

Language and Emptiness: A Diagrammatic Comparative Study of Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Nāgārjuna

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Introduction: Language and Emptiness

Discussions of the direct or indirect correlation of language and thought serve as the basis for a variety of debates among cognition theories. While this essay is not fundamentally interested in examining bottom-up or top-down debates of linguistics and cognition, our discussion of language and thought will ultimately suggest the conclusion that there is a false dichotomy among the shared assumptions those approaches make in attempting to understand the development of language and cognition. This tentative conclusion, however, is not the direct purpose of this paper. Instead, we focus on how a common problematic situating thought and language with respect to an inexpressible emptiness or nothingness appears in the work of three otherwise very different philosophers: Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Nāgārjuna.¹

By exploring the thought of Martin Heidegger as it appears in several key essays subsequent to *Being and Time*, we will diagrammatically demonstrate Heidegger's approach to language as involving an inherent problem directly connected with perspective and framing. It will become clear how, through the acknowledgement of a lack in comprehension, we may actually gain insight into the inexpressibility of language and for a moment possibly transcend such limitations. We will then move to the problem of meaning and language as addressed by Ludwig Wittgenstein in his lectures from the early 1930s. Again by utilizing diagrams, we will visually express Wittgenstein's dualism of meaning as the difference between representation and practice. We finally engage the work of the second century South Indian Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna, whose complex analysis of the notion of emptiness has been highly influential for later Buddhist thought. By applying elements of both Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's theories, we create a third diagram with respect to Nāgārjuna's view that synthesizes Heidegger and Wittgenstein in a way that illuminates the two Western philosophers and relates them in a new dynamic.

¹ The authors developed the ideas in this paper in the context of an Independent Study course comparing these three thinkers taken in spring 2011 with Professor Rocco Gangle, Endicott College.

Section One: Martin Heidegger Comprehending the Inexpressibility of the Nothing

1.0: Introduction to Martin Heidegger

Instead of attempting a comprehensive discussion of Martin Heidegger's work, it may be beneficial to recall the pre-text Heidegger provides for his essay "What is Metaphysics?":

"What is metaphysics?" The question awakens expectations of a discussion about metaphysics. This we will forgo. Instead we will take up a particular metaphysical question. In this way it seems we will let ourselves be transposed directly into metaphysics. Only in this way will we provide metaphysics the proper occasion to introduce itself.²

Here the reader is given a bit of insight into Heidegger's final expression and analysis. By stating that his following essay does not and cannot transcend the limitations of the metaphysical problem, it is from this seemingly uncertain position that we gain our first glimpse of the way the metaphysical problem is constructed and the way metaphysics originally comes to presence. Keeping this idea in mind will function as a valuable foundation for understanding Heidegger's central claim pertaining to language and inexpressibility.

Let us first unravel some of the terminology used throughout Heidegger's essays. Often incorporated into discussions of human cognition and perception are the terms 'Being' and 'beings'. Heidegger uses each of these terms as a way of differentiating between forms of thought and/or existence. "Being" refers to the way one may exist in proper relation to the world as a whole, while the term 'beings' is used to describe individuals or objects within the world. The distinction between these terms illuminates Heidegger's initial structural design for the theory that we will be discussing in Section 1.1. In explaining the difference between Being and beings, Heidegger wants to expose the way our minds have come to develop into thinking *beings* as opposed to functioning in a state of *Being*.

Heidegger describes that as humans, we are constantly engaged in an act of thinking. The notion of comprehension and developed thought will be discussed in greater detail in Section 1.1 and Section 1.2. For now, we will vaguely describe the development of the knowledge base of *beings* to better understand the terminology and theory used by Heidegger. The structure of *beings*' knowledge for Heidegger can be understood as a system of negative interpretations that developed from the foundation of *Being*. Because *Being* is considered an *a priori* state with respect to that of *beings*, the term *The Nothing* is incorporated only after a permanent separation of *beings* from *Being*. In later sections the differentiation between *Being* and the *nothing* will become more clear. For now it is beneficial to continue to define and understand the idea of *beings*. Heidegger further defines the thought process of *beings* as a development of a reflexive and self-fulfilling structure, which can never come to comprehend anything other than what is inside (or brought inside) the form of knowledge. Due to the functionality and structure of the

² "What is Metaphysics?" in Heidegger, M. (1993). *Basic Writings*. D.F. Krell, (Ed.). New York, NY: HarperCollins, p. 93.

knowledge of *beings*, the distinction between *Being* and the *nothing* is justified by the characteristics formed from the perspective of *beings*. As confined within the development of *beings*' knowledge base, Heidegger better identifies the fundamental problem of inexpressibility that restricts *beings* from understanding *Being*. However, an essential component to Heidegger's theory of inexpressibility notes that the restriction just mentioned does not restrict one's ability to acknowledge the existence of the nothing. We will explore the unique way in which The Nothing is not directly comprehended by *beings* but is theoretically conceptualized in Section 1.3.

In order to further explain the structural confinement of *beings*' knowledge, Heidegger chooses the terms *enframing* and *concealment* to better reflect and describe the perimeters and limitations of expression that create and restrict *beings*' knowledge. Mastering the concept of how one's thoughts develop and (paradoxically) immobilize one's ability to process how one may properly exist in terms of *Being*, is an important step in Heideggerian logic. After adequately describing and moving through initial elements of Heidegger's discussion, we will be able to position ourselves more conclusively in the final section, which will make clear Heidegger's comprehension of the inexpressible.

