CAN THERE BE A HEIDEGGERIAN VIRTUOUS AGENT?
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Abstract:
This paper articulates a distinction between the “transcendental” and “immanent” dimensions implicit in virtue ethics, namely the aim to maintain some dimension of objectivity and universality to ethical judgments while recognizing and respecting the inescapability of contingent, historically-conditioned ethical frameworks. Coherently holding these two dimensions together has been a persistent challenge for virtue ethics, and skepticism about its capacity to do so has been the source of powerful critiques from many different angles. I aim to address this challenge by expanding on and critically assessing Charles Taylor’s hermeneutical account of transcendental goods. I argue for a conception of transcendental virtues that follows from a Heideggerian notion of authenticity as a transcendental good structurally parallel to Aristotelian eudaimonia. This conception informs and constrains the kind of practical understanding of the virtues and what they require that obtains at the immanent level of practices and traditions, which I explain with reference to the virtues of courage and temperance.

1. A Challenge to Virtue Ethics

Most kinds of ethical theory that center on virtue are rooted in the notion that practical knowledge – knowledge of what is to be done in the specific circumstance – requires character traits that dispose their possessor to respond in the appropriate ways to certain features of the situation. According to the variations of this kind of account that David Solomon has termed “radical virtue ethics,”¹ the knowledge of what is appropriate cannot be independently specified in a way that wholly abstracts from the special kind of sensitivity to the demands of the situation that the virtues provide. Thus, for instance, if a situation presents the agent with a range of possible actions, each involving a certain degree of threat to something she

¹ David Solomon, “Virtue Ethics: Radical or Routine?” in Intellectual Virtue: Perspectives from Ethics and Epistemology, ed. DePaul and Zagzebski (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 57-80. Solomon distinguishes “radical” virtue ethics from “routine” theories that tend to accept the central aims, categories and methods of modern ethical theory and find a way of fitting the virtues into that system. “Radical” virtue theorists, on the other hand (among whom he names MacIntyre, Anscombe, Geach, and to some extent Hursthouse and Foot) will reject the supposition that the recovery of a broadly classical mode of thinking about ethical life represents simply a modification or improvement of a largely continuous and healthy project of articulating what it means to be moral.
otherwise values – such as her well-being, her good standing in the community, her comfort and satisfaction, the well-being of those she cares about, and so forth – the extent to which she will put these things at risk for the sake of some greater purpose will depend upon how much courage she has to do so. The courageous person will know and be disposed to act in a way that displays an understanding of the relative value of certain goods that should or should not be sacrificed for the sake of other goods. But such an understanding, according to radical virtue theories, cannot be articulated in terms of independent principles such as whether a proposed action will result in an optimal degree of happiness or preference-satisfaction, whether it conforms to a standard of pure rational justification, to divine commands, and so forth. Rather, one has to already be courageous to know what the courageous thing to do is in a particular situation.

How does one acquire such dispositions, according to these accounts? Like any disposition, the disposition of the virtuous agent to exercise sound practical reason will be the result of upbringing and conditioning, modeling one’s behavior on exemplars, the repetition of types of action that one has, for one reason or another, come to regard as generally appropriate, the correction of failures, and so forth. However, if these sorts of experiences are supposed to be the basis of a disposition to judge rightly in matters of practical reasoning, virtue ethics seems to be in a rather precarious position. For it then seems committed to the thesis that the capacity for sound ethical judgment, the right kind of affective attunement to the social environment, and other aspects of what is involved in living well, depends upon, and always proceeds on the basis of, contingent, historically- and socially- conditioned frameworks or horizons.
We shall be using the terms “frameworks” and “horizons” interchangeably to refer to a set of mostly unnoticed and unarticulated (that is, unconceptualized) background understandings by means of which we make sense of our lives. For instance, we all have some background understanding of such social norms as the appropriate distance to stand from someone else in various conversational circumstances. In a crowded room, I understand that standing two feet away from my conversation partner might be appropriate, whereas in a quiet, open space such distance would be uncomfortable. They are “background” in the sense that we do not have to reflect on them, or to ever have reflected on them, to “know” what is appropriate in the circumstances.

I maintain (along with a wide variety of philosophical traditions beyond the ones that we shall directly engage) that the majority of our everyday lives operate on the basis of such shared background understandings of norms, standards, and typical behavior, understandings that are for the most part inherited and inexplicit. The totality of these understandings is what we mean by a “horizon” or “framework.” The claim we raised above – that the virtuous person’s sensitivity to the demands of the situation is more basic than what can be justified on

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2 The term “frameworks” is the term Charles Taylor typically chooses to refer to this phenomenon, while Hans-Georg Gadamer most often speaks of “horizons,” and both of them draw this notion out of Heidegger’s account of “being-in-the-world” as the basis state of human existence. We will discuss all three later in the paper.

3 There is debate over whether all elements of the background understandings are in principle conceptualizable, even among those who agree that it is never the case that the entirety of one’s horizons can ever be conceptualized. Many in the Heideggerian tradition, notably Hubert Dreyfus, deny the first thesis, in contrast to those like John McDowell who affirm it. See the essays in the forthcoming collection, Is the Mental a Myth? ed. J. Schear (Routledge).

4 Most reflection, indeed, is only occasioned by instances in which something is going wrong, such as when we are too close for comfort. Even in those cases, however, we typically adjust our stance unreflectively to bring about a more comfortable relation, rather than consciously reflect on the norms of appropriate conversational distance. Encounters with people from other cultures is often a sure way to bring such social norms to conscious awareness, as the normal, automatic response to awkward situations is often ineffective.
the basis of rules or principles – can be expressed in terms of a key feature of horizons, namely that one can never “escape” or attain a perspective independent of one’s horizons from which one could form practical and evaluative judgments. This is because, as we shall argue a bit further on, they are always already operating to orient us in any kind of enquiry into such questions as what kind of life is worthwhile, what obligations we have toward others and toward the natural world, and so forth. One must already have a basic sense of the answer to these kinds of questions if one is going to be able to conduct any kind of meaningful enquiry into their more refined and justifiable articulations, or to know what would constitute a justification. To say that there is no absolute or universal perspective free of presuppositions, no “view from nowhere” from which one could pass objective and final judgment on practical matters, is to say that we always have to rely to some extent on what kinds of understandings already constitute my horizons.

