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Being Wise Before Wisdom: The Historical Development of Phronēsis from Homer to Aristotle, and Its Consequences for Hans-Georg Gadamer's Hermeneutic Ethics

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BEING WISE BEFORE WISDOM:

THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF PHRONĒSIS FROM HOMER TO ARISTOTLE,
AND ITS CONSEQUENCES FOR HANS-GEORG GADAMER'S HERMENEUTIC ETHICS

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN PHILOSOPHY

BY

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CHICAGO, IL

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In August of 2008, just before starting grad school, I underwent emergency surgery at Loyola Chicago Hospital, which led to a diagnosis that required ongoing treatment. It also began a long fight with an insurance company (United Healthcare), which denied coverage of any of the associated costs. The insurance company won the fight, despite the advocacy work of my doctors, hospital administrators, and, especially, my mother. I filled out a form at Loyola Hospital asking for a reduction in the money I owed them. It was a last ditch effort, and I had begun brainstorming alternative careers before I had set foot in a classroom. One day a very nice woman at the hospital called to let me know that my request had been granted. I thanked her and asked her how much the bill would be now after the reduction. She told me that I didn't owe the hospital anything. The technical term she used was "forgiveness."

Many other people played key roles in, as Hilde Lindemann might call it, "holding me in my personhood" while I worked on my PhD, and they all deserve acknowledgement – but, in particular, I want to say thank you to Mom and Dad, Marco, Mike and Shannon, Andy and Jesse, and the whole community of friends I discovered here at Loyola Chicago. I don't know the name of that hospital administrator, but I am grateful to her and to the hospital for giving me a chance to keep studying philosophy, and for teaching me more about forgiveness. How does one know how to speak and act in a way that is what the Greeks would have called *kalon* – beautiful? Many puzzles arise when you try to answer that question, but I'm grateful to everyone named here for living in ways that constantly remind me that it is a question worth thinking about.

Of course, you could quite easily object that my whole philosophy is nothing but *phronēsis* – but, of course, it *is* nothing but *phronēsis*, and this continues to be the case.
– Hans-Georg Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	iii
LIST OF FIGURES	vii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
Overview	1
The Question: What is the Relationship between Ethics and Interpretation?	3
Chapter Outlines	5
CHAPTER TWO: CONCEPT AS TRADITION AND RESPONSIBILITY	9
History: Gadamer’s Methodological Commitment to a Certain “Begriffsgeschichte”	11
Experience and the “Conceptuality of the Concept”	32
Concluding with Dialogue: From Gadamer (Back) to Phronēsis	52
CHAPTER THREE: AN HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF PHRONĒSIS: PART ONE: THE PREHISTORY OF PHRONĒSIS	62
Introduction	62
Introduction to the Specific Historical Task	64
Homer	73
Hippocrates	83
Heraclitus	95
Conclusion and Transition: Phronēsis as an Historical Tradition	109
CHAPTER FOUR: AN HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF PHRONĒSIS: PART TWO: A TRADITION IN DIALOGUE: ARISTOTLE’S PHRONĒSIS BETWEEN PLATO AND ISOCRATES	113
Introduction	113
Overview of the Chapter	116
Part One: What is the Conversation in which Aristotle is Participating?	116
Part Two: Variations on a Theme: A Reinterpretation of Aristotle’s Analyses of Phronēsis in Book Six of the Nicomachean Ethics	133
Conclusion	191
CHAPTER FIVE: THE ETHICAL (RE)TURN OF HERMENEUTICS: PART ONE: THE HERMENEUTICAL PROBLEM OF APPLICATION	194
Introduction	194
The Fundamental Problem of Hermeneutics: Application	199
Two Problems with Application	211
Transition to Phronēsis: (Self-)Understanding on the Way to (Self-)Understanding	229
CHAPTER SIX: THE ETHICAL (RE)TURN OF HERMENEUTICS: PART TWO: GADAMER’S RETRIEVAL OF PHRONĒSIS	234

Introduction	234
Main Lines of Gadamer’s Retrieval of Phronēsis in Truth and Method	237
Phronēsis as Virtue: Gadamer after Heidegger, Ethics before Ontology	258
The Heir to Practical Philosophy? Hermeneutic Phronēsis after Truth and Method	266
Conclusion	277
CHAPTER SEVEN: CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY HERMENEUTICS	279
What has this dissertation done so far?	279
What still need to be done?	281
What is missing in Gadamer’s retrieval of Phronēsis?	284
Retrieving the Phrēn – the heart of understanding	289
BIBLIOGRAPHY	296
VITA	308

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. A Taxonomy of Phronein.	71
Figure 2. A Taxonomy of Phronein.	99
Figure 3. A Structural Overview of <i>TM</i> , Chapter Four.	204

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Overview

This dissertation is concerned with the intersection between ethics and the interpretation of texts. That is to say, with the extent to which the act of interpretation can be and ought to be understood as a matter of ethics, and, conversely, with the extent to which ethics can be and ought to be understood as a matter of hermeneutics. It has not always been the case that ethics and hermeneutics (the art of interpretation) were considered possible philosophical bedfellows – the contemporary view that their intersection comprises an important site for philosophical inquiry has only recently been made possible largely via the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer in the second half of the 20th century. Although the intersection of ethics and hermeneutics is no longer dominated merely by Gadamer’s philosophy, his work remains a philosophical touchstone for those who wish to trace out other, critically different views on the matter.

This dissertation provides a thorough critical reconstruction and hermeneutical evaluation of Gadamer’s oft-repeated, yet under-explored, claim that the process of interpretation requires *phronēsis* (practical wisdom).¹ I argue not only *that* this claim is the unique conceptual centerpiece of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, already attested to in the epigram above, but also for a particular view of how to understand Gadamer’s retrieval of the ancient Greek

¹ Although there have been many articles and chapters written on this topic, it is still noteworthy that presently there exists no book-length study on Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis*.

concept. In particular, I argue for a “strongly ethical” understanding of Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis*, and therewith I outline the conceptual basis for a “hermeneutic ethics.” Gadamer scholars have only recently begun to emphasize the ways in which Gadamer’s philosophy is primarily concerned with ethics, and not with mere epistemological or metaphysical problems, or with mere questions of historical interpretation of particular classical texts.²

My argument for this view of Gadamer’s hermeneutics is straightforward enough. It proceeds by working within Gadamer’s own framework in order to show the necessity of the view that I articulate of his retrieval of *phronēsis*. By taking Gadamer on his own philosophical terms – specifically, on his own terms regarding the nature of concepts and the relationship of language to history and tradition – I am able to show that the retrieval of *phronēsis* for hermeneutics must be understood in a strongly ethical sense, whether or not Gadamer himself fully explored or understood this. Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis* says more and entails more than he himself seems to have realized.

In particular, Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis*, according to his own hermeneutical presuppositions, is the retrieval not of an abstract concept, or of a clearly defined piece of terminology invented by Aristotle, but rather it is the retrieval of a whole great historical tradition of thinking about and wrestling with the phenomena named by that ancient Greek word. Gadamer’s claims about the nature of concepts and their relationship to history and tradition very clearly point in this direction. However, Gadamer does not appear to have fully grasped how those claim “apply” to his own retrieval of *phronēsis*. Therefore, by re-retrieving the concept of

² Two examples that emphasize an ethical reading of Gadamer’s work, and which I refer to occasionally in the dissertation, are the following: P. Christopher Smith, *Hermeneutics and Human Finitude*; and the recent book by Monica Villhauer, *Gadamer’s Ethics of Play: Hermeneutics and the Other*.

phronēsis in a “Gadamerian” manner, I am able to argue for a view of “hermeneutic ethics” that is deeply indebted to Gadamer, but which points in relatively unexplored or long forgotten directions, and toward new possibilities for thinking through the general relationship between ethics and the process of interpretation.

The Question: What is the Relationship between Ethics and Interpretation?

Since at least Schleiermacher it has become commonplace for modern hermeneuticists to affirm the unity of “understanding” and “interpretation,” and to reject the possibility that reading could ever be an interpretation-free activity for human beings.³ Put baldly, wherever and whenever reading occurs, it does so on the basis of some interpretive (not yet explicit) framework, “lens,” “tradition,” or hermeneutical apparatus, and so on. Thus the English word “reading” can today also mean “interpretation” - for example, when one says that another’s “reading” (i.e., their interpretation) of something was not very good.

However, what has been far less of a common concern, at least until very recently, is to consider the act of reading and interpretation as an ethical matter. I do not mean (1) that one’s interpretation of a text may have ethical consequences - for example, in the way a biblical text or political speech can be interpreted in such a way so as to seemingly countenance some unjust behavior or institution. Recognition of that kind of connection between interpretation and ethics

³ Thus for all their disagreements, both E.D. Hirsch in his *Validity in Interpretation* and Gadamer are in agreement about this particular unity, at least. For an historical overview of Schleiermacher’s role in affirming the unity of “understanding” and “interpretation,” see sections II.3.1.A.i-ii of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, titled “The prehistory of romantic hermeneutics,” and “Schleiermacher’s project of a universal hermeneutics.” I will refer to the structure of *Truth and Method* throughout the dissertation in this way, where, for example, “II.3.1.A.i-ii” refers to Part “II,” chapter “3,” section “1,” and subsections “A.i-ii.”

has been present at least since Plato, who criticized the traditional Greek *muthoi* for ethical reasons.⁴ Relatedly, neither do I mean (2) that there is a way of reading that up-builds or informs one's ethical character and behavior, such as reading for "edification." That insight has been so pervasive that it might well be said that "edifying" literature is at the very core of our Indo-European literary heritage.

As important as they are, neither of those two types of an intersection between reading and ethics comprise the focus of this dissertation. Rather, I mean that the interpretive act itself is one which may have an ethical dimension or basis to it. This would mean, among other things, that in the consideration of what constitutes a truly exemplary reader or interpreter, we would partially have to consider his or her ethical-interpretive virtues and vices in some form or another. Ubiquitous in the works of late ancient and medieval commentators and spiritual writers, for example, the idea that an appropriate understanding of a text could be, at least partially, dependent on one's character, may strike us today as utterly foreign, moralistic, and obviously incorrect. "Foreign," because it has generally not even been a topic of discussion in modern and contemporary philosophy until very recently; and "obviously incorrect," for the related reason that the act of interpretation has been viewed by modern philosophers merely as one particular epistemic problem with little connection to supposedly extra-epistemic matters such as one's ethical character. Finally, "moralistic," because one may fear that in beginning to ask about the intersection between ethics and the act of interpretation, we may be led into

⁴ It is worth noting that Plato is following a trend of criticism that can be seen already in the works of the tragedians, as well as lyric poets such as Pindar. Perhaps it would be better to view Plato, even at his most "radical," as a Greek philosopher who stands within the tradition of Greek "religion" (admittedly a complicated term to apply here), which seemingly from the start was a tradition alive with self-critique and re-innovation of its understanding of the gods and their behaviors.

erroneously speculating about the ethical character of another interpreter or scholar qua interpreter - an “ad hominem” attack if ever there was one. Nevertheless, the connection between reading and ethics is one which Hans-Georg Gadamer, by appealing to the concept of “*phronēsis*,” began to inquire into through his seminal work of 1960, *Truth and Method*; and it is that connection that I wish to probe more deeply. What I hope to offer at the end of the dissertation is a coherent and compelling account of a “hermeneutic ethics,” which can be viewed (1) as a natural extension of the concept of *phronēsis* from its Greek historical development, and which (2) avoids any of the worries just stated.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter One sets the philosophical stage by reconstructing Gadamer’s hermeneutic view about the nature of conceptuality, thereby explaining why and how *phronēsis* qua philosophical concept will be approached throughout the rest of the dissertation in the way that it is. In a certain respect, this chapter offers an account of the “methodology” of Gadamerian thinking, to the extent that there is one. The chapter begins by asking the question “what is a concept according to Gadamer?” and then proceeds by reconstructing what I take to be the unique hallmarks of Gadamer’s hermeneutic understanding of the concept. I organize these chief features under the three headings of “history,” “experience,” and “dialogue,” and give an account of their role in the formation and nature of conceptuality according to Gadamer’s work. Aside from accurately representing key features of Gadamer’s philosophy, the philosophical goal of this chapter is to show just what it means to speak of a philosophical concept as a “tradition” for which one may be responsible.

The next two chapters (Chapter Two and Chapter Three) then apply this hermeneutic understanding of conceptuality in a concrete historical direction, and introduce the topic of “*phronēsis*” explicitly. Over the course of this long historical exploration, I make a contribution to the intellectual history of the development of ancient Greek ethics by showing the historical background and intellectual contexts out of which Aristotle would eventually articulate his influential understanding of “*phronēsis*.” Chapter Two explores the earliest etymological and intellectual roots of “*phronēsis*” in three figures across three different domains: that is, Homer (poetry), Hippocrates (medicine), and Heraclitus (pre-Socratic philosophy). Chapter Three then shifts into the specifically Athenian intellectual climate of 5th/4th century BCE. In this chapter I first show how the concept of *phronēsis* provided an important site of contention (one among many to be sure) between the philosopher Plato and the rhetorician Isocrates. Second, I show how Aristotle’s own account of *phronēsis*, as put forward in *Nicomachean Ethics* VI, can be fruitfully interpreted and understood on the basis of this historical context. The result of this chapter shows concretely how Aristotle ought to be understood as both participant, inheritor, and (re-)founder of an intellectual tradition concerning *phronēsis*.

Chapter Four explicitly begins the process of tying together the work done in previous chapters with the main philosophical problematic of the dissertation - that is, the question of to what extent the interpretive act itself has an ethical component to it. Gadamer’s famous retrieval of *phronēsis* has been much discussed, both in its own right and, to some extent, in connection with Aristotle’s own analysis of the concept. However, having previously shown (in Chapter One) what it means to understand a concept as a kind of tradition - and, in the case of *phronesis* (in Chapter Two and Chapter Three), the basic outlines of the developing tradition as it occurred

from Homer to Aristotle - we are put in a much better philosophical position (in Chapter Four and Chapter Five) to understand and critically evaluate Gadamer's own retrieval of that tradition. Thus in chapters Four and Five, I articulate a view of Gadamer's retrieval of the concept of *phronēsis* for hermeneutics via a close re-reading of key sections of *Truth and Method*, as well through an engagement with several of his later writings, and by considering the status of Gadamer's "philosophical hermeneutics" in general.

In Chapter Four I analyze Gadamer's retrieval of *phronēsis* in *Truth and Method* by showing how it functions as an answer to a particular question or problem – namely, the so-called hermeneutical problem of "application" (*Anwendung*); a problem, which Gadamer refers to as the "fundamental problem of hermeneutics."⁵ According to Gadamer's view, understanding – insofar as it requires an act of "application" – is a kind of *praxis*, or the performance of a concrete act.⁶ Gadamer scholars have not always been clear enough about the complexity and difficulty of the concept of hermeneutic application, and I hope to make the retrieval of *phronēsis* more intelligible by first clarifying the nature of hermeneutic application and showing precisely why it necessitated Gadamer's turn to Aristotle. In Chapter Five, I explicitly offer a "strongly ethical" interpretation of Gadamer's retrieval of Aristotle, both in *Truth and Method*, and for his "philosophical hermeneutics" generally.⁷ Although the great majority of attention to Gadamer's retrieval of *phronēsis* has centered on *Truth and Method*, I

⁵ Cf. the sub-section title in *Truth and Method*, II.4.2.

⁶ Thus Gadamer speaks of "interpretation" as a "process" or "performance" (*Vollzug*).

⁷ This "ethical view" is opposed, for example, to the view that Gadamer's retrieval of *phronēsis* is merely metaphorical, or ought to be understood in merely Heideggerian terms – i.e., as an existential structure of *Dasein*.

hope to show why this focus on *Truth and Method* is insufficient, and, furthermore, why drawing from Gadamer's later writings in particular reveals his strong concern for a "hermeneutic ethics" grounded in the concept of *phronēsis*.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I begin to articulate one way in which Gadamer's work needs to be critically extended for an adequate hermeneutic ethics. Although Gadamer's retrieval of *phronēsis* opens up one basic way forward for thinking about the intersection of ethics and interpretation, the (missing) role of virtues of character and affectivity in relation to *phronēsis* haunt this retrieval. In this last chapter, then, I indicate, albeit only provisionally, the outlines of what I would call an "emotionally healthy hermeneutics" via a retrieval of the "*phrēn*" (heart) as relevant for a hermeneutic ethics grounded in "*phronēsis*."

CHAPTER TWO

CONCEPT AS TRADITION AND RESPONSIBILITY

“Whatever I say, it is not my word alone” – Plato, *Apology*, 20e

This dissertation comprises a series of hermeneutical studies on the concept of *phronēsis*. What a “concept” is, however, requires some clarification; and, specifically, what a concept is for a philosophical hermeneutics such as Gadamer’s. In other words, how does Gadamer understand the nature of a concept (*Begriff*), and what are the unique or defining features of a hermeneutically well-grounded conceptuality (*Begrifflichkeit*), on which our following studies on the concept of *phronēsis* will be based? Stated another way, the task of this first chapter is to clarify what it means to think (hermeneutically) in concepts, or perhaps even to clarify the way or “method” of hermeneutic thinking. The thinker of *Truth and Method*, we will see, was not without his method(s).

Although the real analysis and explanation will only be given throughout this chapter, it may be useful to state, in a general way, the most essential features of a hermeneutical account of a concept: namely, the essential roles played by (1) history, (2) experience, and (3) dialogue in the languages that support our philosophical thinking and the development of concepts. By highlighting these three unique, interrelated facets of Gadamer’s approach to the nature of concepts, this chapter will argue that concepts are best understood as dynamic hermeneutic *traditions*.

The structure of the chapter is as follows: I take “history, “experience,” and “dialogue” each in turn, detailing their function in a Gadamerian account of concept (re-)formation. For each, I will also briefly discuss some of the relevant historical context in which Gadamer’s thinking moved and developed. Providing at least a small glimpse into the historical background of Gadamer’s thinking about concepts has the benefit also of serving as one concrete example of how conceptual thinking necessarily develops in relation to history, experience, and dialogue. As an overview of the chapter, I offer the following schema (with the immediate historical-intellectual contexts in the parentheses). The most essential features of Gadamer’s understanding of the concept are:

1. History (*Begriffsgeschichte* vs. *Problemgeschichte*)
2. Experience (Phenomenology vs. *Characteristica Universalis*)
3. Dialogue (Question and Answer vs. *Weltanschauung*)

For the reader acquainted with the structure of Gadamer’s magnum opus *Truth and Method*, the structure of this chapter may seem rather familiar. The last sections of Part Two (II.4.3 A – C), which together fall under the heading “Analysis of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* [historically effected consciousness],” repeat the movement of thinking from *history* to *experience*, and culminating in *dialogue*.¹ Methodologically, then, this chapter is precisely as it should be: for the concept of “*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*,” which I will explain below,

¹ These sections of *Truth and Method* come just after the sections that retrieve Aristotle’s concept of *phronēsis* in order to discuss the “hermeneutical problem of application”: thus this dissertation in a way simply reverses this movement. This structure shows up again in the latter sections of Part Three of *Truth and Method* (i.e., III.5.2.C – 3.A) where the movement of thought proceeds from history and experience to dialogue.

is fundamental to Gadamer's hermeneutics, and so analyzing the nature of conceptuality on that basis is just what one should expect.²

The relevant literature for this chapter, aside from Gadamer's 1960 *Truth and Method*, is comprised of three late essays.³ The first is his 1992 programmatic piece on language, "Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language." The second and third are his two sorely neglected "Begriffsgeschichte" (History of Concepts) essays of 1969 and 1970: "Begriffsgeschichte als Philosophie," and "The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy."⁴

History: Gadamer's Methodological Commitment to a Certain "Begriffsgeschichte"

Setting the Historical Scene: the Emergence of an Historical Consciousness

In his 1887 work, *On the Genealogy of Morals (Moral)*, Nietzsche, speaking of concepts (*Begriffe*), declares that, "only that which has no history can be defined."⁵ His rhetorical flourish

² As Donatella Di Cesare puts it, "the concept of *effective history (Wirkungsgeschichte)* is the central point around which the theoretical part of *Truth and Method* turns. After he overcomes the instrumentalism of historical consciousness, Gadamer spends the rest of the book exploring the consequences for historical and linguistic experience that arise from the new consciousness of effective history" (*Gadamer. A Philosophical Portrait*, 93). Cesare does not, however, link the discussion of Gadamer's terminology to the matter of "Begriffsgeschichte" as I am here.

³ I am in no way claiming that these are the only texts that discuss the subject matter of this chapter, but such comprehensiveness would be both exhausting (for writer and reader alike) and unnecessary given the stated aim of telling the reader what understanding I myself have come to about the matter (*Sache*).

⁴ Aside from the works just listed, I will also draw on some of the following pieces of Gadamer's work: "Begriffsgeschichte als Philosophie"; "The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy"; "Die Philosophie und ihre Geschichte"; "Historik und Sprache" (in which Gadamer discusses with the Historian Reinhart Koselleck – the primary developer of "Begriffsgeschichte" after Gadamer); "Semantics and Hermeneutics"; and especially the late (1992), programmatic essay, "Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language."

⁵ Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*, II.13.

here works by exaggerating the tension between “history” and “definition” – an exaggeration symptomatic of the philosophical period in which an “historical consciousness” was emerging.⁶ Despite its exaggeration, the quote remains instructive nonetheless. There is indeed a fear that if our very words and concepts are themselves historical creatures “on the move,” then we cannot truly fix, stabilize, universalize, or objectively justify the philosophical claims that we make.⁷ If our concepts have their own historicity, then, so this anxious line of thinking goes, the universality of a concept’s meaning seems to be lost.⁸ Indeed, not just *philosophy*, but the act of *communication* itself seems then to be historically relativized by the influx of an historical awareness. Nietzsche showed something of this in his “genealogy” of the concepts (*Begriffe*) of good and evil (*Böse*), and today the debates surrounding the various problems of “incommensurability” (e.g., the incommensurability among competing natural-scientific paradigms) show that we are still grappling with the philosophical consequences of the last 200

⁶ By “historical consciousness” I refer to that, post-Hegelian period in which there arose an explicit awareness – on the part of philosophers, historians, theologians, philologists, etc. – of the effect of history and historical context on a past writer or thinker’s work. Slowly, over the course of the 19th and early 20th centuries, the consequences of this consciousness for *oneself* as present writer or thinker began to come into view (e.g., am I myself not also shaped by history and a historical context?). However, as we will see, it was Gadamer’s work that most clearly analyzed this situation.

⁷ This is just what Nietzsche declares in the passage from which the quote is taken: today (*heute*), it is impossible to say (*zu sagen*) why we “punish” (*strafen*).

⁸ In contemporary hermeneutic literature, the reaction to this kind of thinking has generated renewed attempts to fix the meaning of the hermeneutic object – e.g., to the author’s intention. Cf. E.D. Hirsch’s *Validity in Interpretation*. For a more recent, and highly nuanced, view about that status of authorial intent, and one which maintains some Gadamerian inspiration, see Pol Vandavelde’s *The Task of the Interpreter: Text, Meaning, and Negotiation*.

years.⁹ In this respect at least, we might do well to think less in terms of the “end” of modern philosophy, and rather of the “rise” of an historical consciousness, which knows very well the idiosyncrasies and differences between centuries, texts, cultures, and thinkers, and all too little of that which binds us together. Gadamer’s work is explicitly, self-consciously situated within this particular context. How then does his understanding of the concept and of conceptuality take shape in light of an historical consciousness?

Gadamer’s understanding of the concept is bound up with the development of German historiography at the turn of the 20th century, which, in part, sought to respond to the apparent problem of historical consciousness. In Part Two of Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*, the chapter titled “Historical Preparation” traces the various counteracting attempts made by late 19th century German historians and philosophers to develop a method (*Method*) that could serve as guarantor of historical objectivity. In this way, the claim of Nietzsche’s aphorism would lose its rhetorical force via the counterweight of an objectifying method, which would fix the meaning of terms despite their apparent historical plurality. In particular, the Neo-Kantian development of a “*Problemggeschichte*” (history of problems) and Wilhelm Dilthey’s *Critique of Historical Reason* – a title to be taken expressly in the Kantian sense of “critique” – functioned in this regard.¹⁰

With respect to a “history of problems” (*Problemggeschichte*), Gadamer notes that, “the

⁹ For a helpful hermeneutical discussion of the problem of “incommensurability,” see Chapter One of Richard Bernstein’s *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*.

¹⁰ In truth the German philosophers and historians were reacting not so much to Nietzsche as to Hegel’s philosophy of history, which is indeed the ground zero for Western philosophy’s historical turn. Moreover, it was Hegel’s 1827 *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte*, which provides the first instance – perhaps his coinage – of the word “*Begriffsgeschichte*.” Cf. G.W.F. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History* (trl. Leo Rauch), 9. With respect to Gadamer, one might say that his position, which we will articulate below, lies “between Nietzschean genealogy and Hegelian sublation.”

methodological claim [or hope] of the history of problems is striking. Once we establish the identity of those problems that extend throughout the history of philosophy as the perpetually recurring, fundamental questions of human thought, we then gain a firm foundation against the danger of foundering in historical relativism.”¹¹

Yet in *Truth and Method* Gadamer systematically shows how this very claim or hope of such historiographic methods founders in light of the insight into a historicity at work in even the most rigorous of methodologies.¹² Alasdair MacIntyre echoes Gadamer’s move here: “The teaching of method is nothing other than the teaching of a certain kind of history.”¹³ What then does this mean for Gadamer’s own work? Does Gadamer have no “method” for handling the historical element of concepts? Should we understand *Truth and Method* to be arguing *for* a kind of historical relativism about language? Indeed, Gadamer does not have a “method,” if this is taken to mean a procedure for controlling or neutralizing historical nuances, differences, and particularities. It must be acknowledged, for example, that the 5th century Athenian *polis* is not “the same” as the *nation-state* of 19th and 20th century European and American political philosophy – and so the “problems” raised in one context cannot simply be taken as identical to those raised in another.

¹¹ Gadamer will undercut this through the “critical” or “destructive” work of “*Begriffsgeschichte*,” through which one can call into question the universal “identity” of such “recurring problems” throughout history. Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, “The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy,” 1.

¹² I will not discuss here the details of Gadamer’s engagements with the Neo-Kantian historians here. For an overview, see Jean Grondin, “The Neo-Kantian Heritage in Gadamer,” in *Neo-Kantianism in Contemporary Philosophy*, 92-112.

¹³ Bernstein, 53. Bernstein cites the source as MacIntyre’s essay, “Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science,” but he specifies that the quote comes from the “original typescript.” I am unable to verify the location of the quote outside of Bernstein’s citations.

That said, Gadamer's "history of concepts" (*Begriffsgeschichte*) remains a kind of *methodos* or philosophical path of thinking, the implementation of which can be found at work throughout his writings. Gadamer's specific form of "*Begriffsgeschichte*" helps to correct our understanding of the role of history in our concepts, and shows how progress in thinking is still possible without denying the great role that differing historical contexts play in that thinking. What then exactly is Gadamer's understanding of "*Begriffsgeschichte*" (history of concepts)?

Gadamer's "Method": Between *Begriffsgeschichte* and *Problemgeschichte*

In the short paper "*Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity. Subject and Person,*" presented in 1975, Gadamer speaks explicitly of this "methodology":

Now, I have long followed the methodological principle (*den methodischen Grundsatz*) to undertake nothing without giving an account of **the history of a concept**. One must take into account the anticipations of our language (*der Vorgeiflichkeit unserer Sprache*) for our philosophizing by seeking clarity about the implications of the concepts with which philosophy is concerned.¹⁴

Perhaps such a claim would be surprising for those who suppose that Gadamer's work is "against" or "opposed" to the employment and necessity of scholarly "methods" in the *Geisteswissenschaften*.¹⁵ Indeed, one might be tempted to write off the comment above were it

¹⁴ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "*Subjektivität und Intersubjektivität. Subjekt und Person,*" 87-9. Boldface mine. The essay has been translated into English as "Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity," *Continental Philosophy Review*, vol. 33 n.3 (2000), pp. 275-287. The quote can be found on page 276. See also David Vessey's helpful paper which originally alerted me to Gadamer's remark here. David Vessey, "Gadamer's Interpretive Practice," presented at the 2014 *NASPH* meeting, can be found online at http://www.davevessey.com/Gadamer_interpretive_Practice.pdf.

¹⁵ Gadamer comments in the "Forward to the Second Edition" of *Truth and Method*: "I did not remotely intend to deny the necessity of methodical work within the human sciences..." The question is rather whether, for philosophy, there could be such a procedure that would remove the burden of actual thinking or guarantee "results" (*Ergebnisse*). And what does "results" mean for the human (or social) sciences? Cf. *Truth and Method*, xxvi.

not repeated very clearly and consistently throughout his works, e.g., in his 1960 *Truth and*

Method:

Key concepts and words which we still use acquired their special stamp [in the past], and if we are not to be swept along by language (*nicht von der Sprache trieben lassen will*), but strive for a reasoned historical self-understanding (*ein begründetes geschichtliches Selbstverständnis*), we must face a whole host of questions about verbal and conceptual history (*von Wort- und Begriffsgeschichte*).¹⁶

Or again in his 1977 autobiography, *Philosophical Apprenticeships*:

The history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) seems to me to be a precondition (*Vorbedingung*) for responsible critical philosophizing in our time, and it is only along the route of the history of words (*Wortgeschichte*) that the history of concepts can move forward.¹⁷

The autobiographical context of this last quotation concerns Gadamer's role, together with Joachim Ritter and Karlfried Gründer, in editing and contributing to the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, as well as the *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*.¹⁸ In fact, one of Gadamer's principal contributions to the discipline of history involves his association with "Begriffsgeschichte" as a form of historiography. However, that is not to say that Gadamer understood "Begriffsgeschichte" in the same way that historians, such as his student Reinhart Koselleck, did.¹⁹ As we will see, Gadamer expressly denies that it is best understood as a new,

¹⁶ Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke Band 1. Hermeneutik 1: Wahrheit und Methode*, 15.

¹⁷ Gadamer, *Philosophical Apprenticeships*, 148. The original German version, *Philosophische Lehrjahre. Eine Rückschau*, was published in 1977 by Vittorio Klostermann. Cf. *Philosophische Lehrjahre*, 183.

¹⁸ Gadamer took over the journal after its founder, Erich Rothacker, died. Gadamer was also active in founding and editing other journals, such as the *Philosophische Rundschau* (founded in 1953 with Helmut Kuhn), but these do not necessarily tie themselves to the issue of "Begriffsgeschichte."

¹⁹ István M. Fehér is thus right to say "what Gadamer calls 'conceptual history'...is in some sense his method," but what I am saying in this chapter is that the emphasis must be placed on the "what Gadamer

competing form of “historiography.”²⁰ Rather, Gadamer’s advocacy of “*Begriffsgeschichte*” – transformed, as we will see, by his difficult concept of “*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*” – is a *philosophical* position rooted in his (transformed) understanding of the nature of history and our philosophical or intellectual relation to the past. As we will see, Gadamer denies that an “historical consciousness” can ever actually engage its historical object (e.g., a past text) without itself being a participant in the very history that it seeks to “objectify.” This means that every engagement with the past, even where it seeks to let the past speak “on its own terms” – and indeed we must do our best to make that possible – is always already a re-appropriation or “application” of that past.²¹ The words we use today to translate the words of the long past are themselves words born from all the days in between that separate us from that past.²²

Is the historical past of philosophy “gone” or is it somehow still “with us?” If the Neo-Kantian approach of “*Problemgeschichte*” seemed to ground the past of philosophy in a timeless,

calls...” and not on “*Begriffsgeschichte*” as a term as such. Cf. István M. Fehér, “Love of Words - Love of Wisdom. Philology and Philosophy from a Hermeneutical Perspective,” 1. Today, for example, as one can see in journals like *Contributions to the History of Concepts* that although Koselleck and the English philosopher-historian Quentin Skinner shape the journal’s philosophical heritage, it is not clear how much of a real link remains to Gadamer’s position. For a discussion of the concept of “*Begriffsgeschichte*” as it pertains to historians and to the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, as well as (some of) Gadamer’s efforts in this area, see the following articles: Jan-Werner Müller, “On Conceptual History”; Melvin Richter, “*Begriffsgeschichte* and the History of Ideas”; and Melvin Richter, “Conceptual History (*Begriffsgeschichte*) and Political Theory.”

²⁰ “What the history of concepts as philosophy [*Begriffsgeschichte als Philosophie*] is concerned with, is not the history of philosophy [*Geschichte der Philosophie*].” We will have occasion to explore this comment below. Cf. Gadamer, “The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy,” 13.

²¹ I will discuss Gadamer’s concept of “application” (*Anwendung*) in Chapter Four in more detail.

²² One could wonder to what extent the general neglect of our late ancient and entire “medieval” philosophical history has contributed to a *present* misunderstanding of both ourselves as philosophers and our understanding of its Western origins in classical Athens.

a-historical grappling with “universal problems” (such as “the problem” of freedom or knowledge), the radical historicism of a history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) seemed, by contrast, all too ready to emphasize the profound “past-ness” of an historical work by articulating – often in staggeringly detailed scholarship – the vast differences of the contexts in which various philosophers lived and worked.²³ Gadamer is explicit about this competition between *Problem-* and *Begriffsgeschichte*: “in so far as the history of concepts [*Begriffsgeschichte*] seeks critically to overcome the naïve mirroring of oneself that we find in the hypostasizing of the “problem,” the impression may arise that the history of concepts involves a radicalization of historicism.”²⁴ Although Gadamer will deny the accuracy of this impression, we can gain a sense for how this wrong impression arises in the first place by offering the following example:

To treat the concept of “freedom” as a constant and universal “problem” of philosophy presupposes that we who inquire into this problem already have discovered and properly described a stable, determinate “object” (*Gegenstand*) for philosophical investigation – namely, a suprahistorical, universal concept of “freedom.”²⁵ However, a glance at the *history of the*

²³ The German “*Problemggeschichte*” approach found its English counterpart in Bertrand Russell’s *Philosophy and its Problems*, which R.G. Collingwood, the English counterpart to German “*Begriffsgeschichte*,” criticized heavily in his *Autobiography*. As a “reception history” it would be interesting to trace the subsequent influence – and lack of influence – which Collingwood and Russell had on English-speaking historians and philosophers respectively. Where exactly A.O. Lovejoy’s “history of ideas” fits in would likewise have to be taken into account in such a study. Cf., Elizabeth A Clark’s, *History, Theory, Text. Historicism and the Linguistic Turn*. See also, Chris Lawn, “Gadamer and the dialogue between philosophy and its history.”

²⁴ Gadamer, “The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy,” 2.

²⁵ Gadamer discusses this example in both his “*Begriffsgeschichte als Philosophie*” and “The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy.” The opening paragraphs of “*Begriffsgeschichte als Philosophie*” clearly echo Hegel’s introductory comments in the *Encyclopedia* concerning the problem of

concept of “freedom” calls into question the commensurability, let alone identity, of that concept across even a small sample of philosophical epochs. Is (1) the modern hunt for an uncaused cause (or “free choice”) in light of the apparent determinism of nature really the same (or commensurate) problem of freedom that is at issue when (2) a theologian speaks of the freedom of being “yoked” to Christ, or when (3) the Stoics and Epicureans speak of the “*eleutheria*” of a stable, unperturbed soul, or when (4) Plato has Socrates consider the, at once moral-ethical and social-political, difference between the “free citizen” (as member of a *polis*) and a slave or a “slavish” person, and so on?²⁶

Gadamer’s understanding of a “history of concepts,” however, is importantly different from either a “history of problems,” or a history of concepts qua mere radical historicism, which merely proliferates the (awareness of) historically different understandings of a concept. Rather, Gadamer’s advocacy for the work of radical historicism is only one, albeit necessary, “critical” moment within a larger philosophical whole: “the disintegration of the identity of the problem does not lead to the total instability of arbitrary opinions and dogmas, into which the history of philosophy would then dissolve. Rather, reflection on the history of concepts entails an intensified, critical consciousness of historical tradition, and the appropriation of the essential

the “beginning” of philosophy and of determining its true “*Gegenstand*.” Gadamer echoes this again at the beginning of his published lectures, *Der Anfang des Wissens*.

²⁶ To take a different example, one can think of the easy confusion that can occur when discussing Platonic “ideas” alongside Locke, and in a 21st century classroom of undergraduates who have their own conception of “idea” in play as well.

content of that tradition.”²⁷ The ongoing “appropriation of the essential content” of a tradition names, for Gadamer, the movement of conceptual thinking. In order to see how this works, we need to stress that at the heart of Gadamer’s own form of “*Begriffsgeschichte*” is his understanding of “*wirkungsgeschichte*” (effective history) and especially of “*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*” (historically effected consciousness). Thus to proceed further with our explanation of the role of history in concept (re-)formation, we need first to explain how Gadamer uses these two terms.

Wirkungsgeschichte and Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein

The term “effective history” or “historical effect” (*wirkungsgeschichtliches*) – traditionally understood as a reception history – when applied to a text, highlights the continuous impact (*Wirkung*) of that text throughout its various historical receptions by those who receive it from those who hand down (*überliefert, tradit, paradidōsi*) the text.²⁸ The meaning of Plato’s *Symposium*, for example, cannot be simply fixed or identified with its original historical context because, as a work (*ergon*), which continues to work (i.e., it is *wirklich*, and is in a state of *energeia*), we cannot study the *Symposium* merely as a “past” historical “object.” Plato’s *Symposium* is not “past” because it is still speaking somehow into today’s world – not in spite of, but because of the 2,000+ years of its being handed down. Strictly speaking, the *Symposium* is not “a book” but a *tradition* and an *effect* or *force* to be reckoned with. Gadamer is explicit here:

²⁷ Gadamer, “The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy,” 2. See also the quote from Gadamer’s autobiography given just above.

²⁸ The history of Plato’s *Symposium* includes, for example, its eventual contact with 18th and 19th English romanticism through Percy Bysshe Shelley’s translation of “*The Banquet*,” which Mary Shelley published in bowdlerized form in 1840.

the true “object” (*Gegenstand*) of hermeneutics is our linguistic (*sprachlich*) tradition (*Überlieferung*) – which is not and cannot become an actual “object” (*Objekt*) for us.²⁹

Likewise, the concepts and words that we today use to read, translate, understand or interpret Plato’s *Symposium* are first given to and transformed by us through our teachers, who in turn received and transformed them through their teachers, and so on.³⁰ The “hermeneutic situation” of the present forms the occasion for the further effect and working out of the past through its continual (re-)application or (re-)appropriation.

And yet mere awareness of “*Wirkungsgeschichte*” – qua a history of reception – is not what Gadamer means with the cumbersome phrase “*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*.” It is one thing to simply recognize *that* a text or concept that is handed down into varying historical contexts and varying hermeneutic situations is always read and understood differently throughout those contexts. But what is the nature of this “recognition”? For Gadamer it is the sudden recognition (*anagnōrisis*) that we too will approach those same texts or concepts differently through being historically and hermeneutically situated. Gadamer phrases this in

²⁹ See the section of *Truth and Method*, “Language as determination of the hermeneutic object” (III.5.1.A).

³⁰ Thus we are already beginning to have enough distance from the turn of the 20th century to be able to detect a clear difference in the concepts and language employed by W.D. Ross to interpret Plato and Aristotle from those in many circles today. Soon someone will have to write a piece of intellectual history concerning the revival of English language Aristotle scholarship from the late 19th century to the late 20th. We will need such a history when the interpretive concepts employed by those earlier scholars ceases to really be the language we speak any longer. Such a situation is already prefaced with emergence of new English translations of the Greek texts.

quasi-Hegelian language: there are philosophical consequences for an historical consciousness that “becomes aware of itself” *as* an historical consciousness.³¹

What then specifically is an “historically effected consciousness” (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*)?³² In speaking of an historical consciousness that has become aware of itself, Gadamer opens his section on “historically effected consciousness” in *Truth and Method* by critiquing the presumption that this “becoming aware of itself” entails, in the style of a *Reflexionsphilosophie*, any *rising above* the effect or impact of history. One might be tempted to think, in this vein, that once we recognize the force of history on our interpretations and translations of Plato or Aristotle or a sacred scripture, we must then search for a way to circumvent or deaden the force of that history in an effort to win back an objectively true interpretation or translation that would remain valid universally. However, what Gadamer means by saying that “understanding proves to be a kind of effect and knows itself as such,”³³ is that such *knowledge* is precisely the knowledge of one’s *limitations*, and the knowledge that one cannot control or master the effect of history as such:

We are not saying, then, that history of effect must be developed as a new independent discipline ancillary to the human sciences, but that we should learn to understand ourselves better and recognize that in all understanding, whether we are expressly aware

³¹ “Understanding proves to be a kind of effect and knows itself as such.” Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 336.

³² Gadamer says that “*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* is something other than inquiry into the history of a particular work’s effect – as it were, the trace a work leaves behind” – i.e., something other than reception history, although reception history is important precisely because it brings into focus the continuity of a text over time as an unfolding tradition. Cf. *TM*, 336.

³³ Gadamer, *TM*, 336.

of it or not, the efficacy of history is at work...even where faith in method leads one to deny one's own historicity.³⁴

This then is the first meaning of a historically effected consciousness: namely, to recognize our own limitations as a finite human consciousness that is what it is thanks to the tradition into which it (partially) awakens and (partially) re-forms.³⁵ *Gnōthi Seauton*.³⁶

The second meaning of “historically effected consciousness” concerns not primarily the *limits* of human understanding, but rather of what kind of understanding is indeed possible for finite humans and how it is so. Put baldly, human consciousness is historically limited in such a way that it is always already *involved* or *participating in* the history that it seeks to understand.³⁷ Gadamer summarizes this by describing the manner in which human understanding “belongs” (*zugehörig*) to that with which it is engaged – be it a text, artwork, etc. To take the same example as above, we have already seen how Plato's *Symposium* is not a fixed historical object wholly residing in 5th century Athens, but is rather a 2,000+ year old *tradition*.

³⁴ Gadamer continues: “Our need to become conscious of effective history is urgent...but this does not mean that it can ever be absolutely fulfilled. That we should become completely aware of effective history is just as *hubristic* a statement as when Hegel speaks of absolute knowledge, in which history would become completely transparent to itself and hence be raised to the level of a concept.” Gadamer, *TM*, 300ff.

³⁵ For his full critique of *Reflexionsphilosophie*, see Gadamer, *TM*, 336-341.

³⁶ Cf. Eliza G. Wilkens' excellent work, “*Know Thyself*” in *Greek and Latin Literature* for a taxonomy of the various ways the imperative was understood throughout the classical period.

³⁷ Thus Gadamer proceeds in the same way as when he turns the “negative” recognition of hermeneutic “prejudices” (*Vorurteile*) into a “positive” ground for any understanding whatsoever. Some presuppositions can be reformed or rejected, but there is no dispensing with the whole of one's “interpretive glasses” as such. The discussion of “*Vorurteile*” however remains abstract until it is connected to the nature of historically effected consciousness, and so I have not seen any need to discuss it here.

Whoever reads the *Symposium*, then, belongs to its world, and further “effects” or unfolds that tradition. The point to be emphasized is that the text is not a static historical “object” which the reading “subject” stands over against as it studies it and searches for its “meaning.” Richard Bernstein, commenting on Gadamer, aptly writes that, “it is important to reiterate that a tradition is not something “naturelike,” something “given” that stands over against us. It is always “part of us” and works through its effective history...The task of effective historical *consciousness* is to bring to explicit awareness this historical affinity or belongingness.”³⁸

With this understanding of a “historically effected consciousness” in place, we need to ask what follows from this where concepts and language as such is concerned; and how does this further illuminate our understanding of Gadamer’s unique form of “*Begriffsgeschichte*”?

Gadamer’s Hermeneutical Understanding of *Begriffsgeschichte*

We have already noted that the effectiveness of history, which gives shape to and is entwined with our understanding, is at work also in our interpretive and thinking concepts. We can see this clearly, to take a different example, by reading a work of history from the 19th century. Such a work is for us often just as revealing about that author’s own presuppositions and hermeneutic situation as the historical subject matter the author discusses (e.g., *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*). Or again, glancing at different versions of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* from the last 150 years – an ostensibly objective encyclopedic display of history, ideas, persons, and places, etc. – can reveal how the historical period that put together a particular version viewed its contents.

³⁸ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 142. Bernstein clarifies this statement elsewhere by noting, as we already have, the limited or finite nature of this human awareness of the effect of history.

At the same time, Gadamer notes that historical naiveté about the concepts through which one thinks and interprets something “becomes truly abysmal when one starts to become aware of the problems it raises and so demands that in understanding history one must leave one’s own concepts aside and think only in the concepts of the epoch one is trying to understand.”³⁹ Instead, a truly “historically effected consciousness” is a consciousness that is alive to (1) its limitations and (2) its “belonging” together with whatever it is seeking to understand – and just because, or to the extent that it is alive to this, it is set on the path of a more human(e) encounter with the hermeneutic “other” (e.g., a text). It is a consciousness that does more justice to the hermeneutical situation in which we recognize ourselves as being historically “effected” (set in motion), and as always already engaged in a hermeneutical task of “application.”⁴⁰ In light of this, Gadamer cannot be appropriately called either an “historical determinist” or an “historical relativist,” for what binds reader and text is not just the historical tradition as a “past” which continues to work itself out in our words and deeds as a *vis a tergo* (force from behind). It is also the bond of a mutual concern for a particular subject matter (*Sache*), and which thereby necessarily involves the reader in a dialogue with the text about that shared matter.⁴¹ What we need to stress now is that to discuss or share something in common presupposes, among other

³⁹ Gadamer, *TM*, 398.

⁴⁰ I will save a discussion of the concept of “application” – which forms the heart of Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis* – for Chapter Four of this dissertation. Suffice it to say, Gadamer is not talking about such naïve “applications” as those which try to make a past text (e.g., Aristotle’s *Ethics* or *Politics*) “relevant” by forcing it to speak the language of contemporary, Rawlsian-inspired political liberalism. That kind of “updating” has its place to a certain extent, but Gadamer is concerned to show a kind of application that is *unavoidable*, even for the classicist who wishes “only” to “understand” the text “on its own.”

⁴¹ I will say more about this “*Sache*” in the next section on “experience” and concept formation.

things, (1) a common language, and (2) a mutual involvement in the subject matter.⁴² But what is the relationship between 1 and 2; that is, between word and subject matter (*Sache*)? This question leads us back to (and will conclude) our discussion of Gadamer's relationship to "*Begriffsgeschichte*" and "*Problemgeschichte*."

We can see a beginning of how Gadamer will ultimately transform both "*Problemgeschichte*" and "*Begriffsgeschichte*" by looking to his early writings. As early as 1924, well before his explicit articulation of an historically effected consciousness, Gadamer was already beginning to formulate his understanding of the nature of concepts, and of the historical character of language. As the entry for "*Begriffsgeschichte*" in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* points out, Gadamer had argued early on for the necessity of a "*hermeneutische Problemgeschichte*" through the route of a "*hermeneutische Begriffsgeschichte*."⁴³ With his later developed understanding of an "historically effected consciousness" in play, Gadamer was eventually also able to speak both of his "methodological" commitment to *Begriffsgeschichte*, and also of "the real truth of *Problemgeschichte*."⁴⁴ If human consciousness involves its "*belonging*" together with the history or tradition that has shaped it, then the "history of problems" approach maintains some truth insofar as it sees the past as potentially having present

⁴² I will discuss how a "common language" is both a presupposition and an ongoing task between hermeneutic partners in the third section of this chapter - on "dialogue." To understand the other requires that we work to *create* as much as already employ a "common language."

⁴³ HWP, "*Begriffsgeschichte*," 806. As an aside, the *HWP* entry for "hermeneutics" was written by Gadamer in the style of a "history of concepts." On the language of "*hermeneutische Problemgeschichte*," as well as Gadamer's early critiques of his Marburg teachers, see his "*Metaphysik der Erkenntnis*" and "*Zur Systemidee in der Philosophie*."

⁴⁴ For the expression, see Gadamer's essay "The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy," 12.

relevance.⁴⁵ The trouble, for Gadamer, with a “history of problems” is not that it appropriates the past, but that it tries to deny that what it is doing is indeed an appropriation or retrieval and not an ahistorical insight into a timeless philosophical problem. Contrariwise, the trouble with a mere “*Begriffsgeschichte*” – i.e., one not transformed by an “historically effected consciousness” – is that its critical historicism, which rightly detects a naiveté on the part of traditional “*Problemggeschichte*,” thinks that it itself forestalls the task of hermeneutic application by providing such detailed, nuanced histories.⁴⁶

For Gadamer, *human historical-conceptual thinking* is neither to think in terms of a series of eternally recurring, universal problems, nor in terms of a mere bricolage of discrete “histories” each with clear, closed temporal boundaries that preclude any ongoing relevance or “effect.” The awareness that we are (co-)participants in an ongoing tradition which we are constantly re-forming, transforms our approach to the past of that tradition:

To think historically means, in fact, *to perform the transposition that the concepts of the past undergo* when we try to think in them. To think historically always involves mediating between those ideas and one’s own thinking. To try to escape from one’s own concepts in interpretation is not only impossible but manifestly absurd. To interpret means precisely to bring one’s own preconceptions into play so that the text’s meaning can really be made to speak for us.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ “We still acknowledge the legitimacy of the intention of the history of problems – namely, to recognize one’s own questions appearing in history.” Gadamer, “The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy,” 2.

⁴⁶ Gadamer thus acknowledges that a nuanced feel for historical difference is not what separates “*Begriffsgeschichte*” from “*Problemggeschichte*.” Cf. “The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy,” 12-13.

⁴⁷ Gadamer, *TM*, 398.

In other words, the performance (*Vollzug*) of hermeneutics is the task of concrete application, which mediates between the hermeneutic poles of familiarity and strangeness at work in our conceptual engagement with the text. Just as he was explicit in naming “*sprachliche Überlieferung*” (“linguistic tradition”) as the “*Gegenstand*” of hermeneutics, here too Gadamer is clear about the “*Vollzug*” of hermeneutics: “the linguisticity of understanding is *the concretion of historically effected consciousness*.”⁴⁸ The consideration of the place of history in our language is not merely accidental to a Gadamerian approach to concepts, but rather is its exact philosophical center. Understanding a text involves one in the task (*Aufgabe*) of making its meaning concrete in and for the present hermeneutic situation in which one lives. Just as the historically effected consciousness recognizes that it “belongs” to the world of the text, so too it recognizes that the text “belongs” to, or must be given a place in the world of the interpreting reader. Or still better, it is to recognize that in the mediation of the world of the text and the world of the reader, there arises (indeed already has arisen) a common world, which binds the two together in a dialogue about some matter (*Sache*): “There can be no speaking that does not bind the speaker and the person spoken to. This is true of the hermeneutic process as well...this process is simply *the concretion of meaning itself*.”⁴⁹ And again, “the text is made to speak through interpretation. But no text and no book speaks if it does not speak a language that reaches the other person. Thus interpretation must find the right language if it really wants to

⁴⁸ Gadamer, *TM*, 391.

⁴⁹ Gadamer, *TM*, 399.

make the text speak.”⁵⁰ The (naïve) attempt to “only” interpret the text “on its own terms” on the basis of its “original” historical meaning in fact lacks an appropriate self-understanding of one’s position as reader/interpreter, as well as an actual involvement in the claim to truth of the text.⁵¹

We can summarize what we have learned here so far by stating the consequences for Gadamer’s “*Begriffsgeschichte*” approach insofar as it is grounded in two-fold outcome of an “historically effected consciousness” – viz., the awareness (1) of one’s finite, historical position as interpreter (i.e., one’s *limitations*), and also (2) of one’s communality with the hermeneutic object (i.e., one’s *belongingness*). The *necessary* task of cultivating an (always limited and historically situated) understanding of the historicity of a text – viz., not only its “original” production, audience, and author, but also the history of its effect or reception – is only “one moment” of understanding. The other “moment” or element involves the necessary continuation of a genuine dialogue with the text (concerning which we will say more below). Gadamer summarizes the matter thus:

Projecting a historical horizon, then, is only one moment in the performance of understanding; it does not become solidified into the self-alienation of a past consciousness, but is overtaken by our own present horizon of understanding. In the performance of understanding, a real fusion of horizons occurs – which means that as the historical horizon is projected, there simultaneously occurs its **sublation** (*Aufhebung*).

⁵⁰ Gadamer, *TM*, 398.

⁵¹ “We think we understand when we see the past from a historical standpoint – i.e., transpose ourselves into the historical situation and try to reconstruct the historical horizon. In fact, however, we have given up the claim to find in the past any truth that is valid and intelligible for ourselves. Acknowledging the otherness of the other in this way, making him the object of objective knowledge, involves the fundamental suspension of his claim to truth.” Gadamer, *TM*, 302-303.

We designate the controlled performance of such a fusion as the **vigilance** (*Wachheit*) of an historically effected consciousness.⁵²

There are two consequences to this last sentence, which equates a “controlled performance” of interpretation or understanding with a kind of “vigilance.” A discussion of the first and largest issue, i.e., the nature of a hermeneutic ethics, will have to wait for a later chapter of the dissertation, since it concerns Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis*, and the explicit discussion of the central hermeneutic problem of application, which we have here only alluded to. The second issue is specific to the task of this chapter, and will motivate our turn to the next section: namely, the “fusion of horizons” spoken of in the quote just above entails that the text and the interpreter participate in a shared conversation about some thing or matter (*Sache*). It is the shared matter of concern that must be brought into focus, and concerning which the interpreter must understand the text as trying to speak truthfully. Trying to appreciate the historical situation of a text is therefore simultaneous with the effort to understand the *experience* of some **subject matter** (*Sache*) about which the text speaks.

Gadamer’s form of “*Begriffsgeschichte*,” therefore seeks to “concretize” concepts that have become ossified and abstracted from their historical origins in ordinary, living language – where language is close to life, and where the fluid metaphorical extension of language takes precedence over its univocally fixed occurrence in technical discourse: “The *Aufklärung* achieved by the history of concepts – which revives the enduring connections between concepts

⁵² Boldface and translation mine. Gadamer, *GW I*, 312. The “simultaneity” Gadamer speaks of is to be taken quite literally – one does not “first” study the text historically and then “second” become involved in a dialogue about its meaning. Rather, even when the attempt is simply to offer a philological commentary on a text, or in the “mere” translation of a text, both “moments” of understanding can be found for one who knows how to look.

and the natural usage of language – consists in the concretization of the conceptual meaning of assertions and the freeing of this meaning from dogmatic distortions.”⁵³ To make something concrete again is to open up a field of concrete experience and phenomena – and so too to open up “the varieties of historical experience” (to modify William James’ phrase). Put broadly, becoming aware of the history or tradition in which our concepts develop is to gain a heightened self-understanding of our place as human thinkers: “*Begriffsgeschichte ist begriffliche Aufklärung*” although “*kann begriffliche Aufklärung immer nur partial sein.*”⁵⁴ This “conceptual enlightenment” - whose pursuit is the responsibility of today’s thinker - is “partial” because we do not stand over against history as its objective onlookers, but as we have seen, are (in the ontological sense) an historically effected consciousness.⁵⁵ What is more, just because we understand ourselves as participants in a process of handing-down (i.e., in a tradition), we also understand that we will - one way or another - hand-on the tradition, and the responsibility for it, to those who come after us. With respect to “conceptual enlightenment,” then, future thinkers will always already find themselves with the task of needing to “re-concretize” the inherited conceptual language in the face of their own hermeneutic situation - that is to say, in the face of their own present concrete *experience* of the *phenomena* that shape the subject matter (*Sache*) of a past thinker’s work. With this we have come to the next basic component of Gadamer’s

⁵³ Gadamer, “The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy,” 5.

⁵⁴ Gadamer, “Begriffsgeschichte als Philosophie,” 244-245.

⁵⁵ “The meaning of philosophical concepts is not determined through any arbitrary decision as to what they are to designate. Rather, philosophical concepts acquire their meaning from their historical origin and from that ability to give rise to new meaning which these concepts themselves possess by virtue of the fact that philosophical thinking always takes place in linguistic forms.” Gadamer “The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy,” 1-2.

understanding of the concept - that is, the role of *experience* in the (always a re-)formation of concepts.

Experience and “the Conceptuality of the Concept”

In this section of the chapter, I *first* introduce the basic “phenomenological” understanding of conceptuality (*Begrifflichkeit*), which forms the lasting point of departure for Gadamer’s subsequent thinking about the nature of concept (re-)formation and its relationship to experience and history. After a brief introduction, I meet this introductory task through a careful discussion of the meaning of “*Begrifflichkeit*” in one of Heidegger’s early Marburg lecture course – the first, which Gadamer was to attend. After this, I move *next* to a discussion of the details of a Gadamerian account of conceptuality and concept formation by comparing two key places in *Truth and Method*, as well as looking to his late essay “Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language.”

To the Things Themselves: Gadamer’s Phenomenological Inheritance of “Conceptuality”

In a short autobiographical piece, Gadamer reflects back on the historical situation in which he wrote his 1928 *Habilitationschrift* on Plato’s *Philebus* under Heidegger’s direction: *Plato’s Dialectical Ethics: Phenomenological Interpretations of the Philebus*.⁵⁶ Upon returning to the universities after the First World War, Gadamer describes the hollowness of pre-war cultural, philosophic, and scientific attitudes: “This was the end of an age: the age of liberalism, the unlimited belief in progress, and the unquestioned leadership of science within cultural life.

⁵⁶ Cf. Gadamer, *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*, 13-19.

All of this perished in the War's battles of material."⁵⁷ What emerged for Gadamer as a philosophical alternative, as for so many other contemporary German (and later French) philosophers, was the quasi-rallying cry of the burgeoning phenomenological movement (Husserl, Scheler, Heidegger) – “*zu den Sachen selbst!*”⁵⁸ In this well known phrase, we find a proper philosophical point of departure for putting forward a Gadamerian account of “conceptuality” (*Begrifflichkeit*) and of “concept formation” (*Begriffsbildung*), whose internal engine of development or determination is the concrete experience of “phenomena” or “things.”

The young Gadamer was captivated by the cry “to the things themselves!” just as the Italian Renaissance thinkers, in the midst of a flourishing reading culture, cried “*ad fontes!*” in their retrieval of classical texts.⁵⁹ To return to the things themselves was methodologically decisive for Gadamer's conceptual engagement with (the subject matter of) Plato's *Philebus*:

This allowed me to completely subordinate my philological-historical research to my interests in the subject-matter, and also to set aside the problematic of what was then known as “value-ethics.” It allowed me, where possible, to go back to the subject matter, to the phenomena... “*Phenomenological Interpretations of the Philebus*” thus means a description of the phenomena themselves, which seek on this basis the conceptual expression that the phenomena have found in Platonic thought.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Gadamer, *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*, 14.

⁵⁸ The influence on Gadamer of “phenomenology,” together with Dilthey's historical reflections and the German translation of Kierkegaard, are together described by Gadamer as “a critical turn against academic philosophy: the *Problemggeschichte* of Neo-Kantianism and Husserl's transcendental phenomenology.” Gadamer, *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*, 15.

⁵⁹ Cf. Gadamer's short excursus in *Truth and Method* on the conceptual history of this Renaissance phrase, and the philosophical and spiritual traditions that support the imagery of an emanating fountain (Plotinus) and of the need to always return to the wellspring of life (“as the deer longs for water, so my soul...”). Gadamer, *TM*, 502.

⁶⁰ Gadamer, *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*, 16.

In the case of the *Philebus*, that required a phenomenological description of various “*Sache*,” qua phenomenological forms of pleasure and knowledge, in order to philosophically participate in the real subject-matter or “problematic” of the work (i.e., “*Sache*,” here qua hermeneutic “*Scopus*” or intention) – namely, the question of a humanly good life within the intertwinement of pleasure (*hēdonē*) and understanding (*phronēsis*).⁶¹

Over some time the complexity of issues involved in his early “phenomenological investigations” of Plato’s late dialogue began to emerge for Gadamer. Looking back on his early work on Plato at the age of 89, Gadamer writes:

I then found myself confronted with a problem that would later lead me to a fundamental problem of hermeneutics – the linguisticity of understanding. How is it possible, I asked myself at the time, to make a Greek text like Plato’s *Philebus*, a text which asks about the good in human life, speak anew from the fundamental experience of our own life-world? It was necessary to make the concepts used by the Greeks speak again. If we simply translate and repeat the Greek concepts, we would not discover ourselves in them...⁶²

In these reflections we find an expression of the task of this section of the chapter – namely, to clarify the relationship between *experience* (of phenomena) and the (re-)formation of the concepts that guide and support our thinking. In doing so we will gain a fuller appreciation of what Gadamer meant by describing his form of “*Begriffsgeschichte*” as “an integrating moment

⁶¹ That *Sache* can, in Gadamer, refer both to “phenomena” and to the hermeneutic grasp of the *question* the text (implicitly or explicitly) gives expression to, is no accident. For how phenomena can be said to pose *questions*, cf. David Vessey, “Gadamer’s Interpretive Practice.”

⁶² Gadamer, *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*, 16f.

in the movement of philosophical thinking, a way to reveal its inherent conceptuality (*Begrifflichkeit*).⁶³

Specifically, what does Gadamer mean by speaking of “conceptuality” (*Begrifflichkeit*) or the “conceptuality of the concept” (*die Begrifflichkeit des Begriffs*)? We can recognize the phenomenological sense of this language by turning, briefly, to Martin Heidegger’s first lecture course given at Marburg in 1924, and now published as *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*. In this course, the first course that the 24-year-old Gadamer attended, we find a clear alignment of “*Begrifflichkeit*” with “experience” and phenomenality.

At the very outset of the course, Heidegger describes the purpose of the lectures as “purely philological” (*rein philologisch*), and in stark contrast to any kind of philosophy as such.⁶⁴ The Freiburgian Heidegger immediately distances himself from the style and methods of his Marburg colleagues by flatly declaring that the course will not involve any “*Problemgeschichte*.”⁶⁵ Instead, the “entirely philological” purpose of the course is meant to discuss and appropriately prepare the way for a later philosophical engagement with Aristotle and with the philosophical *concepts* that are central to his thinking. However, although Heidegger recommends that his students read Werner Jaeger’s works on Aristotle to gain their

⁶³ Gadamer, “The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy,” 14.

⁶⁴ “*unsere Behandlungsart ist nicht philosophisch, die Resultate keine Philosophie.*” Heidegger, *GA*. 18, 333. Translations taken from Martin Heidegger, *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy* (trl. Robert Metcalf and Mark Tanzer).

⁶⁵ “*Keine Philosophie- und Problemgeschichte.*” Heidegger, *GA*. 18, 332.

bearings, it becomes clear that the “philology” practiced in the course is something quite different from anything one would have expected at that time.

On the one hand, Heidegger defines “philology” as “the passion for knowledge of what has been expressed,” and he defines “conceptuality” (*Begrifflichkeit*) as “the substance [*Substanz*] of all scientific [*Wissenschaftlichen*] research” – both rather benign, introductory, expressions.⁶⁶ On the other hand, however, these expressions are also given a precise “phenomenological” sense through the explanation of just what is meant by the term “basic concept” (*Grundbegriff*), which forms the title of the course. For Heidegger here, the expression “basic concepts” has a double meaning – it refers both (1) to the vocabulary that is central to a particular thinker, and so which should be discussed in any “introductory” course (here, e.g., on Aristotle), as well as (2) the “basis” or “ground” or “soil” (*Grund, Boden*) of those “basic concepts.” What is the “basis” or “soil” from which a concept (particularly here an “Aristotelian concept”) emerges? To answer that question is the “philological” intent of the lecture course.

Specifically, Heidegger proposes that “the things [or matters] themselves” (*die Sachen selbst*) are the basis of “conceptuality.” A “basic concept” then can be investigated by considering “how the matter is experienced” (*wie die gemeinte Sache erfahren ist*).⁶⁷ Offering the example of Aristotle’s concept of “*kinesis*” (motion, *Bewegung*), Heidegger the philologist (shall we also say phenomenologist?) tells his students that

We must, therefore, ask what is meant by the concept of movement, in the sense of that which is *concretely experienced* [*konkret erfahren*] in the concept as it is meant. What

⁶⁶ Heidegger, *GA* 18, 4, 6.

⁶⁷ Heidegger, *GA* 18, 13.

did Aristotle have in mind when he thought of movement? Which moving phenomena [*Bewegungsphänomene*] did he have in view?...We do not ask these questions with the aim of gaining knowledge of a conceptual content [*Begriffsinhalt*], but rather we ask how the matter meant is experienced...⁶⁸

Concrete experience, then, forms the “soil” or “ground” of conceptuality, and so when Heidegger, throughout the course, speaks of the “*Bodenständigkeit*” (earthiness, indigenious, native, down-to-earth) character of conceptuality, it is primarily concretely lived experience that is at issue, and which needs to be *exhumed* if the students are going to be shown not how to “cognize” and play with Aristotle’s words like prefabricated game pieces, but rather to “see” (*sehen*) and “determine” (*bestimmen*) the matters (*die Sache*) or the phenomena oneself with the same “originality and legitimacy” (*Ursprünglichkeit und Echtheit*) as Aristotle.⁶⁹

At the same time, the “concrete experience” is expressed through language since “that which is originally seen is *primarily addressed*.”⁷⁰ In Heidegger’s course, this involves consideration not only of how Aristotle “addresses” the phenomenon of movement – i.e., how does he talk about it? What language does he use? – but also of considering what “claim” (*Anspruch*) is ultimately made about movement. The philologist – or better, the hermeneut – must ask, concerning Aristotle, “in what way is a phenomenon like movement addressed so as to

⁶⁸ Heidegger, *GA* 18, 13.