1.1: Properties of Negation

In order to understand the difference between *beings* and *Being*, we first must understand the way *beings* come to be formulated within thought. For Heidegger, the knowledge base of *beings* is not a complete system but rather, a thought process built out of and separated from *Being*.³ The creation of knowledge for *beings* functions as a form or structure presented with respect to one's environment and not in conjunction with it. Heidegger wants to present the idea that pure knowledge, which is the way one is in proper relation to the world, can only exist within the realm of *Being* and is thus separate from the developed thought process of *beings*.

Through the properties of negation, Heidegger describes the way individuals (as *beings*) take meaning from the world.⁴ One creates and identifies objects and concepts through a system of negation. In other words, every object or thing is only understood relative to counterparts or relational concepts. A simple example of this notion can be explained with the statement that *a cat is a cat because it is not a dog*. For Heidegger, the way in which knowledge is formed is a complicated system of negations that ultimately functions to create (seemingly) singular definitions. Although one may think these definitions pertain to a single concept, in actuality, that concept is contingent upon the system as a whole. As a person develops cognition, they are continually developing their understanding of more complex concepts according to the *negative* relations that have previously obtained. Acknowledgement and differentiation are examples of a system of negation in practice. Negation, as a system of knowledge, gives order and understanding to and from other concepts which for Heidegger is what ultimately creates *beings*.

After describing the way negation sorts and creates a system of knowledge, Heidegger uses the functionality of negation to explain a critical point of his logic. Due to the fact that the structure

³ Heidegger, "What Is Metaphysics?" p. 89-110

⁴ "On The Essence Of Truth," in Heidegger, M. (1993). *Basic Writings*. D.F. Krell, (Ed.). New York, NY: HarperCollins, p. 112-138

of negation functions only pluralistically, comprehending the properties of negation illuminates the necessary existence of something *a-priori* from which to be negated. *This a-priori existence, that is negated by the creation of the knowledge base of beings, is what has been referred to thus far as Being.*

Figure 1A is a diagram of Heidegger's ideas as discussed thus far. Negation is set as circle (c), the functionality of a concept as used by *beings* is circle (b) and most importantly, the existence of *Being* is set as circle (a). This diagram visually expresses the connected and relational properties of every such (b) and (c) from the original position of (a). It is important to understand the idea that although circle (a) may seem to function as the start of a coherent system of connections, this is only true from the perspective of circle (b), which is dependent on circle (c). The perspective and perception of *beings* as circle (b) is not mutually connected to Heidegger's proper source of knowledge, circle (a). The main idea to take from this diagram is the relationship of *Being* and *beings* and the way the diagram expresses *beings*' negational knowledge. It is this structure that illuminates the first step in comprehending Heidegger's ultimate notion that the root and cause of the problem of the inexpressible is the paradox of *beings*' knowledge.

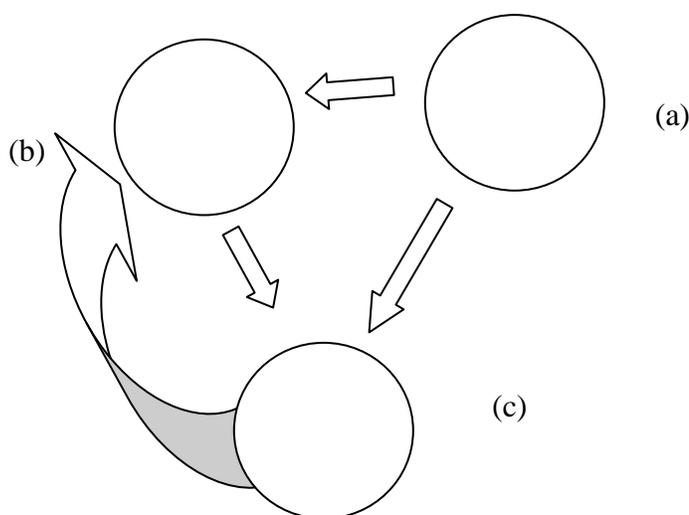


Figure 1A

Developing upon the premise of negation, Heidegger begins to reveal how the system of negation is inadequate for describing *Being*. However, before moving too quickly, let us continue to examine the 'negationally created world' of *beings*. By examining an example of an emotional state with the capabilities to transcend the limitations of *beings*, we can provide further evidence for the existence of the *nothing*.

Emotions are a complicated aspect of *beings*. Acknowledgement of different emotions can alter the original form as one rationalizes and reproduces emotions in accordance with the system of negation. Generally, emotions function as a response to a stimulus. The way one reacts or

observes a stimulus will include to some degree an appropriate (relative to the system) response. To claim that it is common for one to feel and/or act angry in a situation where anger is accepted as an appropriate reaction is also to acknowledge that emotions function relative to experience. For Heidegger, emotions in this sense are directly connected to the created state of *beings*. An individual at a conscious or subconscious level can only come to understand emotion by connections made within the system of negation. Thus, emotions, similarly to concepts, have been divided and internalized through the system of negation. However, Heidegger explores a specific emotional state that exhibits recognition of the system of negation and the state of *beings*. Through investigating the state of anxiety we can demonstrate the encompassing structure and subsequent shortcomings of negation.⁵

The experience of pure anxiety, which is not the result of a known cause, has the capacity to overcome a person in a seemingly *irrational* way. Anxiety experienced as an unprovoked emotion, disconnected from comprehensible stimulus, separates one from the system of negation and the cognitive states of *beings*. In the moment of anxiety, a person may feel indifferent or apathetic towards what they previously understood of their physical world, while in their new cognitive state. The cognitive state of anxiety thus disrupts the configuration of figure 1A. If the person experiencing anxiety is set as circle (b), then this individual becomes detached from the feed-back loop of circle (c). This person is now free from the structure of *beings* and is only in connection to circle (a), exposing one to an indescribable experience. While in this state, Heidegger explains that one can experience, for a moment, the nothing. The structure of negation, which allows one to comprehend relatively, is no longer relative to the pure state of anxiety. The person who has entered into the condition of anxiety cannot rationalize the change in emotional state or comprehend the experience in any previously developed way. This is because the feeling of anxiety was not the result of a known stimulus. The significant relevance of the anxiety example for Heidegger is to provide evidence towards the limitations of *beings'* knowledge. It is Heidegger's persistence in dissecting the structure of beings that allows for the exposure of the nothing. The following section demonstrates the structural closure due to the parameters and functionality of the negation system of *beings*.

