

Understanding as a Finite Ability

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1. Heidegger and Wittgenstein both characterize human understanding as an *ability*. They also both suggest that this ability is *finite* in nature. In this essay I want to survey the different ways each of them respectively investigates the idea of understanding as a finite ability—first, to make some progress on what such an idea might come to, and second, to use it to shed light on each of their projects.

Consider first Kant's distinction between the finite intellect and the infinite intellect. This contrast is characterized by Kant in a number of different ways. According to one prominent characterization, an infinite intellect, possessed of a capacity for intuition that is the source or cause of its objects, produces its objects. Let me call this the productive intellect. By contrast, the intuition of a finite being, such as a human being, is *given* its objects from without, and therefore must be affected by objects to cognize them (see *CPR* B72, among other places).

According to a second characterization, an infinite intellect comprehends in one fell intuitive sweep the totality of whatever it comprehends. Let me call this, for reasons that will soon become clear, the “single gulp” intellect. Contrast a form of intellect that must successively “synthesize” the parts or aspects of what it comprehends. Such an intellect is in no position to cognize its object in one stroke, that is, swallow it all down in a single gulp.ⁱ

In what follows, I will put forward the following exegetical claim: whereas Wittgenstein explores the finitude of human understanding by juxtaposing it to the infinitude of the single gulp intellect, Heidegger explores the finitude of human understanding by juxtaposing it to the infinitude of the productive intellect. As a secondary claim, I will suggest that this difference in

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senses of finitude is coupled with a difference in the sense in which both are respectively anti-Cartesian philosophers. Whereas Wittgenstein's primary Cartesian target is a thesis in philosophical psychology—namely, that understanding consists in a mental state—Heidegger's primary target is a Cartesian thesis in ontology—namely, that the subject of understanding is a special kind of *thing*. I begin with Wittgenstein, and then turn to Heidegger.

2. At *PI* §150, Wittgenstein explicitly introduces the idea of linguistic understanding as a kind of ability, set in contrast to the idea of understanding as a mental state, or a state of consciousness. Consider an ordinary English word, "chair." "Are there enough chairs for everyone?" "This chair is good enough." You've just read three sentences (now four) containing the word "chair." Would you call your understanding of this word a "mental state"? If so, did you just enjoy four mental states? How long did each state last? As long as it took for the word to be uttered? Or did the mental state, like an echo, carry on but fade as the relevant sentence concluded? Can we determine the duration of each state by means of a stopwatch?

Wittgenstein writes at *PI* p. 65:

"Understanding a word": a state. But a *mental* state?—We call dejection, excitement, pain, mental states. Carry out a grammatical investigation as follows: we say

"He felt dejected the whole day"

"He was in great excitement the whole day"

"He has been in pain uninterruptedly since yesterday."—

We also say, "Since yesterday I have understood this word." "Uninterruptedly," though?

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The question that concludes the passage is supposed to sound confused. One could read it as marking the conclusion of a *reductio* of the thought that understanding is a mental state, at least in the sense of a mental state that is a conscious experience that takes time, that has genuine duration. At *PI* §154 we are instructed, “[D]on’t think of understanding as a ‘mental process.’” Call Cartesianism in the theory of understanding the claim that understanding is a conscious mental state or process.

Compare the sense of confusion of “uninterruptedly, though?” with the strangeness of the question “*when* do you understand the word ‘chair?’” And then note the kinship of this seeming confusion with the following when-question. Wittgenstein:

What if one asked: When *can* you play chess? All the time? Or just while you are making a move? And the whole of chess during each move?—And how odd that being able to play chess should take such a short time, and a game so much longer!” (*PI* p. 65)

Wittgenstein’s alternative to Cartesianism, promising to avoid such queer consequences, is the suggestion that the grammar of “understands” is closely related to that of “can” or “is able to” or “know how to” (*PI* §150 and §182). The respective grammars of this series of words and phrases “belong in one investigation.” Or in *PG* 47: “‘Understanding a word’ may mean: *knowing* how it is used; *being able to* apply it.”

3. A natural worry to have about the idea of understanding as an ability is the phenomenon of sudden understanding, as in: “Now I understand!”? Recall the “since yesterday I have understood this word” in the first passage above. At *PI* §151 Wittgenstein considers this use of

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“understand,” which serves as an entrée to the following illustrative scenario. A writes down a number series, and B, in the pupil position, is to figure out the formula that expresses the law of the sequence of numbers: “Now I understand!” and B proceeds to continue the series on his own. Surely *here*, if anywhere, understanding is a mental state—for example, the formula itself might very well occur to one, prompting the claim to understand. The familiar sense of understanding here imagined is something that *happens*, a moment of occurrent awareness, and so well captured by Cartesianism about understanding.

