On Being Critical: Critical Hermeneutics and the Relevance of the Ancient Notion of *Phronesis* in Contemporary Moral and Political Thought

by

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ABSTRACT

On Being Critical: Critical Hermeneutics And The Relevance Of The Ancient Notion Of
Phronesis In Contemporary Moral And Political Thought

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This thesis explores the question of what it means to be a critical being, and how we can
cultivate and enact a critical orientation through the ancient Aristotelian notion of phronesis. I
begin by defending the claim that the familiar traditions and methods of rhetoric and
hermeneutics have their practical, experiential and critical origins in a fundamental and
constitutive human desire to express and understand ourselves and others through the most
primary of human capabilities: listening, speaking, interpreting and understanding. This way of
describing hermeneutics and rhetoric gives us a sense of their origins in lived experience. It also
reminds us that rhetorical expression and hermeneutic understanding are not to be thought of as
merely ‘systematized disciplines’, ‘instruments’ or ‘methods’ that we can be indifferent to, but
part of our participatory linguistic experience. I argue that once the interpenetrating relation of
rhetorical expression and hermeneutic understanding is made apparent, an implicit critical-
thinking dimension in experience also becomes visible. This ‘critical dimension’ is not
discovered in static theory, procedure or method, but, rather, something that is enacted over time
with and among others. It is Aristotle’s concept of phronesis, and his understanding of insight
and practical reasoning that best captures the emergence and enactment of critical thinking-
being. Phronesis is a mode of practical reasoning that is always in motion, always challenging
and interrogating the relation between the particular circumstances we find ourselves in, and the historical traditions, general rules, laws or procedures that form our normative background.

I allow this argument for a critical hermeneutics through *phronesis* to be challenged by Jürgen Habermas’s critical sociological approach. I conclude, firstly, that Habermas’s critical theory relies for its *critical* thrust on a hermeneutical reflective tradition of immanent critique and insights about communication that can be grasped through *phronetic* reasoning, tradition and concrete embodied linguistic practices. Secondly, I argue that critical hermeneutics enacted through practical reasoning and *phronesis* describes a way of thinking-acting-desiring being that is more congruent with our actual experience, and therefore capable of meeting the personal, occupational, moral and political exigencies of a complex and diverse contemporary world.
In memory of Lawrence F. Guerin and Muriel M. Guerin for giving me a love of learning and the desire to reach for something more.
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It is essential and inherent in our personal and communal life that we are always engaged in a critical evaluation of that life. This raises the important question of what it is to be a critical being, and what shape or form this critical orientation should take at a personal, moral and political level. The ancient traditions of rhetoric and practical reasoning or *phronesis* emerge out of this need. They point the way towards a developing, lived critique that arises organically from the distinctiveness and particularity of our experience with and among others. In contrast to this approach to critique, however, one of the most familiar and pervasive ways of understanding political and moral thinking in the contemporary world is through Jürgen Habermas’s abstract universalizing moral/legal perspective. I argue that the development of the ancient emergent, organic perspective reconfigured through contemporary hermeneutic philosophy has the philosophical and practical resources appropriate to contemporary critique, and that following this path of understanding reveals the strengths and the limitations of Habermas’ approach.

The overall argument will be advanced in five distinct but closely related stages. I begin by describing in human experiential terms the relation that rhetoric has to hermeneutics (Chapter One). This way of beginning allows us to see how a critical orientation arises naturally and organically in the very activities of speaking and listening, interpreting and understanding. In the second stage, I elaborate and expand on how this emerging critical orientation is enacted through Aristotle’s writings on practical reasoning, and particularly the notion of *phronesis* (Chapter Two). The goal here is to give nuance and detail to the Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* within a broader framework of practical reason, as a critical enacting orientation that can help us navigate the complex and often turbulent waters of personal, moral, political, occupational and communal
contexts and situations. I then take this ancient understanding of *phronesis* and read it through more contemporary philosophical perspectives provided by Hans-Georg Gadamer’s hermeneutics and Paul Ricoeur’s discussion of narrative temporality (Chapter Three). The reconfiguration through hermeneutics and narrative gives historical and temporal depth to *phronesis* and brings us to a point where we can instructively contrast it with a more abstract, theoretical standpoint which discovers its exemplar in Habermas’s communicative critical perspective (Chapter 4). I argue that Habermas’s critical theory relies for its *critical* thrust on a hermeneutical reflective tradition of immanent critique and insights about communication that can better understood as something that gradually emerges and is enriched through *phronetic* reasoning (Chapter Five). I conclude the last chapter by bringing together the elements of rhetoric, hermeneutics, practical reasoning and *phronesis* which have been carefully described, and put them to work in concrete contemporary practices in three different practical domains: the political, the legal and the pedagogical.

The terms ‘hermeneutics’ and ‘rhetoric’ have different meanings and applications in a variety of legal, political and philosophical contexts and historical epochs. By ‘hermeneutics’ I refer here not to a methodology or theory for interpreting written texts. Instead, following the thinking of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Martin Heidegger, hermeneutics is to be seen as something more basic to the human condition of understanding. That is, hermeneutics involves interpretation, understanding and application not as something only reserved for the philosopher or the legal (or biblical) scholar, but as that which is presupposed in all aspects of thinking, reading, speaking and listening experience. This is a thesis that will be sustained and supported throughout the entire work.
The word ‘rhetoric’ is often used in a pejorative way. We say ‘oh that’s just rhetoric’, meaning, presumably, that in some sense rhetorical argument is at best ornamental, or at worst a propaganda delivery system used by politicians, political advocacy groups, public relations firms or corporate spin doctors. In this latter sense rhetoric would be used to conceal the truth, or the reality on the ground. At a juridical level such a negative reading would reduce rhetoric to a tool used by unscrupulous lawyers to dazzle a jury into believing some improbable state of affairs. But the word rhetoric (Greek *rhetorike*) is originally not understood as negative or harmful. Indeed, rhetoric is indispensible in an oral tradition. In its ancient form it is not considered as a mere technique or professionalized discipline, but essential to the proper conveying of meaning, and the articulation of ethical and political standards. In this sense, rhetoric is a model for speaking well or persuasively—one that has its own internal critical norms, and presupposes that speakers and listeners possess a reflective, interpretive, background understanding. To ‘speak well’ is to acquire knowledge of a variety of opinions—it is to have internalized the *episteme* of *doxa* or the knowledge of opinions. But it is also to have a deep understanding of the ethical and practical dimensions which a particular context demands. Seen from this practical perspective, rhetoric is not originally ‘flowery speech’ or merely an instrument or ‘thing’ we use, but a fundamental human gesture to reach beyond our own self-enclosed world, and say something understandingly, that is listened to by someone else. Given this, rhetoric will not be something we use in a haphazard fashion when it suits us, but something that is fundamental to, or constitutive of, all human linguistic expression. As such, it can be looked upon as a self-developing, interpretive and critical enterprise that opens up the possibility of possibility in language. This more primordial perspective discloses to us that long before it is reduced to a method or technique, rhetoric is inextricably related to hermeneutics (interpretation), and also to
If this is right, then rhetoric is one of the key linguistic means by which cultural, social and critical aspects of our lived experience are produced and reproduced in public and interactive practices.

There are, of course, many reasons why rhetoric has come to have the pejorative status it now occupies—which have nothing to do with rhetoric itself. One might say that rhetoric will tend to become a propagandistic device in a culture bereft of practical reason, or spontaneous political activity, opinion and dialogue. In such a scenario the fear is that rhetoric would inevitably be used as a tool of the powerful—a tool that reduces or shrinks reality by using language against itself. George Orwell’s dystopian novel *1984* comes immediately to mind. However, I contend that at that point rhetoric would no longer be rhetoric, but simply a kind of sophistry or propaganda. It is no secret to anyone who has survived the 20th century that authoritarian regimes cannot tolerate difference. At a very basic level, the plurality of appearances and opinions to which rhetoric testifies is simply unthinkable within a totalitarian mindset, a rigid political ideology or unyielding religious doctrine. This is why it is vital to attempt to retrieve something like a positive conception of rhetoric—to see rhetoric as the art of the possible, and the means through which difference and plurality are expressed. This cannot be done merely by appealing to theory. My wager is that the moment rhetoric is lifted out of a practically oriented relational human experience of understanding, listening and speaking, and reconstituted within an uncompromising abstract theoretical perspective—the moment it is understood as ‘instrument of persuasion’—something important is lost or occluded: namely, the notion of rhetoric as the means by which we multiply possibilities of understanding in language, and at the same time fundamentally orient ourselves toward each other in ethical, political and
practical speaking and listening. If, as I claim, rhetorical expression is inextricably tied to hermeneutic understanding and testifies to the emergence of a critical orientation, then we must conclude that it is ‘always already’ a practice which involves an interpretive background of meanings, and presupposes internal goods, critical limits and possibilities that express ethical and moral contexts of meaning and decision making. If, like hermeneutics, rhetoric can help us to understand the ‘other’ who is distant from us, it will also help us understand ourselves—who we are. The goal of the present undertaking is to retrieve this notion of plurivocity of meaningful expression and internal critical orientations that rhetoric presupposes. But it is more than this. It is also the effort to recover the practical, ontological and ethical dimensions of rhetoric, perhaps suspending for a moment, the sometimes consuming idea that only elaborate theory can situate and legitimate a constitutive human practice.

There is, admittedly, something about rhetoric whether ancient or modern that both attracts and distresses us. It represents both the desire to reach out and persuade someone of something, and the desire to conceal truth or reality through the mastery of language. Anyone who has listened to or read the text of Barack Obama’s extraordinary 2008 speech “A More Perfect Union” will know that they participated in a rare rhetorical event. This was a speech that appeared to vividly bring together all of the elements of good Aristotelian rhetoric—reasoned argument, dramatic metaphor and analogy, an inspired vision of the future, a speaker who appeared to have a solid ethical character, as well as a sympathetic grasp of the needs of his immediate audience. Obama’s implicit goal was to distance himself from a controversial religious figure (Jeremiah Wright) in order to mitigate a looming personal and political crisis, while expressing in a historically nuanced way the complex issue of existing race relations that linked the historical and ideal telos of ‘a more perfect union’, to the future ideal of post-racial
relations. At the time, even Obama’s harshest critics saw this speech as striking and ground-breaking. Yet, by the end of his first term even ardent Obama supporters would admit that his speeches often promised much more in the way of ‘hope and change’ than was ever concretely delivered. Indeed, a less than flattering over-all appraisal of Obama’s speeches four years later might conclude that the rhetorical strategies used in the 2008 speech would become standard fare for all of Obama’s speeches—to speak in vague moral platitudes, appeal to collective narcissism or American exceptionalism, and generally deflect or avoid the facts on the ground, and any real confrontation with the concrete and particular problems of troubled race relations, war, corporate hegemony, poverty, the vast expansion of the surveillance and security state, and the gradual erosion of the rule of law.

Whatever one might conclude regarding the structural distortions within American politics, or the political or personal motives behind Obama’s various political speeches, two things are clear. The first is that we cannot morally assess rhetorical expression until we can hermeneutically or interpretively grasp it at a particular and concrete level of lived experience, where words capture or fail to capture the truth of the situation on the ground. The second is that it is often difficult for us to immediately grasp when political rhetoric is used as tool of power where the ‘success’ of persuasion is understood to be a matter of how well a speaker suspends the reflective or thinking possibilities of listeners, and emotionally ‘wows’ them by a clever appeal to abstract myths of progress and perfection, or superficial and banal characterizations of patriotism. This is why cultivating a critical orientation is as indispensible now as it was in Homer’s time. It is my conviction that when rhetoric is not understood as a participatory event, but used instead as an instrument or device that only the ‘expert’ possesses or is in complete control of, then it devolves into a strategic tool used by the powerful to conceal an unarticulated
personal or political goal. Given this possibility it should not surprise anyone that the word ‘rhetoric’ is often associated with specious argument or deceitful speech.

However, if rhetoric affords the powerful a means of securing the status quo, it also can be a participatory event that provides for us a means to respond to and disrupt the latter. In other words, rhetoric can be the means through which we are able to speak truth to power, to express dissenting opinions, and to resist hegemonic forces. This, I contend, is the real meaning of rhetoric as a constitutive human linguistic practice that is always framed by an interpretive context. This interpretive context means that rhetoric is never a univocal undertaking, but always entails a hearer and presupposes that the speaker will hear the implied voice of another. The broad aim of Chapter One is to describe rhetoric as something more than merely a tool of the powerful—in other words, to describe rhetoric not as a univocal undertaking, but as a participatory event which involves both the capacity to speak and the capacity to hear, in one’s own speech, the implied voice of the other. This is rhetoric as that mode of constitutive linguistic interchange which expresses our most basic and unavoidable human need to communicate something in the right way, at the right time, for the right reasons. To carry out this aim will require us to make two claims. The first is that rhetorical expression is inextricably related to hermeneutic or interpretive understanding. The second claim is that this very interrelation exposes a critical dimension of thinking which is best characterized and enacted through the ancient notion of phronesis—that is, a human capacity to cultivate the kind of practical insight that helps us to say the right thing, at the right time, in the right way.

This is, clearly, an uphill battle, since rhetoric is almost universally understood in a pejorative way. For Aristotle, to be skilled in rhetoric was to have a certain discerning power to see or grasp in any given situation what might be persuasive. In Plato’s Gorgias, rhetoric (tekhnē
rhētorikē) is the art of the orator. What I wish to recover here is that this word, rhetoric, derives from an even more basic word in Greek: eirō (εἰρω) which means ‘to speak’, to tell or ‘to say’.² It is this basic notion of ‘speaking’, telling or ‘saying’ and its companion ‘hearing’ or listening that I want to initially associate with rhetorical expression as an interpretively framed human linguistic capacity that emerges with and among others. The aim here is to suspend or bracket any sort of social theorizing about the function of rhetoric, in order to look more circumspectly at our actual human experience of speaking and listening. What is called for then is not the analysis of different models or theories of rhetoric, but a phenomenological description of the experience of rhetoric in rather more primordial terms—terms that express our constitutive human desire to understand ourselves, and to make contact with others through the most primary of human capabilities: speaking and listening, interpreting and understanding.

This idea becomes much more visible once it is seen how closely related the experience of rhetorical expression is to the experience of hermeneutic or interpretive understanding. Hermeneutics has to do with understanding and interpretation, and rhetoric is the projection and inscription of meaning in persuasive spoken language. However, I argue that rhetorical expression can have neither relevance nor persuasive power without hermeneutic or interpretive understanding. My way of illustrating this relation will not be by giving examples of everyday situations of speaking-listening and interpreting-understanding. Instead, I follow an indirect course through the poetic-aesthetic realm of literature. Situating rhetoric and hermeneutics in this fictional or literary manner may appear to be a very peculiar way to demonstrate the human experience of rhetorical expression and hermeneutic understanding. However, the great advantage of beginning with ancient literary works is that we are introduced to rhetoric and hermeneutics not by way of abstract or ideal theoretical constructs or methods, but through a
world of shared meanings and concrete situated contexts where protagonists and audiences witness the tragic dimension of human action, the finitude of the human condition, and the virtue of critical insight.

In the context of familiar human stories that speak with nuance, particularity and relevance to the perplexities and ambiguities of our human condition, we are exposed to rhetorical expression and hermeneutic understanding in their first semblance as the means through which we ‘always already’ participate in shared activities of speaking, listening, understanding and critically engaging ourselves and each other. Indeed, our second proposal is that once we grasp the relation between speaking-listening (rhetoric) and interpreting-understanding (hermeneutics), we see that we are also unavoidably engaged in the natural development of a discerning critical orientation. I wager that situating the initial description of interpretive-rhetorical-critical experience in the aesthetic dimension allows us to immediately see how the very activity of speaking and listening depends on a hermeneutic capacity to understand and interpret what others are saying. In turn, this listening-hearing activity opens up a critical truth-oriented space of possibility. In other words, through the most basic form of storytelling it becomes clear that the interpenetrating relation between rhetoric and hermeneutics is precisely what enacts or makes possible what will be described as an emerging ‘critical orientation’. In Chapter Two, I elaborate this idea of critical orientation by reading it through Aristotle’s discussion of *phronesis*.

We need not have any specialized knowledge or above average intellectual capacity to understand how *phronesis* or practical wisdom works in our daily lives. One of the most accessible introductions to *phronesis* is detailed in a real-life example given by Barry Schwartz and Kenneth Sharpe in their book on practical wisdom.3 The authors begin by quoting a list of job duties that detail what a person must do in order to fulfill the function of ‘custodian’ in a
hospital setting. There is no mention in all of these latter duties of any responsibility towards or care for patients—indeed there is not even any recognition that custodial duties involve other human beings! Most of us are familiar with these sorts of generic job descriptions, which detail responsibilities and specific duties. What is interesting is that if we were to follow such a description to the letter—if we were to ‘work to rule’ doing only what is specified in the job description—it is very likely we would be fired within a week. In the example given by the authors, the custodian describes how he had to clean a room twice because the comatose patient’s father did not actually witness him doing it the first time around. The custodian explained that over time he had become familiar with the patient’s history, and had sympathy for both the patient and his father. He describes an emerging insight that even though he had fulfilled his official function of cleaning, what still remained was his sense that being a ‘good custodian’ in a hospital setting involved not just mopping floors, making beds and vacuuming carpets, but showing consideration and empathy towards individuals and families—encouraging and listening to them in a way that was consistent with the goods of health and well-being in a hospital setting. While it is clear that the officially recognized ‘custodial duties’ were part of this experience, what is more telling is the fact that the particular setting (in this case a major teaching hospital), not the general job description, determined what it meant to do well as a custodian in this situation. This example perfectly captures the sort of practical wisdom that is gathered over time and emerges as critical insight in the very concrete doing of a job—an emerging insight that is precisely defined in the mediation between the general demands or rules specified in a job description, and the unique, particular and unpredictable circumstances that occur in the very activity of doing a job. It was his recognition of human contingency—the interaction with others in a variety of unpredictable situations—that enabled this custodian over
time to extend the goods internal to the practice of being a custodian in this particular context, as well as affording him an on-the-job opportunity to extend and deepen his own capacity to reason practically. In this sense, phronesis is more than just a tool or a ‘reasoning skill’. In other words, something of positive surplus value is added in the very exercise or undertaking of phronetic reasoning. This ‘something’ is a growing potential for expanding individual wisdom and excellence in thinking and judgment.

What the above example also shows is that phronesis is not a critical ‘theory’, nor does it presuppose that we must attain theoretical depth or sophistication in order to engage our world at a critical level. Phronesis, in the sense meant here, is a way of describing how we enact a critical orientation and become critical beings, and create critical communities over time in the activity of doing and engaging in practices with and among others. I will claim that a critical orientation is enacted over time not because we are rehearsed in abstract theory, but in virtue of the practical reality that we are always participants engaged in practices, and in dialogical activities such as reading, speaking and listening with and among others over time, in a concrete world of needs, interests and desires. When this critical orientation is encouraged, nurtured and cultivated with others, it can have obvious personal, moral and political ramifications. For example, it can take the form of interpretively and reflexively grasping our particular moral or political situation in light of history, or an imagined future possibility. It can be enacted as a reflective uncovering, or a sudden insight into what was hitherto not immediately or readily apparent. Phronesis can help us insightfully and confidently navigate through the many personal difficulties and challenges we are constantly exposed to. In key part, the cultivating of such a personal, critical, moral or political orientation through speaking-listening and interpreting-understanding is initially made possible through linguistic activities such as rhetoric, dialogue and the experience of reading.
However, it is also perceptible in our everyday practical and embodied interactions with others, and in the infinite variety of practices, communicative exchanges and occupations that we daily engage in.

One of our most valuable historical sources for understanding what is involved in the ancient notion of *phronesis* is Aristotle. For Aristotle, the kind of practical reasoning and insight that *phronesis* underwrites and sustains, is essential for realizing virtues such as courage, temperance or justice. I will argue that what *phronesis* or practical wisdom additionally entails is a holistic account of what it is to understand and enact a critical being—an account that assumes that we are not merely *thinking* beings, but that our thinking being is inextricably tied to our bodily comportments, our capacity to perceive, to experience a range of different desires and emotions, to reflexively understand ourselves, and to interpret and give meaning to our actions in a temporal context that presupposes both remembering and anticipating. Admittedly, this argument presupposes a somewhat broader conception of *phronesis*. However, as we will see, what is added is still rooted in Aristotle’s over-all description of practical reason. Indeed, we will discover that *phronesis* is, in fact, only one element in a broader conception of practical reason that includes things such as insight, dialogue, interpretation and timeliness. What makes Aristotle’s discussion particularly relevant for us has to do with how he relates practical reasoning to situated human activities and human desires. What does this entail?

We typically describe ‘reasoning’ as something that is wholly separable and dissociated from emotion, or, more basically, from what I will call ‘desiring’. *Phronesis* reminds us that every practical ‘thinking’ is always a ‘desiring,’ and every desiring is accompanied by thinking. We cannot, nor would we want to, escape this practical lived reality. But, does the inextricable relation of desiring and thinking mean we cannot be ‘objectively’ critical? For many, the notion
of reasoning desire or desire-oriented reason will appear impossibly confused. Reason, if it is to be ‘objectively’ critical, must not allow itself to be contaminated by desire or emotion. However, I will challenge this assumption using Aristotle’s understanding of *phronesis* and practical reasoning as a guide. In marked contrast to the notion of adopting a completely objectifying, disengaged critical attitude that responds to isolated or disparate social or philosophical ‘problems’, and depends for its critical force on choosing this or that prevailing theory or method, I will put forward the idea that *phronesis* represents an alternative notion of critical reason that is situated not in theory but in ongoing thoughtful practical activity. The difference here is the difference between simply knowing that something is the case, and cultivating a certain kind of critical agency or be-ing over time. Critical be-ing is not a passive state that we completely attain, but an active becoming that we continuously strive for in the experience of particularity and difference—that is, it is something we concretely and continuously enact in concert with others over time in every one of our particular activities and practical engagements. Critical *theory* by contrast is something we *know*—that is, the precise articulation of abstract rules or procedures that attempt to articulate generic emancipatory goals, and subsume or bring the particular under this general knowledge. *Phronesis* describes a kind of practical reasoning that allows us to move in the reverse direction—to allow the particular to inform, deepen or amend the general. The assumption I make and defend is a simple one, but it has profound consequences: it is that doing or saying the right thing, in the right way, at the right time in this or that situation, is not a matter of theoretical or abstract knowledge, but a question of cultivating a certain kind of character constituted through a critical awareness which emerges over time in practical life.
There are many reasons why the cultivation and enactment of a critical being through *phronesis* is essential, but perhaps the most crucial one is that, at this point in history, we live in a world where environmental limitations are clearly visible, and where the future sustainability of all forms of life are at imminent risk. In such a situation, we cannot be satisfied with merely adopting general theoretical or emancipatory perspectives, but must make the effort at a very particular and concrete level to specifically and critically rethink and reorient our practices so that they shed new light on or reanimate our more general moral, legal and environmental perspectives. This is the concrete critical reasoning possibility that *phronesis* and practical reasoning affords us. Aristotle extolled the virtue of balance at an individual ethical level in the polis or political state. In a modern context, this idea of equilibrium has become, for us, a desperate matter of balancing humanity’s needs with the needs of a vulnerable earth, in every single one of our activities. What is demanded is not just a new or updated critical theory, improved technical devices or new social technologies, but a sustained commitment to cultivating a critical pedagogy. A critical pedagogy must involve the nurturing, over time, of thinking-desiring and responsible beings; beings that think and desire freedom in each of their linguistic, occupational, political, and social commitments and practices; beings that take responsibility for who they are, and can be accountable to others, and to a fragile world of limited resources. It is by beginning with Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis* that we can gain insight into how such a critical pedagogy could be enacted in our practical affairs. This is, once again, an uphill battle.

In our present digital age of instant messaging, ten-second sound bytes, cost-benefit analysis, dependence on behaviorist models or calculative algorithms that predict and routinize human thinking and acting, the notion of practical wisdom or *phronesis* might seem to be
something of an inconvenience. Practical wisdom, and the cultivation of insightful critical awareness, takes time and effort. It is both an ‘end’ and an ‘activity’. As an end it is that excellence of understanding towards which we implicitly strive in every human practice or endeavor. As an activity it is a careful attending to our experience of the particular—an effort to notice the many-sidedness of phenomena and imagine someone else’s perspective. The kind of thinking demanded in this context is something that is irreducible to generic procedures, rules or algorithms. Phronetic reflection and insight cannot stand still or be summarized, bordered or commodified in advance. It is always engaged and always moving—reflecting constantly, critically and creatively upon the ‘part’ in relation to the ‘whole’, the ‘particular’ in relation to the ‘universal’, the ‘traditional’ in relation to the innovative and unorthodox. Practical wisdom is not static theory or method, but the activity of thinking freedom as a practice. It is enacted every time we realize that the present definition, rule, law, description or procedure needs to be rethought in light of our experience of things.

Exercising phronetic thinking does not presuppose that we can do without general rules or laws, but, instead, constantly reminds us that these latter could not have any normative hold on us if they had not first been grasped through our thinking-acting experience of the world with and among others. Moreover, if general rules and theories can be said to give us a static and stable perspective of things, phronesis is the mode of reasoning always in motion, always challenging and putting in question the theoretical stability of the status quo. In this sense phronesis represents a much more radical ongoing critical enterprise.

Though phronesis is an ancient notion, there is nothing antiquated in the idea of practical reasoning and insight gathered over time in practical experience. There is nothing anachronistic in the phronetic presupposition that ‘who we are’ is about ‘how we deliberate’ and ‘what we do’
and, conversely that ‘what we do’ establishes ‘who we are’. To turn again back to the wisdom of Aristotle (and Plato) is not a nostalgic return to the unfashionable past which no longer applies, but a remembering of our constant indebtedness to a tradition of understanding about practical reasoning that is not only relevant but critically indispensable in our efforts to understand and effect change in our contemporary world. Having said this, it is also clear that Aristotle’s notion of *phronesis* is largely confined to his study of ethics where it is described as an intellectual virtue. I propose, in Chapter Two, that the reflexive critical orientation that *phronesis* opens up comes more distinctly into focus when the ethical realm is brought into dialogue with Aristotle’s discussion of rhetoric and politics. There are good reasons to take up Aristotelian ethics in the context of his rhetoric and politics. These spheres are naturally related to each other, not so much in terms of shared method or theoretical compatibility, but at the level of lived human experience. However, there is a second reason for choosing to bring the ethical, rhetorical and political spheres together. Once the relation between rhetoric and hermeneutics is made transparent at the level of human experience, we can begin to appreciate how rhetoric is always situated within normative ethical and moral frameworks, and expressed in the public sphere of human interaction.

In the public realm, the participatory activities of speaking, listening and understanding are constantly being renewed and updated in different linguistic, social, political and occupational contexts and situations that are always changing and often unpredictable. We are asked to be flexible in our dealings with others in various and changing circumstances, but also reminded not to forget, or entirely dispense with, certain traditions or conventions that coalesce in various occupational goals, legal precedents or moral imperatives. The ability to critically navigate through, and mediate between, particular contexts and general demands is precisely what the
activity of *phronetic* thinking-being describes. The elaboration of *phronesis* in Chapter Two details the enactment of a kind of critical awareness that develops organically over time, in the very activities of interpreting, speaking and listening, but yet does not rely for its critical potential on any over-arching theory. Because of this, *phronesis* unlike many so-called ‘critical theories or methods’ is much better able to accommodate the notion of practical reasoning as both historically situated and temporally elaborated within human experience. This is not something Aristotle himself explicitly thematizes. Despite this, the discussion of *phronesis* as that which presupposes an inextricable relation between acting-thinking-desiring-being is completely capable of accommodating a more contemporary historical and temporal perspective. In Chapter Three, I explore these historical and temporal dimensions by looking at two contemporary philosophers who have helped to articulate a modern framework for understanding the importance of retrieving the notion of *phronesis*: Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur.

The wager of Chapter Three is that *phronesis* can be extended beyond Aristotle, and indeed beyond the ethical, rhetorical and political to the very *praxis* or activity of critical understanding itself. What is at stake here is the rediscovery and radicalizing of *phronesis* and practical reasoning as enacting a critical orientation that emerges naturally in the very doing of each one of our practical engagements and endeavors. To radicalize *phronesis* in this way requires that we permit it to be read through the important contemporary philosophical notions of historicality and temporality.

We can easily forget in the everydayness of our activities, that we are creatures of history. Moreover, it may be a prejudice of every epoch that it views itself as somehow ‘above’ or beyond its history or what has preceded it. Relatedly, we are often caught up in the givenness of *this* particular present moment of time—of *this* temporal present which in its immediacy seems
unconnected to the past or the future. However, despite these understandable and common experiences of forgetfulness, we are also quite aware, the moment we begin to reflect upon our life, read a book, or talk to others, that we belong to history, and are formed by what came before us, and the anticipation of what lies ahead. History and time are not theoretical abstractions. They are, instead, concrete lived attributes of our human condition. To live outside of history or temporality, would be to view ourselves as god-like. I argue that it is here that the ancient notion of phronesis can bring us back to earth—to the ‘rough ground’ of human experience. Additionally, it can provide us with a way to grasp what it is to become a critical being—a being implicitly aware of its own indebtedness to the historical and the temporal aspects of experience. In other words, it is here where we see the importance of Gadamer’s discovery that understanding, interpretation and application work together, and are historically-situated activities, mediated through language and guided by phronesis and practical reason. To see ourselves as inescapably beings that ‘effect’ and are ‘effected by’ history is implicitly to recognize both our limitations and our possibilities. Moreover, I argue that Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics makes us aware that practical reasoning and phronesis are expanded and deepened once they are framed within the situated context that history provides. This is the first radicalizing moment of phronesis through Gadamer’s universal hermeneutics.

The second radicalizing moment is discovered through a grasp of our relation to time, or more accurately, to our status as temporal beings. One of the simplest ways to capture this notion of temporality, as distinct from mere clock-time or cosmological time, is through the notion of storytelling or narrative. We all tell and listen to stories. We author, and are shaped by, the stories we tell ourselves and others. We continuously update, revise and rethink our practices, ourselves and others in light of such narratives. We perceive ourselves and others, and we
configure our past, present and future in story-like or narrative terms. If *phronesis* is practical reasoning, one of the most important carriers or temporalizing mediums for such reasoning is narrative. I will make the claim that if narrative is one of the key ways we come to know ourselves and others as temporal beings, this knowing is not accessed through a pure logic of demonstration, nor in the perfection of method, but, rather, in everyday *phronetic*, practical reasoning which helps us to creatively and critically evaluate ourselves, and our world. Once again, the very telling and grasping of ourselves in narrative temporal terms involves *phronesis* and practical reasoning. *Phronesis* is able to bring together thinking-being and acting precisely because our human experience is not merely an aggregate of isolated atomistic, unconnected incidents, but is capable of being reconfigured as a recognizable story or narrative where actions, reasons and desires unfold in the context of what ‘has been’, what ‘is’, and what ‘might be’. Ricoeur’s insight is that language is the horizon of temporal and temporalizing possibility by way of narrative—or to use his words “time becomes *human time* to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence”.7 Taken together, these elements of historicality and temporality deepen our critical orientation, not because they belong to a theoretical perspective, but because we ‘always already’ experience the particularity of the world through history and through narrated time, and are, thereby, able to enrich and extend our capacity for practical reasoning and insight. It is worth adding that the historicality and temporality of human understanding is not only something *phronesis* accommodates, but something it *enacts* through the practices of rhetoric, dialogue and narrative.

Chapter Three temporarily puts rhetoric to one side, in order to allow the notion of practical reasoning and *phronesis* to be elaborated through Gadamer’s understanding of dialogue,
and Ricoeur’s discussion of narrative. However, once hermeneutic understanding is understood as a *phronetic* activity within history, its relation to rhetoric can be rediscovered again in a more contemporary setting. This chapter completes what we could think of as a linguistic hermeneutic-critical circle by way of *phronesis*—from rhetorical expression and dialogical interaction as embodying speaking-listening and understanding-interpreting, to history and narrative storytelling as embodying reading-writing and understanding-interpreting. In closing, Chapter Three also raises an unavoidable question—a question that goes to the heart of whether the ancient Aristotelian notion of *phronesis*, which was initially elaborated within the confines of a smaller, less institutionally structured world, can really supply us with the appropriate way to enact a critical orientation that will enable us to evaluate contemporary practices or assess the modern complex and diverse power structures we inhabit.

We are certainly vulnerable to systemic distortions in a way ancient societies were not. Moreover, it is easy to conceive of a small community where participants can realistically share common goods, and where *phronesis* can govern practical deliberations and actions. But is this the world we live in? These are precisely the questions which one our most important contemporary social and political philosophers, Jürgen Habermas, underscores, and therefore it is at this transitional stage where we move from the exposition of *phronesis* to what is referred to as critical theory.

Chapter Four begins with the claim that Habermas’s critical enterprise can be understood as a response to the question ‘what must a critical philosophy amount to’. Given this, I begin with a conceptual history of the idea of ‘critique’ and critical thinking that takes shape in, and is elaborated by, historical figures such as Roger Bacon, Galileo, Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and Marx. What is soon discovered, from a historical perspective, is that ‘critique’ is commonly
related to the notion of ‘crisis’, and initially coalesces in the drive for rational legitimation through appeal to objective method that often takes mathematical form. Coincident with the ‘objective’ mathematical grounding of critique and critical thinking is the narrowing of Aristotle’s more encompassing understanding of reason, and the rejection of teleology and purposive rationality, in favor of the experimental method and ‘truth-revealing’ scientific theory. However, what also becomes apparent with the rise of the scientific and mathematical paradigm is the idea that through the latter we can have ‘objective’ control and mastery over nature and ourselves as subjects. This kind of instrumentalizing mode of thinking will reverberate through all political, economic, technical and institutional arrangements, and it will figure prominently in the reconstruction of the practical world as reducible to behaviorist, utilitarian and functionalist goals, and the reconfiguring of human identity as individual, isolated and atomistic, rather than collective, participative and community-oriented. The ancient notion of phronesis and practical reasoning, which presupposes creative, spontaneous and participative forms of interaction, and a shared telos, is thereby overshadowed by the rise of science and mathematical models of description and critique.

With the rise of Humean epistemological skepticism regarding the grand claims of scientific rationality, and the move to a more ‘inward’ psychologizing framework for understanding human desire and belief, the notion of critique and the critical undergo yet another revolution. At this stage, Kant’s subject-oriented rational tribunal assures reason of its lawful claims not by external mathematical authority or dogmatic decree, but ‘in accordance with its own eternal and unalterable laws.’ As a result of this internalizing critical move, the Kantian subject can no longer claim to know the world ‘as it is in itself’, but can only claim to know the world as it appears through the a priori structure of its own understanding. At a further stage of
conceptual unfolding, the critique of *a priori* reason will give rise to a phenomenologically-oriented Hegelian notion of *immanent* critique, which is ‘critical’ insofar as it is able to grasp the critical resources and possibilities within the concrete practice of thinking and experiencing a world. I draw here an explicit connection between Hegel’s understanding of immanent critique, and the pivotal role that negation plays in his thinking. Additionally, I point to the relation that immanent critique and negation have to earlier discussion of ‘insight’ in Aristotle.

In Hegel, the familiar distinction between objective knowing and subjective experience is challenged by a developmental understanding of consciousness and self-consciousness. To be critically and self-consciously aware is, for Hegel, not something gained by knowledge of theory, or solely through the autonomous individual mind (as in Kant), but, rather, something that is always an ongoing participative activity, dependent upon the recognition of the reality of another who is also a self-conscious being. With Hegel we return to notions of human experience, intuition, the development of a critical self-conscious awareness over time in particular contexts of understanding, and the notion that these latter always presuppose a recognition of ourselves with and among others. In short, Hegel brings us back to Aristotelian themes and ideas, presupposed in the ancient notion of practical reasoning and *phronesis*. Hegel affords us the opportunity to encounter again the immanent, constant movement and teleological orientation of thinking activity. It is this thinking activity (*phronesis*) which in realizing *itself* realizes a gradually emerging critical self-awareness. In other words, it is in the very doing or activity of practical thinking wherein we insightfully discover or uncover contradictions, inconsistencies and distortions in our own conceptions, and in those ideas, opinions, traditions and configurations of meaning we live within.
The conceptual history then moves from a Hegelian phenomenological description of critical reason discovering or becoming aware of itself, to a Marxist understanding of critique that inevitably purchases its ‘materialist’ grasp of critique by way of the empirical science of economics, and emerging theories of mass society. With Marx the telos of philosophy is no longer to merely interpret, but to change the world. Such change presupposes a ‘material’ and empirical approach. However, even if it depends on the authority of empirical science, the conceptual form of social and economic critique that Marx adopts is still an immanent one—that is, it is still very much in the Hegelian spirit of disclosing or unveiling distortions and contradictions within human practices and capitalist economic configurations. However, from a Marxist perspective, Hegel’s immanent ‘critical’ orientation is not real but only apparent. It is apparent insofar as it is formal and abstract, and it is formal and abstract because human beings are conceived in a merely ‘abstract’ way as self-consciousness. Paradoxically, however, I argue that Marx’s own understanding of immanent critique is necessarily tied to his embrace of scientific method. This means, therefore, that his emancipatory program can itself only be expressed through abstract social and economic laws.

It is at this point in our conceptual history where we encounter the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, and eventually Habermas himself. What the contemporary ‘Institute for Social Research’ wants to make explicit, in expressly epistemological terms, is the implicit ‘false consciousness’ that attaches to conventional positivist social science. This is what distinguishes critical theorists from Marxist social-scientific analysis. Marx was willing to accept many of the conventions of empirical social scientific method, and the law-like axioms of Adam Smith’s economic theory. The early Social Research thinkers such as Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse saw traditional theory and positivist science as blind to the reality that so-called ‘objectivity’
actually served to sustain, legitimate and reproduce distorting ideologies and social practices. The early Frankfurt school believed it could expose or unmask the reality of traditional theory and positivist empirical science through immanent critique—that is, by reading through the surface of their claims, and discovering inconsistencies, hidden or distorted claims, and internal contradictions. A critically aware self-understanding of science and theory would be the mark of modern critical social theory. Unlike traditional theory, critical social theory would not uphold or blindly reproduce the distortions of modern capitalist social and economic relations. However, this shift in self-understanding could only occur if theory and practice were considered not as two different worlds, but as existing together in a mutually reinforcing and interpenetrating way. The theoretical realm of abstract reason would, henceforth, have to be thought of as that which is always disclosed through the practical. More succinctly, this would mean that theory would be another, perhaps more organized, form of practice. As a result, reason would be grounded in the real practical world, and be directed to constantly interrogate itself, and thereby recognize the limitations of its claims to truth. It was the need to articulate this practical self-reflexive capacity which belonged to situated reason that animated the early Frankfurt theorists, and allowed critical theory to earn its rank as a truly ‘critical’ enterprise.

What Habermas sees as the principal problem of early critical theory is that in its radical critique of reason, it actually undervalued the communicatively-oriented resources within reason itself. The exclusive embrace of situated or ‘practical reason’ does not make full use of the resources of rationality. It exposes reason to relativism, and to the irreducible plurality of contingent, incommensurable perspectives. Habermas’s worry is that because critical theory principally occupies itself with a negative one-sided fixation on the potential distortions of instrumental forms of reason, this has a totalizing effect which leaves no room to re-imagine or reconstruct the positive critical and
emancipatory potential within rationality. According to Habermas, this state of affairs has grave social, moral and legal consequences. He thinks that reason need not be reduced to its merely instrumental or strategic form. Therefore, his project reflects the effort to bring to our attention the still-to-be-articulated critical potential of the Enlightenment under the rubric of a more ‘communicatively oriented’ rationality. Habermas does not turn to Aristotle, but, instead, to modern social theory as the means through which communicative rationality must be elaborated. In this sense, Habermas’s communicative approach represents a real challenge to *phronesis*.

Although Habermas’s philosophy has taken a number of turns, and has been elaborated in an astounding multitude of discourses and interdisciplinary contexts, I argue that his fundamental critical orientation can be summarized in two ambitious goals. His first aim is to articulate, through what I interpret as an *immanent* form of critique, the limitations of instrumental rationality, while at the same time bringing to light a persistent emancipatory cognitive interest. This emancipatory interest can be summed up as the requirement to retrieve a more positive understanding of reason—one which provides the condition of possibility for a reflexive, empirically grounded, hermeneutically informed, communicatively oriented, social science. The second aim, also realized through an immanent form of critique, is the determination to reconstruct the ‘pragmatics’ of communication by ‘peering through the surface’ of language, and making explicit the normative conditions of possibility for undistorted communication, and a normative telos of uncoerced rational understanding and agreement. I spend the remainder of Chapter Four detailing these two claims, and emphasizing two conclusions from Habermas that are in direct competition with the thesis of the present work: that the political-ethical framework of Aristotelian philosophy and the ancient notion of *phronesis* are simply no longer relevant in a modern world, and that Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics through *phronesis* is not able to
bring forward a critically-oriented perspective at an individual, political or social level of awareness.

Chapter Five confronts these latter conclusions by showing how Habermas’s critical theory actually relies for its critical thrust on a hermeneutical reflective tradition of immanent critique, and on insights about communication that can only be accessed and enacted through interpretive phronetic reasoning, tradition and concretely embodied linguistic practices. Additionally, I demonstrate that Habermas’s own project can be made much more concrete and pedagogically sound when it is reformulated with critical hermeneutics enacted through practical reasoning and phronesis in mind. To be sure, this practical turn reconfigures Habermas’s critical project as something which must inevitably unfold within the very framework of practical reasoning and phronesis that he appears to explicitly reject. It is not the evolutionary ‘rationalization of the lifeworld’ that best describes our emerging critical capacity. Rather it is within the experiential, the historical, the interpretive and the temporal, where we develop and emerge over time, with the help of the ancient concept of phronesis, as critically aware beings with and among others. This is not to dispense with universalizing articulations or abstract theories, but, rather, to insist that the latter only comes long after much of the work of thinking-doing experience has formed a certain kind of normative character—a character that we constantly interrogate and dialectically elaborate in particular contexts by way of the resources provided to us by practical reasoning and phronesis. I illustrate this latter point, in a preliminary way, by drawing together the previous arguments and elaborations of rhetoric, hermeneutics, practical reasoning and phronesis, and by showing what this over-all critical perspective looks like when it is situated and applied in three different practical realms: the political, the legal and the pedagogical.
Chapter One

Hermeneutics, Rhetoric and Desire: A Literary-Philosophical Excursus

“Hermeneutics and rhetoric are intimately related in that every act of understanding is the reverse side of an act of speaking, and one must grasp the thinking that underlies a given statement. Dialectics relies on hermeneutics and rhetoric because the development of all knowledge depends on both speaking and understanding.”

1.1 The Wager

In this Chapter I introduce two proposals that will be elaborated and defended. The first, made manifest through a phenomenological perspective, is that long before rhetoric and hermeneutics become professionalized disciplines, they are actively engaged in, part of our lived experience, and realized through the human practices of speaking, listening and understanding. This thesis will be attested to through two early Greek literary works: Homer’s Iliad and Sophocles’ Antigone. My reasons for initially situating the argument at an aesthetic level of drama, and by way of these texts in particular, will become apparent momentarily. Secondly, I propose to bring forward the issue of speaking rightly or truthfully within the complex context of human desire. This second proposal will look at rhetoric and hermeneutics from a more reflective, philosophical perspective through Plato’s dialogue Phaedrus. To put this in a slightly different way, our second proposal introduces the idea that a ‘critical dimension’ is not something that is discovered in static theory or method, but, rather, something that emerges over
time in reflective experience with and among others, and is therefore an activity enacted by and through rhetorical expression and hermeneutic understanding.

Initially, we can say that hermeneutics has to do with understanding and interpretation, and rhetoric is the projection and inscription of this latter meaning in persuasive spoken language. However, I will argue that rhetoric is more than mere logical persuasion, and hermeneutics comprises more than ‘methods’ of interpretation. Moreover, I will claim that though they are distinct ideas, hermeneutic understanding and rhetorical expression are inextricably related to each other. More fundamentally, they convey the constitutive human desire to express and understand ourselves and others through the most primary of human capabilities: speaking and listening, interpreting and understanding. This constitutive desire is made manifest in language through the contingency, partiality, particularity and plurality of opinions; it appears in language as the possibility of meaning, but also as the expression of human limitation, and the real possibility of confusion, ambiguity, conflict and disagreement.11

Rhetoric is the place where this complex of appearances is brought to spoken language. Rhetorical eloquence is a skill that is learned with and among others. It is not something reserved for the professional political orator. Rather, it is a way of reflecting and thinking that can capture or create something new in language, but always relies on already existing traditions of meaning if it is to be persuasive or promote conviction in others.12 In this way it can be said to exhibit, even in its most primitive form, aesthetic qualitative differentiations through simile, metaphor, metonymy etc., and be revealed in discursive modes of argument, narrative and description. Insofar as it is an expression of desire, rhetoric can and often does manifest in a way that is hubristic, self-aggrandizing and blinding to how we understand ourselves, and to what others are trying to say to us. But, through desire rhetoric can also manifest as the possibility of opening up
in language a space for critical resistance, dissent and critical hope by affording us new ways of articulating freedom, justice and political agency. All of these attributes of rhetoric as desire testify to the inescapable plurality of appearances that rhetoric embodies. In other words, they bear witness to rhetoric as an interpretive unfolding of the everydayness of being in language, and to the praxis orientation or being-at-work of rhetorical expression insofar as it opens a space of possibility for creative, interpretive and critical reflection. Each of these constitutive aspects of language—the rhetorical, the interpretive, and the creative-critical—are at their core relational. That is, they testify to the fact that what we say, and how we understand, is always oriented in the space that exists between selves and others.

Rhetoric is usually thought of as confined to speaking or speech. While it certainly can be defined as persuasive speech, this is not the whole picture. Rhetoric involves both speakers and listeners. It requires not just good speakers but good listeners. My wager here is that as this practical, experiential and relational origin becomes visible, and the notion of rhetoric as an expression of human desire is made manifest, we are inevitably led to the conclusion that rhetoric (speaking and listening), and hermeneutics (interpreting and understanding), are interpenetrating modes of practical human interaction that always already involve a kind of critical reflection and insight. Insight is not a technique or a technical skill. It is not a visual experience, but instead a kind of thoughtful seeing or sudden grasp of the truth or rightness of something. Insight is more than what meets the eye. Moreover, phronesis testifies to fact that insight is a mode of thoughtful seeing that deepens over time through experience, and in the very activity of thinking and engaging in practices with others. I contend that insight understood in the context of phronesis constitutes a dimension of critical awareness—a sudden awareness that a given conclusion or judgment is correct, or that some state of affairs hitherto unseen or not
understood is now graspable. *Phronesis* and insightful awareness presuppose that despite the fact that things change over time, we can still gather wisdom and promptly perceive the truth or rightness of a given proposal, law, perspective or argument, as our experience expands and deepens over time. This is not practical reflection and critical insight by way of an external legitimating theory, but something that arises in the very ‘doing’ activity that understanding, listening and speaking presuppose. The literary and philosophical traditions of early Greek literature and philosophy can help us initially bring into relief the practical, ontological and ethical dimensions of hermeneutics and rhetoric—dimensions that are often occluded by an excessively abstract methodological focus.

Of course there are an infinite variety of ancient Greek literary works we could choose from. However, Homer’s *Iliad* and Sophocles’ *Antigone* are, paradoxically, both familiar or close to us and historically distant from us. This particular configuration of proximity and distance allows us to see the inextricable relation between hermeneutic understanding and rhetorical expression from our own contemporary perspective, but it also helps us to imaginatively grasp this relation from the perspective of an audience of the past. Admittedly, early Greek oratory has a different origin and structure than later Greek tragedy. However, I will not focus on such structural distinctions, but rather on the particular meaning contexts that give rise to what is said, how well it is said, and who listened or did not listen to what is said. Moreover, by beginning in the aesthetic dimension of tragedy we can understand how hermeneutics and rhetoric work together in the situated context of Greek storytelling, before they are later taken up through more philosophical perspectives of Plato and Aristotle. At a distinctly moral level, we will also see, in the articulation of a tragic sensibility, something essential about how insight is not only co-extensive with the ancient concept of *phronesis*, but how it is
absolutely essential for the cultivation of a critical orientation. More specifically, we will discover that when characters lack *nous* (insight) and *phronesis* (practical reason) the result is a distortion of perspective that takes the form of narrowness of vision, self-centeredness, and an inability to see what is right here and now, or a deafness to both the voice and the implied voice of another. Without the benefit of *phronesis* we lack the reasoning and creative capacity to make proper or equitable determinations, and we draw the wrong conclusions about what to say or how to act or intervene in a way that realizes the good we seek; without *nous* or insight we lack the noetic or intuitive capacity to interpret beyond the obvious, to see beneath the surface of things, and suddenly grasp the ethical or political implications of what is said or done. In the context of the *Iliad* and the *Antigone*, the lack of such intellectual virtues and intuitive capacities gives rise to one-sidedness, misunderstanding, and finally to suffering and tragedy.

What these literary works illustrate, in a preliminary way, is that the cultivation of a critical orientation through insight and *phronesis* is not something reserved for use by the ‘expert’ rhetorician, the skilled politician or the professional moral philosopher. On the contrary, insight and practical reasoning are something all of us can recognize in others and develop in ourselves through experience. Secondly, they exemplify to us that wisdom and insight are not reducible to rules or methods, but always enacted over time with and among others in the very thinking and doing of things. Of course, it may be objected that the *Iliad* and the *Antigone* are works of fiction that depict archetypal heroes or a ‘larger than life’ tragic characters—and not the everydayness of human experience. However, it still remains true that these works of literature have survived the millennia precisely because they articulate with nuance, particularity and relevance, the perplexities and ambiguities of the human condition. There is, of course, a sense in which tragedy represents the limit of practical reasoning. Tragic situations are situations that have no
certain solution. They defy all our attempts at reasoned moderation or synthesis, and resist our desire to rest at ease in the comfort of a consoling metaphysics or theism. Despite this, there is something about the thinking and articulating of tragic situations that speaks to us in a fundamentally human and practical way. The possibility of tragedy does not entirely foreclose on our experience, or doom us to continuous suffering. Instead, it implores us to ‘think more’ about how we might resist our sometimes overwhelming desire to narrow the world, or attempt to, hubristically, make the world after our own image.

Moreover, if the function of works of literature, or for that matter any narrative, is to bring together chance and random events within a temporal unity of plot, this latter structural unity need not be thought of as a contrived form of experiential consolation or concordance. In great tragedy (or other enduring works of art) we are not offered, from the perspective of our own experience, the comfort of consolation, but rather thought-provoking elements of discord, disruption and ambiguity. In such works what is unfolded through rhetoric, narrative and character is the experience of a fundamental incompleteness, of the fact that we are limited in our capacity to know. This is what is given to us as the most original constitutive element of our human condition. Homer, and the later Greek tragedians, ask us to attend to this world of human limitedness, of weakness, variability, particularity, luck and as Martha Nussbaum thoughtfully put it, ‘the fragility of the good itself’. Yet it is, paradoxically, in this very world of human limitation, incompleteness and fragility where rhetoric as the articulation of difference and hermeneutics as the grasp of meanings are both given a place —where they are allowed to matter. It is also where we are asked, perhaps most importantly, to attend to the particularity of a world that is always already a world with and among others. Finally, it is within the experience
of both human limitation and human possibility that tragedy presents where we will discover the conditions of possibility for the development of critical insight.

These themes are captured in exemplary fashion in a number of literary works, beginning with Homer’s *Iliad*. But why begin specifically here? Aside from familiarity, the *Iliad* is a poem that affords us the opportunity to hear different kinds of speeches, which then become associated with particular characters. In various situated speeches we can thereby grasp how the self-understanding of characters evolves over time. What is important for the argument here, is that before Aristotle discussed the relation of character and rhetoric, and perhaps also before rhetoric was elaborated in any systematic fashion, Homer had already recognized that good character was a necessary component in persuasive speech. Moreover, Homer implicitly grasps that speech can be the carrier of wisdom and critical insight (as it is with Odysseus), or it can, as Aeneas reminds us, be “a twisty thing” [*Iliad 20.245*] more concerned to aggrandize, obfuscate or conceal the truth or reality of the situation. The narrator of the *Iliad* speaks in the third person, from an omniscient perspective, giving the audience clues and insights into each character, including the Gods. Because of this we are able to see that what characters say to each other reveals in some measure both ‘who’ they are, and how we should react to them as an audience. The *Iliad* can then be seen to be one of the earliest exemplars of how rhetorical expression is always intimately tied to hermeneutic understanding, and the self-understanding of character. We can also gather from the approximate historical setting of the poem (in the Bronze Age, Twelfth or Thirteenth Century BC), and the place (what would now be modern Turkey), that something resembling a heroic code of virtue was the guiding ethos imagined by the author.¹⁷

The specific story of the *Iliad* begins and ends with the character of Achilleus. It is the final year of a ten-year war between the Greeks and the Trojans. However, it is not the war, as
such, that is of importance for Homer, but, rather, the gradual development of wisdom and deepening understanding that takes place in the character of Achilleus. While it is true that there might be a certain uniformity that arises out of the construction of heroic characters such as Achilleus and Odysseus, and also the case that there are set speeches which presuppose a pre-existing theological-moral order, the audience (then and now) can still respond thoughtfully and emotionally to this work because something of existential significance is conveyed through speech, and through the actions of various characters. As Geoffrey Kirk notes “what the characters say does not so much reflect their own particular personalities at this moment as their human and generic responses, often confused and inadequate, to the events in which they find themselves entangled”. It matters not that such literary works are works of fiction, or as one might say ‘imitations’ or ‘representations’ of human situations. What matters is that they bring forward recognizably human experiences through dramatic speech in action.

The imagined ordering of possible reality in the *Iliad* is not taken by its audience as real, or as a deceptive pseudo-reality, but as something that brings a recognizable world of experience and action into focus. It is able to do this because it draws on the preexisting hermeneutic intelligibility of action, displayed for an audience that would still have been very familiar with the heroic code of virtue. The audiences then and now can take pleasure in the gathering of meaning that unfolds through the imitation not “of persons but of action and life, of happiness and misery.” ‘Action’ is not mere physical movement. It is something that involves giving reasons, expressing desires, and reflectively deliberating about what to say and do. These features of human experience are expressed through plot and embodied in speech—in dialogue and rhetoric. It is rhetoric that allows an audience to experience the distinctiveness of each
character, and from these latter representations, to participate in the experience of the inevitability of suffering, of success and failure, of good and evil, guilt and innocence.

Firstly then, rhetoric in the *Iliad* is situated within a context of action that is meaningful to an audience because it presupposes an already preexisting shared understanding. This is the first moment where we see the relation between hermeneutic understanding and rhetorical expression. This relation is something that manifests both within the action of the play, and at the level of the audience. It is precisely through a shared linguistic and contextual understanding that meaning is possible at both levels. The characters in the *Iliad*, and in other works examined below, are understood in the particularity of an emplotted situation that surrounds them and calls on them to speak and act in certain ways. The interaction between language, character and action allows the audience to grasp the *ethos* that characters attempt to establish. But this grasp is contingent upon an already existing background understanding. Hermeneutic ‘fore-understanding’, as Heidegger will later call it, becomes *explicit* understanding by placing the audience in a world of action that is expressed through language. Again, we can see in this, the points of intersection between the rhetorical and the hermeneutic. It is simply not possible to be either persuaded or remain unconvinced by rhetorical oratory or speech without presupposing an implicit hermeneutic understanding of the context out of which it arises. In this case, the context is one of describing the vicissitudes of war, the individual disputes and internal divisions among protagonists, the mytho-theological world order, and, of course, the tragic heroism of the warrior Achilleus.

All of these intertwining hermeneutic and rhetorical elements are underscored in Sophocles’ *Antigone* as well. If the focus of our exposition of the *Iliad* is the speaker, it is the other side of rhetoric or *listening* that is highlighted in the discussion of Sophocles’ *Antigone*. The tragic themes, the one-sidedness and hubris of characters, are, however, framed within a
more complex set of competing claims and hermeneutic allegiances. The heroic *ethos* that animated the *Iliad* has become in Sophocles’ *Antigone* a more distinctly political and morally charged understanding that raises important ontological questions about the being of the *polis*, and the relation of citizens to the state, as well as the fidelity of familial relationships. What is worthy of note in the *Antigone* is that this complexity of competing claims opens up for its audience the possibility of what Simone De Beauvoir calls an ‘ethics of ambiguity’. Yet, despite this ambiguity, we can still discern when the words in the speeches of Creon and Antigone are ill-considered and reflect an insular perspective. This is because rhetoric has already within it, a normative force that derives its power from a hermeneutically discerned background understanding of different moral and political possibilities. Thus, we see implicitly that once rhetorical expression and hermeneutic understanding are considered as inextricably related to each other, a third or critical dimension begins to emerge which takes the form of using the ‘right words’ at the ‘right time’ and in the ‘right way’. What provides the basis for this critical dimension is a certain hermeneutically grasped background of shared goods, meanings and differentiations, but also a desire to realize the virtues internal to the practice of speaking and listening.20 As we will later claim this ‘critical dimension’ is a combination of *nous* (insight) and *phronesis* (practical reason) at work.

Lastly, we will look at Plato’s *Phaedrus*. The *Phaedrus* introduces the key notion of human desire, and opens up the interrelation between rhetoric and desire at a more distinctly critical and philosophical level. When hermeneutics, rhetoric and critique are thought of in terms of abstract theory or method, we do not notice their primordial involvement with human desire. As the *Phaedrus* makes explicit, desire is central for understanding the power that rhetoric has to deceive and flatter, but also its equal potential to be the medium where wisdom and truth may be
expressed. It is common to see the Platonic corpus, especially the *Gorgias*, as an unambiguous disavowal of rhetoric—of rhetoric as the mask worn by the sophist. We will argue that this perspective is one-sided. If anything can be said about Plato’s works in general, it is that they testify to the fact that one of the fundamental ways in which we relate to and learn about ourselves and others is through the activity of questioning, speaking and listening. Admittedly, this work by Plato takes a more explicitly dialogical form than either the *Iliad* or *Antigone*, but this should not lead us into thinking that rhetoric is not fundamental to Plato’s thinking. Plato precisely understood the ineliminability of rhetoric—of persuading, of speaking well and truthfully, as well as listening closely to what the other has to say. Indeed, there is no better way of understanding the interpenetrating aspects of rhetoric and hermeneutics as practices of human understanding than by way of careful attention to Platonic dialogue.  

1.2 The Stakes

What we hope to gain over-all is an understanding of the interpenetrating relation between hermeneutics and rhetoric that is enacted through the lived experience of speaking and listening. Secondly, we wish to put forward a preliminary understanding of the way that practical reasoning and critical insight emerge not as something dependent on method or theory, but as developing organically through the very activities and practices of speaking-listening, interpreting-understanding. But we need to first get clear about how rhetoric and hermeneutics are typically conceived of as separate domains, and secondly how we are to think of them as interpenetrating linguistic practices of understanding, speaking and listening.
When rhetoric is separated from hermeneutic contexts which inform ethical and political practice, and hermeneutics, like rhetoric, becomes a rule-oriented, method-driven discipline, the deep connection both have to practical human concerns is left behind. It then becomes possible, and perhaps inevitable, to view each as a separate disciplinary field, and, from there, technically oriented, strategic enterprises. The need to legitimate rhetoric and hermeneutics through the disciplinary impetus provided by theory, and articulated through rules, has certain obvious benefits just as any systematizing of knowledge does. For our purposes, however, it will become far more important to provide a clue to understanding how rhetoric and hermeneutics might mutually realize each other in practice, and in the experience of understanding itself.

There is, of course, already a fundamental hermeneutic of rhetorical speech we are familiar with through the relationship of ‘part to whole’—sometimes referred to as the hermeneutic circle. Thus, we understand a speech or text both by relating this part to the whole, and the whole to this part. This constant ‘to and fro’ movement captures one of the important features of hermeneutic reflection, and, indeed, of understanding itself. As the quotation from Schleiermacher attests, the relation articulated between hermeneutics and rhetoric is not something unfamiliar to philosophers. In *Being and Time* Heidegger tells us with respect to Aristotle’s rhetoric that “…contrary to the traditional orientation, according to which rhetoric is conceived as the kind of thing we ‘learn in school’, this work of Aristotle must be taken as the first systematic hermeneutic of the everydayness of Being with one another.” But the relation is given even more explicit formulation in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s claim that “the rhetorical and hermeneutical aspects of human linguisticality completely interpenetrate each other”. Gadamer makes a second important claim about the degree to which both rhetoric and hermeneutics are enacted in *praxis*: 
...rhetoric is not mere theory of forms of speech and persuasion; rather, it can develop out of a native talent for practical mastery, without any theoretical reflection about ways and means. Likewise, the art of understanding, [hermeneutics] whatever its ways and means may be, is not dependent on an explicit awareness of the rules that guide and govern it. It builds, as does rhetoric, on a natural power that everyone possesses to some degree. It is a skill in which one gifted person may surpass all others. And theory can at best only tell us why. In both rhetoric and hermeneutics, then theory is subsequent to that out of which it is abstracted; that is to praxis.24

This link of hermeneutics, rhetoric and praxis, or practical activity, which Gadamer underscores in the above passage, is crucial for understanding both the ethical and ontological dimensions of rhetoric and hermeneutics. Why is this important?

We typically think of rhetoric as having to do with persuading an audience and hermeneutics as involving the interpretation of texts. We think of them as methods that depend for their epistemic and organizational legitimacy on theory. What Gadamer is saying is that theory is something that comes after not before practice. The problem is that method and theoretical perspectives tend to be hegemonic. When this happens we lose sight of the fact that rhetoric and hermeneutics are really constitutive modes of speaking and understanding that have an ontological origin—they are constitutive of the way we are with ourselves and with others in language. From a methodological perspective, theories of rhetoric have been associated more particularly with argument and persuasion in the law courts and the political arena, while hermeneutic theories are confined to determining appropriate canons for interpreting theological
and legal texts. Each of these epistemically oriented domains might be seen as developing a system of formalized definitions, classifications of type, and rules for argumentation or interpretation—in short, each would be methodologically oriented, rule-governed and self-contained disciplines. However, while such a methodological approach might in different ways define and limit the theoretical scope of rhetoric and hermeneutics it also tends to make them into mere objects of study, while distancing them from the very historical contingencies and practical concerns out of which they arise. Part of the problem is that when rhetoric and hermeneutics are segregated, rationalized, managed and subsumed under method, they begin to be looked upon merely as useful argumentative or interpretive instruments which serve circumscribed ends. What is lost in the emphasis on method and theory is an important intrinsic ontological and critical dimension—that is, the connection that hermeneutics and rhetoric, as practices, have to the human experience of understanding and normative critical application itself; and, related to this, the interconnections they have with each other. In other words, once we subsume rhetorical expression and hermeneutic understanding under method, we lose the sense that they are fundamentally a part of our speaking, listening and understanding being. We forget that we ‘always already’ belong to, and participate in, rhetorical and hermeneutical practices, in virtue of the fact that we are ‘in’ language ‘understandingly’. The ontological claim here, continuous with Heidegger and Gadamer, is that rhetoric and hermeneutics are not initially theories, but, rather, basic ways we comport and constitute ourselves, and understand our relations with others in language. The practically-oriented human experience that is displayed in rhetoric is one of both speaking and of listening. Here I call to mind a fuller sense of ‘speaking’ in the derivative verb *eirô* (ειρω) which means ‘to speak’, to tell or ‘to say’. It is this basic notion of ‘speaking’, telling or ‘saying’ in the word *eirô*, when understood in the context of
logos, which means discourse or speech (itself derived from the verb legein or ‘to say’) that becomes not merely ‘saying’ (or assertion), but also receiving, hearing, gathering or bringing together and deliberating. This appeal to etymology confirms that rhetoric is a participative linguistic undertaking that must imply not just speech but speaking, listening and thinking with and among others.

Tied intimately to rhetorical expression, is the experience of hermeneutic understanding. According to Gadamer, hermeneutic understanding involves a co-dependent relation between interpretation, understanding and application. Both rhetoric and hermeneutics are, as Gadamer might say, ‘reason incarnate in existence’; that is, a kind of practical knowing or grasping of truth that arises out of participation and dialogue with others. Looking at these constitutive practices through the wider lens of human experience, what we understand as rhetoric becomes the name for the multiple possibilities of speaking and listening, and what we recognize as hermeneutics is the activity of understanding itself. Both rhetorical expression and hermeneutic understanding imply a concernfulness and way of ‘attending to’ a world with and among others.

What this implies is that we cannot begin by understanding rhetoric and hermeneutics as static or methodologically limited abstract theories of argumentation and interpretation. Instead, we must look first at our lived experience. More particularly, we must understand that sort of linguistic and dialogical experience which can be accessed through phenomenological description, and can be glimpsed in the human practices of reading and understanding, speaking and listening. These latter are not abstract, theoretical activities, but practical lived activities. Moreover, the dialogical nature of human linguistic experience is crucial here because it reveals that the concrete situations we find ourselves embedded in are never exclusively determined by an
‘abstract subject’ wholly separate from others. Rhetoric and hermeneutics testify to this always present ‘otherness’ in the contexts of speaking, gathering meaning, listening and understanding.

What Gadamer refers to as praxis (or practical activity) is related to another important feature that is associated with rhetoric and hermeneutics: phronesis. The notion of phronesis or practical reasoning raises issues of human desire and truth. Of course, it is Aristotle’s notion of phronesis that we will be principally concerned with. But it is important at this early stage to introduce the idea that the cultivation of practical wisdom is something tied to human desire. If rhetoric and hermeneutics are constitutive of our efforts to truthfully understand ourselves and others at the level of speaking and listening practice, they are also caught up in the whole range of human emotion and desire. At this early literary stage phronesis manifests as a desire to reason truthfully and in a way that attends to the specific demands of a given situation. In the Iliad, the Antigone and in Plato’s Phaedrus, what is highlighted is that when speaking, listening and understanding are not governed by the desire to cultivate truth-oriented practical wisdom or phronesis within a framework of shared ends, but are rather manifestations of the desire for self-aggrandizement, the result is not just the reduction of rhetoric to sophistry, but a fundamental loss of the ethical capacity to hear and understand one another. The connection between rhetoric, hermeneutics, phronesis, truthfulness and desire is thus foregrounded in the readings of the Iliad and Antigone, and explicitly thematized in the discussion of Plato’s Phaedrus.

1.3 Speaking-Listening: Rhetoric as Oratory in Homer’s Iliad

The Iliad opens with the words “Sing, goddess, the Anger of Peleus’ son Achilleus and its devastation, which put pains thousand-fold upon the Achaians.” The story begins when a
Trojan priest, Chryses, asks Agamemnon to return his captured daughter Chryseis, and offers a significant ransom to Agamemnon, which the latter stubbornly refuses. The god Apollo is solicited by Chryses to exact revenge against Agamemnon for this refusal, and nine days of plague are visited upon the Greek Army. Achilleus calls for a gathering to try to stem the plague, and eventually Agamemnon consents to the return of Chryseis. However, he unwisely determines that as compensation he should take Achilleus’ captive Briseis. As a result, Achilleus suffers something of a public humiliation, and subsequently withdraws from the war. The effect of Agamemnon’s refusal and Achilleus’ withdrawal inaugurates the ensuing action of the poem.29

As Ian Worthington has noted, Greek oratory is “rhetoric in action”.30 Oratory is the ‘action’ by which the audience of the Iliad can discern character and disposition. It is also the place where we are exposed to the fact that the fluency of oratory does not always meet the reality on the ground or the demand of truthfulness. It is during the gathering called by Achilleus that one of the more abusive verbal assaults on Agamemnon, Achilleus and Odysseus is launched by the disorderly Theristes. When Homer has Odysseus open his speech by saying “Fluent orator though you be, Theristes, your words are ill-considered” [Iliad 2.246-7], he intends to show us how impressive rhetoric can be ethically shallow, and employed to an ignoble end. Theristes had begun his speech with an impertinent dressing down of Agamemnon: “Son of Atreus, what further thing do you want, or find fault with now? Your shelters are filled with bronze; there are plenty of the choicest women for you within your shelter, who we Achaians give to you first of all whenever we capture some stronghold” [2.225-8]. He continues, in what is clearly an insulting tone to all, but directed specifically at Agamemnon, to recommend a strategy of withdrawal: “My good fools, poor abuses, you women not men of Achaia, let us go back
home to our ships and leave this man here in Troy to mull his prizes of honour…”.[2.235-7] By contrast, Odysseus [in 2.246-264 and 2.284-2.333] shows himself not only as a fierce warrior who has earned the respect of his fellow soldiers, but as a speaker both practically discerning and eloquent. He begins by chastising the disrespectful Theristes, and though speaking respectfully to Agamemnon, in the end refutes his argument as well. In his speech Odysseus sympathizes with his comrade’s impatience to go home, while reminding them both of their promise to besiege Ilion, and also of Kalchas’ interpretation of a prophetic vision of inevitable victory. His speech embodies a hermeneutic grasp or understanding of the theological moral order coupled with a practical mastery (phronesis) of what the present situation demands in light of this.31 It is useful to compare Odysseus’ speech with Achilleus [1.122-129; 1.149-71; 1.225-44], and Agamemnon [1.106-20; 1.131-47; 1.173-87; 1.286-3303]. What stands out in the speeches of Agamemnon and Achilleus is thumos (anger). Thumos is the consequence of hubris or excessive pride and arrogance, that signifies the loss of contact with what is happening on the ground, or what the present situation realistically demands. One could say, then, that irascibility and excessive pride disrupt or displace the exercise of practical reasoning and insightful judgment. Yet there is still a difference between the rhetoric of Theristes and that of Achilleus and Agamemnon. The difference lies in an implicit acceptance of the heroic code. One suspects here that the modern ear might initially have more sympathy for Theristes than either the aristocratic Agamemnon or Odysseus. But there is clearly something self-serving and even pusillanimous in Theristes’ speech. He would likely have been considered a man without honor even to Greeks living in a democratic polis. By contrast, both Agamemnon and Achilleus, despite their overweening pride, still have the desire to achieve honor and esteem from their peers. Even though a classical Greek audience would have clearly distinguished their own striving toward a more democratic polis
with an aristocratic ethos, they, like us, could still derive enjoyment from this work. They would have understood that the world presented to them was a world in which honor is more important than life itself. Moreover, as audiences we discover that honour is something won not only in courageous action, but also through eloquent well-reasoned and coherent speech that exemplifies character virtues such as sincerity, good temper, right ambition, loyalty and generosity to friends and fellow soldiers, respect of the gods, and kindness to supplicants. Homer makes clear to us that in Odysseus’ spoken words all of these virtues are acknowledged; in Achilleus and Agamemnnon only some are, and in Theristes, none.

Now many commentators have depicted the persuasiveness of Odysseus’ rhetoric as something largely attributable to the logical force of his speech. Hanna Roisman, for example, sums up the difference between Odysseus and Theristes as follows:

…Odysseus uses his verbal resources differently than Theristes. One key use is in the creation of a logically coherent argument. Substantively, the logic of his approach is evident in his methodical refutation of Agamemnon’s argument for leaving. This makes his speech part of an ongoing discourse that is meaningful to the leaders who make the decisions, and relevant to the troops, since it deals with the legitimate concerns of soldiers fighting a long war away from home: the pangs of homesickness, the tension between the claims of honour and the claims of survival, and, above all the chances of victory, and the disposition of Gods in whose hands victory ultimately lies. Consideration of these vital issues is strikingly absent from Theristes’ speech.32
It is clear that as listeners or readers we are constrained to conclude that Theristes’ speech is not so much illogical but, in fact, ‘sound and fury’ signifying nothing. However, it would be a mischaracterization to say that it is mere logical coherency in Odysseus speech which alone makes it persuasive. To be sure, Odysseus’ speech is persuasive because it has a certain aesthetic proportionality and logical coherence. More importantly, however, it is persuasive because it embodies a level of insight that enables consensus, and also because it demonstrates an implicit respect for recognizable virtues and a respect for the heroic code of honour. Odysseus not only says the right thing in the right way at the right time—he embodies, in his words, the important presupposition that the desire to put one’s own interests before others in a hubristic fashion, must give way to a more encompassing desire to uphold certain virtues, and the heroic code of honour, which in this case are situated in the context of a common telos or goal: namely, the defeat of Troy. We have, then, a first glimpse of eloquent rhetorical speech which derives its persuasiveness not merely from logic or from ornamental, seductive or casuistic style, but from a hermeneutic grasp of the exigencies of the particular situation, of the governing claims of virtue or arête, of the traditions of the past, and of the promise or grasp of a prophetic truth. If the key to good rhetoric here is both eloquence and hermeneutic understanding, the central or coordinating intellectual virtues that help to realize the latter are not demonstrative logic, but phronesis (practical reason) and nous (insight).

We know implicitly that Odysseus has practical wisdom because we, as an audience, share with the author a capacity to evaluate actions in terms of a hierarchy of values. To be sure, we are also, as an audience of readers and listeners, caught up in the emotional intensity of the experience of confrontation and conflict that is embodied in the situated speeches of characters such as Achilleus, Agamemnon, Theristes and Odysseus. But this emotional intensity only
makes the practical and ethical stakes that much higher. In large part, this emotional intensity, though inaugurated through the emotion of anger—whether the wrath of Achilleus, the anger of Agamemnon, or the divine anger of Hera, Apollo, Zeus, of Hektor and Menelaus—is carried also by emotions of sorrow, love, shame and fear. Odysseus’ speech is rhetorically persuasive not only because he is clever or because his reason is not compromised by pride or anger, but because he embodies the right kind of desire, and is therefore able to speak from a more encompassing thumos. It is not that Odysseus is cold or calculating; it is that his desires, his ‘spiritedness’, is attuned to the demands of the particular situation in light of more defining general demands and allegiances. It is this virtuous capacity to mediate between the general demands and particular contexts that is the mark of what Aristotle elaborates as phronesis. Whereas Achilleus and Agamemnon speak out of a narrow thumos (i.e. in angry, arrogant defense of their individual honour), Odysseus attempts to situate his own thumos within a broader context of honour that can be found in loyalty and generosity to friends and fellow soldiers, respect for the gods, and the promise of victory. To put this in another way, Odysseus is interested in preserving an ongoing community that presupposes shared ends—a community where honour can be extended through friendship and respect for others. By contrast, in giving full rein to their desire for self-aggrandizement exhibited as hubris and reflected in an equally self-aggrandizing specious rhetoric, both Achilleus and Agamemnon distance themselves from the community of others, and in Achilles’ case, suffer the tragic loss of a beloved comrade—Patroclus. Yet, it is often through the experience of sudden and profound suffering and loss that a measure of wisdom and self-understanding is gained. On this reading, the *Iliad* is the story of Achilleus’ internal transformative understanding from a narrow ‘anger filled thumos’ to a more encompassing thumos “…moved by pity, sympathy and mercy”. We can experience the tragic
tension of the story because, from the beginning, Odysseus’s rhetoric reminds us that self-aggrandizing spiritedness—that is, *thumos* reduced only to personal anger, unchecked or not guided by practical wisdom—must, like rhetoric in the hands of the self-serving politician, lead to hubris, and potentially result in very tragic outcomes for ourselves and for others. Odysseus paradigmatically embodies the three characteristics of good rhetoric that Aristotle will later underscore: good character (*ethos*), logical coherence (*logos*) and emotional appeal (*pathos*).

