Doing What We Do and Saying What We Say

Heidegger, Wittgenstein and servility

by David Wemyss (January 2014)

In his early masterpiece, *Being and Time*, Heidegger begins by introducing an apparently trite but ultimately earth-shattering idea. It's this: *human beings do what they do, and say what they say.* They have virtually no capacity to do or say more. Of course imaginative and clever people do and say imaginative and clever things – but still only the things they do and say.

Suppose that in response to the evening scents of a summer garden you threw yourself face first into the freshly watered soil of the flower beds. People would think you were crazy. You don't do that. It's just not what you do. But you could take your wife's hand and place it gently on the soil, encouraging her to keep it there for a moment – like a little sacrament. When a certain kind of thing is 'just not done,' you can still draw closer to it. But it takes skill. A bit of style.

Likewise, when you imagine that you haven't said what you needed to say in order to feel that the 'real' you is at hand – or that a conversational baton hasn't been taken out of your hand seamlessly enough and that the 'real' you is somehow absent as a result – you simply can't control the situation. But the baton is sometimes passed on after all – if one of the speakers can make an intuitive move that's skilful enough to allow our 'unfreedom' to open up a bit.

This is the very antithesis of the Cartesian assumption that the world falls to be interpreted by subjects looking out upon it – and looking in upon themselves. Instead we get something like crude behaviourism. Everything boils down to a chronic conformity – but the slender exceptions are almost miraculous.

And we have to let it be. We can't coerce it. Indeed, a Heidegger scholar would remind me that nowhere does Heidegger suggest that primitive or unmediated thinking (or speech) is in some way the metaphysically 'correct' way for Being to show itself. Chronic conformity seems to be made of the same stuff as the unprepared mind that differs from it. *We do what we do and say what we say* – except when a fissure shows itself.

For Heidegger, human beings are immersed in the world long before they ask philosophical

questions about it – and their questions show how much they've forgotten their immersion. For example, if someone says that existence is a queer or uncanny thing, a bit like looking out of a window for a few years before the window just disappears – but also a bit like *being* the window too – we feel much more comfortable with the first analogy. The second one seems to underestimate our individuality.

Yet the window *is* a better analogy than that of a spectator looking out of it. We shouldn't place the mind on one side and the world on the other. But of course the idea that you're more like a sentient window than an autonomous spectator is an idea that could be called transcendental – or murderous. Transcendental because an infinitesimally small flake of being and time is experiencing itself as it truly is, with its language-use restored to its indigenous immediacy – but yet murderous because the cash value is that human life might conceivably no longer seem to matter very much, and certainly not in terms of our modern assumptions about human rights.

Heidegger is unmoved. He thinks these assumptions gain strength from our drift towards more and more spectatorship – and more and more spectatorship leads to the constant interpretation of the world as if we weren't already in it.

So we see existence as an investment – and tell ourselves we'll get the best return on a portfolio of ***social imperatives.*** The world is ours to plan and redesign in terms of desirable ***outcomes.*** These outcomes will be useful, ***efficient,*** and ***not wasteful.*** In managerial phrases – and it's no accident that the language is managerial – people say that ***social justice*** will be ***driven up*** by ***performance targets*** to achieve ***continuous improvement.***

When I realised at the turn of the 21st century that almost all public language was going to sound like this within ten years, it sank in for the first time that this was why Heidegger had ended up contesting nothing less than *humanism itself.* Not only that; he also looked at Hitler and National Socialism and imagined he was seeing a corrective. And, in my thinking through of all of this, something stirred. A kind of political errancy settled over me.

But I couldn't have been drawn further in. My fascination was with restoring language-use to an indigenous immediacy, whereas Heidegger seemed to be looking for a wildly extravagant way of imagining the restoration being locked into place – even at the expense of our autonomous individuality (which he didn't think existed anyway).

So *the illusion of* individuality and human dignity was to be subsumed within our historicity – with the intention that an indigenous immediacy in speech would not only be released but also

culturally safeguarded. However the field of expression of Heidegger's immediacy was limited. One recalls his extraordinary romanticising of Bavarian farmers – slow and strong and silent, in tune with the seasons and the land – in the 1934 radio broadcast *'Why Do I Stay in the Provinces?'* Or one might think of the Nuremberg Rallies – horrifying and slavish, but uncontaminated by nitpicking or quibbling.