One might accommodate sudden understanding by conceding that the word “understanding” is ambiguous. Sometimes we use it in the ability sense; sometimes we use it in the state sense. Compare the word “bank.” Sometimes we use it to refer to a pile of dirt by a river; sometimes we use it to refer to an institution that holds money and charges fees (among other things). But that can’t be right. To lift a remark Wittgenstein offers in a different context: “Then has ‘understanding’ two different meanings here? — I would rather say that these kinds of use of ‘understanding’ make up its meaning, make up my *concept* of understanding. For I *want* to apply the word ‘understanding’ to all this” (*PI* §532). Suppose I hold up a picture of a pile of dirt by a river, and a picture of a branch of HSBC. You wouldn’t want to apply “bank” to all this, at least in the same sense that you want to apply “understanding” to the state of sudden understanding and the ability to understand.

So how *do* the two uses of “understanding” go to “make up” one concept? The broadly Cartesian way to proceed here would be to start with understanding as an act or state of occurrent awareness. This is the fundamental use. And then the question is: how can we get from *this* to something with the shape of an ability? What glue holds together those four states of your understanding of the word “chair” so they can be seen to be something like actualizations of one

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fertile capacity, that is, your understanding of the word “chair”? An answer: the mental states are modifications of a single substance.

Wittgenstein’s alternative to Cartesianism, at least on one reading, inverts the order of proceeding. This reading starts with understanding construed as an ability. That is the fundamental use of the word “understanding,” expressive of the basic category in terms of which the concept of understanding finds its home. One then accommodates sudden understanding by construing it as the onset of an ability. “Now I can go on!” is one expression of this onset (among others). Does the formula *have to* come before B’s mind for something like that expression to come out? We can easily imagine nothing whatsoever occurring in the pupil’s mind when he says he can go on: he just finds himself able to go on, perhaps with a feeling of relief, a releasing of his breath, an unhesitating stroke of his pencil, as he struggles to hold back a smile. If the formula does occur in his mind, does that *suffice* for him to be able to go on? We can easily imagine a case of the formula occurring without being able to go on. And it is not hard to imagine, further, the shrillness of the inspired type whose insistent reports of “Now I can go on!” make no connection with actually being *able* to go on.

Wittgenstein accordingly says at *PI* §180 that “[i]t would be quite misleading . . . to call the words [‘Now I know how to go on’] a ‘description of a mental state.’” We are encouraged, as an alternative, to call the expression of those words a “signal” and to judge whether the signal was rightly employed by what the pupil goes on *to do*. With the case of sudden understanding so accommodated, as signaling the onset of an ability, its support for the truth of the claim that understanding is a mental state is disarmed. An occurrence of the formula (or what have you) coming “before the mind” is accordingly put in its place as, if not a piece of ornamentation, at

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least not integral to understanding as such. Understanding, Wittgenstein teaches us, is *not* a mental state.ⁱⁱ

On a second reading, Wittgenstein's alternative to Cartesianism does not *deny* that understanding is, or at least can be, a mental state. His remarks on understanding rather amount to the effort to disabuse us of a *mythical* conception of mental states. The real problem with the Cartesian construal, according to this reading, is that the mental state of understanding is pictured in complete abstraction from its surroundings—for example, the stage-setting of B having learned algebra, having used such formulae before, and so on (*PI* §179). It is only in the context of this cropped picture that the problem arises of how to get a self-contained state to open up into the fertile ability to go on. However, if we acknowledge the occurrence of a state of consciousness in which the formula comes before the mind, but we do so in a way which recognizes its place in a wider context, then we can recover an innocent idea of understanding as a determinate mental state. Indeed, the occurrence of the formula, when it does occur, can suffice to be able to go on. “Now I can go on,” in such a case, *is* an expressive signal, but also, at one and the same time, the self-ascription of a determinate mental state. On this reading, if we call the idea of understanding as a mental state a fly, Wittgenstein is letting the fly out of the fly-bottle.ⁱⁱⁱ

While the second reading may enjoy stronger textual support, it is not clear how much ultimately hangs on the difference between them. Either way, whether “Now I can go on” is best understood as merely signaling the onset of an ability, or rather, in doing that, expressing (at least sometimes) the self-ascription of a determinate mental state within the wider context of the flowering of an ability, the very fact that the text makes both readings available testifies to

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Wittgenstein's crusade against the Cartesian thesis that understanding *consists in* an experiential state or process.

4. Wittgenstein's characterization of understanding as, or as akin to, an ability of course raises many questions. For example, what sets understanding apart from other abilities, such as the ability to ride a bike? Wittgenstein likens not just understanding but also knowledge to an ability. What distinguishes the ability to understand from other broadly intellectual abilities to which it is clearly linked? My question in this chapter is: In what sense is the ability to understand, for Wittgenstein, finite? Wittgenstein's aims and methods generally tend to discourage the use of straightforward assertion. One suspects that if he did allow himself the force of assertion in this area, he would have said something like, "Understanding is *akin* to being finite." Or perhaps he might have said, "We are prone to think of understanding as infinite," followed by some imaginary scenario that makes that temptation somehow or other uncomfortable to discharge.

