In giving explanations, I already have to use the language full-blown (not some sort of preparatory, provisional one); this is enough to show that I can come up only with externalities about language.

– Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations, § 120*

1. Overview

My paper takes as its point of departure a pair of claims from the opening chapter of Hubert Dreyfus’s commentary on Division One of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. The two claims concern the nature and status of what Dreyfus takes to be one of Heidegger’s most fundamental insights, namely, his recognition and appreciation of the importance of a background understanding of being. For Dreyfus’s Heidegger, recognition of a background marks a radical departure from the orientation and aspirations of the Western philosophical tradition. Whereas philosophy had been guided by the goal of mapping out all forms of human understanding, so as to see how they work and what makes them possible, Heidegger, by contrast, “questions both the possibility and desirability of making our everyday understanding explicit.”
Instead, Dreyfus writes, Heidegger “introduces the idea that shared everyday skills, discriminations, and practices into which we are socialized provide the conditions necessary for people to pick out objects, to understand themselves as subjects, and generally, to make sense of the world and of their lives.” (BITW, p. 4)

At the same time, Heidegger argues that “these practices can function only if they remain in the background.” (BITW, p. 4)

So for Dreyfus’s Heidegger, the understanding of being is a “nonexplicitable background that enables us to make sense of things.” (BITW, p. 4) In explaining this idea of the background as “nonexplicitable,” Dreyfus offers the pair of claims that interest me:

We can to some extent light up that understanding, that is, point it out to those who share it, but we cannot spell it out, that is, make it understandable even to those who do not share it. Moreover, what we can get clear about is only what is least pervasive and embodied. Heidegger has the sense that the more important some aspect of our understanding of being is, the less we can get at it. (BITW, p. 22)

That these two claims appear sequentially suggests that they fit together in some way. For example, what Dreyfus says in the second and third sentences in the passage might be understood as an explanation for what he says in the first: that we cannot “get at” what is most pervasive and embodied about our understanding of being provides a reason why we can only “light up” that understanding rather than “spell it out.” Part of what I want to do in this paper is offer something by way of resistance to this suggestion, as I am inclined to think that the two ideas actually go in different directions. That is, each claim can be teased out so as to point toward a very different idea of the background, and it is not clear to me that (or how) they fit
together. What I want to suggest is that there is a way of reading – and cashing out –
the first claim that provides the notion of a background with a purely deflationary
sense. But this deflationary sense pulls against the sense of mystery conveyed by the
second claim, since if we take seriously the more deflationary line of thinking, there
is ultimately no “there” there that we cannot “get at.” What is left instead is the
question of just why we take there to be something that is ineliminably mysterious
about our forms of understanding.

At the risk of moving too far out of the orbit of canonical figures in
phenomenology, my discussion of these two ideas about the background will be
oriented primarily around remarks from Wittgenstein’s later philosophy. I do not
take this to be too much of a departure, especially in the context of discussing
Dreyfus’s contributions to phenomenology. Dreyfus often reads Wittgenstein as
something of a fellow traveler in terms of opposition to the philosophical tradition
in ways that often parallel – and mostly reinforce – the insights in Heidegger that
most interest Dreyfus.

But even if examining Dreyfus via Wittgenstein constitutes something of a
detour, I want to propose that if we take care to tease apart these different senses of
the background, we confront a number of worries that are directly relevant for
phenomenology. First, there is a serious question about just what kind of
explanatory work the appeal to the background is meant to do. This is a question
that arises on both the deflationary and the more mystery-laden senses of the
background. For Wittgenstein, this is just as it should be, since his philosophy is
directed against the explanatory endeavors characteristic of traditional philosophy,
whereas it is not clear that Dreyfus would be happy with this largely negative point.\(^1\)

Secondly, whether understood in a deflationary or mysterious sense, the notion of the background raises issues for phenomenology in terms of what it would mean for there to be a phenomenology of the background. In what sense is the background a topic for phenomenology, rather than a limit on it? I will try to say something about this question at the conclusion.

2. The Background as Deflationary: Wittgenstein on Explanations of Meaning

Let’s consider more closely the first sentence in the Dreyfus passage with which I began:

> We can to some extent *light up* that understanding, that is, point it out to those who share it, but we cannot *spell it out*, that is, make it understandable even to those who do not share it.

