HISTORICITY, CONTINGENCY, AND VIRTUE

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Abstract

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This dissertation takes a novel approach to the development and defense of analytic virtue ethics by bringing it into contact with the thought of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. A consideration of the ethical implications of their thought helps us answer, I argue, a deep and persistent challenge to the notion that practical knowledge proceeds from virtuous dispositions. According to standard virtue theories, the acquisition of the virtues, the conception of the good life of which they are constitutive, and their practical deliverances all depend upon contingent, historically conditioned, and inescapable frameworks of understanding. This seems to put at risk certain ideals of a philosophical ethics, including the possibility of self-critique, the universal scope and objectivity of our judgments, and realism. Most virtue theories seek to maintain these ideals, at least to some extent; yet, the claim that virtuous practical knowledge depends upon conditioned frameworks seems to many critics hopelessly incompatible with the ideals, committing virtue ethics instead to a form of relativism or elitism.
The hermeneutical account of virtue and practical reasoning that I articulate takes its bearings from the Heideggerian notion of authenticity. This account, I argue, contributes a much-needed response to the aforementioned problem for virtue ethics, while also demonstrating Heidegger’s relevance to ethics, particularly for the analytic tradition in which he has been little considered. After setting out the problem in chapter 1, I proceed to elucidate and defend Heidegger’s account of the ontological structure of human life. This account, I argue, entails a conception of the authentic life that parallels and clarifies Aristotelian *eudaimonia*, and deepens our understanding of virtue ethical notions like practical wisdom and affective responsiveness.

The next few chapters consider the significance of a Gadamerian account of understanding, particularly how elements of our frameworks of understanding can be foregrounded and revised in ways that correct false presuppositions and issue in greater practical wisdom. Central to the process is a conception of dialogue that implies neither an escape from frameworks altogether nor the perpetuation of false ideologies.

Finally, I develop a theory of virtue that emerges from the foregoing discussion by extending and critically assessing the hermeneutical ethics of Charles Taylor. This theory distinguishes between (in my terms) “transcendental” and “immanent” virtues, a distinction that answers the initial worries by reconciling the thesis about the dependency of practical reason on conditioned frameworks with the philosophical ideals of critique, universality, and realism with respect to practical knowledge.
For Manuela
CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS ........................................................................................................... V

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION ........................................................................................................... 1
  1.1 The Contingency Objection ................................................................................................. 1
  1.2 Historicity, Contingency, and Virtue .................................................................................. 12

CHAPTER 2: THE STRUCTURE OF AUTHENTICITY ................................................................. 31
  2.1 The Heidegger Problem ..................................................................................................... 31
  2.2 Dasein and Its World ......................................................................................................... 38
  2.3 Das Man as a Structural and a Normative Notion ............................................................. 51
  2.4 Authenticity and Inauthenticity as Structural and Normative Notions ....................... 65
  2.5 Dasein and Death ............................................................................................................. 70
  2.6 Alternative Authenticities ................................................................................................. 76
  2.7 Throwness and Projection ................................................................................................. 87

CHAPTER 3: AUTHENTICITY AND NORMATIVITY .................................................................. 97
  3.1 The Problem of Subjectivity ............................................................................................. 97
  3.2 Egoism and Utilitarianism ............................................................................................... 99
  3.3 Kantian Ethics ................................................................................................................ 106
  3.4 Transition to Virtue ........................................................................................................ 118
  3.5 Authenticity .................................................................................................................. 120
  3.6 Virtue Freed from the Subject/Object Model ................................................................. 130
  3.7 Naturalism .................................................................................................................... 144

CHAPTER 4: HERMENEUTICS AND PRACTICAL WISDOM ...................................................... 168
  4.1 Gadamer and Heidegger .................................................................................................. 168
  4.2 The Ontological Turn in Hermeneutics ............................................................................ 171
  4.3 Episteme, Techne, and Phronesis ................................................................................... 178
  4.4 Prejudices and the Fusion of Horizons ......................................................................... 188
  4.5 Dialogue and the I-Thou Encounter ........................................................... ........................ 199
  4.6 Dialogue and the Priority of the Question ................................................................. 207
  4.7 The Fusion of Horizons .............................................................................................. 214
  4.8 Phronesis and Experience ............................................................................................ 220

CHAPTER 5: THE CRITIQUE OF HORIZONS ......................................................................... 227
  5.1 Hopelessly Ideal? .......................................................................................................... 227
  5.2 The Kantian Critique ..................................................................................................... 229
  5.3 The Traditionalist View ............................................................................................... 238
  5.4 The Pragmatist View ................................................................................................... 245
  5.5 From Heidegger to Gadamer and Back to Plato ......................................................... 256

CHAPTER 6: CAN THERE BE A HEIDEGGERIAN VIRTUOUS AGENT? .............................. 263
6.1 Authenticity and Virtue: Some Problems ....................................................... 263
6.2 Taylor’s Hermeneutics of the Good ................................................................. 273
6.3 Why We Still Need the Virtues ........................................................................ 288
6.4 Transcendental Courage .................................................................................. 290
6.5 Transcendental Temperance ............................................................................. 295
6.6 Transcendence, Immanence, and the Fusion of Horizons ................................. 306
6.7 Open-mindedness as a Hermeneutical Virtue .................................................... 313
6.8 Conclusion ........................................................................................................ 315

BIBLIOGRAPHY ...................................................................................................... 317
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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Contingency Objection

The latter half of the 20th century witnessed a revival of interest within mainstream moral philosophy in a model of ethical theory and enquiry that takes its inspiration from classical philosophy, particularly Aristotle. “Virtue ethics,” as it has come to be generally known, takes as its fundamental notion of conception of what sort of life is a well-lived one, and what kinds of dispositions and character traits would make their possessors good qua human being, namely the virtues. This was perhaps the dominant approach to ethical questions until the Enlightenment, when radical shifts in the conception of the human self and the world caused it to fall out of favor, at least in secular philosophy. And so after several hundred years in which moral philosophy has been predominantly conceived within consequentialist or deontological frameworks, the development and defense of the virtue approach to ethics has had to maintain itself in response to some deeply rooted preconceptions not only about what moral philosophy is supposed to be, but also about the nature of the moral agent and its relation to the world.

To sketch the picture for the moment in broad and admittedly overly simple strokes, deontology attempts to articulate an account of the rules and principles that underlie right action as such, irrespective of the results of the action or the character of
the agent. The virtue ethicist, by contrast, holds that we cannot specify which actions would be called for in a particular situation independently of the virtuous person’s special perception of that situation’s demands. Reliance on rules and principles, indeed, is a sign that one has not acquired the sensitivity to these demands that characterizes the possession of the virtues. Consequentialists attempt to identify some end that is to be brought about by our actions, something that is objectively recognizable and universal across all people such as maximal pleasure, preference-satisfaction, or simply “value.” Right actions are ones that best realize this end in the states of affairs that issue from them. The virtue ethicist maintains that the recognition of an end as valuable or to-be-realized, much less the sort of supposed calculative reasoning from the effects of possible actions with respect to that end to objective moral judgment, is not possible apart from the virtuous life itself. So pleasures or preferences are only “good” by being the pleasures or preferences of a virtuous person, e.g., and good states of affairs in general must make reference to the well-lived life, either by being constituents of such a life or recognizable only by someone living well.

Again, these so-called positions – both the virtue ethicist’s and her rivals’ – are, of course, quite reductive and not at all indicative of the very wide spectrum of views; but for the time being it’s enough if they can indicate an important and difficult feature of many articulations of a virtue theory, what we will be calling the historicity and contingency of the virtues. In short, the primacy of character in virtue ethics often gets taken to mean that knowing and doing the “right thing” in each circumstance is only possible from within a historically-affected and contingent horizon that has already
shaped our character prior to reflecting on ethical issues, including the contours of virtuous character itself. To some extent at least, one has to be well disposed already not just in order to develop a virtuous character, but to be able to successfully engage in the enquiry into how to live in the first place. Aristotle himself famously said so in the *Nicomachean Ethics*: “Anyone who is going to be a competent student in the spheres of what is noble and what is just...must be brought up well in his habits.”¹ A virtue indicates a fundamental kind of orientation to the self and the world, and it is only out of this orientation that the enquiry into what is worthwhile can take place; thus, we must already have a background understanding of what is worthwhile for the enquiry to proceed in the right direction. Moreover, the enquiry can only result in an account that is given “sketchily and in outline,”² which is to say that it doesn’t provide answers to the questions of how to live so much as refine an existing practical capacity to do the appropriate thing at the appropriate time in the appropriate way.

This background understanding, finally, cannot be self-given or acquired from scratch, as it were, but is the result of a combination of factors outside one’s control – family, upbringing, culture, society, and even things like genetic disposition. So if one is courageous, one is going to perceive the goods involved in exercising caution has having a certain status relative to the goods that involve a certain degree of risk-taking, and the way one perceives these goods will depend on disposition one has already acquired –


² NE 1095b
whether one is already courageous. And this is not, ultimately, something for which the courageous person can take full credit, but is a product of contingent circumstances beyond her control.

This stands in stark contrast to the aim of modern moral theories to identify and justify a conception of the “right thing to do” from a universal perspective, independent, at least in principle, of historically contingent frameworks, and independent of whatever character one has happened to have developed. For a variety of reasons we will shortly explore, such an aim seems to have a self-evident desirability to it such that a theory that denies it, however much plausibility it would otherwise enjoy, would represent a failure to realize, or at least aspire to, a preeminent philosophical ideal.

We have introduced the issue that will be the theme of this dissertation in rather stark and generalized terms in order to allow the problem at stake for virtue ethics to stand in relief before we attempt to articulate a substantial account of virtue or frame the issue of historical and contingency in a way that can respond to the objections that arise. The main one, which we will call, following Solomon, the “contingency objection” to virtue ethics, has many facets which we will draw out in section 1.2, but the basic idea is that the contingency of certain factors necessary for good moral judgment and behavior seems to undermine the special nature of the moral as something that transcends our particular, conditioned horizons. Moral demands, it is

commonly thought, consist of obligations and restrictions on any person’s behavior: something that gives anyone a reason to act or refrain from acting and thus something for which all humans as such can be held responsible. For this to be the case, they have to be capable of being recognized and adhered to regardless of contingent conditions such as one’s upbringing, inherited dispositions, culture, tradition, and history. The fact that this is apparently not the case for an ethics based in the virtues, at least as we characterized it above, should make us wary of it as a fundamental account of morality.

In particular, if good or right judgment and behavior depends upon having the right kinds of dispositions towards thought and action, and these dispositions are not definable from a perspective independent of the contingent frameworks and historical narratives within which one’s dispositions are already acquired, then it seems that virtue ethics entails one or more of several unappealing consequences. First, we can accept a strong relativism about moral values, maintaining that there really is no truth about how one ought to live as such. There is at best the truth about how I or we ought to live given the set of conceptions I or we happen to have. And so it is “true” that given A’s set of conceptions about what kinds of ends are worthwhile, etc., she would be acting well in doing X. But it is just as “true” that given B’s alternative conceptions, he would be acting badly in doing X in the same circumstances. And both A and B would be right in making a negative judgment about the other’s actions, if there is no perspective independent of A and B’s frameworks from which to evaluate their actions and thus adjudicate their dispute. An alternative to relativism might be some kind of elitism according to which I can reasonably maintain that my behavior and conceptions of how
one ought to live are objectively true, but deny both that I can or should be able to justify that to anyone, particularly to someone without the acquired capacities to recognize it, and that these capacities are available to all.\(^4\)

While these sorts of views — relativism and elitism — are often espoused by those outside mainstream philosophy (as we who regularly teach undergraduates well know), they have long been taken by philosophers as reason to reject a theory that entails them. Why is this? There are numerous explanations that refer to certain intellectual developments and presuppositions, but at this point rather than drawing those out we can briefly note how certain aspects of the modern social predicament seem to call us to the task of rigorously defending the moral way of life in the face of unprecedented challenges. As we will discuss further in the next section, in an age characterized by dramatically increased globalization, contact between different cultures, traditions and ways of life, the weakening of traditional norms and social structures, and other such facets of modernity, there is a palpable urgency to finding ways of addressing the kinds of conflicts and challenges that arise in ways that avoid either imperialistic impositions of one group’s views on another or turning a blind eye to what strikes us as obvious injustices.

\(^4\) If we add to this the idea that living well also requires the provision of certain contingent external goods such as health, wealth, social status, etc., then we have a view that seems close to the one that has often been attributed to Aristotle, rightly or wrongly. See, for instance, Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), chapter 3, and our discussion of him below.
The witness of the past century’s horrors, however, elicits both a skepticism about any kind of universality to morality, at least at the epistemic level (if moral rules really are universal, how could so many people have gone so terribly wrong?), and yet a pressing need to pass judgment, both to honor the victims (what happened really was evil), and to provide the tools that will ensure nothing like that happens again.

According to the contingency objection, virtue ethics can neither respond adequately to the rising skepticism, nor provide the needed explanatory and preventive tools. So long as we see our own thought and behavior as the product of our own contingent social horizons, it might be thought, there appears to be no reason as such to call into question one’s perspective rather than simply retreat into the assured safety of one’s own established ways of life.

To make things worse, as historical narratives become increasingly intertwined, as traditions and cultural practices lose their authority and robustness, and as we become more and more individualized, the historical frameworks that orient our conceptions of what it means to live well give way to personal preferences, which makes it increasingly difficult to find any ground for ethical judgment and critique that’s non-arbitrary. And so there are fewer ways of navigating a world in which new technologies, scientific and medical developments, the globalization of the market, and so forth, issue greater and more urgent summons to our moral consciousnesses. We feel more and more a sense of “homelessness,” as Heidegger likes to say: the condition in which secure normative footholds from which to successfully navigate the world are nowhere to be found.
We have been trying to motivate the significance of the issue of contingency and historicity to the viability of an ethics of virtue by drawing out some possible – and deeply problematic – implications of this (as we are supposing) core feature. In short, virtue ethics often seems ill-equipped to respond to the ethical challenges of our modern age: better-suited, perhaps, to an earlier era in which the kinds of predicaments described above were not so prevalent.

We contend that this is not the case. On the contrary, we shall argue throughout this dissertation that the kinds of worries we have been considering, and will develop further below, arise out of a misguided notion of what philosophical ethics can or should be, which is in turn rooted in a deeply problematic conception of the human being, its relation to other people, to the world and to its own conditioned horizons. This conception is, in some way or another, that of the subject disengaged from the world in such a way that it becomes a kind of detached, disinterested observer; and that this perspective is the only one from which valid moral claims may be made or substantive frameworks critiqued. An ethics that presupposes such a conception might give the appearance of having been able to avoid problems like the ones we raised, and from such a perspective the contingency objection to virtue ethics would certainly have force. If it’s true, so the thought goes, that the disengaged, disinterested perspective is not possible, then either there are no truths about how one should live, or it’s merely a matter of accident or good fortune that we have access to them. The task of most modern moral philosophers has thus been the attempt to determine and justify exactly what the disengaged perspective is and what it reveals about how we should live. In
this way they hope to provide the basis from which we can supply objectively justified answers to the kinds of problems that arise in the modern predicament.  

We will argue that this task cannot be made good, but that the contingency objection only applies when one continues to maintain that the disengaged, unconditioned perspective is the *ideal*, and the only one from which non-arbitrary or non-chauvinistic moral claims can be made and substantive frameworks critiqued. So long as our social and historically conditioned frameworks continue to be seen merely as *limitations* on our ability to effectively engage the modern predicament, our only options might seem to be to stubbornly continue with the modern project of morality, or bite the relativism/elitism bullet and all that it entails. In the first case, the conditioned background remains unacknowledged, and thus unable to be critiqued and transformed; in the second case, it is acknowledged, but there is no non-pragmatic reason to engage in critique or transformation. The alternative picture that we will be defending considers our conditioned horizons as a *precondition* of the possibility for genuine dialogue and self-critique.

This is a picture that takes inspiration from the thought of Martin Heidegger and his student, Hans-Georg Gadamer. As we will discuss in the following chapters, they maintain that the engaged embeddedness in conditioned horizons is not a merely

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5 Of course, Hume and his heirs deny that there are truths of morality in a strong metaethical sense: moral claims are not factual claims but expressions of affective states. But in the sense I’m talking about it, it might be an empirical fact that, say, all normal people have negative responses to murder, so it’s true that murder is wrong; or all people desire pleasure, so it’s true that actions that promote pleasure are right, etc.
possible (much less deficient) mode of an essentially independent subject, but rather is our inescapably fundamental way of being. Our being is, moreover, finite and temporal, meaning we are constantly projecting an understanding of ourselves and the world out of some given but shared horizon. Once we can secure the proper ontological foundations of our engagement in the world, we can see that the modern moral project obscures and diminishes the possibilities for critique and transformation of our horizons by failing to understand what they are and how they shape our understanding. Moreover, we can come to see that our horizons are never merely given: they are constantly being shaped, revised, and modified. Understanding how this happens gives us greater lucidity into the process, and thus gives us the kind of ownership of our lives that characterizes authenticity. Finally, we will argue that authenticity entails the recognition that we are not solipsistic beings whose task is to “know” and “act on” an essentially detached “world,” but rather beings whose sense of agency and identity are bound up with a world of significance, including other people; that our understanding of this significance is a continually unfolding, dialogical and practical interpretation; and that these features raise the demand of an open and critical engagement with one’s heritage, society, and community.

Something along these lines is not only compatible with, but also the best way to understand virtue, or so we will suggest. Both Heidegger and Gadamer were deeply engaged with classical philosophy throughout their careers, and so it should come as no surprise that there is much to be gained from a consideration of their thought in relation to that of contemporary virtue ethicists. This is particularly true in so far as virtue
ethicists are in thrall to some of the mistaken ontological and epistemological presumptions that Heidegger and Gadamer sought to overcome. I intend to explore the ways in which their contributions can shape an approach to virtue ethics in which the contingency of our conditioned horizons in which we engage ethically in the world is no longer an objection, but, if I may, a virtue of the approach.

Having outlined the problem that concerns us and the broad aims of this project, we will next articulate in greater detail the conception of virtue ethics and the possible problems introduced above. In chapter 2, we will give an interpretation of Heidegger’s thought, focusing primarily on Being and Time and the account of authenticity, which will prepare us to consider how it bears on moral philosophy, both critically and constructively, in chapter 3. Chapters 4 and 5 will engage Gadamer’s hermeneutics in the challenge of showing how the horizons out of which we project an understanding of how to live are shaped and transformed in such a way as to lead to greater practical knowledge of the good in human life. In the final chapter, we will consider how this account bears on an ethics centered on the virtues. Engaging and expanding on the thought of Charles Taylor, we shall suggest that the account of authenticity provides a way of articulating a transcendent level of discourse about the virtues that is neither disengaged from, nor merely subject to the particularized discourse that takes place at the immanent level of cultures, practices and traditions, but rather takes the form of a hermeneutical dialogue between a conception of the virtues that emerges out of the ontological account of the authentic, dialogical self and the more substantive conceptions that emerge in our living practical engagements.
1.2 Historicity, Contingency, and Virtue

Of the many varieties and permutations of ethical theory that have been described as “virtue ethics,” the ones we will be most interested in, as we indicated at the outset, are those that adhere to a broadly Aristotelian framework. According to the *Nicomachean Ethics*, all human activities and projects aim at some final end or chief good: *eudaimonia*. Though there is no exact translation for this, commonly suggested terms like “happiness,” “flourishing,” “living well and faring well” and “well-being” point us to the basic idea, that of living a successful life *qua* human being. As such, *eudaimonia* is a teleological notion, having to do with the proper end of the thing in question. This means that it bears a structural parallel to notions like being a good watch *qua* watch, being a good wolf *qua* wolf, being a good citizen *qua* citizen. In each of these cases, the concepts “watch,” “wolf,” and “citizen” bear in them conceptions of what it is that watches, wolves and citizens characteristically do; and so a good or successful watch, wolf and citizen is one that does these things well. The virtues of a watch, wolf, or citizen are those characteristics it needs to carry out its end well, such as accuracy, cooperation in hunting, and a certain kind of participation in the life of the polis, respectively. Following this pattern, Aristotle attempts to elucidate what it is that humans as such characteristically do, and from there give an account of the conditions for successfully engaging in that characteristic activity.
Once we have identified the human function or end (which Aristotle defines as “an activity of soul that follows or implies a rational principle”), and the virtues necessary to attain this end (courage, justice, temperance and practical wisdom are his chief ones according to the traditional interpretation), we can then give a derivative account of right action as, roughly, the sort of thing a courageous, just, temperate and practically wise person would do in the circumstance. The virtuous person does the appropriate thing at the appropriate time in the appropriate way – appropriate, that is, to the end of a well-lived life as a whole. She will know what ends and actions are noble, what frivolous, what shameful, and how to pursue the noble ends nobly. Moreover, a virtue is a character trait or disposition that refers to the shape of one’s whole life, not just one’s actions. So the virtuous person will also have the appropriate affective responses to the situation: she will feel pleasure at the appropriate time in the appropriate way, saddened, indignant, joyful, angry, remorseful, etc. And if one truly possesses the virtues, one will judge, feel and act well reliably and for the right reasons, not intermittently or accidently.

This, I hope, is a relatively unproblematic summary of Aristotle’s general view, one that displays some basic features most virtue ethicists will want to defend. What’s often disturbing from the point of view of modern ethics is the vagueness and apparent imprecision of this account, which, to many minds, points to the need to find a basis for

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6 NE 1098a.

7 For more on this, see Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), chapter 1.
notions like appropriateness outside of the notion of the virtuous character. According to the Aristotelian, this cannot be done, or at least not in any fundamental, determinate sense. At some point we have to acknowledge the importance of historically-conditioned frameworks of significance to the virtuous life in both providing the content to the conceptions of virtues, ends, and appropriateness, and shaping one’s character in a way that enables a person to both perceive the good and respond accordingly.

First, consider this with respect to the development of a virtuous disposition. The acquiring of any disposition, as we now know, is significantly affected by the kind of environment in which one is raised long before one develops a robust reflective self-awareness. To develop a virtuous disposition, then, one must already be, as it were, on the right track. For instance, one must have models of virtuous behavior to emulate, which requires one already has a sense of who the models are. In the earliest stages, one’s models are one’s caregivers, and the models continue to be people that one has not “chosen” to emulate, or at least not until long after important character traits have been developed. Thus if one’s early model is a white supremacist or profligate, this is certainly going to have a significant influence on how one thinks about and acts towards people of other races, or how one thinks about and acts on one’s appetites. Likewise, to

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8 This is, of course, only typical, and doesn’t deny the possibility of a kind of ‘conversion’ experience that can radically transform one’s developed disposition. More challenging cases involve a transformation that is less dramatic than a radical conversion, but much more gradual, piecemeal, and yet no less profound when one compares the kind of person one has become to the person one was, which may appear to have been thoroughly rotten. However, I don’t think that these phenomena gainsay Aristotle’s more general point that there’s never a moment when we engage in ethical thought and practice unaffected by our acquired dispositions, and that these dispositions will have a profound, even if not determinative effect on how we do so.
develop the right kinds of affective responses requires that one already be disposed to some extent to feel a certain way in certain circumstances. Thus young children who take pleasure in causing pain to animals typically have a hard time developing into adults that express the appropriate sympathy to other people’s pain.  

The use of such examples to differentiate between the development of virtuous and non-virtuous character presumes (like Aristotle did of his audience) agreement that certain ways of thought and behavior regarding race, the appetites, the pain of others, etc., are appropriate and others inappropriate. So in the very act of trying to spell out a conception of the virtues, we are already presuming a shared orientation towards appropriate thought and behavior, at least to a certain extent; and this has always been the case. I can reasonably presume that my present audience will agree that the very raising of the question, to paraphrase Anscombe, of whether torturing animals, securing certain unique advantages for people solely on the basis of their skin color, or the execution of the innocent might be a good thing shows a corrupt mind. In the past sixty years or so it has been quite safe and unproblematic – and commonplace – to use Hitler as a paradigm of a bad person, the Holocaust as the paradigmatically awful event, and certain acts like rape as paradigms of wrong behavior. In this way benchmarks are set for a viable moral theory: it must be able to demonstrate why such things are wrong and deplorable. But what is interesting is the apparent fact that we need such


paradigms in order to orient moral enquiry. The truth of this would support the Aristotelian view that we can only engage in moral enquiry by having acquired the right kinds of conceptual frameworks according to which we would agree that of course Hitler, the Holocaust, and rape are undeniably bad, and recognize the denier of such commitments as standing outside the realm of normal, rational moral discourse.

The defender of modern morality need not deny this point; they need only to show how our common understandings derive from sources that are independent of the understandings themselves. It may be that certain aspects of our cognitive faculties entail the wrongness of these kinds of things; or that they are incompatible with the realization of universal ends like the freedom from pain or respect for dignity. According to such a perspective, the fact that we share an understanding of certain behaviors as paradigmatically good or bad points ultimately beyond such shared frameworks of significance to certain universal principles that underlie them. Our task is to identify and elucidate these underlying principles to better serve us in cases in which there isn’t general agreement, to justify the generally accepted views against those (from another culture or a fringe segment of society, say) who might disagree, or to guide our practical reasoning in cases of uncertainty.

To put this point in the language of the virtues, the claim might be that the conditions for a virtuous life are knowable from outside the virtuous person's perspective; the virtuous person is the one who has internalized these conditions in such a way that she can’t help but judge, act and feel in ways that embody them. This is
how Mill describes virtue in chapter 4 of *Utilitarianism*, for instance.\textsuperscript{11} Having given what he took to be an entirely disinterested, empirical account of the principle of morality as the greatest happiness principle (actions are right in so far as they promote the greatest happiness for the greatest number, where happiness is defined as pleasure and the absence of pain), he goes on to suppose that it is possible to internalize this principle to the extent that virtuous action – action that adheres to this principle – becomes a part of happiness rather than a means to it. But the important point is that one need not already be virtuous to recognize the validity of the principle of morality.

Kant makes a similar claim with regard to the relation between virtue and moral duty. “Virtue,” he claims in the *Tugendlehre*, “is…the moral strength of a human being’s will in fulfilling his duty, a moral constraint through his own lawgiving reason, insofar as this constitutes itself in an authority executing the law.”\textsuperscript{12} The “duties of virtue” have to do with the sorts of ends that a person of good will would adopt, which is to say they are the ends any rational person could consistently will in an exercise of unconstrained practical reason. Virtue, as a disposition of the will, is a capacity to restrain one’s tendency to allow appetites and inclinations distract the will from the commands of reason. But then this rests on the claim that one’s duties are themselves derivable from a source independent of one’s character, namely the conditions of the free exercise of pure practical reason. Such is the disconnect between the possession of


virtue and the capacity to rationally discern one’s duty that Kant is able to say that “lack of virtue...can indeed coexist with the best will,”\(^\text{13}\) so long as there aren’t any temptations pulling the will away from reason’s command. Thus, the kinds of things that a virtuous person would or would not do can and should be specified and justified in a way that abstracts from one’s disposition to respond to circumstances in certain ways.\(^\text{14}\)

The kind of virtue ethics that we are considering here – including, I think, Aristotle’s view – disputes these models in which the conditions of the virtuous life can be identified and justified independent of the virtuous life itself. We will mention a few influential examples from recent years. Alasdair MacIntyre defines the virtues as those character traits necessary to successfully engage in practices, to sustain one in the quest for the good that provides narrative unity to a life, and to carry forward the traditions within which this quest and the participation in practices must take place.\(^\text{15}\) But these three facets of human life involve conceptions of ends, goods, and standards \textit{internal} to themselves. Thus it is only \textit{within} the context of practices and traditions that we are able to recognize the kinds of ends and goods involved and what kind life the virtues –

\[^{13}\text{Kant, } \textit{Metaphysics of Morals}, 6:408.\]

\[^{14}\text{Kant, in fact, channeling the Stoics, hammers home this point by adding that virtue doesn’t simply guard against the temptations of affect, but must govern the passions, subordinating them to the commands of reason alone. Due to the susceptibility of the passions to cloud our judgment, we cannot trust the deliverances of feeling and desire apart from pure, unadulterated reason’s endorsement. So virtue isn’t so much having the right kinds of passions as it is the strength to let reason, not the passions, govern the will. See Kant, } \textit{Metaphysics of Morals}, 6:408.\]

\[^{15}\text{See Alasdair MacIntyre, } \textit{After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory}, 2\textsuperscript{nd} ed. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), chapters 14-15.\]
as those characteristics needed to achieve these ends and goods – enable. But since the virtues are already necessary to recognize and extend the conception of these ends and goods, there is a certain kind of circularity to this picture.\(^\text{16}\)

John McDowell, in similar fashion, has argued that the question of “how one should live” must be approached from the “inside out,” as opposed to the “outside in” approach of modern moral theories.\(^\text{17}\) A virtue, according to his characterization, is a special sensitivity to the sort of behavior the situation calls for; and what this sensitivity detects exhausts the virtuous person’s reasons for acting. That is, it “silences” all other reasons such that they have no influence on the will. So a person who acts otherwise than the virtuous person would does not share that sensitivity, which is to say she doesn’t perceive the situation in the same way that the virtuous person does. If this is the case, then the “deductive paradigm” model of practical reason presumed by modern moral theories cannot apply. This paradigm presumes that rational behavior proceeds according to a practical syllogism in which there a universal principle that serves as the major premise, knowledge of the particular situation as the minor premise, and a reason for action as the conclusion; i.e., it follows codifiable rules. If this were the case, then certainly we would want to try to discern the kinds of universal principles and rules that underlie the behavior of virtuous persons; and if we could do so, then we would have an external standard for right behavior that does not depend on

\(^{16}\) As well will see in chapter 4, this is not a vicious circularity, but can best be characterized as a hermeneutical one.

the virtuous person’s particular sensibilities or any other contingent factor. But

McDowell, drawing upon Wittgenstein’s arguments on rule-following, maintains that the deductive paradigm is an illusion, an “inability to endure the vertigo” induced by the idea that the virtuous person’s sensitivity to reasons depends not upon universal principles but on “the whirl of organism Wittgenstein calls ‘forms of life’. ”

Therefore:

It is highly implausible that all the concerns which motivate virtuous actions are intelligible, one by one, independently of appreciating a virtuous person’s distinctive way of seeing situations...We do not fully understand a virtuous person’s actions – we do not see the consistency in them – unless we can supplement the core explanations with a grasp of his conception of how to live...The rationality of virtue, then, is not demonstrable from an external standpoint...It is only an illusion that our paradigm of reason, deductive argument, has its rationality discernible from a standpoint not necessarily located within the practice itself.

Bernard Williams, in a somewhat more skeptical tone, argues that by putting substantive ethical dispositions into the content of the self, the Aristotelian effectively rejects the possibility that there is a view “outside” of one’s acquired dispositions that can tell us anything about how to live:

I am, at the time of mature reflection, what I have become, and my reflection, even if it is about my dispositions, must at the same time be expressive of them. I think about ethical and other goods from an ethical point to view that I have already acquired and that is part of what I am. In thinking about ethical and other goods, the agent thinks from a point of view that already places those

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18 McDowell, “Virtue and Reason,” 150. The notion that “vertigo” in the face of the loss of universal foundations leads us to take refuge in absolutes like the deductive paradigm parallels almost exactly Heidegger’s claim that the threat of angst leads one to take refuge in the tranquility of das Man, which we will discuss in chapter 2.

goods, in general terms, in relation to one another and gives a special significance to ethical goods.  

This means that the kinds answers to the question of how one should live cannot be given to each person, as the modern philosopher thinks; it can only, at best, be given for each person. That is, if I am already habituated into an ethical outlook, then my practical reason will have been shaped accordingly; if I am not habituated into that outlook, then I won’t understand the force of the practical considerations that move the person within that outlook. The best I can say is that my answer to the question of how one should live reflects the other person’s “real interests,” even if she does not understand that.

We will offer our own arguments for similar sorts of claims in the following chapters; presently we are concerned to capture through these examples a sense of what must be reckoned with if the claims of Aristotelian virtue ethics, at least as people like MacIntyre, McDowell and Williams represent it, are going to orient moral enquiry. First, these claims may strike us as, at best, archaic. With the development of modernity came the loss of the metaphysical presuppositions and cultural conditions

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21 Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 39-40. Williams goes on to question whether, in the absence of Aristotle’s metaphysical teleology (see below), we can have any foundation from which to make even the latter sort of claim. As he puts it, “We understand...that the agent’s perspective is only one of the many that are equally compatible with human nature, all open to various conflicts within themselves and with other cultural aims” (Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 52). McDowell has elsewhere criticized William’s representation of Aristotle here as having a “felt need for foundations” as a “historical monstrosity,” and I think he’s right (see John McDowell, “Two Sorts of Naturalism,” in *Virtues and Reasons*, ed. R. Hursthouse, G. Lawrence and W. Quinn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 177). But Williams wanted to draw attention to the aspects of Aristotle’s thought that might sound particularly uneasy to modern ears, which is partly what I’m trying to do here as well.
that would make these sorts of views relatively unproblematic. Metaphysically, the
picture of the teleologically structured cosmos meant that we could make sense of the
notion that all things, including human life, have a proper end, which thus infuses
normativity into the very fabric of the universe. There’s no need to attempt to deduce
normativity from subjective features of specifically human life (desires, feelings, the
structures of practical rationality,\(^{22}\) etc.) since we, like everything else, have our proper
way of being, which obtains regardless of any particular person’s capacity to recognize
it. And this notion received even stronger support from its association with the
purposes of a God that created and structured this universe. The scientific and religious
revolutions of modernity seemed to challenge this picture, presenting us instead with a
picture according to which either there is no normative structure inherent in the
universe (a possible consequence of the revolutions of Galileo, Newton, etc.), or there is
such a structure, but due to the inherent fallenness of human nature it cannot be
discerned apart from the special revelation of that divinity, which is not necessarily
afforded to everyone (the claim of the Protestant objectors to the Roman view of
natural reason).

Along with – and intimately related to – these revolutions came a changing
conception of the self and its relation to the “world of significance.”\(^ {23}\) We can only go

\(^{22}\) With respect to structures of rationality, I mean “specifically human” in contrast to the
features of the “objective” empirical world, not in a way that implies that the structures of rationality
themselves are limited to humans, which Kant, to whom I’m alluding, denied.

\(^{23}\) The issue of what “world” means will be a significant theme later on, but here we need only to
refer to the obvious fact that aspects of the milieu in which we live our lives matter to us. Whether they
matter because we subjectively project meaning, because we discern human-independent value, or for
into the minutest of details here, but one of the most significant impacts had to do with what came to be seen as the reflective self’s ideal disengagement from its world. Descartes’ cogito argument positioned the subject as, in its most raw essential state, disengaged from any presuppositions about the world whatsoever. Thus any legitimacy to our beliefs and modes of engagement had to be grounded upon what such a radically disengaged subject could affirm. Empiricists, while rejecting Descartes’ rationalist foundations, nevertheless continued to maintain that there was a special mode of access that the subject has to the world that prescinds from metaphysical presuppositions tout court, and that this access serves as a kind of ideal foundation for any further claims I can make about the world. In both cases, nothing “normative” can be affirmed from the point of view of such a radically disengaged subject. The only thing that serves as the foundation of our knowledge is some non-normative fact: the fact that “I exist,” or certain bare facts that I empirically discern (primary properties or sense data, for instance).25

some other reason (as we will argue) is not important at this point, but it will be crucial to the later arguments.

24 Some of the best accounts of the ways in which the revolutions of modernity significantly altered this conception include Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989) and The Ethics of Authenticity (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991); MacIntyre’s After Virtue and Whose Justice? Which Rationality? (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988); Richard Rorty, Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979); among many others. These will all be a focus of discussion later chapters.

25 Kant, of course, rejects both the empiricist view that we can have any kind of access to the world that isn’t structured by the transcendental categories of thought as well as the possibility of Descartes’ quasi-empirical perception of the self, but continues to maintain that normativity itself must be grounded in something essentially non-normative, namely the structures of pure practical reason, even if we abstain from calling this a “fact.” So what we suggest follows about the fundamental distinction between the conditioned and unconditioned would still obtain in his case.
What follows, then, is a sharp distinction between the conditioned and the unconditioned with respect to the kinds of normative claims I am legitimately allowed to make. Conditional claims – the ones that presuppose a particular normative framework – are only generally valid if that framework itself can be endorsed on unconditional grounds, grounds whose justification lies outside of any such framework whatsoever. Otherwise, conditional judgments and claims that I make have no normative force, either proscriptively or evaluatively, with regard to other people’s lives and behavior, except in the case that they have subsumed themselves under the same normative frameworks. Since the claims of the virtuous person are *ipso facto* (according to the accounts above) only valid from *within* a conditioned framework, they cannot claim legitimacy unless they are capable of justification from a perspective outside of that (and any) framework; and this is just what the Aristotelian virtue ethicist denies is possible. Therefore, either we must accept that normative claims *have* no independent legitimacy, or we have to reject the view that the virtuous person’s deliverances represent any kind of standard that could apply beyond her particular conditioned perspective. In other words, according to the picture of the relation between self and world that has emerged in modernity, normativity is: (A) an arbitrary projection of certain aspects the disengaged self on the non-normative, neutral world; (B) the

\[26\] Even in these cases, it is typically maintained that for claims that I make to have any force for another person by virtue of sharing some normative framework, this framework must be one under which the other has *voluntarily* subsumed themselves. For instance, we might both submit ourselves to the authority of a religious tradition or a club, which, in doing so, involves accepting the force of the normative claims made therein. But that force remains contingent on our continuing to adhere within that system, and for the claims made therein to be otherwise than coercive, we must be free to withdraw our allegiance if we so choose. See Philippa Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” In *Virtues and Vices* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1978).
contingent (at least from the human perspective) revelation of normative structures to a select, privileged few; or (C) an aspect of the world (in the broadest sense that may include the non-natural) that can only be discerned from a perspective that prescinds from any presuppositions about normativity whatsoever. (C) is obviously incompatible with the virtue ethicist’s perspective; yet most virtue ethicists will reject (A) and (B) as well.

What this means is that if virtue ethics is going to succeed as a viable way of thinking about the way norms and values structure and make claims on our lives, it has to rest on a conception of the self and its relation to the world that resists certain trappings of modernity. It has to reject the supposition that the position of the disengaged, unconditioned subject provides the benchmark for normative validity, for it is just this prejudice that entails the conclusion that the virtue ethicist is committed either to relativism or elitism. While there are many ways in which philosophers have tried to challenge this prejudice, the thought of Heidegger and Gadamer, as I mentioned above, provides a promising avenue that has received scant attention among Anglo-American philosophers.

However, despite what we will argue, following Heidegger, have been some problematic ontological foundations in the development of modern ethics, many of its claims have been a response and contribution to a very real and consequential set of shared cultural phenomena that have irrevocably changed the landscape in which ethical enquiries must proceed from that in which virtue ethics originally had its home.
The expansion of technology and the institution of free-market capitalism and liberal democracy are two of the most obvious. As we have learned from Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and many others, these have all in various ways dislodged the individual from its traditional sources of identity and meaning and contributed to a growing sense of homelessness and alienation that limits our capacities to effectively manage the challenges they bring. Yet they have also raised our consciousness of otherness and alterity, and brought a new urgency to the need to honor and respect the dignity of the individual and her capacity for self-determination. This is partly why the appearance of elitism in virtue ethics is so disconcerting.

But it is also why relativism should strike us as equally disconcerting. As the world shrinks, the kinds of frameworks to which our norms and perceptions of value are thought to be relative become less identifiable with robust traditions and coherent cultural narratives and more with the whims of individual fancy. This is often seen as liberating, allowing the individual to determine her own possibilities independent of the hegemony of traditional authorities. And certainly this is so if the authorities embody a certain kind of intransient dogmatism and take a dictatorial stance that allows no room for individual expression. But when this liberation slides into subjectivism and relativism (to echo Taylor’s phrase) in the context of liberal modernity, what was once the hegemony of traditions and cultural forms over the life of the individual now

27 One obvious modern-day instance of such an authority is the Third Reich, and so it seems that an appeal to Heidegger, who notoriously endorsed this regime for a short time, would be the wrong place to look for a response to the modern predicament. I will address these worries early in the next chapter.
becomes the hegemony of technology and the market. The traditions and cultures embody in their essences shared conceptions of the good that direct and limit the possibilities of individuals, which also means they direct and limit the ways in which the forces of the market and technology can move. Technological advancement and use and market forces are subsumed under the enveloping context of a shared conception of the human good, and subservient to that. But when conceptions of the good reduce to the contingent perspective of the isolated individual, there is nothing left beyond them to place limits on the impersonal and self-perpetuating forces of markets and technologies themselves. We become, indeed, enslaved to them, and to some extent enslaved to those that wield power to control these forces.  

So we are in the uneasy position in which the good of self-determination and respect for alterity and difference that has attained a preeminent position in modernity has the potential to undermine itself when taken in certain directions. And in some reactionary cases people have attempted to deny these goods their value, as in nationalist movements or religious fundamentalism. The motivation seems to be the thought that the modernist values inevitably degenerate into nihilism: if self-determination, etc., come to be seen as the only or the preeminent values, and if that is

28 The extent to which anyone is able to control these forces, especially outside of a coherent and shared framework, is often greatly exaggerated, probably in a desperate attempt to place blame when things go badly. Heidegger, for instance, focused much of his later work on the problem of technology’s enslaving power, arguing that technology is not a tool available to be wielded by the most powerful will but rather embodies a kind of orientation towards ourselves and the world, one which then structures our possibilities, both those of the “strong” and “weak.” See Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 3-35. We will return to this in the final chapter.
ultimately self-undermining, then nothing of any value is left. So to counteract this trend and preserve not just traditional values, but value itself, we must stalwartly defend our traditional beliefs and ways of life by any means necessary against the forces of modernity that would seek to undermine them.

Fortunately, we have neither succumbed to the reactionary movements nor descended into nihilism (or at least not yet), despite continuing to maintain these modernist ideals. This does not, of course, mean that the threat is not real, and there have been disturbing trends in recent years in both directions. The challenge for virtue ethics, as we shall undertake it, involves explaining and justifying the claim that ethical enquiry and understanding can only take place from a position always already within contingent and historically-conditioned frameworks while avoiding the debilitating slides into relativism and elitism. This involves, for one, finding a way of articulating the values of self-determination, respect for dignity and alterity, and other modern commitments in a way that supports a basic contention that these are goods insofar as they are aspects of a life of virtue. It also involves the problem of how the aspiration to a kind of transcendence of historically-conditioned perspectives that often underlies the promotion of such goods can be reconsidered and revised rather than simply rejected.

29 The journalist Sara Robinson recently compared certain trends in the far-right movement in America with historian Robert Paxton’s analysis of the stages of development of modern fascist regimes, and the results were sobering. See “Fascist America: Are We There Yet?” Campaign For America’s Future, August 6, 2009, http://www.ourfuture.org/blog-entry/2009083205/fascist-america-are-we-there-yet (accessed 2 Oct 2009).
We will argue that Heidegger’s notion of authenticity leads us in the right direction, and that its strong connection to Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* opens the door to the development of an understanding of virtue that takes inspiration from that. Authenticity requires self-constitution and self-ownership, and indeed the concept traces itself to the modernist ideals of freedom and self-determination. But Heidegger’s account places it within an ontology according to which humans are not fundamentally “subjects” distinct from the “world,” but are, as he terms it, being-in-the-world. On this account, authenticity requires not the distancing of the subject from its inherited forms of life (heritage, culture, tradition, etc.) to determine its own values, create itself, or discern objective principles – but a certain kind of critical engagement with its inherited frameworks. And the possibility and form of such critical engagement will turn out to be, once we have examined Gadamer’s dialogical hermeneutics, a crucial feature of the practical wisdom necessary for a well-lived live and sound moral understanding.

We will be attempting to make explicit what has been implicit to some extent in many influential developments of virtue ethics,30 and which has been entirely ignored in others. And in recent years one Anglo-American philosopher who has tried to make explicit the relevance of Heidegger and Gadamer to ethics has been Charles Taylor, but

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30 Of note among these are MacIntyre and McDowell, each of whom has acknowledged a debt to Gadamer, which would imply a debt to Heidegger as well. However, McDowell has, as far as I know, never mentioned Heidegger, and MacIntyre’s scant references have been universally critical. Each of them, along with many others, have a more direct link to Anscombe, and through her to Wittgenstein. In recent years there have been several explorations of the relation between Wittgenstein and Heidegger as well as Wittgenstein and Gadamer, and though I shall not explore this relationship here, and it’s not implausible to think that there is much to be gained from a dialogue between these two traditions of thought.
Taylor has not been as concerned to show the relevance of their thought to modern Aristotelian virtue ethics. And so even though our interpretations of Heidegger and Gadamer will have much in common with Taylor’s, we hope to extend and develop this interpretation in fresh ways, engaging more directly with the recent debates in virtue ethics. To start, then, we will now turn to a general analysis of Heidegger’s account of authenticity.
CHAPTER 2:
THE STRUCTURE OF AUTHENTICITY

2.1 The Heidegger Problem

Having now displayed the challenge to virtue ethics posed by the claim that all understanding, particularly the practical understanding of how to live well, proceeds from within contingent, historically-conditioned horizons, this chapter will explore and elucidate Heidegger’s account of human ontology with the aim of justifying this claim and explaining what exactly it involves. The relevance of Heidegger’s thought to virtue ethics is not incidental, but is a manifestation of the deep inspiration he took from his readings of Aristotle, particularly leading up to Being and Time. Due to the scope of this present study, we won’t have the space to examine in any great detail his actual writings on Aristotle or how they fed into the account of authentic human life as it took shape in Being and Time, but will remain focused on the content of that text itself and what it has to teach us about human life, which will then orient our own investigations into its relevance for a modern Aristotelian ethics and for the question of ethics more generally. We can say, however, that the inspiration he drew from Aristotle was, in keeping with Heidegger’s hermeneutical procedure, not uncritical, and if we can

consider *Being and Time* to be a kind of development of Aristotelian themes, it’s a development that involves a significant amount of rethinking of some of the foundational ontological commitments in the classical system, some of which we will bring into relief in the course of our interpretations. But with that qualification, the orientation of this chapter will be towards his notion of authenticity, with a view towards drawing a close parallel in chapter 3 between that and the concept of *eudaimonia*, or the well-lived life, that governs thought about the virtues in the Aristotelian tradition. Thus this chapter can be seen as establishing the kinds of preconditions for thinking about ethics in general and virtue in particular, the consequences of which, as we shall see in greater detail in the next chapter, are that many of the objections and alternatives to virtue ethics trade in certain presuppositions about human life, the world, rationality, nature, and the ways these domains interact about which Heidegger’s thought raises some serious doubts.

The aim of the consideration of Heidegger’s thought in this chapter and the next is not to produce any substantive ethical “theory,” although we will offer a development of some concepts central to virtue ethics, and in the last chapter we will consider some substantive ethical implications of the notion of authenticity. Rather, again, the aim is to establish what any substantive understanding of how to live needs to embody with respect to its presuppositions about human life in the most general sense, and what kinds of presuppositions have tended to lead it astray. Nevertheless, some preliminary remarks on the relevance of Heidegger to ethics are in order, since there are both theoretical and, frankly, character issues with which to contend. The character issue is
obvious and notorious: Heidegger was, for a brief time at least, an advocate of National
Socialism – i.e., a Nazi. I won’t bother entering the debate over whether he was really
an overt genocidal fascist, merely a naïve head-in-the-clouds patsy for Nazi ideology,
etc. etc. Since Heidegger’s own life and politics is not our subject, entering into this
debate might lend the false impression that I consider his relevance to ethics to hang on
how closely these features are associated with the wickedness of that ideology and its
regime. Rather, I will assume without discussion that his political views and associations
were, in the strongest sense of the word, deplorable. However, any suggestion that his
judgments and behavior are entailed by his thought needs to be demonstrated; and no
such demonstration is, as far as I know, extant. 32 The great many people who have
ever reason to abjure anything associated with Nazism (Jews, in particular) and who
have nevertheless found Heidegger’s thought illuminating and persuasive gives strong
prima facie testimony to the claim that there is no such entailment. And so I will
associate myself will all reputable Heidegger scholars and students who unequivocally
revile his involvement with the Nazis, while yet finding his philosophical thought to be

32 One recent and notorious attempt to offer such an argument has been Emmanuel Faye’s
monograph, Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy in Light of the Unpublished Seminars
offered us some quite potent additions to the evidence of Heidegger’s own disturbing political views
and his compliancy with even some of the extreme aspects of National Socialist policy. However, he attempts
to demonstrate that the Heidegger’s thought can only be understood as foundation and justification for
National Socialism, and his writings removed from philosophy shelves and restacked in the Nazi history
sections. This isn’t just spurious interpretation; in the words of one reviewer, “we should be wary of any
scholar who would have us believe there is only one dimension to the world,” adding that “[t]he most
dismaying thing about Faye’s book is that, apparently, he wants to deny us [the] freedom” to “read
[Heidegger’s writings] in new ways” (Peter Gordon, “Faye, [etc.]” Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews,
March 12, 2010). The irony of such one-dimensional extremism, to the point of declaring, “Let’s get rid of
these books,” occurring in an attack on a Nazi, is thick.
not only worthy of serious consideration, but manifestly inconsistent with the kind of application he himself gave it for a time. At any rate, once we have completed our study we hope that the results themselves will belie the supposition that Heidegger’s unscrupulous associations render his thought unfit to contribute to an understanding of what it means to live virtuously in the world.

The theoretical challenge involved in considering the contributions of Heidegger’s thought to ethical theory begins with the rather troubling fact that he explicitly denied that his work was a study in ethics. Moreover, the scant attention he pays to the sorts of problems that moral philosophy characteristically deals with are almost wholly negative, involving claims that the traditional concepts employed are misleading and tend to distort and cover over the truth about human existence. He claims in his introduction to Being and Time that most of philosophy, as well as other human enquiries such as theology, science, psychology and, indeed, ethics, have tended proceed according to an inadequate conception of the ontology of their subject matter (BT 37). In order to ground each of the areas of enquiry ontologically, we have to rethink the question of Being in general. And so Heidegger sees his task in Being and Time as one of fundamental ontology, or ontology in the widest sense – an enquiry into “that which determines entities as entities, that on the basis of which [worauffhin] entities are already understood” (BT 26). Only in arriving at a place where the question


of Being has been properly reopened and addressed can we hope to proceed forward with the kinds of ‘ontic’ enquiries into such themes as the right way to act, the kinds of virtues required to live well, and other “ethical” matters. However, not only did Heidegger rarely proceed with such investigations himself, it seems that he continued to hold such investigations to be generally encumbered with distortive, rather than illuminating, presuppositions and procedures, as we shall see in more detail later on.

I would maintain, though, along with several other recent commentators, that all is not lost for the attempt to carry forward the task of developing philosophical ethics once we’ve engaged seriously Heidegger’s thought. For one thing, Heidegger acknowledges in the “Letter on Humanism” – a response to a correspondent’s wish for him to “write an ethics” – that there is an original meaning of the word ethos, one that signifies one’s “abode” or “dwelling place,” and in which “what pertains to man’s

35 Regrettably (to revisit the previous discussion), a case could plausibly be made that some of the material during the early 30’s (such as the notorious Rektoratsrede of 1933) could be considered discourses on ethics, even the virtues, but with unmistakable National Socialist overtones. Again, we hope and maintain that the alternative discourse we shall offer is better Heidegger than Heidegger’s.


essence, and...resides in nearness to him” can appear. According to him, “ethics’ ponders the abode of man,” and so “that thinking which thinks the truth of Being as the primordial element of man, as the one who ek-sists, is in itself the original ethics” (LH 258). That is to say, there is a kind of understanding of human life – the kind advocated in Being and Time and elsewhere – that entails that whenever we are seeking to understand ourselves and the world authentically we are engaging in ethics. He quickly adds, admittedly, that this sort of thinking is really ontology, not ethics in the way it has come to take shape over the course of Western history. But his suggestive remarks should not dissuade us from ethical enquiry, but rather give us a clue as to the kinds of dangers of reduction, artificial compartmentalization, and parochialism to which that sort of enquiry is susceptible. Indeed, as I hope to explicate, the widening of the field of concern in ethics from a narrow concern with “peremptory directives[s] and...rules that say how man...ought to live in a fitting manner” (LH 255) to a concern with the manner of one’s life as a whole has been a defining theme in the revival of virtue ethics. Hence the fruitfulness of a serious engagement with Heidegger’s thought.

In our present concern Heidegger’s thought, particularly in Being in Time, can be especially fruitful, since one way we might describe its overall theme is as a working out of the meaning and implications of Dasein’s “thrownness,” which is the condition of the possibility of having any ethical understanding whatsoever. How and to what extent can such a thrown being have a kind of “ownership” over its life, in the sense that it isn’t

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38 See Charles Scott, The Question of Ethics (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990), 142-147, for an elaboration on Heidegger’s remark here that refers to the classical sources.
simply in thrall to the contingencies of its history, tradition, culture, and other such “givens,” particularly with respect to its understanding of how to live well? How, in other words, can we argue for a positive dimension of thrownness, such that it is not simply the condition of having substantive ethical understanding, but the condition of any kind of transcendence of our contingent frameworks, the kind involved in the quest to revise and develop our understandings of the good in human life? In Heidegger’s terms, according to the interpretation we shall venture, this becomes the problem of how Dasein’s historicity and worldliness can be at once the source of and condition for authentic existence, even as it remains as the temptation, as it were, towards inauthenticity.