We can add to this understanding of *thumos* something else that Odysseus speeches presuppose which would eventually be closely associated with rhetoric: the *kairotic* capacity to discern the right or opportune time to intervene or speak and a hermeneutic interpretive principle of ‘*equity*’. In rhetoric we can understand *kairos* in a general way to mean speaking at the right or opportune moment. It is a notion that reaches back to the early Greek philosopher Pythagoras, to the sophists Protagoras and Gorgias, as well as being central to Isocrates understanding of rhetoric. It is through Pythagoras that *kairos* comes to be linked to justice and in particular to equity. Equity is usually understood in a narrow legal sense, dating back to Aristotle, though the latter did not understand it merely as a procedural notion, but also something related to the virtue of justice. As Kathy Eden remarks, in the concept of equity we have an accommodative power insofar as it represents “responsiveness to particular circumstances”. In this sense, part of what is recognizably ‘right’ or just about Odysseus’ speech is not its logical force, but its proportionality: speaking to each interlocutor according to what he merits; knowing the right time in which to intervene. Odysseus’ speech demonstrates that he is a wise arbiter between disputants. But for our purposes, it also represents the interconnectedness of the rhetorical principle of *kairos* (timeliness) and the hermeneutic principle of *dikaion* (justice).
It is not so much logical coherence then, but a certain kind of practical insight that allows us to assume a distinction between the skill of manipulative speech-making, which might easily persuade the vulnerable or untutored, and that sort of speech which persuades because it is an exemplar of discerning judgment. As Roisen puts it “...the basis of Homer’s theory seems to be that in view of the power of speech to move men, especially ordinary men, merely skilled rhetoric must be distinguished from right rhetoric”. There is, of course, no explicit ‘theory’ of rhetoric given to us by Homer, but there is implicitly a recognition that the power of speech is something that is tied both to the speakers’ understanding of a given audience, as well as his or her own character. It would not then be exaggerating to say that what brings the Iliad to life is not the story itself, which would have certainly been familiar to the audience of the time, but rather the tension that unfolds in dramatic action and rhetorical exchanges between speakers who exhibit, in greater or lesser degree, a measure of practical wisdom in speaking. As we have seen the rhetorical mastery involved here is, by no means, merely logical coherence, but rather a matter of saying the right thing, in the right way, at the right time, and in being guided by the right desire. In the dramatic tension that unfolds between Agamemnon, Achilleus and Odysseus, Homer illustrates how right rhetorical expression is linked to hermeneutic understanding and practical reason and insight. More crucially, he shows how a lack of the latter results in a limited grasp of rhetoric as merely a linguistic extension of hubristic self. This tension is palpable when it is realized by the reader that in his bitterness and pride Achilleus simply will not be persuaded by the measured speech of Odysseus. There is surely something very familiar to us in this refusal to heed wise counsel. Indeed, what allows us to experience an all-too-human tragic dimension is precisely Homer’s implicit wager that Odysseus speech could not be heard by Achilleus, but would, in fact, be heard by a listening audience.
We can be persuaded, or we can be manipulated by speech, but we can also just hear only what we want to hear. The good propagandist as rhetorician counts on this sort of selective hearing. Choosing not to hear the truth, or listen to words that speak knowingly about the reality on the ground, is the aural instantiation of moral blindness—and the very antithesis of phronesis. In the discussion of Sophocles’ Antigone we will look more circumspectly at this ‘other’ side of rhetoric—of listening, and the refusal to hear. But we can already take note of four emerging themes. First, that rhetorical mastery and hermeneutic understanding begin not in theory but as interpenetrating practices embodied and realized in speaking and hearing. Secondly, that there is implicitly a critical and insightful moment that emerges naturally and organically in the hermeneutic distinctions drawn between rhetorical flourishes which conceal specious argument and attach to rather unsavory characters, and to ‘right’ rhetoric which is exemplary insofar as it is tied to virtuous character and involves the ability to keenly observe ‘in any given case’ the right thing to say at the right time, in the right way, guided by the right desire. Thirdly, we can begin to get a sense that rhetoric separated from the ethical and political—in this case the ultimate ethico-political stakes of war—is rhetoric that is potentially distorting and self-aggrandizing. Finally, we can take note of the fact that the best speakers in the Iliad are not persuasive because they are familiar with canonical rhetorical texts or pre-eminent theoretical perspectives of rhetoric. They sway their audience because, at a very practical reasoning level, they are able to deftly combine elements of argument, emotion, tradition, ethics and politics. Taken together these orienting motifs exemplified in the Iliad give us a first clue to understanding the interrelatedness of rhetorical, hermeneutical and practical wisdom aspects of language situated within human experience. It is not theory that informs the writer of the Iliad of
this, but his intuitive grasp of the creative possibilities, as well as his understanding of the limitations of language, and ultimately of practical lived experience.

1.4 Listening-Speaking: The Rhetoric of Sophocles’ *Antigone*

We argued above that though the *Iliad* may employ set speeches that have a certain formality, readers can still respond to what characters are saying at a human level of experience. In other words, these are not, for the most part, professionalized speeches, yet they manage to bring home to us, through the spoken word, the contingency of a given human hermeneutic situation in recognizable experiences of sorrow, anger, courage, friendship, loyalty and shame. What is often not taken account of is the primary role that listening plays in rhetoric. Listening is the other side of rhetorical (and hermeneutic) experience. An individual or an audience is addressed, and they cannot help but hear. *How* they hear what is said to them is a measure of *who* they are: their particular station or status, their concerns and allegiances. To put this in terms that Schleiermacher, Gadamer and Heidegger would undoubtedly agree upon, rhetoric as a mode of speaking and listening is something that always presupposes hermeneutic understanding. It is this other ‘listening’ side of rhetoric that I want to highlight with a reading of *Antigone*.

The *Antigone* is a tragedy by Sophocles which dates around 442 BC. It is the third of a trio of Theban plays, and begins with the death of two brothers, Eteocles and Polyneices, who are on opposing sides in Thebes’ civil war. Creon, who has become the new ruler of Thebes, determines that while Eteocles shall receive sanctification and proper burial rites, Polyneices will be denied any such consideration, and be the subject of public shame—lying unburied and the prey of carrion. The play opens with Antigone and Ismene, sisters of the dead Polyneices and Eteocles,
meeting secretly and lamenting Creon’s decision. Antigone determines that Polyneices’ body should be properly buried, even if this means disobeying Creon’s edict. When Ismene refuses to go along, Antigone angrily disowns her and makes clear her determination to carry on with what she considers a sacred duty to her dead brother.

The perpetual conflict that Antigone represents simply cannot be understood as a battle of individual egos or wills. If we fail to grasp what each side represents and embodies—a ‘hermeneutics of the family’ (Antigone) over against a ‘hermeneutics of the polis’ (Creon)—the tragic ramifications of the play would simply be lost on us. That they are not lost on us has everything to do with the fact that we can implicitly recognize the often interminable character of many of our own moral debates—the seemingly intractable adherence of one person or group to a given moral perspective or belief, and their apparent incapacity to see themselves or the world from another’s perspective. It is this hermeneutic background context of conflicting duties that gives not only a depth of meaning to the play, but underscores the need for a kind of approach that does not find its terminus in the appeal to absolute duties, laws or rules, but, instead, discovers a new possibility by way of cultivating a capacity for creative insight, and the sort of practical reasoning that can mediate here and now between the particular demands of a given situation, and the general demands of background traditions, principles or laws.

Of course, Sophocles’ play is not meant to be understood as an argument for phronesis, or indeed for any particular kind of moral reasoning. Despite this, it is the lack of phronesis or practical reason, and the lack of insight or nous that gives rise to tragic outcomes. This conclusion is not something we as audiences know automatically. It is something we must work through and discover for ourselves as we listen to or read the play. Moreover, if we are attracted to Antigone and Creon, it is not because we interpret them as mere automata that slavishly
follow the logic of their respective positions to a pre-ordained, perfectly predictable conclusion. In tragic literature we can implicitly know that the end is, in some way, prefigured in the beginning. However, what holds our attention as an audience is our need to imagine what could have been said differently—what sorts of actions or what choice of words might have served to avert a tragic outcome. It is this activity of thinking otherwise, or of lamenting the incapacity of listeners to hear reasonable counsel and good advice, that keeps audiences riveted to the words and action of the play. *Antigone* is not a dull didactic affair simply because it does not give us final or certain answers. Instead, it poses persistent moral questions, and shows us in dramatic terms, the possibilities and limits of the human condition. Antigone’s dissident political perspective and Creon’s failure to recognize the dimension of family loyalty are immediately recognizable to us at a very palpable experiential level. We want to hear and have sympathy for both sides; we are engaged by, and attracted to, the possibility of debate and discourse between characters that are situated in divergent and perhaps incommensurable contexts of understanding. These discourses and arguments represent the boundaries, the differences, and the varieties of human possibility from which we begin to grasp and learn about the world. Yet we also can grasp that as the action of the play unfolds, and the characters become more uncompromising, suffering and tragedy must also ensue. For our purposes here, what will be important to note is just how deeply intertwined the realms of rhetorical speech and hermeneutic understanding are, and how this intimate relation points up the need for practical wisdom and *phronesis*.

Whereas in the *Iliad* the focus was primarily on speaking, with *Antigone* I want to look at the other side of rhetoric—one realized through the need to cultivate a capacity to listen to the (often only implied) voice of the other. Developing a capacity to hear the voice of another is a hermeneutic as well as a rhetorical achievement. We must hear the spoken and unspoken plea of
another; we must make an effort to grasp the nuance and inflection of voice; and finally we must insightfully interpret what we hear so that we can thoughtfully respond to another. These are attributes that show, once again, the interdependence of rhetorical expression and hermeneutic understanding, as well as testifying to the emergence of practical wisdom and insight in the activity of speaking and listening. Listening or receiving captures a fuller sense of the legein of logos since it involves not just a capacity to hear the word as reasoned, but also to hear it as evoking something at an affective level of understanding. This can be underscored through the basic idea that there is no understanding where there is speaking without listening. What will be highlighted in our discussion of Antigone is the idea that the refusal to listen to the voice of the other results in a narrowing of possibility and meaning, leading in this case to great suffering and very tragic outcomes. The characters of Sophocles’ Antigone instruct us that when we fail as speakers to hear the voice of the other—even when this is an implied voice—rhetoric becomes a univocal undertaking, and this univocity can manifest towards others as arrogance, hubris, inflexibility, domination and control.45

Once again, the language of the opening scenes of the play encourages us to attempt to grasp the familial, political and religious background that continue to shape the actions of this tragedy. In the second Stasimon the Chorus reminds us that “once a house is shaken by the gods, then madness stalks the family without fail.” (II.584-85).46 This background context of understanding is crucial if we are to grasp how it is that we could be sympathetic to the character of Antigone. The tragic familial-political forces which shape and determine the dramatic tension of this play follow from the first play of Sophocles’ trilogy, Oedipus The King.47 Antigone begins by referring to the founding Oedipal myth which helps the audience to appreciate the depth of continuing shame that she and her sister must suffer: “Ismene, dear heart, my true
sister: you and I are left alive to pay the final penalty for Oedipus. I’ve never seen such misery and madness—It’s monstrous!—such deep pain and dishonor—as this which falls upon the pair of us.” (Antigone 1.1-5)

It is within this interpretive background context of isolation, denial, suffering and dishonor that we can begin to sense Antigone’s insularity—her tragic incapacity to hear something different, and thus a failure to interpret the world as offering another possibility. At the same time, it is her steadfast desire to remain true to her own convictions that enable us to sympathize with her character. Yet, her apparent love for a shamed brother appears not as selfless (agape) or even ‘familial’, but as a distorted narcissism that issues out of her preoccupation with her sense of familial shame and dishonor. Antigone begins by laying out Creon’s proclamation:

…It’s the burial of our two brothers. Creon promotes one of them and shames the other. Eteoclēs—I heard Creon covered him beneath the earth with proper rites, as law ordains, so he has honour among the dead. But Polynices’ miserable corpse—they say Creon has proclaimed to everyone: ‘No burial of any kind. No wailing, no public tears. Give him to the vultures, unwept, unburied, to be a sweet treasure for their sharp eyes and beaks’. That’s what they say the good Creon has proclaimed to you. And me, he forbids me too. And now he’s strutting here to make it plain to those who haven’t heard—he takes this seriously—that if anyone does what he forbids, he’ll have him publicly stoned to death. There’s your news. Now show your colours: are you true to your birth? Or a coward? (Antigone 1.21-38)
Even as we sympathize with Antigone’s perspective, we cannot help but perceive in her uncompromising words, a lack of wisdom and insight. When Ismene resists Antigone’s plea to help her bury Polynices, asking her sister to ‘think carefully’, and reminding her that ‘men are stronger and must be obeyed’, the response by Antigone is unbending and embittered:

…I won’t press you any further. I wouldn’t even let you help me if I had a change of heart. Go on and be the way you choose to be. I will bury him. I will have a noble death and lay with him a dear sister with a dear brother. Call it a crime of reverence but I must be good to those who are below. I will be there longer than with you. That’s where I will lie. You, keep to your choice. Go on insulting what the gods hold dear. (Antigone l.69-77)

There is something both uniquely admirable and disturbing in Antigone’s words. The blind loyalty and love for a brother is commendable, yet it makes us uneasy; the aggressive defiance of paternalistic authority is understandable, but appears rash and overdrawn; the embracing allegiance to divine law gives the impression of authentic reverence, yet it is one-sided; the rejection of both sister (and later fiancé) is uncompromising, and even shrill. Mark Griffith aptly describes the language of Antigone as “highly individual and strangely contradictory: at the same time manly and feminine, dutiful and transgressive, visionary and narrow minded”.48 Despite these contradictions, the audience of Fifth Century BC would have sympathized with Antigone’s role as a woman who must ensure the preservation of the divine law on which family bonds depend—just as they would have recognized that it is the role of men to uphold the human law that supports community and government.49 They would have felt the pain of Antigone’s
isolation, the sorrow of her loss, the injustice she suffered as a result of being imprisoned by Creon for attempting to bury her brother, and her defiant determination to take her own life rather than suffer the indignity of Creon’s death sentence and imprisonment in a tomb. At the same time, the audience would also be quite aware that men grow to maturity in the family, and women dwell within the community—so men and women are not entirely enjoined to follow their own law without regard to one another. Moreover, Antigone’s allegiance to family is weighted not towards the living—her sister, or the possible generation of offspring with Haemon, but towards the non-living. In her haste to defend and honour her dead brother she is blind to the political context of friendship and enmity out of which Creon’s proclamation regarding Polynices’ issues. From a modern perspective we might claim that such blindness would be natural given that women were excluded from This blindness Yet, in an equally important sense, we find that her blindness toward the political manifests in a defiance of the relation of dominance and violence that this sphere can sometimes embody.

For his part, Creon reduces all human relations to a single political context of friend and enemy. The dramatic tension in the play unfolds precisely in the irreconcilable opposition between Creon’s partial and unilateral vision of human law, and his narrow conception of political good, and Antigone’s equally one-sided desire to uphold the bonds of family through allegiance to the dead.50

However, the confrontation between Creon and Antigone is for the most part virtual, not face to face. Antigone is certainly one of the main characters, and our sympathies are with her throughout. Yet she is out of hearing for more than half the play. Could this be a fault of construction? I think not. In the opening scenes Antigone’s fate is already decided—even in suffering she will never turn back or regret her decision to oppose Creon: “If the gods really
agree with this, then suffering should teach me to repent my sins” (Antigone ll. 925-6). Her conclusion: the gods do not agree with Creon, and therefore, she should not repent. If we sympathize with Antigone’s failure to listen, it is because listening is the most difficult of all human capacities. Like Antigone, we are embedded in our history, in our prejudices, in the ‘sins of our fathers’. And like her we are sometimes not that interested in risking our opinions or ourselves in genuine dialogue with others. We are more at home within the narrow confines of roles that are given to us, or that we give to ourselves. Antigone’s partial perspective, in some sense, must remain intact throughout. The tragedy is that it is precisely because of this univocity that she will die friendless, husbandless and childless, with only the dead for company: “…No tears for me, no friends, no wedding hymns. They are taking me away in misery by the road before me, now and forever forbidden to see the blessed eye of light. No friends cry for me. No one is mourning.” (Antigone ll.876-882)

Creon’s perspective is equally one-sided, yet as a character he is allowed to dominate the stage, confronting in his various speeches, the Chorus, the Watchman, his son Haemon, and finally Tiresias. But the tragic outcome here must unfold only gradually through the exchange of words. Though Creon will eventually hear the words of Tiresias it will be too little, too late. From an audience’s perspective, Creon’s projection of himself as an infallible, almost divine ruler begins to unravel in the crucial exchange with Haemon. We are meant to sympathize with Creon in the beginning as well. But the Chorus makes clear to us that in the rhetorical exchange with Haemon, our sympathy for Creon must gradually lessen. The reason for this is that Creon’s rhetoric remains univocal: in his speech he refuses to acknowledge or listen to the voice of Haemon, and also to the implied voices of others—the familial plea of Antigone, and the concerned voice of the citizen of Thebes. It is through Haemon’s speech that the audience
inevitably begins to see that Creon’s hubristic rhetoric is a product of his refusal to listen to another, and that this refusal coalesces in a narrowed perspective, and a rigid authoritarian comportment. Indeed, it is by taking on the perspective of the Theban citizen—the voice of the other—that Haemon reveals, in his own speech, that obedience to his father’s rule issues not out of respect, but out of fear. Haemon’s own rhetoric takes on the perspective of the other, guiding the audience while reinforcing the sympathy they already have for Antigone: “No woman has had a fate so unfair (they say)” (Antigone I. 694). But although Haemon assures his father that he is a loyal son, what will gradually emerge in his speech is an appeal for equity—a reminder that those who cling to their anger, and deal rigidly without forbearance of the opinion of others do not exhibit wisdom or insight.

At a certain point in his speech, we witness Haemon moving toward a belief that his father’s ruling with respect to Antigone is unwise. In an explicit way, Haemon lets us know that the tragic flaw of hubris arises out of his father’s inability to listen to others: “I say that the oldest idea and the best, is for one man to be born complete and know everything. Otherwise—and it usually does turn out otherwise—it’s good to learn from anyone who speaks well” (Antigone II. 720-723). For the audience, as reflected in the chorus, Haemon’s words are indeed spoken wisely. But they are words that will remain, tragically, unheard by Creon. Indeed, the latter has no ear for good counsel, but only hears only the impertinence of youth, and the betrayal of father by son. From this point onwards Creon’s desire to remain in control of those around him, and his unbridled anger at those who dissent, cloud his capacity to think and judge wisely. All of this is dramatically displayed in his univocal rhetoric. So it is with most tyrants. Lost, is a capacity to see the reality, listen to the implied voice of the other, and hear the truth. This is most evident in Creon’s misinterpretation of the prophet Tiresias. In his rigidly defined, strategically oriented
understanding of political power and possible treachery, he can only hear Tiresias’ words as deceitful rhetorical speech which functions to disguise the latter’s desire for external reward and personal gain. Inevitably, Creon’s rigidity breaks down when confronted by the stinging truth of Tiresias prophetic words. Yet even as he acknowledges his mistake, pleads for good advice, and submits to the authority of the wiser Tiresias, it is too late. Creon finally listens, and in attending, he finds his mind ‘is shaken’. To ‘give in’ he laments ‘would be terrible, but standing firm invites disaster’. This moment of transition from the false certainty that issues out of hubris, to the uncertainty captured in a stark moral dilemma, can be interpreted as an emerging grasp that there is more at stake. In beginning to listen, he begins to understand himself, and the rigidity of his former perspective. Yet, we may wonder why Creon’s recognition of his error in judgment does not serve to mitigate his suffering. He seems to be tragically imprisoned within a fate he cannot alter. On my reading, this tragic predicament is a result of the fact that Creon’s ‘transformation’ never quite reaches ‘all the way down’. In other words, even as he hears and understands Tiresias’s prophetic message, he only hears it only with ‘one ear’—that is, within the confines of his one-sided concern for the political. He was advised to first release Antigone, and to then bury Polyneices. In fact, out of fear of compromising the welfare of his limiting conception of the polis, Creon does the very opposite. He first accompanies his attendants in the burial, and only after this, decides to release Antigone. The sequence of this decision has, of course, tragic consequences for not only does Antigone commit suicide, but Creon’s wife Eurydice and his son Haemon also take their lives.

From a more contemporary perspective, what we are left with will not be that the conflict between a ‘hermeneutics of the family’ (Antigone) and a ‘hermeneutics of the polis’ (Creon) can be resolved either logically or in the ‘logic of history’. There just is no grand solution here. My
own reading of Antigone is that she is more a character who embodies a subversive political orientation—one that tests the limits and norms of patriarchy, and less a character that represents passive subservience to the private realm of family. Subversive political figures can and often do exhibit the virtue of uncompromising passion when justice is circumvented or denied. But when such passion is not also firmly embedded in a passionate desire for deeper understanding, insight and practical wisdom, it can manifest as hasty speech, inflexible and reckless action, and incapacity to hear the voice of another. This is why I believe that there is something of profound practical value which we can derive from a reading of Antigone—the recognition that out of the conflict and tragedy that defines the human condition, we can sometimes discover and cultivate the sort of practical wisdom that enjoins us to carefully think through the effect of our words, to rise above the seductive immediacy of our desire for self-aggrandizement and power, to act with insight rather than reckless abandon and to listen with care and attention to the particular and always present and implied voice of another.

We have taken this detour through the Antigone and the Iliad in order to situate rhetoric in the context of recognizably human situations, and show how it is that rhetoric is inextricably bound to a hermeneutic reflection and understanding of context. Focusing on the experiential aspects of speaking-listening in this way prevented us from too easily seeing rhetoric as detached from hermeneutics and subsequently reduced to a merely formal, autonomously understood, discipline. That rhetoric did indeed gradually emerge as a formal discipline of study is not open to debate. How this came about and who are its key figures are the subject of much scholarly study. As well, the history of philosophy’s relation to rhetoric is complex and fraught with controversy, and divisive territorial disputes. Yet there was a time when rhetoric was given pre-eminent philosophical-practical standing as a civic art and course of study in the classical Greek
school founded by Isocrates. And it may be no accident that the emergence of democratic forms
of government in ancient Greece had its corollary in the pre-eminence of rhetoric and rhetorical
traditions. Indeed, there is arguably a more direct connection between democracy and rhetoric in
the 403BC ban on rhetoric by the Council of Thirty Tyrants who saw the proliferation of rhetoric
as potentially a means of spreading sedition. During this period the focus on rhetoric as one
commentator notes “emphasized the public, persuasive and contextual characteristics of human
discourse in situations governed by the problem of contingency.” This tradition of rhetoric
carried through to later Roman rhetoric, notably Cicero, and following him, Quintilian.

From the early Greek literary context, we move to an examination of rhetoric in Plato’s
Phaedrus. The Phaedrus is a dialogue probably composed around 370 BC by Plato and set
(rather atypically) outside of Athens. It revolves principally around the topic of rhetoric,
referencing one of the most well known speech-writers, rhetoricians and sophists of the time,
Lysias, son of Cephalus. Despite a rather playful opening, this dialogue is a very serious
discussion of the nature of love, rhetoric and creative inspiration. However, though rhetoric is
made more explicit and thematized as a subject of inquiry, we should again resist the temptation
of seeing it as separated from human experience, and reduced to abstract theory. With respect
to Plato we will show that a conventional reading of the Phaedrus merely emphasizing hostility
and condemnation of rhetoric can be easily over-drawn. Instead, we will offer an interpretation
of the Phaedrus that brings us to an awareness of the importance of rhetorical speech-making as
opening up an occasion for a deeper understanding of practical reasoning and the good. The
hermeneutic and ontological corollary here is discovered in the context of the question ‘who’ is
speaking and ‘who’ is listening.
1.5 *Plato’s Phaedrus: The Hermeneutics and Rhetorics of Desire*

What is the relation between desire and rhetoric? As I have hinted, it is not so strange a pairing as one might think. There is much debate about where rhetoric stands with respect to the way it is encountered in Plato’s *Gorgias* and the *Phaedrus*. In the former, rhetoric reaches its limit in philosophy. It cannot be ignored, but it can be controlled, and its negative potential redirected through dialectic. However, in the *Phaedrus*, the emphasis is not so much on how to discipline rhetoric through philosophy, but, rather, on what happens in the ‘soul’ when we are persuaded. The context here is not merely knowledge, but, principally, human desire. I will begin with the following very simple thesis: rhetoric, like erotic love can take two distinct forms. The erotic love or desire that is purely a hedonistic instrumentalizing of another is analogous to the kind of ‘mere rhetoric’ that in a self-aggrandizing manner persuades an audience by using empty bombastic language which emphasizes style and ornamentation over substance. The erotic love or desire that playfully awakens us to something more enduring is at one with the idea of rhetoric as an invitation of one to another that makes possible a deeper understanding of the other, and better grasp of oneself. In other words, we can take notice here that the ‘other’ that rhetoric or desire presuppose is not abstract, but concretely situated and worthy of attention and consideration ‘as another’ distinct from myself. Socrates uses rhetoric—speech-making (and poetic language), to persuade Phaedrus that rhetoric divorced from wisdom is mere technique, just as *eros* or desire, without love of virtue, can only be flattery and seduction. This way of describing rhetoric is not meant to be any kind of interpretive key to the complex, endlessly puzzling, and at times deeply moving Platonic dialogue, *Phaedrus*. At the same time, I would like to posit that a conventional reading of the *Phaedrus* merely emphasizing hostility to rhetoric
obscures the reality that, for Plato, rhetoric has a key role to play in opening up a path to wisdom.\textsuperscript{55}

The character of Phaedrus personifies rhetoric as ornament—he is the occasion for the proliferation of speech-making in general and specifically in Socrates.\textsuperscript{56} Socrates describes himself as “sick with passion for hearing speeches” (\textit{Phaedrus} 228b) and he describes Phaedrus as “superhuman when it comes to speeches” (\textit{Phaedrus} 242a). It is not that Phaedrus is, by any conventional standard, a skilled rhetorician. Indeed, in ‘Phaedrus’ we have a very young man (presumably good-looking) who can be described as motivated by hedonistic erotic pleasure, and is very easily seduced by clever speech. Phaedrus often forgets what he says twenty minutes ago, and he cannot see the irony in Socrates’ speeches. He knows neither love nor suffering, and is in every way the perfect embodiment of what we might call today an immature, supercilious, self-absorbed, aesthete. It is no great wonder that he would commit an offence against both rhetoric and \textit{eros}—an offence which Socrates himself repeats in his own first speech, and must then distance and purify himself from in a subsequent palinode. What I wish to emphasize here is that Phaedrus, as a personification of eros-rhetoric, is the catalyst that will make possible an understanding of rhetoric and eros which at its best can, like poetry (and \textit{philia}) be said to be divinely inspired, and which has a power that can deeply affect and perhaps transform us.

We gather from the dialogue that Phaedrus was under the seductive influence of Lysiasian rhetoric. \textit{Seductive} not merely because Phaedrus, as an impressionable, and rather selfishly inclined youth, would be an easy target for both the artful contrivance of the rhetorician and the physical-sexual dimension of \textit{eros}, but also because rhetoric and \textit{eros} entail each other in the dialogue itself. From a philosophical perspective, the hope expressed in the dialogue is that he will, away from the influence of Lysias and the Polis, learn to distinguish a limiting
understanding of rhetoric as mere persuasion and cleverness, from a more comprehensive understanding of rhetoric as speech guided by truth. At the same time, he will begin to be able to see the difference between a narrow understanding of eros as mere sexual gratification, guided by base selfish desire, and a more complete understanding of eros as the desire for truth, and the love of good character. To be sure, he has a rather long way to go—a whole lifetime, perhaps. But he has one thing going for him—a good teacher: Socrates.

The dialogue begins with Phaedrus’ enthusiastic praise for Lysias’ speech, which he reads to Socrates. The speech is the perfect embodiment of self-interested erotic love.57 Taken in by the sweep of this sham rhetoric, the self-absorbed Phaedrus seems incapable of the critical distance necessary to even see how the speech fails at an ornamental rhetorical level, let alone distinguish its flaws at the level of substantive content. And, like most self-absorbed youth, he does not think anyone can see through his casuistry and concealments. On the other hand, Socrates, the indefatigable ironist, understands critical distance. He perceives that Lysias’ speech is not only lacking in substantive content, but, is on the whole, rather pedestrian in its rhetorical style.

On my reading, the three central though unspoken questions of this work are ‘what does it mean to persuade’, ‘what does it mean to love’ and ‘how can these latter be understood together’.58 What we discover is that speech that persuades by seductive ornament rather than truth, is like the consuming eros of seductive desire—a desire that is seemingly never satiated. Therefore, Lysias’ speech which represents both of these latter attributes must be unmasked—persuasion must be distinguished from flattery, and love from mere seduction. At this point, one might expect that Plato would follow convention and have Socrates engage Phaedrus in a familiar dialectic of question and answer, developing the consequences of various prominent proposals in order to illuminate a given subject matter—in this case rhetoric or erotic love. But,
since the subject of this dialogue is rhetoric, or speech-making itself, Socrates will have to proceed in a somewhat uncharacteristic way. In other words, if he is going to unmask a certain kind of rhetoric as sophistry, then he must do it not through dialogue but through exemplary rhetorical speech. Socrates tells Phaedrus that his “breast is full”, and he thinks he can “make a different speech, even better than Lysias”. In so doing, Socrates will himself take on the role usually reserved for his interlocutor—that of putting forward an opinion on love. It is clear that this is not an opinion that Socrates himself would ever lay claim to. But since the point is to demonstrate to Phaedrus how simple it is to construct a better more persuasive speech—even one with a content as absurd as Lysias’—Socrates will adopt the persona of the sophistical rhetor.

Socrates’ first speech is no ordinary proposal, but a speech that is meant to demonstrate how rhetoric can be stylistically charming and persuasive, yet embody a content that is no more or less than an extravagant and carefully constructed lie! He does, of course, distance himself from what is said by the fraudulent disguised lover in his speech—first by covering his head, and then by setting the context of the speech as, in fact, the ruse of a lover who pretends he is a non-lover in order gain erotic sexual satisfaction. This is a speech that is precisely meant to be ‘over the top’—Socrates is not only posing as a rhetorician, but posing as someone on the edge of a lover’s irrational erotic frenzy as a result of the sensuous scenic setting and his physical proximity to Phaedrus.

Again, this way of proceeding does not employ in any conventional way the Socratic method of eliminating a thesis in order to avoid contradiction. Rather, the wish is that Phaedrus will see through Socrates’ ironic ruse, and therein discover his own lack of critical distance. Plato had to have known that his readers would see the ruse, and also feel Socrates’ apparent discomfort at his own speech. But he would have also been anxious for us to see that this Socratic ruse
precisely escapes Phaedrus. This is important, since the point of Socrates’ first speech is that if one uncritically understands love as something ruled by erotic sexual desire, then one would be equally taken in by the sensuousness of an unrestrained deceptive rhetoric.

But, we may ask, why does Phaedrus not see this? We know that he is attuned to, and taken in by, the ornamental and clever rather than the truthful, by style rather than substance. We also know that Phaedrus is very young and self-absorbed. If the first speech is a failure, it is a necessary one. In fact, having failed in his parody of rhetoric to push Phaedrus’ critical faculties, Socrates finally states, (with something close to exasperation): “Phaedrus that speech you carried with you here—it was horrible, as horrible as the speech you made me give”. He tells Phaedrus that he must now ‘purify himself’ by giving a more ‘tasteful speech’. Why? One could say that in his first speech Socrates attempted to use bad rhetoric against itself to persuade Phaedrus of the truth of philosophy, but I think the more enduring pedagogical lesson to be drawn is that Socrates wants to push Phaedrus to take responsibility, and simply think for himself. This is a notion of rhetoric as the invitation to think more—as something participatory rather than univocal. Moreover, this is implicitly a claim that rhetoric can serve a positive pedagogical function and need not be reduced to an instrument of self-aggrandizement. This is what Socrates is after. To be sure, Socrates really is a lover of the company of young boys and a lover of logoi, of speeches—that is, rhetoric. But his love of speech is a love of the potential of truth that speaking gives rise to, just as his love for the company of youth is a love that can only be finally realized in the sharing of that sort of wisdom which all of us are invited to participate in.

We emphasized in our discussion of the Iliad and Antigone the relation between speaking and listening. With the Phaedrus we can go one step further and emphasize the question of ‘who’ is speaking and ‘who’ is listening. Socrates represents in his ‘palinode’ speech the
recollec
tion of forgotten meanings, and the unmasking of illusions. He represents, in other words, not just the need for rhetoric to be concerned with meaning, but also with practical wisdom and, indeed, with truth. If rhetoric is to be persuasive, the speaker must know who is listening—who the audience are and what they are asking. Since the audience here is Phaedrus, a representation of all that is wrong with rhetoric, Socrates will use rhetoric to open the door to philosophy. However, he accomplishes this not through the limited perspective of rhetoric as simply clever and seductive speech, but a broader understanding of rhetoric that is kindred to poetic inspiration—a recollection of the journey of the soul. Phaedrus represents a non-philosophical, but perhaps widely accepted view of eros or sexual desire. However, desire is inextricably tied to the human condition, and undergirds human striving in many different forms. Socrates understands love because he is the personification of eros par excellence—not the sort of eros that is concerned with exclusive desire for sexual gratification, love of eloquent speech, or rhetorical flourish—but the passionate desire for wisdom. What is interesting is that the eros that Socrates incarnates is that which is not carnal—it is not something completed in a sexual act. It is, rather, something that persists, that is fixed in the human desire to know oneself. It is, if you will, that which makes the soul immortal.

Socrates begins the Palinode in praise of madness, which he divides into four sorts. Madness is not as evil as we might be led to think. It is a gift associated first with divination. Recall, (at 242c), that Socrates claims to have heard a voice that told him he must make atonement for his offensive speech. He then says that this explicit admonition was in some way foreshadowed in a disturbance of soul. Madness is also identified with purification and inspiration. This is nowhere more pronounced than in Socrates ‘rhetorical speech’, but it can also be witnessed, in an equally forceful way, through the mythic description of the soul as a
team of winged horses. Now, doctrine there may well be in all of this, but the latter is not expressed in the language of science or even philosophy. It is, somewhat ironically, inspired by the muse of poetry. Here the relation of rhetoric to poiesis could not be closer. To be sure, the sort of madness that inspires the poetic imagination can completely possess and take over the soul. This is what we are led to believe might have happened to Socrates in his first speech. He is urged on by Phaedrus, and is ‘swept up by the surroundings’, on the edge of speaking in dithyrambs, and possessed by the Nymphs. However, there is yet a fourth kind of madness—one that is much more intimately associated with the reasoning soul. This is the madness of eros in the form of love of wisdom. Accordingly, because madness that is eros is a condition of the soul, Socrates tells Phaedrus that his first step will be to inquire into the nature or truth about the soul.

From the perspective of the present discussion, what I would like to take from the above is the idea that neither eros nor rhetoric can exist separate from the human experience of desire. Love needs beautiful things, but it needs to be wary of possession by beautiful things; similarly lovers of wisdom need rhetorical skills if they are to reach an audience, but they cannot allow themselves to be possessed by self-aggrandizing eloquence. The desire to persuade must be, at the same time, a truth-oriented speaking that presupposes human belonging, and realizes the most basic desire to reach out to another in a way that also hears their implied voice, and acknowledges and addresses the particularity of their implied claim. At the same time, the most skilled rhetorician must not only know his particular audience; he must understand the ‘nature of the human soul and grasp the world as a whole’. The consequence of such a broadened scope of understanding for rhetoric is clear: to practice the latter art to its fullest capacity is to honour truth, and to invite the other to participate in the lifetime journey towards practical wisdom.

Socrates understands both authentic love and genuine rhetoric because he is the personification
of eros par excellence—not the sort of eros that is consumed by a desire for sexual gratification or seduced by merely ornamental speech, but the passionate desire for wisdom itself.

1.6 Two Possible Objections

It is a convention to think of rhetoric and hermeneutics as distinct disciplinary fields of study. Yet, while it is one thing to see hermeneutic understanding and rhetorical expression as intimately related within the ambit of human linguistic experience, it is quite another issue to insist that this relatedness can be sustained at a more theoretical level of understanding. Two obvious criticisms contend against bringing hermeneutics and rhetoric together.

Firstly, there is the worry that any attempt to bring together the disciplines of hermeneutics and rhetoric must inevitably lead to abolishing boundaries or collapsing traditions of understanding. Thus, rhetoric as it has come to be understood is largely a strategic enterprise concerned with generating and giving speeches, not interpreting them—and certainly not critically interpreting texts in general. In a parallel way, hermeneutics is often understood as a technique of interpreting obscure or difficult texts clearly distinguishable from the goal of rhetoric, which as Aristotle has described it, has to do with discovering the ‘available means of persuasion’. There is, however, something artificial in these disciplinary distinctions, which I have tried to underscore above by linking them to basic modes of human understanding and the linguistic experience of speaking and listening. It is still, of course, possible to do justice to the distinctive character of hermeneutics and rhetoric as traditions involving speaking and understanding, while showing (to paraphrase Ricoeur) from each perspective, the necessity of other at the core of its own concerns. Hermeneutics and rhetoric will go on as distinct fields of
study. Our goal here is to present the possibility that if we see these concernful practical human activities as merely separate disciplinary fields of interest we lose sight both of their interpenetrating nature and the normative critical potential of practical reason and insightfulness that emerges gradually within them. (We will further elaborate this normative critical potential when we look at Aristotle and Gadamer.) But we do not need to abolish boundaries or collapse different traditions or disciplines in order to recognize that there are reservoirs of possible meanings that surface in the rhetorical and hermeneutic traditions when these latter are thought about in terms of our experience in language and in the attempt to understand ‘who we are’. We can maintain the distinctiveness of each tradition, while still making room, at a phenomenological level, for the description and articulation of their inescapable relatedness to each other within practical linguistic experience.

The second possible barrier to the stated thesis is the obverse of the first. The above stipulation of the need for definitional boundaries emerges in this objection as the inherent lack of boundary which apparently characterizes more contemporary perspectives on hermeneutics and rhetoric. Thus, it is claimed that hermeneutics and rhetoric have become such generalized phenomena, any attempt to establish boundaries as to what precisely they individually denote becomes impossible. Hermeneutics, as Gianni Vattimo has remarked, has “acquired an ecumenical form so vague and generic, it is losing much of its meaning”. Similarly, rhetoric has become the name for a master trope ranging over all discourse. In the words of Edward Schiappa and Jim Hamm rhetoric stands for such a wide range of phenomena “including oratory, parts of speech, prose genres, figurative language, performance, pedagogical practice, discourse, the strategic use of language, persuasion, and various theories of discourse, language or persuasion…that just about anything and everything could be studied as rhetoric or as
The tempting conclusion to draw from this is that generality of application equals ‘thinness’ in over-all meaning, or perhaps invulnerability to falsification. This is undoubtedly a concern that is related to a particular epistemological or methodological perspective which presupposes that words cannot be universally applicable without losing meaning or significance. But it is by no means clear how once rhetoric is identified with communication per se, or hermeneutics revealed as the historico-linguistic condition of human understanding, they must then lose direction, or that this newly ‘attenuated’ status somehow deprives them of radicality or specificity. By emphasizing the ontological, practical and critical aspects of hermeneutics and rhetoric I have tried to emphasize that the important boundaries here are not epistemological in nature, but related to the limits and possibilities of action and thinking in actual human practices.

This chapter began by situating rhetoric within the human experience of understanding speaking and listening, in particular Homer’s *Iliad* and Sophocles’ *Antigone*, in order to show how hermeneutics and rhetoric in early Greek literature interpenetrate at the level of speaking and listening before they are disciplined through more abstract socializing and theoretical perspectives. I then looked at Plato’s *Phaedrus* in order to introduce the idea that rhetoric is the expression of human desire that can either unfold as self-aggrandizement, or as the possibility of expressing and enacting practical wisdom with and among others. These are themes that will recur again and again in subsequent chapters. The placing of rhetoric within a wider context of interpretation, desire and practical wisdom is what will be further explored in Aristotle and, thereafter, Gadamer and Ricoeur. It is to these latter thinkers, and to a more fully articulated notion of practical reason and *phronesis*, that we must now turn our attention to.
Chapter Two

Hermeneutics, Rhetoric and Practical Wisdom: Aristotle

“It is not true, as some writers assume in their treatises on rhetoric, that the personal goodness revealed by the speaker contributes nothing to his power of persuasion; on the contrary, his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses.”

2.1 Phronesis and Practical Reasoning

In the previous chapter, I began by examining the relation between hermeneutic understanding and early traditions of Greek epic poetry and tragedy in order to provide some insight into the thesis that rhetorical expression is always situated within an implicit hermeneutic background, or already interpreted framework of meanings. By situating hermeneutics and rhetoric at this experiential level, we come to see how thinking-expressing and interpreting-speaking are inseparable. This is not rhetoric or hermeneutics as ‘systematized discipline’ or ‘instrument’ that we can be indifferent to, but rhetorical expression and hermeneutic understanding as part of our participatory linguistic experience. This way of describing the rhetorical and the hermeneutic is not meant to displace or disparage the elaboration and organization of their individual constituent elements under distinct methods or theoretical perspectives. The analytic, rhetorical, dialectical and hermeneutic aspects of language can and should be distinguished. But before we speak of rhetorical culture or art, before we reduce
rhetoric and hermeneutics to instruments or methods, we must first attempt to describe how these ways of understanding and interacting might arise out of our experience and our practices.

As we have seen, it is not knowledge of abstract rhetorical or interpretive method that guides us, the authors, the characters, or the audience of the *Iliad* and *Antigone*, but an ‘always already’ present capacity to make sense of a world of connections, conflicting perspectives and possible meanings, and an ‘always already’ present capacity to question, persuade or be persuaded. Long before we construct a theory of interpretation or persuasion, interpreting, persuading, asking questions, are already a part of what it is to *experience* a world with others in language. Rhetoric and hermeneutics, as phenomena that show themselves in linguistic experience, testify to this basic linguistic comportment of human beings as beings who speak, listen, understand, question, misunderstand, interpret and persuade. Classical works of poetry and literature could be considered exemplary illustrations of Gadamer’s claim that long before they are professionalized disciplines, “the rhetorical and hermeneutical aspects of human linguisticality completely interpenetrate each other”.64 One might imagine here a circle, where rhetorical expression is described as a way of persuasively articulating an understanding, while hermeneutics is seen as the interpretive understanding of an articulation.

The first proposal of the previous chapter was that such an interpenetrating relation was demonstrable in an indirect way through works of epic poetry and tragedy because these show us how interpretative contexts and speech work together through the actions of characters. Though the world presented may be historically distant from us, it is still recognizable as a human world characterized by finitude and fraught with ethical ambiguity, moral blindness and hubris. What I tried to underscore was that the moment this relation between hermeneutical understanding and rhetorical expression is made evident, a second theme or proposal also becomes more obvious:
that a kind of critical insight is enacted. Once again, the enactment of critical insight does not follow from an appeal to theory or method, but emerges organically within the very active linguistic doing and being with others.

In the present chapter, my goal is to intensify this practically-oriented understanding of critical insight. This will be accomplished by elaborating the ancient Aristotelian notion of *phronesis* and describing a broader understanding of practical reasoning. Two questions arise here: Why *phronesis*, and what does ‘a broader understanding of practical reasoning’ entail?

The most succinct answer I can give to the first question, at this early stage, is that *phronesis*, in the way it is introduced by Aristotle and later elaborated by Heidegger and Gadamer, is a way of talking about practical reasoning as a holistic critical enterprise that, in one word, brings together ‘being’ ‘acting’ and ‘desiring’: that is, it implicitly recognizes that ‘who we are’ is related to what we do and how we deliberate, and conversely, ‘what we do’ establishes ‘who we are’.65 The reference to ‘holism’ here is meant to suggest the idea, analogous to holistic medicine, that understanding what it is to be a good person, or to realize a flourishing polity, is analogous to grasping what is required to be a healthy person—both of the latter require an integrative perspective of the ‘whole’ body, person or polity that brings together different but interrelated, interdependent aspects. It is this integrative reasoning-being-desiring function that *phronesis* provides. More crucially, the notion of developing a critical orientation is not merely ‘knowing’ what is right or appropriate in the circumstances, but wanting or desiring to do the right or appropriate thing. In his discussion of *phronesis* and virtues of character, Aristotle sets us on a course of thinking that brings the relation of thinking-desiring-being and acting into sharp focus. What *phronesis* entails is something close to what it is to be a whole human being. In other words, it entails that we are not merely *thinking* or rational beings, but feeling,
expressing, acting, embodied beings. Aristotle understood this; it is why his rhetoric makes room not only for *logos* but also for *pathos* and *ethos*. It is also why I will claim that rhetorical expression, hermeneutic understanding and *phronesis* must be thought of as closely interrelated.

The second question regarding what ‘a broader understanding of practical reasoning’ entails can be understood in both in a substantive sense of relating other elements of practical reasoning, *nous, kairos, sunesis, gnome*, and *epieikes* to *phronesis*, and in terms of scope, or as the attempt to extend the range of application of *phronesis* beyond its initial framing in ethics to include the realms of rhetoric and politics. I will take a moment here to elaborate both of these questions.

*Phronesis* is not a technical skill that we learn like carpentry or typing. It is not about determining predictable outcomes or weighing or judging options regarding what one ‘ought to do’. If we have a constant or good character, Aristotle thinks that we will already know in some sense what we ought to do. On a strict Aristotelian interpretation, *phronesis* is the intellectual virtue that helps us choose the correct means through which we can realize an already known end. However, there are, in fact, other elements of Aristotelian practical reasoning that work alongside *phronesis* that can contemplate goods or ends. These other elements show up in his ethics, but they are also central when the ethical is realized through the rhetorical, and in the sphere of politics. I will certainly read along with Aristotle, but I will also attempt to rethink *phronesis* in a broader context of practical reasoning. This rethinking will allow *phronesis* to be situated more explicitly within Aristotelian ideas about rhetoric and politics. What I want to emphasize for now is the idea that the *phronetic* describes that space of thinking-acting-desiring where insight is formed and cultivated over time through each concrete particular experience. For Aristotle, *phronesis* is the intellectual virtue that helps us to secure, in a reflexive way, the
goodness of our character by enjoining us to take actions that continuously accomplish and
perfect the latter. This means that we simply could not realize virtues of character such as
courage, temperance, friendship or justice without \textit{phronesis}. It will be discovered that there is
nothing outmoded or old fashioned about character. Character is about who we are, and whether
we can be accountable to ourselves and to others. It is the unique and original blending of
thinking, being, desiring and acting in the formation of character, and the enactment of critical
insight, that marks \textit{phronesis} as worthy of closer examination.

But there is another reason why my focus is on \textit{phronesis}. If, as I hope to show, \textit{phronesis}
describes the thinking-desiring-acting place where a very important sense of experience-based
judgment and insight are cultivated, then it will not, on the one hand, be something reducible to,
or defined by, demonstrative, mathematical or deductive logic. Nor will it be, on the other hand,
captive to sophistical or manipulative reasoning. This makes reasoning at the \textit{phronetic} level
something very special and unique. It is concretely oriented to the particular, yet not relativist or
superficially perspectival. It also allows us to understand the sort of practical reasoning that is
involved in both rhetorical expression and hermeneutic understanding. In other words, because it
is \textit{situated} reasoning—reasoning that must grapple with the exigencies of what is now present
before us as a problem, an issue, a dilemma, or a need to deliberate—there is always operative
within \textit{phronesis} a crucial creative or innovative reasoning aspect. This creative aspect allows us
to navigate through difficult situations, but it also just happens to capture the kind of practically-
oriented productive reasoning and insight that inheres in both the realms of rhetorical expression
and interpretive or hermeneutic reflection. This is what makes \textit{phronesis} distinct and valuable: it
is that sort of practically-oriented reasoning that helps us develop and cultivate over time a
certain quality of mind. From the perspective of more abstract reasoning, such a quality of mind
might be seen as potentially prejudicial—something that could contaminate the impartial application of laws and moral rules.\textsuperscript{66}

With the notion of \textit{phronesis}, however, Aristotle presents us with a rather different perspective. The creative critical competence that \textit{phronesis} and practical wisdom presuppose is something that forms us not as wholly autonomous disembodied ‘subjects’, but as embodied beings who are reflexively realized and cultivated through their interactions and sense of belonging with others. When Aristotle tells us that “…the mark of a man of practical wisdom is to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular respect, e.g. about what sorts of thing conduce to health or to strength, but about what sorts of thing conduce to the good life in general” (\textit{NE} Book VI Ch. 5 1140a25-28), he is certainly affirming that practical reasoning is an expression of thinking in the context of ethical being with oneself. But he is also, I will claim, insisting that practical reasoning must be finally realized in both the individual \textit{and} in a public space. It is easy to lose sight of this important point when we see human reasoning as strictly a matter of individual and impartial application of rules and procedures—whether these are moral, legal or occupational. More importantly, deliberating well is not something that is external or outside of us—something we can entirely distance ourselves from—but, precisely, something that both forms us as unique individuals and cultivates a certain kind of public being through discussion and dialogue with others.\textsuperscript{67} Aristotle certainly understood this even if he did not elaborate the connection between \textit{phronesis}, rhetoric and politics in an expansive way. However, I will explore these connections in what follows.

Additionally, I will make the case that \textit{because} it brings together both being, desiring and acting \textit{phronesis} is a mode of \textit{critical} hermeneutic reflection. How is \textit{phronesis} to be understood as a ‘critical enterprise’?
In describing a way of knowing where practical skill and reflective deliberation co-operate, where experience and reflection on experience work in concert, where creative improvisation issues from the gathered wisdom of particular experiences of ourselves and others, *phronesis* and practical reasoning provide us with a way of critically assessing not just what we should do, but ‘who we are’ in light of the sorts of decisions we make. *Phronetic reasoning* is reflexive ‘critical’ reasoning precisely because it is ‘not dependent on any over-arching theory or law to ground its dependence.’ In other words, it is enacted by a particular spontaneous demand that is brought before it, and through these ever present demands it accumulates and cultivates over time a critical depth of insight and responsiveness to each new situation. In this way, *phronesis* is a way of talking about practical reason as an ever-widening grasp of things. It does not subsume or subordinate new situations or circumstances under a general rule, law or practice. Rather, it calls upon us to honour the uniqueness of the particular, and consider again what might not have been contemplated in the articulation of general rules, imperatives or laws—in other words, *phronesis* presses us to always ‘think more’. It thereby makes thinking manifest in a world of practical relations and activities.

I am saying here that *phronesis* is a critical mode of reasoning insofar as it enacts thinking in light of the questions, ambiguities, incommensurabilities, and sometimes potentially tragic consequences of what is before us. In such situations we are often practically and critically compelled to think more—to imagine a more encompassing story from the inside out. This is quite distinct from the reductive notion of the critical as the subsuming of particulars under abstract rules, procedures or regulative ideals. In other words, to operate under the assumption that ethical, moral or political reflection and deliberation are merely mechanical or simply a matter of subsuming particulars under rules, is to suppose that such reasoning activity can be
performed in an abstract disengaged way—perhaps even in a ‘thoughtless’ or unreflective manner. By contrast, *phronesis* is actively *thinking* from the ground-up about the particular situation that is before one. At the same time, it is not calculative, procedural or disengaged reasoning, but engaged thinking-desiring that coalesces in an emerging capacity for critical awareness and insight. It is precisely by engaging the ‘particular’ in a multiplicity of different contexts and situations that we enact or make possible a capacity to be critically aware and insightful. In this sense, the exercise of *phronetic* reason is tied to cultivating a certain critical responsiveness to what is around us. *Phronesis* and practical reason do not understand critical judgments within practices as *critical* insofar as they rely on a set of ideal independent moral rules, procedures or theoretical axioms. Practical wisdom is something that evolves out of our particular practical involvements. As we will discover, from a *critical* perspective, *practical* wisdom involves *phronesis* but it also involves a gathering, coalescing insightfulness.

The gradual capacity to be insightful in our practical affairs is made possible through experience, but it is principally something that is gained by patiently listening to others, and by the careful reading and interpreting of what has come before us. To put this in a slightly different way, we become insightful by bearing witness to the wisdom of those who accompany and precede us. According to this perspective, we never stand entirely outside of a network of interpreted meanings or linguistically oriented relations with and among others. Bearing witness to the wisdom of others is implicitly a form of recognition that learning always emerges in the encounter with another in practical contexts of thinking and doing. In this sense, *phronesis* assumes what Paul Ricoeur has called a ‘hermeneutics of trust’ or belief in the wisdom of another. It is this bearing witness to and trusting in the wisdom of others that gives rise to our sense of belonging, of responsibility and of solidarity. *Phronesis* is, therefore, a mode of critical
engagement and practical reasoning that assumes we are communal beings, or as Aristotle might say, ‘political animals’. However, phronesis does not ask us to blindly trust what is handed down to us. The entire thrust of phronesis and practical reasoning is one of gaining a deeper grasp of the present situation by carefully observing and rigorously thinking through how the particular shows itself to us. This means that in trusting to the wisdom of others we are at the same time cultivating in ourselves a power to read beneath the surface of things—to suspect that we may not be possessed of the whole truth, and must continuously refine and correct our understanding by developing an ability to ask the right questions. Phronesis as a critical orientation presupposes not merely trust in the wisdom of others who have shown a capacity to respond thoughtfully and insightfully to different situations, but also trust in our own capacity to recognize when the wisdom in ourselves and of another comes up short.71

If the first step in the elaboration of critical phronesis involves spelling out the relation between being and acting, the second step entails the framing of this latter relation within a broader context of practical reasoning that includes Aristotle’s discussion of the place of rhetoric and politics in practical human affairs.72 With respect to the question of a broader context of practical reasoning I will claim that while phronesis is certainly at the center of Aristotle’s understanding of deliberative reasoning in ethics, it is clear that he also meant for it to work in conjunction with other elements of reasoning that unequivocally place us in a context of relations to others in a public sphere. A broadened context of phronesis and practical reason permits us to see, in an even more elaborate way, how our capacity for critical insight can emerge through rhetoric and in political action. In addition to the virtue of phronesis a broader notion of practical reasoning brings before us elements such as nous (intuitive or perceptive understanding),73 kairos (recognizing the right time to speak or act), sunesis (a critical distinguishing grasp of
particulars), *gnome* (a form of empathy or grasp of the relation between the self-characterization of a person or speaker, and the affinity or bond he creates through recognition with an individual or audience), and *epieikes* (equity or fairness as a way of correcting the rigidity of a rule or law in the context of concrete practical demands). Again, these elements of practical reasoning, along with *phronesis* itself, are not reducible to a standardized set of rules and procedures that we methodically follow or check off as we go. They are what we might call ‘emergent performative capabilities’ that are discovered by us in language, and in our practical activities and engagements with others. Because they always imply relations with others, they presuppose the possibility that we can learn through experience how to critically discern the ‘right path’, ‘way of speaking’, or course of action.

The goal of elaborating critical insight through a broader Aristotelian notion of practical reasoning and *phronesis* will be seen to traverse the domains of rhetorical expression, hermeneutic reflection, ethical deliberation and political action. The *Nicomachean Ethics* sets out the initial parameters of *phronesis* and practical wisdom. The *Rhetoric* provides us with a way of realizing *phronesis* at a linguistic performative, public or political level. For Aristotle rhetoric, like ethics and politics, is a practical endeavor, not a scientific one. Moreover, “the true student of politics…is thought to have studied virtue above all things” (*NE* Bk. I: Ch.13 1102a7-9) and “rhetoric is a combination of the science of logic and of the ethical branch of politics” (*Rhet.* BK. I Ch. 4 1159b10-12) Thus, Aristotle understood the need to see rhetoric as a necessary part of public, political being and acting. According to this reading, it is a mistake to read Aristotle’s ethics, rhetoric and politics as simply a taxonomical concern with classifying and recording various modes of virtue, differing possibilities of rhetorical speech or different configurations of political power. This way of interpreting Aristotle misses the profoundly normative dimension of
his thought. Moreover, it fails to grasp that all of these latter spheres are intimately tied to each other and to a telos of practical wisdom that is possible through human experience, and is precisely meant to be situated in human communities that in some measure strive to cooperatively seek the good. In other words, that ethics strives towards the ‘virtuous mean’ has implications for the idea of rhetoric as that which strives for a more truthful way of expressing something, and, in turn, implications for the understanding of a politics that moves towards a more comprehensive grasp of justice in the polis.

In addition to ‘the reasoned state of capacity to act’ or phronesis, rhetoric also implies ‘the reasoned state of capacity to make’ or poiesis. For this reason rhetoric has a unique and pivotal role in Aristotle’s philosophy. The art of the rhetorician must be assessed not only from the perspective of whether she is successful in producing arguments that persuade an audience, but also whether she has deliberated well regarding the public good. Insofar as it brings together ‘acting’ and ‘being’ phronesis in the rhetor will embody three fundamental comportments: She will have reasoning skill (logos), good character (ethos) and a capacity to evoke in an audience the right emotional response at the right time for the right reasons (pathos).74 Understood through phronesis, rhetoric involves a deliberative capacity, but it is also must be comprehended as a civic art—something that helps to shape communities and form the character of speakers and listeners, rhetoricians and citizens. To borrow Aristotle’s language it is ‘for the sake of the political that the rhetorical is pursued’.75 Indeed, from the perspective of the ethical, it is politics that is the ‘master art’ for it is the latter that

...ordains which of the sciences should be studied in a state, and which each class of citizens should learn and up to what point they should learn them; and we see even
the most highly esteemed of capacities to fall under this, e.g. strategy, economics, rhetoric; now, since politics uses the rest of the sciences, and since, again, it legislates as to what we are to do and what we are to abstain from, the end of this science must include those of the others, so that this end must be the good for man. For even if the end is the same for a single man and for a state, that of the state seems at all events something greater and more complete whether to attain or to preserve; though it is worth while to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more godlike to attain it for a nation or for city-states. These, then, are the ends at which our inquiry aims, since it is political science, in one sense of that term. [NE Bk. I: Ch. 2 1094a30-1094b11]

The rhetorician as *phronimos* presupposes, therefore, good character and right deliberation (*phronesis*), but it also presupposes a capacity to creatively make or produce something (persuasive speech) that is beyond itself (*poiesis*), in order to continuously and creatively realize the art of the political—that is to continuously strive towards public good.

Aristotle reminds us that without creativity rhetoric becomes dull and tedious. But he also implies that without a context of public good, rhetoric loses its standing as a practice that helps us cultivate the virtue of belonging, and becomes a self-aggrandizing instrument of deception, manipulation and domination. Notice here that rhetoric could still be quite logically coherent—but without the ethical, without virtue, it would look more and more like sophistry. In our own day we know this only too well. By the time Plato and Aristotle had established their respective ‘schools’, rhetoric had become a disciplined ‘object’ often associated with specious reasoning or sophistry. It is not that the latter were in competition with the sophists for students; it is that the
proliferation of sophistic teaching ended in a distorted public rhetoric which likely put Socrates to trial and death. The stakes then, were indeed high. And just as for Plato, so too rhetoric in our own day raises political issues of power, of praise and blame, of justice in the courts, and of perpetual epistemological problems in reconciling truth with rhetorical practice. The relation between rhetoric and truth is no less relevant now than it was then.

Our first priority in the following is to understand how Aristotle explicates *phronesis* in the over-all context of his ethics. This will require an exposition of what is called *eudaimonia*, and subsequently the effort to determine how *phronesis* is understood as enacted in practice in reference to the virtues of character. Secondly, I will take some time to situate and distinguish *phronesis* from other kinds of truth-oriented knowing. This will give a sense of its unique and indispensible practical reasoning character. However, I will also stress that as important as it is to distinguish *phronesis* from other modes of knowing at a philosophical level, at a more practical level, it is just as essential that we grasp how *phronesis* typically works alongside, and indeed presupposes, other kinds of knowing. Once I have laid out this ethical and epistemological background we will be better equipped to see how it is that *phronesis* can bring together Aristotelian notions of rhetoric and politics. Finally, I will suggest throughout the chapter that the gradual enactment of a critical capacity is implicit within the very thinking activity of *phronesis* once it is grasped within a broader context of practical reasoning.

2.2 *Phronesis, Virtue and Eudaimonia*

At a first glance the *Nicomachean Ethics* seems preoccupied with the explication of what might be called a typology of virtues and vices. Thus, for example, the virtue of courage is
contrasted with both a vice of ‘deficiency’ (cowardice) and a vice of ‘excess’ (rashness); the
virtue of civility with a vice of deficiency (surliness) and a vice of excess (obsequiousness), and
so on. There is, however, much more at stake than just a cataloging of virtues. Virtue and
practical reasoning are implicated together. Virtue is realized through reason. According to
Aristotle’s definition, virtue is not a particular thing but “…a state of character concerned with
choice, lying in a mean, i.e. the mean relative to us, this being determined by a rational principle,
and by that principle by which the man of practical wisdom would determine it.” [NE Bk. II Ch.
6 1106b36-1107a3] Aristotle tells us that the moral virtues such as, temperance, civility, justice,
courage, sincerity are not something we have innately by nature, even if ‘nature’ in some sense
(that is, our reasoning capacity) makes it possible for us to receive them. Nor is moral virtue
something that can be taught in the abstract. Our ability to form virtuous habits of thinking and
acting, to ‘determine the mean between vice and virtue’ relative to us, is not something that
emerges through the study of moral theory; neither is it a gift bestowed by the gods, or just a
matter of chance or luck.77 Rather, virtue is something realized through practical reasoning and
acquired through habit—we develop virtuous character by engaging in virtuous activity that
becomes habitual: “It is well said, then, that it is by doing just acts that the just man is produced,
and by doing temperate acts the temperate man; without doing these no one would have even a
prospect of becoming good.” [NE Bk. II: Ch. 4 1105b9-12].78

The above intuition is familiar to us: we form certain habits through repetition, and by
following the example of others. As we develop a capacity to reason, we become reflexively
aware of what we are doing, and why we are doing it. In this sense, we are not blindly repeating
actions, but implicitly asking ourselves ‘why we act’ and how we should proceed in this
particular case. We are also, at the same time, implicitly forming and cultivating our desires—
that is, we are not only thinking about doing the right thing, at the right time, in the right way—but in so doing, implicitly reinforcing a desire to follow this reasoning course, thereby deepening our capacity to resist the desire to act in a thoughtless or unreflective manner. This reflexive capability can be understood by the name of *phronesis* or practical thinking. *Phronesis* is not contemplative thinking but activity-oriented thinking—that is, it is *praxis*-oriented. *Phronesis* is the activity or *enactment* of reasoned and insightful thinking in light of some particular and concrete question, issue, or situation that needs to be decided. Because it involves a certain reflexivity that is tied to action, the exercise of *phronesis* is simultaneously the cultivation and refining of a certain kind of virtuous person—that is, it is through the continuous activity of *phronetik thinking* and cultivation of *insight* that we become good persons, speakers, or citizens. Presumably, both memory and expectation are involved in *phronesis*, but there is also a sense in which our entire reasoning-desiring being is attuned to the possibility of responding thoughtfully to what is presented before us. This means that *phronesis* cannot be merely about calculating the best advantage for ourselves, or rationally choosing between options based on self-interest. Rather, *phronesis* assumes both that we are reasoning-desiring beings, and that we express, realize and extend the good of practical reasoning in ourselves through our relations with others.

In other words, we do not cultivate merely the reasoning capacity that helps us do the right thing, but we also cultivate the accompanying desire to do the right thing in light of a notion of good that is always performed among and shared by others. *Phronesis* is activated when we are confronted by the unique situation before us. We do not come upon such an experience ‘empty-handed’. We come to it with a certain background of commonly held general assumptions that were also arrived at through experience with others. *Phronesis* is, therefore, a form of practical reasoning that allows us to mediate between traditions, rules or past wisdom, and new or variable
situations. Each new experience broadens and deepens our perspective and our capacity to meet
the new and unforeseen with equanimity. This relation of co-determination between the
particular and the general gives us a clue as to why Aristotle believes that unlike other sorts of
reasoning states (for example techne) phronesis is knowledge that cannot be forgotten. To forget
the kind of knowing that phronesis brings would be, in a crucial way, to forget or lose oneself.
This is precisely because who we are is what we do, and what we do establishes, over time, who
we are—doing or acting, desiring and thinking are brought together and established together.

We have already noted that phronesis is acquired by bearing witness to others who have
demonstrated a measure of practical wisdom in their actions. In this sense phronesis is not
something privately arrived at, but something publicly demonstrated in a practical context of
action. It cannot be taught or memorized as a formula; we must witness its enactment in others.
This bearing witness to the wisdom of others can take a number of forms: observing or
interacting with them while in the activity of doing something, listening to elders or teachers,
reading books etc. To be sure, Aristotle would say that ‘a good beginning is more than half of the
whole’. In other words, acquiring practical wisdom and phronesis is something we must be ready
to receive by having been exposed to a proper intellectual training, and good moral habits early
in life. When we are young we don’t really understand the full spectrum of reasons regarding
why we should do certain things or why we must ‘choose’ a certain course of action. The idea
is that as we mature and experience the world with and among others, as we thoughtfully share in
some understanding of good, our early habits will become more informed, their reasons
uncovered, and made transparent to us.

What is decisive here is, firstly, our exposure to a variety of experiences, and secondly, our
uniquely human capacity to intelligently grasp, by way of the gathering power of nous (what
Aristotle refers to as the eye of the soul), the most basic principles of the good. We will have much more to say about the kind of intuitive thinking that nous describes, and also about phronesis as the "reasoned and true state of capacity to act with regard to human goods" (1140b20-25) momentarily. For the present, we need to emphasize that phronesis is not an unreflective, automatic or habitual reasoning response to the world: because circumstances and situations are always evolving, phronesis must be a kind of practical thinking, ‘seeing’ or intuiting that responds to the particularity and uniqueness of each situation. Phronesis assumes that the world of ethical and political decision-making is not ‘all-of-a-piece’, but rather something characterized both by tradition, or what has been, and by otherness or by ‘that which could be otherwise’. It is precisely this presupposition of mediating difference and sameness, the familiar and the strange, the particular and the general, that characterizes the activity of phronetic thinking. Over time, we meet up with new situations and unforeseen contexts, and by observing and reflecting upon the decisions and actions of others who have more experience and wisdom, we ourselves become more adept at meeting the demands of the present situation. It may even be the case that as practical wisdom develops we find ourselves running slightly against the grain of a formerly learned habit, as we experience difference, ambiguity, and the broad ramifications of decision-making. It is not then just a linear accumulation or aggregation of decisions that defines phronesis, but an ever-widening and deepening capacity to grasp different possibilities and situations by thinking across, or sometimes against, a convention or rule. There is then a certain built-in elasticity or flexibility involved in phronesis and practical reasoning. It is this flexibility that Aristotle implicitly refers to when he designates phronesis as the sort of practical reasoning capacity that can deal appropriately with ‘that which could be otherwise’.
According to Aristotle, *phronesis*, and practical reasoning as a whole, help us to deliberate in such a way as to further secure a certain character, disposition or ethical orientation; that is, they help us secure the right desires, determine the right measure, the right time and the best means to achieve a virtuous end. *Phronesis* plays its practical reasoning part by discerning the right means through which we might best realize the intermediate point between a vice of excess and one of deficiency. Since each situation that calls for us to choose may differ slightly, we need a reasoning capacity to determine just where the intermediate point is on a case by case basis. To get things ‘right’ in this way is to realize practical truth. Aristotle relates that “…there is a mark to which the man who has the rule looks, and heightens or relaxes his activity accordingly, and there is a standard which determines the mean states which we say are intermediate between excess and defect, being in accordance with the right rule” [NE Bk. VI Ch 1. 1138b21-25]. It is *phronesis* that provides this determinative means. But how does it do this?

To begin with, *phronesis* is not like mathematically plotting a determinative course on a coordinate graph. Nor does it involve ‘splitting the difference’ between two extremes or vices—we do not bring together the vice of excess with the vice of deficiency, and then determine the ‘middle ground’. Rather, *phronesis* is activated by the particular concrete situation. Each situation calls upon us to exercise *phronetic* reasoning in order to determine a mean that is *relative to us*—it must be *relative* to us not in the sense that we are some ‘abstract individual’ but relative to the situation we find ourselves in. The mean is not, therefore, something arithmetically equidistant between two points that are unchanging. Ethical decision-making is decision-making that must take account of the fact that things could be otherwise, and that we often find ourselves in differing places and contexts which presuppose distinct possibilities and limits. Just as importantly, discovering the mean relative to the situation we find ourselves in is
not something we accomplish in a moral vacuum, but something that we grasp over time by closely observing the reactions, and internalizing the reasoned opinions and considered judgments of others. Put another way, to determine the mean ‘relative to us’ could never be to say that we, as autonomous agents, are the sole measure of truth or good. It is true that each of us have a slightly different capacity for *phronetic* reasoning because each of us will have experienced life differently through a broad range of activities. For example, if I am an experienced parent, teacher, speech writer or janitor, the determination of a mean—not going too far one way, or falling too short in another—will be less difficult for me to determine than it would be if I were very new at parenting or speech-writing. In fact, as a novice, I will in some sense lack the excellence of *phronesis*. I will be much more susceptible to being rash, incontinent, fearful or indecisive. In this sense “relative to us” does not mean relative to me in the sense of ‘subject to my whim’, but relative to me in the sense as defined in reference to the particularities of my situation. It does not mean that ‘I can do whatever I want’, but exactly the opposite—‘I am enjoined to do what is appropriate and correct in the situation that calls for me to make a decision’. Importantly, we do not reflect and act as if we were wholly autonomous individuals, detached from the world, but rather ‘as if’ we embodied the wisdom of the *phronimos*—a wisdom that is shaped, cultivated and deepened only with and among others.

I should also say here that *phronesis* is not some independent logical faculty of the mind. It is, instead, a potentially broadening wisdom that ‘waits’ on the experience of differing situations to be realized. In other words, *phronesis* is informed by experience, directed by *nous* and realizes its task in the securing of virtuous habits in order to live well. *Phronesis* is, therefore, both potentiality (*dunamis*) and thinking activity (*energeia*). The ‘end’ or goal of *phronesis* as an intellectual virtue is its own ‘being-at-work’. It is deliberation that results in the sort of choice
that secures good character *in action*. If we have the patience and perspicacity to listen to others who are wise, Aristotle believes we ourselves will, over time, become better at making the right call. In fact, in most, though not in all cases, our power to discern and deliberate will be, as we gain experience, fairly swift. The reason for this is simple. Each time we make the right call, the goodness of our character (and our desires) is further secured. Over time we become better at unhesitatingly ‘seeing’ the right thing to do, and we thereby deepen our desire to do the right thing the next time we encounter a situation that calls for a decision. In other words, we become in the ‘habit’ of making the right choices because we have made the right choices and cultivated the right desires in the past—this is what Aristotle means when he says that we ‘become virtuous by doing virtuous deeds’.

If *phronesis* is, likewise, a ‘virtue’, then we become good at it in the very activity of doing it. When Aristotle says in doing ‘just’ or ‘temperate’ acts we become just and temperate’, he is well aware of the distinction between the actions that someone does that *appear* to be just or courageous, and those that are done *as* just and temperate men do them’. Just and temperate men do not just act with justice and moderation; they have cultivated in themselves the desire to be and to *think* with justice and moderation. To exercise *phronesis* is, similarly, to cultivate the desire to act *as* practical reasoning persons or agents. The ‘*as*’ here means that doing the right thing can never be entirely ‘thoughtless’, morally relative, or a purely mechanical exercise. In other words, the agent or person must deliberate and choose an action or reach a decision for its own sake. The agent must be “… in a certain condition when he does them; in the first place he must have knowledge, secondly he must choose the acts, and choose them for their own sakes, and thirdly his action must proceed from a firm and unchangeable character” [Bk. II Ch. 4 1105a28-33]. What is important here is that *phronesis* is not merely a particular kind of
reasoning—a mere tool to be used in practical affairs—but, uniquely, a kind of practical reasoning that realizes and extends the virtue of, and desire for, practical reasoning itself.

Notice here that there is nothing about what we have so far described as phronesis that is ‘antiquated’ or something that could only work in the Greece or Macedonia of Aristotle’s time. The reason for this is simple. Phronesis does not belong to an abstract theory of morality, or one that pertains only to Ancient Greece. It is, rather, a way of talking about how reason unfolds in human experience itself—it is, therefore, something that is immediately recognizable to all of us. This is not to say that Aristotle did not have a very situated ethical world-view that presupposed a certain hierarchy of familial and political relations, and a distinctive naturalistic teleological perspective. Still, we might wonder whether detaching phronesis from this particular Aristotelian worldview would fundamentally change our conception of it. I believe there are good reasons to conclude that because phronesis is so intimately tied to action and human experience as such, it would not suffer unduly if we did not presuppose Aristotle’s views on family, women or citizenship. What we need is to get somewhat clearer about, however, is what Aristotle’s teleological ethical perspective amounts to, and what the ‘good’ or eudaimonia involves.

From the perspective of ethics, phronesis is an intellectual virtue that helps us practically orient ourselves, and critically discriminate in particular situations with respect to how we might best achieve or realize the good. But what is the ‘good’ here? Aristotle tells us that the good is something that is not desirable as a means to some other good, but desirable ‘in itself’—the good is ‘good without qualification’. In the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle’s task as ‘philosopher’ is to thoroughly question the received opinions about what has been designated by ‘the good,’ and thereby gradually gain insight into what can stand the test of reflective scrutiny. The good that stands this test is what Aristotle calls eudaimonia.
Eudaimonia is typically equated with the noun ‘happiness’. The word itself is a composite of the word ‘eu’ meaning ‘good’ and ‘daimon’, which can be roughly translated as spirit or ‘divine spirit’ in human beings. It might appear then that eudaimonia would be the articulation of good that could only be realized through our most divine part—through theoretical contemplation of the eternal and unchanging world, not practical reasoning respecting the particular and contingent. If we were to limit ourselves to Book X of the Nicomachean Ethics, a case could be reasonably be made for such a narrow reading of eudaimonia. However, there are good reasons to think that once we take Aristotle’s text as a whole into account such a narrow reading of eudaimonia could simply not be sustained. This will become evident when we take up the distinctions and interrelations between Aristotle’s different modes of reasoning. The more specific point to make is that ethical reasoning and human virtue presuppose a broad range of actions, desires, and real-life practical situations that call for us to make decisions in light of certain goods we hold as defining or central. To reduce eudaimonia to merely theoretical or philosophical contemplation of the eternal would be inimical to the ‘balanced perspective’ Aristotle’s entire ethics asks us to strive towards. More significant is the idea that rational activity (theoretical or practical) is the realization of a specifically human telos—a telos that presupposes that reasoning can take a number of different forms, but that each of these latter are mutually defined and reinforced through each other, and often realized together in practical activities.

Eudaimonia is the realization of happiness in each of these activities. But, what does ‘happiness’ actually mean here? Unfortunately, happiness is often interpreted as an unexpected sense of euphoria, or it is associated simply with a pleasurable feeling. Happiness would appear, on this account, to be something that we privately, passively and intermittently experience. In
This way of describing eudaimonia not as an end-state but as an ongoing striving activity in accordance with human flourishing, excellence or arête, allows us to grasp that it is something that can be actively and reasonably realized at the individual and at the political level, with and among others. This is a translation that comports well with Aristotle’s understanding of eudaimonia as something that defines our basic human telos or function as that of beings who strive continuously to realize excellence or arête [NE Bk. 1Ch: 7 1098a 6-17]. It is also consistent with the notion that eudaimonia is not just ‘any good’ but a constitutive good that informs and gives meaning to other goods, allowing us to make particular value determinations at an individual and a collective level.84

To realize eudaimonia is not a matter of committing an assortment of virtues to memory, nor is it reducible to calculating the requirements of a ‘comfortable life’. It is, rather, a matter of ‘doing’ or actively engaging in the world—choosing, speaking, listening and deliberating with and among others—in a way that sustains and extends our very capacity to choose, speak, listen and deliberate among others.85 Granted, Aristotle does not describe eudaimonia as the realization of itself in this way. However, if the ethical and the political are about choosing, speaking and deliberating well; if they are about grasping the appropriate mean relative to us; if they about gaining insight into what constitutes the good of human flourishing, then the description of eudaimonia as self-realizing in ethical and political activity is a plausible one. Choice and deliberation are not calculative or deductive exercises we stand apart from, but activities we are
always in the midst of with others. For Aristotle, we are both desiring and reasoning beings. Reason helps us form the right sort of virtuous habits over time, and virtue helps us properly direct our desires: “the good state is truth in agreement with right desire” (NE VI. 2.1139a32). But reason, as practical reason or *phronesis*, is something that emerges in us, and in our relations with others. The good as ‘human flourishing is, likewise, something we determine in our own individual case, but always with and among others. The practical conception of knowing that *phronesis* stands for is connected to both action, through choice (*prohairesis*), and desire—or as Aristotle describes it ‘desiderative reason or ‘ratiocinative desire’. This means that the good is not ‘whatever we feel like doing’, but tied to knowing *as excellence* at an individual *and* at a civic or public level. Our being as a whole, and our flourishing together, are implicated in the exercise of practical wisdom and the determination of the good.

In the context of ethical life, we have seen that the sort of thinking activity associated with human flourishing through the exercise of virtue is *phronesis*. The key, however, is for us to grasp that for Aristotle: 1. ‘*eudaimonia*’ is not a static, eternal or unchanging abstract good, but an ever-deepening understanding, and continuously nuanced articulation, of that which is best both for ourselves and for our community, and, 2. that practical reasoning is not theoretical, abstract or calculative reasoning, but involves situated reasoning (*phronesis*) and insight (*nous*) that *enacts* or makes possible all of the virtues. *Phronesis* and *nous* must therefore be the sort of experiential reasoning and insight that helps us to deliberate well about how to realize *eudaimonia* both in ourselves, and with and among others in a political community. Finally, *eudaimonia* will be something that can take various forms: in rhetorical expression, ethical deliberation or political activity.
We can conclude here by saying that Aristotle does not explain *phronesis*, the virtues or *eudaimonia* with reference to an already established body of knowledge, or ask us to examine the theories which are crafted by expert moral theorists. Instead, he directs us to look at how *phronesis* is found in the actions and reasoning of certain exemplary *individuals* [1140a24-25]. For example, we could not teach someone how to be courageous by asking them to follow a predetermined set of rules, or exhort them to read the ‘theory of moral courage’ by so and so. There are no rules for courage. What we can do is propose that they look at certain individuals who have been put in situations where courageous action is demanded and ask them to attempt to grasp what might be involved. What is most evidently different here is the relation that *phronesis* has to the self-reflecting agent of action. One way of grasping this relation between reflexive self-understanding and action, is to compare *phronesis* with what Aristotle says about other kinds of knowing. We need, additionally, to understand in a more detailed way that even if *phronesis* is not precisely the reasoning virtue that helps us contemplate ends or *eudaimonia*, there are other practical reasoning elements in Aristotle that work alongside *phronesis* that can, indeed, help us to do just this.