And then there was the notorious speech to 'German Students' in November 1933 at Freiburg University:

> *Let not propositions and 'ideas' be the rules of your being. The Führer alone is the present and future German reality and its law. Learn to know ever more deeply that from now on every single thing demands decision, and every action responsibility. Heil Hitler!*

Now the thought of Wittgenstein saying that is absurd. His conception of immediacy in speech can never be culturally safeguarded. He would *never* have meant anything like that.

Or would he?

When you first read Wittgenstein you may well think he means the opposite of what he actually means. After all, you'll probably have heard about the Tractatus – language is a kind of *picturing* – and how the later philosophy is totally different, with language now seen as a kind of *game*, played in – wait for it – *immediacy.* That's stage 1. Stage 2 is when you pick up on the idea that the two bodies of work may not be so different after all. Stage 3 is when you realise how wild the late stuff really is – pretty well completely counter-intuitive compared with our everyday assumptions.

You'll want to tell people that you've discovered the philosophical holy grail.

This however will not go well. *They* won't get it – and you'll soon begin to feel that *you're* in danger of losing it. Wittgenstein himself said he was trying to repair a spider's web with his fingers. How can there not be thoughts in our head when we're speaking? It's crazy. But then, at stage 4, you suddenly begin to see that there *are* usually thoughts in your head when you're speaking – just as everyone believes – *but that they don't have to be there.*

We put them there ourselves. After thousands of years of human language-use, the *de facto* anthropological truth is that we often 'think and speak' at the same time – and take it for granted that this is the norm.

For example, I'm very familiar with the feeling of speaking to a committee and thinking 'this is not going well.' *And the two things happen at the same time.* So, clearly, if I can have a thought while I'm speaking that *isn't* the same thing as I'm saying, it's easy to imagine that I can have a thought while I'm speaking that *is* the same thing.

Possibly non-verbal, possibly not.

Many would suggest that the commonplace occurrence here is surely that speech translates concomitant or marginally antecedent mental events – events bearing an equivalence of some sort to the meaning of the words uttered. And of course other events *of the same kind* might be occurring – but *not* getting translated into words.

Accordingly, I could have mental event X going on in my head – and getting translated as I speak to the committee – while mental event Y could also be going on in my head – 'this is not going well' – but *not* getting translated. Could *both* get translated – be spoken out loud – if our mouths and throats were structured differently?

Or if our *brains* were different?

As Wittgenstein says, there's something fishy here. He can hardly deny that the experience of speech can co-exist to a greater or lesser extent with an awareness of its meaning being fastened down – as if a tarpaulin were being secured on the deck of a ship in a storm at sea – but he also wants to keep hold of the conviction that this 'tarpaulin feeling' is not always there – *and that it feels good when it isn't.*

So the 'tarpaulin feeling' is neither logically necessary nor innate. We don't *have to be* thinking when we speak, even if we usually are. The content of the reasoning that allows us to behave intelligibly every moment of every day is not being disallowed but displaced. For example, the content of my reasoning as I explain to my wife why I didn't paint the fence will be impossibly complicated – but where is it to be found? How can access be taken to it? Was it rehearsed in my mind when I decided not to get the paint out? If I rehearse it again now, by way of placating my wife, why do I feel as if I'm rehearsing it for the first time – and that it may be more like a set of intelligible ideas than the retrieval of ideas I had had earlier?

When I tell her why the fence remains unpainted, my explanation may well be plausible – but did I actually have the thoughts which I attribute to myself thereby? And could the situation feel different depending on the choices I make? For example, if I say I can't actually tell her why I didn't do the job, but that a set of regularities in my behaviour might allow a plausible inference to be made, it could well *feel* better – but then she might says she's sick

of living in a *ménage-a-trois* with Wittgenstein.

But a lot of things *do* get rehearsed in our minds. We say ‘I remember thinking that very thing.’ And there’s no reason to doubt it. But it’s just one strand of experience among many.

How long could two interlocutors speak to each other without either of them rehearsing the content of the reasoning that must be ‘in’ the history of each of them? How long could they conduct a conversation that was more or less immediate – with no ‘tarpaulin experience’ felt – before one or both sensed the tarpaulin being fastened down again? Ten minutes? Obviously, five or ten or twenty or forty is not the point. The point is that *this is what it’s like.* It can change in seconds, and change back again just as quickly.

So – are people who don’t ever sense the tarpaulin loosening *less human* than those who do?

Heidegger wouldn’t say less human, of course. He’s not even *trying* to be ‘human.’