1.2: Contingent Axioms of Relative Knowledge

The many fields of Mathematics, Science, and Technology are unified in their efforts to uncover truths about the world we live in. Heidegger's metaphysics, which shares the same stated intention, explains how those approaches, including his own, are intrinsically flawed and function in a way that further limits one's concept of *Being*. The only difference between Heidegger's metaphysics and the previously stated fields are the interpretation of retrospection that will take place in Section 1.3.

Heidegger would like to point out that methods of study with intentions of understanding the world can only operate in a reflexive manner.⁶ The findings in many fields of study are produced

⁵ See Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?" pp. 100-5.

⁶ "Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics," in Heidegger, M. (1993). *Basic Writings*. D.F. Krell, (Ed.). New York, NY: Harper Collins, pp. 267-306

from the foundation of axioms. Much like the properties of negation that create the ability of something to be known contingently, an axiom is an accepted presupposition that facilitates the development of ideas. An axiom functions as a starting point upon which all future information remains contingent. An example of this logic can be performed using mathematical numbering. The number '3' is relative to the whole concept of numbers within that particular systematic collection. Upon obtaining the function of numbers, the concept can be used and manipulated within the parameters of that understood model. As one begins to employ numbers to create, such as creating the notion of negative numbers, new concepts will be (relatively) created, where previously nothing had existed. However, it is important to understand that the new concept only exists in relation to the elements of the previous theory. The initial structure created by numbers is needed in order for further exploration. Formulas for calculating gravity may be accurate and depict a *truth* about the world but, once again, can only function contingently from developed axioms. Axioms, much like the properties of negation, are essential for the developed knowledge of *beings*. What Heidegger is suggesting is that the achievements produced from the academic fields mentioned previously are paradoxically more distant from the *a priori Being*.

Heidegger's main theory to grasp from this section is better understood by using Figure 1A once again. We will continue with the example of numbers and discuss the aspects of this example visually. The axioms of mathematics are represented by circle (c), while the distinguished number '3' is represented by circle (b). As for the formula for calculating gravity or the notion of negative numbers, these concepts can only be represented by the intensification of relations between circles (b) and (c). Ultimately, new concepts which combine and utilize other previously *defined* axioms are confined to the structural relationship of (b) and (c). These new concepts would be represented as circle (b) while the number '3' and the whole of mathematics (as well as other axioms) are situated in circle (c). It should become clear how it is that new concepts come to exist in relation to the system as a whole in the same way that numbers relate to mathematics. What becomes relevant about the idea of gravity or negative numbers – and the larger scope of what Heidegger is progressing toward – is that although theories refer back to concepts or axioms, in terms of our diagram, new concepts have not created new or more significant circles with greater connected relation to circle (a). Conversely, the new concepts actually progress in the opposite direction from '*Being*'.

What is most important to understand from this discussion of axioms is the notion that what develops from (c) uses (c) and cannot provide truth that avoids traces of the initial axiom.⁷ No matter what method is explored in order to understand *Being* (represented as (a)), it can only reproduce "methodo-logical" truths. The accomplishments in any distinguished field seeking truths inevitably involve an initial axiom, which does not exist in proper relation to *Being*. For Heidegger, the intensification of the interactions between (b) and (c) will generate more correlated circles but will never be able to escape the reflexivity of the system. These circles may appear to create better understanding of *beings* but in fact, these developments are incapable of understanding or explaining the *a-priori* (or primordial) position of circle (a) as *Being*.

⁷ See also "The Question Concerning Technology," in Heidegger, M. (1993). *Basic Writings*. D.F. Krell, (Ed.). New York, NY: Harper Collins, p. 307-342. This essay illustrates a similar logic to that of "Modern Science, Metaphysics, and Mathematics."

1.3: The Problem of Enframing

The final step of Heidegger's logic develops upon the previous sections in a way that will illuminate the essential insight of his specific understanding of the metaphysical problem and his acknowledgement of the necessity of the inexpressible. It is here that Heidegger's initial pre-text to "What is Metaphysics?" which described the intrinsic limitations of his work becomes more fully clarified.

As discussed in Section 1.1, the properties of negation intrinsically involve a contingent counterpart that must exist *a-priori* with respect to anything that has come into existence through the structure of interpretation associated with *beings*. This leads one to presume that there first must be something that is negated in order for the reproduction and intensification of *beings'* knowledge base. From this position we (*think* we) can move towards acknowledging the existence of something outside or initial to the creation of concepts that are defined through the properties of negation. In Section 1.2, truth and knowledge as defined and discovered through fields of study are reduced to the presupposed ideas or axioms central to their nature. These methods do not progress toward initial truths, 'proper existence' or the nothing. The way methods come to function only complicates the axioms that are already fundamentally not in proper relation to *Being* or the nothing.