What would it mean to say that understanding is infinite? And why might we be tempted to say such a thing? In Wittgenstein's remarks on rule following, one of the temptations explored is the idea of understanding, or meaning, as a kind of act or state that has "already taken all those steps" (*PI* §188). In a characteristic scene of instruction, this temptation is attributed to the one occupying the teacher position, having encountered the pupil who, when he reaches 1000, continues to follow the order "+ 2" with 1004, 1008, 1012. The teacher, the voice of the interlocutor, wants to insist that he *meant* the order "+2," that the pupil ought to write 1002 after 1000. The "voice of correction" reminds the teacher that he doesn't want to say that he (the teacher) *thought* of the step from 1000 to 1002 when he meant his order, and that even if he did,

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there were surely other steps that he didn't think of. At *PI* §188, Wittgenstein's narrator steps back for diagnosis:

[Y]our idea was that this *meaning the order* [+2] had in its own way already taken all those steps: that in meaning it, your mind, as it were, flew ahead and took all the steps before you physically arrived at this or that one.

So you were inclined to use such expressions as “The steps are *really* already taken, even before I take them in writing or in speech or in thought.”

Using the number series here as a trope for the “whole use of the word,” Wittgenstein then returns (at *PI* §191) to the theme of sudden understanding—the grasping in a flash—that had earlier been set in tension with the notion of understanding as an ability. The flash understanding, construed now as a temptation, is imagined to determine all the steps in advance in such a way that there could be *no* possibility of misinterpretation. Such an act is called an “inordinate fact” or a “philosophical superlative” (*PI* §192),

Wittgenstein elsewhere warns against such a philosophical superlative: “[We] mustn't think that when we understand or mean a word what happens is an act of instantaneous, as it were non-discursive, grasp of grammar. As if it could all be swallowed in a single gulp” (*PG* 49). The non-discursive grasp is precisely the idea of the *intuitive* grasp characteristic of Kant's second sense of infinite intellect, the *single gulp intellect*. In understanding or meaning (say) the word “chair,” hence grasping the concept of chair, the single gulp intellect grasps all the possibilities of something susceptible to being called out as a “chair,” *in one fell swoop*.

To appear in *Wittgenstein and Heidegger* (Routledge, 2013) eds. D. Egan, S. Reynolds, and A. Wendland

Accordingly, the totality of possibilities is grasped by the non-discursive intellect as *actual*, laid out before it, in a comprehensive intuiting.

By warning us not to think that when we understand a word what happens is an instantaneous grasp of grammar, Wittgenstein is in effect recognizing that our understanding is not of the form of a single gulp. It is not in that sense infinite; it is finite. And while the *assertion* of the finitude of human understanding is generally incompatible with Wittgenstein's methods, one might say that by participating in the temptation to be infinite, Wittgenstein is in effect *showing* human understanding to be a finite ability.

Two further points are worth making before turning to Heidegger. First, there are materials here for a diagnosis of the attractions of Cartesianism about understanding. Throughout the *Investigations*, Wittgenstein is clearly concerned to debunk the idea that meaning or understanding something by a word is a matter of an experience or state of consciousness enjoyed at the time of speaking or hearing. One reason that the phenomenon of the "Now I understand!" receives so much attention, I think, is that Wittgenstein is attuned to the sense in which the eureka-like power of this particular kind of experience can pull one toward an experiential conception of understanding. But another reason the phenomenon is of such interest is that it is a concrete experience that, suitably inflated, is well adapted to the demands of the single gulp intellect. For here understanding does indeed involve a felt moment of insight, an instantaneous grasp of meaning that, under the pressure of certain philosophical temptations, can be construed as a reaching out and taking in of every possible use of the word at issue, from *here on out*. Wittgenstein's anti-Cartesianism accordingly targets a view of understanding as a kind of act or experience that is easily exploited by the fantasy of single gulp infinitude. Hence Wittgenstein's almost obsessive concern with the phenomenon of sudden understanding.

To appear in *Wittgenstein and Heidegger* (Routledge, 2013) eds. D. Egan, S. Reynolds, and A. Wendland

Second, it is worth stressing the link between the single gulp intellect and the effacement of the distinction between actuality and possibility. I opened this essay by distinguishing two Kantian characterizations of the infinite intellect, as the productive intellect and as the single gulp intellect. A third characterization offered by Kant is negative, namely that “the distinction between the actual and the possible does not enter into the representation of this intellect” (Kant [1790] 2001, 273). Let me call this the modal characterization of the infinite intellect. We can see how the modal characterization follows from the single gulp characterization. For a single gulp intellect, the actuality of its object coincides with the totality of the object’s possibilities: to grasp something in a single gulp is for all its possibilities to be actual, made present to the unlimited intuition of an infinite intellect. Accordingly, the single gulp intellect is a form of intellect that has no place for a distinction between the actual and possible.

