

The Paradox of Being: Dasein as a Potential "Ground" for Futures Work*

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Carol J. White's¹ work has a natural cadence and a clarity of expression which makes the philosophical questions being dealt with come alive and appear seductively clear. Such is the richness of the intellectual world she weaves that insights abound yet come in and out of focus as the philosophical terrain shifts. Ultimately this is a work that critiques the metaphysical yearning for certainty. It opens up culture and processes of social ordering to a deepened understanding of the interplay between action and presence.

Central to the work is the concept of Dasein, which has been generally understood as "a way of being present in our everydayness". White shifts the focus from the existential context of individual-presence to the cultural presencing of conditions of intelligibility and argues backwards through Heidegger's works that what he was groping towards in his classic *Being and Time* becomes clear only retrospectively (White 2005: 1). The *Foreword* by White's mentor Hubert L. Dreyfus offers a clear synopsis of this process and elegantly outlines the development of our understanding of Dasein as a cultural condition as opposed to an individual one.

This is where it gets very interesting for futurists looking for ways to understand social change and its link with personal transformation. To White, Dasein is a ground or background that contextualises human consciousness – what Heidegger calls a "thing context" (White 2005: 4) - it allows for some possibilities while

silencing others; specific 'things' emerge while others disappear according to the intelligibility of the context. Importantly, Dasein sets the horizon while allowing for alternatives to exist at the margin (White 2005: 139). Thus, human subjectivity is framed by our awareness or unawareness of the things around us as discrete units, from this arises issues of authentic and inauthentic selfhood (White 2005: 30, 34). Furthermore, our sense of "being" is determined by our interaction with/in (through) Dasein as a set of cultural background practices (White 2005: 3).

All sorts of questions emerge here. Central to them all is the fact that Dasein, as an ontological explanation, allows us to understand Being as the dynamic of cultural and individual activity; it is, for critical futurists, a site for the maintenance or transformation of the current order. Choice and anxiety, an awareness of personal and collective vulnerability, pervades Dasein and sits within this ontological backdrop. Yet Dasein has an ontic dimension that reflects our Being-in-context, it is our situatedness in time and space; a site in which we reveal our selves to ourselves. Is there a connection here between the "realities" of structure and agency? White's analysis seems to suggest such a cross over. Does Dasein offer a way to understand the unitary nature of a persistent dualism within our work as futurists? Is this concept able to bring practical depth to Ken Wilber's integral ontology (Wilber 2001)? In addition, can it be

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extended to the four quadrant analysis Wilber has developed and Slaughter has extended so effectively into integral futures work (Slaughter 2004)? Furthermore, are the links with Dasein's ontic nature able to enrich Sohail Inayatullah's epistemic work with Causal Layered Analysis (Inayatullah 2004)? And finally, if we switch civilisational lens, when looking at the Tantric social philosophy of P.R. Sarkar, can we engage his understanding of subjective approach through objective adjustment with the Dasein that is simultaneously active and passive and able to sustain the paradox of such a condition (Sarkar 1996)?

Other points can be raised here. There is a paradox in that being is bounded by individual consciousness, it is marked by finitude; yet it also takes form and content from the timeliness of its historical and cultural ground – the thrownness of Dasein. Thus White observes: "While each individual is certainly 'deeply involved' in the world, the 'it' through which the world happens is the community, and more expansively, the culture." (White 2005: 34) Tina Chanter points to this paradox tangentially by way of Heidegger's critique of metaphysics – here she sees the problem as a logical one: "Metaphysics has obscured from itself the fact that it has used time to think being, and being to think time, without acknowledging that the very interpretations of both time and being that are in operation feed off one another in subterranean ways." (Chanter 2001: 2) White's angle is different, by situating being in a contingent temporal context the cultural fabric that generates meaning and directs self-consciousness is the Dasein that resolves the paradox Chanter points to. By casting Dasein as a cultural condition White demonstrates Heidegger's proposed corrective to the weakness he identified in metaphysics.