The discussion of Heidegger's ideas has thus far been demonstrated through language. If we now place *Language* as a concept into figure 1A, we can come to explore the beginning of Heidegger's final step and how it is possible that the inexpressible inadvertently takes on meaning by way of recognition.⁸ When we place the concept of Language into circle (c), language is then what is used to define and understand its own context and relation. This then sets Language a second time within the diagram, this time as circle (b). The intensification of Language takes place between both circles (c) and (b) and continually develops within that context. The development of the method of Language is what is then used to describe or understand the initial circle (a). The description of circle (a), and its relation to the diagram and the structure of Language, as vague as it may be, would contain elements of both (b) and (c) as Language. This also would place Language once again in the diagram but this time in an attempt at describing circle (a). However, the existence of circle (a), the notion of *Being* or the nothing, is flawed by the very attempt to comprehend what circle (a) actually is through Language. The error and impossibility of our diagram's example of Language has led us back into the same sort of predicament we uncovered in section 1.2 with the notion of axiomatic truths. Yet, at the same time we have taken the argument one step further by facilitating the acknowledgement of circle (a) in a way that disputes the *a-priori* function previously represented. By acknowledging the inexpressibility of circle (a) we can come to understand something interesting about our thought process.

Because '*Language to Language as Language*' does not reproduce, come to explain, or express anything new without relation to the system of Language, conceiving circle (a) in such a way

⁸ "The Way To Language," in Heidegger, M. (1993). *Basic Writings*. D.F. Krell, (Ed.). New York, NY: Harper Collins, p. 393-426

would now bring the notion of what circle (a) represents inside the concepts of recognition. In fact, by using Language to describe the notion of the *a-priori* circle (a), what is being conducted is a paradox of the entire diagram and structure of what we have been discussing. In our Language example, circle (a) can no longer exist as *a-priori* foundation intrinsic and isolated from the developments of circles (b) and (c), but rather is now a conceived idea that has been brought into the development and concepts in an inaccurate depiction of *a-priori* existence. As we discussed in section 1.1, this is not a possible way of understanding what circle (a) represents in terms of the diagram and the knowledge of *beings*. If circle (a) was conceived from the form or method built out of circles (b) and (c), yet initially existed only in separation and solitude from both circles (b) and (c), then circle (a) must have been transformed such that (b) and (c) could conceive it. What had previously represented circle (a) does still exist; yet the diagram now needs to reflect a final step concerning the inexpressibility of Language.

On a greater scale we have just examined what we might term the ‘paradox of acknowledged existence.’ To more simply state the idea, by using language (or our form of existence) to describe the *a-priori* existence of *Being*, we have used a developed structure (Language) to come to understand the relationship and have not actually transcended the limitations of the system. Thus, the existence of something *a-priori* that we can come to understand is compromised and not purely understood as unrelated to a form of knowledge previously acquired. This essential idea will be the final step for our discussion of Heidegger. We will now more clearly demonstrate this idea using the new and more accurate diagram, Figure 1B:

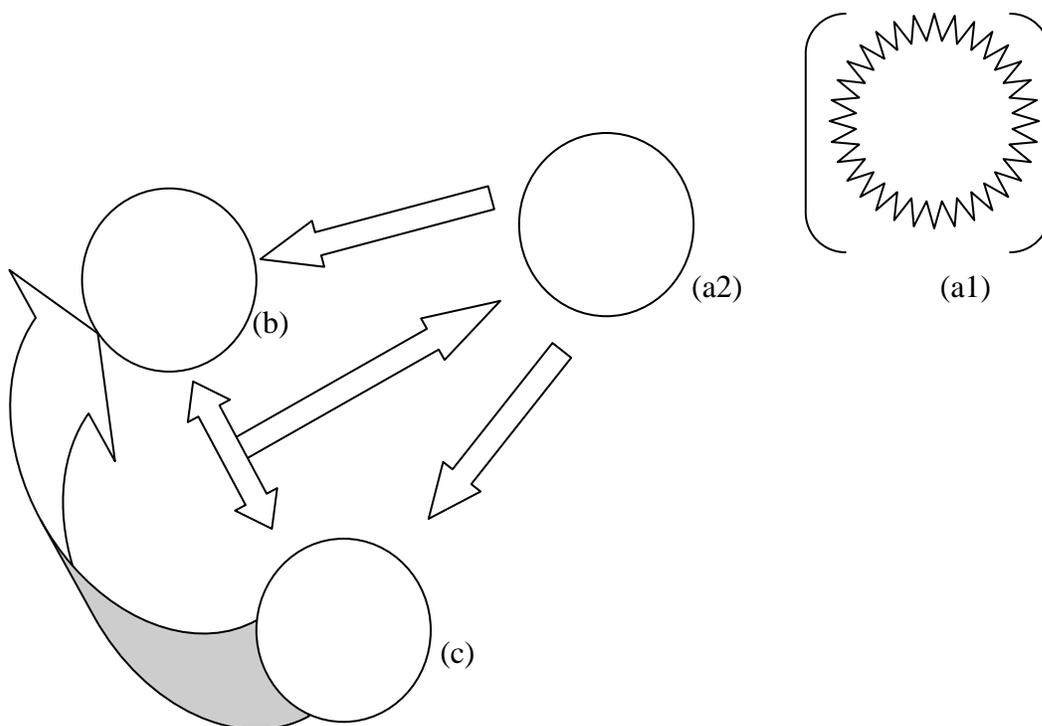


Figure 1B

Tracing the larger problem of metaphysics now through Figure 1B should help clarify Heidegger's final problem of the inexpressibility of language and how it is we cannot truly understand *a-priori* existence without the use and interpretation of our current system of knowledge. *Proper existence* is represented by circle (a1), which also represents *Being*, the nothing, proper relation, or any other term used thus far in an attempt to describe something that we have now come to understand cannot be accurately expressed. One should take notice of the bracketed disconnect of (a1) from the rest of the diagram. As circles (c) and (b) develop from circle (a1), it should be assumed that circle (a1) has shifted out of the expression and (a2) is formed and acts as (a1) in a conceptual sense. As we witnessed above, it may be possible to utilize the system that develops from (a1) but our negational structured knowledge base can only come to conceive circle (a2). This is because once there is an existence of 'something' (conceptually), there is an unavoidable separation from *Being* (a1). *Being* is explained as the empty field from which everything else comes into existence. The irreversible split is from (a1) and the rest of the diagram. As the flow of arrows alludes to, (b) and (c) can only attempt to understand an initial beginning. However, the realm of understanding is now intrinsically attached to the system, (b) and (c), which only come to express the limitations of (a2) and the system as a whole. Any notion of (a2) is not the same as the indescribable (a1). It should be clear now that the problem of metaphysics is necessarily contained within a frame or perspective.