A challenge to virtue ethics can thus be specified in the following way: Let us suppose that when the virtue ethicist uses terms like “appropriate” and “right” to refer to the deliverances of the virtuous person’s practical knowledge of what is to be done in the circumstance, she is (implicitly, at least) acknowledging a standard by which these terms can be distinguished from, say, (merely) “conventional” or “normal” or, more loquaciously, “what most people would do in these circumstances.” This seems to be a basic desideratum in a justifiable account of how to live, especially since, as history tells us, the majority does not rule. Given

5 We would all agree, for instance, that the fact (if it is a fact) that the majority of Germans in the 1930s and 40s supported Nazi policies, or that the majority of antebellum Southerners supported slavery, does not justify these ideals. Moreover, as Nietzsche and Heidegger among many others have taught us, “majority” or “received” opinion often functions to secure the status quo, obscuring and debilitating our capacity to question and challenge prevailing norms.
the claim about the inescapability of contingent and conditioned horizons, however, it is hard
to see how such a distinction can be sustained. The claim might seem to entail that virtue
ethics is committed to a strong relativism or conventionalism about the deliverances of
practical reason. Alternatively, we might entertain the notion of a kind of provincial elitism
which maintains a commitment to practical truth, but truth of a sort that is available only to
those who are lucky enough to have been brought up well and in the right sorts of communities
or traditions, to have had the right kinds of experiences, and enjoy other such fortunes from
the social lottery.

These worries can motivate the continued adherence to some form of the modern
project that seeks to find a universal and absolute basis for moral judgment independent of the
contingent features of any particular horizon. I maintain that this is untenable, and that in fact
reliance on supposedly universal rules or principles is antithetical to the good life, although we
will not be arguing that here. Those who share my view that the modern project is untenable,
however, might be inclined to reject the centrality of the virtues to an account of how one
should live for different reasons. Whatever else a virtue is, it is a state of character. And
whatever else a state of character is, it is some kind of embodied disposition to think, feel and
act in certain ways in response to the circumstances. Moreover, as we said above, a virtue
(according to most classically-derived accounts) is a disposition to respond rightly, where
rightness is determined in some way with respect to logos, that is, some property or standard
that is not reducible to any particular person or society’s projection. Given this minimal
conception of the virtues, one who is, say, persuaded by some form of existentialist thought
might worry that the notion of a state of character – particularly one which is fixed, reliable,
and oriented toward the *logos*, as the classical conception maintains – conflicts with the demand to in some sense take ownership of one’s life, to radically “choose” oneself. From a more pragmatist perspective, such a conception of the virtues does not take seriously *enough* the historical and contingent character of any understanding of social norms. Either way, it might be thought that the notion of a state of character oriented toward a transcendent *logos* maintains too much of the metaphysical baggage that weighs down other theories of morality.

This latter view bears close associations with Martin Heidegger’s thought, particularly in *Being and Time.*⁶ One of his concerns in that book was to challenge the metaphysical presumptions about human life that he thinks have dominated Western philosophy since Plato, presumptions that not only fail to account for our fundamental mode of being, but function to reify social norms and stultify creative and responsive self-determination. Such metaphysical presuppositions may include something akin to an Aristotelian metaphysical biology, the notion of a fixed social or cosmic hierarchy, or the like, on the basis of which we attempt to determine the human essence or telos. Part of the Heideggerian project might be understood precisely as opposing any such determinations, at least in so far as they lay claim to objectivity with respect to the content of that determination, in favor of a kind of self-ownership or originality often associated (misleadingly, as I will later claim) with his account of authenticity.⁷

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⁷ The attack on the Aristotelian metaphysical picture has come from many other fronts than a Heideggerian one, of course. The age of the mechanization of natural science, the exposure, emerging in the 19th century, of these metaphysical claims as modes of entrenching and reinforcing power structures, and the growth of historical consciousness and cross-cultural awareness have all radically called into question many of the ways Aristotelians might try to justify a conception of what the virtues are and what kinds of attitudes and behavior they enjoin. We can note, for instance, the ways in which the notion of the good life, and the virtues thought to be necessary for it, has taken substantially
There seems, then, to be a significant discrepancy between Heidegger’s thought and virtue ethics. It is hard to see how we can make sense of the notion of a virtue without some kind of determinate content to the understanding of the good life, yet it might be supposed that Heidegger’s anti-metaphysical thrust undermines that possibility. From the perspective of the virtue ethicist, the concern might be that without some sense of reliable and fixed dispositions to think, feel and act well, the notion of the genuinely admirable life can find no articulation in a Heideggerian account. It might be supposed that closest thing we can find to the “virtuous” agent will be inconsistent, too focused on some sort of idiosyncratic self-discovery or self-expression and the like, and thus not worthy of admiration. The virtue ethicist might then think that our only recourse, in the face of the worries about relativism and elitism described above, is to reject the Heideggerian account by continuing to adhere to something like an Aristotelian naturalist metaphysics, or by subsuming the notion of the virtue under one of the more familiar forms of modern moral theory, notwithstanding the kinds of problems that the claim about inescapable horizons raises for such accounts.

In short, then, the challenge to virtue ethics is to somehow hold together what we might call the “transcendental” and “immanent” dimensions of its account of practical knowledge. The thesis that the practical knowledge of the virtuous person is the deliverance of a state of character oriented toward the truth of how to live, what should be done, etc., may differ forms across time and human culture, a fact that both proponents and critics of something resembling an ethics of virtue have pointed out. (See, for instance, Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue [Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984], especially chapters 10-13; Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989]; and Raymond Geuss, Outside Ethics [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005], pp. 78-96.) Such accounts point out how, e.g., the virtues of the Homeric hero differ radically from those of Aristotle’s adult male (Athenian) citizen, both of which are incompatible in many respects with those of the Roman citizen, the medieval Christian, the Enlightenment bourgeois, the Marxist proletariat, the Muslim jihadist, and on and on.
seem irreconcilable with the essentially historically-conditioned, contingent character of one’s horizon of understanding. From the perspective of those who aspire to a universal ethic, virtue ethics cannot avoid either a pernicious relativism or elitism. From the perspective of those who include the thesis of inescapable horizons in a more general critique of Western metaphysics, virtue ethics cannot avoid trading in spurious metaphysical presuppositions about the human telos.

2. The Heideggerian Approach

I maintain that these problems can be overcome by adopting a hermeneutical approach to questions of the good and the virtues, although we can only give the bare indications of such an argument here. The approach we favor takes its bearings from Gadamer’s development of a Heideggerian analysis of the finite temporality of human existence. Roughly, Heidegger argued that human life, and the enquiries into various meanings therein, starts from a position in which we already have an orientation toward the world of significance that affects the way that we approach these questions, echoing what we have already been saying about the radical virtue ethics position. Yet we are always “projecting” on that basis, expressing a provisional interpretation of the meaning and significance of a situation through our attitudes, actions, and judgments. This is to say that “orientation” is not the same as “determination,” indicated by the basic fact that our perspectives on the world are constantly being revised in response to situations and challenges that these prior perspectives, and the projections arising from them, cannot adequately accommodate. Moreover, all projections are themselves finite, always subject to the possibility that they will reveal inadequacies in and a need for revisions to the horizons out of which they are made. As Gadamer describes it, we continually undergo
experiences that draw out elements of our background understanding standing in need of revision, and re-project an interpretation of the meaning and significance of concrete situations on the basis of those modified horizons. This is a circular\(^8\) dialectic that continues throughout our lives, and as such characterizes in a basic way the being of the reflective human life.

