

Practical Reason Unbound: Politics and Human Agency in a Promethean Key

by

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of
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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

Traditional approaches to the empirical research of human action, rational choice theory dominant amongst them, have implicitly adopted philosophical pre-suppositions about human action that are untenable and in need of correction. In this project, I seek to both (a) diagnose these problems by showing that rational choice theory is insufficiently attentive to both the question of what agents are and of what kind of world they occupy, and (b) overcome these problems by offering a conception of practical reason that is more “realistic” in that it incorporates a philosophically convincing account of world and of the practical agent’s relation with it. To that end, I develop a conception of praxis that is centered on the idea that practical agents act within and toward practical *horizons* rather than exercising a faculty of choice within *stable decision spaces*.

Dedication

To Gerald Minsker (1929-2010), James Reynolds (1928-2011), and John Perkins (1921-2011). I was beyond fortunate to have grown up with three grandfathers, and I never imagined that I would lose them all in one year. This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of these wonderful men.

Contents

Abstract.....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	viii
Preface	1
1. Martin Heidegger and the Conceptual Foundations of Praxis	9
1.1 The return to praxis as a fundamental task for philosophy.....	13
1.2 Praxis and the good	24
1.3 The world as horizon.....	29
1.4 Dasein and limits.....	45
1.5 Being and Time, the “Dasein analytic,” and the recovery of praxis.....	50
1.6 The centrality of care.....	63
1.7 The plasticity of horizons	74
1.8 Conclusion: Dasein as praxis, Dasein as horizontal being	77
2. The Stable Decision Space as a Foundational Concept in Rational Choice Theory and its Limits in Conceiving Praxis.....	80
2.1 A brief introduction to decision spaces	86
2.2 Decision spaces in a complex key: decision field theory	94
2.3 Robert Nozick, meta-rationality and the limits of instrumental reason.....	100
2.4 Praxis and world construction, part I: Buchanan and Tullock within and beyond rational choice theory	113
2.5 Praxis and world construction, part II: the deontic constraint argument against rational choice theory	129
2.6 Conclusion.....	138

3. Securing a New Footing for the Philosophy of Praxis.....	140
3.1 Praxis beyond acts and things: Alvin Plantinga and possible worlds.....	141
3.2 Practical reason as negation and thus as possibility: Roy Bhaskar and transformative praxis	150
3.3 Praxis as struggle with and within horizons: Sartre and the practico-inert	167
3.4 The social field as an infinite game: game theory within and beyond its limits	189
3.5 Apples, oranges, or nothing? Horizons, worlds, and the theory of preferences	209
3.6 The flexible edges of praxis: notes on care	221
4. Praxis as Transcendence	226
4.1 Infinite desiring machines: the passions and maximization	227
4.2 Hope's privileged place among the affects: Ernst Bloch and praxis	252
4.3 Brief excursus on phenomenology	270
4.4 Practical transcendence in action: the entrepreneur	273
4.5 Practical transcendence in the polity	293
Conclusion	304
Works Cited	312
Biography.....	319

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Preface

We humans are practical beings. Our interaction with the world is characterized by what the Greeks named *praxis*, by an active concern with our possibilities and with the good and goods, and this concern demands that we seek to realize possibilities in the world, our grandiose life projects, our petty, trivial daily tasks, and everything in between. In doing so, we rely on practical reason, and thus on the ability to make decisions, to weigh costs and benefits and pros and cons. Our practical activity is the forging ground of the household, the economy, the polis, of institutional life, of science and technology, of every aspect of the lived human world. The philosophy of human action, since Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* at the very latest, has been concerned with understanding what praxis is, how it functions, what limits us as practical beings, how we make decisions, and how our understanding of praxis—our practical self-reflection—should inform our thinking about economics, ethics, and politics. In this project, I seek to contribute to this running discourse by making a two-pronged general argument: (1) that the institutionally predominant means of understanding praxis, found in rational choice theory¹ and the bulk of the quantitative social sciences, are fundamentally faulty in the crucial respect that they cannot capture the full scope of human praxis, even if they might well be useful in the pursuit of more limited aims; and (2) that if we are to grasp praxis in its essence it is not enough to merely criticize RCT, as so many have done. Nothing less

¹ Because of its frequent usage, rational choice theory will hereafter be reduced to the acronym "RCT."

than the constructive project of providing new, more philosophically defensible fundamentals for the understanding of praxis can get us closer to the essence of praxis. While this project is strongly engaged with both of these arguments, its engagement with (1) is always subordinate to the goals encapsulated in (2). My criticisms of RCT are always undertaken in the name of overcoming the deficiencies that I find. Even so, the novel conception of praxis set forth here should not be read as an attempt to negate RCT or to argue for its irrelevance or obsolescence, but rather an attempt to discern its proper place within a broader effort to understand what it means to be a practical being.

This project will be divided into four chapters and a brief conclusion. Chapter 1, “Martin Heidegger and the Conceptual Foundations of Praxis,” is the only chapter that is concerned with the thought of a particular thinker. In this chapter, I argue that we find in Heidegger’s thought, particularly from his early, pre-*Being and Time* (1927) period, a number of invaluable resources for reinvigorating the philosophy of praxis. To be a practical being means to confront the flux of experience and to confront death. Care (*Sorge*), our concern for our possibilities, makes our existence as human beings—and thus of perception, of meaning, of action in general—possible, and care confronts the world as flux by always already being in the future and also in the past in crucial respects. In every present moment, we exist as futural and also as tethered to the past, torn between our limitations as beings that are always already on a particular practical trajectory, contending with a fundamentally uncertain world. Most importantly for my purposes, there is latent in Heidegger’s practical philosophy the idea of practical *horizons*, a concept that guides many of my attempts to re-think praxis in novel ways. The

phenomenological return to the lived experience of praxis, inspired by Heidegger's phenomenology in his early work, will provide the basis for much of this project and can be seen as making decisive contributions to my conceptual architecture.

Chapter 2, "The Stable Decision Space as a Foundational Concept in Rational Choice Theory and its Limits in Conceiving Praxis," concerns itself largely with the critical task of understanding the basic axioms of RCT. I argue in this chapter that RCT, in spite of its diversity, can be boiled down to a set of assumptions about possibility, a set of assumptions that I will designate using the term *stable decision spaces*. RCT must always assume that practical agents confront immanent sets of possibilities, and we may thus expect RCT to successfully illuminate decision making only when decision makers themselves confront such situations. My critique of RCT in this chapter—and throughout the project—must be understood as a critique in the Kantian sense, not an attempt to engage in a thoroughgoing theoretical takedown but rather an attempt to discern conditions under which certain forms of knowledge are possible. RCT often attempts to overcome its foundational limitations through various means, some of which are discussed in this chapter, but its limitations haunt it inescapably. Many critiques of RCT would stop here, but I choose to push further, namely by arguing that if we take the axioms of RCT seriously, what results is not always what we expect. Via engagements with the thought of Robert Nozick, Buchanan and Tullock's *Calculus of Consent* and Joseph Heath's *Following the Rules*, I hope to show that the practical agent of RCT is necessarily a being concerned with the world as a whole, insofar as the world is always

the inescapable staging ground of our lives and projects, and we cannot help but be concerned with how that world is shaped.

Chapter 3, “Securing a New Footing for the Philosophy of Praxis,” is where the more constructive aspect of the project begins to take shape. Where Chapter 2 is largely critical with hints of a constructive project sprinkled throughout, Chapter 3 is thoroughly engaged with the question of what praxis comes to look like when we begin from different axioms than those that undergird RCT. To give a few examples, when we understand praxis as concern for possible worlds, what we end up with is a transformed sense of praxis’ very object, of what it is fundamentally about, as well as a transformed theory of preferences. When we begin with the assumption, furthermore, that our confrontation with the world involves not only a confrontation with immanent possibilities but also a fundamental comportment of practical *transcendence* vis-à-vis the world, we discover what it would mean to engage in transformative praxis—and also why the weight of the past and of history are so difficult for praxis to properly confront.

Chapter 4, “Praxis as Transcendence,” builds on the constructive project begun in Chapter 3 by tracing some of the consequences of the avenues of thought opened up there. I seek to show, first, that *homo aeconomicus* is not quite what we think it is at first, and that if we take the presumptions about *homo aeconomicus* found in the so-called “anthropological” section of Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, what we end up with is precisely the kind of “passionate,” horizon- and world-transformative creature that is not to be found in RCT. Using the thought of Ernst Bloch, I seek to show why hope and practical transcendence are mutual conditions of possibility for one another, and why the affects

are central to our understanding of praxis. I also hope to illustrate what practical transcendence means by using the figure of the entrepreneur as an exemplar of much of what I have discussed throughout the project. In general, Chapter 4 is something of a mixed affair, more diffuse in subject matter than the chapters preceding it. This is so by design. There is still much work to be done in our understanding of praxis, and this chapter seeks only to suggest what some of the next steps might be. Above all, I hope to show that there is much to be gained from taking up these questions anew.

For some, the project might seem to come to completion in an unsatisfying way. There is no polished, finalized, ready-made “theory of praxis” on offer that can act as a replacement for RCT; no broad-based discussion of the political consequences of a new conception of praxis; and no set of prescriptions to be delivered to the practicing social scientist concerning how she should change her ways. That is because my project is considerably narrower than that. I merely aim to engage in a sympathetic immanent critique of RCT and to highlight the ways in which the account of human action found there necessarily pushes up against certain limitations, and some hopefully well-grounded suggestions about how we can begin to push beyond those limitations, as well as some of the building blocks for a new—or perhaps renewed?—philosophy of action.

Before I begin, I feel that a few words on my chosen title are in order. Prometheus, as most versions of the ancient Greek myth goes, defied Zeus, stole fire from the gods, and gave it to humankind as an act of kindness. He is the founder of technology and, in some variations of the legend, the creator of the human race itself. Prometheus eponymously embodies foresight in his act, and he is often portrayed in

contrast to his brother Epimetheus (“seeing after”), who gave useful traits to all of the animals but then—consistent with his lack of foresight—accidentally had none left to give when it came time to give humans a positive attribute. His brother was forced to compensate for this oversight and was severely punished: Zeus bound him to a rock, where his liver is eaten out every single day by an eagle, only to grow back again the next (presumably for all eternity).

The Prometheus myth has undergone myriad reconfigurations through the millennia. Hesiod portrayed him as a trickster. Goethe used the Prometheus myth to affirm human creativity. Percy Bysshe Shelley understood love as the Promethean power *par excellence*, while Prometheus finds his way into the title of his wife Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus*. The tendency in modernity has been to see Prometheus as a symbol, often politically charged, of essential elements of the human race: “As rebel, traitor, culture hero, and protector of mankind, Prometheus embodies the human condition with all its potential for brilliant innovation and for cruel suffering,”² not to mention that he stands as the “immortal prototype of man as the original rebel and affirmer of his fate.”³

The kind of transformation wrought by Prometheus in giving humans fire was one that can be understood neither as a gradual shift in states of affairs nor as a change that emerges organically out of the conditions that preceded it. The bestowal of fire—and thereby of technology, *technē*—upon humankind must be seen as a qualitative rupture in

² Dougherty (2006), 3.

³ Kerényi (1963), 17.

circumstances, a discreet shift in the fabric of possibility. In real life, fire was of course not stolen from the Titans on Olympus, but the discovery of fire likely initiated an immediate qualitative shift in human history, and I include Prometheus in my title because I am convinced—and hope to convince the reader—that humans are capable of introducing qualitative shifts into the world (whether they are always advised to do so is another matter entirely). This kind of transformative action is not something separate from practical rationality and it does not involve the temporary suspension of it. It is part and parcel of praxis, a possibility that always inheres in the nature of praxis, and any conception of praxis that does not honor this is one that we should deem suspect and incapable of grasping the breadth of our practical experience and capabilities. But Prometheus is not just a redeemer/transformer: he is also a sufferer. He ends up bound to a rock. Human praxis is no different: the weight and inertia of the past in the form of tradition and the already-present lived world—what Sartre calls the *practico-inert* (discussed in Chapter 3)—often seems total to us. *And yet*—we instigate revolutions of all kinds: political, cultural, economic, technological, scientific. We’ve people on the moon and have expanded our average life expectancy to previously unimaginable levels; we build and destroy civilizations and invent new regime types; everywhere we look we see farm plots turn into factories and old factory grounds into office space for social media start-ups; the list could go on indefinitely. This is the inescapable double bind of praxis and the Gordian knot at the heart of this project.

I will not return to the myth of Prometheus until the conclusion. But throughout these pages, the image of humans as beings that are deeply ensnared in circumstances

that often stultify and break them should resonate strongly with us. At the same time, another image, that of human beings as creatures that possess occasionally awe-inspiring world-transformative practical powers, should resonate in our imagination to the same extent. These twin images should give pictorial body to the new conception of praxis that I seek to convince the reader is the only truly defensible one.

1. Martin Heidegger and the Conceptual Foundations of Praxis

“To act phronetically is by far the primary basis for living a full life.”
—Sophocles, *Antigone*

Martin Heidegger might strike one as a strange thinker to engage with on the subject of praxis for two reasons: (1) because *any* engagement with Heidegger is fraught with an intrinsic set of difficulties, stemming from his political engagements and the intellectual currents with which he was more or less explicitly engaged (like so-called “vitalism” and “decisionism”); and (2) because the rest of this project deals not with specific thinkers but rather seeks to operate on a much more analytical level, and when thinkers *are* engaged, it is usually because they stand in as representatives of concepts (e.g. Roy Bhaskar for transformative praxis, Ernst Bloch for hope, and so on). But an engagement with Heidegger’s thought is justified, I think, for two reasons: (1) Heidegger is the only modern thinker to engage with the question of praxis and the thicket of concepts surrounding it, from *phronēsis* to *technē* to being-in-the-world and many others, in as radical and convincing fashion as he has; and (2) many of the implications of Heidegger’s “practical” thought have received little of the attention that they deserve.¹

While a number of thinkers have taken on *phronēsis* as a philosophical and political

¹ Heidegger’s practical thought is certainly not without scholarly engagement. See Kisiel (1993), Volpi (1994), Nancy (2002), Sadler (1996), all of which are discussed in this chapter, as well as many others. But that scholarly engagement has tended to be devoted to potted summaries of Heidegger’s practical philosophy and to intellectual-historical work about his engagement with Aristotle rather than an effort to put that thought to use in engagement with other conceptions of praxis, as I undertake it.

theme—e.g. Heidegger’s student Hans-Georg Gadamer,² Alasdair MacIntyre,³ and Michael Oakeshott⁴—and *praxis* more broadly—e.g. many thinkers within the Marxist tradition⁵—as central philosophical concerns, few have given proper conceptual weight to Heidegger’s reinvigoration of the Aristotelian notion of *praxis*. Concepts such as circumspection [*Umsicht*], the plane of action [*das Woraufhin*], and our essential directedness toward the future [*Immer-schon-vorweg-sein*, literally always-being-ahead-of-oneself], to name the most central, specifically tie *praxis* to human temporality and to an uncertain world that is always fundamentally in movement. Thinkers engaged with the collapse of metaphysics and the “death of God,” including John Caputo,⁶ Gianni Vattimo,⁷ and Santiago Zabala,⁸ have given *some* weight to the “practical” Heidegger, particularly those thinkers like Franco Volpi and Theodore Kisiel who have taken great pains to demonstrate the link between Heidegger’s engagement with Aristotle and works like *Being and Time* (1927) (and often to later works as well).⁹ But never, as far as I know, has the “practical” Heidegger been used in debates concerning the philosophy of the social sciences. The considerable insight of works like his *Phenomenological*

² See Gadamer (1975), particularly pages 21 and 22.

³ MacIntyre (2007).

⁴ While *phronēsis* is a theme throughout Oakeshott’s corpus, even though it is rarely explicitly named, his *Experience and its Modes* is the most direct treatment (see Oakeshott (1933), particularly chapter 5, “Practical Experience”).

⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, Georg Lukács and Rosa Luxemburg are good twentieth-century examples.

⁶ Caputo (1987, 2007).

⁷ Vattimo (2004).

⁸ Zabala (2009).

⁹ Kisiel (1993) is Kisiel’s most sustained engagement, and the bulk of Volpi’s scholarly corpus is devoted to this issue, although Volpi (1994) is the most immediately relevant example.

Interpretations of Aristotle (1922), *Basic Concepts of Aristotelian Philosophy*¹⁰ (1924), and the more praxis-oriented sections of *Being and Time* (1927) have not yet been brought forth in light of an engagement with basic questions concerning human action—particularly the question of practical rationality. For political theorists, this is particularly unfortunate, as these are questions that never lie far from the very heart of political questioning. Overcoming this lack is the primary objective of this chapter.

While Heidegger's practical philosophy achieves its most mature expression in many senses in *Being and Time*'s so-called "Dasein"¹¹ analytic," his *Basic Concepts* provides a more wide-ranging presentation of the fundamentals of his early thought, both in the depth of its questioning and in the rich breadth of concepts that it employs. What Heidegger is seeking is nothing less than a turn to philosophy as "originary ethics,"¹² meaning a turn away from the thorny metaphysical and theological questions that have troubled us for so many centuries and toward the question of who and what we are—how our interaction with the world functions, how our relations with one another are possible,

¹⁰ Hereafter designated as *PIA* and *BC* respectively.

¹¹ This concept is notoriously difficult and complex, and occupies Heidegger during many of his most productive years, at least in the early stage of his career (when it is a more explicit theme in his work than it is later on). In this chapter, it will suffice to trim down its multivalent meaning to suit our purposes. When I use the term "Dasein" here, I designate the specific mode of being of human beings, as qualitatively distinguished from things, gods, animals (at least most animals), and anything else we can imagine. I acknowledge that this reduction and simplification does considerable violence to the richness of Heidegger's project in the works under consideration here, and I can respond only by contending that nothing that I say about Dasein here compromises the many other aspects of Heidegger's discussion of Dasein (e.g. the aesthetic, metaphysical, theological, linguistic, and other implications of conceiving humans as Dasein). I should also note that Dasein remains "Dasein" when used in the plural in German, and I follow that usage in English.

¹² Nancy (2002).

what constitutes our relationship with language and history, and so on. While many Heideggerian themes are readily visible in this period, from the overcoming of Western metaphysics to the return to the question of being, it has become well-established in the literature on Heidegger that these themes are inseparable from Heidegger's engagement with humans as primordially *practical* beings.¹³ Franco Volpi, for example, provides us with a basic conceptual nexus in an appropriately terse form: "Dasein is praxis."¹⁴ That is, if we are to properly understand the peculiar type of being embodied by human beings alone, then this mode of inquiry must proceed by reaching to the very heart of praxis. So what does it mean if praxis constitutes our very "essence," our most basic mode of being? What coherent pictures of "the human" does such a return to praxis disturb, demolish or augment? What can be "recovered" via such questioning? My essential argument here is that what we uncover is the *worldliness* of praxis. This seems like an obvious claim, but it masks subtleties that demand attention. For Heidegger, *any* conception of praxis must be bound up with *some* conception of the world, no matter how rudimentary. What we gain from Heidegger's thought is a particular conception of the world as an ever-shifting, never-settled constellation of practical *horizons* within which our activity takes place—a world to which we respond and with which we contend by continuously creating, modifying, and preserving horizons. Anything that we do, from our most basic projects and choices to our most complex undertakings, involves working with and through

¹³ Why, for example, confront the whole of Western metaphysics, from a Heideggerian perspective, if not to combat the ways in which metaphysics limits our practical comportment and prevents us from being more attuned and capacious practical agents in the world?

¹⁴ Volpi (1994).

horizons. The *Menschenbild*¹⁵ put forth by Heidegger is one that is attuned to our practical condition in a philosophically unique way. In later chapters, I will use Heidegger's basic insights into our practical condition as a critical tool. In this chapter, I will (a) undertake a close reading of the three texts in question in an effort to systematize Heidegger's practical philosophy into a limited set of theses primed for critical engagement, and then (b) argue that Heidegger's implicit idea of the human is theoretically convincing and worthy of much further consideration.

1.1 The return to praxis as a fundamental task for philosophy

We see the basic roots of Heidegger's thinking concerning praxis in his lecture course from Winter 1921/2, "Phenomenological Interpretations of Aristotle." He begins the course with a sharp criticism of "university philosophy" and its forgetfulness of "factual life," which is the true ground of philosophy (or, more accurately, of *philosophizing* as a continuous return to the reality of our concrete being-in-the-world). For Heidegger, philosophy is a fundamental "how" of life [*Grundwie des Lebens*] that continuously pushes back toward life itself, its situation, its character, its limits. He seeks to rescue the concept of life from the idea that it is a "thing" that can be understood the

¹⁵ This is a term that I use on several occasions throughout this project because its usual translation, "philosophical anthropology," is rather unwieldy and not an accurate translation anyway. In German, *Menschenbild* literally means "picture of the human." It is what results when we attempt to put together some kind of total conception of what human beings are, how they act, what they are made of, etc. Henceforth, I will use the term "idea of the human" for the sake of the reader, but it should be known that this is always intended as a translation from the German.

way that other things can and to restore the sense of life as process, as a “how,” and he seeks to do so via some of the philosophical anchoring points that he finds in then-contemporary rejections of the rationalism of the heirs of Kant.¹⁶ In German, “Leben” is both a noun and a verb, and Heidegger seeks quite simply to make life as a verb, life as *living*, a subject for philosophy, and thus in order to take up the question of praxis—which is inseparable from any and all life/living—in a radical fashion.¹⁷

Early in the *PIA*, we see a concept emerge that will play a decisive role in both his early work and in *Being and Time*: “Repetition [*Wiederholung*]: everything hangs on its meaning.”¹⁸ For Heidegger, repetition is not meant the way that it is used in colloquial speech. Rather, it is another name for the fundamental instability of being. Inspired by Søren Kierkegaard’s reflections on human anxiety in our confrontation with the world, death, and God, Heidegger locates repetition at the very heart of praxis, and thus installs the world as uncertainty at that very heart as well. The world is characterized by repetition (*Wiederholung*, literally “catching again” or “grabbing again”) because the world *as a whole* always presents itself anew to us. Elements of the world might persist

¹⁶ Here, Heidegger is indebted to the so-called *Lebensphilosophie* of Wilhelm Dilthey and others. A more in-depth engagement with *Lebensphilosophie* is beyond the scope of this project, although an investigation of praxis according to *Lebensphilosophie* might give us fruitful insights at least into the history of the concept of praxis.

¹⁷ This is similar to my aim in this dissertation. RCT understands itself as a theory of praxis, usually as *the* theory of praxis par excellence (if others theories are taken up by it at all), and just as Heidegger responds to the academic philosophy of his day by returning to what he took to be the fundamentals of life/praxis, I seek to respond to the political and social research of my day by returning to the very same set of questions. Analogous to Heidegger’s reaction against understanding life in an intransitive sense, I am reacting against understanding practical reason in *its* intransitive sense by seeking to recover praxis as it is lived, as it comes to pass in the world.

¹⁸ *PIA*, 85.

over long periods of time, and aspects of our experience may be marked by a great deal of stability, but stability itself is grounded in the world—a world which as a whole is constantly on the move, constantly slipping through our fingers.¹⁹ Repetition in Heidegger’s sense here can be read as in many ways the very antithesis of our colloquial usage. It is precisely *because* being continuously presents itself anew, in a non-repeated and perhaps non-repeatable fashion, that the repetition of anything is able to stand out for us as exceptional (as when, for example, a baseball team repeats as World Series champions, a success that is remarkable because of the way that it confronts a world that is hostile to that repetition).²⁰

It is through repetition that we must understand Heidegger’s conception of praxis, which Heidegger uses in its broadest conceivable sense: as the confrontation between life/living²¹ and the world characterized by repetition and thus by fundamental fluctuation. Living means being concerned with possibility; this concern takes place in a *world*. Living and world as concepts are analytically inseparable from one another. The world is that in which, out of which, for which, with which, against which, on which,

¹⁹ It is this slipperiness of the world that also grounds Heidegger’s famed “destruction of metaphysics,” which is intended to shatter our faith in metaphysics because metaphysics can never form an eternal image of world (when we understand world in the proper sense, of course).

²⁰ Caputo (1987), particularly Part One, “Repetition and the Genesis of Hermeneutics” (p. 11-94), traces the concept through its inception in Kierkegaard and beyond Heidegger into the work of Derrida and the post-Heideggerian tradition. Caputo also goes to great lengths to ground his own conception of hermeneutics, as well as his conception of praxis, in the idea of repetition.

²¹ Henceforth in this chapter I will simply use “living” instead of life, for reasons that should already be clear.

toward which, and from which living lives.²² “Living is in itself world-oriented; ‘living’ and ‘world’ are not two objects existing for themselves, like a table, to which the chair sitting in front of it is spatially related.”²³ Inert matter is not “world.” World emerges only when living as a “how” of being comports itself with respect to other things, to be concerned with its possibilities. In order to truly understand living, we must apply interpretive force to our factual condition [*Abstand*]: “This forcing is not a... violence and arbitrariness of a rootless, foreign, ordering systematicity, typification and so on, but is rather demanded by factual living itself.”²⁴ This is precisely what makes Heidegger’s undertaking phenomenological—rather than positivistic—and calls him to a phenomenological reading of Aristotle, who as far we know was the first thinker in the West to concern himself with such fundamental questions concerning praxis as living and world.

While *PIA* sets out the philosophical stakes of this question, it is from his *BC* that we can begin to piece together Heidegger’s conception of praxis. While he claims that his sole purpose in this work is to uncover the “*ground* out of which these basic [Aristotelian] concepts grow, and *how* they grew, meaning that the basic concepts should be seen in their specific *conceptuality*,”²⁵ it is clear that Heidegger’s aims are not quite so neutral. For it is unmistakable that Heidegger’s twofold aim is (1) to engage in *philosophy*, which he opposes to Socratic dialectic and to sophistry, both of which he sees

²² *PIA*, 85.

²³ *Ibid*, 86.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 87.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 4.

as giving off the mere appearance of true passage to matters themselves, implying that past interpreters of Aristotle have evaded Aristotle's genuine questions in the name of constructing arid systems; and (2) to recover an authentic core of Aristotelian thinking from the Middle Ages and "Hellenistic school philosophy" and their effort to crystallize Aristotle into a corpus of logic,²⁶ which is solely concerned with the passing on of "technical possibilities" in thinking rather than with a "confrontation with *things* [*Sachen*]."²⁷ Aristotle, according to Heidegger, has had the misfortune of being transformed into a purely metaphysical thinker, whose major contribution to the West was supposedly to have tamed and ossified being into orders and categories. Heidegger wants to engage with the usual array of Aristotelian concepts (e.g. *technē*, *phronēsis*, *prohairesis*) but wants to do so in a way that makes them "come alive,"²⁸ as Kant, according to Heidegger, re-vivified logic. Heidegger calls us to re-engage Aristotle in this way because he wants to place us once again "in pursuit of the scientific [*wissenschaftlichen*] explication that Aristotle supplies"²⁹ and thus to rescue us from the centuries of misunderstanding experienced by the works of Aristotle, the acme of which was found in the "controversy surrounding universals"³⁰ of medieval thinkers and their "pedantic misunderstandings."³¹ Whether or not we accept Heidegger's curt dismissal of the central debates of the Middle Ages (debates prompted by the rediscovery of

²⁶ *BC*, 9.

²⁷ *Ibid.* Italics are mine.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 16.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 17.

Aristotle), his creative reworking of Aristotle is a welcome one simply because it is so fruitful.

What we gain from a reading of Heidegger's *BC* is a preliminary understanding of what he will later call *Dasein*. Heidegger begins with a discussion of Aristotle's claim that human beings can be understood as a *zoon logon echon* [a living thing possessing *logos*].³² This understanding of human being has deep practical implications for Heidegger. It is our possession of *logos* that makes human beings into beings-in-a-world [*Sein-in-einer-Welt*]. This description places *Dasein* in fundamental opposition to beings that are merely "there." Ordinary things do not have a world; they are simply surrounded by other "stuff" that they do not perceive. *Logos* most fundamentally designates our status as beings for whom the appearances of things are at issue; for us, there is only appearance because we occupy a world. Heidegger's delineation of the character of human being as distinct from other types of being is put forth at least partially to underscore *Dasein*'s practical, worldly character. And because *Dasein* has such a worldly, practical character, it cannot be understood as a "what" in a static way—the way that a tree is a tree—but rather as a *how*. What, then, is the best way to grasp this "how?" Should we do so biologically? Anthropologically? Theologically?

In response to questions such as these, Heidegger emphasizes that the peculiar "how" of *Dasein* as *zoon logon echon* cannot be understood biologically as a set of static

³² For Heidegger, this also works the other way around: *Dasein* is possessed *by* the *logos* as well. This other meaning corresponds much more directly to the "later" Heidegger and his presentation of humans as open to the mystery of being (this is also the period in his life in which Heidegger more or less abandons his concern for praxis as a philosophical theme).

characteristics or markers of categorical differentiation, nor can it be understood anthropologically via Dasein's outward forms of appearance, nor as something "wild, deep or mystical" per se. It is simply one "category of being"³³ among others. But what does being-in-a-world have to do with *logos*? For Heidegger, the world always "speaks" to living things in some way. The world emerges as a *world* for living things because the world expresses itself [*Sichaussprechen*] in some way. This holds even if that relationship is a primitive one. To fish, water and other marine life forms are perceived *as* something, e.g. *as* threatening, *as* food, and so on. What Heidegger refers to as *apophansis*, the "as" structure of appearance, applies for all living beings. While bacteria may not have a very well-developed apophantic capability, they certainly do respond to the stimuli that constitute their world. Heidegger even goes so far as to say that "where speaking stops, where the living thing no longer speaks, we speak of 'death.'"³⁴ The substance and essence [*ousia*] of living is this worldliness, bound up with appearance. Things appear to us "as" something, in such and such a way, precisely because living must respond to the world, survive within it, flourish within it. For where else would living do so if not in the world?

This says a great deal about living in general, but what about Dasein in particular? What makes it special among the many types of living things out there? Here, Heidegger turns to Aristotle's definition of human being as *zoon praktike tis tou logon echontos*

³³ Ibid, 21.

³⁴ Ibid, 21.

[practical life form in possession of language].³⁵ Note that in this definition Aristotle has explicitly put praxis in the equation. While all living is practical, not all living is in possession of language the way that we are. Humans are thus those special creatures capable of using language as a practical tool (to organize projects, to give directions, to guide conduct, and so on). At this point in the text (§9), Heidegger takes a somewhat abrupt turn toward the *polis*. But this should not surprise us, for the essence of political life and its attendant proximity to the question of praxis was a central question for Heidegger during this period.³⁶ While the polis is merely a “*possibility* of human living”³⁷ rather than an *essential* characteristic of human living that we constantly embody and realize,³⁸ the fact that it is indeed possible says a great deal about Dasein and its practical possibilities. Because the world appears to us in this or that way [*apophainesthai*] and we, as practical beings, are capable of responding to it and engaging in practical uses of language, humans are thereby capable of forms of living and being together that other creatures are not. The essential difference for humans is that they possess the capacity to be with one another [*koinonia, Miteinandersein*] or the possibility of collective living. Other living beings certainly live “with” one another in a spatial/material sense—like fish in schools, ants in anthills, bees in swarms—but what

³⁵ Ibid, 43.

³⁶ This period also finds him making his many questionable political decisions, i.e. not only enthusiastically joining the NSDAP but also seeking to become its leading intellectual.

³⁷ Ibid, 45. Italics are mine.

³⁸ By this, Heidegger means that the polis is always an *achievement* and never a mere substrate of humans’ “natural” sociality, or of what Heidegger would later refer to in *Being and Time* as being-with [*Mit-sein*]. Such sociality is surely the condition of possibility of the polis, but it is not a sufficient condition. The polis takes a lot of work and is always in danger.

they almost all lack is collective praxis a meaningful sense. The deepest condition of possibility for collective praxis is the human capacity to reveal things to one another as good and bad, desirable and undesirable.³⁹ While some animals, like dogs, might have primitive capacities to direct one another, what they lack is any capability whatsoever to *discuss* the good and the bad, to make claims and counter-claims about it. Animals clearly possess the quality of being placed next to another in space, but they lack the quality of being able to speak with one another, the sharing of complex information, denial/refutation, and linguistic contestation. Another way to express this difference is to draw the distinction that Aristotle draws between *phonē*, which is simply expressive sound, possessed by whales and birds and many others, and *logos*. Both define ways in which the living thing confronts the world—taking on the basic forms of recommending and discouraging in the most basic sense (*sympheron* and *blaberon*)—and provide the foundations of living together. On the lowest end of the scale might be the exclamation from a friend that my clothes are on fire (“Put it out! Put it out!”); on the higher end might be the attempt to convince someone that her life will be more peaceful if she renounces urbane consumerism and moves to the country. While this account of language and praxis does not *yet* suggest that human praxis is fundamentally shaped by horizons, we can begin to see how the socio-linguistic constitution of Dasein makes praxis in the fullest sense possible: out of our often collective orientation toward the good and our confrontation with the world as flux emerges a creature that does not simply respond to

³⁹ Ibid, 47.

its world but in fact always already acts *in relation to it*. Both individuals and groups of whatever size and complexity continually respond to the flux of experience through praxis. The development of language, for both Aristotle and Heidegger, is the characteristic means by which we do so, which in turn enables us to practically confront the world more capaciously, in a more complex fashion, with a better arsenal of responses to the vicissitudes of fortune.

Elsewhere, Aristotle provides a related expression for the Dasein of humans: *psyches energeia*. Human Dasein is (a) a practical form of living (like all forms of living) that (b) possesses language—as we have laid out already—and is (c) characterized by *psyche*, a “soul”—although certainly not of an eternal/Platonic/Christian sort—that continuously acts not only within the world but upon itself and in relation to the good. This relationship with the good is labeled *agathon*. While *agathon* is typically translated as simply “the good,” Heidegger understands this term from this standpoint of his broader project of resurrecting practical philosophy. For Heidegger, *agathon* is not simply the good in some kind of neutral way or as something “out there” that we seek,⁴⁰ but rather names our status as beings for whom the good is at issue. Even plants can be ensouled, but to be ensouled as a *zoon logon echon* is to have an orientation toward the good that is subject to modification, questioning, and discussion (as noted above with respect to language). The Aristotelian notion of *energeia* (activity or operation) in this formulation is important because it calls on us to understand this relationship to the good as being a

⁴⁰ Strangely enough, Heidegger would likely concur with important aspects of G.E. Moore’s discussion of the so-called “naturalistic fallacy” concerning the good and its ineffability.

mode of activity. We exist *as* a relationship with the good, and once we cease having and *being* that relationship, even if we're still breathing and our heart keeps beating, it's difficult to call us alive in any of the more restrictive senses of the term.⁴¹ Heidegger would likely accept the highly Aristotelian claim that it is simply analytically true that praxis seeks some sort of good. "*Agathon* is primarily *end*, telos, more exactly *peras* [limit]."⁴² It might be somewhat ill advised to engage in too complex a discussion of the good and goodness in this context. It will suffice for my purposes to say that *agathon* simply names our status as beings that are *toward* something, always after something, always pushing toward some kind of limit. Even when praxis takes on forms that Heidegger deems perverse, e.g. the characteristically modern drive to master nature or the pursuit of endless bodily pleasure at the expense of other possible commitments, there is still a good that is being sought, namely the securing of a longer lifespan, enhanced economic productivity, etc. But free-floating definitions of this sort are not terribly satisfying from a theoretical standpoint. Fortunately, Heidegger's discussion of the good in the *Basic Concepts* provides more sound theoretical anchoring points for unlocking this deeply complex relationship.

⁴¹ The idea of the good gives rise, of course, to some of the most difficult of philosophical questions. In this chapter, I will avoid as many of those deep questions as possible. Thus, when I claim that human beings have and are perhaps defined by a relationship with the good, I am not necessarily implying that there is a single highest good for us, or that we cannot have a multiplicity of goods, or that there is some good "behind" all of the various goods that we seek. My general argument about praxis may indeed force me to fall on one of the many sides of this debate, but I will enter such debates tentatively and only when necessary.

⁴² *BC*, 62.

1.2 Praxis and the good

Given that being human means having a relationship to the good that other forms of living things likely do not, what does it then mean for us to have such a relationship? For Heidegger, we relate to the good as to a limit toward which we are always pushing.⁴³ We are always on the way to some good, be it simple pleasure (*hedone*), social honor and recognition (*timē*), victory or mastery over others (Plato would call this desire *thymos*),⁴⁴ eternal salvation, equilibrium with our environment,⁴⁵ a longer life span, and any number of others. On top of that, it is usually difficult to disentangle these many disparate goods that we seek. Bodily pleasure and a sense of peace are difficult to separate, as are social esteem and a feeling of power vis-à-vis others, to give only two simple examples. The notion of telos, alongside our status as fundamentally teleological beings, draws the concepts of praxis and the good together. Dasein⁴⁶ is characterized as life [*zoē*] with a concern for its own being that exists as a being-in-the-world. As we have seen before, this continuous, unceasing concern—and Heidegger will later distinguish this form of concern from “care” (*Sorge*, as opposed to *Besorgen*)—is the essence of all living qua

⁴³ This echoes, even if slightly discordantly, Michel Foucault’s notion of a “limit-attitude” from his “What is Enlightenment?” essay in Foucault (1984) as well as Romand Coles’ and Wendy Brown’s shared conception of radical democratic ethics as “edgework.” See Coles (2005) and Brown (2005).

⁴⁴ These three examples of possible goods are taken directly from Aristotle himself.

⁴⁵ Eternal salvation and equilibrium with the natural environment are of course nowhere to be found in Aristotle’s writings, but are nonetheless examples of ways of understanding the good.

⁴⁶ As I have done so far and will continue to do henceforth, I will use the term Dasein to refer to human Dasein. In parts of the *Basic Concepts*, Heidegger uses the term more broadly for any kind of “being-there,” but such references are rare, and it’s always clear when human Dasein is intended and when not.

living. Teleology and concern for possibilities are inseparable. The teleological nature of humans is fraught with tension, both because we have a plethora of goods that we seek in the world and also because teleology draws us out into the world in complex ways that are not always subject to external empirical grasp. Teleology is thus not resolvable into any sort of simplified means-ends relationship, as if a human actor simply has a goal *G* at time *t*₁, from which point that actor then gauges the availability of resources, possible courses of action, and so on. Surely, we do engage in this type of operation quite often. Praxis is not *not* this, but when we understand praxis more fundamentally, we see that such a reductive conceptualization can illuminate praxis only in a fragmentary way.

We can trace Heidegger's understanding of praxis and the good via his most important objection to Aristotle. Heidegger makes the audacious (and likely insupportable) claim that for "the Greeks" in general⁴⁷ the "radical fundamental possibility"—that is, the highest possibility—of living being is the theoretical life (*bios theoretikos*), in which "living persists in pure contemplating."⁴⁸ All other forms of living are deemed of lower rank and grade in comparison; the *bios theoretikos* is the implicit *telos* of all human living. Whenever we see human praxis in motion, we can judge a priori that contemplation is what it seeks; this or that project must be understood as being implicitly on the way toward contemplation, to *theoria*, to pure seeing as opposed to the

⁴⁷ It's never entirely clear to whom Heidegger is referring when he makes this claim and others like it. It seems very, very unlikely that Thucydides, Thrasymachus from Plato's *Gorgias*, Protagoras and a great many others would place the *bios theoretikos* at the pinnacle of human teleology.

⁴⁸ BC, 44.

tangled, earthbound praxis of concrete living;⁴⁹ and we can judge any form of life as better or worse or nobler or baser on the whole from this standpoint. While Heidegger might be exaggerating somewhat when he asserts that the “the Greeks”—presumably he means Athenian philosophers—are united in this conception of praxis, his argument against it says a great deal about how he seeks to understand our relationship with the good, for this is precisely the lineage of thinking that he seeks to overcome. The elevation of the *bios theoretikos* to absolutely privileged status is tied to a privileging of *sophia* (wisdom) over *phronēsis* (more about *phronēsis* later), and it relies on a conception of being in which Aristotle found himself entangled *in spite of himself*—that is, in spite of his many insights into human being as praxis.⁵⁰ Our relationship to the good must be understood as more polyvalent than a simple striving for a life of contemplation. For Heidegger, Aristotle remains unfortunately beholden to a conception of being as *parousia*, as constant presence, the eternal Platonic forms being the best example,⁵¹ and this is what leads him to produce the practical hierarchy that he does. But once we move beyond this conception of being—and this moving beyond of course characterizes

⁴⁹ An alternative argument is that of phenomenologist Matthew Ratcliffe, who argues that we need not insist on a hard and fast distinction between *praxis* and *theoria*. Ratcliffe on theory: “The difference between unthinking practical activity and a reflective contemplation of objects that wholly removes itself from their practical significance is a matter of degrees” (Ratcliffe 2008, 45).

⁵⁰ Heidegger never quite explains why Aristotle never seeks to resolve the deep antinomy that Heidegger sees between the metaphysical Aristotle and the phenomenological Aristotle. It seems, though, that Heidegger simply ascribes Aristotle’s prejudice in favor of *sophia* over *phronēsis*, *epistemē* over *technē*, and the theoretical life over the practical life to a cultural prejudice derived from Aristotle’s rootedness in Athenian philosophy, particularly Platonic philosophy.

⁵¹ For the most succinct discussion of Aristotle, Heidegger, and the question of being as presence that I have yet encountered, see Sadler (1996), particularly chapter 1, “Being and the Ousiological Reduction,” p. 38-95.