2.3 *Nous* between Phronesis and Episteme

I have emphasized that *phronesis* is a kind of reasoning that brings desiring-thinking-acting together with being. Given this, the exercise of *phronesis* is, at the same time, the cultivation of a particular quality of mind, *and* the development over time, of certain kind of critically-oriented ethically aware person. One way of understanding the unique perspective *phronesis* gives us, is to think of it as always implicating the person as an ‘ethical whole’. In every decision or
deliberation *phronesis* always presupposes a reflexive self-understanding. For example, it is possible to evaluate the excellence of a *product* made by a carpenter, or the theory proposed by a physicist, independent of the latter as persons, whereas we would have difficulty separating the actions of a person from who they are at an *ethical* level. This distinction points to the difference between a good that attaches to an object, and the good that is realized in activity itself—or to borrow from Aristotle, there is a difference between making and acting. We are judged by what we do and how we do it. This means simply that acts that exhibit virtue or vice are related to the disposition or character of the agent—how he or she understands themselves, and justifies the actions and decisions they make based on this self-understanding. In short, the sort of reasoning Aristotle has in mind when he speaks of *phronesis* is reasoning that presupposes the inseparability of acting and being—of ‘what I do’ and ‘who I am’. Why is this distinction of importance? Part of the reason goes to the heart of the distinction that Aristotle makes between *phronesis* and ‘*techne*’. We will spend some time discussing this important distinction, but we must begin with a more basic division between two fundamental sorts of knowing, and then describe how the unique concept of *nous* or insight operates in both realms of knowing.

According to Aristotle, “…there are two parts [of the soul] which grasp a rational principle—one by which we contemplate the kind of things whose originative causes are invariable, and one by which we contemplate variable things.”[NE Bk. VI: Ch. 1 1139a5-10]. In the first case, we reflect upon the unchanging world through *episteme* (scientific reasoning) or *sophia* (philosophical reflection). In the second case we reflect upon, and perhaps change the world through *techne* (the know-how involved in production or ‘making’); or we reflectively respond to the world of constant change by way of *phronesis* (practical reasoning).88 There is, however, yet another level of awareness which could be more accurately described as a sudden
understanding, gathering together or grasping of something. This is what we might call *insight*, or what Aristotle refers to as *nous*. Where does *nous* fit into ethics?

*Nous* is related to *phronesis* but distinct from it. To put this in a slightly different way, when *phronesis* is operative—when we cultivate our reasoning capacity by choosing the right means, or by determining the right course of action, in the right way, at the right time, we are also creating a space of possibility for insight or *nous*. That is, we are opening up a horizon of thinking possibility in experience where we are able to abruptly ‘see’ or intelligently grasp something we had not previously thought of. *Nous* describes this spontaneous thrust or upsurge of understanding where something that might have been occluded from our view is made transparent to us. We spoke briefly above about *nous* in a practical context as a kind of intelligence or ‘intuitive’ capacity to grasp the most general features of the good. But in Aristotle *nous* is initially associated not with practical, but with scientific knowing. In Chapter VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle tells us that *nous* or intuitive reason is what ‘grasps first principles’ [NE Bk.VI: Ch. 5 1141a7]. In the *Posterior Analytics* he relates that “…we suppose ourselves to possess unqualified scientific knowledge of a thing, as opposed to knowing it in the accidental way…when we think that we know the cause on which the fact depends, as the cause of that fact and of no other, and, further, that the fact could not be other than it is.” (*Posterior Analytics* Bk. I: Ch.1 71b8-12]. At the level of scientific reasoning, *nous* is insight regarding first principles that is made possible by the sustained practice of observing the world of nature. It is not a process or chain of deductive reasoning, but rather something on the order of ‘aha! Now I get it!’ For the scientist then, *nous* is that kind of insight that coalesces in the formulation of general principles by way of inductive reasoning. How is it that *nous* can work at the level of both *episteme* (scientific reason) and *phronesis* (practical reason)? It will serve our purpose here
to be more circumspect regarding how Aristotle understands the distinctiveness of these two reasoning realms.

*Episteme* (scientific reasoning) is concerned with necessity or that which cannot be otherwise—its object is the necessary, and it is that which enables us to grasp the universal, the eternal, ungenerated and imperishable [1139b20-25]. *Episteme* presupposes that we have an inherent capacity to abruptly and insightfully grasp first principles—though these first principles are not themselves objects of scientific knowledge. Thus, scientific knowledge or *episteme* is about explaining, demonstrating, deducing from already known first principles (*archai*). First principles are not innately known (from birth) or demonstratively arrived at, but, nevertheless, something we humans (uniquely) have the capacity to intuitively grasp or ‘see’. To say that such intuitive grasping or *nous* is the “…the originative source of science” [PA Bk. II Ch:19 100b14-16], is to say that ‘knowing’, at the level of science or *episteme*, would not be possible without *nous*. *Episteme* needs *nous* at the level of scientific knowing or theoria. However, I will claim that *phronesis* also needs a practical variation of *nous* as well. In other words, *nous* will be seen to represent an adjunct of practical reasoning that is not concerned with ‘means’, but with ‘ends’.

We said earlier that *phronesis* is only concerned with reasoning about means and not ends. For Aristotle *nous* is distinct from, but the necessary counterpart to, *phronesis*. [NE VI. 11. 1143a-1143b] *Nous* arises from experience of the world. Thus, as we are exposed to the different situations and possibilities which experience provides, *nous* helps us to insightfully grasp, in an intuitively correct manner, what the most basic ‘first practical principles’ must be. Just as *nous* and *episteme* yield theoretical wisdom, *nous* and *phronesis* give us practical wisdom. *Nous* is the immediate grasp of that which is individually and collectively of ultimate concern to us. It is the grasp of, and the desire for, the particular end as well as a concomitant desire to integrate that
end into our character in order to realize eudaimonia or human flourishing as a whole. Therefore, 
nous operates in two directions: it gives us insight into the general or ultimate good and insight 
into the specific situation. Thus,

…not only must the man of practical wisdom know particular facts, but 
understanding and judgment are also concerned with things to be done, and these are 
ultimates. And intuitive reason (nous) is concerned with the ultimates in both 
directions…intuitive reason which is presupposed by demonstrations grasps the 
unchangeable and first terms, while the intuitive reason involved in practical reasons 
grasps the last and variable fact, i.e. the minor premises. For the variable facts are the 
starting points for the apprehension of the end, since the universals are reached from 
particulars; of these, therefore, we must have perception, and this perception is 
intuitive reason. (NE VI. 11. 1143a33-1143b7)

Why is all of this important in the context of phronesis? It is my view that phronesis is 
inextricably related to practical nous—that one cannot be without the other, and that both are 
grounded in experience. The limitation of phronesis would appear to be that it must be confined 
to deliberation about means.91 Phronesis does not contemplate ends because the activity of 
phronesis is its own end. In other words, the ‘end’ of phronesis is in the very doing of it—not the 
imagining of a good as something outside of it. Aristotle is rather stubborn in his insistence that 
phronesis deliberates only about means not about ends. Phronesis does not give us the reasons 
why we should be virtuous. It does not appear to reason about ends at all. The question is then, 
how do ‘ends’ make themselves known to us? We know that the ends we arrive at must be
grounded in our experience of the world. What *nous* provides for us is precisely this grasping power or insight that arises from the practice of *phronetic* reasoning—from our very reasoned individual deliberations, our engagements and experiences with and among others, and our desire to continuously enact and extend the latter. If, as Aristotle claims, what uniquely defines us as human is a capacity to reason in various ways with regard to various ends, then our ultimate telos, from an ethical perspective, is to strive through our practical thinking activity to continuously extend and elaborate this reasoning capacity in as many different spheres as possible.

The defining feature of the *phronimos*, says Aristotle is “…to be able to deliberate well about what is good and expedient for himself, not in some particular sense, e.g. about what sorts of things conduce to health or strength, but about what sorts of things conduce to the good life in general” [NE Bk. VI CH. 5 1140a 25-29]. The reading which we wish to capture here is that *phronesis* must always be understood within a wider context of practical reasoning which includes first and foremost *nous*, and is, therefore, always operative in the determination of what is ‘conducive to the good life in particular and in general’. We discover over time, experientially and intuitively, by way of *phronesis* and *nous*, certain defining and sustainable ends by living with and among each other—by engaging in practices together, by recognizing each other, by speaking, listening and reflecting, not in isolation, but always with each other. *Nous* is the sudden insight that grasps the ‘end’, as well as a concomitant grasp of how to integrate that end into our character. This way of describing *phronesis* and *nous* together situates practical reasoning not just within the individual moral self, but in a context of relations with and among others. For Aristotle the relational would not just involve family, but also cultivating friends and engaging in political activity.  

92 Indeed, for Aristotle, there would be little point in contemplating
an ethics without at the same time realizing its telos in the public world of the polis. The polis is not absolute or fixed, and politics is not merely a strategic enterprise. The polis and the political presuppose participation by all who are citizens in order to realize eudaimonia or human flourishing.

Once again, the political, insofar as it involves matter of practical concern, will involve reasoning about the variable and therefore, phronesis. The supposition here is that we do not begin with fixed abstract ends or unchanging rules. Instead, we articulate, develop and perfect ends through our attention to and apprehension of the particular contexts, situations, and circumstances which experience unfolds for us. This is true in ethics and in politics. The experiential intuitive element that nous provides us is crucial, since in ethics and politics we are continuously asked to contemplate new situations in a changing world—a world that could, indeed, be ‘other’ than it is. Phronesis, as it were, depends on the Janus-faced aspect of nous that has insight in two directions, the particular and the general, precisely because phronesis in deliberating well deliberates in this particular situation (with the help of nous) about what ‘conduces to the good life in general’ [NE VI. Ch. 5 1140a25-27]. To say, ‘I’ or ‘we’ deliberated well’, is to say that ‘I’ or ‘we’ chose the appropriate means to realize the good among a number of alternatives, but also to say that in knowing that this particular action is the appropriate means, I/we anticipated the appearance of a future good instantiated by the choice of means. It is not phronesis that helps us with this anticipation, but insight or nous. The potential uncovered here is an interpretation of practical reasoning not confined to deliberation about the best means to the end of a good already known, but the striving for insight about the good through the experience of speaking and listening to others about the best ends to pursue. Note here that, where there is no speaking, where there is no dialogue, there is no possibility of nous or insight. What we
discover in rhetoric, ethical reasoning and dialogue is that our reach often exceeds our present reasoned grasp of things. This surplus of meaning potential is something that insight ‘inwardly grasps or perceives’—where we are able to reach beyond what is immediately apparent or shown in speech and conversation. The person who ‘deliberates well’ with and among others will possess both a capacity for reasoned discernment and creative insight, both phronesis and nous—both excellence in discerning deliberation regarding how to best realize the good, and creative insight into the substantive good of practical human flourishing at an ethical, rhetorical and political level. The polis or political community that sees itself as the ‘condition of possibility’ for citizens to continuously exercise excellence in practical reasoning, and that encourages the striving towards insight in practical affairs, will be able to realize a uniquely human telos—it will realize, in a very concrete way, eudaimonia or human flourishing. Under such a description of phronesis and nous, what becomes obvious is that such practices as rhetorical speech and dialogical exchange between citizens can be understood as the linguistic means by which we are invited to insightfully and creatively reach beyond a present grasp of things, and beyond individual moral deliberation, to collective deliberation with others with whom we share a political world. Rhetoric and dialogue are not theoretical or abstract interactions but the practical means through which we discover a deeper sense of the way we develop, articulate and understand a common end or good.

When Aristotle relates that “virtue tells us to aim at the right mark, and practical wisdom makes us take the right means” (1144a8) he may seem to limit practical wisdom to deliberation about means. But what he is really doing is making a distinction between the virtues of character and the virtue of practical reason, in order to show how they are fundamentally related. This relation only becomes evident in the activity of doing with others—that is, when virtue and
practical reasoning are actually situated within the ongoing practical activities of rhetorical and political deliberation. It is in these contexts of active engagement that something like the articulation of a common good emerges by way of *phronesis*, and with the help of *nous*, or practical insight. The ‘political’ can thereby be said to precede and be the ‘master’ of the ‘ethical’ in the sense that without the former—that is, without the context of the other—the latter would have a flattened or narrow meaning.

To speak in a more contemporary voice what *phronesis* and *nous* articulate is a presumption that we never speak, listen, reason or deliberate in an experiential vacuum, or from an abstract, disengaged, perspective. Moreover, we do not begin life with a fully present sense of the good that then remains substantively intact and unswerving over the course of time. The good, or the ends that inform our choices, are disclosed to us in the totality of our involvements with others, and the continuously expanding grasp of each situation as it confronts us, and as it relates to a background of understanding and knowledge. Over time, as we experience a world of relations with parents, siblings and educators, we gather and strengthen certain ways of recognizing and connecting means and ends, of balancing and arbitrating conflicting contexts.

Our individual deliberations about means in any given practice are also, and at the same time, a reflection of who we are—the life we have chosen and cultivated over time as a good life. When we deliberate about means or appraise the actions we are to undertake, we are also appraising ourselves and the extent to which these means are a reflection of our understanding of ourselves and of a good life with and among others. To be sure, this way of putting the matter is not precisely Aristotle’s—but it does, in fact, describe our initial framing of *phronesis* as that which brings together ‘being’, ‘thinking’, ‘desiring’ and ‘acting’; of that which *implicitly* recognizes
that ‘who we are’ is about ‘how we deliberate’ and ‘what we do’ and, conversely that ‘what we do’ establishes ‘who we are’.

Now, what is interesting and important here is that *nous*, in both contexts of *episteme* and *phronesis*, emerges not as abstract knowing, but rather as knowing that occurs in the wake of human experience. *Nous* is not demonstrative reason, nor is it discursively arrived at knowledge. It is, rather, a sudden insight that makes further discursive scientific demonstrative reasoning possible. Scientific reasoning (*episteme*) requires *nous*, but it is expressed through the syllogism: in other words, through the discursive logic of demonstration. What distinguishes *episteme* is the certainty and necessity of its conclusions. This is where the contrast between scientific reasoning and practical wisdom is most pronounced. Practical reason does not bequeath to us a set of rules that we then apply to all situations. It does not subsume particulars under a general rule. In fact, it allows the ‘new’ or particular to shed further light on, and perhaps slightly correct the general and intuitively arrived at insights about the good or the just. 93 This is why, in practical affairs, *nous* must work in two directions—both with respect to the particular and the general.

From all of the foregoing, we can begin to appreciate that the infinite variety of interpretative rhetorical contexts, moral dilemmas, political regimes, legal states, does not call for a grand unifying rational theory, but, rather a mode of reasoning that, over time, becomes more subtle, and better able to respond to differences and particularities in the right way, in the right measure, and at the right time. This is the role that *phronesis* takes on. *Phronesis*, like *nous*, but unlike *episteme*, is not theoretical reason but an enacted practical wisdom that emerges gradually out of human experience. At this point in the argument what must now be made clear is that *phronesis* or practical wisdom describes a kind of practical reasoning that is distinct from what we know as philosophical contemplation: what is referred to by Aristotle as *sophia*. 

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2.4 *Phronesis and Sophia*

In Book VI Aristotle tells us that *sophia* is a combination of the knowledge of first principles (*nous*), and demonstrative knowledge (*episteme*), and of what follows from these latter at a more comprehensive or ‘finished’ level of philosophical thinking [*NE Bk. VI Ch: 5 1141a9-19*]. However, in Book X *sophia* or philosophical wisdom appears more acutely to reside *above phronesis* or practical wisdom. *Sophia* gives us knowledge that is remote from human interests and goods. What is at issue here with respect to *phronesis*?

It would appear that philosophical knowledge is the ‘best’ sort of knowledge precisely because it is disinterested knowledge of the ‘highest objects’—contemplation has no end beyond itself.\(^94\) In Book X, we are told that the contemplative life of the philosopher is exemplary because it is the highest sort of rational inquiry, the most continuous, self-sufficient, and pleasurable of activities [1177a20-35]. It is pursued for its own sake, not for the sake of something else. Indeed, it is not even the human, but rather the *divine* element present within us that allows us to share in philosophical wisdom:

…it is not in so far as he is man that he will live so, but in so far as something divine is present in him; and by so much as this is superior to our composite nature is its activity superior to that which is the exercise of the other kind of virtue. If reason is divine, then, in comparison with man, the life according to it is divine in comparison with human life. But we must not follow those who advise us, being men, to think of human things, and, being mortal, of mortal things, but must, so far as we can, make ourselves immortal, and strain every nerve to live in accordance with the best thing
in us; for even if it be small in bulk, much more does it in power and worth surpass everything. [1177b27-1178a2]

We should not be surprised at Aristotle’s privileging of sophia or the upholding of knowledge of the imperishable and the necessary, since this was a consistent theme in Plato (as well as Parmenides). However, it is important to keep in mind that even if Aristotle implicitly accepts the superior rank of sophia, he explicitly thinks against this longstanding tradition, when he makes room in Book VI for a kind of knowing and reasoning capacity that deals with the contingent and concrete character of human ethical and political experience. Indeed, with the exception of Book X, the *Nicomachean Ethics* is exclusively concerned with the variable, the contingent, and situated in the realm of human finitude. With its attention to *phronesis*, Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics* does not in any way contradict the pre-eminence of sophia, but it does, importantly, situate philosophical wisdom in the context of a practical world which requires the sort of real-life thinking activity necessary for the cultivation of virtuous individual life and praiseworthy political existence. There is, therefore, a necessary tension between philosophical contemplation and practical thinking as decision-oriented activity—a tension that makes the former possible, but the latter inevitable. In other words, we simply would not survive very long were we to devote all our time to contemplation of the eternal and imperishable. In fact, Aristotle’s language sometimes can give the impression that engaging at the political, ethical or rhetorical level of contingency is a necessary evil which only serves to create the space for a more rewarding—though practically useless—philosophical activity. This, in turn, might lead us to think that for Aristotle there is an unbridgeable divide between philosophy and public affairs. But it is of the utmost importance not to think here in either/or terms—that is, the
rational versus the irrational, or philosophy versus ethics or politics. Instead, we will grasp Aristotelian ethics in a more profound way when we think of it as articulating different levels of co-dependent rationality. It may be in some sense true that the life of contemplation is ‘sufficient unto itself,’ and that “the philosopher, even when by himself, can contemplate truth, and the better the wiser he is” [1177a33]; but it is also the case that the philosopher can only be by himself when he lives in a world where justice and virtue are possible—and this is a possibility that presupposes both an ethics and a politics that make room for virtue and justice.\(^6\) That we need others might be seen as a shortfall. If so, it is very human one—and philosophy can be seen as the means through which we can contemplate the eternal as well as the place where thinking expresses both human creative possibility and human finitude. That Aristotle recognizes this insofar as he speaks of \textit{sophia} in a context where it is not at home—in a book about the ethical realm of contingency and finitude—is evident. For by showing us the place of \textit{sophia} in the realm of the eternal, Aristotle thereby frees himself to establish an equally legitimate role for the kind of reasoning that occurs in the practical sphere of human affairs.

We have discussed \textit{episteme} (scientific reasoning) and \textit{sophia} (philosophical contemplation), but there is one last contrast we can make that will add further clarification to \textit{phronesis}, and which will also be instructive in our grasp of what can go wrong in ethical, political and rhetorical contexts when we treat ourselves or others as mere ‘things’ or sheer ‘means’ to an end. This is the contrast between \textit{phronesis} and \textit{techne}.\(^7\)
We come now to the close cousin of *phronesis*: *techne*. *Techne* is the kind of reasoning we employ when we want to produce something. For Aristotle, *sophia* and *episteme* are more intimately related to the *intellectual* aspect of the soul, whereas *techne*, *poiesis* and *phronesis* are associated with the *appetitive* or desirous aspect of the soul, and operative in the realm of human experience and practical everyday needs. As we have already seen, the exercise of *phronesis* is uniquely implicated in both the desiring and the intellectual aspects of the soul [1139a30-32]. But *techne* and *phronesis* share something in common: they deal with the ‘variable’, or ‘what may be otherwise’ [*NE* Bk.VI:Ch.3 1140a1-5], and are not concerned with certain or eternal truths, but practical truth. Practical truth, Aristotle tells us is “...discerned from the facts of life” [*NE* Bk.X:Ch.8 1179a17-18]. Yet, because it concerns ‘making’ rather than ‘doing’, *techne* reasoning is the central generating source of everything that is useful to us. *Techne* presupposes that we can change the world—that we can make both useful and beautiful things. As human beings we originate action. We are moved by some desire or other; we then make a choice, and perhaps deliberate about how to achieve this end. We have, therefore, a capacity under the reasoning directive of *techne* to set things in motion. In the *Physics* Aristotle tells us that “…nature has been defined as a principle of motion (*kinesis*) and change” (200b12). This ordering principle of motion, is intrinsic within nature (*phusis*). Thus, the things in nature—animals, plants, earth, fire and the like, have within them a principle of motion or self-manifestation [192b9-16]. But of the things that exist, nature is not the *only* cause (*aitia*). *We*, as intelligent ‘makers,’ *also* cause things to come into the world. In this case, the cause of ‘motion’ is not *within* the things we make but in *us*—it is ‘within us’ insofar as we are builders, craftsmen
or artists. In the most basic terms then, *techne* is a kind of practical, productive knowledge that has to do with both knowing ‘how’ and ‘knowing that’. If, for instance I am building a deck I must have some design in mind, and a rough idea of *how* to execute this design in a step-by-step fashion. But, I must also know *that* in a rainy climate certain kinds of wood will tend to resist moisture better, and therefore last longer; or to make proper stairs I must know *that* I should divide the total height of the deck by seven in order to have an idea of the approximate number of stair risers I will need. Relatedly, I need to know *how* to use tools to make such a set of stairs. It is important, of course, not to think of *techne* as entirely ‘rule bound’. There is an adaptive, improvisational and flexible side to being a good ‘maker’. Additionally, one must be open to unforeseen situations—one must, as Aristotle would say, be at home with ‘chance’ (*tuchē*) [1140a18-20]. In light of change and contingency, *techne* reasoning requires not slavish adherence to a plan, but a flexible approach that invites us to also be clever, cunning and resourceful.99 In this openness to variability and contingency, *techne* reasoning is very much like *phronesis*. However, like *episteme*, but unlike *phronesis*, *techne* is indeed capable of being taught, remembered and forgotten. This is because, unlike *phronesis*, *techne* is not the kind of reasoning that forms and cultivates a certain kind of person or acting-thinking-desiring ethical orientation. When we are reasoning from a *techne* perspective we do not reflexively consider whether choosing this or that means, or realizing this or that end will contribute to the good of human flourishing. How does Aristotle describe this distinction?

In Book VI Aristotle distinguishes *techne* as ‘making’ from *phronesis* or acting: “…the reasoned state of capacity to act is different from the reasoned state of capacity to make. Hence too they are not included one in the other; for neither is acting making nor is making acting” [NE 1140a2-7]. One way of illustrating this difference between ‘making’ and ‘acting’ is through the
relation of means and ends. The tools, the plan, and the materials, are the means by which I achieve the end of building a cabin; the cabin itself is the means by which I achieve the fulfillment of another end—perhaps, shelter. In contrast to this *phronesis* is not a reasoning skill that moves us from ‘A’ to ‘B’ in a stepwise linear fashion, but, rather, a reasoning grasp of how I can shape or cultivate my character in a way that best realizes the good for myself and for others with whom I share a familial and political life. This presumes that *phronesis* will be a mode of reasoning and a gathering of wisdom which unfolds over the span of an entire life of practically-oriented thinking activity—not merely reasoning that helps me to make or complete a specific project. The ‘good’ Aristotle has in mind with respect to *phronesis* begins and ends in the activity of practical reasoning or *phronesis* itself, not in the product of this activity. But, it is also the case that if our ultimate goal is *eudaimonia*, or the activity of realizing human flourishing through *phronesis*, and if we exist ethically and politically in a world of particularity that could be otherwise, then *phronesis* will be an ongoing, lifelong activity of rethinking in light of experience. What gives us direction in this lifelong journey is the reasoned-desire to act with a certain constancy of character, and a creative-intuitive grasp (*nous*) of what is involved in realizing or securing the activity of flourishing. Importantly, this ‘end’ of ‘securing the goodness of character’ and simultaneously realizing *eudaimonia* is not pre-determined, nor indeed something that we, as persons or citizens, can stand apart from or remain unaffected by.

Cultivating ‘good character’ is something that I cannot instrumentalize—I cannot treat my character as if it were a mere ‘object’ or thing that I am separate from.100 With *techne* it is different. Imagine, for example, that I were demonstrating to someone how to play a familiar song on the guitar. One way of illustrating the proper strumming technique would be just to play the song well. But I might then further illustrate the proper
technique by intentionally making a typical mistake. What I would be doing in this latter case is withholding or standing at a distance from my mastery as a guitar player in order to take on the role of an apprentice. The mistake made would not signify that I have lost the ability to play guitar, but rather that I am in such command of the art of guitar playing that I am able to both show or withhold this skill, at will. I can, in a sense, instrumentalize my skill, or step outside of it in order to show something about the right and wrong way to play a song. According to Aristotle, from the ethical perspective of *phronesis*, I simply could not treat my *character* as an object in this fashion. In other words, from an ethical perspective, I could certainly think through the ramifications of a given course of action, but I could never use myself as a mere object or thing in order to test whether I possess the capacity to do the right thing by doing the wrong thing!

However, not only does *phronesis* presuppose that we cannot treat ourselves or our own character as an object’; it also assumes that we cannot treat others *as if* they were mere material that we ‘work on’ for our own benefit, or can have mastery over as we would a tool. In other words, we cannot treat others simply as though they were a means to *our* ends. This is an idea most of us are familiar with through Kant. But Aristotle’s understanding of *phronesis* would similarly exclude such an instrumental understanding of others. For Aristotle, we can have mastery of tools in the making of an artifact, and we can thereby predict certain outcomes with a fair amount of accuracy, but we could never have mastery or achieve certainty or unfailing predictability in our relations with others. To think that we could do so would be to think of others as less than human, and of ourselves as above the human—it would be to radically misunderstand Aristotle’s hylomorphic understanding of the relation between soul and body, and his view of our human condition as fundamentally an embodied rational, political being that lives
in a world with and among others where things could be otherwise.\textsuperscript{101} Practical reasoning, and especially \textit{phronesis}, must be understood as an intellectual virtue, ultimately realized in the realm of the political. It must, therefore, be grounded not on self-aggrandizing or merely self-interested terms, but on cooperative terms; in other words, not with treating others as mere things at our disposal, but as reasoning and purposeful persons or citizens of the polis.

But we may still wonder whether there is any sense in which we can be said to ‘make ourselves’ through the arête or excellence of \textit{phronesis}? We are, of course, all familiar with the ubiquity of self-help books that promise we can ‘make-over’ ourselves if we follow their step by step procedures! However, in the first instance, the ‘material’ we require in order to accomplish this is never fully at our disposal as it would be if we were building a birdhouse—we would have to have already lived an entire life to gather up all the requisite material. Secondly, because we exist in the human realm of choice and deliberation where things ‘could be otherwise’, the goods at which we aim are not absolute, but subject to alteration in light of new experiences. Thus, human ends and goods are not always fully apparent to us, even when we have a steadfast character. A good deal of ‘who we are’ may indeed be formed at a fairly young age—and perhaps does not vary that significantly after a certain age. We may reflect upon and move toward a certain notion of the good that has become apparent to us over the course of time. Despite this, we never exist as completely sculpted or as merely disengaged observers of the world. In the Aristotelian world of ‘that which can be otherwise’, we are always in the midst of language, of being influenced, formed and potentially transformed by that which we hear, see and experience around us—conversations, speeches, stories, our friends and family; our educators, our political world, our culture and history. Because of this reality, our ends, and even the means through which we achieve these latter, are not eternal or unchanging. More to the
point, ‘who we are’, our character, is intimately connected to what we desire, what we do, and how we go about doing it.

What we can infer from the above is that for Aristotle techne and phronesis must be distinguished. Nevertheless, as we shall momentarily see, it is essential that we grasp the important relation between phronesis and techne in the context of many of our human activities, and in the present case, we are concerned with one activity above all: rhetoric. Rhetoric is a learned skill that always presupposes an ethical and political comportment—in this sense the good rhetorician is intimately related to the good person. In speaking and listening to each others arguments, we reflect upon and imagine through language new and different possibilities at the ethical, social and political level. Aristotle’s description of the distinct realms of ethics, rhetoric and politics is a description of phenomena from a variety of perspectives, but what tie these three contexts of action and understanding together is a wider notion of practical reason that includes, but is not limited to phronesis. Whereas techne reasoning can operate without reference to a world of others, practical reasoning and phronesis are always, implicitly, caught up in relations of reflexive self-understanding, and, therefore, in relations with others: “…the just man needs people towards whom and with whom he shall act justly, and the temperate man, the brave man” [1177a32-35]. To be sure, techne like phronesis has to do with that which ‘may be otherwise’. In other words, to be a good maker is analogous to being a good person, insofar as both of the latter are deepened by experience and widened by a certain creative capacity. For example, I might have to be creative when I am building a cabin, especially when some unforeseen circumstance prevents me from precisely following a pre-determined plan. The more experience I have, the better equipped I will be to overcome unforeseen obstacles. Similarly, to secure a steadfast character sometimes requires me to creatively deliberate in unforeseen situations. But the
difference is that the experience and imaginative capacity I bring to bear when trying to decide how to overcome an unexpected situation while building a cabin shows that I have mastery in cabin building, but it says very little about me as a person or moral agent acting in the world.

When Aristotle tells us that whereas “making has an end other than itself, action cannot; for good action itself is its end” [NE Bk.VI:Ch.5 1140b7-8] he is saying that action is constitutive of agency. How we deliberate upon a just course of action says something about ‘who we are’—and the knowledge that is required for right action cannot be systematized like a techne.

Indeed, we do not possess phronesis as a species of knowledge like we possess the learned knowledge of the rules and steps that tell us how to make something. Techne knowledge is at my disposal at any given time, but I can sometimes forget this knowledge of rules or steps. I cannot, however forget the practical knowledge gained by the exercise of phronesis. Why is this? The practical conception of knowledge that phronesis stands for is intimately connected to both action [1152a 8-9] through choice (prohairesis) and desire—as Aristotle describes it ‘desiderative reason or ‘ratiocinative desire’ [1139b 4]. This means that the desiring, thinking human being as a whole is implicated in the exercise of practical wisdom. It is true that the person of practical wisdom or phronimos exhibits a certain ‘skillful mastery’ (something close to techne) of deliberative reasoning; but his ethical excellence can not be reduced to a single formula or a series of procedures. To speak in a modern voice, we would say that the reasoning which defines practical reasoning and phronesis could never be possible if actions were thought of as discrete atomistic events. For phronesis and practical reasoning to make sense, it must be the case that human activities and actions are connected to each other in the formation and cultivation of characters and communities over time.¹⁰² In this sense, what we have said about techne and phronesis holds at the political level of the polis or state. We cannot, through techne,
‘make ourselves together’ as a community or collective as if we were following a blueprint to a fully known end. This would be to live in a world where we would be without choice and, in fact, enslaved by a fixed idea. In the 21st century we know only too well that this sort of enslavement begins when individuals, and whole populations, are treated as merely the means to some end which they neither participate in, nor deliberate about. For Aristotle, if there is no deliberation, if there is no choice, then there can be no way of talking about freedom in either an ethical or political realm: we would live in a world of necessity rather than possibility.\textsuperscript{103} To think about community or the public sphere of action in this fashion would, in effect, be to treat the entire \textit{polis} or community ‘instrumentally’ as a fixed object or mere ‘thing’. The end result would be the loss of both the ethical and the political—in a word, the human world of possibility and freedom.

I have gone to some trouble to distinguish \textit{phronesis} from other ways of thinking because the sort of practically-oriented wisdom that \textit{phronesis} stands for brings together thinking, desiring and acting in a way that is unique in moral and political philosophy. And, despite its historical distance from more modern perspectives about the self, and more universalizing moral theories, there is something immediately recognizable about the idea of \textit{phronesis} or practical reasoning.\textsuperscript{104}

What I would like to add now is that although each of the above ways of reasoning is distinct, they are often found \textit{together} in practice—that is, they can and often do overlap. From an epistemological perspective it is always important to distinguish different ways of knowing. However, from a practical (and one might add, ontological) perspective, the many different ways of knowing interpenetrate. For example, medical doctors have scientific knowledge of the body which is arrived at demonstratively (\textit{theoria}) as well as an intuitive grasp (\textit{nous}) of the first
principles of medicine; but, they may also have a related surgical skill (techne) which is refined through long experience in order to achieve the goal of health. The goal of health is itself a mode of human flourishing which can be realized in many different contexts. Or again, philosophers may have scientific knowledge of different phenomena (episteme), an intuitive grasp of the principles of reflection (nous), skill at argumentation (techne), a love of theoretical wisdom (sophia) and perhaps, finally, exhibit practical wisdom and phronesis in their pedagogical role as teachers. Finally, the good rhetorician will possess the skill of techne in the construction of arguments, a creative or poetic capacity (poiesis) to use metaphor and narrative, an ethical intuition or insight (nous) into what is required by statesmen and citizens to realize individual and collective flourishing, and the capacity to reason phronetically so that the best means of realizing the latter is chosen individually and collectively. The crucial point to take away from Aristotle’s epistemic divisions and clarifications is, therefore, that episteme, sophia, techne, poiesis, nous and phronesis are not necessarily mutually exclusive in the practical world of activity. Indeed, in most practices, and, as we shall further see, especially in rhetoric, the last four knowledge-orientations must work together. I want then to say a bit more about how rhetoric can be understood as an exemplary way of bringing together phronesis and techne within the context of the good.

2.6 Rhetoric, Phronesis and Eudaimonia

Though I have hinted at the relation between techne and phronesis in rhetoric, we can begin here by making a more explicit claim: rhetoric is not just a question of ‘knowing what is persuasive’, but of embracing persuasive argument as an extension of a certain kind of truthful
and justice-oriented linguistic bearing toward a community or political state. Rhetoric combines both a ‘reasoned state of capacity to act’ (*phronesis*) and a reasoned state of capacity to make (*techne*). The rhetor as *practitioner* (*techne*) can be understood *at the same time* to be rhetor as *phronimos*—in other words, someone who embodies excellence in character and therefore deliberative excellence, but who also possess the technical skill involved the construction of persuasive argument. Moreover, once we grasp the role that the rhetorician plays in making known, through speech, the good of the *polis*, we will discover how ethics, rhetoric and politics can each play a distinctive but mutually reinforcing role.

There is, to put this point another way, an ongoing dynamic interplay between *techne* and *phronesis* that is embodied in the search for ‘the available means of persuasion’ which rhetoric embodies. The dialectical relation that exists between *techne* and *phronesis* in rhetoric can be understood as something that unfolds because two different kinds of ‘means’ orientations—one directed toward finding the best means of persuasion (rhetoric), and one concerned with the discovery of the best deliberative ethical means (*phronesis*)—are considered as mutually reinforcing. These two ‘means orientations’ can only come together in a productive way when they are mediated by the concern for human flourishing or *eudaimonia*, at both an individual and a collective level. In this sense, rhetoric is not just another craft or art—rhetoric is something that involves language and character in a way that distinguishes it from every other human practice. This is why we lose something when we see it as mere ‘techne’ or craft. There is, undoubtedly, an inherent tension between *techne* and *phronesis* which emerges at the level of the *polis*. A *polis* dominated by *techne* reason would perhaps result in a certain predictability and reliability, but this would leave very little, if any, room for either freedom or possibility. We would be trading security and predictability for freedom. The risk of *phronesis* is, of course, the risk of variability,
uncertainty and contingency—but this risk is also the condition of possibility for the flourishing of freedom, and a place within reason where the unique and irreplaceable character of the human can show itself. For Aristotle, the *polis* could not prosper in a material way without *techne*, but it could not flourish in any recognizably human way without *phronesis*. Rhetoric is a linguistic possibility that can flourish non-sophistically only where the ethico-political context embodies a concern for truth and justice. I tried to give some sense of this relation in the discussion of Plato’s *Phaedrus*.

Now admittedly, Aristotle never speaks about rhetoric as the place where *techne* and *phronesis* come together. However, when we look closely at his discussion of rhetoric, and the important role that character plays in persuasion, it is clear that rhetoric functions as something more than merely an instrumental mode of argumentation. If this is a plausible reading, then we can further claim that speaking and listening—whether this takes the form of dialogue or rhetoric—is the means through which citizens deliberate together with others about the ‘best means to discover and sustain human flourishing through excellence’ (*arête*).\(^{106}\) It is thereby possible to see the rhetor as the public face of the *phronimos*, who, in discovering the best available means of persuasion, perceives the good insightfully and discursively with the help of others, and deliberates with others about how to reach it. If this is, indeed, a possibility, then the ethical and the rhetorical can be understood as realizing both individual deliberative and communal excellence.\(^{107}\) Whether Aristotle would have entirely agreed with this kind of interrelation between rhetoric, ethics and politics as co-determining human flourishing or *eudaimonia* is an open question. What is not in question is that Aristotle’s account of rhetoric involves a coordination of different elements of desiring, knowing and insight: not just good argument but also good character achieved through *phronesis*; not just logical skill but also *nous*.
or insight into the good (eudaimonia). Additionally, as we will soon see, rhetoric embodies practical reasoning elements including kairos, sunesis, gnome and epieikes. What is important to recall from our previous discussion of the relation between hermeneutics and rhetoric is that speaking and listening, understanding and interpreting, provide the linguistic horizon wherein all of these reasoning elements are brought together.\textsuperscript{108} What is required at this stage is some sense of how Aristotle understands and describes the sphere of rhetoric.

It is conventional to see rhetoric as tied to a ‘theory’ of argumentation. Much of the subsequent scholarship on Aristotle’s rhetoric focuses on this latter theory, and the enigmatic status of syllogistic enthymemes that the Rhetoric introduces. The Aristotelian ‘enthymeme’ has been the subject of much debate among philosophers and logicians, but we only need to see that for Aristotle the enthymeme functions like a syllogism:

> With regard to the persuasion achieved by proof or apparent proof: just as in dialectic there is induction on the one hand and syllogism or apparent syllogism on the other, so it is in rhetoric. The example is an induction, the enthymeme is a syllogism, and the apparent enthymeme is an apparent syllogism. I call the enthymeme a rhetorical syllogism, and the example a rhetorical induction. Every one who effects persuasion through proof does in fact use either enthymemes or examples: there is no other way. [Rhetoric Bk. I: Ch. 2 1356b1-7]

The enthymeme is thus a kind of simplified syllogism that begins with opinion and common experience, often leaving well-known premises unexpressed, and not going step by step through all of the nuances of more sophisticated argument. The reason is simply that rhetoric is situated...
and directed toward particular audiences, who would find it tedious and difficult to follow intricate chains of reasoning. Importantly, however, the rhetor’s knowledge must be concretely grounded in experience, observation and study of the art of persuasion itself. Presumably, this is accomplished through the study of exemplary enthymemes. What we need to see clearly here is that rhetoric, like *phronesis*, deals with the ‘particular’ context or situated audience, and does not secure certainty, but rather, probability, or what is ‘for the most part’ true. Moreover, much like ethically-oriented discussion, rhetoric begins with a provisional assumption or well-known opinion. Speakers are allowed to assume that an audience would already be familiar or perhaps agree with a given claim. Additionally, although enthymemes have a formal structure that includes premises and a conclusion, they are rather informal insofar as they begin with commonly accepted opinions and derive probable conclusions. In this sense rhetoric presupposes, again like ethics, that the world could be otherwise. Good rhetoric does not tax or overwhelm us with subtle argument; it is brief and assumes that, as an audience, we want to be persuaded by more than mere deductive logic. What is important for our purposes is, first, the idea that a good speaker always includes or invites listeners into a kind of conversation, and second, that persuasion is not merely a matter of logical argument.

It is not simply logic or a ‘theory of argumentation’ that situates rhetoric in Aristotle. Rhetoric is not a static logical ‘discipline’ as we might understand this phrase, but *praxis*—i.e. a human-centered activity. It is true that Aristotle’s *Rhetoric* can be seen as a way of systematizing or organizing *logos*, or the ‘that which is said’ of speech. But this way of viewing the matter conceals a more primordial reading of his lectures on rhetoric, both as a way of grappling with the various possibilities of speaking in situated human experience, and, also (to put the matter in rather more Heideggerian terms), understanding how we cultivate a concernful mode of being-
with-one-another by exchanging and reflecting upon a variety of opinions (doxa) in different contexts of speaking and listening. Aristotle’s rhetoric, like Plato’s *Phaedrus*, is implicitly a critique of rhetoric—that is, an attempt to establish precisely the limits of rhetoric, in order to stem its complete integration into sophistry. My thesis is that this critique could only be accomplished if we were to also assume that rhetoric does not presuppose a purely techne orientation, but must also be related to the ethical—and thereby to character virtues and the intellectual virtue described as phronesis. Furthermore, rhetoric must be situated within the context of human flourishing (eudaimonia) and made possible through the community or political state. This should not be considered as a thesis that has no textual support in Aristotle. Aristotle relates that rhetoric is “an offshoot of dialectic and also of ethical studies” and “…ethical studies may fairly be called political” [*Rhetoric* Bk. I: Ch. 2 1356a23-27].

The rhetor not only produces arguments (as any craftsman), but he must deliberate upon how and when to use them, with the aim of contributing to realizing the good, or the flourishing of the polity as a whole (eudaimonia). He must observe and draw upon ‘the available means of persuasion’ to produce good arguments, and he must also determine (deliberate) within a particular situated context, what will count as good reasons that support his conclusions. In so doing, the rhetor expresses, creatively, through argument, not only appropriate logical reasoning, but practical reasoning in the form of deliberation. He also says something about who he is—what his character (ethos) is—as well as demonstrating a practical knowledge of the varieties of human experience and desire. It is this combination of elements which would, for Aristotle, allow the audience to differentiate the rhetor as phronimos from the rhetor as sophist. This already places rhetoric in a context that cannot be reducible to mere craftsmanship—to mere techne.
According to Aristotle, there are three means (entekhnoi pisteis) of effecting persuasion. To have these means at one’s disposal requires that speakers be able to: 1. reason logically (logos); 2. Understand human character and goodness in their various forms (ethos), and 3. Understand the emotions (pathos). To understand human emotions is “…to name them and describe them, to know their causes and the way in which they are excited” [Rhetoric Bk. I: Ch.2 1356a24-25] Note that what Aristotle is articulating here is both the need for recognition and perhaps even symmetry between reason, emotion, intellect and desire. To be sure, he is always careful to point out differences and make distinctions between different phenomena, but the more interesting point is how he might see them working together in speech and action: reason, emotion and desire are all considered by him to be fundamental capacities and comportments of a situated being. A situated being in this sense would be one that inhabits an ethos which lives in and among the rhetorical, ethical and political dimensions of practical life. In rhetoric and ethics these human capacities and comportments are concerned with that which is not yet fully determined, and that which inevitably calls for some level of practical deliberation and action. I am suggesting here that there is an obvious connection that Aristotle wants to make in his discussion of phronesis, between rhetoric, politics and ethics. The idea that rhetoric has an ethical significance is a way of saying that for Aristotle the power of the good can be brought together with the power of the spoken word (logos) and realized in civic life.

The art of rhetoric is not, for Aristotle, tied to a particular subject or discipline but has a universal scope of application [Rhetoric Bk. 1: Ch. 1 1355b8-9], and it does not confine persuasion merely in terms of success or producing emotional effect, but sees it as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” [Rhetoric Bk. 1: Ch. 1 1355b26-7]. What does this definition amount to? We can note, firstly, that the use of the term ‘faculty’
is not tied to any specific perceptual bodily organ in the conventional sense of seeing or hearing, but is an inherent cognitive capacity or power. The faculty of observing in the context of rhetoric implies perceiving, cognizing, imagining, discovering and inventing—all activities related to thinking. To observe is to insightfully grasp (nous) what is possible and relevant to persuading an audience in a given circumstance. The second related point is the decision to talk about rhetoric not first as something that achieves its own internal end in ‘persuading’ but rather in ‘observing’, discovering or finding. This way of looking at rhetoric resists the idea that it has its meaning wholly in an external end—i.e. persuasion. In other words, if Aristotle were just another sophist he would have made a direct link between rhetoric and persuasion, seeing it as nothing other than techne or merely a linguistic means or instrument of persuasion based on a set of rules derived from experience. What he does, instead, is define rhetoric as a practice that has its own internal goods—goods that are related to thinking, insight and deliberation, and goods that help to extend and enrich the practice of rhetoric itself. The goods ‘external’ to rhetoric such as individual power, prestige and the like, are goods that do not belong to the practice of rhetoric as such. Thus, rhetorical excellence, like ethical arête, both assumes a capacity for insight and has a deliberative component—it presupposes a reflective and creative capacity (dunamis) or ‘faculty’. The more the rhetor is able to realize the rational deliberative potential within rhetoric, the better rhetorician she will be. But, importantly, this means that although she may be in many cases persuasive, persuasion will not be measured only through the logic of argument, but also through the goodness of her character, as well as her imaginative grasp or feel for the particular audience. This latter imaginative capacity is captured in the notion of pathos, and thus belongs to the ‘faculty of observing’ as well.
Finally, it might be helpful to compare what we sometimes mean in a moderns sense by ‘observing’ and what ‘observation’ might mean for Aristotle. We often think of observation in modern ‘empirical terms’ as a technique where we place ourselves at an objective distance from what is observed, and then simply record the world passively. But for Aristotle there is no objective-subjective divided world as we might think of it in our Cartesian way today. For Aristotle, phenomena of the world show themselves to us in their various aspects, and philosophy should try to grasp these phenomena from as many points of view as possible. What ‘observing the available means’ directs us to, is not so much a particular perceived thing, but an openness towards the many-sidedness of persuasion. It is not the world as distant object, or the subject as disengaged self. Rather, it is a world of thinking and acting within which we move, and are thoroughly and actively embedded—a concrete world of possibilities and concerns. For this reason rhetorical speakers must be attuned to, and have an expansive knowledge of, both the world and the human psyche (desire), if their arguments are to be persuasive. Rhetoric must grapple with probability, desire, particularity and contingency, for it will never achieve certainty. What ‘observation’ at the level of rhetoric amounts to for Aristotle is ‘letting the available means of persuasion’ show itself in its various aspects, its particularity and concreteness. This might appear as an overtly modern ‘phenomenological’ reading, but, in my view, it is a reading that comports better with the over all spirit of Aristotle’s discussion of rhetoric than either the methodological interpretation of rhetoric or the modern empirical understanding of observation. ‘Observing in any given case the available means of persuasion’ is, on this reading something like discovering what the situation demands, and bringing to articulation, through practical reasoning, something that is already in some way understood and shared by an audience. We can see here that observing the available means at the level of
concrete and particular is already the exercise of phronesis as a defining element of practical reasoning.

If ‘observing the available means of persuasion’ is an invitation to look at the many-sidedness of speech, this is not an incitement to conclude that ‘anything goes’. As a practical concernful activity rhetoric must also have some sense of a horizon, a comportment, or potential toward knowing the good, and therefore toward the truth. Aristotle declares “…what makes a man a sophist is not his faculty but his moral purpose” [1355b17-18]. He not only reminds us repeatedly that rhetoric is useful, but more importantly that using it rightly or speaking well confers ‘the greatest benefits’ whereas wrongful use inflicts the greatest of injuries’ [Rhetoric Bk. I Ch:1 1355b6-8]. Using rhetoric wrongly is not simply making logical errors, but in an important sense, turning the entire sphere of rhetoric into a mere tool of power which obstructs our most basic natural desire to realize human flourishing (eudaimonia) by upholding what is true and just [Rhetoric Bk. I Ch:11355a20-23]. One cannot read these latter passages without hearing echoes of the voices of Socrates and his accuser Meletus in Plato’s Apology. Indeed, it is precisely the lack of good character that shows through in Meletus’ rhetoric.

For Aristotle, as we have already noted, the development of good character through virtue is a way of saying that we become what we do—our actions make possible a certain sort of character. Good character is not something we develop wholly on our own—it is also cultivated through the right polity and the just ‘constitution’. Hence it is no surprise that Aristotle would assert that “…legislators can make citizens good by forming habits in them” [NE Bk. II: Ch. 1 1103b3-5]. But we can also emphasize that for Aristotle speaking is a human activity enacted with and among others. It is rhetorical speech as praxis that itself contributes to the formation of character over time. Not only must the rhetor exhibit both virtuous character and wisdom in his
speech, and thereby prove an exemplar of deliberative excellence (arête), he must also, in the
course of interchange with citizens of the polis, fortify the goodness of his and their characters. If
this is a reasonable conjecture then it constitutes a clear challenge both to an understanding of
rhetoric as merely instrumental, and to paideia or education as merely the acquisition of a set of
technical skills.115 If not the precise letter, this is at least the spirit of what Aristotle articulates in
his works on rhetoric, ethics and politics.

We can conclude that the cognitive and deliberative capacities that Aristotelian rhetoric
presupposes under the definition of rhetoric as a ‘faculty of observing in any given case the
available means of persuasion’ point to phronesis as central. Rhetorical speech is well-reasoned
speech when speakers embody the virtue of phronesis and eudaimonia or concern for human
flourishing. Phronesis enables the individual moral agent to deliberate well; it enjoins the
rhetorician to balance reason and passion, intellect and desire, in his search for the best possible
means of persuasion. It gives a space of possibility for the citizen and legislator to enjoy the
‘greatest degree of happiness, and acquire fullest measure of virtue.’ When rhetoric is seen
through the lens of phronesis or practical reasoning, it becomes less obviously reducible to
merely a technique or techne, and becomes, instead, a practical-reflective enterprise.

Clearly, Aristotle thinks it is quite possible for a speaker of bad character, if he is clever, to
persuade an audience to draw conclusions about some state of affairs that he himself does not
believe, or perhaps actually knows are untrue or fantastical. This is certainly the case when
persuasion is reduced to techne—mere cleverness as persuasion is in this sense mere sophistry.
The deinos (literally terrible or producing fear) as Aristotle calls him is, however, the polar
opposite of the phronimos: he would, as rhetor, instrumentalize phronesis itself, and as Gadamer
reminds us in rather chilling language, “nothing is so terrible, so uncanny, so appalling, as the
exercise of brilliant talents for evil”\(^{116}\). It is clear that Aristotle wants no part in promoting the latter.

At the same time, the *phronimos* as rhetor can be clever as well, but not *merely* clever, since his cleverness is always associated with virtue. *Phronesis*, Aristotle reminds us, must be realized as presupposing virtue: “Practical wisdom…this eye of the soul acquires its formed state not without the aid of virtue…therefore it is evident that it is impossible to be practically wise without being good.” [NE Bk. VI: Ch. 12 1144a26-32]. Given this, the wise rhetorician will employ *enthymemes* cleverly (persuasively), but also in such a way that the conclusions reached articulate what is good or best for human flourishing. What is ‘good’ or ‘best’ is what aims at human flourishing, or the good with and among others in a just polity. This is the realization of the excellence of rhetoric through *phronesis* in the context of realizing *eudaimonia* as an ongoing activity that attempts to encourage, realize and sustain human flourishing.

Secondly, as we have noted above, Aristotle’s philosophical reconfiguration of rhetoric does not reduce the latter to a narrow logic of demonstration. He uses the notion of ‘enthymeme’ to expand practical reasoning to include the situated demands of both *ethos* and *pathos*. This attempt to unite a concern for truth through demonstration, and the consideration of *ethos* (character), and *pathos* (emotion), reminds us that rhetoric is, inescapably, a creative and imaginative enterprise—and one which cannot be fully appreciated without reference to human experience itself. Certainly, there is persuasion through argument, but mere logical stringency is simply not enough. The capacity to discover in each case ‘the available means of persuasion’ must include considerations about the ethos of the speaker as well as considerations about how to dispose listeners to experience *pathos*. These three ‘proofs’, *ethos, pathos* and *logos*, do not operate separately in persuasive speech-making, but always in conjunction with each other. To
paraphrase Aristotle we might say that ‘like the good person, the good rhetor must direct his argument to the right persons, to the right extent, at the right time, motivated by the right desire, and accomplish persuasion in the right way’. To put this in a more concise way we could say that rhetoric would be empty without human desire (pathos), ethically blind without good character (ethos) and unpersuasive without the logos of practical reasoning. These ingredients (ethos, pathos and logos) deftly combined, are what allow rhetoric to be understood not just as a tool or instrument, but as an expression of the human desire to speak to others in a way that is oriented by friendship, justice and wisdom.

It is not just phronesis that helps us to situate rhetoric in the context of the political, but a broader understanding of practical reasoning itself. We have already made some progress in this direction by bringing the relation between ‘practical nous’ or insight and phronesis (deliberative excellence) into sharper relief. But there are other elements of practical reasoning which Aristotle introduces in his ethics. I will claim that these latter elements assist in the bringing together of ethical reasoning and persuasive rhetorical expression, as well as helping us to concretely situate rhetoric within the context of political speech and action oriented toward human flourishing (eudaimonia).

2.7 Practical Reasoning and Rhetoric through Kairos, Sunesis, Gnome and Epieikes

In the Nicomachean Ethics Aristotle describes ho kairos as something resembling the determination of what we might consider to be the ‘appropriate’ response to the particular situation we find ourselves in: we must “in each case consider what is appropriate to the situation” [NE Bk.II: Ch. 2 1104a8-9]. To exhibit kairos is therefore to grasp the good in the
category of time. Kairos is, in a crucial way, the temporalizing moment of phronesis. To seize the opportune moment is to know what to say or do in this particular contingent situation, because one has grasped insightfully the background hermeneutic context in light of a future possibility. This latter exercise is precisely phronetic reasoning and insight working together in the context of a temporal whole—that is, as a three-fold past-present-future understanding. When we think about what is involved in good ethical and political decision-making, or about what makes for a good speech, we can immediately see that ‘good-timing’ is more than just a technical kind of knowing, or a form of self-aggrandizing strategic discernment. To know what to say or do right here and now in this situation requires a deep understanding of the confluence of past conditions and decisions that that gave rise to the present situation, but, also an insightful grasp of an anticipated or likely future. This latter insight can take the form of articulating, in light of the present situation or context, a more comprehensive understanding of the general rule or commonly held principle as it applies to the future; or, it could take the form of a prophetic warning about what will happen if a present situation continues. In either case, phronesis and insight are suddenly broadened in the kairotic moment and, thereby, made much more critically potent. What kairos adds to practical reasoning is a wider temporal grasp of a particular situation, and, therefore, a deeper understanding of when to act or when to speak in order to best realize the flourishing of a community or polity (eudaimonia). To exhibit kairos at an ethical or political level of deliberation is to know when to relax and when to heighten our response to a given situation in light of a temporal understanding of the whole. In this sense, kairos is a critically orienting rhetorical element that is essential to both ethical and political deliberation. At the same time, kairos has a pedagogical dimension that can be seen most obviously through rhetoric. It goes without saying that in public speaking ‘timing’ is everything. To exhibit kairos
is to know that there is a ‘right time’ to say something, and a right time to say something in a particular way. One knows this because one grasps both the general assumptions held by listeners, and temporal context that give rise to the need to say something here and now. *Kairos* is, therefore, that opportune time or moment of decisive significance when a particular situation calls out to be addressed in a particular way. The reflective person, speaker or judge, tutored by experience, grasps this ‘right time’ intuitively. Thus, he or she exhibits *kairos* when they demonstrate their insightful capacity to adapt to and take advantage of changing, contingent circumstances—to intervene and focus at the right time in the right measure. In rhetoric it is tempting to reduce *kairos* to a merely success-oriented contextual element. This would be unfortunate, for it would miss the qualitative dynamic aspect that *kairos* represents in the context of political speech. In other words, there is not only an opportune moment to address a given issue from a success-oriented perspective consistent with ‘observing the available means of persuasion’; there is also an opportune time, from an ethical, legal or political perspective, to speak something that will extend the *arête* or flourishing of the self, the law or the *polis*.

We have already described practical *nous* as the unique human capacity for creative insight into that which is of ultimate concern to us (*eudaimonia*), which can then be achieved through *phronesis*. We can now broaden our notion of practical wisdom by describing the role that *sunesis* plays. According to Aristotle *sunesis* is a grasp of “…things which may become subjects of questioning and deliberation” [*NE* Bk. VI: Ch.10 1143a7-8]. It is distinct from *phronesis* insofar as the latter ‘issues commands’ whereas *sunesis* ‘issues sound judgement’ [*NE* Bk. VI: Ch.10 1143a15]. *Sunesis* is a way of describing how we must be capable of distilling from any given speech, text, or subject matter, the central or most vital concerns, by asking the right sort of question. The art of asking the right question is indispensible in all of our ethical and political
activities. We must be able to read a situation perspicaciously, and make sound determinations and judgments based on our intuitive grasp of what precisely and particularly is at stake. We might say here that *sunesis* occurs when we ask ourselves, or each other, ‘what is before us as a subject matter which we want to question and further deliberate about’—i.e. before we articulate the end or perfect the latter through the exercise of *phronesis*. It is interesting that *sunesis* is usually understood as a talent for ‘comprehending’ in the realm of *episteme* or theory, but Aristotle wishes to reserve a place for it in practical thinking as well. It is, however, a qualified role. In other words, Aristotle tells us that *sunesis* or understanding “is neither the having nor the acquiring of practical wisdom”, [*NE* Bk. VI: Ch. 10 1143a11-12], but it is still related to practical wisdom in the sense that it provides the condition of possibility—sound judgment through dialogue with others—for practical wisdom. Moreover, it is not just the practical moral realm, but, principally, the political and civic realm of discussion and deliberation where *sunesis* is recognized as essential. *Sunesis* is the natural complement to *phronesis* in the public realm of asking questions and making deliberative judgments about the best ends to pursue for all citizens. It is very likely that Aristotle would have seen the sophist as someone without either *phronesis* or *sunesis*—for these latter are not mere strategies of persuasion, but always related back to the good of truth-oriented deliberation in the ethical and public realm with and among others. Moreover, *sunesis* as a mode of understanding is not reserved for the expert speaker or the professional politician—it must be a capacity that all, as *citizens*, can participate in. To the extent that we are able to critically distinguish the particulars of what someone says, or of what is put forward as a definition, and thereby further extend our understanding of the particular subject matter by asking the right questions, we are, according to Aristotle, engaging in *sunesis*. *Sunesis* presupposes then that we must sometimes interpret, distinguish and elaborate what is before us.
as a concrete issue, statement, speech or other particular. It therefore embodies the sort of understanding grasp that accompanies *phronesis*; in other words *sunesis* is reasoned critical interpretation and judgment arrived at through dialogue, and *phronesis* is reasoned deliberation about the best way to proceed or realize a shared end or good.

What can help contextualize the timeliness of action and speech (*kairos*) and facilitate sound understanding, is a third element of practical reasoning: *gnome*. Typically *gnome* can be translated as ‘maxim’ or ‘thought’. In this sense, it can be understood as the introduction of something familiar in order to help us grasp something new or more complex. What attaches to *gnome* in a more general sense is the virtue of empathy, or our capacity to intuitively grasp what someone is trying to say, or intuitively and empathically project through stories and maxims, what might be more easily grasped by others. According to Aristotle, part of what makes a speaker persuasive is their reasoning skill—in the case of rhetoric their ability to express argument through the enthymeme. But, as we have said, *logos* is but one element of persuasion. We also have at our disposal enthymeme-like devices such as analogy, stories, proverbs and maxims [*Rhetoric* Bk. II: Ch.20-1 1394a9-1395a8]. These latter devices are persuasive to us not because they express a complex chain of reasoning, but because they cue our memory and thereby create in us an affinity or bond with the speaker. The speaker’s capacity to make us feel ‘at home’ is, in some sense, a way of talking about the ethical context of recognition, or recognizing and inviting others. Thus, even though we are listeners, we are also *participants*. We have a participative sense when something is asked of us. Perhaps we are invited to experience a feeling of affinity or pride in the recognition of some proverb, or the use of an analogy or traditional story that unveils something that is both familiar and new. This capacity to recognize the other in its distinctiveness, yet build a rapport or affinity with them by enjoining them to
reflect and pay attention to a familiar aphorism or story, is a further ethical orientation that
*gnome*, as practically oriented judgment, represents. The speaker demonstrates a capacity to
creatively engage an audience, not by presenting them with a long complex chain of argument,
but by telling a story, using an analogy, employing a metaphor, citing a well known maxim, with
a view to shedding light on *this* particular situation. The danger of *gnome* is, of course, a certain
clichéd thinking, or oversimplification to the point of banality. However, for Aristotle
‘discovering the available means of persuasion’ cannot be simply resorting to standard clichés,
hackneyed expressions or stump speeches. It must ultimately be about attending to the
particularity of the audience and assuming that participants have some capacity to grasp the most
complex issues by way of recognizable analogies, examples, and the wisdom of the past. As we
will later discover, with help from Paul Ricoeur, in metaphor and narrative are not lulled into
complacency, but invited to *think more*. The rhetor as *phronimos* employs *gnomai* in a way that
allows an audience to thoughtfully participate by glimpsing the unknown or unfamiliar through
the known and familiar. This imaginative, creative possibility that makes its way through speaker
and listener is what *gnome* can represent. In this sense *gnome* can also attest to the reflective-
hermeneutic capacity that speakers and listeners embody when they grasp their situation in light
of the wisdom of the past. But, importantly, *gnome*, like practical *nous, sunesis, kairos* and
*epieikes*, is not derived from abstract theory or philosophical contemplation of the eternal, but
gathered over time through experience and in practical endeavors. This means that all of these
latter elements of practical wisdom presuppose a common world that comprehends what *is* now
the case in light of what has been and what could be.121

We come lastly to, arguably, the most important element of our broadened notion of
practical reasoning in the idea of *epieikes* or equity.122 At the level of ethics, equity is related to
the virtue of justice. In practical human affairs, *epieikes* asks the question, ‘what happens when following the universal law or rule leads to injustice in the particular’. In the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle notes that

When the law speaks universally, then, and a case arises on it which is not covered by the universal statement, then it is right, where the legislator fails us and has erred by over-simplicity, to correct the omission—to say what the legislator himself would have said had he been present, and would have put into his law if he had known. Hence the equitable is just, and better than one kind of justice—not better than absolute justice but better than the error that arises from the absoluteness of the statement. And this is the nature of the equitable, a correction of law where it is defective owing to its universality. (*NE* Bk. V: Ch. 10 1137b18-28)

Note that what Aristotle is implying in the above passage is that it is the very *generality* of law that is both a virtue and a source of difficulty in human affairs. It is a virtue to have a certain generality in the form of simple and straightforward rules and laws. But in the context of the human world—of that which can be, and often is, *otherwise*—this generality often prevents just or reasonable outcomes. In the *Rhetoric* Aristotle tells us that unwritten law “... makes up for the defects in a community's written code or law” (*Rhetoric* Bk. 1: Ch. 13 1374a24-5). Thus, in human affairs—in the context of ‘that which can be otherwise’—we simply are not able to say, once and for all, how things will be. Our lack of omniscience means that from time to time the abstract universal law must be corrected, broadened or deepened, in light of the always changing particular situation. Though Aristotle uses law here as a paradigmatic call for the invocation of
equity, what we need to grasp is that from a practical reasoning perspective *epieikes* or equity is the kind of discriminating sympathetic judgment that is called for in any situation where a presupposed universal rule, common perspective, conventional thinking becomes hegemonic or all-encompassing. When this situation occurs, the voice of the particular, the unique or distinctively human is silenced. The capacity to exercise good judgment with respect to some situation we have not encountered before is a matter of understanding that *this* particular situation cannot be *subsumed* under some general rule, without losing something important. Equity is thus a determination to discover the right or just ‘fit’ between the general and the particular. For Aristotle, the judge who is unjust is the judge who has no discriminating sympathy, and intentionally ignores the distinctiveness of the particular situation which calls for a correction, broadening or deepening of the general rule. We will revisit this notion of equity in the context of Gadamerian hermeneutics.

I have tried to show that all of these above elements constitute a broader understanding of that sort of practical reasoning which undergirds ethics, rhetoric and politics. Each of the latter work with *phronesis* and each take on a distinctive and critically-orienting role depending on what the particular situation before us demands. They are ‘critical’ orientations because in combination with practical reasoning (*phronesis*) and insight (*nous*) each of these latter elements allows us to think more, to discern with perspicuity, to discriminate and test ideas in a thorough way, to discover what is the right thing to say or to do in this or that particular context. Moreover, each can be realized in different ways at the ethical, rhetorical and political levels of thinking-acting-desiring being. The *rhetor as phronimos* will be someone who knows that there is an appropriate time to speak to this particular situation (*kairos*) and who has a clear grasp of how particular situations are to be interpreted and elaborated (*sunesis*) [1143a12-15]. He will
have ‘practical nous’ [1143b3] or an insightful grasp of the good (eudaimonia). He will be able to creatively employ a variety of different literary devices such as metaphor, analogy and narrative in order to keep an audience interested and help them understand what is principally at stake in a particular situation (gnome). Finally, his speech will be governed by a concern for equity (epieikes); that is, a concern that the rigidity of the law, the polity, or the constitution not issue in the proliferation of injustice.

Now it is clear that rhetoric was, for Aristotle, a specialized discipline. But every one of these elements that belong to practical reasoning and phronesis can just as easily be understood in the idiom of mundane human relations and activities. There is the right time to say or do something (kairos); there is need for life’s situations to be reasonably interpreted and discussed (sunesis); we sense our obligation to be sympathetic and empathetic toward others with whom we share a world by relating familiar stories and the wisdom of elders (gnome); there is a need to grasp ethical ‘first principles’ and the complexity of possibilities and consequences in acting (practical nous); finally, there is a requirement that we tailor the generality of rules and conventions to meet the end of justice as equitable for all concerned (epieikes). These are the elements that belong to a wider context of practical wisdom and phronesis. They help us to normatively navigate through a world that is complex, various, particular and contingent. But they also elevate rhetoric to a kind of self-understanding it did not previously have in its more instrumental guise as mere tool of persuasion.

Admittedly, not everyone who speaks or acts will demonstrate these capacities all the time, or even show evidence of great practical wisdom—but we are all at least capable of exercising phronesis and acting wisely in some measure. We are capable because we can experience the world through time, we can remember and gather together past experience. Moreover, we can
implicitly recognize those who possess wisdom in greater measure than ourselves, and cultivate a
desire to learn from the latter. There is something intuitively right about saying that the more
experience I have, the better equipped I will be to overcome unforeseen obstacles; the more time
I spend in the practical realm with and among others, the greater will be my potential for
wisdom, and the less enslaved I will be by immediate desires. There is also something intuitively
right about saying that ‘what I do’ and ‘how I deliberate’ forms me or ‘cultivates’ a certain kind
of person over time. Again, this does not mean that we will not make errors or be blind to certain
things.\textsuperscript{124} Nor does it mean that we can just airlift the whole apparatus of Aristotelian practical
reason into the complexities of the 21\textsuperscript{st} century, and expect a perfect fit. At the same time, there
is in a study of Aristotle’s ethics, rhetoric, and politics, a great deal of wisdom and critical insight
regarding the way that being, acting and desiring are formed together with others over time.
Moreover, there is something worth pursuing in the intuition that we can, indeed, catch a glimpse
of what it means to realize excellence in speaking, interpreting, listening, understanding and
deliberating, by way of the example of those wiser than ourselves. From these exemplary
‘others’ we can begin to see how our own \textit{immediate} selfish or unhindered desires might be
\textit{mediated} through reflection upon a world that \textit{always} involves just and empathetic relations with
others. The hope is that with the other’s help, we may ourselves, in time, achieve a measure of
practical wisdom.

From a more philosophical perspective, what is important is that the sort of deliberative
rhetoric that presupposes \textit{phronesis} must be understood as distinct from the instrumentalism of
sophistry or specious reasoning. The rhetor as the public face of the \textit{phronimos} is motivated by
right reason and right desire—that is, reason motivated by the desire for better understanding and
wisdom, not the desire for self-aggrandizement. Because it is the case that all three spheres, the
ethical, the rhetorical, and the political, give rise to human thinking and action, they operate in a realm of contingency and probability (what is capable of being otherwise) rather than of necessity. This is central for understanding the role that practical reasoning plays as a way of guiding our ‘being as activity’ in a way that is oriented toward truthfulness. Aristotle describes what it would be for a person to achieve the mean with respect to the virtue of truthfulness. This is not someone who keeps specific agreements or honors a particular promise—these latter could also belong to other virtues such as justice. Rather it is someone who, when there is absolutely nothing at stake,

“…is true both in word and in life because his character is such…the man who loves truth, and is truthful where nothing is at stake, will still more be truthful where something is at stake; he will avoid falsehood as something base, seeing that he avoided it even for its own sake; and such a man is worthy of praise. He inclines rather to understate the truth; for this seems in better taste because exaggerations are wearisome.” [NE Bk. IV: Ch.7 1127b2-8]

Rhetoric, ethics and the political must be oriented toward truth. Moreover, truthfulness must go ‘all the way down’. In other words, our capacity to be truthful will be a measure of the goodness and integrity of our character, and realized not just in relations with others but in being ‘true to ourselves’. Phronesis is an intellectual virtue than can only properly flourish in those who have a desire to be true to themselves. Because of this, phronesis is practical wisdom and knowing which Aristotle would see as necessary for the rhetor or politician, since the latter must perceive, or be true to his own aims—aims that always operate alongside the common good of the polity.
This is not eternal or divine truth, but truth in practical affairs. Citizens, audiences, rhetoricians and politicians all dwell in the realm of contingency—in a human world where complete knowledge and dialectical certainty is simply not possible. Despite this ‘on the ground’ reality, insight and phronesis oriented by a desire for truth must prevail if the polity is to flourish. To the extent that a desire towards truth is lacking or missing, the politician and lawmaker are vulnerable to sophistry, and the polis is exposed to the possibility of tyranny. It is, of course, difficult to know with any great depth the person that was Aristotle. But we can say, at the very least, that this latter situation would clearly not be something he would have desired.

What the broader context of practical reasoning implies then is an understanding of the good reflected and acted upon in ethics and politics—or to use Ricoeur’s more contemporary but apt words, intending toward “the good life with and for others in just institutions”. To be a good rhetorician, politician or citizen is, for Aristotle, to know in some measure what is congruent with human nature: what sorts of desires impel us, what sorts of emotions motivate us, what promotes happiness, virtue, friendship and the right functioning of the polity. Thus, to be a good person, rhetorician, politician or citizen is to strive toward a broader understanding of practical wisdom.

These elements are what give phronesis and practical reasoning a normative critical dimension. Moreover, they are elements of practical reasoning that are immediately recognizable to anyone who is involved in any sort of practice. Insofar as practices always involve interactions with others, all of these aspects of practical reason have a normative force. Together they constitute what I will later elaborate as an experience-based critical hermeneutics. They are not constituent elements of a grand theoretical structure that give us a nicely detailed roadmap of
how to act or what to say, but are rather modes of reflective comportment that we acquire over time.

What I have tried to weave together alongside Aristotle is a more complex interrelationship between rhetoric, ethics, and politics by way of a wider context of practical reason and *phronesis*. Secondly, I have tried to show that practical reasoning and *phronesis* embody a kind of critical thinking activity not only reserved for the expert or the elite rhetorician or philosopher, but something all speaking, listening and interpreting beings can participate in. Since we are all thinking creatures capable of experiencing a world, *phronesis* as a form of reflection on this experience presupposes that we are all capable of attaining varying degrees of practical wisdom—admittedly, some with more obvious acuity and perspicacity than others.

Now that we have reached this point it is imperative to say something, in a more contemporary context, about the mode of ‘being’ of rhetoric itself, that will relate back to the opening chapter, and give us a hint of what is to come. In some ways, I have already touched on this issue by proposing that the persuasive force of rhetoric cannot be understood without some grasp of the ‘always already’ interpreted background of past, present and anticipated meaning. This is why hermeneutics and rhetoric are to be thought of as interpenetrating spheres of critical understanding. But there is more at stake here. If the rhetorician or indeed any speaker uses rhetoric as an *instrument*, or sees it as an assorted bag of ornaments and clever tricks, then he treats rhetoric as purely ‘*techne*’ and is, thereby, no longer in the experience of rhetoric itself. What does this mean? For one thing it means that the speaker looks at rhetoric as something he is in complete control of, and more ominously as the means through which he can exert his ‘will to power’ over others. This is rhetoric as hubris, or as mere self-aggrandizement. It means that rhetoric, which is after all an experience that occurs in linguistic interaction (and not in a ‘private
language’ to speak in a Wittgensteinian voice), could have no possibility of changing or transforming the speaker himself—he is detached or separated from its meaning possibilities because he uses it as a merely a means to the end of enhancing individual power. It also means that the ‘successfulness’ of persuasion is understood by the speaker to be a matter of how well he suspends the reflective or thinking possibilities in his listeners, and ‘wows’ them by clever subterfuge. We glimpsed this very possibility in the person of Phaedrus’ teacher/speech writer Lysias. By contrast, to dwell ‘in the reciprocal experience of rhetoric’ is to put oneself or one’s ideas at risk, to make a gesture of offering something that can be taken up and responded to by another. This letting go of the self through the acknowledgement of communicative reciprocity is precisely what enacts the development of a critical orientation in the self and in others.

So, one may well ask, does this perspective fundamentally alter the character of rhetoric as a persuasive mode of interaction? I do not think so. Indeed, I would say that what it does instead is allow rhetoric to realize its most vital aim as the ‘first systematic hermeneutic of the everydayness of Being with one another’. I have proposed in the foregoing analysis how Aristotle’s thinking might be interpreted in such a way as to suggest how rhetoric is rightfully intertwined with ethical and political insight and deliberation—how rhetoric is one way of articulating those goods which members of a polity all contribute to, are affected by, and participate in. But I will say now that this is another way of describing rhetoric as something that we do not wholly invent, but, rather, something that occurs through us. In other words, it has its meaning, its persuasive value and its truth orientation in the space of meaning and thinking possibility that exists between speakers and listeners. This brings rhetoric much closer to dialogue than is usually described. In the next chapter I will, in fact, elaborate what this idea means by taking up speaking and listening through Gadamer’s understanding of dialogue. I will
also take a further step in radicalizing what I see as the critical dimension within *phronesis* and practical reasoning, by grasping the latter through the historicality and temporality of understanding itself. With these elements in place we will be in a better position to move another step closer—beyond Aristotle, Gadamer and Ricoeur—to a creative understanding of practical reason in what I have called ‘critical hermeneutics’ through *phronesis*. 
Chapter Three

Gadamer and Ricoeur: Phronesis Rediscovered and Radicalized

Introductory Remarks: Phronesis as the Enactment of our Historically and Temporality

In the first Chapter I spent some time in the effort to situate hermeneutics and rhetoric at the level of human experience, rather than just giving a detailed analysis of the disciplinary methods and theoretical boundaries typically associated with them. The purpose here was to introduce both the possibility that rhetoric can be thought of as something more primordial than mere ‘instrument of persuasion’, and the possibility that hermeneutics can be understood not merely as a set of methods or rules for interpreting texts, but as basic to human understanding and experience. I argued that these possibilities are discovered the moment we conceive rhetorical expression and hermeneutic understanding as operating together—as inextricably linked at the level of human linguistic experience. Thus, rhetoric can be understood as the public expression or carrier of a constitutive human desire to relate persuasively to others through speaking and listening, and as such, something always performed in light of an already interpreted framework of concerns, priorities, and ethical and political meanings. Rhetoric is, therefore, implicitly tied to hermeneutics, or more informally, to interpretively understanding ourselves and others in differing linguistic, cultural, mythological, ethical and political contexts of meaning. I also introduced the idea that when we grasp the interrelation between hermeneutic understanding and rhetorical expression, we become aware of a third or ‘critical dimension’ that arises naturally in the very activity of speaking, listening and understanding. I situated these related constitutive human experiences (speaking-listening, interpreting-understanding) within an
aesthetic-ethical-political realm of storytelling, tragedy and dialogical exchange, because such memorable literary forms provide an easy and familiar point of access for us to see how a critical orientation emerges naturally when the relation between hermeneutic understanding and rhetorical expression is made explicit. I have also claimed that this emerging critical orientation that inhabits linguistic practices does not rely for its veracity on the appeal to theory or method.

Having established this emerging critical dimension in language, I then looked at how Aristotelian notions of *phronesis* and a broad understanding of practical reasoning could further extend the critical dimension of thinking by bringing together ‘being’, ‘acting’ and ‘desiring’ at the ethical, rhetorical and political levels. I made an effort to elaborate how Aristotle’s description of practical reasoning, *phronesis* and insight (nous) in ethics could also be extended to rhetoric and politics. *Phronesis* and *nous*, which can be understood as a combination of practical reasoning and the insightful grasp of things, are both experience-based expressions of human finitude, yet also conditions of possibility for the creative reimagining of ethical and moral understanding, rhetorical expression and political discourse. They are (along with other elements of practical reason) the means by which we *enact* what I have called a critical thinking-acting-desiring being in practical endeavors. The goal of the present chapter can be summed up in the wager that *phronesis* can be extended beyond Aristotle, and, indeed, beyond the ethical, rhetorical and political, to the very praxis of understanding itself. What is at stake here is the rediscovery and radicalizing of *phronesis* and practical reasoning as a critical orientation that emerges naturally in the very thinking-doing of each one of our practical engagements and endeavors. What I mean here by ‘radicalizing of *phronesis*’ is the effort to see the latter not merely as a practical reasoning mode that is related specifically to ethical considerations, but rather a mode of reasoning that is constitutive of all practical activities and interactions, and
indeed, of understanding itself. I have already stressed a modest constitutive approach in the claim that *phronesis* can also be productively situated beyond the borders of the ethical to both the realms of rhetoric and politics. Why then is a further radicalizing moment necessary?

