

**Prejudice Reconsidered:  
A Defense of Situated Understanding**

Adam Sandel

Jesus College

For the degree of DPhil in Politics  
Department of Politics and International Relations  
University of Oxford

2013

## ABSTRACT

My dissertation draws upon ancient political philosophy (Plato and Aristotle) and 20th century hermeneutic thought (Heidegger and Gadamer) to argue that our judgment and understanding is always “situated” within a world, or horizon, shaped by the projects, practices, and traditions in which we are engaged. This means that judgment never starts from scratch. The exercise of judgment, in evaluating competing arguments in politics or law, in trying to understand a philosophical text, in deliberating about how to act in this or that circumstance, is always informed by preconceptions and commitments that we have not justified in advance. In this sense, our judgment is always “prejudiced.” But contrary to a familiar way of thinking, the prejudicial aspect of judgment is not some regrettable limitation. Certain prejudices, I argue, can actually enable good judgment rather than hinder it.

The primary goal of the dissertation is to clarify the concept of prejudice and to draw out its implications for politics, ethics, and philosophy. What does it mean to reason from within the world? What room does such reasoning allow for human agency and political reform?

By drawing upon Heidegger’s notion of “Being-in-the-World” and Gadamer’s notion of “horizon,” I develop the idea that our life circumstance is an intelligible perspective that informs our deliberation and judgment. Moreover, our life perspective provides the basis for a kind of situated agency.

After elaborating the situated conception of understanding, I show that it is implicit in Aristotle’s notion of practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and in Plato’s notion of dialectic. My goal is to bring out a link that is often overlooked between their philosophy and 20th century hermeneutic thought. By reading each in light of the other, we gain a deeper understanding of what it means to reason from within the perspective of our lives.

## CONTENTS

Introduction: The Concept of Prejudice.....5

Chapter 1: The Case Against Prejudice.....44

1. Prejudice as a source of error: Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes
2. Prejudice as a source of unfairness: Adam Smith
3. Prejudice as a source of enslavement: Immanuel Kant

Chapter 2: Situated Judgment and the role of Prejudice in Understanding:  
Heidegger and Gadamer.....79

HEIDEGGER.....79

1. Introduction to Heidegger's conception of *Dasein* and *Being-in-the-World*
2. The subject-object conception of the world contrasted to Heidegger's interpretation of the world
3. The question of being and its Socratic character
4. The *world* as a referential totality of equipment, nature, and *Dasein*
5. The world as the condition of philosophy
6. The world as the basis for the distinction between Being and beings
7. The world understood as a cosmos
8. Situated understanding and prejudice
9. Objective knowledge as a mode of Being-in-the-World
10. Being-in-the-World and human agency
11. Being-in-the-World as thrown-projection
12. Being-in-the-World and situated understanding

GADAMER.....156

1. Introduction to Gadamer's defense of prejudice, its connection to Heidegger
2. Gadamer's application of the hermeneutics of *Dasein* to the human sciences
3. Gadamer's critique of historicism
4. How to distinguish legitimate prejudices from illegitimate ones

Chapter 3: The Implicit Case for Prejudice in Philosophy and Politics:  
Plato and Aristotle.....190

PLATO.....190

1. Introduction to Plato's implicit notion of situated understanding and prejudice
2. The concept of common opinion (*doxa*) in Plato
3. Opinion and truth: The metaphor of the cave
4. The fourfold structure of pre-understanding

5. The connection of the cave metaphor to Socrates' account of dialectic
6. The revolutionary and conservative sides of situated understanding

ARISTOTLE.....251

1. Introduction to Aristotle's practical, or "situated" conception of the Good
2. Character as the condition of ethical knowledge
3. Character as the union of nature (*phusis*) and habit (*ethos*)
4. Character as the condition of its acquisition
5. The practical nature of virtue: Why the standard of good judgment cannot be captured in an abstract account
6. That situated understanding does not imply being bound to a fixed context: The way in which our prejudice is open to expansion
7. The epistemic significance of habit and the relationship between the means and ends of action
8. The sense in which virtue is given by nature

Conclusion: Prejudice and Rhetoric.....289

1. The suspicion of rhetoric as an outgrowth of the case against prejudice
2. Thomas Hobbes's case against rhetoric and its link to the detached conception of judgment
3. Prejudice and rhetoric reconsidered
4. Lyndon Johnson: Rhetoric and the meaning of everyday things
5. Abraham Lincoln: The situated character of apparently abstract eloquence
6. Frederick Douglass's situated defense of equality
7. Conclusion: The unity of philosophy and life

Bibliography.....327

(Word Count: 99,127)

## **Introduction**

### **The Concept of Prejudice**

I write, strange though it may seem, in defense of prejudice. Today prejudice is out of favor, and understandably so. It refers, more often than not, to a deplorable set of attitudes and practices based on animus and hatred for this or that group. Racial prejudice is a notorious example. It casts a dark shadow over any attempt to rehabilitate prejudice as an aspect of moral and political judgment. So why would any decent person want to defend prejudice? What possibly can be said on its behalf? Insofar as prejudice refers to thought or action beclouded by hatred and animus, the answer is nothing; such prejudice warrants condemnation, not defense. But prejudice also has a broader meaning.

Perhaps it is best captured by Kant's definition of "enlightenment" as "the emancipation from prejudices generally."<sup>1</sup> By "prejudice" he clearly means something more than unjustified hatred. Prejudice, Kant writes, is the "passivity of thought."<sup>2</sup> To be prejudiced is to be conditioned by nature, culture, tradition, or any force external to one's own reason. The "maxim of unprejudiced thought," and the essence of enlightenment, is to transcend such external influences -- to "think for one's self."<sup>3</sup>

We find a similar rejection of prejudice in some of Kant's notable predecessors. Francis Bacon, for example, writes that the human intellect would be better off "cleansed of prejudice," purged of what he calls the "idols of the mind." By the "idols," he means the influences of tradition, habit, language, upbringing, and so on. We would judge more truthfully, Bacon writes,

---

<sup>1</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), §40, 152.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

if our “understandings were unbiased, a blank slate.”<sup>4</sup> Descartes expresses a similar view when he resolves to rid himself of all “preconceptions” before reconstructing knowledge piece by piece.<sup>5</sup> Echoing the “blank slate” ideal, he maintains that our judgments would be firmer and less obscure if “we had had the full use of our reason from the moment of our birth, and if we had always been guided by it alone.”<sup>6</sup>

Thus, the notion of prejudice that Kant, Bacon, and Descartes articulate goes far beyond unjustified animus. It has to do with any source of judgment whose validity we have not verified for ourselves. The aspiration to banish prejudice in this broad sense is, I believe, a powerful intellectual ideal in our times. To be sure, we have reason to despise prejudice understood as hatred and discrimination. But the wholesale rejection of prejudice reflects the deeper, more pervasive assumption that rational judgment must be untainted by pre-judgments of any kind, including the understandings and commitments that we acquire from tradition, habit, custom, and our upbringing.

This way of thinking about judgment, and the renunciation of prejudice it implies, is what this dissertation seeks to challenge. My challenge rests on a distinction between two conceptions of judgment. The first might be called the *detached conception*. According to this conception, we judge best when we judge without relying on any external authority or influence. Such judgment is “detached” in that it seeks to break free from all influences whose validity we have not verified by our own reason.

---

<sup>4</sup> Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 18.

<sup>5</sup> Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 26.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

The second conception of judgment might be called the *situated conception*. According to this conception, the aspiration to a wholly detached way of judging is misguided; reasoned judgment is always and inescapably a form of reasoning from within our life circumstance. According to the situated conception of judgment, our life circumstance is not an obstacle to reason but a perspective that informs and enables it.

My aim in this dissertation is to elaborate and defend the situated conception of judgment. But I want also to show what is at stake in the contrast between the detached and the situated conceptions for the case against prejudice. If, as I hope to show, the situated conception is more plausible, then Kant's case against prejudice, and that of Bacon and Descartes, is called into question. If judgment is inescapably situated rather than detached, then the very attempt to "cleanse" our minds of prejudice may be misguided. Perhaps the so-called "idols of the mind" should not be banished after all.

Now the notion of reasoning and judging from within our situation, or life circumstance, is admittedly obscure. One goal of this dissertation is to make sense of it. To do so, I draw upon the work of two twentieth century German philosophers, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. They argue that our judgment is always "situated" within a world, or horizon, shaped by the traditions, projects, and practices in which we are engaged. This means that whenever we exercise our judgment -- in evaluating competing arguments in politics or law, in trying to understand a philosophical text, in deliberating about how to act in this or that circumstance -- we never start from scratch. Our judgment is always informed by preconceptions and commitments that we have not justified in advance. But contrary to appearance, the prejudicial

aspect of judgment is not some regrettable limitation. Certain prejudices, they argue, can actually enable good judgment rather than hinder it.

The assumption that good judgment must always be detached is influential today, not only in philosophy but also in politics and law. One striking example, from the American legal system, is the idea that a fair jury should be composed of members whose minds are ideally blank slates, untainted by any prior familiarity with the contending parties or the subject matter of the case. The justification frequently offered by judges and legal scholars is that this sort of jury selection eliminates bias and selects jurors who will approach the case with an open mind. But, as the inescapability of prejudice would suggest, this approach does not yield a truly prejudice-free jury. In fact, it might actually lead to a jury with the wrong prejudices -- a jury that lacks the background understanding necessary to judge well or to even identify the relevant facts.

Consider, for example, the approach to jury selection in the 1990 obscenity trial of a Cincinnati art museum and its director, who were accused of exhibiting controversial photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe. The judge dismissed a potential juror simply on the grounds that she had seen the exhibit (not only the controversial photographs). She was also the only one who claimed to be a regular museum-goer. Among the jurors selected was someone who “never went to museums.”<sup>7</sup> The judge assumed that people who had seen the exhibit, or even people who often visit museums, would be somehow prejudiced, perhaps in favor of artistic license, and would therefore be disposed to judge unfairly. In an attempt to avoid prejudice

---

<sup>7</sup> Jeffrey Abramson, *We, the Jury*, (New York: Basic Books, 1994), 21-22.

altogether, the judge apparently sought to fill the jury with people who had no prior familiarity with museums (or obscenity law).

But is such a jury really prejudice-free? A more plausible account is that a jury of people who almost never go to museums tends to be prejudiced in its own way: Such a jury would seem to have little basis for determining what is appropriate in that context. How could people unfamiliar with the type of work normally displayed in museums accurately determine whether a certain photograph met “contemporary community standards of decency” -- the standard they were asked to interpret? Jurors who lacked this background knowledge, or prejudice, would seem ill-equipped to judge the case fairly.

My use of “prejudice” will no doubt sound strange to those familiar with its pejorative sense. Isn’t what I have here called “prejudice” simply a stand-in for “background knowledge?” In a sense, yes. My aim is precisely to connect these concepts. But the important question is what *kind* of knowledge. To say that I “know” what sort of work is typically displayed in museums is different from saying that I “know” the names of the photographs currently on exhibit. The second is mere information, whereas the first is a familiarity with content, with what counts as art versus trash. Beyond being value-laden, this sort of knowledge seems inescapably situated. It involves being raised in a certain community, going to museums, interpreting the art, developing a sense for what’s “decent.” In this sense, we might call such knowledge a “prejudice.” Furthermore, insofar as such knowledge is situated, it would not be reducible to rules or principles accessible to anyone anywhere. This particularist quality of situated knowledge fits with the common association of “prejudice” with partiality.

A second example of the contemporary suspicion of prejudice lies behind the denigration of political rhetoric common today, well captured by the familiar expression “that’s mere rhetoric” -- eloquent nonsense crafted merely to persuade a particular audience. This denigration of rhetoric goes beyond a mistrust of politicians and their motives. It reflects a deeper view about the nature of political argument and how it should proceed. According to this view, political arguments depend for their justification on principles that can be specified “non-rhetorically,” so to speak -- without reference to the particular situations in which they arise. Rhetoric, which attempts to persuade through stories, images, and references geared to a particular audience, is, at best, an adornment to the “real argument.” At worst, rhetoric is a form of pandering or deception. The suspicion of rhetoric, one might say, is based on the proposition that rhetoric appeals to people’s prejudices and not their reason. Persuasive orators, the argument goes, lead their listeners to judge in a partial manner -- influenced by their own perspectives, which others may not share. We assume that policies and principles should ultimately be justified in abstraction from the predispositions of a particular audience -- justified by reasons ideally accessible to anyone anywhere.

But examples of great rhetoric force us to question this assumption. The speeches of political figures such as John F. Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, and Martin Luther King arguably derive their moral force not simply from the principles they invoke, but from the way in which they appeal to the life circumstances of their listeners. In his campaign for civil rights, for example, Lyndon Johnson was famous for evoking feelings such as moral outrage, bound up with everyday roles and practices that resonated with his audience. He was even known to speak

in a thicker southern accent in the South in order to forge a common footing with his listeners.<sup>8</sup> Although Johnson spoke to people as situated, he used his rhetoric to challenge their views -- to denounce segregation in light of other practices that mattered to them. Strange though it may sound, by appealing to people's prejudices, Johnson's rhetoric arguably gave moral force to principles of equality.<sup>9</sup>

The attempt at blank-slate jury selection and the suspicion of political rhetoric attest to the rejection of prejudice familiar today. But as I have suggested, this rejection is misguided. In order to rehabilitate the concept of prejudice, I begin by exposing the ideal of detached judgement as *itself* a prejudice -- an aspiration shaped by a questionable tradition of thought. Following Gadamer's lead, we find the source of this tradition in the early modern period and the Enlightenment. In fact, as Gadamer points out, "not until the Enlightenment does *the concept of prejudice* acquire the negative connotation familiar today."<sup>10</sup> The word "prejudice," he explains, actually comes from "prejudgment," which used to have "either a positive or negative value." This meaning, he continues, seems to have been limited during the Enlightenment "to the sense of an unfounded judgment," a judgment shaped by human authority or tradition rather than one's own reason.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Bryan Garsten, *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 193.

<sup>9</sup> See Conclusion, section 4.

<sup>10</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1989), 273.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

In Chapter 1 of this dissertation, I examine the case against prejudice as it emerged in early modern and Enlightenment thought.<sup>12</sup> In a way, this continues Gadamer's discussion of prejudice by offering a more sustained account of what he famously calls the "prejudice against prejudice."<sup>13</sup> My goal, however, is not to provide an exhaustive history of the concept of prejudice, nor to prove Gadamer's provocative suggestion that the "prejudice against prejudice" defines the essence of the Enlightenment.<sup>14</sup> My historical turn is intended, rather, to clarify the concept of prejudice and to lay out the most compelling arguments against it. To this end, I examine Bacon, Descartes, Smith, and Kant -- all of whom explicitly address "prejudice" or develop the ideal of detached judgment.

As we will see, these thinkers sought to banish somewhat different conceptions of prejudice. Adam Smith, for example, associates prejudice with particular customs and loyalties, which he considers parochial and irrational.<sup>15</sup> He does not, however, consider the basic sentiments he defends to be prejudices, even though he understands such sentiments to be conditions of moral judgment.<sup>16</sup> Kant, by contrast, considers *any* sentiment, however widely shared, to be a prejudice no different in principle from particular desires, habits, and customs. Prejudice, by his account, denotes anything "given," or prior to one's own reason.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> "Enlightenment" here refers to the self-description of the age in which the thinkers whom I examine wrote. I do not mean to assert that a single way of thinking defined what we today call the Enlightenment period.

<sup>13</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 273.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 272-273.

<sup>15</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Ryan Patrick Hanley (New York: Penguin, 2009), 229.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 376.

<sup>17</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, §40, 152.

But despite their disagreements about the scope of prejudice, all of these thinkers agree that we judge best when we abstract from prejudice broadly conceived as our situation, or life circumstance. In fact, the reason Smith exempts the basic moral sentiments from the category of “prejudice,” even though the sentiments condition our judgement, is that he considers them to be fixed and universal in the human species. As such (so he claims) they provide a basis of judgment independent of habit, custom, and tradition.

In addition to highlighting the nuances of “prejudice,” the thinkers I examine bring out two important senses in which transcending prejudice leads us to judge “well.” The first sense of judging “well,” which Bacon, Descartes, and Smith emphasize, is judging *truthfully*. Our situation, they argue, especially our upbringing and the authority of tradition, tends to lead us astray. Transcending such prejudice is the first step toward discovering the *truth*, whether about the universe (Bacon and Descartes) or about the right way to act (Smith).

The second sense of judging “well,” which Kant highlights, is judging *freely*. Judgment influenced by prejudice, he argues, is not only erroneous but enslaved. Free judgment must be autonomous; it must come from within, from the dictates of one’s own reason and not from habit, custom, culture, or even desire.

Thus, the case against prejudice has two strands -- one to do with truth, the other with agency. My aim is to challenge both of these strands, at least with regard to moral and political judgment: to show that prejudice can be illuminating and also consistent with a genuine kind of freedom.

In order to defend prejudice by way of the situated conception of understanding, I want to introduce a distinction between two different versions of that conception. The first version, which I derive from Heidegger and Gadamer, might be called the “hermeneutic” conception. The term “hermeneutic” captures the sense in which one’s life circumstance is an intelligible viewpoint open to interpretation. The second version might be called the “sentimental” conception. In contrast to the hermeneutic conception, it defends the unreflective embrace of tradition and sentiment over reason. Edmund Burke’s case for prejudice is an illuminating example. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), Burke shockingly declares: “In this enlightened age, I am bold enough to confess, that we are generally men of untaught feelings; that instead of casting away all our old prejudices, we cherish them to a very considerable degree, and, to take more shame to ourselves, we cherish them because they are prejudices.”<sup>18</sup>

Burke’s reference to “this enlightened age” highlights the sense in which he saw his defense of prejudice as a reaction against the spirit of his times. Like Kant, Burke identifies “enlightenment” with the overcoming of prejudice. But instead of lauding this development, he bemoans it. As his connection of prejudice to “untaught feelings” suggests, Burke’s defense of prejudice builds upon Smith’s (and Hume’s) defense of sentiment over reason.<sup>19</sup> Echoing his Scottish predecessors, Burke declares that “our passions instruct our reason.”<sup>20</sup> But by defending

---

<sup>18</sup> Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790), ed. Frank M. Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 74.

<sup>19</sup> The phrase “untaught feelings” appears somewhat strange given that these “feelings,” according to Burke, are specifically those cultivated by habit and custom. In this sense they would seem “taught,” not “untaught.” But the phrase makes sense if we consider “untaught” to mean “from a source whose authority does not depend on rational justification.” This is precisely how Burke understands tradition.

<sup>20</sup> Burke, *Reflections*, 69.

sentiment as a kind of “prejudice,” Burke does not simply restate the views of Smith and Hume in more shocking terms. For the sentiments Burke defends are precisely those that Smith and Hume denounce as *mere* prejudices. In particular, Burke defends sentiments connected to traditional institutions and social roles -- the feelings of reverence sustained by “the spirit of a gentleman, and the spirit of religion.”<sup>21</sup> Smith, as we have seen, denounces such sentiments as parochial. He defends instead what he considers to be the general, “natural” sentiments -- those supposedly untainted by habit and custom. Burke, by contrast, defends precisely those sentiments shaped by traditional sources of authority.

When Burke speaks in praise of “prejudice,” he rarely means “untaught feelings” in the abstract, but feelings as shaped by particular habits, customs, and roles. In fact, he often uses “prejudice” to denote the habits, customs, and roles themselves. For example, he speaks of the “church prejudice,” by which he means the established church of England insofar as it shapes the practice and judgment of Englishmen. He ranks the church establishment “first of our prejudices” and defends it at great length.<sup>22</sup>

But in key passages, at least, Burke’s vehement defense of prejudice actually accepts a basic premise of the outlook he challenges. Like Bacon, Descartes, Smith, and Kant, Burke accepts the basic opposition of prejudice and reason. He thus adopts the distinction grounding the case against prejudice and merely flips the values -- defending prejudice over reason.

Consider his praise of tradition in the following passage:

To fortify the fallible and feeble contrivances of our reason, we have derived several other, and no small benefits from considering our liberties in light of an inheritance...The idea of a liberal descent inspires us with a sense of habitual native dignity...By this means our liberty becomes a noble freedom. It carries an

---

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. 67.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 78.

imposing and majestic aspect. It has a pedigree and illustrious ancestors. It has its bearings and its ensigns armorial. It has its gallery of portraits; its monumental inscriptions; its records, evidences, and titles. We procure reverence to our civil institutions on the principle upon which nature teaches us to revere individual men; on account of their age, and on account of those from whom they are descended.<sup>23</sup>

Here Burke praises England's "inheritance" for instilling a sense of dignity, nobility and majesty.

But this sense does not correspond to some inherent meaning that our inheritance embodies. We revere the "civil institutions," "ancestors," "portraits," "monuments," and everything else, Burke suggests, not because they have some intrinsic value that makes a claim on our reason, but because they are *old*. The mere fact that our institutions are old triggers a certain "natural" reverence in us. Reverence comes not from reason, which is "fallible and feeble," but from nature, which he calls the avenue leading to the heart as distinct from the mind. Our prejudices, according to Burke, are sentimental affects, "well-placed sympathies of the human breast."<sup>24</sup>

Burke's separation of prejudice and reason comes to powerful expression in his defense of tradition as "pleasing illusion." As this expression suggests, Burke considers tradition to be at odds with enlightenment and reason. But instead of celebrating enlightenment, he bemoans the decay of tradition:

All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politics the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the superadded ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.<sup>25</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 66.

Tradition, according to Burke, is a “pleasing” illusion that *human beings* create. Burke’s metaphor of throwing “drapery” over social life powerfully captures his belief that we adorn the brute facts, or conventions, with our own subjective values. He makes this explicit when he writes that the drapery is “furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination.” The wardrobe represents the inner sphere of subjectivity. We draw from the wardrobe and throw its contents upon society in order to “cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature.” Burke thus implies that reverence for tradition is the product of a human need, a need to find value in a world that, in itself, is meaningless. Most telling is Burke’s claim that our traditions raise our nature to dignity “in our *own* estimation” (emphasis added). In other words, the roles, customs, and institutions that constitute tradition are elaborate artifacts created by human beings to convince themselves of their own worth. Tradition derives its meaning from the values which human subjects ascribe to it. Accordingly, Burke at one point refers to tradition as “artificial.”<sup>26</sup>

Burke’s sentimentalist defense of prejudice offers a clarifying contrast to the hermeneutic defense I aim to develop. My goal is not to sing a wistful praise of the past, but to connect prejudice and reason, to show that our habits, customs, and traditions are more than sentimental dispositions or mechanical ways of behaving. According to the hermeneutic case for prejudice, our habits, customs, and traditions are more or less informed understandings that emerge from and articulate our life circumstance -- an intelligible outlook that, for better or worse, always shapes our judgments and actions.

---

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 117.

In Chapter 2, I derive the situated conception of judgment from Heidegger and Gadamer, first and foremost from Heidegger's notion of "Being-in-the-World." In the first part of Chapter 2, I offer an interpretation of Being-in-the-World that challenges the ideal of detached judgment and that tries to make sense of what it means to reason from within our life circumstance. At the heart of "Being-in-the-World" is the idea that our most basic mode of understanding is not the detached scrutiny of our beliefs and their origin, but the practical understanding that arises from making things, putting them to use, responding to situations, aiming at certain ends. This sort of understanding not only arises from but is also embodied in our activity. Heidegger's notion of Being-in-the-World leads him to reject the familiar subject-object distinction.<sup>27</sup> When we are engaged in our activity, he argues, we are not subjects who contemplate objects. Rather, we are bound up with our purposes and ends, situated in the world we seek to understand.

In order to capture this notion, Heidegger replaces the subject-object distinction with the concept of "Dasein," literally "being-there."<sup>28</sup> "Dasein" expresses the idea that we are defined by what we do, by the activities we carry out, by the situations in which we find ourselves, and ultimately, by our comprehensive situation, or life circumstance -- what Heidegger calls the "world." The world, as Heidegger understands it, is not a set of arbitrary habits, customs, or social forces that condition us blindly. It is an intelligible whole, constituted by the totality of our practices.<sup>29</sup> "Being-in-the-World" denotes our fundamental awareness of this articulated

---

<sup>27</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927), trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1962), 87.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>29</sup> The complication, of course, is that this "whole," according to Heidegger, is an incomplete, or a partial whole. It is not a closed circle of meaning intelligible "down to the smallest letter" (Gadamer), as Hegel's Spirit. In this sense, the whole contradicts itself. But Heidegger nevertheless insists that the world must be understood as a destiny (*Geschick*), as a meaningful whole, however incomplete. For this reason, the term "intelligible whole" is a fitting description for what he means by the "world." It highlights the crucial contrast between the "world" and a set of meaningless social forces.

whole -- an awareness that is itself engaged, or embodied in our life. Such awareness, Heidegger argues, is the condition for the possibility of all action and understanding. It is the condition even of our ability to study the things around us as objects. Such reflection is one way of Being-in-the-World, not a privileged way of grasping reality or judging soundly.<sup>30</sup>

After interpreting Heidegger's account of Being-in-the-World to clarify the situated conception of understanding and to challenge the ideal of detached judgement, I consider whether Being-in-the-World allows room for human agency. This question has special significance in light of the case against prejudice I seek to challenge. For one of the main arguments against prejudice (as I show in Chapter 1), is that prejudice is opposed to freedom. If deliberation and judgment is unavoidably situated, or in Heidegger's terms, a mode of Being-in-the-World, then what becomes of freedom?

Although Heidegger does not attribute autonomy to a subject, I argue that his notion of Dasein nonetheless allows for a conception of agency. The basis of this conception is his interpretation of Dasein as "thrown-projection," which highlights a passive and an active dimension of Being-in-the-World.<sup>31</sup> "Thrownness" reflects the fact that any judgment, intention, or action, however revolutionary, makes sense only in relation to what is "given," namely, the world, the totality of practices in which we are situated. Although we can question and revise any particular practice, aim, role, or judgment, we are incapable of overturning the whole order of things, of redefining ourselves from the ground up.

This does not mean that the whole is a fate to which we are enslaved. It is, rather, the source of a certain kind of agency. Heidegger gestures toward this notion of agency with the

---

<sup>30</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 86-87.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 188.

concept of “projection.” Even what appears to be mere habit, or thoughtless adherence to tradition, involves a sort of creative adaptation. However implicitly, we are always reshaping the world that conditions us. Projection thus involves a kind of freedom, which, moreover, can be interpreted as a certain kind of autonomy -- arguably a more genuine kind than Kant’s ideal of pure practical reason.

Central to the conception of agency that I derive from Heidegger is that Dasein is at once entirely passive and entirely active. We can make sense of this apparent contradiction by understanding the *unity* of thrownness and projection -- the way in which each depends on the other. By highlighting this unity, I offer an interpretation of Dasein as neither self-creative nor subservient to a pre-given destiny. At the same time, I argue against a familiar understanding of Dasein as free to shape its identity but only within the “range of possibilities available in [its] culture.”<sup>32</sup> To conceive of Dasein as partly-free, partly constrained in this way mistakes thrownness, or what is “given,” for a limit to agency rather than its source.

For those unfamiliar with Heidegger’s thought, this preview of “Being-in-the-World,” “Dasein,” and “thrown-projection” will still, I imagine, seem somewhat obscure. To shed light on these key terms is my task in Chapter 2. At this point, I aim only to prepare this discussion by indicating how “Being-in-the-World” helps us distinguish the detached from the situated conception of judgement.

What Heidegger means by “Dasein,” the “world,” “thrownness,” and “projection,” is notoriously difficult to discern. In drawing upon these terms to clarify what I mean by “situation,” or “prejudice,” I also offer a certain interpretation of the world that I believe is most

---

<sup>32</sup> Richard Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999), 63.

faithful to Heidegger but finds little expression in Anglo-American readings of his thought.

Whereas these readings tend to view the world as a contingent web of practices,<sup>33</sup> I argue that it should instead be conceived as a sort of lived story, or a destiny. (The term “story” I take from Hannah Arendt’s discussion of the “web of enacted stories,”<sup>34</sup> and the term “destiny,” I take from Heidegger himself.) Although this destiny is essentially veiled, or incomplete, it is nevertheless intelligible -- not as an object of theoretical knowledge, but as a narrative that we live out. We participate, moreover, in bringing it to light.

As such, the world is not a network of contingent social practices that condition us blindly and passively. I was led to recognize this point in my effort to distinguish Heidegger’s conception of the “world” from mere circumstance as articulated by those who denounce prejudice. Central to my argument in Chapter 2 is that judging from within our “situation,” or “life circumstance,” does not imply being governed by a set of contingent social conventions or mere sentiments. What I have called “situation,” or “life circumstance” is captured in Heidegger’s notion of the world, which is an intelligible whole, a whole that is articulated into a “totality of involvements” (i.e. a totality of purposes and ends). Although the world itself is not identical to its articulations, and cannot be understood in the same way as any activity or practice can be understood, the world is nevertheless intelligible from within. We understand the world by “Being-in-the-World,” and this understanding is susceptible to improvement. As this sort of intelligible whole, the world provides a basis for deliberation and judgment.

---

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Piotr Hoffman, “Death, Time, Historicity: Division II of *Being and Time*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles B. Guignon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006). Here he refers to the “the full contingency and groundlessness” of Dasein’s existence (Hoffman, 239). Cf. also Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger’s Being and Time, Division I* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991).

<sup>34</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 181.

In order to cast this idea in more familiar terms, we might describe the “world,” or what I have called our “situation,” or “life circumstance,” as a *perspective*. The situated conception of judgement captures the fact that all judgment comes from a certain perspective. The concept of perspective affords us an intuitively plausible model for how our situation, or “world,” can inform our judgment rather than hinder it.

When we speak of “perspective” in the visual sense, we mean a particular range of view -- the perspective from the valley, the mountaintop, the edge of the sea. The curious thing about a perspective is its relation to the things it makes visible. A perspective itself is not identical to the totality of things it reveals. As the condition of sight, a perspective cannot be seen in the same way as any of the things it reveals can be seen. And yet, a perspective is nothing but the totality of what it reveals. Consider, for example, the perspective from a mountaintop. The perspective is inseparable from the fields that checker the landscape, the lake in the distance, the hills beyond it. Without these things, the perspective would not be the distinctive viewpoint that it is. Nevertheless, the perspective, or the whole range of view, itself invisible, is what grants us the vision of these things and what gives them their distinctive look. If we change our perspective by descending the mountain, the same things appear in different proportions. If we turn away entirely, they all vanish.

This curious part-whole interdependence, and the elusive character of the whole, also characterizes what we call a “life perspective.” By “life perspective,” we typically mean a particular point of view shaped by many experiences but at the same time their condition. Consider, for example, the perspective of a child. The child’s perspective is shaped, of course, by the characteristic activities of a child -- preparing for “show and tell” at school, eagerly

awaiting recess, playing “hide and go seek,” waiting for the ice cream truck, watching cartoons, and so on. Without doing any of the childlike things, one would not have the distinctive perspective of a child. And yet, it is only from the perspective of a child, or a childlike sensibility, that any of these things “appear,” or command the interest and excitement that they do. The perspective of a child is thus the condition of the many activities that shape it.

The same part-whole relationship defines our “life perspective” in the comprehensive sense in which we often speak of it: the point of view shaped by the experiences (i.e., activities, roles, practices, etc.) familiar to us. A life perspective is inseparable from these experiences, but it also grants them their distinctive meaning. In other words, any particular experience, or set of experiences, however “defining” of my identity, makes sense, or has the significance it does, only in light of my life as a whole. This is captured, I believe, in the familiar experience of having to tell a story in order to express the meaning of a significant event or person in our lives. When we attempt to elicit the meaning of particular things, we have to articulate, to some extent, the whole way of life in which they fit. We have to say something about our perspective.

To be sure, our perspective is for the most part inarticulate, and no account of it could be exhaustive. Just as a visual perspective conditions everything we see, a life perspective conditions everything we understand, including our particular attempts to elucidate the perspective itself. Moreover, a life perspective cannot be questioned or revised in the same way as any particular activity or practice can be. For our perspective directs in the first place what appears as question-worthy. What Heidegger means by the “world” is something like our life perspective in this comprehensive sense. This is the sense of “situation” I aim to develop.

Perhaps it is easier to see how one's situation, conceived in terms of "perspective," can provide a basis for reasoned judgement.

We can see this with particular clarity by considering how we speak of higher, more expansive perspectives, and lower, more limited ones. Consider Plato's image from the *Phaedo* of someone's clouded view of the sun and the stars from the perspective beneath the sea compared to the clearer view of someone who could lift his head out of the water and gaze upon the world above.<sup>35</sup> Although it may be difficult, in certain instances, to distinguish among better and worse perspectives, in most cases, at least, we can distinguish quite easily. (While we may be unable to determine whether the view of Mount Everest is superior from above, as from an airplane, or from below, as from base camp, we could still say with certainty that both of these perspectives surpass that of a person climbing the mountain while looking at his feet.)

In the case of life perspectives, we also have a sense of higher and lower. Consider the perspective of a child compared to that of an adult. We recognize the superior perspective of an adult insofar as it reveals more clearly, or in truer proportion, the relative significance of certain interests, concerns, aims, responsibilities, and so on. The perspective of an adult thus informs deeper understandings and better judgments. We experience this all the time in those instances of returning to a book, or a movie, that we read, or watched, when we were young and being able to interpret it in a new and more insightful way.

In general terms, we can say that the adult perspective reveals the child's perspective as partial and thus includes it in a more comprehensive awareness. This does not imply that the child's perspective is entirely immature or misguided. In fact, we recognize certain childlike

---

<sup>35</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 111a-c.

sensibilities as correctives to the habits we fall into as adults. We appreciate, for example, the sense of wonder for the little things around us that we tend to pass by in the hustle and bustle of the work day. But these features of a child's perspective, and their characteristic charm, emerge only from the viewpoint of an adult, a viewpoint informed by alternative attitudes and stances toward the world. From this more expansive perspective, an adult can articulate the insight and shortcoming of a child's way of seeing things.

We can draw the same kind of distinctions among life perspectives in the comprehensive sense, i.e., the variations of our fundamental awareness of the "world," our situation writ large. Certain understandings of the world are more comprehensive than others. They enable deeper understandings and better judgments.

In a certain sense, judging from a perspective might seem to imply being limited, even hopelessly bound to a single viewpoint. The limited nature of situated understanding is well captured in the familiar expression "you would have had to be there to really understand." In this phrase we acknowledge the sense in which insightful commentary on certain topics (for example, what made the joke so funny) seems to presuppose a shared experience (having actually been "there," at the comedy show), an experience that cannot be fully reproduced in an abstract account alone. But to think that such experiences form some fixed perspective that includes us (who attended the show) and excludes everyone else, would be a mistake. It would overlook the basic fact that by giving an account of the situation, we invite others, who may not have been there with us, to consider our account by reference to their own, potentially analogous experiences. We thereby invite them within our perspective but also open it to expansion in light of what they say. Perhaps upon hearing another person's account of the situation, we revise how

we had previously characterized our having been “there.” The familiar experience of persuading someone else to see things your way -- or of being persuaded -- proves that our perspectives are open to expansion. As Heidegger shows, our fundamental experience of the world, our situation, or perspective, writ large is open to expansion in the same way. The very fact that one’s perspective is not a subjective viewpoint but embodied in one’s life activity, in relation to others, means that, at least in principle, others can come to share it.

The standard of a “broader” or “more comprehensive” perspective is, of course, not some unconditional criterion of truth -- for that would undermine the very notion of perspective. Rather, the standard is given *by the perspective itself*, by how it reveals the partiality of a previous perspective. In other words, the way in which we know that a perspective is “more comprehensive” is that clarifies a previous one, exposing it as a shrouded view of what we now can see clearly. Only in light of the transition from a lower perspective to a higher one, by which the latter includes and supersedes the former, does the superiority of the higher emerge. Because the higher includes the lower and is thus inseparable from it (as an adult’s perspective includes a child’s) the problem of rival or incompatible perspectives does not arise. The problem would arise only if in asserting one perspective to be “higher” or “clearer” than another we assumed two entirely alien viewpoints. But when we speak of “higher” and “lower” life perspectives, we mean that the higher is “higher” precisely because it contains the lower, revealing both its insight and shortcoming. In this sense our understanding is always retrospective. We come to grasp the true merit our of perspective only by recapturing it within a more adequate one. As Hegel famously maintained, “the owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of the dusk.”<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 13.

Although the situated conception of judgment implies that some perspectives are higher than others, it does not imply Hegel's claim that there is a single, highest perspective from which we attain absolute knowledge. As Heidegger shows, the "situated" character of understanding means not only that understanding is engaged, or practical, rather than detached, but that understanding is essentially incomplete. It is worth taking a moment to consider that practical understanding does not itself imply incompleteness. Although our understandings may be conditioned by the life in which we are engaged, by what Hegel calls "ethical substance," we might nevertheless, at least conceivably, attain a perfectly clear understanding of the life that conditions us. This is precisely what Hegel claims to have achieved in his philosophy. He maintains that understanding is not detached, or captured in abstract concepts alone. For the meaning of concepts only makes sense to someone engaged in the life from which the concepts emerge. But to such a person, at least at the end of history, the philosophical statement is the perfectly clear expression of that way of life. Hegel's absolute knowledge thus exemplifies only one dimension of what I mean by situated understanding. Absolute knowledge is situated insofar as it depends for its intelligibility on the actual life it knows. And yet, it is also complete, fully clear, and, in this sense, prejudice-free.

According to the conception of situated understanding I derive from Heidegger, even our broadest and clearest perspectives remain, to some extent, partial and veiled. Put in positive terms, our perspectives are never fixed once and for all, but always open to further clarification and expansion. This has to do with the creative, or "projective" dimension of understanding -- that any particular act of understanding comes to reshape the perspective that conditioned it. The

partiality of our perspectives, together with their practical character, highlights the sense in which they are prejudices.

The connection of “perspective,” or “situation,” to “prejudice” finds explicit statement in Gadamer. By drawing upon Heidegger’s notion of Being-in-the-World, Gadamer derives the idea that “all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice (*Vorurteil*).”<sup>37</sup> This, he argues, is not some regrettable limitation. For certain prejudices, or aspects of our life circumstance, can enable understanding. They can be, as he puts it, “productive of knowledge.”<sup>38</sup> In the second part of Chapter 2, I show how this apparently puzzling claim is plausible.

Gadamer’s reason for linking Being-in-the-World to “prejudice” is to rehabilitate the sources of judgment that became discredited during the Enlightenment. His primary aim is to show how our life circumstance, or “horizon,” shaped by our traditions, practices, commitments, and concerns, is a perspective that informs our understanding in the human sciences. In particular, he seeks to undermine a certain ideal of detached historical research that arose in the wake of the Enlightenment. According to this ideal, which he calls “historicism,” the proper method of research is to abstract from our own interests, concerns, and conceptions of truth, so as to avoid imposing contemporary views upon a past age. Historicism teaches us to discover the “original” meaning of an historical work by escaping our own perspective and reconstructing the context in which the work emerged. Gadamer challenges historicism by arguing that contemporary prejudices are unavoidable, but also potentially illuminating. Although certain prejudices may obscure our understanding of an historical work (or epoch), others may clarify it.

---

<sup>37</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 272.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

My interpretation of Gadamer begins by laying out his general critique of historicism. My aim is to draw out the implications of the situated conception of judgment for how we relate to the past. Gadamer's crucial insight, in this regard, is that to be situated within a horizon means that one's own "present" is always in motion. It is not a fixed set of "opinions and valuations," but a fundamental awareness that is open to question.<sup>39</sup> As such, it cannot be sharply distinguished from the past. Insofar as our own identity is open to question, so too is the extent to which we differ from past ages. And insofar as the past is intelligible, it is never truly behind us. In a sense, the past and present belong together. This belonging implies that the meaning of any aspect of our historical tradition can be recovered only in relation to the present. The notion that we should try to escape our contemporary perspective to attain prejudice-free historical knowledge is misguided.

After laying out this relation between past and present at a general level, I offer a concrete analysis of how contemporary prejudices can enable historical understanding. Gadamer's devotion to how prejudice informs the study of classical texts makes his work of special relevance for historians of ideas, political theorists, and those concerned with interpreting a tradition of thought. In order to highlight this relevance, I apply his theory of prejudice to interpreting Plato's *Republic*. I first consider how a certain contemporary prejudice can illuminate Plato's conception of poetry (Book X). I conclude by showing how a certain misleading prejudice can be overcome through a careful reading of Plato's teaching on opinion versus knowledge (Book V). My aim is to clarify how Gadamer's theory of prejudice works. Central to this challenge is working out the distinction between prejudices that illuminate and

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 305.

prejudices that distort. I also hope to show how interpretation involves a twofold gain in knowledge: a better understanding of the text, and a better understanding of ourselves. My reason for interpreting Plato is to prepare Chapter 3, in which his philosophy takes center stage.

In Chapter 3, I turn to Plato and Aristotle. I do so in order to show how they give early and powerful expression to the situated conception of judgment. At the heart of their thought, I show, is a compelling account of how judgment is informed by a certain notion of prejudice.

The apparent difficulty with this claim is that neither Plato nor Aristotle explicitly addresses the concept of “prejudice,” or even “situation.” The word “prejudice” is of Latin origin, and the concept has, of course, been shaped by the understanding that emerged in modern times. Plato and Aristotle did not have this tradition behind them, and in particular, they did not confront the ideal of detached judgment as expressed by its modern proponents. For this reason, their case for “prejudice” is implicit in other concepts. Similarly, the word “situation” is of German roots and lacks an obvious Greek equivalent. My derivation of the “situated” conception of judgement from Plato and Aristotle therefore relies upon similar, but, of course, not identical, concepts.

The most conspicuous is that of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom, as developed by Aristotle in the *Ethics*.<sup>40</sup> *Phronesis* captures the way in which moral judgment involves a virtuous disposition of character (*hexis*), cultivated by one’s upbringing (*paideia*), habit (*ethos*), and practice (*praxis*). Sound moral judgement is thus irreducible to abstract principles. It is

---

<sup>40</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), Book VI.

unattainable through book-learning and the use of one's own reason alone. In this sense, it is a kind of "situated judgment."

This interpretation of Aristotle is not without precedent. In his recent book *Saving Persuasion*, Bryan Garsten uses the term "situated judgment" to describe a key feature of Aristotle's ethics.<sup>41</sup> Most significantly, Gadamer uses Aristotle's conception of moral judgment as a model for his situated conception of historical understanding (cf. *Truth and Method*, "The hermeneutic relevance of Aristotle"). To this end, Gadamer interprets the basic problem of Aristotle's ethics in the following terms: "If man always encounters the good in the form of the particular practical situation in which he finds himself, the task of moral knowledge is to determine what the concrete situation asks of him..."<sup>42</sup> Moreover, in a fascinating remark in his essay "Hermeneutics and Historicism" (1965), Gadamer acknowledges that his use of Aristotle actually "followed a line that Heidegger began in his early years at Freiburg, where he was concerned with a hermeneutics of facticity [i.e., the "given"], against neo-kantianism."<sup>43</sup> This suggests that Heidegger's infrequent and often critical citations to Aristotle in *Being and Time* actually conceal a deep debt to Aristotle's *Ethics*. As Gadamer (who was one of Heidegger's closest students) reveals, Aristotelian philosophy was a springboard for Heidegger's notion of Being-in-the-World: "a real vindicator of [Heidegger's] own philosophical purposes." In particular, Heidegger drew upon Aristotle's "demonstration of the analogical structure of the good and the knowledge of the good that is required in the situation of action."<sup>44</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 124.

<sup>42</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 311.

<sup>43</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Hermeneutics and Historicism" (1965), in *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, rev. ed. (New York: Continuum, 1989), 536.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 536.

In Chapter 3, I follow Heidegger and Gadamer in deriving from Aristotle's *Ethics* a situated conception of judgment. My contribution is to tie Aristotle's notion of *hexis*, or disposition of character, to "prejudice." In particular, I show how Aristotle vindicates habit (*ethos*) as a source of character and sound judgment. As such, habit is not opposed to nature, or natural right, but its partner.

Aristotle's connection to the case for prejudice is familiar enough. Plato's is far less so. I nonetheless attempt to show that Plato too can be seen as defending a version of situated understanding. This challenges a familiar interpretation, which sees Plato's conception of the *ideas* as offering, in fact, a radically *prejudice-free* ideal of knowledge. This interpretation appears, of course, to find strong support in the famous cave metaphor.<sup>45</sup> The metaphor seems to teach that philosophy involves escaping the shadowy realm of changing opinions and appearances in order to grasp the eternal truth. By means of a sort of pure reason, detached from the influence of *nomos* and tradition, the philosopher is able to escape this cave-world and to attain knowledge of the *ideas*, ultimately of the *good* itself, which remains the same everywhere and always, regardless of any particular perspective. This interpretation is well summarized by Raphael Demos in his introduction to Jowett's edition of *The Dialogues of Plato*:

Plato's philosophy is perhaps the most notable effort in the history of Western thought to construct a doctrine of absolute and objective values...Thus, there are two worlds; the world of absolute beauty, and the world of opinion, with its conventions and delusions. This is the root of the dualism in Plato's philosophy -- a dualism which is fundamental and pervasive in his thought.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> Plato, *Republic*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935), 514a-518b.

<sup>46</sup> Raphael Demos, Introduction, *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Random House 1937), 9.

Contrary to this familiar interpretation, I argue that Plato defends a certain situated conception of philosophy. To state this conception in brief: Philosophy is situated in that it begins from common opinion and everyday life, which sustains a hazy, pre-philosophical understanding of the *ideas*. Through questioning certain opinions and practices in light of others, philosophy gradually develops this hazy awareness, arriving at clearer knowledge. Philosophy can be said to transcend the world of opinion and appearance only in the sense that it reveals its deeper truth -- a truth implicit from the start, initially veiled by contradictory opinions. At no point is philosophy detached, and even at the highest level of understanding, it remains incomplete. This is what I aim to show through a close reading of Plato's *Republic*, with reference also to the *Apology*, *Phaedo*, and *Symposium*.<sup>47</sup>

This situated conception, I believe, goes to the heart of Plato's thought and offers, perhaps, the most inspiring case for prejudice. Of course, the burden of my interpretation is to show that even those passages that appear to defend a detached conception of knowledge actually support a compelling version of the situated conception. Central, therefore, to my interpretation, is a reading of the cave metaphor that challenges the familiar view that the metaphor depicts philosophy as transcending opinion and appearance. In short, this view overlooks the fact that the shadows and statues in the cave prefigure the actual things in the world above. The relation of the shadows to the things above implies that common opinion is not entirely deceptive but contains hints of the truth.

---

<sup>47</sup> In my interpretations of Plato and Aristotle, the translations of the Greek are my own unless otherwise stated. I have used the Loeb edition Greek texts, edited by Jeffrey Henderson. In translating Plato, I have often drawn upon the translations of Allan Bloom (*The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom, 2nd ed. (Basic Books, 1991)) and Seth Benardete (*Plato's Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993)). In translating Aristotle, I have often referred to H. Rackham's Loeb Edition translation (*The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926)).

Plato seems to suggest that as opinion is questioned and revised, it approaches truth with increasing clarity. He represents the philosophical quest as an ascent from the shadows to the things above. But this is not an ascent to a detached ideal of knowledge. I offer an interpretation of the ascent according to which the insight gained at each level remains tied to the levels below. Even the highest insight, the final vision of the sun, which represents knowledge of the good, is shaped by the concrete journey leading up to it, indicating an essential link between theory and practice. Moreover, this knowledge turns out to be incomplete -- an opinion, however elevated, that is open to further clarification.

This reading of the cave metaphor illuminates and is substantiated by Socrates' explicit account of *dialectic*, which should be understood, I argue, as the development of a preconception, or prejudice, through the give and take of conversation.<sup>48</sup> In a larger sense, this conception of dialectic fits the action and outcome of Plato's dialogues. Socrates never approaches his interlocutors with a detached standard of truth in hand that enables him to prove their opinions wrong. Far from claiming to know the truth, Socrates famously maintains that he knows only that he knows nothing.<sup>49</sup> This claim is complicated, of course, by the fact that knowledge of ignorance is not *itself ignorance* -- for it presupposes an awareness of that which one lacks. But whatever knowledge Socrates may possess, he is certainly no dogmatist. He is always eager to engage people's opinions, and he is a master at speaking to people from within their own perspectives. By challenging certain opinions of his interlocutors in light of others, he leads them to higher insights that clarify what, in a sense, they understood all along.

---

<sup>48</sup> Cf. Plato, *Republic*, 510c-511e, 532d-534e.

<sup>49</sup> Plato, *Apology*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914), 21d.

This is the sense in which learning, as Socrates suggests in the *Meno*, *Phaedo*, and *Phaedrus*, is actually recollection (*anamnesis*). Learning is the recovery of a faint awareness we possess from the beginning. If the cave metaphor calls attention to the revolutionary side of philosophy, the teaching on recollection underscores the conservative side. Socrates' claim that learning is recollection substantiates the idea that philosophy is the unfolding of a pre-understanding, and it confirms the underlying message of the cave metaphor.

As indicated by this summary, my section on Plato contains two related strands: an elaboration of the case for prejudice, and an argument that Plato's view can, indeed, be interpreted as an instance of the situated conception of understanding. Few would dispute that Heidegger, Gadamer, and Aristotle argue for some version of the situated conception of understanding over the detached one. The same, however, cannot be said of Plato. He is standardly seen as a proponent of the detached conception. In fact, many of the English translations of Plato are so influenced by the ideal of detached knowledge that they distort the meaning of the Greek and create the impression that Plato was a precursor to Descartes, or Kant. One prominent example is Jowett's translation, in which he renders the important "second sailing" (*ton deuteron ploion*) of Socrates as the "second best approach."<sup>50</sup> (The "second sailing" is Socrates' description of the decisive moment at which he changed the orientation of his philosophizing -- away from the study of efficient causes and toward "the speeches" (*eis tous logous*), i.e., toward the opinions of his fellow Athenians.) Nowhere in the Greek text does the expression "second *best*" appear. In fact, Socrates' whole point is that the turn toward the

---

<sup>50</sup> *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett, vol. 1 (New York: Random House, 1937), 483.

speeches represents a gain. And this turn is a turn in the direction of situated reflection; it appeals to the understanding embodied in everyday opinion. Jowett's translation misses this aspect of Plato's meaning.

Aristotle's sympathy for a certain conception of prejudice is more evident than Plato's. In the second part of Chapter 3, I develop the view that Aristotle's account of *phronesis* should be interpreted as an account of situated judgment. This emerges especially in his contrast between *phronesis* and craft-knowledge (*techne*).<sup>51</sup> Although both concern "practice" in that they aim at action rather than contemplation, *phronesis* is situated in a way that craft knowledge is not. Whereas craft knowledge involves only the detached grasp of the product's form (*eidos*), *phronesis* requires an engaged understanding of the situation of action. Such understanding involves a certain disposition of character (*hexis*): the ability to balance competing goods and commitments, which is shaped by habit and upbringing. This is why Aristotle maintains that the standard of good judgment cannot be captured in principles alone. Although he aims to provide an illuminating account of the virtues, he insists that even his own philosophy is an insufficient guide for action. It is helpful only for those who already possess a virtuous disposition of character.

Aristotle's account of how character conditions moral judgment illuminates the situated conception of judgment two key respects. First, his account highlights an important distinction between situated understanding and modern behaviorist accounts of judgment according to which our decisions are merely conditioned by sociological factors. Aristotle shows that

---

<sup>51</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140b.

although moral judgment is conditioned by habit and upbringing, it nevertheless involves our own agency. We play a role in forging our characters through the activity of judging itself. By judging well and doing virtuous deeds consistently, we come to develop the character that conditioned our judgment in the first place.<sup>52</sup> This is what Aristotle means when he says that we acquire virtue through habit (*ethos*), through the repetition of virtuous actions. Each “repeated” action involves sizing up a situation that is similar to but never the same as what has come before.

Second, our disposition of character, or “prejudice,” so to speak, is always open to improvement. In other words, the fact that judgment always involves prejudice does not imply its being merely relative to context -- as if we were stuck within our own perspectives and lacked any rational basis for contesting the judgments of others. To the contrary, Aristotle defends the idea of a *natural* standard of virtue independent of convention.<sup>53</sup> Aristotle’s teaching on natural right reveals the way in which situated judgement is consistent with a certain notion of universal truth (as Gadamer later claims). According to Aristotle, the standard of virtue is embodied in our practices and activities, and ultimately in our understanding of the good life as a whole. Although the standard is sustained by human judgment and action, it is never wholly its product. In this sense, the standard is natural. It can be said to evolve, as Aristotle claims, even though it is not merely a matter of convention.<sup>54</sup>

---

<sup>52</sup> The acquisition of character is thus circular and eludes any sensical statement in terms of formal logic. We acquire good character through judging well, and we can only judge well if we already possess good character. Aristotle seeks to illuminate precisely this mystery.

<sup>53</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1134b 15-20.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 1134b 20-35.

In summary, Chapter 3 has three goals. I hope first, to develop the case for prejudice in compelling terms; second, to shed new light on Plato and Aristotle; and third, to connect their thought with the 20th century hermeneutic tradition. If my interpretation of Plato is convincing, an interesting implication is that his thought bears closer relation to Aristotle's than is typically recognized. The familiar view, of course, is that Plato defends an abstract, ideal conception of the good, whereas Aristotle defends a concrete, practical conception. This view is famously captured in Raphael's "School of Athens," which depicts Plato pointing upward toward the heavens and Aristotle gesturing downward toward the earth. But according to the interpretation I offer, both philosophers defend a certain situated conception of the good. (We should therefore interpret Aristotle's critique of the *ideas* in *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book I, as a critique of a view that Plato raises, but ultimately rejects.) To be sure, their conceptions appear, at least, to diverge in some important respects. Plato presents the good as a metaphysical concept, as the basis of the cosmos, whereas Aristotle presents it more modestly, as the end of human action. But a closer look at Aristotle's conception of the good, I suggest, reveals a closer kinship to Plato's than first meets the eye. Although Aristotle argues that the good is the end of human action, he also conceives it as pointing beyond what is merely human, as something "divine" (*theos*). At any rate, my point is to suggest that interpreting Plato and Aristotle with an eye to the question of prejudice brings out some fascinating similarities in their thought.

Furthermore, I hope that my interpretation will bring out an important link between ancient philosophy and 20th century hermeneutic thought that is often overlooked. The connection between these two traditions is obscured, in large part, by Heidegger's own polemical stance toward Plato. In *Being and Time*, and in other works (cf. "The Thing"), Heidegger tends

to treat Plato as a foil, as a founder of the misguided notion that we discover reality through detached theory. It is no surprise that some of Heidegger's prominent interpreters adopt a similar line, treating Plato (and even "the Greeks") as mere cannon fodder for Heidegger's explosive discovery of Being-in-the-World. For example, in his introduction to Heidegger's thought, Dreyfus writes:

From the Greeks, we inherit not only our assumption that we can obtain theoretical knowledge of every domain, even human activities, but also our assumption that the detached theoretical viewpoint is superior to the involved practical viewpoint. According to the philosophical tradition, whether rationalist or empiricist, it is only by means of detached contemplation that we discover reality. From Plato's theoretical dialectic, which turns the mind away from the everyday world of "shadows," to Descartes's preparation for philosophy by shutting himself up in a warm room where he is free from involvement and passion, to Hume's strange analytical discoveries in his study, which he forgets when he goes out to play billiards, philosophers have supposed that only by withdrawing from everyday practical concerns before describing things and people can they discover how things really are.<sup>55</sup>

In this passage, Dreyfus articulates precisely the interpretation of Plato that I challenge. He then goes on to explain how Heidegger undermines this way of thinking. But according to my interpretation, Plato's views are far closer to Heidegger's than Dreyfus and many commentators maintain. Properly understood, Plato's situated conception of philosophy actually helps to clarify the meaning of Being-in-the-World. So despite what Heidegger himself seems to suggest, we should not consider him to be Plato's opponent. By understanding each philosopher in light of the other, we gain a deeper understanding of what it means to reason from within the world.

Although the link between ancient philosophy and 20th century hermeneutic thought is often overlooked, it is not without precedent. Typically, the link is drawn to Aristotle. We see this, for example, in Gadamer, and, somewhat more implicitly, in Hannah Arendt. Her analysis of the human condition in terms of labor, work, and action mirrors Aristotle's distinctions among

---

<sup>55</sup> Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 6.

household management (*oikonomia*), craftsmanship (*techne*), and action (*praxis*). It also mirrors Heidegger's account of the world as consisting of nature, equipment, and Dasein. Although Arendt does not explicitly unite Aristotle and Heidegger, the influence of both features prominently in her work.<sup>56</sup>

Few thinkers, to my knowledge, have drawn the link between Plato and the hermeneutic tradition, but two come to mind. The first is Gadamer, who uses the Platonic dialogue as a model for the questioning relation to historical tradition he defends.<sup>57</sup> He concludes *Truth and Method* by connecting Plato's conception of the beautiful to the light of the spoken word. Just as the beautiful shines forth and captivates us "without its being immediately integrated with the whole of our orientations and evaluations," so too does the voice of our historical tradition: "There is something evident about what is said, though that does not imply it is, in every detail, secured, judged, and decided."<sup>58</sup>

The second notable thinker to connect Plato to the hermeneutic tradition is Leo Strauss. Although Strauss rarely spells out this connection, he develops it in his revealing interpretations of Plato, which often bear the mark of Heidegger's influence. I refer, for example, to his interpretation of Plato's conception of knowledge in terms of "horizon":

All knowledge, however limited or "scientific," presupposes a horizon, a comprehensive view in which knowledge is possible. All understanding presupposes a fundamental awareness of the whole: prior to any perception of particular things, the human soul must have had a vision of the ideas, a vision of the articulated whole. However much the comprehensive visions which animate the various societies may differ, they are all visions of the same -- of the whole.<sup>59</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

<sup>57</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 355.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 480.

<sup>59</sup> Leo Strauss, *Natural Right and History* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953), 125.

This passage bears a striking resemblance to an earlier passage in which Strauss summarizes the thesis of what he calls “radical historicism,” a term intended to encompass Heidegger’s philosophy:

All understanding, all knowledge, however limited and “scientific,” presupposes a frame of reference, it presupposes a horizon, a comprehensive view within which understanding and knowing take place. Only such a comprehensive vision makes possible any seeing, any observation, any orientation.<sup>60</sup>

My project of uniting ancient Greek philosophy and 20th century hermeneutic thought thus follows in the line of Gadamer, Arendt, and Strauss. Considered in light of each other, these two traditions provide a compelling basis for reviving the concept of prejudice.

The fourth and final chapter draws out the implications of this revival for how we should understand the nature of political argument. In particular, the idea that prejudice can enable good judgment forces us to reconsider the common assumption that political rhetoric is an illegitimate form of argument -- one that appeals to people’s particular passions, interests, and commitments rather than their reason. The suspicion of rhetoric is well summarized by Bryan Garsten, who notes its influence in contemporary political theory and practice:

Political theorists tend to focus on reasonable dialogues of justification rather than passionate exchanges of rhetoric. While actual politicians have not abandoned persuasion (how could they?), they prefer not to acknowledge their art. They understand that when they hear an argument described as “rhetorical,” it is being either decried as manipulative or dismissed as superficial. In both theory and practice today, the reigning view of rhetorical speech is that it is a disruptive force in politics and a threat to democratic deliberation.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>61</sup> Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 3.

Perhaps not surprisingly, this conception of rhetoric went hand-in-hand with the suspicion of prejudice. We see this strikingly in Kant, who denounces rhetoric precisely on the grounds that it plays upon people's prejudices, thus bypassing their reason. In fact, he defines rhetoric as the art of "talking men round and prejudicing them in favor of anyone."<sup>62</sup> Consistent with his critique of prejudice, Kant argues that rhetoric inhibits autonomy. Rhetoric, he writes, "in matters of moment, [moves] men like machines to a judgment that must lose all its weight with them upon calm reflection."<sup>63</sup>

To be sure, what we today call "mere rhetoric" is often, in fact, superficial pandering to people's unreasonable desires. The association of rhetoric with pandering goes back to Socrates, who famously compares rhetoric, as it was taught in his day, to the skill of cookery. Both, he suggests, seek merely to gratify desires without any concern with their worth.<sup>64</sup> But rhetoric, conceived as the art of persuading people by appealing to their passions, predispositions, and loyalties, is not, as such, mere pandering opposed to reasoned argument. It is, rather, a way of reasoning from within people's perspectives and a way of engaging their situated judgment.

By defending this conception of rhetoric, I develop Garsten's work in *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment*. There he argues that "a politics of persuasion -- in which people try to change one another's minds by appealing not only to reason but also to passions and sometimes even to prejudices -- is a mode of politics that is worth defending." Persuasion is worthwhile, he continues, "because it requires us to engage with others wherever they stand and to begin our arguments there, as opposed to asserting that they would adopt our opinion if they

---

<sup>62</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, §53, 192.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, §53, 193.

<sup>64</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), 465a.

were more reasonable.”<sup>65</sup> I aim to develop this argument by reference to the conception of prejudice I defend. By considering prejudice as an aspect of reason, we see rhetoric in a new light. Instead of seeing it as a pernicious mode of argument that discourages people from judging detachedly, we come to recognize it as a compelling instance of the engaged understanding that defines our relation to the world.

In order to reveal rhetoric as exemplary of situated understanding and judgment, I examine some of the most compelling political speeches. These speeches, I show, derive their moral and persuasive force not simply from the principles they may imply or invoke, but more fundamentally, from the way in which they appeal to and clarify the life perspective of the audience. Even those speeches that appear to rely solely on abstract principles of equality and justice also rely upon prejudices that make these principles intelligible.

