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# The St. John's Review

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## The Wisdom of Jacob Klein

Olivier Sedeyn  
Translated by Brother Robert Smith

In the *Apology* Plato tells us what led Socrates to the practice of philosophy, a practice that finally landed him before the Athenian court of law to defend himself against the charges of not believing in the gods of the city and of corrupting the youth. It happened, Socrates said, because his friend Chaerophon had asked the Oracle at Delphi if any man existed who was wiser than Socrates, and had been given the answer that there was none. Socrates reacted characteristically in refusing to believe the oracle and, upon noting “a god cannot lie,” in wanting to verify the answer. The best way to do this was to find people who everyone agreed were wise and to examine them in order to “show the gods” that there were many men wiser than Socrates. Everyone knows the outcome: Socrates examined these men and realized that, although they were reputedly wise and thought themselves genuinely wise, they were not. Insofar as Socrates himself did not claim to be wise but was aware of his ignorance, he could in a sense be said to be wiser than they. Perhaps human wisdom consists in knowing that one doesn’t know, in being aware of one’s ignorance, rather than in the “divine” wisdom that those who think they penetrate the secrets of nature or who think they know the secrets of education, like the Sophists, supposedly possess.

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But are there wise men among our contemporaries? The very posing of this question shows how strange it is. Even so, is not philosophy the “love of wisdom”? It is said that Alexandre Kojève thought Jacob Klein was a wise man. What can such a claim mean when made by the famous Hegelian who inspired the idea of the “end of history”? Surely we are not being shown an example of Hegelian wisdom, which rests on the idea of the cyclical completion of the Concept, and is founded on the history of Reason. He can mean none other than ancient wisdom—that of Socrates, the seeker who knows that he does not know, who never ceased to fascinate Kojève, as his dialogue with Leo Strauss on tyranny shows.

Jacob Klein was a life-long friend of Leo Strauss, whom he knew from the time the two were students at Marburg in the early 20's. And Leo Strauss felt it possible to say: “In my opinion, we are closer to one another than to anyone else of our generation.” It can be said that Strauss and Klein tried, each in his own way, to reopen the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns, and that each was determined to show that the ancient point of view can be legitimately held today. Obviously this stance did not win them widespread admiration—Klein is even less well known than Strauss. My purpose in writing this introduction to the seemingly simple lecture that follows is to encourage readers to consider it thoughtfully.

Klein was born in Russia in 1899. He was educated in Germany between 1912 and 1922. He studied philosophy, physics, and mathematics. He then continued his study of mathematics and ancient philosophy. In 1923, he was influenced decisively by Heidegger's way of reading the ancients: to read them without presupposing the superiority of the modern view; to read them for what they are, according to their own criteria. From that point on Klein tried to deepen his understanding of Plato and Aristotle. To acknowledge Heidegger's influence—and this is important—does not mean an acceptance of Heidegger's own philosophy. Neither Klein

nor Strauss was ever in that sense a Heideggerian. They were drawn exclusively to his way of reading the ancients. We see this in the fact that Strauss and Klein, who throughout their lives were intent on understanding and judging the differences between the ancients and the moderns, rejected Heidegger's judgment that subjectivity and modern metaphysics had their origin in Plato. The break, according to them, occurred at the birth of modernity. Klein's most important book, *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*,<sup>1</sup> locates the difference between the ancients and moderns in the distinctive way they conceptualize number. To give a brief and insufficient account of this matter, we can say that the ancients considered number to be “a definite quantity of definite things”; or, in other words, number always refers to some thing beyond itself. On the contrary, for the moderns, beginning with Vieta and Descartes, number does not refer to things, but to a general concept, namely body or extension. Modern abstraction is “symbol-generating.” It cuts number off from a world it is supposed to reveal. This explains the connection between this concept of number and “universal method,” itself inspired by a *mathesis universalis*, a method valuable in every domain. This is quite different from the Greek notion of method as always particular, that is to say, related to the objects under consideration. Klein's reflections thus bear directly on what seem to be the most powerful pillars of the modern conception, the origins of mathematical physics.

Klein tried to point out this striking ontological shift, linked to the new way of conceptualizing number, which allowed modern science to be concerned no longer with ontological problems, to “leave them aside.” We hope that it will soon be possible to read Klein's book in French. It is strange that a work whose importance is considerable is not better known: it opens up an understanding of the origin of mathematical physics, a discipline that holds a unique position of authority in the modern world.

Be that as it may, circumstances forced Strauss to emigrate during 1932-33, first to France, then to England; and forced Klein, after having taught in Prague, to immigrate to America in 1938. He came to know Scott Buchanan, who was then trying to renew an old college in Annapolis. In that Maryland town, Klein was to find a new direction for his activities. The program of learning that he along with Scott Buchanan established aimed to provide “over four years an education in the liberal arts in which one reads great books from Homer and Euclid to Freud and Russell.”

Klein's main work from 1938-1976, at least up to his partial retirement in 1969, was consequently to teach the liberal arts. The liberal arts, as is generally known, are composed of the *quadrivium*—arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy—and the *trivium*—grammar, logic, and rhetoric.<sup>2</sup> It is surprising that in an era in which it seems that education and instruction ought to have as their aim social utility, a university should choose as its model a type of study drawn up in the Middle Ages and rooted in Greek antiquity. Yet maybe the utilitarian purposes of today find their true meaning, if they are to have one, in the higher purpose of making us free.

Jacob Klein consecrated his life to transmitting his knowledge of the fundamental texts of the Western tradition. In particular, he placed emphasis on the arts helpful for interpreting texts. In his own way, Klein, like Strauss, insisted on “the problem of the art of writing,” and a great part of the program at St. John's College consists in the reading of “great books.” Klein pressed us especially to read Platonic Dialogues paying particular attention to the dramatic structure of the conversation. It even appears that he was the first to recognize the necessity of doing so. Every claim of a Platonic character, even Socrates, has to be interpreted in the particular context of the dialogue in which it appears. It cannot be said, as is perhaps common in contemporary works, that one finds the theology of Plato, for example, at the end of the 10th book of the *Republic*, because this “theology” derives its

meaning from its place in the construction of the just city in books 2-4. Klein was right to raise again and again the question of how to read a Platonic dialogue.

Klein wrote only three other books: *A Commentary on Plato's Meno*,<sup>3</sup> which he pondered for several decades and was published only in 1965; *Plato's Trilogy*,<sup>4</sup> comprising the *Theatetus*, *Sophist* and *Statesman*, which is clearly imbued with his knowledge of Greek mathematics; and a volume entitled *Lectures and Essays*,<sup>5</sup> assembled by his students and friends after his death, that treats Greek mathematics and mathematical physics, speech, and precision, and thinkers such as Virgil, Dante, Plato, and Aristotle. This collection constitutes a remarkable introduction to liberal education.

The following lecture is from this collection. Klein attempts to show what specifically constitutes history and what distinguishes it from what we call an “historical sense.” History understood in the modern sense is in fact one of the great gods of our era. Understanding history amounts to preparing to better understand what is at stake in the quarrel of the ancients and the moderns, since the ancient, Socratic notion of wisdom has perhaps not disappeared. It may yet be valid, despite the claims of universality of the “historical sense.”

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> *Die Griechische Logistik und die Entstehung der Algebra, Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der Mathematik, Astronomie und Physik*, Abteilung B: Studien, vol. 3, fasc. 1 (Berlin, 1934): 18-105 (first part); fasc. 2 (1936): 122-235 (2nd part). Published in English as *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*, trans. Eva Brann, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1968.

<sup>2</sup> Thirty years ago, the corridors of the National Pedagogical Institute were decorated with windows representing these liberal arts. I suppose that these ancient references have disappeared.

<sup>3</sup> *A Commentary on Plato's Meno*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1965.

<sup>4</sup> *Plato's Trilogy*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1977.

<sup>5</sup> *Lectures and Essays*, Annapolis: The Saint John's College Press, 1985.



## History and the Liberal Arts

### Jacob Klein

Friends and enemies of the St. John's Program, visitors to the college and many of its alumni often raise the question: Why is History neglected in the St. John's curriculum? They point to the obvious contrast between the chronological order in which the "Great Books" are read and the remarkable lack of historical awareness displayed by the students. The time has come, I think, to deal with this question extensively. I propose to do that in this lecture. Let us reflect on the role and significance of History in a liberal arts curriculum.

The first, rather simple, statement that can be made is this: Man, having the ability to understand and being inquisitive by nature, wants to explore everything that he sees about him—the various plants and animals, the stars and the clouds and the winds, the surface of the earth, the rivers and the forests and the stones and the deserts. Whether this preoccupation stems from his immediate and urgent need, whether his inquisitive attitude is merely an extension of his concern to provide the necessities of life for himself, whether it is the manifestation of his very nature or simply idle curiosity, need not be discussed at this point. Whatever the origins of this desire, man wants to find out, to figure out, to know. In this sense, then, man may be said to be inquisitive not only about what surrounds him, at the present time, but also about the future: he wants to know what is going to happen to him as well as to everything else around him. And finally he wants to know what happened in the past. Out of this latter desire, we may somewhat naively say, grows History, i.e., the exploration of the past, the finding of the past, the description of what has happened in the recent as well as in the most remote

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Jacob Klein (1899-1978) was a tutor at St. John's College, Annapolis, serving as dean from 1949-1958.

past. Curiously enough, as you know, the Greek word *historia* means originally exploration of any kind. Gradually, it came to mean, even to the Greeks, the exploration of the past and the description or narration of past events.

Thus we have History, i.e., historical books: Herodotus, Thucydides, chronicles of all kinds, histories of Europe, America, India, of Guatemala, of the city of Annapolis, of the Universal Postal Union, of St. John's College, of the Imperial Palace in Peking. Such histories may be more or less correct. Descriptions of events must be checked as to their accuracy with the help of all the evidence available: books, old records, letters, inscriptions, etc. Special skills in exploring and checking the evidence must be developed. Historical science and the methodology of historical science become a branch of knowledge; history can be taught and learned. Departments of History and archives are established. Historical journals come into being, dedicated to the improvement and enlargement of historical knowledge. All this circumscribes what may be called the domain of History. Is this, then, what History is?

You sense immediately: this is not quite it, this is not a sufficient description of History and what History means.

First of all, there is a special emphasis in the pursuit of History which is lacking in other branches of learning. Take the science of geology, for example. However important and interesting its investigations and findings might be, this science does not make *universal* claims, it restricts itself to a definite domain. There is no such thing as a "geological approach" to any given problem. And yet there always seems to be an "historical approach" to almost any kind of problem in almost any field.

Secondly, it is not quite correct to state that history is the description and narration of past events. Not everything that is past is "historic." That one of us here went to Washington or to San Francisco last week or some time ago does not necessarily belong to any history. It might, though. From a

certain point of view, with regard to an event we judge a significant one, we can—retrospectively—recognize the importance of events which led to that significant one. Nobody, indeed, ever assumed that all events and happenings are equally important and significant and could become recorded in history books. Even Tolstoi, who formulated the idea of such an all-comprehensive history, based on integration procedures in the face of infinite series of minute events, of historical infinitesimals, as it were, did that merely to reduce history thus understood to absurdity. All written and traditional history is based on a principle of *selection*. This means that we must have—and in fact do have—some yardstick to measure the significance and importance of events, whatever history we may be writing.

It is not too difficult to discern these yardsticks in Herodotus or Tacitus or Gibbon, for example; more difficult perhaps, but not impossible, to discover them in Thucydides. We can even venture to say that in general the yardstick is provided either (a) by the consideration of the present state of affairs, the salient features of which want to be traced back to their origins, in a sort of *genealogical* procedure, or (b) by the desire to derive a lesson for the future either from mistakes and failures or from exemplary actions in the past, which desire leads to what has been called, since Polybius, *pragmatic* history. Sometimes both kinds of yardstick are combined.

I say that both—the universality of the tendency to subject any theme to an historical investigation and the selecting of events or facts to be dealt with historically—help us to win a better understanding of this human enterprise called History. This enterprise does not seem to be grounded in an inherent property of events or facts that permits us to arrange them in a sequence, an historical sequence, but seems rather to depend on a certain way of looking at things which stamps them into an historical pattern. One might be tempted to apply Kantian terminology to this phenomenon—and people

have actually done so—: there might be something of an historical *a priori*, a form of our thinking that inescapably leads us to see things in an historical perspective. Let us consider this for a moment. Let us beware though lest we indulge in an empty, if easy, construction.

As far as pragmatic history is concerned, the selection is based on our sense of moral virtues or our understanding of practical maxims of conduct. *Hybris* versus Moderation, Tyranny versus Freedom, false hopes and foolish fears versus prudence—these are presented and pointed out to us in the unfolding drama of historical successes or catastrophes. Here, then, the historical scene is merely the enlargement of our daily life, providing us with great examples in large script. History in this sense is founded on completely “unhistorical” points of view. That is why this kind of history writing does not constitute a specific domain like Physics or even Poetry. Note that Aristotle, the great systematizer of human knowledge, in the face of such history—the only one he knew—did not treat it as a *pragmateia*, a discipline in its own right. The same Aristotle who investigated, defined, elaborated on every conceivable art and science—grammar, logic, physics, botany, zoology, astronomy, theology, psychology, politics, ethics, rhetoric, poetry—did not elaborate on history, although he so often prefaces his investigations with a review of positions and opinions held in the past. I conclude: there is no historical *a priori* in pragmatic history.

The same holds true of the genealogical type of history, though not in the same way. The very notion of genealogy comprises notions of origin, source, development, more generally, the notion of a temporal order. But these notions are not strictly historical ones. They also determine our understanding of biological phenomena, or more generally, of phenomena of change. They are not constitutive categories of historical experience. They are operative in any myth, they help to picture the growth and decay of institutions, the expansion of dominion and power; but the emphasis is on the

nature of those institutions and the overwhelming character of that power. The bases of this type of history, exemplified in Polybius and the Roman historians, are still unhistorical, mostly legal and political.

But when we turn to that universal tendency to view things historically, to use the historical approach in almost any field, the picture changes. It seems, indeed, as if here the form of History shapes the material under consideration so as to make anything we look at assume historical clothing, as if the very basis of our looking at things were—we hear it so often—History itself. When, a moment ago, I denied that this was the case in pragmatic and genealogical history, I implicitly assumed, by way of contrast, the possibility of such a view. The question, then, is whether this historical way of looking at things is itself a necessary form of our understanding. One way of answering this question would be to apply the following test: Can we approach and solve *this* problem historically?

The pragmatic and genealogical types of history are the only ones known in antiquity and the understanding of the nature of history corresponds to them. But a new understanding of history begins with the advent of Christianity. Let us consider briefly in what it consists. I shall use two outstanding examples: Augustine and Dante.

Augustine, in the *City of God* (15-18), gives a World History based on a fundamental distinction. Mankind consists of two parts: there are those who live according to Man, i.e., in sin, and those who live according to God; there are two communities, the city of men and the city of God. The latter is in the making and after the Second Advent will become the everlasting Kingdom of God. The earthly city will then be destroyed and its inhabitants will join Satan. As long as this world exists, both cities are intertwined. Augustine distinguishes six ages: 1) from Adam to the Deluge; 2) from Noah to Abraham; 3) from Abraham to David (the “prophetic age”); 4) from David to the Babylonian captivity; 5) from

the Babylonian captivity to Jesus Christ; 6) from Jesus Christ to the end of this world. This universal history is conceived mainly in terms of the Biblical account; but the great oriental kingdoms, as well as Greece and the Roman Empire, have their place allocated in the general flow. This is not a "Philosophy of History"; it is rather History itself, i.e., the description of succeeding ages according to God's providential ordering of all events. The important thing for us to note is that historical succession itself, the fact of History, the fact that men's lives weave the history of the World, is not an accidental property of those lives but their very essence. Our and our fathers' years have flowed through God's eternal Today, says Augustine in the *Confessions*: "from this everpresent divine 'To-day' the past generations of men received the measure and the mould of such being as they had; and still others shall flow away, and so receive the mould of their degree of being." History, then, reflects the essential temporality of man, but reflects no less the eternal timeless pattern of his being. In following up the chain of historical events we do not select significant links. We follow God's providential plan. *Our* historical perspective is *our* view of an eternal order, just as the flow is our way of incomplete existence. For us "to exist" is identical with "to exist historically." But that, again, means that our existence spreads out in time the timeless pattern of God's wisdom. This is neither pragmatic nor genealogical history. It is, one might say, symbolic history. History presents the symbols that unfold in succession the eternal relations between creation, fall, redemption, and salvation.

Let us turn to Dante. Here, again we see a World History conceived in terms of God's timeless providential pattern. History is the sinister chronicle of man's fall pursued through all generations of men. The Greek and Roman worlds occupy a far more important place in this chronicle than in that of Augustine. The horrors of Thebes more than those of Babylon indicate the complete abnegation of God's grace. It

is not the contrast between the City of Men and the City of God which determines Dante's general view of historical events, but rather the contrast and intertwining of God's spiritual and God's secular order, of Church and Empire. The secular order, stemming from God, reflects but is not identical with the spiritual order. Troy and its destruction are symbols of man's pride and man's fall. "And it happened at one period of time," Dante writes in the *Convivio*, "that when David was born, Rome was born, that is to say, Aeneas then came from Troy to Italy.... Evident enough, therefore, is the divine election of the Roman Empire by the birth of the Holy City (i.e., Rome), which was contemporaneous with the root of the race from which Mary sprang." The history of the world is here a kind of symbolic duplication of the spiritual history of man. It is by this very nature, as in Augustine, two-dimensional. Or, to put it in different words, the horizon of this kind of history, or better, of this kind of historian, is not historical. In this respect this kind of history is akin to the pragmatic and genealogical kinds. Here, again, it is worth noting: the primary liberal disciplines listed by Dante in the *Convivio* and linked to the ten heavens of the world (the spheres of the Moon, Mercury, Venus, Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the sphere of the fixed stars, the *primum mobile* and the Empyrean Heaven) are Grammar, Logic, Rhetoric, Arithmetic, Geometry, Music, Astronomy, Physics and Metaphysics, Ethics, Theology. History is not one of them.

