Wittgenstein and Heidegger: on Use

It is well-known that since the end of the 1970's, a prolific tradition of comparison has undertaken to highlight the similitudes between the work of those two major contemporary philosophers that are Wittgenstein and Heidegger. To present it shortly, we could say that a first wave of comparison has consisted in reading Heidegger using a set of "pragmatic" Wittgensteinian intuitions. Richard Rorty for instance has undertaken to underline some "pragmatics" intuitions in Heidegger from a Wittgensteinian point of view in his *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* from 1979 and in his some important papers. Charles Taylor's *Philosophical Papers* from 1985 and *Philosophical Arguments* from 1995 and above all Hubert Dreyfus's 1991 *Being-in-the-World* take place in a similar move. There work had a huge influence on numerous Heidegger's scholars like John Haugeland and Robert Brandom (to be very selective).

Apart from this fist wave of comparison, it is also possible to distinguish a second historical wave of comparison which undertook to read Wittgenstein from a Heideggerian point of view. As an example, I could mention Stanley Cavell's (especially in his *Voice of Reason* from 1979 or in his work about Emerson) and Stephen Mulhall's more recent work.

But my today purpose is not to analyse the history of this comparison. I would rather focus on one of the argument traditionally used for justifying the comparison between Wittgenstein and Heidegger: the way both philosophers deal with the notion of "use". It seems obvious that Heidegger, like Wittgenstein, pay indeed attention to our daily environment of use which determines our ordinary practices. However I seek to show that the two approaches differ profoundly in their understanding of what such a "use" is. In doing so, I hope to underline the importance of the ontological dimension of Heidegger's phenomenology and, on the contrary, to cast a new light on Wittgenstein's method, and particularly on the famous thesis of the *Philosophical Investigations* §43: "the meaning of a word is its use in the language". (quotation 1)

I will start with the analyse of Heidegger's way of dealing with the notion of "use".

As early as in his first Freiburg Lessons, Heidegger asserts that life relates to its world of concern not in a theoretical way but in a way which is commensurate to what life needs. In the famous analysis included in Heidegger's 1919 *Kriegsnotsemester* §14, Heidegger shows that the perception of every object – of an academic "pulpit" in his example – depends on *how* it is perceived: in different ways according to which the perceiver *uses* it. (That is the second quotation of the hand-out. It is a German one because I didn't find the English version)

Against Husserl, Heidegger argues that the "pulpit" that I perceive cannot be reduced to a theoretical object that I have to describe as having such and such properties (as coloured, squared and so on…). According to Heidegger, I see the "pulpit" *as used* as a pulpit, that means that I do not see at first a brown pulpit but I immediately *understand* that it is professor pulpit that as to be used for teaching, that it is to high for my small size, to far from the microphone, etc. So, in 1919, Heidegger introduces already the idea that the experience of perception is always "oriented" in a "background" of primary (pre-linguistic) signification. Before seeing the pulpit, I understand how it has to be used. Conversely, if I do not understand the sense of its determining background (the seminar room), I will understand differently how to use it. Heidegger famously mentioned the case of the Black-Forest farmer or of the native Senegalese: both would not use and then not understand similarly the pulpit. They would think that it is a protection wall against arrows or anything else but the main point, according to Heidegger, is that they will always think that it has a meaning that depends from the way it will be used: in any case, their perception of the pulpit will depend on how they could understand and use it. As a consequence, Heidegger points out that our relations to our everyday environment are *use* relations.

More fundamentally, in the first chapters of his 1927 *Being and Time*, Heidegger suggests to generalise the category of "use" considering that all the "readiness-to-hand" (*Zuhandenheit*) with which the *Dasein* deals has to be compared to *Zeuge*, that is to "stuff", or to what the French translators translate as "tools". It means that the *Dasein* relates to *all* wordly stuff as something which can be used. According to Heidegger, the *Dasein* uses chairs but also classroom, university, state and even the environment in which those elements take place. *Sein und Zeit* §17 clarifies the point in highlighting the ontological and categorical structure of these *Zeuge*: they deserve their own ontological structure and this structure is precisely called the "utility-for". As a consequence, Heidegger asserts that the "readiness to hand" stuffs of the *Dasein*'s environment are ontologically structured by their "utility". It means that the ordinary relation of the Dasein to the daily stuffs is a "use-relation".