Dreyfus is here contrasting something we *can* do – “*light up* that understanding” – with something we *cannot* do – “*spell it out*” – where the latter means making it “understandable even to those who do not share it.”\(^2\) What I want to suggest is that the contrast Dreyfus relies upon here is far less clear than it initially appears. That is, the way Dreyfus lays things out, it looks like there are two kinds of project at issue, one of which turns out to be impossible. If, however, we think through what

\(^1\) This is a point that has been emphasized by Denis McManus, whose discussions of Dreyfus and the background are in the background of my own. See the next note for references.

\(^2\) Earlier in the commentary, Dreyfus characterizes this latter alternative as spelling out “*these practices in so definite and context-free a way that they could be communicated to any rational being or represented in a computer.*” (BITW, p. 4)
Dreyfus says we *can* do, then there being a clearly delineated inability stems from a contentious – and ultimately confused – idea of how the notions of explanation, understanding, and meaning hang together. In other words, if we see – or *remind* ourselves of – how “lighting up” that understanding works and the way it involves our always in some way – but also in some ways possibly *not* – “sharing it,” the second, apparently contrasting idea dissolves.³

To find a way in here, consider what Wittgenstein says in § 87 of the *Philosophical Investigations*:

> Suppose I give this explanation: “I take ‘Moses’ to mean the man, if there was such a man, who led the Israelites out of Egypt, whatever he was called then and whatever he may or may not have done besides.” – But similar doubts to those about the name “Moses” are possible about the words of this explanation (what are you calling “Egypt”, whom the “Israelites”, and so forth?). These questions would not even come to an end when we got down

³ My teasing out of a deflationary understanding of the notion of the background resonates with, and in some ways draws upon, work by Barry Stroud and Denis McManus (McManus, in turn, draws upon the work of John McDowell). See Stroud, “The Background of Thought” and McManus, “Rules, Regression, and the ‘Background’: Dreyfus, Heidegger and McDowell,” and *Heidegger and the Measure of Truth* (viz. Chapter 4). Stroud’s discussion focuses on the idea of the Background as it emerges in the work of John Searle. While Stroud endorses a kind of negative appeal to the notion of a Background as blocking certain forms of explanation in the philosophy of mind and language, he challenges the idea that appeal to the Background provides a new kind of explanatory project, such that the Background is something pre- or non-intentional that “makes possible” our having or being in intentional states. McManus’s discussion focuses directly on Heidegger and Dreyfus: what I refer to here as a deflationary idea of the background accords with what he calls a “dissolving” conception. For McManus, what is being dissolved is a way of thinking about representations that makes the question of their possibility seem urgent; on such a way of thinking, appeal to the background is meant to address that urgent question. McManus argues that if we take that question seriously, the appeal to the background only serves to raise the question anew, and so provides nothing by way of a satisfying answer. Rather than providing an answer to the question of how representation is possible, appeal to the background should be understood as a contribution to the project of rethinking the idea of representation in such a way that the question of its possibility no longer arises.
to words like “red”, “dark”, “sweet”. – “But then how does an explanation help me to understand, if, after all, it is not the final one? In that case the explanation is never completed; so I still don’t understand what he means, and never shall!” – As though an explanation, as it were, hung in the air unless supported by another one. Whereas an explanation may indeed rest on another one that has been given, but none stands in need of another – unless we require it to avoid a misunderstanding. One might say: an explanation serves to remove or prevent a misunderstanding – one, that is, that would arise if not for the explanation, but not every misunderstanding that I can imagine.

It may easily look as if every doubt merely revealed a gap in the foundations; so that secure understanding is possible only if we first doubt everything that can be doubted, and then remove all these doubts.

The signpost is in order – if, under normal circumstances, it fulfills its purpose.

The passage begins with an example of Wittgenstein’s explaining what he means, in this case by the name “Moses” (the passage refers back to § 78, where the example of the name “Moses” is first introduced). What follows the first dash (“But similar doubts...”) introduces a worry about the efficacy of this explanation in a way that threatens to prove intractable. The worry goes something like this: whenever I offer an explanation of what I mean, the words I use in formulating that explanation might themselves stand in need of explanation. The problem here is that this worry iterates, since whatever I offer by way of explaining what I mean in the first explanation might itself stand in need of explanation, and so on. So, to use the example, if I explain what I mean by “Moses” by appealing to Egypt and the Israelites, those too are words whose meaning may need to be explained. If I then explain what I mean by these words, such explanations will in turn use words whose meaning may need to be explained, and so on. We thus face a regress of explanations that we start to feel must terminate in a final explanation, which serves to found or ground all of the explanations higher up; otherwise, as the quoted voice midway
through the first paragraph laments, “I still don’t understand what he means, and never shall!”