The potentiality in Dasein for change is ever present. Thus being is negotiated and contingent and, in a futures context, open to renegotiation when specific moments cease to be legible and are replaced or give way to a new present. Thus, as Heidegger puts it: "History only dies *historically*." (Heidegger 1997: xvi) White, in extending this point, sums up: "In Western history, the rational animal died for

Dasein to become the image of God; God's favourite creature died for Dasein to become the conscious subject. Old possibilities are left behind in this transformation, and new ones take their place in the 'there' of being." (White 2005: 22)

Another interesting point that White makes is that Dasein needs a future as much as a past in order to situate the present. Here it is bounded by Heidegger's specific concept of death, not as the passing of an individual but as the closure of a particular Dasein. White sums this up: "Dasein acquires a future when it acquires an understanding of being such that being is in question². In this respect, 'primitive Dasein' has no future³. As the future which is the 'to come,' what Western Dasein will be comes to it from its concealed end, the realm of death⁴." (White 2005: 98-99) Interestingly, she continues by observing that "Heidegger argues that Dasein's authentic projection of its future requires it to 'repeat' the possibilities of its past by transforming them in its new understanding of being." (White 2005: 99) Thus we find individuals and cultures engaged in a kind of sorting, often unconsciously (inauthentically), of features that define a present. This is significant in futures as the conscious engagement with issues of finitude are the *raison d'être* of the project. Consciousness of Dasein is central to Heidegger's understanding of authentic action. Thus Dreyfus states in the *Foreword*: "If we are authentic, we are always actively preserving and transforming. Indeed, preserving and transforming each imply the other. One can only preserve what is transformable. One can only transform what requires preserving." (Heidegger 1997: xxxiii)

White argues that Heidegger was specifically interested in the category Dasein and not in its constituent processes within the historical arena. His was a concern with the abstraction. As futurists however, there is the possibility that the concept, as a category of being/doing and therefore both social analysis and engagement, can augment our understanding of the present and its limitations and possibilities. Thus thankfully, as White notes "no epoch is privileged" (White 2005: 29) as every age is bounded and

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defined by a Dasein that is both human and structural. So today "we are the Dasein that regards a forest as timber, a mountain as a quarry, a river as water-power" (White 2005: 30) yet within this moment lies the death of Dasein and the possibility of another reading. In this sense one of the tasks of futures could be constructed as the process of alerting us to the marginal and the authentic in order to engage ethically with social transformation and preservation. (Heidegger 1997: xxxiii)

White provides us with an excellent gloss to a rethinking of Martin Heidegger's concept of Dasein. This in turn feeds into the general work on constructions of the social from Castoriadis' ideas about the social imaginary (Castoriadis 1997) to the textual renderings of Foucault and other post modernists (Foucault 1977). A socially grounded Dasein allows us to think about social ordering as a process of contingencies alive with tension. This vivifies the use of Foucault's concept of heterotopia by Kevin Hetherington in which the seeds of Being are present as an horizon of potential or "spaces of transition and deferral" (Hetherington 1997).

Within this schema thinking itself becomes an activity that allows for its overthrow as it is temporally and spatially constrained. Thus Karin de Boer, in an analysis of Heidegger's work on time and consciousness, acknowledges that "only thinking that is able to waver seems able to maintain itself" (de Boer 2000: 311). White allows us to see a meeting between change and structure in which time is not stripped of its temporal texture, offering a concept of Dasein that weaves meaning into worlds of activity. This insight is of significant value to futures studies, which like all the social sciences, has struggled with conceptions of temporality and narrow constructions of time. Barbara Adams, in her critique of the handling of time by the social sciences in general, is clear that when the two, time and temporality/change and structure, are treated separately it is not possible to effectively engage with issues of the future. When we fail to bridge this gap she concludes:

"Life, growth, novelty, the possibility of self-knowledge, the temporal extension across physical boundaries inherent in conscious-

ness, and the power which I have come to recognise as an integral part of all relations in which the abstract quantity of time is used or allocated; all these are mostly excluded. Furthermore, where one or even more of these aspects are included, they tend to be presented as serial, linear, progressive, or cumulative when in most situations these aspects would be present simultaneously." (Adam 1990: 6)

Time and Death enriches the speculative inner life-space of futures studies not by posing answers but by offering a re-evaluation of Heidegger's concept of Dasein. One that enables us to more clearly identify minimalist constructions of time and being that impede social action and sustain processes of social ordering that privilege specific constructions of meaning and the possible over others. The "horizon" that emerges is where change and transformation both lie.

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Notes

1. Carol J. White (1946-2000) was paralysed from the age of thirteen by a tumour on her sixth vertebrae which stopped her from walking and impaired the use of her hands. She died of pneumonia on October 1, 2000. She was formerly Associate Professor of Philosophy at Santa Clara University, USA.
2. This sense of "being in question" which is so pervasive today explains why Futures Studies has emerged as a form of participatory social engagement.
3. In other words, there is only the present to represent both past and future.
4. "Death" in this context represents the eventual intelligibility of the Dasein of modernity.

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