

BOOK REVIEWS

Paul Edwards, *Heidegger's Confusions*.
Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2004. 129 pp.

A blurb on the back cover of *Heidegger's Confusions* (HC) says that "if all philosophers had their very own miniature Paul Edwards sitting on their shoulder as they wrote, we would be spared a great deal of pretentious nonsense." We would also have lengthier publication records, at least, that is, if this mini-Edwards could be persuaded to train us in the craft, plied so adeptly here, of recycling decades-old articles into new books. Though this text is billed as a "thorough critique" of Heidegger's philosophy that "continues a project that [Edwards] began several years ago," the truth is that HC is an underresearched polemic drawn from four previous publications dating from 1975 to 1989.

The tenor of this volume is aptly captured by its two-paragraph "Preface," in which Edwards dubs Heidegger the "greatest catastrophe in the history of philosophy," inveighs against the increasing number of Anglo-American philosophers who take Heidegger seriously, and situates the present study as an attempt "to stem this tide of unreason" (9). Edwards's efforts to this end are addressed to two basic areas of concern. First, he aims to show that Heidegger's "quest for Being" (characterized here by reference to texts written after *Being and Time*) amounts to a series of "word torrents"—indeed, "huge masses of hideous gibberish"—that issue from Heidegger's failure to grasp that 'existence' is a "logical constant" (à la Russell) rather than a characteristic of things (46, 41). Second, Edwards seeks to demonstrate that Heidegger's analysis of death in *Being and Time* is a confused amalgamation of abject falsehoods and trivial truths; in the event that Heidegger says something true about death, the truth in question is readily expressible without all the "hocus-pocus" conjured by his unduly (and perhaps willfully) turgid prose.

Given the gravity of these charges, Edwards does little to inspire confidence in his credentials for prosecuting the case. He says nothing, for instance, about the interpretive challenges that arise in view of the substantive differences between the phenomenological orientation of Heidegger's philosophy and the broadly Russellian orientation of his own views on being and death. Without a word about the historical and methodological underpinnings of Heidegger's project or the complexities of its development from early to late, Edwards analyzes passage after passage at face value, rarely providing adequate contextual information and often compounding the perplexity of the primary texts at issue by appealing (unfavorably) to isolated passages from dated secondary commentaries. The result is that it is usually unclear that the confusions Edwards imputes to Heidegger are in fact Heidegger's confusions and not rather those of certain Heidegger commentators, chief among them Edwards himself.

But apart from the interpretive deficiencies of Edwards's case (to which I will return at the end), potential readers should be aware at the outset that

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HC's dated scholarship and hyperbolic rhetoric raise serious questions, in and of themselves, about its fitness for contemporary scholarly audiences. Notwithstanding its newly minted ISBN number, this book is 100 percent recycled material, and its source texts are not exactly recent. Though Edwards stops short of full disclosure in acknowledging these sources,¹ a visit to the stacks confirms that about two-thirds of the book is drawn from a monograph published in 1979 (a text that itself is largely a reprint of two previous articles), and the other third is taken from an essay that first appeared in 1989; all told, nearly half of this volume has been published not just once, but twice before.²

It should be clear, moreover, that the texts repackaged here—marketed as a new monograph rather than an anthology of reprints—are neither substantively revised nor augmented with transitions to smooth out the awkward shifts between formerly freestanding essays. Though Edwards has reshuffled a few headings and reorganized some paragraphs, the only remarkable changes in *HC* are a handful of substitutions that seem contrived to conceal the text's true vintage. One discovers, for instance, upon reading a page otherwise identical to its forebears, that 'Richard Nixon' has become 'George W. Bush', or that '1974' has given way to '2003'.³ Even the acknowledgments page is reproduced verbatim from the final footnote of a previous article—verbatim, that is, but for the addition of the epithet 'the late' before the name of a since-deceased interlocutor.⁴

Putting aside the question of whether such tactics meet the bar of scholarly good faith, Edwards's decision to reprint this body of work basically "as is" leaves *HC* vulnerable to summary dismissal on two fronts. First, despite the fact that, upon its original publication, much of this material was criticized by numerous respondents as a "serious misinterpretation"—even "a complete misreading"—of Heidegger, Edwards does not even acknowledge, much less

1. He admits that "some materials in the present book have appeared previously" (123), but this admission (a) first appears on an acknowledgments page buried just before the index; (b) fails to furnish the full citation information (title, date, and so forth) customarily provided for reprinted source materials; and (c) misleads the reader by conversational implicature to the inference that the reprinted materials play a supporting role in a substantively new or significantly revised work.

