Unresolved Futurities: On Hermeneutical Shapes

In this paper, I offer a hermeneutical/deconstructive interpretation of a specific drawing by Leonardo da Vinci and a thought-experiment suggested by that drawing. As I will make clear below, my reason for turning to this drawing is that it graphically illustrates an ambiguity in Martin Heidegger’s notion of the hermeneutical circle. I take this ambiguity to be illustrative of an interpretive problem of crucial importance to mainstream interpretations of Heidegger as well as to the hermeneutical and deconstructive traditions. In a more complete version of this paper (which I will make available online) I explicate this problem through an interpretation of relevant passages in Being and Time that argues that 1) there are two different, irreducible understandings of futurity in Heidegger’s thought and 2) that Heidegger’s understanding of the present helps to mediate these different meanings of futurity. In the version I offer today, however, I simply end brief presentation and explanation of these conclusions, and have to leave them largely unargued for. My emphasis instead will be on presenting the thought-experiment and the problem that arises from it.

Part One: The Battle of Anghiari

In 1503, Leonardo da Vinci was commissioned by the Republic of Florence to paint a fresco depicting Florence’s victory over Milan in the Battle of Anghiari. In preparation for this fresco, which was to have contained several scenes of melee between riders on horse-back, Leonardo drew a number of sketches, including one of a horse in the act of rearing.

The sketch contains in a static image two separate conceptions of time. On the one hand, we could understand the various lines as the succession of movements in a horse, as though we were seeing an elapsed-time photograph or a series of images from a flip book laid on top of one another. The time that is unfolding would be the time of the act of the horse rearing. The stability
of the lower half of the horse contrasts with the ferocious movement of the upper half as the horse rears. Another possibility (the one which more faithfully replicates the purpose of a sketch as part of a plan for a fresco), would be to understand this as the picture of Leonardo’s activity of thought. The lower half of the horse, whose position Leonardo basically knows, is drawn first. Various possibilities for the front legs and the upper body are then projected, but many are abandoned as inadequate for this particular project. Those possibilities that are seized upon are then further drawn, so that the sketch becomes less and less tentative; more and more clearly and finely drawn as the artist decides what he wants this horse to be. But the lines that are abandoned remain. And in each of these lines, even the most hesitant sketches indicating where the horse’s head would be at the wildest moments of its movement, there remains implicit an understanding which could be more richly unfolded.

To get a clearer conception of what I mean, it might be instructive to compare Leonardo’s sketch to a more recent work, Brice Marden’s “Tang Dancer.” Here again, we have a sequence of lines that resembles a figure in motion. But in the case of “Tang Dancer,” we are much more justified in seeing this motion as belonging to the figure and not to Marden’s thought. This is a completed work, one which represents the culmination of a certain arc in Marden’s career, away from his early minimalism towards a sort of abstract figuration. Here, we have a figure, which we are told was inspired by a tomb, presented in several poses that emerge when what initially seemed to be abstract lines resolve themselves. The movement is the movement of the dancer, and Marden wants us to see that movement in a static image (perhaps also like Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, assuming that there really is a nude anywhere in there). In contrast, Leonardo is planning to present only one moment of that movement. The
extraneous lines will be lost in the painted surface, which will remain in Florence long after Leonardo has returned to Milan, taking his sketches drawn on precious paper with him.

This might sound like a quibbling difference, a debater’s point, or the point of an academic who wants to leave a mark on a field that has been pretty thoroughly trodden upon. This is not the kind of distinction that makes any sense to common sense, whose insights, Kant insists, philosophy should not lose track of. After all, whether we imagine a horse rearing its head or we imagine an established master imagining a horse rearing its head, is it not one horse that we are imagining in one act of imagination? Our common sense objector, (if she is as well versed in the phenomenological tradition as she is in Kantianism), might even press her point further and say that the difference that I am describing is the difference between noesis and noema, the difference between thinking and the thing thought, which is hardly a difference at all. Noesis and noema do not, like subject and object, name two different things, but two sides of the same intentional act. We can focus on the activity of Leonardo imagining or we can focus on the thing he is imagining. We can focus on Marden’s play with this funerary figure, or we can focus on the thing he is playing with. And, our phenomenologist might continue, a smile on her face that might remind us of a certain famous painting, there can be no temporal difference between noesis and noema, because temporality is a property of the unifying intentional act, of the unity that lies behind the stream of consciousness.