The answer to this question can be put quite straightforwardly. If what we call the critical dimension of understanding, or critical insight, does not reside in the appeal to method or theory, but, instead, is something that is cultivated over time, develops organically, and is in enacted through the very activities and practices we engage in, then what we are talking about is not critical *theory* which happens ‘after the fact’, but the emergence of critical *being* which is actively *lived*, cultivated and practiced not just in ethics but in all of our practical endeavors. Aristotle’s philosophy helps us, in a preliminary way, to grasp the notion of critical being by way of *phronesis*. What is missing, or not fully spelled out in Aristotle’s account of practical reasoning and *phronesis*, is any sense of the historicality of human understanding, as well as any explicit recognition of language as the horizon of temporal and temporalizing possibility. Now there most assuredly is, as we have seen, an implicit temporalizing of *phronesis* through the notion of ‘*kairos*’ or timeliness. Distinct from the eternal and unchanging characteristic of *episteme*, *phronesis* is a kind of reasoning that presupposes our ‘within-timeness’ in the bringing together of thinking activity and being *over time*. The virtue of *phronesis* originates, and is sustained, by the *continuity* of the self, and this assumes that we can ethically realize the good because we are capable of remembering the past and projecting the future. It is through the practical reasoning notion of *kairos* that rhetorical expression and ethical and political decision-making (*phronesis* and *nous*) are ‘temporalized’. Indeed, *phronesis* would make little sense if the way we experienced the world was such that each present moment displaced the past one—we would be living in an ‘eternal’ present.
As we previously noted, to seize the opportune moment that *kairos* embodies, is to already know what to say or do in *this particular contingent situation*, because one has insightfully grasped a future possibility in light of a background hermeneutic context. The question is *how precisely is this future possibility concretely grasped?* My answer is that it is grasped through a narrative or story that one tells oneself, or that one situates oneself within. This concrete radicalizing moment is what Ricoeur’s notion of narrative temporality adds to *kairos* and *phronesis*. Telling a more comprehensive or inclusive story—whether this is understood within an ethical or political context—is precisely the critical activity of *phronetic* and practical reasoning insight as temporally informed. Of course, Aristotle does not explicitly thematize this temporal dimension of *phronesis* or *praxis*. My aim, however, is to bring the notion of *kairos* together with Paul Ricoeur’s understanding of narrative temporality, in order to better grasp the temporal dimension of *phronesis* in a practical linguistic context of story-telling. Recognizing this temporal dimension of *phronesis* is, at the same time, grasping how *phronesis*, *nous* and other elements of practical reason enact a critical-hermeneutic dimension of *understanding* that is essential in a contemporary context of complex and diverse ethical and political practices.

I am not saying here that to understand or engage in practical reasoning or *phronesis* means we must be expert historians, or understand all of the complexities of human temporality. Rather, I mean that when *phronesis* is situated in the context of our historicality and temporality, two key elements regarding the ‘being of understanding’ as a *phronetic* activity is uncovered. The first is that understanding is a historically situated activity, which means that understanding is simultaneously limited and enabled by its historicality. The second is that understanding is mediated through language, and language as story-telling is the medium through which we relate to ourselves and to others in the context of what ‘has been’, what ‘is’, and what ‘might be’. On
this account, neither history nor language (neither dialogue nor rhetoric) are ‘instruments’, at our immediate disposal. Instead, they are something we ‘belong to’, participate in, and are always in the midst of. Our capacity to grasp the historical and temporal dimensions of understanding gives practical reasoning and phronesis an ethical-moral depth and range of application it did not have within the constraints of Aristotle’s philosophy. However, my hope is that we will discover that the principal defining feature and elements of phronesis and practical reasoning, previously elaborated through Aristotle, will not only remain intact but will be given a hermeneutic-historical and temporal depth they did not previously have.

I said that the distinguishing mark of phronesis was that through it ‘thinking-being’, desiring and ‘acting’ come together. I will add a certain hermeneutic depth to this latter profile by claiming in the following that the ‘being’ we are is historically situated and understands itself critically through language, and in particular the temporalizing aspect of narrative or story-telling. More importantly, we will find that the historicality and temporality of human understanding and language is not only something phronesis accommodates, but something it enacts through the practices of dialogue, rhetoric and narrative. My way of illustrating both the historicity of understanding and the temporality of phronesis as presuppositions of critical insight enacted through dialogue, rhetoric and narrative, will be through Hans-Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics and ideas gathered from Paul Ricoeur’s Rule of Metaphor and Time and Narrative.126

First, I will speak to Gadamer’s understanding of dialogue and the crucial importance of rhetoric. Dialogue does not just have a family resemblance to rhetoric. Dialogue, whether this is with the self, with texts, or with others, is the originating linguistic condition of possibility for the ethical, the rhetorical and the political—indeed beyond these latter, dialogue opens up
different meanings and creative possibilities in all of our human practices, including the practice of understanding itself. Like its intimately close associate, rhetoric, dialogue is the speaking-listening medium through we become aware of both our finitude and our creative possibilities. But we will not, by any means, let go of rhetoric in favour of dialogue. Instead, we will discover with Gadamer that rhetoric is the public expression of a more intimate dialogical form—it requires both speakers and listeners, and it is not monological or univocal, but participative. Moreover, rhetoric and dialogue do not presuppose an abstract sphere of ideal discourse or logical certainty. If anything, they presuppose a certain particularity, unpredictability and spontaneity that sets both of these forms of linguistic interaction squarely within the Aristotelian epistemological-ontological framework of *phronesis* and ‘that which could be otherwise’.

Dialogue, like rhetoric, dwells in the concrete lived world of human experience, historicality and temporality. We have argued, with help from Aristotel, that rhetoric can be viewed as a practical-critical enterprise which employs the ‘enthymeme’ in order to creatively open up the possible. Gadamer will help us to understand that if rhetoric is dialogical, then dialogue is also rhetorical.

This interpenetrating relation is best grasped under the rubric of *phronesis* and practical reasoning, where what is said or asked is not just ‘well said’ but said or asked using the right words, at the right time, in the right way. The rightness of the speaking or asking of a question does not reside in its logical form but, rather, in its ability to help us to understand or, in the case of rhetoric, to persuade by insightfully speaking truth to particular concatenations of power.

Moreover, it is hermeneutic reflection and understanding that reveals to us that rhetoric inscribes a contingent relation of language and power at a particular moment, and, therefore, at the same time, opens the possibility of questioning, of contesting, and of resisting the *status quo*. There is nothing ‘conservative’ in this latter idea, or for that matter in Gadamerian hermeneutics.
itself. Quite the contrary. Gadamerian hermeneutics is always radical hermeneutics because it takes *phronesis* and critical distance seriously. To be sure, *Truth and Method* is not meant as a normative work of moral or political philosophy. Nor does Gadamer articulate a critical dimension in hermeneutics by giving us a new *method* for interpreting—he does not say ‘this is how we should interpret a text, or live our lives’. So, at one level the task of *Truth and Method* and philosophical hermeneutics is not prescriptive but descriptive—in other words, it shows us how interpretation works, and what happens to us when we understand.

But to conclude that all Gadamer does is ‘description’ is to have missed the critical and defining role that *Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein* and prejudice play in helping us to situate our understanding, and the central defining role that *phronesis* plays in helping us uncover the elements of understanding, interpretation and application in Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics. When Gadamer describes the notion of ‘application’ as something always presupposed in understanding, he is already talking about nothing other than *phronesis*! Gadamer does not just describe how we understand, he also makes abundantly clear that if we really want to understand and critically interrogate our traditions of understanding, then *phronesis* is the only sort of experience-grounded practical reasoning that will do. This is not merely ‘understanding’ in the particular spheres of politics or ethics, but *every* form of human understanding. What is requisite here is not a taxonomy of rules or procedures, but precisely insight and *phronesis*—the capacity to achieve reasoned and insightful understanding about the world and about ourselves.

Our second thesis can be put simply in that maxim that *phronesis* and practical reasoning, insofar as these take linguistic form, require a temporalizing framework, which is best captured in the concept of narrative temporality; conversely, our temporal being is grasped and realized
not in a theoretical abstract world, but in a world of practical affairs, and in those stories which are prefigured in a past understanding, while anticipating a critically-oriented hope for the future. It is Paul Ricoeur who has persuasively argued that language is the horizon of temporal and temporalizing possibility by way of narrative. Narrative or story-telling is something that happens in both dialogue and rhetoric. As we discovered through our aesthetic-poetic interpretations of Ancient Greek oratory, tragedy and dialogue, narrative requires situated practical reasoning or *phronesis*. The telling of stories testifies to the fact that we are indeed beings-in-time—not just creatures of clock time that live in a moment-to-moment series of ‘now’s’—but beings who can experience a sense of continuity in a present that holds together a sense of ‘having been’ and a sense of ‘yet to be’. To say we engage in the activity of telling and listening to stories that shape ‘who we are’ is to say, once again with *phronesis* (and *kairos*) in mind, that being and acting are brought together through narrative. Narrative is therefore constitutive of our temporal being and our critical selfhood. Why critical? The experience of time as ‘human time through narrative’ brings us to an ethical and political awareness of the individual and collective stories we are, and the perplexities and ambiguities of the human condition. The ethical and political awareness that narrating as an exercise in *phronesis* can make apparent is discovered in stories of particular human suffering, of the fragility of existence, of characters who exhibit moral blindness and hubris, and also of our desire to resist being governed in this or that dehumanizing way, and finally of a hope of something better in the future. So, while it is certainly the case that the ancient notion *kairos* or timeliness expresses the temporalizing dimension of *phronetic* reasoning and insight, it is narrative temporality that brings to life this temporalizing dimension within language and practical human affairs as speaking-listening and understanding-interpreting.
Phronesis and practical reasoning find their fullest realization as a ‘critical’ orientation through historicality and narrative temporality. In the present chapter, we will claim that not only can phronesis and practical reason accommodate the historical and the temporal, but that, in an important sense, phronesis is the reasoning enactment of our fundamentally historical and temporal ‘being as understanding’ through the dialogues we engage in, and the stories we are.

We begin, then, by laying out what Gadamer means by the historicality of understanding, and argue that this latter notion can be considered the first step in the radicalizing of a critical dimension of phronesis and practical reasoning. In the first part of our discussion of Gadamer we will proceed by describing three central and related notions: the constitutive role of prejudice and tradition in understanding; effective-historical consciousness (Wirkungsgeschichteliches Bewußtsein); and, finally, the relation between understanding, interpretation and application. Each of these will be seen to play a distanciating role that enables the critical dimension of phronesis to be exposed. We will then consider how Gadamer’s discussion of the relation between hermeneutics and rhetoric permits us to grasp how rhetoric inscribes the contingent relation of language and power at a particular historical moment in time, and has therefore a critical role to play in bringing into the open distortions in language that can then be responded to. In the second part, we will turn to Paul Ricoeur’s understanding of the temporalizing function of narrative and conclude that this temporalizing understanding is enacted by and through phronetic reasoning at the same time as it gives to phronesis a critically necessary temporal depth.
3.1 The Role of Prejudice and Tradition

Gadamer’s elaboration of the historicity of human understanding is indebted to Heidegger. It is Heidegger’s existential analytic of Dasein, and the attempt to make our be-ing (understood more as a verb) more apparent to itself, that gives Gadamer an insight into the ontological features of understanding, and the universality of hermeneutics. From a critical perspective, grasping our historicality is getting hold of and confronting our distinct prejudices, which can then provoke us to ask new questions. Therefore, the recognition and avowal of prejudice already presupposes that we can achieve a measure of critical distance. But there is something even more fundamental involved here. We think of understanding as an ‘intellectual’ activity. What Gadamer is bringing to our attention is that this intellectual activity is never abstract or intangible, but made concretely possible precisely because it presupposes an ineliminable historical background of concerns, values, convictions, attitudes, traditions and prejudices. Without such background prevailing conditions of possibility, we could not understand ourselves, nor could we make much sense of the world we inhabit. There are two key notions that we must grapple with here: prejudice and tradition.

Following our Enlightenment predecessors we tend to think of ‘prejudice’ in a pejorative way as something associated with irrational judgment. In the familiar sense, we call an individual ‘prejudiced’ when they hold unfavorable and unfounded assumptions about a person, or an ethnic or gender group, and persistently refuse to acknowledge the latter assumptions as precisely, unfounded. Gadamer points out however, that prejudice did not always have this
excluding negative connotation. In a much more innocuous sense, our ‘prejudices’ are just the inescapable conditions of possibility for our experiencing a world. For Gadamer, prejudice is not initially something that is false or distorting, but simply an ineradicable feature of what it is to be a historically situated being. Prejudice is a pre-judgment that we ‘always already’ inhabit—a preconception that initially appears to us as valid, or at least as provisionally true. The important point here is that prejudices are not a priori true—they are a product of our historicality. In other words, we may indeed be led by our prejudice to misunderstanding, negative appraisals and error, but we cannot entirely escape prejudice. We might inevitably see a prejudice as limiting, and attempt to move beyond it, or conversely, we might discover that it has, in fact, an experiential ground or legitimacy. But, crucially, this capacity to see limitations is an effect of history itself. In other words, it is precisely by grasping prejudice as prejudice—that is, as both a condition of understanding, and as something attached to tradition, or to a history of understanding—that enables us to achieve critical distance. What has this to do with *phronesis*? The recognition of prejudice as prejudice is something that can only happen by way of practical reasoning and *phronesis* when we attend to the particular in relation to the general or background historical context of principles, rules, laws or traditions. *Phronesis* is practical reasoning, and, as such, it cannot give us absolute certitude about the world, because it is tied to the realm of situated human affairs. Given that human beings are indeed finite, historical beings, it is clear that *phronesis*, understood not merely as situated reasoning, but as historically situated reasoning, must realize itself again, or realize itself ‘anew,’ as reasoning in the context of a more radical historical sense of ‘that which could be otherwise’.

What troubles Gadamer is the ‘all or nothing’ attitude regarding prejudice that reaches its culminating point in the Enlightenment determination to view prejudice as a representation of
antiquated attitudes, religious dogma or primitive beliefs, rather than as a condition of understanding itself. ‘Enlightened’ thinkers could only see prejudice and tradition as things to be overcome because the latter presupposed an unreflective confidence in tradition and traditional authority, or an over-hasty unmethodical employment of reason. In fact, it will turn out that for Gadamer, “…the overcoming of all prejudices, this global demand of the Enlightenment, will itself prove to be a prejudice” and that dispensing with this conception of prejudice “…opens the way to an appropriate understanding of the finitude which dominates not only our humanity but also our historical consciousness.”

From an ‘enlightenment’ perspective the authoritativeness and credibility of every received tradition, whether oral, written, or religious, is a matter for reason to determine:

It is not tradition, but reason that constitutes the ultimate source of all authority.

What is written down is not necessarily true. We may have superior knowledge: this is the maxim with which the modern enlightenment approaches tradition and which ultimately leads it to undertake historical research. [TM p. 272].

For Gadamer, it is crucial that we recognize that the ‘authority’ reason grants to tradition, or to an individual, is not something arbitrarily bestowed or automatically granted, but emerges through ongoing interrogation and dialogue. To acknowledge the authority of a tradition or the person who speaks from a tradition is to acknowledge that wisdom, insight and judgment are earned over time through dialogue with and among others. This fact alone is good reason for us to grant an authoritative status to a person or tradition. It is not absolute authority we are granting, but always provisional or conditional authority. In this sense, the authority Gadamer
has in mind is the authority that *phronesis* grants—a capacity to grasp, by way of practical reasoning and insight, the universal or general through the particular, and the particular through the universal. *Phronesis* and insight are cultivated through long experience with others. This is why dialogue is crucially important for Gadamer. Authority, by way of *phronesis*, can, therefore, be instructively contrasted with the sort of reasoning and knowing which issues from narrow technical knowledge. The latter might be described as ‘expertise’—which is closer to *techne* or the knowledge of methods, rules and procedures than it is to practical wisdom or *phronesis*.  
What is also clear from the above is that, for Gadamer, traditions of understanding, historical texts and documents are viewed by ‘enlightened reason’ as historical ‘objects’ of disengaged study, not something we encounter, or live in. Thus, the enlightenment ‘prejudice’ that must be brought to our attention, is that the rise of epistemologically-oriented historical science and historiography is the “last step in the liberation of the mind from the trammels of dogma, the step to objective knowledge of the historical world, which stands on a par with the knowledge of nature achieved through science” [*TM* p. 275]. According to ‘enlightened’ principles then, the objects of the past begin as the prejudices of the past rendered non-prejudicial, only after they have been subjected to the rigors of rational scrutiny. *Logos* must triumph over *mythos*. According to Gadamer, what is presupposed in this particular self-understanding of the perfectibility of reason is the determination not only to give reason hegemonic status over prejudice, superstitions and magic, but to see reason as the means of progressively carrying us through to the realization of a *telos* of absolute knowledge.  
The trajectory of thinking Gadamer outlines begins, then, with the emergence of enlightenment reasoning, which is subsequently countered by a reactionary romantic ‘revival’ of the past. This latter is then succeeded by an increasing interest in historical research, and with it, a determination to subject
history to the rigors of scientific method. There is a very recognizable and commonly held normative assumption here that ‘scientific method’ applied to historical research will free us from the chains of dogma and the shackles of prejudice and tradition. However, according to Gadamer, the ‘enlightened’ dogmatic faith in a doctrine of progressive human freedom, which scientific method upholds, is itself a prejudice—a prejudice that does not see itself as such. At this point Gadamer asks,

…does the fact that one is set within various traditions mean really and primarily that one is subject to prejudices and limited in one’s freedom? Is not, rather, all human existence, even the freest, limited and qualified in various ways? If this is true, then the idea of an absolute reason is impossible for historical humanity. Reason exists for us only in concrete, historical terms, i.e., it is not its own master, but remains constantly dependent on the given circumstances in which it operates. [TM 276]

Notice here that reason understood as ‘concrete’, ‘historical and ‘dependent on given circumstances’is not methodical, abstract, mathematical or certain reason, but what we have described as practical reason or phronesis. Since practical reason is ‘situated reason’, it actually has a critical capacity to uncover the hegemonic enlightenment distortion of reason ‘as reason oriented towards absolutism’. This human-oriented practical self-understanding of the limits of reason is precisely what enlightenment reason is blind to, and what practical reason and phronesis are able to see. It is not because he disavows reason, but precisely because he takes reasoning seriously, and grasps the limits of reason itself, that Gadamer can critically engage enlightenment pretensions and bring the notion of prejudice to our attention. Secondly, notice
that what Gadamer brings to our attention is not as preposterous as might initially appear to an ‘enlightened mind’: namely, that we ‘belong to’ and are in some sense enabled by the prejudices and traditions we initially inhabit.\textsuperscript{139} To be enabled by prejudice, to inhabit tradition, is not to live in an unchanging world, or be imprisoned by ignorance. According to Gadamer, we ‘produce and determine tradition ourselves’ in the sense that we both understand and participate in its evolution over time. [TM 293]

We can already begin to see how Gadamer’s claim that reason is not detached, absolute and therefore ahistorical, but concrete and particular, will inevitably make it possible to retrieve something like an Aristotelian practical reasoning perspective. As we have previously said, Aristotle also recognizes that our background, the way we were raised and educated, implicitly forms us. Neither Gadamer nor Aristotle would see this background as necessarily negating our capacity to choose and deliberate truthfully—if anything it would serve to make the latter possible. Indeed, when Aristotle reminds us that practical wisdom is something that requires long experience, that it is ‘concerned with particulars, which become familiar from experience’, he is precisely saying that we have good reason to respect the authoritativeness of elders and longstanding traditions because they have the gathered wisdom that only experience can grant.

What we can say, with some measure of confidence, is that Gadamer thinks we need to see history, tradition and prejudice not from the epistemological perspective of method-driven science, but as something closer to the ontological ‘conditions of understanding itself’. This reconfiguration and rehabilitation of prejudice and tradition presupposes that history is not a mere object for us to study, but something we inescapably inhabit and belong to. Our individual prejudices, ‘far more than our judgments constitute the historical reality of our being’. Clearly, Gadamer’s ‘ontological’ focus does not, by any means, displace an epistemological concern to
strive toward truth in inquiry. It is important to understand here that Gadamer is not saying that we should give up on reason, or that the authoritativeness of a tradition, when it displaces one’s own judgment, cannot be a ‘source of prejudices’. This would be folly since for Gadamer reason through dialogical exchange is always the inevitable arbiter of tradition. At the same time, to assume that our only, or even our primary guide for assessing tradition, or the exclusive means through which we are given unassailably certain or absolute knowledge, is that sort of scientific method which putatively operates outside of history, would be equally delusional. A more subtle kind of reason is called for by Gadamer—a mode of reasoning that is capable of being intensified by virtue of its very capacity to be historically aware: *phronesis*.

Traditions, whether religious, legal, philosophical or cultural, have a certain authoritative status. They are formative, or identity forming. But, in a modern, complex, diverse world there will always be a tension between the desire to hold to the security of belonging and familiarity that authoritative traditions represent, and the desire to overcome or critically rethink ‘who we are’ and to open ourselves to something new. This tension is not reducible to an ‘either/or’ proposition, or something we can ‘overcome’ through the right method. The tension between authority and reason is constitutive of what it is to be human. In other words, we are always in the midst of things, discovering, going back again, looking forward, and striving to understand. For Gadamer, there is no contradiction between reason and authority. The authoritativeness of a speech, a tradition, a person, or a text is precisely something that reason must freely grant and continuously question. Traditions, texts, and the like, are granted authoritativeness because they are a ‘source of truth’—and this, he reminds us, is “what the Enlightenment failed to see when it denigrated all authority”. For Gadamer, this failure gives rise to a distorting perspective—a view that ‘suspects’ the wisdom and knowledge of the past, while it blindly accepts the absolute
authority of method as the primary means to truth. What Gadamer claims, however, is that
traditions are neither blindly nor thoughtlessly adhered to. The authority of a tradition is not
forced on us, but rather something we freely grant and continuously acknowledge:

…the fact is that in tradition there is always an element of freedom and of history
itself. Even the most genuine and pure tradition does not persist because of the inertia
of what once existed. It needs to be affirmed, embraced, cultivated. It is essentially
preservation and it is active in all historical change. But preservation is an act of
reason, though an inconspicuous one… [TM 281].

The inconspicuousness here is due to the fact that ‘living a tradition’ involves caring for,
concretely moving about in, cultivating, reflectively grappling with, and continuously bearing
witness to, what has preceded and situated a present understanding. It is precisely this practical
reasoning activity that inconspicuously enacts tradition and makes possible our present
‘understanding’. To say this, is to say that we always embody traditions as reasoning practical
beings that have interests, priorities and expectations. Moreover, we can choose to sustain and
continue in a tradition, or we can see it as holding us back and make a determined effort to
rethink or reconfigure our present understanding in light of a different set of priorities. Either
way, to embrace and affirm the tradition we dwell within follows from the fact that we are
always situated within a tradition, but also from the fact that the wisdom we gather over time
through our experiences only gradually brings us to a better understanding, or to a point where
we can question the legitimacy of a tradition. In other words, it would simply be illusory to
conclude that through some purely rational method, or scientific methodical procedure, we could
suddenly and entirely leap out of and overturn a tradition of understanding that has in fact formed us. Prejudice and tradition testify to our fundamental historicity and, thus, to our fundamental finitude: we are always situated by prejudice, in the midst of tradition, and moving towards a future understanding. What we need to take from this discussion of prejudice and tradition is the extent to which Gadamer’s thinking parallels Aristotle’s. In the practical lived orientation of understanding that is afforded to us by notions of prejudice and tradition, there is embedded the very Aristotelian idea that we are formed by habits of thinking, ‘prejudices’ and traditions of understanding, and that we become conscious of this formation when we recognize that being-thinking-desiring are held together in the exercise of phronesis and practical reasoning. More conspicuously, the particular and situated nature of experience and understanding that Aristotle describes when he speaks of a kind of knowing that flourishes in a practical world that ‘could be otherwise’ has its counterpart in Gadamer’s articulation of the finitude, contingency and particularity of human understanding. What Aristotle could not have conceived of is a radicalizing moment in phronesis realized through what Gadamer calls Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewuβtsein, or effective historical consciousness.

3.2 Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewuβtsein: Effective-Historical Consciousness

Effective-historical consciousness or, better, ‘consciousness of the history of effects’, Gadamer tells us, is constitutive of the act of understanding itself. But what does ‘consciousness’ mean here? For Gadamer, consciousness is not a closed container where thoughts are gathered and stored. Neither is it simply a set of neural responses in the brain. Consciousness is always ‘intentional’; that is, it is an ‘attending to’ or ‘disposition towards’ something in the world—a world that is already permeated with meaning. Consciousness as ‘intending towards’ is not a
disembodied or abstract activity, but, rather, an embodied opening or acting toward the world, as well as a capacity to receive and be affected by the world. Consciously does not create a world ex nihilo—it already belongs to, and participates with others in the effort to orient itself, and to grasp the meaning and significance of things. To say that consciousness is ‘effected’ by history is to say that it is situated in and belongs to the historical, and, further, that it can become aware of this situatedness by a reflective effort which manifests in language—in speaking, listening, reading.

Although the philosophical expression (Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein) seems imply in the word ‘consciousness’ an immediacy of awareness, the fact is that, for Gadamer, we are so fundamentally caught up in, and a part of history, we are not entirely conscious of the ways in which our historicality forms and shapes us. Much of the time we live in an extended present of interests and concerns, unaware of the extent to which we are conditioned by what came before us. For instance, we have noted that, for Gadamer, prejudice and tradition are constitutive of understanding. But this does not necessarily mean that we are always fully aware of the latter as ‘effects of history’. Quite the contrary—it is a difficult task to become aware of what Gadamer calls our historical and hermeneutical situation. It is an undertaking of reflexive self-understanding that asks questions such as ‘Who we are?’, ‘How did we get here?’, ‘Where are we going?’, ‘What shall we do?’, ‘How should we understand this?’ or ‘What does this mean?’.

Clearly, these are questions that cannot be reflected upon by appealing to a neutral method or disengaged reasoning. They are precisely questions that provoke us to risk a different understanding of ‘who we are’, and ‘what we think we know’, by exposing ourselves to and taking up a variety of conversations, texts, or works of art. In other words, they are practical and praxis-oriented questions that express continuous and fluctuating normative, concrete and
particular interests and concerns which can only be addressed through a kind of reasoning perspective that is flexible and capable of mediating the particular context in relation to background traditions and discursively arrived at norms; a mode of reasoning that implicitly brings together ‘being’ ‘acting’ and ‘desiring’ and the recognition that ‘who we are’ is a function of what we do or say, and how we deliberate, and conversely, ‘what we do and say’ establishes ‘who we are’. Once again, then, it is phronesis that Gadamer has in mind. For Gadamer these kinds of ontological and existential questions are ongoing—they continuously attest to our essential historical and finite being. We can never raise ourselves above the continuous flow of events, or step out of history. The conceit of method is that it presumes to exempt us from this web of historical effects—it assumes that a neutral method allows us to reach a certain objective truth. However, according to Gadamer, history

…determines in advance both what seems to us worth enquiring about and what will appear as an object of investigation, and we more or less forget half of what is really there—in fact we miss the whole truth of the phenomenon when we take its immediate appearance as the whole truth. [TM 300]

To think that we could rise above such historical effects through scientific method not only exhibits a kind of arrogance, but sediments the distorting prejudice that scientific knowing is somehow exempt from historical effects. Effective-historical consciousness is, for Gadamer, both the avowal of human consciousness effected by history, and an expression of the difficulty of becoming conscious of history’s effects—effects that often appear to occur ‘behind our backs’. 142
The first way we become aware of the effects of history, of our immersion in a given tradition, or of the hidden prejudices that appear to escape our view, is to ‘turn around’ so as to have a wider and more proportioned perspective. This is what Gadamer describes as the task of acquiring a reflexively aware hermeneutic or interpretive horizon. The latter is made possible when we allow ourselves to hear the voice of the other. Through texts, in conversation or dialogue with others, we are presented with a continuously changing horizontal perspective that helps us to discover and rediscover where we ourselves are situated, and what we (often unconsciously) hold as right or true. Gadamer relates that “…to acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand—not in order to look away from it, but to see it better within a larger whole and in a truer proportion.” The perspectives we hold within the traditions that shape us—our ‘horizontal perspectives’ move about and change as we experience the world with and among others. However, to reflectively grasp another perspective from within our own tradition does not require complete empathic understanding, or the wholesale subsumption of who we are into another tradition or historical epoch. What it suggests is a more expansive breadth of seeing by way of a more acute listening to 'the voice of the other'.

What is crucial for the task at hand is to understand how becoming aware of our historicity (i.e. grasping that our historically-effected-consciousness) is already a mode of distanciating critical reflection. What does this mean? To say that Gadamerian notions of tradition, prejudice and effective-history describe a reflective critical dimension is to say, consistent with the perspective of practical reasoning and phronesis, that it is our experience of the multiplicity of particulars that informs and enlarges our understanding. Phronesis together with I have elaborated as a wider context of practical reasoning allows us to achieve a critical distance within the traditions we inhabit, without presuming that we reason entirely outside of them. It achieves
this distance because it is, on the one hand, able to grasp the particular context, situation or circumstance in relation to the tradition, law or common wisdom of the past, and, on the other hand, through creative insight or nous, capable of anticipating a different or future context of understanding—perhaps one that sheds new light and understanding on the present prejudice. Practical reasoning and phronesis can accomplish this because they provide us with a particular-oriented corrective to the rigidity or generality of the law or tradition of understanding. In other words, to realize the acuity and insightful perspective that moves with and alongside the virtue of phronesis, is at the same time to acknowledge that we are both limited, yet capable of self-reflectively and creatively anticipating ‘that which could be otherwise’. What Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewuβtsein adds to phronesis is an historical dimension that could only have arisen within the ongoing, ever-expanding practice of understanding itself. However, we still need to get clear about what the ‘practice’ of understanding specifically entails.

3.3 Practical Reasoning and the Practice of Understanding

Understanding is something we are ‘always already’ in the midst of and engaged in, though not always reflexively aware of. In other words, the activity of understanding involves the prior understanding of things, of background meanings and horizons of possible meaning and expectation. We will take notice of this aspect of understanding in the following discussion of the relation between understanding, interpretation and application. For the present, we need to first look at understanding as something we also strive to realize or achieve. In this latter sense, we can describe the experience of understanding as the experience of attentively turning towards,
and attempting to grasp something. Over time, by way of exposure to practical reasoning contexts, we can extend and enrich the goods internal to understanding as a ‘practice’. What is a practice? We have spoken of the practice of speaking and listening, and also about more familiar occupational practices. All of these latter involve practical reasoning, insight and *phronesis*. In the previous chapter we emphasized the elements of practical reasoning in the context of ethics, rhetoric and politics. What we want to take note of is the way that practical reasoning, as we have elaborated it with help from Aristotle, can help us not merely with the weighty, consequential, or extraordinary ethical and political decisions and deliberations we need to make, but with the most basic or primordial kind of thinking: understanding.

As we have said, *phronesis* is a mode of practical reasoning that yields insight gathered over time within the very concrete doing of *any* practice whatsoever. We can certainly intuit, in an immediate way, how this notion of practical reasoning and insight might be apparent in something like the practice of teaching, or law or physiotherapy. I would claim here that *understanding* ‘as a practice’ is no different. The goods internal to understanding ‘as a practice’ are precisely the ones we have previously spelled out: namely, *phronesis* (deliberation), practical *nous* (insight), *sunesis* (judgment) *epieikes* (equity), and *gnome* (empathy). These are the goods *internal* to the practice of understanding, because they realize, extend and enrich understanding as a practical, participative, reflective, creative, and imaginative activity—not for the sake of individual self-aggrandizement, but for the sake of the practice of understanding *itself*, and also for the entire community of understanding beings. To describe understanding in this fashion is to be aware of it as a practice of recognition (of human finitude) and as a practice of freedom (or what we will designate as thinking an ‘impossible possibility’).
What we must attempt to keep in mind for the present is that all practices, including understanding, are formed and deepened over time, and their aims and virtues are capable of being grasped and realized by all ‘practitioners’. Next, we need to see that the reasoning and insight that practical wisdom and *phronesis* call attention to, cannot be summarized by merely carrying out respective duties, or by slavishly following rules, procedures and methods, or by adhering always only to the ‘letter of the law’ in a predictable routine fashion. In the context of understanding, following the letter of the law would be akin to ‘rote’ learning or mere ‘procedural thinking’. To exercise *phronesis* and practical reason, however, may in fact require us to go beyond ‘the letter of the law’, convention or rule and imaginatively realize the goods internal to a practice that have not yet been recognized or realized in the current interpretation of standards, procedures or conventions. To enact practical insight and *phronesis* is to ‘understand better’—that is, it is to assume a background framework of rules, but, more importantly, to simultaneously assume an always changing environment—to be prepared to confront the unexpected, the particular, or that which was not initially contemplated by a convention, generic rule or law.

We might be inclined to conclude from the above that *phronesis* is a rare event. However, exactly the reverse is true. If we have understood what it is to be a person who embodies *phronesis*, then we also have understood that ‘what we do’ and ‘how we deliberate’, is related to ‘who we are’ as a thinking and insightful person. In other words, far from being a rare circumstance, the particular or unexpected is a continuous, ongoing, everyday phenomenon that the person who embodies *phronesis* simply assumes. To embody a *phronetic* perspective with respect to any practice or activity whatsoever, is to grasp both the general conditions, rules, aims, requirements or duties of a given practice and the extent to which the particular, unique situation,
circumstance, demand, or case before us calls for both reasoned deliberation and creative insight. It is this combination of reasoned deliberation and insight that creates a space of possibility for extending, reinvigorating and enlarging the goods that are internal to any practice—whether law, nursing, teaching, managing, cleaning buildings or understanding itself. As our experience of the particular context expands, our grasp of the general aims or rules also broadens and deepens. More specifically, our capacity to meet the unexpected with equanimity, and to rethink the ‘whole’ in light of the ‘part’, and the ‘part’ in light of the ‘whole’, is gradually extended. This is, of course, precisely a hermeneutic effort of interpreting the part in terms of the whole, and the whole in terms of the part. But it is a hermeneutic effort that presupposes practical reasoning and insight. Over time, we become more aware of and attuned to what Alasdair MacIntyre has called ‘the goods that are internal to a given practice’. MacIntyre would say that the goods internal to a practice are realized through *phronesis*. In other words, it is *phronesis* that helps us to extend our intuitive capacity and, in turn, enables us to realize *excellence*, or what Aristotle would call *arête*. What is important is that *phronesis* and the broader context of practical reasoning I have elaborated help us better appreciate the virtues, or general laws or rules because together they can generate new ways of conceiving means and ends in the ongoing interrelations we have with others. Exercising practical wisdom is, by no means, something reserved for the elite or highly educated practitioner. Indeed, the reality is that practical wisdom, as a combination of reason and insight, can be something that janitors as well as nurses, educators, physiotherapists and judges can acquire. The point is that the goods internal to a practice, realized through practical reason, are not fully or even adequately circumscribed by universal rules or generic job descriptions, but emerge gradually and naturally out of experience, and in particular contexts and speaking-listening activities that we find ourselves engaged in every single day.
It is clear from this analysis that engaging in any sort of practice is not an unreflective or mindless repetition of bodily actions; nor is it simply a competency, ‘technique’ or skilled capacity to use a tool, or an applied strategy that helps us to carry out some pre-determined result. To engage in a practice presupposes that we have a capacity to reflect upon our actions as they relate to our provisional grasp of a generic rule, law or over-all good (eudaimonia). Secondly, and just as important, practices are always in some measure a participatory and productive engagement with others. Practices invite us think about ourselves, about others and about the goods internal to a practice, but they also enable us to extend our very capacity to reason creatively and wisely in perfecting what originally defined the ends or rules that governed a practice. In other words, practices assume that something different, something not initially anticipated, may impel us to go back and re-think, perhaps slightly correct an initial conception or definition, or push us to find a new interpretation of the rules in order to keep the practice vital and enduring.

I want here to imagine now that the practice we want to describe is the practice of understanding itself. Can understanding be a practice? And if it is a practice, does it presuppose phronesis? As I said above, I think the answer to all of these questions is ‘yes’. I believe Gadamer’s Truth and Method is, at its fundamental core, a reflection upon the human experience and practice of understanding, and how this understanding unfolds in life through phronesis and practical reason in all of our activities and endeavors. It is, therefore, a book about phronesis, and simultaneously a book about the practice of human understanding. But Truth and Method takes phronesis to a different level by situating it within a conscious understanding of our historicality. This is the radicalizing moment I have tried to elaborate. Gadamer, crucially, extends the possibilities of phronesis and practical reasoning beyond what Aristotle might have
imagined, because he grasps the defining and primordial role of history in all of our understanding.

It may initially appear odd to say that understanding is a ‘practice’ since we tend to view understanding as an ‘interior’ or abstract process of reasoning. Part of the problem here is that we think that understanding is something that occurs in the space between our ears. In other words, understanding takes place ‘inside’ the solitary privatized world of the individual mind, or ‘subject’. In a related way, we think that ‘that which is understood’, exists ‘outside’ of us as an ‘object’. Of course, it is certainly possible and useful, from a particular cognitive philosophical, theoretical, or scientific perspective to conceive of an ‘objective world’ and a ‘subjective understanding’ as two distinct and separate things. But, from a phenomenological perspective, our actual experience of understanding cannot really be accurately or fully described in this way. Rather, the experience of understanding the world ‘out there’, and our own understanding of ‘something’, are not two discrete events, but come into being together. We do not differentiate in understanding itself between an ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’. In other words, constitutive of the experience of understanding is that it always occurs in a relational and holistic way.

Understanding is always productively co-determined by a number of different relations—by way of sign and symbols; through what is behind us as a past understanding, and what is before us as a subject-matter; with the other whom we are engaged, etc.\(^{149}\) What this state of affairs must remind us of, is that understanding is never an immediate, but always a mediated grasp of things—something that is achieved gradually, and often with difficulty. Looked at in this way, understanding is a kind of ongoing striving practical activity, but also something that continuously ‘happens’ to us over the course of time. To put the matter in this way, is to say that understanding is both activity and event—something we do or strive for, and something that
‘happens to us’. Paradoxically, the *praxis* or activity involved in understanding is best captured when we grasp that understanding is both something we have always already arrived at, *and* something that we are always on the way towards. If it can be said to have a ‘location’, then understanding occurs in the space that is opened up by the ‘other’ or the subject matter which is put before us, and is brought to life or enacted in our relation with another—with the ‘other than self’: a person, a text, or a tradition of understanding.

But if this is what understanding *is*, what are the goods internal to it as a *practice*? I wager that *phronesis* itself, and every one of the elements of practical reasoning we have previously laid out, can be considered goods internal to the practice of understanding. In other words, these latter elements of practical reasoning help describe how human understanding is cultivated over time with and among others—they describe an emerging, reflexive, critical capacity in the very taking up of a tradition, a dialogue with another, an engagement with a text.

To put this more specifically, I would say that within the ongoing concrete practice of realizing and extending the goods internal to understanding, there is the right time to say or do something (*kairos*); there is need for life’s situations to be reasonably interpreted and discussed (*sunesis*); we sense our obligation to be sympathetic and empathetic toward others with whom we share a world by relating stories and the wisdom of our elders (*gnome*); there is a need for us to gather insight over time into the relation between the particular situation and general goods, laws or practical ‘first principles’ (practical *nous*) and to strive to deliberate well with respect to the best means of achieving understanding (*phronesis*); finally, there is a requirement, in every practice including understanding, that we tailor the generality of rules and conventions to meet the end of what is fitting, just and equitable (*epieikes*). As I have said, these are all elements that belong to a wider context of practical wisdom. But, they are, additionally, ‘goods’ internal to the practice of...
understanding itself. They exemplify not merely a reproductive but a *productive* capacity of creative thinking, insight, and practical reasoning that is the mark of human understanding as a practice.

If the above is a plausible account of Aristotelian-Gadamerian understanding—that is, if practical reasoning elements such as *kairos*, *nous*, *sunesis* and *phronesis* etc., are considered goods internal to the practice of understanding, then they can also be considered as contributing to what I have called an emerging critical orientation that coalesces in understanding itself. In other words, these latter internal goods enact understanding as the practical means by which we are enabled over time, with and among others, to navigate through a changing, complex and variable world. Moreover, ‘understanding’ as embodied practical reasoning, insight and *phronesis* is, at the same time, ‘understanding’ as a critical enterprise that brings together ‘being’ and ‘acting’; that is, understanding that presupposes that ‘who we are’ is about how we deliberate in each particular case, the historical tradition we belong to, the conversations we have, and the texts we take up; conversely ‘what we do’ ‘what we read’, ‘what we talk about’, how we deliberate, establishes ‘who we are’.150 As we have repeatedly said, it is this bringing together of *being* and *acting* that defines *phronesis*, and, therefore, also defines the practice of understanding itself. Let us now return to Gadamer.

For Gadamer, one way to capture the meaning of understanding as a *phronetic* practice is through the notion of ‘play’.151 The metaphor of play affords us a way of describing how we ‘lose ourselves’ in the activity of playing. How does this work? When we are caught up in playing a game, the game draws us in—we ‘forget ourselves’ or our own immediate concerns, and strive to extend the virtues of the game itself. In this sense, the game perpetuates itself and in ‘going along for the ride’, we serve this end. To realize the goods or virtues internal to the
practice of rhetoric, architecture, philosophy, hockey, chess, farming, nursing, acting or playing music, presupposes that we have left our ‘ego’ behind—that we do not allow our own individual desire for attention and praise get in the way of the natural and spontaneous unfolding of the ‘game’. In an odd sense, we play the game and the game ‘plays’ us.\textsuperscript{152} It is as if the game had ‘a mind of its own’, and only ends as a game because we have agreed beforehand to impose an artificial time limit. Importantly, however, there is nothing in ‘the play itself’ or the practice that seeks an ending.

Imagine now the ‘play’ we are engaging in is ‘understanding’ through the encounter with another in dialogue. The dialogical form, very much like the play of a game, invites both speaker and listener to give way to a different possibility of meaning that is not owned or possessed by either. Interlocutors ‘lose themselves’ in the to and fro ‘play of conversation’. It is often mistakenly thought that interlocutors in a dialogue or discussion make some kind of ‘in advance’ conscious, completely self-aware, decision to ‘give themselves over’ to the play of a conversation. However, Gadamer reminds us that it is not an individual choice, but rather the very form of dialogue (the game itself) that pulls us away from our desire to hold fast to an opinion, belief or conviction. This is the case whether the interlocutor is a person or a written text. In other words, what is first and foremost ‘before us’ in a conversation is a ‘subject matter’ that is presented to us in symbolic form—in language. This subject matter is allowed to gradually and concretely emerge through the question and answer form that defines dialogue with another. From a more epistemological perspective, we could say that the play of the dialogical encounter does not have an ‘end’ or terminus in immutable truth, or final and complete understanding: the play of dialogue seeks only to perpetuate itself through the continuous possibility of the interrogative form. In this sense, dialogue is never finally completed, overcome or realized as an
indisputable, final truth—it asks, perhaps implores us, to always go on. And yet, despite this seeming lack of a terminus or end, it is in the very experience of being compelled by way of the dynamic of the dialogical form to risk and sometimes let go or give up a sedimented self-understanding, or closely guarded opinion—to allow ourselves to experience the pull or the pressure to release and open ourselves to the possibility of a different understanding. The dynamic activity that inheres in the to and fro of dialogue is the very essence of a critical orientation. The development of a critical orientation is only possible when we are prepared to risk our own understanding in the play of dialogue. It is this distanciating ‘play’ that allows us to realize and extend the virtues internal to dialogue and understanding itself—to discover our prejudices and the limitations of our own perspectives, and, finally, to extend and deepen our critical, creative capacity to reasonably and insightfully grasp ourselves and the particular subject matter before us.

I will conclude our discussion of the practice of understanding through the play of dialogue by simply saying that dialogical activity is the embodiment of the practice of critical understanding—it is ‘understanding’ as that which is realized through speaking and listening, understanding and interpreting. Just as I described rhetorical expression not as a univocal activity, but as something that requires the participation of speakers and listeners, as well as a self-reflective grasp of a hermeneutic context, we can similarly describe dialogue as speaker-listener participating in the play of critical understanding and interpretation. More significantly, I described dwelling ‘in the experience of rhetoric’ not as a game the speaker is in total control of, or as an extension of his self, but as, inherently, a giving over or letting go of oneself and risking of something before another in persuasive speech. This notion of dwelling ‘in the reciprocal experience of rhetoric’ shares with dialogue the essential and intrinsic presupposition that insofar
as language is a shared communicative activity, it simultaneously enacts or activates a reflective, critical and creative capacity in ourselves and in others. To ignore this—to view dialogue or rhetoric as a means of merely personal empowerment or self-aggrandizement—would be to see them as mere instruments at our disposal, and not as the expression of a primordial desire to reach out to the other-than-self; to speak, to listen, to interpret, to understand, and, finally, to gain a measure of wisdom.

3.4 Phronesis as Understanding, Interpretation and Application

We understand many things well or not so well…texts, history, our own bodies, mathematics. Some of these we might feel we can have certainty about, others less so. Deductive and empirical knowledge involve a certain kind of understanding. Our experience of the world itself involves understanding. Not just our immediate experience, but our experience as we discover what is and is not—of appropriation and negation. We will elaborate this latter notion in a moment. We have discussed understanding as a practice and the ‘play’ of understanding as dialogue. The question we want to ask at this point is: ‘what is involved in the experience of understanding itself’? How shall we describe what goes on in understanding itself?

For Gadamer, ‘understanding’ is the primary mode of human experience. When we understand we actively grasp something or make an idea, a sentence, a text, intelligible to ourselves. Note here that understanding is not just a capacity or skill that I have, but implies that ‘who it is that understands’ is caught up in that which it understands. Understanding implies also self-understanding: “…it is true in every case that a person who understands, understands himself
*(sich versteht)* projecting himself upon his possibilities*.* Understanding is always self-understanding. Moreover, understanding is not filling a void or empty space that exists in our mind, nor is it an act of re-creating an interlocutors precise understanding, or merely grasping an author or speaker’s intention. Understanding is a continuous activity of grasping what is particularly before me—a subject matter at hand. But this understanding of a subject matter is never without a ‘fore-structure’—a whole constellation of previously understood meanings within which I already exist. To understand something new is to have already understood something before...“everything that makes possible Dasein’s projection ineluctably precedes it”.

[TM p.264] I read a book, or I listen to someone speak, and in the effort to find the words, ‘understanding’ has already occurred. It has occurred because something that preceded it made it possible. Now this acknowledgement of understanding ‘what is before me here and now’ as involving, also, an understanding of previously understood meaning, is one way of talking about ‘tradition’.

A ‘tradition’, as a constellation of previously understood meanings that cohere together, is that which frames a present understanding. As we have already noted Gadamer thereby adds to understanding (and *phronesis* itself) a crucial element of critical historical self-understanding in the recognition of our ‘historically-effected consciousness’ (*Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewuβtsein*). In the event of understanding we find ourselves always already (unconsciously) within a fusion of past and present horizons which both give rise to and limit our possibility of understanding. In understanding, we are ‘always already’ interpreting what is said by probing our thoughts for the right way to make the meaning of what has been written or spoken more transparent to ourselves. What is before us—a word, a sign, a symbol, a sentence, or a situation, calls out to us, it asks to be understood. We are always, as we speak, read and listen, at the same
time actively bringing together, in a to and fro movement, the past and present—realizing at this moment of understanding what came before, and anticipating or projecting what is yet to come, continuously revising our provisional interpretation and refocusing our attention. While doing so we are moving from a part to a whole and from a whole to a part. In a rather interesting and analogous way, when I understand I am always in a process of ‘translating’ something—that is bringing closer to me that which appears distant or foreign through the use of my own words.

This is what Gadamer means when he speaks of understanding as ‘agreement’—agreement is not agreement in the sense of social consensus, or the ‘one to one’ correspondence of my idea to yours, or this word and that thing over there; it is not my pure conformity or absolute concordance of understanding with what is spoken or read. Instead, Gadamer sees agreement as a measure of my particular situated ability to grasp what is given as other than mine, and yet identifiable and graspable to me. To be sure, agreement is in an important sense the goal or telos of dialogue and understanding, but agreement in this sense is not something static, final or absolute, because our understanding is always moving, always incomplete, always in the midst of a different concrete particular situation, and, through experience, always on the way to a broader understanding. This is why, for Gadamer, phronetic reasoning perfectly captures the unending movement of understanding. Unlike method and rigid demonstrative logic, phronesis can cope with difference because phronesis precisely is thinking ‘in motion’. Indeed, the best way to describe understanding as phronesis is not as a static or passive singular event, but as the activity of continuously moving back and forth from identity to difference. To put this in a more philosophical way, we understand when we ‘identify’, but we identify only in virtue of the “seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour of the negative.” To understand is for
Gadamer both a matter of agreement or identity and negation. How does this notion of negation unfold in understanding?

Our understanding of the experiences we encounter sometimes confirms the presuppositions we bring to it, and sometimes it overturns them. In overturning them our understanding holds on to, and preserves, some truthful aspect of our former presuppositions, as well as the negation of the latter. We say “I’ve never looked at the matter in this way”. In so doing we both acknowledge our limited understanding, and feel the pressure to remain open to a new possibility. The experience of negation teaches us the limitations and fallibility of our own experience, as well as the possibilities of experiencing something new or different. In this sense the experience of negation in thinking and dialogue is ‘understanding as application’. Moreover, the experience of negation is presupposed in critical reasoning and the possibility of creative insight—it is not knowledge arrived at through the accumulation of facts, nor the invocation of certain knowledge through the logic of method. Instead, negation describes the means by which we gather applied understanding and wisdom over time.

Negation is then, for Gadamer, what impels dialectic and what plays a significantly productive role in understanding.\textsuperscript{156} But, once again, it is not negation as a tool, ‘instrument’, or ‘intellectual method’ that then leads to an ultimate, final truth. Nor is it the case that the experience of understanding is exactly repeatable, as if we were repeating an experiment to confirm a hypothesis. What we experience in negation is, instead, the partiality of our own understanding. In the activities of listening, of dialogue, or of reading, our secure understanding of something is challenged or comes up short. The experience of negation in reflection is the experience of insight into our past prejudices, and our present experience. Indeed, it would literally be impossible to experience any determinate meaning about our past present or future
without determinate negation. Negation is not, therefore, a technique or something we use as a ‘tool’ of logic. Rather, negation is the way understanding *itself* must proceed. This way of describing understanding should not be reduced to a ‘psychologizing’ representation or structural cognitive schema. It is a phenomenological description of how we can understand the *experience* of understanding *itself*. For Gadamer the ineliminability of negation in understanding means that we can never completely capture any given phenomena in its totality. For a certain (perhaps enlightenment) mindset, this will appear counterintuitive to the very nature of rationality and truth. But Gadamer insists that it is the fact of negation as *constitutive* of understanding which actually enables us to experience something new or different—something we did not previously see. The capacity to experience something new or different through negation is, at the same time, a *critical* capacity. In other words, to grasp ‘understanding’ as a dialectical relation of identity and negation, is see that it is always actively discriminating, clarifying, comparing, weighing, and it is always being challenged and asked to reconstitute and reorient itself.

We can all think of examples of the way we experience understanding as that curious sense of expectation of meaning, affirmation of meaning, negation of this expectation as we read, and a newly revised expectation as a result. In my own case, over the years I have read the novel 1984 several times, and each time I read it, I bring to it a slightly different world of interests, memories, anticipations, presuppositions, emotional and psychological attitudes—and yet though they are the *same* words I read *every* time, something different always occurs in my understanding, and what I think the story means: ‘It is not only this, but it is that’, or, ‘I now understand this differently than I once did’, or, ‘what I once understood really does not do justice to the work or entirely hold true anymore’. The partiality of my previous readings becomes glaringly evident. It is as if what I once held has been both negated and preserved in the
experience of reading the text again. I understand the same and yet differently. It may even escape my notice what exactly it is that has changed in me such that I now see things differently. More to the point, I will never (hopefully) achieve any complete and final mastery of this text—what asks to be understood can always be understood differently—in a deeper, perhaps better way—even if not finally and definitively. This is not only the joy of reading but precisely the opposite of ‘anything goes’.

Finally, we can say that for Gadamer negation does not completely absorb understanding: negation works in tandem with identity and is, at once, the possibility for a new, a different or a better understanding. I began in philosophy with beliefs and vague opinions that were largely untested and often shockingly naïve. Yet I, and every other student, inevitably had to conclude that there were better interpretations, more convincing arguments, and a better way to grasp some idea. Did we know this because we knew there was an absolute truth that we just had not discovered? By no means! What happened, more often than not, was that our opinions and way of understanding were demolished or shattered not by the truth, but by our own impatient initial grasp of something. Very much like the young Phaedrus we were stopped by the exotic appearance of something, aroused by its intoxicating rhetorical appeal. But as we moved through the variety of different possible interpretations and understandings over time we began to grasp something about the ‘way we formerly understood’. We began to recognize that a critical (or, if you will, emancipatory) understanding is always about recognizing and exposing our stubbornly held prejudices and assumptions—about bringing them to light. We are able to do this because there always exists a multiplicity of authoritative traditions, texts and teachers who we can learn from, and with whom we can participate in the practice of understanding. As we have said, in the practice of understanding, we cultivate, develop and enact *phronetic* reasoning.
and hermeneutic understanding over time through questioning, reading, speaking, listening and understanding one another. This cultivation and enactment of understanding and practical wisdom is not a matter of accumulating or aggregating facts or mere technical proficiency, but the enactment through the concrete experience of negation, a naturally emerging critical insight. It may appear obvious at this point that the experience of negation in understanding is related to the experience of the particular as the ‘negation’ of the general rule, law or procedure. Just as negation makes possible a new understanding of the whole, so too does the particular situation that phronesis contemplates negate a present understanding by shedding new light on the way we understand the law, general rule or tradition of understanding. Moreover, our capacity to experience negation as a truly critical aspect of thinking is something that we must strive toward and cultivate just as we cultivate a capacity for practical wisdom.

It is, of course, true that some of our blinding prejudices will not easily be given up, since they are sedimented consciously or unconsciously in a present understanding. Grasping this reality is, at the same time, from an Aristotelian perspective, grasping that our prejudices are not just unconscious presuppositions, but expressions of desire that have been gathered over time. What this means is that thinking creatively, and understanding differently require not merely sustained effort but the cultivation and nurturing of a desire to reach beyond our present grasp of things with and among others. The cultivation of such a desire does indeed occur when we expose ourselves to the other—to the particular situation, to texts, speeches, and conversations. What is important for Gadamer is that even if we see that our prejudgments always, in part, condition what we understand, we need not lose the sense that there are things that we have misunderstood, but now understand better. We can miss meanings, we can be blind to the truth of what is put before us, and we can be just plainly wrong about things. But,
importantly, what is gained in the ongoing effort to understand in dialogue with others is a clue to grasping our own partiality—our human finitude, to put the matter existentially. Once again, there is no simple formula, method or technique that we can appeal to here, nor is there a final and ultimate truth that ends in complete understanding. Instead there is a ‘thinking more’ which marks our understanding of understanding as ‘the dialogue that we are’.

It may already be obvious given the above that both interpretation and application are implicated in the act of understanding. We tend to think of interpretation as something that temporally precedes understanding, and application as that which occurs only after we have interpreted and understood. However, according to Gadamer, understanding, interpretation and application are of a piece. Interpretation, he claims, “…is not an occasional, post-facto supplement to understanding; rather understanding is always interpretation, and hence interpretation is the explicit form of understanding”. [TM p.307].

In the next paragraph he adds that

…in the course of our reflections we have come to see that understanding always involves something like applying the text to be understood to the interpreter’s present situation. Thus, we are forced to go one step beyond romantic hermeneutics, as it were, by regarding not only understanding and interpretation, but also application as comprising one unified process. [TM p.308]

We can say then that for Gadamer there is no emptiness or gap between understanding, interpretation and application; *applicatio* or application, (a word directly borrowed from the
tradition of ancient rhetoric) is a constitutive element of *all* understanding—it is not something we do ‘after the fact’ of understanding. There is, of course, a familiar sense in which we might (after the fact) apply a new meaning to something we have already understood, or perhaps we might hesitate to apply what we already know. However, this takes nothing away from that fact that in understanding the existing or new meaning of something we have already grasped how it applies. To fail to ‘apply’ is to have failed in understanding. The exemplar here is translating from one language into another. If we cannot apply our new translation to some context, then we have failed to adequately understand the meaning of the original words or sentence. However, the notion of application can also be exemplified in recognizable practical tasks such as building a doghouse, or even more intricate examples of reading a philosophy text. In both cases to understand what it is to build a doghouse, or to understand Plato’s *Republic* means to have, at the same time, applied this understanding in some concrete context.

I have noted previously the relation that the experience of negation in thinking has to ‘understanding as application’. But Gadamer is also interested in application as something which has a corollary in Aristotle’s understanding of *phronesis*. In knowing or understanding the ‘good’, the *phronimos* does not pause, then apply it to this particular situation. The application of his knowledge to this concrete situation is constitutive of his very understanding of the meaning of the good—as well as to the rightness of his action. His *phronetic* excellence does not lie in knowing (*episteme*) the rules and procedures, but in being able to discover, unhesitatingly through reasoned insight, the best way to realize the good in this particular concrete situation. Each different situation will ‘call out’ to understanding and application in this very way. In this sense, we can say that ‘application’ just is *phronetic* thinking activity as understanding. But if this is the case, and if application and interpretation are part of understanding, then
understanding itself will also be a *phronetic* activity. We usually think of application as putting to immediate use, in a specific way, a universally recognized good, or an ethical tradition of understanding that we have inherited. But it is not the *universality* of the good or the tradition that is at issue for Gadamer. What Gadamer is resisting is the idea that in applying this latter ‘universal good’ to a particular situation, we somehow must cognize it in an abstract ‘objectifying’ way before then *applying* it. Gadamer would not, of course, hesitate to say that our understanding at any moral or ethical level is always conditioned by something that preceded us—it is our hermeneutic situatedness that precisely gives rise to the possibility of our understanding anything whatsoever. What cannot be the case, however, is that the rightness of our actions and applications must depend wholly on the fact that we objectively and intellectually conform to some abstract universal norm. To think that it does, is to have already abandoned the possibility that we can act critically, or ethically, or morally, in this or that concrete particular situation. We can begin to notice then, that understanding-interpretation-application are *phronesis* embodied as reflective practice—a notion of *phronesis* which ‘always already’ involves critical judgment, precisely because it is enacted ‘as a whole’ in this situation, and not because it relies on some existing abstract law to ground its truth. Practical wisdom is thus, for both Aristotle and Gadamer, not something that can be objectively measured, quantified, abstracted or detached from the human situation of understanding. Moreover, I would reiterate here that practical wisdom is *critical* precisely because it *does not* depend for its critical orientation on a static pre-given set of conditions, regulative ideals, procedures, rules or absolute standards, but articulates an ongoing and ever-widening experience-based reasoning and insightful capacity to meet with equanimity the particular moral and political exigencies that persistently confront us. If understanding as application and *phronesis* were, in fact, dependent in
this way, then being *critical* would simply be a matter of ‘after the fact’ application of a rule: thoughtful decision-making and creative deliberation would be reduced to a mechanical calculus, or more accurately, we would exemplify something akin to what Hannah Arendt has described as ‘thoughtlessness’.

Gadamer insightfully illustrates the notion of application and its relation to *phronesis* by way of what he takes to be the exemplar of law. We are already familiar with how Aristotle elaborates the notion of *epieikes* or equity in the context of law. We described equity as one of the key elements in a wider context of practical reason. Gadamer gives equity an equally important position in the practice of understanding. Typically we think that to understand is to understand how the general is applied to the particular case at hand. We therefore see the general concept as something already determined, and equally binding on all persons. The analogy Gadamer uses is law. We view the judge as the embodiment of law—someone who already knows the law’s background pedigree and grasps its ‘generality’ or general meaning within a certain jurisdiction. The law itself appears to us to have a certain authoritative status owing to its having been historically arrived at, and agreed to, in the present. Moreover, those who sit in judgment are thought to have a specialized or even technical knowledge of this background pedigree. In this sense, legal decisions or outcomes can be known or predicted in advance. However, there is another equally if not more encompassing sense of application in the context of law.

In Book V Chapter 11 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* Aristotle introduces the notion of *equity* as a corrective to the rigidity of law. By doing so he introduces, as it were, a reversal of the trajectory of reflection: instead of general to particular we reflect on the particular in order to inform the general. [1137b5-1138a5] Rather than subsuming the particular under the general,
Aristotle introduces the idea of equity as a corrective to the generality and abstractness of the law, by allowing our focus to shift to a grasping of the particular, in its uniqueness and singularity. For Aristotle, the application of law, owing to the variability of human affairs, is always an unfinished project. Thus, a judge who applies the law rigidly in this particular case, which seems to not originally have been contemplated, could be considered to have compromised justice for the sake of law. Gadamer relates that when the jurist or judge restrains the law through equity considerations this does not in any way diminish the law but is in fact the means through which we discover a richer or more nuanced understanding of the law. In the spirit of Aristotle, Gadamer tells us that “…the law is always deficient, not because it is imperfect in itself, but because human reality is necessarily imperfect in comparison to the ordered world of the law, and hence allows of no simple application of the law” [TM p.318].

We can conclude here that something productive, rather than merely re-productive, something critical and reflective, rather than merely mechanical, is happening in this movement from the particular to the general and back again. This something is not deductive or demonstrative reasoning; it is not an appeal to method. It is rather situated phronetic reasoning. Understanding law is at once interpretation and application or as Gadamer sees it…

…the correct interpretation of the law is presupposed in its application. To that extent, one can say that each application of a law moves beyond mere understanding of its legal sense and fashions a new reality…the application of the law to a given legal case seems to me to contain an act of interpretation. This means, however, that every application of legal prescriptions that appears to do justice to the issue at stake both concretizes and further clarifies the meaning of a given law.158
Borrowing from this idea of equity in the application of law reminds us that like law, understanding is always, and at the same time, interpreting and applying. Reflecting on Aristotle, Gadamer writes that “…the finding of the law always requires the enlarging consideration of equity…the perspective of equity does not stand in contradiction with the law, but precisely by relinquishing the letter of the law it brings the legal meaning to complete fulfillment”. In a similar way understanding is always about concretizing and further extending the virtues or goods internal to understanding. Understanding implies eπεικηs or equity, and, therefore, phronesis.

Of course, it is not just judges but every legal practitioner, and indeed anyone who inhabits a practical, social or political world framed by a tradition, a code of laws, a prescriptive set of rules, or job description, that will inevitably be challenged to think through the prevailing law, rule or prejudice in the context of equity. Equity is a reflecting upon both the letter and the spirit of a law, rule or prescription; it is a way of critically grasping both the past interpretive tradition, and the present particular situation before us. What enables this ‘thinking through’ is the kind of historically aware critical insight captured in practical reasoning and phronesis. In all of these instances, including the juridical realm, phronesis is not a simple substitute for ‘reasoning logically’. Because it is ‘always already’ embedded in a contingent world that is mediated by finite beings, phronesis (for both Aristotle and Gadamer) is something that emerges through human experiencing, and this latter unfolds in ways that exceed the merely calculative or logical. Phronetic wisdom, gathered over time with and among others, involves notions beyond logic, calculation or method. It makes room for notions such as forgiveness, reconciliation, equity,
individual conscience and moral conviction. These latter attributes and comportments that issue in the experience with others are all implicated in a gradually emerging critical orientation.

In summation, we can say that if the juridical realm is exemplary, it is by no means the only context where understanding-interpretation-application is enacted through *phronesis*. For Gadamer, understanding, interpretation and application are *phronesis* at work in *all our engagements*. It does not matter here whether we are talking about the law, a given text, a work of art, a longstanding tradition or practice, understanding itself, or some other configuration of social or political relations that are governed or circumscribed by a set of rules or conventions. In every case, we are thoroughly enmeshed in a world of human finitude; of relations that are not reducible to a theoretical model, or deducible from a system of fixed ahistorical rules. If there is any certainty here, it is the certainty that things ‘could be otherwise’.

3.5 *The Critical Dimension of Rhetoric through Phronesis*¹⁶⁰

We have discussed the role of prejudice and tradition, the meaning of effective-historical consciousness, the event of dialogue with another, the role of negation in the experience of thinking and the relation between understanding, interpretation and application. Each one of these latter ideas is a constituent of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics, and each can be understood in light of *phronesis*. In turn, the ancient concept of *phronesis* undergoes a transformation and radicalization through each of these reflective additions. As we have defined it, *phronesis* is that sort of practical wisdom that brings together thinking-being and acting. In this sense human finitude, our historicality, our very understanding, is *enacted* or constituted by *phronesis*—by the ‘experience of experiencing over time’, that defines *phronesis*. The radical
critical dimension of *phronesis* is underscored when we recognize the historicality of understanding. This recognition is exemplified in our emerging capacity to ‘distance ourselves’, in some measure, from the immediacy of experience. It is, in other words, something that is disclosed by becoming consciousness of ourselves as historical beings that inhabit both distorting and enabling prejudices and traditions. Secondly, the radicalizing of *phronesis* is discovered in the experience of the ‘play’ of conversation and dialogue—in the giving over of ourselves to the event of understanding through speaking and listening. Thirdly, our understanding of *phronesis* is exemplified and intensified when we grasp how the experience of negation in thinking and dialogue with others is what keeps *phronesis* in constant motion and provides the condition of possibility for new and creative insight. Finally, we realize a certain radicalizing critical distance in the capacity we have to reflect upon the particular in a way that informs the general—this renders understanding as *phronesis* not as just ‘reproductive’ but as an ongoing creative, critical and *productive* activity.

Before leaving Gadamer, however, it will serve our purposes to draw out some of the important points of intersection between rhetoric and hermeneutics in a way that links up with the first chapter, and with Gadamer’s idea that ‘the rhetorical and hermeneutical aspects of human linguisticality completely interpenetrate each other’. The tradition of rhetoric has a crucial role to play in understanding Gadamer’s hermeneutics as a critical hermeneutics.161 Essential to a critically-oriented hermeneutics, as we have noted, is that we grasp that we first belong to a tradition before we can depart or distance ourselves from it. Rhetoric embodies both of these latter elements of belonging and distance. In the first place, over against the idea of method-oriented human sciences, which developed from Galilean natural science, Gadamer reminds us of the true breadth of a rhetorical wisdom that not only “includes every form of
spoken communication”, but that, in so doing, “holds human society together”. Our sense of community, solidarity and eudaimonia or human flourishing in Aristotle’s and our own time are not deduced from logic or accumulated from the facts. These notions emerge through our capacity to speak, listen, read and experience in common, but also to access the wisdom of the past. Gadamer reminds us that Vico’s appeal to ‘sensus communis’ or common sense is meant to counter the predominant Cartesian method of acquiring certainty through methodical doubt, and, instead, reconnect us to ancient rhetoric, and the ideal of eloquence as a source of past wisdom. But Gadamer cautions that “…talking well (eu legein) has always had two meanings; it is not merely a rhetorical ideal. It also means saying the right thing—i.e. the truth—and is not just the art of speaking—of saying something well” [Gadamer, TM 19]. In the realm of human practical affairs the ‘truth’, as Aristotle and Gadamer might say, is not identified with certainty but with probability, and knowledge is not grounded in the abstract but “directed towards the concrete situation” [Gadamer, TM 21]. However, even if rhetoric does not supply us with compelling proofs, it can still be understood as the participative means through which we invite each other to ‘think freedom as a practice’. In this respect rhetoric is dialogical because neither speaker nor listener is an abstraction, but rather an embodied, situated and concrete person. Hermeneutic reflection enables a persuasive possibility in rhetoric not because it provides methodological rigor, but because it helps speakers connect with listeners through the articulation of mutually shared understandings. Moreover, if hermeneutics is ‘universal’, so too is rhetoric: “Clearly, the ability to speak has the same breadth and universality as the ability to understand and interpret”. But if it has universality of application, it does not have universal knowledge of the good. What sort of knowledge does rhetoric imply?
Gadamer tells us that the rhetor must have “knowledge about that to which one has to persuade people here and now, a knowledge of how one is to go about doing this and a knowledge of those whom one has to persuade.” To this we can add what we have previously described: that the rhetor must have the insightful grasping power of *nous*, the perspicacity involved in determining the right time to speak (*kairos*), the capability to interpret, distinguish and elaborate a concrete issue (*sunesis*), the creative capacity to use metaphor and narrative (*gnome*) and finally a discriminating sympathetic capacity for wise judgment (*epieikes*). This wealth of possible ways of knowing and discerning what is probably true does not rely on the organizing and structuring power of the methodical sciences; it does not presuppose “the cognitive mastery of data or the technical mastery of materials.” It has its own rich domain of possibility in the expansiveness of experience and in the reciprocity that defines communicative interaction.

Finally, I raise again the crucial critical-orientation that rhetorical reflection uncovers. Near the end of *Truth and Method* Gadamer expresses a wish for greater recognition of the fact that both hermeneutic and rhetorical reflection attest to the *reasoning* nature of beings who understand by listening, attending and conversing with one another. There is perhaps a hint of exasperation in Gadamer’s description of a place of reasonability that has been all but forgotten in the unfettered desire to discipline dialogical experience and rhetorical reflection through the reconstruction of unforgiving abstract rational principles. Gadamer declares that the realm of understanding is

…the realm hermeneutics shares with rhetoric: the realm of arguments that are convincing, (which is not the same as logically compelling). It is the realm of
practice and humanity in general, and its province is not where the power of “iron-clad conclusions” must be accepted without discussion, nor where emancipatory reflection is certain of its “counterfactual agreements”, but rather where controversial issues are decided by reasonable consideration. The arts of rhetoric and argumentation (and their silent analogue, thoughtful deliberation with oneself) are at home here. If rhetoric appeals to the feelings, as has long been clear, that in no way means it fall outside of the realm of the reasonable. Vico rightly assigns it a special value: copia, the abundance of viewpoints. I find it frighteningly unreal when people like Habermas ascribe to rhetoric a compulsory quality that one must reject in favour of unconstrained, rational dialogue. This is to underestimate not only the danger of the glib manipulation and incapacitation of reason but also the possibility of coming to an understanding through persuasion, on which social life depends [Gadamer, *TM* 568].

What is evident in the above is the assertion that hermeneutics and rhetoric are not without the resources of reason. But much more can be added to this. As we described above, rhetorical reflection, insofar as it is both situated and situating, inscribes the *contingent relation of language and power at a particular moment*. Rhetoric projects the understanding of a particular world—it expresses the ‘truth’ of that world. Precisely because of this, it also, and at the same time, opens the possibility of questioning, contesting, and resisting the truth as expressed. As listeners, we are never entirely passive, but always in the activity of trying to understand, interpret and apply what has been spoken. What this means from the perspective of *phronesis* is that rhetorical reflection and dialogical exchange—both in speakers and listeners—is never a
mere matter of replicating or reproducing meaning, but always a matter of applying and in so doing, enacting a critical orientation in the form of a provoked and imagined question: “Where do you speak from?”; “What do you mean?”; “In whose interest is this?”; “Why is this important?” These are the sorts of situated rhetorical questions that the experience of speaking or reading or listening gives rise to in the context of practical reasoning and phronesis. In asking them, we recognize the power that language has to express, inscribe, and conceal relations of power, domination, discipline and control. At the same time, this recognition carries with it the countervailing possibility of provoking resistance, of revealing the false universals, and exposing the asymmetries of power—not because phronetic wisdom presupposes an abstract ideal, but precisely because it is directed to particular forms of power and concrete practices. In rhetoric and dialogue our fore-meanings, traditions, prejudices and self-understandings are revealed to us, and it is our very capacity to become aware of these limits and our propensity to give in to them that awakens or enacts a critical attitude.166

3.6 Critical Phronesis and ‘Thinking Freedom as a Practice’167

We can sum up the above discussion of Gadamer by saying that the enactment of critical insightfulness through phronetic reason is something that emerges over time in the encounter with the other in language. For Gadamer, hermeneutics is the enactment of phronesis in the practice of understanding and dialogue. Moreover, hermeneutics, like phronesis, is not reducible to a technique, a simple application of rules, or an invocation of method. Insofar as reading, speaking and hearing are not just competencies or capacities, but actual practices we engage in, they will consist in our being able to choose the right aim, in determining the basis upon which
what is given or presented should be interpreted, and in grasping what the other person wants to say or wants us to understand. It will, thus, be the never-ending task of finite creatures who wish to understand themselves and each other, to assume that their grasp of the facts or ‘the way things are’ is never complete or completed. It is this incompleteness that spurs one to critically review again and again all the possible opinions, prejudices and proposals encountered in dialogue with another.

This encounter which takes place in language (whether rhetorical or dialogical) is an encounter that makes possible the self-developing over time of a practically-oriented, reflective and critical capacity—an orientation that we call critical not because it gives us a template of laws, moral rules or procedures, but because it opens us to a reservoir of meanings, possibilities and differences, and impels us to preserve a reflexive attitude. A reflexive attitude is simultaneously a grasp of where we are situated, but also a moment of pausing, a searching within, and reflecting upon, a determinate opinion or idea presented to us. It is the repetition and reiteration of this reflexivity in different situations, immanent within dialogical encounters themselves, that over time enacts and deepens our critical awareness—an awareness that puts us on guard against the temptation to acquiesce to distorted or hegemonic thinking, or submit to the rigidity of reductive theories, ungrounded opinions and narrow worldviews.

To put this in a slightly different way, our linguistic encounters are an expression of creative and critical possibility. What this latter amounts to is what I will call ‘thinking freedom as a practice’. Thinking freedom as a practice is a form of thinking-acting that implicitly recognizes both human limits and human possibilities. It is not a regulative ideal of individual freedom, or an argument for the need to have more choices. It is not linked to the crass commodification of freedom represented by modern economic myths of a ‘free-market’—
market which is ‘free’ only for those who can afford it. Realizing the goods internal to the
practice of freedom would involve recognizing freedom as, inherently, a cooperatively
established activity that secures and extends human ‘belonging’, and continuously expands our
capacity to critically and creatively imagine and re-imagine human flourishing in each of our
practical activities. In this sense, what I am calling ‘thinking freedom as a practice’ is not a
theoretical exercise or a specific thought-project, but a way of describing how a creative and
critical dimension is enacted in particular situations through language, by way of what we have
called practical reasoning and phronesis. If phronesis brings together being and acting—what we
do and who we are—it is dialogue and rhetoric, our being in language, that makes us cognizant
of our historicality, and thereby aware of both our limitations and our possibilities. By
recognizing the historically contingent orientation of understanding, and engaging in the practice
of thinking freedom as a practice in dialogue with another, the creative and critical dimension of
thinking emerges naturally—what we might call an impossible actuality, or as Eberhard Jüngel
puts it, an ‘impossible possibility’ is disclosed.168 ‘Impossible possibility’ is not some vague,
metaphysical notion, or absolute standard, but rather the possibility that is grasped in the
particular act or event of understanding—in our willingness to ‘let ourselves go’ and to risk our
ideas, arguments and opinions before each other—to risk our sense of ‘who we are’ and how we
understand. Moreover, the ‘impossible possibility’ of thinking freedom as a practice is a
subversive force: it is a critical emancipatory undertaking that does not elevate us beyond our
interpretive practical being, or allow us to acquiesce in the glib invocation of unquestioned rules
or dogmatic perspectives, but, instead, makes us accountable to ourselves and to others by
reminding us to constantly ‘think more with ourselves and with others in every particular
situation that confronts us’.
To be sure, this way of expressing a creative and critical dimension in dialogue may appear rather fanciful in a world of individuals that increasingly communicates in sound bytes and banal text messaging. Despite this reality, the impulse to learn and to understand each other has not yet been entirely stilled; and the desire to cultivate further discourse, to test our strong convictions and deep assumptions with others cannot utterly disappear so long as we value human creativity and freedom in thinking and dialogue with each other. More than this: the desire through rhetoric, reading and dialogue, to unleash possibilities that have been repressed or concealed by official histories, disciplinary practices, unquestioned laws or rules of rigid thinking, is a reflexive desire to embrace and cultivate our essential and inherent capacity for critical agency.