Nevertheless, we concede that considering the direction in which Heidegger’s own thought turned in his writing after Being and Time, as well as much of what he said in that book itself, our interpretations of it in the direction of an ethics of virtue might seem anathema to the spirit of his thought. If that is so, then we may simply have to say that he was shortsighted with respect to the possibilities inherent therein.³⁹ This is one reason why we will be invested in considering two figures (Gadamer and Taylor) who, despite their profound indebtedness to Heidegger, have considered philosophical ethics

³⁹ Perhaps – and this is wildly speculative – a sense of being thoroughly discredited as someone capable of contributing anything substantive to ethical debates led to a withdrawal from any and all such concerns, which we may charitably (or naively) attribute to a sense of remorse, or otherwise to cowardice, or the recognition that his continued advocacy of those substantive views which led to his discredit would ruin him. I would certainly not want to be taken as advocating a reduction of his aversion to moral arguments to such psychological explanations, for that would not only be far too presumptuous, it would display a failure to consider seriously the possibility that such aversion has genuine philosophical grounds. Nevertheless, it shouldn’t be ruled out as a contributing factor, particularly in light of the very different attitudes towards ethical discourse taken by many of his most prominent followers.
a worthwhile pursuit. If their legacy is any indication, such a project is indeed worth undertaking.

2.2 Dasein and Its World

Having dealt with some preliminary objections to our project, we turn now to the exposition of Heidegger’s account of authenticity, starting with the ontological analysis of human being ("Dasein") as presented in Being and Time. The stated aim of this work is to raise anew the question of the meaning of Being. The way into this question begins with the implicit, pre-theoretical understanding of Being that we already have. This seems a rather obvious enough way of proceeding: in any enquiry, like a journey, we cannot begin in a vacuum; otherwise, we would have no clue which direction to go. Rather, we must already have some sense, however rudimentary, of what it is we are seeking. But what often happens in the course of such enquiries is that the pre-theoretical understanding in which we already operate gets lost or covered over, and what emerges out of it gets mistaken for something foundational. An example of this, which we will draw out in detail later on, is the claim that rationality, or sense data, or some such highly derivative element of our understanding represents our fundamental mode of access to the world.

A crucial insight that threads through Being and Time as a common theme is that we can never fully get behind our pre-theoretical understandings and attain, in Nagel’s

40 Cf. Aristotle’s famous statement of the necessary starting point for politikê in NE 1095a. The resemblance here is no accident.
famously evocative phrase, a “view from nowhere.” We cannot step back from rationality, consciousness, nature, human life, or whatever we are considering, to examine them from a neutral point of view, for the very enquiry itself must already presuppose something about its subject matter. While this is arguably true even of the natural sciences (as Kuhn taught us), it is most obvious in the case of enquiries into features of human life, like ethics. This is because the enquiry itself necessarily involves – by being an instance of – those very features and activities it seeks to understand, and so we cannot, as it were, examine rationality from a position that is arational, or consciousness from a position of non-consciousness, or human life from a position outside of human life. If it is never the case that we can completely step outside of ourselves to examine ourselves, then there must always be some pre-theoretical understanding of whatever it is we’re seeking that not only precedes but always underlies our capacity to conceptually articulate it. That is to say, what we understand about ourselves is always more than what we can conceptualize.

What’s more, Heidegger claims that in most of our everyday life our understandings of ourselves and the world goes unnoticed, emerging only when something disrupts our engaged activities. He offers by way of example our understanding of a hammer. When we encounter a hammer in the workshop, we don’t have to reflectively consider it to “know” understandingly what it is, its purpose, how it relates to my possible tasks or the other items in the workshop. If I am engaged in a project that requires the use of a hammer, I can often simply reach for it and put it to its proper use, all the while maintaining my focus on the task at hand (building a shelf, say),
or perhaps focused on something else entirely (listening to some good music or an
interesting podcast, perhaps). Presuming I have sufficient skill in building shelves, using
hammers, etc., the hammer can function for me in the course of my projects without
ever entering into my occurrent cognitive awareness. If the hammer example is not
convincing, consider something like our ability to leave rooms by turning a doorknob
and walking through the opening. The vast majority of times that we use doorknobs in
this way do not involve any cognitive awareness of what we are doing. Even in activities
that require some cognitive attention, like riding a bike, the aspect on which we focus
our attention is only one small part of a vast array of maneuvers, most of which we
perform simply on the basis of a rudimentary know-how that cannot be fully
articulated.41 When we do conceptualize our activity, usually something has gone
wrong, causing a disengagement from our absorbed activity: perhaps the hammer is too
heavy; perhaps the doorknob doesn’t turn correctly, or there is something obstructing
the doorway; perhaps there is an obstacle in the road that I have to navigate on my
bike. When things go badly enough, I might end up considering what kind of hammer,
doorknob, or bicycle would allow me to accomplish my ends, and form some kind of an
idea of what a hammer, doorknob or bicycle is. But notice that such determinations are
highly derivative of a rich and largely unproblematic understanding of a world of
equipment, tools, and instrumental relationships, as well the capacity to manipulate and

41 Indeed it’s often the case that “thinking” about our activities is often a hindrance to competent
performance, as sports coaches have long been aware. An interesting account of this from a tennis
coach’s perspective is given in Timothy Gallway’s book, The Inner Game of Tennis (rev. ed. New York:
Random House, 1997).
employ them, that remains largely unnoticed in our everyday lives, much less cognitively articulated.

The entities that we encounter in the course of this everyday coping – the hammers, doorknobs, and bikes – are what Heidegger calls “ready-to-hand” [zuhanden], and these encounters are founded upon what Heidegger terms “Being-in-the-world”: the fact that our engaged familiarity with and understanding of a world suffused with meaning and significance, and the ability to successfully cope with this world, runs deeper than what intellectual or cognitive reflection can bring into its scope. To say that cognitive reflection does not accompany most of our activity is not to say that those activities are “blind” or merely instinctual in the manner of non-human animals; rather, it is guided by a special kind of “sight” or “knowledge” he calls circumspection [Umsicht]. Circumspection “sees,” in its familiarity with the world, not this or that piece of equipment per se, but a whole network of relationships and roles that are intertwined with human projects and ends. We understand the hammer as having a particular significance to the activity of building a house, say: the hammer is in order to nail the nail, in order to bind the wood, in order to build the roof, in order to provide shelter from the weather, etc. The “world,” in Heidegger’s sense of the term, is this vast array of interlocking roles and relationships with which we have an engaged, pre-cognitive familiarity.

Even though we primarily encounter the world in this way, we obviously do consider objects in ways that abstract from their roles in the interlocking webs of
significance. This is to encounter an object as “present-at-hand” [vorhanden], which is to say, as an object of disinterested examination, having no relation to our ends and purposes. In so far as we regard an entity merely as a hunk of iron atop a hunk of wood, or as a collection of atoms, etc., we are regarding it in its presence-at-hand. This, of course, is the sort of comportment the natural scientist appropriately takes to her subject matter. What Heidegger cautions against, however, is the tendency we have in the modern age of science to suppose that presence-at-hand is the “real” being of entities, including, as we will see later, human beings. That is not to affirm any kind of anti-scientism, that what we can affirm about entities and the world from the disinterested perspective is not “real.” Rather, what Heidegger wants to reject is an attitude akin to what McDowell calls “scientism”: the belief that only what is determined to be the case from the disinterested, neutral perspective is “true,” and everything else is subjective projection. Thus the hammer comes to be mistakenly regarded as a “Thing + value,” where “Thing” denotes some kind of substance with objectively (that is, empirically) describable properties, and “value” denotes the subjectively imposed meanings that human beings tack on to it, so to speak.

It’s hard to know how the scientistic attitude is justified beyond mere stipulation, particularly if the comportment towards entities necessary to encounter them in their presence-at-hand involves divesting them of the meaning and significance they bear in our proximal encounters with them; as Heidegger puts it, “to lay bare what is just present-at-hand and no more, cognition must first penetrate beyond what is ready-to-hand in our concern” (BT 101). So ontologically, presence-at-hand depends upon
readiness-to-hand; the tendency of the modern philosophical tradition is to see the
dependency the other way around: that anything like “functionality” or readiness-to-
hand is a product of the combination of two present-at-hand entities, namely the
neutral “stuff” of the world and the projections of human beings onto it. We will discuss
and try to defend in greater detail Heidegger’s grounds for rejecting this kind of
scientific attitude later, but one of the fundamental problems has to do with the
implicit presuppositions about us humans and our relation to the world that are in play.
These presuppositions are, to preview the following discussion, that humans are
fundamentally self-contained “subjects” that encounter and must deal with a world of
“objects.”[^42]

As we said before, our familiarity with the world is a familiarity with the webs of
significances that constitute the world of hammers, doorknobs, etc., and allow us to
cope therein. These entities have the character they do on the basis of a certain “in-
order-to” structure, that is, in serving a certain kind of function, playing a certain kind of
role in our activities and practices. The understanding of these structures, and the

[^42]: The kind of reduction of both the world and ourselves presupposed by much of modern
Western philosophy is quite prevalent, and explains Heidegger’s reluctance to blithely adopt the standard
philosophical language in his writings: if much of what ends up being put into words by philosophers is
dramatically shorn of its ‘originary’ meanings (the meanings that cohere with the phenomena as they
present themselves in themselves), adopting such language only exacerbates the misunderstandings, one
might say. We will nevertheless do our best to translate his terminology into more standard philosophical
parlance, but there is a limit to how far one can do so without distorting the insights he offers us. I would
add that whether I have presented an adequate account of Heidegger’s views up to this point, and if I
have, whether we want to follow him in such a wholesale questioning of the philosophical tradition is not
as important as whether this basic insight – and indeed warning – can be heeded: that we must attend
carefully to the phenomena that often get distorted and misconstrued in the process of conceptual
articulation. This is of course no more important – and no more relevant to ethics – than in the question
of how we are to consider human life and its way of being, the central question to ethical enquiry.
competence or mastery with which we are able to negotiate our way through this world of equipmental relations, is what is meant by “familiarity.” Dasein’s familiarity with the world is more basic than and underlies its more determinate cognitive reflection, particularly the kind that regards entities as present-at-hand from a disinterested “view from nowhere.” This notion that our most fundamental way of being is engaged, circumspective dealing with the world of meaningful structures and significances is part of what Heidegger means by being-in-the-world. As we said previously, these structures and significances are intelligible in terms of the roles and relationships they have to each other, to more general structures, and to our own projects, ends, and, ultimately, our self-conceptions. Perhaps I’m hammering to build a shelf to hold my books to organize my collection to facilitate my research to be a more productive philosopher. Or to… display my collection of antique manuscripts to impress my visitors. Or to…impress upon my child the importance of literature in life. Or to…remind myself of all those books I’ve purchased but have yet to read. Or some combination of all of these. The being of the hammer and its significance ultimately rests on the understanding I have of myself as a philosopher, a collector, a father, etc.

How is this supposed to be different from, much less a challenge to the view that humans are projectors value onto a neutral world, that we create meaning where there really is none, etc.? The answer is that the latter view has to presuppose a radical gap between the subject that projects and the object onto which it projects, a gap that would require for its intelligibility the capacity to consider subjectivity itself from a kind of ‘outside’ point of view to observe its interactions with the world, the way one might
observe the interactions between animals, molecules and quarks. Heidegger’s insight is that such a perspective on ourselves, at least in so far as it purports to exhaust our being, is never possible.\(^43\)

Before we can offer a more adequate defense of this negative claim,\(^44\) we need to consider Heidegger’s positive view on the being of Dasein. The fact that an engaged, pre-cognitive understanding of the world underlies and precedes any reflection reveals that we are fundamentally “worlded” entities, not, in the first instance, “subjects.” We know how to use equipment, tools, and other artifacts of human fabrication; we know too how to navigate around tree branches on a bike, how to read the clouds for signs of a storm, and deal with other elements of the non-fabricated environment; further, we know how to converse with other people, how far to stand from them, how to interpret their facial expressions, and so forth, in a sense of “knowing” as capable of negotiating everyday life without having to cognitively consider what we’re doing. All of this, to repeat the point made above, is possible on the basis of a particular kind of comportment towards our being.

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\(^{43}\) What I have in mind here is the idea that the proper perspective on human life as a whole (including morality) is the disinterested point of view. Naturally nothing in Heidegger’s thought denies that there is a great deal we can learn and know about human life from that point of view; on the contrary, certain aspects of human life have always required the disinterested perspective, long before the advent of modern science (medicine is a prime example, and there are others). And it is perhaps due to the success of the scientific point of view in so many areas that the temptation is persistently there to circumscribe all domains of enquiry under its rubrics.

\(^{44}\) See section 2.5.
We should not take comportment as something like a cognitive choosing of how we are to conceive of ourselves that then gets applied in various situations. On the contrary, such reflection on ourselves is a kind of comportment, or to put it differently, it is a kind of stand that we take on our being, one that is present long before cognitive reflection even begins to manifest itself.\(^{45}\) If, as I will elaborate further, the taking of a stand on our own being precedes and underlies any particular stand (such as the consideration of oneself as a subject distinct from the world of objects), then the taking of a stand itself is more fundamental to our being than whatever determinate stand we may take. This may sound as if self-reflection and the sense of responsibility or control we have over ourselves is epiphenomenal, an illusion that masks the fact that we are really mere automatons, subject to the whims of biological or cultural fancy. But in the same way that our circumspective engagement in the world is constantly being revised, so is our comportment towards ourselves constantly being shaped by our experiences and the kind of reflective response we take to them.\(^{46}\) Perhaps at very young stages this comportment is comparable to what we might call animal instinct, but at some indefinable point it is no longer appropriate to consider ourselves as mere automatons.\(^{47}\)

\(^{45}\) Most parents of young children can no doubt attest to this. Hubert Dreyfus, moreover, offers an interesting example of how babies from Japanese and American cultures respond in different ways to their parent’s expressions at ages as young as a few months.

\(^{46}\) The possibility and nature of such revision will be a major theme of chapter 4’s encounter with Gadamer’s hermeneutics.

\(^{47}\) Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that the sorts of features that characterize the concern with one’s own being of developed adults begin to take shape at a very young age. A more systematic
How is it possible to think of our being as deeper than cognitive subjectivity without falling into some kind of biologism about human nature? We will take up this question again in chapter 3 when we discuss naturalism. For now, the issue hangs on clarifying Heidegger’s claim that the being of Dasein is “care” [sorge] in his special ontological sense that refers to Dasein’s temporality. As we shall see, one of the reasons that we are tempted to reduce Dasein’s being to something like rational subjectivity, biological functions, socially-determined preferences, desires and attitudes, etc., is that we fail to recognize this “caring” about being, including one’s own being, as temporally structured, that is, as at once past, present and future.

To explain, consider this remark on the being of Dasein:

The being of any such entity is in each case mine. These entities, in their being, comport themselves towards their being. As entities with such a being, they are delivered over to their own being. Being is that which is an issue for every such entity (BT 67).

That we comport ourselves to our being is to say that we are always presently engaged in the world in a way that displays an understanding of its meanings and significances. But we do not create these meanings and significances; we are delivered over to them, which is to say we are “thrown” into a world in which meaning and significance is there already. But to say that being is an issue, or as we have been putting it, that Dasein takes a stand on its being, means that Dasein is “projecting” itself onto the future, and it can do so authentically or inauthentically. It’s to the explication

of these claims that we now turn, and in doing so we will be able to turn our focus more towards the implications of Heidegger’s thought on questions about how to live.

We can see from the previous discussion about the ready-to-hand how Dasein displays these temporal features in its mode of caring for these kinds of entities, what he calls “concern” [besorgen]. It would be absurd to suppose that the meanings and significances of the ready-to-hand are not already “there” in the world, that we somehow subjectively determine for ourselves how to use hammers, doors, and so forth. Some of our understandings of these sorts of things are picked up through imitation, some are taught, some we “figure out,” some are probably innate. While the process of skill acquisition does sometimes involve cognitive reflection, much of it does not, and we couldn’t possibly reflect beforehand on all the vast networks and arrays that we grasp in our dealings with the world. There is a way one builds houses, uses hammers, rides a bike, eats and drinks, etc., that is already set out, as it were, in the world. Meanings are “there” in the world, and so are we, always already engaging in the world. But naturally the meanings aren’t fixed; the experience of human creativity and innovation attests to this, as does the simple fact that every situation in which we are engaged is unique, requiring a certain degree of flexibility and the capacity to extend, expand and modify what we have inherited. The modified understanding

48 Again, it’s instructive to consider small children and how much understanding they have before acquiring rational capacities.
orients our future engagements, and this process of refining what we have previously understood continues throughout our lives.49

This kind of temporal structure applies not just to our dealings with the ready-to-hand, which is just one aspect of “care,” but also to our interactions with other entities with the being of Dasein, the aspect of care that Heidegger terms “solicitude” [fürsorgen]. As in the former case, our interactions with other people are mostly non-reflective, and reflection typically results from some disruption of our engaged dealings with others. For the most part, I am able to effortlessly negotiate the social world, knowing how far to stand from people, how to order a cup of coffee, how to talk to a child vs. a friend vs. a customer, how to interpret various looks and gestures, the significance of a person’s attire, etc. Indeed many, if not most such capacities have been with me since my earliest days, and the extent to which my ability to understand and engage in appropriate behavior is the result of conscious reflection is very small indeed. Furthermore, the claim that these understandings are not, even in principle, available in their totality to cognitive codification is perhaps stronger in the case of our interactions with others than in the case of our engagement with the ready-to-hand. Taylor Carman, arguing in defense of Hubert Dreyfus, has recently made this case with respect to our capacity for the “art of conversation.”50 He asks, “Could we, if pressed, specify – even demonstratively – when it is appropriate to speak or remain silent, or

49 The basic structure just described is a paraphrase of the hermeneutical process that we will take up in chapter 4.

precisely *how* the tone or mood of the conversation has become somehow creepy or inappropriate?” He continues by noting that:

Conversing requires rationality, yet it also involves a kind of intelligent sensitivity to nuances of tempo, reciprocity, mood, duration, and subject matter that are arguably not *already* as such conducive to conceptual recognition and rational reflection. The point is not that such nuances are altogether unavailable to thought, but that thinking about them often requires a significant shift or modification in the content of our initial sensitivity to them in order to render them thinkable, to conceptualize them – in short, to rationalize attitudes that were not in the first instance thoughts at all, but intelligent intuitive “feels” for how things were showing up and how well or badly we were coping with them.\textsuperscript{51}

What Carman is driving at is the existence of norms governing a certain form of social interaction – conversation, in this case – that are at once *received* (we couldn’t possibly invent them outright, as Wittgenstein’s private language argument demonstrates), in which we are constantly *engaged* in a way that defies reduction to the application of a set of codifiable rules and principles, and which must continually be adapted and modified. The basic point is that solicitude – our social engagements – involves an engaged familiarity with norms, meanings, ways of interacting, etc., that exceeds cognitive articulation and yet is not meaningless. Obviously, this claim has profound implications for how we should pose and respond to ethical questions, as we shall soon see.

\textsuperscript{51} Carman, “Conceptualism and the Scholastic Fallacy,” 16-18.
2.3 Das Man as a Structural and a Normative Notion

So how is it that we come to have an engaged understanding of the social world, given what we have just argued? The first part of a Heideggerian answer is to emphasize, once again, that we have to guard against approaching the question from a presumption of subjectivity, as if the familiarity a person has with its social milieu is that of an essentially self-contained subject interacting in certain ways with other subjects, which would be the correlate to the presumption that our engagement with the world is that of a subject with (external) objects. The temptation towards this presumption is due, likewise, to taking the sort of reflection and awareness of oneself as a distinct individual that emerges when one becomes disengaged from everyday social interaction as our basic state of being, our essence. Rather, in an admittedly murky way of putting it that I hope to clarify, we are our social milieu.

Heidegger’s term for the social milieu in which the meanings that shape our engaged understanding of the world, including each other, are contained is das Man.\(^52\) Being absorbed into the average everyday interpretations and dealings of das Man is “falling.” Das Man and falling and their modes share a curious characteristic in Heidegger’s thought, or so I will argue, in that they are both a positive and necessary constituent of our existential structure (what we will call the “structural sense”), as well

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\(^52\) There is considerable disagreement about how to best translate this term, even more so than most of Heidegger’s other neologisms. Macquarrie and Robinson initially rendered it as “the they,” but that carries the sense of something separate from me, rather than a structural constituent of my being. “The One,” “the Anyone,” and “the Everyone” are other common alternatives, but they too have limitations, and end up sounding so far from standard English that they don’t seem to contribute much to perspicuity. For this reason I will usually leave das Man untranslated, though I will occasionally use “one” where he uses Man.
as the negative ground of inauthentic existence (what we will call the “normative sense”). In this respect, it would be misleading to consider these notions simply as part of a neutral, non-evaluative description of Dasein’s structure, or simply as pejorative terms indicating a possible but deficient way of living. Indeed, the fact that Heidegger himself discusses them in both ways lends itself to such misinterpretations. But it’s the dual significance and interrelatedness of these notions that can help us understand how one can both be historical and authentic.

In the structural sense, das Man is both the answer to the question of the “who” of Dasein (one’s identity), as well as the source of the intelligibility of the world. As Heidegger says, “the ‘who’ is not this one, not that one, not oneself, not some people, and not the sum of them all...Das Man, which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of Being of everydayness” (BT 164). Das Man is not identical with one’s community, culture, religion, society or any other more or less determinate group or structure with its distinguishing characteristics, but rather it represents, to borrow from Blattner, “patterns of social normativity”\(^{53}\) that guide and structure everyday life. That is to say, das Man “articulates the referential context of significance” (BT 167), that structure of roles and relationships, norms and standard behaviors, that guide our circumspective concern and solicitude. As Heidegger describes it:

We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as one takes pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as one sees and judges; likewise we shrink back from the ‘great mass’ as one shrinks back; we find ‘shocking’ what one finds shocking. Das Man, which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes the kind of being of everydayness (BT 164).

It is because these sorts of norms and standards underlie and form the basis of our identities that we are able to make sense of the world, including ourselves and other people, both practically and reflectively. The issue of whether and to what extent one’s life is and/or should be guided and determined by such patterns of social normativity is most salient in the case of more weighty issues, such as religious beliefs, political commitments, cultural and artistic judgments and activities, and so forth. But before exploring further what Heidegger means by the phenomenon of das Man, we should highlight the point that even in the midst of reflecting on, accepting, rejecting, or modifying one’s relationship with das Man in such issues as these (which will be our focus a bit later in the chapter), das Man remains a necessary structural aspect of our being.

I mean this in two ways. First, das Man is a sort of benchmark in relation to which we define ourselves. Thus, our identities are never “self-created,” as if drawn ex nihilo or from some original source within ourselves. Instead, even the identity of someone as a maverick, a counter-culturalist, or the like is defined every bit as much as that of the conformist in relation to the prevailing modes of social normativity: “We shrink back from the ‘great mass’ as one shrinks back” (BT 164). Secondly, it is never the case that one can ever escape conformity entirely without utterly losing one’s ability to understand and navigate the world. The burden of having to “choose” moment by
moment would be utterly debilitating, and one’s actions would be unrecognizable by anyone else, thus depriving one of any capacity for relationships or social transactions of any kind. “Proximally Dasein is [das Man], and for the most part it remains so” (BT 167).

These are familiar points, particularly from critics of Descartes’ misguided attempt to identify a “self” distinct from any such influences. And so in this respect, Heidegger’s argument about the necessary structural dimension of social normativity to one’s identity aligns him with, among others, the traditions of Hegel, Wittgenstein, American pragmatism, and indeed the neo-Aristotelian tradition in large part. However, as I mentioned before, the ontological point about the inescapability of the fact that Dasein “is” das Man is coupled with the notion of immersion in das Man being somehow the mark of inauthenticity. Grappling with this juxtaposition allows us to better understand how one can make sense of the possibilities of critique of one’s inherited history and social frameworks without positing an ideal position of evaluation that lies outside of them.

54 I have in mind here both the idea that the ideal human life is one that is, as it were, self-created, as well as views of practical rationality that seem to picture rational life as consisting of continual, autonomous decision-making on the basis of what we take to be good reasons to act, whether they are thought of as reasons that are normative in themselves, are so on the basis of subjective desires and preferences, or some such model that begins with a conception of humans as ideally individual, autonomous rational agents. Heidegger wants to reverse the priority here, and claim that in so far as we are able to engage in practical deliberation or reasoning, we are still always doing so from within the inescapable frameworks of our social milieu, and that such models certainly do not represent the bulk of our meaningful activity. Both of these sorts of views under attack will be further explored later on.
First, though, we need to tighten our grip on the various features of *das Man* and how they structure us, and in doing so the more pejorative dimensions will begin to emerge. *Since das Man* is, in a sense, our shared social horizons, and since it’s these horizons that provide the capacity to effortlessly navigate the world as we for the most part do, when people are doing what “one” does they don’t stand out, they are not conspicuous; but when they deviate from this, the response is usually suppression. This might be by way of subjugation and censure, or by accommodating those deviations within itself (as when the “counter-culture” ends up becoming the norm, the innovative and creative becomes the standard, and so forth). This pattern follows the model of our dealings with the ready-to-hand that we discussed earlier: when things are going “right,” we are typically not cognitively aware of what we’re doing, even though what we’re engaged in is meaningful. When we become disengaged and start noticing our activity, the equipment, etc., it is usually due to malfunction, and the response is to try to suppress the source of the disruption (fixing something, gaining better skill, etc.). Likewise, when our social activity is “normal,” it doesn’t stand out, and some kind of “malfunction” brings deviant behavior to the fore, which then compels us to try to restore the smooth operation of the social order, so to speak.\(^{55}\) So the relationship of each individual Dasein to *das Man* in is one which at once provides its sense of belongingness and a certain kind of threat, namely, that of censure, abandonment and

\(^{55}\) In both cases, and particularly at the level of *das Man*, the notion of a “malfunction” should not be taken too strongly as necessarily involving something bad or otherwise negative. What I mean is anything that disrupts normal activity. So a stroke of genius, a display of beauty, and uncommon virtue can be “malfunctions” in this sense.
alienation if it deviates from the social norms. This opens us to what Heidegger later calls the “threat” of a loss of such an identity, which, when recognized, is the basis of “angst.” That is to say, in so far as we are subjected to the standards of thought and behavior defined by our social milieu, and in so far as these norms of behavior constitute our identities, the possibility of deviation from those norms presents itself as a possible threat to the sources of meaning and self-understanding.

To mitigate against this threat, das Man tends to cover over the essential tenuousness and vulnerability of our identities, beliefs, and ways of life by certain modes of interpretation constitutive of “falling.” Falling, we recall, has a non-normative structural sense of sharing social horizons without which life would be unintelligible. But the pejorative (i.e., normative) sense has now emerged. To anticipate what we will shortly discuss, “bad” falling, as a kind of dispersal into das Man, releases Dasein of the burden of having to choose its own possibilities. It is to renounce “ownership” of one’s life. It is to be inauthentic. So the modes of falling will likewise have a structural and non-normative sense (though it is often difficult to discern in some cases, given his account of them), as well as a normative (i.e., pejorative) and non-structural sense. These modes include “idle talk” [Gerade], “curiosity” [Neugier], and “ambiguity” [Zweideutigkeit].

Before exploring them in detail, I want to make a further note about the different senses – the structural and normative – that I will argue are present in his account, and why he might have been reluctant to make these different senses explicit.
This will position us to see the relevance of examining these phenomena to our wider aims of orienting an account of virtue inspired by Heidegger’s thought. The modes of falling are the modes of being of average everydayness, which is to say, they are inescapable in so far as are lives are lived, and must be lived, for the most part in this mode. Heidegger explicitly claims that this account of modes of falling of Dasein is “purely ontological in its aims, and is far removed from any moralizing critique of Dasein” and any “disparaging signification” (BT 211). In some sense, what I have been calling the structural sense, he is right; however, it is famously very difficult to see how he could have thought that the account he gives lives up to those stated intentions and avoids disparagement. The critical tone is manifest, and becomes more so as he carries the analysis along. Perhaps, I would suggest, he is so fixated on the status of much of what passes for “moralizing critique“ and other value judgments as themselves manifestations of falling that he is desperate to avoid his analysis turning into an instance of the very phenomenon he’s (obviously, I would say) critiquing, not simply analyzing. These “moralizing critiques,” as the next chapter will explain, are modes of debased falling (i.e., they are inauthentic) in that they do not adequately acknowledge Dasein’s being, including falling in its structural, constitutive aspects. Perhaps, that is, Heidegger lacked a bit of imagination as to the possibilities for conceiving ethical enquiry – an enquiry into how one should live – in a way that begins from a proper acknowledgment of the structural (in his terms, ontological) features of human life and indeed opens them up in their meaning and significance. I hope to show how virtue ethics has the potential to be just that sort of enquiry. These suggestions will hopefully
become clear in the following pages, in which we will examine the modes of falling, paying particular regard to how they manifest the kind of lostness in *das Man* that characterizes inauthenticity. One of the characteristic features of such lostness is a refusal or inability to face up to one’s finitude – one’s death and thrownness, as we will see.

The first of these modes of falling, “idle talk,” is a form of communication in which a superficial or limited understanding of a subject matter gets passed off as authoritative and genuine. When we communicate, we are trying to draw the hearer into a genuine understanding of whatever it is that we’re talking about. But it is impossible for us to have such an understanding about the vast majority of issues. Hence most of what we say is simply “passing the word along and repeating” (BT 212) what we ourselves have heard. For the most part this is not necessarily problematic. To echo previous points, we couldn’t function if we did not largely trust the authoritative testimony of others, and repeat with confidence what we have been told under the assumption that somewhere along the chain of communication is some kind of genuine understanding of the subject matter. If it is true that we can only have genuine understanding of a very limited portion of the world in which we have to navigate our lives, then most of our underestimating of the world will remain somewhat opaque, and yet we can still have enough of a grasp of it to get by, so to speak. “This way in which things have been interpreted in idle talk has already established itself in Dasein. There are many things with which we first become acquainted in this way, and there is not a little which never gets beyond such an average understanding” (BT 213). This requires a
certain kind of humility and discernment as to which matters are such that we can claim or recognize authority and expertise, and as to which matters demand silence or openness to and expectations of revision to our preconceptions. This is just what idle talk in its debased form fails to do. In the process, “its initial lack of grounds becomes aggravated to complete groundlessness” (BT 212).

For example, an expert in the biological sciences and evolution may have a genuine, original understanding of human physiology and its biological development, neurological processes and so forth, but a very rudimentary and sketchy grasp of religious history, practice and belief. As an atheist or agnostic, his own position as an outsider with respect to religion would immediately preclude him from any genuine, original understanding of religion, and an expressed hostility and antagonism towards religion would further limit his authority to pronounce on the nature, value, and implications of religious commitment. The phenomenon of idle talk manifests itself as he fails to respect his limitations by keeping silent or opening himself to dialogue with religious adherents as a way of furthering his understanding (at least to the limited extent his own non-belief will allow), and instead attempts to wrench this phenomenon away from the religious adherents themselves, dismantle it by enclosing it within the narrow contours of his own particular perspective and pass off his understanding as the final and authoritative word on the subject.56

56 I’m alluding, as the reader may have guessed, to the prophets of the so-called “New Atheism,” championed by such luminaries as the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel Dennet, and journalist Christopher Hitchens. Their books, and the movement they have
The claim is not that the non-believer scientist has no understanding of religious belief at all, of course, or that his interpretations cannot be illuminating and disclosive of something true about the phenomenon, nor does it entail relativism about such things as religious belief.\textsuperscript{57} Rather, the perniciousness of idle talk lies in the way in which it circumscribes the subject matter into a form that can in principle be grasped by anyone, regardless of his or her proximity to the phenomenon in question. But it can only do that by “perverting the act of disclosing into an act of closing off” (BT 213). Why is this?

A clue can be found in Heidegger’s positive account of the function of discursive communication.\textsuperscript{58} Discourse is, drawing upon the Greek tradition, “logos as \textit{apophansis},” which Heidegger interprets as let
ing what the discourse is about “be seen...\textit{for} the one who is doing the talking...\textit{or} for persons who are talking with one another, as the case may be” (BT 56). That is, “\textit{what} is said is drawn \textit{from} what the talk is about, so that discursive communication, in what it says, makes manifest what it is talking about, and thus makes this accessible to the other party” (BT 56). As we said

\begin{itemize}
  \item helped spawn, argue that religious belief of all sorts is not just an illusion capable of being explained away as a disposable byproduct of human evolution, it is a pernicious element of human society without which we would all be better off. Despite displaying an almost farcical level of ignorance about religious belief, their books have sold millions of copies, garnered tremendous attention and acclaim, and acquired an almost scriptural status by those of like minds.
  \item This trend has not limited itself to critics of religion, however: what I am now describing can very well apply to certain naturalist approaches to morality, as I will argue in the next chapter (section 3.7).
\end{itemize}

\textsuperscript{57} A full defense of this will be have to wait until later chapters, although some further suggestions about how the Heideggerian view is neither objectivistic nor relativistic (which are two sides of the same flawed approach to knowledge of ourselves and the world) will be offered in this one.

\textsuperscript{58} These themes will receive a much more thorough treatment in chapter 4 when we explore Gadamer’s conception of hermeneutical discourse, which essentially adheres to the basic form I present here.
before, prior to any conceptual articulation of some subject matter or phenomenon, we already operate with an understanding of ourselves and the world. This understanding, moreover, is based on a shared horizon of intelligibility (otherwise we would never be able to make sense of our interactions with one another). Out of this horizon, certain elements come to stand in relief for one reason or another (breakdown, etc.). In communication, we are “pointing out” (BT 199) some entity, “letting an entity be seen from itself” (BT 196) in this relief. It does this by giving that which is present in our shared understanding a “definite character” such that we “let someone see with us” that which has been pointed out (BT 197).

Two important implications must be noted. First, since communication operates by giving a definite character to what is already present in our shared understandings, it follows that what is present in our understanding will always exceed what can be articulated in discourse, just as it exceeds what can be codified. Discourse operates rather like a lens or a telescope: in bringing some element into focus, other elements are thereby blurred or lost from view. Second, when we communicate we are not transferring the contents of our minds to the contents of someone else’s mind or anything like that, which presupposes self-contained subjectivity as the locus of the communicative act. Rather, as beings that are fundamentally engaged in a shared world, when we communicate we are focusing the hearer’s attention on something that is already “there” in her understanding.\(^{59}\) This demands an openness to the possibility

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\(^{59}\) One is, of course, reminded at this point of Plato’s *Meno*, in which Socrates uses the example of mathematical instruction to argue that a teacher does not impart knowledge to the student so much as
that in doing so, the listener will then have something to say back, bringing something else into relief as a result of the communication that can then shape the understanding of the original speaker. That is, there is never the “final word” on a subject matter in so far as what can be articulated in discourse always exceeds what gets articulated in any particular instance of communication. So the function of communication must always be to facilitate a relationship of being towards the entity itself on the part of all the participants in the discourse, the entity which is already to some extent understood.

This is just what idle talk, again, fails to do. In merely “passing the word along,” we either assert something about which we lack an original understanding, or we do so in a way that fails to respect the function of discourse as this reciprocal opening up of the subject matter. What’s crucial is that as the “lack of grounds,” or even the limited grounds that to some degree characterizes all discourse, “becomes aggravated into complete groundlessness,” idle talk must take on the illusion of authority in its tone. This can only be accomplished by “discouraging any new inquiry and any disputation, and in a peculiar way suppress[ing] them and hold[ing] them back” (BT 213). Thus it is a distinguishing mark of the debased forms of das Man, of which idle talk is one, that what gets said carries with it a claim to final authority, to “having the last word,” as it were.⁶⁰

make manifest what the student already knows. Although it’s clear that Heidegger gives a very different account of the significance of this phenomenon than does Plato, it remains an interesting point of congruence, as far as it goes.

⁶⁰ This is not to suggest that all claims to authority are simply forms of falling. That would, indeed, be rather ridiculous, and starkly at odds with the Gadamerian view we will take up later (209-
In a moment we will consider the clear relevance of Heidegger’s views to the predicament of the early 21st century. With the increase of the means of communication in modern times comes the increase in the dominance of idle talk, and its sibling modes of falling, curiosity, and ambiguity. Curiosity is the degraded form of a kind of “perception” in which, freed momentarily from the concerns of everyday life, we are able to dwell on and deepen our understanding of something, akin, perhaps, to the kind of contemplation in the sense of Book X of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, though I won’t pursue that connection further here. Curiosity, by contrast, “concerns itself with seeing, not in order to understand what is seen (that is, to come into a relationship of being towards it) but just in order to see” (BT 216). As a result, “curiosity is everywhere and nowhere” (BT 217), which is to say it never remains focused on any one thing long enough to let it penetrate its initial perspective, being constantly distracted by something else. When idle talk and curiosity flourish, the consequence is ambiguity, a condition in which “it becomes impossible to decide what is disclosed in a genuine understanding, and what is not...Everything looks as if it were genuinely understood, genuinely taken hold of, genuinely spoken, though at bottom it is not; or else it does not look so, and yet at bottom it is” (BT 217). In a remark that certainly challenges Heidegger’s claim not to be offering a critique of these phenomena, he says that “in the

213) What we are trying to highlight are claims to authority that are ungrounded because they lack the presumption of openness to new ways of seeing, or because they lack anything like the originary encounter with the phenomena required for *logos as apophasis* (i.e., they don’t know what they’re talking about). Heidegger can happily acknowledge many forms of genuine authority in all sorts of subject matters, particularly given what we said before about the fact that we can’t have an originary encounter with *everything.*
ambiguity of the way things have been publicly interpreted...Dasein’s understanding in das Man is constantly going wrong in its projects, as regards the genuine possibilities of Being” (BT 218).

As we witness the unprecedented development of communication technology into the age of the Internet, Heidegger’s claims about the dominance of these forms of falling become remarkably prescient. We devour the self-important ranting and raving of our favorite commentators opining about any subject matter that they happen upon, ascribing to them just that groundless authority that characterizes idle talk. Talk shows, blogs, and news outlets, and recently town hall meetings increasingly resemble gladiator matches more than venues for the open exchange of ideas, confirming the tendency to slide into self-righteousness that is closed off to genuine communication. We’ve substituted sound bites and scrolling headlines along the bottom of cable news shows for thoughtful, engaged, and nuanced analysis and argument. An event or rumor can be posted on a blog, circulated among other blogs, and within hours end up on the front page of a major news publication’s website. The increasingly frantic pace of television has been augmented by the addictive meandering through the maze of links to trivialities on the web and the pseudo-neurotic need to check email and news feeds every few minutes. Chat rooms, Facebook status updates and text messages

61 As I remarked above, it’s difficult to see exactly what the ‘merely ontological’ (i.e., structural) dimensions of curiosity and, even more so, ambiguity might be. I would suppose that the idea would be that to some extent they are simply unavoidable in the course of everyday life, and so they would have to be accompanied by the due humility and recognition of our tendency to fall into their debased forms that we mentioned with respect to idle talk.
increasingly replace bodily or even voice contact, allowing people to present themselves any way they wish without the threat that comes with exposing oneself to another. In such a world, “the obviousness and self-assurance of the average ways in which things have been interpreted, are such that while the particular Dasein drifts along towards an ever-increasing groundlessness as it floats, the uncanniness of this floating remains hidden from it under their protective shelter” (BT 214).

While there is of course much more that can be said about modern culture from a Heideggerian perspective, I want to ultimately make a somewhat less obvious and more contentious claim, namely that many manifestations of modern moral philosophy itself are, or can be, an instance of falling, and thus, inauthentic Dasein. Though Heidegger never makes this connection explicitly, it becomes evident when we draw out the notion of inauthenticity, to which we now turn.

2.4 Authenticity and Inauthenticity as Structural and Normative Notions

In a general sense, the contrast between authenticity [eigentlichkeit] and inauthenticity in Heidegger’s thought is between a life that is “owned” versus one that is not “owned,” though that terminology can be very misleading if it conjures up the image of a bare “subject” bearing some kind of relationship to the various non-essential details

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62 Also, I don’t pretend to ignore or downplay the obvious fact that these kinds of things I just listed off have been present in some form throughout human history; indeed they would have to have been if we’re to take Heidegger’s account to be an analysis of human life as such, not in some particular time or place. I have no pretensions that modern society is ‘worse off’ than it has been in the past, since that kind of claim would be far beyond the scope of this dissertation, and I wouldn’t know how to evaluate such a claim in the first place given what will emerge in our later discussion of historicity. But the point of the following is to try to motivate the claim that what Heidegger has said does pertain in very real ways to modern society.
of its “life.” At any rate, this contrast is not a straightforward one. In keeping with the distinction we have made between das Man and falling as each having an inescapable, structural dimension as well as a (negatively) normative dimension, some commentators have pointed to a related distinction in the notion of authenticity and its opposites. Charles Guignon, for instance, makes the structural/normative distinction in sorting out an apparent inconsistency in Being in Time regarding the relation between authenticity and das Man. The inconsistency would be that, on the one hand, Heidegger seems to claim that fundamentally we are das Man, that is, our identities, including our sense of the norms and for-the-sakes-of-which that guide our thinking and activities, are primarily a product of the contingent social milieu into which we are thrown, and so authenticity is not going to be an escape from das Man so much as a particular way of being das Man. On the other hand, he sometimes suggests that authenticity refers to the more fundamental way of being, and that being dispersed into das Man is a possible modification of that way of being. So the inconsistency seems to be in how Heidegger regards the condition of being dispersed into das Man. Is it an inescapable structure, but one which contains the possibilities of being lived out authentically or inauthentically? Or is such dispersal itself an existentiell possibility


64 This would be to say that das Man is an existential, while authenticity is an existentielle modification. See BT 130, 267.

65 I.e., a reversal of the characterization above. See BT 259, 317.
rather than an existential necessity, and one which characterizes inauthenticity? How are we to reconcile this supposed inconsistency?

Guignon suggests that we can understand authenticity in an ontological or structural sense as having to do with the fact that Dasein is always taking a stand on its being, the fact that being is always an issue for it. The way things have significance and meaning is in terms of the for-the-sakes-of-which that structure our lives, what my ends, plans and purposes are, what constitutes my sense of identity and the sources of value – these all “matter” to me. One is still “authentic” in this sense even if this mattering takes the form of apathy or, importantly, mere conformity to the way things get publically interpreted; i.e., dispersal into das Man. The latter possibilities characterize inauthenticity in the normative sense as a possible way to be, as opposed to the possibility of living authentically in a normative sense, taking a certain kind of stand: one that is owned (more on this below).

Regardless of whether our lives are owned or not, the particular possibilities themselves are always drawn from the historical situation into which we are thrown, that is, from das Man. The fact that the intelligibly of the world depends upon shared social horizons entails that I can never extricate myself from das Man as the source of meaning and possibilities. This is the sense in which das Man also constitutes my essential nature. As Heidegger says, “in no case is a Dasein, untouched and unseduced by this way in which things have been interpreted, set before the open country of a ‘world-in-itself’ so that it just beholds what it encounters” (BT 213). Again, I can never
attain to a “view from nowhere” in which I am radically free to simply choose my possibilities unconstrained by my contingent, historical situation. On the other hand, how I relate myself to these thrown possibilities given by my historical situation can be either authentic or inauthentic (in the normative senses); that is, my life can be either owned or disowned, depending on whether or not I succumb to the leveling and distortive tendencies of das Man that we discussed above and let them determine the shape of my life. In short, in so far as my life can be intelligible at all, I must conform to the possibilities and public interpretations that constitute the historically conditioned social milieu into which I am thrown. However, in so far as I am the sort of being that cares about being and how things matter to it, I can do so either by taking ownership of my life or letting myself drift along in a mode of conformism.

While this explanation clears up some issues in Heidegger’s text, perhaps, the terms are still far too unwieldy for our purposes. It makes sense as an implication of Dasein’s temporality we discussed earlier, that Dasein is always a thrown projection. We are inheritors of and participants in a public way of interpreting ourselves and the world (we are das Man). This is what it is to be thrown. But we are always projecting

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66 Blattner suggests a third possibility, that of one’s life being unowned. This is, like a disowned life, one in which we have not chosen our possibilities but have been merely taken up into them. The difference depends on how one responds to the phenomenon of angst, which we will discuss shortly. In short, angst brings us face-to-face with the contingency of lives and the lack of absolute foundations, and the burden of choosing ourselves. We can either respond to this angst by resolute choosing, or by sinking back into the comfort and tranquility of a life that is chosen for us, so to speak. That is, our lives can be owned or disowned. Not having faced angst, our lives have yet to be owned or disowned: they are unowned. This should all become clearer later on.
ourselves at the same time, taking up our thrown possibilities in some way.\footnote{Given the critical remarks we made earlier about the sort of view that takes meaning and value to be “subjective projection,” it may seem confusing to start using the term “projection” in a way that refers to an aspect of our being. One fundamental difference between the two senses is that Heidegger’s only makes sense in terms of Dasein’s temporality – we’re “projecting” ourselves onto the future. In this sense it seems helpful to think of projection as roughly saying that our life is a project (see page 94). (The sense we were critiquing might be understood by analogy with a movie projector, in which one present-at-hand object (the projector/human) shines an image on another present-at-hand object. Hopefully the context will make it clear which sort of projection we’re talking about.)}

Henceforth I will not use authenticity in a way that refers to the fact of our thrown projection (the structural sense), but only in the normative sense, as a possible way of taking up our thrown possibilities. Likewise, the necessary, structural dimension of our dispersal into \textit{das Man} will be referred to as our thrownness, and the normative dimension of that, “inauthenticity” as the opposite of (normative) authenticity.

Despite Heidegger’s rather muddled way of dealing with these concepts, one of the reasons it was important to focus a bit on his different uses of them to point out the way in which authenticity, as a kind of normative ideal of human life akin to eudaimonia, cannot be understood without regard to our thrownness and our projection as equally constitutive of our being. This is important if, when attempting to explicate the notion of authenticity, we are to avoid a “voluntarist” interpretation or “romantic” one, which we will take up in section 2.6, as well as a radical “historicist” interpretation that we will briefly address in chapter 5. Again, each of these interpretations has a degree of legitimacy to it, but misses the fundamental importance of the other. Certainly authenticity does involve, as the existentialist interpretation emphasizes, recognition of oneself as a self-constitutor in the face of the ultimate lack of an absolute and objective
ground of meaning and value to which we can appeal, and the burden of choosing how one is to live in the face of this realization. And certainly authenticity does involve, on the other hand, an honest confrontation of the fact that the sources of meaning and value, tenuous and contingent as they may be, are nevertheless something we have been delivered over to and from which we can never extricate ourselves. Each of these is, in its own way, a consequence of facing up to our finitude, or what Heidegger calls our “nullity”; that is, authenticity is going to somehow have to do in the first instance with how we respond to the finitude of our thrownness and the finitude of our death as the ultimate possibility. We will begin with the notion of death, one of, I think, the most widely misunderstood elements of Heidegger’s thought.

2.5 Dasein and Death

The first thing to say confronts this misunderstanding directly. Death [Tod], it must be remembered, is an existential notion, not a biological one. Heidegger does not mean by existential death, at least primarily, the event of ceasing to function as a living organism. This is manifest by the fact that he uses a different term for this event, “demise” [Ableben]. Rather, Heidegger wants to suggest that when we examine more closely our everyday notion of death (demise), we find that it bears a significance that extends wider than the event itself.⁶⁸

⁶⁸ The procedure exemplified here is what Heidegger’s calls “formal indication”: beginning with our everyday notions, delving into their significance (as opposed to simply analyzing their taken-for-granting meanings), and discovering in that significance something which points beyond the everyday notion, often revealing it as misleading. The reason for such a procedure has to do with the fact that, as we have repeatedly explained, we always operate with a pre-cognitive understanding of being, but the
We mentioned early on the consistent theme in *Being and Time* that most of our understanding of the world is pre-cognitive, and that this understanding becomes manifest to our occurrent conscience awareness primarily through some kind of disruption or breakdown. Thus we become aware of the hammer as a hammer, including whatever explicit ideas we may have about what a hammer is supposed to do and what qualities a good hammer might have, when the hammer doesn’t function as it should (because it’s too heavy, badly made, we lack the skill to use it properly, etc.). Similarly, Heidegger wants to insist that we have an understanding of ourselves and our own essence that becomes manifest in breakdown. The breakdown is angst.69 Angst discloses Dasein as being-towards-death. This brings to light our essential nature as self-constitutors, and the ultimate contingency of whatever determinate content might in fact constitute, or be taken to constitute, our identities. We will now try to explain these claims.

tendency of *das Man* is to distort by passing off the more obvious and superficial manifestations of the phenomenon for the phenomenon itself. Thus the everyday notions can indicate the direction in which a deeper articulation of our understanding might lie. In the present case, the term “death” normally refers to the end-of-life event, but though that doesn’t adequately reveal its significance, it does, as it were, point the inquiry in a certain direction.

In this and other noteworthy cases we will look at later – guilt and conscience – one may wonder why Heidegger continues to use the everyday term to refer to the existential phenomenon when that lends itself to so much confusion. My suggestion is that it functions as a kind of heuristic device, wrenching those concepts, and so us, out from under the dominion of *das Man* in a way that at once unsettles them and opens us up to the broader significance they have in our understanding.

69 The reason we won’t use the term “anxiety,” the typical translation of angst, is that, first, angst is a relatively familiar term in the English language which seems flexible enough to capture Heidegger’s sense, and second, “anxiety” connotes too strongly a certain psychological state akin to “worry” or “stress,” which is not what Heidegger means.
Dasein is always already thrown into definite possibilities, which is to say that it is always living in a way that displays a particular kind of orientation in the world. Brought up as an American, Chinese or Saudi Arabian, as a Jew, a secularist, a Muslim, in a poor or rich family, etc., there are certain understandings of what kind of behavior, way of talking, way of relating to those like you and different from you are appropriate, what kinds of ends and activities are worthwhile and which immoral or frivolous, what characterizes a well-lived life, etc., understandings which have been handed over to me in a given identity; and it’s within these understandings that I mostly live out everyday life. Due to the tendencies of das Man to imbue itself with authority and to stamp down deviance and creativity, many, if not most of these given understandings carry the weight of being objectively grounded, certain and exclusively so. And so we carry on with our lives in the tranquilizing certainty that the ends, values, and perspectives orienting our lives are the “right” ones, should the question ever arise.

Angst in its nascent form arises when this certainty and sense of groundedness gets questioned, and thus the security of those possibilities that constitute our identities is threatened. At its limit, angst is the kind of experience\(^\text{70}\) in which the contingency of all of our possibilities, and indeed our identity as a whole is disclosed. The basic idea is this: Dasein is that being which can and must always take a stand on its being by pressing forward into possibilities. Any particular possibility into which it presses forward – any particular stand it takes – can be abandoned, lost, stripped away, or

\(^{70}\) More precisely, angst is a “mood,” in Heidegger’s sense to be discussed in the following chapter (section 3.6).
modified. The limit situation of this condition is that all of one’s possibilities have been lost, that there is nothing more into which Dasein can press forward. This is ontological death, “the possibility of the absolute impossibility of Dasein” (BT 294). Certainly demise – the end of one’s biological life – is an instance of this, and indeed reflection on one’s end in the sense of demise often occasions the awareness of the finitude and contingency of our lives. But again, Heidegger insists that death is a possibility that pertains to us here and now, not in some indeterminate future.

To put it differently, Heidegger cryptically says in an early lecture course that Dasein is its death.71 What I think he means by this is that there is nothing that can release me from the burden of ultimately having to choose what stand to take on my being. The opposite of having to choose is having an orientation be so utterly compelling that I am released from the burden of choice. But if the possibility of death always looms, and death is the condition in which no stance or orientation gives shape to my life, then there is no stance or orientation that can be utterly compelling in this way. Therefore, the stand I take on my being, my sense of identity that frames my possibilities, is one that ultimately I have to choose. To anticipate, authenticity is resolutely taking up this burden.

In short, just as the breakdown of equipment and social relations brings us into a position in which we start questioning them in their being, so too does angst with

regard to our own self-understandings and significances. And what it reveals is that none of these is such as to be securely grounded and immune to threat. Heidegger’s move here appears to his answer to the Cartesian epoche, with two crucial differences. The first, of course, is that he arrives at a very different conclusion than Descartes. Instead of arriving at the secure foundation of the cogito from which we can build certain and objective knowledge, the conception of oneself as a thinking thing is one of those possibilities called into question. Second, it does not appear that angst is anything like a “method” that one can employ at will in the comfort of the fireside sitting chair. Rather, it seems to be a phenomenon that comes upon Dasein. The conductor might find herself losing her hearing; the young Christian might take a college course that challenges his faith; the rich aesthete may run out of money or have a debilitating accident; the social worker may crumple under the weight of the apparent futility of her efforts; the civil rights activist may become disillusioned, the neo-Nazi may strike up an expected friendship with a Jew. The possibilities are endless. But death is, as Heidegger often says, a possibility that is “not to be outstripped,” meaning that no matter how we might respond to the experience of the loss of meaning, any possibilities we might then take up will continue to have the same vulnerability and contingency.

