1997

Three essays in conversational ethics

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The University of Montana

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Three Essays in Conversational Ethics

by

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B.A. Washington University in St. Louis, 1994

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Montana

1997

Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date
"Merleau-Ponty's Dissolution of the 'Problem of the Other': A New Vision for Ethics":
Traditional accounts of the mind have been biased toward the interiority of the mind. This has led to an account of subjectivity that creates "the problem of other minds." As a consequence, descriptions of moral communities have always had the anxiety of that problem hanging in the background. Merleau-Ponty offers an account of perceptual consciousness that avoids the problems that follow from the model of the interiorized subject. In turn, an account of the moral community must be given that does not have the anxiety of 'the problem of the other' hanging in the background.

"Wittgenstein's Two Senses of 'Understanding'":
Wittgenstein contends in the *Philosophical Investigations* there are two senses of 'understanding': paraphrastic and intransitive understanding. The second, intransitive understanding, serves a special purpose in our lives—it pulls us out of our habitual and prejudicial ways of speaking and being. The only problem is that it creates new habits and prejudices, because we are tempted to think of our new ways of speaking as more accurate or better than the previous ones. Attempts to create a style of speaking that avoids this pitfall have not worked out (e.g., Heidegger), which leads us to a suspicion that style alone does not resist literalization. New styles of speaking must be coupled with a state of character that steels us to resist the temptations to make divinities of our ways of speaking.

"Plato's *Meno* and a Problem for Moral Education":
The *Meno* provides a model for moral education, but there are gaps in it. That is, the dialogue maps a progression a successful student makes, but being in one state is not a sufficient condition for the progression to the next state. A student must come to see the goods internal to a life of excellence instead of pursuing excellence for the sake of external goods, and this transformation cannot be brought about by anyone but the student herself. The transformation comes out of nowhere—it cannot be conditioned. As a consequence, the most convenient manner of describing this change of character is as a question of grace. In turn, I contend the dialogue's conclusion is a gesture toward this problem.
Preface

These three essays are essays in ethics. All of them start off with relatively complex technical and epistemological issues, but ultimately boil down to a basic question: what sort of contributions do we want to make to our moral and philosophical communities? In this reduction of technical and epistemological questions to ethical questions, I am hoping to draw attention to a simple idea. Namely, at the foundations of our systematics, we have certain powerful and compelling experiences that inform our intuitions of how the systematics should work. We catch glimpses of what we would like our lives to be, what we would like our institutions to be. They are landmarks by which we orient ourselves both as philosophers and as human beings. We judge our lives and others’ by these standards. What I see in common with these standards is the fact that we in our visions of the good life prefer spontaneity and dialogue to coercion and soliloquy. We see how we best get along with others, how our relationships are most fulfilling, how we resist the cultural homogeneity that seems to envelop and entrap even our best attempts to be genuine.

"Merleau-Ponty and the Dissolution of 'the Problem of the Other': a New Vision for Ethics" takes a similar tack by the fact in it I contend our ethics is colored by how we view...
otherness. When otherness must be constructed, our ethics are stiff. That is, we can describe how to act morally, but we cannot describe how we get along. Moreover, when otherness as other is unavailable—as Sartre would contend—our relations are fundamentally conflictual. However, if we construe otherness as something discovered in the world with us, we find an agreement between ourselves and others which must be prior to our social-contractual agreements. We can see how our moral intuitions are informed by how we fall into spontaneous rapport with others.

I try in “Wittgenstein’s Two Senses of ‘Understanding’” to describe the problems facing us when we reflect upon our moments of spontaneity—how when we privilege the habit of particularly moving or compelling moments, we fall back into formulaic interactions with each other all over again. It is not that I am lamenting the fact that we seem not to be able to find a descriptive strategy that always avoids becoming entrapping. However, I am looking into how we would have to live in order to avoid being captured by certain pictures of language, mind, or even the good life.

“Plato’s Meno and a Problem for Moral Education” is an essay on the chasm between the necessary conditions for successful moral education and the sufficient conditions. What Plato shows in the Meno is how, even though the value of pursuing inquiry in a friendly and conversational manner seems self-evident, people still miss it. They simply do not
see it. When we try to convince someone to take up a new manner or framework for investigations, we can show that person the new framework, compare it to the old framework, even train that person to make use of the framework. But we can never instill an appreciation for the framework itself in a person. Students must come to that appreciation by themselves. What a student must do is acknowledge her ignorance in a matter when shown she cannot provide an adequate account. Moreover, she must be willing to pursue the truth in the matter. But students fail to do even this. They are often unwilling to own up to the fact they do not know, and when they do acknowledge their ignorance, they are complacent with that ignorance. They, even though they see they do not know, feel no desire to come to know. However, when students make this transformation, from the teacher’s perspective, it comes *ex nihilo*. That is, it seems that there is no sufficient condition for the transformation—it simply happens.

As a consequence, all of these essays involve a vision of a community that encourages its members to question its conventions and find new ways of speaking, yet also remains true to its project of bettering and educating its members. Even though real changes in character cannot be conditioned sufficiently, that community provides the necessary space for that transformation to take place. Much of what is actually said in these essays about such a community, however, is
vague, but intentionally so. Once such an account begins to be explicit, it takes the form of a methodology or a set of rules, and once this happens, the account becomes subject to its own criticisms—namely, that it, too, is a dogma. What I am trying to do with my account, then, is avoid the nostalgia of identifying with big and captivating ideas like Reason, Philosophy, Being, Truth, and the like, because such accounts begin to ring hollow once they get under way. What I can say at most is that the education and betterment these communities provide us is not only a healthy suspicion of such nostalgias, but a willingness to make do with them until we begin to bump our heads against their limits. What we do once we are at these limits is begin making forays into the unknown instead of mapping its borders.
# Table of Contents

1. Merleau-Ponty and the Dissolution of 'the Problem of the Other': A New Vision for Ethics.............2

   A. A short history of 'the problem of the other'........3
      1) Descartes problematizes the other...............4
      2) Kant's ingenious argument........................5
      3) Husserl and the argument by analogy.................7
      4) Sartre and concrete relations with others.........11

   B. Merleau-Ponty's dissolution of the problem........18
      1) Merleau-Ponty breaks with the traditional model..18
      2) Dissolving 'the problem of the other'..............25
      3) 'Flesh' and the handshake..........................30

   C. Conversational ethics..................................37
      1) Imperativity, interrogativity, and reciprocity...39
      2) Overrunning the other...............................47
      3) Antipodosis........................................50

2. Wittgenstein's Two Senses of 'Understanding'...........55

   I. Meaning, use, and being able to go on..............56

   II. The two senses of 'understanding'....................59
      1) Paraphrastic understanding..........................60
      2) Intransitive understanding...........................63

   III. How intransitivity becomes a problem...............74

   IV. What is to be done?.................................80

3. Plato's Meno and a Problem for Moral Education.........89

   I..........................................................90
   II..........................................................97
   III.......................................................101
   IV..........................................................103
   V..........................................................107

Bibliography...............................................114
Three essays in
Conversational Ethics
Merleau-Ponty’s Dissolution of ‘the Problem of the Other’:

a New Vision for Ethics.
The 'problem of the other' boils down to a simple question: do we consider ethics to be an individual private exercise or do we consider it to be a conversational public exercise? That is, when philosophers describe their relations with others, they reveal how they see the ethical community around them. They reveal how they relate to that community and its members. They reveal in what style they wish to enter into that community. In this paper, I will consider a few moments in the history of modern philosophy's engagement with 'the problem of the other' in order to show that philosophers have been biased toward considering ethics more in terms of soliloquy than dialogue. In his *Phenomenology of Perception* and *The Visible and the Invisible*, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, although he has difficulty overcoming the traditional model of the interiorized and private subject because he must engage it, offers a vision of ethics as conversation. This model demands to be developed, expanded, and tested. In turn, I provide a further model (antipodosis) for conversation wherein I try to articulate how by giving primacy to intersubjectivity, we can develop a new vision of ethics.

A. A short history of 'the problem of the other'

'The problem of the other' has been one of the more laughable topics of philosophical discussion. Most would
agree that when the conversation gets to the point where it is necessary to prove that others exist, the participants should smile politely to each other and instead of constructing an adequate proof, set to retracing their steps to see where they went so awry. This, unfortunately, has not always been the case.

1) Descartes problematizes the other.

Descartes sets the stage for the problem of the other specifically by the fact that he insists we know things (e.g. his famous piece of melting wax\(^1\)) not by way of the senses but by way of the understanding alone. He maintains this because he demands that we be skeptical of the res extensa in the world (things available to perception), because they are constantly in flux. If these were the only things we could know, knowledge would be impossible. That is, if the only ways we can know wax as wax were by way of merely perceptual recognition, we could never be certain about what sorts of perceptual criteria we should use--because all of wax's qualities can change with a mere strike of a match. But on the other hand, when he “distinguishes the real wax from its superficial appearances, ... and considers it naked, it is certain.”\(^2\)

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\(^2\) Ibid., p. 90.
Descartes similarly problematizes knowledge of others by making the relation with an other a four-part relation: (i) myself as res cogitans, (ii) my body as res extensa, (iii) the other's body as res extensa, and (iv) the other as res cogitans. I am always quite sure of myself as res cogitans, but progressively less sure of the other things in the relation. This situation is the genesis of the 'problem of the other':

So I may chance look out a window and notice some men passing in the street, at the sight of whom I do not fail to say I see men, just as I say I see wax; and nevertheless what do I see from this window except hats and cloaks which might cover ghosts or automata which move only by springs? But I judge that they are men, solely by the faculty of judgment which resides in my mind, that which I believed I saw with my eyes.3

What is important here is the fact that he must judge that these walking, talking, smiling, sniffling, and farting entitites outside his window are people - that he must weigh out the evidence, reflect on it, and offer a judgment. This situation, especially in light of Descartes' methodological solipsism later in the Meditations, can only be mediated by the one entity outside ourselves that we cannot doubt--namely, God. Since Descartes assures us that God exists and would not deceive us, we can confidently judge the other to exist.

2) Kant's ingenious argument

3 Ibid., p. 89, emphais mine.
The venerable Kant also treats the 'problem of the other' as a problem of judgment, but does not rely on God's omniscience/omnipotence/infinite benificence to ground this judgment. Instead, Kant contends we can be sure of the other's existence by the use of our own faculties of pure reason which take the form of what we shall call the argument by analogy.

Kant, as Descartes had before him, considered the relation with the other to be four-part; (i) myself as subject, (ii) myself as object, (iii) the other as object and (iv) the other as subject. From this division, Kant's argument proceeds as such:

P1: We must assign to objects, necessarily and a priori, all the properties that constitute the conditions under which alone we can think them (i.e., objects must be subject to the categories for them to be available to a subject).

P2: We cannot have any representation whatsoever of a thinking being, through any outer experience, but only through self consciousness (i.e., subjects are never subject to the categories--and so never available to other subjects).

C1: Objects of this kind (thinking things) are, therefore, nothing more than the transference of this consciousness of mine to other things, which in this way alone can be represented as thinking beings.4

Kant contends that the way thinking beings can meet the

conditions of P2 for us is that we have to recognize the possibility of an existent exhibiting the properties applicable to its subject—which depends entirely on a transcendental employment of the understanding. And so as it would stand, for me to recognize an other as other would require me to lend her my subjectivity in my own reflection upon my relation with her. I could only hope that she would do the same for me—else it would end up rather degrading, because if she did not reflectively lend me her subjectivity, I would be no more than a talking turnip to her. Certainly not an ideal conversational situation. Moreover, this "reflective transference of consciousness" is still a mystery—what exactly happens when we represent others as thinking beings instead of merely as automata? How, more clearly, do we decide to go from seeing the other as object to seeing the other as subject, and can we honestly say that this representation of the other is any more than a construct that I have produced all by myself?

3) Husserl and the argument by analogy

Edmund Husserl engages this question in its hardest form in the fifth meditation of his *Cartesian Meditations*. By way of his second *epoche* (the transecendental reduction), Husserl had restricted the transcendental ego "to the stream of its

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pure conscious processes and the unities constituted by their actualities and potentialities. And indeed it is obvious that such unities are inseparable from the ego and therefore belong to its concreteness itself.⁶ Other egos, then, for me are "merely synthetic unities of possible verification in me," and consequently do not even count as others. In effect, Kant's argument by analogy has led us to a solipsism, because the other can only be for me as a representation created by my own self-reflection. Husserl thinks that he can not only salvage the other as other (as if others were really in peril of being sucked back into his head when he stopped reflecting on himself apprehending them as other) but also can salvage the argument by analogy which had made the whole situation problematic to begin with.

Husserl's second epoché is intended to be a device by which our own particular 'ownness' in an intersubjective field can be investigated. What seems to be the case at first is that if everything is reduced to 'ownness', then the very possibility of describing otherness is precluded. Husserl believes it is possible to get around this difficulty by pointing to what he calls "the noematic-ontic mode of givenness of the other."⁷ He takes this givenness to be the "transcendental clue" to unravel the mess methodological solipsism got him into by the fact that it is

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⁶ Ibid., p. 89.  
⁷ Ibid., p. 90.
not that we find the other belonging to us, as something other constituted out of ownness, but rather as an otherness experienced as "thereness for me" in "empathy." It is from this lone clue that Husserl's phenomenological sleuth is to construct a "transcendental theory of experiencing something other."9

What the second epoché reveals as the stratum of experience uniquely my own is my body. It alone is "the only object 'in' which I 'rule and govern' immediately," and only within it I can bring to light myself as "animate organism (Leib)." Other bodies (Körper)--be they the books in a library, the football in a major bowl game, or even the bodies of other people--do not exhibit this unique belongingness to me. No matter how hard I try, they do not do my bidding instantaneously. They require some manipulation. But there is something special and uncanny about the bodies of the third kind--the bodies of other people. In our particular/peculiar ways of perceiving others' bodies, there is something extra given in their appresentation (our representation of a body wherein we not only are aware of the side we can see but also of what we cannot see)--namely, the fact that they too are Leib but in a way that the personal side of that animateness is unavailable. The other is animate in that we can engage in

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8 Ibid., p. 92.
9 Ibid., p. 94.
10 Ibid., p. 114.
all kinds of "harmonious behavior" that manifests itself as a concordance of expressions, gestures, and postures such that we can share some realm of each others' lives. The other's body is "livingly present" to me.\textsuperscript{11}

It is in this "community of monads" that "an intentional communion with something else [can] exist,"\textsuperscript{12} by way of our taking up specifically with the animate body made available to us by our commonalities. The last part of the analogy is merely that we recognize that as part of our bodily existence in relation to other bodies, our bodies will always be "Here," and other bodies will always be "There."

Consequently, in appresentation of the other, because animate-ness is reciprocally available, the other "must be appresented as an ego now coexisting in the mode there, 'such as I should be if I were there.'"\textsuperscript{13} I look at the other, then, as if I were standing inside her body—as an analogue to my own particular ownness.

But it seems that Husserl's dressing up of the argument by analogy does not get around the problem. He still keeps the situation a four-term relation in that there is: (i) my ego as animate body, (ii) my body as objectively present body, (iii) the other's body as objectively present body, and (iv) the other's ego as animate body. Because the analogy is the replacement of (iv) with (i) in the form of "over there",

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., p. 112.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., p. 129.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., p. 119.
Husserl has not made it clear how this argument by analogy avoids the paradox (if not outright absurdity) of describing otherness with ownness.