It is not idealistic chimera to say that whatever practice we are involved in and do well—from being a janitor, a writer, a teacher, physician, judge or politician—requires practical reasoning and reflection. Moreover, in each of these cases it is never the thoughtless or unquestioning adherence to general rules, job descriptions or formal structures that gives us creative insight and understanding, or makes us better at what we do. What makes us good at what we do is a function of our capacity to interact with others in the very doing of a practice in a particular, concrete setting—to do something well, is to think beyond ourselves in the space of possibility that dialogue with others provides. Dialogue and rhetorical reflection are instantiations of critical phronesis, and phronesis is itself enacted in dialogical relations of speaking-listening, and radicalized through the recognition of our fundamental historicality. Historically conscious being-thinking-desiring are thus brought together in language by way of phronesis and phronesis becomes a mode of practical reasoning radicalized through our grasp of the historicity of understanding.
Part II
Ricoeur on Time and Narrative

3.7 Introductory Remarks

We move now to a second, equally important, radicalizing moment of *phronesis* understood through the notion of temporality. If it can be said that we are historical beings, it can, likewise, be said that we are creatures of time in an everyday sense. Paul Ricoeur’s philosophy will help us describe and understand this temporalizing dimension of understanding and how it relates to *phronesis*. The principle linguistic vehicle here is narrative, something closely related to the rhetorical and the dialogical, and something that is likewise elaborated and made possible through *phronesis* and practical reasoning. The connection between narrative and *phronesis* may not be immediately apparent to us. This will soon be amended. For the present we can simply say that the relation between narrative and *phronesis* works in both directions. In other words, we can say that if narrative, or the stories we tell, are the means by which we come to know ourselves and others, this knowing is not accessed through a pure logic of demonstration, or in the perfection of method, but in the everyday *phronetic*, practical reasoning which helps us to creatively and critically assess ourselves and our world. At the same, time, if *phronesis*, insight and practical reasoning bring together thinking-desiring-being and acting, this is possible because the latter can be reconfigured in recognizable stories or narratives which unfold in the context of what ‘has been’, what ‘is’, and what ‘might be’—that is, in temporally lived experience. Our present goal, then, is to make more explicit the role that *phronesis* plays in Ricoeur’s understanding of the creative aspect of metaphor and narrative, but also to give some
sense to how phronesis or phronetic reasoning can be said to enact the temporal dimension of metaphor and narrative.

What is it to inhabit, or to live in time? It cannot merely be a matter of checking the clock from ‘time to time’. The undifferentiated and abstract intervals of time measured in seconds, minutes or days are meaningful to us only through a structure of care: we say ‘it’s time to feed the baby’, or ‘soon I must leave for work’ or ‘we did that already’. These very familiar expressions bring together a three-fold present—they ‘make present’ to us now what ‘is to be’, and what ‘has been’. At the moment this happens, we leave the abstract world of time as a simple succession of ‘now’s’ measured by the clock, for the concrete lived and practical world of human concerns that constitutes our temporality. In the above expressions we can take note of the fact that it is language that carries the burden of expressing care in a threefold temporal present. This, then, is how we shall begin to grasp the complex relation between time and narrative.

To begin with, Ricoeur does not think that human self-understanding is something we immediately have, but something we must achieve by way of phronetic reasoning indirectly and over the course of time. Thus, his hermeneutics presupposes the possibility that the world does not just happen to us, but is something in which we actively participate and intervene in through our capacity to grasp signs, symbols, words, sentences and stories. Speaking and listening, reading and interpreting are hermeneutic tasks. They testify to the fact that we have an inherent capacity to make and remake ourselves and the world in which we live. But, the question immediately before us is, ‘what is it about narrative, in particular, that must now draw our attention? This latter question raises other questions related to what we have previously discussed: ‘Is there not something fundamentally unreal and retrograde about narrative or storytelling’? ‘Is not narrative an abstraction, at a remove from the concrete and particular’? If it
is meant to represent the real world, on the basis of what, shall we determine which of the stories we encounter, honour truth, and which trade in illusions?

We cannot begin to answer these questions until we first grasp Ricoeur’s most fundamental hermeneutic assumption: that if we are ‘situated beings’ conditioned by history and temporality, we are also, fundamentally, capable beings. It is language that attests to this fundamental capability. Dwelling in language, whether through rhetoric, dialogue or reading is, at the same time, realizing that we can creatively and critically rethink ourselves, and thereby change our world. Ricoeur’s entire philosophical project is the effort to capture, in a variety of different contexts, what it means to be a critically-oriented, creative and capable being. We will explore two of these exemplars of human capability and creativity which are directly related to language and to the argument herein: namely, metaphor and narrative.

3.8 Our Capacity for Semantic Impertinence: Metaphor

We begin with metaphor, and particularly Ricoeur’s Rule of Metaphor.171 Ricoeur’s understanding of narrative has its roots in both Aristotelian rhetoric and poetics.172 It is the mimetic and creative aspects of figurative discourse discovered through metonymy, synecdoche, irony and most centrally, metaphor, wherein Ricoeur’s linguistic inquiry begins. Metaphor is equally at home in rhetoric and poetry. We usually think that metaphor is just the trading or substituting of one word or phrase for another. But metaphor is much more than this. From the Aristotelian perspective on rhetoric we have seen that there is always a creative element in observing in any particular case the possible means of persuasion. This creative aspect can be realized through the use of metaphor.173 In poetry and tragedy, Aristotle recognized also how
metaphor has the capacity of allowing us to see differently. He tells us that metaphor “consists in giving the thing a name that belongs to something else; the transference being either from genus to species or from species to genus or from species to species or on grounds of analogy” [Poetics Chapter 21 1457b7-10]. It would appear from this definition that metaphor is merely the substitution of one name for another without carrying much in the way of new information. But Aristotle placed a very high value on the mastery of metaphor because it involved an intuitive capacity to see similarity in the dissimilar [Rhetoric 1412a10]. Ricoeur is likewise interested in our capacity to grasp the inventive power of a metaphor that has the potential to disrupt and disturb “a whole network by means of an aberrant attribution”. The transgressive potential, or what Ricoeur refers to as the ‘semantic impertinence’ of metaphor, is the creation of new meaning. But this creation of meaning is not arbitrary or merely decorative—it testifies to the productive power of language, whether written or spoken.

We can relate the transgressive productive power of metaphor, its ‘impertinent’ creation of new meaning, back to our previous discussion of insight or nous. It is the capacity we have to suddenly and insightfully grasp a new possibility of meaning that metaphor attests to. This emerging insight is something that is made possible through experience because we are able to see the limitations in application of a present metaphor when we are confronted with a new or different context or situation. What was once disclosive has become stale or clichéd. Thus, for Ricoeur, metaphor cannot is merely be a substitution of one word or phrase for another. The reverberating power of metaphor—its capacity to disturb meaning—is something that is only fully achieved in reference to a hermeneutic ‘whole’. Metaphor is, in fact, situated by what Ricoeur calls (following Aristotle’s lead) the mimetic. Metaphor is mimetic insofar as it re-describes something already known in a new or innovative way. Mimesis is not meant here as
mere imitation or copy, but as the redescription of reality that finds in metaphor and narrative a most remarkable and potent carrier of semantic innovation. In Aristotle *mimesis* finds its own elevated home in the unfolding of a plot (*muthos*). Ricoeur’s conviction is that metaphor is the means through which *mimesis* becomes *muthos*—not a mere imitation of nature but a semantic refiguration of human action. In so doing, Ricoeur sees metaphor as an exemplar of how language and human action, belonging and creativity, being and acting are brought together. Beyond the poetic and descriptive, beyond the referential function of metaphor, Ricoeur always has an ontological perspective in view:

…to present men ‘as acting’ and all things ‘as in act’—such could well be the ontological function of metaphorical discourse, in which every dormant potentiality of existence appears as blossoming forth, every latent capacity for action as actualized. Lively expression is that which expresses existence as alive.

Ricoeur’s ontology is captured in the description of historically situated human beings as ‘capable beings’ who enact a creative and critical capacity through language. In words that echo Gadamer’s understanding of belonging and Heidegger’s description of the future as a projection of possibilities, Ricoeur makes clear the ontological ramifications of metaphorical and poetic understanding:

…poetic discourse brings to language a pre-objective world in which we find ourselves already rooted, but in which we also project our innermost possibilities. We must thus dismantle the reign of objects in order to let be, and to allow to be
uttered, our primordial belonging to a world which we inhabit, that is to say which at once precedes us and receives the imprint of our works. In short we must restore to the fine word *invent* its twofold sense of both discovery and creation.178

Ricoeur’s stress on human situatedness, activity and capability—themes we have previously noted—underscores his conviction that meaning is not just something that happens ‘behind our back’ but, through language, something we actively discover and creatively participate in. One may wonder if metaphor—a simple figure of speech—should be asked to bear such ontological freight. However, metaphor is only the first part of our story of the radicalizing of *phronesis* through temporality. Ricoeur realizes that the innovative and creative aspects of metaphor can only be fully realized in a fuller account of language and narrative. How then, we may ask, are metaphor and poetic discourse related to temporality and narrative? If metaphor testifies both to our innermost capacity to discover in the *present* a meaning that precedes us (that we already ‘belong to’ in Gadamer’s language), and our capacity to creatively and imaginatively anticipate the projection of something new, then metaphor itself has a certain temporalizing structure. In other words, metaphor brings together, in the present moment, an understanding of previously agreed meaning, *and* the anticipation of a new semantic pertinence. This temporalizing structure becomes much more apparent in narrative through what Ricoeur refers to as the three-fold structure of *mimesis*. How is the construction of metaphor related to *phronesis*?

*Phronesis*, and the broad perspective of practical reasoning we have laid out, presupposes reasoning and insight-related capacities to grasp the concrete particularity of what is before us, and relate it to the general background understanding we have gathered over time. *Phronesis* and
insight are the names we have given to what Ricoeur would claim are human capabilities unfolded in language. They attest to our basic imaginative capacity to insightfully grasp existing meanings and creatively leap forward and capture new possibilities of meaning. This is exactly what metaphor itself does at the level of language—in other words, metaphor is the construction of new meaning grounded in a past understanding and a future anticipation. What now shall we say of narrative?

3.9 *Narrative between Discordance and Concordance*

It is perhaps no accident that the notion of narrative identity might be thought to have its origins in a combination of factors including historical and time consciousness and the articulation of a notion of ‘autonomous self’ which coalesces in the modern seventeenth-century novel. It is here where we first begin to see how the elements and episodes of a *particular* individual life become integrated in narratives that are situated within an increasingly secular, more expansive, and perhaps, gradually more complex and diverse world. Importantly, it is the ‘particular’ person, rather than the general or archetypal type that is emphasized in the modern novel. Moreover, it is the bringing together of temporality, or a certain time-consciousness through narrative that defines the structure of the modern novel as the unfolding of the story of a life over time. Of course, the telling of stories as a way of integrating the ‘particular’ within a broader temporal ‘whole’ certainly predates the modern novel. In this sense, narrative identity, described from a phenomenological or experiential perspective, is something we can grasp at a basic human level of linguistic understanding. Inherent in the notion of narrative identity are the very issues and themes we have raised in discussions of *phronesis* and the historicity of
understanding: namely, how the relation between sedimented, general or historical understanding and particular circumstances or contexts is mediated through both *phronesis*, and a creative or innovative capacity for insight (*nous*); that we are both interpreting and interpreted beings in the context of our speaking-listening-reading activities; that we can develop, over time, an emerging critical perspective through the ongoing stories we listen to and tell to ourselves and others that articulate both ‘who we are’ and ‘who we ought to be’. In this sense, narrative testifies to the fact that we can both make and unmake ourselves, that we can take a stand, see ourselves as responsible to ourselves and to others, and thereby achieve, through our heard and told stories, some measure of ethical integrity and self-constancy.

Ricoeur attempts to get hold of the relation between narrative and time from a distinctly philosophical-phenomenological perspective, beginning with Augustine and Aristotle. The hypothesis tested in Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative* is the following: “time becomes human time to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode, and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal existence”.\(^{181}\) Simply put, narrative is not to be looked upon as a ‘thing’ or ‘object’, but as a mode of human interaction and understanding that takes a temporalizing form. In this sense, narrative is something that is closely tied to both rhetoric and dialogue.\(^{182}\) What I want to emphasize here is that, like rhetoric and dialogue, narrative is not merely a technique, or an instrument that presupposes a methodical approach. Rather, narrative is a basic human activity and linguistic comportment—the active expression of our desire for self-understanding, and the concomitant desire to reach out to another by writing or saying something that will be read, heard and understood as a coherent whole. What Ricoeur persuasively argues is that the fact that we can tell and listen to stories not only attests to our linguistic and temporal being, it confirms our status as capable persons. Because of this, Ricoeur emphasizes narrative as
an *activity* even if it is also a particular constructive format. The general question we will pursue in what follows is ‘What is the relation between *phronesis*, narrative and temporality’? To adequately respond to this question we will need to access the rich and enduring philosophical reflections of Ricoeur’s *Time and Narrative*.183

According to Ricoeur we grasp our own life in a very practical way as if we were a story, and we interpret ourselves and others according to the different possible intersecting and overlapping individual and collective stories we tell. The ‘story that we are’ is, of course, provisional and incomplete, but what is crucial is that narrative or the telling of stories is constitutive of both our individual and our collective identity. There is nothing startling or new in this. What Ricoeur adds to the conventional understanding of narrative is the idea that in the very activity of telling a story, of narrating to ourselves or to others, we transmute what we might call ‘clock time’ into human time. This is not a mere intellectual exercise, but it is, as we shall soon see, something that is enacted through *phronesis*.

Just as Aristotle used the notion of character as a settled or stabilizing condition that helps us to make reasoned decisions in differing circumstances, Ricoeur is likewise convinced that we need the stability of narrative to bring a certain constancy and temporal order to the transience of life. Conversely, narratives and stories are meaningful to us to the extent that they embody our temporal experience.184 How does this occur? In the first place we must take note of two converging historical-philosophical thematics: The many *aporias* that arise in the reflection on time by Augustine in his *Confessions* and the response to (if not final resolution of) these latter aporias through a reconfiguring of Aristotle’s notions of *muthos* (emplotment) and *mimesis*.185
Sustained reflection on the notion of time inevitably seems to push us to an untenable conclusion: that time has no being. Ricoeur sums up the problem when he notes that “…the future is not yet, the past is no longer, and the present does not remain.” [TN v. 1 p. 7] Yet, despite such an uncomfortable truth, we stubbornly insist on speaking of time as something that has being and exists. However, if time has no being, if the present has no duration, how is it that we measure or even grasp time? According to Ricoeur, what holds firm against the ambush of doubt is “experience articulated by language and enlightened by intelligence” [TN v. 1 p. 9]. The ‘intelligence’ Ricoeur has in mind here is not methodically-based or mathematical inspired. It is rather closer to what we have described as ‘insight’ and the gathering wisdom that *phronetic* reasoning enacts through language. It is experience that confirms the being of time “by placing the past and the future within the present by bringing in memory and expectation” [TN v. 1 p. 8]. In Augustine’s thought, this ‘three-fold present’ reconfigures the extension of time as the *distention* [*distentio animi*] of the soul. Augustine uses the example of reciting a psalm to illustrate that in the activity of saying or performing a recitation one’s attention to the present is, at the same time, filled with anticipation of the whole, which gradually *contracts* while the memory of what has already been performed *extends*. Crucially, in *activity*, the present is distended to encompass the future and the past. This is not merely an intellectual process of gathering static anticipatory images of the future with static memories of the past and then washing them all together in the present. What is central for Augustine and Ricoeur is the practical, experientially grounded, performative *activity* presupposed in the notion of a three-fold present. In Ricoeur’s words, “it is no longer a question of either impression-images or anticipatory images, but of an action that shortens expectation and extends memory. The term
action and the verbal expression *agitum* ...convey the impulse that governs the whole process” [TN v. 1 p. 20].

But then, we may well ask, what happens *after* the recitation—what happens to the three-fold present once the ‘song’ or ‘psalm’ is over? Do we not then necessarily fall back into temporal *discord* and the aporetic abyss of time? Moreover, is the grasp of a three-fold present something that happens only in the activity of the individual soul or mind, and, if so, can we really say that our grasp of time is concrete and measurable outside of our own individual experience? Finally, the idea of the three-fold present is certainly a dynamic metaphor, but is the rich complexity of lived temporality to be reduced to a constructed format?

These questions urge Ricoeur to introduce a second thematic: where the lived experience of temporal *discordance* is confronted by the verbal experience of *concordance* that is discovered in Aristotle’s notion of *muthos* or emplotment. Emplotment is not Aristotle’s term but one Ricoeur uses in order to stress the activity of bringing together the various, episodic and disparate elements of life to expression by way of language in the form of a coherent story.

‘Emplotment’ is not a static concept, an abstract simplifying metaphor, or a heuristic device, but, rather, the ongoing practical activity of constructing or structuring various actions and events into an ordered whole, which has a beginning, a middle, and an end. It is this activity of bringing the disparate and *discordant* under the structuring activity of *concordant* emplotment that interests Ricoeur. This structuring activity is part of what it means to make sense of a life that is constantly in motion. I interpret Ricoeur’s notion of emplotment as practical reasoning and *phronesis* in action. Emplotment is an ongoing dynamic activity of articulating and rearticulating, producing and reproducing the elements, events and incidents of our experience. In reconfiguring experience emplotment implies both a capacity to hermeneutically reflect or
interpret, and to apply this understanding in a story that can be told to oneself and to others. We are able to accomplish this emplotting activity precisely because we are able to experience the world in a temporal way, and because we can reason phronetically—that is, we can grasp the particular in the context of the general and the general in light of the particular.

At the very beginning of the *Poetics* Aristotle announces that even if they differ in form, manner or means, epic poetry, tragedy, comedy, dithyrambic poetry and music share one essential feature: they are imitative (mimetic) arts. It may initially seem odd that Ricoeur would choose Aristotle to develop the notion of emplotment since the *Poetics* is a work primarily concerned with tragedy, an imitative art that takes dramatic rather than narrative form—it is, in other words, a ‘showing’ rather than ‘telling’. But aside from the issue of mimesis which will figure prominently in Ricoeur’s analysis, it is Aristotle’s description of what goes into the making of a plot that Ricoeur finds valuable. The activity of emplotment is the bringing together of different aspects of human activities—aspirations, incidents, reasons, causes, fortuitous events—within a temporally unified whole. Like the innovative, creative aspect of metaphor, emplotment brings, in linguistic form, a new possibility, “a new congruence in the organization of events” [*TN* v.1 p. ix]. In so doing, it converts discordant episodic time into concordant human time. Thus, Ricoeur tells us that, for Aristotle, to make up a plot is “…already to make the intelligible spring from the accidental, the universal from the singular, the necessary or the probable from the episodic”. [*TN* v. 1 p.41]
Ricoeur’s intention is not to offer a new interpretation of Aristotle, but, instead, to reconfigure the entire field of narrative through various points of departure that Aristotle provides. Whether the notion of narrative can bear the weight of a multitude of different sorts of discursive formations—epic, history, fiction, rhetorical speech, poetry and drama is certainly an open question. For our present purpose, however, we need only grasp that narrative is in an important sense something we can dispense with only if we are willing to risk our sense of ourselves as active agents who understand ourselves and others because we are capable of enacting a critical and temporal selfhood through *phronesis*—through our reasoning capacity to both remember and creatively anticipate in language through narrative. What Ricoeur draws from Aristotle is the idea that the mimetic arts are not merely imitative or static copies of the world, but express, through *poiesis*, the creative activity of *making*. I have already spoken of rhetoric as involving both a kind of deliberative activity (*phronesis*) and also as a kind of creative making (*techne*). Ricoeur’s notion of narrative emplotment and mimesis can likewise be described as involving both reasoning and creative elements. Thus, for Aristotle “…imitating or representing is a mimetic activity inasmuch as it produces something: namely the organization of events by emplotment”.188 Ricoeur affirms that for Aristotle the tragic poet must “subordinate the consideration of the characters to consideration of the action itself”.189 Aristotle is not, of course, interested in *muthos* as the bearer of temporality, but what Ricoeur points out that is of interest here is that neither is it *logos* which makes the plot of a tragedy intelligible. Indeed, “…what is at issue is an intelligibility appropriate to the field of *praxis*, not that of *theoria*, and therefore one neighboring on *phronesis*, which is the intelligent use of action” [TN v. 1 p. 40]. To
imitate action ‘well’, in tragedy, is to have grasped the intelligibility of human activity as a whole, not as isolated unrelated incidents through logic, but as gathered together through practical reasoning and *phronesis*.

We have stressed the notion that the narrative form, and narrating itself, presupposes a certain reasoning activity and a dimension of temporality. With this background in mind we can state more precisely how Ricoeur relates time and narrativizing activity through his understanding of a three-fold *mimesis*.\textsuperscript{190} In the simplest terms what Ricoeur calls *mimesis*\textsubscript{1} is the representation of our prefigured understanding of action. In other words, much like Gadamerian notions of prejudice and ‘effective historical consciousness’ *mimesis*\textsubscript{1} describes the pre-narratively organized practical world of intentions, norms, actions, motives, expectations, reasons, causes, responsibilities and conflicts that are already structured symbolically and temporally—what we already have to know and understand before we can even hope to bring together (or ‘configure’) actions and characters into a more concrete narrative whole. For example, in our everyday life we need to be able to distinguish human action from mere physical movement, we need to be able to grasp the heterogeneous elements such as circumstances, motives, intentions, reasons, differentiate objects from ourselves, and ourselves from others; we need to have already grasped, in some fashion, patterns of meaning, signs, cultural norms, symbols; finally, we must already have some sense that what happens to us occurs *in* time. To put this in another way *mimesis*\textsubscript{1} presupposes that we experience our own experience as both historically situated, and temporally framed. Further, we can say that we only grasp this notion of the experience of experiencing by way of practical reasoning, insight and *phronesis*. The vast action-oriented web of understanding, knowledge, critical discrimination, deliberative capacity
and concern that practical reasoning, insight and *phronesis* provides is also the condition of possibility for *mimesis*$_2$.

*Mimesis*$_2$ is the more explicit configuring or emplotting activity of bringing together all of the prefigured, pre-narrative elements of *mimesis*$_1$ into narrative or emplotted form as a story. To ‘configure’ can thus be seen in Gadamerian terms as a kind of hermeneutic-interpretive ‘seeing as’ or grasping how the individual parts or events of lived experience fit into a whole, and how this ‘whole’ gives meaning to the parts. ‘Configuring’ is the insight-oriented human capacity of bringing together heterogeneous elements, “agents, goals, means, interactions, circumstances, unexpected results” into a unified whole [TN V. 1 p. 65]. But mimetic activity does not end here—and this is where Ricoeur moves beyond Aristotle—for not only do we represent and configure (*emplot*) events, actions and persons in a narrative form, we also re-present them in the activity of listening and reading. This last reconfiguring activity Ricoeur designates as *mimesis*$_3$—analogous to what Gadamer might describe as application. If *mimesis*$_1$ describes our historicality or the situatedness of our understanding, then with *mimesis*$_2$ we enter, in Ricoeur’s words, the creative imaginative kingdom of the ‘*as if*’, and move beyond the confining realm of Aristotelian tragedy, to a dynamic mediation between pre-understanding (*mimesis*$_1$) and post-understanding (*mimesis*$_3$).$_{191}$

It is clear that while *mimesis*$_2$ provides a pivotal interpretive mediating role, it is *mimesis*$_3$ which marks the prominent departure from metaphor to narrative, for it is the latter that introduces the heretofore unthematized notion of the hermeneutic and applicative world that the reader brings to the text. This extra dimension of representation which coalesces in the notion of a ‘reader’ not only brings into sharp focus the practical issue of distinguishing the fictive from the historical, but it also fully opens up the ontological or *being* dimension. How so?

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Mimesis is that representational stage where the world of the text intersects with the world of the listener and the reader. In the first chapter we emphasized this latter interpretive level of mimesis in order to highlight the relation between rhetoric and hermeneutics. As speakers, listeners and readers we grasp ourselves and others by actively engaging in the world that the text brings before us—whether a tragic epic or play, a philosophical work, a speech or poem or simply in dialogue with another. In each case, it is practical reasoning that situates our understanding and enacts the emplotment of events and actions into meaningful sequences.

From the reverse perspective, Ricoeur’s elaboration of narrative gives to phronesis and practical reasoning a thoroughly radical and temporalizing character. In Chapter Two, I described kairos as a way of temporalizing phronesis. To embody kairos is to have seized the opportune moment when to speak to, relax or heighten once response in this particular contingent situation, because one has grasped insightfully the background hermeneutic context in light of a future possibility. This latter exercise is precisely phronetic reasoning and insight working together in the context of a temporal whole—that is, as a three-fold past-present-future understanding. I venture that what Ricoeur’s elaboration of mimesis finally achieves is the linguistification of this temporalizing kairotic moment of insight in the context of a narrated unity—whether this takes the form of individual or collective identity. In so doing, phronesis becomes a fully temporalized mode of practical reasoning. Phronesis is grasped through narrative, and narrative is understood by way of phronesis. Temporalizing phronesis and practical reason through narrative allows us to see, in a deeper, more radical way, how the particular situation is always framed and ultimately grasped in a story about the past and a critical insight into a possibly different future.
Grasping *phronesis* and practical reasoning within the framework of human finitude and historicality (Gadamer) and giving it a narrative temporal character (Ricoeur) finally enables us to reach beyond the confines of Aristotelian ethics and understand *phronesis* in language as the creative and critical means through which we bring together being and acting in every practical human endeavor. This, in no measure, means that we leave ethical recognition or moral obligation behind. Indeed, the experience of time as human time through narrative brings us to both an *ethical* and a *political* awareness of the individual and collective stories we *are*, and the perplexities and ambiguities of the human condition itself: here the fragility of existence, our incapacity or *refusal* to tell a story, the stark reality of suffering, the persistence and ubiquity of violence, all challenge our capacity to act, and compromise the hope of creatively imagining a better story, or of thinking a new possibility. It is, therefore, by respecting these very human limits, where a broader understanding of practical reasoning, *phronesis* and *Nous* (insight) enact a critical capacity that can respond to the unique and particular in terms of the general—where they can creatively think freedom as a practice through the effort to tell a better story of how we might ‘live well, with and for others, in just institutions’. To see how this effort might be realized in contemporary contexts or practices must, however, wait until we have allowed one of the most provocative and persistent critics of the Aristotelian perspective to now speak: Jürgen Habermas.

I have attempted to describe in the above, the experience we have of our fundamental historicality and temporality in language, in order to order to further enrich the concept of *phronesis* in the context of the complexities of a modern world. But the foregoing must lead us to ask a very basic question: Given a world where there is some sense of an integrated community whose participants share common goods, *phronesis* makes sense. But is this the world *we* live in? Can our reconfigured understanding of *phronesis* really supply us with the kind of critical
apparatus that can discern the modern complex and diverse power structures we inhabit, and the systemic distortions we are vulnerable to? Can it provide a moral counter-weight to the hegemony of instrumental reasoning? These are the kinds of questions that Jürgen Habermas’s complex critical social theory raises, and it to the latter we now turn.
Chapter Four

Hermeneutics and Critical Theory: Habermas’s Communicative Critique

The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.192

4.1 Introductory Remarks

The project of critical hermeneutics that I have articulated over the course of the past three chapters began with the claim that rhetorical expression and hermeneutic understanding are inextricably related, and that this could be illustrated in the aesthetic dimension of tragedy, and eventually at the level of philosophical reflection. I argued, from a more phenomenological perspective, that in this very relation between hermeneutics and rhetoric, something like a capacity for critical insight is enacted not by way of appeal to abstract theorizing or methodology, but, organically, within the very active doing and being with others which language makes possible. I elaborated this embodied critical dimension through the classical Aristotelian notion of phronesis, and a broader context of practical reasoning. Finally, the ancient concept of phronesis was extended beyond specifically ethical considerations and configured as a constitutive mode of reasoning that governed all our practical activities and interactions including understanding itself. I argued that not only is phronesis the principal reasoning mode through which we grasp and enact the historical and temporal dimensions of understanding, but that these latter dimensions serve as the means by which phronesis as a practical reasoning mode can be see as providing us with a way to understand how a critical orientation can emerge over
time in the very ‘doing of things’ with and among others. I have tried to give a gradually more intensified sense of how phronesis can be grasped as a critical mode of awareness and self-awareness implicated, enriched and elaborated through rhetoric, dialogue, narrative and in the very practice of understanding, interpretation and application.

The implicit wager behind this interpretive work was that phronesis and practical reasoning, beginning in Aristotle, arises out of our practical experience, and that an awareness of our fundamental historicality and temporal being in language allows us to see that it can, indeed, embody the sort of critical insightfulness that belongs to our understanding in every single one of our practical endeavors. However, before we can draw any conclusions about whether phronesis, along with the broader context of practical reasoning I have articulated, enacts a critically discerning perspective that can adequately address contemporary moral, political or occupational contexts, concerns and issues, we need to confront what might be considered a more ‘universalist’ moral perspective. The question which may now be pressed is whether phronesis and practical reasoning—even a more robust, temporally and historically reconfigured phronesis—can really supply us with the kind of critical framework that is capable of discerning and freeing us from the potentially distorting effects of modern complex institutional power structures, and the ubiquitous modes of instrumental reasoning which are reproduced in almost every aspect of our technological, social and political world. After all, phronesis surely could not have been conceived in a world of such complexity where there was no possibility of an integrated community whose participants shared common goods. If this description is an accurate representation of our present world—if we no longer have any possibility for creating, articulating or sustaining community or a shared understanding of eudaimonia as human
flourishing—then *phronesis*, as a critical mode of understanding, will appear to have very little traction for us, and we will be constrained to advert to a more abstract universal perspective.

Part of the wager here (following Gadamerian thinking) is that communities are not static social entities but ongoing, activity-oriented ‘events’ that are precisely made possible through language and what I have been describing as *phronesis* and practical reasoning. However difficult it might be in a modern world of instrumental relations to create and sustain communities, it is still the case that such communities exist and continue to be possible. Yet the complex contemporary world described above assumes that even given the possibility of community, we are still confronted by an untenable either/or—either that sort of practical reasoning which is concerned with the concrete and particular, or a kind of reasoning that articulates a more ‘universalist’ or transhistorical perspective. To be sure, what I have tried to articulate thus far is not that we need to sacrifice traditions, or universal perspectives, or general moral rules, in favor of a more particularizing perspective but, rather, that such traditions, rules and interpretive-universal perspectives are already assumed by *phronesis*. In other words, the *phronimos* is always formed by, and in the midst of, a tradition, set of moral rules, universal laws or occupational conventions. There are two important points to take note of here. The first is that so-called universal or trans-historical perspectives would not have any normative power over us unless they were articulated and understood through our particular experiences over time—and this is something that only practical reasoning and *phronesis*, as I have described it, can do. Secondly, the *critical* capacity of the *phronimos* does not lie in her ability to articulate or invoke rules or universal perspectives, but in her perspicacious reasoning and insightful grasp of what the present situation, issue, question or problem demands, as well as her grasp of how this demand may help us to elaborate, slightly correct or perhaps deepen our understanding of the
tradition, law or moral rule itself. It is this ‘to and fro’ movement between the particular and the universal that defines the ‘critical being’ of *phronesis*, insight (*nous*) and the elements of a broadened practical reasoning.

If, however, I am to make the case for a critical hermeneutics through *phronesis* persuasive to a more contemporary context of thinking, I must now allow it to be challenged by one of the most important thinkers of the 20th century, and certainly the most familiar spokesperson of the Frankfurt school of critical theory. What Jürgen Habermas brings to the debate is a profound grasp of the historical conditions and philosophical debates that prefigure the Enlightenment as well as a post-enlightenment multi-disciplinary and often trenchant analysis of the present world of complex social and institutional arrangements. Having said this, we will begin in somewhat reductive fashion by distilling from Habermas’s many writings two distinct proposals that taken together comprise the essence of his critical project:

1. An *immanent* critique of instrumental rationality that exposes an emancipatory cognitive interest, and provides the condition of possibility for critically oriented social sciences.

2. The *reconstructive-pragmatic* critique of language that exposes the conditions of possibility for undistorted communication, and the telos of uncoerced rational understanding and agreement which provides the requisite normative foundations for a contemporary critical orientation in both morality and law.

What we will discover is that these two proposals are arrived at through what can be described as ‘immanent critique’. This fact will be important in grasping how indebted Habermas’s critical moral, legal and social theory is to what we have described as critical
‘insight’ grounded on experience, to Hegel (and the concept of ‘negation’) and, in fact, to Gadamerian hermeneutics and *phronesis* itself. This is not a conclusion Habermas himself would necessarily agree with. Moreover, it is a thesis that will only be capable of being illustrated over the course of the next two chapters. My present aim is to begin by giving an historical conceptual background to Habermas’s critical project, and the Frankfurt school of critical theory, and thereafter to explicate Habermas’s critical theory in light of this latter history. Although the progression of Habermas’s thinking has taken a number of turns and been elaborated in a truly astonishing multitude of discourses, we will allow ourselves the conceptual conceit of assuming that despite these many different configurations Habermas has never withdrawn from the two basic critical-emancipatory proposals noted above.

My express purpose is to explicate the above proposals in a careful manner, and with as much detail as possible. However, I also need to provide something in the way of a conceptual historical background so that we can better grasp what gives rise to the thinking of the Frankfurt school, and, in particular, to Habermas’s own emancipatory project. This latter will be, of necessity, somewhat truncated, but its usefulness will become more apparent as we proceed.

4.2 *A Historical-Conceptual Background*

One cannot take up the history of the rise of critique and critical philosophy during the 18th and 19th century without remarking on the nascent optimism presupposed in the notion of critique and the critical as embodying change, transformation, and even revolution. Moreover, it would be impossible to understand the idea of ‘critique’ and the development of modern critical theory without grasping the conceptual-historical origins (and often disguised political aims) that
took shape in the critical philosophies of Kant, Hegel, and Marx. While this may appear as an impractical task to carry out in a short space, we can at least attempt to discover the sorts of questions that the concept of critique poses. Philosophy always begins with a question. In this case we can ask what does the concept of critique entail, or perhaps better, what must a ‘critical’ philosophy amount to?

The answer is, as always, varied and somewhat ambiguous. We usually understand critique as directed specifically to some particular object, subject matter, practice, discourse or perspective. Thus, to embody a critical attitude is perhaps to be able to employ a method or a number of reliable procedures that will help us to find gaps in reasoning, omissions, errors, or faults in a written work. Relatedly, criticism can be seen as the particular practice of assessing or evaluating an art object or performance. But critique can also be a defined as a wide-ranging systematic inquiry, or a comprehensive orientation that describes how we discern and distinguish valuable and praiseworthy practices, discourses and institutions from aberrant or distorted ones. At this level, philosophical inquiry and critical theory/practice appear to overlap. However, as Seyla Benhabib points out, what is interesting from the very start is that both words ‘critique’ (kritikē) and ‘crisis’ have a common origin in the Greek word krisis. The closest translation of this Greek word is not all that far removed from what we have described as practical reason—that is, a capacity to distinguish, discern and ‘judge’. But the appearance of the French word ‘critique’ in the first years of the eighteenth century already had embedded within it the idea of ‘crisis’ as marking the need for a decisive ‘turning’ from instability and illusion, to stability and truth. The vehicle that would carry this expansive and revolutionary impetus could not be particular-oriented, practically embedded reason, but would have to be something much grander in pretension and scope. In other words, the capacity to discern and judge—what we have
hitherto described, through the ancient concept as *phronesis*, as something which arises organically through experience over time in a way that brings together being and acting—would be largely displaced by an understanding of critical discernment realized through the power of abstract, disengaged reason. This is apparently not a capacity developed over time and elaborated with and among others through dialogue, but something that is situated in either the ‘eternal’ realm of mathematics, or in the individual, autonomous, reasoning mind.\textsuperscript{194}

I propose here what may be described, in somewhat oversimplified terms, as three revolutionary moments which mark the demise of *phronesis* and the embodied notion of critical acting-being. The first of these is the mathematically founded universalizing of scientific method which not only displaces the teleological world view, but becomes the paradigmatic means through which any critical understanding must proceed; the second is the mind-body dualism that characterizes Cartesian philosophy, and the third is the notion of critique as something which must be justified on *a priori* grounds.\textsuperscript{195} Interestingly, what our conceptual history of the notion of the critical will show is that the rise of scientific abstraction and these three presuppositions can be illuminated through the phenomenological perspective that points us back in the direction of *phronesis* and a more situated context of reasoning.

Our short history begins in 1267 with Roger Bacon, and the effort to unify all of the sciences under mathematics. The lofty purpose of the latter’s *Opus Majus* was to correlate the learning of the sciences in order to make them available to the Church, and thereby ‘elevate and save mankind’.\textsuperscript{196} Bacon’s abstract distillation of a ‘method of experiment’ from a concrete problem would give to all sciences a universally valid procedure. He tells us that “a thorough consideration of knowledge consists of two things: perception of what is necessary to obtain it, and then the method of applying it to all matter that they may be directed by its means in the
To be sure, this is a philosophical approach that presumes that philosophy is partial and imperfect and only exists ‘through the influence of divine illumination’. But Bacon begins in a way that is strikingly familiar to anyone who has read Descartes *Discourse on Method* or *Meditations*. Thus, for Bacon true wisdom implies: 1. sound methods of gaining knowledge; 2. the application of knowledge to important purposes. Yet, access to truth is not something ready to hand or simply something we can read off of nature; rather, it “lies hidden in the deep and is placed in the abyss”, and the imperfect human mind is itself subject to error. There are four obstacles to truth: submission to faulty and unworthy authority, influence of custom, popular prejudice, and concealment of our own ignorance. Authority, habit and prejudice can sometimes lead to truth, but, Bacon warns, these latter will more often lead us into error. Since we cannot depend on our own experience or traditions to discover the truth, we must rely on something external: namely, scientific method. The universalizing of method is, in an important way, a feature of science that arises naturally out of the veneration of abstract mathematics. For Bacon, logic, and indeed all of the sciences, depend on, and are verified through, mathematics and it is mathematical method that provides the form for a generalized understanding of the critical and of critique. Mathematical knowledge is, for Bacon, ‘innate.’ Accordingly, abstract mathematics is as close to divine intellect as human intellect can ever hope to be. We have then, with Roger Bacon, a clear notion of the critical as responding to the crisis of knowledge that occurs when unquestioned customs, traditions and prejudices effectively conceal truth. Secondly, we have a notion of the critical as that which is founded upon the appeal to both abstract mathematics and scientific method.

Almost four hundred years later, in 1623, Galileo published *The Assayer*. By this time natural philosophy and mathematics had become the medium for expressing the very laws of
nature. In a mocking diatribe against Horatio Grassi (who took the penname Lothario Sarsi) Galileo writes:

…In Sarsi I seem to discern the firm belief that in philosophizing one must support oneself upon the opinion of some celebrated author, as if our minds ought to remain completely sterile and barren unless wedded to the reasoning of some other person. Possibly he thinks that philosophy is a book of fiction by some writer, like the Iliad or Orlando Furioso, productions in which the least important thing is whether what is written there is true. Well, Sarsi, that is not how matters stand. Philosophy is written in this grand book, the universe, which stands continually open to our gaze. But the book cannot be understood unless one first learns to comprehend the language and read the letters in which it is composed. It is written in the language of mathematics, and its characters are triangles, circles, and other geometric figures without which it is humanly impossible to understand a single word of it; without these, one wanders about in a dark labyrinth.201

Some few years later (1637) we can see how the languages of geometry and algebra have become, for Descartes, the very model for method itself: “For, after all, the method which teaches us to follow the right order, and to enumerate exactly all the elements of a problem, covers everything that gives certainty to the rules of arithmetic.”202 In the embrace of the virtue of method and mathematical abstraction, we can also recall what Husserl, in The Crisis of European Sciences, described as ‘the mathematization of nature’ and inevitably of the lifeworld itself.203 Implicit in this move toward mathematicization is not only the narrowing of Aristotle’s
more encompassing understanding of reason, but also the rejection of teleology and purposive rationality in favor of the experimental method and apparently truth-revealing mathematics.

Moreover, the momentum that defines the gradual preeminence of abstract method as the singular bearer of truth, must inevitably gives rise to the view that method must be something which unfolds neutrally outside of history—and indeed outside of any association with the religious and the political. To be truly ‘critical’ one must stand outside of history and politics. Only then can mankind truly progress. To critically discover the truth of the future we must escape the shackles of the historical and the political. Finally, and paradoxically, it is determined by Descartes that the final objective truth discovered by way of method is that the very medium through which method originates, and must be perfected, is the subjective disembodied mind. The far-reaching consequences of Cartesian dualism for epistemology, not to mention the ramifying effects it had upon the social, political and ethical spheres cannot be overestimated. The body for Descartes is not knowable as the ‘lived body’ or the place where we come into being in a multitude of involvements with our environment and others; it is an abstract ‘object’. My body cannot be the locus of my experience—it cannot be that which knowingly lives, speaks, hears, sees, intends, expresses joy, and finds its way around the house, because all of these activities are, in fact, dubitable. There can be no room in such an account for what we have described as the bringing together of embodied being and acting which Aristotle’s understanding of phronesis presupposes.

What we can gather from the above, is that by the time of Descartes the notion of methodical critique is at one with methodical doubt. We move from abstract mathematics to abstract method inspired by mathematical form, but carried out by res cogitans. The movement of rational justification is from an ‘outward certainty’ divinely and externally secured through
mathematics to an ‘inward one’ internally guaranteed by ‘thinking substance’. With Descartes, the only safe place left is to be found in the critical refuge provided by *res cogitans*, the individual mind. This subject-oriented perspective views the world as an object—as a vast opportunity for technical mastery and control. What, therefore, becomes apparent through the rise of science and mathematical models of critique, is the idea that we can have ‘objective’ control and mastery over nature and ourselves as subjects. Virtually all political, economic, technical and institutional goals and perspectives will inevitably see themselves through this model of instrumentalizing understanding. Ideally, what will be removed from this picture is the notion of *phronetic* reasoning as participative; as embodying a shared telos of flourishing by way of the enacted reasoning realm of human possibilities, of creativity, spontaneity, dialogue and thinking-acting being with and among others.

To be sure, the competing virtue of autonomy and the hermeneutics of suspicion regarding the moral authority of myth, magic and religion begin to gradually emerge, and it is here that we meet up with Kant’s enthusiastic Enlightenment directive: “Have the courage to use your own understanding!” At some level, we can all certainly share in Kant’s enthusiasm. However, and rather paradoxically, as instrumental rationality becomes more pervasive, the virtue of ‘autonomy’ is less and less connected to the world of practical heteronomous human relations with others. Autonomy will, in fact, become imprisoned within a self that is hermetically sealed off from ‘the other’. Indeed, it is this instrumentally-founded notion of autonomy that will precisely enable the further colonization of instrumental forms of reasoning in human social and institutional settings—something which the Frankfurt school will take notice of. What inspires, accelerates and solidifies the historical turn to the autonomous individual as the foundation of critical possibility is a rich and interesting social and political upheaval. Yet, it
would take a certain kind of courage and audacity to reconfigure the very idea of the critical as a
generalized critique of the limits every form of knowledge and, indeed, a critique of what was
then understood as the ‘knowing subject.’

One hundred and fifty years after Descartes, in 1787, Kant published the 2nd edition of the
Critique of Pure Reason—which might have been alternately entitled ‘On the Limits and Scope
of Pure Reason’. ‘Pure’ reason is reason cleansed or purged of the material of senses, of opinion
and of the aid of experience. The purity of a priori reason here is not something we can know
through experience or deductive mathematical proof. Rather, its purity is an effect of it being
exclusively that which can only be intuitively grasped in the mind. It is not the case that Kant has
given up on the idea that mathematics provides certain knowledge. It is rather that he thinks it
will take more than mathematics to ground the sort of knowledge we are actually capable of. As
it turns out ‘pure reason’ is rather limited to form without content. Critical knowledge will,
therefore, have to make room for both the empirical and the rational—for the formal and the
substantive. Neither does Kant want to do away with metaphysics. Metaphysics is indispensible.
Despite the fashionable (and rather contrived) indifference to it, the more mature judgment of the
age could no longer stand idly by and just let things carry on under the reign of the skeptic. The
mission of the age of critique and criticism would in 1787 be to “…undertake anew the most
difficult of all its tasks, namely that of self knowledge, and institute a tribunal which will assure
reason of its lawful claims, not by despotic decrees but in accordance with its own eternal and
unalterable laws. This tribunal is no other than the critique of pure reason.”209 The language
here is telling. Revolution is not just something that occurs only in the social and political sphere,
but also at the philosophical level—in a revolutionary understanding of what we can reasonably
and justifiably claim to know. Again, we can take notice of two important shifts that, by degrees,
move reason to a more internal context of justification. The first is the shift away from pure mathematics and logic: thus, for Kant deductive or demonstrative logic is a method that will only lead us to infinite contradiction and aporiae. We must not look to these external proofs, but, rather, within our own structured understanding, if we want to encounter the world critically. Secondly, there is a shift from the Cartesian knowing subject to a ‘phenomenological’ subject which can no longer claim to know the world ‘as it is in itself’, but can only claim to know the world as it appears, through the a priori structure of its own understanding. This turn rather changes the critical game. We critically orient ourselves not through mathematics or the objective observation of nature, or the eternal and unchangeable laws of the world, but by way of autonomously experiencing the world as something, and making an attempt through the a priori categories of our own understanding to describe the very form of this experiencing ‘as’. This is not a simple or trivial shift of critical perspective—it is a revolutionary resituating of our fundamental understanding of critique, and the striving towards a new unfolding of critical understanding, and indeed of our knowing-perspective itself. What I want to track here is movement from an implicit phenomenologically-oriented Kantian ‘critique of a priori reason’ to a more explicit phenomenologically-oriented Hegelian notion of immanent critique.

We can begin by taking note of the fact that in that space between the French and American revolutions when Kant’s own ‘Copernican revolution’ is inaugurated, ‘critique’ itself takes on a properly revolutionary form. With this new and revolutionary awareness of its own legislative power, the Kantian critical faculty of knowledge will not gather wisdom by submitting to what is given to us in experience; it will order nature to conform and submit to its a priori structured authority. When the crisis of legitimation of reason becomes manifest as a crisis, a revolutionary reversal will be necessary, since knowing will have been put into jeopardy by
Hume’s skepticism. The ‘crisis’ of knowledge precisely demands a ‘critique’ of the limits of knowing in order to allow the subject to come to an awareness of his own critical legislative faculties. In the preface to the second edition of the Critique of Pure Reason Kant informs us that his treatise “marks out the whole plan of the science [of metaphysics] both as regards its limits and as regards its entire internal structure”.  A critique is thus, for Kant, the establishing of a boundary or limit. Moreover, the effort to establish such an epistemological limit is a necessary propaedeutic to any further discussion of more urgent practical-moral concerns. As important as such a critique was for the sciences, the revolution against the illegitimate authority of skepticism was most assuredly also a call for human freedom and individual emancipation. In other words, to discover what we can legitimately know, to discern the limits of speculative reason—to narrow it or distill it down to its most provable synthetic a priori propositions—is a necessary task if we are to subsequently address the more significant questions of ‘what we ought to do’ and ‘what we can hope for’.

What is important here is the notion of breadth. We are not speaking of the critical as a particular criticism or a specific critical inquiry. Nor are we describing the critical as embodied practical knowing and gathering of wisdom in the Aristotelian sense. Instead, at a structural level the critique of reason encompasses and circumscribes the entire field of knowing, while it simultaneously expresses an emancipatory desire to be freed from the illusions of metaphysics and the distortions of skepticism—all for the sake of establishing legislative limits while reserving a place for human freedom (and no doubt, for faith). At the level of the individual, the critical orientation of the subject is the discovery of the intuitive form of our experience itself. Kant tells us from the very beginning that the effort to establish limits to reason—to ‘discipline’ reason—is at one with putting the latter on ‘the secure path of a science’ [CPR Bvii p. 17], but
what he says near the end of the *Preface* is far more telling in terms of what the role of critique
is: “Dogmatism is…the dogmatic procedure of pure reason, *without previous criticism of its own
powers*” [CPR Bxxxv p. 32]. The ‘critique of reason’ must self-reflexively examine itself.211

We can sum up what we have said so far in this condensed history of critique and the
critical, as the determined effort to interpret the justification of knowledge initially as the
securing of abstract universal and necessary knowledge that takes mathematical, methodological
or transcendental form in order to eventually diagnose, revolutionize and emancipate us from
ignorance, illusion, superstition and skepticism. What these indices of the critical and ‘critique’
reveal, is that certain historical and conceptual conditions *already* had given rise to what might
be called an ‘emancipatory interest’, expressed through an abstract reasoning process or *a priori*
structure of the mind. The movement of thinking that we have witnessed, however, situates the
critical both in terms of a certain breadth, but also in terms of a certain trajectory from ‘external
to internal’ legitimating grounds. Even though this move to the ‘internal’ can be glimpsed in
Kant’s phenomenological understanding of critical reason, it is not until Hegel that the latter
internal or *immanent* notion of the critical becomes manifest.

We can say, without controversy, that there is something revolutionary, once again, in
Hegel’s notion of critique as *immanent* critique. Immanent critique is not the appeal to something
‘transcendent’ or outside of history and time. It is, in fact, the discovery, uncovering or
disclosure of critical resources already *within* an historical understanding, or, more concretely, a
set of social or cultural practices. This critical approach has affinities with hermeneutic
understanding as we have described it in Gadamer, and also of the notion of critical *phronesis*
that we developed through Aristotle.212 What is noteworthy for our purposes here is that
immanent critique would be inconceivable if we did not in the first place already *share* certain
interpretations, norms, self-understandings, practices, evaluative criteria and moral contexts of understanding or good. In other words, the presupposition here is that the critical is not critical because it appeals to something outside of history or human experience, but critical precisely because it is capable of grasping the critical resources and possibilities within concrete histories, practices and human experience itself. This is what Hegel’s phenomenology attempts to do. For the latter, phenomenology is the medium through which the implicit logic of Kant’s Copernican turn in philosophy unfolds as ‘experience becoming aware of itself’ in the very experience of experiencing. But it is important to grasp that Hegel is not just reading a script or recording what happens; he is helping us to see the extraordinarily multivalent and dynamic properties of human experience and history itself. For Hegel, coming to know ourselves and the world—once again, from a phenomenological perspective—is acknowledging our practically-oriented, thinking activity, not as something we own or determine, but something we participate in. If philosophy is to attain an authentic ‘scientific’ status it will not be the appeal to a mathematically-grounded external method that gets us there—nor will we be able to reduce our knowing to (Kantian) a priori formal structures, ‘lifeless universals’ or a table of essences. It is not mathematics, the method of assertion and refutation that is central, for

… the way of asserting a proposition, adducing reasons for it, and in the same way refuting its opposite by reasons, is not the form in which truth can appear. Truth is its own self-movement, whereas the method just described is the mode of cognition that remains external to its material. Hence it is peculiar to mathematics, and must be left to that science.213 [Emphasis added]
In this sense, a ‘critical’ perspective is formed through the gradual grasp of what shows itself in the very way that it shows itself in our experience. But phenomena are not always apparent, or something we can simply ‘read off the surface’. We have to work, we have to uncover, and we have to make an effort to grasp the phenomena of the world. This takes time and perseverance. To undertake such a critical effort is not, for Hegel, a matter of “material thinking, a contingent consciousness that is absorbed only in material stuff, and therefore finds it hard work to lift the [thinking] self clear of such matter, and to be with itself alone”\(^{214}\) nor is it simply ‘free from all content’—that is, a transcendental method of arguing back to the a priori conditions of possibility. The critical for Hegel is the ‘letting go’ or ‘letting be’ of thinking “into the immanent rhythm of the Notion”.\(^{215}\) And the immanent rhythm of the Notion takes place in a dialectical movement… “that generates itself, going forth from, and returning to, itself.”\(^{216}\) What this means is that the critical is not critical insofar as it appeals to an external transcendent authority, but insofar as it reveals, through an immanent dialectic (i.e. through negation and the negation of negation), the very tensions and conflicts that take shape in the history of our experience of experiencing our understanding. Thus, the fact that we are indeed historical beings is what implicitly allows us to experience the world as critical beings, with and among others.\(^{217}\) That reason is embedded in history is also implicitly a critique of the pretensions of Kantian a priori transcendental philosophy.

How does Hegel exemplify this notion of immanent critique? In a striking example that he will take up at the phenomenological level of human experience, he demonstrates how the fundamental human striving to recognize oneself as another is masked or obscured by relations of power. He shows through the dialectical relation of master and slave that self-consciousness exists ‘in and for itself’, only in its acknowledgement of the other—that is, it recognizes itself
insofar as it recognizes another.\textsuperscript{218} For my purpose, I will interpret this latter dialectic precisely as an illustration of the ongoing striving and struggle that is ‘always already’ a part of our coming to an awareness of self through the recognition of another. However, just as importantly, I want to claim that the master-slave dialectic is the first exemplar of a revolutionary understanding that stipulates we can have immanent \textit{reflective} knowledge of the world and of ourselves that is not grounded in the model of either the empirical positivist sciences, or the theoretical sciences. Immanent critique is an experientially-grounded undertaking that unfolds in the concrete contexts that we find ourselves in. It presupposes a notion of reason which is not transcendent or mathematical, but that still allows us to read ‘beneath the surface structure’ of things and discover something that was not fully apparent or visible. This turns out not to be reason that exists eternally or ‘outside of history’, but reason that is precisely an effect of historical understanding and immanent within human experience. In this sense, immanent critique will eventually link us back to our own grasp of the critical as that which is enacted in through \textit{phronesis} and concrete practical contexts of thinking-acting-desiring being.\textsuperscript{219}

In our short conceptual historical analysis we have, thus far, tried to illustrate how critique and crisis work together, and we have traced a path of critical awareness that migrated from an externalizing perspective where the absolute authority of divine illumination, abstract mathematics or methodical doubt provide a critical point of departure, to an ‘internal’ Kantian transcendental notion of critique, and thence to a Hegelian inspired \textit{immanent} notion of critique and critical being. What is crucially important in Hegel is how negation operates as a productive driving force which enables or enacts the possibility of immanent critique. We have already spoken of the experience of negation in dialogue as that which impels Gadamer’s notion of understanding. Just as it was for Gadamer, so with Hegel, \textit{negation} is not something that derives
from the outside or an external source, but is rather discovered as internal or *immanent* within the movement of thinking. Moreover, the immanent self-movement of thinking through negation, and the ‘negation of negation’ is the practical means through which critical awareness emerges. This is a critical awareness that develops organically whereby we are able to insightfully look ‘beneath the surface of things,’ and expose or uncover contradictions, inconsistencies and distortions in reasoning and language. What I am suggesting here, as a way of illuminating the present thesis in light of this conceptual history and what has been previously argued, is that there is a productive, creative and critical aspect of practical reasoning that is exposed once the relation between immanent critical reason, productive negation and creative insight is revealed. We can get a better sense of this intimate relation through Marx and the early critical theorists.

In a way, Marx’s configuration of dialectic, despite its own claim that it begins from a concrete anthropology, inevitably appeals to more abstract economic analyses which are grounded in scientific method. In what follows I want to show how Marx grasps the immanent Hegelian dialectic within a concrete anthropological framework. This is what I designate as the third revolutionary turn in my narrative-historical and conceptual unfolding of critique and the critical. It can be understood as both a continuation of a crisis-oriented form of Hegelian immanent critique, and a reconfiguring of this latter within a context where philosophy and empirically based socio-economic theory are now inextricably tied together. Hence, with Marx we understand ourselves not primarily as Kantian transcendental subjects or Hegelian self-consciousness beings, but as an ‘ensemble of practical, social and economic relations’. In his early writings, Marx’s immanent critical approach is aimed at exposing the inherent contradictions within capitalist forms of labor, and in so doing liberating the suffering and alienation of actual concrete individuals, communities, and societies. In this sense, it is very
clearly a ‘materialist’ critique of Hegelian thinking. Yet though ‘concrete’ Marx’s immanent form of critique is carried through at a distinctively philosophical level in the discussion of alienated labour. This should not be at all surprising given Hegel’s profound philosophical influence on Marx. In his later writings, however, Marx enlists the help of economic and social theory in order to expose the internal contradictions that are hidden beneath the structures of capitalist production. It is this latter configuration of immanent critique married to an empirically oriented methodological approach that promises to carry forward a revolutionary program of change.

It is clear that Marx wants to develop a praxis that preserves something of the Hegelian immanent movement towards self-consciousness, and the materialist Feuerbachian notion of species-being. In the introduction to his 1844 essay “A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” he makes two important claims: “For Germany, the criticism of religion has been essentially completed, and the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism.” He is, of course referring here to Feuerbach and the latter’s embracing critique of religion. But the second claim is much more interesting. In essence, it is both a statement and a programmatic call to action that virtually every critique of ideology thereafter will reproduce—that is, firstly, the bringing to consciousness through immanent criticism something that has hitherto been obscured by ideology, and, second, the effecting of a reversal or inversion of an originally spurious inversion—the negation of negation. We need to look at both of these claims.

It may initially be wondered why Marx begins with religion, when it is the political and economic framework that he is more interested in. However, there are definite affinities between dogmatic religious doctrine, and an unquestioned faith in capitalism. The ideology of religion, like that of capitalist production, presupposes and trades on an illusory concept of the human.
This, according to Marx, must be reversed—that is, it must been demonstrated through immanent critique that capitalist production pretends to be something that is necessary and true, but is rather something that rests on an illusory and ultimately human-destroying concept of alienated labor.223

At this point however, the unmasking work of immanent critique is still situated at a conceptual philosophical level—for Marx this conceptual critique is something that needs to be done if only to bring the world of anachronistic German politics to some level of self-awareness respecting their penchant for abstraction. To complete the move towards a concrete praxis revealing the ideological distortions of capitalist production, Marx found it necessary to bring together Feuerbach’s materialist critical analysis and Hegel’s notion of immanent critique. What we must not fail to notice here is that, for Marx, Hegel’s version of immanent critique fails. Hegel’s immanent ‘critical’ orientation is not real but only apparent. It is apparent insofar as it is formal and abstract, and it is formal and abstract because human beings are conceived in a merely abstract way as mere ‘self-consciousness’. Hegelian immanent critique, in its abstract dialectical form, mistakes truly human life, suffering and estrangement, for an abstract essence that is nothing but consciousness:

…Hegel having posited man as equivalent to self-consciousness, the estranged object – the estranged essential reality of man – is nothing but consciousness, the thought of estrangement merely – estrangement’s abstract and therefore empty and unreal expression, negation. The supersession of the alienation is therefore likewise nothing but an abstract, empty supersession of that empty abstraction – the negation of the negation. The rich, living, sensuous, concrete activity of self-objectification is
therefore reduced to its mere abstraction, *absolute negativity* – an abstraction which is again fixed as such and considered as an independent activity – as sheer activity. Because this so-called negativity is nothing but the *abstract, empty* form of that real living act, its content can in consequence be merely a *formal* content produced by abstraction from all content.\(^{224}\)

For Marx, a critical orientation that separates the thought from the thinker, and describes only a conceptual abstract movement of thought, at the same time separates man from his natural material being—as a physical being “endowed with eyes, ears, etc., and living in society, in the world, and in nature”.\(^{225}\) However, in Marx’s view this can only be a pseudo-critical orientation—indeed it is implicitly a disavowal of the ‘critical’ in favour of the refuge provided by *intuition*—a mystification not a concrete reality. Thus, he tells us that “…the *mystical* feeling which drives the philosopher forward from abstract thinking to intuiting is *boredom* – the longing for content.”\(^{226}\)

However, at this point Marx himself is still fighting Hegel on *conceptual* grounds, and his notions of class, of human need and of the proletarian are conceptual constructions waiting to be given concrete meaning through the empirical social sciences. The critical program of this early stage is to effect a critical reversal from the abstract idea to the concrete materialist concept by dissolving speculative illusions about civil society, the family and labour. Thus, despite the criticism of Hegel, there is also a profound respect for the achievements of his phenomenology:

The outstanding achievement of Hegel’s *Phänomenologie* and of its final outcome, the dialectic of negativity as the moving and generating principle, is thus first that
Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, conceives objectification as loss of the object, as alienation and as transcendence of this alienation; that he thus grasps the essence of labour and comprehends objective man – true, because real man – as the outcome of man’s own labour. The real, active orientation of man to himself as a species-being, or his manifestation as a real species-being (i.e., as a human being), is only possible if he really brings out all his species-powers – something which in turn is only possible through the cooperative action of all of mankind, only as the result of history – and treats these powers as objects: and this, to begin with, is again only possible in the form of estrangement.\footnote{227}

Through his reading of Hegel Marx is able to identify the very significant role that the concept of negation plays in thinking. Moreover, Hegel has helped him grasp that existing conditions can be penetrated and exposed through immanent critique. Finally, Marx’s dialectical critical orientation parallels Hegel’s insofar as it is grounded in the assumption that each developmental stage of social and economic history has within it certain tensions and conflicts. These latter tensions and conflicts take definitive shape over time in various concrete practices. As they do, it becomes evident that the existing social conditions are actually an impediment to any further progress. The new social stage is not posed as a transhistorical ideal or utopia, but as a real existing movement that will inevitably revolutionize the existing way of things. What becomes apparent, at this point, is that if the real existing movement can be empirically observed, and if the value of social progress is grounded on the extent to which it can accommodate and extend human capacities and human freedom, then the movement of historical development can be demonstrated not just through philosophy, but by way of a scientifically
grounded framework of social-empirical evidence and economic law. In this sense, philosophy can only take us so far—if we were interested only in describing and interpreting experience, we might be happy with philosophy, but in a concrete practical and material world, the point is to change things for the better. This will require not an elaboration of practical wisdom or Feuerbachian anthropology, but the objective science of empirically arrived at economic facts, and theoretically sustainable laws of motion that govern social and economic change on a broad historical scale. Hence, the immanent historical movement configured within a conceptual teleology is reconfigured as a scientifically grounded program towards the inevitable progression of human freedom in the realization of communism. In this way, immanent critique becomes an adjunct of scientific method and can be expressed in social and economic laws.228

4.3 The Rise of the Social and The Institute for Social Research

My narrative-conceptual history is by no means detailed or nuanced enough to stand on its own as a thoroughgoing philosophical-historical inquiry. However, it will be invaluable in helping us understood the philosophical issues that gripped the Frankfurt school, and, in particular, the thought of Habermas. After making some initial comments on the key early figures I will move to an extended analysis of Habermas’s notion of communicative action and rationality.

I have tried to underscore the fact that there are different ways of describing the critical impetus and various critiques, which are tied to various historically situated ways of understanding and crisis. There are also a number of differences between the way Marx, neo-Marxists and Critical theorists of the 20th century describe their particular critical projects. At the
same time, elements of each of the predecessor ‘critical theorists’ we have discussed so far can be discovered in more contemporary critical theorists. Thus, critique and critical understanding are viewed in a variety of ways: as the establishment of boundaries and limits, as embodying an abstract perspective, as a reflexive orientation, as something which must carried out by way of method or empirical scientific procedure, and as immanent within history, reason or socio-economic relations. All of these elements form the backdrop of a continuing contemporary debate about critical theory. However, what we have described so far is largely taken from a philosophical perspective. We have not discussed, at all, the other important historical precursor to modern critical theory: the rise of sociology and social theory. To do justice to this latter perspective we would need to ask how the notion of the ‘social’ or the ‘social group’ made its way into mainstream thought; was this a function of the rise of secularism, the lessening significance of family, industrial and economic expansion, the hegemony of the state and the concomitant impetus towards atomistic individualism, or some combination of all of these factors. We cannot possibly address these questions, since, to do justice to the sociological side of critical theory, would mean taking a long journey through classical social theorists such as Montesquieu, Rousseau, Comte, and more modern figures such as Weber, Simmel, Durkheim and Parsons. At best, what we can attempt here, is a reading of the classical critical theorists in a way that gives us some sense of the sorts of social questions that animated their critical enterprise.

One of the central themes of the earliest Frankfurt thinkers was the idea that a critical theory of society needed to go beyond the rigid disciplinary boundaries of traditional theory and positivist science. Marx’s own self-understanding of his project does not explicitly express itself as a new or revolutionary epistemology, even if it advocates a revolutionary program of
emancipation. To be sure, Marx may have believed that his reversal of Hegelian dialectic in a materialist dialectic would inevitably give rise to a necessary shift in our knowledge perspective. However, the ‘revolutionary interest’ Marx forwards is articulated at an emancipatory practical, economic, social and cultural level that is not easily reduced to merely epistemological considerations. Despite this, Marx would view his social ontology and his emancipatory program as actually made possible through a rigorous empirical and social-scientific analysis. In this sense, Marx was willing to accept many of the conventions of empirical social-scientific method, and the law-like axioms of Adam Smith’s economic theory. Given this, we can begin to see how important it was for the 20\textsuperscript{th} Century ‘Institute for Social Research’ to make explicit, in expressly epistemological terms, the implicit ‘false consciousness’ of conventional social science.\textsuperscript{230} There is, implicit in this effort, a desire to continue, but also to clarify, Marx’s emancipatory program by making explicit a certain way of knowing distinct from positivist empirical science and natural science. It is here that we meet up with Max Horkheimer’s inaugural 1937 essay “Traditional and Critical Theory”.\textsuperscript{231}

It is a traditional epistemological perspective exemplified through the model of objective empirical science that is on trial in this essay—not merely in terms of a particular method, but much more significantly, because this method exhibits all the properties of an illusory objectivity—of a \textit{false consciousness} .\textsuperscript{232} Critical theory will unmask the pretension that somehow the theories deduced by the social scientist as an neutral ‘observer of facts’ are in no way a reflection of certain beliefs, biases and socio-economic worldviews. This ‘phantom objectivity’, as Georg Lukács will call it in the context of reification, manages “an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature”.\textsuperscript{233} We can see, again, the primacy of immanent-oriented critique as a way of unmasking
the hegemony of what is looked upon now as a more traditional ‘objectivist’ understanding, scientifically grounded in social and economic theory. For Horkheimer, this ‘phantom’ objectivity means that traditional theory takes on an absolutizing structure “…as though it were grounded in the inner nature of knowledge as such, or justified in some other ahistorical way, and thus it became a reined, ideological category.”[TCT 194] Not only does traditional theory contain the presumption that it is an exclusive path to truth, but also the presumption that its ‘objective’ status immunizes it from any charge that it supports, legitimates or reproduces distorting ideologies and social practices.\(^{234}\) The problem is that holding to this traditional social knowledge perspective is implicitly being captive to a certain ideological world-view that trades in the illusion of objectivity. According to Horkheimer, we require a conception of theory that “overcomes the one-sidedness that necessarily arises when limited intellectual processes are detached from their matrix in the total activity of society.”[TCT 199] It is a narrow, limited, vision of traditional social theory, and the latter’s lack of critical self-scrutiny and self-understanding, that is brought into relief by immanent critique. According to Horkheimer, this means, in essence, that we will have to ‘radically and critically reconsider’ not just the purview of social theory, but also ‘the knowing individual as such’. [TCT 199]

We may well ask at this point, ‘what then is it about critical theory as theory that not only makes it distinct, but also distinctively capable of diagnosing the false consciousness inherent in traditional theory’? Even if we cannot appeal to trans-historical justification, is there not still a need for a distanciating perspective that allows us to get hold of how and why traditional social knowledge is distorted knowledge? What Horkheimer’s essay implies, is that if there is any critical possibility, it will have to come from an immanent-critical examination. In other words, we can only diagnose the distortions within traditional social theory by looking at the contradictory and inconsistent definitions
that undergird existing social and economic practices, and by uncovering the hidden prejudices and structural biases of traditional theory itself. Immanent critique would seem, therefore, to implicitly involve a kind of insightful grasp of systemic distortions beneath the surface of things. ‘Insight’ in this sense is the presupposition of a distanciating critical perspective through the immanent grasp of internal contradictions or distortions within existing understanding or theory. What I believe we can begin to see surfacing, at this point, is the idea of critical ‘theory’ as something rather closer to *phronetic* reasoning and practical insight distinct from the strictly empirical or hypothetical-deductive orientation employed in method-driven social-scientific reasoning. As *theory*, critical theory will have to be structured in such a way that it is does not, as traditional theory does, reproduce in an unthinking way, the present distortions which animate social and economic relations. The self-understanding of critical theory will then have to be ‘reflexive’ or ‘aware of itself’, and also of the distorting potential of contemporary forms of institutional power, and dominant explanatory economic, political and social ideologies. Only then can it hope to actively diagnose and transform society. But how does it do this?

According to Horkheimer, in critically engaging forms of oppression and exploitation critical social theory must bring together theory and practice. Moreover, the theoretical framework it employs cannot be abstract but must be *contextualized*—in other words, it must never assume that that which is under study can be understood by abstracting it from its cultural, political and historical context. In this sense, its critical target is not reducible to a singular science of economic relations, but it must seek to examine the various unselfconscious commitments, conflicts and internal contradictions of a (globally) wide range of economic, social and cultural practices. This directionality brings us right back to the notion of ‘immanent critique’. Immanent social critique is a kind of reflective knowing that enables us to self-reflexively grasp ourselves in the context of our
practical thinking activities, while exposing the internal contradictions within a particular social institutional form. Unlike scientific method and traditional social theory, immanent social critique has the capacity to critically engage not only other perspectives, but to interrogate its own understanding. It is this reflexive capacity (one that phronesis also implicitly embodies) that, in Horkheimer’s view, earns critical theory a critical status. Moreover, immanent critique provides the condition of possibility for change, without at the same time succumbing to the illusion that it speaks from an absolute perspective—and at bottom it provides the condition of possibility for alleviating the travails of all those who suffer, are powerless, and who we are actually in solidarity with.\footnote{235} We cannot, of course, do this alone, but neither can we rely on the notion that traditional theory will really be able to help us much:

Critical thinking is the function neither of the isolated individual nor of a sum-total of individuals. Its subject is rather a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and, finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the social totality and with nature. The subject is no mathematical point like the ego of bourgeois philosophy; his activity is the construction of the social present…. in genuinely critical thought, explanation signifies not only a logical process but a concrete historical one as well. In the course of it both the social structure as a whole and the relation of the theoretician to society are altered, that is both the subject and the role of thought are changed. [\textit{TCT} 210-211]

This view of immanent critique and criticism is shared by both Marcuse and Adorno.\footnote{236} To be sure, there are differences in subject matter and there are obviously distinctive styles. But the desire to
bring to our awareness, in an historically informed way, distorting and unjust social and culture relations in modern society, and the effort to make room for different interpretations that can disclose prevailing illusions and forms of propaganda is a Marxist project of emancipation continuous with Hegelian immanent critique.

What may appear somewhat paradoxical at this point is the fact that revolutionary transformation for the critical theorists became more of an abstract art than a continuous political struggle where concrete forms of practical resistance were linked to informed understandings.237 What Habermas will claim is that as much as early critical theory informs us through immanent critique of the internal contradictions and conflicts of contemporary economic practice and theory, it cannot really be a critically transforming enterprise simply because it is locked into a theorizing framework that increasingly manifests as a radical critique of reason itself. According to Habermas, critical theorists like Adorno, and other postmodern thinkers, undervalue the resources within reason, and inevitably become vulnerable to relativism, and the irreducible plurality of contingent incommensurable perspectives. Habermas worries that it is precisely this latter one-sided fixation on the distortions of reason that must eventually attenuate the critical and emancipatory potential within rationality, and ultimately result in dire social, moral and legal consequences. His philosophical efforts will therefore be focused on bringing to light the ‘still to be articulated’ critical potential of the Enlightenment itself. What we will notice in what follows, however, is that Habermas’s reconstruction of rationality retrieves the forgotten critical impetus of the Enlightenment by bringing together a situated, immanent [Hegelian] form of reason and a universal reconstructive [Kantian] perspective which, as it turns out, is ultimately still an immanent form of critique.
4.4 *Habermas I: The Immanent Critique of Instrumental Rationality*

As early as *Theory and Practice* Habermas had already formulated what would be one of the central ideas of his programatically elaborated critical framework—the reconstruction of reason in a way that is reflexively aware of its own history, and capable of forwarding an emancipatory program “by means of critical insight into relationships of power”.238 Such a reconstruction would bring together theory and practice in a modern context which left behind the rigid Aristotelian epistemological distinctions between *theoria* and *praxis*. Though it is clear that Habermas has critical social and political aspirations that are in keeping with the earliest emancipatory preoccupation of the Frankfurt school, his point of departure here is clearly epistemologically-oriented—that is, he asks ‘what sort of epistemic status can political and social theory lay claim to’?

In answering this question it becomes quite clear that, for Habermas, the political-ethical framework of Aristotelian practical reasoning is simply no longer relevant or capable of addressing complex social and institutional configurations of influence and power. Modern ethical and political thinking must then begin not with Aristotle but with an examination of Hobbes and Machiavelli. Indeed, Habermas relates that “two hundred years before its final defeat” Hobbes and Machiavelli had “completed the revolution in approach, in the whole manner of thinking” of Aristotelian political philosophy.239 From a Habermasian sociological perspective, politics is purely a question of acquiring and holding on to power. He is persuaded that we can no longer understand politics as the place where the ethical is realized; we can no longer count on the notion of the political as an exclusively praxis-oriented cultivation of character, distinct from *techne* and technical reasoning. According to this perspective, practical
philosophy and the situated understanding of reasoning that *phronesis* embodies simply cannot speak with relevance and critical perspicacity to the problems and distortions of modern complex mass society, nor can it hope to compete with the resources of an empirical-sociology modeled after the much more epistemologically rigorous sciences. Habermas thinks this was evident as early as Hobbes and Machiavelli. In the mechanistic world of Hobbes, human beings are objects—just one more ‘material’ for science to discover. As material objects within nature, human beings will ‘necessarily behave in a calculable manner’ if and when science constructs the proper conditions. The differences between the Aristotelian world-view and that of Hobbes become much more pronounced as reason becomes more elaborate and mathematized in the Enlightenment—to a point where the hazy notion of ‘insight’ and *phronetic* reasoning are eclipsed by ‘the precision of calculated technique’. ‘Politics’, Habermas concludes, “becomes the philosophy of the social, so that today scientific politics can, with justification, be counted among the social sciences”. To be sure, Habermas is, by no means, advocating a purely technical understanding of reason, nor does he think that theory and praxis should be considered intrinsically at odds with each other. Rather,

…a scientifically founded social philosophy which reflects on itself in the manner of philosophy of history must be concerned with a methodological approach which on the one hand, will correspond to a clarification of practical consciousness, but on the other, will not relinquish that methodological rigor which is the irreversible achievement of modern science.
Habermas does, in fact, want to hold to a practical orientation, and he does not think that the practical realm of action and thinking should be reduced to technical know-how. Indeed, if anything, because of the hegemonic status of the mechanistic world-view, it would be next to impossible for us to relevantly distinguish between the technical and the practical—they are considered the same. For Habermas the danger of a rationality confined to the technological horizon is that

…no attempt at all is made to attain a rational consensus on the part of citizens concerned with the practical control of their destiny. Its place is taken by the attempt to attain technical control over history by perfecting the administration of society, an attempt that is just as impractical as it is unhistorical.245

But Habermas refuses to give into either immobilizing despair or uncritical optimism regarding the promise of science. Instead, he takes up the notion of praxis initially in a Marxist voice, while carefully distinguishing his own epistemologically-oriented critical and historically self-conscious program from that of Marx.246

Thus, in Knowledge and Human Interests, Habermas is first and foremost concerned with providing an epistemological foundation for social critique.247 But it is also, interestingly, an epistemology which expresses a particular philosophical anthropological view of human possibility, and our cognitive limits. In this sense, he is still interested in the question of how an ideology reflects and distorts, and how it influences and sustains a false or distorted understanding. Habermas believes Marx missed an opportunity in not providing such an epistemological-interest orientation, for if he had done so he would probably not have
succumbed to the temptation of equating critique with natural science.\textsuperscript{248} Interestingly, it is Hegelian ‘immanent critique’ that is able to diagnose this failure. In other words, by showing the disparity between Marx’s self-understanding of economic and social science, and the concrete reality that underlies it (its purely instrumental approach to rationality) Habermas is able to mark where a break with positivism must occur.

To achieve this epistemological end Habermas develops a schematic outline of three kinds of knowing and connects these latter to specific research methods and particular human interests. Thus, ‘instrumental’ knowledge defined as causal/explanatory knowledge, presupposes a technically-oriented human interest in prediction, and must therefore be elaborated and sustained through empirical-analytic research methods; ‘practical’ knowledge expresses a human interest in ‘understanding through interpretation’, and this approach to knowledge must be grasped through the traditions and methods of hermeneutics; finally, emancipatory knowledge expresses a critically-oriented knowledge which presupposes that we have an emancipatory interest in freedom, preeminently realized through critical social science.\textsuperscript{249}

In normal parlance the word ‘emancipation’ evokes the idea that we can be redeemed or delivered from servitude, liberated from the circumstances that enslave us. This can take very particular form as liberation from physical captivity or enslavement, or it can describe a more general liberation from hidden forms of human and institutional domination, repression or subjugation. It is this latter notion of emancipation that Habermas is interested in, and it is an aim that he does not think can be achieved without help from both the historical-hermeneutic and the empirical-analytic sciences. Initially, however, Habermas wants to distinguish the interests that situate different forms of knowing, and then put forward the idea that an emancipatory interest can be satisfied only through a reflective immanent critique, and an epistemologically-oriented
reconstruction of the pragmatics of language. This critique and reconstruction discloses the normative content which is at the very heart of communicative action, and which all of us, as competent speakers, will immediately recognize and attest to. Importantly, our emancipatory interests can also be shown to be historically situated and made necessary and transparent to us, once we begin to grasp the extent to which modern institutional arrangements and social configurations rely almost exclusively on an often de-humanizing instrumental conception of rationality.