By examining political rhetoric, we gain a deeper understanding of democratic politics and of what it means to reason from within a life perspective. In particular, we catch a glimpse of the agency connected to this notion of reasoning. The possibility of persuasion, made actual by the great rhetorical moments in our history, reveals that we are never bound to a fixed viewpoint. The practice of persuasion provides a compelling instance of how we are always defining the perspective that conditions us.

---

<sup>65</sup> Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 3.

## **Chapter 1**

### **The Case Against Prejudice**

#### 1. Prejudice as a source of error: Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes

In order to understand today's suspicion of prejudice, we should consider its philosophical roots in early modern thought. By unearthing these origins and tracing their growth, we may better grasp the force of what I have called "the case against prejudice." It seems that the case against prejudice did not arise in the realm of moral and political thought, but in 17th century natural philosophy. The idea that we judge best when we abstract from "prejudice," broadly conceived as the influences of our life circumstance, can be traced to Sir Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes. Although neither philosopher extends his critique of prejudice to the realm of ethics, both powerfully shape the detached conception of judgment that informs Adam Smith and Immanuel Kant's moral thought.

Bacon and Descartes maintained that prejudice leads to scientific or philosophical error. They argued that in order to understand the universe, including, not least, ourselves, we must abstract from all prejudice and use our own reason. Each, of course, had a different notion of "one's own reason." Bacon defended a method of empirical research and induction, whereas Descartes sought a method of finding "clear and distinct" first principles. But both emphasized "one's own," in contrast to that of "another" (whether human authority, common opinion, or tradition). Sound philosophical judgment, they argued, requires escaping one's particular life-

perspective. By means of such detached reasoning, they claimed, we can discover context-free truths accessible to anyone anywhere.

Bacon articulates his case against prejudice by invoking the “blank slate” ideal of knowledge, which has since become a familiar metaphor for detached judgment: Men, he writes, would more easily discover nature’s “deeper truths” if their “understandings were unbiased, a blank slate.” But “as men’s minds have been occupied in so many strange ways that they have no even, polished surface available to receive the true rays of things, it is essential for us to realise that we need to find a remedy for this too.”<sup>66</sup> A real scientist, he continues, is someone who, “with faculties unimpaired and the mind cleansed of prejudice, applies himself afresh to experience and particulars.”<sup>67</sup>

Bacon’s “blank slate” ideal has come to inform today’s suspicion of prejudice in realms far removed from natural science. One example, as we have already noted, is in the realm of jurisprudence. Bacon’s idea that prejudice tarnishes the mind, leading it to misunderstand the facts, or “particulars,” motivates today’s search for jurors without any background familiarity with the case, whose mind’s are “blank slates.” Judges and legal scholars often assume that a blank-slate juror is the sort best prepared to receive and assess the facts. A prejudiced juror, by contrast, is liable to misinterpret the facts -- just as a prejudiced natural philosopher, according to Bacon, is liable to misinterpret the phenomena.

---

<sup>66</sup> Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 18.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

Bacon elaborates what he means by “prejudice” in his discussion of the “idols” of the human mind -- the various influences that tarnish the intellect. Common to all of the idols is that they condition our judgment prior to our justifying them through a “sure method” of detached reflection. As such, Bacon argues, the idols must be overcome as the first step toward attaining knowledge.

It is notable that Bacon devotes as much space and emphasis in his *New Organon* (1620) to indicting prejudice as he does to developing the scientific method he sought to establish. Bacon envisaged the *New Organon* as the basis for his *Great Instauration*, an ambitious project of recording, reevaluating, and correcting all human knowledge of the natural world. But before laying out his principles of systematic observation, documentation, and induction, he devotes the entire first book of *The New Organon* to exposing the “idols.”

The most general idols Bacon calls the “idols of the tribe.” They denote our tendency to believe about the universe what we want to be true, to be influenced by our will and desires. The human understanding, Bacon writes, “is not composed of dry light, but is subject to influence from the will and the emotions, a fact that creates a fanciful knowledge; man prefers to believe what he wants to be true” and tends to reject “sensible ideas” because they “limit his hopes.”<sup>68</sup> According to Bacon, hope and desire are merely subjective dispositions. They find no expression in nature as it really is. In order to grasp the “deeper truths of nature,” he writes, we must rein in the tendency to believe that nature embodies a certain order, or harmony, or strives to realize ideal forms.<sup>69</sup> He dismisses such views as “superstition” and “fanciful knowledge” -- the projection of human concerns onto nature.

---

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

A common example of our basic tendency to believe what we “want to be true,” one that Bacon highlights, is our disposition to trust the senses, in particular, sight. Human thought, he laments, “virtually stops at sight; so that there is little or no notice taken of things that cannot be seen.”<sup>70</sup> Although Bacon does not spell it out, the reason that he links our tendency to trust the senses to our emotions and desires is that in order for us to fix upon objects of sight, they must, in some sense, captivate us. In order for us to notice them in the first place, they must trigger our concern in one way or another. The interest we take in the objects of sight, whether out of idle curiosity, disgust, or rapture, prompts us to believe that these things are real and not merely illusory. Our interests lead us to trust our vision even when our reason doubts it.

As evidence for such a tendency, we may consider the resistance to heliocentric theories of the solar system, despite compelling reasons in their favor. What finally convinced people that the earth orbits the sun was not the Copernican theory, but Galileo’s confirmation of it through the telescope. As Hannah Arendt notes, the visual confirmation allowed people to behold what theorists had only speculated.<sup>71</sup> Bacon criticizes our tendency to accept the truth of what the senses reveal, stressing the need to abstract from appearance. For Bacon, appearance is the product of our own subjective faculty of perception, providing no hint at nature’s “deeper truth.” In order to reach such truth, we must correct our naive trust in the senses through detached scientific reasoning.

Bacon elaborates his doctrine of the idols by turning from the general human prejudices to their concrete sources. What gives shape to our allegedly misleading desires and emotions, according to Bacon, are the “idols of the cave.” Each man, Bacon writes, “has a kind of

---

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>71</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 259.

individual cave or cavern which fragments and distorts the light of nature.”<sup>72</sup> By “cave,” Bacon means one’s particular life circumstance, shaped especially by his “upbringing and the company he keeps” and by “his reading of books and the authority of those whom he respects and admires.”<sup>73</sup> As the term “cave” suggests, Bacon conceives of one’s life circumstance as an obstacle to understanding.

As strongly as Bacon denigrates the influences of habit and upbringing, he recognizes their force. He assumes that transcending the cave would be, for many, a difficult matter. In particular, it would require suspending all judgment on the teaching of one’s most respected mentors -- including philosophers as highly regarded as Aristotle and Plato. The truth of their teachings, if any, would have to be confirmed by a proper method of detached reflection.

One aspect of the cave that Bacon recognizes as especially difficult but necessary to transcend is the pull of common opinion and conventional language. Words, he claims, insofar as the same ones are used differently among different people, “do violence to the understanding, and confuse everything; and betray men into countless empty disputes and fictions”<sup>74</sup> He suggests that if language is to aid thought rather than confuse it, the meaning of words must be reconstructed piece by piece such that everyone describes the same things by the same names.<sup>75</sup>

As part of this critique of language, Bacon condemns writing that is “rhetorical and prone to disputation.” Rhetoric, he writes, is “inimical to the search for truth.”<sup>76</sup> According to Bacon, truth must be “non-rhetorical,” so to speak -- derived from a “sure method” of reasoning and

---

<sup>72</sup> Bacon, *The New Organon*, 41.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 48-49.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 58.

stated in principles independent of the particular way in which they are expressed.<sup>77</sup> In light of this notion of truth, Bacon denounces Plato's philosophy, presumably for its use of metaphor and myth, calling it no better than sophistry.<sup>78</sup> Bacon's scorn for rhetoric thus gives early expression to the idea, elaborated by Hobbes, that rhetoric, by means of metaphors and images, adds inconsistency to language, muddling clear, logical, context-free thinking. The suspicion of rhetoric along these lines, which developed in the 17th century and continues today, went hand-in-hand with the critique of prejudice.

In summary, Bacon's "blank-slate" ideal of knowledge, his rejection of the "idols," and, in particular, his account of upbringing and convention as a sort of "cave," point to the renunciation of "prejudice" that has come to inform not only natural philosophy, but also much of ethics and political thinking. The wholesale rejection of prejudice, in Bacon's sense of life circumstance, is what I aim to challenge.

Although Bacon's critique of prejudice is one of the first and most vehement that we find in early modern thought, his critique has since been eclipsed, to some extent, by that of Rene Descartes. Substantively, Descartes's critique of prejudice contains little that Bacon had not already covered. In fact, a striking feature of Descartes discussion of prejudice is how consistently it lines up with Bacon's, despite the deep differences between their philosophies. Although Bacon and Descartes offer different accounts of the source of philosophical first principles, they agree that first principles must be prejudice-free, intelligible in abstraction from any particular life-circumstance.

---

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

Although Descartes tends to use the terms “preconception” and “habitual opinion” more often than “prejudice,” he uses them to forcefully articulate what I have called the “prejudice-free,” or detached conception of knowledge. “Preconception,” for Descartes, is a broad concept that includes all of the understandings that we absorb from everyday life and our upbringing but have not validated by “the standards of reason.” Descartes argues that we must suspend “preconception,” in this sense, and determine its truth (or lack thereof) through detached reflection.

The first rule of Descartes’ *Discourse on the method of rightly conducting one’s reason and seeking the truth in the sciences* is “carefully to avoid precipitate conclusions and preconceptions.”<sup>79</sup> He writes of preconceptions: “I thought that I could do no better than to undertake to get rid of them, all at one go, in order to replace them afterwards with better ones, or with the same one’s once I had squared them with the standards of reason.”<sup>80</sup> Similarly, at the beginning of his *Meditations*, he justifies his radical doubting, which he suspected would seem strange to his readers, on the grounds that such doubting counteracts prejudice: “Although the usefulness of such extensive doubt is not apparent at first sight, its greatest benefit lies in freeing us from all our preconceived opinions.”<sup>81</sup>

Like Bacon, Descartes was acutely conscious of the power of prejudice over our judgments. He considers prejudice to be reason’s relentless rival for dominion over human understanding. Just as Bacon understands transcending the cave as the most basic and challenging step toward enlightenment, Descartes singles out the suspension of preconception as

---

<sup>79</sup> Rene Descartes, *Discourse on the Method* (1637) in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 29.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>81</sup> Rene Descartes, *Meditation on First Philosophy* (1641) in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 73.

the first and most challenging principle of philosophizing. He remarks, for example, that the proper use of his reason is an “arduous undertaking” because “my habitual opinions keep coming back, and, despite my wishes, they capture my belief, which is as it were bound over them as a result of long occupation and the law of custom.”<sup>82</sup>

The way in which Descartes fills out his notion of “preconception” reveals its deep affinity to Bacon’s notion of “prejudice” and the “idols.” Corresponding to the “idols of the tribe” is what Descartes calls the tendency to be misled by our will and the related “spontaneous impulse” to trust our senses.<sup>83</sup> The will, by which Descartes means our desiring and striving, tends to lead the intellect into error. In particular, he claims, we are misled by the body and its desires: We tend to mistakenly judge everything “in terms of its utility to the body,” and to assess “the amount of reality in each object” by the extent to which the body is “affected by it.”<sup>84</sup> For example, when you “judge that an apple, which may in fact be poisoned, is nutritious,” you understand “that its smell, color and so on, are pleasant, but this does not mean that you understand that this particular apple will be beneficial to eat; you judge that it will be because you want to believe it.” This holds true, he continues, for any object of reflection: “there may be many things about it that we desire but very few things of which we have knowledge.”<sup>85</sup> The conclusion Descartes draws is that philosophy, or the search for knowledge, requires abstracting from desire, and, above all, the desires of the body.

---

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 79

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>85</sup> Rene Descartes, *Objections and Replies to the Meditations*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 133.

Perhaps the most well-known prejudice that Descartes' denounces is our "spontaneous impulse" to believe that what appears to our senses corresponds, in any way, to reality. He famously raises the possibility that appearances are mere products of our subjective imagination, corresponding to nothing in the "external" or "objective" world.<sup>86</sup> But we naively assume, Descartes writes, that appearances are real. Just as Bacon impugns the tendency of thought to virtually stop at sight, Descartes laments that "we become tired if we have to attend to things which are not present to the senses." As a result, our judgments about such things are faulty, based on "preconceived opinion" rather than clear and distinct perception.<sup>87</sup> As the previous passage about our perception of the apple suggests, Descartes connects our tendency to trust the senses with the basic tendency of the will to mislead the intellect. The reason we get caught up in what appears to the senses is that we take a certain interest in it. The apple looks and smells good, so we neglect the invisible poison within. In general, we believe what we want to be true. Our "subjective" emotions and desires obscure the "objective" facts.

The general tendency to be misled by the will acquires its particular shape, according to Descartes, from our upbringing. He reflects, for example, on "how the same man with the same mind, if brought up from infancy among the French or the Germans, develops otherwise than he would if he had lived among the Chinese or cannibals."<sup>88</sup> He offers this reflection not to argue for the importance of a civilized education, but rather as evidence that one's upbringing as such is a limitation -- a cave, as Bacon calls it -- that one must try to escape through the use of his own reason. Just as Bacon claims that people would be better off if their minds were blank slates,

---

<sup>86</sup> Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 79.

<sup>87</sup> Rene Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy* (1644), in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 187.

<sup>88</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, in *Selected Writings*, 28.

Descartes maintains that our judgments would be firmer and less obscure if “we had had the full use of our reason from the moment of our birth, and if we had always been guided by it alone.”<sup>89</sup>

As part of his critique of upbringing, Descartes also denigrates conventional language.

Words, he argues, are deceptive labels for concepts that often lead us into lazy thinking:

Because of the use of language, we tie all our concepts to the words used to express them; and when we store the concepts in our memory we always simultaneously store the corresponding words. Later on we find the words easier to recall than the things; and because of this, it is very seldom that our concept of a thing is so distinct that we can separate it totally from our concept of the words involved. The thoughts of almost all people are more concerned with words than with things; and as a result people very often give their assent to words they do not understand.<sup>90</sup>

Descartes separation of “word” and “thing” (or “word” and “concept”) reflects his detached conception of understanding. The things themselves, according to Descartes, exist as separate from the particular terms in which we describe them. Words are mere labels that we invent and apply to things whose being we can ultimately grasp independently.

Perhaps the most striking feature of Descartes’ critique of prejudice is his insistence on its universal scope. Whereas Bacon occasionally suggests that his prejudice-free method of study would benefit fields beyond natural philosophy, Descartes asserts that his rules for the direction of the mind, first and foremost the rejection of preconception, should “extend to the discovery of truths in any field whatever.”<sup>91</sup> In rules “one” and “two” of the *Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence*, he boldly claims that human wisdom “always remains one and the same, however different the subjects to which it is applied,” for “all knowledge is certain and evident

---

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>90</sup> Descartes, *Principles of Philosophy*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 187.

<sup>91</sup> Rene Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence* (1628), in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 5.

cognition.”<sup>92</sup> He adds that “we should not regard some branches of our knowledge of things as more obscure than others, since they are all of the same nature and consist simply in the putting together of self-evident facts.”<sup>93</sup>

The radical character of Descartes’ claim can be seen in contrast to Aristotle’s teaching that an educated person demands the kind of precision and clarity that each topic dictates. Certain topics, such as ethics and political science, argues Aristotle, do not admit of the same sort of clarity and precision as geometry. This, he continues, does not mean that the former are somehow less scientific, but, rather, that they are of a practical nature. Ethical insight cannot be captured in abstract principles alone because it involves a certain engaged, or, we might say, “situated,” understanding. In contrast to Aristotle, Descartes exempts no realm of understanding from his prejudice-free method of investigation.

## 2. Prejudice as a source of unfairness: Adam Smith

The case against prejudice that we find in Bacon and Descartes may be summarized as follows: Sound, or reliable judgment requires transcending prejudice, broadly understood as any influence whose validity we have not explicitly confirmed through detached reason. In particular, transcending prejudice means transcending our life circumstance -- the perspective acquired by habit, custom, common opinion, our upbringing. According to Bacon and Descartes, our life circumstance is a merely contingent set of facts. It provides no inherent insight and often

---

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 17.

hinders our judgment. Although certain life circumstances may, by chance, dispose us to judge well, we can discover this in the first place only by means of detached reflection.

Adam Smith applies this way of thinking to moral judgment. Our life circumstance, he maintains, leads us to uncritically privilege our own interests over the interests of others. In particular, we tend to be prejudiced by our loyalties to family, friends, and country.<sup>94</sup> We accord such loyalties disproportionate moral weight, he argues, out of mere habit and custom. If we were to reason properly, we would recognize the contingent character of our loyalties, but habit and custom blinds us. As a result, we tend to judge unfairly, neglecting the interests of “all sensible and intelligent beings.”<sup>95</sup> In order attain a critical stance toward our motives, and to judge the propriety of our conduct, writes Smith, we must examine our conduct as any “fair and impartial spectator would examine it.”<sup>96</sup>

Pinning down what Smith means by the “impartial spectator” is not an easy matter. We can make sense of it, I believe, as a metaphor for the detached conception of judgment. We become “impartial spectators” when we step back from our life circumstance and assess our motives for ourselves, by means of our own reason, unburdened by the pull of particular loyalties. This is what Smith seems to mean when he speaks of removing ourselves from our own “natural station”:

We can never survey our own sentiments and motives, we can never form any judgment concerning them, unless we remove ourselves, as it were, from our own natural station, and endeavor to view them as at a certain distance from us...But we can do this in no other way than by endeavoring to view them with the

---

<sup>94</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), ed. Ryan Patrick Hanley (London: Penguin, 2009), 344.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

eyes of other people...We endeavor to examine our own conduct as we would imagine any other fair and impartial spectator would examine it.<sup>97</sup>

Smith's notion of "viewing" our motives at a "distance" highlights the detachment he believes to be necessary for moral judgment. This sort of detachment, he makes clear, does not imply that one should feel equally loyal to everyone: "The man who should feel no more for the death or distress of his own father, or son, than for those of any man's father or son, would appear neither a good son nor a good father."<sup>98</sup> Accordingly, Smith criticizes the Stoical philosophy, which prescribes us to "eradicate all our private, partial, and selfish affections."<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, Smith maintains that we should feel for "ourselves, our friends, our country" the "reduced passions of the impartial spectator."<sup>100</sup> When we weigh our loyalties in the moral balance, we weigh them not as our *own* loyalties to the actual people who are closest to us, but as generic loyalties to "one's closest" in the abstract. We imagine how an abstract anybody would feel for an abstract brother, friend, or fellow citizen. Our own particular loyalties have no special moral weight. They carry whatever relative weight our detached reason accords them.

Smith emphasizes the detached character of moral judgment in terms of leaping out of one's own situation and into the impartial spectator's. In doing so, one becomes two different people at once -- the judge and the judged:

When I endeavor to examine my own conduct...I divide myself, as it were, into two persons; and that I, the examiner and judge, represent a different character from that other I, the person whose conduct examined into and judged of. The first is the spectator, whose sentiments with regard to my own conduct I endeavor to enter into, by placing myself in his situation, and by considering how it would appear to me,

---

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

when seen from that particular point of view. The second is the agent, the person whom I properly call myself, and of whose conduct, under the character of a spectator, I was endeavoring to form some opinion. The first is the judge; the second person the judged of. But that the judge should, in every respect, be the same with the person judged of, is as impossible, as that the cause should, in every respect, be the same as the effect.<sup>101</sup>

Smith's reference to the person whom I must transcend, or the "judged," as "the person whom I properly call myself," reveals the sort of detachment he advocates. Moral deliberation requires putting one's own self aside and becoming an abstract anybody.

Smith's account of the impartial spectator follows the basic critique of prejudice that we find in Bacon and Descartes. Sound judgment requires abstracting from one's life circumstance. However, Smith's understanding of prejudice is complicated in one important respect: Although he maintains that judging well involves abstracting from prejudice in the sense of one's particular situation, he does not argue that it requires abstracting from all influences given prior to reason. Smith offers a certain defense of the "given" by suggesting that the motivation to assume the role of the impartial spectator is, in the first place, given by human nature, by a universal sentiment of humanity.<sup>102</sup> Following David Hume, Smith claims that our first perceptions of right and wrong come not from reason, but from "immediate sense and feeling."<sup>103</sup> If moral judgment indeed has its source in feeling and is, therefore, not based ultimately on reason, one might say that moral judgment is based on a sort of prejudice. Although moral judgement involves transcending one's particular situation shaped by culture and upbringing, and in this sense, is detached, or prejudice-

---

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 377.

free, moral judgment remains bound to the human situation -- to that which happens to be given in the human species.

Smith's moral philosophy thus rests on a distinction between two senses of "prejudice." In the most expansive sense, prejudice refers to any source of judgment given prior to reason. Among these sources would be any sentiment, however widely shared. In a somewhat more specific sense, prejudice refers to the influence of one's life circumstance -- the influence of habit, custom, education, upbringing, common opinion, and so on. Smith denounces the second conception of prejudice, but offers a certain defense of the first.

To be sure, Smith never himself uses the term "prejudice" to describe what he takes to be the universal natural sentiments, the fixed aspect of human nature at the foundation of moral judgment. He uses "prejudice" only in the context of discussing the more specific sense of prejudice that he criticizes: habit, custom, one's particular loyalties. Smith's critical use of "prejudice" attests to how "prejudice," by his time, had become a pejorative. But even though Smith does not understand himself as a defender of "prejudice," his claim that sentiment is ultimately prior to reason amounts to a certain defense of "the given," or of a source of judgment whose influence lies beyond our control. As we will see, Immanuel Kant denounces any such influence as a "prejudice." He claims that moral judgement involves transcending everything external to one's own reason -- including any sentiment that happens to be universally shared. Kant, we might say, offers the purest case against prejudice.

Smith, of course, foreshadows Kant to the extent that he defends impartiality and argues that moral judgment must be detached from one's particular situation. But Smith's defense of impartiality is ultimately closer to Hume's claim that moral judgment requires one to "depart

from his private and particular situation,” and “chuse a point of view, common to him with others.” By “common,” Hume means that everyone happens to share this point of view.<sup>104</sup> Kant takes a further step: Sound moral judgment must be based on pure practical reason, detached from anything given. So although Smith has been interpreted as a forerunner to Kant, we should keep in mind the difference in their critiques of prejudice. Kant rejects all prejudice, whereas Smith adopts Hume’s view that “reason is and ought only to be a slave to the passions.”<sup>105</sup>

It should be noted that Smith comes very close to Kant in one passage where he seems to suggest that impartial judgement requires transcending not only one’s particular situation, but also any prejudice whatsoever, even universal benevolence:

It is not the soft power of humanity, it is not that feeble spark of benevolence which Nature has lighted up in the human heart, that is thus capable of counteracting the strongest impulses of self-love. It is a stronger power, a more forceable motive, which exerts itself upon such occasions. It is reason, principle, conscience, the inhabitant of the breast, the man within, the great judge and arbiter of our conduct...It is not love of our neighbour, it is not the love of mankind, which upon many occasions prompts us to the practice of these divine virtues. It is a stronger love, a more powerful affection, which generally takes place on such occasions; the love of what is honourable and noble, of the grandeur, and dignity, and superiority of our own characters.<sup>106</sup>

Without knowing the source of this passage, one might easily mistake Kant for Smith as its author. The basis of moral motivation is not “love of our neighbour” or even “love of mankind,” but the “dignity” of acting according to “reason, principle, and conscience,” of expressing the better part of our nature. This is the only passage in the *Theory of Moral Sentiments* in which Smith seems to suggest that sound moral judgment must be prejudice-free in the broadest sense of the term -- based entirely on reason and not even on natural benevolence.

---

<sup>104</sup> David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), ed. J.B. Schneewind (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), 75.

<sup>105</sup> David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1740), 2nd ed., ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 415.

<sup>106</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 159.

But Smith undermines this suggestion at the end of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, where he explicitly addresses the ultimate source of moral approbation:

It is altogether absurd and unintelligible to suppose that the first perceptions of right and wrong can be derived from reason, even in those particular cases upon the experience of which general rules are formed. These first perceptions, as well as all other experiments upon which any general rules are founded, cannot be the object of reason, but of immediate sense and feeling. It is by finding in a vast variety of instances that one tenor of conduct pleases in a certain manner, and that another as constantly displeases the mind, that we form the general rules of morality...But nothing can be agreeable for its own sake, which is not rendered such by immediate sense and feeling.<sup>107</sup>

Here Smith firmly maintains that moral judgment is ultimately motivated by sentiment, not reason.

Smith's final position on prejudice seems to be this: Moral judgment is prejudice-free insofar as it involves abstracting from one's own situation and assuming the position of the impartial spectator. But at the same time, the desire to see things from this abstract standpoint is motivated, in the first place, by a certain prejudice -- a natural sentiment: "Nature has, accordingly, has endowed [man], not only with a desire of being approved of, but with a desire of being what he ought to be approved of; or of being what he himself approves of in other men."<sup>108</sup> Smith concludes that morality demands detachment and that the desire to judge detachedly comes from a natural human attraction to fairness despite the opposite pull of particular interests. He ultimately defends an impartial morality based on an innate human prejudice for impartiality.

Smith's explicit case against prejudice, understood as life circumstance, and his implicit defense of prejudice, understood as natural sentiment, are both views that I seek to challenge. My goal is to show that one's life circumstance, including one's particular loyalties to family,

---

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 377.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 140.

friends, and country, is not a merely contingent fact, or set of facts, that inhibits moral judgment, but an intelligible perspective that informs it. My goal is thus to question the distinction between prejudice, on the one hand, and reason, on the other. Correspondingly, I reject Smith's implicit defense of prejudice understood as natural sentiment distinct from reason. According to my argument, all human sentiments are shaped by the terms in which we describe them, terms which themselves arise from within our life perspective.

Smith's conception of life circumstance, which he discusses in terms of "habit and custom," provides a sharp contrast to the conception of perspective that I aim to defend. Smith considers habit and custom to be the most basic source of prejudice, the source of the particular loyalties that lead us astray. Habit and custom, by his account, are merely mechanical dispositions into which we fall as an effect of our particular culture and upbringing. Smith highlights the rote aspect of habit in the following passage: "When two objects have frequently been seen together, the imagination acquires a habit of passing easily from the one to the other... [and] though, independent of custom, there should be no real beauty in their union, yet when custom has thus connected them together, we feel an impropriety in their separation."<sup>109</sup>

Smith considers habit and custom to be forces that pervert natural sympathy for mankind at large, leading to a parochial love of one's own. He calls "habit and custom" the "chief causes of the many irregularities and discordant opinions which prevail in different ages and nations concerning what is blamable or praise-worthy."<sup>110</sup> Habit and custom thus distort human nature, understood as the basic moral sentiments common to all men regardless of their particular

---

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

situations -- what Hume calls the “general unalterable standard, by which we may approve or disapprove of all of characters and manners.”<sup>111</sup> Smith believes that the basic desire to be fair and impartial is “natural” in this sense, that this desire is a fixed aspect of human nature independent of habit and custom.

In order to understand Smith’s account of the influence of habit and custom on moral reasoning, we should first consider his account of their influence on aesthetic judgment. Smith considers their influence to be strongest on judgments concerning beauty. Few are “willing to allow,” he writes, “that custom and fashion have much influence on their judgments concerning what is beautiful, or otherwise, in the productions of any of those arts; but imagine, that all the rules, which they think ought to be observed in each of them, are founded upon reason and nature, not upon habit and prejudice.”<sup>112</sup> Here Smith articulates precisely the distinction I aim to challenge -- the distinction between “reason and nature,” on the one hand, and “habit and prejudice” on the other.

With respect to aesthetics, at least, Smith tends to consider prejudice a more or less inevitable feature of judgment. For this reason, he is not severely critical of it, but accepts it with a certain resignation. For example, he concedes that “a man would be ridiculous who should appear in public with a suit of clothes quite different from those which are commonly worn, though the new dress should in itself be ever so graceful or convenient.”<sup>113</sup> But Smith makes this concession in a critical tone. As the phrase graceful “in itself” suggests, Smith still defends the

---

<sup>111</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, 49.

<sup>112</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 229.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

ideal of a prejudice-free aesthetic based on natural standards of beauty independent of anyone's particular situation. He laments that "few men have so much experience and acquaintance with different modes which have obtained in remote ages and nations, as to be thoroughly reconciled to them, or to judge with impartiality between them, and what takes place in their own age and country."<sup>114</sup> The most discerning aesthetic eye, he suggests, would view the "different modes" of beauty from the distance of a detached spectator, unprejudiced by the taste of his own age.

To bolster his defense of a prejudice-free ideal of aesthetic judgment, Smith suggests that utility and natural agreeableness recommend certain forms to us independent of custom:

I cannot, however, be induced to believe that our sense even of external beauty is founded altogether on custom. The utility of any form, its fitness for the useful purposes for which it was intended, evidently recommends it, and renders it agreeable to us independent of custom. Certain colors are more agreeable than others, and give more delight to the eye the first time it ever behold them. A smooth surface is more agreeable than a rough one. Variety is more pleasing than a tedious undiversified uniformity. Connected variety, in which each new appearance seems to be introduced by what went before it, and in which all the adjoining parts seem to have some natural relation to one another, is more agreeable than a disjointed and disorderly assemblage of unconnected objects.<sup>115</sup>

A cursory analysis of Smith's custom-free aesthetic reveals its weakness. Most significantly, his defense of utility as a criterion for aesthetic value uncritically equates the good with the beautiful. Just because something is useful, or fitting, does not make it attractive. We can imagine numerous examples of very useful forms that are in no way beautiful. In many cases, in fact, usefulness comes at the price of beauty. (Consider simple, more functional articles of clothing, or utensils, that lack beauty precisely because they are made to work well.) Smith's defense of the natural agreeableness of certain colors, surfaces, and arrangements is equally questionable. To his assertions such as "a smooth surface is more agreeable than a rough one,"

---

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 233.

one is inclined to reply with a “smile and two question marks.” Are the “smooth” savannas of Africa more attractive than the “rough” mountains of the Himalayas? Is a scene depicted on a flat canvass more beautiful than a scene depicted in relief? Similar objections could be raised with respect to each of his other criteria. Smith’s questionable claims attest to the difficulty of separating beauty and custom. His attempt to do so belies his desire for a standard of aesthetic judgment independent of any particular perspective.

As part of his staunch defense of impartial judgment, he excoriated the poets of his time who formed literary groups in an attempt to sway public opinion in favor of their respective styles -- some advocating the model of classical literature, others defending a break from tradition. Smith refers disparagingly to such groups as “literary factions,” each of which employes “all the mean arts of intrigue and solicitation to preoccupy the public in favor of the works of its own members.”<sup>116</sup> Smith compares such attempts at persuading the public to bribing a jury, declaring that the literary groups had “attempted both to obtain praise, and to avoid blame, by very unfair means.”<sup>117</sup> Smith’s analogy to bribery is far-fetched considering that the literary groups were offering arguments, not money for the support of their work. But the analogy makes sense in light of his ideal of prejudice-free judgment. By offering persuasive arguments for the merit of their work, the poets instilled a conspicuous prejudice in their audience. Those who came to be persuaded of a certain style’s superiority would, of course, read the poetry in a new light -- from a perspective shaped by the artist’s testimony. According to Smith, this meant that the critics were no longer reading what was really on the page. Instead, they were interpreting the words through the distorting lens of the artist’s rhetoric. Here, as in Bacon’s

---

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid., 150.

thought, the case against prejudice goes hand-in-hand with a rejection of rhetoric. The fairest judge of literary excellence, according to Smith, is a blank-slate reader -- one who is unprejudiced by the artist's persuasive arguments.

In the case of moral as compared to aesthetic judgment, Smith expresses more confidence in people's ability to overcome prejudice. He argues that in contrast to our sense of beauty, which may "easily be altered by habit and education," the "sentiments of moral approbation and disapprobation" are "founded on the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature; and though they may be somewhat warped, cannot be entirely perverted."<sup>118</sup> This echoes Hume's notion, in the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, that the basis of moral approbation lies in human nature, independent of custom:

This principle, indeed of precept and education, must so far be owned to have a powerful influence, that it may frequently encrease or diminish, beyond their natural standard, the sentiments of approbation or dislike...But that *all* moral affection or dislike arises from this origin, will never surely be allowed by any judicious enquirer. Had nature made no such distinction, founded on the original constitution of the human mind, the words *honourable* and *shameful*, *lovely* and *odious*, *noble* and *despicable*, had never had place in any language...The social virtues must, therefore, be allowed to have a natural beauty and amiableness, which, at first, antecedent to all precept or education, recommends them to the esteem of uninstructed mankind, and engages their affections.<sup>119</sup>

Although Smith, like Hume, firmly defends a natural source of moral approbation, independent of education and upbringing, he readily admits that custom can, to some degree, shape moral sentiments for better or for worse. To the extent that Smith does defend habit and custom, he defends them as tools for getting us to consistently do the right thing. On the one hand, "when custom and fashion coincide with the natural principles of right and wrong, they

---

<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 234.

<sup>119</sup> Hume, *Enquiry*, 40.

heighten the delicacy of our sentiments, and increase our abhorrence for everything which approaches to evil.” On the other hand, those “who have had the misfortune to be brought up amidst violence, licentiousness, falsehood, and injustice; lose, though not all sense of the impropriety of such conduct, yet all sense of its dreadful enormity.”<sup>120</sup> For this reason, Smith stresses the ethical importance of education in good habits. Furthermore, he argues, good habits help make virtue our second nature, leading us to consistently do the right thing. But despite the benefits that habit and custom may bring, Smith consistently maintains that habit and custom at best reinforce virtue. In the first place, virtue is determined from the standpoint of the impartial spectator.

Reinforcing this point, Smith depreciates any manners or qualities of character to which we are favorably disposed by custom alone:

The different manners which custom teaches us to approve of in the different professions and states of life, do not concern things of the greatest importance. We expect truth and justice from an old man as well as a young, from a clergyman as well as from an officer; and it is in matters of small importance only that we look for the distinguishing marks of their respective characters. With regard to these too, there is often some unobserved circumstance, which, if it was attended to, would show us, that, independent of custom, there was a propriety in the character which custom had taught us to allot to each profession.<sup>121</sup>

In the last sentence, Smith suggests that even when we assume that custom is the source of our approval of certain manners, our approval actually derives from some “unobserved circumstance” independent of custom. Smith’s eagerness to reject custom reiterates his claim that important moral judgments must be justified by detached reason.

The particular features of our life circumstance that Smith singles out for critique are the loyalties to our family, friends, and country, which he claims are based on mere habit and not

---

<sup>120</sup> Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 234.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 244.

reason or nature. “What is called affection,” Smith write, “is in realty nothing but habitual sympathy” that arises from living in proximity with the same people.<sup>122</sup> Smith explains the affection for family members in this way. He reasons that since a person’s family members “usually live in the same house with him,” they are “naturally and usually the persons upon whose happiness or misery his conduct must have the greatest influence.” Therefore, he is “more habituated to sympathize with them. He knows better how everything is likely to affect them, and his sympathy is with them more precise and determinate than it can be with the greater part of other people.”<sup>123</sup>

Smith extends this argument to neighborhood and work relationships: “Among well-disposed people, the necessity or conveniency of mutual accommodation, very frequently produces a friendship not unlike that which takes place among those who are born into the same family.”<sup>124</sup> In all these cases, friendship arises from a “constrained sympathy,” which has been “rendered habitual for the sake of conveniency and accommodation.”<sup>125</sup> The only kind of friendship that Smith praises highly is friendship among “men of virtue,” that is, among fellow impartial spectators who are willing to sacrifice the “inferior interests” of their “own particular order or society,” and even of “the greater interest of state” to the “interest of that great society of all sensible and intelligent beings.”<sup>126</sup>

---

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 260.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 258.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 277.

### 3. Prejudice as a source of enslavement: Immanuel Kant

To this point, we have examined what I introduced as the “first strand” of the case against prejudice: the idea that prejudice leads us into *error*. According to this way of thinking, we must abstract from prejudice for the sake of learning the *truth* -- whether the truth about the universe (Bacon and Descartes) or the truth about how best to act (Smith). Like his predecessors, Immanuel Kant maintains that prejudice tends to obscure our understanding of nature and morality. But he also develops another line of critique -- what I have called the “second strand” of the case against prejudice. According to Kant, prejudice is opposed not only to truth but to *freedom*. By articulating both strands of the case against prejudice, and, above all, by developing the opposition of prejudice and freedom, Kant brings the case against prejudice to its most powerful expression. Any compelling defense of prejudice must respond to Kant’s critique of it.

Kant’s deep concern with freedom is captured by his definition of “prejudice” as “the heteronomy of reason.”<sup>127</sup> By “heteronomy,” Kant means the opposite of autonomy, which, he argues, is the essence of freedom. To be free, Kant’s maintains, is to be governed from within rather than from without, to be guided by one’s own reason rather than by nature, society, culture, or any external influence.<sup>128</sup> To be guided by these latter forces is to be “heteronomous,” or “prejudiced.” Kant thus understands “prejudice” quite expansively. “Prejudice” denotes anything given prior to what we have validated or chosen by our own reason.

---

<sup>127</sup> Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), §40, 152.

<sup>128</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* (1785), trans. and ed. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4:446, 52.

Above all, prejudice includes the influence of life circumstance (as it does for Bacon, Descartes, and Smith), but it also includes any desire whatsoever. For if we consider the matter, argues Kant, we do not choose our desires. They act upon us as contingent facts of nature -- in the same way as other influences typically considered “external.” As part of his demanding conception of using “one’s own reason,” Kant rejects desire as a kind of prejudice -- at least insofar as we aspire to act freely. In this sense, Kant’s critique of prejudice goes one step further than Smith’s. As we have seen, Smith impugns life circumstance as “prejudice,” but he defends what he considers to be the “natural” human sentiments. By contrast, Kant rejects even the latter as “prejudices” that must be overcome for the sake of autonomy.

Like Bacon, Descartes, and Smith, Kant considers the overcoming of prejudice to be central to the progress of reason. In a telling passage, he defines “enlightenment” as the “emancipation from prejudices generally.”<sup>129</sup> In positive terms, the “motto of enlightenment” is to “make use of one’s own understanding without direction from another.”<sup>130</sup>

In his essay “What is Enlightenment” (1784), Kant reiterates that judgment shaped by prejudice is not merely error-prone but “passive,” or enslaved. He compares the failure to think for one’s self to being bossed around like a child: “It is so comfortable to be a minor!,” he declares with scorn. “If I have a book that understands for me, a spiritual adviser who has a conscience for me, a doctor who decides upon a regimen for me, and so forth, I need not trouble myself at all.”<sup>131</sup> Perhaps the book contains the truth, perhaps the priest knows what is moral, and perhaps the doctor knows what is healthy. The problem with following their prescriptions is

---

<sup>129</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, §40, 152.

<sup>130</sup> Immanuel Kant, “An answer to the question: what is enlightenment?” (1784), in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and edited Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 17.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

not that I may err, but that I fail to “trouble myself,” that I fail to exercise my own reason.

Although, in the above passage, Kant singles out human authority as a source of prejudice, he makes clear that “prejudice” denotes any kind of “direction from another” (including direction from tradition, or even one’s desires). His “maxim of *unprejudiced* thought” is the general injunction “to think for one’s self.”<sup>132</sup>

Notwithstanding Kant’s somewhat counterintuitive inclusion of all desire under the category of “prejudice,” his basic idea that prejudice, conceived as life circumstance, constrains one’s freedom is quite familiar today. We often assume the free judgment requires abstracting from the influences of common opinion, convention, and our upbringing. We assume that to reason from such sources is to remain mired in what blind habit has taught us to think. And even if judgment shaped by such sources proves to be reliable, we still view it as reflecting an undesirable lack of agency. Following Kant, we tend to think that free judgment means “thinking for one’s self.”

Kant’s connection of prejudice to a lack of agency not only sheds light on our contemporary suspicions of prejudice but also on the suspicions of his philosophical predecessors. Although Bacon and Descartes focus primarily on how prejudice leads to error, their critiques of prejudice are also motivated by a deep concern with freedom. For example, although Bacon claims to be motivated by “the eternal love of truth,” he goes out of his way to criticize the followers of Aristotle’s philosophy not simply for being confused, but for having “*enslaved* themselves to it from prejudice and the authority of others” (emphasis added).<sup>133</sup>

---

<sup>132</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, §40, 152.

<sup>133</sup> Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, 63.

The same concern with freedom lurks just beneath the surface of Descartes' case against prejudice. Although Descartes claims to reject preconception in order to form "true and sound judgments,"<sup>134</sup> he also affirms an interest in breaking free from authority. He considers his method of doubting and avoiding preconception a way of "emerging from the control of my teachers" and resolving "to undertake studies within myself...to use all the powers of my mind in choosing the paths I should follow."<sup>135</sup>

Most tellingly, Descartes associates his prejudice-free method of philosophizing with self-mastery, with being in command of one's own thoughts and desires. This alone, he claims, is sufficient to make philosophers "richer, more powerful, freer and happier than other men."<sup>136</sup> In these passages, Descartes ties the rejection of prejudice to being self-directed as much as to seeking the truth. Descartes also describes his method of doubt as a way in which "the mind uses its own freedom."<sup>137</sup> He conceives doubt as a source of liberty from the tutelage of his upbringing. We are at "our freest," Descartes adds, when "a clear perception impels us to pursue some object."<sup>138</sup> Although the claim that we are at the same time both "free" and "impelled" might appear contradictory, it makes sense if we consider that the "clear perception" impels us from within -- it is an achievement of our own self-reflection, and in this sense, an entirely different source of authority from the sources that lie outside us.

As these passages show, the ideal of freedom as autonomy motivates the case against prejudice even before Kant. What makes Kant such an important critic of prejudice is that he

---

<sup>134</sup> Descartes, *Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 1.

<sup>135</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 24-25.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>137</sup> Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 73.

<sup>138</sup> Descartes, *Objections and Replies to Meditations*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 135.

brings the views of his age to their clearest statement. He rejects prejudice as a source of error and unfairness, but most of all, as a source of slavery. Kant's thought thus unifies and completes the two strands of the case against prejudice that we have inherited.

Kant most famously writes against prejudice in his moral philosophy. He does so in the name of fairness and respecting the dignity of others, but more significantly, in the name of autonomy. The fairness rationale for rejecting prejudice emerges in Kant's first formulation of the Categorical Imperative, which commands "act only in accordance with that maxim through which you can will that it become a universal law."<sup>139</sup> This formulation expresses the idea that if we can't consistently will our maxim and its universal application, we are unfairly favoring our own interests over the interests of others. Thus, the "universal law" test bears a certain likeness to Smith's "impartial spectator." The basic idea is that sound moral judgment requires abstracting from one's particular situation and judging from a standpoint shared with everyone else.

But Kant's special concern for freedom leads him to a more thorough rejection of prejudice than Smith's. Whereas Smith accepts that the basis of praise and censure is a natural human inclination for fairness, Kant argues that the source of moral judgment must be prejudice-free in a more demanding sense: It must be motivated by duty alone, by the dictates of one's own reason detached from any sentiment of benevolence or inclination for fairness. This is what Kant means by "pure practical reason." Reason is "pure" insofar as it transcends the influence of all prejudice. The value at stake in exercising pure reason is not fairness, which could be

---

<sup>139</sup> Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:421, 31.

achieved otherwise, but autonomy. Kant argues that one should take an interest in morality, even if it does not lead to happiness, because willing the Categorical Imperative is one way of transcending the influences of one's life circumstance and desires and of realizing "the idea of freedom." Freedom, he maintains, is the source of human dignity; it distinguishes a human being "from all other things, even from himself insofar as he is affected by objects."<sup>140</sup> Kant's radical critique of prejudice thus reflects his demanding notion of autonomy.

Kant develops both the truth and freedom rationales for rejecting prejudice in his writing on aesthetics. It is here, in fact, that we find some of his most illuminating accounts of the detached conception of judgment. Kant praises our faculty of aesthetic judgment insofar as it involves abstracting from the "charm and emotion" of the work and trying to determine how anyone else would judge it.<sup>141</sup> His first reason for defending such abstraction is that it helps us avoid error, or "illusion":

[Taste is] a critical faculty which in its reflective act takes account (*a priori*) of the mode of representation of everyone else, in order, *as it were*, to weigh its judgment with the collective reason of mankind, and thereby avoid the illusion arising from subjective and personal conditions which could readily be taken for objective, an illusion that would exert a prejudicial influence upon its judgment. This is accomplished by weighing the judgment, not so much with actual, as rather with the merely possible, judgments of others, and by putting ourselves in the position of everyone else, as the result of a mere abstraction from the limitations which contingently effect our own estimate.<sup>142</sup>

The idea that sound aesthetic judgment involves resisting "charm and emotion" recalls Bacon and Descartes' parallel claim about judgments concerning nature. Understanding nature's "deeper truths," as Bacon puts it, requires abstracting from the way that nature strikes us as

---

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 4:452, 57.

<sup>141</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* (1790), §40, 152.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid., §40, 151.

useful, beautiful, threatening, or purposeful. To understand nature in such terms, he maintains, is to read human values into the objective world. In a similar vein, Kant argues that we must abstract from the way in which a work of art, or any beautiful thing, charms us. What we find charming, he warns, might merely be a product of our subjective whim. It may have nothing to do with the value of the aesthetic “object” itself.

Kant’s injunction that we uproot ourselves from our own situations, or “positions” and try to place ourselves “in the position of everyone else,” rests on his assumption that our particular situations are “subjective and personal conditions” that “contingently effect our own estimate.” On the basis of this assumption, Kant equates a “man of enlarged mind” with someone who “detaches himself” from his personal situation and “reflects upon his own judgment from a universal standpoint (which he can only determine by shifting his ground to the standpoint of others).”<sup>143</sup> Kant denies the possibility that one’s particular perspective might be more illuminating than the detached standpoint of the abstract anybody. According to his view, particular implies parochial.

Kant’s detached conception of aesthetic judgment is also motivated by his concern for freedom. He praises prejudice-free aesthetic judgment insofar as it cultivates our autonomy. In fact, he measures the “aesthetic worth of the fine arts” by the extent to which they contribute to the free play of the “imagination” and “understanding.” The worthiest forms of art, he claims, engage the mind and contribute to autonomy. The basest forms appeal to prejudice and foster heteronomy.<sup>144</sup>

---

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., §40, 153.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., §53, 191-192.

Kant's most illuminating comparison, in this regard, is of poetry to rhetoric. He ranks poetry first "among all the arts," on the grounds that it "expands the mind by giving freedom to the imagination...It invigorates the mind by letting it feel its faculty -- free, spontaneous, and independent of determination by nature..."<sup>145</sup> By contrast, he ranks rhetoric lowest among the arts. Rhetoric, he writes, "so far as this is taken to mean the art of persuasion...is a dialectic, which borrows from poetry only so much as is necessary to win over men's minds to the side of the speaker before they have weighed the matter, and to rob their verdict of its freedom. Hence it can be recommended neither for the bar nor the pulpit."<sup>146</sup>

Kant's suggestion that orators somehow bypasses the reason and freedom of their listeners seems puzzling given that persuasive speech surely elicits some sort of active participation, or "weighing," on the part of those persuaded. People do not just assent to a speaker's view for no reason, capitulating as if their arms had been twisted.<sup>147</sup> Kant's objection to rhetoric makes sense, however, if we consider the sense in which rhetoric persuades people by appealing to their prejudices. Effective orators are typically masters at speaking to people from within their particular perspectives. The most persuasive politicians often encourage their listeners to judge, or to "weigh," the issues in light of the particular things they care about. On these grounds, Kant's calls rhetoric the art of "talking men round and prejudicing them in favor of anyone."<sup>148</sup> Such an appeal to prejudice, Kant argues, is at odds with cultivating autonomy.

---

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., §53, 192.

<sup>147</sup> Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 7.

<sup>148</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, §53, 192.

Thus rhetoric robs people of their freedom. Kant's deep suspicion of rhetoric is yet another example of the widespread condemnation of it that developed alongside the critique of prejudice.

Kant's renunciation of prejudice, thoroughgoing though it is, contains an important complication. On the one hand, Kant ties together the truth and freedom strands of the case against prejudice, defending a radically detached conception of judgment. On the other hand, however, in a subtle yet profound way, he provides the philosophical basis for a defense of prejudice that emerged among 20th century hermeneutic thinkers and that I elaborate in chapters to come. Kant unwittingly prepares the case for prejudice in his "transcendental deduction" of the categories.<sup>149</sup> There he argues that knowledge depends upon certain conditions, namely, the "categories of apperception," which cannot themselves be known but must be presupposed in order to make sense of knowledge. In brief, the "categories" reflect the presupposition that experience as a *whole*, or, in Kant's terms, the "unity" of experience "in accordance with *a priori* rules," is prior to the experience of particular "objects."<sup>150</sup> Although we never perceive this unity as an object, we must presuppose it as the condition of knowledge.

The idea of "conditions of knowledge," at least in a faint sense, gestures toward the idea that knowledge involves a certain kind of prejudice. For Kant, what we know, including what we perceive "clearly and distinctly" (Descartes), rests upon conditions we do not *know* but must *presuppose*. On the basis of this way of thinking, Heidegger and Gadamer eventually

---

<sup>149</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781, 2nd. (B) ed., 1787), trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), A95, 226.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, A108, 233.

rehabilitate prejudice (*Vorurteil*). As we will see in Chapter 2, they adopt Kant's basic notion of conditions of knowledge and develop a situated conception of those conditions.

But although in hindsight we must credit Kant with setting the stage for Heidegger and Gadamer's line of thought, Kant's own account of the conditions of knowledge lies far from a defense of prejudice. For the conditions, or the "prejudice," that Kant's transcendental deduction establishes is nothing other than the *a priori* categories of the knowing subject. To be sure, we, as knowers, can never "get behind" the categories that structure experience in order to have "pure," or unmediated, knowledge of things "in themselves," including our personal identity, or ego, in itself.<sup>151</sup> In this respect, Kant corrects Descartes by showing that the "I think" perceived in self-reflection presupposes a "unity of apperception," which itself (as the condition of consciousness) cannot be brought before one's consciousness as an object.<sup>152</sup> One might therefore say that, according to Kant, knowledge is always "prejudiced" by the universal structures of subjectivity.

But this use of "prejudice" would be misleading. For unlike "prejudice" understood as one's world, or concrete life-perspective, the "prejudice" that Kant may be said to articulate refers to the active faculty of the subject's own understanding. This active faculty, Kant maintains, is prior to any actual experience or situation. Far from vindicating the idea that knowledge presupposes prejudice, Kant's transcendental deduction actually provides the metaphysical background for the possibility of the subject's radical autonomy -- its ability to transcend all prejudice. The Kantian subject, which constitutes the world as it appears and can

---

<sup>151</sup> Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:451, 56.

<sup>152</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A107-108, 232-233.

be known, is, in principle, free of its own creation: free of the causal laws that govern nature and free of the conventions that order society.

But although Kant considers the condition for the possibility of knowledge to be the fixed, universal structure of subjectivity, Heidegger and Gadamer adopt his transcendental way of arguing and use it to undermine his own conclusion. Heidegger, as we will see, argues that the conditions of knowledge run deeper than the categories of the knowing subject. He argues that the very possibility of the subject-object relation presupposes a way of life, or a “world,” in which human life is situated. Heidegger’s notion of situated understanding, I argue, provides a framework for defending prejudice that overcomes the opposition between prejudice and reason. So in conclusion, although Kant is the thinker who brings the case against prejudice to its fullest expression, he is also, unwittingly, the philosopher who initiates its overcoming.

## Chapter 2

### Situated Judgment and the role of Prejudice in Understanding: Heidegger and Gadamer

#### HEIDEGGER

##### 1. Introduction to Heidegger's conception of *Dasein* and *Being-in-the-World*

As we have seen in Chapter I, today's suspicion of prejudice in politics, law, and everyday life is part of a larger way of thinking that emerged in 17th century natural philosophy and came to full expression during the Enlightenment: Sound reasoning, whether scientific, aesthetic, or moral, must be detached from any influence whose validity we have not justified in advance. In order to know reality, or to assess the aim of our actions, we must step back from our life circumstance. We must transcend the perspective shaped by tradition, habit, custom, and our upbringing. We must, in other words, cleanse our mind of all prejudice and methodically use our own reason to confirm the validity of our beliefs and motives.

Heidegger undermines this way of thinking. Our most basic way of knowing the world, he argues, is not through the detached scrutiny of our beliefs and their origin but through dealing with the world "concernfully," through being at work, building things, putting them to use, living out certain ends.<sup>153</sup> This "knowing" is not the detached relation of a subject to an object. It is a

---

<sup>153</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time* (1927), 83.

practical kind of knowledge that is simultaneously an understanding of one's self. It involves knowing how to deal with things, how to use them properly, how to fulfill one's daily activities. Heidegger points out that the items of equipment we deal with in everyday life -- a hammer, or pair of shoes, for example -- "are not objects for knowing the 'world' theoretically";<sup>154</sup> in fact, insofar as we use them proficiently, they do not appear as objects "present" to our consciousness at all. A strange, yet familiar feature of our experience, to which Heidegger draws our attention, is that when we are engaged in work, the equipment we use *vanishes* from our perceptual and cognitive range altogether: "It must, as it were, withdraw in order to be ready-to-hand quite authentically."<sup>155</sup> In our engaged activity, we understand the world as continuous with ourselves, not as a collection of objects that we could reflect upon, doubt, or affirm. At the same time as our tools withdraw, we, as subjects, vanish too, dissolving into the work we carry out.

The disappearance of self-consciousness that characterizes our basic life activity explains Heidegger's peculiar term for human being: *Dasein*. Heidegger uses this term precisely to avoid the suggestion that human life is defined by subjectivity, inner consciousness, or cognition. Translated into English, "Dasein" (*Da-sein*) literally means "being-there," where "there," in Heidegger's sense, denotes a situation rather than a physical location. "Dasein" captures the way in which we are defined by the activities we carry out, by the situations in which we find ourselves, and ultimately, by our comprehensive situation, or life circumstance -- what Heidegger calls the *world*.

But although "Dasein" indicates that the self is bound up with its situation, or world, *Dasein* does not imply that the self is merely generic, or the product of some cultural mold.

---

<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 99.

Dasein can be considered, in each case, an individual that participates in shaping its context and whose being is never identical to anyone else's. Thus, Dasein's world, the basis of its being, is not a set of social forces that acts upon it from the outside -- as if an entity called "Dasein" with its own inner life, or psychological and biological tendencies, gets stamped by some social template or molded by a complex array of influences. Dasein *is* its world, and its world is always its own.

Stated in basic terms, and in a way that wards off familiar suggestions of "social context," Dasein's world is something like its *story* -- a lived, or enacted, story of which Dasein is simultaneously the sufferer and author.<sup>156</sup> The conception of the world as a sort of story diverges from a familiar interpretation according to which the world is a context of practices with no ultimate point. Piotr Hoffman expresses a version of this view when he speaks of "the full contingency and groundlessness" of Dasein's existence.<sup>157</sup> Richard Polt implies the same when he calls the world a "complex of options" (although he then interprets it as a "sphere of meaning," leaving ambiguous whether he understands the world as a story or a pointless network of practices).<sup>158</sup> Perhaps the most prominent version of the "contingency" view comes from Hubert L. Dreyfus in his commentary on Being-in-the-World.<sup>159</sup> Dreyfus's commentary has been an aid to my own understanding of Heidegger, especially of the sense in which Dasein is

---

<sup>156</sup> For the notion of human life as a story or narrative, cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 184; cf. also Charles B. Guignon, "Authenticity, Moral Values, and Psychotherapy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, 277-278. As I explain below, considering the world as a sort of story fits with Heidegger's own interpretation of the world as a "fate" (*Schicksals*) or "destiny" (*Geschick*).

<sup>157</sup> Piotr Hoffman, "Death, Time, Historicity: Division II of *Being and Time*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, 239.

<sup>158</sup> Richard Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999), 72.

<sup>159</sup> Hubert Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991).

not a self-conscious subject. Dreyfus does a remarkably clear job of distinguishing Heidegger's notion of practical, or engaged, understanding from the understanding of a subject related to an object.<sup>160</sup>

The shortcoming, I believe, of his analysis, is that it misses the sense in which Dasein's practical reason in various domains points to a more comprehensive notion of "reason" tied to the world as a certain story, or destiny. The only sort of larger whole that Dreyfus describes is the "holistic background coping that makes possible appropriate dealings in particular circumstances."<sup>161</sup> His conception of this "holistic background" as devoid of any ultimate meaning leads him to such statements as "man is the result of a cultural interpretation," or Dasein is "passively formed."<sup>162</sup>

The very term "culture," which interpreters frequently invoke to make sense of Heidegger's notion of the world, is rather misleading. An example is Polt's claim that according to Heidegger, "personal choice is dependent on the range of possibilities available in one's culture."<sup>163</sup> The term "culture" is misleading because it implies a normalized, collective, or conventional way of doing things in contrast to a distinctive or individual way. To inject "culture" into Heidegger's thought is thus to suggest precisely the worldview he seeks to challenge -- that of choosing selves constrained by a menu of impersonal social (or "cultural") options. According to Heidegger, Dasein is not a "self" who faces another entity called the

---

<sup>160</sup> Although I offer an account of practical understanding, or what Heidegger calls "concernful circumspection," the account assumes a basic familiarity with how understanding can be embodied in action (rather than represented in a mind). For anyone interested in learning more about this topic, and for anyone interested in how Heidegger's thought relates to contemporary questions in analytic philosophy, I would recommend Dreyfus's book, especially chapters 1-6.

<sup>161</sup> Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 104.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>163</sup> Polt, *Heidegger: An introduction*, 63.

“world” or “society” or “culture.” Dasein, in a sense, *is* its world, and its world is a totality of purposes and ends, a totality that coheres as a lived story. Rarely does Heidegger himself speak of “culture,” and he seems, in fact, to avoid it when elucidating the concept of *world*. He speaks instead of particular purposes and practices “for-the-sake-of-which” Dasein exists and which ultimately point to a fate (*Schicksals*) or destiny (*Geschick*). In this way, Heidegger forces us to consider that the world cannot be reduced to the familiar concepts of “culture” or “zeitgeist.” The world certainly comprehends these influences but is by no means defined by them.

The sense of contingency that Dreyfus highlights in his reference to “culture” is captured quite explicitly in the following passage:

Not only is human being interpretation all the way down, so that our practices can never be grounded in human nature, God’s will, or the structure of rationality, but this condition is of such radical rootlessness that everyone feels fundamentally unsettled (*unheimlich*), that is, senses that human beings can never be at home in the world.<sup>164</sup>

Dreyfus here equates Heidegger’s important notion of being “unsettled” (*unheimlich*) with “radical rootlessness,” a term that Heidegger, to my knowledge, does not use. “Radical rootlessness,” in fact, misses the thrown dimension of human life (see Section 11), which involves bearing a destiny. To make sense in light of thrownness, “unsettled” or “not-at-home,” must be understood, I believe, as a positive concept, capturing the “projective,” or transcendent dimension of human life: that our nature is to be always exceeding ourselves, that there is more to us than we can possibly know.<sup>165</sup> The open-ended character of our lives, which Heidegger

---

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>165</sup> In contrast to Dreyfus, Stephen Mulhall interprets Heidegger’s “*unheimlich*” along the lines I have suggested. According to Mulhall, *unheimlich* captures the fact “that our existence is always capable of being more or other than its present realizations, and so that, for all our worldliness, we are never fully at home in any particular world.” His phrase “never fully at home” is an instructive contrast to “radical rootlessness.” Cf. Stephen Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 259.

certainly does emphasize, implies neither contingency nor radical rootlessness. Perhaps Dreyfus's most telling formulation of the "contingency" view paints Heidegger as a sort of nihilistic libertine, one who believes that "nothing is grounded and that there are no guidelines for living."<sup>166</sup> In formulations such as these, Dreyfus comes dangerously close to likening Heidegger's understanding of social practices to the view that sees them as mere prejudices. Such interpretations, which stray far from Heidegger's own key terms, attest, I believe, to the influence of the "prejudice against prejudice" on contemporary thought.

The conception of the world as a contingent set of practices overlooks the basic fact that we can give an account of our actions and of the world in which they make sense.<sup>167</sup> Dreyfus asserts that "once a practice has been explained by appealing to what one [typically] does, no more basic explanation is possible."<sup>168</sup> But this is untrue. Rather than appealing to convention, or to "the way things are done in our culture," we can tell a story that makes sense of the practice within the narrative of our life as a whole, that explains why the practice is necessary, or essential to our identity and why other people, perhaps, should also adopt it. Although the story will surely never exhaust the meaning of the practice, or justify it once and for all, the very fact that we can tell one implies that our practices are not merely contingent. They cohere as parts of a world, which, however veiled and inexhaustible, gestures toward an intelligible whole.

---

<sup>166</sup> Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 38.

<sup>167</sup> Moreover, if the world is, indeed, a contingent set of practices, as Dreyfus suggests, if there is really no necessity whatsoever that things be the way they are, then, in principle, at least, Dasein should be able to entirely transcend its world by spontaneously remodeling it. In other words, if the practices that define the world are ultimately meaningless cultural norms, then one could live according to his or her own taste, the norms be damned. Heidegger insists, however, that Dasein cannot get beyond the world into which it is thrown (*Being and Time*, 330). This impotence of Dasein in the face of its thrownness forces us to consider the world as a pre-given unity of meaning, a narrative, of a sort, which conditions any attempt to change it.

<sup>168</sup> Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 155.