For Heidegger, then, the existence of what is initially being negated cannot be described. The problem of understanding circle (a1) is a meta-methodological one. Language can be used to describe language but there is not a way to use language to escape the confinements of the linguistic perspective. Heidegger is correct to state that the work he was conducting contains the same limitations as any other field of knowledge. However, his explanation of the limitations of language to describe *Being* seems to transcend the limitations for a moment. Heidegger's approach to understanding the *a-priori* existence from within the system of beings is valid but only as recognized through the realization of the inexpressibility (as a limitation) of language.⁹

Section Two: Ludwig Wittgenstein The Dualism of Meaning

2.0: Introduction to Ludwig Wittgenstein

In Ludwig Wittgenstein's course lectures from the period 1932 to 1935 at Cambridge University, he often proceeds by inquiring about the definition of a proposition. He suggests that by providing examples of propositions one can acquire a general idea of what a proposition is. The following question then arises of what constitutes a general idea. Is having a general idea constituted by something that occurs in the mind? Or is it the activity enacted in practice?

⁹ "The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking," in Heidegger, M. (1993). *Basic Writings*. D.F. Krell, (Ed.). New York, NY: Harper Collins, p. 427-449. This essay is useful for attempting to understand how Heidegger contemplated language and emptiness.

Wittgenstein questions the concept of understanding as a way to introduce a problem of defining and explaining ‘meaning’.

2.1: The Presence of Representation and Action

Wittgenstein explains that language is a method used to communicate expression from one person to another that involves both verbal and nonverbal components. An essential idea for Wittgenstein relies on analyzing the approach one takes for understanding language as meaning. Wittgenstein alludes to how it is one usually attempts to define language with the use of particular literary definitions. However, Wittgenstein expresses that, in actuality, language contains meaning as derived only out of the context of the particular usage.¹⁰ Developing upon this concept, Wittgenstein points out how language manifests itself in two different *ways*: through mental representations and through associated external practices or behaviors. The representation of the language in the mind and the practice of the meaning become two different ways language is in use. When determining whether or not a person understands a concept, one assumes that if an individual can apply the concept correctly in practice, then they have come to understand the concept in representational form as well. One might even say that usage of the concept follows from or reflects the inner feeling. This position relies, however, only on the presented form of language and not on the complex quality of meaning that Wittgenstein ultimately wants to express.

One is disposed to believe that if a person can perform an assigned task successfully then they must also possess the mental image corresponding to the action performed. This supposed corresponding mental image would confirm a conceptual mental bond between the tester and the person being tested. However, Wittgenstein demonstrates that there are actually two different elements functioning in such an example. A person *comes* to represent an idea and also *comes* to practice or exhibit the idea. For example, we would like to assume that if a person were asked to retrieve a plant, and he or she did so correctly, that both the person asking for the plant and the person retrieving the plant hold the same mental representation of the concept ‘plant’. It is assumed that meaning flows from language in one consistent direction. Yet what is essential for Wittgenstein’s logic is the perspective that an idea can be depicted in terms of mental representation or physical practice.¹¹ Wittgenstein points out that the way we approach understanding meaning is typically in the ‘most general sense’. This perspective functions coherently when representation and the practice reflect the same meaning of an idea. What becomes seemingly strange and yet quintessential for Wittgenstein’s approach is when representation and practice do not correspond but still represent the same form of meaning.

We can now use Figure 2A as a way to illustrate Wittgenstein’s idea of how events of meaning typically take place. Meaning as circle (b) is derived from language as communication, which is represented by circle (a). Meaning as circle (b) can be applied to both mental representation as circle (c) and the meaning taken from the corresponding and correlating practices as circle (d).

¹⁰ *The Yellow Book (Selected Parts) 1933-34: Lectures preceding dictations of The Blue Book*, in Wittgenstein, L. (2001). *Wittgenstein’s Lectures: Cambridge, 1932-1935*. A. Ambrose, (Ed.). Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, p. 43-55.

¹¹ *Michaelmas Term 1934: Lectures I-XI*, in Wittgenstein, L. (2001). *Wittgenstein’s Lectures: Cambridge, 1932-1935*. A. Ambrose, (Ed.). Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, p. 77-105.

