

Heidegger's Presentational Strategies: The Ontological Priority of the Readiness-to-hand over the Presence-at-hand

Raza Ali Hasan

Instructor, Department of English, University of Colorado, Boulder, CO, USA

&

Muhammad Sheeraz

Assistant Professor, Department of English, International Islamic University, Islamabad

Abstract

Drawing upon the interpretations of Martin Heidegger's *Being and Time* offered by the favorable commentators such as Hubert Dreyfus, Robert Dostal, Harrison Hall, and Charles Taylor, this paper responds to Heidegger's unsympathetic commentator Herman Philipse's critical interpretation of *Being and Time* (Sections 12-18 of Division I) and shows the validity of Heidegger's claim for the ontological priority of the practical world over the theoretical world. This has been done by showing that the practical world where readiness-to-hand is the norm, emerges from a self-correcting, transient originary situation where readiness-to-hand is primordial to us while we arrive at the theoretical aspect of presence-at-hand when we encounter the unreadiness-to-hand. This paper also shows that Heidegger's text is coherent and consistent. This has been done by looking at the structure of Heidegger's presentational strategies and by making links explicit in them. We have also looked afresh at how he defines certain pivotal elements of his practical world and their relationship with each other.

Keywords: *Philosophy, Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, Heidegger's presentational strategies, presence-at-hand, readiness-to-hand*

Introduction

German phenomenological philosopher Martin Heidegger's *Time and Being* (1962) is considered to have an unparalleled impact on the face and future of philosophy (Olesh, 2008, p. 1) and related fields such as artificial intelligence and cognitive science, etc. (Dotov et al, 2010). His picture of the world in which he lays out "the way things show up in the flux of our everyday, pre-reflective activities" (Guignon, 1993, p. 4) "is still very contested; indeed, it is always menaced with being rolled back" (Taylor, 1993, p. 317). Our contention is that the reason why it is "menaced with being rolled back" is not the dominance of rationalism or representationalism or Cartesian cognitivism in our thinking that makes Heidegger's account open to contestation, but it is because of Heidegger's employment of certain strategies in his description itself of the practical world of Dasein (human existence) which makes his description less convincing.

Harrison Hall gives a very effective presentation of Heidegger's practical world, but does not seem fully convinced by this description and has to continue with a stipulation: "*if all of this is correct*, the ready-to-hand and its practical world enjoy a priority over the present-at-hand..." (emphasis ours, Hall, 1993, p. 131).

Following Hall's assumption, we investigate whether making modifications in Heidegger's strategies of presentation results in a presentation which sounds more convincing and plausible. In doing so, we respond not only to Heidegger's unsympathetic critic like Philipse but also to some of his favorable critics whose interpretation is reviewed here. We have also looked afresh at how he defines certain pivotal elements of his practical world and their relationship with each other, such as presence-at-hand and readiness-to-hand. His reliance on the presentational strategy of repeatedly using phrases like "always already" or "proximally and for the most part" have been explained and have also been similarly used in our exegesis. Also newer aspects of relationships between the elements of his practical world become more apparent, such as the fact that ontological priority of readiness-to-hand as found in the practical world turns out to be (as per our reassessment) independent of the actual originary relationship between presence-at-hand and readiness-to-hand.

A large bulk of work is available on Heidegger's *Being and Time* (e.g. Thompson, 2004; Mulhall, 2005, etc.). Our overall attempt in this paper, however, is informed by what we see as a situation where even favorable commentators, who are themselves completely convinced of the veracity of Heidegger's account, are not completely sure that Heidegger was able to present a convincing picture of everyday practical life-world. So the issues raised by favorable commentators such as Herbert Dreyfus, Robert Dostal, Harrison Hall, Charles Taylor as well as a completely unsympathetic commentator like Herman Philipse have been addressed here.

