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On the Sources of Ethical Life

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to argue that the connection between hermeneutics and practical philosophy is so strong that one needs to consider hermeneutics as the outline of an ethical sensibility, one that takes up the challenges that are outlined by Heidegger's call for an "original ethics." Part of this argument entails demonstrating how understanding, the real task of every hermeneutic project, is ultimately a form of self-understanding.

Keywords

Heidegger, hermeneutics, ethics, care of the self, Gadamer

My purpose in what follows is twofold. First, I want to press the argument that in Gadamer's understanding of hermeneutics we find the contours of an ethical theory and that this kinship between hermeneutics and practical philosophy goes to the core of what constitutes hermeneutics—it is neither accidental nor supplemental. Second, I want to argue that, once we recognize this kinship between hermeneutics and praxis, we come to see more clearly how hermeneutics is not simply a *theory* among other possible theories—whether it be regarded as a theory of truth, interpretation, history, or what have you—but that it needs to be understood both as, and out of, a *practice* that cultivates an ethical sensibility. Of course, in light of the prevailing sense that ethics is a matter of the application of theory, part of such arguments must be that we need to understand ethics differently. Here I will propose that we do this by recognizing the need for ethics to become, as Heidegger suggests, more "original," that is, closer to its own sources.

I confess that I have always thought of hermeneutics as having a real and important ethical significance. In fact, this has long seemed so self-evident that it has always surprised me that others were surprised by this view. There are several rather obvious reasons one would immediately see at least a link

between hermeneutic theory and ethics. Four clear examples stand out: first, hermeneutics is centered upon the question of ethical judgment as it is developed by Kant; second, it is modeled on Aristotle's notion of *φρόνησις*; third, it is concerned with conversation and listening; and fourth, it is animated by a deep respect for alterity and a sensitivity to the complexities of historical realities. Those cornerstones of the way Gadamer formulates the idea of hermeneutics seem to be very good reasons to assume that an ethical sense, ethical concerns, belong to the foundations of hermeneutics—and one could even point to more such examples. Furthermore, Gadamer seems to explicitly affirm this view in *Truth and Method* when he writes that “Aristotle's description of the ethical phenomenon... offers a kind of *model for the problems of hermeneutics*.”¹ That is the sort of claim one finds often made by Gadamer; one sees it, for instance, in the essay entitled “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy” where he says that “theoretical knowledge about the experience of understanding and the praxis of understanding—that is, philosophical hermeneutics and one's own self-understanding—cannot be separated.”² In short, the bond between hermeneutics and practical philosophy is a frequent theme for Gadamer. For all of these reasons—and more—it has always seemed to me that hermeneutics, both as a theory and as a practice, is deeply rooted in the concerns of ethical life. And yet, it seems that there is no real recognition of what this sameness of hermeneutics and ethics entails. So, I want to once again make the argument that hermeneutics needs to be understood as an ethics. But before I do that, I need to say more precisely just what this notion of an “original” ethics means.

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Heidegger is not terribly helpful in unfolding what he means by his call for ethics to become more “original.” Nonetheless, one can glean something of such an ethics from scattered comments. For instance, it is clear that calling for an “original” ethics does not simply mean that it should be a novel form of what has long passed for ethics; rather, it means that it should be fundamentally different from ethics as it is currently understood. More precisely, it should be different insofar as it draws closer to the sources of what lets something like an ethical life be, and it should be free from the prejudices of metaphysics that

¹ H.-G. Gadamer, *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. I (Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck Verlag, 1990), 329. Henceforth all volumes in the *Gesammelte Werke* will be cited as *GW*, followed by the volume number and the page number.

² H.-G. Gadamer, *Vernunft im Zeitalter der Wissenschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1976), 109.

have long governed ethical reflection. Those prejudices are several, but a few stand out as central. In particular, it is the metaphysical partition of ontology from ethics, that is, the separation of theory and praxis, that Heidegger finds most in need of being overcome. This, in part is what Heidegger is referring to when he writes that “if it is the case that the word ἦθος, in accord with its basic meaning, entails a reflection upon the dwelling of human being, then a thinking that thinks the truth of being as the originary element of human being is *already implicitly* an original ethics.”³ Such an ethics should be understood as neither theory nor practice; it is, rather, founded in how we make sense of our world, how we understand, and this cannot be fully accounted for as a theoretical matter, nor does such sense emerge as a matter of practice alone. Properly understood—something I do not believe that Heidegger himself quite achieved—such an ethics undercuts or deconstructs the very notion of a theoretical/practical divide, since it concerns the formation of that character out of which both theoretical and practical relations to the world emerge. Understood in this way ethics is much more a matter of an enacting of an understanding that defines the “basis” of our being-in-the-world. It is that for which one bears absolute responsibility, since it returns one to that which is most of all one’s own.