But these technical matters are not terribly pressing, because what Husserl has set up is a bafflingly rigorous description of how we appresent others to ourselves that, even if it did work (which is dubious), no one would take the time to actually deduce otherness for others with any regularity, because it would be a terrible hassle. In other words, Husserl has given a description of how the other is available to me, but it seems that it requires such a level of precision and attention, I would run out of mental energy deducing otherness from just taking a walk on a busy street. Who would take the time to perform these elaborate mental-gymnastics every time she bumps into someone?¹⁴

4) Sartre and concrete relations with others

Sartre is the most vocal of the phenomenologists who object to the unwieldiness of Husserl’s laborious process of

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¹⁴ In fact, this procedure begs the question: how do we know when we’ve got our deductions right? How can we even go about learning or testing the accuracy of this procedure without others already being present to us? Husserl had contended that ego and alter-ego are “always and necessarily given in an original ‘pairing’,” but is this all that needs to be said? (Cartesian Meditations,112) Why, then must there be an argument? The very fact that Husserl does use the argument by analogy is indicative of how his methodological solipsism catches him in another loop—that it chips off what it must use as a toe-hold to climb out of the ego—well it has dug with the second epoche.
bringing others to 'noematic-ontic givenness.' He contends that Husserl's approach burdens consciousness with problems of evidence and knowledge which deprive it of the essential spontaneity that is revealed in investigations of intentionality. Sartre wants to change the topics of inquiry from epistemological issues to ontological issues because he recognizes that:

if the other is accessible to us only by means of the knowledge we have of him, and if this knowledge is only conjectural, then the existence of the other is only conjectural.... If the body is a real object really acting on thinking substance, the other becomes a pure representation, whose esse is a simple percipi.15

When the connections I establish with others are construed to be connections of knowledge, I can never escape solipsism, because I can never prove or verify that my consciousness (as a transcendental and constituting ego) can, in its very being, be affected by any thing beyond the mundane (bodily) existence of others.16

Sartre's turn to ontology in Being and Nothingness takes the form of describing how we experience a change in the landscape of our world when another person appears. This phenomenon certainly demonstrates that the other's presence as an objectively present body (and consequently as a conjectural entity) is not all that is really happening--that is, "it is infinitely more probable that the passerby whom I

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16 Ibid., p. 318.
see is a man and not a perfected robot." I recognize that the other (as other) is not simply another part of a world I constitute for myself—rather, she is another locus or center around which the world can be organized (and is organized). But the most profound aspect of recognizing the other as a presence in person is in the moment, upon the other's appearance, of "being-seen-by-other".

The world is polarized with the other's appearance. Everything still exists for me, but seems fixed in a flight from me to another locus (the other), and when I recognize I occupy a position in that same world (with my body), I recognize that I too am in a flight to the other as a permanent possibility. I feel that the other can always be looking at me.

The obvious question here is how does it happen? Certainly Sartre has shown that we are affected by others as more than their mere presence as objects, but we philosophers want to know how it happens. Sartre avoids the 'external' or 'cognitive' relations between ourselves and others by claiming that the relation is "internal." He makes this evident with his description of how we react to the modification of the world (and our being) when the other comes on the scene—we feel shame, embarrassment, anger,

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17 Ibid., p. 340.
18 Ibid., p. 345.
19 Ibid., p. 345.
20 Ibid., p. 221.
pride, etc. In any one of these situations, the effect of my world's (and my) rearrangement is that I consider myself as an object for the other while the other is present to me as a subject. The other binds me to the 'facticity' of my past and my situation such that "I am my ego for the other in the midst of a world that flows toward the other." Sartre captures this feeling of being in the other's gaze (the feeling that my being is transformed in the presence of the other) in his famous description of the eavesdropper being caught peeking though a keyhole:

[As I am looking through the keyhole], this situation reflects to me at once both my facticity and my freedom... I cannot truly define myself as being in a situation; first because I am not a positional consciousness of myself; second because I am my own nothingness... I escape provisional definitions of myself by means of all my transcendence.

I am engaged in the activity of looking. I am not reflecting upon myself as something that knows (or is to be known), rather I am the landmark by which the world makes sense and the spectacle behind the door is disclosed. I exist as myself for my pre-reflective consciousness.

But all of a sudden I hear footsteps in the hall. Someone is looking at me! What does this mean? It means that I am suddenly affected in my being and essential modifications appear in my structure - modifications which I can apprehend and fix conceptually by means of the reflective cogito.

What makes the relation between others concrete (and i

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21 Ibid., p. 380.
22 Ibid., p. 348.
23 Ibid., p. 349.
nternal), then, is not the fact that I see others by way of looking at myself, but that I see myself when somebody else sees me. It is with the presence of others that we suddenly have our attention reflected directly upon ourselves.

But the other can be under my gaze too. I can return the gaze and transform the other into an in-itself, strip her of transcendence, fix her in a situation, spatialize and temporalize her. Because of the nature of Sartre's description of the 'internal relation', the other and I maintain a mutual denial and nihilation, our relation is fundamentally conflictual. We find ourselves in a duel of gazes.

The implications here are profound. Once we come to some connection with the other (by way of language, facial expression, dismissive gesture, whatever), we learn what the other thinks of us, and "this is the thing which will be able to at once fascinate us and fill us with horror."\(^{24}\) We find ourselves offered up to the other's judgment, and in that act of judgment we come to a determination of how we see ourselves and in turn, act. Whether or not we agree with the other's judgment, the way we will carry on will be informed by the judgment. We confront a world organized by the other, and we find that we are no longer masters of our own situation—\textit{the other determines how we use our own freedom.} As a consequence, we have two choices. We can be:

\(^{24}\) \textit{Ibid.}, p. 355.
a), the masochist, who causes herself to be fascinated by herself as an object determined (in its facticity) by the other, a being who condemns herself to trying to annihilate her own subjectivity by causing it to be assimilated by the other.²⁵

or b), the sadist, who looks at the other's look and attempts, on the ground of her own freedom, to confront the other's freedom, who turns the gaze back on the other such that the other cannot touch her.²⁶

Because the other's presence reveals the being which I am unable to either control or appropriate (since it is the other's judgment), it is necessary for me to choose how I am to respond, because I must respond. "From the moment I exist I establish a factual limit to the other's freedom, I am this limit, and each of my projects outline this limit around the other," and vice versa.²⁷ Consequently, "respect for the other's freedom is an empty word," because in either choice (a) or (b), the other is a means to my end of becoming the self that I wish to be.²⁸ In the case of (a), the masochist, the other serves merely as someone who can choose my projects for me and as the person in whom I can (for a while) situate my responsibilities. In the case of (b), the sadist, the other serves me as a possession whose freedom I determine. Sartre points out that these two tactics are ultimately self-defeating in that the masochist can never erase her freedom by giving herself over to the other, and the sadist can never possess the other as other, because once the other becomes a

²⁵ Ibid., p. 493.
²⁶ Ibid., p. 494.
²⁷ Ibid., p. 530.
²⁸ Ibid., p. 531.
possession, she ceases to be an other. So with each failure of one tactic, I am motivated to adopt the other one. Consequently, my relations with others individually may be dialectical (as a struggle over mastership and bondage), but my relations with others in general are circular.\textsuperscript{29}

Klaus Hartmann notes that “for Sartre, negation and negatedness, answering to subject and object, constitute a contradictory opposition.”\textsuperscript{30} As a consequence, recognizing myself in the other (e.g., in the argument by analogy) requires a contradiction—that the subject be available to itself as an object, or that in the object a subject has access to itself qua subject. It is in this strict bipolarity that Hartmann situates the antagonism between individual subjects which makes it impossible to have access to the other as a subjectivity or even to recognize oneself in the other.\textsuperscript{31} As a result, Sartre’s description of concrete relations with others leaves us locked up inside ourselves in a struggle of gazes with every other person we encounter. Moreover, since the original relationship with the other (in general) is that of internal negation (situating an object within a field of reference), it seems that Sartre would contend that we could be certain of others in general, but we have no way of being certain of individual others—we do not

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., p. 474.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 116.
know anything about particular others as others. Consequently, even our most intimate relations with others manifest the subject’s antagonism for the object—“even the beloved is a look.”

B. Merleau – Ponty’s dissolution of the problem

Accounts of otherness as a problem stem from modern philosophy’s retreat to the internality of the subject—a retreat to the certainty available in statements about one’s own mind. The only problem is that once we have retreated to certainty, we are reluctant to accept anything else except things mediated by the certain. The result is that things, others, and even ourselves become representations for us. They become things we must construct. What philosophy becomes, then, is a very intricate talking to oneself. Others, even in the most intense and honest joint inquiry, love affair, or conversation, become either conjectural ‘that’s-what-I-would-say-were-I-over-there’ entities or entities who must be subjugated by my use of language.

1) Breaking with the traditional model

Descartes’ model for philosophy demands that the philosopher proceed directly from the mind’s interiority to the exteriority of the world. Merleau-Ponty believed it was

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32 Sartre, op. cit., p. 484.
necessary to reformulate the arguments and problems
promulgated by such methodologies. In a note written a year
before his death, he outlines his revisions:

Replace the notions of concept, idea, representation
with the notions of dimensions, articulation, level,
hinges, pivots, configuration — The point of departure
= the critique of the usual conception of the thing and
its properties → critique of the logical notion of the
subject, and of logical inference ....^n^3

With this new theoretical impetus, Merleau-Ponty hoped to
develop a descriptive strategy that gives primacy neither to
the internality of consciousness nor rests on a distinction
between subject and object. In fact, he hoped to articulate
an ontology that elaborated notions that would dissolve the
traditional tensions between subjects and objects, subjects
and subjects, humankind and humans. The traditional
accounts make such notions their bread and butter, and in
turn, all suffer from the same problems— the problem of the
external world, the problem of the other, the problem of
individual consciousnesses. Phenomenology, especially with
Husserl and Sartre, was an acceleration of these attitudes to
the point where they were actually starting points for
systematics (as Sartre had used the tension between subjects
as the point of departure for his description of concrete
relations with others). Ethics, in turn, suffered from
distinct inadequacies, because its injunctions (when taken to

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^n^3  Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, ed.
Claude Lefort, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern
be in accord with and influenced by epistemology) were tantamount to treating others as conjectural entities. Descartes had insisted we not allow our wills to extend beyond our understanding.\(^3\)\(^4\) Kant's internalized subject's criterion for proper action is that the action is out of good will, but he admits that because the subject is interiorized, we cannot even see good will.\(^3\)\(^5\) As a result, we are unable to get to the other about whom and for whom we are trying to describe ethical behaviour.

Merleau-Ponty had a very different vision of how things hang together, and he saw much of his picture nascent in Husserl's description of intentionality.\(^3\)\(^6\) Husserl had contended that the ego does not merely think; it thinks about something. Consciousness is not simply consciousness; it is consciousness of something. Here, consciousness constitutes a meaningful world for itself through a series of continuous and commensurate judgments, definitions, attitudes, and activities. Husserl (and Merleau-Ponty) referred to this contiguousness of intention as intentionality of act. For Merleau-Ponty, however, what is missing in this description is a deeper intentionality—an intentionality of lived bodily existence "where the world is not merely a blank slate

\(^{34}\) Descartes, op. cit., pp. 114-6.
awaiting bestowal of significance, but already has a distinctive physiognomy." He referred to deeper level of intentionality and significance as operative intentionality.

Merleau-Ponty contends in The Phenomenology of Perception that only by way of this broadened notion of intentionality we can understand "the natural and antepredicative unity of the world and of our life, being apparent in our desires, our evaluations, and in the landscape we see, more clearly than in objective knowledge, and in furnishing the text which our knowledge tries to translate into a precise language." When operative intentionality is ignored, the world only reveals itself through a history to be reflected upon or essences to be analyzed. Here, in the historical-analytical reflection, our primary encounter with the world of things (in operative intentionality) is withheld in favor of breaking up perception into qualities and sensations. We depart from our pre-reflective origins. Here, we are tempted to think of ourselves as subjects or transcendental unities of apperception and the like. As a consequence, others become problems for us because we cannot adequately represent them as concatenations of sensations. But Merleau-Ponty is not leveling a philippic against analytic reflection;

38 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. xviii.
rationality, subjectivity and objectivity are not problems for him. Rather, he is reminding philosophers of their pre-reflective origins, and by this reminder, he hopes to suggest a new account of being-in-the-world; “true philosophy consists in re-learning to look at the world.”

Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* is an attempt to call attention to our existence as incarnate subjects inhering in the world, and the crucial term for this inherence is the body. Merleau-Ponty introduces us to a subjectless subject—a subject which cannot pull itself out of the world to contemplate itself or the world in isolated reflection. When we look closely at objects, we find they exist only in contextual lived realities. These contexts are not constituted by autonomous intellectual reflections and judgments, but by motor responses, practical spaces and body dynamics. “The synthesis of the object is effected through the synthesis of one’s own body, it is the reply or correlative to it.” By conceiving of my body itself as a mobile object, I am able to interpret perceptual appearances and construct them as they are (e.g., the apperception of all six sides of a cube is given not because I have Euclidean intuitions of space, but because I do things with cubes—I roll dice, pack boxes, play 3-D Tetris). Consequently, neither my body nor the world my body lives in can be

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comprehended in isolation. Neither term is reducible to the other.

As a result, personal existence is fraught with ambiguity, uncertainty, and obscurity. Pre-reflective existence (that of the 'customary body' or the 'habitual body') opens onto a realm of existence that is not exhaustible by reflection, because it is rooted within a motor-physiognomy that can never be wholly disclosed. My body's familiarity with the world goes all the way down—I can never exfoliate my latent, tacit, bodily knowledge fully. Even our most mundane and simple practices resist being disclosed in their entirety; we have to live them, be trained to act within them (e.g., the act of kicking a soccer ball becomes more and more difficult to describe—and the description becomes less and less clear—as we try to articulate the multiplicity of movements necessary for the execution of an adequate kick, but yet we still know how to give soccer balls good kicks without having to rely on such runaway analysis).

Because we reside in bodies, we cannot completely clarify our positions; we eventually have to rely on the intuitive, practical, public self-evidence of the limits of our accounts. But what we take to be self-evident in these accounts is inconstant. It is only made constant by a certain training or acclimation to specific situations. Merleau-Ponty gives an example of how we gear ourselves into
different lighting situations:

Electric lighting, which appears yellow immediately upon leaving the daylight, soon ceases to have any definite color for us, and, if some remnant of daylight finds its way into the room it is this 'objectively neutral' light which seems to have a blue tint to it.... The level is laid down [for a particular situation], and with it all the color values dependent on it, as soon as we begin to live in the prevailing atmosphere and re-allot to objects the colors of this spectrum in accordance with the requirements of this basic convention.42

Bodily intentionality reveals how we gear ourselves into situations, perceive and react to concatenations of objects—we are invariably open-ended. Instead of positing a single space as the necessary condition for objects in general (as Kant does with the transcendental deduction of the categories), Merleau-Ponty draws our attention to the lived and practical spatiality which is inseverable from our experience of qualities as particular modes of being-in-the-world. As Monika Langer notes, "the sensible beckons to the incarnate subject and the latter responds by shaping existence accordingly."43

As a consequence of the ambiguity and opaqueness of pre-reflective existence, the very attempt to establish a realm of pure thought, pure reason, or pure subjectivity as an indubitable ground for all knowledge seems backwards (if not outright impossible). Such attempts to establish the absolute interiority of the subject seem to be in defiance of

42 Ibid., p. 311.
the fact that all 'inner' states, reflective moments, and subjective judgments are always and everywhere based in, derived from, and reducible to pre-reflective 'outer' states. That is, for reflection to even be possible, we must first exist as beings-in-the-world; we must be something to be reflected. As a consequence, we do not reduce existence to thoughts about existence (judgments, thetic moments, etc.); instead, thought is re-integrated with our total project of being-in-the-world.