Heidegger's attempt at philosophical rather than scientific exegesis of everyday practical life-world might be at the root of the difficulty that even favorable commentators run into. One could argue that the philosophical picture of what is after all the material world—everyday practical life-world—remains only a speculation until and only if it is later validated by science. The subjectivity of "being-in-the-world" must eventually fall under the auspices of science. What could be argued is that Heidegger's subjective picture of the material world does need scientific clarification for it to become more convincing and not just to other philosophers. An example from history of science makes this argument clear. The idea that atoms exist, that all matter in the universe is made up of atoms, posited by the Greek philosopher Democritus in the 5th century B.C., maybe considered originally a philosophical not a scientific idea. It was Albert Einstein's scientific explanation of Brownian motion in the 20th century—random movement of pollen grain in water—that convincingly proved the existence of atoms and molecules. Before Einstein, atoms and molecules had been only theorized as being constituents of water. Hypothetically speaking what if rather than a scientist like Einstein, a twentieth century philosopher, say like Heidegger, had taken up the problem of Brownian motion and somehow had drawn an accurate (albeit from the subjective point of view) and similar explanation (maybe even identical to that of Einstein's) of the Brownian motion that included the idea of existence of jostling atoms

and molecules. The way such a philosopher would go about making the connection between Brownian motion and existence of atoms would be to first object to the very use of the microscope by Robert Brown because that reverses the ontological priority of the practical world over the theoretical world allowing him to see the motion of the pollen grains. Therefore, such a philosopher's preliminary subjective task would be to restore the ontological priority of the practical world over the theoretical world by rejecting any use of scientific apparatus. Secondly, the philosopher would prefer to assume that the Brownian motion, though unobserved and unseen, is a part and parcel of the practical world, and somehow relate the Brownian motion to Democritus' old theorization that atoms and molecules constitute water. But this radical conclusion, that Brownian motion is related to the subjective existence of atoms would still remain less convincing for his fellow contentious philosophers than Einstein's more "objective" scientific "proof" of the existence of atoms. In fact, in this hypothetical scenario, just like Democritus needed Einstein, what would be needed in the future is a scientist to come along who took this philosophical explanation of Brownian motion and put it on sound scientific footing. Otherwise, the uncertainty about the existence of atoms and molecules (the most important result from the explanation of Brownian motion) would persist indefinitely. Subjectivity must contend with objectivity. That is, philosophical speculation must eventually be transformed into scientific reality. After all, the open-ended contentiousness in the field of philosophy is entirely different in nature from contentiousness of theorization in the field of science.

Favorable Commentators' Interpretation of *Being and Time*

Herbert Dreyfus quotes Ludwig Wittgenstein to emphasize that the other great philosopher of the twentieth century also believed that the everyday practical world was foundational in determining our overall understanding of things: "Not what *one* man is doing *now*, but the whole hurly-burly, is the background against which we see an action, and it determines our judgment, our concepts, and our reaction" (Wittgenstein as cited in Dreyfus, 1997, p. 7). Dreyfus goes on to quote Wittgenstein's warning against systematization of this hurly-burly: "Not to explain, but to accept the psychological phenomenon—that is what is difficult" (p. 7).

Dreyfus contends that Heidegger elaborates on this commonsense background in Division I of *Being and Time* (Dreyfus, 1997, p. 7). It seems, on the other hand, that Heidegger actually did pay heed to Wittgenstein's injunction. He elaborates as much as he can but then stops short strategically, sometimes seemingly resorting to stating questions that seem contradictory to assertions he made earlier. Robert J. Dostal, discussing Heidegger's treatment of entities as they appear to us in the world, also hints on these strategies. The primary strategy or approach Heidegger takes to describe the practical world is to describe it as "our encounter with things in the world as exemplified by work in a workshop" (Dostal, 1993, p. 161). This then lets Heidegger describe the being of entities as readiness-to-hand as they appear to us. Since the everyday is located in a workshop, the entities found in this world have to be seen as equipment. This approach once again has drawbacks as far as convincing a reader is concerned as a reader has to accept that the practical world consists of equipment. So Heidegger does sound less convincing in his presentation when he describes the south wind as an equipment for the Swabian farmer in section 15 (p. 161). Another of

Heidegger's strategies that Dostal is aware of is that of resorting to questions which are not immediately answered and asserting open conjectures:

...he [Martin Heidegger] also says that "yet only by reason of something present-at-hand [or "extant"] 'is there' anything handy" (*Being and Time* 101). He then asks a question he does not answer: "Does it follow...that handiness is ontologically founded upon presence-at-hand?" At stake in this question is the question as to which is ontologically prior – our practical approach to things or our theoretical approach. (p. 162)

Dostal is genuinely left wondering about the validity of Heidegger's presentation of the practical world because of Heidegger's hermeneutical strategy of raising a crucial question and then leaving it open. This strategy makes it harder on the reader to accept his radically new reinscription of the transcendental subject around the idea of "being-in-the-world." By stating and leaving the question open, Heidegger might be unintentionally acknowledging that he too is perhaps not quite sure about the answer. But one might also argue that such strategies are the only way Heidegger can seriously engage with Wittgenstein's hurly-burly.