When Heidegger speaks of the “basic meaning” of the word ἦθος, he refers to the way it means something like a native place or the place where something belongs and flourishes. The word ἦθος is used this way in Homer’s *Iliad* when Paris, running through Troy in order to find Hektor, is likened to a horse breaking free and running to find the haunts [ἦθεα] and pastures [βοιὸν] of other horses: ἦθος is the place where the animal belongs with other animals—it the place where they gather and flourish. There is a passage in Plato where one finds this more archaic sense of the word ἦθος that is an even more appropriate way of understanding the “basic meaning” of ἦθος. It appears in the *Phaedrus* at 276d when, in the course of discussing gardens, Socrates introduces the idea that written words constitute a sort of “garden of letters” (γράμμασι κήπους) that are the seeds to be planted in the soil that is the soul. In that passage, Socrates speaks of the place where those seeds were planted as an ἦθει and that place is also the word for the character of the soul in which that garden of letters is planted. In this case, ἦθος refers to a gathering place but also something like a soil upon which something grows, and that which

³ M. Heidegger, *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt: Klostermann Verlag, 1978), 187 (emphasis added). This sameness of ontology and ethics—and indeed much more—remind one of Spinoza, about whom Heidegger’s silence is deafening.

grows in this place is one's character. It is the place where the soul is forged and formed. An ethics that is original—the sort of ethical understanding that I want to argue defines hermeneutics—cultivates this place, forms a character, and nourishes that out of which anything like conduct, decision, action, right or wrong is to be thought and understood.⁴ To put it in other words, one might say simply: ἦθος ἀνθρώπω δαίμων.⁵

More could be said of Heidegger's understanding of this point and of the ways in which one can develop the idea of an ethics in Heidegger. But my intention is not to continue with Heidegger; it is rather to pursue the development of the idea of such an ethics in Gadamer, since I believe that Gadamer moves far beyond Heidegger in this matter. There are, of course, differences between Heidegger and Gadamer on the conception and understanding of the task of a philosophical ethics, but by and large, Gadamer's approach does follow the concerns of Heidegger's sense of an original ethics. Above all, Gadamer recognizes that such an ethics does not find its center in any rules of conduct, any discussion of the will or imperatives, nor is it articulated by the juridical language of right and wrong. Rather, like Heidegger, Gadamer will understand the questions of ethical life to be centered much more upon the issue of comportment and of the formation of character.

With that brief characterization of the idea of an original ethics and its distinction from ethics as it is typically thought, let me turn finally to Gadamer in order to make a case for the argument that hermeneutics needs to be understood as providing a more articulated theory of ethical life and that the practice of hermeneutics needs to be understood as an ethical practice. In the end, the practice of hermeneutics requires an orientation that tells us much about—and is deeply aligned with—ethical life. My largest goal is to unfold this orientation as an ethical concern. One might put it this way: I want to let hermeneutics think its own exposition in the light of the sense of ethics as an ἦθος.

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⁴ One finds this double sense of ἦθος expressed by the way this word is used in both senses in *Laws* 792e (on children and habit as cultivating an ἦθος) and 865e (on a murderer who returns to his haunt, ἦθος, the place where he is comfortable and at ease).

⁵ Heraclitus, fragment 119, in *Die Fragmente der Vorsokratiker*, ed. H. Diels and W. Kranz, Bd. 1 (Hildesheim: Weidmann, 1989), 177.