The finitude of human existence, as we just indicated, means that there is no absolute or Archimedean starting point when addressing questions of practical significance, no foundation in some secure basis such as utility, rules, or the principles of pure practical rationality from which we can either derive or justify an account of right action in each circumstance. Briefly, the reason this does not entail relativism or elitism with respect to practical rationality is that a fundamental way in which our understanding is shaped is through dialogue with history, culture, tradition, and more immediately, the other persons with whom we share a world.\(^9\) Relativism or elitism would imply a kind of final pronouncement on the veracity of my own (or my culture or tradition’s) perspective with respect to possible interlocutors that might challenge or augment it: if something is already true for me (or for us),

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\(^8\) As Gadamer describes it in *Truth and Method* (initially in terms of textual interpretation), this circle is anything but vicious, since the modification of one’s fore-meanings represents a *productive* expansion of horizons beyond their initial scope, an expansion that results in increased capacity to understand not just the text, but the subject matter about which the text speaks. See *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. J. Weinsheimer and D.G.Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1989), especially 265-277. For this reason, I think Charles Taylor’s term “ratcheting effect” seems to better capture this movement than “circle.” We can think of pushing down on a lever of a ratchet as at the same time raising the bar, and when we raise the lever the bar doesn’t drop along with it, but stays in place, ready for the next push.

\(^9\) The reason Gadamer and Taylor place emphasis on the dialogical character of our understanding and its development has to do with the way in which our horizons or frameworks, and thus our self-understandings, are linguistically constituted (“webs of interlocution” is how Taylor describes them). Language, moreover, as Wittgenstein argued as well as anyone, is essentially social, and can never be reduced to a system of symbols and rules. Thus, these socially- and linguistically-constituted understandings, to be authentic, depend upon continually maintaining oneself in a kind of dialogical relationship that allows practical truth to emerge in terms of a “common language.” See section 7 for more on this idea.
whether we take this to indicate a relative truth or a special, privileged access to the truth, then no dialogue is necessary. The finitude of human existence, coupled with the necessity of self-understanding through dialogue, precludes the legitimacy of such an attitude and demands a recognition of others as potentially challenging or augmenting my (or our) perspectives.\(^\text{10}\)

This is a very rough sketch of a complex and, in the context of this paper, admittedly unexplained and undefended set of claims. However, the sketch serves to indicate the notion of authenticity that will guide the rest of this paper. Authenticity, as we will be using the term, stands for the formal structure of the good life,\(^\text{11}\) and as such is the analogue in Heideggerian terms for Aristotelian eudaimonia: a life lived in a way that respects and fulfills the ontological structure of human life as such. It is formal in the sense that it doesn’t in itself provide any substantive content, but rather represents the kind of comportment that one takes to the substantive content inherent in one’s life as embedded in practices, traditions, relationships and other such modes of one’s frameworks. This stance, in its most general terms, embodies a

\(^{10}\) There is a \textit{kind} of relativism here, to be sure, insofar as practical knowledge is knowledge \textit{relative} to the concrete situation, which is always different. However, this not the vicious kind often presumed, I think, when objections to relativism are raised. Vicious relativism is simply the reciprocal of the problematic notion of absolute, timeless truth, the possibility of which the consciousness of historical effect and human finitude have challenged. Gadamer and Taylor both insist that truth as an aspirational ideal, even one that can only be approached asymptotically, as it were, is indispensable to our lives. Moreover, nothing precludes us from maintaining a firm commitment to what Taylor calls our “best account” as it has been articulated so far, where “best” is a genuinely comparative notion, not a placeholder for something like, “the account we happen to like.”

\(^{11}\) Heidegger never puts it this way, and indeed might be rather uncomfortable with this locution. However, I think that Gadamer and Taylor did Heideggerian hermeneutics a great service by reclaiming ethical language from Heidegger’s rather blithe dismissal of its relevance to his supposedly descriptive project of fundamental ontology, not to mention his cavalier way of sweeping all “ethics” into the pile of ungrounded metaphysical “forgetfulness” of Being. His articulations, for instance, of \textit{das Man} and its modes have, to my mind, a clear normative tone, often manifest just where he claims to be offering an account that is “far removed from any moralizing critique of Dasein” and any “disparaging signification” (\textit{Being and Time}, 211).
recognition of the finite temporality of human life and the way in which we come to an understanding of ourselves as practical agents through dialogue.

The purpose of this paper is not to specify exhaustively what this account of authenticity involves and entails, nor to defend in detail the claim that it helps us overcome the problems raised for virtue ethics above. Rather, we shall respond to the supposition that there is a fundamental incompatibility between a Heideggerian account of authentic human life and a theory of practical normativity centered in the virtues. Articulating an account of a Heideggerian virtuous agent provides a novel and fruitful way of reconciling the dimensions of transcendence and immanence inherent in a virtue theory of ethics, one that maintains a certain dimension of objectivity and realism about the good life without requiring either the attainment of a universal or objective perspective, or the reliance on a spurious and potentially elitist metaphysic.

3. Taylor’s Hermeneutics of the Good

Our way of framing this sort of account and defense of the relation between the virtues and authenticity will involve an extension of some lines of thought put forward by Charles Taylor. Taylor’s account of practical reasoning is hermeneutical in the sense that, first, he thinks we must begin not from some abstracted ideal of rationality or empirically verifiable conception of human nature, but from the way we actually, in this particular historical context, engage in ethical deliberation. Our understandings of self, society, and the human good, he maintains, are intertwined with each other, socially- and historically-constituted, and always operative regardless of our avowed theoretical positions. Such positions include the ones
maintained by those whom he whimsically calls the “boosters” and the “knockers” of modernity, viz., those who maintain the modern ideal of a prejudice- and value-free perspective, and those who think we can and should reject the centrality of peculiarly modern ideals such as freedom, dignity, and self-determination, happiness, and the affirmation of ordinary life.