Heidegger's entire philosophical project from beginning to end—our conception of praxis begins to change in its fundamentals. Once the *bios theoretikos* is dethroned as the king of all forms of life, the question of praxis is thrown back upon itself. In the *BC*, *eupraxia*, good praxis, is the true aim of praxis, not contemplation. Good praxis has more and better praxis as its end—which in turn has more and better praxis as *its* end, and this process goes on ad infinitum, which transforms *eupraxia* into a virtuous circle (if we do things right). But to say that the goal of praxis is *eupraxia*, which itself aims at *eupraxia* all over again is of course to once again beg the initial question. For it seems like the dullest of philosophical truisms that praxis simply aims at “good praxis.” Where should this line of thinking lead?

It turns out that our initial consternation is unwarranted, for there's a great deal in the *BC* that helps us out of this tangle. While the question of what actually constitutes *eupraxia* is and must remain an open question—for to close off the question with a definite set of answers and claims would be to reduce praxis in all its multiplicity to sterile formulae and bullet points—there is a great deal that can be said about how Heidegger understands *eupraxia*. First, we must return again to the question of our basic movement in the world. The human being as *psyche* is characterized by judgment and discrimination (*krinein*, “taking up and determining”) and *kinein* (derived from *kinesis*, the root word for our word “kinetics”), translated by Heidegger as “self-movement.” Dasein is living that moves through the world (a) according to a principle other than mechanical causality (the way that, say, a rock is passively ground into sand by water), and (b) as a form of being that can be *otherwise* and is also capable of recognizing that it

can be otherwise (Heidegger might describe this as the essence of consciousness). Hence, Dasein must hold itself out toward multiple possibilities (*kinein*) and thus exercise choice.⁵² Even pleasure, which is so often understood in a physiological/biological sense, is refused a “biological” basis.⁵³ Heidegger goes as far as using his reading of Aristotle to ground pleasure [*hedone, Sichwohlbefinden*] in the essence of Dasein discussed above. He approvingly quotes Aristotle: “Pleasure in something is a certain *movement* of being of a living thing in a world.”⁵⁴ Rather than as fullness, as something possessed, reached, attained, and so on, pleasure is to be understood as being-elevated [*Gehobensein*], “a specific lightness of being-in-the-world that lies in joy.”⁵⁵ The problem with privileging the theoretical life is that it elevates one form of lightness, of elevatedness, over others. The telos of praxis is indeed being-elevated, and the elevation associated with *theoria* does not seem to be denied by Heidegger. But there are other forms of elevatedness that are truer to worldly praxis than contemplation, like mastery over our circumstances, a

⁵² For Heidegger, there might well be something like choice the way that we understand it in everyday speech, but for him the grounds and conditions of possibility of choice are always a more pressing philosophical concern (at least in the *Basic Concepts*), and this concern likely shares common roots with his more general critique of positivism. This will be taken up in more detail in the section on *prohairesis* in this chapter.

⁵³ Heidegger is continuously inclined to transfer aspect after aspect of human life away from a biological understanding toward what he describes as an ontological understanding. See, for example, chapters 18 and 19 in *Being and Time*, where Heidegger distinguishes the task of ontology from the Cartesian account of being as spatial extension, which, Heidegger thinks, is always the understanding of being according to which the natural sciences—including biology—function. This is part of Heidegger’s general critique of positivistic understanding, which he sees as an impoverished form of understanding in many realms, human praxis surely being one of the most poignant examples.

⁵⁴ *BC*, 48. Italics are mine. The quote is Heidegger’s translation of Aristotle’s *Rhetoric*, 1369b35.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

sense of efficacy in our affairs, a feeling of freedom from unwanted entanglements, free time to develop our powers, the sense of being in a process of self-overcoming, etc.⁵⁶

We must note that while Heidegger would likely have a strong sense of what is practically possible and impossible—and thus a strong sense of what our proper political aims should be—his practical philosophy nevertheless understands Dasein as a being that is unlimited in one important sense: being-in-the-world can take on a vast number of forms and have a veritable infinity of possible objects. That to which we apply judgment and hence take into consideration from the standpoint of our possibilities—or perhaps the possibilities of others, or perhaps of “mere things”—can be almost anything imaginable. After all, what could *in principle* restrict this range, beyond the accidents of circumstance? We can see from even this highly preliminary look into the “how” of human being that there is a kind of raw, unrestricted character to human praxis that Heidegger brings to light, whether that is his intention or not. This will be important to his understanding of *phronēsis*, human being-toward-the-future, and circumspection.

1.3 The world as horizon

So far, we have been concerned almost solely with the praxis side of the praxis-world divide. But we must bear in mind that these concepts can only be understood with and through one another, because both in their real being are inseparable from one

⁵⁶ Unfortunately, Heidegger does not directly provide us with any examples of what practical elevatedness might look like. But from the general thrust of his thought and his proximity to *Lebensphilosophie* and other currents of thought we can infer a few in basic outline, as I do here.

another. In these texts, the world for Heidegger is to be understood as “there, not intermittently or incidentally, but rather *constantly* there. The question is simply *how* this being-there of the world is primordially constituted. The world is there for living in such a way that it in some way *concerns* living.”⁵⁷ The direct consequence of the being-in-the-world of human life is that this condition is inescapable for us. If it ever seems or feels like this relationship has been suspended—say in moments of relative peace or tranquility—this seeming suspension has come about solely as a particular successful and temporary mode of confronting the world. For the living thing—and particularly for humans, who live “in the future” in a way that other living things do not—can expect no genuine peace with the world, no practical standstill or genuine rest, and the basic knowledge or sense that this is indeed the case perpetually defines the relationship of the living being with the world. This confrontation is indeed what gives rise to praxis, which by definition could not have arisen in the universe prior to the origins of life. Praxis is not something that is done among other things, for praxis does not merely involve “doing” in the usual sense. Rather, praxis names the total relationship between beings concerned with their possibilities, whether “consciously” or not, and the world, which itself has modes of *kinesis* that are not *necessarily* beneficial to the possibilities of particular living things. As stated before, even plants can be said to have praxis. Survival and flourishing both have conditions of possibility that must be wrested from those circumstances that also necessarily threaten them. If there is not enough sunlight, the plant must extend itself

⁵⁷ Ibid, 51.

toward it if the plant senses that sunlight is within reach. Praxis is simply the *kinesis* of living, the basic inner principle, the “how” of living—the movement toward what is judged good (like sunlight for the plant) and away from what is deemed bad.

To use a very Heideggerian word, praxis and world are *equiprimordially* [*gleichursprünglich*] bound to one another as concepts and in reality. Even when we declare that we are not concerned with something (“That’s none of my business”⁵⁸), this is simply a mode of comportment in which we still acknowledge that the world is there, that we are bound up with it no less than before and that the matter that we say we don’t care about is worthy of our declaration. Yet Heidegger insists that our comportment toward the world admits of degrees in certain fundamental respects: “Here there are different levels and tiers.”⁵⁹ Most importantly, a living thing has varying degrees of attunement⁶⁰ to the world. *Aisthesis*, the root of our word “aesthetics,” names the mode of appearing of the world, the fact that the world comes across in colors and intensities and textures and so on. It is the very basis of perception [*Wahrnehmung*, literally “truth-taking”] itself, its basic condition of possibility. Heidegger insists that perception is not to be understood as a raw sensing or feeling of the world but rather as a taking up and gathering [*Vernehmen*] of the world. For animals, the very openness and accessibility [*Erschlossenheit*] of the world is characterized by sound [*phonē*], for humans by *logos*,

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid, 52.

⁶⁰ Attunement is the translation for *Befindlichkeit* adopted by Joan Stambaugh in her translation of *Being and Time*, and I follow her in this usage. I also use this term elsewhere in contexts where I am not discussing Heidegger’s phenomenology of praxis directly, and I intend it to have the same basic meaning.

which is a special mode of being-in-the-world characterized by having the world—and others who are a part of that world—“there” in a particular fashion. But what exactly *is* this special mode? What makes it qualitatively different? Heidegger, presenting himself as recovering the “authentic” Aristotle, gives a more or less Platonic response: as discussed above, it is *agathon*, the good, that marks the separation. Human Dasein is related not only to immediate possibilities as, say, bees or ferns would be, but rather also has some relationship to possibilities *beyond* those. Just as in Plato’s cave analogy, in which the illuminating sun and the good are rendered analogous, the good carries with it a sense of ascension, of there always being “more.” Animals may be understood as cave-dwellers in the sense that the mode of appearance of the world never rises above taking the world “as is” and adopting a mostly passive response to its volatility.⁶¹ For humans, however, the world as we confront it in the moment. It is never *simply* there, but is rather there in light of our seeking of the good—in our projects, goals, ends—whether that good is mere survival or some set of more refined possibilities. While we often do concern ourselves with immediate goods and respond to threats and opportunities that arise, perhaps seemingly out of nowhere, in our immediate environment, we also learn from the

⁶¹ One can certainly question Heidegger’s account of animals. Stuart Elden, for example, has criticized Heidegger’s lack of genuine engagement with the question of the animal and his insistence on defining animals as sheer lack and deficiency vis-à-vis the human. See all of Elden (2006). But it is also difficult to avoid the conclusion that *precious few* non-human animals could be understood as practical in the same sense as humans. I will very provisionally suggest here that rational choice theory’s basic axioms might do quite nicely in understanding animal behavior and might, in fact, be incapable of qualitatively distinguishing the behavior of humans and, say, fungi. This would be a strike against RCT and its epistemological purchase in understanding human praxis.

world that immediate things are not simply *given*, and that they too have conditions of possibility and emergence.⁶² Concern with securing or even producing those conditions of possibility is also one of the basic elements of praxis—and it is this extension beyond practical immediacy that makes us *horizontal* beings who, in order to both respond to the unstable world in a satisfactory way and to carve out reliable practical territory within the world continuously extend themselves beyond the immediate—in both space *and* time.

What Heidegger names here is essentially the primordial *affective* character of living. Disposedness [*Sichbefinden*] toward the world can be understood as the most basic way in which living things react to their environment. As concerned with their possibilities—be they survival or beyond—living things cannot but respond to the world and to be “moved” by it, so to speak. To be wholly unmoved by the world would be to lose touch with it and hence to cease being concerned with possibility. The world *qua* world continuously elicits at every moment (*Augenblick*, blink of an eye) one modality or another of disposedness on the part of the living being (one thinks immediately of Heidegger’s conception of temporality and repetition [*Wiederholung*]). But this very clearly does *not* mean that living is characterized by any kind of “pure” receptivity, as if a living thing could be receptive and nothing else and still be thought of as a practical being. On the contrary, living as seeking and concern must also be characterized by a kind of assertion vis-à-vis the world, a pushing back against the whims of circumstance and a projection into the environment. It may be precisely this assertion or exercise of

⁶² The given as a theme for the philosophy of modality will be taken up again in chapter 3, primarily in the section on Roy Bhaskar and the possibility of transformative praxis.

strength⁶³ that defines the basic *kinesis* of living and separates living Dasein from the rest of being.

Yet humans are special because through *logos* their intercourse with the world is far more finely tuned. While many animals, as mentioned before, possess *sympheron/blaberon* and hence are capable of sending signals to others, only humans have a relationship with *agathon* and thus have a sense of the good (whatever they end up taking the good to be). In the title of section §9α, Heidegger even refers to *logos* as the “mutual discussion with others of that which is beneficial in the name of concern.” It is on this basis that humans have fellowship [*koinonia*] and sociality, what Heidegger calls “having the world there alongside others” [*das Miteinander-Dahaben der Welt*]. Not only is the world there for the individual Dasein to confront on its own, using its own resources and lights, but it is also necessarily shared with others, upon whom one can potentially rely in the confrontation with the world (or towards whom one should be wary, as when we have adversaries or enemies). On Heidegger’s account, without others we never become true humans, because the world comes to have the character of being most fully there only through community (*koinonia*).

Humans are special in yet another sense: humans are teleological beings in a way that other beings are not.⁶⁴ But the idea of *telos* is one that appears to have obvious

⁶³ One could imagine Heidegger following Hans Blumenberg and using the term self-empowerment [*Selbstermächtigung*].

⁶⁴ Here and henceforth I will avoid the question, set forth earlier, of whether or not human praxis is qualitatively different in various respects from that of other “higher” animals. In this project, I will assume that it is and that there really is an important qualitative break. This could well be

implications but demands theoretical care on our part. *Telos* is typically defined as “end,” but what it means to be a being with ends is not at all obvious. When I have a particular practical end in mind, it could well be that there are numerous ways of achieving it (or of failing to achieve it) and thus numerous possible projects that that end demands of me. If my end is to plant an herb garden in my backyard, this is not *yet* a specifically formulated project. It remains abstract and in need of work, so to speak. It remains for me to piece together all of the various projects that enable me to achieve that end. I have not yet decided which herbs to plant, which section of my yard to use, which month is the best for planting, and so on. But I’m nonetheless capable of intending to construct such a garden without yet knowing which subordinate projects that commits me to. Here, my “end” is to plant an herb garden, but that commits me to numerous “smaller” ends, all of which bear some kind of necessary relationship with my end. This form of intending and anticipating Aristotle calls *prohairesis*, and it is from here that the theme of choice is to be taken up. Far too often, *prohairesis* is simply translated as “choice,”⁶⁵ which is not entirely misguided but still misses a great deal of the texture inherent in *prohairesis* as a

false, and if it turns out that there primates or dolphins or octopi are more like humans than we previously thought, this might have an impact on our understanding of praxis, but would not necessarily prompt us to call into question the arguments on the table here.

⁶⁵ See in particular Chamberlain (1984), in which Chamberlain lists the following translations of *prohairesis*, all of them adopted in turn by respected scholars: intention, will, purpose, choice, purposive choice. Chamberlain’s proposed translation, “commitment,” is better than the other available translations along some axes, but nonetheless not wholly satisfactory. It is for this reason that I choose to leave it un-translated in this section and seek instead to present its multiplicity of significations *as* a multiplicity rather than sacrificing nuance for the sake of clarity.

concept. Somewhat more fitting as a translation is Charles Chamberlain's "commitment."⁶⁶ *prohairesis* names that capacity to engage in a kind of pre-choosing of an end that in turn defines the choices that are made under the aegis of pursuing that end. "Choosing" to plant an herb garden—or rather *committing* to do so—would be an instance of *prohairesis*, while deciding that Joe's Yard and Garden Store across town is the cheapest place to purchase fertilizer would be something more akin to "choice" in a more everyday sense. Heidegger defines *prohairesis* as "the anticipatory taking-up [*Vorwegnahme*] of a telos, of an 'end' of praxis."⁶⁷ Choice in the simplest sense is what we do when we're confronted with possibilities 1 through *n* and choose from among them based on some criterion (like the maximization of enjoyment) and without regard for larger projects.

On the other hand, *prohairesis*, taken up again by Epictetus much later and used to different ends (which will not be taken up here),⁶⁸ names the necessity that Dasein faces of responding to the world not only with "choices" that are made from a number of possibilities standing before it, but also the construction of commitments within which choices are bestowed with possibility and sense. It names our capacity to rank possibilities, holding some as primary and others as secondary or superfluous with respect to the commitment, following Chamberlain, that we have made. Were we incapable of *prohairesis*, praxis as we humans experience it would be impossible, for we

⁶⁶ Chamberlain (1984).

⁶⁷ *BC*, 60.

⁶⁸ For the most extended treatment available, see Sorabji (2007).

would be forced into a kind of pure receptivity vis-à-vis the world. Bacteria have something vaguely related to “choice” insofar as they “choose” hospitable over inhospitable environments, often using cilia and other mechanisms of motion to find hospitable environments. But it would be a stretch to say that they had anything like *prohairesis*, for they do little to construct their environment and do not have anything resembling projects. Implicitly, their projects might be described as “survival” and “reproduction,” but these projects emerge as a kind of sum total of their chemically programmed reactions to stimuli. Rather than in terms of *prohairesis*, we may understand them as possessing simple *hairesis*. The *pro* in *prohairesis* represents a kind of prior choosing, perhaps even a meta-choice: when we commit to something, to a particular end, we also necessarily commit to the choices that are conducive to bringing about that end. When we are planting our backyard garden, we may “choose” to scrap the project and build a pool instead, which would be fully consistent with our exercise of *prohairesis* as a faculty. But choosing to build a pool instead of a garden would mean altering our original commitment itself. If we remain firm in our commitment to build a garden, then the choice to build a pool instead becomes an *invalid* choice: we have chosen in advance *not* to make a whole number of choices, amongst them the choice to build a pool in the same place where the garden was intended to go.

For the Stoic Epictetus, in a similar spirit, *prohairesis* is another name for human freedom in the deepest sense: “You may fetter my legs, but not even Zeus can conquer

my *prohairesis*.”⁶⁹ Even when we have no real, effective freedom, the freedom of our interior worlds is maintained. In other words, we cannot relinquish *prohairesis* without falling into a kind of contradiction. If we were to give up *prohairesis*, we could not do so via *prohairesis*. We may give up this or that project, but to forsake our status as creatures capable of commitment to projects would be to forsake being a teleological being—and thus to forsake being fully human. But this does not mean that our *prohairesis* always remains the same. It can wax and wane, strengthen and weaken. It is subject to corruption, as when we become addicted to drugs and become incapable of basic practical continence, and also to correction, as when we improve our self-discipline. In this sense, *prohairesis* can be likened to dignity: when we retain our dignity, we retain our separation from other forms of being, but there is no guarantee that we will always succeed.

Prohairesis might strike us as being something like a notion of “will” or “freedom.” For the Stoics, these terms were almost completely synonymous. But Heidegger would be quick to counsel caution in making that jump too hastily, insisting on a nuanced conception of will/freedom. For Heidegger, *praxis* *never* simply emerges out of the void, never out of any kind of radical subjectivity that exists in some substrate of the world radically separate from other beings (as one might find in, say, Kant or Fichte’s account of the noumenal will, a bizarre non-entity that is imagined as non-worldly if not otherworldly). Rather, *praxis* is always rooted in a world shared with

⁶⁹ *Discourses*, 1.1.23.

others. These others are confronted not only strategically, as either tools or obstructions to our projects, although Heidegger would not deny that we often *do* confront others this way, but also as those who provide us with language, meanings, and with what Heidegger refers to as an everyday understanding of things. In §9 of the *Basic Concepts*, a number of concepts so central to *Being and Time*—and so thoroughly political/critical in that setting—make their first appearance. *Das Man*⁷⁰ emerges here as the baseline form of being-with-others, which comes alive through speech. *Das Man*, what “one does,” what “one says” in a situation, what “one means” when one says something, gives us the basic building blocks for practical action in a world shared by others. When looking at a tree, I might enter into a poetic revelry about growth, or the seasons, or the color green, but these reveries might not be readily communicable to others, and sharply divorced from circumspectly comporting oneself in the world [*Sichumtun in der Welt*], which may involve telling someone to park their car in the shade provided by the tree or avoiding the tree when jogging through the forest. In other words, the everydayness [*Alltäglichkeit*] of *das Man*, its commonsensical quality, provides us with our most basic tools for encountering the world. We learn words for things by learning what others call them. We learn to tie our shoes from seeing how others do it. If we invent new ways of doing things—a clever new catch phrase or a creative way of tying our shoes (as with

⁷⁰ This term, like others in Heidegger, is unfortunately not translatable into English. It is often translated as “the one,” but this comes far short of the mark. Heidegger gets the term *das Man* from everyday speech. *Man* is German’s impersonal pronoun, like the French “on” and the English “one.” “Man denkt” means “one thinks.” *Das Man* thus turns the German impersonal pronoun into a substantive, and his intended meaning isn’t much more complex than that.

Velcro)—we do so almost always on the basis of *das Man*, and thus with the help of a cultural background that is usually and for the most part not deeply reflected upon by us.⁷¹

The world first becomes “there” for us in a practical sense via *das Man*. This form of revealing [*Offenbarmachen*] the world is always a sharing [*Mitteilen*] with others, and it is precisely this mutual having-before-us [*Dahaben*] of the world that is the basic condition of possibility of living in society. Being-with-others is not merely a kind of concrete empirical fact, but rather expresses a *how* [*Wie*] of Dasein. When we’re alone in a field, spot a dandelion, and see it *as* a dandelion—and not as a symbol for something else, like spring or love—we are seeing it as “one” would likely see it. While Heidegger would bristle at this form of language, the term “averageness” [*Durchschnittlichkeit*] really can be understood in a semi-mathematical sense: most people of our sort would see the dandelion as simply a flower, as a living thing, with a particular taste, use, smell, etc. Very few would see it as a symbol of lost love. If in a particular time and place, however, most people came to see dandelions as symbols of lost love—say, because of some local legend—this would come to constitute the average understanding of dandelions. This understanding would, in turn, have practical consequences (perhaps locals would adopt “Dandelion Day” as a local holiday, or a local poetic tradition involving odes to

⁷¹ For Heidegger, the lack of reflection associated with *das Man* lends it its troubling aspects. *Das Man* has been linked, for example, to Nietzsche’s notion of the mindless “herd creature” that is capable only of mimetically following others’ behavior. Heidegger never himself makes this connection, but it is not inconceivable that his concerns about *das Man* are indeed very Nietzschean.

dandelions would sprout up). But barring that possibility, it would likely be our *bios*—our status as a particular being with a particular life history and constellation of meaning guiding us—that would see the dandelion this way.⁷²

Interestingly, Heidegger roots even the Platonic forms (*eidei*) in praxis. Through *theorein* (*Hinsehen*), reflective/abstractive seeing, we come to have a sense of the appearance of the world. It comes to seem normal, even homey to us (at least under sufficiently non-chaotic conditions!). In that case, we come to think of aspects of our world as formally—and thus *eidetically*—universal: “In *eidōs* lies a so-called universality, universal validity, a claim to a certain averageness.”⁷³ We begin to call certain flowers dandelions, whence comes the *eidōs* of dandelion, which we can discuss with others, whence comes the sense—arguably found in the Platonic corpus—that the world and/or being itself might have such a universal/formal character. This really gets to the heart of Heidegger’s motives in re-reading and “recovering” a more authentic Aristotle. If the formalization of Being gives rise to the whole destiny of the West, the triumph of technology, the philosophy of the will to power, and so on, then Heidegger’s return to the basic fundamentals of praxis must be read as an effort to re-root us in what is truly universal and not a mere contingent historical accident (that is, the metaphysical turn [*Kehre*] supposedly inaugurated by the Greeks). If metaphysics has lied to us about

⁷² There is also the possibility that we would be aware of the distance between the meaning that we ascribe to the flower and that of others. This strikes me as in itself an important form of practical knowledge, in that not having this kind of knowledge could well produce an array of problems for us.

⁷³ *BC*, 64.

Being by formalizing it, then it is high time to reject the lie. Aquinas, Hegel, Kant, even Nietzsche—none of these thinkers will get us there the way that Aristotle does, for none of them truly reach for the roots and ground *everything* in praxis, and hence *agathon*, *logos*, *telos*, *kinesis*, and so on.

While Plato is typically seen as the figure that introduces the idea of the good into philosophy, Heidegger describes Aristotle as rooting this idea much differently. The good [*agathon*] for Aristotle, is not something “out there” toward which we are drawn and that exists independently of us. *Agathon* is rather “the authentic character of the human.”⁷⁴ Before we are anything else, we are related to various goods, be they pleasure [*hedone*], or honor [*timē*], or something else. What Heidegger suggests here, however, is that being a practical being means never stopping at this or that good, but rather continuously moving from good to good.⁷⁵ Indeed, if the *kinesis* of human Dasein involves a continuous attunement to possibility, then what intrinsic reason would there be for praxis to stop at this or that good or even understanding of the good? Praxis certainly might do so for a time, but being-in-the-world also likely means that new goods, pleasures, and so on continuously present themselves and call our present goods into question (I might be happy tending to my flower bed until I look across the street and see my neighbor mowing a beautifully-cultivated lawn, which suddenly makes my flower bed seem trivial

⁷⁴ *BC*, 65.

⁷⁵ The *bios theoretikos* is somewhat different in this regard. In this form of life, we stop moving from good to good and settle on that one good—contemplation—from which we would have no reason to deviate. It seems to me that Heidegger would either deny that this process ever comes to an end or insist, against Aristotle, on the superiority of concrete praxis.

and no longer worthy of my time).⁷⁶ In fact, Heidegger goes as far as to say that *agathon* “is not something that is objective and merely hangs around us, but is rather a *how of Dasein* itself.”⁷⁷ Again, if we *take* the good to be something “out there,” beyond Dasein and the pursuit of our possibilities, we are simply mistaken. In pursuing the good, we are always pursuing a possible condition of being, that is, a particular possibility (even if it’s a possibility for others). This is why Heidegger draws an unbreakable relationship between *agathon* and *telos*: although our relationship with *agathon*—and *agathon* seems to be precisely that *relationship* rather than the Good “in itself”—may be an open and usually unstable one, it continuously crystallizes into particular *teloi*, projects. As I stated earlier, it is one of the demands of praxis that Dasein constantly “choose” its possibilities (although one must be careful not to think too far in the direction of ascribing such choices to a radically free *cogito*). And yet *agathon* is never fully absorbed by *technē*, so to speak: praxis’ concern for possibility renders Dasein open for new projects, new *teloi*. This is the horizon within which “choice” occurs. Although *prohairesis* is usually translated as ‘choice,’ it should not be understood as a free choice between a number of different possibilities available at a given moment. It is a choosing ahead of time—the *pro* in *prohairesis*—a kind of prior orientation. Choice, as it is typically understood, involves a stable choice *set* that provides a constrained range of possibilities. *Prohairesis*, as discussed earlier in this chapter, is more fundamental, for *prohairesis* names that

⁷⁶ What I mean here is that this discovery of new goods is *in principle* unlimited. The specificities of our various life paths, cultural backgrounds, and so on, provide real practical limits to this process of discovery.

⁷⁷ BC, 69.

continuous process of crystallization whereby praxis comes to focus on certain possibilities and objects. It emerges out of necessity from praxis itself: praxis would be helpless in the world if it did not rank certain possibilities, projects, objects, and so on, as having priority over others. The gods, who do not live in time, may not need *prohairesis* as part of their “praxis” (whatever godly praxis might be!). I argued earlier that praxis for humans cannot be merely receptivity to the world. It must also be *assertive* in the world.

Prohairesis is our means of doing that, of rising above having to continuously confront every situation as an open choice set. Praxis continuously *produces* our choice sets, carving them out of the ebb and flow of experience. And unlike “choice,” it does not and perhaps *cannot* passively hold a choice set constant: even if a choice set is limited (for example, sinking or swimming), praxis may chafe at or at the very least be *aware of* those limitations *as* limitations. Furthermore, when a choice set comes into play *and* it appears that there is an opportunity to expand that choice set (in a way that is deemed good by a particular Dasein), then praxis, via the “faculty” of *prohairesis*, will experience an expansion in its choice set. To what degree does such expansion take place? Clearly, it all depends! A being concerned with possibilities experiences no inescapable limitations of this sort. While not every Dasein comports itself as “actively” in the world as others, we must nonetheless conclude that Dasein, *as* praxis and thus as a certain kind of transcendence vis-à-vis the world, *cannot* simply take “choice sets” as given. Heidegger understands the world as flux, as a non-chaotic but always moving mesh of possibilities without a constant central organizing principle. If we understand the world the way that he does, then we must follow him in calling our usual notion of choice deeply into

question. If the world is fundamentally anarchic in the way it arranges possibilities—but remember, *not* necessarily chaotic—then what would guarantee our choice sets? Where would they come from? Would it not be up to praxis to assert itself in the world in a way that makes desirable choice sets possible?

1.4 Dasein and limits

Heidegger’s attempt to make the good more “Aristotelian” (flexible/ineffable) and less “Platonic” (otherworldly) serves an important purpose in understanding praxis. *Agathon* and praxis are inseparable: *agathon* is the seeking of the good, a seeking which has no limit and holds within itself the possibility of pushing at whatever limits it (*peras*). And yet, for Aristotle, this seeking must come to some sort of rest; *kinesis* must find its ultimate home in some kind of telos that is in itself [*di auto*] as opposed to being for the sake of some other end [*di heteron*]. This *di auto* is the implicit limit [*peras*] of praxis—a final telos of which we are by no means always aware. Even if praxis never reaches this telos—and it’s highly unlikely that it does for any of us—it remains important for us to insist that praxis is constantly operating at the limit, always reaching beyond something, and that flourishing—*eudaimonia*, so central to Aristotelian ethics—demands this. But we only exist as creatures at the limit because we are always limited, because our concern is always rooted: “The coming-to-rest of concern [*Besorgen*] is only possible insofar as what is concerned for is *there*, that concern does not reach out into emptiness, that

concern has the character of limitation.”⁷⁸ Dasein is being-limited [“Dasein ist Begrenztsein”]. *Agathon*—our relationship with the good—never sets its limits once and for all. It is here that Heidegger takes a sort of “existential” turn (although I’m aware of the dangers of using this loaded language too freely) by introducing the concept of *bios*. Earlier, *zoē* was the generic term for the “how” of living as a type of being, namely as the type of being characterized by praxis. *Bios* may be translated as “life” or “living” as well, but for Heidegger *bios* stands for life not in terms of life generally but rather as *a* life, “the temporality of a life from birth to death.”⁷⁹ Indeed, *bios* and *zoē* are equiprimordial [*gleichursprünglich*]. A living creature can only live a life, a “course of life” [*Lebenslauf*], on the basis of being *zoē*, but this does not mean that the existence of this or that *bios* is not radically separate from the rest of being and from other creatures. *Bios* is the “how” of *zoē*: life can only exist as this life-form, as this creature with a history. This is perhaps the first emergence in Heidegger’s work of a discussion of the relationship of particular creatures with death (which in *Being and Time* he names being-toward-death [*Sein-zum-Tode*]). Specific *lives* must be understood not as mere generic instances of living as a universal category. Living as such, particularly that of human beings, is impossible to capture metaphysically. This explains Heidegger’s antipathy toward attempts to characterize human being as *animal rationale*, for defining human beings vis-à-vis the rest of being as being the only creature with “reason” is to describe us too generally. Yes, we are creatures with reason, but every human life is *this* life, this form of

⁷⁸ BC, 72.

⁷⁹ BC, 74.

reason, this special form of being. Describing a human being as an *animal rationale* says almost nothing about the life of *this* person.⁸⁰

In his later *Being and Time* (discussed in the next section), the concept of death (coterminous with the concept of *bios*) and the idea of *authenticity* are fundamentally related. Only human being can be authentic because only human being can profoundly recognize its finitude. Surprisingly, Heidegger gestures in this direction in the *BC* as well. He briefly takes up Aristotle's discussion of the differing modes of *bios*, a discussion that for Aristotle is fundamentally normative. For Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*,⁸¹ human *bios* always finds itself in pursuit of one of three *teloi* (*hedone*, *timē*, and *theorein*, as before). *Eudaimonia*, as the *telos* in itself of human *bios*, is bound to contemplation rather than to pleasure and honor because both are ephemeral and do not rely on a particular Dasein itself (thus, they are not authentic [*eigentlich*], they are not truly our own), whereas the good of contemplation does not rely on other Dasein in the same fashion.⁸² Pleasure, for one, depends on the world, on the availability of the objects that provide pleasure. The *bios theoretikos* must be understood as the "authentic possibility of human existence."⁸³ In neither is Dasein "at home" with itself; both settle on a particular *agathon* and dwell there, rather than approaching living as a course of life. Both forms of

⁸⁰ If Heidegger's thought indeed holds traces of nominalism in it, then this would be the place in which this comes forward most strongly.

⁸¹ 1059b.

⁸² Although we know from Aristotle's *Politics* that the contemplative life emerges only within very particular—and fragile—social conditions.

⁸³ *BC*, 77.

bios “fall asleep,”⁸⁴ whereas authentic human being involves wakefulness, which can be won only via good praxis [*eupraxia*] or the good life [*euzoia*]. Heidegger is careful to stress that in both cases the “*eu*” is not “out there” in the world (the way that the ineffable “good” allegedly is for Plato) but is rather a “how” of *bios*. *Agathon* is a particular “how” of concern for our possibilities. Whether or not Aristotle is right about the three primary *teloi* about human living is not necessarily important here. What *is* important is his effort to distinguish the life of contemplation—insofar as it has an autarkic, self-sufficient quality that the others lack—as the highest human telos and to use this telos as a critical principle vis-à-vis *hedone* and *timē*.

Yet in spite of Aristotle’s effort to place the *bios theoretikos* at the top of the teleological ladder in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Heidegger claims that there can be “no good in itself [*an sich*],”⁸⁵ and that Aristotle is simply mistaken—for Aristotelian reasons!—in privileging one over the others. Rather, *agathon* is always a limit of praxis, an ever-receding goal, which is a continuous push into the furthest and outermost [*das Äußerste*] and, importantly, toward an *eschaton* (as in our word “eschatology”). This is Heidegger’s reason for insisting that Aristotle is not a “teleological” thinker. The flute player, to use Aristotle’s example, achieves his telos when he learns to play in an exceptional way.⁸⁶ The crucial word here is “way:” being an exceptional flute player is not a state, but rather a how, a *kinesis* (or, when he’s not playing, a possible *kinesis* that

⁸⁴ *BC*, 78.

⁸⁵ *BC*, 79.

⁸⁶ *BC*, 78.

he can activate when he wishes to). Praxis thus has a deeply unstable character: insofar as it does not seek a definite telos but rather *agathon* (as telos *and* limit), it continuously bears the possibility of opening out onto new *teloi*, taking on new conceptions of what is good, taking on new projects, etc. This does not mean, of course, that our praxis in the world is always equally plastic/flexible, for this can vary according to our circumstances, or, to give one of Aristotle's examples, according to age.⁸⁷ But it does mean that praxis is always to be found constrained by limits—a necessary consequences of praxis' quality of being-in-a-world—*and* also as pushing up against those limits. For Heidegger, this is simply what we must expect from a creature who is both concerned with its possibilities and facing death—as all living is—but is aware of this and is aware of its' worldly quality and of the instability of the world.

Dasein as a practical creature has already begun to have a character that is difficult to grasp. Praxis is characterized by being always limited and yet always having a complex relationship with its limits; Dasein is characterized as having a relationship with the good that is open to a profusion of goods and possible projects. This is already quite a distance from understanding praxis as “choosing.” In later sections and chapters, the implications of this will be drawn out further, as I argue that understanding praxis in terms of worldliness necessarily transforms our sense of what praxis is *about* in the first place. For now, however, we must move on to Heidegger's discussion of praxis in *BT*

⁸⁷ Aristotle stresses that it is in our youth that we are most in tune with the world as possibility and as plasticity. Heidegger might describe youth as the time in which Dasein is praxis most purely, that is, when it most strongly and actively has the character of pushing at limits.

because it is in many ways the culmination of many of the basic insights opened up in the *BC* and *PIA*.

1.5 *Being and Time*, the “Dasein analytic,” and the recovery of praxis

In many ways, *BT* is Heidegger’s last systematic engagement with praxis. The degree to which praxis remains a latent concern for Heidegger throughout his life is of course a central pre-occupation of a great deal of Heidegger scholarship that, for reasons explained earlier in greater detail, I will not take up here. What is more important is the fact that Heidegger’s thinking concerning praxis emerges in *BT* with more lucidity than it does in the earlier lectures on Aristotle (and it should always be borne in mind that they are lectures). In those lectures, Heidegger never explicitly claims to be fashioning any kind of systematic treatment of praxis, usually preferring cryptic and off-hand remarks about returning to roots and fundamentals. In *BT*, there are no such remarks; what is sought is clearly nothing less than an “interpretation of Dasein”⁸⁸ in accordance with a more general tarrying with the question of being and with a phenomenological approach that self-consciously seeks to suspend past understandings of Dasein in the interest of something philosophically new.

One must approach a work like *BT* with great care, not in spite of its systematicity and its architectonic character but rather *because of it*. The question of where and how to begin to read such a work—and to gain anything from it that is not simply a tautological

⁸⁸ *BT*, 41.

product of a well-formed system of meanings and concepts—is a delicate matter. Here, I will approach *BT* as minimally as possible. That is, I will resist the urge to engage in conceptual overreach into questions of, say, the meaning of being as time, the meaning of history, the accuracy of the existentialist reading of *BT*, and so on. I will instead favor the far more narrow approach of continuously drawing my analysis back to *one* set of questions: what does it *mean* for Dasein to be a practical form of being? What are the essential characteristics of a being that is practical in the way that Dasein is practical? When we've begun to properly address these questions, we'll be in a position to gauge other conceptions of praxis in light our newly gained understanding.

While the initial sections of the work, concerned with the question of being in general and the proper means of addressing this question (Part 1, Chapters 1 and 2, respectively) are of immense philosophical interest, the work at hand has little to gain from pursuing this path. It is in the second part of the book (“The Interpretation of Dasein in Terms of Temporality and the Explication of Time as the Transcendental Horizon of the Question of Being”) that Heidegger begins to take up the question of Dasein directly. Over and over, he is at pains to distance his understanding of Dasein from “ontic”⁸⁹

⁸⁹ This term is always used by Heidegger in contrast with “ontological.” The ontological is typically associated with depth and the ontic with superficiality. For Heidegger, things have an ontic character because we can observe them and describe them according to “objective” criteria. Dasein, however, must be understood ontologically because we must get *inside* of Dasein. Important aspects of human beings can only be understood ontically, like physiology, but Heidegger’s general contention in *BT* is that our understanding *Dasein* absolutely cannot take place in ontic terms, and that recovering an ontological understanding is of immense importance for philosophy and for the destiny of the West (I will not make any claims whatsoever concerning the latter).

understandings of Dasein that never consider Dasein in its *being* but rather in its various scattered phenomenal manifestations. Such ontic approaches cannot help but cast Dasein as a “what-being” (*essentia, Was-sein*) rather than as a “to-be” (*existentia, Zu-sein*). The positivistic social sciences rely exclusively on an ontic understanding of Dasein. They observe Dasein making choices and seek to infer how decision making works on that basis.⁹⁰ For Heidegger, if we really want to get to the heart of human praxis we must do so on the basis of *existentia*, the “how” of Dasein, and this can be achieved only phenomenologically, from the perspective of Dasein itself. Heidegger’s well-known and much-discussed claim that “the ‘essence’ of Dasein lies in its existence,”⁹¹ the usual starting point for “existentialist” readings of Heidegger, has a particular import for us: humans are indeed characterized by “what-being” because we have bodies, but we cannot rely on *any* empirical/factual approach if we are to understand *Dasein*. We cannot properly understand it and its characteristics the way that we can begin to understand a table or a house or a tree (the examples that Heidegger gives).

In fact, Heidegger implicitly suggests that what it means for Dasein to be an *existentia* is precisely to be a type of being that will *always* confound the expectations that we have formulated on the basis of ontic approaches. Dasein is, qualitatively different in that it “*is* always its possibilities and [that] it ‘has’ these possibilities as an

⁹⁰ Those who argue for a “revealed preferences” approach to social-scientific understanding would even claim that it is *only* on this basis that we can understand human decision making, and that seeking to infer more than observation allows is always epistemologically suspect.

⁹¹ *BT*, 42.

attribute only as something objectively present to it [*Vorhandenes*].”⁹² This inescapable fact concerning Dasein is something that Dasein can remember or forget only because it originally “is” possibility. Heidegger’s distinction between authenticity and inauthenticity, so central to *BT*, emerges largely out of this possibility of remembering, forgetting, and comporting ourselves (or not) in different ways based on this possibility. While Heidegger is quick to stress in this discussion that inauthentic Dasein is not a “lesser” form of being or on a “lower” level of being [*Seinsgrad*], the general thrust of the text—and much of Heidegger’s work in general—strongly suggests otherwise and points to an implicit normative perspective at work in *BT*. The same can be said for the so-called everydayness [*Alltäglichkeit*] of Dasein, which we saw in embryonic form in *BC* and *PIA* but becomes a dominant theme in *BT*.

Authenticity is a specific mode of our *practical* comportment toward the world. Authenticity is typically interpreted “existentially,” but we need not adopt this interpretation for reasons that will become clear. Inauthentic praxis is simply *bad* praxis; it is praxis’ failure to be true to how demanding it is to realize the good in the world. Praxis is always limited and subject to various forms of closure, but inauthentic praxis is mired in unnecessary forms of closure. Dasein is always characterized by a concern for its possibilities—in that we never *ontologically* forsake this concern—but there are times when that concern fixates solely on the cues taken from *das Man*, or from *timē* or *hedonē* or both, and so on. Authentic praxis, on the other hand, truly and resolutely seeks to

⁹² *BT*, 42.

become as *phronetic* as possible in its relationship with itself, the world, and others. That is, authentic praxis is not *eupraxia* in the sense of being effective or successful, but rather praxis that is most true to what praxis fundamentally is, namely confrontation with the world as flux. When we fail to act in accordance with this principle for whatever reason, we fall into inauthentic praxis. *Phronēsis* is so central to Heidegger's thinking about praxis that I would openly claim that *phronēsis* and authentic praxis are one and the same. *Phronēsis* is of course one of the most important concepts in Aristotelian ethics, denoting "prudence," "practical wisdom," or perhaps "good judgment" or "good common sense."⁹³ It is as difficult to pin down as a concept as it is to appropriately translate it.⁹⁴ But it should suffice at first to note that for Aristotle it is strongly associated with *sophrosyne* and with the so-called "doctrine of the mean" in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, denoting the capacity to respond to situations with the appropriate level or modification of whichever virtue is called for in the moment.

