

Death and Responsibility: Socrates and Heidegger

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In my paper I investigate how moral responsibility is related to death. For Hobbes, fear of violent death is a motivating factor in submitting to Leviathan. For Heidegger, anxiety in the face of death throws Dasein back onto itself and lets it assume a self-responsible life. By contrast, Socrates considers fear of death an instance of ignorance masquerading as “human” wisdom. Not afraid of death, he dies for his conviction and Athens. In discussing these positions, I hope to clarify the connection between “responsibility” and a “happy death”, or, what is the same thing, “resistance” and a “good life”.

Introduction

Death is always one’s own. If one overlooks this, one will miss the point.

Heidegger

Then I showed again, not in words but in action, that, if it were not rather vulgar to say so, death is something I couldn’t care less about, but my whole concern is not to do anything unjust or impious.

Socrates

In the first part of this paper I shall revisit Heidegger’s analysis of death in *Being and Time* and argue that Heidegger’s embrace of existential anxiety before death involves a polemical rejection of the Socratic overcoming of the fear of death. This opens the door to potentially unethical decisions. In the second part I will discuss an opposite view on Heidegger advanced by Haugeland. According to Haugeland, Heidegger’s conception of death must be understood as a necessary condition for the possibility of responsibility. I shall argue that even if Haugeland’s ontological interpretation of death is defensible, it fails to show that there are normative constraints at work in Heidegger’s conception of responsibility, meaning that it cannot rule out unethical decisions.

Heidegger’s Analysis of Death

Any discussion of Heidegger’s concept of death in *Being and Time* must not ignore the most advanced interpretations available today, i.e., Carol White, Hubert Dreyfus, and John Haugeland. Carol White has suggested that “it is a mistake to understand Heidegger’s discussion [of death] as dealing only or even directly with the personal level”.¹ Instead, she holds that Heidegger’s “existential death” “occurs when old worlds die and new ones are born”.² In an insightful and sympathetic preface to her book Dreyfus summarizes White’s reading of Heidegger as follows:

Death is equated with the sort of world-collapse that can befall a cultural epoch, and dying is striving to preserve the culture’s understanding of being while being ready to sacrifice it when confronted with anomalous practices that portend the arrival of a new cultural world.³

White’s view is predicated on the thesis that “reading Heidegger as any sort of an existentialist was a mistake on our part”.⁴ Rejecting this “personalist misreading” of *Being and Time*,⁵ she holds that

¹ Carol J. White, *Time and Death* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 101. For an insightful critique of White, see Iain D. Thomson, “On the Advantages and Disadvantages of Reading Heidegger Backwards: White’s *Time and Death*”, in *Inquiry* 50, no. 1 (2007), 102-120.

² *Time and Death*, 89.

³ Hubert L. Dreyfus, “Foreword” in *Time and Death*, xxxi.

⁴ *Time and Death*, li.

Heidegger must be read in light of his later writings, which show his dominant concern for reopening the question of being. Even the prominence of Dasein in *Being and Time* must be seen as standing in the service of the question concerning being.

[Heidegger] is interested in the entity that *we* are and its being. Thus we need to focus on the peculiar character of Dasein that makes an issue of what it is to be in general, not just Dasein in its everydayness and certainly not just the individual person.⁶

According to White, “Dasein” is the defining ontological property or essence “we” happen to have; yet “‘Dasein’ is not equivalent to ‘a human being’ or ‘a person’ any more so than ‘what-is-ready-to-hand’ is equivalent to ‘a hammer’”.⁷ Since Dasein is not the same as “human being”, there is no reason to assume that Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein’s death is primarily an account of personal death.

Prior to White’s book Haugeland advanced a very similar view, arguing that there is not “a separate and unique Dasein for each person”⁸ and that “Dasein as such is not individual or personal”.⁹ On this reading it might appear as if “Dasein” is Heidegger’s successor concept for what the tradition identified as “reason”. And no one in his right mind would equate “reason” with an individual man or woman. So why assume such a restriction in the case of “Dasein”?

