do, that the humble preoccupations of our days is precisely the stuff our selves are made of” (78).

Braver coins several terms and phrases, such as the Rules-Exception Ratio Law, Logical Stoicism, the Interpretation Aporia, Rational Retrospective Reconstruction, and the Perceptual Model of Thinking. Along with his idea of original finitude, which I will elaborate and critique in my final remarks, Braver’s Perceptual Model of Thinking is used to show us what it is exactly that unites Heidegger and Wittgenstein, despite the fact that they belong to different intellectual traditions (with a few overlapping exceptions, of course). As alluded above, both Heidegger and Wittgenstein criticize previous philosophers for defining the essence of human experience as if our primary relationship with the world were theoretical or knowledge-based. The Perceptual Model, by contrast, “places understanding closer to perception than to running through a syllogism in one’s mind. Rather than weighing the pros and cons of an array of options confronting us, we simply see what is to be done in a given situation” (141). The rules of life do not exist outside of our everyday habit of using those rules; they do not exist, that is to say, in isolation of one another or outside of our phenomenological and historical context. We do not learn rules by first grounding them in relationship to other rules that happen to be absolute, unchanging, and intellectually self-evident. We know that we understand how to move a chess piece, for example, when we do in fact tend to move chess pieces in the right way and under the right circumstances. This model of thought clearly emphasizes a holistic approach to knowledge, life, and perception. Rejecting his earlier linguistic atomism, in which the truth of elementary propositions can be determined apart from other isolated facts and propositions, Wittgenstein ultimately expands his notion of truth to include all sorts of external features and conditions: “A word’s or a proposition’s meaning is its place within a language-

game, against the background of human life; detach it from these, and you no longer have the same word or proposition" (84). Using the metaphor of a chess move again, Braver argues that once we change the external, social, and phenomenological circumstances of a particular move we thereby also change the meaning of that move: "[P]ut the tableau on stage as part of a play, say, or make it the transmission of a coded message between spies—and you fundamentally alter the significance of the 'same' motions" (86). There are no isolated meanings; there are only truths understood in their appropriate contexts for humans who are directly and immediately immersed in a finite world of changing, transformative possibilities.

Braver's explanation for why traditional philosophy views the world as a rational system of inert things, objects, or truths can be summed up in his principle of Retroactive Rational Reconstruction: "In this case, the reconstruction slips present-at-hand objects underneath tools and explicit knowledge beneath circumspective know-how" (30). In our average everydayness, as Heidegger puts it, our use and manipulation of things in the world manifests a dynamic, non-cognitive orientation in which all kinds of factors are mutually affecting one another: human desire, prejudice, tradition, temporality, social pressures, personal background, and so on. We are only able to presume that what is dynamically ready-to-hand is in fact present-at-hand when we retroactively observe, in a self-conscious manner, our everyday modes of being. We reinterpret experience to satisfy the demands of particular philosophical paradigms, so that the troubling elusiveness of human experience begins to show itself as a collection of inert, present-at-hand substances: "The very act of formulating an ontology loads the dice toward one particular form of being by filtering out everything but self-sufficient static substances, thus inclining metaphysicians to take presence-at-hand as the paradigm of being" (104). According to Braver, this retroactive tendency reverses how we experience the world holistically by abstracting individual components from that experience and then projecting them back into the world as if they themselves sustained it. Traditional categories of thought transform our dynamic interactions with others and the world into compartmentalized entities, and thus we reassure ourselves that our mortal finitude is grounded in something firm, stable, and everlasting. The common project of Heidegger and Wittgenstein is to replace this impoverished notion of finitude with a more holistic understanding of our everyday comportment.

The concept of original finitude informs Braver's methodological project of uniting Wittgenstein and Heidegger in their critiques of private language, present-at-hand metaphysics, pure logic, the dominance of picture-thinking, Platonic realism, meaning-objects, Cartesian subjectivity, and so forth. It is also central to his understanding of ethics, in particular, the ethics of restraint. Human finitude has for too long now been modeled upon something metaphysically grander than itself: "Human reason has been understood as a limited version of divine intelligence; infinitude has determined the finite/infinite contrast. Wittgenstein and Heidegger construct a notion of *original* finitude, finitude without a contrast—or at least not the unavailable contrast with infinitude" (9). Perhaps we would like to heal our existential wounds by identifying ourselves with some higher order of infinitude, but this for Heidegger implies that we are fleeing from our true mortal condition, and it is this fragile, angst-ridden, mortal condition which invariably signifies original finitude. It is finitude without recourse to salvation, pure logic, or absolute foundations. But this isn't to be taken for nihilism. Insofar as

original finitude reminds us of our humble origins and ineluctable epistemological limits, it disrupts the modern quest for technological and economic omnipotence. We dream of limitless control and mastery, but our arrogance represses the sublime idiosyncrasies associated with genuine finitude. The best that modern autonomy and technology can do is “resemble the *Republic’s* city for pigs, where the only value that qualities like nobility or excellence can have lies in their (supposed) productivity, their exchange-rates for efficiency and convenience; where glens and dales are bulldozed for Starbucks and McDonalds” (239). This political affirmation of finitude is common in continental philosophy. In the battle against modern forms of technological and cultural assimilation, it has become a pervasive tendency in continental circles to highlight the inevitable finitude, otherness, heterogeneity, difference, passivity, alterity, groundlessness, excess, or immanence within each of us. Braver is not alone in his contention that the “philosophical/technological control fantasy cannot be the final truth about us due to the essential, unavoidable moment of passivity” (239). It is obviously no easy task to question or critique such an influential argument, especially within the confines of a book review, but it does have its flaws. The argument is provocative and enticing partly because of its claim to an “unavoidable moment,” but precisely insofar as the moment of passivity is unavoidable it seems all the more unusual that we should fear for its epistemological, technological, or political assimilation. That *specific* elements of finitude or otherness should be assimilated in our routine modes of behavior is entirely plausible. But the *original* finitude associated with passivity is an unavoidable fact that permeates every small and large aspect of our phenomenological orientation. It is not only the form but also the content of the control fantasy that is imbued with doubt, ambiguity, and finitude. But if we nevertheless wish to critique the globalizing tendencies of technology, social media, and consumerism we will have to do so without resorting to categories of thought—such as original finitude—that are as broad and all-encompassing as the objects of our philosophical complaints.

Apple Zefelius Igrek  
Philosophy Department  
Oklahoma State University  
Stillwater, OK  
USA  
[zefelius.igrek@okstate.edu](mailto:zefelius.igrek@okstate.edu)