When Machiavelli and Hobbes dethrone classical philosophy and revert to pragmatic history as the best teacher man can have in planning and conducting his life, they still cling to a two-dimensional history to build their own political philosophy.

But now the scene changes: Vico's New Science marks a new beginning. Like Machiavelli and Hobbes he defies all preceding philosophy. He bases his work on the fundamental (Leibnizian) distinction: the *true* and the *certain*. What is true is common and therefore abstract. What is certain is the

particular, the individual, the concrete. "*Certum* and *commune* are opposed to each other." The philosophers pursue what is common. They lack certainty. Only history (which includes philology) deals with the certain. The most certain for us is that which we ourselves have made, the *facta*, the facts. "The world of civil society has certainly been made by man; its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations or civil world, which, since man had made it, men could hope to know."

Vico sets out to fulfill this hope. This is the scope of his New Science. It is historical by definition. The historian looking at man-made worlds can understand their innermost core. He will thus attain a more certain truth than the philosophers ever could; he will discover "the common nature of nations" or the "ideal eternal history" of nations established by divine providence. The New Science will thus be "a rational civil theology of divine providence." "Since divine providence has omnipotence as minister, it develops its orders by means as easy as the natural customs of men." This also means that this science is a "history of human ideas" (not a philosophical reflection on ideas). There are recurrent cycles in the history of nations that always comprise three stages: the divine, the heroic, and the human. The proper field of the historian is the customs of men, their institutions, their laws, their writings, their poetry. In understanding them he understands truth that is certain—truthful certainty—precisely what the philosophers are unable to accomplish.

At first sight it seems as if history in Vico's understanding preserved its two-dimensionality, since the objects of his findings are the "universal and eternal orders established by providence." But these orders do not exist outside of time. Divine

providence is not the providential plan of salvation anymore. Vico's history is bent on finding the laws governing the human world in contradistinction to the laws governing the world of nature. Historical reality with its recurrent stretches is one-dimensional. On the other hand, the historian alone is now the true philosopher. The methods of interpretation and of philology he has to use constitute a *new organon* comprising axioms, definitions and specific rules of inference. In other words: Vico's work competes with the work of Natural History, with the work of Mathematical Physics.

We have here a rather amazing historical fact before us. Let us remember. Towards the end of the sixteenth century a reinterpretation and reconsideration of the traditional, "classical," mathematical sciences lead to the establishment of Algebra, a hitherto obscure and "vulgar" discipline neglected by all recognized institutions of learning, as the eighth Liberal Art. Its progress coincides with the development of a new symbolic discipline, understood as Universal Mathematics, a new and most powerful instrument of human knowledge which is meant to replace the traditional Aristotelian Organon. The science of nature becomes mathematical physics, begins to dominate all human understanding and gradually transforms the conditions of human life on this earth. The only force opposing this development is History with its claim to universality, first attributed to it by Vico and maintained with increased vigor up to this moment. It is significant, I think, that Vico's idea of an "ideal eternal history" is a derivative of the idea of a Universal Mathematics, a shadow, as it were, that the latter casts. As Universal Mathematics is to all specific mathematical disciplines so is the "ideal eternal history" to all specific histories of nations. But this parallelism between Universal Mathematics and Universal History is to be understood in the light of the distinction between that which is "abstractly true" and that which is "concretely certain." The new science of Mathematical Physics leaves the natural experience of nature far behind: all

that is concrete vanishes behind a screen of mathematical symbols. Any teleology loses its meaning. The new science of History tries to restore the dignity of the concrete, fills the gap between the abstract symbolic understanding of nature and the immediate human experience of the world around us. It cannot dispense with the notions of means and ends. It is the distinction between the true and the certain which underlies the familiar and superficial distinction between Science and the Humanities. The latter are conceived as inseparable from History, can only be approached in historical perspective, come actually to life only in the medium of History. Since Vico, the idea of an eternal pattern of history, a vestige of the original Christian understanding, although occasionally forcefully advanced, has been generally abandoned. The emphasis is on the development of what has been called the *historical sense*.

Three consequences follow.

First, the fascination with the "otherness" of the past: the discovery or reconstruction of cultures and civilizations "different" from ours, each with a different "sense of values" ascertainable in customs, institutions, works of art, architecture, literature, philosophy, religion. This very notion of an autonomous "culture," underlying the various manifestations of human activity can arise only within an historical horizon. Truth itself becomes a function of "culture," the existence of which appears a certain fact; "relativity of values" becomes inevitably the concomitant of the historical perspective.

Secondly, the sense of participating in the relentless historical flow makes observable *trends* the guide of our actions. The acceptance of events and doctrines that are supposed to follow the "historical trend" is one of the most potent causes for the predicament in which European nations have found themselves in recent decades. The impact of Marxism which goes under the name of historical materialism and the reaction to it derive their strength from the historical sense projected into the future. The Gallup Poll is

one of the most recent and most ridiculous examples of this preoccupation with trends.

Thirdly, a man understands himself completely as an historical being. "Historicity" becomes his very nature, but not in the sense that it reflects some timeless pattern. His Self disintegrates into a series of socially, and that means historically, conditioned reflexes. Historicity does not mean Tradition. To see ourselves as historical beings means to break the invisible traditional ties in which we live. At best, tradition then becomes a romantic notion, at worst, an academic phantom.

If we consider the disciplines taught in our schools, it is easy to see that all natural sciences are patterned on the model of mathematical physics. The idea of a universal mathematics as the new organon of all science, however, dies away. On the other hand, all the disciplines within the realm of the humanities have become historical to the very core. The study of literature, philosophy, religion, music and the fine arts, for example, is almost exclusively the study of the history of literature, the history of philosophy, the history of religions, the history of music, the history of art. Fields of study of a more practical applicability as, for example, languages, political science and economics, retain a certain autonomy. The theoretical dignity they may have, however, is safeguarded only by historical considerations or, for that matter, by methods borrowed from mathematical physics.

It seems, then, that Mathematical Physics and History divide between themselves, in a fairly exhaustive way, the rule over the entire domain of human knowledge. Does this permit us to consider them as the two necessary ways and forms of our understanding? If this be so, Mathematical Physics and History would come close to being the two Liberal Arts of the modern age. Any liberal arts curriculum ought then to concentrate on these two great bodies of learning in keeping with the trend of events and in preparing students to follow it further.

At this point, we can pause and reflect on the results we have reached.

As to Mathematical Physics, the task before us is clearly not the tracing of its historic development. We have rather to understand the methods and the nature of the concepts that have made this development possible. We have to understand the specific use made of mathematical symbols, the relation of a mathematical deduction to a verifying experiment, the relations between observations, hypothesis, theory and truth. That is indeed what we are trying to do in our Mathematics Tutorials and in the Laboratory. And if we do not do that fully and in the most satisfactory manner, we have to improve our ways. The danger we are running in this case is the very same that has threatened the integrity of scientific understanding since the seventeenth century and which has barely begun to be warded off in recent developments: the danger to confuse the symbolic means of our understanding with reality itself.

If we turn to History, we have first to remember the question which gave rise to the preceding historical account. The question was: Is the historical way of looking at things a necessary form of our understanding? The answer—in the perspective of History—is in the negative: The universal historical approach is itself a product of, and presumably nothing but a phase in, an historical development, which cannot claim any absolute validity, no matter how “natural” and familiar it seems to us at the present moment. We have to recognize, moreover, the possibility of a dangerous confusion similar to the one I just mentioned with regard to Mathematical Physics. The results of historical investigations based on specific historical concepts and methods of interpretation ought not to be confused with the real picture of a real past. Not to see that, means to surround us with a pseudo-historical horizon of almost mythical quality so as to make us talk glibly of “Greek culture,” “medieval times,” “Renaissance,” the “Seventeenth Century,” the “Age of Enlightenment,” etc. Such pseudo-mythical notions are usually in the minds of

people who recommend that we take into account the proper “historical background” whenever we read and discuss a book. The assumption behind this recommendation is a rather naive one, to wit, that in the effort we make to understand a book or a series of books we could fall back on an objective and certain datum, the general culture in which the ideas expressed or propounded in those books are rooted and from which they derive their strength and intelligibility. We ought to see instead that the commonly accepted picture of an historical period is largely due to an interpretation of the content of books and other documents which presupposes in the first place the ability to deal with grammatical patterns, to discern rhetorical devices, to grasp ideas in all their implications. In point of fact, the main task of any historian is of necessity the interpretation of whatever data he may collect. The art of interpretation and all the other arts which minister to it depend on the understanding of the function of signs, of the complexity of symbolic expressions, and of the cogency of logical relations.

To understand a text is not a simple matter. To arouse and to cultivate this understanding is one of the primary tasks of our Language Tutorials. More than anything else, more, certainly, than the historical sense fed so often on sheer ignorance, an improvement of our interpretative skills could help foster genuine historical research and writing. We may ultimately get to see that the problem of History is itself not an historical problem.

It follows, then, that in pursuing these goals we should ignore history’s claim to universality, ignore History itself, if you please, in order to devote our full attention to the development of all the arts of understanding and all imaginative devices man can call his own. It takes courage to pursue a rather narrow and steep path hardly visible from the highways of contemporary learning. But let us remember the inscription on the old seal of the College: No path is impassable to courage. The reward may be high.



## Prudence and Wisdom in Aristotle's *Ethics*

Eric Salem

In Book 1 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle defines happiness or the human good as an “activity of the soul in accordance with virtue,” then adds immediately, “and if the virtues are many, in accordance with the best and most complete” of them (1098a 16-18).<sup>1</sup> Aristotle spends the next five books filling in this “sketch” or “outline” of happiness. He distinguishes intellectual and ethical virtue (1103a4-18).<sup>2</sup> He defines ethical virtue and its centerpiece, choice (1105b29-1107a2; 1111b4-1113a14). And he discusses at great length a total of thirteen virtues, eleven ethical, and two intellectual. But nowhere in these first six books does he tell us which of these virtues is “best and most complete.”

Could it be courage, the first of the virtues taken up by Aristotle? Does happiness consist in doing beautiful deeds on the field of battle, in withstanding one's fear of death and tempering one's eagerness for the fight (1115a4-b24)? Or is it perhaps justice, the only virtue to which he devotes an entire book of the *Ethics*? Does the human good show itself, above all, in the setting right of wrongs and the distributing of good things according to merit (1130b30-1131a1)? Again, is wisdom, the last of the virtues defined by Aristotle, a likely candidate? Can we be fully ourselves, fully achieve human happiness, only in looking away from the shifting tangle of human affairs and looking to the unchanging sources of all things (1141a16-1141b2)? Or is the sought-for virtue perhaps that curious disposition tucked away at the end of Book 4 which inclines us to listen and speak to one another in a fitting way in our moments of leisure? Is happiness to be found

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in the witty play of intelligent conversation, in telling the right joke at the right time to the right sort of people (1127b28-1128a33)?

We are not told. We are not even told—or at any rate, not told explicitly—how we might go about deciding the question, how, that is, we are to decide whether one virtue is better and more complete than another. And yet we are dealing with a matter of the greatest practical import, and Aristotle knows it. It is not just that our own good, our personal happiness, is at stake. From the outset Aristotle characterizes his investigation of the human good as “a sort of political inquiry” and he reminds us repeatedly, especially in the early books of the *Ethics*, that the primary task of the statesman or lawgiver is to make his citizens good, i.e., to educate them in virtue by means of the laws (1094b10-11; 1102a7-10; 1103b2-6). But to set down laws with a view to happiness would clearly require both that one know the order of the virtues—and hence which one of them is best and most complete—and also that one know whether that highest virtue is the sort of virtue that can be brought about by means of the law.<sup>3</sup>

I think Aristotle has his reasons for almost leaving us in the dark about these questions. Were he to dot every “i” and cross every “t” in his argument, he would do us, his readers, an injustice. We would not be disposed, or not as disposed, to read his account of the virtues with discernment, to make that argument our own by asking ourselves at every moment, “Could this be the virtue that will bring me or my fellow citizens happiness?” Like Plato, the teacher and fellow lover of wisdom to whom he refers with affection in Book 1, Aristotle invites his readers to participate in, and not merely to observe, his own inquiries. Aristotle the inquirer writes his books for inquiring minds.

I said a moment ago that Aristotle almost leaves us in the dark. I do not mean by this that he provides us with clear-cut, final answers to the questions I’ve just raised at some later

point in the *Ethics*, say, in Book 10. For I think—and I’ll say more about this later—that what Aristotle says there about happiness and the virtues is fraught with difficulties and full of questions. I rather mean that in various passages throughout the *Ethics* Aristotle leaves hints which help us to think through, if not to answer once and for all, the question, “Which of the many virtues lies at the core of human happiness?” The famous discussion in Book 10 is certainly one such passage. Another, and one of the most helpful, forms the conclusion of Aristotle’s inquiry into the virtues. In what follows I want to focus on the latter passage, to see what progress one can make by working through what Aristotle says and implies at this critical juncture of his inquiry.<sup>4</sup>

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Aristotle begins the final section of Book 6 by raising two questions about the intellectual virtues. The first question concerns the usefulness of prudence and wisdom; the second treats the relation between them.<sup>5</sup> Aristotle spins out the first question roughly as follows. Men do not seem to become happy through wisdom, for wisdom, as knowledge of the eternal, knows nothing of becoming, “contemplates none of those things through which a human being will be happy” (1143b19-22). Nor are men better off for having knowledge of the human good, i.e., prudence. For what prudence knows, namely, “the just and beautiful and good things for man,” the good man does (*prattei*) and does without needing to know them (1143b22-28). What’s more, even if prudence were knowledge, not only of the human good, but also of the means whereby men become good, an already good man would not need it. And a man who wished to become good would not need to have it himself. After all, men do not become doctors in order to become healthy—they simply visit and obey them (1143b28-33). Or as Aristotle himself had suggested as early as Book 2, men become virtuous, not by reflecting on virtue, but by doing virtuous things, that is, by doing the things prescribed by the law and the lawgiver

(1103a31-1103b7; 1103b14-23; 1105b9-17). Why, then, should a man who desires to become good or virtuous and hence happy seek to acquire either wisdom or prudence?

Before we look at Aristotle's answer, or rather answers, to this question, we would do well to reflect for a time on the particular understanding of both happiness and virtue that gives rise to it. In the first place, Aristotle's question seems to rest on the assumption that the activity or being at work (*energeia*) which constitutes happiness lies in deeds (*en ergo-is*), in performing good and beautiful works (*erga*): happy men are men who act courageously, justly and so on. Because happiness is this sort of activity (and not, say, the activity of thinking), Aristotle can further assume that the virtues it accords with are, in the first instance, the ethical virtues: if happiness consists in doing courageous and just deeds, then it makes sense to say that the virtues are courage and justice. Some form of thinking might be an element of happiness, but it could be only if it somehow made possible and were for the sake of the doing of such deeds. Finally, Aristotle's question assumes that in fact the ethical virtues can both arise and flourish within the human soul without the aid of thinking. The sphere of ethical virtue and action is, as it were, a self-sufficient whole. Men acquire the ethical virtues, become men of good character, by doing virtuous deeds, and once they have acquired them, they need only exercise them, i.e., act in accordance with them, to be happy.

In sum, Aristotle's question concerning the usefulness of prudence and wisdom hints at a first answer to our initial question; in fact, it presupposes an answer to it: the virtue we are looking for is simply ethical virtue. For if happiness is a matter of doing the right deeds, then ethical virtue, the stable readiness to do such deeds, has to form at least part of that virtue. But if ethical virtue is in itself sufficient to produce those deeds, if ethical virtue can do without the help of reason, then it seems to possess the character of completeness which Aristotle's definition demands. Ethical virtue, by itself,

seems to be the "best and most complete virtue," best because it issues in the highest human good, and most complete because it accomplishes this without help from elsewhere.