Herbert Dreyfus and Charles Taylor being aware of the strategies of presentation deployed in *Being and Time*, take them into account while interpreting *Being and Time*. Dreyfus's section on *Angst* seems to be based upon the strategies behind Heidegger's presentation and so it comes to the opposite conclusion from that of Philipse (see below). Charles Taylor also seems to be aware of them when he mentions that what "sounds deceptively weak" is based on a strong strategy of repeated use of the phrase "proximally and for the most part" (Taylor, 1993, p. 333).

Modifying Heidegger's Presentational Strategies

Dostal's quote above is the point of departure for our procedure to elaborate Heidegger's presentational strategies, so as to show that Heidegger's account is a consistent one and that it supports the assertion that "our approach to things is ontologically prior to our theoretical approach". Our first modification in Heidegger's presentational strategy will be to link (directly as the question seems to demand) his assertion (taking it to be true), "yet only by reason of something present-at-hand [or "extant"] 'is there' anything handy," with his question: "Does it follow...that handiness is ontologically founded upon presence-at-hand?" (Dostal, p. 162).

When we take them to be closely related, the only answer to the above question left possible is the following affirmative assertion: "handiness is ontologically founded upon presence-at-hand". This seemingly wrong answer, that is, the wrong starting presupposition (when compared with Taylor's, see below), will still lead us to handiness's priority. Thus, "founded upon" will be shown not to be necessarily implying priority all the time. This priority of handiness hinges on the Heideggerian presuppositions, givens, indicated by phrases such as "proximally and for the most part," "always already," etc. Incidentally, Taylor, as we stated above, also points towards

this as his argument for the priority of handiness: “The argument about conditions of possibility [of intelligibility] is also carried in his [Heidegger’s] repeated use of the phrase *zunächst und zumeist* (‘proximally and for the most part’...)” (1993, p. 333).

When it comes to the terms present-at-hand or ready-to-hand, the phrase *zunächst und zumeist*, “proximally and for the most part,” applies only to handiness, thus signifying its priority, for it skews the definition of both readiness-to-hand and presence-at-hand, giving weight to readiness-to-hand. In fact, the definition of these terms is not a static one, but a dynamic one in which ready-to-hand and present-at-hand play off each other. So talking about them separately seems useless. Here is how Heidegger gives us a very dynamic description of readiness-to-hand (thus also of present-at-hand):

The more we seize hold of it and use it, the more primordial does our relationship to it become, and the more unveiledly is it encountered as that which it is—as equipment. The hammering itself encounters the specific ‘manipulability’ [“Handlichkeit”] of the hammer. The kind of being which equipment possesses—in which it manifests itself in its own right—we call “readiness-to-hand” [Zuhandenheit]. (1962, p. 98)

It is a decrease in our “concernful dealings” or circumspection that leads to more presence-at-hand, while an increase leads to more readiness-at-hand. Circumspection or “concernful dealings” creates the variation in the being of tools. By describing present-at-hand in such a way Heidegger has succeeded in undermining its traditional meaning “as most real or basic” (Hall, 1993, p. 129) and appropriating it for his own uses. Notice also the characteristic of primordialness also shifts (just like the present-at-hand and ready-to-hand shifts) depending on our relationship to the ready-to-hand object—as the object becomes more and more ready-to-hand, the less and less does it remain present-at-hand.

Yet another presentational strategy Heidegger employs when elucidating the dynamic relationship of the present-at-hand and the ready-to-hand, suggests that definitions are only interpretations by using phrases that indicate phenomenological perspective, such as “it shows itself” or “as looking that way.” For instance, here’s another occasion where he seems to be implying that ontological handiness is founded upon present-at-hand: “*it shows itself* as an equipmental Thing which *looks so and so*, and which, in its readiness-to-hand *as looking that way*, has constantly been present-at-hand” (emphasis ours; Heidegger, 1962, p. 103). What Heidegger is also trying to show us is that equipment has a general tendency to show itself to us as ready-to-hand: “[p]ure presence-at-hand announces itself in such equipment, but only to withdraw to the readiness-to-hand with which one concerns oneself...” (p. 103).