So is he right about this? Someone might object that the idea of choice is itself an illusion, that we are utterly determined, by culture, biology, or whatever, to frame the world in a particular way, and thus that our orientation is ultimately compelling “from the outside,” as it were. To echo the points made above (section 2.2), it’s hard to see this as more than just stipulation, or to put it in present language, as itself a possible
orientation towards our being that is regarded as if has inescapable grounds for holding it. But then the claim becomes simply circular: why are the grounds for thinking that we are determined towards some particular orientation utterly compelling? It cannot be because we are determined towards the orientation that finds them compelling, for that would be just question begging. It can’t be because there are rational considerations for holding to that view, since that presupposes that underlying the second-order view of ourselves as culturally or biologically determined is a first-order view of ourselves as responsive to reasons, say, in which case the second-order view dissolves.

But this brings up a second, more plausible objection: that there are ultimately compelling reasons for adopting one orientation towards the world rather than another, reasons to which our choice of framework, to be the “right” one, must be responsive. The question of whether something like this is so, and how we are to make sense of it, is, we might say, a guiding theme of this dissertation, and so I can only offer a very brief kind of response at this juncture. I will try to establish that from a hermeneutical point of view it is the case that there are better and worse orienting stands to take towards the world; and indeed, we have already considered some that are “worse” (such as the one in the previous paragraph). But what we have to guard against is the supposition, implicit in the objection as I phrased it, that this can be determined outside of any particular framework already adopted. That is to say, it is no objection to Heidegger’s view to suppose that the only legitimate perspective on the world is one that is gains its legitimacy from having been considered and adopted from a purely rational perspective, prescinding from all determinate content whatsoever. And it is no objection to his view
to claim that the alternative to either this or radical determinism/historicism is
voluntarism, the view that our choice of stand to take on our being is arbitrary and
baseless. This is what we will now consider.

2.6 Alternative Authenticities

The manner of our response to angst and the being-towards-death that it
reveals marks a crucial difference between authentic and inauthentic life. We can grope
about for something secure, refusing to face the finitude of existence. We can lose
ourselves in the publicness of das Man, refusing, as it were, to be concerned with the
burden of choosing ourselves. Or we can resolutely choose our own possibilities. Put
this way, it is easy to see how Sartre’s radical voluntarism took its inspiration from
Heidegger’s analysis of angst and death, as well as how this analysis might lend itself to
a romantic kind of call to “be oneself” in the sense of finding some hidden meaning
deep within oneself to which one is called to be “true.” 72

Neither of these directions is adequate to Heidegger’s analysis, and so if we are
looking to see what Heidegger’s thought might contribute to an account of virtue, the
virtuous life will not look like either of these pictures either. We can look to Heidegger’s

72 With regard to the following interpretations of both Sartre and the romantic view, our primary
concern is to elucidate what I take the be the most plausible interpretation of Heidegger’s notion of
authenticity by contrasting it with other possible, but inadequate, interpretations. I acknowledge that if
our primary concern was Sartre, Rousseau, Herder, Dilthey, etc., themselves, the analysis and critique we
shall offer might be reasonably challenged as based on a misrepresentation of their thought. And so
these names or the schools of thought they represent should be taken more as placeholders for the kinds
of common conceptions of authenticity that, if attributed to Heidegger as I interpret him, would lead to
confusion and a misunderstanding of the argument we are making in this dissertation. This applies to
chapter 4’s discussion of romantic/historicist hermeneutics as well.

76
analysis of conscience to see why a romantic interpretation fails. He describes conscience as the “call” to authenticity, and like “death,” “conscience” is one of those concepts that is employed in a way that often obscures its underlying significance, as when the romantic might see conscience as one’s “inner voice” that gets lost amidst the babble of the everyday world.\textsuperscript{73} I can only sketch a rough and inchoate version of Heidegger’s account of conscience here, with a promise to offer more substantial explanation and defense later; our present concern is to show how a romantic view of authenticity, as obeying one’s conscience in the sense of an inner voice, falters.

The everyday view of conscience is that of the inner voice telling us what to do or what not to do, often in the face of inclinations or desires to do otherwise. More sophisticated accounts have seen it as the calm, rational reflection on our duties (Butler), a kind of pain associated with the violation of our duty (Mill), as an “inner court” representing the moral law (Kant), and as the voice of God, to name a few. These sorts of views suppose there to be an independent truth about our duties of which conscience informs us, convicts us, motivates us towards, etc. Heidegger rejects these views (for reasons that we will have to wait until later to see), but still sees them as indicating in some way a phenomenon he describes as “the self calling to the self” (BT 317 ff). But in contrast to the other views, he adds the perplexing but crucial point that what conscience speaks to us is, strictly speaking, “nothing.”

\textsuperscript{73} In the next chapter, we will explicate the notion of conscience in more detail to show its important conceptual relationship to \textit{phronesis}. So the current discussion will end up having the consequence of undermining a possible interpretation of phronesis as “listening to one’s inner voice” or some such.
What I think Heidegger means here is the following: in so far as I am inauthentic (lost in das Man), I relinquish myself to its dominion. Given its tendency to pass off its ways of doing things as having absolute authority, particularly in the form of rules or directives, considering the voice of conscience as speaking to some independent or universal moral standard is a form of inauthenticity. It is the self thus lost and unowned to which conscience appeals, calling it to not merely subsume one’s life under the rules and standards that constitute traditional morality. But the appeal is made by this same self, in so far as I am capable of a kind of ownership of my life. I can’t “know” what to do simply by appeal to any independent standard, which is why the voice speaks “nothing”: nothing from the point of view of the self lost in and in thrall to the public (including moral) standards of the social milieu. Otherwise put, it is the call to recognize and embrace, rather than suppress, the existential fact of our being-towards-death, which as we saw above involves the recognition that no standards, rules or norms have final and absolute authority, but burden us with the task of choosing ourselves in taking a stand. The “nothingness” to which consciousness calls can thus be seen in contrast to some sort of secure and utterly compelling source of reasons for acting that would remove the burden of choice.

Thus far, this (very rough) account seems to be congruent with what a romantic view might say. The latter sort of view might then conclude that I have to look inside to my own individual genius or creativity for guidance. Or perhaps “find my inner spirit,” “realize my true identity,” or “discover my personal vision and purpose” or some other title on the self-help shelf.
However, it remains the case, as we have said, that the content of the possibilities is still drawn from this world. There is nothing independent of my world, a deeply embedded “private voice” which I can hear and understand if I only shut out the chatter of the world. As Heidegger puts it, the self lost in the public interpretations of *das Man*:

does not get called to that Self which can become for itself an ‘object’ on which to pass judgment, nor to that Self which inertly dissects its ‘inner life’ with fussy curiosity, nor to that Self which one has in mind when one gazes ‘analytically’ as psychical conditions and what lies behind them. The appeal to the Self in the *Man-selbst* does not force it inwards upon itself, so that it can close itself off from the ‘external world’. The call passes over everything like this and disperses it, so as to appeal solely to that Self which, notwithstanding, is in no other way than Being-in-the-world (BT 318).

If the life to which I am called is to remain intelligible, it must find its bearings from within the shared horizons of the social world, the same world the immersion and dispersal into which constitutes inauthenticity. This is why Heidegger refers to the call of conscience as “one which calls us back in calling us forth”:

In calling forth to something, the ‘whence’ of the calling is the ‘whither’ to which we are called back. When the call gives us a potentiality-for-Being to understand, it does not give us one which is ideal and universal; it discloses it as that which has been currently individualized and which belongs to that particular Dasein (BT 326).

We will return to this theme momentarily. For now it’s worth pointing out that a romantic interpretation of authenticity fails not only because there is no private, inner self with its own content to which we’re called to “be true,” but also because supposing that there is amounts to another instance of approaching the self as if it were an object
to be examined, something present-at-hand in Heidegger’s terms.74 “Such procedures,” Heidegger explains, “are facilitated by the unexpressed but ontologically dogmatic guiding thesis that what is...must be present-at-hand...” (BT 320). That is, the presumption he rejects is that if there is anything like a “conscience” which “calls,” it must be something I can examine and explain from a third-person perspective, whether that be the contents of some inner, true self, or the mechanisms of naturalistic processes at play. All of these are instances of the circumscribing that characterizes the objectifying tendencies of *das Man*. So ironically, the romantic interpretation of the call to authenticity, as an interpretation of the very phenomenon that is supposed to transcend the distortions inherent in public interpretations, ends up trading in just such distortions.

The voluntarist interpretation is a bit more difficult to challenge from a textual standpoint, since many passages from *Being and Time* lend themselves quite well to such an interpretation. Sartre, as we well know, thinks that simple acquiescence to the traditional norms and standards is an exercise of “bad faith.” We pretend that there are universal absolutes to which we must adhere, instead of facing up to the unsettling fact that whatever values guide our lives are ones that we have ultimately chosen to offer allegiance. There are no overriding reasons to choose one way of life over another, and so any choice is ultimately just as valid as any other, so long as it is chosen in a spirit of

74 This critique applies equally to the supposition that the phenomenon of angst can be reduced to a mere neurological or biological process, something that the scientist or anthropologist can explain in concepts that would just as well apply to the runt of the litter.
freedom and without the pretense of responding to some kind of essential purpose or meaning inherent in human life (including the kind of “inner purpose” of the romantic view). So we can see that Sartre’s view sounds quite close to, if not synonymous with what we just argued were the implications of being-towards-death. To distinguish the Heideggerian position from this kind of existentialism, I will raise two objections to this sort of view, one from Heidegger’s later writing and one entailed by Heidegger’s position in *Being and Time*.

First, in the “Letter on Humanism” Heidegger takes up directly the claims put forward by Sartre, presumably from the latter’s “Existentialism is a Humanism.” In addressing the shared concern that “man... think the essence of his being and not merely... give accounts of the nature and history of his constitution and activities” (LH 228), that is, to approach ourselves as the being that must take a stand on its being and recognize “the seductions of the public realm as well as the impotence of the private,” Heidegger insists that “man must first let himself be claimed again by Being” (LH 223, my emphasis). Neither the acquiescence to the public interpretations nor to our own private desires can realize “the property dignity of man,” with which Sartre, I think, would have agreed. But Heidegger sees this dignity not in exercising a kind of “lordship” over Being (LH 245), but as the “shepherd of Being” (LH 233-234). In this illustrative language Heidegger seems to be trying to evoke a sense that Sartre’s picture is merely the reciprocal of, not an alternative to the problems of traditional metaphysics. The

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traditional notion that there is a determinate, objective essence of human life which can serve as the foundation of our conceptions of meaning, purpose and value (and hence our choices and ways of life), on the one hand, and the claim that any meaning, purpose or value is the product of human choice, each exercise “lordship” over being by closing off the question of Being. That is, the “proper dignity of man” lies in the fact that we can always question Being not simply in the sense that we can always call into question the received interpretations, but that we are enquirers. More generally, we are the beings through which Being – meaning, significance, intelligibility, truth, etc. – discloses itself, which can take place through enquiry but also through art, poetry, and other sorts of activity. It is no more necessary that we concede unthinkingly to some particular given interpretation of our meaning and purpose than it is to suppose that for there to be any meaning or purpose we having to simply impose it. As beings that continually ask the question, “who am I” or “what is,” we must always be searching for an answer. But it would be fruitless to genuinely pose such a question if the answer were simply to reside in our own wills.

Indeed to suppose so would be to forestall the possibility of any answer, no matter how provisional, in the sense of something possibly unexpected, something that might challenge or illuminate in a new way our prior understanding, and thus to render the question meaningless qua question.76 This brings me to the second objection, derived from Heidegger’s account of Dasein as the being for whom being is an issue.

76 For further discussion of the nature of the question, and how it is more fundamental than the statement, the claim, or the choice, see chapter 4.
For being to be an issue implies that we are engaged in the question of what “is.” In as much as our preconceptions are for the most part determined by the heritage into which we are thrown, we cannot simply appeal to how things initially “appear” to us. For the most part, appearances are clouded by the distorting public interpretations that seek to maintain themselves in the tranquility of what is familiar. But this, as we have shown, is more often than not a subversion of anything that might be disturbing and threatening, a kind of avoidance of anything that might disrupt the security of the received norms and practices that orient our lives and ground our identities. And so the notion that we should merely “choose” in a voluntaristic sense does not in any way guarantee that this choice is authentic.

As Sartre recognizes, when one chooses, particularly under his presumption that my choice and my choice only confers value on what is chosen, one closes off the possibilities that are not chosen, and this is distressing. If I decide to fight for the resistance rather than stay home to care for my mother, as in Sartre’s famous example, I have taken a stand on what direction my life is to take, which is simultaneously a stand on what direction my life is not to take. But the question then becomes, why, if there is nothing to recommend one direction over another, should that choice be distressing, as Sartre (and Heidegger) insist? If something is distressing, it is so because something is at stake. But if all that matters is whatever my will is to decide should matter, then what is at stake in the choice? There is no “wrong choice” to make, no higher way of life to which I will fail to live up.
But then a further difficulty emerges: why should I care about being authentic? That is, what recommends the lucid embrace of one’s freedom over bad faith? It cannot be that bad faith is somehow a “lower” or “less valuable” form of existence, since that possibility is ruled out by the claim that such evaluative notions are created by my will. It is difficult to see how choosing itself can be taken as having anything to recommend it. If choice is a good thing, it is so only because I have “chosen” to “choose.” So not having “chosen” does not thereby become something “bad”; it merely means I have not chosen to confer value on choice itself.

One way to understand the voluntarist’s mistake is that he conflates what we have been distinguishing as the structural dimensions of Dasein’s existence with the normative possibilities inherent within that structure. Sartre is right in insisting that in so far as Dasein is the sort of being that must always take a stand on its being, it is not the case that the right way to live is an independent truth which is waiting to be discovered by means of some sort of calculus involving the application of a universal rule or principle to the particularities of my life and circumstances. How we orient ourselves, and the kinds of self-conceptions and evaluative presuppositions inherent in that orientation, will themselves inform the kinds of considerations that lead us to judge one course of action or way of life as more worthwhile than another. But this orientation is precisely what will always be in question, given the kind of self-constituting beings we are. So structurally, it is true that we always have to “choose” our lives, in the sense of taking some kind of orientation towards questions of meaning and value, an orientation that cannot itself be judged from a standpoint independent of
any orientation whatsoever. However, this does not entail that the choosing itself is the sole determinant of the value of what is chosen. Put differently, it is not in taking some particular stand on my being that such a stand, and the resultant judgments, behaviors and perceptions, are valid. Heidegger seems to indicate as much in his remarks on “values” from the “Letter on Humanism”:

It is important finally to realize that precisely through the characterization of something as ‘a value’ what is so valued is robbed of its worth. That is to say, by the assessment of something as a value what is valued is admitted only as an object for man’s estimation. But what a thing is in its Being is not exhausted by its being an object, particularly when objectivity takes the form of value. Every valuing, even where it values positively, is a subjectivizing. It does not let beings: be. Rather, valuing lets beings: be valid – solely as the objects of its doing (LH 251).

Given that the context of these remarks is a response to Sartre’s existentialism, it is reasonable to suppose that he is referring here to the notion that an object’s “value” is a function of its “being-valued,” viz., taken as an object of value. Presupposed by such a notion is the duality of subject-object that Heidegger wants to overcome: when we speak in evaluative terms, so the voluntaristic claim goes, the “subject” is circumscribing the “object” in such a way as to determine it as having some particular kind of value. Its being, particularly in its value, is reducible to the combination of some “neutral” entity and a subjective act of valuation. This is simply the inverse of the kind of objective realism about value that Heidegger and Sartre alike want to challenge. Both the objective realist – the one who considers value as an inherent feature of the fabric of the independent universe waiting to be discovered – and the subjective anti-realist – who thinks of value as the projection of the subject onto the world of objects – trade in
a kind of metaphysics that fails to account for the other structural feature of Dasein, that Dasein is \textit{thrown} Being-in-the-world – a world always already infused with significance – prior to any such subject-object distinctions.

As I suggested before, the voluntaristic interpretation of authenticity, though right in its rejection of a certain kind of metaphysical objectivism about value incompatible with Being-in-the-world, makes the mistake of conflating this structural element of authenticity with the normative dimension when it supposes authenticity to be identical with some kind of radical choice. As I argued above, this dissolves any normative dimension of authenticity, since it cannot explain why we \textit{should} be authentic. And the problem is that this account does not pay sufficient regard to the fact that Dasein can never get behind its thrownness. If it is true that there is no perspective or neutral orientation \textit{from} which we choose among various alternative possibilities – no ultimate \textit{subject} disencumbered from the world – then we will have to question the very possibility of radical choice. What appears to be the free, uncompelled choosing of one’s self and one’s possibilities will turn out to be the unrecognized influence of some element of one’s thrown circumstance driving one toward one decision or another. Thus, the kind of lucidity about one’s ultimate freedom and the burden of choice that Sartre identifies with authenticity turns out to be, on the contrary, an instance of opacity about one’s possibilities.
2.7 Thrownness and Projection

So we have tried to argue that authenticity cannot be conceived in either a romantic or a voluntarist sense, both because they do not stand up and because Heidegger himself rejects them. To this it might simply be responded that Heidegger’s overall view is incoherent: given his analysis of death and how that opens up the burden of choosing one’s own possibilities, it might seem that he is committed to some kind of voluntarism, or even nihilism, despite what he claims, or that his analysis of death is itself deeply problematic. We have indicated that the direction of response lies in holding fast to Dasein’s temporality as a whole, which includes not just projection (the dimension we have been considering in the death analysis and its implications) but thrownness as well. Thus, whatever authenticity is, whatever choosing one’s possibilities in the face of death will turn out to be, it is inseparable from the fact that we can never escape the condition of having been thrown into, and having to project out of and back onto, a way of understanding and engaging with ourselves and the world.

This brings us to the heart of our analysis of how Heidegger’s thought bears on the question of historicity and contingency. The question before us now is how Heidegger reconciles the notion of authentically choosing one’s possibilities on which the voluntarist interpretation seizes with the claim that one cannot get behind one’s thrownness, which seem at first to stand in contradiction to one another. This problem is essentially the same as how we can ground the normative dimension of das Man and its modes, given their inescapable structural dimension. If das Man is an essential
element of our being, how is it that living in the mode of das Man can be a negative thing? Similarly, if thrownness is an inescapable dimension of our being, how is it that we can genuinely choose our possibilities? It may seem that the only sense we can make of authenticity as a normative ideal is that of simply facing up to the fact that the way we think, judge, evaluate, and act are merely contingent products of our historically conditioned, thrown circumstance.

When Heidegger introduces the discussion of Dasein’s historicality, he does so by noting the “one-sidedness” of an account which only focuses on being-towards-death in the sense of the projection of one’s ownmost possibilities in the face of a lack of determinate grounding principles. If such a projection is, as we have said, “taking over” oneself and one’s possibilities of being as opposed to simply following the norms and standards of das Man, it remains the case that “we must ask whence, in general, Dasein can draw those possibilities upon which it factically projects itself” (BT 434). This is going to turn out to be some content already present in one’s “heritage,” and so the question has to be what kind of relation to that heritage will constitute authenticity, or more specifically, authentic historicality.

We have already discussed how the intelligibility of our lives at its most fundamental level presupposes a world laced with rich meanings and significances out of which our identities are constituted prior to and always lying behind any cognitive awareness of and reflection upon it. As beings who are always engaged with the world, we can never adopt a kind of “worldless” perspective from which either to evaluate
alternative possibilities or to arbitrarily choose how to orient ourselves. Even reflection itself must make use of language, concepts, modes of thought, and other capacities that have to be, to some extent at least, inherited and presupposed. Moreover, this world must be a shared one if we are to make sense of all the various kinds of relationships we have with other people. And these shared horizons must be bound up with a shared history within which the way of interpreting ourselves and the world has come down. So the resolute choosing which constitutes authenticity must always bear an intimate relationship with those historical horizons. “The authentic existentiell understanding is so far from extricating itself from the way of interpreting Dasein which has come down to us, that in each case it is in terms of this interpretation, against it, and yet again for it, that any possibility one has chosen is seized upon in one’s resolution” (BT 435). What Heidegger means by this is captured in the passage that follows:

The resoluteness in which Dasein comes back to itself, discloses current factical possibilities of authentic existing...in terms of the heritage which that resoluteness, as thrown, takes over. In one’s coming back resolutely to one’s thrownness, there is hidden a handing down to oneself of the possibilities that have come down to one, but not necessarily as having thus come down. If everything ‘good’ is a heritage, and the character of ‘goodness’ lies in making authentic existence possible, then the handing down of a heritage constitutes itself in resoluteness. The more authentically Dasein resolves – and this means that in anticipating death it understands itself unambiguously in terms of its ownmost distinctive possibility – the more unequivocally does it choose and find the possibility of its existence, and the less does it do so by accident. Only by the anticipation of death is every accidental and ‘provisional’ possibility driven out. Only Being-free for death, gives Dasein its goal outright and pushes existence into its finitude. Once one has grasped the finitude of one’s existence, it snatches one back from the endless multiplicity of possibilities which offer themselves as closest to one – those of comfortableness, shirking, and taking things lightly – and brings Dasein into the simplicity of its fate [Shicksals]. This is how we designate Dasein’s primordial historizing, which lies in authentic resoluteness and in which Dasein hands itself down to itself, free for death, in a possibility which it has inherited and yet chosen” (BT 435).
In this passage Heidegger is trying to show how authenticity must first and foremost involve a recognition of and resolute embrace of the finitude that lies at both “ends,” so to speak, of one’s being: thrownness and death. On the one hand, there is the fact that, in the face of (existential) death, there are no absolute certainties, no conceptions of human nature, the structures of rationality, the cosmos, the natural or supernatural order, or any other source of meaning, significance, and value that compel allegiance by their very nature. There is always the possibility that whatever determinate conception frames and orients our understandings will fail. The provisionality and contingency of our orienting frameworks, and the consequent burden of having to ultimately choose, can be something we either accept and embrace, or something which we suppress, either by passively acquiescing to the public interpretations of das Man or by naively countenancing our choice of projection as a “discovery” of some absolute truth. On the other hand lies the fact that we cannot function as human beings without some kind of orienting framework, and the content of that orientation, as we have stressed, must be one that is received and shared, if there is going to be any kind of intelligibility to our lives. It must, in other words, be an inheritance. But as an inheritance, it is not something we have created or invented, which is to say there is the finitude of our having to live out our lives within a horizon that we can never fully get behind. So the kind of framework that orients an authentic life must be one that is “inherited and yet chosen” where each of these dimensions remains finite, and authenticity itself cannot involve pretending otherwise.
But as Heidegger remarks in the foregoing passage, choosing is not simply adopting the possibilities “as having thus come down,” in the sense of, say, converting to a religion or political ideology in such a way that one “chooses” to submit oneself unquestioningly to the prevailing authorities, a set of guiding principles, beliefs or interpretations, etc., as if what prevails is the final word. To do so would be what we earlier called “acquiescing” to possibilities that, we might say, belong not to oneself but strictly to another, which characterizes lostness in das Man. Rather, authentic choosing of the received possibilities must “repeat” them by making what Heidegger calls a “reciprocative rejoinder” [Erwiderung] (BT 438). The sense of this term indicates both an acknowledgement of debt to the past as the wellspring of one’s possibilities, as well as the constant demand to bring such interpretations to bear on the uniqueness of the particular situation, thereby necessarily modifying the interpretation as it has been received. This may sound like he is talking about the application of some kind of objective principle of action, but that would be a misreading. “When such a rejoinder is made to this [received] possibility in a resolution,” Heidegger explains,

it is made in a moment of vision [augenblick]; and as such it is at the same time a disavowal of that which in the ‘today’, is working itself out as the ‘past’. Repetition does not abandon itself to that which is past, nor does it aim at progress. In the moment of vision authentic existence is indifferent to both these alternatives (BT 438).

77 The following remarks will be expanded in chapter 4 as we consider the concept of application in Gadamer’s hermeneutics, and will have an important bearing on the account of the relation between “transcendental” and “immanent” virtues in chapter 6.

78 The idea that repetition does not “aim at progress” anticipates an easily-misunderstood remark that Gadamer makes in Truth and Method, when he claims that understanding is never “better,” only “different.” I argue in section 4.8 that Gadamer overstates his case in order to distinguish his view
One way of reading this passage is as a challenge to the view that human action can be adequately parsed into the universal and the particular. According to such a view, human action is ideally *rational*, and this means that the ideal rational agent acts on the basis of principles that it can recognize as having universal validity. As we confront occasions for action, we either recognize and accept as fulfilling this requirement something which has been given to it ("abandoning itself to that which is past") or come up with some new or modified principle that comes closer to achieving this ideal ("aiming at progress"). In both cases, the presumption is that whatever guides rational action must be in principle valid for all rational agents as such. Heidegger's alternative to this picture is that the kind of "rejoinder to the past" that constitutes authentic action is in an important way singular and concrete, made “in a moment of vision” as opposed to on the basis of rational principles. The reason for this lies in his rejection of the cognitivist view of human action that it presupposes.

First, we have discussed in detail Heidegger’s argument that “care,” the being of Dasein, has to do with our engaged dealings in the world that proceed on the basis of an understanding of the world, including ourselves and other Daseins, that cannot be reduced to cognitively-available rational forms, even in principle. Yet the world remains for the most part intelligible, which is to say our engagement is not blind. To be sure, sometimes this understanding gets made explicit, articulated in ways that do take the form of reasons or principles; but the point is that the space of meaning is broader than

from Hegel’s; in similar fashion, we can perhaps understand Heidegger’s statement here as a bit of hyperbolic distancing of his view from the kinds I suggest below.
the space of reasons, as Carman put it above. We are now in a position to add that Dasein’s being-towards-death is incompatible with the notion, even in principle, of universal principles that can tell us what to do.

This means that the way in which the inherited past (our “heritage” in his terms) has its effect is not in terms of providing us a determinate content like a set of beliefs or principles which we apply to our present, concrete situations. Rather, it supplies those frameworks within which engaged, pre-conceptual involvement, as well as conceptual thought, takes place. Since engaged involvement is always also a projection onto the future, and since those projections involve taking a stand our being, engagement is a matter of taking such a stand. But – and this is the important point to be made – the way in which our heritage gets passed down is determined not by the heritage itself, but by the way in which Dasein’s own self-projections come to bear on its engagements with the world.

I’ll put it another way: when we use hammers and converse with people, we already have an inherited understanding of what hammers and conversations are for, what body movements, what words, intonations, cadences, etc. (in the case of conversation), and what kinds of responses to various possible hindrances are necessary for successful engagement in hammering and conversing. These understandings are pre-conceptual, which means that they cannot be entirely circumscribed, even in principle, under codifiable rules (“if X happens, then one should Y,” e.g.). So when we hammer and converse, we are not simply applying practical principles to concrete
situations. But there still is a point to what we are doing – it still makes sense. These points have their intelligibility by being part of a structural whole that ultimately refers to Dasein itself as the being that has an understanding of its own being. Thus the understanding I have of how to hammer or converse will make reference to the stand I take on myself as a carpenter, a family member, a friend, a business associate, a stranger, etc., all of which will be drawn from a shared heritage. But just as there are no rulebooks on how to hammer or hold a conversation, there are no rulebooks on how to be a carpenter, friend, etc.79 Being these things is, we might say, a project80 always in development: there is never a point in which one has ever finally “figured out” what it is to be a friend, etc. What’s more, to be a carpenter or friend I have to be engaged in the characteristic activities. To say that being historical involves making a rejoinder to the past in a moment of vision is thus to point to the phenomenon of having to continually reshape what it means to use hammers, hold conversations, etc., which is intertwined with the continual reshaping of our identities as carpenters, fathers, etc., all of which takes place out of an inherited sense of what this means, but can only finally take shape as we bear the burden of having to choose our possibilities in our engaged dealings.

79 This is not to say there aren’t good “rules of thumb” or rules pertaining to some aspects of these engagements, of course, and these guidelines may be more or less determinate and applicable depending on what we’re talking about. But the claim is that rules can never exhaust what it means to be these sorts of things, in so far as we are talking about them ontologically. Some occupations, perhaps, might be strictly rule-guided, but we’re not talking about those sorts of things. A good distinction between the two would be the difference between being a university professor – an occupation that can be circumscribed in terms of certain codifiable duties, standards, and the like – and being a teacher, which would be an example of a kind of stand one can take on one’s being not circumscribable in this way.

80 Cf. fn.67.
These last points have pertained to Dasein’s existential structure: it describes our characteristic way of going on, to anticipate the later discussion about virtue; they haven’t yet clarified what it is to live authentically as a carpenter, friend, etc. Nor have we yet said anything explicit about what it means to be a good carpenter, friend, etc. All of this will be treated with (I hope) due care in the chapters that follow. I will first make a preliminary remark in anticipation of that. If we follow Heidegger’s method of formal indication and start with the notion of authenticity in the everyday sense, as in some way “being true to oneself” or “owning” one’s being, and if there is something legitimate in this, it will lie in living one’s life in accordance with one’s existential structure. This, we have already suggested, is drawn from the Aristotelian notion of eudaimonia as a well-lived life given the sort of beings we are. So in each case, it is necessary to have the right kind of approach to the question of what sorts of beings we are, i.e., what our existential structure is. This chapter has been an attempt to elucidate a Heideggerian perspective on this question. Dasein, as Heidegger sees it, is a being that has been thrown into a world with meanings and significances arising out a shared and effective history, in which and out of which it always must project a particular kind of understanding of Dasein and the world. Dasein is finite and temporal, meaning that thrownness, engagement and projection are equally part of our being, and one can never get behind one’s thrownness or disengage oneself from the world, and death is the possibility that cannot be outstripped. This analysis calls into question approaches to human life and the world that begin with the presumption of subjectivity or interiority detached from an external, objective world, ones that regard human nature
as an object to be analyzed, ones that make a sharp distinction between the neutral, objective world and subjective meanings and values, and ones that consider rationality to be the primary mode of meaningful engagement with the world. All of this, as well as the challenge to certain rival views of authenticity, will no doubt have carried suggestive insinuations as to how this account will pertain to the questions of ethics, and to virtue ethics in particular. It is to the task of making these insinuations explicit that we now turn.
CHAPTER 3:

AUTHENTICITY AND NORMATIVITY

3.1 The Problem of Subjectivity

The last chapter was an exposition and defense of some of the basic features of Heidegger’s analysis of Dasein, the aim of which was to draw out the meaning of authenticity and to distinguish it from some of the dominant construals of human life that underlie much modern thought about morality, as well as certain misperceptions to which the notion of authenticity is susceptible. This has been in the context of a larger project of articulating and defending an ethics of virtue that can recognize, incorporate and defend the fact of inescapable contingent, historically conditioned horizons lying behind our understanding of how one should live. We have suggested that the relevance of the Heideggerian view to virtue ethics lies in the parallels between his notion of authenticity on the one hand, and the notion of eudaimonia or living well at the heart of virtue ethics on the other hand, as both having to do with successfully living as the sort of being one is. So one of the aims of this chapter will be to draw out this relevance in somewhat general terms, explaining how Heidegger can help us get a clearer grasp of how to approach and live out the question of what it means to live well, to be practically wise in the sense of having a sensitivity to and appropriate response to the situation, and how virtues of character might be construed. Towards the end of the chapter, we will focus our attention on the issue of naturalism, given that this has not
only been one of the most prominent approaches to virtue ethics, but one of the principal ways in which its defenders have tried to meet the challenge of historicity and contingency. We will argue that approaching the question of ethics from the perspective of authenticity raises a number of significant problems for a strong naturalist account, and that the modifications proposed by virtue ethicists with similar reservations about strong naturalism tend nevertheless to veer into what remains a problematic rationalist or intellectualist direction.

In the broadest terms, this chapter will be arguing for certain transcendental conditions with respect to the question of how to think about ourselves as beings with ethical understandings, which will at the same time be an argument against other, more common approaches. One of these conditions will be that we have to recognize this understanding as unfolding in the course of a dialogical encounter with the heritage from which we draw its substance and content, as we began to talk about in the previous chapter. The nature and shape of such an encounter is what we will look to Gadamer’s thought to help us discern in chapters 4 and 5. Having drawn this out, we will try to apply our findings to more concrete questions about the virtues in chapter 6, in which we will see the structures of authenticity and hermeneutical dialogue as dialectically informing the concrete shape that our practical understanding of the virtues takes within the specific contexts of cultures, practices, and traditions.

So we will begin the chapter by proposing some critiques of modern morality, given the Heideggerian analysis we gave of human life and its relation to the world in
the previous chapter. If we recall, a tendency of the philosophical tradition that
Heidegger targets in his critiques is to take a derivative mode of comporting ourselves
towards entities – that which sees them in terms of features that can be recognized and
described independent of their significance to Dasein, viz., as present-at-hand – as the
primary and most legitimate mode of access to them; and this is especially problematic
with regard to our approach to humans themselves. One of the primary ways in which
this tendency has infected moral philosophy is through the presumption of subjectivity.
By this I’m referring to accounts of the nature and justification of paradigmatic moral
themes like values and goods, duties and right/wrong actions, pleasure and happiness,
and virtues that take their starting point in the notion of a “subject” that can be entirely
perspicuous to itself in a way that is disengaged from the world of “objects.” The two
sides of this dichotomy and their relation to each other have, of course, received highly
divergent and conflicting treatments; but what remains common is the unjustified and
often unquestioned prejudice that some metaphysical picture of this sort is the proper
approach to questions of ethics.

3.2 Egoism and Utilitarianism

Consider first how this manifests itself in broadly empiricist treatments of
morality.\textsuperscript{81} Egoistic theories, for example, give priority to the interests, desires or
potential pleasure-feelings of the isolated individual, which can be identified and

\textsuperscript{81} By “empiricist” I’m going to mean those who follow Hume in maintaining that reason by itself
cannot ground our moral concepts, so they appeal to some empirical fact about our subjective
constitution – ends, desires, sentiments, preferences, values, etc. – to serve as the basis of moral
judgment.
characterized in a form that lends itself to procedural practical reasoning about how best to attain their fulfillment. Values have their source in the interior of the self-interested individual, and the familiar moral duties thus get explained as the optimal course of action to secure pleasure or the absence of pain, desire fulfillment or preference satisfaction, or even some kind of animal end like survival and propagation. There is no such thing as altruism, for instance, since what appear to be entirely other-directed actions like self-sacrifice can still trace their origins to the calculation that the observance of such a norm can better secure the cooperation of others without which I would not be able to fulfill my own interests.82 Or we might take up a much more skeptical stance towards traditional moral norms and, like Callicles, chalk up altruistic behavior to naïve conformism or weakness.

Utilitarian theories agree that the justification for morality ultimately rests on some fact that is ego-centered, such as that we all pursue pleasure and the absence of pain as the ultimate end, or that we all have our own individual preferences. The mistake of the egoist, they claim, is supposing that “right action” is to be identified with the optimal satisfaction of my own interests; instead, they see the egocentric fact as

82 This approach even finds echoes in contractarian theories that are more commonly rooted in Kant than in Hume, in which moral norms represent the sorts of behavior that the atomistic, self-interested individual would proscribe in the ‘original position’ in which one does not know one’s social position, ‘comprehensive conceptions’, talents, specific ends, etc. As ethical theories, contractarians articulate principles of right action and analyze moral concepts in terms that presuppose a subject which can examine itself as an object that has the property of desiring, valuing, taking an interest, etc.; and that this subject exists, moreover, radically for itself, at least in its most fundamental being. While I think that what I say in the following paragraphs, as well as the section on Kant, would apply mutatis mutandis to a contractarian view of morality, I’m not so sure that they would apply without further argument to a contractarian view of justice (e.g., Rawls’). Unfortunately I won’t have the space to attempt such an argument here.
identifying that which has the highest value, in the sense of that which should be brought about through our actions. So by introspection on our own motives and desires (and presuming a common human nature), we can recognize pleasure and the absence of pain or preference satisfaction, e.g., as something everyone recognizes as the greatest value, given a conception of “value” as “that at which we aim to bring about.” And this leads to the conclusion that maximal pleasure, preference satisfaction, etc., as such is the state of the world that contains the greatest value, and thus the state at which all of our actions should aim.

So utilitarian and egoistic theories of morality both rest on the same foundational principle: that right action is that which brings about optimal value, and value is ultimately determined in terms of the interests of the isolated subject. Thus these theories share the presumption that a) human life is best characterized in terms of the isolated subject that has its own ends, desires, interests, and preferences; b) that one’s ends, desires, etc., are perspicuous to the subject, or at least enough so as to allow for practical reason to circumscribe them under a form available for the application of practical rules, such as “If S desires X, and A optimally achieves X, then S ought to A”; and c) that explaining and justifying normative significance proceeds from a framework of the sort presumed by (a) and (b). According to the Heideggerian view we

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83 The fact that there are consequentialists who do not attempt to locate the values to be maximized egocentrically (e.g., Philip Pettit and G.E. Moore) is relevant to the specific point I’m about to make, but not to the more general point about the failure of consequentialism due to an inadequate grasp of our way of being in the world.
are defending here, both (a) and (b) fail to be ontologically justified, and so (c) fails as well.

We have already discussed at length Heidegger’s reasons for rejecting (a), but I will briefly rehearse some of main points. Prior to and always lying behind the picture of the inwardly-focused subjective agent is the entity that is engaged with the world in a way that displays a given and shared horizon of understanding, an understanding in which the various webs of significance refer to Dasein’s projection of its own being. Out of this pre-cognitive but circumspective (i.e., meaningful) engagement with the world we might come to see some aspect in a certain relief – as something we desire, an end we want to achieve, etc.; our being as self-constitutors might also come into relief as we come to reflect on what our ends, values, beliefs, desires, etc., are or should be. But something’s coming into relief in this way is both a result of a disruption in our everyday, engaged activity, and necessarily involves other aspects of our understanding receding into the background. So concepts like subjectivity, ends, desires, preferences, etc., are only partial, derivative and limited ways of characterizing our way of going on, and as such a theory – like a moral theory – that attempts to make sense of some aspect of human life or human life as a whole, cannot be grounded in these concepts alone.

It would not necessarily follow from the failure of (a) that (b) fails as well. It seems that one may consistently agree that preferences, desires, etc., have something like the derivative, circumscribed and limited status vis-à-vis the whole of meaningful human life, and yet maintain that it is necessary to think in these terms if we are going
to construct an adequate theory about a certain *domain* of human life. This is the
domain that is concerned with the question of how anyone ought to act with respect to
*a particular* set of concerns that have chiefly to do with the regulation of interactions
between individuals who exhibit a wide variety of forms of life. Furthermore, the
defender of a utilitarian or egoist sort of view might argue that the possibility of this is
contained within the Heideggerian picture just rehearsed. Suppose, taking such a
position for a moment, that we grant that human life proximally and the for the most
part is an engaged understanding, that the belief-desire model does not adequately
characterize the whole of meaningful engagement, and that such a picture emerges out
of some kind of disengaging breakdown. We could then maintain that the domain of
“morality” concerns just those sorts of circumstances in which breakdown in our social
relations has occurred or may occur. Accordingly, we can identify something like the
having-of-preferences or the pursuit-of-pleasure/avoidance-of-pain as an element or
aspect of our engagement that emerges in a way common to *all* of us, which can then
serve as the basis for principles, duties and rules that are intended to regulate social
interaction insofar as it is subject to breakdown. 84

It is not implausible to think of our traditional moral norms and standards as
playing a role of this sort – that is, as applying to actual or potential sources of
breakdown in our everyday interactions rather than as representative of or entailed by
an account of our *fundamental* way of engagement in the world. But according to the

84 I will consider this sort of objection again, but in the context of a Kantian view rather than an empiricist one.
view under consideration, that element of our shared social horizons which is to serve as the foundation of moral norms is not only inherently self-directed and egocentric, it must, again, be available and perspicuous to subjective reflection as such – isolated from those interconnected webs of significances in which they originally have their intelligibility.

There’s no reason to think, however, that granting the possibility that a partially detached, reflective comportment towards our shared social horizons might disclose a content that is both common and available for rational (or, as I will propose later, hermeneutical) application, will reveal content anything like the quantifiable, universal and fundamentally self-directed content supposed by the theories under consideration; and indeed, there is every reason to suppose that it won’t. The reason has to do in part with the fact that our basic modes of comportment do not have this essentially self-directed character. We are proximally engaged with a world, not, as it were, with ourselves as subjects, and it is as beings within-the-world that we have a sense of what is meaningful and significant, including what is valuable and worth promoting or pursuing. So by the time we undertake the kind of radical abstraction of our proximal engagements necessary to arrive at anything like an isolated subjective element such as a pure pleasure or preference, we will have so thinned out the phenomenological character of our experience that there’s no reason to think that what we have arrived at bears any significant resemblance to rich structures and layers of meaning that constitute our lives. That is, the notion of pleasure or preference as such, detached from thick frameworks with their constitutive conceptions of the meaningful life, of
what Taylor has described as incomparably higher goods (those that orient the relative value of all other goods, such as the affirmation of ordinary life, dignity and freedom, etc.), is either a mere chimerical abstraction, or so reduced that there’s nothing about them that indicates why they should serve any kind of foundational role in our reasoning about how to live.

Virtue ethicists, particularly those of an Aristotelian slant, have long been trying to make this point. The Heideggerian approach recalls the point that the “world” in and which we are engaged bears interrelated webs of significances, significances that refer to one another in the context of a totality that refers to Dasein’s stand on its being as the ultimate for-the-sake-of-which. This stand, moreover, is not to be understood merely in terms of voluntaristic “choice” made by a subjective individual, but arises out of and projects back into a framework of understandings into which we are thrown and from which we can never completely extricate ourselves. Within this kind of picture, there is never such a thing as pleasure or pain in and of itself: there is always the pleasure-of- or the pain-of- some kind of involved activity, and the significance of that pleasure and pain will be inseparably intertwined with the significance of the activity itself, which is then only intelligible in terms of the larger frameworks that bear an essential relation to Dasein’s stand. The same point could be made about preferences: a preference is only intelligible in terms of a larger totality of involvements that refers to

the stand Dasein takes on its being. Again, these points are not in themselves unique to the Heideggerian perspective; but I hope that we can see how Heidegger’s views provide a particularly robust justification, and one that avoids some of the complications that arise for many of the more traditional Aristotelian approaches that we will discuss later in this chapter.

It might be retorted that nothing we have said precludes the possibility of isolating pain-as-such, pleasure-as-such, or a preference-for-this-or-that-as-such, however thin and artificial it may be, if such isolation is for the purposes of finding a common element that can figure into our moral reasonings. Perhaps; I’m not going to pronounce on that, because I don’t think we have to. If what we said before about pleasure/pain, preferences, etc., serving as the ultimate value in these theories is right, and value is a kind of significance (as it surely is), then these isolated interior states, removed from the webs of significance, can have no significance, thus no value, and thus cannot figure meaningfully into any kind of thinking about how one should live.

3.3 Kantian Ethics

So much for egoism, utilitarianism, and similar empirical theories of morality that maintain the notion of a certain quantifiable component of our inwardly-directed subjectivity serving as the basis of ethics. We suggested before that these sorts of approaches were one instance of the broader trend in modern moral philosophy to begin ethical enquiry with the presumption of subjectivity, which seeks to ground morality in some inwardly-accessible feature of human life detached from the human’s
relation to the world of “objects.” From Heidegger’s perspective, this interprets Dasein as present-at-hand, which is inauthentic in that it covers over the finite temporality (engaged-thrown-projection) of our being. We will turn now to Kant and Kantian-inspired approaches and argue that they too fail for a closely related reason.

Kant, of course, has a rather different way of countenancing the subject/object distinction than the empiricists, though the distinction remains, I claim, foundational. Kant’s “subject” is the autonomous and (what comes to the same thing) rational agent, determinable through freedom by pure practical reason, while “objects” are determinable through the categorial forms of pure theoretical reason. On this basis Kant grounds morality in the notion of a duty, an unconditional obligation that is independent of the vicissitudes and contingencies of consequences and subjective interests or inclinations. Moral duty is derived from the conditions of free action itself, as the imperative to act only on those maxims that the rational agent can will to be universal law. Only by bracketing everything but the rational will’s unconstrained self-determination can we truly be agents, and this procedure entails certain maxims as representing obligatory actions, and others as prohibited. So the “subject” need not (and Kant thinks cannot) be considered as an object of empirical investigation into its desires, ends, preferences, etc., and the determinations of moral worth are not going to be discovered in the world as the objects (projected by humans or otherwise) of a calculative rationality. Kant’s moral principle is one of absolute self-legislation, a feature which respects genuine freedom in requiring an autonomous, self-imposed rational ground.
Accordingly, Heidegger and Kant share a rejection of approaches founded in empirical subjectivity on the grounds that such an approach to the human agent as an object of empirical investigation disregards the presupposition of freedom and self-constitution necessary for practical normativity as such. If, to bracket the previous argument for a moment, I discover through empirical investigation into my subjective constitution certain ends, preferences, desires, etc., and if they are to serve as the basis of claims about reasons to act rather than simply descriptive claims about the causal determinants of our behavior as it happens to be – if, that is, we are to consider ourselves as agents in any relevant sense, rather than automatons or mere animals – then we must suppose that those ends, etc., present themselves as possible sources of reasons to reflective scrutiny. And both Heidegger and Kant seem to agree that for anything to be available as a genuine possibility in this way, the entity for whom these are presented as possibilities must take itself as subjected to the burden of choosing which possibilities will be determinative for it. But that entails that lying behind the normative significance of ends, preferences, etc., is the presupposition that the being of such an entity includes self-constitution as one of its fundamental aspects. The disagreement between Heidegger and Kant lies in just how we are to make sense of this notion of self-constitution or “choosing,” and what relationship that bears to other aspects of its being and to the world.

For Kant, self-constitution is to be identified with self-legislation on the basis of the form of pure practical reason as such. He denies that anything outside of this purified conception of practical reason – including “subjective” facts such as desires,
ends, preferences, and the like, as well as “objective” facts about human nature or nature in general – should enter in to the process of self-determination, except as providing the content and material conditions for the exercise of rational agency. The condition of self-constitution or choosing, and thus of moral action, turns on a rational procedure that has its source in a radically disengaged rational agency. The domain of moral normativity is thus turned radically inward, and nothing in the “objective” world – the world constituted by the categories of pure theoretical reason, and ultimately the world of the Ding an sich, can have a bearing on the operations of practical reason if we are to be genuine – indeed, authentic – agents.

Notice, however, that even though the entity under consideration (the “moral agent”) is no longer an object of empirical investigation, it still has the being of, in Heidegger’s terms, presence-at-hand. Genuine self-constitution can only obtain on the basis of universal structures of rationality that obtain for any rational being as such; this means we have to be able to distance ourselves from ourselves as engaged being-in-the-world, indeed radically so, in order to obtain that perspective on ourselves which is fully and properly disengaged, disinterested, and universalized – the perspective that regards entities as present-at-hand. What we end up with, then, is a mirror image of the empiricist point of view, according to which the “world” is, properly considered, neutral and meaningless, while meaning, value and significance lie within the individual subject. Kant’s picture is essentially the same, except that the source of at least one kind of meaning, value, or significance – the moral kind – is reason as such, rather than preferences, desires, etc. The reason we can take them to be essentially mirror-images
of each other is because both are instances of explaining the significance of human life in terms of the relation between two present-at-hand entities – the subject (practical agency, res cogitans, locus of desire, etc.) and the object (the meaningless, empirical world).

Let us return to the point made above – that both Heidegger and Kant reject the empiricist approach on the grounds that it cannot account for something that it must presuppose, namely that for the elements of my subjective constitution to count as normatively significant I have to take myself to be the sort of being for whom these can be regarded as providing reasons for action. This in turn requires me to presuppose myself as self-constitutor, which Kant interprets as self-legislator. What is problematic about this move, from Heidegger’s perspective? It’s essentially this: to conflate self-constitution (existential projection, Heidegger’s terms) with self-legislation on the basis of absolute laws is to attempt to transcend finite temporality – the finitude of thrownness and death – that precludes the possibility of an adequate orientation towards ourselves in terms of presence-at-hand.

This can be best explained and defended by returning to the phenomena of conscience and guilt introduced in the previous chapter, Heidegger’s account of which seem to double as a thinly veiled critique of Kant, though the criticism could just as well apply to any deontological system of morality. We recall that Heidegger described conscience as the call of oneself to oneself: the call to authenticity out of lostness in das Man. And we contrasted this view with ones that suppose conscience to be a kind of
“inner voice” that tells us right from wrong. Guilt in the everyday sense similarly bears a direct relation to the notion of a duty or moral law. More generally, the everyday interpretations of conscience and guilt rest upon an interpretation of Dasein modeled on the social relationships between individuals or institutions that have or can come to have debts. To be guilty is to be the basis for some lack in another, “failing to satisfy some requirement which applies to one’s existent Being with Others” (BT 328), in the sense in which one thus owes a debt to the other. Conscience is that which attests to one’s guilt, or warns one of the guilt that will incur from some possible action or inaction, or otherwise informs one as to the kinds of actions required or prohibited if one is to avoid incurring guilt. So in this sense, to paraphrase an evocative line of Heidegger’s (BT 340), Dasein’s life gets conceived as if it were a household or a business with a balance sheet that needs to be reckoned up. Guilt is being in the red, and conscience is the judge (or perhaps probation officer, financial planner, etc.).

As a member of civil society, my capacity for being the basis of a lack in another of something owed to them grounds the possibility of legal guilt, where the analogue to conscience would involve various aspects of the legal and judicial system. And of course the same model has been central to Christianity and Judaism, in which we are guilty for our breach of Divine law individually and collectively, a guilt for which atonement must be made if we are to be reconciled to God. The social, legal and religious senses of conscience and guilt are possible only because as a member of some such system of established requirements, laws, and duties can one bear the requisite kinds of responsibilities and obligations. However, modern morality, particularly its
deontological forms, has attempted to preserve this kind of structure on the basis of some feature of human life as such, independent of any particular institutions, theology, or social arrangements. That is, I have to abstractly consider myself as essentially some present-at-hand thing, whose properties are essentially and absolutely of such a kind that it can incur possible guilt by virtue of the commission or omission of action-types, again abstractly considered. And it is this sort of being that can be addressed by some quasi-external “voice” of conscience.

But Heidegger, as we have seen, argues that this self-conception is possible only on the basis of a more fundamental one, one to which the notion of universal and absolute law and quasi-legal guilt cannot apply. What he wants to argue is that “guilt” in his existential sense is constitutive of our being, equiprimordial with the other constitutive aspects, not an accident that may or may not adhere to the independent subject. Indeed, the latter possibility is grounded existential guilt. When we consider guilt in the sense of having debts or failing in one’s responsibilities, what we perceive is that it involves one’s being the basis of some kind of lack, a “nullity.” This nullity is the absence of something that should be present (a sum of money, the performance of a task, the adherence to a restriction, etc.). How is it possible for there to be this kind of

86 It’s worth clarifying that we’re discussing specifically those deontological theories that, like Kant’s, purport to apply to human beings as such in a way that everyone can, at least in principle, be aware of the moral law. One might be a metaphysical deontologist but not necessarily an epistemological one, maintaining that only in virtue of a particular orienting framework can one be aware of the moral law, but that the law nevertheless applies to all human beings as such. The most obvious examples of this can be found in religious traditions that maintain the universality and apodecticity of the Divine Law, while supposing that only those with special dispensations, who engage in the right kinds of devotions, etc., can have knowledge of it.
situation? It is for our lives to matter to us in such a way that there can be significance to the fact that something or other is or is not present. That is, unless there are shared frameworks of significance in terms of which we can recognize or assume responsibilities, the everyday notion of guilt would not make sense. And these frameworks are not something we can create; otherwise, there would be no significance in the first place, no direction in which to project. This is existential guilt: the fact that we always have to project from some thrown framework which orients our understanding of the world and which we can never get behind, at the risk of losing the possibility of significance altogether, and thus the possibility of everyday guilt. The nullity of existential guilt is both the limitation of the fact that we can never get behind our thrownness, as well as the fact that whatever orientation is going to inform our possibilities will necessarily exclude other possible orientations.