Of course, someone might note at this point that we are looking for one virtue and might raise the objection that ethical virtue is not a single virtue, but a name for eleven distinct virtues. This objection seems to have been anticipated, however, by Aristotle's own presentation of the ethical virtues, where it is intimated, at least twice, that the ethical virtues may be one in more than name (or even kind). First, in his account of the magnanimous or great-souled man, whose perfect goodness and self-sufficiency he repeatedly emphasizes, Aristotle calls magnanimity "all-complete" and describes it as "a sort of *kosmos* of the virtues; for it makes them greater and does not come to be without them" (1024a2-10).<sup>6</sup> Here we seem to be invited to imagine that the various ethical virtues become fully themselves only as they occupy their proper places within the spacious soul of the magnanimous man—to imagine, that is, that ethical virtue becomes one complete whole in the person of the magnanimous man. Again, several times in the course of his account of justice in the broadest sense, Aristotle identifies such justice with "complete" or "whole" virtue (1129b26-27; 1130a14-16; 1130b6-8). The notion here seems to be that the laws, at least the laws in the best regime, enjoin men to be good in every sense of the term—to be zealous in defense of the city, to be generous and gentle and fair toward fellow citizens and so on—so that, in principle, to be just, to be steadfast in one's obedience to the law, is to be virtuous simply (1129b11-26). Once more we seem to be invited to regard the ethical virtues, not as a heap of disparate dispositions, but as a unified whole, in this case a whole that has its origin in law and its end in the good of the political community.<sup>7</sup>

Someone might also wonder why, after spending a whole book discussing the intellectual virtues, Aristotle would choose to raise a question which so pointedly calls into ques-

tion the goodness or usefulness of prudence and wisdom. The first thing that must be said here is that Aristotle's question, and the assumptions upon which it rests, are in keeping with much of what he says in the earlier books of the *Ethics*. Activity and action, ethical virtue and virtue are treated as near synonyms throughout the first five books. Only occasionally does Aristotle suggest that the life of action might depend, ultimately, on the activity of reason, much less on a virtue of reason; he never even broaches the possibility that thinking might be choiceworthy for its own sake. Generally speaking, the life of action and ethical virtue remain at center stage in that discussion: reason and thought lurk in the wings, barely visible at rare moments.<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps Aristotle wrote the first half of the *Ethics* in the awareness that even the most serious of his readers would tend to identify ethical virtue with virtue and happiness with right action, and would have to be persuaded—and could be persuaded only gradually—that excellence in reasoning must play a central role in the good life. Or what may amount to the same thing, Aristotle's curious way of proceeding may arise out of the determination, exhibited everywhere in his works, to think his way to the truth of a matter by way of everyday experience and common opinion—in this case the common opinion that courage, moderation, liberality and the like are the virtues and that happiness is a matter of *eu pratein*, acting or faring well.<sup>9</sup>

Whatever the reasons for Aristotle's way of proceeding in Books 1 through 5, the first question elaborated by him at the end of Book 6 seems to sum up the general view of happiness found in those books: ethical virtue, perhaps in the form of magnanimity or justice, is the "best and most complete virtue" whose issue is happiness. In Book 6 prudence and wisdom come in from the wings and occupy center stage for a time, but the body of that book still leaves us wondering whether those virtues are to be more than minor characters in the drama of the *Ethics*.

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How, then, does Aristotle answer the question he has raised about the usefulness of prudence and wisdom? His first answer can be summarized as follows. Even if prudence and wisdom produced nothing, each would be worthy of being chosen for its own sake, for each of them is a virtue of the part of the soul that thinks (1144a1-3). Moreover, wisdom and prudence do produce something. Wisdom, in particular, produces happiness, not in the way that medicine produces health, but in the way that health itself produces healthiness or healthy activity (1144a3-5). "For being part of whole virtue, it makes a man happy through its possession and its activity" (1144a5-6).

Perhaps the first thing we should notice here is the use Aristotle makes of medicine and health. Earlier, in the course of framing his question, he used that analogy to suggest that reason is of no use to the virtuous man: ethical virtue was likened to health, and reason likened to the art of medicine for which a healthy man has no need. Now reason, especially in the form of wisdom, is itself likened to health, and the art of medicine, for the moment at any rate, drops out of the picture entirely. If wisdom does not replace ethical virtue as the health of the soul, it is at least set on an equal footing with it.

Two elements seem to be involved in this shift in analogy or argument. The first is a certain deepening of our understanding of causality or responsibility. Aristotle's question assumed that wisdom and prudence could be regarded as useful or productive only if they brought forth virtue and virtuous activity in the manner of so-called efficient causes. But wisdom, at any rate, cannot—and need not—be regarded as a cause in this sense. Like the other virtues—and the vices as well—wisdom is a *hexis*, an enduring condition, and, as such, it both forms the soul and shapes the soul's activity (1106a10-12; 1139a15-17).<sup>10</sup> But for just this reason it can be regarded as a cause, and in the measure that the part of the soul it

conditions and the corresponding activity it shapes are central to our being human, wisdom can be regarded as responsible for human happiness. Wisdom, in other words, is, or may be, a *formal* cause of human happiness.<sup>11</sup>

The second and, to my mind, more fundamental element involved in the shift—without it the question about what sort of cause wisdom might be could never arise—is Aristotle's abrupt setting aside, without the slightest comment, of the assumption that happiness consists simply in right action. That is, the ethical virtues could earlier be assumed to constitute the health of the soul, and wisdom could be dismissed in a sentence as useless, only so long as happiness was assumed to be a matter of acting well. And conversely, wisdom can now be placed on an at least equal footing with the ethical virtues only if the reigning assumption of Books 1 through 5 is no longer allowed to be the measure of the usefulness or goodness of the virtues. Clearly, then, Aristotle's first answer is a radical one; it goes to the root of his question concerning the usefulness of prudence and wisdom by denying the very premise upon which that question rests, by denying, that is, that happiness consists simply in right action.<sup>12</sup>

Indeed Aristotle's answer might leave us wondering whether happiness has anything at all to do with right action. After all, he does not say that wisdom and the ethical virtues together constitute the health of the soul and together produce happiness; he simply likens wisdom to health and says that wisdom produces happiness. Aristotle does say that wisdom produces happiness in the measure that it is part of "whole virtue," and we might be inclined to think that by "whole virtue" he means wisdom plus the ethical virtues plus prudence, but he is in fact silent about the meaning of the words "whole virtue." Perhaps the ethical virtues have no part in the whole of which wisdom is a part.

It may be useful at this point to spell out in some detail the various possible consequences of Aristotle's answer. In the first place, if we accept Aristotle's claims about wisdom, we

can of course no longer regard ethical virtue, taken as a whole, as the "best and most complete virtue," and can no longer assume that the activity of soul that is happiness is exhausted in the performance of good and beautiful deeds. Good works are not good enough. The activity that makes up happiness must somehow include the being at work of thinking, and not just any thinking, but the knowing of objects which are at once "most honorable" and "incapable of being otherwise" (1139b18-22; 1141a18-20, b2-3). And the disposition of soul that makes this activity possible, namely, wisdom must form at least part of the "best and most complete virtue."

This is not to say that the ethical virtues cannot also be part of the "best and most complete virtue." It could be the case that by "whole virtue" Aristotle means "the sum of the virtues," that wisdom, prudence and ethical virtue together constitute the "best and most complete virtue." If this were true, the happy man would be the man whose soul's parts each possessed its proper virtue, and his happiness would show itself in the beauty of his deeds, in his understanding of human affairs, and in his knowing of the first and highest of things. Again, if this were true, we might be compelled to deepen and broaden our understanding of magnanimity, to see it as the *kosmos* or constellation of all the virtues, including prudence and wisdom. And finally, if this were true, we would surely be obliged to read the "if" clause in "if the virtues are many, in accordance with the best and most complete of them" as a genuine question: "if the virtues are many" would have to mean "if the virtues are many and not facets or parts of one whole virtue."

On the other hand, it could well be the case that the ethical virtues are to be excluded from the notion of whole virtue. Wisdom and prudence might be the two parts of whole virtue. Or wisdom might be part of a whole whose other parts are as yet unnamed. Finally, it seems at least possible that the words "whole virtue" are simply the first line of

defense in Aristotle's freeing of wisdom from the charge of uselessness. By locating wisdom within the whole of virtue, he suggests that wisdom deserves at least equal consideration with the ethical virtues. But Aristotle's final position might be that wisdom, in isolation from the rest of the virtues, is the sole cause of human happiness.

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Aristotle's second answer, to which I now want to turn, seems to me to be a far less radical defense of reason than his first. It answers the charge of uselessness, not by posing an alternative to the life of action based in ethical virtue, but by showing that reason in the form of prudence is an integral part of that life.

In effect, Aristotle shows here that the analogy drawn from medicine and health does not adequately represent the relation of prudence to ethical virtue. That analogy suggests that the ethical virtues, and the actions commonly associated with them, are in themselves independent of prudence, and only incidentally in need of it. But in fact, Aristotle argues, the ethical virtues cannot themselves produce the equivalent of healthy activity, as health presumably can in the case of a healthy body. The character of a man's actions depends on the quality of his thinking as well as the goodness of his character. We aim to do justice or to act generously, we are moved to do what is just or what is generous, because we are just or generous; the ethical virtues are responsible for the rightness of desire and the rightness of our ends. But it is up to prudence to see all that bears on or contributes to those ends (*ta pros ta telê*), and hence to discover just what the right things are, right here and right now: we must think, and be able to think well, if we are to see the particular shape that generosity or justice must take on in a particular situation. In short, prudence and the ethical virtues are co-causes of those motions or activities of the soul which make for happiness on the level of deeds—assuming, that is, that such deeds have

anything to do with happiness (1144a6-9, 20-22; 1145a2-6).<sup>13</sup>

But Aristotle's answer goes further than this. Not only the actions we associate with the ethical virtues, but also the ethical virtues themselves depend on the presence of prudence within the soul. To be sure, Aristotle argues, there seem to be certain natural bases for the ethical virtues. Certain men seem to be by nature disposed to be just or moderate or courageous, and these "natural virtues" can exist in separation from prudence (1144b4-9). But ethical virtue in the strict sense cannot be or come into being without prudence (1144b14-17). And the reverse is also true. Again, there appears to be a natural power or faculty within the soul that enables us to discover the means necessary to accomplish a given end (1144a23-26). But this power of the soul, which Aristotle calls shrewdness or cleverness, is open-ended; it can be used for good or for ill (1144a26-27). Once developed and perfected, it becomes prudence, but it cannot be developed and perfected unless the ethical virtues are there to make the ends that we aim at the right ends (1144a27-1144b1). Ethical virtue and prudence, then, are not only co-causes of right action, but also co-causes of one another. They form a two that does not admit of division: neither can be or be at work without the other; neither of the parts of the soul of which they are virtues can be fully itself in the absence of the virtue of the other (1144b30-32).

The consequences of Aristotle's second answer seem clear enough. If by the words "best and most complete virtue" Aristotle means to refer to only one of the many virtues he has discussed, and if by "complete" he means, even if only in part, "able to be and be at work without help from elsewhere," then clearly neither prudence nor any of the ethical virtues can even qualify for the position of "best and most complete virtue." This would leave wisdom as the only possible candidate. And the account of wisdom that Aristotle provides in the body of Book 6 suggests that wisdom does indeed

possess the completeness which prudence and the ethical virtues lack. For there wisdom is distinguished from knowledge precisely on the grounds that knowledge as knowledge lacks insight into its starting-points, and is therefore incomplete, while in wisdom insight into starting points and knowledge of what follows from those starting points are inextricably linked (1139b25-35; 1140b31-35; 1141a17-20).<sup>14</sup>

And yet the very way in which Aristotle articulates the relation between prudence and ethical virtue in his second answer suggests that those virtues, taken together, possess something like completeness. Although each by itself is incomplete, prudence and ethical virtue together seem to form a sort of self-sufficient whole, independent of wisdom and, indeed, analogous in structure to wisdom, with ethical virtue supplying prudence with the starting points from which it deliberates, and prudence supplying ethical virtue with that discernment and judgement of particulars upon which any right action depends.

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We seem to have reached an impasse. Although it has become clear that the ethical virtues cannot themselves constitute the “best and most complete virtue,” clear that reason in some form must play a part in the good life, it still remains unclear which form of reason is most likely to lead to happiness. Of all the virtues, wisdom best fits Aristotle’s definition of happiness. Wisdom must not only form part of complete virtue, as we gathered from Aristotle’s first answer; it may well be that virtue. But it seems that prudence, in company with the ethical virtues, could also lay claim to the title of complete virtue. In fact, Aristotle goes out of his way here to single out prudence, as if it, rather than magnanimity or perfect justice, were the true unifying ground of the virtues related to action (1144b32-1145a2). Should his bare assertion that wisdom plays a major part in happiness be allowed to obscure what can be said for prudence? Finally, we have not yet seen any evidence to contradict the hypothesis, again drawn from

Aristotle’s first answer, that by complete virtue Aristotle means “whole virtue” and by whole virtue he means all the virtues. Why should happiness not consist in the being at work of all the parts of the soul, each in accordance with its proper virtue?

As it turns out, the second of the two questions Aristotle raises in the final section of Book 6 bears directly on the issue before us, i.e., the relation between prudence and wisdom. If that question and its answers do not provide us with final solutions to the difficulties I have just articulated, I think they may at least help us to understand them more clearly.

Aristotle asks: can prudence, whose work it is to rule and give orders concerning each thing, also be said to rule and give orders to wisdom (1143b33-36)? Like his first question, Aristotle’s second question has two answers. And like those earlier answers, these answers point us in different directions. In this case, each answer hints at a different understanding of the relation between prudence and wisdom.

Let me begin with Aristotle’s second answer. To say that prudence rules wisdom, Aristotle claims, would be like saying that politics rules the gods because it gives orders concerning all things in the city (1145a10-12). Just as the gods dwell outside the city, out of the reach of politics, so too, we infer, wisdom lies outside—indeed, above—the domain in which prudence properly exercises its authority.

Aristotle’s answer seems at first glance to be a straightforward denial of the power and right of prudence to rule wisdom. But the very brevity of his answer—and if brevity is the soul of wit, it should probably count as the wittiest response ever made to a fundamental question—seems to invite further reflection. We might wonder, for instance, whether politics can and must give orders concerning all things in the city precisely because the gods take no interest and no part in the life of the city. And we might wonder, too, whether political life takes on a kind of wholeness and self-sufficiency precisely because the gods leave men to their own devices. In short, we

might wonder whether the supremacy and self-sufficiency of the gods not only limits the extent of political authority, but also constitutes that authority and the very domain in which it is exercised: perhaps politics and the city *are* only in the wake of divine withdrawal. But what may hold for the city and its gods may hold for prudence and wisdom as well. Perhaps the particular character that wisdom takes on over the course of Book 6—its self-sufficient contemplation of the unchanging sources of all things, its consequent separation from human affairs and human doings—requires Aristotle to grant the life of action a certain wholeness and requires Aristotle to find a central place for prudence within it (1141b2-8). The two apparently contradictory views articulated a moment ago, the view that wisdom alone possesses completeness and the view that prudence in company with the ethical virtues possesses a sort of completeness, may not be incompatible after all: the second view may follow from the first. The assumption about happiness which characterizes such a large part of the *Ethics*, the assumption that human happiness lies in acting well, may be the result, curiously enough, of Aristotle's gradually unfolded claim that wisdom and true happiness exist in utter separation from ordinary life.

Of course, to return to Aristotle's image, it does not quite seem true to say that politics and political life exist in complete separation from the gods. Surely one of the tasks of politics, one part of its educative work, is to teach citizens to honor the gods.<sup>15</sup> If so, might prudence not have an analogous task: to make the superiority of wisdom visible on occasion, to remind the ethical virtues, or those who possess them, that wisdom is after all the most honorable of activities? Granted that for the most part prudence must keep its ear to the ground, its nose to the grindstone and its eye on the particular; granted that in general it must take its bearings by what the ethical virtues disclose as the human good; still, it seems difficult to believe that prudence would not in some

form and on some occasions look beyond and point beyond the horizon established by the ethical virtues.<sup>16</sup>

Indeed, isn't this just what we find Aristotle himself doing in Book 10? There he makes his most explicit claim for the absolute superiority and self-sufficiency of wisdom, and he does so in the strongest language imaginable (1177a18-b4; 1177b17-27; 1178b22-24). In light of that claim, the claims of prudence and the ethical virtues pale: in Book 10 Aristotle insists that the life based on prudence can be called happy only in a secondary way, that the wise man will take up that life, a merely human life, only with a certain reluctance (1178a9-23; 1178b3-8). And yet, almost in the same breath Aristotle begins to speak of educating men in what seems to be ethical virtue, and begins to introduce his study of politics as if nothing had happened (1179a30-b4; 1179b23-28). One minute he is telling his readers not to settle for the human-all-too-human but "to be immortal" instead, the next he is exhorting them to attend to families and friends and to engage in his "philosophy concerning human" i.e., mortal, affairs (1177b32-35; 1180a29-33; 1181b12-16). He gives his readers a glimpse of the highest life, shows them enough of it to make them honor its claims, but then leaves them and their lives more or less intact.

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Aristotle's first answer to his question concerning the relation of prudence to wisdom tells a somewhat different story, and leads to a somewhat different way of reading the drama of the *Ethics*. Once again, the superiority of wisdom to prudence is emphasized: Aristotle calls wisdom the virtue of the "better" part of the soul. And once again, Aristotle insists that prudence does not give orders to wisdom. Likening prudence to the medical art and wisdom to health, he says that prudence does not "use" wisdom, but sees to it that it comes into being: prudence gives orders for the sake of wisdom, not to wisdom (1145a7-10).

Still, Aristotle's very use of this medical analogy—yet again—points to a different way of understanding the relation between prudence and wisdom than we find in his other answer. Much earlier, in his initial question, Aristotle had used the analogy to suggest that the ethical virtues are sufficient unto themselves: prudence might be needed to bring those virtues into being, but those virtues, once in place within the human soul, can do without the help of prudence. Now, having rejected this analogy in the case of the ethical virtues, Aristotle resurrects it in the case of wisdom. He thus suggests that wisdom in fact enjoys the self-sufficiency earlier attributed to the ethical virtues. But he also suggests, as he had not in his other answer, that wisdom in some sense depends on prudence. Indeed his use of the words “sees to it that it comes into being” seems intended to underscore this dependence.<sup>17</sup> Wisdom is not a god after all; it may possess a divine self-sufficiency *once* it has come into being, but it must come into being and prudence is somehow responsible for bringing it forth.