Now Heidegger’s description of readiness (and of the practical life-world) is apparently convincing only because he strictly keeps the content of “concernful dealings” constant and changes are in the tools themselves, which results in the sliding scale of presence-at-hand and readiness-to-hand. That is, the swing from the ready-to-

hand to the present-at-hand and back has to do with usability or unusability of tools, not with the state of “circumspection” or “concernful dealings.”

Transcendental *Dasein*

Yet at the same time this presentation of the practical world is not wholly convincing, because it seems to leave out the part played by Heidegger’s “transcendental *Dasein*,” with its projective understanding of the later sections of *Being and Time*. Charles Taylor strictly follows Heidegger’s lead when he asserts that “[Heidegger’s] basic thesis [is] that things are disclosed in a world as ready-to-hand (*Zuhanden*)” (1993, p. 332) and then continues to assert: “[t]o think of this character as something we project onto things that are first perceived neutrally is to make a fundamental mistake” (p. 332). To bring in the idea of projective understanding to this description on the surface seems to be contradictory. For instance, to consider Michael Inwood’s explanation of how projection works, while keeping Taylor’s assertion in mind, both these assertions seem to contradict each other: “Any *Dasein* must project a world...[it] enables *Dasein* to understand e.g. what a tool is or what another person is” (Inwood, 1999, p. 177). Perhaps it is this projective understanding that Heidegger seems to be readily admitting to have left out in his description of the practical life-world at this point: “Of course Being-in-the-world is a state of *Dasein* which is necessary a priori, but is far from sufficient from completely determining *Dasein*’s Being” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 79).

As a matter of fact, it turns out that circumspection of concern is understanding (p. 187) and only in section 31 of *Being and Time* does Heidegger get to what he has left out: his concept of understanding. Heidegger wants his concept of understanding to replace “pure intuition” (mentalistic “thinking”):

By showing how all sight is grounded primarily in understanding (the circumspection of concern is understanding as *common sense* [*Verständigkeit*]), we have deprived pure intuition [*Anschauen*] of its priority, which corresponds noetically to the priority of the present-at-hand in traditional ontology. ‘Intuition’ and ‘thinking’ are both derivatives of understanding, and already rather remote ones. (p. 187)

We need to complicate the picture at this point by introducing the idea of *Dasein*’s thrown-projective-understanding in relation to equipment and see if handiness still retains its primordality. This way we will be able to bolster the description of everyday practical life-world, making it a more robust presentation.

Herbert Dreyfus (1997), it seems, utilizes a similar strategy when in a section of his commentary, *Being-in-the-world*, he tries to illustrate “transparent coping skills.” Transparent coping skills are like projections. They do not have a definite time of acquisition. They are “original action[s] [*Urhandlung*] of *Dasein*” (Inwood, 1999, p. 176). Dreyfus uses the examples of implicit socializing of Japanese babies versus American babies and distance-standing practices, that is, the knowing of what distance to stand from others in an elevator (1997, p. 16-17). What he is trying to do is to go behind such

statements as “[t]hese most general skills and familiarity are even more transparent and invisible than specific practical ones” (Hall, 1993, p. 132).

The illustrations are still unsatisfying because Dreyfus underlines his argument by appealing to the “most general skills and familiarity” rather than tackling the more “specific practical ones” such as “hammering.” It is understandable that one would shy away from elaborating the acquisition of these “specific practical skills” as they are more explicit, i.e., they seem more cognitive. The danger in such an explication is that one could presumably fall into the trap of mentalistic explanation which would sound too cognitive and thus defeat the point of explication.

In the sections 12 and 13 of *Being and Time*, the term deficiency is not used directly in relation to “concernful dealings” or circumspection but in relation to tools:

If knowing is to be possible as a way of determining the nature of the present-at-hand by observing it, then there must first be a *deficiency* in our having-to-do with the world concernfully. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 88)

We will apply the term deficiency to the *Dasein*'s projective understanding to indicate a disturbance that results in a ready-to-hand object, without it being damaged or missing, to show itself as present-at-hand. This happens because the deficiency in *Dasein*'s projective understanding is the lack of the usual familiarity with the workshop that it is presupposed to have. This *Dasein*'s projective understanding projects a world where there is no place for hammering. He does not have the requisite skills. This is definitely not a case of “tacit norms of appropriateness” (Hall, 1993, p. 134).