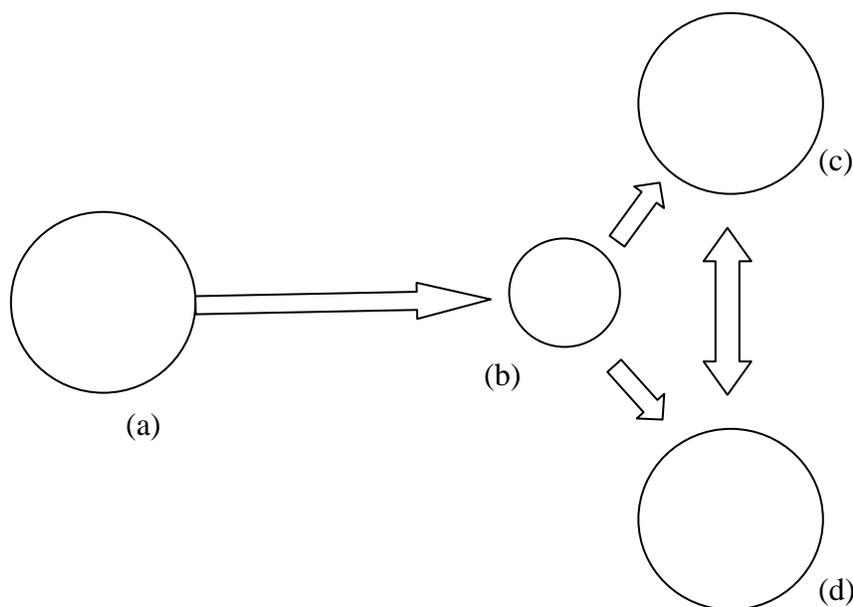


Figure 2A

2.2 The Discrepancy Between Representation and Practice

Although in the most general use of an idea there is a correspondence between mental representation and actions in the environment, Wittgenstein explains that this correspondence is only a tendency, not a rule.¹² For instance, in the example given earlier where an individual is asked to retrieve a plant, the tester merely assumes the individual has the correct representation of a plant because of the individual's apparently corresponding actions. However, the person retrieving the plant could have made their selection based on a different interpretation from that of the tester. For instance, the individual's representation of a plant may only correspond to their understanding of the color green. In this case, the representation enacted in practice by the retriever would still correspond to the given meaning of the word 'plant' by the tester. As a result, the person asking for the plant would believe the individual has the correct representation of a plant because they were able to use the concept correctly in practice. However, although the individual's representational meaning of a plant happened to correspond to the practice of retrieving a plant, this may have been no more than a coincidence. This would have been true even if the retriever's representation of a plant had corresponded to their understanding of the color blue. The meaning of a plant in this situation corresponds to both the representation and the practice, even though the individual being tested may not have been able to distinguish correct usages of the plant concept. This is because, in this situation, representation and action aligned in a most common and expected way.

¹² *Lent Term, 1935: Lecture XIII*, in Wittgenstein, L. (2001). *Wittgenstein's Lectures: Cambridge, 1932-1935*. A. Ambrose, (Ed.). Amherst, New York: Prometheus Books, p. 153-155.

It is generally thought that “understanding” requires a correlation between inner feelings and external actions. However, in the period between the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* and *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein develops the idea that this is not necessarily the case. Representation and practice can have two distinct meanings, but because it is impossible to know if someone has the correct representation of a concept, practice is the only type of meaning that can be tested and observed by others. Wittgenstein points out that one is incorrect to equate an idea with a mechanism that possesses exactly one use. While that perception facilitates the natural correspondence theory of truth involved in interpersonal relations, it is not necessarily valid. Language can be interpreted and used from multiple perspectives. Let us now draw out an example where representation and practice do not correspond in the most usual way, yet meaning still subsists.

In this example, let us presume that person A misses person B. Let us also presume that if person A was given the chance to be with person B, they would turn the opportunity down. What Wittgenstein wants to emphasize is that although our concept of missing may correspond to the desire to want to be with the individual being missed, it does not have to. The concept of missing for person A and the act of turning down the opportunity to be with person B do not contradict the meaning of ‘missing’. It is possible for person A to miss person B but to choose not to be with person B. What is happening in this example is the representation and practice of “missing” are not aligning in the most common way. However, each of these usages of missing corresponds to the same feeling, although the meaning of missing seems to be *contorted*. The main goal of this section, then, is to illustrate that meaning functions in two different ways; as a mental process or mindset, and as an action or behavior. These do not have to be directly correlated.

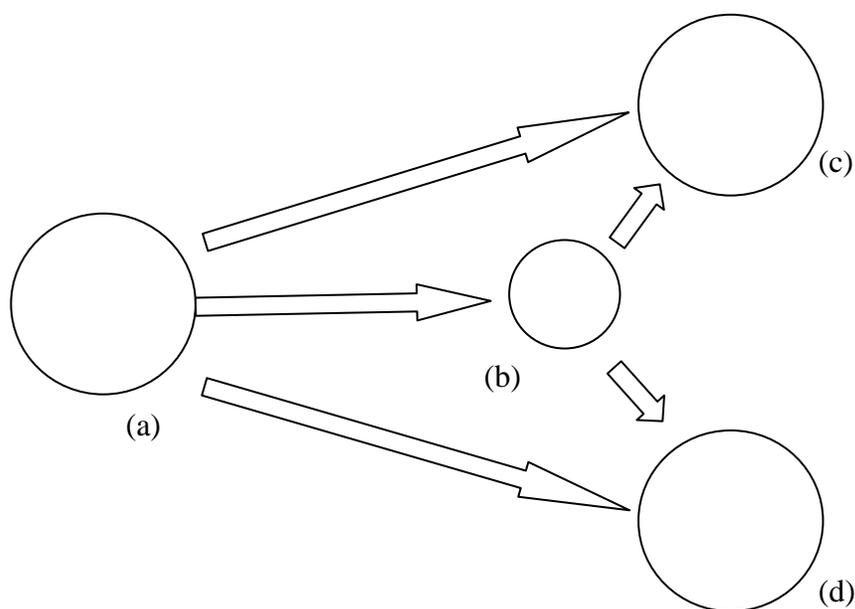


Figure 2B

In light of this example, Figure 2B illustrates Wittgenstein’s idea that there are two separate types of meaning: representation (c) and practice (d). Note that in this diagram there are separate arrows pointing from language (a) to representation and practice, (c) and (d). This reflects

Wittgenstein's conclusion that there are two distinct types of meaning. Representation and practice *may seem* to correspond to one another in the most general use of a concept, but on a wider scale they run on separate tracks, even if those tracks often run in parallel. It is important to note that the arrow connecting (c) and (d) in Figure 2A is no longer present in Figure 2B. This represents the incommensurable difference between meaning as representation and meaning as practice.