The conception of the world as a kind of story makes best sense, I believe, of Heidegger's own thought in which "meaning," "fate," and "destiny" are key concepts. But first and foremost, this conception of the world captures the sense of "situation" I mean to defend. Unlike a "social context," or set of forces, a story has a point; it is about something, which is to say it always has a certain "moral," however trite or profound. Moreover, a story always has a protagonist -- someone who carries it out. Only through the action of Achilles, for example, is there an *Iliad*. But at the same time, it is only through the story that the protagonist becomes who he is. While there would surely be no *Iliad* without Achilles, there would also be no Achilles without his story as a whole. As soon as Achilles has emerged, so too has the *Iliad*. Dasein's world is intelligible in a similar way.

Insofar as Dasein is always a story that I live out, a story not identical to anyone else's, Dasein "is in each case mine," and for this reason, "one must always use the *personal* pronoun when one addresses it: 'I am', 'you are.'"<sup>169</sup> But we must not assume, Heidegger insists, that the personal pronoun denotes some inner self in contrast to the external world. It is the bias of modern thought, he argues, beginning most conspicuously with Descartes, to equate individuality, or self-possession, with having an inside that is shielded, so to speak, from what goes on around me. The "I," is not some "cabinet of consciousness," but myself expressed in the way I live.<sup>170</sup> Although explicit self-reflection is, of course, a possibility of Dasein, and although it may enrich one's life in certain ways, it is not constitutive of Dasein's identity or self-possession. Heidegger maintains that even without self-conscious reflection, my life can, in principle, be an authentic expression of who I am.

---

<sup>169</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 67-68.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

Although being absorbed in life does not involve self-consciousness or cognition, it is by no means mechanical behavior, mere instinct, or blind continuity with one's environment. We are inclined to understand it as such because we assume that detached theoretical reflection is the only type of "knowing" properly so called. We therefore understand practical activity as "atheoretical in the sense of "sightlessness." "171 But our ability to handle things "has its own kind of 'knowledge.'"172 It is a situated kind of understanding, the most basic mode of what Heidegger calls "Being-in-the-World." In analyzing Being-in-the-World, my aim is to make sense of the situated conception of understanding, thereby revealing the sense of "prejudice" involved in judgment.

In general terms, "Being-in-the-World" denotes Dasein's practical understanding of life as a whole. "Being-in" must be taken as "being in a situation," and the "world"173 as Dasein's situation writ large -- the totality of practices in which Dasein is engaged. Heidegger's ambitious project is to give a concrete account of Being-in-the-World and to reveal it as the condition of any possible understanding or relation to the world whatsoever, whether theoretical or practical. In this sense, he aims to show that Being-in-the-World is the most basic, or fundamental, mode of human existence. Being-in-the-World is not one possibility among others, as if sometimes we are "in the world" and other times we exist in another way: Dasein is never "an entity which is, so to speak, free from Being-in, but which sometimes has the inclination to take up a

---

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>173</sup> In *Being and Time*, Heidegger uses the term *world*, in his special comprehensive sense, without any quotation marks. When he speaks of *world* colloquially, in the various senses in which we typically use the term, he puts it in quotation marks -- as "world" or 'world.' He uses the term 'world,' placed in single quotation marks, when speaking of "the totality of entities" around us, and "world," placed in double quotation marks, when speaking of a concrete world in the comprehensive sense, e.g., the "world" of the peasant woman (*Being and Time*, 93).

‘relationship’ towards the world. Taking up relationships toward the world is possible only *because* Dasein, as Being-in-the-World, is as it is.”<sup>174</sup> This holds true, Heidegger shows, for any possible relationship, including what appears to be detached reflection. Considering the world as an object is one way of Being-in-the-World and by no means a privileged standpoint for grasping reality. Thus, what Bacon and Descartes consider the only legitimate path to knowledge, Heidegger reveals as a narrow species of understanding, a mode of knowing that is “founded” on our practical understanding of life as a whole.<sup>175</sup>

In the following interpretation of Heidegger, my primary goal is to clarify the situated conception of understanding by reference to Being-in-the-World. What I mean by “situation” and “life perspective” is well captured in Heidegger’s account of the world. As part of interpreting Being-in-the-World, I address how it undermines the first strand of the case against prejudice: the idea that in order to judge truthfully, we must judge in a detached manner. By showing that our ability to step back and explicitly assess our beliefs and motives presupposes an engaged understanding of life, Heidegger exposes the supposedly prejudice-free standpoint as itself a prejudice -- a particular stance made possible by our prejudice writ large.

After showing how Heidegger undermines the ideal of detached reflection, I turn to a deeper analysis of Being-in-the-World in order to derive a conception of situated agency that undermines the second strand of the case against prejudice -- the idea that prejudice is opposed to freedom. My suggestion is that implicit in Heidegger’s notion of Being-in-the-World is a conception of agency that actually preserves a certain notion of autonomy.

---

<sup>174</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 84.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

I hope to contribute an interpretation of Heidegger that clarifies the conception of prejudice I defend, that articulates a vision of situated agency, and that frees his thought from the distorting language of “culture,” “contingency,” and “rootlessness.” My approach is to hew closely to Heidegger’s own language and to avoid formulations of the world in terms of the subject-object or individual-society frameworks. Because these frameworks have come to pervade not only our philosophical discourse but also our everyday repertoire of expression (and for the most part without our notice), avoiding their influence is no small task.

Even among well-known interpretations of Heidegger, we find the misleading use of “subject” and “object” to describe Dasein and the world. According to Hoffman, for example, “Dasein reveals itself as rooted in its historical community only by exploring the full depths of its own *subjectivity*...” (emphasis added).<sup>176</sup> According to Polt, “Heidegger believes in *objectivity*” (emphasis added). But “objectivity,” Polt adds, “does not mean the complete absence of prejudices and points of view. Instead, true objectivity involves a willingness to revise one’s point of view in light of what one discovers.”<sup>177</sup> So while acknowledging that Heidegger defends a certain sense of prejudice, Polt misleadingly invokes “objectivity,” a concept that Heidegger seeks to overcome. What Polt means to say is that Heidegger believes in a *right interpretation*. But instead of putting it in such terms, Polt falls back on the familiar equation of “right” or “true” with “objective.” This obscures Heidegger’s crucial insight that a “right” interpretation need not conform to an object of detached reflection.

---

<sup>176</sup> Hoffman, “Death, Time, Historicity: Division II of *Being and Time*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, 240.

<sup>177</sup> Polt, *Heidegger: An introduction*, 71.

2. The subject-object conception of the world contrasted to Heidegger's interpretation of the world

The ideal of detached reflection that emerged in 17th century natural philosophy was based on a certain conception of the world. According to this conception, the world is a collection of meaningless objects governed by contingent forces rather than final causes. It does not embody rationality, or exist to "express an order of Ideas or archetypes."<sup>178</sup> Meaning is not a feature of the world, as Plato and Aristotle believed, but originates in the minds of human subjects. To conceive of the world as inherently meaningful is to project onto things what human beings "most desire to find."<sup>179</sup>

This holds true for the social world as well as for the natural. The practices that organize human life do not themselves embody reason or have an essential nature. They are merely conventional, owing their meaning to the human subjects who create them. To think otherwise is to be deceived, as Burke says, by "pleasing illusion."<sup>180</sup> According to this view, traditional roles and institutions are products of the human mind that have taken hold through habit and custom. Having taken hold, they become features of "culture," which, to a greater or lesser degree, puts its artificial stamp upon the individuals born into it.

Thus arises the ideal of detached reflection as the only means for knowing reality (what *is* in the natural realm) on the one hand, and for determining how to act (what *ought* to be in the social realm) on the other. Understanding "the true rays" of nature, as Bacon writes, requires

---

<sup>178</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 5.

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>180</sup> Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 66.

abstracting from the way nature appears as beautiful, threatening, or purposeful.<sup>181</sup> We must rein in our hopes and desires and rationally examine the brute facts. Of course, different thinkers had different conceptions of what it meant to rationally examine the facts. For Bacon, it involved careful experimentation and induction. For Descartes, it involved finding clear and distinct first principles. But both Bacon's "empiricism" and Descartes' "rationalism," though different in many respects, rested on the subject-object distinction. They both strove to eliminate subjective prejudice in order to know the world "objectively."

Heidegger challenges the subject-object distinction because he thinks it misses the basic way we understand and relate to the world. Understanding the world is not just a matter of looking at things, surveying the facts "out there," and then processing them in our minds. It involves engaging with the world -- knowing our way around, being competent to do things. For Heidegger, understanding has an inescapably practical dimension that recalls Aristotle's notion of *phronesis* (practical knowledge). The world, according to Heidegger, is not a meaningless array of objects that the human mind surveys and takes in. It is constituted instead by the web of projects and ends towards which we aim. Only on the basis of the world in this sense -- the world in which we act and deal with things, and which has a point -- can "nature," "society," or any object for reflection, including ourselves, appear as such.

According to Heidegger, we cannot come to know reality through detached reflection or empirical observation alone. In order to understand the world, we must live within it. This leads to a special conception of philosophy. The goal of philosophy, according to Heidegger, is to give a sufficient interpretation of the world, to illuminate the perspective that limits and makes

---

<sup>181</sup> Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, 18.

possible all understanding. But we can reflect upon this perspective philosophically only insofar as we already exist within it, only insofar as we are engaged with the world and understand it as a world of *concern* to us. In this sense, philosophy does not teach us something new, as if it connected us to reality for the first time. Illuminating the world means clarifying what we, on a certain level, already know. As we shall see in Chapter 3, this view of philosophy recalls Plato's teaching that knowledge is recollection.<sup>182</sup>

### 3. The question of being and its Socratic character

Heidegger developed his conception of the world and demonstrated its priority in light of a single question -- the question of the meaning of *being*. What do we mean when we say that something *is*? Heidegger recognized that the question might appear dauntingly abstract, "a mere matter for soaring speculation about the most general of generalities."<sup>183</sup> But he insisted that it was both the most basic question and the most concrete. He gave it concrete direction, first and foremost, by placing it within the western philosophical tradition. The question of being, he pointed out, was not some novel speculation of his own but an ancient puzzle that had since been forgotten. In particular, it was a puzzle raised by Plato, which Heidegger acknowledges in the first line of *Being and Time*. The line comes from Plato's *Sophist*: "For manifestly you have long been aware of what you mean when you use the expression 'being.' We, however, who used to

---

<sup>182</sup> In one of the few explicit analogies of Heidegger to Plato that I have encountered, Polt connects Heidegger's circular, or hermeneutic, conception of philosophy to Plato's notion of recollection (*Heidegger: An Introduction*, 31).

<sup>183</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 29.

think we understood it, have now become perplexed.”<sup>184</sup> Heidegger sought to reawaken Plato’s question.

Although Heidegger does not himself mention it, there is something strikingly Socratic about the question of being. Socrates’ famous question -- the one he always would ask his fellow Athenians -- was “what *is*...” For example, what is justice?, what is virtue?, what is the good?. Socrates, in other words, was concerned first and foremost with the *being* of what he investigated rather than its composition or generation. This distinguished him from the physiologists of his day, who attempted to explain the nature of things by reference to their parts and the causes of their coming into being. According to Socrates, the question of being was more fundamental. He would often point out that in order to determine the composition of something, or the cause of its coming into being, one must presuppose an understanding of what that thing *is*. Without some understanding the thing itself, the whole, completed thing, any further investigation about it is blind.<sup>185</sup>

Heidegger adopts this Socratic line of thought, but his distinctive twist is to explicitly investigate the being of being rather than to start, as Socrates did, by asking about the being of justice, virtue, and so on. Nevertheless, Heidegger gives his investigation concrete direction in broadly Socratic fashion. For in approaching the question of being, Heidegger, like Socrates, turns not toward the objects that appear to sight, but toward the practices, ends, and opinions that constitute human life. By doing so, Heidegger suggests that the comprehensive study of being, what he calls “fundamental ontology,” has, broadly speaking, a *political* character. Fundamental ontology is not primarily the study of objects, much less of the elements, atoms, and particles

---

<sup>184</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>185</sup> Cf. Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 123.

that comprise the physical universe. It is first and foremost a study of human practices. Only on the basis of such a study, suggests Heidegger, does the rest of the universe become intelligible.

Heidegger's concern with human practices makes his ontology of special relevance for political philosophers. This becomes clear as his provisional answer to the question of the meaning of being emerges. Being, Heidegger shows, is something like the *world*, that is, the world of *concern* to us. Only on the basis of this world do beings appear as what they are. Investigating the meaning of being thus involves addressing the nature of human understanding and action. Accordingly, Heidegger begins *Being and Time* by examining everyday life.

To make sense of Heidegger's conception of Being-in-the-World, we must think our way beyond the familiar subject-object distinction. Heidegger proposes that we do so by distinguishing two ways in which beings appear to us in everyday life. The first is "presence-at-hand" (*Vorhandenheit*), by which he means objects that we, as subjects, detachedly examine. Entities "present-at-hand" might be things as they really exist in the external world, or they might be our own, distorted representations of such things. In fact, once beings appear in this way, the question naturally arises of whether they really correspond to our subjective representation of them and whether they even exist in the "external world" at all. As Descartes famously speculates, perhaps what we take to be reality is merely a figment of our imagination, a dream implanted in our own consciousness by a malevolent god.

Heidegger regards "presence-at-hand" as a non-basic way in which beings appear. It is derivative of another mode of being, which he calls "readiness-to-hand" (*Zuhandenheit*).<sup>186</sup> We

---

<sup>186</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 98.

encounter beings as ready-to-hand when we deal with them rather than look at them detachedly. When we deal with things (such as a hammer, or a pair of shoes), when we engage with them, when we put them to use, we become absorbed in doing so. But when we are absorbed, the things we use no longer appear as objects. They become, in Heidegger's phrase, "ready-to-hand." This term captures the sense in which the things we use vanish from our perceptual range as we work with them. Things ready-to-hand are "there," in that we have a practical awareness of them, but they do not appear as objects for cognition.<sup>187</sup>

It is clear how this notion of "ready-to-hand" differs from the standard way of describing the world in terms of subjects and objects. While absorbed in activity, we do not distinguish ourselves from the things we put to use. Only when our activity is disrupted, when the spell of absorption is broken, so to speak, and our attention is drawn to the things we are engaged with, only then do we come to regard these things as "present-at-hand." By distinguishing these two understandings of being, both grounded in familiar experiences, Heidegger challenges the ontological priority of presence-at-hand. The world, he argues, is not primarily a collection of objects that we come to know through detached reflection. We understand things first and foremost as ready-to-hand.

By inquiring into the nature of the ready-to-hand, Heidegger concretely develops his conception of the *world* -- the basic structure of any situation that makes possible things ready-to-hand and present-at-hand. Only on the basis of Being-in-the-World, he shows, can we put things to use or reflect upon them in a detached manner.

---

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 99.

#### 4. The *world* as a referential totality of equipment, nature, and Dasein

By starting his inquiry from the experience of using equipment (*das Zeug*), Heidegger does not mean to suggest that human life is defined primarily by labor or productive activity. The use of equipment is simply one feature of our experience, which, if examined carefully, affords us a glimpse at Being-in-the-World. In his writings after *Being and Time*, Heidegger devotes less attention to equipment and develops his conception of the world through other means, for example, by examining the work of art.<sup>188</sup> But his derivation of the world from equipment is his most famous and perhaps his most concrete. By analyzing Heidegger's conception of the world, I aim to clarify the concept of "situation" -- to show how it can be understood as a life perspective that enables our understanding.

Heidegger begins his account of the world by pointing out the following: "Taken strictly, there 'is' no such thing as *an* equipment. To the Being of any equipment there always belongs a totality of equipment, in which it can be this equipment that it is. Equipment is essentially 'something in-order-to...'" And "in the 'in-order-to'" lies "an *assignment* or *reference* of something to something. In other words, equipment "always is *in terms of* its belonging to other equipment: ink-stand, pen, ink, paper, blotting pad, table, lamp, furniture, windows, room."<sup>189</sup> Without this "totality of equipment," or some such totality, none of the particular things could exist as the things they are. The parts presuppose the context as a whole: It is in this arrangement that "any 'individual' item of equipment shows itself."<sup>190</sup>

---

<sup>188</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1935-1936) in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

<sup>189</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 97.

<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

The way in which equipment “shows itself” is in our dealings (*umgang*) with it -- when we actually go about using it. In such dealings, the equipment “is not grasped thematically as an occurring Thing, nor is the equipment-structure known as such even in the using.”<sup>191</sup> If the equipment performs its function and is “ready-to-hand” authentically, it vanishes along with the references it implies. Paradoxically, the equipment is “there” most authentically when it is not there for us to look upon or consider. Thus, the ready-to-hand “is not grasped theoretically at all.”<sup>192</sup> Nevertheless, our dealing with the ready-to-hand “is not a blind one.” It “has its own kind of sight,” which is guided by the *work* -- “that which is to be produced at the time.” The work “is accordingly ready-to-hand too,” and “as the “*toward-which*” of such things as the hammer, the plane, and the needle, likewise has the kind of being that belongs to equipment.” As such, the “the work bears with it that referential totality within which equipment is encountered.”<sup>193</sup>

But the work refers not only to a context of things made. It also refers to materials that human beings harvest and cultivate, what is typically called “nature”:

In the environment [of the workshop] certain entities become accessible which are always ready-to-hand, but which, in themselves, do not need to be produced. Hammer, tongs, and needle, refer in themselves to steel, iron, metal, mineral, wood, in that they consist of these. In equipment that is used, ‘Nature’ is discovered along with it by that use -- the ‘Nature’ we find in natural products.<sup>194</sup>

---

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 100.

Heidegger reiterates that the “nature” to which the work refers is ready-to-hand and thus discovered within the totality of equipment. Nature “is not to be understood as that which is just present-at-hand, nor as the *power of Nature*.”<sup>195</sup> In other words, the things of the earth and sky are not encountered as objects of theoretical study, or as things that can be defined in terms of physical properties or forces. Rather, they are implicitly understood along with the work: “A covered railway platform takes account of bad weather; an installation for public lighting takes account of the darkness, or rather of specific changes in the presence or absence of daylight -- the ‘position of the sun.’”<sup>196</sup> When we are absorbed in building the railroad platform, or in using it, we understand “bad weather” without reflecting upon it explicitly. The very structure of the platform and the way we position ourselves beneath the covering attests to such an understanding.

Heidegger’s casual treatment of the work’s reference to nature disguises a subtle and significant insight: In the experience of being absorbed in work, both fabricated products (equipment) and natural things are discovered as ready-to-hand; they have the same, value-laden mode of being. The rain, for example, is “bad weather,” not droplets of water produced by condensation. The sun is the “vaulting sphere of light” whose rising and setting marks the time of day; it is not a ball of mass around which the earth revolves. As ready-to-hand within a totality of involvements, natural things are thus discovered as meaningful in their own ways. This insight calls into question the familiar contrast between what is artificial and natural, between what human beings produce and what arises spontaneously. When we are absorbed in

---

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid., 100-101.

work, at least, “natural” and “artificial” things appear as the distinctive kinds they are *only in relation to each other*, within the totality of references.

Beyond referring to equipment and to nature, the work “also has an assignment to the person who is to use it or wear it. The work is cut to his figure; he ‘is’ there along with it as the work emerges.”<sup>197</sup> The work thus refers to Dasein -- not just to my own Dasein (i.e., the one doing the work) but to *others* who inhabit different roles. This means that the work transcends the bounds of the workshop and reaches into a *public* world, a world shared with others:

Along with the work, we encounter not only entities ready-to-hand but also entities with Dasein’s kind of being -- entities for which, in their concern, the product becomes ready-to-hand; and together with these we encounter the world in which wearers and users live, which is at the same time ours. Any work with which one concerns oneself is ready-to-hand not only in the domestic world of the workshop but also in the *public world*.<sup>198</sup>

The others “who are thus ‘encountered’ in a ready-to-hand, environmental context of equipment, are not somehow added on in thought to some Thing which is proximally just present-at-hand.”<sup>199</sup> For example, we do not explicitly conceive of a shirt-thing which is intended for another entity, the wearer. Our consideration of the wearer is just as implicit, or “inconspicuous,” as our consideration of the rain when we build the railway platform. That is to say, the “others” to whom we relate are not present-at-hand subjects “over against whom the “I” stands out.” They are rather “those from whom, for the most part, one does *not* distinguish oneself -- those among whom one is too.”<sup>200</sup> Heidegger takes pause to mention that

---

<sup>197</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>198</sup> Ibid., 100.

<sup>199</sup> Ibid., 153.

<sup>200</sup> Ibid., 154.

“theoretically concocted ‘explanations’ of the Being-present-at-hand of Others urge themselves upon us all too easily; but over against such explanations we must hold fast to the phenomenal facts of the case which we have pointed out, namely that Others are encountered *environmentally* [i.e., within the context of equipment].”<sup>201</sup>

The way in which we “encounter” others, however, is manifestly different from the way we encounter things ready-to-hand. Our concern for others, our “solicitude,” as Heidegger calls it, is always guided by roles and terms of “being-with.” In everyday existence, for example, being-with is often “being for, against, or without one another, passing one another by, not “mattering” to one another.”<sup>202</sup> These are not explicit thoughts or beliefs, but attitudes expressed in one’s activity: “When material is put to use, we encounter its producer or ‘supplier’ as one who ‘serves’ well or badly. When, for example, we walk along the edge of a field but ‘outside it,’ the field shows itself as belonging to such-and-such a person, and decently kept by him.”<sup>203</sup> We understand the owner not by means of reflection, but in our bearing that attests to his presence, in our “circumspective” care not to trespass on his property.

Equipment ready-to-hand thus carries within itself a totality of references -- to other equipment, to nature, and to Dasein. These references are not properties of equipment, as if they could be removed one by one, leaving the thing itself intact. This would be to mistake equipment for something present-at-hand such as Descartes’ ball of wax -- a physical thing occurring in space to which contingent properties accrue -- color, hardness, shape, and so on.

---

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid., 158.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 153.

By contrast, the references of equipment constitute its very *being*. Detached from the network of references, the equipment would not be what it is.

This totality of references is a first approximation of what Heidegger calls the phenomenon of the *world*. From this initial sketch, we can begin to distinguish the world from the concepts of “culture” and “social context.” First of all, as the reference to nature suggests, the world is more comprehensive than either of the former terms. For when we speak of “culture” and “society” we typically imply the human world in contrast to the natural. Heidegger’s conception of the world as a *unity* of equipment, nature, and Dasein, undermines this contrast. Furthermore, although Being-in-the-World implies being-with-others, and is in this sense a *public* way of being, such publicity does not imply rigid conformity to societal norms.

The way in which Dasein, in each case, uses equipment toward its purposes and ends may conform to the typical “way things are done” in its society, but such use may also reflect Dasein’s own take on life for which no cultural template exists. To be sure, Heidegger does suggest that the meaning of any action is shaped by its relation to what one might *typically* do in the given circumstance. And what one might typically do, is, of course, shaped by culture.<sup>204</sup> But this suggestion does not imply that action as such conforms to some cultural mold. In fact, Heidegger regards the tendency of action to slide toward such conformity as the *inauthentic* dimension of Dasein.<sup>205</sup> So in order to understand what Heidegger means by the world, we should set aside the familiar notions of culture and social context and follow Heidegger’s own

---

<sup>204</sup> See his discussion of *das Man*, or “what one typically does,” as a fundamental dimension (or “existential”) of Dasein (*Being and Time*, ¶27). The concept of *das Man* and its relationship to inauthenticity is treated in section 10 below.

<sup>205</sup> Heidegger, I believe, would firmly deny Dreyfus’s suggestion that authentic Dasein must “take over the average [ways of being] one has in one’s culture just like everyone else” (Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 157).

terms. Stated simply and in summary, the world is a totality of equipment, nature, and Dasein. We can imagine a number of such totalities, but the only way to get a firm handle on what Heidegger means is to consider the totality of one's own life.

Dasein's "absorption in references or assignments constitutive for the readiness-to-hand of a totality of equipment," even the most basic use of a hammer or pair of shoes, embodies a practical understanding of the world, and this is what Heidegger means by "Being-in."<sup>206</sup> The strange phrase "absorption in a totality of equipment" captures the sense in which Dasein's understanding of equipment, and thereby, the world, is entirely practical. It is not a matter of beliefs, mental contents, or cognition. For what Dasein "understands" is not some object, some present-at-hand entity, but how to handle things appropriately -- things from which Dasein does *not* distinguish itself. When equipment is being used, when it is ready-to-hand authentically, it "withdraws," thereby veiling even its own being *as* ready-to-hand within a totality of assignments: "The assignments themselves are not observed; they are rather 'there' when we concernfully submit ourselves to them."<sup>207</sup>

The phrase "submit ourselves" highlights the unity of Dasein, its work, and the referential totality (world). Far from being a self-conscious subject confronted by some present-at-hand task, Dasein *is* its activity. For example, when a workman hammers at his bench he *is* the activity of hammering. But the activity of hammering is never a mere activity; it points beyond itself to Being-in-the-World, to the articulated whole (of equipment, nature, and Dasein) in which the workman is immersed. Thus, Being-in-the-World, at the most basic level, is a mode of "knowing" expressed entirely in Dasein's activity, or comportment. It is not the relation of a

---

<sup>206</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 107.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

subject to an object, and, for the most part, its character *as* Being-in-the-World remains hidden from view. This “remaining hidden” does not, as such, denote a vague or deficient understanding. It refers, rather, to the *mode* of understanding, which is entirely practical, or implicit.<sup>208</sup>

The explicit character of Being-in-the-World can emerge only when there is some disruption in Dasein’s concerned activity. The tool, for example, might break, and “when its unusability is thus discovered, equipment becomes conspicuous.” This conspicuousness “presents the ready-to-hand equipment as in a certain un-readiness-to-hand.”<sup>209</sup> In becoming conspicuous, the equipment becomes present-at-hand insofar as it emerges explicitly *as* a sort of object. But its presence-at-hand “is still not devoid of all readiness-to-hand whatsoever,” as if it were “just a Thing which occurs somewhere,” a mere object with value-neutral properties. The equipment is still bound up with our concern; it becomes something explicitly *unusable*, something we need to fix or else shove out of the way.<sup>210</sup> But in emerging as deficient, it emerges as something that was useful for a certain task. Readiness-to-hand shows itself, “and it is precisely here that the worldly character of the ready-to-hand shows itself too.”<sup>211</sup> For what appears is not simply the particular item of equipment, but that “*toward-which*” the equipment was being used: “we catch sight of the “*toward-this*” itself and along with it, everything connected with the work -- the ‘whole workshop’-- as that wherein concern already dwells.” In this way, “the world announces itself,” not “as something never seen before, but as a totality

---

<sup>208</sup> The phenomenon of the virtuoso at work attests to how masterful, or certain, one’s practical understanding can be.

<sup>209</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 103.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid.*

constantly sighted beforehand in circumspection.”<sup>212</sup> (Here Heidegger uses “seeing” to denote a practical sort of awareness in contrast to the familiar notion of looking, or perceiving.<sup>213</sup>)

The fact that the world can “announce itself” and be interpreted in speech attests to the intelligibility of Dasein’s everyday absorption in work. Such absorption is not mechanical behavior, mere habit, or aimless activity. It has a *point*, which is ultimately tied up with an understanding of the world. The point becomes explicit as that “toward-which” Dasein works. The “toward-which” refers to a totality of equipment, to nature, and, finally, to Dasein. For example: “With hammering there is an involvement in making something fast; with making something fast, there is an involvement in protection against bad weather; and this protection ‘is’ for the sake of [um-willen] providing shelter for Dasein -- that is to say, for the sake of a possibility of Dasein’s being.”<sup>214</sup>

This “for-the-sake-of” being sheltered -- in a house, or under a covered railway platform, for example -- is not directed toward something else ready-to-hand. It is an end in itself, a particular way of being that expresses what it means to live well and which organizes the totality of equipment:

The totality of involvements constitutive of the “toward-which,” goes back ultimately to a “towards-which” in which there is *no* further involvement: this “toward-which” is not an entity with the kind of Being that belongs to what is ready-to-hand within a world; it is rather an entity whose being is defined by Being-in-the-World, and to whose state of Being, worldhood itself belongs. This primary ““towards-

---

<sup>212</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>213</sup> In this respect, Heidegger follows Aristotle’s understanding of *nous* as defined in *Ethics*, Book VI -- a certain eye of the soul that grasps particulars, the things most basic in any deliberation about how to act. This sort of grasp is not that of science (*episteme*), nor is it something attained by reasoning (*logos*). It is a certain type of perception (*aisthesis*), but not that of the senses.

<sup>214</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 116.

which” is not just another “towards-this” as something in which an involvement is possible. The primary ‘towards-which’ is a “for-the-sake-of-which.” But the ‘for-the-sake-of’ always pertains to the Being of Dasein, for which, in its Being, that very Being is essentially an issue.<sup>215</sup>

The “for-the-sake-of” is not defined by its usefulness for some further end; it points beyond itself to a totality of other ways of being, ultimately to Dasein’s understanding of life as a whole. This is what Heidegger means when he defines the “for-the-sake-of-which” as an entity whose being is defined by “worldhood itself.” Just as a “totality of involvements which is constitutive for the ready-to-hand” is “‘earlier’ than any single item of equipment,” so a totality of ways of being is “‘earlier’” than any single way.

Characteristic of his style in *Being and Time*, Heidegger leaps over this point in order to summarize the general structure of the world (rather than to describe any particular world). We should pause, however, to consider what he means -- especially since the reference “for-the-sake-of-which” is central to the world’s structure, linking the equipmental totality to Dasein’s self-understanding. (Moreover, as Heidegger himself stresses, what he means by the general existential structures of the world are only intelligible in light of examples.) Heidegger’s point, stated simply, is that any single way of being attains its distinctive character -- the responsibilities it involves, the feelings it evokes, the claim it makes -- only in relation to others. What it means to be a family member, for example, emerges in relation to being a friend, coworker, business partner, fellow citizen, and so on. Detached from some such totality, the role of family member could not exist in any recognizable way. Thus, any way of being presupposes a totality of ways, a certain way of life as a whole.

---

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 117.

We might illustrate this point through Hegel's conception of the family, whose "immediate" unity based on love emerges in relation to civil society and the state. One is in the family, Hegel writes, "not as an independent person but as a member."<sup>216</sup> Each is loved and cared for equally, regardless of talent and personality. But the very terms that define such unconditional love, and thus, what it *is* to be a family member, presuppose a realm in which distinctions matter. Love appears in light of civil society -- the sphere of production and exchange in which members are valued for their particular roles within the economy-- as landowners, businessmen, civil servants.<sup>217</sup> The roles that define civil society, in turn, become possible only in relation to the state -- the institution that gives them public recognition as parts of a common good.<sup>218</sup> Without this link to the common good, the roles would melt into an undifferentiated mass of profit-seeking individuals. The distinctions would be lost. In this way, the family refers beyond itself. It presupposes ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) as a whole. To understand one's self as a family member, in other words, is also to understand one's self as a member (or at least a potential member) of civil society and the state. Without the other spheres of life, the family could not exist in any recognizable way. Hegel's account of ethical life helps to illuminate what Heidegger means by "being-with" others as a defining feature of Dasein. Being-with always points beyond "one's closest" (e.g., one's family), which is why the world is a *public* world.

Hegel's account helps to clarify Heidegger's general point about ways of being. That "for-the-sake-of-which" Dasein works presupposes a totality of possibilities in which Dasein

---

<sup>216</sup> Hegel, *Philosophy of Right* (1821), §158, 110.

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.*, §182-256, 122-155.

<sup>218</sup> *Ibid.*, §257-261, 155-161.

understands itself. In other words, in working “for-the-sake-of” a certain way of being, Dasein has taken a stand on what it *all* means. This has nothing to do with explicitly reflecting on the “meaning of life.” Regardless of whether Dasein has ever raised such questions, and in spite of any opinions it might have on the matter, Dasein possesses an implicit awareness, or understanding, of the whole.

More precisely, Dasein *is* its understanding of the whole. Any particular possibility that Dasein lives out in a given moment is part of a larger story; the “for-the-sake-of-which” carries within itself all the other possibilities that Dasein has taken up and passed by.

Heidegger is careful not to ascribe any particular point to the story, and in this crucial respect, his notion of life as a whole diverges from Hegel’s account of ethical life, whose point is the realization of Spirit. According to Heidegger, there is no single, fully realized, story that Dasein’s way of life embodies. His point is simply that some understanding of the whole, however trivial or deep, is presupposed by any particular way of being.

The fact that the equipmental totality “goes back” to Dasein’s way of being reveals the unity of Dasein and the world. The world coheres only in relation to Dasein’s self-understanding -- that “for-the-sake-of-which” things are ready-to-hand:

The “for-the-sake-of-which” signifies an “in-order-to”; this in turn, a “towards-this”; the latter, an “in-which” of letting something be involved; and that in turn, the “with-which” of an involvement. These relationships are bound up with one another as a primordial totality; they are what they are as this signifying...This is what makes up the structure of the world -- the structure of that wherein Dasein as such already is.<sup>219</sup>

---

<sup>219</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 120.

But only insofar as there is a world can Dasein devote itself to any particular way of being and thereby understand (i.e., be) itself. Existing “for-the-sake-of” being sheltered would be impossible without houses, covered platforms, and the network of equipment they imply. Along with Dasein’s being, “a context of the ready-to-hand is already essentially discovered.”<sup>220</sup> Moreover, any particular “for-the-sake-of” presupposes a totality of possibilities in which it makes sense. In this way, human life presupposes the world it sustains.

Here emerges the justification of Heidegger’s term “Dasein.” Not only does “Dasein” ward off subjectivist understandings of human life (for we exist “first and foremost” as beings absorbed in things), but it also captures the sense in which our non-reflective activity -- our absorption in “having to do with something, producing something, making use of something, giving something up and letting it go, undertaking, accomplishing” -- presupposes a horizon, or *world* to which we already belong. Human life is defined by “Da-sein,” “being-there,” or “Being-in-the-World.” It is never the activity of an isolated self, whether conceived as a “thinking thing” (Descartes) or as a “social structure of drives” (Nietzsche).

## 5. The world as the condition of philosophy

Heidegger adds a further, crucial point: Dasein’s “submission” to the world, its “Being-in,” is by no means dissolved when Dasein “steps back” from its activity and gives an explicit account of the relations that constitute Being-in-the-World (i.e., when Dasein does philosophy, or “fundamental ontology”). It might be supposed, he acknowledges, that “inasmuch as Relations

---

<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

are always ‘something thought’,” that worldhood has been “dissolved into ‘pure thinking.’” But although the “context of assignments or references, which...is constitutive for worldhood, can be taken formally in the sense of a system of Relations,” one must note “that in such formalizations the phenomena get leveled off so much that their real phenomenal content may be lost”<sup>221</sup>:

The phenomenal content of these ‘Relations’ and ‘Relata’ --the “in-order-to,” the “for-the-sake-of”, and the “with-which” of an involvement -- is such that they resist any sort of mathematical functionalization; nor are they merely something thought, first posited in an ‘act of thinking.’ They are rather relationships in which concerned circumspection as such already dwells.<sup>222</sup>

In other words, the involvements constitutive of the world are implicit in Dasein’s absorbed activity, and, as such, are not discovered for the first time in the interpretation that points them out. The interpretation simply articulates what Dasein already understands in practice. The retrospective articulation, moreover, is no substitute for the involvements *themselves*, which still need to be lived out in order to mean something.

For example, simply indicating the involvement of “making something fast” in “providing a shelter for Dasein” does not by itself represent, or capture, what it means to build “for-the-sake-of” being sheltered. In order to understand this, one would need to understand the situations in which being soaked by rain is undignified, which, in turn, dictate what sort of shelters get built. In other words, what counts as building a *shelter* (“in-order-to”), rather than an inappropriate covering, requires a practical understanding of being sheltered (“for-the-sake-of”), which means knowing when to seek protection from bad weather and when to remain outdoors. Getting drenched while waiting for the train is undignified. Braving the elements while running a marathon is part of the sport. Covering a railway platform would thus make sense as “building

---

<sup>221</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 121-122.

a shelter,” whereas covering a marathon route would not. In the latter case, the cover would not be a shelter at all, but an impediment to the sport.

So to consider Heidegger’s interpretation of the world an act of pure thinking or cognition would be to misunderstand it entirely. Only in light of the actual life relationships to which it points does the interpretation make sense. Rather than a representation of the world, the interpretation is a sort of torch that illuminates it -- that reveals the general structure of the articulated whole to someone who already exists within it. The schematic interpretation is no substitute for *what* it illuminates. The words on the page come to life only in virtue of our actual lived experience, in virtue of the concrete world we inhabit.

## 6. The world as the basis for the distinction between Being and beings

The *world*, or “relational totality” of equipment, nature, and Dasein, is Heidegger’s first formulation of the *whole*, the all-encompassing situation, in which particular entities “within-the-world” can emerge -- items of equipment, natural things, and Dasein in its manifold ways of being. In terms that Heidegger later adopts, and that define perhaps the most crucial distinction in his thought, the world is a first approximation of being as a whole, or Being as distinct from beings. Especially in his latter essays, Heidegger uses “Being,” to denote the basis on which beings can be discovered as they are: “Things are, and human beings, gifts, and sacrifices are, animals and plants are, equipment and works are.” But “that which is, the particular being,

stands in Being.”<sup>223</sup> Only Being “grants and guarantees to us human beings a passage to those beings that we ourselves are not, and access to that being that we ourselves are.”<sup>224</sup>

As the condition for the possibility of beings, Being is distinct from the things to which it gives rise; it is “prior,” “more fundamental,” “more primordial,” or “more fully in being,” than beings -- all terms which Heidegger at different points uses to express the contrast. But despite drawing this distinction, which, in a sense, separates Being from beings, Heidegger reiterates that Being is not some transcendent principle floating above and beyond the beings it makes possible. In fact, if it were, it would be another being among beings (albeit a special one) and not Being (as a whole). Being always resides, so to speak, *in beings*, which Heidegger demonstrates concretely in his account of equipment, of how the world “announces itself” in the hammer, or the pair of shoes. This to say that Being, or the world, is an *articulated* whole -- composed of different *kinds*, each of which embodies the whole in its own way.

The relationship between the world and entities within the world, Being and beings, whole and part, emerges in light of the concrete examples Heidegger provides. A hammer, as we have seen, refers beyond itself to the world. It is the distinctive being that it is only as part of the world; it could not exist otherwise. The same, however, is not true in the reverse. The world would persist, and maintain a certain identity, in the absence of any particular thing, such as a hammer, to which it gives rise. But nevertheless, the hammer is not a mere part, or fragment of the world and nothing more. It is a point at which the world comes into focus in a unique way. (This “coming into focus,” what it implies for the world’s identity, and how it rounds out the relation between Being and beings, can be appropriately addressed only in light of Heidegger’s

---

<sup>223</sup> Heidegger, “The Origin of Work of Art,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 51.

<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*

interpretation of Being-in-the-World as “thrown-projection,” treated in Section 11, below.) In summary, the world must also be considered as “Being,” or “the whole,” which, on the one hand, is distinct from “entities within-the-world,” or “beings,” or “parts,” yet, on the other, is related to them in the way outlined above.

## 7. The world understood as a cosmos

A final way in which we might characterize the world is by an ancient term that is illuminating even though Heidegger himself does not, to my knowledge, use it. Heidegger’s conception of the world, we might say, is the sketch of a *cosmos*, or more precisely, the character, or basic relational structure of a cosmos. According to the Greek understanding, “cosmos” denotes being as a whole, or the basic level of reality, insofar as it is intelligible, or embodies reason. And insofar as the whole is intelligible, so too are the parts, or kinds, that articulate the whole. The parts are intelligible in light of the whole.

The Greek view contrasts the notion of cosmos with that of *chaos* -- the notion that reality is wholly meaningless, a mere heap of entities with no ultimate order or point. Plato presents a conception of cosmos insofar as he claims that the whole is the *idea* of the good. This represented a radical contrast to the predominant pre-Socratic understanding of the universe as a collection of atoms governed by contingent forces.

Heidegger’s conception of the world can be thought of as a certain revival of the notion of cosmos. The world, which gives rise to beings, is an intelligible whole. It is articulated into different ends (the manifold possibilities of Dasein), which themselves presuppose a fundamental

awareness of the whole. The world must therefore be understood as a sort of text. However -- and this is essential to Heidegger's thought -- the text lacks a complete, or fully worked out meaning. The meaning of the whole, according to Heidegger, is open to question, which means that the whole is incomplete. It is a partial whole, which, nevertheless, cannot be reduced to a part.

The partial character of the whole may partly explain why Heidegger avoids the term "cosmos," which often denotes a rational order punctuated by a full stop. Hegel's conception of Spirit is one example. But despite its incompleteness, the world, according to Heidegger, is by no means "a mere collection of the countable or uncountable, familiar and unfamiliar things that are just there," and neither is it "a merely imagined framework added by our representation to the sum of such given things."<sup>225</sup> Here he explicitly rejects the view that meaning originates in the subjective consciousness. The world, he firmly maintains, has a destiny, however veiled, and for this reason, we may appropriately consider it a sort of cosmos.

This interpretation finds support in a line from Heidegger's essay on *The Origin of the Work of Art*: "Through Being there passes a veiled destiny that is ordained between the godly and the counter-godly."<sup>226</sup> Although this sentence leaves much in darkness, it illuminates the cosmic character of the world (here reinterpreted as "Being"), defining the basic terms in which the story must be told. The story is a "veiled destiny," something understood from the start but simultaneously discovered. This defines the "how" of the story, i.e., the way in which it unfolds. "Between the godly and counter-godly" defines the "what," or the essence. Being must be defined in terms of ultimate ends, ends beyond particular human beings. Heidegger intimates

---

<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid., 51.

this in his account of how Dasein depends on the world it sustains. All human striving and creating presupposes the world, which is to say that human life is subordinate to the story it enacts.<sup>227</sup>

Although “cosmos” might still appear a misleading imposition on Heidegger’s conception of the world, I introduce it as preparation for the following chapter on Plato. There I interpret Plato’s *ideas* as grounding a conception of situated understanding not entirely unlike Heidegger’s. Specifically, my interpretation of Plato’s *idea* of the whole should be read with Heidegger’s conception of the world in mind. Each, I suggest, sheds light on the other, providing a clearer view of situated understanding and its implications.

I realize that this suggestion runs contrary to familiar interpretations of Plato -- even to Heidegger’s own. In fact, Heidegger sometimes defines his conception of Being in contrast to Plato’s, suggesting that Plato, along with Greek thought, mistakenly experiences the Being of beings as “presence-at-hand” and thus overlooks the phenomenon of the world.<sup>228</sup> According to this suggestion, the *idea* is a present-at-hand entity above all other entities -- the self-sufficient, eternal source of their being. The *idea* reveals itself to the pure perception of the knowing mind, thereby justifying theory, or passive contemplation, as the authentic stance toward the cosmos. Accordingly, Heidegger interprets the Platonic conception of “knowing” (*noeisis*) as a superficial understanding that overlooks the relation of knowing to Being-in-the-World.

In support of this interpretation, Heidegger frequently points out the connection in Greek thought between knowing and seeing, expressed, for example, in the Greek *eidenai*, “to know,”

---

<sup>227</sup> The character of the world as a cosmos emerges all the more clearly in Heidegger’s later reformulation of Being as the “fourfold” of “earth, sky, mortals, and divinities” (cf. “Building Dwelling Thinking”).

<sup>228</sup> Cf. Heidegger, “The Thing,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*: Plato “conceives of the presence of what is present in terms of outward appearance, and has no more understanding of the nature of the thing than did Aristotle and all subsequent thinkers” (Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 166).

derivative of the verb “to see.” This is Heidegger’s distinctive version of a familiar interpretation of Plato -- one that portrays him as defending pure contemplation detached from everyday life. As I aim to show, however, this understanding of Plato is misleading. In the next chapter, I defend a rival interpretation of Plato’s conception of knowing that suggests a closer affinity to Heidegger’s way of thinking.<sup>229</sup> In light of that interpretation, the use of “cosmos” to characterize Heidegger’s conception of the world will appear more fitting.

## 8. Situated understanding and prejudice

At this point, let us pause to consider how Heidegger’s conception of Being-in-the-World clarifies the situated conception of understanding. By the terms “situation,” “life circumstance,” and “prejudice writ large,” I mean something like Heidegger’s conception of the world. To say that understanding is “situated” means that it presupposes a certain practical understanding of the world, what Heidegger calls “Being-in-the-World.” To say that this understanding is “practical” means that it’s embodied in our activity, our “concernful circumspection” (dealing with equipment) and “solicitous being-with” (engaging with others). It is irreducible to principles or any sort of mental content, and it has nothing to do with a subject contemplating an object. In understanding the world, or its situation, what Dasein understands is nothing other than its very

---

<sup>229</sup> Heidegger is certainly right that *eidenai* preserves a connection between knowing and seeing that is central to the Greek understanding. Plato, for example, famously likens knowing the Good to seeing the sun. Nevertheless, Plato never simply equates the two, and nor, arguably, does he understand knowing as mere “beholding” detached from practice. We must remember that Plato uses vision as a metaphor for knowledge, not as a mere substitute. Moreover, the notion that Plato sharply distinguishes knowing, or “theory,” from what Heidegger means by “being-in” is questionable in light of how Plato treats the relationship between vision and production (*poiesis*). We may also note that there is precedent within Greek thought for associating mind (*nous*) with a certain type of common sense, or practical perception. In the *Ethics*, for example, Aristotle speaks of *nous* in this way, in terms of “having sense,” being a “sensible man.”

self. Dasein *is*, in a sense, its world, which means that situated understanding is always *self-understanding*.

Heidegger's account, to this point in our analysis, shows that dealing with things ready-to-hand and living out particular possibilities is a kind of situated understanding along these lines. In the next section, we will see how he shows the same thing with respect to objective knowledge -- what is typically considered "context-free" theory.

Heidegger's conception of the world undermines the notion that our life circumstance is a *mere* prejudice that perverts our understanding. Although a kind of prejudice, our life circumstance, as the very term *world* suggests, is not some subjective "cave," but a certain perspective shared with others -- a perspective, moreover, that grants us access to the beings we encounter. Although we speak of particular life perspectives, or, in Heidegger's terms, particular understandings of the world, each is in principle intelligible from within another. By getting to know someone else, for example, we can bring ourselves within his or her perspective. The fact that one's own world, which is also to say, one's own Dasein, may be unintelligible to certain people, or misinterpreted by them, simply reflects their failure to adequately grasp it. While there is never any guarantee of mutual understanding, or the attainment of a shared perspective, there is no inherent limit to it. This is what Heidegger establishes by replacing the subject with Dasein.

To state this insight another way: Despite the articulation of Dasein into various ways of being, each life is the same in that it embodies a more or less comprehensive understanding of the whole. Because this understanding is not subjective, but, rather, expressed in the way each person lives, it is manifest to others and can be grasped by them.

Finally, the double sense in which I have used “prejudice” -- sometimes to denote one’s whole perspective (“prejudice writ large”) and other times to denote particular preconceptions, commitments, traditions, and practices -- corresponds to the distinction between Dasein’s understanding of the world and of particular entities “within-the-world.” Each way of being that Dasein inhabits presupposes an understanding of the world, of life as a whole. At the same time, each way of being can itself be considered a certain window onto the whole. In this sense, what I have called particular “prejudices” (following Burke’s use of the term), are understandings that emanate from one’s comprehensive life perspective. They are not mere sentiments, blind dispositions, or “pleasing illusions” as Burke believes.

#### 9. Objective knowledge as a mode of Being-in-the-World

Heidegger undermines the ideal of detached reflection by interpreting it as a mode of Being-in-the-World. It is not, Heidegger shows, a procedure by which a subject transcends its “cabinet of consciousness” to attain knowledge of nature in itself. The kind of “knowing” (*erkennen*) whereby we step back from our concerns and examine things as objects is, rather, a modification of our “concernful circumspection” (practical understanding) that has “strayed into the legitimate task of grasping the present-at-hand.”<sup>230</sup> But although “legitimate,” or unimpeachable as such, this task is in many ways limited. While it allows Dasein to predict and control nature, it by no means reaches nature’s “deeper truth.” When we step back from our concerns, we conceal nature as ready-to-hand, as well as the world, which gives rise to things ready-to-hand in the first place.

---

<sup>230</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 194.

Before examining how Heidegger puts detached reflection in its place, we should recall Bacon and Descartes' idealized version of it.

As we have seen, they argue that grasping nature in itself, or as it really is, requires abstracting from the way it charms us, or draws us in -- the way it strikes us as beautiful, threatening, useful, and so on. Human longing and valuing according to their view, is merely a subjective projection onto the brute facts. Understanding the "deeper truth of nature" (Bacon) requires detached reflection guided by sound method. Only in this manner does the world first become *known* rather than experienced in a haphazard or mythical way.

An analogous view of the social world informs the moral theories of Smith and Kant. They consider the institutions, practices, roles, and commitments that define society to be contingent arrangements, meaningless in themselves. They embody no intrinsic good but owe their worth to the human subjects who value them. Although certain roles and commitments tend to command our allegiance (just as certain aspects of nature strike us as beautiful or purposeful), such allegiance is ultimately based on our subjective feelings, not reason. Judging how to act thus requires stepping back from the influence of one's society, or life circumstance, from one's loyalties to family, friends, and country, and reasoning in a detached manner. The prejudice-free ideal of judgment thus governs both modern ethics and science.

"Austere," a term that Charles Taylor invokes, is an apt way of describing the modern scientific and moral attitude.<sup>231</sup> It powerfully captures the sense in which, according to this attitude, sound understanding and judgment requires *discipline*. As Bacon, Descartes, Smith, and Kant all observe, prejudice exerts a strong pull, especially, they claim, when crusted over by

---

<sup>231</sup> Taylor, *Hegel*, 6.

habit and custom. The problem is not simply that people fall into error, but that they tend to resist the truth, to be seduced by their own hopes and fears into misunderstanding or poor judgment.

This explains Bacon's extensive indictment of the "idols" of the human mind, which he develops before he outlines his scientific method. It also explains Descartes radical doubting, which is step one of his "rules for the direction of the mind." The elimination of all prejudice, and the revelation of how the will leads the intellect into error, is the condition for reconstructing knowledge piece by piece.

In this way, Bacon, Descartes, and all those who considered themselves "enlightenment thinkers," interpreted their mission first and foremost as illuminating darkness, smashing the idols of the past. Of course, they also saw themselves as founders of science. But their negative, or destructive project is what they tended to highlight. A clear example, as we have seen, is how Kant defines Enlightenment as "the emancipation from prejudices generally."<sup>232</sup> Enlightenment is not the acquisition of knowledge (although so much is implied), but the struggle against human prejudice, the fight for a detached standpoint from which sound understanding can begin.

The ideal of a detached standpoint is based on the assumption that meaning, or value originates in the minds of subjects who face a world that is meaningless in itself. Considered from the natural scientific standpoint, the world is a collection of objects governed by contingent correlations. Considered from the ethical standpoint, the world is a set of social facts whose value is given by human subjects. Only according to this interpretation of the world does it make sense to consider the perspective shaped by our desires, aims, practices, and commitments to be,

---

<sup>232</sup> Kant, *the Critique of Judgment*, §40, 152.

as such, a *mere* prejudice -- a “pleasing illusion” that hinders the rational understanding of nature and leads to uncritical moral judgment. It is precisely this assumption that Heidegger’s conception of the world challenges.

Dasein, he argues, is not a self-conscious subject who stamps things with value, and the world is not a collection of mere objects or social facts. What we typically construe as human “values” presupposes the subject-object distinction, which the notion of Being-in-the-World is intended to undermine. For Heidegger, “values” are not subjective dispositions, but correspond to the ways of being “for-the-sake-of-which” Dasein exists. In a sense, these ends are relative to Dasein -- the being who lives them out. But this relativity does not make them merely human values. The ends for the sake-of-which Dasein exists can be considered meaningful *in themselves* insofar as they make sense within the totality of ends that articulate the world. This totality is given prior to Dasein’s taking up, questioning, or revising any particular practices. As an intelligible whole, the world is inherently meaningful; it can be understood as a certain kind of text (although essentially unfinished).

According to this vision of things, meaning is not an arbitrary human imposition on nature, as Bacon and Descartes maintain, but defines its very *being* insofar as it appears as ready-to-hand within a totality of involvements. In Dasein’s “concernful circumspection,” its basic way of Being-in-the-World, nature appears in precisely this way, as “the Nature which ‘stirs and strives,’ which assails us and enthralls us as landscape.”<sup>233</sup> Such characteristics are not merely ways of “taking” nature, “as if some world-stuff which is proximally present-at-hand in itself

---

<sup>233</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 100.

were ‘given subjective coloring’ in this way.”<sup>234</sup> These terms define nature *in itself*, as understood in our dealings, which have nothing to do with cognition or subjective reflection.

Heidegger highlights the difference between his and Descartes’ account of nature as follows: Descartes “prescribes for the world its ‘real’ Being, as it were, on the basis of an idea of Being whose source has not been unveiled and which has not been demonstrated in its own right -- an idea in which Being is equated with constant presence-at-hand.”<sup>235</sup> This leads him to consider the “world,” or nature in itself, to be the extended body (*res extensa*). All beings independent of the intellect, he claims, can be made intelligible as modifications of extension. Extension becomes the basis of material reality (*res corporea*), the substrate upon which everything else is built. This, in turn, implies that “quantitative modifications of the modes of *extensio* itself” would “provide the footing for such specific qualities as “beautiful”, “ugly”, “in keeping”, “not in keeping,” “useful”, “useless”.<sup>236</sup> If one is oriented primarily by *extensio*, “these latter qualities must be taken as non-quantifiable value-predicates by which what is in the first instance just a material Thing, gets stamped as something good.” But all the while, this assumes “*that goods have pure presence-at-hand as their kind of being.*”<sup>237</sup> It overlooks the phenomenon of “readiness-to-hand,” and therewith, the world.

Of course, writes Heidegger, “‘Nature’ itself can be discovered and defined simply in its pure presence-at-hand,” as a mere thing with properties, for example. But it is a mistake to interpret such discovery as reaching the “deeper truth of nature” by transcending everything

---

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 129.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid., 131-132.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., 132.

“subjective” or “artificial.” Dasein is never a subject in the first place, and disinterested reflection is, rather, a modification of Dasein’s absorbed Being-in-the-World.

In order for us to step back from our absorbed activity and to examine things as objects, “there must first be a deficiency in our having-to-do with the world concernfully” such that things appear as present-at-hand:

When concern holds back [Sichenthalten] from any kind of producing, manipulating, and the like, it puts itself into what is now the sole remaining mode of Being-in, the mode of just tarrying alongside....[das Nur-noch-verweilen bei...] This kind of Being towards the world is one which lets us encounter entities within-the-world purely in the way they look (*eidōs*), just that; *on the basis* of this kind of Being, and as a mode of it, looking explicitly at what we encounter is possible.<sup>238</sup>

For example, the hammer a workman grabs might be too heavy so that his work is interrupted.

The hammer now appears as something present-at-hand, which can be defined by the way it looks and by other properties detached from its function (“in-order-to”). Such definition was impossible while the hammer functioned as ready-to-hand and did not appear as perceptible. But in light of the disruption, it now shows itself as an object of reflection. Having been grasped as such, it can furthermore become the topic of an assertion: “the hammer is heavy,” which is to say, “This thing -- a hammer -- has the property of heaviness.”<sup>239</sup>

Assertion of properties, Heidegger points out, has often been considered a way of revealing things “objectively,” or as they really are, detached from everything subjective, and in a way “valid *for* everyone who judges rationally.”<sup>240</sup> A notable example is Bacon’s claim that the “form or true definition” of a given “nature,” such as heat, can be captured in a list of qualities

---

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., 200.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid., 198.

sufficient to produce it. This, he claims, defines heat as it really is -- relative “to the universe and not to the sense.”<sup>241</sup> But this way of thinking, Heidegger shows, is a mistake: “Assertion is not a free-floating kind of behaviour which, in its own right, might be capable of disclosing entities in general in a primary way: on the contrary it always maintains itself on the basis of Being-in-the-World.”<sup>242</sup> Specifically, what Dasein grasps in the assertion is one narrow way of understanding the hammer, made possible by Dasein’s *withholding of concern*, a stance that conceals far more than it illuminates.

When Dasein thus “directs itself toward something and grasps it, it does not somehow first get out of an inner sphere in which it has been proximally encapsulated” such that now and for the first time it begins to understand the thing itself. Dasein’s “primary kind of Being is such that it is ‘outside’ alongside entities,” i.e., absorbed in things that it understands as ready-to-hand within a totality of involvements.<sup>243</sup> This understanding is precisely what gets covered over in the assertion, which restricts the hammer to being present-at-hand in a specific way:

If this entity becomes the ‘object’ of an assertion, then as soon as we begin this assertion, there is already a change-over in the fore-having. Something *ready-to-hand with which* we have to do or perform something, turns into something ‘*about which*’ the assertion that points out is made. Our fore-sight is aimed at something present-at-hand in what is ready-to-hand. Both *by* and *for* this way of looking at it [Hin-sicht], the ready-to-hand becomes veiled as ready-to-hand...Only now are we given any access to *properties* or the like. When an assertion has given a definite character to something present-at-hand, it says something about it *as* a “what”; and this “what” is drawn *from that* which is present-at-hand as such. The as-structure of interpretation has undergone a modification. In its functioning of appropriating what is understood, the ‘as’ no longer reaches out into a totality of involvements...The ‘as’...dwindles to the structure of just letting one see what is present-at-hand, and letting one see it in a definite way. This levelling of the primordial ‘as’ of circumspective interpretation to the “as” with which presence-at-hand is given a definite character is the specialty of assertion. Only so does it obtain the possibility of exhibiting something in such a way that we just look at it.<sup>244</sup>

---

<sup>241</sup> Bacon, *The New Organon*, 135.

<sup>242</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 199.

<sup>243</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>244</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

Thus, “assertion cannot disown its ontological origin from an interpretation which understands...circumspectively.”<sup>245</sup> What assertion articulates, in other words, is not some pure perception of the thing itself. What gets seen in the first place, and in what aspects it gets seen, is directed in advance by Dasein’s concerned circumspection.

In light of this practical understanding, moreover, assertion, or any detached “knowing,” must be interpreted as a certain mode of *engagement*, namely as a *deficient* mode, i.e., “holding back,” “*not* caring,” which, as such, is *nonetheless value-laden* than the attitude that puts things to use and discovers them as ready-to-hand. By “deficient,” Heidegger does not mean “inappropriate.” He simply means lacking in concern. His point is that even the “purest *theoria*” presupposes a certain practical stance, or attitude, toward the thing being examined: “even when we look theoretically at what is just present-at-hand, it does not show itself purely as it looks unless this *theoria* lets it come towards us in a *tranquil* tarrying alongside.”<sup>246</sup> Even what appears to be the most detached scientific reflection remains relative to Dasein’s concern. As Heidegger puts it, “any cognitive determining has its existential-ontological Constitution in...Being-in-the-World.”<sup>247</sup> In this sense, it is a situated kind of understanding.

---

<sup>245</sup> Ibid.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 177.

<sup>247</sup> Ibid.

## 10. Being-in-the-World and human agency

As we have seen, the case against prejudice arose not only out of a concern for the truth. It was motivated, in large part, by a certain conception of freedom, a conception that came to its fullest expression in Kant: To be free is to be guided from within, “to make use of one’s own understanding without direction from another.”<sup>248</sup> By contrast, to be influenced by prejudice of any sort -- whether human authority, tradition, common opinion, or custom, is to be slavish. Freedom requires abstracting from the perspective of one’s upbringing and judging from a detached standpoint. According to Kant, this means abstracting even from one’s own desires.

Heidegger’s conception of Being-in-the-World undermines this ideal of freedom insofar as the ideal depends on the possibility of detachment. Even when we step back from our concerns and try to study the things around us in a detached manner, such reflection is nevertheless situated. It is one stance among others, enabled by Dasein’s practical understanding of life as a whole. But although never free from Being-in, Dasein is by no means enslaved to its situation (world). Dasein is subordinate to a world it sustains. The world is what it is only in relation to Dasein’s self-understanding, that “for-the-sake-of-which” Dasein exists. This reciprocal accord between Dasein and the world undermines any sharp distinction of master and slave. In fact, as I will argue in this section, Being-in-the-World implies a conception of human agency that preserves the Kantian ideal of self-direction while liberating that ideal from the difficulties associated with Kant’s conception of pure reason. This means that we should

---

<sup>248</sup> Kant, “An answer to the question: what is enlightenment?,” in *Practical Philosophy*, 17.

understand Heidegger not simply as an opponent of Kant or of the ideal of self-direction, but actually as its savior.

The Kantian ideal of abstracting from all prejudice presents two difficulties. First, as Heidegger argues, the ideal cannot succeed. It is impossible to abstract from all prejudice. But second, even if such abstraction were possible, if pure practical reason could be sovereign, this very ideal is in tension with Kant's conception of freedom as autonomy. For autonomy means *self-direction*, which put negatively, means freedom from dependence on another. But according to Kant, such freedom can be won only by presupposing a subject of pure practical reason given prior to any possible experience. This means, however, that freedom is, in a sense, at odds with the very ideal of autonomy: Insofar as the self is free, its bounds are *fixed and given* prior to experience. Who I am, in other words, is entirely beyond my control; I remain the same regardless of any stance I take toward myself. Whether I pursue this desire, this role, this involvement, my identity remains unaffected. Now, of course, from Kant's point of view, this is just the point. The subject, being the presupposition of experience, is not transformed by experience. But one could argue that this way of conceiving the self unduly restricts the self-direction of which a truly autonomous self is capable.