But there is an important philosophical conundrum lurking beneath the surface of this quibbling debate, one that common sense might do well to heed. It concerns what we mean by the unity of this unifying intentional act, particularly when we are talking (as we are here) about imaginary intentional acts, about the play of the imagination, which cannot hope to find unity either in the solid material world or in the fixed ideality of philosophical and scientific concepts.
What if, at least sometimes when I think, there is a difference between what I think I am thinking about and what I am actually thinking about? Of course, this happens all the time in those thoughts that avail themselves of sensory information or that rely on concepts of the understanding. Thoughts about the physical world and thought governed by the concepts that we share with some group (whether that group is a subgroup of specialists, of all competent English speakers, or of all humanity) have a built-in way of telling me whether I have properly understood the contents of my conscious life. And so, to use a favorite example of Umberto Eco’s, we can laugh at Marco Polo when he thinks that he has seen a black, hairless unicorn but has actually just seen a rhinoceros. But can this problem arise even when all that I am thinking about is in my head? When it comes to imagination and to interpretation, how would I know what I was or was not thinking about?

In short, I am concerned here with the phenomenon of misunderstanding, and clarifying what happens in misunderstanding has played an important role in philosophical conceptions of the mind. From the Heideggerian perspective that I will adopt later in the paper, what is particularly interesting about the kind of misunderstanding that we are talking about here is that it elucidates the constitutive role that the possibility of understanding plays in all kinds of understanding, especially imagination and interpretation.

Let us suppose that I have never seen the completed fresco of the Battle of Anghiari, but I have seen this sketch and a number of sketches which, when coupled with some descriptions I found in Leonardo’s notebooks, lead me to imagine in vivid detail what the completed fresco must look like. Note, for reasons that will be important later, that I do not say I imagine in vivid detail how Leonardo wanted that fresco to look or how the fresco actually looked. Here, the sketches and the descriptions serve to produce a vividly imagined object. I then decide to paint it.
Lacking both the technical expertise and any discernible hand-eye coordination whatsoever, I fail miserably. In the New Yorker, Peter Schjeldahl, deems my attempt to be “utter crap,” and, over in The Nation, Arthur Danto says: “The only thing [’s fresco succeeded in doing was in convincing me that I have been far too generous in what I am willing to call art.” What does it mean that I failed?

Now, my failure is somewhat different than other famous failures in the history of thought: it does not proceed from misapplying concepts to sensory experience, like Marco Polo. It does not proceed from misunderstanding the relationships among abstract ideas, like Meno’s poor slave boy. I cannot pinch myself and learn I was dreaming, nor is there any evil demon tricking me into thinking that I have succeeded when I failed. And I have removed the avenue of thinking that I have misunderstood Leonardo by not claiming to have understood him in the first place. Rather, my failure comes from a rather straightforward inability to realize a certain idea in a certain medium. The idea was adequate on its own, wasn’t it?

What I want to argue here is that this is too simple of an understanding of the relationship between ideas and their realization, because it fails to take into account the peculiar temporality of the imagination and the relationship of that temporality to what I will follow Heidegger in calling “world-time.” As I briefly suggested, this is a feature as much of interpretation as it is of the imagination. In order to argue for this position, I will turn to Heidegger’s famous exposition of the hermeneutical circle in Being and Time. I will argue that in trying to understand the place of this figure in Being and Time, commentators run the risk of conflating the temporality of the imagination with the temporality of “world-time,” both of which need to be kept rigorously apart. I will end by suggesting that this risk is built into the very figure of the “hermeneutical circle,” and that a circle is not the most apt metaphor at all. For reasons that will become clear in
the course of this exposition, I will suggest that when Heidegger thought he was thinking about the hermeneutical circle, he was actually thinking about a hermeneutical crystal.