2) Dissolving 'the problem of the other'

In the chapter 'Other People and the Human World' of The Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty considers "how I experience my own cultural world, my own civilization, that is, how other subjectivities make their appearance in experience." He notes that the traditional reply has been that "I interpret their behaviour by analogy with my own," but I run into a serious problem - "how can the word 'I' be put into the plural, how can a genearal idea of I be formed, how can I know there are other I's?" He puts his finger on the paradox of consciousness seen from the outside:

If subjectivity is reduced to mind--or constituting

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44 Monika Langer puts it best when she says that the theoretical disposition to demand the interiority of the subject "is not only an untenable position but also a dishonest one, insofar as it always already surreptitiously presupposes that which it attempts to deny." (p.99)

45 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 348.
If one consciousness posits other consciousnesses, it has rendered them dependent by making their esse their percpipi. Moreover, (and Sartre sees this too) the subject cannot even constitute another as subject because it would be a contradiction for the subject to make itself an object for itself (that is, the logical notion of the subject is that it can never be an object). Consequently, self-perception cannot be the starting point for an account of other minds. (Here is where Sartre stumbles, because he contends that we know of the other because of an internal relation we establish with ourselves when the other comes on the scene—that is, we know the other's awareness of us because we come to reflect upon ourselves.) So, "insofar as I constitute the world, I cannot conceive another consciousness."  

Merleau-Ponty's break with the traditional conception of consciousness offers a way out. Because the problem of other minds had been generated by the model of the internal, occult, and mysterious mind, the problem could never come to a solution. But Merleau-Ponty's account of consciousness is not as a constituting consciousness, but rather:

as perceptual consciousness, as the subject of a pattern of behaviour, as being-in-the-world or existence, for only thus can another appear at the top of his phenomenal body, and be endowed with a sort of 'locality'. Under these conditions the antinomies of objective thought vanish. I discover vision, not as a

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46 Langer, op. cit., p.98.
47 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 350.
‘thinking about seeing’, to use Descartes’ expression, but as a gaze at grips with a visible world, and that is why there can be another’s gaze; that expressive instrument called a face can carry an existence, as my own existence is carried by my body, that knowledge-acquiring apparatus.48

As a result of this turn, we do not see intentions as mental entities independent of mechanistic bodies (as ghosts in machines). Rather, bodily intentionality resides in our body’s activities, it “speaks to” other phenomenal bodies and is comprehended by them prior to any reflection on either side. There is actually no need for an analogy here.

Significance for me is in fact intersubjective significance. The other appears at the other end of interaction “as the completion of the system.”49 That is, there is a mutual presence of incarnate subjects which precedes any reflection, alienation, or negation. The system the other completes takes the form of a cultural practice—a system of communication where “as the parts of my body together comprise a system, so my body and the other person’s are one whole, two sides of one and the same phenomenon.”50 As we appropriate certain cultural objects and use them as others do (that is, as we learn and master more and more expressive mediums—from painting to skating, from writing love letters to waving hello), we project ourselves into an environment of interaction and communication.

Merleau-Ponty suggests that there is one particular

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48 Ibid., p. 351, emphasis mine.
49 Ibid., p. 352.
50 Ibid., p. 354.
cultural object that plays a crucial role in the perception of the other: language. In dialogue, the other and I not only share a common ground, but we create that common ground together. "My thoughts and his are interwoven into a single fabric.... Here we have a dual being, where the other is for me no longer a mere bit of behaviour in my transcendental field, nor I in his; we are collaborators for each other in commensurable reciprocity."\(^{51}\) As Merleau-Ponty had pointed out earlier, the linguistic gesture delineates its own meaning. Words and speech are not codes for thought. "Why should thought seek to duplicate itself or clothe itself in a succession of utterances, if the latter do not carry and contain within themselves their own meaning?"\(^{52}\) That is, speech possesses a power and significance of its own—thought and expression are simultaneously constituted. Meaning is not indexical, then, it must be diacritical. When I am in dialogue with an other, we are not engaged in an exchange of mental images mediated by a code of sounds and gestures; instead, we are thinking out loud together. When I am faced with an angry or threatening gesture, I do not need to reflect upon my compendium of past experiences with anger to situate the angry gesture as meaning the person is angry. I do not see the anger or threatening attitude as a mental or psychic fact behind the phenomenal gesture. \textit{The angry}

\(^{51}\) Ibid., p. 354.  
\(^{52}\) Ibid., p. 182.
gesture does not make me think of anger, it is anger itself.\textsuperscript{53} Consequently, cultural objects—the institution of language most notably, but also music, painting, and bodily postures—allow others to be perspicuous for me (and me for others). But this perspicuity is not of the kind where I can see into the other’s head and see her anger. On the contrary, because Merleau-Ponty had insisted that language consists of use value instead of signification, it does not matter how we represent the other for ourselves, but how we respond to her being angry. “Each [gesture] by itself has no signifying power that one can isolate, and yet, when they are joined together in speech or, as it is called, the verbal chain, they all make unquestionable sense.”\textsuperscript{54} We inhabit linguistic spheres where words are gestures with lived value, where they fit together with a naturalness that cannot be captured except by those gestures in those orders. (Merleau-Ponty notes that the novelist, artist, and musician assemble gestures in a similar manner—the novelist’s task is to depict inter-human events that resonate with living meanings.)\textsuperscript{55}

Sartre’s description of dialogue, on the other hand, amounts to it being a continuation of conflict and reversal

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid., p. 184.
\textsuperscript{55} Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Phenomenology of Perception, p. 151.
of alienation by other means. Speaking for Sartre is another form of seduction of the other. Merleau-Ponty, however, contends that learning to speak is not simply the mastering of a new intellectual faculty, but the acquisition of a new and powerful capacity to live with others not as the center of the world, but as a de-centered self— one that is in a situation where "we encroach upon one another inasmuch as we belong to the same cultural world, and above all to the same language, and my acts of expression and the other's derive from the same institution." In speech, we graft onto one another such that mutual recognition need not be given because intersubjectivity enjoys a primacy that it would make no sense to even question.

3) 'Flesh' and the handshake

In The Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty makes it clear that it is impossible to do justice to the phenomenon of otherness from within an ontology of transcendentalism, subjectivism, or dialecticalism. We can never describe otherness with ownness. However, he later realized that his own account of otherness in The Phenomenology of Perception suffered from a very serious problem: his notion of the body leaves it entirely unclear

56 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, p. 372-4
how the perceiver is simultaneously part of the perceived world and sufficiently apart from it for a dialogue between them to arise. The body in The Phenomenology of Perception was to be an incarnation of habitual pre-reflectivity. It functioned (as it did for Sartre as the pre-reflective cogito) as the pole of the touchable— that to be perceived and reflected upon. Consciousness, on the other hand, functions as the reflective pole, the side that gives voice to the 'world of silence' that pre-reflective bodily existence provides for it. But, in The Visible and the Invisible, Merleau-Ponty reconsiders the coherence of the very notion of a pre-reflective cogito.\(^5^8\)

What I call the tacit cogito is impossible. To have the idea of 'thinking' \(\ldots\). to make the 'reduction', to return to immanence and to consciousness of \(\ldots\), it is necessary to have words. It is by the combination of words \(\ldots\) that I form the transcendental attitude, that I constitute the constitutive consciousness. The words do not refer to positive significations and finally to the flux of Erlebnisse (experiences) as Selbstgegeben (self-evident). Mythology of a self-consciousness to which the word 'consciousness' would refer -- there are only differences between significations.\(^5^9\)

Pre-reflection and reflection are themselves cultural and grammatical artifacts— it is not that the artifacts of grammar are created by them. So describing interaction with the other in terms of bodily pre-reflection still falls prey to the problem of describing otherness with ownness. As a consequence, Merleau-Ponty found it necessary to come up with

\(^{5^8}\) James Schmidt, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 94.
\(^{5^9}\) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, \textit{The Visible and the Invisible}, p. 171, emphasis mine.
a new description of how we can both touch and be touched without having recourse to the notion of the body as a pre-reflective cogito. That is, he must describe a neutral medium in which ownness and otherness can meet without contradiction.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty uses the notion of 'flesh' as a 'prototype of being', a mediator between the body as being a part of and the body as being apart from the world. Vision adheres to the visible, perception adheres to the perceptible. It is the eye that sees, not the soul. We, as seers, are visibles—we are reversible. "It is that the thickness of the flesh between seer and the thing is constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their means of communication."\(^{60}\) Flesh exists as the synergy between the seer and the seen, but it itself remains unseen—it must remain the other side, the obverse, of sensible being. By way of the flesh, we can overcome the paradox of difference and sameness, self and other, ipseity and alterity. That is, any account of the other or the object must include a mixing of identity with difference—difference, because the other must be genuinely other (not me); and identity, because the other must be disclosed as something that I can recognize as analogous to

myself. Flesh provides the common ground where the other and I can reach each other—where I can see and be seen—but also where we can be opaque to each other to maintain our specific identities. Otherness must be discovered within this ground. The other must make herself known to me (as the paradoxically same and different). If the other is a meaning or significance I can project upon some discernable body, then that body is not truly another's, I would manufacture the other.

What Merleau-Ponty's idea of 'flesh' boils down to is a question of mediation. Flesh is the "third thing" in the subject-object and subject-subject dialectic. Traditionally, it was thought that for such a dialectic to get under way, the third entity in mediation must originate from one of the two poles in the dialectic. However, when we actually go about describing how the subject goes about producing the mediator, we fall into idealism (or intellectualism), where everything is reducible to "ownness."

61 Kant's transcendental deduction of the categories is an attempt to do this very thing, but with objects in general. The schemata were to be the mediators between the subject and the object—in that the categories were to be indicative of 'belongingness to the subject' and their 'reference' were to be indicative of their difference. This, of course, does not work, because reference cannot be given but by way of another superaddition of the categories to a judgment. As a consequence, Kant's critical philosophy spawned a proliferation of what can be called 'internal philosophy'.


63 Ibid., p. 17.
On the other hand, when the object is the source of mediation, the subject has no ownness—no pattern is more recognizable than any other. The way “flesh” works mediately, then, is in no such manner. It itself is anonymous—neither bearing the stamp of the subject nor of the object. Merleau-Ponty’s objection to the dialectical dogma of mediation springing from the poles is that for the relations between the poles to even be possible, it must already be established. The object, then, is not constructed, intuited, or represented in the subject but is discovered in a neutral space.

The question still remains: what exactly happens when we discover otherness? Merleau-Ponty provides an example—a model of reversability: the handshake. Flesh is the medium of reversability—the third term in the doubling back of the relation between the touching hand and the touched hand. The body is capable of seeing, touching, and hearing itself, and in fact, the gaze can detach from the subject and turn back upon itself as if it came out of the things seen. So, in the handshake, “I can feel myself touched as well and at the same time as touching”—there is no problem with the alter

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64 Cf. Merleau-Ponty’s description of the inadequacy of intellectualist and physiologist descriptions of sensation in Phenomenology of Perception, pp. 3-25.
65 Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, pp. 77, 87, 93.
because it is not I who sees (touches), not he who sees (touches) because an anonymous visibility (touchability) inhabits us both in virtue of that primordial property that belongs to the flesh, being here and now, of radiating everywhere and forever, being an individual, of being a dimension and a universal.

In the circle of the touched and the touching, the touched takes hold of the touching—the touched inscribes itself in the touching. When we see other people, we do not look at them with pupil-less eyes; we designate our place among others as a visible, with seeable eyes. It is here that I understand the other's transcendence—not because I grasp the other as a transcendent entity (as a subject, consciousness, mind, res cogitans, whatever), but because the other and I dance around the flesh. Instead of an abyss that separates us, a joining of two sides of a dance links us. We must both be "abstracts from one sole tissue." Our relationship is not that of two contradictories (as with a dialectic), but rather as two entries into the same being, two different moments in the same syntax, reverses of each other.

Of course I can never have the other's experiences, but this does not put us at odds—nor does that make her inaccessible. This non-coincidence is manifest even in the non-coincidence of touching and touched. That is, the touched can never touch the touching, but it does bind it,

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67 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, p. 142
68 Ibid., p. 143.
69 Ibid., p. 262.
inscribe itself in it. What the touching is, then, is not a problem. What the other is, then, is not a problem.

Claude Lefort criticizes Merleau-Ponty for insisting that the phenomenon of reversibility discloses otherness. Lefort contends that by doing so, Merleau-Ponty ignores the irreducibility of otherness. But as both M.C. Dillon and Gary Brent Madison contend in their responses to Lefort’s essay, Merleau-Ponty’s use of the notion of ‘flesh’ allows for otherness to remain irreducible, but no longer mysterious. Madison contends that flesh allows the subject to be for itself an other, but as Dillon anticipates (and as I have shown earlier), this does not allow the other to be discovered. For Madison, the other would be merely another production were this so. That is, Madison’s account of how otherness is available is that it is an “internal phenomenon,” but he insists that it is not an “internal projection.” Instead, he contends that “when I engage in reflection, I am already for myself an other. Because of this, otherness is inscribed in my very flesh.” However, Madison’s account seems to work in denial of the facts that

71 (Lefort, op. cit., p.8) Lefort also criticizes Merleau-Ponty for not having made it clear how cultural practices come about - that the Being Merleau-Ponty actually investigated was not that wild experience he had hoped to give expression, but was already domesticated for him (p.11). However, this issue goes too far afield for the purposes of this essay.

Merleau-Ponty had pointed out that: (1) 'other within the self' manoeuvres are commensurate with the pre-reflective cogito, which he had repudiated, and (2) any account of otherness that is derived internally is nothing more than a dressing up of the argument by analogy.

C. Conversational ethics

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology discloses how we are geared into a bodily order (logos) which is already intersubjective, already informed by mutual recognitions. As a consequence, we can appreciate the otherness of the other with more acuity. We can articulate and explore the ambiguities of our relations with others—not so that they will suddenly become unambiguous but so that we can be more sensitive to and cognizant of the necessity for ambiguity and reversability in our relations with others. As David Michael Levin notes, here, in these hinges of relations with others, in "the intertwinnings, transpositions, and reversabilities taking place in the dimension of our intercorporeality..., the body's deeply felt sense of justice [is brought to light]."73 What philosophers should do now that our discussions of relations between ourselves and others can be informed by Merleau-Ponty's new model is make use of it in

new situations, investigate what might be disclosed about an ethics that works silently between our bodies.

Our sense of justice is deeply rooted, firmly grounded in the body of our experience. There is a preliminary sense of justice already schematized in and by the flesh: this sense is a political ideality, a logos, which gives the flesh its ethical and political axis; its sense is an implicit logos which already lays down, for our intercorporeality, a direction for further exertions, and gathers us into forms of communication by which we can extend its enlightening rule.74

Levin suggests that we ask the question: what kind of society do our bodies require? He suggests that “given the fact that the order of our bodies is an order structured by reversibility, what the body needs for its fulfillment is a social order governed by institutions of reciprocity.”75 In fact, many of the current (instead of ideal as Levin suggests) social institutions can be described in terms of bodily relations.76 My project in this paper is not nearly as ambitious, but is of importance. I intend to use Merleau-Ponty’s model of the reversibility of the handshake to inform a description of how we maintain the informal institution of the personal relationship--how we get along as individuals. It only makes sense that a new ethics should be brought about when a new ontology has been articulated.

Because “flesh” exists as an anonymous mediation between

74 Ibid., p. 43.
75 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, The Visible and the Invisible, p. 43.
76 Deleuze and Guattari’s parallels between capitalist production and bodily (both erotic and ergonomic) production is the most obvious example.
subjects, an account of how subjects get along should take account of this anonymity's influence on how those subjects make rules for their interaction. That is, because traditional theories of ethics have relied on the mediation coming from either the subject or the object, they make injunctions about what kind of rules should be made. But once we recognize that we encounter others in a world constituted by neither of us, we see from where our moral intuitions arise. That is, our utopian visions, moral fibre, ethical hope, and appreciation for the virtues are informed by moments we have with others that are not constructed with rules and principles but ones where we come together spontaneously.