Hence being-guilty is this condition of having to project our possibilities from some orientation of which we are not the author. Conscience is that call to take these possibilities over as our own, to project our ownmost possibilities. But if it is the case that, as being-guilty, there must always be some pre-given horizon out of which we project, some presumption of what’s significant that we can never fully bracket or otherwise disregard in the exercise of pure self-legislation, then the Kantian’s mistake, like that of the empiricist, is to suppose that there is a kind of detached or external perspective, free from any presumptions of value or significance, from which we can render a judgment as to the objective, universal validity of the contents of our horizons.
The Kantian can reply that Kant’s theory, too, involves the “taking over” of handed-down possibilities, and that our critique ignores the fact that the content of our maxims is always provided by the contexts in which we engage in practical reasoning. This is true, and we should not be misunderstood as suggesting that Kant’s principle of morality is supposed to *generate*, rather than provide a way of *testing* the inherited content of our moral reasoning. The objection, rather, is to the claim that the procedure by which we conduct such a test lies somehow outside of the horizons of significance, that it is neutral with respect to presumptions of value. Heidegger’s argument is supposed to provide *a priori* grounds for rejecting this claim, and thus for rejecting the universality and objectivity of such procedural results. And we can confirm this simply by considering the fact that underlying Kant’s principle of morality is a certain kind of presumption about the relative significance of such things as self-legislation, freedom, and the exercise of duty, *vis-à-vis* other features of our lives, such as our ends, desires, feelings, special relationships, commitments, social identity, and so forth. And so not only do we draw the content of morality that is to be tested from the heritage, we draw the foundations of and justification for that test itself likewise from the heritage, a heritage that accords such things as freedom an incomparably higher status than other things with respect to the question of who we are and how we should live.\(^{87}\)

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\(^{87}\) This is a view defended by Charles Taylor in a number of places, notably in the early chapters of *Sources of the Self*. Cf. “Kant’s Thoery of Freedom,” *Philosophy and the Human Sciencies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 318-337.
But there is another reason to reject the idea that we can obtain a standpoint outside of our conditioned horizons from which to render objective, universal judgment as to their content. This has to do with the other, futural dimension of finitude: being-towards-death. If we recall from the last chapter, the existential notion of death (which is more basic than the notion having to do with the “end of life,” what Heidegger calls “demise”) refers to the “possibility of no more possibilities” – the possibility that the world can collapse into insignificance, stripping me of determinate possibilities into which I can press forward and disclosing Dasein in its pure being-possible. For our lives to be intelligible, they must be lived out within frameworks that contain the kinds of webs of significance in reference to which I can make sense of the equipment and relationships to others that orient my possibilities. Without such frameworks, I cannot so much as use a hammer or know how far to stand from someone. In the limit condition of death, I have to take a stand on my being but I have no stand on which to take: I am utterly debilitated. In this sort of condition, rules, principles, and duties are meaningless, becoming more like the rules of etiquette for a club when one no longer cares about the ideals and ends of club membership, to use Foot’s example.89

88 MacIntyre offers in the post-Imperial Polynesian societies a historical example of the collapse of frameworks of significance that renders the traditional codes of conduct meaningless. These societies persisted in recognizing the validity of “taboos” long after the sets of beliefs out of which these rules and codes emerged had collapsed. King Kamehameha II of Hawaii saw the pointlessness of these taboos, and was able to abolish them at no cost to the stability of his society. See MacIntyre, After Virtue, 111-113.

89 Philippa Foot, “Morality as a System of Hypothetical Imperatives,” in Virtues and Vices and Other Essays in Moral Philosophy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 157-173. Although Foot has offered a critique of Kant that is, I think, consistent with and supportive of the Heideggerian view I’m articulating, her conclusions in this paper tend towards the kind of Humean perspective we critiqued earlier. We will address her more developed views in section 3.7.
In short, rules and principles depend upon underlying frameworks of significance for their intelligibility. For rules to have a categorical status – commanding absolutely with universal authority – there would have to be some corresponding framework that is likewise absolutely necessary, immutable and indissoluble. The death analysis reveals this to be impossible. Why does the framework of pure rationality not satisfy this requirement, as the Kantian would no doubt object? The reason goes back to the arguments of the previous chapter, coupled with what we just saw in the guilt analysis: the fact that we cannot get behind our thrownness is grounded in the fact that the space of meaning and significance is wider than what can be contained within the space cognitive rationality, and so trying to orient our lives in terms of a particular, derivative and limited sphere is misleading at best, and pernicious at worst.

Why might it be pernicious? Making validity claims that command absolute, universal allegiance is, as we discussed earlier, one of the ways in which das Man levels off Dasein’s possibilities by declaring some single course of action as required or prohibited. It mitigates the anxiety and uncertainty of our finitude by releasing us from the burden of having to own ourselves authentically, that is, in a way which is true to the sorts of beings we are – thrown projecting. Certainly the notion that something is absolutely required or prohibited as such – that there are practical laws derivable from human nature or rationality regarded independently of any contingent and historically conditioned content – releases us from the burden of choosing it; one can simply submit to it in the way one submits to one’s military commander or, indeed, civil laws. Angst reveals to us the fragility of the kinds of self-conceptions that would function
analogously to the military or civil structures in providing the justification for such laws, and thus the fragility and contingency of the laws themselves. One can either face up to this fragility, or flee into the kinds of rationalizations and false certainties characteristic both of *das Man* and modern moral philosophy, or simply content oneself with just living uncritically as “one” does.

Conscience, in Heidegger’s sense, is that pull to reject the latter two possibilities. It is to accept the *ultimate* impotence of empirical and rational considerations, feelings, desires, duties, and laws to tell us how to live, and to take ownership of our lives “in the moment of vision.”\(^{90}\) I mentioned before that Heidegger’s conscience is the existential analogue to Aristotle’s phronesis, so the conclusions we draw from the foregoing arguments, and the explanation of what the previous line might mean for ethical questions will be of the first importance to an account of virtue that takes inspiration from the Heideggerian tradition. Before we proceed, we should consider where we stand after having offered some critiques of the dominant traditions in modern philosophy and recognize some worries and objections that could easily be raised. We won’t attempt to satisfactorily answer them right now as much as indicate the

\(^{90}\) This does not mean that *disregard* such things; quite the contrary. As inescapable aspects of our horizons, they make claims on us, claims which must be treated seriously in the dialogical working out of our practical understanding, as we will clarify in the next chapter. Indeed Gadamer’s positive understanding of Kant’s categorical imperative to which we alluded earlier sees it as providing a powerful restraint on the easy tendency to disregard the bindingness of our perceived duties in the face of desires to do otherwise. To claim that this bindingness can never be absolute or universal *as such* and *a priori* is not to claim that it can’t assume a status quite close to that. But to discern this requires us to go beyond the limited concern with pure procedure.
directions in which the responses might lie, directions which will be pursued in the coming pages and chapters.

3.4 Transition to Virtue

The critique of Kantian morality just offered claims that we cannot ground an understanding of how to live in categorical rules and principles because such an attempt is inconsistent with the finitude of Dasein’s being as engaged, thrown projection (care). The broadly empiricist approaches also fail in founding themselves on certain supposedly empirically discernable, isolate elements of our subjective constitution, which we argued is impossible without divesting these supposed elements of any kind of significance, thus rendering them useless to any account of how to live. Both of these approaches share the presumption of subjectivity, which we have characterized as the attempt to isolate the subject as the source of normativity, in contradistinction from the neutral, objective world. It is this shared presumption that accounts for their failures: ontologically, Dasein is being-in-the-world prior to any distinction between subject and object. These distinctions interpret all being in terms of presence-at-hand, which is to say they isolate the entity under consideration from any underlying frameworks of significance, taking a disinterested perspective towards, e.g., the material world, the structures of rationality, or the psychological ego. For certain purposes, it might be fully legitimate and even necessary to interpret the world and Dasein as present-at-hand entities; the mistake comes in supposing that this interpretation is exhaustive of being, particularly with regard to the kinds of questions having to do with what is worthwhile,
what is right, what is good. Such questions already presuppose an interest in what it means to live well, which is possible only on the basis of an orientation towards what is worthwhile, etc. So the issue is not how one can escape or fully disengage from such orientations, but how such orientations can be embraced in a way that avoids circularity, relativism, or outright arbitrariness.

It is the persistence of these latter worries that seems to motivate critics of Heidegger and virtue ethics alike, as we discussed in chapter 1. Given the largely negative arguments we have offered so far, it might seem hard to see how a positive position which embraces both our historicity and thrownness as well as the burden to choose ourselves in a way that can meet these worries can be sustained; and we acknowledge that we have said little thus far to articulate and defend such a perspective. But what we have tried to do is show the inadequacy of moral theories that fail to respect some aspect of our existential constitution, whether that be our thrownness, our being-in-the-world, or our projection, and the finitude that bookends all of these. So these theories are unable to adequately address such worries either. If any positive view is to avoid the deficiencies that have plagued modern morality – and which, we might add, might account for Heidegger’s distaste for moral philosophy – it must be cognizant of the ontological presuppositions that underlie these deficiencies. But just as important, we have put forward authenticity as a way of life that acknowledges the sorts of beings we are; and if Heidegger is right, we have largely lost sight of the proper way to enquire into the question of our being. Correspondingly, if I am right in suggesting a correspondence between authenticity and eudaimonia, then
the critiques just offered can serve as warnings against any tendency to approach
enquiries into virtue and the good life in a way that succumbs to the same problems.
Some of these problems will be explored later in the chapter when we discuss
naturalism. But we will now begin to explore some of the ways in which an Aristotelian
account of ethics may be developed following the account of Dasein and authenticity
that we have been articulating.

3.5 Authenticity

At the risk of repetitiveness, we will briefly recapitulate this account. Dasein is
Being-in-the-world, which is to say it has an engaged understanding of itself, other
Daseins and the world which is for the most part pre-cognitive, and which is possible on
the basis of shared, historically conditioned horizons into which it is thrown and from
which it can never extricate itself. Out of these horizons and back into them it projects
an understanding of itself in reference to which the webs of significance that constitute
the world are intelligible. So the horizon of the world and its self-understanding are
neither subjectively determined nor objectively fixed, static and unchanging, but are
constantly being revised.

Following from this basis, to pick up on a point made towards the end of the
previous chapter, we can say that authenticity is not a “state” but a way of being that
embraces, rather than flees from, this ontological structure. If there are no fixed
interpretations, no set of rules to determine with finality how to live my life, then
authenticity will be a continual process of opening oneself to new ways of
understanding what it means to be. So authenticity is not a kind of determinate condition, something that can be “achieved” in the way that someone might achieve a degree or promotion, a level of monetary success or notoriety, or a state like psychological pleasure or the overcoming of depression or an addiction; nor is it the case that authenticity is a modification of some such state. One is not a philosophy professor authentically or inauthentically, if that refers to occupying a certain position in the university system or some such. But one can be a teacher or a researcher authentically or inauthentically, insofar as that refers to a way of life in which one is constantly understanding anew what it means to be a teacher or researcher and what such modes of life involve. Insofar as being a parent means simply having an offspring, being a citizen refers simply to a certain a legal status vis-à-vis a certain regime, being a student means simply enrolled at a school, these likewise can be neither authentic nor inauthentic; but corresponding ways of thinking about parenthood, citizenship and student life that are best characterized as a way of life can be lived authentically or inauthentically.

This is because fundamentally Dasein is the being that makes being an issue, presses forward into possibilities, rather than the occupier of some social position, the subject of psychological experience, or some other determination that would support the view that authenticity is some kind of determinate state. As Heidegger puts it, Dasein “is existentially that which, in its potentiality-for-Being, it is not yet” (BT 185-6). We have to continually work out what it is to be; I have never “figured out” what is means to be a teacher, father, citizen or student, particularly if that signifies some final
satisfactory set of rules and standards to which I have to live up or an objective mold into which I have to fit. To be inauthentic, indeed, is to be bound up with the received, public interpretations of some mode of life – to simply do what one is “supposed” to do as professor, parent, citizen, student, etc. But it is just as inauthentic, and contrary to the “project” that is our lives, to suppose that the final word on what it means to “be” is contained in our biological nature, our religious traditions and texts, or in a set of moral principles.

On the other hand, we have underscored how these ways of being and the projections involved are always thrown projections, which means they can’t but take into account and be influenced by the understandings that have come down to us in our dealings. Obviously no teacher, citizen, etc., can operate from within a vacuum, determining ex nihilo and individually what this way of life involves. To authentically project one’s own possibilities requires a sensitivity to the meanings and imports which constitute one’s heritage and one’s social milieu, meanings and imports that underlie

91 These examples, I think, are apt from the perspective of anyone engaged in one or more of these ways of life in 21st century America, as I presume most readers of this present work will be. Academic life is consumed by external standards of success, such as number of publications, institutional and departmental rankings, grant money obtained, and so forth. Parents are under enormous pressure to abide by the latest expert opinions on whether babies should sleep on their stomachs or backs, co-sleep or sleep in separate rooms, breast or bottle feed, etc. The citizen is subjected to increasingly reified public determinations of “conservative” or “liberal” or “Republican” or “Democrat,” and the pressure to identify with one or the other. Anyone who has ever taught a class, especially to undergraduates, can attest to the powerful demand to achieve good test scores and GPAs, and the expectation that there are certain codifiable procedures one can follow to do so. It’s no surprise that Heidegger, like Nietzsche before him and many subsequent critics of modernity, was rather pessimistic about our current possibilities as a culture, which may partly account for his later associations of authentic life with a kind of quasi-esoteric withdrawal.
the kinds of standards and rules that emerge in public interpretations. That is, to live in a way that does not simply submit to rules is not to flout or disavow them; it is to recognize them for what they are in their positive role: an articulation of the understandings present in the shared social and historical horizons. One might say that public interpretations, rules, standards, and the like can play the positive role of orienting us towards the meanings and imports that underlie them. But sensitivity to those meanings is only possible if one is to consider them as received, not absolute.

Recall from a passage quoted earlier that Heidegger speaks of this as a “rejoinder” to the heritage, made in a “moment of vision” – in the “doing” itself. Hubert Dreyfus has spoken of this kind of understanding of what is to be done that manifests itself in the doing as a kind of cultural expertise. The expertise of the craftsman or musician cannot be reduced to a set of procedural rules, nor is their skill a matter of determining beforehand what is to be done and then doing it. Indeed the expert, as Dreyfus has argued, can be distinguished from the novice or intermediate precisely by the fact that they don’t simply follow rules, and typically don’t have to reflect on what is to be done in order to successfully engage in their activity. Such reflection is often in fact a hindrance to the activity, and the application of rules a

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92 This is one reason why I thought it was crucial to distinguish between das Man and its modes as structural aspects of our being and as deficient, inauthentic ways of being. We need the structural aspect to make sense of authenticity as more than simply being “non-conformist” or some such.

93 Here we can take “heritage” in a way that encompasses one’s present social milieu.

barrier to the kind of creativity and innovation we associate with expertise. This makes sense if reflection and articulation are most often the result of something going wrong, which would typically characterize the activity of the novice or intermediate rather than the expert. And yet, once again, for the activity to be intelligible as a genuine expression of expertise, it has to be undertaken within the context of something like what MacIntyre has called a practice, involving recognizable standards of excellence and continuity with the history and social context of the practice.

The deep accord between Heidegger’s account and Aristotle’s can, hopefully, now emerge. Eudaimonia, as we know, is commonly translated as “happiness,” which has lent itself to misinterpretation as a kind of blissful psychic state that accompanies my activities, or even as an experience of blissful non-activity like a drug-induced high. This misinterpretation is exacerbated by the fact that Aristotle refers to “happiness” as the “final end” – the end at which all other ends aim. Were we to take this at face value, we would be easily led to think of happiness as bearing a structural identity to the ends of instrumental activity: I am hammering the wood in order to build the house in order to provide shelter in order to...be happy. So happiness would be a kind of “thing” like the house or the shelter – something that, once realized, has a status independent of my activity.

But notice what emerges when we observe the correspondence between eudaimonia and authenticity. In Heidegger’s account, all of these in-order-to

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95 See MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, chapter 14.
relationships bear a structural relationship to the stand I take on my being as the final “for-the-sake-of-which.” It is not authenticity per se that is the final for-the-sake-of-which; rather, it is being-a-provider, being-a-house-dweller (or teacher, etc.). We said that these identities can be lived out authentically or inauthentically, according to the sorts of conditions articulated above, conditions which are determined by our ontological structure – the sorts of beings that we are. This amounts to the idea that in taking a stand on my being – which I am always already doing by virtue of being-in-the-world – we are exhibiting an ontological structure, which we might put by saying that authenticity in the structural sense is our end; by living in a way that respects and fulfills that structure we, as it were, fulfill that end: we are authentic in the normative sense (see section 2.4). Happiness (as eudaimonia), accordingly, is not the final end in the sense of a state independent of our activities, but has to do with the manner in which these activities, and life in general, are lived out. Happiness is the final end in the sense of characterizing the sorts of beings we have to be to engage in such activities authentically; and it is fulfilled according to whether the manner of engagement is simply the submission to established conventions, simply the attempt to do things “differently” for the sake of difference, or whether it exhibits an open, engaged rejoinder to the heritage.

To live in this way requires, as we just said, a kind of sensitivity to the meanings and imports of one’s heritage that enables one to respond appropriately but creatively to the unique situations we encounter. This “cultural expertise” cannot be a matter of simply doing what one does, nor is it applying a set of rules or principles; and we have
tried to show that such forms of life are inconsistent with our existential constitution, being rather the exercise of dominion by *das Man*. Now we are in a position where we can try to explain the correspondence between Heidegger’s “conscience” and Aristotle’s “phronesis.” Conscience is the call to authenticity out of the dominion of *das Man*; but given what we have said about authenticity and conscience, we can now understand conscience as the engaged sensitivity characteristic of cultural expertise. In other words, we can see conscience as the kind of practical wisdom necessary for authentic eudaimonia.

To draw out this connection, consider what Aristotle has to say about the development and exercise of phronesis. He warns his audience early in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that the account of how to live well can only be given “sketchily and in outline,” and that to benefit from the enquiries into the human good one must already be sufficiently mature and well brought up,

which has been one of the sticking points for critics of virtue ethics as we discussed in chapter 1. Let us consider this claim, then, from Heidegger’s perspective, keeping the connection between conscience and phronesis in view. Heidegger maintains that our lives are lived out for the most part under the dominion of *das Man* and its modes. And we have suggested that this need not necessarily be a bad thing, for two reasons. One is that we have to, to some extent, live as “one” does if our lives are to remain intelligible. Secondly, it reflects the fact that no one is born an expert, so to speak, particularly if expertise is not the application of

independent standards; but one can only become so by responding to rules and standards whose purpose is to point the learner towards her own authentic understanding. This is certainly confirmed by the development of any kind of expertise: one has to first be shown how to do things, be given principles to follow, standards to respect, and models to emulate to be an expert craftsperson, athlete, musician, driver, or whatever. But as we established before, the expertise that these are supposed to guide us into is one which cannot be reduced to cognitive principles. So someone who continued to practice a craft, make music, play a sport, etc., by either following a set of procedural rules or by simply doing what one’s forbearers have done is not an expert.

Why should we think that living well in a general sense would be any different? Aside from subscribing to the kinds of mistaken ontological presuppositions we have critiqued, perhaps the worry is that the notion of having to be “well brought up” seems tantamount to indoctrination. But this is not so in the realm of cultural expertise, if that is the right way to think about phronesis/conscience, any more than it is in any other kind of expertise; and indeed in both cases simply following the received standards and models is inconsistent with it.

Heidegger’s phenomenology of angst can help clarify why this is so. As one acquires any kind of expertise, trial and error is going to play an essential role. Through the experience of and insights gained through the dialectic of success and failure, both of one’s own efforts and the efforts of one’s predecessors, one comes to a greater understanding of what is genuinely possible, which involves not simply avoiding past
failures, but understanding why they failed so as to avoid the failure of one’s own creative and original efforts. We suggest that angst functions much the same way. In anxiety, we are brought face to face with the lack of any final, determinative grounds and the burden of projecting one’s own possibilities. In this way, to be phronimos, to be able to project creatively, originally and disclosively out of one’s thrown circumstances, we have to have the mature insight that arises out of the experience of one’s own failures and the failure of others and the understanding of why they failed, which ultimately comes down to the fact that no exemplar, no “way of doing things” has the final word on how we should live.

Does this mean that phronesis requires having had the experience of angst in its limit sense, which is the complete dissolution of the sources of meaning and the experience of utter groundlessness? There are times when Heidegger’s text seems to suggest as much. However, it does not seem to me that this is necessary, and indeed we should be wary of an account that requires some kind of “dark night of the soul” for genuine wisdom. To be sure, the narratives of many of the greatest innovators and visionaries and the most laudable lives include episodes of such radical doubt with regard to the inherited frameworks in terms of which they had made sense of their lives. But we should be cognizant of the fact that we tend to notice most those whose

\[97\] One thinks, in Christian history, of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane and his lamentations on the cross, St. Augustine, Martin Luther and, as we have recently learned, Mother Theresa, and their profound experiences of doubt, loss and abandonment; scientific revolutionaries like Galileo, Copernicus, Newton and Darwin whose transformations of our understandings of nature were borne out of intellectually and personally tumultuous relationships to the established systems they sought to displace; even key figures in the political and philosophical movement we call the Enlightenment, of which both Heidegger and the Aristotelian tradition are often so critical, experienced the kind of radical
contributions to our understandings were revolutionary, radical, and transformative, contributions that would almost always require a radical questioning of the heritage they had received. There’s nothing in Heidegger’s account of authenticity that requires us to think of the creativity and innovation involved in authentic life in such dramatic terms, and so nothing that would preclude us from supposing that the vast majority of individuals who are exemplars of authentic life remain unnoticed by the annals of history not because they were not genuinely wise, but because their way of life was one that creatively extended the heritage, rather than radically transformed it. The musician might offer a subtly different interpretation of a piece than the one standardly given; the athlete might modify her form from the way she has been coached; and the parent might come to recognize that her child responds better to one way of discipline than another. None of these need involve complete disownership of the received interpretations of what it means to be a musician, athlete or parent for the sense of open-endedness and questionability of these interpretations to be manifest and to thus be free to “own” oneself, to exhibit wisdom about what is to be done in the circumstances that goes beyond conformity and principles.

We’ve pointed to the structural similarity between authenticity and eudaimonia as living according to the sort of being one is, and how for both Heidegger and Aristotle the content of this cannot be determined in advance but must involve the sort of

“homelessness’ characteristic of angst before or while they proffered their no-doubt sincere reconstructions of the way humans should view themselves and society. This latter point should caution us against overlooking the contributions of modernity, and I think Charles Taylor is exemplary – particularly among those who share the basic perspective we are developing – in his respect for them, as we will discuss in chapter 6.
wisdom or cultural expertise that allows one to do what’s appropriate in particular circumstances. Conscience or practical wisdom requires sensitivity to the imports and meanings inherent in our heritage, a sensitivity which not only attunes one to what’s important and what gets lost in public interpretations, but which, in being creative and original, is disclosive of the deeper meaning and significance therein rather than a covering up. We can now extend this discussion of the relationship between Heidegger and Aristotelian ethics by enquiring further into the character of this sensitivity.

3.6 Virtue Freed from the Subject/Object Model

Aristotle famously holds that phronesis perceives the mean. The coward and the rash person each lacks phronesis, in that the coward is too fearful and the rash person is too fearless; courage, then, is the mean between excess and defect of respect for what is fearsome. Heidegger takes up these themes in his lecture course on Plato’s Parmenides, interpreting phronesis as a balance between “concealment and unconcealment.” What we have been suggesting is that authenticity is living as the sort of being we are, which can be put by saying that it “unconceals,” both with respect to one’s own being and the kinds of meanings and significances inherent in our world. Thus concealment has to do with the way in which being gets covered over. Lawrence Hatab suggests that if we take pure concealment as “the oblivion of nothingness” and pure unconcealment as “the metaphysics of constant presence generated from a fallen immersion in beings,” then authenticity would be “[dwelling] in an ontological balancing
of concealment and unconcealment, a balancing, in the language of *Being and Time*, of being-toward-death and care.” Hatab writes further:

Each vice conceals by unconcealing too much, and virtue would be the measured balance of these extremes that discloses what is concealed by each vice. This suggests that virtue is a kind of blending of the force of opposing conditions that discloses an otherwise concealed truth... Too much unconcealment (too much of a good thing), unbalanced by otherness, creates an absence, a concealment of its appropriate apportionment in ethical action...Ethical situations can be seen as a play of concealment and unconcealment in the tension of human possibilities. Phronesis can be understood as the balancing of the tension at moments of decision, as the capacity for responsive and appropriate action.98

Using courage as a paradigm example, Hatab illustrates this by associating the sense of restraint and caution in the face of danger with an unconcealment of care (for one’s own life, the lives of others, etc.), while the unconcealment of being-towards-death, bringing with it a recognition of finitude, releases the hold one has on trying to preserving what ultimately cannot be preserved, which can then propel one into facing threatening situations without restraint. The unconcealment of our being as being-towards-death conceals something of our being as care, and vice versa. Thus authentic practical wisdom involves this dialectic or balancing of those two dimensions, which maps on to Aristotle’s account of courage as the mean between cowardice — too much care — and foolhardiness — too little care, and vice versa with regard to being-towards-death. Whatever it is that is required by care cannot be determined beforehand, independently of the situation: Dasein is always being-towards-death. But Dasein is at the same time called to care for being, including the relationships, heritage and

98 Hatab, *Ethics and Finitude*, 120.
meanings that are constitutive for its self-understanding. In acknowledging the kinds of tensions that arise in the face of threat and fear, we find that Aristotle’s account of courage articulates just the kind of balancing care that Heidegger is talking about.99

So we’ve seen how, if phronesis is understood ontologically in terms of Heidegger’s account of conscience, conscience does not tell us what to do, in the sense of the application of a principle like, “in situation S, do A.” Rather, conscience calls us out of these kinds of determinations in a way that enables us to respond appropriately to the situation. This is phenomenology confirmed by the case of courage, cases in which the call to be as being-towards-death must be balanced with the call to be recognized in terms of care. As we have said, this requires sensitivity to the meanings and imports in each situation, sensitivity that cannot be reduced to cognitive perception. The sensitivity of the virtuous person (e.g., the courageous person) will be an attunement to the ways in which things matter. How are we to make sense of this?

Two ways can quickly be set aside: the cognitivist way which supposes that meanings are “out there” objectively, and where sensitivity has to do with a certain kind of (disengaged) intuition or rational knowledge; and the non-cognitivist or sentimentalist way, according to which the sensitivity is an attitude or feeling, and meanings are shared in so far as we share a subjective constitution that tends to have the same attitudes towards the same things. We have already offered critiques of both

99 We will offer a more extensive treatment of courage as a virtue constitutive of authenticity in chapter 6, section 6.4.
sorts of approaches, and so we won’t go into any more detail here. But given the predominance of the subject/object ontology that underlies them, it is often hard to see how the kind of alternative proposed or implied by many virtue ethicists gains traction.

Heidegger’s notion of *befindlichkeit* – “state of mind”\(^\text{100}\) or “disposedness” – might help, as it is a mode of being-in-the-world, his ontological alternative to the subject/object distinction. Disposedness as an ontological structure has to do with the fact that we are always in some kind of affective attunement that discloses the ways in which the world matters. This might sound initially like a version of the views we just rejected; however, according to Heidegger’s analysis we find that our affective responses are not to be identified with an inward, psychical state, one that contrasts sharply with a objective, disaffected “knowledge” of that to which we have such an affective response. Our disposedness is a way of disclosing the world that is, as we shall try to show, more basic than either of these.

“Befindlichkeit” is the fact that we always “find” ourselves attuned, and the particular way in which we are attuned gets manifested by our “mood.” Normally, we think of moods as a general kind of “feeling” that, if we are not careful, may distort our ability to see things “as they really are.” Thus someone in a “bad mood” might tend to see people’s motives, her own possibilities, etc., in a more negative light than if she

\(^{100}\) We will not use this translation, which appears in Macquarrie & Robinson, due to fact that the notion of an inward, mental state, which this term easily connotes, runs contrary to Heidegger’s meaning. However, I mention this translation in the main text due to the fact that more everyday uses do seem to capture the notion of *befindlichkeit*, as when we might say that someone is in a “contemplative,” “agitated,” “weak,” or “determined” state of mind for instance.
wasn’t in this frame of mind and was instead in a more “rational,” clear-headed state; likewise someone in a particularly “good mood” might be more hopeful and optimistic than she should be. So on this account, genuine “knowledge” is impaired by our moods, and it would be better if we were less susceptible to them, more stoic, perhaps, and less “moody” in our psychical life.

While there is certainly something true about all of this if we’re talking about moods as emotional states, that is not what Heidegger means. The more basic, existential notion is that of something we are always in and that lies behind the most extreme emotional outbursts and the most clear-headed reasoning alike: it is that on the basis of which we have a clear head or emotional feelings. Only when we associate “mood” with a particularly strong emotional state would we want to call an emotionally placid state “moodless,” but that is more a warning against conflating a mood with emotion; indeed we clearly can, and often do, talk of the balanced, stoic state as itself a particular kind of mood (“he’s in a tranquil/studious/contemplative mood right now...”). Again, the kind of mood we are in – the way in which we are affectively attuned – manifests the significances and imports of the situations in which we are engaged, and it is by virtue of this that we say that moods “disclose” the world. It’s not simply the case that, in being in a certain sober mood I can better ascertain cognitively or empirically what truly “is,” but rather in that mood the world shows itself in a particular, more fundamental way, as, say, an occasion in which it’s not appropriate to let personal concerns affect what I am doing (as the mood of a scientific lab would be). But this allows that other moods might disclose the world in other ways.
This becomes more plausible when we consider a mood as not simply a psychical state, but something more like an atmosphere into which we are steeped. Consider the way in which, as Heidegger puts it, a mood “assails” us: certain things are said, certain things happen, certain people might be encountered, and we find ourselves, as it were, wrenched into a certain mood. We speak of a “cloud” in a room, the restless or angry mood of a crowd, the spirited atmosphere of a sporting event, even the mood of a society during a time of crisis or prosperity; and we can’t help but get caught up in that. This atmospheric character makes best sense, I suggest, when we think of ourselves as embedded in shared horizons of significance. Often the relationship between the situation and the mood is ambiguous, and attempts to parse the mood into a set of natural facts that have a common causal relationship to everyone’s respective emotional centers often seem quite contrived. Instead of countenancing this as an uncertainty about the causal relationship between the perception of certain objective properties and the emotive reaction, it might be that the mood cannot be reduced to such elements.

Why is this? It’s essentially the same reason that my capacity to hold a conversation is not reducible to rational form: engagement in a meaningful world is ontologically more basic than the hiving off of that engagement into various elements like reason and emotion; and such analyses, while not false, provide only a limited grasp of how we go on. Indeed, when we consider conversations, we can see how mood is

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101 This phrase is borrowed from Blattner’s discussion of the topic.
disclosive in a pre-cognitive way. As we carry on a conversation, we are “attuned” to the significances of cadence and tone, body language and facial movements, the choice and structure of words, etc., of the person with whom we engage. This in turn affects our own cadence, etc., and all of this happens generally without being aware of what we or the other person is doing.

Compare this with artistic sensibilities. When we judge a work of art, are we merely having a subjective response to the colors, sounds, etc., so that there is no such thing as genuine artistic “value”? Do we perceive some “property” of the art work, its “goodness” or some such, in addition to its empirical properties? Perhaps these are the wrong sorts of questions, one founded on the presumption that the only sort of being is presence-at-hand, which is itself a mode of interpretation that is derivative from engaged understanding. If we follow the ways in which art, music, film and other critics describe their own work, it becomes apparent that the most difficult position to maintain is one which either reduces artistic judgment to personal reaction or preference, or which reduces it to the perception of an objective property. Few critics will claim that their own judgments should be taken to be objectively valid in the sense that they are perceiving the meaning of the work, or that their evaluation has nothing at all to do with something like taste; and yet few consistently maintain that as they write their reviews and evaluations, they are simply expressing their own subjective projections (for if this were the case, then artistic criticism would be a preeminent narcissistic activity). But whatever avowed theoretical stance they may take on their own work, in practice and tone critics seem to be engaging in an activity in which the
are attempting to communicate their own attentive awareness of a work’s qualitative features, features which are discernable only by one with a developed sensitivity, but which nevertheless is a sensitivity to a being which is “there” in the world constituted by our shared horizons.

This is equally evident in the sensibility of the artist herself. Although some artists describe their process of creativity as the expression of something “deep inside,” as it were, many describe the process as a submission to something given, releasing control over the creative process and letting the medium speak. One thinks of the jazz musician who “knows” how to respond to the theme set in motion by his fellow musician in a way that has little to do with cognitive awareness, much less a decision procedure about what notes to play at what time and in what tempo, etc. Or the photographer who “sees” the scene in a particularly striking way and frames her camera to capture that moment, but who could only sketchily articulate what it was that she saw and what the photograph discloses. It would be highly misleading, perhaps even perverse, to circumscribe the experiences of the critic and the artist under the rubric of the subject/object model. If the artist or critic, as subject, is essentially separated from the world, then either she is simply projecting her own emotive responses to the neutral “facts” that she discerns in the world, or there are objective, independent qualitative properties of the independent world, such that the more she distances oneself from her prejudices and inclinations, the more she can “see” them. The fact that each of these alternatives has been persuasively undermined points to the possibility that the sensitivity to meaning and value in our encounters with works of art, like the sensitivity
to imports in the way we live our lives, seems to resist an interpretation that begins
from the position of the subject disengaged from the world. These problems can point
us back to a more basic phenomenon according to which the world of significance and
meaning is constitutive of our being. If this is so, then sensitivity is the disclosure of
something that is already there in our horizons.

Why should we take this phenomenon as more basic, rather than a naïve desire
to make sense of a senseless world? Heidegger’s response, I think, would be to once
again draw our attention to the occasions for calling into question the basic
phenomenon. We fall into the way of approaching the world in terms of the
subject/object relationship when some particular way in which things have mattered to
us in the past gets called into question. I might, for instance, have long harbored a fear
of public speaking, but my ambition to succeed in an occupation that requires public
speaking leads me to want to overcome that fear. The “mood,” in this case, is fear. A
therapist might help me overcome that fear by convincing me that fear itself is a
contingent state of mind that bears no essential relationship to reality. I and the
therapist see myself as subject, essentially free of any state of mind such as fear, and
the world as being neither threatening nor safe, but in itself neutral with regard to such
evaluations. I thus, as subject, have a “choice” as to how I’m going to perceive the
world in terms of evaluative qualities. In convincing myself of these propositions about
myself and the world, I am able to overcome my fear of public speaking.
What is noteworthy about this sort of example is that I would have not, in fact, performed the disenchantedness of the world that I might think I have. That whole process of thought has taken place, in fact, on the basis of the disclosure of a world in which it matters whether or not I can engage in public speaking. It might be responded, of course, that what this exercise reveals is the subjectivity and contingency of all “mattering,” including such things as the desire to succeed by being able to speak in public, not just emotional responses such as fear. But why should we suppose this? Does not the fact that any approach the world, including those that attempt to reduce experience to the subjective projection of value onto a neutral world, must always take place on the basis of a disclosure of the world as mattering in certain ways lead to the conclusion that the disclosure of a world that matters is itself more basic than the subjective projection model? And if this is the case, then subject/object model looks to be a way to cover over and obscure our fundamental ontological constitution.

It is worth pausing a moment and reminding ourselves of the point to this discussion of disposedness and mood. We have been trying to get a grasp of what it means to say that the practical wisdom operates on the basis of a sensitivity to the meanings of the situation, and how that sensitivity gives rise to appropriate behavior. So we have had to investigate what it means to have sensitivity to a situation in general, and this, we have suggested, is best understood in terms of disposedness as an ontological structure that manifests itself in mood. It seems that most of the time our sensitivity is on the right track: most people most of the time are attuned to the social horizons in ways that allow for unproblematic engagement in the world – we can hold
conversations, commiserate with others in their joy and grief, etc. It’s the problematic situations that call for more reflection, ones in which my own or someone else’s behavior seems strange or inappropriate in some (perhaps ineffable) way, or even more troublesomely, when the appropriate or normal behavior starts to seem discomfiting in a way that calls the frameworks themselves into question. And it is with regard to these sorts of situations that we ask the question, what characterizes the virtuous person’s sensitivity in particular? What makes it the case that we might say that someone has the right kind of disposedness? Can we coherently countenance what it means for one to be sensitive to meanings, imports, and significances that are “really there”?

It might seem strange that while we have been talking up to this point about sensitivity to meanings, imports and significances, we have not generally spoken of “values.” But isn’t that just what the virtuous person perceives? Is it not the case that the virtuous person knows and does what is “good”? Naturally this must be so, but using these terms has become difficult due to the distortions arising from the supposed “fact/value” distinction, to which I have made several allusions already. This supposed distinction, countenanced or implied by many ethical theories but finding its most able articulation in Hume, maintains that judgments of value are not the sorts of things that can be subject to whatever objective truth conditions determine something as a fact. The supposition is that facts represent “the way things are,” independent of the subject doing the representing. Values represent some stance the subject takes on those facts – whether they are good, bad, laudable, deplorable, ought to be promoted, brought
about, prevented, etc. More precisely, a value is an expression of a subjective attitude taken towards some actual or possible state of affairs. The traditional alternative has been to see a “value” a property – perhaps a non-natural one like Moore thought – that adheres in the objective world, and sensitivity to it might be thought of along the lines of the oenophile’s sensitivity to subtleties in a glass of wine. Heidegger seems to have something like the latter in mind in the passage from the “Letter on Humanism” that we quoted earlier (section 2.6). In this passage he clarifies what he means when he claims to be “thinking against values,” and I will quote it again:

To think against values is not to maintain that everything interpreted as ‘a value’...is valueless. Rather...precisely through the characterization of something as “a value” what is so valued is robbed of its worth. That is to say, by the assessment of something as a value what is valued is admitted only as an object for man’s estimation. But what a thing is in its Being is not exhausted by its being an object, particularly when objectivity takes the form of value. Every valuing, even where it values positively, is a subjectivizing. It does not let beings: be. Rather, valuing lets beings: be valid – solely as the objects of its doing...To think against values therefore does not mean to beat the drum for the valuelessness and nullity of beings. It means rather to bring the clearing of the truth of Being before thinking, as against subjectivizing beings into mere objects (LH 251).

Heidegger’s worry seems to be that if we take a value to be a property of an object or situation, whether something that adheres in the object itself or the consequence of the way human nature is disposed to feel and react, we thin out the character of our attunement to significance. In particular, we effect a sharp distinction between the subject as a projector, calculator, intuitior, etc., and the object as that on which one projects, whose value can be measured and compared, in which adheres a certain quality, etc. As he makes clear, though, this only amounts to “valuelessness,” the notion that values are merely subjective, arbitrary and ultimately meaningless
projections, if we start from the assumption that values must either be in some sense be “out there,” or that human nature must be wired to value certain sorts of things, a constitution that we can empirically or rationally discover; and it is this assumption that we have been at pains to reject.

What this means is that when we spoke before about the sort of sensitivity and attunement that a virtuous person has as being the “right” sort, this cannot be understood the discernment of “value” per se, at least not in the first instance. It might be that we can retrospectively articulate what it is that we are sensitive to in value-laden terms, and this does not seem in itself problematic from a Heideggerian perspective. But like any articulation, this will always involve a narrowing down of a thicker, pre-reflective understanding, which in the case of the virtuous person is an attuned practical understanding of what is to be done.

What we have instead been attempting to do is to draw out some of the ontological preconditions for any such characterization, and warding off the attempt to give a cognitivist or sentimentalist account of virtue. The alternative we will consider in the next chapter is hermeneutical, and the distinguishing feature of a hermeneutical approach is that it takes place within historically-conditioned horizons, seeing those horizons as inescapable not only in the sense that they are necessary for the intelligibly of moral reflection, judgment and practice, but also for these latter activities to be authentic. That is, in so far as we are capable of owning our lives – where owning has do to with transcending these horizons in the sense of critiquing, modifying, extending
and in some cases transforming them – we have to avoid ontological distortions that set us on the wrong path towards genuinely critical engagement with the heritage. To put it succinctly, the claim is that all attempts to answer the question of how one should live approach that question from a set of historically-conditioned frameworks that carry with them ontological presuppositions. Some of these presuppositions explicitly or implicitly deny the inescapability of these frameworks, attempting to escape them by positing the position of the worldless subject. This is the subject that can “be its own author,” in the sense of arbitrary choosing (Sartre) or self-legislation on the basis of pure rationality (Kant); or it can be that which disinterestedly observes objective properties, whether those properties are supposed to be normative facts about the world (“values,” etc.), or natural facts about human desires, ends and preferences. If the current claim is right, then these presuppositions are self-defeating: they are presuppositions that deny the inescapability of presuppositions.

This brings us to an important point with regard to the overall theme of this dissertation: the “problem” of historicity in virtue ethics. If the problem is raised within a framework that presumes the question of how one should live as one that can only legitimately be raised and addressed from the perspective of the disengaged subject, then the problem itself dissolves, for the presumption underlying it is incoherent. However, the problem is a legitimate concern, if what we just said about the disclosiveness of moods is true. Surely in our modern horizons there is a strong spirit of apprehension and indignation towards parochialism, elitism and imperialism; suppression, oppression and exploitation; arrogance, ignorance and dominance; and
other such forms of behavior. And if these can be supported by the claim that there is no neutral point of view from which they can be criticized, then that should indeed worry us. But given what we have said so far, we have to be careful how exactly to define the problem and how to approach its resolution. The problem seems to be not that horizons as such are inescapable, but that particular horizons are inescapable; in other words, that there is no avenue for genuine critique, modification, extension or transformation which isn’t viciously circular, no matter what Heidegger wants to claim about authenticity as transcending one’s horizons. And we suggested before that a hermeneutical approach can offer a promising response to these worries.

3.7 Naturalism

Before turning to that approach, we will consider a popular and influential attempt to ground the virtues in a way that, as I will suggest, seems to be grappling with how to reconcile our thrownness and projection, and that is ethical naturalism. We have been exploring the claim that there are interesting and significant structural parallels between the Aristotelian concept of eudaimonia and the Heideggerian concept of authenticity that warrant a serious consideration of how we might better understand each in light of the other. This parallel involves the fact that both have to do with living as the sort of being we are, which we have at times phrased as the fulfillment of our being. One particularly dominant trend in modern virtue ethics has been to characterize this as “fulfillment of our nature.” Ethical naturalism attempts to tease out those qualities and characteristics that are involved in being good qua human being in a way
that shares a basic logical structure and status with the evaluation of plants and animals and their parts and characteristics. According to this approach, we can observe that the characteristic activity of the wolf, to cite Foot’s famous example, involves certain social behaviors such as hunting in packs, which in turn requires that a wolf cooperate with the other members of its pack to bring down its prey. Under this conception, the free-riding wolf is a defective one. The same could be said of any living thing, including a plant, that has a “characteristic way of going on” in Hursthouse’s terms, from which we can derive a notion of the sorts of behavior and qualities needed to be a good specimen of its kind. And so, according to this model, humans have a characteristic “way of going on,” from which we can derive a notion of the sorts of behavior and qualities needed to be a good human being.

Two questions emerge for us: first, how do we determine this characteristic way of going on? And second, is this determination the sort from which we can derive specific behavior-types that can figure in an evaluative judgment of the behavior of individual members of that species? We will consider first some models that seem to clearly conflict with Heidegger’s analysis, the socio-biological approach, and the essentialist approach. These have not been the models generally adopted by contemporary virtue ethicists, though residues of these models do cling to two of the most prominent naturalist accounts, those offered by Foot and Hursthouse. We will____________


argue that two critiques of Foot, those offered by McDowell in his essay, “Two Sorts of Naturalism”\textsuperscript{104} and Annas in her paper, “Virtue Ethics: What Kind of Naturalism”\textsuperscript{105} agree with what Heidegger would say, but draw a conclusion that veers too far in an intellectualist direction. I will end up suggesting that the naturalists are on the right track in that they are trying to hold together the thrown and the projecting aspects of our being, but this calls for a treatment of these aspects that doesn’t reduce them to something more concrete than they really are, like animal nature and rationality, respectively.

We will call the socio-biological\textsuperscript{106} approach one that considers humans in exactly the same way that a biologist would consider her subject matter, namely, as operating according to certain socially and biologically determined mechanisms that it is the job of the scientist to observe and describe. Under this approach, more common in sociology and anthropology than it is in philosophy (at least today), we can explain human behavior as responding to various needs and drives put into us over the course of evolution such as the need to survive, procreate, and propagate the species or social group. The methodology here is entirely empirical, taking its descriptions of the characteristic human way of going on from observations of how humans in fact do


\textsuperscript{106} Other names for this sort of view might include “behaviorist,” “scientistic,” “evolutionary,” “ethological,” “mechanistic” and others, but I chose “socio-biological” to indicate the way in which the methods and techniques of biology are applied to the study of human life, with a recognition that social forces may play an equally determinative role in explaining human behavior as biological ones.
behave, discerning certain patterns inherent in those behaviors, correlating them with the patterns discerned in the behavior of, say, other primates, and positing some natural end or ends that can explain such behaviors.

A second form of naturalism, which comes closer to and is often taken to be Aristotle’s approach, would be what we will call essentialism about human nature. This approach need not reduce the human essence to the level of a biological and social determination, but maintains that humans have an essence that is fixed and determinate enough to ground a determinate conception of how we ought to live. This is usually distinguished from socio-biological determinism in countenancing something more than, and perhaps even contrary to our animal nature as constitutive of the human essence; indeed for this reason socio-biological naturalism has emerged out of a rejection of essentialism on the grounds that such a notion of a fixed and determinate human essence cannot be empirically confirmed. But what these approaches share is the presumption that there is something pre-given in human nature as it is, whether transcendentally fixed or the product of natural development, that can be discerned and described adequately enough to form an account of human life from which true, objective statements can be made about which behaviors and character traits enable, and which deter humans from realizing their pre-given ends.

What these approaches miss is the significance of the fact that humans are self-interpreting entities, not simply self-discovering entities as these forms of naturalism would have to maintain. The confirmation of this lies in the background of the very
projects themselves. These projects are enquiries into human nature, conducted by human beings. So prior to any determination of humans as having some determinate essence, prior to the stance taken on humans as socio-biological creatures whose behavior and characteristics can be subsumed under empirical laws, there remains the being that takes such a stance, and always has to take some stance. Thus there is a certain performative contradiction involved in these forms of naturalism: the very project of constructing a determinate naturalistic theory of human nature requires that she approach her subject matter in a way that she does not approach her own self as enquirer. To engage in these sorts of enquires, she has to begin with an underlying interpretation of the kind of entity humans are (entities with a fixed, objective essence, socially and biologically determined creatures, etc.) that orients her enquiries, as well as certain presumptions about the proper way to gain access to the specifics of these natures. But the account she gives of human nature is supposed to be independent of any interpretations humans make of themselves. In Heidegger’s terms, she is always already taking a certain stand on her being when she engages in her enquires, a stand out of which her particular conception of human nature emerges. Yet this conception is supposed to be neutral with respect to the particular frameworks and self-conceptions that orient human lives. Hence the performative contradiction inherent in her approach.

We might attribute this mistake to the failure to regard Dasein’s being as finite and temporally extended. This is to say that humans – enquirers and subjects alike – are constantly engaged in interpretation, projecting an understanding out of given and
evolving frameworks. But human nature itself then gets conceived, in these approaches, as something fixed, that is, as eternally present. In metaphysical essentialism the non-temporality of human nature is clear; in socio-biological naturalism, it emerges as the presumption that human nature is the sort of thing that can be subsumed under law-like generalizations. Our thrown projection is, on the contrary, finite: we can never get behind our thrownness to determine human nature as it “really is,” and we can never posit an interpretation of human nature that is immutable and complete. And so, if this argument is correct, naturalism about human ends and the virtues needed to achieve them cannot take the form of socio-biological naturalism or essentialism.

Fortunately, the major modern proponents of naturalism in virtue ethics have avoided these trappings, and there is reason to think that Aristotle did as well. Philosophers such as John McDowell, Julia Annas, Philippa Foot, Rosalind Hursthouse and Alasdair MacIntyre have endorsed some form of naturalism in the sense that they maintain a logical continuity between accounts of natural normativity that follow from a species’ characteristic way of going on and accounts of human normativity that follow from our characteristic ways of going on. They also emphasize continuity between the natural world and our own in that, whatever else we may say about ourselves, we are still biological creatures. But they follow Aristotle's lead in stressing the game-changing relevance of our rationality to a naturalist account. In this way the grammar and meaning of “good” remains the same between human and non-human, or ethical and
non-ethical contexts, but some of the problems associated especially with the socio-biological account are avoided.

Hursthouse, for instance, identifies four ends appropriate to any social animal, namely its individual survival, the continuance of its species, its characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyments, and the good functioning of its social group, where each of these is defined relative to the species in question. A good social animal is one that is fitted or endowed with respect to its parts, its operations, its actions, and its desires and emotions in ways that serve these four ends characteristic of its species.107 As social animals, the conception of a good human being will be constrained by these four ends. However, “our characteristic way of going on, which distinguishes us from all the other species of animals, is a rational way. A ‘rational way’ is any way that we can rightly see as good, as something we have reason to do.”108 As the sorts of creatures that are not only part of the natural, biological order but are a species of rational animal – that can ask for reasons for doing one thing rather than another, and has the capacity to question our impulses and desires in the seeking and acting on reasons – Hursthouse claims that “we are ethically good (or bad) human beings according to whether we are well (or ill) endowed with respect to reactions that are not merely physical, our (occasional) actions from inclination, our emotions and desires, and our actions from reason.”109 That is, the ethical naturalist considers human beings as a

107 Hursthouse, On Virtue Ethics, 200.
108 Hursthouse, On Virtue Ethics, 222.
109 Hursthouse, On Virtue Ethics, 207.
whole in giving its account of the ethical life. Unlike the Kantian, for whom moral goodness resides wholly in the rational will purified of ends, interests and inclinations, the naturalist can take the extent to which we are well disposed with respect to our desires, our emotional responses, and our ends as ethically relevant considerations of human goodness. But unlike the Humean, for whom the account of a good human being reduces to how we feel about a certain character, we can rationally evaluate a character or disposition according to how well it serves the four ends of a rational, social animal, including the end of acting from reason. “The actions of anyone who does not φ when φ-ing is the only rational thing to do are ipso facto defective” as Foot puts it, and so people who fail to act rationally in this way are defective human beings.

Indeed Hursthouse adds that “it is primarily in virtue of our actions from reason that we are ethically good or bad human beings,” as rational action, she claims, is what is most distinctive about human beings relative to other social animals. What is it about our rationality that accounts for this distinction? Her suggestion is “the genuinely transforming effect of our rationality on the basic structure” given in our animal nature. The “characteristic way of going on” for other animals is defined in terms of some relatively narrow account of what they normally do, which is, for them, biologically determined; there’s no sense in saying that an animal “ought” to behave differently than how they normally behave. The problem in the human case is that, not

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only is it extremely difficult to identify “characteristic” human behavior with anything like the degree of specificity that we find in other animals, humans “can assess what we do do and at least try to change it...We have room for the idea that we might be able to live better.\textsuperscript{113} Our “characteristic way of going on” cannot be determined simply by observing how humans tend to behave in certain situations, and so “the notion is avowedly normative” rather than descriptive as in the socio-biological and essentialist accounts. This yields a judgment that humans are for the most part not living ethical lives, which, as we will soon discuss, rings a familiar tone when we think back to Heidegger’s claim that we are for the most part falling into inauthentic existence.

Claiming that our way of going on is characteristically a rational way, again, does not obviate the four ends of social animals she proposed before; rather, they will substantially constrain the reasons for action of a well-endowed (i.e., virtuous) human being. Neither does it suppose, to echo a point made earlier, that our reasons for action must be neutral with respect to our particular social and cultural circumstances. Rather, the conception of what the virtues are and what sorts of behaviors they involve will always be arrived at from within an ethical outlook, and will always be open to revision, especially with regard to determinate conceptions of virtuous actions.\textsuperscript{114}

It remains unclear exactly what the relationship between our natural ends and practical rationality is envisioned to be under this model, however, and several

\textsuperscript{113} Hursthouse, \textit{On Virtue Ethics}, 221

\textsuperscript{114} Hursthouse, \textit{On Virtue Ethics}, 227-230
possibilities suggest themselves. One might be that the natural ends place constraints on what is actually possible for us as social animals. Hursthouse seems to suggest something along these lines when she raises worries about the possibility of countenancing impartial benevolence as a virtue. “It...looks as though the species and familial bonding that are part of our biological, animal nature, and make us ‘partial’ to your own species and children, play an essential role in sustaining [the] two ends” of the continuance of the species and the good functioning of the social group.\textsuperscript{115} It would be futile to suppose that a well-functioning human being might be one which defiantly resists our naturally-given ends in the name of some higher ideal, under such a view: not only will this inevitably fail to be realizable in practice, it would entail a conception of an ideal human life as one which, if everybody realized this ideal, the flourishing of the human species itself would be put in jeopardy.\textsuperscript{116}

One objection to this sort of view is that it does not necessarily follow from a conception of a universal human ideal that everyone can, or even should realize it. Utilitarians have often tried to make this point in various ways. A stronger objection is that the best these four ends can do for us is constrain what might count as a universal

\textsuperscript{115} Hursthouse, On Virtue Ethics, 225

\textsuperscript{116} A similar kind of critique might be raised with regard to moral ideals having to do with our relation to non-human, especially domesticated animals. For instance, to someone who considers vegetarianism to be a kind of human ideal, we could reasonably point out that if everyone stopped eating cows, chickens and pigs, not only would those animals likely die out as a species (given that they have evolved to become dependent on human farming practices for their continued survival), but many other agricultural practices which have a symbiotic relationship with animal farming (using their manure instead of chemical fertilizers, e.g.) would be put in jeopardy. A case for the detrimental effects of universal vegetarianism has been made by Michael Pollan in his book, The Omnivore’s Dilemma (London: Penguin, 2006), chapter 17. The response of the vegetarian might follow a similar line to the response to the critique of impartial benevolence I give above.
conception of a well-functioning human being; it is hard to see what practical constraints they might put on individuals or groups of individuals, if we are to grant a plurality of possible ends that humans may and do have which will necessarily override these four natural ends. For example, the life of the celibate monk does not seem to be oriented towards the furtherance of any of the four ends, at least not directly, and this is especially so when we consider the hermit or ascetic. We may, of course, conclude that it is not possible to live well as a hermit or ascetic monk, but this might be simply modern, secular hubris, given the high place these sorts of lives have had in countless traditions. And we need not raise extreme examples of this sort to recognize that many lives we hold up as admirable seem to be the sorts that would be inimical to one or more of the four ends if they were models for all people. An opposite but related worry is that in this approach, virtue and practical reason have strictly instrumental value: the natural ends are pre-given by nature or evolution or whatever, and are in that sense external to the means of realizing them. This raises the old “why be moral” question: why should I care about these ends (i.e., the natural ones), when I have ends of my own? So it seems implausible and unhelpful to think of our ends as social animals as constraining practical rationality with respect to “realistic” possibilities.