Indeed, White astutely notes that Heidegger’s insistence on personal pronouns in referring to Dasein “would be a very odd point to make, if ‘Dasein’ simply denoted ‘a person.’”¹⁰ Therefore, White proposes to take Dasein as an ontological category that describes the being of my I and your I, the being of I’s in general.¹¹ In support of this view, White quotes from *The Letter on “Humanism”*, where Heidegger writes that “the personal, no less than the objective, misses and misconstrues the way of being of ek-sistence as being-historical”.¹²

Nonetheless, although it is clear that Heidegger indicates reservations about an exclusive identification of Dasein with the personal human being, it is far less clear that he abandons all reference to the individual person. This can be shown by revisiting Heidegger’s analysis of death in *Being and Time*. Without a doubt, the greatest challenge that Heidegger faces in the analysis of death, or Dasein’s being towards death, to use his ontological language, is the proper demarcation of the phenomenon under investigation. Heidegger concedes that “death”, taken in its broadest sense, is a “phenomenon of life”.¹³ “Life”, Heidegger continues, “has to be understood as a kind of being to which being-in-the-world belongs”.¹⁴ Death befalls what is living in the world. Just as being in the world is characteristic of organisms—they cannot exist outside their environment—, so death is characteristic of organic life. Death is the cessation of living-in-the-world; it is the departure of life from its world, “*das aus-der-Welt-gehen*”,¹⁵ literally “walking away from the

⁵ *Time and Death*, 117.

⁶ *Time and Death*, 101.

⁷ *Time and Death*, 33.

⁸ John Haugeland, “Truth and Finitude: Heidegger’s Transcendental Existentialism”, in *Heidegger, Authenticity, and Modernity: Essays in Honor of Hubert L. Dreyfus*, Vol.1, ed. Mark Wrathall & Jeff Malpas (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), 46.

⁹ “Truth and Finitude”, 58.

¹⁰ *Death and Time*, 35

¹¹ See *Death and Time*, see 37.

¹² *Death and Time*, 38. White does not consider that if we let go of personal Dasein, we cannot find refuge in “a collective character of Dasein” (*Death and Time*, 38, note 29), as it is precisely *The Letter on “Humanism”* which shows that “culture” or “society” is just the subject writ large, and hence still beholden to the metaphysics of subjectivity. Nevertheless, White is quite right in insisting on the ontological level of the investigation in *Being and Time*, this side of all edification, existentialist or otherwise.

¹³ *Sein und Zeit*, Gesamtausgabe, Bd. 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1977), 328.

¹⁴ *Sein und Zeit*, 328.

¹⁵ *Sein und Zeit*, 320.

world". Death is an exit or exodus from the world of the living. The crucial point is that as phenomenologist Heidegger links the phenomenon of death to life, and that means organic life.

However, although organic life is the reference point for death as a phenomenon, Heidegger omits a full analysis of life in the first place. The reason proffered is that life assumes its full and actual form in Dasein, such that the ontology of Dasein logically precedes the "ontology of life".¹⁶ But Heidegger fails to explain why "life" is fully developed in Dasein alone such that all other life is privatively related to it. Heidegger leaves behind the entire biological and physiological level of life or death, subordinating it to the ontology of Dasein instead, which ontology in turn is entirely purified of all organic materiality. This curious abstraction from the full spectrum of the phenomenon of "life" truncates and limits Heidegger's approach to death. For it is one thing to focus on "existential death" as what is characteristic of "Dasein", and it is quite another thing to bypass altogether Dasein's manifestation in humans and the messy business of organic death in human life. Hans Jonas' observation that in the wake of Cartesianism *as well as* anti-Cartesianism the phenomenon of life was lost sight of is also true of Heidegger's attempted overcoming of Descartes.¹⁷ This omission of (organic) life haunts Heidegger's analysis of death with a vengeance, as is evidenced in his introduction of a whole set of new categories.

Thus Heidegger stipulates that "the ending" of a living thing is called "*Verenden*", or "perishing".¹⁸ It is not to be confused with "*Sterben*" or "dying" which refers to the phenomenon in which Dasein's kind of being, existence, relates to death by being towards death.¹⁹ Only "living things" perish and Dasein qua Dasein is not a living thing. Hence Dasein cannot perish. But one wonders how Dasein can manifest the highest form of life, when it turns out not to be a living thing at all. In any case, because of this construction Haugeland can remark that "Dasein never perishes—not because it is immortal or everlasting, but because it is not a living organism in the biological sense at all".²⁰ But surely, Dasein is also present in some life, human life to be precise, and it is only *in* human life that we know of Dasein in the first place. Indeed, precisely because Dasein also "has" life, not just existence, Heidegger is forced to argue that "qua living thing" Dasein can also "end", which he calls *Ableben*, "demise". He writes:

Insofar as Dasein 'has' its physiological death corresponding to its life, though not ontically isolated, but co-determined by its original kind of being, and Dasein can come to an end without actually dying, while, on the other hand, it does not simply perish [*verendet*] qua Dasein, we call this intermediate phenomenon *demise* [*Ableben*].²¹

However, at this juncture where Heidegger joins up the analysis of Dasein with biology and organic life he also separates the domains by saying that Dasein can come to an end without existentially dying. Yet Heidegger is careful not to argue for the reverse view that Dasein can die without coming to an end. Dasein cannot exist without living; but it can live without "existing". In other words, Dasein can die only to the extent that it has life, which is what is lost at death. There is no absolute division between natural life and existential dying, at least in human Dasein.

When Heidegger writes: "Dasein dies de facto as long as it exists",²² he puts into his own language a saying in the Middle Ages which he himself had quoted a little bit earlier: "as soon as a human being comes into life, he is old enough to die".²³ The certainty but indeterminacy of death is here founded upon life, not upon an existential structure of Dasein. Life is Dasein's natural, organic

¹⁶ *Sein und Zeit*, 328.

¹⁷ Hans Jonas, *Das Prinzip Leben* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1977), 40-49.

¹⁸ *Sein und Zeit*, 328.

¹⁹ *Sein und Zeit*, 328-29.

²⁰ "Truth and Finitude", 66.

²¹ *Sein und Zeit*, 328.

²² *Sein und Zeit*, 334.

²³ *Sein und Zeit*, 326.

underground. To be sure, this natural facticity is a matter for Dasein's care, thus always a matter of interpretation. Still, this does not dissolve the issue of life (and its loss at death) into thin air. Put differently, by attempting to divide death into a problem of life and biology on the one hand (perishing or demising), and an existential comportment on the other hand (dying), Heidegger effectively spiritualizes or intellectualizes death, abstracting from its ontic or historical and biological reality as an occurrence in the world.²⁴

Despite these problems, Heidegger's analysis of existential death is convincing in one respect. Heidegger successfully immanentises death. "Being towards the end [*Sein zum Ende*] does not come about by way of an occasionally emerging attitude, but, rather essentially belongs to thrownness of Dasein, [and] is revealed in this way or that way in one's attunement (mood)".²⁵ Death belongs to Dasein, not as "conclusion" or "cessation", or the yet-outstanding "part" or event in life which would make it whole, but, rather, as an intrinsic way in which life is lived—constantly. Death shines into Dasein and Dasein "comports itself" to death.²⁶ Death "is" only as a possibility; for when death finally arrives there is no Dasein to experience it. Death is the always possible annihilation [*Vernichtung*] of the being of Dasein.²⁷ Death only exists to the extent that Dasein "assumes" this possibility as its own.

Death is a possibility of being [*Seinsmöglichkeit*], which Dasein has to assume each time. Through death, Dasein is confronted with its *ownmost* ability-to-be. What is at stake for Dasein in this possibility is its being-in-the-world *simpliciter*. When Dasein runs up against this possibility, its possibility, it is totally turned back to its ownmost ability-to-be. Thus facing itself, all other relations to other Dasein are severed. This ownmost, non-relational possibility is at the same time the ultimate one [*äusserste*]. As ability-to-be, Dasein is not able to surpass the possibility of death. Death is the possibility of the total impossibility of Dasein. Thus death is revealed as the ownmost, non-relational, non-surpassable possibility.²⁸

Death is a limit beyond which Dasein cannot go, but as such limit, death falls under the remit of care [*Sorge*]. Concerning its ontological possibility, then, "dying" is founded upon "care".²⁹ In fact, because care is the projection of possibilities into the future, there would be no existential death without care. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger does not advance the reverse conception to this view, i.e., that without death or an ultimate limit, there would be no disclosing of the world at all. We might call this the *alethic* view according to which the dark side of death or nothingness provides the foil for the light in the clearing in which Dasein stands. But in *Being and Time*, Heidegger resolutely sidesteps any metaphysics of death, let alone "the theodicy and theology of death".³⁰ There is no vindication of the necessity of death. Death is not a necessary condition for the possibility of truth. The finitude of Dasein is part of the phenomenological account of Dasein's thrownness.