1) Imperativity, interrogativity, and reciprocity

The point of coming into contact with another person—whether it be a stranger who sits next to me on the bus or a good friend who just has entered the room—is the point where I come into communication with that other person. We open an expressive space. In the case of the stranger on the bus, I at least make some sort of gesture that acknowledges her presence—I move over to give her some space to sit; I may make some sort of greeting nod. These gestures are not necessary (in that they are not the only communicative gestures that can be used), but some gesture is necessary. Even refusing to make a greeting gesture (i.e., not even
acknowledging the other person sitting right next to me) is a gesture in that it speaks to the other person—it tells her that I refuse to even acknowledge her (isn't that enough?). In this case, she can either comply (she can ignore me too, and we can be in agreement), or she can respond by trying harder to engage me—which usually leads to some dismissive gesture on my part or an outright rebuff. Either way, I set the tone for the expressive space between us. We don't have to speak, but the longer the trip, the more uneasy we become with the silence. In the case of my friend coming into the room, we greet each other with each other's names, maybe a pat on the back, or an exchange of familiar expressions. We allow conversation to flow; our posture is toward one another such that we can pick up on how the other is reacting; we explore each other's affectations. At some time, I may happen upon my friend when she is distraught or angry, and I can only respond by listening to her, by trying to comfort her, or trying to take her side—there is no letting the conversation flow where it may here.

What these examples ammount to is this: when we enter into communication with others, we make gestures of opening the expressive space such that we can either come into a

77 I once sat next to a woman on a plane from Detroit to San Fransisco for 5 hours. She refused even to look at me for the entire trip, and it began to bother me, because it required such a concerted effort on her part not even to respond to the most basic of overtures—looking at me, the obligatory smile, sitting in her seat like there was some one sitting next to her, etc.
dialogue of determining what or how to communicate, or one of us makes a demand that the communicative space be a certain way. The person who refuses to speak to me on the bus and the distraught friend make imperative gestures to me—they alone determine the mood of the communication, the topic of discourse, our project together (even if it is the absence of a project as it is when I am rude to the woman on the bus). The person who responds to my presence on the bus and the friend who is open to conversation with me (be it idle talk or dialogue) make interrogative gestures to me—they open the expressive space such that we can decide together what the topic of conversation and the mood of the communication will be. We treat each other as the ends of the communication—not the extraction or exchange of information, expression of some feeling, or sense of satisfaction from having accomplished something.

The response to the imperative gesture is contained in the imperative gesture itself. The other's behaviour in response to the gesture is preordained by the gesture; that is, the other either complies or rejects entering into the communicative space altogether. In either case, both parties have their roles unambiguously determined until the project is brought to fruition. Both parties crystalize for each other. The one who makes the demand polices the interaction; she makes sure we do not change the topic of conversation until she is satisfied. In the case of the silent stranger
on the bus, my compliance is that I do not open some communicative space, but our proximity on the bus (the fact that we sit right next to each other) requires that I continually re-comply (that is, any moment my eyes drift near her or when a bump knocks our shoulders together requires that I again comply with her demand that we not enter into any more communication than our agreement not to communicate). In the case of my distraught friend, my compliance is my reacting with sympathy, lending her my ear, letting her vent until she feels better, or at least until she wears herself out. My rejection would take the form of changing the subject (another imperative gesture, saying generally 'I don't want to talk about that, but this, however, I will talk about') or of refusing to be sympathetic, refusing to allow her to expect me to react in any manner. In any of these cases, my intentional field (my choices for action) is restricted; I must react to the imperative gesture in certain ways--someone else situates me in a certain syntax.

In any of these cases, the person making the imperative gesture demands that I fulfill her expectations, play a certain structured role for her, do what is appropriate, and it is in this demand that I become distanced from the other. Not because I am alienated by the fact that I have something forced upon me (although this does happen, it is not the ontologically distancing aspect of this gesture). Instead, I
am distanced from the other because the other demands that we step into a structure that generalizes me, that makes me into a service-provider, something that makes me merely something useful, a means. In the imperative mood, I say 'I want to be X, and you must be my Y.' And as a Y, the other's richness and thickness is exchanged for a thinness—a Y-ness to my X-ness. The other is not allowed to choose which structure we will inhabit together. In fact, when the relation between the other and me is in the imperative mood, the other’s (and my) identity is more of an obstruction than an assistance to the perpetuation of the structures of the relation. That is, the other can only know me as a generality, an abstraction, a person that services to fill one of her lacunae. Professionalism as a mode of sociability is an excellent example of how the other is kept at a safe distance—she is generalized and compartmentalized. As professionals we treat clients a certain way, colleagues a certain way, secretaries and office help a certain way....

The interrogative gesture opens an indefinite field of expression for the other. Nothing is predetermined for the other. In the case of the stranger on the bus, her gesture of greeting opens a space where I can choose any direction—where I am allowed to explore. She too explores—by the fact that she sees how I explore. In the case of the friend who comes into the room, our conversation manifests itself as a playfulness—we disclose affectations, interrogations,
But a problem analogous to the problem of generality with the imperative mood surfaces for the interrogative mood. Couples who have just started to see each other often find themselves at a point where they go round and round with the question: "what do you want to do?" "well, what do you want to do?" They awkwardly attempt to avoid any imposition on the other. That is, in the interrogative mood, we may maintain our dignity as self-determining agents, but there is no structure for us to be agents in at all. There is nothing to determine.

At some point, we have to make a decision. We have to have a project, we have to have something to talk about or some way of interacting. However, it is not that we come to these moments as transcendental, contextless intellects such that we would not have any impetus to choose one direction or framework over another. We are not Buridan's asses forever caught between water and food unable to make a decision which to have first. We are embodied consciousnesses with desires, agendas, and predilections that situate us such that when we come upon an other, we come upon that other with a mood, a disposition, a project. We are always and already involved. (This is what Merleau-Ponty reveals with his description of operative intentionality.) As a consequence, when the other comes on the scene, she comes on as either something relevant to the project at hand or as an opportunity to begin a new project. While I am reading in my room, a knock may come at
my door. I answer the door and find my friend has come over to chat. She and her chat are distractions to my project of reading, I may ask her to leave because I have to read, or I may invite her in and take a break from my reading. While I am walking to a restaurant, I may be thinking about a certain television show when I bump into someone. I can tell her that I am on the way to dinner and cannot stop to talk, or I can invite her to comment on the television show.

What is at issue here is the fact that because we enter into relations with others out of projects and contexts that extend beyond our moment with the other, we find that we are led to determinations of the expressive space we have with the other. We have things to do, and every time others step onto the scene, their presence is seen against that background.

Reciprocity is the recognition of the fact that at some times some people must, because they have pressing circumstances and because something must be decided in order for us to even have an expressive medium, make determinations upon what kind of expressive medium we will use and what our project will be. We recognize that someone has to make a decision at some point in time, and we, out of that recognition, can see how such a decision fits in with the other’s project—not as a general other, but as a specific other. That is, when I meet up with the other, she appears to me not as a reflection of myself upon myself (as she would
for Sartre or any of those who use the argument by analogy), because she appears as a singular other with her own style of being--her own posture, her own way of putting things. Were others to appear solely as analogies to myself, they would have no distinctness, no identity beside the functions they serve in my life. However, when we recognize the other's mood, certain nuances in how she articulates her determinations of the expressive space, we see how our project fits with her life. We can see how we fit in with other people. Just by a waiter's body language and pitch of voice, I can tell whether or not he is being funny or nice to me simply because he wants a tip or because he genuinely likes chatting with customers. I can tell whether or not I am interrupting something important when I walk into a room by how people are sitting in their chairs, look at me, or respond to my overtures to engage in conversation. As a consequence, we decide to either play along with the other's project or withdraw from the project altogether. I can ignore fake waiters. I can leave meetings that have nothing to do with me.

Reciprocity, then, manifests itself as indulgence, broad-mindedness, and charity. We know certain things are important to other people. They make certain demands upon us, and when the demands are not outrageous, we comply--we go along. The distraught friend needs to be comforted, so I do my best to comfort her. The lady on the bus wants to be left
alone, so I leave her alone. The friend who drops by my house while I am reading wants to talk, so I may chat with her. The point is, when we make determinations of expressive spaces, we show each other what kind of life we want to live—what things are important to us.

2) Overrunning the other

The danger, though, is the fact that our own agendas can obscure the other's gestures toward us. That is, because the other steps on a scene already colored by our own desires, her desires can be considered to be beside the point. Moreover, if the other gestures in the interrogative mood or allows me to regularly determine the expressive space, I am given free reign to determine the practice at hand however I like. This leads to tyranny.

Let us say I am in a bar with a friend of mine. We belly up to the bar to order our drinks when she asks me what I will be having. I say I think that I will have a bottle of X. Oh no, not X, she says. You should have Y. It's a much better drink. So I order Y. We get a table. I ask her about her day. She tells me about her day and then suggests we talk about a certain book. I may have no opinion on the matter, so she proceeds to tell me what she thinks about the book. Later in the evening, I try to change the subject or tell her about my day. She seems uninterested; she looks around the bar or stares back at me glazed-eyed. I return to
asking her what she wants to do or talk about, and she perks right up.

What this example is supposed to elucidate is how we can be tempted to react to the fact that others, even though their projects do not overlap with ours, defer to our projects; we can become self-centered, self-serving. What makes this situation possible is reciprocal practice—that is, when others go along with our demands out of deference to our style of life, we are tempted to think our style of life the only one that counts. The child who has tolerant parents (ones who listen attentively to everything the child says, indulge the child’s wishes, and make attempts to defer to the child’s determinations) usually comes out terribly spoiled instead of learning to be tolerant by the parents’ examples. The same happens in everyday interaction—those who make demands in groups of tolerant people become more demanding than tolerant. Reciprocity begins to break down, because it makes room for tyranny. In reciprocity, we make room for ourselves to be overrun.

Playing opposite the tyrant has its stresses and strains. At some point in time, we ask ourselves if it is worth it. At some point in my night out at the bar with my bossy friend, I ask myself whether or not I am going to continue to tolerate being overrun. I decide either to assert myself by making a demand on the tyrannical other or point out the fact that she does not listen to me, or I play
the martyr and continue to be overrun.

In the case of making a demand upon the tyrannical other, I try to usurp her position. I give her a taste of her own medicine. I demand that I be heard. I may be confrontational. I may tell her that her stories are boring and her drink choice is terrible. In any case, I make drastic determinations on how we interact, I call attention to myself and my dissatisfaction with how she is running our conversation. But in the case of playing the martyr, I resolve myself to deferring to the other's determinations and decisions. But I make this resignation, not out of finding that I cannot overcome her tyranny (even though I actually may not be able to), but because I see my resignation as a noble sacrifice—-one in the name of reciprocity's tolerance. In turn, I make gestures to call attention to my compliance with the other's wishes regardless of my own wishes. I may evoke some thin earnestness when listening to her stories or make weak protestations before submitting to her will in the end. I try to make my going-along appear to be a sacrifice. I work to make the tyrant feel guilty for forcing me to do her bidding.

The problem with either of these reactions to tyranny is the fact that both perpetuate tyranny. The first—-usurping the tyrant—-leads to a struggle of wills. In the end, neither individual will be able to even stand being around the other. The second—-playing the martyr—-does nothing more
than call attention to the tyranny by giving into it. Even though the tyrant may feel guilty (which is not even guaranteed since the tyrant must first be acquainted with reciprocity for her to feel guilt over not enacting it), she does not necessarily have to stop being a tyrant. In fact, feeling guilty about being a tyrant would be one more topic of conversation for her to monopolize and control.

3) Antipodosis

The mark of reciprocity is the fact that it is a measured fairness. Each member of a conversation is allowed to run things for a while. Sometimes members exploit each other in the relationship, but such moments are few and far between and reparations are made once all members of the community are properly trained. That is, reciprocity is a state of relation between two people that must be tended, pruned, and weighed out. We take turns determining what the current project is. We make exchanges—I will go to the opera one night with my fiance, and she agrees to come to the truck and tractor pull the next night. In this respect, reciprocity is primarily prudential in nature—I.e., we make beneficent gestures in order to receive them. Reciprocity only seems broken in a relationship when I do not receive what I want from the other members.

However, our relations with others do not have to always be dialogical. That is, in the imperative-interrogative mood
distinction, the tyrant-martyr coupling, and the circularity of reciprocity, our relationship with the other remains tied to the bipolarity of the subject and object. That is, in each, one member determines the project and the other either goes along or challenges the determination. But Merleau-Ponty had demonstrated that such bipolarity is not necessary. In the handshake, we encounter others not as objects or subjects but as a discovered otherness, an immanent transcendence, a feeling and felt hand. But what is this like in a continuous relationship with an other?

I am dribbling the ball in a soccer game. I push the ball forward into an open space. Suddenly, one of my teammates runs behind a defender and waves her hand to draw my attention. Our eyes lock, and I pass the ball. She dribbles downfield. I pass the ball not because she and I have an agreement that she will pass me the ball in the future. I don’t pass her the ball because good passing is a means to the end being a winning goal. I pass her the ball because it fits. We may be joined together in a project with some definite end, but my motivation is more aesthetic than teleological. For a moment in our purposeful and deliberative machinations, we are spontaneous.

As with the handshake, neither is wholly in control of the situation. We both make our own contributions, but we do not obscure each other. I am both subject and object for the other and she for me. In this shared space, neither of us is
the center of the practice. Rather, we graft onto one another in a neutral medium. Neither of us decides the ball has to be passed - we both act in such a way that it is. It is here that determination is beside the point--control of the situation falls from one person to the other, but we do not have to be usurping the role of the tyrant or dutifully allowing each other to control the course of events for a while. Instead, control remains anonymous. With the tyrant-martyr pairing and the reciprocal circle, control is never ambiguous at any moment. We set up a rules (explicitly or implicitly) for interaction, and never is it even a question who is in control. But when I pass the ball to my teammate racing down the field, it is never clear who is in control. Is she the one who demands the ball with her urgent hand waving and determined run? Am I the one who makes the determination by gracing her with the ball? We can’t say. In the handshake, too, it is ambiguous who is touching and who is being touched.

This anonymous control remains between the other and myself. It never congeals on either of us. It is like a hopping from foot to foot, not quite running, not quite standing, not quite staying still - it is antipodosis. Here, we find rapport with our friends. Here we find romance with our lovers. We are not measuring out who gets to decide what, but acting harmoniously.

When I see my friend, she is not a reflective analogue
to my subjectivity. That is, I do not have to analogize her with myself to understand how to interact with her, which is what most bipolar theories of ethics would suggest. I do not have to ask myself how I would want me to treat her were I her. When I begin to think that way, everything I do seems forced. I would not be able to joke with her. I would not be able to strike upon any natural rhythm with her. Here would be where we would have to begin to make rules for interaction with each other. But when I normally come upon my friend, I know how to interact with her. I may not be able to articulate or bring to light all the rules for our interaction (there may not even be any rules for all our exchanges), but when we involve ourselves in a project together, things seems to fall into place. We gear ourselves into each other.

The same with my lover. When our bedroom involvement becomes rule-bound as reciprocity would dictate (such that if I do X for her, then she will do Y for me), our lovemaking takes on the hue of an exchange economy. Our relations reduce to sexual opportunism. But when we are caught up with each other, when we have nothing more at stake than being with each other, when neither one of us dictates what goes on, we interact antipodetically.