Notice that the worry begins with an observation that seems undeniable: any explanation of what I mean may itself stand in need of explanation. If someone does not understand something I have said, then it is possible that what I say by way of explanation will itself not be understood. If we then add in the idea of iterability, it looks like we have a series of possibilities such that every particular explanation selects from – is only a fragment of – that entire series. That series is in some sense already there, with a definite order and direction, such that each explanation depends upon whatever explanations lie “further down.” An ideal or complete explanation would in some way encompass that entire series, thereby foreclosing any possible misunderstanding. We thus have in very short order the beginnings of what Wittgenstein would call a picture, whose pictorial elements, so to speak, can be understood as a set of requirements for any adequate explanation of meaning. As standing in a kind of series, there is a definite direction of explanation – a direction of definition – that fuels the idea of a direction of analysis. What we are really doing when we offer an explanation of what we mean is giving (or relying upon) an analysis of our initial expression, where the results of that analysis are in turn to be analyzed until a terminus (the endpoint of analysis) is reached. It should be noted here that this passage appears after remarks where Wittgenstein has interrogated the idea of genuine names as standing for simples, whose sense is guaranteed and directly grasped, and immediately before returning to the idea of logic as something
**sublime.** The suggestion is that those heady ideas begin with what look like platitudes.

So how does Wittgenstein interrupt this line of reasoning? And how does that interruption tell us something about the notion of the background? Let’s start with the first question. Consider Wittgenstein’s initial response to the lament in quotation marks: “As though an explanation, as it were, hung in the air unless supported by another one. Whereas an explanation may indeed rest on another one that has been given, but none stands in need of another – unless we require it to avoid a misunderstanding.” What Wittgenstein is questioning here is the idea that any explanation automatically requires – or even naturally leads to – a further explanation that serves to support it in some way. While one explanation may turn out to require another, that need not be the case. As he goes on to note, the point of an explanation is to remove or avert a misunderstanding, one that has actually arisen (or is likely to arise). An explanation is thus directed at a particular misunderstanding on a particular occasion with a particular interlocutor. Such a misunderstanding may be unexpected, baffling, peculiar or frustrating; it may be predictable given the audience, completely foreseeable, unsurprising, or avoidable; it could be simple, easily removed, or eminently manageable. It depends on the nature and severity of the misunderstanding, why it has arisen, and what it takes to overcome it. The misunderstanding may simply be a matter of someone’s mishearing what I’ve said, in which case I can explain what I mean by repeating what I’ve said more clearly. But in other cases, the misunderstanding may have a deeper source, such as a lack of familiarity with a particular range or domain of
concepts. In these cases, there may be greater challenges in terms of what I can and cannot say by way of removing the misunderstanding. That there are a wide variety of kinds of misunderstanding suggests that explanations go in different directions, so that even if the same utterance is at issue, what needs to be explained and why might be only tangentially related in different cases. To use Wittgenstein’s example again, while we might on some occasions explain who Moses was by appeal to the Israelites, on other occasions, the explanation could just as easily go the other way: we may explain to someone who the Israelites were by citing Moses as their leader. It depends on who is asking and why. What this suggests is that there is not a well-defined structure of possibilities that any particular explanation selects from and depends upon for its efficacy. When Wittgenstein rejects the idea that an explanation might somehow address “every misunderstanding I can imagine,” it is not because this is a Herculean task that is beyond my powers; rather, it is unclear just what kind of requirement this is. What exactly is picked out by the phrase “every misunderstanding I can imagine” and how does such a notion even come into play when I explain what I mean to someone who has misunderstood what I say?

When it comes to explanations of meaning, we might adduce at least the following features based on what Wittgenstein says here in § 87:

i) Explanations are situation-specific

ii) As situation-specific, they are responsive to the particular misunderstanding they are addressing

iii) Explanations are directed to particular people, whose misunderstandings may be different and may have arisen for different reasons (compare explaining to a grown-up vs. explaining to a child; explaining to a friend vs. explaining to a stranger; explaining to a
fellow speaker of English vs. explaining to a non-native speaker of English; and so on)

iv) What works as an explanation for one person/situation/utterance might not work for another person/situation/utterance

v) Explanations start somewhere: giving an explanation presupposes that other things are already understood

vi) Explanations end when they have served their purpose (not when everything that could possibly be explained has been explained)