Phronēsis demands of us that we act courageously but neither cowardly nor rashly on the battlefield, magnanimously but neither ostentatiously nor miserly when contributing our wealth to worthy causes. For Heidegger, *phronēsis* is rendered absolutely inseparable from *eupraxia*. Ross (1984)'s translation defines it as "a true and

⁹³ The latter translations are from Hohler (2007), p. 347.

⁹⁴ Hohler (2007) writes that "we all believe we can recognize it when we see it, but we have difficulty in naming or defining it...Aristotle was in a similar position, but attempted to identify a list of the constitutive traits" (p. 348). My approach in discussing *phronēsis* will be similar to Aristotle's in this respect.

reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things that are good or bad for man.”⁹⁵ Schuchman defines it as “the capacity to think well for the sake of living well.”⁹⁶ Jana Noel usefully divides interpretations of *phronēsis* after Aristotle into three rough categories:⁹⁷ (1) the “rationality” interpretation, according to which *phronēsis* is understood as the capacity for deliberation and the giving of reasons; (2) the “discernment” interpretation, which sees *phronēsis* primarily in terms of “situational perception and insight;” and (3) the “good life” interpretation, according to which *phronēsis* is understood as the capacity to go beyond making decisions in this or that situation into the realm of reflection on what constitutes the good life and what it means to live well. Heidegger would likely respond that *phronēsis* is indeed all three, which is precisely what makes it so inseparable from *eupraxia*. *Phronēsis* as “rationality” is closest to strict means-ends rationality—which indeed involves deliberation in a sense—but is different because the giving of reasons always involves a reflective distance from our action, a freedom *from* action in an important sense.⁹⁸ *Phronēsis* as “discernment” is closely related to Heidegger’s circumspection [*Umsicht*] and refers to our capacities for

⁹⁵ *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1140b5.

⁹⁶ Schuchman (1980), 33.

⁹⁷ I should note that Noel does not say anything about Heidegger in her discussion, but her laying out of the three categories is useful because it tells us not only about the varying yet intertwined ways of understanding *phronēsis* but also illustrates how Heidegger’s conception implicitly accommodates all three.

⁹⁸ This freedom from action could be understood as something like what Romand Coles refers to as “ateleology” (Coles 2005, particularly Chapter 5, “Derrida and the Promise of Democracy”). Ateleology is the capacity of humans to suspend our teleological pursuit of ends and to be open to the question of what our ends should be and to the possible enrichment of our categories of understanding and judgment.

coping with—and potentially flourishing in—the flux, from moment to moment. And *phronēsis* as related to good living, for Heidegger, would be closely related to *eudaimonia* as related to the question of flourishing over the course of a life [*Lebenslauf*] and thus as inseparable from our being-toward-death [*Sein-zum-Tode*].

Because *phronēsis* seems to be all of these things for Heidegger, it is not one capacity among others, like being able to program the DVR attached to the TV, nor can it be mastered the way that such a capacity can.⁹⁹ Rather than as “a” capacity, it would be best, I think, to characterize *phronēsis* as our ability to stand outside of our capacities, in the name of judging which ones we lack, which we need to reinforce, which we need to scale back. This kind of judgment, like all forms of judgment, is always taking place in the flux. In a world characterized as an anarchic—though not always chaotic, to repeat—and fluctuating mesh of possibilities, the good life—Aristotle’s *eudaimonia*—cannot possibly be gained through *technē*. For *technē* is associated with the repeatable, with the formal (remember the brief discussion of forms and *eidos* above).¹⁰⁰ *Phronēsis* is concerned with the singular, with the moment [*Augenblick*, blink of an eye], with our ability to strive for “the greatest degree of flexibility, openness, and improvisation.”¹⁰¹ Surely, *technē* is appropriate for all kinds of things and in all kinds of situations (even

⁹⁹ For Heidegger, *phronēsis* is always bound to our *lack* of mastery over the world as flux. It’s difficult to see how a lack of mastery can itself be mastered, or what that would even mean. The project of becoming a progressively more phronetic being is fraught with all kinds of ambiguity. What would constitute progress? What aspect of *phronēsis* should one focus on first?

¹⁰⁰ Smith (1980) defines Heidegger’s notion of *technē* as being bound up with manipulating and producing, as opposed to *phronēsis*’ concern with practical insight within an ever-changing world (p. 83).

¹⁰¹ Dunne (1993), 245.

Heidegger, the great critic of technology and of “technological” practical orientations in general, would be forced to admit as much). But what is it that enables us to determine when *technē* is appropriate and when it is not? Heidegger would respond that *phronēsis* is what enables us to do precisely that. For *phronēsis* must be understood *ontologically*, that is, not as something we “have” or “do” amongst other things, but rather as what we *are*. The name for that encounter that takes place between world and Dasein is simply *praxis*, but what that encounter constantly demands from us is *phronēsis*. We often fail not just because *phronēsis* is demanding, especially cognitively, but because it’s difficult to know when we’re being sufficiently phronetic, that is, when we’re properly contending with the flux. Circumstances might smile upon us in ways that make us *think* that we’re being adequately phronetic—that we’re responding to the flux in a way that is adequate to this or that end—but if things had been even slightly different we would have failed in that pursuit because we weren’t truly up to the task. We may also fail in certain pursuits in spite of highly phronetic action on our part.¹⁰²

Simply put, inauthentic praxis is praxis that has lost its phronetic edge—praxis that is too fixated on one good to the detriment of the more general flourishing of a particular Dasein, or praxis that wrongly fancies the world to be a stable *eidōs* rather than an anarchic flux, or praxis that has grown weary of contending with the flux and now exists as denial. Denial of what praxis truly is constitutes for Heidegger a dangerous

¹⁰² As Daniel Smith describes it, “to engage in a world ‘phronetically’ is, therefore, an attempt to understand its possibilities for relations and actions vis-à-vis the stable-mutable *phainomena* that comprise a world” (2003, p. 89).

temptation. It's not entirely pleasant to think of the world as flux, to think that there is no guarantee that stable things will remain stable, that everything good is always under potential threat.¹⁰³ But facing up to the world and seeing it without illusions simply makes us better practical beings and pushes us further toward *eupraxia*. This willingness to see the world *as* world is what Heidegger calls "resoluteness" [*Entschlossenheit*].¹⁰⁴ Dasein *is* praxis, but it is not always *phronēsis*. It is constantly distracted from *phronēsis*. It prefers the safety and comfort offered by non-phronetic comportments and the worldviews that accompany them.

Authentic praxis—*eupraxia*, resolute praxis, praxis without illusions—exists in the world as a never flinching, well-developed attunement to practical horizons. This should remind us of Heidegger's concept of *circumspection* [*Umsicht*, literally "sight around"],¹⁰⁵ which is reintroduced in *BT*.¹⁰⁶ *Phronēsis* demands good seeing, so to speak, a sensitivity to situations, and a concern for the singular, the unique (as opposed to *technē*, which is concerned with the non-unique, with the repeatable). And for *phronēsis*,

¹⁰³ For Heidegger, this set of temptations ultimately gives rise to all of Western metaphysics, to a conception of being as perpetual presence [*parousia*], to the rise of the technological worldview, and so on. Right or wrong, we need not necessarily follow Heidegger in all of this to accept the more mundane argument that *phronēsis* is difficult to sustain and that conceptions of the world that are not true to its status as flux are easy enough to fall into.

¹⁰⁴ Heidegger defines resoluteness as "the stolid, *Angst*-ready projection of ourselves into the world" (Heidegger 1953, 297). As throughout my reading of *BT*, my interpretation of resoluteness is given a "practical" spin that is not at all readily available in the text but is, I think, nonetheless warranted.

¹⁰⁵ Another common translation for *Umsicht* is simply "prudence," and the corresponding adjective "umsichtig" can mean not only circumspect but also judicious, cautious, or considerate.

¹⁰⁶ "Heidegger intends his concept of circumspection to be a phenomenological account of *phronēsis*. Heidegger, then, takes on the supposed priority of disinterested, theoretical ways of being through a reading of Aristotle's conceptualization of *phronēsis*" (Weidenfeld 2011, 257).

always circumspect, timing is everything: “Circumspection gives to all proceeding and to all execution the proper course of action, the means of fulfillment, the right opportunity, the appropriate moment [*Augenblick*].”¹⁰⁷ The world as a whole continuously presents itself as new at every moment. Some elements certainly remain the same or similar, but the world as a total mesh of possibilities is never the same. *Phronēsis* is praxis that is most in tune with this aspect of the world. “Doing what the moment demands” is of course a completely empty command and might have us do any number of things, but it illuminates the essence of *phronēsis* in at least a formal sense.

Being able to act phronetically—in tune with the moment, in a circumspect way—means being attuned to horizons in the sense of a kind of basic knowledge: we get to know our environs better, we understand history and our traditions better, and hence have a better sense of where and what we are. Circumspection means being able to see within a horizon. But if we understand the world as flux, then horizons are always dependent on something else. If those horizons are to be maintained—or changed, or made more amenable to our aims—then *phronēsis*/circumspection would also mean seeking to understand how to go beyond those horizons, or which aspects of our horizons are both valuable and threatened and thus in need of protection, which of our goals need to be fully jettisoned in light of that knowledge, and so on. To be inauthentic—or less authentic—would mean to lack knowledge of our practical horizons, to expose ourselves to the flux in unnecessary ways, to fail to be properly phronetic. In describing

¹⁰⁷ Heidegger (1953), 172.

authenticity this way, I am fully aware that I risk trivializing it, particularly insofar as some of the more dramatic themes of *BT*—Dasein’s confrontation with death, the meaning of being, and so on—recede into the background. I acknowledge this and respond by pointing out that (a) what I seek to describe is authenticity only in its purely practical dimension, and that (b) Heidegger’s conception of Dasein as praxis logically forces us to understand authenticity in this way, which is important because we can better understand Heidegger’s conception of praxis when we do so from the implicit normative perspective that he provides us.

If one is still not convinced that Heidegger’s idea of authenticity can be understood from the standpoint of praxis, one would be well-advised to consider Heidegger’s conception of historicity—Dasein’s necessary rootedness in history—developed much later in *BT* (Part Two, Chapter 5, “Temporality und Historicity”). There, he states that

corresponding to the rootedness of historicity in care, Dasein always exists as an authentic or inauthentic historical being. What stood under the title of everydayness in the existential analytic of Dasein as the next horizon in view must be understood as the inauthentic historicity of Dasein.¹⁰⁸

As beings characterized by care, we are necessarily historical, insofar as we must always respond and act within *some* totality of conditions—for Heidegger, always a shifting totality—that, as a totality, is simply never subject to the praxis of any particular Dasein (hence Heidegger’s continued emphasis on destiny [*Geschick*] and fate [*Schicksal*] and

¹⁰⁸ *BT*, 376.

his sustained downplaying of the powers of subjectivity¹⁰⁹). Care draws out of the self and into history based on its own internal logic. “The basic sense of the movement of factual living is *care*,” or “being-out-toward-something” (Heidegger’s translation of Aristotle’s *oregontai*, derived from *orego*, “reaching out for”).¹¹⁰ All living is characterized by this continuous outward motion, being drawn out of “itself” and into the mesh of the world: “This caring movement of living is not an *attribute* of beings that precede factual living; rather, Dasein *is* the being-out-toward movement of care.”¹¹¹ Humans, it seems, are unique for Heidegger because there are so few limits to how far and in how many ways that may happen.

Historicity is the active, practical confrontation between Dasein and its world, the story of Dasein’s struggle to make the world suitable for our projects. It is only in a secondary and derivative sense that we can speak of history as “world history,” that is, as a totality of events with or without “meaning”—after all, there could be no history in *any* sense without this confrontation. When Heidegger calls on us to take on an authentic comportment vis-à-vis history, he is calling on us to awaken ourselves in a fundamental way. For Heidegger, this means many things, but for our purposes here—and to take Heidegger’s thought in unforeseen directions—we can understand authentic historicity as attunement to our horizons, as a rescuing from possible oblivion of the *world* in the phenomenological sense. This does not necessarily mean that one must become a world-

¹⁰⁹ Heidegger goes as far as describing Dasein as the “plaything of circumstances and events” (Heidegger 1953, 382).

¹¹⁰ Smith (2003), 80.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

historical figure or an expert in history or geography. Even if one commits to spending one's life in one's hometown rather than living as a wandering cosmopolitan, there are ways of living in that town's continuing history that are more or less well attuned to the horizons that structure the town.

And so one might live in the town “poorly,” without ever bothering to understand the traditions followed by others, or the power structure that dictates decision making in City Hall, or the socio-political forces from outside of the town as a practical horizon that nonetheless have a deep impact on the town itself (like changes in trade patterns that will impact local workers or federal legislation that will change the status of local wetlands). Living “poorly” might indeed mean living apolitically, that is, seeing life in the town as mutely there, its rhythms and processes and changes as the product of chance—or of nefarious plans perpetrated by some “them”—rather than as the product of human decision making, of the work of other practical beings, of *politics* (understood in Heidegger's sense).

In light of Heidegger's persistent reminders that fate plays a virtually overwhelming role in our lives, we must also remember the centrality of the *future* in *BT*. If one is ever tempted to characterize Heidegger as a thinker solely concerned with fate, destiny, and so on, such an account would be extremely difficult to square with his emphasis on Dasein's so-called “ecstatic temporality.”¹¹² In spite of Dasein's fatedness—its ensnarement in horizons that it never masters—Dasein remains *practical*: it remains

¹¹² Dasein's inescapable “simultaneous” entanglement in past, present and future.

concerned for its possibilities, for doing the best it can in and against the flux. To repeat: “Dasein *is* always its possibilities and it does not ‘have’ them as something at hand [Vorhandenes].”¹¹³ Of course, this recognition and awareness is something that we can recognize and/or forsake—hence Heidegger’s emphasis on authenticity and inauthenticity—and this has everything to do with how and how well we comport ourselves in the world.

1.6 The centrality of care

There is a great deal that changes between *BC* and *PIA* and the later *BT*, at least in terms of emphasis, but there’s also a remarkable degree of overlap. One of the central elements of Heidegger’s analytic of praxis that remains constant throughout the 1920s lies in the centrality of the concept of care [*Sorge*], to which Heidegger devotes one of the longest chapters of *BT*. For Heidegger, care is the most fundamental attribute of Dasein, as deeply constitutive of Dasein as praxis; it is simply that which separates it from other types of being (although most likely not from animals) and makes possible all the other characteristics of Dasein that we have discussed (being-in-the-world, always-being-ahead-of-oneself, projects, circumspection, etc.).¹¹⁴ In other words, “care” is the answer to Heidegger’s guiding question in Chapter 6 (“Care as the Being of Dasein”):

¹¹³ *BT*, 42.

¹¹⁴ Thomas Sheehan, who has written extensively on the Heidegger-Aristotle link, has defined always-being-ahead-of-oneself as the “kinetic exceeding of entities” and as “being already beyond entities and disclosive of the possibilities in terms of which entities can be understood” (1988, 80). It is only because we are always ahead of ourselves that we are beings that can *appreciate* the possibilities in things and in terms of those possibilities.

“How are we to determine, in an existential/ontological fashion, the totality of the disclosed structural whole?”¹¹⁵ Care gathers all the various aspects of Dasein together. Even *Angst*, often mistakenly taken to be the foundation of the Dasein analytic, is rooted in care: only a being *concerned* with possibility, with its life and death, with the good, with others, and so on, can exist in an *Angst*-filled relationship with the world. Furthermore, care stands at the basis of what are often taken as similar phenomena, such as will, wish, predilection [*Hang*], and urge.¹¹⁶ It’s not difficult to see how each is merely one instantiation of care: will as the “faculty” of a being confronting the self, world, and others, seeking to realize its projects, impose itself within recalcitrant circumstances; wish as a sought-after possibility; predilection as a concern about the future or as a dominant tendency within a particular Dasein; urge as a hankering after a possibility that is difficult to resist and dispose of. It is extremely difficult to disagree with Heidegger here on philosophical grounds:¹¹⁷ if there is to *be* a concept that’s capable of gathering and tying together the vast manifold of human attributes into some kind of unity or totality [*Seinsganzheit*], one is hard pressed to show that it lies elsewhere. Even the attempt to do so via a concept like “reason,” as Heidegger points out again and again in *BT*, ultimately circles back around to care: what is the ultimate “function” of reason, so to speak, if not to enable us to comport ourselves in the world in a particular sort of way?

¹¹⁵ *BT*, 181.

¹¹⁶ For these four terms, I follow Joan Stambaugh’s translation (Heidegger 1996).

¹¹⁷ To define the “essence” of Dasein differently, namely on theological grounds, is of course another matter entirely!

Even if we understand reason as an essential “faculty,” what is a faculty if not a set of capabilities? What are capabilities if not possibilities? And so on.

Care will play an important role in various places in this project because the consequences of defining care as the basis of Dasein often lead us to see praxis in ways that are at odds with RCT. RCT is in itself a theory of care in a sense: it designates something—usually utility, which is by definition empty—after which an agent strives, that it cares about. Such an agent exercises this care within some kind of bounded world, perhaps a hypothetical set of market conditions, or perhaps a household or a voting booth or an auction. More appropriately, we could say that interests serve a function in RCT analogous to the that of care in Heidegger. There, too, Heidegger’s whole thinking concerning praxis is at odds with RCT. In his much later *Was heißt Denken?* (1954), he states that “interest, *interesse*, means to be among and in the midst of things, or to be at the center of a thing and stay with it.”¹¹⁸ Or alternatively, as stated by Chia and Holt: “Self-interest is not the competitive assertion of interests at the inevitable expense of others but an opening up of oneself to things and events that are different, and that therefore resonate with unrealized potential.”¹¹⁹ Now, this is not to say that care—and as a derivative concept, interest—cannot draw us into assertive and combative competition with others. Rather, Heidegger has already begun to piece together a philosophical picture of our fundamental relationship to possibility and to the world in which the possible—not to mention the impossible—find their ground. What Heidegger never

¹¹⁸ Heidegger (2004), 5.

¹¹⁹ Chia (2009), 102.

explicitly says but can nonetheless be derived from his thought on care is that care has a kind of limitless character. His discussion of limit (*peras*) in *BC* suggests that this and that practical project always run up against limits and are often to be found playing with or pushing at those limits. Dasein is always a creature at the limit because it is always futural,

itself in its being always already *ahead*. Dasein is always already ‘beyond itself,’ not as a relating toward other beings which it is *not*, but rather as being toward the *potentiality of being* which it itself is. The structure of being of this essential “it concerns...” [*es geht um*, also translatable as “it’s a matter of...”] can be grasped as the “being-ahead-of-itself” of Dasein.¹²⁰

What this means for us here is that the potentialities that exist in being—which only are *grasped* as potentialities because Dasein is there to do the grasping—lie open to us. We stumble upon them; they jump out at us and surprise us; they transform our sense of the possible; and so on. To be an “interested” being means to be characterized by this kind of openness. For Heidegger, as a thinker of fate, destiny, tradition, and so on, would *never* assert that this openness is total. Every Dasein exists weighed down by limits on what is cared for, what possibilities are taken as good possibilities, and so on. Dasein is also limited in its sense of possibility by cultural background and other historical factors: “Actualizations of care always occur within historically particular worlds that foster the realization of some possibilities while precluding or making difficult the realization of others.”¹²¹ But this is not *at all* to say that the boundaries aren’t subject to change.

¹²⁰ Heidegger (1953), 192.

¹²¹ Smith (2003), 83.

This still says very little of substance about care. In general, it's all too easy for discussions of this sort—particularly when dealing with a systematic work like *BT*—to run around in circles. What we're seeking here is not simply a kind of forced equation of praxis, Dasein, care, and so on, but rather a deeper sense of what these terms *mean* and what they *commit us to* when we take them seriously. My central thesis concerning care is that care is never “simply” concerned with this or that thing, but rather that care is *always* fundamentally connected to other concerns in myriad ways. Heidegger never explicitly makes any number of arguments that I'm about to make here, but this should not be of fundamental concern, particularly insofar as Heidegger himself is a thinker who continuously calls upon us to dig for the roots, to seek the essence of ideas, and not to shrink from tracing their consequences; furthermore, there is nothing in *Being and Time* itself, as far as I can tell, that would force us to cast serious doubt on the conception of care that I propose here. Thus, just as Heidegger reads Aristotle “creatively,” and yet—arguably—without committing interpretive violence to an essential set of ideas, I here seek care in its fundamentals as one of the keys to a genuine understanding of praxis.

We may begin with Heidegger's assertion, briefly mentioned earlier, that care is “ontologically ‘prior’” to wishing, hoping, and so on, insofar as care is coterminous with *any* “possibility of being, for the sake of which Dasein exists.”¹²² Not even *desire*—as many psychoanalytic or biological accounts might assert—constitutes the fundament of Dasein. Rather, care is what makes desire possible. It is solely on the basis of our

¹²² *BT*, 194.

ontological status as caring about our possibilities that we ever come to cathect our desire into this or that thing, person, goal, etc., in the first place. “Taking care of” [*Besorgen*] things in general and “solicitude” [*Fürsorge*]¹²³ vis-à-vis others emerge only on the basis of care. Our very status as beings with a *future*, capable of projecting our sense of possibility into the future [*Sich-vorweg-sein*] is rooted in care, which gives rise to wanting: “In the phenomenon of wanting, the underlying wholeness of care shines through.”¹²⁴ But what is this “whole” of which Heidegger speaks here? In *BT* he clearly means that care is what ties together the temporal ecstasies of past, present and future in which we find ourselves. But care is never simply empty; it cannot *but* become attached to sets of possibilities, or else it would no longer be care in the fullest sense.¹²⁵ Instead, we constantly *project* ourselves [*sich entwerfen*] via a multitude of projects [*Entwürfe*], which can be anything from tying our shoes to painting an abstract art masterpiece to founding a fledgling corporation. Already, in this idea of projection, we begin to see the ways in which care is continuously binding itself to a number of things simultaneously—and necessarily so. When tying our shoes, we’re *tacitly* concerned that no one come along and disturb us, that we’re in a safe environment to do so (and hence not in the middle of the freeway), and so on, even if our consciousness is not deeply pre-occupied with thinking “I hope no one comes along to disturb me” or “it is of the utmost importance

¹²³ *BT*, 194.

¹²⁴ *BT*, 194.

¹²⁵ One could even say that care is like consciousness in that it is always characterized by *intentionality*, Husserl’s term for consciousness’ continuous directedness towards things and the incoherence of the idea of “mere” consciousness bereft of object.

that I make sure that I remain physically safe while I complete this act.” This project is then linked to the fulfillment of other, sometimes more abstract projects: we tie our shoes so that we can meet certain social norms of proper dress. In turn, we’re trying to conform to certain social norms because many of our even broader life projects—making money, gaining basic social approval, becoming active in local politics—depend upon us meeting those norms.

And so we move from care as the basis of praxis into projection/projects as the “how” of praxis—to borrow liberally from Heidegger’s reading of Aristotle. Care is never singular: in attending to a particular possibility, we must always be concerned that the conditions that *make* it possible are in place. To have tying our shoes as a project *demand*s that we be concerned that the laces not break; there is no necessity to having “tying our shoes” as our project at any given moment, but within the confines of that project, there are certain entailments that we can draw from the nature of that project itself. The pursuit of *any* goal has similar implications, it would seem. And from this notion of project, we can begin to better understand Heidegger’s concept of being-in-the-world. In the world as Heidegger understands it, the conditions in which our projects unfold [*das Woraufhin*, the “upon-which”] are always the product of conditions that are themselves contingent, and these chains of dependency go on *ad infinitum*. Those conditions, too, are never found in isolation, just as projects are never discrete. Heidegger’s concept of world and the “worldhood of the world” can be read in precisely this manner.

Earlier, we saw why even “basic” life forms have something like a world in a very rudimentary sense, in that they never encounter “mere matter” but rather always confront things as good and bad, beneficial or harmful, etc. (even confronting things *as* neutral or as background still makes them part of the world for a living creature). For us, as for other forms of life, the world can be understood as that within which Dasein lives as Dasein. For any Dasein, the world at any point in time *cannot* be the totality of all things—another way in which praxis always pushes up against limits—but rather as that mesh-like staging ground to which I have repeatedly referred. The world phenomenologically understood *is* a totality, but it is one whose limits are constantly expanding and receding, opening and closing. To be concerned for the world and to be concerned for self and others are inextricable from one another. Our concern for other people, arising out of our fundamental being-with [*Mitsein*] others projects us into the world as much as anything else. Because the world is a set of practical horizons, projection *in general* constantly opens our care out onto the world and beyond this or that project. The shoe-tying example from earlier shows this well enough, but less trivial examples are not difficult to concoct. If I’m interested in opening a new grocery store—surely a far more demanding practical enterprise than tying shoes in almost every conceivable sense—then I must be attuned to a number of horizons simultaneously: I must assess local demand for food items, obtain the proper building permits, watch for drastic shifts in capital markets when obtaining a loan, and so on. If, all of a sudden, news reports indicated that a currency crisis in Kazakhstan was in the offing, then suddenly my concern would *of necessity* be drawn there, insofar as changes there might affect capital

markets for better or for worse (from the standpoint of my interest, that is). My initial project of opening the store (and, presumably, of keeping it profitable) thus *exposes* me to the world and its movements in a multitude of ways, many of which I could not have anticipated.

This project must also be understood as gathering a number of projects/*teloi* into one (getting a loan and permits, finding managers, etc.). And yet it opens up my care in other ways as well. While I need to do x, y and z in order to complete my project, there is a great deal about which I'm likely more sub-consciously concerned that regards even more fundamental aspects of my world. The conditions of possibility of opening a store are staggering in number: a stable market economy, sufficient consumer demand, a peaceful society, etc. Of course, no one *has to* open a store, and many of us choose projects in such a way that we would *never* become interested in global capital markets and local zoning laws. There are certainly questions of degree, which Heidegger tacitly acknowledges when he makes a distinction, for example, between the “public [*öffentliche*] we-world of our ‘own’ neighboring (home [*häusliche*]) world.”¹²⁶ Both sub-worlds belong to the world as a totality, but Heidegger's account of praxis forces us to conclude that the “private” home world is always a practical horizon that is built within the world as a whole and whose contours—like the contours of *all* horizons—are fragile, sometimes more or less so than we think.

¹²⁶ Heidegger (1953), 65.

Every project has its limits, both in the sense that what it can accomplish is limited and also in the sense that the horizon within which it takes place must always be carved out of the world (in both senses of the word world). The world also limits our projects because circumstances¹²⁷ are continuously in motion in a horizon-transformative way. Now, as I've stressed before, this does *not* mean that Heidegger would assert that the world—whether the social world, political world, etc.—is fundamentally chaotic or that Dasein has to continuously deal with transformation in every horizon. In spite of being a thinker of the flux, of being as *polemos*,¹²⁸ and of temporality as the ground of being, Heidegger never fetishizes chaos or claims that we only ever face what we *take* to be regularity. He would assert—and in this we should follow him—that the totality of circumstances that Dasein faces *does* continuously present itself anew. In the earlier section on Aristotle, we encountered one of Heidegger's first engagements with the question of time as *kairos*. The continuous shift in the totality of circumstances faced by Dasein and the idea of *kairos* are fundamentally bound to one another: while regularity might reign within one horizon for a long time, the totality of circumstances within which that horizon exists can change in the blink of an eye [*augenblicklich*]¹²⁷—in fact, whatever totality we are confronting has already changed within the span of time that it takes to say

¹²⁷ We are, Heidegger would remind us, the “plaything of circumstances and events” (*BT*, 382). The word “circumstance” itself (directly analogous to the German “Umstände”) can be understood as meaning something like “horizon” or a constellation of horizons, although I would argue that a constellation of horizons *can* be understood as one horizon *or* many, depending on which aspects of an actor's orientation one is seeking to understand.

¹²⁸ Heidegger defines *polemos*, the root word of our “polemical,” as “a strife that holds sway before everything divine and human” (Heidegger 2000, 65).

the word “kairos.” Not all of those minute changes are relevant to us or to any of our projects, but they *could be*, and we might not discover those changes until it is too late.

That Dasein lives *kairotically*—that is, always facing a shifting world whose contours are ultimately unclear, with the capacity to seize opportunities when they open up for us—means not only that praxis presents immense difficulties given what the world *is*, but also that our basic practical comportment should never harden into a set of iron-clad rules.¹²⁹ If our practical horizons were always stable, then we would be free to adopt a purely “theoretical” stance toward the world. That is, we would be able to distill certain essential aspects and iron-clad necessities constituting the fabric of the world and comport ourselves—regardless of what our ends were—in accordance with that theoretical knowledge. As in his reading of Aristotle, *Being and Time*’s general “anti-theoretical” orientation is strongly bound up with Heidegger’s particular notion of praxis. “The form of seeing bound up with this involvement is *circumspection* [*Umsicht*].¹³⁰ Heidegger certainly means seeing in a deeper sense than simple sight, referring also to our ability to cognitively take up the world, understand it, contend with changes in it. This deep seeing [*Hinsehen*] is a continuous sort of reaching out—more precisely a *being-reached-out*, since we can never change it—into the mesh of horizons that Dasein confronts and uses. If *phronēsis* is the modality of praxis that deals with the unique, with situations—and necessarily does so kairotically—and a technical/theoretical orientation

¹²⁹ Even if we want to restrict praxis using universal rules—as simplistic versions of Kantian ethics might,

¹³⁰ *BT*, 69.

seeks the non-unique and rule-like, then *phronēsis* names an open, fundamentally anarchic relationship to horizons. If the upon-which [*das Woraufhin*] of human praxis is always on the move in *some way*, then *phronēsis* is the name that Heidegger would give to our primordial practical condition. It is only “later,” so to speak, that Dasein begins to engage in even the most rudimentary *technē* and *theoria*. Fortunately for Dasein, the world is such that *technē* and *theoria* very often “work,” at least if properly carried out. But the accomplishments of *technē* and *theoria*, which accumulate before our eyes every single day, are always put to work in the *world* (in the Heideggerian as opposed to Cartesian sense). This means that our phronetic condition never goes away. Dasein remains forever burdened with questions like the following: what should I *do* with technology? What are the consequences of theoretical understanding? What are the limits of *technē*? Is my faith in *technē* to solve this or that problem too strong? *Being and Time* can be read, among other things, as an effort to hurl the reader head-on into questions such as these. In seeking to return us to the *world*, Heidegger wants to remind us of the promises and dangers, empowerments and difficulties, bound up with our practical condition.

1.7 The plasticity of horizons

If Dasein were confronted by a stable set of horizons—and thus not by a *world* but rather by a kind of vacuum—what would the consequences be? According to the conception of praxis in development here, this would mean that Dasein may still live

under certain kinds of uncertainty,¹³¹ but such uncertainty would be far more amenable to our practical understanding than the more fundamental uncertainty involved with being-in-the-world.

But Dasein, as worldly, does not act within a vacuum. Instrumental action is always horizontal in the deep sense put forth earlier. But from what standpoint can we *judge* horizons vis-à-vis one another? If horizons make the attainment of ends possible, then we can judge horizons based on their conduciveness to allowing Dasein—alone or with others—to achieve that end. This admits of numerous potential criteria of judgment. Some horizons allow us to achieve an end more quickly than others; some with less cost—monetary, cognitive, or otherwise—than others. In a more basic sense, some *fail* where others do not.

Insofar as horizons are carved into the *world*, they are of necessity *plastic*. This does not always mean that they are plastic in a way that is always favorable to the pursuit of our ends, as our experience so often attests. Unfortunately, Heidegger says nothing directly about this fundamental plasticity, just as he says little about the world as a concept (beyond his phenomenological discussion). But as with the rest of my interpretation [*Auslegung*, taking apart and laying out] of *Being and Time*, there is a great

¹³¹ It is important to note that when I speak of horizons, I am not necessarily saying that horizons are *guarantees*. Rather, they must be thought of as conditions of possibility. I might open up a certain practical horizon by becoming better at tennis than ever before, to the extent that I become capable of beating my tennis-playing friend. But I may not beat her every time. I have simply gone from a zero to a non-zero likelihood of doing so. Horizons do the work of making the pursuit of certain goals possible, but they are not simple levers that we all pull to get what we want. If ever one of our goals were so easily attainable, the language of horizons would be inappropriate in that case and we would be better speaking of accomplished facts.

deal that may be safely inferred given Heidegger's premises. The very concept of world itself is inseparable from such an idea of plasticity, for the world always appears to us as *a* world and never as everything that is. The world is continuously in motion: one horizon opens up here, another closes down there, we think another has opened up but we are mistaken, another opens and we are not yet aware. The very fragility of the world in the face of the potentially encroaching and de-stabilizing power of the flux—ineliminable, elementary contingency—is enough to convince us of the plasticity of horizons. This extends beyond the plasticity of this or that horizon to the very human practical horizon itself. And yet Dasein is never *merely* a “plaything of circumstances and events,”¹³² as if a practical being could *ever* exist in the world that way (while retaining its status as a practical being). The practical world waxes and wanes (to use the words of Wittgenstein), both as a whole and in its constituent horizons, which may never cohere into any kind of single whole from the standpoint of practical consciousness, insofar as there may well be limits to the ways in which care gathers our world together.

As I have stressed before, this need not commit us to a vision of the world as utter chaos, in which everything is threatened all the time and practical agents are continuously upended by the vagaries of fluctuating fortune. Stability of all kinds can be found in the world. All kinds of horizons remain stable enough that we can rely upon them for long periods of time. Plenty of people work until retirement age expecting that they will be able to pick up monthly pension checks at a certain point, and they do just that. We

¹³² Heidegger (1953), 382.

proceed with many of our projects quite boldly, going forth with the assumption that the conditions of possibility of that project will hold in place, and quite often it turns out that we were right to do so. This would not surprise Heidegger at all, for his concern is not to show or to warn us that everything is a giant house of cards, but rather that the world is not constructed out of guarantees and certainties. In our world, everything hangs together, reminiscent of the German *Zusammenhang*, meaning context. There is simply no central guarantee upon which everything hangs, no foundation that ensures the stability of our horizons *in the last instance*. This lack of guarantee, not the expectation of pure chaos, demands *phronēsis*.

1.8 Conclusion: Dasein as praxis, Dasein as horizontal being

I hope that by this point it has become clear why I began this chapter with a somewhat belabored effort to root praxis in what I argued is its condition of possibility, i.e. in living concerned with its possibilities. Wherever there is living, there is care; wherever there is care, there is praxis; wherever there is praxis, there is world. The risks of casting praxis in this way are twofold: it risks (1) over-generalizing praxis and de-emphasizing human praxis as something qualitatively different from that of other creatures, and (2) obscuring Heidegger's own specific aims in raising these questions anew (namely, the overcoming of metaphysics and the re-rooting of philosophy in factual living). To (1), I can respond only with the stop-gap measure of avoiding the question of the qualitative singularity of humans in their praxis, as I have done already; to (2), I can only respond that concepts are *meant* to be interrogated in precisely the way I

do here. For humans, there is no praxis without horizons. Even the most elementary kinds of projects available to us, as I showed in my discussion of care, entangle us in horizons, quite often in a vast variety of them. Simple life forms could be understood as having something *like* horizons in a very rudimentary form: bacteria, for example, have mechanisms for sensing the chemical make-up of their environment, and hence they project themselves into their environs. But this shows in merely embryonic form what constitutes the much more intensive *and* extensive praxis of humans, for projection and circumspection do not *by themselves* constitute horizontality.

It's important to seek guidance from Heidegger on these questions because the concepts he puts forth in his early (read: pre-“turn” [*Kehre*]) work put us in a position to grasp praxis in a way that other philosophical currents do not, from the great metaphysical systems of the West to Kantian ethics to RCT, which ultimately say very little about praxis as horizontal projection into the world. For Heidegger's concept of world is deeply rooted in his general attempt to prioritize time over being, to insist on the fundamental temporality—read: finitude—of all things, all horizons, all worlds. What is at stake in Heidegger's self-proclaimed “recovery” of praxis via phenomenology is the question of the *eupraxia*, and thus of the good life and the difficulty of its realization. Walter Brogan, for example, argues that the problem is “fundamentally the need to retrieve a sense of human excellence that is not reducible to normative or biological interpretations.”¹³³ Heidegger would certainly add the interpretations of RCT to this list if

¹³³ Brogan (2005), 138.

he had taken up the question of praxis in his later thought, which he essentially does not. In the next chapter, I will carry out this critical work and approach RCT from the standpoint of the conception of praxis opened up in this chapter.

2. The Stable Decision Space as a Foundational Concept in Rational Choice Theory and its Limits in Conceiving Praxis

My intention in this chapter is neither to provide an exhaustive account of the intellectual trajectory and many variants of rational choice theory (RCT) nor to provide a conceptually complete alternative to RCT on the basis of my critique. My initial foray into this latter task will have to wait until the next chapter. Instead, I will seek to discern essential conceptual components of *any* conceivable version of RCT. In attempting to do so, I run the risk of failing to discuss or account for currents within RCT that are conceptually consistent with RCT but somehow overcome RCT's limitations. I am well aware that RCT is a vast and varied tradition, and that I can scarcely do justice to its multiplicity and depth in one chapter. But I hope to show early on in this chapter that there are things that RCT simply can and cannot be, and I will make arguments for why RCT has inherent limits as a conception of human behavior (and perhaps of human *action* as well, although that is a separate discussion that will be dealt with later).

In the previous chapter, I laid out the foundations of a theory of praxis, both of its conceptual origins and of its essential components and moments. Here, I will largely set aside the results of that constructive effort, which will make a return in the next chapter. Instead, my method consists of highlighting currents within RCT that do not fully escape or defy its logic, but that nonetheless point toward elements of a more compelling conception of praxis. Thus, I will engage with major thinkers within the tradition of RCT only when necessary, and there are many that I will leave out simply because they do not

suit my immediate expository purposes.¹ I feel that this is justified because my intention is to distill and put forth the essential features of RCT and not to piece together an intellectual history of the tradition, which others have already developed.² At a first glance, this seems like an arduous task. From game theory to theories of bounded rationality to decision field theory to theories of risk and uncertainty, RCT presents itself under many guises, and it would be understandable to suspect that RCT is not susceptible to being reduced to a set of axioms. One of my central goals is to show that this *not* the case. RCT indeed has a set of presuppositions that enable it to make descriptive and prescriptive inferences about human behavior—presuppositions without which it could scarcely constitute itself as a tradition of inquiry.

My contention, then, is *not* that RCT's axioms are “wrong” in any absolute way or that the tradition of RCT is conceptually suspect, empirically valueless, or driven by questionable political motives,³ as some would contend. Rather, my aim is to engage in a *critique* of RCT, and here I mean critique in the Kantian sense. For Kant, critique is not a simple negation or affirmation of a tradition of thinking (although it might accomplish that). Critique is instead the effort to seek the grounds of a mode of thinking in order to

¹ This might appear to the reader as cherry picking. In my defense, I would respond that my attempt to distill the essence of RCT is precisely undertaken to disarm such criticism. If I am right about what the essential characteristics of RCT indeed are, then leaving this or that major work, author, finding, etc., out of the picture is justifiable. If it is the case, however, that there are currents *within* the tradition of RCT that indeed cut against the grain of how I present RCT, then I indeed open myself up to the criticism that I've misunderstood the tradition. This judgment I leave to the discerning reader.

² See Amadae, S.M. (2003).

³ See, for one among many examples, Amadae, S.M. (2003), particularly chapter 5, “Rational Choice and Capitalist Democracy.”

discern its *limits*.⁴ My goal in discerning the essence of RCT—which I will proceed to perform via the concept of **decision spaces**—is to enable us to answer a particular set of questions: when would we expect RCT to have explanatory power vis-à-vis the real world? What conception of the “real world” is implicit in RCT and is it a convincing one? When would we expect that RCT would be unable to perform the prescriptive/descriptive work that we want it to? What would be the added value of a theory of human action founded on different premises? What might the limits of that newer conception be?

My main argument is that RCT must always make a sort of pact with the devil: in the name of bearing any sort of empirical weight whatsoever, it must pre-suppose certain things about the nature of human practical contexts that render it unsuitable for a philosophically convincing account of praxis. The concept of decision spaces, briefly mentioned above, will form the conceptual backbone of my critique. RCT, no matter how complex or multi-dimensional, must always postulate a finite—even if often quite large—set of possibilities given to an actor. Under “possibilities” we may subsume a vast array of things: commodities to be purchased, moves in a game, legislation up for

⁴ In his *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant refers to his critical project as an “investigation, which we cannot properly call a doctrine, but only a transcendental critique, because it aims not at the enlargement, but at the correction and guidance, of our knowledge” (Introduction, section VII, from the online Project Gutenberg edition, trans. J.M.D. Meiklejohn). I consider my own project as transcendental in a similar sense: not because it jumps straight to the truth of things, but rather seeks to play a role as arbiter, seeking distance from a tradition without committing unnecessary conceptual violence against that tradition. My aims are, of course, far more specific than Kant’s in that they have nothing to say about knowledge *qua* knowledge, but rather about our possible knowledge of human praxis.

passage, rebelling against vs. obeying the state, and so on. *Any* predicted outcome of a decision situation for a rational actor, even if unpredictability and uncertainty are taken to be aspects of that situation, must already be contained within that very situation itself. In fact, we could even *define* a decision situation as the sum total of possible decisions to be made within it; it's unclear what the substance of a decision situation even *could be* if not such a sum total. For the very idea of a predicted/predictable outcome is necessarily dependent upon a limited multiplicity of options; we could not "expect" behavior that was not already immanent within prior limitations. I cannot expect my friend to enter a house through a door that I do not know to exist; I might expect that he enter through *a* door, or even that he would try to find one of which I'm unaware, but that would amount to a different expectation entirely.