A second way of thinking about the relationship of the natural ends to rationality is that they provide genuinely normative constraints, not just descriptive ones, on virtue and practical reason. This seems to be a more accurate sense of what Aristotle and his modern successors like Foot and Hursthouse have in mind. One’s individual well-being can only be defined in terms of what it is to be a well-functioning human being. The
four ends are not seen as providing restrictions on what a good human being can be, but rather that they provide the positive content of any such conception, simply because what it is to live well as an individual can only be defined in terms of what humans are, as a species. And humans are the sorts of beings that seek individual survival, the continuation of the species, characteristic freedom from pain and characteristic enjoyment, and the good functioning of the social group, as well as the sorts of beings that can choose to act on the basis of reasons. And so the content of (good) reasons for acting will be provided, at least in part, by the four natural ends, while reason must be actively engaged in determining how we are to live well as social animals.

But the worry is that it is not very clear how the considerations of our animal nature are to guide rationality, which considerations are to be seen as genuinely normative and which are not. Too much deference to our animal nature leads to some familiar worries that the naturalistic perspective will entail and justify conceptions of the good life that seem uncomfortable to many of us. For instance, it is often worried that it justifies certain forms of subjugation of women, confining the good life of a woman to the roles of motherhood and domestic care; that love relationships and parenthood are closed to homosexuals; that celibacy and the life of prayer and contemplation of a religious devotee cannot be a flourishing one, etc. And it seems to open up problems associated with the contingency of the natural lottery, which we have already discussed in places: if flourishing is tied closely to our biological and animal functions, and if the possibility of fulfilling these functions rests in no small part on whether we avoid unfortunate mishaps like barrenness, disease, and the like, then a great many people
are incapable of living flourishing human lives despite being otherwise good, reasonable persons.

In response to worries such as these, Julia Annas has suggested that we are to see our human nature as “more like the material for us to develop into a finished product by the use of rationality.” She continues:

My practical rationality is seen as a skill or expertise which gets to work on the circumstances of my life, including of course the rest of human nature, and makes something of it, in the way that a craftsperson makes an object from raw materials...But what is distinctive about us is that our ways of living can be transformed as a whole by our rationality; we can choose and create new ways of living...I can try to turn my life from a mass of materials which are formless in the sense that I haven’t given them form, into a product of rational thought, unified by my trying to live by certain kinds of reason and make myself into a certain kind of person, a life which I am living, rather than just taking for granted...All of our social animal nature is transformed by its being activated, as we live, in a rational way.

According to this craftsperson analogy, it’s not the case that the end and function of a human life is simply determined by nature, but that nature serves more as a kind of starting point for rational reflection, and bears with it certain limitations on rational possibilities in the way that there are limitations to what the sculptor can do with the bronze. So Annas, while maintaining the logical structure of naturalism (humans are the sorts of beings that are capable of transforming our given nature into a product of rational thought, and a good human is one that does this well), has allocated a considerably diminished role to what is given, and tied human flourishing very closely


to the operations of rational reflection. That is, we are good human beings in so far as the operations of rational thought give shape to and determine our lives as they have been given to us.

But what is it for rational thought to shape the “raw materials” of human nature, if not an echo of the kind of cognitivism or fact/value dichotomy that we critiqued earlier? It divides off the “self” into a natural component which has no normatively significant character in itself, and the reason, whose rules of correct operation can then bestow normative value onto the operations of the creature who performs the rationally-determined acts. While it doesn’t limit the sphere of normativity to pure reason, since it certainly considers our emotions, desires, natural ends, etc., as providing the content of practical reason, and considers reason’s influence on these aspects of our lives to be necessary for flourishing, cognition and rationality remain the sine qua non of normative significance.

The advantage of naturalism was supposed to be that we could find in human nature certain ends and norms that are constitutive of human life as such, and which could then determine the direction of sound practical reasoning. Without such naturally-given ends providing practical reason not only with its content but its normative character, it might seem hard to see how we can avoid a view of practical reason that doesn’t, in the end, ultimately require either its detachment from the rest of our lives or its enslavement to subjective desires. On the other hand, the advantage of the more rationalist approach to naturalism was that it respected the sense that we are
not bound to the somewhat narrow constraints on what counts as human flourishing imposed by the socio-biological approach and, to a lesser degree, Hursthouse’s and Foot’s approaches. Moreover it respects the fact that the free shaping of our own lives as such seems to be a constituent of flourishing, and that respecting human dignity seems to involve respecting our capacity to transcend our given natures.

In his essay, “Two Sorts of Naturalism,”119 John McDowell attempts to resolve these kinds of worries by rejecting, with Heidegger, the modern “scientistic” presumption according to which reason has to somehow find its place in relation to a disenchanted natural world. It is this presumption that, in his view, gives rise to the inadequacies of empiricism and rationalism alike as a ground for our conception of human nature and virtue. In an argument similar to the one we offered above, he claims that it is not possible to straightforwardly derive an account of human flourishing from the disinterested observations of human behavior once we consider the significance of our rational capacities, which by their nature are supposed to enable us to stand back and question our natural desires, ends and functions, rather than simply be the mechanism by which these independently recognized ends can be realized. In the absence of an appeal to independent facts about what humans need to ground practical reason, it might seem that individual interest, or the structures of pure reason itself detached from the world, are the only candidates left; but this is only so when

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we’ve “purged the world of meaning,” seeing intelligibility and significance as the product of the human mind.

The kind of picture of human nature that emerges from the empirical, disinterested perspective he calls “first nature,” which contrasts with the “second nature” of a being with logos, the capacity to transcend first nature. It seems that by “second nature” McDowell has in view something very similar to what we have been calling “horizons of understanding” and “frameworks of significance,” the background on which one is able to discern the meaning and intelligibly inherent in the world. As beings with second nature for whom the world is meaningful and intelligible, it’s not the case that theoretical reason takes account of the “objective” facts of the empirical world – such as facts about our first nature – and then reports back to practical reason the sorts of ends it should pursue; practical reason doesn’t have to go outside of itself to find the grounds of its correctness. But neither is it the case that practical reason has to disengage from the world for these grounds, if both of these presumptions rest on the “hankering to acknowledge something brutally alien to subjectivity” in the philosophy of nature. Rather, due to our second nature certain sorts of things just are reasons for action. It seems that McDowell is trying to maintain a structural continuity between first and second nature in the following way: according to the first nature account, A just is what S should do, because that is what creatures of species X do in circumstances like these; and this is grounded on the basis of empirical observation of how they in fact tend to behave (their first nature). Similarly, according to the second nature account, A just is what S should do, because this is what a rational person should do in
circumstances like these; and this is grounded in the kinds of valid reasons for action inherent in one’s acquired moral outlook.

The virtuous person, he claims, is the one that gets these reasons right – that has the right kind of second nature; this is because it is the nature of reason to aim for *correctness*. Since *any* purported ground of reasons for action can be called into question, so can the grounds supplied by our acquired second nature, and we can and should reflect on these grounds to try to identify and correct problems in our outlook. But reflection on our second nature must be Neurathian, which is to say that one refines one’s moral outlook from within, as opposed to stepping outside of it.\(^{120}\) So it should be apparent from this that McDowell has offered a certain kind of naturalism that seems supportive of the Heideggerian claims we have been dealing with, along with the hermeneutical approach to revision and critique that we will discuss in the next chapter.

However, there remains in McDowell’s account a trouble about the centrality of reason to his conception of second nature. He wants to maintain that the world is intelligible in so far as it lies within the “space of reasons,” which seems to suggest the meaningful structures of the world and our own second nature are all in principle

\(^{120}\) This refers to Otto Neurath’s illustration of how scientific development proceeds, which McDowell wants to extend to any kind of critical engagement with the grounds of objective truth. The model is of people on a boat at sea, who, over the course of time, end up replacing each plank piece by piece as the plank gives out. So even though they never disembarked from the boat to perform their repairs, they were still able to identify and fix problems in the boat’s functioning, even to the point where they end up with a constitutively different boat altogether.

This illustration, I think, captures quite well the hermeneutical procedure that Gadamer develops on the basis of Heidegger’s thought, so I’m quite pleased that McDowell refers to it as a model for ethical reflection, as does Hursthouse.
available to cognitive reflection. Thus the “sensitivity” to meaning and significance that we discussed earlier becomes reduced to a sensitivity to reasons, the characterization of the virtuous person’s practical knowledge is ultimately in terms of cognitive activity, and we can recognize the kind of Neurathian reflection on our own second nature as genuine progress by virtue of its rational character.

So while McDowell has rightly challenged the dichotomy between the world of meaning and the world of nature that gives rise to inadequate accounts of the relation between nature and virtue, the worry is that by circumscribing the “space of meaning” under the “space of reason” he thins out and distorts somewhat the full range of aspects involved in a virtuous person's understanding.

Heidegger would likely agree with McDowell that we cannot regard the concepts of “nature” and “rationality” as fundamentally distinct from each other, and each accessible as they are from a “view from nowhere.” Heidegger’s reason for rejecting this view, however, is that the comportment towards entities as present-at-hand – as these conceptions are – is possible on the basis of being-in-the-world. As being-in-the-world, the world is constitutive of our being, which is to say that meaning and significance is always “there” in a more basic way than through cognitive reflection, and always exceeds what such reflection and grasp. If our concern is with how it is that the virtuous person engages in the world, and more generally with the possibility of critical development of our frameworks of understanding that underlie anyone’s engagement, then we shouldn’t limit these concerns to one, derivate aspect of our being.
I want to suggest a somewhat different way of developing the kinds of thoughts that seem to be in play in the naturalists’ accounts. What gets characterized as a distinction between our nature and our rationality points, I would suggest, to a distinction between that aspect of our being which is “given,” and that aspect which can take hold of and make an issue of that givenness, which in Heidegger’s terms correlates with thrownness and projection. Modern philosophers, in thrall to the doctrine of disenchanted nature, have tended to consider each of these in a way in which they are fundamentally opposed to each. Heidegger, on the other hand, sees thrownness and projection as equiprimordial aspects of our existential structure, opposed to each other only when we mistake some particular determination that stands in relief in certain episodes of disengagement for the basic phenomenon itself. More specifically, thrownness gets substituted by the kind of comportment towards entities whereby we see them as subject to law-like generalizations; projection gets substituted by the cognitive operations of rational thought that stand in relief when engaged familiarity breaks down. And these two determinations do seem to stand in an uneasy relationship with one another. But that is why he insists that we always have to go back to the phenomena, back “zu den Sachen selbst.”

By way of recap, Heidegger argues that our originary or primordial way of encountering the world is in the mode of an engaged familiarity. It is engaged in that most of our activities and dealings with equipment are not guided by cognition; reflection and cognizing occur when somehow we have become disengaged from our activity through the malfunctioning of equipment, etc. But the lack of cognitive
reflection in everyday activity does not mean that the activity is “blind,” rather it is
guided by the “sight” of circumspection, which is possible on the basis of a pre-cognitive
familiarity with the various relations equipment have to each other and to our activities.
These various relations ultimately culminate in a “for-the-sake-of-which” which has no
further end, namely Dasein itself, as the being for which that being is essentially an
issue. The “world” is this vast array of interlocking relationships whose meaning and
significance is inseparable from our human identities, those possibilities and for-the-
sakes-of-which that constitute our lives. While it is true that at certain times we are
compelled to take explicit account of these relationships, bringing them into reflective
awareness for rational consideration, it remains the case that rationality is founded
upon, and derivative of, a prior engaged familiarity, and so is far from adequately
characterizing are distinctive way of going on. What is distinctive about humans, rather,
is that we are “worlded” creatures: we are the beings that always already operate with
an understanding of the world that is interlocked with an understanding we have of
ourselves.

Moreover, as we also discussed, if what we just said characterizes the
fundamental way we encounter the world, then to encounter an entity as an object for
reflective scrutiny involves disregarding its being as ready-to-hand in order to observe,
examine and define it in its pure presence-at-hand. “To lay bare what is just present-at-
hand and no more, cognition must first penetrate beyond what is ready-to-hand in our
concern” (BT 101). But Heidegger wants to stress that such penetration is not a matter
of getting at the thing’s “real” being, its “Thinghood” as the true account of what an
entity is, for that leaves behind the rich array of significances that constitute our more fundamental experience with the world. It’s true that the natural sciences regard “nature” in terms of presence-at-hand, and that is entirely appropriate for that domain of enquiry. But even the natural sciences themselves have different ways of orienting themselves to their subject matter: the biologist doesn’t regard entities in the same way that a physicist or chemist would, for instance, and it would be highly erroneous to suppose that the accounts she gives are somehow less “real” or “true” than the accounts of the physicist. Likewise, it would be just as erroneous to suppose that the orientation of the natural sciences as a whole does not exhaust the being of the world. The forest is not just a macro organism: it is a source of wood for a house or fire, it is a place of beauty or tranquility, a threat to my home as a wildfire approaches, etc. To call these sorts of ways of relating to the world a matter of projection has already begged the question in favor of the priority of a particular kind of stance taken towards entities, a stance which, again, is very much removed from our encounter with the world.

What does this mean for a naturalistic account of virtue? It means first off that, as McDowell argues, the attempts to determine human nature by considering our animality is bound to be inadequate. Humans have second nature, or in Heidegger’s terms, humans have worlds; animals do not. But for Heidegger this also means that rationality is derivative, not fundamental to the way we go on. As we remarked earlier, the space of meaning is wider than the space of reasons. But on another, more positive side, if both of these ways of regarding ourselves are modifications of a more fundamental Being-in-the-world, they need not be seen as standing opposed to each
other, but each can be correlated, as I suggested above, with two equiprimordial aspects of Being-in-the-world, namely thrownness and projection.

Moreover, when the naturalist insists that our status as animals imposes certain corresponding ends and restrictions on our possibilities, what they are pointing to, albeit somewhat misleadingly, is the fact that our worlds are worlds into which we are thrown, that we have not created ourselves and our possibilities, that the horizons of the world are shared ones that carry with them a recognition that our lives are bound up with the lives not just of other Daseins, but with the world of nature, of equipment and paraphernalia, and other animals. The problem arises when we try to circumscribe this thrownness under the categories and methods of the natural sciences, rather than seeing it as encompassing much more than can be contained therein.

When, on the other hand, the naturalist insists that our rationality gives us the capacity to transcend our thrownness and choose our actions and lives on the basis of reasons, what they are pointing to is the fact that we are always projecting our possibilities, that any given framework of understanding is open to question, that there

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121 We will return to the question of naturalism in the next chapter when we consider how it is that our horizons do, indeed, include a sense of ourselves as embedded not just in a social world, but in a natural world. This draws upon a dimension of our thrownness that Heidegger often neglects, namely our embodiment. As embodied entities, the horizons out of which we project include a sense of continuity with the non-social world, and a sense in which care for being includes a demand to respect and free up this natural world for its own being. This, I think, can mitigate against a latent anthropocentrism inherent in Being and Time, though something that he corrects in some of his later writings like the “Letter on Humanism,” “The Question Concerning Technology,” and “On the Origin of the Work of Art.”
is no sense to the notion that we are merely determined to be one way or another, either biologically or rationally.\textsuperscript{122}

As I stated at the outset of this chapter, I did not intend this discussion to contribute much by way of substantial content to an account of the virtues and what it means to live well as a human life, nor to provide a concrete answer to the problems associated with historicity and contingency. What I intended was to draw out and defend some of the ontological preconditions for any such account, and on this basis raise some worries about ethics, including virtue ethics, as it has commonly been approached. We have, however, attempted to spell out, in general terms at least, how Heidegger thinks we can be both authentic and historical, which will prove to be essential if we are going to follow through with the suggestion that authenticity is fundamental to eudaimonia, and that the conscience which calls us to authenticity is fundamental to phronesis.

What we have not yet done is spell out in adequate detail what it means for the authentic Dasein to choose itself out of its thrown, historically conditioned situation. In particular, we need to elaborate further how it is possible to engage in the kind of “reciprocal rejoinder” to one’s heritage that is necessary for authentic historicity when we do not have recourse to either pure principles of rationality or a naturalistic, objective perspective on human nature as the basis from which to evaluate our

\textsuperscript{122} As we have seen previously, to simply submit to one’s given desires, inclinations, received norms, or “animal instincts” is itself a stand one can take on one’s being, but one which, by turning away from the burden of choosing oneself, characterizes inauthentic life.
heritage. If we recall, the notion of a reciprocal rejoinder is that of handing down to oneself of the heritage, the thrown frameworks from and in which we can make sense of ourselves and the world. But it is not a handing down as it has come down, but rather as modified, carried forward. But carried forward on the basis of what? Towards what? How do we avoid modifying it for the worse? How do we avoid seeing the reciprocal rejoinder as merely arbitrary or capricious? These are the questions we will now face as we consider Heidegger’s student, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and his development of a hermeneutical approach to historical authenticity.
CHAPTER 4:

HERMENEUTICS AND PRACTICAL WISDOM

4.1 Gadamer and Heidegger

One of the central themes of the last two chapters was Heidegger’s account of the ways in which everything from culture and society to philosophy and scientific discourse tend us towards inauthenticity, presenting and assuming ontological premises that distort or neglect our way of being in the world, particularly Dasein’s finitude and being-towards-death. While we engaged in some explorations into the shape of a Heideggerian ethics, one thing that would have stood out was that much of the tradition of Western moral philosophy, according to the Heideggerian view, is implicated in these distortions, and so it would seem that the relation of authentic Dasein to this tradition, as to the broader tradition of Western thought and culture, would be largely antagonistic. Since I just used the term “tradition,” it bears noting that we have rarely spoken of “tradition” in anything but a pejorative tone, except when that term was used more descriptively to refer to a school of thought inspired by a particular thinker (such as the Aristotelian tradition). Broader senses of that term, “modern tradition,” “metaphysical tradition,” “philosophical tradition,” and so forth, were more often than not characterized as distorting lenses of some sort. This mirrors Heidegger’s own disparaging tone when that word appears in his work, and he explicitly opts for the term “heritage” [das Erbe] when referring to the social and historical horizons that underlie
the authentic Dasein’s existential constitution, rather than “tradition,” which he seems to associate more with established and dominating conventions, dogmas, beliefs, and so forth: the ways in which das Man exercises its dominion, as we discussed. It is curious, then, that Gadamer unapologetically chooses to use “the tradition” to refer to one of the centerpieces of his own thought without acknowledging Heidegger’s misgivings about that term. That he does could be merely the result of a terminological choice with no real significance (i.e., it could be that Gadamer always means by der Tradition what Heidegger meant by das Erbe).123 But I would suggest it is an instance of a subtle but significant shift of both tone and emphasis, though not necessarily a profound departure in substance, of the student from his teacher, a shift towards a more hopeful and constructive (if at times naively so) view of the prospects for an authentic and critical encounter with all of those modes of social and intellectual life of which Heidegger was so suspicious.

We might say that Gadamer sought not so much the destruction of tradition as its rehabilitation; not so much to reveal the distortions and obfuscations of the language of philosophy as to reorient it, thereby uncovering what it has been trying to say all along. While recognizing that in seeking to develop an account of such phenomena as understanding, knowledge and truth he will not be able to use the concepts in play unquestioningly, he nevertheless “will have to take over whatever features of the

123 Both, however, sometimes use der Überlieferung to refer to that which is “handed down” in a favorable way. The key difference is in their respective comfort with der Tradition.
original meaning of [the] concepts have come down to it.”

Throughout his work he emphasizes the “belongingness to” or “affinity with” tradition [Zugehörigkeit], which is closely connected with recognizing its “authority,” notions that undoubtedly pertain to what we called the structural dimension of Dasein’s being (in particular its thrownness), but which, considered with respect to the normative dimension of authenticity, seem perilously close to Heidegger’s characterization of inauthentic falling. Some commentators, in my view, tend to overemphasize this difference, claiming that Heidegger took what Smith terms a “Gnostic turn” in his later writings that was concerned solely with “heeding Being’s call to the solitary thinker” out of communities and traditions, a turn which was prefigured already in what they see as Being and Time’s excessive focus on the “forgetfulness of Being” that characterizes das Man. Regardless of what we want to say about his later temperament, we have tried to emphasize Heidegger’s insistence that insofar as some structural feature is inescapable, as “belongingness” within social horizons surely is, then normative authenticity can never seek to transcend or escape its ontological structure. However, there may be some truth to the claim that Heidegger did not provide us with much by way of a positive account of what it means to authentically engage with tradition, to carry that tradition forward, so to speak, as the correlate to his disclosure of the tendencies toward inauthenticity and forgetfulness of being inherent therein. As we articulate


Gadamer’s dialectical approach to questions of virtue, practical wisdom, and the scope and possibilities of critical moral reflection, the somewhat negative view of society and the philosophical (especially moral) tradition in foregoing treatment of Heidegger will be tempered; however, we will return in chapter 5 to the worry that Gadamer may have been too idealistic in his account of dialogue, and address the real concerns about the mostly “fallen” state of culture in which dialogical practical reasoning would have to take place. But first we begin by briefly situating Gadamer’s “ontological” hermeneutics in relation to that of his Romantic and Historicist predecessors.

4.2 The Ontological Turn in Hermeneutics

One of Gadamer’s most significant inheritances from Heidegger was the ontological turn in hermeneutics, viz., the claim that understanding and interpretation are not so much actions we perform as fundamental constituents of our being: to “be” is to have a world, and to have a world is to have a certain comportment towards entities on the basis of which we project an understanding of those entities and ourselves in the

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I think Gadamer saw his relation to Heidegger this way as well. He admits in the forward to the second edition of Truth and Method that “like many of my critics, Heidegger too would probably feel a lack of ultimate radicality in the conclusions I draw...When science expands into a total technocracy and thus brings on the ‘cosmic night’ of the ‘forgetfulness of being,’ the nihilism that Nietzsche prophesied, then may one not gaze at the last fading light of the sun setting in the evening sky, instead of turning around to look for the first shimmer of its return? It seems to me, however, that the one-sidedness of hermeneutic universalism has the truth of a corrective. It enlightens the modern viewpoint based on making, producing, and constructing concerning the necessary conditions to which that viewpoint is subject. In particular, it limits the position of the philosopher in the modern world. However much he may be called to draw radical inferences from everything, the role of prophet, of Cassandra, of preacher, or of know-it-all does not suit him...Though the will of man is more than ever intensifying its criticism of what has gone before to the point of becoming a utopian or eschatological consciousness, the hermeneutic consciousness seeks to confront that will with something of the truth of remembrance: with what is still and ever again real” (TM xxxvii).
course of living. This understanding is constantly being refined as we respond to new situations that, due to finitude, can never be fully anticipated, which is to say we are constantly interpreting. The ontological turn marked a distinct shift from what hermeneutics had been in the modern period, which Gadamer traces in *Truth and Method* from its beginnings in the problem of how to understand difficult passages in ancient and religious texts, to the emergence of historical self-consciousness and its effect on the approach of the Romantics and Historicists, most notably of Schleiermacher, Ranke and Droysen. Their consciousness of the way in which meaning depends upon historical context destroyed the idea that it could be, in principle, directly self-evident, recognizing that the language and concepts one brings to the text differ from those of the author and from other interpreters. If there is an objective meaning to be understood, so it was thought, the interpreter must somehow have a method available that, if followed, would guarantee the transcendence of his own contextual perspective; otherwise there can be no way of knowing if the meaning he discerns in the text is the “true” meaning or just the product of his own contingent perspective. And it was thought to be the task of hermeneutics to work out this method.

According to Gadamer’s account, pre-Heideggerian hermeneutics attempted to marry historical consciousness with the aims and standards of the natural sciences, according to which “knowledge” is only valid insofar as it is the product of the technical application of a procedure guaranteed to eliminate all contingent features of the investigator’s particular circumstance. Since meaning still has to be connected to some historical context, this meant that hermeneutics was the method by which the
interpreter “transplants” himself, so to speak, into what we might call the “originary situation”: the author’s own intentions, the perspective of those who experienced a historical event first-hand, the vision of the artist, and so forth, thereby leaving his own (historically contingent) perspective behind in the discernment of meaning. Only thus can the interpreter lay claim to “objective” knowledge – knowledge that does not vary with the circumstances of interpretation.

Heidegger’s ontological turn, according to Gadamer, reoriented the notions of understanding, interpretation, knowledge, application, meaning, and similar concepts away from their characterizations in terms of pseudo-scientific procedure. In one of his most oft-quoted passages, Gadamer writes:

> Understanding is to be thought of less as a subjective act than as participating in an event of tradition, a process of transmission in which past and present are constantly mediated. This is what must be validated by hermeneutic theory, which is far too dominated by the idea of a procedure, a method (TM 290).

The ontological turn in hermeneutics involves the claim that one can never escape entirely one’s own perspective, at least with respect to questions of meaning, as we have discussed. This entails that the transplantation of one’s subjective consciousness into that of another is just as impossible as the attainment of a kind of decontextualized “universal horizon.” But this claim tasks someone like Gadamer with the challenge of responding to the supposed implication that outside of the domain of the natural sciences, “meaning” is simply subjective or relative or a truth possessed only by a privileged few. So long as we take scientific method as the standard for any kind of alternative to these options, Gadamer’s claim about the inescapability of horizons might
seem to doom hermeneutics into either pressing forward towards some *analogue* of the natural science model of procedural knowledge, or resigning itself to some form of strong anti-realism with regard to meaning.

The significance of all of this for ethics should be clear in at least two respects. First, it is commonly the case that “objectivity” and “knowledge” with respect to moral judgments are measured along the same lines that we have been calling the scientific ideal: one that necessarily excludes any element of the subjective constitution of the one making the judgment that is not at the same time universal across all possible subjects. For a moral judgment that I make to be considered objectively valid, according to such a view, it must demonstrably be the case that *anyone*, regardless of her social and historical circumstance, could make the same judgment, and uniquely so such that there’s no alternative judgment that could claim such a status. For such a demonstration, I have to have recourse to methods and procedures that, if correctly applied, will be guaranteed to yield correct moral judgment with respect to possible actions. So the task of the moral philosopher is commonly conceived as that of working out such methods and principles. The parallel to the rise of historical consciousness might be a recognition that any judgment of right will be relative to more comprehensive conceptions, and these conceptions are localized to a person, society, etc. But this wouldn’t necessarily preclude objective judgment of right *per se*, even with respect to a perspective that the one making the judgment does not subjectively share; we might simply say that action A is objectively right *for S*, relative to S’s set of values as an individual or member of a morally significant group. And so the proper procedure in
moral judgment would involve applying a procedure by which one can, as it were, adopt any perspective *idealiter* so as to determine whether a particular course of action was or would be right given that set of values, etc.

Gadamer’s (and Heidegger’s) claim about the “universality of the hermeneutical problem” – the ontological claim – is the claim that understanding on the basis of inherited frameworks is fundamentally constitutive of our way of being and something from which we can never escape, not even *idealiter*. This is a claim about the limits of the interpreting subject herself, i.e., about the one making a moral judgment, regardless of whether she is seeking to make a judgment about what anyone should do *simpliciter* or about what anyone should do *given a set of comprehensive conceptions*. And so the second respect in which Gadamer’s critique of the previous hermeneutical theories sketched above finds its parallel in ethics pertains to its consequences for moral claims if we hold onto the scientific ideal of knowledge in the domain of practical reasoning. We may hold to an *ideal* of moral action as justified by a procedure whose identification and application are independent of one’s particular historical and social circumstances, and press forward in the attempt to articulate it, perhaps by greatly limiting its scope within the domain of practical life; we may reject the notion of *independent* justification for an objectively rational procedure, but argue that it can be sustained within, and only within, coherent, self-enclosed traditions whose presupposed commitments are fundamentally incommensurable with others; or we should give up on the notions of even relative knowledge and truth in practical affairs, and instead see that domain as a
pragmatic exercise in working out various coping mechanisms internal to social life as we happen to find it.

These alternatives, what we will later describe in more detail as a kind of modified Kantianism, what Gadamer calls *traditionalism*, and pragmatism, are often offered as rejoinders to Gadamer’s thought, both critically and supportively. But we shall argue in chapter 5 that they are misconceived due to the unwarranted hegemony of the scientific ideal of procedural rationality over practical affairs. Gadamer’s response to the kinds of problems opened up by the ontological turn is to challenge this hegemony, one under which all knowledge becomes a form of either *episteme* or *techne*, to use the Greek terms. Instead Gadamer wants to open up the space for what Aristotle called “another kind of knowledge” (*allo eidos gnoseos*), namely *phronesis*: different from yet no less valid than the other kinds. In *Truth and Method* and elsewhere Gadamer draws upon Aristotle’s (and Plato’s) accounts of *phronesis* – what we characterized previously in terms of the call to authenticity – as a model for hermeneutics. But it’s more than a model: if we follow Gadamer’s account we should come to see that authentic hermeneutical understanding is *phronesis*. In *Truth and Method*, the focus is less on the subject matter of ethical understanding than on the subject matters of texts, the human sciences, and art. But these are subject matters that necessarily lack clear boundaries, all of them, along with ethics, modes of that general, ontologically constitutive practical understanding. And so if *phronesis*, conceived in terms of hermeneutical dialogue, is a genuine kind of practical knowledge, a disclosure of truth, and if it ranges over one’s life as a whole rather than over some
narrow “moral” domain, then we have the basis for an account of how the alternatives above can be overcome in an ethics of virtue centered on such hermeneutical *phronesis*.

This, of course, requires making good on the claim that authentic *phronesis* (i.e., hermeneutics) is a form of knowledge that does not rely on method. And it certainly seems right that a practical understanding which cannot be self-critical or subject to revision in light of a truth that *transcends* itself would only be a simulacrum of knowledge, not knowledge in an interesting sense that speaks to the kinds of concerns raised in chapter 1. So we will set out in our investigations of Gadamer’s hermeneutics with his treatment of Aristotle, beginning with the way in which he carves out the structure of *phronesis* in distinction from those of *episteme* and *techne*, as a way of clarifying what we have described as the difference between practical knowledge and the sort modeled on the natural sciences. Having done so, we will then examine his account of interpretation and the role that fore-meanings (i.e., prejudices) play in coming to an understanding of meaning. The focus of that examination will be on how the interpreter is able to foreground her prejudices in a way that allows legitimate ones that enable authentic understanding to be distinguished from prejudices that obscure or distort it. The basic claim will be that the process of foregrounding and legitimating prejudices is not technical but dialectical, that the dialectical process involved in hermeneutical understanding is fundamentally dialogical, which we will explicate in terms of being challenged by another person. *Phronesis* thus requires several conditions: the *recognition* of oneself and the other as co-constitutors of a continuous tradition that constitutes a shared world; an openness toward, and willingness to have
one’s understanding called into question, which itself depends on recognizing the priority of the question to the claim in practical reasoning; and a sense of meaning that is always practical in that it only arises through application, which entails that meaning itself will always be local and concrete. Understanding, as we shall explain, is the “fusion of horizons” in which meaning – practical knowledge, to be specific to this theme – is neither wholly distinct from, nor the “possession” of (i.e., relative to) any one particular world-view. And finally, these conditions gain their normative force as conditions of authenticity – the way of life that discloses the truth of Being, as we hope to make clear. Given the familiar relationship in Aristotle between phronesis and eudaimonia, we will thus be able to reinforce and explicate in chapter 6 the claim that authenticity characterizes the life of eudaimonia, opening up an articulation of the virtues as simultaneously the character traits needed for authentic hermeneutical understanding and for living well.

4.3 Episteme, Techne, and Phronesis

We won’t be attempting to fully articulate the episteme/techne/phronesis distinction here, nor claim to be offering an adequate analysis of Aristotle’s views themselves, but rather to open up some thematic features of hermeneutical, in contrast to procedural, knowledge for which we laid the groundwork in our study of Heidegger, and which will be developed in more detail in the pages that follow. Phronesis, techne, and episteme are distinct forms of knowledge, according to Aristotle, in that their subject matters are themselves of fundamentally different natures. Episteme is
knowledge of what is always the same and cannot be otherwise, which does not describe the realm of human practice in which the possibilities for action and the conditions in which one has to act constantly vary. This should seem obvious, but the failure to recognize this has been a hindrance to practical philosophy ever since Plato’s “empty generality,” as Aristotle called it, of the Idea of the Good, continuing up through modern attempts to uncover “universal” or “absolute” moral truths, “non-natural” moral properties, invariant moral “facts” about human nature, and so forth. In Heidegger’s terms, this is a concern with the present-at-hand, which as we saw is derivative and less primordial than the concrete “factuality” of being-in-the-world that is always underway. The object of moral knowledge, Gadamer reminds us, “is man and what he knows of himself. But he knows himself as an acting being...which is concerned with what is not always the same but can also be different...The purpose of his knowledge is to govern his action” (TM 314), and so “knowledge that cannot be applied to the concrete situation remains meaningless and risks obscuring what the situation calls for” (TM 313).

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127 In The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1986), henceforth IG, Gadamer argues that Aristotle was unfair to Plato, even consciously so, in his characterization of Plato’s Idea of the Good, and that their respective views on the relation between the eidos and the particular have more in common than is usually thought. He suggests that Aristotle may have slanted Plato’s Idea of the Good in order to better articulate his own position in contrast. And so if Gadamer’s argument about Plato is right, then what we say here should be taken in the same way.
Both *techne* and *phronesis*, by contrast, “imply a practical knowledge fashioned to the measure of the concrete tasks before them,”¹²⁸ and so as a knowledge of how to live or what is to be done, ethical knowledge will have to lie within this domain, not in the domain of *episteme*. Moreover, each requires both a general background understanding – a “world” – acquired through education, training, and previous experience, which it to say it requires a mediation between a “universal” (this background understanding) and its application to the exigencies of the particular situation. But the nature of this mediation differs between *techne* and *phronesis* in three ways that should be familiar to readers of Aristotle. The first has to do with the nature of application itself; the second with the means-end relationship; and the third with the way we understand the situation of another.

On the subject of application, the main difference between *techne* and *phronesis* is that the former is, in principle even if never in practice,¹²⁹ a kind of knowledge that can be complete and codifiable independent of the concrete moment of application; the latter is not. The general knowledge involved in *techne* can thus take the form of rules,

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¹²⁹ An interesting question is whether Gadamer would have thought that there really could be anything like genuine “technical” knowledge in a sense that clearly contrasts with *phronesis*. This is especially so given the analysis of our engaged skillful dealings with the ready-to-hand, which we argued could not, even in principle, be codified into rules. Thus it’s not implausible to suppose that, ultimately, all practical knowledge is a form of *phronesis*. To be sure, though, there are domains in human life in which codification can go a long way, and more importantly that the endeavor to refine procedural rules and the like is an appropriate aim, regardless of whether this could ever result in complete technical knowledge in the sense we’re describing. What Gadamer is trying to do first and foremost is draw us away from considering questions of meaning, including ethics, to have even an aspirational self-conception in terms of *techne*. 
procedural principles, and so forth (essentially what Kant called rules of skill). I can know how to build a chair, program a computer, treat a disease, etc., even if I’m not actively engaged in those activities. This is why we can say that a technical skill can be taught, learned, and forgotten. We can take it up or put it down, and if we let that skill languish, we can lose possession of it altogether. Moreover, in certain situations we might find that due to the lack of material conditions, say, the knowledge can only be imperfectly or incompletely applied, which does not imply either that one has incomplete knowledge or that the experience of failure would necessarily change that knowledge. The important point is that application is something independent of and subsequent to the knowledge itself (the universal), something we “do” with it without necessarily altering it.

But a different problem of application obtains in the case of phronesis given that, as “the subject of... phronesis, man always finds himself in an ‘acting situation’ and he is always obliged to use ethical knowledge and apply it according to the exigencies of his concrete situation” (PHC 120). This is not the sort of knowledge that gets called upon here and left aside there, despite seeming to be so by the way we often speak of “moral situations” in distinction from non-moral ones. This language cannot designate any kind of determinate, substantial distinction since the very sort of judgment that would pick out the one kind of situation from the other is itself done on the basis of a prior evaluative understanding of the relative importance of certain features of a circumstance, about norms and values, a capacity to discern when and how those norms and values are in play, and so forth. In other words, differentiating one circumstance
from another as a “morally relevant” situation is an act of phronesis, not a marking out of the domain of phronesis. This points to the more basic phenomenon that there is never a time in which we are not engaging our practical knowledge, the knowledge of “how to act,” which is always at work even where the situation does not strike us as (ethically) significant. Thus it is misleading to speak of it as something we may or may not “apply,” as something we may learn prior to application or forget, and involving other distinctive features of technical knowledge.

This obviously raises suspicions about the aims of modern philosophy to articulate moral principles with universality and specificity. Gadamer further argues that the universal element – the norms or general knowledge of how to act that underlies my practical knowledge in particular instances – is constantly being determined in and by the concrete situations and the decisions I make. In this way, there is an important difference in what these two kinds of knowledge aim at. The telos, as it were, of technical knowledge is the complete and final articulation of the procedural rules that can determine the course of action in any possible situation. So even if that telos is never actually obtainable in fact, the practitioner seeks ever to advance the universality, finality, and invariance of her knowledge – to increase her technical “expertise.”\(^{130}\) The norms that guide phronesis, by contrast, are always in

\(^{130}\) This should not be confused with Dreyfus’ notion of “cultural expertise” that we discussed in chapter 3. In fact, according to that account, “technical expertise” may indicate, or is at least compatible with, a lack of “cultural expertise” with respect to the domain of practical life as a whole.
principle incomplete apart from concrete application, for it is in this moment of application that their meaning becomes manifest.

This is for two reasons that take us back to the previous chapters’ arguments, and which will be elaborated on later. The first is that the norms are part of our shared, pre-conceptual horizons, and since there is no standpoint behind these horizons from which to consider them in their totality, there is no standpoint from which to attain an absolute and universal perspective on their meaning. The second point, which follows from the first, has to do with the fact that in concrete application certain significances of the norms come to the fore while other possibilities get lost from view (the telescopic effect that we discussed earlier). And since the possibilities for application are inexhaustible, so are the possible meanings and significances of these norms.

The second way in which techne differs from phronesis lies in the different conceptual relation between the ends and means, and the resultant role that deliberation and choice play in determining action. In technical activity, it is possible in principle for both the ends and means to be determined beforehand in such a way that the technician need not deliberate about them in the course of the activity. The ends of technical activity are a certain product or state of affairs that can be determined independently of the means to achieve them or the persons bringing them about. Since the ends can remain fixed and determinate in this way, an expert who has learned the sufficient means need not consider anew on each occasion how to proceed; she can simply repeat what has worked before, or teach these procedures to someone else.
Since both means and ends can be fixed in a way that their conception does not require the practitioner to take special consideration of the concrete situation, it’s possible in technical activity for one to simply “follow the rules,” and thus to evade responsibility for one’s actions or their results.

In the case of ethical knowledge, since the concern is with the sorts of things like justice and courage that, as we just discussed, cannot be specified independently of the concrete moment of application, the determination of both ends and means will be particular to each situation. It is in the choice of means that the end is determined in its concrete form (the just, courageous, etc.); and likewise, the norms, rules, laws, and so forth (the means, in other words) have their point and take their bearings in relation to the end. Since neither the ends nor the means can be concretely determined beforehand, ethical knowledge requires a certain kind of “ethical perception” \([\textit{aesthesis}]\) of both ends and means that “cuts through the situation” (PHC 124). Speaking somewhat hyperbolically, Gadamer argues that “here, in the question of the good, there is no body of knowledge at one’s disposal. Nor can one defer to the authority of another. One has to ask oneself, and in so doing, one necessarily finds oneself in discussion either with oneself or with others” (PHC 123). All of this means that the aim of ethical knowledge is ultimately not this or that action, nor this or that end as such, but “the complete ethical rectitude of a lifetime” (PHC 123), which is what Gadamer takes Aristotle to mean by claiming that “ethical knowledge is a ‘knowledge-for-the-sake-of-oneself’” (PHC 119).
Given what we have just said about the indeterminacy of ends and means, this latter phrase cannot mean that ethical knowledge secures one’s own advantage, maximizes pleasure or the good or preference satisfaction or some such, if all of these are conceived, as they often are, as having a determinate form such that there is an equally determinate fact as to the means to secure them. Just as phronesis is not a matter of applying a set of pre-determined skills and procedures to a particular situation, rectitude in one’s life cannot be realized by a certain choice of means to a pre-conceived end (the “good life,” say), since “man does not deal with himself in the same way that an artisan deals with his material” (PHC 119). We cannot step back from ourselves in order to examine the raw materials and determine how to shape them according to a certain eidos of the good life as a kind of product to be realized, but we are constantly in the process of filling out and shaping that conception in the course of concrete existence.\(^\text{131}\)

The third respect in which phronesis differs from techne has to do with our understanding of the ethical situations of other people, or more specifically, situations in which we are not directly engaged. According to a conception of practical knowledge as techne, the procedural rules are of such a form that knowledge of what is to be done is simply a matter of abstractly applying them to the exigencies of the particular situation. This would mean that one could, in principle, apply these rules to any

\(^\text{131}\) This point (if our later defense is successful) reinforces the worries we had about some forms of naturalism that we discussed in chapter 3, particularly Annas’ notion that rationality “deals with” the “raw materials” delivered by nature. It likewise undercuts the erroneous conception of the virtues as ultimately a means to an end (eudaimonia), insofar as it contrasts with the more plausible view that the virtues are constitutive of the end. We will take up contrast in chapter 6.
situation, so long as one has all the relevant details, and arrive at the correct judgment.

If, on the other hand, the situational knowledge characteristic of *phronesis* resists articulation in universal form, requiring, rather, certain pre-cognitive background understanding of norms, self-conceptions, and goods that can never be made fully explicit, then attaining such an understanding when I am not the one directly involved requires a particular kind of *sympathetic* understanding or affinity with another, the modification of *phronesis* that Aristotle calls *synesis*. Indeed we will see that Gadamer’s hermeneutics ends up elevating *synesis* above the place that it has in either Heidegger’s or Aristotle’s thought, as it is this kind of understanding – one which is neither a matter of transposing oneself into the other’s situation nor a matter of a kind of alienated observation and judgment, but rather a “bond” over a common subject matter – that above all constitutes the hermeneutical experience. At the same time, this points to significant limitations with respect to the kinds of judgments we are permitted to make, under such an account, about the lives and behavior of others, to return to a worry raised in chapter 1. The appeal of the *techne* model lies partly in the idea that it permits us to pronounce *objectively* on the normative status of another’s life and/or behavior without having to share the background understanding that may lead

132 The lack of this kind of affinity, which Aristotle thinks is most fully realized in genuine friendships, does not necessarily preclude one from offering *advice* to another; but the wisdom of the advice-giver, it seems to me, includes the wisdom to discern how much advice she can offer or how strong it can be given her level of *synesis* with the other (wisdom many “professional ethicists” and advice columnists seem to lack). It might be claimed that in certain cases there is no need for *synesis* since there is no question of what the other person should or should not do (e.g., if the other person is wondering whether to participate in a racially-driven lynch mob). But even here, the situation is not simply one of whether to participate or not, but would obviously include issues having to do with why the person found himself in that position in the first place, which the simple “participating would be wrong” answer does not address, but which a level of *synesis* might.
them to a different sort of judgment. And this seems unavailable on the *phronesis* model, which is a large source of the relativism/elitism worries we have raised. And so to meet these worries we must consider the form and possibilities inherent in the hermeneutical experience of *synesis*.

As we said above, these characterizations of the difference between *phronesis* and *techne* are familiar points within the context of virtue ethics (though not always sufficiently appreciated), and they echo much of what we argued previously. And again, we have made them primarily for the sake of thematization, expressing in Aristotelian terms the claims Gadamer wants to defend about the nature of hermeneutical knowledge, which is a form of *phronesis*, in contrast to other conceptions that themselves parallel the form of practical knowledge advocated or presumed by rival theories of morality. This allows us to indicate at the outset of the following discussion its relevance to virtue ethics.

But we will briefly mention another reason that this difference is worth highlighting, referring to the fact that much of the criticism that both Gadamer and Heidegger have of modern philosophy and modern culture is that it has become increasingly technologized at the expense of *phronesis*. As Richard Bernstein has pointed out, we can speak of Gadamer’s project as a hermeneutical application of Aristotle to our present concrete situation that can open up dimensions of ethical life that have been forgotten. He writes:

> What Gadamer takes to be basic for our hermeneutical situation is that we are confronted with a world in which there has been a ‘dominion of technology
based on science,’ and there is a ‘false idolatry of the expert,’ ‘a scientific mystification of the modern society of specialization,’ and a dangerous ‘inner longing in our society to find in science a substitute for lost orientations.’ It is this problematic that orients Gadamer’s questioning of Aristotle’s text, for Gadamer’s central claim is that there has been a forgetfulness and deformation of what *praxis* really is.\textsuperscript{133}

4.4 Prejudices and the Fusion of Horizons

To begin explicating these ideas, we will consider what precisely is meant by the hermeneutical experience and this notion of a “bond over a common subject matter.” The well-known term for this is the “fusion of horizons,” and a key aspect of Gadamer’s account of it involves a rehabilitation of the notion of a prejudice in the face of what he takes to be the Enlightenment’s “prejudice against prejudices.” A prejudice is essentially Gadamer’s more provocative term for an element of that inescapable background understanding that the earlier chapters defended, and so rather than explicating it again in detail we will briefly situate it within the context of hermeneutics.

We recall that the rise of historical consciousness challenged the Enlightenment’s naïve faith in the possibly for unmediated rational or empirical access to some objective truth outside of historically-conditioned conceptual frameworks, but that the hermeneutics that arose from this consciousness had its own naïve faith, that of the possibility of transcending one’s own perspective so as to adopt idealiter that of the author of a text, a historical period, etc. What historical consciousness preserved of the Enlightenment faith was that that some procedure or method can be found whereby one’s own conditioned perspective is no longer in play in the determination of meaning through

interpretation. And not only was this considered possible, it was presumed that without it the interpreter will be *subjected* to the influence of her own preconceptions in a way that prevents genuine understanding. Understanding requires, in other words, the “extinction of the self.” This meant that “prejudices,” which we can broadly take at this point to be any kind of explicit or implicit judgment of meaning regarding some subject matter that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have finally been examined (paraphrased from TM 270), were considered a hindrance to true understanding.

It should be clear by now why Gadamer wants to make the ontological claim that prejudices are a necessary constituent of any understanding at all. And if this is true, then to suppose that one is or ought to be free of prejudices in understanding is not only nonsensical, it subjects one to the “tyranny of hidden prejudices” (TM 270). That is, so long as one supposes oneself to be rendering judgments free from any presuppositions, one forecloses on the possibility of examining and challenging the prejudices that are always *in fact* in play. So if the impetus behind the drive to free oneself from prejudices is, rightly, to avoid arbitrary, unfounded judgments, to avoid *merely* subjecting that with one seeks to understand to the conceptions one happens to already have, then it turns out that one is hindered in this aim in appropriating the scientific or *techne* model for the hermeneutical task.

We just endorsed the aim to avoid arbitrary, unfounded and subjugating prejudices in seeking to understand meaning by opening them up to examination and
critique, which first requires recognizing that one can never avoid the effect of prejudices as such. Realizing this aim depends, of course, on the possibility that despite their inescapability, one’s prejudices can nevertheless be manifest for the purposes of critical examination, enabling true, productive ones to be distinguished from those that lead to misunderstanding and subjugation. And this in turn requires both their foregrounding and the suspension – at least temporarily – of their effect.

But now we seem to be presented with a conundrum. The question, one which has often confounded Gadamer’s critics, is how he can at the same time claim that prejudices are inescapable, and yet hold that they can be foregrounded and suspended for the sake of critical examination. If the point about the “tyranny of hidden prejudices” problem is that by supposing oneself to be free of prejudices one thereby leaves one’s (inevitably) operative prejudices unexamined, what could he mean by foregrounding, suspending and examining one’s prejudices without recourse to a methodology? The critic might claim that this process itself, if it’s not to be viciously circular, must be one of becoming temporarily “prejudice-free” so that one’s prejudices can be weighed against some standard that is not itself another prejudice. Now this standard might be said to be one of a number of things: a transcendental condition of rational thought or communicative practice, perhaps; a direct, unmediated rational or empirical perception of “reality”; or perhaps a wholly internal coherence among one’s overall set of beliefs.
We have already dispensed with the first two possibilities as inconsistent with finite being-in-the-world (though we shall consider the “conditions of communicative practice” idea again later). The coherentist view, while in a sense closer to the one Gadamer wants to defend, fails to account for the possibility that coherence and consistency are compatible with misunderstanding, a possibility he acknowledges and seeks to avoid. Moreover, the subjectivism implied by the notion of “internal coherence” runs contrary to the claim that understanding requires a common bond with respect to the subject matter, a fusion of horizons, something the coherentist picture might allow for but not require. Gadamer’s claim, to put it another way, is that understanding involves at once immanence and transcendence: interpretation aims at understanding a meaning that is, as he puts it, “neither mine nor yours” (TM 368), and yet cannot be the deliverance of an absolutely transcendent consciousness, one that is free from the effect of historical conditions.

Explaining this requires first that we attend to the fact that our starting point in the kind of interpretive process that involves critique and modification of prejudices is structurally the same as the aim: an essentially social horizon, an understanding of a shared meaning, recalling what we argued in chapter 2 about the necessary structural dimension of das Man. If we are subjected, on the contrary, to the “tyranny” of a “hidden prejudice” about a fundamental distinction between subject and object, it is much easier to think that the meaning interpretation seeks must either lie within the subject or lie within the “objective” world. Gadamer’s inescapability claim would thereby commit him to the first option. So establishing that meaning always transcends
any particular Dasein (by being part of that shared world) without supposing it to be a part of a Dasein-\textit{independent} world (in the sense of something present-at-hand), and that this is characterizes both our pre- and post-reflective condition, is the first step in grasping how any particular individual can be answerable to a meaning that is not simply his or her subjective creation, while remaining embedded within those shared social frameworks that underlie our understanding. It is \textit{through} our participation in the constant movement of these frameworks that our own understanding is constantly being modified.

So how can we ensure that this modification is towards better, more authentic understanding rather than towards the inauthenticity that generally characterizes \textit{das Man}? To answer this we need to get a clearer grasp on how this modification takes place, and it will be helpful to briefly turn to Gadamer’s account of textual hermeneutics in order to lay bare the structure of hermeneutical experience in general. In short, hermeneutics proceeds circularly. We begin with what he calls a “fore-having” \textit{[Vorhabe]} – the background grasp of the language, our familiarity with the subject matter, and so forth, out of which we project the meaning of the text. This projection runs up against what is “there” in the text, and this experience then modifies the background, out of which we project the meaning anew. And so “understanding what is there” essentially involves “working out this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as [one] penetrates into the meaning” (TM 267).
Without the fore-having there would be no entryway into the task of interpretation. But insofar as we aim at correct interpretation, we cannot presuppose that our fore-having is adequate to the subject matter of the text. “All correct interpretation,” Gadamer insists, in a clear rejection of the anti-realist position with respect to meaning, “must be on guard against arbitrary fancies and the limitations imposed by imperceptible habits of thought, and it must direct its gaze ‘on the things themselves’,” keeping this gaze fixed “throughout all the constant distractions that originate in the interpreter himself.”

Again he writes:

Interpretation begins with fore-conceptions that are replaced by more suitable ones. This constant process of new projection constitutes the movement of understanding and interpretation...Understanding realizes its full potential only when the fore-meanings that it begins with are not arbitrary. Thus it is quite right for the interpreter not to approach the text directly, relying solely on the fore-meaning already available to him, but rather explicitly to examine the legitimacy – i.e., the origin and validity – of the fore-meanings dwelling in him (TM 267).

The next question is, how does the background understanding that underlies the initial projections get revised “in terms of the things themselves” when we have no vantage point from which to compare a vision of “objective reality” to our presuppositions about it? The answer lies in the nature of “experience” [Erfahrung] as an event that disrupts our engaged, unreflective dealings in the world, a phenomenon we introduced in chapter 2 in explicating Heidegger’s analysis of everyday being-in-the-world. We recall from that analysis the way in which for the most part our engaged coping in the world is unproblematic, i.e., we are able to use hammers and such without
taking explicit notice of the hammer itself, our bodily movements, and so forth. But when something goes wrong or breaks down, these elements come to the fore (in what Gadamer calls fore-sight [Vorsicht]), and we consider them in order to determine what went wrong, how to put things in order again, etc. And the aim of this consideration is to allow these fore-grounded elements to recede once more into the background, so that we can resume focusing on the task at hand (building a shelf or whatever) and not focusing on the hammer or the hammering itself. This can only be successful, however, if we allow the background understanding of hammers and hammering, etc., to be revised “in terms of the things themselves” – in terms of what is needed for successful coping with the task. When the things themselves confirm the fore-meanings (in this case, when we can successfully engage in the activity of hammering), then we can be said to have genuine “understanding.”