I will note here only briefly that further attention to the top half of the above list indicates what we might call an ethical dimension of speech, in that speaking to one another involves a willingness to explain what we mean, to remove or avert misunderstandings. And that willingness may in some cases be limited or missing, which is a kind of failure to engage with one’s interlocutor. (There is also a question of willingness on the part of the interlocutor to try to understand what is being said; not every failure is the fault of one party in the conversation.) Such a failure is really a failure to care whether one is understood or not, and so registers an insensitivity to the audience of one’s words. But even in cases where that willingness is present, the ways in which we can be – and fail to be – responsive to the audience of our words registers different degrees of sensitivity to the particular occasion for speaking, as well as the particular audience for what one says. What I offer by way of explanation when I have not been understood, as called upon by the particular misunderstanding, will need to find the right point of entry in terms of what the audience does understand and can understand. In that search, I may, on some occasions, be impatient, indifferent, frustrated, or dismissive, which can in turn indicate anything from a condescending to contemptuous attitude toward
whomever it is to whom I am speaking. Speaking to one another involves and reflects a range of attitudes toward one another, which can in various ways be virtuous or not.

If we concentrate on the bottom half of the list, we can begin to approach the issue of the background. When Wittgenstein points out that an explanation of meaning removes or averts a misunderstanding, one thing that suggests is that any particular misunderstanding occurs against a background of understanding. If someone is so much as able to query who I take Moses to be, then there is already at least some common understanding between us (my listener understands enough of what I’ve said to ask for an explanation of one thing I’ve said; I understand enough of what she has said to grasp that something of what I said needs to be explained). Moreover, any explanation I give, if it is to remove the misunderstanding, must itself be understood. If it is understood, then the explanation I have offered has done the trick. There is no further explanation that follows on from my initial one when it is successful: merely possible misunderstandings are irrelevant. Of course, it is possible that anything I offer by way of explanation will itself be misunderstood, and so it is possible that something I took for granted or presupposed (“I thought you were clear on who the Israelites were”) may turn out to be mistaken. What needs to

4 As Wittgenstein notes in § 30 of the Investigations: “One has already to know (be able to do) something in order to be capable of asking a thing’s name. But what does one have to know?” I take it that this remark is applicable to the notion of asking what someone means. My sense in both cases is that Wittgenstein’s leaving the concluding question unanswered is deliberate, in that there is no one something one has to know or be able to do. Apart from saying something along the lines of “Lots of things,” how one fills in details will depend on the particulars of the case. Compare being able to ask for the name of a pet, a best friend, a color, a foreign currency, a galaxy. Each of these enlists a different range of background knowledge and abilities.
be resisted in this near-platitude is drawing out as a consequence the idea that the best or complete explanation would be one that presupposed \textit{nothing}. An explanation that presupposes nothing is one side of the coin whose reverse is the notion of first doubting “everything that \textit{can} be doubted, and then remov[ing] all these doubts.”

Wittgenstein’s suggestion that explanations presuppose understanding accords with Dreyfus’s idea that any kind of “lighting up” of our understanding is a kind of “pointing out to those who share it.” But for Dreyfus, this kind of lighting up is to be contrasted with a kind of “spelling out” that would make what we understand “understandable even to those who do not share it.” My point in rehearsing some of Wittgenstein’s ideas from the \textit{Philosophical Investigations} has been to question what that latter idea comes to: what kind of “spelling out” are we imagining here, such that we can say of it that it is something we are \textit{unable} to do? If we try to imagine a creature with whom we share nothing – no shared sense of anything whatsoever – then the idea that we could \textit{explain} anything or make ourselves understood in any way at all seems to fade away. Where could any such project \textit{begin}? What possibilities of understanding and misunderstanding are in play here? What possibilities for responsiveness are at issue? One wonders if the task envisioned here is akin to trying to make oneself understood to a fencepost. Is it a failing on my part that I cannot? As Denis McManus puts it in his discussion of Dreyfus and the background, one way of thinking about the lesson here is that “we cannot stand outside of, and survey, our ways of making sense: at any stage in the project of ‘foregrounding’ – by attempting to ‘spell out’ – our understanding, there could then
be said to remain a residual ‘background’ of understanding which we presuppose and have not ‘spelt out’.” (HMT, p. 97) Put this way, however (and I think McManus ultimately agrees), too much credit is accorded to the idea that is being rejected, as we should ultimately not see ourselves as prevented from doing something. Instead, it is the idea of “standing outside” our ways of making sense that should be unmasked as a confusion. I think Wittgenstein can be seen to be gesturing in this direction in the following passage from Remarks on the Foundations of Mathematics:

To what extent can the function of language be described? If someone is not master of a language, I may bring him to mastery of it by training. Someone who is master of it, I may remind of the kind of training, or I may describe it; for a particular purpose; thus already using a technique of the language.