From one standpoint, this is not intrinsically damning or problematic, for the positing of stable decision spaces *must* be undertaken by RCT if it is to have *any* empirical import whatsoever. Just as we could not form expectations of the behavior of hypothetical agents if we did not place that behavior within certain a priori limits, we would not expect a model of rational behavior that built fundamental uncertainty⁵ into it

⁵ By fundamental I mean that we may not even know what our decision space is, what may befall us, whether or not there are opportunities of which we are not aware, etc. When our decision space is not closed, it is nearly impossible for us to form anything like reasonable preferences. Decision making under conditions of non-fundamental uncertainty is possible, provided that we can begin to attach likelihoods to certain possibilities and thus to comport ourselves in line with those likelihoods. But when we face fundamental uncertainty, such a comportment is not possible. One may ask: but isn't this an empirical claim? No, it is an analytical claim. Praxis can be understood as precisely this process of attaching possible actions with likely or possible consequences.

to bear empirical import. On the flip side, when there are possibilities available to an actor that we have not considered as part of that actor's decision space, then we cannot adequately account for *why* they've made the decision that they've made. The same goes for when we misjudge what actors *take* to be their own decision spaces. An actor might make a decision that we correctly see as contained within that actor's decision space, but we might not understand their reasons for doing so, the preference ordering that gave rise to that decision, and so on. If we think that Fred has bought a Range Rover simply because he's an outdoorsy type of guy that can easily afford one, we may fail to realize that Fred is indifferent toward Range Rovers and other SUVs and has chosen the Range Rover because he wants to embarrass a neighbor he dislikes who drives an old and rusty Range Rover.

Someone like Milton Friedman would object to this entire way of casting the aims of RCT and the empirical social sciences. In his highly influential "The Methodology of Positive Economics,"⁶ he argues essentially that understanding *why* actors do what they do is beyond the scope of the social sciences (his focus is on the discipline of economics, but he would undoubtedly cast similar aspersions on other disciplines that seek a fuller account of human action). For those who accept Friedman's assessment of the proper scope of RCT, my critique might bear little weight. From this perspective, who cares about an adequate philosophical account of praxis? The bread-and-butter of social inquiry is in its practical *results*. Macroeconomics is said to be successful when the relationship

⁶ This essay is found in Friedman (1966), p. 3-16 and 30-43.

between, say, interest rates and general employment comes to be better understood. My response is that even a discipline like macroeconomics—in which Friedman himself spent most of his time as a serious academic—might be able to address basic questions like the relationship between inflation and employment with some degree of precision. But without an *analytical* dimension—in which arguments are made concerning the always philosophical question of *why* the claims of that discipline are acceptable, grounded claims—such a discipline remains conceptually barren. It might even retain predictive power, but it would not know *why* it had predictive power, insofar as it would not even be able to make the most basic ontological claims about its object domain—what actors are relevant in an economy, why they make the decisions that they do, and what fundamental regularities exist in modern economies that allow us to make any claims about them whatsoever. Thus, when we restrict the aims of the social sciences far enough that they are not susceptible to the critique that I undertake here, we cannot help but impoverish the social sciences in fundamental ways.

In this chapter, I will remain completely agnostic as to the empirical accomplishments of RCT, preferring always to evaluate RCT as a conception of human action and/or behavior. A common critique of RCT is that it has consistently failed to deliver on its initial purported promise to make great strides in the understanding of human behavior, and this critique remains widespread, even amongst social scientists.⁷ My project is fundamentally different because it seeks to ask not about the past and

⁷ The most well-known example is Green and Shapiro (1994).

present of RCT but rather about its fundamental character. The questions that issue from this task are much different from questions concerning how far RCT has or has not brought the social sciences: if RCT has indeed been useful in the past, *why* has it been useful? Under what conditions would we expect it to be useful? When does understanding human decision making demand something different?

In sum, the basic argument at hand is that RCT's conception of human behavior⁸ as being wholly immanent to the conditions within which that behavior takes place has two fundamental consequences: on one hand, it renders human behavior intelligible in a fashion that supposedly allows RCT to fulfill its basic "scientific" task, but it does so at a heavy philosophical cost, the scope and depth of which will become clear over the course of this chapter.

2.1 A brief introduction to decision spaces

The concept of a decision space, first brought into play above, is not entirely new, although the way in which I employ the term is somewhat novel, mostly because I use it with a critical intent. In his book on utility theory, Paul Weirich, for example, defines a decision space as follows: "In a decision problem, where an option's utility is analyzed, I call the space of reasons a *decision space*. The points of the space are locations for

⁸ Note that I use the term "behavior" here rather than "action." While it is not common in the RCT literature to make a distinction between these two terms, I will seek to do precisely that at various points in the dissertation.

reasons tallied to obtain an option's utility."⁹ He employs the concept in order to form a more nuanced conception of utility than those currently available. He contests the underpinnings of utility analysis and its tendency to "reduce an option's utility to reasons for or against the option, or utilities attached to those reasons."¹⁰ What is needed is a multidimensional approach that "accommodates various traditional forms of utility analysis and ensures their consistent conjoint application."¹¹ The study of decision making cannot rely upon a simplistic conception of utility if it is to remain true to the complexity of the decision-making process, which cannot simply take a possible course of action and assign it a utility, even an ordinal utility, and call it good.¹² This is easy to illustrate with an example. What would be the "utility" of switching to a healthier diet? Clearly, it would be deeply unsatisfactory to simply say "20" or "more than staying with our current diet." We would need to take into account the time horizons within which we are working and many other factors.

Given the idealizations about agents and their decision problems, the finest-grained reason is a chance for realization of a person's basic intrinsic attitude. Such reasons occupy the points of my decision space. When agglomerated various ways, they yield an option's utility.¹³

⁹ Weirich (2001), 4.

¹⁰ Ibid, 5.

¹¹ Ibid, 241.

¹² The role of utility in decision theory is a deeply controversial matter, and I do not intend to endorse Weirich's conception here. I'm simply using his conception of decision space as an example with respect to which I posit my own idea of the decision space, which has different intentions and functions on a far more general level within the theory of decision.

¹³ Ibid, 241.

We should note immediately that Weirich uses the concept with respect to analyzing a *single* option under consideration in decision making, and not to the set of options that characterize a particular decision. This difference is absolutely fundamental because it is based on definitional grounds. Although Weirich's *Decision Space* is the most comprehensive treatment of the concept available, I will forego any further engagement with Weirich's definition in spite of what I perceive as its usefulness for utility theory.

Far more akin to my own conception is that of Gebhard Kirchgässner. While Kirchgässner never explicitly uses the term "decision space," he develops crucial insights into what he calls decision situations.¹⁴

The decision situation of a single individual can be essentially split into two elements: preferences and restrictions...In a particular decision situation, restrictions limit the space of action [*Handlungsspielraum*] of the individual; inside of this space of action lie possibilities of action that stand open to the individual and from which the individual must decide.¹⁵

This basic definition serves as a good initial jumping off point for an understanding of decision spaces. On one hand, actors enter a decision space (for Kirchgässner, a decision "situation") with a set of preferences, which can be understood as something like goals or purposes (whether or not preferences in this simple sense can be likened to goals or purposes is a question I will take up in great detail elsewhere). They are what *demand* decision from actors in the first place. Without preferences, which can be understood as

¹⁴ The Kirchgässner book on which I rely here is written in German, and so naturally the English "decision space" is nowhere to be found. Yet equivalent German expressions — such as "Entscheidungsraum" — are also not found in the article. In general, Kirchgässner provides conceptual work that is important to my own concept, but does so without producing the kind of readily available single concept that I seek to construct.

¹⁵ Kirchgässner (2000), 5-6.

the most basic way of understanding a concern for our possibilities, there would simply be no reason to act at all; when viewed from the standpoint of the discussion developed thus far, preferences could perhaps be understood as the most basic conceivable way of ordering and ranking possibilities from the standpoint of choice. When a practical being confronts the world, that confrontation *necessitates* preferences. One could even assert that it is analytically true that practical beings have preferences, in that a practical being seeks to realize possibilities in the world, which in turn entails “preferring” some possibilities over others. No practical being could be indifferent toward which possibilities are realized. A concern for life means a “preference” for life over death. When ants scurry from fire, they are acting on implicit preferences, which might well be distinct from human preferences insofar as they are “hard-wired” rather than subject to reflection. On the other side of the coin, the human agent is always confronted by restrictions, which can and have been understood in a number of ways: scarcity of resources, constraints constituted by the actions of others (as in game theory), the binary availability/unavailability of means, informational constraints, and so on. As David Kreps describes it, practical reason at its best would amount to the “ability to foresee everything that might happen and to evaluate and optimally choose among available courses of action.”¹⁶

It is on this dual basis that RCT as an actual methodological tool in the social sciences becomes possible: “I can understand human action only if I can explain it with

¹⁶ Kreps (1990), 745.

the help of such a model.”¹⁷ Kirchgässner calls the fundamental axiom of RCT the “rationality principle.” He makes the bold claim that “in a scientific sense, the ‘rationality principle’ that underlies the economic model of behavior should be seen as on par with the ‘causality principle’ in the natural sciences.”¹⁸ He is right. If the goal of the natural sciences is to understand things of a law-like nature, it must have an idea of causality as its foundation (even if, following Hume, we cannot *know* causality in itself and must infer it as a condition of possibility of understanding); if we are to understand things that are of a purposive nature (let’s call them persons), then we must understand them in terms of this very basic confrontation between purposes and constraints. These two sides of the coin presuppose one another. A purposive being without preferences and constraints would be an absurdity—for we could not be purposive if we always already occupied the states of the world that we wanted to occupy and if we were indifferent as to what those states were.

From this simple foundation, we can begin to account for most and likely all of decision theory, both within RCT and outside it. Game theory emerges when “the possibilities of action that are available to the individual are necessarily related to other individuals.”¹⁹ The decisions of others become one constraint among others. Theories of optimization, analogously, whether of a maximizing or satisficing bent—if we determine that there’s a fundamental distinction between the two, which is doubtful—are based on

¹⁷ Kirchgässner (2000), 8.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

the idea of a “systematic choice out of pre-given, known alternatives.”²⁰ Wherever one finds *homo oeconomicus*, one must necessarily find the following:

1. The separation between preferences and restrictions
2. The valuation of alternatives according to relative advantageousness
3. The susceptibility of this behavior to changed conditions and incentives.²¹

For Kirchgässner, as for Herbert Simon before him, “such concepts of bounded rationality are then meaningful above all if there exists, in a decision situation, broad-based uncertainty concerning possibilities of action and their consequences.”²² When uncertainty is an aspect of a decision situation (or space), information itself becomes an instrumental good. If we are uncertain as to the consequences of a decision, and the decision is sufficiently momentous, it is instrumentally rational to seek knowledge concerning those consequences, and even to do so at great cost under the right conditions. The extent to which uncertainty rules in a decision situation depends, of course, on a vast number of things. In conditions characterized by certainty, the search for the “best solution” to a decision problem is in itself more “rational” than it would be in a situation characterized by uncertainty, lack of information, and so on (this kind of consideration is of course the impetus not just to conceptions of rationality, but also to the entire “behavioral economics”²³ paradigm within RCT). This is particularly true, for example, in cases involving social norms, in which there may be a great deal to be gained by

²⁰ Ibid, 12.

²¹ Ibid, 13.

²² Ibid.

²³ For a more thorough discussion of behavioral economics, see section in the next chapter.

violating social norms, but we follow them anyway because violation carries implicit costs. Kirchgässner even goes as far as making the somewhat bold claim that

in general one can suppose that in markets the incentive for rational behavior in the sense provided by traditional models is higher than when other social decision procedures are in play, as for example in political or bureaucratic decisions. This may well be the reason why social scientists like to see the realm of application of the economic model of behavior as restricted to the “economic” realm in the traditional sense of the term.²⁴

As we know, this does not always turn out to be the case, as the assumptions of RCT are so often brought to bear on realms of life that are not easily contained within the “traditional” market economic realm. What must be noted for our purposes here is that Kirchgässner uses a particular conception of decision situations to explicitly demarcate the “proper” scope of RCT-based inference from its misguided over-extension. It is too early to argue that I agree in principle with Kirchgässner’s claim, insofar as there is still much more conceptual work to be done, but I should at least note the convergence.

While Kirchgässner applies a great deal of focus to the more external aspects of decision spaces/situations—that is, external to the acting subject and their intentions—another equiprimordial aspect of his conception is that of preferences.

It should be doubted neither that individuals have different preferences nor that preferences can change over the course of time. Insofar as one cannot grasp preferences independently from the behavior of individuals, a fundamental question arises concerning how meaningful a research strategy is that explains changes in human behavior through changes in preferences.²⁵

²⁴ Ibid, 13-14.

²⁵ Ibid, 16.

With respect to this problem, Kirchgässner concurs with my basic thesis that “there exists a great danger of immunizing the theoretical conclusions” of RCT by “explaining any change [in behavior] on the basis of changes in preferences.”²⁶ One solution, of sorts, to this problem, is to seek to explain human behavior on the basis of restrictive conditions, which are useful because they are independently verifiable—unlike preferences, which lend themselves to endless philosophical argumentation in a way that external conditions do not.²⁷ Assuming the relative stability of preferences is a necessary counterpart to this sort of explanation.

In sum, Kirchgässner’s most important contribution is that he establishes a firm conceptual connection between the concept of decision spaces—via a roughly analogous concept—and the axioms of RCT. He is right that without stable decision spaces, RCT loses both its explanatory and predictive power; when stable decision spaces can be assumed, that explanatory and predictive power is regained. But that gain comes at a cost: the more strongly we insist on stable decision spaces as a condition of possibility of the predictive power of RCT, the more strongly we must restrict the “real world” applicability thereof. We are forced to deduce from this state of conceptual affairs that any plausible philosophical account of praxis must find different roots.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ One of the tasks of this dissertation is, of course, to render “external conditions” problematic and to attempt to grasp them in the most dynamic way possible. Yet it remains true that theorizing external constraints avoids any number of deep conceptual difficulties with which the theory of preferences must always contend.

2.2 Decision spaces in a complex key: decision field theory

It is not difficult to imagine a counter-argument to that of Kirchgässner: there are better and worse forms of RCT that in turn produce more and less complex accounts of human behavior. This is undoubtedly true. The deeply simplified version of RCT that one encounters in an Intro to Micro-Economics or Introduction to Political Behavior course is usually scorned by both undergraduates and contemporary political scientists, and is introduced only as a bridge to more nuanced forms of analysis.

The same can be said for decision theory, where the central importance of decision spaces is taken as a more explicit axiom. In decision field theory (DFT), for example, one finds precisely such an emphasis, except that in DFT, what one finds is a far more intricate and dynamic understanding of the determinants of decision making than one finds in most permutations of political science and economics. As we will see, DFT is an effort to overcome the lack of dynamism inherent in other forms of decision theory, and it succeeds in providing that along a number of axes. And yet it only overcomes these deficiencies in a way that is both limited and that fails to overcome the seemingly inescapable shortcomings of RCT and its many kin. What this shows is that any attempt to understand human praxis that is based on RCT must necessarily founder, *irrespective of the level of formal sophistication that has been attained*. DFT is a useful case to consider in this regard because its level of sophistication, even at its inception in Jerome Busmeyer and James Townsend's seminal article ("Decision Field Theory: A Dynamic-Cognitive Approach to Decision Making in an Uncertain Environment"), is extremely high, incorporating a multitude of factors, including the pressure of time, the

availability of information, and so on. To put it bluntly, if decision field theory cannot escape the gravitational pull of RCT's founding axioms, it is difficult to imagine what *could*.

Busemeyer and Townsend begin their article by separating themselves from previously available theories of human decision making, which they describe as typically falling into one of four categories:

Deterministic theories postulate a binary preference relation that is either true or false for any pair of actions. *Probabilistic* theories postulate a probability function that maps each pair of actions into the closed interval [0,1]. *Static* theories assume that the preference relation (for deterministic models) or the probability function (for probabilistic models) is independent of the length of deliberation time. *Dynamic* theories specify how the preference relation or probability function changes as a function of deliberation time.²⁸

According to the authors, the first two conceptions of decision making necessarily posit a closed decision space because decision is understood as demanding pair-wise comparisons, although the two conceptions handle those comparisons differently. The second two theory types are modifications of the first pair insofar as they introduce the element of time, although this added dimension leaves the axiom of closed decision spaces intact. What the authors seek is to “build on this previous work by extending these theories into the stochastic-dynamic category.”²⁹ The resulting conception of decision is described as follows:

When confronted with a difficult personal decision, the decision maker tries to anticipate and evaluate all of the possible consequences produced by each course of action. For real decisions, a vast number of consequences may be considered,

²⁸ Busemeyer and Townsend (1993), 432.

²⁹ Ibid.

and these anticipated consequences are retrieved from a rich and complex associative memory process... Therefore, the decision maker must undergo a slow and time-consuming process of retrieving, comparing, and integrating the comparisons over time. No action is taken until the preference for one action becomes strong enough to goad the decision maker into action.³⁰

Decision field theory can thus be understood as an attempt to embed complexity into the very heart of the decision-making process. At any given time, individuals face a flux of information, some of it easily digestible and straightforward and some of it not, a plethora of possible courses of action that must be considered, and so on. It is also dynamic in that it necessarily folds the idea of learning and the past into decision-making. Consequences of future actions are rarely if ever considered in the abstract, but are rather assessed from the standpoint of past information. While the authors issue a major caveat at the beginning of this passage—“When confronted with a *difficult* personal decision”³¹—it seems that, anecdotally at least, the bulk of human decision making is “difficult” in this particular sense. That is, it is difficult to conceive of human decisions that did not involve anticipating and evaluating possible courses of action, tying possible consequences to memory of past events, and so on. This may be true even when we heavily rely—for better or worse—on the judgment of those who have come before us.

Within the skeletal³² model underlying decision field theory, mathematical weight is given to *attention* (“which represents the retrieval of an *association* between an action

³⁰ Ibid, 444.

³¹ Italics are my own.

³² By skeletal I mean that one can imagine any number of permutations of or modifications to the basic model that the authors sketch. I seek to show here, however, that such permutations and

and a consequence”), the *valence* assigned to a given action (“the anticipated value of an action at [a given] moment”), a momentary *preference state* (which is a function of the various valences attached to various possible courses of action), as well as to the necessity of crossing a *threshold* before a decision is made (it is assumed in the model that decision making must overcome some kind of initial inhibition, produced by what the authors call a “motor system”). Valences—values attached to certain possibilities—are weighed by a valence system, which then feeds into a decision system, which transforms valences into preferences, which then encounters the motor system of inhibition mentioned just before.³³ In total, seven parameters are taken into account: the mean valence input (which explains the direction of preference); the variance of the valence input (which is a proxy for the strength of the preference); the inhibitory threshold (past which the “strength” of expected value must go³⁴); the initial anchor point (which is used to register subsequent reversals in the direction of preference); the growth-decay rate (which registers “serial position effects,” or the fact that our decision tendencies may change over the relevant time span); the goal gradient parameter, of

modifications can only take us so far in our understanding of praxis and decision, insofar as they must see us fundamentally as consumers of our practical situation.

³³ Ibid, 446.

³⁴ This is one of the more difficult to grasp among the seven parameters. Essentially, in any decision, there is a trade-off between speed and accuracy. Accuracy is surely an aspect of sound decision making, but the achievement of accuracy takes time, which is of course a scarce resource. But surely there is an acceptable level of accuracy past which we are comfortable, so to speak, making a decision. The degree to which we weight time vis-à-vis accuracy depends on the nature of the decision being made, but it is intuitively very plausible that this is an ever-present factor in decision making.

which deliberation time is a function; and, lastly, a time unit, which is “chosen to be as close to zero as needed to approximate a continuous time process, that is, the length of discrete time periods.”³⁵ Many of these seven parameters are derived from preceding theories of decision making, but become incorporated, subordinated, and embodied within decision field theory.

I freely admit that a great deal in DFT is opaque to me and likely to virtually anyone outside of the discipline of decision theory. We can see that in seeking to “formalize this decision process,”³⁶ decision field theory must treat its subject matter with incredible mathematical/methodological sophistication. For how could it not? It would be unfair to expect simplicity and straightforwardness in modeling something as complex and dynamic as human decision. Fortunately, an account of DFT that truly gives it its due is not really necessary in order to discern the basic axioms and limits in play. The authors themselves are quite helpful to that end, insofar as they effectively own up to the “real world” limitations of DFT:

Although it is possible to apply decision field theory to complex real-life decisions, these decisions do not allow the necessary experimental control to discriminate among competing theories. The scientific support for all decision-making theories is based primarily on simple, but highly controlled, experimental tasks that are designed to investigate important properties of the decision process.³⁷

A sufficient test of the validity of decision field theory vis-à-vis other theories of decision—like the four mentioned earlier—cannot take place in everyday practical life.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid, 444.

³⁷ Ibid, 436.

Why? For precisely the same reasons that we should doubt RCT's basic hold on everyday action when it is divorced from conditions that we would expect to be conducive to experimentation. In fact, one could surely argue that there is an implicit "experimentalist"³⁸ bias in RCT.

For these reasons, and others to be introduced in the coming sections, there are good *a priori* reasons to believe that understanding praxis is not ultimately a matter of arriving at any specific, desired degree of theoretical complexity. There are aspects of our practical experience that *no* such degree of quantitative complexity can capture. The world is a buzzing, swarming mess of causes, factors and forces. One's initial impression is that there is an element of infinity in our practical situation: for all intents and purposes, *any* decision could hypothetically have an infinite number of factors associated with it. In deciding which color shoes to wear in the morning, I might try to factor in every single person I could potentially see that day and choose the color according to which would be more pleasing overall to the vast array of people that I encounter. I might even decide to wear green shoes hoping that I happen to run into a member of the Boston Celtics. But we cannot help but reduce this complexity via a number of cognitive means. *Of course* decisions are complex. My argument is not that decision theory has not yet attained the appropriate level of complexity. Rather, my argument is that there is a *type* of complexity that no decision theory—and no offshoot of RCT—can grasp, and that is the presence/absence dynamic that is present in many (though not all) of our decisions. When

³⁸ The term is my own and is not intended as a neologism, but rather as a temporary placeholder.

I speak of presence and absence, I do not mean this in quite the same way that a Jacques Derrida or another member of the post-Heideggerian tradition might mean it—although there are without a doubt certain affinities. What I mean is rather that praxis often involves the introduction of *the new* into the world. The new comes in both grandiose and mundane forms: it can mean both radically new forms of social organization that reach down to the very roots of the social order, or new inventions that make further technological changes possible, or new catch phrases, or new ways of managing

2.3 Robert Nozick, meta-rationality and the limits of instrumental reason

The argument that reason must surely be more than “merely” instrumental is not a particularly novel one. It is a criticism that has dogged rational choice theory and the theory of instrumental reason more generally from the very start. Robert Nozick’s critique of instrumental reason can be read as following in the footsteps of previous attempts to flesh out a more full-bodied conception of reason, but with essential differences that are important for the critical project that I seek to develop here. Nozick’s critique is important because, like my own, he seeks neither to simply negate RCT—whatever it would ultimately mean to do so—or to brush it aside as irrelevant or self-evidently inferior to some more substantive account of reason. He admits that “the notion of instrumental rationality is a powerful and natural one...Every...description [of reason] that purports to be complete includes instrumental rationality within it. Instrumental rationality is within the intersection of all theories of rationality (and perhaps nothing else

is).”³⁹ Why? “Because the instrumental conception of rationality “does not seem to stand in need of justification, whereas every other theory does.”⁴⁰ And yet the question for Nozick, as for many others, is “whether it is the *whole* of rationality.”⁴¹ Nozick answers this question in the negative. Instrumental rationality surely *is* a type of rationality—perhaps the one that we spend the most time practicing—but it is not the only one. In spite of this, it is decidedly not the case that instrumental rationality is *self-justifying*, above all because it relies on particular conceptions of the world, the good, the person, and so on. If our conception of any of these were to change, then our whole account of instrumental rationality would be transformed from the ground up. Nozick’s task in *The Nature of Rationality* is to show that there are important fundamental philosophical questions about instrumental rationality that must be answered before we can begin to draw conclusions about how instrumental rationality “works” (which is the typical domain of theories of instrumental rationality).

His basic argument is important to mine because he explicitly introduces a concept of *world* into his theory of instrumental rationality. While the next chapter will flesh out this concept in much more detail than I will do here, Nozick’s discussion is a good way to introduce the concept:

We might think of the *pure* theory of rationality as the theory of what standards are to be adhered to by any kind of being in any kind of world, that is, by every kind of being in every kind of world. But it seems unlikely that, if there *are* any such standards, they will be very contentful [sic] or get us very far. Still, they

³⁹ Nozick (1993), 133.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

might provide a starting point for the project, within one world, of using these pure standards to form a view of that world and oneself, then modifying the standards accordingly, forming a new view on the basis of these modified standards, and so on.⁴²

It seems straightforward enough to argue that reason in general is dependent on assumptions about the world, about what things matter in the world, about what our ontological commitments⁴³ are, and so on: “Our standards of rationality must depend upon our view of the character of this world and upon our view of what we are like, with our capacities, powers, disabilities, and weaknesses.”⁴⁴ Thus, being rational, even instrumentally so, in a world in which there is zero scarcity of basic goods would be fundamentally different from being rational in our own world. Our projects would be fundamentally altered, our standards of fairness and justice might well be different, and so on. Being rational in a world without cows or the color purple or David Letterman would not be so *qualitatively* different. In general, Nozick’s point seems to be that the further we stray from any particular conception of the world, the more difficult it becomes to make general claims about rationality. RCT can be interpreted, I would argue, as an attempt to do just that: it seeks to provide a more or less content-less notion of instrumental rationality, based on a particular conception of the human, that would be applicable in any world not fundamentally different from what we know of our own.⁴⁵ In

⁴² Ibid, 135.

⁴³ For the classic treatment of this idea, see Quine (1959).

⁴⁴ Nozick (1993), 134-135.

⁴⁵ If humans began living on colonies on Mars, to give a somewhat silly example that nonetheless gets the point across, we would not expect that instrumental rationality as we know it would simply cease. Humans would still have to cooperate with one another, provide for basic needs,

the worlds without cows, the color purple, and/or David Letterman, this and that particular usage of instrumental rationality would certainly be affected—no one would be trying to maximize milk production or time spent watching “The Late Show” on CBS—but our *theory* of instrumental rationality would be unaffected.

In general, one of the most important facets of Nozick’s argument is that behind any theory of instrumental reason lie a number of meta-arguments about the world, about what human beings are, etc. It would be difficult to conceive of instrumental rationality as a *sui generis* concept. One of the conditions underlying instrumental rationality is *always* what Nozick calls a “principle of decision.”⁴⁶ Different branches of RCT are characterized by different principles ascribed to human decision. For example, theories of bounded rationality seek to distinguish themselves from other forms of RCT by ascribing the principle of “satisficing” to human actors (and root the principle of satisficing in intrinsic limits constraining the efficacy of our decision making).⁴⁷ But principles of decision are also something that human actors may more or less consciously *choose*:

A principle of decision is established (tentatively) by a method of reasoning...[W]e should hope that in our own situation there is significant mutual support between whatever set of principles of reasoning we find most convincing. A discrepancy here would be a spur to change.⁴⁸

provide incentives for action, and so on. In this regard, even Mars would not be a world “fundamentally different” from our own!

⁴⁶ Ibid, 136.

⁴⁷ Simon (1955) is usually taken as the first introduction of this idea into RCT.

⁴⁸ Nozick (1993), 136.

To give a somewhat unpolished example, we might very well adopt a principle of decision whereby “pure” means-ends rationality is our sole criterion of decision and the maximization of momentary pleasure in whatever circumstances is our end.⁴⁹ It’s difficult to imagine someone fully embodying this principle of decision. Perhaps they would find that principle unsatisfying and seek more durable pleasures, or perhaps they would be morally aghast at some of the decisions they end up making and so on. Principles of decision are supposed to *work* for us. When they stop working—as they likely would over time in the example just provided—they should be discarded in favor of different principles. Perhaps in light of the failure of the principle of momentary bodily pleasure maximization, we adopt a principle that limits such pleasure in the name of enhancing our overall bodily pleasure. This would force us to forego many momentary pleasures in the name of holding out for more intense pleasures, more sustained pleasures, and so on; this may also become unsatisfying after a time, and the desire for a new principle might enter into consideration. Or, along more Nozickian lines, our beliefs about the world may change. If we were dissatisfied with a life seeking momentary pleasures, receiving information that the world held greater pleasures in store for us would be crucial to our change in principles. All of this, of course, remains purely within the realm of “utility,” so to speak. We have not yet entered the domain of moral and other considerations that, it is often claimed, should rule over purely instrumental rationality in

⁴⁹ Nietzsche’s “Last Man,” lazy, undisciplined, living only for the sake of base bodily pleasure, and capable of nothing “higher,” might be taken as the ideal type of this set of commitments, at least within the history of philosophy.

some way. We would hope that social actors would adopt principles of action that did not fall wholly under the umbrella of maximizing pleasure derived from food, drink, exposure to pleasing natural phenomena, and so forth, but even if they did, RCT would still presuppose the same parameters.

What, then, is rationality? It's clear that even if we accept instrumental rationality as an important and perhaps even necessary component of rationality more broadly understood, we must also nonetheless accept that instrumental rationality is itself a more fundamentally plural concept than we are often inclined to think. How we understand instrumental rationality depends crucially upon how we describe the world and what kinds of ontological commitments we harbor. If we are committed to a conception of the world that we confront in our praxis that holds that we face nothing but stable decision spaces, then our conception of instrumental rationality is discordant *from the ground up* with a conception of instrumental rationality based on a conception of praxis as confrontation with an unstable flux of circumstances—or, for that matter, with a conception of the world that seeks to account for both the fundamental instability of horizons *as well as* the possibility of the construction of decision spaces that are consistent and stable enough to be reliable as contexts for our projects (the more unstable they are, the less we may consider them genuine contexts per se). What, then, becomes of our principles of instrumental rationality? Let us assume for the sake of argument that we remain with the assumption of utility maximization as the core axiom of instrumental rationality (and RCT thereby). *Even this principle* commits us to different things based on our ontological commitments. Thus far, I have listed three possibilities:

1. The world as a stable decision space or a plurality thereof. In such a world, utility maximization means choosing from among a set of possibilities wholly immanent to that decision space. According to such a perspective, we might even imagine a human actor's entire lifespan described as *one* single decision space. Or perhaps an actor is somehow pushed to and fro into one stable decision space after the next. The overall result is the same either way: the actor faces only immanent decision possibilities at every decision-making juncture.
2. The world as fundamentally lacking any and all stable decision spaces. In such a world, gaining any kind of utility, much less maximizing it, seems more intrinsically difficult than in world 1. In world 1, there are at least exists the possibility of attaching probabilities to possible outcomes (which is impossible outside of stable decision spaces). Assuming that we *know* the basic character of world 2, we can dispense with any of the basic presumptions of RCT, Bayesian decision theory, prospect theory, and so on. Presumably, such a world would be so random that every decision would essentially be akin to a throw of the dice. Information gathering would likely lose all of its purpose. Any utility—or any good at all—would fly at us at random, presuming that we could even *live* in such a world.
3. The world as fundamental uncertainty, but with at least *one* stable decision space. While we are restricted from describing such a world as a stable decision space in and of itself, we do know that there is at least one, and hence that stable decision spaces are *possible*. With this knowledge in mind, we might seek to preserve the one stable decision space that we have against the chaotic character of the flux around it. We might even construct decision spaces where they don't exist already, or expand the stable decision spaces that already exist. In world 3, instrumental rationality is neither a choosing among various already-existing options (as in world 1) nor is it nothing but a crap shoot (world 2): here, instrumental reason would be potentially ruled by a plurality of principles. Within stable decision spaces, the principle of maximizing utility by choosing among a panoply of options—as on a game show—would rule, whereas outside of those spaces some other principle would necessarily apply. In addition, if we expanded our concept of that world to include the possibility that new stable decision spaces can be formed where they did not previously exist, then a number of new possibilities emerge. For example, it would likely become a practical imperative to: produce stable decision spaces where chaos reigns (assuming, of course, that stability is preferred to chaos from the standpoint of the acquisition of utility); make somewhat stable decision spaces even more stable (presuming that we can speak of degrees of stability); and so on.

This is a mere beginning to what could be a far more extensive thought experiment. But this discussion should be adequate to the task of demonstrating that the conception of

instrumental rationality that we choose—and the axioms and norms that necessarily go along with it—deeply depend on how we characterize the world.⁵⁰ There may indeed be changes to our conception of the world that do not call for such deep transformations in our thinking—like the ones mentioned above where specific objects, like the color purple, were inserted and removed from the worlds in question—but this does not mean that we tweak our conception of the world infinitely and expect our basic conception of praxis to remain unaltered. This should also be sufficient to demonstrate just how much conceptual/ontological baggage comes along for the ride whenever we accept RCT as an adequate account of praxis. In essence, we must assume world 1.

From this more ontological discussion issues a normative discussion which has bearings on how we imagine “success” in each of the world types, as well as what we would demand of actors in each. To begin, the ideal-typical “consumer” of the practical world, who takes advantage only of immediate, immanent possibilities, would be equally at home in worlds 1 and 2, where all decision possibilities are givens (with the crucial difference that decision possibilities in world 1 are actually intelligible). On the obverse side of the ideal-typical consumer of the practical world lies the ideal-typical *producer* of the practical world. This would be an actor who not only responded appropriately to decision situations—“appropriately” depending, of course, upon what criteria of decision were invoked—but also molded them or even produced them where they did not already

⁵⁰ In turn, the way we characterize the world is often if not always dependent upon ideology, that is, upon some generalized conception of how things usually and for the most part function.

exist. Such an actor is only possible in world 3, where instrumental rationality means something far different from what it means in the other two worlds.

To illustrate the importance of our beliefs about the basic character of the world, imagine an actor who was living in world 3 but *thought* that she was living in world 1. Such an actor would be oblivious to the practical possibilities latent in her world and would falsely imagine herself to be a passive recipient of her practical possibilities. One would hope that she would acquire, either through experience or by some other means, the set of beliefs appropriate to world 3. This shows that while knowledge of one sort is of course an essential element of instrumental rationality—as duly recognized by many variants of RCT—there are more fundamental forms of knowledge that undergird our practical activity (or if they do not yet, then they should). I will suggest this only in passing, but it strikes me that one possible objection to RCT as an account of praxis might be one that could be described as experiential or even phenomenological: do people *really* think that they live in a world like world 1? Or do they think and, more importantly, *act* as if the world—our world—is more like world 3?⁵¹ My predilection is to think that most people really conceive of and act toward the world as if it were fundamentally like world 3, which means sometimes passively accepting certain horizons and decision spaces, sometimes producing new ones, and so on.

In addition to our conception of instrumental rationality, our implicit theory of preferences also must rest on an implicit account of what the world is. On one side,

⁵¹ I will exclude world 2 from consideration because I strongly doubt that anyone experiences the world that way usually and for the most part.

one can make preferential choices only in some situations: being alive, having the capacity to know alternatives, having the capacity to make a choice, being able to effectuate an action toward a chosen alternative, facing no interference with these capacities that makes it impossible to exercise them.”⁵²

This is straightforward enough: in order to have preferences, we have to be the type of being who needs to have preferences to attain some kind of goal. In the previous chapter, in conjunction with my interpretation of Heidegger, I argued that *any* practical being implicitly has preferences, and I would re-assert that same claim again here. More generally, there are always “preconditions (means) for preferential choice... There is a *presumption* that the person will prefer that the necessary conditions for preferential choice, for making any preferential choice at all, be satisfied.”⁵³ One of these preconditions is that what is being preferred—as well as that over which it is preferred—belongs in our decision space. We can certainly have preferences for things that are not available to us—I might prefer owning a brand new BMW to owning a brand new Volkswagen Jetta, although neither is available to me—but those preferences may not have any practical import. But such preferences *can* have practical import when we want to produce a decision space within which that preference becomes relevant. If my yearly income expanded ten-fold, my preference for the BMW would become relevant because my decision space would come to include the possibility of purchasing either one. Thus, my initial car preference also entails a preference for the higher-income decision space within which that preference comes to have practical import.

⁵² Nozick (1993), 142.

⁵³ Ibid. The italics are Nozick’s.

For Nozick, we are simply better off thinking about practical reason in terms of *goals* rather than preferences: “Goals...are different from preferences or desires. To have or accept goals is to use them to filter from consideration in choice situations those actions that don’t serve these goals well enough or at all.”⁵⁴ Theories of preferences aren’t necessarily worthless, but preferences revealed or otherwise, especially when considered in isolation, seem to have little to say about instrumental rationality. Goals—Heidegger might say projects (*Entwürfe*)—and preferences are mutually generative in a fundamental way: “We can use goals to generate actions for serious consideration, actions that *do* serve those goals.”⁵⁵ Our preferences give rise to goals—I prefer coffee to tea in the morning, and so it was once my goal to obtain a coffeemaker—but our goals also have innumerable sub-preferences attached to them—when I had the goal of obtaining a coffee maker, I then acquired, so to speak, a preference for obtaining a reasonably priced one over an over-priced one. While the preference for a reasonably priced over an over-priced coffeemaker could be understood as a latent one that would hold irrespective of the particular project/goal in question—it’s hard to imagine why that preference would ever be reversed—the latent preference would be without practical import. When preferences and goals are understood this way, both are seen in a new light: the formation of preferences is actually *useful* to us in our practical pursuits rather than merely the “reason” for acting in the first place, and goals can be understood as something like a bundle of preferences, some stronger than others, some subordinate to

⁵⁴ Ibid, 145.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

others, and so on. What, then, does all of this contribute to the discussion at hand? The idea of goals/projects begins in the sphere of bread-and-butter preference theory but molds that set of claims into something that is both more strange and convincing.

In terms borrowed from Chapter 1, it molds the theory of *hairesis* into a theory of *prohairesis*. Instrumental reason remains the realization of our goals in the world, the fulfillment of our interests, and so on, but our whole sense of those things is transformed. Nozick even goes as far as hinting at a conception of practical reason similar to my own, although it unfortunately only arises in passing:

The generation of *new alternatives* plays an important role in action as well as in belief. A choice of action is made among alternatives. Better choosing among the existing alternatives is one way to improve the results. Another way is to widen the range of alternatives to include promising new ones. An imaginative construction of a new alternative, heretofore not thought of, might be what makes the greatest improvement possible. There might be helpful rules about when to seek such new alternatives, but the results will depend upon actually finding them.⁵⁶

Implicit in this passage is precisely the conception of possibility—and the corresponding understanding of praxis that necessarily accompanies that conception of possibility—that, I believe, RCT must fundamentally eschew if it is to remain true to its aims. Even better, Nozick goes as far as to allege the following:

In some situations, much more might be gained by generating new alternatives and choosing among the existing alternatives only. The second best among the new alternatives might be far superior to the very best among the old ones. *It is as important to cultivate the relevant imaginative powers as to sharpen the discriminative ones.* Without the exploration and testing of other imaginative possibilities, the procedures of rationality, by focusing only upon the *given* alternatives, will be myopic. Even when they do well for us, they may restrict us

⁵⁶ Nozick (1993), 172. The italics are my own.

to a local optimum... Without the imaginative generation and testing of new possibilities, rationality alone will get us only to a local optimum, to the best of the already given alternatives.⁵⁷

If only *The Nature of Rationality* had been twice as long, with the second half beginning at this argumentative juncture and building upon the channels of thought it makes available! Much of what is found in this dissertation could even be read precisely as an effort to complete the project made possible by this conceptual opening. For a number of crucial ideas can be discerned in the two previous quotations. Nozick implicitly describes RCT—although he of course never names it explicitly—as operating precisely in the sphere of choosing “among alternatives” rather than the sphere of the “not yet thought of.” In fact, for Nozick, non-dynamic praxis isn’t really rational at all, in that it might well be forced to accept second-best (or far worse!) over and over again. If we are to push beyond local optima into the realm of global optima, however we happen to define global, then an imaginative and phronetic use of Nozick’s reconstructed conception of praxis is firmly in order. And yet Nozick still finds place for the “discriminative” powers described by RCT, but he sublates such powers into a higher synthesis.

Nozick’s arguments take us a number of places, but if there is one that stands out in its importance for my argument here in this chapter, it is the following: *praxis, insofar as it finds itself both inside and outside of stable decision spaces, needs to make choices concerning decision spaces themselves*. If we act according to an account of the world in which we believe that we are always in a stable decision space, then we are never

⁵⁷ Nozick (1993), 173. Italics are my own.

prepared for the potential dissolution of those decision spaces, it never occurs to us to transform or negate them, we never develop forms of know-how (as yet undeveloped here) capable of contending with such a world, etc. The normative implications of this, even if from the standpoint of “pure” instrumental rationality severed from all ethical considerations, are deeply perplexing. What would it mean to not only “choose wisely” but also to be an optimal producer, sustainer, or reformer of decision spaces? What practical virtues will be demanded of us? Questions like this will be addressed in depth in the next chapter. At this point, we will need to venture back into a world more firmly rooted in RCT and attempt to push the limits of the logic of what we find there, just as we have done with Nozick.