To be sure, Kant offers a powerful conception of autonomy: to be free from every influence external to one's self. But the ideal falls short in this respect: the autonomous self lacks the capacity to effect any fundamental *change*, to develop its identity. This lack, moreover, represents a shortcoming of autonomy itself, which Kant (and his forerunners such as Descartes) formulate precisely in terms of "self-rule," and "self-direction." But is self-direction not, in a certain sense, empty if it completely lacks power over the self that does the directing? To be

sure, giving the moral law to myself implies a certain “positive” conception of freedom, but this self-legislation still never touches my identity. It remains an act of self-respect that merely lives up to who I already am and always will be.

Furthermore, freedom, as Kant conceives it, is won at the price of individuality. Insofar as human beings are free, they are undifferentiated, or a unitary subject. Only as empirical selves who pursue particular desires do they achieve any distinction. Even granting that Kant does not mean to *denigrate* the empirical self who pursues happiness in its own way, the empirical self is not *autonomous*. More precisely, the desiring and striving self is free only insofar as it remains capable of abstracting from all desiring and striving, capable of attaining a standpoint shared with everyone else. While there is something appealing about the unity of all rational beings, there is something at least unsettling about the notion that our individuality consists in nothing more than our purely contingent impulses and desires.

Finally, the Kantian subject lacks agency in a sense that points beyond the capacity to shape its own identity: It is utterly incapable of changing the way things *are*, of having any responsibility for nature, which, as Kant maintains, is the realm of necessity. The complication, to be sure, is that this necessity is rooted in the knowing subject itself. The mind, Kant argues, prescribes to nature its laws. Nevertheless, the structure of the mind (or subject) is given prior to any possible experience. This means that nature obeys a strictly necessary course in the face of which human beings are powerless. Human agency can only bring about what *ought* to be in the social world. It can never shape what *is*.

My suggestion is that Heidegger’s notion of Being-in-the-World involves a more powerful kind of agency than Kant’s ideal of pure practical reason. Being-in-the-World aspires

to a deeper sense of self-definition and individuality than the Kantian subject is capable of. Moreover, unlike the Kantian subject, who is responsible only for itself and for what *ought* to be, Dasein is responsible for the world -- for what, in the most basic sense, *is*. If this view of agency is plausible, it would dissolve the second pillar of the case against prejudice. It would show that situated understanding, not detached reason, is what makes true freedom possible.

The notion of freedom connected to Being-in-the-World can be understood to fall within the tradition that conceives freedom as *independence*. This tradition, shaped notably by Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Marx, can be distinguished from the tradition typically attributed to Hobbes, Locke, and Hume, which conceives freedom as the ability to act on one's desires unimpeded. Freedom, conceived as independence, requires more than the absence of obstacles to one's action. It involves independence from everything external to the self.

The thinkers who develop this conception of freedom give, broadly speaking, two different answers as to how we achieve independence. The first, which comes from Kant, is that we achieve independence by abstracting from everything external to ourselves and reasoning, so to speak, "from within." But Kant's successors, most notably, Hegel and Marx, argue that this ideal of abstraction is misguided. Human life, they maintain, is inextricably dependent on nature and society. To neglect this dependence, moreover, is to miss an essential dimension of ourselves. Not only is the ideal of detached reason impossible; it also *alienates* us from our desires and the world in which we realize them.

Hegel and Marx thus seek to replace the Kantian ideal of abstraction with a rival version of independence: the ideal of *integrating* the objective world into one's very self, of coming to

recognize what is “other” as ultimately one’s *own*. For Hegel, this means coming to recognize the objective world as ultimately the expression of subjectivity, as posited by a cosmic spirit who attains self-knowledge through human action and understanding. For Marx, who rejects Hegel’s notion of spirit, human independence involves transforming nature and society in order to reflect back to man his own “species being.” In both cases, independence means overcoming alienation from the surrounding world, or as Hegel puts it, “being one’s self in one’s other.”

Common to these different versions of independence is the idea that freedom is ultimately of a *subject*, or involves the dialectical overcoming of an alien, “objective” world. Achieving freedom means either abstracting from what is alien (Kant), or integrating it, coming to see it as an expression of one’s self (Hegel and Marx). Heidegger’s replacement of the subject with Dasein significantly alters the problem of freedom. It shifts the issue away from overcoming external influences and toward extricating ourselves from submersion in what what lies *closest* to us.

As Being-in-the-World, Dasein *belongs* to its world, and, in this sense, faces nothing alien. The threat to Dasein’s independence comes not from some external source, but rather, from its own tendency to become absorbed in the details of life such that it fails to understand them as parts of a meaningful whole. Instead of living out its roles understandingly, with a certain eye to the unity of its life and with a view to clarifying that unity, Dasein performs them in a formulaic manner, guided by the way in which “others” do it, without a sense of nuance or of what the situation may call for. Heidegger calls this tendency toward blind conformity the “inauthenticity” of Dasein. He stresses that the “others” to whom Dasein conforms are not “*definite* Others” who stand out as separate from my own Dasein and to whom I consciously

compare myself: “What is decisive is just that inconspicuous domination by Others which has already been taken over unawares from Dasein as Being-with. One belongs to the Others oneself and enhances their power.”<sup>249</sup> The others are not “this one, not that one, not one’s self [man selbst], not some people [einige], and not the sum of them all.” They are “the neuter, the “they” [*das Man*].”<sup>250</sup>

Heidegger’s concept of *das Man*, awkwardly translated as “the they” is meant to capture Dasein’s tendency to succumb to “the way *they* do things” or “the way things are typically done”:

We take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *they* [*man*] take pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *they* see and judge; likewise we shrink back from the ‘great mass’ as *they* shrink back; we find ‘shocking’ what they find shocking.<sup>251</sup>

To reiterate that Dasein’s submersion in *das Man* does not involve explicitly looking toward others and away from one’s self, Heidegger notes that such submersion often drives Dasein into “the most exaggerated ‘self-dissection’, tempting itself with all possibilities of explanation” such that Dasein becomes “*entangled* [*verfangt*] in itself.”<sup>252</sup> Such excessive self-scrutiny (reflected in the culture of psychoanalysis) masquerades as a genuine way of unearthing Dasein’s “true self,” but in reality, it plunges Dasein further into the depths of self-delusion. For to assume a “true self,” or core, beneath some “culturally-constructed” facade, entirely misses the basic character of Dasein. Dasein is neither a subject who defines its identity nor an object buffeted to and fro by society.

---

<sup>249</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 164.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

<sup>252</sup> Ibid., 222-223.

In losing itself in the details of its life -- in this or that role, activity, attitude, or some collection thereof -- and in thus falling victim to what “they” do, Dasein tends toward a generic *type*, what Heidegger calls the “inauthentic” self. This self is inauthentic in two, ultimately connected, senses. First, the inauthentic self is dispersed into anonymous “others,” bearing no mark of its *own*. It carries out its life as if it were, so to speak, replaceable by anyone else with the same CV. Second, and above all, this self is inauthentic in that it conceals the very essence of Dasein. For Dasein is defined by its Being-in-the-World, by its situated understanding of the whole, and not by its being this or that. In its everyday preoccupations, inauthentic Dasein loses itself “among beings,” thereby forgetting its fundamental relation to Being, or to life as a whole.<sup>253</sup> This forgetfulness is the source of Dasein’s lack of self-possession. For Dasein’s awareness of the whole is what affords it a critical standpoint from which to assess its particular activities, from which to see them in the right proportion, undistorted by the superficial understandings of *das Man*.

Heidegger interprets Dasein’s tendency toward self-dispersion as “falling” into the world and “away from itself.”<sup>254</sup> “Falling,” he makes clear, is not the tendency of a subject to become submerged in another entity called the “world.” Falling is itself a mode of Being-in-the-World, which, as it were, conceals the very *character* of the world. In a sense, Dasein’s falling is the opposite of the predicament facing a subject confronted by an alien world of objects. To remedy the latter involves recovering a certain unity, whereas to remedy the former involves winning a certain distinction. Both predicaments, however, can be interpreted as a kind of alienation, or

---

<sup>253</sup> Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics” (1929), in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977), 106.

<sup>254</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 220.

loss of self possession. Falling Being-in-the-World, writes Heidegger, is “alienating.”<sup>255</sup> It conceals Dasein’s basic relation to Being and, thereby, the possibility of being something of its *own*.

In order to win independence, Dasein must exist authentically; it must overcome its tendency toward falling and come to recognize itself as Being-in-the-World. This does not require that Dasein *conceptualize* Being-in-the-World as such; it requires only that Dasein live its life in a way that embodies an *awareness* of Being-in-the-World. The key feature of this awareness is a certain reflective distance from beings, or particular activities and roles, such that they no longer impinge upon Dasein’s identity. This distance is attained not through detachment, or abstraction from beings, but through understanding them as parts of a larger whole, as expressions of the *world*. Dasein must come to recognize the world, or Being, rather than beings, as the source of its identity.<sup>256</sup> In other words, what defines Dasein is not this or that detail, or some collection thereof, but its lived awareness of the whole. In this sense, Dasein achieves a certain independence. Dasein is conditioned, as Heidegger puts it, by *nothing*. This “nothing” is not to be confused with the mere negation of everything that is, nor with some empty ideal of pure reason. “Nothing,” moreover, does not imply the emptiness of existence, as

---

<sup>255</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>256</sup> This interpretation of authenticity, which relies on the distinction between Being and beings, is more illuminating, I believe, than familiar accounts which emphasize Dasein’s choosing its life rather than passively living it. The latter finds expression in Richard Polt, who writes that I exist authentically when “I truly choose this identity [of mine], instead of just letting it happen” (Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction*, 79). “Choosing” versus “letting it happen” is, first of all, misleading since Dasein, as thrown-projection, involves an active *and a passive* dimension (see section 11 below). The passive dimension implies that even authentic Dasein’s life, in a sense, “happens” to it. Furthermore, the emphasis on choosing still leaves in darkness the *basis* of choice. If authentic Dasein does not choose, or act, on the basis of *das Man*, then on what basis? This is the real question, to which Polt does not venture an answer. In fairness, Heidegger himself is notoriously vague on the basis of authentic choice. He insists that the basis is “indefinite” and that “only the resolution itself can give the answer” (*Being and Time*, 345). But if we follow the distinction between Being and beings, we can formulate at least a general answer to the nature of authentic action: Its mark is clear-sighted decision on the basis of Being, on the basis of one’s lived understanding of the whole, rather than this or that detail of life.

if, in Dreyfus's terms, "nothing is grounded and there are no guidelines for living."<sup>257</sup> "Nothing" captures the sense in which Being, or the whole, is not identical to any of the beings it makes possible.<sup>258</sup> In other words, Being cannot be understood as a thing or collection of things; Being is quite literally *no-thing*. Expressed in terms of a narrative, Dasein's life story is not identical to any of the events, projects, and relationships it involves. The story as a whole is the source of any and all of the details that emerge within it. In being conditioned by nothing, Dasein is "individualized *as* Being-in-the-World."<sup>259</sup>

Being thus individualized, Heidegger stresses, does not mean becoming a "free floating" individual who turns away from its particular activities and commitments, or who surveys and assesses its life as if from a bird's-eye view: "Authentic Being-one's-Self, does not detach Dasein from its world, nor does it isolate it so that it becomes a free-floating "I." And how should it, when...authentic disclosedness, is *authentically* nothing else than *Being-in-the-World*?" Authenticity "brings the Self right into its current concerned Being-alongside what is ready-to-hand, and pushes it into solicitous Being with Others."<sup>260</sup> The difference is that authentic Dasein lives out its particular involvements in a new spirit, having recaptured them within a lived narrative -- a "fate," or "destiny." Authenticity, writes Heidegger, "snatches one back from the endless multiplicity of possibilities which offer themselves as closest to one -- those of comfortableness, shirking, and taking things lightly -- and brings Dasein into the simplicity of its

---

<sup>257</sup> Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 38.

<sup>258</sup> Heidegger, "What is Metaphysics?," in *Basic Writings*, 110. In a general sense, and at more comprehensive level, Heidegger's conception of being dependent on "nothing" recalls Rousseau's notion of being dependent on the "general will" rather than any particular will. Of course, for Heidegger, the "nothing," or "Being," is an articulated whole rather than the sort of unitary whole suggested by the general will. (And of course "Being" is a cosmic, or ontological concept, not just a political one.)

<sup>259</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 233.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

fate [Schicksals].”<sup>261</sup> To signify that this “fate” is one that Dasein, in each case, shares with others, Heidegger calls it a “destiny” (*Geschick*).<sup>262</sup>

In light of its destiny, Dasein comes to see its relationships, activities, and aims no longer as generic roles, as objects of fanatic devotion, or as what one typically does, but as distinctive points at which its life as a whole comes into focus. Having thus recovered its particular loyalties from the depths of *das Man* and recaptured them within its own life, Dasein gains a personal stake in them. In this sense, Dasein no longer “takes things lightly,” but is “pushed into solicitous Being with Others” -- pushed into a clear-sighted loyalty to those with whom its destiny is bound.<sup>263</sup>

Agency involves an awareness of this destiny and a simultaneous recognition of Dasein’s own responsibility for it. The world, or destiny, to which Dasein is, in a sense, subordinate, itself depends on Dasein. For the world, as we have seen, is structured by the possibilities “for-the-sake-of-which” Dasein *lives*. And through Being-in-the-World, through living out its life, Dasein simultaneously *develops* itself and its world, reshaping, or, better yet, clarifying, *the basis* of its own being. Dasein, and, thereby, its world, is never fixed once and for all. Insofar as the world denotes Being, or the source of all beings, as Heidegger maintains, Dasein’s agency reaches beyond self-responsibility. Unlike Kant’s subject of pure practical reason, who is

---

<sup>261</sup> Ibid., 435.

<sup>262</sup> Ibid., 436.

<sup>263</sup> This conception of authenticity may be contrasted to Dreyfus’s. According to his view, authenticity means realizing that “no possibilities have intrinsic significance, i.e., that they have no essential relation to the self, nor can they be given any.” In light of this insight, which wipes out “all intrinsic meaning and so all reasons for doing things,” Dasein adopts a certain stoic indifference to life, living an “empty, open spontaneous way of Being-in-the-World” (Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 316, 321). This notion of authenticity is part and parcel of Dreyfus’s view that the world is a contingent network of shared practices. He therefore understands authentic Dasein as an empty locus of ultimately unguided activity that understands itself as such. For his description of authentic Dasein’s spontaneous action and indifference toward its own desires, cf. Dreyfus, *Being in the World*, p. 323. This description presents a striking contrast to the conception of authenticity I derive from Heidegger. Far from being “indifferent” to its desires, authentic Dasein, according to my reading, pursues them all the more tenaciously.

responsible only for its own actions and what *ought* to be, Dasein, is, in a sense, responsible for the world, for what, in the most basic sense, *is*.

Before explicating Heidegger's conception of situated agency, we should consider a puzzle that he addresses. If Dasein tends to exist inauthentically, as a fallen "they-self," submerged in its circumstance, how does Dasein in the first place become aware of its inauthenticity and seize upon its potential for agency? The task seems especially difficult in light of this predicament: The characteristic feature of inauthentic Dasein is its lack of self-awareness. In the depths of its "downward plunge," inauthentic Dasein believes itself to be leading "a full and genuine 'life,' ...for which everything is 'in the best of order' and all doors are open."<sup>264</sup> As Dasein plunges into "the groundlessness and nullity of inauthentic everydayness," this plunge "remains hidden from Dasein by the way things have been publicly interpreted, so much so, indeed, that it gets interpreted as a way of 'ascending' and 'living concretely.'"<sup>265</sup> How does Dasein free itself from this fix?

The root of the answer is that "inauthentic" Dasein is still *Dasein*. In other words, in existing inauthentically, Dasein does not become something else. It becomes dominated, rather, by a specific mode of being -- one that *covers over* its true nature:

On no account "do the terms "inauthentic" and "non-authentic" signify 'really not', as if in this mode of Being, Dasein were altogether to lose its Being. "Inauthenticity" does not mean anything like Being-no-longer-in-the-world, but amounts rather to a quite distinctive kind of Being-in-the-World -- the kind which is completely fascinated by the 'world' and by the Dasein-with of Others in the "they."<sup>266</sup>

---

<sup>264</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 222.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.*, 223.

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

It is not as though some people are thoroughly authentic and others thoroughly inauthentic.<sup>267</sup>

Inauthenticity is rather a basic tendency of Dasein in each and every case. But even in the most extreme instance of Dasein's fallenness lies the seed of authenticity.<sup>268</sup> Although it may, for the most part, remain buried in what "they" do, authentic Dasein has a way of surfacing in certain unpredictable moments.

Throughout his work, Heidegger gives different accounts of such moments. In *Being and Time*, he speaks of the fundamental experience of "anxiety" (*angst*), which he elaborates as the "call of conscience."<sup>269</sup> Precisely what experience these terms are meant to capture is notoriously vague, and Heidegger seems to have abandoned the concepts in his later writings. He turns instead to the way in which experiencing certain works of art, and in particular, poetry, reveals to Dasein its authentic relation to the world.

But common to all of these fundamental experiences is that they reveal Dasein as defined by its relation to Being, or its situated understanding of the articulated whole. Recognition of this basic relation is the key to Dasein's liberation from "fallenness" (*Being and Time*), "the

---

<sup>267</sup> Although some interpreters read Heidegger as thus dividing human beings (Dreyfus, for example, refers to "the transformation from inauthentic to authentic existence" as a "gestalt switch," cf. Dreyfus, *Being in the World*, 317), the notion that some people are thoroughly authentic and others thoroughly inauthentic would undermine Heidegger's firm claim that Being-in-the-World is the basic mode of *all* human life. For if some people were thoroughly inauthentic, they would no longer exist as Being-in-the-World and thus could no longer be described as *Dasein*. In such cases, moreover, a switch to authentic existence would be impossible. For no appeal to live authentically would have purchase with those who entirely lacked a sense for the shortcoming of their lives.

<sup>268</sup> Mulhall thus interprets the "seed" of authenticity as the "*repressed but not extinguished* capacity for genuine individuality" (emphasis added, Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, 276). He likewise interprets inauthenticity as "the self which is in eclipse" (Mulhall, *Inheritance and Originality*, 277).

<sup>269</sup> Cf. *Being and Time*, ¶40, ¶54-60. As one might expect, "conscience," for Heidegger, is not some inner moral voice that commands certain actions. It is the call of Being-in-the-World, a call "which *we ourselves* have neither planned nor prepared for nor voluntarily performed." But "the call undoubtably does not come from someone else who is with me in the world." The call "comes from *me* and yet from *beyond me*" (Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 320). It speaks, moreover, without voice, conveying no particular command. And how could it, when it calls Dasein to nothing else than Being-in-the-World? If the call is to be interpreted as saying anything, writes Heidegger, it says only one word: "Guilty!" Dasein as Being-in-the-World, writes Heidegger, is essentially guilty -- not because it has done something wrong, but because, whether consciously aware of it or not, Dasein, in its very mode of existence, is responsible for a world that it has not chosen or created. Living authentically involves owning up to this guilt.

public superficialities of existence” (*What is Metaphysics?*), or “captivity in that which is [i.e., beings]” (*The Origin of the Work of Art*). Anxiety, for example, brings Dasein face to face with itself *as* Being-in-the-World, thereby shaking it loose from the clutches of those entities in which it is prone to lose itself. Unlike fear, which is always fearful in the face of something threatening, anxiety, in Heidegger’s special sense, is anxious in the face of nothing in particular: “Nothing which is ready-to-hand or present-at-hand within the world functions as that in the face of which anxiety is anxious.”<sup>270</sup> Rather, “*the world as such is that in the face of which one has anxiety.*”<sup>271</sup> Anxiety thus brings us before our Being-in-the-World. It “tells us that entities within-the-world are of so little importance in themselves that on the basis of this *insignificance* of what is within-the-world, the world in its worldhood is all that still obtrudes itself.”<sup>272</sup> The key insight is the insignificance of entities *in themselves*, that is, entities considered in abstraction from their place in the whole. By revealing the world, and not anything within it, as the ultimate condition of Dasein, and as the source of all meaning, anxiety pulls Dasein out of its absorption in what “they” do, bringing it “face to face with its Being-free for...the authenticity of its Being, and for this authenticity as a possibility which it always is.”<sup>273</sup>

The full sense in which Dasein’s authenticity comes with a certain agency rests on the nature of Dasein’s relation to the world, or to Being. This relation is one of mutual dependence. On the one hand, Dasein is subordinate to Being. As Heidegger writes, “Being’s poem, just begun, is man.”<sup>274</sup> On the other hand, Being unfolds only through Dasein’s action. In this sense,

---

<sup>270</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 231.

<sup>271</sup> Ibid.

<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>274</sup> Heidegger, “The Thinker as Poet,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 4.

“man is the shepherd of being.”<sup>275</sup> This conception of human agency is perhaps best captured in Heidegger’s reformulation of Being-in-the-World as *thrown-projection*.

## 11. Being-in-the-World as thrown-projection

As the hyphenated phrase indicates, “thrownness” and “projection” must be taken as two sides of the same phenomenon. Each defines the whole of Dasein. Roughly speaking, “thrownness” denotes the passive dimension of Dasein and “projection” the active. But this distinction demands qualification: Although splitting the phenomenon in two is necessary for the sake of analysis, the halves must be reunited in the final interpretation. Neither thrownness nor projection can be understood without reference to the other. Moreover, even to speak of an active and passive dimension of Being-in-the-World is somewhat misleading. The full force of thrown-projection, I believe, is that Dasein is entirely passive and entirely active. Because Dasein is defined by this contradiction, each term must be stated in its full radicalness, only to be negated by the other, and then, finally comprehended together. Furthermore, the conception of agency that I aim to highlight would be lost if projection were simply equated with freedom and thrownness with its lack. It is not as though Dasein is partly determined (thrown) and partly free (projecting). Thrownness is just as essential to Dasein’s agency as projection. In fact, each term taken in isolation would, in its own way, imply a total lack of agency.

By highlighting the entirely-passive, entirely-active character of agency, I hope to contribute a reading of Heidegger that avoids two familiar extremes -- what we might call the

---

<sup>275</sup> Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism” (1947), in *Basic Writings*, 210.

“existentialist” interpretation of his thought, on the one hand, and the “communitarian” interpretation on the other. The “existentialist” reading neglects the implication of thrownness and maintains that Dasein is self-creative -- defined, ultimately, by its own choices and actions rather than tradition or any enduring source.<sup>276</sup> This way of taking Heidegger finds its most famous expression in Sartre but also figures prominently in contemporary Anglo-American literature. Richard Polt, for example, suggests that according to Heidegger, “taking a steadfast stance [i.e., choosing to act resolutely] is the only sort of constancy that we can achieve.”<sup>277</sup>

By contrast, the “communitarian” reading of Heidegger highlights the passive dimension of Dasein, relying on a certain construal of thrownness while overlooking projection. According to the communitarian reading, human beings are moved by large impersonal forces, whether the spirit of their times or some mysterious collective fate. At moments, at least, and especially in his later work, Heidegger himself appears to adopt this sort of fatalistic view. He slides most infamously toward denying human agency in his suggestion that the Nazis were not really responsible for their own actions but simply swept up in the “will to power,” a certain mode of being that had come to dominate modern life, quite beyond human control, in the form of technological society and the “conquest of nature.”<sup>278</sup> But a balanced examination of Being-of-the-World reveals a more complex account of agency than either the “existentialist” or “communitarian” reading admits.

---

<sup>276</sup> Another version of this “existentialist” reading is that Dasein, although driven by circumstances beyond its control, still acts spontaneously, unburdened by any tradition or destiny. Without any reason for acting one way or another, Dasein instinctively responds to its current situation. In this sense, Dasein is radically free, in Dreyfus’s terms, a “self-defining set of factors” (Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 300).

<sup>277</sup> Richard Polt, *Heidegger: An introduction* (London: Routledge, 1999), 95.

<sup>278</sup> Thomas Sheehan, “Reading a Life: Heidegger and hard times,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, 88.

Not surprisingly, many interpreters advance a conception of Dasein as partly free, partly constrained, which appears to incorporate both projection and thrownness. In this vein, Polt qualifies what I have called his “existentialist” reading with the suggestion that “we are free, but our freedom is necessarily limited; our possibilities have to be drawn from our own heritage.”<sup>279</sup> Hoffman similarly maintains that Dasein is free to choose, but “only within a certain spectrum of values and traditions.”<sup>280</sup> Although the partly-free, partly-constrained notion of Dasein seems to acknowledge both projection and thrownness, it actually commits same oversight as the existentialist and communitarian readings. It fails to recognize that projection and thrownness are two sides of the same phenomenon, not conflicting aspects of human life. To say that we are free *but only* within our “heritage” or “tradition” is to interpret thrownness as a limit to freedom rather than its source. According to the interpretation I offer, thrownness and projection are complementary dimensions of Dasein’s situated agency.

Thrownness denotes the passive dimension of Being-in-the-World, that Dasein “is and has to be.”<sup>281</sup> To state this necessity in the most extreme terms: Who I am, as this particular being, is thoroughly determined in advance of any stance I might take toward myself. Nothing I do -- no activity I assume, no role I take up, and certainly no belief I come to hold -- will ever change my identity. To be thrown means “never to have power over one’s ownmost Being from the ground up.”<sup>282</sup> This “facticity” of Dasein, “that it is and has to be,” recalls, in a general

---

<sup>279</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>280</sup> Piotr Hoffman, “Death, Time, Historicity: Division II of *Being and Time*,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, 239.

<sup>281</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 174.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid., 330.

sense, the Kantian notion that the self is given prior to its ends -- that personal identity precedes any possible innovation or act of choice. However, there is a great difference that we should reiterate: Dasein's identity, its structure, has nothing to do with its being a *subject*. According to Heidegger's account, the *world* replaces the subject as that which is pre-given. Thrownness expresses the basic fact that any way of being myself -- in "concernful circumspection," "solicitous being-with," or explicit self-reflection -- presupposes my Being-in-the-World. To state the same in terms of understanding (for *being* myself always means *understanding* myself): Any way of understanding myself, at any moment, presupposes an understanding of the world, of *a way of life that I have not created or chosen*. My life, which is also to say the world in which I am engaged, inevitably precedes and conditions anything I might do to change it. Thrownness thus denotes Dasein's "fate" or "destiny," which is why it makes sense to recast my "Dasein," or "Being-in-the-World" as my life-story. Thrownness is not an event that I have suffered in the past and that has left me with some lingering aftereffect. It defines my being with equal force at any possible moment. Dasein in each case "has *always already* been thrown" (emphasis added).<sup>283</sup>

For this reason, thrownness must be sharply distinguished from a sort of limitation on one's options given the cultural or historical circumstances. According to this view, what we might call the sociological account, an individual gets "thrown," or born, into a "world," such as 20th century America, and then must choose from a certain range of life activities in order to piece together its identity. At first, the influence of habit and custom may direct the choice, but of course, the individual may come to decide for itself what combination of life options is to its

---

<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 236.

taste. Moreover, it may eventually create new options of its own and thereby change, at least bit by bit, the culture in which it lives. This freedom qualified by cultural limits is precisely the sort of partly-free, partly-determined conception of human life that Heidegger rejects. Dasein is not some present-at-hand individual, or center of self-consciousness, that gets thrown into a present-at-hand “culture.” Human existence is never the mutual interaction and compromise of two such entities. Any notion of the “individual versus culture” itself presupposes being-thrown into a world in which that distinction has some meaning.

Thrownness denotes Dasein’s “submission” to its world. Dasein *is* its world, and as a unity of meaning, its world is its story, or destiny. All willing, acting, or making can do nothing more than realize what Dasein already *is*. We might express the nature of this passivity by means of the following example: Consider an author of a book who must write its final chapter; or better yet, “part two.” Imagine also that he did not himself write the first part but that the book somehow fell into his hands. In this situation, the author is clearly not free to write whatever he desires. Insofar as he must continue the story, any addition, any new creation, is determined by the standard of story itself, by the unity of meaning that the text expresses. The addition, even if we speak of it as a wonderful enhancement, is nothing other than an enhancement of the story *itself*. It would be a mistake, in other words, to consider each successive addition as a creative act that alters the original -- as if one alien item after another got tacked onto the story and eventually contorted the original into something no longer itself. Each addition, whether the first, the tenth, or the hundredth, brings forth the same unity of meaning.<sup>284</sup>

---

<sup>284</sup> This should be obvious to any author or interpreter. (Ronald Dworkin, for example, has expressed this basic idea with respect to legal interpretation. In *Law’s Empire*, he compares judges to authors of a chain novel.)

“Being-thrown” means that Dasein, at every moment, is a conditioned author of this sort. The fundamental difference, however, is that the unfinished text is Dasein *itself* expressed in everything it does, in its very way of life. Unlike the imaginary author who could relinquish the book he happened to find, Dasein has no choice but to live as the text that it always already is. Any attempt to detach itself from the story and to “rationally” dissect and determine its life from the “outside” is *itself* a part of the story. And any particular act of “narration,” any deed or new insight, whether explicitly intended to change the story or not, nevertheless presupposes the story as a whole. This is all the more conspicuous in cases where Dasein’s action is unfitting. The “outstanding” character of such actions brings Dasein’s thrownness all the more obtrusively to the fore.

Thrownness means that Dasein can only become what it already (implicitly) is. But despite this givenness, Dasein is at the same time undetermined, a “potentiality-for-being.” Dasein’s potentiality-for-being is rooted in “projection” -- the active, or creative dimension of Being-in-the-World.<sup>285</sup>

In order to interpret projection, let us return, once more, to the example of the imaginary author. In defining the author’s subordination to the text (thrownness) we had to use terms such as “part two,” “addition,” “creation” -- all of which imply a capacity to bring about something new, to “*project*.” Although the given text as a whole constrains what the author can write, it retains a certain openness. The standard to which any addition must comply, the meaning of the whole, is never captured by a set of rules that could dictate the book’s end in advance, or even

---

<sup>285</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 185.

prescribe a definite range of endings. The authority of the text still leaves to the author a *boundless responsibility*. The book's fate lies entirely in his or her hands. For each addition inevitably transforms the whole, however imperceptibly. To be sure, the addition must take its direction from the whole, but through the addition, the whole resonates in a new voice. The nature of a dramatic plot twist, or the denouement, makes clear this part-whole interdependence and highlights the potentially radical character of a particular change. From the standpoint of the peak, everything looks different. Certain events fade into obscurity, others emerge as significant, and the meaning of it all finally comes forth, as if a curtain veiling the action had suddenly been torn aside. Such instances make obvious the transformative power of the author, despite his fidelity to the given text. Here is an image, at least, of projection in its unity with thrownness. (The image should be familiar as the hermeneutic circle involved in any textual interpretation, or creative writing.)

At every moment, Dasein, as thrown, is also projecting. Just as it has no choice but to be the text it always already is, so too does it have no choice but to write the next chapter.<sup>286</sup> Dasein is constantly "writing" simply in virtue of living its daily life, which, for the most part, has nothing to do with reflecting on *what* to write (i.e., how to live well). In this sense, the comparison to the imaginary author may be somewhat misleading. Insofar as Dasein is always projecting, whether aware of it or not, projection belongs to thrownness: "Dasein is thrown into the kind of Being which we call "projecting.""<sup>287</sup> As thrown, Dasein is subordinate to the lived story (world) in which it is immersed. Any action Dasein takes for the sake of any way of being,

---

<sup>286</sup> Here emerges the sense in which Dasein is fundamentally guilty. Whether aware of it or not, Dasein has a boundless responsibility for its own, unchosen, destiny.

<sup>287</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 185.

is conditioned by the world. But the world (and thereby Dasein) is characterized by the same openness as the unfinished text in the example above. In “projecting” itself upon a particular way of being, Dasein transforms the whole.

All understanding, Heidegger shows, is projective. It has an inherent tendency to develop itself, to move beyond what it achieves, and to redefine its condition (the world). The most basic kind of understanding, of which all others are modifications, is the practical wisdom involved in “‘being able to manage something’, ‘being a match for it’, ‘being competent to do something.’”<sup>288</sup> Such understanding, as Heidegger shows, always pertains to a certain way of being -- that “for-the-sake-of-which” Dasein “manages,” “manipulates,” or “puts to use.” Understanding of this sort, Heidegger elaborates, has the character of a *possibility*: “Dasein is in every case what it can be...it is its possibility.”<sup>289</sup> The meaning of such possibility must be distinguished from “possibility” in the familiar sense:

Being-possible which Dasein is existentially in every case, is to be sharply distinguished both from empty logical possibility and from the contingency of what is present-at-hand, so far as with the present-at-hand this or that can ‘come to pass.’ As a modal category of presence-at-hand, possibility signifies what is *not yet* actual and what is *not at any time* necessary. It characterizes the *merely* possible.<sup>290</sup>

An example of what Heidegger calls the “*merely* possible,” would be “I could cast a ballot for the presidential candidate in today’s primary.” The “possibility” signifies an action that I represent in my mind and know how to complete -- an action that I consider as present-at-hand. But since the deed still lies ahead of me, there is no necessity that I actualize it. In this sense, it is “*merely* possible.”

---

<sup>288</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid.

By contrast, Dasein's manifold ways of being are "possibilities" in a far more radical sense: No pre-given standard, or "plan," as Heidegger puts it, could define their completion: Understanding possibilities "has nothing to do with comporting one's self toward a plan that has been thought out, and in accordance with which Dasein arranges its Being."<sup>291</sup> Knowing how to be a family member, or how to fulfill a vocation, is not something that I fully grasp at some point and thereafter just apply to my actions -- as if now I know it and merely have to decide whether to continue. Such "knowledge" is *itself* attained only through being applied, or lived out. The standard of its "validity," one might say, emerges through the activity itself -- much in the same way as the standard of virtue, according to Aristotle, emerges through practice.

To be sure, thrownness ensures that there is always a pre-given standard that defines the way of being and marks it off from others. Stated at a basic and general level, the standard is given by the world, by the relational totality of possibilities and the ready-to-hand contexts to which they are linked. Although the standard is seldom the theme of explicit reflection, and never reducible to rules, it is always something one can articulate in speech. As Hegel convincingly demonstrates, for example, one can give a definition, a *logos*, of what it means to be a family member by articulating the bond of immediate unity, distinguishing it from the bonds of civil society, and so forth. One could deepen the definition by pointing to examples of people who display the excellence of the role, who balance the competing claims of other spheres in a manner befitting of a "family man." All of this shows that the family has a certain *eidos*, a form, or basic character.

---

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 185.

But according to Heidegger's account, the form itself is never fixed once and for all. It is always open to further clarification in light of new situations that call forth creative adaptation. Such adaptation inevitably comes to reshape the form.<sup>292</sup> So although living out a certain role means, in a sense, "applying" a given understanding to the present situation, the understanding is itself enriched by the application -- enriched such that it can really be considered a "new" understanding. The new understanding, in turn, is itself open to further development. In this sense, understanding is "projective" -- the working out of a possibility that is not extinguished, but kept open, maintained as a possibility, even in being actualized: "projection, in throwing, throws before itself the possibility as possibility, and lets it *be* as such."<sup>293</sup>

Although projection is most conspicuous in extraordinary situations that give rise to radically transformed understandings, Dasein is always projecting, even in moments that appear banal. As Heidegger constantly emphasizes, the simple act of maintaining a possibility, even in the most routine manner, means letting others pass by: Dasein "always stands in one possibility or another: it constantly is *not* other possibilities, and it has waived these in its existentiell [individual] projection."<sup>294</sup> Such "letting pass by" is not a simple rejection of one option in favor of another. For the very act of "letting pass by" itself comes to redefine the current possibility, which now can be understood as something to which Dasein has "held on" in the face of "so and so." The new terms inevitably give the possibility a different cast, redefining its very being.

---

<sup>292</sup> For this reason, Dasein's various ways of being cannot be considered generic roles. The projective dimension of existence implies that any way of being is open to transformation; it bursts all cultural molds toward which it may tend. Nowhere does Heidegger suggest that authentic Dasein "must take over the average for-the-sake-of-whichs one has in one's culture, just like everyone else" (Dreyfus, *Being-in-the-World*, 157). When Heidegger writes that *das Man*, or "the they," is a fundamental dimension of Dasein, he means simply to point out that any way of being attains its full meaning in relation to how one might typically act. In other words, part of the significance of an action is the way in which it creatively diverges from what one would typically do in the situation.

<sup>293</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 185.

<sup>294</sup> *Ibid.*, 331.

Perhaps now it is something to be preserved all the more, perhaps something to be rejected.

Through projection, Dasein develops its particular possibilities -- the various ways in which it can be. But in doing so, Dasein simultaneously develops its world: "With equal primordially the understanding projects Dasein's Being both upon its "for-the-sake-of-which" and upon...the worldhood of its current world."<sup>295</sup> From the perspective of a significant transformation, Dasein's entire world rings out in a new voice. The particular transformation lights up and gathers together all the essential events and relationships, letting everything merely accidental fade away: "Wherever those decisions of our history that relate to our very being are made, are taken up and abandoned by us, go unrecognized and are rediscovered by new inquiry, there the world worlds."<sup>296</sup>

In such cases, the world, and thereby Dasein as a whole is clearly transformed, not simply altered as if Dasein had seized a new possession, tossed it in its hopper of capacities, and moved on as the selfsame being "plus one." As Gadamer puts it, Dasein is "suddenly and as a whole something else...in comparison with which its earlier being is nil."<sup>297</sup> This radical newness is revealed by the fact that what Dasein has become could not possibly have been deduced or predicted from the perspective of its former world, and this is because the very terms that define its new world were formerly unavailable. Projection thus denotes the revolutionary dimension of Dasein's being, its capacity to initiate change, to reshape its own identity, and ultimately, to reshape the world itself.

---

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>296</sup> Heidegger's reference to "those decisions of our history that relate to our very being" undermines Dreyfus's assumption that no possibilities have "an essential relation to the self."

<sup>297</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 111.

But what the world thereby becomes is nothing other than what was implicit in the unity of meaning that conditioned Dasein's projection in the first place. What Dasein brings about through its projection is a deeper understanding of its thrownness: "Projection is the opening up or disclosure of that into which human being as historical is already cast."<sup>298</sup> Here the two terms emerge in their unity: Thrownness conditions projection, which, in turn, actualizes thrownness. This is why Dasein's thrownness, or its fate, is not a mere condition that pushes it from behind. The very character of the world into which Dasein is cast emerges only through Dasein's bringing it to light.

We now can see how Dasein is at once entirely passive and entirely active. Thrownness and projection each characterize the whole of its Being-in-the-World. It is not as though thrownness expresses the constrained part of Dasein and projection the free. To think in these terms is to misconceive thrownness as something like "the range of possibilities available in one's culture"<sup>299</sup> and projection as the ability to act and adapt within that range. Many interpreters understand thrownness and projection in this way, overlooking their fundamental unity. Hoffman, for example, writes that to recognize thrownness is "to acknowledge that my life can express itself [i.e., project] only within a certain spectrum of values and traditions. I now realize that I cannot be 'anything and everything,' since my life is bound up with such and such (and not any other) historical roots."<sup>300</sup> But if we consider thrownness to be an open-ended text, an unfinished unity of meaning in contrast to "such and such" constraining factors, thrownness is not some limit to agency but the source of boundless creativity. It provides a standard for action

---

<sup>298</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 73.

<sup>299</sup> Polt, *Heidegger: An Introduction*, 63.

<sup>300</sup> Hoffman, "Death, Time, History: Division II of Being and Time," *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, 239.

that directs Dasein's projection, thus giving it meaning, and, at the same time, allowing it free rein. Correspondingly, projection is not simply a creative capacity that struggles to overthrow what is given. It is rather a capacity for authorship that unveils a destiny already afoot.

To state the unity of thrownness and projection in a slightly different way, the radical dependence of human life on fate emerges only in light of Dasein's *creativity*. The creative actor discovers this dependence not in light of his willing and striving being thwarted by external forces, but in light of how a truly original act returns Dasein to itself, revealing a destiny that it understood, darkly, all along. The phenomenon of projection thus attests to a memory in Dasein that reaches deeper than any past event or series world affairs. It attests to a fate that Dasein at once carries out and uncovers -- a fate that is, in this sense, *historical*. Heidegger thus reinterprets thrown-projection as the "historicity"<sup>301</sup> of Dasein -- that Dasein is at every moment handing itself down (projecting) a destiny (thrownness).

The unity of thrownness and projection emerges in Heidegger's own interpretation of the world. On the one hand, Heidegger's explicit philosophical statement depends for its meaning on what is given, namely, the world itself -- the world as experienced "pre-ontologically" in Dasein's everyday life. Only on the basis of this practical awareness can Dasein articulate the world in terms of relations that make sense. In abstraction from the actual world, Heidegger's terms such as "with-which," "in-order-to," "for-the-sake-of," and so on, would lose their meaning. The interpretation, one might say, is entirely pre-determined by the phenomenon of the world itself.

---

<sup>301</sup> Macquarrie and Robinson render *Geschichtlichkeit* as "historicality," reserving "historicity," for Heidegger's less comprehensive term "Historizität," which refers to the study of history. But as "historicity" is the translation of *Geschichtlichkeit* that we find in most other translations of Heidegger, and in Weinsheimer and Marshall's edition of Gadamer's *Truth and Method*, I will use it here.

But although Heidegger's interpretation is a sketch of what is pre-given, it is also more: In pointing to the world, Heidegger not only represents it as best he can, but, at the same time, initiates its transformation: By finding the right words to characterize the world, or the Being of beings, words that had never before been spoken, Heidegger's interpretation paves the way for a new stance toward things, thereby transforming the world itself. Such a transformation does not necessarily imply any tangible or perceptible change; but it means that life is lived in a new spirit. Consider, for example, the way in which Heidegger's interpretation of the world enlightens what Gadamer calls the "modern viewpoint based on making, producing, and constructing."<sup>302</sup> Insofar as those in the grip of this viewpoint come to accept Heidegger's interpretation, they would not simply gain a clearer theoretical insight, but a new stance toward the world -- a new mode of "doing and prizing, knowing and looking."<sup>303</sup> In this way, Heidegger's own philosophical interpretation is determined by thrown-projection. It presupposes an understanding it brings to be.

The unity of thrownness and projection is the key to understanding Heidegger's account of human agency. It is helpful to consider how agency would be lost if human life were characterized by only one of the two terms. "Pure thrownness," for the sake of argument, would mean something like complete subordination to a destiny written in the stars. In this case, human beings would live meaningful lives, and perhaps distinctive ones, but they would be the mere playthings of the gods and in no sense free.

---

<sup>302</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, "Foreword to the Second Edition," xxxiv.

<sup>303</sup> Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 64.

“Pure projection” would, in a sense, reverse matters. It would imply an utterly chaotic universe upon which human beings would impose all order. In such a world, human beings would be free from any transcendent standard of action, but life would be wholly meaningless. Without any standard to guide willing and creating, human life would collapse into an endless spiral of the same spontaneous action, each deed as fleeting and insignificant as the next. In such a world, human beings would lack any self-possession. They would be the focal points of arbitrary deeds, and in no sense agents.

The conception of Dasein as thrown-projection avoids each of these two extremes. As thrown, “every Dasein has been factually submitted to a definite ‘world’ -- ‘its world.’”<sup>304</sup> This “submission,” however, means that Dasein has a guiding light, a destiny that provides a standard for action. But the destiny emerges only through Dasein’s attempts to fulfill it. Human life simultaneously partakes of both making and discovering. Through its own action, Dasein brings to light the world that conditions it. In this sense, Dasein is truly self-directed.

## 12. Being-in-the-World and situated understanding

The purpose of examining Heidegger’s thought has been to clarify the concept of situated understanding. Because Heidegger is concerned first and foremost with the question of the meaning of being, his account of situated understanding is cast at a general level. He is primarily concerned with working out the way in which Dasein’s investigation of being, what has

---

<sup>304</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 344.

traditionally been called metaphysics, is itself conditioned by being. To use his own terms: Fundamental ontology presupposes Being-in-the-World.

But although Heidegger develops his conception of Being-in-the-World with his own broad aims, “Being-in-the-World” is nevertheless relevant for how we consider the situated character of understanding in various domains -- scientific, aesthetic, moral, political, and so on. Gadamer has shown the relevance of Heidegger’s work for how we conceive of understanding in the human sciences. And in fact, if we look at Heidegger’s own texts, we see that they include discussions of how specific kinds of understanding presuppose Being-in-the-World. The examples include handling equipment, ascribing properties to objects, studying history. So even if one’s primary goal is to develop the situated character of moral and political judgment, Heidegger’s thought is an instructive place to turn.

Moreover, as we have seen, the case against prejudice in the realm of morality and politics is part of a larger conception of reason and knowledge that emerged in 17th century philosophy (Bacon and Descartes). According to this view, we judge best when we abstract from our life circumstance and subordinate all of our predispositions to detached reason. Heidegger’s thought can be seen to challenge this view. As we have seen, Heidegger shows that all knowledge is a mode of Being-in-the-World, which is the fundamental structure of Dasein. In other words, situated understanding is the basic condition of human life.

We provisionally defined situated understanding in the following terms: All understanding, and all judgement, operates within a certain perspective that determines what counts as true understanding and sound judgement -- a perspective shaped by the totality of our practices. This perspective, however, is not some arbitrary set of predispositions or social forces

that hinders our range of view. The perspective itself is a certain understanding of life as a whole. Situated understanding can thus be defined in terms of the part-whole relationship: Any particular understanding presupposes a more or less comprehensive awareness of the whole. We might call this awareness a “prejudice” insofar as it is primarily practical and, therefore, irreducible to principles accessible to anyone anywhere. The term “prejudice,” moreover, captures the sense in which our fundamental awareness of the whole is *partial* or incomplete. Insofar as we are alive to this partiality, however, we can develop our comprehensive awareness from “within”: by revising certain understandings in light of others, thereby broadening the perspective that conditions us.

Heidegger’s account of Being-in-the-World fills out this sketch of situated understanding in a way that we might summarize as follows: Take any human activity -- from the most basic use of a hammer or a pair of shoes, to the most rigorous scientific analysis of nature. Whatever the activity may be, one can say that it points beyond itself to a certain way of life as a whole. Although a way of life is, for the most part, lived unconsciously, that is, without explicit reflection upon its ultimate point, it nevertheless embodies an *understanding*. This is revealed by the simple fact that when our absorption in life is interrupted, when something goes wrong, or perhaps when someone asks us what we’re up to, we can give an account in terms of purposes (“in-order-to”), ends (for-the-sake-of”), and ultimately a certain story as a whole (“our world”). While the account will never fully represent the nuances of the story as actually lived, the account will still make sense to those who are there living *with us*, or to those who can relate to similar concrete experiences. This is the real thrust of Being-in-the-World: That our more or

less comprehensive understandings of life, in light of which our particular activities attain their meaning, are not subjective or cognitive but embodied in life itself.

The fact that any particular activity points to some such vision of the whole means that any activity can be questioned, revised, or developed, in light of that vision. And by revising or developing any particular understanding, we thereby develop our understanding of the whole that conditioned us in the first place. According to Heidegger's account of thrown-projection, we are, in fact, at every moment revising and developing our particular understandings, simply in virtue of living out certain ways of being and letting others pass by. Through such "projection," we are continuously working out the comprehensive understanding into which we are "thrown." This development may be for the better or for the worse. It may be an expansion of our horizon or a contraction. Prudence would say that we never can know for sure which horizons, or perspectives, are superior to others. Without any fixed criteria in hand, evaluation is difficult. It must be added, however, that once we become aware that our horizons embody a certain story and that the story is essentially open, we come to recognize that any transformation must be understood in terms of a better or worse articulation of the whole. In light of this recognition, we place ourselves in a position to discriminate intelligently among competing interpretations of the world and to offer more illuminating ones ourselves.

The implication of thrown-projection is that any world change is, in a sense, either a revelation or concealment of the same. In contrast to Nietzsche's suggestion that all truth is human creation, that all world views are arbitrary constructions of the will to power, which throws up horizons and tears them down, Heidegger conceives of truth as "unconcealment."<sup>305</sup>

---

<sup>305</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, ¶44.

Although he admits a creative, or “projective,” character of understanding, and thereby maintains that truth is not merely the reflection in speech of a fixed order, Heidegger insists that creation is a sort of midwife that allows an implicit truth to emerge more clearly. “Truth” here has a double meaning: truth of the particular being and truth of being as a whole. It is notable that Heidegger connects “unconcealment” to the Greek *aleitheia* -- the common word for “truth,” but also signifying “un-forgetfulness,” or less awkwardly, “recollection.”<sup>306</sup> Thrown-projection implies that “thinking holds to the coming of what had been, and is remembrance.”<sup>307</sup> This insight points to a sense in which situated understanding is actually consistent with universal truth -- an idea that Gadamer develops and that we will take up in the following section.

---

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

<sup>307</sup> This line, taken from one of Heidegger’s poems, coupled with his explicit discussions of truth, suggests an affinity to Plato’s teaching that knowledge is recollection. Perhaps the connection between the two thinkers runs deeper than at first glance (Cf. “The Thinker as Poet,” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, 10).

## GADAMER

### 1. Introduction to Gadamer's defense of prejudice, its connection to Heidegger

Perhaps the most striking aspect of Gadamer's *Truth and Method* (1960) is his defense of prejudice (*Vorurteil*). In attempting to revive prejudice from its disparaged status, Gadamer seems to follow in the footsteps of Burke. On the surface, the similarities between the two thinkers are remarkable. Both use "prejudice" to denote tradition insofar as tradition serves as a source of authority. Both defend prejudice against those Enlightenment thinkers who impugn its legitimacy. But Gadamer, unlike Burke, connects prejudice to reason. Prejudice, Gadamer writes, is a "condition of understanding," and certain prejudices are "productive of knowledge."<sup>308</sup> Whereas Burke defends prejudice in terms of "sentiment" and "pleasing illusion," Gadamer defends it in terms of *truth*.

In connecting prejudice to truth, Gadamer's real predecessor is not Burke but Heidegger. Although Heidegger uses the term "prejudice" (*Vorurteil*) rarely and without fanfare, he tends to use it with positive emphasis -- typically as a synonym for "presupposition." Gadamer takes up and develops this meaning. He does so with particular reference to Heidegger's account of thrown-projection. As "thrown," Dasein always interprets itself (or any other entity) in light of what Heidegger calls a "pre-understanding," or "fore-having," which is what Gadamer means by "prejudice." But this "pre-understanding," or "prejudice," is constantly being worked out as Dasein "projects" itself upon it -- whether explicitly, in thematic interpretation (e.g., Heidegger's

---

<sup>308</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 280.

study of being), or implicitly, in the course of everyday life. Following Heidegger's distinction between the world and entities within-the-world (or Being and beings), Gadamer uses "prejudice" in a double sense. He sometimes speaks of one's comprehensive "prejudice," or *horizon*, and other times, of one's particular "prejudices." Any act of understanding involves working out both layers of prejudice -- our pre-understanding of the particular entity, and our pre-understanding of life as a whole. As our understandings are inseparable from the things themselves, "prejudice," for Gadamer, is an ontological concept. The to-and-fro movement of our particular prejudices and our comprehensive prejudice, or horizon, is the play of reality itself, what Heidegger calls the "historicity" of Dasein.

This fundamental movement is what Gadamer means by "hermeneutics," a term traditionally confined to the interpretive understanding of texts. (The familiar principle of literary hermeneutics, as Gadamer summarizes it, is that the meaning of a text as a whole "guides the understanding of the particular passages: and again this whole can be reached only through the cumulative understanding of the passages."<sup>309</sup> The "anticipation of meaning in which the whole is envisaged becomes actual understanding when the parts that are determined by the whole themselves also determine this whole."<sup>310</sup>) Although Gadamer is interested in understanding texts, his primary aim is not to develop the method of literary hermeneutics. His aim, rather, is to develop the hermeneutics of Dasein:

Heidegger's temporal analytics of Dasein has, I think, show convincingly that understanding is not just one of the various possible behaviors of the subject but the mode of being of Dasein itself. It is in this

---

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid., 291.

sense that the term “hermeneutics” has been used here. It denotes the basic being-in-motion of Dasein that constitutes its finitude and historicity, and hence embraces the whole of its experience of the world.<sup>311</sup>

## 2. Gadamer’s application of the hermeneutics of Dasein to the human sciences

In *Truth and Method*, Gadamer demonstrates how the hermeneutics of Dasein plays out in the human sciences, particularly in the study of historical tradition. His basic question is the following: How does historical research relate to the fundamental “historicity” that defines Dasein? How does such research draw upon and effect “the totality of our experience of [the] world?”<sup>312</sup> More specifically, in what sense does understanding the meaning of an historical event, a work of art, or text, involve prejudices drawn from our lives, and ultimately, the comprehensive prejudice, or horizon, that defines our life as a whole?

Behind this question is Gadamer’s awareness that contemporary historical study tends to conceal its tie to our own lives. It tends to neglect its relationship to the living history that defines our Being-in-the-World. Our attitude toward the past, writes Gadamer, has become “strangely detached”<sup>313</sup> -- and in two senses. The first we might call the “practical,” the second the “methodological.” Neither, argues Gadamer, does justice to our actual practice of historical study.

The “practical” sense of detachment has to do with the relationship between history and ourselves. It captures the tendency to view historical tradition as a collection of relics rather than

---

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., “Introduction,” xxvii.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid., xxii.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., xxiii.

guides to our own practice. Gadamer remarks that people used to study the classics of philosophy, literature, and art, with great personal interest, seeking to learn truths relevant to contemporary life. In this sense, they were engaged with their objects of study. Properly speaking, their “objects” of study were not mere objects, but tied to their self-understanding. Today, however, a tendency has emerged to study the classics in an antiquarian manner -- not out of a desire for instruction, but to learn “how they lived back then.” The antiquarian approach, we might say, is a highly developed mode of the attitude we typically take toward museum exhibits. We seek to experience a great civilization of old but do not expect guidance from it.

But however entrenched this attitude might be, argues Gadamer, it misunderstands itself as wholly antiquarian. Whenever we consider an historical relic -- a work of art, the ruins of a temple, an ancient text -- insofar as it provides a glimmer of insight into how “they” lived, we can never quite silence its claim on our own lives. Quite beyond our control, we will incorporate the experience of its meaning into “the totality of our self-understanding.”<sup>314</sup> What we take to be a mere relic will inevitably give us new terms in which to express and understand our own commitments and concerns. It would be difficult to make sense of the interest we take in history without reference to its effect on us.

The “methodological” sense of detachment has to do with the way we understand history as scholars. It is tied to a certain notion of “correct” or “scientific” historical analysis. The basic idea is that in order to recover the meaning of an historical event, text, or work of art, we must step back from our own concerns, interests, and understandings. We must step back so as to avoid interpreting the past in terms that were foreign to *its* way of thinking. According to this

---

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., “Forward to the Second Edition,” xxvii.

view, historical works must first and foremost be understood as products of their own age, as products of the context in which they were written. In order to grasp what they are about, we must escape our “contemporary” historical situation and return to the past’s way of thinking. We must put our own thoughts aside and consider instead the “worldview” of the author; we must reconstruct the linguistic usages of his time, the literary forms that prevailed, and so on. By doing so, we can recover the “original” meaning of the text -- the meaning it had when it first took shape within the author’s historical situation.

This conception of detached historical research is what Gadamer calls “historicism” -- an intellectual movement whose origin he attributes to the romantic period (Schleiermacher), and which blossomed in 19th century German thought (Dilthey). Historicism involves detachment in that it teaches us to flee our “contemporary” situation, or “prejudice,” and to thereby “return” to the past in an uninvolved manner. This “return” is supposed to reveal the prejudice-free, “original” meaning of the work -- the meaning that remains the same everywhere and always, untainted by contemporary bias.

Historicism, or “methodological” detachment, we might say, represents a more extreme rift between historical study and ourselves than does an antiquarian attitude. For according to historicism, the only way of gaining genuine access to history, to the meaning of an ancient text, for example, is through suspending its relevance to our own lives. Whereas an antiquarian attitude simply neglects to explicitly consider what history might teach us, historicism denies the very possibility of learning anything from history -- at least until detached historical inquiry has revealed history’s “true” meaning. Historicism assumes a radical rift between present and past

that requires special methodological effort to overcome. In short, it enjoins us to treat the past as dead. Any “life” that the past may appear to have is deemed “contemporary bias.”

Gadamer argues that historicism has matters reversed. Only in light of our own horizon can we draw distinctions among epochs, or “worldviews,” and determine the true meaning of historical works. Despite the claim of historicism to provide an “objective” analysis of history, its very “objects” are constituted by the prejudices of the interpreter -- by understandings drawn from the interpreter’s own horizon.

To historicism, Gadamer opposes his own “hermeneutics,” which seeks to illuminate the inescapable role of prejudice for historical understanding. There is no such thing, Gadamer argues, as the “original” meaning of an historical event, work of art, or text -- if by “original” we mean something that can be uncovered without reference to our own prejudices. Whenever we try to understand the past, we do so from within our own horizon. More specifically, our own interests, concerns, and understandings -- our particular “prejudices” -- animate our historical inquiry, determine what objects we select for research, and shape how we interpret those objects. Properly speaking, there are no historical “objects” separate from our preconceptions of them.

But this does not imply that we are in some way limited by whatever understandings we may begin with. Although certain prejudices may distort the meaning of an historical work, other prejudices, he argues, can illuminate it. They can be “productive of knowledge.” When we attempt to attain a detached understanding of history, to abstract from our own perspective and to think purely as people “back then” thought, we not only fail, but we “more or less forget half of what is really there -- in fact, we miss the whole truth of the phenomenon.”<sup>315</sup> The

---

<sup>315</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 300.

“phenomenon,” Gadamer maintains, is, in a certain sense, the original meaning of the historical work -- its meaning untainted by contemporary bias. He insists that there is such a truth to be discovered -- a truth that is not merely relative to the interpreter’s own fancy. But paradoxical though it may sound, we recover this original meaning, Gadamer argues, not simply by imagining how *they* thought, but by considering the relation of the text (or work of art, or event) to our *own* lives.

Although Gadamer is well aware that certain features of our own lives, certain contemporary prejudices, may hinder our understanding of the text, he maintains that other prejudices may enable it. By considering the text within our own perspective, we can actually reveal layers of its original meaning that its author or initial recipients did not explicitly recognize. According to Gadamer’s view, the original meaning of a text cannot be captured in a single account that would be intelligible to anyone anywhere. It unfolds only in light of certain prejudices. But even though the original meaning “unfolds,” and thus is never fixed once and for all, it unfolds into *itself*, realizing its very identity through change. The task of critical reason, therefore, is not to escape prejudice as such, but to separate the “*true* prejudices by which we *understand*, from the *false* ones, by which we *misunderstand*.”<sup>316</sup> “Hermeneutics,” as Gadamer intends it, describes the process of this separation.

Gadamer’s rehabilitation of *prejudice* might appear to be a polemical defense of what might otherwise be called the “situated,” “perspectival,” or “engaged” character of understanding. All of these terms describe what Gadamer is getting at, and he often employs

---

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 278.

them. But his use of “prejudice” is not simply a shocking formulation of what he could have stated otherwise. For “prejudice,” as we have seen, is the very term used by prominent Enlightenment thinkers to denote custom, tradition, particular commitments, perspectives, insofar as they predispose our understanding and action. Gadamer seeks to defend precisely what Enlightenment thought discredits. In speaking of “prejudice,” Gadamer consciously adopts the Enlightenment’s own term and reinterprets it, revealing prejudice as a feature of reason rather than its opposite. His defense of prejudice appears shocking only because we have been so thoroughly influenced by what he calls the “prejudice against prejudice,”<sup>317</sup> the ideal of “the absolute self-construction of reason,”<sup>318</sup> that the word “prejudice” now has a decisively pejorative meaning.<sup>319</sup>

But before the Enlightenment, Gadamer points out, “prejudice” did not have “the negative connotation familiar today.” It simply meant “a judgment that is rendered before all the elements of a situation have been finally examined.” For example, “in German legal terminology, a ‘prejudice’ is a provisional verdict before the final verdict is reached.” As such, it has a “positive validity, the value of the provisional decision as a prejudgment, like that of any precedent.” Only in light of the ideal of detached reflection did “prejudice” come to mean a baseless judgment -- a judgment influenced by tradition, habit, custom, and not reason.<sup>320</sup>

---

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 273.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 278.

<sup>319</sup> And only once it acquired its negative meaning could it later be used to describe genuinely deplorable attitudes such as racial hatred.

<sup>320</sup> The German *Vorurteil*, writes Gadamer, “like the English “prejudice” and even more than the French *prejuge*, seems to have been limited in its meaning by the Enlightenment critique of religion simply to the sense of an “unfounded judgment.” The only thing that gives a judgment dignity is its having a basis, a methodological justification (and not the fact that it may actually be correct). For the Enlightenment the absence of such a basis does not mean that there might be other kinds of certainty, but rather that the judgment has no basis in the things themselves -- i.e., that it is “unfounded”” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 273).

Gadamer seeks to rehabilitate the older notion of “prejudice” associated with “prejudgment” and “precedent.” His novel twist, of course, is to give “prejudice” ontological significance and to connect it to historical understanding.

### 3. Gadamer’s critique of historicism

Let us review the historicist premise that Gadamer challenges. According to historicism, all thought belongs to a unique “historical situation,” or “worldview,” which denotes something like the comprehensive background of meanings, or terms of description, available to a given age. Central to the concept of “worldview” is that it does not merely describe a set of beliefs, or propositions, or claims to truth, where “truth” means the conformity of a statement to its object. The defining feature of a worldview is that it sets the bounds of truth; more precisely, it determines what counts as *relevant* truth, what commands the concern of a given age. A worldview, then, is equivalent to what we might call “truth” with a capital “T,” as distinct from the many truths to which it gives rise. Insofar as a “worldview” dies, so too do its “truths.” They may still be “correct,” i.e., in conformity with their objects, but this correctness becomes meaningless, no longer anything to which a sensible person would subscribe.