To what extent can the function of a rule be described? Someone who is master of none, I can only train. But how can I explain the nature of a rule to myself?

The difficult thing here is not, to dig down to the ground; no, it is to recognize the ground that lies before us as the ground.

For the ground keeps on giving us the illusory image of a greater depth, and when we seek to reach this, we keep on finding ourselves on the old level. (RFM VI, § 31)

Elsewhere in this same stretch of remarks, Wittgenstein notes: “We talk and we act. That is already presupposed in everything I am saying.” (RFM VI, § 17) We might put the lesson of these remarks like this: making sense of anything we say and do itself involves talking and acting. The “illusory image of a greater depth” is the idea that we can somehow make sense of our ways of talking and acting without taking anything for granted in terms of what we say and do. This would be a kind of talking and acting that was somehow self-explanatory, that preempted every possibility of misunderstanding. We keep “finding ourselves on the old level”
insofar as anything we appeal to by way of explanation is more of the same kind of talk, where it is always possible to be misunderstood.\footnote{A brief remark on the concluding paragraph of \textit{Investigations} § 87, where Wittgenstein refers to the signpost as being “in order” if it “fulfills its purposes” under “normal circumstances.” Signposts that fulfill their purposes in this way can be misunderstood; what matters is only that they by and large are not. Wittgenstein’s concluding with an allusion to signposts refers back to § 85, which begins with his likening a \textit{rule} to a signpost. Within that remark, Wittgenstein contrasts \textit{empirical} and \textit{philosophical} senses of the notion that a signpost leaves room for doubt. The empirical case is a matter of signs that have been shown to be in some way confusing, vague, ambiguous, difficult to follow, and so on. These are what we might simply call \textit{bad signs}. In such cases, signs may be improved in ways that strive to remove confusion, vagaries, and so on, or people may be given better instruction in the use of such signs. (I have colleagues in other departments who specialize in such things.) It depends on what the signs are for and why the problems are arising. The main thing is that in the empirical case, we are addressing \textit{actual} or at least \textit{foreseeable} problems. The philosophical case, by contrast, concerns what are only \textit{possible} doubts, misunderstandings that \textit{could} arise. The risk of emptiness here can be seen in what is guiding the philosophical case, namely, the idea of a sign that cannot possibly be misunderstood, no matter who was using it and no matter what the circumstances. Such a “sign” would be nothing short of \textit{magical}. I think that § 87 as a whole, as well as much of the \textit{Philosophical Investigations} more generally, can be understood as directed against various forms of magical thinking.}

I referred at the outset to this way of thinking about the background as \textit{deflationary} and I want now to say what I mean. Wittgenstein is famous for saying that “explanations come to an end somewhere.” One way of thinking about the background is to see that “somewhere” as naming a definite \textit{place}: what we all “share” that makes language, thought, and meaning possible. My sense is that Dreyfus often thinks of the background this way, so that appeal to the background does some kind of philosophical-explanatory work (the background is what “enables us to make sense of things”). On the line of reasoning I’ve been trying to tease out of Wittgenstein, by contrast, explanations come to an end at no particular place; they come to an end whenever we have reached an understanding. Just
where that is depends on who “we” are. We might put this point by saying that not everything is shared. Just how much we have in common – just how much can be relied upon or taken for granted – is not something fixed or definite, but varies in a variety of ways. I may be surprised that something I’ve said has been misunderstood and it may be a challenge to figure out the best way to remove that misunderstanding. One way of thinking about what I referred to above as the ethical dimension of speech is that speaking involves a sensitivity to this varying, shifting background, so that making sense to someone else can sometimes require more or less work, more or less patience, more or less effort. Making sense always takes place against a background of things that are presupposed or taken for granted, but just what or how much can be presupposed or taken for granted is not something fixed or determined in advance. These are things that get discovered and amended in the ongoing process of talking to one another. For this reason, it is misleading to talk about the background, a definite place or space that we “have” or within which we “dwell,” that serves as some special kind of ground.