2. The book has five chapters. Chapters 1 and 2 are drawn from Edwards, "Heidegger's Quest for Being," *Philosophy* 64 (1989): 437–70. The material in chapter 3 first appeared in two separate articles (Edwards, "Heidegger and Death as 'Possibility,'" *Mind* 84 [1975]: 548–66; and Edwards, "Heidegger and Death: A Deflationary Critique," *Monist* 59 [1976]: 161–86) and was subsequently reprinted in Edwards, *Heidegger and Death: A Critical Evaluation* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1979). Chapters 4 and 5 are drawn from Edwards, *Heidegger and Death*, 46–59 and 40–45, respectively.

3. Edwards, "Heidegger and Death," 169; and *Heidegger's Confusions*, 61; "Heidegger and Death," 183; and *Heidegger's Confusions*, 77.

4. Edwards, "Heidegger's Quest for Being," 470; and *Heidegger's Confusions*, 123.

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answer, these standing objections.⁵ Second, he ignores the past two decades of Anglo-American Heidegger research, electing instead to rest his case, in large part, on questionable interpretations of commentaries from the fifties, sixties, and seventies. The result is that Edwards is on the record in 2004 calling the “recent” influx of Anglo-American interest in Heidegger a “tide of unreason” without a single reference to the work of Hubert Dreyfus, John Haugeland, Robert Brandom, Theodore Kisiel, Michael Friedman, Daniel Dahlstrom, or Mark Wrathall (among others).

It is due in part to the contributions of scholars like these that Edwards’s hyperbolic rhetoric and dismissive attitude toward Heidegger and his interpreters will now seem quaint even to many philosophers in the Anglo-American mainstream. Those who prefer evenhanded criticism to invective, in any case, may balk at Edwards’s repeated derision of rival commentators as “gushing” and “uncritical” Heidegger “worshippers” (24, 87), “disciples” (49), and “devotees” (59); “more sober and rational persons,” Edwards declares, “will continue to regard the whole Heidegger phenomenon as a grotesque aberration of the human mind” (47).

Too often, regrettably, this incendiary rhetoric is just the crackle of a smoldering straw man. It is fair to say that scholars familiar with Heidegger’s project—sympathetic or otherwise—will readily detect this volume’s many oversimplifications (Heidegger’s problematic rests on the “false assumption” that “existence is the most basic characteristic of existing things”) and false imputations (Heidegger believes that “in a quite literal sense, a human being is already its future”) (37, 68). The common root of these problems is Edwards’s fundamental misunderstanding of the method and intent of hermeneutic phenomenology, which he consistently presents as though it were simply an incompetent attempt at conventional conceptual analysis.

But whereas Edwards would have us believe that Heidegger’s logical ineptitude is such that he “totally fails to distinguish between the ‘is’ of predication, the ‘is’ of identity, and the ‘is’ of existence” (37), other more credible sources tell a different story. For example, recent books by Michael Friedman and Daniel Dahlstrom (both of whom enjoy the respect of analytic and continental audiences alike) offer critical-historical examinations of Heidegger that illuminate both the seriousness of his interest in logic and the perspicuity of

5. Dan Magurshak, “Heidegger and Edwards on ‘Sein-Zum-Tode,’” *Monist* 62 (1979): 107–18; Stephen Bungay, “On Reading Heidegger,” *Mind* 86 (1977): 423–26. Others in a long list of detractors include Lawrence Hinman (“Heidegger, Edwards, and Being-toward-Death,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 16 [1978]: 193–212); John Llewelyn (“The ‘Possibility’ of Heidegger’s Death,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 14 [1983]: 127–38); Carol White (“Dasein, Existence, and Death,” *Philosophy Today* 28 [1984]: 52–65); and Max Hallman (“Edwards and Heidegger on the Significance of Death,” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology* 16 [1985]: 301–6).

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his strategy for diagnosing a “logical prejudice” in modern and contemporary philosophy that he believed was alienating human understanding from its hermeneutic grounding in lived experience.⁶ Judged alongside books like these, with their critical yet hospitable tenor, their recourse to the most up-to-date historical and archival research, and their accessibility across the analytic/continental divide, *Heidegger’s Confusions* leaves much to be desired.

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6. Michael Friedman, *A Parting of the Ways: Carnap, Cassirer, and Heidegger* (LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 2000); and Daniel Dahlstrom, *Heidegger’s Concept of Truth* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001) (“logical prejudice” is Dahlstrom’s term).

Philosophical Review, Vol. 116, No. 2, 2007
DOI 10.1215/00318108-2006-047