His approach is thus to consider what kinds of judgments we in our present historical situation tend to make about human life and action (including judgments that are often in conflict with each other), and inquire as to the ideals, conceptions and commitments that underlie these judgments. These in turn presuppose certain kinds of ontological pictures of the self, the world and the relation between the two which may or may not confirm the ideals, etc., and the judgments based on them. Moreover, all of these dimensions of our situated practical lives emerge from and evolve within historical movements, the investigation into which may likewise reveal dimensions and possible conflicts within our judgments and ideals that otherwise remain hidden. In almost all cases, such investigations reveal the need to clarify, refine, and revise our presuppositions about who we are and what kinds of lives are worthwhile. This process is what he terms “articulation,” and not only is the lack of articulation a great source of the apathy and discord in our modern world, no way through these problems is possible without the kind of hermeneutical dialogue with the modern heritage that he attempts to jointly explain, defend and practice.

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Taylor maintains that for us contemporary citizens of a modern Western culture, the fact of the matter is that we hold to some form of the peculiarly modern ideals in such a way that they constitute inescapable elements of our conception of the meaningful, and by extension, the ethical life. That is, we cannot conceive of a practically relevant mode of ethical thought that does not take these ideals as constituents of what he calls “strong evaluation” – evaluation in terms of what is incommensurably higher than other conceptions of the good, which is itself a core constituent of Aristotelian thought.

However, the development of these ideals, or as he calls them, “hypergoods,” also fed the growth toward what he considers, in agreement with many critics of modernity (including those propounding a radical virtue ethics), distortive and often pernicious meta-construals of human agency and practical reasoning. Chief among these are the priority of disengaged rationality, the punctual view of the self, and atomism, which lead to the modern emphasis on proceduralism and/or instrumentalism that underlie the dominant Kantian-derived and consequentialist normative theories, respectively. In all-too-brief terms, disengaged rationality is the ideal of a rationality abstracted from substantive commitments, including views about what is a worthwhile human life, what kinds of goods and goals are intrinsically and incommensurably higher than others, and the like. The punctual view of the self is “the self is defined in abstraction from any constitutive concerns and hence from any identity…[whose] only constitutive property is self-awareness.”¹³ This generates a view of rationality as instrumental to achieving the purposes that I happen to have (even if those purposes can be reduced to ones that all humans happen to have). Finally, atomism is the conception of the self.

¹³ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 49.
as inherently independent of any ties to community, a world of concern, historical connections, and special relationships. These all, of course, interrelate, and they often conflict depending on how one elaborates on and prioritizes each of these elements (as the debates between debates between Kantians and consequentialists illustrate). His task has been to show that an articulation of the modern ideals and the way they function in moral discourse reveals, among other things, their presumptive status as hypergoods, a status that conflicts with the meta-construals of human agency insofar as these construals deny the centrality of hypergoods to practical reasoning.

That we cannot escape according a central place to hypergoods in practical reasoning is an example of what he calls a transcendental argument, one that identifies certain modes of human life and self-conceptions as inescapable for us. In other words, if the articulation of the way we in fact engage practically in the world discloses such inescapable features, this must then figure back into more substantive accounts of ourselves as moral agents as well as into particular judgments and decisions.

I would maintain, and I think Taylor does as well, that Heidegger’s account of finite temporality describes just such inescapable or “transcendental” features. Thus, if we define authenticity as a way of life that respects and fulfills our being, conceived in these terms, authenticity has the status of a “transcendental good.” A transcendental good would be

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14 The following account relies heavily on Taylor’s piece, “The Validity of Transcendental Arguments,” in Philosophical Arguments (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 20-33. The term transcendental could also be rendered as ontological if we seek to adhere more closely to Heideggerian terminology. I have opted for transcendental in order to adhere to Taylor’s terminology, as well as to avoid having to explain what Heidegger means by ontological in relation to the way this term is often applied in contemporary analytic metaphysics.
distinguished from what we shall call an “immanent good,” namely, a good that is internal to particular historical and contingent practices and traditions. Immanent goods, as we are defining them, refer to what we shall call “optional” modes of life. We call them “optional” not because their value, the hypothetical truth of their commitments, and so on are merely relative to preference and opinion, but because one can opt out of any of them without necessarily doing violence to oneself as a human being at a fundamental level. Those that are inescapable are not optional in this way: the represent some common feature or features of human life shared by everyone regardless of where we find ourselves relative to the optional modes.

One important point to be made here before returning to the question of the virtues is that the inescapable features and their transcendent goods cannot by themselves provide a sufficient or even intelligible grasp of how to live (pace certain modern proceduralist moral and political theories); they need to be concretized, given form and substance at the local level of the various optional modes of life, for their full meaning to be manifest. This is due to a feature of human life that Taylor, Heidegger, Gadamer, and radical virtue ethicists agree is itself

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15 Heidegger describes the phenomenon of angst as an experience that discloses both the fundamental tenuousness of particular, substantive commitments (i.e., their status as “optional” in the sense we are employing), as well as certain transcendent features of human life. In this case, human life is disclosed as transcendentally “being-toward-death,” a dimension of finitude.

16 The distinction between “optional” and “inescapable,” and thus between “transcendental” and “immanent,” doesn’t map onto the distinction between “necessary” and “contingent” in the way that, say, Kant would likely want them to, were he to employ such categories. This is revealed by Taylor’s recent work on secularism, in which he describes how an understanding of the cosmos was, for premodern societies, inseparable from an understanding of forces, influences, and intelligences distinct from the world of the mundane. It is a hallmark of the “Secular Age” that such presuppositions are no longer necessary for us in the way they were for our ancestors, if Taylor’s account is correct. Thus what can intelligibly be considered an “optional” mode of life for us – one that recognizes such forces, etc. – would have been inescapable in a different age. If there are inescapable presuppositions of the stronger sort that Kant envisioned – ones applicable to any rational being whatsoever – the category of the inescapable as I envision it will be broader that that.
inescapable: normative enquiry begins and ends with, and can never by fully disengaged from, human life as it is actually lived.