3. The Background as Mystery: the Illusion of Depth

I want to turn now to the second claim in the passage from Dreyfus’s commentary, which goes beyond the initial contrast between “lighting up” and “spelling out.” Again, Dreyfus writes:

Moreover, what we can get clear about is only what is least pervasive and embodied. Heidegger has the sense that the more important some aspect of our understanding of being is, the less we can get at it.
The connective “moreover” is interesting here, as it leaves it unclear just how the two thoughts are related to one another. Does the second idea, wherein our difficulty getting at “some aspect of our understanding of being” varies in direct relation to that aspect’s importance, follow on from the first? In offering a deflationary reading of the first claim Dreyfus makes, such that we should see through the demand of spelling out to “those who do not share it” as illusory, my suggestion has been that the rejection of this demand at the same time casts doubt on the notion of the background as something there to be got at or not. There is always a background, but just what that is or what it “contains” is not something fixed or determinate.

While I have appealed to Wittgenstein as a way of developing this deflationary idea, it is important to note that his writings can also be mined for teasing out the more mysterious sense of the background. In a 1931 passage that appears in *Culture and Value*, Wittgenstein says as much:

> Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning. (CV, 16)

While this remark appears quite early in the development of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy (he only returned to philosophy in 1929), echoes of this idea can be found among his very last writings. Consider, for example, the following passage from *On Certainty*, written two decades later:
Am I not getting closer and closer to saying that in the end logic cannot be described? You must look at the practice of language, then you will see it. (OC, § 501)

Insofar as “the ground keeps on giving us the illusory image of a greater depth,” it seems fair to say that Wittgenstein himself was at the very least alive to the temptation to succumb to just such an image. There is something about “the ground” that intimates to us a “greater depth” that we “seek to reach,” even though “we keep on finding ourselves on the old level.” How does this happen?

As a start, consider the following passage from early on in the *Philosophical Investigations*:

One attends to the shape, sometimes by tracing it, sometimes by screwing up one’s eyes so as not to see the colour clearly, and so forth. I want to say: this and similar things are what one does *while* one ‘directs one’s attention to this or that’. But it isn’t only these things that make us say that someone is attending to the shape, the colour, etc. Just as making a move in chess doesn’t consist only in pushing a piece from here to there on the board – nor yet in the thoughts and feelings that accompany the move: but in the circumstances that we call “playing a game of chess”, “solving a chess problem”, and the like. (Pl, § 33)

Attending to the color or shape of something, like making a move in chess, is something pretty much all of us are able to do. I can, when looking at someone’s shirt or a painting on the wall, look more attentively at the tones or the texture; I can pay more attention to how the shirt fits or how the painting is framed; and so on. In doing any of these things, I might *do* various other things, such as screw up my eyes or gesture with my hand, and also *think* various things, such as “That’s an amazing shade of blue!” In reflecting on such ordinary episodes, if we look only at what is readily available, we are apt to feel puzzled: the gesture of pointing, for example,
does not by itself seem sufficient to pick out the color rather than, say, the shape (the two gestures look exactly the same), just as “pushing a piece from here to there on the board” does not by itself count as a move in chess. We are apt in such moments of reflection to turn inward, so that the gestures or the movements are in some way infused or informed by an accompanying thought or feeling that makes the gesture or the movement have the meaning it has. But Wittgenstein thinks, and argues relentlessly throughout the Investigations, that this maneuver inevitably fails, as it only raises again the question of what makes that accompanying thought or feeling about color or chess or whatever is at issue. If I think, “Now I’ll take his knight,” as I move my bishop across the board, what passes through my mind, taken by itself, has no more in the way of meaning than the movements of my hand (if the movements are somehow not enough, then what passes through my mind fails to “anchor” that movement). Wittgenstein is not at all denying that we make meaningful gestures, just as he is not denying that we have thoughts that are about chess moves. His point instead is that in such reflective moments, when we dim down our gaze, we neglect or forget the way these episodes of gesturing and thinking are situated in what he refers to in the above passage as simply circumstances. These circumstances serve as a kind of background against which such gestures, movements, and thoughts have the meanings they have. Part of Wittgenstein’s aim is expose and exorcise our tendency to forget these circumstances, to remind us of their importance as “stage-setting”\(^6\) for the sense of what we do and say.

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\(^6\) The term “stage-setting” appears in the original Anscombe translation of § 257 of the Investigations; the revised translation by Hacker and Schulte omits the term.
But what is it about this largely corrective (or therapeutic) appeal to circumstances that gives us an “illusory image of a greater depth”? And why is it that we find ourselves, in seeking those depths, always on the same level? My sense is that the answers to these questions lie in the indefiniteness or indeterminacy of the background. Let me try to explain what I mean here.