The hermeneutical circle is Heidegger’s answer to the problem of the different failures of the understanding that I alluded to above, problems which seem to point to the necessity of a priori knowledge. In Plato, Descartes and Kant (to name three exemplary moments in this itinerary), the capacity to realize that a mistake had been made implied a fore-knowledge of the right answer or at least a fore-knowledge of how to obtain the right answer. The slave boy thinks that doubling the side of a square will double its area, but, when he tries to realize this idea in a visual figure, he “recognizes” his mistake. But how could he have recognized the right answer? He must have had a conception guiding his realization. Although Descartes and Kant change the ontological and epistemological shape of this robust a prioricity, in each case the triumph of reason through common sense announces the necessity of a priori knowledge.

In the case of Kant, it is worth dwelling on this a prioricity briefly. Of course, Kant did believe that certain universal categorical concepts were necessary for there to be anything like understanding, but equally importantly, he recognized that our experience could be processed by concepts that were not prior to all experience in this strong sense but still functioned liked a priori concepts in future experience. A motley collection of his followers as widely variant in attitudes as Charles Sanders Peirce and Heidegger have realized that the role the schematism plays in these so-called “empirical concepts” are much more philosophically interesting than Kant himself thought. Peirce, for example, said “For if the schemata had been considered early enough they would have overgrown his whole work;” the implication being they would have rendered any strict a priori concepts unnecessary. And in his Kantbook, Heidegger used the schematism to emphasize that the imagination necessarily plays a productive role in all
experience. In doing this, he explicitly emphasized the futural character that the imagination plays in concepts. Even when concepts are produced in part through the faculty of the imagination, the imagination has to project them onto, give them over to, the understanding and to reason. This means that it must ultimately give them over to experience. It can only imagine what these concepts will do. It cannot realize its own conception.

This is roughly the insight that Heidegger incorporated into the hermeneutical circle. By the time the hermeneutical circle was introduced in *Being and Time*, Heidegger had already defined Dasein, the being of the human being, as “Being-in-the-world” and had already elaborated the world in terms of a totality of significance. “Significance” here has a maximally broad meaning and simply means that entities in the world are encountered as being for something, and the “for something” of all beings are related structurally in such a way that that total structure is more or less what we mean by a world. When asking what it means to say that Dasein is “in” the world, Heidegger turned to three structures which, in the second part of *Being and Time* (after the discussion of the hermeneutical circle) would be overlaid onto temporality as the way that Dasein has a past, a present and a future. What would become Heidegger’s sense of futurity was here described as “understanding:” to be in the world of structured significance is to have an understanding of that significance. And that understanding is projective: things in the world are “for something” insofar as Dasein has projects, plans and sketches.

These projects are futural because they entail what is not presently the case but what Dasein plans on becoming the case. What is more important, however, is the sense in which the notion of projects builds on the phenomenon of recognition. Lacking even an *a priori* as weak as Kant’s, Heidegger turns the future into the *a priori*. Insofar as Dasein understands beings in the world, it has an understanding of what they are for, of how they fit into the total structure of
circumspection in which the worldhood of Dasein’s world is found. This is at once a theoretical and a pragmatic position: Dasein understands the world by realizing its own understanding. It has its own understanding as (among other things) a fore-conception.  

In the course of realizing this fore-conception, Dasein will further revise and clarify this fore-conception, perhaps having to abandon its fore-conception all together. But the point is that this fore-conception provides the starting point: it is an entrée into a certain kind of movement, a kind of movement that I engage in inasmuch as I live, a kind of movement that is as rich and variegated in its realization as is my life, in which I would like to do a lot of things. For example, paint the *Battle of Anghiari*.