⁶⁹ Heidegger, *GA* 18, 14-15. We must understand “*Ursprünglichkeit*” here in the same *phenomenological* sense as “*Grund*” or “*Boden*” – experience is the “origin” (*archē*) and so “legitimate basis” of every concept. The romanticized “originality” of an artist in relation to her or his peers, for example, is not what is at issue here; and neither too are we concerned with a merely chronological or historicized sense of “original.”

⁷⁰ Heidegger, *GA* 18, 14.

accord with the *guiding claim* of the matter seen?”⁷¹ Heidegger repeatedly summarizes this account of conceptuality by distinguishing its “three aspects” as (1) the basic experience (*Grunderfahrung*), (2) the guiding claim (*führenden Anspruch*), and (3) the prevailing intelligibility (*herrschende Verständlichkeit*).⁷²

With this we can see the sense behind Heidegger’s reaffirmation at the end of his introduction that his course is “preliminary” to philosophy insofar as one must first have a firm grasp on the “matter” (*Sache*) under discussion, and/or what is “meant” with a particular concept in philosophy before one can actually philosophize.⁷³ The “soil” of thinking and of conceptualization is concrete experience, and one who does not “begin” there will not approach a philosophical text like Aristotle’s in the correct way.⁷⁴ Heidegger summarizes this approach later in the course:

The *genuine interpretation* [*die eigentliche Interpretation*] occurs in the right way, then, only if it is fulfilled *on the ground of explicit conceptuality*, if the interpretation is retrieved [*wiederholt*], is understood in accordance with the ground [*Boden*]. Therein, a *general hermeneutical principle* [*ein allgemeiner hermeneutischer Grundsatz*] appears,

⁷¹ Heidegger, *GA* 18, 14.

⁷² Heidegger, *GA* 18, 270. “Prevailing” here means the particular ethos or historical situation in which a phenomenon or “matter” is addressed and how so. Heidegger views Aristotle’s “*endoxic method*” as an engagement with this “prevailing intelligibility” or “*doxa*.” In other words, we come to “see” phenomena via how it is addressed – and prior to any philosophizing this means addressed in the “down-to-earth” or “native” manner of the wider cultural environment as well as one’s intimate relations to those who teach one first to speak, and with whom one “tries out words.”

⁷³ Heidegger, *GA* 18, 7.

⁷⁴ But when do we have the “correct” grasp of our experience? Thinking does not wait in its hunt for answers. We will see how this informs Gadamer’s account of concept formation below.

that *every interpretation is only genuine in retrieval*. Only then is it a putting-forward of that which no longer stands there.⁷⁵

The “retrieval” – as with so much terminology in his course – requires a phenomenological understanding as well. It is by discovering and engaging with the experiences – the “soil” of concepts – that one is able to offer an interpretation of a past philosopher’s work. This remains a legitimate task for interpreters even when it must be acknowledged that such a “recovery” or “unearthing” of an “original experience” necessarily involves some change.⁷⁶ With this determination of “conceptuality” in terms of experience, and with the recognition that the interpretation of another thinker’s use of a “basic concept” requires a retrieval of its “basis” or “soil” in experience, we have hit upon the crux of a Gadamerian account of concept (re-)formation. What, after all, is *experience* as such; and (how) is it possible to “retrieve” the “matter” or “the things themselves” that were at issue in a past thinker’s texts such that our reading or understanding of that text stands a chance of being “genuine” –i.e., allowing the voice of the past (with its articulation of its experience of “the things themselves”) to speak into today (with our, perhaps radically different, experience and articulation)?

To the Details Themselves: Experience, Metaphor and Concept Formation

⁷⁵ Heidegger, *GA* 18, 270.

⁷⁶ To what extent did Heidegger understand this? See Gadamer’s comment in 1992: “When the elderly Heidegger came up on deck during a boat trip through the Aegean and saw through the morning mist the contour of an island slowly emerging, it was for him as if he thought “being” for the first time as the Greeks did. He wrote me then: “We still think the Greek world not Greek enough.” That surely did not mean that we should ourselves think as the Greeks did...” Gadamer, “Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language,” *Language and Linguisticity in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, 41f. I leave open the question as to whether Heidegger seriously intended, naively or romantically, to “think like a Greek” (or, later, to “think like Parmenides”).

Concept re-formation is intimately tied to experience; and yet although the importance of experience in the formation of concepts has long been recognized, Gadamer writes in *Truth and Method*, “however paradoxical it may seem, the concept of experience [*Erfahrung*] seems to me one of the most obscure we have.”⁷⁷ For *Truth and Method* this obscurity is the result of two interrelated issues:

- (1) the neglect of the historicity of experience, and
- (2) the determination of experience along the lines of the logic of subsumption and induction.

I will discuss each issue in turn. Now Gadamer himself does not explicitly link together these two issues – they are found in two different parts of *Truth and Method*, separated by nearly a hundred pages of intervening material. In Part Two II.4.3.B (“*The concept of experience (Erfahrung) and the essence of the hermeneutic experience*”), the task is to recover the “inner historicity” of *Erfahrung* (issue number one listed above). The second discussion in *Truth and Method* comes much later, towards the end of the book in Part Three III.5.2.C (“*Language and concept formation*”), in which the task is to argue for a positive role (even the essential role) of metaphor and of metaphorical “transference” (*Übertragung*) in the process of concept formation, as opposed to the mere subsumption of a particular under a pre-given universal (number two listed above). We are asking philosophically, then, what the relationship really is between the

⁷⁷ Gadamer, *TM*, 341. Thus Gadamer’s approach, as we will see, is to argue that the problem with traditional accounts of concept formation stems from a mistaken (viz., restricted) understanding of *experience*.

discussion of “experience” (*Erfahrung*) in Part Two of *Truth and Method*, and the explicit discussion of “concept formation” (*Begriffsbildung*) in Part Three.

What Gadamer calls “*Erfahrung*” (experience) in Part Two of *Truth and Method* is neither the romantic “*Erlebnis*” of an “aesthetic consciousness” (criticized so roundly in Part One of the book), nor the *reduction* of experience to essentially bald “*sensation*” of immediately given sense-data – an abstraction criticized by Gadamer in his “*Begriffsgeschichte*” essays as well as in *Truth and Method*.⁷⁸ By contrast, Gadamer argues that a more fitting understanding of “*Erfahrung*” – and thereby of the process of concept formation that is guided by experience – requires a description of the “inner historicity” of human experience (*die innere Geschichtlichkeit der Erfahrung*).⁷⁹ Gadamer’s description of this “historicity” of experience involves two interrelated insights: human experience is (1) less a “result” of “sense data” and much more so an ongoing *process* of becoming “experienced,” which, hermeneutically speaking (2) does not begin from any zero point, but rather always entails the general *re-formation* of the tradition and language through which our experiential world is articulated and (limitedly, partially) understood. These two points raised in *Truth and Method*, are summarized and echoed throughout Gadamer’s writings on conceptuality and conceptual history, for example, in the untranslated essay “*Begriffsgeschichte als Philosophie*”:

⁷⁸ And criticized by many phenomenologists. In his essay “*Begriffsgeschichte als Philosophie*,” *GW* II, 80 Gadamer uses the English word “sensation” when discussing understanding of experience in the “empiricist” sense it has had since the 17th century, and which grounds the methodological work of the natural sciences.

⁷⁹ Gadamer, *TM*, 342.

*Begriffsbildung ist – hermeneutisch gesehen – durch schon gesprochene Sprache ständig mitbedingt. Wenn das aber so ist, dann ist es der einzige philosophisch-redliche Weg, sich das Verhältnis von Wort und Begriff als ein unser Denken bestimmendes Verhältnis bewußt zu machen.*⁸⁰

A philosophically robust account of concept formation cannot abstract from the concrete experience in which we always find ourselves as already speaking and thinking about our experiential life-world from out of a particular language and tradition. In truth, concept “formation” is always a “reformation.” To treat (1) the formation of concepts, and (2) the historicity of the language we think through, as two different philosophical issues, distorts the nature of human *experience* as a tradition-supported openness to new, or further, experiences. Put differently, our understanding of the role of experience in the formation of concepts will necessarily be transformed by a “*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*.”⁸¹

With respect to experience, our language displays a dual hermeneutical role. That is, our concepts and words can – and do – both (1) *distort* our experiences and generate false problems, and (2) *ground and guide* our experiencing life itself insofar as the supposed immediate givenness of “sense-data” is in fact already understood through the mediating role of language.⁸² The demand of modern scientific knowledge, Gadamer argues, has narrowly focused on this first “distorting” role of language here, as one revealing the need for an objective

⁸⁰ Gadamer, “*Begriffsgeschichte als Philosophie*,” 80. “Hermeneutically, the formation of concepts is always partially conditioned through an already spoken language. But if that is so, then the only philosophically honest path is to become aware of the relation between word and concept as a relation that conditions our thinking.” (Translation mine)

⁸¹ Gadamer echoes this: “This is precisely what we have to keep in mind in analyzing historically effected consciousness: it has the structure of *experience (Erfahrung)*.” Gadamer, *TM*, 341.

⁸² Likewise, our concepts themselves are grounded in *prior* experiences and reformed in light of further experiences.

methodology for checking and verifying the truth of experience.⁸³ By contrast, Gadamer argues that the *telos* of undergoing or suffering experience does not (exclusively) lie in its serving as data for the acquisition of scientific knowledge. As with the “*pathei mathos*” and the “*hope*” of Aeschylus’ *Prometheus Bound*, Gadamer seeks to recover the moral, ethical, social, and humanistic *telos* of experience – that of becoming “an experienced person.” What does this mean?

On the one hand, there is the understanding of experience as contributing to the formation of concepts through the constant (*re-*)*confirmation* of the experience one already has (e.g., the sun has risen today, as it has yesterday, and the day before). The *result* of this type of experience, as Aristotle tried to show in his famous image of the battle route in his *Posterior Analytics* 2.19, is the formation of general conceptual structures, which ground “knowledge” (*epistēmē*, *Wissenschaft*). For Gadamer, however, this misses the nature of the *process* of ongoing experience in which prior experience is *overturned* by some new experience:

If we thus regard experience in terms of its result, we have ignored the fact that experience is a process. In fact, this process is essentially negative. It cannot be described simply as the unbroken generation of typical universals...Language shows this when we use the word “experience” in two different senses: the experiences that conform to our expectation and confirm it, and the new experience that occurs to us.⁸⁴

In other words, a “new experience,” which unsettles our previous understanding of some matter (*Sache*, *phenomenon*), gives us a new, broader *horizon* in which both the old and the new

⁸³ Gadamer traces this “fixation” back to the rise of modern science in Francis Bacon who analyzed, among other “prejudices,” the so-called *idoli fori*, which stem from the “false” use of conventional language. Cf. Gadamer, *TM*, 344f.

⁸⁴ Gadamer, *TM*, 347f.

experiences of that matter are held together in a more comprehensive understanding. Experience in this sense is a process of “determinate negation” (*bestimmte Negation*).⁸⁵ To acquire a broader horizon is also to be given a new space in which one can have *further* experiences. The new experience, and the understanding of the matter that it generates, also makes possible its own further overturning by some further experience: “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.”⁸⁶ Or again, “experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself.”⁸⁷

This concept of experience – as the ongoing process of openness to further experience on the basis of past experience – highlights the “historical” character of finite human persons:

Experience in this sense belongs to the historical nature of man...experience as a whole is not something anyone can be spared. Rather, experience in this sense inevitably involves many disappointments of one’s expectations and only thus is experience acquired...Every experience worthy of the name thwarts an expectation. Thus the historical nature of man essentially implies a fundamental negativity that emerges in the relation between experience and insight.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Gadamer, *TM*, 346.

⁸⁶ Gadamer, *TM*, 350. Gadamer continues: “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. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and learn from them.”

⁸⁷ Gadamer, *TM*, 350. Gadamer draws heavily on Hegel throughout this discussion.

⁸⁸ Gadamer, *TM*, 350.

The insight (*Einsicht*) that emerges from experience, then, is not primarily the acquisition of units of information, but rather a form of *self-understanding*, since one now has a sense for the limitedness and deceptiveness of one's own previous understanding of things. To undergo an experience in this sense, is to learn "not this or that particular thing, but insight into the limitations of humanity...Genuine experience is experience of one's own historicity."⁸⁹ This kind of insight is, at the level of experience, just that kind of self-understanding that we discussed above under the heading of an "*historically effected consciousness.*" Recognizing that we read, interpret, understand, think, and re-form concepts by always already participating in a process of receiving and "handing on" a tradition is, at the level of *experience*, to be open to the new or the different precisely because one recognizes one's own limited experience; and this too is something "learned" through experience.

For the purposes of this chapter, now, the question needs to be asked how precisely this conception of experience applies to the process of concept (re-)formation in general. Gadamer notes that one does not form a concept once and for all because one's experiencing life is never finished or completed – *unless one is precisely closed to experience.*⁹⁰ Even then, such possible

⁸⁹ Gadamer, *TM*, 351. Here is a good example of near synonymy, or at least wide overlap, over Gadamer's expressions "finitude," "limitation," and "historicity" – we might also use the words "situatedness" or, in a Heideggerian fashion, "facticity."

⁹⁰ In *Truth and Method*, at the end of the section on "Experience" and just prior to the transition to the section on "Platonic dialogue," Gadamer determines hermeneutic experience in terms of the *moral* (*moralische*) experience of the I-Thou (*Ich-Du*) relationship. Of course, hermeneutically, the "Thou" is here the *tradition cum text*. But does the textual perspective exhaust Gadamer's insights? I do not think so. Gadamer's "hermeneutics" stands in the tradition of Buber, Rosenzweig, Kierkegaard, etc. just as much as, and perhaps even more so than the phenomenological one. This will become important again in later chapters where we discuss Gadamer's retrieval of "*phronēsis*." Gadamer is not willing, as Heidegger was, to neglect the ethical-moral tonality of "*phronēsis*" in making it into an ontological structure of *Dasein*. Cf. Gadamer, *TM*, 352-354ff.

closure can never be total (*pathei mathos*) even in the most dogmatic person (“he who does not listen will be made to feel”).⁹¹ Articulating what this means for concept reformation requires that we turn now to Part Three of *Truth and Method* and its section, “Language and Concept Formation.”

In the section of *Truth and Method* titled, “Language and Concept Formation,” Gadamer puts forward an argument that can be found in many contexts throughout his work. Put abstractly, this is to argue for the *mutual enrichment* of something “general” in relation to something “particular” in order to counteract any reductive logic of subsumption that treats all particulars as merely something to be subsumed under a general. More specifically, at the level of concepts and natural language, this means that it is inappropriate to understand our use of concepts as though they were already fixed, and so presenting us only with the task of subsuming our encounters with particulars under the correct general concept or word. Rather, according to Gadamer here, with every particular speech act, the general concepts and words used are themselves enriched by the particular - and singular - encounter with the matter (*Sache*) at issue: “A person who speaks - who, that is to say, uses the general meanings of words - is so oriented toward the particularity of what he is perceiving that everything he says acquires a share in the particularity of the circumstances he is considering.”⁹² For example, however true that it is that someone who “writes” must already have some pre-understanding of what “writing” is in general, nevertheless, with every new, particular writing situation, the general concept of

⁹¹ Gadamer often refers to Aeschylean tragedy in this context. Cf. Gadamer, *TM*, 350ff.

⁹² Gadamer, *TM*, 427.

“writing” undergoes its own further re-formation by being particularized, concretized, or applied. The academic who, while being rather familiar with scholarly writing, must write to a friend whose wife has just died, discovers how little they really know how “to write.” In discovering that “so, this too” is writing, one’s general understanding or familiarity with the concept of writing undergoes a whole reformation. A constant re-formation of concepts is at work just as much as experience itself is an ongoing process:

The general concept meant by the word is enriched by any given perception of a thing, so that what emerges is a new, more specific word formation which does more justice to the particularity of that act of perception. However certainly speaking implies using pre-established words with general meanings, at the same time, a constant process of concept formation is going on, by means of which the life of a language develops.⁹³

So far, Gadamer’s words may seem just like a classic account of concept formation that emphasizes the role of “induction.” But Gadamer is clear that this is not primarily what he is trying to bring to light, but instead it only serves as the backdrop for his engagement with the “metaphoricity” of language, and of the role that metaphor plays in concept formation. Put another way, the role of induction in concept formation results in the abstraction of a generic universality from multiple particular experiences of some phenomenon. However, the (Aristotelian) interest in how knowledge of a universal essence arises through induction does not completely exhaust the process of concept formation. For, according to Gadamer, concepts are also formed and reformed through the linking together of multiple experiences via a process of “metaphorical transference.” To use classical language, what we often grasp in our experience

⁹³ Gadamer, *TM*, 427-428.

of two different particularities are their commonalities *per accidens*, and not the abstraction of a universal substance:

If a person transfers an expression from one thing to the other, he has in mind something that is common to both of them; but this in no way needs to be generic universality. Rather, he is following his **widening experience**, which looks for similarities, whether in the appearance of things or in their significance for us. The genius of linguistic consciousness consists in being able to express these similarities. This is its fundamental metaphorical nature, and it is important to see that to regard the metaphorical use of a word as not its real sense, is the prejudice of a theory of logic that is alien to language.⁹⁴

This lengthy quote is one of the few places where Gadamer explicitly links together his account of *experience*, which we discussed in the previous section, with his account of *concept formation*. To say “this here, is like that, there” is not the same thing as saying “these are two particular cases of some universal concept.” For one may only mean to draw two particularities together via metaphor and analogy. To give an example: on the one hand, we can say that in our particular encounters with both a “pencil” and a “pen” that we learn to subsume these under the general concept of “writing instrument.” And yet, what is this general concept of “writing,” and what “writes”? When Plato, in the *Philebus*, has Socrates say that our experience (as the combining of *mnēmē* and *aisthēsis*) *writes itself on our soul*, his metaphorical use of the verb *graphein*, far from obscuring the nature of “writing” and of “experience,” in fact gives us the opportunity to begin to see more deeply into the nature of both.⁹⁵ In fact, Socrates goes further in his metaphor here by noting that when experience writes itself on to our lives “truly,” it generates true understanding and true *logoi*; and when our experience writes falsely or

⁹⁴ Gadamer, *TM*, 428. Boldface mine.

⁹⁵ Plato, *Philebus*, 39af.

deceptively, it generates a deceptive language and understanding. Here we are a long way off from the universal, objective use of concepts that would methodically ground a modern scientific study of “writing” or “experience,” but that obviously does not mean that our conceptual horizons have not been *expanded* (“*ausbreitenden Erfahrung*”), or that we have not gained some *understanding* about the “writing” and “experience” via the metaphorical use of language.⁹⁶

For Gadamer, an incomplete and truncated understanding of concept formation occurs when the formative process is narrowly described in abstraction from the life of living, ordinary language with all of its expressions, metaphors, evocations, and overtones.⁹⁷ Words and concepts are not tools that are fashioned in order to do a job, and which one picks up and puts down at will, as if from a mental storehouse of language, because, in part, words and concepts are in a constant process of (re-)formation. Even the formation of a “technical term” or an artificially constructed sign-system is always born out of living language, and must continue to be related back to living language if it is really going to speak: “however great the distance between the technical term and the natural use of language, the connection with the living language always remains constitutive for the meaning of concepts.”⁹⁸ Philosophical concepts always maintain a connection to the resonances, overtones and the “metaphorical” meanings in

⁹⁶ Or at least one could gain a deeper understanding if we were to spend more time on the example given here.

⁹⁷ For more on this see Joel Weinsheimer’s “Gadamer’s Metaphorical Hermeneutics,” *Gadamer and Hermeneutics*, 181.

⁹⁸ Gadamer, “*The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy*,” 5-6. We will see this in great detail in the next two chapters of this dissertation, in which I reconstruct a history of the concept of *phronesis*.

living language, on account of, as Gadamer puts, “the intimate unity of speech and thought.”⁹⁹ One does not “first” construct a language, and “second” proceed to think by its means - rather, the constant reformation of philosophical thoughts occurs right alongside the constant reformation of the language we have inherited and participate in. It is easy to lose sight of this when the words we inherit are so smoothed over, ossified, and restricted in their meaning that we no longer have any awareness of their original metaphorical connection to living language - for example, that we speak of the “legs” of a table, or that the Euclidean word for a mathematical “angle” is taken over from the “bend” in a person’s knee. On the one hand, becoming (partially) aware of such connotations, origins, and metaphorical resonances may be trivial and unnecessary in order for the discipline mathematics to do its job. On the other hand, at least in the realm of philosophy, it is always an open question as to whether becoming more aware about the historical life of ordinary languages that always resounds in our concepts is important for thinking.¹⁰⁰ As we will see in the coming chapters of this dissertation, the whole process of the formation of the concept of *phronesis* from Homer to Aristotle is highly dependent on a highly creative interplay and interweaving between metaphorical, analogical, poetic, scientific, and philosophical contexts of language use.

⁹⁹ Gadamer, *TM*, 430.

¹⁰⁰ Gadamer is explicit: “Admittedly, this does not yet prove that there exists any need to become critically conscious of such residual connections...The task of the questioning pursued in *Begriffsgeschichte* can scarcely lie in a total historical elucidation that would suspend language’s self-forgetfulness in its full self-consciousness. Rather, it is just this self-forgetfulness of language that legitimates the limited nature of such elucidation.” And later “While concept-historical analysis can promise no unequivocal answers here, it can nevertheless reveal the openendedness of what can be questioned...” Gadamer, “The History of Concepts and the Language of Philosophy,” 6, 8.

In fact Gadamer goes further in arguing for the significance of the link between philosophical concept-words and ordinary language. It is not just a question of *potential* significance, because philosophical thinking always finds itself with the *actual* task of making itself communicable to the other in conversation. This is so even, or especially, where there is the greatest amount of philosophical stammering and “need” for language (*Sprachnot*).¹⁰¹ Insofar as we participate in a historico-linguistic tradition, philosophical thinking follows the trail of the *re-formation* of its concepts while one becomes an experienced person and an experienced thinker, who is struggling to appreciate more and more what this participation (*methexis*) means. One can say the same thing, and much more simply, by affirming that philosophical thinking is not and cannot be performed as a “monologue” just as no one philosopher or thinker is the master of language. Concepts are always reformed in “dialogue” – be it the dialogue with the past or with one another.¹⁰² Thus in a late lecture Gadamer can say, “without bringing concepts to speak and without a common language, I believe we will not be able to find the words that can reach other persons. It is true that we usually move “from word to concept,” but we must also be able to move “from concept to word” if we wish to reach the other person...Only in this way, too, will we be able to hold ourselves back so that we can allow the

¹⁰¹ Gadamer often cites the example of Heidegger’s stammering here. Criticizing Heidegger’s rebuke of what he called “the language of metaphysics,” Gadamer (1) denies that there ever has been such a thing as the one “language” of metaphysics, and then goes on to say (2) “what Heidegger wished to say is certainly that he lacked the language to express what he wanted to say...’I am speechless’ means basically that one has encountered something surprising and unexpected, for which the appropriate expression is lacking to say what one wants to say.” Gadamer, “Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language,” *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, 40.

¹⁰² Plato, as Gadamer likes to point out, referred to “thinking” as a “dialogue of the soul with itself.” How is this a “dialogue”; who are the partners here? See Paul Ricoeur’s *Oneself as Another* for robust philosophical suggestion.

other person's views to be recognized."¹⁰³ By bringing into awareness the hermeneutical role of *dialogue* with the other for the continual re-formation of concepts, we have reached the culmination of this chapter. I will conclude by discussing the place of dialogue in concept formation, and by summarizing the function of this chapter as a whole.

Concluding with Dialogue: From Gadamer (back) to Phronēsis

In his paper, "Gadamer's Interpretive Practice," David Vessey helpfully summarizes several aspects of what we have discussed in the first two sections of this chapter: "When performing a history of concepts 'in their conceptuality' we need to trace the concepts back to their motivating phenomena; that is the only way we can understand them."¹⁰⁴ Vessey here highlights many of the basic concepts that have oriented this chapter – viz., *Begriffsgeschichte*, conceptuality, and experience. For the purposes of concluding this chapter, Vessey's statement also draws out a lingering issue; and one, which provides the context for concluding this chapter with a brief discussion of Gadamer's concept of "dialogue" and its role in concept reformation: namely, what is it to trace a concept "back" to its "motivating phenomena"? What is the philosophical sense of this phenomenological "back"; and *how* is such a tracing back to be accomplished?

¹⁰³ Gadamer, "From Word to Concept: The Task of Hermeneutics as Philosophy," *The Gadamer Reader*, 120.

¹⁰⁴ David Vessey, "Gadamer's Interpretive Practice," 9-10. Vessey explicitly notes Gadamer's "*Begriffsgeschichte*" essays in this regard: "in his *Begriffsgeschichte essays*" Gadamer says that "we should be seeking the phenomena that motivate the text." (Vessey, 10).

These questions are not directed toward Vessey per se, but rather toward Gadamer, whom Vessey is paraphrasing.¹⁰⁵ Gadamer, e.g. in his essay “Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language,” speaks of “the path back to the original Greek experience of language” and of “the original experience of the world that resides in the language and development of the Greeks.”¹⁰⁶ If Gadamer is not slipping into a kind of romantic naiveté about the possibility for such an “original experience” – *which he is not* – then we will need to explicate just how Gadamer understands the issues involved here. The orienting concept, which will guide my response to the matter just raised, and which will conclude this chapter, is of course Gadamer’s understanding of “dialogue” and “language as conversation.” What then is, and how does, the concept of dialogue, which has indeed already been functioning in the background throughout this chapter’s two previous sections, relate to the reformation of concepts and the “conceptuality” of the concept?

Now an historically effected consciousness, as we have said, recognizes that within the limitations of human self-consciousness, the linguistic tradition(s) in which we speak and think will, in part, function as a *vis a tergo* (force from behind). However, at the same time, an historically effected consciousness also recognizes that, through our belonging to the shared world of a linguistic tradition (e.g., the shared world that makes reading a text possible), and

¹⁰⁵ In fact, following the quote from him just above, Vessey goes on to ask a different, though somewhat related, question – one which concerns the sense behind Gadamer’s claims that *phenomena* “speak” by “posing questions” to us, and the hermeneutical consequence of this view.

¹⁰⁶ Gadamer, “Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language,” *Language and Linguisticality in Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, 41. I already hinted at this issue above in the discussion of Heidegger and his concern with explicating “basic” concepts. The phrases I quoted from Gadamer here are also directed toward an engagement with Heidegger. In fact, we will see how this forms a point of departure from Heidegger for Gadamer.

through the ongoing nature of human experience (as openness to the new), language will also always function as a *vis a fronte* (force from the front). That is to say, it is a force coming from the voice of the other who faces us, be it the speaking of a living human other, or the speaking of the text to us.¹⁰⁷ Put hermeneutically, a “*vis a fronte*” in the form of linguistic tradition is *you speaking to me*. Language, for Gadamer, is fundamentally what issues forth from a “Thou” (*Du*) as an address to an interlocutor (e.g., a reader) who then responds. “Language as conversation” therefore orients Gadamer’s phenomenological description of the human experience of language, and guides his hermeneutical reflections.¹⁰⁸ In *Truth and Method* this element is made explicit: “Hermeneutical experience is concerned with *tradition*. This is what is to be experienced. But tradition is not simply a process that experience teaches us to know and govern; it is *language* – i.e., it expresses itself like a Thou.”¹⁰⁹ The experienced hermeneut is not primarily the one who “knows” what the other is saying, but rather the one who is capable of letting the other speak about the shared matter of concern (*Sache*) in ways that may be quite different from how one understands things oneself.

Now with respect to the reformation of concepts in philosophy, it has become easy to neglect this dialogical basis of thinking, for example, (1) when we, post-Cartesians, presuppose the nature of thinking to be the monological work of a solitary, disembodied ego; or (2) when we

¹⁰⁷ Cristina Lafont, in her work, *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy*, speaks in just this way about Gadamer’s philosophy of language. Cf. *The Linguistic Turn in Hermeneutic Philosophy* (trl. Jose Medina), 78-80.

¹⁰⁸ For a clear statement, see Gadamer, “Reflections on my Philosophical Journey,” *Library of Living Philosophers: The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer* (ed. Lewis Hahn). (Open Court Publishing Company, 1996), 45.

¹⁰⁹ Gadamer, *TM*, 352.

use concepts or terms that have become ossified or restricted in their meaning through a neglect of their history and their connection to human experience; or (3) when we allow the fixity of thought in writing, which in our day is mostly read silently, to cloud over the connection of that writing to living communication and the continuation (continuity) of the dialogue in which the text expresses itself.¹¹⁰ Rather, for Gadamer, *thinking* – even, as Plato calls it, “the dialogue of the soul with itself” – is always the participation in a conversation handed down in and through the historical tradition.

Understanding the dialogical nature of thinking, and making this conversation explicit, is the task of Gadamer’s hermeneutics as a form of philosophy: “Every attempt of thinking is an attempt to converse...In the end, and also in philosophy, language remains conversation – conversation of the soul with itself or also with the other. Philosophy does not know any true sentences that one only has to defend and that one tries to prove as the stronger. Philosophy is rather a continual self-overcoming of all its concepts, as [*wie*] a conversation is a continual self-overcoming [*Selbstüberholung*] through the answer of the other.”¹¹¹

This “continual self-overcoming of all [of philosophy’s] concepts” (“*beständige Selbstüberholung aller ihrer Begriffe*”) is here related to the play of living dialogue between

¹¹⁰ This is precisely where language is most of all a *force from behind*: when, by failing to acknowledge the work of history or our hermeneutic situation, we pretend to speak and think “objectively” – in truth here, history will have its say.

¹¹¹ Gadamer, “Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language,” *Language and Linguisticity*, 43.

conversation partners.¹¹² We have seen already in the first two sections of this chapter how a particular concept carries within it a whole historical-linguistic tradition – a plurality of voices seeking to express an understanding of its “conceptuality” (*Begrifflichkeit*) or “matter” (*Sache*).

So far from being the willful fashioning of a technical term that is univocally fixed in its meaning, philosophical concepts are always undergoing their own reformation through the ongoing dialogue of human thinking; a dialogue, that is to say, *in which the “Sache” or phenomenon under discussion itself undergoes its own continual linguistic reformation*. One who reads Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* with an understanding of “*eudaimonia*” as “happiness” will (we hope) have their understanding of “happiness” changed, deepened, and challenged throughout the course of engaging that text. But that means that, at the end of the reading, one should (or could) go back through the text again and re-read with a new understanding of the *Sache* that one takes to be under discussion, and with which one is philosophically engaging – and again and again. Likewise, one who reads Aristotle’s text at the age of 18 and again at the age of 35 and again at 80 will, on account of their own experience with “happiness,” also engage with the *Ethics* differently each time as the *Sache* that forms the basis of the “conversation” between reader and text is continually transformed, and, we hope against hope, progressively deepened. Just as new experience involves the continual deepening and breakup of the short-sightedness of our past experience, philosophical thinking involves the continual breakup of the rigidity of supposedly chemically pure concepts (*die Starrheit der chemisch-reinen Begriffe*) – i.e., concepts whose meaning falsely appears to be already fixed,

¹¹² Thus Gadamer here provides an example of how a metaphorical statement can offer a path for philosophical thinking and clarification at the level of the concept (here, e.g., the concept of “thinking” as a “conversation”).

unalterable, and uncontaminated by the overtones, metaphorical uses, or varied applications of the word within our experience of the world.¹¹³ And again, within such an ongoing dialogue philosophy encounters its proper “touchstone” for the evaluation and reformation of its understanding of the matter at issue, or, as we say, the heart of the matter.¹¹⁴

Now how do things stand where the matter of “tracing” a concept “back” to motivating phenomena, or where, as Gadamer says, “the original experience of the world” that motivated the formation of a concept is concerned? Gadamer, who is implicitly criticizing Heidegger here, does indeed acknowledge a limited appropriateness of such an undertaking – it is always correct, for example, through “philological-historical work,” to seek out a deeper, more adequate understanding of the language of the text and the world that it gives voice to.¹¹⁵ However, two points need to be emphasized here.

First, it indeed is surely amazing how a text – and sometimes with the aid of historical-philological work – can alert us to another way of experiencing the world, and so deepening our philosophical engagement or “dialogue” with it. But just this fact means that one never seeks out the “original experience” of a motivating phenomenon in isolation from one’s own

¹¹³ Gadamer, “*Begriffsgeschichte als Philosophie*,” 249. Gadamer continues on to liken philosophical thinking to music: “*Musik ist erst jenes Gebilde, in dem Obertöne mit allem, was sie an neuen Klangwirkungen und Aussagefähigkeit der Töne zu erzeugen vermögen, mitspielen. So ist es auch im philosophischen Denken. Die Obertöne der Wörter, die wir gebrauchen, lassen uns die Unendlichkeit der Denkaufgabe, die Philosophie für uns ist, präsent halten, und das allein erlaubt, sie – in aller Begrenzung – zu erfüllen.*”

¹¹⁴ “*Im wirklichen Sprechen oder im Gespräch, sonst nirgends, hat Philosophie ihren wahren, ihren nur ihr eigenen Prufstein.*” Gadamer, “*Begriffsgeschichte als Philosophie*,” 250.

¹¹⁵ Gadamer, “Toward a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language,” *Language and Linguisticity*, 41. This can occur not only through “philological-historical work” but also through the occasional shock or surprise when re-reading a text, we suddenly realize that we did not appreciate the text’s foreignness or difference from our own world and opinions and experiences.

understanding and experience of that phenomenon. Listening or remaining open to the foreignness of the text is already a form of dialogical engagement about a subject matter, just as philosophy does not simply *critique* the language of a given text (*Sprachkritik*), but also seeks out and *discovers* new words for communicating with the other (*Sprachfindung*). Gadamer, who I quote at length, is explicit here:

Where communication seems impossible because one “speaks different languages,” hermeneutics is still not at an end. Precisely here the hermeneutical task is posed in full seriousness, namely finding a common language. Even the common language is never a fixed given. It resides in the play of language between speakers, who must enter into the game of language so that communication can begin, even where various viewpoints stand irreconcilably over against each other. The possibility of communication between rational beings can never be denied. Even the relativism which seems to reside in the multiplicity of languages is no barrier for reason, whose “word” [or *logos*] all have in common, as already Heraclitus was aware.¹¹⁶

For Gadamer, language is fundamentally a form of “participation,” a way of being “with-one-another” in communality, and so our dialogue with a given text is not something that can only begin “after” we have grasped the correct way of understanding the *Sache* to be discussed.¹¹⁷ Instead, we are always already working out our grasp of the subject matter precisely within an ongoing dialogue itself.

Second, this then means that at the very least, we must say that we are always only “on the way” to a better (I do not say “final”) understanding and dialogue with the text, because our understanding of the “conceptuality” or “heart” of a concept is always a provisional, somewhat

¹¹⁶ Gadamer, “Reflections on My Philosophical Journey,” *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, 29. I will take up Gadamer’s own paraphrase of Heraclitus (B2), which he quotes elsewhere as well, in a later chapter. And I will discuss Fragment B2 in its own right in Chapter Two – whether he knows it or not, Gadamer is here quoting the first occurrence of “*phronēsis*,” which was perhaps the coinage of Heraclitus.

¹¹⁷ Cf. Gadamer, “Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language,” *Language and Linguisticity*, 46.

idiosyncratic and distorted, and highly limited one. A “fully true” interpretation of Plato’s *Republic* would require that one engage with that text on the basis of a “fully true” understanding of, among other things, justice. But “justice,” for our human understanding, is not a static concept with ideal “properties” that could be enumerated once and for all if only one was smart or creative enough. Justice, like all concepts, is a *tradition* in which we participate and which is still unfolding. Justice is on the move.

The “original experience” we are seeking, in this respect then, has nothing to do with the “originality” of the historical context of a particular text, even if working towards such an understanding, as we said above, also has its limited place. Rather, we are always seeking out the “origin” as the *archē, telos* or “source” of “justice” in all its reality. It is by continually seeking out that source or wellspring that our philosophical dialogue with Plato’s *Republic* will be continually deepened and “corrected.” “*Ad fontes!*” provides direction, but we are mistaken if we seek the heart of a concept in some past historical context – it does not direct us “back” but rather (also) points us toward the openness of the future, and so humbles our self-understanding by reminding us that reaching that “end” is not for us – our own individual end is not the “end” of “justice.” There are hermeneutical consequences here.

In reading Plato’s *Republic* in the 21st century, we are not only drawn into the particular historical tradition surrounding the reception of that text. We are also drawing the *Republic* into the 21st century by allowing it to speak into and transform our understanding of our own world, and converse with us about the questions and problems that haunt us today – e.g., our own concern for justice and its lack. The “common language” that makes this possible is not the

abstraction of common principles of the concept of justice that both partners could agree upon.

Rather, as Gadamer writes,

It is certainly not always the case that a formal definition first makes the use of a concept common. Still less is a final justification required from which everything can be proven. The basis is rather a firm looking towards what is truly common, to which one belongs and to which we attempt to adhere. There can be no doubt here that such a looking forward always lies beyond the actually expressed. It is something like the idea, and especially the idea of the Good, that Plato's Socrates' untiringly sought, without being able to doubt it...Plato knew quite well why he called the step over the provable "dialectic" and entrusted it to the art of conversation.¹¹⁸

It is enough to conclude this chapter to say, as we said at the end of section one above, that for Gadamer the "application" or "fusion" of different languages or horizons of experience of the world must be done "correctly" (*richtig*) and under the "vigilance" (*Wachheit*) of an historically effected consciousness: "In the performance of understanding, a real fusion of horizons occurs – which means that as the historical horizon is projected, there simultaneously occurs its *Aufhebung*. We designate the controlled performance of such a fusion as the vigilance (*Wachheit*) of an historically effected consciousness."¹¹⁹ The "performance" (*Vollzug*) of the hermeneutic dialogue should be done *well*, responsibly, correctly, appropriately, with tact, etc. Here the question inevitably arises, *how* are we to engage in this hermeneutic dialogue in a correct (*orthotes*) or right or appropriate or true way? We fundamentally misunderstand the nature of interpretation if we think "correct" here simply means correctly following a procedure or methodology. Instead, the "correct" action in an ethical-practical situation requires the same sort of "vigilance" and tact as the "correct" action in a hermeneutic situation. With this, we

¹¹⁸ Gadamer, "Towards a Phenomenology of Ritual and Language," *Language and Linguisticity*, 46-47.

¹¹⁹ Boldface and translation mine. Gadamer, *GW I*, 312.

finally link back up with the central theme of this dissertation as a whole – for Gadamer’s answer to this issue lies within his retrieval of Aristotle’s concept of *phronēsis*.

But what is this concept of *phronēsis*? In this chapter we have come to recognize the nature of conceptuality as a dynamic tradition in which we who speak take up the word as the responsibility for accomplishing a task. What follows is my attempt to clarify the historical development of *phronēsis* in as much detail, complexity, polysemy, and nuance as I can by caring for the *phrēn/phronein* word family from Homer to Aristotle, and that ultimately in order to show how Aristotle was able to penetrate to the heart of, and so determine, “*phronēsis*” as an explicit philosophical concept. In this way we will see that Aristotle is at once a retriever, reformer, and founder of the tradition of *phronēsis* as the wisdom of living in words and deeds. Only after this – rather lengthy – historical mediation and engagement with the Greek origins will we come back to Gadamer and his own retrieval of *phronēsis* as an answer to the question surrounding the *praxis* and ethics of hermeneutics.

First, then, another re-beginning: the origin, *archē*, or wellspring of *phronēsis* is an affective one, lying in the very middle of our heart, lungs, or chest, i.e., our center – in that Homeric organ called the “*phrēn*.” That is where, in the face of our life “situation” (moral, practical, hermeneutic or otherwise), we feel the first trembling of worry, understanding, anxiety, confusion, excitement, surprise, and indeed, even our stumbling thinking that eventually “presses

forward” into our words and deeds, and so takes its place within “the conversation that we are.”¹²⁰

¹²⁰ Both Heidegger and Gadamer have referred to Hölderlin’s poem, “*Friedensfeier*” (“*Seit ein Gespräch wir sind...*”), but I came to a version of this phrase by way of Chapter One of Adriaan Peperzak’s *Thinking about Thinking. What Kind of Conversation is Philosophy?*

CHAPTER THREE

AN HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF PHRONĒSIS – PART ONE: THE PREHISTORY OF PHRONĒSIS

“Even when etymologies are right, they are not proofs but rather achievements preparatory to conceptual analysis, and only in such analysis do they obtain a firm foundation.”

- Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 108

Introduction

In Chapter One, I outlined the essential features of a Gadamerian-hermeneutic understanding of concepts and concept formation. By showing how, for the discipline of hermeneutics, concepts develop through their essential relationship to (1) history, (2) experience, and (3) dialogue, I analyzed the nature of concepts as living, dynamic traditions, in which thinkers are participants: in short, a concept is a kind of tradition. Throughout that chapter, I also showed how this hermeneutic understanding of concepts provides some guidelines for a Gadamerian “method” or “way” of engaging in philosophical inquiry - the writer of *Truth and Method*, it turns out, has a way of doing philosophy.

Towards the end of the previous chapter it was hinted that something like “*phronēsis*” plays an essential role in hermeneutics, although it remains for later chapters to explicitly discuss what this means, why this is the case, and what the implications are for the over-arching question of this dissertation - namely, in what sense is interpretation an ethical action? What is needed in these next two chapters (Chapter Two and Chapter Three), is to enact, concretely, this

Gadamerian way of doing philosophical inquiry in relation to the concept of *phronēsis*. If “*phronēsis*,” for Gadamer, is going to play an essential - indeed *the key* - role in the process of interpretation and understanding, it is imperative that we first gain a solid understanding of just what “the concept of *phronēsis*” means. Furthermore, in harmony with the work done in the previous chapter, it is also imperative to grasp the concept of *phronēsis* in just such a way that does not overlook (1) the *historical* development of that originally ancient Greek concept, (2) the particular *experiences* of phenomena that have been involved in the formation of that concept, and (3) the intellectual *dialogues* or conversations in which that concept continually underwent a process of re-formation. By reconstructing the history of *phronēsis* from Homer to Aristotle, it will become clear how “*phronēsis*” is not pure and simply an Aristotelian concept, but rather names a tradition in which Aristotle’s thinking participates, but which does not silence the other voices that have passed down that concept to him in their own ways.

Before beginning, it should be noted that these next two, “historical,” chapters of the dissertation are not merely in service of, or preparatory to the later chapters (Chapter Four and Chapter Five) on Gadamer’s work. It is also possible to read the next two chapters “for their own sake” or as “stand alone” contributions to the history of Greek thought. In this way, in particular, I aim to bring to light two historical facets of *phronēsis* that are sorely under-discussed. First, the goal of this chapter is specifically to show how “*phronēsis*” developed out of the *phren-phronein* word family as it was employed in poetry (Homer), medicine (Hippocrates), and pre-Socratic thinking (Heraclitus). Second, in the next chapter I aim to show how Aristotle’s own analyses of *phronēsis* are born out of a particular intellectual conversation (or better, “*Auseinandersetzung*”) between philosophy (Plato) and rhetoric (Isocrates). These

two historical goals taken together support my discussion of Gadamer in Chapter Four and Chapter Five, since they will result in (1) a well-grounded understanding of the concept of *phronesis*, as well as (2) a concrete example of what it means to say that a concept is an evolving tradition.

Introduction to the specific historical task

Scholarship

In claiming to provide some vital cultural background to Aristotle's own work on the nature of *phronēsis*, comprehensiveness is not and cannot be the goal. My hope in fact is simply to *begin* a discussion which is long overdue, and for which there is much work still to be done. It can be quite surprising to discover that even now, after so much spilled ink, there are still areas of Greek culture and philosophy that we are relatively in the dark about. Nevertheless, that seems to me to be the case when it comes to the cultural background of the concept of *phronēsis*. Of course, this is only *partly* the case. Beginning from the most recent renaissance in classical studies over the last 150 years, there has been plenty of work done on various aspects that are of clear relevance to the concept of *phronēsis*.¹ Nevertheless, we still lack a systematic overview of these pieces, as well as a sustained consideration of their significance for our reading of Aristotle.² A whole world of problems lie behind even the seemingly straightforward question such as whether or not "prudence" (from the Latin *Prudentia*) is still today an adequate translation of "*phronēsis*," and,

¹ For example, tracing the understanding of the noun "*phrēn*" from Homer to Euripides, for which see Shirley Darcus Sullivan, *Euripides' Use of Psychological Terminology*.

² And by extension, for how we view Aristotle's later philosophical translation into Latin.

if not, what would be.³ To really understand how to answer that question we would need to foreground the Greek cultural context and grasp the relevant connotations and motifs of the word, and then consider the extent to which our language has similar resources of varying degrees of similarity – for starters. Every translation is always an act of *highlighting* some aspects over others, but until we have a better sense for *the musicality of the word*, we will have only mere precedent to guide us in both our linguistic translations as well as our conceptual understanding of the role of *phronēsis* in its various Greek contexts.⁴

Now it is of course true that there are several works that concern the nuances of *phrēn* and *phronēo* in various Greek cultural contexts, but these are generally piecemeal in nature and do not consider the import of this for Aristotle. Our understanding of Aristotle therefore generally lacks the kind of synoptic character that would be necessary for a real contextualized re-reading of his work on *phronēsis*.⁵ Recently, however, some exciting attempts have been

³ For example, Irwin’s translation of the *Nicomachean Ethics* defends the translation of “prudence” for “*phronēsis*” almost exclusively on the basis of the authority of historical precedent – a defense which lacks any mention of the relevant hermeneutical complexities necessarily involved in every act of translation. Philosophically, I find this to be an inadequate solution insofar as the task is to understand Aristotle in our own language – *as though we had any other option*. I will return to this hermeneutical issue in the next chapter.

⁴ To be clear, mere precedent is not necessarily a bad thing. The purpose of these two chapters of the dissertation however is hermeneutic – i.e., to revive the Aristotelian concept by attempting to seek out the broader context in which it developed and functioned for Aristotle.

⁵ An interesting exception to this, on which I have relied somewhat for checking my own interpretations, is Pierre Aubenque’s *La prudence chez Aristote*. Though somewhat old now, the work really ought to be translated into English.

made to reconsider Aristotelian *phronēsis* in light of the Greek tragedies.⁶ But this can only be viewed as a beginning; and in any case, the impulse to reconsider Greek philosophy in light of Greek tragedy takes its contemporary departure from Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, for whom Euripides was already 'too close' to Socrates.⁷ An exaggerated tension between enlightened philosophical reason and a quasi-tragic "*amor fati*" serves its purpose undoubtedly, but it remains an exaggeration nonetheless until further cultural spheres are included into the conversation about Aristotle, and we should not be forced to situate our understanding of *phronēsis* along *that* axis merely. But what other axes are there? What other situations, and what other contexts? It should be noted that my aim is not to determine an objectively correct description of '*the*' proper context for interpreting Aristotle. Consonant with the hermeneutical clarity and humility that is required in every encounter with a text, it is enough to point out that both *the salient historical-contextual features* as well as *a subsequent re-reading of Aristotle* will be fundamentally *oriented* by the kinds of *questions* that *we ourselves* are interested in asking. This is the case *even if our questions and interests remain hidden from our explicit self-awareness*, and perhaps even *especially* when this is so.

⁶ The result of which has already pushed our understanding of Aristotle's practical philosophy in some relatively new and interesting directions by contemporary philosophers such as Martha Nussbaum or Paul Ricoeur.

⁷ It is interesting to see how Nietzsche's uneasiness with Euripides (along with Freud's fascination with Sophocles) exerts a kind of hidden authoritativeness even today in contemporary scholarship on Aristotle, for whom Euripides was the "most tragic" of tragedians (*Poetics*), and who he directly quotes in his discussion of *phronēsis* in the *Ethics*.

Methodological Considerations

In this chapter I have tried to provide a few suggestive points of cultural contact, and to begin drawing out what seem to be important motifs on whose basis we might gain some new insight into Aristotle's conceptualization of *phronēsis*. I have left the tragedies out of this chapter, since some work on this has already been done. Further, out of sheer necessity, I have unfortunately had to set Plato in his own right aside for now, despite the fact that Plato uses "*phronēsis*" more than any other classical Greek prose writer.⁸ Surprisingly, this Platonic context is also the most important gap in our appreciation of Aristotle's context. Perhaps owing to Plato's creative and basically free use language in general, there is no systematic study of his particular use of *phronēsis* or the *phrēn/phronēo* vocabulary generally. However, until we give serious thought to what Plato is trying to express philosophically with such language, our reading of Plato on this topic still risks being overly determined by Aristotle's own critiques of him; critiques which *appear* to be reflected in his own – somewhat idiosyncratic – refinement of ordinary language into the language of philosophical concepts.⁹ Happily, in any case, philosophical investigation does not have to wait on philological completion – indeed, it cannot.

⁸ Or anybody else for that matter. Perhaps there was something of this behind Gadamer's comment that *phronēsis* "is really a Platonic concept." Cf. Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*. However, mere word *frequency* obviously cannot be equated with *philosophical* investigation. For *that*, Aristotle's analyses are still the standard.

⁹ My hypothesis, which I can only gesture at in this chapter, is that in fact Aristotle is *returning* the language of *phronēsis* back to its "ordinary" roots, but while still essentially preserving what he has inherited from Plato and Socrates regarding the significance of *logos* for human action, and thereby refusing to allow the concept of *phronēsis* to completely recede into rhetorical-political superficiality, which it can *seem* to have in, e.g., Isocrates. In other words, we might read Aristotle as striking a philosophical third way "between Plato and Isocrates."

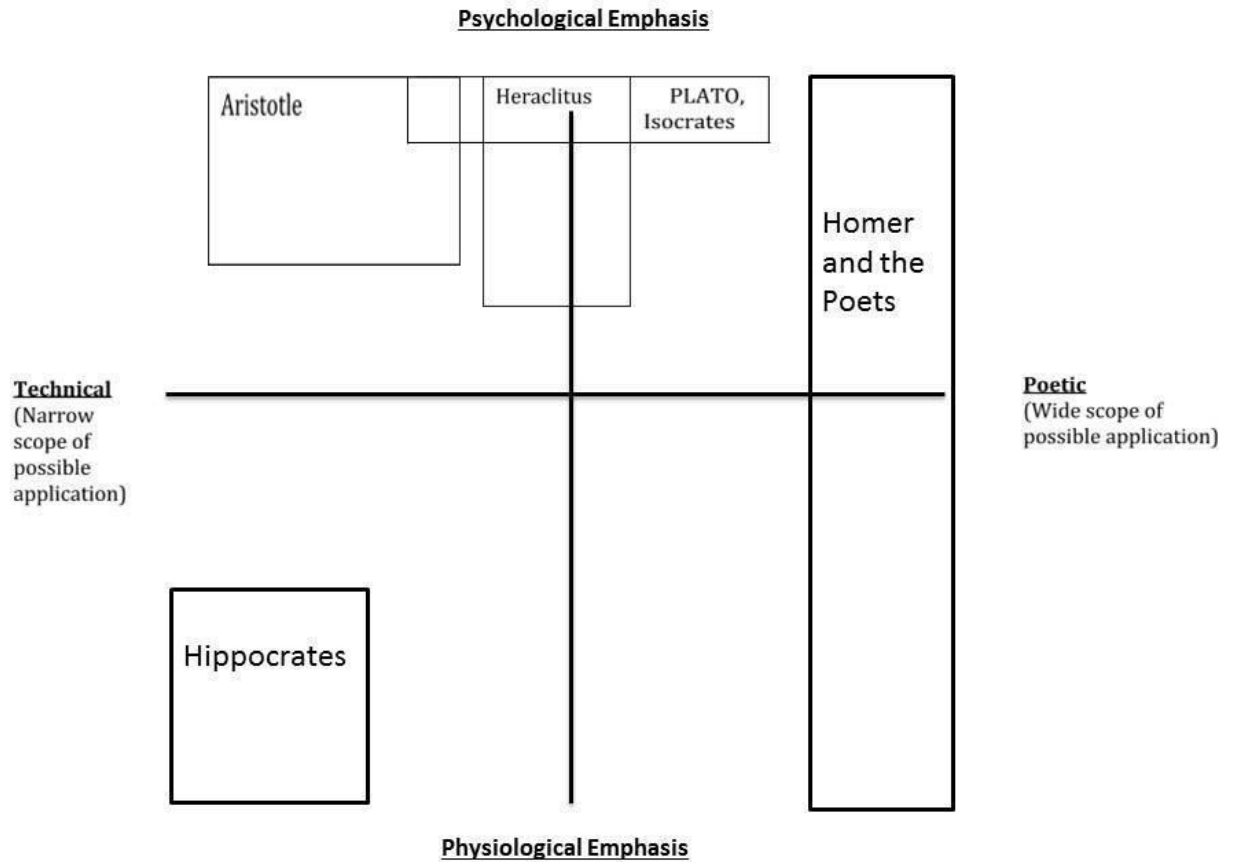
In the next chapter I will, however, provide a brief sketch of Aristotle's contemporary situation vis-à-vis the concept of *phronēsis*, which, hermeneutically, places Aristotle in between (or as a third way from) the use of *phronēsis* in (1) Plato and (2) Isocrates.

Pressing on, I have instead put my energies elsewhere in this chapter: *Homer*, *Hippocrates*, and *Heraclitus*. Homer was surely the most important for grasping the basic poetry of the *phrēn/phronēo* word-family in general. The Hippocratic Corpus was necessary to research because, although its specific influence on Aristotle's concept of *phronēsis* is only slight, the medical context as such is one of the most significant impulses behind Aristotle's thinking generally – son of a doctor that he was. Further, together with Homer, the Hippocratic writings form two ends of a semantic spectrum, and thereby help to orient the reader within the wide range of meanings of the *phrēn/phronēo* word-family employed by Greek intellectuals of later centuries.

To aid the reader I have constructed, below, a two-axis diagram of the linguistic situation. At the one (Homeric) end, we have a very wide, **poetic** use of the word-family (i.e., a wide scope of application), which, as will be discussed in detail below, generates a host of ambiguities and overlapping references. At the other (Hippocratic) end, we have a far more **technical**, use of the word-family (i.e., narrow scope of application), and particularly with respect to “*phrenes*,” which is generally used exclusively to refer to the diaphragm as a physical organ. To supplement this horizontal axis, I have also included a vertical axis ranging from uses that tend to highlight or emphasize “**psychological**” aspects to those that highlight more “**physiological**” aspects. My hope here is to give the reader a quick snapshot of how several authors generally tend to make use of the word-family. A few issues must be kept in mind here. First, for any particular use of,

e.g., “*phronēsis*,” by a particular author, that use may or may not be adequately placed within the relevant area mapped out here – good writers often surprise us. The diagram therefore is *probabilistic* in nature. Nevertheless, it seems to me that the diagram has a basic validity insofar as we keep in mind its purpose – namely, to provide the reader with an initial orientation and introduction into the dynamic varieties of “*phronēsis*.” Like all introductions however, there is some element of superficiality and hermeneutic injustice at work, the supplementation, correction, and general complication of which is the purpose the bulk of the chapter. For example, the diagram does not at all make clear the surprising commonalities between Heraclitus’ understanding of *phronēsis* and some of the Hippocratic literature. Further, the diagram may dispose the reader to assuming – *incorrectly* – that the vertical axis is intended to imply some form of a philosophical dualism between mind and body. Instead, I am merely concerned with *emphasis* by given author, and in fact *none* of the author’s discussed give any indication that *phronēsis* is an immaterial activity – even when it is extended to non-human beings (as in Heraclitus or Plato).

Figure 1. A Taxonomy of Phronein.



It should be noted that, insofar as Homer and Hippocrates form two end of the horizontal axis, Heraclitus will complicate things. On the one hand, Heraclitean “*phronēsis*” is not classifiable as either a straightforwardly technical or poetic use. At the same time, as we will see below, Heraclitus’ apparent coinage of *phronēsis* also breaks new conceptual ground in the *phrēn/phronēo* word-family. Further, as a consequence of this, not only does Heraclitus provide

us with the earliest mention of “*phronēsis*” (along with “*gnothi sauton*”), but his dense, difficult thinking also helped to generate the basic themes and problems regarding *phronēsis* that would be explored later by Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle (as I tried to indicate in the diagram).¹⁰ Further, the extreme hermeneutic difficulty of reading Heraclitus’ fragments proves useful for breaking up and re-tilling the intellectual soil of what is often today taken to be the basic sense of *phronēsis* – i.e., an epistemological term referring more or less to the activity of good deliberation. Heraclitus’ fragments are not easily interpretable if this is the meaning of *phronēsis* that we expect to find, and so the dense aphoristic style forces us to be open to other possibilities. Deliberation is not the hallmark of “*phronēsis*” in Heraclitus (or many other authors for that matter).

In what follows, I will offer a brief overview of each of the three “authors” insofar as they make use of the *phrēn/phronēo* word-family, and “*phronēsis*” in particular.¹¹ I will proceed in chronological order, and confine scholarly debate and references to the footnotes. I will also try to restrict any lengthy discussion of Aristotle in relation to a particular passage or author, preferring instead to save such discussion for the next chapter. My hope overall is not to lose sight of the enlivening and interesting themes and connotations that give body to the language, even as it is slowly raised to the level of conceptualization and self-conscious investigation. It is

¹⁰ I do not mean to suggest either that Heraclitus or any of the later writers did any of this explicitly, self-consciously, or intentionally. Rather, I am suggesting that *hermeneutically* it is helpful to understand the development of the *subject matter* of “*phronēsis*” this way. With respect to what any of these individuals intended *psychologically*, I am in fact skeptical of the actual relevance.

¹¹ The lexeme “*phronēsis*” does not exist in Homer, and not prior to Heraclitus.

rather difficult to gain a feel for the nuance of an otherwise dead word, and while no undertaking in this respect can ever be said to be completed or “successful,” we can at least rest assured that our *reading* of Aristotle will be changed and deepened as a result, and so too, thereby, our *understanding* of what is essentially at issue in that (re-)reading. With that said, I begin with Homer.

HOMER

The etymology of the *phrēn/phron-* word group is rather obscure. Several possibilities have been suggested over the decades in an effort to derive *phrēn* from one or more Indo-European words such as “surround” (**bhren*), “enclose” (*phrasso*), “shudder,” “quiver” (*bhur-*), “care,” “worry” (*ghren*), “cause to understand,” “to explain” (*phrazo*), as well as words relating to various parts of the body.¹² A variety of etymological dictionaries also link *phrēn/phronēo* to *phrazo* (i.e., to indicate [to oneself or another], phrase, declare, perceive, contrive), as well as to *osphrainomai* (i.e., to smell or catch the scent of...), though this latter use is not even found in Homer.¹³

Homer’s use of *phrēn/phron-* language in general is abundant.¹⁴ There are 379 occurrences of *phrēn*, and 14 occurrences of the synonymous *prapides*.¹⁵ The vast use of *phrēn*

¹² Cf., Sullivan, Shirley Darcus, *Psychological Activity in Homer. A Study of Phren*, 21.

¹³ C.f., Prellwitz, Walther, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der griechischen Sprach*, 494-495, and also Chantraine, Pierre, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque*, 1227-1228.

¹⁴ Attending to Homeric language is of course no simple task. There are plenty of interpretive questions that themselves would need to be admitted if a full study was being undertaken, which, per the introduction, it is not. For example, the relationship of ordinary 8th century B.C. language use to the grammatical-structural as well as poetic and religious demands of Epic Poetry written in dactylic

in Homer is in the plural *phrenes*, a feature that generally persisted, at least until the tragic poets, who tended to prefer the singular *phrēn*. In Homer, the singular *phrēn* occurs only 57 times, 21 of which are the formulaic expression “*kata phrena kai kata thumon*”.¹⁶ Similar to the English “lung – lungs,” *phrenes* seems to refer to some sort of unity although the word is plural. Grammatically, in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, *phrenes* is almost exclusively used in the accusative and dative cases with no instance of the genitive and only a handful in the nominative.¹⁷ Thus, the word is closely linked to a wide variety of verbs and prepositions: the *phrenes* are something “to,” “in,” “from,” “toward,” “against,” and “with” which something takes place.¹⁸

In order to untangle the complexity of the Homeric *phrenes*, I will make an analytical distinction between the “corporeal” and the “cognitive” features of the word, and treat each in its turn. However, as will hopefully be apparent by the end, this distinction must finally itself be

hexameter. All that I am concerned with here is to give the reader a basic sense for how the *phrēn/phronēo* word-family is used in Homer.

¹⁵ Pelliccia, Hayden, *Mind, Body, and Speech in Homer and Pindar*, 15.

¹⁶ Sullivan, Shirley Darcus, *Psychological Activity in Homer: A Study of Phren*, 177, and 200, n.2.

¹⁷ Jahn, Thomas, *Zum Wortfeld ‚Seele-Geist‘ in der Sprache Homers*, 309-314.

¹⁸ The dynamic nature of the *phrenes* in an individual character has helped to contribute to the now-standard debate about the Homeric “self”. That is to say, given the porosity of a particular character’s agency by not only the gods’ intentions and actions, but also the character’s own “organs” such as the *phrenes* – organs in which so much surprise and tumult takes place – to what extent can that character be properly called a “self” as opposed to a mere focal point of chaos? On this issue I find Hayden Pelliccia’s comment about a “normal operating self” to be sufficient: Pelliccia, Hayden, *Mind, Body, and Speech in Homer and Pindar*, 260. For an alternative take, however, see Bruno Snell’s *The Discovery of the Mind*, and for a nice overview of the basic positions, see Chapter One of Darcus Sullivan’s *Psychological Activity in Homer: A Study of Phren*.

canceled in service of a higher, albeit more ambiguous, unity. It seems to me that the Homeric use of *phrenes* is itself an ambiguous one, not open to strict demarcation and conceptualization or univocal translation. Nevertheless, beginning with this distinction helps to make this situation clearer.

At the end of this section, it will be clear that two central aspects (*affectivity* and *speaking*) of the Homeric *phrēn/phronēo* word family, together with a primary connotation of “breathing” and the general *practical-ethical* context for the word’s application, provide us with the most basic grasp of the relevant words and ideas (although admittedly covering a great wide range of senses). Moreover, the Homeric context also provides us with an initial sense for the hermeneutic context in which later philosophical thinking about “*phronēsis*” would take place (e.g., that of Aristotle’s). This is not to say that nothing changes, or is lost in the intervening time before Aristotle analyzes the concept of *phronēsis*. On the contrary, as we will see in the subsequent section, the Hippocratic medical understanding of the “phrenes” is dramatically different from Homer. As a general hermeneutic rule, however, that which persists unchanged, or holds steady, usually slips by us unnoticed, whereas what clearly changes seems to shine more brightly, and fascinates our contemplative life. It seems to me that the basic overtones and connotations of ordinary words, even when raised to the supposed height of a concept, are necessary to seek out and listen to as we try to hear what a corpus like Aristotle’s may still have to say to us today.

Phrēn

As one of the infamous so-called Homeric “organs,” the corporeal dimension of the *phrēn* can be translated by “diaphragm,” “heart,” “midriff,” “lung,” and “chest”. This leads us to

the first great theme of the language: *A defining motif of the word family is found in respiration, breath, breathing, and air.* Throughout, *even up to Aristotle's day*, it will be paramount that we do not forget this basic connotation. While some scholars have preferred, perhaps anachronistically, the translation “diaphragm” in light of the more determinate use found in the Hippocratic texts, Richard B. Onians has offered “lungs” as a superior alternative for (at least the corporeal side of) the *phrenes*.¹⁹ Translating *phrenes* in Homer as “lungs,” according to Onians: (1) does justice to the near exclusive use of the plural form, (2) makes better sense of many perplexing textual passages, and (3) draws out the close connection between breathing, speaking, emotion, and thinking.²⁰ Philip N. Lockhart has followed Onians by attempting to uncover a respirational sense of the verb *phronein* by rendering it as “to breathe” or “to exercise the lungs,” and thereby offer a stark contrast to the supposedly overly cognitive and intellectualistic understanding of the activity of *phronein*.²¹

Yet, in epic poetry, *phrenes* is used in too wide a sense to be understood merely as the “diaphragm” or “lung.” Moreover, it is methodologically dubious to confront Homer’s use of

¹⁹ The “anachronism” would involve reading 5th century medical writings back into 8th century Epic poetry.

²⁰ C.f., Onians, Richard B., *The Origins of European Thought*.

