

On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Reading Heidegger Backwards: White's *Time and Death**

IAIN THOMSON

University of New Mexico, USA

(Received 22 July 2006)

ABSTRACT *In Time and Death: Heidegger's Analysis of Finitude*, Carol White pursues a strange hermeneutic strategy, reading Heidegger backwards by reading the central ideas of his later work back into his early magnum opus, *Being and Time*. White follows some of Heidegger's own later directives in pursuing this hermeneutic strategy, and this paper critically explores these directives along with the original reading that emerges from following them. The conclusion reached is that White's creative book is not persuasive as a strict interpretation of Heidegger's early work, but remains extremely helpful for deepening our appreciation of Heidegger's thought as a whole. Most importantly, White helps us to understand the pivotal role that thinking about death played in the lifelong development of Heidegger's philosophy.

Carol White's *Time and Death: Heidegger's Analysis of Finitude* is a book rich in thought, dense in original interpretive claims, and overflowing with supporting textual references. Indeed, there is so much going on in White's text that a reviewer might be excused for initially feeling a bit like a hungry mosquito upon discovering an elephant, that is, excited and daunted at the same time, since there is more food for thought here than a single reviewer can hope to digest. It is fortunate, then, that Hubert Dreyfus has already written a magisterial "Foreword" to White's book, in which he introduces her work by focusing on her original and provocative interpretation of

*Carol J. White (2005) *Time and Death: Heidegger's Analysis of Finitude* Mark Ralkowski (Ed.) Foreword by Hubert L. Dreyfus (Aldershot: Ashgate) pp. xlvii + 179, \$94.95. Unprefixed page references are to this work.

Correspondence Address: Iain Thomson, Department of Philosophy, University of New Mexico, MSC03-2140, Albuquerque, NM 87131-0001, USA. Email: ithomson@unm.edu

Heidegger's phenomenology of death. White's view, put simply, is that "death" is Heidegger's name for the collapse of an historical understanding of being, a collapse which creates the space for a rare authentic individual to disclose a new historical understanding of being and so inaugurate a new age. Dreyfus, after critically but sympathetically reconstructing White's interpretation, goes on to situate it within a panoramic overview of eight different ways in which eleven well-known interpreters have understood—or, more commonly, misunderstood—what Heidegger means by death. Providing a critical synopsis of each of these eight different interpretations of death, Dreyfus organizes them into an almost dialectical progression of increasingly satisfying interpretations, a progression which, he argues, reaches its fulfillment in the complementary work of White and John Haugeland.¹ Although I cannot recapitulate the detailed arguments from Dreyfus's 28 page essay here, I shall build upon several points from his analysis below. Still, every Heidegger scholar will want to read Dreyfus's Preface for themselves, because this mature and insightful work, in which the world's leading expert on *Being and Time* critically synthesizes almost every major interpretation of Heidegger on death, represents an uncircumventable contribution to our understanding of Heidegger, one with respect to which all future interpreters of Heidegger's views on death will want to situate themselves.²

The inclusion of Dreyfus's important Foreword in White's book is thus, by itself, already sufficient to make White's book significant for the scholarly community.³ Dreyfus, in turn, argues for the independent importance of White's work by suggesting that—once some minor interpretive reconstruction distances White's interpretation of death from Nietzsche and brings it closer to Haugeland—her work on the long-vexed topic of what exactly Heidegger means by death should be recognized as one of the twin peaks of more than a half century of scholarship. Because Dreyfus has already made such a forceful case for a slightly reconstructed version of White's interpretation of death, what I propose to do here, in hopes of expanding the critical discussion of White's original and provocative book, is to step back and examine her more general hermeneutic strategy of reading Heidegger's early magnum opus, *Being and Time*, back through the interpretive lens of his later work. This strategy of "retrospective reading" forms the background for White's interpretation of death, as Dreyfus recognizes (ix), and by explicitly focusing on this background here, I shall try to say more about what White's original method of reading Heidegger backwards reveals as well as what it conceals, and then conclude by suggesting how we might develop the best of these insights while eliminating the blind-spots that still accompany them in White's path-breaking work.⁴

I. White's reading

Despite my title, White does not actually take herself to be reading Heidegger backwards, for that would require the later Heidegger to have

said something that the early Heidegger did not already say, some philosophical insight unique to his later work that would be capable of casting a new and revealing light on his early work. As White puts it, however: “There is no distinct ‘early’ and ‘late’ Heidegger, in my view, only earlier and later ways of saying the same thing” (p. 2). Surface similarities notwithstanding, White’s claim that the early and later Heidegger *say the same thing* is not a reflexive application of Heidegger’s provocative claim that “all great thinkers think the same”, his idea that great thinkers think from (and so circle around) an “unthought” insight that they never fully manage to put into words; nor is it a version of his closely related but more mystical idea that all the great thinkers were really struggling in this way to put *the same* ultimate reality into words, but that this reality is “so essential and so rich that no single thinker exhausts it”.⁵ White’s claim—that Heidegger’s early and later works are “saying the same thing”—is more mundane and yet just as provocative: White really means that there is no essential difference between Heidegger’s early and later philosophy. Heidegger’s later works obviously look different from *Being and Time*, but White maintains that “this is not because of a change of mind but rather because of a change of method and a change of language to one not so easily accommodating of the metaphysical misreading that has plagued the early work” (p. 47). In other words, the later Heidegger never changed his mind philosophically, he just changed his method and style so that he could present *the same philosophy* in a way that would resist the “metaphysical misreading” that befell his initial presentation of this philosophy in *Being and Time*.