The equipment has become unusable because, to use the old term, “circumspection of dealings” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 102) does not know how to use a hammer. This is a case of an originary situation where the circumspection does not *yet* know how to manipulate a hammer. This situation corresponds to Heidegger's conjecture that before anything is handy there has to be something present-at-hand.

Yet it is important to remember that “proximally and for the most part” is not the norm. Such abnormality has an overwhelming tendency to correct itself as soon as possible; indeed, that is why in the everyday world we do not “proximally and for the most part” encounter such situations because the out of the norm situation corrects itself as soon as possible.

As soon as this deficient *Dasein* acquires the necessary in-order-to and for-the-sake-of-which, it is hammering away skillfully. Primordially the *Dasein* is once again employing a “practical approach to things” not a “theoretical approach.” The self-correcting situation or state takes us back to a state where it seems like “readiness-to-hand is ontologically prior.” Our description of things is identical to *Being and Time*'s section 16 except for the starting point, the original state we find the world in, is present-at-hand. An important point to remember is that the only reason why this deficient *Dasein* was able to self-correct the primordial state to handiness was because

of the “always already” presence of all the other *Daseins* whose projective understandings were not deficient.

So in our case, the originary situation, where our re-presentation began, was one of presence-at-hand which could only imply that “handiness was ontologically founded upon presence-at-hand.” But despite this, this originary situation turned out to be not pervasive or prevalent but self-correcting, to such an extent that before we could describe it as such and such, it was back where it appears to us “proximally and for the most part” as if in a state where *readiness-to-hand was ontologically prior* again.

The self-correcting, transient originary situation where presence-at-hand was primordial can only be drawn by looking at the situation from the perspective of *Dasein's* projective understanding. Without including *Dasein's* projective understanding, Heidegger could only hint at this originary situation as he does in his statements that Dostal (1993) quoted. By actually drawing the scenario, we find that it is not necessarily true that in Heidegger's question “Does it follow...that handiness is ontologically founded upon presence-at-hand?” is ontological priority at stake. As we just saw that even if we answer it in affirmative, due to the Heideggerian given “proximally and for the most part,” it does not change the overall ontological priority. In other words, ontological priority is independent of the actual originary mutual relation of presence-at-hand and readiness-to-hand.

By our analysis Charles Taylor (1993) rightly asserts that “basic thesis that things are disclosed in a world as ready-to-hand (*Zuhanden*)” with stipulation of “proximally and for the most part.” He is correct about his second assertion as well that “[t]o think of this character as something we project onto things that are first perceived neutrally is to make a fundamental mistake” (p. 34). The *Dasein*, to begin with, never perceives neutrally. By definition if one perceives something as present-at-hand, this is only in relation to ready-to-hand. Heidegger's present-at-hand is not really equivalent to a de-contextualized occurrent (extant) object that scientific stance would reveal. Present-at-hand is not a context-free designation. It does have a context—it is called ready-to-hand:

This [broken tool] presence-at-hand of something that cannot be used is still not devoid of all readiness-to-hand whatsoever; equipment which is present-at-hand *in this way* is still not just a Thing which occurs somewhere. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 103)

Furthermore, though Heidegger never denies that his *Dasein* is not a “transcendental subject,” the world as a referential whole already exists before a *Dasein* projects a world.

Critiquing an Unfavorable Commentator's Interpretation of *Being and Time*

Herman Philipse, mistaking Heideggerian presentational strategy (of not discussing projective understanding earlier) to an internal contradiction, figures that Heidegger's initial description of the practical world and seemingly “non-transcendental” *Dasein* in that world (being-in-the-world) contradicts the later description of *Dasein* as a

“transcendental subject,” retro-fitted with “thrown projective understanding,” in *Being and Time*:

The very idea that *Dasein* essentially exists in a meaningful world *an sich* would not make sense, of course, if this meaningful world were a projected world as well and if the projected framework were as optional as the projected framework of science. (Philipse, 1998, p. 324)