One consequence of this is that the infinite intellect, however penetrating, is in no position to do grammatical investigation. In a well-known passage, Wittgenstein says: “We feel as if we had to *see right into* phenomena: yet our investigation is directed not towards *phenomena*, but rather, as one might say, towards the ‘*possibilities*’ of phenomena” (*PI* §90). Contrasting our form of understanding to that of a single gulp intellect is a reminder that the distinction between the actual and the possible *does* enter into the representation of the human intellect. Whether any form of understanding that does not appreciate this distinction is truly intelligible is a difficult question (to which I will briefly return in conclusion). What is clear, at any rate, is that any being bereft of the distinction would not engage in the philosophical enterprise of directing itself toward the possibilities of (actual) phenomena.

I have so far argued that Wittgenstein’s remarks on understanding as an ability belong in opposition to a broadly Cartesian position according to which understanding consists of a mental

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state or state of consciousness. I have further argued that Wittgenstein depicts our understanding as finite, in contrast to the comprehensive intuitive power of the infinite intellect. Let me now turn to Heidegger.

5. While the issue of mental states is a target in *Being and Time*, it is certainly not pursued in the unrelenting (ever returning) manner one finds in Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. In the preface to that book, Wittgenstein announces the subjects that have occupied him in the form of short list, which include the concepts of "understanding" and "states of consciousness."

Heidegger's introduction of the concept of understanding, by contrast, is set within the context of reawakening the question of the sense of being. Indeed, the whole idea of the inner, the private, or the hidden gets nothing close to the attention in Heidegger's work that it enjoys in Wittgenstein's confessional *tête-à-tête*. Heidegger is simply not all that gripped by problems around the idea of a mental state.

The most sustained critical discussion of Descartes in *Being and Time* concerns his conception of space, and his conception of the world as *res extensa*. Of course part of the moral about Descartes' inadequate conception of the world is that if meaning is always already in the world, as Heidegger's phenomenology suggests, you don't need an inner space of mentality to "cook it up." And there are some appearances of Cartesianism in philosophical psychology, mostly as a fly to be swatted away. Heidegger's dismissal, in the provisional stages of the book, of the idea of the human as a "cabinet of consciousness" is one such (*BT* 62/89), followed by several reminders throughout the Division I account of being-in-the-world (e.g., *BT* 136–37/176 and 165/205). In Division II, the Dilthey-Husserl notion of an *Erlebnis* is sufficiently prominent in his tradition that Heidegger finds it necessary to guard against his idea of the voice of

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conscience being construed as an inner *Erlebnis*, hence: “[T]he phenomenological structure of existing is not anything like experiencing” (BT 279/324).

However, Heidegger’s resistance to Cartesianism in philosophical psychology is eclipsed, or rather finds its place within, Heidegger’s resistance to Cartesianism *in ontology*. His primary target is not the the idea of understanding as a mental state but rather the Cartesian conception of the *subject* of understanding. According to this conception, the subject is a *res*, a special kind of *thing*—an entity whose mode of being is *Vorhandensein*. The modern fascination with consciousness and inner psychological conditions, on Heidegger’s view, is ultimately one expression of a deeper ontological commitment to the subject of understanding as a present-at-hand thing.

Identifying this level of engagement with Cartesian philosophy puts us in a position to see the sense in which Heidegger in fact seeks to *recover* a certain form of Cartesian thinking about understanding. This is the Cartesianism that, with the *cogito ergo sum*, rightly took what Heidegger calls “the turn to the subject” (BP 123; cf. BT 24/45), but neglected to make the *sum* an issue. Hence the following introductory characterization of the project: “Our analytic raises the ontological question of the being of the ‘*sum*.’ Not until the nature of this Being has been determined can we grasp the kind of Being which belongs to *cogitationes*” (BT 46/71–72).

Heidegger’s idea of understanding as an ability, then, has its place in this broader investigation of what it means for Dasein, for the subject who understands, *to be*.^{iv}

6. Being “is,” as Heidegger makes clear, the intelligibility of what is. *This* is the notion of being that interests Heidegger (BT 152/193). “Entity” (*Seiend*) is Heidegger’s term of art for that which is, all and only what there is: “[E]verything we talk about, everything we have in view, everything towards which we comport ourselves in any way” (BT 6–7/26). “Being” (*Sein*) is thus

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“that which determines entities as entities, that on the basis of which entities are already understood (*verstanden*)” (*BT* 6/25–26). The question, then, asks about what it takes to understand entities *as* entities, that is, what it takes to make sense of them in terms of their being.