Having laid out some of the terms we will be drawing from Taylor, we can now ask what this means for an ethics of virtue in the context of our problematic. One way of approaching this question is by asking why Taylor himself (to say nothing of Heidegger and Gadamer\textsuperscript{17}) seems largely uninterested or reluctant to ascribe a central place to the language of the virtues in his discussions. Indeed, when he directly addresses virtue ethics as a rival to proceduralism, consequentialism, and other forms of modern moral theory, most notably in an essay engaging MacIntyre’s After Virtue, he declares that he prefers to speak of an ethic “whose most basic concept is the good” rather than an ethic of virtue, though he thinks that this essentially “amounts to the same distinction.”\textsuperscript{18} Making “the place of the good” rather than the place of the virtues the central issue in confronting these theories promises, he seems to suggest, a more fruitful engagement with modern moral thought and the kinds of ideals that drive it, the kind that forges a path between the boosters and knockers. He does not directly explain the

\textsuperscript{17} I was once given an anecdote in which the person relating the story had asked Gadamer directly (during a question/answer session following a talk of his) whether there are “hermeneutical virtues.” Gadamer responded, rather vehemently, that his was not any kind of a virtue account. It is not unreasonable to suppose that Gadamer associated the notion of a “virtue account” most strongly with a kind of ultra-conservative neo-Aristotelianism advocated by a coterie of German philosophers in the mid- to late-20\textsuperscript{th} century (clear representatives of the “knockers” of modernity that Taylor refers to), rather than those who have been at the forefront of the virtue ethics revival in late 20\textsuperscript{th} century analytic philosophy, with whom he likely, with the exception of Alasdair MacIntyre, had little familiarity. In a review of After Virtue (“Ethos und Ethik (MacIntyre u. a.),” in Gesammelte Werke 3: 350-374 [Tübingen: Mohr, 1987]), Gadamer expresses a generally positive reception of MacIntyre’s argument, his reservations mainly pertaining to the extent to which MacIntyre seems to rely on an Aristotelian metaphysic in his account of the virtues. It is doubtful, however, that MacIntyre’s argument would, from Gadamer’s own perspective, account for such a strongly negative response to the query about an association between hermeneutics and virtue ethics. Perhaps the following suggestions about Taylor’s reluctance to invoke the language of the virtues might explain this reaction by Gadamer as well.

reasons for this preference or why he might think it holds such a promise, but we shall explore two related possibilities.

The first has to do with the problem of inarticulacy mentioned earlier. While he would agree that the language of the virtues is one of those aspects of our moral discourse we cannot do without, or at least not without debilitating reduction and misrepresentation,¹⁹ that language only has its place within a broader substantive account of practical reason, one whose most basic concept is the good life. Unless we make the good itself the basic concept of an account of practical reasoning, notions like the virtues too easily end up being hijacked by proceduralism.²⁰ This is manifested when the virtues are described ultimately in terms of what he calls “preserving qualities”²¹ – qualities that have the effect of reliably ensuring that the independently-defined moral or rational procedures are followed. According to this conception, the virtues are not necessary for these procedures to either be defined or followed; rather, they facilitate their enactment. Accordingly, whatever we countenance as a “higher” or “more worthwhile” form of life (a life constituted by virtue) is so only derivatively from some more basic notion of the external end to which that form of life is to serve.

What these accounts fail to appreciate, as I understand Taylor to be arguing, is the way in which their articulations of the procedures necessary for sound moral judgment, by reference to which the conception of a “higher” or “virtuous” form of life is to be derived, already, and surreptitiously, presuppose a notion of what a higher form of life must be. That is,

¹⁹ Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self, 55.
²⁰ This would be an example of what Solomon calls “routine” virtue ethics. See note 1 above.
²¹ Charles Taylor, “Justice After Virtue,” 24. I am slightly modifying his notion of preserving qualities to fit the contours of the present discussion by removing the language of the good conceived in substantive terms, but I do not suspect he would object to my application of this term.
they presume a notion of the good life (a life exercising free rational agency, a life of happiness, a healthy family or community life, etc.), and try to whittle out of it some independent conception of the end that such a life pursues. This end is then supposed to enable us to identify and justify that which it presumed in the first place – the kind of life needed to reliably achieve that end. Put differently, they presume to define the higher form of life in terms of a de facto end neutral with respect to the good, such as the exercise of rational agency or an empirically discernable end that we all happen to share, while having surreptitiously singled out that end as the realization or display of what they already presume to be a higher form of life or hypergood.

We can briefly clarify this argument by examining the disputes among those who locate the end differently. Person A might claim that the virtues are those traits that enable the exercise and promotion of autonomous, rational agency, in which alone the dignity of humanity consists; B might argue that all humans in fact pursue happiness or the satisfaction of their preferences, and the virtues are those qualities that enable them to promote the optimal realization of these states of affair through their actions; while C might maintain that as natural creatures we are given to care for and sustain those with whom we have special ties, such as family and community, and the virtues are those qualities by which we do so most reliably and effectively. In each case, the ends propounded by each will often conflict with the others. A, B, and C might try to establish their claim against the others by appealing to some de facto, universal feature of human life, such as our rationality, our pursuit of happiness or our immersion in families and communities. But who would deny that either of them is wrong, strictly speaking? Of course we are creatures with the capacity to reason about what to do,
who think that happiness is desirable (ceteris paribus, at least), and recognize the importance of family and community. The question, then, becomes one of ranking and ordering these goods, determining which take precedence over the others in cases of conflict. This is where, Taylor argues, no amount of appeal to de facto ends or features of human life can suffice. Here we must instead appeal to some notion of hypergoods, some conception of a form of life that is incommensurably higher that the others such as to enable us to judge that, say, happiness attained by violating cannons of rationality, or the sacrificing of one’s family’s well-being for the sake of the anonymous public would be a mistake. Once we embark in these directions, however, we are appealing to what we already take to be higher forms of life, not simply ends in themselves.

Accordingly, we might express Taylor’s favoring of an ethic whose most basic concept is the good over one whose most basic concept is the virtues in the following way. The notion of “the good” (or “the good life”), if it is to serve as a basic concept, must be a strongly evaulative notion. That is, it cannot be subsumed under a non-evaluative concept such as the conditions of rational agency or the de facto ends of human life, due to the fact that any legitimate place these latter concepts have depends upon their relation to a more basic conception of the good life. The notion of the virtues, on the other hand, does not enjoy such a status. Even if one were to offer an account of the virtues as constitutive of the good life (as many if not most radical virtue ethicists do), this does not preclude offering an account of the virtues as instrumental to proceduralist ends. Since the concept of the good life necessarily runs afoul of proceduralist articulations, while the concept of the virtues does not, the problem of inarticulacy as such – which we characterized above as having its roots in the presumption of a
proceduralist meta-ethic – seems best resolved by taking the concept of the good, rather than that of the virtues, as basic.