On the other hand, Heidegger clearly views death as a catalyst of sorts. Death collects and focuses Dasein. Death is not just any odd possibility, but an ultimate one. It calls Dasein back to itself from its dispersion in *das Man*. Hence death is a prerequisite for authentic Dasein. Heidegger writes:

Not only is death not "owned" in indifference by one's own Dasein, but, rather, death takes Dasein to task as a singular Dasein. Death's non-relationality, which is realized in anticipating

²⁴ It seems to me that in their respective interpretations White, Dreyfus, and Haugeland exploit and indeed exacerbate this weakness in Heidegger's analysis, for they totally ignore the natural, physiological side of death altogether, in order to advance their argument that the proper subject of death is not the human being or person, but rather cultural worlds or epochs and/or the defining scientific and cultural paradigms governing these epochs.

²⁵ *Sein und Zeit*, 334.

²⁶ *Sein und Zeit*, 332.

²⁷ See *Sein und Zeit*, 315.

²⁸ *Sein und Zeit*, 333.

²⁹ *Sein und Zeit*, 335.

³⁰ *Sein und Zeit*, 330.

it, singularizes Dasein. This singularisation amounts to a way of disclosing the “there” for existence. This reveals that all dealing with the [public matters of] concern and all being together with others fail when it comes to one’s own ability-to-be. Dasein can be genuinely itself if and when it empowers itself for just that.³¹

This account by Heidegger is hard to square with White’s interpretation of death. Singularisation and non-relationality refer to a person’s increasing isolation from his or her environment, not the cultural self-interpretation by a civilization. There is no meaningful surrounding of *das Man* in the context of civilizations and cultural worlds. Therefore, existential death is not applicable to these social entities. On the other hand, to pre-empt the often-heard charge that Heidegger manoeuvres himself into some absurd solipsism, one needs to clarify that Heidegger has in mind a kind of self-finding and self-binding to the projects that one finds worthwhile pursuing—within the enviroining- and with-world. Heidegger writes:

Dasein is genuinely itself only to the extent that, as concerned engagement at...and considerate being with...it projects itself primarily upon its ownmost ability-to-be, and not the possibility of the they.³²

Death helps Dasein to concentrate its life around the projects it finds worthwhile. It thus forces personal decisions. But every positive engagement entails the rejection of endless others. Death singularizes Dasein—it brings out that Dasein lives its own non-substitutable life—and it forces Dasein to assume its own finitude by opting for the finite number of projects it can realistically strive for. But contrary to the widespread view according to which Heidegger favours rugged individualism and “decisionism”, he actually contends that the realization of Dasein’s finitude will result in a form of humility and self-relativisation. For a project, embraced as finite, opens itself up to be surpassed by others.³³ Thus, finitude can certainly cultivate a sense of through and insurmountable provisionality.

And yet, there is anything but peaceful tranquillity in Heidegger’s discussion of death. The chief reason is that Dasein is thrown into utter anxiety when facing its certain but always pending perdition. The mood is sombre, reminiscent of what Dürer expressed in his painting *Knight, Death and Devil*.



³¹ *Sein und Zeit*, 349-50.

³² *Sein und Zeit*, 350.

³³ *Sein und Zeit*, 350.

It is Heidegger's contention that anxiety in the face of death answers to the "threat" of losing one's existence.³⁴ As this anxiety reveals the very being of Dasein, namely its utter destructibility or possible and always pending annihilation, anxiety cannot be mastered or domesticated, although one can of course give in and avert one's eyes and flee into the world of show business or academia or what have you. Heidegger is quite adamant that anxiety in the face of death is, as it were, incurable. He writes:

Being towards death is essentially anxiety. The indubitable, if "only" indirect testimony for this stems from the being towards death itself, namely when it inverts anxiety as cowardly fear and, then, with the overcoming of this fear makes known its cowardice before anxiety.³⁵

This is a tortured sentence in German as much as it is in my English translation. Who would recast anxiety (understood in Heidegger's sense) as fear before death, and then announce that this fear can be overcome, which freedom from fear, according to Heidegger, would then attest to the cowardice in the face of anxiety? Although it is an improvable conjecture at this stage, I suggest that Heidegger has Plato's testimony concerning Socrates' death in mind. After all, in *The Phaedo*, Socrates declares that philosophizing is a training in dying, which puts him in a certain dialectical relationship to Heidegger's focus on anticipating death as a precondition for authentic Dasein. Now, in *The Apology*, Socrates imagines that someone could charge him with recklessly endangering his life through his pursuit of philosophy. Socrates says:

But perhaps someone might say: "Are you then not ashamed, Socrates, of having followed such a pursuit, that you are now in danger of being put to death as a result?" But I would make to him a good reply: You do not speak well, man, if you think a man in whom there is even a little merit ought to consider danger of life or death, and rather regard *this* only, when he does things, whether the things he does are right or wrong and the acts of a good or bad man.³⁶

Socrates clearly indicates that the philosophical stance implies an overcoming of the fear of death. But Socrates adduces an ethical argument for this. For he observes that if we focus on the fact that time runs out, we might miss on the much shorter window of opportunity given for an ethical life and lapse into what he calls "wickedness". Socrates says to his judges: "But, gentlemen, it is not hard to escape death; it is much harder to escape wickedness, for that runs faster than death. And now I, since I am slow and old, am caught by the slower runner [i.e., death], and my accusers, who are clever and quick, by the faster, wickedness".³⁷ Socrates' second argument is that to fear death presupposes that death is intrinsically evil. But we have no knowledge about that. Socrates tells his judges:

For to fear death, Athenians, is nothing else than to think one wise when one is not; for it is thinking one knows what one does not know. For no one knows whether death be not the greatest of all blessings to man, but they fear it as if they knew that it was the greatest of evils. And is not this the most reprehensible form of ignorance, that of thinking one knows what one does not know?³⁸

For Socrates, then, philosophy is a project that overcomes the fear of death. But does it betray, as Heidegger suggests, cowardice before the deeper anxiety of death? One can easily see why Heidegger would perhaps think so. After all, in *The Phaedo* Socrates undertakes to prove the immortality of the soul—no less than five times. That looks like an idealism that does not believe itself. Given Heidegger's inveterate distaste of cultural idealism, it is safe to assume that he would reject this as philosophical grandstanding against the fear of death. Plato's flight of reason simply facilitates the cowardly escape from reality. But in *The Apology* Socrates faces death without any

³⁴ *Sein und Zeit*, 352.

³⁵ *Sein und Zeit*, 353.

³⁶ *Apology*, 28b.

³⁷ *Apology*, 39a.

³⁸ *Apology*, 29a-b.

arguments about the immortality of the soul. In fact, he realizes what Heidegger calls “running towards death”, which allows Socrates his extraordinary resoluteness in dealing with his accusers. But unlike Heidegger’s dogged search for an authentic life *before death* or *in light of one’s permanent dying*, Socrates does not make life (or the finiteness of life) an unquestioned and unqualified good, such that the always pending loss of it informs his decisions. From Socrates’ perspective, the anxiety about the loss of life is a fearful reversal of philosophical *sophrosune* in the face of death, leading to the undue prioritizing of life (being-in-the-world) over ethics. If we follow Socrates, life or the loss of life (dying) is not the most important thing. At the end of *The Apology*, Socrates says: “but now the time has come to go away. I go to die, and you to live; but which of us goes to the better lot, is known to none but God”.³⁹ It seems to me that Socrates’ attitude in preparing to drink the cup of hemlock—as shown below in Canavo’s famous sculpture—expresses a mature philosophical attitude that shows courage in the face of imminent death, but also courage and equanimity in relation to the ontological anxiety concerning the inevitable loss of one’s life or existence.



It may well be that, in contrast to his early writings, the later Heidegger, following his turn towards *Gelassenheit*, develops a more accepting attitude towards death. It is highly instructive that later Heidegger no longer foregrounds authenticity or the anxiety of death. Yet in *Being and Time* Heidegger is still on his way to develop his highly polemical critique of the philosophical tradition and its alleged metaphysical flight beyond the temporal world and history. His anti-Socratic valorisation of the anxiety concerning death (and the always pending loss of life) or the attendant valorisation of the temporal and finite life as such sits perfectly well within that overall anti-metaphysical framework.⁴⁰

Of course, we must not confuse the ontological anxiety of death with the mere ontic fear of our demise. Moreover, it is also clear that Heidegger argues that the immersion in anxiety will ultimately result in a better grip on life. I have argued above that Heidegger’s position does not explain how necessary ethical constraints come into play to ensure that choosing one’s life issues in an *ethically* responsible life. However, in contrast to this position, Haugeland has argued that anxiety of death is a necessary condition of the possibility of an ethical life of responsibility. To this we now turn.

³⁹ *Apology*, 42a.