My today point is that, on the contrary, it is far from obvious that Wittgenstein accepts such an extension and generalisation of the notions of use and tools. It is true that Wittgenstein pays attention to how we *use* in context language signs. This is obvious, for instance in the *Blue Book* (quotation 3): "if we had to name anything which is the life of the sign, we should have to say that it was its *use*". Several times, Wittgenstein states, for instance in the *Blue Book*, that "it is the particular use of a word which gives the world its meaning" (quotation 3 too). He then highlights that a word has a meaning only in our ordinary *practices*. By the way, in the §17 of the *Philosophical Investigations*, he famously compares the different categories of words to the categories of tools in a tools box. I quote: « think of the different points of view from which one can classify tools or chess-men" (quotation 4). In the *Blue Book*, the organization of tools is also a model for thinking the organization of words: "Think of words as instruments characterised by their use, and then think of the use of a hammer, the use of a chisel, the use of a square, of a glue pot and of the glue" (quotation 4 too). Such organization directly depends on for what stake we will *use* the different tools. For instance, it could have some sense to associate the glue et the ladder in some context (in order to fix a poster on a wall for instance) but not in some other. As a consequence, it is true that Wittgenstein pays a special attention to different tools in the world, for instance to the "hammer" in the *Blue Book*.

Following these indications, it seems relevant to compare Wittgenstein's interest for the notion of "use" to Heidegger's interest for the notion, for instance for the "use of the hammer" in the paragraph 15 of *Being and Time*. But looking more precisely both analyses of the notion of "hammer", we can notice that there is a fundamental discrepancy between the two philosophical methods. Contrary to Heidegger that intends to characterize the ontological structure of the readiness-to-hand that is the hammer, Wittgenstein only intends to clarify the different aspects of the sign "hammer" in the language, that is how it is used in the language. That is precisely this difference between an ontological concept of use and a methodological and localised one that I intend to interrogate now in order to outline the discrepancy between Wittgenstein's philosophical method and Heidegger's hermeneutical one.

I. Two notions of "use": an ontological and a grammatical one

In order to specify this discrepancy, I now suggest to analyse very carefully the way the so-called « second Wittgenstein » uses the notion of "use" in the *Blue Book* and in the *Philosophical Investigations*.
As a beginning, we can notice that in all Wittgenstein quotations, Wittgenstein is exclusively interested in the "use" of language *signs*. The idea of "tools" is only used as a comparison, in order to clarify how language signs work. It seems clear that Wittgenstein's analysis of the "use" has no ontological dimension. One of the *Blue Book* quotation (quotation 5) testifies that Wittgenstein is very reluctant to every move that consists in substantializing the notion of use. I quote:

> "The mistake we are liable to make could be expressed thus: We are looking for the use of a sign, but we look for it as though it were an object *co-existing* with the sign. (One of the reasons for this mistake is again that we are looking for a "thing corresponding to a substantive").

We can deduce from this quotation that Wittgenstein does not consider the way we use things as the paradigm of the notion of "use" he is interested in. He only underlines the fact that we use some language *signs* but not every world object and even less the world itself.
If we consider the way the notion of "use" is introduced in the proposition 3.326 of the *Tractatus*, we notice that, soon in the *Tractacus*, Wittgenstein only considers the "use" of signs (quotation 6): "In order to recognise a symbol by its sign we must observe how it is used with a sense ».The use of the *sign* makes it alive and transforms it into a symbol.
In the very famous §43 of the *Philosophical Investigations* in which the notion of "use" is famously re-introduced, Wittgenstein also speaks of the use of "word": "For a *large* class of cases – though not for all – in which we employ the word "meaning" it can be defined thus: the meaning of a word is its use in the language. (PI, §43) (quotation 1)

It means that in order to understand the signification of a "word" and to look after its sense, we don't have to postulate the existence of a so-called object named "sense": we just have to see how a world could be "explained". That is clearly the point of *Philosophical Investigations* §560 and also of the *Blue Book* (See quotations 7 and 8). So, according to Wittgenstein, the only way to "explain" a word is to show how it is *used*. So considering how a word is *used* is above all a therapeutics method to prevent any substantialization of the notion of "sense".
As an example of this method, I will quote the example of the *Blue Book* that describes how to explain the sense of words like "chair" or "toothache" (quotation 9):

> "It is a part of the grammar of the word 'chair' that *this* is what we call 'to sit on a chair', and it is part of the grammar of the word 'meaning' that *this* is what we call 'explanation of meaning', in the same way to explain my criterion for another's person having toothache is to give a grammatical explanation of the word 'toothache', and, in this sense, 'an explanation concerning the meaning of the word 'toothache''".