So the problem is that with reciprocity (and other forms of dialogical relations with others), we remain distant from the other. The syntax of exchange of goods and services
takes the place of possible communication and rapport. The other and I remain generalizations in an unambiguous structure. We do business. Traditional (rule-based) ethics work relatively well here, but when the situation gets smaller and more ambiguous, traditional ethics has nothing more to say. How would we run my passing in a soccer game through the Categorical Imperative? So the question still remains, how do we get along on a day-to-day basis? How I may pass the soccer ball in a game may have no real moral import, but it does reflect how I get along with the others around me. (Moreover, most diehard soccer fans would contend that an unwillingness to pass the ball is indicative of severe moral deviancy.)

What this discussion amounts to, then, is a description of certain situations in which we fall into a rapport with others--where we get along without the strictures of ruleboundedness. These moments are the moments that inform our moral intuitions--they are moments reciprocity constantly tries to re-attain. In no way then, is reciprocity any less morally worthy or actually good. What it is is derivative, and the same can be said for any system of rules governing behavior. Antipodosis, then, is a certain structural moment that resists structural description, because we are acting spontaneously and without rule-determinations.
Wittgenstein's Two Senses of 'Understanding'
I. Meaning, use, understanding, and being able to go on.

Wittgenstein contends in his later work that language is a field of related activities, each with its own style. These activities, like commanding, chatting, questioning, counting, and reciting, are each integral parts of (and compliments to) other non-speaking activities like walking, drinking, eating, and playing. In light of this contention, words have certain meanings because they are used in certain public and conventional situations. A sense of propriety goes along with conventions, and meaning lies within the realm of how certain activities in certain situations are related to (or bear some resemblance to) what is appropriate to those situations. The meanings of words are the conventional roles the words play in a language.

When we understand, we do not do anything extra-linguistic. To understand is not to grasp some non-linguistic object by decoding linguistic signs. Instead, understanding is a technique of seeing how certain utterances or activities are appropriate (either with relation to other utterances or to certain situations) and, in turn, responding appropriately. For instance, if I were to say to someone "Get me a glass of water," I would know the person has understood by her response. Either she would say "O.K." and get me a glass of water, or she would do something else.

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water, or refuse to do so by saying something to the effect "Get your own." Complimentarily, we would not say she understands if she takes off her shoe and tosses it through a window, invades Poland, or makes some sort of gesture we have never seen before. So, the relationship between a command and a response is always one of convention of what is linked to what. The criterion for whether or not someone has understood is not, then, what picture she has in her mind when a command is made, but how she behaves after the command. When we say someone understands addition, we expect her to be able to do addition. When we say someone understands a series, we expect him to be able to complete the series.\(^2\) We expect people who we say understand to be able to go on--to respond in some manner that is conventionally appropriate.\(^3\)

This account of meaning and understanding in terms of use and being able to go on stands distinct from common misconceptions of meaning and understanding - those in terms of grasping a rule. In a nutshell, these misconceptions amount to this: meaning is determined by rules, and when we understand we grasp those rules. Wittgenstein's discussion of rules in sections 143 through 242 of the *Philosophical Investigations* shows how these misconceptions are incomplete as descriptions of how we understand. His first counter to

\(^2\) Cf. PI.143.
the rule-oriented misconception is that the rules for the practice will never exhaust the practice. In fact, knowing how to play a game may never involve learning the rules to the game. Wittgenstein suggests we imagine learning how to play chess without having been told the rules but by watching the game being played.\textsuperscript{4} Moreover, when we are presented with a set of rules for a practice, we have to interpret them in order to understand the practice. Unless there are rules for interpreting rules (and rules for those rules \textit{ad infinitum}), we have to interpret the rules (and act) without justification.\textsuperscript{5} As a consequence, if rules were the determining factors for meaning and use, we would have a paradox, because "no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out in accord with the rule."\textsuperscript{6} But Wittgenstein shows the way out: "following a rule is analogous to obeying an order. We are trained to do so; we react to an order in a particular way."\textsuperscript{7}

That is, the regularity of rules' application is contingent on the regularity of technique of obeying the rule. The practice being described by the rules, then, must be logically prior to its rules (and not the other way around), because without the regular techniques of applying the practice's rules, the rules would not be able to say

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{4} BB.13.
\item \textsuperscript{5} Cf. PI.217, 219.
\item \textsuperscript{6} PI.201.
\item \textsuperscript{7} PI.206.
\end{itemize}
Wittgenstein’s second counter to the rule-oriented misconception is that because rules are public entities, it is impossible to follow a rule privately (or follow a rule in one’s head). Following a rule is a public practice. As a consequence, to understand an utterance, just grasping (by having a certain picture in one’s head) the rules for its meaning is not enough—because there is no public criterion for that understanding. Understanding must be public, and it must be in the form of going on. And this going on—when we understand—accords with the rules of the practice, but is not determined by them. That is, rules allow and disallow usage. They do not determine usage. Consequently, they do not help us understand a sentence’s meaning, because they do not say anything that might reveal anything more than whether the usage is or is not allowed.

II. The Two Senses of “Understanding”

In sections 531-533 of the Philosophical Investigations, Wittgenstein is concerned with two senses of “understanding” which may be called: (1) paraphrastic understanding and (2) poetic or intransitive understanding.

We speak of understanding a sentence in the sense in which it can be replaced by another which says the same; but also in the sense in which it

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8 PI.202.
cannot be replaced by any other. (Any more than one musical theme can be replaced by another.)

In one case the thought in the sentence is something common to different sentences; in the other, something is expressed only by these words in these positions. (Understanding a poem)9

(1) In the first sense, “understanding” means the ability to replace one sentence with another which says the same thing. It is paraphrasing. Conventionally, the ability to paraphrase a sentence is considered a worthy indicator of understanding—it is a mastery of a technique of expression. Paraphrasing demonstrates a familiarity with the varieties of ways one sense can be constructed within the rules of a language—like knowing all the different tools that can be used to do the same thing. (Consider the way that a common simple sentence such as “I’m tired” can be paraphrased with “I’m beat” or “I’m worn out” — or more tellingly, how many different ways a sportscaster can say one team beat another.)

What is implicit in paraphrastic understanding is a reduplication of a sentence’s use in a language-game. So, in a language L, if a sentence $S_1$ with sense (use) $s$ is replaced with sentence $S_2$, the criterion for determining whether $S_2$ is being used successfully as paraphrasis is its relation to $s$ (whether or not $s$ can be $S_2$’s use) and not to $S_1$. That is, the criterion is in terms of the commensurability of $S_1$’s and $S_2$’s range of use—the criterion is the “thought of the

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9 PI.531.
sentence [that] is ... common to different sentences."¹⁰ That "thought" is the use to which the sentences are put, and the sameness of that use is nothing other than how the sentence affects the rest of the language game in which it is being used. If the practice continues no differently than before, then the paraphrasis is successful; if not, then the meaning is changed.

The way paraphrasis is achieved, though, is by comparing the effect \( S_1 \) and \( S_2 \) respectively have on the language-game. Since \( s \) (the use) does not exist independently of them, there is no pre-existent set of ideas or senses to which these sentences are to correspond. By this, the relation between \( S_1 \) and \( S_2 \) is not arrived at by way of sense as an intermediary (like a third man), but by way of sense as the respective sentences' shared place in a language \( L \). Put simply, a sentence's sense does not exist independently of its use (since its sense is its use), and its use cannot exist independently of the sentence— as if one could "airball" or "brick" without basketball talk.

Paraphrastic understanding has one particularly obvious usage: to demonstrate the use of a sentence in a language game by replacing it with another sentence with the same use. Paraphrasis can be used for clarification. Usually this practice designates a certain sense \( s \) which \( S_1 \) might not

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¹⁰ PI. 531, emphasis mine.
unambiguously have in that context, but $S_2$ does (or at least if $S_2$ is also ambiguous, they share $s$ as one of many uses).

$S_2$ clarifies the way $S_1$ is being used. This is how we would explain how the farmer who fed dollar bills to her cows so that they would have rich milk erred.

Paraphrastic understanding also draws attention to the structure of the language game that the sentences are in. Paraphrasis gives a road map of the language game—the different ways of getting to the same place. In paraphrasis, the practice speaks for itself. The practice's well worn roads come to light. Its conventions and ingrained ways of doing the same things become clear. Remember that sports caster with all the ways of saying one team beat another?

The problem is that clarification is often confused with explanation—demonstrating the sense of a sentence in one language game $L_1$ by replacing it with a sentence with an analogous sense in another language game $L_2$. Explanation consists of a comparison of syntactical relations in the analogous uses in the language games. So, "in order to 'explain' [a musical piece] I could only compare it with something else which has the same rhythm (I mean same pattern)."\(^{11}\) Explanation takes the form of translation—taking an obscure or unfamiliar expression and replacing it with one that is familiar. In the case of some unfamiliar

\(^{11}\) PI.527.
expression $S_1$ (an expression in an unfamiliar language-game) which would "look like implements, but I don't know their use," the replacement expression $S_2$ explains $S_1$’s use with its own use in L2. This works well sometimes, because translation points out and works from similarities between language games, and many language games have extensive similarities. The practices that surround the use of color-words in Indo-European languages is an adequate example, and even a discussion of offensive tactics in soccer can be translated into hockey-talk. So what distinguishes paraphrastic understanding (clarification) from explanation (translation) is the language game of which the replacement sentence is a part. Paraphrasis stays within the original language game, and explanation goes outside of it.

(2)Wittgenstein’s second sense of “understanding” is poetic or intransitive understanding—in which the sense of the original sentence cannot be commensurate or replaceable with that of another sentence. Such replacement is impossible, because the relation between the sentence and its sense is exclusive. (Imagine the damage that could be done to the Homeric expression “rosy-fingered dawn” in paraphrasis or explanation, what would happen to Keenan-Ivory Wayans’ “I’m gonna get you sucka,” or Frank Black’s “my heart is crammed in my cranium—and it still knows how to pound”.) No other

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12 PI.526.
sentence can have that sense—it is “something that is expressed only by these words in these positions.” Poetic expression creates its own use with its coinage. Its use is irreplacable in the same way that Wittgenstein says:

I should like to say that “what the picture tells me is itself.” That is, its telling me something consists in its own structure, in its own lines and contours.

Wittgenstein had pointed this out as early as 1932 in *Philosophical Grammar*:

It may be that if it is to achieve its effect, a particular word cannot be replaced by any other; just as it may be that a particular gesture cannot be replaced by any other.... No one would believe a poem remained essentially unaltered if its words were replaced by others in accordance with an appropriate convention.

Intransitive understanding, then, is the ability to inhabit an uncanny and original expressive practice. This inhabitation and this space are what is created when we understand or “go on” in a completely unique way. Because changes in meaning manifest themselves as changes in behaviour, we inhabit this space by the fact the we act within it—we appropriate it as a way of behaving, a way of living. However, the way in which it is achieved is dependent on paraphrastic understanding, because the way a certain expression makes sense is through its relation to

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13 PI.531.
14 PI.523, italics mine.
already sedimented rules and uses. In the way that meaning the same thing means "going on" in the same way (as paraphrastic understanding works), *intransitive understanding comes about by going on in a different way* - not a radically different way, but one that shares a family resemblance to the ways we have responded to similar expressions. The poetic expression is reminiscent of already sedimented practices (and this is how we can step into them when they are poeticized versions of familiar practices), but they also make a new and remarkably different application of the rules by which those previous practices proceeded.

Colin Falck notes that the "moving forward of the human spirit" brought about in poetry, art, and other expressive media relies on the grammar of previous expressions.\(^\text{16}\) Each successive grammar reveals the possibilities of its predecessor. "Metaphor builds on the language-uses we already have in an organic, and not a random way."\(^\text{17}\) The organic nature of the relationship between the metaphor (intransitive expression) and sedimented usage is one of reminiscence or resemblance; that the grammar is not razed to the ground, but is subtly altered. It is given a twist. Regular usage of words develops habits and prejudices about how those words are to be used. New usages of these words, then, cater to


\(^{17}\) Ibid., p. 372.
those prejudices (instead of completely throwing all of them out)—otherwise we cannot understand.

An example of how “one explains the expression, [or] transmits one’s understanding” may make things a bit clearer. Take, for example, a genre-picture. If the genre is not known, it will be unfamiliar to people who look at it—they may not be able to make use of it. (Imagine ancient Egyptians looking at an Impressionist painting.) There are two ways we could approach bringing these people to an understanding of the painting: it could either be (a) explained, or (b) understood intransitively/poetically. Paraphrasing is not an option, since there is no other sentence or expression which has the same use. Moreover, paraphrasing presupposes a mastery of the realm of practice that the expression is in—consequently, the paraphrasis would be just as unintelligible as the original expression.

(a) If we decide to explain the painting, what we do is rework the painting in a manner that is intelligible to our pedagogical subjects. (We reword the unintelligible poem.) We might point to lines and colors on the canvas and say, “That’s a chair” or “That’s a horse.” We might also draw another picture in a familiar style that allows understanding. We also might say, “it’s just like that other painting you know—the one with the...” We set the painting alongside familiar paintings. We say it simply. We

18 PI.533.
put it in "layman's terms," in a language that these individuals can paraphrase. But the analogy that supports the explanation is only a partial one that transforms the uncanniness of an intransitive expression into something familiar and conventional.

Kjell Johannssen notes in a similar discussion of the distinction between paraphrastic and intransitive understanding that in aesthetics, such a procedure offends our sensibilities — that we would leave something out, that "understanding paintings is not primarily a matter of translating them into some other medium of expression."\(^{19}\)

Consequently, the way that our pedagogical subjects will view such genre paintings in the future will be ignorant of the analogy's incompleteness, because they will not even come into contact with that uncanniness; the unique place the expression holds in the other language-game (painting). They do not know the rules it re-interprets. Moreover, these individuals will not be able to tell original expressions in this practice from sedimented expressions. The uncanniness and resonance of the original expression—what is the most compelling and affecting thing about it—is lost. These individuals will look in translation. (This is the danger of such things as beginner's guides to realms of discourse, e.g.

Cliff's notes, masterplots, etc.. The reader begins to think of the texts themselves as embellished, confused, and wordy embodiments of their explanations.)

(b) If we decide that these individuals should come to intransitive understanding of the painting, we must "lead" them to comprehension. This "leading" is something entirely different from explanation. Instead of taking the expression in an unfamiliar and original genre and putting it into a familiar genre, the leading acclimates these individuals to the original and unfamiliar genre. We teach the use of a new tool by teaching a new technique. We engender appreciation for a genre by having the individuals inhabit the genre, learn its rules and their conventional applications by applying them themselves. We set the painting alongside similar paintings. We then bring our students to a point where paraphrasis within the practice is understandable, and by this, we engender the ability to recognize the uncanniness and resonance of a poetic or original expression within that practice. We bring our students into the practice the expression is part of, and by this, they develop a feeling for the congruency of the practice. A nose for congruency is the precondition for a nose for difference. They then can understand the originality and uncanniness of the expression—how it is both congruent with what has been done, but somehow radically different too. This is not available to

20 PI.534.
explanation. Intransitive understanding, then, is not just different from explanation in approach, but it is different in kind.