⁴⁰ In his debate with Cassirer in Davos, Heidegger himself polemical embraced finitude against all metaphysical inspirations to infinitude in the tradition. For an excellent discussion of this, see Peter E. Gordon, *Continental Divide: Heidegger–Cassirer–Davos* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), especially 182-83.

II Haugeland

In his essay “Truth and Finitude: Heidegger’s Transcendental Existentialism”,⁴¹ Haugeland presents nothing less than a comprehensive interpretation of *Being and Time*, which aims at presenting a unified account that establishes the inner coherence between Division One (dealing with everydayness, being-in-the world, and care) and Division Two (devoted to the more “existentialist” themes such as death, resoluteness, and history). I shall focus here on only two claims of Haugeland’s highly ambitious project. The first claim is “that death, as Heidegger means it, is not merely relevant but in fact the fulcrum of his entire ontology”.⁴² The second claim is that “resolute Dasein takes responsibility not only for ontical but also ontological truth”,⁴³ which means, among other things, that during a systematic or catastrophic breakdown of ontological truth, resolute Dasein is where the buck stops. It is responsive, because it is responsible for ontological truth. It is Haugeland’s view that discarding a “failed” ontological truth—the unsuccessful paradigm of a culture or a way of life—is possible only because Dasein is finite and bounded by death, which in turn enables it to let unsuccessful disclosures of the world go, let them “die”. In Haugeland’s words, death “is the protagonist who makes it possible”.⁴⁴ In this regard, Haugeland’s account is very similar to White’s with which we started out. Death is not primarily the death of a person, but the death of a culture or scientific or cultural paradigm that has outlived its usefulness or fruitfulness.

Haugeland’s overall strategy is, first, to draw out Heidegger’s implicit transcendental commitments and, second, to argue that Heidegger essentially historicizes and existentialises the transcendental. As every reader of *Being and Time* knows, Heidegger stipulates that Being “is that which determines entities as entities”, or that Being is that which “renders intelligible entities” beforehand, staking out the horizon of possible claims that can be made about these entities.⁴⁵ Haugeland interprets this to mean that Being is a paradigm or theory in the light of which we first locate certain entities as possible objects of human comportment. Being is thus a transcendental horizon, and not to be confused with the entities that can be disclosed within it. Ontical truth or what Heidegger calls “correctness” pertains to the disclosure of entities within the already disclosed transcendental matrix of Being.

As an illustration, suggested by Haugeland himself many years ago, we might take a chess board and the rules of chess. It can be determined that with *White* making the first move, *Black* cannot be checkmated in two moves, while it is logically possible to checkmate *Black* after the third move. Theories work in the same way. They project a field of possible encounters with entities which are then discovered as such (together with the laws connecting them). The same holds true for social practices. Discovering entities as entities “involves grasping them in terms of a distinction between what is possible and impossible for them”.⁴⁶

Next, Haugeland notes that any discovery of ontical truths requires at the same time self-disclosure of Dasein. For instance, I can grasp that a student has failed to come to class, only if I understand myself as a teacher or a researcher or timetabling expert investigating tardiness behaviour in students, etc. I can get things “right” and “wrong” precisely within this double-context of self-disclosure (understanding my role or function) and world-disclosure (understanding the world in which I function). If I note the absence of a student, I may get it wrong, for instance, when I mistakenly register someone as “late”, when that person is not even enrolled in my class. But only the prior projection of myself as a teacher and the classroom as part of the teaching environment in

⁴¹ “Truth and Finitude”, 43-77.

⁴² “Truth and Finitude”, 44.

⁴³ “Truth and Finitude”, 74.

⁴⁴ “Truth and Finitude”, 77.

⁴⁵ *Sein und Zeit*, 8.

⁴⁶ “Truth and Finitude”, 53.

which I teach allow me to get ontic things right. In other words, an ontological framework has to be in place before I can discover an ontic truth about a late student.