A second possible reason for Taylor’s avoidance of virtue-centered ethical language relates more directly to the distinction between immanent and transcendental goods that we set out earlier, and accordingly brings us back to the notion of authenticity as a transcendental good. Transcendental goods, we recall, pertain to inescapable features of human life as such, while immanent goods are internal to particular contingent and optional modes of human life, such as practices and traditions. The thought possibly motivating Taylor’s preference (as well as the reluctance of Heidegger and Gadamer to invoke the language of the virtues) might be that the language of the virtues depends upon, or at least is only at its most coherent and meaningful within, the context of established practices and traditions internal to which is a determinate conception of the good.22 We can add to that the worry that such a conception of the good and its attendant virtues, taken by itself, tends to neglect the finite projective dimension of authenticity, or in other words, the fact that any conception of human nature and the human good is necessarily indeterminate and incomplete. Our understandings of ourselves and of the good, according to a hermeneutical account, is always interpretive, requiring the application of any previous understanding to the exigencies of the concrete situation, which then modifies the original understanding as we indicated before. Thus, there is no “final

22 There would also likely be a suspicion about the various forms of naturalism that many virtue theorists invoke in articulating an account of the virtues, especially as a way of overcoming the problems we raised in section 1, but which often rest on metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions worrisome to a Heideggerian. Distinguishing these forms and addressing the question of their possibilities and limits within the overall hermeneutical framework we are espousing would be necessary in a more complete discussion of this topic, but it would be far too complex and tangential to the scope of the present treatment. I discuss the question of naturalism at length in chapter 3 of my dissertation.
interpretation,” and so no solidified conception of the good of the kind needed to provide a robust account of the virtues. This is a transcendental condition, and one that, it might be thought, too easily gives way to reification and dogmatization of some particular, contingent conception of the good when the language of the virtues is centrally invoked. So to maintain the interpretive openness required both for self-critique and for authenticity, it is better to focus our discourse on a notion of the good, whose interpretive character can be manifest and sustained. Or so it may be supposed.

4. Why We Still Need the Virtues

To be clear, the foregoing was merely a speculative explanation for a curious divergence between Taylor and those radical virtue theorists with whom he otherwise holds much in common, not an argument Taylor ever makes. Assuming its plausibility, however, our response will consist of two parts. The first part will be to argue that, while it is true that any account of the virtues depends on a corresponding substantive conception of the good, any conception and articulation of the good, at both the immanent and transcendental level, requires us to attend equiprimordially to our notions of a virtuous life. Second, using the virtues of courage and temperance as examples, we shall show that it is possible to discourse about virtues corresponding to the transcendental good of authenticity, and that this can and must dialectically inform and constrain articulations of the virtues at the immanent level of particular practices and traditions. This will serve to exhibit the possibility of critique and revision of one’s horizons that is neither viciously circular nor based on the presumption of an absolute, disengaged standpoint.
The first response appeals to Taylor’s own argument that we explicated a moment ago: moral theories that seek to define a higher form of life in reference to a de facto universal end or standard of rationality surreptitiously rely on a notion of what a higher form of life must be. If this is the case, then articulation about the conception of the hypergood(s) that implicitly motivate these accounts would have to be an articulation about the form of life that they surreptitiously espouse as higher. Moreover, if we are to adequately articulate what we implicitly recognize as a higher form of life, then we are appealing to something in the family of character traits, habits, dispositions, ways of thinking, typical affective responses, and other such features of a life that, by definition, have the character of established patterns of behavior: we must appeal to a conception of the virtues, in other words.

To put it differently, suppose that we, like Taylor, seek to articulate and refine what we in our modern society implicitly recognize as hypergoods that trump other ends, particularly in a context in which the notion of hypergoods is somewhat anathema. These (typically unacknowledged, ex hypothesi) background understandings of hypergoods manifest themselves not so much in terms of an espousal of a good but in our attitude toward certain kinds of patterns of behavior, such as respect for persons regardless of contingent characteristics, a certain degree of self-ownership and the capacity to sometimes go against the norm, the refusal to attempt to impose one’s will and viewpoint upon others, and so forth.23 Our implicit acknowledgment of “hyper-virtues” (if we may coin a term) points to both the inescapable presence of hypergoods in our practical reasoning as well as the substantial form of the hypergoods themselves. Therefore, a hermeneutical ethic of the sort to which Taylor

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23 We should add that it is not particular instances of these behaviors that we admire so much as lives that embody them, which is why it is not a stretch to speak of these things as modern virtues.
aspires – one whose starting point is always the received understandings of what it means to live well, however confused they may be, and whose aim is an increased articulation, refinement, and justification of these understandings – must appeal at a fundamental level to the conceptions of the forms of life that we acknowledge as having a superior value in themselves (rather than as preserving qualities). Omitting or deemphasizing the language of the virtues would thus debilitate the project of hermeneutical articulation as Taylor himself conceives it.

The second challenge supposed that the language of the virtues relies on a determinate conception of the good of the sort that would conflict with the transcendental notion of authenticity, a notion that contains within itself a fundamental open-endedness with respect to any concretization of the conception of the good. We claimed that we can, on the contrary, articulate virtues associated with authenticity, and that this articulation can and must dialectically inform and constrain the articulation of immanent virtues. We shall exhibit this with respect to two classical virtues, courage and temperance.

5. Transcendental Courage

Courage is often cited as a virtue closely connected with Heidegger’s analysis, if only implicitly; and it is given different emphases depending on how we articulate the closely related notion of resoluteness in the face of human finitude, a condition of authenticity. On the one hand, it takes courage to resist the social pressures and temptations to deny the limits and tenuousness of any particular conception of the good, and indeed any particular conception of
the immanent virtues. *Das Man*,\(^{24}\) as Heidegger reminds us, perceives finitude as a threat, and responds by trying to “flee” from or suppress this fact. The basic idea, as I read Heidegger, is that our identities inescapably bear a strong relation to the various traditions and practices of which we are a part, whether by upbringing or by choice. The extent to which the constituent beliefs, norms, and ideals are secure is the extent to which our own identities as individuals are secure. Correspondingly, threats to these features of the social milieu are threats to our own identities. Just as the soldier on the battlefield would be naturally inclined to preserve his or her own security, we are existentially inclined to preserve our identity as we have been given to understand it, and this often takes the form of tendencies to reify and dogmatize social solidarities. However, just as the soldier is called to subsume and even sacrifice his or her individual security in service to a commitment to a greater good, so we are often enjoined by our commitment to authenticity to potentially challenge or reject the established beliefs, norms, and ideals. Accordingly, the courage of the soldier has its existential analogue in the courage of the person who aspires to authenticity.

On the other hand, the finite temporality that constitutes our being – the being that the authentic (i.e., *eudaimon*) person strives to respect and fulfill – demands resoluteness not just in the face of pressures to adhere to established norms, standards and beliefs, but pressures toward the opposite extreme of associating authenticity with the disavowal of anything based in authority, tradition, or convention. The hermeneutical account recognizes that we as practical agents are always already shaped by such factors, and thus that we have to maintain

\(^{24}\) Roughly, “*das Man*” indicates the social milieu, which can range as broadly as something like “Western culture” or as parochially as “the academic community,” or even, I would argue, something like “those engaged in the philosophical profession.”
ourselves within a dialogical relationship with what Heidegger calls the “heritage” and Gadamer calls the “tradition” if we hope to achieve authentic clarity on our practical understandings.