It is Weber’s notion of Zweckrationalität or means-ends rationality, the instrumental calculation of means-to-desired-ends, that helps Habermas here. Thus, an instrumental form of reason would treat objects only as a ‘means’ not as an ‘end in itself’. For example, from a purely profit-oriented economic perspective, nature would be looked upon merely as a means of prosperity. At a practical or social level, adopting an instrumental-rational perspective might help us to develop utilitarian cost-benefit analysis or strategic, calculative and efficient forms of social action and interaction. However, it would not be the communicative reasoning means through which we could advance our understanding, discover a new meaning, deliberate with others about what is best to do in this situation, debate the virtue of justice, discuss the merits of participatory democracy etc. It is not that instrumental rationality is of no value, or intrinsically evil—indeed, it is necessary for mere survival. The problem for Habermas is that in a corporate-capitalist system this mode of instrumental rationality becomes the yardstick by which we measure the legitimacy of all knowledge claims. Indeed, the instrumentally-oriented steering mechanisms of money and administrative rationality inevitably ‘colonize’ all human spheres of action and interaction. In this sense, the totalizing institutionalizing thrust of instrumental reason can easily overtake the potential for realizing a communicative understanding of action that is
“…governed by binding consensual norms, which define reciprocal expectations about behavior and which must be understood and recognized by at least two acting subjects.”251 At the same time, Habermas thinks that if we conclude, along with Adorno, that instrumental rationality is all-encompassing, we will tend not to look for other forms of reasoning which can precisely elaborate the moral aims of the enlightenment. Once again, it is a Hegelian inspired immanent critique that helps Habermas to diagnose the inherent incapacitating self-understanding of instrumental rationality. In other words, if a scientist or an economic theorist thought they could give a thorough picture of the world in purely instrumental rational terms they would end up by having to presuppose forms of intersubjectivity and non-instrumental categories of communicative interaction that would precisely contradict their own instrumental rational framework.252 Discovering or unveiling such a dependency is not accomplished by way of appeal to some external transcendent authority. Instead, it is exposed in the immanent critical insight that arises out of the concrete and particular practices undertaken by communicatively-oriented practitioners—practitioners who are interested not in manipulating or using one another for personal gain, but who want to open more comprehensive meanings and thereby advance a ‘telos of mutual understanding’.

At this early stage of his writing, Habermas is somewhat more sympathetic to a hermeneutic-emancipatory model than he will be later when he takes up a universalizing pragmatic language perspective. What is worth noting, however, is that he demonstrates his historical and structural depth-hermeneutic perspective by way of analogy with Freudian psychoanalysis. In other words, the goal of Freudian psychoanalysis is to bring to consciousness repressed fears and fantasies through dialogue with a therapist. If we think through this idea at a more social level we can see how the therapeutic-emancipatory thrust implicit in the model of
psychoanalytic critique is analogous to exposing our inner resistance to the truth, or bringing to our self-conscious awareness an unarticulated desire to cling to unreal or distorted perspectives. When such resistance is brought to the surface, we can then begin to insightfully grasp the (ideologically-generated) obstacles that have stood in the way of a more grounded and truth-oriented self-formation. In this sense, what we have described as immanent critique, shows itself by way of analogy with Freudian psychoanalysis.

This kind of psychoanalytic immanent critique has obvious affinities with Hegel’s master-slave dialectic as well as Marxist ideas of alienation and false consciousness. To be sure, Habermas was criticized relentlessly for not recognizing the implicit power imbalance between therapist and patient. Moreover, it was also pointed out that in many instances therapists are motivated by functional and not critical-emancipatory goals. However, what makes this an interesting and rather different early critical orientation is that it inescapably presupposes what we elaborated in our discussion of Gadamer: that through dialogue with another, we are able to achieve insight into our own limited, incomplete, and sometimes distorted thinking.

Clearly, Habermas did not think that ordinary hermeneutic method would alone suffice to bring us to a critical consciousness, since he saw it as merely ‘interpretive’ and therefore incapable of bringing to awareness the individual's distinctive self-formative processes. But notice that the goal of dissolving resistance is something that is realized by way of a dialogical encounter in both the psychoanalytic and in the practical or social setting. True, the assumption behind Freudian psychoanalysis is that the person who is undertaking the analysis is a ‘professional’ and has some level of authoritative understanding or competence. But a case could be made that all dialogical encounters provide a critical function when they open us to different meanings and creative possibilities in a way that helps us better understand ourselves and others.
Moreover, the dialogical form, understood as ‘play’ which invites both speaker and listener to give way to a different possibility of meaning not owned or possessed by either, is ultimately the means through which we can immanently and insightfully grasp limits, inconsistencies and distortions in thinking. As Gadamer might say here, it is not individual choice but rather the very form of dialogue (the game itself) that pulls us away from our desire to hold fast to a false opinion, distorted belief or misguided conviction. I suspect that if Habermas himself had looked more closely at the critical orientation that Gadamer’s dialogical model provides us with, he might have achieved a better result than he did with the analogy of psychoanalysis.

The fact is, however, that Habermas left the psychoanalytic model behind by the time of writing the *Theory of Communicative Action*, and never returned to it. It is not that he disavowed the important role hermeneutics might play in upholding the intrinsic value of historical understanding. Nor would he deny that hermeneutics provides an important meaning-dimension to the social sciences. What he does reject is Gadamer’s claim that hermeneutics is universal—that is, that hermeneutic understanding is fundamentally constitutive of the way we relate to the world. For Habermas, to insist that hermeneutics is universal leaves no room for a critical orientation that can grasp the distortions which within communication itself. It is for this reason that Habermas’s critical theory explicitly moves towards the study of the pragmatics of language itself—and, in so doing, distances itself from a more Hegelian-Marxist form of immanent critique, at the same time as it embraces a Kantian universalist reconstructive orientation.
4.5 Habermas 2: The Reconstructive-pragmatic Critique of Language

From a more sociological perspective, the ground-breaking work at this stage of Habermas’s thinking is his two-volume *Theory of Communicative Action*.255 This complex and wide-ranging work examines theories of language, social action and systems in both an analytic and a synthetic fashion. In previous books and essays Habermas had foreshadowed, in programmatic fashion, many of the themes elaborated in *Theory of Communicative Action*, and it is with one of these essays in particular that we will begin our own explication of the second thesis—that is, the *reconstructive-pragmatic* critique of language that exposes the conditions of possibility for undistorted communication, and the *telos* of mutual understanding and uncoerced rational agreement.256 The norms that ground Habermas’s critical theory do not rely on mathematics, absolute reason, an appeal to the logic of history or the ‘cunning of reason’. Nor is his approach exclusively a product of economic or social analysis. It is, in fact, the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy (as Richard Rorty has described it) that occurred in the early and middle 20th century which newly animates and orients Habermas’s critical approach.257 He discovers, at the very basis of language itself, something of immense universal and rational significance. Within language, Habermas discovers, from a study of the pragmatics of communication that when we adopt a ‘communicative’ perspective we necessarily presuppose certain universally recognized norms of equality and symmetry—in other words, when we communicate with others we ‘always already’ presuppose that all communicative participants who are interested in, or affected by, some proposal for action, must have the same opportunity to initiate speech acts—whether this takes the form of stating positions, asking questions or debating a point.258 This is, of course, a somewhat oversimplified description of the fundamental norms of communication that Habermas
painstakingly articulates. However, I believe it sufficiently captures a very original discovery about the presuppositions of communication—one which he will recapitulate and reconfigure in a number of different contexts of application.

The normative orientation of formal pragmatics is derived through an abstract neo-Kantian perspective. However, as we will soon discover, this transcendental reflection will find its real critical orientation not through transcendental argument but immanent critique. To be sure, the project of Habermasian critical social theory is still an epistemologically-oriented rational reconstruction of knowing in keeping with the emancipatory goals of critical theory. However, certain specific Marxist issues such as the attempt to bring together theory and practice, the development of a revolutionary praxis, are no longer explicitly thematized, though arguably one might say these latter have been reconfigured within the framework of linguistic analysis and a communicative reconstruction of social theory. There is also a relation between the development of self by way of communicative competence to the developmental logic and hierarchical ordering structure that underwrites Habermas notion of social development. Finally, there is an extension of the theory of communicative rationality to a discourse theory of morality, discursively grounded deliberative democracy and the discourse theory of law.

The question I wish to pursue here is whether the transcendental retreat to a more universalizing, esoteric, and abstract analysis of communication and action theory has had the effect of attenuating the critical-emancipatory thrust that first animated the critique of ideology, and whether, in fact, this is something that must inevitably occur given the abstract social framework of theory that Habermas elaborates.

In his essay “What is Universal Pragmatics” Habermas announces that he has “…proposed the name universal pragmatics for the research program aimed at reconstructing the
universal validity basis of speech.”259 We can notice, from the very start, that with the word ‘pragmatics’ Habermas is signaling that his effort will not be focused on syntactic or grammatical forms, but on the forms of utterances and the contexts of meaning and intention that speech action presupposes. Accordingly, universal pragmatics proposes that speech (not just language) can be subjected to a formal analysis.260 Secondly, with the word ‘reconstruction’ Habermas tells us he is not engaging in a purely interpretive or hermeneutic reflection; neither is reconstruction something arrived at through conventional ‘deductive nomological hypotheses’ nor the empirical-analytic approach. The latter deductive and observational orientations presume an objective ‘observer-oriented’ status, and are directed by the goal of explanation. By contrast, the reconstructive sciences are elaborated from the perspective of a participant who is more interested in understanding the ‘meaning’ of utterances and rendering explicit the intuitive knowledge of competent speakers. Where the object domain of the empirical-analytic sciences would be physical things, the object domain of formal pragmatics is the symbolic universe, paradigmatically represented through language. ‘Reconstructing’ does not involve merely observing the surface phenomena of language. To reconstruct is to ‘peer through the surface structure’ of speech or other symbolic formations and ‘discover the rules according to which these are produced’.261 The reconstructive approach, then, is an uncovering or laying-bare of deep structure and unarticulated rules of competence. Thus, the reconstructivist asks ‘what are the intuitive presuppositions of speech’ or ‘what is involved in the universal ‘know-how’ or implied competence’ of communicative speech-acts, that we can then philosophically distill, and convert into a more explicit ‘know-that’ set of formal presuppositions.

Habermas admits that reconstructions make ‘essentialist claims’, which would comport with his ‘universalist’ designation of pragmatics, but here we must make a distinction between
an essentialist *metaphysical* claim with regard to something like ‘substance’, and an essentialist *reconstructive* claim that argues regressively to some set of conditions or unavoidable presuppositions, which must be the case given human linguistic experience. This reconstructive approach would appear to have a transcendental argument structure.

However, Habermas does not want his reconstructive pragmatics to be reduced to merely the working out of an *a priori* transcendental linguistic approach of speech pragmatics. In other words, he is not interested in describing the *a priori* conditions of speech, for this would commit him to the strong thesis that his reconstructed conditions of speech have been unassailably proven true for all time. Habermas is careful not to fall into any sort of absolutist perspective, and he is persistently and perceptively critical of any explanatory or critical orientation founded on historicism, behaviorism or functionalism. Instead, he is determined to forward and defend a more modest, historically aware claim, that the reconstruction of formal pragmatic speech conditions is always subject to contingent boundary conditions, and to empirically grounded modifications. Additionally, he will surrender the conceptual ground provided a ‘transcendental knowing subject’ maintaining that the latter is simply not required to legitimate the constitutive features of speech experience.262

Certainly it may be argued that Habermas employs a *quasi*-transcendental approach in reconstructing the normative linguistic values of equality and symmetry. It is not, in other words, wholly an *a priori* discovery, since the constitutive features of speech are subject to historical circumstances, and perhaps further empirically-based elaboration.263 Kant had asked, from a transcendental perspective, ‘What are the conditions of possibility for knowledge through experience to be possible?’, or, ‘What are the features of cognition that must be presupposed in order to make sense of the world’? Habermas’s domain of interest is more limited—he wants to
discover the conditions of possibility for reaching agreement in communicative speech acts. I would argue that despite this more limited goal, Habermas’s reconstruction could still be characterized as a kind of transcendental argument. In other words, in both Kant and Habermas what is being set out are *conditions of intelligibility*; in both cases we are arguing * regressively* (as all transcendental arguments do) from present experience; in both cases we are trying to identify *conceptually necessary* (i.e. non-accidental) and universal (i.e. not particular) features of speech. Notwithstanding Habermas’s reservations about the *a priori* necessary status of some versions transcendental argument, a reasonable case can be made that formal pragmatics takes a transcendental-argument form. But, I would additionally claim, that it is a transcendental argument that has a critical thrust precisely in virtue of the fact that it is also, and at the same time, an immanent critical insight arrived at by looking at particular and ongoing linguistic practices. To be sure, Habermas does not make any such claim and believes that his formal pragmatics is an empirically-grounded research project. This can be seen much more clearly when he elaborates his understanding of speech-act theory. We will discuss this momentarily but we are still left with a question: ‘why does Habermas think he has to ground the normative communicative values of symmetry and equality through a Kantian transcendental form of argument? This question brings us back to our initial inquiry regarding the ‘critical orientation’ that Habermas wants to forward in his critical theory. If formal pragmatics thematizes, through a reconstructive effort, the conditions of possibility for communicative competence, it does so with the critical intent of directing participants towards the ideal of rationally motivated consensus. Thus, a *description* of the preconditions of communicative competence is at the same time a normative *prescription* that enjoins speakers to respect conditions of symmetry and equality—to
strive towards being inclusive and comprehensive, and to promote undistorted and uncoerced communicative exchanges.

To understand this descriptive-prescriptive transition we must first grasp that for Habermas communicative speech acts raise potentially justifiable validity claims—in other words they can be rationally vindicated in some manner. For example, if I am having a conversation with one or more persons, then what we ultimately want is not to manipulate each other, but to reach some sort of mutual understanding about whatever it is we are talking about. In the act of reaching such understanding we may raise substantive issues, make assertions about the world, ask questions, discover meanings and so on. However, it is precisely because ‘what we say’ in these latter instances can always, in principle, be put in the form of specific truth-claims, that we can achieve understanding and consensus. In other words, to be ‘vindicated’ our speech-act claims must, in principle, be capable of being acknowledged as true, our intention must be oriented towards truthful disclosure, and our facts must satisfy certain adequacy conditions whether we are appealing to our intuitions, experiences, deductive or inductive argument or consequences.264

Like Kant, Habermas distinguishes between the scientific, the moral, and the aesthetic spheres of knowing. The validity claims of objective science will be made from a third person perspective, and involve cognitively-oriented instrumental knowledge. The validity claims that express normative rightness and the legitimacy of shared perspectives and norms will involve moral and practical knowledge. Finally, aesthetic and expressive validity claims will be articulated at a subjective level that involves sincerity, authenticity and truthfulness. Each of these spheres has its own set of background relations, practices and traditions, and we inhabit all of them—the objective, the social and the subjective—adopting the appropriate attitude, depending on the context. The key for Habermas is that because each of these spheres can be
lived, reflected upon, and reproduced, by way of language, it is possible to grasp their structure in terms of certain validity claims.

Habermas’s very structured and abstract way of dividing up knowing in terms of such validity claims may strike us as rather odd. For example, we may wonder whether it is in fact possible or even desirable to talk about the expressive/aesthetic realm in terms of a validity claim. However, it does not appear *prima facie* controversial to claim that what we say to each other must have an intelligible structure—that what we say must be put into a recognizable grammatical form that allows us to potentially understand its meaning. Nor, in most cases, does it strain credulity to say that if we make a statement or declare something then the latter must be capable of being acknowledged as potentially true. Neither should we be inclined to deny that when we talk to someone, we must assume that they are speaking truthfully, and not being deliberately deceitful. Finally, we would probably agree that whenever we stipulate certain facts about the world these latter must, in principle, be capable of being verified as correct. All of these presuppositions appear practically obvious and intuitively right.

What is important is that if we sometimes (or even often) fail to adhere to these latter preconditions, this does not undermine Habermas’s formally reconstructed pragmatic presuppositions. For Habermas, the rules of formal pragmatic speech are not things we can ‘choose’ to adhere to. Rather, they are rules which are automatically presupposed in every speech action—they are universal and structural features of the way we actually use language. On this view, formal pragmatics assumes something rather straight-forward—that there is such a thing in our linguistic experience as a ‘competent’ speaker. It is this competence that is rationally ‘reconstructed’. So what has competence to do with a critical orientation?
By rationally reconstructing the presuppositions of what is involved in such competence
Habermas is, at the same time, offering us a critical ideal which we can use to regulate speech
that is oriented to consensus and mutual understanding, by distinguishing the latter from
untruthful speech, or speech intended to manipulate or distort reality. Therefore, these
presuppositions establish certain critical standards of validity and competence against which we
can normatively measure what is said in our various speech actions. Granted these are, for
Habermas, ‘hypothetical’ standards which can be further constructed, elaborated and tested
through empirically-guided analysis. But the pre-theoretical competencies that are reconstructed,
and that are subject to continuous confirmation by the empirical sciences, are still meant to
articulate universal knowledge. How such a rational reconstruction is arrived at is by ‘peering
beneath the surface of ordinary speech utterance’.

However, there is another element to this critical reconstruction—one that is closer to
Hegel than to Kant. The method of formal pragmatics is not merely a description of the structure
of pragmatically-oriented speech. The reconstruction of universal presuppositions of consensual
speech action additionally expresses a developmental progressive grasp of language use. In other
words, we have come to grasp, over time, not only that there are certain presuppositions of
competent speech, but also that the reconstructions which express these features will be
contingent, historically situated, and evolving. Therefore, they will not be closed or absolute. We
can see the clearly Gadamerian hermeneutic-historical influence, as well as the Hegelian
perspective that Habermas’s developmental grasp presupposes. The development, over time, of
shared intersubjective norms of speech competency, will provide the condition of possibility for
certain forms of social coordination that are also based on coordinated action and
communicatively oriented speech. In this way, the pragmatics of speech is also the pragmatics of
social action. If speech or the coordination of social action is disturbed or breaks down, if there is distortion or coercion, then these latter pathologies can be tracked back to a source—a failure to realize presupposed norms of speech and action. Habermas is quite aware that speech and social action are always subject to vagueness, coercion and distortion. We can and do deviate from these norms. But that is why they must be reconstructed and their normative status exposed. The reconstructive effort Habermas undertakes shows that these normative conditions are

*unavoidable* not inviolable. From a critical perspective, we can also perceive that in forwarding such a developmental notion, Habermas is attempting to articulate an ‘enlightened’ guide for human action in speech and social interaction that helps us distinguish and determine that our *authentic* knowledge-oriented interests always already presupposes un-coerced and undistorted communication. To become aware of this is to comport oneself in language and in social relations in a genuine and authentic way.

We can see how this works when we grasp the normative comportment underscored in the distinction between locutionary, perlocutionary and illocutionary speech acts. This distinction derives from John Austin.\(^{265}\) One of the straight-forward ideas behind it is the notion that through speech we perform actions. When we describe, ask, pronounce, inform, and announce we are doing or performing things with words. We often think that in saying ‘I promise’, or in uttering a command, we are, in fact, already engaged in an action. For example if I say “I do” then I am not only uttering a statement (a locutionary act), I am doing or *performing* something: i.e. getting married. What Austin claims is that when we make a statement, or give a description, or ask a question, we are also performing an act or ‘doing something’ with words. Saying is a kind of doing. But not only is saying a kind of doing, it also has a kind of directionality—that is, it has a situated meaning or context dependent *illocutionary* force. For example, if I say to
someone who has recently recovered from an illness ‘How are you doing?’ they will grasp, implicitly, the force or intention of this question as an expression of concern. By contrast, if I say to a co-worker ‘How are you doing?’ they will grasp, implicitly, the force or intention of this question as the expression of friendly interest or conventional greeting. What is intended by the same words is different in a different context. Thus, the illocutionary force or intention of what we say may vary from situation to situation and along social, cultural and linguistic lines.

Finally, if we utter or say something in order to ‘achieve an effect’—to incite someone to action, to make them angry, to inspire them, then we can surmise that not only can saying be doing, and express meaning, but it can have peripheral, external or perlocutionary effects. There are, of course, perlocutionary effects that are unintended but these are not what will be at issue for Habermas. What Habermas does with Austin’s distinction between, locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary speech is to single out perlocutionary acts as speech acts framed by a teleological or goal-directed context. The claim he will make is that perlocutionary effects “ensue whenever a speaker acts with an orientation towards success and, in doing so, simultaneously connects speech acts with intentions and instrumentalizes them for purposes that are only contingently related to the meaning of what is said”.

What is crucial here is that, in singling out and distinguishing strategically-oriented perlocutionary effects from meaning-oriented illocutionary acts, Habermas is simultaneously distinguishing strategic speech-actions from speech-actions that are oriented toward reaching an understanding with someone about something. Put simply, what Habermas does is give a normative critical thrust to an empirical-analytic descriptive account of speech-acts by reading them through his understanding of communicatively oriented rationality. Whether this distinction can be rigorously maintained in the complex hurly-burly of human speaking and listening is an interesting question which we
will not pursue. What we can say is that from the perspective of speech-act theory, language is something we ‘use’ or ‘do things with’, rather than something we are ‘in’ or inhabit.  

For our present purposes, what we want to underscore is the extent to which a transcendental reflection which gave rise to formal pragmatics, and the normative prescriptive thrust of speech-act theory, are, at bottom, exemplars of what we have previously described as an ‘immanent’ critical orientation. Recall that we said that the critical dimension of immanent critique lies in its unveiling capacity—in other words, it helps us to grasp something hidden or, to use Habermas’s language, to ‘peer through the surface structure’ and discover hidden contradictions and inconsistencies. What is made visible, or rendered transparent through Habermas’s formal pragmatics and his prescriptive empirical-analytic speech-act analysis is that those who are using language ‘strategically’ or employing reason ‘instrumentally’, must in practice presuppose that which they performatively reject—namely, that language is primordially oriented towards reaching understanding. This orientation towards ‘reaching understanding’ not only has deep affinities with hermeneutics, but the immanent critical dimension that animates Habermas project is much closer to the hermeneutics of Hegelian dialectic and Gadamerian dialogical understanding than might be surmised on a first inspection. This is something we will explore further in the following chapter.

We can summarize by saying that Habermas thematizes the critical potential of a normative mindset through relations of symmetry and equality between interlocutors. If we now carry this mindset through to the social and political sphere of action, it becomes evident where the critical orientation of communicative action must inevitably see itself manifested. At a social and institutional level, the relations of symmetry and equality have the capacity to coordinate diverse aims, enhance social solidarity, and critically address systemic distortions that follow
when we permit instrumental and strategic forms of rationality to colonize all aspects of the lifeworld—for example, those aspects of the family, of interpersonal relations, our diverse ethical and cultural understandings, and of course, the public, institutional and political spheres of interaction. Habermas does not want to displace instrumental modes of reasoning with communicative rationality. Rather, he wants to give us a tool to recognize instrumental reasoning as a form of rationality that is necessary but not sufficient since it fails to do justice to the kind of communicative rationality that is at the heart of undistorted communicative exchange. Habermas thinks this is the only way we can critically engage a complex contemporary world. In this sense, he would have very little patience for any attempt to reconfigure practical reasoning and *phronesis*, since this would always carry with it an almost delusional nostalgia for the Greek *polis*. For Habermas, the sort of situated reasoning *phronesis* represents may be fine if it is confined to very particular contexts, but it could never serve at a wider social and political level where we need a universally-oriented critical apparatus, that allows us to match the complex wide ranging social and economic powers and pathologies that define our modern world.269

Hence, a world where social and political speech was guided by the awareness of the presuppositions of communicative action would be a world that could, in principle, distinguish between strategic or instrumental speech, and speech oriented at furthering consensus and mutual agreement. It would be a world where it was possible to critically engage all those who speak falsely, who speak manipulatively, and who are intentionally untruthful. This will undoubtedly appear to be a very powerful critical tool. However, as we shall see in the following chapter there are reasons why we should seriously question its over-all presumption as a ‘critical’ enterprise. To anticipate, somewhat, we can say that the critical is both a matter of knowing and the developing of critical *being*. This latter notion simply cannot be accommodated within
Habermas’s critical theory. To use Habermasian language, we could say that it is the emphasis on abstract norms of communicative rationality that effects a decoupling of critical knowing and critical being. It is by way of an Aristotelian-inspired framework of *phronesis* and practical reason that we can bring these two interrelated notions back together, and, in so doing, distinguish a critical acting-being orientation that can meet the exigencies of a diverse contemporary world.

In this chapter we have taken some time to articulate a conceptual history of the notions of crisis, critique and the critical. Following this, we gave some background to the principle figures of the Frankfurt Institute for social research. Finally, we looked at Habermas’s reconstruction of formal pragmatics, speech-act theory and his over-all theory of communicative rationality. We suggested at the beginning that the critique of instrumental rationality that exposes an emancipatory cognitive interest, and provides the condition of possibility for critically-oriented social sciences, and the *reconstructive-pragmatic* critique of language that exposes the conditions of possibility for undistorted communication and the *telos* of uncoerced rational understanding and agreement are, in fact, both discovered by way of an ‘immanent form of critique’ that reads beneath the surface of phenomena and interrogates and uncovers that which is often obscured in everyday linguistic practices. In the final chapter, we will further elaborate this suggestion, and discover that immanent critique can be better grasped, enacted and extended through an understanding of practical reason and *phronesis*—a framework of reason that Habermas explicitly rejects.
Chapter Five

Hermeneutics, Rhetoric and Critical Phronesis

“You cannot buy the revolution. You cannot make the Revolution. You can only be the Revolution. It is in your spirit, or it is nowhere.”

5.1 The Critical Program

In the following chapter I have three explicit but interrelated goals. The first is to show that Habermas’s critical theory relies for its critical thrust on a hermeneutical reflective tradition of immanent critique and insights about communication that can better accessed through phronetic practical reasoning, tradition and concrete embodied linguistic practices. The second aim is to argue that the critical orientation elaborated herein as critical hermeneutics enacted through practical reasoning and phronesis describes a way of thinking-acting-desiring being that is pedagogically sound, congruent with our experience, and more than capable of meeting the moral and political exigencies of a complex and diverse contemporary world. Finally, I aim to bring together the elements of rhetoric, hermeneutics, practical reasoning and phronesis which I have carefully described and show how they might be concretely applied in three different practical realms: the political, the legal and the pedagogical.

In the previous chapter I suggested that Habermas employs a transcendental form of regressive argument to disclose the presuppositions at the heart of communicative rationality, but also implicitly draws upon an immanent form of critique to diagnose and expose distorted forms of communication. I want to suggest here that what makes Habermas’s critical theory ‘critical’ is
not its theoretical or abstract quality, or its appeal to transhistorical values, but rather its immanent critique or unveiling of communicative distortions in actual communicative practices that then gives rise to the *insight* that communicative interactions must presuppose the values of both equality and symmetry if it is to realize the telos of mutual understanding in communicative practices. I have tried to show that this ‘immanent’ form of critique is, in fact, a hermeneutic or interpretive effort which presupposes the inherent value of negation while it exemplifies the kind of thinking and creative insight captured by *phronesis* and a broader context of practical reasoning. By contrast, having wholly rejected *phronesis*, Habermas believes that this communicative telos, though discovered through experience, must inevitably take a more abstract status transhistorical as a regulating ideal if it is to be seen as rationally legitimating. I want to claim, instead, that Habermas’s regulating ideal itself, like any tradition, law, or general description is not only discovered but continuously and creatively rediscovered, deepened and corrected through what I have described as a *phronesis*, insight and a broader context of practical reasoning.

To anticipate somewhat, I will claim that practical reasoning and *phronesis*, which describes a way of thinking-acting-desiring-being, is pedagogically sound and congruent with our experience precisely because it does not forward an abstract universalizing critical *theory*, but rather describes how critical *being* enacted as insight and expressed through *phronetic* reason coalesces and intensifies the *desire to think and act freedom as a practice with and among others in just institutions*. Critical-being realized and enacted through *phronesis* is holistic because it speaks to us as whole beings—as capable, embodied and temporal beings, that are historically and linguistically situated; as beings who think, desire, respond emotionally, and take up a multitude of practices; as beings who are not detached from others or their natural environment,
but who precisely belong to each other, to a family, to a language, to a history, to communities of shared interests and to a culture. Critical hermeneutics through phronesis, insight, and a broad context of practical reasoning is not dependent on any over-arching theory, nor does it derive its critical orientation from abstractly ‘knowing that’ something is the case. Instead, the critical hermeneutics we have elaborated describes how we become critical beings and create critical communities over time by participating in practices, and in rhetorical and dialogical activities such as speaking, listening and reading with and among others in a concrete world of needs, interests and desires. It is this embodied and enacted notion of phronesis and practical reasoning, not abstract critical theory, which actually can prepare us to critically navigate through our multivalent, continuously changing world, by urging us to strive towards thinking freedom as a practice. Thinking freedom as a practice is not about having choices or making choices. It is about comporting oneself reflexively, cultivating oneself critically over time in particular occupational, academic and community settings, and learning how to resist a desire to acquiesce to distorted or hegemonic thinking, or submit to the rigidity of reductive theories, ungrounded opinions and narrow worldviews. This critical reflexivity requires that we strive towards an awareness of our temporality and historicality, both our limitations and our creative possibilities.

5.2 Immanent Critique as Hermeneutic, Practical Reflection

Immanent critique works as a form of uncovering the hidden logic, presuppositions, inconsistencies and/or contradictions that inhere within a theory, an interpretation or a set of social or cultural practices. At a prima facie level, to ‘expose’ or ‘uncover’ requires reflective hermeneutic or interpretive work, and some grasp of conventional logic—perhaps the law of
contradiction or identity. This kind of critique could be something that took place in a limited or narrow context—a theory or a philosophical position, or it could manifest at a large scale ideological level. In either case, such a critique will imply that it is possible to critically engage the theory, position, practice or ideology not because we speak from an abstract ‘distortion-free’ perspective, but because in the very activity of engaging or practically living within the practice, theory or ideology, we can begin to grasp, over time, certain inconsistencies, incoherencies, contradictions, anomalies and misrepresentations. In other words, we do not use one abstract theoretical perspective to grasp the contradictions of another abstract theory or ideology—we grasp these contradictions, if at all, in the concrete practical living of them. Given this, we can say, without controversy, that immanent critique presupposes hermeneutic reflection, which as we have tried to show is itself something that is grasped by way of practical reasoning, insight and phronesis. How does this conclusion relate to Habermas’s position?

Habermas’s later philosophy would tend to see the ubiquity of instrumental and strategic forms of reason in our money-media-steered world as something that makes it next to impossible for us to access a non-ideological perspective. But let us assume for the sake of argument that immanent critique is always, in principle, possible because we can experience and live in a particular perspective, discourse or ideology. When we critically assess such perspectives or ideologies through immanent critique we are, in effect, insightfully grasping both what the practice and discourse necessarily and visibly presumes behind a certain orthodox structure, and what this ideological structure hides, occludes or marginalizes, which is also necessary, yet necessarily hidden. Immanent critique does not just expose the internal inconsistencies and contradictions of ideologies, practices and discourses; it uncovers the fact that the latter must actually hide their necessary dependence on these contradictions and inconsistencies in order to
prevail. When the distorted ideology, discourse or practice is shown to be at odds with itself, its once legitimate standing suddenly collapses. By contrast, a purely external critique would have to rely on a previous belief in or adherence to a transcendent authority or criteria such as God, Reason or History. It is clear that Habermas own approach is closer to an immanent rather than a transcendent critique. He is interested in an immanent approach that can ferret out distortions and inconsistencies in actual practices. But importantly, Habermas does not want to entirely dispense with some form of externalizing perspective—the most intriguing element he introduces from his unique critical perspective is what might be called transcendence from within immanence. What this means will become apparent momentarily.

What I wish to presently call attention to, in light of what has been previously argued, is the difference between critique as a tool or strategy which we apply in this or that case, and ‘the critical’ as a practically lived, experientially enacted, orientation which we live in or inhabit over time with and among others. It is precisely *phronesis* and practical reason that speaks to this pivotal difference, because *phronesis* is the gathering of critical wisdom over time through our experiential exposure to a plurality of situated experiences, and not merely a diagnostic tool (*techne*) or set of regulative ideals that we just happen to use. It is this existential-ontological dimension of cultivating in ourselves a discerning critical orientation over time that will enable us to actually insightfully grasp distortions, inconsistencies and contradictions within any given institutional arrangement, or occupational or discursive practice. It is the lived experience of anomalies, inconsistencies, distortions and contradictions in practices and discourse that is revealed through *phronesis* that attests to the hermeneutic depth of practical reason.

To say this is to say that it seems unlikely that merely abstractly showing internal inconsistencies or exposing distortions of a practice, ideology or theory will be enough to move
us to act. In other words, we hold on to things, theories, perspectives or doctrines for reasons that have less to do with logic and knowledge, and more to do with certain desires, habits, loyalties and affective comportments. Given this, something like an immanent critique of the internal contradictions and inconsistencies of corporate capitalism will not, in and of itself, be for us a normative undertaking that moves us to action unless we have cultivated over time the capacity to notice and resist unsustainable forms of economic growth, the implicit logic of converting of citizens into mere consumers, systemic unemployment and inequality etc. This capacity to notice and resist forms of repression and inequity is something that builds over time when freedom as a practice is enacted in speaking, listening, interpreting and understanding with and among others. The enactment of freedom as a practice is something that only a kind of reasoning wholly embedded in ongoing experience can make possible. I propose that it is precisely phronesis and the broader framework of practical reasoning that has been elaborated here which can properly meet this requirement.

An example here might serve to illustrate the above point. From a conventional critical perspective I might parse out the elements of a given political speech, and discover later, through sustained practical and critical reflection, that the communicatively grounded language of mutual understanding which seemed entirely authentic at the time was actually strategically used to disguise a naked instrumental goal—perhaps the instituting of a policy that served to enrich the chances of the politician’s re-election, while at the same time undermining consumer protections, or eradicating forms of social solidarity or equality. I might say that this politician performatively contradicted himself. But the normative force of such an immanent critique that would lead to potentially countervailing protest and action would not rely on the fact of contradiction, but, rather, on the sense of outrage and betrayal I felt when I realized that this
politician who was elected to protect the interests of citizens is actually *undermining* them. This sense of outrage has everything to do with a complex web of understandings, desires and relations that have evolved over time in various traditions and social, legal and cultural practices which have formed me. In other words, it has to do first with the lack of congruence between who the politician *is*, and who he *ought to be in light of a defining political telos or end*, and second, with my lived sense of betrayal that someone is using a mode of representation that I honour and trust in to further their own selfish ends instead of the good of the community. The normative force of the latter is grounded in what one might call an action-oriented ontological-ethic (of *who* someone is, as a result of what they *do*), rather than a static logical or epistemological-ethic (whether their actions are logically consistent or approach an abstract, universal or distortion-free ideal). As a result, the normative weight of immanent critique is derived from lived practical experience, not the abstract internal logic of performative contradiction. It is *phronesis* and practical reasoning that is able to critically see this incongruence, and, therefore, it is the latter that can best accommodate an action-oriented ontological ethic.

What I am claiming here is that if there is something resembling a normative critical force within the exercise of immanent critique, then it must be inevitably grounded on the concrete mode of historically and temporally understood reasoning that *phronesis* and practical reasoning describe. How would this unfold? Over time, as we engage in dialogue with others, as we participate in concrete practices, we realize certain shared goods, values, virtues and a reasoning perspective internal to such practices and dialogue. We cultivate certain habits of mind that allow us to both reflect and deliberate upon the elements of a particular demand or issue before us, in light of these shared goods, general rules or perspectives, while at the same time
building up resistance—which manifests as embodied reasoned *and* desired resistance—to reductive perspectives, distorted thinking, authoritarian forms and rigid adherence to the letter of the law. In other words, we build up, or cultivate over time, a capacity to be flexible, circumspect and attuned to the exigencies and demands of our world. If immanent critique is grounded in a concrete mode of historically and temporally understood reasoning, the latter is carried through by way of the productive power of *negation* in thinking and understanding.

We have discussed the central role of negation in both Hegel and Gadamer. Negation is something that experience allows us to grasp over time, and immanent critique is the enactment of negation in thinking. For Gadamer the experience of negation is *constitutive* of understanding. But negation is also crucially what *phronesis* embodies at the level of human experience. It is negation that actually enables us to experience something new or different—something we did not previously see. Without this enacted experience of negation, *phronesis* would not be possible and immanent critique (to the extent that it would even be conceivable) would be merely an abstract formal or logical matter of exposing and describing inconsistencies with no particular critical thrust. It would be merely a ‘knowing that’ something might theoretically be the case. If I am right about *phronesis* as fundamentally understood through the relation of thinking-acting-being, then exposing ideologically distorted thinking, institutions, or practices will be about cultivating a capacity to grasp what the *experience* of negation in understanding is telling us—in other words, from a critical perspective we will become attuned to hearing and listening for what is *not* said beneath what *is* said or stipulated or practiced. There is simply no more important or elementary practical, critical undertaking in a modern complex world than cultivating this capacity to recognize the experience of negation and the negation of negation. Why is this so important?
It is crucial because through negation we not only experience that something is hidden or occluded from our view, but that as a result of our emerging awareness of this negation, something productive *about the very experience of this awareness* is possible—perhaps a new awareness about the world. This *productive* aspect of negation is in fact the negation of negation—that is, the experience of negation is ‘turned back on itself’ and something positive and productive is newly realized. Crucially, it is hermeneutic reflection gathered, deepened and enacted through *phronesis*, insight and practical reasoning that is able to both grasp what has hitherto been occluded (negation) and able to help us re-imagine our world differently (negation of negation).

An example might illustrate this better. Imagine, for instance, that you are newly arrived in a country that advertises itself as ‘the land of opportunity’. You are highly qualified or skilled in some way, but cannot get a job in your field. There are jobs that meet your skills, but no one will hire you. You end up working as a dishwasher. The land of opportunity is, for you, a land where the skill and experience of new persons is negated. In the very palpable and embodied experience of this negation, you begin to recognize that beneath its pristine, shiny surface, the new land actually thrives and flourishes because it is able to freely underpay, instrumentalize and abuse immigrants. You subsequently reach a point where a new productive understanding presses you to advocate for the rights of immigrants. This is how the experience of negation, and the negation of negation as *productive understanding*, can be said to perfectly capture the notion of immanent critique. Immanent critique is an experience-grounded insight and recognition, as well as the productive negation of an original negation carried through, not by abstract critical theory, but by hermeneutic reflection and practical reasoning. It simply cannot be reduced to a rule or regulating ideal. Negation is something that must be lived, that *belongs* to thinking and acting.
experience—and it is precisely our ‘on the ground’ experience that enacts the kind of reasoning perspective *phronesis* embodies.

Now, back to Habermas. As we have previously noted, Habermas’s critique of instrumental forms of reasoning begins with an insight about how the latter presuppose, or are often parasitic upon, communicative forms of reasoning. How does he achieve such an insight? Is it because he had already formulated and fully elaborated a communicative theory? This seems unlikely. What is much more probable is that his insight was grounded on a fairly astute hermeneutic reflection arrived at by carefully thinking through, and being caught up in, the experience of negation—an experience which we have argued is characteristic of *phronetic* reason, insight and an immanent form of critique. In other words, the lived experience of language carried out in instrumental forms revealed its parasitic reliance on communicative presuppositions which themselves were realized as a productive negation.

Habermas does not, of course, choose to describe his critical efforts in a way that underscores the constitutive role that the experience of negation in understanding plays. Undoubtedly, he believes that a critical emancipatory theory must be articulated beyond merely hermeneutic or interpretive considerations, and be rationally grounded in an abstract transhistorical ideal of communicative rational consensus. But even if this were the case, (and this is by no means self-evident) is such a *critical-emancipatory* thrust something we derive or deduce from critical theory—or is it instead something we experience in a lived, practical context of interaction with and among others? I would claim that the moment Habermas moves to an abstract transhistorical perspective, the immanent critical thrust of experiencing negation and the negation of negation is flattened or divested of its critical power. In other words, once we move to Habermasian critical theory, the actual *lived* experience of negation is flattened or
deflated, and we are left with no choice but to subsume the concrete particular situation under an ideal rule. Meanwhile, the productive capacity that is represented through the notion of consensus takes on a rather unreal, distant formulation. The result of this is a critical orientation and a notion of ‘critical thinking’ that is immunized and disengaged from any concrete particular genuine recognition of the otherness of the other. It is, in other words, an abstract understanding of consensus that is experientially blind to those very communicative ideological distortions of thinking, of institutional arrangements and of human practices that occur in lived experience.

If it is to have any critical orienting thrust immanent critique must be understood through the concept of negation; and the capacity to grasp what the experience of negation is telling us has to be something cultivated over time through phronesis. Instead of subsuming things under a rule, negation allows the full breadth of the particular situation to open up a creative productive possibility. Immanent forms of critique will, then, normatively manifest as the uncovering act that calls for us to counter hegemonic, distorted or reductionist perspectives—they will be a call not to merely interpret or subsume, but the thinking-desiring critical effort to creatively and productively change things.

Clearly, before any of this can happen we must be pedagogically prepared. In other words, we must cultivate a critical disposition in ourselves through our speaking, reading, listening and dialogical relations with others, over time and in a practically oriented reflective way. We emerge as critical beings when we develop the art of formulating questions and issues in the right way, at the right time, in the right measure, in ourselves and with others. This will not be a question of following a set of procedures, a template of laws or moral universal rules, but a matter of cultivating a practice of thinking freedom which opens up the critical space for the experience of negation to take hold of us, and thereby open us to reservoirs of meaning,
possibility and difference. As we said earlier it is the repetition and reiteration of this critical reflexivity in different situations, immanent within our practices and dialogical encounters that over time strengthens critical acumen, and defines *phronetic* reasoning. If immanent critique is reduced to an abstraction—if it is not grasped in experience and cultivated through *phronesis* but left at the abstract level of theory, then whatever normative critical force it had which will lead to action will very soon dissipate.

What now of Habermas’s quasi-transcendental critique? Transcendental critique involves uncovering and reconstructing the shared background assumptions of communicative action. To be sure, the act of reconstruction Habermas undertakes amounts to the seemingly *a priori* rational claim that certain conditions are universal and necessary in order for communicative action to take place. Communicative action presupposes “…language as a medium for reaching an understanding, in the course of which, participants, through relating to a world, reciprocally raise validity claims that can be accepted or contested”.²⁷¹ In this sense communicative action presupposes reflectively-oriented action. But the ‘reflection’ here would seem not to be grounded on experience, but on logic, or rational validation which finds its ultimate telos in an ideal of consensus that is arrived at through a transcendental-like argument.

However, *and this is central*, Habermas does not want to stipulate that communicative reason and action is grounded in an external ahistorical transcendental absolute. Given this, the persuasive or critical force of his argument cannot be *a priori*, deductive or demonstrative in any strict sense. In a deductive argument we are compelled to conclude something because the form of the argument itself dictates this. But in the case of transcendental arguments, we are persuaded because the reconstruction of assumptions is carried out by way of successively more elaborate interpretations of what is involved in the shared background of assumptions. Habermas’s
rational reconstructive program is the attempt to regressively *read through the surface structure* of language (i.e. hermeneutically reflect upon) and expose the basic operative preconditions of communicative action. If this were simply a ‘neutral’ description of the *pragmatic a priori* presuppositions of communicative understanding, then it would not be a normative-critical enterprise.

However, it cannot be a conventional description, since in order to gather together these presuppositions, we have to ‘read through the surface’ of the existing lifeworld—that is, the pre-theoretical forms of communicative exchange. This act of ‘uncovering’ or ‘exposing’ hidden presuppositions is precisely what we might call an immanent form of critique—in other words, it is an interpretive reflection, and sudden *insight* that shifts our gaze from the practice to an underlying structure, revealing that which was not initially fully apparent at the level of everyday communicative activity. However, once the pragmatic presuppositions are thereby hermeneutically exposed, what happens then? Well, it is then determined by Habermas that these presuppositions must be ‘reconstructed’ as regulating ideals of communicative competence. On the basis of *what* is such a determination to reconstruct made?

A reconstructive science is, for Habermas, one that brings together philosophy, empirical research and social theory. By way of this combined interdisciplinary approach we are able to articulate the implicit normative orientations that always already guide us. In this sense, ‘reconstruction’ is a kind of rational reflection that can be described as a way of *looking again* at things. Looking again yields what we have been calling ‘insight’—a sudden grasp of what has hitherto been occluded or remained unarticulated. The insight here could take the form of a sudden grasp of the implicit assumptions of rational consensual speech, or perhaps the rational preconditions of moral, legal or political discourse. But, once again, insight is something that is
enacted through negation, and negation is something that occurs at a hermeneutic level of reflection. Thus, we can begin to appreciate just how beholden the Habermasian critical program is to the threefold critical orientation—immanent critique-insight-negation—made possible through hermeneutic reflection, practical reasoning and *phronesis*.

It is from this experience-based insight into the implicit assumptions of consensual speech that Habermasian critical theory is grasped and articulated. The notion of consensus, or what Habermas later describes as the ‘telos of mutual understanding and agreement’, is, of course, one of the key presuppositions of Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics. What Habermas does is abstractly formalize this hermeneutic insight and situate it at the level of theory. What this will amount to is the effort to make explicit, at a theoretical level, the idea that we can imagine ourselves to be participants who have a certain capacity or ability to use language in a competent way, and that this competence tacitly presupposes particular and universally shared assumptions, ideals, or rules that enable us to assess what others say—that help us to evaluate their arguments, and say, ‘I agree’, or ‘I disagree’. According to Habermas, the reconstructive sciences tell us that in order for there to be authentic communication we must presuppose that we are competent speakers, and that our communicative interactions involve, in principle, a symmetrical distribution of opportunities to choose among and employ speech-act relations, and the parity of all communicative participants. These presuppositions are formalized through theory. But what does such formalization add, from a ‘critical’ perspective? I will argue, in what follows, that long before Habermas formalizes the presuppositions of pragmatic speech into a communicative theory of rationality, the critical work of critical theory has already been accomplished through *phronetic* reasoning and practical insight. But before defending this latter claim I want to make two important points that express both the subtlety and the attractiveness of Habermas’s position.
To begin with, Habermas clearly does not want to claim that the pragmatic presuppositions of speech have a Kantian \textit{a priori} status or are immunized from historical or social contingency or future empirical considerations. At the same time, he \textit{does} want to say that they are ‘universally held’ presuppositions. The critical orientation he adopts does not derive from Kantian subject-centered ahistorical conditions of equality and symmetry, but neither does it ground its critical force on some reworked rational-empirical version of contingent relativist historicism. What Habermas wants to do is situate the logos of critique \textit{across} multiple forms of linguistic and social practice. This ‘transverse’ diagnostic critique has the virtue of respecting local forms of context-dependent understanding, while demanding that the latter be sometimes tested against wider or more universally held contexts of \textit{praxis}-oriented communicative reason. To follow this trajectory of critique is to become aware that it is not subject-centered \textit{a priori} ahistorical rationality that grounds communicative competence, but something on the order of a dialogical, empirically testable, cross-cultural, \textit{trans}historical category of differentiating reason. The prefix ‘trans’, meaning ‘across’, presumably refers to the possibility of a shared normative framework that can be empirically discovered across cultures and traverses particular historical configurations showing up in various practices and institutional arrangements as an evolving communicative capacity. Of course, all of these subtle refinements are meant to help us deftly navigate between historical relativism and ahistorical transcendental \textit{a priori} reason, while keeping intact the possibility for ongoing critical discernment; in other words, keeping intact a normatively grounded capacity to read through the surface structure of discourses, practices and institutional arrangements, and unveil or disclose both the necessary presuppositions and the potential distortions of communicative rationality and action. For Habermas, these latter considerations define the parameters of what it means to complete the project of the
Enlightenment in a way that respects the complex and multiple contexts of language and culture, while offering us a rational normatively grounded critical program. He is persuaded that his critical theory is a critical theory for a contemporary age whose self-understanding has come to an historical awareness, and a rational recognition of the communicative rational values of equality and symmetry between all participants in their ongoing social, moral, political and legal relations.

In all of this there is an implicit philosophical anthropology at work which it is instructive to be aware of. Habermas’s philosophical anthropology is expressly articulated against historical absolutism and the positivism of science. Moreover, it is not an anthropology that presupposes subject-centered reason or Cartesian dualism. But it does, as all philosophical anthropologies do, make connections between our history, our nature and our cultural practices, symbols and formations. As such, it promotes an interdisciplinary approach to our efforts to grapple with the complex issues of a contemporary society. Habermas’s philosophical anthropology, and his background social theory, postulates the emergence of empirically testable and historico-rational values of equality and symmetry. To put his critical project in a slightly simplified way, we could say that it is likely that Habermas developed a particular philosophical anthropology as a result of his acquaintance with social thinkers like Weber, Enlightenment thinkers like Kant and historical/structural thinkers like Marx and Hegel. He then adopted a hermeneutically grounded empirical-analytical sociological approach which enabled him to both formalize his immanent structural critique, and legitimate his reconstructive epistemology. With this in place his next step would be to convert the description of the presuppositions of communication into a regulative transhistorical ideal of competent speakers and communicative exchange, grounded in conditions of equality and symmetry.
Perhaps, at this point, one is tempted to argue that Habermas’s philosophical anthropology assumed, from the beginning, the very thing he intended to prove by way of reconstruction—that is, the conditions of symmetry and equality. However, this is not what we want to specifically highlight as a counterargument. Rather, what we want to point to is simply how this order of gradual awareness of critical resources is grounded on a fundamentally hermeneutic reflection and an inescapable reliance on tradition, and something that very much resembles *phronesis and nous* (insight). The persuasive and critical force of Habermas’s argument, from beginning to end, is a result of his penetrating readings of a wealth of different *traditions* of understanding, and his capacity to hermeneutically reflect upon, and highlight their various virtues, while showing their weaknesses according to an emerging *tradition* of equality and symmetry in communicative interaction. Habermas’s historical hermeneutic reflection, and his isolation of certain values that are found within Kantianism—that is symmetry, respect, dignity and equality—could never been undertaken unless he assumed that their persuasive value lay in their capacity to be hermeneutically and practically recognized in our experience.

That they *could* be recognized, however, is not a function of their rational theoretical status as transhistorical values, or the potential they have for pragmatic reconstruction into regulating ideals of uncoerced communication. Nothing so abstract is happening. They are recognized because they issue from embodied practices that can grasp at the level of *phronetic* critical discernment the need for recognition of certain values of symmetry and equality in particular contexts and situations, in order to better realize, in linguistic and other practices, an emerging democratic tradition or telos that has become capable of being translated into the language of mutual understanding and consensus. In other words, the values and normative priorities of symmetry, equality and democracy were *already* well established in various practices, prophetic,
critical and emancipatory traditions of literature, rhetoric and philosophy before they were taken up in abstract communicative theory. The problem is that we think it is the ‘theory’ that grounds or informs symmetrical and democratic practices, rather than our own hermeneutical-reflective lived experience. What is significant here is that long before Habermas brought these values together under his critical theory, they were already actively part of lived experience, and realized through concrete particular human practices of speaking, hearing, interpreting and understanding. His abstract critical theory would simply not be intelligible to us if we did not, in the first place, share certain traditions of interpretation, and norms, particular self-understandings, practices, evaluative criteria and moral contexts of good.

In other words, what serve as the rational ground for these critical forms is not theory but our practical involvements, and a shared background of hermeneutic understanding. Given this, the persuasive critical thrust of immanent critique and transcendental argument is already a part of a gradually emerging, hermeneutically reflective understanding. This is a hermeneutics that not only ‘interprets the world’, but by insightfully reflecting upon it, changes the world; it is not merely interpretive hermeneutics, but always already a critical hermeneutics that we are now describing. To put this critical hermeneutics in terms of phronesis, with respect to Habermas, we could say that the transcendental reflection, the transhistorical legitimation and the immanent critique of instrumental forms of rationality that he undertakes could only become possible if they were already grounded in a practical phronetic understanding of linguistic experience, and an emerging or developing phronetic practical and concrete and particular insight that certain conditions of equality and symmetry must prevail if we are to stem the threat of ubiquitous forms of strategic and instrumental reason in the various and particular aspects of the lifeworld. It is hard to imagine how else Habermas could ever articulate his critical program if he did not
already have something like a historically and temporally aware *phronetic* insight about the way we orient ourselves in linguistic practice in very particular situations and contexts. After all, what is a ‘reconstruction’ but an insightful *rethinking* of the present context of particular, concrete linguistic experience in light of a coherent grasp of the past (tradition) which articulates the most comprehensive story so far of our historically contingent, but recognizable ‘telos of mutual understanding’, and the values of symmetry and equality? If this is correct then it must be the case that whatever critical potency Habermas’s critical theory continues to have will ultimately rely not on its ‘theoretical status’ or the transhistorical status of its presuppositions but, rather, on its capacity to be creatively and productively configured and reconfigured in particular contexts of moral and political experience through the kind of flexible reasoning perspective *phronesis*, *nous* and a more encompassing framework of practical reason provide.

What I have described as *phronesis*, which is both historical and temporal, can in every sense accommodate Habermas’s critical orientation better than his own sociology of knowledge approach. Sociology of knowledge is a theoretical formulation that presupposes the notion of a disengaged observer, whereas Habermas is ultimately interested in a practical critique and specific and particular formations of interest which are rather flattened at the level of abstract social theory. If a temporalizing and historically-situated notion of *phronesis*, as we have described it, can be understood as the gradual development through experience over time of an insightful disposition to determine what is the proper thing to do in a concrete situation, then it can also be understood as capable of grasping and enacting through concrete linguistic practices, the values of symmetry and equality. On this view, if Habermas entire critical project a can be said to have a telos or aim, it is an aim expressed more properly through practical reasoning, insight and *phronesis*. 
To put this another way, if my reading of Habermas is correct and immanent critique (as insight carried out through reflective hermeneutic experience of negation and the negation of negation) is the central critical orientation of his critical theory, and if this critique is historically situated and emerges by way of a developing intuitive understanding of the already existing traditions of symmetry and equality in social and political speech, then there is nothing in this that would constitute a critical orientation or trans-historical ground over and above the sort of critical dimension that we have articulated by way of phronesis, practical reasoning and reflective Gadamerian hermeneutics and dialogue. This by no means denies that critical theory can have an important role to play in organizing and structuring practical insights. What it does deny is that theory renders those insights that arise out of practical experience over time critical simply because they are organized, formalized and postivized—the reality is that long before it is formalized in theory, critical practical reasoning and insight are already enacted in practical lived experience. Additionally, as we have maintained throughout the present project, it is sometimes an unfortunate consequence of social theory that it actually obscures the very concrete realities that it relies upon to give it explanatory power. This is most especially a danger when we are talking about the concrete exigencies of power and the ideological distortions that take multiple particular forms and are re-presented in various practices and institutional arrangements. Indeed, were we to reduce practical reasoning to the sort of formal theoretical framework that Habermasian critical theory provides we would actually end up with a very flat and impoverished understanding of what it means to be critically oriented being at a personal, moral and political level. To be a critically oriented being is not to allow our critical faculties to be absorbed by, or directed through, abstract epistemological concerns at the level of justification,
but to grasp in a concrete and particular way what we need to do in order to change things. This, at any rate, is what we intend to show over the course of the next few pages.

5.3  *Phronesis: From Critical theory to Critical Being*

Over the course of my extended argument I have attempted to put forward the idea that the critical orientation understood as ‘critical hermeneutics enacted through practical reasoning and *phronesis*’ embodies a way of thinking-acting-desiring being that is pedagogically sound, congruent with our experience, and more able to critically engage the moral and political exigencies of our complex and diverse contemporary world. I took the time to explicitly elaborate this critical orientation in order to provide an experience-grounded alternative to the pervasive and familiar Habermasian abstract universalizing moral perspective. Part of my argument is articulated out of a particular pedagogical approach that stresses the crucial element of lived experience, and the idea that we learn about who we are and how we can critically engage our world through the wisdom of others, in experience, and through our capacity to see ourselves as temporal and historical beings who belong to traditions of understanding, occupational practices, to language and culture. This kind of critical orientation does not forward an abstract universalizing critical *theory*, but describes, instead, how critical *being* can be enacted as insight and expressed through *phronetic* reason which coalesces and intensifies the desire to think and act freedom as a practice with and among others in just institutions. What this requires is that we see ourselves as critical beings not merely from an ‘intellectual’ or abstract perspective, but holistically as beings who are capable, embodied and temporal beings, historically and linguistically situated; as beings who think, desire, respond emotionally, and take
up a multitude of practices; as beings who are not detached from others or their natural environment, but who precisely belong to each other, to a family and a culture. Unlike the Habermasian perspective, critical hermeneutics through phronesis, insight and a broad context of practical reasoning is not dependent on any over-arching theory, nor does it derive its critical orientation from abstractly ‘knowing that’ something is the case. Instead, the critical hermeneutics I have put forward has its roots in the ancient concept of phronesis and is carried through in rhetorical and dialogical activities such as speaking, listening and reading with and among others.

In Chapter One, I spoke of the relation between hermeneutics and rhetoric as not initially ‘theories’ about persuasive language or interpretation, but as expressions of a constitutive human desire to understand ourselves and others through speaking-listening and interpreting-understanding. Thus, it is in rhetoric where first arises the possibility of expressing community and solidarity, but also where illusions and distortions surface. It is through an already interpreted background of hermeneutic understanding which both situates and makes possible a different interpretive possibility that both rhetoric and dialogical relations are possible. Along these lines, we also talked about understanding as a practice of recognizing this situatedness but also giving rise to the possibility of thinking freedom as a practice. In all of these latter discussions the notion of modern theory and method was kept at a distance in order to allow the argument to proceed phenomenologically in a way that honours the multiple modes of experience before they are compartmentalized and de-ontologized in theory.

However, it is clear that it is also a fundamental human desire to theorize, to reflect at an abstract level, to grasp ‘the whole’ in a simple economic way that draws the many together under ‘the one’. We cannot ignore or avoid this yearning for simplicity, nor should we want to.
However, from the practical level of lived experience, neither should we have any illusions that abstract theory or scientific method is the exclusive or even paradigmatic way of critically orienting ourselves, or even of reaching or representing the truth of lived experience. Indeed, if anything, the sort of reasoning and practical insight that is much more encompassing and expressive of our desire to be a certain kind of person and live a certain kind of life, to critically meet the particular exigencies of our continuously changing world, is what we have referred to here as practical reasoning and phronesis. This is because phronesis expresses the idea that we are caught up in a world of differing relations and particular situations, but can still be reasonably expected to be responsible to ourselves, and answerable to others. If we hold common convictions, or share common views about the good, or what is required for us to flourish as healthy, creative and critical beings who must necessarily depend on each other and on the necessity of a balanced and sustainable approach to our environment, it is not because we conform to theory, but because we accept the practical reality that we live in a world with and among others whom we can both depend upon and exchange ideas with. The conclusion here is not that we inhabit such a shared perspective, but that realizing or enacting a sense of belonging and community that insightfully grasps what it means to flourish as healthy, creative and critical beings, will be something that critical hermeneutics through phronesis can actually provide.

Practical reasoning is not a mode of reasoning that abjures knowing. However, at the level of moral, ethical and political practice ‘knowing that’ something is the case is not ultimately what enacts our capacity to be critically insightful. An emerging critical capacity is always a matter of cultivating in ourselves, through our practices and relations with others, a certain quality of mind or depth of thinking-being-acting over time, that can prepare us to meet the difficulties, complexities, challenges and travails of life with something approaching
equanimity. In other words, critical hermeneutics through *phronesis* requires not merely that we *know how* to effect change, or *know what* freedom as a practice means in the abstract, but that we cultivate in ourselves and in others the desire to be critical beings that enact these latter in every one of our particular linguistic, cultural, political and occupational practices.

From the practical reasoning perspective that I have elaborated, beginning with the relation between rhetoric and hermeneutics, I would conclude that if Habermas’s critical theory has any grip on us it is because it speaks to our own practical experience (just as Kant’s abstract categorical imperative does), and is persuasive insofar as it is an undertaking that expresses itself not through transhistorical categories, but through interpreted traditions that are *living traditions* enacted through *phronetic* reason, and articulated in various rhetorical, pedagogical, legal, social and political practices. Moreover, if Habermas does not consider the completion of the Enlightenment project he undertakes as presupposing the inevitable progression toward absolute knowledge and immutable eternal truth, but rather as a mode of interpreting the world that is wholly situated within history and human finitude, then what he is trying to articulate through the rubric of theory is not importantly a ‘knowing that’ something is the case, but, rather, a normative-critical understanding based on something like *phronesis* and insight about what is demanded in modern, complex, communicatively-oriented societies.

The notion of a critical theory and the idea of *phronesis* should not, however, be reduced to a simple ‘either/or’. We cannot simply dismiss Habermasian theory from a practical *phronesis* perspective, casting it as a formal or empty critical enterprise. Likewise, from the perspective of Habermasian theory, *phronesis* with its emphasis on the particular does not have to be seen as reasoning perspective that devolves into moral, legal or political relativism. The criticism here is not that Habermas’s approach is useless because it is empty or formal, but that it situates certain
phronetically arrived at insights regarding linguistic relations at a formal level in abstract theory, and in so doing divests them of critical relevance for particular always changing and ongoing practices. What we need to do then, is look at Habermas’s theory always in light of a phenomenology of human experience that is enacted through rhetorical expression and hermeneutic understanding, and is elaborated along the lines of what we have described as critical phronesis. Doing so, fundamentally alters the focus of what it means to understand the disclosive role of critique, and more importantly, what it means to engage a world as a certain kind of critically-oriented being. Thus, to embody a critical orientation is not a matter of mere knowing that something is theoretically the case, but cultivating a certain depth of insight and critical practical reasoning capacity which is able to grasp through hermeneutic reflection the inconsistencies, distortions or contradictions of a social or linguistic practice. We respond critically (that is, reflectively and insightfully) to a particular situation not by subsuming or dissipating it under a rule or concept, but by productively mediating between the claim that the particular situation makes, and the background knowledge, set of practices, tradition of law, that it belongs to.

The word productive here is intentional. A productive mediation involves a creative dimension that is realized and enacted through negation and the ‘negation of negation’. This is why we emphasized, from the beginning, that phronesis must be framed within a broader context of practical reasoning that allows the exercise of phronetic practical reasoning to be both an activity and a making—both a reflective (negation) and a creative reconfiguration (a negation of negation).

Notice here that what makes us increasingly capable of critically navigating through difficult situations and challenges is not our knowing that something is the case, (for example, a
set of facts or rules), but a result of the very sustained ‘doing’ activity of enacted insightful thinking and creative imagination. It is this activity—this enacted thinking in a concrete particular context that solidifies, over time, a certain kind of dispositional critical being. It is critical because it is the cultivation in us, over time, of a kind of relevant reasoned responsiveness and insight towards an always changing world. Critical acting-being demands not only a certain reflective acumen, but also a creative capacity to sometimes look beyond or think against the grain—against the convention, rule or law in order to actually better realize the latter. But what this means is that critical acting-being is critical because it does not depend upon the knowing of some over-arching law or theory to ground its dependence. We gather and enact a critical capacity in the spontaneity of the situation that is before us, and the critical depth of this capacity issues from an ever-widening grasp of different particular situations over time.

If we take now the practical insights that inform Habermas’s notion of communicative action—that is, the call to make explicit in practice the values of equality and the symmetrical conditions of communicative exchange, and grasp these latter within the parameters of phronesis and the broad context of practical reasoning, what is finally to be gained?

The first thing that we must understand is that we cannot know, in advance, how such ideals or rules will apply in different contexts or particular situations. For example, our grasp of what equality and symmetry mean will become deeper and more refined through particular experiences—that is, we will understand how they are to be applied similarly yet differently in each new situation that we encounter. The gathering of wisdom that results will shape and cultivate our thinking-acting being in a way that enables us to see better each time what the fit is between the values of equality and symmetry and the demands of the concrete situation. But as we have seen, it is not just equity or tailoring the generality of the rules of symmetry and equality
to meet the demands of the particular that is involved in practical reasoning. Part of discerning how the values of equality and symmetry will be honoured and applied in a particular situation will involve looking at the traditions of application, and becoming aware of the historicity of our own understanding. This effort of looking at traditions of application yields a patient, sympathetic and empathetic grasp that helps us discern how these values should be concretely realized. This latter aspect of practical reasoning is what we have described in our broadened account of practical reasoning as *gnome*. We can grasp *gnome* and other elements of practical reasoning through a simple example.

Let us assume we find ourselves in a situation where we are involved in a round-table meeting with other cultural groups. Perhaps this round-table discussion is centered on some civic or ecological issue, and involves First-Nations representatives. Following the example of the *phronetic* and practical reasoning perspective we have elaborated, we would need to become aware of what Gadamer might call a ‘history of effects’—that is, the history of exclusion and colonialism they had endured, and are still enduring in understanding and interpreting. We might also have to make some hermeneutic effort to listen to and honour their narratives and stories so that we could begin to know how *they* see their past and future, as well as how they understand and apply something relevantly similar to the values of symmetry and equality. In other words, we could not just unthinkingly brandish our own tradition’s understanding of such values, and expect everyone to immediately conform to what we see as a ‘universal or transhistorical’ perspective. Additionally, we might have to grasp both the general assumptions held by speakers around our table, and the particular contexts that gave rise to the need for them to express a perspective, and discern from all of this the right or opportune time to address or speak to an
issue raised. This discernment of right or opportune moment is precisely understood through the practical reasoning element of *kairos*.

From a *phronetic* practical reasoning perspective, it would soon become apparent to us that what was called for would not be the invocation of transhistorical norms of equality and symmetry, but reasonable interpretation and discussion of how these values might be understood and applied in *this* particular situation. This would mean that a Gadamerian dialogical openness would be the center around which we would grasp each other’s perspective. We have described this dialogical perspective through the practical reasoning element of *sunesis*. In the unfolding of this dialogical encounter our own prejudices and traditions would be challenged and we would catch a glimpse of how limited our own perspective were. Through what we described as *nous*, in the very doing of speaking and listening, we would experience the sudden insight that our perspective on what equality and symmetry means is, in experiential terms, somewhat narrow or not congruent with participants actual on the ground experience, and perhaps even somewhat patronizing. With the help of others, we might then move beyond our limited horizon of understanding. What *phronesis* would provide and enact in such an encounter would be a more expansive breadth of *seeing* by way of a more acute *listening* to the ‘voice of the other’. It would be the reasoning-desiring perspective that could enact our capacity to self-reflectively and creatively experience and anticipate ‘that which could be otherwise’, and perhaps shed a more extensive understanding about what the values of symmetry, equality and respect mean in this particular concrete world of human interactions.

Moreover, at a critical level, such a *phronetic* perspective would enjoin us to pay attention to the particular instances of negation—that is, where someone in the group made a disguised attempt to overpower or instrumentalize another participant; we would have this critical capacity
because we would know, through experience, that the rhetorical expressions they employed inscribed the language of sexist, racist or colonialist attitudes. What is pivotal here is that none of what we have just described presupposes that the critical insight accomplished relies as much on the invocation of transhistorical norms as it does in the very particular context of dialogical exchange where participants come to gradually see the limits and possibilities of their perspectives. Moreover, though we have used just this one example, it is clear that this is the kind of situation we are all familiar with because it represents the difficulty and the effort required to reach understanding with others about what matters to us, what differentiates us, and what we share in common. What developing a critical orientation from the perspective of phronesis and practical reason presupposes, if it presupposes anything, is that the more we experience, the more we engage with each other, the more books we read, conversations we have, speeches we hear, the deeper our understanding will be over time with and among others.

Before closing our discussion of Habermas we need to make an effort to see how the critique of instrumental reason, while certainly important given the ubiquity of modern instrumental forms of reason and technique-oriented strategies of social interaction, is simply not as hermeneutically deep as a critique of the contemporary world grounded in the contrast with phronetic reasoning. If there is something right about phronesis as an experience-based mode of cultivating character, enacting spontaneous and particular-oriented thinking, and shaping a certain kind of thinking-acting being, then what would the world look like without it? We can imagine what Alasdair MacIntyre has called a ‘disquieting suggestion’. From the perspective of classical Greece the absence of phronesis would be the triumph not of theoria or sophia but of techne. As we have said techne was pervasive in Aristotle’s world and its main competitor was not theoria or sophia, but phronesis. Techne rationality could easily obliterate sophia as it
obliterated Socrates. But Aristotelian *phronesis* is not only capable of preserving a place for *sophia*, but capable of keeping *techne* in check. Without *phronesis*, however, the Greek world would be a world where citizens would exercise very little choice; a world where they would lose the capacity to judge or deliberate; a world where they would, in fact, be incapable of distinguishing between one excess and another. It would be a world where they would gradually lose any desire for truthfulness or justice—in fact they would lose all of the virtues. Rhetoric would be simply a technique taught to the powerful or the wealthy by paid sophists. Democratic forms of political participation would give way to tyrannical rule. At the individual level, they would see themselves as objects or things that could only survive if their world was planned in advance and predictable. The virtue of friendship as the capacity to want good for another for *their* sake would also be narrowed since friendship without *phronesis* would be seen merely strategically as the practice of using others for our own individual benefit. The emphasis would gradually be not one of cooperation and participation but one of suspicion, fear, withdrawal and spectacle. Notice here that because *phronesis* is concerned with forming a whole person—a thinking-acting-desiring being that exists with and among others, Greek citizens would not just be subject to distorted relations and political forms, but would actually lose any capacity to be reflexively-oriented beings. To put this in more modern terms, along the lines of Hannah Arendt, they would live in a world of fabrication. They would, in fact, actually lose what it is to be human—the capacity for spontaneity and bringing something new into the world.

What of our own contemporary world—what would a world entirely bereft of *phronesis* look like? From the perspective that we have elaborated here, the picture of the Greek world is no less disquieting or devastating than anything that arises out of a Habermasian critique of instrumental reason in our own ‘complex modern world’. Indeed the loss of *phronetic* reasoning
for us would, in a way, be just as devastating, simply because it would describe the loss not just in external social, political or economic terms, but in terms of a deep human loss—a loss of *who we are* as thinking-active-desiring beings. This, when all is said and done, is the central problem of critically engaging our contemporary world through the framework of a ‘sociology of knowledge’ that shifts our gaze away from the particular and concrete, and perceives human experience through the disengaged lens of an ‘objective observer’ in abstract functionalist or behaviorist terms. Fortunately, we have not yet reached a point where critical insight and practical reasoning through *phronesis* are no longer present. The worry, however, is that to the extent that we allow abstract theory and instrumental forms of reasoning to exclusively guide our personal, moral and political relations; to the extent that we ignore or refuse to take seriously our own lived experience of negation and of thinking freedom as a practice, we might yet realize such a devastating state of affairs. Indeed, as we shall see in what follows, hope still remains in the everyday practical activities we all engage in, and in the effort to remember and re-imagine a different, and perhaps more sustainable world.

What we need to do now is look at real life situations, speeches and practices in order to illustrate just how relevant and necessary the *phronetic* and practical reasoning perspective is in every one of these endeavors. We will do this by applying our philosophical findings in three distinct and recognizable spheres of human thinking and acting: the legal, the political and the pedagogical.
5.4 Critical Phronesis: Three Contexts of Application

In the following three practical domains, the legal, the pedagogical and the ethico-political, critical hermeneutics through *phronesis* and insight is called for, and/or attested to, in a particular context. These examples do not show the full range of possibility of *phronesis* within each practical configuration, but they do give a sense of what is required, or what can be achieved through the critical and creative reasoning perspective I have outlined at a very practical level of activity. Up until now what I have put forward is a more philosophical elaboration of critical hermeneutics through *phronesis*. But, in each one of these examples, something of the character of practical reasoning, *phronesis*, and *nous* (insight) as situated reasoning and discernment of the particular, in light of a background context of human flourishing or the goal of striving towards living well, with and among others, in just institutions, can be glimpsed through recognizable concerns, issues and exigencies.

**The Pedagogical Sphere**

In Chapter Two, I said that *phronesis* compels us to attend not just to our own self-understanding, but to listen, observe and learn from others, with whom we participate in practical contexts of thinking and doing. It is, therefore, intimately tied to how learning emerges in the encounter with others. This ‘pedagogical’ element of *phronesis* has been noted and elaborated in an historical and conceptually comprehensive way by Joseph Dunne.\(^{273}\) Dunne was roused into the effort to work through historical and philosophical perspectives about the notion of practical reasoning and *phronesis*, because he determined, as a teacher, that the method-driven instrumentally-oriented, ‘behavioral objectives model’, which was being promoted at the time,
was neither helpful to students or to teachers.\textsuperscript{274} Indeed, to the extent that this model attempted to deprecate the particular context of learning, and remove any potential for creative spontaneity in the classroom (in teachers or students), it demonstrated a somewhat dehumanizing pedagogy. Moreover, Dunne soon realized that a \textit{techne}-based ‘blueprint model’ was not, in any way, a ‘neutral’ method of teaching. It presupposed an instrumental approach to students and teaching that upheld standards of ‘efficiency’ analogous to a ‘cost-benefit’ economic analysis. This approach intentionally and systematically removed contingency and particularity, flattened differences, and minimized anything resembling independent thought and reflection, or the cultivation of “qualities of mind and character, a habit of truthfulness, a sense of justice, a care for clarity and expressiveness in speech and writing”.\textsuperscript{275} All of these virtues or human excellences were ignored, in order to acclaim the superiority of an abstract order of efficiency, as if human beings were ‘objects’ or ‘resources’ that need to be ‘maximized’ in a reductive economic, competitive sense. According to Dunne, a \textit{techne} or instrumental approach to pedagogy such as the above upholds rational planning and control of curriculum, test-based initiatives, and gives those who are charged with assessing teacher performance the necessary ‘analytic tools’ to measure success or failure by standards that are not grounded in the spontaneous, lived experience and activity of teachers and students, but in the business-efficiency model of instrumental reasoning. With the help of Aristotle and a number of other philosophers—Collingwood, Arendt, Gadamer and Habermas—Dunne attempts to develop a \textit{phronetic} alternative:

In this alternative picture, practical knowledge has been shown as a fruit which can grow only in the soil of a person’s experience and character; apart from the
cultivation of this soil, there is no artifice for making it available in a way that would count. \(^{276}\)

What Dunne exposes, as that which is always at the core of good teaching or pedagogy, is *phronesis*. In particular contexts of activity it is *phronesis* and practical reasoning that any good teacher will be able recognize as “properly characteristic of her task—even if the task is conceived only in the broadest terms”. \(^{277}\) What concrete experience shows, is that when teaching is not exclusively result-oriented, or merely a means to success, but, primarily, considered as a ‘good in itself” then it: 1. will be open-ended, and will not shy away from spontaneous innovation and insight in the classroom; 2. will allow the teacher herself to express who she is—that is, her character as a thinking and emotional being; 3. will grasp that teachers are individuals who always act ‘*within the field of an individual and communal effective history—which is the more effective for operating pre-judgmentally’*; 4. will understand that a teacher’s ‘own greatest effectiveness or ‘power’ is realized in moments not of manipulation but of interplay’.

When *phronesis* and practical reason are allowed to govern teacher-student relations, individuals are treated not only as though they were ‘whole desiring beings’ who are capable of spontaneous, creative and critical thought, but also as temporal beings who respond to stories, and who are situated in a particular cultural, historical and linguistic context that informs the practice of teaching-learning. As a result, the intrinsic value of each teacher and each student is upheld and honoured, because each, in an important way, is unique and truly *irreplaceable*. Teachers are unique and irreplaceable because they will have cultivated over time, in very concrete particular contexts, a profound wisdom and insight about what *this* class or *this* student might require or demand in *this* new and unforeseen situation. \(^{278}\) Students are unique and
irreplaceable because each have an individual story to tell about who they are and where they come from—a story that can provide the means to help teachers to creatively improvise their approach to teaching. The crucial thing about *phronesis* for Dunne is that without presupposing technique as an all-encompassing form of rationality, it is still able to bring both general knowledge and teaching technique to bear on the particular situation in a way that, as Aristotle might have put it, is directed to ‘the right person, at the right time, to the right extent, with the right aim, in the right way’. What we can take from Dunne’s discussion is that, pedagogically, what *phronesis* presupposes at a practical level, is the notion of an educational community representing the interests of the *whole* community; what it presupposes at a political level, is that we are first and foremost *citizens* and not consumers; what it presupposes at the individual level of the teacher is, finally, a pedagogical self-understanding that is oriented toward ongoing research, and the cultivation of that sort of reasonableness which is in keeping with human finitude; what it presupposes at the level of the student is a holistic critical orientation that honors the creative and spontaneous, and exemplifies ‘thinking freedom as a practice’, with and among others, in just institutional arrangements.