What follows from Aristotle's suggestion that wisdom is not quite self-sufficient? If wisdom depends, for its very being, on the activity of prudence, it cannot be regarded as the sole cause, among the virtues, of human happiness. If by the “best and most complete virtue,” we mean all those human excellences through which happiness comes into being, then that virtue would have to include prudence as well as wisdom. But if prudence, in turn, depends on the ethical virtues, would it not follow that happiness depends on the presence within a soul of all the virtues—at least in the measure that wisdom is not fully present and at work within that soul? Does Aristotle, then, intend us to identify complete virtue with the sum of the virtues? Are we to understand, after all, that happiness somehow consists in the being at work of all the virtues, including the ethical virtues?<sup>18</sup>

Perhaps. But Aristotle's words “prudence gives orders for the sake of wisdom” oblige us, I think, to reconsider the rela-

tion of prudence to the ethical virtues. According to Aristotle's earlier argument, prudence depends on the ethical virtues because the ethical virtues, in directing desire aright, illuminate or disclose the ends by which prudence takes its bearings. But if the proper ends for the sake of which prudence makes its deliberations are not, or are not primarily, courageous, moderate or just actions, if the proper end of prudence is wisdom or the activity of wisdom, the ethical virtues would seem to fall short in their work of forming right desire. What seems to be needed instead is a new *hexis*, a new ordering of the soul, that corresponds to the desire for and delight in wisdom above all things. In short, what seems to be needed is an inner condition or virtue we might call *philosophia*, love of wisdom.<sup>19</sup>

This is not to say that in the new order of things ethical virtue would be rendered useless. What seems to be required instead is a sort of transformation of the ethical virtues, a reformation of them that would leave wisdom at the core of right desire. The man who underwent such a reformation might, to all appearances, be scarcely distinguishable from the man for whom right action was everything. The ethical life would not have to be a matter of reluctance to him, as it seems to be to the wise man alluded to in Aristotle's other answer. But his would be a greatness of soul, a “*kosmos* of the virtues,” big enough to house a longing to take in the very sources of all things; an ever-present appetite for wisdom, which would somehow shape his every deliberation, would distinguish him from the man who honors wisdom without pursuing it. In short, the complete or whole virtue of such a man, in whom prudence gives orders for the sake of wisdom, would include the ethical virtues without being defined by them.

Now nowhere in the *Ethics* does Aristotle explicitly discuss the constellation of virtues I have just described. He does, however, point to it from time to time. For instance, I think it is difficult to read Aristotle's account of the curious

disposition mentioned at the beginning of this essay without being reminded of the philosophical life, especially when it is read in conjunction with the discussion of its two companion virtues, also unnamed: “friendliness” (displayed toward those with whom one is not fully friends) and “truthfulness” or “love of truth” (in which Socrates and Socratic irony or self-depreciation loom large) (1126b19-31; 1127a33-1127b9; 1127b22-32). Indeed, by placing his account of the readiness to engage in playful, leisurely, tactful conversation in the midst of his account of the ethical virtues, Aristotle suggests that philosophy can occur in the midst of the ethical life.<sup>20</sup> But perhaps the clearest of Aristotle’s allusions to this conjunction of the virtues is to be found in his account of friendship, which by its position provides a delicate contrast to the account of the apparent disjunction between wisdom and the other virtues in Book 10.<sup>21</sup>

There, when at the end of Book 9 he returns to the theme of complete friendship or the friendship between good men, Aristotle makes it clear that the virtue or goodness of such men lies in thought and action. In the course of a single chapter he at once describes the unalloyed delight which good men take in contemplating one another’s deeds, and yet insists that their living together comes to completion in philosophic conversation, in their “sharing of words and thought in common” (1169b30-1170a4; 1170b10-12). Aristotle even suggests that something like the completeness or self-sufficiency that belongs to wisdom characterizes the life of reflection and action enjoyed by good men who are friends. Using language which seems intended to remind us of his account of the divine life in Book 12 of the *Metaphysics*—the life in which wisdom at work presumably shares—Aristotle describes the “living together” of good friends as a sort of “thinking of thinking” (*Meta.* 1074b15-35). Since friends are other selves, friends see themselves “at work” in seeing their friends “at work,” and this seeing or “theorizing,” being itself a form of being at work, brings completeness and joy to their

common life (1169b30-1170b19). While men who are lovers of wisdom rather than wise may not themselves possess the divine self-sufficiency which comes with wisdom, their lives acquire a kind of wholeness and divinity in the presence of their friends.<sup>22</sup>

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Why does Aristotle leave us with these two, rather different accounts of happiness? Some time ago I suggested that Aristotle, exercising his own prudence, makes the superiority of wisdom visible in order to instill in his readers a kind of distant respect for wisdom, but then leaves them and their lives more or less intact. I think that this suggestion, while true, has its limits. Some of his readers might retain their focus on the life of action; they might come away from the *Ethics* with a deepened understanding of the foundations of the ethical life along with a well-founded, if distant, admiration for wisdom and its pursuit. But for others, for those most engaged by Aristotle’s inquiry into the highest good and most eager to make his inquiry their own, the experience of reading the *Ethics*, especially Books 6 and 10, would surely be different. They would see, with Aristotle, the insufficiency of the everyday, customary understanding of virtue and happiness, would see that the life of action must in truth be suffused and completed by deliberative thought. But they would also see, with Aristotle, the ultimate insufficiency of thought aimed at action, would see that thought as thought reaches completion only in the thinking for its own sake of what is simply thinkable. They would thus see, with Aristotle, that there is a space in the human soul—the soul of the animal defined by thinking—that only wisdom can fill, would see that being complete as a human being ultimately means passing beyond what is human. For such readers a simple separation of spheres—“my life of action here, the sphere of being wise somewhere over and up there”—is simply not a possibility. For to have *taken in* the thought that wisdom is the highest good, to have made it truly one’s own, is already to have undergone the re-orien-

tation of prudence described above; it is to have become philo-sophic. And to have *arrived* at the thought that wisdom is the highest good, to have taken a genuine part in Aristotle's philosophic deliberations, is to be *already* on the way to wisdom; it is to have made a beginning in the being at work of philosophizing.<sup>23</sup> To leave such readers with only a distant vision of the superiority of wisdom would not be enough. Aristotle must provide some sense of the sort of life to be lived on the way to wisdom, if only to show how the pursuit of wisdom might "fit" within ordinary life. Prudence and the wish to see respect for wisdom flourish among those dedicated to a life of thoughtful action may require Aristotle to voice the claims of wisdom, but prudence and a kind of friendship with certain of his readers equally oblige him to show them, in word and in deed, what a life of loving wisdom might look like.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> All references to the *Nicomachean Ethics* are to Bywater's edition, the Oxford University Press (London, 1894). Citations and references are generally given in Bekker numbers. Translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> Roughly speaking, the ethical virtues are the human excellences that define character (*êthos*); they thus shape our responses to the world, i.e., our feelings or passions (*pathê*), and our actions (*praxeis*) within it. The intellectual virtues have to do with the activities most central to the "part" of us that thinks, that "has reason (*logon echei*)" in almost every sense of those terms.

<sup>3</sup> Aristotle's inquiry is clearly meant, in the first instance, for men who are serious about the pursuit of happiness both for themselves and their cities (1095a8-11; 1102a12-26). His book is thus addressed to *hoi charientes kai praktikoi*, "men of a certain cultivation or grace who are also able to act"—and this means, to men who, if asked, would identify happiness with honor but who, if pushed, would identify it with virtue (1095b22-30).

<sup>4</sup> Because the following investigation begins with the middle of Aristotle's own inquiry, it will have to take for granted any number of claims, above all, the claim that happiness is an activity (rather than, say, an occasional feeling) and the claim that it has everything to do with virtue or excellence (rather than, say, pleasure). Aristotle himself argues for both claims in Book 1, most explicitly in the chapters (7 and 8) that treat his definition directly. A brief reflection on the words he uses to define happiness may help make more apparent what is at stake there. The word I have translated as "activity" or "being at work," *energeia*, is one of two words used by Aristotle for the core meaning of a thing's being; the near synonym for it is *entelecheia*, which means something like remaining fully at one's end or being fully complete (*Metaphysics* 9, 1048a32-b9; 1050a3-24). *Kata*, "in accordance with," clearly has its strong causal meaning here; it means "through" or "because of" rather than simply "in alignment with" (*Meta.* 5, 1022a14-23). Finally, "virtue," *aretê*, related to the verb *arariskô*, "to join" or "fit together," means "fitness," the inner condition that allows for something to be and work as well as possible (*Ethics*, 1106a15-21). To say that happiness is an *energeia*, then, is to say that it is that activity in which what we are as human beings, i.e., our human form, becomes fully present. And to search for the virtue it accords with is to search for the inner condition through which that complete presence arises, i.e., through which we are fully human or, as we like to say, "are all there" (*Meta.* 9, 1050a34-b2).

<sup>5</sup> "Prudence" and "wisdom" are traditional translations of *phronêsis* and *sophia*. Neither is entirely adequate to the task. *Sophia* has overtones of skill and precision in the arts entirely missing from the ordinary sense of "wisdom," while its connection to craftiness in speech (as in "sophistry") turns up only in degraded forms like "wise guy" and "wisecrack." Prudence, on the other hand, can suggest a caution that has no correlate in *phronêsis*: Aristotle's *phronimos* is no fool; still, there might well be occasions and circumstances in which *phronêsis* would demand that a man throw caution to the winds and hurl himself once more into the breach.

<sup>6</sup> *Kosmos* has been variously translated as "ornament" (Apostle), "crowning ornament" (Rackham) and "crown" (Ross). Though magnanimity may be a crown, it is surely much more than an ornament. How it might serve as something like a unifying ground for

the virtues begins to become clear as we recollect that *hoi charientes kai praktikoi* are lovers of honor to begin with, that being chosen for their own sake rather than the sake of honor is the hallmark of virtuous actions and that magnanimity is the virtue concerned with one's response to another's conferral—or failure to confer—honor on one's virtue (1105a26-1105b5; 1124a4-12). More generally, magnanimity has to do with the way the good man keeps a grip on himself and his virtue in the face of good and bad fortune (1124a112-16). Hence its first appearance (in Book 1), where it is said that, “the beautiful shines through whenever someone bears many and great misfortunes with good grace, not through want of sensibility, but because he is well-bred and great-souled” (1100b30-33).

<sup>7</sup> I have focused here on what magnanimity and whole justice share in common. But there are also significant differences between them, differences that point to significant difficulties with each of them. The emphasis in the account of magnanimity is on self-sufficiency and near stillness: the magnanimous man is said to be “lazy” or “workless” (*argos*=*a-ergos*) in the absence of a project worthy of his virtue and “to be unable to live for (*pros*) another (except for a friend)” (1124b23-26; 1124b31-1125a1). In the description of complete justice, by contrast, the whole emphasis is on the activity or “using” of virtue for (*pros*) others; the perfect citizen is apparently completely absorbed in promoting the happiness of his city and fellow citizens. The self-sufficiency and activity that together characterize happiness seem to fall asunder in these first attempts to characterize complete virtue (1097b14-21).

<sup>8</sup> To be sure, Aristotle defines choice in Book 3 and defining it involves him in a discussion of deliberation; he also mentions the intellectual virtues at points and notes once that there will have to be a discussion of “right reason” later on (1111b4-1113a14; 1103b31-34). Still, the whole emphasis is on the importance of doing, of acquiring a good and stable character by acting in a certain way; “mere” knowing looks like a refuge for the lazy and weak, and Aristotle no sooner gives himself opportunities to talk about the virtues of intellect than he squanders them (1103b20-31; 1105b9-18; 1098a7-17; 1098b23-26).

<sup>9</sup> For enunciations of the “hermeneutical” principle at work here, see 1095a30-b4 and the beginning of the *Physics*, 184a16-184b14.

For the centrality of the principle to the whole dialectical enterprise, see the beginning of the *Topics*, 100a30-b23 and 101a35-b4. The grounds for the principle are perhaps best stated best at *Metaphysics* 2, 993a30-b11. John Burnet provides a useful summary of the business and character of Aristotelian dialectic and its relation to ethical inquiry in the introduction to his excellent edition and commentary on the *Ethics*. See *The Ethics of Aristotle* (London: Methuen, 1900), pp. xxxiv-xliv.

<sup>10</sup> For an illuminating discussion of the meaning of *hexis* and its place within the ethical life, see J. Sachs, “Three Little Words,” *St. John's Review* 54, no.1 (1997), 1-9. Mr. Sachs underscores the distinction between *hexis* and mere habit as well as the activity implicit in *hexis*. Both points are well worth making. It is no accident that *hexis* is an action word derived from the future form of *echein*, which means “have” “hold” or (used intransitively) “be in a certain condition.” A *hexis* is no mere effect of an activity, as, say, poverty is an effect of thinking; nor is it a mere condition for activity as, say, eating is a condition for thinking. It is instead a particular readiness for a particular activity; it is a being-in-shape-for, an intending-to, a being-about-to that requires nothing but opportunity to spring into action; it is, one might say, that activity “on hold.”

<sup>11</sup> For the senses in which wisdom and the other virtues can be regarded as formal causes, see Burnet, op. cit., pp. 144 and 283.

<sup>12</sup> Has anything in the intervening discussion in Book 6 prepared us for this change in perspective? I think so. Although the bulk of Book 6 remains focused on thought as it bears on human action, at the beginning of the book and again in the discussion of knowledge in the strict sense (*epistêmê*) we are reminded that not everything we think about has to be marked by the changeability of human affairs: there are some objects of thought which exist of necessity and we have the “parts” to know them (1139a6-11; 1139b22-23). Then, in the discussion of wisdom (*sophia*), we are reminded, or told, that man is by no means the best thing in the cosmos—and that it is precisely the “action” of *sophia* which puts us in contact with the best of those unchanging things (1141a20-22, a33-b2).

<sup>13</sup> Once Aristotle reminds us here of the part that reasoning plays in the life of action, his question about the usefulness of the intellectual virtues may begin to seem merely odd, at least as regards

prudence. But I think we should beware of dismissing that question too quickly. In the first place, there seem to be any number of moments in life when the most honest answer we can give for why we did something is, “It just felt right” or “I had the sense there was nothing else I could do.” In fact Aristotle himself notes in his discussion of courage that we really see whether the virtue is truly there precisely in moments of sudden danger, when deliberation simply is not a possibility (1117a17-22). Moreover, it seems possible to argue that the perspective of Aristotle’s initial question is simply the perspective of the law. We have already taken note of those places where it is said that the intention of the law is to make men good, i.e., to be a sufficient condition for (ethical) virtue in men. But Aristotle also notes that it is the very nature of law to overlook the particulars with which prudence works: from the point of view of law, prudence, which frees a man to become “a sort of law unto himself,” seems to be at best unnecessary (1128a29-33). Hence the need for “equity,” which adjusts for the universality of law by looking, if you will, from the particular situation, through the law to the intention of the lawgiver (1137b11-34).

<sup>14</sup> For example, the mathematician as mathematician uses his definitions and postulates rather than reflecting on them; he takes his slice of being, his “field,” for granted and sets to work learning as much as he can about it. The man engaged in first philosophy, the man in pursuit of wisdom in the strict sense, accepts no such limit on his thinking; even the so-called principle of non-contradiction—the mathematician’s favorite tool—becomes for him an occasion for reflecting on the being of beings. See *Metaphysics* 1003a20-28; 1005a19-b8.

<sup>15</sup> For Aristotle’s comments on the place and necessity of “care concerning the gods” in the city, see the *Politics* 1322b18-29, 1328b11-13; 1329a27-34.

<sup>16</sup> At 1141b22-30 Aristotle distinguishes two aspects or modes or kinds of prudence, an “architectonic” form that closely resembles lawgiving and a form that corresponds to politics in the ordinary sense, i.e., the hands-on deliberative engagement with the particulars of political life.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle’s words here directly echo the language he had used earlier in Book 6 to characterize art (*technê*): “art” or “the activity of

art” (depending on what text one chooses to follow) “sees to it (*theôrein hopôs*) that there comes into being some one of the things that admit of being and not being . . .” (1140a10-14).

<sup>18</sup> I am assuming here that what Aristotle is referring to in the first instance is the relation of prudence to wisdom within a single soul, that the wisdom that prudence is working to bring forth is in the first instance wisdom for oneself: the prudent man is like the doctor who tries to heal himself. To be sure, prudence in this sense might also direct itself toward bringing about wisdom and the pursuit of wisdom in others; one need look no further than the *Ethics* for evidence of this. Yet I think—and this should become clearer momentarily—that prudence can direct itself outward in this way only if it has already undergone an inner realignment, into a prudence that sees wisdom as the chief good. Only a man who had come to see wisdom in this way, and so wanted it for himself, would want to see others have it as well.

<sup>19</sup> For the appropriateness of the name, consider Aristotle’s discussion of philo-words at 1099a7-21 (especially the *philo-theôros*, the man who loves to behold) and the passage from the Republic it clearly echoes, where Socrates “defines” the philosopher as a “lover of the sight (*philo-theamon*) of the truth” (475b8-e4).

<sup>20</sup> It is here that Aristotle first introduces the thought that a man might be responsive to the demands of law or custom while remaining independent of it: “So the graceful (or gracious) and free (or generous) man will keep himself in this condition, being a sort of law unto himself” (1128a31-32).