Aristotelian courage, as we know, is the mean between cowardice and something like rashness, the inability or unwillingness to respect and value what is worth preserving in the face of a temptation arising from overzealousness. Similarly, the illegitimate conflation of authority with tyranny, prejudice with thoughtlessness, and tradition with dogmatism underlies a hubristic urge to overemphasize the capacity for and coherence of original self-creation, determination through universal rational principles, or naturalistic reduction, all of which are supposed to replace the authority of what has been handed down to us. Again, courage can manifest itself as resolute steadfastness that does not easily succumb to the threat to the potential validity of received understandings posed by the seductiveness of the (supposedly) novel or original.

How to hold these two possibilities of authentic courage together and find the virtuous mean is a challenge not unlike finding the mean between cowardice and rashness for the soldier on the battlefield. One of the sources of both kinds of challenge is the fact that no rational procedure can determine the answer independent of the concrete situation. This should be obvious in the case of battlefield courage, but with respect to horizons within which we engage practically in the world, it can be a little more unsettling. However, this very unsettlement often reveals the distortions and obfuscations that infect our understandings,

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25 Gadamer refers to “the Classical” (in the sense of “the classics of philosophy,” not just the subject of expertise in a Classics department) as an example of that which has this kind of value in a tradition: “[The classical] does not refer to a quality that we ascribe to particular historical phenomena but to a notable mode of being historical: the historical process of preservation [Bewahrung] that, through constantly proving itself [Bewährung], allows something true [ein Wahres] to come into being” (Truth and Method 287). Classics of philosophy, say, are so by virtue of the fact that they continually speak in new and interesting ways to different generations, and thus are worthy of continued engagement.
distortions such as those that lead us into those temptations courage is needed to overcome.

By articulating the transcendental dimension of courage in terms of finite temporality, then, our capacity for authentic practical knowledge in concrete life can be raised to a higher level.

6. Transcendental Temperance

As an example of this, consider the virtue of temperance. It might seem to be the one virtue in the classical set that is most at home within localized frameworks, since the activities most often associated with this virtue, paradigmatically sex and eating, have been especially integral to the social norms that define and distinguish cultures and religions. Indeed, it is hard to think of any subject matter that is more ubiquitous throughout human history in terms of its central normative significance to the practical self-conceptions of cultures and religions, and yet so particularized in terms of the actual norms and practices that exemplify temperance in any given social framework.

Yet, there are reasons to think that temperance as a virtue need not remain the sort of topic that can only be the subject of dialogue at the level of cultures, traditions, practices, families, and other local, particularized and “optional” forms of life with their immanent goods. Indeed the fact that temperance has such near-universal importance at this level suggests that caring about these activities in a way that acknowledges significance beyond personal choice is itself integral to a transcendental articulation of human life and its virtues.

To sketch such an articulation, we would first call attention to the way in which a Heideggerian view of the self and its relation to the world, what he calls “being-in-the-world,” contrasts with a subjectivistic conception of practical agency, the sort grounded in the meta-
construals of disengaged rationality, the punctual view of the self, and atomism that we referenced above. Accordingly, we can describe how certain kinds of sexual and gastronomic attitudes and activities, particularly those that either instrumentalize or aestheticize this domain, fail to respect the non-instrumental and non-aesthetic significance of this dimension of our own lives as well as the beings impacted through these practices. The Heideggerian conception of the person (the kind that authenticity respects and fulfills) is not simply an isolated locus of needs, desires, and evaluative projections the satisfaction of which determines, de facto or de jure, our actions. By the same token, the entities that constitute my world are not “there” in such a way as to be put at the service of this satisfaction: “standing reserve” [Bestand] as Heidegger puts it at one place.26 Rather, Heidegger argues that we are “embodied” begins in a primordial sense. This means that the conceptual abstraction of, on the one hand, the “self” and its concerns, and on the other the “world” (including the physical body with its needs, appetites, etc., as well as the “raw material” of its valuation and interest), is derivative of a more basic bodily comportment toward entities within-the-world (including one’s own body itself), a comportment that is itself expressive of a kind of stand that one takes on their significance. To put it differently, human life, by virtue of its embodiment, always operates with an implicit understanding of the significance of the body and the entities within its world that precedes and can never be fully circumscribed under the kinds of conceptual abstractions involved in notions like the subject/object and fact/value dichotomies, notions presumed by instrumentalist and aestheticizing approaches toward bodily activities such as sex and eating. It is not that there is no sense to these notions; rather, the problem comes when

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we take these abstractions as basic modes of being, and thus as justification for, say, considering the significance of the body, other people, or the natural world merely in terms of their relation to my own subjective desires and interests. Rather, our basic mode of being, according to the Heideggerian, fundamentally (that is, ontologically) involves care for our own (embodied) being, concern for the entities within-the-world, and solicitude toward the other persons (Daseins) with whom our own identity is intertwined.  

To be authentic – to care authentically – thus requires at a minimum that our attitudes and activities with respect to bodily functions like sex and eating be oriented toward a respect and disclosure of the fact that my own self and the being of those with whom I engage in sexual activity, on which I depend for sustenance, and the world as a whole have significance that is non-instrumental and not of my own projecting, an orientation that places demands on these activities themselves. This is, however, simply another way of describing the formal conditions of what virtue ethics calls temperance: an orientation toward bodily activities articulates what we mean (or should mean) by a character trait, and the notion of an authentic orientation restates what we might otherwise call the possession of the character traits constitutive of a life of eudaimonia. Moreover, since we have been describing a kind of orientation that pertains to the fundamental structure of human life rather than some

27 In the “Letter on Humanism,” Heidegger describes this care as, authentically, of a character that is disclosive: it seeks to “let beings: be” rather than “lets beings: be valid,” which is to say it refuses to see our capacities for self-projection simply in the service of appetite-satisfaction, nor does it see the entities within-the-world this way. See Martin Heidegger, “Letter on Humanism,” in Basic Writings, ed. David Farrell Krell (San Francisco: Harper, 1993).

28 In this respect there is a suggestion of the Kantian notion of respecting persons as ends-in-themselves, and certainly something like this would follow from the concept of solicitude as I explain in chapter 3 of my dissertation. However, to be the object of this kind of non-instrumental respect, in our account, does not depend on the capacity for rational self-determination or other features of Dasein, but rather on the rejection of an essential distinction between the world as “raw materials” and the rationality that sets purposes and uses that material for their achievement.
particularized concretization of it, this is an articulation of temperance as a transcendental virtue.