According to historicism, history presents us with a sequence of worldviews, the rise and fall of standards of truth that define different epochs. History thus teaches that there is no trans-historical truth, no standard that persists throughout the ages and that would allow us unmediated access to the past’s way of thinking. Strictly speaking, the persistence of a worldview would

deny the existence of the “past” in the decisive sense of an epoch distinct from the present.<sup>321</sup>

Because history consists of a sequence of worldviews, historical understanding requires a special sort of effort: It requires that we leap out of our own worldview, which is a *mere* prejudice, and “transpose ourselves” into the worldview of the epoch under consideration. We must think in terms of “its ideas and thoughts” and thus advance toward historical “objectivity” -- toward a decisive statement of “what *they* thought.”<sup>322</sup>

Gadamer credits historicism with divining the situated character of thought insofar as it admits the belonging of thought to a “worldview” or “horizon.” But historicism mistakenly assumes that our own “present” horizon can be separated from the “past,” that human life can be torn asunder in this way, split into a sequence of separate “horizons.” Gadamer asks rhetorically:

Are there really two different horizons here -- the horizon in which the person seeking to understand lives and the historical horizon within which he places himself? Is it a correct description of the art of historical understanding to say that we learn to transpose ourselves into alien horizons? Are there such things as closed horizons, in this sense?

His answer is “no.” In positing a sequence of horizons, or in speaking of horizons as “closed,” or in tearing “present” from “past,” historicism misunderstands the very meaning of “horizon.” It assumes that its “own” horizon can become an object of detached knowledge, that it can be defined with sufficient clarity so as to separate it from “horizons” of the “past.” This is impossible. For to be situated within a horizon “means that we are not standing outside it and hence are unable to have any objective knowledge of it.”<sup>323</sup> The sort of knowledge of our

---

<sup>321</sup> This, ultimately, was Hegel’s view. Although he ascribes a sequence, of sorts, to history, the “sequence” is really a repetition of the same epoch on a higher level. For example, the Greek world of art expresses hazily the same Spirit that is realized in conceptual thought at the end of history. Thus, the Greek world has “passed on” only in a sense. In the end, it is preserved at a higher level.

<sup>322</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 297.

<sup>323</sup> *Ibid.*, 301.

horizon we can acquire is inescapably engaged and always partial: “throwing light on it is a task that is never entirely finished.”<sup>324</sup> Our own horizon, or comprehensive self-understanding, conditions every attempt to express its limits and every attempt to separate it from a “past” horizon:

*To be historically means that knowledge of one's self can never be complete. All self-knowledge arises from what is historically pregiven, what with Hegel we call “substance,” because it underlies all subjective intentions and actions, and hence both prescribes and limits every possibility for understanding any tradition whatsoever in its historical alterity [i.e., difference].*<sup>325</sup>

The thought that separates epochs, that, for example, distinguishes between our worldview and that of ancient Greece --is *itself* embedded in our own, all-encompassing horizon --and questionable in light of it. Any such separation may, in fact, turn out to be unwarranted. Perhaps what we consider to be “our” worldview is, upon proper reflection, basically the same as the worldview of the Greeks. Perhaps what we consider “theirs,” is in fact, a *clearer* expression of our own. Perhaps what we take “ourselves” to be and, thus, what we take “them” to be is merely a foreground estimate, a distinction drawn on the basis of inessential concerns that occupy the forefront of our attention. Gadamer’s point is simply that we can never know in advance and we can never know decisively. Historicism assumes a radical separation of worldviews that is unjustified. Without warrant, it denies the possibility that our own understandings might illuminate the meaning of the historical tradition we study, and that the understandings of that tradition might illuminate our own lives.

---

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid.

The notion that any distinctions we might draw between present and past are questionable in light of our own, all-encompassing horizon, is a key point for Gadamer. As an example of how such distinctions can be effectively questioned, we may examine Gadamer's own argument against the separation of the "age of Enlightenment," from the "age of myth." Gadamer is especially interested in this separation for the following reason: Not only does he consider it to be a misstep that still exerts undue influence on contemporary thought; he also identifies it as the *very origin* of the historical consciousness *itself* -- the consciousness accustomed to driving a wedge between the present and past, between "today" and "back then." By showing how this particularly fateful distinction of epochs is mistaken, Gadamer achieves two things: He exemplifies how all such distinctions can be questioned, and he accounts for our very tendency to assume them uncritically.

Gadamer argues that the distinction between the "age of Enlightenment" and the "age of myth" is founded on the false distinction between reason and prejudice. We have already examined how that distinction defines the self-understanding of the Enlightenment. People saw themselves as part of a new age -- an age in which reason and not prejudice would be the ultimate source of authority. No longer would people allow tradition, habit, or custom, to shape their understanding. All matters would now be decided "before the judgment seat of reason."<sup>326</sup> In the preceding chapters we have considered examples of how the crusade against prejudice featured in 17th century natural philosophy (Bacon and Descartes) and Enlightenment ethics (Smith, Hume, Kant). The same way of thinking dominated the study of traditional texts, and in particular, the bible. The "real radicality of the modern Enlightenment," observes Gadamer, is

---

<sup>326</sup> Ibid., 274.

that “it must assert itself against the Bible and the dogmatic interpretation of it.” As with any claim to truth, the teaching of the Bible must be verified by detached analysis:

Thus the written tradition of Scripture, like any other historical document, can claim no absolute validity; the possible truth of the tradition depends on the credibility that reason accords it. It is not tradition but reason that constitutes the ultimate source of all authority.<sup>327</sup>

But the very distinction between “tradition” and “reason,” argues Gadamer, is misguided. So too is the more general distinction between “reason” and “prejudice.” What the Enlightenment defines as “reason,” is, in fact, only a narrow species of understanding. By limiting reason to cognition, or detached reflection, the Enlightenment neglects the practical understanding embodied in everyday life, what Heidegger explicates as Being-in-the-World. Gadamer credits Heidegger with presenting the phenomenon of reason, or understanding, in its true proportion: “Before any differentiation of understanding into the various directions of pragmatic or theoretical interest, understanding is Dasein’s mode of being insofar as it is ‘potentiality-for-being’ and ‘possibility.’”<sup>328</sup> What the Enlightenment deems sources of “prejudice” -- tradition, custom, commitment to one’s closest -- are, in fact, “possibilities” of Dasein -- understandings, which, as such, are open to question and constantly evolving. Without warrant, the Enlightenment relegates these understandings to the categories of “sentiment,” and “rote habit.”

Gadamer reiterates this point with respect to tradition -- the paradigmatic “prejudice.” What determines the Enlightenment understanding of tradition, writes Gadamer, is its antithesis to reason: “whether one wants to be revolutionary and oppose it or preserve it, tradition is still

---

<sup>327</sup> Ibid., 274.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid., 250.

viewed as the abstract opposite of free self-determination, since its validity does not require any reasons but conditions us without our questioning it.”<sup>329</sup> But this, he continues, is a mistake:

There is no such unconditional antithesis between tradition and reason...The fact is that in tradition there is always an element of freedom and of history [i.e., movement or evolution] itself. Even the most genuine and pure tradition does not persist because of the inertia of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It is, essentially, preservation and it is active in all historical change. But preservation is an act of reason, though an inconspicuous one. For this reason, only innovation and planning appear to be the result of reason. But this is an illusion.<sup>330</sup>

Despite all appearance, and prior to explicit “innovation and planning,” tradition is constantly in motion. What might seem to be blind perpetuation of the old, or mechanical habit, always has a “projective” dimension. Handing down tradition really means adapting it to the current circumstances, maintaining it in the face of other possibilities. And through such preservation, tradition is constantly being redefined: “affirmed, embraced, cultivated.” Although this process operates, for the most part, unconsciously, it is nevertheless critical. The distinction between tradition and reason is ultimately unfounded.

Nevertheless, the distinction is assumed uncritically and leads to the impression of a vast gulf between present and past, between the “age of reason” and the “age of myth.” Such a rift in time, writes Gadamer, was previously unimaginable. For centuries prior, people had related to historical tradition as a counterpart to the current times. One need only consider how theologians such as Thomas Aquinas studied the texts of Aristotle and Plato. Far from treating the classics as relics of a bygone epoch, they read them with deep personal interest -- as guides to the good life rather than as historical documents. It was generally understood that the classics were concerned with the same basic questions as the present. The western philosophical tradition was, in

---

<sup>329</sup> Ibid., 282.

<sup>330</sup> Ibid.

Gadamer's words, a sort of "continuous stream" that lacked an historical sense. Although diverted at moments -- by the "latinization of Greek concepts and the translation of Latin conceptual language into the modern languages" -- the stream flowed relatively unbroken.<sup>331</sup>

By damming the flow of tradition, the Enlightenment prepared historicism. But insofar as the Enlightenment understood itself to have discovered "reason" as the decisive standard of knowledge, its self-consciousness was still unhistorical. Reason, people believed, would now serve as the standard for all time. In order for the idea of the relativity of epochs to emerge, the Enlightenment's faith in reason had to be shaken. This happened via *romanticism*, which at once challenged the standard of reason, entrenched the reason-myth distinction, and led to an interest in the revival of tradition.

Instead of celebrating the advent of reason, romanticism disparaged it, seeking to recover tradition, habit, sentiment, and so on. A notable example, from the very beginning of the movement, is Burke's defense of prejudice. But the romantic critique of the Enlightenment still adopted the Enlightenment's basic premise: the distinction between reason and myth, and the corresponding philosophy of history: "the conquest of mythos by logos."<sup>332</sup> Instead of questioning this history, and articulating a new vision that could comprehend both "reason" and "myth," romanticism merely "reverses the values" -- "seeking to establish the validity of the old simply on the fact that it is old."<sup>333</sup> "What determines the romantic understanding of tradition is its abstract opposition to the principle of enlightenment."<sup>334</sup> Now "the world of myth,

---

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., "Introduction," xxiii.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>333</sup> Ibid.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid., 282.

unreflective life not yet analyzed away by consciousness, in a 'society close to nature,' the world of Christian chivalry -- all these acquire a romantic magic, even a priority over truth."<sup>335</sup>

These "romantic revaluations" entrenched the idea that history consists of radically different epochs, each with its own standard of authority. The "age of reason" can make no privileged claim to allegiance. Although it can appeal to the value of detached reflection, free thinking, and so on, it cannot refute the ages that did not value these things -- that instead valued sentimental commitment and respect for traditional authority. The "age of reason" can cite the predictive power of the new natural sciences, but it cannot discredit the ages uninterested in the "conquest of nature," the ages whose teleological science aimed at expressing the proper place of nature in a meaningful human life. Why should the criterion of predictive power be made decisive for knowledge of the earth and sky?

Challenges to reason along these lines seemed all the more compelling in light of the wealth of historical knowledge unearthed by the romantic passion for revival: "the discovery of the voices of the peoples in their songs, the collection of fairy tails and legends...the discovery of worldviews implicit in languages."<sup>336</sup> The Enlightenment no longer appeared as a privileged age, but as one unique worldview among others, an island floating on the great sea of history.

Soon arose the view that all ages, including the Enlightenment, could be understood only historically -- as ages defined by their own standards. As people began to accept the relativity of their own age, their interests shifted toward historical research. Historical knowledge now seemed to be the type of knowledge *par excellence*, the "liberation of the mind from the

---

<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 275.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 276.

trammels of dogma,” including the dogma of reason itself.<sup>337</sup> Thus emerged 19th century historicism, the way of thinking that teaches us to forget ourselves and return to the past’s way of looking at things.

To summarize the train of events: What set everything in motion was the Enlightenment distinction between reason and prejudice -- between the authority of detached, methodical thought, on the one hand, and of tradition, custom, and habit, on the other. On the basis of this distinction arose the perception of two radically different epochs -- the present age, whose standard was “reason,” and the past, whose standard was “myth.” And on the basis of this division of epochs arose the historical consciousness -- the general sense of a rift between “today” and “back then.” Subsequent historical research presumed this rift, which soon became a self-evident point of departure: Only by suspending contemporary criteria, the mere “prejudices” of the present times, can we obtain objective knowledge of how people thought “back then.”

Stepping back, the way in which Gadamer interprets the Enlightenment, romanticism, and historicism in light of the “prejudice against prejudice” is itself an example of how an historian’s own prejudice can illuminate the meaning of history. Gadamer’s prejudice, we might say, is his understanding that the prejudice-reason distinction is misguided and has undue influence on contemporary life. This prejudice, in a sense, belongs to Gadamer’s own historical situation. It is shaped, for example, by his study of Heidegger, by his familiarity with the German philosophical tradition, and so on. Nevertheless, Gadamer’s own prejudice helps to

---

<sup>337</sup> Ibid., 277.

clarify some key turning points in the history of ideas. His prejudice really does make sense of the Enlightenment, romanticism, and historicism in a way that other historical analyses might overlook.

By explaining the genesis of historicism in terms of the effect of the “prejudice against prejudice,” Gadamer helps make sense of historicism’s fundamental ambiguity: that it assumes the historically situated, or “prejudiced,” character of all thought, but inconsistently supposes that we, as historical interpreters, can leap out of “our own” situation and into “another” -- that this sort of procedure, is, in fact, the proper method of historical research. Historicism falls prey to this confusion because it misconceives the concept of “situation” or “horizon.” Biased by the romantic reaction to the Enlightenment, which perpetuates the sharp contrast between “reason” and “prejudice,” historicism confuses “historically situated thought” with something like “incompatible standards of thought,” “divergent worldviews,” “alternative vocabularies,” or “closed horizons.” To someone who thinks in these terms, it makes sense to teach the suspension of one’s own perspective, or set of “prejudices,” in order to understand another.

But to think in this way neglects the true implications of situated thought. In supposing we can leap out of our situation, and in supposing that we should try to do so, historicism “*is based on the modern Enlightenment and unwittingly shares its prejudices.*”<sup>338</sup> Specifically, it shares the “one prejudice of the Enlightenment that defines its essence...the prejudice against prejudice itself...”<sup>339</sup> Beneath historicism’s “critique of rationalism and of natural law philosophy,”<sup>340</sup> beneath its apparently generous pronouncement of the relativity of all

---

<sup>338</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>339</sup> Ibid., 272-273.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid., 272.

worldviews -- itself included -- smolders the hubris of a present age that presumes to have mastered itself -- that presumes to know its own horizon so thoroughly as to distinguish it from all the ages that have come before. But as Gadamer reminds us, “it is important to avoid the error of thinking that the horizon of the present consists of a fixed set of opinions and valuations, and that the otherness of the past can be foregrounded [i.e., separated] from it as from a fixed ground.”<sup>341</sup>

Properly grasped, our historicity, or Being-in-the-World, denies the possibility of complete self-knowledge and, hence, of analyzing “other” horizons in abstraction from “our own.” Our conception of “other” horizons will always rest on a questionable interpretation of “our own,” and, in this sense, will involve prejudice. Thus, in order to understand “other” ages in their own right, undistorted by our own biases, we must attain an adequate understanding of *ourselves*. Although our self-knowledge will always be incomplete -- a prejudice open to revision -- we can deepen it in many ways. And one significant way, Gadamer points out, is through the very activity of interpreting texts from our historical tradition -- not as relics of an alien age, or as mirror images of who we take ourselves to be -- but as critical sounding boards for our own prejudices.<sup>342</sup> Only through such self-examination can we begin to sort out our relation to so called “past” ages.

In other words, the situated character of our thought ensures that the past, insofar as it is intelligible as such, will always, in a sense, *belong* to the present: “Understanding will always involve more than merely historically reconstructing the past “world” to which the work belongs. Our understanding will always retain the consciousness that we too belong to that world, and

---

<sup>341</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>342</sup> Ibid.

correlatively, that the work too belongs to our world.”<sup>343</sup> It is a mistake, therefore, to treat the works of our historical tradition -- the classical texts, works of art, deeds -- as parts of an alien age.

Nevertheless, an historical consciousness is illuminating in this sense: It makes us aware that an historical work speaks from a perspective that is not merely identical to our own. It reminds us, if all-too-loudly, of the tension between the meaning of the work and the meanings we may uncritically read into it. An historical consciousness thus guards us against the tendency to dig up from a text the prejudices that we ourselves have buried. We always approach a text with prejudices, and if we are to uncover the text’s meaning, we must have some awareness of its “otherness” -- that it may not conform to the meanings readily familiar to us. Such awareness involves “neither neutrality with respect to the [text’s] content nor the extinction of one’s self,” but the awareness of “one’s own fore-meanings and prejudices.”<sup>344</sup> Thus, an historical consciousness helps us formulate “the fundamental epistemological question for a truly historical hermeneutics” as follows: “what is the ground of the legitimacy of prejudices? What distinguishes legitimate prejudices from the countless others which it is the undeniable task of critical reason to overcome?”<sup>345</sup>

---

<sup>343</sup> Ibid., 290.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>345</sup> Ibid., 278

#### 4. How to distinguish legitimate prejudices from illegitimate ones

The answer, in a sense, is straightforward: The “legitimate prejudices” make the best overall sense of the “things themselves.”<sup>346</sup> In the case of literary interpretation, the “things themselves” are the texts, but more precisely, what the texts are discussing, i.e., the subject matter as presented in the texts.

For example, in the case of Plato’s *Republic*, the “things themselves” are Plato’s accounts of justice, the good, poetry, and so on. The interpreter will approach the text with certain expectations of meaning drawn from his own understanding, certain prejudices, or “fore-meanings” of the “things themselves.”

These prejudices may be more or less explicit. For example, the interpreter may face the *Republic* with a nuanced theoretical account of justice based on prior studies, or he may simply be familiar with how the word “justice” is used in everyday life. In either case, the “prejudices and fore-meanings that occupy the interpreter’s consciousness are not at his free disposal.” He cannot “separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstandings.”<sup>347</sup> The separation “must take place in the process of understanding itself.”<sup>348</sup> The process involves testing the prejudices against the articulation of the text, determining whether the prejudices make sense of the text in all its parts:

A person who is trying to understand a text is always projecting. He projects a meaning for the text as a whole as soon as some initial meaning emerges in the text. Again, the initial meaning emerges only because he is reading the text with particular expectations in regard to a certain meaning. Working out

---

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., 295.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.

this fore-projection, which is constantly revised in terms of what emerges as he penetrates into the meaning, is understanding what is there...A person who is trying to understand is exposed to distraction from fore-meanings that are not born out by the things themselves. Working out appropriate projections, anticipatory in nature, to be confirmed by “the things” themselves, is the constant task of understanding. The only “objectivity” here is the confirmation of a fore-meaning in its being worked out. Indeed, what characterizes the arbitrariness of inappropriate fore-meanings if not that they come to nothing in being worked out? But understanding realizes its full potential only when the fore-meanings that it begins with are not arbitrary.<sup>349</sup>

How is this circular movement worked out in practice? Let us consider both cases: an illuminating prejudice (or a “fore-meaning” that its “not arbitrary”), and a misleading one. How might an interpreter justify the first and overcome the second?

Imagine that our aim is to interpret an ancient text, for example, Plato’s *Republic*. We might ask many questions about the dialogue, but let us suppose, for the sake of example, that we wish to discover Plato’s view of poetry --specifically, the relationship of imitative poetry (*mimesis*) to truth. In Book X of the dialogue, Socrates suggests that such poetry is a lowly art involving deception: that Homer and Aeschylus create only illusions of virtue, vice, and things divine, just as a man holding a mirror up to the world creates an illusion of the animals and plants reflected.<sup>350</sup>

For many thoughtful readers, this condemnation of poetry, or what today we call the “arts,” would appear to be unduly severe. Surely poetry can enrich our understanding of virtue and vice by providing new and illuminating terms in which to express it. Doesn’t Homer’s Achilles reveal in unforgettable terms both the nobility and narrowness of the warrior ethic? Doesn’t Aeschylus’s Orestes help us see the impotence of the human will in the face of fate -- the folly of trying to master life as if we were at our own mercy? We recognize all this, and with it,

---

<sup>349</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>350</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 596c-e.

the general power of poetry, in light of the profound reflections on language that emerge from romanticism. We learn, for example, from thinkers such as Herder and Humboldt that language does not simply label, or mirror, an independent reality, but participates in constituting what it expresses. From their accounts, and from subsequent versions of this expressive conception of language, we are disposed to a deeper appreciation of poetry and its connection to truth. We recall, for example, Nietzsche's suggestion that art is the "truly metaphysical activity of man."<sup>351</sup> All of this, we might say, constitutes a sort of prejudice in favor of poetry. When we encounter Socrates' harsh critique, the prejudice gives us pause. Could Plato really mean to liken poetry to a mirror?

Upon closer examination of Book X, the text yields a more complex account. In light of our prejudice, certain features stand out that actually undermine the mirror-image understanding of poetry and suggest a stronger relationship between poetry and truth. We notice, for example, that Socrates never himself affirms the mirror-image account, but merely proposes it as a possible analogy -- specifically the first of three that he offers from 596a to 598c. Although the analogies seem to elaborate the mirror-image account, they actually call it into question. Let us summarize them as follows:

- (1) The poet is like a man with a mirror (*Republic*, 596c-e):

The man with a mirror "makes" all of the things that each of the craftsmen produce, and "makes" all the things of the earth and sky, simply by capturing their reflections. Insofar as the things that

---

<sup>351</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, "Attempt at Self-Criticism," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 2000), section 5, 22.

the person mirrors are themselves imperfect images of their *ideas*, the person is an imitator of an image. For example, when the person holds the mirror up to a couch, he makes an image of the craftsman's couch, which is itself an image of the one *idea* of a couch (the true, or natural, or god-given couch).

(2) The poet is like a painter who paints a couch (*Republic*, 596e-598b):

The painter paints the craftsman's couch, and in doing so, necessarily renders the couch from a certain perspective -- from the side, or front, or somewhere else. The painter thus imperfectly imitates the craftsman's couch, which is itself only an instance of the *idea* of a couch. The painter is thus far from truth, or in the words of Socrates, "at the third generation from nature."

(3) The poet is like a painter who paints a craftsman (*Republic*, 598b-c):

Supposedly to emphasize the suggestion that the painter's imitation is "far from the truth," Socrates adds this consideration: "The painter, we say, will paint for us a shoemaker, a carpenter, and the other craftsmen, even though he doesn't understand any of these arts. But if he is a good painter, in painting a carpenter and displaying him from far away, he would deceive children and foolish human beings into thinking that it is truly a carpenter."

These analogies are all supposed to reveal the sense in which the tragic poet is "third from the king and the truth" when it comes to virtue, vice, and things divine -- a mere imitator of

images. But in light of our prejudice concerning poetry, we can see that each successive analogy actually moves further from *mirroring* and closer to *illuminating*. Unlike the man with the mirror, who passively and haphazardly reflects the couch as he walks by, the painter must deliberately omit and heighten certain features of the couch. The painter's couch, in other words, involves interpretation. Socrates draws our attention to this by noting that the painter must paint from a certain perspective. Although Glaucon assumes that the painter's perspective is a shortcoming, Socrates invites the reader to draw the opposite conclusion: that by rendering the couch from from a certain angle, in a certain light, in certain relations, the painter actually participates in clarifying the essence, or "couchness" of a couch. The best painters, we might say, help bring forth the *idea* of a couch itself. At any rate, their paintings are certainly more than mirror images.

Socrates underscores this point by considering the painter who paints a craftsman. If painting a couch involves interpreting, painting a shoemaker or a carpenter involves it all the more obviously. For what defines a craftsman is not his looks, or anything that appears to the naked eye, but his characteristic *activity*. In order to paint a craftsman well, or to even paint one at all, the artist would have to capture, in some way, the craftsmanly work, bearing, attitude. Not just any snapshot, or arbitrary mirror image, would suffice. The painter's ability to render the craftsman would presuppose a certain understanding of craftsmanship -- not the technical know-how of a craftsman, as Socrates misleadingly suggests, but knowledge of the vocation: of the attitudes and concerns it involves, of what marks it off from other activities, of how it fits into life as a whole. Don't all skilled painters draw upon some such comprehensive understanding? By highlighting the features of a craftsman in a uniquely fitting way, wouldn't they elicit what a

craftsman, in truth, *is*? Insofar as the painting does elicit the truth, it dissolves the sharp distinction between the “real,” animate, craftsman and the artistic rendition of one. The fact that the painting might trick a child or fool from afar would not weaken its claim to truth.

Taken together and in sequence, the analogies seem actually to undermine Socrates’ initial suggestion that imitative poetry is a deceptive mirror image of the world. Interpreted in light of our prejudice, the analogies edge closer and closer to the idea that poetry participates in bringing forth the very being, or truth, of what it speaks about. As if pushing us to draw this conclusion, Socrates considers the truth of poetry anew: “Or, again,” he asks Glaucon, “is there something to what [the praisers of poetry] say, and do the good poets really know about the things that, according to the many, they say well?”<sup>352</sup> If the answer were unqualifiedly “no,” and if it simply followed from the previous analogies, why would Socrates pose the question anew? The fact that he does indicates a potential link between poetry and truth.

And sure enough, Socrates’ final analysis of poetry drops the mirror-image analogy and turns instead to the influence of poetry on the soul. Socrates impugns the poets not for telling lies, but for awakening the soul’s passionate side and thereby provoking *lawlessness*. According to this indictment, poetry is at odds with *nomos*, but not with truth. At least with respect to a certain aspect of the soul, or an important category of “the human things” -- with respect to “*eros*, and spiritedness,” and “all the desires, pains, and pleasures in the soul,” poetry does not simply mirror them, but brings them to life.<sup>353</sup> More precisely, poetry “cultivates and waters” the desires<sup>354</sup>: It evokes their nature, directs them toward certain ends, and thus shapes their

---

<sup>352</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 599a.

<sup>353</sup> *Ibid.*, 606d.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*

influence on human action. This expressive-constitutive power of poetry is precisely what puts it at odds with the law. But if the soul's passionate side, rather than its sober, law-abiding tendency, is the springboard for philosophy (as Socrates consistently intimates), then poetry would be a potential ally in the quest for truth.

The point of this example is by no means to decisively settle the complex question of Plato's conception of poetry. It is intended, rather, to show how reading an ancient text with a certain "contemporary" prejudice may actually illuminate the text in a way that one might otherwise ignore -- especially if one attempts to suspend all prejudice. The prejudice, or preconception, that poetry is tied to truth really does make sense of Plato's account. As I have outlined, it fits with the twists and turns of the dialogue.

This is what Gadamer means by "testing" a prejudice and justifying it. We begin with a preconception of the text as a whole, or of a certain theme in the text as a whole, and we see whether it fits the parts. If it does, we can say, provisionally, that the prejudice is "productive of knowledge."

The knowledge at stake is always twofold: We understand both Plato's conception of poetry more clearly and also our own. I have emphasized the first insofar as understanding Plato, rather than ourselves, is the goal of historical research. But according to Gadamer's hermeneutics, understanding runs in both directions: Our own understanding of poetry reveals Plato's, which, in turn, reveals our own. Specifically, Plato offers a distinctive version of the link between poetry and truth by tying it to the doctrine of *ideas*. We cannot begin to develop this relationship here. But in brief, we can say this: If the *ideas* are, in some sense, the eternal truths, as Plato suggests, then poetry is subordinate to what it elicits. Poetry, in other words, is not

purely original or creative. This insight might help to adjust the dominant contemporary accounts of poetry (or, more broadly, art), which tend to emphasize its creative dimension -- that poetry constructs reality, or "truth," rather than reflects it. The point is that Plato's distinctive formulation of the link between poetry and truth can serve as a critical sounding board for our own accounts of that link -- the very accounts that prejudiced our reading of Plato in the first place. The two combine to express a more comprehensive insight. This is what Gadamer calls the thoughtful mediation of the past with contemporary life.<sup>355</sup>

It would be a mistake, therefore, to call the hermeneutic, or prejudicial character of interpretation "reading merely our own meanings into the text." First, insofar as our prejudices really do make sense of the subject matter as presented by Plato, they justly belong to the text itself, or to Plato's conception of poetry itself. No amount of supposedly "objective" historical findings could refute this. An historian of ideas could heap example upon example of divergent usages of "poetry" and "truth" in classical Athens, or marshal extensive biographical evidence suggesting that Plato believed that poetry was strictly at odds with truth. None of this evidence would be decisive for reaching the historically accurate meaning of Plato's dialogue until such evidence could be organized into an interpretation of the text that surpassed the one above by making better sense of the text as a whole.

Second, to say that we read our own meanings into the text misses the sense in which we revise our own meanings as read. Even when our prejudice fits the text, the very process of having justified the prejudice, of having measured it against the meaning of another, amounts to an increase in knowledge. Insofar as we comprehend the "other" within "our own," we take

---

<sup>355</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 161.

away more than we came with. Continuing the above example, our “own” conception of poetry cannot be formed without Plato’s.

Having considered an illuminating prejudice, and how it can be justified, let us consider a misleading one, and how it can be overcome. The obvious answer is that we overcome misleading prejudices in the same way as we justify illuminating ones: by testing them against the text. But we confront a complication: For the most part, our prejudices are unconscious, which means we can’t test them explicitly. So if they lead to misunderstandings, how do we become aware of our mistake? How, asks Gadamer, “can we break the spell of our own fore-meanings?”<sup>356</sup> Provided that we read with care, they will dissolve of themselves:

Just as we cannot continually misunderstand the use of a word without its affecting the meaning of the whole, so we cannot stick blindly to our fore-meaning about the thing if we want to understand the meaning of another...if a person fails to hear what the other person is really saying, he will not be able to fit what he has misunderstood into the range of his own various expectations of meaning.<sup>357</sup>

Consider, for example, a familiar prejudice that might lead us to misinterpret Plato’s discussion of opinion (*doxa*) versus knowledge (*episteme*).<sup>358</sup> As contemporary readers, we might be inclined to mistake Plato’s term “opinion” for “subjective belief,” and “knowledge” for “objective truth.” The prejudice at play here is the subject-object distinction, which, although foreign to Plato’s philosophy, exerts a strong and largely unconscious influence on contemporary thought. Originally a novel theoretical distinction drawn by modern philosophers to separate what is produced by “inner consciousness” from what actually corresponds to the “external

---

<sup>356</sup> Ibid., 270.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>358</sup> Cf., Plato, *Republic*, 477-480.

world,” the distinction has since become a familiar and implicit part of everyday discourse. We use the terms “subjective” versus “objective” unreflectively, often as substitutes for “baseless” versus “justified,” or “biased” versus “fair.” When we read Plato, the subject-object prejudice is liable to shape our interpretation while escaping our notice. We might be wholly unaware of any possible difference in meaning between “opinion” and “subjective belief.” How, then, do we come to recognize Plato’s own meaning?

At a certain point, we get “pulled up short” by the text, and our prejudice emerges explicitly. We can no longer reconcile the text with our misinterpretation. For example, we meet the puzzling suggestion of Socrates that “opinion” occupies a space *between* “ignorance” and “knowledge.”<sup>359</sup> This tripartition seems to clash with the equation of “opinion” and “subjective belief.” For when we speak of “subjective belief,” we imply that it has (potentially) *no* relation to knowledge. The clash calls our attention to the possibility that Plato’s term “opinion” diverges from our initial expectation.

The divergence becomes all the more apparent in light of Socrates’ suggestion that opinion, in a sense, grasps reality, or what *is*. Although it falls short of knowledge, which grasps what *is* “without qualification,” opinion does not lay hold of mere illusion, or what “in every way *is not*.” Occupying a middle position between knowledge and ignorance, opinion grasps what “at the same time *is* and *is not*.”<sup>360</sup> More precisely, opinion grasps a likeness, or an imperfect instance of the *idea*. Thus the text refutes our prejudice that what Plato calls “opinion” means “subjective belief.”

---

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., 477a.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 478d.

In becoming aware of our prejudice, we not only free Plato's meaning from distortion, but we also gain a potentially deeper understanding of Plato's subject matter: the nature of opinion. Upon discovering Plato's claim that opinion divines the truth, or, in his terms, points to the *ideas*, we can no longer uncritically accept our own view that opinion is merely subjective. Perhaps Plato is right.<sup>361</sup> In any case, the encounter with Plato's text provokes us to question our own understandings. As in the previous example, historical research is simultaneously an exercise in self-knowledge.

The discussion of interpreting Plato is intended to clarify the circular movement between our own "contemporary" prejudice and the meaning of an historical text. I place "contemporary" in quotation marks so as to indicate the possibility that our own prejudice actually makes sense of the historical work, and, therefore, belongs to the past. To make sense of the work means to illuminate and harmonize its parts: "The harmony of all the details with the whole is the criterion of correct understanding."<sup>362</sup>

In the case of our first example, our prejudice, or anticipation of the whole, is our (provisional) answer to the question: what is the point of Plato's discussion of poetry? Roughly stated, it goes something like this: Imitative poetry actually participates in constituting what it imitates, and, therefore, cannot be understood as a mirror image of the world. In light of this preconception of the whole, certain parts of the text stand out. The parts may affirm the preconception or clash with it. In either case, we revise the preconception of the whole in light of the parts. In the case of a stark clash, we might have to reject the preconception altogether. In

---

<sup>361</sup> The sense in which opinion points to the *ideas* will be developed as a theme in the next chapter.

<sup>362</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 291.

the case of a neat fit, we might still sharpen our preconception to reflect the whole more adequately. Thus “the movement of understanding is from whole to parts and back to whole.”<sup>363</sup>

But even when we revise our prejudice such that it harmonizes with the parts of the text, our understanding remains incomplete. For the fundamental circle at play is not simply the particular circle between our preconception of the whole text and the meaning of its parts. This particular circle, Gadamer reminds us, is part of the comprehensive circle of Dasein’s interpretations of historical texts, events, and so on, and the whole horizon within which Dasein interprets.

Gadamer’s case for prejudice ultimately goes back to the prejudicial or “thrown” character of human life. His point in *Truth and Method* is to play out Heidegger’s ontology of Dasein with reference to the human sciences. We always interpret historical tradition from within our own horizon, or world. It “determines in advance both what seems to us worth inquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation”<sup>364</sup> We attempt, for example, to understand Plato’s view of poetry because the question of poetry is somehow of concern to us. It appears within our horizon, and in a certain light. But by deciphering Plato’s view of poetry, or by discovering the meaning of any historical work, we broaden the horizon that conditioned our inquiry in the first place. Given that this comprehensive circle never comes to a close, the true meaning of a text (or any topic of interpretation) is never final. As our horizon develops and gives rise to new interpretive prejudices, we may discover unexpected layers of a text’s meaning.<sup>365</sup> Indeed, the act of having interpreted a text reshapes our horizon, which, in turn,

---

<sup>363</sup> Ibid., 292.

<sup>364</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid., 298.

might reveal a deeper interpretation of that very text. Prejudice thus remains an essential feature of understanding: The “understanding of the text remains permanently determined by the anticipatory movement of fore-understanding.”<sup>366</sup>

This apparently abstract point is actually quite concrete. What Gadamer means by the essentially prejudicial, or horizon-bound nature of understanding, reveals itself in the familiar experience of rereading a book, or seeing a movie later in life and grasping what it means in greater depth. Consider, for example, reading a novel in high school and then again ten years later. What accounts for the gain in understanding? Is it that we look harder at the text as adults, or that we have keener cognitive faculties? Neither seems to account for the gain. We may have read every word in school and had a quicker mind in many ways -- at least concerning things like counting and memorizing. A simpler, yet deeper, explanation is that ten years later we read the book from a broader or more mature perspective. It is not that we read what “is there” more carefully or with greater brain power, but that we see it differently -- in light of new interests, concerns, and understandings. Certain themes stand out that before we failed to recognize, that we were unable to recognize because we lacked the relevant terms of expression that come with experience and cultivation.

The gain in perspective that comes with adulthood is a conspicuous example of Gadamer’s general point: Our horizons are constantly evolving, giving rise to potentially deeper interpretive insights. This is why “the discovery of the true meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process.”<sup>367</sup> The infinity reflects the projective character of understanding, its endless potential to develop itself: “Not only are fresh sources of error

---

<sup>366</sup> Ibid., 293.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 298.

constantly excluded, so that all kinds of things are filtered out that obscure the true meaning; but new sources of understanding are constantly emerging that reveal unexpected elements of meaning.”<sup>368</sup> Although no account of a text will be final, the best interpretations are still true in a sense that is “universal.” For they really do illuminate the text itself, which remains the same throughout the various interpretations that shed light on it in different ways. The same subject “presents different aspects of itself at different times or from different standpoints.”<sup>369</sup>

---

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 285.

## Chapter 3

### The Implicit Case for Prejudice in Philosophy and Politics: Plato and Aristotle

#### PLATO

##### 1. Introduction to Plato's implicit notion of situated understanding and prejudice

In this section, I develop the case for prejudice by turning to Plato. The difficulty, which I raised in my Introduction, is that Plato does not explicitly discuss “prejudice” or “situation.” These concepts, after all, have been shaped by a tradition of thought that developed long after his time. As one might expect, they lack obvious equivalents in Greek. Nevertheless, I believe that a compelling account of situated understanding can be derived from Plato's thought. By examining Plato's account, together with the one we find in Heidegger and Gadamer, we gain a distinctive and clear vision of what it means to reason from within the world.

The special difficulty of deriving Plato's case for prejudice is that, on the surface, at least, he seems to defend a radically prejudice-free ideal of philosophy. We might summarize it as follows: Philosophy involves detaching one's self from common opinion and everyday practice, represented by the shadows in the cave. By breaking free of such influences, the philosopher is able to grasp the *ideas* -- the essences that structure the universe and that remain the same everywhere and always, regardless of any particular perspective.

Not surprisingly, Plato's doctrine of *ideas* has often been interpreted as defending an eternal standard of truth detached from the world of appearance, opinion, tradition, and everyday

life. Martha Nussbaum, for example, interprets the *ideas* as “eternal, non-context-dependent paradigmatic objects.”<sup>370</sup> She maintains that Plato’s belief in such “objects” lends support to his belief that “contemplative activity” is “context-independent.”<sup>371</sup> For Plato, she writes, philosophy, seeks “a standpoint that is more than human, one that can look on the human from the outside.”<sup>372</sup> This means finding “a place where reason, free of pain and limitation, can stand alone, above the restrictions imposed upon thought by merely human life.”<sup>373</sup> According to Nussbaum’s reading of Plato, the “natural human way of seeing,”<sup>374</sup> is an illusion, and philosophy is the path to enlightenment -- the route from the cave to the sun.

Another prominent version of this interpretation comes from Sir David Ross. According to Ross, Plato’s *ideas* capture the fact that over and above the many things that people assert to be just, beautiful, good, and so on, is some master definition of these terms -- a universal, or pure form independent of the concrete instances embodied in opinions and practices. As such, the form is the same everywhere and always, just as the truth of “two and two equals four.” His account of the *ideas* is worth quoting at length, as it offers a clear example of the detached conception I challenge:

The essence of the theory of Ideas lay in the conscious recognition of the fact that there is a class of entities, for which the best name is probably ‘universals’, that are entirely different from sensible things...Plato [saw] that the objective difference between universals and particulars answers to the subjective difference between science and sense-perception. The senses present us with a world of particular events in which qualities are present almost inextricably conjoined and confused...But in reason we have a faculty by which we can grasp universals in their pure form and to some extent see the relations that necessarily exist between them. The best example we have of this power is to be found in

---

<sup>370</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *the Fragility of Goodness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 149.

<sup>371</sup> *Ibid.*, 149

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.*, 157.

mathematics, and Plato was the first thinker who clearly saw this. When we say that 2 and 2 make 4, we are implying not that we have often experienced instances in which this is so, and never found an instance to the contrary, but that we perceive that from the nature of the system of numbers this must be so... [Plato] envisaged the possibility of similarly perceiving necessary relations between other universals than those treated by mathematics...He sometimes expressed this aspiration too sanguinely, as when in the Republic he speaks of deducing the whole nature of the system of Ideas from a single unhypothetical first principle. In that he was mistaken.<sup>375</sup>

Ross thus interprets Plato's theory of *ideas* as defending a sort of pure reason detached from sensibility and experience. In fact, Ross's interpretation bears a striking resemblance to the perspective-free ideal of knowledge that we find in Descartes and Kant. The connection to Descartes is evident in Ross's claim that Plato understands mathematical entities and relations as the model for his *ideas*. Just as we grasp the truth of "2 and 2 make 4" without any recourse to experience, so we grasp the *ideas* and their relations.

Ross's claim that Plato sharply separates "universals" from "sensible things" also mirrors Kant's distinction between the categories of apperception and the sensible particulars that the categories organize. For Kant, the categories are given prior to experience, and, in this sense, detached from it. (In other words, the categories are in no way affected or altered by experience, which is precisely how Ross envisions the *ideas*.) Ross thus offers a sort of proto-Kantian interpretation of Plato in the same vein as Nussbaum. The connection between their readings emerges in the following passage where Nussbaum echos the mathematical conception of philosophy and links it to escaping politics and human attachments:

The philosopher or mathematician's particular choice of content contributes powerfully...to his harmonious condition. He chose these pursuits precisely because they were always available and did not require any special conditions for their exercise. He can think about theorems in all kinds of

---

<sup>375</sup> Sir David Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951) 225-226. I am indebted to Leo Strauss for pointing out this passage.

circumstances; they are always available for his activity, regardless of his political circumstances, regardless of the activities and attachments to other human beings.<sup>376</sup>

Perhaps the most striking feature of Nussbaum and Ross's interpretation of Plato is that both read into his thought the subject-object distinction, which, as we have seen in Chapter 2, lies at the root of the prejudice-free ideal of knowledge. This distinction does not appear in Plato. In fact, it is arguably alien to his thought. Plato defines the knower-known relationship not in terms of "subjects" and "objects," but in terms of the "soul" (*psuche*) and "the beings" (*ta onta*) or "the things known" (*ta gignoskomena*).

The concept of "object," which Nussbaum and Ross foist upon Plato as a stand-in for "being," is distinctively modern. "Object" makes sense only in relation to the notion of a subject, or an inner consciousness that represents an external world and may represent it falsely. Correspondingly, the notion that science and philosophy aspire to "objectivity" makes sense only in relation to escaping "subjectivity," that is, to escaping the prejudices to which the mind is prone and which prevent it from knowing the "object," or nature "in itself." This way of thinking, as Charles Taylor shows, emerged sometime around the Protestant Reformation.<sup>377</sup> It developed in light of the scientific revolution and reached, of course, its most famous statement in Descartes. The subject-object distinction was subsequently taken up by the empiricist tradition (Hobbes, Locke, Hume), and came to its most powerful statement in Kant. Thus, the notions of "object" and "objectivity" carry with them the baggage of a tradition of thought that developed long after Plato's time. Nussbaum and Ross's use of the term "objective" to describe Plato's *ideas*, and "subjective" to describe his view of sensation and desire is not only an

---

<sup>376</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 159.

<sup>377</sup> Charles Taylor, *Hegel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 9.

anachronism; it wrongly casts Plato as a proponent of the detached conception of knowledge and misses the sense in which he offers support to a situated conception.

Now, I do not mean to invoke the historicist trope that versions of modern concepts cannot be found in ancient texts. One aim of my project is to reveal Plato's affinity to conceptions of "prejudice" and "situated understanding" that do not have obvious Greek equivalents. But invoking modern concepts to interpret Plato's thought -- especially concepts as loaded with distinctively modern meaning as "subject" and "object" -- places a burden on the interpreter to show how those concepts, apparently foreign to Plato, actually illuminate his thought. It is striking that neither Nussbaum nor Ross -- both of whom are renowned classics scholars -- even attempts to justify the use of the terms "subject" and "object." They seem to view these terms as unproblematic, deploying them as if they were self-evidently Plato's. I refer to the following formulations of Plato's views, drawn from Nussbaum's *The Fragility of Goodness*:

[The Republic contains] a complex theory of true value and of objective valuation.<sup>378</sup>

The ranking of 'pleasures' is a ranking not of subjective feelings about activities, as to their strength or intensity, but of the activities themselves, as to their true worth or objective desirability.<sup>379</sup>

The objects of the intellect are themselves also maximally stable, in fact (in Plato's view) eternal.<sup>380</sup>

Any scientist or mathematician whatever, with or without external objects, is bound to be better off than the lover of unique individuals.<sup>381</sup>

---

<sup>378</sup> Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness*, 140.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>381</sup> Ibid., 149.

Nussbaum's use of the term "value" as a substitute for the "good," the "beautiful," or the "true," also reveals a pervasive reliance on the subject-object distinction. For the concept of "value" is closely connected to the idea of a subject who *values*, i.e., who sets his or her own ends. Hence the familiar question: "What are your values?," which assumes that you have yours and I have mine. For Plato, "values" (if we are to use the term) are not things we "have" in the sense of "possess as subjects." Values, namely, the good, the beautiful, and the true, are things we encounter and discover in the course of life -- whether or not we choose to pursue them.

The fact that there exists no corresponding verb to the nouns "good," "beautiful," and "true" reveals, I believe, the sense in which these terms lean against a subjectivist way of thinking. (By contrast, the noun "value," with its corresponding verb "to value," lends itself to the subject-object distinction.) The closest Greek equivalent to the term "value" is perhaps *time*, or "worth." But its meaning still diverges decisively from "value." For *time* comes from the verb *timein*, to *honor*. To understand the "worthy" things as "honorable," in fact, cuts against subjectivism. For, as Aristotle teaches, we honor precisely those (desirable) things for which we are not responsible, those things which lie *beyond* our choice. Thus we honor happiness (*eudaimonia*) rather than praise it.<sup>382</sup>

Ross also relies on the subject-object distinction, perhaps most egregiously in his claim that Plato saw "that the objective difference between universals and particulars answers to the subjective difference between science and sense-perception."<sup>383</sup> Ross's uncritical reliance on these arguably anachronistic terms is all the more striking given that he describes his book as historical in character. His goal is to "trace the history of the theory of Ideas" as that theory

---

<sup>382</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1101a 20-25.

<sup>383</sup> Ross, *Plato's Theory of Ideas*, 225.

developed throughout Plato's various dialogues. The irony is that Ross undertakes this historical project without awareness of his own historical bias in speaking of "objective" universals and "subjective" particulars. Ross's bias leads him to construct a caricature of Plato as someone obsessed with "objective" standards of truth who was clearly "mistaken" in conceiving one such standard for everything. While attempting to render an historically faithful account of Plato, Ross ends up unearthing his own straw man.

That two classical scholars could uncritically read the subject-object distinction into Plato attests to how deeply the distinction has seeped into our contemporary repertoire of expression. What was once a groundbreaking philosophical theory, developed through great effort by Descartes, Kant, and other thinkers, is now accepted unreflectively as part of everyday language. For example, "objective," in common parlance, has become a synonym for "true," despite the arguably deep philosophical difference between the two concepts. The term "subjective" is commonly used to denigrate any judgment call, or matter of interpretation, unguided by fixed criteria of evaluation. Similarly revealing is the expression "that's my objective" as a substitute for "that's my aim" or "goal" or "purpose" or "end." For Plato and Aristotle, aims, purposes, and ends reflect a teleological way of thinking according to which one's actions are guided by purposes inscribed in the world. To re-describe ends or aims as "objectives" implies a subject who has set the task or chosen the aim for himself or herself.

Given our largely unconscious acceptance of the subject-object distinction in everyday life, it is not surprising that the distinction similarly informs our philosophical language, including the interpretation of ancient texts. The language of "subjects" and "objects" has, indeed, infiltrated almost every contemporary English translation of Plato. Paul Shorey's Loeb edition translation,

for example, renders “the clearer things pointed out” (*tauta to onti saphestera ton deiknumenon*) in the sunlit world above the cave as “the objects pointed out.”<sup>384</sup> In fact, Shorey’s translation switches from “things” to “objects” when he moves from the things in the cave to the things above. His use of the term “objects” for the clearer, or truer, things reflects the modern ideal of detached, “objective” knowledge.

If the subject-object distinction is an alien imposition on Plato’s thought, then we must inquire, by way of introduction, into his actual account of the knower-known relationship. Instead of expressing this relationship in terms of “the subject” and “objects,” Plato conceives it in terms of “the soul” (*he psuche*) and “the beings” (*ta onta*), or, simply, “the things known” (*ta noumena* or *ta gignoskomena*). The passive formulation attests to the sense in which knowledge itself, according to Plato, has a decisively passive dimension. Knowledge is not something established by the self-scrutiny and self-correction of a knowing subject. It is something received from the beings themselves. (“The beings” refer to all the entities we might study -- from a human being, to a craft, to justice, and so on.) Correspondingly, the source of the errors into which we fall is not our subjective bias, which we could, in principle, correct by ourselves, but the inscrutable, or misleading character of reality itself.

Even a cursory glance at the *Republic* will reveal that the concept of “soul” is far from identical to the concept of “subject.” One way of seeing the difference is by considering Socrates’ definition of the soul in *Republic*, Book IX. There he divides the soul into a wisdom loving part (*philomathes kai philosophon*), an honor loving part (*philonikon kai philotimon*), and

---

<sup>384</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935) 515e, 125.

a profit loving part (*philochrematon kai philokerdes*).<sup>385</sup> The soul is thus tripartite but also a unity. It is a unity in that each part, and hence, the entire soul, is defined by *desire (epithumeia)*. The fact that desire defines the soul sharply distinguishes it from Kant's conception of the subject. According to Kant, the subject is defined by a capacity for pure reason detached from desire. Although Socrates in *Republic*, Book IV, seems to suggest that the soul has a separate reasoning part (*logistikon*) and desiring part (*epithumetikon*), which would put them in tension, he rejects this division in favor of what he considers a more thorough analysis in Book IX. In both cases, however, the soul is characterized, in some sense, by desire.

To be sure, Socrates' definition of the soul in terms of desire does not necessarily distinguish it from all conceptions of the subject. (Kant's, of course, is a special case.) Thinkers such as Thomas Hobbes and David Hume, for example, develop conceptions of the subject in terms of desire. But what distinguishes Plato's "soul" from their accounts of the subject is that the soul's desires are defined by certain ends, not by second-order desires ungoverned by reason. These ends, moreover, are by nature (*kata phusin*) of different rank: wisdom first, honor second, profit third.

How Plato justifies this order is a difficult matter. Here I note only that Plato intends the order to be ontological rather than merely prescriptive. His point is that whether consciously or not, the soul, by its very nature, desires wisdom first and foremost. The reason, in short, is that wisdom is the only means by which the other desires, and hence, the entire soul, can be truly fulfilled. But for the moment, my purpose is simply to point out that Plato's "soul" should not be understood in terms of the modern conception of "subject." The root of the difference is that the

---

<sup>385</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 581a-b.

soul is defined by desire, which, in turn, is defined by a natural order of rank. The modern subject, by contrast, is defined either in opposition to nature (Kant) or in terms of so-called “natural” desires that are contingent, or meaningless in themselves (Hobbes, Hume).

Just as the “soul” should not be conceived as a “subject,” so “the things known,” or “the beings,” should not be conceived as “objects.” Properly understood, “the beings” are not things separate from the soul, or things that the soul reflects upon in a detached manner. They are things with which the soul is engaged, things that the soul “knows” through practice. As such, they point to a situated conception of philosophy. We see this most clearly by turning to Plato’s conception of “the human things” (*ta anthropeia*) -- things such as virtue, justice, goodness, and so on.

Now, it is worth noting that the human things occupy a central place in Plato’s thought. This is because he sees them as pointing beyond what is merely human. As Book VI of the *Republic* suggests, the study of the good turns out to be identical with the study of the cosmos. Plato’s concern with human things (or the concern of Plato’s Socrates with human things) is thus connected to a concern with all things. Leo Strauss brings out this point in his commentary on Socrates:

Contrary to appearances, Socrates’ turn to the study of human things was based, not upon disregard of the divine or natural things, but upon a new approach to the study of all things. That approach was indeed of such a character that it permitted, and favored, the study of human things as such, i.e., of the human things in so far as they are not reducible to the divine or natural things.<sup>386</sup>

With the priority of the human things in mind, let us consider why they should not be understood as “objects.” Strauss offers a helpful route, which begins by connecting Socrates’

---

<sup>386</sup> Strauss, *Natural Right and History*, 122.

study of the human things to the *ideas*: “[Socrates’] study of the human things, consisted in raising the question ‘What is?’ in regard to those things -- for instance, the question ‘What is courage’ or ‘What is the city.’”<sup>387</sup> Now, “that to which the question ‘What is?’ points is the *eidōs* of a thing, the shape or form or character or ‘idea’ of a thing.”<sup>388</sup> The *eidōs*, or *idea*, denotes the thing as a whole -- the whole as distinguished from its parts, or from “that out of which it has come into being.”<sup>389</sup>

Socrates’ quest for the *ideas*, his devotion to the question “What is?” began from his observation that when we speak about any of the beings (*ta onta*), we presuppose an understanding, however faint, of the being as a whole. Take “justice,” for example. When we speak of “justice” in particular contexts, when we say, for example, “justice must here be served!,” or when we speak of particular actions being just or unjust, we have a sense not only for these particular just (or unjust) things, but for the meaning of justice *as such*, or as a *whole*. Otherwise we would not even be able to apply the term “justice” in the right contexts.

From where do we acquire this sense for the idea of justice? Plato’s implicit answer is that we acquire it from common opinion and everyday practice. Strauss expresses Plato’s view as follows: “The being of things, their What, comes first to sight, not in what we see of them, but in what is said about them or in opinions about them. Accordingly, Socrates started in his understanding of the natures of things from the opinions about their natures.”<sup>390</sup> By “opinion” (*doxa*), Plato does not mean a subject’s detached beliefs about beings “out there.”

---

<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 124.

“Opinion,” as he shows, denotes the soul’s basic understanding of beings that emerges from practice. Plato highlights this practical aspect of opinion by means of his characters, all of whom voice opinions that are clearly shaped by their life perspectives.

The beings, then, refer to the *ideas*, which exist first and foremost as embodied in opinion and practice. They are neither ideas represented in a subject’s mind, nor abstract objects existing in the world “out there.” The tendency of modern interpreters to treat the *ideas* as abstract forms similar to mathematical entities reflects the modern tendency to conceive the world in terms of subjects and objects. Properly understood, Plato’s distinction between *idea* and instance reflects the distinction between whole and part, or universal and particular -- not the distinction between “objective” and “subjective,” or “abstract” and “concrete.”

Philosophy is the quest for the *ideas*, and, as such, it must begin from the *ideas* as hazily embodied in opinion. Philosophy aims to clarify this hazy understanding by questioning certain opinions of an *idea*, certain instances, or parts, of that *idea*, in light of others. By thus questioning parts, philosophy aims to clarify the thing as a whole. Insofar as it proceeds by questioning opinions, philosophy can be described as “dialectic,” which derives from the verb *dialegethai*, “to have a conversation.” Accordingly, Strauss interprets “dialectic” as “the art of conversation or of friendly dispute.”<sup>391</sup> He summarizes it well as follows:

The friendly dispute which leads toward the truth is made possible or necessary by the fact that opinions about what things are, or what some very important groups of things are, contradict one another. Recognizing the contradiction, one is forced to go beyond opinions toward the consistent view of the nature of the thing concerned. That consistent view makes visible the relative truth of the contradictory opinions; the consistent view proves to be the comprehensive or total view. The opinions are thus seen to be fragments of the truth, soiled fragments of the pure truth. In other words, the opinions prove to be

---

<sup>391</sup> Ibid.

solicited by the self-subsisting truth, and the ascent to the truth proves to be guided by the self-subsistent truth which all men always divine.<sup>392</sup>

We began by noting that the things to which Plato's Socrates devoted special attention were the human things. Socrates sought these *ideas* first and foremost. Now, of the human things, Socrates suggests that one *idea* is of special significance -- the *idea* of the *good*. The good, according to Socrates, is the most basic of the human things. In short, it is most basic in that it conditions all human action. Whether consciously or unconsciously, all human action aims, ultimately, at the good.

In order to make sense of this basic premise, we should consider that the Greek understanding of "good" (*agathos*) is closely tied to the concept of "useful," "fitting," or "suitable for a given end." In this sense, *agathos* is close to our notion of "good" as when we speak of a "good bridle" or a "good horseman." The key is that *agathos* does not carry the moralistic sense that "good" often does in English. The opposite of *agathos* is "bad" in the sense of "useless," or "unfitting," rather than "evil." *Agathos* can denote a "good man" (*agathos anthropos*), but typically in the sense of "a man who does his job well," or who "displays the excellences befitting of a man." Thus, the good man is one who lives a most fitting, well-ordered, or coherent life.

In light of this notion of "good," we can begin to see the sense in which the good plausibly conditions all human action. Socrates does not mean to suggest that all people aim at what we typically call the "morally good." This suggestion would seem implausible in light of the many instances of people who pursue unjust or evil ends. In order to understand what Socrates means by the priority of the good, we must follow the more modest sense of "good" as "useful."

---

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

What Socrates means is well captured by Aristotle in his introduction to the *Nicomachean Ethics*. Every human action, Aristotle writes, aims at “some good” (*agathou tinou*); it is action “for the sake of” (*charin*) a certain end (*telos*).<sup>393</sup> Among ends there is a hierarchy. We see this clearly in cases where several pursuits are subordinate to a single end -- as bridle-making is subordinate to horsemanship, which, in turn, is subordinate to generalship (i.e., being a good general in war). Now, in order to make sense of any of the ends, including the higher ones, which appear to be ends in themselves, we must presuppose, Aristotle suggests, a single highest end -- the good as such, or as a whole. For only in light of the good as a whole do any particular ends make sense, or attain their “goodness.” Without the good as a whole, writes Aristotle, all action would be “pointless” (*mataia*).<sup>394</sup> (“Pointless,” and not “wicked” or “evil” is the key word.) Insofar as our action has a point, insofar as it makes any sense, we must presuppose a single, highest good. In this sense, the good as a whole is the “supreme good” (*to ariston*); it unifies all of the other goods.

It was on the basis of this way of thinking that Socrates ascribed special significance to the *idea* of the good. In order to understand any of the human things, he maintained, one must understand the good -- at least on some basic level. In other words, the study of any of the human things points, of necessity, in the direction of the study of the good. In the *Republic*, we see how this unfolds in the case of justice.

Now, if we add, as Socrates maintained, that all things, which is to say, not only the human things, but also the divine and natural things, come to light only in relation to the human things, then the study of all things, the science of the universe as a whole, would be based on the study

---

<sup>393</sup> Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094a.

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.*

of the good. Thus, in the *Republic*, the investigation of justice points, ultimately, to the good, which turns out to be congruent with the cosmos. The *idea* of the good turns out to be the idea of the whole (*Republic*, Book VI). The end that informs, and, indeed, defines human life, is, in the final analysis, the basis of the cosmos. Thus, the soul and the cosmos are intertwined. In this sense, the cosmos is informed by *nous*, or “intelligence” (cf. *Phaedo*).

To the modern sensibility, the Socratic approach to the study of all things seems naively anthropocentric. To study the universe on the basis of the good seems to read into nature “what human beings most desire to find” (Bacon). But this charge presupposes the subject-object distinction according to which the human things are merely subjective values, meanings that find no expression in the world, or in nature as it really is. Socrates’ thought challenges this modern assumption.

Incredible though the cosmic significance of the good may seem, it is actually not so implausible. Socrates’ turn to the human things as the basis for his study of all things finds a certain contemporary expression in Heidegger’s turn to the *world*. According to Heidegger, as we recall, the world, which is to say, the world of concern to us, the world of human practice, provides the footing for the study of all beings. The world is the source of all beings, the Being of beings. In an analogous sense, the *idea* of the good, is, for Socrates, the *Idea* of *ideas*. (For this reason, I will denote the *idea* of “the Good” with a capital “G,” so as to distinguish it from the other *ideas*.) The relationship between the soul and the *ideas* thus finds a certain analogy in the relationship between Dasein and the world. At any rate, both relationships provide a similarly radical contrast to the subject-object conception of the world.

By foisting the latter upon Plato's thought, interpreters such as Ross and Nussbaum obscure his meaning. "Soul" (*psuche*) becomes "subject;" "being" (*to on*) becomes "object;" the good (*to agathon*), the beautiful (*to kalon*), and the true (*ta aleithe*) become "values." Moreover, the task of philosophy, the task of unmasking the illusive character of reality, becomes the task of transcending our "subjective delusions." The "thing in itself" (*kath' hauto*), Plato's key term for the thing as a whole, as distinguished from its parts, becomes "the thing in contrast to how *we* perceive it." At the end of it all, Plato is cast as a proponent of the most radical form of detached knowledge.

In contrast to this interpretation, I will argue that at the heart of Plato's thought is actually a compelling account of the situated conception of understanding along the following lines: Philosophy is situated in that it begins from common opinion and everyday life, which embodies a basic understanding of justice and all topics of investigation. This understanding is not detached, as if our opinions were merely abstract beliefs, but is primarily embodied in our customs and practices. Philosophy begins from this understanding, which it never entirely transcends. In fact, the very goal of philosophy is to elicit the deeper *insight* of its starting point. For however incomplete, common opinion and everyday life contain indispensable hints of the truth -- divinations of the *ideas* without which philosophy would be impossible.

The *idea*, according to my interpretation, denotes the basic character of each of the beings. In other words, the *idea* denotes each of the beings considered as a whole rather than as a collection of parts. Moreover, the *idea* is neither an abstract form that we represent in our minds,

nor an abstract object that exists “out there” in the world. The *idea* is embodied in our practices and intelligible only as such.

Plato often suggests that in order to philosophize, we must have some prior awareness of what we are to investigate as a whole. Otherwise we could not even point to examples of it or raise questions about it.<sup>395</sup> Philosophy begins from this basic understanding, and by questioning certain opinions and practices in light of others, it gradually sorts out the surface confusions, revealing more clearly the *idea* that was latent all along. Through the give and take of conversation, philosophy develops its starting point, continuously recapturing the *idea* on a higher level.