<sup>21</sup> That friendship in some form may be a candidate for “best and most complete virtue” is suggested by the following considerations. Aristotle opens his account of friendship with the claim that friendship is “a virtue or involved with virtue . . .” (1155a3-4). We later learn that genuine friendship (*philia*) involves more than mere liking (*philêsis*); it is a *hexis* and involves choice, i.e., it shares certain important structural features with ethical virtue (1157b28-31). We also learn that justice, which at least in its broadest sense was earlier identified with whole or complete virtue, is in important respects superseded by friendship (1155a22-28; 1163b15-18). Finally, Aristotle’s name for friendship at its peak, “complete friendship,” points directly back to the language of “best and most complete

virtue,” and the friendship in question is between men who are simply good or virtuous without qualification (1156b7-35). The connection between friendship and philosophy begins to become apparent in chapter four of Book 9, the beginning of the sequence that leads to the passage discussed below. Here, for the first time in the *Ethics*, man is openly identified with the intellect or thinking part of himself, and the good man is characterized by his abiding love and cultivation of his self in this sense (1166a13-23).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Amelie Rorty, “The Place of Contemplation in Aristotle’s NE,” in *Essays on Aristotle’s Ethics*, ed. Amelie Oksenberg Rorty (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London, 1980) esp. pp. 388-391.

<sup>23</sup> In the *Ethics* itself we are witness to a peculiar coming together of *theôria* and *praxis*; “philosophic deliberations” is meant to get at this conjunction. From one point of view Aristotle’s inquiry is simply a sustained practical deliberation about what to do with our lives; from another it is a sustained philosophic exploration of a what-is question—“What is the human good?”—in which any number of basic features of human being come to light. In it we see the thinking of what is turn practical as it turns its gaze on itself—the being capable of thought—and the conditions for its own activity. But more to the point, we see practical thought turn theoretical as it turns from deliberation about the particular conditions for this or that virtuous act to deliberation about the virtues themselves, i.e., the conditions for happiness itself. Once we take into account this doubleness in Aristotle’s own inquiry we must begin to wonder seriously just how settled the distinction is between prudence and wisdom—or at any rate, between prudential and philosophic inquiry (1112b20-24; 1142a31-b2).



## Jacob Klein and the Phenomenological Project of Desedimenting the Formalization of Meaning

Burt C. Hopkins

Scope and Limits of Husserl’s Reactivation of the Sedimented Origins of the Modern Spirit

For Edmund Husserl, phenomenology as First Philosophy has but one goal: intuitive knowledge of what is. On his view, both what in the world the formalized meaning formations of mathematical physics (e.g.,  $f = ma$ ) refer to and therefore make intuitable, and how in the world this reference and corresponding intuition is possible, is obscure. He traces this obscurity to the fact that the formalized meaning at issue in modern mathematics is made possible by the progressive “emptying of its meaning in relation” (*Crisis*, 44/44)<sup>1</sup> to the “real [real]” (35/37), that is, to the intuitive givenness of the things manifest to everyday sense experience in the surrounding world. Husserl’s historical reflection on the beginnings of the development of modern, Galilean science, reveals that it is first made possible by this progressive emptying of meaning. That is, the meaning formations of the mathematics that make physics possible are themselves made possible by their “becoming liberated from all intuited actuality, about numbers, numerical relations” (43/44), and, of course, from the intuitively given shapes of actual things. More precisely, the ideal shapes of Euclidean geometry are

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substituted for the intuited shapes of things, while algebraic calculation with “‘symbolic’ concepts” (48/48) that express numbers in general—as opposed to determined numbers—excludes the “*original* thinking that genuinely gives meaning to this technical process and truth to the correct results” (46/46).

To be sure, Husserl’s investigations of this problem in the *Crisis*-texts are fragmentary. Their focus is on the origin of geometry and on what he refers to as the “sedimentation” (52/52) involved in the Galilean impulse to treat Euclidean geometry in a taken-for-granted, and therefore straightforward, manner. Husserl uses the term “sedimentation” to designate the “constant presuppositions . . . [of the] constructions, concepts, presuppositions, theories” that characterize the significations of the meaning formations of a science—in the case at hand, of Galilean natural science—insofar as they are not “‘cashed in’ [*einzulösenden*],”<sup>2</sup> (OG, 376/366), that is, reactivated in terms of the original activities that produced their meaning. Cashing in the meaning formations in question requires that we eventually reactivate the “historical beginning” (367/356) that this science “must have had,” which in the case of Galilean natural science means that we eventually have to reactivate the origin of the Euclidean geometry that was taken for granted when its meaning formations were first established.

Husserl’s fragmentary analyses of the “*origin of the modern spirit*” (*Crisis*, 58/57), in which he links to Galileo’s name “all of our characterizations . . . in a certain sense simplifying and idealizing the matter,” function therefore to “de-sediment” the meaning formations and thereby to reactivate their historical beginnings. Specifically, Husserl’s de-sedimentation cashes in the impulse of the Galilean spirit to mathematize the world by tracing this accomplishment back to its origin in “the sphere of immediately experiencing intuitions and the possible experience of the prescientific life-world” (42/43). Husserl encounters the obscure or unintelligible meaning for-

mations of present-day mathematical natural science, and moves backward to an historical reference that mediates his access to the life-world. Thus it is not as if Husserl, sitting in his study, is somehow able to conjure up the direct experience of the prescientific life-world and to compare it with the abstract view of the world presumably found in the meaning formations that make up mathematical physics. Rather, his experience of mathematical physics, when combined with his expectation that its meaning formations must somehow be ultimately founded in a reference (or, more precisely, an intention) to the world that is capable being intuitively fulfilled at some level, leads to his discovery (or, more properly, his re-discovery) of the prescientific life-world and its true origins.

Rather than rehearse Husserl’s well-known analyses, what is necessary here is to thematize their salient results and highlight their fragmentary character. Husserl shows that the Galilean impulse rests on both a *direct* mathematization of the appearances of bodies and an *indirect* mathematization of their sensuous modes of givenness as they show up in the intuitively given surrounding-world. That is to say, Husserl’s attempt to cash in the ideal meaning formations of the pure shapes of Euclidean geometry, which Galileo took for granted as the “true” shapes of nature, reveals that our direct experience of nature *never* yields geometrical-ideal bodies but “precisely the bodies that we actually experience” (22/25). Directing our regard to the mere shapes of these bodies in an abstractive way cannot yield what modern science understands as “geometrical ideal possibilities,” nor can their arbitrary transformation in fantasy. Even though the latter yields “ideal’ possibilities” in a certain sense, these possibilities remain tied to sensible shapes and thus can only manifest their transformation into other sensible shapes.

The method of operating with the pure or ideal shapes that characterizes Euclidean geometry thus does not point directly back to the sensible shapes of the bodies we actually

experience in the life-world, but rather to measuring, “the methodology of determination by surveying and measuring in general, practiced first primitively and then as an art in the prescientific, intuitively given surrounding-world” (24/27). It is therefore the praxis of perfecting such measuring, “of freely pressing toward the horizon of *conceivable* perfecting ‘again and again,’” (23/26) which yields “*limit shapes* [*Grenzgestalten*] as invariant and never attainable poles” toward which the series of perfecting tends. Euclidean geometry is then born when “we are interested in these ideal shapes and are consistently engaged in determining them and in constructing new ones out of those already determined.” This is the geometry that was pre-given to Galileo as a taken-for-granted tradition. The original activity in which the ideal meaning formations of Euclidean geometry were accomplished remained concealed to Galileo. Thus when Galileo mathematized the intuitive shapes of bodies directly and their sensuous manners of appearing indirectly by substituting for them the ‘anticipation’ of their true being in the ideal shapes of Euclidean geometry, the original intuition of the sensible shapes of bodies, along with their transformation into limit shapes by the praxis of measuring, became “sedimented.” That is to say, as a consequence of Galileo’s methodical construction of the “true nature” through the substitution of the ideal shapes of Euclidean geometry for the experience of sensible shapes proper to bodies, the original intuition of sensible shapes was lost. Hence, Husserl’s famous characterization of Galileo as “at once a *discovering* and a *concealing genius*” (53/52).

Husserl’s analyses of the Galilean mathematization takes cognizance of the fact that “one thing more is important for our clarification.” This “one thing more” is the “‘arithmetization of geometry’” (44/44). Aided by “the algebraic terms and ways of thinking that have been widespread in the modern period since Vieta,” this arithmetization transforms the ideal shapes of Galileo’s Euclidean approach to the world into

algebraic structures whose symbolic formula-meaning displaces—“unnoticed” (44/45)—the signification of magnitudes. The geometrical shapes of Galilean science are covered over when replaced by algebraic notations. Husserl considers this the “*decisive accomplishment*” (42/43) of the natural scientific method. In accord with its “complete meaning” (*Gesamtsinn*), this accomplishment makes possible the anticipation of systematically ordered, determinate predictions about the practical life-world. Such predictions are made possible by hypothesizing underlying ideal mathematical structures expressed in general formulas with indeterminate values. By means of these, empirically verifiable regularities can anticipate the intuitions that constitute immediate, prescientific experience. Consequently, “[t]his arithmetization of geometry leads almost automatically, in a certain way, to the *emptying of its meaning*” (44/44). Husserl points out that this unnoticed emptying of meaning eventually “becomes a fully conscious methodical displacement, a methodical transition from geometry, for instance, to pure analyses, treated as a science in its own right” (44/45). Thus this process of methodical transformation leads beyond arithmetization to “a completely universal ‘formalization.’” A purely formal analysis transcends the pure theory of numbers and magnitudes of algebra: analysis assumes the guise of a *mathesis universalis*, a universal mathematics of “manifolds.” Manifolds are thought of in “empty, formal generality”; they are conceived of as defined by determinate modalities of the “something-in-general.” And although Husserl does not explicitly mention it here, the construction of the “formal-logical idea of a ‘world-in-general’” at issue in the *mathesis universalis* is what he elsewhere refers to as “formal ontology.”<sup>3</sup> In contrast to his analyses of the Galilean geometrization of nature, however, Husserl’s analysis of *mathesis universalis* or formal ontology does not attempt to reactivate the historical beginnings of the original accomplishment that makes it possible. He makes no attempt to cash in the sedimentation of meaning that accom-

panies it. This sedimentation is inseparable from the displacement of the immediate intuitive experience of the life-world that takes place in the arithmetization of geometry, the displacement that originally makes possible the formalization of meaning at issue in formal ontology.

Despite Husserl's failure to pursue this task of de-sedimentation with respect to formalization, it is clear that he thinks that its de-sedimentation would lead to immediate intuitions in the life-world. This is evident from the following passage:

If one still has a vivid awareness of this coordination [among mathematical idealities] in its original meaning, then a mere thematic focus of attention on this meaning is sufficient in order to grasp the ascending orders of *intuitions* (now conceived as approximations) indicated by the functionally coordinated quantities (or, more briefly, formulae); or rather, one can, following these indications, bring the ascending order of intuitions vividly to mind.

Likewise in *Formal and Transcendental Logic* Husserl expressed the conviction that

the *meaning-relation of all categorial meanings* to something individual, that is, on the noetic side, to evidences of individuals, to *experiences*—a relation growing out of their meaning-genesis and present in every example that could be used by formal analytics—surely *cannot be insignificant for the meaning and the possible evidence of the laws of analytics*, including the highest ones, the principles of logic. Otherwise, how could those laws claim *formal-ontological validity*? (217)

However, neither the *Crisis*-texts nor *Formal and Transcendental Logic* contain, respectively, concrete analyses

that bring vividly to mind the ascending order of intuitions at issue in the original meaning of symbolic formulae-meaning or that trace the meaning-genesis of formal analytics from the immediate intuitions of individual objects. Consequently, Husserl's conviction that it is possible to provide such analyses remains without a demonstrable *phenomenological* foundation. In what follows, I shall argue with the help of Jacob Klein's work that the peculiar character of the abstraction that yields the symbolic formulae that underlie formalization precludes, in principle, the cashing in of its meaning formations in the intuition of individuals. More precisely, I shall show that the categorial meaning formations at issue in formal ontology do not refer *directly* to individual objects but only to other materially and individually empty meaning formations. I shall do so by demonstrating that the original accomplishment of the symbolic representation of numbers leads to an indirect understanding of numbers and ultimately to the substitution of symbolic expressions for the ideal numerical entities referred to by Greek arithmetic. I shall also show that the consequence of this is that a sedimented understanding of numbers is superimposed upon the sedimented geometrical evidences at issue in Galileo's mathematization of nature. Finally, I shall argue that the result of this "double" sedimentation is the impossibility of locating in the immediate experience of the life-world a direct referent proper to formalized categorial meaning formations.

Jacob Klein's De-Sedimentation of Symbolic Formula-Meaning

Jacob Klein's *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*,<sup>4</sup> which was published in two installments in 1934 and 1936 (on the basis of research completed in the early 1930s<sup>5</sup> and thus before Husserl began his *Crisis*-texts in 1934)<sup>6</sup> is remarkable in that it, in effect, accomplishes the de-sedimentation of the historical genesis of the development

of symbolic thinking in modern mathematics that remained unclarified in Husserl's fragmentary analyses of mathematics in the *Crisis*-texts. Klein accomplishes this by reactivating what he refers to as the process of "symbol-generating abstraction" (GM, 129/125), a process which he contends initially makes possible the formalized meaning formations of mathematics. Yet unlike Husserl's attempt to reactivate the Galilean impulse behind the development of mathematical physics, Klein's reactivation is based upon actual research in the history of mathematics.

Klein's reactivation of this development traces its basis to an abstraction that is radically different from the ancient *aphairesis* (abstraction). Klein shows how the meaning formation that results from symbol-generating abstraction does not refer to the direct perception of the quantity or magnitude of things. Rather, the term *symbolum*, which originated with Vieta, was used both for the letter signs and the connective signs that referred neither to determinate numbers nor to the arithmetical operations performed upon them, but to indeterminate numbers and the general rules that govern the algebraic art of calculation. Klein reactivates the meaning that became sedimented in Vieta's "universal extension [*universale Erweiterung*]" (179/172) of the ancient concept of the *eidōs* (species) of an *arithmos* (counting number), an extension "through which the species become the objects of a 'general' mathematical discipline which can be identified neither with geometry nor with arithmetic."

Regarding the transformation of the ancient concept of number, the first part of Klein's study definitively establishes that Greek mathematics shared a common understanding of *arithmos* as a "determinate amount of determinate things" (53/46). Greek arithmetic sought to establish the truth of its object, first as it shows up in counting, then as a determinate amount of pure units (monads), and finally with respect to its mode of being. Notwithstanding the ancient debate over the ontological dependence (Aristotle) or independence (Plato)

of the latter, the "theoretical" concept of number, as an ideal being comprised of a determinate amount of "pure" units that are indivisible, remained constant for the ancients. With Vieta's innovation of calculating with *species* represented by letter signs, however, the *direct* relation of "number" to a determinate amount of determinate things or units is lost. As Klein puts it:

While every *arithmos* intends *immediately the things or the units themselves* whose number it happens to be, his letter sign intends *directly the general character of being a number* which belongs to every possible number, that is to say, it intends "number in general" immediately, but the things or units which are at hand in each case only mediately. (182/174)

Klein appeals to the mediaeval distinction between first and second intentions (*intentio prima* and *intentio secunda*) to characterize the letter sign as designating a "second intention," that is, as designating "a concept which itself directly intends another *concept* and not a *being*," i.e., not a thing or unit. In addition, the independence accorded the general character of number (or "general number") signified by the letter sign insofar as it is now the object of Vieta's calculational operations, "*thus transforms the object of the intentio secunda*, namely the 'general number' intended by the letter sign, *into the object of an intentio prima*, of a 'first intention', namely of a 'being' which is directly apprehended and whose counterpart in the realm of ordinary calculation is, for instance, 'two monads', 'three monads'." The consequence of this is that the "being" of the species "is to be understood neither as independent in the Pythagorean and Platonic sense nor as attained 'by abstraction'... in the Aristotelian sense, but as *symbolic*. *The species are in themselves symbolic for-*

mations—namely formations whose possible objectivity is understood as an actual objectivity” (183/175).

As a result of this shift in the intentionality of the concept of number, what was originally a “concept” for the ancients, namely the *eidos*, species, is now treated as an “object.” It is impossible, however, “to see amounts of things or units in the isolated letter signs ‘A’ or ‘B’” (183/176) used by Vieta to represent this “object.” Hence, their “numerical character” is only “comprehensible within the language of *symbolic formalism*” (183/175). According to Klein, Vieta derived the rules of this formalism from “‘calculations’ with amounts [*Anzahlen*] of monads.” Thus it is only through the application of these rules to the letter signs or symbols, that they acquire a numerical character. Indeed, “[t]hese rules therefore represent the first modern *axiom system*; they create the systematic context which originally ‘defines’ the object to which they apply.” However, because letter signs do not signify amounts of things or monads but rather the “concept” of “number in general,” Klein observes that they can retain a numerical character “only because the ancient ‘amounts’ (*Anzahlen*) of monads are themselves [eventually] interpreted as ‘modern numbers’ (*Zahlen*), which means that they are conceived from the point of view of their symbolic representation” (184/176).

For Klein, Descartes was the first—and perhaps the only—thinker to attempt to render intelligible the new mode of abstraction at issue in the symbolic “mode of being” of the modern concept of number. In addition, Descartes extended the methodical scope of the general analytic of algebra. In Vieta’s hands, algebra was thought of as an auxiliary discipline, in the sense that he still understood it as the method for finding the solutions to traditional arithmetical and geometrical problems. By contrast, Descartes identified the methodically “general” object of the algebraically conceived *mathesis universalis*, “number in general,” “which can be represented and conceived only *symbolically*—with the ‘substance’ of the

world, with corporeality as ‘*extensio*’” (207/197). This identification amounts, of course, to Descartes’s symbolic interpretation of Euclidean geometry, an interpretation that for Klein involves “a ‘sedimented’ understanding of numbers... [being] superposed upon the first stratum of ‘sedimented’ geometrical ‘evidences’”<sup>7</sup> at issue in Galileo’s direct and indirect mathematization of nature. As a consequence of this, “the ‘general analytic’ takes over the role of the ancient fundamental ontological discipline” (*GM*, 175/169). With this, “an effort is made to let it supersede the traditional logic completely,” an effort that for Klein gave rise to the battle between the ancients and moderns in the seventeenth century, a battle that “is still being waged today, now under the guise of the conflict between ‘formal logic’ and ‘mathematical logic’ or ‘logistic’, although its ontological presuppositions have been completely obscured.”