Gadamer’s analysis of textual understanding shares this basic structure. For the most part when we read we are not focusing on the text itself, including such elements as author’s intentions, linguistic usage and the like, but on what the text says. When I read a report in a newspaper, for instance, rarely am I thinking about anything other than what is being reported – the content or subject matter itself, in other words. This indicates a kind of affinity or accord between my horizons and the horizons of the text such that I don’t take explicit notice of either (I’m not questioning or reflecting upon them, in other words).
The parallel to breakdown in the workshop is “the experience of being pulled up short by the text” (TM 268) and it is here that explicit interpretation begins. The focus on the subject-matter of the text is disrupted, perhaps because the language is difficult or unclear, or perhaps because what the text seems to say strikes me as problematic, objectionable, or unexpected; or it might be that the text seems to say something strikingly true but contrary to what I might have otherwise thought. Whatever the nature of the experience, when I am pulled up short some element of my background framework stands out as being put into question by the text, and I may likewise begin to question the background framework of the text itself. That is, the discord between what I would have expected the text to say and what the text actually says (according to the initial projection of meaning) forces me to ask why I had the expectations I did, why the text seems to say something different, and how to respond to that discord in a way that can make sense of the experience and allow me to resume a focus on the subject-matter. When this latter condition has been achieved, we can be said to understand “what is there” by virtue of the fact that an accord between my projections of meaning and what the text says has been restored. It’s crucial to note, however, that at no point in this process have I attained a “prejudice-free” perspective, for when the problematic element of my horizons becomes foregrounded an inexhaustible depth of background understanding remains; indeed if this were not so then there would be no sense to the idea that in the correcting of prejudices a kind of unproblematic accord between my horizons and those of the text could be brought about.
An example might help to clarify this process. If a strange linguistic usage is the source of the experience, I might have to consider whether I am simply unfamiliar with that usage and have to learn something new, whether the usage is comprehensible on closer inspection, or whether the usage is simply outside of the given linguistic conventions. Even in that latter case, however, we don’t simply dismiss it as “wrong”; we might have to ask whether there might be a point to this unconventional usage (a position in which the reader of Heidegger’s texts frequently finds herself). And if that doesn’t pan out and we conclude that the text is simply mistaken in its linguistic usage, the usual response is to try to insert some other term or phrase that might make it comprehensible and consistent with what we have understood from the text already, allowing us to carry on reading. Only when all of these endeavors fail do we fall back to a conception of the text as some sort of idiosyncratic expression of the author, something we cannot fit into our own horizons but must be understood solely in terms of the author’s.

The case of being pulled up short by linguistic usage is instructive in that it is, I take it, both unproblematically descriptive of what actually happens for the most part in the course of reading a text, as well as at the same time offering a normative account of responsible reading. Here my own horizons – my grasp of linguistic conventions, etc. – first gets put to the test by the text, in that I assume that this grasp might be somehow inadequate or that it might be expanded. The horizons of the text might also be expanded by my attempts to substitute a more adequate language. But notice that whatever happens, my interpretive gaze is always directed towards the subject matter
*itself*. What I mean is that I engage in this process in order that my fixation on *how* something is being said will give way to a focus on *what* is being said. And I am guided by the subject matter in that I continue this process of revising my own and/or the text’s horizons until *what it says* can make sense. And only if all attempts fail do I conclude that there is a significant barrier to understanding it, in which case it might be appropriate to bring in something like certain philological tools, or, deeming it incoherent, either stop reading or approach it not in terms of its subject matter but with merely psychological or historical interest.

Two presumptions about the text are in play in this approach, according to Gadamer. One is the “presumption of completeness,” and the other the “presumption of truth.” We bring to the text the initial presumption that what it says is complete, that is, coherent, and that the expansion of horizons will bring out this coherence when it is momentarily disrupted (otherwise, there would seem to be no point in trying to understand it). I also presume that the text potentially has something true to say to me, which is why I am concerned that the revisions will be such as to will allow this truth to emerge before I conclude that the text is incoherent or simply an expression of the author’s idiosyncratic opinion. If I’m reading Heidegger, say, and he uses unfamiliar terms like “*vorhandenheit*” or familiar terms like “*Verfallen*” in unfamiliar ways, it’s not enough to consider whether he uses those terms in consistent ways within his text; rather I’m called to consider whether *what* they are communicating by this strange usage might reveal something to me.
Assuming, then, that the attempts to understand do not fail, what has happened is that the horizons in terms of which I initially encountered the text have been revised, and I return to it anew, projecting again a meaning for the whole out of a modified framework of prejudices and preconceptions. As we said above, this movement of projection, modification of horizons and re-projection is a circular one. And as we can see, this circle is anything but vicious, since the modification of one’s fore-meanings represents a productive expansion of horizons beyond their initial scope, an expansion that results in increased capacity to understand not just the text, but the subject matter about which the text speaks.¹³⁴

To carry through and justify this explication of textual interpretation we would need to consider the more difficult cases in which we are pulled up short by the content of what the text says. However, our aim has been to exhibit the basic structure of the process of hermeneutical understanding and to show how certain prejudices that hinder it are foregrounded, suspended, and modified in light of “the things themselves” without adopting a disengaged, prejudice-free perspective or having recourse to some sort of independent, technical procedure or method.

¹³⁴ For this reason, I think Charles Taylor’s term “ratcheting effect” seems to better capture this movement than “circle.” We can think of pushing down on a lever of a ratchet as at the same time raising the bar, and when we raise the lever the bar doesn’t drop along with it, but stays in place, ready for the next push.
4.5 Dialogue and the I-Thou Encounter

The process sketched above – a starting point in engaged projection of meaning, an experience that disturbs this engagement and foregrounds something of the horizons at play, the modification of those horizons and re-projection – is a dialectic whose aim is the “fusion of horizons.” In the case of linguistic usage that we considered, it is clear how this fusion is a matter of literally finding a “common language,” one that permits the language itself to recede into the background and the subject matter to command our focus. Ultimately, though, as we shall see, the fact that our identities, our capacity for reasoning, deliberation, taking counsel and argumentation all take shape within language, means that the fusion of horizons that discloses truth in practical matters will likewise involve finding a common language, albeit in a broader sense than the in textual case. It is for this reason that the dialectic of practical reasoning must be fundamentally dialogical. We shall now endeavor to show what this means and why it is the case.

As before, we have to make sure that the question of hermeneutical practical reasoning starts at the right place, namely in the engaged familiarity we have with the social world. This is important for two reasons. The first is that if this is our most basic state of being, and the explicitly rational, deliberative, and argumentative processes derivative, then these have their source as well as their aim therein. Moreover, there will always be an unarticulated background lying behind whatever elements of that background do become articulated in the process of explicit reasoning, etc. What we are considering here is essentially a restatement of Aristotle’s claim that all ethical
enquiry must proceed from *to hoti* – “the that.” As Gadamer says, “[Aristotle] means we must start with our practice itself and the living awareness that we have in it of what is [agreed upon] as good...Theoretical assertions about what is good practically...are not to be taken from somewhere else but are to be derived from the realm of practical experience itself” (IG 162-3). And the aim of such enquiry is to bring us back into a more adequate *engagement*, not to perpetuate the process of explicit reasoning about practical affairs indefinitely, as if that were the only way our lives could be rational. This is another way of expressing the Aristotelian idea that virtues are “habits”: when we engage in explicit practical reasoning the aim is to shape our character in such a way that we no longer have to continually deliberate or question what to do in similar circumstances. Rather, we have the capacity to do what is to be done in an immediate, pre-reflective (but circumspective) way.\(^{136}\)

The second reason it is important to start with engaged familiarity rather than cognition is that this orients the way that we conceive the kind of “experience” that provokes the foregrounding and modification of our preconceptions, leading to improved practical understanding. Gadamer, appropriating Hegel’s account of dialectical experience, maintains that this is an *event*, and one that is *negative*. By “event” he means it is not something that we initiate or control, but rather something that comes upon us and “thwarts expectations” (TM 356). We saw this in the notion of

\(^{135}\) NE 1095b6, 1098b2.

\(^{136}\) We will say a bit more about the notion of “character” from an existential perspective in chapter 6.
being “pulled up short by the text”: we don’t expect to be pulled up short; rather what we expect is not what we find. In social life, the experience thwarts our (implicit) expectations that proceed from engaged social familiarity. This may be something as mundane as a person standing too close to me. Or it may be more significant, as when something strikes us as unjust, or fearful; someone gets angry at us or accuses us of wrongdoing; someone stands in need of help; we find ourselves desiring to act in a way contrary to some norm, or perhaps someone else acts or wants to act contrary to that norm. In all of these cases, something about the situation stands out in relief as challenging, perplexing, making a claim on us; and it does so by disrupting everyday engagement. That is, some element of that background familiarity by which I am able to navigate the social world unproblematically is called into question, which is to say it no longer functions to allow me to make sense of the world, and has to somehow be revised.

We will see how this clarifies our conception of phronesis a bit later. Here, we can ask again how the revision of horizons that proceeds from dialectical experience takes place authentically, and what sort of practical understanding emerges from that. In the realm of practical matters, we are concerned with the modification of already shared social horizons. And so we can take as paradigmatic the experience of being challenged by another person – what Gadamer calls the I-Thou encounter, or the experience of the Thou. To sufficiently grasp what is involved in this encounter,

\[137 \text{This is also the case with textual interpretation, though as that’s not our concern here we won’t pursue that claim further.}\]
however, it is important to consider two common but inauthentic conceptions of it in order to draw out the features that we need to acknowledge in an authentic one.

Gadamer describes three forms that the I-Thou encounter can take – two inauthentic ones and one authentic, namely a *mechanistic* one, a *subjectivistic* one, and one that is *dialogical* (TM 358-362). In the first sort of inauthentic encounter, what we call a mechanistic one, “there is a kind of experience of the Thou that tries to discover typical behavior in one’s fellowmen and can make predictions about others on the basis of experience” (TM 358). That is, we can approach the Thou as an object whose characteristics and behavior follow certain general laws that fall under the heading of “human nature,” and our encounter with the person becomes subsumed under the task of discovering and refining these laws. In this sort of experience my relation to the other is supposed to be entirely disinterested, and as such the “claim” of the other ceases to be a genuine claim at all in the sense of something that challenges *me*, but rather an instance of the operation of the laws of human nature, an utterance or behavior that can and should be explained in these terms.

This sort of experience is doubly problematic. It is ontologically problematic for reasons that we have discussed at length in previous chapters. We can sum up the

138 These are not terms that Gadamer uses to label the different kinds of encounter, but I chose them because they correspond to the fundamental presupposition about the being of the other person that each kind takes. This is also why I distinguish them in terms of authentic and inauthentic, which he does not. But I don’t see any reason why he would object to my way of labeling them.

Alternatively we might follow Warnke and label the first two *objectifying* and *assimilating*, respectively, which refers to the procedural attitude we take towards to other. See Warnke, “Literature, Law and Morality,” in *Gadamer’s Repercussions*, ed. Bruce Krajewski (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 82-102.
relevant points by noting how it assumes something about the other person – that her utterances and behavior can be adequately subsumed under general laws about human nature – that the interpreter does not assume about himself insofar as he assumes the role of "inquirer," someone seeking to find something out, someone for whom being is in question. He implicitly acknowledges, in the act of inquiry, his own being as that of Dasein, the entity for which being itself is an issue, without extending that acknowledgment to the other.

On the basis of this sort of mechanistic response to the Thou, we can see how the Thou can be regarded as, echoing Kant's formulation, a mere means to my ends. By assuming that her behavior follows general laws, I can engage in calculative reasoning that allows me to predict it, and thus to make her amenable to my purposes. And so here we see once again the relevance that Heidegger's ontological investigations have for ethics. The problem is not simply that the interpreter is assuming one thing about himself (that he is the sort of being that can set ends and explore the ways in which those ends can be realized) and something else about the other (that her behavior is subject to laws and thus calculable), and thereby displays an inconsistency with respect to his underlying ontological presuppositions about human life. Rather, through this insight we also gain a more rigid footing for the common judgment that treating people as mere means to my ends displays something morally problematic. If phronesis is, as we have maintained, authentic practical knowledge, and if authentic practical knowledge displays an understanding that proceeds on the basis of adequate ontological foundations particularly with respect to human existence, then the
mechanistic sort of I-Thou encounter is inauthentic, displaying instead a lack of phronesis.

We can make a similar argument with respect to the second kind of problematic I-Thou encounter that Gadamer identifies, the one we termed subjectivistic and which shares its structure with the Romantic/Historicist hermeneutics we mentioned earlier. In this sort of experience the I regards the Thou more as a genuine “Thou,” as an end in itself, a unique person that can speak back to me out of its own self-understanding, and that cannot be regarded ontologically in a different way than how I regard my own self. But in all of this both the I and the Thou are regarded atomistically, each expressing its own point of view in a struggle for mutual recognition. “Understanding” the other becomes a matter of “getting inside her mind,” which requires bracketing my own standpoint and leaving my own presuppositions out of play. Now this might seem to be a laudable sort of approach, one that pays full recognition and respect to the autonomy of the other and the legitimacy of her own standpoint (if not the claim itself) by not allowing anything of my own perspective with its values, concerns, self-understanding, etc., to affect the way I understand her. Not only would it seem to display full recognition and respect, it may appear that the only way to truly understand the other, to grasp the meaning of what the other says or does free of contamination by my own perspective, is to “extinguish the self” and adopt the other’s perspective as one’s own.

It should be obvious by now that this approach fails by assuming that subjectivity is more fundamental to both the I and the Thou of the encounter than being-in-the-
world, and that one can thus escape one’s own perspective and adopt that of another. Notwithstanding this point, this second kind of encounter presumes that one can genuinely understand the other’s challenging claim without that understanding having an effect on one’s own perspective. Having had a kind of experience in which my normal, meaningful social engagement becomes disrupted by an encounter with the words or deeds of another, and by approaching the other and myself as atomistic subjects each with its own distinctive point of view, the task of understanding becomes disconnected from the consideration of what that might mean for me. It’s rather as the therapist might approach the patient, the teacher the student, or the parent the child. In this way Gadamer undermines the thought that the subjectivist approach to understanding the other accords maximal respect, arguing that it tacitly functions to deprive their claim of its legitimacy by “keeping the other person’s claim at a distance” (TM 360).

Now one could object that there might be additional normative reasons to regard the claim as more than an expression of a point of view, but Gadamer wants to make the stronger argument that since we cannot be said to understand the meaning of the provocation in this way, the normative demand is built into the structure of understanding as such. He makes a point about the understanding of texts that echoes well-known retorts to Humean expressivism about normative claims, that we don’t mean them merely as subjective expressions: “Texts do not ask to be understood as a living expression of the subjectivity of their writers. This, then, cannot define the limits of the text’s meaning” (TM 395). So we have to approach the I-Thou encounter in such
a way that to understand what the other says just is to apply it to myself, to re-orient my own horizons in response.

What’s missing in each of these inauthentic conceptions is the recognition that the I-Thou encounter takes place within shared social horizons, and it is always within these horizons that normative meaning is understood, both prior and subsequent to their reorientation. Moreover, these horizons are constituted in and by language insofar as they contain conceptions of value and significance that stand beyond what we happen to pursue as biological creatures, conceptions of things as worthy of pursuit. As zoon logon echon, to evoke Aristotle’s famous description, meanings are opened up to us that would otherwise be unavailable apart from language. Charles Taylor, in a discourse on Heidegger, puts it this way:

[In language] the things that surround us become potential bearers of properties; they can have new emotional significance for us, as objections of admiration or indignation; our links with others can count for us in new ways, as lovers, spouses, or fellow citizens; and they can have strong value.  

Since normative significance is constituted by language, it must be disclosed and understood in language; and since it is part of shared social horizons, it cannot be understood solipsistically but rather discursively, by engaging with those who share these horizons. These two points entail that the kind of I-Thou encounter which is required for authentic understanding of norms (as well as any other kind of meaning or significance) must be dialogical. More generally, hermeneutical experience is dialogical, 

and so the practical wisdom displayed by the virtuous person will likewise maintain itself in a dialogical relationship with the world of significance.

What we are interested in, then, is a characterization of the kind of dialogue that leads to genuine practical understanding of the normative meanings inherent in our world; that is, we want to know what kind of dialogue exposes and corrects false prejudices, confirms true ones, and thus productively shapes the background framework that underlies practical knowledge.

4.6 Dialogue and the Priority of the Question

We’ve been maintaining throughout this thesis a notion of authenticity as disclosive of the truth of being, as a manner of life that exhibits, rather than denies or suppresses, our ontological structure and the relation it bears to the world of significance, and that significance itself. In this way, for dialogue to be authentic it must be disclosive not simply in terms of its results but in its manner or structure. And a central condition of this is to accord a priority to the question rather than the claim or proposition. We mean this in three respects.

First, our finitude, as we argued previously, precludes the possibility of any final or absolute knowledge, and of thus any claim or statement that is not itself open to question. We can never attain complete perspicuity on our background horizons to know, say, whether my maxim was pure, or what sorts of presuppositions were influencing my judgment, and so forth; and on the other hand, given the nature of experience as an event that challenges my expectations of meaning, which is itself
founded on our being-towards-death, I can never know in advance whether some claim or judgment might not run up against such an unexpected challenge. These points ground a more common-sense idea about dialogue: that an exchange of words is only really a dialogue when both parties are to some extent *in question* about some subject matter. Making claims is, of course, part of the dialogical process, but only insofar as they are put forward as *possible* answers to an open question to be weighed against other possible answers. Practical reasoning seeks good judgment with regard to its concerns, but we would never consider someone a good judge in the courtroom if he came to the matter already decided.

Moreover, often it is the case that claims function to help clarify just what the question itself really *is*, which can lead to greater clarity and perspicuity on my presuppositions. Reversing this priority by considering the proposition or claim *itself* to have fundamental priority, as is so often the case in models of rationality and argumentation, thus closes off the possibility that we are seeking to explain, namely how one can correct prejudices that lead to misunderstanding.

The second respect in which the question has priority brings us back to the point that we cannot have genuine understanding without that in some way affecting us and our perspectives. If a claim must be understood as a possible answer to a question, then to understand a claim means we have to understand the question. But as Gadamer says, “to understand a question means to ask it” (TM 375), which is a way of saying that I have to apply that question to the present situation. All beliefs and all
claims, however sound they may have been in one context, are answers to questions that have to continually be opened up and re-posed; and these questions may admit of different answers when that is carried through.

This stands in contrast to the “timelessness” and universality of propositions when removed from the context of the question, and as we shall see later on, grounds the answer to the worries about relativism that are often raised in objection both to Gadamer’s thought and virtue ethics. There is a sort of relativism involved here, to be sure, given that the necessity of application means that whatever judgments we make will be relative to the context in which the question is asked. But the kind of relativism envisioned by these objections is simply the reciprocal of absolute timelessness and universality. If there is anything transcendent about moral truth claims, so it might run, they must be capable of expression in such timeless, universal propositions; otherwise, there is no transcendence to them at all. As we shall see later, this dichotomy dissolves in a dialogical account of ethics.

Third, following on these last two points, to genuinely pose a question in a way that puts my presuppositions and prejudices at risk and allows them to be corrected, “one must want to know, and that means knowing that one does not know” (TM 363). This distinguishes genuine questions from, for instance, rhetorical questions simply meant to persuade the other, or what Gadamer calls “slanted” [schiefe] questions that are posed in such a way that they ensure an answer that confirms what I already believed. To make a claim or to understand a claim made by another, then, opens up a
question the answer to which, then, may possibly contradict what I had previously thought. And so this third sense in which the question has priority refers to the stance of openness that any authentic dialogue must presume if critique and modification of one’s prejudices is to be possible.

Having established the priority of the question in dialogue, we move to a further feature that makes authentic dialogue possible. If we recall the analysis of textual interpretation earlier in the chapter, two crucial features of this were the presumptions of completeness and truth. Similarly, when I seek to come to an understanding about some practical subject matter through dialogue, I have to approach the other person with the same kinds of presumption, which Gadamer also describes as a presumption that what the other person says has authority. The notion of authority is certainly one of the more unsettling features of Gadamer’s thought, for several reasons. This notion, perhaps even more so than that of prejudices, is anathema to Enlightenment modernity in that respect for authority is often contrasted with Kant’s motto of the Enlightenment: “Having the courage to make use of one’s own understanding.” Submission to authority is taken to be the opposite of freedom, rational judgment, and self-determination. And we have also seen that it is not just the Enlightenment spokespersons that balk at the notion of authority, but some of their most trenchant critics like Nietzsche and even Heidegger, in the sense of authority that is easily equated with the dogmatisms and false certainties of das Man. From a more common-sense

perspective, the idea that I’m supposed to respond to every claim made in the context of dialogue by first presuming that the other person has authority with respect to the claim he makes seems ludicrous. Am I supposed to accord the racist presumptive “authority” in the claims he makes about the relative merits and rights of whites over blacks, for instance?

In response to the suspicions of both the Enlightenment and their critics, we should note that Gadamer explicitly rejects the idea that “blind obedience” to authority is in any way compatible with authentic understanding. Since Gadamer is too often read as advocating the authority of tradition in opposition to the use of one’s own judgment,¹⁴¹ it’s crucial to take careful note that he pains himself to distance his own view from such a notion. “Understanding certainly does not mean merely appropriating customary opinions or acknowledging what tradition has sanctified” (TM xxxvii), he submits. Authority, rather:

Is ultimately based not on the subjection and abdication of reason but on an act of acknowledgement and knowledge – the knowledge, namely, that the other is superior to oneself in judgment and insight and that for this reason his judgment takes precedence – i.e., it has priority over one’s own (TM 279).

So simply acquiescing to what another says as authoritative in such a way that their judgment displaces one’s own is not authentic understanding. Indeed, it seems

¹⁴¹ Gadamer himself acknowledges in the preface to the 2nd edition of Truth and Method that he perhaps focused perhaps a disproportionate amount of attention on the issue of authority. However, he seems to have seen this focus as a “corrective” to the tendencies among dominant philosophies of all persuasions – including Heidegger’s – to denigrate authority, leaving the possibilities and grounds of its legitimacy insufficiently explored. I will try to articulate how the modes of inauthenticity we discussed in the previous chapters can help clarify the scope and limits of the authority of tradition as Gadamer articulates it, that is, where an authentic response to the authority of tradition becomes inauthentic, and vice versa.
that such displacement could only be appropriate in the domain of *techne*, wherein it is possible that another person might know better than I do the objectively optimal means to a determinate end. The worry about authority that is raised with regard to the question of ethical knowledge suggests, then, an implicit acknowledgement that this domain is not the purview of *techne*, which calls into question the theories of morality modeled on that conception of practical knowledge and often advocated by the critics of authority themselves. Furthermore, a notion of displacing authority might also follow from a presumption about the absolute disconnectedness between my own horizons and those of the other, such that displacing my own judgment with that of the other’s is akin to the “extinction of the self” presumed to be required by historicism, which is why we stressed the importance of approaching the issue of practical understanding from the right starting point in the recognition of shared horizons. Finally, it might be a symptom of the lostness in *das Man* that we discussed in chapter 2, in which *das Man* ascribes the status of unimpeachable authority to what is nothing more than idle talk. But we noted there that what distinguishes idle talk from genuine discourse is the lack of an “original understanding” or proximity to the subject matter, which often reveals itself in the desperate attempt to close off discussion by claiming the “last word.”

Rather, legitimate authority is based on the kind of original acquaintance with the subject matter that idle talk lacks, the acknowledgment of which requires the exercise of one’s own judgment. To explain, it is crucial to recognize that that the presumption of authority is, in the end, “a prejudice in favor of a *content*, not a person” (TM 280). Due to my limitations as a finite being, I can never have a complete grasp on
the subject matter; and if this grasp is to be deepened through my encounter with the other, I have to initially presume that it can be – that she may have an understanding that I lack. This follows from the priority of the question we just established.

However, two other consequences for the notion of authority follow from that priority. First, to recognize a claim as authoritative, it has to open up or address a question that is, we might say, a “live”142 one. For most of us, it’s not a live question whether blacks and whites should enjoy equal rights and status, nor is it easy to see how that could ever become one again; thus the racist’s claim that we mentioned earlier, in not addressing or opening up a live question, does not carry a claim of authority.143 Second, even when we have reason to accept what the other says as having legitimate authority to shape our understanding, it is not the case that we should always accept that claim as it stands. This is due to the necessity of application in the process of coming to an understanding we just discussed: I always have to ask the underlying question myself, which is to say that I always have to understand some espoused norm

142 Another term might be “open question,” but as I want to maintain a distinction (for clarity, not in essence) between the openness of the question and that of the questioner, I chose “live” rather than “open.”

143 The notion of a “live” question is admittedly rather vague, and I hope to be able to clarify it in future work. One of the obvious issues is this: this feature of a possible question must bear some relation to the (contingently) dominant ethos of the social horizons in which the corresponding claim is made. So while it may seem inconceivable to most of us that the question of the rights and status of blacks relative to whites would even be a question, there are fringe societies in which this would be a live question; and it wasn’t so long ago that this question was live in the mainstream of Western societies. Moreover, for many people the question of the relative status and rights of, say, homosexuals is inconceivable as a question in much the same way, despite the fact that, in America at least, this is a live question for the mainstream of the society. Thus the association of the presumption of authority with the viability of questions raises some important issues regarding the possibilities of immanent critique on this view, the response to which will be indicated in chapter 5.

213
or claim in light of the present situation. And to do so, I cannot simply *remove* myself from my own perspective and adopt the perspective of the other, even when I regard it as authoritative.

4.7 The Fusion of Horizons

We have been articulating the structure and conditions of dialogue, which characterizes the process of coming to an understanding about practical affairs, an understanding that will have been modified in a dialectical response to experiences that disrupt our normal engaged practice. And the concern was to show how this response can be a productive one, one that corrects false prejudices, improves our sensitivity to normative significance, and in general leads to the refinement of our practical understanding that we could call the acquiring of *phronesis*. Since all of this takes place within shared, linguistically-constituted horizons, we argued that, for it to be possible, the dialectic must take the form of a dialogue, which we have explicated in terms of the straightforward case of the I-Thou encounter – a dialogue with another person who initially challenges me.

Given the priority of the question that we have defended, Gadamer is able to say that “to reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one’s own point of view, but being transformed into a *communion [Gemeinsame]* in which we do not remain what we were” (TM 379). That is, it has as its telos not the *victory* of one side or another, as if the dialogical context were like a courtroom or debate with each party merely advocating their position;
rather “the goal of all attempts to reach an understanding is agreement concerning the subject matter. Hence the task of hermeneutics has always been to establish agreement where there was none or where it had been disturbed in some way” (TM 292). This “agreement” is properly understood as the fusion of horizons, and if practical wisdom is possible only on the basis of dialogical response to experiences, and the goal of dialogue is the fusion of horizons, then the mark of practical wisdom -- the mark of having corrected false prejudices, etc., -- is this fusion of horizons itself. We will try to clarify what this means in the next few pages before addressing the kinds of worries and objections that are bound to be raised against this account as we have just summarized it.

It is important first to distinguish the agreement that characterizes the fusion of horizons from a kind of contractualist compromise, where my own assertions, claims, values and ends are coordinated with those of another so that they can be mutually respected in a way that brackets the question of their legitimacy. This latter conception, we argue, is a manifestation of the tendency of belongingness to devolve into “lostness in das Man.” Das Man seeks to cover over finitude and guard against angst, as we saw, by imputing certitude or unquestionableness to concepts and beliefs. This can be through the dogmatic axiomatizing of conventions, but it can also manifest itself in the postulation of an “agreement” that ensures the inviolability of the beliefs of each party to that agreement (so long as they do not impinge upon the inviolability of the others’). What Gadamer wants to capture in the notion of the fusion of horizons is a richer notion of solidarity, one that recognizes our interdependence not simply in the sense of
ensuring the conditions for each individual’s pursuit of the good (which is the legitimate thrust of the contractualist account), but in the capacity to have any understanding of the good at all. The contractualist notion of agreement maintains itself within a framework that holds to the essential separateness of persons, according to which it makes sense to speak of “my” conception of the good versus another’s. If we reject that framework in favor of the one according to which any individual’s conception of the good is socially constituted, then the idea that agreement means allowing each individual to determine for herself what her conception of the good is to be would be tantamount to ensuring that none of us could ever come to an authentic understanding of the good.

But on the opposite side of things, it is important to clarify that the “bond to this subject matter” that that dialogue seeks to establish “does not consist in some self-evident, unquestioned unanimity.” Rather, “hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness” (TM 295), or as Gadamer otherwise puts it, “belongingness” and “distance.” The dialogical process of reaching understanding, indeed, “proceeds from the commonality that binds us to the tradition” (TM 293, my emphasis). But Gadamer quickly adds that “this commonality is constantly being formed in our relation to tradition. Tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves” (TM 293, my emphasis). That is, if we think of “the tradition” as that shared social framework within which we are able to have an understanding of the good or of normative significance, this is never properly seen as
having its fulfillment in some final determinate form due to the fact that whatever understandings proceed on its basis will have to be continually revised and reconsidered in light of the ever-changing contexts of human life. “There can be no single interpretation that is correct ‘in itself’ because...every interpretation has to adapt itself to the hermeneutical situation to which it belongs” (TM 397). If the notion of “correctness” in interpretation (i.e., in practical reasoning) has as its goal the fusion of horizons, and if this is to then issue in something like an established practical capacity (the virtues), then the fusion of horizons cannot be conceived as a kind of final “unanimity,” which is always, essentially, a temporary condition if it’s ever a condition at all. Rather, whatever agreement is reached has to maintain an openness to the “otherness,” “strangeness,” and “distance” that occasions further development in light of changing contexts, and grounds the possibility that this tradition, and the practical understandings therein, will remain adequate to correctly respond to whatever new and unexpected questions, situations and demands arise within practical life.

The positive model Gadamer provides for understanding through dialogue is translation. This is not merely analogous to dialogue; rather, the linguisticality of our deliberative and argumentative reasoning, together with the fact that it is in language that the various background understandings of normative significance become foregrounded and revised, means that the dialogical process by which the I and the Thou each augment each other’s understanding requires translating the other’s understanding into terms that can be applied to oneself. Or better, we seek a common language whereby the subject matter – the normative significance we are seeking to
grasp – of which each of us has a partial understanding, shows itself more adequately in light of the situation.

In textual translation, the translator must bring out the meaning expressed in one linguistic context in that of another. “The meaning must be preserved, but since it must be understood within a new language world, it must establish its validity within it in a new way” (TM 384). For meaning to be preserved in a way that what the text speaks about – its subject matter – can be understood by the speakers of the other language, the translation “cannot be simply a re-awakening of the original process in the writer’s mind; rather, it is necessarily a re-creation of the text guided by the way the translator understands what it says” (TM 385-6, my emphasis). It must apply the original meaning to the concrete situation of the other language-world, which, as anyone who has ever been tasked with translation knows, precludes the technical application a set of procedural rules (such as exchanging words-for-words) that reduce one language to another. “Only that translator can truly re-create who brings into language the subject matter that the text points to; but this means finding a language that is not only his but proportionate to the original” (TM 387). The translator has to be able to enter into the other language world while not leaving his own behind, which is to say he seeks a “fusion” of horizons of the original text and those of the language into which he translates, the adequacy of which is determined by whether the subject matter is made comprehensible.
The fact that translation is possible in the first place, that new translations are always possible, and that new translations are often necessary given the changes in the linguistic horizons of the present, indicate that the meaning of what the text is talking about always surpasses any particular expression of it. But we can recognize this without supposing either the absurd idea that new translations are never better, just different; or its reciprocal, that different translations must be either better or worse as such. To avoid the first conclusion, we have to approach the task of translation with the presumption that there is a genuine meaning that surpasses what can be said in any particular expression. And as it is this task of illuminating this meaning that guides the process, there is a standard or measure of adequacy beyond the results as they happen to take form. This, in turn, presupposes the mutual belongingness of the original text and the translated one to a common tradition wherein this meaning resides, however removed they may be from one another temporally or culturally. But avoiding the second conclusion requires maintaining a respect for the alienness of the original text even while striving for familiarity, an alienness that is the consequence of the dynamic nature of the tradition, the need to continually reapply what we have previously understood, as well as what we said before, that meaning transcends articulation such that no particular instance, be that of the original or of the translation, exhausts it.

These features and conditions of translation, we have argued, are likewise features and conditions of dialogical practical reasoning. And so hopefully it has become clearer what is meant by the fusion of horizons, considered as a “translation” guided by the subject matter itself. Gadamer sums up this notion by saying:
Reaching an understanding in conversation presupposes that both partners are ready for it and are trying to recognize the full value of what is alien and opposed to them. If this happens mutually, and each of the partners, while simultaneously holding onto his own arguments, weighs the counterarguments, it is finally possible to achieve – in an imperceptible but not arbitrary reciprocal translation of the others’ position (we call this an exchange of views) – a common diction and a common dictum (TM 387).

In attaining this “common diction and common dictum,” our respective horizons, from which we each have a view of the subject matter, become “fused,” and thus what is inadequate to the subject from my own perspective can be corrected in terms of what is adequate from the other’s, and vice versa. As we have stressed, though, becoming “fused” is not the same as become one single horizon, since any fusion must maintain itself in a recognition of the fundamental alterity of the other; rather, we could say that each has augmented the other. And this permits of the possibility that one might be augmented better than the other. There’s no need, in other words, to suppose that for the fusion of horizons to occur, both parties to the dialogue must have their understanding shaped in productive ways, any more than we must suppose that the horizon of the original text must be affected by the translation for those horizons to be fused. This will be relevant to answering a pressing objection about the idealism of Gadamer’s account in the next chapter.

4.8 Phronesis and Experience

We can return now to the notion of dialectical experience, and specifically what we can say about the individual who has undergone an experience and had his or her horizons reshaped through dialogical practical reasoning, which can in turn further clarify this notion of the fusion of horizons. This will, I hope, also illuminate Aristotle’s
account, wherein experience holds a central place as a condition of practical wisdom. Experience, as we said above, is an event that thwarts expectations, provoking us (when authentic) into the dialogical process whereby, in the fusion of horizons, I acquire a new capacity for the kind of prereflective, circumspective coping with the social world that characterizes my life for the most part. Aristotle likewise maintains that the *phronimos* must be sufficiently experienced in life to have the right kind of dispositions needed for reliably virtuous practical knowledge. If we understand this in terms of dialectical experience, it means that the *phronimos* has had her inherited understandings of social norms revised and corrected to a greater extent than the less experienced person, such that she has acquired greater “cultural expertise.” But as we will explore in a moment, there is another side to this, namely that her experience (presuming it’s authentic) opens her up to the finitude of human existence, which is to say she becomes more open to further dialectical experience and thus less “dogmatic.”

This latter point contrasts Gadamer’s account with the Hegelian conception of dialectical experience. According to the Hegelian conception, in the negation of previous expectations my consciousness is “raised” to a new level by unmasking deceptions and the correcting of false expectations, to which Gadamer concurs. But Hegel took this to entail that the dialectic must ultimately issue in absolute knowledge, that is, the overcoming of all experience in the complete identity of consciousness and object. Gadamer, on the contrary, maintains that the finitude of historical

144 This feature ground our explication of the virtue of “open-mindedness” in chapter 6.
consciousness precludes this ideal; and indeed, it is this very finitude that becomes manifest in the course of being experienced. The experienced person, he argues, becomes “radically undogmatic” (TM 355). That is, the more experienced one is, the more one comes to recognize the tenuousness and questionability of our beliefs, or more precisely, the openness of our horizons as well as their limitation:

The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience. That is why a person who is called experienced has become so not only through experiences but is also open to new experiences. The consummation of his experience, the perfection that we call ‘being experienced,’ does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else...The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself (TM 355).

Now as we said, it’s certainly true that Gadamer’s discussion of dialectical experience does not at all deny the Hegelian view that it can reveal inadequacies and falsehoods in our conceptions and speaks plainly about the overcoming of illegitimate prejudices and the confirmation of legitimate ones. However, he shies away from calling this movement a movement towards “better understanding.” “Understanding is not,” he submits, “understanding better, either in the sense of superior knowledge of the subject because of clearer ideas or in the sense of fundamental superiority of conscious over unconscious production. It is enough to say that we understand in a different way, if we understand at all” (TM 296-97).

But Gadamer, we would maintain, has overstated his case in his attempt to distinguish his account from Hegel’s. In this passage, he gives the impression that the experienced person is one who, as it were, gives up on the notion of practical truth
altogether in a complete reversal of Hegel’s ideal of absolute knowledge as the ultimate outcome of dialectical experience: “radically undogmatic” might seem to be essentially “radically skeptical” or “radically relativistic.” This is not necessary. As we saw with translation, the possibilities of meaning outstrip articulation, which is to say no one can legitimately claim to “have the last word.” However, this same transcendence of meaning tasks us with trying to “get things right” – with allowing our interpretation to be guided by the subject matter itself. Thus there does not seem to be anything that keeps us from making provisionally claims, even ones that have universal scope; Gadamer himself acknowledges this in his reading of Kant, as we shall see in section 5.2.

What’s more, this notion that understanding is never better, only different, is belied by Gadamer’s own account of the history of hermeneutics, aesthetics, the interpretation of Aristotle and Plato, and indeed the dialectic itself, to name a few topics on which he’s offered substantial contributions. Does he not consider his own account of understanding a genuine “advancement” over his predecessors, for instance? He certainly seems to suggest as much. Can we not then say that an individual or a tradition can likewise make advancements (and can decline) with respect to ethical understanding? We would have to avoid a notion of progress that has its final telos in

145 This is point Taylor makes in defending his “best account” principle – which maintains that if certain terms and conceptions of strongly valued goods indispensable to making sense of ourselves, then they are likewise indispensable to practical reasoning – against the charge of relativism. See Sources of the Self, 60-62.

absolute knowledge, of course, as well as a certain Enlightenment notion according to which progress is identified with the gradual overcoming of prejudices altogether, the rise of unfettered rationality out of the murkiness of traditions, the unfreedom of reliance on authority, and so forth. But these do not exhaust the possibilities of what progress or advancement in practical knowledge might mean.

The conception of progressive understanding through experience that can be discerned in the Gadamerian account, rather, is captured by the famous illustration of the retreating army that Aristotle offers in his *Posterior Analytics*. The soldiers in chaotic flight gradually come, one by one, to stand their ground and return to a coherent formation that can be directed and commanded. There is no single instance of a particular soldier standing his ground that determines when the change from chaos to coherent formation has occurred; and yet it occurs. Similarly, there is no experience that, in itself, provides determinate knowledge of a universal that commands our practical action. And yet such universals do emerge – they are “uncovered,” in Heidegger’s sense of aletheia – through particular experiences.

The knowledge of these universals, again, is not in the first instance determinate knowledge by a subject of a concept, an arche that figures in a practical syllogism, with which, Gadamer thinks, Aristotle himself was too narrowly concerned. Gadamer is not denying that this occurs; nor does he deny the likewise narrow concern in Aristotle with experience in the sense of positive observations, and how through the multiplicity of

\[147\] *Posterior Analytics*, 100a10-15. Cf. TM 352.
such particular observations the universals – what they have in common – becomes disclosed. Gadamer’s point, rather, is that these conceptions of experience and the refined knowledge of the universal that emerges are derivative of the basic phenomenon that is essentially negative. Since we are always already in the world, we always already know how to act – we grasp universals, albeit in a mostly unarticulated, pre-conceptual way. And this grasp remains this way, for when some element comes to the fore in experience and dialogical articulation – when it becomes disclosed or “unhidden” – the rest recedes into the background, remaining hidden. But when this articulation occurs on the basis of first recognizing the questionability of some aspect of our background knowledge, and then through further questioning, answering, offering reasons and testing these reasons in conversation with the tradition, with one’s interlocutors, and so forth, the background knowledge as a whole has been irrevocably modified. It has been modified in response to some kind of inadequacy, and, if authentic, this inadequacy will be overcome; hence, there has been progression. The fact that this progression can never come to a final resting place does not mean that we cannot have confidence in where it has led up to this point; but it does obviate the notion of someone who is “perfectly experienced,” one for whom this background understanding stands in no need of further revision. And it is the experienced person who best recognizes this, for her authentic practical knowledge is at the same time knowledge of the structure, limitations and possibilities of human life in its finitude, and who thus has no need to flee into dogmatism and false certainties. Hence the experienced person – the phronimos – is the one who is most open to new experiences,
which is why her practical knowledge can lay the best claim to having overcome false and debilitating prejudices, to have a better grasp of the truth.

This draws to a close the basic account of how it is possible to maintain that ethical understanding always must take place within contingent, historically effected and socially-constituted horizons, that there is no perspective from which we can perceive or reason about the objective truth of moral issues which does not involve assumed background presuppositions, and yet at the same time allow for the possibility of critique, modification and correction of one’s horizons in a productive, truth-conductive way. Though there are many points that would need clarification and many worries that would need addressing, the next chapter will focus on a general one, the problem of the ideality of this dialogical account, the response to which, I hope, can indicate the form of response we would take to many more specific concerns.
CHAPTER 5:
The Critique of Horizons

5.1 Hopelessly Ideal?

The previous chapter offered an account of practical reason that gives central importance to the dialogical structure of understanding, an indispensible aspect of the notion of the authentic self that can orient a hermeneutical account of virtue. The objections we shall consider in this chapter involve in some way or another the thought the account we have offered is hopelessly ideal.\(^{148}\) The claim might be articulated as follows: Let’s grant the soundness of this account as an argument about the sorts of beings we are and what thereby ought to be the case in our social lives, our quests to understand the meaning of justice, living well, and so forth. What are we to say about the actual realities of our current world, or for that matter any particular tradition, culture, or historical period, in which the conditions or venues for the kind of dialogical encounter we have described seem cripplingly absent? Given this absence, the likelihood would seem to be that the understandings that we have inherited through

\(^{148}\) One might also consider it hopelessly vague if one desires a more systematic presentation of the process of practical reasoning, the kind which can take the form of a procedure or method that can then be applied to practical situations. We have tried to show that this aim fails to be realizable in having its basis in a misconception about human beings, the status of moral claims, and the way we come to acquire practical knowledge. And since one cannot offer an abstract rational decision procedure or method of justification, then there’s a limit to what one might say about substantive issues from the schematic position of our argument. Notwithstanding that, in the next chapter we will offer some general characterizations of the virtues that issues from our discussion, which will include some examples to illustrate how approaching substantive practical questions within the framework of authentic dialogue does indeed give us reason to consider certain kinds of practice moral and immoral.
the tradition, not to mention our own understandings as such inheritors as well as people who (if we’re honest with ourselves) have often failed to “understand authentically” in the manner described are, to put it bluntly, in pretty bad shape. And so if the conditions for dialogical understanding are indeed largely absent because they are largely unrecognized or largely stifled, then what hope do we have of ever advancing towards greater ethical understanding?

Certainly no one can doubt that juxtaposing the rather abstract and ideal form we have tried to articulate up to this point with the present realities of our global condition, and almost any particular culture, society, or tradition therein, paints a rather bleak landscape, and we won’t waste words right now with specifics. And certainly at least two figures who have influenced our account tremendously – Heidegger and MacIntyre – have famously expressed this kind of pessimism about modern culture. Two other issues – the problems of ideology and incommensurability – emerge, or can be understood as emerging, perhaps not so much as a critique of the Gadamerian account per se but as a response to this dismal condition: the seeming unrest between understanding as it ought to be and understanding as it is, or perhaps even can be if not supplemented by a more precise procedural ethic that can pronounce on the validity of at least the more weighty of normative claims.

We shall focus our discussion first on Jürgen Habermas, representing a kind of modified Kantianism. Following this, we shall be arguing that the Gadamerian account we are offering does not entail either a kind of isolated traditionalism or Rortian
pragmatism, which will allow us to address the worries of elitism and relativism, described in chapter 1, that are often raised about Gadamer’s account and virtue ethics alike.

5.2 The Modified Kantian Critique

Someone in sympathy with a Habermasian view might contend that due to the limits of any actual situation of communicative practice, we must move out of the sphere of concrete practice and strive to articulate the conditions for communicative practice as such into a form serviceable for critiquing objectively those norms and claims that arise within concrete practice. We can maintain with Gadamer that knowledge must be understood not in terms of subjective experience but intersubjective language, and so the way to truth is through agreement in community. But we can state the worry above as acknowledging that not only is agreement hard to come by; agreement itself is no guarantee of truth. The agreement could have been secured by coercion, presenting false information, rhetorical advantage, or some shared systematic distortion. So certain conditions of authentic dialogue must obtain if the kind of consensus that is arrived can claim to have something like the categorical status we attribute to truth.

So according to the Habermasian view, what we have been calling authentic dialogue presupposes certain basic conditions such as symmetry, reciprocity, and freedom from domination. We can identify such features as those of an ideal dialogical situation, and on this basis articulate principles that can allow us to correctly judge
whether a particular claim would meet with agreement in such a situation. In this way the failures of any actual contingent situation to embody the reciprocal dialogue required for ethical understanding would not preclude us from judging what the outcome would be if such a dialogue were to take place. Moreover, this ideal dialogical situation pertains to all possible situations in which the question of normative validity might arise, and so whatever norms or claims would be validated – that is, consented to – in this situation are ones that would be validated in any possible situation. They can enjoy universal, unconditional validity; likewise, those that would not meet with universal assent by all participants in such an ideal dialogue do not. So Habermas thinks that Gadamer’s claims about the embeddedness of ethical understanding within language and tradition does not preclude the possibility of validating or invalidating moral claims in a way that “bursts every provinciality asunder,” overcoming the problem of moral judgment when the practice of dialogue does not or cannot take place authentically.

With these tools Habermas aims to distinguish between “ethical” norms – those whose strength and justification lies within the realm of concrete practice and thus only have conditional (if any) validity – and “moral” norms, whose justification is independent of any particular form of ethical life and thus whose validity, application and bindingness are universal and unconditional. The tenability of this project depends on whether one can successfully provide a universalizability test that can determine

whether a norm or course of action would secure the agreement of all those affected under ideal conditions of symmetry and reciprocity, conditions that abstract from the actual forms of life in which dialogue takes place; and it also depends upon whether it could be relevant to concrete practice in a way that preserves its unconditionality.  

On both counts, the project proves untenable. One reason has to do with the applicative moment in our understanding of norms. We argued above that a norm, like a law, only has its complete meaning when concretized in the situation of practical reasoning. No norm can possibly take into account in its formulation every possible practical situation in which it might apply, for the simple reason that the domain of practical life includes infinitely various possibilities. Even if an ideal speech situation were conceivable and we could determine what norms in their generalized, abstract form would be consented to, that is no guarantee that their concretization would ensure the same level of agreement. What we are objecting to here is not the practice of argumentation and dialogue about generalized norms, but the supposition that we can reach a final verdict on the validity of norms in the abstract. Certainly we must discuss norms in the abstract to a certain extent as part of the hermeneutical process of

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150 See especially Jürgen Habermas, “Discourse Ethics,” in Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action, translated by Christian Lenhardt and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), 42-115. There he proposes that for any norm, it can claim validity if and only if “all affected can accept the consequences and the side effects its general observance can be anticipated to have for the satisfaction of everyone’s interests (and these consequences are preferred to those of known alternative possibilities for regulation)” (65, emphasis in original). This leads to his “principle of discourse ethics”: “Only those norms can claim to be valid that meet (or could meet) with the approval of all affected in their capacity as participants in a practical discourse” (66, emphasis in original). The justification of this principle rests on the claim that someone who puts forth a claim but rejects the principle is engaging in a “performative contradiction” (80).
developing our understanding of how to live; the general understanding of them forms the horizons out of which we project concrete understanding. But the hermeneutical process essentially involves this moment of projection in which we apply and concretize (including hypothetically) the general understanding, which feeds back into and revises our general normative presuppositions. What is essential to this picture is that the process is never complete, since the range of possibilities that may obtain in the realm of concrete application is never exhaustible in reflection. Thus, there can be no final, complete understanding of the content a norm, which entails that there can be no final, complete agreement, even ideally. Therefore, the attempt to secure universal and unconditional validity proves an unrealizable task in principle.

If concrete application is necessary to understand a norm, moreover, we have strong reason to be suspicious about the notion of an ideal speech situation that prescinds from the particularities of our situated common life. To know what a norm means for the purposes of evaluation, I have to know how it does or would apply to actual life, which inextricably involves an understanding of what is worthwhile and valuable, the rich depths of significance that constitute my sense of self and a shared sense of community. As many philosophers have argued in challenge to the family procedural conceptions of justice and morality of which Habermas’ is a member, the emaciated notion of the ideal agent involved in their theories of either the generation or the testing of norms turns out to be unrecognizable from the perspective of human life as it actually is, and thus has only a very limited, if any, justified relevance to the questions and problems we face in the course of our practical lives.
What's more, thinking procedurally in this way has a potentially deleterious effect on practical judgment, as it proposes to substitute the practical wisdom that takes reflective consideration of the particularities of the concrete situation with a supposedly objective procedure. That is, it replaces _phronesis_ with _techne_. Given our remarks on this distinction in the previous chapter, we can say that in the case of procedural theories such as this one, what begins from the attempt to address the very real and significant threats of domination, the reign of self-interest, and the influence of self-perpetuating ideologies and their stultifying effect on sound practical judgment, turns into just such an instance of what they were meant to overcome.

However, I should be clear that I only intend this objection to apply to these theories insofar as what they regard as the principles for assessing the validity of norms are conceived in such a way as to _substitute_ for concrete practical wisdom. When practical wisdom is (rightly) seen as operating from within horizons that include a rich array of contingent, historically conditioned conceptions about the good in human life, the value of and our place within the natural environment (including non-human animals), religious matters, art, and other intertwining features of human existence, the response of proceduralists to the variation and conflict that inevitably arises when these conceptions come in contact with one another is to attempt to do away with anything that isn’t universal when considering matters that have universal import. Justice has long been such a matter, and the more globalized we become the more universal the significance of the rest of our ethical lives becomes. The aspect of proceduralism that I am objecting to, in a Gadamerian spirit, is that which supposes that the only valid
response to a possible source of conflict is to expunge that source from consideration.

The objection is, first, that this supposition is impossible, and because it is impossible it ends up being self-contradicting. Secondly, it severely reduces the ways in which practical consciousness might be transformed by dialogical experience. When dialogue gets conceived in such a way that includes such contingent matters, the agreement and reconciliation that emerges is one that has relevancy to the whole of our practical lives, not just to one circumscribed domain.

If we reject the supposition that these procedural methods are supposed to substitute for a contextualized wisdom about practical matters, one that operates from within the rich and layered web of understandings about the vast array of aspects of human life, we need not reject their relevance to practical wisdom altogether.

Philosophers such as Habermas, Rawls, Nagel, Scanlon, Korsgaard, and many others have done a great service in clarifying the ways in which unreflective presuppositions about the good and other parochial value commitments, inclinations, desires and ends often function as means of avoiding or obscuring those considerations of equality, fairness, and reciprocity that should otherwise call for more universally justifiable actions.

Indeed this is where Gadamer finds the particular importance of Kant. While he certainly has objections to Kant’s formalism and his narrow focus on duty and the lack of regard given to other crucial aspects of the “ethos” of humankind, what Kant managed to do was preserve the dignity of the unconditionality that pertains to the ethical
phenomenon in the face of “all the turbidity coming from the viewpoint of inclination and interest – in the naïve consciousness as in the philosophical.” Gadamer does not deny that the “consciousness of duty” is an essential aspect of our situated life-practice, however much it might be sullied in the ways Heidegger revealed. And so it would be mistake to reduce that consciousness to its inauthentic forms, as if an account of how it serves to stifle creativity, self-ownership and self-responsibly, and consciousness of the finitude of human existence is all there is to say about it. Rather, when we distinguish the consciousness of duty or obligation from the knowledge of procedural rules whose function is to supplant responsible decision-making on the part of the individual (by essentially making that decision for her), we observe two universal features of human life. first, that a consciousness of duty, as a kind of demand that asserts itself in the course of practical deliberations, is indeed an aspect of our situated ethical understandings, one that often gets experienced when it comes in conflict with our particular inclinations; and second, that there is a tendency to try to exclude ourselves from the demand it imposes as a way of justifying a course of action that accords with our inclinations. This latter tendency is what Gadamer calls the “dialectic of the exception.” If we think about the concept of law (both natural and positive), we note


152 I don’t mean universal in an a priori or a necessary sense; I’m merely assuming that the reader will agree that this is true of almost all people and traditions with whom we interact socially and politically.

that the law cannot claim dogmatic authority in the sense that it removes the necessity of application for its meaning to be concretized.\textsuperscript{154} But this does not contradict the universal scope and bindingness of the law itself: whatever meaning we ascribe to the law in concretization, this meaning still retains the force of obligation and duty on all those under its scope. The temptation in application is to mitigate this force as it pertains to our own selves by applying it in such a way that we are excluded from this obligatoriness if our own interests should conflict with its fulfillment. Gadamer suggests that the same features pertain to the consciousness of ethical duties as it arises in the course of reflective practical life.