²¹ Lockhart, Phillip N., “*phronein* in Homer,” 99. Lockhart admits, and I would argue, that his attempt lacks a general persuasiveness insofar as there are only a small handful of instances where it would even seem plausible to render the verb with a more “physical” sense. Nevertheless, this should not obscure the issue. *Phronein* takes place “in” the *phrenes*. That is enough to establish the connection with respiration and corporeality generally. In any case, Lockhart’s attempt stands alone in the literature, so far as I can tell.

language with the expectation of terminological precision.²² Whether *phrenes* was a term that once had a more precise meaning, which had become more amorphous in Homer's time, or whether it is simply an element of Homeric-poetic writing that gives the term its richness of overtones and wideness of application, we cannot say. What, from our perspective, might be perceived as inconsistency, ambiguity, or obscurity, is perhaps simply the life of "natural language as distinct from specifically coined jargon".²³ To get a clearer picture of how wide the word "*phrenes*" can be used, therefore, we need to merge the cognitive and corporeal aspects that have been kept apart up until now.

Ambiguities in the *phrenes*

There are two features of the *phrenes* which cannot simply be classed as an overtly corporeal feature on the one hand, or more cognitive and intellectual feature on the other. The first, already introduced above, concerns the fundamental motif of "respiration." The *inspiration* that allows a Homeric character to speak with "winged words," and to deliberate and act with courage or *menos* often takes place "in" or *via* the *phrenes*. The *phrenes* are where a

²² While I am somewhat sympathetic with Onians' "lungs", I find Ireland and Steel's hermeneutical hesitancy to be both more persuasive and more precise: "Homer was first and foremost a poet engaged in the oral transmission of material that was largely traditional. The vocabulary he used, itself the result of decades and even centuries of change and development...For this reason we should perhaps be wary of applying too narrow an interpretation upon a word that appears to display a range of meaning as wide as that of *phrenes*...At all events it cannot be that we require from the poet an exactitude in dealing with a word that has at once physiological and psychological overtones..." See also their comment about Onians: "[His] arguments suffer from overstatement, from a desire to interpret literally many cases better left to be understood in a figurative sense." Ireland and Steel, "*Phrenes* as anatomical Organ in the Works of Homer," 194-195.

²³ Which I hope is reminiscent and consonant with the discussion of these issues in the previous chapter. Ireland and Steel, "*Phrenes* as anatomical Organ in the Works of Homer," 193.

character “*breathes*” what has been given via the god who inspires, breathes, or puts something, e.g., courage or an idea, into him or her.²⁴ Jeffrey Barnouw has tried to offer some intuitive plausibility to the connection between respiration and practical intelligence by noting that, phenomenologically, “it is the tense diaphragm and the pounding heart, and in the lungs when breathing becomes labored, that we can *feel* ourselves thinking about what greatly concerns us.”²⁵

A second ambiguous feature²⁶ concerns the relationship (be it a harmonious or oppositional relationship) of “outward” physical appearance or action, to “inner” disposition or character, as when the disguised Odysseus, having been treated so poorly by the suitor Altiños, retorts that it is a pity that Altiños has no *phrenes* to match his beauty.²⁷ One’s *phrenes* can be “firm” or “fitting” (Penelope), or “wretched” and “dark” (Agamemnon).²⁸ Relatedly, the archaic

²⁴ Onians, Richard B., *The Origins of European Thought*, 52. For an example, see *Odyssey* I.89 where Athena intends to do precisely this in-spiration of Telemachos so that he will leave Ithaca in search of his father.

²⁵ Barnouw, Jeffrey, *Odysseus, Hero of Practical Intelligence*, 102. Although Barnouw does not develop this insight in any systematic way, it is precisely this connection to lived experience that needs to be uncovered and described in order to grasp at least something of the *affective* and *traditional* connotations of “*phronēsis*” in Aristotle’s work. I will return to this motif below.

²⁶ That is to say, a feature which cannot easily be classed as merely physical or cognitive because the sense of the word’s use covers an overlapping array of dimensions, as I will discuss below.

²⁷ Od. 17.454. Or as when Hector rebukes Paris: “Will not the Achaeans mock us and say that we have sent one to champion us who is beautiful to see but who has neither strength nor courage in his *phresin*?” *Il.* 3. 44-45.

²⁸ Pearson, Lionel, *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece*, 54.

view²⁹ that a liquid (i.e., wine) is taken directly into the lungs also helps to articulate an ambiguous use of *phren*. Wine can be *meliphron*, sweet or pleasing to the *phrenes*. Should we say here that the wine is pleasing to the “lungs” (or to whatever other corporeal site one attaches to the *phrenes*), or that it is pleasing to the “mind”? Perhaps it is best to declare the opposition itself as simply out of place? In any case, we need to highlight the tight relationship between what is *passively* taken into or received from “the outside” by the *phrenes* (breath, words, wine), and what then *actively* comes back out of the *phrenes* (breath, words/deeds/emotions).³⁰ This situation is nicely depicted in Altinoos’ rebuke of Odysseus’ brazen speech for which the wine is blamed: “Wretched beggar you have no *phrenes*...the honeyed wine has wounded you as it does others who gulp it down beyond measure.”³¹

We can turn now from the more ambiguous features to the more *explicitly* psychical, or cognitive, side of the *phrēn*.³² Like the Homeric *noos*, the *phrenes* exhibit a broad array of what could be loosely referred to as “cognitive” or “psychical” activities including the following: deliberation, worry, thought, feeling, consideration, etc. Each of these activities generally includes shades of ethical, emotional, and practical-volitional meanings, which is not to suggest

²⁹ C.f., Onians, Richard B., *The Origins of European Thought*, 32-36.

³⁰ E.g., Sarpedon’s words “bite” Hector in his *phrenes*. *Il.* V. 493; and Pindar writes the line, “Terrified, the old man’s *phrēn* cried out, ‘My son!’”. For Pindar, see Pelliccia, 6.

³¹ *Od.* XXI. 285-295. Altinoos goes on to list a series of events in which someone committed some error as a result of impairing their *phrenes* with wine.

³² This is not to suggest that the cognitive dimension is somehow incorporeal in Homer. Rather, the issue here is simply a matter *emphasis*. After all, cognitive activities (*phronein*) take place “in” the *phrenes*.

that such categories are themselves distinct in Homer.³³ Insofar as a more explicitly “intellectual” activity is being emphasized (as opposed to the “emotions” of the *phrenes*), the Homeric *phrenes* includes at least four prominent capacities: (1) ability to recognize salient practical features of a situation, (2) ability to make plans about future situations and decisions for action, (3) receptivity to the words and deeds of other persons, gods, or animals, and (4) a tendency towards being either wise or foolish.³⁴ Whether or not one finds the more intellectual aspect to be the most prominent feature of the *phrenes*, this feature itself cannot be understood in abstraction from, especially, the emotional and ethical aspects. To be *periphron* or *aphron* (wise or foolish) cannot be reduced to a matter of mere success or failure of deliberation or an unemotional calculus. The context and characters involved in the use of such language must guide the reader’s sense of the shades of meaning.

Further, the *activities* of the *phrenes* associated with the verb *phronein* are always tightly bound up with ethical and practical concerns – *a feature that, alongside the “respiratory” motif, generally persists throughout antiquity*. We find an exemplary ethical-practical moment in, e.g., Theognis: “This city is pregnant, Cynus; I feel it may breed a man who will put a check on our *kakes hubris* [base hubris]. Our citizens have *saophrones* [sound *phrenes*] still, but the leaders

³³ Shirley Darcus Sullivan is quite helpful in outlining the features of each of these (non-)categories, e.g., by showing that the range of emotions typically supported by the *phrenes* include joy, courage, pain, grief, anger, rage, fear, care, worry, love, hate, etc. For citations, consult the expansive appendix to her *Psychological Activity in Homer. A Study of Phren*.

³⁴ This is not an exhaustive list, but presents the great bulk of intellectual activities of the *phrenes*. For a full discussion, c.f., Chapter Seven of Sullivan’s *Psychological Activity in Homer. A Study of Phren*.

are ready to fall into the depths of baseness...”³⁵ Lionel Pearson, in his excellent work, *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece*, summarizes the situation nicely: “The term *phrenes*, it must be admitted, is used with a certain vagueness in Homer, in much the same way as terms like ‘heart’, ‘mind’ and ‘feelings’ in modern English; it is not used to denote intelligence as opposed to feelings, and the corresponding verb, *phronein*, can mean ‘feel’ as well as ‘think’.”³⁶

Breathing under pressure: emotion, language, and respiration in the phrenes

Before transitioning to the next moment of this chapter’s intellectual history of *phronēsis*, I want to elaborate the claim advanced at the beginning of this section that the connection to “respiration” establishes a key background for the whole *phrēn/phronēo* word family. There are two relevant points to be made here. The first concerns the link between *respiration*, *action*, and *emotion*.³⁷ An exemplary situation for Homer in which these three phenomena occur is that of battle. One can be “dai-phron” or “peri-phron” in war. To have a mind for (perhaps we should say, “to have the lungs for”) battle and to know how to handle oneself with true cleverness and wisdom throughout the tumult and complexity of a whole war (as a general would need), or in a particular battle (as a soldier would need) requires that one’s breathing remains “*measured*” so as to “keep one’s head on straight” and not be *a-phron* (foolish, headless), but also that one receive a little luck (*tyche*) from the gods in the form of

³⁵ Theognis, 39-42. C.f., Theognis, “The Elegiac Poems of Theognis,” *Elegy & Iambus* (trl. J.M. Edmonds), vol. 1, 235.

³⁶ Pearson, Lionel, *Popular Ethics in Ancient Greece*, 54.

³⁷ The second, discussed below, concerns the link between respiration, action, and *speaking*.

inspiration (menos).³⁸ The one who is *daiphron* must still not be foolish *qua* “heartless,” or disposed toward foolhardy fits of rage, but must know how and when to be *exephron*, that is, to “hold back” or “stay” one’s war-like *phrenes*. In the *Odyssey*, of course, such language has a wider application than literal fighting. The pounding heart, anxious breathing, and the way the stomach seems to turn over are phenomena that occur in any situation that displays its own social, ethical, and existential complexity.³⁹ To be *aphron* is not simply a failure of cognition. Rather, it is to give oneself over, or, better, to be *delivered over* to an uncontrolled heart and mind, e.g., to the hyperventilation displayed in the sheer terror of a helpless fighter in battle who acts foolishly,⁴⁰ or to the hubris, arrogance, and presumptiveness of a base heart. The *phrenes* can be either good (*euphron*) or bad (*aphron*), and the steady vigilance over one’s emotions that is required is seemingly built into the language itself.⁴¹

A second issue to be clarified is that between breathing, action, and language or *speaking (logos)*. The *phrenes* often seem to “speak” to their owner in a sense close to the language of *conscience* and *impulse* – that is to say, their “language” is one toward or away from

³⁸ For a good discussion on this etymological background, see Bruno Snell’s “*phrenes – phronēsis*,” 34-64.

³⁹ Here is another point that must be carried over into our eventual retrieval of the later 4th century philosophical and political understanding of *phronēsis*.

⁴⁰ C.f., Snell, Bruno, “*phrenes – phronēsis*,” 50.

⁴¹ T.B. Webster echoes this: “The beating of the heart is obviously affected by emotion; so is the pace of breathing, and this is visible in the diaphragm which appears as a dark shadow at moments of great exertion and excitement”. Webster, T.B., “Language and thought in early Greece,” 31.

action.⁴² Hayden Pelliccia is worth quoting here: although the *phrenes* “cannot tell us anything specific, nor give an account of their ‘knowledge’ because they lack *logos*,” nevertheless their lack in verbal precision and intellectual clarity also exhibits “powerful ethical authority, in the sense that they give powerful testimony to a persons’ ethos: being impulsive, they are assumed to be honest and sincere”.⁴³ It seems to me that we find here the basic force behind the occasional German translation of *phronēsis* as “*Gewissen*” (conscience). Do not the heart, guts, stomach, and lungs “know” or “have a feel for” what is (apparently) desired and what must (apparently) be done (or not done) long before being raised to the level of public speech or, further, to the clarity of the philosophical concept – that is to say, in the (self)conscious use of language?

Further, the *phrenes* are a necessary but insufficient condition for the activities of speaking and listening insofar as they help to set the *tone* or *context* in which *logos* transpires. This point remains close to the affective dimension of the *phrenes*, but what should be noted here is that the condition of a particular character’s *phrēn* will act as a kind of initial, affective, *interpreter* (*hermeneus*) of the *logos* of another person or god. Words often *stir*, *strike*, *hurt*, *gladden*, or otherwise affect the *phrēn* of Odysseus.⁴⁴ The “spirit” in which we receive or “take in” words or thoughts from another is at least as important as the explicit content of what was

⁴² C.f., Hayden Pelliccia: “The organs are the source of what we might call impulses: they can impel a person to a certain action, perhaps an action different from what the person otherwise thinks desirable”. Pelliccia, Hayden, *Mind, Body, and Speech in Homer and Pindar*, 39.

⁴³ Pelliccia, Hayden, *Mind, Body, and Speech in Homer and Pindar*, 260-265.

⁴⁴ *Od.* VII.218ff; VIII.448; XIII.362; XV.486; XVII.238; XVIII.327, 331, 391, 345; XXIV.382.

articulated.⁴⁵ To “put” another’s *logos* in one’s heart (or, passively, to have them “put” there by another, e.g., by Athena), as Penelope occasionally does,⁴⁶ is to suggest a deeper sort of care, pondering, or deliberating over what has been said – a kind of deliberation or care that begins long before and often long after any step-wise calculation of a determinate response.

HIPPOCRATES

I turn next to the Hippocratic Corpus in order to highlight some distinctive changes from the Homeric usage as well as to make clear that even in the drastically different contexts that separate 8th century Epic Poetry from 5th century medical research, the underlying motifs discussed above still retain a hold on the meaning of the language. I will discuss the manner in which the Hippocratic literature (1) *departs* from, and (2) remains *consonant* with a traditional (i.e., Homeric) understanding by looking at the noun *phrēn* and the verb *phronēo* each in turn. It should be noted once again that my concern is not with a particular medical author’s work *per se*. I will ignore consideration of the purpose, authorship, and date of, as well as theoretical conflicts between the individual medical treatises. My interest is confined to noting the basic features of how the word-family is being used in general. That said, when I do narrow my focus, below, on an individual work, I will then, of course, spend more care on the historical-exegetical

⁴⁵ Here lies another hermeneutic lesson, insofar as we are always already “spiritually” or “emotionally” oriented in our receptiveness to the word of another. Affective *neutrality* would here simply be the clinically diagnosable condition of a “flat-affect” – which is even still a kind of orientation of course, albeit an unfortunate one.

⁴⁶ For a paradigmatic example, c.f., Od. XIX.236.

complexities specific to the passage(s) in question.⁴⁷ The point to be stressed is that the analysis of Hippocrates given here vis-à-vis Homer should not be construed as an historical or chronological thesis, but simply a philological one. That is to say, I am not making any claims about the historical development of the meaning of the language. Placing “Hippocrates” after “Homer” (dubious proper names which must themselves be understood in a quite loose sense) is meant only to highlight the extent to which they each employ the *phrēn/phronēo* vocabulary in rather different ways.

Phrenes in the Hippocratic Corpus: Connections to Homer

In their use of “*phrenes*,” the Hippocratic⁴⁸ writers maintain a connection to the Homeric usage in at least *three* ways. *First*, though perhaps least interestingly, the medical treatises persist in using the plural “*phrenes*” by a wide margin. *Second*, although it is correct that the Hippocratic texts generally use “*phrenes*” to refer to the diaphragm in a merely material fashion (i.e., stripped of any cognitive dimension), the fact that the writers feel the need *to distance* their technical, medical use of the term from such ordinary or poetic uses shows that there still persists a link between the cognitive and corporeal dimension of the *phrenes* in the 5th and 4th centuries. The second issue also persists in Aristotle, though the use of “*phrenes*” in

⁴⁷ For now, those suggestions will be confined to the footnotes.

⁴⁸ I will sometimes slip between “Hippocrates” and “the Hippocratic writers” in order to indicate the loose sense in which the proper name “Hippocrates” can be attributed to the medical corpus whose name it underwrites.

written texts drastically declines in frequency by the late 4th/3rd centuries – an event which is perhaps a direct consequence of the influence of the medicalization of the noun.⁴⁹

The *third* and final way in which the Hippocratic writers remain close to the ordinary use of “*phrenes*” also concerns their use of “*phronēo*” (discussed below), and is much more interesting than the two features previously mentioned, and is worth lingering over. Of concern is the still foundational, and to that extent basically unquestioned, relationship between *phrēn/phronēo* and its “respirational” motif; that is to say, a link with breath, breathing, and air on the one hand, and the diaphragm (*phrenes*) and cognitive capacities (*phronein*) on the other. While the link *between* the *phrenes* and the activity of *phronein* was medically severed over time, their respective links to the context of respiration remained utterly steadfast. The link between the *phrenes* and respiration in the medical writings, for example, is obvious: the function of the “diaphragm” just is a respiratory one. Even today there is still a shadow of this, e.g., in our use of the “phrenic nerve” to refer to the nerve regulating the respiratory motor functioning of the diaphragm.⁵⁰ I will return to the respiratory theme below.

Phrenes in the Hippocratic Corpus: Medical Innovations

⁴⁹ I say “written texts” to avoid the claim that the written texts we have access to accurately portray the scene of day-to-day language use. I will discuss the *in-frequent* uses of “*phrenes*” in Plato and Aristotle later. For now, it should be noted that, despite the massive vocabulary of both philosophers there are less than 20 instances of some form of “*phrēn*” in *their entire combined works*. Compared to the statistics for Homer given above, the basic situation is clear enough: By the 3rd century, the great Homeric ‘organ’ had been surgically removed by the doctor’s more technical, naturalistic language.

⁵⁰ Other contemporary words built from the *phren-* prefix include frenzy, frenetic, or frantic, as well as medical terms like phrenismus (encephalitis), phrenomania (delirium), and my personal favorite, phrenomophobia (fear of thinking).

The major point of *departure* from the ordinary or Homeric use of *phrenes* can easily be seen in light of the Hippocratic discussion of (1) the classical disease called “*phrenitis*,” as well as (2) the classical question about the “seat of the mind”. In the hands of ancient medicine, the *phrēn* ultimately loses its Homeric-Poetic mystique, and instead is refitted into a more technical, medical terminology.⁵¹

Together with *mania*, *epilepsy*, and *melancholia*, *phrenitis* (discussed below) rounds out the four primary psychosomatic diseases of classical medicine, which are often closely related in their symptoms and treatment. *Phrenitis*, which in modern medicine was split into the diagnoses of meningitis and encephalitis, is described by the ancient writers with such disparate symptoms as insomnia, seizures, chills, and side pain.⁵² The constant features of *phrenitis* in all cases, which generally tends to be lethal in the Hippocratic case studies, are fever and some form of psychological impairment, generally referred to as *paraphronesis*, *ekphrones*, *paranoian*, and *mania*.⁵³ The etiology of *phrenitis* is also obscure. While the inflammation of the *phrenes* would seem to be the most intuitive, the translation of “*phrenitis*” into modern medicine comes by way of meningitis and encephalitis, which refer to inflammation in the brain. Further, some

⁵¹ A study of the influence of Greek *medicine* on Greek *tragedy* would, I think, yield a different conclusion overall. The poets – similar to our use of “heart” – have always been comfortable with a language that does not fit in the doctor’s analyses. The hermeneutic priority of a work’s *subject matter* here is rather obvious.

⁵² Which refer to inflammation in the *brain*. As we will see, in the Hippocratic writers a split is introduced between the *phrēn* (diaphragm) on the one hand, and the healthy or ill activity of *phronein* on the other, which may or may not take place “in” the *phrenes* as it did in Homer.

⁵³ *Epidemics* VII recounts a story in which the town butcher in Acanthus developed a *phrenitis*-related hunchback.

Hippocratic texts attribute *phrenitis* to bile settling in the bloodstream, which should already alert us to the fact that these writers were quite willing to separate the *phrēn* qua material organ, from the activity of *phronein*, and arrive at varying conclusions as to the precise *location* of that activity.⁵⁴ In any event, the treatment for *phrenitis* is entirely physical – patients are to keep warm, abstain from wine, take hot baths, eat and drink various doctor-prescribed concoctions, etc. Volker Langholf’s helpful work succinctly summarizes the role of “*phrenes*” here:

In the Hippocratic Collection it [i.e., *phrenes*] has practically lost its Homeric meaning of a function (‘intelligence’, ‘mind’, ‘soul’ etc.), and is most often used as an anatomical name equivalent to *diaphragm*, and occasionally for other membranes...it always means an organ, never a function; it is never used metaphorically.⁵⁵

To be ‘*phrenitic*’ has little to do with having poor *phrenes* in the Homeric sense. When Penelope chastises Telemachos for allowing a guest (the disguised Odysseus) to be treated so poorly, telling him that his *phrenes* are no longer good and firm (*empedoi*), she does not send for a doctor, but rather, by her actions, demonstrates what it means to be thoughtful and considerate (*epiphron*).⁵⁶ Even the abstention from wine, which Altinoos recommends to the disguised Odysseus, is obviously stated on an ethical-practical plane rather than a medical one in which the ostensibly same advice is given by the Hippocratic doctor.⁵⁷ Nevertheless, as suggested above, it is this old poetic connection between the corporeality of the *phrenes* and some cognitive,

⁵⁴ Discussed below under the heading of the question of the “seat” of the mind.

⁵⁵ Langholf, Volker, *Medical Theories in Hippocrates: Early Texts and the ‘Epidemics’*, 40- 44.

⁵⁶ Homer, *Odyssey*, XVIII.210-220.

⁵⁷ Though perhaps not an entirely different plane!

affective, ethical, and practical dimension that the Hippocratic writers feel the need to *explicitly confront*. To put the issue somewhat differently, we can ask *how* the Hippocratic corpus generally wedges a difference in between what was previously considered to be two sides of the same coin: that is, the corporeality of the *phrenes*, and the psychical activities taking place “in” them. One way the difference is discussed comes by way of the classic question concerning the seat of the mind. Since the symptoms of *phrenitis*, as with other diseases such as epilepsy (the so-called “sacred” disease), tend to be dominated by a mixture of physical and psychical disturbances often employing a range of terms associated with our *phrēn/phronēo* word-family, it stands to (one line of) reason that the *phrenes* are the seat of mind. After all, where else but the *phrenes* would be the place to look to for an account of *ek-phrones* (“out of one’s mind,” delirium, madness)? Along with the blood and the brain, the *phrenes* are often presumed to be an initially reasonable candidate for the noble office of the mind. However, e.g., in the infamous *De Morbo Sacro*, the writer is quite clear about the abyssal difference⁵⁸ between the organ “*phrenes*” on the one hand, and the activities (and their malfunction) related to the verb *phronēo*. Not only is such a distinction clear here, but the writer is equally clear about the brain being the seat of the mind:

In these ways I hold that the brain is the most powerful organ of the human body...The diaphragm [*phrenes*] has a name [*onoma*] due merely to chance [*tyche*] and custom [*nomo*], not to reality [*eonti*] and nature [*phusei*], and I do not know

⁵⁸ It should be noted that we are not drawing a distinction between “the mind” and “the body” here. The separation of the *phrenes* from psychical activities, which they “contain” in Homer, is specifically a question of corporeal *location* in Hippocrates and not a distinction between materiality body and immaterial mind.

what power [*dunamin*] the diaphragm [*phrenes*] has for thought and intelligence [*noein kai phronein*]...⁵⁹

The author of the text allows himself to speculate about the *phrenes*, but even then the matter is clear:

It can only be said that, if a man be unexpectedly over-joyed or grieved, the diaphragm jumps and causes him to start. This is due, however, to its being thin, and having a wider extent than any other organ; it has no cavity where it can receive any accident, good or bad...it feels nothing before the other parts do, but is idly named as though it were the cause of perception; just like the parts by the heart called ‘ears’ [i.e., the auricles], though they contribute nothing to hearing.⁶⁰

Although the *phrenes*, along with the heart, “are best endowed with *aisthesis*” (sensation, feeling, perception), “neither [the *phrenes* nor the *heart*], however, has any share of *phronēsis*, but it is the brain which is the cause [*aitios*] of the things I have mentioned.”⁶¹

Aside from the arguments in favor of the brain, Aristotle himself would later make the same claim about the etymology of *phrēn* and its (non-)relationship to *phronein*.⁶² Historically, the *phrenes* would never again regain the prominence and dignity displayed in Homer, even if the Homeric use persisted in the occasional poetic use.

Phronein in the Hippocratic Corpus

⁵⁹ Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*, 20.

⁶⁰ Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*, 20.15-30ff.

⁶¹ Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*, 20.

⁶² *Parts of Animals*, III.10 672b25-673a10.

Given the change that the *phrenes* have undergone in the Hippocratic corpus, we need now ask how the verb *phronēo* is understood, and if it is at all different from its basis in the language of poetry. Because the medical authors have severed the Homeric link between the *phrēn* as an organ and the activity of the verb *phronein*, we have to treat their understanding of both separately. Thus while the differences from Homer vis-à-vis an understanding of the *phrēn* was clarified above, a more complex picture results when consider the Hippocratic understanding of the activity of *phronein*. As with the first section, I will here discuss two respects in which *phronēo* language is used (1) differently from, and (2) in consonance with Homer. Both respects are, thankfully, distilled in two particular passages in the Hippocratic corpus – the text from *De Morbo Sacro*, quoted above, and a particular chapter from *On Breaths*.⁶³

What connects the Hippocratic use of the activity of *phronein* together with its poetic use in Homer is not simply that it is understood to be some kind of cognitive, intellectual (broadly construed) activity, but rather that it maintains close ties to the “respiratory” motif that I have suggested forms the primary background for all *phrēn/phronēo* language. In fact, and nearly paradoxically, precisely because of the way in which the medical writers understood *phronein* differently than Homer (i.e., as *doctors* and quasi-natural scientists), they are actually led to emphasize and make explicit the connection between *phronein* and respiration, air, and *pneuma*. In other words, in departing from one Homeric feature (i.e., the link between the *phrēn*

⁶³ Cf., also Hüffmeier, Friedrich “*Phronēsis in den Schriften des Corpus Hippocraticum*,” 51-84.

and *phronēo*), the Hippocratic corpus solidifies another. What then are these differences and similarities?

On the one hand, the nature of 5th/4th c. medical prose writing together with the sorts of questions which motivate the Hippocratic writers results in a different sense of *phronein* than is found in Homer. This is not merely due to the fact that clear distinctions, e.g., between *aisthesis* and *phronēsis* are sometimes prevalent in Hippocrates, whereas the same cannot be said of Homer. The Hippocratic Corpus is so varied and disharmonious that one always feels the danger of drawing conclusions by omitting some alternative piece of evidence. The real mark of difference in the uses of *phronein*, however, is more general. There is a clear difference in the style and tone with which the medical writers approach any discussion of *phronein*. That is to say, the Hippocratic texts are concerned specifically with the physical nature of human intelligence. Whereas the Homeric presentation of *phronein* is clearly more dynamic and covers broad array of meanings, the Hippocratic usage is (somewhat) more precise, and more precisely focused on a particular aspect – i.e., the relationship between the activity of *phronein* and the corporeal constitution of human beings as healthy or sick.⁶⁴

To summarize: *phronein* in Hippocrates designates the *healthy, normal, sound* use of one's cognitive faculties, including intelligence and thinking (broadly construed), as well as “perception” in the robust sense in which we might say in English “she's a very perceptive

⁶⁴ I acknowledge that I am overstating the issue somewhat here however. Just as with Homer, to be “healthy” was still understood by way of a variety of religious practices and a sound grasp of an individual's place in the immediate environment and the cosmos generally vis-à-vis that of the gods.

person” or “he knows how to read a situation”.⁶⁵ *Phronein* in Hippocrates can be contrasted with *paraphronesis*, and being *aphron*, either in the more technical, medical sense of “delirious” (as in the case of the disease *phrenitis*), or in a sense reminiscent of a Homeric character who, amazed at the audacity of another’s words or deeds, exclaims that he must be “out of his mind.” Examples of the preoccupation, as is only right for a doctor, with the ways in which a normal and healthy *phronēsis* can be sustained or can deteriorate is apparent in the Hippocratic text, *On Breaths*. *Phronēsis* there is said to undergo a change (an *alloiōsis*) in a number of ways, such as the onset of disease (i.e., epilepsy), or in more everyday ways, such as in sleep and dreaming, and drunkenness. The writer is concerned to note that there are a variety of corporeal events, activities, and changes which produce significant consequences for what is otherwise referred to as a sound, healthy mind.⁶⁶ The connection between our bodily constitution and the healthy use of our cognitive faculties comes by way of what the writer refers to as “habits” (*ethismata*): “Learnings and recognitions are matters of habit. So whenever we depart from our accustomed habit our intelligence (*phronēsis*) perishes”.⁶⁷ The “habits” here should be understood on the basis of Hippocratic *dietetics*, which includes not only what and how one eats, but also what and how one should engage in physical exercise, business, parties, etc. – in short, one’s whole day-

⁶⁵ I therefore consider myself to be in basic agreement with Pierre Aubenque’s *La prudence chez Aristote*, and Friedrich Hüffmeier’s “*Phronēsis in den Schriften des Corpus Hippocraticum*.”

⁶⁶ In this case, through some obstruction or alteration in the makeup or flow of the blood.

⁶⁷ *Ta gar mathemata kai ta anagnorismata ethismata estin; hotan oun ek tou eiiothotos etheos metasteomen, apollutai hemin he phronesis*

to-day and year-to-year “style” or “disposition”. Dramatic or subtle changes and excesses vis-à-vis one’s “character” will affect one’s *phronēsis*, perhaps for the better but often for the worse.⁶⁸

Drawing the discussion of Hippocrates to a close, I want to discuss, as with Homer, the relationship between *phronein* and breathing.⁶⁹ The relationship between wind, or air, and disease in the Hippocratic corpus would be a theme too large to tackle on its own here.⁷⁰ Suffice it to say that the link is clear, e.g., throughout *De Morbo Sacro*: changes in wind patterns and climate (*kairos*) play a key role in both managing and explaining the onset of a particular patient’s ailment. The importance of air, climate, and proper respiration for *phronēsis* becomes clear by the end of the work, which I quote at length in light of its relevance:

....when it [i.e., the brain] is healthy, it is an interpreter [*hermeneus*] to us of the phenomena caused by the air, as it is the air that gives it *phronēsis*...in fact the whole body participates in *phronēsis* in proportion to its participation in air...As therefore [the brain] is the first of the bodily organs to perceive [*aisthanetai*] the intelligence [*phronēsis*] coming from the air [*ēeros*], so too if any violent change

⁶⁸ Although I will discuss this in more detail in the next chapter, we should take note that Aristotle, through his *ethos-ēthos* (habit-character) word-play, is evoking the world of popular medicine, but thereby raising it to the higher, ethical-practical level of virtue. Aristotle’s implicit point is fundamental: (bodily) health is not enough to satiate the most primordial desire of human *phusis*. As that which saves (*sōzein*) *phronēsis*, moreover, the virtue of *sophrosune* is equally raised up by Aristotle onto a higher philosophical plane. But is not Aristotle *in this sense* simply remaining a faithful follower of the Socratic-Platonic transformation of language and thinking? Whatever criticisms Aristotle has of the “Socratic exaggeration” of virtue/knowledge in *EN* BK VI, we should not lose sight of the more fundamental agreement on the basis of which his thinking moves.

⁶⁹ As stated above, the connection between breathing and the *phrenes* (diaphragm) in Hippocrates is clear. The function of the diaphragm just is a respirational one.

⁷⁰ Even if we restricted our focus to the texts considered here, *De Morbo Sacro* and *On Breaths*.

has occurred in the air owing to the seasons [*horeon*], the brain also becomes different from what it was.⁷¹

I am unaware of any Homeric use of *phronein*, which would rival what, to modern ears, must sound strange in speaking of “intelligence” or “sense” as residing in or coming from the air. In any event, this role of air has consequences not just for patients, but for the etiology of diseases as well as the doctor’s ability to prescribe treatment. According to the writer of *De Morbo*, the so-called “sacred disease” is incorrectly and unhelpfully named, owing to a misattribution of the “divinity,” which properly belongs to the “elements”:

Therefore I assert that the diseases too that attack [the brain] are the most acute, most serious, most fatal, and the hardest for the inexperienced to judge of. This disease called sacred [i.e., epilepsy] comes from the same causes as others, from the things that come to and go from the body, from cold, sun, and from *the changing restlessness of winds*. These things are divine. So that there is no need to put the disease in a special class and consider it more divine than the others; they are all divine and all human. Each has a nature and power of its own; none is hopeless or incapable of treatment.⁷²

Understanding and respecting the “restlessness of winds” and its role in providing, sustaining, and destroying human *phronēsis* is the heavy task that falls to the doctor:

So the physician must know how, by distinguishing the seasons for individual things, he may assign to one thing nutriment and growth, and to another diminution and harm...Whoever knows how to cause in men, by regimen [i.e., dietetics], moist or dry, hot or cold, can cure this disease also, if he distinguish the seasons for useful treatment, without having recourse to purifications and magic.⁷³

⁷¹ Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*, XIX.

⁷² Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*, XX-XXI.

⁷³ Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*, XXI.

To conclude, despite the fact that the *phrēn* has been severed from its earlier link to *phronein*, the theme of *respiration* closely follows on heels of any use of both *phrēn* and *phronein*. Homer and Hippocrates – and here I mean ancient Greek culture generally – presume an intimate link between the outside air or environment, and its involvement with “inner” human cognitive activity. In fact, Homer’s poetry itself was never as explicit as Hippocrates on this point: *phronēsis* is “of the air” (*tes phronēsis tou eeros*), and “the whole body participates in *phronēsis* in proportion to its participation in air”.⁷⁴ But what can it mean to say that *phronēsis* involves such an *elemental* dimension – i.e., that *phronēsis* is in some meaningful way bound up with the air? The brain, for its part, is the *hermeneus* of “the phenomena caused by the air” insofar as it distributes to the rest of the body its proper share of “phronetic air,” thereby causing (*parexei*) intelligence and movement of the limbs (*ten phronesin kai ten kinesin toisi melesi*).⁷⁵ Here, the whole body *breathes phronēsis* to the extent that its contact with the “outside” air is sound and unobstructed.

There is a good reason why *phronein* and *phronēsis* could never really come to be thought of as *incorporeal*, if indeed even *nous* has that meaning in Plato or Aristotle. *Phronēsis* names not only the healthy, sound manifestation of human psychology, but also articulates an intimate connection with one’s surrounding world, and the *climate* which forms and reforms one’s cognitive capacities in this-here-and-now *environment*, even despite (or together with) all

⁷⁴ Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*, XIX.7-10.

⁷⁵ Hippocrates, *On the Sacred Disease*, X.20-24.

of the contingency in the “restlessness of the winds”.⁷⁶ Be it in Homer or Hippocrates, *phronein* is a deeply *human*, climate and environment specific, activity. If *noein* (e.g., in Aristotle and Plato) could potentially raise the human *up to* something divine, *phronēsis* requires the gods “come down” to our contingent, human situation, and in-spire or breathe something divine (courage, wisdom) *into* us. This intimacy between “inside” intelligence and “outside” environment clearly presses hard against any modern subject-object, inside-outside, or mind-body presupposition. In a way, the tension will only become greater with Heraclitus.

HERACLITUS

Reorientation: The Emergence of “Phronēsis”

In the following section I narrow the focus down to “*phronēsis*” as such. At this point, the above two sections have given us a robust picture of how to understand in general the *phrēn/phronēo* word-family across two very different rhetorical contexts (Homer and Hippocrates). With Heraclitus, however, we begin to move from the plane of historical-etymological interest to the plane of philosophical thought. As when Socrates in the *Philebus* can no longer hold the door shut and must relent, allowing all the varieties of knowledge and pleasure to come rushing in to join the discussion about the second best life, so, too, Heraclitus’ fragments force philosophical thinking to begin in earnest. Heraclitus not only introduces “*phronēsis*” into Greek, but further, through the movement of his cryptic thought, he also sets the

⁷⁶ This could be further developed along archaic religious lines by investigating the need for a divine “interpreter” (*hermeneus*) of the meaning of subtle shifts in the “winds” or “tides” for those going off into battle or preparing for a birth.

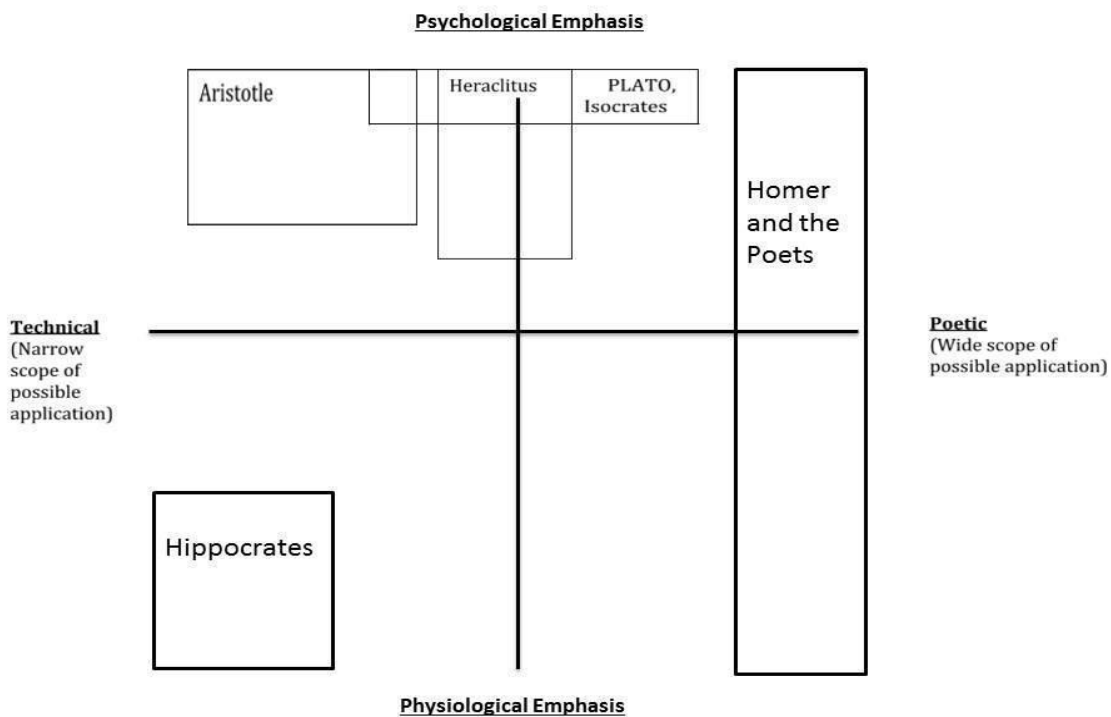
basic hermeneutic stage for many later authors' thinking about the meaning of *phronēsis* (especially Plato, Aristotle, and Isocrates).

Returning to the diagram which I introduced at the beginning of this chapter (provided again just below), the point to be noted here is that Heraclitus establishes the meaning of *phronēsis* in a decidedly “psychological” (as opposed to merely “physiological”) sense. In general, later thinkers followed him in this.⁷⁷ Moreover, Heraclitus' use of the word, although I will argue below that it has a *somewhat* precise sense (i.e., as a form of self-knowledge concerning one's place in the cosmos), nevertheless is not to be taken as a ‘technical’ concept, on account of the linguistic density of his fragments and the obscurity of the thinking taking place within them. As far as the “scope” of application (the horizontal axis in the diagram), I situate Heraclitus in the middle of that axis in order to indicate some of my interpretive reservations regarding just how precise Heraclitus understood the word. The diagram is also intended to indicate the way in which thinkers, after Heraclitus, pulled “*phronēsis*” in rather different directions in terms of the scope of application (now wide, now narrow). Explicating *that* situation, however, will be left for the start of the next chapter. In general, what I am aiming to do in the rest of this chapter is to give an account of one under-developed but important context for understanding and retrieving Aristotle's philosophical analyses of *phronēsis* – namely, the introduction of the concept into philosophical thinking by Heraclitus.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ To reiterate a caveat however. The diagram is merely probabilistic, and does not purport to do full justice to any thinker's actual use of the language. I am of course open to suggestions for revision and clarification. Nevertheless, the basic situation seems correct enough to be useful for orientation.

⁷⁸ Heraclitus admittedly is only one context among many for understanding the concept of *phronēsis* in Aristotle, standing alongside Plato and Isocrates who are even closer to Aristotle's writings.

Figure 2. A Taxonomy of Phronein.



Interpreting the “phronetic fragments” of Heraclitus

The topic of “*phronēsis*⁷⁹ in *Heraclitus*” is terribly underexplored.⁸⁰ Given that Heraclitus has provided us with the *first mention* of “*phronēsis*” (perhaps his coinage), it is

Nevertheless, I hope this section will demonstrate why Heraclitus remains invaluable for re-reading any of these later authors.

⁷⁹ Although there is no one English word that correctly translates *phronēsis* across all contexts, “understanding,” “wisdom,” and perhaps also “thinking” are adequate beginnings for its use in Heraclitus.

surprising that the theme has not received more attention. The specific aim of what follows is two-fold. First, and most generally, I will make the case that there exists a “*phronetic* language” in Heraclitus, which should be taken seriously *as* an important topic for further exploration in its own right.⁸¹ Second, over the course of a close reading of several of the most relevant fragments, I provide a provisional description of what Heraclitus takes “*phronēsis*” to be.

A Private Understanding?

The first use of the abstract action noun “*phronēsis*” occurs in the following fragment:

Although the word is common, the many live as though they have private understanding [*phronēsin*].⁸²

The fragment, which was preserved for us in a passage from Sextus Empiricus, is particularly rich in its complex construction and conceptual density. Unlike many other

⁸⁰ That is not to say that it is *entirely* unexplored. The point is simply that “*phronēsis*” in Heraclitus is generally subordinated to some other, or more general line, of investigation. For some who do, albeit briefly, discuss the topic, see Kirk’s commentary on fragments B2 (according to Diels’ numbering) in *Heraclitus: The Cosmic Fragments*; Werner Jaeger’s “Heraclitus” in his *The Theology of Early Greek Philosophers*; and Gadamer’s “Heraclitus Studies” in *The Beginning of Knowledge*. See also the 2008 dissertation by Mathew P. Meyer, “Heraclitus on Meaning and Knowledge Limitation.”

⁸¹ I am not very happy with these expressions, and welcome alternatives. In any case, by “*phronetic* language” and “*phronetic* fragments” I mean the word-family derivable from the basic noun *phrēn*, the verb *phroneo*, and especially *phronēsis*, which transforms the verb into an action noun. I include the following in my list of “*phronetic*” fragments: B2, B17, B112, B113, B116 (for *phronein* and *phronēsis*), and B104 (for “*phrēn*”). For “*euphronē*,” a beautiful poetic epithet used by Heraclitus to refer to “night,” see also B26, B57, B67, and B99. Throughout the section, I will always cite the Greek in a footnote whenever I first introduce a particular fragment.

⁸² τοῦ λόγου δ' ἐόντος ξυνοῦ ζώουσιν οἱ πολλοὶ ὡς ἰδίαν ἔχοντες φρόνησιν (B2). Kahn: “Although the account is shared, most men live as though their thinking were a private possession.” The verb *phronein* and its root noun *phrēn* were already in use in Homer, though their meaning had also developed somewhat dramatically by the time of Heraclitus. See n. 12 below for his gloss on the fragment.

fragments, B2 contains a cluster of key Heraclitean words – i.e., *logos*, *xunos*, *oi polloi*, and *idios*.⁸³ My aim is to show that *phronēsis* needs to be added to that list as well. Before we can answer the question about the meaning of *phronēsis* in Heraclitus, we need to take a close look at B2. As is so common with the Ionic wordsmith, his language buzzes with the electricity of dialectical play as each fragment demands that we slow down and linger with it.

Just what is going on in B2? It is often noted that the “*common logos*” appears juxtaposed to the “*private phronēsis*” of the many. But what is the nature of this juxtaposition? It is imperative here that we pay close attention to the ‘contrary to fact’ tonality suggested not only by the “*hōs*” (“as if”), as well as the “although...” in the opening clause, but also by the syntactic separation of “*phronēsis*” from its adjective “*idian*” (“private”) by way of the intervening participle “*exontes*” (“having”). By constructing the fragment in this way, Heraclitus has underlined the paradoxical *unreality* involved in the way most of us (*oi polloi*) live our lives.⁸⁴ Human life is all too often lived in an *irrealis* modality. At the conceptual level, the essential opposition concerns the common and the private (ξυνοῦ vs. ἰδίαν), and not at all simply

⁸³ Note the several parallelisms with the beginning of B1 – the famous *Logos-Proem*. The full first sentence of B1 runs, τοῦ δὲ λόγου τοῦδ' ἐόντος αἰεὶ ἀξύνετοι γίνονται ἄνθρωποι καὶ πρόσθεν ἢ ἀκοῦσαι καὶ ἀκούσαντες τὸ πρῶτον. Kahn’s translation: “Although this account holds forever, men ever fail to comprehend, both before hearing it and once they have heard.” For example, (1) both B1 and B2 take the bare form, “although X, yet Y,” (2) the opening clause of B1 (τοῦ δὲ λόγου τοῦδ' ἐόντος) is repeated nearly identically in B2 (τοῦ λόγου δ' ἐόντος), and (3) each sentence concludes with a statement about the rather miserable condition of how most humans live vis-à-vis the *logos*. This syntactical closeness has led some to think that B2 must have come just after B1, but it seems to me that this confuses conceptual closeness with closeness in order.

⁸⁴ See Vlastos, 132-135, for someone who also notes the sense of the “unreality” of the *phronēsis* in play at B2.

the *logos* and *phronēsis as such*.⁸⁵ To make this structure more apparent in English it might be better to translate B2: “although the word is common, the many live as if they privately had *phronēsis* [understanding].” A more precise question would therefore ask about the extent to which *phronēsis* can participate in what is “common,” as opposed to the solipsistic, myopic, and private world of the sleeper, which Heraclitus equates with the *irrealis*. In fact, the introduction of the “private *phronēsis*” by the “as if” (*hōs*) should already alert us that Heraclitus is forcing the word into a context that is foreign to his real understanding of it. Real *phronēsis* – what that is, we have yet to say – is not to be identified with the private life of the many (*oi polloi*). Before we can respond to this question, however, we need to shed some light on the nature of the “common” and the “private” here.

We are given a clue about the meaning of “private” in fragment B89, which states that, “the world of the waking is one and shared, but the sleeping turn aside each into his *idion* [private] world.”⁸⁶ The one and shared *cosmos* (*hena kai koinon kosmon*), that is to say, the world of the waking, is opposed to the sleepers who “turn aside” (*apostrephesthai*) into a private (*idion*) world. We have here the image of a sleeper who, having been partially awoken for just a moment (perhaps by a gadfly), shifts positions and “turns over” onto his other side in bed, and

⁸⁵ Kirk, 61ff, is explicit about this: “It is important not to be misled by the contrast between *xunou* and *idian* into thinking that an equally exact contrast exists between *logou* and *phronesis*...[There] is sufficient connection between *logos* and *phronesis* to ensure that the opposition between their significant epithets is not lost.” I am in agreement with Kirk’s point, but not his reasoning, as I will discuss below.

⁸⁶ ὁ Ἡράκλειτός φησι τοῖς ἐγρηγορόσιν ἓνα καὶ κοινὸν κόσμον εἶναι τῶν δὲ κοιμωμένων ἕκαστον εἰς ἴδιον ἀποστρέφεσθαι. Though it is not to be classed as a “*phronetic* fragment,” it is useful insofar as it clarifies the *idian* of B2. Note again the logical form, “although X, yet Y” in play here.

comfortably drifts back down into the unreal-world of sleep. All too often, humans might be better described not as “rational animal” but rather simply as “very tired.” Aristotle draws a perfectly correct conclusion from this, though it is not generally given much philosophical emphasis – unlike the gods, our participation in *theoria* is hemmed in by the fact that we get tired, and are ultimately destined for sleep.⁸⁷ Of interest to Heraclitus, however, is the sudden and absolute opposition between the common world of the one who is awake, and the private world of the sleeper. We are familiar with the way that a friend who falls asleep during a late night conversation suddenly no longer seems to be in the same world with us. On account of this, readers of Plato’s *Symposium* are forever frustrated with Aristodemus who fell asleep, thereby separating us from the world of Socrates’ *logos* concerning tragedy and comedy.

At the other end, with respect to the language of the “common,” Heraclitus invites us to pull apart an ambiguity present in the word. In one way, it is appropriate to identify the many (*hoi polloi*) with what is common. However, Heraclitus says that what is common (*xunou*) is precisely what the many *commonly* forget or miss in their lives. It may indeed be *common* to live as though one could privately have an understanding concerning what is good and worthwhile, but the truthfulness and vitality of one’s “own” wisdom is often enough unmasked in the light of day – that is, in the shared, *common* space of the word of dialogue. In other words, it is common, all-too-common for us to retreat into the privacy of our own opinions and pseudo-understanding (*idian phronēsin*), missing out on what it means to take our place in the shared, public world, structured as it is by the truly “common” *logos*. The common *logos* of B2 cannot be a private possession because it is not something one can be said “to have” at all. Neither does

⁸⁷ Aristotle, *EN X.7*.

the *logos* require *private* (*idian*) initiation into a secret knowledge. Rather, the *logos* pervades all and is shared by all things unendingly (*aei*) – it is *common* to all things: “although the word is common, the many live as if they have understanding [*phronēsis*] privately” (B2).

A Puzzle about B113

What then does Heraclitus take to be the nature of an authentic, real *phronēsis*? This sort of question is just what forms part of the gap in the scholarly literature. By not raising the topic of *phronēsis* to the level of explicit engagement in Heraclitus’ fragments, there is a tendency either to not see the question itself,⁸⁸ or to interpret it on the basis of rather anachronistic categories.⁸⁹ Both G.S. Kirk and Charles Kahn, at least, see that there must be *some* kind of connection between *phronēsis* and *logos* insofar as fragment B2 makes us wonder whether there really even is such a thing as a “*private phronēsis*” at all. However, they are in disagreement about the nature of that connection.⁹⁰ Their disagreement is ultimately determined by the interpretation of another “*phronetic* fragment” (B113), which states, “understanding is common

⁸⁸ Vlastos, 132, is clear about the nature of the juxtaposition in B2 (i.e., between “common *logos*” and “private *phronēsis*”), but he fails to engage the question of what would be a positive account of *phronēsis* in Heraclitus.

⁸⁹ As Dorter, 42-43, does insofar as he might seem to push Heraclitus into a quasi-cosmopolitan and humanist direction. We should not forget that, from the perspective of his contemporaries, it would have been Heraclitus himself who seemed to be living in his own *private* world – “turning aside” from the public by forsaking a powerful political career in 6th century Ephesus.

⁹⁰ Sextus Empiricus’ gloss seems unhelpful to me: B2 “is nothing other than an explanation of the way in which the universe is ruled. Therefore **insofar as we share in** awareness of this, we speak the truth, but insofar as we remain independent of it, we lie.” Boldface mine. See Kirk, 57-64. The question I am raising here is rather Aristotelian in a way: just what is meant by “share in” or “participate in”? Sextus Empiricus does not clarify, though he seems to suggest that *phronēsis* is something that allows us to “share in” awareness about the nature of the universe (i.e., the *logos*).

to all.”⁹¹ As Dorter notes, the fragment has been interpreted in a wide variety of ways, none of which stand conclusively.⁹² For Kirk and Kahn, the matter largely rests on how we read the (*xunon esti*) *pasi* here.

Should we take Heraclitus to be implying only “all” human beings? If so then we are led, as Kirk is, to claim that *phronēsis* names a human activity which, in its true (i.e., not “private”) form, grasps its proper *object* (i.e., the common *logos*).⁹³ Thus the connection between *phronēsis* and *logos* “is a connection of relation rather than of kind.”⁹⁴ More specifically, *phronēsis* in Heraclitus would be an epistemological activity of those humans who have found the proper object to grasp in their thinking.

Alternatively, perhaps the “*pasi*” of B113 signifies that understanding (*phronein*) belongs to all things (the whole *cosmos*) in common, thereby pushing the fragment toward a quasi-panpsychism, which is how Kahn takes it. In this case the relationship between *phronēsis* and

⁹¹ ξυνόν ἐστι πᾶσι τὸ φρονέειν.

⁹² Dorter: Fragment B113 “has been interpreted in widely different ways: from Kirk’s dismissal of it as a paraphrase of B2...to Kahn’s interpretation of it as panpsychism, to Schindler’s proposal to take it as meaning ‘I cannot think by myself alone.’” See Dorter, 43n.16.

⁹³ Thus Kirk, 61-62ff: “The opposite of *idia phronesis* would not be *xunh phronesis*, which is nonsense (in spite of fr. 113d), but *phronesis tou xunou*, which would include the *xunos logos*.” This is close to begging the question. Why “nonsense” unless Kirk has already determined that *phronēsis* has no place beyond human cognition? But where has he shown this? On the contrary, there was even Ionic precedent for understanding *phronēsis* in a more ‘elemental’ way – that is to say, for *phronēsis* to be “in the air” and so “in” human beings only inasmuch as the air is breathed (See, Hippocrates *On the Sacred Disease*. 20ff). Kirk helps himself by abandoning B113 as spurious. It seems to me that Vlastos has been persuasive in rescuing B113 in its own right as genuine. See Vlastos, 135ff.

⁹⁴ Kirk, 61-62. See note 7, and note 15 for my thoughts about this suggestion.

logos would indeed be close to synonymous. In fact, this is how the early church father Hippolytus apparently interpreted things, and the German philologist Karl Reinhardt, following him. The “fire” (or “thunderbolt”) is able to steer (i.e., order, distinguish, re-connect, etc.) all things (B64),⁹⁵ because it is *phronimon*.⁹⁶ Karl Reinhardt has worked back from here in arguing that “*phronēsis*” (*Vernunft*) was in fact already in Heraclitus (!) a synonym for *logos* and fire – as the “*Vernunftfeuer*.”⁹⁷ It is true that Heraclitus nowhere explicitly equates *phronēsis* with either fire or *logos*. But on the other hand, when was Heraclitus ever explicit?

Having raised the issue about “real *phronēsis*” with the help of B113 and its puzzle, we can shed more light on the matter by looking to other *phronetic* fragments. It seems to me that by failing to treat “*phronēsis*” explicitly as a proper topic of investigation, both Kirk and Kahn are forced into placing too much weight on the reading of “*pasi*” in B113. But both B113 and, especially, B2 begin to come into their own when they are placed in *hermeneutic proximity* with their *phronetic* cousins, such as B17.⁹⁸

Phronēsis as Understanding One’s Place in the Cosmos

B17 runs as follows: “Most do not think [*phroneousi*] things in the way they encounter them, nor do they recognize what they experience, but believe their own opinions.” Part of what

⁹⁵ τὰ δὲ πάντα οἰακίζει κεραυνός.

⁹⁶ Hippolytus, *Refutatio* IX.10.7, and also Karl Reinhardt’s *Parmenides* (cited below).

⁹⁷ See Karl Reinhardt’s *Parmenides und die Geschichte der griechischen Philosophie*, 161-162ff.

⁹⁸ οὐ γὰρ φρονέουσι τοιαῦτα πολλοί, ὅκοίσοι ἐγκυρεῦσιν, οὐδὲ μαθόντες γινώσκουσιν, ἐωυτοῖσι δὲ δοκέουσι.

makes this fragment so notable is that here “*phronēsis*” is contrasted to what it seemed (at least at first glance) to have been precisely identified with in B2. In B2 the many were said to live as if they had their own private understanding, and we were left in the dark about what non-*idian phronesin* might look like. But here in B17, *phronein* is itself contrasted with the thinking of the many that is blind to anything other than their own opinions. Further, B17 provides real insight into what it would be to move out of the lonely, secluded world of private thinking. To let one’s *understanding* be *guided* and *disciplined* by experience (i.e., how phenomena show up to or are encountered by us) is the positive task that Heraclitus gives us. Elsewhere, Heraclitus seems to describe this as learning the *language* of things (B107).⁹⁹ Mere sensation is not enough for real *understanding* (*phronēsis*) or experience. What good are eyes and ears if they do not understand the language that phenomena speak: “Not knowing how to listen, neither can they speak” (B19).¹⁰⁰ The most rigorous *listening* is the prerequisite for *phronēsis*. For what we understand and what we testify to is, at its best, the common word of the world – that is, the *logos* (should we also say the *phronēsis*?) that is common to all.

Continuing in this way, it seems significant to me that we have embedded within B17 faint allusions to the old “*pathei mathos*” and “*gnothi seauton*” dictums. Anchored by “*ginōskousin*,” Heraclitus is able to echo both dictums at once.¹⁰¹ Through this, we are given an

⁹⁹ κακοὶ μάρτυρες ἀνθρώποισιν ὀφθαλμοὶ καὶ ὄτα βαρβάρους ψυχὰς ἐχόντων. Kahn: “Eyes and ears are poor witnesses for men if their souls do not understand the language.”

¹⁰⁰ ἀκοῦσαι οὐκ ἐπιστάμενοι οὐδ' εἰπεῖν.

¹⁰¹ See the “γινώσκειν ἑωυτοῦς” in B116, discussed below, for an even clearer reference.

interpretation that combines the two: to recognize *experience* as that which one must *accept* and *undergo* in order to “wise up” up to one’s place in the *cosmos*. Explicit praise of *phronēsis* occurs in B112, where the activity of *phronein* is said to be the greatest virtue, and is identified as true wisdom – here taken to be the ability to *speak and act* (*legein kai poiein*) in tune with the truth, and to perceive in accord with nature (*physis*).¹⁰² *Phronēsis* has become a form of self-knowledge.

Echoing this, *phronēsis* as self-knowledge is evidenced also in fragment B116, which, *not coincidentally*, contains the *first mention* of “*gnothi seauton*”: “it belongs to all men to know themselves and to think well.”¹⁰³ Here we have a clear instance of “*pasi*” being restricted to humanity.¹⁰⁴ Therefore, even if we must bracket the question of the scope in which *phronēsis* is “common to all” at B113, we still have won some genuine insights about how Heraclitus views its manifestation in *human* life. *Phronēsis*, at least insofar as human beings have a share in it, is for Heraclitus a form of *self-knowledge*, where the particular “self” that is at issue can only truly

¹⁰² [σω]φρονεῖν ἀρετὴ μέγιστη καὶ σοφίη ἀληθέα λέγειν καὶ ποιεῖν κατὰ φύσιν ἐπαῖοντας. Kahn: “Thinking well is the greatest excellence and wisdom: to act and speak what is true, perceiving things according to their nature.” In some versions, the Heraclitean cognate of *phronein* – *sophronein* – is preferred here, though for my purposes either one are is adequate.

¹⁰³ ἀνθρώποισι πᾶσι μέτεστι γινώσκειν ἑωυτοῦς καὶ [σω]φρονεῖν. As Kahn and others (e.g., Wilkens, Diels, North, perhaps also Vlastos) have noted, here is another place where *phronein* and *sophronein* are found in different manuscripts, but which are in any case cognate. For “*gnothi seauton*” in Heraclitus, cf., Eliza Wilkens, 12.

¹⁰⁴ But I do not see that this resolves the Kirk-Kahn disagreement one way or another. Kirk might cite this as precedent for taking *pasi* in a restricted sense when used with *phronein*, whereas Kahn might point out that Heraclitus has taken pains here to do exactly what he did not do before – namely, *restrict* the usage. Both are reasonable – and that is partly what makes the interpretation of *phronēsis* in Heraclitus a genuine hermeneutical task.

be understood in light of its *particular* situation vis-à-vis the *whole* cosmos. *Phronēsis* names a *particular* attunement to the structure of the *whole*, and is manifested in one's *living* (actions, passions, words, etc.).¹⁰⁵

Returning to fragment B2 one last time, things begin to fall into place when we recognize that “*phronēsis*” has this specific sense of self-knowledge: “Although the word is common, the many live as though they privately have *self-knowledge*,” or “...as though their *self-knowledge* were a private possession.”

Though perhaps an inadequate translation, putting things in this way at least highlights the unreality of *idian phronesin*, and gives us a somewhat clearer sense of what Heraclitus understands by the word. To understand oneself or one's place is to recognize the link between one's own orientation, and the context or environment in which one is oriented. It is natural – for us – to carve up the public and the private, the interiority of the individual and the exteriority of the world. Yet that kind of distinction is just what Heraclitus cannot abide. Human beings are not set apart from the world either in body or in mind. Therefore, neither is our understanding of ourselves, or the good life, disconnected from the common *logos* that structures all. Self(-knowledge) and world(-knowledge) are intimately entwined with one another for Heraclitus – so close in fact that the distinction between the two keeps breaking down.

¹⁰⁵ Heraclitus does not specify what that life looks like, nor does he restrict *phronēsis* to a cognitive act *per se*, since it is primarily one's *living* that exemplifies *phronēsis* and not the thoughts that one might have in one's head. We can be sure at least that it is something rather different from merely the Periclean skill of political deliberation (*euboulia*), which impressed Aristotle and Isocrates so much.

To bring this discussion to a close, with its introduction of the concept of “*phronēsis*,” Heraclitus has handed us a question about the relationship between the individual and the world – i.e., the concrete ground of the dialectical movement between the particular (i.e., the individual) and the universal (i.e., the universe or cosmos).¹⁰⁶ No doubt there is still a great deal to explore in the *phronetic* fragments by emphasizing some fragments over others, or by placing them in varying hermeneutic orders. But the matter of self-knowledge that has emerged here is vital, and persisted throughout later discussions on the nature of *phronēsis*, e.g., in Plato and Aristotle.

Conclusions and Transition: Phronēsis as an Historical Tradition

The purposes of this chapter were (1) to show in general how the concept of “*phronēsis*” in fact names an historical tradition, and (2) to show specifically how “*phronēsis*” developed on the basis of the *phren-phronein* word family as it was employed in poetry (Homer), medicine (Hippocrates), and pre-Socratic thinking (Heraclitus). In order to accomplish this task I had to undertake a rather lengthy investigation into that long-developing, dynamic, cultural heritage. In part, this was because there are currently hardly any secondary works which attempt to synthesize the various (or at least many of the) pre-Aristotelian uses of “*phronēsis*.” Because of this, I tried to investigate and bring to light a few of the most relevant contexts, and, especially in the case of Heraclitus, and to a lesser extent Hippocrates, to propose an interpretation of the understanding of *phronēsis* that is at work there. By choosing to focus on Homer, Hippocrates, and Heraclitus, we are now able to see the outlines of the historical situation in which later

¹⁰⁶ Note the similarity to the dialectical movement of Aristotle’s own thinking about *phronēsis* in *EN VI*. I will say more about this below.

5th/4th c. thinkers such as Plato, Aristotle, and Isocrates, would begin to develop their own understanding of the matter.

By now it should at least be apparent that Aristotle in no way created the concept of *phronēsis ex nihilo*, as it were. As a participant in a tradition, and in light of the particular situation in which he puts forward his own understanding of *phronēsis*, we need to view Aristotle's approach to *phronēsis* as one of the first great hermeneutic retrievals and revivals. In general, the concept of *phronēsis* belongs to a tradition which concerns a nexus of themes and questions that are expressed through the language of the *phrēn/phroneo* word-family. That is to say, questions concerning one's place in the world, and how one's living fits into it, whether we construe this

1. (with Homer) as being primarily about a particular concrete situation of speaking and acting, with an eye towards success of rather concrete, localized goals (a la Odysseus and Penelope); or
2. (with Hippocrates) as a more general question about the healthy, sound, and fit (physiological) constitution of the human person; or finally
3. (with Heraclitus) as a great "cosmic" question about the human participation, throughout the whole of one's living (*legein kai prattein*), in the *logos* that binds all things.

Going forward, it will be important to keep in mind that, as a general working definition, *phronēsis is a form of self-knowledge*. To a rather large extent, the different ways of understanding the concept are variations on that theme. Moreover, we will have to keep in mind that the self-knowledge characterized by *phronēsis* is manifested *between* oneself and the world.

This also is the case whether we understand that “world” in an elemental and material way (Hippocrates), in a cosmic, universal way (Heraclitus), or in a localized, practical way (Homer).