One example of authentic temperance that we can briefly discuss at the level of a transcendental conception of the virtues involves eating, and particularly the way in which the dominant modes of food production and consumption in the West (and increasingly elsewhere) utterly fail to express an authentic orientation toward the beings within the world of my concern. It has been well-documented, and recently popularized through a series of widely-read books,29 that the modern agriculture industry has wreaked tremendous violence – literally as well as figuratively – on the sources of our food for thoroughly instrumental reasons aimed at satisfying consumer demand for food that is as cheap and plentiful as possible and that maximizes the return to the corporate producers. The genetic modification of crops and animals, the use or at least overuse of hormones, antibiotics, pesticides and fertilizers, the maltreatment of workers, the abuse of animals, the environmental degradation and numerous other atrocities strike most of us (or would if we knew the full extent of them) as vile and abhorrent. According to the immanent commitments and conceptions of many if not most local traditions, this would be unacceptable in itself. But what I am concerned to point out here is the way that a transcendental conception of temperance speaks not only against these practices but embodies a call to authentic care on the part of the individual which would in most cases preclude the support of such practices as far as possible. For when we recognize the driving mechanisms behind such practices – a demand to cheaply and conveniently satisfy

superficial gastronomic desires at whatever cost – we see that they not only embody a perspective on animals, plants, workers and the environment which reduces their being to that of an instrument for our purposes, but also an inauthentic perspective of ourselves as eaters. The activity of food consumption loses its significance as integrated into a broader system of relationships to the modes of production, the environment, and other people whose well being is at stake, and becomes entirely oriented around punctual desires and aesthetic interests. Or, if the activity does ostensibly maintain this broader significance, it can only do so through the maintenance of ignorance about what transpires beyond the supermarket or restaurant. Therefore, the ideal of living in such a way that our activities with respect to eating embody authentic care – that is, display temperance – seems to demand that we take a stand against such practices.

Although much more would need to be said to elaborate and defend this claim, my aim, to repeat, has been to indicate how the virtues can and should be a central focus of discussion within the frame of an authenticity-based ethical hermeneutics, one that recognizes transcendental goods. As we emphasized above, however, an articulation of transcendental virtues is not complete without application within the framework of particular contexts. Thus, the ideal of authentic care with respect to eating would have to be concretized within particular contexts that may call for a different kind of local temperance than others. In some contexts, temperance may involve the eschewing of meat or animal products altogether. 30 On the other

30 Matthew Halteman, for instance, has argued that the eschatological hope in the “Peaceable Kingdom” – the fulfillment of salvation in which there is no more death – inherent in most forms of Christian belief calls the Christian to a mode of life that anticipates this hope by refusing to engage in practices (like eating meat) that inherently involve killing. See his Living Toward the Peaceable Kingdom:
hand, certain local cultures and ways of life may be inextricably bound up with the raising
and/or consumption of meat, in which case the practice of temperance may not involve
shunning it but caring that its production and consumption is carried out in a humane,
sustainable, and edifying way, a way that is not merely in service to the kinds of instrumental
and aesthetic purposes that easily follow from inauthentic presumptions about the relation
between the self and the world.

7. Transcendence, Immanence, and the Fusion of Horizons

How, then, should we characterize the relationship between what we have been calling
“transcendental” and “immanent” virtues? Space does not permit us any adequate level of
precision here, but since the focus of this paper is a defense of the compatibility of virtue ethics
with a Heideggerian notion of authenticity, we can make some indicative remarks that draw
upon the conditions of hermeneutical understanding defended by those such as Heidegger,
Gadamer, and Taylor. As the examples we have given suggest, this relationship is not one of
derivation, as if the account of the transcendental virtues entails certain concrete practices.31

Rather, to re-engage some themes from earlier in the paper, hermeneutical
interpretation, or what Taylor calls articulation, begins when some feature of our everyday

Compassionate Eating as Care of Creation (Washington, DC: Humane Society of the United States
Animals and Religion, 2008).

31 In this respect, it is closer to the relationship between Kantian or neo-Kantian regulative principles,
notably the Categorical Imperative among others, which do not generate maxims but constrain what of
the maxims inherent in our historically-conditioned understanding can claim rational justification.
However, unlike these kinds of theory, the hermeneutical approach does not limit the transcendental
horizon to some circumscribed dimension of human life such as the conditions of practical rationality or
Habermasian non-coercive discourse, much less one that professes neutrality with respect to the good.
Partly for this reason, neither is the transcendental horizon a universal horizon in the sense that it can
be fully and demonstrably articulated such that it can provide an apodictic standard that applies in some
determinate way to all contingent circumstances. See fn. 16 above.
engaged practice and its constitutive background understandings becomes disrupted, drawing out for scrutiny some particular element of this background. This may include presumptive beliefs, affective responses, social norms, our relationship to the natural world or technology, and so forth. As these, and the deeper construals of human life and agency on which they depend, are foregrounded, discourse attains a greater level of transcendence and no longer remains bound to the substantive presumptions with which it began. At the same time, the clarity and articulation about the virtues achieved at the transcendental level must remain dialogically engaged with the substantive commitments at the immanent level for it to have the effect of transforming our horizons.

The ideal is that this hermeneutical process will issue in what Gadamer calls the “fusion of horizons.” This notion refers to a kind of harmonious accord between one’s horizons and those of the historical, cultural, and social world with which we are confronted, or as Gadamer sometimes puts it, the working out of a “common language.”

Gadamer argues that working out a fusion of horizons is the way we humans, in fact, come to an understanding of ourselves and the world, and so recognizing this as a transcendental dimension of human life is a condition of authentic practical understanding. As a transcendental dimension, it implies certain transcendental virtues, among which I can simply list a few such as open-mindedness, respect for alterity, and what we might roughly put as a willingness to approach dialogue in “good faith.”

These transcendental virtues required for the kind of dialogical fusion of horizons that characterizes authentic practical knowledge, along with Gadamer’s continued instance that in

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the attaining of such a “communion” [Gemeinsame] we never “remain what we were,” 33 indicate how a hermeneutical account of virtue precludes the kind of parochialism that was worrisomely thought to follow from the thesis that practical understanding always depends upon contingent historical horizons. Indeed, I would add, only by way of a concluding suggestion, that those theories that maintain the possibility or actuality of some universal moral perspective or apodictic final judgment are much more at risk of falling into parochialism than a radical virtue theory conceived along hermeneutical lines, a conception that this paper has tried to spell out.