Unlike Heidegger, Gadamer did address the question of ethical life directly and frequently: from his earliest works such as “Praktisches Wissen” (1930) and *Platons dialektische Ethik* (1931), up through the period of *Truth and Method* where we find texts such as “Über die Möglichkeit einer philosophischen Ethik” (1963), to later works such as “Freundschaft und Selbsterkenntnis” (1985), even to his final significant work, which was a translation and commentary of Book VI of Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, the text that he studied with Heidegger and that so profoundly ignited his philosophical imagination. Even Gadamer’s last “new” publication, which was the text of a lecture he gave to students at a Gymnasium, “Erziehung ist sich erziehen” (2000) takes up the theme of this sense of understanding that cultivates character rather than simply cognizes abstract ideas. In other words, though he never systematically treated the largest questions of the relation of hermeneutics and ethical life, those concerns were enduring and never far from Gadamer’s work. The reason for this is simple: the character of understanding that is the aim of hermeneutics is always a form of self-understanding. Such self-understanding is never remote from the realm that Plato characterized as the soil that is the soul.

If one culls these texts in which Gadamer discusses ethical concerns as a hermeneutical problem, one finds that a set of rather tightly related themes and arguments emerges and that these outline key features of Gadamer’s understanding of the character of a philosophical ethics. One sees above all that he does not take for granted that philosophical discourse has a hegemony over the arena of ethical concerns and questions. In fact, one sees that Gadamer considers it a real question whether there can even be a philosophical knowledge of moral life. This is because the conditional and contingent character of human life must forever disrupt any effort to forge a doctrine of ethics, and consequently, any ethics that is sensitive to this conditionality will not be able to deny its own conditional nature—in other words, it must recognize its own questionableness. This modesty of any possible ethics, this humility of its claims and authority, is the most necessary feature of any ethical stance for Gadamer. It manifests itself as a sort of openness to the other and as a form of criticism that is always reflexive rather than aggressive. But within the horizon of this humility that will limit and temper any ethical claim, one does find some clear hallmarks of what Gadamer understands by ethical understanding. Three tightly interrelated themes deserve to be mentioned in particular: the role of conceptual language in ethical understanding, the transition of ethical understanding into practice, and the distinction between ethical understanding and *τέκνη*.

Gadamer sharply distinguishes ethical understanding from conceptual knowing. Just as the first sentence of *Truth and Method* makes a distinction between the character of truth in the humanities and that found in the natural sciences, so too does the concern with ethicality begin with a parallel distinction: conceptual language is insufficient and inappropriate for the language of ethical life, that is, for the character of its articulation and expression. The problem with the concept is this: it is defined by its impulse, its drive, to universality and generality, but ethical life is lived out in the life of the idiom—in the realities of history, the sufferings of individuals, and in the singularities that define life as an idiom, as a singular being who is absolutely responsible for how one understands one's world and how one enacts that understanding. The language of literature in which we find the play of singular situations and the various idioms of art that do not abide by the ideal of the concept are better adept at opening up the questions of ethics. This is why Heidegger said—in a comment with which Gadamer is in full accord—that “in the tragedies of Sophocles we find ἦθος thought more originally than in Aristotle's lectures on ‘Ethics.’”⁶ Conceptual language, language that is governed by the law of universalizability, tends to express its moral significance in terms of laws, which by virtue of the way language plays into their formation are held to be universalizable. Consequently, philosophical approaches to ethics get expressed in terms of universal laws and imperatives, and the frameworks of ethical life are articulated according to juridical terms such as right and wrong, guilt and innocence, good and evil. This means that ethical life gets thought as a matter of rule-governed behavior, as a matter of ideals that are to be applied to the realities, the idioms, of factual life. In the end, by thinking ethical life in terms of such conceptual categories, we end up with the imperatives of such categories—or even more fundamentally, with the imperative of the category itself. Kant, at least the Kant of the second *Critique*, marks the summit of this liability of the language of philosophy brought to bear upon the realm of ethical life.⁷

Of course, Gadamer does not reject the task of philosophy in the formation of an ethical life, but insofar as the mother tongue of philosophy will always be the concept, he reminds us that, while concepts arise out of the lived word, the words of factual life, in order to bear any real force in that life they cannot

⁶ Heidegger, *Wegmarken*, 184.