Wittgenstein might say it though. He often felt that ordinary people seemed barely human, even disgusting. It’s one of the things that cause people to imagine he might have been a cultural pessimist to the point of active conservatism.

But I think we’re going to have to give up on that one. A separate essay might look more closely at how we could ever have imagined such a thing.

In the meantime, though, we’re talking about a *fin-de-siecle* Viennese intellectual with an aristocratic background and a crazy upbringing who ended up in Cambridge saying he was going to be an aeronaut unless Bertrand Russell told him he was clever enough to be a philosopher.

Russell of course quickly confirmed that on no account should he be an aeronaut, and the quintessential philosophical genius was up and running. After a world-historical contribution to symbolic logic in a book that ended with a flurry of gnomic quasi-religious remarks, he slowly shifted his ground to develop the kind of questioning outlined in the paragraphs above.

He also fitted in Tolstoyan angst and heroism in the First World War, months in a hut overlooking the Sognefiord in Norway, an attempt at being a country schoolteacher back in Austria, distaste for what he saw as the corrupt chatter at High Table in Cambridge, genuine enthusiasms for American pulp detective novels and Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, a bid for anonymity as a hospital porter in Newcastle during the Second World War, and much more besides.

He didn’t care about money, property or rank. He hated theatricality or affectation and told

students to go and do something useful like work in Woolworths. He struggled with the sense of ‘not being a religious man but seeing every problem from a religious point of view.’ Religion, needless to say, meant the likes of Kierkegaard and Dostoyevsky – and of course Tolstoy again. The end came at sixty-two with one of the killer lines in the European cultural tradition of ‘the good death.’

‘*Tell them I’ve had a wonderful life.*’

When he surely hadn’t.

But then again he did say that we weren’t here to have a good time.

Here are three quotes –

> *(1) ‘The hysterical fear over the atom bomb being experienced, or at any rate expressed, by the public almost suggests that at last something really salutary has been invented. The fright at least gives the impression of a really effective bitter medicine. I can’t help thinking: If this didn’t have something good about it the philistines wouldn’t be making an outcry. But perhaps this too is a childish idea. Because really all I can mean is that the bomb offers a prospect of the end, the destruction, of an evil – our disgusting soapy water science. And certainly that’s not an unpleasant thought, but who can say what would come after this destruction? The people making speeches against producing the bomb are undoubtedly the scum of the intellectuals, but even that does not prove beyond question that what they abominate is to be welcomed.*
>
> *(2) ‘I believe that bad housekeeping within the state fosters bad housekeeping in families. A workman who is constantly ready to go on strike will not bring up his children to respect order either.’*
>
> *(3) ‘The child is wicked, but nobody teaches it to be any different and its parents spoil it with their stupid affection.’*

You could be forgiven for thinking that all of that confirms the old impression that Wittgenstein was temperamentally religious, unable to make the move into faith, culturally pessimistic – and a conservative of the apolitical type.

But the quotes can quickly take on a different hue. In (1) ‘our disgusting soapy water science’ is disgusting because *scientism* compares badly with the dignity – and *immediacy* – of manual work. But Wittgenstein isn’t just keen on people working with their hands – he’s keen on work that makes unmediated sense in a community especially characterised by its deeply

shared assumptions *[Gemeinschaft].*

The purpose of honest work should be able to be explained to anyone. How many of us today can tell our friends and family what we actually do for a living? And how many of us are sure that what we do is fundamentally important?

Wittgenstein could have romanticised Heidegger's Bavarian farmers too.

Also, as a separate issue, we shouldn't assume (as we would today) that someone welcoming the atomic bomb – and talking about 'the scum of the [pacifist] intellectuals' – must surely be right-wing.

Meanwhile in quotation (2) a workman constantly ready to go on strike would have been uncongenial to Stalin as much as to Margaret Thatcher. And in (3) the suggestion that parents have no sacrosanct role *vis-à-vis* their children is a suggestion to which Stalin – again – would have warmed.

And all through the thirties and early forties Wittgenstein expressed sympathy for the Soviet regime so clearly that he was assumed by quite a few people in Cambridge to be some sort of Stalinist. No doubt he was attracted by the Russia of Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy more than by Marxism – one thinks in particular of Platon Karataev in *War and Peace* – but he also quite clearly excused Stalin his crimes on the grounds of the immensity of the Soviet project. He was no 'useful fool' though. He knew what was going on. In fact he even said that he wasn't disturbed by the thought of oppression.

> *'The important thing is that the people have work – tyranny doesn't make me feel indignant.'*

In