However, before turning explicitly to Aristotle’s own use of *phronēsis* in light of his participation in this tradition, I want to conclude by returning to the motif of *breathing*, which I highlighted throughout this chapter. The basic connection between breathing, air, and the manifestation of one’s cognitive and emotional faculties, persisted in various ways throughout Western history - for example, in the Renaissance poem *Orlando Furioso*, in which Orlando recovers his “wits” by inhaling them from the jar in which they were stored after he lost them. This does not necessarily imply a *direct* connection to the *Greek* context, but rather the respiratory theme that was expressed in Greek through the language of *phrēn/phroneo* might simply highlight a particular field of common human experience. Even today, expressions like “breathing under pressure” and “breathing it all in,” or when one says that an idea or love is “in the air,” all evoke an experience that has apparently been common to many people across many different times and places. The activity of breathing marks the passage between “inside” (thinking, feeling, deliberating) and “outside” (environment, situation, context), and indeed renders false a strict separation of these two terms. Moreover, the connection between the two is terribly complex and does not permit a strictly abstract (decontextualized) analysis. For example, one can *actively* think about a situation in which one has to act, but one’s thinking can also be *passively* influenced by the given situation. Moreover, it can be something ethically good or bad when, for example, (1) one speaks or acts without any real understanding of the nature of the environment or context, or, alternatively, (2) when one’s words or actions seem to be wholly determined by the situation, and thus, “out of one’s control.” The ethical question,

i.e., the connection of *phronesis* to ethics, remains terribly difficult and complex, and requires a sustained, rigorous analysis - that is to say, in its Greek context it required the intellectual engagement with *phronesis* by Plato and Isocrates, and, ultimately, Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. In the next chapter we will see just how Aristotle's analyses of *phronesis*, for all their depth, breadth, and rigor, remain indebted to his philosophical and literary forebears, and further, we will see how knowing this allows us to articulate the faint outlines of the trajectory of the concept-tradition of *phronesis* after Aristotle.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁷ For example, how the conception of *phronesis* in rhetoric did not simply die out after Aristotle's philosophical sublation or "*aufhebung*" of Isocratean thinking. Isocratean *phronesis* persisted in Cicero, who seemed not to distinguish between "rhetorical" and "philosophical" *phronesis*. Untangling this, and other historical issues surrounding the concept of *phronesis* requires, or so I am trying to show, a hermeneutic sensitivity that is alive to the role of history, experience, and dialogue in the re-formation of concepts, which I discussed in Chapter One.

CHAPTER FOUR

AN HISTORICAL ACCOUNT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF PHRONĒSIS – PART TWO: A TRADITION IN DIALOGUE: ARISTOTLE’S PHRONĒSIS BETWEEN PLATO AND ISOCRATES

ἡ δ’ ἐρμηνεία ἔνεκα τοῦ εἶ
- Aristotle, *De Anima*¹

Introduction

Gadamer’s revolutionization of the discipline of hermeneutics worked on the basis of his understanding and retrieval of the concept of *phronēsis* - and specifically on the basis of his understanding and retrieval of Book Six of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. In order to engage in a critical dialogue with Gadamer’s work (Chapter Four, Chapter Five, and the Conclusion), then, we need first to gain an understanding of *phronēsis*. As I showed in Chapter One of this dissertation, gaining a hermeneutical understanding of a philosophical concept requires coming to awareness of that concept as a kind of living tradition, which has been shaped and reformed by its relation to (1) history, (2) experience, and (3) dialogue. Whether or not cosmologically, we

¹ “*Hermēneia* is for the sake of well-being” (DA II, 420b21). The Greek word *hermēneia*, by the 5th/4th century, had a tangled web of connotations, not all of which can be captured merely by way of “interpretation,” “expression,” “explanation,” “mediation,” or “translation.” Within the context of the *De Anima* passage cited, “expression” is perhaps the best translation, but only if it is taken to mean the *expression* of thoughts, through vocalized words, *spoken to another*. *Hermeneia*, “expression,” here should not be confused with that 18th century German romantic, aesthetic concept of “self-expression,” still alive today, whereby one attempts to “express” one’s inner, subjective life-feeling (*Lebensgefühl*) through art, music, dance, etc. The emphasis of “*hermēneia*” throughout the classical and medieval periods was always on *communication with others* – that is to say, on dialogue. For Gadamer’s history of the concept of “*Ausdruck*,” see Appendix VI in *Truth and Method*, 503-506.

must affirm hermeneutically - *ex nihilo nihil fit*. The previous chapter began the process of gaining this hermeneutical understanding of *phronēsis* by showing the early significance of Homer, Hippocrates, and Heraclitus in that tradition. What remains now is to complete the account of the early history of *phronēsis* from Homer to Aristotle, by showing how Aristotle's own work in Book Six of the *Nicomachean Ethics* can be understood as the first great culmination - i.e., both summit and retrieval - of the tradition of *phronēsis*. Whoever retrieves *phronēsis* in Aristotle, retrieves also Plato, Isocrates, and so many others. Said differently, to learn from Aristotle about practical wisdom, is likewise to learn from those participants in the tradition who have handed "*phronēsis*" down to him.

In order to make the above claims clear in the case of Aristotle specifically, the goal of this chapter is to show how Aristotle's own analyses of *phronēsis* are born out of a particular intellectual scene - with particular questions and concerns - involving philosophy (Plato) and rhetoric (Isocrates). Aristotle's conceptualization of *phronēsis* in Book Six of his *Nicomachean Ethics* is appropriately interpreted not as mere conceptual analysis or as the fixing of a technical term for naming a certain ontological distinction, but rather first and foremost as the search for his own *response* to a question (or set of questions) that had been handed down, in particular, from Plato and Isocrates. In other words, an interpretive, hermeneutic, story is required given the disparate uses of "*phronēsis*" that are employed throughout Aristotle's various works - e.g., his use of the word in his biological works, or its function in the *Protrepticus* or the *Metaphysics*, wherein it is nearly synonymous with what is called "*sophia*" in the *Nicomachean Ethics*. In this chapter, I am claiming that the way to tell this story with respect to the *Ethics* is through the specific intellectual dialogical context involving Isocrates and Plato. Aristotle's understanding

of *phronēsis* is bound up not only with the philosophy of Plato, but also the political rhetoric of Isocrates; and the profundity of Aristotle's analysis of the concept in his *Nicomachean Ethics* works on the basis of his critical engagement with those earlier thinkers.

At the end of this chapter it will become clear that, on the one hand, it was right for later thinkers - e.g., Cicero, Aquinas - to associate the matter of *phronēsis* fundamentally with Aristotle and his *Nicomachean Ethics*. However, by tying Aristotle's understanding of *phronēsis* back to its roots in the soil of wider, ordinary language and intellectual-cultural life, it is possible to cultivate a deeper awareness of how Aristotle's epoch-making work not only does not break with, but in fact depends upon an engagement with, other thinkers of *phronēsis*. In this way it is possible to break apart the all-too fixed ground of an understanding of *phronēsis* that occurs when our engagement with it is more concerned to fashion a technical term, and less a matter of ourselves participating in the ongoing dialogue concerning the actual subject matter of practical wisdom and/or self-understanding - for example, by considering the role of *phronēsis* in speaking. In particular, this chapter aims to recover a sense for just why Isocratean rhetoric made such a lasting impression not only on Aristotle's understanding of *phronēsis*, but also on later thinkers such as Cicero or Machiavelli. By approaching *phronēsis* as a concept-tradition in which Aristotle participates, but is not the only participant, it will be possible to gain awareness for the sense in which *phronēsis* is required in our speaking to one another - in short, to gain awareness for the sense in which our use of language is a concrete ethical-practical concern. Gadamer's work may have rendered the connection between interpretation (of language) and ethics philosophically explicit, but there are traces of an awareness of that connection already

residing in the ancient Greek development of the concept of *phronēsis*. Gadamer's turn to "*phronēsis*" was more insightful than seems to have realized.

Overview of the Chapter

In order to show how *that* Aristotle's understanding of *phronēsis* can be understood as emerging out of a particular intellectual-cultural situation, this chapter moves from a general *cultural* scope (Part One) to a more precise *textual* one (Part Two). In Part One of the chapter I make the case that the concept of *phronēsis* of the 5th/4th century BC was intimately bound to (political) *rhetoric*, and to *speaking* more generally (*eu legein*). To do this, I (1) give an account of the cultural and intellectual situation in which Aristotle's concern with *phronēsis* took place, and (2) indicate some of the hermeneutic and methodological issues that are involved in taking this context seriously for reading and interpreting Aristotle. In part two, I provide a close re-reading and interpretation of Aristotle's conceptualization of *phronēsis* in Book Six of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

Part One: What is the Conversation in which Aristotle is Participating?

In this first part (Part One) of the chapter, I make the case that the concept of *phronēsis* of the 5th/4th century BC was intimately bound to (political) *rhetoric*, and to a concern with *speaking* more generally (*eu legein*). To do this, I (1) give an account of the cultural and intellectual situation in which Aristotle's concern with *phronēsis* took place, and (2) indicate some of the hermeneutic and methodological issues that are involved in taking this context seriously for reading and interpreting Aristotle. In particular, in this first section, I clarify my own approach to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* by briefly articulating my understanding of the nature of

Aristotle's writings as they have been handed down to us, and of the manner in which his conceptualization of *phronēsis* exists in relation to ordinary language.

Reading and Participation in Dialogue: A Note on Reading Aristotle's Ethical Works

One potential problem that should be confronted upfront concerns the rejoinder to any attempt to read Aristotle's analysis of *phronēsis* in strong connection to ordinary language and cultural context: namely, Aristotle's description of *phronēsis* is unique precisely inasmuch as he raises the language of *phronēsis* to the level of a *concept*; one, moreover, which exists precisely in abstraction from its ordinary and contextualized employment. Here we confront a fundamental interpretive question, which concerns what sort of hermeneutical presuppositions will guide our reading of Aristotle's practical works.

While it may at first seem as though this rejoinder takes seriously Aristotle's penchant for conceptualization, in fact it fails as an appropriate hermeneutical presupposition not only by misunderstanding the nature of conceptuality,² but also (1) failing to appreciate the nature of Aristotelian writing, concerning which we have much to (re)learn from early commentators,³ and

² This philosophical-hermeneutical issue has been discussed in Chapter One, in which I present and defend a Gadamerian account of the relationship between philosophical concepts, ordinary language, and historical tradition.

³ Here I am taking my cue from the interesting and important research done by Jaap Mansfeld in his *Prolegomena: Questions to be Settled before the Study of an Author or a Text*. In particular, see pp. 10-43. As an example, Mansfeld notes that a fixed series of questions were said, as early as Proclus, and some of which were adapted from Origen, to be required to ask before, or in conjunction with, the reading of a work of Aristotle or Plato. Among the eight or so questions are, for example: (1) What is the *skopos* or aim or goal of the work? (2) what is the reading position of the work in the place of Aristotle's works (i.e., at what point, and after reading what other works, should the present work be read)? (3) What is the

(2) failing to appreciate the unique historical position in which Aristotle is one of the first thinkers to fashion a robust *conceptual* vocabulary. I will unfold each of these two points in turn.

With respect to Aristotelian writing (point “1”), Aristotle’s precise use of language is always dependent on and motivated by the questions being pursued within the context of a particular work. The fact that in his ethical works Aristotle gives “*phronēsis*” a conceptually thick, rather precise, meaning, does not therefore oblige him to use the word in the same way elsewhere.⁴ We see this clearly in his use of “*phronēsis*” in the *De Anima*, the *Protrepticus*, and his biological works - e.g., when he assigns “*phronēsis*” to bees, discusses its physiological relationship to the *phrenes*, or makes it appear to resemble what he calls *sophia* in *EN VI*.⁵ The *context* and nature of the philosophical conversation has priority over the meaning of words.

utility of the work (*utilitas*)? (4) What qualities are required of the exegete or teacher? (5) What qualities are required of the students or readers?

⁴ To think that Aristotle’s “real” understanding of *phronēsis* can be determined in this way provides some of the interpretive framework underlying late 19th and early 20th century attempts to trace the “historical development” of Aristotle - e.g., along the lines of supposedly early “Platonic” uses of “*phronēsis*” juxtaposed to later “Aristotelian” uses. For example, see Werner Jaeger’s monograph on *Aristotle*. For an early critique of this approach, see Gadamer’s 1928 essay “*Der aristotelische ‘Protreptikos’ und die entwicklungsgeschichtliche Betrachtung der aristotelischen Ethik.*” Gadamer continued his critique of this, and similar, hermeneutic approaches, later in his life by emphasizing the nature of Aristotle’s writing as “school notes” and the concomitant danger of placing too much hermeneutical weight on particular turns of phrase as evidence of a “development” or as a more or less “Platonic” period. See the last two chapters of his *Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*.

⁵ In fact, as we will see below, Aristotle does not stick to his “terms” even within Book Six itself – wherein he first supposedly “defines” them!

More precisely, the meaning of a particular word or phrase, and the context or scope of a work, are *interdependent*.⁶

Concerning Aristotle's historical position as a thinker (point "2"), recognizing that Aristotle does occasionally craft precise, conceptual terms, must be held together with the fact that rather often his conceptualization of a word is historically *unique*. This means that his crafting of a concept must take its departure *from ordinary language*, since it cannot depend on a pre-established body of discipline specific, specialized jargon. It is just this fact that creates the interesting hermeneutic cases where Aristotle attributes a particular philosophical view concerning, for example, the nature of perception, to authors whom we should be surprised to learn had any "*views*" at all (e.g., Homer).⁷ Aristotle's development of conceptual language thus by necessity takes place on the basis of a *dialogue* with the ordinary, lived language of the tradition(s) in which he is situated.⁸ His "endoxic method" is not just an attempt to pay homage

⁶ Thus, just as we must be careful when we make claims about Plato in general by citing evidence from across various dialogues, we need similar caution lest we read Aristotle's works altogether as comprising a grand system that employs a fixed terminology throughout. The philosophical and hermeneutical position that I am taking here of course comes from Gadamer - as was discussed in Chapter Two - and I am attempting to show the fruitfulness of this position concretely.

⁷ For a good example of this, see Aristotle, *De Anima* III.3. A whole world of hermeneutical issues surfaces the minute we ask whether Aristotle was "wrong" to interpret Homer in the way that he did. The ancient practice of reading a traditional text as if it spoke *directly* to a writer's present needs and context was quite common, not only in philosophy and medicine, but in legal disputes as well. Thus Homer's epic poetry could be cited to substantiate a 4th century legal decision. Gadamer calls this the relevance (*Aktualität*) or application (*Anwendung*) of a living text, as opposed to the (naïve) treatment of a text as a mere relic - i.e., a dead artifact which no longer "speaks" or "applies" to us. I discuss the concept of hermeneutic "application," and why Gadamer thinks it necessitates *phronēsis*, in Chapter Four and Chapter Five.

⁸ See my discussion of the role of "dialogue" for the formation of concepts in Chapter One.

to and retrieve traditional views, but is also a searching about for suitable expressions or phrases that can light the path of thinking.

To push the matter somewhat further, Aristotle himself in fact claims that the main virtue of *style (lexis)* is *clarity (saphēs)*, and, especially in prose, one ought to generally take one's cue from ordinary language (*ek tēs eiōthuias dialektou*).⁹ For Plato and Aristotle, speaking and writing, as the *medium* of all philosophical inquiry, serve the goal of *communication* with another person.¹⁰ In this respect, Aristotle models in an exemplary way what Gadamer philosophically articulates: there is always a two-way, back-and-forth, relationship between philosophical concepts and their life in ordinary language; that is to say, a mutual re-interpreting and *filling out* of the meaning of a word.¹¹ Thus, ancient commentators and readers, who from early on (e.g., already with Galen) wondered at Aristotle's "*terse and dark*" style, admirably applied what we sometimes today call the "hermeneutical principle of charity" by explicitly asking "why has the philosopher cultivated obscurity"?¹² Rather than assume some logical or rhetorical fault on the part of Aristotle, they instead worked from the noble hermeneutical presumption that such density and obscurity itself served some purpose which, in its turn, was for the sake of an ultimate *clarity*. Perhaps the response already given by Theophrastus, as a

⁹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, III.2 1404b1ff.

¹⁰ See note 1 at the beginning of this chapter on the word "*hermēneia*."

¹¹ Gadamer actually refers to such "filling out" as an "*increase in being*" (*Zuwachs an Sein*) both in *Truth and Method*, 145 and 156, as well as in *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, 165.

¹² Cf., Mansfeld, *Prolegomena*, 25ff. We do not typically associate the "obscurity" and "terse" style of Aristotle with that of Heraclitus, whom Aristotle did not seem so fond of. But perhaps, from the perspective of our reception of their *texts*, the styles of the two are not so different after all.

supplement to Aristotle's comments on the importance of clarity in one's "style" (*lexis*), still stands: "...one ought not to elaborate everything in detail, but leave some things to the reader, for when he notices what you have left out, he does not remain a mere reader, but becomes a participant."¹³

With Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* in particular, there is more than one way in which the reader is invited by the text to become a *participant*. It is commonly noted that Aristotle's surviving works generally take the form of "lecture notes" or quasi-treatises which were used for generating and leading something like a classroom discussion. The writing itself, unlike the poetic beauty of the Platonic dialogue is almost a kind of *stenography* - shorthand notes that only find their full expression and concrete vitality in the *lived dialogue* amongst the participants (e.g., those attending Aristotle's lecture). Aristotle's style in the *Ethics* poses questions to us just as a teacher offers questions, or sketches out lines of thought to students for a living discussion together.¹⁴ The language of the text itself is thereby oriented in the same direction that it invites the reader to follow - that is, *towards a dialogue*.¹⁵

This is not the only manner in which the *Nicomachean Ethics* calls the reader to participation, however. There is also the issue that arises in light of the peculiarity of the subject matter itself ("*ethics*"), and the purported *aim* (*skopos*) of the book – that is, not to have mere

¹³ Cf., Mansfeld, *Prolegomena*, 26.

¹⁴ Cf., Gadamer's "*Nachwort*" in his very late (1998!) German translation and short commentary, *Nikomachische Ethik VI*.

¹⁵ Which perhaps is quite different from the orientation and invitation of either a sacred text, or the great systems of modern philosophers.

knowledge of what is good, but much more so to *become* good (*EN X.9*).¹⁶ That aim also supports the exploration of the traditional question about the *teachability* of “*phronēsis*” and virtue, whose complexity Aristotle also inherits from Isocrates and Plato which leads him (Aristotle) consistently and urgently to restate the requirement that those who come to his lectures on ethics already be *disposed* in such a way that they can benefit from them (*EN X.9*). To the extent that we do not read Aristotle’s book as a mere historical artifact, but *as something which says something to someone*, perhaps those requirements still hold today for those of us who come to the text as students hoping to *learn* from Aristotle.¹⁷ Keeping the above issues in mind as we interpret the *Ethics* will also allow me to emphasize the *protreptic character* of the work. In a number of respects, the *Nicomachean Ethics* is Aristotle’s true “*protrepticus*.”¹⁸

Nicomachean Ethics VI: Written Thoughts for a Conversation (with Plato and Isocrates)

¹⁶ Aristotle prefigures this at *EN.II.4* (1105b12ff.) where he writes that the many (*hoi polloi*) “instead of doing virtuous acts, **take flight into logoi**, and fancy that they are pursuing philosophy and that this will make them good men. In so doing they act like sick persons who listen carefully to what the doctor says, but entirely neglect to carry out his orders. That sort of philosophy will no more lead to a healthy state of soul than will the mode of treatment produce health of body.” This is a rich passage to begin with, but becomes all the more complicated when we catch the repetition of the famous phrase from Plato’s *Phaedo* in which Socrates says that he abandoned cosmology, physiology, et al., and “took flight into *logos*.” Is this a veiled critique of Academic dialectic?

¹⁷ Note the similarity between Aristotle’s statement about what is required of the student of ethical philosophy, and question 5 of the early commentators: i.e., “what qualities are required of the students or readers?”

¹⁸ Cf. D.S. Hutchinson and Monte Ransome Johnson’s “Protreptic Aspects of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*” in *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 383-409. Gabriel Richardson Lear has also offered the following claim about Book Six in particular: “I believe the structure of *NE VI* is protreptic, leading the audience raised in fine moral habits to an appreciation of theoretical wisdom...to appreciate that in some sense theoretical wisdom is a standard for practical wisdom.” (See Lear, 94). There are many other protreptic “moments” in the Aristotle’s lecture on ethics, e.g., in the course of his clarification of the nature of *philia* and of “self-love” (which I will note below), and in his description of the life of contemplation at *EN X.7-8*.

Having clarified some of the precise hermeneutical presuppositions that will guide our reading of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in Part Two of this chapter, we can now outline the historical conversation in which Aristotle's robust conceptual analysis of *phronēsis* is participating.¹⁹ Aristotle's discussion of *phronēsis* in Book Six of his *Nicomachean Ethics* occurs within the context of a particular cultural conversation about the good life, about the extent to which one can "learn how" to live such a life, and about the extent to which there can be "wisdom" saturating one's concrete living – that is, one's speaking and acting, along with one's affections, decisions, and thinking. As is so common with Plato and Aristotle, the conversation partners – friend and foe – comprise those so-called "sophists" who, throughout the preceding century, effected a radical transformation of the educational and cultural formation of citizens – i.e., of their *paideia* and of how best to "use their *scholē*" to shape a way of living or *bios*.²⁰

In particular, Aristotle's contributions to the concept of *phronēsis* participate in a conversation inherited from the Platonic dialogues and the rhetorical works of Isocrates.²¹ In saying this, I aim to echo the claim of Tarik Wareh that we need to *reject*

The assumption that the essential ideas of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* can be fully understood without reference to the system of rhetorical education which we can know through Isocrates' surviving works...Aristotle and Isocrates both express a theory of how an actor (the virtuous man for Aristotle, the politically active orator for Isocrates),

¹⁹ This section is thus another concrete example of the role of "history" and "dialogue" in relation to concept formation that was discussed in Chapter One.

²⁰ On the emergence and impact of the sophists in the 6th and 5th centuries, see Werner Jaeger's 3 volume work *Paideia*. Oxford University Press (1986), and in particular his chapter titled, "The Sophists" in Volume 1, and "Isocrates" in Volume 3.

²¹ For recent attempts to show the importance of this context for an understanding of Aristotle's concept of *phronēsis*, see especially, Wareh, Tarik. *The Theory and Practice of Life: Isocrates and the Philosophers*, and *Isocrates and Civic Education*.

through rigorous training or habituation [*ethizein*, for both thinkers], achieves a state of readiness to act ‘just the right way’ in a crucial moment’s unscripted performance.²²

Among the important issues involved are the following: (1) the role of general ethical norms, rules or principles, on the one hand, and particular, even singular, concrete situations with all their complexity, on the other (and thereby the “applicability” of general principles); (2) the importance (or unimportance) of philosophical contemplation about the nature of goodness, justice, and beauty (as well as being – *physis*, *ousia*) for wise *living*; and (3) the possibility (or impossibility) of *teaching* wisdom (*phronēsis*). Regardless of the particular paths taken by Plato, Aristotle or Isocrates to respond to these issues, the concept of wisdom (*phronēsis*) was always inextricable from its social-political and ethical manifestation in personal and interpersonal relationships within a particular community. Even if Plato (and Aristotle, at least in the *Protrepticus*) raises *phronēsis* to the heights of cosmological and metaphysical wisdom, that is not evidence that Plato (or Aristotle) ever denied or lost sight of the ethico-political significance of *phronēsis*. On the contrary, if anything, it is evidence of just how all-encompassing was Plato’s (and Aristotle’s) orientation towards the *Good*.²³

Unfortunately, attention to this context, and its significance for Aristotle’s conception of *phronēsis* has been scant. Tarik Wareh’s 2012 book *Theory and Practice of Life: Isocrates and the Philosophers*, together with David Johnson’s 2002 dissertation entitled “The Discovery

²² Tarik Wareh, *Theory and Practice of Life*, 6.

²³ Cf., Gadamer’s *Plato Dialectical Ethics*, in which he argues for an ethical orientation inherent within Plato’s concept of “dialectic,” through the use of which one can become *phronimos* (e.g., in the *Philebus*). Or was *phronēsis* already required for the appropriate (good, not sophistic) use of dialectic in the first place?

of Practical Reason: Plato, Aristotle and the Development of a Notion of Deliberation” form major pieces of recent philosophical scholarship.²⁴ Both works offer extremely detailed and interesting proposals for how to conceive of the philosophical polemics between Plato and Isocrates – the two principal educators of Athenian citizens and rivals for the name of “philosopher” – and, further, of Aristotle’s place between and in the wake of them both. Before turning to a close reading of *Nicomachean Ethics VI*, then, I will first quickly sketch both Wareh and Johnson’s approach to this cultural context. While I may disagree with them on particular points, I am in basic agreement with their sense that an historically sensitive discussion of *phronēsis* in Aristotle can only occur when we appreciate his involvement in a conversation that includes both Plato and Isocrates.

Tarik Wareh is explicit in arguing for the three philosophers’ “participation in a shared framework of protreptic and inquiry,” and that this participatory engagement explains the fact that Isocrates’ vocabulary includes words like *phronēsis*, *ideai*, and *philosophia*: “...if we consider there to have been an open conversation [between Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle], the result is not that we will confuse or identify Isocratean and Aristotelian accounts of deliberation...Rather, the result is a more complete picture of a complex space and arena within which Isocrates and Aristotle were among those intervening to contest and refine such notions [as *phronēsis* or *philosophia*].”²⁵ This shared space of philosophical conversation is indeed a

²⁴ Neither work, however, is concerned with the overall historical tradition of *phrēn/phroneo*, or the initial emergence of “*phronēsis*” in the fragments of Heraclitus.

²⁵ Tarik Wareh, *Theory and Practice of Life: Isocrates and the Philosophers*, 7. Wareh is contrasting his view (which I agree with), with the assumption that the “sophist” Isocrates merely attempted to co-opt such key Platonic-Aristotelian terms for his own dubious ends.

complex one, since the use and meaning of words like *phronēsis* or *philosophia* - and so the understanding of what those terms disclose about the world - do not function as fixed terminological units, but rather as living words that are constantly being spoken and (re)formed within the intellectual conversations of the 5th/4th century (and on!). For example, while Plato and Aristotle may reserve for their own schools the designation of “philosophy,” and refer to Isocrates as a “sophist,” *Isocrates does just the opposite*. Thus, his treatise “Against the Sophists” takes Plato as one of its targets, and his “Antidosis” - written in the style of an *apologia* - is the defense of his “*philosophia*”!

Furthermore, we cannot even presume a straightforwardly *polemical* separation between the three thinkers. We can see, for example, just how difficult Aristotle has made reading Plato when we acknowledge the fact that his critiques are often already found within the dialogues themselves.²⁶ Introducing Isocrates as a third “partner” in the philosophical conversation adds another layer of complexity. This is because, even if they use different words, or give varying meanings to the same words, both Plato and Aristotle share much in common with Isocrates. For example, the significance of the *kairos* (right time, moment) as a *philosophical concept* seems to have first been articulated by Isocrates, acknowledged by Plato (by way of its non-philosophical roots in medicine), and explicitly appropriated by Aristotle in his ethical works. Aristotle’s use

²⁶ I mean that once we see, e.g., that in the *Philebus* the orientation is toward the humanly practicable good, then we need to re-question Aristotle’s own criticisms of Plato’s conception of the Good as being ethically and practically irrelevant. On the complexity of Aristotle’s critique of Plato, cf., Gadamer’s *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*. The complexity of how to read Aristotle’s critiques of Plato can also be seen, for example, by reconsidering the purpose of those critiques in light of the fact that they are often also found already in Plato – e.g., the “Third Man” argument.

of *kairos* in the context of his *Nicomachean Ethics* should be associated *less* with its medical roots (i.e., the doctor must know *when* to apply which treatments by looking to the “weather”), and much more so with Isocrates, who developed a rather extensive account of the ways in which a politician or public speaker must be well-attuned to the *situation* into which they are speaking.²⁷ Furthermore, all three thinkers are in agreement with respect to their defense of a “flexible *logos* against any *technē* (art) that claims to offer written prescriptions adequate to the demands of action.”²⁸

Of course, this does not preclude Isocrates from charging exorbitant fees for his “teaching” (which he says is not and cannot be identified with any kind of *epistēmē*) which seeks to provide some *paideia* or care or help (*ōphelein*) for the soul. That Platonic *epistēmē*, according to Isocrates’ understanding of it, could not really provide any such help, precisely forms his reasons for classing the Academics as “sophists” and “eristics” - thinkers who pursue seemingly lofty, grandiose thoughts, but which are of no real use (*chrēsimon*) or help to anyone’s

²⁷ Which is not to say that the medical and rhetorical contexts have nothing in common. Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, refers to the honorable skill of doctors when attempting to “bridge” rhetoric and philosophy. For Isocrates’ account of the concept of *kairos* see his “*Against the Sophists*.” The complexity of how the three thinkers relate returns however, since in the latter treatise, Isocrates’ argument for the importance of sensitivity to the “moment” or “situation” is contrasted with those who practice sophistry and/or eristic - i.e., according to Isocrates, *Plato* (among others).

²⁸ Tarik Wareh, *Theory and Practice*, 8. Wareh later nuances his claims about Isocrates vis-a-vis *technē*, since Isocrates does not hold any real *praxis/poiesis* distinction as Aristotle does. To put the matter bluntly, Isocrates is not always clear whether his “*paideia*” which leads to (teaches?) *phronēsis* is for purely “instrumental” purposes (traditionally, glory, fame, honor – that is, *timē*) or something higher, as it surely is in Plato and Aristotle. Cf. Wareh, 20. Note how Aristotle systematically, and “protreptically” redefines the meaning of *timē* for his audience throughout *EN*. X.7-9.

life.²⁹ Contrariwise, Aristotle defends Platonic *philosophia* and *phronēsis* in his *Protrepticus* against these charges of Isocrates. Saving the details for the close reading of Aristotle's *EN VI* which follows below, we can already begin to appreciate why Aristotle would have felt it necessary there (*EN VI*) to "untangle" the overlapping meanings of various terms, as he did when he tried to clarify the nature of *phronēsis*, distinguishing it from *epistēmē* and *technē*, as well as from *doxa*, which Isocrates took to lie at the basis of his "*paideia*."³⁰ Aristotle's conceptual analyses can therefore be read as his attempt to help clarify the "terms" of an ongoing conversation. How often do we, when looking back on philosophical polemics that took place in an earlier time period, or between two colleagues, find the contestants saying very similar things although they used very different vocabularies - and so "talk past" one another? Aristotle is in a similar position with respect to Plato and Isocrates, and their respective vocabularies. However, and this truly complicates matters, Aristotle does clarify terms or fashion fixed meanings in order to disinterestedly judge the winner of a rhetorical contestant. Rather, he is a *philosopher* - and that means that *he himself is also always thinking* about the truth of what is being said, and thereby the extent to which a given word, phrase, or general "*logos*" discloses what is true.

In contrast to Wareh's "complex" view (of the relationship between Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle) described above, the work of David Johnson offers a more straightforward (though for that also less nuanced) account of the relationship of the three thinkers, and, furthermore, does so

²⁹ We should never forget that *phronēma* (thought, spirit, resolution) could also carry the connotation of *arrogance* and *high-mindedness*, especially in the tragic context.

³⁰ As Wareh notes, after Plato, what could be more un-philosophical than substituting *epistēmē* with *doxa*? However, we have to appreciate just what Isocrates *meant* by the term "*doxa*" (and *epistēmē*). For more on this, see Takis Poulakos, "Isocrates' Civic Education and the Question of Doxa," 44-68.

precisely vis-a-vis the development of the concept of practical reason in particular. According to Johnson, Aristotle develops his account of practical reason by responding to problems posed to Plato via Isocrates, and so for Johnson, Aristotle(‘s account of practical reason) synthesizes and transcends both thinkers and their respective theories.³¹ More specifically, Johnson proposes the following schema:

Plato conceives of wisdom as knowledge (*epistēmē*) of general principles that are worth knowing for their own sake and for the sake of their role in guiding deliberation and action. In so doing, he encounters difficulties justifying the claim that wisdom ensures excellent deliberation. As Isocrates rightly argues, excellent deliberation primarily requires perceptiveness and case-specific judgment concerning particulars - capacities which cannot be acquired through or replaced by knowledge of general principles.³²

Put baldly, for Johnson, Plato supplies attention to the “generals” and Isocrates supplies attention to the “particulars.” On Johnson’s reading, Aristotle (1) affirms our “capacities for perception and case-specific judgment about particular circumstances” (with Isocrates), and also (2) affirms the need for “true *hypolēpsis* (“rational supposition”) of ends, which forms a *non-deductive* basis for determining the general ends that serve as the starting-points of means-end deliberative reasoning.”³³

³¹ Cf. the “Introduction” to Johnson’s dissertation.

³² Johnson, iv. Johnson could have also mentioned the importance, for Isocrates, of “habit” and “experience.”

³³ Johnson, iv. Johnson maintains that Plato holds that the “general ends” concerning action can be rationally *deduced*. Although I cannot engage with him on this point, Johnson and I here part ways. Here I find Tarik Wareh’s nuanced scholarship more helpful, since Wareh is sensitive to the *variety* of views that Plato’s seems to put forward in various dialogues. It is symptomatic that Johnson does not engage substantially with the *Philebus*, which, more than any other dialogue, should be read together with Aristotle’s *Ethics*.

The heart of Johnson's engagement with Aristotle and Isocrates concerns his attempt to show the pivotal place of Aristotle's *Protrepticus* insofar as it articulates a defense of Platonic philosophy against the illegitimate criticisms levied by Isocrates. This criticism charged the Platonic contemplation with being a merely "eristic" dialectic and of no practical "use" (*chrēsimon*) or help (*ōphelein*) to the *souls* of those who engaged in Plato's gymnastic dialectics.³⁴ Thereby, Isocrates was able to contest the notion that there even is such a thing as knowledge (*epistēmē*) concerning ethico-political-deliberative matters.³⁵ By contrast, Isocrates defends his *philosophia*, in his *apologia*, the "Antidosis," by characterizing it in the following terms:

For since it is not in the nature of man to attain a science (*epistēmē*) by the possession of which we can know (*eidenai*) positively what we should do or what we should say, in the next resort I hold that man to be wise (*sophos*) who is able by means of his beliefs (*tais doxais*) to arrive generally (*hos epi to polu*) at the best course (*to beltiston*), and I hold that man to be a philosopher who occupies himself with the studies from which he will most quickly gain that kind of insight (*phronēsis*).³⁶

There are whole worlds of questions contained in Isocrates' use of all of the highlighted terms here. As we will see below, Aristotle's analysis of *phronēsis* in Book Six of his *Nicomachean Ethics* simultaneously retrieves or appropriates much of Isocrates' thoughts about the

³⁴ Note that Isocrates here charges Plato exactly with what Plato accuses the "sophists" of doing!

³⁵ Cf. Johnson's discussion of Aristotle's reply on p.102ff. Aristotle's basic response is to argue that (1) there *is* such knowledge (*epistēmē*) – a reply which is striking given that Aristotle, though for different reasons, denies such "epistēmē" in Book Six of the *EN* – and furthermore that (2) Isocrates is "completely ignorant" of the distance separating what is good (*ta agatha*) for its own sake, from what is necessary (*ta anagkaia*).

³⁶ *Antidosis* 271; quoted in Johnson, 118. Note the use of the phrase "for the most part" or "generally" – a phrase which Aristotle employs to great effect in his practical philosophy.

“methodology” of his *paideia* while also creating a wide gap between the ends to which Isocrates sets his sights in contrast to Aristotle’s profoundly wider or deeper horizon.³⁷

The line of questioning that we must hold fast to throughout what follows concerns precisely those themes that were first raised by Heraclitus when he first set down the word “*phronēsis*” for others to contemplate: namely, a question of just how wide one’s *scope* must be in order to properly contemplate and/or respond to even the most practical, exigent questions of human living, let alone those more “metaphysical” questions about the nature of human beings and their place in the whole cosmos. For Isocrates, the horizon or scope of what is relevant for the *phronimos* to take into consideration in order to deliberate well and live virtuously has a clear, finite political end. Whatever form of contemplation lifts one out of the pressing, practical questions of inter-personal – especially *political* – *action*, or fundamentally calls into question those prevailing *doxai* on which “virtuous” *action* is based, constitutes, for Isocrates, at best a propaedeutic on the same level of gymnastics or training in mathematics, and at worst a harmful seduction to inaction, quietism (*apragmosunē*), and to corruption.³⁸ Although some distance from the immediate present is required in order to deliberate at all, so this line of thinking goes, too much distance leaves one in the rarefied air of useless speculation.³⁹

³⁷ For the language of “retrieval” or hermeneutic “application” (sometimes referred to as hermeneutic “appropriation”), see the next chapter of this dissertation.

³⁸ In this way Isocrates – who made a fortune with his “*paideia*” – attempted to defend himself against the charge of “corrupting the youth” in his quasi-*apologia*. His “Antidosis” court case failed, and he was forced to pay the cost associated with equipping a trireme.

³⁹ The popularity of this position, it seems to me, persists throughout a variety of cultural spheres, and continues today as an anti-intellectualism and suspicion of academic “inactivity.” The Latin translation of the “*bios politikos*” as the “*vita activa*” preserves the connection between “action” and “politics” perfectly.

By contrast, for Heraclitus as for Plato the horizon of the *phronimos* is far wider. This is not because their appetite for knowledge is so much greater than Isocrates. Neither Plato nor Heraclitus aim for an all-encompassing, systematic knowledge in the way that the later modern philosophers did. Rather, for Plato as for the Aristotle of the *Protrepticus*, the question of *philosophia* – as the question of *how to live* – could only be truly *asked* and *answered* when one has begun to grasp the *telos* of “nature” (*physis*) as a *whole* – a *telos* in which one’s life is asked to participate. Such radical “cosmic” lines of thought serve to effect a veritable revolution in the prevailing *doxai* about any number of traditional concepts, not the least of which are the traditional views about ethico-political *aretai* and concomitant *timē* (honor). Even if Isocrates’ scope extended later in his life beyond Athens and became *pan-hellenic*, for all of that he still failed to see the practical importance of a *pan-cosmic* sense for reality. To put things another way, whereas Isocrates was concerned with a growing class of politically *apragmones* (quiet, inactive) citizens, Plato, Heraclitus, and other philosophers were concerned with the already large class of those who were *philopragmones* (meddlesome, busybodies).⁴⁰ In light of their differing assessments of the social-political situation, the importance of *phronēsis* in Plato and Isocrates are at odds.

But what about Aristotle? The question of where, on this issue of scope or horizon, Aristotle’s concept of *phronēsis* in his *Nicomachean Ethics* fits in provides our basic orienting hermeneutic question for the following re-reading of *NE* Book Six. Tracing the development of

⁴⁰ See Plato *Republic*, 549c; and Isocrates *Antidosis* 227. For a detailed treatment of the specific political meaning of these terms, see L.B. Carter, *The Quiet Athenian*.

the concept of *phronēsis* from Homer to Hippocrates and Heraclitus, and, further, seeing how some of the basic themes and questions (such as the question of “scope” or “horizon” of *phronēsis*) were discussed by Plato and Isocrates, has allowed us to discover a somewhat novel, though historically well-grounded, approach to Aristotle’s work on *phronēsis*. In other words, having set the historical stage, and by tracing some of the most important historical themes and questions, we can now ask in earnest: how does Aristotle participate in, retrieve, and give new, foundational and lasting energy to the tradition of *phronēsis* and to “practical philosophy” in general? Just what is the distinctly Aristotelian understanding of *phronēsis*?

**Part Two: Variations on a Theme: A Reinterpretation of Aristotle’s Analysis of Phronēsis
in Book Six of the Nicomachean Ethics**

Who is Phronimos? From Pericles to Socrates, and From “Phronēsis kata meros” to “Phronēsis
kata holōs”

It is quite right for Aristotle to begin focusing his explicit attention on an abstract action noun like “*phronēsis*” (and we will follow him in this) by looking at those individuals in whom such a virtue lives, namely, the “*phronimoi*” (the practically wise persons, or the persons with understanding for living the good life).⁴¹ It is right to begin this way since the “definition” must ultimately be tested against the extent to which it reveals a *human* possibility – that is to say, we are looking for the humanly practicable good or the good life for humans. Thus, Aristotle here says that we can come to a definition of “*phronēsis*” by considering or looking (*theōrēsantes*)

⁴¹ Aristotle does the same thing in the *Metaphysics* (I.2 982a1ff) by setting his sights on the adjective “*sophos*” in order to understand the substance of “*sophia*.”

toward those we call (*legomen*) “phronimos.”⁴² On the one hand, this introduces the familiar “endoxic” procedure, and Aristotle will indeed mingle prefigurations of his considered views with culturally wider, common thoughts and opinions, some of which he may or may not fully endorse in the end. On the other hand, as we will see, the appeal to ordinary language and opinion also comprises Aristotle’s general attempt to return the concept of *phronēsis* to its traditional soil, in contrast to the metaphysical heights it had attained in Heraclitus and Plato, who sometimes poetically stretched the meaning of words to the point of “obscurity.” In this respect, tying *phronēsis* back to its living, ordinary use is not just characteristic of an “endoxic method” but rather reveals something of Aristotle’s philosophical distance from the Academicians, such as Xenocrates, concerning the nature of *phronēsis* as such. Rather than following the Academy in drawing a distinction between *theoretical* and *practical* “*phronēsis*” as Xenocrates had done, Aristotle, at least in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, lets the everyday use of language guide the movement of his thinking, and so “*phronēsis*” in Aristotle is here tied to its concretely human, practical manifestation, which, as we saw in the previous chapter, has been in the foreground ever since Homer.⁴³ In this way, Aristotle’s re-orienting of *phronēsis* towards ordinary language brings him closer to Isocrates; if Isocrates, for his part, goes on to allow

⁴² *EN*. VI.5 1140a24.

⁴³ This is not always the case, as Aristotle’s use of “*phronēsis*” in the *Metaphysics*, *De Anima*, and, as we saw, in the “Protrepticus,” is often closer in tone to its typical use in Plato. In some respects, Aristotle’s use of *phronēsis* in *EN*. VI is an *outlier* with respect to the rest of his corpus. For the reference to Xenocrates, see Burnet’s comment on p. 261 in *The Ethics of Aristotle*. Ayer Co Pub (1976). In that comment as well, Burnet also claims that “in Plato the word *phronēsis* is exactly equivalent to *sophia*...” This is an unhelpful comment because it is not clear that Plato himself uses “*sophia*” in a consistent manner (and why should a dramatist?). Moreover - as I have already tried to indicate above - Plato’s use of *phronēsis* in the *Philebus* comes extremely close to its function in Aristotle’s *Ethics*, which is why some have raised the possibility that the *Philebus* is already a response to Aristotle, or an Aristotelian-minded student raising questions in the Academy.

common opinion and common ways of speaking to dictate his thinking too strongly (according to Plato and Aristotle), that is no objection to Aristotle's methodological appropriation of (some of) this tendency.⁴⁴ In his *Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, Gadamer is basically right to summarize the matter in the following terms:

Aristotle remains true to the actual language usage of *phronēsis* in his ethics, as in fact he does generally. It is not the case, as Natorp believed, that Aristotle restricted a ceremonious artificial word of Plato's to the ethical realm. Quite the reverse: Plato in fact widened the customary usage, whose proximity to practice must have always been sensed, to include dialectical knowing, and he did so in order to ceremoniously exalt dialectic. In other words, he took what was called practical reasonableness and expanded it to include the theoretical disposition of the dialectician.

Conversely, if on occasion Aristotle himself follows Plato's widened language usage, one should not overburden this circumstance by basing hypotheses about Aristotle's "development" on it, as Jaeger, Walzer, and others once tried to do. In truth, it demonstrates only that Aristotle continues to live in the same world of language as Plato's. Nor does it in any way mean that in such cases Aristotle forgot the proper sense of *phronēsis* - whose meaning he himself analyzed - or that he was consciously "Platonizing."⁴⁵

In introducing the topic of *phronēsis*, Aristotle follows the familiar rhetorical practice of marking out an exemplary person (a "*paradeigma*") as worthy of emulation, and an example or model to be "imitated" or "followed" in one's own singular life and way.⁴⁶ Aristotle further

⁴⁴ Though we will see below that, in the end, Aristotle is in far more agreement with Plato than with Isocrates, even though he appropriates much of Isocrates' thinking, and uses terms somewhat differently in the *EN* than Plato does in his dramas.

⁴⁵ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, 37-38ff. In a later chapter, we will have to return to Gadamer explicitly and ask in what sense he could have offered the following statement, in a late interview with Riccardo Dottori, in which he claims, provocatively, that *phronēsis* "is really a Platonic concept." Cf. Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, 22.

⁴⁶ For several examples in Isocrates, see Carlo Natali, *The Wisdom of Aristotle*. 195, n.63. Aristotle, as with most things, appropriates this procedure for his own ends, which is clear enough, for example, when we learn in *EN* X.7-9 that "*eudaimonia*" must really be understood on the basis of its truly "paradigmatic" instance -i.e., not just the activity of contemplation per se, but the activity as it is performed by "God." Isocratean "paradigms" are, by contrast, human, all-too-human.

follows the orators in naming Pericles as *phronimos* along with the commonly acknowledged qualities of the *phronimos*, chief of which is the practical concern for what is good for oneself and for other human beings.⁴⁷ Now Pericles, whose name was synonymous with the height of Athenian democracy and geo-political might, was renowned for his *rhetorical* ability just as much as his *political* acumen – or better, the two were *inextricable*. The name of Pericles provides Aristotle with a good indication of what *phronēsis* means *precisely because* Pericles displayed the ability to tactfully or skillfully *speak* to and *persuade a particular* audience about his political deliberations concerning what actions the community should or should not take in a *particular* situation. Both the carrying out of the decision, and the ability to communicate and persuade the community that this particular course should be undertaken, are concrete forms of *praxis*. It is important that we do not lose sight of the way in which *discourse (legein)*, at least for the 5th/4th century Greek intellectuals, comprises *the* distinctly human *activity*, be it primarily with another person, or in that “dialogue of the soul with itself.”⁴⁸ Aristotle’s mention of Pericles is intriguing, and unfolding this discussion ultimately leads us back to the problem, introduced above, of how wide the “scope” or “horizon” of the understanding of the *phronimos* must be.

In his commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Burnet states that the name of Pericles as *phronimos* is related to Aristotle’s mention of Thales and Anaxagoras in chapter seven as two

⁴⁷ 1140b8ff. The language of concern for what is good for oneself and for others runs throughout *EN*. VI.5.

⁴⁸ I remain skeptical about the extent to which we could make the same claim about the Homeric or Spartan warrior, or the countryside farmer.

sophoi.⁴⁹ However, Burnet's framing of things in this way obscures the issue. Aristotle is not straightforwardly comparing "Pericles" as *phronimos* to "Thales and Anaxagoras" as *sophoi*. The question of *who* are to be the true *paradeigmata* - a question we must answer ever anew - is bound up with what I have been calling the question of the scope or horizon of what the true *phronimos* will consider as relevant for deliberating about right action, and for living the good life.

For example, just prior to the mention of Thales and Anaxagoras as potential *sophoi*, Aristotle initially named the famous sculptors Pheidias (commissioned by Pericles to work on the most sublime parts of the Parthenon, and the creator of the "Statue of Zeus at Olympia" which was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world) and Polycleitus (who invented the model of the style of statue depicting a young male nude, which he called "*kanōn*"). These extraordinary talents were said to possess "*sophia*" (in a sense which in fact is closer to Aristotle's definition of *technē* given in *EN VI.4*).⁵⁰ Now Aristotle allows that they are indeed *artistically* wise, but proceeds toward a deeper sense of philosophic wisdom by broadening the scope of the nature of such *sophia*. Some people, he says, are wise not in *particular* areas of knowledge or about some *part* or aspect (*meros*), but rather are wise about the *whole* (*holōs*), and to the extent that one is "wholly" wise, then *that* kind of *sophia* is the most exact or precise (*akribestatē*) form of knowledge (*epistēmē*) – e.g., in contrast to the *partial* form of wisdom

⁴⁹ For "Pericles" as *phronimos*, see 1140b8ff, and for "Thales and Anaxagoras" as *sophoi*, see 1141b1-8. See Burnet's comment on 1140b8.

⁵⁰ 1141a10ff.

revealed in the sculpting wisdom of Pheidias.⁵¹ The true *sophos* will have a “head” (*kephalēn*) on his or her knowledge about that which is the most exalted (*timiōtatōn*) - that is to say, there will be a governing or consummated unity of meaning living among all the parts that help to comprise that whole, and which take their proper places and find their proper limitations and delimitations in light of that unifying “head.”⁵²

Likewise, within the context of considering who is to be called *phronimos*, Aristotle also raises the issue of “scope” in his initial indication of what *phronēsis* is:

Now it is held to be the mark of a prudent man to be able to deliberate well about what is good and advantageous for himself, not in some one part (*meros*), for instance what is good for his health or strength, but what is concerned with the good life as a whole (*to eu zēn holōs*). A sign of this is that we also speak of people as practically wise in a certain area (*peri ti*) when they calculate well towards some worthwhile (*spoudaion*) end, which is not [attainable by] an art. In this way, the one who deliberates about the whole (*holōs*) will be practically wise (*phronimos*).⁵³

This is a rich passage, and I will comment on it more below. For now, however, I merely want to note that much will hang on how one understands the meaning of “*to eu zēn holōs*” - the good life as a whole. This is not merely an “exegetical” or narrowly hermeneutic issue with respect to Aristotle, but indeed is a question that invites us to participate in that ongoing conversation that lies at the heart of the philosophical tradition of *phronēsis*. Burnet’s gloss, which leads the reader to see Aristotle comparing Pericles as *phronimos* to Thales and Anaxagoras as *sophoi* is

⁵¹ This discussion occurs at *EN* VI.7 1141a9-23.

⁵² For this odd use of *kephalē* see Plato’s *Gorg.* 505d, and *Phileb.* 66d, as well as Aristotle’s *Rhet.* 1415b8f. Aristotle uses this kind of language at 1141a20 just after the discussion of Pheidias and Polycleitus, and again at 1141b1-5 just prior to the naming of Thales and Anaxagoras.

⁵³ 1140a25-28. Translation modified from H. Rackham, *Nicomachean Ethics*. *Loeb Classical Library*. It is important for what follows to note that the “*ti*” here stands in place for the “*meros*” given earlier. We will see below that Aristotle later begins to shift his language from *meros* and *holōs* to *tis* and *haplōs*. This shift in language gives us a clue for how to interpret the meaning of “*to eu zēn holōs*.”

misleading because it precisely misses the question that underlies the discussion - that is, the question of how wide a horizon or scope one's wisdom must be in order to live the good life, or, to put it another way the question of what "*to eu zēn holōs*" means. In contrast to Burnet, I propose the following extended analogy is in play: (practical) wisdom in part : (practical) wisdom as a whole :: Pheidias and Polycleitus : Thales, Anaxagoras (and Pericles?).

The question is whether Aristotle thinks that Pericles models *phronēsis* only in part or in general; that is, whether, like the wisdom of Pheidias and Polycleitus, Periclean understanding has a restricted or partial scope. By presuming that Aristotle is simply comparing Pericles with Anaxagoras and Thales, Burnet has, in a way, skewed the interpretive game.

But if not Pericles, then who? The title I gave to this section just above was intended to alert the reader, however, to my own view on the matter. It may be that Socrates, for Aristotle, is not necessarily a *sophos* in Aristotle's more refined, technical sense; and that rather, for Aristotle, Socrates is in fact the true *phronimos*.⁵⁴ Or, to put the matter more precisely, Aristotle will accept both Pericles and Socrates as *phronimoi*, but remains ambiguous with respect to whether he thinks that a narrowly politico-rhetorical *phronēsis* is really concerned with the good life *as a whole*. Just as Thucydides' portrayal of Pericles in the "funeral oration" is an exemplary moment for the meaning of *phronēsis*, so too Plato's portrayal of Socrates in the *Apology* - his own kind of funeral oration - also exemplifies what it means to speak, deliberate, and act well in

⁵⁴ This also accords with Aristotle's general impression of Socrates as someone who pursued *ethical* wisdom first and foremost. See the comments on Socrates in Aristotle's *Metaphysics*, I.6, 987a29-35.

a particular social-political context and with an eye towards the truly good life for oneself and for the community.⁵⁵

The problem, as we will see below, ultimately hinges on the meaning of “*to eu zēn holōs*,” which must be understood as an equivalent expression for Aristotle’s eudaimonic vocabulary. That is to say, the meaning of *eupraxia*, and *eu zēn* must be co-determined together with the meaning of *eudaimonia*, towards which a particular human’s deliberative thoughts, actions, and desires bend. For Isocrates, of course, Pericles is the exemplary *phronimos tout court*, whereas the philosophers (whom he calls the “sophists”) muddy the practical waters by subjecting the ‘obvious,’ ‘doxastic’ meaning of (1) the virtues, (2) human happiness, and (3) worthwhile practical goals not only to a radical re-questioning, but also by connecting such inquiry to the “unhelpful” and “useless” speculation about nature (*physis*), being (*ousia*), and the heavens.⁵⁶ According to Isocrates, pursuing the political (i.e., economic, military, and social) well-being of Athens - or, later in his life, a *Pan-Hellenic* well-being in the face of Alexander - was the rhetorico-political task of the *phronimos*, full stop. Aristotle quotes – and we should not be afraid to hear some Socratic irony or ambiguity in the passage – the common opinion that “this is why people say that men like Anaxagoras and Thales ‘may be wise but are not prudent’, when they see them display ignorance of their own interests; and while admitting them to possess a knowledge that is rare, marvelous, difficult, and even superhuman, they yet declare this

⁵⁵ Recall that in Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates positions himself as a “politician” qua gadfly, seeking to be a true help to Athens. I see no reason to treat this as merely ironic.

⁵⁶ In this way, Isocrates’ frustration with Plato and Aristotle is not unlike the charge that Socrates busied himself with things above the sky and below the earth, made the weaker argument the stronger, etc.

knowledge to be useless (*axrēsta*), because these sages do not seek to know things that are good for human beings.”⁵⁷ Note how far this Isocratean opinion is from Heraclitus inasmuch as Heraclitus ridicules the provinciality of the lives and wisdom of *the many*, who fail to discern what it means to take up one’s place within the *cosmos* – precisely as a matter of *phronēsis*!⁵⁸

Keeping all of this in mind now sheds new light on Aristotle’s naming of Pericles: “That is why we think Pericles and people of that sort to be practically wise (*phronimous*) - because they have (*dunatai*) theoretical knowledge (*theōrein*) of what is good for themselves and for human beings (*ta hautois agatha kai ta tois anthrōpois*), and we think household managers and politicians (*oikonomikous kai politikous*) are like that.”⁵⁹ The question of what is “good for

⁵⁷ *EN*. VI.7 1141b2-8. This language of “uselessness” is typically Isocratean and is precisely the view *against which* Aristotle argues in the *Protrepticus*. Thus, I am suggesting that one way to interpret Aristotle’s quotation of this common opinion is as a bit of irony – as if pursuing an understanding of what is the highest or divine and most wondrous, was not a good way for finite, humans to live. Is that not the conclusion of Book Ten of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, or the conclusion of Book Six wherein *sophia* regains superiority over *phronēsis* – despite the fact that *phronēsis* is required in order to pursue *sophia*? The same could be said when Aristotle mentions the old story of Thales supposedly “falling” into a well - as if he would not have climbed down into it on purpose. We should not forget how important wells were for such astronomers in the mapping of star movements, etc.!

⁵⁸ “Although the *logos* is common to all, the many live as if they privately had understanding.” (B2) See the previous chapter for my full explication of this, and other, fragments of Heraclitus. In a way, Isocrates’ Pan-Hellenic goals are, in the end, not “*cosmopolitan*” enough.

⁵⁹ 1140b7-11. Trl. C.D.C. Reeve, *Aristotle on Practical Wisdom*, 56. Reeve’s translation of *theōrein* here, though intriguing, is too strong. We should not presume that Aristotle is working with his technical definition of *theoria* until, and only in the context of, the last half of Book Ten. That said, Reeve’s translation is helpful for alerting us to this use of *theōrein*, as something worth commenting on, and it is unfortunate that Burnet, Joachim, and Greenwood avoid it. In his translation of *EN* VI, Gadamer interestingly translates this line as “Deshalb meinen wir, Perikles und seinesgleichen seien vernünftig, **weil sie einen richtigen Blick für das haben**, was für sie und andere gut ist, und schreiben wir diese Tugend der Vernünftigkeit den Ökonomen und Politikern zu.” (Boldface mine). “*Einen richtigen Blick*,” and its motif of sight, is a thoughtful translation not just for the ordinary use of *theōrein*, but for *phronēsis* especially. We might also be reminded of the colloquial English expression used in baseball, where a batter must “have a good eye” in judging whether a particular pitch will be a good pitch to swing at or to let pass. See Gadamer, *Nikomachische Ethik VI*, 35.

oneself” and “for human beings” can only be answered with reference to the meaning of the “first principle” or “starting point” of practical philosophy and ethical life in general – namely, the question of the meaning of *eudaimonia* as *to eu zēn holōs*. Is the practical wisdom of Pericles “*kata meros*” or “*kata holōs*”?

Rather surprisingly, at this point Burnet offers a gloss on “household managers and politicians,” saying simply “these are instances of *phronimoi kata meros*.”⁶⁰ This seems to beg the question, for it might suggest that Aristotle does not endorse Pericles (*the* exemplary politician) as a real *phronimos*.⁶¹ At any rate Burnet also seems to presuppose that we have at this point in Book Six (yet still only half way through the *first chapter* in which *phronēsis* is introduced), been given Aristotle’s considered view concerning “*phronimoi kata holōs*.” We have not. Rather, what is occurring at *EN* VI.5 is, among other things, Aristotle’s initial approach *towards* a more robust, dialectical treatment of the question concerning “partial vs. whole” *phronēsis*, or the “scope” or “horizon” of what is relevant for *phronēsis*. That full discussion, which I will discuss below, only begins at the end of chapter seven (1141b9) and continues halfway through chapter nine (1142a12) – which may account for why some manuscript versions begin chapter 8 just at 1141b9, i.e., to signal that a new discussion has begun.⁶²

⁶⁰ Burnet, *Ethics of Aristotle*, 263.

⁶¹ Which, at any rate, would make Aristotle’s esteem of Pericles less “anti-Platonic” – as several other scholars see it insofar as it runs counter to the skeptical thrust of Socrates’ descriptions of Pericles in Plato’s *Meno*, *Gorgias*, *Protagoras*, and *Alcibiades*. On this “anti-Platonic” reading of the naming of Pericles, see Carlo Natali, *The Wisdom of Aristotle*, 195, n. 63.

⁶² Such as the version Gadamer follows in his translation of *NE* VI. I find this grouping of chapters to be more helpful, although I will follow the conventions of most English translations when referring to the various chapters.

L.H.G. Greenwood, in opposition to Burnet, remarks that “Professor Burnet strangely holds that the *oikonomikoi* and *politikoi* are instances of the *phronimoi kata meros*. Surely not. *To eu zēn holōs*, the great final *telos*, is the end that the *oikonomikoi* and *politikoi*, as such, have in view - their end is not any particular *telos* such as health or victory.”⁶³ However, Greenwood, by not lingering with the question of the “*holōs*,” proceeds too quickly in assimilating nearly all manifestations of *phronēsis* to a *phronēsis kata holōs*. He claims that, with respect to the politician, the household manager, and the individual as such, “all have as their end *to eu zēn holōs*, whether for a country or a family or an individual.”⁶⁴ But then the question must arise for Greenwood, which it does not, *what would be a phronēsis kata meros?* In any case, we require some robust explanation – which I hope to provide below – for how to more concretely understand a *phronēsis kata meros* and *holōs* on the basis of 1141b9-1142a12. Both Greenwood and Burnet seem to be working with an implicit understanding of the meaning of these terms, but they offer no real explication. Finally, in C.D.C Reeve’s 2013 translation and commentary on Book Six, he writes that, with respect to Pericles, “it is soon obvious, indeed, that whatever Pericles did possess it was no more than a nascent form of Aristotelian practical wisdom. For he can hardly be supposed to have possessed the understanding of what happiness is that practical wisdom and full virtue of character imply.”⁶⁵ Reeve does not make use of the *kata meros* and *kata holōs* framework in his text, but he, as with the other commentators, is at least clear that the

⁶³ L.H.G. Greenwood, *Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics Book Six*, 185.

⁶⁴ Greenwood, 185. Italics mine.

⁶⁵ C.D.C. Reeve, 158-159.

question of Pericles' being *phronimos* hangs on "the understanding of what happiness is" which involves the interpenetration of *phronēsis* and the character virtues. Nevertheless, the description of Periclean *phronēsis* as "nascent" is vague, and we can give more sense to the text once we have a clear grasp of the *question* that Aristotle is participating in - namely, the question of the scope of the wisdom of the *phronimos*, along with the contrary answers that seem to be advocated by Isocrates, on the one hand, and Plato, on the other.

By way of one further example of how Aristotle's thinking makes the transition from part to whole, it may be worth quickly noting his use of the term "good deliberation" (*euboulia*), a term which must be heard in its social-political register. Aristotle's introductory definition of *phronēsis*, which I quoted above, concludes with the statement that "the one who deliberates (*bouleutikos*) about the whole is *phronimos*."⁶⁶ In this way we are already prepared for what Aristotle will say about *euboulia* at *EN VI.9*, which concludes with the following:

Moreover, it is possible to deliberate well, either unconditionally (*haplōs*) or to further a specific end (*pros ti telos*). Unconditionally good deliberation correctly furthers the unconditional end (*to telos to haplōs*), the specific sort, some specific end. If, then, it is characteristic of practically wise people (*tōn phronimōn*) to have deliberated well, good deliberation (*euboulia*) will be the sort of correctness (*orthotēs*) that is in accord with what is advantageous (*sumpheron*) in furthering the end about which (*hou*) practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) is true supposition (*alēthēs hupolēpsis*).⁶⁷

⁶⁶ 1140a31.

⁶⁷ 1142b28-34. Trl. C.D.C. Reeve (72). The relative pronoun "hou" is ambiguous and has given birth to much debate regarding the nature of practical reasoning; debate, which hangs on the issue of whether the *hou* refers to "means" or (also) to the "end(s)" of human action. The textual problem is bound up with the interpretive question of whether Aristotle thinks that *phronēsis* deliberates about "means" (to the end) only, or also deliberates about the "end" itself. Although I will not argue for it here, my position is similar to Daniel C. Russell's, who points out that, at the very least, *phronēsis* must deliberate about ends insofar as it seeks to make the general, *indeterminate* end (e.g., "helping a friend," "living well") more *determinate* by considering *both* the "means" (e.g., "shall I do X or Y?") as well as what the end means or looks like concretely in this particular case. See Daniel C. Russell's "Phronesis and the Virtues" in the

By moving from the language of “*meros...holōs*” (part, whole) to the related, though more subtle, “*tis...haplōs*” (conditioned, unconditioned), Aristotle shows how “*to eu zēn holōs*” is an expression which raises the question of the meaning of *eudaimonia*: the “true supposition” of *eudaimonia*, as “the unconditional end” (*to telos to haplōs*), or “the highest end” (*to telos to ariston*), for and at which all human beings essentially long and aim, helps to guide our deliberations about what is truly, finally, “advantageous” for our particular lives – both in the short and long term.

By using the language of “*haplōs*” - i.e., what is simple, unconditioned, unqualified - Aristotle helps us to understand his use of “*holōs*.” The good life “as a whole” could, after all, have any number of meanings, and it may be that Aristotle endorses several of them. *Temporally*, “*to eu zēn holōs*” could mean that the *whole* of one’s *lifetime* (*bios*) should be performed in the *ergon* of human living - “for one swallow does not make a spring, nor does one fine day; and similarly one day or a brief period of happiness does not make a man blessed and happy.”⁶⁸ *Spatially*, for lack of a better term, it could mean that *all* the various “areas” or “parts” that make up the whole of one’s life (e.g., family, friends, job, social-political context, etc.) should be good or lived through in a good way, since “the term self-sufficient, however, we

Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, pp. 205-219. As an aside, it is worth noting that Aristotle’s text is ambiguous in exactly the same way as Heraclitus’ proem, which Aristotle complains about in the rhetoric: “Generally speaking, that which is written should be easy to read or easy to utter, which is the same thing. Now, this is not the case when there is a number of connecting particles, or when the punctuation is hard, as in the writings of Heraclitus. For it is hard, since it is uncertain to which word another belongs, whether to that which follows or that which precedes; for instance, at the beginning of his composition he says: “Of this *logos* which exists always [*aei*] men are ignorant,” where it is uncertain whether “always” should go with “which exists” or with “are ignorant.”” (*Rhet.* III, 1407b11-19).

⁶⁸ *EN.* I.7 1098a18f.

employ with reference not to oneself alone, living a life of isolation, but also to one's parents and children and wife, and one's friends and fellow citizens in general, since man is by nature a social being."⁶⁹

However, the sense of "simple" or "whole" that is being underlined in Book Six in relation to the "intellectual virtue" of *phronēsis* in particular is somewhat different than either the "temporal" or "spatial" senses. To deliberate about the good life *as a whole* or the good life *pure and simple*, as the English phrase goes, requires that one's heart and mind (Homer would have just said one's *phrenes*) are *wholly* oriented toward the ethical task of living a good human life as this particular human being. In another epoch, Kierkegaard would pick up on this theme in his essay "Purity of the Heart is to Will One Thing."⁷⁰ Thus Aristotle concludes Book Six with a reconsideration of the nature of both *phronēsis* and *the ethical virtues* in order to make clear that only when there is a mutual suffusion amongst these two "parts" of a virtuous soul can a person be said to be *good*.⁷¹ That is to say, the truly good person is good "simply" and in no way

⁶⁹ *EN*. I.7. 1097b7-11. I chose this quotation, as well as the one just above, precisely because Aristotle explicitly outlines *eudaimonia* as consisting, among other things, in "self-sufficiency" and a certain sense of the "function" or *ergon* of human life. Carlo Natali also identifies this passage as relevant for gaining an understanding of *phronēsis* and the good life "as a whole." Cf. Carlo Natali, *The Wisdom of Aristotle*, 150-154.