What, then, was the disastrous metaphysical misreading that motivated Heidegger’s drastic stylistic metamorphosis shortly after *Being and Time*? White’s answer is again surprising: the problem to which Heidegger’s later style is a response was the “personalistic misreading of the whole text of *Being and Time*” (p. 117). Or, as White provocatively puts it: “Reading [Heidegger] as any sort of an existentialist was a mistake on our part” (p. 2). The common view that *Being and Time* seeks to describe, and so help readers to achieve, genuine individuality or personal authenticity is a “metaphysical misreading”, White thinks, because this reading of Heidegger as an existentialist follows from (what Heidegger himself sometimes called) the metaphysics of *subjectivism* (or metaphysical “humanism”), that is, the historical process by which human self-awareness became so foregrounded in our philosophical analyses that the human “subject” was first divorced from and then eventually came to eclipse the broader reality of which the human being was originally an integral part. Just so, White believes, a reader like Sartre so foregrounds Heidegger’s existential analyses of the meaning of human being that these analyses come to eclipse the understanding of the meaning of being in general that they were ultimately meant to illuminate.⁶ White thus holds that “it is a mistake to understand

Heidegger's discussion [of matters such as death, conscience, and authenticity] as dealing only *or even directly* with the personal level" (p. 101, my emphasis). The hard line White takes here, in other words, is that, however illuminating Heidegger's discussions in *Being and Time* might be about such recognizably existential topics as the significance of death, the meaning of conscience, and the achievement of genuine individuality, such illumination is only incidental, an indirect flash at best, borrowed from a light Heidegger is really casting elsewhere. Less metaphorically put, the existential analytic of Dasein is intended merely to be propaedeutical to the discovery of the meaning of being in general (or "fundamental ontology"). And, if the existential analytic of Dasein is important *only* as preparatory to fundamental ontology, then, White suggests, "[t]he ontological level of the whole discussion in the second half of *Being and Time* [needs to be] shifted from the personal and subjective to the cultural and historical" (p. 1).⁷

It is this crucial hermeneutic shift—from the personal to the historical—that paves the way for White's original and creative interpretations of Heidegger's famous discussions of such phenomena as "death", "authenticity", and "conscience", phenomena White reads not as existential descriptions of experiences shared by many individuals but, instead, as Heidegger's somewhat "convoluted" way of articulating "cultural and historical" phenomena that are of the greatest ontological importance (li), since they transform a culture's historical understanding of what is and what matters, and also extremely rare, since only a handful of Promethean individuals have ever experienced the phenomena of death and authenticity directly. Remember that, as I mentioned at the beginning, White takes "death" to be Heidegger's way of describing the collapse of an historical understanding of being which creates the space for Dasein authentically to disclose a new historical understanding of being and so inaugurate a new age.⁸ As she puts it, "Heidegger regards authentic disclosedness as something quite rare and...not just a matter of adopting a certain attitude toward one's life or behaving in a certain way" (p. 119). The linked phenomena of death and authentic disclosedness do not directly concern the individual person at all but, rather, seek to describe the way a few rare individuals experience the collapse of the ontological self-understanding that had been guiding the age. White, quoting Heidegger's work from the 1930s, says that death is the collapse of an historical world that uncovers a "reservoir of the not-yet revealed" (p. 55), the ontological "well" of history from out of which this same Promethean individual authentically discloses a new understanding of being and so inaugurates a new age.⁹

This "well" of history, encountered in death, is being, and White describes this revolutionary encounter with poetic, almost visionary elegance:

Authentic Dasein is the one who reaches into the depths of this well to find a new star, a new way of understanding the being of what-is, that

becomes the culture's new starting point as it navigates the twilight between its old world and the new way of disclosing its world that glimmers on the horizon. Nietzsche could see in a lightning flash that God was dead, that will to power ruled what-is, but it took the thunder, the shattering impact of this revelation, another half century to reach the ears of the anyone. (p. 75)

White is virtually channeling Heidegger here, and her powerfully evocative description lets one who has studied Heidegger's late essay on Georg Trakl see how Heidegger himself must have understood the symbolism of the starred well outside his famous "hut" in Todtnauberg. Still, one might wonder why White thinks that the same rare individual who experiences the collapse of the ontology previously guiding the age should be lucky enough also to be the one to disclose a new understanding of being for the next age. Why not think instead, for example, that many individuals will temporarily experience the more or less total collapse of their world, but only a very few will respond by disclosing a whole new world for themselves and for their ages, rather than just finding some new and more reflexive way to reconnect to their old world?¹⁰

White's considered view seems to be that the authentic discloser of a new world recognizes the death of the old world precisely by recognizing the new understanding of being waiting in the wings to replace the old; that is, the death of the old is seen only in the birth of the new.¹¹ As White thus puts it (drawing explicitly from the later Heidegger's readings of Hegel [pp. 56–60] and Trakl [p. 22]), "death is not decay but rather a matter of leaving behind the form of man that has decayed. In Western history, the rational animal died for Dasein to become the image of God; God's favorite creature died for Dasein to become the conscious subject" (p. 22), and, we should add (to update White's story), the conscious subject is now dying as Dasein becomes merely another intrinsically-meaningless "resource" (*Bestand*) standing by to be optimized, and, moreover, this understanding of Dasein as a mere human resource will need to die in order for Dasein to be reborn once again in a non-nihilistic form.¹² Heidegger's philosophical vision of historical salvation is much more easily described than accomplished, however, since, on White's view: "Exhorting someone to 'Be authentic!' makes as much sense, or as little, as exhorting them to be another Plato or Nietzsche" (p. 43). White still finds reason for hope, nonetheless, because she reads *Being and Time's* discussion of "conscience...as what has kept Dasein continually questioning what it is to be for over 2500 years and has prevented us from remaining satisfied with any one answer" (p. 112). Conscience, on her reading, testifies to our perennial ontological *restlessness*. Such restlessness might seem uniquely well-fitted to our current technological understanding of all entities as intrinsically-meaningless resources awaiting optimization, the agitated ontology of a "constant

becoming” (Nietzsche) that is accelerating entities into “a state of pure circulation” (Baudrillard), but in fact the phenomenon of conscience suggests that *this too shall pass*. White, looking at the inner structure of “the conflict in the interpretation of the being of what-is”, finds hope in the idea that this ontological conflict of interpretations “cannot be put to rest. Every interpretation leaves out something about the appearance of being and thus leaves something unsaid that the next creator will try to say” (p. 164).