We cannot leave the pedagogical sphere before highlighting the contributions made by Paulo Freire, and one of his most articulate and important student-advocates, Henry Giroux. What is so relevant and crucial about Freire’s and Giroux’s pedagogical orientation is that they articulate a critical *phronesis* that draws its power from a dialogical approach to learning that is grounded in situated ethical or universal moral awareness of the exigencies of those who are marginalized, forgotten, dehumanized and oppressed by the global machinery of instrumental consumer-oriented rationality. It is a pedagogy that is, initially, always directed towards the oppressed. Thus, it is a pedagogy that holds to the notion articulated in Matthew 24:40 that
‘whatever you do for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you do for me.’ For Freire this pedagogy has two stages:

…In the first, the oppressed, unveil the world of oppression and through praxis commit themselves to its transformation. In the second stage, in which the reality of oppression has already been transformed, this pedagogy ceased to belong to the oppressed and becomes a pedagogy of all men in the process of permanent liberation.²⁸⁰

In the spirit of Hegel’s master-slave dialectic, Freire recognizes that “it is only the oppressed who by freeing themselves can free their oppressors”.²⁸¹ They are able to accomplish this not through monologue, slogans and communiqués, but through dialogue which is a reflective and participatory activity. Moreover, the student-teacher relationship has a fundamentally narrative character where knowing emerges through inventing and reinventing stories. Imparting knowledge is not about teachers depositing facts or catalogues of information into students, so that they can be made into disciplined beings who are adaptable and manageable.²⁸² For Freire, teaching-learning emerges in each unique situation through critical thinking and dialogue; it is about teachers and students together helping to bring about or give birth to, a creative critical dimension of thinking-acting-desiring being; a thinking-acting being that is based on a ineliminable solidarity with, and belonging to, others; a thinking-acting being that is critically aware of both the socio-political realities, and the possibilities for creative transformation. In a word, Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed is phronesis enacted in the classroom.
Henry Giroux has taken up Freire’s challenge in an extensive, relevant and thought-provoking way. His many books and articles testify to his remarkable ability to speak in different forums, from a cogent perspective that is committed to keeping alive a critical dimension of thinking in the public and political sphere, as well as the realm of public and higher education. In a voice that echoes Hannah Arendt’s understanding of ‘dark times’, Giroux tells us that

…education is fundamental to democracy, and…no democratic society can survive without a formative culture shaped by pedagogical practices capable of creating conditions for producing citizens who are critical, self-reflective, knowledgeable, and willing to make moral judgments and act in a socially responsible way.283

For Giroux critical pedagogy is vital to enacting a socially and politically aware agency—what we have described as critical acting-thinking-desiring being. As a teacher, he experienced, like Joseph Dunne, the rise of instrumental forms of pedagogy, and the reduction of teaching to a ‘skill, technique, or disinterested model’. For Giroux this had the effect of reducing young people to ‘cheerful robots’ who were more like docile bodies than active participants. The deeper pedagogical purpose of such an instrumentalizing approach, according to Giroux, was to turn students into insatiable consumers of goods, and passive spectators that derived satisfaction from the continuous valorization of aggression and violent spectacle. To realize this end, it would be necessary to neutralize any attempt to teach wider values of justice, equality, or to instill a love of learning, and a critical-thinking orientation. Giroux resisted this approach, at no small personal cost, and became all the more determined to forward a different ‘critical’ pedagogy—one which can only described as phronetically oriented:
Critical pedagogy is not about an *a priori* method that simply can be applied regardless of context. It is the outcome of particular struggles and is always related to the specificity of particular contexts, students, communities, and available resources. It draws attention to the ways in which knowledge, power, desire, and experience are produced under specific basic conditions of learning, and illuminates the role that pedagogy plays as part of a struggle over assigned meanings, modes of expression, and directions of desire, particularly as these bear on the formation of the multiple and ever-contradictory versions of the ‘self’ and its relationship to the larger society.²⁸⁴

To put the matter in terms that should, by now, be familiar to the reader, what Giroux asks of all teachers is to recognize the role they can take up as one of inspiring and cultivating thinking-creative acting being in students—a thinking-acting-desiring being that is critically-oriented towards thinking freedom as a practice in every one of their endeavors.

*The Political Sphere*

The political sphere is the place where something new is brought into the world through action.²⁸⁵ It is, therefore, rooted in the human condition where both the limits and the possibilities for beginning again are attested to. When the political is reduced to spectacle, or self-aggrandizement, formalism or procedure, strategic alliance or maneuvering, unthinking allegiance or crass patriotism, then all of the human possibilities for action, invention and intervention are, in fact, erased. However, as Hannah Arendt reminds us, if there is a single
essential human capacity that gives meaning and possibility to action, it is speech. To speak well is to find the right words, at the right time, in particular circumstances. But the particularity of the event of speech and action does not mean that what occurs, as a result of speech, is a predictable or certain outcome. Speech and action are vulnerable to misinterpretation, and unexpected effects. Yet it is precisely the possibility that speech and action can cut across boundaries of expectation, upset the status quo, and push the limits of possibility, that marks it as fundamental to action, and to the human condition. Moreover, unlike making, acting is irreversible—we cannot take back or unmake our actions. To assume that we can, is to assume that we are only makers who can destroy, at will, what we have made. In the human world of action such destruction would be inevitably be an invitation to violence.

To put this in a way that refers back to my discussion of rhetoric in Chapter Two, if a speaker uses rhetoric as an instrument—an assorted bag of ornaments and clever tricks, then he is no longer in the experience of rhetoric itself. Speech becomes something that he possesses and is in complete control of. This instrumentalizing of speech removes its possibility as action and thereby it’s potential to transform the speaker herself—she is detached or separated from its meaning possibilities. It also means that ‘success’ rather than meaning is what is stake. We have seen that if acting and speaking are meaningful, they are also dangerous and fraught with ambiguity. However, the fragility of intervention, the uncertainty of outcomes, the irreversibility of action, the potential for instrumental forms of reasoning to dominate, and coercive and often violent possibilities to ensue as a result of action, should not lead us to think that we are thereby resolved of the responsibility to act. Indeed, for Arendt it is these very limiting possibilities that enact our capacity to both promise and forgive. In the futurity of promising we show we have the power to create "islands of certainty in an ocean of uncertainty". With the capacity to forgive,
we relieve the great burden of an irreversible past. Both of these are moments of restoration and possibility intimately tied to the political.

What I want to emphasize here is that what takes place in the realm of acting, speaking, promising and forgiving belongs to the thinking-acting being realm of phronesis. These human conditions and possibilities are not realized through calculative, theoretical or methodical approaches, but are enacted through practices guided by phronetic reasoning, practical insight and the awareness of our historical and temporal being. They inaugurate the possibility of thinking freedom as a practice, and enact a critical reflexive responsiveness to the world we inhabit. In what follows, I will attempt to give concrete standing to these human conditions in the realm of political speech and critical political journalism.

If there is one question around which the political revolves, it is the question of who 'belongs' and who is 'excluded'—who can be a citizen and participate in the bringing forward of something new, and who is marginalized, or excluded from this fundamental aspect of the human condition. With respect to this issue, there is really no figure in the modern history of prophetic political activism more important than Martin Luther King Jr. His voice is the voice of eternal vigilance that speaks truth to power, and arises out of a remembering and forgiveness of the actions of the past, an abiding promise for a different possible future, and a critical dimension of thinking about the present. It is the voice of faith, of experience, of prophetic insight, and of practical wisdom. His rhetoric inscribes the contingent relation of the powerful and the powerless at a particular moment, in particular circumstances, but always in a way that evokes our most basic critical need to both resist injustice, and recognize the finitude and possibility that marks our distinctively human condition. As rhetoric of resistance it opens up the possibility of questioning, of contesting, and of countering the status quo—of thinking freedom as a practice.
As rhetoric of critical hope, it creates the possibility of a common experience and a possible community. King’s rhetoric is not meant so much to persuade an audience or simply represent the problems of race, fragmentation, war or poverty, but to invite an audience to attest to the human experience of these realities by looking at themselves in light of an effective history, and a differently imagined future.\(^{287}\) It is his unswerving determination to \textit{act}, to courageously intervene in the world that creates the condition of possibility for something new. King is most cited for his fight for civil rights, and his advocacy for non-violent resistance. However, near the end of his all too short life, he spoke against the Vietnam War, and in his last speech addressed the issue of poverty and injustice through the particular context of the Memphis Sanitation strike. The speech against war is addressed to the evils of a particular time and place, to the specific actions of a President and a Congress. But it is a speech that recognizes the great difficulty and courage it actually takes in the real world to speak truth to power:

\[\ldots\text{some of us who have already begun to break the silence of the night have found that the calling to speak is often a vocation of agony, but we \textit{must} speak. We must speak with all the humility that is appropriate to our limited vision, but we must speak. And we must rejoice as well, for surely this is the first time in our nation's history that a significant number of its religious leaders have chosen to move beyond the prophesying of smooth patriotism to the high grounds of a firm dissent based upon the mandates of conscience and the reading of history. Perhaps a new spirit is rising among us. If it is, let us trace its movements and pray that our own inner being may be sensitive to its guidance, for we are deeply in need of a new way beyond the darkness that seems so close around us.}\]^{288}
These words attest to our desire and need to respect truth and to reach out to the other in speech in a way that also hears their implied voice, and acknowledges and addresses the particularity of their implied claim. This is rhetoric as primordial belonging and occasion for expressing community and solidarity. It is clear that King knew this speech would invite criticism and bitter resentment of those in power, as well as those who did not want his civil rights message to be attenuated by wider social justice and war concerns. But King understood that these battles were related to each other—that the difficulty of keeping alive the civil rights movement was linked to the unrelenting continuance of the war in VietNam:

There is at the outset a very obvious and almost facile connection between the war in Vietnam and the struggle I, and others, have been waging in America. A few years ago there was a shining moment in that struggle. It seemed as if there was a real promise of hope for the poor -- both black and white -- through the poverty program. There were experiments, hopes, new beginnings. Then came the buildup in Vietnam, and I watched this program broken and eviscerated, as if it were some idle political plaything of a society gone mad on war, and I knew that America would never invest the necessary funds or energies in rehabilitation of its poor so long as adventures like Vietnam continued to draw men and skills and money like some demonic destructive suction tube. So, I was increasingly compelled to see the war as an enemy of the poor and to attack it as such.289

These are not theoretical musings, but the articulation through speech of practical concerns that are situated in concrete contexts that demand attention and reflection. At the same time, this is a
speech immersed in a history of effects, a prophetic understanding of how war devastates the human condition. King’s response was not cynicism or apathy, but active human intervention, and the attempt to find ‘new ways of speaking’. He also understood that he would be targeted and perhaps killed for his determination to hear the call for justice and freedom from abject poverty. It did not matter. What mattered was to bring something new into the world in the very act of speaking a prophetic promise:

…And then I got into Memphis. And some began to say the threats, or talk about the threats that were out. What would happen to me from some of our sick white brothers?

Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now, because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land! 290

These last prophetic words are framed within the Mosaic covenant, and have their corollary in the story of Exodus. However, King’s ‘God’ is not the God of abstract law, but rather the God whose central commandment is to love others. In this sense love is, for King, the other side of justice. King was, of course, not a ‘politician’—at least not as we conventionally understand the word. He was, however, enmeshed in politics and in the polity, and he was a witness to the violence, injustice and untruth of law and political power. His *phronetic* insight and prophetic
wisdom was gathered over time through the experience of exclusion and marginalization as a person of colour. His *phronetic* comportment was not displayed in speech that subsumed events under a general rule, law or theory. Rather, like a good Aristotelian he exhibited it through a careful attending to the concrete particularities of each situation in order to correct the injustices that are disguised in the generality of custom, tradition or law. By so doing King was able to inspire in his listeners a sense of the need to intervene and take action, while at the same time to never fail to forget the promise of something better—never to forget the *telos* of hope that is inherent in critical thinking and action.

From the prophetic critical orientation of *phronetic* insight, we move to investigative reporting and the practice of critical journalism in the social and political realm. With the advent of new forms of social media technologies, we have available now, a wealth of alternative sources that give voice to issues and concerns usually left to the margins, or completely ignored by corporate media conglomerates. For the sake of brevity, I will only highlight a few instances of the latter. Ideally, journalism is thought to have an epistemic function of revealing, in an explicit and accurate fact-oriented way, what is happening in the world at a local and international level. It presupposes certain virtues of reliability, honesty, and the exercise of independent insightful judgment, and its goal is in some sense to provide a check on governmental or other forms of power by informing a citizenry. In this sense, it has what might be called a ‘watchdog’ function. In other words, critical journalism brings to light the instruments of political or corporate control, and exposes the on-the-ground reality of war and human suffering that results from particular political decisions’ it uncovers the abuses and distortions of political and corporate power. When these latter critical functions are absorbed into the interests of those with great power and privilege, then the epistemic role of journalism
devolves into one of tabloid news, propaganda, distraction and entertainment. Private corporate media are not interested in advancing public interests, generating debate or informing a citizenry, but finally, in making a profit and securing their power and privileged status. They reject the notion of plurality or public space. Thus, whatever might seem to challenge or conflict with the interests or requirements of their power and status will simply not be allowed to see the light of day.

What is significant about alternative and independent critical journalism, for my present purposes, is that it attempts to critically re-imagine journalism as a *phronetic* practice, in a public commons where shared goods are preserved and extended. Its epistemic responsibility is thereby restored, and journalism becomes again that ‘eye of the people’s soul’ as Marx might have said—that is, it becomes a condition of possibility for making the world visible to itself. Here we speak of critical journalism as unveiling contradictions, inconsistencies and distortions, and in so doing, prodding us into reimagining and rethinking ourselves and our relation to the world. I have described this critical orientation as a form of immanent critique in the experience of negation and the ‘negation of negation’. It is a critique that arises not from the sort of journalist who merely repeats the perspective of those in power, but from the journalist who sees their most primordial function as one of giving a voice to the other who has been allowed no opportunity to be seen or heard; it is the journalist who is caught up in the particular, perhaps even life-threatening context, and real-life situation that cries out to be witnessed and listened to. Critical journalism is in every sense a *phronetic* practice—both because it is able to bring a particular context into sharp relief by situating it at an historical level of understanding, and at a hermeneutic-critical level of uncovering or disclosing of events, and, because it exercises this function in light of certain shared goods regarding justice, human dignity and equality. It enacts a
critical dimension by revealing contradictions, showing us something new, or connecting the
dots in a way that gives us a better grasp of what the economic, political or cultural stakes are. In
a world that is suffused with banal, superficial sensationalist reporting by privatized privileged
media stars, this is indeed a form of critical hermeneutics through phronesis. There are numerous
courageous figures we could choose from, but I will only speak briefly about one of these:
Robert Fisk. Fisk discloses the world to us as it is ‘in the particular’ while still adhering to
standards of professionalism and journalistic integrity.

In his work *War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning* Chris Hedges speaks of the enduring
attraction, excitement, exoticism of war, and the bizarre, grotesque and fantastic universe of war
culture. War, Hedges relates,

\[\ldots\]dominates culture, distorts memory, corrupts language and infects everything
around it, even humor, which becomes preoccupied with the grim perversities of
smut and death. Fundamental questions about the meaning, or meaninglessness, of
our place on the planet are laid bare when we watch those around us sink to the
lowest depths. War exposes the capacity for evil that lurks just below the surface
within all of us.\[292\]

It is, undoubtedly, because of this stark reality that the origins, reasons and causes for war
are usually expressed in language that is abstract and morally-charged, but essentially empty of
content. Thus, the human species has fought wars ‘for civilization’, out of ‘international duty’,
‘against the threat of communism or terrorism’ and so on. What is startling about the latter
descriptions is how abstract they are, and how this very abstraction serves to obscure the truth
that lies beneath the surface of war—that it “…represents the total failure of the human spirit”.293

Robert Fisk has described this failure over and over again in newspaper articles and books.
Fisk is as much a historian as he is a journalist. Yet his expansive and well-documented work
The Great War for Civilization is more than a mere chronology of eyewitness reports. His critical
journalism is critical insofar as it recognizes that our understanding is always historically situated
in a very concrete way. It is this recognition that frames his determination not merely to report
‘history as it happens’ but, from a more critical perspective, to “…challenge authority—all
authority—especially when governments and politicians take us to war, when they have decided
that they will kill and others will die.”294 By describing in stark terms the details of genocide,
torture, pain, injustice and human suffering, Fisk not only expresses the critical hope that we can
resist a tendency towards complacency, and a desire to normalize war and aggression, but
underscores the critical and moral obligation to expose the mendacious refrain that “we didn’t
know—no one told us”.

Critical journalism presupposes the hermeneutic reflection and recognition that journalists
cannot be detached entirely from the historical, political, linguistic and cultural contexts that
formed them, but it also presupposes that journalism cannot be servile to power. The value and
credibility of critical journalism is something that issues from the capacity to insightfully grasp
the particular situation in light of general concatenations of political and economic power—to
read not just on the surface, but beneath the surface, and thereby expose a truth that officially
sanctioned narratives attempt to conceal.
The Legal Sphere

We have previously pointed to the law, or the legal sphere as exemplary insofar as it is implies a combination of hermeneutic reflection, rhetorical expression and phronetic reasoning. The Latin word jurisprudential is precisely meant to convey the central idea behind phronetic insight—that is, the cultivation of a hermeneutic reflective capacity, which grasps the general in terms of the particular, and the particular in terms of the general, with the aim of advancing ‘equity’ or balance. Aristotle discusses how phronesis functions through the rhetorical notion of equity to ‘correct’ the generality of the law in light of the particularity of a situation that could never have been initially contemplated. Gadamer, similarly, finds in phronesis a mode of reasonableness that enables us to subject the universality of law to the particularity of experience. Gadamer reminds us of the interpretive aspect of applying the law, carried through by way of a phronetic mediation of the particular and the general, in the context of a practically oriented task or question:

…the judge who adapts the transmitted law to the needs of the present is undoubtedly seeking to perform a practical task, but his interpretation of the law is by no means merely for that reason an arbitrary revision. Here again, to understand and to interpret means to discover and recognize a valid meaning. The judge seeks to be in accord with the “legal idea” in mediating it with the present. [TM 328]

Moreover,

…the work of interpretation is to concretize the law in each specific case—i.e., it is a work of application. The creative supplementing of the law that is involved is a task reserved to the judge, but he is subject to the law in the same way as is every other
member of the community. It is part of the idea of the rule of law that the judge’s judgment does not proceed from an arbitrary and unpredictable decision, but from the just weighing up of the whole. Anyone who has immersed himself in the particular situation is capable of undertaking this weighing-up. [TM 329]

What we can take from the above is that when the ‘codified law’ is no longer an authentic expression of particular experience, when it merely subsumes or takes no account of the reality of the particular situation, it is likely that injustice follows. It is this sensitivity to what particular experiences and circumstances can disclose, and this awareness of what the ensuing consequences of enacted law means in the concrete lives of individuals, that describes what *phronesis*, as an insight-oriented reasoning mode, restores to the praxis of adjudication. The attention to the particular and to a certain ‘history of effects’ is what underscores the reasoning behind the sentencing provisions of Section 718.2 (e) of the Canadian Criminal Code. This section asks judges to consider the particular circumstances and effective history of aboriginal and First Nation’s people:

**718.1** A sentence must be proportionate to the gravity of the offence and the degree of responsibility of the offender.

However,

**718.2** A court that imposes a sentence shall also take into consideration the following principles:
(e) all available sanctions other than imprisonment that are reasonable in the circumstances should be considered for all offenders, with particular attention to the circumstances of aboriginal offenders.

What is interesting is that the language of the above provision resulted from growing evidence and a gradual recognition of the systemic over-incarceration of first-nations people, particularly in northern communities, but also off-reserve. This concrete reality, coupled with a growing awareness (and literature) on the abject social and economic conditions of aboriginal life, the emerging consciousness of the effects of colonial attitudes, and the generalized predisposition towards ‘carceral’ alternatives that many judges adhered to, initiated a need to rethink the notion of sentencing in historical, cultural and social terms. In other words, in the very practical thinking-activity of law, a critical perspective about the law’s limitation or deficiency emerged over time.

Even more interesting, however, is the fact that the jail-oriented solution to crime and especially youth crime, with little or no consideration of social, economic, health and substance abuse or race-oriented colonial attitudes carried on despite the newly added sentencing provisions. This tells us that reimagining a different possibility, thinking freedom as a practice in law must always contend with sedimented beliefs, and narrow, distorted perspectives. No doubt there were judges who took the new provisions to heart, and attempted to initiative alternative sentencing approaches. Likewise, there were others who insisted that they always presupposed such principles anyway, or that the new provisions were previously a part of their sentencing practice. However, this ‘prejudice’ or resistance to giving concrete meaning to the law could not go unrecognized for long, simply because the experience of all those who were caught up in the
everyday practices of the judicial system could not help seeing that the same sorts of negative outcomes, and colonial attitudes which gave rise to over-incarceration of first nations individuals in the first place, continued. What surfaced over time was that the carceral orientation of the justice system, and the systemic failure to address the issue of over-incarceration could no longer be ignored if the integrity of the justice system were to prevail.

This can be gleaned in light of the provisions for conditional sentencing [742.1, 742.2, 742.3] which were originally designed to address the issue of over-incarceration by allowing judges an opportunity, in those cases where the offence merited imprisonment of less than two years, to craft a sentence that allowed offenders to serve ‘time’ in their community under appropriate supervision. Unfortunately, the drive or impetus of carceral attitudes in the judicial system and in judges themselves—due in part to political pressure to continue an emphasis on denunciation, deterrence and separation rather than restorative and rehabilitative aims of justice within the criminal code—was underscored in the crafting of sentences that reproduced the very sort of blindness to the issues of poverty, domestic and substance abuse, that originally resulted from an insensitivity to colonialist attitudes.

Thus, sentences were crafted in such a way that they imposed conditions so exacting and lacking in attention to the particular circumstances of social-health infrastructure resources and the cycle of drug and alcohol abuse that arises out of impoverished and hopeless economic conditions that offenders consistently re-offended and were rerouted through the conventional jail system. The recidivism that was meant to be addressed by Section 742 continued and perhaps was even accelerated. Yet the law, so seemingly impervious to change, does in fact gradually change over time through the framework of practical reasoning that phronesis and the notion of equity embodies. The momentum of a carceral attitude could only be addressed, and somewhat
reined in, by elaborating again and again the principles behind section 718.2(e). There are two noteworthy cases here: R. v. Gladue, [1999] and R. v. Ipeelee [2012].

Gladue arises out of the case of an aboriginal woman who entered a guilty plea to the charge of manslaughter for the killing of her common law husband, and was sentenced to three years in prison. At the time of the stabbing, the accused had high blood-alcohol content. At the sentencing hearing, the judge took into account mitigating factors of youth, signs of remorse, lack of criminal record, and the fact that she had a supportive family, and had made the effort to attend alcohol abuse counseling, and upgrade her education while she was on bail. The judge also noted that she was provoked by the victim’s remarks and behaviour, and had a hyperthyroid condition which caused her to overreact to emotional situations. There were also aggravating circumstances, principally that by her words and actions the accused intended to harm the victim. As a result, the trial judge determined that ‘principles of denunciation and general deterrence must play a role...even though specific deterrence was not required’. He did, in fact, specify that the sentence should take account of rehabilitative concerns. However, he determined that since the accused lived in an urban area off-reserve and not ‘within the aboriginal community as such’, there were no special circumstances arising from her aboriginal status. The sentence was appealed, and the majority of the Court of Appeal dismissed the appeal. In rendering their own decision, the Supreme Court justices took the time to underline the fundamental purpose and principles of sentencing, and the factors that should be considered by a judge in striving to determine a sentence that is fit for the offender and the offence which are codified in 718.2(e). They emphasized that this latter provision requires sentencing judges to consider all available sanctions other than imprisonment, and to pay particular attention to the unique circumstances of aboriginal offenders. Further, they cautioned that this provision was not
merely a codification of existing jurisprudence, but a *corrective* designed to address the ongoing serious issue of overrepresentation of first-nations people in prisons, and thereby intended to encourage sentencing judges to craft concrete and meaningful restorative sentences:

There is a judicial duty to give the provision’s remedial purpose real force. Section 718.2(e) must be read in the context of the rest of the factors referred to in that section and in light of all of Part XXIII. In determining a fit sentence, all principles and factors set out in that Part must be taken into consideration. Attention should be paid to the fact that Part XXIII, through certain provisions, has placed a new emphasis upon decreasing the use of incarceration.

Finally, the court determined that the sentencing judge and the appeal court

…may have erred in limiting the application of s. 718.2(e) to the circumstances of aboriginal offenders living in rural areas or on-reserve. Moreover, he does not appear to have considered the systemic or background factors which may have influenced the accused to engage in criminal conduct, or the possibly distinct conception of sentencing held by the accused, by the victim’s family, and by their community.

The important specification was that the absence of alternative sentencing programs specific to an aboriginal community should not deter or inhibit sentencing judges from crafting a fit sentence that takes meaningful account of the principles of restorative justice.

It is quite possible that immediately after the above decision, Gladue-minded considerations issued in a renewed focus on restorative justice initiatives in sentencing.
sentencing judges were drifting away from these restorative principles and attempting instead to carve out exceptions to Gladue factors, in order to reaffirm, and further entrench principles of retributive punishment: denunciation, deterrence and separation. Clearly, the emphasis of incarceration over rehabilitative measures is related to particular political contexts and legislative initiatives, but the increasing resistance by judges to consider Gladue factors is also related to what can only be described as a willful blindness towards the particular concrete conditions that perpetuate and sediment systemic forms of discrimination and colonialist attitudes.\(^{295}\) As a result, thirteen years later, the Supreme Court of Canada was once again called upon to give a renewed emphasis on Gladue factors in R. v. Ipeelee.

This case, indexed as R. v Ipeelee, is a decision that speaks to two separate cases of Aboriginal offenders with long criminal records, alcohol and drug abuse issues, and long-term supervision orders. The pivotal issue, once again, is how to determine a fit sentence for aboriginal offenders. Determining a fit sentence is a matter of recognition that the particular circumstances of aboriginal offenders are unique, and call out for a heightened awareness and consideration of historical and systemic prejudice, and the cultural fragmentation, familial dysfunction and economic disparity that results from this. Such recognition must be attended to, and underscored by, those ‘first-line’ hearers of fact who grasp the potential of discriminatory practices inherent in the justice system. To be sure, judges enjoy a measure of latitude and discretion, but this fact in no way abrogates their duty to adhere to the principles mandated by particular sections of the Criminal Code [718.1 and 718.2]. We spoke earlier of the notion of Aristotle’s understanding of equity. In modern parlance this notion is equivalent to the legal idea of proportionality. Thus, the Supreme Court justices remind us that proportionality is
intimately tied to the fundamental purpose of sentencing — the maintenance of a just, peaceful and safe society through the imposition of just sanctions” that are “…proportionate to both the gravity of the offence and the degree of responsibility of the offender.” The court also affirms the corrective or remedial aspect of 718.2 (e) which is intended to address the issue of overrepresentation of First Nations individuals in Canadian prisons, and enjoins sentencing judges to take seriously, a restorative approach to sentencing. What is important in R. v Ipeelee is the idea that the generic category of moral blameworthiness is intimately related to the particular circumstances and the effects of history. To ignore these circumstances and effects in sentencing is to violate a fundamental principle of justice and, as it were, to allow injustice to prevail. Moreover, consideration of this principle does not contravene or undermine the criminal law, but precisely enacts it in a just fashion. Thus, the Supreme Court determines that:

When sentencing an Aboriginal offender, courts must take judicial notice of such matters as the history of colonialism, displacement, and residential schools and how that history continues to translate into lower educational attainment, lower incomes, higher unemployment, higher rates of substance abuse and suicide, and of course higher levels of incarceration for Aboriginal peoples. These matters provide the necessary context for understanding and evaluating the case-specific information presented by counsel. However, these matters, on their own, do not necessarily justify a different sentence for Aboriginal offenders. Furthermore, there is nothing in the Gladue decision which would indicate that background and systemic factors should not also be taken into account for other, non-Aboriginal offenders. The parity principle which is contained in s. 718.2(b) means that any disparity between
sanctions for different offenders needs to be justified. To the extent that the application of the Gladue principles lead to different sanctions for Aboriginal offenders, those sanctions will be justified based on their **unique circumstances** — circumstances which are rationally related to the sentencing process. Counsel has a duty to bring individualized information before the court in every case, unless the offender expressly waives his right to have it considered. A Gladue report, which contains case-specific information, is tailored to the specific circumstances of the Aboriginal offender. A Gladue report is an indispensable sentencing tool to be provided at a sentencing hearing for an Aboriginal offender and it is also indispensable to a judge in fulfilling his duties under s. 718.2(e) of the Criminal Code. [R. v Ipeelee]

Notice here that what is central is the notion that particular contexts and historical effects must initiate further reflection upon the general principles and statutory requirements of the law. This is what Gadamer means when he describes the function of adjudicators as one of attempting to understand, to interpret, to discover and to recognize a valid meaning. It is also precisely this characteristic restorative, interpretive and reflective capacity that is perfectly embodied and enacted through **phronesis**.

### 5.4 The Relativist Objection

Before I bring my elaboration of critical hermeneutics through **phronesis** to a close I need to address a general worry that this project remains vulnerable to relativist objections. First, I
must draw an important distinction between the idea that instrumental means-ends rationality reproduced at a social, moral and economic level is something that institutions, political and economic thinkers, media relations and people in general have come to accept, and the notion that such a mode or rationality is totalistic or definitive of all human experience. The former is perhaps a truism; the latter is not only false but, if true, is something that would very likely be impossible to detect. Why is this distinction important? One of the conclusions drawn by critics like Habermas is that *phronesis* cannot possibly address the problems of a contemporary world where instrumental forms of reasoning have become institutionalized and ubiquitous. He and others fear that because there is so little left to access at the level of tradition, shared goods, and so on, any critical normative force that *phronesis* has would be attenuated or contaminated by the ubiquity of instrumental forms of reasoning. Therefore, the argument goes, the only way to counter instrumental forms in this modern institutional world, is to suspend the *phronetic* and the historical, and invoke a universal standard based on a transhistorical, cross-cultural appeal to communicative rational normative presuppositions.

In other words, implicit in the idea that we must advert to transhistorical appeals in order to critically engage instrumental forms of rationality is the idea that there are simply no traditions, historical contexts, social configurations that are not beholden to instrumental rationality. This is false, as we have already shown in our situating of *phronesis* and practical reasoning within contemporary concrete practices in the spheres of pedagogy, politics and law. My project of critical hermeneutics through *phronesis* expresses the idea that we simply do not need to conclude that in the context of our complex, multivalent, institutionally-oriented world, a critical orientation that yields truth or reality must now be something discovered only by way of procedural rationality, or a transhistorical critical theory. Nor do we need to succumb to the
groundless cynical perspective that stipulates there is no immanent critical perspective we can adopt, or any critical rhetorical tradition that we can access to help us expose and resist instrumental forms of reason within any given tradition. These will always be possible so long as we can, in fact, experience the world. Indeed, there are various configurations of legal universal rights and norms within traditions, precisely because a particular history was considered and drawn from. Moreover, there still exists, as we can abundantly see in our own practices and relations with others, a capacity to be insightful, to reason responsibly and to exercise good judgment.

To be sure, it takes hermeneutic work and rhetorical savvy to see how the conduct or speech of individuals in a tradition might fail to conform to their professed norms and ideals; or to show that they do not value these latter; or to indicate that the effects of the practices they engage in are not what they imagine them to be; or even to demonstrate that they have been willing or unwilling pawns in practices that enshrine distorted norms of powerful selfish interests; or finally that we can and do speak truth to power. But, all of this is precisely phronesis-oriented hermeneutic, historical and rhetorical work—it is not a short-circuited appeal to procedural, transcendental or transhistorical norms. If all we think we have to do to be critically oriented is to invoke universal laws, or appeal to transhistorical regulating ideals, then we will gradually be incapable of learning anything new or even of imagining anything different.

Indeed, the very idea that any living tradition is wholly completed and completely unified borders on absurdity. The institutional or systemic status of instrumental forms of reasoning is not equivalent to absolute status—if this were so, the very possibility of critically engaging the status quo would be impossible if not inconceivable, since even our traditions would be perceived through this totalizing perspective. In fact, if anything is true in history—even our
most monstrous atrocities, outrageous wars, occupations, destructive repressive political regimes—it is that resistance is not futile but ubiquitous! This does not mean that we are not often blinded by our own selfish perspectives, or in error about the way things are. This will ever be so. And, if philosophy cannot help us resist a desire to perpetuate the false consolation that willful blindness bestows—the individual or collective denial of truth, or the reality on the ground—then at least the storyteller, tragedian and poet sometimes can. If the fault is really not always in the stars, but often in ourselves, then the vanity, hubris and moral blindness of Achilleus, Agamemnon, Creon, Antigone, Oedipus, King Lear and Hamlet can provide for us a way of imaginatively grasping what cannot be logically deduced or theoretically derived: our capacity for self-delusion. If inner poetic vision has a philosophical counterpart, then it can be no other than that ‘mind’s eye’ which I have described as phronesis and practical wisdom. It is precisely through this capacity to critically and imaginatively ‘see’, that philosophy and art can be said to both interpret and, as Marx would have it, to ‘change the world’. However, change does not happen all at once. What change presupposes is that we can cultivate, over time, a capacity to think freedom and critically interpret and respond to what is before us, with and among others. What this means is that critical hermeneutics through phronesis and practical reasoning, as I have described it, is neither relativist, parochial, nor conservative. It is, rather, the most radical critical orientation we can adopt—one that allows us to speak critically at a personal, moral and political level out of the very particular historically and temporally situated-being and context that we are.
Conclusion

To change ourselves or our world presupposes that we can change the way we think and act, and this requires ongoing and sustained interpretation and critical assessment. A critical orientation is not something we can achieve in isolation from others. We are embodied beings who fundamentally belong to each other, exist at a certain point in history, are situated in physical space, and inhabit a particular language and social, cultural world not initially of our own choosing. Because of this, the critical orientation we choose to adopt must be one that can account for, and embody our acting-thinking-desiring-being as a whole. I have made the attempt here to articulate through the ancient notion of *phronesis* and a broader understanding of Aristotelian practical reasoning, a way of critically orienting our thinking-acting being that can appropriately meet the exigencies of a changing world, and help us to spontaneously and creatively navigate through the often turbulent individual, moral and political contexts we find ourselves in.

In Aristotle, the notion of character formed through habituation, and the various virtues which themselves are enacted by the intellectual virtue of *phronesis* describes our capacity to embody, over time, a certain constancy of disposition, and to cultivate a creative, intuitive and critical capacity to meet with equanimity the unique and unpredictable character of particular situations. To adopt a critical orientation is both a matter of developing a certain critical personhood or character over time, and of imagining different possibilities; a character that is constant over time yet not immobilized, or entirely confined by this emblematic status; a character that is durable yet strives ever to think freedom as an ongoing practice. To think freedom as a practice is to cultivate the capacity to respond creatively and imaginatively to a
world that unfolds as a continuing series of turning points, dilemmas, demands which can be understood in light of the past and future. This is what the ancient notion of *phronesis* and Aristotelian practical reasoning give us. *Phronesis* is not a theory of the critical, but rather a description of the way we become critically-oriented beings over time. In this respect, it articulates something that we have always grasped in our practical affairs, but cannot reduce to a recipe or set of rules or imperatives. The unqualified demand for explicit decision procedures and universal rules lends itself to the false conviction that the certainty of rules secures just outcomes.

Through *phronesis* and practical reasoning we discover that in the real world we are not informed or directed by rules or recipes, but guided more by our emerging capacity to grasp moral dilemmas, insular perspectives, the disruption of the status quo, the ambiguity of ethical contexts, and real-life suffering and tragedy. I began my discussion in the present work with this notion of tragedy, because in tragedy we experience our human finitude; we hear again, and witness anew, the intractability of human suffering. The experience of the tragic is insight into the illusion of moral certitude, of the inescapable fault of hubris, and of our inability to see or hear another who is before us and speaks. It is an insight that brings us back from the aloof, disengaged, moral self, to the real and present world of particularity, with and among others. This practical insight discloses to us that despite the fact that we are often in the grip of things we cannot overcome and of complexities we do not entirely grasp, there is always an urgent need to listen and to imagine another’s suffering by attending to the particularity of their situation. In this move from tragic to practical wisdom we see what, from the very beginning, we called the emergence of a critical dimension. In *phronesis* this critical dimension is the enactment of
reasoning and insightful being at an individual, moral and political level that emerges as a listening, a seeing, a reflecting and an imagining over time, with and among others.
Among others whom we share a language, a history, a cultural beginning or a religious understanding. We cannot simply dismiss Aristotle’s ethics because it does not conform to our more modern inclusive perspectives. One of the advantages of taking up Aristotle’s rhetoric and politics along with his ethics is that we can begin to see the important way in which these three spheres—ethics, rhetoric and politics—are related to each other, and the way our human practices can be understood in various interlinked ways. What becomes apparent is that the either/or epistemic boundaries or definitional limits of seemingly distinct notions of \textit{ethics}, \textit{rhetoric} and \textit{politics} are still intuitively plausible—after all, part of grasping any phenomena is becoming aware of what distinguishes it from other phenomena. At the same time, accepting that we in fact can and do make such distinctions does not commit us, from the trajectory of our own experience, to agree, for example, that ‘doing’ and ‘making’ are two fundamentally different things never enacted together in our involvements with each other. Similarly, we would say that in practice choosing a certain means is already in an important sense choosing an end. The end is already implicated in the means. For, example, if we as an activist group determine that the best means to overturn an unjust law or rule in order to realize the available means etc., definitive boundaries and distinctions soon begin to break down and a certain fluidity becomes more apparent between ways of knowing, understanding and applying. It is therefore unsurprising that the differentiation Aristotle made between \textit{theoria}, \textit{techne} (skill), \textit{nous} (understanding), \textit{praxis} (activity) and \textit{poiesis} (making) are still intuitively plausible. After Virtue, A Study in Moral Theory, 2nd edition, University of Notre Dame Press 1984 pp 187-91.

1. By organic I mean here an experiential ‘felt’ or embodied sense of what is right to say or do in this situation at this time.
4. The distinction between ‘internal’ and ‘external’ goods of a practice is elaborated by Alasdair MacIntyre in his fascinating and ground-breaking work \textit{After Virtue}. ‘External’ goods or rewards of a practice are goods such as prestige, power, status or money, which are not specific to any given practice as such, and accrue only to the individual who ‘wins them’. By contrast, to realize goods \textit{internal} to a practice is to realize and extend certain specific skills, a creative imaginative grasp of duties, an attentiveness to particular changing demands, and particular circumstances, with a view to extending and enriching the practice—not for the sake of the individual practitioner, but for the sake of the practice itself; and also for the entire community of practitioners. The goods ‘internal’ to a practice can only be realized through the experience of \textit{participating} over time in the practice, and presuppose that practitioners initially accept the authority of certain standards of excellence, and are prepared to abide by the rules. These standards and rules are not eternal or absolute, but represent the best standards realized so far. To exercise \textit{phronesis} and practical reason may in fact require us to go beyond the letter of the law or rule in order to realize the goods internal to a practice that have not yet been recognized or realized in the original setting of general standards. It is this latter imaginative situation that the example given above is meant to underscore. See, Alasdair MacIntyre, \textit{After Virtue}, A Study in Moral Theory, 2nd edition, University of Notre Dame Press 1984 pp 187-91.
5. It is certainly important to be cognizant of the potentially limiting nature of Aristotle’s ethico-political definitions regarding political inclusion and gender equality as well as his important epistemological distinctions between different spheres of human interaction and knowing in the \textit{Nicomachean Ethics}. At the same time, we must not simply dismiss Aristotle’s ethics because it does not conform to our more modern inclusive perspectives. One of the advantages of taking up Aristotle’s rhetoric and politics along with his ethics is that we can begin to see the important way in which these three spheres—ethics, rhetoric and politics—are related to each other, and the way our human practices can be understood in various interlinked ways. What becomes apparent is that the either/or epistemic boundaries or definitional limits of seemingly distinct notions of \textit{praxis} and \textit{poiesis}, of ‘acting’ and ‘making’ cannot be so definitively maintained the moment we are caught up in the tide of human experience and linguistic practices which move back and forth from political activities to ethical concerns, from rhetorical expression to dialogical understanding. If one looks closely at the examples that Aristotle uses to demonstrate praxis or action in certain contexts of human experience—for example medicine, managing a household, observing among the available means etc., definitive boundaries and distinctions soon begin to break down and a certain fluidity becomes more apparent between ways of knowing, understanding and applying. It is therefore unsurprising that the differentiations Aristotle made between \textit{theoria}, \textit{techne} (skill), \textit{nous} (understanding), \textit{philosophical wisdom}, \textit{praxis} (activity) and \textit{poiesis} (making) are still intuitively plausible. After Virtue, A Study in Moral Theory, 2nd edition, University of Notre Dame Press 1984 pp 187-91.
hold a value as worthy in a theoretical vacuum—it must always be something we share with others. This is the very nature of value. At the same time, this does not mean that what we hold together as inestimably valuable cannot be rethought in light of new experiences, dialogue with others or contemplation with ourselves; it does not mean that such values are not historically situated nor any longer subject to further elaboration, reflection and even alteration and transformation. It means only that as we experience the world of plurality, difference and particularity with and among others over time we will in fact come to generate, identify and pursue what we consider to be certain vitally important goods and ends that inevitably define other ends that we consider less central. This context of human experience is all that is required for us to see that we are, at least at an ethical and political level, fundamentally teleological beings and that the ethical, rhetorical and political dimensions of human experience are importantly related to each other. As we will demonstrate in the foregoing it is Aristotle’s notion of insight and phrnetic reason that gives these various dimensions of human experience a critical orientation.

6 This is an expression borrowed from Joseph Dunne’s Back to the Rough Ground: Phronesis and Techne in Modern Philosophy and in Aristotle, University of Notre Dame Press, London, 1993.

7 Paul Ricoeur, Time and Narrative (Volume I) Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press, 1984 p.52


9 The phenomenological perspective is already an interpreted or hermeneutic perspective because it presupposes the fullness of language and human finitude. Moreover, because we are in language only through others we cannot begin as isolated detached atomistic subjects. What we understand by ‘lived experience’ is related to two German words which refer back to Wilhelm Dilthey and Edmund Husserl: Erlebnis and Erfahrung. The root of Erlebnis is leben, to live, and refers to first-hand experiences. We could say that to experience something is first to ‘inhabit or live in it’—the expression ‘walk a mile in my shoes’ comes to mind here. Erfahrung is that sense of experience as something grasped within time. This way of talking about experience derives from the root word fahren which means to travel. Thus to live in the experience of something is to travel or move around in it such that one becomes aware of who one is in the ‘here and now’. We will raise the idea of erfahrung again in Chapter 3 when we elaborate Gadamer’s notion of effective-historical consciousness (Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein).

10 It would have been possible to initiate a phenomenological investigation of the relation between rhetorical and interpretive experience by looking at examples of our own everyday acts. This course of examination unquestionably has certain merits. However, establishing the phenomenologically grounded argument through the aesthetic dimension affords us a unique opportunity to grasp together in a story, and as an audience, how the very activity of speaking and listening depends on a hermeneutic capacity to understand and interpret what others are saying, which, in turn, opens up a critical truth-oriented space of possibility. Moreover, this aesthetic-creative dimension of hermeneutic and rhetorical experience will be something that is further elaborated when we come to Ricoeur’s notion of mimesis and narrative. Guided, as we often are, by the idea of truth as something found only through the rigorous attention to abstract method, we do not often see truth as something disclosed or discovered by way of aesthetics or in the experience of art. Yet it is precisely the experience of truth in art which concerns Gadamer in Truth and Method. Relatedly, because rhetoric is so thoroughly marked in scholarly literature as a taxonomical concern with figures and tropes, it is easy to forget that long before this professionalizing imperative takes hold, a deep understanding of the way rhetoric and interpretation situate, and are situated by the human experience of listening and speaking, was intuitively grasped in the aesthetic realm of tragedy—and, one might also add in Aristotle’s Rhetoric and Plato’s Phaedrus. What I wish to emphasize here, is the fact that even though the Iliad and Antigone are ‘literate works’—i.e. written works, they are not dominated by methodical concerns. They are discourse in action—a fact that testifies to the hold that an oral tradition, though losing ground by the time of Antigone, was still part of the Greek ethos. It is also certainly true that works by Homer and Hesiod would have had a wide pedagogical influence and authority in Greek customs, ethics, religion and politics. It is this latter influence, and the pedagogically suspect instrumentalizing of poetry by the sophists that concerned Plato. Whether the later condemnation of Plato for his ‘trashing’ of the poets, and his claim that poetry must be judged through the reflective tradition of philosophy, is actually warranted, remains an open question. I tend to believe that philosophical reflection always reacts to authoritative traditions, simply because it asks us to ‘think more’ in dialogue with others. I think the same is true of poetry and literature—to an even greater degree. At the same time, I do not think that Plato’s condemnation of the sophists (some of whom were quite learned and undoubtedly good teachers) was as thoroughgoing as it might appear in some of his dialogues—though it could be argued that Aristotle was somewhat more forgiving than Plato. The key point here is that grasping rhetoric and interpretation within the tragic aesthetic dimension where human suffering, conflict, blindness and limitation are beheld, allows us to see how these modes of
understanding and expression are fundamentally related to each other in the multiple dimensions of our lived experience. We begin not only to get a sense of the limits and possibilities of language in speaking, listening and understanding, but a sense of the need to raise these possibilities to a critical reflective level, involving questions of the right thing to do or say in this situation, and whether what is determined or chosen is done so truthfully and with wisdom.

11 For some it will be this very plurality—the ubiquity of the rhetorical that is a problem. But, again, rhetoric presents both the possibility of securing the status quo and disrupting it. In other words, rhetoric can be a tool of propaganda or it can, through rhetorical questions, reassert the stark reality of a world all but swallowed by propagandists and spin doctors. It can demand that we face up to what we have done or give good reasons for why we act in a particular way. In this sense rhetorical questions often lead to a fuller dialogical and dialectical interrogation of the meaning of events and history. Aristotle recognized this in his description of rhetoric as related to dialectic. The point here is to see Aristotelian rhetoric not initially as an isolated abstract theory of tropes but as a mode of ethically and politically-oriented speaking and listening that presupposes an interrelated network of arguments and meanings which make possible a community of understanding or ‘lifeworld’ in something like a Husserlian sense: “In living with one another each one can take part in the life of others. Thus, in general the world exists not only for isolated men [and women] not only for isolated men [and women] but for the community of men [and women]; and this is due to the fact that even what is straightforward is communalized”. (Edmund Husserl, The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, Translated by David Carr, Northwestern University Press 1970. p.163)

12 To borrow from Paul Ricoeur we could say that the art of rhetoric is grounded in “a pre-understanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources and its temporal character”. [Paul Ricoeur, Time and Narrative (Volume I) Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press 1983 p.54] This hermeneutic pre-understanding gives meaning to the action of characters, and to the activities of speaking and listening. Action here is not mere physical movement; it implies agents who have distinct identities, intentions, anticipations, and capacities, and who realize these latter by acting with and among others. This understanding of the relation between hermeneutic pre-understanding and activities of speaking and listening is what brings the rhetorical within the ambit of a practical (rather than theoretical) understanding. Moreover, as we shall see in Chapter Two, it allows the practice of rhetoric to be understood as a potentially phronetic activity. In Chapter Three the notion of hermeneutic pre-understanding will be understood through the defining relation that exists between time and narrative.

13 This is not meant as an argument for dismissing the valuable role that theory might play in its ‘after the fact’ organization and articulation of what the best sort of rhetoric might look like. It is more a decision to focus on what I believe are the more primordial elements of rhetorical practice in speaking-listening, and the always already existing critical and prudential judgments that inhabit the practice of rhetoric before they are explicitly theorized. The cultivation of certain virtues and discriminating critical insight has already happened before the theoretical enterprise begins. This way of beginning has merit precisely because it shows us that in the practical action-oriented relational space of rhetoric and dialogue we are always already discovering, coordinating, differentiating, discriminating and cultivating praiseworthy and blameworthy human qualities. We are, as it were, already in a ‘critical orienting space of possibilities’. Moreover, it is reflection upon the traditions we inherit—our ‘historicality’, to use Gadamer’s language—that helps us open up the relational space within which we develop these latter norms of criticism. Such norms simply do not automatically issue from the abstract disengaged perspective of theory.

14 At a moral-ethical level Dennis Schmidt reminds us that “…what is essential in Greek tragedy, what it poses as a question today, is that it awakens in us a renewed sense that we do indeed live in a world that is larger than we can either control or define and that we are held in the grip of that which we cannot comprehend.” From perspective of human finitude, of the need to express and listen to others, of desire we are not so very far from the Greeks. [Dennis J. Schmidt, On Germans and other Greeks: Tragedy and the Ethical Life, Bloomington: Indiana press 2001 p. 280]

15 In his influential book Mimesis: The Representation of reality in Western Literature, (Princeton 1953) Erich Auerbach has argued that works such as Homer’s Iliad do not invite us to reflect or interpret but simply perceive events, emotions and actions as a series of purely present images. Unlike biblical narrative which demands that we “fit our own life into its world” (p.15) Homeric epic poetry, with its formulaic structure, does not invite us to enter into the work in any interpretative way but rather asks us to simply accept the events of the poem as already complete and self-sufficient. Although there is some plausibility to this as a reading of the way the poem is constructed, I am by no means persuaded of the thesis that Homeric poetry does not invite its audience (then or now) to fit their own life into its world of actions, events and emotions. It is true that we may not imagine ourselves to be warriors on an epic field of battle, but we all know what anger, pride, courage, sympathy, friendship, and loss are about—and our
experience of the dramatic unfolding of action in the *Iliad* is that of a unified connected narrative, that precisely builds its tension through the articulation, in actions and words, of these very human experiences and emotions. The same could be said of many works of science fiction and indeed of fantasy works such as Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings*. The idea that there is no mediation between listener’s or reader’s and the events of the *Iliad* would be like reducing our experience of this work to something like spectators at a Grand Prix auto race.

16 Nussbaum, M.C., *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Ethics in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy*, New York : Cambridge University Press, 2001. It is this notion of ‘limitedness’ that Greek tragedy underscores, (and what I will later refer to as ‘human finitude’) that in an important sense pre-figures Aristotle’s understanding of *phronesis*—not to mention Gadamerian philosophical hermeneutics and Ricoeur’s narrative theory.

17 Like many ancient oral traditions, it is likely that the story of the *Iliad* predated Homer’s own telling. The deciphering of the Linear B tablets in 1959 and the fascinating discovery of several Achaeans settlements in Greek mainland and Crete also raised questions about the origins of this ancient Greek poem.


19 Aristotle, “Poetics” in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, Edited by Richard McKeon Random House New York, 1941. 1450a1-5, p.1461. For the great ‘phenomenologist’ Aristotle, not only does experience show us that we have a distinctive capacity to imitate, but that we ‘simply delight in works of imitation’. (*Poetics* 1448b4-15) We delight in such works because we are able to take pleasure in recognition and learning—in the grasping together, or as Aristotle puts it, (in a very hermeneutic way) “gathering the meaning of things” (*Poetics* 1448b17). Imitation is not meant here as passive replication or copying. For Aristotle imitation is an activity that has a decidedly creative element. He tells us that “the poet’s function (unlike the historian) is to describe, not the thing that has happened, but a kind of thing that might happen” [1451a36-7]. What is fascinating about the *Poetics*, however, is that Aristotle manages in his discussion of the creativity of mimesis to bring together the contingency of poetic creation (what might happen), with a sense of necessity that surges up in the contemplation of the whole (what must happen). This pairing of contingent and necessary does not occur anywhere else in Aristotle, and this is because in poiesis a world can be contemplated ‘as’ something distinctive and recognizable yet remain imaginary. One must add, however, that Aristotle’s understanding of ‘contingency’ is not radical in the sense of a completely random ‘anything goes’, (one might imagine here the notion of radical contingency implied in the evolutionary biology of Stephen Gould). Contingency for Aristotle is always something circumscribed by the rational and the organic-teleological. Having said this, contingency still has a place in the very important ethical sense that there can be no meaning given to ‘deliberation’ if we were to live in a world governed exclusively by necessity or ‘that which cannot be otherwise’.

Paul Ricoeur has noted that creative mimetic activity lies for Aristotle in “the organization of events by emplotment”. For Ricoeur a story is not simply a chance configuration of real events thrown together in an arbitrary way but, rather, a narrative configuration that gives meaning to events. Ricoeur tells us that an event is not merely a singular occurrence, but something that is defined through its contribution to the development of a plot. Likewise, the stories we read and tell each other are more than just a random enumeration of events in serial order. The function of a story is to organize events into an intelligible whole. Emplotment is thus a way of synthesizing or configuring heterogeneous discordant events into a temporal order of concordance. In this way, a work such as the *Iliad* is not a chronology of observed events, but a creative or invented construction—one that both suspends the norms of literal historical truth, and yet connects the reader to a coherent and familiar world that situates events in recognizable and authentic experiences of happiness, anger, courage, pride and suffering. I explore the narrativity of human experience in the context of temporalizing *phronesis* in Chapter Three.

20 Such virtues might, in fact, be very similar to the sorts of ‘conditions of possibility’ that Habermas spells out in the context of realizing the ‘telos of mutual understanding’—for example, intelligibility, rightness or truthfulness; but, they might also include such virtues as patience, empathy, integrity, sincerity or modesty. Importantly, however, all of the latter would be known or recognized not primarily because participants agreed, in advance, to a set of idealized presuppositions, but because in the very doing or activity of speaking and listening, certain goods that extend and enrich the practice of speaking and listening are internalized by participants. It is the activity of doing, of engaging as a whole person, not simply ‘knowing’ that matters here. The difference is one of being and becoming a good listener or speaker over time, not merely knowing, in advance, what conditions are a priori necessary. Similarly, in the context of morality, the issue is not merely getting a procedure right, or ‘knowing’ the good—it is, rather, one of being and becoming a good person over a whole life, and, thereby, realizing what it means to be ‘true to oneself’. The latter is an ontological-existential demand—a demand that echoes throughout an entire lifetime of decision-making and concerned activity.

21 I will take up and elaborate this idea of dialogue as the other side of rhetoric in the third chapter.
Augenblick of the adaptive way. Tanzer, Indiana University Press 2009, pp. 71-72. Heidegger relates that “…the human mode is in the mode of being-with-one-another; the basic determination of being itself is being-with-one-another. This being-with-one-another has its basic possibility in speaking, that is in speaking-with-one-another, speaking as expressing-oneself in being-with-one-another. This being-with-one-another is understood as the moment of vision, the moment of kairos.

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On this important aspect of listening, see Gemma Corradi Fiumara The Other Side of Language, A philosophy of Listening, Routledge, 1990.

Homer, The Iliad translated by Richmond Lattimore, University of Chicago Press, 1951.

The Iliad, 1.1-3

The background story of the Greek-Trojan war originates in what is popularly known as the ‘Judgement of Paris’. Paris the Trojan son of Priam is asked to choose the most beautiful goddess from among Hera, Athena and Aphrodite with the prize being a golden apple addressed to "the fairest". He chooses Aphrodite because she promises him the beautiful Helene, wife of the Greek Mycenaean King Menelaus. Against the advice of his brother Hektor (one of the greatest and most honoured of Trojan warriors), Paris makes off with Helene and so begins the ten year war.

Ian Worthington, editor Persuasion: Greek Rhetoric. Routledge, 1994 p. viii

Odysseus’ speech is also persuasive because it embodies what Augustine and Ricoeur describe as action interpreted within a three-fold temporalizing present. Thus, the exigencies of the ‘present’ situation demand that Odysseus speak words that grasp together the obligation presupposed in a past promise and the anticipation of a prophesied future.


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As we will see in Chapter Two, the notion of *kairos* plays an important temporalizing role with respect to *phronesis*.

The notion of equity plays a significant role in Aristotle’s discussion of justice: “The same thing, then, is just and equitable, and while both are good the equitable is superior. What creates the problem is that the equitable is just, but not the legally just but a correction of legal justice.” [1137b9-12] Equity also, of course, has an important place in contemporary jurisprudence and it plays a similar supplementary role—to mitigate the harsh application of strict rules of law.


In the Homeric case discerning judgment is judgment that recognizes the importance of the honour ethic as well as the creative acumen in choosing the right words to express this latter.


Perhaps one might also call to mind here Hannah Arendt’s description of ‘thoughtlessness’ as a profound example of blindness: the inability to judge—a much more pervasive human fault than what might be described as pure evil. See Hannah Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations: A Lecture” in *Social Research* 38, no. 3 Fall, 1971. p. 417

This hermeneutic contrast is borrowed from Paul Ricoeur’s discussion of Antigone in *Oneself as Another* and is meant to highlight the crucial place where tragedy follows from deep and seemingly intractable conflicts which are themselves grounded in a one-sided or strict adherence to absolute rules or duties. To relentlessly adhere to univocal rules or give in to relativism or arbitrariness is to embody a kind of moral blindness that almost inevitably issues in tragic outcomes. For Ricoeur it is in these very situations of interminable conflict that we discover that neither consequentialist (utilitarian) or deontological appeals can help us. Indeed, it is precisely here where we find that only practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and a capacity for critical insight in a particular situation can guide us. See Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Translated by Kathleen Blamey, University of Chicago Press 1992. pp. 241-249

It is this embrace of the essential notion of ‘difference’ that is captured in Aristotle’s idea that the ethical flourishes in a world where ‘things could be otherwise’.

The word ‘univocity’ might seem odd at first, but rhetoric simply could not be rhetoric without plurality—without both a speaker and listeners. If speech were purely an *a priori* deductive enterprise, or an emotive exhortation there would little need for cultivating a practice of listening. Listeners are listeners when they are caught up in nuance, in the logos, pathos and ethos of speakers who wish to say something to them. In this sense rhetoric exists in the dialogically shared space of one to another.


In his desperation to avoid a prophetic fate Oedipus actually accelerates his own demise, unknowingly killing his father and marrying his mother. Oedipus’ own father Laius inaugurated his son’s tragic end when he violated the ancient obligation of hospitality by abducting and raping a young boy he was tutoring, Chrysippus, son of King Pelops.


Despite the fact that women did not play a significant role in Greek politics, they did figure prominently in Greek tragedy (Clytemnestra, Cassandra, Medea)—and far from being entirely negative portrayals, these individuals were often given more depth and complexity than was likely granted to them at the political level. There are, of course, many other interpretive contexts that we could also highlight. The conflict within religion between civic religion and a more ancient family centered religion; the conflict within politics between tyrannical rule by fiat versus democratic rule through persuasion, and more broadly the conflict between religion and politics itself. This is not even to mention more modern social and psychological interpretations that the play has inspired.

Paul Ricoeur, with characteristic hermeneutic acumen, reflects that the tragedy of Antigone touches “the agonistic ground of human experience, where we witness the interminable confrontation of man and woman, old age and youth, society and the individual, the living and the dead, humans and gods”. Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself as Another*, Translated by Kathleen Blamey, University of Chicago Press 1992. p. 243

One is reminded here of Gadamer’s distinction at the level of *phronesis* between that sort of genuine authority which arises out of wisdom and the formal authority that demands blind obedience.

The reference to ‘theory’ throughout this dissertation requires some historical elaboration. We are perhaps all too familiar with the conventional modern distinction between theory as a disengaged reasoning activity yielding certain or even abstract eternal truth, paradigmatically represented by the philosopher or scientist, and the world of the practice, thought of as a kind of engaged reasoning which gives us useful but contingent knowledge. Here the theorist is seen as the ‘detached observer’ or spectator, while the practitioner is viewed as an engaged participant. This view arises out of an implicit acceptance of the hegemonic status of a modern scientific understanding of theory and method as applicable to virtually all fields of inquiry—including the human centered spheres of ethics, politics, economics, aesthetics and religion. As might be expected, this way of dividing up and differentiating aspects of knowledge and reason tends toward an oppositional, perhaps unbridgeable, impasse. However, there is a persuasive case that can be made from an historical hermeneutic perspective that, at least in its early Greek historical context, \textit{theoria} was a much more encompassing term—as much at home in religious festivals and cultural practice as in esoteric philosophy. \textit{Theoria} as Domenico Jervolino writes “is not something that can be assembled as modern scientific theories are, but is rather a belonging to, and an approaching of the rationality of being. In ancient times \textit{theoria} meant a procession or delegation sent to the feast in honour of a God: ‘To contemplate the epiphany of a god does not mean merely to consider a state of affairs in an aloof fashion, or even to be an interested onlooker at a marvelous spectacle. This contemplation means participating authentically in what goes on, a true, genuine presence’”. [See Domenico Jervolino “Gadamer and Ricoeur on the hermeneutics of Praxis” in Paul Ricoeur, \textit{The Hermeneutics of Action}, edited by Richard Kearney (Sage Publications 1996) p. 65.] See also H.G. Gadamer \textit{Praise of Theory}, translated by Chris Dawson (Yale University Press, 1998) pp 16-36. In her extensive and stimulating discussion of the cultural context of Greek \textit{theoria} Andrea Nightingale gives a further elaboration of the philosophical \textit{theoros} in Plato who “detaches himself from the social world and “journeys” to see the divine Forms. He is altered and transformed by this contemplative activity and returns to the city as a stranger to his own kind”. See Andrea Wilson Nightingale, \textit{Spectacles of Truth in Classical Greek Philosophy: Theoria in Its Cultural Context} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p. 36. We cannot simply revert back to this early Greek notion of theory, but neither should we uncritically accept the rather ubiquitous view of theory as an intellectual undertaking that is constitutionally immunized from historical effects.

As always there is both an historical and an exegetical context that we must be aware of here. Historically we should remember that Plato’s \textit{Phaedrus} and many other dialogues are in some measure a response to the proliferation of certain schools of thinking (notably Isocrates) that saw rhetoric more as a useful tool in public affairs. (This is not to say that rhetoric for the latter could not have a moral orientation). Secondly, a more thorough and rigorous examination of the \textit{Phaedrus} would involve looking at its similarities and differences to other dialogues—principally \textit{Protagoras}, \textit{Republic}, \textit{Ion}, \textit{Symposium} and the \textit{Gorgias}.

The historical Phaedrus was apparently implicated in the Profanation of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the Mutilation of the Hermes in 415BC. Aside from this we know (from the \textit{Protagoras} at 315c and \textit{Symposium} at 176d) that he was closely associated with Socrates. We also know he came from a well-established family through marriage to his cousin who was apparently the granddaughter of Xenophon (Lysias 19.15) an Athenian general. Socrates is said to have served under Xenophon. I gathered from my research that Phaedrus was a person of both financial means and social stature—that is until the religious scandal. The Phaedrus of the \textit{Symposium} has the appearance of a rather more mature fellow than in the dialogue that bears his name. In both dialogues Phaedrus is depicted as a passionate admirer of speeches and rhetoric, as well as the motivating source for speeches by others. However, in the \textit{Symposium}, he is no longer extolling the virtues of half-baked rhetorical speech concerned with the most expedient way to persuade someone to give in to sexual favours.

One is reminded in Lysias’ speech of the reflective Kierkegaardian aesthete who thrives not so much in the immediacy of hedonistic pleasure itself but in the delight of knowing that he is capable of engineering and sustaining a drawn-out seduction. Lysias, like Kierkegaard’s Johannes, is the cynical aesthete who is really in love with artifice, and his own ability to recreate the world after his own image. The setting of the dialogue is away from Athens. It could be argued that for Socrates separation from Athens is problematic—indeed Phaedrus notes that Socrates is completely out of place, and Socrates strengthens this by claiming that landscapes and trees do not teach him—only people in the city can. But there is something ironic about all of this. Firstly, Socrates’ \textit{maieutic} is most effectively brought into being through the one-on-one conversation between an older more experienced philosopher, and a younger untutored one. In Phaedrus, Socrates has all he needs to realize this. Secondly, and perhaps more ominously, Socrates is in fact dead at the time the \textit{Phaedrus} is written—and it is precisely the people of Athens who condemned him. Now, I think Plato may be telling us here that
what made philosophy unfit and dangerous for Athens and Athenian politics was the absence of a certain kind of love of wisdom, and the embrace of sophistical rhetoric over philosophy. We are thus reminded that if there is one thing Athens showed, with the execution of Socrates, it was an utter disdain for philosophy and philosophers. From this perspective, Socrates discomfort with nature is symbolic of his desire to practice his maieutic art in a city that, in the end, simply would not have him. Notice here that it is not the laws and constitution of Athens that are the problem, but the citizens of Athens. Socrates must remain estranged from that which he most desires. Thus, Plato locates this dialogue away from Athens in order to show both how intimate the connection is between the philosopher and the city-state, and how this relation has become corrupted when the city denies entrance to one of its best citizens. It may also show Plato’s disillusionment with the city and with Athenian politics in general, and hence the need for philosophy, and indeed education, to maintain autonomy from the politics of the day in order for it to properly guide inquiry and allow participants to reflect upon the implications of uncritically held opinions.

Inspiration of the sort we usually identify with poetry and the imaginative is given a special role in the *Phaedrus*. It is telling here that the ‘poetic’ is the means by which practical wisdom is exemplified.

This is perhaps an oversimplification, but it does not obscure the central thesis that we tend to forget that rhetoric without hermeneutic reflection is empty. It may be true that modern rhetoric is much more sophisticated than its classical counterpart—it must take into account argumentation and discourse theory and a different conception of language and its relation to structural and symbolic understanding. But for all this the poetics and practice of rhetoric still relies on very basic elements: i.e. metaphor, simile, synecdoche, allegory, paradox, hyperbole and syllogism—and every single one of these latter elements presupposes, in its relation to persuasion, an already hermeneutic grasp of situation and context. Moreover, it would be difficult if not impossible to conceive of rhetoric as purely an abstract art—we will always find that we are called back to the ethos of rhetoric wherein we deliberate and dwell in language with and among others.

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Edward Schiappa and Jim Hamm, “Rhetorical Questions” in *A Companion to Greek Rhetoric*, edited by Ian Worthington, Blackwell Publishing 2007, p. 4


To speak in Heideggerian terms, *phronesis*, insofar as it addresses ‘the right and proper way to be’ is a kind of ‘caring’ or concernfulness in our thinking-doing activity. The word ‘holistic’ here is meant to convey the idea of a hermeneutic whole-part relation. It can also describe, analogous to medical practice, the idea that healthy critical awareness is something that we embody throughout our whole human comportment: through our desires, our capacity for insight and our ability to reason.

We will return to this idea of the ‘impartial’ as a ‘prejudice’ against prejudice when we discuss Gadamer in the following chapter.

We will emphasize the public dialogical character of *phronesis* when we take up Hans Georg Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics.

This idea is borrowed from Judith Butler’s “Performatve Agency”, *Journal of Cultural Economy*, 3: 2, 2010. pp. 147-161. Butler is here referring to Hannah Arendt’s understanding of judgment, specifically with reference to *Eichmann in Jerusalem* (Viking Press, New York 1963.)

As we shall see, one of the exemplars of *phronesis* is judicial reasoning—that insightful capacity to think creatively in the present and particular context but in light of a history or tradition of reasoning and enacted law.

It might be helpful here to contrast *phronesis* with the sort of large-scale emancipatory reasoning implicit in modern critical theory from Marxist to Habermas. However, as we will argue in the following chapters ‘critical emancipatory reason’ owes much of its cogency and persuasive power to pre-enlightenment emancipatory and prophetic traditions, not to mention the sort of practically situated critical reason that Aristotle introduces with *phronesis*.

*Phronesis* would then involve not merely what Ricoeur calls a ‘hermeneutics of trust’ but also what he describes as a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’. Suspicion is not Cartesian self-doubt, but related to the idea that the text or the dialogical encounter always presents the challenge of understanding through interpretation. To meet this challenge we must be willing to listen, but also be willing to suspect that we have not been given the whole truth. The dialectic of trust and suspicion that inheres in *phronesis* is precisely what allows it to be described as ‘critical’.
values. More to the point we can easily see how all three divisions of rhetoric implicitly have a public pedagogical function of their capacity to continuously diminish the uniqueness and relevance of the particular. Aristotle concludes that the "trouble with modern theories of behaviorism is not that they are wrong, but that they could become true, that they actually are the best possible conceptualization of certain obvious trends in modern society." [Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1958 p. 322]

72 We can take note here of the proximity to Aristotle that Hannah Arendt’s political reflections unfold. Arendt discovers that we have succumbed to the temptation to separate knowing from acting, and embraced ‘making’ over ‘action’. Thus, our notion of ‘the political’ is not discovered in “anarchic disclosive revelatory and unruly actions” which are at the heart of human plurality, but in the mastery of the technical over human affairs and human action. This latter is a world that is perfectly captured through the predictive framework and methodology of the social and behavioral sciences. The spontaneity and contingency that characterizes human action and freedom is abolished by the imposition of hierarchical rule, and an ethos of instrumental reasoning and predictability. The result is a socialized predictable mankind. One need not look too far afield to notice just how ubiquitous the social science, behaviorist model has become—and with it an astounding proliferation of so-called ‘experts’ whose expertise is a function of their capacity to continuously diminish the uniqueness and relevance of the particular. Arendt shrewdly concludes that the "trouble with modern theories of behaviorism is not that they are wrong, but that they could become true, that they actually are the best possible conceptualization of certain obvious trends in modern society." [Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1958 p. 322]

73 See Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, edited by Richard McKeon Random House, New York 1941. Bk. VI: Ch. 3 1139b 11-18 and Ch. 5 1140a25-1140b30. Nous is not to be confused with ‘sense perception’; it is rather ‘the mind’s eye’. See also De Anima III 4, 429a10–18.

74 Indeed one could say that the Rhetoric gives Aristotle the opportunity to explicitly examine our experience of emotion or human desire. The fact that Aristotle chose the Rhetoric rather than the Nicomachean Ethics or De Anima to elaborate our experience of emotions is interesting in itself. One might say that this has everything to do with the fact that Aristotle is interested in how orators use or instrumentalize emotion in order to persuade a particular audience. This is undoubtedly true but it is far from the whole picture. Aristotle does in fact discuss appetites and what we today refer to as ‘emotions’ in his ethics—and they are far from peripherally concerned with virtues. To experience compassion, gratefulness or hope is to embody virtue itself. Moreover, to act courageously is in some sense to cope, at a reflective level, with fear. There is an appropriate time and place to exhibit anger, confidence etc. This is not a view of emotion as something static or unchanging that just happens to us, but something we think through and cultivate over time in ourselves and with others. From a phenomenological perspective there is something right about Aristotle’s account. In our own experience we know that it is quite possible to think our way into—to reflectively bring about a state of anger, love, sorrow or envy. We also know that over time as we gain understanding and experience of different situations and persons our experience of different emotions can deepen and be grasped in a more comprehensive way. Aside from the ethics Aristotle does indeed pay close attention to emotions in his work on rhetoric—again it is interesting that the emotions are emphasized here not as something private but rather as a condition of possibility for public persuasion. We can not only reflect upon our own emotions, we can, through language evoke feelings in others. However, if rhetoric is indeed a ‘civic art’, then it has a pedagogical role to play in shaping characters and communities in such a way they individually and collectively realize and desire what is best. This will involve a grasp of ethos, logos and pathos. But to experience pathos for the phronimos is not to experience what we refer to as ‘emotion’ as something that just ‘happens to us’ or that we are ‘in the grip of’. On this view emotions are, single mental events—brute, irrational, thoughtless feelings that we undergo. Certainly there is also a conventional stoic perspective that emotions or passions are something slightly distasteful. But, as we have emphasized, for Aristotle, in the phronimos acting and being are inextricably related. This means that emotions are complex experiences that involve both thinking and feeling. For Aristotle, the person of good character does the right thing at the right time with the right emotions. The rhetorician evokes the right emotions at the right time for the right reasons. W.W. Fortenbaugh very succinctly discusses the relation between thinking and feeling—the cognitive elements of emotion in Aristotle on Emotion. A Contribution to Philosophical Psychology, Rhetoric, Poetics, Politics and Ethics, 2nd Edition, London: Duckworth, 2003.

75 Aristotle tells us that "there are three divisions of oratory—(1) political, (2) forensic, and (3) a ceremonial oratory of display" [Rhet. Bk.1 Ch:3 1358b7-8]. Each of these three is “determined by the three classes of listeners to speeches. For of the three elements in speech-making—speaker, subject, and person addressed—it is the last one, the hearer, which determines the speech’s end and object. The hearer must be either a judge, with a decision to make about things past or future, or an observer. A member of the assembly decides about future events, a juryman about past events: while those who merely decide on the orator's skill are observers." [Rhet. Bk.1 Ch:3 1358a361358b7] It may appear from what Aristotle says here that it is political oratory that is most relevant. One could argue, however that for Aristotle the ‘master art’ (i.e. politics) cannot be circumscribed by political speech-making. I will claim that forensic (legal) rhetoric is equally important in the articulation and enactment of virtues and communally held values. More to the point we can easily see how all three divisions of rhetoric implicitly have a public pedagogical
function that can be best articulated through the reasoning framework provided by practical reasoning and phronesis.

70 As we noted earlier, the issue of rhetorical expression and right reasoning is, by no means, absent from Homer. Oratorical skill was certainly honoured, but Homer impresses upon us the tragic consequences of allowing the power of appearances to overtake wisdom and truth in speech. Likewise, Plato’s Phaedrus, and especially Aristotle’s Rhetoric, both stand out as attempts to grapple with and preserve the necessity of rhetoric, without dispensing with a concern for truth, or an ethical, justice-oriented perspective. Aristotle does this in a very original way by discovering and elaborating practical reasoning and phronesis.

71 Luck or chance does, however, have a role to play in ethics. Aristotle tells us that “…there are some things the lack of which takes the luster from happiness, as good birth, goodly children, beauty” [1099b33]… and reminds us that “many events happen by chance, and events differing in importance; small pieces of good fortune or of its opposite clearly do not weigh down the scales of life one way or the other, but a multitude of great events if they turn out well will make life happier (for not only are they themselves such as to add beauty to life, but the way a man deals with them may be noble and good), while if they turn out ill they crush and maim happiness; for they both bring pain with them and hinder many activities. Yet even in these nobility shines through, when a man bears with resignation many great misfortunes, not through insensibility to pain but through nobility and greatness of soul.” [1100b20-33] If we happen to be born into a dysfunctional community and raised in an environment of violence and selfishness with no exposure to people who care about learning and respect towards others, then realizing happiness through virtuous activity will be a difficult, and perhaps even a seemingly insurmountable challenge. At the same time, if we act as if everything we do is a result of things external to our own choice and deliberation, we would be left with a rather meaningless existence. And none of the above even touches the issue of the ‘ill-fortune’ of women, slaves, the chronically ill or the intellectually or physically challenged—according to Aristotle, all of the latter are simply unable to realize eudaimonia.

72 Aristotle continues, “But most people do not do these, but take refuge in theory and think they are being philosophers and will become good in this way, behaving somewhat like patients who listen attentively to their doctors, but do none of the things they are ordered to do. As the latter will not be made well in body by such a course of treatment, the former will not be made well in soul by such a course of philosophy” [NE Bk. II: Ch. 5 1105b13-19].

73 Worldly experience is for Aristotle crucial for “while young men become geometricians and mathematicians and wise in matters like these, it is thought that a young man of practical wisdom cannot be found. The cause is that such wisdom is concerned not only with universals but with particulars, which become familiar with experience; but a young man has no experience, for it is length of time that gives experience “[1142a12-16].

74 One can already see why Gadamer would have seen law as one of the exemplary contexts for the exercise of phronesis.

75 Additionally, Aristotle would distinguish acts done justly, and acts done justly only ‘by accident’. We cannot reasonably assign praise or blame to someone who acts out of ignorance or compulsion.

76 In a contemporary context Charles Taylor has elaborated what he calls ‘hypergoods’ or goods that are incomparably more important than other goods and which provide the framework against which we assess other goods. See Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, The Making of the Modern Identity, Harvard University Press Cambridge Mass. 1989 pp 63-73

77 Perhaps instead of eudaimonia the word eupraxia better describes the activity orientation of ethics.

80 One can already see why Gadamer would have seen law as one of the exemplary contexts for the exercise of phronesis.

81 In a modern context Charles Taylor has described (in a phenomenological way) this kind of constitutive notion of good with the term ‘hypergoods.’ Hypergoods are constitutive goods which provide for us a broad horizon within which we can make value determinations and discover what we ought to do in any given case. See Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, The Making of the Modern Identity, (Harvard University Press, 1989) pp 3-53. We can also instructively contrast Aristotle with Gadamer here. Whereas Aristotle discovers the telos of the ethical in eudaimonia and instructs us to move toward this goal through the reasoning orientation provided by phronesis, Gadamer returns to phronesis to help us discover the telos of the ethical in the continuous search for meaning and understanding through dialogue with each other. In both cases phronesis is not reducible to a method or set of presuppositions or rules; for Aristotle it emerges as experientially informed practical wisdom which realizes virtue and the good in the individual and the polis; for Gadamer it unfolds as the broadening of understanding through a multitude of dialogical encounters.

83 There are many interpreters of Aristotle who see the Nicomachean Ethics as solely a book about how individuals can be said to self-interestedly exercise and acquire virtue. In my view, this is a fundamentally flawed reading of Aristotle. Intellectual and moral virtues certainly pertain to the individual, but it would be inconceivable for
Aristotle to believe one could acquire and exercise virtue without others—without a context of activity with and among others. Without the political, the ethical would be effectively without meaning or purpose. To interpret the Nicomachean Ethics as an ethics oriented by self-maximizing individual concerns and interests would be to anachronistically impute to this work a modern understanding of the autonomous atomistic moral self that would be entirely foreign to Aristotle.