⁷⁰ Gadamer's turn to the Greeks can be partially understood in this way. While Gadamer is deeply influenced by Kierkegaard's call to "purity of heart" – or by Heidegger's discussion of "authenticity" – he distances himself from the individualism that seems to run alongside 19th and 20th century "existentialism." Aristotle, and the classics in general, represent for Gadamer a better understanding of the human person as engaged in and constituted by "dialogue." In this way, Gadamer came to identify the locus of concrete human responsibility less with Heidegger's "Being-towards-death" but much more so with Aristotle's discussion of "friendship." For a similar understanding of Gadamer's biographical relationship to the Greeks, see P. Christopher Smith's comments in his translation of Gadamer's *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, 173 n.5.

⁷¹ This discussion occurs at *EN*. VI.13, and is exemplified in Aristotle's intriguing distinction there between virtue being determined "*kata ton orthon logon*" and "*meta tou orthou logou*."

“divided” against him or herself such as in Aristotle’s terrifying description of the self-understanding of the person who is *vicious*: “...such persons are at variance with themselves, desiring one thing and wishing another...such men do not enter into their own joys and sorrows, as there is civil war in their souls; one part of their nature, owing to depravity, is pained by the abstinence from certain indulgences while another part is pleased by it; one part pulls them one way and another the other, as if tearing them apart.”⁷² On the other hand, a perfect unity of soul is not a human possibility, since a human soul, unlike the soul of a divine being, is not *simple* but rather “complex,” as Aristotle shows through his analysis of the various “parts” of the one human soul.⁷³

I will explore the issue of the “*holōs*” further in the next section. It is enough for now to conclude by restating that what lies behind the particular *questions* which Aristotle, writing and thinking in the wake of Plato and Isocrates, is wrestling with from the very start of his analysis of *phronēsis* at *EN*. VI.5 - questions in which we must also participate - are dealt with only in light of the foundational question of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: what is *eudaimonia* for finite human beings? As the “first principle” or the fundamental *archē* of all deliberation and practical wisdom, our practical lives always presuppose some grasp or “supposition” of the meaning of

⁷² The full description occurs at *EN*. IX.4 1166b1-30. We should note the *protreptic* tone of the passage, which thus concludes with Aristotle drawing the practical consequence for his listeners: “If then such a state of mind is utterly miserable, we should do our utmost to shun wickedness and try to be virtuous. That is the way both to be friends with ourselves and to win the friendship of others.”

⁷³ Gadamer important conclusions from this for the question of the “two lives”: “Aristotle knows just as well as Plato that for human beings precisely this possibility of the theoretical life is limited and conditional. Human beings cannot devote themselves persistently and uninterruptedly to thought’s pure seeing for precisely the reason that their nature is composite.” Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, 176-177.

happiness – both “in outline” and as it concretely appears in particular situations. The task of “practical philosophy” is to clarify this target and aid a “true supposition,” which, however, can only really be grasped to the extent that the whole of one’s *character* (i.e., one’s emotions, habits, desires, etc.) is well-educated and well-molded enough to “see” what sort of life (*bios*) is truly good *as good*.⁷⁴ Aristotle agrees with Isocrates’ emphasis on the importance of *practice*, *habit*, and the formation of character as a general corrective to the exaggerated “intellectualism” of Socrates and Plato who seem to equate possession of virtue with the *knowledge* (*epistēmē*) of it. However, as I have been suggesting in this section, Aristotle, by taking the name of Pericles as an all-too-obvious candidate for being *phronimos* – indeed the exemplary candidate for Isocrates – is able to push the discussion of the meaning of happiness to a higher or deeper register. Yet although Aristotle will give, as we will see below, a deeper meaning to *phronēsis* than Isocrates would affirm – indeed one that is ultimately much closer to Plato than to Isocrates – that does not mean that Aristotle goes so far as to equate the *sophos* and the *phronimos*, as Plato seemed to have done even though for Aristotle the *bios theōrētikōs* also includes the achievement of true *phronēsis*.⁷⁵ Put bluntly, Aristotle’s understanding of the *phronimos* sits ambiguously in between Isocrates on the one hand, and Plato on the other.⁷⁶

⁷⁴ Note the strong connection between the *character* and the *intellectual* virtues, which Aristotle finally draws towards the conclusion of Book Six (1144a28ff): “the highest good [*to telos kai to ariston*] only appears to the good person; vice perverts the mind and causes it to hold false views (*diapseudesthai*) about the first principles of conduct (*tas praktikas archas*). Hence it is clear that we cannot be *phronimon* without being *agathon*.” Although I cannot explore this here, there is a tantalizing hermeneutic question lying beneath Aristotle’s comments here, and in other places: what sort of *character* stands behind the *Nicomachean Ethics*?

⁷⁵ Here I follow Carlo Natali’s position according to which the contemplative life is “a *weighted equilibrium* of components that have different degrees of importance and dignity.” It is not altogether

Cosmos, Community, Individual: The Moral Scope of *Phronēsis* and its Relationship to *Sophia*

After Aristotle's introductory comments concerning *phronēsis*, some of whose most basic questions we outlined above, there is a brief interlude (1140b31-1141b8) before he explicitly returns to consider the nature of *phronēsis* more deeply. It would be incorrect to interpret this interlude as the mere methodological completion of a task outlined at the start of chapter three; the famous treatment of the five ways in which the rational 'part' of the soul accomplishes truth through affirmation and denial: *epistēmē* (chapter 3), *tēxnē* (chapter 4), *phronēsis* (chapter 5), *nous* (chapter 6), and *sophia* (chapter 7).⁷⁷ Aristotle proceeds to analyze each of these five ways in just the order given above, and, given this, one could perhaps read what follows after the initial discussion of *phronēsis* in chapter five as simply the completion of the analysis of "the five ways" before proceeding to a more thorough investigation of *phronēsis* in chapter 8. One might even suggest that chapters 6 and 7 "interrupt" the discussion of *phronēsis*, and conjecture that they might perhaps be better placed before chapter 5.

Treating chapters six and seven in this way would, however, terribly obscure the approach to the questions regarding *phronēsis* that are at issue. H.H. Joachim instead rightly suggests that the analysis of the five ways, and what follows thereafter, should be interpreted on

clear, however, whether Natali would, in the end, want to call his position an inclusivist one (as opposed to the exclusive or dominant view). For more on his own view, see 111-114, and 165-183.

⁷⁶ Thus my *historical* claim about Aristotle's conception of *phronēsis* vis-a-vis Plato and Isocrates is also meant to be consonant with Aristotle's general *methodological* orientation toward preserving or "saving" what is (limitedly or qualifiedly) true in the thoughts and writings of earlier intellectuals, poets, and generally well experienced persons.

⁷⁷ *EN*. VI.3 1139b15f. In fact Aristotle uses the verb *alētheuei* to describe the soul's activity - the soul can be said "to truth" in five ways.

the basis of a more or less unified attempt to clarify the relationship between *phronēsis* and *sophia*: “the object of the passage - the main object of the book [i.e., Book Six] - is summarized in the recapitulation: ‘We have now stated what *phronēsis* is and what *sophia* is: with what each is concerned: and that each is an excellence (*aretē*) of a distinct part of the sou.’”⁷⁸ Yet Joachim does not quite see the socio-historical context that supplies the question which comes to be at issue for Aristotle in light of Isocrates and Plato’s debates about the nature of (practical) wisdom - i.e., the question of the scope of the wisdom of *phronēsis*.⁷⁹ Already throughout the discussion of *sophia* in chapter 7 there are indications of the more robust consideration of the scope of *phronēsis* that will follow in chapter 8.

Chapter 7 in fact carries this procedure forward by further delimiting the scope or horizon of *sophia* and *phronēsis* on the basis of their proper “objects.” I have already somewhat discussed Aristotle’s naming of Thales and Anaxagoras as *sophoi* in relation to the naming of Pericles as *phronimos*. However, there is another way to read the naming of various *sophoi* which becomes instructive for this task. Aristotle writes of *sophia* that it is concerned with the most exalted (*timiōtatōn*) objects; knowledge (*epistēmē*) about which, moreover, would be rare (*peritta*), amazing (*thaumasta*), difficult (*xalepa*), and daimonic (*daimonia*).⁸⁰ By contrast, Aristotle writes in the middle of this chapter that the objects of human *phronēsis* are *human*

⁷⁸ H.H. Joachim, *Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics. A Commentary*, 189. The quote from Aristotle occurs at 1143b14-17. Joachim does not say it explicitly, but his statement that I have quoted is a perfect example of the old hermeneutic task of identifying the *scopus* of a particular textual passage. Following Gadamer, I am aiming simply to go one step further by rephrasing this *scopus* in terms of a question that must be answered. It is generally hermeneutically instructive to attempt to ask “what is the question to which X is the response.”

⁷⁹ We will see below that Joachim does show some awareness here, but does not explicitly confront it.

⁸⁰ See especially 1141b3-8, and 1141a20.

beings and what is good for human beings - indeed even what is “the best” (*aristos*) *practicable good for human beings*.⁸¹ I say “human *phronēsis*” because Aristotle, aside from mirroring the language of the *Philebus* about what is the human good, also ascribes *phronēsis* - in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and elsewhere - to other animals, such as bees or any animals “which display a capacity (*dunamin*) for forethought (*pronoētikēn*) as regards their own lives (*peri ton autōn bion*).”⁸² With respect to the relationship of *phronēsis* to *sophia*, there are three *profoundly interconnected* issues that arise in light of these just quoted passages.

First, for Aristotle, the “objects” of wisdom (qua *sophia*) are, quite simply, *better* than the objects of wisdom (qua *phronēsis*): “For it is absurd to think that...*phronēsis* is the most serious (*spoudaiotatēn*) [way of accomplishing truth] since man is not the best thing in the cosmos (*mē to ariston tōn en tō kosmō anthrōpos estin*).”⁸³ C.D.C. Reeve renders the sentence as “For it

⁸¹ See 1141b13. In fact, Aristotle here defines the good deliberator pure and simple (*haplōs*) as the one who practically pursues what is *the best for human beings* to pursue. Thus when Aristotle uses the example of “light meat” to illustrate the so-called “practical syllogism,” which models the activity of deliberation, we should not at all think that “light meat” is literally meant to be taken as a paradigmatic example of the sort of questions and activities that a *phronimos* will be concerned with. As when Socrates discusses shipbuilders or shoemakers, so too with Aristotle, the heart of the matter lies elsewhere. Given that this passage follows on the heels of a statement about what is “*the best*” in *the cosmos* as such, it seems to me that we have here another hint at what will, in the end, count as true *phronēsis* for Aristotle: a life that is morally well-guided toward the end of contemplation (i.e., the divine). By orienting the nature of deliberation and of practical wisdom toward a robust questioning of what truly is “best,” Aristotle refuses to undertake anything less than a radical investigation into the nature of traditional answers; answers, moreover, which Isocrates still affirms too quickly. Burnet, 269, notes that the use of *haplōs* here is to be understood in contrast to “*kata meros*.”

⁸² *EN*. VI.7 1141a28-30. The immediate context of which (1141a20-30) also in part concerns the issue of the *phronimos*.

⁸³ 1141a21-22. The language here is compressed somewhat. Where I write “way of accomplishing truth” Rackham writes “kind of knowledge.” Since “knowledge” is a good translation of *epistēmē*, which is only one of the five ways of accomplishing truth, I would rather not use “knowledge” here to avoid implying that *phronēsis* is a kind of *epistēmē*, since that is exactly what Plato seems to do, and what Isocrates (and Aristotle) will distance themselves from.

would be a strange thing to think - if anyone does - that political science or practical wisdom is best - unless the best thing in the universe is a human being.”⁸⁴ Although he does not show awareness of it in his commentary, Reeve’s translation is useful for identifying a place in the text where it is helpful to remember that this is precisely Isocrates’ position (viz. that [political] *phronēsis* is best and that [philosophical] *sophia* is “useless” since it does not “benefit” human beings). Gabriel Richardson Lear, however, makes it a point to draw out the anti-Isocratean impulse that is in play insofar as Aristotle identifies the objects of *sophia* differently than Isocrates, who “claimed that the deeds of heroes and great men were the proper object of *philosophia* on account of *their* great superiority.”⁸⁵ In this respect the entire trajectory of Book Six, and indeed ultimately of the *Ethics* as a whole, shows how fundamentally juxtaposed Aristotle and Isocrates are. Whereas Aristotle claims, as we will see below, that *phronēsis* finds its ultimate meaning in service to *sophia*, Isocrates claims just the opposite.⁸⁶

Second, the objects of *sophia* concern “the best” entities in the *cosmos as such*. However, the peculiarity of the object of *phronēsis* - i.e., what is good “*for oneself*” - requires that it be differentiated depending on the “oneself” that is at issue (e.g., a human vs. a fish vs. a bee). Thus Aristotle writes: “It is also clear that *sophia* cannot be the same thing as *politikē*; for if we are to call knowledge of our own interests *sophia*, there will be a number of different kinds

⁸⁴ C.D.C Reeve, 62.

⁸⁵ Gabriel Richardson Lear, *Happy Lives and the Highest Good*, 112.

⁸⁶ As we saw above insofar as Isocrates claims that the mental “gymnastics” of Academic and Platonic “sophistry” may find their redemption by being good preparation for politics and for the kinds of political discussions that were pursued in Isocrates’ school.

of *sophiai*, one for each species: but there cannot be a single such wisdom dealing with the good of all living things, any more than there is one art of medicine for all existing things.”⁸⁷ Whereas the objects of *sophia* would ostensibly be the same for all insofar as they are simply the best things in the *cosmos* (notwithstanding the fact that lower animals cannot engage in *philosophia* proper), the object of *phronēsis*, as the “well-fare” of oneself, will be different for each species.⁸⁸ Gabriel Lear has helpfully noted one further import of this passage, by drawing attention to the way in which Aristotle is already here prefiguring the later claim that *sophia* is “superior” to *phronēsis*: *phronēsis*, unlike *sophia*, “does not distinguish human beings from animals.”⁸⁹

Third, in differentiating *sophia* from *phronēsis* in this way, *Aristotle continues the tradition of thinking of phronēsis as the wisdom of “self-understanding,”* which was explicitly begun with Heraclitus’ coining of the term. We have also seen how this tradition occurred implicitly already in Homer (e.g., as the practical awareness of what action one must undertake), or in Hippocrates (e.g., as the self-understanding of one’s physical limitations and what dietary balancing acts one must perform to remain healthy). Further, by identifying *phronēsis* as “self-understanding” (specifically as the understanding of what is *best* for ourselves) we can also see how, for Aristotle, it may possibly be, in the end, that *Socrates* and not *Pericles* is the true

⁸⁷ 1141a29-32 (trl. Rackham).

⁸⁸ Note that here at least the “good” for humans is a species-good and not a “private” good, despite the fact that it is up to the individual to concretize that good. In fact, it would be more precise to say that Aristotle is seeking the good for humans *not as the member of a “species” per se, but rather as a politēs (citizen)*. We will see below how this later specification plays an important role in further distinguishing *phronēsis* from *sophia* for Aristotle.

⁸⁹ Gabriel Richardson Lear, 114. However, Lear is careful to point out that this may not apply to Aristotle’s full account of *phronēsis*, which “perfects a distinctively human function...and what it enables us to do is not something of which beasts are capable.” (116)

paradigm for a wisdom about “the good life as a whole.”⁹⁰ In the pursuit of “self-understanding,” as *the* ethical undertaking (despite Aristotle’s reservations for calling this a form of “knowledge”), Socrates remains the true exemplar.

Sophia is a wisdom that is, so to speak, unidirectional and wholly “out-going” - it reaches up and out towards the best, most divine and wonderful beings in the cosmos. *Phronēsis*, by contrast, is a unique kind of *re-flected* wisdom, a doubling back upon oneself in practical (self-)understanding. It is not therefore a wisdom about humans as the “second best” objects in the universe - for it is not an “objective” wisdom at all.⁹¹ According to Aristotle, even if human beings are “better” than all other animals, that is irrelevant as a definition of *phronēsis*, since the unique aspect of *phronēsis* in Aristotle’s discussion of it here is that, structurally, it is a movement of a kind of *re-reflection* (just as the *conscientia* of later epochs echoes, however faintly, the traditional demand to “know thyself!”).⁹² Aristotle’s own rhetoric exemplifies this here: it is true *phronēsis* on Aristotle’s own part to see and accept that the *phronēsis* of a mortal, limited human creature is only one small part of the whole cosmos: at least in this moment in the

⁹⁰ This is a complicated claim. The complexity lies in the fact that Socrates also clearly exemplifies not the *vita activa*, but the *vita contemplativa* of *EN. X.8* (where the description of the philosopher mirrors that given in Plato’s *Theaetetus*). Thus we also need an account of how *phronēsis* will be found in the life of the latter.

⁹¹ It is therefore incorrect to juxtapose *sophia* and *phronēsis* as a competition between “first place” and “second place” per se. The point I am emphasizing here is the extent to which we truly have two *different kinds* of wisdom - whose “strengths and weaknesses” are therefore different. This is entirely consonant therefore with the fact that each of these “intellectual virtues” is the excellence of one “part” of the “rational soul” – now the “scientific,” now the “calculative” sides.

⁹² Interestingly, Gadamer notes that even the “lower” animals can be said to participate in the divine for Aristotle

text, there is no difference between the conceptual analysis of *phronēsis*, and the wisdom (*phronēsis*) of that analysis.

Having thus provided an initial differentiation of the *objects* of *phronēsis* and *sophia* in the beginning of chapter seven, Aristotle turns at the end of the chapter to a further clarification of the scope of *phronēsis* in particular (1141b23-1142a12), although even this further clarification will, in the end, simply return us to the question of its relationship to *sophia*.⁹³ The movement of Aristotle's thinking about *phronēsis* in this particular passage oscillates between two common views about the scope of *phronēsis*, according to which the virtue of practical wisdom properly has either a *political* or an *individual* scope of concern. Throughout this passage, Aristotle is careful to note how these common views have impacted the use of the language of *phronēsis* (and other associated words) by ultimately distorting its real (ethical) meaning. It is entirely appropriate for Aristotle to move from a differentiation of two kinds of wisdom (*phronēsis* and *sophia*), to the more specific clarification of *phronēsis* in the way that he does. For, if *phronēsis* is to be a form of "self-understanding" (as opposed to a "cosmic understanding"), it is then only natural to ask what the scope of this "self" will be - viz., will the true *phronimos* be concerned (1) with his or herself exclusively, or (2) with the socio-political

⁹³ Hermeneutically, the *scopus* that I am identifying here concurs with the comment of Joachim just quoted above. The relationship of *phronēsis* to *technē* and the distinction of *praxis* from *poiēsis*, which has occupied the attention of so many contemporary scholars and retrievals of the "relevance" of Aristotle (which includes the retrievals of Gadamer and Heidegger), is in truth for Aristotle a rather minor issue, which is why he simply refers the listener to his "exoteric" dialogues for the arguments about those distinctions. The heart of the matter for Aristotle is, in the end, the question of what sort of wisdom *philosophia* longs for, and how that longing can be ethically and concretely lived out by particular, finite human persons. Ever the aristocrat, there is never any real worry that the expertise of a tradesman could be superior to either *phronēsis* or *sophia*.

community *as such*, or with some third possibility.⁹⁴ While the common views that underlie these two extremes are able to pick out some true aspect of practical understanding (*phronēsis kata meros*), they need to be contextualized within a larger scope or whole, both so that they are properly understood in their (partial) truth, and so that the meaning of *phronēsis kata holōs* can come into sharper focus.

The particular lines (1141B23-34) of this passage are, as Carlo Natali writes, “rather complex, and badly organized.”⁹⁵ Because he has worked hard to untangle the meaning of the passage, I quote Natali’s translation in full:

Politics [A] and *phronēsis* [B] are the same habitual state (*hexis*), but they differ with regard to their being (*to...einai*). As for that [A] which regards the city, the one [A.1] which is architectonic is legislative wisdom (*phronēsis*), while the other [A.2], which deals with individual cases, has the name common to both, politics. This latter is both practical and deliberative; in fact, a decree (*psēphisma*) is practical in the [it is] an ultimatum. For this reason it is said that only these latter govern the city, as they are the only ones who act, like manual labourers. And it is also thought that [B] *phronēsis* is mainly that which regards oneself and the individual; and this has the common name, ‘wisdom’ (*phronēsis*); as for the others, one is [A.3] ‘economics’, another [A.1] ‘legislation’, another [A.2] ‘politics’, and, with regard to the last of these, one [A.2.1] is ‘deliberative’ and the other [A.2.2] is ‘judicial’.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ A hermeneutical note: The end of chapter seven concludes with a brief discussion of how *phronēsis* must be concerned with “particulars,” and, after the dialectical investigation that I am discussing here, Aristotle seems to return to a discussion of the importance of “particulars” for *phronēsis* at the end of chapter eight. A hermeneutical discussion of how the dialectical interlude relates to the discussion of “particulars” is sorely needed, though I cannot deal with that issue here. Suffice it to say, it will not do to avoid the question by suggesting that the dialectical interlude should be “moved” somewhere else. The specific interpretive task, it seems to me, must concern the question of how the last line of chapter seven, and its use of “*arxitektonikē*” connects to the use of “*arxitektonikē*” at the very beginning of chapter eight (let alone the hunt for an “architectonic science” discussed in Book One!).

⁹⁵ Natali, 23.

⁹⁶ 1141B23-34. See Natali, 22-23.

Without going into detail about the nature of Athenian politics,⁹⁷ a careful consideration of this shows one way in which Aristotle attempts to clarify the nature of *phronēsis*. With the proliferation of terms for various aspects of socio-political life mentioned in the above passage, there is a temptation to unduly restrict the meaning of *phronēsis* merely to the scope of one political province or another - or indeed simply to oneself as a single being (*auton kai hena*). In truth, *phronēsis* is a “common name” (*to koinon onoma*), which properly applies to all the various socio-political spheres of concern. Indeed the scope of *phronēsis* will be coextensive with the whole “scope” of ethics. To pursue the real meaning of *phronēsis*, Aristotle must guard against the fragmentation of socio-political life into discrete domains, which threaten to appropriate a word like *phronēsis* merely for one sphere or another. In the face of this, Aristotle defines *phronēsis* as a concern for “the good life as a whole,” and although such a definition can only be specified in a general outline, it is enough for taking a philosophical step forward in the difficult hunt for what, in the end, is “good for oneself” or “the best” for human persons – or at least those who are lucky enough to consider what form of life (*bios*) their leisure (*scholē*) should take.

Aristotle raises the possible view that *phronēsis* concerns what is good for oneself qua only *this one, single* individual by lending it some authoritative credibility through a reference to some lines in Euripides’ lost *Philoctetes* (1141b34-1142a5). This leads us to the second key theme - i.e., how Aristotle situates his conception of *phronēsis* within the social context of an opposition between the life of (political) action exemplified in men like Pericles, on the one

⁹⁷ For clear discussion of this passage, see Natali, 23, as well as Burnet’s commentary.

hand, and on the other, the life of (political) quietism exemplified by rural farmers, young intellectuals, and wealthy but politically disaffected oligarchs.⁹⁸ In the Euripidean tragedy that Aristotle quotes, Odysseus contrasts the anxious, busybody (*polupragmones*) nature of politicians and “men of action” (*prassontas*), with “*phronēsis*” and “minding one’s own business.”⁹⁹ In this way, Euripides gives voice not only to the individualism of his generation, but also to the *apragmosynē* (love of a quiet life, freedom from politics) that was becoming an established “way of life” (*bios*) in the face of the wartime horrors and political disasters that defined Athens in the late 5th century BCE.¹⁰⁰

Obviously Isocrates could never have given any credence to such a view. His whole wealthy business of “education” depended precisely on teaching aspiring young men how to become “men of action” in the political life of Athens and to avoid what is “useless” or to be tempted to become an *apragmones*. A “life of action” - and here we mean a Periclean-like engagement with the political activities of Athens - *just is* the content of Isocratean *phronēsis*. For Euripides to *contrast* “*phronēsis*” with involvement in the socio-political well-being of the community would be, at best, an outrageous misunderstanding for Isocrates. And so it was also

⁹⁸ For a whole historical overview of this issue, see the rich, rewarding work of L.B. Carter, *The Quiet Athenian*. Unfortunately, Carter stops his study short with Plato and only briefly suggests some conclusions for Aristotle’s practical philosophy.

⁹⁹ 1142a1-6. The phrase “minding one’s own business” appears to have been coined by Plato, who also contrasted “*philopragmosunē*” with “*apragmosunē*” (i.e., minding one’s own business) – a contrast which Aristotle appropriates to suit his own needs, as I discuss below. See also Burnet’s comments on the passage at 272.

¹⁰⁰ This dovetails nicely with the whole debate about where true *paideia* is learned and practiced - in the city or in the countryside? We should keep in mind that “culture” is a concept which, so to speak, grew out of the noble practice of *agriculture* and husbandry, and for which Xenophon would still vocally advocate.

for Pericles himself (as portrayed by Thucydides): “We alone regard the man who takes no part in politics not as minding his own business (*apragmōn*), but as useless (*axreios*).”¹⁰¹ In fact, this is one important respect in which not only Isocrates and Aristotle, but Plato as well are all in agreement, if not for the same reasons or motivations. To restrict the scope of “wisdom” to just oneself is both philosophically naive and ethically disastrous. Thus, Aristotle is also quick to note the individualistic exaggeration at work in views such as the one suggested in Euripides’ lost play. Aristotle comments: “Yet certainly a man cannot pursue his own well-being (*to autou eu*) either without *oikonomias* or without *politeias*. Further, how one should conduct one’s affairs is not clear and should be considered.”¹⁰² If human beings can be appropriately understood, at least in part, as “political animals,” then a robustly human wisdom about what is good for human well-being (i.e., *phronēsis*) must include the active participation in the well-being of the whole community in which the single individual finds his or her place *as* an individual. The “scope” or “horizon” of the wisdom of the *phronimos* must include more than simply the concern for one’s “own good” *qua* the individualistic abstraction from the whole concrete socio-political and historical community that surrounds one’s singular life. From the city of ethics, there is no quiet countryside to escape from moral responsibility.

However, whereas Isocrates would identify “politics” precisely with “*phronēsis*,” Aristotle undertakes his reflection on the scope of *phronēsis* (i.e., whether it is a concern for the

¹⁰¹ Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, II.40.2.

¹⁰² 1142a9-11. Carlo Natali, 196, n.73, interestingly notes that “In *pol.* this is spelled out, in the sense that one should pursue one’s own economic interests not with a view to increasing one’s *oikos* as much as possible, but in order to provide oneself with the leisure to take part in the political and philosophical life (7, 1255b35-37).”

single individual merely, or includes the wider community), at the start of chapter eight, by stating that “*phronēsis* is indeed the same *hexis* as *politikē*, though their essence (*to einai*) is different.”¹⁰³ This is another extremely important passage which has not quite received the attention it needs. Greenwood translates the passage as “political wisdom and practical wisdom are in practice the same quality, though the words do not really mean the same thing.”¹⁰⁴ Rackham and Burnet both remark that, for Aristotle, “*politikē*” is not identical to “*phronēsis*,” but rather a “special application” of it.¹⁰⁵ The language of “special application” suggests therefore that *politikē* is only *phronēsis* “in part” and not “as a whole”; and indeed this is how Burnet seems to take it: “...*politikē* is a special application of *phronēsis* generally. There is also *phronēsis* concerned with the family (*oikonomia*) and the individual.”¹⁰⁶ Neither Burnet nor Rackham, however, seem to show awareness of the problem or question that supports Aristotle’s move here - namely, the question we have been pursuing concerning the meaning of *phronēsis* “as a whole” or “simply.” Throughout Book Six, Aristotle is indeed “defining” the meaning (i.e., delimiting the horizon or scope) of *phronēsis* as a concept,¹⁰⁷ but he does not do so in the straightforward manner of a dictionary. Rather, his analysis of the concept of *phronēsis* occurs

¹⁰³ *EN*. VI.8 1141b23f. On the use of “*to einai*” in this passage see Irwin’s commentary (245, 229), Burnet (270), and Natali (196 n.66).

¹⁰⁴ L.H.G. Greenwood, *Aristotle. Nicomachean Ethics*, 107.

¹⁰⁵ See Rackham, 346 n.c, and also Burnet, 270.

¹⁰⁶ Burnet, 270. Greenwood’s commentary does not really touch on this issue except to say that “*All phronēsis* is to some extent *praktikē* and *bouleutikē*...” Greenwood, 190-191.

¹⁰⁷ The conceptual relationship between the Greek word “*horizein*” and the language of part and whole make it perfectly natural that Aristotle, in seeking to “define” the essence of *phronēsis*, would proceed by considering what makes up a “partial” vs. a “whole” or “simple” *phronēsis*.

on the basis of a dialectical movement of thinking whose orientation ultimately concerns a (or *the*) typical “Socratic question”: that is, what is the good for humans and what is good to do in this particular situation?¹⁰⁸ H.H. Joachim’s commentary on this passage indicates a grasp of this issue. Precisely because Joachim has explicitly laid down a hermeneutic *scopus* for Book Six (viz., to work out the relationship between *phronēsis* and *sophia* as two “kinds” of wisdom), he is able to see that Aristotle’s interest here is not merely to discuss a “special application” of a “general” *phronēsis*. Rather, Aristotle is pursuing an answer to the question of the scope of *phronēsis*, and thereby taking his place in between (both with and against) Isocrates and Plato - as chief representatives of two “extreme” views about the nature of *phronēsis* and its relationship to politics, to theoretical wisdom (*sophia*), and to the good life *in concreto*. On the one hand, Aristotle sees that *phronēsis* is not a wisdom which encompasses some realms of human practical life and excludes others, as if some “parts” did not require (practical) wisdom or “self-understanding.” Human desire reaches out for *eudaimonia* - the good life *as a whole* - and desire will not concede that the good life can be lived in public while one’s home life is a tragedy, or when one’s finances and health are good, but one’s friendships are a disaster. The practical wisdom or self-understanding required to live a humanly good life as a whole (or “through and through” as the English phrase goes) demands that the “grasp” (both by the intellect and by one’s

¹⁰⁸ See the recent book by Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates*, and especially the introduction “The Socratic Question of the *Ethics*.”

desiring character) of what is “the best” for human persons must infuse the whole of one’s living.¹⁰⁹

Therefore, when Aristotle remarks in Book Five that justice “as a whole” (*holē dikaiosunē*) coincides with virtue “as a whole” (*holē aretē*), this does not mean that the virtue of *phronēsis* is only about politics any more than justice is only about politics.¹¹⁰ This becomes all the more clear once the language of “*dikaiosunē*” is made subservient (not only at the end of Book Five, but also in Books Six and Eight) to ethical concepts like “*epieikeia*” (equity, reasonableness), “*sungnōmē*” (forgiveness), and “*philia*” (friendship) - concepts which must pervade the whole of human living as with *phronēsis* in order for the good life to be concretely realized. The Isocratean conception of *phronēsis* is at best a *phronēsis kata meros*, and Pericles qua politician is at best a *phronimos* “in part.” Contrariwise, we already find some preparation for the meaning of Aristotelian *phronēsis* in the Plato’s *Apology*, wherein Socrates gives his justification for not being “politically active,” strictly speaking. In contrast to the “life of action” which Isocrates, or those like him, encourage young men to take part in (and who charge a hefty fee for their “education”), Socrates, *who cites his poverty as a witness*, instead models a peculiar combination of political action and inaction. Socrates indeed is a “busybody” (“*polupragmonō*”

¹⁰⁹ It is in this sense that I agree with Greenwood that the politician, the household manager, and the individual as such, “all have as their end *to eu zēn holōs*, whether for a country or a family or an individual.” See Greenwood, 185.

¹¹⁰ See Joachim, 214. Joachim wants to emphasize how important *politikē* is, but since he does not see that there is an extreme here as well (i.e., that of Isocrates), he somewhat overstates the case when he says that “*phronēsis* in its highest realization coincides with *politikē*.” Yet what follows after this, insofar as Joachim articulates Aristotle’s difference from Plato, is terrific and well said. Perhaps Joachim is still right, however, once we recognize that the *Ethics* leads into the *Politics* - for Aristotle, true *politikē* is not merely (Isocratean, or traditional) *politikē* either.

at *Apol.* 31C) who never stops exhorting others toward true virtue and toward a truly good life. But he is a busybody “in private” (*idia*, 31c) – Socrates does not meddle in the context of the assemblies or the state as such. Moreover, he proceeds in this way for precisely *ethical* reasons: “A man who really fights for the right, if he is to preserve his life even for a little while, must be a private citizen (*idiōteuein*), not a public man (*dēmosieuein*)” (32A). For those who, like Plato and Aristotle, advocate for a human life of *philosophia* in contrast to the life of politics, Socrates’ wisdom (*phronēsis*) remains exemplary.

For Aristotle, the true scope of *phronēsis*, like the meaning of *eudaimonia*, is much bigger than the political power plays of Athens, and instead covers the whole of human *praxis*. Moreover Aristotle’s consistent orientation of *eudaimonia* towards *activity* (“...an activity of the soul in accord with virtue...”) is opposed *both* towards those who would identify *eudaimonia* with a *state* of inactive,¹¹¹ unperturbed tranquility (*ataraxia*), and those who think that *eudaimonia* is the flowering of Athenian domination.¹¹² The former do not see that human life is meant for *action*, while the latter myopically misunderstand the true *goal* of human action as such. Or to put it another way, whereas the former do not see that an “*energeia*” is better or more fulfilling than a bare state or “*hexis*,” the later do not see how the “use” (*chrēsis*) of a *hexis* by way of its concrete actualization can be good “for its own sake,” and not because it is “useful” for some other end such as political power, wealth, or honor (*timē*). Thus, in the later chapters of Book Six (what I would title “The Varieties of *Phronēsis*” at 1143a25-1143b17) Aristotle

¹¹¹ This a disagreement that Aristotle has with his contemporary Academicians and the proto-Stoics. See Natali’s Chapter Four, 119ff.

¹¹² On this class of individuals, see L.B. Carter, *The Quiet Athenian*.

affirms with some slight reservations that a whole range of words refer to various aspects of the same phenomenon - that is to say, *to the same persons who are paradigmatically (practically) wise*. One catches a glimpse of what true *phronēsis* is when we are moved to say that a person shows “understanding” (*sunēsin*), “forgiveness” and “considerateness” (*sungnōmēn, gnōmēn*), “insight” (*noun*), and “wisdom” (*phronēsin*) in their living.¹¹³ Still further, at least part of the definition of all of these terms will be the same insofar as (1) they all ultimately have the same scope of concern or are about the same things (i.e., the whole of human living), and (2) they all concretize the meaning of “equity” or “reasonableness” (*epieikeia*) by “having a good eye” (“*horōsin orthōs*”) or correctly judging what is reasonable (“*...kritikē tou epieikous orthē*”) - abilities (*dunameis*) which are “learned” or “gained” through *experience (empeiria)*.¹¹⁴ In this way, Aristotle appropriates typically Isocratean concepts such as the *priority of experience* both for becoming a good judge and for having insight into human living, but he alters their philosophical foundations by subjecting everything to a sustained inquiry into the meaning of the human good (along with nearly every other traditional Athenian ethical term), and, further, by extending their scope well above and beyond mere politics or the well-being of Athens per se.

¹¹³ *EN*. VI.11. 1143a25-1143b17. Daniel C. Russell, takes the same interpretive approach here by calling these terms “a whole family of skills” of *phronēsis*. See his “Phronesis and the Virtues” in the *Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 206.

¹¹⁴ See 1143a23-28, and 1143a6-14. Aristotle is clear enough that the mere passage of time or merely getting older is not sufficient for their acquisition. The philosophical consequence is this: According to Aristotle, we do not “learn” from experience by nature. Or, to put it another way, in the end, we do not truly undergo experiences *by nature (phusis)*. Something else must be required for us to really “learn from,” “be disciplined by,” or “undergo” an experience. Aristotle does not tell us what this is exactly, but, if I can speculate, it seems to me that the answer must lie in the formation of character and desire and not necessarily in any kind of self-conscious reflection. We need only consider those persons who constantly “analyze” their experiences, but yet who never seem to “learn” from them.

As Carlo Natali has said, “from the fact that happiness [for Aristotle] is mainly composed of fine and noble actions, it is wrong to draw the conclusion – typical of Athenian culture of the time – that the best thing to do is to try to obtain as much power as possible in order to perform many fine deeds.”¹¹⁵ If traditional, aristocratic *aretē* and its related *timē* requires the level of power, wealth, and passion that is exemplified by someone like Pericles, then, according to Aristotle, so much the worse for (that understanding of) virtue.¹¹⁶

Yet, at the same time, if Aristotle distinguishes himself from Isocratean *phronēsis*, does this entail that Aristotelian *phronēsis* is to be aligned with its Platonic (or Academic) conception, which seems to equate *phronēsis* with *sophia*? Joachim is insightful and succinct here as well:

The good for the agent, Aristotle insists, depends upon his position and function in the community, i.e., the common good of the *polis* as a member of which the agent can find full scope for expressing his human self...But Aristotle stops here, for the present at any rate. He does not, like Plato, maintain that the statesman’s insight into the good for man involves philosophical knowledge of the scheme of things as a whole, and of man’s place

¹¹⁵ Carlo Natali, *The Wisdom of Aristotle* (trl. Gerald Parks). (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 167. Natali interprets Aristotle’s “theoretical life” by drawing the consequences of the view just quoted above. For Natali, and I here I agree with him that “the best life...consists of contemplating, and at the same time practicing the virtues of character that are compatible with the primacy of contemplation and necessarily connected with it, not as a means to end, but as part of the harmonious realization of the philosopher’s personality” (171). This “compatibility” is discussed in more detail especially on page 175.

¹¹⁶ I say “passion” here to note that the emotions of the philosopher will also be somewhat different than those of the great politician, just as the emotional life of the “life of action” and the “life of contemplation” will be somewhat different. The “strive for greatness” that must orient the political life can be contrasted with its more humbled version in the “wonder” of the philosophical life. This mirrors Aristotle’s comments in Book Ten concerning the different level of “external goods” required to manifest Periclean-like virtue vs. to engage in contemplation together with friends. See also the *Politics* (1334a1-36) where Aristotle identifies certain virtues (e.g., *sōphrosunē*) as especially important for those who wish to “spend their leisure” engaged in *philosophia*, since the danger of arrogance (*hubris*) becomes greater in periods of peaceful leisure. We can articulate a proverb here: Nobody counts their life divine in wartime, but those who lead a quiet life may be filled with arrogant thoughts (*phronēmata*). At the same time, the Spartan *sōphrosunē* was identified with a slowness to act and *hēsychia* as a way of avoiding the *hubris* resulting from success in war and politics. See Thucydides, *The Peloponnesian War*, 1.84.2

in that scheme...For *sophia* has for its subject-matter the nature of things as a whole, and is not restricted to the understanding of a particular class of things.¹¹⁷

Aristotle appears to concede something to Isocrates' charge of the political-practical "uselessness" of philosophical inquiry. By partitioning the universe into the changeable and the unchangeable, and ascribing a kind of wisdom proper to each (i.e., *phronēsis* and *sophia* respectively), Aristotle may appear to leave behind his "Platonic" position in the *Protrepticus*.¹¹⁸ The Aristotle of the *Nicomachean Ethics* seems to affirm an unbridgeable practical gap between knowledge about, as Joachim says, man's place in "the scheme of things as a whole," on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the (self-)understanding about one's place within the political community and the practical pursuit of *eudaimonia*. In other words, "first philosophy" and "ethics" seem to find their philosophical separation as two distinct realms of inquiry, and this separation may – in part – have to do with the Isocratean insight into the "uselessness" of metaphysical inquiry for meeting the exigencies of practical life.¹¹⁹

On the other hand, when Aristotle stops short of identifying *phronēsis* with *sophia* at the end of the Book Six, it is ultimately in order to remind his student/reader about the dignity, which *sophia* maintains over *phronēsis*. From an Isocratean perspective this is an altogether strange intellectual move – viz. to concede that *phronēsis* is not (Platonic) *sophia*, but to maintain that, ultimately, it is the pursuit of *sophia* that makes possible the fullest eudaimonic

¹¹⁷ H.H. Joachim, *The Nicomachean Ethics. A Commentary*, 214. Note Joachim's use of "scope" and "part/whole" language.

¹¹⁸ In which, namely, Aristotle specifically seems to equate *phronēsis* with *sophia* and argue for the practical-ethical important of both. See my discussion of the work in Part One of the chapter of this dissertation.

¹¹⁹ For more on this issues, see Claudia Barrachi's *Aristotle's Ethics as First Philosophy*.

life of human persons. Thus, any Isocratean-concession that Aristotle makes is at the same coupled with a Platonic-reaffirmation of “(philo-)sophia.” By reaffirming the dignity of *sophia*, Aristotle in fact redoubles his ‘*protreptic*’ efforts here at the end of Book Six - this time in the form of a philosophical treatise carrying the weight of sustained argumentation and inquiry, rather than through the common rhetorical genre of a “*protrepticus*.”

In any event, we have now seen how Aristotle positions himself “between” Isocrates and Plato. However, in order to understand the details of this “in between” position, we need now to consider more closely Aristotle’s inquiry into the specific relationship between *phronēsis* and *sophia*, which covers the end of Book Six (chapters 12 and 13).

The Aporematic Conclusion to Book Six

The two concluding chapters of Book Six rather abruptly introduce a series of *aporiai* to which Aristotle’s analysis of *phronēsis* culminates. C.D.C. Reeve, whom I follow in distinguishing three such puzzles, notes that “in whatever terms puzzles about the virtues of thought are raised, a discussion of them is the methodologically appropriate sequel to working out their definitions. For definitions of the virtues are starting-points for ethics and as such are appropriately defended dialectically or aporematically...”¹²⁰ This is consistent with Aristotle’s general approach to “definitions” which find their real function only insofar as they make a subsequent discussion possible and philosophically precise, but which are generally not carried

¹²⁰ C.D.C. Reeve, *Aristotle on Practical Wisdom*, 241. Where Reeve says “definitions” I would remind the reader that for Aristotle this has meant, at least for *phronēsis* here, a wrestling with its scope - i.e., what sorts of issues are relevant to *phronēsis* and what are irrelevant.

over across contexts. Even within the same chapter previously “defined” words can be used in more or less “technical” senses.¹²¹ Hermeneutically, the last chapters of Book Six are in fact the real beginning of a philosophical discussion that only finds its full treatment in Book Ten and its discussion of the extent to which both the “political” and/or the “theoretical” life is the best, happiest use of one’s leisure.¹²² The three *aporiai* raised at the end of Book Six, then, consist in a question of

- (1) what use (*chrēsimon*) *sophia* is for becoming *eudaimon*;
- (2) what use (*chrēsimon*) *phronēsis* is for becoming *eudaimon*; and
- (3) whether *phronēsis* or *sophia* is the more “authoritative” (*kuriōtera*).¹²³

These puzzles or knots, however, are not extrinsic to the analysis of the concept of *phronēsis*, but rather, as Reeve says just before their introduction, “although Aristotle seems to put a full stop to

¹²¹ As the use of “poiein” in Book Six attests (e.g., at 1144a1-5 where *sophia* “produces” happiness). Although I cannot deal with it here, it seems to me that bearing this in mind would offer real interpretive aid for understanding the discussion of the “two lives” in Book Ten. My hypothesis is this: Aristotle does not *always* use “*phronēsis*” in Book Ten in the rather technical or full bodied meaning that he gives it in Book Six. In fact, as we have seen, even in Book Six he plays with its wider, ordinary meanings and does not maintain a “consistent” usage. The point I take it is that Aristotle does not “define” a word once and for all, but rather is constantly working to highlight or make apparent various aspects or sides to the concept - a task which may require leaning on a colloquial sense rather than a previously stated conclusion about the concept.

¹²² I highlight the context of “leisure” since, in the *Politics*, Aristotle denies that beasts or slaves in fact have a “bios,” “participate in happiness,” or take involvement in the *polis*. We could also add, for Aristotle, children (and women?) to this list. The opportunity to “have a share” in something divine (be it *theōria* or moral virtue) is a restricted one indeed for Aristotle. On the other hand, as Gadamer notes the tradition of assigning particular animals to a god (e.g., Zeus’s eagle or Apollo’s dolphin) was apparently still in Aristotle’s mind (at *EE* 1217a24). To be “named after” a god is, in a sense, to participate (*metexein*) in the divine. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, 175n7.

¹²³ The first two are introduced at 1143b18-33, and the third is stated at 1143b33-36. Because the first two are so similar, I will occasionally discuss them together.

his accounts of practical wisdom and understanding at [the end of chapter 11], VI 12-13 adds substantially to them.”¹²⁴ In fact (and many commentators have not emphasized this enough) *EN* VI.13 in particular not only “adds substantially” to the meaning of *phronēsis* and its relationship to *sophia*, but also to the meaning of the character virtues as well, as we will see below.

Introducing the Three Puzzles.

Before dealing with the puzzles insofar as they are relevant for understanding the meaning of *phronēsis*, we should note that, once again, the characters of Socrates and Isocrates are lurking in the background; and keeping this philosophical context in focus will guide us in interpreting the rest of Book Six. While Socrates (or “Socratic ethics”) is in fact explicitly a concern for Aristotle here, Isocrates is, as usual, only identifiable through the mention of key bits of Isocratean terminology or argumentation.¹²⁵ In this case the *aporiai* about the use (*chrēsimon*) of *phronēsis* and *sophia* should remind us of the same charge against which Aristotle sought to offer a defense in the *Protrepticus*. That Aristotle, here at the end of Book Six, wonders what the “use” of both *phronēsis* and *sophia* could be, shows in fact how close this puzzle is to the one raised by Isocrates and dealt with in the *Protrepticus*. For if, as Jaeger was so keen to show, Aristotle used “*phronēsis*” in the *Protrepticus* in a “Platonic” way - i.e., almost synonymous with *sophia* - then one might suppose that perhaps, by way of the separation of *phronēsis* and *sophia* in the *Ethics*, the charge of “uselessness” would only apply now to *sophia* and not to

¹²⁴ C.D.C. Reeve, *Aristotle on Practical Wisdom*, 239.

¹²⁵ An earlier example of this occurs in *EN* VI.9-11 where Aristotle appropriates Isocrates’ conception of the *kairos*, and the importance of *empeiria* for *phronēsis*, *eubouleia*, and related concepts.

phronēsis.¹²⁶ That Aristotle raises the puzzle about *both*, however, stands as a testament to how far Aristotle's conception of *phronēsis* itself is from Isocrates' own conception, and how little Aristotle is willing to concede to Isocrates about the nature of either concept.¹²⁷

The first puzzle then, is laid out as follows. With respect to the usefulness of *sophia* for becoming happy, Aristotle presents the problem in the following way: "One might puzzle, however, about what use (*chrēsimoī*) they are [i.e., both *phronēsis* and *sophia*]. For surely *sophia* will not consider (*theōrei*) any of the things from which a human being will come to be *eudaimōn* (since it is not concerned with anything's becoming)" (1143b18ff).¹²⁸ As I discussed above, the scope of *phronēsis* and *sophia* was delimited in the course of the first eight chapters by distinguishing (1) their proper objects, and (2) the structure of their movement. Whereas *sophia* is concerned with *the cosmos as a whole*, and, more precisely, the best, most wonderful, divine, and *eternal* things in the cosmos. *Phronēsis* by contrast is concerned with *the humanly good life as a whole*, and, more precisely, with the concretization of the good life in the particular, mortal, mutable, socio-political (and private) realms of human living. To the extent

¹²⁶ I refer to Jaeger not as drawing this later inference, but rather as proposing the view that the *Protrepticus* is an "early" or "Platonic" work of Aristotle's. It was in fact Aristotle's use of *phronēsis* in the *Protrepticus* that formed the backbone of Jaeger's "developmental" thesis; a thesis against which a young Gadamer argued against vigorously in his article from 1927. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Der aristotelische 'Protreptikos' und die entwicklungsgeschichtliche Betrachtung der aristotelischen Ethik."

¹²⁷ In any case this is especially clear when Aristotle places *sophia* "over" *phronēsis*, thereby adopting the exact contrary to Isocrates' position.

¹²⁸ It may be that in the question "what use are they" (*peri autōn ti chrēsimoī eisin*), the "*autōn*" refers to all the intellectual virtues in general, and not just *phronēsis* and *sophia*. However, since the specific answers to the aporiai laid out involve Aristotle only thinking about the relationship between *phronēsis* and *sophia*, I will have to set aside the possibly more inclusive reading of "*autōn*." It would, however, be interesting to consider to what extent Aristotle considered it possible that, for example, *technē* or *euboulia* were potentially "useless."

that one is concerned with *eudaimonia*, *eu prattein*, and the *eu zēn* of oneself as a member of a community, then one will not be a lover of *sophia*, but rather a “*philophronimos*.”

However, this leads immediately to the second side of the aporia - concerning the “uselessness” of *phronēsis* for becoming happy (1143b21-33). This puzzle admits that *phronēsis* is concerned with the whole realm of things (i.e., the moral virtues) which, following the first five books of the *Ethics*, are identified with true happiness. However, virtuous actions are just what the good person, that is to say the person whose whole *character* has been well-habituated, does already; and so Aristotle continues:

Knowing (*eidenai*) about [the moral virtues] does not make us any more capable of doing them; just as is the case with the knowledge of what is healthy and vigorous - using these words to mean not productive of health and vigour but resulting from them: we are not rendered any more capable of healthy and vigorous action by knowing the science of medicine or of physical training.¹²⁹

That is the one side of this puzzle. It appears that *phronēsis* is useless for being happy since the “state” of being happy results from the possession and (especially the) actualization of a virtuous *character*, and not from any knowledge or intellectual concern with such virtues or aspects of

¹²⁹ 1143a24-28. This distinction between pursuing knowledge *about* virtue and actually *becoming* virtuous is an echo of Book Two of the *Ethics*, where Aristotle, also making use of the analogy to medicine, says that the many (*hoi polloi*) “instead of doing virtuous acts, take flight into *logos*, and fancy that they are pursuing philosophy and that this will make them good men. In so doing they act like sick persons who listen carefully to what the doctor says, but entirely neglect to carry out his orders. That sort of philosophy will no more lead to a healthy state of soul than will the mode of treatment produce health of body” (*EN*. II.4, 1105b12-18). This is a rich passage, but becomes all the more complicated when we catch sight of the repetition of the famous phrase from Plato’s *Phaedo* in which Socrates says that he abandoned cosmology, physiology, et al., and “took flight into *logos*.” The phrase at *Phaedo* 99e is “...*eis tous logous kataphugonta*.” Aristotle’s version of it here is “*epi ton logon katapheugontes*.” For comment on this link, see Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates*, 6ff.

human living.¹³⁰ Moreover, and here is the other side of the puzzle, even admitting that it is the disposition of one's character that "produces" or issues forth in virtuous activity (i.e., the activity of *eudaimonia*) and relegating *phronēsis* merely to the task of *becoming* virtuous will not suffice. *Phronēsis* is also "useless" in this way since not only does this admit that (1) *phronēsis* is of no use to those who are already virtuous, but (2) even for those of us who are not "we may just as well listen to others who possess *phronēsis*...We may be content to do as we do in regard to our health; we want to be healthy, yet we do not learn (*manthanomen*) medicine."¹³¹

At the end of the introduction of the first two *aporiai*, we seem to be left with the startling conclusion that neither *sophia* nor *phronēsis* are necessary either for becoming or for performing human happiness. Book Six, in this respect, should be a superfluity for Aristotle's practical philosophy. Of course, we know already that Aristotle accepts none of these positions; but how does he untie these knots?

¹³⁰ One can feel the sophistry involved already by noting identification of *phronēsis* with a stock of *knowledge* just like the *technē* which the expert medical doctor will have. Hasn't Aristotle just got done clarifying the difference between the two? For the import of emphasizing "activity" here, see Natali's comments on Aristotle's differences from Academic and neo-Stoic conceptions of happiness as a *state* of inactive, unworried bliss (*ataraxia*): Carlo Natali, *The Wisdom of Aristotle*, 119ff.

¹³¹ 1143b28-33. Note again the tension in play in the analogy. By identifying *phronēsis* with a body of knowledge such as the doctor would possess we are falsely led into the error of thinking (1) that there are such persons as "moral experts," and (2) that we may shirk the moral responsibility of choosing a course of action for ourselves by simply doing what the "expert" tells us to do. *Phronēsis* is not a body of knowledge that could be transmitted or *taught* to another person any more than a parent could "reproduce" their moral conscience in the moral conscience of their sons and daughters. The "gap" between the teacher and the taught in the realm of ethics is not just due to the freedom of the latter, nor merely the result of changing times and circumstances, but rather to the imperative nature of ethics as such ("...here there is no place that does not see you. You must change your life!" - Rilke). Thus Aristotle says that with respect to *phronēsis* "there is no forgetting" (*lēthē*).

Somewhat surprisingly, at this point Aristotle abruptly introduces a third *aporia* before turning to a robust re-investigation of the whole realm of the key concepts of his *Ethics* in order to respond to the various puzzles. This third *aporia* (1143b33-36) concerns the question of which kind of wisdom should reign “supreme” or has more “authority” in human life - *sophia* or *phronēsis*. (A strange place to offer this puzzle given that we have just been led into the worry that neither concept is useful for happiness at all!) While it would be thought strange for anything to be more sovereign (*kuriōtera*) than *sophia*, *phronēsis* is precisely a kind of wisdom which rules (*archei*) and commands (*epitattei*), and these just are the activities of one who is “*kurios*.” Thus we must wonder: With respect to human living or the task of becoming human and of performing the function of our humanity in an “*eudaimonic*” way, what kind of wisdom should capture the longing of our hearts and minds as most worthy of attaining? *Phronēsis*? Or *sophia*? We now turn to the solutions of these puzzles.

The Architecture of Happiness: Phronēsis as “Medicine” and Sophia as “Health”

There are two places in Book Six where Aristotle indicates a response to the puzzle about the “uselessness” of *sophia* in particular (1144a1-6, and 1145a7-12). However, these are really only brief hints (by way of an analogy) which are unfolded more fully in the discussion of *theōria* and the so-called “two lives” (the *vita activa* and the *vita contemplativa*) in Book Ten. Thus, what follows at the end of Book Six, as what follows in the rest of this dissertation chapter, can only be a provisional sketch of Aristotle’s full response.¹³²

¹³² With respect to contemporary scholarship there is much that could be said here - particularly about the recent trend to be “disappointed” with Aristotle’s “intellectualism,” “rationalism,” or ultimate decision to place, as we will see, *sophia* “over” *phronēsis*. I cannot discuss this literature here. However, I would simply like to note that this has been a contentious issue as far back as Alfarabi, who tried to interpret

Aristotle's first response, rather quickly stated, adopts more or less the same approach that was found in the *Protrepticus*. Against those who constantly ask "what use is it?" Aristotle asserts that *sophia* and *phronēsis* are desirable in themselves since they are virtues (of the intellect) and virtues are choiceworthy, necessary, or desirable in themselves ("...*kath' hautas anagkaion...*").¹³³ In particular, they are each virtues of *different* "parts" of a healthy, unified rational soul – namely, the "scientific" and the "calculative" parts, or, in other words, the part concerned with the truth of the divine (cosmos), and the part concerned with the truth of human action and what is possible for humans to change. Aristotle's second response picks up on this claim that *sophia* is a *virtue*, and then infers the reasonable conclusion that indeed there is a way in which *sophia* is the cause of happiness. Since *sophia*, together with *phronēsis*, is one of the "highest" virtues, this means (1) that "*sophia* is a part (*meros*) of virtue as a whole (*holēs aretēs*),"¹³⁴ and (2) that through its actualization (*energein*) it makes (*poiei*) a person happy.¹³⁵

Aristotle in such a way so as to "reverse" the superiority and give pride of place to *phronēsis* - inviting much criticism from other neo-Aristotelian commentators. Philosophy has traditionally "quarrelled" not just with poetry, but politics as well. But here we also must not forget the political tragedies associated with Socrates (Alcibiades), Plato (Dionysius), and Aristotle (Alexander). In the face of the execution of Socrates and the tense times of Syracuse in the late 5th or Athens in the 4th century BCE, who could seriously affirm the superiority of the "political life," whose concerns are dominated by "politics" and "war" (*EN X.7*), over the life of philosophical contemplation and meditation?

¹³³ 1144a1. This is a perfect example for Aristotle's basically free, ordinary use of language. He is here making the exact same point which was made against Isocrates in the *Protrepticus*, but using different words. In the *Protrepticus* Aristotle lamented those who, while constantly asking for the "use" of a thing, do not see the difference between what is good "in itself" and what is necessary for something else (Aristotle says "*anagkaia*" there!).

¹³⁴ This has clear implications for the meaning of the "theoretical life" of the philosopher, as I will mention below.

¹³⁵ 1144a5f. The use of "*poiei*" here, following on the heels of the infamous distinction between *praxis* and *poieisis* is another example of Aristotle's inconsistent use of supposedly technical terms.

Two points need to be emphasized here. First, by restating that *sophia* is “a part of virtue as a whole” we should not be confused, as Greenwood is, into thinking *sophia* is a “means” to happiness. Joachim is right to say that the “parts” of virtue here (i.e., *phronēsis* and *sophia*) are “not parts of *eudaimonia* in this mechanical sense.”¹³⁶ Rather, Joachim continues, “the good life is an organized or systematic whole, and *sophia* and *phronēsis* produce and constitute it in a vital sense.”¹³⁷ However, “vital sense” is vague. The point is simply that *phronēsis* and *sophia* are co-constitutive “parts” of the good life, though, of course, that does not mean, as Natali is careful to note, “that they are parts in the same way as the others, or that they are on the same plane and have identical roles.”¹³⁸

Indeed, we saw above that the chief distinction between *phronēsis* and *sophia* is not only that the latter is concerned with “the unchanging” and the former “the changing” - or better, as both Gadamer and Gabriel Richardson Lear phrase it, the “unchanging” vs. that which is of concern for an agent insofar as he or she is capable of effecting a change through his or her actions.¹³⁹ Since we have carefully traced *the tradition of phronēsis* from Homer up through Heraclitus and on, we have been in a good position to easily grasp a structural difference

¹³⁶ H.H. Joachim, *The Nicomachean Ethics. A Commentary*, 217. Reeve, in his commentary, unfortunately does not comment on the expression “a part of virtue as a whole.”

¹³⁷ H.H. Joachim, *The Nicomachean Ethics. A Commentary*, 217.

¹³⁸ Carlo Natali, *The Wisdom of Aristotle*, 152.

¹³⁹ See Gadamer’s essay “*The Socratic Question and Aristotle*” (trl. Carlo DaVia), 95-102. See also Gabriel Richardson Lear, *Happy Lives and the Highest Good*, 96-97. It seems to me then that within the distinction between the “unchanging” aspects of reality and “that which could be otherwise” there is a hint of the old “*gnothi seauton!*” dictum in play, for to know what one can and cannot change just is one of the hallmarks self-knowledge. See Eliza Wilkins, “*Know Thyself*” in *Greek and Latin Literature*.

between *sophia* and *phronēsis*: whereas *sophia* is a wisdom that looks up and out towards the divine cosmos, *phronēsis* is a humbled wisdom of self-understanding, which Socrates pursued by “caring for his soul.”¹⁴⁰ The demand coming from Delphi - “know thyself!” - is the true “architectonic” wisdom which “gives commands” (*epitattei*) for living one’s finite human life well.¹⁴¹ In this sense, the “best politician” is neither the Periclean general nor the Socratic gadfly, but, specifically, the oracular imperative.¹⁴²

Aristotle’s second response to the first *aporia* employs an analogy - characteristically drawn from the realm of *technē* - and hints at the fuller analyses that comes in Book Ten.¹⁴³ Aristotle says that “*sophia* produces (*poiouσι*) happiness, not in the sense in which medicine (*iatrikē*) produces health (*hugieian*), but in the sense in which healthiness (*hugieia*) is the cause of health” (1144a3-5). The reliance on the (somewhat insufficient) analogy with medicine and health in fact runs throughout the last chapter of Book Six, reminding the reader that Book Six is

¹⁴⁰ By “self-understanding” here I do not mean “merely concerned with oneself” but rather the self-understanding that is required for right action not only in one’s private, personal affairs, but also in one’s socio-political dealings with others, and so on.

¹⁴¹ Aristotle identifies *phronēsis* as an architectonic wisdom at the very end of chapter seven and the beginning of chapter eight. For the use of “*epitattei*” with respect to *phronēsis* see 1143a9, 1143b36, and 1145a9. The latter two references occur also in the differentiation of *phronēsis* from *sophia*.

¹⁴² Burnet is also careful to note, as he calls it, “the imperative character of *phronēsis*.” This sense of *phronēsis* is what allowed for its later (medieval) association with *conscientia*, which itself still contains, though somewhat hidden in the language, the demand to “know thyself.” John Burnet, *Ethics of Aristotle*, 282.

¹⁴³ Here the analogy again concerns the medical art. Earlier, when discussing the so-called “practical syllogism,” Aristotle also had recourse to the medical art in the form of dietary and nutritional advice by beginning with the general principle that “light meat is healthy.” Even in Aristotle’s choice of examples we can see how *phronēsis*, by being associated with behaviors such as eating, cannot attain the divine status of *sophia* in Aristotle’s eyes. See also Ronna Burger’s interpretation of this passage in *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates*, 121.

concerned to discuss the healthy soul as opposed to the (moral) sicknesses that will be discussed in Book Seven.¹⁴⁴ Joachim explains the cryptic claim that *sophia* “produces” happiness insofar as healthiness produces health by relying on Aristotle’s 4-fold theory of causation: “*Sophia* is the formal cause of happiness, though not its efficient cause. It is the state - or, rather, the continuous activity - whose manifestations are the supremest human felicity. Health is the cause of man’s being healthy as the *hexis enuparchousa* (inner state) from which acts of health proceed.”¹⁴⁵

The wisdom of the whole, that is, the *cosmic* whole and the most wonderful aspects of that whole,¹⁴⁶ i.e., *sophia*, is the end simpliciter (*to telos to haplōs*) on which we must set our sights - as on a target - and for the sake of which we must tighten or loosen, increase or decrease, push or pull on the whole of our practical lives.

Now if *sophia* has become the formal cause of *happiness* (which certainly provides a stark rebuttal to the charge the *sophia* is “useless” for becoming happy!) then what of *phronēsis*?

¹⁴⁴ Both Ronna Burger and Gadamer (in the concluding essay of his translation of Book Six) pick up on the significance of *phronēsis* as a kind medical art or purification for the soul. There is, of course, much in common with the Platonic Socrates in this analogy, and, although I cannot explore this hypothesis here, it may provide a further way in which Aristotle distances himself from the political rhetor Isocrates, despite all of the ways that Aristotle has appropriated Isocratean concepts. See Chapter Four of Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates*, as well as the concluding essay of Gadamer’s translation and commentary of *Nikomachische Ethik VI*.

¹⁴⁵ H.H. Joachim, *The Nicomachean Ethics. A Commentary*, 217. Burnet also relies on the theory of causation to explain the analogy. John Burnet, *Ethics of Aristotle*, 283. Ronna Burger explores the implications that follow from the apparent claim that it is the *possession of sophia*, which makes a human happy (as opposed to mere *philo-sophia*). Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates*, 123-130.

¹⁴⁶ I agree with Ronna Burger that neither here, nor in the *Metaphysics* (982a8-14), is Aristotle altogether clear about any significant differences between the most *comprehensive* knowledge vs. the most *precise* knowledge. See Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates*, 259n12.