⁷ On this, see my “Einige Betrachtungen zu Sprache und Freiheit aus einem hermeneutischen Blinkwinkel,” in *Heidegger Jahrbuch* (Frankfurt: Klostermann Verlag, 2005), 59–73.

remain only concepts, but must be brought back to the word. The final words of his essay “Vom Wort zum Begriff” (1995) address this point: the movement of philosophy is “from the word to the concept, but we must move from the concept to the word if we are to reach the other. . . . [T]his belongs to the great achievement of art . . . and, in the end, touches upon the basic conditions of our lives together as human beings.”⁸ In other words, the reach and legitimate claim of philosophy in the realm of ethical understanding is neither complete nor final. Philosophical hermeneutics understands that its final gesture must be to enact a *return* to factual life and the realities of ethical life as realities borne and suffered in the singular. This return is essential and it is at the heart of what constitutes hermeneutics as a practice. In order to grasp its nature, one must come to see how different this return to the word, to the singularities of life, is from what has long been considered to be the problem of application of concepts, of theory and ideas, to praxis.

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Gadamer calls the problem of application [*Anwendung*] “the overarching and central problem of hermeneutics.”⁹ One might put the point more directly: the basic task of hermeneutics is to overcome the notion that understanding needs to be applied. If, however, it is the case that philosophy operates in the realm of the concept and according to the ideal of the universal, then it is indeed the case that the universal that is disclosed and in which truth lies does need to be brought to bear, to be applied, to the particular realities of life. In such a notion of understanding the *application* of truth becomes a *post facto supplement* to truth. As a result of such an approach, the questions of factual life, the real site of any ethics, become secondary to *knowing* what is true. Against this metaphysical conception of truth as that which needs to be deliberately applied so that a gap, a distance, and a tension between the universal and particular instance is crossed, Gadamer argues that real understanding is always already application. Application is not a supplement to truth but is, rather, the real condition of something like truth in the form of an articulated theory. Recognizing this, seeing what it means and what measure it sets for the character of understanding is the key to grasping the nature of hermeneutics.

The traditional framework for speaking of the problem of application is in terms of the relation of theory to praxis. There are, however, several spin-offs of

⁸) H.-G. Gadamer, *Gadamer Lesebuch* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1997), 110.

⁹) Gadamer, *GW* 1: 312.

this framing of the question: universal and particular, ontology and ethics, law and the case, the objective and the subjective, the abstract and the concrete. Typically there is a hierarchy assumed in this relation, and typically theory (or universality, ontology, law, objectivity, abstraction) stands above the realities of history and practice (though there are, of course, important exceptions that reverse that hierarchy—here one thinks especially of Marx and Nietzsche—and Gadamer is even sometimes accused of simply ceding priority to praxis over theory). But from the hermeneutic point of view, these are false dichotomies that cannot be resolved even by means of their own dialectic. These terms and the framework for conceiving the task of thinking that they articulate have misunderstood the real—or at least the first—task of thinking. That task is what Gadamer discusses as a matter of understanding.

To appreciate the real radicality of the notion of understanding in hermeneutics, one needs to approach it out of Sections 31–33 of *Being and Time* where Heidegger develops the notion of understanding as an existential of Dasein and thereby exposes the difference between the hermeneutic of understanding and the cognitive interpretation that such an understanding makes possible. I will not rehearse Heidegger's discussion of understanding here, nor will I try to unpack the differences one can find in the way Gadamer discusses understanding. There is, I believe, a sense in which Heidegger presses more forcefully on this notion, while Gadamer retreats a bit into the view that understanding is indeed akin to praxis. But the point that I want to make, the point that I believe Gadamer needs to make, is that understanding is never found apart from factual life; it does not stand above it as a theory, but neither is it to be defined as a matter of praxis. Rather, understanding is a continuous act that is renewed at every instant; it is a way of life that is informed by history, language, and habits—all of the realities of the situation of factual life. As such, understanding is not to be understood as a theory—even though a theory may eventually result from understanding—nor is it to be understood as an action—whether that action be taken as blind or illuminated by theory—through which we muddle until we achieve the clarity of a theory, of cognition. Rather, understanding forges the center, the “who,” that we become; it becomes the basis for how it is that we come to know and conceptually articulate our world and ourselves. Much could be said about the character of understanding as such a basis, but for now I will only remind you of one decisive point, namely, that such understanding—such a factual life—is finite. Heidegger and Gadamer both characterize this finitude in several ways and as accounted for by many factors, but nothing makes this point as clearly as Heidegger's often repeated remark that *Das Leben is diesig, es nebelt sich immer*

wieder ein. Any theory, any understanding of praxis, any effort to speak of the origins of ethical life must bear this in mind.