In fact, “[it is the existence of the world] which enables *Dasein* to understand e.g. what a tool is or what another person is” (Inwood, 1999, p. 177). Important point to remember here is that the tool as present-at-hand or ready-to-hand is pre-existent. *Dasein* does not create the world. It only interprets it in his projection:

But ‘commercium’ of the subject with a world does not get created for the first time by knowing, nor does it arise from some way in which the world acts upon a subject. Knowing is a mode of *Dasein* founded upon Being-in-the-world. Thus Being-in-the-world, as a basic state, must be interpreted beforehand. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 90)

When Heidegger does eventually talk about projecting a world, “he speaks of the projection of something onto something else” (Inwood, 1999, p. 176):

With equal primordially the understanding projects *Dasein*’s Being both upon its “for-the-sake-of-which” and upon significance, as the worldhood of its current world”. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 185)

As Heidegger puts it, *Dasein* is never “free from being-in” (p. 83) that is it has already discovered a world: “As Being-in-the-world, *Dasein* has already discovered a world at any time.” So it is immediately clear that *Dasein*’s projection is not optional, and Herman Philipse’s objection that it is *Dasein*’s projection that makes the world a meaningful structure is spurious, since in fact *Dasein* is projecting onto a world that already exists.

Philipse (1998) wants to pronounce Heidegger guilty of incoherence because of his remark “it collapses into itself.” It seems that he is misreading hermeneutical cues in presentation as inconsistent and as contradictory reasoning, which makes him think that Heidegger’s treatment of Angst is completely disastrous as far as his earlier description of a “non-transcendental subject” *Dasein* in the world is concerned:

In section 40, for instance, he suggests that the meaningful world as such is annihilated in the experience of angst. “It collapses into itself”...We might say that in the experience of *Angst*, *Dasein* is without any projective understanding, and this very fact would reveal that the world as a meaningful structure is nothing but *Dasein*’s projection. (Philipse, 1998, p. 325)

Philipse is convinced that he has shown the complete invalidity of any of Heidegger’s fundamental claims:

However, if even the world as a meaningful structure is *Dasein*'s projection, Heidegger's claim that readiness-to-hand (*Zuhandenheit*) is the way in which entities are in themselves (*an sich*), whereas the scientific projection skips entities as they really are, becomes unjustified...." (p. 325)

Furthermore, Philipse accuses Heidegger of using the term "world' in the sense of totality of beings, and not in the sense of ... being a significant whole of referential relations" (p. 325) in the section on *Angst*. That is, "if this significant world collapses into itself, no world in Heidegger's special sense of the word survives: we are confronted by a meaningless totality of entities" (p. 325). That is, we are back to where present-at-hand is primordial. Herbert Dreyfus who is a more careful reader mounts a solid defense and gives an alternative reading to "it collapses into itself." He explains that "in revealing itself as insignificant the world does not cease to be a referential whole" (Dreyfus, 1998, p. 179). His reading of Heidegger's remark is based on unraveling contradictions stemming from Heidegger's strategic presentation in two seemingly contradictory sentences:

The totality of involvements of the ready-to-hand and the present-at-hand discovered within-the-world, is, as such, of no consequence; it collapses into itself; the world has the character of completely lacking significance. (Heidegger, 1962, p. 231)

and

...entities within-the-world are of so little importance in themselves that on the basis of this insignificance of what is within-the-world, the world in its worldhood is all that still obtrudes itself. (p. 231)

He reconciles these remarks to be consistent by pointing out that the same term "obtrudes" is "used [elsewhere] to describe the way the referential whole stands out when a tool is missing" (Dreyfus, 1997, p. 178).

Conclusion

By introducing the idea of "thrown projective understanding" and by working with his presentational strategies, we have shown that Heidegger's text is consistent and it does posit that our practical approach is prior to our theoretical approach to things. Furthermore, we have shown that the order in which Heidegger's narrative unfolds and by his use of his presentational strategies, an unsympathetic reader like Philipse is likely to draw wrong conclusions, and even careful readers like Dostal and Hall are left feeling unsure. Though one should always remember as Heidegger reminds us that his account is after all an interpretation, nothing is really as conclusive as Taylor implies in his reading of *Being and Time*. The best approach to reading *Being and Time* would be to read it like Dostal and Hall do, cautious but with an open mind.

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