This circular movement of dialogue -- the movement between our lived awareness of the *idea* and our understanding of its instances -- can be considered a movement between prejudice and the particular considerations that reshape it. This is how I interpret Plato’s “dialectic.” The end of dialectic is the understanding of each of the *ideas*, which, by necessity, points to the understanding of the *idea* of the Good, the *idea* of the articulated whole.

But although this understanding becomes increasingly clear to the philosopher, it remains incomplete -- an opinion, however sophisticated, that is still open to development. For as the philosopher’s initial understanding of the Good is deepened, it inevitably gives rise to new considerations and opinions, which, in turn, may come to clarify the Good. Although Plato seems, at times, to imply that philosophy ends in complete knowledge, he also suggests that the philosopher’s distinguishing mark is knowledge of ignorance. We should keep in mind the famous saying of Socrates: “The only thing I know, is that I know nothing.”<sup>396</sup>

---

<sup>395</sup> Cf. Plato, *Meno*, 80d.

<sup>396</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 21d.

It would therefore be too simplistic to consider Plato the philosopher who, without qualification, extolls knowledge over opinion or being over becoming. As I will show, Plato considers the peak of knowledge to be, at the same time, an opinion, and he considers being (*to on*), in the most fundamental sense of “the whole” (*to pan*), to be something that we participate in bringing to light. Far from articulating a radically prejudice-free ideal of knowledge, Plato presents philosophy as inseparable from the human situation.

## 2. The concept of common opinion (*doxa*) in Plato

In order to understand the way in which common opinion prefigures the *ideas*, we should begin by clarifying Plato’s conception of common opinion (*doxa*). The word *doxa* simply means “opinion,” of which there are many types and levels of sophistication. The basic characteristic of opinion is its incompleteness compared to knowledge (*episteme*). “Common opinion” denotes *doxa* at its most basic, pre-philosophical level. It encompasses the various everyday understandings by which we live. Three features of common opinion deserve special attention: (1) its multiplicity; (2) its relation to practice and “one’s own”; and (3) its connection to poetry.

(1) It is true that *doxa* often refers to the prevailing opinions of the day. This sense is captured by the fact that *doxa* can mean both “opinion” and the decision made by a majority of the assembly.<sup>397</sup> Nevertheless, *doxa* is by no means monolithic. Socrates speaks, for example, of the “many views of the many about what is noble and about other things.”<sup>398</sup> In fact, a basic feature

---

<sup>397</sup> Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 359.

<sup>398</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 532d.

of opinion is precisely that it often differs from person to person and becomes the topic of controversy. Cephalos, for example, holds the conventional view that justice is paying one's debts and appeasing the gods.<sup>399</sup> Thrasymachus, by contrast, asserts that justice is the advantage of the stronger.<sup>400</sup> Common opinion thus ranges from lawful and ancestral views to tyrannical and rebellious ones. In general terms, common opinion, in some way, always contradicts itself. The experience of being contradicted leads one to seek a consistent view of the matter, at least in those cases where the matter is of personal concern. Common opinion is thus the springboard for philosophy.

Although some opinions are highly controversial, others are common sense understandings that we hold with complete certainty. But even these opinions can be the starting points for deeper reflection. A notable example comes from the beginning of the *Statesman* in which the Eleatic Stranger and Young Socrates are attempting to define the kingly science. Having agreed that the kingly science is the art of herding living beings in community, the Stranger asks Young Socrates to further divide the art of herding in order to separate the kingly herding from other forms. Without hesitation, Young Socrates separates the care of human beings from the care of beasts. Now, no one in his or her right mind would dispute that the kingly art concerns the care of human beings -- an assumption that would be necessary for any sensible discussion about statesmanship. But however basic and however certain this assumption may be, it remains an opinion in that it requires further elaboration. In order to determine its truth, one would first have to clarify the qualitative differences between herding animals and herding human beings. One such difference, as the Stranger points out, is that human beings, unlike beasts, dispute the

---

<sup>399</sup> Ibid., 331a-c.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid., 338c.

type of person who is truly the shepherd: “for merchants, farmers, and everyone who prepares grain for use, and also trainers and doctors” would challenge the statesman and assert “that they themselves tend to the care of human beings.”<sup>401</sup> In this sense, even the most certain common sense understandings are open to clarification and are therefore opinions, not knowledge.

(2) Perhaps the most significant characteristic of common opinion is its connection to practice -- to people’s actual lives. Through the close connection of the involvements of his characters and the opinions they voice, Plato shows that a person’s opinions are not detached beliefs that come from nowhere. They are shaped by the roles and relations in which that person is engaged, and ultimately, by his or her experience as a whole. For example, Cephalos’s opinion that justice is telling the truth, paying one’s debts, and appeasing the gods makes sense in light of his occupation as a moneymaker and his role as household patriarch. Plato provides this background on Cephalos before having him voice his opinion on justice. In doing so, Plato suggests that people’s opinions must be understood in light of their life perspectives.

We first see Cephalos engaged in his characteristic activities and only afterward do we hear his reflections on them. Cephalos enters the scene wearing a wreath, having just performed a sacrifice in his courtyard.<sup>402</sup> Soon after, we hear that he has made a living earning back most of his father’s squandered inheritance. (Cephalos explains that he possesses about as much land as his grandfather inherited. His grandfather multiplied his inheritance many times, which Cephalos’s father, in turn, squandered. Cephalos estimates that he has recouped enough of the

---

<sup>401</sup> Plato, *Statesman*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), 268a.

<sup>402</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 328c.

losses so as to leave his own children with slightly more than he himself inherited.<sup>403</sup>) These biographical details are not mere embellishments to the narration. They provide Socrates a pathway for questioning Cephalos -- first about the benefits of wealth and then about the nature of justice.<sup>404</sup> Cephalos's biographical background helps explain where he's coming from when he finally asserts that justice is paying one's debts to men and gods. He views justice through the lens of a pious, frugal, businessman.

Similarly, Thrasymachus's denigration of dialectic and his insistence that justice is the advantage of the stronger fits with his role as an Athenian orator accustomed to giving long speeches aimed at victory in the law courts.<sup>405</sup> Thrasymachus projects the end of his own art onto Socratic questioning and thereby misunderstands it as a cheap attempt to score points against an opponent. From the standpoint of someone concerned with victory rather than knowledge, the knack for posing questions seems inferior to the ability of answering them. Thrasymachus views justice in a similar way -- in service of defeating others.

The connection of common opinion and practice is revealed most powerfully, perhaps, by people's eagerness to defend their opinions and by their anger, in some cases, toward those who refute them. This, of course, is the backdrop for the drama of Socrates. It would be impossible to make sense of the Athenian reaction to Socrates without understanding the existential significance of the opinions he and his students questioned. Despite how Socrates portrays matters in the *Apology*, his Athenian opponents were not simply annoyed at him for being a busy-body; nor were they jealous of him for possessing some sort of theoretical superiority.

---

<sup>403</sup> Ibid., 330b-c.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid., 330c-331d.

<sup>405</sup> Ibid., 338

They perceived Socrates as a threat to their very way of life, which is reflected in the charge that he corrupted the Athenian youth and introduced new gods.

The charge is striking given that Socrates was not a revolutionary, or rabble rouser, in any typical sense. He never, for example, founded a new religious cult and urged others to join. He simply questioned people's opinions and influenced his students to do the same. But somehow, this was tantamount to overt action. In fact, it was just as threatening. The fateful clash of Socrates and the Athenian *demos* reveals how tenaciously people are willing to defend their opinions.

In order to make sense of this tenacity, we must consider that opinions are more than idle speculations or detached theoretical beliefs about this topic and that. People's opinions always, in some way, reflect a certain understanding of life as a whole. In this sense, our opinions are very much "our own": we perceive them to be a part of who we are, and sometimes we are even willing to kill or to risk life and limb in their defense.

But the existential import of opinion also makes possible a certain form of reasoned argument that does not necessarily provoke people's anger. For if we understand the life perspectives from which people's opinions emerge -- if we have a basic sense of where people are "coming from" -- we can challenge certain opinions they hold in light of others we suspect will matter to them. This is precisely how Socrates questions his interlocutors. He sizes up their perspectives and tailors his inquiry accordingly. Dialogue of this nature would be impossible if opinions were merely isolated, context-free beliefs that varied endlessly from person to person, or within the same person at different moments.<sup>406</sup>

---

<sup>406</sup> Cf. Thomas Hobbes's conception of opinion, which offers an clarifying contrast to Plato's.

We might call Socrates' way of questioning a kind of "situated" questioning in that it works within the life perspective of his interlocutors. The way in which Socrates speaks to people as situated is well captured in his questioning of Kephalos's opinion on justice:

You speak beautifully, Kephalos...But this thing justice, shall we assert that it is only the truth and returning what a man has taken from another; or is doing these things sometimes just, other times unjust? I say, for example: everyone would surely say that if a man takes weapons from a friend when [the friend] is level-headed, and the friend demands them back when he is mad, one should not return such things, and the man returning them would not be just, and furthermore, one should not be willing to tell someone in this state the whole truth.<sup>407</sup>

Although Socrates claims that "everyone" would surely withhold the weapons, the example is especially intended for Kephalos. It is meant to persuade a gentlemanly merchant with a stake in friends and an ample concern for his own self-interest.<sup>408</sup> And indeed, Kephalos agrees -- even though Socrates has challenged elements of his outlook.

A more dramatic example of how Socrates questions people from within their perspectives is how he challenges the opinion of Thrasymachus that justice is what's good for the stronger. Instead of making a moralistic argument along the lines of "treat people as you would want to be treated" -- a claim that would carry no weight with a fiery orator concerned with victory -- Socrates poses the following question: when you say that justice is what's good for the stronger, do you mean what the stronger *think* is in their interest or what is *truly* in their interest? For don't even the most powerful tyrants sometimes miscalculate what's good for themselves and later regret it?<sup>409</sup> Thrasymachus agrees that justice is what's *truly* good for the stronger, and the

---

<sup>407</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 331c.

<sup>408</sup> Socrates would surely have devised a different example if he had been trying to convince Immanuel Kant, for example.

<sup>409</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 339d.

discussion continues.<sup>410</sup> The point is that Socrates works from within Thrasymachus's own way of thinking, questioning Thrasymachus based on an understanding of his character. But this questioning is nevertheless critical. For in fact, Socrates gets Thrasymachus to make a significant concession: The strong do not always know what's good for themselves, and therefore, justice cannot simply be whatever rules they think best. In fact, by Thrasymachus's own admission, the strong depend for the efficacy of their strength on those who *know* what's best for them. Socrates thus undermines Thrasymachus from within his own perspective.

These examples from the beginning of the *Republic* highlight the way in which Socrates draws upon people's life perspectives in order to question their particular opinions. Instead of challenging people by appealing to a standard foreign to them, Socrates questions their views in a way that helps them better understand their own lives. In this manner, he captures the attention of his young listeners and cultivates their longing to learn more.

Socrates' "situated" mode of questioning could be considered a kind of rhetoric in service of philosophy. Of course, this is a special kind of rhetoric -- one concerned with truth, not victory. Borrowing Aristotle's formulation, we might call Socratic rhetoric the *antistrophe*, or complement, to dialectic. By speaking to people as situated, Socrates changes their minds without confusing them or provoking their resentment. He challenges certain opinions they hold in light of others, transporting them to broader perspectives that they can still recognize as their own.

In short, the connection between people's opinions and practice explains why the Athenian *demos* felt mortally threatened by Socrates. It also explains why certain young men were

---

<sup>410</sup> Ibid., 340c.

enthralled by his philosophy. But if Socrates was so loved by the young men he questioned and taught, why did he fall victim to the many? In order to make sense of this paradox, we must consider that Socrates was condemned by people who, for the most part, never actually met him. The Athenian *demos* knew Socrates only through his students, many of whom probably lacked their teacher's art for challenging people in ways they could accept. It is telling that Socrates begins his apology by saying that his most dangerous opponents are nameless to him.<sup>411</sup> In the end, he suggests that if he had time to question them individually, he would be able to prove his innocence. But because he must speak identically to his different opponents *en mass*, Socrates fails to get himself off the hook. Socrates' failure in this fateful moment reveals the significance of speaking to people as situated. A crowd can have a similar perspective only to a limited degree, and for this reason, Socratic rhetoric loses its full power to challenge opinions without arousing anger.

(3) The third characteristic of opinion that deserves special attention is its relation to poetry. As Plato suggests, this relationship is circular. On the one hand, the poets *imitate* the views of the many, gaining popularity by catering to whatever they desire. On the other hand, the poets *shape* opinion. Unlike imitators who simply hold a mirror up to the world, the poets interpret and give rise to it. Most significantly, they influence people's conception of "virtue and vice" and "things divine."<sup>412</sup> This power of the poets to shape opinion explains why Plato considers them potential rivals of both the statesmen and the philosophers. The statesmen must make poetry serve the city. The philosophers must make it serve the truth.

---

<sup>411</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 18d.

<sup>412</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 598e.

The pull of opinion that we have already noted -- the pre-philosophical claim it makes on us, and the fact that we have a stake in defending it, can be more fully understood by considering its connection to poetry. The effect of every good poem, or well-told story, is to draw us in even before we have thought through its meaning with sufficient care. This has to do with the relation of poetry to the beautiful. Poetry captivates us in its beauty and thus compels us to consider the claim it makes. The problem however, to which Plato draws our attention, is that the beautiful, or charming, is not identical with the good or the true -- at least not in any simple way. Plato especially highlights the tension between truth and beauty. In the *Apology*, for example, Socrates finds the poets deficient precisely because they say many beautiful things but cannot interpret the meaning of their own poems.<sup>413</sup> Plato points to the same tension in the *Symposium* when Socrates forces Agathon, the tragic poet, to admit that he spoke beautifully about *eros* while being mistaken about its true nature.<sup>414</sup>

The apparent disunion of beauty and truth brings to relief the problematic character of poetry and common opinion. Although poetry and common opinion captivate us and can be starting points for reflection, they are not identical to the truth. In *Republic*, Book X, Socrates suggests that poetry is, in fact, “third from the truth” insofar as it imitates an imitation of the *idea*.<sup>415</sup> He likewise suggests that common opinion, represented by the statues in the cave, is third from the truth -- being two levels beneath the actual things in the world above.<sup>416</sup> This

---

<sup>413</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 22b-c.

<sup>414</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925), 201b-c.

<sup>415</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 599d.

<sup>416</sup> *Ibid.*, 514b-516b.

coincidence further suggests the connection of common opinion to poetry and highlights their problematic relation to truth.

But although poetry and common opinion do not speak the whole truth, they do not simply tell lies either. If the latter were the case, we would be hard-pressed to make sense of Socrates' eagerness to engage people's opinions. If he believed that common opinion were wholly without insight, he would likely have conducted his inquiries in a radically different manner -- perhaps in the fashion of Descartes who sequestered himself from society to seek self-evident truths. But rather than withdrawing from the world of opinion and appearance, Socrates plunged into it -- questioning people from within their own perspectives. In fact, Socrates describes the fundamental moment in his philosophical development -- his "second sailing"-- as a turn toward "the speeches" (*eis tous logous*).<sup>417</sup> By "speeches" (*logoi*), he does not simply mean the contrived speeches of orators, but more broadly, people's opinions. Socrates' turn toward the speeches left behind his earlier way of investigating the nature of things, which involved studying their constituent parts and the causes of their coming into being. Rather than seeking the truth about things in this manner, Socrates decided to examine people's opinions.<sup>418</sup> It seems he discovered that people's opinions contain hints of the truth and pathways for critical reflection that the atomistic natural science of his day overlooked. In his explicit treatment of opinion (most notably in *Republic*, Book V, and the *Symposium*), he describes it as between ignorance and knowledge.<sup>419</sup> In what sense this is so, we must investigate more carefully; but the evidence

---

<sup>417</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 99e.

<sup>418</sup> Ibid.

<sup>419</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 479d-e; *Symposium*, 202a.

we have so far considered is reason enough to assume that common opinion is not as far from the truth as we might think.

Plato's suggestions regarding the truth of common opinion mirror his suggestions about the truth of poetry. It is well known that despite Plato's critique of poetry, the harshest of which we find in *Republic*, Book X, Plato himself employs precisely the poetic devices he denigrates. Most strikingly, Plato's dialogues are imitative in the sense Socrates denounces at the opening of Book X. For this reason, we ought to question the extent of Plato's critique of poetry.

Furthermore, Plato himself provides some significant hints that poetry is not necessarily corrupting. Notably, he prefaces *Republic*, Book X, with an important qualification: imitative poems seem to corrupt the mind of those who hear them "*and do not as a remedy have the knowledge of how they really are*" (emphasis added).<sup>420</sup> The implication seems to be that poetry does not corrupt the minds of those who know its true nature. The danger of poetry, it seems, is not that it tells lies, but that it contains glimmers of insight that people tend to mistake for the *whole* truth. But for those who recognize the seductive power of poetry and its potential to delude, poetry might be a cultivating rather than a corrupting influence.

We should remember that during the days before his death, Socrates devotes himself to writing poetry in order to fulfill a dream that recurred earlier in his life and that always said the same thing: "Socrates, make music and practice it!"<sup>421</sup> (Here "music," *muzike*, must be understood in the broad sense of what we today call "the arts.") Socrates recounts this experience at the beginning of the dialogue that ends with how he turned toward the speeches (*Phaedo*). The Socrates who practices music and the Socrates who questions peoples opinions

---

<sup>420</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 595b.

<sup>421</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 60e.

seems to be one in the same. Again, the connection between poetry and common opinion is striking. Both, moreover, are connected to the search for truth.

Finally, and most significantly, the criticism of poetry and common opinion as images of images and, therefore, illusions, is more complex than it might appear. For an image bears a likeness to the thing imaged, and, in this sense, is not entirely misleading. With these introductory considerations in mind, let us examine in greater depth the connection of common opinion and truth. Perhaps the best place to begin is with Plato's unforgettable metaphor of the cave -- the metaphor that seems, but only seems, to support a conception of detached knowledge.

### 3. Opinion and truth: The metaphor of the cave

Searching for the truth of opinion in the cave metaphor might at first seem strange. The metaphor seems to teach that behind the world of our everyday experience is some true world that we can only discover by rejecting opinion and appearance and following a method of detached reasoning. This dualistic understanding of Plato finds expression in Raphael Demos's claim that according to Plato, "there are two worlds; the world of absolute beauty, and the world of opinion, with its conventions and delusions." This dualism, Demos maintains, "is fundamental and pervasive in [Plato's] thought."<sup>422</sup>

According to this familiar reading, opinions and appearances are entirely deceptive, charming illusions from which we must free ourselves in order to discover the truth. This interpretation seems to have inspired Bacon's phrase "the idols of the cave," by which he denotes

---

<sup>422</sup> Raphael Demos, Introduction, *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett (New York: Random House 1937), 9.

the influences of tradition and upbringing.<sup>423</sup> The idols, according to Bacon, are mere obstacles to sound reasoning.

This familiar understanding of the cave metaphor appears, no doubt, to have some plausibility. After all, Plato likens the cave to a prison where people live in delusion, mistaking shadows of fabricated things for true beings. Attaining wisdom, he suggests, requires escaping the cave and beholding the true things above. Moreover, Socrates describes the escape as a “release and healing from bonds and folly.”<sup>424</sup> If we assume, as Socrates implies, that the cave represents the city, broadly understood as the world of opinion and appearance, then the ascent seems to imply that grasping the truth requires transcending the city. All this seems in line with the case against prejudice -- the idea that we must reject all influences whose validity we have not confirmed through detached reasoning. But a closer examination reveals the inadequacy of this interpretation. Rather than condemning prejudice and defending detached knowledge, the cave metaphor actually conveys the situated character of understanding.

Before examining the cave metaphor itself, we should consider its place within the *Republic* as a whole. The metaphor appears in more or less the middle of the dialogue as part of the discussion of the *idea* of the Good, which straddles Books VI and VII. The discussion of the Good is the apex of the *Republic* in that it deals with the most comprehensive theme. Socrates says that in order to fully understand justice -- the primary goal of the dialogue -- one must understand the Good, which turns out to be the *Idea* of *ideas*, the cosmic whole itself. The metaphor of the cave is meant to show how one might come to know the Good. It is a metaphor

---

<sup>423</sup> Bacon, *The New Organon*, 41,

<sup>424</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 515c.

for the philosophical quest from beginning to end.<sup>425</sup> For this reason, the cave metaphor can be considered the highest and brightest point of the *Republic*.

But even the loftiest peak attains its height only in relation to an ascending and descending slope. The first half of the *Republic* might be considered the ascent. The drama begins with Socrates having gone down to the Piraeus. He starts, so to speak, in the cave -- in the commercial center of Athens that abounds with the most varied characters and opinions -- far from the thin air of philosophy. The first half of the dialogue may be considered a gradual ascent as the discussion develops into an increasingly sophisticated investigation of justice. By the end of Book VI, the discussion moves beyond justice to the Good and how it might be known. This is the apex where we encounter the cave metaphor. From there, the dialogue descends -- returning to how the ideal city might actually come into being, considering the cycle of regimes, comparing the happiness of the tyrant to that of the just man, returning to why imitative poetry should be banned, and ending with a myth about the afterlife.

Even if the cave metaphor is the clearest statement of the most comprehensive theme in the *Republic*, the metaphor cannot be understood without reference to both the ascent and descent that comprise the dialogue as a whole. In particular, the metaphor's profound statement of the philosophical quest refers backward to how an actual philosophical dialogue has unfolded. The metaphor also points forward to the further treatment of images in the context of poetry.

The cave metaphor is the most important part of the *Republic*. Considered by itself, however, it is only a part. Its importance emerges in light of the *Republic* as a whole. The

---

<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 521c.

relationship between the *Republic* and the cave metaphor thus models the relationship between *idea* and instance. With this in mind, we may turn to the metaphor itself.

The first important feature of the cave is the long entrance extending across its whole width, which is open to the light.<sup>426</sup> The cave is not a closed horizon cut off entirely from the world above. The wide entrance actually implies a certain continuity of the two perspectives that calls into question whether the cave is wholly different from outside.

To be sure, there is still a significant contrast captured by the different sources of light: the fire versus the sun. But the contrast is easy to overstate, and we should bear in mind the simultaneous identity and difference of the two perspectives. Given the cave's openness to the light, it would be impossible to entirely separate the illumination provided by the fire within from that provided by the sun from outside. If the cave represents the world of everyday experience, this world is somehow connected to the true world discovered by philosophy. At least there is no fixed boundary separating the two, as would be the case if the underground dwelling were sealed and had to be smashed through by those trying to escape.

The implied continuity between everyday experience and philosophical insight challenges the notion that opinion and appearance is *mere* prejudice, something that must be rejected as a prelude to sound reflection. We recall Descartes' famous resolution to get rid of his preconceptions "all at one go, in order to replace them afterwards with better ones, or with the same one's once [he] had squared them with the standards of reason."<sup>427</sup> According to Bacon, Descartes, Smith, Hume, and Kant, sound judgment requires smashing through the "cave" of the

---

<sup>426</sup> Ibid., 514a.

<sup>427</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on the Method*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 26.

perspective forged by tradition, received opinion, and upbringing. These perspectives are “subjective and personal” (Kant) or “private and particular” (Hume). As such, they provide no insight and must be overcome. They are closed caves in a sense that Plato’s metaphor seems to reject.

The identity and difference of the cave and the upper world finds further expression in the shadows and figures within the cave. In one sense, the shadows and figures are illusions, not the things themselves. In another sense, however, the shadows and figures hint at the truth. They bear a *likeness* to the actual artifacts, animals, and people in the world above. Even the shadows on the cave wall contain the truth darkly and in an outline. In fact, if we consider what is seen at each level of the ascent -- from the shadows to the figures in the cave to the images outside to the things themselves -- each type of image approaches the truth with greater clarity.

The connection of the images to the actual things is easily overlooked in light of the tendency to equate “image” and “appearance” with “mere illusion.” During the Enlightenment, the terms “image” and “appearance” came to denote the mental representations of a subject, which, as such, may bear no relation to objects in the “external world.” Descartes, for example, concludes that the external world does not conform to its appearance but to the properties which are “comprised within the subject matter of pure mathematics.”<sup>428</sup>

Kant maintains perhaps the sharpest disunion between appearance and reality in his notion that “things in themselves” (“noumena”) bear no resemblance to “phenomena” -- at least none we could ever come to recognize. According to Kant, the “phenomena” are the objects of knowledge constituted, in part, by the mind of the knowing subject. The “noumena,” by

---

<sup>428</sup> Descartes, *Meditations*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, 116.

contrast, are the phenomena considered as “things in themselves” -- things detached from all subjective influence. The “noumena,” are, for this reason, unknowable. (Kant maintains that we can only know objects as structured by our own, subjective, categories.)<sup>429</sup>

Thus, Kant’s understanding of “noumena,” shaped by his nuanced account of the subject-object relation, departs radically from Plato’s understanding of *ta noumena*, or “the things known.” The *noumena*, for Plato, are the things in the world above the cave, which, according to the metaphor, admit of being grasped. According to Plato, the *phainomena* prefigure the *noumena*. Or more precisely, the *noumena* are the true *phainomena* -- the things that show themselves as they *are* in themselves. At no point does Plato define the “thing in itself” (*kath’ hauto*) in contrast to the thing “for us.” But given the way in which Plato’s key terms have been appropriated to serve the subject-object conception of the world, his understanding of images as divinations of the things themselves is overlooked.

Plato is especially vulnerable to misinterpretation given the words he uses for “images”: *eidola*, *phantasmata*, *phainomena* -- all of which have been contorted to suit the subject-object conception of the world. The word “*eidola*” (singular, *eidolon*) is of particular interest as the source of the Latin “*idola*” and English “idols” whose meaning underwent a radical shift during modern times. According to the common Greek understanding, an *eidolon* is a likeness -- the reflection of the thing itself. (Plato clearly adopts this meaning insofar as the *eidola* in the cave reflect the real things above.) According to the predominant modern understanding however, “idol” implies “entirely false.” To be sure, this meaning already had roots in the Judeo-Christian understanding of the idol as a false image rather than a true reflection of the divine. But Bacon

---

<sup>429</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, “On the ground of the distinction of all objects in general into *phenomena* and *noumena*,” 338.

gave this meaning much broader scope when he applied it to all prejudices of the human mind. Bacon uses “idola” as a synonym for “illusions.”

Plato’s “*phantasmata*” and “*phainomena*” have undergone similar shifts in meaning. In Greek, both mean “appearances,” related to the verbs *phantazesthai* and *phainesthai* respectively, which both mean “to appear” or “to show one’s self.” Neither attains its meaning in contrast to reality, as “phantasm” does in Hobbes or “phenomena” does in Kant. In fact, the Greek *phainomena* can denote divine appearances, often expressed by the related *epiphainea*, which means both divine appearance or appearance in general. This is the source of the English “epiphany,” which preserves the connection between appearance and truth. Whereas the subject-object understanding of “appearance” implies “falsehood,” the Greek understanding is closely tied to truth. Plato adopts the understanding of his time but deepens it by emphasizing both the identity and difference of appearance and reality. We must constantly bear in mind this identity and difference when reading the cave metaphor.

Transferring Plato’s analogy of sight back to opinion, the message of the metaphor seems to be that opinion, at each stage, prefigures the truth. As the stages progress, opinion approaches the truth with increasing clarity. Even at the level of shadows, opinion is not entirely misleading. Accordingly, Socrates describes the ascent as coming “nearer to being” (*engutero tou ontos*) and never speaks of a state wholly out of touch with being.

Before interpreting the insight gained at each level of the ascent, we should consider for a moment the character of the ascent itself. The very fact that Plato describes philosophy in terms of an ascent along a “rough, steep, upward way” suggests a fundamental relationship between

theory and practice.<sup>430</sup> As we have already noted, Plato conveys this same insight through the action of the *Republic*, which teaches the connection between people's opinions and their lives. Plato suggests that a person's opinions are not detached beliefs that come from nowhere. They are shaped by the roles and relations in which that person is engaged, ultimately, by his or her life perspective. A change in one's opinion thus involves a change in one's self. The connection between opinion and life, between understanding and self-understanding, finds expression in the cave metaphor as well. A person can attain higher theoretical insight only through a concrete journey of self-transformation. What the person sees at each stage of the ascent is granted by a higher perspective, made possible by having climbed upward and turned around. One cannot grasp the truth while remaining in chains with his head facing the cave wall.

The link between theory and practice challenges the detached conception of knowledge according to which anyone, regardless of his or her life circumstance, can grasp the truth by reasoning methodically. The cave prisoners lack the right perspective to even know what *counts* as the truth. They are preoccupied with predicting which shadows will "pass before, which after, and which at the same time as others," but all the while, they take the shadows for granted and have no awareness that the shadows themselves are images of truer things.<sup>431</sup> In order to learn this, they must break free of their chains and starting the journey upward.

Plato expresses the situated character of understanding in dramatic terms when he imagines someone returning from the upper world and attempting to set the prisoners free.<sup>432</sup> The attempt to enlighten them, suggests Plato, is bound to fail. For the wise person's words would fail to

---

<sup>430</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 515e.

<sup>431</sup> *Ibid.*, 516c.

<sup>432</sup> *Ibid.*, 517a.

express anything that the prisoners could understand from their limited life experience. From within their narrow perspective, the prisoners would actually think the wise man the fool. Only in light of a broader horizon, acquired through the journey upward, could they come to see the shadows as fainter expressions of a clearer truth.

Plato also makes a graver suggestion. Not only will the wise man's words fail to reach the prisoners; the words will sound threatening to them. To the prisoners, who, because of their lack of perspective, fail to recognize the hints of insight expressed in their way of life, the truth will appear as a threat to everything they hold dear. In particular, the truth will appear to denigrate the things most prized in the cave. The prisoners who excel at predicting the sequence of shadows and who receive honors for their skill will have a stake in defending their narrow competence.<sup>433</sup> If a philosopher were to inform them that they excel at nothing more than predicting shadows of reality, the cave dwellers, Socrates imagines, will strike out against the philosopher.<sup>434</sup> In a haunting passage that foreshadows his own fate, Socrates asks: "and if somehow they were able to seize and kill the man who attempts to lead them up and free them, wouldn't they kill him?"<sup>435</sup>

The hostility of the prisoners powerfully reflects the difficulty associated with the situated nature of understanding, or the basic relation of understanding to people's actual lives. A wise teacher cannot simply approach his students with the truth in hand and expect them to grasp it by means of abstract reasoning. Grasping the truth presupposes a certain life perspective attained through experience and upbringing. To someone who lacks the right perspective, no matter how

---

<sup>433</sup> Ibid., 516c-d.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid.

<sup>435</sup> Ibid., 517a.

sharp an intellect he or she may possess, the truth will not make sense. In fact, Plato suggests, the sharpest thinkers in the cave -- the ones most adept at guessing which shadows will precede and follow others -- are, in a sense, the most deluded. Their mastery of predicting shadows distracts them from recognizing that the shadows are only images of the truth. Socrates compares the cave prisoners to men who aim at bad ends but are very skilled at acquiring what they want. They have a certain sharpness of sight, but “the sharper it is, the more bad they accomplish.”<sup>436</sup> Socrates uses this example as proof that “sharp sight” is not what the prisoners lack. What they lack is the right orientation.

Correspondingly, the model of education that Socrates proposes does not involve sharpening people’s sight, but “turning around” their souls. Education, he maintains, is not the art of putting sight into a blind soul (or of sharpening its vision) but of getting it to look in the right direction.<sup>437</sup> Although Socrates sometimes suggests that certain pursuits, such as number, calculation, and geometry, can be used to sharpen the soul’s eye, he maintains that these pursuits are mere aids to education. He conveys their limited benefit by praising those who excel in them as “*so to speak* sharper in all their studies” (emphasis added).<sup>438</sup> This sharpness, however, says nothing about the end, or content of their studies. Socrates’ repetitive invocation of *chresimos*, or “useful,” to describe the mathematical pursuits, affirms their merely instrumental worth. They are potential aids to dialectic but not the ultimate means for grasping reality.

Contrary to what Ross, Nussbaum, and others maintain, Socrates never implies that dialectic is modeled on the mathematical pursuits that may aid it. When he gets around to

---

<sup>436</sup> Ibid., 519a.

<sup>437</sup> Ibid., 518b-d.

<sup>438</sup> Ibid., 526b.

describing dialectic, he defines it simply as the art of “being able to ask and answer questions in the most learned way.”<sup>439</sup> By means of this most basic and difficult pursuit, the soul is able to gradually ascend to higher perspectives.

The problem of Plato’s prisoner, who is chained in front of the cave wall, is analogous to the problem of Heidegger’s “inauthentic self” who is submerged in the superficial concerns of everyday life. In both cases, the lack of understanding has to do with a distorted, or narrow, life perspective and not the lack of mental acuity or analytic sharpness. The lack, therefore, cannot be overcome simply by abstract thought. It involves altering one’s practice in such a way that reveals one’s former perspective as partial. According to Heidegger, this change is sparked by certain fundamental experiences. In *Being and Time* he speaks of “anxiety” and “the call of conscience.” In latter works, he speaks of the experience of the work of art. According to Socrates, the soul’s “turning around” is brought about by the practice of conversation, whose driving force is *eros* (cf. *Symposium*). Thus, for Plato and Heidegger, theoretical insight is tied to practice.

But the fact that understanding is thus situated also provides a path toward enlightenment. The cave metaphor teaches that our perspectives, however partial, are open to expansion. The task of a wise teacher is to discern the perspective of his students and to question certain parts of it in light of others. This is the essence of Socratic dialectic, which should also be considered a form of rhetoric. By means of such education, the teacher gradually turns his students (or at least some of them) toward higher perspectives.

---

<sup>439</sup> Ibid., 534d.

Having outlined the ascent's character, we may now turn to the insight gained at each level. Of special note is the way in which each level of the ascent transcends the former not by leaving it behind, but by including it within a broader perspective. In this sense, each higher level remains tied to the levels below. The final insight of the Good, I argue, remains situated within the ascent as a whole. What follows is an interpretation of the cave metaphor that tries to make the best sense of its twists and turns.

The shadows on the cave wall represent opinion at its least sophisticated level. At this stage, we have only a faint understanding of justice and all the other *ideas*. This understanding is embodied in opinions and practices full of unresolved contradictions. But within this “barbaric bog”<sup>440</sup> lies a dark outline of the *ideas* themselves, the being and vision of which is granted by the firelight, which prefigures the sun. Even as prisoners, we possess a faint understanding of the Good -- of the articulated whole that gives birth to the multiplicity of *ideas*. At this stage, however, our understanding of the Good and the other *ideas* is hazy and implicit. The prisoners are preoccupied with guessing how the shadows will move and pay little attention to discerning what the shadows *are*. The suggestion might be that the prisoners are mostly concerned with predicting what the law courts will deem just and do not consider the nature of justice itself.

The first step toward liberation is to recognize the shadows as images of statues modeled and manipulated by other human beings. Grasping the higher truth of the statues depends upon recognizing them as the source of the shadows. Before the prisoners make this connection, they “believe that what was seen before is truer than what is now shown.”<sup>441</sup> In order to understand the statues, and not the shadows, as “closer to being,” the prisoners must come to recognize the

---

<sup>440</sup> Ibid., 533d.

<sup>441</sup> Ibid., 515d.

interplay of the two -- namely, how the former has a certain priority over the latter. The message, which recurs throughout each stage of the ascent, is that the truth of any opinion, or understanding, is always relative to a hazy prior understanding it clarifies.

Socrates compares the human beings behind the prisoners to puppeteers. They carry all sorts of artifacts “and statues of men and other animals wrought from stone, wood, and all sorts of material.”<sup>442</sup> The puppeteers, we might venture, represent the poets and the statues their poems.<sup>443</sup> The Greek understanding of poetry is closely tied to the concept of making, which is reflected in word *poiesis* meaning both poetry and any sort of making or bringing to be.<sup>444</sup> At this stage of the cave metaphor, and nowhere else, appears a clear reference to things made. The statues are “wrought” (*ergasmena*) from every kind of material, presumably by the human beings who carry them. Furthermore, the statues occupy the realm two levels below the actual things above, which puts them “third from the truth” -- as Socrates places poetry in Book X. The coincidence is striking, and the message seems to affirm the tie between common opinion and poetry. Common opinion is a dark image of what first acquires its shape in the poetic word.

At this stage, the prisoners would come to realize that the shadows are not facts of nature unaffected by human action. The everyday opinions and practices we take for granted are decisively influenced by the most creative speakers and, therefore, are not fixed once and for all. But contrary to the familiar view that arose during the Enlightenment, common opinion and custom is not mere human creation, or convention. The statues in the cave are not Bacon’s idols.

---

<sup>442</sup> Ibid., 514c-515a.

<sup>443</sup> Cf. Allan Bloom, “Interpretive Essay,” in *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1991), 404. He interprets the puppeteers as the poets and statesmen.

<sup>444</sup> Cf. Plato, *Symposium*, 205b-c: “The cause of anything going from not being to being is poetry. Thus the works of all the crafts are poetic and all the craftsmen are poets.”

For the fabrications of the poets reflect in stone and wood the actual things above. Somehow, and mysteriously, the poets possess an understanding of nature. Otherwise they would be unable to create images of the *ideas*. The poets both mirror the *ideas* and give them shape by forging the medium in which they appear. But poetry is still “third from the truth.” The poets have only a faint, unconscious understanding of the *ideas* reflected in their inability to interpret their beautiful renditions.<sup>445</sup>

With the recognition that the meaning of things is not simply given emerges a new standard of truth, captured by the Socratic question “What is...?” This question previously lay dormant as the cave dwellers were more concerned with predicting and manipulating things than asking about their being. The experience of having been deceived about being leads the cave dwellers to recognize “what is...?” to be the most basic question and, thus, the *idea* to be the basic standard of truth. For the question “what is...?” aims at the thing itself, as a whole, rather than its composition or the cause of its coming into being. This stage of the ascent reflects the major transition in Socrates’ own philosophical journey -- the moment at which he recognized the shortcoming of “pre-Socratic” physiology and set out on his “second sailing.” Instead of studying efficient causes and compositions in the fashion of the natural scientists, he turned toward discerning what each of the beings *is* -- starting with people’s opinions and working toward the *idea*.

The ascent out of the cave and into the world above represents our increasingly clear understanding of the *ideas* as we question certain opinions in light of others and try to discern the things themselves. If the cave represents the horizon of common opinion, or opinion at the least

---

<sup>445</sup> Cf. Plato, *Apology* 22b-c. Socrates finds the poets deficient because they say many beautiful things but are unable to interpret the meaning of their own poems. They claim to be possessed by an inexplicable divine inspiration.

sophisticated level, the world above represents that horizon expanded by philosophy. We move from shadows, to reflections in water, to the things themselves.<sup>446</sup> Socrates implies that this step by step progression is necessary: If someone were forced to look upon the things themselves without first going through shadows and reflections, he would be blinded by the light and “unable to see [even] one of the things now said to be true.”<sup>447</sup> This reiterates the lesson of the transition from shadows to statues: Knowledge of the things themselves is situated in the person’s total journey. In other words, we come to grasp the things above as “truer,” or closer to reality, insofar as they reveal the shadows and images *as* shadows and images. Detached from the whole ascent, the truth of the things above would not emerge. This implies that the truth of our higher opinions on justice, or whatever topic, is not context-free. The truth rests upon the way in which it clarifies our prior opinions on the matter.

But in order to fully grasp the shadows and images as divinations of the truth, the actual things above must be understood together with the sun: the very source of their visibility and being and their partner in creating and images and shadows. The final step in the ascent is to behold the sun itself and to recognize its nature as that which is responsible for all things seen.

The sun, Socrates tells us, represents the Good, the *Idea* that grants being to the multiplicity of *ideas*, thereby ordering the cosmos.<sup>448</sup> At this stage, the standard of truth evolves a second time: The first transition, which occurred in the cave, is from efficient causes to *ideas*, and the final transition, which occurs in the world above, is from the *ideas* to their source -- the *Idea of ideas*. Only in relation to the Good, says Socrates, can anything be known, or even

---

<sup>446</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 516a.

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*, 517b-c.

thought.<sup>449</sup> In this sense, the Good is the cause of all opinion, just as the sun is the cause of all things seen. Without knowledge of the Good, our knowledge of any particular topic remains incomplete. Knowledge of the Good is thus the end of philosophy.

The decisive question for determining Plato's stance on prejudice (as expressed in the cave metaphor) is whether at this final stage of the ascent we attain a sort of detached knowledge of the Good, or whether our understanding of it remains situated within the ascent as a whole. And even if our understanding of the Good remains tied to the journey that brought us there, does grasping the Good bring the meaning of the journey to complete clarity? Or does the Good, and hence the meaning of the journey, remain veiled and open to further revelation?

The answer appears in what Socrates says at 516b-c: The completion of the ascent is to grasp the sun in its radiance and generative power. In the final vision, one must recognize that the sun "provides the seasons and the years and presides over all things in the visible place, and is, in a certain way, the cause of all these things."<sup>450</sup> Socrates initially suggests that this insight involves making out the sun "not in some alien place, but the sun itself by itself in its own region."<sup>451</sup> In other words, the insight involves beholding the sun alone, in one all-inclusive glance. This would imply a certain detached conception of the Good insofar as the final vision of the sun depends no longer on looking back at the images and shadows from which the ascent began. According to this account, the final, all-inclusive viewpoint is a perspective that leaves the the lower levels behind.

---

<sup>449</sup> Ibid.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid., 516b-c.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid., 516b.

Although Glaucon readily agrees that the sun can be seen in this way, Socrates forces us to consider otherwise. For in looking at the sun alone, one would not really behold its radiance, but a blinding uniformity of white. Paradoxically, in order to grasp the sun itself, one would have to turn away from the sun in its own region and look back to the things upon which it shines. This is all the more true if one must grasp the sun as the cause of the seasons, years, and all the things that grow. One could not discover this by looking at the sun alone, but would have to turn back to the multiplicity of beings that constitute the world the sun nourishes. Grasping the essence of the sun would require more than a single all-inclusive glance. It would require looking at the sun and then back to the world of phenomena it makes possible.

Moreover, the essence of the sun would not be fixed once and for all. For no glance back at the world would behold the identical sight as the previous. Although there is a certain regularity to the seasons and the things that arise and perish, each is never identical to what came before. So with each glance back, one would come to a fuller understanding of the sun's radiance and power.

The deepest layer of the cave metaphor is that the sun itself is not the single bright sphere fixed above the world as its external cause. Although the sun grants things their visibility and being, it could not realize its own nature without them. The "sun itself" is not a single being above all other beings, but the interplay of the light from above and the world below. The sun brings the world of phenomena into being and thereby fulfills its own nature, maintaining a certain identity throughout its growth.

Translating the vision of the sun to the understanding of the Good, Plato's teaching would seem to be this: Our understanding of the Good is not detached from our particular

understandings acquired through upbringing and education, but embodied in them. Although the Good itself has a certain priority to any particular understanding, or set of understandings, we can grasp the Good only through the particular expressions it makes possible.

As we revise certain understandings in light of others, we also come to a clearer understanding of the Good. Any insightful revision of the particular provides a clearer understanding of the whole. Therefore, the soul cannot catch sight of the Good in a single glance, even when the soul turns explicitly toward investigating the Good. The soul can understand the Good only from a particular vantage point within it. Any statement of the Good, however sophisticated, remains an opinion. Such opinions are true, in one sense, as they grasp the same Good from different angles and with varying degrees of clarity. But in another sense, as opinions, they fall short of knowledge and remain open to clarification in light of new considerations.

In other words, we might say that our understanding of the Good, however advanced, has a certain poetic, or creative character: In giving a true account of the Good, we not only represent it in speech but also participate in shaping it. Socrates' own account of the Good is one example of this union of poetry and truth. His metaphor of the sun makes sense because it really does represent the Good. But by expressing the Good in these particular terms, Socrates gives it a new cast. He grants us a way of conceiving the Good that did not exist before. The cave metaphor teaches that our understanding of the Good is always characterized by this openness.

The practical character of our understanding of the Good, and the necessary incompleteness of this understanding, captures the sense in which it remains a kind of "prejudice." The horizon within which we understand remains, to some extent, veiled no

matter how brightly illuminated or broadened by philosophy. This is through no fault of our own, but because there is always more to the whole that even the greatest thinker can know. It is no wonder, therefore, that Socrates professes his ignorance when it comes to speaking about the Good. He can provide only a “child of the Good” -- the metaphor of the sun and the cave -- and not the Good itself.<sup>452</sup> This is due to the very nature of the Good: Although it provides knowledge and truth, it is simultaneously beyond them.<sup>453</sup> Part of understanding the Good is coming to this insight.

Far from denigrating opinion as *mere* prejudice, the cave metaphor teaches its link to truth from the lowest level of shadows to the highest level of the sun. In fact, in his concluding analysis of the metaphor, Socrates explicitly rejects the blank-slate ideal by which we start with a prejudice-free mind and learn piece by piece:

Education is not what men, making grand proclamations, assert it to be. They assert, presumably, that they put into the soul clear knowledge that isn't in it, as if they were putting sight into blind eyes...But the present account...indicates that this power is in the soul of each.<sup>454</sup>

Education, properly understood, “takes as given that the soul has sight, but not rightly turned, nor looking at what it ought to look at.”<sup>455</sup> Beginning with the sight that is there, education gradually develops it, turning the soul “until it is able to endure looking at that which is (*to on*) and the brightest part of that which is.”<sup>456</sup> In other words, the way we learn about justice, or the being of anything, is by working out a sort of “pre-understanding,” which is the starting point of dialectic.

---

<sup>452</sup> Ibid., 507a.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid., 508e.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid., 518b-d.

<sup>455</sup> Ibid.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid., 518c.

#### 4. The fourfold structure of pre-understanding

We can now characterize Plato's conception of the starting point (*arche*), or "pre-understanding," of philosophy in four terms, derived from the action of the *Republic* itself and from the cave metaphor:

- (1) Partial knowledge of the instances of the thing being investigated
- (2) Partial knowledge of the whole thing being investigated (its *idea*)
- (3) Partial knowledge of the particular practices familiar to us
- (4) Partial knowledge of the good life as a whole (the *Idea* of the Good)

These four terms, taken together, constitute what Plato conceives as the starting point for philosophy. "Partial knowledge" is here synonymous with "opinion" and denotes the faint knowledge that dialectic aims to clarify. As "partial" captures the contrast to "complete," "partial" is perhaps more informative than "faint." We must bear in mind, however, that through philosophy properly conducted, the partial knowledge with which we begin approaches completion, even while remaining partial, i.e., falling short of knowledge.

In order to gain a firmer grasp of the nature of the starting point, we may take as an example the investigation of justice from the *Republic*.

(1) We begin with a partial understanding of the just things -- practices such as paying one's debts, giving sacrifices to the gods, doing good to friends, and so on. These understandings are partial insofar as they are clearly just most of the time but not without qualification.

(2) As soon as we have some understanding of these just things, we must also have a certain understanding of justice as a whole. For without this understanding, we would have no basis for recognizing particular examples of justice. In other words, whenever we assert that something is just, we have some sense of what we mean by "justice," even if we have not questioned it explicitly. The very fact that we can use the word "justice" in the right context indicates our sense of the whole thing, however faint. At the beginning of the *Republic*, for example, all of Plato's characters have the basic grasp that justice has to do with the good, with actions that, generally speaking, are beneficial and should be done. Even the claim of Thrasymachus that justice is what's good for the stronger expresses this understanding. Our grasp of justice and just things, of whole and part, of *idea* and instance, must unfold together.

Plato teaches that our initial understanding of justice, captured by (1) and (2), itself presupposes a broader understanding:

(3) If we consider the just things, we see that they imply an understanding of particular roles and practices that we gain, in large part, beyond the realm of justice. Take, for example, the opinion of Cephalos that it is just to withhold weapons owed to a friend while he is mad.<sup>457</sup> In order to

---

<sup>457</sup> Ibid., 331d.

understand this particular action as a just action, one must understand the role of a friend and what it demands. Friends deserve to be treated with special concern for their own good in a way that distant acquaintances, for example, would not. Although this understanding of friendship can have important implications for what counts as a just action, the understanding is shaped through being with friends in different contexts throughout one's life -- most of them unrelated to justice. The example of a friend is one of many roles and practices presupposed by our understanding of just actions.

(4) As soon as we have an understanding of the particular practices implied by the just things, we must also have a certain understanding of the good life as a whole -- the *Idea* of the *Good*. For ultimately, our conception of a friend, or any other role or practice, is shaped by its relation to the totality of roles and practices familiar to us. In order to pursue and grasp the significance of any particular practice, we must already have a rough understanding of the good as a whole -- the end toward which all aims tend. Without some understanding of the Good, however, implicit, we could not sensibly pursue any particular end. We would have no basis for aiming at one thing rather than another.

Although the character of the Good is inseparable from the particular goods that compose it, the Good is irreducible to them. For the Good is the source of their nature and maintains a certain identity while the particulars come to be and pass away. Thus, in order to have opinions at all, whether about justice, or any other topic, we must have some understanding of the Good. The Good is the *Idea* of *ideas*, the all-encompassing whole that grants intelligibility to everything that is (1-3).

Although such an understanding of the Good might seem somewhat incredible, it really is not so strange if we consider, once more, Plato's suggestion that people's opinions always come from somewhere. They are not simply isolated beliefs about particular topics, but emerge from a certain life perspective, a certain comprehensive vision of the whole. For example, the opinion Kephalos holds about justice is not simply about justice but reflects a certain view of things human and divine, of how they fit into a meaningful life. Although Kephalos lacks conscious awareness of the connection between his opinion on justice and his vision of the whole, and although his understanding of the whole is rather partial, it nevertheless shapes his particular views, which would not make sense otherwise.

The fourfold structure of the starting point of philosophy, or what I have called "pre-understanding," can be derived from the cave metaphor as well as from the actual opinions of Plato's characters. Each level of the ascent contains four elements that line up with (1)-(4):

- (1) The relative clarity and detail of the individual things seen
- (2) The whole form of the individual things seen (each shadow, statue, image, or actual thing)
- (3) The totality of things (all the shadows, statues, images, or actual things taken together)
- (4) The observer's standpoint, illuminated by the fire/sun, which provides the range of view

Each of these four terms is linked to the other and, therefore, the four terms must be taken as an articulated whole: The outline of each shadow (2) only appears because there is some content within (1), even if, at first, the content is just uniform blackness. But the particular

content emerges only within the bounds of a discernible form. Without any form, there would be a uniformly chaotic blur of unrelated particulars. In order to appear as they do, the parts presuppose the thing as a whole (the *idea*). But the thing as a whole, taken by itself, is, like the parts that compose it, insufficient. It attains its distinctive look in relation to other appearances (other *ideas*), ultimately in relation to a totality of appearances (3). The totality is made possible by its parts (2), but these parts acquire their look only in relation to the totality (all of the *ideas* in relation to each other).

Finally, all of what the observer beholds, the entire scene (or the articulation of the whole), is provided by his or her standpoint, illuminated by the fire/sun -- the *Idea* of the Good (4). Only in relation to his illuminated standpoint does the totality of appearances acquire its character as a totality of shadows, statues, reflections, or actual things. But at the same time, the standpoint and its source of light reveals itself only through the things that appear within it. The standpoint is reflected in the phenomena it illuminates.

The philosophical quest expressed in the cave metaphor traces the development of this fourfold starting point, which, initially, is embodied faintly in common opinion and everyday practice. We may have no explicit awareness of justice itself even though we understand it in our speaking of just and unjust things. But that we indeed possess such an implicit understanding is proven by the fact that when Socrates asks what justice is, we can give a more or less intelligible reply. Although our initial answer may be very inadequate, we can begin to clarify it as we question and revise certain opinions in light of others. We know that we have gained a clearer insight when it makes better sense of our opinions and practices as a whole, thereby revealing the truth and shortcoming of our prior understanding.

As we clarify the subject matter, we also come to clarify the whole perspective from which our opinions about it emerged. In general terms, we clarify the *idea* being interrogated and also our understanding of the Good. At first, such clarification of the Good may proceed implicitly, but at a certain point, we come to recognize the Good as the basis of all thought. We come to realize that whenever we question and clarify any important topic, we at the same time clarify the whole horizon within which we question. This is the point at which we first turn toward the sun itself. We come to recognize that the goal of philosophy is not only to learn about this or that *idea*, but to understand the whole as such, the *Idea* of *ideas*, the basis of all beings. Now we direct our efforts toward clarifying the whole itself or toward clarifying other topics with an eye to the whole. Just as with any other *idea*, we clarify the whole from within our understanding of it: by revising certain opinions about it in light of others and by finding new ways of expressing its character.

##### 5. The connection of the cave metaphor to Socrates' account of dialectic

The account of situated understanding expressed in the cave metaphor illuminates Socrates' explicit account of dialectic, which otherwise remains quite enigmatic. Interpreters have been tempted to liken dialectic to the mathematical branches of study that Socrates presents before his account of dialectic in *Republic*, Book VII. There Socrates presents five branches of study that he suggests are aids for leading the soul from the cave to the light. The branches of study are: number and calculation (522c), geometry (526c), the study of three-dimensional figures (528b), astronomy (528e), and the study of the harmonic movement of sound (530d).

This list initially creates the impression that dialectic will be some technique akin to mathematics. It is no wonder that interpreters have understood dialectic in this way, especially as the “mathematical” interpretation fits with the familiar ideal of detached knowledge. In the same vein as Ross and Nussbaum’s interpretation of dialectic, Paul Shorey, who translates the Loeb Edition of the *Republic*, claims that dialectic is reserved “only for first-class minds who have undergone a severe discipline in abstract thought.”<sup>458</sup>

But these readings overlook Socrates’ emphatic suggestion that the list of mathematical studies is nothing but a potential prelude to dialectic. He suggests, moreover, that the “prelude” might not even be necessary. After describing the five branches of study, Socrates asks Glaucon a telling question: “Don’t we know that all of this is a prelude to the law itself which must be learned? For surely it’s not your opinion that the men who are clever at these things are dialectically skilled.”<sup>459</sup> The emphatic “surely” (*pou*) indicates a potentially radical disunion between the previous branches of study and dialectic. Plato underscores this disunity through Glaucon’s response: “No, by Zeus, except for a few whom I’ve encountered.”<sup>460</sup>

Glaucon’s response is revealing in two senses. First, and most obviously, it suggests that those clever in the mathematical branches of study are, for the most part, not skilled in dialectics. Second, and more subtly, it reveals that Glaucon already has a certain notion of dialectic such that he can compare the dialecticians to the mathematicians and judge to what extent they overlap. Glaucon has some sense of dialectic even though he has *not* undertaken the previous studies. (We know, at least, that he has not undertaken the study of three-dimensional figures,

---

<sup>458</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey, “Introduction” (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1930), xix.

<sup>459</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 531d.

<sup>460</sup> Ibid.

which he refers to as not yet developed). Socrates' lead-in question about dialectic, coupled with Galucon's response, thus hints at the disunion of dialectic and mathematics.

When Socrates gets around to explicitly describing dialectic, he likens it to none of the previous studies. Instead, he turns once more to the metaphor of ascending from the cave to the light.<sup>461</sup> In other words, Socrates returns to *poetry* in this crucial moment. Poetry had been missing from the list of the supposed prelude studies to dialectic. Socrates implicitly brings poetry back in his own poetic speech. The art of metaphor, not mathematics, provides the inroad for his actual account of dialectic.

In his account, Socrates defines dialectic by contrasting it to the other branches of study rather than likening it to them. Socrates says that the distinctive quality of dialectic, compared to all other manners of inquiry, concerns the relation of dialectic to its starting point (*arche*). All the other arts (*techai*) depend on a starting point, or basic assumption (*hypothesis*) that they leave unexamined. They depend, in other words, upon an unjustified assumption that they never get beyond. Socrates singles out "geometry, calculation, and the like" as examples:

The men who put themselves to geometry, calculation, and such things assume as known the odd and even, the figures, three kinds of angles, and other things akin to these in each investigation. These things they make basic starting points (*hypotheses*) and do not think it worthwhile to give a further account of them to themselves or others, as if such things were clear to all. Beginning from them, they go ahead with the remainder [of the investigation] and end consistently at that toward which their investigation set out.<sup>462</sup>

Far from considering geometry and the rest of the mathematical studies to be models for dialectic, Socrates denigrates them, claiming that such arts only "dream about being."

---

<sup>461</sup> Ibid., 532a-b.

<sup>462</sup> Ibid., 510c-d.

[For they lack the capacity] to see it in awakesness so long as they use basic starting points, and leaving them unmoved, are unable to give an account of them. For if the beginning is what one doesn't know, and the end and what lies in between are woven together from what one doesn't know, by what means, with respect to this agreement, could knowledge ever arise?<sup>463</sup>

Socrates says the same of the natural science of his day that claimed to explain the nature of things by reference to their composition and generation. Those devoted to this science would, for example, try to explain what a human being is by identifying the distinctive atoms or elements that compose a human being. But all the while, these investigations presupposed an unexamined understanding of their theme. Only because the scientists assumed in advance that what they dissected into its parts was, indeed, a human being, could they draw their conclusions.<sup>464</sup> Their explanation in terms of parts presupposed that they already knew the being as a whole of what they were trying to explain -- at least enough to identify it in the first place. Yet, since they failed to question and justify their presupposition, argued Socrates, they had no reason to believe that they had discovered the parts of a human being rather than something else. Having left their basic assumption untouched, they could not really be said to know anything, despite their apparent competence.

In contrast to all the other arts, says Socrates, dialectic “attempts with regard to everything to grasp what each thing itself *is*” -- without relying on any unexamined assumptions.<sup>465</sup> Instead

---

<sup>463</sup> Ibid., 533b-c.

<sup>464</sup> Cf. *Statesman*, 261-267, where the Eleatic Stranger parodies what we might today call a “positivist” or “value-neutral” division of the animal kingdom in order to identify human beings. The joke is that this method, which pretentiously aims at “the most perfect truth,” i.e., the truth unprejudiced by considerations of what is “lowly and honorable,” assumes precisely what it claims to transcend. Plato thus suggests that the divisions intended to decisively and indisputably distinguish the human race only make sense in light of an implicit prior understanding of what a human being is. For example, that human beings fall within the category of land animals as opposed to aquatic animals is “clear to all” only because we know already what we’re looking for (264d-e). The division, in other words, adds nothing to our understanding of human beings that we didn’t already know.

<sup>465</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 533b.

of starting from a fixed beginning and working toward an end, dialectic “moves toward a beginning.”<sup>466</sup> Although “moving toward a beginning” appears paradoxical, it makes sense as the development of a pre-understanding through the give and take of conversation. This, I suggest, is how we should understand dialectic.

Dialectic, or philosophy, must, of course, begin somewhere. It begins with the basic understandings embodied in common opinion and everyday life. But rather than treating these beginnings as fixed assumptions, dialectic treats them as “steppingstones and springboards in order to reach what is free from assumptions at the beginning of the whole.”<sup>467</sup> Dialectic simultaneously moves beyond the starting point and toward it -- for what it means to move beyond, or to gain greater insight, is to clarify the confusions of one’s initial understanding and thereby to elicit the truth that was latent all along. At no point does dialectic assume anything as merely given. Even the developed understanding is itself open to revision in light of new considerations: When dialectic has grasped the truth of its beginning, the account now proceeds “from that which arises from this beginning and thus goes back down toward an end.”<sup>468</sup>

Socrates adds that dialectic involves “using *ideas* themselves: by means of *ideas*, toward *ideas*, it ends in *ideas*.”<sup>469</sup> This somewhat baffling line makes sense if we bear in mind the teaching of the cave metaphor: Our starting point always involves an understanding of the *idea* we seek to know (represented by the images and things taken as wholes). This understanding is precisely what dialectic aims to clarify: dialectic involves going from the *idea* to instances and

---

<sup>466</sup> Ibid., 511c.

<sup>467</sup> Ibid., 511b. Bloom’s translation.

<sup>468</sup> Ibid. Bloom’s translation.

<sup>469</sup> Ibid. 511b-c.

back to the *idea*, constantly recapturing the *idea* on a higher level. This comprehensive mode of reasoning may be contrasted to all the rest, which fall short precisely because they begin from an implicit understanding of the *idea* but leave it unexamined, moving to various claims about its properties but never returning to the thing itself. For example, the pre-Socratic physiologists moved from an implicit grasp of the *idea* toward its composition but all the while, they left the *idea* veiled in darkness.

Socrates' comparison of dialectic to other modes of inquiry brings to relief the distinction between what Gadamer calls a prejudice "productive of knowledge" and a *mere* prejudice. Unlike a mere prejudice that is fixed, unjustified, and which thereby limits the inquiry it conditions, the "prejudice" worked out in dialectic is continually questioned and revised.

#### 6. The revolutionary and conservative sides of situated understanding

The account of philosophy expressed in the the cave metaphor and the explicit discussions of dialectic highlights both the revolutionary and conservative character of situated understanding. Each is equally central to the phenomenon. Although "situated" might seem to imply a context-bound, rigid understanding, Plato's account suggests otherwise. The movement from the cave to the sun symbolizes the radical change that our situations, or perspectives, can undergo as we critically reflect upon them from within.