But, sadly, the turn to Heidegger spells new trouble for me because now it turns out that my idea was never as good as I thought it was and that the problem lay as much with the idea as with my attempt to realize it. This is because, for Heidegger, ideas (at least the ideas of the imagination) do not merely present some particular content as though it were there, but rather present the conditions for its realization. As we will soon see, this applies not only to the ideas of the imagination but also to the concepts that govern interpretation. The sketch of the *Battle of Anghiari* is an idea for a certain kind of project. Once I have this idea, I enter into the hermeneutical circle. Along with fore-conception, Heidegger also says that I have a certain fore-having and fore-sight.  

In a certain sense, I am already holding onto this future object. It is there before my eyes: I recognize it because it is an integral part of my plans. Now, it is important to recognize that for Heidegger, fore-conception, fore-having and fore-sight are not distinctive kinds of understanding: they are three ways of describing the same act of understanding. The way that I have a certain concept of my object is by having a vision of that object and that vision entails that I comport myself a certain way presently. My failure to comport myself in that way entails a failure of my fore-conception. It turns out I was never really
thinking of the fresco that I thought I was, at least insofar as I was thinking about it as something I could actually realize. To put it in Kantian terms, I could say that I cannot separate out the ability to have an aesthetic idea (something that Kant says is the property originally of geniuses and of the rest of us only through judgments of taste)\textsuperscript{17} from the technical skills to realize that idea. It turns out that I was never thinking about what I thought I was thinking about. I was thinking about something else entirely.

“Well, yes” our common-sense protester objects, “but this just points to the limits of your contrived example. Granted, your fore-conception was faulty, but that is only because you never really had that fore-conception at all. You pretended to have it to illustrate a certain point and even there you had to steal it from Leonardo da Vinci. And the problem that you are pointing to would be a non-problem for him. That is the point of a sketch. He produces the sketch to give himself an idea for how he will proceed. He works out certain ideas about motion and movement, which painters have had trouble depicting. He does it in a drawn medium to leave himself room to make mistakes. But it’s all part of his master plan and will simply make the finished work that much better. He is a master. You are right that part of his idea is the knowledge for how to realize that idea. But to insist that this produces a disunity in his idea is absurd. It might have done this in your project, if you could have actually had that project. But, because you are not a master artist and not a genius, you could not. You imagine two different temporalities in the horse that Leonardo sketched, but those two temporalities are just in your head. They are made impossible for Leonardo by the unity of his act of consciousness, by virtue of the fact that he imagines the horse moving and decides on a particular moment of that movement and then ultimately paints that moment. Ultimately, there will be a unity between the
imaginary horse, the thought-process in Leonardo’s head and the horse on the wall in Florence. And that is what it means to be a master: to be assured of this unity.”

This is all fair enough, as common-sense usually is. The trouble, however, is that geniuses sometimes lack common-sense. Take the Battle of Anghiari, for example, and now Leonardo’s and not mine. I mentioned earlier that in my fictional example I had never seen the actual fresco. In fact, this is true. I have not, and neither have you. The fresco was a monumental failure for the same reason that the sketches for it are worth looking at 500 years later: because Leonardo was an experimentalist. In this case, he was experimenting with applying certain encaustic techniques to a certain experimental kind of plaster. He had practiced under dry conditions, but he was not lucky enough to have dry conditions when he actually painted the fresco. The paint therefore more or less slid off the surface of the plaster and onto the floor. What happened to the horse? I’m sure it slid along with everything else. What happened to its unity? It failed to appear. I guess the unity rode off into the sunset, into a long, 500 year night where, to paraphrase Hegel, all horses are black.

The infinite unity of possibility is a real kind of unity, but it is not the kind of unity that we were looking for our projects to give us. What we wanted was the identity of something with itself over time, an identity that would restore our faith that various different modalities of time could be reduced to one. What we wanted were assurances that our projects actually described the future, as we suppose them to.