In one of his later manuscripts, Wittgenstein writes:

> We judge an action according to its background within human life, and this background is not monochrome, but we might picture it as a very complicated filigree pattern, which, to be sure, we can’t copy, but which we can recognize from the general impression it makes. (RPP II, § 624)

Wittgenstein again appeals here to the notion of a background against which we judge an action (I take it that by judge he means, most basically, picking out an action as the kind of action it is). So there is something there that makes a “general impression,” but it is not something we can form a determinate sense of while judging whatever it is that holds our attention. Insofar as we “picture it,” what comes to mind is a very complicated pattern that strikes us in a general way, but without our being able to copy it. I don’t think Wittgenstein just means that the pattern is too complicated to copy, but that what the pattern is itself indeterminate, so that there is no one “copy” that would count as the copy. In the immediately subsequent remarks in this typescript, Wittgenstein further elaborates on this kind of indeterminacy:

The revised translation is certainly truer to the German, but I nonetheless find the phrase helpful.
The background is the bustle of life. And our concept points to something within this bustle. (RPP II, § 625)

The notion of a “bustle” (the German here is Getriebe) is itself a deliberately vague notion (at RPP II, § 622 immediately preceding this stretch of remarks, Wittgenstein discusses the paradigmatic vague concept, “heap”); there is no saying just how much activity or what variety constitutes a bustle:

And it is the very concept ‘bustle’ that brings about this indefiniteness. For a bustle comes about only through constant repetition. And there is no definite starting point for ‘constant repetition’. (RPP II, § 626)

“Bustle” is only one of several terms that Wittgenstein uses in remarks from this late period in his writings. Immediately after invoking the notion of a bustle, he adds another:

How could human behavior be described? Surely only by showing the actions of a variety of humans, as they are all mixed up together. Not what one man is doing now, but the whole hurly-burly [Gewimmel], is the background against which we see an action, and it determines our judgment, our concepts, and our reactions. (RPP II, § 629; Z, § 567)

This last remark also appears in Zettel, where it is followed by the following pair of remarks:

Seeing life as a weave, this pattern (pretence, say) is not always complete and is varied in a multiplicity of ways. But we, in our conceptual world, keep on seeing the same, recurring with variations. That is how our concepts take it. For concepts are not for use on a single occasion. (Z, § 568)

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7 Elsewhere, Wittgenstein writes: “The greatest difficulty in these investigations is to find a way of representing vagueness.” (LW I, § 347)
And one pattern in the weave is interwoven with many others. (Z, § 569)

The idea of a *pattern* appears in the opening remarks of Part II of the *Philosophical Investigations* (what the new edition now titles “Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology – A Fragment”), most notably where Wittgenstein says that “‘grief’ describes a pattern which recurs, with different variations, in the tapestry of life.” (PPF, § i) What all of these notions – weave, pattern, bustle, hurly-burly – appear to be driving at is not just the way particular actions (as well as uses of a word, applications of a concept, and so on) are embedded in broader surroundings, but the way those surroundings form a kind of indefinite backdrop. As a backdrop, it is something we sense or in some way discern whenever we pick out anything in particular, but we sense it only as a kind of indefinite presence insofar as we are attending to that particular thing.

To return to the questions I posed above, we might say something like this: Wittgenstein’s appeal to the background as something indefinite, like a complicated pattern that we “cannot copy,” but which nonetheless makes an “impression” on us suggests a way of understanding our being tempted by an “illusory image of greater depths.” In being struck by something indefinite or indeterminate, there is a kind of “pull” toward making it more definite or determinate: *we want* to copy the filigree pattern and in that way understand just *how* this background *works* in terms of explaining what my making a move in chess or pointing to a color or having a certain thought finally consists in. If we could just find a way of taking in this background as a whole, then we could thereby make sense of our making sense of
things in some final or comprehensive way. The problem, however, is that whenever we render some part of this background more determinate – pull out one strand from the “weave” in the “tapestry of life” – we just get more of the same kinds of things with which we started: particular gestures and movements, momentary thoughts and feelings, utterances and expressions. In other words, we just get more foreground, which again stands out against an indefinite backdrop in terms of which it stands out in the way it does. This problem is already intimated in the passage from the *Investigations* that ends with the example of a move in chess. What makes up the “circumstances” is just more stuff about chess: playing a game of chess, solving a chess problem, and so on. As just more stuff about chess, none of this tells us anything more about what making a move in chess consists of beyond moving a piece across the board apart from the truism that the movement in question has to be a move within the game of chess (and all that involves). In this sense, we repeatedly “find ourselves on the old level,” i.e. back among the foreground phenomena we were originally trying to understand.