Now it is often the case that we have a hard time recognizing the “dialectic of the exception” when it rears itself in the course of our own practical deliberations. This is where Kant comes to our aid by clarifying and exposing the notion of obligation and duty in contrast to the self-serving interests lurking in practical consciousness. However, Gadamer sees the real danger (which Kant brilliantly exposed) not so much in the conflict between reason and desire – that which informs us of our true moral duties and that which pursues “mere” self-interest, as many formulations would have it – but as a danger present within reason itself. We have a tendency to rationalize our self-interest, to utilize the tools of a specifically scientific rationality to justify what we want to be the case. This was a particular tendency of the Enlightenment philosophy in Kant’s day, according to Gadamer, and we should not think that this tendency has abated in

\textsuperscript{154} Gadamer makes this argument in his discussion of legal hermeneutics. See TM 324-341.
our day. And so Gadamer considers Kant’s real conflict to be not so much with an Aristotelian ethics that can assert the dependency on history and culture of our recognition of norms, and yet recognize that an essential aspect of ethical understanding is the consciousness of duty; rather his conflict is with a scientifically-oriented conception of irrationality that too easily finds within its bag of tools the resources to “rationally” justify some particular prejudice as an exception to the universal scope of the duties inherent within its own tradition.\textsuperscript{155} Kant’s formulations of the Categorical Imperative come to be seen as aiding and clarifying the rationality that tests laws, “defending it against the doubts originating from the Enlightenment’s cognitive pride” (AIE 159) and “validating the moral task in the face of the ever growing expansion of scientific and technical power” (AIE 159-60).

A similar point can be made, I think, about Habermas’ project with respect to the dialogical movement of coming to an understanding of our ethical commitments, as well as other manifestations of the broadly Kantian project in moral philosophy. To be sure, we must recognize and resist certain errors sometimes involved in such projects: reducing the whole of what matters in the ethical phenomenon to duty validated by a reason that tests laws or its cousins in other Kantian theories; the tendency to prioritize this aspect of the ethical life as having a unique dignity by virtue of having excluded particularity and interest; and the presumption that our recognition and understanding of duties is absolute, their validation final, and the need for responsible, concrete and

\textsuperscript{155} In IG chapter 3, Gadamer links this tendency back to the sophists, whose “dazzling art of the forceful answer” (99) was the counterpart to Plato’s dialectic.
well-conditioned practical character removed. But this need not by any means entail that notions like obligation and duty, universal scope and imperative force have no place in the hermeneutical ethical consciousness, notions which “basically describe the simple obviousness which those of solidly founded character ascribe to the maxims of behavior they solidly maintain” (AIE 157). Quite the contrary: to suppose so would be to deny one of the pillars of the inheritance of tradition and the common life in which we move.

5.3 The Traditionalist View

What we have been trying to show is that in the face of real barriers to authentic dialogical understanding the answer is not a retreat into the sphere of the theoretical that leaves behind the practical concreteness of the situation, which we might put as “ascending” out of ethos into logos. But Gadamer affirms with Aristotle that ethos requires logos, that “phronesis has thought in the very midst of it” (AIE 155), and the logos must be defended against the intrusions of mere parochialism and self-interest. Kantian-like theories of moral rationality or discourse can aid in such a defense, but as an aspect or guide, not an alternative to or replacement of hermeneutical practical reasoning in some narrow “moral” domain. Neither, then, should these barriers compel us to retreat the other way, into an ethos that attempts to leave logos behind or circumscribe it entirely within a narrow, closed-off domain. Here we have in mind those like Rorty who seek to replace argument with rhetoric, truth with pragmatic justification, on the one hand; and on the other hand a form of what Gadamer calls
“traditionalism” (TM 281), whose response to the cacophony of voices in modern society is to give up on coming to a shared understanding beyond some narrowly defined community whose shared practical and metaphysical commitments are relatively secure.

The latter is often the caricature drawn of views such as Gadamer’s, along with so-called communitarian, neo-Wittgensteinian, neo-Aristotelian, and other such ethical and political theories. The idea attributed to these views seems to be that the failure of modernity to provide a foundational or transcendent principle on which to draw for the sake of resolving or reconciling differences between different historical and ethical traditions means that, with respect to question of ethical reasoning at least, they remain at a profound and irreconcilable variance with one another. Ethical reasoning and coherent practical judgments require the background provided by these traditions, but since this background cannot be transcended, bracketed, or otherwise negated, the judgments made on their basis will be irreducibly incompatible with those made from within a rival tradition. This means further that there is no perspective from which we can evaluate traditions as a whole, and so the best we can do is to internally refine and develop the one to which we hold allegiance.

Certainly Gadamer’s view, as well as those of many forms of virtue ethics, resonates with this description in many respects; however, there are two theses that hermeneutics might be thought to entail with regard to ethical reasoning, theses that would support the traditionalist interpretation but which Gadamer denies. The first is
any pronouncement of fundamental incommensurability, and the second is the need for a sort of “inward retreat.” As a program that wants to circumscribe horizons around impenetrable boundaries and thereby close off the possibilities for mutual understanding across different traditions, traditionalism shares much with the historicism that Gadamer painstakingly criticized. However, it is worth noting that his criticisms did not deny the tremendous debt he owed to historicism. In the same way, as with his treatment of Kantian views his objection is to traditionalism in its reductionist tendencies, not to the perspective as a whole.

As we saw earlier, historicism’s great contribution was to call attention to the dependency understanding has on historically-effected horizons and the impossibility of achieving a universal standpoint from which to discern objective meaning. But it continued to model its account of objectivity and truth on the standards provided by the natural sciences, including demonstrability, repeatability, and the like. And so it had to presume that they only way to maintain truth and objectivity was to locate them within circumscribed historical horizons within which these standards can be met. So the objective meaning of a text, historical event, etc., has to be located at the source, identifiable only by transferring ourselves out of our own historical horizon and into that of the other. Notice how in order to preserve the claim that interpretation is objective according to the presumed standards, the interpreter has to leave her own prejudices, commitments and such behind; otherwise another interpreter with her own horizon will necessarily arrive at a conflicting interpretation. Notice also that this has to presume that the horizon into which we project ourselves is in an important way self-enclosed. It
has to be a horizon that *any* interpreter in whatever situation can enter in the same way as any other, and thus discern the objective meaning. And it is this presumption of the self-enclosed nature of horizons that receives much of Gadamer’s criticism.

In a similar way, the traditionalist rightly recognizes the dependency of our ethical commitments on the resources of tradition. But in order to preserve a certain conception about the rational truth-status of moral claims, she has to artificially circumscribe that tradition, seeing it as an enclosed sphere within which the relation between its conceptions about human nature, final ends, standards of rationality, and the like enjoy a clear and secure status. In this way, moral claims made within the tradition can be demonstrably shown to be true *given* that set of conceptual resources, and demonstrable in this way to anyone whatever, at least in principle – even those who do not share those conceptions themselves. The less self-enclosed and internally coherent we conceive of a tradition, the less its truth-claims can be vindicated. And so the more we hold onto this ideal of truth and demonstrability within traditions, the more we will have to see them as self-enclosed and incommensurable.

We will offer three objections to traditionalism from the Gadamerian perspective, which is to say three reasons why Gadamer, as well as a hermeneutical ethics, should not be conceived along this model either favorably or unfavorably. The first worry is that this view runs the risk of objectifying tradition, seeing it as a kind of self-standing, present-at-hand entity; and this is a susceptibility that pertains also to language, horizons, cultures, and individuals, the latter being one we have particularly
discussed at length. To take this position with respect to any entity requires an attitude of complete distantiation – that I can see the entity and its features in a way that I, as the subject of enquiry, do not “belong” to it at all. Traditionalism adopts this attitude in so far as renders final judgment on the commensurability between one tradition and another and takes this as an excuse to disengage from broader dialogue and instead engage in a wholly internal one. To render a judgment of this sort would require complete perspicuity as to the meaning of the basic commitments of one’s own tradition and its potential rivals; otherwise, it is hard to see how we could declare that these meanings not only do, but must conflict. Instead, Gadamer insists that attaining such a perspicuity and final judgment on the meaning inherent within a tradition is not possible given that all such judgments are an event of tradition itself, not a judgment rendered from a standpoint outside of tradition. He relays this point with respect to cultures, which can easily apply to traditions, when he remarks:

Just as the individual is never simply an individual because he is always in understanding with others, so too the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon (TM 304).

Traditions, languages, cultures, horizons, and individual self identities are constantly in flux, constantly subject to experiences that can and do call out, challenge and modify their commitments, even their basic ones, in ways that cannot be foreseen due to the nature of experience itself. Due to this ever-present tenuousness, the incommensurability claim comes to be seen much more as an unjustifiable excuse to avoid putting one’s commitments at risk in dialogical exchange, which solidifies local
solidarities into dogmas, a hallmark of *das Man* and the inauthenticity of life lived in its subjection.

A second, more positive point has to do with the linguisticality of traditions and horizons, together with the universality of translation. One of Gadamer’s central theses which we mentioned in chapter 4, but which we unfortunately have not been able to give its due in this treatment, is his claim that all understanding is linguistic. We did, however, touch on the analogy between coming to an understanding through dialogue and translation, which we noted was not, strictly speaking, an analogy, but a continuum that differs only in emphasis and degree rather than substance. And there we argued that just as the translator has to presume that the subject matter of the foreign text can be rendered in another language in a way that both preserves meaning and makes that meaning intelligible in the other language, so the participants in dialogue have to presume that there is a truth in what the other says to me that I can understand in a way that is both meaning-preserving and relevant to me. To be sure, this presumption might not always be fulfilled; but that is never something I can know ahead of time, and the task of both the translator and the participant in dialogue is to strive towards that “common diction” and “common dictum.” So once again, incommensurability claims come to be seen as of a piece with those of a philologist who would declare, impossibly, that the text of some foreign artifact *cannot* be made to speak to us in our own tongue.

To this Gadamer replies:

It is true that those who are brought up in a particular linguistic and cultural tradition see the world in a different way from those who belong to other traditions. It is true that the historical ‘worlds’ that succeed one another in the
course of history are different from one another and from the world of today; but in whatever tradition we consider it, it is always a human – i.e., a verbally constituted – world that presents itself to us. As verbally constituted, every such world is of itself always open to every possible insight and hence to every expansion of its own world picture, and is accordingly available to others (TM 447).

Even if this should strike us as overly optimistic and perhaps naïve, it is not a claim that can be repudiated with finality. And so the presumption of (possible) truth which presides over the hermeneutic consciousness’ encounter with the other remains legitimate and binding, and forecloses on the incommensurability claim.

Finally, a pressing worry about any view that makes claims about the dependency of our capacity to recognize and appropriate truth on tradition (and other elements of our historicity, conditionedness and finitude) is that it precludes the distinction between truth and justification-within-tradition. This has become much more salient in the modern period in the wake of globalization and the increased conflict between traditions and cultures, the unprecedented suffering and horrors that have been perpetuated in the name of some narrow ideology or other, and what seems, at least to this inhabitant of the modern world, to be an increasingly vitriolic and ideological public atmosphere. In such a condition, the retreat into local, self-contained and autonomous domains in which local solidarities can have their free governance seems less and less a possibility. In addition, it is not obviously a possibility that we should welcome, given our experiences in the past century. Paul Fairfield puts it well when he says:

For every inquisition or religious crusade there is an ancient tradition of belief, a moral vocabulary, a set of well-established institutions of social norms. For
every massacre of political dissidents there is a tradition of social hierarchies, a consensus on the importance of authority and of knowing one’s place within the society. As social solidarities legitimate themselves, so too may they legitimate (what become very difficult to recognize as) forms of oppression.156

This expresses what has been, and continues to be, a strong motivation to transcend the dependency of moral judgment on tradition and propose a universalistic standpoint from which to evaluate and render judgment on the validity of social norms. The guiding issue is whether the ideal of a truth that surpasses simple agreement can be sustained within a hermeneutical conception of ethics, or whether we have to bite the bullet and declare that, for all the stated aspirations of dialogue and hermeneutical reflection to open itself to the “truth” of the subject matter of justice, virtuous behavior, the good, and other such concerns, such practices are, in the end, merely a form of pragmatic justification of what we, in our current historical circumstance, take to be the most sustainable way of life.157

5.4 The Pragmatist View

The latter conclusion is the one that was forcefully defended by Richard Rorty, and in doing so he drew heavily upon Heidegger and Gadamer, in addition to the American Pragmatist tradition of Pierce, James and Dewey. So in the next few pages we


157 Another approach to this third worry might be to recommend the withdrawal of the individual from public life altogether, including the public life of a particular tradition or solidarity. As we indicated early in the chapter, this is what some take Heidegger’s movement to have been in his later years.
will consider whether the subjects of our present enquiry really do lend themselves to Rorty’s appropriations.

Shortly before Gadamer’s death, Rorty wrote a tribute piece on Gadamer’s famous dictum, “Being that can be understood is language” (TM 474), in which he claimed Gadamer as an ally in his quest to motivate a pragmatic account of the relation between truth and justification.\(^{158}\) Gadamer’s hermeneutics, as he sees it, motivates us to abandon all talk of essences and correspondence of our ideas with the “way things really are,” and instead to adopt a strictly nominalist account of the meanings in our language and practices. “[I]n a culture that took Gadamer’s slogan to heart,” Rorty offers, rivalries between “bishops and biologists, or poets and philosophers, or fuzzies and techies...would not be thought of as controversies about who is in touch with reality and who is still behind the veil of appearances. They would be struggles to capture the imagination, to get other people to use one’s vocabulary.”\(^{159}\)

In Rorty’s view, then, Gadamer’s hermeneutics enjoins us to see being—encompassing concepts like truth, the good, essence, and so forth—pragmatically, as

\(^{158}\) Richard Rorty, “Being That can be Understood is Language,” in Gadamer’s Repercussions, ed. Bruce Krajewski (Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press 2004), 21-29. To be fair to Rorty, at least the Rorty of this piece, he admits that he has not offered “an account of the real essence of Gadamer’s thought” (which we presume to be a somewhat ironic statement, since Rorty would consider such a claim senseless anyway), or an account that he thinks Gadamer would necessarily endorse. Rather, he seems to see his project as “a suggestion about how a few more horizons might be fused”—Gadamer’s, his own, and those “currently coming into use among analytic philosophers” (28). So my remark that Rorty is claiming Gadamer as an ally should be read with this qualification: not an ally in the sense that the “essence” of each of their thought is the same, but rather in the sense that a Rortian can find much that is useful in Gadamer’s hermeneutics toward his or her own project. The criticism I will defend, then, is that Rorty does a disservice to Gadamer’s thought by appropriating him for his own theory, when such a treatment denies one of the central and indispensable features of Gadamer’s hermeneutics.

\(^{159}\)Rorty, “Being That can be Understood is Language,” 28
entirely reducible to language; that is, it has no meaning outside the pragmatic use that such terms might put in service of our ends: “Being” does not transcend our language in any way, at least not in any way that makes the slightest sense to talk about.

The central claims of Rorty’s pragmatist position are these: first, “truth,” as the term normally functions in philosophical discourse, assumes that there are ways that things “really are,” to which we aspire our words and representations to correspond. Second, he argues that we have been misled to suppose that the purpose of rational thought and discourse is to get at the reality of these “essences.” Rather, the supposition that we could get outside our own linguistic conceptions to things themselves, to see if they “match up,” is an absurdity. “The truth” is not something we could ever attain; therefore we should not suppose that this is ever what we aim at in the sciences, philosophy, or any other field of inquiry and discourse.

Third, there is a perfectly sensible alternative to this mistaken “epistemological” conception, namely one in which all of our ways of talking are pragmatically related to the goals that we happen to have; that is, they are simply coping mechanisms for finding our way about in the world. Once we disavow all ambitions to find universal justification of knowledge claims, apodictic metaphysical truths, to get in touch with ontological reality, and so forth, any of the terms once in the service of these claims are put to a different use within the limitations of pragmatic discourse, if they have any such use; otherwise, we jettison them. Inquiry and discourse thus become means of finding new and interesting ways of saying things, of coping. Rorty maintains that this
pragmatic program not only avoids the absurdities of the alternative “truth-oriented” projects, but actually better serves the ends that many of the proponents of these conceptual systems share: control and manipulation of the natural world, building inclusivist democratic communities, even such ends as love and friendship.

Underlying the discourse of modernity, particularly on moral and political issues, Rorty suggests, is a false contrast between truth and justification connected to a flawed conception of human rationality. Human rationality depends entirely upon the linguisticality of our concepts. Since we are all situated within language, to echo familiar points, justification is a matter not of comparing the concepts within language to the external world, to supra-conceptual universal realities accessible through some pure rational reflection, or to pure transcendental intuitions stripped of prejudices. Rather, justification is a matter of relating these concepts to one another according to certain contextually-determined justificatory standards. Following on this, the advocates of a contrast between truth and justification take the obvious implication that my beliefs may not be justified in all possible contexts of inquiry to mean that I may have justified beliefs that are not true. That is to say, there is a presumed “fact of the matter,” independent of the contingencies of my linguistic context, to which my beliefs may or may not correspond; given the limitations of our present background knowledge, modes of discourse, theories of justification, prejudices, etc., I may have a belief that meets certain (contingent and contextual) standards for justification, but may not satisfy that correspondence to which I aspire as a rational inquirer.

248
Rorty, however, considers this supposed contrast between truth and justification to be nonsensical. For one thing, how could I know that my belief is not only justified but also true? If I claim that a belief is true, then I claim that it is eminently justified, that no standards of justification will ever come along to challenge this. But how could I possibly know this? Perhaps because I can somehow see a reality distinct from the grounds of justification? Whatever we might consider this “seeing” to be, it would only be further grounds for justification. At any rate, this language of “seeing reality” is just a circumspective way of moving about within our linguistic horizons, not transcending them as the term implies. Rorty’s basic claim, then, is that all we do or can aspire to is to broaden our context of justification for our beliefs to include more people, more traditions of inquiry, and to “tie together the various things previously said in new and perspicuous ways.”

Adding some further element of “truth” that we also want our beliefs to aspire to is absurd: we can only aspire to that which is attainable. Since nothing more than justification is attainable, then, aspiring towards “truth” should not be taken to mean anything more than aspiring towards further justification, which is, as we have said, bringing others within our linguistic horizons.

More precisely, Rorty argues that the only way in which we should use the concept “truth” in a different sense than justification is a “cautionary” one. When we say something like, “this belief may be justified, but it still may not be true,” what we should mean is, “this belief may be justified here, now, but there may be other contexts

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160 Rorty, “Being That can be Understood is Language,” 24
in which it is not justified.” Any further use of truth as “that which transcends all contexts of justification,” which would encompass terms like “universal,” “necessary,” “unconditional” and so forth, since they putatively refer to a “reality” beyond the reach of our horizons, have no use in political or moral theory and practice, or indeed any theory or practice whatever (save perhaps logic and mathematics, which we won’t discuss). From Rorty’s point of view, it would serve moral discourse better if we all agreed that any claim of truth beyond justification is pragmatically pointless. Without any access to such a truth, these claims forestall advancements on the issues of our day, wasting time on formulating universal principles and such when we should be trying to rhetorically compel others to accept our point of view. There is simply no point in saying, “I think racism is wrong for these reasons... and I think ‘racism is wrong’ is true.” At best it is akin to a foot stamp (a la Arthur Fine); but most likely it is either empty or misleading.

Once we realize that “the notions of real essence and of truth-as-correspondence stand or fall together...Gadamer’s slogan gives us a way of sweeping both aside...It is a suggestion about how to redescribe the process we call ‘increasing

\[\text{161}\text{ Rorty often speaks of this as “future contexts of justification,” but I think this is a bit misleading. All that I think he means by that is to say that there may be contexts in which we attempt to justify our beliefs but fail (which would obviously be in the future to the one doing the justifying). But “future contexts in which justification fails” might connote a Modernist conception of “progress” which would be unfriendly to his position. That is, someone might take this to imply that our context of justification is “better” than previous ones but not as good as future ones. But Rorty would point out that this only makes sense when we talk about “better” with respect to some ideal context in which justification and truth are coextensive, rather like the picture Habermas has in mind. To avoid misunderstandings, then, Rorty should probably forego “future contexts of justification” in favor of “other” or “different.”}\]
The Gadamerian conception of the Sache, according to Rorty, is “forever up for grabs, forever to be reimagined and redescribed in the course of an endless conversation.”\(^{163}\) If Rorty is right, that the Sache is not to be thought of as something transcendent that has pertinence to our hermeneutical practices, then the process of understanding, of redescribing and of *Horizontverschmelzung*, is not a question of “whether the relations expressed in a new vocabulary are really there,” as the metaphysician asks; rather, “the Gadamerian will ask only whether they can be woven together with the relations captured by previous vocabularies in a helpful way.”\(^{164}\)

Gadamer, as we have seen, agrees with Rorty that understanding cannot involve escaping one’s horizons of meaning and significance in order to get at the essence of things, get into another’s mind, or discover truths accessible only to pure, disengaged rationality. This, moreover, is why both are suspicious of method, insofar as method has this kind of detached access to truth as its goal.\(^{165}\) Rorty concludes from this, again, that the best we can do is to find new and useful ways of speaking, attempting to fuse our horizons with those of our partners in discourse if that helps; but given the confines of the hermeneutical circle, it no longer makes any sense to ask if our interpretations

\(^{162}\) Rorty, “Being That can be Understood is Language,” 24

\(^{163}\) Rorty, “Being That can be Understood is Language,” 29

\(^{164}\) Rorty, “Being That can be Understood is Language,” 27

are “right,” our language capture the “way things are,” if there is a “truth” beyond the
circle of understanding that I or the text bring to the conversation.

However, in coming to these conclusions Rorty has misrepresented the nature of
the hermeneutical circle, at least as Gadamer sees it, and unnecessarily emasculates
hermeneutical discourse by disengaging language from truth. Rorty seems to limit his
conception of “reality” or the “way things are” to the Kantian Ding-an-sich and thereby
radicalizes Kant’s claim that this is inaccessible as such to the idea that it is not even
worth speaking of a mind-independent (or in his case, language-independent)
transcendence. Gadamer, however, shares Heidegger’s alethic understanding of truth,
which itself is a modification of Husserl’s phenomenology of perception, as we
mentioned in chapter 2. Husserl held that our perceptual knowledge of the thing [Die
Sache] is always perspectival: we perceive the thing from one side or the other, and in
doing so the other side is hidden. But we are still perceiving the whole thing itself, just
not as a whole, and it is the relatedness of these different perspectives that transcends
any particular perspective and discloses truth. Gadamer extends this idea to language
when he writes:

Seen phenomenologically, the “thing-in-itself” is, as Husserl has shown, nothing but the continuity with which the various perceptual perspectives on objects shade into one another...In the same way as with perception we can speak of the “linguistic shadings” that the world undergoes in different language worlds. But there remains a characteristic difference: every “shading” of the object of perception is exclusively distinct from every other, and each helps co-constitute the “thing-in-itself” as the continuum of these nuances – whereas, in the case of the shadings of verbal worldviews, each one potentially contains every other one within it – i.e., each worldview can be extended to every other (TM 448).
When we see these last words in light of their Husserlian “shadings,” it’s clear that “each worldview can be extended to every other” says more than the idea that I can rhetorically bring other people within my orbit, or vice versa. Rather, each linguistic worldview can potentially disclose to the other something new about the same, transcendent reality. This means, however, that it is not at all the case that “the Sache is forever up for grabs,” as if the linguistically of worldviews entails that language creates the thing, produces Being. Gadamer’s view is that language “houses” Being, to echo a Heideggerian phrase. It is the “clearing” [Lichtung] wherein reality is intelligible.
Language reflects, rather than creates, intelligibility, and this means that the language we find through dialogue must be adequate to this task. This is a demand that it seems hard to recognize in Rorty’s thought. Plenty of ways of talking can make the world seem intelligible, allowing us to cope; but it is this very fact that leads Heidegger to warn of the dangers of fallen modes of discourse. Yet on Rorty’s view authenticity and inauthenticity, dialogue or dictatorship, are potentially equally valid modes of pragmatic coping, at least in principle.

And so Gadamer’s dictum, “Being that can be understood is language,” is not the claim that Being is reducible to language, that they are identical. Being must be seen as transcending language for such activities as translation and dialogue – which presuppose a common meaning that they seek to disclose – to have their point. Since we are always engaged in interpretation, conversation, and dialogue – a point Rorty would agree with – and since these activities have their point in the disclosure of something that transcends their individually, historically, and socially particular
instances, then maintaining a firm orientation towards the truth of what is being said (die Sache, reality) is the only way to make sense of the activities themselves.

Now Rorty would likely counter that these characterizations of Dasein, of authenticity, and truth-oriented dialogue are also, in the end, just “ways of talking,” just as his own arguments are. It’s not that this statement (“these are all just ‘ways of talking’”) can be claimed to be a truth that represents a language-independent reality; rather, Rorty is proposing it, trying to persuade us to think and talk in these terms and see how we get on. Ultimately, there is no way to refute him on this point. But we can say securely that Gadamer, for all that he shares with Rorty, thinks we cannot eliminate an orientation towards the true and not merely the justified, the good and not merely the better, without denying the better part of our way of being in the world. Indeed, when asked for his thoughts on Rorty, Gadamer once remarked, “I would perhaps agree with him in that in our search for the good we will, at best, hit upon the better, never the good in itself. And yet…it’s also true that we will never search for or find what is better for us without seeking the good in itself or at least having it in mind.”

There is, indeed, much more complexity and nuance in the Gadamerian notion of truth and related notions like the good, which we don’t have the space to pursue here with any adequacy. One of these complexities has to do with his appropriation of the


167 The collection, Hermeneutics and Truth, edited by Brice R. Wachterhauser (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994) contains some very helpful treatments of this topic.
Platonic idea of the true or the good as a “shining forth” [Erleuchtung], as having a kind of immediate compellngness to it that commands our respect, addressing us out of our complacency in established convictions. Gadamer gives as an example the kinds of texts that we characterize as “classical” (in the sense of “the classics,” not simply Ancient Greek and Roman):

[The classical] does not refer to a quality that we ascribe to particular historical phenomena but to a notable mode of being historical: the historical process of preservation [Bewahrung] that, through constantly proving itself [Bewährung], allows something true [ein Wahres] to come into being (TM 287).

We regard certain texts, as, for instance, “classics” of philosophy because they are the ones that philosophers have always found to have insights that are both compelling (even if we don’t ultimately agree) and thus demanding of our consideration, and inexhaustible, such that they can continually have something to say to us no matter what our historical or intellectual situation. They have this in a kind of self-evident, immediate way, he thinks; and something like this pertains to the “immediacy” with which the truth or reality makes its claim on us.

While this is a difficult idea that we won’t attempt to fully explicate, it can tell us something more about the phronimos – the “experienced” person. To make sense of

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168 As Robert Dostal points out, this notion of the experience of truth having a kind of immediacy to it is prominent in Heidegger’s later work, and he argues that a key difference between Heidegger and Gadamer lies in the respective emphasis they place on this kind of experience relative to the mediated, conversational experience. See Robert Dostal, “The Experience of Truth for Gadamer and Heidegger: Taking Time and Sudden Lightning,” in Hermeneutics and Truth, edited by Brice R. Wachterhauser (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1994), 47-67. This relates us back to the opening pages of this chapter in which we called attention to what is sometimes considered later Heidegger’s “gnosticism.” Gadamer, by recognizing the importance of this kind of immediate experience, can be seen as trying to balance that with the mediated, conversation experience that Heidegger largely neglects in his later work.
experience as an event which draws us out of our engaged coping, we might be tempted to think of it in a Rortian way: something goes wrong in a merely pragmatic sense, and we then try to put the pieces back together as best we can. As we can now see, Gadamer would urge us to think of this phenomenon as the event in which something of the truth of reality “assails” us and “addresses” us, which is to say that we are compelled to some feature of reality, a feature that has been hidden not simply because of our finite capacities to grasp reality as a whole, but because some feature of our prior understanding is inadequate to that reality itself. So the “experienced” phronimos is one who has been addressed and responded authentically to that challenge, and thus has a firmer grasp on the truth or the good.

5.5 From Heidegger to Gadamer and Back to Plato

We have been considering possible responses to the modern predicament in which we can recognize with Gadamer the ways in which understanding is dialogical but also take seriously the lack of both the practice and the conditions. Habermas thinks that we can and should idealize dialogue so as to secure objective moral truth, while Rorty holds that we should do away with concepts like truth and the good altogether except perhaps in a very cautionary sense; and the traditionalist maintains that we should isolate as far as possible the communities and traditions within which dialogue takes place. We have argued that while a hermeneutical perspective would have to deny their ultimate positions, much of what they aspire to emphasize and justify about
the ethical life is, I think, sustainable, and in fact better supported if it avoids their narrowing of the discourse of philosophical ethics.

But what, then, becomes of the problem about the lack of practice and conditions for dialogue? Here we can look back to Heidegger’s existential account of *phronesis* as the call of conscious out of the false securities, certainties, rationalizations, and idle talk of *das Man*, and into an existence that embraces one’s finitude as well as the self-projection of one’s own being. We described how such a one neither denies the heritage that constitutes the horizons in which we form and carry out our practical self-understandings, nor supposes that appropriate behavior (“cultural expertise”) is either a matter of following a set of rules or simply following the herd and accepting that the given attitudes and conventions are the only things we have to work with in making our way in the world. We can now emphasize that given the centrality of dialogue, the call of conscience cannot call us *out* of the social world in which dialogue must take place, but must press forward into the hope that even in the most distorted and inauthentic contexts, even in the midst of hopeless situations, dialogue still *is* our way towards understanding, that there still is something we might learn from the cacophony of voices, and something we, particularly as those who are “experienced,” might contribute. Retreat into solitude or into the lostness of *das Man* is not an option once we recognize the conditions and contours of authenticity.

However, we can temper this Gadamerian optimism with a little bit of Heidegger’s pessimism about social life, which reminds us of the ease with which we get
caught up into the inauthentic modes of *das Man*. This should lend some hesitancy and caution in our dialogical encounters, both with respect to the claims of others and our own convictions (advice that Heidegger himself should have taken more to heart). Moreover, the fact that we cannot control whether and how others participate with us in this exchange is perhaps one reason why Heidegger placed so much emphasis on the *self*-responsibility to heed the “call.”

Now this may sound like cold comfort, particularly in our current social climate. It may sound also like we are suggesting that we should “listen to” and “learn” from racists, terrorists, boobs spitting hot air in the media, psychotics, members of the flat-earth society, and others who either have views so far distanced from our own or have so clearly and decisively removed themselves from anything resembling a dialogical situation that it seems obvious that the possibilities for dialogue have reached their limit (we raised this worry before in terms of the presumption of authority). And indeed Gadamer acknowledges that there are limits to the possibilities of understanding what the other is saying beyond which we can only see it as the other’s opinion, in psychological terms, and so forth.¹⁶⁹ To be sure, even in most of the extreme cases it’s not the case that the racist, terrorist, media boob or whatever has come to his or her practical convictions within a self-enclosed vacuum (though we might have to say this about some, like the psychotic). Rather, for every extremist view there is often a

¹⁶⁹ See page 197 above.
background set of presumptions shared by others much more open to the dialogical encounter.

But nothing in what we have said suggests that we should engage dialogically with every such challenge we meet. This is absurd from a practical standpoint given that we could never have enough leisure to do so, particularly in modern times when the dissemination and thus encounter with challenging perspectives is such a pervasive part of everyday life. More importantly, the notion that experience leads one to an increased openness to experience must be understood as an increased awareness of what is genuinely challenging. The increase in “cultural expertise” that follows on authentic experience obviously entails an increased capacity to discriminate between those claims worthy of dialogical consideration, whose underlying questions are, as we put it before, “live,” and those which are not.

Finally, Gadamer offers an illuminating interpretation of the Republic according to which Plato recognized and wrestled with just this sort of problem, illustrated in the tension between the life of theoria and the “cave of politics, in which all knowledge is inexact and where things always go wrong” (IG 68). Should the guardians not be allowed to retreat to their Black Forest hut and enjoy the greater fulfillment a life of contemplation? Socrates is not troubled by this, since in his ideal state this sort of conflict would not pertain. But Gadamer asks,

does not this very denial [of conflict] prove to the thinking reader that the conflict is real? Indeed it does. To my way of thinking, there appears to be no doubt that Plato has this conflict in mind in all of its sharpness and that he displays it negatively by the very impossibility of his utopian ‘solution’ – the
conflict, that is, between knowledge of the truth, to which the theoretical life is dedicated, and actual political life (IG 69).

The ideal state of the Republic cannot be actualized any more than, certainly, the ideal communicative situation of Habermas, or even localized ideal dialogical community that embodies the conditions and virtues we have elaborated. But “does Plato seek nothing more than to show that the conflict between theoria and politics is irresolvable?” In our terms, would we have to conclude that Gadamer’s account can only show that the ideal truth-oriented hermeneutical situation is an impossibility, and so we should be content to conclude that one of the alternatives we have been considering is the only viable alternative, despite the problems we have raised?

No, he insists:

One must read the whole [Republic] as one grand dialectical myth [and] take all the institutions and structures in this model city as dialectical metaphors...Here, reading dialectically means relating these utopian demands in each instance to their opposite, in order to find, somewhere in between, what is really meant – that is, in order to recognize what the circumstances are, and how they could be made better (IG 71).

On the one hand, according to Gadamer’s interpretation the institutions of this model are supposed to draw our attention to truly bad conditions by way of contrast, which is a large part of what we have attempted to do throughout this chapter and in the previous ones. We have tried to uncover the inadequacy of the technological or scientific model of practical knowledge and how it not only fails to respect the kinds of beings of we are but enables and loses itself in the “seductiveness there is in having power” (IG 72), a siren call to which the modernist, the traditionalist and post-modernist/pragmatist are susceptible, as we suggested.
On the other hand, he reminds us that “the disorder of human being is never complete chaos,” and invites us to consider whether Plato’s allegory of the cave was not meant to recommend a life to theoria over praxis but rather the opposite: to “dispel the illusion that dedication to philosophy and the theoretical life is wholly irreconcilable with the demands of political practice in society and the state...The allegory is supposed to explain why those caught up in the practical life consider the theoretical life worthless” (IG 74-75). Like Gorgias, we are tempted to suppose that philosophy – the dialogical quest for truth and the good – makes one unfit for “real life” when the conditions required by this quest seem impossibly utopian. Rather, “the paradox of the philosopher-king” found in the Republic is “meant to give us the positive insight that both aiming at the good and knowing reality pertain to the political actions of the true statesman as well as to the true theoretical life” (IG 71).

In mythical language, we can note with Gadamer that blindness assails people both when leaving the cave and when entering it. But this “doesn’t imply that they are really blinded or are incapable of getting oriented there” (IG 75). In more conceptual language, we can say that part of the burden of the quest for authentic practical life, a life of virtue, is struggling to find that balance between what is ideal and what is practically feasible, never losing oneself in one or the other of these domains.

Though we will explore this more concretely in chapter 6, many who have been influenced by Gadamer’s thought have argued that this calls for supporting certain social arrangements, institutions and practices that facilitate dialogue, such as
democracy, recognition of the rights of individuals and societies to self-governance and free expression, and the like, yet they reject the implication that these institutions and practices require the abandonment of attempts to allow more comprehensive conceptions to enter into the dialogue. Supporting the expansion of these conditions and working to remove their oppressive obstacles would clearly be a precondition for the individual’s own aspirations towards authentic, dialogical understanding.

In the next chapter, we will engage more directly the ideas and arguments we have put forward up to this point with the questions of virtue by considering one person who has made the kinds of arguments we mentioned in the last paragraph, Charles Taylor. Taylor, as we shall see, would concur with much of the interpretations of Heidegger and Gadamer and their ethical significance that we have offered; yet he stops short of framing these ideas in virtue-centered terms. Considering why will help us determine the limitations and possibilities of a hermeneutical virtue ethics.
CHAPTER 6:

CAN THERE BE A HEIDEGGERIAN VIRTUOUS AGENT?

6.1 Authenticity and Virtue: Some Problems

The problematic of this dissertation has been the claim, or at least implication, of most virtue-based theories of ethics that practical understanding in the broadest sense – including practical knowledge of what is to be done in the circumstances, the capacity for sound ethical judgment, the right kind of affective attunement to the social environment, and other aspects of what is involved in living well – depends upon, and always proceeds on the basis of contingent, historically- and socially-conditioned frameworks or horizons. As we discussed in the first chapter, this has been the source of objection to virtue ethics from two fronts. From the perspective of much modern normative theory, this undercuts the aim of ethical theory to be able to give an account of the special nature of the moral as a practical domain that transcends the realm of subjective valuations and parochial ends, guiding and assessing actions as they ought to be done by any person whatsoever. From the opposite side, these features have been thought to undermine the virtue ethicist’s pursuit of any substantive theoretical account of living well, calling instead for an exhortation towards rhetorical and pragmatic problem-solving or aesthetic self-creation. We have been pursuing a response to these sorts of objections through an explication and development of Heidegger and Gadamer’s thought, articulating an account of authenticity as the aim and condition of a
well-lived life structurally parallel to Aristotelian eudaimonia. Our account has considered the importance of historicity and contingency not just in terms of the limits they place theoretical reflection on how to live, but as enabling conditions that determine the direction and shape such reflection can and should take. This chapter aims to bring these investigations to bear more directly on the question of virtue. We shall consider whether and in what way the language of the virtues best articulates what it means to live well (i.e., authentically), and whether and in what way this language is bound to particular conditioned frameworks or rather has the potential to involve some sort of transcendence that doesn't undermine the inescapability claim about conditioned horizons.

By way of recap, chapters 2 and 3 explicated the structure of human existence as being-in-the-world with the aim of distinguishing authentic and inauthentic modes. We suggested that authenticity, as a normative account of how one should both think about and comport oneself practically towards one’s own being and the world (which is to say, the kinds of practical responses one should have towards the situations encountered in the course of life), takes its bearings from the existential structure of Dasein, the being of human beings. This being is, according to the Heideggerian analysis that we have defended, finite and temporal. This means that Dasein is both futural, projecting a “stand” or an orientation for its life in its practical engagements, and regressive, always projecting out of a horizon of understanding into which it is “thrown,” one that is always partially inherited; and it does so in the present “moment of vision,” meaning it cannot disburden itself of either its inheritance or its self-projection by taking refuge in some
form of heroic (total) self-creation or (total) conformism, including conforming to social norms, rules, or some kind of deterministic socio-biological picture. These temporal structures point to the ways in which any normative account of authenticity must respect our finitude, which Heidegger analyzed in terms of death and guilt. By “death” he had in mind the fact that no projection we could make, no conception of the point and purpose of life, is final and complete, immune from revision, revolution, or even annihilation; and so there is no point at which we are no longer having to “choose” ourselves by taking a stand on what matters (where “choice” refers to a practical comportment conceived more broadly than the product of conscious deliberation). By “guilt” he indicated both the fact that we can never “get behind our thrownness” and adopt a “view from nowhere,” a perspective on what matters for human life (and thus for ethics) that takes no account of the various meanings and significances that I have inherited as a member of some particular culture, tradition or society (since otherwise, as thrown, there would be no significance whatsoever); and that any judgments, attitudes, or practical orientations I adopt and accept face the threatening possibility that they will be undermined, amounting to failure either existentially (i.e., they will be undermined by some future insight I have into what human life is all about as such or for me), practically (i.e., I will find such an orientation unlivable), socially (i.e., it cannot be sustained given the culture and practices in which I seek to pursue it) or some combination of these.

Given the phenomenological adequacy of this account – i.e., given that this is an adequate account of human life as it is actually lived, as we have argued – certain
implications follow regarding any normative account of human life as it *ought* to be lived, which we are calling the authentic life. In the first place, and most obviously, the account will have to respect the ontological dimensions of human life that we have articulated. A life that attempts to refuse the task of self-projection would be inauthentic. This means that normative theories that attempt to essentially remove this dimension of self-projection from an account of practical knowledge and right action would be proposing a form of life inimical to living well. This can take the form of proceduralist and rule-based theories, as well as ones that attempt to reduce the values and ends we project to some singular, unifying and independently identifiable and calculable feature. On the other hand, a life that refuses to acknowledge its situatedness within historical, social and linguistic contexts, and its dependency on these contexts for the meaningfulness of its self-projections would likewise be inauthentic. This precludes attempts to characterize the authentic or meaningful life in terms of a *radical* self-choosing, as well as theories of morality that attempt to define the conditions of right action, the central value or values, and so forth, in a way that abstracts from the social milieu and an embedded understanding of how to live. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, one of the central marks of inauthenticity is the attempt to “flee from finitude” by taking refuge in supposedly absolute conceptions of how to live. And so theories that aim for a final pronouncement regarding the essential nature of human life, the determinate character and structure of the good in human life, or an absolute set of inviolable rules or principles that are to have the last word in our practical reasoning will fail to respect and promote authenticity in human life.
We have argued in detail how this account of authenticity undermines the dominant trends in modern moral philosophy, and so a theory of ethics that avoids these trappings will have to be in some respect “radical” as opposed to “routine,” to use terms introduced by David Solomon as a way of distinguishing various positions within recent thought on the significance of the virtues to ethical theory. Roughly, Solomon calls those positions “routine” that tend to accept the central aims, categories and methods of modern ethical theory and find a way of fitting the virtues into that system; “radical” virtue theorists, on the other hand (among whom he names MacIntyre, Anscombe, Geach, and to some extent Hursthouse and Foot) will reject the supposition that the recovery of a broadly classical mode of thinking about ethical life represents simply a modification or improvement of a largely continuous and healthy project of articulating what it means to be moral.

We provided some indications of what a virtue account centered on the notion of authenticity might involve by focusing on a notion of practical wisdom, the wisdom displayed by the virtuous person, as the “call of conscience.” Essentially (and vaguely), it is the call to authentic existence amidst the pressures to play down or cover over the essential aspects of being-in-the-world. We also termed it as the call to “care” for being, where caring has the sense of not subjecting our own being as agents, as well as the being of the world of which we are a part, to the imposition of our own will to dominate, which might take the form of circumscribing our own lives or the world

(including other lives) under determinate conceptions and categories meant to make them manageable, knowable or otherwise practically and epistemologically secure.

Now besides being vague, this notion of practical wisdom as the call of conscience might seem quite removed from and even antithetical to the concerns that animate virtue ethics in at least two respects, and which may thus constitute reasons why a Heideggerian would avoid the language of the virtues or, conversely, why someone persuaded by the virtue approach might be reluctant to accept the Heideggerian analysis. First, the Heideggerian view might seem hopelessly negative, devoid of – or worse, denying the possibility of – any positive substantial content with regard to questions of the good in human life and living well. It seems that Heidegger was so concerned to distance his account of authenticity from anything that reeks of metaphysics or anthropocentric humanism that he leaves us quite puzzled as to how we should go on. What does it mean to care for Being or, to bring the question closer to ethics, for beings, particularly given the fact that we’ve supposedly ruled out as inadequate (or inauthentic) many of the answers proposed to these sorts of questions in the history of Western thought and culture?

Second, there are concerns about the place of the notion of a virtue itself within this account. Whatever else a virtue is, it is a state of character. And whatever else a state of character is, it is some kind of embodied disposition to think, feel and act in certain ways in response to the circumstances. Moreover, according to a classical conception accepted by most contemporary virtue theory, a virtue is a disposition to
respond rightly, where rightness is determined in some way with respect to logos, that is, some property or standard that is not dependent on any particular person or culture’s projection. Given this minimal conception of the virtues, the Heideggerian might worry that the notion of a state of character – particularly one which is fixed and reliable, as the classical conception maintains – might conflict with the notion that the call of conscience is to in some sense take ownership of one’s life, to take a stand or choose for oneself, as an essential aspect of being-in-the-world that is constantly presenting itself. That is, how do we reconcile the notion of a “state of character” with the projective dimension of authenticity, particularly with the idea that our life is a continuous project rather than an attempt to establish some definite character traits that are then to determine the way we live? The worry might be that the notion of a fixed state of character that determines our manner of being sidles too closely to a conception of human life in terms of present-at-hand properties like the ones we critiqued in chapter 2. But from the other perspective – that of the virtue ethicists – the concern might be that these notions of reliable and fixed dispositions to think, feel and act well, something we clearly admire in people, can find no articulation in Heidegger’s account, and thus the “virtuous” agent will be inconsistent, too focused on some sort of idiosyncratic self-discovery or self-expression and the like, and thus not worthy of admiration.

An added worry related to the previous is the thought that the notion of the virtues cannot escape a presumption of something akin to an Aristotelian metaphysics, whether a metaphysical biology, a fixed social or cosmic hierarchy, or the like. From the
Heideggerian perspective this would be too intertwined with the kinds of reification of social norms that characterizes das Man, and which we have opposed to authentic life; it has also been the focus of a more general critique of the Aristotelian view in the age of the mechanization of natural science, the exposure, emerging in the 19th century, of these metaphysical claims as modes of entrenching and reinforcing power structures, and the growth of historical consciousness and cross-cultural awareness. We can note, for instance, the ways in which the notion of the good life, and the virtues thought to be necessary for it, have taken radically different forms across time and human culture, a fact that both proponents and critics of something resembling an ethics of virtue have pointed out. The virtues of the Homeric hero differ radically from those of Aristotle’s adult male (Athenian) citizen, both of which are incompatible in many respects with those of the Roman citizen, the medieval Christian, the Enlightenment bourgeois, the Marxist proletariat, the Muslim jihadist, and on and on. Part of the Heideggerian project might be understood precisely as opposing any such determinations of the human essence and/or telos, at least in so far as they lay claim to objectivity with respect to the content of that determination. Yet can we make sense of the notion of a virtue without some kind of determinate content to the notion of the good life? Depending on our

171 MacIntyre’s After Virtue, among many other of his works, has been exemplary as an account of the virtues that traces their historical and cultural forms and development. Charles Taylor’s Sources of the Self has likewise offered a similar historical and culturally-sensitive narrative, albeit his focuses on the concepts of self and identity that, he argues, make essential reference to conceptions of the good life, and so has much in common in certain respect with a virtue-based account like MacIntyre’s. We will be discussing Taylor’s view in much greater detail in the pages that follow. An interesting recent consideration of the significance of historically- and culturally-bound conceptions of the good life and their relation to conceptions of the virtues which is sympathetic to, yet critical of the aims of virtue ethics can be found in Raymond Geuss’ “Virtue and the Good Life” from his collection of essays, Outside Ethics (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 78-96.
perspective, we might take this question to be a point in favor of rejecting either the Aristotelian project or the Heideggerian one.

Worries like these that, I argue, call for an account of authenticity that emphasizes its hermeneutical character, particularly the ways in which identity, character, and practical understanding are shaped in truth-oriented dialogue as we articulated in chapters 4 and 5. As we will see below, this permits us to make an important distinction between a conception of the virtues that is answerable to the particular substantive views of the good life that may have received their articulation in determinate metaphysical terms, and one that is answerable to an existential analysis of human Dasein that calls the idea of a metaphysical determination as such into question. Neither one, so we shall argue, is sufficient for an adequate conception of the virtues, but each must dialectically engage with the other.

To begin to explain, we initially saw how Heidegger describes the call of conscience as a “rejoinder to the heritage.” That it would have to in some way be a response to the various conceptions that we have inherited from history and culture, rather than a radical rejection\textsuperscript{172} or heroic self-creation, follows from the need to respect our thrownness as integral to authenticity. Moreover, it is the notion of making a rejoinder to the heritage that we attempted to elucidate in our exposition of

\textsuperscript{172} See the discussion in section 2.7, where I argued that even radicals must retain much of their inheritance for their lives to continue to be intelligible, given the depths at which our self-understandings are shaped by the languages and modes of interaction that have their sources in the heritage. Where someone is “radical” might have to do with prominent practices, valuations, beliefs, etc., but for them to even be able to articulate what it is they are reacting to and what kind of alternative they are embracing they have to assume much more than they are rejecting from those modes of life.
Gadamer’s thought. By way of a brief sketch of how we can answer the worries raised above, the content of our practical conception of how to live will always already be “there” in the understandings inherited from our heritage or tradition: we are always already practically engaged in a world of significance, structured by in-order-to relations that refer to an identity or stand that we take on the being of ourselves and the world. We can then say that the notion of a “character” refers to this practical comportment that is oriented towards significances already present in the world of which we are a part. The kind of view that takes “character” to be some fixed and unchanging present-at-hand property is itself a kind of comportment, albeit a self-defeating one. Thus, the existential notion of character is more primordial than the one that generated the worries raised above.

Moreover, as Gadamer sought to show through his rehabilitation of the notion of a prejudice as favoring a content, rather than, say, a person or institution – a content that is both practically effective and continually being worked out – we can maintain that the account of authenticity is not meant to provide the content of our practical knowledge as such but rather to frame the way in which we are to appropriately respond to what is already there. And so included in the notion of a character is not simply the particular comportment and prejudices we already have with their substantive practical content, but the kind of stance we take toward that content itself. The question of authenticity has to do with whether it respects our existential constitution which, along with finitude and temporality, involves what Charles Taylor has called “webs of interlocution.” We must see ourselves as constantly shaping our
self-understandings and our understandings of how to live in dialogue with the heritage (including history, tradition, culture, and intimate relationships among other things).

6.2 Taylor’s Hermeneutics of the Good

Mentioning Taylor provides a way of addressing in a deeper way the worries we raised about the virtues, for he is someone whose thought, as the reader familiar with his work will no doubt have noticed, has much in common with the lines we have pursued throughout this dissertation; and yet he has for the most part curiously avoided the sort of language that explicitly refers to “virtue” or “the virtues” in discussing ethics. Taylor’s approach to questions of the self, of our moral relations to others in both institutional, political and everyday practice, to religious and cultural critique and study, and many other issues on which he has provided invaluable contributions, is a thoroughgoing hermeneutical approach, at least in the sense we have defended.

Maintaining that our understandings of self, society and the human good are intertwined with each other and rest on background (and largely unarticulated or unrecognized) ontological and epistemological presuppositions, Taylor takes for granted all and none of these. That is to say, he falls in neither with those whom he whimsically calls the “knockers” – those who tend to see modernity in nothing but critical terms – and the “boosters,” who tend to be too uncritical of modernity and the notion that it represents an unambiguous “advancement” over earlier forms of thought and life.173 If

there is one presupposition that seems to guide his thought, it is the presupposition that
the ideals, conceptions, and driving commitments that characterize much of modern
thought and practice are mostly legitimate but somewhat confused. And at the very
least, he is much more enthusiastic about the prospect of rehabilitating them than he is
about merely criticizing them, though with a healthy recognition of the difficulty, and
perhaps unrealizability of the goal of achieving coherence and commensurability among
them and with those characteristic of pre- and post-modern thought.

His approach is thus to consider what kinds of judgments we in our present
historical situation tend to make about human life and action (including judgments that
are often in conflict with each other), and inquire as to the kinds of ideals, conceptions
and commitments that underlie these judgments. These in turn presuppose certain
kinds of ontological pictures of the self, the world and the relation between the two
which may or may not confirm the ideals, etc., and the judgments based on them.
Moreover, all of these dimensions of our situated practical lives emerge from and evolve
within historical movements, the investigation into which may likewise reveal
dimensions and possible conflicts within our judgments and ideals that otherwise
remain hidden. In almost all cases, such investigations reveal the need to clarify, refine,
and revise our presuppositions about who we are and what kinds of life are worthwhile.
This process is what he terms “articulation,” and not only is the lack of articulation a
great source of the apathy and discord in our modern world, no way through these
problems is possible without the kind of hermeneutical dialogue with the modern
heritage that he attempts to jointly explain, defend, and practice.
Without being able to go into too much detail, Taylor homes in on the modern forms of the demand for recognition and respect for dignity, showing how they take a form in modern Western society which gives a salient place to freedom and self control, places a high priority on avoiding suffering, and sees productive activity and family life as central to our well-being. And as his historical analysis demonstrates, these forms are indeed peculiarly modern, representing a significant departure from premodern ways of understanding which had their sources in relatively more determinate and shared horizons, at least at the level of specific communities and cultures. These horizons included interwoven conceptions of pre-given social roles, a cosmic hierarchy (the “Great Chain of Being,” for instance), and a conception of community as oriented towards a common good in which all members are interdependent, but in which some, in virtue of their special contribution to this common good, are thus are deserving of special honor.

According to the narrative he presents, modernity gradually transformed the horizons of the West while in certain respects retaining some of the elements of the pre-modern concern with social roles, cosmic hierarchy and an ethic of honor and desert.\textsuperscript{174} The advancement of post-Galilean natural science (which was at the same time a rejection of Aristotelian science) brought the notion of the cosmic hierarchy into doubt; the emphasis on creativity, freedom and self-expression, among other factors,

\textsuperscript{174} MacIntyre’s discussion of Jane Austen and especially Ben Franklin elucidates examples of the retention of elements of a pre-modern conception of the virtues within a framework well underway within modernist challenges to it. See After Virtue chapter 14.
contributed to the prioritizing of self-definition over social role; and the rise of a conception of the intrinsic equality of persons led to the displacement of an honor ethic with one rooted in the notion of dignity. All of this fed into the modern ideal of authenticity, considered in its broadest sense.