But the question still remains: how exactly does acclimation to this practice and recognition of originality and uncanniness take place? The clearest answer is training. Our linguistic practices are rule-bound, but they are not exhausted in their entirety by the rules. Wittgenstein notes, "my reasons soon give out. And then I shall act without reasons." In light of this "running out," the training has two goals: (i) to allow those trained to recognize the appropriate and inappropriate actions within the rule-bounded expressive space (to develop the ability to understand paraphrasis), and (ii) to be able, as a consequence of (i), to recognize the original and uncanny application of a rule. It is in (ii) that these individuals recognize that "the application of a word is not everywhere bounded by rules," and that the poetic expression pushes that rule-boundedness where there is no rule determining the use of a word. Intransitivity also draws our attention to the structure of the language game—but one with a changed perspective. Intransitive expressions (like paraphrastic expressions) allow the practice to "speak for itself." What is revealed, though, is not merely the well-worn paths of somnambulistic

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21 PI.211.
22 PI.84.
usage (as it does with paraphrasis), but of a new way to go on and how it is tied to those of well worn paths. Our pedagogical subjects recognize the contingency of the expression, the contingency of the rule’s application, and, by this, the contingency of the very style of being (or speaking) which produces the expression.

Those who coin and use new expressions and the ones who understand them make themselves free of conventionalized practices, because they have created a new way of being. Because any difference in meaning must manifest itself as a difference in speech and behaviour, understanding’s practical correlative—being able to go on—in the case of intransitive expressions is itself intransitive. Intransitive understanding jolts us out of our sedimented linguistic practices, throws us into new perspectives, launches us into new ways of being and doing. However, this re-creation’s intelligibility (possibility of practice) hinges wholly on the recognizability of the re-created rule. If the old rule and practice are still recognizable as standing behind the new practice, the expression’s audience and speaker can make use of it. The expression invites practice, because its rules are still perspicuous—the audience can “go on” with it. The audience can find a foothold. On the other hand, if the expression does not bring out the old rule in a way that gives the expression a realm of some form of familiar practice (if the expression does not lend itself to any kind
of use), the audience is inclined to believe the speaker inept or insane (or at best speaking a different language).

The condition that poetic expressions must meet is the analogy between its own style and the style of the practice upon which it is parasitic. The poet must be aware of the tradition being re-created and whether a re-creation of that tradition would be intelligible. Because some rules are more central to certain languages than others, re-creations of these rules will be less and less intelligible in accordance with the rule's centrality. The more central the rule is to the language game, the less intelligible its re-working will be. This is because intelligibility of an expression is first and foremost the ability we have to make use of that expression, and when a rule's application that stands at the root of the language game is re-created (changed or merely ignored), the interpreter is given no way to put the interpretation into practice. In other words, when an intransitive expression re-creates a central grammatical rule (one which is necessary for meaning in the language game), the expression is merely unintelligible, it is a mistake. It precludes its own use. (Imagine a re-creation of the rule by which we organize words in a declarative sentence—e.g. “My is tie blue”.) These rules are developed by linguistic communities as necessary conditions for sense.

Max Black's discussion of rule formation as identification of aspects of speech acts within linguistic communities ((i)
required, (ii) forbidden, or (iii) permitted) is helpful here. Required speech acts (i) are the necessary conditions for intelligibly participating in a linguistic practice. Forbidden speech acts (ii) preclude speakers from even participating. Permitted speech acts (iii) can be used, but they are not necessary for meaningful use. Rules that require (i) or forbid (ii) speech acts are what is at issue; they are the central rules. When a speaker does not accord with (i) or (ii), the speaker is no longer meaningfully engaged in the practice, and the rest of the linguistic community either sees the individual as confused (and the community tries to correct or re-train the individual) or the community sees the individual as utterly helpless, hopeless, or insane. Either way, the speech act is not even recognized to be engaged in the practice in which it was used, because to respond to the expression would result in razing the practice to the ground. The utterance is a tool without an application.

However, when an expression has to do with a less central rule—a rule which permits a speech act (iii) and which does not forbid certain uses or is not a necessary condition for sense in the language game—the expression does not make a preclusion of its own use. Instead, the expression offers an alternative (but similar) practice to the one re-created.

Realms of practice within the language game are still open to this expression which are not open to the expression that recreates central rules. The utterance does not cut itself off from the language in which it was intended to be meaningful, because it takes up an aspect of the linguistic practice that is not subject to correction. For such speech acts, there is no logical limit (in terms of normative restrictions) to the possible activities that could be introduced into a linguistic practice.

In light of this discussion, two conditions for intelligibility (usefulness) for intransitive expressions can be distilled. They must (a) be such that they are different, but also reminiscent of similar expressions in an ordered language game, and (b) they must not be contrary to the rules central to that language game. Because intransitive expressions push between the ordinary forms of justified actions (ones which appeal to necessary conditions and customary permissions) and the ordinary forms of unjustified actions (ones which bear no resemblance to any activities in the practice or ones which are explicitly made forbidden), the utterance provides its own justification. There are no identical activities that the speaker can gesture toward for justification. The intransitive utterance stands by itself.
III. How intransitivity becomes a problem

In light of the fact that differences in meaning are manifested as differences of behaviour (a difference in how we go on), it is possible that styles of being with intransitive expressions may become conventionalized and habitualized, and by this transformation, the expression loses its earlier power of liberating language users from the strictures of sedimented practices and habits. Here is how.

1) As shown earlier, when we say people understand, we expect them to be able to go on. That is, we make a distinction between people who understand and those who do not by the way they act. Those who understand something act a certain way, and those who do not understand act in another or in a multiplicity of other ways. For example, we say only people who can successfully add understand addition.

2) Because languages have rules which necessitate and exclude certain usages, intransitive expressions, when coined, must be judged to be admissible or inadmissible by a community of speakers familiar with the language and those rules. Speakers of a language are those who decide whether or not a new way of speaking is to be allowed in the language. They are the ones who distinguish intelligible from unintelligible expressions.

3) Those who understand an expression have the ability to make use of it. Upon understanding an utterance, speakers of a language have a way of determining when it is appropriate
to use the expression. In effect, when the situation in
which the intransitive utterance was coined (or a situation
with a resemblance to the original situation) is repeated,
those who understood the expression in the former can use it
in the latter. Think of all those famous lines from *Pulp
Fiction* being parroted by gen-X’ers. If the appropriate
situation is common in a language-game (or if there are many
situations that resemble the original situation), the
expression can gain a wider range of usage. Because
understanding an expression pushes us into new ways of
behaving, the behaviour sets the stage for more situations in
which the expression can be used. With each new usage, the
language shifts, because the practice of speaking the
language is changed. And with each repeated usage of the
intransitive expression, the expression moves closer and
closer to the center of the language game. The expression
becomes conventional.

4) Regular usage of an expression makes the expression
(and its attendant behaviour) more and more central to the
practice of speaking a language. The expression becomes more
and more secured, more and more conventional. (This is where
the difference between fashion and fad, slang and cliché,
originality and banality is formed.) At this point, the
expression is still reminiscent of its first resonance and
uncanniness, but the coin becomes tarnished with its regular
and systematic usage. Originality becomes concretized. In
addition, when certain marginal forms of expression become more and more prevalent, they begin to lose the force they once had. The context in which they had been originally used becomes beside the point. The expressions' contexts become so wide and so nebulous, the expressions no longer even mean what they originally meant. For example, the adage "Neither a borrower nor a lender be" has been taken to be one of Shakespeare's kernels of wisdom and has been quoted and invoked so regularly, we rarely (except for those of us who read Hamlet carefully) recognize the fact that the expression was supposed to be ironic. Polonius uttered it in a fit of dottering about burdening his son with advice.  

5) Once an expression becomes more and more central to a practice, it breeds its own rules. It breeds normative behaviour that gestures to the expression when justifying or eliminating other expressions. "We [develop] prejudices with respect to the use of words," and the irony is that the prejudice comes out of an expression which was originally used in a way that jarred those who understood it out of their previous prejudices. The danger at this point is to say (as would those bewitched by their prejudices) that this new way of speaking is more useful than the one prior or (even if we were to recognize the inclinations to speak one way or another as a prejudice) that one certain prejudice represents reality better than another or a previous one.

24 Cf. Hamlet. I.iii.79.
Wilfrid Sellars' discussion of the "Jonesian Myth" is helpful here.\textsuperscript{25} Sellars' hypothetical Mr. Jones falls into a similar pit of bewitchment with a new and powerful way of speaking. Jones is a man who learns a framework of discourse about public objects, but he has "taught himself to play with it as a report language. Unfortunately,... [and] with a modesty forgivable in any but a philosopher, he confuses his own creative enrichment of the framework of empirical knowledge, with an analysis of knowledge as it was."\textsuperscript{26} Because of his confusion in his attitude with respect to his change in the language of possible objects, Jones speaks (when in reference to public objects) of a given from which all knowledge of these objects springs. "He construes as data the particulars and arrays of particulars which he has come to be able to observe, and believes them to be antecedent objects of knowledge which have somehow been in the framework from the beginning."\textsuperscript{27} And because of the semantic changes in the language due to the new expression described in (3) (i.e. that changes in certain parts of a practice affect the practice globally) the meanings constructed by the new habits become the given. These structures become "the privileged matters of fact" to which claims for legitimacy appeal (or from which these claims are

\textsuperscript{26} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 529.
\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 539.
derived).\textsuperscript{28} Once a certain form of behaviour becomes concretized to this extent, those who make use of and inhabit that way of being, lose sight of its contingency. They become absorbed in "an episode of the Myth" such that the role of the community's approval (in 1 and 2) are ignored to the point that when asked for a genealogy of the practice, they speak as if the world (independently of language) provided cue-cards for the language's development, and not that it was merely a matter of a certain community coming to certain agreements about how to talk. As Sellars describes him, Jones falls into this sensibility, and intransitive expressions, by their very nature of compelling us to change the way we are by showing us a new way of being, have the power to bewitch us by their creative enrichment of already available discourses.

Wittgenstein provides a wonderful example of bewitchment with his description of a response to Schopenhauer's contention that man's real life span is 100 years. Wittgenstein's interlocutor gives a wistful cry, "yes, that is how it is... because that's how it must be!" Of course, it would all make sense that way. "It's as though you've understood a creator's purpose. You have grasped the system."\textsuperscript{29} In a sense, we feel tempted to "make divinities of

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., p. 508.  
logical constants."\(^{30}\)

But examples for this kind of progression need not be so obscure. As language-users (in the widest sense), we see this kind of progression afoot in every aspect of culture: the West-Coast offense, body-piercing, "awesome," alt-rock, "alrighty then," having a coke and a smile, being "cool," being "bad," being "rad," being "yourself," the nickel defense, whatever. The very utterances which opened new ways of being close off subsequent ways of being. Gestures which added richness to what were grammatically determined practices become part of that machinery of determination. What was once novel and liberating is now banal and constricting.

Our ordinary language, which of all possible notations is the one which pervades all our life, holds our mind rigidly in one position, as it were, and in this position sometimes feels cramped.... Thus we sometimes wish for a notation which stresses a difference or one which in a particular case uses a more closely similar form of expression than our ordinary language. Our mental cramp is loosened when we are shown the notations which fulfill these needs \(^{31}\).

The problem at issue here is that once we have met this need, we make what had relieved our mental cramp part of the problem. What was originally a twist or a critique of "common sense," after a bit of usage, becomes "common sense" with the same hum-drum-self-contentment that necessitated such twists and critiques in the first place.

\(^{30}\) CV.22.

\(^{31}\) BB.59, emphasis mine.
In this age of post-Wittgensteinian philosophy, we are compelled to ask ourselves when presented with a problem: "how must we look at a problem in order for it to become solvable?"\textsuperscript{32} We should be taking up new descriptive strategies such that problems are no longer problems; we need to find ways to dissolve problems. But this problem is not one that can be solved in this way, because the problem is one with the very strategy with which these problems are dissolved. When we provide a new outlook or way of speaking in order to dissolve one problem, we become prejudiced toward using that manner of speaking. We mistake a tincture for a panacea.

Richard Rorty faces this situation at the end of his \textit{Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature}.\textsuperscript{33} Once it is clear that the philosophical enterprise is no longer an inquiry into essences or representation (i.e. epistemology), what reason do we even have for redescription (offering new descriptive strategies, making or using intransitive expressions)? When we replace \textit{knowledge} with \textit{self-formation} as the goal of thinking, we see just why these movements of novelty are necessary. "The events which make (and allow) us able to say


new and interesting things about ourselves are, in the nonmetaphysical sense, more 'essential' to us than the events [and conventionalized practices] which ... shape our standard of living."\(^{34}\) Those new and interesting gestures and utterances are what edify us in the face of the homogeneity of convention—"edifying discourse is supposed to be abnormal, to take us out of our old selves by the power of strangeness, to aid us in becoming new beings."\(^{35}\) In the face of the problem of conventionalization in the practice of philosophy, Rorty distinguishes systematic philosophers and edifying philosophers. The latter are first and foremost skeptical of systematic philosophy, but not because they stand as revolutionaries to contented actors and speakers. Both kinds of philosopher offer new descriptive strategies, because both are discontented with and stifled by the conventional theoretical discourse. But the difference lies in what these philosophers plan to do with their new ways of speaking.\(^{36}\) Systematic philosophers are constructive and offer arguments such that their manner of speaking may be institutionalized. Their battle cry is "the end of philosophy." They "build for eternity." They put their subject on the path of a science. The systematic philosopher recognizes what will happen to this new way of speaking and is more than willing to embrace it.

\(^{34}\) Ibid., p. 359.
\(^{35}\) Ibid., p. 360.
\(^{36}\) Ibid., p. 369.
The edifying philosophers, on the other hand, "dread the thought that their vocabularies should ever be institutionalized, or that their writing might be seen as commensurable with the tradition." To avoid this, they are reactive to the systematists. They write satires and parodies. They offer only aphorisms. They speak and write in ways that are intentionally peripheral. They adopt a style that they suppose cannot become an institution. Consequently, edifying philosophy is always parasitic, always needing something to critique, always needing a straight-man to converse with, confound, and ultimately exasperate. The role that the edifying philosopher plays, then, is that of helping us to avoid the bewitchment and self-deception which comes from believing our current way of speaking to be final. The edifying philosopher sees human beings as "generators of new descriptions rather than beings one hopes to be able to describe accurately." And, by this attitude, the edifying philosopher furnishes the rest of the community with a wealth of reasons to find a new way of speaking and may even offer up her own as an option.

One way to see edifying philosophy ... is to see it as the attempt to prevent conversation from degenerating into inquiry, into a research program. Edifying philosophers can never end philosophy.

The reason why edifying philosophers know they must "keep the

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37 Ibid., p. 377.
38 Ibid., p. 378.
39 Ibid., p. 372, emphasis mine.
conversation going" is because not only do they feel the "mental cramp" Wittgenstein had gestured toward, but also because they see the danger of setting up a final and privileged vocabulary. They are trying to prevent a freeze-over of their discipline and their culture. What is so frightening about the possibility is the automatic nature of thought once certain descriptions are no longer being questioned. In the same way we are suspicious that people who justify their decisions with cliches (e.g. Polonius and those who make use of his expressions) are not really thinking, the edifying philosopher has the sneaking suspicion that once a discipline's final vocabulary and theoretical issues are put to rest, that discipline will become one big cliche with unthinking practitioners. We will cease to be human, because we will begin to see ourselves as something decided.40

The edifying philosopher, acting as the philosophical anarchist, works to dismantle the systematics in a manner that cannot be systematized. That is, they decry the very notion of having a definite view while denying they themselves have definite views. This, of course, is a self-referential paradox, but the edifying philosopher does not seem to even be phased by this charge.