There is a final complication, however. Until now, these Promethean creators found something new to say about being by returning to the well of untapped possibilities left over by the Greek inception of metaphysics, but this well is now tapped dry; as White says, “we have run out of possibilities for new metaphysical conceptions of the being of what-is” (p. 164). White adopts Heidegger’s claim that metaphysics is coming to an end (although to be able to explain *why*, White would need to discuss Heidegger’s crucial view of metaphysics as *ontotheology*, which she leaves out of her account). Nevertheless, White reasons, because “being always prepares a path for itself over and beyond whatever is at any particular time” (p. 160), we can still learn to understand being in a new, non-nihilistic way. We will once again be able to recognize and restore the intrinsic meaning to entities, if only we can learn to practice a phenomenological comportment sensitive to the “Appropriation” (her somewhat old-fashioned translation of *Ereignis*), an ontological truth *event* that — even after the end of ontotheology — still “takes away that which is its own from boundless unconcealment” (as Heidegger puts it in the 1962 essay, “Time and Being”, in a passage White quotes [p. 162]). Obviously, such ideas ring rather differently from the measured tones of *Being and Time*, yet for White there is nothing new to be found even in the later Heidegger’s famous notion of *Ereignis*, which she reads simply as Heidegger’s later way of spelling out the implications already contained in the early notion of *Eigentlichkeit*. *Ereignis* might be the later Heidegger’s preferred name for a genuine ontological “event”, a revolutionary insight that inaugurates the next stage in the history of being, but *Being and Time* already understood the authentic *Augenblick* as a “moment of insight” that “discloses the being of what-is” (p. 114). With the support of some of Heidegger’s most spectacular etymological acrobatics, White reads *Ereignis* back into *Eigentlichkeit* and maintains that, already in *Being and Time*, the authentic moment of “[i]nsight is in fact the ‘happening’ in which Dasein lets itself be taken up into the Appropriation of being” (p. 159).¹³

II. Reading White

I find White’s views creative, insightful, and extremely suggestive, but they are not without some problematic presuppositions and implications that deserve to be explored.¹⁴ So as not to overlook the obvious, let me draw

attention to the fact that White's ingenious readings of Heidegger's discussions of death, authenticity, and conscience in *Being and Time* allow her to present Heidegger's early magnum opus as if it were already primarily concerned with the history of being. By reading Heidegger's later insights into the history of being back into *Being and Time* (which is what I mean by "reading Heidegger backwards"), White is able to make a completely uncompromising claim for the unity of Heidegger's thought. For, indeed, if Heidegger was already seeking to illuminate the structure of the history of being in Division II of *Being and Time*, then there are not two separate halves of Heidegger's work to try to connect; instead, the simple unity of Heidegger's entire career of thought becomes clear. Anyone who has studied the voluminous literature on the contentious question of how to understand the relation between the early and the later Heidegger will know that enthusiastic assertions of the fundamental unity of Heidegger's work are a dime a dozen among the Heideggerian faithful, but what gives White's monistic view of Heidegger its substance and traction is her strong claim that, even when we adopt the perspective of Heidegger's later work, "no retreat from or retraction of the basic points of *Being and Time* is necessary" (p. 35).¹⁵ By reading the later notion of *Ereignis* back into the early notion of *Eigentlichkeit*, for example, White eliminates any need to account for what most interpreters would take to be a glaring difference between Heidegger's early and later views.

Now, for many of us, I suspect, White's uncompromising defense of Heidegger—a figure who, on her reading, never changes his mind, never needs to retract or fundamentally transform the claims he set forth in *Being and Time* (as if his philosophy were born full-grown in his early and *unfinished* text, like wisdom from the head of Zeus)—all this will sound too hagiographic, too excessively faithful, almost more Heideggerian than Heidegger himself.¹⁶ In my view, it is in the hyperorthodox disposition of White's reading that her important work most problematically shows its age, the mark of that incredibly polarized scholarly audience for which White first conceived and began writing her book twenty years ago, in which one had to be either for or against Heidegger.¹⁷ That absurdly simplistic imperative is finally giving way to more balanced approaches (in Heidegger scholarship, if not in American politics). Indeed, who among Heidegger's most ardent admirers today would deny that he was a philosophical giant with feet of clay? In the right mood and company, we might even debate which of Heidegger's character flaws was the greatest.¹⁸ The most philosophically significant of these faults, however, was surely Heidegger's nearly constitutional incapacity to admit his own mistakes. The damage done to Heidegger's philosophical reputation by his refusal ever to apologize publicly for his Nazi affiliation is only the most disturbing consequence of this fault. Another, less obvious (and occasionally more amusing) consequence can be found in Heidegger's frequent later attempts

to provide revisionist reinterpretations of his earlier views, retroactively rereading them so that they will not contradict his later insights (rereadings that White accepts at face value and follows enthusiastically).¹⁹

A large question that critical interpreters of Heidegger's body of work must eventually face is: How should we approach Heidegger's retrospective remarks concerning his earlier work? Because these frequent rereadings run the gamut from plausible and insightful, to suggestive but dubious, to bizarre and ridiculous, the only general hermeneutic principle we can rely on is to approach these retrospective reinterpretations individually and with caution. Still, a student of Heidegger's retrospective remarks could be forgiven for taking them as evidence for the controversial view, recently championed by Derrida, that authors' self-interpretations never settle difficult questions concerning the meaning of their work, since an author is only his or her own first reader, and not even his or her own *best* reader. For, reading Heidegger's own violent attempts to fit the square peg of his early philosophy into the round hole of his later thought would make anyone hesitate to assent to the received view that an author has privileged access to the meaning of his or her own words. This issue leads to some large hermeneutic questions, such as whether the "best" interpretation is the scholarly one that most faithfully captures the meaning of the original in its original context, even at the price of showing it to be wrong, or, on the contrary, the creative interpretation that most forcefully asserts the truth of the original by updating its context and so altering its meaning.²⁰ Rather than discuss the matter in the abstract (on in another context), however, let us examine one of the main examples White relies on in order to justify her strategy of reading Heidegger backwards.