2.4 Praxis and world construction, part I: Buchanan and Tullock within and beyond rational choice theory

James M. Buchanan and Gordon Tullock’s⁵⁸ *The Calculus of Consent: Logical Foundations of Constitutional Democracy* (1962) is quite rightfully considered the forerunner of Rawls’ *Theory of Justice* and a classic in the RCT literature.⁵⁹ What makes it so unique—particularly given how early in the history of the RCT tradition it was written—is that it takes insights from RCT and uses them not to illuminate empirically researchable aspects of human behavior and decision making—although it may do so

⁵⁸ Henceforth, I will refer to Buchanan and Tullock as “B+T” for the sake of brevity. This is not to be confused with *BT* (*Being and Time*).

⁵⁹ I don’t consider *Theory of Justice* here because the basic points that I wish to make about B+T and about the kind of world-constructive kind of thinking that they embody can be made without recourse to dealing with Rawls’ much more intricate project.

indirectly—but rather to make normative claims about the very structure of society (and likely the first attempt to do so). This is immediately apparent in the book, as it begins not with any claim about human behavior per se, but rather with the following:

This is a book about the *political* organization of a society of free men. Its methodology, its conceptual apparatus, and its analytics are derived, essentially, from the discipline that has as its subject the *economic* organization of society... This work lies squarely along that mythical, and mystical, borderline between these two prodigal offsprings [sic] of political economy.⁶⁰

Already we can see that B+T seek to use the RCT tradition to make larger claims about social organization. First, we must determine what exactly they mean by social organization. On one hand, they explicitly state that they “are not attempting to write an ‘ideal’ political constitution for society.”⁶¹ Their much more modest aim is to “analyze the calculus of the rational individual when he is faced with questions of constitutional choice.”⁶² That is, they seek to make claims about what kind of social foundations—in this case constitutional foundations, conceptually restricted to decision-making rules—that a rational individual would hypothetically choose. I discuss their work here not necessarily to evaluate their fundamental claims about decision-making systems—which is surely beyond the scope of this chapter—but rather to highlight some of the ways in which thinking about instrumental reason can be raised from a first- to a second-order level of analysis without violating the spirit of the original first-order considerations (that

⁶⁰ Buchanan and Tullock (1962), Preface, v. Italics are the authors’.

⁶¹ Ibid, vi.

⁶² Ibid.

is, without making any conceptual jumps that can't be justified within the axioms of RCT).

While B+T certainly do not use the vocabulary of stable and non-stable decision spaces, their discussion of constitutions nevertheless produces a fruitful discussion of the notion. The idea of a *constitution* is the central concept in *Calculus of Consent*, because “constitution” names the most general conceivable way of conceptualizing the political realm from the standpoint of social choice: “We shall mean by this term a set of rules that is agreed upon in advance and within which subsequent action will be conducted.”⁶³ A constitution thus produces a *kind* of decision space, for it does produce a foreclosed set of possibilities. *But*, the foreclosure that it enacts is the exclusion of certain *kinds* of possibilities. Under a constitution in which, for example, the constitution itself cannot be suspended by executive power, even during wartime, there's a whole class of possible actions that are excluded: the court system can never be rendered powerless, the executive can never rule by decree, and so on. It is certainly true that constitutions can be violated. A president might effectively suspend the constitution by sending the military into the streets and declaring martial law, even when this is not *de jure* legal. But to put it somewhat bluntly, what constitutions do is precisely to limit the set of decisions that are *both* (a) practically possible, and (b) constitutional. Constitutions may never succeed at making violations of the constitution impossible, but that is not what we expect of them. Thus, a constitution in B+T's sense produces something a lot *like* decision space, yet it

⁶³ Ibid, vii.

does so in a far more open-ended fashion than the more static decision spaces with which we have dealt thus far. We could even characterize B+T's project as an attempt to think about *ideal* decision spaces. The central question animating *Calculus of Consent* could be re-described as a response to the question, What kind of fundamental decision space is most amenable to the implicit aims of a "society of free men?"⁶⁴ For B+T, there are certain things—like martial law during peacetime—that no instrumentally rational person would *ever* want,⁶⁵ and we all have an implicit interest in living in a social order that seeks to minimize the possibility of such unpalatable things coming to pass. A "free man" would thus want none of his individual decision spaces to be ones in which living under martial law would be a factor.

In order to engage in a more in-depth discussion, a broad-based introduction to B+T is in order. Their entire project emerges out of a central difficulty of human political life: "The selection of a decision-making rule is itself a group choice, and it is not possible to discuss positively the basic choice-making of a social group except under carefully specified assumptions about rules."⁶⁶ More or less every individual lives under the sway of collective decision making, which means that *not* every individual can simultaneously dictate the basic decision making rules within society. If we assume that individuals eventually come to have opposed interests, we can also assume that they

⁶⁴ Ibid, v.

⁶⁵ By "no instrumentally rational person," I mean only those who would be *subject* to martial law and its many potential abuses. A paranoid or power-hungry executive, or a particularly thuggish rank-and-file member of the military, might well have an interest in imposing martial law!

⁶⁶ B+T (1962), 6.

come to have opposed conceptions of what kinds of decision-making rules would be most advantageous to both them and the social group more broadly. From this perspective, unanimity concerning both specific decisions and also for rules *about* decisions is *prima facie* good, insofar as it does not require us to invoke any other decision-making criteria to justify the decision. But if we assume that unanimity is not always possible, the question of *consent* becomes much more difficult. For social actors need to consent to the regime even when they don't get their way, and for B+T it is not enough to simply force them to "consent" via violence: their moment-to-moment consent has to be genuine and based on a more originary consent.

How is that consent to be achieved? It would be quite easy to achieve if we could assume a fundamental homogeneity of interests across all interest categories. But if we cannot assume this, then we have to think in a more marginal fashion. That is, we have to conceive of a structure that is *marginally* better than all other alternatives for *all* parties involved. For no structure will fully satisfy the interests of heterogeneous social actors. Instead, individual participants in social life have to choose *meta-rules*. This necessarily operates on an even broader level than my previous discussion of horizons. Stable decision spaces, at least when conceived as a single iteration "game," are not governed by rules in a meaningful sense; practical horizons are much more likely to be constructed according to rules;⁶⁷ in turn, rules intended to govern many or all social horizons are yet

⁶⁷ I would even venture the thesis that practical horizons *have* to be constructed according to rules in *some* way, be they explicit or implicit, attached to coercive force or other forms of incentive, etc. A practical horizon with no structuring principles capable of lending that horizon intelligibility

another conceptual step removed from stable decision spaces. This is precisely the sense in which B+T's choosers design meta-rules.⁶⁸ Among the most important of such meta-rules, for example, is that society must not be ruled by decision-making procedures that allow social groups to engage in exploitation of other social groups, e.g. the imposition of slavery, drudgery or caste hierarchies. "It is precisely the recognition that the State may be used for such purposes which should prompt rational individuals to place constitutional restrictions on the use of the political process."⁶⁹ One can even argue that it is only via such meta-rules that the political process can be transformed into a "positive-sum game."⁷⁰ Failure to construct meta-rules of this sort is a surefire way to construct a political system that is a zero-sum game at best, at least from the somewhat narrow utility-based standpoint of B+T.

What kinds of rules are we talking about, then? At this point, an actual elaboration of B+T's system has become necessary. "Rules," of course, could mean a number of

would thereby be a *prima facie* absurdity. Even if I were to (a) buy a building in the middle of the city and (b) tell people that they were free to come and go as they please, and that they could do whatever they wanted without punishment *except* damage the building itself—and presuming that (d) the police were to turn a blind eye to what happens in the building—the very physical structure of the building itself would have some kind of horizon-structuring practical force in and of itself. It would limit the kinds of activity that could take place within the building, and those very basic, concrete limitations might in turn come to have a norm-constructing power, which might in turn come to implicitly govern the "free" activities of people that came to the building.

⁶⁸ It should be noted that B+T do not use this terminology, although I believe it fits their aims.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 13.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 24. This shows how far B+T's contractarianism lies from more Hobbesian forms and how closely they ultimately approximate more natural rights-oriented theories.

things within the bounds of a thought experiment like this: social norms, specific laws concerning specific domains of concern, etc. But B+T's focus, as briefly treated above, is narrow, hinging upon the cost and benefits associated with collective as opposed to individual action. "Collective action, if undertaken, will...require that the individual spend some time and effort in making decisions for the group, in reaching agreement with his fellows."⁷¹ When we make decisions concerning private concerns, such costs are naturally reduced to zero. But "more importantly, under certain decision-making rules, choices contrary to the individual's own interest may be made for the group."⁷² For any collective decision, there is a number of people, N , required to make a decision. As N gets larger, the external costs for each individual decrease. These external costs are comprised of "the costs that [a decision maker] expects to endure as a result of the actions of others."⁷³ This is a decreasing function as N gets larger because if, for example, unanimity is required to make a decision, then the individual will always get his or her way because he or she has veto power over any decision. If, say, only 60% of decision makers needed to agree to render a collective decision (as opposed to 100% in the case of unanimity), the expected costs to the typical decision maker would likely be great, since they would suffer from the burden of collective decisions that do not favor them. Requiring more stringent decision-making rules thus has the effect of reducing the average expected cost.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

Things get problematic when we assume, as B+T do, that as N gets larger, the costs associated with decision-making increase. If unanimity is demanded, then one would expect that the time and effort needed to get everyone on the same page—either through persuasion, cajoling, bickering, kvetching or what have you—would be considerable. When a simple majority is required, those costs are starkly cut. The end result is that when one adds external and decision-making costs, what one gets is a U-shaped curve with a single local optimal point, K/N , that minimizes total costs for the individual decision maker. Hence, a system that requires $K-1$ percent of decision makers to reach agreement imposes excessive external costs; at $K+1$ percent, the system imposes excessive costs associated with the decision-making process itself.

This is the general relationship that B+T thus establish between the individual and expected costs. But they are quick to stress that *not* “all potential or government or collective activity should...be organized through the operation of the same decision-making rule.”⁷⁴ Different activities impose different potential external costs on the decision maker. If decisions concern matters that mean very little to us, then K/N has a low value. If I don’t care for Gummi Bears and the government is in charge of pricing them, then the potential external costs associated with changes in the price of Gummi Bears bear few to no external costs for me. Far more pressing a concern for B+T is those questions that concern “those possible collective or public decisions which modify or restrict the structure of individual human or property rights after these have once been

⁷⁴ Ibid, 73.

defined and generally accepted by the community.”⁷⁵ Such decisions are more essentially political because they affect not only this or that concern, but our basic practical horizons themselves. The external costs associated with the banning of my favorite candy are qualitatively different from those associated with changes in laws concerning warrants, search and seizure, the burden of evidence needed to effect conviction, etc. When such decisions are in question, the value of K/N rises sharply for *everyone*, to a level far above that of the Gummi Bear case. B+T would likely even argue that some decisions, K must equal N. No individual decision maker would want to risk, for example, putting eternal, absolute power in the hands of a despot or a cadre of elites. Thus, increasing K/N on the one hand helps to prevent abuses of collective power. B+T also suggest that K/N should also be high for decisions in which one decision maker—or a small subgroup of the decision-making population—stands to benefit disproportionately based on their size.⁷⁶

For B+T, the most important implications of their model are the following: (1) “It is rational to *have a constitution*;” (2) the rule of basic majority decision is merely one among a multitude of possible rules—indeed, any possible value of K/N amongst a group of decision makers could be taken as a possible rule—and it is arbitrary to take that as “the” standard democratic rule without taking into account a number of other factors; (3) as decisions become more potentially intrusive with respect to person and property, the

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ B+T give the example of municipal zoning ordinances, in which changing the designated usage of one particular piece of property might provide a massive boon to that particular property owner while not providing that same benefit to other property owners. In such cases, unanimity or near-unanimity of nearby property owners is often required. Ibid, 74.

importance of restrictive decision rules characterized by a high K/N increases; and (4) the more inclusive decision-making rules become—that is, as K/N increases—the higher the likelihood that individuals will accept collective decisions (*ceteris paribus*), insofar as the potential external costs associated with those decisions decreases correspondingly.⁷⁷ To put it more succinctly: rational choosers are willing to put up with potential external costs associated with group decisions, but that willingness is limited and contingent upon a number of factors. With this basic framework in place, B+T take up a fruitful discussion of a variety of voting and decision-making procedures, income distribution, different forms of legislature, pressure groups and special interests, and so on. Those discussions are beyond the scope of this chapter, and all of the explication of B+T's model needed to make the necessary argumentative points has already been carried out.

Insofar as this is not a dissertation about decision-making procedures *per se*, the question asserts itself: what does any of this have to say about praxis and our practical condition? At a first glance, this seems to be a difficult question, because *The Calculus of Consent* is not explicitly oriented toward concrete practical life at all. But I contend that it nonetheless has a great deal to say about us, although not as directly as a Heidegger or a Nozick. What B+T show,⁷⁸ I am convinced, is that an instrumentally rational person necessarily has an interest in the most basic characteristics of their *world*. Decision

⁷⁷ I attach the *ceteris paribus* provision here because it's important in such a case to hold constant the kind of decision being made.

⁷⁸ I stress once again that B+T are not alone in this regard. There are certainly other uses of RCT that could be called upon to make the argument I'm making here. I somewhat arbitrarily choose *Calculus of Consent* because it is seminal and elegant and comments directly on readily relatable issues that would be familiar to any student of politics.

makers, according to RCT, are indeed concerned with making good decisions and maximizing utility here and there. But they are also concerned with being a member of a collectivity that benefits them more than it harms them—and thus with being able to exercise enough *political* influence over the structure of the practical world to minimize the possibility of being trampled by the collective or by some subset of it. The amount of leverage they require vis-à-vis the collective varies, as B+T stress again and again, but never do we have an interest in surrendering that leverage. We might live in a collectivity in which or have concerns for which we're comfortable (for whatever reason) with allowing the collective to make important decisions for us, and thus with our practical horizons being significantly shaped by binding decisions, backed by coercive force, “from above.” Or we may not, and there's no need to rehearse the possible reasons why we might not. And from the standpoint of praxis, a number of other implications emerge. Insofar as we have an interest in living in particular kinds of worlds, we are also concerned with preserving those worlds when we inhabit them and bringing them into being when we do not. Such concerns are difficult to model in terms of stable decision spaces, but they are no less consistent with RCT than the indifference curves between two goods encountered in the opening chapters of microeconomics textbooks.

In *Calculus of Consent*, B+T begin with the usual axioms of RCT, but they use them not to construct falsifiable empirical models, but rather to engage in conceptual *world-construction*. This is quite different from making normative claims about how individuals, firms, other institutions, and so on should behave given contextual factors.

For B+T are concerned with the practical world in its entirety.⁷⁹ Their guiding question concerns the basic contours of the world into which a practical agent is born—or thrown, to follow Heidegger—and the conditions in which they remain. B+T only concern themselves with fundamental decision-making procedures. They make no claims concerning the distribution of resources (as Rawls would do later), the most advantageous system of production, the desired common virtues of citizens, etc. Instead, they restrict themselves to claims concerning primary decision-making procedures and thus, in my vocabulary, with the meta-decision space underlying all decision spaces, which decides on basic restrictions and other attributes of the entire social terrain. Such decisions seem to be an ineliminable aspect of human social life. Even when decisions take the form of allowing aspects, instances, and whole realms of social life to operate according to an essentially anarchic logic, this remains a political *decision*.⁸⁰ It seems likely, in fact, that no rational chooser, at least no risk-averse chooser, would willingly enter a social world that *chose* to be fundamentally anarchic in this respect (nor would they choose to live in a world that was so orderly that that, too, impinged upon their

⁷⁹ Or at least, insofar as they are dealing with a single practical world that presumably exists alongside others, with the most general level conceivable with resort to making claims about inter-state interactions, although one could conceivably make claims about that as well from B+T's perspective. Carrying that thought experiment as far as one can is surely beyond the scope of this project.

⁸⁰ Thus, a free market for a particular good would be seen, from this perspective, not as "separate" from the state, but rather as a product of forbearance on the part of the state, perhaps in the name of what decision-makers take to be the common good, or perhaps for less "noble" reasons (like the personal enrichment of decision makers, to give a cynical example).

potential flourishing). Whether a society *could* remain in such a condition for long and still be called a “society” is a separate, empirical question.

I concern myself with the work of B+T in this chapter not to endorse or reject the specific claims they make about decision-making procedures—claims that seem to me to be plausible enough—but rather to show that *Calculus of Consent* demonstrates one way in which RCT can be pushed beyond its usual boundaries in a way that is wholly consistent with its axioms. B+T begin with a few basic premises and proceed to construct a properly conceptual space. Among these premises: there is presumed to be a single society in question, in need of fundamental, constitutive decision-making procedures, capable of experiencing a kind of free-standing historical moment in which desirable constitutional structures can be put into place. Rational actors that are to live in that society—and, in a crucial sense, to find the ultimate conditions of possibility and limits to the totality of their life’s action in that society—are presumed to want to live under procedures that promote their interests, even if at the expense of others. The “real-world” basis for decision problems of this sort is clear enough. Let’s take a rough example. Debtors like inflation, *ceteris paribus*, and lenders prefer real price stability. But neither group in a democratic society—it is to be hoped—gets to lord it over the other and dictate monetary policy in a way that fully supports its own interests. That is, the debtors cannot ramp up the money supply until the real value of their debts is effectively zero. In a parallel fashion, lenders cannot tighten the money supply to a trickle in the name of preserving the real value of debts they are owed. If one side or the other were capable of using the coercive power of the state to buttress their practical imperatives, we would be

speaking of a kind of perversion, and perhaps even of domination and unwarranted coercion. A second-order problem emerges in that the unilateral imposition of the first-order interests of a social group may ultimately be detrimental. Tightening the money supply to zero may severely hamper economic health in a way that makes debtors default on their loans (perhaps because they become unemployed), thus rendering them unable to pay back their loans—a grim situation indeed for lenders. The converse case, in which debtors flood the economy with money and produce inflation levels that cripple economic life and produce costs to them that far outweigh their debts, is easy enough to conceive. In order to preserve some kind of balance of conflicting interests—and perhaps social peace as well—any society characterized by sovereign rule must have a decision-making forum, one which allows both groups a seat at the proverbial table, as a basic structural element. Even more fundamentally, such procedures cannot simply be ad hoc, that is, thrown into place in order to confront this or that particular issue.⁸¹ Instead, it's a practical imperative, for B+T, that there be a kind of ur-horizon underlying social action in its totality, a framework—rationally chosen and set in place via human will-

⁸¹ In fact, it's difficult to imagine how ad hoc decision-making procedures could be made to adequately deal with issues that are of broad social import. Arbitration for a dispute between families or private parties? Perhaps. But for a broad-based issue like the money supply, which is a persistent social question, both parties would have to agree upon a neutral arbiter, when the conflict could be considered settled, and so on. We could even make the claim that the more a particular issue is an unceasing question in social life, the stronger the case that it is only amenable to properly *political* decision-making procedures, or at least "political" in B+T's sense. As seemingly paradoxical as it may be, the decision to remove the money supply from direct legislative control would itself need to be agreed upon by all relevant decision makers in some fashion—or else the decision-making procedures responsible for that abdication of authority would themselves need to be procedurally legitimate.

formation—that, in a way, pieces together the practical horizons that are the flesh of social life. It should be made clear that producing a basic decision-making framework for society does *not* mean that society is necessarily ruled by a heavy-handed governing apparatus or that all aspects of social life are dictated by direct political decision. What it means, rather, is that procedures be in place that retain the *possibility* of intervention in social life, and that when practical horizons remain free from direct political influence—via regulation, coercive force, and so on—they remain so because it has been *decided* that they should remain so.⁸²

Thus, B+T take the axioms of RCT and use them to make normative claims about how society should look in certain basic aspects, and accordingly make demands of the world (indeed, it is all too easy to imagine a political world without such decision-making procedures, e.g. authoritarianism). But what does this have to say about praxis? At first, B+T seem to prove nothing outside the domain of *theoria*, that is, outside of the domain that they construct in thought, on this basis of deductions from axioms. This may well be true. But I would argue that *Calculus of Consent* has import for my fundamental argument for two reasons:

1. There is no reason to think that real-world practical agents would not seek to transform the practical world according to forms of reasoning akin to those employed by B+T. The content of that reasoning might ultimately differ from the

⁸² In fact, B+T briefly address this issue directly: “When will it prove desirable to shift one or more sectors of human activity from the realm of private to that of social choice, or vice versa? Implicit in our discussion is the assumption that the criteria for answering such questions as this can only be found in the conceptual unanimity among all parties in the political group. Agreement among all individuals in the group upon the change becomes the only real measure of ‘improvement’ that may be accomplished through change.” Page 6-7.

conclusions found in *Calculus of Consent*, but holding the practical world to the standards of theory and acting accordingly is indeed a kind of action, of “choice,” that is exceedingly difficult—though perhaps not impossible—to understand within a rational choice framework.

2. Correspondingly, it is most certainly in our practical interest to seek the kinds of theoretical knowledge found in thought experiments like *Calculus of Consent*. When I say “our,” I do so quite seriously. It may not appear to be in our interest, either according to RCT or according to the interests that we end up coming to have or think we have in our real-world practical activity, but it is—although we may have to retreat to something like a generic species standpoint (for the “we” in question) in order to properly make that claim.

The strange thing is that the goal of RCT is presumably to “change the world,” if such a trite expression can be forgiven. Economists seek to show that such-and-such an institution, practice or basic social arrangement maximizes efficiency; political scientists make claims about regime types and their viability and advantages and disadvantages; and so on, to give only two examples. And yet such transformations—from one economic arrangement to another, one regime type to another—remain beyond the ken of most RCT, although perhaps not necessarily so.⁸³ What works like *Calculus of Consent* show is that RCT can act as a sort of critical theory, and that any adequate account of practical reason must be able to account for the framework-transformative dimensions of action that would deign to bring the practical world in accord with the normative claims of RCT (although framework-transformative activity may of course make all sorts of changes that have little or nothing to do with what RCT might tell us to do). RCT can only really concern itself with “interests,” narrowly understood. One type of action that seems to be

⁸³ If taken to an extreme, an argument of this sort could ultimately claim that RCT is always involved in a sort of performative contradiction in which the kinds of normative changes it might call for could not be accounted for by the theory itself. I will introduce this argument as a suggestion and leave it at that.

qualitatively beyond its grasp is precisely the effort to bring the world into accordance with the normative demands that “theory,” divorced from the interests of this or that isolated actor, places upon the world—even those demands that RCT itself would bring to bear upon our practical lifeworld. Such demands quite often include judgments about decision spaces themselves. The authors express this all well enough on their own:

With the philosophers of the Enlightenment we share the faith that man can rationally organize his own society, that existing organization can always be perfected, and that...recognizing this about himself, man can organize his own association with his fellows in such a manner that the mutual benefits from social interdependence can be effectively maximized.⁸⁴

Implicit in such wishes is the possible extension of the concern—we might as well use Heidegger’s *care* at this juncture—of the decision maker outward, in the direction of ever-wider portions of practical space, in the direction of one totality or another. The decision maker implicitly called for by B+T is beginning to look like a strange creature, perhaps unrecognizable in certain respects to many operating within RCT.

2.5 Praxis and world construction, part II: the deontic constraint argument against rational choice theory

From Buchanan and Tullock we saw how RCT can be used to make normative claims about basic elements of entire social structures, when such structures are understood as horizons or perhaps as meta-horizons of action. Joseph Heath’s treatment of RCT in *Following the Rules: Practical Reason and Deontic Constraint* also operates

⁸⁴ Ibid, 306.

on a similar register, although his claims are much different. Heath's project in this book is to show how we must understand humans as *deontic beings* if we are to understand crucial human phenomena.⁸⁵ Heath may be read as one of the most prominent exponents of a more or less Kantian conception of instrumental reason,⁸⁶ because he proposes that there are types of behavior and action necessary to the functioning of any imaginable society—not to mention necessary to the production of the practical horizons within which RCT even *could* explain human behavior—that operate according to principles different from those on offer on the part of RCT.

But Heath takes this claim and extends it far beyond morality traditionally understood. Without seeing humans as deontic beings, we cannot hope to fully account for that which sets us apart from other animals—beings that, following Heidegger, are also characterized by praxis. The “big four” traits that can only be understood from a deontic perspective are language, rationality, culture, and morality.

Not only are all four likely to be the product of a single development, but the development in question is likely to have been more like a ‘tweak’ to existing capacities than a brand/new mechanism... Thus morality is almost certainly part of an evolutionary ‘package-deal,’ one that includes all of our more prized cognitive

⁸⁵ The word “deontic” stems from the Greek *deon*, which the online Liddell-Scott dictionary defines as “that which is binding, needful, right, proper.” Heath makes a distinction between the “deontic” and the “deontological” as follows: “I would like to defend the rationality of deontic constraints at the level of action, but am not committed to defending ‘deontology’ as a theory of justification” (Heath (2008), 10). The substance of this distinction will be clarified over the course of this section. For now, it is important to note that deontic is by no means synonymous with “good,” the way that it might bear that meaning in simplistic versions of deontological ethics. One can be deontically evil when one acts evilly in a rule-bound fashion.

⁸⁶ I will leave it up to the reader to decide just how properly Kantian Heath's argument might ultimately be. For my restricted purposes here, the extent of Heath's philosophical fidelity to Kant is a relatively unimportant matter.

abilities, such as planning for the future, developing scientific theories, doing mathematics, and so on.⁸⁷

These are audacious claims that concern moral philosophy, social psychology, cognitive psychology, the philosophy of action, and any number of other realms. The one claim that ultimately ties them all together, at least from the standpoint of Heath's claims about society and praxis, is that if we are non-deontic beings that seek to maximize utility in this or that situation, we never would have been capable of the many achievements that we typically associate with our species. "The type of subjectivism about value that rational choice theorists have been inclined to adopt makes it very difficult for them to turn around and prohibit agents from caring about the intrinsic properties of their actions."⁸⁸ It is this other concern that separates us from our closest primate relatives. The problem with RCT is that it presents us as merely being more intelligent and sophisticated—of having a better "cognitive endowment"⁸⁹—than other primates, rather than being *qualitatively* distinct from them. The "big four" characteristics are what constitute that separation, and they hang together inseparably. Being "moral" in a deontic sense—that is, being capable of praxis that is rule-bound—is intimately tied up with the other three characteristics. Heath's direct attack on RCT-based instrumental reason could not be any more pointed:

If human beings were nothing more than very smart chimpanzees, and human rationality was nothing more than an amplification of the cognitive abilities chimpanzees use when fishing termites out of a hole, then we probably would be

⁸⁷ Heath (2008), 9.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

instrumental reasoners. We would also be extremely uncooperative, have no culture or civilization to speak of, and live in primal hordes of no more than 150 individuals.⁹⁰

Without the ability to think in terms of complex time horizons, to engage in multivalent and cross-cutting forms of association, and to extend our concern beyond this or that decision situation, our species would experience a profound impoverishment, in every conceivable sense. Other living beings indeed have praxis, but their lack of deontic capacities severely limits their potential. We humans retain the capacity to *refuse* to be opportunistic maximizers in some situations, sometimes consciously and deliberately, and at other times because a kind of semi-automatic normative impulse in us pushes us to do so.

RCT fails to account for our status as deontic beings leaves us in a position in which we cannot conceptually account for social order itself. If we conceive of RCT as precisely that tool that enables us to understand human behavior in orderly circumstances—with stable decision spaces, to use my language—then this is a fairly damning charge, for it starkly restricts the applicability of RCT. While some would want to use RCT to account for the rise of social order itself, Heath argues that RCT cannot do this. Why? Because RCT can only demand of us that we be maximizers in particular situations; it can never ask us to form more substantively rational social orders. Thus, its conception of instrumental action is restricted to a kind of situational rationality: “Social order, according to this view, is nothing other than a consequence of individually

⁹⁰ Ibid, 292.

maximizing behavior made under the correct set of institutional circumstances.”⁹¹ But these stable enabling circumstances are typically *assumed* into being rather than being properly explained. This leads one into a kind of infinite regression whereby ever more fundamental sets of circumstances need to be understood as being produced by decision makers maximizing utility within stable decision spaces. For reasons that need not be fully developed here,⁹² Heath argues that we can only account for this fundamental horizontal stability by recourse to humans’ tendency to be deontic, norm-conforming beings—that is, beings that very often refuse to maximize utility within particular situations. “Morality is not about having the right sort of desires, but rather about vetoing the wrong sorts of desires.”⁹³ Being something more than a simple utility maximizer is an intrinsic element of this task. Ultimately, all of this is intended to be true most fundamentally to “the basic Kantian claim, with respect to moral motivation...that there is an internal connection between following the rules of morality and being a rational agent.”⁹⁴

⁹¹ Ibid, 43. I should note that I find Heath’s conception of RCT to be somewhat simplistic, occasionally even impoverished. I do not intend to endorse his conception here. I do seek to show, however, that Heath still has a great deal to tell us about both the limits of RCT and how RCT itself could be modified to overcome those limits.

⁹² I freely admit that I’m skipping over an important part of Heath’s argument. I think this is justified because I’m neither attempting to reconstruct the entirety of Heath’s argument nor to assess whether he is right or wrong about social order, but rather to show why the basic thrust of Heath’s inquiry aligns with my own.

⁹³ Ibid, 288. I do not fundamentally agree with this claim, for a number of reasons, but this quote, I think, says a great deal about Heath’s position.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 9.

If we are to be understood as a “moral animal,”⁹⁵ then we must make a decisive break from RCT as a sufficient account of practical rationality. This has little to do with the well-worn criticism of RCT that it is amoral (or, for some, even anti-moral). The point is rather that being a moral animal, for Heath, simply means that

we have a normative control system, and hence a disposition to respect social norms. This is no small achievement, since the fact that morality takes the form of a system of duties—actions that must be performed for their own sake, and not for the sake of some anticipated reward—has often been regarded as one of its most puzzling features.⁹⁶

Heath limits his definition in this way in order to avoid difficult normative questions about what the content of morality should be, restricting himself instead to the “specification of the psychological structures that must be in place in order for the individual to acquire and conform to conventional morality.”⁹⁷ If morality in the conventional sense of the term is to be *possible*, then it demands of us that we not be first-order maximizers. If we were to ground morality in general in concern for utility, we would have to do so at a level far above first-order concerns (by first-order, here, I mean within particular decision spaces).

But the rational agent of RCT is not even *instrumentally* rational in the fullest sense, because that agent is not concerned with a host of instrumentally important things. To give the most salient of Heath’s examples, the decision maker of RCT is unconcerned not only with basic social order in the present, but also the persistence of social order into

⁹⁵ Ibid, 286.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 290.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 291.

the future. The concern of this agent is discretely divided into particular decision spaces, games, iterations, etc. But practical rationality in the fullest sense demands of us (a) that we at least *sometimes* act deontically, that is, in ways that demand that we forfeit potential gains in particular decision spaces; (b) that we act as simple maximizers when maximization as a principle is consistent with deontic principles; and (c) that we learn to know the difference and act accordingly. Neither in Heath's text nor elsewhere can it be made entirely clear what is meant by "at least sometimes." That strikes me at least initially as impossible to determine a priori. On one hand, it is highly unlikely that Heath would argue that we must act in a deontic fashion all of the time, given the world's multiplicity, which might very often demand deviations from rule-bound behavior. What must be borne in mind is simply that instrumental reason demands that our action achieve a point of view above and beyond our various horizons.

What I would like to suggest is that a particular type of practical consideration, which I will here call *world-attunement*, might be useful in providing added weight to Heath's claim. Frequently, Heath seeks to explain the deontic character of many of our judgments with recourse to certain biological and psychological traits displayed by human beings, e.g. our tendency to be both more trusting and more vengeful than RCT would predict, cognitive capacities that necessarily operate according to rules, etc. But I might also suggest that Heath goes wrong because he sells us somewhat short from the standpoint of praxis. We may not need recourse solely to psychological/biological characteristics in order to explain—not to mention justify—deontic behavior and action. By world-attunement I mean the capacity to judge our praxis from a standpoint beyond

our individual horizons. Previously, I used Buchanan and Tullock as examples of thinkers who would have us draw our practical concern *upward* (in a conceptual sense), and I think that Heath implicitly makes a similar move. While there is perhaps an array of arguments for why deontic ethics and world-attunement are mutually necessary, I will suggest two at this juncture: world-attunement as (1) concern for how praxis transforms *the actor*, and (2) concern for how praxis interacts with other horizons or even meta-horizons.

With respect to (1), I think that Kant can provide some guidance.⁹⁸ Kant argues against tormenting animals, for example, due to the psychological effects on the moral dispositions of humans themselves that might follow. Kant does not see animals as members of the kingdom of ends, and thus not as part of any immediately relevant moral community, but he worries that a human being that is willing to inflict arbitrary pain on an animal might become more willing to inflict arbitrary pain on human beings. Thus, even if we derive utility from such behavior, we should refrain from doing so because the action itself redounds back onto *us* in morally relevant ways. One could imagine him making a similar claim about smashing rocks with hammers for no reason, which might produce certain aggressive dispositions in us. Kant's concern, which should be familiar to us in an era not only of continued large-scale meat production but also of realistic ultra-violent video games, which provide utility to many and don't "hurt" anyone but are nonetheless deeply worrisome. What Kant would demand of us—as well as Heath,

⁹⁸ I should make it clear that although Kant is crucially important in Heath's overall project, Heath himself does not make this particular argument.

undoubtedly—is that our praxis acquire an acute sense that actor and act are often fundamentally not dissociable from one another.

World-attunement as (2) praxis conscious of its interaction with broader practical horizons—the consciousness of which, as I have argued in several places, can extend almost indefinitely—is easy enough to grasp. For Heath, when we stop at a long red light at 4 am in the middle of nowhere, and there is zero chance whatsoever that we will be caught running the light, most of us will hesitate to run the red light. Heath gives a number of reasons throughout *Following the Rules* for why we would hesitate, as well as for why we might trust unknown others more than is warranted given our lack information, why we take our shopping carts back without proper incentive to do so, and so on. But one reason he does not provide is that there might be forms of practical reasoning at work in such decisions. We might stop at the stop light and wait for the green light because we're concerned that there might be *some* slim chance that we'll be caught, or, more importantly for my argument, we might be concerned about the impact it will have on our own willingness to obey the rules in the future (when we're perhaps in situations in which there is far greater than a zero percent chance that we'll be caught), or we might be concerned with the long-term consequences of every social agent disrespecting even seemingly insignificant rules. Arguments (1) and (2) in such a case would be inseparable: I might stop at the red light because I'm concerned with how rule-breaking transforms me and with what a world would look like in which people maximized utility when they shouldn't—not to mention what a world would look like in

which everyone allowed themselves to be transformed into subjects unconcerned with following reasonably-constructed rules!

Heath's contribution to this long-standing debate is to buttress his very convincing philosophical position with examples: results from economic experiments, insights from empirical psychology, and common sense intuition. On his own terms, Heath offers a number of powerful critiques of RCT that are worthy of addition to the readily-employable arsenal of such critiques. But that was not my interest here. Instead, I prefer to read his critique as yet another way of pushing up against the limits of RCT and suggesting a path beyond them. Both Heath and Buchanan and Tullock provide sound reasoning behind the claim that practical reasoners must be concerned with broader social possibilities and horizons. What exactly that means will have to wait for the next chapter, which has a more constructive intent.

2.6 Conclusion

The most important thing that I hope to have accomplished in this chapter is not necessarily establishing a new angle from which to criticize RCT, although that is certainly not an un-important aspect of my argument, but rather a convincing attempt at *shifting* the conception of what instrumental rationality is and can be away from a more limited and static conception. To that end, I've highlighted both (a) contributions to the tradition of RCT that I take as providing clues as to the necessary conceptual structure of RCT, and (b) streams of thought that are firmly within the tradition of RCT in crucial respects but that point beyond RCT in a number of different directions. Gebhard

Kirchgässner and others gave us the tools with which we were able to distill the essence of RCT into a set of basic concepts and commitments. From there, Robert Nozick's thought began pointing us in the direction of a concern for ontology and for our account of basic elements of the practical world. Buchanan and Tullock have shown us that a concern for the basic structure of social space is necessarily of central concern for any practical agent (whether they think so or not). In a similar vein, Joseph Heath has shown us why world-attunement—beyond this or that particular horizon—is a central aspect of practical reason. In the next chapter, all of these insights will be retained as foundational and pushed to their full conceptual conclusions. There, I will seek to address questions like the following: if we *begin* with the insights into decision spaces and the world developed above, where does that lead us? What *is* this alternative conception of action so often hinted at thus far? What conclusions must we draw about RCT? In short: what happens when we take Heidegger seriously both in his conception of praxis—as concern for our possibilities—and his conception of world—as repetition—and transform *that* into our founding axiom?

3. Securing a New Footing for the Philosophy of Praxis

As the title of this chapter suggests, my main aim in this project is not to produce a “new theory of praxis” in any kind of finalized way. For reasons that should be clear up to this point, I have strong doubts that such a finalized theory is possible. Indeed, one cannot be entirely sure what such a theory would even look like, particularly in that when we take the idea of praxis seriously, in its most fundamental sense as concern for possibility, then a “theory of praxis” must operate on a level of generality that doesn’t leave behind a whole lot to latch on to. I’m certainly not the first to have my doubts about the possibility of turning the study of praxis into a “hard science” or even into a determinate idea of the human, but it’s important to have a strong philosophical sense of *why* we should have such doubts. So far, this dissertation has served primarily to set boundaries: here, we can expect a form of the investigation of praxis like RCT to tell us something useful, while over there we should entertain no such expectations. Only in passing have I suggested what might lie beyond RCT. Now though I seek to remedy that in a number of ways. From a certain standpoint—a standpoint that is likely too philosophically demanding—the results of this pushing beyond RCT might be somewhat disappointing. Never in this chapter do I arrive at a finalized picture of what a new study of praxis might look like, nor do I seek set in place a neat set of unshakable axioms, nor do I make a knock-down case for its empirical applicability or its possible contribution to the social sciences as they currently stand.

What I instead undertake is a multi-pronged effort to push our conceptual boundaries forward. For example, whereas in the last chapter I argued that praxis cannot

help but open out beyond particular horizons into the “world,” here I seek to elaborate just precisely what that might mean via a discussion of Alvin Plantinga’s ontological investigations, a special section on Heidegger’s concept of care, and a theory of infinite games. The overall design of this chapter will be as follows: I will start with two sections on praxis from the standpoint of ontological questions (the sections, respectively, on Alvin Plantinga’s meditations on possible worlds and Roy Bhaskar’s “dialectical” conception of praxis, respectively); then, I will pivot into a critique of game theory and a re-conceptualization of game theory commensurate with the aims of this project (on David Carse and finite and infinite games); and I will end with a set of arguments concerning care as a philosophical concept—and an underexplored one, I will argue—and concerning praxis and the practico-inert. In the conclusion, I will tie these somewhat divergent strands together into a set of theoretical propositions about praxis that will then be used in the coming chapter to illustrate what kind of impact such a reconceptualization of praxis might have both in the world of the empirical social sciences and the philosophy of practical reason beyond questions concerning the social sciences.

3.1 Praxis beyond acts and things: Alvin Plantinga and possible worlds

In various places up to this point I’ve vaguely gestured toward a potential understanding of praxis as related not just to particular things, acts, goals, and the like, but rather to possible worlds. While this was less pronounced in Chapter 1, the suggestion lurked in the background in many parts of Chapter 2. In this chapter, I would like to finally fill in the gaps by arguing why praxis must *necessarily* be related to possible

worlds, even when it seems that its scope is more limited and particular. First, though, I need to be clear about my aims in engaging with the question of possible worlds. I do *not* intend to make an actual contribution to the possible worlds literature in analytical philosophy, which would be stepping onto a philosophical mine field and not terribly useful for my own aims.

The possible worlds literature is best known from works such as David Lewis' *On the Plurality of Worlds*,⁹⁹ but it has philosophical antecedents, such as the work of Alvin Plantinga. I focus on his work here because it provides a discussion of possible worlds theory (PWT hereafter) that is most amenable to a discussion of praxis. David Lewis' discussion of possible worlds, for example, is almost solely devoted to discussing the world as a whole and as such, and is primarily pre-occupied with deep ontological questions surrounding contingency, necessity, essence and accident, the question of what is real, etc. Much of this discussion is philosophically important but bears little direct import for my own project. Although Plantinga's use of PWT never explicitly takes up the question of praxis, the way that he defines and discusses worlds is far more helpful in such a discussion.

Plantinga begins his "World and Essence" (1970) essay with the following generalized statement about contingency:

If we are comfortable with the idea of *states of affairs*, recognizing that some but not all of them obtain, and that some that do not *could have*, we may join Leibniz

⁹⁹ Lewis (1986).

and logic...in directing our attention to *possible worlds*. A possible world is a state of affairs of some kind—one which could have obtained if it does not.¹⁰⁰

The discussion of possible worlds can attempt to tackle essential features of the world *as such*—that is, in what fundamental ways could our world be different and yet still be coherent, non-contradictory, etc.—but it need not. Notice here that Plantinga insists that a possible world is a state of affairs of *some kind*, not necessarily of the total, all-encompassing sort. When we speak of possible worlds in this way, we need not operate on any grandiose level.