The use of “as” here is meant to mark a contrast. Lizards and, for example, babies obviously interact with entities in all sorts of ways—and in the case of lizards, in all sorts of quite agile ways. But they do not, Heidegger must confess, comport toward entities *as* entities. Heidegger says if we use the “as” with lizards, we need to qualify the “as” by putting a line through it, as if to cross it out. The difference that makes the difference between we who are *Dasein* and the lizards, in Heidegger’s view, is the possession of ontological understanding. And his question is: what does it take to have *that*?

To be a *Dasein*, then, is to be a sense-maker, to understand being. *Dasein*’s understanding of being (*Seinsverständnis*) is a capacity or an ability, a *Können*. This, however, is not one ability among others that *Dasein* might happen peculiarly to have. For unlike being able to tie one’s shoes or being able to speak (say) English, understanding being is an ability that is definitive of *Dasein* as the kind of entity that it is. Hence Heidegger’s characterization of this fundamental ability not as an ability one “has” but as an “ability-to-be” (*Seinkönnen*).

So what is it to understand the being of an entity? To understand the being of an entity (including oneself) is to understand the ways that entity can be—and no less, cannot be. Heidegger characterizes the understanding at issue as the projection of entities onto their possibilities.^v Heidegger: “In the projecting of the understanding, entities are disclosed in their possibility” (*BT* 151/192). This understanding is a matter of appreciating what is possible and not possible with the actual entities toward which it comports. More precisely, the human adult comports itself toward entities *as* actual or real thanks to understanding the possibilities in terms

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of which those entities are what they are, and whether they are. This prior understanding makes possible, in the sense of enables, comportment toward entities as entities.

We can approach Heidegger's conception of ontological understanding by reminding ourselves that we, unlike lizards and babies, hold things to standards.^{vi} Consider the following two examples to illustrate the phenomenon. To be a hammer is to be able, when well wielded, to drive in nails (among other things). The field of possibilities for being a hammer has developed through history by human agents engaging in the practice of carpentry. If one picks up a hammer to discover it wilt like a flower, one has been taken in. It is a gimmick, or maybe a work of art. The "hammer" is flouting the functional standards that make hammers what they are, and so *could not* be a real hammer. Those who understand carpentry, and so make sense of hammers *as* hammers, appreciate this fake hammer for what it is, and would acknowledge its unreality if challenged. To be a real or actual hammer, after all, is to accord with certain ontological, in this case, functional, standards.

Or take a more generic example: To be an ordinary perceptible thing is to behave in more or less stable and predictable ways. The "laws" of ordinary medium-sized things lay out the field of possibilities for being such things. For example, if one were to see an object, say a rock, that pops in and out of existence before one's eyes, something would be awry, and would be recognized as such by any competent perceiver. The "rock" would be flouting the standards of substantial independence and persistence that hold for objects, and so *could not* be any such thing. Those who understand objects, and so make sense of them as such, would find themselves compelled in this situation to look again, and might very well worry that they have been drugged. For to be an ordinary perceptible thing is to accord with certain ontological standards.

To appear in *Wittgenstein and Heidegger* (Routledge, 2013) eds. D. Egan, S. Reynolds, and A. Wendland

Heidegger is suggesting then, with great plausibility, that entities must “live up” to standards in order to count as being. Such standards are accordingly ontological standards, standards concerning what it is for entities *to be* as opposed to *not* being. Ontological standards are, one might say, the “ground rules” of the real. To comport toward actual entities oriented by the standards that frame their possibilities—an orientation without which, Heidegger claims, there would be no comportment toward entities *as* entities—is to understand being. The ability to appreciate, and look after, the distinction between the being and non-being of entities is what constitutes human understanding.

7. We can draw out this conception of ontological understanding by considering Wittgenstein’s case of the disappearing chair at *PI* §80. Wittgenstein starts the imaginary scenario with: “I say, ‘There is a chair over there.’” This utterance is, for Heidegger, a paradigmatic case of comportment toward an entity *as an entity*—that little word “is” expresses our understanding of being in action. Wittgenstein continues:

What if I go to fetch it, and it suddenly disappears from sight? — “So it wasn’t a chair, but some kind of illusion.” — But a few seconds later, we see it again and are able to touch it, and so on. — “So the chair was there after all, and its disappearance was some kind of illusion.” — But suppose that after a time it disappears again—or seems to disappear. What are we to say now? Have you rules ready for such cases—rules saying whether such a thing is still to be called a “chair”? But do we miss them when we use the word “chair”? And are we to say that we do not really attach any meaning to this word, because we are not equipped with rules for every possible application of it? (*PI* §80)