So it is *out of* understanding as an existential that something like a theory or a praxis that is defined in relation to theory emerges. But—and this is the real contribution of hermeneutics—such understanding requires a *return* to itself, and this return to factual life is not to be understood as a matter of application. This is what Heidegger means when he says that “philosophy is universal phenomenological ontology, beginning with a hermeneutic of Dasein which, as an analytic of *existence*, has made fast the guideline for all philosophical questioning at the point where it *arises* and into which it is *folded back*.”¹⁰ If there is a circle that defines hermeneutic understanding, then it is found in this return, the fold in which the real meaning and measure of understanding is found. This too is where hermeneutics shows its deep and essential kinship with an original ethics as the formation of character, as sowing seeds in the soil that is the soul. According to Gadamer, this return that is not a matter of application is the central problem of hermeneutics. It is also exceedingly difficult to address.

This return to factual life in which it becomes clear that hermeneutics, properly understood and practiced, is not an abstract theory but is, rather, profoundly rooted in ethical life cannot be understood insofar as thinking submits itself to the language and logic of the concept. A different relation to language is one of the keys here. In particular, the need to bring language back to its roots, to keep it from slipping irrevocably into abstraction and an ideality that effaces the deep resonances of language is paramount. The practice of hermeneutics is always attuned to the workings of language, since the path back to factual life, the way a return that is not an application takes place, will always be in large measure a matter of listening carefully to what language is saying. There is no rule that can be laid out for how one is to carry out such listening. One can say however that its goal is the *intensification of the sense of life*; it is to enact a return to factual life that enriches understanding and that knows itself to be a moment in this circle, the continuous act that is always renewed, that we call understanding.

But there is another way of speaking of this return, this transition that belongs to the nature of real understanding, back to factual life. This brings me to the third of the three themes that I believe help illustrate the ethical character of understanding for Gadamer. This theme concerns the way in

¹⁰ M. Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Frankfurt a.M.: Klostermann, 1977), 436.

which one can say that the excellence of understanding, its real aim, is a ἥξις τοῦ ἀληθεύειν (the habit of being in truth).¹¹

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In order to unpack the way in which understanding belongs to practical life as this return, Gadamer refers to Aristotle's notion of φρόνησις—like φρόνησις, understanding is a unique form of knowing, one that cannot be measured by the standards of cognition, nor is it able to be fully formulated as a matter for theory.

Gadamer's discussions of how φρόνησις is like understanding invariably begin by highlighting its difference from τέχνη; in particular, we can learn a τέχνη; it can be taught to us by another, but by the same token, this means that it can be forgotten. Furthermore, τέχνη is a form of knowing that is able—or not able—to be enlisted to govern action. For instance, I can choose to use my knowledge of how to make shoes, or I can simply set such knowledge aside. Τέχνη is a knowledge that I can turn to and draw upon or simply ignore. It can be separated from action; it need not be a part of any and every action. It can even be separated from who I am. As a result of this, τέχνη inevitably confronts the problem of its own application: if it is to be actualized and brought into being, then there must be a means to the realization of the end of that τέχνη—if I am going to make shoes, then I must be able to apply that knowledge to the materials and possibilities that present themselves to me; I must be able to find the means to realize my end.

Such, however, is not the case with φρόνησις, which is a form of knowing that has already understood its own situatedness so that there is no need even to pose the question of the application of such knowledge. This is the case because we do not stand over against φρόνησις as something that we could adopt or not, learn or forget; it is rather a knowing that makes one who one is. Or better: it is that knowing that is defined as the orientation, comportment, and character that leads us in our factual lives. It is at the center of what defines us as ethical beings at all. Φρόνησις is a knowing that defines—to the extent that any such definition is even possible—who one is. From this point of view, it is rather easy to understand how φρόνησις is another way of unfolding the significance of Heraclitus' remark ἦθος ἀνθρώπου δαίμων: the knowing that is φρόνησις includes a sort of self-understanding or, at least, a sort of self-situatedness of the knower.

¹¹ See, for instance, "Über die Möglichkeit einer philosophischen Ethik," in *GW* 4: 175.