All of this can be seen more clearly on the basis of Klein’s analysis of Descartes’s thinking in the *Regulae*. In that work, Descartes attempted to come to terms with the mode of being of the “pure” concepts presupposed by the “formal” meaning proper to the symbolic concepts of the new algebraic quantities. Descartes speaks there of “‘abstract beings’ (*entia abstracta*)” (210/200) that are the products of the “‘pure intellect’ (*intellectus purus*),” which the mind apprehends “when it thinks” and “in a way turns *itself toward itself*.” In order to be true, these abstract beings “must be altogether divorced from the imagination” (209/199). Thus for Descartes “‘extension is not body’” (208/198), “‘number is not the thing enumerated,’” and “‘a unit is not a quantity’” (209/199). The mind’s attempt to represent the pure concepts extension, number, or unit by means of the imagination “‘would necessarily arrive at contradictions,’” because “‘in the imagination the “idea” of extension cannot be separated from the “idea” of body, nor the “idea” of number from the “idea” of the thing enumerated, nor the “idea” of unity from the “idea” of quantity.’” However, when the “pure” intellect,

for instance, separates “from a multitude of units ‘represented’ in the imagination (a number of units, that is), their ‘multitudinousness’ as such, i.e., the ‘mere multitude’...the ‘pure’ indeterminate manyness to which simply nothing ‘true’, nothing truly in ‘being’, and hence no ‘true idea’ of a being corresponds, it must employ the imagination in order to be at all able to get hold of the thing separated.” Thus for Descartes the imagination, which allows the mind to envisage, for instance, “‘five units’, here enters into the service of a faculty not ‘perceptually clear’, namely the ‘pure intellect’, which, *being bare of any reference to the world*, comprehends ‘fiveness’ as ‘something separated’ from ‘five’ counted points or other arbitrary objects—as mere ‘multiplicity in general’, as ‘pure’ multiplicity” (211/201–2). Hence, according to Klein for Descartes “*the imaginative power makes possible a symbolic representation of the indeterminate content which has been ‘separated’ by the ‘pure intellect’*” (211/202). Klein calls the “abstraction” at issue here a “*symbol-generating abstraction.*” On his view “[i]t alone gives rise to the possibility of contrasting ‘intuition’ [*Anschauung*] and ‘conception’, and of positing ‘intuition’ as a *separate* source of cognition alongside of reason.” This is the case because for Descartes neither the “pure” intellect nor its symbolically represented “pure” ideas have any “*relation at all to the being of world and the things in the world.*” And because the ontological issue here is not so much the “incorporeality” of the “pure” intellect and its ideas but their separation from the corporeal, it is a philosophical legacy of Descartes and the formalization of the modern concept generally that “intuition” comes to fulfil the function of “re-establishing” an ontological connection between cognition and the world.

The result of all of this for Klein is Descartes’s view that the intellect, when directed to the “idea” of number as a “multitude of units” presented by the imagination, turns to its “own knowing” (221/208) and no longer sees it directly in “the ‘performed act’ (*actus exercitus*)...but ‘indirectly’,

‘secondarily’ (*secundario*), or in terms of another scholastic expression, in the ‘signified act’ (*actus signatus*)...Its immediate ‘object’ is now its own conceiving of that ‘multitude of units’, that is, the ‘concept’ (*conceptus*) of the number as such; nevertheless this multitude itself appears as a ‘something’, namely as *one* and therefore as an ‘ens’, a ‘being’.” And when this “*ens rationis* as a ‘second intention’ is grasped *with the aid of the imagination* in such a way that the intellect can, in turn, take it up as an object in the mode of a ‘first intention,’ we are dealing with a *symbol*, either with an ‘algebraic’ letter sign or with a ‘geometric’ figure as understood by Descartes.”

If we substitute Husserl’s terminology of intentionality for the mediaeval terminology employed by Klein, we can readily understand the symbolic meaning formation yielded by symbol-generating abstraction as an “empty intention.” However, it is “empty” in a sense that Husserl did not appear fully to appreciate, and could not because his programmatically announced project in the *Crisis*-texts has as one of its goals the intuitive “cashing in” of the formalized intentional meaning formations of symbolic formulae.<sup>8</sup> But this is precisely what Klein’s de-sedimentation of the symbol-generating abstraction that produces such meaning formations shows is impossible *in principle*. It is impossible for the simple reason that what such empty meaning intentions intend is a concept or category (presented in a “secondary” or “categorical” intention), which is apprehended by means of a first or straightforward intention and which therefore presents a “formalized” meaning formation that does not directly refer to or intend the kind of individual entities that can be presented or fulfilled in “intuition.” Put differently, Husserl’s “felt” need to “de-formalize” the empty intention characteristic of the mathematical formula in the *intuition* of individual objects in the pre-scientific life-world—in order to provide a *foundation* that would render such meaning formations intelligible—is itself symptomatic of the lack of direct

reference to these objects, a lack that makes symbolic meaning formations possible in the first place. He, of course, recognized that a progressive “emptying of meaning” was inseparable from the initial constitution of symbolic meaning formations. In other words, when the *standard* of meaning is conceived as the immediate intuitive contact with the things of the world, the formalized meaning formations that make modern science possible cannot but be *experienced* as “empty” of meaning. But this conclusion only follows if the intuitive contact with the individual things of the world is established as the sole criterion for providing a foundation for meaning. However, this is precisely what Husserl fails to establish but instead simply assumes. He assumes this as a consequence of what he supposes is the “inner intentional unity” of the history of philosophy and, therefore, the unity of the intention proper to the First Philosophy of the ancients and *his* transcendental phenomenology. Klein’s de-sedimentation of the historical accomplishment of the symbol-generating abstraction demonstrates that this standard for meaning cannot be established for all meaning formations and therefore demonstrates that the relationship between ancient First Philosophy and modern metaphysics is characterized by a historical *discontinuity*. In Husserl’s terms, what Klein shows is that the intentional referent proper to the “empty intention” of formalized meaning formations is *essentially* different from that of the “empty intention” proper to general meaning formations. Thus, whereas the latter—for instance, the categorial meaning of a house that is presented to consciousness in the absence of the perception of a house—lends itself to the direct intuitive fulfillment of its meaning when a house is “given” in perception, the “empty intention” of the formal meaning of  $y = mx + b$  does not lend itself to a direct intuitive fulfillment of its meaning.<sup>9</sup> The consequence of this, then, is not the *unintelligibility per se* of the formal meaning intention of the formula, but rather its relative “unintelligibility” in comparison to the “foundedness” of the general

(i.e., the traditional categorial meaning formation or *eidōs*) meaning formation in the intuition of the individual things in life-world.

#### Postscript: Symbol-Generating Abstraction and the Universal Formalization of Meaning

The universal formalization of algebraic thinking that began with Leibniz’s concept of a *mathesis universalis*, which severs Descartes’s identification of the formalized meaning formations yielded by symbol-generating abstraction with extension, eliminates once and for all the possibility of establishing even an indirect relation between such meaning formations and the pre-given scientific life-world. Whatever else this universalization of formal analysis accomplishes, it is clear that it removes the basis for any reference to the life-world by the “empty intention” of the formal category proper to “the something-in-general.” The consequence of this is that the possibility of—however indirect—an intuitive “cashing in” of the formalized meaning formations of the *mathesis universalis* of modernity is in principle precluded. Thus, also precluded in principle is the possibility of realizing Husserl’s dream of grounding the formal ontology presupposed by mathematics and formal logic in the intuition of individual objects in the life-world.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, ed. Walter Biemel, Husserliana 6 (The Hague: Nijhoff, (1)1954; (2)1976); *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1970). Hereinafter cited as *Crisis*, with German and English page references, respec-

tively. Quotes in series will bypass the convention of repeating the reference to their source.

<sup>2</sup> Originally published in a heavily edited form by Eugen Fink as “Die Frage nach dem Ursprung der Geometrie als intentional-historisches Problem,” *Revue internationale de Philosophie* 1 (1939), 203–25; Fink’s typescript of Husserl’s original, and significantly different, 1936 text (which is the text translated by Carr) was published as Beilage 3 in Biemel’s edition of *Hua* 6; “The Origin of Geometry,” appears in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, 353–83. Hereinafter cited as “OG” according to the convention for serial quotes stated in n. 1, above.

<sup>3</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Formal and Transcendental Logic*, trans. Dorian Cairns (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1969), 190; German text: *Formale und transzendente Logik*, ed. Paul Janssen, *Husserliana* 17 [The Hague: Nijhoff, 1974], 67; hereinafter cited as *FTL* with original page reference, which is included in the margins of both the German and the English additions cited.

<sup>4</sup> Jacob Klein, “Die griechische Logistik und die Entstehung der Algebra” in *Quellen und Studien zur Geschichte der Mathematik, Astronomie und Physik*, Abteilung B: *Studien*, vol. 3, no. 1 (Berlin, 1934), 18–105 (Part 1); no. 2 (1936), 122–235 (Part 2); *Greek Mathematical Thought and the Origin of Algebra*, trans. Eva Brann (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1969; reprint: New York: Dover, 1992). Hereinafter cited as GM, with German and English page references respectively, following the convention for serial references stated in n. 1, above.

<sup>5</sup> Klein’s wife, Dodo Klein (who was Gerhart Husserl’s ex-wife), reports that it was “probably 1932, 1933” when he wrote this text. The quote is from p. 14 of a typed transcript of a tape recording of memories of her second husband. The transcript (the tape recording is apparently lost) is among Klein’s papers housed in St. John’s College Library, Annapolis, Maryland.

<sup>6</sup> Husserl’s work on the Crisis was begun in 1934, whereas his work on the origin of geometry dates from 1936 (see *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie. Eine Einleitung in die phänomenologische Philosophie*, ed. Reinhold N. Smid, *Husserliana* 19 [Dordrecht: Kluwer,

1993]), editor’s introduction, xi and lvi). The former was first published in 1936 and the latter, posthumously in 1939 in the version edited by Fink.

<sup>7</sup> Jacob Klein, “Phenomenology and the History of Science,” in Marvin Farber, ed., *Philosophical Essays in Memory of Edmund Husserl*, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1940), 143–63; reprinted in Jacob Klein, *Lectures and Essays*, ed. Robert B. Williamson and Elliott Zuckerman (Annapolis, MD: St. John’s Press, 1985); the quote is from p. 84 of the latter.

<sup>8</sup> This goal is consistent with Husserl’s articulation of the possibility of a formal judgment in *FTL*. Regarding the “ideal ‘existence’ [*Existenz*] of the judgment-content” (193) that is at issue in formal judgments, he writes: “we are referred to the syntactical cores, which seem to be functionless from the formal point of view. That would imply, then, that the possibility of properly effectuating the possibility of a judgment (as a meaning) is rooted not only in the syntactical forms but also in the syntactical stuffs. This fact is easily overlooked by the formal logician, with his interest directed one-sidedly to the syntactical—the manifold forms of which are all that enters into logical theory—and with his algebraizing of the cores as theoretical irrelevancies, as empty somethings that need only be kept identical” (194). Thus for Husserl: “Prior to all judging, there is a universal experiential basis. It is always presupposed as a harmonious unity of possible experience.” And this means that “in respect of its content, every original judging and every judging that proceeds coherently, has coherence by virtue of the coherence of the matters in the synthetic unity of the experience, which is the basis on which the judging stands.” However, it is just this experiential basis that Klein’s analysis of the shift and transposition of the levels of intentionality at issue in the symbol-generating abstraction shows is no longer a factor in the “intentional genesis” of the formal judgments that are at issue in algebraic calculations.

<sup>9</sup> Husserl, of course, recognizes that “formalization is something essentially different from variation. It does not consist in imagining that the determinations of the variants are changed into others; rather, it is a disregarding, an emptying of all objective, material determinations” (*Erfahrung und Urteil* [Hamburg: Meiner, 1985], 435; *Experience and Judgment*, trans. James S. Churchill and Karl Ameriks [Evanston, IL: Northwestern, 1973], 359). However, it is

precisely the lack of relevance of the variation of an intuitively apprehended individual variant (presented in the straightforward intention proper either to the perception or imagination that yields the individual exemplar that is the basis of variation) that is at issue in formalization, which eliminates the possibility of tracing the intentional genesis of the formal meaning (yielded by the formalizing abstraction proper to the symbol-generating abstraction) to an intentional activity directed to the experience of the life-world's objects. Thus, in the case of the "empty intention" of a house, the possibility of its general categorial meaning refers to an intentional genesis in the intelligible structures of a straightforwardly intended house. In the case of the "empty intention" of an algebraic formula, however, its formal categorial meaning refers to an intentional genesis in a straightforwardly intended category—in other words, the intentional referent of its "empty intention" is not the "synthetic unity" yielded by the "harmonious unity of possible experience." "De-formalizing" the "empty intention" of a formal meaning formation, then, does not lead to the possible experience of straightforwardly intended objects in the life-world, but to ideal meanings, meanings that of necessity have only an indirect relation to this world. Insofar as the latter must already have been mathematized in order for the ideal meanings in question to achieve a "worldly" status, the referent proper to the "empty intention" characteristic of formal meaning formations is in principle precluded from straightforwardly intending the pre-scientific (pre-mathematical) objects of the natural life-world.



## Opening Questions

### Ronald Mawby

#### Introduction

One of the delights of language is that a single string of symbols can entwine so many meanings. So it is with my title, "Opening Questions," which unravels five ways. This essay is first a reflective exploration of questions, so I will be opening questions to our examination. We look briefly at what questions are, how they arise, what they presuppose, and the like. Second, questions often occur in speech or thought as opening moves. When we think in the sense of engaging our minds to find out what is true, we begin and direct our inquiry with questions. Thus every episode of thought opens with a question. Third, questions appear as openings or gaps in the fabric of knowledge. The relation of enclosure between the area of ignorance and the area of knowledge—which encloses which—divides, I shall argue, the taxonomy of questions at its root. Fourth, we call a question open when its answer is not yet settled, so opening questions means posing but not answering them. The adage says, "a fool can ask more questions in a hour than a sage can answer in a week." Here I play the part of the fool. The final thread ties these reflections to our point of departure, which is the rich and important question that opens Plato's *Meno*.

#### Rationale

Before going further, I will say why I consider this undertaking to be worthwhile. Aristotle begins his *Metaphysics* with the statement that all humans by nature desire to know. A desire to know is expressed by a question, so Aristotle

appears to be saying that we are by nature questioners. If so, exploring questions is one way to obey the Delphic injunction, Know Thyself.

Aristotle goes on to say that in the *Metaphysics* he is seeking knowledge of the highest kind, which he calls wisdom. He thus intimates that seeking or desiring or loving wisdom, that is, philosophy, is inherent in human being. I am told the Greek usually translated as “desire to know” may be rendered as “stretched out toward knowledge,” and “stretched out” indicates a certain tension that may be uncomfortable. A teacher of mine thought Aristotle was wrong, that human beings by nature desire to feel comfortable, and implied that the tension inherent in the desire to know is something we seek to avoid. Oscar Wilde famously remarked that one way to avoid temptation is to give in to it. Likewise we can avoid unfulfilled desire by fulfilling it; we eliminate the tension of desiring to know by actually coming to know. This, I take it, is what Hegel thought himself to have done. He finished philosophy as the quest for wisdom by actually attaining wisdom, or rational knowledge of the whole.

Others tell us that the quest for wisdom should be finished by being abandoned. Recent positivists, for instance, say philosophy is pointless because its questions are meaningless. They depict the speculative philosopher as a failed Houdini who entangles himself in verbal confusions from which he is unable to escape. On this view philosophical problems are pseudo-problems, calling not for solution but dissolution. Kant, though his sensitivities differ, is often taken by the positivists as a precursor. His critique of human reason purports to establish the necessary conditions for knowledge, and to show that our reason is unsuitable for certain of its traditional speculative employments. Both Kant and the positivists suggest that we sublimate the desire for wisdom by turning it into channels where knowledge is possible, such as mathematics or natural science. Still others say philosophy is futile because philosophical issues support no genuine epistemic

distinction between knowledge and opinion. In philosophy, they say, the distinction between truth and falsehood resembles Hobbes's distinction between religion and superstition: both are “fear of powers invisible,” religion “from tales publicly allowed,” superstition from tales “not allowed” (Hobbes, 56). What the community allows is truth, what it does not allow is falsehood; the community may be either a proper political entity or an academic group. This has been a position of rhetoricians from the ancient Sophists to the present day.

All the foregoing, from the Sophists to Hegel, share this opinion: the quest for wisdom is temporary. Philosophy lasts only until we either get wisdom or give up wanting it. But philosophy as a way of life takes the desire for wisdom as permanent. If Socrates may be said to have a position, this might be it. Socratic wisdom is the same as Socratic ignorance; the height of human wisdom is knowing what you don't know. Inquiry into which life is best reveals that very life of inquiry to be best. But perhaps the only result of a life devoted to philosophy, the only result defensible in speech, is some coherent understanding of fundamental questions. If our most concentrated and orderly stretch toward wisdom results only in the awareness of questions, then, at least for those of us drawn to philosophy, it is worthwhile to ask about questions themselves.