In order to explain the sense of a word like "chair" or "toothache", we have to explain how it is grammatically used. As a consequence, we see that the Wittgenstein notion of "use" is introduced in this therapeutics context. This method now introduced, we can draw some conclusions about how both philosophers, that is Wittgenstein and Heidegger, differently deal with the concept of "use".

→ Wittgenstein and Heidegger.

We already saw a first reason why the way Heidegger and Wittgenstein need the concept of "use" is not similar. According to Heidegger, "use" is an ontological category: it indicates the ontological structure of the readiness-to-hand. By the way, *Being and Time* paragraph 17 shows that the "signs" and specially the language signs are "derived" from the tools inasmuch as they have to explicit the "reference" structure of those tools. In short, Heidegger is not interested in how we use "signs" but in the different uses of the tools that they manifest. On the contrary, according to Wittgenstein, use is a grammatical concept. It coincides with the signs or propositions variations and "use" manifests the signs aspects variations. As a consequence, it is obvious that both philosophers are very sensitive to the so-called "pragmatics" dimension of understanding. But they develop two very different understanding of this idea of use sensitivity. According to Heidegger, that the way the beings are in the world that is sensitive to use. According to Wittgenstein, only semantics is use sensitive. That the point I now intend to underline: I will suggest that in the background of this discrepancy, there is two different conceptions of semantics.

II. Two notions of semantics

1/Let come back to Heidegger and to his conception of semantics.
There are some important arguments in favour of the thesis that Heidegger has developed his own "philosophy of language" in the Marburg's courses that precede *Being and Time*. He indeed proposes a radical hermeneutical reinterpretation of the aristotelician concept of *logos*. By the way, several commentators (Jean Greisch in France for instance) have underlined the pragmatics dimension of some of the intuitions of this philosophy of language. Following Aristotle distinction between "logos semantikos" and "logos apophanticos" in his 1923-24 Course about Aristotle but also in his 1925 *Prolegomena to the history of the concept of time* (§9), Heidegger points out that the discourse is not primary "apophantikos", that is that all utterances of the discourse are not theoretical and are not evaluable as true or false. He mentions for instance discourses such as wishes, order, prayers, and so on. That means that Heidegger is very aware of the importance of non-propositional discourse and does not think that propositional discourse is the paradigm of every other kinds of discourse. Such critics of propositional semantics could be considered as a prefiguration of the linguistic realism that has been instituted in Oxford in the 1950's. Nevertheless, my point is that Heidegger is also very far from this linguistic realism, and from some Wittgenstein intuitions, precisely because, as shown before, he defends above all that the sense of every discourse derive from the pre-linguistic ontological sense of the world tools.
According to me, from a Wittgenstein point of view, the hypothesis that linguistic sense is prefigured by a non-linguistic one is unnecessary and profoundly misleading. Wittgenstein would not postulate that there is something like a pre-articulated sense of the world. According to him, sense is only linguistic and only linguistic sense is sensitive to use. To quote the *Blue Book*: he is only interested in how we "use words in the *practice*" (quotation 10).

2/Wittgenstein's conception of semantics
In order to analyse more precisely Wittgenstein's use sensitivity semantics, I will now focus on Charles Travis' reading of Wittgenstein, especially in his book *The Uses of Sense*, that focuses on the language sensitivity of use in Wittgenstein. The main purpose of Travis' work is both to criticize the notion of private language and the common understanding of the notion of "semantics" that is predominant in the contemporary philosophy of language. To put it shortly,