It also fed the growth towards what he considers, in agreement with many critics of modernity (including some of those propounding a virtue-based ethic), distortive and often pernicious meta-construals of human agency and practical reasoning. Chief among these are the priority of disengaged rationality, the punctual view of the self, and atomism, which lead to the modern emphasis on proceduralism and/or instrumentalism that underlie the dominant Kantian-derived and consequentialist normative theories, respectively. In all-too-brief terms, disengaged rationality is the ideal of a rationality abstracted from substantive commitments, including views about what is a worthwhile human life, what kinds of goods and goals are intrinsically and incommensurably higher than others, and the like. The punctual view of the self is “the self is defined in abstraction from any constitutive concerns and hence from any identity...[whose] only constitutive property is self-awareness.” This generates a view of rationality as instrumental to achieving the purposes that I happen to have (even if those purposes can be reduced to ones that all humans happen to have). Finally, atomism is the conception of the self as inherently independent of any ties to community, a world of concern, historical connections, and special relationships (which might include

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175 Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, 49.
relationships to trans-worldly entities such as God). These all, of course, interrelate, and they often conflict depending on how one elaborates on and prioritizes each of these elements (as the debates between debates between Kantians and consequentialists illustrate). But his point is to show, as we have tried to show as well (though not always in these terms), that, first, most of the modern forms of moral theory (like the dominant modern cultural ethos) presuppose some variation of each of these elements – disengagement, punctuality, and atomism; and second, that these are, or rest upon, discreditable ontological presuppositions.

We have recounted Taylor’s way of drawing the connection between problematic ontological presuppositions and certain peculiarly modern ideals. Notable among these ideals are freedom, dignity, and (again, in a more general sense than the one we’ve been articulating) authenticity. However, we said before that he wants to avoid associating with the “knockers” of modernity, which would include those who take this repudiation of the ontological presuppositions to be a repudiation of the corresponding ideals themselves. This raises a question: if we reject disengaged rationality, punctualism and atomism, what becomes of the ideals of freedom, dignity and authenticity, which seem, in the thought of some, to be co-conspirators?

This is where, I think, the rewards of Taylor’s hermeneutical approach to ethical thinking become most apparent. The hermeneutical approach, as we argued in the previous chapters, begins from the way we actually, in this particular historical context, engage in ethical deliberation. Taylor maintains (and I would agree with him) that the
fact of the matter for us contemporary citizens of a modern Western culture is that we hold to some modern forms of the ideals of freedom, dignity, and authenticity in such a way that they constitute inescapable elements of our conception of the meaningful, and by extension the ethical life. That is, we cannot conceive of a practically relevant mode of ethical thought that does not at least begin by taking these ideals as constituents of what he calls “strong evaluation” – evaluation in terms of “hypergoods,” viz., those that are incommensurably higher than other kinds of good, which is itself a core constituent of Aristotelian thought. As he himself puts it:

We have to give these ideals a run for their money. And the need to try is made the more urgent by the fact that for many of us in the ‘Aristotelian’ camp, some facets at least of the ideal of modern freedom have great appeal. Indeed, one might suspect that there is virtually no one in the modern age who is not committed to some or other of its facets. Can one build an identity in the modern world which has not to some extent been shaped by this understanding of freedom?...What can/should be rescued of the moral vision which spawned the distortive meta-ethic?176

The “distortive meta-ethic” he refers to in the context of this quote is specifically the fact/value distinction (which we discussed and critiqued in chapter 3), but it is safe to assume it includes any meta-ethic based in disengaged rationality, punctuality/instrumentalism, and atomism. His worry is that when we (legitimately) reject this construal of practical agency, we are led to suppose that we must reject those ideals which are commonly and historically justified on their basis. And doing so would

have the cost of attempting to deny, or at least bracket, so much of what is integral to
moral life and reflection as we in fact engage in it.

The mistake common to the “boosters” and the “knockers,” as I understand him,
is to suppose that moral thinking can be ideally disengaged from the good or goods that
are the object of strong evaluation among those within our webs of interlocution. The
boosters tend to suppose we can do this by means of a certain kind of procedure that
functions independently of what our conceptions of the good happen to be, or by
reducing all goods to some uniform and empirically quantifiable “Procrustean bed” such
as happiness. The “knockers” might aspire to disengage us not from the relevance of
irreducible and incommensurably higher goods or the notion of higher forms of life as
such, just those that have arisen and dominated in modernity, and attempt to reclaim a
pre-modern form of ethical thinking that accounts these modern goods as irrelevant or
unimportant.

Now one of the arguments typically made in defense of the latter sort of
ambition is that the modern ideals are hopelessly flawed in that they are based in
unsustainable and self-contradictory notions of human ontology and agency. This can
be demonstrated by showing how they presume just that which they seek to deny,
namely the recognition of incommensurably higher goods that place demands on us
regardless of our desires, interests, and the like. On this point not only is Taylor in full
agreement, making this kind of argument has been one of his chief concerns throughout
his work. The exercise of unencumbered rationality, the respect for the dignity of each
person, the priority of happiness, and other such notions have to be implicitly presumed
as not only indicating what we as humans do strive for and enact in our thought and
practice, but ought to strive for in the strong sense of overriding or subsuming other
ends, desires and valuations, regardless of whether we recognize them as such. So a
meta-ethical that seeks to deny the inescapable significance of substantive and irreducible
notions of the good life is phenomenologically false, given certain forms of moral
thought that we cannot help using.

In other words, he argues that we are all more “Aristotelian” than modern
philosophers, and indeed many forms of modern culture, care to admit. Where Taylor
parts ways with the “knockers” of modernity is on the question of whether the modern
ideals inherently involve the self-contradictory denial of higher goods and the promotion
of disengaged reason, punctuality and atomism. Is it the case, that is, that enframing
ethical thought in a way that promotes the modern ideals necessarily entangles us in
incoherence? Taylor thinks not. What’s essential is that doing so lead us to increased
articulation and clarity about ourselves and the higher goods that define our sense of
what is worthwhile, what is to be promoted or avoided in individual and collective life,
and so forth, rather than distorting these features as modern moral thinking has tended
to do.

That we cannot escape according a central place to hypergoods in practical
reasoning is an example of what Taylor calls a transcendental argument, one that
identifies certain modes of human life and self-conceptions as inescapable for us. In other words, if the articulation of the way we in fact engage practically in the world discloses such inescapable features, this must then figure back into more substantive accounts of ourselves as moral agents as well as into particular judgments and decisions.

I would maintain, and I think Taylor does as well, that Heidegger's account of finite temporality describes just such inescapable or “transcendental” features. Thus, if we define authenticity as a way of life that respects and fulfills our being, conceived in these terms, authenticity has the status of a “transcendental good.” A transcendental good would be distinguished from what we shall call an “immanent good,” namely, a good that is internal to particular historical and contingent practices and traditions. Immanent goods, as we are defining them, refer to, in my terms, “optional” modes of life. Among the latter are what we would in an everyday sense consider practices and traditions – religions, cultures, vocations, associations, athletic and artistic activities, etc. We call them “optional” not because their value, the hypothetical truth of their commitments, and so on are merely relative to preference and opinion, but because one can opt out of any of them without necessarily doing violence to oneself as a human being at a fundamental level. Those that are inescapable are not optional in this

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177 The following account relies heavily on Taylor's piece, “The Validity of Transcendental Arguments,” in Philosophical Arguments (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 20-33. The term transcendental could also be rendered as ontological if we seek to adhere more closely to Heideggerian terminology. I have opted for transcendental in order to adhere to Taylor's terminology, as well as to avoid having to explain what Heidegger means by ontological in relation to the way this term is often applied in contemporary analytic metaphysics.
way: the represent some common feature or features of human life shared by everyone regardless of where we find ourselves relative to the optional modes.

One important point to be made here before returning to the question of the virtues is that the inescapable features and their transcendental goods cannot by themselves provide a sufficient or even intelligible grasp of how to live (pace certain modern proceduralist moral and political theories); they need to be concretized, given form and substance at the local level of the various optional modes of life, for their full meaning to be manifest. This is due to a feature of human life that Taylor, Heidegger, Gadamer, and radical virtue ethicists agree is itself inescapable: normative enquiry begins and ends with, and can never by fully disengaged from, human life as it is actually lived. We will have more to say about this claim in section 6.6.

Having laid out some of the ideas we will be drawing from Taylor as well as some of our own terms that expand upon them, we can now ask what this means for an ethics of virtue in the context of our problematic. One way of approaching this question is by asking why Taylor himself (to say nothing of Heidegger and Gadamer178) seems largely

178 I was once given an anecdote in which the person relating the story had asked Gadamer directly (during a question/answer session following a talk of his) whether there are “hermeneutical virtues.” Gadamer responded, rather vehemently, that his was not any kind of a virtue account. It is not unreasonable to suppose that Gadamer associated the notion of a “virtue account” most strongly with a kind of ultra-conservative neo-Aristotelianism advocated by a coterie of German philosophers in the mid-to late-20th century (clear representatives of the “knockers” of modernity that Taylor refers to), rather than those who have been at the forefront of the virtue ethics revival in late 20th century analytic philosophy, with whom he likely, with the exception of Alasdair MacIntyre, had little familiarity. In a review of After Virtue (“Ethos und Ethik (MacIntyre u. a.),” in Gesammelte Werke 3: 350-374 [Tübingen: Mohr, 1987]), Gadamer expresses a generally positive reception of MacIntyre’s argument, his reservations mainly pertaining to the extent to which MacIntyre seems to rely on an Aristotelian metaphysic in his account of the virtues. It is doubtful, however, that MacIntyre’s argument would, from Gadamer’s own perspective, account for such a strongly negative response to the query about an association between
uninterested or reluctant to ascribe a central place to the language of the virtues in his discussions. Indeed, when he directly addresses virtue ethics as a rival to proceduralism, consequentialism, and other forms of modern moral theory, most notably in an essay engaging MacIntyre’s After Virtue, he declares that he prefers to speak of an ethic “whose most basic concept is the good” rather than an ethic of virtue, though he thinks that this essentially “amounts to the same distinction.” Making “the place of the good” rather than the place of the virtues the central issue in confronting these theories promises, he seems to suggest, a more fruitful engagement with modern moral thought and the kinds of ideals that drive it, the kind that forges a path between the boosters and knockers. He does not directly explain the reasons for this preference or why he might think it holds such a promise, but we shall explore two related possibilities.

The first has to do with the problem of inarticulacy mentioned earlier. While he would agree that the language of the virtues is one of those aspects of our moral discourse we cannot do without, or at least not without debilitating reduction and misrepresentation, that language only has its place within a broader substantive account of practical reason, one whose most basic concept is the good life. Unless we make the good itself the basic concept of an account of practical reasoning, notions like hermeneutics and virtue ethics. Perhaps the following suggestions about Taylor’s reluctance to invoke the language of the virtues might explain this reaction by Gadamer as well.


180 Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, 55.
the virtues too easily end up being hijacked by proceduralism. This is manifested when the virtues are described ultimately in terms of what he calls “preserving qualities”\textsuperscript{181}—qualities that have the effect of reliably ensuring that the independently-defined moral or rational procedures are followed. According to this conception—characteristic of the kind of “routine” virtue ethics we referred to earlier—the virtues are not necessary for these procedures to either be defined or followed; rather, they facilitate their enactment. Accordingly, whatever we countenance as “higher” or “more worthwhile” forms of life are so only derivatively from some more basic notion of the external end to which that form of life is to serve.

What these accounts fail to appreciate, as I understand Taylor to be arguing, is the way in which their articulations of the procedures necessary for sound moral judgment, in reference to which the “higher” or “virtuous” form of life is to be defined, surreptitiously rely on a notion of what a higher form of life must be. That is, they presume a notion of the good life (a life exercising free rational agency, a life of happiness, a healthy family or community life, etc.), and try to whittle out of it some independent conception of the end that such a life pursues. This end is then supposed to enable us to identify and justify that which it presumed in the first place—the kind of life needed to achieve that end. Put differently, they presume to define the higher form of life in terms of a de facto end neutral with respect to the good, such as the exercise of

\textsuperscript{181} Charles Taylor, ”Justice After Virtue,” 24. I am slightly modifying his notion of preserving qualities to fit the contours of the present discussion by removing the language of the good conceived in substantive terms, but I do not suspect he would object to my application of this term.
rational agency or an empirically discernable end that we all happen to share, while having surreptitiously singled out that end as the realization or display of what they already presume to be a higher form of life or hypergood.

We can briefly clarify this argument by examining the disputes among those who locate the end differently. Person A might claim that the virtues are those traits that enable the exercise and promotion of free, rational agency, in which alone the dignity of humanity consists; B might argue that all humans in fact pursue happiness or the satisfaction of their preferences, and the virtues are those qualities that enable them to promote the optimal realization of these states of affair through their actions; while C might maintain that as natural creatures we are given to care for and sustain those with whom we have special ties, such as family and community, and the virtues are those qualities by which we do so most reliably and effectively. In each case, the ends propounded by each will often conflict with the others. A, B, and C might try to establish their claim against the others by appealing to some de facto, universal feature of human life, such as our rationality, our pursuit of happiness or our immersion in families and communities. But who would deny that either of them is wrong, strictly speaking? Of course we are creatures with the capacity to reason about what to do, who think that happiness is desirable (ceteris paribus, at least), and recognize the importance of family and community. The question, then, becomes one of ranking and ordering these goods, determining which take precedence over the others in cases of conflict. This is where, Taylor argues, no amount of appeal to de facto ends or features of human life can suffice. Here we must instead appeal to some notion of hypergoods,
some conception of a *form* of life that is *incommensurably* higher that the others such as
to enable us to judge that, say, happiness attained by violating cannons of rationality, or
the sacrificing of one’s family’s well-being for the sake of the anonymous public would
be a mistake. Once we embark in these directions, however, we are appealing to what
we already take to be higher forms of life, not simply ends in themselves.

Accordingly, we might express Taylor’s favoring of an ethic whose most basic
concept is the good over one whose most basic concept is the virtues in the following
way. The notion of “the good” (or “the good life”), if it is to serve as a basic concept,
must be a strongly evaluative notion. That is, it cannot be subsumed under a non-
evaluative concept such as the conditions of rational agency or the *de facto* ends of
human life, due to the fact that any legitimate place these latter concepts have depends
upon their relation to a more basic conception of the good life. The notion of the
virtues, on the other hand, does not enjoy such a status. Even if one were to offer an
account of the virtues as constitutive of the good life (as many if not most radical virtue
ethicists do), this does not preclude offering an account of the virtues as instrumental to
proceduralist ends. Since the concept of the good life necessarily runs afoul of
proceduralist articulations, while the concept of the virtues does not, the problem of
inarticulacy as such – which we characterized above as having its roots in the
presumption of a proceduralist meta-ethic – seems best resolved by taking the concept
of the good, rather than that of the virtues, as basic.
A second possible reason for Taylor’s avoidance of virtue-centered ethical language relates more directly to the distinction between immanent and transcendental goods that we set out earlier, and accordingly brings us back to the notion of authenticity as a transcendental good. Transcendental goods, we recall, pertain to inescapable features of human life as such, while immanent goods are internal to particular contingent and optional modes of human life, such as practices and traditions. The thought motivating Taylor’s preference (as well as the reluctance of Heidegger and Gadamer to invoke the language of the virtues) might be that the language of the virtues depends upon, or at least is only at its most coherent and meaningful within, the context of established practices and traditions internal to which is a determinate conception of the good. We can add to that the worry that such a conception of the good and its attendant virtues, taken by itself, tends to neglect the finite projective dimension of authenticity, or in other words, the fact that any conception of human nature and the human good is necessarily indeterminate and incomplete. Our understandings of ourselves and of the good, according to a hermeneutical account, is always interpretive, requiring the application of any previous understanding to the exigencies of the concrete situation, which then modifies the original understanding as we indicated before. Thus, there is no “final interpretation,” and so no solidified conception of the good of the kind needed to provide a robust account of the virtues. This is a transcendental condition, and one that, it might be thought, too easily gives way to reification and dogmatization of some particular, contingent conception of the good when the language of the virtues is centrally invoked. So to maintain the
interpretive openness required both for self-critique and for authenticity, it is better to focus our discourse on a notion of the good whose interpretive character can be manifest and sustained. Or so it may be supposed.

6.3 Why We Still Need the Virtues

To be clear, the foregoing was merely a speculative explanation for a curious divergence between Taylor and those radical virtue theorists with whom he otherwise holds much in common, not an argument Taylor ever makes. Assuming its plausibility, however, our response will consist of two parts. The first part will be to argue that, while it is true that any account of the virtues depends on a corresponding substantive conception of the good, any conception and articulation of the good, at both the immanent and transcendental level, requires us to attend equiprimordially to our notions of a virtuous life. Second, using the virtues of courage and temperance as examples, we shall show that it is possible to discourse about virtues corresponding to the transcendental good of authenticity, and that this can and must dialectically inform and constrain articulations of the virtues at the immanent level of particular practices and traditions. This will serve to exhibit the possibility of critique and revision of one’s horizons that is neither viciously circular nor based on the presumption of an absolute, disengaged standpoint.

The first response appeals to Taylor’s own argument that we explicated a moment ago: moral theories that seek to define a higher form of life in reference to a de facto universal end or standard of rationality surreptitiously rely on a notion of what a
higher form of life must be. If this is the case, then articulation about the conception of
the hypergood(s) that implicitly motivate these accounts would have to be an
articulation about the form of life that they surreptitiously espouse as higher.

Moreover, if we are to adequately articulate what we implicitly recognize as a higher
form of life, then we are appealing to something in the family of character traits, habits,
dispositions, ways of thinking, typical affective responses, and other such features of a
life that, by definition, have the character of established patterns of behavior: we must
appeal to a conception of the virtues, in other words.

To put it differently, suppose that we, like Taylor, seek to articulate and refine
what we in our modern society implicitly recognize as hypergoods that trump other
ends, particularly in a context in which the notion of hypergoods is somewhat
anathema. These (typically unacknowledged, ex hypothesi) background understandings
of hypergoods manifest themselves not so much in terms of an espousal of a good but
in our attitude toward certain kinds of patterns of behavior, such as respect for persons
regardless of contingent characteristics, a certain degree of self-ownership and the
capacity to sometimes go against the norm, the refusal to attempt to impose one’s will
and viewpoint upon others, and so forth.\(^{182}\) Our implicit acknowledgment of “hyper-
virtues” (if we may coin a term) points to both the inescapable presence of hypergoods
in our practical reasoning as well as the substantial form of the hypergoods themselves.

Therefore, a hermeneutical ethic of the sort to which Taylor aspires – one whose

\(^{182}\) We should add that it is not particular instances of these behaviors that we admire so much as
lives that embody them, which is why it is not a stretch to speak of these things as modern virtues.
starting point is always the received understandings of what it means to live well, however confused they may be, and whose aim is an increased articulation, refinement, and justification of these understandings – must appeal at a fundamental level to the conceptions of the forms of life that we acknowledge as having a superior value in themselves (rather than as preserving qualities). Omitting or deemphasizing the language of the virtues would thus debilitate the project of hermeneutical articulation as Taylor himself conceives it.

The second challenge supposed that the language of the virtues relies on a determinate conception of the good of the sort that would conflict with the transcendental notion of authenticity, a notion that contains within itself a fundamental open-endedness with respect to any concretization of the conception of the good. We claimed that we can, on the contrary, articulate virtues associated with authenticity, and that this articulation can and must dialectically inform and constrain the articulation of immanent virtues. We shall exhibit this with respect to two classical virtues, courage and temperance, as well as a modern virtue not on the classical list, namely open-mindedness.

6.4 Transcendental Courage

Courage is often cited as a virtue closely connected with Heidegger’s analysis, if only implicitly; and it is given different emphases depending on how we articulate the closely related notion of resoluteness in the face of human finitude, a condition of authenticity. On the one hand, it takes courage to resist the social pressures and
temptations to deny the limits and tenuousness of any particular conception of the
good, and indeed any particular conception of the immanent virtues. *Das Man*, as
Heidegger reminds us, perceives finitude as a threat, and responds by trying to “flee”
from or suppress this fact. The basic idea, to recall, is that our identities inescapably
bear a strong relation to the various traditions and practices of which we are a part,
whether by upbringing or by choice. The extent to which the constituent beliefs, norms,
and ideals are secure is the extent to which our own identities as individuals are secure.
Correspondingly, threats to these features of the social milieu are threats to our own
identities. Just as the soldier on the battlefield would be naturally inclined to preserve
his or her own security, we are existentially inclined to preserve our identity as we have
been given to understand it, and this often takes the form of tendencies to reify and
dogmatize social solidarities. However, just as the soldier is called to subsume and even
sacrifice his or her individual security in service to a commitment to a greater good, so
we are often enjoined by our commitment to authenticity to potentially challenge the
established beliefs, norms, and ideals. Accordingly, the courage of the soldier has its
existential analogue in the courage of the person who aspires to authenticity.

In both cases, moreover, one of the distinguishing marks of courage (as opposed
to, say, steadfastness or endurance) has to do with the uncertainty that one’s exhibition
of courage will have any payoff. There is no guarantee that the resolve to confront the
challenges that finite temporality, questionability, and the like bring to the established
and reassuring sources of meaning will issue in anything but some kind of loss,
alienation, or even wretchedness, resonating with Aristotle’s discomfort at the idea that
some, like the person on the rack, cannot be called happy no matter how virtuous. But it is the mark of courage in the traditional sense that the person is not only undaunted by the immediate threats to the pursuit of the good, but by the threat that one’s courageous efforts will be thwarted. So it is, I maintain, with the kind of authentic or transcendental courage I have proposed.

This articulation of transcendental courage has, so far, emphasized the existentialist dimension of Heideggerian authenticity. However, the finite temporality that constitutes our being – the being that the authentic (i.e., eudaimon) person strives to respect and fulfill – demands resoluteness not just in the face of pressures to adhere to established norms, standards and beliefs, but pressures toward the opposite extreme of associating authenticity with the disavowal of anything based in authority, tradition, or convention. In other words, courage must also involve the call to care.

Care, as we explained previously, formally indicates the concern and solicitude we exhibit towards our environment (in both the existential and natural senses), towards other Daseins, towards the heritage – in short, towards all of those aspects of our own being and ultimately towards Being itself. Without trying to rehearse here the ways in which we tried to clarify this cryptic idea, we can focus on the fact that we are not solipsistic entities; rather, we are thrown into webs of significances that include human relationships, an understanding of the world of artifacts and nature, a sense of one’s place in an unfolding history, as well as a sense of the transcendent or divine that frames and structures these webs. Our identity is never merely our own, much less of
our own making, but is handed over to us and is always projected from and back into this broader world. In chapter 4 we tried to bring out the especially dialogical character of this thrown projection, and for dialogue to be authentic it must allow the world to “speak” to us, to make a claim on us that can challenge our preconceptions and prejudices.

This, indeed, requires its own kind of courage. There is a certain kind of ideal of self-mastery or self-control motivating the first, more existentialist vision of authenticity; but this ideal runs the risk of concealing our dependency and thrownness, which is just as primordial an aspect of finitude as the projection- unto-death and the ultimate tenuousness of anything into which we are thrown and on which we depend. The struggle to engage in what Gadamer calls the “preservation” [Bewahrung] of the tradition can be just as daunting and demanding of courage, particularly in the face of the modern pressure (itself driven by the ideal of authenticity) to be “original.” The hermeneutical account recognizes that we as practical agents are always already shaped by such factors, and that we have to maintain ourselves within a dialogical relationship with the heritage if we hope to achieve authentic clarity on our practical understandings. Aristotelian courage, as we know, is the mean between cowardice and something like rashness, the inability or unwillingness to respect and value what is worth preserving in the face of a temptation arising from overzealousness. Similarly, the illegitimate conflation of authority with tyranny, prejudice with thoughtlessness, and tradition with dogmatism underlies a hubristic urge to overemphasize the capacity for and coherence of original self-creation, determination through universal rational
principles, or naturalistic reduction, all of which are supposed to replace the authority of what has been handed down to us. Again, courage can manifest itself as resolute steadfastness that does not easily succumb to the threat to the potential validity of received understandings posed by the seductiveness of the (supposedly) novel or original.

The recognition of the thrown-projective character of human life discloses two dimensions of the authentic realization of this character – the call to self-ownership and the call to preserving care – each of which requires a kind of courage for its possibility, as we have tried to indicate. Moreover, this courage is transcendental in that it represents a kind of stand that one must take with respect to whatever particular features of immanent practical life we face. How to reconcile these two dimensions is a difficult task, of course. However, we pointed out above the way in which it mirrors quite well the Aristotelian task of finding the mean between cowardice and rashness for the soldier on the battlefield, a task that requires not the application of a rational procedure but the concrete practical wisdom of the phronimos. This kind of phronesis, moreover, discloses the meanings, significances and goods that underlie the courageous person’s recognition of what courage demands; and it’s the very understanding of such meanings, significances and goods that requires transcendental courage if it is to be authentic.

This is important in two ways. First, an account of courage (and by extension, virtue in general) that elucidates its transcendental dimension as well as the immanent
can help us clarify the classical doctrine of the mean, locating its necessity in the finite temporality of human life as such. Moreover, if we suppose that immanent courage – the courage of the soldier, for instance – must be accompanied by the kind of transcendental courage that enables an authentic understanding of the kinds of meanings, significances and goods that informs phronesis, we are closer to grasping how it is that a conception of the virtues is not that of the perpetuation of ideologies and other such accusations that has framed the problematic of this dissertation. The “courage” to persevere in the defense of pernicious social practices or institutions, for instance, or the “courage” to be “independent” of authority and tradition and so forth, need not be accounted genuine courage at all if it lacks the kind of authentic character described above. In short, the transcendental virtue of courage – the courage of the authentic person – involves a certain relationship to the kinds of understandings that underlie the conception and practice of virtue that obtains at the immanent level, one that thus informs and constrains the kind of activity that can accounted genuinely virtuous.

6.5 Transcendental Temperance

A discussion of the virtue of temperance\textsuperscript{183} can perhaps provide a more concrete illustration of what we mean. It might seem to be the one virtue in the classical set that

\textsuperscript{183} This term might appear too loaded with negative connotations for our purposes, given that, like the term “virtue” itself, it carries associations with certain kinds of repressive, often sexist, views, usually about sexual purity, chastity, and the like. A possible alternative might be “moderation.” One problem with that term, however, is that it doesn’t distinguish this particular virtue very clearly from others, particularly if we adhere to the Aristotelian view that virtues lie in a mean and thus will always be characterized by “moderation.” Moreover, it is crucial to the following discussion that the strong
is most at home within localized frameworks, since the activities most often associated
with this virtue, paradigmatically sex and eating, have been especially integral to the
social norms that define and distinguish cultures and religions. Indeed, it is hard to think
of any subject matter that is more ubiquitous throughout human history in terms of its
central normative significance to the practical self-conceptions of cultures and religions,
and yet so particularized in terms of the actual norms and practices that exemplify
temperance in any given social framework.

Yet there are reasons to think that temperance as a virtue need not remain the
sort of topic that can only be the subject of dialogue at the level of cultures, traditions,
practices, families, and other local, particularized and “optional” forms of life. The first
reason draws upon ontic considerations, rather than ontological ones of the sort we
referred to in the discussion of courage; thus we will not claim that, according to this
first argument, temperance is as such necessary for authenticity (we will venture such
an argument shortly). Rather, we will suggest first that the ubiquity of concern over this
domain, and the fact that such concern seems to be inherent to the way that humans
have consistently embodied their normative commitments and practice, we bracket,
ignore, or compartmentalize such concerns to the detriment of the possibility of fruitful
ethical discourse.

association of this virtue with eating and sex be manifest and maintained, and it seems that “temperance”
maintains this association better than other terms. Given that “virtue” has managed to shed its more
repressive associations due to the serious attention and care its articulation has received in recent
decades, one might hope that a similar articulation of a term like “temperance” might overcome such
repressive associations as well.
Speaking anthropologically, when it comes to how traditions and cultures embody, in regulative norms and codes as well as in unformulated background understandings, the conceptions they have of what a good human life is and how it relates to transcendent ideals or entities (God or gods, the cosmic order, rational self-determination, maximal pleasure or desire-satisfaction, etc.), the activities of sex and eating have enjoyed a nearly universal (as far as we know) status of irreducible significance. Even proud libertines like de Sade or the purveyors of self-consciously gluttonous fare that have recently been gaining attention\(^{184}\) acknowledge by their (self-ascribed) heroic circumventing of established norms of temperance the fact that this subject matters. Some writers have recently drawn our attention to the shift over the past 50 years or so from a cultural ethos that could be characterized by public indifference to the issue of what and how people eat but stringent and publically reproachable sexual norms, to one in which these value priorities have been reversed.\(^{185}\) Nowadays someone can be judged, and even publically sanctioned, by their attitude and practices with respect to eating meat or organic or locally-sourced foods, subscribing to the latest dieting fad, etc., while at the same time it is becoming much less common or acceptable to judge people on their sexual activities. In other words, where sex was once seen much more as a matter of public scrutiny and interest and

\(^{184}\) A notable example is the “Heart Attack Grill.” This is an eating establishment in my home state of Arizona that serves 8000 calorie burgers, fries cooked in pure lard, unfiltered cigarettes, and other such, in the words of its founder, “nutritional pornography.” The waitresses dress as nurses, the food items have names like “bypass burgers” and “flatliner fries,” people over 350lbs can eat free, and so forth, further indicating the express intent of circumventing eating norms.

eating a matter of private choice, contemporary Western culture has effectively reversed these conceptions, particularly among the more educated and/or wealthier echelons of society. This indicates that even while we in the post-secular West (and increasingly elsewhere) may not explicitly acknowledge a conjunction between sexual and gastronomic practices and our deepest sense of meaning and identity, and despite explicit movements towards the privatization of choice in such matters, the fact that the diminution of significance of one of these activities can lead to the increased significance of the other suggests that the significance of this domain in general to our cultural ethos is not something that can be easily sloughed off.186

So, rectitude of thought and behavior with regard to matters of sex and eating has been, and continues to be, an irreducible good in all human cultures. If this is true, then we must recognize that the virtue of temperance – the entrenchment of such rectitude in individual lives – has likewise been of central importance to the shared self-understandings of cultures. To relegate it to a matter of personal opinion or choice is to undermine this significance, diminishing what has characteristically played a vital role in the maintaining of ties to culture and the natural world and in orienting the relation

186 It’s worth noting that even the American Philosophical Association, for all its professed neutrality on the questions that divide professional philosophers, has recently deemed that an explicit stance on questions of sexual ethics (in this case homosexuality) is in order by enacting a policy whereby institutions that prohibit same-gender sexual activity by their faculty are formally censured. I’m not interested in pronouncing on whether or not this is the right policy, but rather in drawing attention to the fact that even among those who diverge wildly on theoretical commitments, and recognize more than any others (perhaps) the relation between substantive judgments and theoretical commitments, this substantive issue is considered significant enough to warrant a decisive judgment that speaks for the whole of the philosophical community. No proposal regarding the eating habits of faculty members is forthcoming as far as I know, though if Eberstadt is right about the cultural shifts we may see something like that in years to come.
between natural and bodily appetites and the objects of their fulfillment with respect to higher purposes than mere satisfaction. The universality of temperance as a central virtue points to the plausibility that it relates to a transcendental, that is, inescapable feature of human life and the human good.

But can we say anything more about this virtue at the transcendental level other than that we should take it seriously? This is especially pertinent for the kind of Heideggerian framework we have been proposing, given that the ethic of authenticity has tended to maintain a close association between sexual and dietary norms on the one hand, and stultifying, dogmatic, and dominating modes of the pressure towards social conformism or the maintenance of repressive power structures on the other. If these norms have traditionally had such a powerful capacity to undermine the possibilities of self-choosing, not least through the mechanisms of (everyday) guilt and shame and the conditioning of one’s sense of self-worth and dignity on whether one adheres to them, then it might seem, and has often been put forward, that the virtue of temperance is almost an anti-virtue from the perspective of the ideal of authenticity; indeed, taking this virtue seriously might seem to mean throwing off its power to dominate one’s sense of the authentic, owned life.

Nevertheless, there are ways in which the conditions and structure of authenticity disclose features of a transcendental articulation of a virtue of temperance. To sketch such an articulation, we would first call attention to the way in which being-in-the-world contrasts with a subjectivistic conception of practical agency, the sort
grounded in the meta-construals of disengaged rationality, the punctual view of the self, and atomism that we referenced above. Accordingly, we can describe how certain kinds of sexual and gastronomic attitudes and activities, particularly those that either instrumentalize or aestheticize this domain, fail to respect the non-instrumental and non-aesthetic significance of this dimension of our own lives as well as the beings impacted through these practices. The Heideggerian conception of the person (the kind that authenticity respects and fulfills) is not simply an isolated locus of needs, desires, and evaluative projections the satisfaction of which determines, de facto or de jure, our actions. By the same token, the entities that constitute my world are not “there” in such a way as to be put at the service of this satisfaction: “standing reserve” [Bestand] as Heidegger puts it at one place. Against a kind of Platonic duality between the body with its needs, desires and appetites, and the mind or rationality as their governor, Heidegger – and to a greater extent certain of his descendents like Merleau-Ponty and Taylor – hold that we are primordially embodied begins. This is to say that bodily comportment, including the way I eat and engage in sexual activity, expresses an identity and comportment just as much as what I believe, think and say. To put it differently, human life, by virtue of its embodiment, always operates with an implicit understanding of the significance of the body and its relation to the entities within its world, an understanding that precedes and can never be fully circumscribed under the kinds of conceptual abstractions involved in notions like the subject/object and

fact/value dichotomies. But these are just the sorts of notions that are presumed by instrumentalist and aestheticizing approaches toward bodily activities such as sex and eating.

It is not that there is no sense to these notions; rather, the problem comes when we take these abstractions as basic modes of being, and thus as justifications for, say, considering the significance of the body, other people, or the natural world merely in terms of their relation to my own subjective desires and interests. Rather, our basic mode of being, according to the Heideggerian, fundamentally (that is, ontologically) involves care for our own (embodied) being, concern for the entities within-the-world, and solicitude toward the other Daseins with whom our own being is intertwined. This care is, authentically, of a character that is disclosive: it seeks to “let beings: be” rather than “lets beings: be valid,” which is to say it refuses to see our capacities for self-projection simply in the service of appetite-satisfaction, nor does it see the entities within-the-world this way.

To be authentic – to care authentically – thus requires at a minimum that our attitudes and activities with respect to bodily functions like sex and eating be oriented toward a respect for and disclosure of the fact that one’s own self and the being of those with whom one engages in sexual activity, on which one depends for sustenance, and the world as a whole have significance that is non-instrumental and not of one’s own projecting. This is, accordingly, an orientation that places demands on these
activities themselves. Moreover, this is simply another way of describing the formal conditions of what virtue ethics calls temperance: an orientation toward bodily activities articulates what we mean (or should mean) by a character trait, and the notion of an authentic orientation restates what we might otherwise call the possession of the character traits constitutive of a life of eudaimonia. Moreover, since we have been describing a kind of orientation that pertains to the fundamental structure of human life rather than some particularized concretization of it, this is an articulation of temperance as a transcendental virtue.

One illustration of authentic temperance that we can briefly discuss at the level of a transcendental conception of the virtues involves eating, and particularly the way in which the dominant modes of food production and consumption in the West (and increasingly elsewhere) utterly fail to express an authentic orientation toward the beings within the world of my concern. It has been well-documented, and recently popularized through a series of prominent books and media, that the modern agriculture industry has wreaked tremendous violence – literally as well as figuratively – on the sources of our food for thoroughly instrumental reasons aimed at satisfying

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188 In this respect, there is a suggestion of the Kantian notion of respecting persons as ends-in-themselves, and certainly something like this would follow from the concept of solicitude as I explain in chapter 3. However, to be the object of this kind of non-instrumental respect, in our account, does not depend on the capacity for rational self-determination or other features of Dasein, but rather on the rejection of an essential distinction between the world as “raw materials” and the rationality that sets purposes and uses that material for their achievement.

consumer demand for food that is as cheap and plentiful as possible and that maximizes
the return to the corporate producers. The genetic modification of crops and animals,
the use (or at least overuse) of hormones, antibiotics, pesticides and fertilizers, the
maltreatment of workers, the abuse of animals, the environmental degradation, and
numerous other atrocities strike most of us (or would if we knew the full extent of
them) as vile and abhorrent. According to the immanent commitments and conceptions
of many if not most local traditions, this would be unacceptable in itself. But what I am
concerned to point out here is the way that a transcendental conception of temperance
speaks not only against these practices but embodies a call to authentic care on the part
of the individual which would in most cases preclude the support of such practices as far
as possible. For when we recognize the driving mechanisms behind such practices – a
demand to cheaply and conveniently satisfy superficial gastronomic desires at whatever
cost – we see that they not only embody a perspective on animals, plants, workers and
the environment which reduces their being to that of an instrument for our purposes;
they also embody an inauthentic perspective of ourselves as eaters. The activity of food
consumption loses its significance as integrated into a broader system of relationships
to the modes of production, the environment, and other people whose well being is at
stake, and becomes entirely oriented around punctual desires and aesthetic interests.
Or, if the activity does ostensibly maintain this broader significance, it can only do so
through the maintenance of ignorance about what transpires beyond the supermarket
or restaurant. Therefore, the ideal of living in such a way that our activities with respect
to eating embody authentic care – that is, display temperance – seems to demand that we take a stand against such practices.

Although much more would need to be said to elaborate and defend this claim, my aim, to repeat, has been to indicate how the virtues can and should be a central focus of discussion within the frame of an authenticity-based ethical hermeneutics, one that recognizes transcendental goods. As we emphasized above, however, an articulation of transcendental virtues is not complete without application within the framework of particular contexts. Thus, the ideal of authentic care with respect to eating would have to be concretized within particular contexts that may call for a different kind of local temperance than others. In some contexts, temperance may involve the eschewing of meat or animal products altogether. The philosopher Matthew Halteman, for instance, has argued that the Christian eschatological hope in the “Peaceable Kingdom” – the notion of the fulfillment of salvation in which there is no more death – inherent in most forms of Christian belief calls the practitioner to a mode of life that anticipates this hope by refusing to engage in practices (like eating meat) that inherently involve killing.190 On the other hand, it could be maintained that certain local cultures and ways of life are inextricably bound up with the raising and/or consumption of meat, in which case the practice of temperance may not involve eschewing it but caring that its production and consumption is carried out in a humane, sustainable, and edifying way, a way that is not merely in service to the kinds of instrumental and

190 Matthew Halteman, Living Toward the Peaceable Kingdom: Compassionate Eating as Care of Creation (Washington, DC: Humane Society of the United States Animals and Religion, 2008).
aesthetic purposes that easily follow from inauthentic presumptions about the relation between the self and the world. Further still, there has been a popularization of movements toward “slow food” – an attempt to retrieve practices related to the preparation and consumption of food that prioritize the goods of the culinary arts and the communal meal – and “local food,” in which one’s eating habits are seen as integral to the sustaining of one’s local economy and pastoral traditions.

Each of these examples can be understood as responding to modernity’s trend toward individualizing, privatizing, and aestheticizing of the domain of eating. The view of transcendental temperance we have been articulating locates such modernist trends within an inauthentic vision of human life, one that fails to account for and respect certain inescapable features of human life. By contrast, the examples of contemporary forms of immanent temperance given above exhibit (albeit in idealized form) an implicit recognition that to be human is to be an embodied being, to project an identity in one’s bodily comportment and practices, and to care about the entities within one’s world through which one’s projection is manifest. These are elements of what we have been calling transcendental temperance. Considered in this light, such local understandings of temperance – the forms of life that embody particular immanent values, narrative visions, and traditions – enjoy a kind of justification beyond the contingencies of time and place, and likewise a kind that would be denied to those that fail to exhibit what we have defended as transcendental structures of authentic human life.
6.6 Transcendence, Immanence, and the Fusion of Horizons

Some potential confusions and objections need to be addressed at this point. We have been exploring the possibility of a space of discourse about the virtues that is transcendental, viz., it does not presuppose any of the substantive understandings of the person, nature and the cosmos, society, and the good that are internal to particular practices and traditions (“optional” forms of life). But these sorts of understandings are those that have characteristically been taken to be indispensible to any adequate and coherent practical understanding of the virtues – both the capacity to articulate and to exhibit the kinds of character traits necessary for a good life – by the kind of virtue theory that we seek to defend. To put the matter another way, the kind of discourse about the virtues and the good that characterizes the forms of life we have called “optional” must presuppose certain internal and shared understandings of the person, etc., as we argued in the foregoing chapters; yet we have been maintaining here that they all implicitly presuppose certain features of human life with reference to which we can articulate virtues (such as courage and temperance) that are constitutive of the kind of life that respects and fulfills what it is to be human from a transcendental perspective (one that abstracts from particularized views of the person, etc.). At this juncture it is important to make a clarificatory point to avoid an apparent paradox. This paradox would seem to arise from the fact that we have been claiming, in short, that the immanent background understandings are indispensible for an understanding of the virtues, and yet we can have an understanding of the virtues that does not depend on them.
The apparent paradox is resolved when we recognize that any discourse about the virtues that attempts to be either wholly transcendental or wholly immanent will be insufficient and incomplete, and that is due to what we have followed people like Heidegger, Gadamer, and Taylor in defending as the hermeneutical character of practical understanding in general. The transcendental understanding of the virtues begins with an understanding of what is involved in the concrete experiences of human life that, for example, calls for a certain kind of practical wisdom with respect to our responses to what is threatening and with respect to our embodied lives, in the cases of courage and temperance, respectively. Such experiences disclose in a more general or abstract way the kind of practical orientation characteristic of an authentic life. But that in itself cannot generate concrete, substantive norms about how to live if, as we have maintained, the horizons that lay behind practical understanding can never be made explicit in their entirety. Rather, following the model we laid out in chapter 4, it has its effect by revising and reorienting the immanent understandings foregrounded by the experience.

In other words, one of the features of human life as such, as we have argued, is that we can never extricate ourselves from the project of developing an understanding of self, the world, and how to live within concrete social frameworks. And so any articulation of the virtues at a level that transcends particular frameworks will be necessarily incomplete, requiring for its realization the particular substantive views of the good they involve. It does, however, constrain these particular substantive views with respect to, for instance, the kind of ontological picture of the self and the world
they presuppose and the nature of practical reasoning. In this respect the account of authenticity and its corresponding transcendental virtues resembles what I think is the most plausible understanding of Kant’s Categorical Imperative, which is best seen not as a decision procedure or a generator of maxims, but as constraining what of the maxims inherent in our historically-conditioned understanding can claim rational legitimacy.

However, in previous chapters we critiqued Kant’s account, along with the sorts advocated by Rawls and Habermas, as proceduralist theories of a sort that cannot sufficiently provide the transcendental means and justification for the critique of immanent horizons. In what way, then, does the account of authenticity and the transcendental virtues differ from such theories? How does it constrain and inform the understanding of the virtues and the good life at the level of concrete social practices and traditions without the supposition that transcendence is tantamount to disengagement from such conceptions of living well, as the proceduralist theories, at least according the interpretations we critiqued, want to maintain?

The answer is the following. A proceduralist theory seeks to articulate a general rule or principle that, when applied to concrete norms, can generate a universally valid judgment. The hermeneutical approach, by contrast, maintains that the transcendental perspective can never achieve the kind of completeness and self-sufficiency to issue an apodictic or absolute principle of this sort. Rather, the critical process involves the continual foregrounding of the various presuppositions underlying such norms (including the conceptions of hypergoods, the conceptions of human ontology, the
conceptions of a flourishing life, and various specifications of these more general conceptions), exposing them to the possible challenges that might arise not simply from an abstract account of the form of practical reason or of discourse, but also from the “voices” of history, tradition, other persons and the world itself. It is primarily through such open encounters, so the hermeneutical approach maintains, that prejudices are revised and sometimes transformed. And this is an encounter that we argued is dialogical in character, whereby a common language can be found. Now this means that the language with which we express the best account (to borrow Taylor’s term) of a concrete, particularized sense of living well will have to “fuse” with the language by which we express the best account of the authentic life as such, in the transcendental sense.

To explain further, if we recall chapter 4’s discussion of the movement of interpretation, we noted the way in which explicit interpretation begins when we are pulled up short by the text – when what it says strikes us in some way as unintelligible, provocative, problematic, unexpectedly right, and so forth. This reveals a discord between the prejudices with which we approach the text and what we find there in it, calling us into a process whereby the horizons of the interpreter and the text are revised with the aim of restoring a kind of mutual, harmonious understanding. We submit that this essentially characterizes the dialectic between local and transcendental virtues. We

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191 For an account of how such things as history, traditions, and the world can be described as having a “voice,” see Charles Taylor, “Heidegger, Language and Ecology,” in Philosophical Arguments (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 100-126.
might have an experience in which our prior understanding of what courage, or temperance, or some other virtue requires in the circumstance is inadequate, which draws out of the background the understanding of human life and its structures and purposes presumed by our prior understanding. We may then find that, for instance, our prior sense of courage was too closely tied with preserving the prevailing status quo, or perhaps we were too caught up in a spirit of progressiveness that we lacked the fortitude to exercise the kind of restraint that allows what is worth preserving in the tradition to have its force. But we cannot know what the transcendental virtue requires until it is allowed to have its effect, if only in reflection, on the richer array of local conceptions. That is, this moment of application – the confrontation with the immanent – concretizes in that moment the meaning of the transcendental virtue.

In this way the relation between the transcendental and immanent that we are identifying with Gadamer’s fusion of horizons is not an entailment relation whereby we can deduce the conception of one from the other, for each requires the other for its sense to be manifest. In the same way, then, it would be misleading to say that the transcendental conception has priority over the immanent, such that if they seem to come into conflict the former would take precedence over the latter. This would wrongly imply that we already have an adequate conception of what the virtues, considered from the transcendental standpoint of authenticity, would demand. Rather, cases of apparent conflict are experiences that occasion the foregrounding and reflection upon the prejudices regarding such things as human nature, the good life and what we admire in persons, and how we deliberate in light of the sorts of structures
opened up by the hermeneutical authenticity account; but lest we succumb too quickly to revisionist impulses, our sense of what the transcendental virtue involves must take account of the fact that certain of these prejudices may be intertwined with established local self-understandings as well as the complex realities of concrete social practices in a deep enough way that radical revisions would fail to allow what is valid in this prejudices to emerge. In short, the fusion of horizons has the character of a kind of mutual elucidation between the transcendental and immanent domains, which ideally displays itself in a kind of effortless, balanced practical understanding – the kind of “cultural expertise” we spoke of earlier.\(^{192}\)

Perhaps the most familiar and straightforward example of such a confrontation regards the virtue of temperance, given that, as we said before, the sense of virtue in this domain is so intrinsically tied to our deepest sense of self and our deepest commitments; and if upheavals in our sense of justice has marked major transitions at the political and institutional level, upheavals in our sense of propriety with respect to sexual and gastronomic norms has had just as profound effects on our social, cultural, religious and individual understandings and practices. Indeed, given the power that these norms have traditionally held over our sense of virtue, it is easy to see how readily

\(^{192}\) Taylor brings up this kind of dialectic with respect to justice, though sometimes, as we noted earlier, the transcendent conception of the good he refers to is not authenticity as such but rather a kind of Rawlsian account of distributive justice. Taylor argues that no such account of justice can be sufficient outside the classroom, for the lived, concrete practices to which such an account is supposed to inform include questions largely ignored or dismissed by much contemporary liberalism, notably questions of desert that were quite central to pre-modern understandings. This, he argues, doesn’t undermine either the classical or the liberal accounts; rather it suggests that they are asking different questions pertaining to transcendent versus immanent levels of enquiry.
they become the focus of the experiences that occasion hermeneutical reflection. We have a conception, let us suppose, of the sexually temperate woman which, when articulated, we find to be based perhaps on a presumption that the woman is the weaker sex and the man naturally dominant; or that the man is less able to restrain his passions, obliging the woman to a kind of modesty that keeps his arousals at bay; or based on a reading of sacred texts that takes insufficient account of context. We find such presumptions easily called into question by modern cultural, scientific, and hermeneutical shifts, which then occasions dialogical consideration of the background ontological presuppositions on which they and the challenging shifts rest.

And yet, the question of the relation between such a transcendental conception and the local remains an interesting one. Should a woman in a traditional Muslim culture wear the burkha, or a nun wear a habit? Should the priesthood be restricted to men, or celibate men? Should persons in same-gender relationships be allowed to marry, or be ordained into the priesthood, or serve in institutions that regard such relationships as transgressive? These questions – hotly debated in many segments of contemporary culture – have at times had their answers in ontic views of the nature of the sexes that have come under fire. But the transcendental conception of temperance to which we are drawn in the course of such questioning – a conception which is clearly gender-neutral, which eschews overtly naturalist determinations, which is non-instrumentalist, and which respects both the projective and thrown character of our understanding of sexual norms – does not in itself settle these questions, for the traditional positions may be capable of articulation in a way that respects the end of
authenticity and its modes. I am not suggesting all of the traditional positions can be (and I don’t think they all can, though I don’t have the space to elaborate); if they could that would undermine the whole thesis of this dissertation: that the contingent and historically-conditioned nature of our understanding of the virtues does not preclude the possibility of critique. Rather what I am proposing is that any such critique cannot be one-sided, which is to say it cannot rely on a transcendental account alone, but must involve a dialogue between an account of the structures of human life as such – offered by the account of authentic life – and the concretization of this account in particular forms that are always embedded in cultural, social, religious and other such, more or less defensible, commitments and conceptions.

6.7 Open-mindedness as a Hermeneutical Virtue

How this dialogue proceeds and what it entails we tried to exhibit in the previous chapters. I want to focus now on a virtue called forth by this feature of authentic life (though there are undoubtedly others), namely open-mindedness. This will be what we have been calling a transcendental virtue, as it pertains to the structure of authentic practical understanding as such and not simply to particular (e.g., modern Western) conceptions. Indeed as we shall soon try to show, it is not just a condition of authenticity: it is necessary if there is to be the kind of dialectical relation between immanent and transcendental virtues that enables critique and revision of our comprehensive practical understandings without the supposition of escape or disengagement.
In everyday talk, “open-mindedness” is often contrasted with strongly held views, functioning as a kind of placeholder for the counter-argument one fails to find. Thus if Jane believes X, and John believes Y where X and Y appear incommensurable, and John can offer no reasons why Jane should believe Y instead of X, John may accuse Jane of not being “open-minded” enough. What this suggests is that John takes Y as in some way self-evident, and if Jane fails to agree with him then she is subjected to prejudices that debilitate her capacity to “see” what is obviously the fact of the matter, or at least a valid take on it.

While we should reject this sentiment for the way that it displaces reasoned debate with personal opinion, there is a suggestion of what the virtue of open-mindedness involves considered from the standpoint of the finite, thrown-projective account of hermeneutical understanding. We have shown how this account precludes the possibility of final judgment, the sort of judgment that would require an impossible universal perspective. And so there is always the possibility that I may have an experience or provocation that calls forth and challenges the prejudices underlying my ethical perspective, enabling me to “see” a situation differently, as the everyday notion of open-mindedness indicates. We discussed in chapter 4 Gadamer’s notion of “experience” [Erfahrung] – the event of provocation that irrevocably transforms our horizons – which he borrowed from Hegel’s account of the dialectic while rejecting Hegel’s telos of universal consciousness. The experienced person, Gadamer argued, is “radically undogmatic,” which is to say that experience opens one up to the possibility of new experiences. This is not at all to say that the experienced person, the person of
practical wisdom, does not have firmly held views or seek to defend their truth. Rather, she is acutely aware not just of the open possibility of new ways of understanding, but of the fact that practical reason always involves application in the “Augenblick,” which requires sensitivity to the significance and demands of each unique situation. And this sensitivity can be weakened by an over-reliance on rules, methods, and established individual or collective convictions.

Therefore, we can best understand the virtue of open-mindedness as this sort of openness to new experiences that constitutes an essential element of hermeneutical practical reason. Moreover, the virtue of open-mindedness is more than a kind of “preserving quality” – one that enables its possessor to understand and attain the good. It is also constitutive of the good life as such, in as much as our identities are constituted in and through dialogue. And for dialogue to be genuine, as we argued in chapter 4, we have to maintain a stance towards the partner that permits what they have to say to penetrate. In this way, the virtue of open-mindedness is a necessary constituent of the authentically dialogical self.

6.8 Conclusion

To conclude, our aim in discussing the virtues of courage, temperance, and open-mindedness has been to exhibit, albeit briefly and in short detail, the kind of enquiry into to the virtues that can proceed on the basis of the account of hermeneutical authenticity we provided in the preceding chapters. Much more work needs to be done, of course, to fill out and justify the claims made, and other virtues considered; but
I hope enough has been said to motivate a continuation of this line of enquiry. On a broader level, we have tried to show how the ontological interpretation of human life that establishes the facts of historicity and contingency with respect to ethical understanding does not preclude, and in fact essentially involves a dimension of transcendence with respect to what we can say about what it means to live well captured in the notion of authenticity. And in focusing on this notion and its characteristics we can articulate a conception of the virtues that is not bound to any particular historical and contingent framework, and in fact elucidates the kind of understanding we have to have of ourselves as practical agents if those frameworks within which we are always embedded can be shaped in the direction that enables a better practical understanding of ethical demands.
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