How does Aristotle counter the claim of “uselessness” with respect to *phronēsis*? Before we develop Aristotle’s - quite robust - answer to this particular puzzle, it will be helpful to begin by quickly seeing how he, at the very end of Book Six, responds to the last puzzle - that is, the puzzle concerning the supremacy of *sophia* over *phronēsis*:

Nevertheless it is not really the case the *phronēsis* is in authority (*kuria*) over *sophia*, or over the higher part (*beltionos moriou*) [of the intellect], any more than medical science is in authority over health. Medical science does not control (*xrētai*) health, but studies (*hora*) how to bring it [health] about (*genētai*); hence it issues orders (*epitattei*) for the sake of (*heneka*) health, but not to health. And again, one might as well say that politics rules (*archein*) over the gods, because it gives orders (*epitattei*) about everything in the polis (*panta ta en tē polei*). (1145a7-12)¹⁴⁷

On the one hand, this passage seems to increase, or make stark, the contrast between *sophia* and *phronēsis* inasmuch as Aristotle reminds the reader of the absolute gulf that separates (1) the political regulations concerning the constructions of temples and the human worship of the gods, from (2) the gods themselves. Likewise, just as there is a difference between the human relationship to the gods, and the gods themselves, so too there is a difference between medical science and health. Both the human worship of the gods and the art of medicine comprise practical, human activities, which pursue, or are “for the sake of” the gods or health. Following the analogy through, when it comes to the concepts of *phronēsis* and *sophia*, the former comprises the practical, human wisdom, which pursues or is “for the sake of” the latter. Exactly what is meant by the use of “for the sake of” (*hou heneka*, 1145a9) language here, however, is

¹⁴⁷ Italics mine. Translation adapted from Rackham. The unstated premise of the last line is that the construction of temples and the appropriate worship of the gods were all relegated by “politics.” It is hard to overstate what a tight bond religion and politics had for the Greeks. It would be interesting to know if Aristotle is being sarcastic here, or if there really was some contemporary who held this, or a similar, position. With respect to medicine, for example, we know how important it was for Plato and Aristotle to articulate clearly why the medical art was insufficient for true health, or why being a “slave” to the doctor and the imperatives of his regimen was inappropriate for a “free” person.

not immediately obvious.¹⁴⁸ Thankfully the language of the *Eudemian Ethics* offers us at least one possible interpretation: “God (*theos*) is not a ruler issuing commands (*epitaktikōs archōn*), but is the end for the sake of which (*hou heneka*) practical wisdom (*phronēsis*) gives commands (*epitattei*)...” (1249b13ff).¹⁴⁹ Here we see an ultimately religious, or divine orientation even of the practical wisdom of *phronēsis*: the *pious* person, just like the *phronimos*, precisely understands that their limited, human living or their pious actions are, somehow, “for the sake of” something higher and divine.¹⁵⁰ Further, the pious person and the *phronimos* have this (practical) wisdom or self-understanding for the same reason, since both have undergone the *purification* that comes by way of an ethically well-oriented *heart and mind* (or shall we just say one’s *phrēn*?). *Phronēsis* is “for the sake of” something divine, and not, pace Isocrates, *kleos* (fame), *doxa* (reputation), or *timē* (honor). It is *practical wisdom*, which understands that the scope of human life *does not, cannot, and must not* equate itself with the whole of things.¹⁵¹ In a

¹⁴⁸ Gabriel Richardson Lear has worked out a view according to which “practical wisdom is theoretical wisdom in practice” - that is to say, *phronēsis* “approximates” *sophia*. See Gabriel Richardson Lear, *Happy Lives and the Highest Good*, 108, as well as Chapter Five of that work.

¹⁴⁹ I have chosen to raise this quasi-religious dimensions, since it seems to me that the possibility that *phronesis*, in Aristotle, still held some kind of religious connotation, is under-explored in the scholarly literature. For the relation of *EE* to the *EN* and the authenticity of the former, see Lawrence Jost, “The *Eudemian Ethics* and its Controversial Relationship to the *Nicomachean Ethics*,” *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 410-427. On the philosophical appropriateness of utilizing both the *EE* and the *EN* in working out Aristotle’s views on *phronēsis*, see Chapter Five in Gadamer’s *Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*.

¹⁵⁰ To hope that, through piety, one could become a god, just is impiety. Likewise, to hope that one could, through living a good human life, live like the gods, just is to be practically unwise or “*a-phrōn*.” Or perhaps Aristotle would prefer to simply say *deinos* (“terrible”).

¹⁵¹ To make the mistake of viewing the whole entirely in terms of one’s own species is lambasted in the comedic “ornithogony” of Aristophanes *Birds*. See also *Statesman* 263d, which may be an allusion to Aristophanes’ comedy.

similar vein, in Book Ten of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle urges his reader, in contrast to the pseudo-wisdom of Euripides and Pindar, “not to obey those who advise that a human should think of human things (*anthrōpina phronein*) and a mortal the thoughts of mortality, but we ought so far as possible to achieve immortality, and do all that a man may to live in accordance with the highest thing in him; for though this be small in bulk, in power (*dunamei*) and honor (*timiotēti*) it far surpasses everything else.”¹⁵²

“We must also reexamine virtue once more”: The “necessity” of phronēsis

We now turn to consider Aristotle’s solution to the second *aporia*, which concerned the “useless” character of *phronēsis* for *eudaimonia*. In this way we are also drawing to a close this chapter of the dissertation, and summarizing some final key elements involved in Aristotle’s full understanding of the meaning of *phronēsis*.

Aristotle gives us two answers to the question about the “usefulness” of *phronēsis*, the first of which takes a similar approach to the one used in identifying the “use” of *sophia* for *eudaimonia* – that is, *sophia* is a component part of virtue as a whole, whose exercise just is happiness, since “happiness” is an activity of the soul in accordance with virtue. Likewise, with respect to *phronēsis*, Aristotle says that *phronēsis*, together with *ēthikē aretē* (moral virtue),

¹⁵² *EN* X.7 1177b30ff. Aristotle here is clearly speaking to a specific audience who traditionally would be motivated by the typically Homeric pursuit of a hero’s life and the honors associated with it. In light of the meaning of “honor” and political power in 4th century Athens, Aristotle is here turning the whole hero-worship apparatus on its head, by associating it not with the “political” life, but rather with the philosophical one. L.B. Carter thus argues that “the *bios theōretikos* (Contemplative Life) was a fourth-century rationalization – an interpretation in philosophic terms – of the political and social phenomenon of *apragmosunē*.” See L.B. Carter, *The Quiet Athenian*, 131ff.

completes or performs the function (*ergon*) of human beings.¹⁵³ Together with *sophia*, *phronēsis* forms the second basic excellence (what Gadamer sometimes calls *Bestheit* or “bestness”) of the rational “part” of the soul. In the opening chapters of Book Six Aristotle analytically split the rational “part” of the soul into two sub-”parts” - i.e., the “scientific” (*epistēmonikon*) and the “calculative” (*logistikon*) aspects.¹⁵⁴ Whereas *sophia* is the virtue of the “scientific” aspect, *phronēsis* is the virtue of the “calculative.” This analytical separation of what is ontologically whole, unified, and healthy, therefore entails that only when “both parts” of “virtue as a whole” (*holēs aretēs*, 1144a1-6) are actualized in a human life can we properly speak of *eudaimonia*. Now we already know from Aristotle’s solution to the third puzzle – concerning the superiority of *sophia* over *phronēsis* – that the actualization of these two rational “parts” of the soul are not on the same operative level. Rather, a hierarchy or “weighted equilibrium” is in play according to which the actualization of the virtue of the “calculative” part (i.e., *phronēsis*) will be oriented toward the ultimate actualization of the virtue of the “scientific” part (i.e., [*philo-*]*sophia*), at least insofar as this is possible for finite human beings embedded in varying socio-political contexts.¹⁵⁵ Thus by the end of Book Six it is clear that *eudaimonia*, or virtue as a whole, depends on the actualization of every relevant “part” of the soul - i.e., the scientific (via the

¹⁵³ *EN*. VI.12, 1144a5-9.

¹⁵⁴ To say it more straightforwardly: It is clear that in *EN* VI.12, Aristotle is working with 4-fold analytical division to describe the “complexity” of the human soul. The scientific and calculative “parts” are in fact two sides of the “rational” aspect of the soul, while the other two “parts” of the soul are desire and the sensing or nutritive “parts.” Thus Aristotle can speak of the “fourth part” of the soul (“...*tetartou moriou tēs psychēs*...”) at 1144a9 in order to deny that it has any proper virtue of its own.

¹⁵⁵ Natali suggests that, depending on the political situation – e.g., wartime vs. peacetime – the theoretical life, strictly speaking, may or may not be a live option. Carlo Natali, *The Wisdom of Aristotle*, 165-176.

virtue of *sophia*), the calculative (via the virtue of *phronēsis*), and the desiring (via the *ēthikē aretē*).¹⁵⁶ “Flourishing” occurs when the entire human soul is, as the phrase goes, “firing on all cylinders,” or when all of its “parts” work together in a harmonious concert.

Aristotle’s second answer to the *aporia* concerning the “use” of *phronēsis* for happiness is, however, much longer, and proceeds by way of a reexamination of the nature of (moral) virtue, and its relationship to *phronēsis*. There is wide disagreement amongst scholars about how to read this response, which takes up the end of chapter 12 and almost the whole of chapter 13 (11144a1-1145a6). Whereas Gabriel Lear, for example, writes that this section “includes some of the most notoriously difficult claims to interpret in the entire *Nicomachean Ethics*,”¹⁵⁷ Carlo Natali, by contrast, thinks that “Aristotle writes these chapters in good style, lucidly expressing himself...so that what he means comes out clearly.”¹⁵⁸

Although I disagree with some of Natali’s claims, his overall interpretive structure is quite helpful for making sense of the text, and much of what I say will be influenced by his interpretive schema according to which Aristotle is here performing a “double mental experiment.”¹⁵⁹ The initial *aporia*, recall, seemed to show that, since it is *moral virtue* that makes us virtuous and happy, *phronēsis* is apparently neither useful for “being” virtuous nor for

¹⁵⁶ I say “relevant” here since at 1144a9 Aristotle excludes the “fourth” part - the nutritive part - from any characteristic virtue that contributes to the proper *ergon* of human persons.

¹⁵⁷ Gabriel Richardson Lear, *Happy Lives and the Highest Good*, 116.

¹⁵⁸ Carlo Natali, “The Book on Wisdom,” *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 195. Continuing, Natali thinks that the confusion occurs “mostly because modern readers do not happen to like what Aristotle *prima facie* is saying.”

¹⁵⁹ Carlo Natali, “The Book on Wisdom,” *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 196.

“becoming” virtuous. Aristotle’s solution, aside from reasserting its dignity as an excellence of a certain “part” of the soul, is to draw *phronēsis* and moral virtue closer together – indeed to bind them together – and so the “double mental experiment” involves asking what either one would really be without the other (now *phronēsis*, now moral virtue). Through this, Aristotle explicitly reunites what has hitherto been analyzed separately throughout the course of his lectures – viz., the *intellectual* and the *character* virtues.

Aristotle begins by saying that just as moral virtue “makes the target correct (*ton skopon poiei orthon*), so too *phronēsis* makes good whatever enables us able to actually hit the target.¹⁶⁰ Often this last clause is read simply as “the means to the end” (*ta pros touton*), and, to be sure, Aristotle is quite concerned to show the importance of finding the correct – that is, good – means or path to the end, which ultimately consists in “the good life as a whole.”¹⁶¹ It is hard to underestimate the role of concrete practical-moral “*success*” in Aristotle’s analysis of *phronēsis* and the attention given to finding the right means. But imperative of *success* in moral-ethical life is not simply a leftover from an archaic-Homeric or aristocratic conception of *aretē* – i.e., in which (e.g., military or political) “success” marks the boundary between *aretē* and *hubris*. Rather, Pierre Aubenque is right to say “*il n’est pas permis d’être maladroit, lorsque la fin est bonne*” – when the end is good, it is forbidden to be clumsy.¹⁶² Similarly, Carlo Natali is right to

¹⁶⁰ *EN* VI.12, 1144a8-9.

¹⁶¹ For more on the language of “means” here, see David Wiggins, “Deliberation and Practical Wisdom,” *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, 221-240.

¹⁶² Quoted in Carlo Natali, “The Book on Wisdom,” *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 199.

claim that Aristotelian ethics “is the opposite of the motto attributed to Melanchthon, *fiat justitia, pereat mundus*” (let there be justice, though the world perish) – a phrase which must be incomprehensible to an Aristotelian ethics.¹⁶³

At the same time, the strict identification of *phronēsis* with the ability to find “the means to the end” has also obscured just what this “finding” entails. “Practical wisdom” is not the name for a merely skillful, rational calculus. It is more correct to say that *phronēsis* is the ability to concretize the abstract end or ends that are set by one’s character.¹⁶⁴ For example, my character may be generally formed so as to desire to help my friend in a difficult situation. But the specific end here – to be a good friend – is still abstract. It is abstracted not just from the “means” (e.g., shall I do x, y, or z), but also from the consideration of what “friendship” or “helping my friend” actually means or *looks like* in this particular, concrete situation; a situation which may be quite different from other situations, and so *the end* may look quite different from any other concrete realization of friendship that I have seen.¹⁶⁵ The ability to find the “right means” is coextensive with the ability to consider what the virtue of friendship really means

¹⁶³ Immanuel Kant also quotes this phrase approvingly in his *Toward Perpetual Peace*, 34.

¹⁶⁴ Here I am in agreement with Daniel C. Russell’s position in “Phronesis and the Virtue (NE vi 12-13),” *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*. Natali acknowledges this but subsequently downplays it in order to avoid giving the impression that *phronēsis* actually *deliberates* about ends – a controversial view. See Carlo Natali, “The Book on Wisdom,” *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 194. I agree that, strictly speaking, *phronēsis* does not deliberate about ends (e.g., should I live the good life, should I be courageous, or should I live a wretched life?), but we must also avoid the opposite danger – that is, giving the impression that *phronēsis* is nothing more than a utilitarian calculation of means.

¹⁶⁵ Strictly speaking this is already a quasi-concrete version of the true, and most abstract, end of human desire: to live well, *eudaimonia*, or “the good life as a whole.” Thus what is ultimately at issue is to make *that* end concrete.

here-and-now in the concrete. *Phronēsis* finds the right means by specifying or concretizing the end – that is, by considering what would *count as* meeting this end. Put another way, the end of “being a good friend” is not, strictly speaking, a goal to be attained at some temporal or chronological endpoint. I must “be a good friend” *the whole time* that I take steps to help my friend in the particular situation; and that requires a vigilance about how, when, in what manner, with what tone of voice, and so on I must engage with and speak to my friend.¹⁶⁶ Daniel C. Russell sums up the matter thus, “the decision-making process, for Aristotle, would seem to involve these three parts: the indeterminate end from which deliberation begins [and which is set by moral virtue/desire], making the end determinate in the case at hand, and working out effective means to that determinate end.”¹⁶⁷ Gadamer, while using a more conceptual language, specifies things by identifying the back-and-forth relationship between the (in)determinate general end, and the concrete situation: “in practical matters the general hermeneutical task, which figures in all instances, that is, of concretizing general knowledge, always implies generalizing something concrete.”¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ It is the same in Plato’s *Euthyphro*. The question “What is piety?” is less about finding the one, true definition of piety, and much more so about its concretization in the particular situation. When Socrates asks Euthyphro about the meaning of piety, he is also asking Euthyphro if his concrete action – taking his father to court – is an instantiation of piety. It is a concrete question to point to an action or to consider a possible course of action and then ask “Is this pious?” “Is this friendship?” This does nothing to downplay the fundamental role of character and desire. One does not seriously ask the concrete question “Is this (particular action) really friendship?” if one’s desires are not already so oriented.

¹⁶⁷ Daniel Russell, “Phronesis and the Virtues,” *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 205. Brackets mine. It seems to me that *phronēsis* is the virtue of performing all three of these “parts” well.

¹⁶⁸ Gadamer, *Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, 160. This kind of language is typical of Gadamer when he wants to highlight the nature of the practical rationality of *phronēsis*.

Aristotle draws out the importance finding appropriate ways of concretizing a general end nicely in one half of his “double thought experiment.” Here he asks what moral virtue would be *without phronēsis*, and thereby offers a brief reexamination of the nature of moral virtue as such (1144b1-10). Aristotle now says that one’s character can take two (*duo*) basic formations – “natural virtue” (*aretē phusikē*) and “true goodness” (*kurios agatha, arēte kuria*).¹⁶⁹ The intention is to show that “natural virtue,” as a general inclination identifiable already in small children and animals to be generous or moderate or brave, is not enough for true, authentic virtue, and can in fact lead one to harm.¹⁷⁰ A person who has a general tendency toward bravery or generosity, but does not have the ability to see how to *concretize* those ends in appropriate, good, ways, is like a cyclops who loses his sight (perhaps Odysseus pokes his eye out) and “meets with a heavy fall.”¹⁷¹ Likewise, if the “eye of the soul” is blind, the moral failing may be sudden and hard – just as when Hippolytus’ natural disposition toward *sōphrosunē* brings him to a tragic end. For Aristotle, this obviously does not entail that there is anything wrong with

¹⁶⁹ There seems to be another analogy in play, according to which Natural Virtue : Full Virtue :: Cleverness : *phronēsis*. However, since the first portion of the “double thought experiment” begins with the consideration of moral virtue *without phronesis*, I will leave a discussion of “cleverness” for later, since it is precisely moral virtue that the merely clever person *lacks*.

¹⁷⁰ *EN VI.13*, 1144b1-10. This latter point perhaps accounts for the reason why Aristotle speaks of “natural **virtue**,” admittedly an awkward expression, and not simply of “natural **disposition**.” It must have been obvious that “natural **vice**” would lead one into harm’s way. The question is whether “natural virtue” is already enough for *eudaimonia* – thereby re-solidifying the “uselessness” of *phronēsis*. Aristotle uses the expression “natural virtue” simply to get at the question of the importance of *phronēsis*. He is not reneging on his earlier claim that we do not become virtuous by nature – hence the introduction of the expression “true goodness” to safeguard the philosophically robust meaning of virtue that has been the subject matter of the *NE* thus far.

¹⁷¹ *EN VI.13*, 1144b8-12. I am not aware that anyone has suggested that the image of the cyclops is in Aristotle’s mind here. Could another alternative perhaps be Oedipus? In any case, Aristotle is here in dialogue with Plato, *Republic* 491a-c.

sōphrōsunē per se, but is only to say that the general, abstract or indeterminate tendency is not enough to guide one safely to the good life.¹⁷²

This has consequences for the meaning of “authentic” or “authoritative” (*kurios*) moral virtue or “real goodness”: it becomes clear that it is not possible to have moral virtue without *phronēsis*.¹⁷³ Only by acquiring that eye of the soul that is *phronēsis* (which Aristotle here sometimes simply calls “*nous*”) can “natural virtue” be transformed into true moral virtue.¹⁷⁴ Understanding concretely how to be a good friend in this-here-now particular situation, is like having one’s eyes opened. For Aristotle, as for Plato and Socrates, it is not enough to “mean well” or “have a good heart”; the true ethical goal is rather to *do well* (*eu prattein*).

With this half of the thought experiment completed, Aristotle, following the consequences, now feels compelled to combat the other extreme according to which moral virtue is, in the end, nothing but *phronēsis*.¹⁷⁵ This extreme is identified with the supposed Socratic view which asserted that the virtues *are* forms of *phronēsis* (or *logos* or *epistēmē*).¹⁷⁶ However,

¹⁷² There is a close affinity here with Plato’s *Philebus*, which I have not seen discussed at all. The problem of the unlimited (*apeiron*), and the role of an appropriate, *sōphron* “measure” that must be applied in order place a limit on the unlimited closely mirrors the problem of the how to – *appropriately* – make determinate what would otherwise remain indeterminate.

¹⁷³ *EN* VI.13, 1144b17. “...*he kuria ou ginetai aneu phronēseōs.*”

¹⁷⁴ *EN* VI.13, 1144b13-18.

¹⁷⁵ Daniel C. Russell makes a careful, and helpful distinction here between the “reciprocity of virtue” and the “unity of virtue.” Whereas the former holds that each virtue requires all the others, and that every virtue requires *phronēsis* (Aristotle’s position), the latter holds that all the virtues are *the same thing* – viz., a kind of *phronēsis* (the position Aristotle rejects). See Daniel Russell, “Phronesis and the Virtues,” *The Cambridge Companion to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics*, 203 n.2.

¹⁷⁶ This discussion occurs as *EN* VI.13, 1144b18-30. For a good discussion of Aristotle’s philosophical relationship to Socrates see Ronna Burger, *Aristotle’s Dialogue with Socrates*. For Lear’s excellent

this view needs to be amended, according to Aristotle, despite the fact that some other Academicians had apparently already begun to modify the position by saying that moral virtue is a disposition *according to* or *determined by* (*kata*) *phronēsis*.¹⁷⁷ Aristotle proposes a “slight modification” (*micron metabēnai*, 1144b25), to this view, which in fact preserves the truth implicit in both the Socratic and the modified Academic views: virtue is a *hexis* that is *united* to or in *communion* with (*meta*) *phronēsis*.

The problem with the Socratic identification of moral virtue with knowledge is, in part, that it exaggerates the role that reason plays in human action while at the same time forgetting or downplaying the role of *ethos*, character, and desire. However, the view of those who modified the Socratic position by saying that virtue is a disposition to act *according to* (*kata*) *phronēsis* is also insufficient. Although they were correct to identify a *relationship* between moral virtue and *phronēsis* (as opposed to their *equation* with one another), this view mischaracterizes that relationship by making it seem as though it is possible to be virtuous simply by “listening to” right reason (*orthos logos*, *phronēsis*) or, as we say, “doing what you’re told.” But “doing what you’re supposed to” is not praiseworthy, and simply “following the rules” may be sufficient for being a good craftsman, but it is not at all sufficient for living the good life.¹⁷⁸ As we have emphasized above, to “flourish” or to be a truly (*kurios*) good person is for all the “parts” of

analysis of Aristotle’s solution to the second puzzle, see Gabriel Richardson Lear, *Happy Lives and the Highest Good*, 116-120.

¹⁷⁷ Aristotle uses the expression “*kai gar nun pantes*” here (1144b21) to describe the ubiquity of the Socratic view amongst “everybody today.” It is an expression which, as Carlo Natali is careful to note (119), “is usually used to indicate the philosophers of the Academy (cf. *Top.* 104b25).”

¹⁷⁸ See C.D.C. Reeve’s helpful commentary here. C.D.C. Reeve, *Aristotle on Practical Wisdom*, 257-260.

one's soul to work in harmony. As Aristotle says when discussing the nature of self-love, "the good man is of one mind with himself, and desires the same things with every part of his nature."¹⁷⁹ In this way, Aristotle's own position remains close to the Socratic position – it is, after all, only a "little adjustment": Aristotle does not wish to *separate* the two for any reason other than to clarify that their real communion does not involve an equation – moral virtue and *phronēsis*, or desire and practical reason, are still two different "parts" of good human action (as well as two "parts" of the human soul). That the one cannot be understood without the other is the purpose of the double thought experiment, the second half of which proceeds by asking what *phronēsis* itself would be without moral virtue.¹⁸⁰

To ask what *phronēsis* would be without moral virtue is the same as to ask what understanding of how to find the right "means" for concretizing one's indeterminate ends would be without a *good* orientation of one's habits, emotions, and desires. Just as Aristotle had introduced a hitherto unexamined concept ("natural virtue") to get at the "real" (*kurios*) meaning of goodness or moral virtue, so, too, Aristotle now offers a distinction between *phronēsis* and "cleverness" (*deinotēs*).¹⁸¹ We should not overlook the connotation of *deinotēs* as something *terrible* or *frightful*. The capacity to realize one's goals is something praiseworthy only to the extent that one's goals are praiseworthy; otherwise it is something cheap and awful (*phaulos* and

¹⁷⁹ *EN IX.4*, 1166A10-15.

¹⁸⁰ This discussion occurs at 1144a11-35.

¹⁸¹ *EN VI.12*, 1144a23-35.

panourgos).¹⁸² *Phronēsis* without the virtues of character is in truth not *phronēsis* at all, but rather something else entirely. Vice, for Aristotle, is not just something “bad” or something one shouldn’t do. Rather, at least in this context, Aristotle wants to emphasize that vice is bad *because* it “perverts the mind and causes it hold false views about the first principles of conduct.”¹⁸³ Vice is bad because it only make matters worse, or makes it more difficult for one to live the good life. The reciprocity of the virtues of character with the virtues of the mind has consequences for that “eye of the soul” that governs human action: “the good only *appears* [*phainetai*] to the good person...Hence, it is clear that we cannot be *phronimon* without being *agathon*.”¹⁸⁴ Gadamer makes the point in a similar manner: “in the realm of practice, holding to a principle, for example, to a certain *aretē*, is not a merely logical act. Practical reasonableness is displayed not only in knowing how to find the right means but also in holding to the right ends. Aristotle’s demarcation of *phronimos* (prudent, reasonable) from *deinos* (clever) turns on this point.”¹⁸⁵

The consequence is the same as it was with the first part of the thought experiment: the communion of *phronēsis* with moral virtue. In fact, Aristotle had already announced this conclusion at the outset of his treatment of the *aporia* regarding the “uselessness” of *phronēsis*

¹⁸² *EN* VI.12, 1144a25ff.

¹⁸³ *EN* VI.12, 1144a33ff.

¹⁸⁴ *EN* VI.12, 1144a33ff. I emphasize “*phainetai*” here since Aristotle, in just a few lines above, had introduced the expression “the eye of the soul”.

¹⁸⁵ Gadamer, *Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, 164-166.

for being good and for happiness.¹⁸⁶ In practical matters, the defining aspect of human creatures is the capacity for what Aristotle calls *prohairēsis* or “choice.”¹⁸⁷ To *choose* to do the virtuous act, and for its own sake, is the hallmark of the difference between a “really good person” and one who, e.g., does something just but cannot be called a “just person.” To concretely *choose* the good here and now – that is to say, to *act* in a truly human and humane way – is the consummate achievement of the intertwinement of moral virtue with *phronēsis*.¹⁸⁸

Conclusion

The early roots of the tradition of *phronēsis* both find a real philosophical beginning as well as culmination in Book Six of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*. Having studied these early roots, as well as Aristotle’s own analyses – both in their specific historical context in light of Plato and Isocrates, and through a close reading of his text – we have put ourselves in position to give our own answer to the question, what is *phronēsis* for Aristotle? Words like “prudence,” “reasonableness,” “practical wisdom,” “tact,” “wisdom,” and “conscience” all have their place, but none of them quite capture what he is after. If, going forward, we make use of these words and others like them, the conceptual content must be presupposed along with them. For Aristotle, in the end, “*phronēsis*” means this: that the conscientious self-understanding of one whose whole human practical life (which is manifested in and throughout one’s emotions,

¹⁸⁶ *EN* VI.12, 1144a10-25.

¹⁸⁷ For Aristotle *prohairēsis* names the ability of a person to be a *source* (*archē*) of action – the human participation in the dignity of self-motion. See *EN*. III for Aristotle’s full discussion of choice. In any case it is important to not let modern, or neo-liberal conceptions of “choice” obscure the Greek *prohairēsis*.

¹⁸⁸ *EN* VI.12, 1144a10-25.

desires, character, and words and deeds) is oriented towards that which makes a human life most humane – the human good.¹⁸⁹

In the course of these last two chapters (Chapter Two and Chapter Three) I have offered an account of the historical development of the concept of *phronesis* from Homer to Aristotle - albeit only a partial account (e.g., which has excluded the ancient dramatists and historians). This functioned, in part, to provide a concrete example of a Gadamerian view of concepts and their (always a re-)formation, which I outlined in Chapter One. Additionally, we are now in a good position to engage in a critical dialogue with Hans-Georg Gadamer's contemporary retrieval of *phronesis* and his revolutionization of the discipline of hermeneutics. In this way, we are well prepared to respond to the guiding concern of this dissertation - namely, the relationship between ethics and the interpretation of texts. Interpretation, we will see, is not only an unavoidably ethical activity, but it is in fact an activity of just the sort that requires *phronesis* if it is to be done well. At first blush, this may seem to be a rather surprising claim, and unlikely to be true. However, by marshaling a robust hermeneutical appreciation for just what the concept-tradition of *phronesis* means, we will be able to understand better not only what Gadamer himself expressed in his writings, but also what he did not necessarily express, but which is entailed in a true retrieval of *phronesis*. In the end, although we will have reason to critique some aspects of Gadamer's retrieval, it will become clear how "*phronesis*" - whose beginnings lay in the *phren* of Homer - is, still, a tradition in which Gadamer himself deserves to

¹⁸⁹ I leave "the human good" unspecified here so as to avoid the difficult question – a topic for another dissertation – of the "two lives" in Book Ten. I have offered suggestions of my view throughout this chapter, but I cannot take the time to deal with the matter in detail here.

be counted among one of its chief philosophical participants by virtue of providing us with, like Aristotle, another key summit-and-retrieval of that tradition.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE ETHICAL (RE)TURN OF HERMENEUTICS – PART ONE: THE HERMENEUTICAL PROBLEM OF APPLICATION

“You must sharpen your ear, you must realize that when you take a word in your mouth, you have not taken up some arbitrary tool which can be thrown in a corner if it doesn’t do the job, but you are committed to a line of thought that comes from afar and reaches on beyond you.”

- Gadamer, “To What Extent Does Language Pre-form Thought?”

Introduction

Chapter Goals and Outline

I began this dissertation by raising a basic philosophical question motivating the work done throughout this dissertation: to what extent is the performance of interpretation (of texts) an ethical undertaking, and, following this, what are the basic outlines of a “hermeneutic ethics”?¹ Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics not only reveals the philosophical legitimacy of asking this question itself, but also provides a way forward in constructing an answer - namely, via his claim that hermeneutics requires *phronesis*. In the next two chapters (Chapter Four and Chapter Five, as well as the Conclusion), I argue for a strongly ethical reading of Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronesis*, and critically extend the trajectory of Gadamer’s thinking to include several unacknowledged, but essential consequences involved in a retrieval of *phronesis* for hermeneutics. The goal of this present chapter, then, is to show how inquiry into a “hermeneutic

¹ See the “Introduction” to the dissertation for my initial introduction of this question.

ethics” (or an ethics of interpretation) follows necessarily from Gadamer’s insight into the unavoidability of a moment of “application” involved in any interpretation or understanding whatsoever.² Interpretation (of texts) is necessarily an ethical act.

The philosophical key - both for this dissertation, and, as I am arguing, in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics - turns on the concept of *phronēsis*. In light of this, I began this dissertation (Chapter One) by reconstructing a Gadamerian account of the nature of concepts and their intrinsic relationship to history, experience, and dialogue. I argued, in short, for an understanding of a concept (*Begriff*) as a dynamic tradition. This set the methodological stage for my own retrieval of the concept of *phronēsis* (Chapter Two and Chapter Three), which sought to emphasize the nature of *phronēsis* as a conceptual tradition, by tracing the path of its historical development from Homer to Aristotle, and especially by emphasizing the continual reformation or refinement of the concept via 5th and 4th century Athenian intellectual dialogue (especially, the “dialogue” between Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle). In this way, I was able to make a contribution to the historical scholarship on the concept of *phronēsis*, as well as to lay the groundwork for a critical engagement with Gadamer’s own retrieval of *phronēsis*. If *phronēsis* is to be the ethical and conceptual heart of hermeneutics, it is essential that one first gains a rich understanding of what it means to reference “*phronēsis*” at all. To take Gadamer at his word “*phronēsis*” is to invite a whole historical tradition of thinking about that concept into the philosophical conversation.

² Below I discuss in detail the complex relationship between “application,” “interpretation,” and “understanding.” For now, it is enough, though insufficient, to simply define interpretation as the linguistic explicitation of one’s understanding (of a text).

By laying the hermeneutic foundation for a new or renewed “*Auseinandersetzung*” between Gadamer and the ancient thinkers of *phronēsis*, the rest of this dissertation will now explore the complexity and, ultimately, the unexplored potential as well as the critical oversights, involved in Gadamer’s claim that *phronēsis* is essential to the hermeneutic process. Put differently, I am now able to hold Gadamer himself philosophically accountable to his own quasi-methodological comment given in the epigram to this chapter: “You must sharpen your ear, you must realize that when you take a word in your mouth, you have not taken up some arbitrary tool which can be thrown in a corner if it doesn’t do the job, but you are committed to a line of thought that comes from afar and reaches on beyond you.” The “historical” chapters of this dissertation (Chapter Two and Chapter Three) sought to “sharpen” my own ear for what is meant by the concept of *phronēsis*. The rest of this dissertation now explores the consequences of staying “committed to a line of thought that comes from afar and reaches on beyond you” - for the line of thought that Gadamer himself began (or at least renewed) through his retrieval of *phronēsis* for hermeneutics does indeed come from afar, as well as reach beyond him (and us).

How then does Gadamer argue that *phronēsis* is a requisite hermeneutic virtue for any act of interpretation? This present chapter provides the first half of the argument by clarifying the nature of the hermeneutic act qua praxis, whereas the next chapter gives an account of the ethical nature of “hermeneutic *phronēsis*” in particular. In this present chapter, I first highlight Gadamer’s engagement with the problem of “application” (*Anwendung*) – a problem, which Gadamer calls “the fundamental problem of hermeneutics.”³ In doing so I explicate Gadamer’s

³ *Truth and Method*, 318. If there was any doubt that one of the primary contributions that Gadamer’s work has made to the discipline of hermeneutics was his radical retrieval of the problem of application,

account of the unity between “understanding,” “interpretation,” and “application”; and furthermore explain how each of these terms are transformed in light of Gadamer’s concept of “*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein*” (effective historical consciousness).⁴ Following this, I then deepen my account of hermeneutic application by raising and responding to two issues, which Gadamer scholars have not sufficiently dealt with, but whose clarification are required in order to make sense not only of what “*Anwendung*” means for Gadamer, but also for understanding his retrieval of *phronēsis*.⁵

Transition: Putting Aristotle Back to Work

In Chapter One I showed how the transference (*Übertragung*) of a word or concept from one domain to another, according to Gadamer, opens up a primary theoretical space for the philosophical transformation (both clarification and modification) of that concept. In Chapter Two I provided a clear concrete historical example of such “metaphorical transference” by showing how the *phrēn-phronein* word-family was variously employed across a number of disparate contexts (poetic, medical, pre-Socratic) – all of which contributed to the formation of “*phronēsis*.” Then in Chapter Three I showed how the development of *phronēsis* into a robust philosophical concept was at the same time the culmination of a tradition of thinking about

one need look no further than a published seminar on hermeneutics, which Gadamer put together with Gottfried Boehm in 1976. In that work, which includes selections of texts from many of the great modern and “postmodern” hermeneutic thinkers, only two pieces of Gadamer’s writings are included: the first is an historical essay on the nature of philosophy in the 20th century; and the second is precisely the sections on “*Anwendung*” from *Truth and Method*, which I will discuss in this chapter. See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Seminar: Philosophische Hermeneutik*, 327-332.

⁴ This chapter presupposes what was said about this concept in detail in Chapter One.

⁵ Those two issues are (1) the extent to which application is something that takes place inevitably and automatically, or, on the other hand, purposefully – or somehow both; and (2) what it could mean for Gadamer to claim that the text is something “universal” that must be applied to a “particular.”

practical-ethical life, whose historical basis is encountered in the works of Plato, Isocrates, and Aristotle.

On the one hand, there is a clear gap, both historical and thematic, separating the previous chapter – on the development of *phronēsis* in Aristotle – from the present chapter concerning Hans-Georg Gadamer’s 20th century philosophical hermeneutics. Yet this gap is not as great as it may appear. For in fact, this present chapter also continues the inquiry into “*phronēsis*” as a conceptual tradition, by articulating one further (contemporary) development of that concept. Just as the *phren-phronein* word family could be applied across disparate contexts, so too Gadamer’s work has shown how the concept of *phronēsis* can be fruitfully applied to a domain not anticipated by Aristotle or his contemporaries – namely, the transference of the ancient Greek *phronēsis* from the concrete realms of human life and action, to the specific realm of hermeneutics and the interpretation of texts. If today we speak of “hermeneutic virtues” such as charity, or if thinkers today articulate a conceptual link between the hermeneutic act and human *praxis*, it should not be forgotten that this link first came into language by way of metaphor (e.g., in the modern scientific attempts to “read the book of Nature,” or today when we say that one “reads a situation” or “does justice to a text”). Nevertheless, it has not always and everywhere been simply obvious that there is such a link between text and action beyond being a “mere” metaphor. Therefore in this chapter, I provide the philosophical and conceptual ground that makes it possible for Gadamer to claim that *phronēsis* has a role to play in hermeneutics⁶ – namely, by showing how profoundly necessary the concrete act of “application” is for any

⁶ And vice versa – hermeneutics also will teach us something more about the nature of humane “practical wisdom.”

interpretation or understanding of a text. Or, in other words, by showing the extent to which understanding (a text) is a form of “applied knowledge.”

“The Fundamental Problem of Hermeneutics”: Application

Motivating the Turn to *Phronēsis*

That Gadamer’s turn to the Aristotelian concept of *phronēsis* formed part of the philosophical center of his 1960 *Truth and Method* was understood almost from the beginning of the book’s subsequent reception. Just *how* to understand the philosophical role that *phronēsis* was intended to play there, however, has proved to be far from obvious. One cannot simply begin with the sections explicitly dedicated to *phronēsis* in *Truth and Method*, because, hermeneutically, the concept of *phronēsis* (like every concept for Gadamer) is an answer to a question.⁷ What is needed, then, is to ask, *what is the question to which “phronēsis” is the answer?* Beginning in this way provides us with the most appropriate interpretive starting point for engaging Gadamer’s (in)famous discussion of the relevance of Aristotle for hermeneutics.

In this dissertation I am claiming that the question that Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis* seeks to respond to concerns “the fundamental problem” of hermeneutics – namely, what he calls the problem of “application” (*Anwendung*).⁸ The question to which *phronēsis* will be the answer

⁷ Methodologically, this is just what one should expect after our analysis of Gadamer’s understanding of conceptuality (Chapter One) - recalling that, for Gadamer, our concepts are (even if only provisional) dialogical answers to questions, which emerge out of experience.

⁸ Gadamer also occasionally uses “*Applikation*” interchangeably with “*Anwendung*,” though this latter is much more common. See Lawrence K. Schmidt, “Application and Praxis,” *Blackwell Companion to Hermeneutics*, 253-258.

can formulated in the following way: how is the *one* text to be understood within the *many* ever-changing hermeneutic situations that concretize and condition its being read and interpreted?

The claim that lies behind this question – or the presupposition that makes this question possible – is that understanding and application are inextricable from one another: the text is only understood in and through its application (or “concretization”).⁹ This claim, however, is not simply an obvious or uncontroversial one, and so Gadamer spends a good portion of Chapter Four of *Truth and Method* arguing both (1) for the essential connection between understanding, interpretation, and application, and (2) for the legitimacy of the problem(s) that are generated once that connection is grasped. After the concept of hermeneutic application is sufficiently clarified and shown to be “the central problem of hermeneutics,” Gadamer’s answer or response to that problem – i.e., *phronēsis* – becomes more understandable and its centrality as the crowning hermeneutic virtue can be recognized.

Fusing Understanding, Interpretation, and Application into a Unity

The concept of application – *ap-plicare* – necessarily implies the related concept of distance. “To apply” originally meant linking two concrete entities together (docking a boat in a harbor), and so “making near what was once apart or separated” became the guide for the

⁹ In some respects it might have been better – at least for English speakers – if Gadamer had not used the word “application” (*Anwendung*), since it is all too easy for us to presuppose that the English “application” means to take something prefabricated and “apply” it to some other thing or “use” it for some other purpose. As the reader will see below, a better word for English speakers to begin to grasp what Gadamer means by *Anwendung* might have been “translation,” “adaptation,” “retrieval” or – in a quasi-Aristotelian vein – “reworking.”

development of the concept.¹⁰ Even when we say that a person “applies himself” to a subject matter such as philosophy or mathematics or baking bread, this still implies that a certain distance is in the process of being overcome. Likewise the application of a general virtue or principle to something concrete entails that some kind of gap is overcome in the concretization - e.g., the separation or distance between “justice” and this here-and-now situation. The contact between two entities which had previously been separated is the hallmark of any mode of application. For the discipline of hermeneutics, it is the *gap between the text and the reader* that is overcome by hermeneutic application; and the nature of that application - bringing it about in the “right” way - involves the wisdom of hermeneutic *phronēsis*.¹¹

Emphasizing the conceptual connection between application and distance also provides us with the added scholarly benefit of clarifying the overall structure of Chapter Four of *Truth and Method*. This intention and structure of this chapter is difficult to grasp, as Gadamer himself later noticed. In a footnote inserted in a later edition of *Truth and Method*, Gadamer reflects on a particular shortcoming of the chapter:

In many respects, the discussion here is much too restricted to the special situation of the historical human sciences and ‘being that is oriented to a text.’ Only in Part Three have I succeeded in broadening the issue to language and dialogue, though in fact I have had it

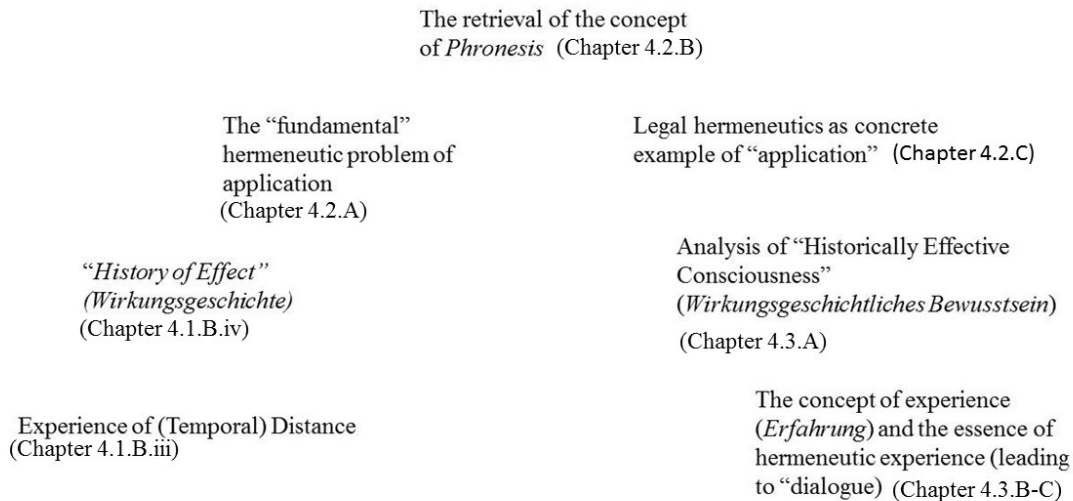
¹⁰ For more on this, see Haomin Liu, “*Subtilitas Applicandi* as Self-Knowledge: A Critique of the Concept of Application in Hans-Georg Gadamer,” 128-147.

¹¹ Admittedly I am here neglecting the universal claim of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics according to which every act of understanding (not just that of a text) requires hermeneutic *phronēsis*. I will return to this issue in the next chapter where I take up Gadamer’s claim that philosophical hermeneutics is a (the?) “heir” to Aristotelian practical philosophy. Nevertheless, I have maintained the traditional focus of hermeneutics on texts since that focus also shapes the guiding question of my dissertation - i.e., to what extent is the interpretation of texts an ethical endeavor?

constantly in view; and consequently, only there have I grasped in a fundamental way the notions of distance and otherness.¹²

For my part, I have tried to keep the importance of dialogue for Gadamer in mind from the beginning of the dissertation; which is why I began (Chapter One) with a discussion of the nature of language and conceptuality as participation in a dialogical tradition, rather than postponing it for the end, as Gadamer did in *Truth and Method*. In order to clarify the structure of Chapter Four, and to show how the topic of “application” motivates the retrieval of *phronēsis*, we can visualize the chapter (below) in terms of a pyramid. After several introductory sections, a very precise philosophical line of thought begins to unfold, which finds its apex in the retrieval of *phronēsis*. For ease of visualization I offer here first the visual schematization, whose headings correspond to their section titles in *Truth and Method*:

¹² Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 398-399.

Figure 3. A Structural View of *TM*, Chapter Four.**A Structural View of *Truth and Method*, Chapter Four:**

The reader should bear in mind that each step in the pyramid is named after a (sub-)section heading in Chapter Four of *Truth and Method*, which, when all taken together, form a basic line of inquiry that are followed to a (i.e., Gadamer’s) conclusion. Moreover, the reader should note the benefit of structuring things as a pyramid: not only can one visualize the basic philosophical trajectory in this way, but, more precisely, one is able to appreciate how both sides of each level of the pyramid correspond to one another. Gadamer systematically raises questions (the left side of the pyramid) and responds to them (the right side of the pyramid), while simultaneously

progressively deepening or ascending to his key philosophical insight – namely, the necessity of (hermeneutic) *phronēsis*.¹³

The experience of the (temporal and cultural) distance between the reader and text introduces one of the basic questions to which modern hermeneutic theorists have tried to respond.¹⁴ The shock of discovering how great the distance can be between reader and text can lead to, and has led to, a false dichotomy according to which the meaning of the text either (1) wholly resides in an unknowable past reading of a text, or (2) is wholly the work of a present, individual reading, which “creates” or “constructs” the meaning of the text. By taking up the experience of distance separating reader and text, Gadamer’s hermeneutics clarifies the nature of that experience, which leads to a novel position according to which the experience of distance *is itself dependent on* an always-already prior act of “application” (*Anwendung*), which “bridges” the gap between reader and text. Moreover, that act of “application,” as I will explain below, is made possible, in part, by the fact that the present reader is in some relevant sense conditioned by the very past that reader is seeking to understand.

Gadamer begins this line of thought by noting that the distance that separates today’s reader from, e.g., the comedies of Aristophanes, is indeed enormous, but it is not the absolute separation between two discrete, atomistic entities – namely, the reading subject, on the one

¹³ A comment about the left base of the pyramid: one self-criticism that later in his life Gadamer came to level against *Truth and Method* is just that in this section he began with “temporal distance,” rather than the experience of “distance” more generally (including cultural, linguistic, and so on). I have placed “temporal” in parentheses to mark this. Cf. his comments in “Reflections on My Philosophical Journey,” *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*.

¹⁴ For more on this, see my discussion in Section One of Chapter One of this dissertation.

hand, and the text, on the other hand. Instead, Gadamer introduces (in the second level of the pyramid) the concept of “*Wirkungsgeschichte*” (historical effect, and the related term, *Rezeptionsgeschichte*), in order to clarify the nature of the (temporal) distance, by showing how the text that is read today is, ontologically, an element of “tradition” - that is to say, it is something “handed on.”¹⁵ This means that the distance between reader and text is not absolute, but rather always only a “relative” distance, across which lies the whole span of historical-cultural “effects” that have conditioned the meaning of the text, which itself has been received by and handed down to others who further transform and hand on the text to us today. The (meaning of the) text itself does not die with its author, but rather continues to grow right alongside – that is, thanks to, or due to – its historical reception.

However, the reception of the text is not a pristine one whereby the text remains unaltered or untransformed by those who hand on and receive that text throughout history. With every new reception of the text there occurs a process of reinterpretation, adaptation, translation, and revival of the text in new and different socio-historical-cultural milieus or “hermeneutic situations.”¹⁶ Thus the ongoing work of tradition connects the contemporary reader to the “past”

¹⁵ This holds even in the case where a “new” text is discovered (i.e., rediscovered), since a single text is not some a-historical creature existing without any relation to other texts, cultural products, historical events, etc. The “discovery” of a new text is not a separate event independent of that text’s taking its place within the larger life of and dialogue with “Tradition.” A text that cannot find a place in tradition is, quite simply, not a text – there are no private texts.

¹⁶ Gadamer uses Heidegger’s term “hermeneutic situation” to encompass not only the particular individual reader’s own hermeneutic presuppositions, experiences, questions, and concerns, but also the whole general spatio-temporal situation in which a text is read (e.g., Aristotle’s works as read in ancient Athens, in Alexandria, in the 13th century, or in England and America in the late 20th century).

life of the text just as much as it provides an initial point of departure whereby the contemporary reader will give the text a new (i.e., relatively different) and sometimes also a “future” life.¹⁷

With this in mind, by the time one reaches the start of Gadamer’s explicit section on “application” in Chapter Four of *Truth and Method* (the 3rd level of our pyramid diagram), it is easier to see why the link between “interpretation” and “understanding” must at the same time involve a kind of “application.” Gadamer’s discussion of application, and his retrieval of *phronēsis*, provide a philosophical key or turning point, which ultimately leads to his technical concept of *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* (effective historical consciousness). Gadamer’s analysis of the link between application, understanding, and interpretation is used to show how it was precisely the blindness to the philosophical legitimacy of the problem of application itself that systematically hamstrung hermeneutic thinking since the 19th century by entangling it in so many *aporias* concerning the “distance” between reader and text.¹⁸

Traditionally hermeneutics was divided into three separate ‘subtleties’: (1) *subtilitas intelligendi* (understanding), (2) *subtilitas explicandi* (interpretation), and (3) the *subtilitas applicandi* (application), which Gadamer claims was included by pietism (J.J. Rambach).¹⁹ These three arts or “finesses” were viewed as discrete parts of the discipline such that, for

¹⁷ In Chapter One of this dissertation I tried to show how Gadamer argues that our language itself is always already “interpretive” (so that every translation is already an interpretation), and that the concepts we use to explicitly interpret a text always participate in the larger life of the tradition that has (partly) shaped their meaning.

¹⁸ *Truth and Method*, 318: “In the early tradition of hermeneutics, which was completely invisible to the historical self-consciousness of post-romantic scientific epistemology, this problem had its systematic place.”

¹⁹ For a nuanced critique of Gadamer’s claim about Rambach, cf. István M. Fehér’s “Hermeneutics and Philology: Understanding the Matter, Understanding the Text,” 269-285.

example, one only ever needed to interpret something when someone (be it oneself or another) did not already understand a given piece of text.

In the 19th century, Romantic hermeneutics (Schleiermacher) was able to see the unity of “understanding” and “interpretation.” According to Gadamer, Romantic hermeneutics acknowledged that “interpretation is not an occasional, post facto supplement to understanding; rather, understanding is always interpretation, and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding. In accordance with this insight, interpretive language and concepts were recognized as belonging to the inner structure of understanding.”²⁰ Whoever does not want to “interpret” but only “understand” a text will, in the end and in a naïve way, simply make use of all the presuppositions residing in the concepts by means of which they understand the text at all.²¹

However, the recognition of the unity of interpretation and understanding also resulted in a new orientation for the discipline of hermeneutics, for it seemed to require a new way of understanding what the task of the interpreter really is. For 19th century post-Romantic hermeneutics, the concern became to discover a scientific method of interpretation that would secure the “objective” meaning of a text. According to Gadamer, this was the near-inevitable result of (1) the reframing of the reader-text relationship in terms of a subject-object relation, (2) the successes of the modern natural scientific method, and (3) the near total exclusion of that

²⁰ *Truth and Method*, 318.

²¹ Thus a student in my classical mythology course was eager to know “if the Greeks really believed in all these myths.” Clearly, unpacking any one of these concepts (the Greeks; [really] believing; myths) would require a dissertation in itself. For a good example of historical research that is also hermeneutically aware, cf. Paul Veyne, *Did the Greeks Believe in their Myths? An Essay on the Constitutive Imagination*.

third traditional hermeneutic element – the “finesse” of *applicatio*.²² The search for the right *method* of interpretation presupposed that what was being sought was an objective, universally true, and timeless interpretation of the text – i.e., one in which the reading subject and their hermeneutic presuppositions are somehow neutralized or deemed inapplicable so far as the meaning of the text is concerned.²³ In light of this new concern, “the edifying application of Scripture in Christian preaching, for example, now seemed very different from the historical and theological understanding of it.”²⁴ “Application” here took on the meaning of a secondary “use” of the text that is otherwise understood on its own. In other words, the text could “first” be understood and, if one so wished, “later” be “applied” in some way. This shift in meaning of “application” meant the general separation of literary and historical hermeneutics from theological and legal hermeneutics. For theological (and legal) hermeneutics, according to Gadamer, necessarily kept in view the “tension” (*Spannung*) between “the fixed text” (*dem gesetzten Text*) such as the law or the gospel, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, “the sense arrived at by applying it at the concrete moment of interpretation [*den konkreten Augenblick der Auslegung*], either in judgment or in preaching.”²⁵ By contrast, post-Romantic literary-historical hermeneutics exaggerated and misidentified the nature of the historical “distance” between

²² *Truth and Method*, 318f. It might have been better for Gadamer to speak not of the “exclusion” of application, but rather of the “transformation” of hermeneutic application into a scientific and technological sense of application.

²³ Cf. Gadamer’s comments on the “secondary naivety” that is involved when one “demands that in understanding history one must leave one’s own concepts aside and think only in the concepts of the epoch one is trying to understand.” *Truth and Method*, 398.

²⁴ *Truth and Method*, 318.

²⁵ *Truth and Method*, 319.

reader and text that needs to be overcome, and so they could only view the element of application as something that may occur only “after” understanding was found – “edifying” perhaps, but incidental to a truly “*wissenschaftliche*” understanding.²⁶ Historically, this also meant that literary hermeneutics and historical studies “cut their ties with the other hermeneutical disciplines [i.e., theological and legal hermeneutics] and established themselves as models of methodology for research in the human sciences.”²⁷

By rehabilitating the place of application, *Truth and Method* sets itself the task of clarifying and reorienting the whole general nature of the hermeneutic process. Gadamer argues that *intelligere*, *explicare*, and *applicatio*, in fact, together comprise a unity. This does not mean that one “first” understands or interprets the text and only “second” chooses to apply the text (or not to apply it) to some particular case. In fact it is not really a matter of choice at all: readers themselves are already a particular (and singular) “case” in which the text is applied *if it is understood at all*.²⁸ A “mere reproduction” (*eine bloße Wiedergabe*) of something, without any adaptation or alteration, is simply not possible because every reproduction or reading always

²⁶ Although Gadamer does not explicitly return to this matter of “edifying” reading, it should be noted that the influence of Kierkegaard on Gadamer was in effect already before he went to Freiburg to study with Heidegger. Has Kierkegaard’s critique of an all-too-“objective” and distanced form of understanding, and the publication of his “up-building discourses” shaped Gadamer’s thinking about “*Anwendung*”? Kierkegaard’s literary *On Repetition* also seems to prefigure the nature of retrieval or a repetition with a “twist” that is involved in Gadamer’s conception of tradition and application.

²⁷ *Truth and Method*, 319. Gadamer continues: “The fact that *philological, legal, and theological* hermeneutics originally belonged closely together depended on recognizing application as an integral element of all understanding.”

²⁸ This kind of understanding therefore also includes *misunderstanding*. Indeed, for Gadamer, even the “best” understanding is always only provisional, partial, and limited, and so must always also be a partial misunderstanding as well.

takes place in a new and different concrete hermeneutical context. For example, a perfectly “historicized” performance of a Greek tragedy is impossible – even when the Greeks themselves began re-performing the works of Aeschylus, they did not hesitate to include stage props or theatre devices that had not been invented in Aeschylus’ day. Each re-performance of, say, the *Prometheus Bound*, be it in Athens in the 4th BCE or the 21st CE, is in some sense a new creation, just as much as it is a revival or re-creation. The danger of attempting to *completely* historicize a tragedy is that it threatens to deaden its effect: the audience may only come away with the experience of having *looked at* a mere museum piece, rather than having actually been *confronted by* or *undergone* a tragedy.²⁹ In other words, the hermeneutic situation and the text are what must be “applied” to one another for understanding to occur: “we have come to see that understanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter’s present situation...we consider application to be just as integral a part of the hermeneutic process as are understanding and interpretation.”³⁰ In the case of the performance of a Greek tragedy, one can say that only by adapting, concretizing, applying, renewing, translating, and so on can the tragedy be understood at all – only by becoming (relatively) different can the tragedy or the text speak again today. The hermeneutic situation in which a text is read cannot be neutralized or historicized away, but instead needs to be *related* to the text so

²⁹ The hermeneutic question is *how* one is able to adapt the play in such a way that it actually speaks to the audience – and that requires a good deal of *practical wisdom*, as we will see later.

³⁰ *Truth and Method*, 319. For this reason Gadamer also remarks here that “this is not to return to the pietist tradition of the three separate ‘subtleties’.”

that the meaning of the text can begin to come to the fore.³¹ It is not for nothing that Euripides performed the *Trojan Women* in 415 BCE, only a few months after Athens had killed the men and enslaved the women of the island of Melos.³²

To summarize what has been discussed thus far, “hermeneutic application” (1) refers to the application, linking together, or concretization of the text itself “to” or “in” the hermeneutic situation of the reader,³³ and (2) is not a separate act, independent from the process of understanding, but is in fact essential for understanding as such.³⁴ In *Truth and Method* Gadamer states that the task of application takes place within the “tension” (*Spannung*) that exists between “the identity of the common object” (i.e., the text) and “the changing situation in which it must be understood” (e.g., by you and me here and now).³⁵

Two Problems with the Problem of Application

Gadamer’s way of speaking about *Anwendung* is not without some confusing elements. There are in fact two questions lingering in the background that must be dealt with. First, is

³¹ *Truth and Method*, 319.

³² A terrific example of how tragedy can be made to speak by being adapted well to a context is that of the “Syria Trojan Women” project, in which Syrian refugee women stage productions of Euripides’ *Trojan Women* in the UK. For more information, visit www.syriatrojanwomen.org.

³³ The act of application in hermeneutics “explicitly and consciously bridges the temporal distance that separates the interpreter from the text and overcomes the alienation of meaning that the text has undergone.” *Truth and Method*, 322.

³⁴ “What we are dealing with here is not the taking of something that was first understood in itself and then “applying” it subsequently to something else; rather, application is involved in the first real reaching of an understanding of a matter by the person who is seeking to understand it.” *Gadamer in Conversation*, p. 47.

³⁵ *Truth and Method*, 320.

hermeneutic application something that occurs “automatically” and “implicitly” in any and every event of understanding, or, second, is it something that the reader “purposefully” and “skillfully” accomplishes (or, third, somehow both automatic and purposeful)? Second, what does Gadamer mean by speaking of the text as a “universal” that must be applied to something “particular”? Answering these two questions will go a long way in explaining some of the details of hermeneutic “application,” as well as completing our approach to Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis*.

Problem One: Is Hermeneutic Application Automatic or Purposeful?

On the one hand, Gadamer claims that application is essential to any and every act of understanding, such that “application is an *implicit* moment in all understanding; it does not at all conflict with the genuine obligation to have scientific rigor. One does not accomplish application by taking some excerpt from the tradition and then making some doubtful “application” of it; rather, application takes place in order for one to understand it at all!”³⁶ This means that wherever understanding occurs, application will also have taken place *whether or not the reader is conscious of or “purposeful” about that application*. In this respect, application happens “automatically” inasmuch as the hermeneutic situation *by necessity* will play a role in making the text understandable.

At the same time, however, Gadamer also claims that the “controlled performance” (*kontrollierte Vollzug*) of the fusion of horizons is the task (*Aufgabe*) of an “effective historical consciousness” (*wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein*), which is “the central problem of

³⁶ *Gadamer in Conversation*, 47-48.

hermeneutics...the problem of application, which is to be found in all understanding.”³⁷ To speak of a “controlled performance,” however, seems to suggest that the act of application is in fact a “purposeful” one, which the interpreter consciously performs. This seems to make application into a very specific type of activity that is not necessarily undertaken “every time” one understands something. Yet, how, then, is this compatible with the claim above that application is always already *implicitly* occurring in any and every moment of understanding whatsoever?

Gadamer’s discussion of application is not incoherent – the two claims are in fact compatible. To the extent that hermeneutic application is “automatic,” “universal,” and always already “implicit” whenever understanding occurs, one can say that for Gadamer application simply means that the text has to be “translated” into a language that the reader can understand. The force of all the hermeneutic presuppositions that reside in our language is what carries the day here. For example, the beginning student who first reads about Plato’s “ideas” will more than likely read the word “idea” in a very un-Platonic (more Lockean, perhaps) sense, and so to that extent will come to a somewhat un-Platonic (or a partial, limited) understanding of Plato. Or again, the translation of *phronēsis* today as “prudence,” which follows its Latin rendering, may lead the beginning student of today – for whom the English word “prudence” connotes a prude or an overly cautious square – to *understand* Aristotle’s crowning moral virtue in a rather lopsided way. To apply the text in this sense, then, refers to the naïve understanding (and therewith also

³⁷ *Truth and Method*, 317-318. This passage is in fact also a good example of where Gadamer equates the “fusion of horizons” with the task of application, which an “effective historical consciousness” undertakes.

misunderstanding) of the text on the basis of one's present hermeneutic prejudices (*Vorurteile*).³⁸ Whoever reads *will* (mis)understand. Because applied (mis)understanding is in a certain sense "automatic," there resides a danger in not acknowledging or remembering that one's understanding of a text occurs, necessarily, through the relating of the text to one's own particular hermeneutic situation; a situation, which – again, necessarily – is different from the horizon in which the text was "first" written. *To admit that this is the case is to acknowledge the hermeneutical legitimacy of the problem of application.*³⁹

To admit that one has a problem, however, already changes one's relationship to that problem, and opens up new hermeneutical possibilities. To understand that one is finite may mean that one begins to live differently; and the insight into one's own hermeneutic finitude likewise may mean that one begins to "interpret" and "understand" (the text, the world, oneself) differently. When Gadamer speaks of a "controlled performance" (*kontrollierte Vollzug*), or that hermeneutics "explicitly and consciously" (*ausdrücklich und bewußt*) performs a task of application,⁴⁰ he means only that the interpreter who has become aware of the inevitability of application tries to perform that application in a more appropriate, better, more correct, and

³⁸ I do not want to overstate the "naivety" here. As I have tried to emphasize throughout Chapter One and the present chapter, one's present hermeneutic presuppositions were not created just "yesterday," but instead belong to the whole ongoing life of the historical traditions that have created the situation in which those presuppositions are at work.

³⁹ The "problematicity" of the problem of application, in turn, consists in the fact that we want to read and interpret well, correctly, rightly, appropriately, truthfully, and so on. This brings us closer to the need for *phronēsis*, but I postpone the full discuss until the next chapter.

⁴⁰ Cf. *Truth and Method*, 322: "Our thesis is that historical hermeneutics too has a task of application to perform, because it too serves [*dient*] applicable meaning, in that it explicitly and consciously bridges the temporal distance that separates the interpreter from the text and overcomes the alienation of meaning that the text has undergone."

truthful manner. In short, they aim to develop the hermeneutic excellence required for becoming good at the unavoidable task of application (namely, as will be seen in the next chapter, the excellence of hermeneutic *phronēsis*). It does not mean that the task of application is something that one can “choose” to engage in or not to engage in, as is the case when one decides to apply a hammer to a nail, or a method to an object. Rather, the hermeneutic act of application is just like encountering an ethical situation wherein one cannot choose to opt out of a response one way or another. Likewise, one can “forget” to apply a procedure or a method in a particular case, but one cannot “forget” the act of hermeneutic application, just as one cannot “forget” *phronēsis*.

Now this does not mean that good interpretation necessarily requires the explicit, “controlled performance” of application. Or put better, the “control” here is not an avowedly methodological control – as if the author of *Truth and Method* was, in the end, attempting to outline a new general hermeneutic methodology like that of Schleiermacher, Emilio Betti, or E.D. Hirsch. It is possible, for example, to come to learn that Plato’s “idea” means something quite different than what one first thought, or that Aristotle’s *phronēsis* is a much more interesting concept than the moralistic orientation of a conservative prude (I hope to have shown at least that much in previous chapters). That such a change in understanding is possible at all is, for Gadamer, the great “miracle” (*Wunder*) of understanding.⁴¹ What is involved in the process of coming to a better understanding, however, is nothing other than the ongoing, repeated act of application. One might begin with a certain (mis)understanding of what Plato meant by “idea,”

⁴¹ Cf. *Truth and Method*, 163, 303, and 322 for Gadamer’s use of “*das Wunder des Verstehens*.” I thus (think that I) disagree with the interpretation of this phrase that is given in Haoming Liu’s article, “*Subtilitas Applicandi*,” 128-147.

but through continuous re-reading and discussing with others who themselves have read and re-read the text, one may suddenly become aware that the meaning of the text is different from what one originally presumed. This means that some of our previous presuppositions through which the text was interpreted are now seen to be insufficient. The text itself has “miraculously” said something to us that we ourselves were not expecting, and in spite of the fact that it can only do so by speaking into our own hermeneutic situation. This means that we are capable of being faced by something “other” than our own immediate hermeneutic presuppositions. One can become aware that the horizon within which one was interpreting the text is insufficient or inappropriate, and so must be altered to better fit what one now is slowly coming to understand in a new (hopefully better) way. The “wonder” – i.e., the place from which Gadamer begins his philosophical questioning – is that understanding seems to deepen itself by becoming (more or less) different every time through an experience of contact with something other.⁴²

To give another example: it is all-too-common for today’s reader of the myths contained in *Genesis* 1 to naively interpret the text as proto- or bad-science that was the product of an ancient people who, nevertheless, were trying to answer the same questions as today’s scientist about the material creation and development of the cosmos.⁴³ Becoming aware that the text may be seeking to answer different questions altogether takes time, re-reading, and engagement with

⁴² *Truth and Method*, 320: “*Understanding proves to be an event*, and the task of hermeneutics, seen philosophically, consists in asking what kind of understanding, what kind of science it is, that is itself advanced by historical change.”

⁴³ Of course equally as bad are those who presume *Genesis* to be dealing with the material creation of the cosmos, but who then try to make it “compatible” with or even “better than” the best scientific explanations that we have today. By contrast, for another good historical work that is hermeneutically aware, see John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Genesis 1*.

others who have spent much time thinking about that text.⁴⁴ The conclusion, then, is the following: *if application is the cause of an initial (mis-)understanding, (re-)application is also the cause of a better (mis-)understanding.*

Problem Two: What is the “Universality” of the Text?