Heidegger's famous 1935 essay, "The Origin of the Work of Art", contains several retrospective reinterpretations of *Being and Time*, published eight years earlier. Eight years might not seem like a lot of time (and this lends Heidegger's remarks more plausibility), but in fact a great deal transpired between 1927 and 1935, not just politically but philosophically as well. Of the transformations in Heidegger's philosophical views during these years, the single most consequential is Heidegger's dawning recognition of *historicity*, the fact that being, and so our being-in-the-world, has a history in terms of which it must be understood. Heidegger's recognition of the fact that humanity's most basic sense of reality changes with time is a lesson hard-won from the deconstruction of the history of ontology that *Being and Time* called for, yet Heidegger's insight into historicity turns out, ultimately, to be incompatible with such central doctrines of *Being and Time* as Heidegger's belief in and pursuit of an historically immutable *fundamental ontology* (or "meaning of being in general") and his apparent attribution of an *a priori*, ahistorical status to the existential structures of *Dasein*.²¹ Taking this incompatibility as the sign of an irreconcilable difference between the early and later Heidegger, most scholars now agree that Heidegger's insight

into the historicity of being constitutes the *sine qua non* of his “later” work.²²

For the same reason, however, Heidegger himself would certainly reject this scholarly consensus (at one point he even denigrates the view that he changed his mind this way as “insidious”), and in this White is entirely in agreement with Heidegger.²³ White (p. 110) thus quotes Heidegger’s 1935 remark that:

The resoluteness [Heidegger hyphenates *Ent-schlossenheit*, thereby connoting “un-closedness”] intended in *Being and Time* is not the deliberate action of a subject but rather the opening up of Dasein, out of the captivity to entities [*Befangenheit im Seienden*], toward the openness of being. (PLT 67/GA5 55)

Heidegger’s explanation is slightly overloaded; let us grant that *resoluteness* is not the action of a “subject”, since *Being and Time* seeks to undercut the subject/object dichotomy and replace it with a recognition of Dasein or being-in-the-world (a more basic dimension of human practice in which the distinction between self and world has not yet been drawn). Setting that rather large issue aside, Heidegger’s main retrospective claim here in 1935 is that when *Being and Time* describes that “resoluteness” whereby a Dasein whose world has collapsed in being-toward-death finds a way to reconnect to its world, this reconnection is not the result of a deliberate *decision*. Dasein, confronting the “nothing” in being-toward-death, does not reconnect to its world by “choosing to choose” (as Heidegger did in fact say several times in *Being and Time*); instead, Dasein reconnects to its world by opening up to being in a way that allows our “being here” to transcend its captivity to entities. I think Heidegger is making a deep point here (a point that White’s connection of *Eigentlichkeit* and *Ereignis* suggests)—namely, that the “nothing” discovered in being-toward-death was, it turned out, Heidegger’s first phenomenological glimpse of the “presencing” of being as such, that is, of the way being as such makes itself felt within our current metaphysical age, where, as White rightly puts it, “Being reveals itself by holding itself back” (p. 160).²⁴ In retrospect, we can say that Heidegger did first glimpse the way being itself exceeds the current understanding of the being of entities in his existential analysis of death in *Being and Time*, but to say (as Heidegger himself and White like to) that Heidegger already understood this back in *Being and Time* is to succumb to an illusion of hermeneutic hindsight and so to read him anachronistically, that is, timelessly, without sufficient sensitivity to the very real breaks, ruptures, and discontinuities through which his work passed as it underwent its fascinating evolution. In Heidegger’s own case, moreover, his frequent attempts to erase the differences that give his thought its irreducible texture are often neither convincing nor necessary but instead follow from an

obsessive desire to have been right all along. I think we can see this if we look a little more closely at the context of the remark from “The Origin of the Work of Art” that White quotes (a context White herself does not mention).

The immediate context for the revisionist rereading of *Being and Time* explored above is Heidegger’s extremely provocative claim, in 1935’s “The Origin of the Work of Art”, that: “He who truly knows what is, knows what he wills to do in the midst of what is [*Wer wahrhaft das Seiende weiß, weiß, was er inmitten des Seienden will*]” (PLT 67/GA5 55). In other words, knowing how to act follows from truly knowing what entities are. The obvious implication is that a genuine philosopher knows what to do in any situation. If one thinks about it a little, it is pretty astounding that Heidegger would reiterate the view that right practice follows from right ontology in 1935, the year immediately following his resignation from his failed Rectorate. If one thinks about it a little more, however, then the underlying worry to which he is responding becomes obvious. If right practice follows right ontology, then does not false practice—as evinced, for example, by a disastrous political decision—entail a false ontology? If he who truly knows entities knows what he will do in their midst, then he who has just been very publicly shown not to have known what to do in their midst looks like he did not truly know entities in the first place. Beneath the surface, in other words, Heidegger seems to be struggling here with a recognizable version of the worry, later debated *ad nauseum* by critics and defenders alike, that his political decision constituted a practical refutation of his philosophical views. Heidegger’s response is quite telling, too. Rather than admit that his political decision did in fact follow from a philosophical confusion—indeed, a philosophical confusion (namely, his earlier belief in a transhistorically-binding fundamental ontology) that his disastrous political misadventure helped uncover (as I show in *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education*)—Heidegger instead deconstructs the relation between an historical ontology and a decision of the will. He writes:

The willing here referred to, which neither merely applies knowledge nor decides beforehand, is thought of in terms of the fundamental experience of thinking [*der Grunderfahrung des Denkens*] in *Being and Time*. Knowing that remains a willing, a willing that remains a knowing, is the existing human being’s ecstatic entrance into and compliance with the unconcealedness of being [*ist das ekstatische Sicheinlassen des existierenden Menschen in die Unverborgenheit des Seins*]. (PLT 67/GA5 55)

To will, in other words, really means opening yourself to the way being reveals itself historically. One who seeks to act on history needs first to

understand the direction in which the history of being is moving; for, willing against the historical tide of being is like spitting into the wind.