What kind of state of affairs is a possible world? It is possible to speak of worlds without necessarily making claims about *the* world as a whole. There is a possible world in which I make it to the doctor on time tomorrow morning and a possible world in which I do not, and whether or not this turns out to be the case certainly has a necessary relationship with other aspects of the world, but we can make claims like this without always needing to account for everything that happens in the world between now and then. Within limits, we may isolate this or that sector of the world and describe contingency within it. But this can only take place within limits because when we isolate one portion of the world as a whole, that portion always necessarily abuts other portions of the world and is dependent upon what's going on there. Thus, a possible world “must be what we may call a *fully determinate* state of affairs.”¹⁰¹ That is, when states of affairs hang together in a coherent way, they begin to form a world. My weighing 187 pounds is

¹⁰⁰ Plantinga (2003), 48. Italics are Plantinga's.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. Italics are again Plantinga's.

a possible state of affairs, as is my wearing a pink shirt. But these states of affairs do not come together to form a world because either one can obtain without the other (I could weigh 187 pounds and wear a green shirt; I could wear a pink shirt and weigh 210 pounds). These two possible states of affairs are independent of one another and thus indeterminate—they do not form a possible world (they could be understood instead as forming two possible worlds). A fully determinate state of affairs, **S**,¹⁰² on the other hand, would be one

such that for any state of affairs **S'**, either **S** *includes* **S'** (that is, could not have obtained unless **S'** had also obtained) or **S** *precludes* **S'** (that is, could not have obtained if **S'** had obtained). So, for example, *Jim Whittaker's being the first American to reach the summit of Everest* precludes Luther Jerstad's enjoying that distinction and includes Whittaker's having climbed at least one mountain.¹⁰³

The language here is somewhat difficult but the underlying claim is not. If Jim Whittaker is indeed the first American to climb Everest, then Luther Jerstad's not being the first to climb Everest and Whittaker's having climbed at least one mountain hang together in a possible world in a necessary way. Whenever states of affairs exist in necessary conjunction with one another, they come to constitute a possible world. In other words, “a possible world is a way things could have been—in a total way.”¹⁰⁴ Necessity is what makes it possible for worlds to be total in this way. In the Jim Whittaker example, there is no possible world in which he is the first American to climb Everest *and* Luther Jerstad is

¹⁰² The use of bold script is not shared by Plantinga and is used only for the sake of clarity.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 104.

also the first to climb Everest.¹⁰⁵ The definition of “being the first American to climb Everest” in *our* world renders it impossible for both men to be the first, and thus can be understood as part of what defines our shared, “real” world. We need not strain to think of historical examples like this to adequately understand how this kind of thinking works. If I catch a cold, there are possible worlds in which my cold lasts for a week because I don’t get enough sleep and don’t drink enough orange juice, and there is another possible world in which I get over my cold within two days because I do all the right things. But there is no possible world in which I get well in two days and also in a week. If we posit that there is a point in time in which I can be considered fully recovered, there can only be one such time. My getting a cold—and not dying from it, of course—hangs together “in a total way” with my recovering from it at only one point in time.

In order to express this more formally, Plantinga borrows from Saul Kripke’s semantic logic. Each possible world **W** is a set of objects that can be expressed as $\psi(\mathbf{W})$. The Everest example (we’ll call it **E**) above, expressed as $\psi(\mathbf{E})$, would contain all the relevant elements of that possible world (presumably there would be a great many elements because it would have to include the fact that Everest exists, that people climb it, that there are Americans, etc.). Thus, when we think about facts, we must also think about the broader states of affairs in which those facts are enmeshed—both causally and logically—and hence about the states of affairs that both make those facts possible and

¹⁰⁵ This assumes, of course, that we are speaking of a possible world in which only one person could have been the first American to climb Everest! It seems that there is simply *no* possible world, no matter how bizarre, in which that would be possible, but these sorts of ontological considerations are out of place here.

that make them hang together in an intelligible way. The world $\psi(\mathbf{S})$ in which it is sunny outside in my city today—not a cloud in the sky—might share many characteristics with the world $\psi(\mathbf{C})$ in which it is moderately cloudy in my city today (for example, my city may exist in both worlds, having the same latitude and longitude, and so on), but $\psi(\mathbf{S})$ and $\psi(\mathbf{C})$ must differ in the degree of cloud cover. The state of affairs “it is completely sunny in my city at 4 pm today” cannot intelligibly hang together with the state of affairs “there are clouds in the sky over my city at 4 pm today.”

If facts about the world can only *be* facts if they necessarily hang together with other facts then it follows, I shall argue, that we must also understand praxis in the same way. The world is of course filled with all sorts of contingency—that is indeed one of the most basic pre-suppositions of this entire project—and so it might seem ill-advised to be making claims about necessity when discussing praxis. But the claims I am trying to make have more to do with basic logical entailment than with this or that aspect of the world. What I mean when I say that states of the world “hang together” from the standpoint of praxis, I mean that no project, goal, purpose, or horizon exists in a vacuum. All have conditions of possibility; all take place in some region of the world. Just as it is incoherent that it could be perfectly sunny in my city at 4 pm (that is, $\psi(\mathbf{S})$), and also to have 40% cloud cover at 4 pm ($\psi(\mathbf{C})$), it is also incoherent to engage in a project knowing with full certainty that the conditions of possibility of the project are not in place. If I *know* that past time can never be retrieved, then I cannot coherently engage in the project of spending extra time at work yesterday evening instead of having gone to play cards at the casino and losing money. Similarly, I cannot engage in the project of driving to work

in the next five minutes in a type of flying car that I know to not yet exist. The possible worlds confronting the practical actors in both examples do not have room for those particular projects. On the other hand, I can engage in the project of building a fire in my fireplace because I have matches, kindling, and all the other necessary items. I have all the necessary items because I had the foresight to make them available to me (perhaps as part of the project of ensuring that I be able to start a fire in my fireplace at any time I wish). In turn, every aspect of the above project(s) relies on a world or worlds—depending on how we frame the issue—that render them possible. Thus, the project “lighting a fire in my fireplace” hangs together—and necessarily so—with any number of facts, states of affairs, etc. Those states of affairs hang together with others in necessary ways, which in turn hang together with others, and so on.

Any account of praxis that deals with stable decision spaces must fundamentally miss this interconnectedness of facts, states of affairs, worlds, and so on, that underlie practical life. As we’ve seen in Chapter 2, decision spaces¹⁰⁶ can of course be quite complex, and they can be understood as varying along any number of axes. But what stable decision spaces can never fully account for is the world as a kind of ever-shifting mesh of possibilities and states of affairs, a mesh that acts as the staging ground for all of our projects and horizons. When we begin to think in terms of possible worlds, we may still think of praxis as being partially constituted by “choice” within horizons, but the mesh-like character of possibility—in which chains of possibility necessarily cling to one

¹⁰⁶ Later in this chapter, I will seek to render the concept of decision spaces problematic *yet again*. At the moment, however, I will use the concept the same way I have used it thus far.

another, all horizons rest upon the fulfillment of certain states of the world, etc.—forces us into a fundamentally new perspective. Choosing from within decision spaces may indeed be understood as emerging from a concern for possible worlds—when we are choosing, say, between consumer goods subject to a budget constraint, we indeed want to realize a possible world in which utility is maximized based on our limitations—but this cannot be the whole story. Praxis as a concern for possible worlds gives rise to a much more expansive conception of praxis, for it is from this standpoint that praxis (a) necessarily becomes *about* horizons themselves, and (b) our concern must necessarily extend beyond this or that thing or project or goal to the conditions of possibility of those things as well. If we have a particular goal that we are pursuing, it would be incoherent for us to be concerned about that goal and also indifferent toward the conditions of possibility of that goal being fulfilled. We may be unaware of what those conditions are, and we may be ignorant as to whether or not those conditions are indeed fulfilled, but we are *a priori* concerned about them nonetheless, regardless of whether we experience an affective concern vis-à-vis those conditions. One of the things that often makes praxis so difficult and uncertain is that everything rests on conditions of possibility that are in principle infinite (depending on our perspective). Thus, if we have the goal of climbing to the top of tree, it may not occur to us to be concerned with the structural integrity of the tree because we're implicitly certain that the tree will not collapse when we're on the way up. But to be concerned with climbing to the top means to be concerned with that being possible in the first place, and so we are concerned with the structural integrity of the tree

as a logical consequence of our project, and thus with the tree having been properly nourished, and so on.¹⁰⁷

In this section, I provided a highly stripped-down account of the issues surrounding possible worlds and introduced only those philosophical considerations germane to the project at hand. Indeed, the arguments surrounding thinkers like David Lewis (whom I mentioned earlier as the founder of the possible worlds literature in analytic philosophy), concerning whether or not possibilities are “real” or if all possible worlds are ontologically “real” and so on may have a great deal of merit from an ontological standpoint, but here it is best to avoid these issues. But I would also assert that even this basic taking up of possible worlds theory is sufficient to expand our conception of praxis in significant ways. When praxis is taken to be concerned about possible worlds rather than “choice,” this opens us onto even further ontological questions concerning the relationship between praxis and possibility. In the next section, I will build upon the claims made in this section by expanding into questions concerning the definition of “world” from the standpoint of praxis, what it means to conceive praxis as transcendence and so on, and will do so using Roy Bhaskar’s self-described “dialectical” ontology and theory of praxis.

¹⁰⁷ Such a chain of “and thus with” entailments can proceed, it seems, *ad infinitum*. In our decision making our reasoning of course does not and likely cannot proceed *ad infinitum*, due to cognitive and other limits. We could even add to the list of basic characteristics of the world: the world is a place in which no practical agent, irrespective of their level of practical cleverness, cunning, thoroughness, etc., can eliminate the possibility of misfortune or even catastrophe appearing out of nowhere. The world as an anarchic mesh of possibility demands that we be able to think in terms of practical entailments *ad infinitum*, but never allows us to get even close.

3.2 Practical reason as negation and thus as possibility: Roy Bhaskar and transformative praxis

Roy Bhaskar, noted for his work in the philosophy of science, is not typically thought of as a thinker concerned with practical reason. But I would like to argue that his book *Dialectic: The Pulse of Freedom*¹⁰⁸ contains a great deal of conceptual work beneficial to my own project because Bhaskar both takes up praxis directly here—particularly what he calls **transformative praxis**—and because he does so from the standpoint of a set of ontological claims about the world that have been hinted at previously but not yet explicitly dealt with. I should make it clear early on that it is by no means my purpose to engage in even the most cursory of summaries of Bhaskar’s concept of dialectics, which is riddled with arcane symbology, awkward neologisms, and run-on sentences that would make even Hegel’s head spin. Fortunately, however, this can all be read as window dressing garnishing a more fundamental set of insights about the relationship between praxis and possibility, presence, absence, negation, and so on. Bhaskar is essential at this juncture because he gives us a decisive push into the conceptual territory where a new philosophical conception of praxis can take hold.

First, we must turn to a heavily stripped-down summation of Bhaskar’s so-called “realism” (Bhaskar is typically cited as the founder of critical realism), because this basic philosophical orientation is inseparable from his account of praxis. From Bhaskar’s

¹⁰⁸ Bhaskar (1996).

realist standpoint, the *real* subtends the *actual*: the world can be understood to have a certain substance, consisting of the “generative mechanisms of nature,”¹⁰⁹ and it is this substance that gives rise to whatever happens to be the case at any particular time, i.e. the actual. A thunderstorm is actual; its most fundamental conditions of possibility are real. It is on the terrain of the actual—one ontological step removed from the real—that the empirical takes shape. The thunderstorm is actual, and because of that it comes to have observable, and thus empirical, characteristics. The goal of the sciences is to endure the long—and likely eternal—slog upward, from the empirical (the merely apparent) to the actual, and then on to the real.¹¹⁰ What, then, is this real? Clearly, knowledge would have every interest in ascending to the real if it were possible to do so, for that would equip us with a skeleton key to the domains of both the actual and the empirical. I will not take up the extremely contentious epistemological question of whether or not access to the real is possible.¹¹¹ Instead, I will turn to Bhaskar’s dialectical ontology as the most basic but also most important response to the question of what underlies the actual.

In spite of the complexity of Bhaskar’s dialectical conception of reality, I feel that it can be fairly well summed up as follows:

¹⁰⁹ Bhaskar (1975), 14.

¹¹⁰ It is this last step, from the actual to the real, that realists insist is possible, contra those inspired initially by Kant’s transcendental idealism who would want to sever our knowledge from the real.

¹¹¹ I will thus remain fully agnostic with respect to the question of whether or not realism is a convincing picture of what human knowledge is capable of. It will suffice to briefly elucidate Bhaskar’s ontology in order to construct a conception of world that is robust enough to inform a conception of praxis that does not take stable decision spaces as its enabling axiom.

Negative is a condition for positive being...[N]atural possibility is a condition for natural necessity, which is a condition for natural actuality, whether contingent or otherwise...[T]he absent has epistemic primacy in our world...For to exist is to be able to become, which is to possess the capacity for self-development.¹¹²

This seems very cryptic, but it need not be. Negative being, negation, is the condition of possibility for positive—that is, actual—being because every accidental fact, state of the world, object, relationship, etc., *could have been otherwise*. That a state of affairs is so-and-so depends upon its not being otherwise, which in turn implies that it could have been otherwise. With the negative as the very substance of the positive/actual, the not-yet possible is as “real” in the everyday sense as the already possible.

Essentially, an ontology like Bhaskar’s is a way of weaving factuality and counter-factuality together in an essential way, which has the effect of tying all of the following inextricably together: the present and the absent, and thereby the given and the not-yet possible, and *thereby* possibilities already included in decision spaces and those that could well be. Bhaskar’s conception of actuality, to build upon this basic ontology, is thus as close as he comes to elaborating a conception of *world*. Actuality is indeed an arena ruled by certain kinds of principles—like the basic laws of physics and so on—which circumscribes the domain of the possible in fundamental ways. But when human praxis is introduced into the mix, a new kind of contingency begins to take root.

It should be noted that the ontological status of could-have-been-otherwise is reserved only for the actual. When we push “upward” to the real, things are no longer plastic in the same way. The laws of gravity, for example, could not have been otherwise

¹¹² Bhaskar (1993), 385.

without unraveling the very coherence of our universe. Thus, this is not a theory of wild, chaotic, unbound contingency, because such an ontology leaves room for all kinds of regularity, sense, order. It is also a conception of world as *dynamism*: according to a dialectical ontology, we would expect that the world (a) would not *in itself* constitute a stable decision space, for no principle, causal or otherwise, would come to structure it in such a way; and (b) that where stable decision spaces did exist, they would be fragile and malleable, and their existence would often if not always be an *achievement* of praxis. Any ontology that is not rooted in such a dialectical interplay falls prey to what Bhaskar labels ontological monovalence,¹¹³ which is one in which “the absence of the concept of absence...conveniently hides existential questions.”¹¹⁴ When we exclude absence from our ontology, we exclude the possibility that all around us there are possibilities—and thus actual states of affairs—which may or may not come into existence, or which could have come into existence but did not. In other words, a non-monovalent ontology like Bhaskar’s has a kind of ghostly ring to it: the present, too, is constituted by excluded and foreclosed possibilities. Just as “negative is a condition for positive being,” the present is always already a composite of present and absent possibilities.

The problem with RCT on an ontological level is that it is necessarily locked inside of a monovalent ontology. No genuinely new practical possibilities are *ever* brought into being. That means that every decision space is stable, and thus seamlessly

¹¹³ Bhaskar never explicit labels his ontology as a “polyvalent” one, but there’s no reason to think that he would object to the characterization.

¹¹⁴ Bhaskar (1993), 366.

flows from and into other stable decision spaces. But for Bhaskar, such a conception of the world can be described as *irrealist* because it is ontologically false. Any irrealist conception of the world lacks “intransitivity, stratification, transfactuality, absence, contradiction, totality, reflexivity and agentive agency...It lacks the concept of the presence of the past and the openness of the future, of systematic intra-activity and the contingency of being...It even lacks the concept of lack.”¹¹⁵ These are strong words! And it is of course unfair to hold the feet of RCT to the fire for all of the above, particularly insofar as RCT is not intended as a fundamental ontology—perhaps not even as a social ontology—nor is it intended to address the kinds of Big Questions that Bhaskar takes up in *Dialectic*. But there is indeed truth to the charge of irrealism against RCT. Even though RCT rarely if ever takes up basic ontological questions, its failure to do so has unintended consequences, the immanent conception of practical possibility being the most pronounced among these. RCT suffers from what I will call a constitutive and thus unavoidable *excess of givenness*: in restricting itself to the already given and the already available, it transforms action into a kind of making-do within an already closed and thus given space. When we act within such a given space, the result becomes “the given” for our future acts, which in turn becomes the given for actions that follow, and so on, *ad infinitum*. Nowhere in this iron chain of possibility can one find gaps and absences from which the practical new could find the space to spring forth.

¹¹⁵ Bhaskar (1993), 366.

But if we take Bhaskar’s dialectical ontology seriously as a *social ontology* of the practical world faced by human beings, then we must begin to see transfactuality—the bringing into presence of that which is absent and vice versa, as filling gaps and producing gaps in the given, and the like—as forming the very material, the very stuff of praxis, if not always then *at least sometimes*.¹¹⁶ Because of this, RCT must be conceived as an “irrealist” conception of action.¹¹⁷ In order for RCT to become realist in Bhaskar’s strict (and non-intuitive sense), it would have to admit the not-yet-possible¹¹⁸ as a category, which, as we saw in the last chapter, is incompatible with stable decision spaces. Because RCT relies on an immanent conception of practical possibility, stable decision spaces must necessarily open out onto other stable decision spaces. Any theory of practical reason that rests on such an immanent conception of practical possibility inevitably pushes up against conceptual limits because it rests upon a *positive* rather than a negative basis. By this I do not mean, of course, positive as “good” and negative as “bad” in an everyday sense. What I mean, rather, is that RCT and its kin cannot incorporate the possibility of negation into their conception of praxis. Stable decision spaces are full by definition; the possibilities that they hand over to us are thus fully “positive.” But within a dialectical ontology, our practical situations are taken as a

¹¹⁶ As in my discussion of Nozick in the previous chapter, my aim here is not to determine how often we can be thought to engage in this kind of praxis. I attempt only to argue in favor of the weak claim that praxis of this sort comes to pass now and then. Any conception of human action that does not allow for this possibility, as I have argued from the outset, is fundamentally flawed.

¹¹⁷ Bhaskar (1993), 365.

¹¹⁸ The category of the not-yet will be explored in depth in the next chapter, especially when I engage with the thought of Ernst Bloch.

different sort of thing entirely. Our practical situation indeed remains partially a product of the given, but even the given itself must be seen as the negation of the non-given: we have practical possibilities in front of us in the first place because other possibilities, for whatever reason, did *not* come into being. Praxis must necessarily be attuned to this basic character of reality. I find the proposition quite doubtful that intelligent praxis even *could* restrict itself solely to the given.

While Bhaskar never directly takes up RCT (he neither mentions it by name nor addresses any thinkers directly associated with the RCT tradition), his remarks on ontology make it clear that he would take issue with its fundamental axioms. The RCT-flavored social sciences are invariably inadequate in the sense that they cannot see praxis as *fundamentally* dynamic. As shown in Chapter 2, there are isolated moments in the tradition of RCT in which different forms of dynamism poke through, but they are surely the exception rather than the rule. In response, we need to implant dynamism at the very heart of our conception of praxis: “Desiring agents have an interest in removing the constraints...on their freedom to satisfy their desires, more generally wants...Definitionally, then, there is a conatus [will, desire] to deconstraint [sic] or freedom.”¹¹⁹ Put differently, desiring agents—let’s even call them utility maximizers—have every interest in seeing their decision spaces as both enabling and confining. They will pass judgment upon their given possibilities accordingly. Perhaps one’s possibility set with respect to one particular project or aim is perfectly sufficient, while another is

¹¹⁹ Bhaskar (1993), 169.

woefully lacking. Perhaps one knows that transforming one's decision space in a particular way will unlock the previously impossible. When we think of our own praxis in this way, our whole stance vis-à-vis the given is transformed. According to RCT, our conatus is to maximization amongst an already established set of alternatives, whereas for dialectical praxis our conatus holds us at a reflective remove from the given.

Should we thus consign the social sciences to oblivion *tout court*? By no means. Bhaskar is certainly a strong critic of the social sciences as they exist, for reasons shared by many other critics, but he nonetheless believes that, under the right conditions, they may take on an “enlightening role for lay actors”¹²⁰ and can thus make an epistemological contribution to the “dialectics of de-alienation and emancipation.”¹²¹ The ontological straight-jacket proposed by RCT amounts to a fundamental restriction on the very substance of human freedom. In stark contrast, a dialectical conception of praxis overcomes this restriction by refusing to accept an immanentist conception of practical possibility. RCT tends to neglect ontological questions altogether. This could not be otherwise, as it seems that the more RCT becomes entangled in questions of the possible, the actual, the world, the given and the not-yet, the less empirical validity it comes to possess—not to mention empirical bearing in the first place. In order for it to retain its validity, it must, as we know, assume stable decision spaces.

When we introduce a dialectical perspective, incorporating considerations of presence and absence, negation, and the like, we also find that several central concepts

¹²⁰ Bhaskar (1993), 258.

¹²¹ Ibid, 259.

with which we have dealt thus far can be seen in a new light. *Phronēsis* is a concept that Bhaskar invokes specifically. He defines *phronēsis*—somewhat differently from myself but not in a way that endangers the usefulness of the concept for my own purposes—as praxis perceived from the standpoint of “criteria of mean, balance, totality, health and wholeness.”¹²² This may at first strike one as at odds with the conception of *phronēsis* developed in the previous chapter. But the commonalities, I think, are clear. *Phronēsis* is indeed still associated with “choosing well,” choosing on the basis of the singularity of contingent situations, and so on, but viewing *phronēsis* from the standpoint of Bhaskar’s dialectical ontology yields further insight—in certain respects beyond Heidegger, I would argue. *Phronēsis* from such a dialectical perspective must mean an attunement not just to the given but to the absent and the not-yet. Such an attunement is implicit in Aristotle although described in much different terms. A person who is funny, and thus possesses a kind of phronetic insight along these lines, does not only wait around for the right moment—Aristotle: *kairos*, Heidegger: *Augenblick*—to say funny things. Quite often, they also seek to structure situations in such a way that they can be funny. They might introduce conversational topics with the aim of saying something funny at a time well into the conversation (although that intention was not known to others), they might wear clothes or even props that make others more likely to find them jovial. Thus, the imperative to be funny brings forth not just a *hairesis* by which such a person chooses from a number of possible things to say in an already structured and *given* situation, but

¹²² Ibid, 281.

also a *prohairesis* whereby being funny becomes a larger project that structures their very “choosing” itself. The very fabric of praxis consists, indeed, in making “choices” (think *hairesis* from the previous chapter), but it also has everything to do with “ills, absences, constraints, inequities and falsities.”¹²³ This is so because praxis often confines itself to the realm of “choice.” In my discussion of Buchanan and Tullock in the last chapter, I briefly alluded to the possibility that praxis—even when understood according to the axiology of RCT—can be guided by the demands of thought, of *theoria*. For Bhaskar, only a dialectical ontology can fully bring this fundamental aspect of *phronēsis* to light. Thus, when Bhaskar introduces totality, balance and wholeness into the conceptual ambit of *phronēsis*, he illustrates just how complex and rich a concept it is.

When we expand our conception of “choice” in such a way, we begin to glimpse what Bhaskar means by transformative praxis. If we accept a dialectical ontology, then praxis becomes entangled not only with choosing in the sense provided by RCT but also with the project of strategically “negating the status quo”¹²⁴—or affirming the status quo if that is what the moment demands. According to my conceptual framework, I would translate this as “potentially performing work on even the most basic and seemingly intractable horizons of our practical being.” Such work may operate at any speed one can imagine; we need not think of such work as suddenly storming the ramparts of society and turning everything inside out overnight, and of doing the same thing the next day, and the next day. The intuition of most of us is probably that such changes nearly always

¹²³ Ibid, 263.

¹²⁴ Ibid, 269.

occur gradually and unaccompanied by grand transformative flashes that are witnessed by all. Nonetheless we do need to conceive transformative praxis as

activity that reproduces and/or more or less transforms, for the most part unwittingly, its conditions of possibility, including, most notably, what, when fleshed out, appear as social structures and their generative mechanisms... The relationship between the social structure which constrains or enables the human agency which reproduces or transforms it can be regarded as mediated by *process*, the way in which structural powers are exercised and their causal effects materialize.¹²⁵

Practical actors might indeed face stable decision spaces, but more fundamentally they confront constellations of opportunities, power relations, blockages, processes, crises, disequilibria. The list could continue indefinitely. Do stable decision spaces even fit into this picture? I would argue that they certainly do. They provide a great deal of the “flesh” of the social world. Even the most transformative praxis can only be deemed “successful” if it leaves behind a residue of stability—that is, if it changes important aspects of the stable decision spaces that come after it. A transformative praxis that left behind only chaos would have little value from the standpoint of human flourishing. When a society passes, for example, from being characterized primarily by feudal/agricultural relations to more modern/industrial relations, this must indeed be seen as the result of transformative praxis undertaken across the social structure. But we would not say that such a transformation does not leave behind stable decision spaces: industrial workers have their daily routines, institutions have normal systems of operation, etc. Transformative praxis

¹²⁵ Ibid, 155-6.

is indeed “the negation of the given”¹²⁶ to some extent, but the purpose behind that negation is not to negate the given/stable decision spaces *as such*, but rather because such a negation serves some kind of end (for better or for worse).

Against both (a) any kind of structuralist understanding of the practical world, which would take our decision spaces to be perhaps somewhat malleable but overwhelmingly determined by basic structural forces like class struggle, “modernization,” and so on, and (b) any sort of radical voluntarism that would understand praxis as capable of negating the given almost “at will,” so to speak, Bhaskar would have us adopt a perspective that has little in common with either.¹²⁷

If society is the condition for our agency, human agency is equally a condition for society, which, in its continuity, it continually reproduces and transforms...[T]his is the duality of structure. And human agency is both typically work (generically conceived), i.e. normally conscious production, and reproduction of the conditions of production, including society: this is the duality of praxis.¹²⁸

Praxis is both horizon-dependent and transcendent. There is no other way of conceiving it, and there is no way of eliminating this duality. Bhaskar does give us some indication, however, that his continuous evocations of freedom, transformation, and the like, are made precisely *because* the weight of structure can so often become stifling for praxis (sometimes for the good). “The games of the *Lebenswelt* (life-world) are always initiated,

¹²⁶ Ibid, 329.

¹²⁷ I do not argue for or against either of these basic theoretical positions insofar as it is difficult to conceive of them as positions at all. They strike me as being more like attitudes or orientations, and I do not see how one could even begin to universalize either of them, even though some have tried. My hope is that the conception of praxis I put forth here gives us theoretical tools to either sublimate this distinction or to render it so theoretically murky as to be inane.

¹²⁸ Bhaskar (1975), 123.

conditioned and closed outside the life-world itself.”¹²⁹ Unless we’re confined to prison or trapped in a similar social condition, we indeed always have a limited practical domain within which we make our choices at any given time. With respect to both space and time, those domains necessarily have edges, points at which they rub up against domains in which individual actors have no practical efficacy whatsoever; those edges indeed may expand and contract, come to include certain elements and exclude others, and horizons might disappear altogether or become pushed out of the sphere of our praxis in every conceivable way. But no matter what we do, those edges always exist, and our praxis is always at the very mercy of those edges (for those edges are by definition not fully included within our horizons). Hence Bhaskar’s insistence on our practical life-world being “conditioned and closed outside the life-world itself.” This is where we begin to fully understand the practical weight of structures. There is simply no way in which individual actors themselves can transform their life-worlds in such a way as to internalize this “outside” conditioning into practical horizons. But what lies on the other side of this hypothetical boundary? Other practical actors, also responding to the flux. This fact in turn calls upon us to abandon the idea of immovable structures, for it is the flux itself confronting all practical actors that guarantees that *no* structure is immovable. For what would guarantee their immovability? It certainly cannot be the flux of

¹²⁹ Ibid, 128.

experience, for it is of the essence of the flux itself that it can provide no such guarantee.¹³⁰

An important objection to note at this juncture is the following: again and again in this section I have referred to non-immanent possibilities, and thus more or less directly to “new” possibilities (new in the sense that they are somehow not fully contained within the set of possibilities confronting practical agents). This immediately begs a whole host of questions. What would it even mean to have “new” possibilities in this sense? Where would they come from? What kind of ontology would we have to find convincing in order to believe in possibilities of this sort? If we speak of possibilities as necessarily hanging together with others—as I just did in the previous section, on possible worlds—then are we not limited to speaking of possibilities as being immanent and nothing more? This is a serious objection that is not easily dispensed with without delving much further into the metaphysics of modality. In the next chapter, I will take up ontological issues of this sort at the level of nuance that they deserve, yet I nonetheless find that a brief discussion is in order here. I confess that using the language of “new” or “non-immanent” possibilities is somewhat misleading, and perhaps suggests to some readers that such

¹³⁰ The problem with speaking this way is of course that it bears the risk of reifying “the” flux, of turning it into a “thing,” over there, that we can easily speak about and to which we can ascribe certain characteristics and in a certain way *know*. I should emphasize here that it is not my intent to speak about the flux—or *physis* or what have you—in an offhand way that makes it seem like a simple context that “explains” everything. The flux is not a “thing” but rather more like a limit or lack—a *limit* to the consistency and regularity of being and a fundamental *lack* of certainty about the practical possibilities and prospects available to actors. Here, as throughout this project, the world as flux is taken as a postulate and not directly argued for. In the next chapter, I will attempt to provide a more philosophically convincing account of world as flux.

possibilities come out of nowhere, springing into being *ex nihilo*. The basis of my argument, however, is much different. Possibilities do not come into being out of nowhere, but rather emerge out of other possibilities, and indeed do so immanently.¹³¹

What is crucial here is the question of *time* and its movement. Time is in many senses the very essence of the flux.¹³² What time ultimately means from the standpoint of praxis is that possibilities must take place *within* time. They come into being and pass away; horizons, correspondingly, come into being and pass away as well, often in ways that have to do with our practical activity, often not (as in the case of an earthquake or a meteor from outer space). Often, it matters a great deal *when* we realize a certain possibility, because timing matters in general in practical life, and because certain possibilities might present themselves to us at some times and not others—or only once *ever*. It is the rootedness of possibility in time that makes possibility never fully immanent. Truly immanent possibilities would be ones that were always available no matter what, at any point in time, and thus detached from the flux of being. “New” possibilities don’t come out of nowhere, but rather out of the flux itself as a continuous giving and taking away of possibilities. Within the flux, there may indeed emerge “havens” of stability and regularity. But these havens are not true havens because they are not self-guaranteeing and self-sustaining from the standpoint of praxis. This lack of a

¹³¹ This is of course a bold ontological claim to make, and one that still lacks proper foundation. I again stress that this argument here is merely a foretaste of a more comprehensive discussion that would be largely out of place in this chapter.

¹³² Heidegger’s discussion of Aristotle’s prioritization of being over time—with Aristotle arguing that time is possible only because there is movement of things in space and Heidegger arguing precisely the inverse—is arguably the classic enunciations of this position.

guarantee is simply another way of saying that the actual and the possible are always inextricably bound to one another. When we understand being as repetition in Heidegger's sense—as the production of ever new combinations, conjunctures, possibilities—then we must understand *phronēsis*, from the standpoint of time, as a kind of pure “opportunism.” Horizons, decision spaces, possibilities, come into being and pass away. To preserve them, if possible, demands that we take advantage of opportunities to preserve them—or to transform or improve them. Of course, total preservation of decision spaces is not strictly possible because horizons are *constituted* by their limits. Horizons are not “in themselves;” their consistency, and thus their very existence, is not and cannot be self-sustaining (as it is unclear what “self” would be doing the sustaining). The next chapter will open with a far more supple account of this relationship, but a brief clarification is very much in order here. Heidegger's discussion of time as *kairos* is perhaps helpful here. Remember that for Heidegger, time is indeed *chronos*, a sequence of moments that relentlessly pass out of existence (essentially clock time). But time from the standpoint of praxis must be seen as *kairos*, as a sequence of opportunities rather than of empty moments.¹³³ To act kairotically is to act in accordance with the world as a continuously shifting opportunity structure. In terms of “new” or “non-immanent” possibilities being at play, it may seem that the idea of the world as an opportunity structure seems to lock us into immanence. Does this not mean that we simply take

¹³³ Intriguingly, the Greek god Kairos (also Caerus for the Greeks, Occasion or Tempus for the Romans) was the divine embodiment of opportunity. He is the youngest divine son of Zeus, with a long lock of hair hanging down from his forehead, which means that one can grab him only as he approaches. This information was taken from <http://www.theoi.com/Daimon/Kairos.html>.

certain opportunities and miss others? In a sense yes, but the opportunities we ultimately take might be ones that prove to be transformative. Retrospectively, we could point to an agent's action and say: "If that agent had not taken that available opportunity, then transformation X would have never come about." Furthermore, the knowledge associated with being able to turn opportunities into transformative action is a very phronetic knowledge. *Phronēsis*, that possibility of being most in touch with time as *kairos*, involves the ability to take moments for what they are, to be able to know what moments offer, what openings and gaps they provide. The antinomy between the world as opportunity structure and the world as potential venue of transformative praxis is only an apparent one.

To return to Bhaskar, the basic thrust of his re-formulation of praxis has been more or less laid out at this point, and a major objection has been considered, even if its resolution must wait for a later point in my overall argument. Praxis is indeed still "allowed" to be understood as contention with given possibilities within stable decision spaces, in a way that's perfectly consistent with RCT, but what is far more important—and unexplored—is precisely the kind of meta-level perspective¹³⁴ that Bhaskar at least begins to provide us with (missing details that will be fleshed out over the course of this chapter). In the next chapter, I will consider transformative praxis from a somewhat different perspective, namely that of the world as inertia and thus as intrinsic limit to

¹³⁴ In Chapter 1, I briefly alluded to this as amounting to a "second-order" practical perspective in opposition to a first-order perspective that can only describe decision making within horizons/decision spaces.

transformative praxis. I will do so via an engagement with Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, which will function as a necessary theoretical counterweight to Bhaskar's emphasis on praxis as transformative. While I will certainly not abandon the idea/possibility of praxis as potentially transformative, Sartre's version of dialectics will provide us, I will argue, with a strong sense of the intrinsic difficulties involved in praxis—even in transformative praxis—difficulties that are potentially under-emphasized in Bhaskar's more wide-eyed account.

3.3 Praxis as struggle with and within horizons: Sartre and the practico-inert

Bhaskar has argued convincingly that we must understand praxis in light of transfactuality instead of in terms of givenness—that is, any conception of praxis that imagines us merely making do within an already set horizon might give us some conceptual leverage, but it will be handicapped in certain fundamental respects. But how does the given impact us? How do we perceive the given? How is it that we overcome the given? For questions like these, Jean-Paul Sartre provides a convincing philosophical picture insofar as he both speaks a similar language as Bhaskar—freely employing terms like praxis and dialectic in similar ways—and because he takes up practical givenness as a philosophical theme more directly than Bhaskar, who mostly remains focused on transformation and freedom rather than limitation. Sartre is important above all because he provides us with a philosophical term for the given: the **practico-inert**. In this section, I will work with Sartre's conception of praxis to argue that: (1) speaking of stable

decision spaces *as such* often amounts to little more than using a convenient analytic device—given the very character of praxis itself—even as a descriptive tool; and (2) any *normative* account of praxis must reach beyond a concern with stable decision spaces and insist on the inseparability of praxis and its product/object. More succinctly: because praxis always functions on the basis of the practico-inert and then in turn *produces* a new practico-inert, the idea of stable decision spaces becomes philosophically compromised, and we must contend with the consequences of that here.

First, it will be necessary to strive for definitional exactitude, because the concept of the practico-inert, while being a succinctly formulated concept, can nonetheless seem more unwieldy than it really is. The inert is that which is lifeless and static. That which is inert is already laden with a kind of directedness: if there is a pile of “inert” rocks in the middle of the street, this nonetheless has an impact on traffic patterns and thus on social relations.¹³⁵ The pile of rocks is not inert in the sense of “having no impact” on human affairs. We can speak of this pile of rocks as having a kind of inertia because it must be dealt with and has efficacy in the world—just as a rolling stream is the embodiment of the downward movement of water that only ceases to have inertia when the stream itself ceases to exist. The pile of rocks in question can thus be read as a barrier to human praxis: drivers want to drive freely through the city without unnecessary detours and delays because getting to work or going home on time are considered to be valued ends.

¹³⁵ Perhaps citizens band together in a Tocquevillean fashion and remove the obstruction themselves, or perhaps the city authorities are called in if they exist.

Drivers seeking to minimize driving time would thus wish for a possible world in which the pile of rocks did not stand in the way, to borrow language from a previous section.

This pile of rocks might be in the middle of the street because they fell from a cliff above the town. Let's assume for the sake of argument that this event is fully "natural" and thus had nothing to do with any human project or intention. In this case, the pile could be understood as being simply antagonistic to human concerns (assuming that no one benefits from the pile being there). But it's also easy to imagine a scenario in which the pile of rocks is sitting in the middle of the street because someone put it there, perhaps an artist making an ecological statement or mischievous teenagers. In such a case, the rocks would be understood as *practico-inert*, that is, as "matter in which past *praxis* is embodied."¹³⁶ Praxis leaves behind traces, by definition, be they traces in the material world (as in the pile of rocks in the middle of the road), in transformed opinions and attitudes produced in those around us, and in forms of self-transformation produced by action within actors themselves. For Sartre, human praxis must thus be understood as the continuous—and unavoidable—production of the very antithesis of praxis. Praxis is not just concern for possibility—this we may simply call *care*, as we have thus far—but rather the active seeking, testing, probing, expansion, and so on of possibility. If care can be understood as the condition of possibility of praxis, praxis itself must thus be understood as *embodied*, in the sense of taking place within the world. But the world is not plastic in a way that would allow us to act within it and leave it unchanged. It could

¹³⁶ Sartre (2004), 829.

certainly be objected that we can imagine praxis that doesn't change much of anything, and thus that leaves scarcely a trace of the practico-inert behind. I might walk to the window to see if the weather is nice, and that would indeed be a simple project and thus an instance of praxis, but it would be difficult to say that this project left behind practico-inert traces in any meaningful way. Fair enough. But we may assert against this that the more efficacious and transformative our praxis is—one is tempted to say the more *significant* our praxis is—the more it is fundamentally bound up with the practico-inert.

If Bhaskar's conception of praxis seems at times to veer too far in the direction of celebrating our transformative powers—emphasizing the fire-bestowing power of Prometheus rather than Prometheus' bondage to the rock—Sartre's conception of the practico-inert, while certainly not denying the possibility of transformative praxis,¹³⁷ places an emphasis on the all-too-often-existing *non*-plasticity of the world that is far more commensurate with the conception of world as flux that I have been putting forth here than Bhaskar's conception of praxis ever is: "Human history—an orientation towards the future and a totalizing preservation of the past—is in fact also defined in the present by the fact that *something is happening to men.*"¹³⁸ This is another way of expressing Marx's favorite dictum that men make their own history, but that they do not do so under conditions of their own choosing. This oft-quoted dictum is intuitive enough—all of us feel this way in trying times, some of us feel like this way essentially

¹³⁷ Indeed, it would be strange for someone like Sartre—Marxist, participant in the French Resistance and advocate of (even potentially violent) decolonization—to deny the possibility of such praxis!

¹³⁸ Ibid, 122.

all of the time. If there is *to be* transformative praxis, its *difficulty* must be recognized and swallowed whole. There are questions that we must ask ourselves: if transformative praxis is to be possible in this or that instance, what form of subjectivity would be capable of enacting it? How deeply must the social edifice be changed for transformation to be carried through? How is a collective social actor to be formed that is capable of enacting that transformation, and how is the solidity of that collective actor to be maintained?

While Sartre does not provide “answers” to questions of this sort—it being difficult to imagine what kinds of philosophically-derived “answers” one even could provide—he does begin to give us conceptual leverage in that direction. Just as I am seeking to do in this project, Sartre is interested in altering our idea of the human from the standpoint of a notion of praxis (although it is surely a very dynamic idea of the human in every respect). He even explicitly states that he intends his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* as a “prolegomena to any future anthropology.”¹³⁹ The cornerstone of this anthropological effort is in many ways similar to what we found in Bhaskar. Sartre says that a dialectical conception of praxis holds us to be “the perpetual transcendence of our ends.”¹⁴⁰ Human praxis, as always at least potentially self-conscious, possesses a kind of infinity at its very heart. One of the ways in which we achieve this kind of transcendence, as it was for Heidegger, is via having projects. When we take on projects—as we cannot help but do all the time—we acquire independence from our

¹³⁹ Ibid, 66.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 328.

circumstances. In having projects, in projecting ourselves into the world, we cease being purely responsive beings merely reacting to this and that stimulus. Through projects, we come to tie various ends together—every project being by definition composed of multiple ends brought together—in a process that may extend indefinitely (as when one sets before oneself the project, for example, of finding a cure for cancer, which ties an extraordinarily large number of smaller projects together). Having projects also stretches praxis through time. When I commit myself to losing 10 pounds in one month, this commits me to a vast number of smaller projects that must be appropriately timed and sequenced. It is through projects that we rise above the immediacy that binds most animals to the present, at least from the standpoint of consciousness (some animals might indeed “plan” for the future, but on the basis of instinct, at least if we are referring to animals below a certain level of cognitive development).¹⁴¹

But just as projects stretch praxis through space and time, forcing us beyond being a simple input-output mechanism into being genuine practical beings, they also necessarily produce what Sartre calls *alienation*. Alienation occurs in the “*practical* relation of the agent to the object of his act and to other agents”¹⁴² when praxis loses itself in itself, when it becomes unreflective. When we explore praxis from the standpoint of the practico-inert, and hence from the standpoint of praxis’ continuous turning into its

¹⁴¹ This should remind us almost immediately of Rousseau’s idea of society enabling us to move beyond being “limited, stupid animals” in the state of nature in his *Discourse on Inequality*. One of the elements of primitive man that enables him to live in a state of bliss is his inability to think in terms of horizons, which enables him to live without inserting himself into the dense web of concerns that praxis in modern, complex societies demands of us.