There is one last issue that must be dealt with before turning to the place of *phronēsis* in philosophical hermeneutics. For the way in which Gadamer relates the concept of *phronēsis* to *Anwendung* is not as philosophically straightforward as it may first appear. For at the very start of the section titled, “The Hermeneutical Relevance of Aristotle,” Gadamer curiously alters his terminology and re-summarizes the task of application somewhat differently from the way in which it had been previously introduced. Gadamer writes:

If the heart of the hermeneutical problem is that one and the same tradition must time and again be understood in a different way, the problem, logically speaking, concerns the relationship between the universal and the particular. Understanding, then, is a special case of applying something universal to a particular situation. This makes Aristotle’s ethics especially important for us.⁴⁵

⁴⁴ To speak of a “firmament” that holds back the waters “above” is of course scientifically incorrect. But that is not what the nomadic Hebrew farmers searching for a home were trying to assert. Rather, with the sense that one is surrounded by (political and environmental) chaos on all sides, and yet standing in a stable, center of peace – and receiving rain to water crops (but not too much rain to cause a flood) – one may search for a language to assert a spirit of *gratitude*. With that change in perspective from the approach of a modern literalist, materialist reading of *Genesis* the task of “application” begins again anew: can we still understand what *Genesis 1*, now, seems to be saying to us? At the same time, when can we say that we have “finally” come to understand just what it is that that text is trying to communicate such that re-reading is no longer required?

⁴⁵ *Truth and Method*, 322. It is worth quoting the German here in full: “*Wenn das hermeneutische Problem seine eigentliche Spitze darin hat, daß die Überlieferung als dieselbe dennoch je anders verstanden werden muß, so handelt es sich darin – logisch gesehen – um das Verhältnis des Allgemeinen und des Besonderen. Verstehen ist dann ein Sonderfall der Anwendung von etwas Allgemeinem auf eine konkrete und besondere Situation. Damit gewinnt die aristotelische Ethik für uns eine besondere Bedeutung.*“ Gadamer, *GW I*, 317. Is Gadamer’s last use of „*besondere*“ signaling that his retrieval of *phronēsis* will also be a concrete and “particular” *example* of the concept of *Anwendung*? In a letter to

Previously I have said that the task of application consisted in the application of *the text* to the *hermeneutical situation*. In the quote above, however, Gadamer does not once mention texts or hermeneutic situations *per se*, but instead speaks about “tradition” and about the “logical” relationship of the universal to the concrete particular, all the while presuming that the same subject matter (*Sache*) is still being investigated – i.e., the problem of application. However, what does it really mean to say that the relation between the text and the hermeneutic situation is like the relationship between the universal and the particular?

In fact the issue is even more complicated. For Gadamer discusses the problem of application by employing a wide variety of terms, not all of which are obvious in their meaning or in how the terms all relate to one another. In order to give the reader a sense for this, I offer here a short table of several of the most common, and most important, ways in which Gadamer speaks about the problem of hermeneutic application. Various, hermeneutic application is said to consist in:

<u>The application of the</u>	<u>To the</u>
1. Text	1. (One’s own) Hermeneutic Situation
2. Universal (or General)	2. Particular (or Singular)
3. Past	3. Present
4. One	4. Many
5. Foreign	5. Familiar
6. Tradition	6. Oneself; Novel
7. Horizon (of the text, past, etc.)	7. Horizon (of the reader, present) ⁴⁶

Richard Bernstein, Gadamer seems to confirm just as much. Cf. Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 261-266.

⁴⁶ I cannot list every place in *Truth and Method*, let alone Gadamer’s corpus, in which he uses these terms. That said, I have supplied many instances where Gadamer has used these terms throughout this chapter. Cf. 298-335 of *Truth and Method* for the most condensed place where many of these terms are used interchangeably.

Gadamer scholars have generally paid insufficient attention to the fact that the differences in terminology here raise as many questions as they resolve. What does it mean to speak of the text as something “universal”? To what extent is the text identical to its “horizon” (of meaning? its historical horizon)? What does it mean to think the “past” as something “universal” (or general), and the “present” as something “particular” (and singular)? And in what sense are these terms reversible, such that it is the particular that must *also* be applied to the universal, and the present *to* the past, and so on?

There is a beehive of questions lurking behind these different ways that Gadamer discusses the *praxis* of hermeneutics. Moreover, it is not possible to dismiss these terminological differences by claiming that they are all only mere analogies intended to clarify the one true sense of hermeneutic application – i.e., that of the text to the hermeneutic situation. For part of what makes Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* so groundbreaking is not just that it has helped to clarify the nature of textual hermeneutics in the *Geisteswissenschaften*, but that it does so by clarifying the nature understanding *as such*, regardless of whether one is seeking to understand a text, a moral situation, a live conversation, a past historical event, an encounter with another culture, (social-)scientific data, and so on. In other words, “philosophical hermeneutics” puts forward a certain universal claim about the nature of human understanding.⁴⁷ This in turn means

⁴⁷ I will deal, partly, with this claim later. See also Gadamer’s article “*The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem*,” which also functions as a helpful summary of the main lines of *Truth and Method*. Gadamer, “*The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem*,” *Philosophical Hermeneutics*. See also David Weberman, “*Is Hermeneutics Really Universal despite the Heterogeneity of its Objects?*” in *Gadamer Versteheren*, 35-56.

that the various ways of speaking about the task of application are not necessarily merely metaphorical, but instead are so many *instances* of the general task of application, which Gadamer argues is an ineliminable aspect of every act of understanding whatsoever.

I cannot deal with every nuance or peculiarity in Gadamer's vocabulary so far as the problem of application is concerned in this dissertation. Thankfully, however, that is not a requirement for describing the philosophical frame of his retrieval of *phronēsis*. What is required, however, is to come to an understanding of what it means to speak about the text as something "universal" (*Allgemein*). This is for two reasons: first, this way of speaking dominates Gadamer's discussion about *phronēsis* not only in *Truth and Method*, but in many other writings as well.⁴⁸ And, second, there is some reason to think that Gadamer himself privileged one particular way of thinking about application: *Verstehen*, Gadamer writes, "is a special case [*Sonderfall*] of applying something universal to a particular and concrete situation."⁴⁹ This seems to suggest that every act of hermeneutic application can be understood in a general and abstract way according to the universal-particular schema. Given these two reasons, what follows is my reconstruction of what Gadamer seems to mean when he writes that the interpreter seeks "to understand this universal, the text."⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Cf. the use of "*Allgemein*" in "*Praktisches Wissen*," Chapter 5 of *The Idea of the Good in Platonic-Aristotelian Philosophy*, as well as Chapter 1 and 4 of *Hegel's Dialectic. Five Hermeneutical Studies*.

⁴⁹ *Truth and Method*, 322.

⁵⁰ *Truth and Method*, 333: "*Der Interpret will vielmehr gar nichts anderes, als dies Allgemeine – den Text – verstehen....*" A full treatment would also require that one reconstructs Gadamer's account of just what a text *is*, which is something that *Truth and Method* does not explicitly state. For a later attempt to "define" the text, cf. Gadamer's quasi-taxonomy of texts that he gives in his (equally quasi-)dialogue with Derrida in "*Text and Interpretation*," *Dialogue and Deconstruction*, 21-51.

Among the (few⁵¹) scholars who have questioned what it means for Gadamer to say that the text is something universal, not only have their responses to that question been different – variously critical⁵² or sympathetic⁵³ – but also their formulations of the question itself have been different. Given this state of the literature, in what follows I offer my own view on the matter, by outlining the clear link between Gadamer’s discussion of (1) application and *phronēsis* in Part Two of *Truth and Method*, to (2) his discussion of humanism in Part One – wherein a substantial account of “universal” is explicitly given.⁵⁴

In what sense then does Gadamer understand the text to be a kind of “universal” (*Allgemein*)? Gadamer shows some awareness that this manner of speaking might require clarification when he signals to the reader of *Truth and Method* (in a footnote) that several earlier sections of the book are relevant to his present retrieval of Aristotle.⁵⁵ Those earlier sections deal with the main concepts of humanism – specifically the concepts of *Bildung* (education,

⁵¹ *The Gadamer Dictionary*, for example, has an entry for “universality,” but its discussion is wholly concerned with Gadamer’s claim that *all* (i.e., “universally”) understanding is “hermeneutic” – i.e., there is no understanding that is not “interpretive” and “applicative” in essence. Thus Gadamer can say that it is not just texts that require interpretation, but, in truth, the whole human of socio-cultural life (and beyond?). Cf. Chris Lawn and Niall Keane, *The Gadamer Dictionary*, 153-154.

⁵² For example, in Liu’s “*Subtilitas Applicandi* as Self-Knowledge: A Critique of the Concept of Application in Hans-Georg Gadamer.”

⁵³ For example, cf. Paul Schuchman’s “Aristotle’s *Phronēsis* and Gadamer’s Hermeneutics,” 41-50.

⁵⁴ To be fair, Liu, at the very end of his article, stumbles upon the possibility of handling the issue in this way as well, but he does not make it thematic or pursue it in depth, choosing instead to quickly dismiss it. His, rather ambiguous, dismissal (142-143), however, begs the question, since he dismisses it only by drawing on the view he has just presented earlier; but we have to wonder whether his earlier approach was in fact the correct one in the first place. In general, however, I am grateful for Liu’s grasp of the problem, although I think his approach and conclusions are insufficient.

⁵⁵ Cf. footnotes 57 and 58 on p. 392.

culture, formation) and *Sensus Communis*.⁵⁶ Although he is not concerned there to give a full explanation of how he understands the concept of a “universal” in its own right, it is nevertheless possible to gain some insight into the key features that are relevant for understanding what Gadamer means by speaking of the text as a “universal,” and thereby for completing our characterization of the task of hermeneutic application.

In the course of his overview of the concept of *Bildung* (*paideia*, culture, formation, cultivation), which is heavily indebted to Hegel’s outline of a “theoretical” and “practical” *Bildung* as well as Hegel’s (somewhat Aristotelian) conception of a “concrete universal,” Gadamer writes that, “*Bildung*, as rising to the universal, is a task for man.”⁵⁷ The expression “*Erhebung zur Allgemeinheit*” is essential for beginning to grasp the way in which Gadamer will later use “*Allgemein*.”⁵⁸ *Bildung* is something “universal,” for Gadamer, inasmuch as it embraces every individual who is “formed” or “shaped” by a “culture.”⁵⁹ However, unlike the technical formation of “material” by a prefabricated “model,” the case of human formation in culture is not something which occurs straightforwardly or in one direction. One is not educated via the

⁵⁶ The pages that are most relevant to us here are, pp. 11-13, 16, 20, 30-31, 35, as well as 201-202, 316, 349-350.

⁵⁷ *Truth and Method*, 12: “*Bildung als Erhebung zur Allgemeinheit ist also eine menschliche Aufgabe.*” Throughout these pages Gadamer regularly quotes from Hegel’s *Philosophical Propaedeutic* and the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

⁵⁸ Liu begins to see this (142), but does not explore it fully: “...the relevance of *Bildung* to the problem of universality [i.e., the “universality” of the text] lies in its classical definition that *Bildung* is “*Bildung zu Menschen*”...and Hegel’s theoretical *Bildung*, which is characterized by...striving to attain the universal.”

⁵⁹ Gadamer notes (*TM*, 9-10) the etymological connection between *Bildung* and the philosophical background of the idea of “formation” according to which a “*Bild*” – as both a *Vorbild* (model) and a *Nachbild* (copy) – has the capacity to shape individuals (i.e., in its “image”).

impress of a predetermined, “universal” (selfsame) model onto a completely passive, blank set of material. In the first place, inhabiting a particular style, tradition, culture etc. is always done by singular individuals who, no matter how much they have in common, are not “repeatable” in the way that the production of metal folding chairs are. This is (partly) because “*Bildung*” is not something that exists separately apart from all the individuals in the way that the technical mold is separate from the individual creations that it shapes. *Bildung* is only found in the particular individuals who are both formed by, and who continually reform, the “culture” that embraces them all. *Bildung*, therefore, neither culminates in identically molded individuals, nor is it an unchanging, pre-set mold – cultural formation is not a case of “mass production.”⁶⁰

Moreover, to be formed in a particular way is a process that takes (a long) time. The educated person (*Gebildete*, “*pepaideumenos*”) is slowly “raised up” (educated, cultivated) to a higher, deeper, and more “universal” perspective and way of living – which here means that one’s initial prejudices are slowly educated via the broadening of one’s horizons.⁶¹ To be educated is not only to have one’s perspective shaped in a determinate way, but also to be given a starting point for encountering the world in ways that may challenge that very education one has thus far received. To be “cultivated,” then, is to be educated into openly and honestly encountering, and being encountered by, the other. For Gadamer, *Bildung* therefore implies a particular *responsibility* for the universal: one must eventually accept responsibility for one’s own, continuing, cultivation as the singular, particular, and universal(ized) human that one now

⁶⁰ To the extent that a group of people behave “exactly the same,” that is not a culture, but rather a cult.

⁶¹ To be “raised up” to a wider perspective – that is not primarily “*Aufhebung*,” but rather the concrete education of a *paidion* (little child).

is.⁶² Cultural formation, education, goes before and beyond any academic schooling or institutionalized “education” precisely because of its fundamental basis in an ethical relation to the other, as Gadamer notes:

It is not enough to observe more closely, to study a tradition more thoroughly, if there is not already a receptivity to the “otherness” [*das Andere*] of the work of art or of the past. That is what...we emphasized as the general characteristic of *Bildung*: keeping oneself open to what is other – to other, more universal points of view.⁶³

I will return to this ethical basis, and its connection to the retrieval of *phronēsis* in the next chapter. For now, it is sufficient to note that Gadamer’s use of “*Allgemein*” refers to that which is “common” (*Gemein*) to individuals, and which (re-)forms and is (re-)formed by those individuals. To “rise up” to a universal is said to be a task (*Aufgabe*) because the “universality” of one’s perspective is never a *total universality*, but always only a limited, and provisional sense of the “whole,” just as one is never “totally” educated or cultivated “completely.” This is why Gadamer writes, in the quote just above, that openness to what is other may involve an openness a “more” “universal” perspective – i.e., a broadened perspective that is, always only relatively, truly universal. To understand and accept responsibility for one’s continuing education, including the fact that one’s understanding is always a partial, limited understanding, means accepting that, e.g., I myself and my understanding of things are not the “whole” of the matter. This kind of “education,” for Gadamer,

Embraces a sense of proportion and distance in relation to itself, and hence consists in rising above itself to universality...This universality is not a case of a particular being

⁶² Cf. also Gadamer’s late lecture “Education is Self-education,” 529-538.

⁶³ *Truth and Method*, 16. And again (16), “to distance oneself from oneself and from one’s private purposes means to look at these in the way that others see them.”

determined by a universal; nothing is proved conclusively...Thus the cultivated consciousness has in fact more the character of a sense [rather than an inflexible yardstick]...it is a universal and common sense.⁶⁴

Coming back now to the text – as the codification of a fellow human’s words – we can say that, for Gadamer, to claim that the text is something “universal” is to say that it is something common, which embraces every reader. That is to say, it is a “task” for the reader to “rise up” to, to take responsibility for, and to be receptive to, and to do so in just the same way, and with the same responsibility, that is required when one encounters any other element of human “culture.” For the words of a text are not primarily scratch marks on a page, which the mind ideally “constitutes” into something meaningful, but rather first and foremost they are the words of another person handed down by other persons to you and I, the readers, who cannot avoid responding to that which embraces us both.⁶⁵

This way of using the word “universal” – as the ever-widening horizon – is carried over throughout *Truth and Method*, and can be easily seen in two long quotations that bookend Gadamer’s account of the problem of application and his retrieval of *phronēsis*. First, just before turning to his specific discussion of *Anwendung*, Gadamer connects that language of universality to his account of historical texts:

⁶⁴ *Truth and Method*, 16. The English translation of this last sentence is informative here. The German simply states “*Es ist ein allgemeiner Sinn.*” Weinsheimer and Marshall have chosen to translate „*allgemeiner*“ as „universal and common,“ which I think is correct inasmuch as it guides the reader to the way in which Gadamer seems to generally be using „*allgemein*” in this context as that which is “held in common.”

⁶⁵ This resonates with Gadamer’s general view of the text as an element of “Tradition” (*Überlieferung*), and, further, with the view put forward in Chapter One of this dissertation where the concept was analyzed as a kind of linguistic tradition.

Understanding tradition undoubtedly requires an historical horizon, then. But it is not the case that we acquire this horizon by transposing ourselves into an historical situation. Rather, we must always already have a horizon in order to be able to transpose ourselves into a situation... Transposing ourselves [*Sichversetzen*] consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards; rather, it always involves rising to a higher universality [*die Erhebung zu einer höheren Allgemeinheit*], that overcomes not only our own particularity, but also that of the other... To acquire a horizon [*Horizont gewinnen*] means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand [*das Nahe und Allzunahes*] – not in order to look away from it, but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion.⁶⁶

And again, at the conclusion of his retrieval of *phronēsis*, Gadamer draws attention to the difference between his use of universal (as a task for one to approach) versus the sense of a universal as something fixed, and wholly pre-determined, which can be “applied” (i.e., “used”) for some other, external purpose:

The interpreter dealing with a **tradition** tries to apply it to himself. But this does not mean that the traditionary **text** [*der überlieferte Text*] is given for him as something universal, that he first understands it per se, and then afterward uses it for particular applications. Rather, the interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal, the text – i.e., to understand what the **tradition** says, what constitutes the **text’s** meaning and significance. In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutic situation. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand at all.⁶⁷

The text then – its meaning and significance – is “universal” for human persons insofar as (1) it is an ongoing task that requires the particular interpreter to “rise up” to it over time, (2) is held in common by a multitude of readers across centuries and contexts, and (3) is only encountered amongst the particular, situated, finite readers who try to understand the text here

⁶⁶ *Truth and Method*, 315-316.

⁶⁷ *Truth and Method*, 333. I have boldfaced places where Gadamer uses “*Überlieferung*” and “*Text*” interchangeably and without warning.

and now.⁶⁸ Put slightly differently, “*Allgemein*,” for Gadamer, means that the (*meaning* of the) text⁶⁹ is something “common,” “genera,” and “whole.” It is (1) “common” or “public” (*allgemein, koinon*) because, put baldly, there simply is no such thing as a private language for Gadamer.⁷⁰ Language, as discussed in Chapter One of this dissertation, is that which communicates and mediates understanding, and the text – as a lingual, communicating phenomenon – is therefore held in common by an in-principle infinite (i.e., never ending) array of speakers and readers. The text is also (2) “general” in the sense that it is something abstract, which only gains its determinate meaning and significance within the very concrete, even singular, context of particular interpreters via the hermeneutic act of “application.” *Anwendung* is not a technical procedure in which one determinate entity is used for another specific purpose. Rather, the Gadamer has shown that the text, “before” it is applied (but when is that?), is not something determinate at all, but rather is something general or “universal.” Hermeneutic application does *not* mean that we “use” what we “already understand” for something else. Instead, the goal is nothing other than to understand the text here-and-now. Hermeneutic application thus refers to the *concretization* of something general and abstract in something

⁶⁸ This last point has bearing on one further way in which one could respond to the question of what it means to say that the text is a “universal” – namely, by relating it to the question about the existence of universals. That is to ask, to what extent is the universality of the text, for Gadamer, something real, ideal, or nominal?

⁶⁹ Cf. *Truth and Method*, 333: “The interpreter seeks...to understand this universal, the text – i.e., to understand what it says [*sagt*], what constitutes the text’s meaning and significance [*Sinn und Bedeutung*].”

⁷⁰ Cf. also P. Christopher Smith, in an introductory footnote to his translation of *The Idea of the Good*, says much the same thing about Gadamer’s use of “*Allgemein*.” Cf. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *The Idea of the Good in Platonic Aristotelian Philosophy*, xxvi.

concrete and determinate. Doing so is what yields the dialogue in which the text can be understood, misunderstood, and understood better and better through continually *concretizing* the general (text) in this here-and-now situation (myself).

Finally, the text is also (3) a “whole” or a “unity” (*Einheit, katholou*) in the sense corresponding to the (in)famous hermeneutic circle according to which understanding is always shuffling back and forth between, on the one hand, a (projected) understanding of one part of the text in light of the whole, and on the other hand, a (projected) understanding of the whole of the text in light of all its parts. Working out the unity or a sense for the whole is also a task to be undertaken; for, as Gadamer says, quoting Heidegger, the task is “to come into the circle in the right way – that is, neither by anachronistically updating [the text] nor by distorting it to fit one’s own preconceptions.”⁷¹

It is in these senses named above that Gadamer writes that “understanding is a special case of applying something universal [the text] to a particular situation [myself]” – what at first sounds like a straightforward sentence, in the end takes on a robust philosophical sense once one outlines the nature of hermeneutic application.⁷²

Transition to Phronēsis: (Self-)Understanding on the Way to (Self-)Understanding

Throughout this chapter, I have emphasized above all that *Anwendung*, for Gadamer, means the application of the text to the hermeneutic situation of the reader. Together with this goes the

⁷¹ *Truth and Method*, 601.

⁷² *Truth and Method*, 322.

claim that whoever seeks to understand (a text) cannot help but “put themselves into” the meaning that is understood, since one cannot even begin to read the language of a text without one’s own conceptual and interpretive “prejudices” (*Vor-urteile*) playing a role in making the language of that text intelligible at all: the text is linked together, coiled up, folded into (*plicare* and *ap-plicare*) the unique hermeneutic situation of every particular reader.⁷³ The concept of application – even if Gadamer has admitted that the word itself can be misleading⁷⁴ – has thus played an important philosophical role in breaking out of the all-too-common presupposition that the reader-text relationship can be appropriately understood on the basis of a subject-object relation, where those two terms could be separated by an objectifying hermeneutic method. This, still common, presupposition works by naively presuming that, via the mastery of a particular methodology (or just by “being careful”), one could separate out the “subjective” elements in one’s understanding of a text from the “objective” meaning of the text itself. For Gadamer, instead, the reader and the text “belong” (*gehören*) to one another. The reader and text are always connected by both the subject matter under discussion (*Sache*), and also by the historical tradition (*Überlieferung*) that “effects” (activates) not only (1) the meaning (*Sinn und Bedeutung*) of the text as it is differently encountered throughout different times and places, but also (2) the “consciousness” (*Bewußtsein*) of the multitude of different readers who engage the

⁷³ “In all understanding an application occurs, such that the person who I understanding is himself or herself *right there* in the understood meaning. He or she *belongs* to the subject-matter that he or she is understanding.” *Gadamer in Conversation*, 47.

⁷⁴ “Now I am willing to admit that the concept of *Applikation*...is artificial and misleading. But I certainly had not anticipated that one could think that, according to it, understanding should be applied to something else. No, I mean that it is to be applied to oneself.” *Gadamer in Conversation*, 37-38.

text.⁷⁵ Because “application” involves the linking together of text and oneself as reader, the understanding that emerges is thus also a kind of “self-understanding” (*Sich-selbst-Verstehen*): “the hermeneutic process involves not only the moments of understanding and interpretation but also the moment of application; that is to say, understanding oneself is a part of this process.”⁷⁶ I will return in detail to this matter of “self-understanding” in the next chapter of this dissertation, since it is in Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis* where this kind of hermeneutic self-understanding is more fully explained.

There is one further link between the earlier sections of *Truth and Method* concerned with *Bildung* and the retrieval of *phronēsis*, which I would like to alert the reader to by way of previewing some of what will follow in the next chapter of this dissertation, and in the conclusion.

It may come as no surprise to find that Gadamer was already hinting at the concept of application in those earlier sections, since to take responsibility for the “universality” of *Bildung* is to attempt to continually “apply” or “concretize” that universal within the warp and woof of human living.⁷⁷ Renaissance humanism provided a variety of answers to this matter through the concepts of *tact*,⁷⁸ *sensus communis*,⁷⁹ *judgment*,⁸⁰ and *taste*.⁸¹ In short, the behavior (in word

⁷⁵ For more on the concept of “belongingness” in *Truth and Method*, and on the nature of the *Sache* in relation to experience, see Chapter One of this dissertation and the section titled “Experience.”

⁷⁶ *Gadamer in Conversation*, 37. And further below (48): “Everyone who understands something understands himself or herself in it. The researcher, too. Then and today are mediated in the researcher’s work – the historical heritage with which he or she is dealing is mediated through his or her own present time.”

⁷⁷ *Truth and Method*, 14.

⁷⁸ *Truth and Method*, 14.

and deed) of the “educated person” involved being governed by a capacity for “reasonableness” or “sensiblyness” (*Vernünftigkeit*).⁸² These concepts one and all are truthfully so many ways in which the tradition of practical philosophy, whose roots lay in the ancient Greek concept of “*phronēsis*,” was continually revived and “applied” throughout changing historical epochs and climates. What is needed, is a thorough historical investigation into the links between Aristotelian practical philosophy, Isocratean rhetoric, their quasi-synthesis in Cicero, and the rediscovery and transformation of Cicero – and the traditions that he bears witness to – in the Italian Renaissance. Although I will not take the time to show this with each humanistic concept just named, in the next chapter and in the conclusion I will try to highlight a few ways in which Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis* was simultaneously a retrieval of the concepts of the humanistic tradition with which he begins *Truth and Method* – whether or not Gadamer realized just how much resonance there is between those concepts and the *phronēsis* of Aristotle. It was precisely the long historical preparation of previous chapters that has made it possible to gain these insights – for example, by exhuming the old Homeric organ, the “*phrēn*,” it is possible to bring into focus one further consequence of post-Romantic hermeneutics, and its fascination with

⁷⁹ *Truth and Method*, 18-28.

⁸⁰ *Truth and Method*, 18-32.

⁸¹ *Truth and Method*, 32-39.

⁸² “*Vernünftigkeit*” – which is used throughout the sections on *Bildung* in *Truth and Method* – is one of Gadamer’s favored translations of Aristotle’s “*phronēsis*” along with “*praktisches Wissen*.” Cf. Gadamer’s translation and commentary of Book Six of the *Nicomachean Ethics*: Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Nikomachische Ethik VI*. As an appendix to this dissertation, I have translated the concluding essay of that work, which, written when Gadamer was 98 years old, offers one of the last sustained reflections on Aristotelian “*phronēsis*.”

methods and the neutralizing of the “subjectivity” of the interpreter: it was the hermeneutical separation of the “head” and the “heart” that made it impossible to appreciate the sense in which the 18th century theologian, Friedrich Oetinger claimed that “understanding” a text (e.g., the proverbs of Solomon) must take place in the “heart” above all else. Just as the “winged words” of Athena were shot to the center of Odysseus, or as the words of “Homer” have been flying to the hearts of readers across millennia, so too Oetinger was able to see the hermeneutical relevance of the heart: “More profound than all knowledge of hermeneutical rules is the application to oneself: ‘above all apply the rules to yourself and then you will have the key to understanding Solomon’s proverbs’.”⁸³

To this point I have sufficiently outlined the framework within which a hermeneutic *phronēsis* will find its place: the practical task that faces everyone who seeks to understand a text, then, is how to concretize the same text in an ever new and different context, and in an ever new and different way. Or, to put the matter in other terms, the problem is how to translate the meaning of the text into a language that is understandable today, or, as Gadamer sometimes says, how to “dialogue” with the text *well*.

⁸³ *Truth and Method*, 28. Gadamer here quotes Oetinger’s 1753 *Inquisitio in sensum communem et rationem*. On this quotation Gadamer remarks (footnote 47) that “just at this point Oetinger remembers Aristotle’s skepticism about having too youthful listeners present during the discussion of moral philosophy. Even this is a sign of how much he is aware of the problem of application.” What Gadamer does not appear to recognize however, is that the problem of “youthfulness” is matter not only of the “head” but all the more so of the “heart” – it is a problem of affectivity and emotional well-being that obscures one’s sensitivity to the truth of what is being said, just as much as an intellectual misunderstanding. What Gadamer also does not see is that the worry about the “youthfulness” of readers/listeners also goes back to Origen and other ancient commentators on the Songs of Solomon. See my discussion of the ancient commentators’ “*isagogica*” in Chapter Three of this dissertation. Cf. also Gadamer’s article “Oetinger als Philosoph,” 89-100. I will return to these issues at the conclusion of the dissertation.

To say that the text is something universal that must be applied to, or concretized in, a particular (hermeneutic situation) tells us not only something about what texts *are*, but also helps us to see why the retrieval of *phronēsis* becomes so necessary. For if the understanding of a text is always already a form of *applied knowledge* in which a “universal” is concretized in a “particular,” then in order to understand exactly *how* such understanding can be done “well,” “correctly,” “excellently,” “rightly,” and so on, a philosophical account of that kind of “applied knowledge” will be necessary.⁸⁴ Put this way, the turn to Book Six of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, wherein several forms of “knowledge in action” are discussed – i.e., not only *phronēsis* but also *technē* – is a perfectly intelligible philosophical move for Gadamer to make.

In what follows I offer an account of the place of *phronēsis* in *Truth and Method* and in “philosophical hermeneutics” in general, by emphasizing several key features of Gadamer’s retrieval, some of which have thus far been underappreciated or even unnoticed, but which we are now in a better position to grasp after having outlined the broad historical development of the *phrēn/phronein* word family.

⁸⁴ Gadamer does not mean that every *understanding* of a text is good or correct – that would be to lapse into a naïve relativism. This calls into question whether or not Gadamer thinks that every reader always already displays a kind of hermeneutic *phronēsis*, or whether that hermeneutic virtue is – as with its Aristotelian origin – only performed by a limited group of excellent persons. I will say more about this in the next chapter.

CHAPTER SIX

THE ETHICAL (RE)TURN OF HERMENEUTICS – PART TWO: GADAMER’S RETRIEVAL OF PHRONĒSIS

“Sources [*Quellen*] need not become muddied by being used. There is always fresh water pouring out of a source, and it is the same with the true sources of the human spirit that we find in tradition. Studying them is so rewarding precisely because they always have something more to yield than has yet been taken from them.” - Gadamer, *Truth and Method*

Introduction

Understanding, then, is something that one does – it is applied knowledge. Gadamer’s recovery of the central problem of “*Anwendung*” (application, concretization), which I analyzed in the previous chapter, has provided us with the philosophical basis for articulating, in this chapter, an understanding of hermeneutics as an ethical matter. If the understanding of a text is always already a form of applied knowledge in which a universal is concretized in a particular, then in order to understand exactly how such understanding can be done “well,” “correctly,” “excellently,” “rightly,” and so on, a philosophical account of that kind of “applied knowledge” becomes necessary. In this chapter, I turn explicitly to Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis* in order to outline and critically deepen my ethical interpretation of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. In doing so, I once again emphasize the sense of *phronēsis* as a form of ethical self-understanding - a key, but underemphasized sense of *phronēsis*, which I also began to highlight in the historical chapters on the Greek development of the concept. Building on that work, this chapter shows how understanding (*Verstehen*), in the end, requires persons who can interpret with (self-

)understanding (*Selbst-verständnis*) in order to come to an understanding with others (*Sichverständigen*) within a hermeneutic community.

It is easy for scholars to insufficiently emphasize, or even neglect the extent to which hermeneutic *phronēsis* is an inherently ethical virtue, and not merely a descriptive concept. In ameliorating this issue, I also highlight one of the key differences that separate Gadamer's retrieval from that of Heidegger's understanding of *phronēsis*, since the shadow of Heidegger's interpretation has continually loomed large over scholars' interpretations of Gadamer's work. By contrast, I argue that even if it was Heidegger who provided Gadamer with the initial spark of interest in renewing the relevance of *phronēsis* for contemporary philosophy, this does not mean that Gadamer ever understood *phronēsis* in a primarily "Heideggerian" manner – namely, as an existential structure of *Dasein*.¹ Showing how Gadamer *explicitly* distances his understanding of *phronēsis* from Heidegger's, while still remaining indebted to him, will help us to appreciate the general sense in which hermeneutic *phronēsis* is, for Gadamer, an ethical virtue.

In arguing for a strongly ethical sense of Gadamer's retrieval of *phronēsis*, there are a series of questions that must be answered. Each of the following questions structure the main sections of this chapter, and will be responded to in turn: (1) what was it that made *phronēsis* in particular so necessary for hermeneutics, as opposed to that other form of "knowledge in action" that Aristotle called "*technē*"? (2) If hermeneutics is a part of our ethical life, is the opposite

¹ For a wide survey of the general trend of renewing the contemporary relevance of Aristotelian politics and ethics throughout Germany, England, and America in the 20th century, cf. Thomas Gutschker's *Aristotelische Diskurse. Aristoteles in der politischen Philosophie des 20. Jahrhunderts*.

also the case; that is to say, is our ethical life – including our reflections on our ethical life – inherently hermeneutic?² (3) When Gadamer claimed that “philosophical hermeneutics” was an “heir” to Aristotelian practical philosophy this clearly signaled that Gadamer’s hermeneutics was different from the 18th and 19th century conception of the art of interpretation.³ Did this claim also signal a new development in the conceptual tradition of *phronēsis*?

In the course of responding to these questions, I also broaden my focus beyond the text of *Truth and Method*. Specifically, I show how Gadamer’s “philosophical hermeneutics” in general can be understood as a form of “practical philosophy” – a rather striking claim of Gadamer’s, which has not been sufficiently clarified. I argue that the late 20th century development of Gadamer’s “philosophical hermeneutics” ought to be understood as an important further historical development in the long conceptual-tradition of *phronēsis*, whose Greek development this dissertation articulated in previous chapters. In this way, I draw to a close the line of thinking begun in Chapter One, where I argued for a Gadamerian sense of a “concept” (*Begriff*) as a kind of living tradition, which I then concretized (or “applied”) in chapters Two and Three, wherein I traced the basic Greek historical development of the tradition of *phronēsis* from Homer to Aristotle. By the conclusion of this present chapter, it will be clear how this conceptual tradition has continued to live via Gadamer’s hermeneutic retrieval. Gadamer’s words, which I quoted in the epigraph to this chapter, can be applied to his own work on *phronēsis* to describe the view of *phronēsis* as a tradition that I have articulated throughout this dissertation: “Sources

² For a full treatment of this question, cf. P. Christopher Smith, *Hermeneutics and Human Finitude: Toward a Theory of Ethical Understanding*.

³ Cf. Gadamer “Hermeneutics and Social Science,” 316.

[*Quellen*] need not become muddied by being used.” The concept of *phronēsis* is ultimately a wellspring or source, from which ever new thinkers in ever new contexts can draw. Although its historical origins lay in ancient Greece and Rome, the philosophical life-course of *phronēsis* has been sustained and reinterpreted by an array of thinkers from antiquity and the middle ages to the Renaissance, and again from its relative hiddenness in modernity to its relative recovery in the 20th century through the works of Heidegger, Arendt, MacIntyre, Nussbaum, and many others. Above all, however, it was through Gadamer’s consistent, 80 yearlong engagement with the virtue of *phronēsis* that renewed a contemporary appreciation of the universal need for a sensitive, humane, practical wisdom. That Gadamer was able in the end to appreciate just how all-encompassing the virtue of *phronēsis* was for his philosophy is seen clearly when, for example, at the age of 100, he remarked, “you could quite easily object that my whole philosophy is nothing but *phronēsis* – but, of course, it *is* nothing but *phronēsis*, and this continues to be the case.”⁴

Main Lines of Gadamer’s Retrieval of Phronēsis in Truth and Method

In the following sections I lay out the main lines of Gadamer’s explicit retrieval of *phronēsis* as it is found in Chapter Four of *Truth and Method*, under the heading “The Hermeneutic Relevance of Aristotle”.⁵ Specifically, four key features of (Gadamerian) *phronēsis* can be used to

⁴ Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, 36.

⁵ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, II.4.2.B. There is some variation amongst scholars on how best to discuss these sections of Gadamer’s magnum opus. For several other good, different ways of handling the topic of *phronēsis* in *Truth and Method*, see the following works: Enrico Berti, “Gadamer and the Reception of Aristotle’s Intellectual Virtues”; Friederike Rese, “*Phronesis* als Modell der Hermeneutik. Die hermeneutische Aktualität des Aristoteles”; Joseph Dunne, “Aristotle after Gadamer: an analysis of the

contribute to a positive philosophical account of the ethical character of hermeneutics: (1) knowing-how, (2) *phronēsis* vs. *technē*, (3) self-understanding, and (4) discipline vs. method in the humanities.

Connecting Phronēsis to Application: Knowing-How (to Apply)?

The common distinction between “knowing that” (e.g., knowing a fact or piece of information) and “knowing how” (e.g., knowing how to be a friend) cannot be maintained once the basic hermeneutical insight into the *practical* character of understanding is recognized. At least in the case of texts, all “knowing” is, in the end, made possible by a fundamental *praxis*.⁶

What then is this type of hermeneutic knowing, which only is what it is via *praxis*, and, moreover, which necessarily always appears (relatively) different given the (relative) difference of every situation? To ask the question another way, what sort of knowing is hermeneutic? Who “knows how” to apply or concretize the text? These questions lie behind Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis* in *Truth and Method*:

If the heart of the hermeneutic problem is that one and the same tradition must time and again be understood in a different way, the problem, logically speaking, concerns the relationship between the universal and the particular. Understanding, then, is a special case of applying something universal to a particular situation. This makes *Aristotelian ethics* especially important for us.⁷

distinction between the concepts of *phronēsis* and *technē*”; Joel Weinsheimer, *Gadamer’s Hermeneutics*, 187-192; and James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, 101-110.

⁶ The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* entry on “Knowing How” partly tries to distinguish knowing “how” and “that” on the basis of the Greek terms *epistēmē* and *technē*. It is revealing that no mention of *phronēsis* is made, and that the main concern is whether “knowing how” could be *reduced* to “knowing that,” when hermeneutically, if anything, the opposite is the case (i.e., “knowing that” is a kind of “knowing how”).

⁷ *Truth and Method*, 322.

Gadamer recognizes that this turn to Aristotle will not necessarily be an obvious one for the reader insofar as “it is true that Aristotle is not concerned with the hermeneutical problem and certainly not with its historical dimension, but with the right estimation of the role that reason has to play in ethical action [*sittliches Handeln*].”⁸ However, Aristotle’s concern, expressed in this way, nevertheless does get to the core of the problem that Gadamer has shown confronts hermeneutics as well: for the “knowledge” that is achieved in the hermeneutic process is not separate from the *actions*, the *agent*, or the *situations* in which that knowledge occurs. Gadamer expresses this by noting that “what interests us here is precisely that he [i.e., Aristotle] is concerned with reason [*Vernunft*] and with [a kind of] knowledge [*Wissen*], not detached from a being that is becoming [*einem gewordenen Sein*], but determined by it and determinative of it.”⁹ For Gadamer, Aristotle too found need to describe a form of knowledge that is inexorably linked to the concrete actions of agents in unique circumstances.

In Chapter Three I showed how, for Aristotle, knowing how to act well, and knowing what (a) virtue is, is not something separable from its *praxis*. I learn, for example, how to be a friend by acting in “friendly” ways over time - and this deepens or changes my understanding of what “friendship” means, and of how to be “a friend” in the future. The knowledge is both (partly) constitutive of its *praxis*, as well as (partly) constituted by its *praxis*.¹⁰ This knowing is

⁸ *Truth and Method*, 322.

⁹ *Truth and Method*, 322.

¹⁰ I say “partly” here since philosophical reflection *about praxis* (e.g., by reading the *Nicomachean Ethics*) also “partly” re-shapes, albeit indirectly, our *praxis* – namely, by clarifying the nature of our aims. The matter is different with philosophical hermeneutics. For reflection *about* one’s hermeneutic *praxis* in

necessarily of a dynamic and changing sort, since the one who is acting, and the situations in which one “shows” what one knows, are likewise dynamic and changing. One does not first *become* an ethical agent, and only then act. Rather, the human agent is, as Gadamer says, “a being that is [is still] becoming.”¹¹ Given this determining role of *praxis* (admittedly which for Aristotle is itself informed by “habit,” *desire*, and *ethos*), it would be an exaggeration to simply *equate* virtue with a discrete body of knowledge, as Aristotle claims Socrates did. The one who displays true virtue is not altogether without knowledge, but the knowledge is a form that is tied to *praxis* and to *desire*, and so Aristotle calls it not *epistēmē*, but *phronēsis*, humane wisdom – a word whose relation to human desire and affectivity had been clear since Homer.

The knowledge involved in the matter of hermeneutics is the same. It would be an exaggeration to reduce “knowing how” to interpret (e.g., a text) to some discrete body of abstract knowledge (e.g., of hermeneutic methods, or of historical or cultural knowledge *about* the text). Rather, such ‘abstract’ knowledge is in fact both (1) constitutive *of* my interpretive *praxis*, as well as (2) constituted *by* my interpretive *praxis*. The interpreter, Gadamer claims, is not altogether without some form of knowledge, but it will be a kind of *phronēsis*, and not the scientific (*wissenschaftliche*) mode of *epistēmē*. What Gadamer says about Aristotelian moral knowledge holds equally true for hermeneutic understanding: “moral knowledge, as Aristotle

order to clarify its nature (e.g., by reading *Truth and Method*) is still fully a hermeneutic *praxis*. Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* is simultaneously a theoretical description of, as well as concrete example of, hermeneutic *praxis*. In other words, does Gadamer actually practice what he preaches? For another response to this question, see David Vessey, “Gadamer’s Interpretive Practice” (online): http://www.davevessey.com/Gadamer_interpretive_Practice.pdf.

¹¹ It is with this in mind that we could re-engage the classic quasi-paradoxical statement of Aristotle: “for things that we must learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.” NE II.1.

describes it, is clearly not objective knowledge [*gegenständliches Wissen*] – i.e., the knower is not standing over against a situation that he merely observes; he is immediately confronted with what he sees [or reads]. It is something that he has to do. Obviously this is not what we mean by knowing in the realm of science.”¹²

At this point, Gadamer raises an important issue, however. For to show that hermeneutic knowing cannot be understood as a kind of science, does not immediately entail that it is a form of practical wisdom. For there is also the mode of technical know-how called *technē*, which is also an applied knowledge tied to a human agent who must “do” something in a concrete situation. Arguing positively for a hermeneutic *phronēsis*, then, also requires disentangling *phronēsis* from *technē*.

Why Phronēsis and not Technē?¹³

Recognizing the task of application entails that hermeneutic knowledge cannot be understood or modeled on the basis of an objective methodology in pursuit of scientific knowledge or “*episteme*.” Rejecting that mode of knowing, however, leads to the more nuanced question of whether hermeneutic understanding is closer to *technē* or to *phronēsis*.¹⁴ For Aristotle’s concept of *technē* also refers to a capacity for concretizing or applying something

¹² *Truth and Method*, 324.

¹³ For the following subsection, I have relied on Friederike Rese, “Phronēsis als Modell der Hermeneutik. Die hermeneutische Aktualität des Aristoteles (GW I, 312-329),” 127-149.

¹⁴ Thus the section of *Truth and Method* titled “The hermeneutic relevance of Aristotle” relies on Aristotle’s account of the different types of knowledge in Book Six of his *Nicomachean Ethics*. It would be a mistake, however, to think that Gadamer is simply trying to force “hermeneutic knowledge” into one of Aristotle’s types. The point is rather that, by trying to characterize the true nature of hermeneutic knowledge, Gadamer is led to search for other words than “*wissenschaftlich*” and “*objektiv*.”

general within a particular situation where some action must be taken (e.g., concretizing “house” through its actual production). This also means that *technē* requires that agents not abstract their knowledge of the general (the universal, “house”) from the situation in which they are trying to produce something (including also the status of the possibly recalcitrant materials). In the preceding chapter, I discussed the nature of this hermeneutic process as one in which something general (e.g., a text) must be concretized in (or “applied to”) something singular (e.g., my given hermeneutic situation in which I am reading) in order for my understanding to occur. However, if this were the full extent of Gadamer’s account of the hermeneutic process, then we might wonder why he does not turn to “*technē*” instead of “*phronēsis*” in order to show how hermeneutic knowledge is not “*distinct from ‘pure’ knowledge detached from any particular kind of being.*”¹⁵ Could we not simply describe the hermeneutic process in terms of the technical *production* of an interpretation – is not “producing” an interpretation exactly what the interpreter does? In what sense is it correct to say that the hermeneutic task (*Aufgabe*) is more an ethical *praxis* than a technical *poiēsis*?

It should be noted at the outset that Gadamer does not utterly reject the possibility that “*technē*” could serve as a (limited) conceptual model or exemplar for hermeneutics.¹⁶ However, Gadamer’s argument proceeds by way of highlighting the *differences* between the concepts of

¹⁵ *Truth and Method*, 324, italics in text. The point is that both *technē* and *phronēsis* share a common differentiation from *epistēmē* insofar as both are forms of “knowledge in action” and not abstract forms of knowing.

¹⁶ For example, “hermeneutical consciousness is involved neither with technical nor with moral knowledge, but these two types of knowledge still include *the same task of application* that we have recognized as the central problem of hermeneutics.” *Truth and Method*, 325f. Or again, “there is, no doubt, a real analogy between the fully developed moral consciousness and the capacity to make something – i.e., a *technē* – but they are certainly not the same.” *Truth and Method*, 326.

technē and *phronēsis* (*poiēsis* and *praxis*) in order to argue for the centrality of *phronēsis* for the hermeneutic task.¹⁷ The main differences that Gadamer emphasizes between *technē* and *phronēsis* concern (1) the relationship between one's prior knowledge and the present situation of action, (2) the relationship between means and end, and (3) the relationship to experience, oneself, and self-understanding. I will first focus on the first two features, saving the third for a more thorough discussing in the next section below.

Prior Knowledge vs. Present Action

Both *technē* and *phronēsis* involve the application of prior knowledge to some present task. In the case of *technē*, the craftsman undertakes his or her productive activity by making use of a prior knowledge in the form of a set of techniques or skills, and a blueprint or methodological plan of implementation. In the case of *phronēsis*, however, the prior knowledge involves an array of customs, habits, education, and experience, as well as general guidelines and exemplary images. Although both *technē* and *phronēsis* are modes of knowing that are oriented toward action, the prior knowledge that helps to determine the agent's action are of very different types: although it is true that the craftsman may have to modify the prior knowledge, for example, by changing part of a blueprint or a plan for building a guitar in this particular situation, the alteration comes in the face of recalcitrant material, limiting material conditions,

¹⁷ Joseph Dunne, in an excellent article, has seen this as well: "Technē and phronēsis are akin in that they both have as their field the variable 'what can be otherwise'...and, moreover, both are concerned not simply with knowledge but rather with a knowledge that can inform practical activity. Despite, or rather because of this closeness, however, it is precisely by spelling out, a good deal more explicitly than Aristotle himself, the full implications of its distinctness from *technē* that Gadamer elucidates the nature of *phronēsis*." Cf. Joseph Dunne, "Aristotle after Gadamer: an analysis of the distinction between the concepts of *phronēsis* and *technē*," 106.

broken tools, and so on. The prior completely determines the craftsman's actions except insofar as some unexpected problem is encountered in the present situation. This is why craft-labor can be delivered over to machines for the mass production of the same product (e.g., mass produced guitars or chairs), and why the human component often amounts merely to checking to make sure there is not a defect in one of the multitudinous creations. However, in the case of *phronēsis*, the prior knowledge cannot be "completely determining" of the agent's action, regardless of whether or not there are "recalcitrant materials" or unexpected, limiting conditions. For example, although I bring some prior knowledge of "friendship" to every new situation of action in which I must be a friend to someone, I cannot let that prior knowledge completely determine what I consider to be the required behavior. Each new present situation in which I must act as a friend to someone may involve me learning something entirely new about what "friendship" is, and so thus substantially revise, or even negate, what I thought I already knew. Put differently, no machine-like behavior can take over the moral task that confronts each singular human person, just as there can be no "mass production" of friendship or *eudaimonia*. This is precisely because the type of prior knowledge that is at issue – custom, education, habit, and so on – must itself constantly be reformed (sometimes dramatically so) in light of the present moral situation. To let one's prior knowledge wholly, dogmatically dictate how one will act in the present is an ethical failure, not a success, since it necessarily forecloses on the possibility that ethical growth, via recognition that one has been wrong, could occur. If one always already knows exactly what to do in every moral situation, one can never be wrong – but what human in fact has such knowledge? The prior knowledge involved in moral action is at its best when it is housed within a spirit of humility and openness to the new.

These issues are the same in the case of *hermeneutics*. Gadamer more than most has emphasized the important role of “prior knowledge” in the task of interpretation of texts (e.g., *Vor-urteile*, pre-judgements): the hermeneutic agent – i.e., the one who faces the practical task of interpretation – already “knows” much that will inform her or his hermeneutic behavior, for, as I argued in Chapter One of this dissertation, no one reads a text without always already participating in a particular historical and linguistic tradition, which pre-forms their interpretative orientation. Whoever begins to read already participates in a conversation that was started long ago, and will continue long after one has “understood.” Furthermore, the source(s) of the prior knowledge involved in hermeneutics is *of the same type* as it was in the case of moral behavior – i.e., tradition, education, custom, habit, exemplars, experience, and so on.¹⁸ Although the hermeneutic agent may possess some skills or techniques – perhaps even a full blown hermeneutic methodology such as Emilio Betti outlined in his confrontation with Gadamer – these skills or techniques can never be wholly determinative for one’s reading a particular text. Instead, the prior knowledge of the hermeneut must – and really will be – constantly reformed and changed in light of the present situation, just as prior knowledge about “friendship” will be reformed in light of present moral situations.¹⁹ There is no way to mass produce the “same” interpretation of a text, just as one cannot mass produce the same right behavior, for the agents

¹⁸ Is what Aristotle calls “ethos” what Gadamer calls “tradition”? I will take up this question in the conclusion of the dissertation where I explore the place of hermeneutic character virtues. What is the equivalent in hermeneutics of “*ēthos*”? How does one “lengthen the vowel” of tradition?

¹⁹ Here I refer the reader back to my discussion of *Bildung* in the previous chapter for an example. The prior knowledge that we receive by way of “cultural formation” or “education” certainly plays a role in our hermeneutic life just as much as in our moral one, and in both cases we are responsible for the continual re-formation of that prior cultural formation in order to be good hermeneuts and moral actors.

involved will be different, the hermeneutic situations will be different, and the unfolding of time and history will change the meaning of our interpretive concepts.

In the realm of craft production, one *first* “learns” how to do something, or first “knows” what one wishes to construct, and only *then* (i.e., later in time) “applies” one’s knowledge in a particular situation. “Knowledge” here is like a readymade tool that can be used or not used for some other, predetermined purpose. As I discussed in the preceding chapter, one does not first understand a text, and then, later, “apply” that knowledge to a hermeneutic situation. For understanding the text itself requires that it be concretized in a particular hermeneutic situation. This is why some readers (e.g., of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*) have the frustrating feeling that they would be able to make sense of a part of the text if they could only *first* already understand the text as a whole. One does not first learn how to interpret, and only then, later, choose to use or not use that skill. Just as one cannot choose to “opt out” of moral life, or refuse to “make use” of one’s practical knowledge, so too one cannot help but to interpret, to understand. Understanding, like moral action, will occur (for good or ill) whether we want it to or not – which is manifestly not the case for any *technē*. There is no “forgetting” to interpret, just as we cannot “forget” to act.

Means vs. Ends

The second difference that Gadamer highlights between *technē* and *phronēsis*, and their respective relevance to hermeneutics, concerns the relationship between means and end. Although both *technē* and *phronēsis* are practically oriented toward some end for which they must make use of correct means, there are nevertheless key differences in how each mode of knowing approaches the relation between means and end. First, as is the case in the “prior

knowledge” of *technē*, so too its end is a determinate end: if one wishes to build a guitar, that is already a highly specific object, which immediately determines much of what must be done in order to achieve that end. The craftsman has not only a highly detailed blueprint or procedure for producing some object (perhaps modifying it in light of available materials), but also a highly specific set of skills for manufacturing the object. The means to the end may have to be modified in light of some unexpected problem, but in general the means, and certainly not the end, undergo no process of reformation when the process of production goes smoothly.

In the case of the wisdom of practical life or, we will see below, in the case of hermeneutic understanding, the relationship of means to end is drastically different than it is in the case of *technē*. The end involved in the case of *phronēsis*, as I discussed in Chapter Three, is of a general, indeterminate kind – i.e., “the good life as a whole” (*to eu zēn to holōs*), or “acting well” (*eupraxia*), or “happiness” (*eudaimonia*). Aristotle himself occasionally reminds his reader how indeterminate these ends in fact are, and how profoundly they require “specification through living” if they are to be realized. “Acting rightly” is not something that can be specified or concretized outside of a particular situation. This indeterminacy (or generality) entails also that “the means” (or mediating actions) to achieving the end cannot be pre-determined outside of the context of action as well. *Deliberating anew in each situation* about the means is required in order to concretize, in my own life, the ultimate end of living well as a whole. Gadamer has this issue in view when he writes, “the relation between means and ends here [i.e., in *phronēsis*] is not such that one can know the right means in advance, and that is because the right end is not a mere object of knowledge either. There can be no anterior certainty concerning what the good life is directed toward as a whole. Hence Aristotle’s definitions of *phronēsis* have a marked

uncertainty (*Schwanken*) about them, in that this knowledge is sometimes related more to the end, and sometimes more to the means to the end.”

For hermeneutics, too, the relationship of means and end is the same as it is for *phronēsis*. The hermeneut is oriented toward the end of “right understanding” but that end remains indeterminate and abstract independent of the specific, concrete situation in which a particular text is interpreted. Likewise, the “means” that are involved in interpretation do not rise to the level of a methodological procedure that one simply needs to follow in order to achieve the end of understanding the meaning of the text. Hermeneutics, the art of interpretation, is no “art” (*Kunstlehre*) after all.²⁰ Each new encounter with a text – even, or especially, when it is a text one has read often – requires deliberating once again about what the text says here-and-now. Knowledge of hermeneutic means – e.g., hermeneutic rules, guidelines, and strategies – is no guarantor for right understanding. What is always required is the virtue of sensitivity and good judgment for knowing how to handle such strategies or guidelines, and for knowing when they are a hindrance to interpreting the text. Put differently, whereas the aim of *techne* is the production of an end external to the doer and the doing (i.e., the doing, *poiēsis*, is itself a “means” to the end product), the aims of moral action and the understanding of a text are not anything set apart from acting well or interpreting well.

The issues discussed in this section have brought us closer to a full appreciation of why Gadamer turns to *phronēsis* for explaining the heart of hermeneutic wisdom. However, in order

²⁰ Here I echo James Risser – note his use of moral language: “Hermeneutics is not a *Kunstlehre*, a doctrine for a technique, but a practice requiring moral wisdom, engagement, and practical application in relation to oneself.” James Risser, *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, 110.

to complete the analysis, we need to turn explicitly to the matter of the relationship of hermeneutic knowledge (and moral knowledge) to *oneself* – myself as interpreter or moral agent. For the aim of moral action and hermeneutic understanding have essential ties to myself as (moral or interpreting) agent – I myself want to become someone who lives well or who interprets well. We will see below how this leads to the sense of *phronēsis* as a kind of self-understanding.²¹ In previous chapters I have hinted at this aspect, but only when we understand how hermeneutics – like *phronēsis* – is always a kind of *self-understanding* can we appreciate the full depth of Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis* in *Truth and Method*.

Self-Understanding and Experience: *Phronēsis* as Mindfulness

One of the more important insights recovered in my earlier chapters on the historical development of *phronēsis*, concerns the relationship of *phronēsis* to the ancient dictum, “Know Thyself,” and to self-understanding more generally.²² As conscientious self-understanding – mindfulness – *phronēsis* is a mode of wisdom that is (1) inextricably tied to particular, singular ethical sites of action and deliberation, as well as (2) inextricably tied to some form of awareness (of oneself) as an ethical agent who must (herself or himself) take action. Deliberating about what I myself should do about this-here-and-now, singular situation, requires that I keep in view the nature of the situation and the other persons or issues involved just as much as myself.²³

²¹ Cf. also the insightful article by Jerome Veith, “Concerned with Oneself as One Person: Self-Knowledge in *Phronēsis*,” 17-27.

²² In particular, I refer the reader back to the section on Heraclitus in Chapter Two (beginning on page 37), and to the discussion of Aristotle throughout the second half of Chapter Three.

²³ I take it that this does not necessarily require that I – self-consciously – think about myself, though sometimes that may be required. What is required, however, is a working sense of oneself.

Translating “*phronēsis*” as “mindfulness” helps to capture these aspects. The word “mindful,” although it can be used to refer to a kind of meditation, still maintains its practical, ethical orientation, which can be heard in English when, for example, parents tell their children to “be mindful of me” or “be mindful of where you are.” This means that I am in some way aware of (1) my own tendencies, character, predilections, and so on, as well as (2) the ethically relevant features of the situation I find myself in. In any case, however I respond to the situation (the words I speak, the actions I undertake) will reveal something of how I understand myself and who I myself am, ethically: my own actions affect myself just as much as they affect others.²⁴ The wisdom – i.e., the mindfulness, the *phronēsis* – that therefore inheres in your or my own “responding well” to ethical situations contains a relationship to ourselves that is unlike any other type of knowing – it is an “*allo genos gnōseōs*.”²⁵

In order to further explain why it is *phronēsis* and not *technē* that provides the real key to the hermeneutic performance (*Vollzug*), Gadamer leans heavily on this sense of self-understanding. Once again, this requires that Gadamer articulate some difference between the self-understanding of *phronēsis*, and that of *technē*: for there is indeed a kind of self-understanding involved in *technē*. “A person who knows how to make (*herzustellen*) something,” Gadamer writes, “knows something good, and he knows it ‘for himself’ (*für sich*),

²⁴ Without this insight, Socrates would not have been able to argue that unjust actions harm the doer just as much, or even more than, the one who has received injustice.

²⁵ In speaking about self-understanding in relation to *phronēsis* in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer cites the following passages from Aristotle in a footnote: *NE* VI.8 1141b33, 1142a30; *EE* VIII.2 1246b36. See also Gadamer’s article “*Praktisches Wissen*” in volume 5 of his *Gesammelte Werke*.

so that, where there is the possibility of doing so, he is really able to make it.”²⁶ A person who knows how to bake bread or build a guitar also has a kind of knowing that has come rest in their soul, as it were – he or she is him- or herself a bread baker, or a guitar maker. However, there are important differences between the self-understanding involved in *phronēsis*, and that involved in *technē*. The differences emerge clearly when we look at how *phronēsis* and *technē* relate to experience and teaching.

Gadamer writes that “it is pointless to distinguish here [i.e., in the case of *phronēsis*] between knowledge (*Wissen*) and experience (*Erfahrung*), as can be done in the case of *technē*.”²⁷ Gadamer’s ensuing discussion here helps us to understand why Aristotle says that virtue (whether *phronēsis* or character virtue) cannot be taught like a body of knowledge, but can only be cultivated over time through experience (*empeiria*).²⁸ The self-understanding that is involved in *technē*, by contrast, means that the craftsman is capable of passing on that knowledge to others, despite the fact that there too experience is required: one can go to school to learn woodworking, but that training will be modified and concretized only through its *application* or *use* in experience. In the case of our ethical lives, however, there is no formal training that could be applied later – one is always already learning from, and applying experience. This is why Aristotle tells his students that his course in ethics is incapable of making them good and happy, but rather provides philosophical reflections about what they are (or should be) already doing –

²⁶ *Truth and Method*, 327.

²⁷ *Truth and Method*, 332.

²⁸ It is quite curious that in the scale of intelligences which Aristotle lays out at the beginning of his *Metaphysics* (viz., which moves from memory and sense perception, to experience, to art, to science, and finally to *sophia*), *phronēsis* is nowhere mentioned.

even at its most exhortative, it is “practical philosophy” that is taught in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and not *phronēsis* as such.²⁹

How then does this distinction between the self-understanding of *phronēsis* and that of *technē* relate to hermeneutics? At the end of the previous chapter, I noted how the task of hermeneutic application entails that the interpreter display some form of self-understanding, since in order for the text to be understood at all, it must be “applied” to oneself and one’s own hermeneutic situation.³⁰ Or, said conversely, I must “apply myself” and my situation *to* the text in order to enact an interpretive dialogue with the text. This concretized “belongingness” (*gehörigkeit*) or “bond” that underlies the reader-text relationship entails that hermeneutic understanding involves also a kind of self-understanding. The hermeneutic dialogue that characterizes all understanding is, Gadamer writes, like Aristotle’s elaboration of *phronēsis* itself as a kind of understanding (*synēsis*, *Verständnis*) and deliberation (*euboulia*, “*Beratschlagung mit sich selber*”).³¹ In the case of *synēsis*, where one must listen sympathetically in order “to be understanding” (whether or not one is going to give explicit advice), one must display the ability to put oneself in the other’s shoes – which requires that one keeps oneself in view as well, in order to take stock of the relevant differences between oneself and the other. How often, by contrast, does it happen that the advice we give to another person actually applies more to

²⁹ I will return to this distinction below for where I discuss the relationship between “(hermeneutic) *phronēsis*” and “philosophical hermeneutics” in order to explain why Gadamer claims that philosophical hermeneutics is an heir to “practical philosophy.”

³⁰ See especially Chapter Four, 33ff.

³¹ *Truth and Method*, 332ff.

ourselves than to the other? It requires a great deal of self-understanding, and a disciplined capacity for listening, in order to be a person truly capable of being understanding for another.³²

This kind of understanding at work in phronēsis (qua synēsis) is exactly what is required in the performance of the hermeneutic task assigned to every interpreter: “once again we discover that the person who is understanding does not know and judge as one who stands apart and unaffected but rather he thinks along with (mitdenkt) the other from the perspective of a specific bond of belonging, which binds him to the other (die ihn mit dem anderen verbindet), as if he too were affected [by what affects the other].”³³ Even the academic distance of the scholar, or the academic exchanges between scholars, rests on a prior bond of belongingness in which the voice of the text can be heard and responded to with practically wise insight (gnome, Einsicht) and sympathetic understanding (syngnōmē, Nachsicht).³⁴

In order to explain more clearly exactly how *phronēsis* lies at the center of the hermeneutic act of interpretation, and, furthermore, how keeping the concept of *phronēsis* in view allows us to understand Gadamer’s own philosophical hermeneutics better, the next section raises, and offers a solution to, a small interpretive issue within *Truth and Method*. The very last lines of *Truth and Method* have often struck readers as puzzling, but bringing the concept of

³² I will say more about this discipline of listening in the next section below.

³³ *Truth and Method*, 332-333. Translation modified.

³⁴ This does not mean “agreement” *per se*. Displaying practical wisdom in my interpretation of texts also “involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no else forces me to do so.” *Truth and Method*, 369. Cf. also Gadamer’s claims about the “normative” dimension of secondary works of scholarship at *Truth and Method*, 161-163.

phronēsis to bear on these a clearly ethical line of thought emerges: displaying *phronēsis* in one's hermeneutic *praxis* is the discipline that outstrips every method.

Discipline and Method: A Note on the Last Lines of *Truth and Method*

The last sentence of *Truth and Method* states, “What the tool of method does not achieve must – and really can – be achieved by a discipline of questioning and inquiring, a discipline that guarantees truth.”³⁵ There is much to be puzzled by in this claim, but here I want to show how it can be understood in light of Gadamer's retrieval of *phronēsis*, as well as, conversely, how the notion of a “discipline of questioning and inquiring” helps us to better understand the relevance of *phronēsis* for the humanities (or the “*Geisteswissenschaften*”).

The title “*Truth and Method*” has proved to be a curiosity to scholars over the years since its publication in 1960.³⁶ Some have viewed the title in oppositional terms – truth “vs” (or “against”) method – while others have viewed it more as a kind of didactic exaggeration meant to remind the reader that truth is a much bigger event than what methodologies can uncover.³⁷

³⁵ *Truth and Method*, 506.

³⁶ “*Truth and Method*” was in fact Gadamer's 3rd choice for a title. The current subtitle “foundations of a philosophical hermeneutics” was in fact the original title Gadamer proposed to Siebeck. It was rejected for fear that it was too long and cumbersome, and that the book wouldn't sell well. The second suggestion, “*Geschehen und Verstehen*” (Event and Understanding), was too similar to the recently published (also by Siebeck) “*Glauben und Verstehen*” (Faith and Understanding). Gadamer finally settled on the title “*Wahrheit und Methode*” (Truth and Method), apparently somewhat in homage to Goethe's “*Dichtung und Wahrheit*” (Poetry and Truth). After all that the book still did not sell well at all during its first few years. By 1965 the book sold only 29 copies. At the end of 1966 1,264 copies were sold. Habermas may have Gadamer to thank for helping him in his early academic career, but Gadamer also has Habermas' engagement with *Truth and Method* to thank for its increase in popularity at the end of the 60's. Cf. Jean Grondin, *Gadamer. A Biography*, 459 n. 8. For Grondin's account of the selection of a title, see 281-282.

³⁷ Concerning the title, I echo what James Risser writes in the introduction to his *Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other*, 5.