Wittgenstein's concern with the temptation to picture our life with language in terms of the single gulp intellect—always already equipped with rules for every possible application—is here on display. The strategy in the passage is to present a case in which, according to Wittgenstein's implied answers to his questions, we don't quite know what to say about whether the word "chair" is appropriate for this kind of thing. Realizing that we don't miss a rule for this strange case in our more ordinary uses of the word "chair" is, I take it, supposed to help disabuse us of the idea that genuinely understanding or meaning the word "chair" requires being equipped with rules for every possible case.^{vii}

How would Heidegger respond to Wittgenstein's questions in the passage? As I read him, his answer to Wittgenstein's first question would in fact be "yes," we do have a rule for this case (though talk of rules is not Heidegger's idiom). Supposing the use of the word "chair" at issue is the application of a concept to an object, purporting to home in on something in the world, a *real* chair, one way to put the rule would be: One doesn't use the word "chair" to pick out something that *could not* be a chair. For to be a chair is to accord with the standards that hold for chairs as such—the kind of thing one can sit in, like *this*. To comport toward chairs *as* chairs, to understand them in terms of their being, is to be prepared to rule this disappearing "chair" out as a genuine chair.

Does this mean that Heidegger is insisting that we are equipped in advance with *every* possible application of the concept of chair? Understanding chairs, Heidegger suggests, is a form of commitment to the bounds of possibility for being an actual chair. However, to possess this understanding is not to close off any possible novelty or vertigo in our life with chairs. Heidegger is not insisting that we are possessed of a single gulp intellect. We do not, in one

To appear in *Wittgenstein and Heidegger* (Routledge, 2013) eds. D. Egan, S. Reynolds, and A. Wendland

single stroke, take all things in chair-wise. Heidegger's answers to Wittgenstein's questions, then, do not amount to denying the finitude of understanding that primarily preoccupies Wittgenstein. Heidegger firmly acknowledges the partiality and unfinishedness of human understanding (see *BT* §68 (a)).

But Heidegger *does* urge that, in so far as we are onto chairs as chairs, we hold chairs within the space of possibilities for being a chair. The relevant notion of the whole here is not the whole of *every* possible application. The whole, rather, is the framework in terms of which chairs are intelligible as chairs—in terms of which, that is, the otherwise unpredictable and dynamic life of chairs takes its course. This prior orientation, on Heidegger's view, far from closing our engagement with things down, is what *enables* our openness to things—hence his characterization of understanding as “fore-structure” (*BT* 150/191). This prior orientation does not preclude the possibility of contexts, real or imagined, in which we encounter something for which it is not clear whether “chair” is the right word.^{viii} Nor does it preclude a context of conversation in which using “chair” to refer to the disappearing chair might find of a kind of figurative, or playful, or hallucinogenic use. The claim is that the intelligibility of any such use presupposes the basic case in which chairs, *actual* chairs, are understood to be the kind of thing that they are: the kind of thing, for example, one can reliably sit on. Heidegger says:

In German we say someone can *vorstehen* something—literally stand in front or ahead of it, that is, stand at its head, administer, manage, preside over it. This is equivalent to saying that he *versteht sich darauf*, understands in the sense of being skilled or expert at it (has the know-how of it). . . . If understanding is a basic determination of existence, it is as such the condition of the

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possibility for all of the Dasein's particular manners of comportment, not only practical but also cognitive. . . . Dasein, as existent, is itself an intrinsically understanding entity. (*BP* 276)

I cite this passage to register Heidegger's link between *vorstehen* (to preside) and *verstehen* (to understand). In colloquial German a *Vorstehe* (noun form) is, for example, the foreman on a construction site, the one who presides over the whole workspace. A *Vorstand* (different nominalization) is a presiding committee, like a board of directors, that is responsible for the whole of a company. In Heidegger's vision of us as understanding beings, understanding is the ability to orient oneself within a whole—a unified space of possibilities—in terms of which entities make sense as the entities that they are. And those of us possessed of this understanding are, one might say, “in the business” of looking after, or sustaining, the whole space of intelligibility in which we find ourselves. We are all (each of us), in Heidegger's picture, foremen, or custodians, of intelligibility.^{ix}

8. What, then, does it mean for the subject possessed of such ontological understanding to *be*? What consequences of the foregoing are to be drawn out, rather than neglected, regarding the *sum* of the *I understand*? How does all this put us in a position to offer an adequate ontology of the subject?