But regardless of this technical absurdity, does Rorty's romanticized edifying philosopher do enough? According to

40 Ibid., p. 377.
Rorty, Heidegger was an edifying philosopher *par excellence*, but his language became institutionalized jargon almost immediately. Heidegger himself was appalled that his expression "language is the house of Being" had become a "mere catchword"[^1] It does no good to be appalled, and it does no good to try to keep it from happening. As it appears, no matter what the intent with which these new ways of speaking are posed they ensnare us. Even if they demand that they be surpassed, they become entrapments. Style alone cannot keep ways of speaking and writing from becoming institutions. They inevitably become encrusted with convention. In light of this problem with Rorty's attempt to dissolve the issue with a new descriptive strategy, it does not matter what is said, who is saying it, or how it was meant to be taken, because if the expression or way of being resonates (is useful), it will be turned into an institution. (Just look at any journal of literary criticism, where it seems, ironically, everybody writes just like Derrida, but not in jest. Even better, just look at how counter-culture has a dress code.)

Wittgenstein's discussion of Breuer, Freud's co-author in *Studies in Hysteria*, points in a fruitful direction. Wittgenstein says that "the real germ of psycho-analysis came from Breuer, not Freud. Of course, Breuer's seed-grain can

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only have been quite tiny. *Courage is always original.*"\(^{42}\)

Where did this courage lie for Breuer? Breuer’s humility in
the face of facts and their explanations is obvious in his
collaborations with Freud (especially against the backdrop of
Freud’s brashness). He was not inclined to trace the
etiology of hysteria and neuroses directly back to erotic
breakdown every time, and Wittgenstein had noted that Breuer
had first proposed, but then dismissed the generalization of
the seductive paradigm. Jaques Bouveresse notes in
*Wittgenstein Reads Freud* how Wittgenstein had seen the
temptation to finalize and divinize the language and method
of psychoanalysis, and had pointed out that giving in to that
temptation is an indication of a profound desire to distill
ourselves, to make divinities of certain concepts.

> For Wittgenstein, a person who thinks there must be
> one correct explanation and one correct reason
> for the sort of phenomena treated in psychoanalysis
> is not someone merely adopting a dominant
> scientific attitude, but someone who is already on
> the road to producing a mythology.\(^{43}\)

Breuer, nevertheless, continued to make use of the
descriptive (and investigative) strategy, not because he
wanted it to (or believed it to) work in all cases all the
time, but because he saw the limits of it, and was aware of
when his usage of the strategy stretched it to the point
where it became a dogmatism and not a description. Breuer’s

\(^{42}\) CV.36.

courage lay in his willingness to recognize even his own groundbreaking descriptive strategy as what it was, a tool with a specific use.

Because we recognize it is not that things must be a certain way, we become more self-conscious about how we philosophize. We recognize how we become self-forgetful when we are captured by certain pictures of thinking, ourselves, and how things hang together. But when we recognize the potential for the same kind of literalization to take place with the things we say (regardless of how much they demand to be taken up and overcome as Heidegger's had), we see how we are responsible for what we say. The question, though, is how we can proceed responsibly, how to continue the conversation without the possibility of literalization. The answer is that we cannot. The potential for our expressions to become dogma always hangs in the background of our conversations. The only way to face this possibility is to encourage informed criticism and continued inquiry. We develop misgivings about accounts framed with the expression "how it is possible that ...." We begin to provide intellectual therapy for our temptations to canonize our ways of speaking. We fall out of love with generality.

However, our discussions do not take the form of a negative theology or a tense silence, as though we only want

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to make retractions of everything we say. That is, we do not necessarily have to criticize continually, satirize, and overturn every one of our attempts at saying something in favor of saying nothing. Resistance to institutionalization cannot be found solely in style. Instead, we make it our business to explore the possibilities of how we can describe things, gesture toward one another, and organize our lives. But we must be continually aware of the limits of these strategies, of their dangers, and of their temptations. And we can only maintain such a carefulness in a community of fellow inquirers. That is, it is not a question of what kind of style of inquiry will avoid being literalized (as those who mistakenly think the aphorism and metaphor do). Rather, it is a question about what attitude we will have about our styles of inquiry, what character we must have in order to resist homogeneity. So in turn, it is not that we have to release ourselves from all of our conventions and traditions or criticize every picture we use. Many are still useful and important to us.

It is true that we can compare a picture that is firmly rooted in us to a superstition; but it is equally true that we always eventually have to reach some firm ground, either a picture or something else, so that picture which is at the root of all our thinking is to be respected and not treated as a superstition.45

As a consequence, we should have no qualms about developing a theory or offering a new description. We are allowed to

45 CV.83
have a view (instead of insisting, as the edifying philosopher does, that we have no view), but we must make sure to use it as a view from a perspective instead of being sub specie aeterni.

What Wittgenstein meant by "courage is always original" in the discussion of Breuer is clear. This virtue is a state of character that pushes us to maintain an honesty about our modes of description, to engage others, to criticize, to make informed use of conventions, and to be forthright about our conventions' contingencies. What we require to be able to resist literalization's temptations to take intransitive expressions as more than their suggestive language is a courage to steel us and prompt us to find new ways of speaking. Instead of being philosophical revolutionaries (as the systematic philosophers) or philosophical anarchists (as the edifying philosophers), we must find the courage to walk between the two and to speak critically in a community of critical listeners, to be philosophical conversationalists.
Plato's *Meno* and a Problem for Moral Education
I

The *Meno* opens with Meno asking "is virtue something that can be taught? Or does it come by practice? Or is it neither teaching nor practice that gives it to a man but natural aptitude or something else?"\(^1\) But the dialogue ends with Socrates concluding that "virtue will be acquired neither by nature nor by teaching. Whoever has it gets it by divine dispensation" (99e). Apparently, virtue comes to us by "something else." If Plato is seriously contending virtue comes only by way of divine dispensation, his project as a philosopher—showing how by applying our reason, we can live virtuously and justly—should be at an end. He has proved the impossibility of his own enterprise. No matter how hard we try to apply our reason, we cannot have an effect beyond what the gods have already determined. So why is the *Meno* not Plato's last dialogue? That is, the *Meno* has traditionally been considered a late early dialogue— one that resembles the early dialogues in much of its style (direct conversation) and substance (confrontation of sophistry), but also different from them in that it continues after the interlocutor has been reduced to perplexity. Most scholars situate the dialogue's composition date around those of the *Protagoras* and the *Gorgias*, but before the *Symposium* and the *Phaedo*. So the problem is, then, if Plato intends

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\(^1\) Plato, *Meno*, trans. W.K.C. Guthrie, 70a. All subsequent references to the *Meno* will be from this translation.
the dialogue's conclusion literally, why did he continue to write philosophy and teach ethics in the Academy?

The challenge Plato poses in the Meno is for his readers to make sense of how the dialogue works. The pressing problem is how we reconcile it with the rest of the Platonic corpus. In earlier (and later) dialogues, Socrates contends that virtue is knowledge. ² In turn, if virtue is knowledge, we can reasonably expect it to be teachable.³ The dialogue's explicit conclusion, then, contradicts the Platonic doctrine that virtue is knowledge—*if virtue cannot be taught, it must not be knowledge.*⁴

The dialogue's aporetic conclusion not only gives scholars who argue for the unity of Plato's thought headaches, but it also is the source of moral anxiety, because praise and blame for our actions is groundless if this is the case. If virtue comes from divine dispensation, we are not responsible for our moral failings or our moral successes. If my moral character is determined by factors beyond my control, how can I be held responsible for my conduct? Those who are vicious should only be pitied and avoided, since we can only speak of their bad luck.

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² E.g. Protagoras 360d, Laches 198, Gorgias 460b-d. ³ Socrates, in fact, makes this same move at Meno 89c. ⁴ Much of this argument relies on the fact that there is not a species of knowledge the is not teachable, which, in fact, can be construed to be at the core of the problem. What seems to be the case in the conversion implicit in moral education is that the student must contribute to the education in a manner that cannot be taught, but must evoked and relied upon.
Moreover, we have no chance of rehabilitating them. The virtuous, on the other hand, deserve no praise or admiration, since people only deserve praise for things they have earned themselves, not for things that have been given them. In a sense, we are rendered morally impotent.

In the face of its conclusion that virtue cannot be taught, the *Meno*'s drama enigmatically revolves around education. Socrates teaches Meno how to pursue philosophical investigations. He also teaches Meno's slave some geometry. Alexander Sesonske points out that these lessons (most notably the demonstration with the slave boy) share the same form in that the student progresses through states of knowledge according to a certain pattern:

1) the state of unacknowledged ignorance, when one confidently says *incorrectly* without knowing,
2) the state of acknowledged ignorance, when one sees that he does not know and therefore cannot say,
3) the state of true opinion which develops from inquiry, when one confidently says *correctly* without knowing,
4) the state of knowledge, when one knows and knowingly says,
and 5) the underlying state of latent knowledge, a kind of knowing without saying which makes the transition from (1) to (4) possible.

This progression of states of knowledge amounts to an educational model, since it represents a coming to know in

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the form of a deepening relationship a person has with a
subject. Students must come to recognize they do not know a
subject to take it upon themselves to pursue further inquiry
into a matter. The problem, though, is how students go from
(2), the state of acknowledged ignorance, to (3), saying
confidently and correctly without knowing. Meno, when he is
reduced to perplexity—i.e., when he is shown that he cannot
answer adequately or correctly about something he claims to
know—states his famous paradox:

But how do you look for something when you don't in
the least know what it is? How on earth are you
going to set up something you don't know as the
object of your search? To put it another way, even
if you come right up against it, how will you know
that what you have is the right thing you don't
know? (80d)

Meno's paradox is divisible into two questions: (i) how do we
recognize when we are right when we cannot say what our
criterion for being right is, and (ii) how do we say anything
at all while knowing we do not know? What is implied here,
then, is that the resolution to the paradox (and the two
problems it implies) can show how it is possible to go from
the state of acknowledged ignorance to the state of speaking
confidently without knowing.

Socrates provides two answers to question (i): the myth
of recollection and his short demonstration with Meno's slave
boy. The myth of recollection is that souls are immortal and

7 Ibid., p. 91.
have learned everything that is. As a consequence, when we are learning, we are really remembering. Teaching, then, is a reminding. However, if taken literally, the myth does not provide an account of how we take ourselves from ignorance to knowledge, because all it provides is an account of how we would be able to do it now that our souls have already learned everything. It merely puts off the question of recognizing when we are right without having a criterion by saying it happened a long time ago.

Regardless of this problem, what the myth does reveal is a suppressed premise in the *Meno*, viz., that we are always in possession of a modicum of knowledge. We are never totally ignorant. However, much of that knowledge is tacit and unarticulated. What the project is for those who wish to know, then, is to bring their tacit knowledge to light and lend it an articulate voice. The question, then, is how do we do that?

In his conversation with the slave boy, Socrates shows *Meno* how it is possible to recognize speaking correctly even without an explicit criterion for being right. He asks the slave boy how he would double the area of a 2x2 square he has drawn in the sand. The boy confidently responds that he should double the length of the sides. Socrates shows the boy his error: if he doubles the length of the sides, the square’s area quadruples instead of doubles. The slave boy

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is reduced to perplexity—he is unable to answer correctly at all. He recognizes he does not know. Socrates leads the slave boy through a construction which allows him to give a correct answer to the geometrical problem. Throughout the demonstration, Socrates shows that the boy "was unable to say what the answer was or even how to go about finding it..., yet he could recognize as true the very things he could not say."\(^9\)

Socrates is quick to point out that the slave boy still does not know. He says, "...these opinions, being newly aroused, have a dreamlike quality," but if the boy were to practice the technique Socrates used many times, they would become knowledge (85c). The slave boy, then, can be taught geometry.

The myth of recollection and Socrates' conversation with the slave boy answer the first question in Meno's paradox (How do we recognize speaking correctly when we do not have a criterion for it?), but the second question in the paradox still remains: how do we say anything at all when we know we do not know? Socrates' discussion with Meno serves to illuminate how we would go from the state of acknowledged ignorance, where we see that we do not know, and therefore cannot say, to the state of true opinion, where we recognize saying correctly as saying correctly without knowing. Because Socrates already knew the answer to the geometrical

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problem he poses for the slave boy, he could only demonstrate that it is possible to recognize saying correctly as saying correctly without knowing. However, Socrates' method of pursuing a definition of virtue, because neither he nor Meno know and they recognize their ignorance, provides an answer to the second question in the paradox. There must be an intermediary state between (2) the state of acknowledged ignorance and (3) the state of true opinion developed from inquiry:

2B) Saying tentatively without knowing; saying something which we know we do not know in order to see what happens after we say it, i.e. saying hypothetically.

Socrates suggests that they "make use of a hypothesis--the sort of thing geometers use in their inquiries"(86e). That is, when we know we do not know the answer to a question, we do not simply throw our hands up in the air or shrug our shoulders and give up. Instead, we respond by saying, "I don't know yet whether it fulfills the conditions, but I think I have a hypothesis which will help us in the matter"(87a). We speak tentatively, and when we speak correctly, we will be able to recognize it as speaking correctly.

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10 This assumption that Socrates does not know what virtue is comes from 71a, where he says he has no idea what virtue is. It is a necessary part of cooperative inquiry, because the way recognizing our own ignorance works is that it prompts us to pursue knowledge. If we find that we already know, we would not have an impetus to pursue an inquiry.

There is a marked difference between the first two states in the educational model at work in the dialogue. The first state, speaking confidently out of ignorance, smacks of presumption and arrogance. But once one recognizes one's ignorance in the second state, that presumption fades into carefulness and attentiveness. Arrogance turns to humility.

When Socrates reduces the slave boy to perplexity, he remarks to Meno:

Soc: So in perplexing him and numbing him like the stingray, have we done him any harm?
Men: I think not.
Soc: In fact, we have helped him to some extent toward finding out the right answer, for up to now not only is he ignorant of it, he will be quite glad to look for it. Up to now, he thought he could speak well and fluently, on many occasions and before large audiences, on the subject....(82d)

Socrates points out two factors here that the reduction to perplexity overcomes: (i) the student's ignorance of her own ignorance, and (ii) the student's willingness to act on and propagate opinions that are in fact wrong. In being reduced to perplexity, the slave boy not only wishes to pursue the truth, but also stops confidently speaking falsities. Now, the moral implications of the difference between not knowing one does not know how to double the area of a square and knowing one does not know are not profound, but those of analogous situations (e.g., knowing one does not know what virtue, piety, or courage is) are. The Euthyphro is
illustrative of this difference. Euthyphro brings charges of impiety against his own father, but he cannot even explain what piety is, and he seems not even to be cognizant of his own ignorance. The consequences include his father's possible death, and he is acting irresponsibly. We suspect that if Euthyphro were to recognize his ignorance, he would no longer pursue his suit against his father.

Meno also undergoes a similar change when he is reduced to perplexity. He cannot give an adequate definition of virtue, so he slowly starts to come to a recognition of his ignorance of virtue. That is, he is started on a progression from unacknowledged ignorance to acknowledged ignorance by the fact that he cannot give a definition of virtue. His confidence in his supposed knowledge is waning. The progression should take the form:

(i) being thrown into perplexity (not being able to answer adequately),
(ii) becoming aware of ignorance,
and (iii) desiring to know.

Each of these stages accords with and supplements states in the model for education in that (i) the reduction to perplexity is the transition stage between (1) the state of speaking confidently out of ignorance to (2) the state of recognizing one's own ignorance. For his part, Meno cannot

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12 Cf. Euthyphro 15d-e.
13 Of course, Euthyphro has other reasons for pursuing this suit beyond his supposed regard for piety. He also wants his inheritance, which has been a long time in the coming.
14 Socrates suggests this progression at 84c in his description of his discussion with the slave boy.
answer. He has been thrown into perplexity, and he is coming to suspect that he does not know what virtue is.