I think that the idea of the hermeneutical circle has the potential to deal with this problem in an interesting way, but this potential is largely unrealized. Up to this point, I have been offering a traditional, fairly uncontroversial interpretation of the hermeneutical circle. We are now, however, in a point to sharpen an unresolved difficulty with this traditional interpretation.
Here, I only have the space to sketch the difficulty and to suggest a resolution. The difficulty arises most clearly when we see Heidegger use the concepts he developed with the hermeneutical circle as a way to elaborate the significance of temporality. Specifically, the two different features of interpretation that I have been relying on are both given a futural significance: both the act of projection by which Dasein engage the world and the anticipation or expectation that the future will come irrespective of Dasein’s projects play a constitutive place in what it means for Dasein to have a future. The difference between these two forms of futurity is far more subtle than the simple realization that my plans for the future won’t determine what the future really is, but this isn’t a bad starting realization to consider that difference. Authentic interpretation explicitly takes that difference into account in relating itself to the world; inauthentic Dasein does not. The projects of a genius like Leonardo shows a more robust awareness of this difference than the projects of an amateur like me. It isn’t just that his imagination is better than mine; it’s ontologically richer.

There’s a lot more to say about this difference, but for now I’ll simply assert that the negotiation of it is a crucial element of the way in which authentic Dasein has a “present” in Being and Time. Ultimately, however it makes more sense to understand Leonardo’s sketch in terms of potentiality than of simple futurity. The reason why the drawing is interesting on its own, apart from the fresco it failed to help realize, is that the drawing presents a number of possibilities, in the incomplete form proper to possibility. Their actualization is suggested, but not realized. This drawing can therefore authentically be understood in terms of what Heidegger called interpretation: it suggests a number of projects which projective Dasein could take up. It presents multiple kinds of possible understandings and relates them to one another, without deciding on one or giving them any decisive unity. It is the temporality of this sort of
presentation that I have been trying to follow. For now, I will leave as a simple assertion, one which I will defend elsewhere, the following provocation: If we follow the figures Heidegger suggests and the line of thinking I’ve tried to open up here, we will arrive at an interpretation of this potentiality as a kind of presentification. What Heidegger will call authentic presence will name a form of potentiality rather than actuality.

Appendix A

Leonardo da Vinci, Sketch of a Horse Rearing
Fischer Fine Arts Image Library Collection, University of Pennsylvania.

http://proxy.library.upenn.edu:6935/cgi/i/image/image-idx?type=detail&cc=fisher&entryid=X-n2005110574&viewid=1&ts=image_only_

(September 18, 2007).
4 Marden, Brice. “Tang Dancer.” (1994). Digital image included as appendix to this article. [oh, is it? because I didn’t see one….] [ADD PAGE NUMBERS]
7 See particularly *Being and Time*, H420-428.
8 *Being and Time*, H152-153.
9 See, Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Paul Guyer and Allen Wood, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A220/B267: “A concept that includes a synthesis in it is to be held as empty, and does not related to any object, if this synthesis does not belong to experience, either as borrowed from it, in which case it is an empirical concept, or as one on which, as a priori condition, experience in general (its form) rests, and then it is a pure concept, which nevertheless belongs to experience, since its object can only be encountered in the latter.” (Italics are mine.) The point I want to emphasize is that while in applying both empirical and pure concepts to objects, experience is necessary, in forming empirical concepts, experience is merely used as source material for something formally similar to a pure concept. This same point becomes crucial in the way that Kant frames the *Critique of Pure Reason*, A137/B176-A147/B187.
10 See *Critique of Pure Reason*, A137/B176-A147/B187.
13 *Phenomenological Interpretation of Kant’s Critique of Pure Reason*, 282f.
14 *Being and Time*, H143-160.
15 *Being and Time*, H150.
16 Ibid.
18 At least, this is one of several possible explanations of what caused him to abandon the project. See Farago 310-311.
“The development of the understanding we call ‘interpretation.’ In it the understanding appropriates understandingly that which is understood by it. In interpretation, understanding does not become something different. It becomes itself” (*Being and Time*, H148).

See particularly *Being and Time*, H260-267.

This occupies the bulk of Chapters Four and Five of Division Two.


This is the topic of Division Two, Chapter Six.

See *Being and Time*, H411-419.


Saramago, 28.