Here we are in a position to turn to Heidegger's conception of the finitude of understanding. Heidegger considered Kant's distinction between finite sensible intuition and infinite intuition a decisive insight. But the sense of the infinite intellect that Heidegger focused on is not the single gulp characterization, but rather the productive characterization. Whereas an infinite intellect, as the source of its objects, is wholly self-sufficient, a finite intellect is

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dependent on existing objects that are *other* than it and *already there*. Expounding Kant, Heidegger says:

The finitude of human cognition does not lie in humans' cognizing quantitatively less than God. Rather, it consists in the fact that what is intuited must be given to intuition from somewhere else—what is intuited is not produced by intuition. The finitude of human cognition consists in being thrown into and onto entities. (*PIK 59/GA 25*, 86; translation modified)

Heidegger proceeds to appropriate this Kantian distinction as a notional contrast. His interest is not at all in the question of whether a divine intellect possessed of infinite intuition actually exists. Nor is the interest in whether we are required to postulate a divine intellect by the demands of reason in either its theoretical or practical application (or both). And the interest is not in measuring the power of a finite intellect according to a standard set by a divine intellect. Heidegger's primary interest in the Kantian distinction lies in its promise as a kind of explanatory contrast, that is, an illuminating *entrée* into appreciating the basic metaphysical condition of human understanding.^x The condition of divine understanding is to produce or create its objects, and thereby be conditioned by nothing other than itself; its condition is to be unconditioned. The condition of human understanding, by contrast, is to be dependent on, and therewith conditioned by, objects that exist independently of it.

Kantian finitude, so understood has to do with objects in our relation to them. Heidegger wants to place Kantian finitude in this sense within a more comprehensive finitude, a finitude to do with being and our understanding of it. For Kant, the basic framework of possibilities for making sense of the world is fixed and invulnerable. The contours of intelligibility delivered by

To appear in *Wittgenstein and Heidegger* (Routledge, 2013) eds. D. Egan, S. Reynolds, and A. Wendland critique are advertised as “complete” and “certain” (*CPR* A13). The fragility of ontological understanding—the liability of the basic possibilities in terms of which things make sense to failure—is foreign to Kant’s thought. The finitude of death, in other words, has no official place in Kant’s thought.

Death, in Heidegger’s systematic ontology, marks a sense of radical futurity characteristic of existence, and therewith characteristic of human understanding. Death is officially the “horizon,” in the sense of limitedness, of understanding. While Heidegger is not the first to draw a constitutive link between death and human understanding—Hegel is one notorious predecessor—no philosopher has given death a more fundamental place. By “death” Heidegger does not mean biological death or croaking (“perishing”). Nor does he mean the biographical death of the obituary (“demise”). Death is no impending storm, for it is not an event at all: “[Dasein] does not have an end at which it just stops, but it *exists finitely*” (*BT* 329/378). Death for Dasein is “a way to be, which Dasein takes over as soon as it is” (*BT* 245/289).

Death, that is, is no more and no less than “being-towards-death.” To be toward death is to live in a manner that is oriented by the possibility of one’s own impossibility, the possibility of “no-longer-being-able-to-be-there” (*BT* 250/294). Being *able* to be there, in Heidegger’s technical use of that phrase, is being able to render the entities *there*, in the world, intelligible in their being. So the possibility of one’s own impossibility—the possibility of being *unable* to be—is the possibility of the comprehensive breakdown of the understanding in terms of which entities make sense. This would coincide with a breakdown in one’s self-understanding. For the shape of who one is, the sense of one’s life as meaningful, is given by the possibilities of making sense that one’s ontological understanding makes available. Death, then, is the essentially threatened character of human understanding. The threat is one of unintelligibility, of a

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wholesale failure or loss of sense. To be *toward* death is to live in the acknowledgment of the *fragility* of the understanding embodied in one's form of life. Heidegger characterizes this fragility as the possibility of having to "take it back," to "give up" on one's ontological understanding, rather than sustain allegiance to it as a basis for pressing on (*BT* 308/355 and 391/443). Death, so understood, is the *riskiness* of any understanding embodied in a form of life: any projection of a space of possibilities for making sense of things stands *exposed* to being disabled by the course of a recalcitrant reality, and hence brought down as a sustainable form of understanding. So the ontological understanding that enables our engagement with entities is an ability that, paradoxically, affords an openness to encounter the materials for its own undermining.

From the finitude that Kant rests content with, the finitude of intuition, there is but a short step to the finitude of death. This is so even if death, so construed, does not figure in Kant's thought. Kantian finitude as contrasted with the infinitude of the productive intellect is in effect the recognition of the distinction between the sensibility through which objects are intuitively given and the understanding that thinks those objects. An intellect for which there is no such distinction is an intellect for which the distinction between the possible and the actual does not apply. The latter distinction "would not enter into the representation of such a being at all" (to return to the negative modal characterization of the infinite intellect introduced in section 4). After all, for such an intellect, to think something possible just is for that something to be actual; the realm of the possible and the realm of the real coincide. Since anything that is thought possible is thereby *guaranteed* to be actual, there is no sense to actuality *thwarting* this intellect's sense of the space of possibilities. And since the productive intellect is not in a position to be thus threatened by unintelligibility, the burden of its possibility is not to be shouldered. Things

To appear in *Wittgenstein and Heidegger* (Routledge, 2013) eds. D. Egan, S. Reynolds, and A. Wendland

are otherwise for the finite intellect, for whom the distinction between the recognizably possible and the actual, and the threat that distinction engenders, is, in Heidegger's vision, the medium of its existence. This is the finitude of a being bent on a sustainably intelligible form of life, and so uniquely capable of fundamental change.