Section Three: Nāgārjuna Using Language in Light of Ultimate Emptiness

3.0: Introduction to Nāgārjuna

The final section of this investigation will shift from the previous emphasis on Western philosophical thought to the ideas of the influential second century Buddhist philosopher Nāgārjuna. The work we will be discussing is Nāgārjuna's *Mūlamadhyamakakārikā* (*The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*). Despite the cultural and historical distances involved, a convergence of the previously discussed theories will be helpful in discerning Nāgārjuna's key theory of emptiness. By amalgamating the diagram created for Heidegger's relation between "beings" and "Being" and Wittgenstein's disjunction of representation and practice, we can more clearly illuminate Nāgārjuna's complex reasoning.¹³

3.1: Heidegger and Nāgārjuna: From Nothing to Emptiness

Nāgārjuna possesses the notion that the world we are accustomed to is actually defective. He refers to this defect as conventional reality. For Nāgārjuna, conventional reality is an endless cycle of suffering caused by the ignorance of desire. Despite the entanglement of desire within conventional reality, Nāgārjuna expresses that desire is in fact an illusory concept contained only within a conventional reality that does not truly exist. The way it becomes possible for one to escape the emptiness and ignorance of conventional reality is to reach ultimate reality. The Buddhist eightfold path is a way of living that promises this opportunity. To reach enlightenment and to exist in the presence of ultimate truth, however, one must utilize conventional reality. Reaching the ultimate truth involves the ability to exist in the world as empty. Nāgārjuna's approach to emptiness and conventional reality is comparable in this respect to Heidegger's ideas of the nothing and the concept of relational reality, respectively.¹⁴ Negation and the complex relations of 'beings' constitute Heidegger's understanding of relational reality. For Nāgārjuna, conventional reality comes from the relation between suffering and the ignorance of desire. However, while the nothing (*Being*) exists outside of relational reality for Heidegger, Nāgārjuna wants to show that ultimate truth exists in accordance with conventional reality. An example of

¹³ Nāgārjuna. (1995). *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna's Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. (J.L. Garfield trans.). New York, NY: Oxford University Press. We rely heavily in what follows on Jay Garfield's commentary included in this text.

¹⁴ A somewhat different comparative analysis of Heidegger and Nāgārjuna is found in Priest, G. (2002). *Beyond the Limits of Thought*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, pp. 237-70.

this can be explored through the definition of essence: in conventional reality, all things contain an essence, which is intrinsic to the entity's identity. The ultimate truth, however, is the emptiness of all; essence becomes illusory. Nāgārjuna uses emptiness here to mean devoid of independent existence.¹⁵ This theory is based on the idea that everything arises in contingency with other things. An object's identity is relational, not intrinsic. Because nothing can exist on its own, everything becomes empty of essence. The ultimate truth thus reveals that the conventional world is empty. Unlike Heidegger's final position of the inexpressibility of the Nothing, Nāgārjuna's theory provides the possibility of gaining ultimate reality in the sense of proper existence. It is at this juncture that Wittgenstein's interpretation of meaning is necessary for comprehending Nāgārjuna's Middle Way.

3.2: Wittgenstein and Nāgārjuna: The Turn to Practice

Wittgenstein emphasized that the way a person uses an idea in practice does not necessarily correspond to the most common representation of the idea. Understanding can be perceived in two different ways, as a mental representation or as a behavior or practice. When applied to Nāgārjuna's Middle Way, the idea that meaning can be plural in this way helps to clarify the explanation that it is possible for one to function in conventional reality while in pursuit of ultimate truth.

One might wonder how it is possible to continue living after accepting the idea that the conventional world is empty. Nāgārjuna's opponent would say that if one knows the world is empty, it must follow that the Four Noble Truths and the Buddhist eightfold path are also empty. Buddhism claims to have discovered a way to escape the conventional reality, but if the Buddhist practices operate within conventional reality, then they must also be meaningless. In other words, if it is accepted that the conventional reality is empty, practice must be futile.¹⁶

However, Nāgārjuna illustrates that the emptiness of conventional reality actually offers hope and meaning. If one accepts the conventional truth as the only reality, then one will be eternally trapped in the cycle of desire and suffering. By attempting to pursue the emptiness of *all*, one has the opportunity to reach an enlightened state and ultimately escape the cycle of suffering and desire. Nāgārjuna's process can be understood by drawing on Wittgenstein's concepts of representation, action, and meaning. Such an understanding of meaning allows for the possibility to comprehend the world as illusory and yet still to apply the Buddhist practices to gain enlightenment. The fact that a person lives and operates within conventional reality does not have to correspond necessarily to the ignorance of desire that, in one way, defines conventional reality.

¹⁵ See Garfield's commentary to chapters I-IV of *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way*. For a discussion of how distinct interpretations of the notion of emptiness come to define the main traditions of Tibetan Buddhism see Duckworth, D. (2010). De/Limiting Emptiness and the Boundaries of the Ineffable. *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 38:97-105.

¹⁶ See in particular Garfield's commentary to chapter XXIV.