### Meno's Opening Question

In the dialogue that bears his name, Meno asks two large questions, one to start the conversation, the other in an attempt to stop it. Meno opens the dialogue by saying:

Can you tell me, Socrates, whether excellence can be taught? Or is it not teachable but the result of practice, or is it neither of these, but men possess it by nature or in some other way?(70)

What can we say about this question? First we can say that it is important. We all have a stake in bringing about human excellence. As parents, teachers, citizens, members of the human community, as people trying to shape for ourselves good and satisfying lives, the answer to Meno's question is important for us. How does one attain excellence? The question surely seems natural, the kind of question that might arise for anyone who reflects on what he or she is doing. The question is old, but fresh. It is a question that won't go away.

Second, we can say that the answer is not obvious. Is excellence teachable? Perhaps, but is it teachable in the way that mathematics is teachable? Perhaps not. Do we attain excellence by practice, as we acquire a skill or habit "by doing"? This is plausible, though not self-evident. Does excellence arise from nature? Is it inherent in us, or at least in those of us who have good natures? It seems reasonable that nature at the least could help or hinder in the pursuit of excellence. Are there other ways in which excellence could arise? Perhaps from the grace of God? Perhaps in some way that we cannot even name? Although Meno's is a natural question to ask, it is not an easy one to answer.

Third, we see very quickly that the question conceals another question, namely, what is human excellence? If excellence is a kind of articulable knowledge, then it may be teachable. If excellence is a practical skill, then it may arise through practice. If excellence depends on an innate capacity or disposition or insight, then it may arise from nature. If excellence is a free gift of the gods, then it comes to be neither by teaching nor practice nor nature but in some other way. And there is a further question, namely, is there such a thing as human excellence? This question has both a formal and an existential sense. Is there a single non-disjunctive characterization of human excellence, and if there is, has it or can it be realized? We may know what we mean by excellence in mathematics, or athletics, or music, and we may be confident that there are excellent mathematicians and athletes and musi-

cians. But do we know in like fashion what it means to be an excellent human being, and are we fully confident that excellent human beings do or can exist?

Meno's opening question is thus important, difficult, and it exfoliates other questions. Let us explore it, for it is a question that bears examination.

Meno begins "Can you tell me, Socrates..." What is Meno seeking? Does he seek the source of excellence, or to discover if Socrates knows that source? The form of words does not tell us. Interpreted strictly the question asks about Socrates' abilities, and invites the response, "Yes I can tell you" or "No I cannot." But the question may be intended otherwise. When I say "Can you pass the salt?" I am not really asking about your abilities. I am making a polite request for the salt. "Can you tell me" in this sense means "Will you tell me" and that means "Tell me, please." Meno, rather than demanding a response, may be asking for one.

Is Meno's question sincere, that is, does he genuinely want the answer? If Meno's question is really about excellence I see no reason to doubt that it is sincere. A sincere question expresses a desire to have in mind the requested information. One asks in order that one may come to know. A sincere question expresses a desire for knowledge. In the soul a question is a cognitive desire. If we use eros as the general name for desire, questioning is an erotic act.

If Meno's question is about what Socrates knows, it may be sincere, or it may be put to embarrass Socrates. Meno says "Can you tell me, Socrates..." I think we should hear this phrase in three ways, by emphasizing in turn "you," "tell," and "me." "Can *you* tell me, Socrates" sounds like a challenge. We sense in the background something like this: "Gorgias could tell me, Socrates; I could tell you; anyone who undertakes public speaking or instruction should be able to tell; you think you're so smart, can *you* tell me?" This puts a challenge, or at least sets a task.

If we retain the emphasis on the word “you” but omit the challenge, we get a question whose focus can be put this way: “I am looking for someone who can tell me about excellence; are you that someone, Socrates?” This is an important question for the interpretation of this dialogue, indeed for most Platonic dialogues: just what does Socrates know? What can he tell us? And if we generalize this part of the question, so that it reads, “Can *anyone* tell me...” we hear a question addressed to us all, which may be taken as a question about our cognitive capacities.

Next, change the emphasis and say, “Can you *tell* me, Socrates.” Now the focus suggests this background: “Socrates, there might be a number of different ways to convey to me the requested information; is *telling* among the ways?” This emphasis makes us aware that telling through the content of explicit speech is not the only way to convey an answer. Showing by pointing, or by enacting, or through the action of speech rather than its content, are alternatives. The dialogue shows the importance of these alternatives. In the slave boy section, where the question is: given a square, what line will produce a square with twice the area?, the importance of pointing rather than telling is made manifest. For the line sought is the diagonal of the given square, and the side and diagonal of a square are incommensurable. Thus if we call the length of the side one unit, there is no finite specification of the length of the diagonal in terms of the unit. The requested length is irrational, unsayable. We could of course call it the square root of two, but in context that is just a way of saying “the line whose square is double the given square,” and repeating the question is not telling the answer. The answer can be given, but not directly in speech—we can point to the diagonal. The intrusion of the irrational raises the issue of whether human speech and reason are adequate to answer questions of human excellence. I also merely mention the suggestion that Socrates answers Meno’s question not in word but in deed. Human excellence might come to be pre-

cisely in the quest for knowledge of human excellence, and Socrates, by showing Meno how to inquire, displays both the route to acquisition and the possession of excellence.

Thirdly, we can emphasize Meno’s words in a way that I doubt Meno would approve: “Can you tell *me*, Socrates.” The background now is this: “Socrates, I suppose you can convey the answer to some people, but perhaps not to everyone; perhaps there are conditions for being told that not everyone can meet; can I, Meno, meet those conditions, so that you can tell *me*?” This raises the issue of what you must have already in order to get what you ask for. Perhaps only the sincere seeker can receive the answer. Perhaps only those who already in some sense have the answer within themselves can receive it. Perhaps we can pose questions that have answers, but answers that we cannot grasp. These alternatives too have importance in the dialogue. It is natural to ask, who is Meno? Scholarship identifies a historical Meno who was greedy, cunning, and unscrupulous. We recall Aristotle’s statement that only a person with a good upbringing and disposition can benefit from ethical discourse. Perhaps Meno is too vicious to be told about virtue.<sup>1</sup> Later in the dialogue Socrates angers Anytus by suggesting that he and his peers lack the excellence of an older generation. Generational decay may occur either because virtue is not teachable or because Anytus and his peers are not teachable. Perhaps the condition for hearing the truth is not directly moral but intellectual, if indeed we can make this distinction. Perhaps Meno is too obtuse to be told—too shallow or too stubborn or perhaps too little aware to see that the answer to his question is not conveyed by telling. Perhaps Socrates cannot tell Meno the answer. Whether Socrates can tell us is a question we must ask ourselves.

How does Socrates take Meno’s question? In part as a challenge, in part as a sincere question. Meno may want to test Socrates, but he gives Socrates an opportunity for real inquiry. Socrates’ reply is certainly not a direct answer;

rather, his reply corrects two false assumptions of the question. First, in a conversation a questioner, by the very act of posing a question, seems to assume that the one to whom the question is put knows its answer. Socrates denies this assumption when he denies that he knows. Second, in an inquiry the questions should be put in rational sequence; thus by putting this question first Meno appears to assume that it is properly the first question. Socrates denies this assumption when he says that he does not know what excellence is, and that no one can tell how excellence arises without knowing what it is. To Meno's opening thrust Socrates makes a judo-like response, saying in effect that Meno has put the wrong question to the wrong person. Socrates admits his ignorance of the source and nature of excellence. When he adds that he never met anyone who knew what excellence is, he turns the tables on Meno, who is now challenged to tell Socrates something. Socrates has inverted their roles, and called Meno's assumptions into question.

Meno then tries to tell Socrates what excellence is. He describes the excellence of a man, and a woman, and says there are excellences for young and old, slave and free. Since there are very many excellences, Meno is not at a loss to say what excellence is. But of course this swarm of excellences is not what Socrates seeks. Socrates wants the one "look" that makes them all excellence. Meno has failed to understand what counts as an answer. We are invited to wonder whether Socrates' question has an answer of the kind that he seeks; perhaps Socrates is asking the wrong question.

Meno denies that there is a single excellence for all until Socrates leads him to admit that all excellence involves moderation and justice. Meno agrees, saying that justice is excellence. Is justice excellence, Socrates asks, or is justice *an* excellence? To get Meno to understand the question Socrates uses the examples of shape and color. Roundness is *a* shape, but not shape, for there are other shapes, and white is a color, but not color, for there are other colors. Likewise justice is *an*

excellence, but not excellence, for there are other excellences. Meno then, to better understand what Socrates is looking for, asks for a definition of shape. Socrates gives him two: shape is the only thing that always follows color, and shape is the limit of solid. Meno objects that the first is useless to one who doesn't know what color is. Socrates agrees that in a friendly conversation one must define with terms understood by both parties. Later Meno asks Socrates to define color, which Socrates does after the manner of Gorgias, saying color is an effluvium from shapes which fits the sight and is perceived.

Do the examples of shape and color tell us something special? In reading Plato the safest assumption is that nothing is accidental, so the choice of shape and color is likely to be significant. What might it mean? Well, one candidate for excellence is that it consists in, or is correlative with, knowledge. If we take that seriously, we get the following proportional analogy: as shape is what always follows color, so excellence is what always follows knowledge. Shape stands for excellence, color for knowledge. Since shape limits the solid, we may think that the solid stands for the soul. The soul is then likened to a finite three-dimensional object. As such it has a shape, and that shape is disclosed to us in self-knowledge. Excellence, if there be such a thing, is the proper shape of soul. The pursuit of excellence involves us with shapes. Geometry is the science of shapes.

If the soul is a solid, it is bounded by a surface. Whatever depths of soul we have, the inner shines forth in what appears to others and to ourselves as we reflect. We disclose ourselves in speech and deed, so properties of the surface should correspond to speech and deed. A surface is both visible and tangible; we yoke visibility to speech and tangibility to deed. The tangible is perceptible by touch, and touch can operate without sight, though often sight guides touch.

We touch things usually to change them, to alter the way things are. We look to see, to discover the way things are. Looking eventuates in belief, touching arises from desire.<sup>2</sup>

Explicit belief and desire depend on ideas, not Platonic Forms but Platonic images, in which content is distinct from reality, the what-it-is divorced from the that-it-is. That the mind can handle ideas makes belief and desire possible. Since a question is a desire for a true belief, that the mind can handle ideas makes questions possible. No eros or no ideas means no questions. Meno is soon to present a paradox the nerve of which is that questions are nonsensical. One implication is that when he puts the paradox, Meno lacks eros or ideas or both.

Meno says that Socrates resembles a torpedo fish in both his look and his touch; Socrates is one in speech and deed. To grapple with Socrates, as Meno has done, is to be numbed with perplexity. To be numbed is to be unable to speak and act because one can feel nothing. Perplexity is to feel nothing. When we are perplexed, the surface of the soul, the visible and tangible limit that defines what we are, is felt to be rent or torn. A gap is opened in the smooth fabric of our speech and deed. To feel that emptiness is to be perplexed. Perplexity ruptures us, it opens us, and the articulation of that opening is a question. The desire for wholeness is the desire for closure, and that is the desire that spurs us to try to answer questions.

#### Meno's Paradox and the Myth of Recollection

After Meno admits he is numb, he proposes his paradox, the large question he puts to Socrates to stop the conversation. When Socrates wants to seek together after excellence, Meno says

How will you look for it, Socrates, when you do not know at all what it is? How will you aim to search for something you do not know at all? If you should meet with it, how will you know that this is the thing that you did not know? (80d)

The conclusion of the paradox is that inquiry is pointless. The argument is formally a dilemma. We either know or don't know. If we do know, inquiry is pointless, for we are seeking what we already have. If we don't know, inquiry is pointless, for without knowing what we are looking for we can neither direct our search nor tell when we have succeeded.

Socrates resolves the paradox by denying that we either know or don't know. We inquire when we both know and don't know. We possess knowledge but do not have it at hand. It is in our souls but not immediately accessible. This, by itself, is not enough to answer the paradox, for we need some way to direct the search for what we don't know and some way to tell when the search is successful. We need a way for our present ignorance to lead to the absent knowledge. The myth of recollection—duly elaborated—presents us with an image of how this is possible.

The myth supposes that the soul, the organ of knowledge, is an original whole, a single totality, for all nature is akin. The complete whole comprises all knowledge. The whole is now broken and fragmentary; the fragments remain in the depths of the soul, but the surface of the soul has gaps or holes where pieces are missing. Gaps in our knowledge keep us from what we want to do or see. Most of these openings are entirely surrounded by the firm surface. What we can't do lies within the horizon of what we can do, and what we don't know is framed by what we do know. Absence of knowledge is bounded by knowledge. Ignorance thus appears like gaps in a jigsaw puzzle. The enclosed emptiness has a specific shape. This shape partially defines a content that can be held in mind and used to direct the search for the missing piece. The hole is not simply nothing. Although it is a hole because it is not there, it is just the hole it is because where it fails to be is just there. To articulate its shape is to formulate a question, to say precisely what gap in knowledge one aims to fill. When we see what is not there we both know and don't know. Ignorance is emptiness, shadow, a hole in the light. The desire

for full insight is the erotic impulse that moves us to inquire. As an emptiness with a boundary shape, the hole enables us to search for what will fill it. Like Cinderella's prince, when we have the empty shoe we can seek the foot that fits it.

If the shape of a hole is to direct its own filling there must be a prior totality in which the hole is set. A gap in the fabric of knowledge implies a fabric of knowledge; to see a shadow one needs light. If we were in total darkness where all is shadow or in unbounded space where all is empty, then Meno would be correct that inquiry is pointless. Questions are boundary phenomena. They arise from the edges of belief, and if there were no beliefs there would be no edges. Inquiry arises in situations where knowledge bounds ignorance, where what we know shapes what we don't know so that we can know what we don't know.

Socrates tells Meno that the immortal soul has learned all things. All knowledge has been collected together, and needs only to be re-collected. The jigsaw puzzle was once assembled, and all the pieces are present, floating in the depths of the soul. If one is brave and tireless one can assemble it again. Or, at the least, Socrates says, we will be better, braver and less helpless if we believe this than if we believe that inquiry is pointless.

The completed puzzle will form the surface of the soul and thus fix the boundary shape or definition of human excellence. Later in the dialogue Socrates introduces the distinction between right opinion and knowledge. In our image right opinion would have the right pieces in the right places, but they would be liable to fall out again. The numbing touch of Socrates, for example, would be liable to shatter to pieces a whole that is not firmly tied together. Knowledge surpasses right opinion in part because it cements the pieces into a cohesive whole. In our picture human excellence is knowledge, but not knowledge only of human excellence. It is all knowledge, complete knowledge, or knowledge of the whole. The whole soul is the excellent soul, and the whole soul is

composed of knowledge of the whole. The excellent soul is an image of the cosmos, so in the myth ultimately self-knowledge converges with metaphysical knowledge.<sup>3</sup> Wisdom as a moral virtue and wisdom as metaphysical understanding are thus related. The questions regarding human excellence and metaphysics are alike. Asking what it means to be human resembles asking what it means to be.

### Questions of Mathematics and Human Excellence

Socrates gives the myth and shows the slave boy's recollection of geometrical truth to overcome Meno's reluctance to inquire. Socrates' argument is by analogy, and goes like this. The slave boy was ignorant of the solution to the geometrical problem, and once he became aware of his ignorance through the numbing touch of Socrates, he grew eager to overcome that ignorance, and succeeded in drawing the solution out of himself. Likewise, Meno has been shown to be ignorant of the nature of excellence by the numbing touch of Socrates, and if Meno too becomes eager to overcome that ignorance he too may succeed in drawing the solution out of himself. My question is, should we accept the analogy?

The analogy is problematic on two counts. First, consider how the slave boy was able to succeed. Was it by teaching, practice, nature, or in some other way? Socrates asked leading questions, and in that sense directed the boy's inquiries as his teacher. The boy initially beheld the solution as in a dream, but Socrates says the solution would become fixed in his mind by practice. The boy answered out of his own convictions; his answers, right or wrong, were his own, arising not from learned opinion but from natural capacity. So the boy succeeded in some other way, namely, through the combination of teaching and practice and nature. Now the teaching was performed by Socrates through questioning, and his directing questions had this property: Socrates knew their answers. Socrates was directing an inquiry into something of

which the boy was ignorant, but which Socrates knew very well. In the inquiry with Meno into excellence, however, Socrates purports not to know the answer. It is not so clear, then, that inquiry into the nature of excellence can be as successful as inquiry into the double square.

The second problematic feature of the analogy concerns the properties of the respective questions. The geometrical question is well defined. We know what counts as an answer. We can present to ourselves in thought a series of increasing lines and think that one of those lines is the one that is sought. Once we see that the doubled line is too large we eliminate an entire range of candidate answers. When we see that the three-halves line is also too large, we eliminate another range of candidates. We narrow our search as each thread is picked up to knit together the hole in the fabric of knowledge. That hole is determinate, and determinate because wholly enclosed.

What about the general question of human excellence? Is that question also wholly enclosed? I think not. If we ask about the excellence of a particular station in life, such as auto mechanic or neurosurgeon or gentleman's personal gentleman, we get an answer insofar as the gap in our understanding is enclosed. Comprehending the station, we can say what is needed to fulfill the station. But it is otherwise when we ask about human excellence as such. Here we do not have a fabric of understanding with an enclosed hole in it. We have the entire fabric of human life held in mind, and we are looking for the place into which it fits. When we ask about particular stations we have the puzzle and are looking for the missing piece. When we ask about human excellence as such we have the piece and are looking for the puzzle.