¹⁴² Ibid, 66, n. 27.

other, into inertness that praxis may again have to contend with, then alienation emerges as this continuous process of praxis turning into non-praxis. As soon as non-praxis has been produced by praxis, there praxis stands again, necessarily facing the consequences of prior praxis. If I sense that a flood is going to destroy my home and surround it with a wall of sandbags, the wall of sandbags is there to confront me whether or not the flood ever arrives. I acted to defend certain horizons—within which my house stays intact—by transforming others, and if the flood never comes, then that sandbag wall is just so much useless dead weight, the disposal of which comes with numerous costs attached. There is simply no praxis without this product. Sartre seeks to expand the concept of alienation to include all praxis *as such*. For Marx, alienation comes about in historic-economic circumstances that produce alienation between man and man, man from his labor, man from the natural world, and so on).

But praxis *always* involves alienation in Sartre's sense because it is constantly ensnared in the world, which is itself always at least partially the product of the praxis of others. That praxis often runs up against this kind of mutual exclusivity is also expressed in Heidegger's concept of the *guilt* (*Schuld*) of Dasein, discussed throughout the second half of *Being and Time*. Dasein is *ontologically* guilty—speaking outside of the usual moral sense of guilt—because it is constantly torn in this fashion. The arrow of time plods mercilessly forward—until death—and continuously forces praxis into binds of this sort. The more consequential the practical decision—irrespective of how we define consequential—the more it ensnares us in practical/ontological guilt. An economist might refer to this as “opportunity cost,” that is, the costs incurred by making one decision and

not another, as when I choose not to work and thus gain leisure time but forego wages. This is an inescapable consequence of being-in-the-world.

Alienation is thus bound up with the “thingly” character of the world. Praxis is never pure in the sense that it can be understood or even observed except as interwoven with real things, real contexts, real states of being. When I drive a car, I am engaging in praxis but it is always *this* praxis, involving this object, this person, this connection between things. But alienation, for Sartre, must remain a *critical* category, which means that we must be able to distinguish between a more and a less. For this reason, Sartre remains indebted to Marxism but not wholly beholden to its categories. There is ultimately in the practico-inert a direct “equivalence between alienated *praxis* and worked inertia.”¹⁴³ Praxis thus becomes alienated the moment it makes an imprint on the world—and the very moment in which it is in the process of making precisely that imprint on the world is always disappearing before our very eyes. Unfortunately for practical beings, anything even remotely resembling happiness, flourishing, virtuous action, and so on, has to take place within these kinds of ineliminable constraints. But just because we face the constraints posed by the practico-inert does not let us off the hook. It also cannot be denied that seeking to overcome the alienation of praxis is among the foremost obligations—if not the foremost obligation—of praxis, not just incidentally but rather *based on what praxis is*. If we understand praxis as concern for possibility, then alienated praxis is by definition when we act *without* proper concern. Proper concern thus

¹⁴³ Ibid, 67.

demands of us that we properly contend with the practico-inert (which is not just a name for what praxis “turns into” but rather for that which praxis always is the moment it ceases being “concern” in some detached way and action).

The field of the practico-inert begins to make its power felt even more strongly when we begin to think of it, as Sartre does, as “the totalizing unity of a negation of man.”¹⁴⁴ If we identify the human with the praxis that we (at best) embody, and thus with the continuous pursuit of possibilities and possible worlds, with spontaneity and freedom, transformative praxis, flourishing, etc., then the practico-inert is the awkward stumbling block to all of the above. Of course, it is not *just* this, because we couldn’t have *any* of the above with a practico-inert field within which our practical activity could take place in the first place. By this I mean that the practico-inert always *enables* praxis, for better or for worse. *Eupraxia*—good praxis, from Chapter 1—also takes place within the domain of the practico-inert. For where else could *eupraxia* take place if not that same world that is the continuous efflorescence of praxis? Even if we leave behind a state of affairs that is poorly or even maliciously conceived, that state of affairs may still harbor all kinds of beneficial possibilities (even if seeing the beneficial in that state of affairs would require a deep change in perspective or even conception of the good on our part). Any number of utopian thinkers have imagined worlds in which praxis is made “easier” in a number of ways. Friedrich Engels’ “realm of freedom,” to give one example, imagines us living in a world without scarcity, in which we can finally be free from labor and thus free to

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 123.

develop as we wish. But even the most utopian of thinkers could not imagine a world in which praxis ceased having the practico-inert as its destiny. Even in Engels' realm of freedom, where securing the basic necessities of life demands nothing of *any* of us, our interaction with the world still issues in the practico-inert: actors must still carry a heavy burden in all undertakings, even if continuously needing to overcome scarcity is no longer a burden (we could think of many others, like the difficulty of repairing friendships once certain words have been spoken or needing to make difficult decisions about the use of (scarce) space). With the practico-inert as the destiny of all praxis—though not of all *care*—praxis implicitly demands, on its own terms and without recourse to some perspective other than praxis itself, that it be lucid to itself, that it achieve self-reflection. This is not merely an arbitrary normative imposition on praxis but rather an a priori demand placed on praxis.¹⁴⁵ We must always “struggle with [our] own action as it becomes other.”¹⁴⁶ As soon as we begin externalizing ourselves in the world via praxis, its effects are always already on the way to becoming potentially alien to us, difficult to manage in the future, inscrutable in their potential effects on our horizons. While we confront all kinds of contingency, the one form of necessity that we always confront is

¹⁴⁵ This, of course, relies on the full exclusion of moral/ethical considerations, that is, the question of “right and wrong.” Clearly, I would never argue that these are not important questions. What I mean, rather, is that my question is not “what should we do and not do?” but rather “what does praxis demand of us on its own terms, that is, from the standpoint of concern for our possibilities being translated into the realization of those possibilities?” Those possibilities might be morally unacceptable ones, and “success” cannot be the only thing that we demand from praxis in human life. But a philosophical consideration demands that we make precisely this distinction. We are seeking the essence of praxis *no matter what it is*.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 124.

that “necessity at the heart of free individual *praxis* presents itself as the *necessity of the existence of this field of inert activity*.”¹⁴⁷ Successful *praxis*—irrespective of what *praxis* seeks to realize—always by definition demands that the world be recognized as a practico-inert field and that every practical decision we make take that as fully into account as our cognitive faculties can manage (and even the enhancement of our cognitive faculties would necessarily be demanded by *praxis*).

The practico-inert is what *praxis* always already produces; it is the necessary byproduct of *praxis on a conceptual level*: simply put, where there is *praxis* there is the practico-inert: “As a kind of material synthetic judgment, [the practico-inert] makes possible the continuous *enrichment* of historical events.”¹⁴⁸ Thus, human history is always in a fundamental sense experienced as “non-human history.”¹⁴⁹ History, from this standpoint, remains a story of human subjectivity at work, but it becomes the story of human subjectivity constantly at work in the world in a way that is constantly producing the conditions for future *praxis*. Once in place, subjectivity must confront the inert over and over again.

History, at this level, has a fearful and depressing meaning: it appears as though what unites men is an inert demonic negation, taking away their substance, that is to say, their labor, and turning it against all men in the form of *active inertia*.¹⁵⁰

In simpler words, *praxis* always produces its opposite. We act to transform something and there it is, indeed transformed, but still *something*, over and against us. To give a

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 318.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 122.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 123.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid.

simple example: a neighborhood association turns an empty field into a park, a move unanimously approved by all affected parties. Once the park has been built, it demands labor for maintenance, the production of new social norms regarding its use, funding sources that enable the association to keep the park from becoming a dilapidated eyesore, and so on. If the park indeed became an eyesore—swing-sets without swings, weeds of every variety, beer bottles and used syringes dispersed everywhere—and political and practical will-power to make it beautiful and inviting again dried up, members of the neighborhood would experience Sartre’s concept in a visceral fashion. To use a slightly overblown expression, the park would come to “weigh like a nightmare on the brains of the living,”¹⁵¹ to use Marx’s pithy expression, which is as succinct a way of describing the practico-inert as one can imagine.

In effect, Sartre takes Marx’s concept of alienated labor—that form of labor the product of which appears as an alien, independent power to those who have performed it and transformed it into a recognizable product—and universalizes it into a broader category that describes an important aspect of the human practical condition. Alienation of this sort is not only a product of capitalist modes of production: the becoming-inert of human praxis would be an aspect even of a socialist utopia. This all seems intuitive enough. Praxis *does* things *to* things (things understood in the broadest sense, including humans, the natural environment, and anything else). What could be more obvious? But what is not at all obvious is what a conception of praxis looks like that considers the

¹⁵¹ The full quote is as follows: “The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.” It is taken from Marx’s *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*.

practical inert at its very core and never takes praxis to operate in vacuum-like stable decision spaces.

Once we begin to place the practico-inert at the heart of praxis, important aspects of our whole conception of human activity in the world—not to mention of history and the political—is potentially subject to change. The practico-inert thus needs to be incorporated into the idea of the human that we have been developing thus far. While Sartre is as skeptical as many others toward describing human beings in terms of essential characteristics, in this discussion we have license to do so.

[The practico-inert] is the *essence* of man in the sense that essence, as transcended past, is inert and becomes the transcended objectification of the practical agent, thus producing within everyone and within every multiplicity the continually resolved and constantly renewed contradiction between man-as-producer and man-as-product.¹⁵²

To be a practical agent is to be forced to embody these two roles—as producer and product—at all times. This dialectic sews together freedom and necessity in practical life—praxis as freedom (by definition) struggling with and against the practico-inert as necessity. Praxis’ work on the practico-inert is the possibility of freedom; the inability of praxis to extricate itself from the practico-inert is necessity. The interiorization of the exterior (perception, interpretation, etc.) and the exteriorization of the interior (effective activity): this process is what we call *necessity*. This work is the ground and meaning of history. Bound up with necessity are what Sartre calls “laws of exteriority.”¹⁵³ These laws, some of them contingent and some of them not, form the unsurpassable limits of

¹⁵² Ibid, 72. The boldface type is in the original as well.

¹⁵³ Ibid, 122.

praxis.¹⁵⁴ Social structures are constellations of laws of exteriority that prove to be contingent, even if not recognized as such; corporeality, scarcity, finitude, multiplicity, and other aspects of our condition are laws of exteriority that are necessary, sometimes even logically necessary.¹⁵⁵ But others that seem to be turn out to not be so: the necessity of the existence of an economy based on slavery, the necessity of the White Man's Burden, and so on. It is in our confrontation with *these* "laws" that praxis achieves a real transcendence vis-à-vis history.

But this confrontation is rare, as is any genuinely transformative praxis, precisely because the weight of the practico-inert is always there, as anti-praxis. Sartre is quick to emphasize the force of structure: "All men are slaves in so far as their life unfolds in the practico-inert field and in so far as this field is always conditioned by scarcity... The practico-inert field is the field of our servitude."¹⁵⁶ Our individual praxis might be blocked in ways that seem insurmountable, and so we seek to engage in collective praxis by joining a movement, starting our own political organization, sabotaging government offices, lighting ourselves on fire as a sign of protest, etc. But there might not be a movement to join, either because it hasn't occurred to anyone to start one or because

¹⁵⁴ As Hobbes, Hegel, and so many others recognized, this in no way means that we always abide such limits quietly, even if we indeed brush up against them.

¹⁵⁵ Many Marxists indeed hold that scarcity is contingent, but even they are forced to admit that scarcity is not something that simply goes away, but that is always present but continuously *overcome* in a society with rationally organized production (even if machines were to do all the work for us, we would still have to man the machines). This basic aspect of our condition would not simply "go away;" it remains a practical problem, even if Sartre speaks of scarcity as a structural constraint of praxis "in spite of its contingency."

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 332.

political repression makes it difficult; we might start our own political organization and awaken very little interest in others; our sabotaging of government offices might endear many to our anti-government cause, or it might inspire the opposite effect; and in lighting ourselves on fire we might become a martyr akin to Mohamed Abouzizi,¹⁵⁷ or we might inspire no sympathy whatsoever. Our efforts to engage in transformative praxis—whether in the name of good or bad—always rub up against limitations in the world, limitations that cannot be known in advance.¹⁵⁸ This inscrutability is of course another element of anti-praxis. Practical agents would also a priori prefer a transparent field of action in which all effects can be fully reckoned with, all essential information could be gathered, and of course in which the relevant aspects of a situation from the standpoint of a project would remain constant. But the practico-inert always provides us with a firm and often impolite “no!”

Fortunately, we needn’t always confront the practico-inert field as isolated actors. Indeed, “taking the practico-inert field in its totality, there is such a thing as a group intelligibility as the transcendence of necessity towards a common freedom.”¹⁵⁹ All groups, no matter the extent to which we would expect them to rise to the level of group consciousness, retain the possibility of remaining under the heading of “passive

¹⁵⁷ Abouzizi was the young, disgruntled Tunisian man who unwittingly sparked the Arab Spring by lighting himself on fire in front of a local government office.

¹⁵⁸ I cannot rigorously argue for this here, but I would assert that transformative praxis of any meaningful sort cannot be carried out under the aegis of certainty.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 324.

activity,”¹⁶⁰ that is, that their common praxis will remain unconscious and in many senses automatic. Collective praxis, as Aristotle rightly understood, is “natural” in the sense that “individual” praxis in the narrowest sense is an extreme limiting case in human history. There may indeed have been Robinson Crusoes in history, but we must at least concede that no one is *born* Robinson Crusoe.

What, then, can the discussion of the practico-inert contribute to the larger discussion at hand concerning horizons, decision spaces, and so on? For one, taking the practico-inert seriously¹⁶¹ means taking horizons seriously as the very stuff of praxis. The practico-inert must always be understood as a basic constitutive limit of praxis, but the very existence of this limit speaks to the transcendence of praxis, in a sense similar to that found in Bhaskar. The fact *that* praxis always leaves behind the practico-inert and that we must re-confront it over and over again (as a matter of repetition, *Wiederholung*, in Heidegger’s sense¹⁶²) also puts on display the fundamental contingency that praxis is capable of inserting into the world. We say to ourselves:

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ When I say this, I do not mean to imply that there are conceptions of praxis that explicitly reject the idea of the practico-inert. It is rather the case that I have not yet encountered a conception of praxis that builds an idea of the practico-inert into its very foundation, as I am trying to do here. It is more a matter of silence than a matter of explicit rejection of the practico-inert when it comes to the investigation of praxis.

¹⁶² Indeed, one of the potential problems in Heidegger—a problem with respect to which Sartre might prove to be useful—is that for Heidegger we confront the flux in the form of repetition, but the question is always what the flux consists of. Heidegger is always quick to root the flux in being as such, and thus in our ontological condition. For Sartre, the flux is indeed our ontological condition, but the flux is always partially constituted *by us*. There is no flux *as such*, unmediated by human institutions, by our interpretations of events, etc. The flux is always at least partially a socio-practical product, except in extremely rare circumstances (for example, when sunspots

“It is *impossible* that this should continue; it is *impossible* that it should be unchangeable; it is *impossible* that there should be no way out, that I should continue to live like this.” Such formulas, which insist on the objective structure of possibilities, are very common. And there are also ones which refer to the subjective moment: “I’ll find a way out, I’ll find a solution somehow,” etc.¹⁶³

Praxis here begins to take on the air of refusal and rejection: things indeed could remain as they are, but our attitude hardens against the status quo and our horizons begin to appear to us in the guise not only of being changeable but also in the guise of the necessity of their being overcome. We might ultimately fail to change a thing, but what begins to transpire when we are caught up in such affects is that our horizons take on a wholly different character: “choosing” amongst the possibilities that we have been granted by the past and by our contemporaneous present is simply not enough. Sartre understands such limits in terms of class and class struggle:

An individual may avoid being a class individual, and may sometimes transcend his class-being and thereby produce for all the members of the class he has left the possibility of individually escaping their destiny...In the structured field of his possibilities and impossibilities (as destiny), this class, at a particular moment and in definite conditions and sectors, is also determined by the possibility that a definite proportion of its members may move into another class...This can be called class *viscosity*.¹⁶⁴

impact climactic patterns). This does not mean, of course, that everything is the product of praxis. That notion, even for someone as invested in transformation as Bhaskar is, is as silly as it sounds. Our experience attests strongly enough that this is not the case. The worry, however, is that people lose a sense of agency because they forget the nature of praxis and need to be reminded how deeply structures of power are constituted by praxis.

¹⁶³ Sartre (2004), 330.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 331.

But we need not follow Sartre and swallow his version of Marxist historical materialism whole if we are to benefit from his discussion of praxis. If anything, one could argue that his conception of praxis makes such a picture more difficult to swallow precisely because it renders social space deeply multiplicitous, fragmentary and in important respects *open*. To overlay this conception with a historical materialism of *any* sort—even if Sartre’s conception is right—is to prematurely foreclose the conceptual possibilities that Sartre introduces by filling them with too much sociologico-historical content.

But we can take Sartre’s comments on social classes as basic limitations on our practical activity in the world—as opening and foreclosing certain horizons for us—and turn them into something more conceptually generalizable. As practical beings we are also historical beings; to be historically rooted means to watch our horizons expand, contract, come into being, disappear, and so on, before our very eyes (and often unbeknownst to us). This is the unbearable weight of the social and cultural structures within which we live. None of us are gods or even god-like, of course, but our circumstances nonetheless wield an often god-like power over us, and our circumstances always consist at least partially of the practico-inert, and thus we all exercise a kind of god-like power vis-à-vis one another. *Eupraxia* thus cannot be understood solely from the standpoint of the individual practical actor. *Eupraxia* on the individual level depends on circumstances that make it possible; those circumstances are social products, which means that *eupraxia* must always be understood as a collective endeavor, and also as inseparable from the question of world construction (as it implicitly is for Buchanan and Tullock).

More troubling for us based on Sartre's discussion is what happens to the very idea of horizons themselves. For the practico-inert does a great deal not necessarily to undermine the idea of horizons but rather insists that the more consequential our action is, the more it transforms our horizons (and by no means always for the better). A world that was more accommodating to praxis, so to speak, would be one in which those horizons that were felicitous to our practical activity would survive our acting within them. Thus far, I have used the term "horizon" as if it were somewhat self-explanatory and in need of no detailed elaboration, largely because I used the concept as a foil to stable decision spaces (horizons are, after all, by nature plastic, finite, vulnerable, etc.). But the idea of the practico-inert forces us to consider the idea of horizons anew (even though Sartre to my knowledge never uses the term horizon specifically). When we are situated in a horizon and we act in a way that changes that horizon, what was it about that former horizon that really made it *a horizon*? How strictly must we define horizons if we are to avoid this conceptual problem?

This poses yet another problem: is my kitchen, for example, a horizon, or is it a mini-horizon within the horizon "my house?" Is my house a horizon or a mini-horizon within the horizon "my cul-de-sac?" Immediately it becomes clear how ill-advised it is to use this kind of language and to define horizons in this way. It wouldn't be entirely nonsensical to speak of the *entire world* at any given point as a horizon. The entire world indeed limits and enables praxis in a grand totality of ways. If we define a practical horizon as a set of conditions of possibility, then we may define that however we wish. A horizon can be understood as the conditions of possibility that make any and all of our

projects possible, or only project X possible. One of these two horizons is of course defined more “broadly” than the other, but both are horizons. But unfortunately there seems to be no simple basis upon which we can look into the world at actual situations and say “that is a horizon,” or “this horizon begins here and ends there,” or “this horizon could be changed in this and that way and still be the same horizon.” But we also cannot do without the idea of horizons, I believe, for to give up the language of horizons would be to give up on the attempt to (a) successfully argue that a theory of praxis based on stable decision spaces is inadequate as a theory of *worldly* praxis and to (b) develop a language that allows us to begin thinking beyond the ways of conceiving praxis that have been handed down to us.

I’m forced to concede that I do not have a satisfying “solution” to this problem, at least at this point. The concept of horizons is a necessary one but also one lacking in specificity along one of its axes and, to borrow a term from social science methodology, operationalizability.¹⁶⁵ But I can nonetheless make a number of remarks at this point that address these issues to a limited extent without diving into a level of theoretical detail about the theory of horizons that is beyond that appropriate to this project. First of all, the theory of horizons remains useful as a critique of RCT-based approaches and as a conceptual building block of a more convincing alternative. Horizons may be understood as that which worldly praxis is “about”—that with which it is constantly concerned, even

¹⁶⁵ That is, what is difficult with respect to so many concepts, even ones that seem intuitively useful and directly relevant to real world affairs, is turning them into usable tools that help us understand the real world and to do so rigorously.

if it seems to be concerned only with this or that project, aim, object, etc. Even if we cannot draw a lot of empirical consequences from this concept, I would nonetheless assert that it remains useful because it ties together a number of the themes that have been raised so far and does so more economically than any other concept. When we speak of praxis as being related, for example, to possible worlds rather than solely to specific goals and ends, then what is meant by “horizon” are the bundles of possibility—and consequently of impossibility—of which I spoke in the section on Alvin Plantinga. If a structure of possibility exists in the world that enables us to complete an action **X**, then we can say that there is an existing horizon that renders **X** possible. This, I think, is a much more useful way of speaking about horizons—at least from a philosophical perspective—than the more simplistic language that I have thus far employed in the name of bringing the concept to the fore in the discussion.

The second important point is that the theory of horizons remains useful even if it is difficult to see how we can look out into the world and say “there’s a horizon here, and another one there.” For horizons remain important if we consider praxis phenomenologically, as we did with Heidegger in Chapter 1—that is, from the standpoint of practical actors themselves. This opens up the possibility, of course, that practical actors may be wrong about their horizons and might fail in pursuing their projects for that very reason, perhaps even most of the time. But just because we are capable of misrecognizing our horizons or fail to gather enough information about them or fail to properly anticipate changes in our horizons does not mean that we do not engage in praxis in terms of horizons (whether we do so “consciously” or explicitly using the

language of horizons or not). How, then, do we distinguish between this and that horizon? Where do we draw the boundaries? This seems difficult if not impossible whether we're speaking from a third-person perspective seeking to understand the decisions of someone else or from a first-person perspective of someone actually engaging in praxis, for the very reason, just mentioned, that the work of discerning what our horizons are, where we should think of one horizon beginning and another ending, and so on, constitute much of the inescapable difficulty involved with being a practical being. Indeed, one of the reasons why I argue so insistently in favor of a conception of praxis as related to horizons is precisely *because* it acknowledges this difficulty in a fundamental way.

To sum up, Sartre's concept of the practico-inert both introduces a necessary element of *eupraxia* ("good praxis")—the very necessity of seeing the practico-inert as both the condition of possibility of all praxis and as its inescapable and continuously re-enacted limit and "other"—and begins to make our conception of horizons tremble in fundamental ways. *Eupraxia* is always caught in this double bind produced by the practico-inert, a double bind that continuously threatens even the most stable of horizons. In the next section, I will operate on the terrain opened up in this and previous sections of this chapter but will seek to give more conceptual body to a conception of praxis that insists on not taking the given, the immanent, and so on, as its basis. I will seek to enrich this conception via a critical engagement with game theory and an attempt to provide a more satisfactory account of game theory compatible with the conception of praxis slowly coming into shape.

3.4 The social field as an infinite game: game theory within and beyond its limits

In this section, I will bring the discussion back in the direction of RCT, although with a critical intent. Up to this point, it may have been noticed that I have said very little about game theory. Here, I introduce game theory as falling squarely within the ambit of RCT and stable decision spaces, and thus as an argumentative foil. But as before, I do not seek to “overcome” game theory or to toss it aside. The use of games as a metaphor can be a powerful conceptual tool. I will begin by laying out the basic underlying axioms of game theory via a brief exposition of what is often considered its founding text, von Neumann and Morgenstern’s *Theory of Games and Economic Behavior*.¹⁶⁶ The critical aspect of my engagement will stem primarily from a reading of James Carse’s *Finite and Infinite Games*,¹⁶⁷ which does not concern itself directly with game theory but provides, I will argue, a perspective on games and gaming that offers us a powerful set of theoretical tools that we can use to both delineate the limits of tradition game theory—which can necessarily concern itself only with what I, following Carse, will call finite games—and to begin moving beyond it via Carse’s concept of infinite games. In Chapter 2, I set out to make claims about the essence of RCT without necessarily engaging with all of RCT’s many branches and offshoots. Here, I will do the same, by making claims about what game theory can and cannot be. In doing so, I run the same risk that I ran last time,

¹⁶⁶ Von Neumann and Morgenstern (1947).

¹⁶⁷ Carse (1986).

namely that there are conceptions of game theory that do not conform to the picture that I paint. Yet I hope to show over the course of my exposition of game theory that there are indeed limits to what game theory *can* be, and those limits stem from the very nature of game theory and its stated ends.

A critique of game theory is important here because it is occasionally argued that game theory *should* occupy an absolutely axiomatic role in all of the behavioral sciences. As Herbert Gintis, the most prominent defender of this position, argues, “game theory provides a trans-disciplinary behavioral lexicon for communication and model-building.”¹⁶⁸ Because of this, “game theory and the rational actor model can be used as the basis for formulating, deploying, and analyzing data generated from controlled experiments in social interaction.”¹⁶⁹ For far too long, the various behavioral sciences—and Gintis remarkably includes anthropology in his claim—have lacked synergy with one another, and even mutual intelligibility, because they have lacked a common paradigm, a condition that game theory is in the position to rectify: “Disciplinary boundaries in the behavioral sciences have been determined historically, rather than conforming to some consistent scientific logic. Perhaps for the first time, we are in a position to rectify this situation.”¹⁷⁰ When we construe behavior as game-like and ascribe to it the many game-like characteristics that game theory attributes to it, we can finally begin to truly attenuate

¹⁶⁸ Gintis (2004), 38. It should be pointed out that Gintis’ major work to date, *The Boundaries of Reason: Game Theory and the Unification of the Behavioral Sciences* (Gintis 2009), falls well within the ambit of traditional game theory and thus within the ambit of the critique I wage here, in spite of his frequent rhetoric to the contrary.

¹⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 39.

¹⁷⁰ *Ibid*, 53.

disciplinary boundaries. I do not affirm or dispute this claim, but rather use it to underline why game theory must be a part of any thorough critique of the kind I am undertaking here.

I will not argue *against* game theory here, but will rather show that a modified conception of game theory is necessary to an adequate philosophy of praxis. As in the previous chapter, I will not concern myself with game theory and its many, many offshoots—from the game theory found in traditional microeconomics to evolutionary game theory to game-theoretic perspectives in biology—but rather with what is considered as a paradigmatic text (as I did in treating Buchanan and Tullock as a paradigmatic example of world-construction from the standpoint of rational choice theory). I adopt this perspective not out of any (in my opinion misplaced) reverence for origins but rather because von Neumann and Morgenstern’s text provides such a thorough introduction to the basics of game theory (as well as incredibly complex treatments of more advanced aspects of game theory). The authors also attempt to produce a “pure” game theory that makes no strong claims about the cognitive information-processing capacities of human beings, insisting on proceeding without addressing those questions.¹⁷¹ For von Neumann and Morgenstern,¹⁷² the need for game theory arises out of the special nature of problems concerning, for example, “the

¹⁷¹ Von Neumann and Morgenstern (1947), 30. This is not necessarily to the authors’ detriment, for a truly “pure” game theory would be one on the basis of which one could eventually enrich game theoretical accounts of behavior by *incorporating* cognitive limitations and other extrinsic influences on decision-making.

¹⁷² Hereafter “VN+M.”

exchange of goods, direct or indirect, between two or more persons, of bilateral monopoly, of duopoly, of oligopoly, and of free competition.”¹⁷³ The approach that such problems demand in the field of economics “is in many respects quite different from the way in which they are conceived at the present time.”¹⁷⁴ In order to understand a great number of even basic economic behaviors, we must view actors as behaving strategically, and thus as basing their decisions on those of other actors rather than against a static background (for example, a consumer confronting a market for goods, which in a way constitutes another “actor” in the world, but ultimately doesn’t make any decisions and thus simply *itself* “acts” as the boundary of a decision space).

For VN+M, we must begin by turning games into an abstract concept and then breaking them down into component parts.

First, one must distinguish between the abstract concept of a *game*, and the individual *plays* of that game. The *game* is simply the totality of the rules which describe it. Every particular instance at which the game is played—in a particular way—from beginning to end, is a *play*...Second, the corresponding distinction should be made for the moves, which are the component elements of the game. A move is the occasion of a choice between various alternatives, to be made either by one of the players, or by some device subject to change, under conditions precisely described by the rules of the game. The *move* is nothing but this abstract ‘occasion,’ with the attendant details of description—i.e. a component of the *game*. The specific alternative chosen in a concrete instance—i.e. in a concrete *play*—is the *choice*. Thus the moves are related to the choices in the same way as the game is to the play. The game consists of a sequence of moves, and the play of a sequence of choices.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷³ Ibid, 1.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid, 49.

First, we must note that a game is understood here as having a *discrete* character. Games progress from one move to another, and presumably actors are fully aware of when the next “occasion” arrives, even if what is happening at that time is not of their own choosing (as in “devices subject to change” above). I’ll briefly note here that it is not immediately clear what happens when it is not clear what counts as an occasion and what does not. This will be taken up later in this section.

Second, rules are absolutely paramount in the formation and continuation of games, because they have a boundary-producing function that guarantees the very identity of games, that is, our ability to differentiate *this* game from *that* game: “If they are ever infringed, then the whole transaction by definition ceases to be the game described by those rules.”¹⁷⁶ One might respond that baseball was still baseball when the designated hitter rule was introduced, and one can easily think of many other examples of the rules of games being changed. But in the baseball example, what is *not* being changed is the nature of *professional* baseball, which is a game in which one willingly accedes to rules set down by Major League Baseball (MLB), the recognized governing authority. In a game such as that, there is a degree of wiggle room already inscribed in the fundamentals of the game itself. If the governing bodies of MLB chose to, say, abolish pitching and batting, then one could make the claim that this indeed violates certain essential aspects of baseball that, when changed, transform not only the rules by which professional baseball playing is conducted, but also the very essence of the sport itself. Any game

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

must draw its coherence from some unshakable set of rules. Any changes in rules must themselves be according to higher rules that act as a kind of untouchable third rail. When those higher rules are changed, we must speak of a different game entirely if not the collapse of a game into a non-structured, non-game set of interactions (although it's unclear to what extent we even *could* understand interactions as thoroughly lacking in game-like characteristics).

From the standpoint of game theory, life becomes much more fundamentally difficult for *homo oeconomicus* than according to other accounts. For now she must suddenly account for the possible actions of concrete others—not just mute “conditions”—in making *strategic* decisions (in fact, non-game-theoretic RCT may be labeled “strategic rationality” only in a qualitatively different sense). Instead of confronting choices dictated by, say, an assortment of possible purchases limited by a budget constraint, the set of choices is defined by other utility-driven agents within the game.

Games at their most basic consist of one interaction between players (such interactions might also go by names such as iterations, moves, etc.). We may speak of “games of strategy”¹⁷⁷ when we begin moving beyond considerations raised in one-off games (like the Prisoner’s Dilemma) into the world of repeated interactions, complex decision trees, and so on. In this world, actors need not only make good decisions within the confines of a particular round or iteration. They are called upon to consider moves of

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 31.

players in future rounds, or even of the game as a whole,¹⁷⁸ because achieving their instrumental ends demands this more complex behavior. One may design games, for example, in which potential gains made in one round are distributed across future rounds according to some set of criteria—as in models that discount utility in future iterations—or in which players mutually benefit from cooperation in some rounds but not in others, or even in which the number of rounds/interactions is not determined in advance (and thus in which there are forms of action that may terminate games, extend them into further rounds, and so on). The games that game theory can take into consideration are thus extremely plastic and variable along any number of axes—complexity of objectives, number of players, types of moves in which players may engage, forms of interaction between players, forms of information that may be exchanged or not exchanged, etc. Thus, when I criticize game theory in this section as being a philosophically inadequate account of our everyday game playing, I do so not by claiming that game theory is overly simplistic. Just as in my critique of decision theory, complexity or lack thereof is not at issue, particularly as both game theory and decision theory—which often overlap and can hardly be considered fully separate paradigms—can be made very complex in a dizzying variety of ways. Instead, I will criticize game theory as being only of value with respect to the *finite* games with which it necessarily concerns itself.

¹⁷⁸ It should have already occurred to the reader that this introduction to game theory is almost childishly simple. Game theory's rich tradition, one could well say, deserves a much better initiation than is given here. I would respond that my intention here is to introduce only as many aspects of game theory as necessary to engage with game theory's necessary set of theoretical axioms.

What James Carse and his *Finite and Infinite Games* shows us is how we can begin to discern the limits of traditional game theory and to subject it to the kinds of criticisms brought to bear on RCT more broadly elsewhere. I say unintentionally here because Carse never directly engages traditional game theory—nor does he even *use* the term—largely because the book is not intended for social scientists, but rather for a more general philosophical audience. The book is nonetheless philosophically pregnant on a number of fronts, most notably in what it has to offer to our conception of what it means for a practical being to necessarily also be a player of games. Carse begins with a broad-based and somewhat cryptic formulation: “There are at least two kinds of games. One could be called finite, the other infinite. A finite game is played for the purpose of winning, an infinite game for the purpose of continuing play.”¹⁷⁹ A finite game has an end point at which one can say that the game is over; on Carse’s terms, if it were not possible to determine this point, then we would not be speaking of a finite game. The games dealt with in game theory *can* potentially be made infinite in the sense that they can be rendered as having an infinite number of rounds (there’s no reason in principle one could not algorithmically concoct an infinite decision tree consisting of an infinite number of players) or having a number of rounds that is not determined in advance. Such games would be either determinedly or potentially infinite *from one standpoint*. But Carse’s sense of the finite/infinite distinction does not have to do with number, at least not primarily. What Carse means by infinite becomes clear in the very last line of the

¹⁷⁹ Carse (1986), 3.

book: “There is but one infinite game.”¹⁸⁰ That is, what characterizes *the* infinite game that is human life¹⁸¹ is that it encompasses all of the games that humans play, framing them, giving them a context to coming into being, limiting them from one another, enabling one another, and so on. Finite games, on the other hand, by definition take place *within* the one infinite game that is human existence as a totality: “Because the purpose of a finite game is to bring play to an end with the victory of one of the players, each finite game is played to end itself. The contradiction is precisely that all finite play is against itself.”¹⁸² This makes clear Carse’s intention in describing infinite games—from now *the* infinite game, for the sake of clarity—as being not for the sake of winning, as it is wholly unclear what it would mean to “win” the infinite game that is human existence, but rather as providing reasons for continuing play. We pursue the game “purchasing the most suitable life insurance” for the purpose of winning the game “most amply providing for our children in death.” We engage in the game “not dying” for the purpose of playing all of the other games we like to play (life and death being understood perhaps as a kind of meta-game in this regard).

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 177.

¹⁸¹ I restrict the infinite game to human life solely for the purposes of the discussion at hand. Carse might describe non-human organisms as being involved in game-like interactions. Even non-living things might have interactions with one another that can be understood as games if we are using the concept of game solely as an illustrative/interpretive device. One could potentially describe the formation of our solar system, for example, as a game, with planets, comets, and the like, as “players.” It’s not clear if it is Carse’s intention to extend the concept of the infinite game this broadly, and fortunately it need not concern us.

¹⁸² Ibid, 23.

But when we begin to assess game-theoretic reasoning from the standpoint of the conception of world that I have been developing here, we are forced to conclude that our comportment toward social life is not most fundamentally a set of discrete finite games. While we do certainly engage in any number of finite games, we always do so within the context of that infinite game that is social life. Being a purposive creature as we are means that we have to make decisions about which games to play, when to stop playing before the game is completed because there are more important games to play, and even *how to sometimes change the rules of the game itself* such that the newly constituted game is a game more consistent with the pursuit of our interests. And when we confront social life as an infinite game rather than as a finite one, a number of aspects of *homo oeconomicus* are rendered suspect. *Homo oeconomicus* becomes (a) concerned with the structure of games in addition to winning, sometimes even transforming precisely what winning even means; (b) aware that maximizing utility might demand beginning or creating new games altogether, if the current set of available games simply does not produce certain forms of utility, excludes certain players, etc.; and (c) capable of thinking about games in a non-particularistic fashion. By non-particularistic here, I mean that as a being with a limited “playing time,” we must gather games into larger games, assess our playing from the standpoint of a whole “career” of game-playing, and so on. While it is possible to model decision-making in terms of a finite life span—or of an unknown life span—for example when seeking to understand life-long consumption and investment

patterns, this is always done with the aim of understanding how we manage a particular project and satisfy a particular, localized set of preferences over time.¹⁸³ In the case of the theory of so-called “consumption smoothing,” for example, whereby individuals seek to maximize lifetime utility, meaning that they must spend and save optimally based on what they expect their future incomes to be. This is certainly a more sophisticated way of understanding our relationship with the future than is often found in RCT, but it still assumes that we are engaged in *one* project over the long term. *Homo oeconomicus* may indeed be capable of sophisticated forms of decision-making like those evinced by consumption-smoothing behavior, but a finite lifespan means something different for a truly purposive being in the deeper sense that I have been laying out thus far. A purposive being must form hierarchies of importance with respect to the games that she plays, formulate standards by which she may judge her “performance” as a totality of interactions, etc. Game theory remains firmly within the horizon of the “old” *homo oeconomicus*: even if a player can change the rules involved in future games and thus engage in some sort of second-order praxis, or perhaps even discontinue playing,¹⁸⁴ and so on, finite games are nonetheless self-contained microcosms. In assessing a finite game, we have to assume that there are structuring conditions underlying the game, no matter how basic. *Homo oeconomicus* concerns itself with such microcosms, whether she is

¹⁸³ An excellent example of this sort of use of RCT can be found in Kotlikoff (2001).

¹⁸⁴ A classic example of a non-game-theoretic approach that attests to the power of discontinuation in institutional life is Hirschmann (1970).

trying to get the most bang for her buck as a consumer or is a CEO trying to navigate the treacherous waters of oligopolistic competition.

In order to draw out this distinction and to give us a better idea of what is at stake for praxis, *phronēsis*, and the like—that is, the main themes of this project—it would be most useful at this point to detail some of the fundamental characteristics of both types of games. To jump to a somewhat higher level of generality, and speaking on Carse’s terms rather than directly on the terms of game theory as a tradition, finite games possess a number of essential aspects:

1. Finite games are restricted as to their possible participants. “A game is played in *that* place, with *those* persons. The world is elaborately marked by boundaries of contest, its people finely classified as to their eligibilities.”¹⁸⁵ If games are absolutely open in terms of who may join them, then games open out onto a kind of infinity. The hermetic seal that renders them finite is broken. Game theory may conceivably contend with this problem by stipulating, for example, that a game consists of x players, without the players knowing how large x might be.
2. Temporal boundaries. Finite games last from time t_0 to t_n . If they did not, we could not speak of *a* game as opposed to *gaming*. A game may be disturbed in such a way that it is never completed, but this simply means that t_n came before completion, which is not the same as its accidental end. Game theory may contend with this by allowing games to run a potentially infinite number of rounds (with the attendant loss of connection with the game-playing realities of finite human actors).
3. Finite games are presided over by rules, not laws, meaning that there is considerable freedom within the rules. “The rules of a finite game are the contractual terms by which the players can agree who has won.”¹⁸⁶ Such rules must be immanent ones in the sense that when players stop following them (this includes when referees refuse to enforce them—they too are bound by the rules of the game), the rules are no longer the rules.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid, 6.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid, 8.

4. Finite players have a marked tendency—technically not an “essential” aspect of finite games, then—to see their participation in particular games as being itself necessary and imposed: “Each role is . . . surrounded both by ruled restraints and expectations on the part of others.”¹⁸⁷ This is known as “self-veiling.”¹⁸⁸ No finite play is possible without such self-veiling, because self-veiling is a condition of winning.¹⁸⁹
5. “All limitations of finite play are self-limitations.”¹⁹⁰ If the participants in a finite game all agree to transform the parameters of the game, they may do so (although they may do so in such a way that they begin playing a different game entirely). If participants fail to agree on changes, then the game may exclude those participants, or perhaps include them on a different basis, etc.
6. One of the goals of finite players is to eliminate surprise. There is no end to which surprise—that is, genuine contingency and uncertainty—is conducive. It is certainly not conducive to victory.¹⁹¹

In general, finite games are bounded snippets, so to speak, of practical life. They are necessarily marked off in distinction to other games (or to non-games). If we understand social life as gaming—as I have already argued we can—then finite games give substance to the social field. Without discrete, finite games, we would be given over to

¹⁸⁷ Ibid, 11.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid, 12.

¹⁸⁹ This is somewhat analogous to Heidegger’s thoughts on *technē* and the problem of technology: the problem with *technē* is not that it should be abolished or that we should be pure *phronēsis* all the time, but rather that we forget ourselves, lose ourselves in technological society and its imperatives; the breathing room from which we could step back and assess our roles and our place within the structure becomes subordinate to winning the kinds of games that technological society sets forth for us: obeying workplace rules and thus remaining employed, acquiring the resources on the market necessary to taking part in civil society, and so on.

¹⁹⁰ Ibid, 12.