3.3: Synthesizing Heidegger and Wittgenstein in Light of the Eightfold Path

At the level of representation, Nāgārjuna's opponent is correct to say that it is impossible to escape conventional reality. The way humans come to think and speak is through language, which takes place within conventional reality. Therefore, humans can never precisely articulate the ultimate truth because it is ineffable. However, because representation and action do not have to correlate, this means that practice does not necessarily have to be empty and meaningless as well. In fact, according to Buddhist tradition an individual can practice within conventional reality in order to reach ultimate truth through implementation of the eightfold path. The eightfold path sets out the course every Buddhist must take in order to attempt to comprehend and utilize conventional reality with the intention of reaching ultimate truth. One can never say what the ultimate truth is, however, and one does not have to understand representationally what is being accomplished by the eightfold path in order to practice it. For Buddhism, the only way to experience ultimate truth is through practice of the eightfold path. The steps towards emptiness may seem to contradict all three theorists thus far, yet through figure 3 it will become clear that Nāgārjuna's path is possible and potentially valid, yet literally inexpressible.

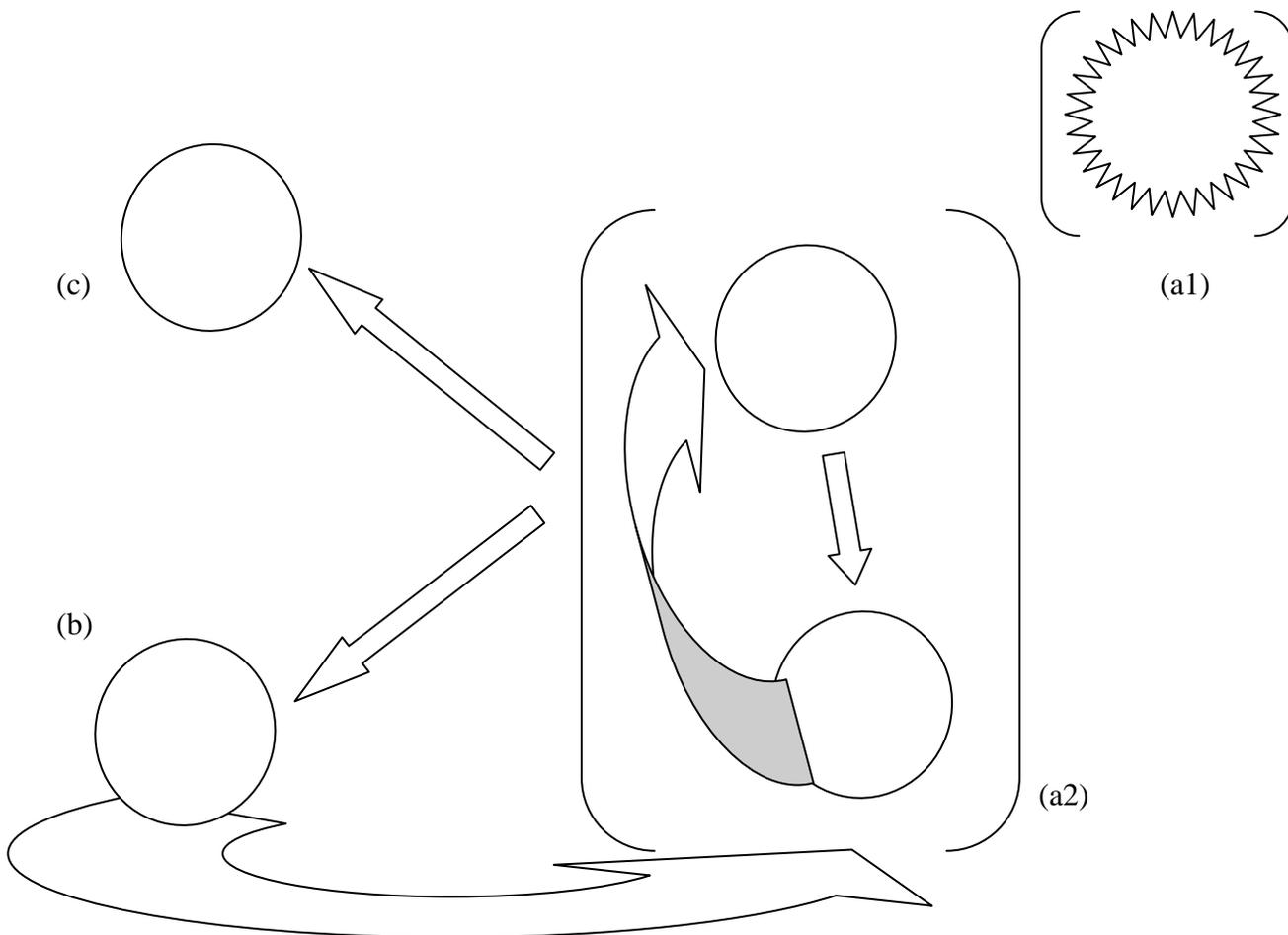


Figure 3

Nāgārjuna's understanding of the relation between conventional reality and ultimate reality by way of emptiness is depicted in Figure 3. Stylistically, conventional reality (a2) corresponds to Heidegger's relational reality. The difference here, though, is that conventional reality (a2) can be used in a way to reach emptiness (a1). However, Heidegger's notion of the continuance and intensification of the system is seen through representation (b). This would be the way that representation of the eightfold path, in any sense of rational comprehension, would in fact function through conventional reality. Drawing on our Wittgenstein diagram, we show Nāgārjuna as emphasizing a similar distinction between representation (b) and practice (c). Although one's representation will always be confined within conventional reality, one's practice need not for this reason be meaningless. The basic idea here can be clarified with an example from Buddhism in practice. If one were to ask a Buddhist monk in meditation to explain what he sees and experiences of ultimate reality, he would not be able to describe it. What a monk may encounter of ultimate reality during meditation is necessarily ineffable because human language has no terms for something outside of the conventional reality the language was created within. However, just because the monk cannot explain what is happening does not mean he is void of any such experience. Nāgārjuna would say that the ultimate reality of Buddhist practices cannot be articulated; it can only be directly lived. This experience itself remains in the last instance inexpressible.

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