Gadamer singles out two aspects of this difference between φρόνησις and τέχνη as especially significant for formulating the character of hermeneutical understanding. The first is that, whereas τέχνη confronts the problem of application and of the question of the means to an end, φρόνησις does not. Instead of needing to confront the problem of its own application to life, φρόνησις requires a different sort of reflection in order to realize itself. More precisely, φρόνησις needs a self-deliberation that opens up something like the self-understanding that emerges from grasping the situatedness of what is to be known. Such self-deliberation is not a matter of a self-inspection in which one observes oneself as if from a distance. It is rather the effort to understand what one does understand, and this means that it is just as much a matter of seeing a situation, seeing the problem of praxis, as it is a sort of dialogue with oneself that is aimed at greater understanding. This deliberation is a unique form of reflexivity; it is the way in which we seek out that understanding that already belongs to the realities of factual life so that there is no need of anything like an “application” of what one learns. The understanding *is* the application. The second aspect of the difference between φρόνησις and τέχνη that Gadamer finds worth highlighting is that φρόνησις is a form of knowing that cannot be forgotten. Gadamer frequently refers to this point, and it is clear that he is struck by the peculiar character of a knowing that is so profoundly integrated into who one is that it cannot be forgotten. His fascination with this goes back to his 1924 course with Heidegger in which, according to Gadamer, Heidegger said “Was bedeutet das, dass es von der Phronesis keine ‘λεθη’ gibt? Meine Herren, das is das Gewissen.”¹² One might worry about the conflation of the Greek and Christian traditions in such a remark, but insofar as one focuses upon the point that Gadamer wants to emphasize, namely, the profound *intimacy* that defines φρόνησις, the link between conscience and φρόνησις is not problematic but illuminating. Such a knowing, defining conscience and φρόνησις alike, cannot only not be forgotten, but I also can not hide from it, since it has already constituted that which I am. It defines that sense of ἦθος that defines me.

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But what does all of this have to do with my opening claim that hermeneutics offers both a theory that responds to Heidegger’s call for an original ethics and that the practice of hermeneutics is itself a cultivation or performance of such an ethical posture? Clearly I want to suggest that the kinship between

¹²) Gadamer, *GW* 3: 400.

hermeneutics and ethical understanding is essential: to fully recognize what is at stake in interpretation and in understanding as Gadamer unfolds those notions, we need to acknowledge and think through the ethical significances of those practices. Obviously—or at least I hope it is obvious—I am not about to conclude that one who is a hermeneut is ethically superior to others. Obviously, I do not want to be heard as suggesting that the life of a philosophy professor exhibits a higher ethical understanding than those who are not professional philosophers. Quite the contrary, I tend to believe that we who have this privilege have less excuse for our foibles and failures than most and that philosophy today, which has become so much a matter of simply vocational training of other philosophy professors, is a sore disappointment in ethical matters.

What I want to suggest is that the goal of hermeneutics—like the goal that one finds in philosophy in its beginnings—is to enlist some outmoded words, wisdom, *Bildung*, and character. It is first and foremost to gain an understanding, and this understanding is, in the end, what one becomes. It goes to forge ἦθος in its most original sense. When I take a text into my hands, when I enter a conversation or engage the idioms of life and others in whatever way I do, the stakes are high, and in the end, what is most at stake is who I am and will become, how I will be with others.

I believe that we tend to forget this, but this is very much at the heart of what it is that defines the idea and practice of hermeneutics. One might object and say, “But isn’t this simply what philosophy has always wanted to be even according to its own name?” This is no objection, and it is quite true. My claim simply means that hermeneutics, properly understood, returns us to the real roots and task of philosophy in general. It does this in a distinctive way, one that does not—as has become *de rigueur* in the philosophical tradition—submit the concerns of ethical life and the cultivation of a self to the rule of the concept and the laws that tumble down from its authority. Rather it remembers that ethical life and its questions always appear in singular lives that unfold themselves according to their own idioms. It does not yield any primacy to theory in the conduct of a life. It knows rather that philosophy is above all a way of life and that it requires a peculiar practice that is not at all a technique but much more a matter of struggling to understand. If there is to be a measure of this understanding, then it is best that we look to the way in which it cultivates an ἦθος rather than begin by asking about its truth. Or one might say that, in the end, truth validates itself—shows its own truth—in this sense of ἦθος.