Perhaps we could also suggest another alternative title for the book, which brings into sharper focus the ethical dimension of Gadamer's retrieval of *phronēsis* as the crowning virtue of hermeneutics: "Discipline and Method." Gadamer's specific rejection of the scientific method as an illegitimate model for the *Geisteswissenschaften* to follow does not entail that Gadamer's approach to hermeneutics is altogether undisciplined. Not only truth, but also "discipline" encompasses more than what method permits. Methodologically dominating an object that one observes in order to know it, is only one way of approaching phenomena.

Listening – and therefore also responding appropriately – is not a "method" one uses or "applies" to objects in order to test them. Rather, listening and responding are ethical disciplines that must be cultivated if one is to learn how to perform them well, and which entail self-transformation and self-understanding. One must become a "good listener" or conversation partner in order to understand the meaning of another's words. Put differently, one must become a "disciplined" person, capable of being appropriately responsive to what is being said (whether said by a text or another person).³⁸ By contrast, the person whose attention is prone to wander whenever another is speaking (or when the meaning of a text is not immediately clear) shows themselves to be an undisciplined listener. Their subsequent responses, then, are prone to being inadequate inasmuch as they do not truly (cor-)respond to the heart of what the other (or the text) is saying. Knowing how to listen well, and how to respond well, requires not only that one is attentive to the other (or to the text) – to what they are (or the text is) saying, and to the context

³⁸ In Chapter Three I emphasized the influence of Isocrates' rhetorical "*phronēsis*" on Aristotle, and tried to highlight that "practical wisdom," for the ancient Greek and Romans was just as much a matter of listening and speaking well as it was of acting well – that is to say, it concerned both *logos* and *ergon*.

in which they are (or the text is) speaking – but also that one is attentive to oneself and one’s own tendencies and proclivities that partially condition one’s own receptiveness and responsiveness to the words of the other. The discipline of listening is not separable from the Delphic command to “know thyself” in the sense of “*sō-phrosunē*.” In hermeneutics too there are disciplines that “save” or “preserve” *phronēsis*, so that one is able “to be always listening [listening better; listening more]” (*immer hörender zu werden*).³⁹

Bringing this sense of “discipline” *qua* responsible receptivity and responsiveness into the *Geisteswissenschaften* reveals a further ethical element of Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis*. One does not *master* a body of work called “philosophy,” “history,” “French literature,” “law,” “theology,” etc. Rather, they are first and foremost *disciplines* that one “applies oneself” to. The expert here is not the one who knows everything, or who knows more than all the others, but rather the one who has become a master by having been mastered by or disciplined by the discipline itself. In short, the master of a discipline is the one who is sufficiently capable of listening to and responding to what is said in the texts and dialogues of that discipline. The “discipline” requires self-transformation and self-understanding so that one can take responsibility for the future of a particular academic discipline – that is, its future transformations and critique.

It is no accident that certain disciplines are called the “humanities,” those “moral sciences,” as John Stuart Mill called them. They can be so-called because we humans who would study them are ourselves, in part, at stake in them. For Gadamer this means that in

³⁹ Gadamer, “*Text und Interpretation*,” 164.

understanding the text “the knower’s own being comes into play.”⁴⁰ Consequently, as Gadamer writes,

The human sciences stand closer to moral knowledge than to [...] “theoretical” knowledge. They are “moral sciences.” Their object is man and what he knows of himself. But he knows himself as an acting being, and this kind of knowledge of himself does not seek to establish what is. An active being, rather, is concerned with what is not always the same but can also be different. In it he can discover the point at which he has to act. The purpose of his knowledge is to govern his *action*.⁴¹

Returning now to the last lines of *Truth and Method*, it is possible to offer a plausible interpretation based on the preceding discussion of *phronēsis* and discipline: “what the tool of method does not achieve must – and really can – be achieved by a discipline of questioning and inquiring, a discipline that guarantees truth.”⁴² Without discussing the way in which Gadamer is using “guarantee” here, it is worth keeping in mind his juxtaposition of discipline and method, as I have done here, and paying careful attention to the ethical tone in which Gadamer refers to “discipline” as the name for some important features of hermeneutic *phronēsis*, such as the capacity for a rigorous listening and corresponding response to what is said. We find confirmation for this reading of the last lines from a letter to Richard J. Bernstein, wherein Gadamer himself was explicit in a comment about this last sentence: “here I mean discipline in the moral sense of the word.”⁴³ Gadamer’s is relentless in his careful attention to the involvement of the reader in the text that they are interpreting, and so also to the ethical

⁴⁰ *Truth and Method*, 506. This was discussed in Chapter One and again in the previous chapter on application.

⁴¹ *Truth and Method*, 325.

⁴² *Truth and Method*, 506.

⁴³ *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 263.

responsibilities that follow from this –i.e., in the form of cultivating a wise, disciplined hermeneutic ability; or, in other words, *phronēsis*.

***Phronēsis* as Hermeneutic Virtue: Gadamer after Heidegger, Ethics before Ontology**

In order to emphasize that Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis* was an intensely ethical one, it will be worth clarifying how Gadamer’s work differs from (the early) Heidegger’s work in this regard.⁴⁴ Gadamer’s inquiry into the hermeneutical relevance of *phronēsis* maintained the essential connection of *phronēsis* to ethics, as I have been arguing in the last two chapters. This connection, however, runs counter to the tendency of Heidegger’s early lecture courses in which Gadamer participated as a student, and from which Gadamer drew great inspiration. As I will discuss further below, Heidegger’s early lectures on Aristotle tended to systematically strip any determinate ethical sense from Aristotle’s practical philosophy.⁴⁵ And yet, those courses were not without significant impact on Gadamer’s thinking – as evidenced, for example, by the influence of Heidegger’s early lectures on Aristotle on Gadamer’s phenomenological-hermeneutical understanding of “basic concepts” (*Grundbegriffe*), “conceptuality” (*Begrifflichkeit*), and of the philosophical importance of a “history of concepts”

⁴⁴ For what follows, see the following secondary sources: P. Christopher Smith, “Phronesis, the Individual, and the Community. Divergent Appropriations of Aristotle’s Ethical Discernment in Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s Hermeneutics,” *Gadamer verstehen/Understanding*, 169-185; Francisco Gonzalez, “Beyond or Beneath Good and Evil? Heidegger’s Purification of Aristotle’s Ethics,” 127-156; Franco Volpi, “*Being and Time*: A “Translation” of the *Nicomachean Ethics*?” 195-211; Walter Lammi, “Hans-Georg Gadamer’s “Correction” of Heidegger,” 487-507.

⁴⁵ For the *locus classicus* of Heidegger’s “ontological” interpretation of *phronēsis*, see the first half of volume 19 of Heidegger’s *Gesamtausgabe*, translated into English as *Plato’s Sophist*. See also Francisco Gonzalez, “Beyond or Beneath Good and Evil? Heidegger’s Purification of Aristotle’s Ethics.”

(*Begriffsgeschichte*).⁴⁶ Gadamer himself has explicitly acknowledged the profound impact that Heidegger's earliest interpretations of Book Six of the *Nicomachean Ethics* had on his own philosophical development: "the course of my own thinking was actually established after my first encounter with Heidegger. Naturally, I was bowled over at first...I was twenty-two years old."⁴⁷ One particular aspect of Heidegger's thought, which "set the course" of Gadamer's own thinking involves Heidegger's early interrelated concepts of *Faktizität* and *Verstehen* (facticity and understanding), which he developed in terms of a "*Hermeneutik der Faktizität*" (hermeneutics of facticity) in his 1923 Freiburg course – one of Gadamer's first as Heidegger's student.⁴⁸ In that course we see some of the earliest indications of the philosophical tradition now called "hermeneutic phenomenology" (or "phenomenological hermeneutics"), a phrase used to characterize the style of thinking of the early Heidegger, Gadamer, and Ricoeur, for example.⁴⁹ The commitment to working out an understanding of phenomena by remaining close to concrete experience, and by recognizing the interpretative nature of that understanding in light of our participation in linguistic and historical traditions is a task the outlines of which Gadamer

⁴⁶ As I discussed in the first and second sections of Chapter One of this dissertation.

⁴⁷ Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, 22. The places where Gadamer articulates the impact that his early encounter with Heidegger had on the development of his own thinking are too numerous to list.

⁴⁸ That, very interesting, course has been published as volume 63 of Heidegger's *Gesamtausgabe*, and translated into English as *Ontology. The Hermeneutics of Facticity*.

⁴⁹ It is worth noting the extent to which I aim to follow in that tradition, under the direction of Adriaan Peperzak. Cf., for example, *Eros and Eris: Contributions to a Hermeneutical Phenomenology. Liber Amicorum for Adriaan Peperzak*.

encountered in Heidegger's courses in the 1920's, and in Heidegger's early manuscript "Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle: Indications of the Hermeneutic Situation."⁵⁰

In what way then did Gadamer's understanding of *phronēsis*, from the very beginning, remain importantly different from Heidegger's? In other words, how is it that *specifically with respect to the concept of phronēsis*, Gadamer was able to reflect back and say of his early encounter with Heidegger, "I was trying to come to philosophy along different paths [i.e., different from Heidegger], specifically, along the path of practical knowledge...[T]he decisive step was already taken in that, from that point on, even if I had wanted to follow Heidegger, I could no longer have accommodated him...Heidegger wasn't really interested in practical knowledge or *phronēsis* at all."⁵¹ What was the "decisive step" alluded to here?

What differentiates Gadamer's understanding of the concept of *phronēsis* – and the hermeneutics that he develops on the basis of that concept – is his abiding concern for the ethical orientation toward the other, thou, you (*Du*). Recognizing the hermeneutic centrality of the conversation between you (*Du*) and me – "the conversation that we are" – was the "decisive step," which meant that Gadamer could "no longer accommodate" Heidegger's thinking "even if I [Gadamer] had wanted to." In order understand how this works, philosophically, however, we need to clarify how Gadamer came to identify an affinity between the Aristotelian concept of

⁵⁰ Martin Heidegger, "Phänomenologische Interpretationen zu Aristoteles (Anzeige der hermeneutischen Situation)," 236-254. On this manuscript Gadamer later comments, "after having read it again, I see I could actually have established quite clearly that Heidegger wasn't really interested in practical knowledge or *phronēsis* at all...But rather, being...If you look at it closely, he isn't really all that preoccupied with Aristotle." Hans-Georg Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, 20-21.

⁵¹ Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, 20.

phronēsis and the Platonic concept of dialogue. For what does *phronēsis* have to do with conversation, with speaking?

In light of the historical work done in Chapter Two and Three of this dissertation, we are in a unique position to understand this question and to affirm that, indeed, from the very beginning of its inception in ancient Greece, *phronēsis* has always had close ties to the realm of speaking (*logos*), and not only of deed (*ergon*). In those earlier chapters, I showed how Aristotle's thinking about *phronēsis* itself developed within a Platonic-Isocratean context in which "reasonableness," "tact," "(practical) wisdom" was understood to be required above all in our *speaking to one another*.⁵² Whether or not Gadamer fully understood the ancient Greek roots of this tradition of *phronēsis* and its links to the context of language and speaking, his work has clearly tapped into this stream.

I am not aware of any place where Gadamer acknowledges the development of the concept of *phronēsis* in the way I tried to outline in Chapter Three. Nevertheless, he was able to sense an important connection in *phronēsis* to Plato's concept of dialogue.⁵³ In contrast to Heidegger's attempt to turn "*phronēsis*" into a merely ontological structure of *Dasein* or into the "practical decision" that every individual, solitary philosopher must face in responding to the "*Seinsfrage*," Gadamer keeps in view the ethical relation of the *phronimos* to the particular

⁵² In the case of Plato it was the Socratic context of philosophical dialogue, and in the case of Isocrates it was the rhetorical context of politics. These two contexts overlap in Aristotle's practical philosophy, wherein *phronēsis* is found in both word and deed, *logos* and *ergon*.

⁵³ I say "dialogue" here instead of "dialectic," since the latter term obscures the ethical point that Gadamer will make about the hermeneutic relationship between persons who are speaking to one another. For Gadamer's full argument about how Platonic dialectic is at the same time a dialogical ethics, see his *Plato's Dialectical Ethics*, as well his *Idea of the Good in Aristotelian Philosophy*.

community, *ethos*, and tradition in which she or he must act in relation to others.⁵⁴ For Gadamer, Heidegger's interpretation of *phronēsis* suffers to the degree to which it is overly individualistic – symptomatic perhaps of many interpretations of Aristotle's ethics.⁵⁵ For example, it is difficult, but essential, to keep in view the relationship of *euboulia* (deliberation) to the primarily social and rhetorical context of the *boulē*: it is true wisdom (*phronēsis*) to know when and how to “take council for oneself” (*bouleuesthai*), in which, as P. Christopher Smith notes, this middle voice does not primarily mean “by” myself all alone, but rather “for” my own sake – in other words, by speaking with others who can deliberate with me.⁵⁶ Relatedly, the interpersonal connection of *phronēsis* to language – e.g., in its various forms of *euboulia*, *synēsis*, *syngnomē* – highlights another important difference between Gadamer and Heidegger. For Heidegger, the semantic sedimentations of tradition that are found in language are precisely what must be “overcome” or “deconstructed” or “de-structured” on the way to the formation of a “new” language built, for example, on the “radical neologisms” invented by the solitary thinker. For Gadamer, however, language is first and foremost conversation (*Gespräch*) between dialogue partners, which entails that language is always already related to historical traditions which hand

⁵⁴ We see this contrast between Gadamer and Heidegger clearly in that, where Heidegger constantly interprets and relates Aristotle's ethical concepts to his *Metaphysics* and *Physics*, Gadamer counsils readers to never forget to relate Aristotle's ethics to his *Politics* and *Rhetoric*. See for example, the first half of Heidegger's *Plato's Sophist*, and footnote 64 in Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, 392.

⁵⁵ I take this point from P. Christopher Smith, “Phronesis, the Individual, and the Community. Divergent Appropriations of Aristotle's Ethical Discernment in Heidegger's and Gadamer's Hermeneutics,” *Gadamer verstehen/Understanding Gadamer*, 169-185.

⁵⁶ Smith also highlights the predominance of the first person plural “we” in Book Six of the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Cf. P. Christopher Smith, “Phronesis, the Individual, and the Community. Divergent Appropriations of Aristotle's Ethical Discernment in Heidegger's and Gadamer's Hermeneutics,” *Gadamer verstehen/Understanding Gadamer*, 180.

down and co-determine the meanings of our words. “Deconstructing” or constructing a “new” language remains, at best, an exaggeration of the proper task of reformation of, and responsibility for, those traditions in which we find ourselves together.⁵⁷ Not only our behavior, but also the whole linguistic element of human thinking and speaking, is done in the context of our “being with one another” (*Miteinander*) – a term, which, for Gadamer, is importantly different from the Heideggerian insight that the individual thinker stands next to others (*Mitsein*): “*Mit-sein* is, in truth, a very weak idea of the other, more a “letting the other be” than an authentic “being-interested-in-him.”⁵⁸ The culmination of *phronēsis* in the moment of decision, the “*prohairesis*” or “*kairos*,” is indeed the action of this here-and-now singular individual, but that does not mean that the *phronimos* acts with an individualistic attitude of “for all I care” (*von mir aus*): the interpersonal and conversational world is found even in the singularity of my own actions.⁵⁹

Gadamer notes that even Heidegger’s surprising translation of *phronēsis* as “*Gewissen*” (conscience) is stripped of any real ethical sense inasmuch as it has no real relation to the other: “for Heidegger, the conscience is undoubtedly *not* the other, but is, rather, the puzzle of this “coming-to-find-oneself” (*Zu-sich-selbst-finden*).”⁶⁰ For Gadamer, the Heideggerian

⁵⁷ It was just this aspect that led Habermas to claim that Gadamer “urbanized” the Heideggerian linguistic “backwoods.”

⁵⁸ Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, 23.

⁵⁹ P. Christopher Smith notes this use of “*von mir aus*” in Heidegger’s discussion of *prohairesis* and *phronēsis* in his article “Phronesis, the Individual, and the Community. Divergent Appropriations of Aristotle’s Ethical Discernment in Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s Hermeneutics,” *Gadamer verstehen/Understanding Gadamer*, 171f.

⁶⁰ Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, 23.

interpretation of *phronēsis* was problematic precisely because it failed to be oriented toward the other: “more and more I found that Heidegger’s inability to acknowledge the other was a point of weakness in him.”⁶¹ In short, for Gadamer, Heidegger’s understanding of *phronēsis* was not an ethical concept at all.⁶² By contrast, Gadamer understood that *phronēsis* is required precisely because ethical actions must be undertaken – in our words and deeds – in which you and I are here together. For Gadamer, the underlying philosophical backbone of *phronēsis* – to be sure a point that remains implicit in Aristotle – is that it takes into conscious consideration the concrete ethico-political situation of I and Thou.⁶³

Having seen how Gadamer’s understanding of *phronēsis* is importantly different from Heidegger’s, we can now further highlight the role of *phronēsis* in Gadamer’s hermeneutic ethics. What does Gadamer’s ethical conception of *phronēsis* have to do with hermeneutics, the interpretation of texts? The hermeneutical problem of trying to become aware of the determining role of our own presuppositions (our *Vorurteile*; our involvement in tradition) in relation to the text we are trying to understand, is not primarily a methodological issue. Rather, it is an ethical

⁶¹ Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, 22.

⁶² What was it then? I concur with the work of P. Christopher Smith who shows how Heidegger uses “*phronēsis*” to name a kind of *theoretical* (!) “*Überlegung*” (consideration) that the individual thinker must employ so as to “see for oneself” what everybody (*man*) is blind to. Heidegger uses “*phronēsis*” as a metaphor for the “intellectual intuition” or “seeing” (*aisthesis*) that the solitary phenomenologist must possess in order to be a great and not “*unsachlich*” (unimportant) thinker. P. Christopher Smith, “Phronesis, the Individual, and the Community. Divergent Appropriations of Aristotle’s Ethical Discernment in Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s Hermeneutics,” *Gadamer verstehen/Understanding Gadamer*, 170-177.

⁶³ “*Phronēsis*, or reasonableness, is nothing other than the conscious side of action, practical knowing. Whenever we take note of this conscious side of the distinction between I and Thou, then we have *phronēsis*.” Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, 54.

task – namely, the same hermeneutical-ethical task that faces us whenever we try to lend an ear to the words of another, regardless of whether they were written down long ago or are being spoken to us by another living person face-to-face. In short – *we are to become wise interpreters whose responses to the other’s words reveal an appropriate and responsible understanding at work*. This entails a disposition of responsible openness and receptivity to that which may appear to us as initially strange; and even in the most rigorous academic research, we have to become persons capable of hearing a voice that is not our own. For Gadamer, the hermeneutic task is essentially bound up with the cultivation of the sort of character disposition that reaches out to the other and provides an interpretive space in which they may speak to and challenge our own presuppositions. By contrast, not to cultivate this kind of hermeneutic disposition is to remain entrenched in what we presume to already know: “the genuine meaning of our finitude or our thrownness consists in the fact that we become aware, not only of our being historically conditioned, but especially of our being conditioned by the other. Precisely in our ethical relation to the other, it becomes clear to us how difficult it is to do justice to the demands of the other or even simply to become aware of them. The only way not to succumb to our finitude is to open ourselves to the other, to listen to the “Thou” who stands before us.”⁶⁴ “Hermeneutic entrenchment” – i.e., guarding ourselves against the other, against what we do not immediately understand, or against what we suspect may threaten our prior understanding – is overcome to the extent that we cultivate a disposition toward responsible receptivity and open listening. What Gadamer calls the epistemic “miracle of understanding” (*Wunder des Verstehens*) is, in the end,

⁶⁴ Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, 29.

coextensive with the metaphysical wonder of goodness, in which we encounter the other in a concrete ethical situation, such that Gadamer can say, in a profoundly un-Heideggerian way, “metaphysics...shouldn’t simply be dissolved; it should be carried back into the ethical question instead.”⁶⁵

The Heir to Practical Philosophy? Hermeneutic *Phronēsis* after *Truth and Method*

In order to show the fruitfulness of the interpretation of Gadamer’s understanding of *phronēsis*, which I have laid out in this present, and the previous, chapter, this section opens up a sorely underexplored issue that concerns the general status of Gadamer’s work in and beyond *Truth and Method*. In short, in this section I raise a question concerning the extent to which Gadamer’s work is merely descriptive of, or by contrast in fact makes normative claims about, the hermeneutic process; and, moreover, I make use of the account of *phronēsis* I have been developing in order to show how it can be used to resolve this question.

What, in the end, does *Truth and Method* or “philosophical hermeneutics” accomplish, so far as its retrieval of *phronēsis* is concerned? If all the work we have done thus far in this chapter has been to outline the ethical underpinnings of the interpretive task, does this mean that *Truth and Method* is making a fundamentally *normative* claim - that is to say, a claim about what interpreters “should” and “must” do, what understanding “should” be like, and so on? Is the aim of *Truth and Method* to “make” us good qua interpreters? If so, this would seem to contrast with Gadamer’s famous assertion that the intention of *Truth and Method* was merely meant to describe and enlighten the nature of the hermeneutic process. The purpose of *Truth and Method*,

⁶⁵ Gadamer, *A Century of Philosophy*, 31.

Gadamer writes, “was and is philosophic: not what we do or what we ought to do, but what happens to us over and above our wanting and doing.”⁶⁶ Later, in an article from 1976, Gadamer echoes this claim, and seems to explicitly distance himself from interpreting his work in any normative sense: “the hermeneutics that I characterize as philosophic is not introduced as a new procedure of interpretation or explication. Basically it only describes what always happens wherever an interpretation is convincing and successful. It is not at all a matter of a doctrine about a technical skill that would state how understanding ought to be.”⁶⁷

And yet, the above quotation is taken from an essay titled, “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy” – a work, like so many of Gadamer’s post-*Truth and Method* pieces, which explicitly links hermeneutics to practical, social-ethical realms of concern.⁶⁸ Furthermore, we must wonder how, throughout *Truth and Method*, Gadamer was able to write about what the interpreter “must” (*muß*) do or “cannot” (*darf nicht*) do if she or he “wants to understand at all” (*wenn er überhaupt verstehen will*).⁶⁹ Is Gadamer himself confused about the status of his own work; and what does this mean for his retrieval of *phronēsis*? In what sense is hermeneutic *phronēsis* really a *virtue* that must or should be cultivated? Does Gadamer’s work as a whole *merely describe* “how things are” for the hermeneutic process, or does it also – even if only indirectly – provide some normative council and protreptic descriptions of how the hermeneutic

⁶⁶ Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxv-xxvi.

⁶⁷ “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” *Reason in the Age of Science*, 111.

⁶⁸ A trend that has been taken up by scholars across disciplines ranging from the humanities to architecture, psychology, healthcare, and law.

⁶⁹ This language runs throughout the entirety of *Truth and Method*, but for the instances alluded to here, see especially *Truth and Method*, 333.

process “should” be viewed and undertaken?⁷⁰ In short, what did Gadamer mean by claiming that “philosophical hermeneutics” was a form of “practical philosophy”?⁷¹

Although this issue is a rather under-discussed one, Gadamer himself appears to have grasped it, even if his response necessitates some careful elaboration.⁷² Gadamer has at least provided us a way forward for developing a fuller response – namely, by relating these questions about philosophical hermeneutics and the normativity of *Truth and Method*, to the Aristotelian tradition of “practical philosophy.”⁷³ For the readers of this dissertation, this may come as no surprise, given the dissertation’s central focus on *phronēsis*. However, this has not been as obvious to some of Gadamer’s otherwise excellent interpreters. For example, two prominent scholars who have discussed the problem of the normative dimension of *Truth and Method* (Alasdair MacIntyre and Lawrence Hinman) have both raised the problem correctly, and yet responded to it insufficiently; “insufficiently,” moreover, in the same way and for the same reason: namely, by failing to relate their reading of *Truth and Method* to Aristotle’s practical philosophy.⁷⁴ In failing to do so, they thereby deprive themselves of a way to make compatible

⁷⁰ This issue is somewhat related to the previous chapter’s discussion of whether or not the task (*Aufgabe*) of application (*Anwendung*) is something that takes place “automatically” or instead requires some “purposeful” act on the part of the interpreter.

⁷¹ Cf. “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” *Reason in the Age of Science*.

⁷² Cf. the last paragraphs of “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” *Reason in the Age of Science*.

⁷³ By this term, applied to Aristotle’s works, I refer to the three works on *Ethics* (*EE*, *NE*, *MM*), as well as the *Politics*, *Rhetoric*, *De Anima* and so on.

⁷⁴ An especially surprising omission in MacIntyre’s case. Cf. Lawrence Hinman, “Quid Facti or Quid Juris?”; and MacIntyre, “Contexts of Interpretation. Reflections on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*.”

Gadamer's claims that (1) *Truth and Method* is not about what interpreters *ought* to do, although (2) understanding is a praxis, which requires the virtue of *phronēsis*.

Both Hinman and MacIntyre claim that when Gadamer says that “philosophical hermeneutics” or *Truth and Method* is not at all concerned with *changing* the actual practices of interpreters (e.g., those working in the humanities), that Gadamer is simply mistaken about his own work: MacIntyre writes, “if I have not misinterpreted Gadamer, his views stand in the most radical of oppositions to our current academic practice... Yet Gadamer refuses to recognize any such radical implications.”⁷⁵ Hinman and MacIntyre – quite rightly – see consequences of Gadamer's work beyond merely describing the hermeneutic process, and so they claim that our understanding of *Truth and Method* must run counter to Gadamer's self-interpretation. In this sense, Gadamer is too modest (or simply incorrect) when he says of *Truth and Method* that “it is quite evident that one must learn method to do the work of a humanist. I am, I hope, a good interpreter and a philologist. As a thinker I just wanted to propose a better understanding of what we are doing in the humanities.”⁷⁶ For Hinman and MacIntyre, Gadamer's attempt to provide a “better” – i.e., clearer and more enlightened – account of the nature of interpretation itself has consequences that should lead to the alteration of our interpretive praxis. However, in contrast to Hinman and MacIntyre, by relating Gadamer's comments back to Aristotelian practical philosophy – as Gadamer himself does, as we will see below – we are able to show that Gadamer

⁷⁵ Yet compare Gadamer's comment in *Truth and Method* (321), in which he recognizes the “radical” implications explicitly: “We are quite aware that we are asking something unusual [*Ungewohntes*] of the self-understanding of modern science [*Wissenschaft*].”

⁷⁶ Gadamer, “Practical Philosophy as a Model of the Human Sciences,” 78.

is not confused about his own work, and that his seemingly contradictory comments do in fact cohere.

On the one hand, *Truth and Method* does not yield another *methodology* for good interpretation – i.e., the form of 19th century hermeneutics that Gadamer is, in part, arguing against. There is no teachable “art” of interpretation in the manner of a *technē*, as I discussed in the first section of this chapter, and to that extent, Gadamer emphasizes that his work is only “theory” or only “reflection” on one’s practice, and is not meant to correct the concrete *praxis* of actual individual interpreters. The normative claim that would tell the interpreter “how” to interpret by laying out the steps one must follow – e.g., “follow the principle of first mention when reading scripture” – is, at best, for Gadamer, a mere heuristic suggestion or possibly helpful tool.

On the other hand, however, heuristic suggestions and interpretive devices are not the only way in which something can be normative for us as interpreters. This is Gadamer’s point in turning to *phronēsis*, and it is the distinction between the normativity of *technē* and *phronēsis* that both Hinman and MacIntyre miss in their discussions of Gadamer’s work.⁷⁷ Gadamer’s turn to *phronēsis* reminds the reader of *Truth and Method* that even the best, most insightful work of (practical) philosophy can never obviate the urgent need for lived *phronēsis* at the actual moment of concrete action in the life of the interpreting agent in this here-and-now *singular* (hermeneutic or moral) situation. Gadamer’s consistent effort to not let his work be read as the formation of a hermeneutic method is thus an ethical, protreptic spur intended to remind the reader that it is

⁷⁷ I will discuss another – very fecund – piece of MacIntyre’s on Gadamer’s work in the conclusion to this dissertation.

always they who must decide and act rightly even though, or just because, even the best formulation of moral or hermeneutic heuristic rules must still be “applied” in singular, concrete contexts: “In whatever connection, the application of rules can never be done by rules. In this we have just one alternative, to do it correctly or to be stupid. That is that!”⁷⁸

Gadamer notes that Aristotle himself makes a similar point in his *Nicomachean Ethics*.⁷⁹ On the one hand, a work of practical philosophy – i.e., a philosophical reflection on human(e) *praxis* – “should also contribute to the goodness of human life,” although “that is a very hard thing to accomplish.”⁸⁰ It is hard to accomplish because behind, before, and after all our philosophical reflection on *praxis* stands the educative force of cultivated “habit,” tradition, *ethos*, circumstance and chance, and so on. Thus Aristotle claims that his lectures on ethics will be of no use to someone who is not “already good” – a claim that still shocks the student of today who wonders if they are at least “good enough” to benefit from the lectures. The same is true for the hermeneutic tasks we all face: “anything said by way of a theoretic description of the forms of right living [or right interpreting] can be at best of little help when it comes to the concrete application to the human experience of life.”⁸¹

That said, there is still a sense in which *Truth and Method* (or the *Nicomachean Ethics*) – as a work of practical philosophy – has consequences for those who attempt to learn from that

⁷⁸ Gadamer, “Practical Philosophy as a Model of the Human Sciences,” 80. The proptreptic tone here is quite similar to several passages in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which I discussed in the second half of Chapter Three.

⁷⁹ Gadamer, “Practical Philosophy as a Model of the Human Sciences,” 83.

⁸⁰ Gadamer, “Practical Philosophy as a Model of the Human Sciences,” 83.

⁸¹ Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” *Reason in the Age of Science*, 112.

work. To explain this, Gadamer relies on Aristotle's well-known image of the archer who, seeing the target more clearly, may be more likely to hit it. In applying this metaphor to his own work on hermeneutics as a form of practical philosophy, Gadamer provides us with a way to understand how it is possible for him to say that, although (or just because) his work is not normative like a *technē*, it nevertheless describes what every interpreter "must" do – i.e., cultivate *phronēsis*.

Gadamer's first point is assumed to be an entailment, albeit an unstated one, of Aristotle's use of the metaphor of the archer and the target. Being able to see a target more clearly does not exhaust the actual praxis involved in hitting the mark: "Aristotle insists that it [i.e., practical philosophy] has a subordinate function. He tells us that it is like the man who tries to hit the goal as an archer, and Aristotle compares his own function with this man...The hunter and the archer concentrate on a little piece of the whole...that [i.e., the concentration on the center] is not, however, the full art of this sport but just an addition so as to make it easier."⁸² The experience with the bow and arrow, the steady breathing, the appropriate amount of tension and relaxation, and so on, all go into the full *praxis* of actually hitting the concrete target. In Aristotle's case, the "full *praxis*" is everything that goes into living the good life as a whole (*to eu zēn holōs*). For this, practical philosophy can at best only be of help through clarification and heightening our self-understanding.

How do things stand with the hermeneutic act? What is the equivalent of "the good life as a whole" for hermeneutics? Gadamer writes, "with respect to hermeneutics and the

⁸² Gadamer, "Practical Philosophy as a Model of the Human Sciences," 83. Gadamer makes the same point in the "Afterword" to his 1998 translation and commentary on Book Six of the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

humanities as a whole we have the task of subordinating both our scientific contribution to the cultural heritage and academic education to a more fundamental project of letting the tradition speak to us.”⁸³ “Letting the tradition speak to us” – the full praxis of hermeneutics is therewith aimed toward a goal that is just as abstract and in need of clarification as Aristotle once saw with the abstract goal of “living well” (*euprattein, eudaimonia*). Gadamer continues, “this is hermeneutics: to let what seems to be far and alienated speak again...Moreover, it should speak not only in a new voice but in a *clearer* voice.”⁸⁴ For the concretization of *that* goal, neither the best hermeneutic method, nor Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* or any other form of “practical philosophy” can replace the responsibility that faces every interpreter – to become *phronimos*.

Gadamer’s claim that each interpreter must undertake to become *phronimos* stands in an ambiguous relation to MacIntyre’s review of *Truth and Method*, which claimed that, for Gadamer, “between **practice**, even intellectual practice,...and the **understanding of** our practice, there is so clear a distinction to be drawn [by Gadamer], that the understanding of practice is not itself part of the transformation of practice.”⁸⁵ MacIntyre is acutely aware that his own interpretive practice has indeed been changed in light of Gadamer’s work, precisely because it transforms the reader’s *understanding* of the hermeneutic act. In that respect, I agree with MacIntyre. However, I do not think that Gadamer himself separated understanding and practice as drastically as MacIntyre claims. It seems to me, instead, that Gadamer does recognize that a

⁸³ Gadamer, “Practical Philosophy as a Model of the Human Sciences,” 83.

⁸⁴ Gadamer, “Practical Philosophy as a Model of the Human Sciences,” 83.

⁸⁵ Boldface mine. Alasdair MacIntyre, “Contexts of Interpretation. Reflections on Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method*,” 46.

change in one's understanding of something (such as one's hermeneutic practice) will have consequences for one's practical dealings with it. What Gadamer wishes to emphasize, however, is simply that such a change does not entail that one could necessarily formulate a set of procedural rules or methodologies that would correspond to the newfound understanding of the practice. "Practical understanding" is always a wider phenomenon than any codified method can encompass. In short, only by becoming wiser, more humane, practitioners – that is to say, by cultivating *phronēsis* – can we become the sorts of interpreters, which the other (qua text) needs us to be if we are to listen and formulate responsible responses to what is said. This is why Gadamer speaks of a "reciprocity" between "theoretical interest" and the bedrock "primacy of practice," and it is precisely at this point that Gadamer sees the strongest link between "philosophical hermeneutics" and the whole tradition of Aristotelian "practical philosophy":

The great tradition of practical philosophy lives on in a hermeneutics that becomes aware of its philosophical implications...In both cases [i.e., philosophical hermeneutics and Aristotelian practical philosophy], we have the same mutual implication between theoretical interest and practical action...The connection between the universal desire to know and concrete practical discernment is a reciprocal one. So it appears to me, heightened theoretic awareness about the experience of understanding, and the practice of understanding, like philosophical hermeneutics and one's own self-understanding, are inseparable.⁸⁶

In other article, Gadamer echoes the same point:

[This] is the point of philosophical hermeneutics. It corrects the peculiar falsehood of modern consciousness: the idolatry of scientific method and of the anonymous authority of the sciences and it vindicates again the noblest task of the citizen - decision-making according to one's own responsibility - instead of conceding that task to the expert. In

⁸⁶ Gadamer, "Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy," *Reason in the Age of Science*, 112. To be fair, this essay is later than MacIntyre's review (though not Hinman's). My point in this section has not been to criticize MacIntyre *per se*, but merely to use MacIntyre's misunderstanding to clarify the normative element within Gadamer's work.

this respect, hermeneutic philosophy is the heir of the older tradition of practical philosophy.⁸⁷

Perhaps Gadamer's frustration with the criticisms of his work leveled by Betti, Apel, and others also applies here to those who fail to understand aright the normative sense at work in his philosophical hermeneutics as practical philosophy: "They all mistake the reflective claim of my analyses and thereby also the meaning of application [*Anwendung*] which, as I have tried to show, is essential to the structure of understanding. They are so caught up in the methodologism of theory of science that all they can think about is rules and their application. They fail to recognize that **reflection about practice is not methodology.**"⁸⁸ "Reflection about practice is not methodology" because coming to new insights about oneself and one's actions (as interpreter or as social agent) – that is to say, coming to a deeper self-understanding – does not at all imply that one has learned new rules or procedures.

What predominates Gadamer's interest in discussing his own work, and what seems to have lead some scholars astray, is his continual emphasis that, despite the "reciprocity" that exists between theory and practice, which helps us to understand ourselves better and our ultimate end more clearly, we will never "complete" the task indicated in the dictum "know thyself." Because of this, no "practical philosophy" can ever become a *technē*: the "human sciences," the "moral sciences," will always remain more "human" and more "moral" than they will "science." "What separates it [i.e., practical philosophy] fundamentally from technical expertise," Gadamer writes, "is that it expressly asks the question of the good...All this holds

⁸⁷ Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Social Science," 316.

⁸⁸ *Truth and Method*, 580. Boldface mine.

true for hermeneutics as well. As the theory of interpretation or explication, it is not just a theory.”⁸⁹

Understanding why Gadamer insists that his *Truth and Method* cannot tell interpreters “what to do” also explains one other common refrain at work in Gadamer’s writings, which relies on his understanding of *phronēsis* as an inherently social concept: namely, the hermeneutic place of friendship and solidarity. There is no isolated reading, but rather we all understand and interpret as persons in community (or persons in historical communities): readers of texts must deliberate together and ask for advice. This gives hermeneutic sense to the “acknowledgements” page at the front of a book (or dissertation) – for it attempts to name a few important aspects of the community that made the individual’s work a possibility at all. Interpretation, understanding, is necessarily related to and takes place within a hermeneutic community and the traditions that have shaped that community over time. When Aristotle considered that it is perhaps better to philosophize together with others, his comment revealed a misunderstanding of the nature of human thinking, since it presumed that it would be possible to philosophize “alone” at all.⁹⁰ After Gadamer’s work, we today can no longer oppose the self-sufficiency of the ideal thinker against a community of friends. The texts and conversations that energize and support our thinking – as with the very languages and concepts within which we think, read, and interpret –

⁸⁹ Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” *Reason in the Age of Science*, 93.

⁹⁰ Cf. *NE*, X.7, 1777a30-35.

are all so many voices of other persons speaking to, and into, our hermeneutic lives here-and-now.⁹¹

Conclusion

In this chapter I have tried to show how Gadamer's retrieval of *phronēsis* was motivated by a deeply ethical concern for how to appropriately receive, listen, and respond to the words of another – a concern, which orients not only the specific hermeneutics presented in *Truth and Method*, but in fact runs throughout his “philosophical hermeneutics” as a kind of “practical philosophy.”

In one way, then, this dissertation has achieved the goals set out at in its introduction: namely, to provide a philosophical response to the question of the relationship between reading and ethics; to provide an historically and hermeneutically sensitive retrieval of “*phronēsis*” as a conceptual tradition that developed from Homer to Aristotle; and to systematically explain how Gadamer's philosophical work provides a proper, reasonable, and (partially) hermeneutically self-aware way or road toward meeting those goals.

In another sense, however, there is still much more to be done if we were to offer a full philosophical “ethics of reading” – but that is a much larger project, which goes beyond the focus of this dissertation merely on the specific role of *phronēsis* for reading and interpreting texts. In the Conclusion of this dissertation, I will briefly outline a few ways in which Gadamer's retrieval of *phronēsis* for a hermeneutic ethics itself remains incomplete. The glaring absence of, or at best the under-discussed and de-emphasized place in Gadamer's work of,

⁹¹ I tried to show one example of this in Aristotle's own case in Chapter Two and Chapter Three, by outlining the great extent to which his use of “*phronēsis*” is deeply dependent on a tradition stretching back from Plato and Isocrates, to Hippocrates, Heraclitus, and Homer, and, from there, into the dark.

affectivity and *character* in the development and manifestation of *phronēsis* dogs the legitimacy of our basic claim that *phronēsis* is necessary for reading and interpreting well. Therefore, in the conclusion of this dissertation, I offer the outlines of my own view concerning the place of affectivity and character in the hermeneutic act. Only by reminding ourselves, again and again, that our interpretive *praxis* is dependent not only on “tradition,” “history,” and “language,” but also, and in a much more personally concrete way, on our affective life as on our character “habits,” can we place in proper perspective and correctly outline the full complexity of hermeneutic understanding.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN EMOTIONALLY HEALTHY HERMENEUTICS

“Even as I take notice of the range of our disagreements, however, I become all the more aware of how often I have been better able to articulate my own thought by reflecting upon Gadamer’s arguments and insights...It may be that in the future others will be able to advance the hermeneutic enterprise further, but, if so, it will only be because they have first been able to learn what Gadamer has taught.” - Alasdair MacIntyre “On Not Having the Last Word: Thoughts on Our Debts to Gadamer”

What Has this Dissertation Done So Far?

The purpose of this dissertation, as laid out in the introduction, was to argue for a particular view concerning the general relationship between ethics and the interpretation of texts; and, more specifically, to do so by outlining the basis for a hermeneutic ethics grounded in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis*. However, because Gadamer’s understanding of the concept of *phronēsis* is philosophically tied to his hermeneutic views about the nature of concepts as forms of tradition(s), I first took the time in Chapter One to reconstruct what it means, “methodologically,” to do philosophy within the mode, style, or tradition of philosophical hermeneutics. The first chapter resulted in a Gadamerian view about the nature of concepts as dynamic historical traditions in which thinkers (implicitly or explicitly) move, and for which thinkers are responsible.

On the basis of this Gadamerian view of concepts, I then turned explicitly to the retrieval of *phronēsis* in order to show as concretely and as historically accurate as possible, how

indeed the ancient Greek concept of *phronēsis* is best understood not first and foremost as an ahistorical, abstract idea, but rather as the name for a particular historical tradition. Thus, in Chapter Two I showed how this tradition began initially with the Homeric *phrēn-phronein* word family, and was slowly transformed via the “application” of the language to different domains of usage – i.e., especially in the Hippocratic medical texts, and in the proto-philosophy of Heraclitean thought, which marks the earliest use of the lexeme *phronēsis*. In Chapter Three, I then showed how this early historical tradition blossomed via its incorporation in and transformation by the Platonic dialogues and the Isocratean rhetorical treatises. Finally, I showed how Aristotle became the principle (re-)founder of the tradition of *phronēsis* – its *locus classicus* – through the robust analyses contained in his practical philosophy. Although the philosophical tradition of *phronēsis* in a way begins with Aristotle, Chapter Two and Three demonstrated that Aristotelian *phronēsis* is not without its own deep, long, and important history. By understanding in detail the trajectory of that tradition – its typical themes and questions – I was able (1) to provide one concrete example of the Gadamerian claim that concepts are intrinsically related to an historical tradition, as well as (2) to eventually confront Gadamer’s own contemporary retrieval of *phronēsis* with some aspects of the historical tradition of *phronēsis* that remained forgotten or only implicitly understood in his work.

In Chapter Four and Chapter Five, then, I turned to Gadamer’s explicit retrieval of the concept of *phronēsis* for his hermeneutics, and argued for an ethical interpretation of this retrieval. For Gadamer, the concept of *phronēsis* is tied to the “fundamental problem of hermeneutics” – i.e., the problem of application (*Anwendung*) – and therewith indicates that the hermeneutic process is a fundamentally practical task confronting every reader. In Chapter Five

I substantiated the ethical character of this practical task of interpretation by showing how Gadamer's retrieval of *phronēsis* for hermeneutics reveals the responsibilities and complexities of appropriately responding to the words of another (as found in a text).

I have argued why and how, for Gadamer, hermeneutics must undergo an “ethical turn” – or rather an ethical return – in order to clarify the most fundamental questions about the nature of interpretation. The activity of reading is an intrinsically ethical task, whose excellent performance necessitates the wisdom of *phronēsis*. Gadamer's retrieval is both a further historical development in the long tradition of the concept of *phronēsis*, as well as a further historical development in the long tradition of the discipline of hermeneutics. Gadamer's work participates in an historical tradition by providing the philosophical meeting point between two previously different streams of inquiry – namely, concerning practical wisdom, and interpretation (of texts). Put differently, Gadamer's work enacts a “fusion of horizons” through the confrontation between ancient practical philosophy, and contemporary hermeneutic theory. What follows is therefore my own first attempt to explain what I have learned “and perhaps could only have learned” from Gadamer.¹

What Still Needs to be done?

Outlining the historical development of the concept of *phronēsis* revealed a key sense in which Gadamer's retrieval is in fact lacking as a retrieval of *phronēsis* – specifically, in its inattention to the role of emotion and character. This, of course, is not to say that Gadamer's retrieval is problematic as such, but simply that it is partial, and in need of further development. Moreover,

¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, “On Not Having the Last Word: Thoughts on Our Debts to Gadamer,” *Gadamer's Century*, 157.

Gadamer's retrieval of *phronēsis* is partial in just such a way that it hinders our ability to more fully understand the ethical nature of the hermeneutic act, since it generally overlooks or downplays the realm of affectivity and character, which, for Aristotle, was inseparable from *phronēsis*. Such a hindrance must be addressed, since it touches the very core of this dissertation's concern with the relationship between ethics and the interpretation of texts. What should be kept in mind, however, is that this insight has been made possible through the historical work done in the earlier chapters of this dissertation. Going back to the sources, retrieving once again "for ourselves" and reconstructing the historical tradition, has altered and enriched our understanding of *phronēsis* as such. Thus, by structuring the dissertation in such a way that attempted to be faithful to a Gadamerian way of doing philosophy – that is, by trying to enact or model Gadamer's hermeneutic claims – we are now in position to critically dialogue not only with Gadamer's work, but also with the work of other thinkers who share some common presuppositions with philosophical hermeneutics.²

What then is it about Gadamer's retrieval of *phronēsis* specifically that is left unsaid or forgotten, and that has key significance for our understanding of the relationship between hermeneutics and ethics? As I have occasionally gestured at throughout this dissertation, there is urgent need for some attention to be given to the character, disposition, or affective side of *phronēsis*, inasmuch as *phronēsis* – properly so-called in an Aristotelian sense – is the intertwining of the intellectual virtue with the virtues of disposition and right-feeling. I do not mean, however, that Gadamer's retrieval of *phronēsis* is lacking only in a specifically Aristotelian sense. For, as has been seen in the earlier historical chapters of this dissertation, the

² Here I think most immediately of Paul Ricoeur, Luigi Pareyson, and Jürgen Habermas.

role of affectivity and disposition has been an utterly central feature of that tradition, whose earliest roots lay in the Homeric *phrēn* (heart). Even still, putting things in this way might make it seem as though the problem were merely historical – i.e., that Gadamer’s retrieval of the tradition of *phronēsis* was merely historically inaccurate. That claim, however, would be to unduly separate philosophy, history, and language – the connection between which formed the content of Chapter One of this dissertation. Philosophically, then, to the extent that Gadamer’s retrieval is lacking in this historical sense (i.e., by forgetting the *phrēn*), it may leave us with an excessively “intellectualistic” account of the hermeneutic act, and thereby of a hermeneutic ethics.³

What I wish to emphasize here is not that Gadamer’s interpretation of *phronēsis* lacked an ethical dimension – that is precisely what I have emphasized in the previous two chapters. Rather, I simply wish to emphasize that his retrieval of *phronēsis* fails to consider the place of emotions or affective dispositions as being an intrinsic aspect of the whole hermeneutic phenomenon, and which therefore need to be philosophically accounted for in any hermeneutic ethics. In short, Gadamer’s retrieval of *phronēsis* requires a corresponding retrieval of the *phrēn* for a hermeneutic ethics. Until hermeneutics confronts, or rather re-confronts, the role of emotion and character in the interpretation of texts, its philosophical work will remain blind to the phenomena of understanding and interpretation in their fullness. Throughout the rest of this conclusion, I explain why Gadamer may have neglected this aspect, and I offer my own thoughts

³ This is perhaps evidenced in the secondary scholarship on Gadamer. At least to the extent that I am familiar with the literature, I have yet to find a work which even has a place for “affectivity,” “character,” “disposition,” or “emotion” in an index, let alone a substantial philosophical discussion of its place in a hermeneutic ethics.

on how a retrieval of this aspect might proceed. In doing so, I indicate a direction for contemporary hermeneutics, which has been largely unexplored – namely, for some scholarly engagement with contemporary philosophy of emotion.

What is Missing in Gadamer’s Retrieval of *Phronēsis* and Why is it Missing?

The excellent hermeneuticist will be a kind of *phronimos*. Gadamer’s work shows us why this must be the case, as well as specifically how the ancient intellectual virtue of *phronēsis* manifests itself throughout the process of interpretation. However, the retrieval of *phronēsis* opens up questions that Gadamer has left unattended, and perhaps did not see. As Alasdair MacIntyre points out, by making his claims “in this Aristotelian way, Gadamer opens up still further critical questions, questions that arise from his interpretation of *phronēsis*.”⁴ MacIntyre too sees that the Gadamerian enterprise only begins with the initial retrieval of *phronēsis*, and that much more philosophical work still needs to be done. Yet, MacIntyre proceeds in a different direction than the one I am proposing. In his essay “On not having the last word: thoughts on our debts to Gadamer,” MacIntyre raises the question of to what extent hermeneutic *phronēsis* can avoid larger metaphysical questions: “hermeneutics so viewed is a sub-discipline of ethics and...just as an Aristotelian ethics presupposes an Aristotelian metaphysics, so a hermeneutics informed by Aristotelian concepts will have very much the same presuppositions. But if that is so, the philosophical commitments of hermeneutic inquiry extend beyond hermeneutics into metaphysics.”⁵ MacIntyre’s point here is well taken, and perhaps necessitates a renewed

⁴ MacIntyre, “On Not Having the Last Word: Thoughts on Our Debts to Gadamer,” 168.

⁵ MacIntyre, “On Not Having the Last Word: Thoughts on Our Debts to Gadamer,” 169.

discussion of one of the very same questions that Plato and Aristotle argued over – namely, does the *phronimos* need to understand metaphysical and theoretical philosophy in order to exhibit *phronēsis*?⁶ Yet, there is another way in which Gadamer’s reliance on *phronēsis* raises new questions, not so much by requiring that we connect ethics to some other area of philosophy, as MacIntyre argues, but rather by requiring that we highlight ethical features that are in fact *intrinsic* to the concept of true *phronēsis*, but which Gadamer himself did not address – i.e., the role of the virtues of character and affectivity. Gadamer’s reliance on the concept of *phronēsis* is somewhat overly “intellectualistic” inasmuch as it neglects the relationship between the intellectual virtue and the whole realm of character and affectivity.⁷

MacIntyre himself briefly mentions the matter of hermeneutic character virtues, but seemingly without realizing that this is not something Gadamer has actually developed: “For so long he [i.e., Gadamer] exemplified both in his person and in his writings the moral dimension of the hermeneutic project. He has been for much of our time the *phronimos* of hermeneutics, the exemplary practitioner of the hermeneutic virtues, both intellectual and moral.”⁸ High praise indeed, but, what in fact are “hermeneutic moral virtues”? Who has given an account of these or discussed how they relate to *phronēsis* more generally? Once it is understood that *phronēsis* is inseparable from the realm of character and affectivity, a question arises – why did Gadamer

⁶ MacIntyre’s conception of *phronēsis* in this essay seems to me to be more “Platonic” than “Aristotelian.” For the Platonic Aristotelian background to this issue, see my discussion throughout the second half of Chapter Three.

⁷ Furthermore, insofar as the thrust of MacIntyre’s conception of *phronēsis* requires that the *phronimos* also be metaphysician, it only exacerbates the “intellectualistic” worry that I am raising here.

⁸ MacIntyre, “On Not Having the Last Word: Thoughts on Our Debts to Gadamer,” 171.

neglect an explicit analysis of this issue? It seems to me that there are two reasons for this, both of which led to the over “intellectualization” of the hermeneutic process.

The first issue concerns the philosophical views that Gadamer was arguing against in *Truth and Method*. It seems to me that by combatting the “sentimentalism” of romantic hermeneutic and romantic aesthetics, Gadamer was perhaps hesitant to still find a legitimate role for affectivity to play in the act of interpretation. For example, one chief aim of Gadamer’s critique of romantic aesthetics and romantic hermeneutics was to recover the view that artworks, as with the whole realm of texts in the disciplines of the humanities, are able to make truth claims and, more generally, to make meaningful epistemic contributions to our knowledge and understanding of the world and of ourselves. In other words, Gadamer rejects the dichotomous view that would place “science” and “truth” on one side as opposed to the side of “art” and “feelings.” Neither science, nor art, has sole access to truth. However, in order to show how an artwork can make truth claims, or how a novel can teach us something, Gadamer chastens romantic hermeneutics for its reliance on opaque concepts like “sympathy,” “life-feeling,” or the “emotional experience” of the interpreter. These concepts for Gadamer - and here I agree with him - are inadequate hermeneutic bases for interpretation.

However, when Gadamer retrieves the concept of *phronēsis* as the basis of his hermeneutic ethics, he does not correspondingly retrieve an appropriate understanding of the hermeneutic role of affectivity. His critique of romantic hermeneutic results in, as it were, throwing the affective baby out with the bathwater. Gadamer’s hermeneutic *phronimos*, in other words, does not seem to have much need for affective emotion or character in the process of interpretation. That Aristotle makes very clear that the concept of *phronēsis* is inseparable from

and dependent upon all the virtues of character and affectivity does not seem to play a vital role in Gadamer's retrieval. Thus, it may be that Gadamer was no longer able to see a positive hermeneutic role for affectivity to play after having to battle against the tide of romantic hermeneutics, which rested on the intuitive basis of "empathy" and "co-feeling" with the spirit of an author. But intuition, co-feeling, and so on – the affective hallmarks of the German romantic hermeneutics Gadamer was arguing against – are not the only types of affectivity.

A second possible reason why Gadamer neglected the hermeneutic function of character and affectivity, may be because he thought he had accounted for it via his conceptions of "tradition" and "hermeneutic presuppositions." After all, tradition is in many respects similar to the *ethos* of a particular educational and cultural climate, and it is in many respects the tradition(s) or the *ethos* that shapes our character by teaching us what habits should be cultivated or not. Thus the character dispositions of the *phronimos* will be oriented by and concretized within a particular social-historical tradition. Likewise, the (often) unconscious "hermeneutic presuppositions" that we bring with us to a text guide our understanding of that text much like affective dispositions and emotions do - namely, by tending to direct our attention toward or away from some things rather than others, and by orienting our reactions to what we encounter.

However, even if we grant that Gadamer might offer an implicit account of the hermeneutic role of character and affectivity via these concepts of "tradition" and "hermeneutic presuppositions," we are still far from an account of hermeneutic character *virtues* or affective dispositional *virtues*. This is because we are not mere slaves to historical tradition or to our hermeneutic presuppositions. Rather, as we become aware of some of our "hermeneutic presuppositions," or as we occasionally are able to take some distance from the *ethos* in which

we were raised, we thereby become responsible for considering whether to reaffirm, alter, or reject those presuppositions or aspects of a tradition. Similarly, as we come to awareness of our dispositional and affective tendencies, we thereby become responsible for considering whether to reaffirm, alter, or reject those tendencies in the role that they play in shaping our understandings and reactions to what we experience. For example, if I come to understand that I have a tendency to avoid discussions of a particular topic because it makes me uncomfortable, I can then decide whether or not I ought to affirm, or work to alter that tendency. Likewise, if I discover that I tend to impatiently react to what I do not understand by quickly rejecting it as nonsensical, then I become responsible for how I respond to that newfound self-insight - i.e., will I practice becoming a more patient person in the face of confusing or difficult ideas, or not? If Gadamer is correct in claiming that the interpreter requires something like *phronēsis*, then we will also need something like a conception of character and affective *virtues* that must likewise be cultivated. The concepts of “tradition” or “hermeneutic presuppositions” are perhaps, if anything, more like the so-called “natural” dispositional tendencies that many people have “by birth” that Aristotle discusses.⁹

Perhaps Gadamer’s own hermeneutic situation required that he take the step of moving beyond the philosophically insufficient hermeneutics of 19th century German romanticism. However, in order to properly “apply” Gadamer’s work to our own hermeneutic situation *today*, it may be necessary to rethink the still common “hermeneutic presupposition” in which there is a strict division between “thinking” and “feeling.” In this way it may become possible to craft a hermeneutic ethics that not only does justice to its foundations in Gadamer’s work, but also does

⁹ Cf. *NE* VI.13 1144b1-10.

justice to the hermeneutic phenomenon as it occurs in the acts of reading, discussing, and interpreting.

Retrieving the Phrēn - the Heart of Understanding

Applying Gadamer's retrieval of *phronēsis* to today's hermeneutic situation requires, as I have said, a retrieval of the "*phrēn*" or "heart" of understanding. Reconnecting *phronēsis* and *phrēn* means, hermeneutically, a reconnection of the intellectual virtue with the affective and dispositional life of the hermeneuticist. In what follows, I can only gesture at this unexplored area of hermeneutics, and outline a few of the major themes and questions that it would need to explore. In particular, (1) I provide a few concrete examples that show how affectivity is relevant to the hermeneutic process in general, and (2) I conclude by briefly gesturing at a few possible examples of "hermeneutic character virtues."

In order to display *phronēsis* in one's living or in one's interpretation of a text, the person involved must not only have insight into the salient features of the given situation, but also some self-understanding of who they are as the individual who must decide and act here and now. To know oneself involves knowing one's tendencies, typical urges, and character - in short, to be aware and mindful of one's affective and dispositional life. Mindfulness of our emotional life entails not that we detach ourselves from it, or attempt to deny its admittance into the present situation, but rather that we bring it into our awareness. In the case of hermeneutics, for example, it is possible to read a text in a spirit of anger or frustration, and fail to consider the extent to which that affective disposition is possibly hindering one's ability to interpret the text

well.¹⁰ In any case, the first point to be emphasized is this: hermeneutic mindfulness cannot be done if one does not even consider that one's emotional and dispositional life may have a bearing on the interpretation of texts. Admitting that dispositional habits and emotions may be involved in one's reading practices does not entail advocating any kind of hermeneutic emotivism or retreat into hermeneutic romanticism. Rather, it is simply to take ownership of the fact that the affective life of the reader is one of the necessary and unavoidable components to the hermeneutic situation in which a text is read and understood. *Phronēsis* thus requires the ability to, as Jerome Veith writes, "apply our affectivity in deliberation. All circumstances engage our emotions in some way, and these emotions in turn 'help to interpret or compose the very situations in which they are responses.' Yet the crucial point is that the interpretation be accurate, and this depends on the virtue of the deliberator, the tendency to feel the right emotions...The *phronimos*' capacity to find this mean entails responding affectively to situations in the way actually called for by circumstances."¹¹ Although Veith comments here are only about Aristotle, and not at all about hermeneutics, their application to the act of interpretation is clear, since texts too engage our emotions in varying ways.

Not only are emotions and dispositions hermeneutically relevant insofar as they may pre-dispose our understanding of a text (whether that pre-disposing helps or hinders our interpretive efforts), but they are also relevant for a hermeneutic ethics insofar as the hermeneutic task requires the reader to respond to the text appropriately - and this may include also an appropriate

¹⁰ The anger or frustration may not even be related to the text at all, but might simply be the mood one is in as one sits down to read.

¹¹ Jerome Veith, "Phronesis as Self-Knowledge," 22. Veith is here quoting from C.D.C. Reeve's commentary on the *Nicomachean Ethics*.

affective response. Affective “neutrality” in the interpretation of texts may be neither possible nor desirable. If and when, for example, teachers read a text with students that puts forward a morally abhorrent view, they are given a double task: both to give a fair, careful representation of the view, as well as to model an appropriate way of responding to it. Remaining utterly dispassionate, or adopting what psychologists call a “flat affect” when teaching might not be modeling “neutrality” from the perspective of students, but rather the modeling of a seemingly unconcerned, aloof posture - a posture which, further, might only serve to confirm many students’ presuppositions that philosophy is “only” a theoretical game that does not touch the lived (e.g., emotional) life of the participants. Relatedly, teachers may need to help students to name their own emotional reactions to texts or ideas precisely so that those students can understand the text better. Again, the psychology of “retrenchment” - wherein an individual seems not to understand something because it raises feelings of discomfort, threat, or fear - can serve as a reminder to teachers that the hermeneutic relevance of emotions cannot be simply bypassed in the effort to facilitate student learning.

One further example of the relevance of affectivity for hermeneutics - one which also occurs in the teaching context - concerns the way in which beginning students learn the skill of reading. Beginning students who are given difficult texts to read may need to rely on other interpretive strategies for making sense of the text than simply conceptual or logical abilities, which indeed they may only be just beginning to practice in the first place. It is not unusual for a student to be unable to express their understanding of a text in conceptual terms, but still be able to make statements about their own affective sense of what the text seems to be saying. In other words, one of the first points of hermeneutic contact for students is precisely the interpretive

result of their affective engagement with the text. No doubt this engagement is insufficient for becoming a more expert reader or for developing the ability to think in other terms, but that does not mean it is illegitimate tout court. It may be that the classroom is too small of a space for students to develop entirely new habits of character and feeling, but giving students the opportunity to cultivate some metacognitive understanding or self-awareness of their own tendencies and emotional responses (to texts) is to make at least some progress in modeling true hermeneutic *phronēsis*. The above examples, however, show merely that affective and character dispositions are relevant for philosophical hermeneutics in general. But what are hermeneutic character *virtues*?

What character virtues might be “internal” to the excellent practice of interpretation? In fact, there is already one disposition that has long been recognized as a centerpiece of excellent interpretation. The modern recommendation of a hermeneutic “principle of charity” can be found explicitly in many thinkers, and, implicitly, it can be traced back at least to St. Augustine. The hermeneutic virtue of charity – whose full account lies outside the scope of this dissertation – has long established itself as virtue internal to the excellent practice of reading. Similarly, the so-called “hermeneutics of suspicion” may provide another example of a kind of character virtue that the excellent hermeneuticist will display – namely, the right balance of trust and suspicion, or even hope and fear, in the reading of texts. Both *charity* and *suspicion* provide examples of potential forms of dispositional and affective relations that are possible to take in relation to texts. The hermeneutic *phronimos*, in this case, will be the one who knows when to display some critical suspicion towards the text, and when to seek out a more charitable interpretation of something that may, at first glance, have seemed worthy of suspicion. On the one hand, the

wise enactment of hermeneutic charity and hermeneutic suspicion requires *phronēsis*, but, *phronēsis* itself is not identical to a character disposed toward a proper blend of charity and suspicion. In other words, it is not enough to say, as Gadamer does, that one must know how to apply the text to oneself. For the process of “application” (*Anwendung*) will also engage one’s dispositional tendencies, and the best hermeneuticist will be the one whose reactions to the text are appropriate. That is to say, the best hermeneuticist will know when to react with either more suspicion or more charity in the course of trying to understand a text.

Nevertheless, although charity and suspicion are fine examples of the kind of hermeneutic character virtues that I am trying to gesture toward here for future research, there is at least one particular form of affective disposition that seems to be to clearly fundamental for excellent interpretation, but which has largely gone unrecognized – namely, the virtue of *patience*.¹²

Patience is a requisite hermeneutic virtue not simply for the concrete fact that it takes time, often a very long time, to read. The reader prone to impatience or distraction may of course have difficulty understanding what is being said. Certainly in this case the need to re-read may be experienced as an annoying disruption of what one might otherwise hope to be a simply straight forward progression of reading one sentence after another, from the beginning of a text straight through to its end. The patient reader will know how and when to pause, re-read, start again, back up even further, re-read some more, and so on.

¹² The thoughts that follow have been somewhat inspired by Matthew Piantalo’s recent work, *On Patience. Reclaiming a Foundational Virtue*, as well as Henri Nouwen’s chapter on “Patience,” in his book, *Compassion*.

However, patient reading not only accepts that the *praxis* of reading is not straightforward – after all, one does not even always read a sentence straight through from left to right, but might re-read some clauses in different orders. Rather, to read with patience is also to understand a much more fundamental truth of hermeneutics – namely, that one may not, and often will not, understand what the text is trying to say after a first reading. Patience is thus closely related also to *persistence*. One must not only “wait patiently” as one reads a text – for example, to wait patiently in the expectant hope that the meaning of the text will become clear at some point before one finishes the book. One must also “patiently persist” again and again, often by being willing to re-read again and again the same piece in the hope that one will eventually understand, and that the text will eventually begin to speak clearly, etc.

There is also a pedagogical relevance to recognizing that the hermeneutic act requires the disposition of patience. Students are often trained to read for “efficiency” by being taught the supposed reading skills of “skimming” or “scanning” a page in order to look for “key terms.” Efficient reading and patient reading may often become opposed to one another, as in the case of reading a work of philosophy, a poem, or a sacred text. Lacking a patient hermeneutical disposition, the reader may quickly grow frustrated at the sheer opacity and “meaninglessness” or “uselessness” of, for example, Aristotle’s *Metaphysics*. Likewise, how many times does one need to read Plato’s *Symposium* or the book of Job before one “understands” – particularly if we agree with Gadamer that understanding is in the end not separable from the moment of application to one’s own life.

No doubt there are other forms of character disposition that may have significant hermeneutic relevance – for example, perhaps courage or gratitude. Furthermore, this area of

hermeneutic character virtues, which I have tried to briefly gesture toward here, will also require some engagement with the work of contemporary philosophy of emotion, virtue epistemology, and so on. The point I wish to conclude on, however, is simply this: by retrieving the concept of *phronēsis* for the discipline of hermeneutics, Gadamer has in a very real way said more than he seems to have realized. I have tried to offer an account of Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics as grounded in the concept of *phronēsis*, and to show how, on his own terms, there remains much that was left "unsaid." To the extent that I have been able to uncover this "unsaid" in Gadamer's hermeneutic ethics it was only precisely by working within his own terms in order (1) to reconsider the whole historical development of the tradition of *phronēsis*, and (2) to keep in view the extent to which the hermeneutic act engages the intellect as much as one's emotions and character.

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