This dissertation takes a novel approach to the development and defense of analytic virtue ethics by bringing it into contact with the thought of Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer. A consideration of the ethical implications of their thought helps us answer, I argue, a deep and persistent challenge to the notion that practical knowledge proceeds from virtuous dispositions. According to standard virtue theories, the acquisition of the virtues, the conception of the good life of which they are constitutive, and their practical deliverances all depend upon contingent, historically conditioned, and inescapable frameworks of understanding. This seems to put at risk certain ideals of a philosophical ethics, including the possibility of self-critique, the universal scope and objectivity of our judgments, and realism. Most virtue theories seek to maintain these ideals, at least to some extent; yet, the claim that virtuous practical knowledge depends upon conditioned frameworks seems to many critics hopelessly incompatible with the ideals, committing virtue ethics instead to a form of relativism or elitism.

The hermeneutical account of virtue and practical reasoning that I articulate takes its bearings from the Heideggerian notion of authenticity. This account, I argue, contributes a much-needed response to the aforementioned problem for virtue ethics, while also demonstrating Heidegger’s relevance to ethics, particularly for the analytic tradition in which he has been little considered. After setting out the problem in chapter one, I proceed to elucidate and defend Heidegger’s account of the ontological structure of human life. This account, I argue, entails a conception of the authentic life that parallels and clarifies Aristotelian eudaimonia, and deepens our understanding of virtue ethical notions like practical wisdom and affective responsiveness.

The next few chapters consider the significance of a Gadamerian account of understanding, particularly how elements of our frameworks of understanding can be foregrounded and revised in ways that correct false presuppositions and issue in greater practical wisdom.
Central to the process is a conception of dialogue that implies neither an escape from frameworks altogether nor the perpetuation of false ideologies.

Finally, I develop a theory of virtue that emerges from the foregoing discussion by extending and critically assessing the hermeneutical ethics of Charles Taylor. This theory distinguishes between (in my terms) “transcendental” and “immanent” virtues, a distinction that answers the initial worries by reconciling the thesis about the dependency of practical reason on conditioned frameworks with the philosophical ideals of critique, universality, and realism with respect to practical knowledge.