Indeed, the cave metaphor highlights the revolutionary character of philosophy to such an extent that it seems, at first glance, to suggest that philosophy involves escaping prejudice altogether. Plato seems to suggest this when he imagines the philosopher returning to the cave,

having his eyes “filled with darkness,” and being unable, at first, to compete with the prisoners in forming judgments about the shadows.<sup>470</sup> The philosopher’s blindness upon returning to the world below appears to imply a sharp distinction between the sunlit realm and the cave. But even here, Plato does not draw the line too sharply. He still suggests that given time, the philosophers could become accustomed once more to the darkness and could come to see the shadows as faint versions of what they learned above. In fact, if we consider Socrates -- the exemplar of someone who has seen the light (insofar as it can be seen) -- he is incredibly adept at questioning the opinions of ordinary people precisely because he recognizes the ways in which such opinions prefigure the truth. His eyes are not infected by the dark.

But we might still consider why the cave metaphor highlights the revolutionary side of philosophy and downplays its connection to a pre-understanding, or prejudice. I believe we can make sense of the apparent imbalance by considering the *Republic*’s political focus. Although the *Republic*, like all of Plato’s dialogues, is impressively comprehensive, its central theme is the tension between philosophy and politics.<sup>471</sup> Lurking behind the action of the *Republic* at every turn is the fate of Socrates -- the man who was put to death by Athens for teaching philosophy. Since Plato seeks to present this tension, it makes sense for him to play up the revolutionary aspect of philosophy. From the standpoint of the city, which seeks to preserve particular customs and forms of reverence, philosophy, which questions such practices, is indeed, revolutionary.

Thus, what we learn about philosophy in the *Republic* is somewhat imbalanced. In general terms, we see philosophy primarily in relation to the particular rather than the whole. In relation to the whole, philosophy cannot effect radical change or lead to an entirely new discovery. No

---

<sup>470</sup> Ibid., 516e.

<sup>471</sup> Cf. Leo Strauss, *The City and Man* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964).

matter how critical and revolutionary, philosophy always clarifies a prior-understanding of its theme. Although the connection of philosophy to pre-understanding, or prejudice, is easily overlooked, the connection is powerfully expressed in the cave metaphor. We mustn't let Plato's brilliant image of the sunlit world obscure its connection to the shadows from which the philosopher's ascent begins.

If Plato highlights the revolutionary side of philosophy in the *Republic*, we should expect him to highlight the conservative side in his less explicitly political works. Indeed, in the dialogues devoted more thematically to the nature of philosophy, Plato suggests that what we call learning is actually recollection (*anamnesis*).<sup>472</sup> Socrates presents this teaching as a myth: In a former incarnation, our souls beheld the *ideas*, of which we now retain only a faint memory. Through philosophizing, we begin to recover the truth we once knew.

In one respect, the myth seems incredible. For how could Socrates be certain that we once knew the *ideas* if he elsewhere admits that he lacks knowledge of what they *are*? But in another respect, the myth captures a truth that Socrates derives from the actual experience of dialectic: what we call learning is really the recovery of a faint understanding we always have from the beginning: We can investigate something only if we already possess a rough understanding of its nature. Otherwise the inquiry would lack any direction. It would not be an inquiry of anything at all. Socrates explicitly addresses this fact in the *Meno*. When we try to answer the question “what is virtue?,” we somehow know to begin by considering justice, bravery, moderation, and so on. From these examples, we learn about virtue. But we know to consider these examples in the first place only because we have some prior grasp of virtue as a whole.<sup>473</sup> Through

---

<sup>472</sup> Cf. *Meno* 81b-86c, *Phaedo* 72e-76d, *Phaedrus* 249b-250c.

<sup>473</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 79b-e.

considering examples, we come to clarify our prior understanding. Gradually, we come to remember something we divined from the start.<sup>474</sup>

The myth about recollection captures the way in which an advance in thought always reveals something strangely familiar. The myth is perhaps Plato's clearest suggestion that philosophy is the unfolding of a prejudice. Although the teaching on recollection is somewhat suppressed in the *Republic*, it still finds expression in Socrates' claim that education does not put knowledge into empty souls but develops what was there all along. It is also present in his claim that dialectic moves toward the starting point rather than simply toward an end. In order to understand the whole of situated understanding, we must consider its revolutionary side, represented by the ascent from the cave to the sun, and its conservative side, captured in the teaching on recollection.

---

<sup>474</sup> The Eleatic Stranger proposes a similar conception of learning in the *Statesman*: We begin with a dreamlike understanding of all things, which we clarify through examples (Plato, *Statesman*, 277d).

## ARISTOTLE

### 1. Introduction to Aristotle's practical, or "situated" conception of the Good

It is often assumed that from the height of Plato's heavenly realm of *ideas*, Aristotle brought philosophy down to earth -- or more precisely, that he grounded the quest for the good in the life of the city. We see this assumption unforgettably rendered in Raphael's *School of Athens*, which depicts Plato pointing to the heavens and Aristotle gesturing down to the earth. But according to the interpretation of Plato I have offered, the contrast between his thought and Aristotle's is not so sharp. Properly understood, Plato's *idea* of the Good is not some abstract form that we might grasp through detached reflection. The Good, I have argued, is embodied in the world. In fact, the Good *is* the world -- the world understood as the articulated whole, or cosmos. We grasp the good only by reflecting upon it from within, or from the perspective of our way of life.

Philosophy, which attempts to replace opinions about the whole with knowledge of the whole, is thus, for Plato, a situated kind of understanding. As such, it remains bound to opinion -- however sophisticated the opinions may be. If we accept this reading of Plato, we must qualify the sense in which Aristotle can be said to have brought philosophy down to earth. It is not as though he retrieved philosophy from the height at which Plato left it hanging. Rather, Aristotle explicates and develops what Plato teaches implicitly.

Whereas Plato conveys the embodied character of the Good and the situated conception of philosophy primarily through metaphor, myth, and the action of his dialogues, Aristotle states it directly. The Good (*to agathon*), he writes, is not some abstract form to which we look for

guidance but a concrete end (*telos*) embodied in our action (*praxis*). Whenever we make things, put them to use, and live out certain roles, our actions aim at the Good (whether or not we consciously reflect upon the Good *as* our aim). For “the Good,” Aristotle maintains, is the end of all ends --that “for the sake of which everything else is done.”<sup>475</sup> As such, the Good is both the aim of our action and its condition. It is the ultimate end (*telos*) toward which we strive, and, at the same time, the source, or beginning (*arche*), of all striving.

To underscore the practical, or “situated,” character of the Good, Aristotle challenges the doctrine of *ideas* according to which the Good is an abstract unity that exists separate (*choriston*) from the actual things called “good.”<sup>476</sup> Notably, he attributes this doctrine to the Pythagoreans, among others, but *not* to Plato. By omitting Plato from his line of criticism, Aristotle maintains the possibility that his own notion of the Good is actually *akin* to his predecessor’s. The Good, concludes Aristotle, is not an abstract form, but a “way of life” (*ergon zoein tina*).<sup>477</sup> It is a “practical good” (*practon agathon*).<sup>478</sup>

By “practical” Aristotle means that the Good is both embodied in practice and intelligible only from the perspective of practice. In other words, our knowledge of the Good is inseparable from our lived awareness of the good, and our lived awareness is inseparable from the Good itself. To grasp the Good thus requires more than detached theory or mere book-learning. It requires life experience (*emperia*).<sup>479</sup> Although the term *emperia*, from which the English “empirical” derives, might suggest the sort of experience that we gain by surveying the world

---

<sup>475</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1097a 15.

<sup>476</sup> *Ibid.*, 1096b 30.

<sup>477</sup> *Ibid.*, 1098a 10.

<sup>478</sup> *Ibid.*, 1097a 20.

<sup>479</sup> *Ibid.*, 1142a 15-20.

“out there” and then processing the data in our minds, this is not what Aristotle means. To avoid this unfortunate association, shaped by modern subjectivism, I have translated *emperia* as “life experience,” not simply as “experience” (as it is typically rendered). The former, I believe, better captures Aristotle’s meaning. *Emperia* is not primarily the experience of objects. It is a basic mode of experience by which we understand the world and, at the same time, ourselves. It is the sort of “experience” that we acquire by growing up in a certain community, developing virtuous habits, deliberating about how to act, making moral judgments. All of these activities contribute toward our understanding of the Good and condition our ability to reflect upon it theoretically.

The sense in which our understanding of the Good, according to Aristotle, can be conceived as “situated” is perhaps best captured by his claim that grasping the good requires *phronesis*, typically translated as “prudence,” or “practical wisdom.” The defining feature of *phronesis* is the ability to “deliberate well about what is good and advantageous for one’s self -- not about a part of life, such as what is good for health or strength, but about living well as a whole.”<sup>480</sup> This deliberative ability, Aristotle continues, is irreducible to rules or abstract principles. In this respect, *phronesis* differs from scientific knowledge (*episteme*), the model of which is mathematics. *Phronesis*, unlike *episteme*, involves grasping the particular goods at stake in a given circumstance and knowing how to balance them well.<sup>481</sup> It involves knowing how to act “at the right time, on the right occasion, toward the right people, for the right purpose,

---

<sup>480</sup> Ibid., 1140a 25.

<sup>481</sup> Ibid., 1141b.

and in the right manner.”<sup>482</sup> In this sense, *phronesis* is situated. It is not the knowledge of this or that object but of the situation in which one is engaged.

The situated character of *phronesis* comes to the fore in Aristotle’s contrast of *phronesis* and craft-knowledge (*teche*).<sup>483</sup> This contrast is perhaps even more crucial for understanding *phronesis* than the well-known contrast of *phronesis* and *episteme*. The importance of the former has to do with the apparent kinship of *phronesis* and *techne*. Both, after all, aim at what we loosely call “practice” in the sense of doing something, or acting, rather than merely contemplating. In Aristotle’s terms, both *phronesis* and *techne* deal with “the class of things that admit of being otherwise,” that, unlike the natural things, are subject to our choice and agency.<sup>484</sup> In this sense, both differ from *episteme*, which concerns things that “exists or come into being of necessity.”<sup>485</sup>

However, *phronesis* and *techne* diverge in this crucial respect: Although *techne* deals with fabrication, and thus involves a certain tangible skill, it is nevertheless a sort of detached knowledge. *Techne* is detached in that it requires only knowledge of the product’s form (*eidos*). The workman can grasp the *eidos* as an object before his mind’s eye, and then, as a separate matter, embody that object in the available material. *Phronesis*, by contrast, is inescapably situated. It involves more than a formal kind of knowledge. It involves the agent’s engaged understanding of a particular circumstance -- an understanding embodied in the agent’s action (*praxis*) rather than represented in his or her mind.

---

<sup>482</sup> Ibid., 1106b 20.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid., 1105, 1140a-b.

<sup>484</sup> Ibid., 1140a.

<sup>485</sup> Ibid.

Aristotle's distinction between *phronesis* and *techne* is worth highlighting, especially as it is often overlooked by modern readers who interpret *phronesis* as a kind of detached theoretical knowledge *applied* to practice. Adam Smith, for example, makes this mistake. According to his interpretation of Aristotle, we can have moral knowledge independent of our actions and habits, and then, as a separate matter, apply that knowledge to practice. Smith thus collapses the distinction between *phronesis* and *techne*, missing the situated character of moral judgment.<sup>486</sup>

Of contemporary philosophers who do recognize the distinction between *techne* and *phronesis*, Arendt and Gadamer are of special note. Both draw upon this distinction to articulate a situated conception of understanding and action. Arendt develops Aristotle's contrast of *techne* and *phronesis* in her own distinction between "work" and "action." Expressing Aristotle's philosophy in terms influenced by Heidegger, Arendt maintains that action is always situated within a "web of enacted stories."<sup>487</sup> Only insofar as work is drawn into this web does it acquire its meaning. Detached from the world of action, she argues, our ability to manipulate and fabricate things would be pointless. In that case, our plastic capacity would cease to be an expression of our agency; it would become a sort of blind know-how.

Gadamer uses the distinction between *techne* and *phronesis* to develop his situated conception of hermeneutics. Accordingly, he interprets Aristotle as teaching that "man always encounters the good" in "the particular practical situation in which he finds himself."<sup>488</sup> Through

---

<sup>486</sup> The tendency to misinterpret *phronesis* in this way points, I believe, to how "practical" knowledge has come to mean "applied theory."

<sup>487</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, section 25, 181.

<sup>488</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 311.

the practice of balancing the competing goods at stake in particular situations, we gain a deeper understanding of the Good life as a whole.

In Aristotle's terms, we come to discern the Good through exercising the particular *virtues of character*, all of which require and cultivate *phronesis*. Aristotle's account of the virtues (bravery, moderation, greatness of soul, justice, generosity, and so on) illuminates the situated conception of judgment in concrete terms. In particular, his account brings out the sense in which moral deliberation and judgment involves *prejudice*. In order to exercise the virtues, or to judge well, one must possess a virtuous disposition of *character (hexis)*. In other words, *hexis* is the condition of *phronesis*.<sup>489</sup> In fact, the very nature of *phronesis*, as Aristotle defines it, must be understood in terms of character. For the ability to size up a given circumstance involves grasping the relative significance of the particular roles and activities that the circumstance calls into play. *Phronesis*, we might say, is a "value-laden" virtue of the intellect. To have good character and to have *phronesis* ultimately amounts to the same thing.

Aristotle's notion of *hexis* captures the sense of prejudice I mean to defend. One's disposition of character can be understood as a "prejudice" in the sense of a particular life perspective -- a viewpoint from which certain actions appear desirable that otherwise might seem unworthy. But the particularity of character is not, according to Aristotle, a limitation to moral judgment -- as if our judgment would be improved if only it could be freed from its conditions. As a mode of understanding, and not a mechanical or sentimental disposition, character admits of being better or worse. A virtuous character provides a broad range of view, enabling one to see the situation clearly and to judge well.

---

<sup>489</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1144a 25-35.

The sense in which character can be understood as a sort of prejudice emerges in Aristotle's claim that the standard of good character cannot be fully captured in an account (*logos*) alone. If what made for good character could be captured in this way, it would become an object of knowledge teachable to anyone anywhere; it would cease, in that case, to be a prejudice. Instead of being some abstract criterion, the standard of virtuous character is whether it indeed enables one to discern the goods at stake in any given situation and to balance them adeptly. The ability to recognize this standard presupposes that one already meets it. In other words, the competent judge of good character must herself be virtuous, or must partake of the right perspective, the right "prejudice."

These considerations introduce the way in which Aristotle's notion of *hexis* can be conceived as a prejudice that enables moral judgment. Furthermore, his notion of *hexis* undermines the assumption that judgment influenced by prejudice is enslaved to circumstance. Although our character is forged by our upbringing (*paideia*), it is not given from the moment of birth, or acquired passively. Aristotle maintains that our character is, in large part, up to *us*; we shape it through the activity of deliberating and judging. By judging well and doing virtuous deeds consistently, we come to develop a virtuous character. This is the sense in which virtuous character depends on *habit* (*ethos*).

Whereas Bacon, Descartes, Smith, and Kant understand habit as a sort of mechanical behavior acquired passively, Aristotle teaches otherwise. Habit is not the mechanical repetition of the same thing or blind obedience to convention. For each virtuous action that we "repeat" must respond to a situation that is similar to, but never the same as, what has come before. Each "repeated" action requires considering new tradeoffs, balancing competing goods, sorting out the

essential from the less pressing. In this sense, habit involves our agency. Through deliberating and judging well consistently, we come to cultivate the character we had previously drawn upon. It thereby comes to serve as a more informed perspective for future judgment. This is why Aristotle insists that happiness, or the good life (*eudaimonia*), requires the exercise (*energeia*) of virtue and not simply the capacity (*dunamis*) for virtue.<sup>490</sup> Not only is the exercise of virtue more fulfilling than simply possessing it, but in order to possess it in the fullest sense, we must exercise it. For each act of moral deliberation and judgment develops our character, thereby improving our capacity for judgment in the future. Habit is thus essential for attaining virtue, and by no coincidence, as Aristotle points out, the Greek word for ethical virtue, *arete ethike*, derives from *ethos*, or habit.

## 2. Character as the condition of ethical knowledge

Aristotle points to the situated character of moral judgment from the beginning of the *Ethics* by insisting that even his own teaching (i.e., the contents of the *Ethics* itself) is an insufficient guide to action. The competent student of “the fine and the just,” writes Aristotle, must *already* be “cultivated in fine habits;” he or she must already possess a virtuous character.<sup>491</sup> Theory requires practice. Only the cultivated person has the starting point (*arche*) from which to learn.

---

<sup>490</sup> Ibid., 1095b 30 - 1096a 5.

<sup>491</sup> Ibid., 1095b 5-7.

The Greek *arche*, or “beginning,” is a key term for Aristotle. Rackham translates it as “first principle,” but something like “basic starting point” better captures Aristotle’s meaning.<sup>492</sup> “Principle” is somewhat misleading, as it suggests some precept or rule that one has in mind. The *arche* of ethics, Aristotle makes clear, is not primarily an object of knowledge, but a practical understanding of how to act well -- an understanding embodied in one’s actions and cultivated by experience. Thus, the person cultivated in fine habits “already has the starting point.”<sup>493</sup>

Aristotle reiterates the practical, or situated, character of ethics in his claim that children are unqualified to study it.<sup>494</sup> The reason is not that children lack some cognitive ability or mental sharpness that adults possess. For, as Aristotle points out, children can become proficient students of mathematics. Nor is it simply that children tend to be led by their passions and lack the discipline to apply the ethical precepts they learn in class. Although Aristotle mentions this consideration, he highlights a more basic reason why children cannot learn ethics: They lack the *experience* necessary to have attained the right disposition of character. They lack the basic condition of knowing how to act: “they are inexperienced (*apeiros*) in the activities of life, and it is from these and about these” that ethical philosophy reasons.<sup>495</sup> In other words, children lack the right *life perspective* from which ethical teaching makes sense. This perspective is the *arche*, the starting point, which is “of great importance for the subsequent course of the inquiry” and admittedly “more than half of the whole.”<sup>496</sup> Without roots in actual life, warns Aristotle, the

---

<sup>492</sup> Cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926), 13.

<sup>493</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1095b 9.

<sup>494</sup> *Ibid.*, 1095a.

<sup>495</sup> *Ibid.*, 1095a 3-4.

<sup>496</sup> *Ibid.*, 1098b 5.

teaching of the *Ethics* will fall flat. It will become mere preaching without resonance -- just as a phrase repeated many times over becomes a mere sound. Although children can repeat philosophical principles, writes Aristotle, they do so without any real conviction that what they say is true.<sup>497</sup>

But although a grasp of ethical philosophy requires a practical understanding of how to live well, philosophy is by no means superfluous. Aristotle indeed has moral wisdom to impart -- wisdom that pertains to practice, that is supposed to improve our character. Otherwise his endeavor would be pointless -- a mere repetition of what we, his students, already know. To the person brought up in fine habits, philosophy can impart a *clearer* vision of what he or she already understands in practice. This is precisely Aristotle's aim. He seeks to give an account (*logos*) of virtue as an illuminating guideline for good judgment. At the same time, however, he aims to highlight the *insufficiency* of all such guidelines. Both teachings are equally important -- not only as theoretical insights, but for the spirit in which we live.

Aristotle's first lesson addresses the second point: Ethical teaching can provide only a "broad outline of the truth."<sup>498</sup> This statement, which Aristotle repeats several times at the beginning of the *Ethics*, is not meant to acknowledge his own shortcoming as a teacher. The claim is intended, rather, to state a truth about ethical knowledge -- that because it involves practical wisdom, it evades being taught in the same sense as a science such as geometry. His goal is to bring to consciousness the essentially practical nature of ethical knowledge and to ward off false interpretations that see ethics as simply about principles.

---

<sup>497</sup> Ibid., 1142b 15.

<sup>498</sup> Ibid., 1094b 20-25.

The inexactness of ethical philosophy is thus determined by the subject matter (*hule*) itself, not by a lack of cognitive power on our part. Aristotle's point is that virtue and the Good life are inaccessible to cognition or abstract thought alone. We learn about them primarily through practice. Otherwise put, any theory of ethics, any way of conceiving how to act, inevitably informs our practice -- quite apart from whether we explicitly affirm or reject the theory. Simply in virtue of providing alternative terms of description, the theory will come to recast what it describes. The ethical phenomena are never wholly unchanged by how we speak of them. Any description, any web of concepts that we attempt to throw around our practices will never contain them. For the web will inevitably dissolve into the practices themselves. An educated person recognizes this, and, in general, recognizes that one must "seek that amount of exactness in each kind which the nature of the thing admits." For example, "it seems just as unreasonable to accept probable conclusions from a mathematician as to demand [formal] demonstrations from an orator."<sup>499</sup> (We can imagine what Aristotle's response would have been to Descartes' claim that all knowledge is "certain and evident cognition." From Aristotle's point of view, this represents an overblown desire for scientific certainty that fails to distinguish between the truth grasped by science (*episteme*) and the truth grasped by practical wisdom (*phronesis*).

Thus, Aristotle claims that his own ethical teaching can serve only as a guideline for action, not as a how-to manual. This claim itself is meant as a first lesson. It is meant to draw our attention to the practical nature of ethical judgment. (While anyone's actual judgments and actions would have expressed this insight, her account of the nature of her judgments might have

---

<sup>499</sup> Ibid.

failed to do so. For example, she might have claimed to be acting on principles alone when, in reality, her judgment involved practical wisdom. For such a person, Aristotle's teaching would impart greater knowledge.)

In the what follows, Aristotle intends to provide his students with a fuller understanding of what practical judgment entails and a more adequate account of their actions -- of what it means to act bravely, generously, justly, and so on, and of what it means to live a good life as a whole. This fuller understanding is intended to help his students become virtuous insofar as it cultivates the virtuous dispositions of character they begin with. The relationship of character and philosophy thus mirrors the circular movement of character and action. Just as character shapes and is shaped by action (i.e., acting virtuously), character shapes and is shaped by philosophical understanding. (In Aristotle's final analysis, philosophical understanding is really just a special type of action, indeed the highest action of the soul.) So from the beginning of the *Ethics*, Aristotle makes clear that grasping the right thing to do presupposes having a virtuous character -- a practical understanding of how to live well. He doesn't hesitate to apply this claim to his own account of ethics. Ethical instruction can improve character but is no substitute for it.

### 3. Character as the union of nature (*phusis*) and habit (*ethos*)

The fact that we develop a virtuous character through habit (*ethos*) means that virtue does not come from nature (*phusis*) -- at least if we conceive of "nature" as what is fixed and given in the species. For according to this conception, "nothing that is by nature a certain way can be altered

by habit.”<sup>500</sup> No matter how many times one throws a stone upward, for example, it will not become habituated to rise instead of fall. Its nature is to be drawn toward the earth.<sup>501</sup>

But although virtue does not come from nature in this sense, virtue is not “against nature” (*para phusin*) either.<sup>502</sup> For nature, according to Aristotle, does not simply denote what is fixed and given in the species or what arises in the absence of human action. The nature of a thing, he teaches, is defined by its *end* (*telos*), or the essential character toward which it tends. In the case of human beings, Aristotle suggests, the “end” must be understood in terms of “*ergon*,” or characteristic *activity*.<sup>503</sup> This activity, he maintains, is that of the *soul*, or more specifically, of the virtues that define the soul, the virtues of character and of thought. But the virtues can be realized only through habit, and for this reason, habit and nature are intertwined. Aristotle thus maintains that human beings are by nature born with the capacity for virtue, but this capacity “is brought to maturity by habit.”<sup>504</sup>

The link between habit and nature is the basis for Aristotle’s distinction between “natural virtue” (*phusike arete*) and “true virtue” (*kuria arete*).<sup>505</sup> The first refers to our capacity, or potential, for virtue that we possess from the moment of birth (*euthus ex genetes*), but with no guarantee of realizing it. The second refers to virtue in the full sense, as perfected by habit and *phronesis*. At first the distinction gives the impression that Aristotle proposes two kinds of virtue, a crude “natural” version, and a purified “true” one. But he soon makes clear that

---

<sup>500</sup> Ibid., 1103a 20.

<sup>501</sup> Ibid.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid., 1103a 20-25

<sup>503</sup> Ibid., 1097b 25.

<sup>504</sup> Ibid., 1103a 25.

<sup>505</sup> Ibid., 1144b.

“natural virtue” really isn’t virtue at all. “Natural virtue,” Aristotle writes, is like a strong-bodied blind man who stumbles about heavily due to his lack of sight. There is nothing virtuous in such a man’s clumsy movements. But if he were somehow to acquire sight, his powerful frame could allow him to move with strength and coordination, to move “virtuously.”<sup>506</sup> Thus “true” virtue is altogether different from “natural” virtue. In other words, we are not born with a sullied version of virtue that we subsequently clean off through habit and *phronesis* -- as when we wipe dirt off vegetables just plucked from the earth. Habit and *phronesis* are not simply cleaning agents that reveal in full clarity what was present from birth. Only through habit and *phronesis* does virtue, and hence, the entire soul, acquire its *shape*. Human beings are, by nature, what they become through their own action.

But if this is so, has “nature” not fallen out of the picture entirely? If human “nature” is shaped by human action, and if human action is guided by choice (*prohairesis*), unconditioned by the merely given, then in what sense does the term “nature” describe human beings at all? It would seem that the “nature” of a human being is to have no nature, which, if true, would make the very term “nature” superfluous. And yet, Aristotle firmly maintains that human beings do have a nature. What he means by “nature” clearly is not captured by the contrast of “given from birth” to “acquired by upbringing.”

In order to understand Aristotle’s meaning, we must consider “nature” as the counterpart not to upbringing, habit, or action, but to *convention* (*nomos*). (Aristotle develops this distinction in his treatment of natural (*phusikon*) versus conventional (*nomikon*) justice.<sup>507</sup>) To say that human beings have a nature is to say that the soul has an essential character whose shape is not

---

<sup>506</sup> Ibid., 1144b 10.

<sup>507</sup> Ibid., 1134a 20.

forged by arbitrary decision. The concept of “nature” reflects the fact that human beings are not self-creative. Although the soul acquires its shape through habit, *phronesis*, choice, and action, it still has a discernible character that, in a sense, remains the same. In this sense, the soul can be said to have a “nature.” The basis of the soul’s nature is its lived awareness of the Good, the unchosen source of the decisions that define its identity. Insofar as the Good retains its identity, despite its changing manifestations, so too does human life.

It should be clear, at least, that Aristotle’s special sense of “nature” is altogether different from the notion that arose during the Enlightenment, the notion of a basic dimension of our being -- whether an instinct, sentiment, or behavior -- that obtains independent of our reason and action. If anyone is to be charged with asserting a simple-minded sort of “biologism” or “naturalism” it is David Hume, not Aristotle.

Aristotle’s view denies the opposition between human nature and habit that lies at the basis of Smith and Hume’s moral thought. Both, as we have seen, argue that moral judgment is based ultimately on natural sympathy, understood in contrast to habit and custom. They defend habit only to the extent that good habit counteracts bad habit, allowing us to consistently act according nature, i.e., to sympathetically identify with humanity at large. But this natural tendency, they insist, is given independent of habit. Good habit alters bad habit but in no way alters nature. Good habit is really a mere servant to nature, defending her dignity against the unnatural social tendencies that assault her. Good habit battles against bad, and in the end, nature stands pure.

Aristotle, by contrast, denies such a thing as “human nature,” understood as a sentiment shared throughout the species, independent of human habits, customs, and practices. How we

feel and what we want, he teaches, is always shaped by our aims and how we articulate them, ultimately, by our understanding of the good life as a whole. As we develop such an understanding through habit and education, our sentiments evolve as well. Aristotle captures this connection of reason and desire in the phrase *orektikos nous*, or “desiring understanding.” To emphasize the union of the two terms, he also reverses the phrase, changing it to *orexis dianoetike*, or “understanding desire.”<sup>508</sup> According to Aristotle’s account, the notion of “pure” desire, or “natural” sentiment detached from habit and custom, is as much a phantom as “pure” reason.

What is natural for human beings is always mediated by human action. Thus Aristotle famously asserts that “man is *by nature* a political animal” (emphasis added).<sup>509</sup> Contrary to appearance, this statement does not mean that the *polis* arises spontaneously out of basic human needs -- for shelter, security and the like. For according to Aristotle, such needs could be fulfilled by non-political arrangements, arrangements akin to the guarantees of peace and commerce between different cities. Human beings are by nature political in that they realize their nature only as members of a *polis*. For only by living together, by growing up in a certain community, by learning to deliberate and judge, do human beings develop the virtues definitive of soul.

Aristotle’s way of thinking thus challenges the familiar contemporary contrasts between “nature” and “nurture,” between “essence” and “human choice,” between what is “given” and what is “socially constructed.” Aristotle reveals that all such contrasts are misguided. They miss the sense in which nature involves our agency. The supposed opposition between human agency

---

<sup>508</sup> Ibid., 1139b 5.

<sup>509</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253a 2.

and nature could arise only when people came to understand themselves as decisively separate from the world in which they lived, when people came to see “nature” as an objective field of forces, governed by laws independent of human subjectivity. On the basis of this world-picture, it indeed makes sense to speak of “nature” versus “artifice” and to raise the question of whether and to what extent our behavior (or any feature of our being) is simply “given” or up to us. At any rate, this notion of “nature,” the notion of a force that directs human life from “the outside,” is a modern bias read back into Aristotle. It is the bias of our tendency to split the world into subjects and objects.

The fact that human nature, according to Aristotle, is realized by human action means that our character is not a result of some natural disposition over which we lack all control. So in order to understand Aristotle’s conception of character as a sort of prejudice productive of good judgment, we must understand it as a wholly different kind of prejudice from Hume and Smith’s familiar notion of natural sentiment.

#### 4. Character as the condition of its acquisition

Although our disposition of character is something achieved rather than merely given, it is neither a product of our making nor something we can acquire having entirely lacked it before. In order to acquire character, we must already, to a certain degree, possess it. For every virtuous deed we accomplish, each step we take toward gaining a virtuous character, itself presupposes such a character. In other words, in order to grasp the standard good judgment and virtuous

action, we must, in a sense, be virtuous already. The fact that character conditions its acquisition captures the sense in which character can be understood as a source of prejudice.

But how does character condition its own acquisition? The sense of this paradoxical statement emerges in Aristotle's comparison of acquiring virtue to craft-knowledge (*techne*). In a general sense, we acquire virtue and craft-knowledge in the same way -- through practice, broadly conceived as "doing" rather than simply thinking. For example, "men become builders by building houses, harpers by playing the harp. In the same way, we become just by doing just things, moderate by doing moderate things, brave by doing brave thing."<sup>510</sup> A person cannot become just simply by learning principles of justice any more than an apprentice can become a house-builder simply by learning rules of house-building. In both cases, the student must put his hands to doing the actual deeds. Only through trial and error can he acquire the right "touch," the excellence required of his role.

Yet, as Aristotle hastens to point out, the acquisition of virtue diverges from that of craftsmanship in a significant respect. This concerns the difference between a successful act of production and an act of virtue:

The crafts are not really the same as the virtues. The things produced by craftsmanship hold their goodness [or usefulness] in themselves, so that it is enough if they are produced having a certain character of their own; but acts done according to the virtues are not done virtuously -- for example, justly or moderately -- if they themselves are of a certain character, but only if the actor does them with a certain disposition.<sup>511</sup>

Herein lies a crucial distinction. When Aristotle says that works of craft "hold their goodness in themselves," he means that the standard of a good shoe, a couch, or a chair, can be read off the

---

<sup>510</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1103b 1-5.

<sup>511</sup> *Ibid.*, 1104b 25-30.

finished product itself. One can simply look at the product and thereby determine whether it embodies the form (*eidōs*) appropriate to its function. One need not know the craftsman who made the product, the circumstances under which he made it, or whether he took pleasure in his creation. None of this background knowledge has any bearing on whether the product is, in fact, good.

In the case of a virtuous deed, however, one cannot simply read off its merit by looking to some “finished product” (i.e., the deed done) detached from the conditions under which it was enacted. For the meaning of the deed, what it *is*, whether or not it’s virtuous, is constituted by the underlying attitude of the actor. If a deed is to count as virtuous, writes Aristotle, the actor must “choose it knowingly, for its own sake, and from a firm and unwavering disposition [of character].”<sup>512</sup> If the actor fails in any of these regards, the deed itself is not fully praiseworthy. For example, if someone gives lavishly to a friend, yet hates relinquishing the money, the act itself, however beneficial to the friend, is not truly generous. For the benefactor, in this case, prizes money more than a fine deed. By contrast, a cobbler who makes a fitting pair of shoes but despises shoemaking nevertheless produces shoes worthy of merit. His attitude does not detract from the character of the product. Similarly, as Aristotle points out, an apprentice who has not acquired a disposition toward excellence (he still makes more errors than not), may nevertheless hit the mark on occasion, and in these cases, the quality of the product is no worse for the craftsmen’s inconsistency. In the case of moral virtue, however, one cannot hit the mark by chance. For the “mark” itself includes the right disposition. Aristotle summarizes the special standard of a virtuous action in the following terms: To be virtuous, the action must be done as

---

<sup>512</sup> Ibid., 1104b 30.

the virtuous *person* would do it.<sup>513</sup> Thus to act virtuously, one must already possess a virtuous disposition of character.

Here emerges the circle between virtuous character and virtuous action. We acquire a virtuous character only by means of virtuous actions. But any such action presupposes that we already have a virtuous character. Thus, we cannot acquire a virtuous character from “square one.” We cannot leap from a state of complete moral ignorance to a state of virtue.

In the case of a *techne*, by contrast, the “virtuous” disposition, i.e., the disposition toward excellence, is not presupposed by any particular act of production. The products “hold their goodness in themselves.” For this reason, a *techne* can truly be acquired from the ground up: By looking to the *eidos* of the product and by learning how to manipulate the materials through trial and error, we can learn a *techne* that we previously lacked. This is not true of virtue, which we must always already possess if we are to perform even a single virtuous deed.

##### 5. The practical nature of virtue: Why the standard of good judgment cannot be captured in an abstract account

To fully understand why moral judgment, according to Aristotle, involves a virtuous disposition of character, we must examine more closely his account of the standard (*horos*) of a virtuous action. Continuing the analogy to *techne*: Both a virtuous deed and a successful act of production are done “according to right reason” (*kata ton orthon logon*), according to a standard

---

<sup>513</sup> Ibid., 1105 5.

that the actor can, in principle, articulate.<sup>514</sup> A virtuous deed cannot, therefore, be based on thoughtless instinct or even “good hunch” (*eustochia*).<sup>515</sup>

But what is the precise nature of the standard? In the case of a craft product, the answer is relatively straightforward: The standard of “right reason” is the *eidos* suited to the product’s use. The craftsman’s task is to grasp the *eidos* and embody it in the product. In the case of a virtuous act, the standard is clearly more complicated. Here “according to right reason” cannot simply mean according to a distinct *eidos*, or according to a principle one has in mind. For part of what makes the action virtuous is whether the actor carries it out in the right spirit -- whether he does it at “the right time, on the right occasion, toward the right people, for the right purpose, and in the right manner.” He must act, writes Aristotle, “always with an eye to what is fitting in the circumstance” (*ta pros to kairon skopein*).<sup>516</sup> In other words, what makes the action virtuous is whether it meets what the *situation* demands.

In order to understand the end -- the deed to be done -- the actor must understand the situation. But to “understand,” in this case, means something quite different than to detachedly behold an object, as the craftsman does when he envisions the *eidos* of his product. For the agent himself is involved in the situation he seeks to understand. As Gadamer writes: “moral knowledge, as Aristotle describes it, is clearly not objective knowledge -- i.e., the knower is not standing over against a situation that he merely observes; he is directly confronted with what he sees.”<sup>517</sup> The non-objective character of moral knowledge does not, of course, mean that such

---

<sup>514</sup> Ibid., 1103b 30.

<sup>515</sup> Ibid., 1142b 1.

<sup>516</sup> Ibid., 1104 5.

<sup>517</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 312.

knowledge is subjective. The point is that the subject-object framework fails to capture the relationship between the actor and his or her circumstance. As Aristotle's formulation conveys, the circumstance, or "situation," refers to people with whom one lives and purposes in which one is engaged. Thus, understanding the situation means, at the same time, understanding one's self. It means having a certain disposition of character that grasps how to live well, that understands the relative significance of particular relations and activities, that balances them adeptly. Clearly the craftsman's understanding of successful production is not situated in this way. In order to make a good pair of shoes, the cobbler need not grasp on what occasion to make shoes, for whom, or for what purpose (beyond foot covering). All he needs to know is the *eidos*. With that in mind, he can make a pair of shoes that will be good or bad in itself depending on whether or not it meets the standard.

Gadamer eloquently summarizes Aristotle's conception of moral judgment, how it diverges from production, and how it is situated rather than detached:

The image that a man has of what he ought to be -- i.e., his ideas of right and wrong, or decency, courage, dignity, loyalty, and so forth (all concepts that have their equivalent in Aristotle's catalogue of virtues) -- are certainly in some sense images that he uses to guide his conduct. But there is still a basic difference between this and the guiding image the craftsman uses: the plan of the object he is going to make. What is right, for example, cannot be fully determined independently of the situation that requires a right action from me, whereas the *eidos* of what a craftsman wants to make is fully determined by the use for which it is intended.<sup>518</sup>

The way in which virtuous acts depend for their merit on the situation and, therefore, cannot be good or bad "in themselves," is well illustrated by the example of a good joke. In order for a joke to be funny, it must be delivered at the right moment. Even the most hilarious joke loses its charm when blurted out during a solemn moment of silence. In this case, it is no

---

<sup>518</sup> Ibid., 315.

longer a joke at all, but rather an inappropriate remark. The situation determines the character of the action. Aristotle claims that this is true of all virtuous deeds.

Although we can certainly articulate the details of the right situation for a joke, or for any given action, such an account will fail to fully represent the situation for someone not “there” with us. For accounts (*logoi*), even the most illuminating ones, are by their very nature, general. They never fully capture the concrete situation in abstraction from the situation itself. Our grasp of a situation is always itself situated. In Aristotle’s terms, it involves *phronesis*.

To be sure, an account of a given situation may shed light upon it and contribute to one’s (situated) understanding. This, after all, is the point of Aristotle’s nuanced descriptions of what sort of moments call forth brave actions, temperate ones, and so on. Moreover, the ability to give an illuminating account of the circumstance, what Aristotle calls “deliberative excellence” (*euboulia*), is the characteristic quality of the *phronimos*. Such a person is able to consider the relevant features of a situation and to decide how to act accordingly. Nevertheless, the accounts provided by the *phronimos*, or by Aristotle’s own philosophy, are not self-sufficient models of situations that could serve as guides for virtue intelligible to anyone anywhere.

Aristotle offers two ways of seeing why this is the case. First, any account intended to capture the circumstances that call for a certain action will always admit of exceptions. Aristotle addresses this in his discussion of “legal justice” (*nomimos dikaios*) and its imperfection. The law must attempt to specify the circumstances that constitute an illegal action. But even good laws necessarily involve some error, for the law “is always a general statement, and a general statement is insufficient to cover certain cases.” This insufficiency “does not make the law any

worse [as a law]; for the error is not in the law or the law giver, but in the nature of the thing: the subject matter is human action, which is essentially irregular.”<sup>519</sup> In order to be truly just, the law must, in certain cases, be corrected by the judgment of the rulers, by what Aristotle calls “equity” (*epieikes*). Equity requires that the rulers supplement the law with ordinances that respond to the concrete situation. For a situation is, by its nature, indefinite, and what is indefinite, Aristotle writes, “can only be measured by an indefinite standard -- like the leaden rule used by Lesbian builders.” Just as that rule “is not rigid but can move around the shape of the stone, so a special decree is made to fit the particular affair at hand.”<sup>520</sup> Aristotle’s teaching on law applies, in principle, to any sort of statement about how to act, including his own accounts of the virtues. Just as the law always involves exceptions, so does any statement about the right thing to do.

Consider, for example, Aristotle’s treatment of courage (*andreia*). The mark of a courageous person, writes Aristotle, is to risk a noble (*kalon*) death for the sake of its nobility.<sup>521</sup> To be fearless in the face of imminent disaster is not brave. Nor is risking death in order to escape poverty or pain. For in such cases, one aims not at nobility, but at the avoidance of some evil.<sup>522</sup> Furthermore, courageous people must risk a noble death in the right manner. They must recognize the full weight of the impending danger, be aware of the potential losses involved, yet push forward nonetheless. Thus, people who are excessively optimistic are not really brave. Their fearlessness comes not from belief in the cause, but from a failure to grasp the risk of the

---

<sup>519</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1137b 15.

<sup>520</sup> *Ibid.*, 1137b 25-30.

<sup>521</sup> *Ibid.*, 1115b 10.

<sup>522</sup> *Ibid.*, 1116 10-15.

situation.<sup>523</sup> The same holds for those overcome by rage (*thumos*). Although they often fight tenaciously, they too lack an appropriate sense for what they could lose.<sup>524</sup>

But even this nuanced definition of bravery admits of exceptions. Aristotle suggests that a brave man “can throw away his shield, and can wheel around and run away.”<sup>525</sup> This might be the case, for example, even if the cause is noble but victory is entirely hopeless. It might also be the case if the person came to realize that he had too much to lose. Although this attitude would appear to be cowardly, especially in light of the Greek warrior ethic, Aristotle suggests that it may actually be consistent with bravery. For if, indeed, the person does have much to lose, for example, if he possesses many other virtues to a degree such that “life is worth most” to him, “and he stands to lose the greatest goods,” then fighting might be reckless rather than brave.<sup>526</sup> Such a person would manifest his bravery only for a great cause. For this reason, he might appear cowardly in ordinary circumstances even though, in reality, he is (potentially) the bravest of all. The “great-souled” man (*ho megalopsuchos*), writes Aristotle, “is not someone who risks small dangers, nor is he someone who loves danger in general, for he honors very few things.” He is “someone who will risk only great dangers, and, in such cases, will be ready to sacrifice his life; for he realizes that life is not worth living in all cases.”<sup>527</sup>

These exceptions to the rule for what counts as courage illustrate the incompleteness of any account of the circumstances that call forth certain actions. Although stating exceptions, as Aristotle does, can contribute clarity to the account, at a certain point, a list of exceptions

---

<sup>523</sup> Ibid., 1117a 10-15.

<sup>524</sup> Ibid., 1117a 5.

<sup>525</sup> Ibid., 1137a 10.

<sup>526</sup> Ibid., 1117b 10.

<sup>527</sup> Ibid., 1124b 5-10.

becomes gratuitous. For there will always be exceptions to exceptions, many of which cannot be foreseen.

A second way in which Aristotle expresses the impossibility of capturing the situation of action in words alone is that understanding the situation involves grasping particulars (*ta kath' hekasta*). In order to grasp particulars, we cannot simply look at them from a distance or consider them detachedly. We must be actively engaged with them in the context of our lives. *Phronesis*, Aristotle writes, involves apprehending the “ultimate and particular things” (*ta eschata kai ta kath' hekasta*). This sort of apprehension is not that of science (*episteme*), nor is it something attained by reasoning (*logos*). It is a certain type of perception (*aisthesis*), but not that of the senses. Since it apprehends what is most basic to any deliberation, it is closer to “the sort of intuition whereby we perceive that the [most basic plane figure] in mathematics is a triangle; for here too there will be a stop [or limit of analysis].” But the type of perception from which *phronesis* draws is still of a different kind.<sup>528</sup> Aristotle describes this kind perception as *nous* -- a certain eye of the soul that catches sight of particulars. The most important clue to what Aristotle means by *nous* is that it develops through experience (*emperia*).<sup>529</sup> *Emperia* must here be taken to mean one's lived experience as a whole rather than any particular experience. For *emperia* conditions the faculty by which we grasp particulars in the first place. The experienced person, writes Aristotle, has a certain eye for particulars that the novice lacks. *Nous* is thus a sense we

---

<sup>528</sup> Ibid., 1142a 20-30.

<sup>529</sup> Ibid., 1143b 10-15.

have in virtue of life as a whole. It is prior to reflection on principles or to deliberate reasoning.<sup>530</sup>

In order to see the way in which understanding a situation requires this sort of *nous*, consider for example, the situation that determines generosity: It involves giving to the right people, and the right amount, and at the right time, and for the right end.<sup>531</sup> Each of these references points to particular relationships, things, and activities. Consider the “right people.” The generous person does not give indiscriminately but to some more than others. For example, she would presumably give more, or at least different things and in a different way, to friends compared to strangers. This means, of course, that she must know who her friends are. As certain as she may be, this certainty cannot be attained by detached reflection on the meaning of a friend. For an essential part of what makes someone a friend is not that he or she exemplifies some generic ideal of friendship, but that, through shared experiences and activities, the person has become a significant part of one’s life. The mark of close friends is a certain way of relating to each other, a “knowing” that is embodied in one’s actions and that develops over time through living together.

The difficulty of describing what makes a particular person a friend brings to relief the practical nature of friendship. No matter how many character traits we might use in our description (for example, loyal, generous, funny, and so on), we still end up describing a generic person. What makes this person and not someone else a friend slips through our fingers. A listener who had never met the person would have no way of distinguishing her from many other people who share the same qualities. In order to begin to capture what makes that person a

---

<sup>530</sup> Ibid., 1143b 10-20.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid., 1120b 1-5.

friend, one is forced to become a storyteller -- to speak of actual events and situations that typify the friendship. The story, unlike a set of principles or predicates, does not attempt to merely represent the quintessential qualities of a friend, as if the story could substitute for actually having been there with the person. The point of a story is, in a certain sense, to transport the listeners to the actual situations and, by doing so, to convey with greater depth what makes that person a friend. This means that the situation to which the listeners are transported is not simply what is reflected in the words of the story in itself, but rather what the story evokes in the listeners' own lives. Understanding the particular remains bound to engaging with it in the context of life as a whole. This is why the standard of virtuous character, or one's understanding of the situation, cannot be captured in an abstract account alone.

6. That situated understanding does not imply being bound to a fixed context: The way in which our prejudice is open to expansion

The sense in which moral judgment involves prejudice should now be clear: grasping the standard of good moral judgment requires understanding the situation. This understanding is not detached knowledge of an object separate from one's self, but the understanding of one's own relationships and involvements. Thus, understanding the situation means having a certain character. One's character is practical, or embodied in one's activity. For this reason, the standard of good character is irreducible to principles or to an abstract account (i.e., *logos*). The practical nature of character is what makes it a sort of prejudice: Character is the basis for moral judgment, yet is not something that can be surveyed as an object of knowledge accessible to

anyone anywhere; for even an illuminating account of one's practical understanding of a situation is no substitute for actually being in it.

But just because moral judgment is situated in this way does not make it parochial or merely relative to its context. To be sure, the character that shapes one's moral judgment is a perspective that is, to some degree, *personal*: The perspective is neither universally shared, nor even shared identically with anyone else. Aristotle captures this personal aspect of one's practical understanding when he writes that the *phronimos* is the person most capable of deliberating about the good *for himself*.<sup>532</sup> In a similar vein, Aristotle writes that the ethical mean (*mesotes*), the standard of right action, is not fixed and universal like a numerical mean, but is relative to us, that is, to our particular situations.<sup>533</sup> But although our perspective is, in a certain sense relative to us, it is by no means "subjective and personal" (Kant), or "private and particular" (Hume). Our perspective is constituted by our activity (*praxis*) -- by our roles, involvements, and concrete relations to others. In opposition to those who claim that the *phronimos* is concerned merely with himself, Aristotle maintains that in considering the good for ourselves, we are necessarily directed toward our domestic affairs and toward political life.<sup>534</sup>

The fact that our perspective is shaped by our relations with the world and not by private thoughts, feelings, or conscience, means that our perspective is always, to some extent, shared with others. Furthermore, it is never a fixed limit. For our relationships are, in a certain sense, constantly evolving, and so too is our perspective as a whole. This evolution is never, of course, a neutral process of development; for our roles and activities always embody an interpretation of

---

<sup>532</sup> Ibid., 1140a 25-30.

<sup>533</sup> Ibid., 1106a 25 - 1106b 10.

<sup>534</sup> Ibid., 1142a 5-15.

their worth -- an interpretation open to question. Thus, any change of perspective implies a better or worse range of view -- a deeper or shallower understanding of one's roles and involvements as a whole. At every moment, we are acquiring our perspective as we take up new involvements, neglect others, or just continue to live out old ones. The last possibility, despite all appearance, is never a mere continuation of the same thing. For living out a certain role means maintaining it in the face of other possibilities, and such preservation inevitably comes to reshape what that role means. Even in cases where we speak of someone becoming "fixed" in his or her perspective, this fixity too, for better or for worse, is really a development acquired through lived experience, always becoming more or less fixed as it is confirmed or challenged.

But although we are constantly acquiring our perspective, often imperceptibly, certain moments tend to shape it more significantly than others. One such moment is having to make a moral judgment -- having to size up the situation, to balance competing claims and to decide how to act. By deliberating and judging well, we not only hit the mark in the particular case but also develop our character, broadening the perspective that shaped our judgment in the first place. We thereby redefine what counts as the "mark" in the future.

By repeating virtuous actions, we develop a virtuous character. In this sense, we acquire character through *habit*. To "acquire," here, does not mean to gain something that we previously lacked. For any particular judgment is always in the first place conditioned by one's character, or by one's situated grasp of what the circumstance demands. In this sense, moral judgment involves prejudice.

Nevertheless, by making particular judgments, and by judging well consistently, we come to reshape the contours of our character, improving the prejudice that will (inevitably) inform our

judgment in the future. So in a certain sense, situated judgment has a transcendent dimension (akin to what Heidegger calls “projection”): it involves moving beyond our present perspective. This transcendence, however, does not take us to some abstract realm removed from our perspective as such. To the contrary, “transcendence” means “clarification” of our previous perspective -- a return to our concrete relations and activities at a deeper level of understanding.

Consider, for example, the soldier who desires to act courageously. In the midst of battle, he must consider whether to push forward or to throw down his arms and retreat. In determining how to act in that moment, in considering whether the nobility of the cause and the potential honor warrants the risk of dying, he would be forced to reflect on the things of significance in his life as a whole -- his other virtues, his loyalty to country, to his friends, family, and so on. In reflecting upon these things in light of the current situation, he may discover that certain loyalties actually carry greater weight than he had previously recognized. In any case, and however he decides to act, that particular moment of judgment will forever redefine the terms of certain relationships. For a country that one loves is not the same as a country for which one was willing to risk everything. And a close friend is not the same as a friend for whom one relinquished honor and returned home. The new terms in which the soldier understands these relationships changes their very character: Some now acquire a deeper significance, evoke different feelings, and demand greater loyalty.

Aristotle’s version of the transcendent, or “projective” character of understanding reveals the shallowness of Adam Smith’s account of how we acquire loyalties to family, friends, and country. Smith calls such loyalties “constrained sympathies,” as they arise, he claims, through our having to perpetually accommodate the same people, or through our having to constantly

witness their joy and sorrow first-hand.<sup>535</sup> Smith's account neglects the way in which our loyalties are shaped by the terms in which we interpret them and by the situations that give rise to such terms. The situations may be far removed from the physical presence of the people upon whom we reflect and come to cherish more deeply.

In summary, what the person gains through deliberation in the moment of judgement is not simply knowledge of the brave thing to do then and there, but a clearer grasp of the significance of particular relationships and ends, which, in turn, reshapes the considerations that would be relevant in any future situation. The person thereby gains a deeper understanding of the very standard by which a brave action is measured.

In general terms, by redefining the nature of one's relationships and ends, the activity of judging redefines the relevant considerations in any future situation. In this way, our judgments come to shape the prejudice that conditions them. Good judgment presupposes virtuous character. Virtuous character is the result of good judgment. "Prejudice," therefore, is never a limitation fixed once and for all.

#### 7. The epistemic significance of habit and the relationship between the means and ends of action

The above considerations reveal the significance of habit for moral judgment. The repetition of virtuous actions is not simply the process by which we become accustomed to doing the right thing -- as if we knew it already and needed only to train ourselves to repeat it consistently.

---

<sup>535</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, 258-259.

Habit, rather, is the condition of moral *knowledge*. Only through doing many virtuous deeds do we cultivate the practical understanding that reveals the right thing to do.

It is important to emphasize the understanding involved in habit, especially as a correction to the modern tendency to view habit as a sort of mechanical behavior. According to this view, shaped largely by Enlightenment philosophers such as Hume and Smith, habit is, at best, a mere means for disposing people toward the right thing -- where “the right thing” is conceived as knowable independent of habit. According to this familiar account, habit can still be a valuable supplement to moral knowledge. For knowledge by itself, argues Smith, may be insufficient as motivation to act virtuously. For example, even if we know the right thing to do, our opposing desires may pull us toward vice. By acquiring good habit, we counteract such desires and come to act virtuously all, or at least most of the time. Smith, as we have seen, considers habit and custom to be, at best, mere means to becoming virtuous, the standard of which is given by the impartial spectator -- a source detached from our habits, customs, and life-circumstance as a whole.

In the grip of this way of thinking, Smith even projects it onto Aristotle. According to Smith’s reading of Aristotle, habit is separate from knowing the right thing to do: One can have a perfectly virtuous “motive and disposition of the heart,” and thereby perform a single virtuous deed, quite apart from habit, or whether one has attained a “steady or permanent character.” In a striking misinterpretation, Smith claims that, according to Aristotle, an action “which proceeds from an occasional fit of generosity is undoubtably a generous action,” even if “the man who performs it is not necessarily a generous person.”<sup>536</sup>

---

<sup>536</sup> Ibid., 323.

To read this view of habit back into Aristotle confuses the nature of ethical habit (*ethos*) with the type of “habit” associated with craft-knowledge (*techne*). In the case of a craft, the workman really does grasp the end in advance of attaining it, and that end, i.e., the *eidōs* of the product, remains the same throughout each successive act of production. Here “habit” is a mere means to an end. What the craftsman learns through “habit” is what materials to use and how to successfully mold them; but in figuring out the right means, he does not gain a deeper understanding of the end.

In the case of action (*praxis*), by contrast, the standard, or the end at which bravery, or moderation, or justice aims, is not something that we fully know in advance and then, as a separate matter, fulfill through employing the right means. Although Aristotle writes that “we deliberate about means and not ends,”<sup>537</sup> he makes clear that the two are actually related. In Gadamer’s terms:

The relation between means and ends here 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 *phronesis* have a marked uncertainty about them, in that this knowledge is sometimes related more to the end, and sometimes more to the means to the end.<sup>538</sup>

More precisely, means and ends are interdependent: We begin with a basic understanding of the end (e.g., how to act courageously or justly), shaped by our character, which can be conceived as our life perspective, or our fundamental awareness of the Good. Through the activity of deliberating about how to fulfill the end, and simply through living our daily lives, we come to understand the end (and our understanding of the Good) more clearly.

---

<sup>537</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1112b 10.

<sup>538</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 318.

## 8. The sense in which virtue is given by nature

The constitutive relationship of means and ends reveals the special sense in which there is, indeed, a natural standard of virtue, even though the standard emerges from a perspective that is itself evolving. This claim makes little sense without the situated character of moral judgment in full view. The notion of a natural standard that nevertheless emerges from within our life perspective indeed cuts against the familiar conceptions of “nature,” or “natural right,” as opposed to habit, custom, and upbringing. According to Hume and Smith, for example, “nature” denotes the basic sentiments that condition moral judgment independent of our life circumstance. Although Kant understands “nature” as the realm of necessity, and thus rejects it as the source of moral judgment, he nevertheless maintains what could be called a notion of “natural right” -- a universal standard of judgment, valid for all rational beings, independent of any situation or particular perspective.

Aristotle’s special conception of natural right challenges the familiar opposition between nature and prejudice. In fact, the situated, or “prejudicial,” character of moral judgment is precisely the basis of its being natural as opposed to merely conventional. In order to see why this is so, let us consider once more the standard of moral judgment -- this time, by comparison to Aristotle’s definition of a merely conventional standard.

A standard is conventional “that from the beginning (*ex arches*) may be settle one way or the other indifferently,” for example, “that the ransom for a person shall be one mina” or that a

“sacrifice shall consist of a goat and not two sheep.”<sup>539</sup> A contemporary example would be that cars must drive on the right side of the road instead of on the left side (or vice versa, as the case may be). These standards may be settled indifferently because there is no higher, unchosen standard to guide the settlement. To raise the question of whether it is intrinsically fitting for cars to drive on the right rather than the left, or for stop signs to be red instead of green, would make little sense.

Some people think, continues Aristotle, that the standard of virtue is determined in a similarly arbitrary manner -- that some people decide upon one system of customs, others upon another. For example, “some people think that all the just things are merely conventional because whereas a law of nature is immutable and has the same validity everywhere, as fire burns both here and in Persia, the just things are seen to vary.”<sup>540</sup>

This sort of “conventionalist” view became even more prominent in modern times, due largely to the tremendous influence of Thomas Hobbes. Justice and all standards, he claimed, are the products of arbitrary human creation. This Aristotle denies. Unlike a traffic law, the standard of justice and of the rest of the virtues cannot be settled arbitrarily *ex arches*. For no matter what someone might declare as just or brave or generous -- whether in a principle, a set of statements, or any sort of account -- the claim is always open to the following question: By acting in this manner, do we acknowledge the full significance of all the relationships and involvements that the situation calls into play? In raising this question, we appeal to a standard of virtue given prior to anyone’s opinion on the matter -- a standard embodied in our relations

---

<sup>539</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1134 15-25.

<sup>540</sup> *Ibid.*, 1134 20-30.

and activities themselves, and ultimately, in our practical understanding of the good life as a whole.

Although this standard is sustained by and emerges through human action, the standard is nevertheless natural. For the standard is not ordained by human beings, or created by the deeds of any particular people. Insofar as we can deliberate, judge, and act at all, we must already possess at least a faint grasp of the standard at which action aims. By means of our particular deliberations, judgments, and actions, the standard of virtue comes more clearly to light. And in coming to light, the standard maintains a certain identity throughout change. In this sense, the standard really can be said to have the same force everywhere (*pantachou ten auten echon dunamin*).<sup>541</sup>

The natural character of the Good reveals the answer to the basic question Aristotle poses at the beginning of the *Ethics*: does ethical inquiry set out from the *archai* or work toward them? The answer turns out to be both. We begin from an initial understanding of virtue -- from a basic practical grasp of the relative significance of our roles and activities and a sense of how to balance them in different situations. By reflecting on this understanding, by questioning certain roles and activities in light of others, we gain a deeper understanding of their relative significance, a broader perspective as a whole, and a keener sense of what future situations demand. In the end, we return to the beginning on a higher level. *Nous*, or the eye of the soul cultivated by experience, must therefore be “both a beginning and an end” (*kai arche kai telos nous*). It is “both the starting point and the subject matter for demonstration.”<sup>542</sup>

---

<sup>541</sup> Ibid., 1134 15-20.

<sup>542</sup> Ibid., 1143b 5-15.

With the situated character of virtue in clear view, we can also understand why Aristotle maintains that the good life is blessed and, therefore, worthy of honor rather than praise. The word *eudaimonia* itself, typically translated as “the good life” or “happiness,” really means “having a good daemon” -- being shepherded throughout life by a guardian god. We might consider the good life blessed for the obvious reason that it depends, to some extent, on chance. No matter how virtuous a person may be, he still needs a god on his side. Without one, he may eventually meet the doom of an Orestes or Oedipus.

But the good life is blessed for a deeper reason, having to do with the very source of virtue. What counts as brave, generous, just, or magnanimous, Aristotle teaches, is not wholly of our own making. In one sense, we do become virtuous by our agency: by the judgments we make, the deeds we execute, and the activities we carry out. In another sense, however, virtue is not within our own power. For in order to judge well in the first place, we must already possess a basic understanding of virtue embodied in the way we live. Ultimately, our acquisition of virtue depends upon a natural standard given in advance -- our lived awareness of the good life as a whole. Prejudice, in this comprehensive sense, is essential to moral understanding, and for this very reason, paradoxical though it may seem, the good life may be considered truly divine.

## Conclusion Prejudice and Rhetoric

### 1. The suspicion of rhetoric as an outgrowth of the case against prejudice

If prejudice is indeed an indispensable feature of judgment, then what are the implications for politics? In this final chapter, I consider how the case for prejudice might lead us to reconsider some familiar views about the nature of political argument and how it should proceed. In particular, the case for prejudice forces us to rethink the familiar assumption that political rhetoric is a lowly kind of discourse -- one that engages people's passions, interests, loyalties, and not their reason. This assumption figures prominently in contemporary discourse. It underlies the way we often dismiss a politician's speech as "mere rhetoric," as high-flown eloquence without substance, as a kind of deception, an attempt to mask a weak argument in rousing language.

One way of articulating the suspicion of rhetoric is that it appeals to people's *prejudices*. The best orators rarely persuade by means of pure logic, or by stating abstract principles addressed to no one in particular. They typically persuade by speaking to different people differently -- depending on who they are, where they live, and what they care about. The most persuasive speakers are often brilliant raconteurs, masters at using stories, images, and metaphors geared specifically to the audience at hand. In short, great orators are skilled at persuading people from within their particular life perspectives. In this sense, they are skilled at appealing to people's prejudices.

For precisely this reason, rhetoric tends to arouse suspicion. Some maintain that policies and principles should be justified in abstraction from the perspective of a given audience -- in terms ideally accessible to anyone anywhere. Perhaps the most prominent statement of this view comes from John Rawls. According to his notion of “political liberalism,” arguments about “constitutional essentials” (i.e., rights and the basic structure of society) depend for their justification on principles of reason that can be specified “non-rhetorically,” so to speak – without reference to the perspective of this or that group. In Rawls’ terms, “public reason” means that “we do not view persons as socially situated or otherwise rooted...as having this or that comprehensive doctrine [this or that religious, philosophical, or moral worldview].”<sup>543</sup> According to this conception, we should justify our positions in terms of principles that do not depend on any particular moral or religious convictions. Although Rawls later revised his position to allow for arguments drawn from “comprehensive doctrines,” he added a proviso that in “due course,” people must give “properly public reasons to support their principles and policies.”<sup>544</sup> But Rawls’ notion of “properly public reasons” admits rhetoric only as an adornment to a legitimate political argument justified independently.