White thinks that “we may well take this language of [being] ‘giving’ and ‘sending’ [itself] with a grain of salt, but it seems relatively harmless”, since Heidegger’s way of making reference to being’s “destiny does not indicate some mechanical determinism but rather the way being is revealed to us in the Appropriation” (p 159). White is right that Heidegger’s view does not entail “some mechanical determinism”, but that is not the only issue at stake. For critics from Löwith to Habermas, Wolin, Zimmerman, Rockmore, and Olafson, we have here evidence for the “burnt fingers thesis”, the idea that Heidegger, having scorched his fingers on the stove of ontic political action, subsequently retreated into an ontological quietism, as if taking refuge in the excuse that “being made me do it”—or, as Heidegger really did say, in the closest he ever came to a public apology (and it is not very close), “He who thinks greatly errs greatly”. (White thinks “errancy” [*die Irre*] is Heidegger’s later name for an attempt to swim against the tide of the history of being and, reading this idea back into *Being and Time*, White takes errancy to be just a later name for “inauthenticity”. This is a mistake, however, since to “err” in Heidegger’s ontological sense is not to swim *against* the tide of the history of being but, on the contrary, to be carried along by this tide so as to develop the understanding of being implicitly guiding one’s own historical epoch, just as Heidegger’s own early work inadvertently extended Nietzsche’s ontotheology instead of contesting and transcending it, as his later work seeks to do. The idea underlying Heidegger’s notorious “He who thinks greatly errs greatly”, then, is that the only way out of an historical understanding of being is to think it through to its end and so pass beyond it.)²⁵ Although I have argued elsewhere that the line of criticism begun by Löwith, amplified by Habermas, and taken over by many others rests on a misunderstanding of the real complexity of Heidegger’s later thought, it does present a rather large obstacle to simply accepting his self-understanding, the now seemingly politically-compromised view that (as White sympathetically puts it) different existential “situations are made ‘possible’ by revelations of being” (p. 123).²⁶ White frequently adopts Heidegger’s seemingly quietistic views, asserting, for instance, that “Dasein is rooted in the Temporality of being. The changing revelation of being gives Dasein its possibilities: what it is able to be” (p. 14).²⁷ Since for White the different revelations of being emerge out of Dasein’s changing cultural practices, however, there is a circularity problem here. (Which comes first, the revelation of being or the practices of Dasein? Is there not a feedback loop running between human agency and the history of intelligibility that prevents us from simply grounding one in the other?) I think White does better to finesse the issue in more carefully wrought statements such as the following: “for Heidegger the motivating force behind history is...the creative insight of Dasein as the vehicle for the

changing disclosure of what it is to be” (p. 123), a statement which does not simply efface the role of deliberate human agency in the historical transformation of intelligibility. Thus, when White asserts that “what is at issue in both notions [of death and authenticity] is not the personal responsibility for individual actions...but rather Dasein’s relationship to being” (p. 112), I want to ask: Why not *both*? Why should sensitivity to the history of being preclude, rather than refine, individual responsibility?

White perhaps comes closest to the view I would recommend when she writes: “For Heidegger, ...the particular person is always the one who understands, makes decisions, and acts, whether these decisions and actions simply define us or help bring about a change in the significance of the culture as a whole, as did Nietzsche’s self-reflection”, but she immediately goes on to add that: “Only in the [culture transforming] case they are decisions within the realm of authenticity” (p. 37). Remember that, on White’s view:

Heidegger regards authentic disclosedness as something quite rare and...not just a matter of adopting a certain attitude toward one’s life or behaving in a certain way. For example, in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* [1935] he suggests that authentic Dasein creates great works of art, the political organization of the state, and poetry as well as ‘thinking’ or philosophy. Such works come to focus a new understanding of being. (p. 119)

Notice, however, that, from the suggestion that one must be authentic in order to be the discloser of a new historical world, it does not follow that one must be the discloser of a new historical world in order to be authentic. Not only is that inference invalid, but it sets the bar much too high for authenticity, with the result—a seeming *reductio* of the view—that only a handful of individuals throughout Western history have ever been authentic. Would it not be more plausible for White instead to maintain that, of the many individuals who have achieved authenticity, only some small subset did so in a way which disclosed a new world? This is, I think, a view once suggested by Dreyfus, who used to think of the relation between authenticity and disclosing a new world as something like the relation between expertise and mastery: an expert, like an Aristotelian *phronimos*, does the right thing at the right time and in the right way (and will be immediately recognized by his or her community as having done so); but a true master inaugurates a new discursive practice, often transforming the old standards of success in the process and so requiring more time to be recognized.²⁸

Still, even this reconstructed version of White’s view, which makes historical world-disclosure a subset of the class of authentic actions, assumes that only authentic Dasein can focus a new understanding of being, and that

is not obviously true. Think of the founding figures of our current technological understanding of being: Was Darwin authentic? Adam Smith? What about Nietzsche himself? White's answer is that authenticity has nothing to do with the "personal" characteristics of an individual, so Nietzsche's insights into will-to-power need not be reflected in his life—but, in fact (*pace* White's explicit consideration of Nietzsche's "sickly, shy personal life" [p. 43]), they were, in negative. Nietzsche knew this about himself and generalized from his own case, suggesting that philosophy is always obliquely autobiographical and that these oblique angles can be charted by "the psychologist" who recognizes that the heights of philosophical idealization are a direct but inverted reflection of a philosopher's unhappy recognition of the depths of failure and weakness in his or her own life.