In such an understanding of hermeneutics as practical philosophy, as a way of answering to the task of an original ethics, one returns to the sense of philosophy that Socrates describes in the *Alcibiades* (127e) when he speaks of the importance of ἑαυτοῦ ἐπιμελεῖσθαι—care for oneself—in philosophy.¹³ And, of course, one finds this point of view developed with great historical sensitivity by Foucault with whom, against expectations, one finds real convergences with Gadamer on this matter.¹⁴ One could develop this notion of the ethical significance of hermeneutics by pursuing these convergences. But, rather than conclude by giving indications of what that might mean, I want to end by raising two concerns, two worries, about this basic claim about the ethical significance of hermeneutics as I have developed it up to this point. Both of these worries, in different ways, point back to Heidegger.

My first worry is that Gadamer's way of unfolding the character of ethical understanding might understate the darker side of the finitude of all understanding. It seems to me that the sense of life as “*diesig*” and as “*immer sich einnebelnd*,” though present in Gadamer, is a bit underplayed. It is present more in terms of a deep sense of the limits of understanding—ethical and otherwise—and of the consequent humility of what one can know. But the sense of the darker risks that the finitude of understanding carries—the sense of the monstrous possibilities we can unleash upon ourselves, others, and the world—is not as forcefully recognized by Gadamer as it is by Heidegger. One sees this in several ways, but it is no more dramatically present than in the different ways in which death presents itself for understanding. For Heidegger, death is an interruption of any understanding, the heart of the enigma that is the movement of life; Gadamer, on the other hand, could comment that “Die Unbegreiflichkeit des Todes ist der höchste Triumph des Lebens.”¹⁵ For Heidegger, death will shadow all understanding, and this shadow harbors possibilities not only of errancy but of the very real undoing of understanding itself. For Gadamer, death folds itself back into life, as the very movement of nature, and so is one more way in which life unfolds itself. This difference

¹³) One finds this notion expressed often, but to refer only to two such references, see the *Apology* (29d), where Socrates complains that most people do not care for the self but for other things, and the *Euthyphro* (2d), where Socrates speaks of the importance of this care for the upbringing of a child. On this point, see also the work of Pierre Hadot.

¹⁴) See, for instance, Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject*, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005).

¹⁵) Gadamer, *GW* 4: 172.

is not a minor matter and opens up upon the question of the tragedy of life, of the way in which ethical beings live not only in the truth, but equally, and without intention, in untruth. In my view, ethical life, ethical understanding needs to be able to account for, and come to terms with, this inherent errancy of life, and on this score, Heidegger does seem to remind us of what might need more emphasis in Gadamer.

The second worry I have about my own remarks points back to Heidegger, the human being who stands as a cautionary tale for this errancy of life. My worry is this: that I might come too close to suggesting that the philosophical life promises a sort of hedge against error, that I am speaking as if the study of hermeneutics held the promise of an ethical life. Well, in some distant sense, I am suggesting that, but only with strong and sharp qualifications. I have been arguing that the goal of understanding that we find at the heart of the hermeneutic project cultivates—or at least should cultivate—something like the soil of the soul, the ground out of which something like an ethical life can grow and flourish. And, as in a garden the soil alone cannot promise that something will grow—too much more, too many other factors play into the whole story of the garden—so too with the soul, this sense of cultivating an ἦθος is only a promise and barely even that. But, as in the garden so too with this ἦθος that one is: without it being cared for, chances are that not much will grow at all no matter how many other factors come into play. Heidegger the man, the singular individual who made some grave mistakes, stands as a dramatic reminder that the real tasks and challenges of ethical life exceed so much of what we are able to know.

The point is this: that in matters of ethical life we cannot accomplish much. In the end, such a life always remains, as Schelling reminds us, a matter of the abyss that is freedom, an abyss that we can neither calculate nor control. No philosophical ethics should ever, in advance, forget this profound limitation upon the possibility of any contribution to the riddles that one confronts as the riddles of ethical life. However, what we can do is recognize that the real goal of our efforts in all understanding is, in the end, nothing abstract, but that if it is to fulfill its aims, it must enact a return to life. This means that, if we are to take my argument to heart, we need to remember that which I believe is at the center of the very idea of hermeneutics, namely, that understanding in its deepest sense serves this ethical aim. It must touch upon that absolute responsibility that I bear; it must contribute to the real shape and character of that idiom that I am. If we are to carry forward the tradition of hermeneutics as Gadamer has unfolded it, then we should be careful not to sever its roots in these aims of ethical life.