86 We have already met up with this notion of ‘desire’ in our earlier discussion of rhetoric. We discovered with Plato’s Phaedrus that it is not merely a knowledge of doxa or opinion (which the phronimos or rhetorician must be aware of) that is at issue, but understanding how desire shows itself in speech: rhetoric opens both the potential of desire manifesting as self-deception, sophistry and distortion, and desire for truth and wisdom in the practice of public speaking. For Aristotle as for Plato rhetoric as desire untutored by philosophy is rhetoric as self-aggrandizing sophistry. The virtuous or temperate person of good moral training ‘craves only what he ought, as he ought, when he ought’ whereas the intemperate and incontinent person is directed towards, yields to and is driven by improper pleasures. In this sense Aristotle also would have seen Phaedrus’ blindness as something that resulted from untutored desire, allowing his passions to cloud his good judgment. It is therefore virtue and reason that must govern moral choice, political ends and rhetorical expression.

87 Thus we are told “…what affirmation and negation are in thinking, pursuit and avoidance are in desire; so that since moral virtue is a state of character concerned with choice, and choice is deliberate desire, therefore both the reasoning must be true and the desire right, if the choice is to be good, and the latter must pursue just what the former asserts. Now this kind of intellect and of truth is practical; of the intellect which is contemplative, not practical nor productive, the good and the bad state are truth and falsity respectively (for this is the work of everything intellectual); while of the part which is practical and intellectual the good state is truth in agreement with right desire” [NE Bk: VI Ch.1 1139a21-31]

88 There is yet another reflective virtue in addition to sophia, episteme, techne and phronesis and that is nous—the capacity to intuitively grasps first principles [NE Bk. VI: Ch. 6 1140b32-1141a8]. As we shall see nous is implicated in both theoretical and practical reason.

89 It is worth noting here that nous is a grasping power that operates independently of sense perception, though it is connected to the latter. Aristotle states “…it is clear that we must get to know the primary premises by induction” [Posterior Analytics Bk. II: Ch. 19]. What is important is that inductive reasoning is not, for Aristotle, ‘scientific reason’ even if the latter is the originateive source of demonstrative knowledge. What is rather puzzling on first inspection is how ‘induction’ (which yields probability rather than certainty) precisely works with nous, an apparently infallible faculty allowing us to grasp principles. One might understand the relation between nous and induction phenomenologically: thus induction is the content-oriented noematic ‘gathering together’ of the many instances and nous the noetic ‘grasping together’ of these under a general principle, securing a more certain epistemic status.

90 There is a risk here of interpreting Aristotelian episteme wholly through our own contemporary understanding of scientific method. Firstly, the modern convention of scientific explanation would reject Aristotelian teleology as having any explanatory power in physics (though there is some debate about this within evolutionary biology). But secondly, it is more to the point that episteme is for Aristotle something that involves ‘that which cannot be otherwise’ demonstrable through the medium of the logical syllogism; this latter aspect is what renders episteme a ‘discursive’ (argument-oriented) knowing as contrasted with nous, or non-discursive knowing. This is not precisely equivalent to the modern hypothetico-deductive, subject-object model of explanation and experimentation usually associated with modern science. Nevertheless, we can probably say, without controversy, that modern examples of episteme would be mathematics and theoretical physics. It is an interesting biographical note that Aristotle’s father, Nicomachus was a medical doctor. Aristotle not only studied medicine, but named his son after his father. This may give us a hint as to why Aristotle had a penchant for medical analogies, and why his work on ethics is entitled Nicomachean Ethics. In his 1957 paper “Aristotle’s Use of Medicine as a Model of Method Used in his Ethics” (Journal of Hellenic Studies Volume 77) Werner Jaeger discusses this—the problem I see here is equating practical thinking with ‘method’. Phronesis is precisely not ‘methodically’ grounded but wisdom gained through the particularity of experience.

91 It is noteworthy that when Aristotle discusses the ethical aspects of rhetoric he speaks of arête or virtue not as a state or ‘hexis’ but as a capacity (i.e. as dunamis): “Virtue is, according to the usual view, a faculty of providing and preserving good things; or a faculty of conferring many great benefits, and benefits of all kinds on all occasions”. [Rhetoric Bk. 1 Ch. 9 1366a36-1366b1]

92 Friendship is a central virtue for Aristotle, for “…without friends no one would choose to live, though he had all other goods” [NE Bk. VIII: Ch. 1 1155a5-7] Friendship depends on community, on having things in common. The
deeper the friendship, the more profound our sense of belonging to a community, the more likely that we will inhabit a just orientation [NE Bk. VIII: Ch. 9 1160a5-9]. If friendship is related to community and to justice, it is also the key to political activity and political community—through friendship in the political community we are able to discover “what is advantageous for life as a whole” [1160a28]. Finally, friendship is not merely a virtue but the condition of possibility for strengthening and extending virtues and the good with and among others. We want to do well, to flourish for our own sake, but we also want to improve ourselves for the sake of another, and thereby improve our political community. [NE Bk IX: Ch. 11 1172a12-15].

This is why practical reasoning as a critical enterprise is inextricably related to justice, and to what we shall later describe as ‘equity’.

In this sense phronesis represents ‘interested’ knowledge—that is knowledge connected to human interests. As we will see in Chapter 4 it is precisely this kind of ‘interested knowing’ that Habermas will try to reconstruct as that which animates all levels of knowing—the empirical-analytic, the hermeneutic-interpretive and the critical-emanicipatory.

This has led some commentators (notably Martha Nussbaum) to conclude that there is an incompatibility between Book X and the rest of the Nicomachean Ethics—that the happiness pursued in the moral and political realm (praxis) is incompatible with the happiness that follows from contemplation (theoria). My own position here is rather closer to Gadamer’s notion that theoria is the highest form of human praxis. I think Aristotle’s astute distinctions and discriminations between different ways of knowing and realizing virtue and happiness should not be reduced to completely disconnected and autonomous worlds, but rather understood as interlocking co-dependent ways of engaging a world. However, this claim cannot reasonably defended here.

It is here where we could say that an unjust Athens could never allow Socrates to ‘live long and prosper’.

Those readers familiar with Kant’s moral philosophy will immediately see a certain affinity between Aristotle’s distinction between phronesis and techne and Kant’s imperative to “…act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end.” Immanuel Kant, Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals, translated and analysed by H.J. Paton. Harper and Row, New York 1964 p.96

Techne is productive knowledge or ‘know-how’ concerned with ‘making’ usually contrasted with phronesis which involves ‘action’ or ‘doing’, and theoria which is more properly associated with knowing. From a craftsman or ‘techne’ perspective, nature would appear as something to be worked upon and organized in such a way that it becomes useful to us. From the perspective of phronesis what are able to understand is how certain things (law, custom or habit) can be applied to daily decisions, but also grasp these latter within the unique and changing circumstances of this time and place. Unlike theoria, phronesis cannot secure certainty because it operates within the ambit of diverse and unpredictable human practices.

It might appear odd to pair contingency or chance (tuche) with the kind of control and deliberate reasoning involved in techne. However, I would argue that what Aristotle had in mind here is the idea that the best craftsman does not attempt to overcome or master chance, but always remains aware of the ineliminable reality of contingency, and when the unforeseen occurs, shows his mastery by working chance to his advantage.

What would happen if we were to instrumentalize ourselves in this way? We have any number of self-help books, and television infomercials that treat persons as if they were mere objects that can be crafted and ‘made-over’. Indeed, much of Western capitalist consumer culture feeds off the idea that we can be entirely ‘commodified’ and identified by a logo or brand—a brand that is intended (with no hint of irony) to represent our ‘uniqueness’ and ‘individuality’. Naomi Klein has comprehensively described this global phenomenon of corporate branding in her very accessible book No Logo, [Picador New York 2000]. At a more existential-philosophical level, one is also reminded of Sartre’s portrayal of the bad-faith, self-deceiving waiter in Being and Nothingness who defines his entire personhood formally through his role as a ‘waiter’. It should not surprise us then that if human beings can be reduced to merely crafted ornamental beings, the practices of rhetoric and moral decision-making could just as easily be reduced to mere ornament, and consistently employ purely instrumental or strategic forms of reasoning.

Hylomorphism is simply the idea of matter and form not as separate universes but as composites or co-dependent aspects of all natural bodies. Aristotle believed such an idea was the only way we could reasonably account for change within permanence. In the case of the ethical, the hylomorphic might be described as the notion of ‘character’ which has a certain stability over time tied inescapably to the intellectual virtue of phronesis, which represents the always in motion intellectual activity that meets contingency and change. Aristotle’s hylomorphic understanding can be contrasted with both the atomistic account of the self and Cartesian mind-body dualism. One can appreciate how a twentieth-century phenomenologist might view Aristotle as a kindred spirit.
As we will see in Chapter Three, it is precisely this notion of individual human actions as meaningful when grasped within a greater hermeneutic whole that allows us to consider *phronesis* and narrative understanding as operating together.


We will grasp why this is so in a more nuanced way when we elaborate the contemporary notion of ‘practices’ in the following chapter.

In this context Gadamer reminds us that “…the nature of the whole includes and involves the entire life and situation of the patient, and even of the physician. Medicine is compared with the true art of rhetoric which allows the right kind of discourse to exercise an effect on the soul in the right kinds of ways”. [H.G. Gadamer, *The Enigma of Health, The Art of Healing in a Scientific Age*, Translated by Jason Gaiger and Nicholas Walker. Standford University Press 1996 p. 41]

From a craftsman or ‘techne’ perspective, nature would appear as something to be worked upon and organized in such a way that it becomes useful to us. From the perspective of *phronesis* what are able to understand is how certain things (law, custom or habit) can be applied to daily decisions, but also grasp (by *nous*) these latter within the unique and changing circumstances of this time and place. Unlike *theoria*, *phronesis* cannot secure certainty simply because it operates within the ambit of diverse and unpredictable human practices.

This understanding runs against the grain of those Aristotelian scholars such as Eugene Garver who claim that “the arts including rhetoric do not bring the soul into good condition and so the arts, unlike the virtues are not a constitutive part of the good life”. I think this is a very limiting understanding of both ethics and rhetoric in Aristotle. Virtue is not merely the development ‘of the irrational desiring soul’, but in *phronesis* and practical reasoning, a mode of thinking that is both rational and desirative. Moreover, the art of rhetoric is not merely a the ‘skill of argumentation’ but the realization of ethos or character through speech in a public domain that takes into account the common good. Thus, it is true to say that Aristotle’s Rhetoric is among the arts, but one must add that it is unique among them since it is something that recognizes the ineliminable nature of human speaking and listening, and the necessity of the latter in the formation and development of common goods. Rhetoric is, along with dialogue, the bridge between Aristotelian ethics and politics. See Eugene Garver, *Confronting Aristotle’s Ethics* University of Chicago Press, 2006. p.10

This thesis becomes more apparent in the third chapter where we examine Aristotelian practical reason through its most eloquent twentieth-century advocate, Hans-Georg Gadamer. It is in the latter’s emphasis on dialogue that we are again reminded of the relation between hermeneutics and rhetoric in human linguistic experience. With Gadamer we are afforded through *phronesis* a possibility for understanding a primordial mode of human interaction: the conversations we have with each other. It is in Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics that *phronesis* becomes a historically aware form of practical reasoning aligned with the hermeneutic enterprise of interpretation, understanding and application. At an existential level this is *phronesis* as a kind of ‘attending to’ or ‘care of the self’ that is always situated in a relation to others. This will be our first point of departure from Aristotle towards a more historically sensitive and eventually (with help from Paul Ricoeur) a more temporally framed, imaginative and creative reading of *practical reason*. It may initially seem odd to pair the monological or univocal character of rhetoric with ‘dialogue’. But at least part of the argument here is that rhetoric, which is at its phenomenological core, a relation of speaking and listening, can also be understood as an activity framed by and realized through the always ongoing conversations we have with others, with texts and with ourselves. The meaning and persuasive potential of the rhetor arises out of her capacity to speak, but just as importantly to *listen* and attend to the implied voice of the other as audience.

Much like Kant in his *Critique of Pure Reason* would much later want to establish certain limits to ‘knowing’ in order to defend it against its most skeptical detractors.

Aristotle goes on to say that rhetoric can often pretend to political expertise or masquerade as political science [*Rhetoric* Bk. 1: Ch. 2 1356a27-30. But such intellectual *hubris* would signify a failure in the character of the rhetor. My interpretation of Aristotle’s clarification is simply that when the rhetor speaks not in probabilistic terms, but as if he were making claims that are absolutely certain, he has exceeded his jurisdiction, and no longer operates in the realm of ‘that which could be otherwise’. This point does not in any way gainsay the conclusion that rhetoric is intimately tied to the ethical or political—indeed, if anything it supports it.
Aristotle concludes that “…it is clear, then, that rhetoric is not bound up with a single definite class of subjects, but is as universal as dialectic; it is clear, also, that it is useful. It is clear, further, that its function is not simply to succeed in persuading, but rather to discover the means of coming as near to such success as the circumstances of each particular case allow. In this, rhetoric resembles all other arts” [Rhetoric Bl. 1: Ch. 2. 1355b7-14] It is also evident to anyone engaged in legal practice or jurisprudence, that rhetoric without phronesis or practical reasoning would be reduced to a rather shallow technical exercise.

On a more contemporary hermeneutic reading, rhetoric presupposes a speaker who has a capacity to grasp a given situation as a set of cultural, moral, and linguistic possibilities that enable him to make sense out of our day to day life. This way of characterizing rhetoric is, again, described by Heidegger in Being and Time and recalls the quote at the beginning of the Chapter 1 where rhetoric is seen by Heidegger as “the first systematic hermeneutic of the everydayness of Being with one another.” Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper and Row, 1962. p. 178 [139]


Even if legislators, educators and rhetoricians cannot ‘teach’ virtue in any direct sense, there is no reason to believe from Aristotle’s perspective that they cannot play a crucial role in educating citizens by showing in exemplary fashion how the character virtues and the intellectual virtue of practical reasoning or phronesis can be realized through speech. This is precisely what the rhetor as phronimos embodies. We cannot be taught virtue, but we can learn from the example of others in their speech and writing how we might be able to perceive, in a more complete way, what the good is. Through the example of others who have a greater measure of wisdom we might also discover how blind to the good we really are.

On this understanding paideia would have to involve both critical phronesis and poiesis—that is, both practical wisdom and a creative capacity. We will explore this at some length in Chapter 5.

Hans-Georg Gadamer, Truth and Method. Translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall, Continuum Publishing, New York, 1996. p. 325 The contrast to the phronimos (someone who, in an exemplary way embodies practical reason) is not, for Aristotle, the ‘evil’ person or someone who gets it ‘wrong’. The real failure of wisdom is the blindness that results from the unfettering of desire which can take a multitude of forms: desire for vengeance or power over the powerless; desire for self-aggrandizement of the self; desire for continuous drama and excessive emotional turmoil which might take the form of anger that is not oriented toward the absence of justice, but self-indulgently created and revealed in; the desire for the spectacular image over the truth; the desire to satiate lust by instrumentalizing another, and so on. These are all desires, as we recall from our discussions of Achilleus, Antigone, Creon and Phaedrus, that can give rise to human suffering and tragedy. Gadamer puts this point well when he tells us that, “The opposite of seeing what is right is not error or deception but blindness. A person who is overwhelmed by his passions suddenly no longer sees what is right to do in a given situation. He has lost his self-mastery and hence his own rightness—i.e. the right orientation within himself…” [TM p. 323]

There is something more to kairos than the idea of ‘good timing’—something not taken up by Aristotle nor fully captured by the idea of ‘timeliness’. This is the idea of kairos as understood through a more modern existential understanding of temporality. Aristotle thought of time as uniform and linear where the ‘present moment’ or ‘now’ is given precedence over both the past (the ‘no longer now’) and the future (the ‘not yet now’). With help from Gadamer and Ricoeur we will elaborate this temporal aspect of kairos (and indeed phronesis itself) within the framework of critical hermeneutics. Here kairos will be understood as seizing of the present moment in light of both historically effected understanding and the projection of something novel into the future. Beyond Aristotle it is not merely skillful or intuitive insight that kairos can capture. The temporalizing of phronesis and kairos brings to bear a ‘critical impetus’ that will be understood as embodying a sense of grasping the significance of the past in order to articulate a prophetic and visionary future.

As we shall see Gadamer argues convincingly that sunesis is something that arises only in dialogue with others.

My decision to situate sunesis within a wider context of practical reasoning is based less on my reading Aristotle and rather more on Gadamer’s discussion of dialogue (which he relates to sunesis) and the event of understanding as understanding, interpretation and application.

If sunesis is related to dialogue, gnome and kairos are related to the temporal aspect of narrative or story-telling. These rhetorical elements of practical reason prefigure the argument made in Chapter Three that phronesis and practical reasoning can be radicalized through Gadamer’s understanding of the historicity of understanding exemplified through dialogue, and Ricoeur’s understanding of temporality exemplified in narrative. Both dialogue and narrative require a mode of reasoning that is inextricably bound to phronesis.
for a truly emancipatory critique. Later critics such as John Caputo claim that because a tradition can become a "suspicion" which takes into account the more radical deconstructive, genealogical elements of Derrida, Nietzsche, he is hegemonic and oppressive, the Gadamerian "hermeneutics of trust" must be counterbalanced by a "hermeneutics of the issue of whether Gadamer's reliance on tradition, and his idea of the 'fusion of horizons,' limits any possibility of diversity, subtlety and originality of the latter thinkers. It also is in some sense a failure to fully appreciate the very radical nature of Gadamer's understanding of \textit{phronesis}, and his discussion of the dialectical relation between belonging and distance, which characterizes interpretation, understanding and application. This is not even to mention divergent theological and ethico-political points of view. The charge of conservatism against Gadamer by Habermas will be familiar to those who have followed the various objections and rejoinders in the Gadamer-Habermas debate. Though much of the shrillness has gone from this debate, due in part to the ensuing exchanges and repositioning of both Gadamer and Habermas in subsequent years, the distinction between 'interpreting a world' and 'changing it' still has traction for many philosophers insofar as it marks a differentiation and adherence to certain basic orientations that have their origin in distinct perspectives about the human condition, about what is determined as a means through which truth can be disclosed (not to mention diverse theological and ethico-political points of view). The charge of conservatism essentially relates to the issue of whether Gadamer's reliance on tradition, and his idea of the 'fusion of horizons,' limits any possibility for a truly emancipatory critique. Later critics such as John Caputo claim that because a tradition can become hegemonic and oppressive, the Gadamerian 'hermeneutics of trust' must be counterbalanced by a 'hermeneutics of suspicion' which takes into account the more radical deconstructive, genealogical elements of Derrida, Nietzsche and Foucault. This is a point that Paul Ricoeur also makes. My own view is that while such a synthetic approach has certain advantages, it can also develop into a rather eclectic critical 'bricolage' that actually does a disservice to the differences, subtlety and originality of the latter thinkers. It also is in some sense a failure to fully appreciate the very radical nature of Gadamer's understanding of \textit{phronesis}, and his discussion of the dialectical relation between belonging and distance, which characterizes interpretation, understanding and application. This is not even to mention Gadamer's strikingly un-conservative characterization of art as offering a possibility of meaning and truth we can participate in, and, of course, his later writings on the interdependent relation that hermeneutics has to the critical resources provided by the ancient tradition of rhetoric. A much more vulgar charge made by Terry Eagleton is that Gadamer has a "grossly complacent theory of history." This unfortunate reading is more than adequately countered by James Risser in his \textit{Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other} [State University of New York Press 1977. pp. 71-3 and p. 225]. Implied in some of the above 'philosophical' criticism is, of course, the suspicion that Gadamer is \textit{also} a 'political' conservative. However, the absurdity of leveling the charge of political conservatism

\textsuperscript{121} We will revisit and reconfigure \textit{gnome} in the context of Gadamer’s understanding of the historicity of understanding and Ricoeur’s understanding of metaphor, mimesis, narrative and temporality in the following chapter.

\textsuperscript{122} Not to be confused with the historical British Courts of Equity—though the latter were also intended to operate ‘alongside the written law’.

\textsuperscript{123} These normative critical elements of \textit{phronesis} will be made much more concrete and apparent in Chapter 5 where I situate critical hermeneutics within the context of various human practices.

\textsuperscript{124} Indeed, if anything it means that we can, paradoxically, also cultivate ‘blindness’—a fact that would appear to raise issues of both relativism and evil. We will return to this issue in Chapter 4.


\textsuperscript{126} The primary text here will be Hans-Georg Gadamer \textit{Truth and Method}. Translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall Continuum, New York 1996. In \textit{Truth and Method} Gadamer traces a path of inquiry about hermeneutics from the experience of art and the romantic hermeneutics of Schleiermacher to the methodological hermeneutics of the human sciences by way of Dilthey “which culminates in the rise of historical consciousness” (TM 173). It is at this latter culminating point when Gadamer points to the possibility that hermeneutics might be something more than a mere ‘method’—something more fundamental than just an epistemologically-oriented question about the various modes of interpretation. In the first chapter I said that long before rhetoric and hermeneutics became professionalized disciplines grounded in theory and explicated through method, they involved human practices of speaking, hearing and understanding. I then showed how the rhetorical and hermeneutics aspects of linguisticality are necessarily related drawing from the Greek literary tradition. The issue of instrumentalizing and regimenting rhetoric and hermeneutics through theory and method was always, however, in the foreground. It was the notion of Aristotelian \textit{phronesis} which first helped us to articulate how we might situate ethics, hermeneutics and rhetoric at the level of practical experience. In \textit{Truth and Method} Gadamer also begins at the aesthetic level of experience. Once again, however, what primarily interests Gadamer is not the analysis of aesthetic criteria or the effort to discover, in a disinterested manner, how art is to be understood. Indeed, if anything he takes time and effort to deconstruct or overturn the idea that aesthetics is something that can be bounded by abstract theory or defined through an aesthetic consciousness of subjective pleasure.

\textsuperscript{127} We may take as a point of departure here Michel Foucault’s notion that power always elicits a response: “Where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power.” I would only add that ‘the power that elicits a response’ is discovered first in linguistic interaction—in dialogical and rhetorical practices. [Michel Foucault, \textit{The History of Sexuality: An Introduction}. New York: Vintage Books, 1990. p. 95]

\textsuperscript{128} The charge of conservatism against Gadamer by Habermas will be familiar to those who have followed the various objections and rejoinders in the Gadamer-Habermas debate. Though much of the shrillness has gone from this debate, due in part to the ensuing exchanges and repositioning of both Gadamer and Habermas in subsequent years, the distinction between ‘interpreting a world’ and ‘changing it’ still has traction for many philosophers insofar as it marks a differentiation and adherence to certain basic orientations that have their origin in distinct perspectives about the human condition, about what is determined as a means through which truth can be disclosed (not to mention diverse theological and ethico-political points of view). The charge of conservatism essentially relates to the issue of whether Gadamer’s reliance on tradition, and his idea of the ‘fusion of horizons,’ limits any possibility for a truly emancipatory critique. Later critics such as John Caputo claim that because a tradition can become hegemonic and oppressive, the Gadamerian ‘hermeneutics of trust’ must be counterbalanced by a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ which takes into account the more radical deconstructive, genealogical elements of Derrida, Nietzsche and Foucault. This is a point that Paul Ricoeur also makes. My own view is that while such a synthetic approach has certain advantages, it can also develop into a rather eclectic critical ‘bricolage’ that actually does a disservice to the differences, subtlety and originality of the latter thinkers. It also is in some sense a failure to fully appreciate the very radical nature of Gadamer’s understanding of \textit{phronesis}, and his discussion of the dialectical relation between belonging and distance, which characterizes interpretation, understanding and application. This is not even to mention Gadamer’s strikingly un-conservative characterization of art as offering a possibility of meaning and truth we can participate in, and, of course, his later writings on the interdependent relation that hermeneutics has to the critical resources provided by the ancient tradition of rhetoric. A much more vulgar charge made by Terry Eagleton is that Gadamer has a "grossly complacent theory of history." This unfortunate reading is more than adequately countered by James Risser in his \textit{Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other} [State University of New York Press 1977. pp. 71-3 and p. 225]. Implied in some of the above ‘philosophical’ criticism is, of course, the suspicion that Gadamer is \textit{also} a ‘political’ conservative. However, the absurdity of leveling the charge of political conservatism
against Gadamer because he upholds our indebtedness to tradition, and attests to our historicality, becomes fairly obvious when we witness the self-understanding rendered explicit in the ‘mission statement’ of the National Review, one of the exemplars of modern political conservative thinking. The goal of the National Review, its authors boldly and proudly pronounce, is to stand “athwart history, yelling Stop, at a time when no one is inclined to do so, or to have much patience with those who so urge it”. Ignore history; stop change—this is the supercilious, messianic message of political conservatism. Gadamer rests his case.

129 There are those who demur and claim that Gadamer does not explicitly ‘prescribe’ anything. Though I can understand how one might come to such a conclusion, I find it ultimately unsatisfying. To say that Gadamerian hermeneutics is bereft of any implicit normative critical dimension through a practical reasoning perspective, to ignore the ineradicably critical orientation that is central to the concept of Wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewußtsein, is to miss something defining about the project of Truth and Method. We will take this issue up in a more elaborate way in Chapter Five.

130 The ethical and political ramifications that follow from this historical and temporal intensification of phronesis will be elaborated in Chapter 5, after exposition of Habermas’s notion of communicative rationality.

131 At an ontological-critical level distanciation is the ‘other side’ of belonging or ‘nearness’. When we interpret or attempt to understand something—a text, a speech, an argument etc, we are trying to bring its meaning closer or nearer to us. This is especially evident if we are translating from one language to another, or when we are dealing with written works or arguments that are distant from us in time. Language changes; social, cultural and scientific understandings evolve. We never understand something all at once, and for all time. If we could in fact do so we would be ascribing to ourselves a god-like status. What Gadamer is trying to get across is that while overcoming distance is the telos of understanding, the recognition of human finitude is also recognition that the meaning possibilities of a text or work are inexhaustible. The notion of distance or distanciation (along with that of negation) is in fact productive—that is, it attests to and enacts a creative and critical potential. It is phronesis and practical reasoning that helps us to recognize our human finitude while enjoining us to make full use of the productive character of distanciation.

132 Heidegger’s ontological exposé of being is arrived at through phenomenological reflection—an attempt to grasp the essential meaning of something that we experience directly. In Heidegger’s words the phenomenological approach calls upon us to “let that which shows itself be seen from itself, in the very way in which it shows itself”. (Being and Time, p. 58.) But the phenomenology here is not Husserl’s eidetic phenomenology grounded in the pure cogito or consciousness—it is a ‘hermeneutics of facticity’, a phenomenology of our existence and existential relations in our world. Moreover, the phenomena that show themselves in a phenomenological investigation are clearly present to us in a mundane sense of our being aware of a present surrounding. But there are features and aspects of our experience that are obscured by their very proximity to us. In other words, what is closest to us is sometimes the most difficult thing to see, grasp or appreciate. Heidegger is not at all interested in the empirical description of the ‘thing’ that we are—he is neither a sociologist nor a psychologist. Dasein or ‘there-being’ is not the human being as ‘subject’ or ‘object’, but as active ‘being in the world’. Thus, dasein is not ‘consciousness’ but concrete human existence, and our primordial relation to the world is not epistemic, but concernfulness and caring. The ‘da’ of dasein (the ‘there’) signifies that we are always already constituted by a web of worldly connections, by our ‘habitation’ in this world. We, therefore, always find ourselves in the midst of things, or to use Heidegger’s terminology we are constituted by ‘thrownness’. Importantly, however, we are not just passively in the present midst of things, waiting patiently or impatiently for something to happen; rather we are actively trying to find our way around, to grasp our future possibilities and make decisions about what we might do in the situations we find ourselves in—we ‘project’, as it were, into our future possibilities. What Heidegger refers to as the ‘ecstatic’ temporality of Dasein (we call... “the phenomena of the future, the character of having been, and the Present, the “ectases” of temporality” p.377 BT) is a way of talking about the historicality of our being, the anxiety we might have in our tendency to be absorbed into the present, and our projection of future possibilities within the limit situation of our ‘being-towards-death’. To forget or ignore our historicality or the temporal meaning of our being-in-the-world would be to see ourselves as mere ‘things’ or objects, confined to an eternal present, rather than creatures who are situated by a world and can choose to be governed by the ‘impossible possibility’ of thinking freedom as a practice. This circle of temporal and temporalizing ‘care’ means that we are not, as Aristotle might say, things that cannot be otherwise, but precisely beings who can take responsibility for how we make ourselves. Accordingly, we should see ‘care’ here not as an emotive orientation but as a ‘concernful praxis’. To be sure, Heidegger often uses terminology that is reminiscent of Kant (the structure of ‘being-in-the-world as ‘a priori’) rather than Aristotle. But it is abundantly clear that it is Aristotle’s philosophy which is the primary point of departure for Being and Time. (This has been authoritatively and painstakingly documented by, among others, Theodore Kisiel in The Genesis of

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Phenomenological reflection shows us that we cannot see ourselves authentically as wholly isolated individuals who make the world, but rather as embodied beings who belong to each other, to a place, to a language, to a cultural surrounding, to traditions of understanding, to practices...to that which we have not chosen or created but can partake of and perhaps reflectively, creatively transform. One of the (more annoying) prevailing themes in contemporary Heidegger scholarship is that in his ‘turning’ he somehow disavows the transcendental project of laying bare the structure of being’. My own view is that Heidegger does disavow the idea that ‘dasein’ can be mapped out in advance by way of a singular metaphysics or modern scientific analysis. His thinking is always provisional, before and after the turn—on the way towards understanding be-ing. What one might say is that Heidegger’s later thinking is more like a transcendental (Copernican?) reversal—from Dasein’s understanding of being to ‘being’s accessibility to dasein’—an accessibility that may be governed more by dialogical-conversational encounters and poetry. It is also claimed that Heidegger turns away from or ‘moves beyond’ hermeneutics and phenomenology. I think there are good reasons to reject this claim as well—which are persuasively underscored in a response to Hubert Dreyfuss by Richard Palmer. (See Hubert Dreyfus, “Beyond Hermeneutics: Interpretation in the Late Heidegger and Recent Foucault” pp. 66-83, and Richard Palmer “On the Transcendability of Hermeneutics” pp. 84-95 in Hermeneutics: Questions and Prospects, edited by Gary Shapiro and Alan Sica, MIT Press 1984.  

As we will shortly discover this measure of critical distance is repeated and enhanced in dialogical and rhetorical modes of speaking and listening. We need not think here only of crude racial or gender prejudices that may inform understanding but also banal and seemingly harmless prejudices. For example, one of our prevailing modern prejudices is that technology will eventually solve all of our human problems. Prejudice is therefore part of what Heidegger refers to as the ‘fore-structure’ of understanding. 


This does not mean that someone who has authoritative knowledge granted to them by virtue of their experience and insight might not also have ‘expert knowledge’. For example, the judge might be a phronimos insofar as she has gathered a measure of wisdom and insight over time, and makes wise decisions that honour the generality of the law and the specificity of the particular situation. Her authoritative knowledge status would be directly related to the over-all wisdom of her decisions. However, she might also be a ‘legal expert’—in other words, someone who knows the specific law and rules of procedure in the courtroom. However, it is difficult to imagine how a legal realm or polity which had only ‘experts’ and no persons that possessed phronesis, could in any sense be a polity that embodied justice. On the other hand, it would be very easy to imagine that a world entirely populated by experts would fit very nicely into a totalitarian system. For Gadamer, the romantic reaction to this abstract dogmatic notion of rational progress is an equally abstract and dogmatic reversal such that “belief in the perfectibility of reason suddenly changes into the perfection of the mythical consciousness and finds itself reflected in a paradisiacal primal state before the ‘fall’ of thought.” [TM p. 274]

The troubling issue is whether we take refuge in and stubbornly affirm the prejudices that condition us—even, and perhaps most especially, when our experience in some way negates these experiences. For Gadamer it is our hermeneutic reflective capacity that allows us to, in some measure, distance ourselves from the traditions that form and inform us—and finally it is our capacity to speak and listen, to participate in dialogical exchange that can help us to discriminate between legitimate and illegitimate prejudices. However, we will discover that another way of addressing this issue which brings together Gadamer and Aristotle is through the kind of critical being-acting that phrontetic wisdom promises in the practice of understanding itself. We will also revisit this important issue in a sustained way when we meet up with the critique of ideology and more specifically Habermas’s claim that the telos
of communication is discovered in the ‘ideal speech situation’ which promises to free us from the distortions of prejudice and tradition.

The description of consciousness here is clearly phenomenological not empirical. It is not meant to displace the objective language of neuroscience—or the specialized research program that studies neural correlates to consciousness. What it may do however is to help us see the latter in light of a wider context or phenomenal web of meaningful human experiences, histories, communicative practices and research configurations. All of these latter phenomenological experiences are ‘effected’ by history in the Gadamerian sense—that is, they are made possible by history. This means that we can never entirely step out of or remove ourselves from the effects of history or indeed our own initial embodied experiences of the world.

One could add here, following Derrida, that consciousness is never fully present to itself, and it cannot be present at all without difference—in an important sense the latter functions in a way very similar to negation in Gadamer.

The radical reflexivity presupposed here is that we can also become aware of our awareness of historical effects—this is a second order philosophical grasp.

One might also risk an existential interpretation here and say that turning around is also a turning outward away from the self-enclosing world of the self. There is a theological corollary here. When we are unable to look beyond ourselves or our tradition, when we do not develop a historically effective awareness, we are that much more likely to uncritically ‘curve in on ourselves’ to borrow from the Augustinian notion. The Latin expression ‘Incurvatus in se’ is Augustine’s way of describing a self that idolatrously sees and seeks all the world and even God through its own self. There is no reason why we could not also apply this latter notion of ‘curving in’ to an entire culture or political state that is incapable of seeing outside of itself and its own limiting perspectives.

Once again, I am borrowing from James Risser’s stimulating discussion of Gadamer’s hermeneutics in his Hermeneutics and the Voice of the Other State University of New York Press 1997, p.17.

I have referred previously to MacIntyre’s understanding of internal and external goods. MacIntyre describes a practice as “Any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realized in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions to the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended”. [Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue, University of Notre Dame Press, 1984. p.187]. For MacIntyre, practices not only presuppose the existence of the virtues, but are in an important way a unifying medium for virtues.

MacIntyre would likely agree that if phronesis is the mode of reasoning that helps us realize the goods internal to a practice, then technē is by contrast the mode of instrumental reasoning we employ when we want to realize those goods external to a practice. MacIntyre uses the example of realizing the goods internal to playing chess and being rewarded by goods external to the game itself: that is, being paid to play.

Anyone who has ever worked on an assembly line will know that to the extent the working environment is guided by the rules imposed by an inflexible ‘machine’ they themselves cease to be involved in a ‘practice’ and, in fact, from the perspective of the employer, lose their identity as a thinking person.

To be sure, Gadamer’s retrieval of phronesis as a mode of praxis oriented truth-disclosive reasoning and insight as also inspired by Heidegger who himself extended Aristotle’s practical philosophy in many productive ways.

In a parallel way our awareness of the ‘self we are’, our self-understanding is not immediate but mediated through the other—by our signs, symbols, texts, stories conversations and the like. This will become more evident when we meet up with Ricoeur.

To speak in Heideggerian terms, phronesis, insofar as it addresses ‘the right and proper way to be,’ is a kind of ‘caring’ or concernfulness in our thinking-doing activity.

This is taken from the example of ‘play’ as a clue to ontological understanding in Gadamer’s Truth and Method.


This metaphor holds not just in the context of conversation and dialogue with another, but in rhetoric and the experience of speaking-listening, and as we shall see with Ricoeur, in the experience of reading. As Ricoeur would say, we expose ourselves to, and enter the world of the text—we ‘lose ourselves’ in its saying and it’s ‘saying’ is not in our control. Because we can ‘lose ourselves’ in the text we can suddenly be exposed to ourselves; we can discover that what we had previously thought or believed, our former perspectives or prejudices, can be challenged. In the play between author and reader we are, as Gadamer describes it, ‘pulled up short by the text’—to say the text ‘reads us’ is to say that it reveals us to ourselves. It is not difficult then to see how the activity of reading is indeed a critical and a dialogical activity. It is also not difficult to perceive the joy of losing oneself in a good book!

This movement of part to whole and whole to part is, of course, one way of describing the ‘hermeneutic circle’. Heidegger, Gadamer and Ricoeur each make their own particular contributions to the meaning of this circle of understanding, but we can say without controversy that in all of these latter the basic presupposition is always that the circle is not a ‘vicious’ but a virtuous circle—it is to be understood rather as an ever widening spiral. In this sense the hermeneutic circle is a way of describing how practical reasoning and *phronetic* wisdom unfold in experience. For Gadamer the hermeneutic circle is a condition of understanding: in the dialogical form of question and response interlocutors grasp something, project a provisional understanding, and return to the subject matter all in a continuously expansive fashion.

G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* translated by A.V. Miller, Oxford University Press 1977, p. 10. We cannot also fail to mention here that if negation is always a part of understanding, the notion of ‘absence’ is how understanding might be seen as ‘critical’ understanding’. There is, in other words, another sense of the ‘that which is not’, which is brought into relief by Derrida and the idea of reversing the privileging of presence over absence. Here we speak of the idea of now grasping in a present understanding, perhaps in dialogue with the self or another, what has been absent, or grasping what is absent or not said in a text or a speech. This I take to be an immanent critical hermeneutic reflection—but this notion of absence can only be critical if it is historically and temporally understood. “The question for critical hermeneutics will always remain: what holds ‘presence’ and ‘absence’ together? By de-ontologizing the relationship between language and understanding, Derrida never comes to grips with Heidegger’s more radical temporaliizing aims. At the same time, Heidegger never privileges presence over absence. His concern above and beyond elaborating the question of the meaning of being in terms of temporality is also to elaborate the *unity* of temporality, and this is done from the point of the ‘nothing’.” [This is a direct citation of a point that was vividly and persuasively brought home to me in the ongoing dialogue through email that I have had with Wayne Turner—a philosopher, friend and fellow-conspirator.]

There is no doubt that the dialogues of Plato present for Gadamer the model of a beginning in dialectical thinking as at one with art of questioning. But for Gadamer it is Hegel’s speculative dialectic that marks the profound importance of negation as a productive element in understanding.

Readers might be thinking here that what is not addressed is the possibility that our understanding is often (perhaps always) subject to conscious or unconscious epistemic or ideological distortion. Though this is a crucial theme, what is presently at stake is the idea that to understand anything implicitly involves the idea that we cannot “stick blindly to our own fore-meanings about the thing we want to understand” (p. 268 TM). These ‘fore-meanings’ are brought together and embodied in the notion of a particular ‘tradition’ of understanding’. Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task”, in *The Gadamer Reader: A Bouquet of later Writings*, Northwestern University Press 2007. pp. 256-257

It is not just the solitary judge who struggles with the aporia that arises out of the need to understand at a practical level both the universality of an accepted legal framework and the individuality of the concrete case. Indeed, every practitioner of law at every level is called upon both by the generality of legal precedent and that which stands before her as the particularity of this situation, to neither be trapped inside this particularity nor be swallowed by the brute seemingly hegemonic law as it stands.

We have (unfortunately) only hinted at the relation rhetoric has to the creative dimension of poetics and the arts. Indeed, it is the discussion of art and the aesthetic dimension of reflection, as well as the fascinating account of the experience of truth in art—that in fact inaugurates and situates the entire argument of *Truth and Method*. The rhetorical title of this latter work is itself a study in Socratic irony: Gadamer is certainly interested in truth; however, he is also persuaded that truth is not something that is disclosed only through method or methodical doubt. Instead, it is our capacity to ask a question and engage with others in dialogue that is more likely to disclose for us a new understanding or a renewed possibility of grasping truth. For Gadamer, and I would wholeheartedly agree, *truth is something that can be experienced in art*, and in the productive ‘art of rhetoric’. Gadamer recalls that Alexander Baumgarten defined aesthetics as the ‘art of thinking beautifully’ and he adds that “…anyone with a sensitive ear will immediately notice that this expression has been formed on analogy with the definition of rhetoric as the *ars bene dicendi* or the ‘art of speaking well’. This relationship is not accidental, for rhetoric and poetics have belonged together since antiquity, and in a sense, rhetoric took precedence over poetics.” [H.G. Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful and other Essays*, Translated by Nicholas Walker, Cambridge University Press 1986, p.17]
The argument developed here is specifically indebted to the thoughtful and suggestive discussions of the role of rhetoric in Gadamer by Francis Mootz [Francis J. Mootz III, “Gadamer’s Rhetorical Conception of Hermeneutics as the Key to Developing a Critical Hermeneutics” in Gadamer and Ricoeur, Critical Horizons for Contemporary Hermeneutics, Continuum 2011. 83-103] and Susan Shapiro “Rhetoric as Ideology Critique The Gadamer-Habermas Debate Reinvented” Journal of the American Academy of Religion 62, 1, 1994 123-50]. My particular way of capturing and extending the thinking behind these illuminating essays lies in the effort to first recall the ‘always already’ critical dimension within Gadamer’s hermeneutics, and then to expose the indebtedness that hermeneutics has to rhetoric by way of phronesis—a concept that, on my reading, defines Gadamer’s entire project of critical philosophical hermeneutics.


Ibid. p. 253.

Francis J. Mootz III, “Gadamer’s Rhetorical Conception of Hermeneutics as the Key to Developing a Critical Hermeneutics” in Gadamer and Ricoeur, Critical Horizons for Contemporary Hermeneutics, Continuum 2011. p. 92

From a different perspective it might still be wondered whether this description of the emergence of a critical dimension in experience, in the absence of a moral framework or guiding telos, must be ultimately ‘directionless’. In other words, can the sort of critical dimension that is enacted through phronesis and situated practical reasoning reach all the way down to what Jürgen Habermas has called systemic distortions of reason? The full response to this question must await a more detailed exposition of Habermas in the following pages. However, we can foreshadow our response by asking whether concrete and particular manifestations of power are adequately captured in the generality of a regulative ideal, and whether the emancipatory thrust of the latter heightens our sense of responsibility or merely dulls and flattens our capacity to respond. Secondly, we might ask whether the a priori and ideal pre-suppositions of rational discourse do not in fact owe their emancipatory power to the many historical configurations of resistance and ‘thinking freedom as a practice’ which pre-existed the Enlightenment. In other words, is not the emancipatory thrust within discourse theory itself finally to be recognized as a reflective enactment of the liberating potential of a ‘future’ past that has been repeated again and again in the great legacy of art and literature, from religious works to works of music, painting, literature, philosophy and fiction that articulate the promise and possibility of human freedom?

We cannot use this expression without recalling Kant’s imperative that although ‘we cannot know, we can yet think freedom’. Immanuel Kant The Critique of Pure Reason, translated by Norman Kemp Smith. Bxxviii p. 28.

Eberhard Jüngel Theological Essays (T & T Clark LTD) 1989 p.111.

This notion of the ‘structure of care’ is related to what Heidegger refers to as the equiprimordiality of the ectases of care in the notion that time, ‘temporalizing itself’ as a whole—that is, time understood not as series of discrete, successive moments in a chain from past to future, but as a temporal whole that is enacted in a three-fold present that includes, equiprimordially, having-been, present, and future. See Martin Heidegger, Being and Time, Translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper and Row, 1962 pp 377-379.

This is why Ricoeur’s hermeneutic phenomenology takes the long wending indirect path through the interpretation of symbols, metaphor, narrative, and from poetic discourse to the hermeneutics of the text.

Paul Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor, Translated by Robert Czerny University of Toronto Press, 1977. [Hereafter cited as RM]. It is unfortunate that the English translation of this work rather misses the dynamic, active sense that the French title captures: La Métaphore vive. As Ricoeur notes in a later interview “…the term vive (living) in the title is all important, for it was my purpose to demonstrate that there is not just an epistemological and political imagination, but also, and perhaps more fundamentally, a linguistic imagination which generates and regenerates meaning through the living power of metaphoricity”. Cf. “The Creativity of Language” in A Ricoeur Reader: Reflection and Imagination, edited by Mario Valdèz, University of Toronto Press 1991. p. 463.

To track all of the literary and philosophical sources that prefigure Ricoeur’s Time and Narrative would be an immense project in its own right. However, aside from Aristotle and Augustine one of the central conceptual distinctions that helps to frame Ricoeur’s understanding of the temporal conditions of action can be found in Reinhart Koselleck’s discussion of what he designates as two historical categories: ‘space of experience’ and the ‘horizon of expectation’. Bernard Dauenhauer gives us a very good summation of Koselleck’s distinction: “The space of experience encompasses the set of past individual and social actions, events and occurrences that are remembered in the present. As the past is now rendered present, the space of experience provides the point of
between the Semantics of Historical Time does not mention, also of some importance to Ricoeur, is Koselleck's elaboration of the notion of Begriffsgeschichte or the history of concepts—here the notion of concept is something directly linked to the practical world: “Without common concepts there is no society, and above all, no political field of action. Conversely, our concepts are founded in politico-social systems that are far more complex than would be indicated by treating them simply as linguistic communities organized around specific key concepts. A "society" and its "concepts" exist in a relation of tension which is also characteristic of its academic historical disciplines.” See Reinhart Koselleck, Futures Past, On the Semantics of Historical Time, translated by Keith Tribe. MIT Press Cambridge Mass. 1985 p.74.

173 In his essay “Imagination in Discourse and in Action” Ricoeur asks: “Can the concept of imagination, employed in a theory of metaphor centered on the notion of semantic innovation, be generalized beyond the sphere of discourse to which it originally belongs?” In responding to this question Ricoeur first determines that the notion of image and therefore of imagination is impoverished by an untenable either/or. From the empirical objectively oriented perspective of someone like Hume “the image is related to perception, of which it is but a trace, in the sense of a weakened presence; toward this pole of the image, understood as a weak impression, tend all the theories of reproductive imagination”. By contrast, from the perspective of phenomenologically subjective consciousness “…the image is conceived of essentially in terms of absence, of the other-than-present; the various figures of productive imagination—portrait, dream, fiction—refer in diverse ways to this fundamental otherness”. Imagination is thereby rendered as either an abstract production or a sterile reproduction. Ricoeur thinks that metaphor and the idea of semantic innovation leaves behind many of the problems associated with either the perceptual or the phenomenological model of imagination and gives us a fresh start. Thus, if images are spoken before they are seen, then they are neither merely residual traces nor mere negations of perception. The linguistic model of the image and imagination allows us to grasp that we can only come to know ourselves and others indirectly through the myths, signs, symbols, metaphors and narratives that we imaginatively create together in language. From the empirical-perceptual and the subjective-consciousness of the image we move to a language oriented hermeneutics of imagination. This more ‘hermeneutic imagination’ is not merely the projection of new meaning at the level of the word or sentence, but the projection of a new world that the text presents. The hermeneutic imagination concretely realized through language can then more emphatically be related to the practical world of action where the imagined in language becomes the condition of possibility for social change and new and transformative social imaginaries. See Paul Ricoeur, “Imagination in Discourse and in Action”, translated by Kathleen Blamey, in From Text to Action, Essays in Hermeneutics, II, Northwestern University Press 1991. pp. 168-187.

174 Paul Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor, Translated by Robert Czerny University of Toronto Press 1977 p. 21. Ricoeur relates that this work is a “plea for the plurality of modes of discourse” and that the central theme which underlies it is the exposition of metaphor as “the rhetorical process by which discourse unleashes the power that certain fictions have to redescribe reality. By linking fiction and redescription in this way, we restore the full meaning to Aristotle’s discovery in the Poetics, which was that the poiesis of language arises out of the connection between muthos and mimesis”.

175 In this sense, metaphor as the productive creation of new meaning is ‘eventful’—in other words, metaphorical attribution is fully active and activating insofar as the action of juxtaposing words in new ways presses us to actively think more. When a metaphor becomes commonplace, trivial or ‘dead’ it loses this eventful impertinence and is relegated to a more conventional lexical status.

176 It is interesting to note here that for Ricoeur the translation of mimesis by the word ‘imitation’ and the translation of phusis by the word ‘nature’ share a similar problem. Both translations assume a rather inert, passive and static world—and thereby both fail to capture the active (dunamis) within nature and the mimetic arts that the ancient Greek understanding presupposes.

177 RM p. 43.

178 RM p. 306.


180 It may appear that one of the disadvantages of narrative is that because it unfolds at an existential or ontological level of human experience, it cannot be reduced or assimilated to the theoretically-driven social sciences, and that therefore, it has little value as means of grasping the relation between individuals and societies from a more
structural or institutional perspective. From the phenomenological and ontological perspective I have tried to articulate, this is actually an advantage since it is usually all too easy to reduce concrete lived experience to behavioral or empirical statistical frameworks of explication and prediction.

Paul Ricoeur, Time and Narrative (Volume I) Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press 1984, p.52. [Cited hereafter as TN v.1 ]. Although it is clear that Gadamer would also have been aware that our temporal being unfolds through language, it is Ricoeur who expressly thematizes this latter idea in a particular way with the notion of narrative.

Indeed, along with exposition, argumentation and description, narrative is considered one of the modes of discourse.


There is, as always in Ricoeur, a relation between language and the ethico-political sphere. This is much more evident in what Ricoeur has called his ‘little ethics’: Oneself as Another. However, it is worth highlighting the following words from the first volume of Time and Narrative: “We tell stories because in the last analysis human lives need and merit being narrated. This remark takes on its full force when we refer to the necessity to save the history of the defeated and the lost. The whole history of suffering cries out for vengeance and calls for narrative”. Paul Ricoeur, Time and Narrative (Volume I) Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, University of Chicago Press 1983 p.75.

In Book 11 of the Confessions Augustine reflects on time: “What is time? Who can explain this easily and briefly? Who can comprehend this even in thought so as to articulate the answer in words? But what in discourse do we mention more familiarly and knowingly, than time? Yet what do we speak of, in our familiar everyday conversation, more than of time? We surely know what we mean when we speak of it. We also know what is meant when we hear someone else talking about it. What then is time? Provided that no one asks me, I know. If I want to explain it to an inquirer, I do not know. But I confidently affirm myself to know that if nothing passes away, there is no past time, and if nothing arrives, there is no future time, and if nothing existed there would be no present time.” Augustine, Confessions. Translated by Henry Chadwick. Oxford University Press, 1998. pp.230-231

We pass by without further comment, Ricoeur’s discussion of the ‘other of time’—i.e. of eternity. However, the notion of eternity should not be simply dismissed as the inevitable legacy of Judeo-Christian eschatology. There are ecstatic moments when we experience some beautiful inexpressible thing or event that appears to embody timelessness. From a deeper theological perspective such a ‘worldly’ experience might appear idolatrous. That said, for Augustine (and no doubt for Ricoeur) eternity is that which not only provides the condition of possibility for temporality, but is the intensification of the human existential experience of time, and, indeed, expresses the deep lamentation and longing for the permanence and stillness brought to light in the eternal and enveloping love of God. This is a ‘stillness’ that is also captured in Aristotle’s understanding of contemplative-philosophical thinking that enhances awareness.

What Ricoeur is interested in initially is, of course, the idea that tragedy is “an imitation, not of persons, but of actions and life, of happiness and misery”. [Aristotle, Poetics Chapter 6 1050a16-17]

Ricoeur continues, “…with one stroke we leave behind the Platonic use of mimesis, both in its metaphysical sense and in its technical one in Book 3 of the Republic which opposes narrative by ‘mimesis’ to ‘simple’ narrative’. [Time and Narrative (Volume I)] p. 34.

[TN 1 p.37] Or as Ricoeur later reminds us repeating a familiar aphorism: ‘First conceive the plot, then add the names!’ In our previous discussion of Aristotle’s ethics and rhetoric we emphasized the importance of character as providing a kind of stability. But we also talked about the way that the activity of phronesis in its capacity to meet the particularity and contingency of experience can further extend and deepen character, bringing being and acting together. It is here where my own disagreement with Ricoeur emerges. Ricoeur claims that in Aristotelian ethics “the subject precedes the action in the order of ethical qualities” (TN V.1 p.37) I tend to see character and phronetic activity or insight as co-determinate at the qualitative ethical level. This is not to deny that our character is formed in some sense before we have fully developed the intellectual virtue of phronesis. At the same time, it is not as if character is just something preformed that we passively inherit. Thinking, perceiving, speaking, listening activity (dunamis) is still very much a part of the formation of character in the very young.

We can also relate the following back to Gadamer’s own tripartite model: understanding, interpretation and application.

The use of the expression ‘as if’ allows Ricoeur to preserve the distinction between fiction and history, yet broaden the notion of narrative in a way that can accommodate both of the latter—in other words, if narrative is always a temporalizing organization of events then it can describe both the historical and the fictional. In Volume 2
of Time and Narrative Ricoeur will spend some time in speaking to the issues of what distinguishes historical from fictive narrative.

194 It is only ‘apparent’ I shall argue, because it mistakenly presupposes that the power of insight and reasoning are entirely private events not the result of dialogical, rhetorical and interpreting practices that unfold in the creative space of experience with and among others.
195 The consequences of these revolutionary moments for the critical project of hermeneutics we have articulated thus far are many, but we will be interested in three in particular: the eclipse of teleology; the separation of theory and practice; the depoliticizing of critique itself, and its reorientation as a neutral disengaged rational response to large scale social, political or economic crises.
197 Ibid. p. 3
198 Ibid. p. 3 The notion that truth is something ‘hidden’ requiring us to insightfully read ‘beneath the surface of things’ will recur again and again. It is finally what will define the notion of ‘immanent critique’. We may also notice that Heidegger’s ontological understanding of truth, not as certainty, correspondence, or representation, but as ‘uncovering’ or aletheia brings it closer to the notion of disclosure, uncovering and insight.
199 Ibid. p. 4
200 Ibid. p. 116-127
201 Edmund Husserl, The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology, Translated by David Carr, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1970. p. 23-60. How does the mathematization of the lifeworld unfold? Husserl explains: “In geometrical and natural-scientific mathematization, in the open infinity of possible experiences, we measure the lifeworld—the world constantly given to us as actual in our concrete world-life—for a well-fitting garb of ideas, that of the so-called objectively scientific truths. That is, through a method which (as we hope) can be really carried out in every particular and constantly verifies, we first construct numerical indices for the actual and possible sensible plena of the concretely intuited shapes of the life-world, and in this way we obtain possibilities of predicting concrete occurrences which are yet or no longer actually given…it is through the garb of ideas that we take for true being what is actually a method.” p. 51.
202 As if this discovery were not itself already a political judgment grounded in a concrete context of interests! In his fascinating study Critique and Crisis Reinhart Koselleck makes a very similar point about the Enlightenment. Koselleck argues that it is part of the pathogenesis of the modern world that those who upheld the principles of the Enlightenment stubbornly refused to be aware of the latter as steeped in a political ethos which was able to hide itself behind the veil of abstract reason and criticism. According to Koselleck, ‘enlightened’ arguments and attitudes were not formed initially in a public forum but emerged in the private sphere—in Masonic lodges and through the early Republic of Letters. [Reinhart Koselleck, Critique and Crisis: Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society MIT Press 1988. It is interesting to note that in his review of Koselleck’s work Habermas, still very much in a Marxist mindset, is predictably and relentlessly critical, arguing, in part, that Koselleck did not really understand the concept of the political in the eighteenth century. Despite this early criticism, many of the themes brought out by Koselleck were actually picked up by Habermas in his work The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere.
203 We have made the claim that phronesis and practical reasoning are capacities enacted through the embodied self only implicitly in our discussion of speaking and listening. The notion of embodiment deserves a much more elaborate treatment which, unfortunately, we cannot hope to accomplish in the present study.
204 We need not make any great leap in logic to grasp the profoundly devastating moral and political consequences of this perspective in our own day.
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We will say something more about these affinities in the following chapter. Following this trajectory of thinking we could say that the sort of hermeneutic distanciating role played by prejudice, tradition et cetera could be described as a form of immanent critique. We will take up this idea in the following chapter.

What this project of delimiting knowledge will require is a special critical ‘method’—a transcendental philosophical approach that argues backwards to the conditions of possibility for any kind of knowing whatsoever. Importantly, the model here is not mathematics as it was for Bacon and Descartes (not to mention Spinoza). A ‘critique’ must distill reason down to its regulative role in the determining of what is acceptable a priori and what is not.

I will state outright that given the way I understand the historicality of immanent critique it would simply not be possible for human consciousness to ever actually reach an absolute point where all knowing could be completed and all reality made wholly transparent. Although this is a debatable point, I cannot imagine Hegel would think this either. This, by no means, is meant to gainsay the presupposition of absolute knowledge as necessary for the project Hegel outlines in his Phenomenology of Spirit. In somewhat analogous fashion I am not entirely convinced that Marx’s Hegelian perspective is meant to conclude in the notion of a species self-consciousness that attains the level of critique in such a way that it is forever freed from all ideological delusion. This would tend to give immanent critique a transcendent god-like status which I do not think it was ever meant to have.

I will eventually claim that the mathematicization of the lifeworld and the seemingly ubiquitous use of instrumentalizing reason is not yet totalizing. The reality is that as long as we can articulate shared goods and participate in the effort to extend existing communities, and advance and encourage the formation of new communities; as long as we can renew, extend and continue multiple forms of resistance and thinking otherwise through the proliferation of performative rhetorical and dialogical practices, something of what belongs to phronesis will remain intact and relevant. This does not mean that phronetic reasoning is not under threat—perhaps now more than ever in a globally connected technical-instrumentally oriented world. But, if it is under threat, our only way of countering and resisting the instrumentalizing imperative is precisely by extending the domain of thinking freedom as a practice—in a word, extending and radicalizing phronesis.


Ibid p. 27. Kant does not see the notion of ‘critique’ as that which merely establishes limits to be of only negative value. Rather, implicit in the establishment of epistemological limits is the possibility of opening a space for the “practical employment of pure reason—the moral...” CPR Bxxv p.26. To claim that the effort to establish the limits of knowledge only yielded negative results “would be like saying that the police are of no positive benefit, inasmuch as their main business is merely to prevent the violence of which citizen’s stand in mutual fear, in order that each may pursue his vocation in peace and security”. ! CPR Bxxv p. 27

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Ibid. p. 35 §58

Ibid. p. 36 §58

Ibid. p. 40 §65

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G.W.F. Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit pp. 111-119.

The return to something which resembles Aristotelian eudaimonia is most evident in Hegel’s notion of sittlichkeit or ‘ethical life’.

By ‘abstract’ I mean here that Marx uses the empirical method of generalizing observed phenomena and elevates this to the level of economic law—in this case the ‘economic law of motion’. I try to avoid the confusing word ‘materialist’ because of its association with the more familiar reductive philosophical (or scientific) meaning regarding ‘matter’. Marx is not initially interested in forwarding such a crass physicalist theory, but rather gives us a phenomenological account (a description of our experiencing) of human alienation as a result of concrete forces and relations of production. In my reading the problem is that this phenomenological perspective gradually becomes more abstract as it takes up the ‘science’ of economics which sees itself as analogous to the natural sciences. It is the hegemonic status of the natural sciences as a model for the human/social sciences that inevitably presses Marx into what Marcuse will later call a ‘one-dimensional’ understanding of the human. Paradoxically, this more abstract configuration is apparent in Marx as it is (albeit differently) in Habermas’s turn to the ‘sociology of knowledge’ and his return to a universalist neo-Kantian reconstructive perspective in the pragmatics of language and discourse
theory. Thus, as we will see ‘critique’ and the critical take both an immanent and a quasi-transcendental form in Habermas’s understanding of communicative rationality.

20 See, for example Feuerbach’s Lectures on the Essence of Religion (Lecture XXX) “But God is nothing other than the abstracted, phantasmagoric essence of man and nature, hypostatised by the imagination; hence theism sacrifices the real life and nature of things and of men to a being who is a mere product of thought and imagination…” It is not atheism that is the negative but the reverse: “What is truly negative is theism, the belief in God; it negates nature, the world and mankind: in the face of God, the world and man are nothing…”


22 In Knowledge and Human Interests Habermas insightfully underscores immanent critique as a critique of commodity fetishism: “…according to Marx, the distinguishing feature of capitalism is that it has brought ideologies from the heights of mythological or religious legitimations of tangible domination and power down into the system of social labour. In liberal bourgeois society the legitimation of power is derived from the legitimation of the market, that is from the ‘justice’ of the exchange of equivalents inherent in exchange relations. It is unmasked by the critique of commodity fetishism.” As Habermas points out there is a crucial continuity here between Hegel and Marx: “…like the Phenomenology of Mind it (Das Kapital—my addition) is guided by the experience of reflection in reconstructing the course of the manifestation of consciousness, although the latter is now seen as prompted by developments of the system of social labour. But, on the other hand, this science of man also resembles Hegel’s Phenomenology in knowing itself to be involved in the self-formative process that it recollects. The knowing subject must also direct the critique of ideology at itself.” Jürgen Habermas, Knowledge & Human Interest, translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro, Polity Press, Cambridge, England, 1987, p.48


24 ibid XXII

25 ibid XXII

26 ibid XXIII

27 There is, of course, room for many different interpretations here, and there is some plausibility to the argument that Engels was more taken with positivistic science than Marx—particularly in his pamphlet Socialism: Utopian and Scientific. One of the most interesting anecdotes regarding this debate is found in the 1873 Afterword to the 2nd German Edition of Das Kapital where Marx identifies the ‘dialectical method’ which he employs as ‘opposite’ to Hegel. Hence, the idealist, practically inert, Hegelian dialectic shows itself through stages of thought that end in the ‘glorification of the existing state of things’. By contrast, Marx sees his own materialist framework, if not grounded not in abstract absolute laws, at the very least representative of a dialectic founded on empirically testable inductive laws which have predictive force, and are capable of impartially showing ‘successive determinate orders of social conditions’ which can then be the grounds for revolutionary change. Thus, from a materialist perspective the logos of dialectical must be verified by way of inductive science. It is therefore method that gives a scientific legitimacy to revolution. See the Afterword to the 2nd German Edition at http://www.scribd.com/doc/48973750/Das-Kapital-Volume-I.

28 Hannah Arendt has noted the result of the collapse of the distinction between public and private, the triumph of fabrication over action and speech, the rise of behaviorist explanations all help us explain the proliferation of social theory—and the demise of thinking about the human condition itself.

29 The Institute for Social Research affiliated with the University of Frankfurt was also helped along the way by a nice infusion of cash in 1922 by Felix Weil, a German grain exporter who wanted to further Marxist study through an established university. Cf. “Critical Theory and Philosophy” in The Handbook of Critical Theory, edited by David Rasmussen, Blackwell Publishers 1996, p. 16


30 It is Lukács not Marx who describes ‘false consciousness’—though the latter concept is related to Marx’s ideas on ideology and commodity fetishism.


32 Douglas Kellner relates that for Horkheimer traditional theory ‘tended toward mechanistic materialism reproducing mechanized thought and practice; it conceptualized the world as a machine during an era in which machines came to dominate human beings’. As a result ‘the dominant bourgeois trends of abstract and quantitative thought which informed traditional theory reproduced the tendencies toward abstraction and quantification based on
exchange in the capitalist market, where value was expressed in quantitative terms. Just as bourgeois society, governed by exchange value, abstracted from values, goals sentiments and qualities, so too did traditional theory. Finally, the fragmentation and division of the sciences were reproduced in the bourgeois division of labour that defined capitalism, whereby specialization and fragmentation are dominant features of the structure of society”. Cf Douglas Kellner, *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity* Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore 1989 p. 45

235 For Horkheimer, suffering is the result of natural events such as sickness and natural disaster, but it is deliberate human intervention that causes hunger, war and exploitation.

236 It is a profound lacuna here that we cannot take up in more elaborate fashion the immensely interesting and fruitful critical work of Marcuse and Adorno—not to mention Walter Benjamin and Ernst Bloch. In an important sense Adorno’s writings are much more radical than Habermas’s and constitute an explicit critique of the sort of enlightenment optimism the latter is so keen to expose. In this sense Adorno’s critical orientation is more in the spirit of Nietzsche and Kierkegaard and later postmodern figures such as Foucault and Derrida. In his later writings Habermas attempts to historically situate and philosophically clarify his own critical perspective with respect to these latter figures. See for example his twelve lectures in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, translated by Frederick Lawrence, MIT Press Cambridge, Mass. 1990.

237 We will claim in Chapter 5 that it is precisely the focus on abstraction, rather than on the thinking-acting-desiring-being provided by *phronesis* and practical reasoning that must impel us to question whether the ‘critical’ dimension of critical theory does indeed forward a truly practical and emancipatory pedagogy.


239 TP p 41
240 TP p 42
241 One need only read the first few sentences of Hobbes *Leviathan* to get a palpable sense of this mechanistic worldview: “NATURE (the art whereby God hath made and governs the world) is by the art of man, as in many other things, so in this also imitated, that it can make an artificial animal. For seeing life is but a motion of limbs, the beginning whereof is in some principal part within, why may we not say that all automata (engines that move themselves by springs and wheels as doth a watch) have an artificial life? For what is the heart, but a spring; and the nerves, but so many strings; and the joints, but so many wheels, giving motion to the whole body, such as was intended by the Artificer?” Thomas Hobbes, Leviathan, edited by C.B. Macpherson, Penguin Books 1985. p. 81
242 TP p. 60
243 TP p. 44
244 TP p. 79
245 TP p. 255
246 I say ‘initially’ here because Habermas Marxist orientation is far less apparent in his later works. Habermas’s critical program will in fact be more often identified with Kant’s transcendental and moral universalizing perspective, and this is certainly a plausible reading. But in terms of Habermas’s own philosophical way of articulating and critically engaging other theorists and traditions, his approach is unmistakably Hegelian. He doesn’t just show the strength and weaknesses of other positions; he is also concerned with showing the immanent movement of reflection and self-reflection respecting contemporary social and political thinking which must inevitably emerge in the articulation of the (reflexive) pragmatic presuppositions of undistorted discourse.

247 By the term ‘interest’ Habermas means cognitive or knowledge-constitutive interests. The project of *Knowledge and Human Interests* is one of recovering the “abandoned stages of reflection”—by which is certainly meant recovering the vital ‘critical’ perspective which Habermas thinks has been enfeebled by an increasingly reductive methodological positivist or ‘scientistic’ approach [p. vii.]. See Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*. Translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro, Boston: Beacon Press, 1971 [Hereafter abbreviated as KHI]

248 One cannot escape the slightly ironical suspicion that Habermas’s historical readings are less interested in laying bare, in a fair manner, the different possible meanings and interpretations of an author in a way that might extend our grasp of a subject matter, and rather more interested in instrumentalizing or using different texts in the effort to fill out the conceptual parameters of his own communicative rationality perspective. Thus Marx, Hegel, Weber, Horkheimer, Adorno, Derrida and Foucault all ‘fail’ in some manner to forward a sustained critical perspective because they just don’t grasp or accede to the communicative dimension of rationality—or worse, they performatively contradict themselves by not admitting that their own articulated positions require communicatively grounded reason. This is most especially evident in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. To be fair, it is perhaps this sort of creative misreading that enables innovative thinking to occur. But if so, we are at that point
speaking of something other than the telos of mutual agreement. None of this, of course, is in any way meant to impugn the profound integrity and capacity to listen that Habermas embodies both as an activist and a scholar.  

We are justified at this point in seeing Habermas’s critical project as also analogous to the Kantian notion of critique as the establishing of limits or boundaries. Like Kant, Habermas is always concerned with setting out and legitimating epistemological limits and borders.  

Weber employs the term ‘rationality’ in a number of different ways. It can mean a certain theoretical grasp of concepts; it can manifest as a purposive/instrumental conception which is driven by the virtues of efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control (i.e. *zweckrationalität*); or it can be a way of describing a more systematic grasp of reality that is grounded in some value orientation. Additionally, Weber speaks at more distinctly sociological level in his elaboration of the term ‘rationalization’. Weber describes ‘rationalization’ as a process of social evolution where primitive religious beliefs gradually dissolve and a more rational-legal understanding begins to take hold. Insofar as the process of rationalization describes the progressive proliferation of *zweckrationalität* it paradoxically represents a shrinking of meaning possibilities. However, it is important to understand here that ‘rationalization’ and ‘purposive rationality’ are not identical terms—rationalization as a process can manifest in a way that clearly exhibits ‘irrational’ perspectives. In this sense Weber’s sociological works can be seen as a critical project of illuminating the rationalizing predicament of modern social and cultural symbols and institutions within an objective social scientific framework. Habermas will claim that Weber’s understanding of rationality presupposes a limited conception of human action and therefore fails to incorporate the make room for communicative forms.  


251 The immanent-critical approach will be something that retains its power for Habermas when he takes on what he refers to as the ‘totalizing critique of reason’ forwarded by Adorno, Derrida and Foucault. However, at this early juncture Habermas’s writings are more concerned with the fact that the social sciences are largely dominated by empirical-analytic conceptions of explanation without considering the immensely fruitful potential that is possible through phenomenological, linguistic and hermeneutic approaches to meaning. See, for example, *On the Logic of the Social Sciences*. Translated by Sherry Weber Nicholsen and Jerry A. Stark, MIT Press, 1988. pp 89-170. Of course, this text also famously inaugurates what will become one of the more fascinating debates of the period between Habermas and H.G. Gadamer. The basis for Habermas worry here is precisely the opposite of the above. In other words, he is concerned about the equally absolutizing potential of the hermeneutic or interpretive understanding.  

252 This means that the goal of functional analysis is not critical or emancipatory, but rather one of integrating individuals into an existing, potentially distorting, social regime. Habermas devotes an entire volume (Volume 2 of *The Theory of Communicative Action*) to the critique of functionalist reason.  

253 Habermas would level a similar charge against functionalism—that the latter approach served an integrative rather than critical-emancipatory purpose.  


255 See for example, Jürgen Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis*, Translated by Thomas McCarthy, Beacon Press, Boston 1975. This work is essentially an immanent critique of contemporary capitalism. Thus, the legitimating structure of capitalism is discovered to embody certain inerminable internal conflicts which betray its own ideals and goals and which, in turn, give rise to systemic economic instability and eventual breakdown of basic forms of social solidarity. (It would be an interesting exercise to pair the latter complex study with Naomi Klein’s more readable work *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (Picador 2008) which is also an immanent critique of the capitalist doctrine of ‘free markets’. Also, in a series of essays [Communication and the Evolution of Society Translated by Thomas McCarthy, Beacon Press, Boston 1979] Habermas elaborates ideas that will be taken up in a more thorough fashion in *The theory of Communicative Action*.  

written a different kind of book.

books own failure to understand itself as a necessary ideals.

reflection back to putative formal conditions of speech which will then inevitably be expressed as universal and approach is in our mind an open question—if only because his ‘formal prag matics’ is very much a regressive determination to vindicate practical reasoning and phronesis value of

University of Notre Dame Press, London, 1993. This is a book well worth the effort for anyone interested in the ‘transcendental subject.’ But whether he actually succeeds in entirely breaking from the transcendental reflective discourse theory and his communicative paradigm does in fact provide a counter to the notion of a Kantian theory of Austin and Searle.

However, the most promising point of departure for Habermas will not be de Saussure but rather the speech-act 356 273 Joseph Dunne, 272 The paradigmatic examples of philosophical anthropology are Max Scheler and Ernst Cassirer. Cf. Max Scheler, 270 Ursula LeGuin, 269 It is quite possible that Habermas thinks that by bringing into relief or ‘raising our consciousness’ regarding the 268 Of course, there are also more explicit Kantian themes in Habermas’s discourse theory of law and morality and 267 By contrast, it is this latter sense of ‘inhabiting’ language that phronesis more fully captures, because it assumes thinking-acting being are enacted together—that thinking is ‘always already’ a being-in language.

Of course, there are also more explicit Kantian themes in Habermas’s discourse theory of law and morality and his proceduralist understanding of democracy. 260 This description is in part borrowed from Seyla Benhabib’s essay “Toward a deliberative model of democratic legitimacy” in Democracy and difference, edited by S. Benhabib, Princeton University Press, 1996, p.70 259 Jürgen Habermas, “What is Universal Pragmatics?” in Communication and the Evolution of Society, Translated by Thomas McCarthy, Beacon Press Boston, 1979. p. 5 [Hereafter cited as CES] Habermas relates that his program of formal pragmatics follows from Karl-Otto Apel’s transcendent-al-pragmatic conditions of communication—though it is clear Habermas wants to emphasize the empirical aspects of such conditions. The term ‘universal pragmatics’ is eventually dropped and replaced by ‘formal pragmatics’ in order to better capture the similarity of the latter to what is called ‘formal semantics’. Though he does not say so in this essay, it may be assumed that by this change Habermas wanted to somewhat distance his project from so direct a reference to Kant, while still retaining a similar reflective methodological attitude, and promoting the ‘meaning’ dimension of speech that will be crucial to his reconstructive effort. 260 CES p. 5-6. This basic distinction between language and speech can be traced back to de Saussure’s distinction between ‘langue’ which describes the formal or structural aspects of language as a system of signs, and ‘parole’ which describes how language is put into practice through individual utterances in particular contexts of speech. However, the most promising point of departure for Habermas will not be de Saussure but rather the speech-act theory of Austin and Searle.

CES p. 12 262 CES p. 21-22. The problem for Habermas here is that Kant’s transcendent-al ego –that is, ‘the “I think” that accompanies all my representations’—is an isolated, abstract or ideal self, not a self caught up in communicative relations with others. Habermas is, therefore, in accord with the phenomenological tradition insofar as he wants to abandon the idea of an isolated transcendent-al ego that serves as the ground of consciousness and intentionality. 263 Habermas wants to disassociate with the a priori transcendent-al aspect of the Kantian tradition altogether. His discourse theory and his communicative paradigm does in fact provide a counter to the notion of a Kantian ‘transcendental subject.’ But whether he actually succeeds in entirely breaking from the transcendent-al reflective approach is in our mind an open question—if only because his ‘formal pragmatics’ is very much a regressive reflection back to putative formal conditions of speech which will then inevitably be expressed as universal and necessary ideals.

CES p.4-5 264 John Austin, How to do Things with Words, 2nd Edition, Oxford University Press 1976. pp 92-109 265 Jürgen Habermas, “Social Action, Purposive Action and Communication” in On the Pragmatics of Communication, edited by Maeve Cooke, MIT Press, Cambridge Mass. 1998. p.123 266 This basic distinction between language and speech can be traced back to de Saussure’s distinction between ‘langue’ which describes the formal or structural aspects of language as a system of signs, and ‘parole’ which describes how language is put into practice through individual utterances in particular contexts of speech. However, the most promising point of departure for Habermas will not be de Saussure but rather the speech-act theory of Austin and Searle.

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The time was in fact during the 1970’s in American schools. What is shocking, is just how this behavioural, instrumental, test-oriented, method-based pedagogical model, now in place for 40 years, can be seen as singlehandedly responsible for the almost complete disintegration of critical reading, thinking and writing skills in both teachers and students. The tragic irony is that it is precisely an updated model of this success-oriented, method-based teaching that is now being touted as the solution for current problems in public schools—which have apparently ‘failed’ to produce students who can ‘successfully compete’ on a global economic scale. Even more puzzling here is the fact that an American President (Barack Obama) who has an extensive background in community-oriented activism would enthusiastically support such a terrible, indefensible, pedagogy.

I am somewhat uncomfortable with Dunne’s impulse to retain the notion of teaching as ‘technique’ oriented. It would seem to me that if we understood teaching as something closer to a ‘practice’ (as we have previously described it) rather than as a number of different ‘techniques’, we would better grasp how *phronesis* is always enacted in the dialectical tension between the general and the particular.


The contrast between Martin Luther King’s rhetoric which is intended to empower others and Barack Obama’s strategic though often eloquent speech intended principally to secure his own status and position of power could not be starker. This is often explained away by saying that expediency and self-serving strategic thinking are just ‘politics as usual’. However, one could make the argument that there is nothing ‘political’ going on here, but rather the attempt to eradicate the political by removing spontaneity, community and any reference to human flourishing within a polity. What political speech is thereby reduced to is rhetoric not as dialogical, and condition of possibility for community and solidarity, but rhetoric as a univocal tool of persuasion—or, at worst, a propaganda delivery system.


Amendments in 1997 introducing a ‘Long Term Offender Designation’ and in 2008 expanding the list of designated offences calling for a reverse-onus three strike rule, will no doubt contribute to a substantive
intensification and deepening of carceral attitudes. Sadly, this will further ramify in the context of an already deplorable situation with respect to the over-incarceration of aboriginals. The real problem is that a primary emphasis on and allocation of resources for retributive-oriented incarceration of offenders (including young offenders) significantly compromises the possibility of pursuing restorative and rehabilitative initiatives, counseling, addictions treatment and so on. The present ‘tough on crime’ approach reproduces the very colonialist attitudes and systemic insensitivities that gave rise to recidivism in first-nations communities. For a superb analysis of the issues at stake with respect to the present Harper Government’s get tough on crime initiatives see Michael Maher & Lorraine Berzins “Open the Doors to Smarter Justice” produced by the Smart Justice Network [http://ccjc.ca/wp-content/uploads/2011/10/Open-Doors-to-Smarter-Justice_2011.pdf].
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