We need not go along with Nietzsche, however, in order to resist reading the history of being back into *Being and Time*. I think we do better to acknowledge that in *Being and Time* authenticity does not require a new understanding of being, even as we praise White for glimpsing the crucial link between world-disclosure and the history of being and suggesting how to articulate the pivotal role death plays in the development of Heidegger's thought as a whole. Death first reveals the nothing, and later the nothing turns out to have been the way being as such first shows itself to us (because our ontotheological understanding of the being of entities as eternally-recurring will to power reduces being to nothing, dissolving it into "constant becoming"). White deserves a great deal of credit for helping us to glimpse such esoteric connections in the development of Heidegger's thought, and I think we best repay her insights by refining and incorporating them into an interpretation of Heidegger's philosophy more willing to acknowledge the important discontinuities in the fascinating development of his thinking throughout his life.²⁹

As I have tried to suggest, then, I think we would do well to adopt a slightly reconstructed version of White's view of death as the pivot around which Heidegger's philosophical development turns. Even if, in the end, I do not find White's interpretation of phenomena such as death, authenticity, and conscience convincing as a close reading of *Being and Time*, I do find her views extremely suggestive for how we should think about where Heidegger's philosophy went after the implosion of the fundamental project guiding that early work. I would thus want to treat those portions of White's book in which she reads Heidegger's later views back into *Being and Time* as an ingenious exercise in creative interpretation, a kind of Heideggerian Midrash—that is, a faithful and often fascinating attempt to dissolve the contradictions in his thought—which, even if it is not always persuasive as a strict interpretation of Heidegger's early work, remains extremely helpful for deepening our appreciation of Heidegger's thought as a whole.³⁰

Notes

1. See Hubert L. Dreyfus "Foreword"; Dreyfus nicely summarizes his interpretive overview on p. xxxi.
2. My own view of what Heidegger means by "death" in *Being and Time* is probably closest to Blattner's (although I reconstruct the view differently than Dreyfus does; see my "Heidegger's perfectionist philosophy of education in *Being and Time*" *Continental Philosophy Review* 37:4 [2004] pp. 439–467). Still, I agree with Dreyfus that the later Heidegger's more mature view is best understood in terms of the hybrid, White-Haugeland view Dreyfus recommends. For me the crucial question, then, is: Can we not have both views, simply by recognizing the real differences between Heidegger's early and later work? (I shall try to motivate that idea in what follows.)
3. I thus hope that Ashgate can be convinced to bring this book out in a more affordable paperback edition, which they have no plans to do, according to the representative I spoke with at the Pacific APA in 2005.
4. François Raffoul's (1999) *Heidegger and the Subject* D. E. Pettigrew and G. Recco (Trans.) (Amherst, NY: Humanities) provides another example of this surprising hermeneutic strategy of reading Heidegger backwards.
5. NI 36/NI 46. For Heidegger, "the same" (*das Selbe*) is distinguished from "the identical" (*das Gleich*) by the fact that there is always some *difference* between two things that are the same. I explain Heidegger's puzzling but important claims about "the same" in *Heidegger on Ontotheology: Technology and the Politics of Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005) pp. 23–28.
6. Although this is too big a topic to develop here, I do not think this orthodox Heideggerian reading of Sartre is entirely fair, because even in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre too took his analyses of the individual subject as revealing the structure of a more encompassing reality.
7. A lot turns here on the thorny question of how exactly one understands the role that Heidegger's analysis of Dasein is supposed to play in his broader investigation of the question of being: Is that analysis merely propaedeutical, as White rather narrowly construes it, or is Dasein not rather the pathway supposed to lead directly to (or open out upon, via temporality) the meaning of being in general? If the latter (as some of White's own analyses suggest), that is, if the existential phenomenology of Dasein (or being-here) is supposed to be the initial point of access to the broader meaning of being in general, then we need not choose between the individual and ontological readings of *Being and Time*, for we can affirm (with the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, as I read him) that the experience of the individual provides the only possible phenomenological path to that fundamental ontological insight Heidegger was indeed searching for—albeit in vain (in my view). But then we would also need to acknowledge, as Heidegger himself was loath to do, that *Being and Time* failed to deliver on its main promissory note; the pathway Heidegger thought would lead directly from Dasein to being in general crumbled away beneath him as he walked along it. In fact, the high water mark of the project of "fundamental ontology" is reached in 1929's *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*, where Heidegger tries to show how Kant's categories of being can be derived from the way Dasein experiences time, such that, for example, we necessarily experience the world in terms of the category of substance—that something which "stands beneath" everything—because experience is always conditioned by our sense that it is "now". In the mid-1930s, Heidegger abandons this "temporal idealism", which sought to generate intelligibility entirely out of Dasein's self-temporalizing, as "subjectivism" (as Blattner argues in his aptly-titled *Heidegger's Temporal Idealism*). Once the path from Dasein to fundamental ontology crumbled, Heidegger had either to admit that he had been wrong (which he rarely does) or else provide revisionist

reinterpretations of what he had originally been saying back in *Being and Time* (the path he usually takes, and on which White follows him). The middle Heidegger even tries for a time to imagine a path leading directly to being which need not pass through the privileged site of Dasein (a seemingly “quietistic” path on which all individual agency seems to disappear, absorbed into the greater “destiny” of the history of being). Heidegger’s critique of subjectivism thus began as a critique of *Being and Time*, and only later broadens into a critique of the “errancy” of the history of being, which Heidegger thought he too had earlier been caught up in. (I shall come back to these points below, but see also my *Heidegger on Ontotheology*, esp. p. 54 note 15.)