Aristotle says that since the function of the eye is to see, the excellence of the eye is to see well. We can all agree. Aristotle goes on to say that if a human being as a whole has a function, then human excellence is to perform that function well. Yes, but does analysis in terms of function work the

same way when we consider parts and wholes? The proper function of the eye is to see well. The analogous function of the whole person would be to live well. But seeing well just means seeing as required for living well. The parallel statement for the whole person—living as required for living well—merely reopens the question.

Aristotle's ethical inquiry is immensely intelligent, and is usually kept from being radical by its massive common sense. Aristotle proceeds, I think, by differentiating the parts of the soul and discussing their respective excellences, and then saying that living well happens when each part of the soul functions well. Aristotle assumes a soul functioning in a certain way, and asks how it would look if it were excellent. He posits an adequate soul, and seeks a great soul. It is as though he were given a square, and sought a double square.

At times, though, Aristotle reveals his uncommon sense, as when he presses the claims of the contemplative life. There Aristotle suggests that the best life enjoins us to change shape as well as size. The *Meno* pictures what I am pointing to when in the slave boy sequence Socrates puts three equal squares together and asks the boy if they could fill in the space in the corner. This is an intriguing question, for in one sense the three squares already form a complete figure. There is no space in the corner, just space outside the figure. Of course what Socrates invites the boy to say is that the triple square be completed with a fourth square. This is the common sense response. Once the figure is seen as an incomplete square, we know what piece is missing. If coming to know what constitutes a complete human life is like completing that figure with another square, then inquiry into excellence is like geometrical inquiry. The ordinary soul and the great soul are similar figures.

But we could also fill in the space in the corner with other figures, equal in area but different in shape.<sup>4</sup> How we complete the figure is not determined solely by our intent to make the resulting figure four square in area. The question of how

to fill in the space in the corner has a mathematical dimension, but not a unique mathematical solution. The question, of which whole is the three-square figure a part, is not a mathematical question. If knowing what constitutes a complete human life is like knowing how to fill in the space in the corner, then inquiry into human excellence fails to resemble geometrical inquiry. Inquiry into the double square and inquiry into human excellence are not alike.

#### Topological Inversion of the Area of Ignorance

How did we get from questions as holes in the fabric of belief to questions of what encompasses the totality of belief? What works this inversion? Several paths force the same twist. When we are trying to put different pieces together, that is, when we are trying to integrate diverse domains of experience, we may be led to the question of what larger frame encloses them. So the quest for a synoptic view of several pieces of experience is one path to inversion.

Another way arises from any single question that is large enough. When we are serious about answering such questions, we wish to put them precisely, so we must accurately map the boundary of our ignorance. If the question is a large one, that is, if the hole in our knowledge is extensive, then we may not be able to see at a glance the entire boundary of the hole. We must move around the boundary in an attempt to encompass it. It is as though we were trying to map the boundary of an inland lake, a lake too large to see across. Inversion happens when we discover that the shore we trace is not the edge of an inland lake but the boundary of an island on which we stand. We encompass everything we know, and see our island set in an ocean of ignorance. The known is encompassed by the unknown, the familiar by the strange. We experience wonder. What, we ask, is the significance of all this? Where does it all fit?

We ask this sort of question when we are turned around on the other side of the boundary. We ask it as outsiders. Anytus takes Socrates' questioning into human excellence as an attack on Athens by one with no commitment to its ethos. Socrates is a strange citizen, a citizen who questions like a stranger. Metaphysical questions are likewise strange. All ultimate questions are strange. If our life consists of filling the familiar holes with the familiar pieces, answering the routine questions with the ordinary answers, then we need never face such questions. Philosophy is evitable. But, as Whitehead remarks, the refusal to think does not imply the nonexistence of entities for thought. If we think far enough we will get to the limits of land. What should we do when we get there? Here is what Kant says in the first *Critique*:

We have now not merely explored the territory of pure understanding, and carefully surveyed every part of it, but have also measured its extent, and assigned to everything in it its rightful place. This domain is an island, enclosed by nature itself within unalterable limits. It is the land of truth—enchanted name!—surrounded by a wide and stormy ocean, the native home of illusion, where many a fog bank and many a swiftly melting iceberg give the deceptive appearance of farther shores, deluding the adventurous seafarer ever anew with empty hopes, and engaging him in enterprises which he can never abandon and yet is unable to carry to completion. (257)

Kant's answer is that we should map the extent of the isle, then turn back and cultivate our garden. Though the very gravity of our mind will pull us down to that ocean shore, once there we must discipline our reason. Though mathematics and natural science are boundless, speculative thought must restrain itself within strict limits.<sup>5</sup>

Hegel's answer is that we live on a finite globe, part of which is indeed submerged, but we are amphibian creatures, both subject and substance, both knower and known. Every line that limits understanding is temporary, for to be aware of a boundary is already to have crossed it.<sup>6</sup> The land is the sea's edge also; we find ourselves on each side of the boundary. The whole globe is properly our home. Speculative thought culminates in an equilibrium in which every question has its answer.

Pascal's answer is that we find ourselves marooned in the midst of an infinite, empty, terrifying expanse that reason cannot cross.<sup>7</sup> Faith alone lets us pass over to the safety of the mainland. Theology teaches that God's power is unlimited, and the gospel tells us that Jesus can walk on water, so the Savior can perform the infinite task of bringing us to safety as easily as he steps to shore from a boat on the sea of Galilee.

These three agree that the isle of knowledge is of fixed size. Kant says that critical reason can determine the circumference once and for all, and teach us to stay on our own side of the line.<sup>8</sup> Hegel says reason operates in an Absolute that is finite but unbounded—a sphere. Whatever encloses a finite area also excludes a finite area. To grasp what is inside we cross and look from the outside, and the dialectical sequence of crossings and recrossings leads to a great circle of maximum circumference. Seeing both sides at once of that all-encompassing circle is the absolute insight. Pascal says human reason is finite but the world is infinite, a sphere whose center is everywhere and circumference nowhere. Knowledge of beginnings and ends is forever beyond the scope of human reason.

Others say that the boundary of knowledge can be pushed back and the domain of the known enlarged. One such is Whitehead, a twentieth-century advocate of the value of speculative philosophy. He writes, "Speculative philosophy is the endeavour to frame a coherent, logical, necessary system of general ideas in terms of which every element of our expe-

rience can be interpreted" (Whitehead, 3). Whitehead says the method of speculative philosophy is imaginative generalization. We generalize the shape of present knowledge to obtain our metaphysical categories, which "are tentative formulations of the ultimate generalities" (8). They are tentative because, for Whitehead, "In philosophical discussion, the merest hint of dogmatic certainty as to finality of statement is an exhibition of folly" (xiv).

I am suggesting that ultimate questions, the questions of speculative philosophy, are persistent because of their topological relations to what we know. They seek the whole understanding in which our current limited understanding has its proper place. Likewise ultimate ethical questions, such as the nature of human excellence, persist because of their topological relations. Thinking as the desire for the whole truth and willing as the desire for the whole good are analogous.

### Looking for the Puzzle

One thing we can learn from Plato's practice is to take our images seriously. Let us see what we can extract from the image of the piece of the jigsaw puzzle. Take our current epistemic and ethical situation as a given puzzle piece. We ask for the whole puzzle. What are some candidate answers? I offer six.

1. When we look at a piece we may say that it is already complete. Epistemic incompleteness depends on questions, and questions depend on ideas whose content is distinct from their reality. Ethical incompleteness depends on some distinction between is and ought, and that too depends on ideas whose content lacks reality. To say that our current situation is complete is to deny any importance to free ideas, either in belief or desire. It seems to me to deny the essence of our humanity, but that is precisely its point. Free ideas make possible belief and desire independent of perception and action,

and thus raise epistemic and ethical questions. If we eliminate free ideas we cut off such questions at their root. The conceptual level of awareness may define humanity, but human being is an unstable and unsatisfying way of being. Better to be a beast or a god, to turn and live with the animals or dissolve into the godhead. No ideas means no felt discrepancy between mind and world; when belief and desire go the thinking and willing self disappears. Certain mystical and meditative techniques aim at this—their view is that thought disrupts mindfulness. A soul reduced to perfect stillness, to total ideational inactivity, would experience no incompleteness.

On this side of the mystic dissolve, what might this way of life be like? Think of surfing. You paddle out, feel the water and the sun, the seventh wave approaches, you stroke hard to get it, you're up, in the curl, thrust along by a surging wall of water. In the exhilaration of that locomotive rush there are no questions, no reflections, just total immersion in the vivid now. The wave breaks, you end the ride, but suppose that when you leave the water you retain the awareness, the concentration, the music of each moment moving through you and sustaining you like the wave. Your life is complete in each passing moment—no plan for the future, no recollection of the past, just embedded in a present presence as in a music, in Eliot's words, "heard so deeply it is not heard at all, but you are the music while the music lasts" (Eliot, 136).

Of course you might need to think sometimes, to prepare a case at law, or deliver pizza, or whatever, but thought never displaces the immediate experience in which you find your satisfaction. Thought is good only if it helps you, as Thoreau says, "... to stand on the meeting of two eternities, the past and the future, which is precisely the present moment; to toe that line" (Thoreau, 11). Perhaps the best life would be one of simple routine, like a well-learned dance.

2. When we look at a puzzle piece we may say that the given piece uniquely determines the entire puzzle, for the piece is premise and the puzzle is deductive conclusion.

Reasoning can make explicit what is implicit and so complete the whole. There are no genuine alternatives in the completion of the puzzle, for what now looks to be contingent is in the end either necessary or impossible. The difference between incomplete and complete is just the difference between what we know and what follows from what we know. This is a rationalism. One of its ethical versions teaches the virtue of complete understanding, and says that complete understanding reveals the coincidence of the is and the ought. Unlike the doctrine that denies any distinction between is and ought, rationalism accepts the distinction between incomplete and complete insight, and says that we ought to attain complete insight. Being as such is good, evil is privation, and ignorance is privation of understanding. With adequate insight, we see that everything is as it must be.

On the way to complete insight we seek awareness of the permanent present, that which remains always as it is. Pellucid apprehension provides our satisfaction. Lured by an experience of beauty and power in one, we seek the calm certainty of fixed insight.

3. When we look at a piece we may say that what is given may be completed in any way whatever. Whereas rationalism says the completion is unique, this view says the completion is arbitrary. Any puzzle can have any shape cut from it, since carving is arbitrary—the world has no joints. Thus given a piece there is no way to tell from what puzzle it comes. Reason neither determines nor limits a completion. This is a skepticism. Whereas for the rationalist we are free if we grasp necessity, for the skeptic we are free if we see that everything is contingent and could be other than it is. The ethical version of this is some sort of relativism. It may be conservative, as with Montaigne, or revolutionary, as with the utopians, or libertine, as with the young. Ethics might be grounded in current practice, understood as relative and historical, but if we push this doctrine we see that current practice does not deter-

mine its own continuation. Anything can follow anything else, and we make up everything as we go along.

Skepticism is often an interim position on a path that ends in celebrating art and activity. Looking beyond our puzzle piece and finding no shape at which to aim, we project there a figure of our own making, and get our satisfaction by bringing it into being. Of course skepticism is not the only source of this impulse to generation. We might find outside our puzzle piece a latent ideal figure calling for realization. In either case action, either production or deeds, engenders our satisfaction. We take the emptiness surrounding the puzzle piece as the painter's empty canvas, or the architect's vacant lot, or the engineer's drawing board, or a field for sport, or the silence in which we make our song. Or we may take it as the empty space where our other half should be, a vacancy we fill when, as we say, we make friends, or make love, or when, extending our line beyond ourselves in a way that somehow completes us, we beget children. Be it artifacts or deeds or relationships, our satisfaction is made through effective action.

4. When we look at a puzzle piece we may say that what is given is discontinuous with what would complete it. An epistemic gap divides what we know from what would give us adequate moral and metaphysical insight. That gap cannot be crossed by reason. The completion is given to us from the other side of the chasm by divine revelation. This is a doctrine of faith. God is the puzzle that tells us what being is and who we ought to be. Faith shares with skepticism a conviction that reason is inadequate, and with rationalism a conviction that our proper completion is unique. Like the Muslim, we submit to a superior. In constant intimate relation with that superior we find our satisfaction, like a little child who, leaping into the embrace of a loving parent, feels himself at home.

5. When we look at a puzzle piece we may deny that it is complete, for it lacks wholeness. It is not in equilibrium, since it satisfies neither intellect nor desire. We may be dissatisfied

with the deductive completions we have seen, for they appear to rest, despite their own intent, on premises that are neither self-evident nor inescapable. We may deny that completion is arbitrary, for such a conclusion itself seems arbitrary.<sup>9</sup> If we refuse revelation, reject the incompetence of reason, and insist that thought and desire be satisfied rather than eliminated, we seem to be left with philosophy. We seek, as one philosopher says, "...a means by which, reflecting on our moral and intellectual experience conjointly, taking the world and ourselves into account, we can put the whole thing together" (Green, section 174).

6. Finally, we may look at our puzzle piece in some other way. This residual category makes the list of alternatives formally complete. Notice how little insight mere formal completion gives.

Unmediated mindfulness, luminous certitude, free creativity, obedient faithfulness, persistent inquiry, or something else—these are the ultimate ways. Philosophy, when it poses the question about the best life, includes philosophy itself as a candidate answer. This sort of philosophy, which I understand to be Socratic, tries to occupy a place between rhetoric and mathematics. Like rhetoric, its fundamental questions arise from concerns that shape and move the soul. Like mathematics, it seeks fully adequate insight. Its logic I believe to be nonmonotonic, its inferences defeasible, which implies that it must always be open to beginning again.

Of course when we ask for the best way of life we are seeking not just candidate answers, but true answers. Questions stretch us toward knowledge only if we desire the truth. Philosophy may draw us toward excellence even though, as Socrates found, it may not keep us out of trouble.

#### Finish Line

It is time to bring this essay to a close. We asked about questions. If we view asking a question as a conversational act, we

can split asking into questionings where the asker knows the answer and those where he does not. If we view a question as an epistemological instrument that directs a course of inquiry, we can split questions into those where ignorance is encompassed by knowledge and those where knowledge is encompassed by ignorance. Crossing these dichotomies breeds four kinds of question. The search for the double square in the *Meno* arose from an enclosed question asked by one who knows. The question of human excellence, and the metaphysical questions which it resembles, are I believe of another type, namely, unenclosed questions asked by one who does not know. The persistence of philosophical questions—the fact that they won't go away—stems from this. They are open questions asked by those aware of their ignorance. Socrates in the recollection myth implies that while our souls are broken, imperfect and incomplete, the missing fragments drift submerged in our depths. We live the philosophic life when we fish in the depths of the soul for what would make our knowledge and our excellence whole. Whether our nets are fine enough, whether our lines are long enough, will remain for us open questions.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> It is not certain, of course, that Plato intends the *Meno* of the dialogue to be identical to Xenophon's *Meno*. Jacob Klein in his commentary on the *Meno* says we are to make the identification, and so should be astonished that a paragon of vice such as *Meno* would initiate an inquiry into virtue. Klein may be right. If he is, it is extremely unfortunate that no English translation of which I am aware brings out the viciousness of *Meno*.

<sup>2</sup> Blind children who are given a fragile object and told, "look but don't touch" respond by lightly running their fingers over the surface. "Looking" is seeking information through the sense of touch; touching is manipulation, handling for one's own purposes.

<sup>3</sup> "We may agree, perhaps, to understand by metaphysics an attempt to know reality as against mere appearance, or the study of first principles or ultimate truths, or again the effort to comprehend the universe, not simply piecemeal or by fragments, but somehow as a whole" (Bradley, 1).

<sup>4</sup> For example, we could fill in the space in the corner with a single figure composed of two different kinds of parts. Place the top half of an ellipse on the hypotenuse of a right triangle whose equal shorter sides are the same length as the sides of the other three squares. The hypotenuse forms the major axis of the ellipse, and we set the semi-minor axis to  $(\sqrt{2})/\pi$ . The half-ellipse together with the right triangle then make an area equal to that of each of the other three squares.

<sup>5</sup> Kant asserts that we can see now that certain speculative questions are forever unanswerable; these are immortal questions. In the land of truth, where knowledge can be grounded, Kant affirms instead the immortality of questions, and he says the proper use of the Ideas of pure reason is as regulative ideals within the phenomenal domain.

<sup>6</sup> "To say the reality is such that our knowledge cannot reach it, is a claim to know reality; to urge that our knowledge is of a kind which must fail to transcend appearance, itself implies that transcendence" (Bradley, 1).

<sup>7</sup> "When I see the blind and wretched state of man, when I survey the whole universe in its dumbness and man left to himself with no light, as though lost in this corner of the universe, without knowing who put him there, what he has come to do, what will become of him when he dies, incapable of knowing anything, I am moved to terror, like a man transported in his sleep to some terrifying desert island, who wakes up quite lost and with no means of escape" (Pascal, *Pensées*, #198).

<sup>9</sup> "Our reason is not like a plane indefinitely far extended, the limits of which we know in a general way only; but must rather be compared to a sphere, the radius of which can be determined from the curvature of the arc of its surface—that is to say, from the nature of synthetic *a priori* propositions—and whereby we can likewise specify with certainty its volume and limits. Outside this sphere (the

field of experience) there is nothing that can be an object for reason; nay, the very questions in regard to such supposed objects relate only to subjective principles of a complete determination of those relations which can come under the concepts of the understanding and which can be found within the empirical sphere" (Kant, 607-608).

<sup>9</sup> It is not the skepticism of the skeptic that I object to; it is the dogmatism. Until one has encountered it repeatedly, it is hard to credit the insistent and unyielding conviction behind the claim "It's *true* that there is no truth."

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