To continue with this example, as a teacher, one can fail to discover (read) the genuine desire to learn in a student. In that case the full phenomenon of the student would still be hidden, waiting to be brought out into the open. A “true comportment” as a teacher would be to allow the student to show himself or herself as a fully competent, capable, and genuinely interested student. Such a discovery would not be a construction. But specific discoveries about the student, for instance, her ability to grasp ideas fast, is dependent on the prior ontological disclosure of the entity’s being a student. Getting things right about the student matters, because I understand myself as a teacher of that student. My practice and self-understanding as a teacher depends on there being students and getting things right about students’ particular aptitude. In this regard, I am invested in the student’s learning. Haugeland holds that “discoveries are beholden to the entities they discover”.⁴⁷

According to Haugeland, ontic discoveries and ontological disclosures can be either routinely executed or they can be “owned” as a project of one’s own individual ability-to-be. Following Heidegger, Haugeland then claims that it is only by running towards death that I can “own” a particular project as my sole responsibility, as something worth my effort, because as a finite being I cannot do everything, that is to say, I have to single out the things I can do and want to do. My death individualises me and pushes me to select priorities in the one and only life I have to live. In Haugeland’s gloss of Heidegger, Dasein’s existential responsibility is “responsibility for its own self as a whole, for who it is”.⁴⁸ The owned disclosure of Being in which entities show up as entities is called resoluteness. Just as I am beholden to the entities as they show themselves within the field of Being, I am binding myself to the ontological disclosure of Being by way of resoluteness. Haugeland writes:

Taking responsibility resolutely means living in a way that explicitly has everything at stake. Heidegger’s way of saying this is: Dasein is the entity for which, in its being, that very being is an issue.⁴⁹

Next, Haugeland asks whether the ontological disclosure of Being, and not just the ontic discovery of entities in it, can go wrong. Put differently, what would it mean for ontological truth to “fail”. We already know that one can make ontic mistakes, such as noting a late student who is not a student in one’s class. But what happens when the overall ontological framework fails? Haugeland writes:

A failure of ontological truth is a systematic breakdown that undermines everything—which just means a breakdown that cannot be ‘fixed up with a bit of work;’ which means that life, *that life*, does not ‘go on.’⁵⁰

A failure in the ontological disclosure of Being shows itself in that things get “out of control”, that things make no longer sense, lose their intelligibility altogether.⁵¹ But since resolute Dasein depends and “owns” the disclosure of Being (through its self-disclosure within disclosed Being), it faces its own impossibility in this crisis or disintegration. Resolute Dasein recognizes that in such a crisis it faces its own existential death, as the inability to be. The crisis is the possibility either to go under or to disclose Being in a more successful way, presumably by drawing on marginal practices and understandings already developing under the old and encrusted disclosure of the world.

If social practices no longer make sense, if things go out of control, then Being has been disclosed in a way that has simply failed. However, since Dasein “owns” the ontological disclosure of Being

⁴⁷ “Truth and Finitude”, 51.

⁴⁸ *Sein und Zeit*, 65.

⁴⁹ “Truth and Finitude”, 73.

⁵⁰ “Truth and Finitude”, 75.

⁵¹ “Truth and Finitude”, 76.

and, furthermore, is self-implicated in it through its dependent self-disclosure in Being, Dasein's own self-understanding is called into question, if and when the ontological disclosure breaks down. Dasein "dies" with the breakdown of the world that it has disclosed and owned in the first place. It is here where Haugeland and White agree. White writes:

[Existential death] occurs when old worlds die and new ones are born. A change in the understanding of being leaves old possibilities behind and lets new ones take their place in the 'there' of being. Hence, impossibility becomes possibility and possibility turns into impossibility. When the medieval world died and was transformed into the modern one, that is, when the new version of being of what-is became that of Anyone, there was no going back to the old understanding again.⁵²

I think that both Haugeland and White are right in seeing that the ontological disclosure of Being is transcendental "only as existential"⁵³ or, what amounts to the same thing, that the finitude of existence is the necessary condition for the resolute disclosure of the world. Both see that Dasein is responsible for the world it discloses, that it is invested in this project, and that it can fail, once things get out of control and too many anomalies show up, for instance, the market economy's being creating not wealth for everyone, but poverty for millions.

However, the responsibility at issue in the ontological disclosure of the world that Haugeland and White identify falls short of anything like ethical responsibility. After all, the failed disclosure of the world of Nazism was wrong even before it was defeated by the military invasion in the 1940s. In fact, for both White and Haugeland, "success" of a disclosure of the world is automatically a sign of its rightness. That will hardly satisfy anyone interested in ethical responsibility. Finitude and death alone do not generate any ethical rules—unless we want to take the insight into the finiteness of all world-disclosures as an index of ontological provisonality, that is to say, of being prepared to let go, of relaxing our investment at the right moment—and to walk away from the old world to new shores when it is the right time.

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⁵² *Time and Death*, 90.

⁵³ "Truth and Finitude", 77.