8. “Being toward the ownmost possibility of death discloses Dasein’s ownmost being as the entity which makes an issue of being, and it frees Dasein from its current cultural understanding of human nature and the things with which we deal; as Heidegger puts it, Dasein is freed from its lostness in the Anyone. ...Dasein is thrown back upon its ownmost self to determine what can be” (pp. 88–9). There are some obvious problems with this as a reading of “death” in *Being and Time*. For instance, White cannot explain the “certainty” of death, although this is one of death’s formal-ontological characteristics, according to Heidegger. On White’s view, “existential death...is by no means a certain or inevitable actuality or eventuality for everyone” (p. 84); on the contrary, it is extremely rare. Moreover, White’s interpretation of another of death’s formal-ontological features, viz., that it cannot be “overtaken” (p. 77), turns on her creative but untenable transformation of “overtaken” (*überholen*), which for Heidegger means *surpassed*, that is, moved past or left behind, into “taken over”, that is, *appropriated*. As she has it: “what lies beyond that possibility [i.e., death] cannot be ‘fetched over’ by Dasein into its clearing, that is, the possibility cannot be overtaken” (p. 77). Although ingenious as a hermeneutic attempt to reconcile early and later Heidegger and suggestive for thinking about the significance of death in his work as a whole, I will suggest that this is untenable as a strict reading of *Being and Time*.
9. Here White is quoting from Heidegger’s “The Origin of the Work of Art” (1935), which I would classify as a transitional or “middle” work, since in it Heidegger has discovered the history of being (at least a simplified version which has only three epochs) but he is still attempting to square this ontological history (or *historicity*) with his earlier idea of a fundamental ontology. He thus explains the historical epochs in terms of a regress from an original ontological plenitude—a halfway story, in my view, but one that White projects all the way to the end of Heidegger’s career, thereby generalizing the philosophically unstable views of the middle Heidegger.
10. For such a view of death, see my “Heidegger’s Perfectionist Philosophy of Education in *Being and Time*”. See also the more complex picture articulated in Charles Spinoza, Fernando Flores, and Hubert L. Dreyfus (1997) *Disclosing New Worlds: Entrepreneurship, Democratic Action, and the Cultivation of Solidarity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press).
11. See also p. 160: “The new world which is coming to be is disclosed to authentic Dasein as already there.”
12. Trakl (1887–1914) was a young German poet (supported, intriguingly, by Wittgenstein) who killed himself during the First World War and whom Heidegger seems to have understood as a visionary whose poetry transmutes the tragic cataclysm of the war into an historically redemptive experience by offering a vision of the historical emergence of a unified human “race” (*Geschlecht*). See Heidegger’s 1952 essay, “Language in the Poem” in *On the Way to Language* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971, pp. 159–98; *Gesamtausgabe* [Frankfurt: Vittorio Klostermann, 1975-present] volume 12 [hereafter “GA” + volume] pp. 31–78).
13. Guided by Heidegger’s own later remarks, White connects the *Augenblick* of authenticity to the insight of *Ereignis* not, as one might expect, by emphasizing that *Eigentlichkeit*

- and *Ereignis* both stem from *eigen*, “own or proper”, but, ironically, by denying this derivation in the case of *Ereignis* in favor of a more speculative etymology that roots *Ereignis* in the “eye” (*Auge*), deriving it from the archaic verb *erügnen*, “to place before the eyes’ or ‘to catch sight of” (p. 158). White also draws on marginalia Heidegger appended to his 1946 “Letter ‘On Humanism’” in which he suggests that we need “to think of *Eigenlichkeit* as the ‘*Eignen des Er-eignen*’ that is, as the belonging to the coming to pass of the *Ereignis*” (p. 159). Although, in fact, Heidegger’s use of *Ereignis* changes over time (as Polt has shown), White does pick out one of his main ways of using this crucial term, viz., to designate the revolutionary insights that effect epochal breaks in the history of being. See Richard Polt “*Ereignis*” in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall (Eds.) (2005) *A Companion to Heidegger* (Oxford: Blackwell) and my “The philosophical fugue: understanding the structure and goal of Heidegger’s *Beiträge*” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 34:1 (2003) pp. 57–73.
14. Problems emerge when one puts White’s interpretations of death and conscience together; on White’s view, new understandings of being are decaying on arrival, such that only the questioning which generates new understandings of being is genuinely authentic—the new answers are not. As she writes: “Authentic insight lies deeper than the spoken or written word, and it has already become the banal chatter of the Anyone by the time it can be stated in mere words.” (p. 167) Once expressed, even such revolutionary insight “ceases to be authentic and becomes commonplace”; it remains “authentic insight...[only] when it still involves the same fundamental questioning of what it is to be” (p. 126). Insofar as this idea of “continuous questioning” forgets epochality (i.e., Heidegger’s claim that the history of intelligibility divides into five overlapping historical epochs), it sounds more like Derrida than Heidegger, and insofar as it forgets “preserving” (i.e., Heidegger’s idea that we are called upon to try to gather and preserve old understandings of being as well as inaugurate new ones), it sounds more like Nietzsche or Levinas than Heidegger. Dreyfus brings out the latter problem very clearly in his Foreword and suggests that White’s Nietzschean emphasis on constant creativity should be synthesized with Haugeland’s emphasis on the importance of *preserving*, according to which resolute Dasein is called to “stick with” an understanding of being “without getting stuck with it”. (It should also be noted that Haugeland does not read later Heidegger back into early; he reaches some conclusions similar to White’s *via* the more straightforward hermeneutic path of a close reading of *Being and Time* itself.)
 15. For White it is thus a problem that “Heidegger seems to have no a priori guarantee that his own philosophy is not another episode in the history of being” (p. 29), and she understands epochs in the history of being as a series of “new orientation[s] to the ready-to-hand” (p. 155). Cf. Dreyfus “Heidegger’s History of the Being of Equipment” in Dreyfus and Hall (Eds.) (1992) *Heidegger: A Critical Reader* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell).
 16. I document this in “The End of Onto-Theology: Understanding Heidegger’s Turn, Method, and Politics” Ph.D. diss., UC San Diego, 1999, Chs. II and III; see esp. pp. 23–35: “Unity, Teleology, and Other Illusions of Hermeneutic Hindsight”. One is reminded of the French saying, “*Il ne faut pas être plus royaliste que le roi* [one need not be more royalist than the king]”. Yet, is not such excessive orthodoxy one of the subtler forms a certain *independence* can take? (And so, in the political context, the path to a certain form of treason, in religion, to heresy?) We might recall, moreover, that even Athena modified her views over the course of time, as Euripides suggests in the *Bacchae*.
 17. I address this point in more detail in *Heidegger on Ontotheology* pp. 78–84.
 18. Megalomania, mendacity, unquenchable ambition, unbridled lasciviousness—perhaps these form a recognizable cluster (“narcissism”, or the “narcissistic self disorder”) and follow from a common root: in the case of a man, abundant (even excessive?) love from