9. Wittgenstein's conception of the finitude of our understanding, its partiality, is shaped by a contrast to the infinite intellect, cast as a single gulp intellect. We saw how a comprehensive intuiting leaves no room for the distinction between the actual and the possible. Heidegger's conception of the finitude of our understanding, its liability to transformative reconfiguration, is shaped by a contrast to the infinite intellect, understood as a productive intuition. Here too, the distinction between the actual and the possible finds no place. The single gulp power of intuition is logically distinct from the productive power of intuition, but either power is sufficient, on its own, to efface the distinction between the actual and the possible. Producing objects and intuiting objects as a whole in one stroke of course come together in the traditional idea of God. And just as the divine intellect, cast as a single gulp intellect, may "see right into" phenomena, but is in no position to do grammatical investigation, Heidegger puts his correlative point, about the divine intellect's productive power, as follows: "God does not do ontology" (*KPM* 318).

Can we really make sense of these infinite powers? For Heidegger, one might think, there is some pressure for productive intuition indeed to make sense. After all, it is meant to serve as one side of a contrast that helps illuminate the finitude of human understanding. For Wittgenstein, one might think, the fact that the power of single gulp intuition functions largely as an object of temptation, or fantasy, lessens the demand for it to be a coherent possibility. But the first thought may overestimate the demands of Heidegger's explanatory contrast, or at least the

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sense that can be made of an infinite intellect by the end of the investigation, while the second thought may underestimate Wittgenstein's sense of the power of the temptations to which he gives voice. These are difficult issues, and must be left for another occasion. This much, however, seems clear: If appreciating the distinction between the possible and the actual, as both Heidegger and Wittgenstein suggest, is fundamental to any recognizably human understanding of things, then the very idea of an infinite intellect, even if coherent, could doubtfully serve as our measure.^{xi}

ⁱ This sense of the infinite intellect is prominent in §77 of Kant's ([1790] 2001) *Critique of the Power of Judgment*. I have formulated this sense sufficiently liberally to allow for its object to be "all things" (as in the traditional notion of the divine intellect) or, more limitedly, a comprehensive grasp of a determinate object of cognition (for example, what it is to be a chair). For a discussion of Kant's different senses of the powers of an infinite intellect, and the claim that they do not cohere, see Gram 1981. The "single gulp" intuition has a long history in classical rationalist philosophy, from Descartes' clear and distinct perception, to Leibniz's "adequate" cognition, to Spinoza's *scientia intuitiva*.

ⁱⁱ This is the style of reading one finds in the work of G. P. Baker and P. M. S Hacker, and Bede Rundle. See Baker and Hacker 2005, 367, and Rundle 2001, 110.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is a style of reading one finds in the work of John McDowell, most recently in McDowell 2009, as well as in Finkelstein (2003).

^{iv} Would Wittgenstein recognize sense in such a question? The closest analogue to his vicinity would be something like: What does it mean to be a speaker? One suspects that Wittgenstein would hear this as one of those big metaphysical questions that needs dissolving, not solving.

^v See especially §31 and §32 of *Being and Time*.

^{vi} For a reading of the Heidegger of *Being and Time* centered on this notion of understanding, see Haugeland (forthcoming).

^{vii} Compare Warren Goldfarb (1997), who reads the disappearing chair passage as a brief against what he calls the fixity of meaning, following Wittgenstein's own discussion of "fixed meaning" (*feste Bedeutung*) in the preceding section.

^{viii} If to provoke such hesitation is the point of Wittgenstein's disappearing chair scenario, then the example Wittgenstein offers, so presented, is not convincing for the point he is trying to make. Cavell's case of the saddle peg chair strikes me as a better case to provoke such hesitation (see Cavell 1979, 71).

^{ix} On Heidegger's notion of understanding as correlated with a unified space of possibilities, see *BT* 145/184.

^x Heidegger: "The essence of finite human knowledge is illustrated by the contrast between it and the idea of infinite divine knowledge, or *intuitus originarius*" (*KPM* 17).

^{xi} Earlier versions of this paper were presented to audiences at the Post-Kantian European Philosophy Seminar in Oxford and the 2012 meeting of the International Society of Phenomenological Studies in Maine. I am grateful to both audiences for their questions and reactions. Special thanks to the editors of this volume for their helpful comments and suggestions, and to David Cerbone, Max Edwards, and Adrian Moore for instructive conversation.