Yet I have spoken about virtue hundreds of times, held forth often on the subject in front of large audiences, and very well too, or so I thought. Now I can't even say what it is. (80b)

The similarity between what Meno says of himself here and what Socrates says of the slave boy at 84b is much too marked to be coincidence. Socrates, by using Meno's own expression, shows his disapproval of Meno's flippancy about the matter by showing how ridiculous Meno appears to those who either know (as with geometry) and those who know they do not know (as with virtue). But Meno lacks patience enough to reflect upon his perplexity. He does not respond to his inability to define virtue by admitting his ignorance and expressing a desire to know what virtue is; instead, he merely admits to the importance of the problem then proceeds to ask after virtue's teachability. But this need not mean that Meno's soul is marred or that he is unfit for inquiry, as some commentators have suggested.\(^{15}\) Instead, it may merely mean that it takes longer for the recognition of our own ignorance in certain matters to come than in others. The slave boy owns up to his ignorance of geometry much more willingly than Meno of virtue for a few reasons:

1) The boy has had no training in geometry and has never

spoken on the matter before, while Meno claims to have had extensive training in discussing virtue and has spoken about it many times in the past.

2) It is much more obvious when people do not know what they are doing in geometry than in discussions of virtue, because there are very concrete ways of determining how things are working out in geometry. That is, Socrates can show the slave boy he is wrong by pointing out that his suggestion quadruples the area of the square instead of doubles it. The criteria for the adequacy of Meno's account are much more slippery.

3) Meno's conception of, and training in, intellectual discussion is more competitive than cooperative. He responds incredulously when Socrates admits his own ignorance(70c). The boy, on the other hand, has had no exposure any style of inquiry, so he has no predilection for either competitive or cooperative inquiry.

Meno may be resistant to owning up to not knowing what virtue is, but that resistance is not an impossible barrier. All it would require for Meno to come to admitting his ignorance is a change of how he saw his discussion with Socrates--were he to see the discussion as a friendly conversation instead of as a competition, he would be more inclined to acknowledge his ignorance. Unfortunately, Socrates seems to be unable to change Meno's mind about the matter.
Thus far I have focused on the moral value of restraint in recognizing our ignorance in a matter. That is, when we see we do not know, we are less likely to blunder about as if we did know. We would not, as Euthyphro does, push to punish people for impiety if we see we do not know what piety is. Moreover, we would see what would be implicitly wrong with such activities—we would see them as hubristic. We would see them as acts of presumption and irresponsibility. I now turn to a description of the moral value of the pursuit of knowledge which comes out of recognizing our ignorance in a matter. As noted earlier, when reduced to perplexity, we should be inclined to recognize our own ignorance and be filled with a desire to come to the truth of the matter. How we go about pursuing that truth, though, must be restrained and tentative inquiry, since we do not know—speaking confidently when we are ignorant is what created the problem to begin with.

After showing that forays into matters unknown can be successful (with his discussion with the slave boy), Socrates attests to the value of not just remaining silent after being reduced to perplexity, but making a go of it:

I shouldn't like to take my oath on the whole story, but one thing I am ready to fight for in word and act— that is, that we shall be better, braver, and more active men if we believe it is right to look for what we don't know than if we believe there is no point in looking because what we don't know we can never discover. (86b-c)
We are improved by pursuing the truth. We become better and braver because we take responsibility for what we do and say. We take a role in shaping our own lives by investigating and questioning the concepts that inform our activities. We strive to make informed decisions. We own up to actions in our past that have been determined by ignorance and misconception. We become more active, because acting and speaking responsibly requires us to be continually attentive. We train ourselves to be honest, intrepid, and thorough in our investigations and our evaluations of others' investigations.

Socrates, in showing Meno some rudimentary rules for defining virtue (e.g., that examples are not definitions, but definitions must meet the test of examples), is teaching him how to contribute to a cooperative inquiry. He is giving Meno the conceptual tools for doing something productive and responsible with his inquiry. He is training Meno to respond to the necessities of a practice. He is showing Meno what excellence is.

We can see, now, how the practice of living the examined life engenders virtue. On one hand, we no longer act irresponsibly by acting out of ignorance. We recognize the problem with acting and speaking confidently when we do not know: innocent people (e.g., Euthyphro's father) can suffer as a consequence. On the other hand, we take it upon ourselves to come to the truth of the matter so that we may
not only speak and act confidently but also with knowledge. We try to make informed and responsible decisions. Once we recognize our ignorance, we try to be attentive to how we tentatively work things out with those who are our fellow inquirers.

**IV**

The difference between being reduced to perplexity (being unable to answer correctly or adequately) and recognizing one's own ignorance is the fact that with the latter, upon being reduced to perplexity, one must acknowledge one's ignorance. That is, teachers can point to the fact that students' attempts do not fulfill the conditions necessary for adequate accounts, as Socrates does with Meno's definitions of virtue, or are simply incorrect, as Socrates does with the slave boy's attempts to double the size of the 2x2 square, but students must make the gesture of acknowledging their own ignorance on their own (no one else can do that for them). A student's ignorance can be revealed by the teacher, but the student must choose by herself to acknowledge that ignorance. The same with the desire to pursue an inquiry into the truth of the matter. The impetus must be internal. The student must see the value in pursuing inquiry, and that impetus cannot be coerced--it can only be evoked. The problem, then, is how teachers can lead students
to come to choose to pursue inquiry by themselves. How can an appreciation for the value of inquiry be evoked?

The impetus to continue inquiry is not generated by being reduced to perplexity. Meno, when he states his paradox—how do we find what we are looking for when we don't know what we are looking for?—is balking at the very idea of continuing inquiry. The slave boy, when shown he does not know, says, "it's no use, Socrates, I just don't know" (84a). He has to be shown how to go on. Now, Socrates provides a good example for him, and he may emulate Socrates in his further attempts at solving similar problems, but what motivates him to do this?

An example might make things clearer here. Alasdair MacIntyre, in his discussion of virtue and training mentions a highly intelligent seven-year-old whom he wishes to teach to play chess. The child has no particular interest in chess, but she really likes candy and has few chances at getting it.

I therefore tell the child that if the child will play chess with me once a week, I will give the child 50 cents worth of candy; moreover, I tell the child that I will always play in such a way that it will be difficult, but not impossible, for the child to win and that, if the child wins, the child will receive an extra 50 cents worth of candy. Thus motivated, the child plays and plays to win.16

At first, the candy alone is the child's reason for playing the game. The teacher hopes that at some point along the

16 Alasdair MacIntyre, After Virtue (Notre Dame U. Press, 1981) p. 188.
way, the child will begin to find some goods specific to chess—that is, ones that do not necessarily lead to sweets. At a certain point, the child will develop a taste (so to speak) for the game—for its gambits, its subtleties, and its nuances. As a consequence, there can be two kinds of goods that would motivate the child to play chess:

On one hand there are those goods externally and contingently attached to chess-playing and other practices by the accidents of social circumstance—in the case of the imaginary child candy, in the case of real adults such goods as prestige, status and money.... On the other hand there are goods internal to the practice of chess which cannot be had in any way but by playing chess for some other game of that specific kind.  

In the case of the first kind of motivation, students are only taught the value of a practice by what it produces—what other goods can be achieved by it. There are many ways for MacIntyre's child to get candy, and were one that provided more candy on a more regular basis to come along, the child motivated solely by the first kind of goods (external goods) would stop playing chess altogether. On the other hand, the child who has developed a real taste for the game (one who has come to appreciate its internal goods) might pursue the other way of getting candy also (out of her love for it), but would continue to play chess no matter how much candy she had.

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17 Ibid., p. 188.
18 That is, chess for the child is analogous to the examined life and the inquiry necessary for it for Plato's students.
Socrates, in his discussion with Anytus, suggests that the sons of Athens' great men, the sons of Pericles, Themistocles, and Thucydides, etc., fall into this chasm between appreciating a practice's external goods and appreciating its internal goods. They pursue only the goods external and accidental to a life of excellence. They pursue praise and prestige. Themistocles' son, despite being exposed to an example of virtue, grew up to be nothing more than a skilled horseman (93d). Thucydides' sons came to be esteemed wrestlers (94c). But none of them esteemed themselves by being virtuous men, despite being given the best education in Athens and having virtuous fathers as role models. These men came to see virtue as one means for attaining praise among many. They, no matter their exposure to their fathers' examples of virtue, never came to see its internal goods. Just as the child who would give up on chess when a more effective candy-procuring means is made available, these men lost interest in pursuing excellence when more readily masterable exercises came to be available. What the problem comes to, then, is that we can provide the necessary conditions for seeing the value of inquiry, but we cannot provide the sufficient conditions for students to see that value. That is, students must recognize their own ignorance in a matter for them to see the value of pursuing the truth of the matter, but having their ignorance pointed out to them is not sufficient to produce the desire to
inquire. Students may be shown the value of inquiry, but they must take it upon themselves to see it.

V

In the opening moments of the dialogue, Socrates compares how, in Thessaly, Gorgias teaches his students to answer questions and how Athenians answer questions. Gorgias, when he arrived in Larissa, captured the hearts of the noblemen there. He then taught Meno and the other members of the nobility the art of oratory:

In particular, he got you in the habit of answering any question you might be asked, with the confidence and dignity appropriate to those who know the answers, just as he himself invites questions of every kind from everyone in the Greek world who wishes to ask, and never fails to answer them (70c, emphasis mine).

Gorgias teaches his students to speak confidently and with authority, but he does not teach them to question each other. He does not give his students the tools to tell good arguments from bad ones; he only teaches them to distinguish when speakers are confident or not. The way disagreements are to be worked out, then, is by way of a struggle of wills, a shouting match, a rhetorical duel. There is no method or standard by which competing claims can be adjudicated and reconciled.

On the other hand, Socrates says that in Athens, "it is the reverse." The citizens of Athens make no pretenses to knowing things they do not know. Socrates ironically remarks
that it is as if all the wisdom had migrated from Athens to Larissa, since:

if you put your question to any of our people, they would all alike laugh and say, You must think I am singularly fortunate, to know whether virtue can be taught or how it is acquired. The fact is that far from knowing whether it can be taught, I have no idea what virtue is (71a).

Socrates then counts himself one of the Athenians who would admit to not knowing what virtue is. The point of this contrast between Athenian and Thessalian dialogical character is to demonstrate two ways we may cope with the suspicion that we may not know. Either we can feign confidence in what we say in order to convince those around us to take what we say to be right, or we can admit that we do not know, speak tentatively, and aspire to find the truth of the matter. As noted earlier, from the point of view of the latter, the former method is a training in presumption and irresponsibility. It is tantamount to a training in complacency in ignorance. However, from the perspective of the competitive speaker (the Larissan and sophist), Socrates’ admission of ignorance is just as incomprehensible. Meno is taken aback at Socrates’ admission. He asks, "is this the report we are to take home about you?" (71c) In Meno’s eyes, Socrates has lost the competition before it even gets started, because the whole point of the competitive model of inquiry is to get others to admit they do not know. As a consequence, when Socrates reduces him to perplexity later in
the dialogue, Meno responds with his puzzle instead of admitting to his ignorance. He does not want to lose, but he cannot see that Socrates is not trying to beat him.

Meno's first definition of virtue for a man is that it "consists of managing the city's affairs capably...so that he will help his friends and injure his foes while taking care to come to no harm himself" (71e). His final attempt to define virtue is that it is "to rejoice in the fine and have power" (77b). Both of these definitions are clues to Meno's predilection for types of inquiry and his motivations for praising and pursuing virtue—namely, that he pursues virtue and inquiry for their external goods. He is interested in virtue because of what comes with it—success, fine things, pleasure, power, etc.. He pursues inquiry for similar reasons—to win arguments and not only to have the power of convincing people they do not know, but to have the power of convincing people that he does know. As a consequence, he is inclined to think of inquiry as coercion and confrontation.

Later, after he has given an example of an adequate definition of shape, Socrates makes a distinction between kinds of questioners: "the clever, disputatious, and quarrelsome kind," and "friendly people, like you and me, [who] want to converse with each other" (75c-d). The first kind are out to refute one another. They work alone. The other kind proceed in a manner more conducive to discussion. They try to maintain the milder and gentler conversational
manner of inquiry. They try to cooperate in their investigation.

Anytus’ mistrust of Socrates comes out when Socrates confounds him by producing counter-examples to his contention that virtue can be taught in Athens. He himself is one of the contentious types of fellow inquirers, and he suspects Socrates of being one. He warns Socrates:

_You seem to me, Socrates, to be too ready to run people down._ My advice to you, if you will listen to it, is to be careful. I dare say that in all cities it is easier to do a man harm than good, and it is certainly so here, as I expect you know yourself._(94e)_

He thinks Socrates is only out to humiliate by proving people do not know. He does not see any value in Socrates’ showing him that he is wrong in thinking that virtue can be taught in Athens, since he is more interested in maintaining his appearance of confidence and dignity as one who knows than in actually being one who knows. For Anytus, too, inquiry into the truth of matters of which he does not know and the excellence it engenders is only a means to ends well beyond it—namely, having power and seeking pleasure.

VI

The _Meno’s_ theory of moral education, though it shows how it is possible to teach virtue, also points to the indissoluble resistances to seeing the goods internal to inquiry. Plato presents a situation in which all the
necessary conditions can be met for moral education to be successful—a reduction to perplexity, a good role model, time for meticulous investigation, a subject with definite requirements—but all these conditions do not amount to a sufficient condition for virtue to be taught. That is, Socrates can show Meno and Anytus the value implicit in admitting they do not know, but, yet proceeding with their inquiries, but he cannot make them see the value in it. Students of virtue must come to see the goods internal to inquiry on their own. They can be given the tools, but only they can decide to use them. Even when conditions are optimal, as with the sons of Athens' great men, students may never come to a recognition of the goods internal to the examined life.

Much of this resistance comes from a certain idea of freedom, viz., that freedom implies that we always know what we really want and what is good for us, and any correction or scepticism from anybody else is an imposition. Socrates gestures toward this idea of freedom when he chastises Meno for resisting the necessities of the subject at hand (86c). Meno values his freedom, and as a consequence, he makes no attempt to govern his actions to accord with the demands that his inquiry with Socrates entails. He refuses to be told what to do even when it has been made clear that (and how) it is for his own good. He acknowledges the importance of pursuing a definition of virtue before inquiring into its
attributes, but is ambivalent to it: "All the same, I would rather consider the question as I put it at the beginning" (86c). He seems complacent in his ignorance—as if he is sure his confidence will win the day when he is around anyone other than Socrates.

This brings us to a re-evaluation of the dialogue's conclusion. What has been shown here is not, as thought before, that no matter how hard we try to apply our reason, we cannot overcome the determinations the gods have made. Instead, it is clear that by applying our reason, we can improve ourselves. Plato's philosophical project is safe, then. What the conclusion that virtue comes from divine dispensation comes to, then, is a gesture toward the mystery of how the student switches from pursuing inquiry for external goods to internal goods. Some students respond and some do not—even when conditions are optimal. Some students will continually see the practice of examining one's life as a means to something beyond it, while others will see the value implicit in it. The success of teaching virtue, then, does not entirely depend on how the teaching goes about. The student must contribute on her own, and the teacher can never be able to bring that about.

The earlier distinction between the quarrelsome questioners and the conversational questioners (at 75d) is at the heart of the issue here. What moral education amounts to is a change of character, and when certain dispositions that
cannot be effected by anyone else but the student are the preconditions for, or preclusions of, successful moral inquiry, from the point of view of the educator, education is as much a question of grace as it is of curriculum. For the student as for the teacher, the transition comes out of nowhere. The value of the examined life becomes evident in the same way that aspects of certain pictures snap into focus when reflected upon (e.g., the Jastrow duck-rabbit). An account of how the change comes about cannot be given, because it would require a description from within a certain framework, and the transition in moral education is a change of frameworks.
Bibliography