- his mother, building and strengthening his ego, coupled with an emotionally distant father, undermining the son's ego strength and thereby leaving him with a recurring sense that nothing he does will be good enough to please his father, hence the so-called superiority complex, which is really a more bipolar superiority-inferiority complex? (Of course, Heidegger had considerable virtues as well.)
19. Again, these rereading are much less amusing in the political context, as, e.g., when the later Heidegger writes to a young admirer insisting that what seems to most of us to be the worst line he ever published—viz., the rightly infamous “The Fuhrer alone *is* the present and future German reality and its law”—can be restored to its true but hidden meaning and so vindicated politically once those who have learned the task of reading notice the stress he in fact placed on the “*is*”... Staring too long into such a rhetorical abyss will make anyone question Heidegger's reliability as a guide to the meaning of his own earlier work. See Heidegger “German Students” in Richard Wolin (Ed.) (1991) *The Heidegger Controversy* (New York: Columbia University Press) p. 47.
 20. Those to whom the answer seems obvious might pause to consider the example of Michael Friedman's and Henry Allison's different ways of interpreting the relation between Kant's view of space (in *The Critique of Pure Reason's* second analogy) and Newtonian science: Friedman situates Kant's philosophy firmly in its historical context and thereby argues that Kant's Euclidean understanding of space has been falsified by the non-Euclidean space of relativity theory, while Allison pries Kant loose from this context in order to “reconstruct and defend” his thought as a viable position in the contemporary landscape. See Henry Allison *Idealism and Freedom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) pp. 80–81.
 21. To see this it is crucial not to confuse *historicity* (the idea that our bedrock sense of what-is changes with time) with *Being and Time's* insights into *historicality* (the ontological issue of what history *is*), despite the fact that Heidegger tends to use the same word, *Geschichtlichkeit*, to designate both historicity (the history of being) and historicality (the being of history). On this point see *Heidegger on Ontotheology* p. 114 note 76.
 22. Further complicating matters is the fact that Heidegger himself would later date his “turn” to 1929, to the essay “On the Essence of Truth”; his reference is to an unspoken transformation that he claims takes place in the background between the end of Section 5 and the beginning of Section 6, and not, as one might expect, to the history of being which he begins to trace there in terms of the historical transformations in our concept of truth. This reflects Heidegger's own sense that the most crucial difference between his early and later work was his recognition of the “nothing” or concealment as the way being as such makes itself felt, a difficult idea central to his later work, and one that he himself doubted he had ever expressed with sufficient clarity. See Heidegger “On the Essence of Truth” *Pathmarks* p. 148 note a, and also Thomson “The Danger and the Promise of Heidegger: An American Perspective” in French translation in Joseph Cohen (Ed.) *Heidegger—le danger et la promesse* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, forthcoming).
 23. See Heidegger *On the Way to Language* p. 20/GA12 104.
 24. There is some confusion in White's account of the later Heidegger's crucial notion of “presencing” (*Anwesen*). White rightly notes that “[p]resencing is not simply the way that all things show up in Dasein's present, as many commentators seem to suggest” (p. 148 note 9), but White then goes on to suggest the same conflation of presencing with “presence” (*Anwesenheit*) herself, falsely maintaining, e.g., that “[s]cience both ancient and modern is founded on the understanding of the being of what-is as presencing” (p. 149).
 25. White reads her misunderstanding of errancy back into “inauthenticity” when she explains inauthenticity as follows: “We do not want to place our understanding of being in question so we try to keep things the way they are, maintain the status quo, and ignore

- the changing understanding of being even if we are in the midst of it.” (p. 136) For Heidegger, however, “[e]rrancy is that within which a particular understanding of being [*Seyn*] must err, which erring alone truly traverses the clearing of refusal—traverses in accord with the clearing of what is lighted up”. Errancy does not mean swimming upstream historically, then, but rather following the stream all the way to its end, where it turns into something else, as Heidegger thought his own extreme Nietzscheanism in the 1930s developed Nietzsche’s technological ontotheology to exhaustion and, in so doing, opened a path leading beyond it. See Heidegger *Mindfulness* P. Emad and T. Kalary (Trans.) (London: Continuum, 2006), p. 229; GA66 259.
26. See *Heidegger on Ontotheology* esp. Ch. 2.
 27. See also p. 146: “In Dasein’s world the paths that guide its resolute decisions about what it is to be are already cleared by being itself through the ways things show themselves to us in our dealings.”
 28. Dreyfus no longer believes that world-disclosure is the highest level of mastery but thinks, instead, that there are two fundamentally different accounts of decisive action—viz., the Aristotelian and Pauline understandings of the *kairos*—which Heidegger blurs together in *Being and Time*. As Dreyfus now has it: “A satisfactory interpretation requires clearly distinguishing two experiences of the source, nature, and intelligibility of decisive action”, viz., “the Greek act of seizing the occasion” in a virtuoso decision and “the Christian experience of being reborn” that is generalized in historical world-disclosure. See Hubert L. Dreyfus “Could Anything be More Intelligible Than Everyday Intelligibility? Reinterpreting Division I of *Being and Time* in the Light of Division II” in James E. Faulconer and Mark A. Wrathall (2000) (Eds.) *Appropriating Heidegger* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press) pp. 165–6.
 29. Heidegger famously offered Father Richardson the following guidelines for understanding the relationship between his early and later work. “Only by way of what [my early work] has thought does one gain access to what is to be thought by [my later work]. But [my early work] becomes possible only if it is contained in [my later work].” White seems to reverse Heidegger’s advice and suggest that Heidegger’s later thought was already *contained* in his early work, just waiting to be recognized and articulated. Here I would read Heidegger, more straightforwardly, as favoring his later work over his earlier and suggesting that, although the later work can only be understood as developing out of the earlier, the early views can only be maintained if they do not contradict the later insights. See Heidegger’s “Preface” in William J. Richardson, S. J. (1967) *Through Phenomenology to Thought* (The Hague: Nijhoff) p. xxii/GA11 152.
 30. I presented an earlier version of this paper to the International Society for Phenomenological Studies, Asilomar, CA, 14 July 2006. I would like to thank Anne Margaret Baxley, William Blattner, Albert Borgmann, William Bracken, Taylor Carman, David Cerbone, Steven Crowell, Hubert Dreyfus, John Haugeland, Piotr Hoffman, Stephan Käufer, Leslie MacAvoy, Mark Okrent, Mark Ralkowski, John Richardson, Joseph Rouse, Charles Siewert, and Cap Thomson for helpful comments and suggestions.