4. **Phenomenology and the Idea of Infinite Tasks**

By way of conclusion, I want to indicate briefly what I take to be the ramifications for this more deflationary conception of the background (as just background, without the definite article) for our understanding of phenomenology. One way to think about the upshot here is as providing a new gloss or twist on Husserl’s idea of phenomenology as involving, or committing us to, a set of “infinite tasks.”
On the orthodox Husserlian way, these tasks are all part of a transcendental-explanatory project, whereby we make clear to ourselves the structures in terms of which our making sense of things is possible. Among those structures are the horizontal-background structures, the “determinable indeterminacies,” whose essential role phenomenology highlights and seeks to make explicit. For Husserlian phenomenology, there is (already) a structure there to made determinate, only doing so is an infinite task. There is no getting to the end of excavating all the “sedimented beliefs” that make up the horizonal structure of experience. Dreyfus for his part rejects this Husserlian conception of phenomenology as an infinite task, since he rejects the idea of the background as a determinably indeterminate structure whose elements might be thought of along the lines of beliefs. For Dreyfus, the background cannot be made explicit because it does not have that kind of structure (again, “the more important some aspect of our understanding of being is, the less we can get at it”). To depict what lies in the background in propositional, belief-like form is thereby to distort it. But Dreyfus still shares with the original Husserlian vision the idea of the background as explanatory, as contributing in some way to our understanding of how intentionality is possible. So there is still the background – something there – that plays a certain kind of role in our understanding or making sense of things, only it doesn’t look the way Husserl thought it did.

On the deflationary conception of the background I’ve been sketching out via Wittgenstein, there is no there there in either the Husserlian or Dreyfusian sense, and so there is neither the infinite task of explicating it, nor the countervailing
insistence that what is there must remain mysterious. Instead, there is just our
talking and acting, any moment of which takes place – and makes the sense it does –
against an indefinitely appearing background, which in turn consists of more in the
way of talking and acting. Insofar as we neglect the way any moment of our talking
and acting takes place against such a background, or insofar as we are tempted to
discern an “illusory depth” within it, then the task is one of addressing the
confusions such forms of neglect or temptation are apt to generate. Since
Wittgenstein recognizes that “the ground keeps on giving us the illusory image of a
greater depth,” there is the infinite negative task of returning us to what
Wittgenstein calls “the rough ground.”8 This sense of an infinite negative task is
registered in the character of Wittgenstein’s later writings, where there is no sense
of finality, no moment of “throwing away the ladder” once and for all.

But there is a perhaps more positively-charged, although still not exactly
constructive, task as well, which is bound up with what I referred to in passing
above as the ethical dimensions of speech. Making sense to one another is itself an
infinite task, whose continual accomplishment depends upon a shared background,
what Wittgenstein calls at Investigations § 242 agreement in “judgments.” That
what is shared – what gets taken for granted or presupposed – is not something
fixed or determined means that what lies in the background can be – or can become
– an problem, something that no longer figures – or is discovered not to figure – in
our shared sensibility, and can in this way become itself a part of the foreground as

8 In a lecture I attended many years ago, Hilary Putnam said something to the effect
that Wittgenstein’s aim was to close down the philosophy shop, only he saw that it
would take forever to do so. I don’t know if this is what Putnam had in mind, but his
remark has stuck with me.
a topic for critical reflection. In seeking to “light up” our understanding – to use Dreyfus’s phrase – the task of phenomenology lies in cultivating an openness to that kind of critical reflection, to seeing and showing how particular ways of making sense depend upon others being taken for granted or assumed. Phenomenology might in this way be understood positively as addressing the ongoing ethical challenge of making sense of and to one another.⁹

⁹ See Fredrik Westerlund’s “What is a Transcendental Description?” (in S. Heinämaa, M. Hartimo, and T. Miettenen, Phenomenology and the Transcendental) for one way of understanding phenomenological descriptions as providing a distinctive kind of illumination and potentially transformative forms of reflective awareness, and so as being worthy of in one sense being called “transcendental” even without the traditional appeal to essential structures and transcendental subjectivity. I try in my paper, “‘Feckless Prisoners of Their Times’: Historicism and Moral Reflection” (unpublished), to sketch out in a different way how this idea of “lighting up” aspects of our understanding (in a way suggested by Dreyfus himself) might be understood as allowing for possibly radical forms of self-criticism.