A helpful way of clarifying the suspicion of rhetoric, in both political theory and practice, is by considering what Bryan Garsten calls the “twin dangers” of persuasive speech -- pandering and manipulation. He argues that rhetoric need not devolve into these perversions. At its best, rhetoric neither follows the crowd nor moves people like puppets on a string. Nevertheless, we tend to conflate rhetoric with such evils. We tend to assume that speech tailored to the passions

---

<sup>543</sup> John Rawls, “The Idea of Public Reason Revisited,” in *Political Liberalism* expanded edition (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 481.

<sup>544</sup> *Ibid.*, 453.

and concerns of a given audience is, by its very nature, an uncritical kind of discourse, one that fails to engage people's reason. According to Thomas Nagel, for example, reason must be detached, or "a way of distancing one's self from common opinion and received practices."<sup>545</sup> This detached conception of reason leads to the disparagement of rhetoric as a kind of smooth-talking that leads people astray, getting them to accept what their better judgment would denounce.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the disparagement of rhetoric as a brand of pandering or manipulation aligns with what I have called the two strands of the case against prejudice -- the idea that prejudice is at odds with truth, or sound judgment, on the one hand, and with freedom, or agency, on the other. To say that rhetoric is pandering is to denounce it as uncritical, as simply telling people what they want to hear, encouraging them to favor their narrow self-interest, leading them to judge without reflection. Here the concern is with poor judgment, or a failure to consider the common good. To say that rhetoric is manipulative is to denounce it as a force that inhibits people's freedom, that exerts a coercive sway over those who hear it. The suspicion is that by appealing to passions, hopes, fears, pleasures, and pains, rhetoric leads people to slavishly accept the speaker's position.

The tendency to reject rhetoric as a kind of uncritical or manipulative discourse reveals the link between the wariness of rhetoric and the case against prejudice. In fact, if we reexamine those who develop the case against prejudice, many of them also disparage rhetoric. Recall, for example, how Bacon denounces ancient Greek philosophy as "rhetorical and prone to

---

<sup>545</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3.

disputation,” therefore, “inimical to the search for truth.”<sup>546</sup> According to his view, truth is wholly independent of the terms that make it compelling for a given audience. Recall too how Adam Smith denounces the poets of his day for trying to sway public opinion in favor of their literary styles. He disparages these rhetorical tactics as “the mean arts of intrigue and solicitation,” as attempts “to obtain praise, and to avoid blame, by very unfair means.”<sup>547</sup> His belief that these means are “unfair” comes from his prejudice-free ideal of judgment. The best literary critics, he assumes, are blank-slate minds, people unaffected by public opinion, or by the author's defense of his own style. Rhetoric, Smith implies, is a force that corrupts aesthetic judgment, that taints the minds of those who hear it, illicitly predisposing them to favor a certain kind of art.

Perhaps the sharpest critique of rhetoric that we have so far considered comes from Kant. He summarily rejects it as the lowly business of “talking men round and prejudicing them in favor of anyone.”<sup>548</sup> By arousing people’s passions, and by appealing to their particular interests, rhetoric, Kant argues, leads people to thoughtlessly accept the speaker’s position. In doing so, it not only leads the listeners to judge poorly, or unfairly, but it also “robs” them of their “freedom.”<sup>549</sup> It “[moves] men like machines to a judgment that must lose all its weight with them upon calm reflection.”<sup>550</sup>

---

<sup>546</sup> Francis Bacon, *The New Organon*, ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 58.

<sup>547</sup> Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Ryan Patrick Hanley (London: Penguin, 2009), 150.

<sup>548</sup> Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*, §53, 192.

<sup>549</sup> Ibid.

<sup>550</sup> Ibid., §53, 193.

## 2. Thomas Hobbes's case against rhetoric and its link to the detached conception of judgment

The basic critique of rhetoric that we find in all of these thinkers-- the idea that rhetoric plays upon prejudice and is thus opposed to reason -- finds its most powerful expression in Thomas Hobbes. Although Hobbes does not discuss prejudice as explicitly as the thinkers we have so far examined, he articulates a well-known version of the detached, or prejudice-free ideal of judgment. At the center of this ideal lies his critique of rhetoric. In order to understand our contemporary suspicion of rhetoric, and in order to see its connection to the case against prejudice, we should consider Hobbes's notion of how rhetoric inhibits detached judgment.

Hobbes's version of the detached ideal emerges in his conception of reason, which he defines as "nothing but Reckoning (that is, Adding and Subtracting) of the Consequences of generall names agreed upon..."<sup>551</sup> For Hobbes, reason requires putting aside our own experiences and perspectives and beginning from fixed premises accepted by all in advance. Hobbes' favorite examples of such reasoning are mathematics and logic:

For as Arithmeticians teach to adde and subtract in numbers; so the Geometricians teach the same in lines, figures (solid and superficially,) angles, proportions, times, degrees of swiftnesse, force, power, and the like; The Logicians teach the same in Consequences of words; adding together two Names, to make an Affirmation; and two Affirmations, to make a Syllogisme; and many Syllogismes to make a Demonstration; and from the summe, or Conclusion of a Syllogisme, they subtract one Proposition, to find the other...In summe, in what matter soever there is a place for addition and subtraction, there is also a place for Reason; and where they have no place, there Reason has nothing at all to do.<sup>552</sup>

Reason, as Hobbes understands it, refers merely to the formal, or abstract, operations of thought that proceed from given premises -- from "generall names agreed upon." Reason has nothing to

---

<sup>551</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 32.

<sup>552</sup> *Ibid.*

do with determining the premises or “general names” themselves. The premises, Hobbes insists, come not from reason, but from *agreement*, from what Plato and Aristotle call *convention*.

Hobbes thus restricts reason to the third section of Plato’s divided line -- the section representing thought that leaves its basic assumptions unexamined. According to Hobbes, reason has nothing to say about basic assumptions; it can attain no higher knowledge. *Geometry*, he writes, “is the only Science that has pleased God hitherto to bestow on mankind.” For in geometry, “men begin at settled significations of their words...and place them in the beginning of their reckoning.”<sup>553</sup>

By why was Hobbes bent on restricting reason in this way? First, he found it a philosophically compelling position. In light of his notion that the universe is a chaotic whirl of matter in motion, he did not believe in any sort of higher reality. In particular, he rejected the idea of a “highest good,” or *summum bonum*. But Hobbes also had a practical stake in defending this philosophical position. As Garsten points out, Hobbes’s philosophy was, in large part, a reaction against the Protestant revolutionaries of his day who invoked divine revelation as a justification for civil disobedience and rebellion. The Puritan preachers tended to dogmatically assert their opinions, claiming to have received them directly from God. They were unwilling to question or revise what they claimed to be a call from their inner conscience. Such recalcitrance led to conflict, and eventually, to the wars of religion. As a witness to and victim of this turmoil, Hobbes had a clear political interest in denying the possibility of so called “higher knowledge.”

The experience of religious dogmatism and war seems to have led Hobbes to the view that reasoning from within people’s perspectives is a contradiction in terms. People’s particular loyalties and religious views, he claims, are merely private feelings and beliefs. As such, they

---

<sup>553</sup> Ibid., 28.

provide no basis for reasoned argument about justice or the good life. “Good” and “bad,” “just” and “unjust,” “holy” and “profane,” are, according to Hobbes, utterly subjective labels that different people attach to different objects, objects which, in themselves, are meaningless: “One man calleth Wisdome, what another call feare; and one cruelty, what another justice; one prodigality, what another call magnanimity...”<sup>554</sup>

We might say that the experience of religious dogmatism coupled with the conception of subjectivity that was emerging in his day led Hobbes to overlook what Plato and Aristotle recognized as the reason, or sense, embodied in common opinion and everyday life. At any rate, Hobbes severed the link between reason and *logos* upon which Plato and Aristotle had insisted. They maintained that reason inheres in the simple yet enigmatic fact that human beings are able to give an account of what they do. Reason and speech are thus inseparable. On the basis of this unity, Plato and Aristotle maintain the possibility of ascending to higher wisdom, to knowledge of the Good.

In separating reason from speech, Hobbes denies the possibility that reason can lead to higher wisdom. Reason, by his account, is nothing but calculation, and speech is nothing but a system of subjective labels. In line with this understanding, Hobbes stresses the need for agreeing to “general names.” For without such initial agreement, he argues, reason cannot proceed. The “first cause of Absurd conclusions,” he writes, is “the want of Method; in that [people] begin not their Ratiocination from Definitions; that is, from the settled significations of their words: as if they could cast account without knowing the value of numerall words, one, two, and three.”<sup>555</sup>

---

<sup>554</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>555</sup> Ibid., 34.

Here emerges the source of Hobbes' strange affinity for geometry. What otherwise appears to be a rather unremarkable sort of knowledge is, for Hobbes, the model of the kind of thinking that begins from settled, uncontroversial premises and moves to uncontroversial conclusions. Geometry, in short, is the model of detached reason, the model of a method whose validity obtains regardless of any particular perspective.

But geometry was not Hobbes's ultimate ideal of reason. He set his sights higher. Geometry was for him merely a model of the sort of certainty that he hoped his political theory could impart to social life. What Hobbes proposed as an instrument of such certainty was the state as "Leviathan." As Garsten highlights, Hobbes intended the Leviathan state to replace people's own judgment as the sole arbiter of decent conduct.<sup>556</sup> By setting all social standards once and for all, by informing everyone "what he should call his own and what another's, what he should call just and unjust, honourable and dishonourable, good and bad," the Leviathan, Hobbes hoped, would allow people to confidently apply instrumental reasoning to social relations, and, thereby, to coexist with minimal controversy and conflict.<sup>557</sup> Hobbes hoped that the Leviathan could bring the certainty and stability of geometry to human affairs.

We might restate Hobbes's ideal as the attempt to overcome perspective, or prejudice, by replacing it with a fixed, external standard of judgment. According to Hobbes, people's particular life perspectives are wholly *subjective*. They provide no footing for reasoned argument. In this regard, his thought falls in line with that of Bacon, Descartes, Smith, and Kant. Hobbes, of course, adds his own pessimistic twist: The viewpoint shaped by one's desires,

---

<sup>556</sup> Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, Chapter 1.

<sup>557</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 79.

loyalties, and religious views is not only a “cave,” as Bacon calls it, but the source of irreconcilable conflict. Perspective, or prejudice, Hobbes teaches, is the source of both ignorance and war.

Hobbes’s critique of rhetoric is an outgrowth of his attempt to banish prejudice as a feature of political argument. He denounces rhetoric as a force that rouses people’s passions, that distorts the true proportion of the things they care about, and that hinders their ability to reason in a calm, calculating, detached manner. The “task of eloquence,” Hobbes writes, “is to make the Good and the bad, the useful and the useless, the Honourable and the dishonourable appear greater or less than they really are, and to make the unjust appear Just as may seem to suit the speaker’s purpose...the result is that votes are cast not on the basis of correct reasoning but on emotional impulse.”<sup>558</sup>

A familiar feature of rhetoric to which Hobbes takes particular exception is the use of metaphor. He goes so far as to identify the “sixth cause” of absurd thought as “the use of Metaphors, Tropes, and other Rhetoricall figures, in stead of words proper.” In “reckoning, and seeking of truth,” he writes, “such speeches are not to be admitted.”<sup>559</sup>

A poet would no doubt resist the notion that metaphor and truth are so radically opposed. To a poet’s sensibility, the purpose of metaphor is to convey truth, to breath life into abstract concepts, to make them concrete rather than empty. But from Hobbes’s point of view, the concrete quality of metaphor is precisely what puts it at odds with reason. The whole point of reason, according to Hobbes, is to abstract from the concrete and particular, to begin from “general names agreed upon.” The concrete, or particular, he claims, is something that distorts

---

<sup>558</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>559</sup> Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 35.

rather than clarifies the general. Insofar as the point of metaphor is to connect general concepts to people's particular experiences, metaphor, as Hobbes sees it, merely adds inconsistency to definitions. It thus undermines the consensus necessary for reason's operation. Metaphor, Hobbes writes, leaves one "entangled in words, as a bird in lime-twiggs, the more he struggles, the more belimed."<sup>560</sup> As this evocative line suggests, Hobbes does approve of at least one kind of metaphor -- that which aims to reveal the folly of metaphor itself. In a larger sense, the only rhetoric of which Hobbes approves, and, indeed employs to powerful effect, is, in Garsten's terms, "the rhetoric against rhetoric" itself.<sup>561</sup> Through the image of the Leviathan, Hobbes sought "to end the practice of rhetoric as it had traditionally been understood."<sup>562</sup> He sought to convince his contemporaries to cede their own judgment to the supreme word of the sovereign.

Against the background of Hobbes's political theory, we can better understand the contemporary suspicion of rhetoric. Although few today share Hobbes's fear that rhetoric will lead to war, many accept his basic idea that rhetoric is opposed to reason, and thus, an illegitimate mode of political discourse. As Gasrten compellingly argues, the familiar defense of "liberal public reason," as an alternative to rhetoric, actually emerges from Hobbes's defense of the Leviathan. For despite the apparent difference between contemporary liberalism and Hobbesian absolute rule, both seek a standard of right that is detached from citizens' particular life circumstances, above all, from their moral and religious views. Both rest on the assumption that our life circumstances are caves that blind us and lead to conflict rather than perspectives that inform our reason.

---

<sup>560</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>561</sup> Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 25.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid., 28.

But with the situated conception of judgment in full view, we can see how the suspicion of rhetoric is misguided. It is misguided at least insofar as it rests on the wholesale rejection of prejudice, or on the opposition of prejudice and reason. To be sure, what is often denounced as mere rhetoric is, indeed, pandering, or worse, speech that shamelessly propagates lies, that manipulates people by distorting or withholding the relevant facts about an issue. But speech that persuades by appealing to people's particular experiences, to their roles, loyalties, and desires, is not by necessity opposed to reason. Rhetoric can be a way of reasoning from within people's life perspectives, a way of engaging their situated understanding.

### 3. Prejudice and rhetoric reconsidered

Perhaps not surprisingly, many proponents of situated understanding are also, in one form or another, defenders of rhetoric. The most obvious example is Aristotle. Contrary to the suggestion of Socrates that rhetoric is mere flattery, a sort of unsophisticated knack for pleasing people and winning their support, Aristotle argues that rhetoric requires a more nuanced kind of knowledge. *Persuading* one's listeners, he argues, involves knowing them at deeper level than their superficial preferences. An orator cannot be like a chef who simply cooks to the taste of his customers. He must understand the regime in which his audience lives, have a sense for the political climate of the day, be able to interpret the prevailing passions, to invoke the myths, proverbs, and metaphors that bear upon the situation at hand. Only by drawing upon this wealth of knowledge can an orator effectively persuade his listeners. Although such knowledge is irreducible to rules or principles, it admits, Aristotle shows, of a kind of rational analysis --

precisely the sort that he offers in his *Rhetoric*. He thereby challenges the claim of Socrates that rhetoric “has no account to give of the things [i.e., the means of persuasion] it applies.”<sup>563</sup>

Aristotle recognizes that persuasive speech appeals to people’s experiences, concerns, and loyalties -- even, in a sense, to their self-interest. But this, he argues, is not necessarily bad. Although Aristotle points out that people can be poor judges in their own case, he also sees in self-interest (or “one’s own,” *ta heautou*) the basis for deliberation. People who have a stake in a given debate, Aristotle observes, tend actually to judge more considerately than those who look on as detached spectators. For example, in the assembly when addressing issues of common concern, people deliberate with greater care than when sitting in the law courts as judges of other people’s business.<sup>564</sup> In these ways, Aristotle’s conception of situated judgment leads him to a nuanced defense of rhetoric.

If we look closely we can also discern a certain defense of rhetoric in Plato. His defense of rhetoric is, of course, concealed beneath Socrates’ apparently harsh rejection of it. In the *Gorgias*, Socrates asserts that rhetoric is mere flattery, speech whose aim is pleasure instead of the good.<sup>565</sup> Rhetoric, he suggests, creates a false impression of right action, just as adorning one’s self in make-up creates a sham image of beauty.<sup>566</sup> Here is where we find Socrates’ famous comparison of rhetoric to cookery. Both, he asserts, aim at pleasures without regard for their worth.

---

<sup>563</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 465a.

<sup>564</sup> Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, 1354b. I am indebted to Garsten for highlighting this theme in Aristotle (Cf. Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 119, 124.)

<sup>565</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 465a.

<sup>566</sup> *Ibid.*, 465b.

But we should understand these severe pronouncements as directed not against rhetoric as such, but against rhetoric as it was typically practiced in Plato's day. For at the end of the *Gorgias*, Socrates maintains the possibility of a noble (*kalon*) kind of rhetoric, one that "aims to make the souls of the citizens good, that strives to say what is best."<sup>567</sup> We might understand this as a reference to the kind of rhetoric that Socrates himself practices -- the kind that, in Aristotle's words, is the *antistrophe* (counterpart) to dialectic. As we have seen, Socrates never refutes his students by reference to some abstract standard of truth. Instead, he challenges them from within their own perspectives. He uses examples, images, myths, and metaphors that he thinks will resonate with the particular people in front of him. In doing so, he guides them to higher insights that they can still recognize as their own. Plato thus provides a powerful defense of rhetoric -- through the argument and speech of Socrates himself.

Gadamer, who, as we have seen, offers the most explicit case for prejudice, also offers a defense of rhetoric. For Gadamer, hermeneutics and rhetoric occupy the same realm: "the realm of arguments that are convincing (which is not the same as logically compelling)." It is the realm, he continues:

of practice and humanity in general, and its province is not where the power of "iron clad conclusions" must be accepted without discussion...but rather where controversial issues are decided by reasonable consideration...If rhetoric appeals to the feelings, as has long been clear, that in no way means it falls outside the realm of the reasonable...Only a narrow view of rhetoric sees it as a mere technique or even a mere instrument for social manipulation. It is in truth an essential aspect of all reasonable behavior.<sup>568</sup>

In the rest of this chapter, I aim to develop the sense in which rhetoric is a mode of situated reasoning. As I have suggested, this conception of rhetoric follows in the tradition of

---

<sup>567</sup> Ibid., 503a.

<sup>568</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, "Afterward," 571.

Plato, Aristotle, and Gadamer. It finds its most powerful contemporary expression in Bryan Garsten's *Saving Persuasion*. Garsten argues that "rhetorical appeals to people's partial and passionate points of view can often be a good means of drawing out their capacity for judgment and so drawing them into deliberation."<sup>569</sup>

My approach to showing how rhetoric is a kind of situated reasoning is to examine several political speeches from American history that cannot be dismissed as mere flattery or deception. These speeches seek to initiate significant political *reform*. But they do so not by appealing to some abstract standard of justice. Instead, they work by invoking tradition and appealing to the life perspective of the listeners. Because the speeches I examine all offer compelling arguments in defense of liberty, because they support positions that, in Rawls' terms, are "reasonable," they appear to derive their moral force from abstract principles alone. As I try to show, however, the speeches actually derive their persuasive and *moral* force by appeal to situated understandings that make the principles intelligible.

By considering rhetoric, I hope to bring the case for prejudice to a conclusion in two respects. First, I hope to draw out its implications for the nature of political argument. As Garsten observes, persuasive speech is "the currency of the democratic realm." Although democracy means "rule by the people," in practice, it means rule by the most compelling orators. It may be true, concedes Garsten, "that in Washington 'money talks,' but campaign strategists and lobbyists often value money for its ability to buy speaking time and a large audience. In general, if people want to wield political power in a democracy, they must look for opportunities to talk to their fellow citizens, to impress them, and to persuade them."<sup>570</sup> In order to influence

---

<sup>569</sup> Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 13.

<sup>570</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

politics, money still needs the support of smooth talking. So whether we like it or not, rhetoric, in some form or another, rules the day. But it makes a great difference whether we understand rhetoric as a regrettable fact of democracy, or as practice, which, in certain forms at least, is worth cultivating. By viewing rhetoric in light of the situated conception of understanding, we can understand it as a kind of reasoned argument that lies at the heart of democracy.

Second, by examining political rhetoric, I aim not only to apply, but also to clarify the phenomenon of situated understanding. Through an analysis of several speeches, I hope to elicit the way in which reason proceeds from within the world rather than from abstract principles alone. Moreover, by considering the rhetoric of reform, I hope to highlight how *agency* is connected to situated understanding, how argument and judgment shaped by prejudice is not merely consistent with agency but an integral expression of it.

#### 4. Lyndon Johnson: Rhetoric and the meaning of everyday things

During the 1960 Presidential election campaign, Lyndon Johnson of Texas, the Vice Presidential running mate of John F. Kennedy, spoke throughout the South in support of civil rights. Instead of appealing to abstract principles of fairness and equality, Johnson invoked common experiences to which his southern audience could relate. As Henry Fairlie recounts, Johnson would often evoke feelings of moral outrage against the daily indignities of segregation:

How would you feel, he demanded of [his listeners] if your child was sick, and you could not take him to the hospital in this town, but had to go twenty miles away? How would you feel, if you were shopping

and your child was thirsty, and you could not give him a cold soda at the counter in the drugstore? Again and again, he won the sullen audiences.<sup>571</sup>

By this account, Johnson does not explicitly appeal to principles at all. He does not argue, for example, that segregation is wrong because it violates equal basic rights and liberties or because it fails to respect citizens as free and equal persons. He appeals not to his listeners detached reason, but to their feelings. The kind of emotion he arouses, moreover, is not some context-free “natural sympathy,” of the sort that Adam Smith claims to be basic. Instead, Johnson arouses a *particular* sense of sympathy, tied to the concern of parents for their thirsty child on a hot day or their sick child in need of a doctor. Furthermore, Johnson asks them “how would *you* feel?” By emphasizing the second person, Johnson connects his message to the lives of the particular crowd in front of him. In order to evoke the moral outrage he intends, Johnson presents two everyday examples of how black children and their parents can’t share in the common life that white southerners take for granted.

In presenting these examples, Johnson speaks to his southern audience as situated. He refers to the hospital in this town, to the activity of shopping at the local drugstore. Most strikingly, the cure for thirst he invokes is not water, but a “cold soda” (presumably the kind served in a glass bottle that was popular in the 1960s south). Johnson’s speech addresses things that are readily familiar to his southern listeners and that have meaning for them. His speech is geared to a specific audience that can relate to buying a cold soda at the local drug store. To an audience of businessmen in the northeast, this typical southern activity would probably lack the same resonance. Johnson (like other politicians including Bill Clinton) was even known to speak

---

<sup>571</sup> Henry Fairlie, “The Decline of Oratory,” *New Republic*, May 28, 1984, 17. Quoted in Garsten, *Saving Persuasion*, 193.

in a thicker southern accent in the South in order to establish a rapport with his audience. He referred to himself as “a man whose roots go deeply into Southern soil.”<sup>572</sup>

The resonant phrases in Johnson’s speech gestures toward the principle “segregation is wrong” without formulating it in such terms. Johnson provides the potent images and examples and lets his listeners see the principle for themselves. Their understanding of the principle is tied to the way of life in which the principle acquires meaning for them.

A person examining Johnson’s words from a detached, analytic standpoint, might contend that I’ve failed to scrutinize the speech systematically enough. The reason why Johnson’s words carry moral weight, one might argue, is because they appeal to an implicit basic principle: We should judge our attitudes and actions by putting ourselves in the shoes of others. Although Johnson does not explicitly state this principle, it lies just below the surface. The principle unifies and explains the particular examples of your feeling a sense of unfairness that someone else is denied the opportunities that you have. By this account, Johnson presents two particular cases to his listeners, each of which evokes a sense of unfairness. These cases of unfairness, in turn, imply the abstract moral principle: “put yourself in another’s shoes.” Segregation is wrong according to this principle.

But to recast Johnson’s argument in terms of an abstract principle is to miss the significance of the examples that make the principle concrete. We should consider that the full meaning of the principle “put yourself in another’s shoes,” its moral force or lack thereof, is tied to how Johnson *expresses* it. Johnson’s examples reveal the “other” as similar enough to one’s self such that putting yourself in his shoes is an appropriate test in the first place.

---

<sup>572</sup> Lyndon Baines Johnson. “We Shall Overcome,” address to a Joint Session of Congress on Voting Legislation, Washington D.C., 15 March 1965.

The meaning of the principle, in other words, is inseparable from its application. To fully understand the principle “put yourself in another’s shoes” means being able to apply it in the right situation, toward the right people. In Aristotle’s terms, knowing the principle means “recognizing the particulars” (*ta kath’ hekasta*) – recognizing to whom the principle applies -- in this case, to equal human beings. For it wouldn’t necessarily make sense to put one’s self in another’s shoes if the other was fundamentally different from one’s self.

Johnson’s genius, what really makes his words compelling, is his ability to find the right examples to show southern whites that they actually share much in common with blacks. Johnson suggests that under segregation, blacks suffer the same injustices that would frustrate southern whites. In this way, he establishes common ground between the two groups. Once Johnson’s speech forges this common ground, the white listeners can recognize the imperative to put themselves in the shoes of blacks. But this abstract imperative crucially depends for its proper application, and thus, for its very *sense*, on the particular examples that show something like “they suffer in the same ways you would suffer.”

To someone analyzing the speech from a detached perspective, Johnson’s particular examples seem to be mere cases that evoke intuitions of unfairness, which, in turn, can be captured in a general principle. But the detached perspective fails to account for the way in which Johnson finds the right examples, and presents them in the right way, to evoke the intuitions of unfairness in the first place. This rhetorical skill is not a mere knack for finding the means to persuade people of a principle that they should accept independently. Stripped of all its relevance to the listener’s own interests and concerns, the principle would be an empty moralism. To insist that people simply accept it as “reasonable” would be pointless finger-wagging.

Otherwise put, the standard of “reasonableness” says why anyone should accept a principle but not why *these people here* should. But as Plato and Aristotle teach us, the abstract “anyone” is always a sort of fiction. Insofar as people are always, in a sense, *these people here*, Johnson’s rhetoric is more than an adornment to the real argument. Johnson’s rhetoric is part of the principle’s justification -- at least for the audience to whom he speaks.

It should be clear, then, that Johnson’s knack for speaking to the interests and concerns of his listeners involves a critical *interpretive* faculty, the ability to see things from within their perspective, to understand the activities that articulate their way of life, to identify some good within those activities, and to highlight how the good, properly understood, reveals other activities to be confused or mistaken. Johnson’s genius is his eye for small things, such as a bottle of cold soda, that point beyond themselves, that refer to roles and activities of significance for his audience. Johnson brings to expression the significance of such things and uses it to evoke a sense of unfairness.

Nor could it be said that Johnson manipulates his listeners. To be sure, he tries to move them to his side. But he does so precisely by appealing to their *own* lives -- by challenging certain aspects of their perspective in light of others. In thus persuading his listeners, Johnson exercises a kind of authority, or rule over them. But the term “over” is somewhat misleading. Johnson does not rule his audience from above, as a marionette handles his puppets, or from outside, as wind bends the branches of a tree. In order to bring his listeners around, Johnson relies on their self-interpretive agency. He urges them to consider the particular things they care about, the things that define their daily lives, and to judge accordingly. This sort of rhetorical

appeal exemplifies how judgment shaped by perspective, or prejudice, is nevertheless critical. We see how prejudice provides the basis for its own revision.

##### 5. Abraham Lincoln: The situated character of apparently abstract eloquence

Lyndon Johnson's rhetoric is a clear example of speech that appeals to concrete experiences and activities rather than to abstract principles. But what about rhetoric that invokes abstract principles without explicit reference to particulars? What are we to make of such cases? Do they show that speech can, indeed, transcend its situation? Let us consider a prominent example: Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address. Upon examination, what appears to consist of abstract language alone actually depends on the particular setting and narrative in which the speech is situated.

The purpose of Lincoln's address was to commemorate the Union soldiers who died at the Battle of Gettysburg and also to persuade the Union troops to keep fighting. The entire speech is only 272 words long, and the language is notably abstract. The speech begins: "Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."<sup>573</sup> Although Lincoln mentions the date of the founding, he leaves out other specifics. Even his more particular references are notably general. For example, he refers to "our fathers," instead of to Washington, Madison, and Hamilton. He refers to "this continent" instead of to North America or the United States. Most significantly, he refers to an abstract proposition: "that all men are created equal."

---

<sup>573</sup> Abraham Lincoln, "Gettysburg Address," Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, 19 November 1863.

As historian Garry Wills observes, Lincoln's address contains no proper names – “not even the name of the battle, or of the cemetery he is dedicating with his speech.” When Lincoln refers to “this ground,” the ground “is only a testing place where the ‘proposition’ is to be vindicated by ‘these dead.’”<sup>574</sup> But in spite of its abstract wording, and, perhaps even because of it, Lincoln's speech is an instance of compelling rhetoric. And, in fact, it was persuasive. The address reinvigorated the spirit of the Union and the founding principles of the Declaration of Independence. It motivated the soldiers to keep fighting.

Does the apparently abstract eloquence of the Gettysburg Address undermine the dependence of general principles on particular references and narratives? Not at all. The speech only seems to rely on abstract statements alone. Its commemorative and persuasive effect really comes from the conspicuous *absence* of particulars -- ones well-known to the audience that day and for generations to come. To grasp the full meaning of the Gettysburg Address, we must pay as much attention to what Lincoln *omits* as to what he explicitly states. Paradoxically, what lends the Address its transcendent character is precisely the concrete circumstance that Lincoln could have invoked yet did not. In this sense, the speech is firmly situated rather than detached.

The Gettysburg Address illustrates Gadamer's point that “to say what one means..to make one's self understood -- means to hold what is said together with an infinity of what is not said in one unified meaning and to ensure that it is understood in this way.”<sup>575</sup> Under the circumstances, Lincoln could have said many things, indeed, an “infinity” of things that he decided, consciously or unconsciously, to pass over.

---

<sup>574</sup> Garry Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 54.

<sup>575</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 464.

What, in particular, were Lincoln's resonant omissions? Most conspicuously, he did not enumerate the details of the battle and its bloody aftermath. As Wills recounts, the battle of Gettysburg had left the Pennsylvania battlefield blanketed with rotting bodies. There were so many dead men that General Meade of the Union army had no time to collect them, and in many cases, the locals had to move aside bodies in order to plant their crops.<sup>576</sup> According to one Gettysburg banker, "arms and legs and sometimes heads protrude and my attention has been directed to several places where the hogs were actually rooting out the bodies and devouring them."<sup>577</sup> The battle of Gettysburg was not even a decisive Union victory despite the high price the Union had paid. Lee's Confederate army had escaped, and both sides had sustained heavy casualties.

Lincoln's audience was all too familiar with the gruesome and demoralizing particulars of the battle, which had been brought into sharp relief by Edward Everett's speech, which preceded Lincoln's. Everett was actually the main speaker. He gave a two-hour speech that set the battle "in a larger logic of campaigns that had an immediacy for those on the scene." He "excoriated the rebels for their atrocities," as he recounted the three bloody days of fighting.<sup>578</sup> Only against this all-too-worldly background, brought to powerful expression in Everett's words, does the Gettysburg Address emerge as distinctively transcendent.

Lincoln's words, which omit the details of the battle, of victory and defeat, conspicuously hover above the particulars, and, in this sense, depend on them. As Wills comments, "The general or generalizing articles – *a* great civil war, *a* great battlefield, *a* portion, *any* nation –

---

<sup>576</sup> Wills, *Lincoln at Gettysburg*, 20.

<sup>577</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>578</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

make this military engagement part of a larger process...The draining of particulars from the scene raises it to the ideality of a type.”<sup>579</sup> The key phrase is the “draining of particulars.” The lofty, *idealistic* quality of Lincoln’s speech comes from the particulars over which the speech hovers: The tragedy of “the macerated bodies, the many bloody and ignoble aspects of this inconclusive encounter, are transfigured in Lincoln’s rhetoric...His speech hovers far above the carnage...The nightmare realities have been etherealized in the crucible of his language.”<sup>580</sup>

By pointing to the significance of Lincoln’s omitting the “nightmare realities,” Wills, on one level, acknowledges the dependence of the Gettysburg Address on its concrete circumstance. But his conclusion that the “nightmare realities have been *etherealized*” is somewhat misleading. If by “etherealized” he means *evaporated* into the principle, or “larger process,” (i.e., that “all men are created equal,” or that “American history is marching toward freedom”), this would overlook the sense in which the principle, or the process, still depends on the particulars. Only insofar as the particulars are *preserved* as essential elements of the struggle for equality does the principle of equality or the march toward its fulfillment, attain its depth, its transcendent character. Without the particulars lurking conspicuously in the background, the principle would lose much of its meaning. It would be a hollow statement, not a principle worth fighting for.

The particulars and the principle, we might say, sojourn together in Lincoln’s speech. By relating the particulars, in their silent presence, to the proposition that “all men are created equal,” Lincoln recaptures them within a certain ideal framework. He thus preserves their horror while simultaneously evoking their nobility. In Wills’s terms, Lincoln “transfigures” the tragedy. The term “transfigures” is more apt than “etherealizes” or “idealizes.” For Lincoln does not

---

<sup>579</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid., 37.

sugar-coat the particulars, as if the grave losses were fully justified in light of abstract equality. Precisely by omitting the particulars, and thus letting them speak for themselves, he avoids terms that would entirely dissolve their horror into a higher cause. He avoids treating the sacrifices as mere means, however laudable, for a cause that retains its force regardless of the fight in its favor. Instead of dissolving the “nightmare realities,” Lincoln builds on them to breath life into the proposition that “all men are created equal.” In other words, the higher cause of liberty *itself* is transformed by the circumstance in which Lincoln invokes it.

Lincoln’s speech highlights the sense in which meaning depends on *silence* as much as on utterance. The significance of silence, in turn, points to the situated character of speech. For only within a situation, in relation to what someone might typically say in a certain circumstance, does speech attain its distinctive character. According to Hobbes’ notion of language, which conceives of words as subjective labels for objects, silence is meaningless. For the absence of sound or gesture cannot designate anything. It merely betokens agreement or the lack of a need to speak. Only a situated conception of language can make sense of the weight of silence, of how the most powerful words often speak to us without voice.

## 6. Frederick Douglass’s situated defense of equality

Perhaps the most compelling instance of rhetoric that reasons clearly from within the world is Frederick Douglass’s Fourth of July speech against slavery. On Independence day, 1852, Douglass was invited to address the citizens of Rochester, New York. Instead of singing a hymn to liberty, Douglass delivered a scorching attack on the hypocrisy of celebrating Independence

Day. He begins his speech by asking: “Why am I called upon to speak today? What have I or those I represent to do with your national independence?”<sup>581</sup> With this question, Douglass alerts his Northern, largely sympathetic audience, to the life circumstance of the millions of Africans still enslaved. A striking feature of Douglass’s speech is the way it works from within the life perspective of his listeners, including from within the perspective of slave-holders themselves.

To make his case against slavery and for the equality of blacks, Douglass rejects abstract, formal arguments:

Must I argue the wrongness of slavery? Is that a question of republicans? Is it to be settled by the rules of logic and argumentation, as a matter beset with great difficulty, involving a doubtful application of the principle of justice, hard to understand? How should I look today in the presence of Americans, dividing and subdividing a discourse, to show that men have a natural right to freedom, speaking of it relatively and positively, negatively and affirmatively? To do so would be to make myself look ridiculous, and to offer an insult to your understanding...I will use the severest language I can command, and yet not one word shall escape me that any man...shall not confess to be right and just...<sup>582</sup>

Douglass resolves to speak justly without applying principles of justice. In dispensing with “rules of logic and argumentation,” he ridicules the kind of speech so prized by Hobbes. What Hobbes considers the paradigm of reason, Douglass considers stupid in the current circumstance. To invoke “natural right” or principles of justice against slavery would be an insult to the understanding of his audience. It would be an insult because it would presume to teach his listeners what they don’t *already know*, what they do not already grasp from within the perspective of their own laws and practices:

Must I undertake to prove that the slave is a man? That point is conceded already. Nobody doubts it. The slave-holders themselves acknowledge it...when they punish disobedience on the part of the slave. There are seventy-two crimes in the State of Virginia, which, if committed by a black man (no matter how ignorant he be), subject him to the punishment of death; while only two of these same crimes will subject

---

<sup>581</sup> Frederick Douglass, “What to the Slave is the 4th of July?” Rochester, New York, 4 July 1852.

<sup>582</sup> Ibid.

a white man to like punishment. What is this but the acknowledgment that the slave is a moral, intellectual, and responsible being? The manhood of the slave is conceded. It is admitted in the fact that Southern statute books are covered with enactments, forbidding, under severe fines and penalties, the teaching of the slave to read and write. When you can point to any such laws in reference to the beasts of the field, then I may consent to argue the manhood of the slave...<sup>583</sup>

The reason for the wrongness of slavery, suggests Douglass, is not to be found in some ideal realm detached from the world. The fact that slaves are equal human beings is embodied in American life itself, most obviously in the laws that hold slaves responsible for disobedience, that disproportionately punish them for crimes, that forbid their being taught to read and write. Douglass does not simply mean to highlight the unfairness of such practices. His deeper point is that the practices actually acknowledge the humanity of slaves, however negatively.

Douglass thus reveals that on the slave-holders' *own* terms, as expressed by their own laws, blacks are equal human beings. To be sure, the slave-holders fail to acknowledge the humanity of blacks in full. For to do so would be to already reject slavery. Nevertheless, the slave-holders possess a keen awareness of the humanity of blacks, at least in part. Douglass elicits this partial knowledge, and holding it before the eyes of his audience, he challenges them to revise their attitudes. By calling attention to what the slave-holders see hazily, Douglass hopes to make them recognize the equality of blacks more clearly. By doing so, he hopes to turn them against slavery. Like Lyndon Johnson, Douglass appeals to the self-interpretive capacity of the listeners. He implores them to revise their practice in light of their own lives.

Douglass continues this approach in the conclusion of his speech, this time, in a more inspiring tone. Instead of pointing to nefarious laws that implicitly attest to the humanity of blacks, Douglass points to a range of distinctively human activities in which blacks and whites both participate:

---

<sup>583</sup> Ibid.

Is it not astonishing that while we are ploughing, planting, and reaping, using all kinds of mechanical tools, erecting houses, constructing bridges...that while we are...acting as clerks, merchants, and secretaries, having among us doctors, lawyers, ministers, poets, authors, editors, orators, and teachers; that we are engaged in all the enterprises common to other men - digging gold in California, capturing the whale in the Pacific, feeding sheep and cattle on the hillside, living, moving, acting, thinking, planning, living in families as husbands, wives, and children, and above all, confessing and worshipping the Christian God, and looking hopefully for life and immortality beyond the grave -- we are called upon to prove we are men?<sup>584</sup>

The equality of black Americans is not to be found in heaven, or in the stars, or in some ideal realm. It is expressed in American life itself -- in the activities and occupations that blacks and whites share.

By appealing to life activities instead of only to principles, Douglass might seem to evoke feeling instead of reason. But this misses the real force of his speech. It misses how the feelings he evokes arise, in the first place, in light of his words. By pointing to certain activities, and by placing them alongside each other, Douglass does not just recall a way of life, or trigger an already-formed set of sentiments. His words *clarify* the activities they describe, allowing the activities to evoke the feelings that they do.

To fully appreciate the creative and critical character of his words, we should consider that “feeding sheep and cattle on the hillside” is not a self-evident description of farming. If one were to ask a farmer for an account of his activity, he might offer a range of answers, perhaps: “tending the flock” or “making a living.” The different terms of description, which might appear to be different ways of describing the same thing, actually express very different activities. To understand farming as “making a living” is to see it as something necessary, something to be mastered (if only for the sake of preservation), something to be done away with if we could. If

---

<sup>584</sup> Ibid.

farming is indeed “making a living,” a merely necessary activity that aims at self-preservation, it would have no place in Douglass’s speech in defense of freedom. It would not attest to the distinctively human qualities that Douglass seeks to elicit.

In contrast to “making a living,” “feeding sheep and cattle on the hillside” expresses the activity not merely as something necessary, or something to be mastered, but as something to admire. It evokes the Jeffersonian vision of the independent farmer, walking among peaceful animals on the firm ground of rolling pastures. It evokes this vision all the more clearly in contrast to the whaler wrestling with nature on violent seas. Douglass’s descriptions do not merely represent instances of farming or whaling whose character is already manifest. The descriptions clarify the activities themselves, allowing them to evoke the admiration of the audience. If these activities point to distinctively human qualities, then blacks, Douglass argues, are equal human beings. For they too participate in such activities. In this way, Douglass allows his listeners to see why slavery is wrong. He does not take them to an abstract standpoint that casts judgment on human affairs from above; he brings his listeners before themselves. He allows them to see that the wrongness of slavery is already implicit in their way of life properly understood.

## 7. Conclusion: The unity of philosophy and life

By examining rhetoric in light of the situated conception of understanding, we can better appreciate the character of political argument. We can see that argument from within people’s

life perspectives is not necessarily pandering or manipulation. Properly conceived, rhetoric is a compelling instance of the situated understanding that defines our relation to the world.

This understanding, as I have tried to show, is at once passive and active, neither blind slavery to circumstance nor detached mastery of it. Different philosophers have expressed this insight in different terms. Heidegger and Gadamer speak of thrown-projection, of our horizon, or world, and the interpretive acts that reshape it. Plato and Aristotle speak of nature, or the cosmos, and its relation to human practice.

Rhetoric affords us a down-to-earth glimpse at what Heidegger, Gadamer, Plato, and Aristotle express at the level of philosophy. Rhetoric, in its most striking instances, is both accepting and critical of the way things are. In this way, it reveals the passive and active sides of situated understanding. Precisely by invoking custom, tradition, and pre-given loyalties, rhetoric can be the vehicle of significant reform.

The simultaneously accepting and critical aspect of rhetoric points to what is ultimately at stake in the case for prejudice. At stake, we might say, is the relation of critical thought to steadfast commitment, of philosophy to our concrete lives. By philosophy I mean the “love of wisdom,” the age-old desire to *know* -- not just to know this or that -- how to write a computer program, or to cure a disease, or to succeed at business -- but to comprehend anything and everything worth knowing -- to raise the Socratic question “What is?” with respect to justice, piety, beauty, friendship, the good life, and, ultimately, to hazard a sufficient answer -- to reach

the truth of the matter. In short, philosophy is the desire to know not only some aspect of life, but to “see the ground and background of all things.”<sup>585</sup>

By life, I mean our basic experience of the world -- life as we live it every day. Above all, life means *commitment*, especially to one’s family, friends, and country. In Greek terms, life, as I here understand it, means love of *one’s own* -- not in the sense of one’s own self-interest, but of one’s own household, occupation, city, religion. The defining feature of this sort of love, or commitment, is its instinctive, or at least implicit quality -- the way it comes naturally to us, the way it precedes our explicit choice to commit. Even when, in certain moments, we consciously affirm some aspect of our life, it seems that life most fully commands our allegiance, that life is most fully *itself*, only when we are absorbed in it, when we are engaged in the activity of living.

So conceived, philosophy and life might seem opposed, indeed radically so. For if philosophy means the explicit *reflection on life*, in all its essential aspects, philosophy might seem, by its very nature, to separate us from life. It might seem to detach us from our commitments by the very act of questioning them. For to question something, whether a relationship, role, or practice, is always, in a sense, to step back from it, to bring its claim within the range of our consideration and thus to break its natural hold on us. In other words, to ask the basic philosophical question -- the question “What is?” -- means to inquire into justice, friendship, or goodness *as such*. The question is primarily unconcerned with *this* particular practice, *this* particular friend, or *this* particular goal. Philosophy would seem, therefore, to be “indifferent to the fate of individuals”<sup>586</sup> -- indifferent, indeed, to life itself. For life, however expansively conceived, always means *my own*.

---

<sup>585</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, pt. 3, “The Wanderer,” in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 265.

<sup>586</sup> Allan Bloom, “Interpretive Essay,” in *Plato’s Republic*, 2nd ed., trans. Allan Bloom (Basic Books, 1991), 405.

Philosophy might seem, even, to inflict a sort of *violence* upon life. For not only does philosophy seem to detach us from our commitments; it seems also to subject them to the sovereignty of reason. By the very act of questioning the things we care about most, we seem to weaken their intrinsic claim to our allegiance. We seem to sacrifice them for the sake of the truth and thus to commit a sort of disloyalty.

The apparent link between philosophy and disloyalty takes us back to the drama of Socrates. As we earlier remarked, Socrates never explicitly renounced Zeus, or any of the Olympian gods. Nor did he found a new religious cult or recommend civil disobedience. And yet, Athens sentenced him to death for corrupting the youth and introducing new gods. The Athenians, at least certain ones, saw in the very activity of his *questioning* a certain disloyalty to the city, an impiety toward its divine basis. For this reason, they sought to halt his search for wisdom.

The Athenian reaction to Socrates belies the familiar suspicion that critical thought undermines serious commitment, that philosophy undermines life. In modern times, the suspicion comes to dramatic expression in Nietzsche's claim that the truth is *deadly*. By this he means that the theoretical analysis of life, if taken seriously, destroys the researcher's loyalty to his own. "Deadly" thus applies to truth *as such* (at least, as Nietzsche claims, to "truth" as it has so far been understood.)

If this suspicion is well founded, if, indeed, philosophy *as such* attenuates our particular loyalties, then, I believe, we must have some sympathy for Nietzsche's defense of life, some sympathy, indeed, for those who condemned Socrates. At least we should not denounce them in full. We must ask, with Nietzsche: "Could Socrates have been the corrupter of youth after all?"

And did he deserve his hemlock?"<sup>587</sup> For why should the call of life, of instinctive commitment, not fight back against the desire to know, against the deadly grasping for sufficient reason? Any serious thinker, must, at some point, venture an answer to this question -- to "the problem of the value of truth." Suppose we want truth, asks Nietzsche, "*why not rather* untruth? and uncertainty? even ignorance?"<sup>588</sup> In asking this question, Nietzsche aims to arouse the Athenian demos lurking in all of us. Even the most fervent lovers of truth, he suggests, harbor a certain love of life -- of their *own* -- that cannot be entirely extinguished: "For all the value that the true, the truthful, the selfless may deserve, it would still be possible that a higher and more fundamental value for *life* might have to be ascribed to deception, selfishness, and lust" (emphasis added).<sup>589</sup>

By invoking these shocking terms, Nietzsche does not mean to valorize petty lies, narrow self-interest, or crude sexual desires. "Deception, selfishness, and lust" are, rather, counter-concepts to "unconditional truth." "Deception" means "appearance," "selfishness" "one's own," "lust" "eros." In short, these terms are meant to capture *life* -- full-blooded life as we live it -- life as distinct from *reflection* upon life -- as distinct from *knowledge* or the quest for knowledge. Nietzsche forces us to consider the potential conflict between philosophy and life. A thinker who fails to see this potential conflict, he suggests, must fail to take philosophy seriously. For to take it seriously is to follow the argument *wherever it may lead*. And might it not lead away from family, friends, and country, away from everything one holds dear? The very activity of questioning seems already to point in this direction.

---

<sup>587</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, preface, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 193.

<sup>588</sup> *Ibid.*, aphorism 1, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 199.

<sup>589</sup> *Ibid.*, aphorism 2, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 200.

A familiar solution is to assert the higher pleasures or greater freedom associated with wisdom. You only experience it once you get there -- so they say. But one gets the sense, as Nietzsche so vividly highlights, that the lovers of wisdom are really those who despise life because they live diseased and decaying ones: "These wise men of all ages -- they should first be scrutinized closely. Were they all perhaps shaky on their legs? late? tottery? decadents? Could it be that wisdom appears on earth as a raven, inspired by a little whiff of carrion?"<sup>590</sup> Nietzsche suggests that someone truly full of life, someone in the moment of living, would laugh at the supposedly higher pleasures of wisdom. To a person truly committed to his family, friends, or city, the philosopher's assertion in favor of wisdom would have no purchase. The conflict is between two irreconcilable perspectives -- each with a claim on its side.

Another potential solution is to recognize the weight of both claims -- to view human beings as essentially torn between critical thought and serious commitment. We find a clear expression of this apparent solution in Allan Bloom's interpretation of Plato. Invoking Plato's terms, Bloom interprets the conflict between philosophy and life as between "the good and one's own. Although Bloom has a certain sympathy for the philosopher, and his quest for the good, he also gives due credit to the claim of one's own:

Men, in fact, do love their own things, and because they are their own things, especially their countries, their families, and themselves. This is the first and perhaps the natural way, before men ever learned of the good. When they do learn of it, they sophistically identify the good with their own in order to remain at peace. If they really wanted to pursue the good simply, they would have to give up their cities, their homes, those whom by habit they call friends, and even perhaps themselves. This is what Socrates actually does. He lives in Athens, but is not really of it, he is married and has children but pays little attention to them. Socrates' life illustrates the sharpness of these conflicts and makes him appear monstrous to the decent people who love their own...The problem that Socrates poses for all of his interlocutors is that he urges them to break with their own in favor of the good. Hardly any are willing to go the whole way, and this willingness to go the whole way defines the potential philosophers, such as Plato himself...

---

<sup>590</sup> Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, "The Problem of Socrates," sec. 1, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, 473.

Actually, what is defined in this bit of dialogue [Diotima's speech in the *Symposium*] is the essential split in man, which presents him with a harsh choice. All men have mothers and fathers, wives and children, and countries, and a large part of their lives is spent in concern for them. Their lives are apparently unified as long as Socrates does not solicit another real part of their nature, their love of the good. They also want real friends...and good cities and just laws. Man's divided loyalties lead to intolerable conflict and much myth-making. This is why men really do not love the truth as much as they say they do. We all recognize that there is such a split in all of us, but it is not characteristic of political and moral philosophy in our time to insist on it.<sup>591</sup>

Bloom thus acknowledges the claim of both the good and one's own, of philosophy and steadfast commitment. Man, he maintains, is torn between these two irreconcilable desires: the desire for wisdom, which means transcending one's city, friends, even one's self, and the desire for a home. The most comprehensive insight, Bloom suggests, is to recognize the tension of these claims, to acknowledge the "essential split in man" rather than to cover it up. This means to be neither Socrates, who loves only the good, nor someone who sophistically identifies the good with his own. But how to live in light of this tragic insight remains unclear.

At this point, we may recall the significance of situated understanding: Philosophy and life, the good and one's own, are not necessarily opposed. In fact, they complement each other. To assume an essential opposition between these terms is to mistakenly conceive of philosophy as *detached*, to assume that the truth at which philosophy aims is some standard or form or idea external to the world, external to our cities, homes, and friends. For if the truth indeed lies outside of life as we live it every day, then the problem of divided loyalties inevitably arises. Do we elect to remain in the cave or to seek the sunlit world above? As Bloom puts it, we are presented with the "harsh choice" between the good and our own, between a "monstrous"

---

<sup>591</sup> Allan Bloom, "The Ladder of Love," in *Plato's Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1993), 137.

indifference to life and a fanatic devotion to it. The only way out would seem to be an honest recognition of the essential conflict.

When Nietzsche wrote that the truth is deadly, he was, in fact, referring not to truth *as such*, but truth conceived as *unconditional*, truth as detached from the perspective of life. His charge was not against philosophy *per se*, but against the theoretical analysis of life that looks upon it from the remoteness of a birds-eye view.<sup>592</sup> In particular, he was referring to the detached historical science that Gadamer also criticizes -- the historicism that teaches us to leap out of our own perspective and into the worldview of a people “back then”-- to think in terms of “its ideas and thoughts” and thus to advance toward historical “objectivity.” Nietzsche saw in this way of thinking a deadly tendency. He saw that it would lead the researcher to eventually look upon his *own* life as a detached spectator, to view his own thoughts and commitments as merely contingent and transitory, and hence, of no ultimate value. In short, Nietzsche foresaw that historicism would lead to the devaluation and denial of life -- to nihilism.

But contrary to appearance, Nietzsche did not assert irrational commitment against theory or “pleasing illusion” against truth. He sought instead to replace the detached conception of theory with a situated, or life-bound one. For the detached conception, he argued, not only degrades life; it also fails to understand it. Only within the perspective of life, he insisted, within the perspective of *one’s own* commitments and concerns, does the true meaning of life *as such*, including the life of others, reveal itself. Nietzsche sought to develop a sort of theory rooted firmly in world -- in the world of *concern* to us -- a theory that would view the world “from inside”<sup>593</sup> -- that would attempt to grasp its deeper truths, but that, at the same time, would

---

<sup>592</sup> Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, aphorism 41, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 242.

<sup>593</sup> *Ibid.*, aphorism 36, 238.

strengthen life rather than destroy it. What might such a theory look like? In what sense can critically reflecting upon life cohere with whole-heartedly living it?

In the case for prejudice, we catch sight of an answer. What at first appear as two conflicting stances toward life actually come together in the situated conception of understanding. As I have tried to bring out, the answer to the Socratic question “What is...?” or to the familiar puzzle “how should I act?” is not lurking behind opinion and appearance, or hovering over and beyond our lives in some ideal realm. The answer is embodied in the world itself, inscribed in our projects, commitments, and loyalties as we live them every day. But the answer is never intelligible “down to the smallest letter,” or present for us to see without effort.

We discern it, always provisionally, only through a certain kind of practical deliberation or philosophy -- a kind unknown to the impartial spectator but familiar to all of us. This sort of reasoning questions life from within. It proceeds from our lived awareness of the whole and at the same time works toward it. By questioning particular practices, aims, and loyalties in light of others, we come to clarify the comprehensive awareness from which we began. And by doing so, we simultaneously clarify the particulars. We come to see them in their true proportions, undistorted by the superficial concerns that used to occupy the forefront of our attention. In this way, critical reflection actually strengthens our particular commitments. It guarantees that while certain relationships fade away, others come to the fore; while some no longer claim our loyalty, others now command our stronger allegiance.

Thus conceived, philosophy is not “indifferent to the fate of individuals” but a source of their very integrity. By pointing us to the universal, philosophy returns us to the particular with deeper insight and appreciation. This basic tie between the universal and the particular, or

between the whole and its parts, finds concrete expression in Socrates' mode of questioning. Instead of refuting his interlocutors by reference to a standard that lies outside their lives, Socrates challenges them from within their own perspectives. Instead of urging Thrasymachus to think from the viewpoint of an "impartial spectator," Socrates pushes him to clarify his very own claim that "justice is what's good for the stronger." He understands Thrasymachus's way of thinking and seeks to derive from it a deeper truth about justice. In doing so, Socrates not only illuminates the topic of discussion but sheds light on his interlocutor's *own* stance toward the world. Rather than asking his students to put their own lives aside and to think abstractly, Socrates urges them to clarify what their interests and concerns already imply. In this way, he leads his students to deeper insights that they can still recognize as their own.

We should remember that the Athenians who condemned Socrates were, for the most part, strangers to him. They presumably knew of his teaching only what his students propagated. As we know from Plato, Socrates had a loyal following, including some of the most prominent young Athenians. They were enthralled by his willingness to challenge conventional wisdom, to question what seemed to be common sense, and to defend justice against fame, fortune, and political prowess. But Plato also suggests that few of Socrates' followers understood his philosophy or were adept at it themselves. Alcibiades is the most dramatic example.<sup>594</sup> Charmed by Socrates' speeches and their apparently radical claims, Alcibiades overlooked their conservative and worldly dimension. He saw within them a divine sort of wisdom but failed to see their link to everyday practice.

---

<sup>594</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 212d-223a.

The Athenians who condemned Socrates knew his philosophy only through the distortions of men like Alcibiades. They saw Socrates as someone devoted to his own strange religion, someone whose piety lay outside of Athenian traditions and the things men typically prize. They perceived Socrates as a threat to their loyalties and commitments, as someone who sought to undermine their way of life. But this suspicion, as Plato shows us, was misplaced, or justified only in part. The whole Socrates, Plato suggests, was not some prophet who confronted Athens with a foreign standard of truth. Socrates was undoubtedly a critic, but not a revolutionary who aimed to remodel Athenian life from the outside. He sought, rather, to reveal its latent insight, to connect the life of the city with life as a whole. In Socrates' love of wisdom, we catch a glimpse of how philosophy and commitment, the universal and the particular, the good and one's own, actually unfold as one. In short, we learn what it means to reason from within the world, what it means to be led by the light of our life perspective and, at the same time, to be the source of its flame.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aristotle. *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. H. Rackham. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926.  
\_\_\_\_\_. *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932.  
\_\_\_\_\_. *On Rhetoric*, trans. George A. Kennedy. New York: Oxford University Press, 1991.
- Abramson, Jeffrey. *We, the Jury*. New York: Basic Books, 1994.
- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.
- Bacon, Sir Francis. *The New Organon*, ed. Lisa Jardine and Michael Silverthorne. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- Benardete, Seth. "On Plato's Symposium," in *Plato's Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Bloom, Allan. "Interpretive Essay," in *Plato's Republic*, 2nd ed., trans. Alan Bloom. Basic Books, 1991.  
\_\_\_\_\_. "The Ladder of Love," in *Plato's Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Burke, Edmund. *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, ed. Frank M. Turner. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003.
- Demos, Raphael. "Introduction," in *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett. New York: Random House 1937.
- Descartes, Rene. *Discourse on the Method*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*, trans. John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.  
\_\_\_\_\_. *Meditation on First Philosophy*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*.  
\_\_\_\_\_. *Objections and Replies to the Meditations*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*.  
\_\_\_\_\_. *Principles of Philosophy*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*.  
\_\_\_\_\_. *Rules for the Direction of our Native Intelligence*, in *Selected Philosophical Writings*.
- Douglass, Frederick. "What to the Slave is the 4th of July?" Rochester, New York, 4 July 1852.
- Dreyfus, Hubert L. *Being-in-the-World: A Commentary on Heidegger's Being and Time, Division I*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1991.
- Dworkin, Ronald. *Law's Empire*. Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press, 1986.
- Fairlie, Henry. "The Decline of Oratory," *New Republic*, May 28, 1984, 17.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. "Hermeneutics and Historicism," in *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, rev. ed. New York: Continuum, 1989.  
\_\_\_\_\_. *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, rev. ed.
- Garsten, Bryan. *Saving Persuasion: A Defense of Rhetoric and Judgment*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007.
- Guignon, Charles B. "Authenticity, Moral Values, and Psychotherapy," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles B. Guignon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Hegel, G.W.F. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977.  
\_\_\_\_\_. *Philosophy of Right*, trans. T.M. Knox. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 1962.  
\_\_\_\_\_. "Building Dwelling Thinking," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hostadter. New York: Harper and Row, 1971.  
\_\_\_\_\_. *The Concept of Time*, trans. Ingo Farin with Alex Skinner. New York: Continuum, 2011.  
\_\_\_\_\_. "Letter on Humanism," in *Basic Writings*, ed. David Farrell Krell. New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1977.  
\_\_\_\_\_. "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*.  
\_\_\_\_\_. "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*.  
\_\_\_\_\_. "The Thinker as Poet," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*.  
\_\_\_\_\_. "What is Metaphysics," in *Basic Writings*.
- Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*, ed. Richard Tuck. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.  
\_\_\_\_\_. *On the Citizen*, ed. Richard Tuck and Michael Silverthorne. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

- Hoffman, Piotr. "Death, Time, Historicity: Division II of *Being and Time*," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*, ed. Charles B. Guignon. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006.
- Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 2nd ed., ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. J.B. Schneewind. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983.
- Johnson, Lyndon Baines. "We Shall Overcome." Address to a Joint Session of Congress on Voting Legislation, Washington D.C. 15 March 1965.
- Kant, Immanuel. "An answer to the question: what is enlightenment?," in *Practical Philosophy*, trans. and edited Mary J. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. and ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Critique of Judgment*, trans. James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. and ed. Mary Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.
- Lincoln, Abraham. "Gettysburg Address," Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, 19 November 1863.
- Marx, Karl. *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, 2nd ed., ed. Robert C. Tucker. New York: W.W. Norton & Company 1978.
- Michalski, Krzysztof. *The Flame of Eternity*, trans. Benjamin Paloff. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012.
- Mulhall, Stephen. *Inheritance and Originality: Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Kierkegaard*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Nagel, Thomas. *The Last Word*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. London: Chatto & Windus, 1971.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Beyond Good and Evil*, in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann. New York: Modern Library, 2000.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Birth of Tragedy*, "Attempt at Self-Criticism," in *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*.
- Nussbaum, Martha. *The Fragility of Goodness*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986.
- Polt, Richard. *Heidegger: An Introduction*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Plato. *Apology*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Dialogues of Plato*, trans. B. Jowett, vol. 1. New York: Random House, 1937.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Gorgias*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Meno*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Phaedo*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Phaedrus*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1914.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Republic*, 2nd ed., trans. Allan Bloom. New York: Basic Books, 1991.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Republic*, trans. Paul Shorey. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1935.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Statesman*, ed. Jeffrey Henderson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Symposium*, trans. W.R.M. Lamb. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1925.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Symposium*, trans. Seth Benardete. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Rawls, John. *Political Liberalism*, expanded edition. New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "The Idea of Public Reason Revisited," in *Political Liberalism*, expanded edition.
- Ross, Sir David. *Plato's Theory of Ideas*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1951.
- Sheehan, Thomas. "Reading a Life: Heidegger and hard times," in *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger*.
- Smith, Adam. *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, ed. Ryan Patrick Hanley. New York: Penguin, 2009.
- Strauss, Leo. *Natural Right and History*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1953.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The City and Man*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1964.
- Taylor, Charles. *Hegel*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Philosophical Arguments*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995.
- Wills, Garry. *Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words that Remade America*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992.