following Wittgenstein and John Austin, he refuses to consider that the meaning of every utterance depends on its truth-condition. Against the truth-conditional conception of semantics, Travis also leans on Wittgenstein to suggest that the sense of the words depends on the way we use it. That is what he calls the "speaker-use sensitivity". What does this precisely mean?
Following Wittgenstein, it does not mean of course that we can use the words as we want without respecting any constraints. For instance, we have to respect some syntax principles. Some combinations are excluded, for instance "milk-I some sugar" has no sense (PI, §498). It is also obvious that it is not possible to violate the semantics sense of words. For instance, we cannot mean "it is warm" with the words "it is cold" (PI, §510). It seems that words wear by their own at least some semantics aspects. By the way, some syntactic categories (just as "verb", "name", etc.) have to be respected.
But Wittgenstein argues that such categories are still use categories. For instance, PI §19-20 shows that a sign like "slab" can be understood as a "word" or as a "sentence" according to the context. Furthermore, Wittgenstein's fundamental point is that a sign finds its sense only when it is used in ordinary language. As a consequence, following Travis (quotation 11) : "It is plausible enough that the semantics of *some* items depends on their use. [He] will ultimately argue that the semantics of all semantics items does so". Travis develops some example. He imagines an definite object (a refrigerator without any carton of milk inside but with a puddle of milk at the bottom of it). He then suggests that there are several ways to understand the question "is there some milk in the refrigerator?" referring to the same object. And these different understandings depend on how we use the sentence in different contexts. He imagines a first scenario: Hugo is eating his breakfast and drinking his morning coffee. He asks his friend Odile: "is there some milk in the fridge?" In this context, Odile has to answer: no, there no milk in the fridge, which means no drinkable milk. But Travis imagines a second scenario: Odile had to cleaned the fridge and Hugo asks here the same question "is there some milk in the fridge?" (considering the same object) Here the answer is "yes, there is still a puddle of milk at the bottom of the fridge". This example shows that it depends on how we use the "semantic items" that they have different meanings. Here is the Wittgenstein concept of use. "Use" indicates a grammatical variation of sign depending on some special context.

Conclusion: the determining role of context

As a conclusion, I will now put the emphasis on the fact that this conception of "use" is very different from Heidegger hermeneutical one. Not only because Wittgenstein's concept of "use" only indicates "sign use" (which is already an important discrepancy) but also because, as Travis put it very clearly, Wittgenstein's concept of "use" is a normative one, contextually determined.

In a way, it could be tempting to say that Heidegger won't say anything different from the above conclusions. I underlined above that Heidegger was also criticizing the truth-conditional concept of semantics in order to show that all discourse were not theoretic and truth-evaluable.
But I hope that the last point I wish to finally underline is likely to make deeper the discrepancy between Heidegger hermeneutics position and Wittgenstein contextualist one. My point is indeed that far from defending a new form of relativism, Wittgenstein defends a strong normative conception. Defending that use determines the sense of our words does not mean that the sense is fixed up to (=selon ?) our desires, intention or life moves. From a Wittgenstein point of view

(which is, to my mind, a contextualist one), such uses are strongly determined in context. In context, we do not arbitrary decide how we use the signs of language. For instance, in the previous examples, if the meaning of the semantic items "is there some milk in the fridge" depends on how those words are used in different contexts, they are nonetheless perfectly determined in every context inasmuch as the context (the breakfast one or the cleaning one for instance) entirely determine with use is relevant or not. As Travis says "the semantics of Odile's words depends, plausibly, on the *circumstances* of their speaking" (quotation 12). The way of using the words, of understanding them and of judging their relevance depends on the circumstances. To put it differently, it means that in circumstances there are some *reasons* to understand a word and so to be sure that another speaker will understand it in the same way. So use is determining but also determined. As Charles Travis put it very clearly in his 2009 book *Les liaisons ordinaires*, « il y a des usages que l'on peut raisonnablement attendre des mots […] et d'autres dont ce n'est pas le cas » (à traduire en anglais) (quotation 12). Those relations are objective inasmuch are they are contextually determined. Those determinations are not written in the stone and even not necessary conventional in Wittgenstein. They are determined by previous practices and they are always efficient in context.

My point is that this normative role of context distinguishes very profoundly Wittgenstein and Heidegger's model of understanding. According to Wittgenstein, the meaning of the word is determines by the uses of the signs but such uses are strictly determines in context, inasmuch as the context plays a normative role. I think that the sketch is very different in Heidegger. According to Heidegger, the meaning of the words derives from the way we use the tools: they explicit, with a certain privation, their original ontological sense. That means that the criteria for meaning, in Heidegger, are not institutionally (or thanks practices) determined by a normative context. They are by the pre-normative life's accomplishment or by the Dasein's projects determined. Even if I am not disposed to conclude for all that that Heidegger's position is a relativist one (at least not a subjective relativism), I want to suggest that there is a fundamental discrepancy between Wittgenstein's contextualist (that is normative) conception of "use" and Heidegger's ontological one: the first one is objectively determined, the second one is the expression of the being's life.