¹⁹¹ One might respond that a fashion critic, for example, actually relies on being surprised by new developments in fashion, and if they were not, then they would have nothing to write about and would hence suffer in their pursuit of fashion critic glory. But in such a case, the only genuinely surprising thing would be Calvin Klein releasing the same Winter line two years in a row—a violation of the basic rules of the game that would likely help no one involved win any of their respective games, although onlookers might win a few rounds of cracking wise at a dinner party, to give just one example.

the flux of experience—to the infinite game of social life as a totality—in a kind of unmediated way that is as difficult to imagine as it is to conceptualize. But finite games are always enmeshed in something larger. Just as I argued previously that our practical horizons gain their very identity/consistency in contradistinction to others, we may say the same of finite games with respect to one another.

On the other side of the conceptual divide we find what Carse calls infinite games. Carse closes *Finite and Infinite Games* with the assertion that there is only one infinite game (even though Carse lays out infinite games—note the plural—conceptually as if there were indeed many). Infinite games share certain qualities with finite games, for example that they are both indeed *games* and share all essential characteristics of games, but the contrast is of course quite stark and revolves around the essential openness and groundlessness of infinite games. Among the essential aspects of infinite games (and their players):

- Infinite games are not restricted in time, both in the sense that they do not have an acknowledged starting point when the game began nor a point when the game is designated to stop: “Infinite players cannot say when their game began, nor do they care. They do not care for the reason that their game is not bounded by time. Indeed, the only purpose of the game is to prevent it from coming to an end, to keep everyone in play.”¹⁹² The infinite game of social life as a whole coming to an end is unacceptable given the very premises of the game itself: “The time of an infinite game is not world time, but time created within the play itself. Since each play of an infinite game eliminates boundaries, it opens to players a new horizon of time.”¹⁹³
- Infinite games cannot be defined by any set of rules that structures the game throughout the duration of play. “The rules of an infinite game must change in the

¹⁹² Ibid, 6-7.

¹⁹³ Ibid, 7.

course of play...They are like the grammar of a living language, where those of a finite game are like those of a debate.”¹⁹⁴ The rules themselves always being at stake thus lends a kind of incoherence to infinite games, not to mention a fundamental malleability.

- There is a kind of transcendence at work in infinite games: “Infinite players use the rules to regulate the way they will take the boundaries or limits being forced against their play into the game itself...Finite players play within boundaries; infinite players play with boundaries.”¹⁹⁵ The boundaries between specific finite games—as well as the boundaries structuring what games we can and cannot play—are always at stake. This playing *with* boundaries has everything to do with the related nexus of concepts at work here: *phronēsis*, horizons, transformative praxis.
- Players of infinite games, once they recognize the character of the infinite games in which they are enmeshed, should give up on the hope of mastering infinite games. This is in direct contrast to players of finite games, who have different basic goals: “It is the desire of all finite players to be *Master Players*, to be so perfectly skilled in their play that nothing can surprise them, so perfectly trained that every move in the game is foreseen at the beginning. A true Master Player plays as though the game is already in the past, according to a script whose every detail is known prior to the play itself.”¹⁹⁶
- The element of surprise must be *maintained* in infinite games. Once everything is predictable, once everything becomes subordinate to the *technē* of finite victory, the game essentially *turns into* a finite game. “Surprise in infinite play is the triumph of the future over the past.”¹⁹⁷ Players of infinite games, once they recognize the character of the infinite enterprise in which they are engaged, adopt a flexible approach: “Because infinite players prepare themselves to be surprised by the future, they play in complete openness. It is not an openness as in *candor*, but an openness as in *vulnerability*. It is not a matter of exposing one’s unchanging identity, the true self that has always been, but a way of exposing one’s ceaseless growth, the dynamic self that has yet to be. The infinite player does not expect only to be amused by surprise, but to be transformed by it, for surprise does not alter some abstract past, but one’s own personal past. To be prepared against surprise is to be *trained*. To be prepared for surprise is to be *educated*.”¹⁹⁸ Carse’s theoretical move here manages to firmly embed a certain

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 9.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 10.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 17.

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 18.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 19.

kind of openness to the future as having *practical* value, the same way that we would think of solid strategies, having resources at our disposal, firm knowledge of the world, and so on as having practical value within finite games. In general, that which is demanded of us and that which counts as a *virtue* is fundamentally different in both types of games. In infinite games, one does not play toward completion, predictability, masterability, and so on, but rather “toward the open, toward the horizon, toward surprise, where nothing can be scripted. It is a kind of play that requires complete vulnerability.”¹⁹⁹

One could surely list a great many more characteristics of both basic types of games, but this should be sufficient to make the fundamental differences clear. Finite games deal with this or that thing. All of our goals, projects, and so on, can be understood as games (or perhaps as concatenations of games, depending on how strict we opt to be in drawing boundaries between games). The infinite game that is social life, however, is that in which all of our finite games are embedded, whether we want them to be or not. It is not subject to mastery in the way that finite games might be, and it is characterized by a vast plethora of game types, rules, player types, and so on. It is in the game of collective social life that it ends up being decided which games should be played and which not, which have to be discontinued before they are over, something that is unacceptable within the horizon of particular finite games.

Being a successful player of finite games means winning, and winning means making appropriate decisions about means and ends, perhaps taking the possible decisions of other actors into account in order to accomplish those ends. But being a “successful” player of infinite games is something much different. For it does not involve simply winning this or that game but rather knowing which games to play, which games

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 25.

combine most auspiciously with other games, when games need to be interrupted or abandoned, when new games need to be invented, when the rules of games must be transformed so radically that the identities of the games themselves change, and so on. Thus, players of infinite games—for Carse, that seems to mean all of us—not only play games but play *with* games. From this perspective, games themselves could be described as tools or instruments. One can imagine a particular outcome in one game is necessary to entry into another game, as when winning the game “obtaining a driver’s license” is necessary to entering into the game “driving on the freeway legally.” Carse says it thus: “We need a term that will stand in contrast to ‘power’ as it acquires its meaning in finite play. Let us say that where the finite player plays *to be powerful* the infinite player plays *with strength*.”²⁰⁰ The infinite player acquires strength because it is useful in games. If the meta-game being played is the game “living the good life,” then the player of infinite games would likely have to balance a whole multitude of games and game types, devoting herself to vast numbers of games without ever being fully captured by any one of them (for excessive capture by a particular game might lead her to neglect others that are necessary for success in the game “the good life”).

In places, Carse even reminds one a great deal of Bhaskar and Sartre when he speaks of the possible and of the boundaries of the possible as being precisely what is at stake in practical life. “Politics” is the name that Carse assigns to those activities that are concerned with the possible itself:

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 31.

When Bismarck described politics as the art of the possible, he meant, of course, that the possible is to be found somewhere within fixed limits, within social realities. He plainly did not mean that the possible extended to those limits themselves.²⁰¹

Carse's aim is implicitly to take seriously Bismarck's "realism" but to tweak his very notion of the real. The "real" of politics consists of the "art of the possible" (also Bismarck), but the possible itself is derived from the games that we play and cannot be said to place some implacable barrier around our game-playing. This does not mean, of course, that absolutely anything is possible, but rather that the possible cannot be determined *a priori*, that is, outside of praxis that pushes up against the edges of the possible and the not-yet-real. Infinite players are correspondingly

not concerned to find how much freedom is available within the given realities...but are concerned to show how freely we have decided to place these particular boundaries around our finite play. They remind us that political realities do not precede, but follow from, the essential fluidity of our humanness.²⁰²

Political reality: the result of successful and unsuccessful games, moves, strategies. Finite play is about accomplishment and goal-seeking within already constituted horizons, whereas

every move an infinite player makes is toward the horizon. Every move made by a finite player is within a boundary. Every moment of an infinite game therefore presents a new vision, a new range of possibilities...Who lives horizontally is never somewhere, but always in passage.²⁰³

When horizons are recognized *as* horizons—and hence as contingent, fundamentally malleable, and so on—then they indeed go from having the character of limits pure and

²⁰¹ Ibid, 39.

²⁰² Ibid, 39.

²⁰³ Ibid, 58.

simple to having the character of an opening outward onto possibilities not yet contained within those horizons. *All* practical possibilities are found within horizons, which means that although they may be understood as limiting in a sense—because they never make all things possible—but also as being primordially *enabling*. What they “enable” is the set of possibilities contained within—and constituting—them, but once those possibilities have been enabled, it is as if the horizon itself is already in question and defined only by that which is immediately made possible *beyond* it.

A horizon is a phenomenon of vision. One cannot look at the horizon; it is simply the point beyond which we cannot see. There is nothing in the horizon itself, however, that limits vision, for the horizon opens onto all that lies beyond itself. What limits vision is rather the incompleteness of that vision. One never reaches a horizon. It is not a line; it has no place; it encloses no field; its location is always relative to the view.²⁰⁴

Horizons thus serve the function of structuring praxis in two mutually intertwined ways: as limiting and as enabling. This is yet another reason why the concept of horizon is so difficult to pin down, even if it is quite intuitive—and necessary to a particular conception of praxis—at a first glance.

Infinite play also cannot help but bear deep similarities with *phronēsis*. While it might be somewhat hasty to propose an analogous distinction between *technē* and *phronēsis* corresponding to the distinction between finite and infinite games, one may make a strong case that the analogy is a strong if not complete one. I relate finite games to *technē* because one may have the hope of mastering certain types of finite games (though not all) through practice, by perfecting knowledge of possible moves and

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 57.

contingencies, and so on. But infinite games do not lend themselves to “practice” in the same way precisely because infinite games require us to constantly confront the unprecedented and the singular: games that we have not yet played, rules that are unknown to us or are intended to be opaque to us, and so on. Remember that *phronēsis* is also characterized by its continuous grappling with the singular (drawing from Chapter 1). Infinite games demand something quite similar of us: “If the goal of finite play is to win titles for their timelessness, and thus eternal life for oneself, the essence of infinite play is the paradoxical engagement with temporality that Meister Eckhart called ‘eternal birth.’”²⁰⁵ In infinite play, confronting the singular and unmasterable is precisely the point. It is not merely a limitation on our praxis and a limitation on our ability to master the world, but may indeed be understood as a *good*.

If we are to entertain a theory of games and gaming that takes seriously the conception of world that I have been developing here, then it must take the marrow of Carse’s *Finite and Infinite Games* seriously and incorporate many of its central theses. When we do so, we are in no way forced to jettison “normal” (i.e. non-Carsean) game theory or to directly reject any of its findings. Within finite games, we might still seek to determine where the Nash equilibrium lies or what we can expect as the outcome of a decision tree, for example. But when we take Carse seriously we rise to a conception of game theory that can account for the existence of finite games—the domain of traditional

²⁰⁵ Ibid, 96.

game theory—and also for a vastly different conception of what it means to be a game-playing practical creature.

3.5 Apples, oranges, or nothing? Horizons, worlds, and the theory of preferences

In the last section, it was shown that game theory is an offshoot of RCT that is subject to radical reworking if we take its premises seriously but inject a specific conception of world into the mix. The very same is true for the theory of preferences. I will argue in this section that there are unacknowledged assumptions undergirding the theory of preferences and that preferences, even when they regard specific things, actually turn out to be related to *possible worlds* (akin to the possible worlds described by Plantinga), and that preferences regarding possible worlds implicitly lie behind *all* of our preferences, which means that a reconstructed philosophy of praxis must also lead to a transformed conception of what it means to have preferences, what it would mean to act upon them, and what kinds of preferences we harbor irrespective of what action we undertake in the world. Unlike in the last section, I will not provide any basic introduction to the theory of preferences here, but I will say explicitly that in this section I will assume a number of things that the theory of preferences often assumes—or must assume in some cases—in order to be coherent. In the examples given below, I will

assume that the actors in question have preferences that are both *complete* and *transitive* and that both actors are thus able to have coherent sets of preferences.²⁰⁶

To make the following more readily digestible, I'll employ a basic symbolic shorthand. Let's suppose that a hypothetical actor—we'll call him Burt (B)—has a preference for apples over oranges, and both apples and oranges are goods (entailing that they bring him positive utility), which means that having either apples *or* oranges is necessarily preferred to having neither (B_\emptyset):

$$B_A > B_O \Rightarrow B_A > B_O > B_\emptyset$$

Notice that in the presumption that both apples and oranges are goods, it follows that a condition in which they are both available (B_{AO+})—also assuming that when a good is available it is also costlessly consumed—is preferable to neither of them being available (B_\emptyset or B_{AO-}):

$$B_{(AO)^+} > B_\emptyset = B_{(AO)^-}$$

²⁰⁶ If these assumptions are relaxed, there may be further consequences for the theory of preferences when we introduce the conception of world that I advocate here. But it is a much more sound argumentative strategy, I believe, to show that unexpected consequences may be derived from the theory of preferences *without* violating some of its basic axioms. Morris and Ripstein (2001) say, for example, that “the requirement of completeness ensures that all alternatives will be comparable; the transitivity condition ensures that at least one alternative will be ranked ahead of others in each situation. If the completeness condition is violated, the agent will not always be able to compare alternatives and consequently to make a choice. If transitivity is violated, a situation may arise in which the agent will be unable to achieve his or her ends because for any alternative there will be another that will be preferred to it” (Morris and Ripstein 2001, 1).

We can quite easily derive similar rules for “bads,” which are by definition associated with negative utility. Let’s say that Burt has a choice between getting kicked in the knee (B_K) or getting kicked in the shin (B_S) and would prefer to be kicked in the knee.²⁰⁷ Both are associated with negative utility, which means that Burt would prefer that neither (B_\emptyset) take place:

$$B_K > B_S \Rightarrow B_\emptyset > B_K > B_S$$

Thus, Burt has a preference for neither happening, or, expressed otherwise, a situation in which the possibility of getting kicked in the knee and getting kicked in the shin are not present:

$$B_{(KS)^+} < B_\emptyset = B_{(KS)^-}$$

It should be noted at this point in the argument that a third term has been introduced that is not typically present in formal analyses of preferences: the null set of preferences. And yet the logic of utility and preferences dictates that we can make inferences about it, like the ones above, which are entirely consistent with certain basic axioms concerning preferences (like transitivity, non-cyclical, et al). Taking the above inferences, we may also determine that

$$B_{(AO)^+} > B_{(AO)^-} = B_{\emptyset_1}$$

$$B_{(TS)^+} < B_{(TS)^-} = B_{\emptyset_2}$$

²⁰⁷ I am indebted to Bill English for this example, which I have modified slightly.

Clearly, B_{\emptyset_1} (no apples and no oranges) and B_{\emptyset_2} (no knee kick and no shin kick) are both empty sets, and thus $B_{\emptyset_1} = B_{\emptyset_2}$, and

$$B_{(AO)^+} > B_{\emptyset} > B_{(TS)^+}$$

This is simply a formalized way of saying that Burt prefers some goods over nothing, and nothing over “bads.” Notice that this result was obtained without any reference to pairwise comparisons between goods and bads: the logic of utility allows us to make the above inference without relying on such comparisons. Up to this point, none of this should be either counterintuitive or new.

We can state this more succinctly by introducing a new term and asserting that, for Burt, a preference exists for one practical *field* over another. The “good” field of possibilities in which apples and oranges are both available (F_G) is preferred to the field in which neither is available (F_{\emptyset}), which is in turn preferred to the “bad” field in which Burt gets kicked in either the knee or the shin (F_B). Thus $F_G > F_{\emptyset} > F_B$. And so we have developed a *very* rudimentary theory of preferences concerning fields. First, we must accept the following:

$$B_A > B_O \Rightarrow F_{(AO)^+}$$

This expresses that Burt’s preference for apples over oranges relies upon the existence of a particular field (F_{AO^+}) in which both are available. Now, one can counter that it’s

possible to hold preferences for things that are not within our practical field. I would prefer to have a Mercedes rather than my 1991 Toyota Camry, and I'm quite certain about that even though I've never driven a Mercedes and it's never been feasible for me to own one. But for the sake of argumentation here, let's say that Burt's preference for apples over oranges may exist even if he's not operating within F_{AO+} , but that that preference has no practical *relevance*, which we may define as the presence of a non-null field.

Now, let's suppose that we introduce a dynamic element into the logic of practical fields. Let's say that Burt not only prefers certain fields over others (in this case, $F_G > F_\emptyset > F_B$), but that Burt has some sort of practical influence over what fields are available to him. In such a world, we would posit that there might be some action A_X that Burt can execute that will transport him from one practical field to another. Let's say that neither apples nor oranges are available to Burt, but for whatever reason it suddenly becomes possible for him to have both available to him. For example, Burt commits the action A_I of moving from Siberia (where neither is available) to California (where both are readily available):

$$B(A_I) \Rightarrow F_\emptyset \rightarrow F_{(AO)+}$$

Thus, the action A_I has brought Burt from F_\emptyset to F_{AO+} , and has thus transformed his merely hypothetical (or one could even say *attitudinal*) preference for apples over oranges into a practically relevant one. Let's also say that there is another "action" that is doing nothing (A_\emptyset) and thus staying in Siberia. We can conclude, again according to the

logic of preferences and utility, that $A_I > A_\phi$.²⁰⁸ Or let's say that there's another action (A_2) that produces a field in which another fruit, pineapple (P), is introduced. Burt prefers pineapple over apples and oranges and it becomes possible for him to move to Southern California, where pineapples are available (as well as apples and oranges). This would mean that:

$$B(A_2) \Rightarrow F_{(AO)^+} \rightarrow F_{(AOP)^+}$$

We can conclude from this that $A_2 > A_1 > A_\phi$: Burt would prefer to move to Southern California over staying in Northern California, and would in turn prefer that to staying in Siberia, and this whole system of preferences is derived from nothing more than his initial preferences for different types of fruit, which *demand* of him that he undergo certain actions, lest he fail to act in accordance with the logic of utility.

We can derive a more universal implication from this: if there is an action A that changes the practical field in such a way that $F_X > F_Y$, then the logic of preferences dictates that a rational actor *must* take action A and produce F_X rather than do nothing and stick with F_Y . And so whenever there is such a possible switch between practical fields, we are dealing with **second-order preferences**, whereas **first-order preferences** deal with practical situations in which there is no such action A . If we are stuck with our original field of action (in this case F_Y), then we (like Burt) are better off simply choosing

²⁰⁸ Moving from Siberia to California clearly involves all kinds of transportation costs, opportunity costs, and so on, which would profoundly affect his choice of action in real life. But for the sake of argument, let's assume that Burt's move is totally costless.

whatever we prefer within that field. But if we see an opening in our current practical situation (the sum total of the fields presented to us) then the logic of second-order preferences takes over and dictates that we ditch F_Y and move to greener pastures.

Thus far, I've portrayed fields as collections of goods or bads (and one could certainly imagine fields that combined both) in order to provide a simplified introduction to the concept. But fields may also be understood in a sense that is both more complex and rich in its implications: as *horizons*²⁰⁹ within which marginal utility can be more or less easily attained. A return to Burt for an illustrative example is in order. Let's say that Burt remains attached to apples as before, and resides in a practical horizon in which apples have a generic, unspecified cost of 4 units ($H_C = 4$). He also has a certain quantity of resources, R , at his disposal, that he uses to purchase apples in an iterative fashion (every week, month, whatever). This means that Burt at the moment can acquire $R/4$ apples. Should his resources increase or decrease, his marginal apple purchase would change at a rate of $\Delta R/4$. Now, let's suppose that there's another practical horizon ($H_C = 2$) in which the cost per apple were reduced to 2 (and R remained constant). Then, marginal apple purchases would change at a rate of $\Delta R/2$, which means that not only would Burt suddenly have access to twice as many apples for each iteration, but the cumulative advantage of operating within the new horizon would grow and grow during each iteration if R remains constant. Thus, as before, if there were some action A^* that would enable Burt to switch from one horizon to the other, he would be compelled to do so.

²⁰⁹ The distinction that I make here between fields and horizons

Previously, we assumed that that switch was completely costless, but we need not retain this assumption: Burt would be happy to switch to $H_{C=2}$ even if there were a switching cost, a cost per iteration, or some combination of both, provided that the costs were consistent with utility maximization (this does not need to be mathematically). And if Burt were operating within the initial horizon and thought he *might* ($p < 1$) be able to cross over into the newer, better horizon—while staying within the old horizon if he fails—he would be willing to do so. Or if failure to cross over to $H_{C=2}$ meant that Burt would have to revert to H_0 (loss of all ability to enjoy apples), he would again be willing to do so if he's appropriately risk non-averse (in this case, he would have to be *very* non-averse, given how much he stands to lose cumulatively over time).

In this situation, Burt is given the opportunity to potentially improve his horizon and acts in accordance with utility maximization in both cases (the outcome of the second decision situation being unknowable without further information about Burt's level of risk aversion). But one can also imagine situations in which Burt is acting within the original horizon ($H_{C=4}$) and the prospect of some exogenous event E suddenly presents itself. The effect of E—let's say in this case that E is an upward cost shock—would be to worsen his situation by pushing him into the horizon $H_{C=8}$, which would entail significant and enduring losses for him. Suddenly, Burt's primary concern becomes the preservation of his current horizon. He would pay an initial cost, a per-iteration cost, or some combination of both in order to stave off the effects of E. Thus, from the standpoint of the rational actor, the importance of horizons can greatly exceed the importance of this or that object (if we understand an object as a singular something that provides utility

only during one iteration). And this importance has a double aspect: (1) if a new and better horizon opens, not only would a rational actor have a preference for entering that new horizon, but the same actor might be willing to risk losing the iterated utility provided by their current horizon in order to enter this new path, and (2) if we're threatened with losing our current horizon without a better horizon opening up to us, this horizon demands our conservation, even if this conservation carries costs with it.

From the above, we can generalize even further. From the logic of utility, preferences and fields, we can infer the following:

$$B_{U \rightarrow \infty} \Rightarrow B(A_*) : F_0 \rightarrow F_\Omega$$

A lot of new symbols have been introduced here that require clarification. I'll state the content of the above formal statement in words. If Burt is a seeker of infinite utility ($U \rightarrow \infty$), then this means that he would act consistently with his own "nature" as a utility maximizer only if he engaged in some action A_* that transformed his current practical field (F_0) into the field that actually provided him with infinite utility (F_Ω). Surely, we are justified in having very strong doubts that Burt can have infinite utility or that there's a practical field in which something of the sort is possible.²¹⁰ But we can perhaps avoid

²¹⁰ This is conceptually doubtful for a number of reasons and raises a number of damning questions: would he be enjoying it all at once? Would it be equally distributed over time? How can one distribute infinity equally over time? These sorts of conundrums are fortunately external to the argument at hand. Furthermore, it must be noted that the purpose of having infinite utility seeking as a postulate is decidedly *not* to posit infinite utility as some kind of goal to be pursued (as if infinite utility were an object), but rather to undergird the idea of marginal utility: if there is

these difficulties by translating the above formulation into more palatable language: if Burt has an interest in maximizing utility, then he is instrumentally rational if he engages in some action A_* that transforms his current practical field (F_0) into a field consistent with utility maximization $F_{U_{max}}$.²¹¹

$$B_{U \rightarrow max} \Rightarrow B(A_*): F_0 \rightarrow F_{U_{max}}$$

He would be instrumentally irrational if (and only if) he were in field F_0 , there existed some possible field F_x that provided him with a bundle of options that yielded a higher utility, and he chose to remain in F_0 . And so if Burt stayed in Siberia in spite of his love for various fruits, he would be untrue to his very essence as *homo œconomicus*, which is frequently understood as choosing within determinate circumstances. Now let us make the very “realistic” assumption that there either is no A_* for Burt or that he does not know what can be done to realize this “best of all possible worlds” from the standpoint of his own pleasure-seeking ego. Or perhaps Burt doesn’t even believe that A_* exists. In any event, Burt does nothing and remains in F_0 . The axiom of revealed preferences would infer that Burt “really” prefers to remain in F_0 . Irrespective of how we feel about revealed

marginal utility to be had—and it is worth the cost—the rational utility maximizer will always of necessity take that opportunity without end. Thus, the principle of infinite utility can be understand as a principle of “more” without end: more utility, more preference satisfaction, at less cost, in ever more advantageous practical fields.

²¹¹ In the next chapter, I will take up in greater detail the question of maximization and what we can be said to maximize and what it really entails to be a maximizing being.

preferences, we would at least have to infer that Burt would have an *attitudinal* preference²¹² for the existence of both $F_{U_{max}}$ as well as A^* . If the horizon he inhabits—perhaps we'd prefer to call it a historical situation or something less jargony—provides him only with some very limited action and thus some very limited possibility of attaining a better horizon (and thus a horizon far, far removed from $F_{U_{max}}$), Burt would *necessarily* remain a sort of dreamer, in that his preferences would be fundamentally at odds with the possibilities afforded by his situation. Burt's character as a dreamer of this kind has the following consequence: if some exogenous change were to shake up his situation and either present Burt with the possibility of A^* or make him think that A^* were newly possible, Burt would necessarily commit A^* as a rational actor.

This, then, should change our basic conception of preferences not in the sense that it changes some of the basic assumptions about preferences that are often made in the social sciences—I list transitivity and completeness here, but there may be others—but rather in the sense that it changes our sense of what preferences are *about*. Even when we are speaking of a preference for one thing over another thing—as in the almost comically simplistic apples/oranges example above—we are tacitly always already speaking of a

²¹² This might, in fact, give us reason to think that we *must* have attitudinal preferences separate from revealed preferences: an infinite utility seeker would by necessity harbor preferences for worlds that are unrealizable, and would rationally act to produce them if they suddenly became possible. We could even express attitudinal preferences as those preferences that we cannot currently fulfill but would happily fulfill if given the opportunity (which would prompt us to adopt the corresponding practical comportment toward the world and its ever-shifting sets of opportunities).

preference for one state of affairs over another, and thus of one kind of world over another. Any philosophical account of praxis *must* address the question of preferences if it is to aspire to any kind of completeness.²¹³ Furthermore, addressing the new conception of praxis on the table here from the standpoint of the theory of preferences also yields new insights on its own. More specifically, I hope to have shown that if our preferences are always implicitly for worlds, then we would expect praxis to also always be related to worlds and, possibly, to the world as a whole. Praxis cannot isolate itself to this or that region of the world—or, as will be explicated in the next chapter, to a restricted span of time—because the things that we have preferences for always have conditions of possibility that lie outside of that thing. Accordingly, we come to be concerned about things not just within horizons but always necessarily beyond them; our concerns are necessarily bound up with a concern for horizons and for the world because we cannot value things *and* also be indifferent to whether or not they are possible. Being a creature with preferences turns out to be far more than conducting operations involving goods. Even if we begin from the most basic axioms of the theory of preferences, we end up in unexpected territory and once again confirm the thesis that praxis is never worldless and always both horizon-bound and ready to push at their limits.

²¹³ In chapter 3, I made the claim that preferences “could perhaps be understood as the most basic conceivable way of ordering and ranking possibilities from the standpoint of choice” (page x). Any practical being must necessarily be a preferring being. This is not a particularly controversial claim. What is more potentially controversial is the set of claims being offered here about the kinds of things that we prefer (namely not just things but also horizons and worlds).

3.6 The flexible edges of praxis: notes on care

In Chapter 1, in my discussion of Heidegger, the concept of care played a central role. For Heidegger, care is the most generalized conceptual standpoint from which we can understand praxis, for it is the name he gives not to what we and all other living creatures “do” among other things or “have” amongst other aspects, but rather what we fundamentally *are*. Insects have care because they are concerned for their own possibilities: they seek survival and reproduction, even if not “consciously” in any meaningful way, and this distinguishes them from, say, rocks or notebooks. Once a living creature is no longer characterized by care, it then becomes impossible to distinguish it from rocks or notebooks, and one would have to strain to not simply declare it dead. Here, I return to the idea of care because I believe that it both brings back together a number of the structuring themes of this chapter and provides the best pivot point into the next chapter, which revolves around the question of our practical relationship with time.

All behavior and action emerges out of care by definition. To borrow Kant’s distinction, it is simply analytically true of behavior and action that they take place “because of” care, although I do not mean “because of” in a causal sense, as if care “causes” behavior or action because it is somehow prior in time. It is much more fitting to think of it the way that Nietzsche thinks of lightning. It is senseless to say that lightning “causes” its own flash, for lightning simply *is* the flash, and it is only from a conceptual standpoint that there can be any difference whatsoever. The same goes for care. We *are* care, and we are constantly behaving and acting out of care—the difference is purely definitional. But the claim that praxis is rooted in care amounts to little more

than a tautology. Why, then, should we think about care in our discussion of praxis at all if care and praxis are so fundamentally linked? What could that possibly add to the discussion? My response is that taking up the question of care at this juncture is important because it provides us with another fundamental perspective from which we can both discern the limits of RCT and also begin to think what lies *beyond* RCT.

Care is a concept that we must recognize in all of its strangeness and depth. When we really think it through, we are very quickly led into surprise and/or confusion. I'll give a simple example, as I have in other cases.²¹⁴ I care about my possibilities, and one of the things that I care about is bodily pleasure—for better or for worse. Ice cream brought me physical pleasure as a child, and it has continued to do so, and so eating ice cream every once in a while has become incorporated into my praxis as a worthwhile goal under certain circumstances. On a particular day, the sun is shining and it is hot outside, and ice cream begins to seem like it would enhance my day a great deal, and so I decide to go the Ben and Jerry's two blocks away and buy my favorite flavor. Already, I immediately care that: the Ben and Jerry's is still open for business; it is open on this particular day; I have the resources to buy some; my path on the way to the Ben and Jerry's is not impeded in such a way that makes the trip so cumbersome as to not be worthwhile from the

²¹⁴ One could certainly criticize my use of examples on the grounds that my project might be better served by introducing political and historical examples. I would counter that while such examples might indeed be useful, relying on the political/historical realm for examples is also somewhat risky, particularly insofar as I am throughout attempting to place the emphasis on the essence of praxis and hence on what we are doing *usually and for the most part*. To that end, the illumination of the everyday has greater argumentative potential than the illumination of the exceptional.

standpoint of my original project; and so on. This means that I “care” (a) whether or not a person whom I do not know will rob the Ben and Jerry’s and put it out of business, (b) that world strawberry prices (strawberry being my favorite flavor) will not be affected by global climactic conditions in a way that will make my ice cream prohibitively expensive, and (c) whether my desire for ice cream will last through the duration of my walk. And if I had decided not to take it upon myself to go to the Ben and Jerry’s? I may not care about those things, or I may care about them in a different way, or from the standpoint of different projects or concerns. *However*, I also care about having the right projects. Perhaps I would later regret not having desired ice cream in the first place, because that desire would have inspired me to go to the Ben and Jerry’s, and that would have been a better way of spending my afternoon than watching YouTube videos. But we are also concerned to regret the right things and not to regret the wrong things, and so perhaps we would find it strange that we regret not going to the Ben and Jerry’s because we *should* regret not having volunteered at a homeless shelter—or perhaps we regret not having even *wanted* to go to a homeless shelter, and hence we regret not being a specific kind of generous and community-oriented person.

I will arbitrarily halt this train of thought there, as one could conceivably participate in this mode of thinking forever. I hope that this suffices to show just how complex a concept care is, how many consequences can be derived from it, and just how much it almost immediately seems to commit us to with respect to our understanding of praxis. Most importantly, we must note that care constantly draws us outward: beyond this or that horizon, beyond this or that project, beyond this or that goal. Furthermore,

care for this or that thing is never isolated, and is always bound up with other instantiations of care. If I can be forgiven a somewhat strange metaphor, care necessarily acts as a kind of glue that sutures and binds and holds things together for us as practical beings. We may think of projects, in fact, as means of structuring care, in as micro- or macroscopic a way as we wish. This is not to say, of course, that care calls upon us to view all things as equally important or that the net that it casts is always limitless or ever-expanding. Many of the things listed above could be considered to be, at best, of microscopic importance to me, even as an ice cream lover. Furthermore, our cognitive and other limitations render us incapable of always being aware of all of the things that we implicitly care about. And those same limitations also force us to hem in the intensity, volume and extent of our cares, and perhaps, at best, to carefully, artfully contour them in a phronetic fashion. There is good reason to think that care *always* harbors a possible reach toward ultimacy,²¹⁵ that is, toward a concern for the world as a whole, for eternity, for the well-being of human beings a thousand years from today.²¹⁶

²¹⁵ This may remind the reader of Paul Tillich's concept of faith as "ultimate concern" (see Tillich 1956). I share with Tillich the sense that our status as caring, practical beings means that we always harbor, as I say above, the possibility of being moved by ultimate concerns like the ones named later in the paragraph. It might even be that we cannot *help* but be drawn into such concerns by the very tendencies rooted in care. The boundary line separating the concerns of existential philosophy and the philosophy of praxis might be difficult to determine, although I will not develop this point further here.

²¹⁶ The German playwright Heinrich von Kleist expresses this kind of sentiment when he says in a letter: "I stand before one who is not yet there, and bow down, a millennium in advance, before his spirit" (Letter to Ulrike von Kleist, October 5, 1803). This is perhaps a somewhat overwrought sentiment, but according to the logic of care there is nothing preventing us from holding such sentiments, nor is there anything preventing us from acting on those sentiments, no matter how far from our present "realities" that may push us.

The next chapter will concern itself with concerns of this sort. It will seek to build the bridges—to which I have thus far only hinted—between the philosophy of praxis and a set of other concerns that at first seem only distantly connected to it: hope, despair, ultimacy, the prophetic, redemption, the Promethean. I close this chapter with a section on care because care subtends not only the philosophy of praxis—including theories of instrumental reason like rational choice theory—but all of these phenomena as well. It is the root [*Ursprung*] of praxis and thus that to which we must ceaselessly return if we are to construct an adequate account of praxis. In this chapter, I hope to have shown that constructing an account of praxis on different bases than those used to construct RCT yields often wildly different results: praxis comes to look like the playing of an infinite game, a concern for worlds and wholes, an ecological enmeshment with things rather than an attunement only to this or that thing, and so on. What has not yet been adequately dealt with in this chapter, however, is the relationship between praxis and transcendence.

4. Praxis as Transcendence

In the previous chapter, I filled in some of the gaps introduced in the more critically-minded Chapter 2 by elucidating some of the theoretical consequences of a transformed conception of praxis. The result was a vision of praxis as rooted in concern for possible states of affairs (or worlds), which is a logical extension of the concern with horizons. In several places, I described praxis understood in this new way as having the quality of *transcendence*, but never fully specified what was meant by that. Here, I wish to more fully engage with the thicket of questions that spring up when a concept like transcendence is used in conjunction with praxis. I begin with a look back to Thomas Hobbes, often seen as the originator of the idea of the human behind RCT, to show how practical transcendence is rooted even in the rudimentary picture of praxis painted by Hobbes (a rudimentary picture that is often argued to be the intellectual basis for *homo oeconomicus*), and thus that practical transcendence has a way of lurking behind even those conceptions of praxis that would not describe us as practically transcendent. I will follow this section with a return to the affective character of praxis, briefly mentioned in Chapter 1, through a discussion of the philosopher Ernst Bloch's magnum opus *The Principle of Hope*. The world is a demanding place for practical beings, and in this section I will argue that those demands include not only deciding well, acting well, and so on, but also sustaining certain inner compartments vis-à-vis the world—including feelings and basic beliefs—rather than others. I will close the chapter by setting forth a somewhat more concrete picture of what practical transcendence means using the figure of the entrepreneur as a theoretical model. The entrepreneur, as I define her, is

characterized by an orientation toward given conditions that is simply more transcendent than that of the consumer or the price-taking producer. Understanding what this special orientation entails is essential to understanding practical transcendence in general, which, as I shall also argue, is a generalizable comportment that makes sense beyond the market circumstances in which the figure of the entrepreneur makes sense. I will then close the chapter with a brief return to the question of what constitutes *eupraxia* and how we can begin to find our way back from the philosophy of “pure” praxis to the specification of what normative questions emerge out of this project.

4.1 Infinite desiring machines: the passions and maximization

Homo æconomicus is a term, featured in the title of this project but hardly at all since, that I will use as synonymous with the practical agent described by RCT.¹ As an analytical/anthropological construct used to understand human behavior, *homo æconomicus* has occupied an ascendant—if not frequently challenged²—position within the bulk of social-scientific empirical research in the last several decades. *Homo æconomicus* is a peculiarly powerful construct because it provides us with a compact, seemingly plausible set of axioms concerning human behavior: we humans are creatures of desire and preference, and this necessarily pushes us to maximize utility (whatever that

¹ This equation of one key term with another might seem unjustified. To this point, however, I have found no conception of *homo æconomicus* that is incommensurate with RCT. Many conceptions, however, purport to go “beyond” *homo æconomicus* without truly doing so, for example Anderson (2000).

² The so-called “Perestroika” movement in political science is one prominent example of such a challenge. See Monroe (2005).

may mean), subject to constraints, given what we know. This project has of course been committed to a deep critique of all of the above elements of RCT/*homo œconomicus*, on the grounds that this perspective does not adequately capture the *whole* of what we are as practical beings. Here, I set forth one more critique: if we hold that human beings are *passionate* creatures, then we must have serious doubts about any conception of praxis that is tied to an immanent conception of practical possibility. In many of the passions lies a relationship with our practical horizons that is not captured (or at least not at all easily captured) by any species of RCT and also directly linked to our practical transcendence vis-à-vis the world.

First, I will set forth what I mean by the passions and why they are not easily captured by RCT via an engagement with a set of arguments made by Ruth Grant. In an article titled “The Passions and Interests Revisited,” Grant offers a critique of the ability of the construct *homo œconomicus* to adequately account for the breadth of human motivation and striving. In making this criticism, she relies upon a distinction between passions and *interests*. The immediate question that might spring to mind is, Aren’t passions also bound up with interests? If I experience the passion of envy against someone, doesn’t that mean that I’m interested in having the things they have? Grant avoids this problem by narrowing her definition of interests to interests in the traditional economic sense. The distinction can be understood along many axes, but for my purposes here the most important distinction is that interests are exchangeable in a way that passions are not. I might find it in my *interest* to sell my home for money, but it would be hard to say that this action on my part had anything to do with the passions. For passions,

on Grant's terms, are characterized by excess and non-exchangeability, if not occasionally even by *pleonexia* (insatiability). If interests can be understood as tame,³ then the passions tend to have a certain wildness associated with them, causing us to overstep boundaries and pushing us into a highly active/transformational relationship with the practical world. As above, interests are often exchangeable in the sense that if we desire an object we're willing to part with money for it, or if we're not willing to part with an object for nothing we might be willing to give it to the highest bidder. Passions, on the other hand, must be seen as being more intransigent, less subject to negotiation and compromise (which money often has a way of facilitating). To give an example, Grant understands a sense of belonging as one of the passions. If we feel like we're lacking a sense of belonging to a group, a sudden influx of cash might fill the gap and take our minds off of this lack, but probably only temporarily. If we're thirsty for revenge against someone, we might not be willing to give up our feud at any price. The distinction is not a hard and fast one, but it is intuitive enough to illustrate the practical and political questions that Grant seeks to shed light upon.

The problem with *homo oeconomicus* as a construct is not that it is useless or that it does not often tell us important things, but rather that it "has a truncated psychology...

³ One could of course counter that interests need not always be "tame." What about greed and acquisitiveness? Are those not passions, and very problematic ones at that? Grant would likely counter both that those passions could be understood as being fundamentally different from other passions, and that greed is *by definition* counter to our "interests" because it is insatiable. Securing a decent lifestyle for oneself, commensurate with human flourishing, would be defined as an interest, whereas greed, the passion, might threaten our pursuit of the good life because it took on a psychological life of its own that is difficult for us to master.

[*Homo æconomicus*] is a rational calculator of his interests, and if the passions come into play at all, they are viewed as an interference.”⁴ If we take *homo æconomicus* as our one and only idea of the human and assume that all of politics arises out of and can be accounted for on that basis, then there are crucial phenomena that we will fail to grasp. Understanding politics demands developing a psychology that is “richer,”⁵ more capacious. When we fail to approach the political world according to such a psychology, we run into a thicket of problems: “A successful political order cannot afford to ignore any of the full array of human passions and purposes.”⁶ This means beginning with *homo politicus*—a tangled mess of *both* interests and passions—rather than *homo æconomicus*—a creature of interests alone—in our thinking about basic political questions. As I said above, *homo politicus* isn’t as tame a creature as *homo æconomicus*: she has needs that are not shared by *homo æconomicus*, and accommodating and satisfying—or perhaps only placating—her is a difficult matter. For Grant, we need not reduce one to the other nor ground one in the other; instead, we should note how starkly different our political imagination ends up being when we take one as foundational as opposed to the other. “Because there are independent political purposes, there is an independent political psychology that is not comprehended in the conception of *homo*

⁴ Grant (2008), 457.

⁵ Ibid, 458.

⁶ Ibid, 460.

œconomicus.”⁷ What, then, are these needs experienced by *homo politicus*? For Grant, the needs with which politics must always deal may be divided into roughly five types:⁸

1. Status (what Rousseau would call *amour-propre*): this includes vanity, pride, and *thymos* (the desire for victory or recognition)
2. Concern for justice: anger (outrage/righteous indignation), pity for the suffering
3. Sense of community/solidarity: on one side, identification, loyalty, attachment, *philia*, and on the other side hatred, enmity, commitment/sense of responsibility/sense of efficacy
4. Commitment and a sense of duty/responsibility (distinguished from #3 in part because we may experience this with respect to people who are not a member of “our” in-group)
5. Fear and the desire for security (here, Hobbes’ thought is representative for Grant)

Political problems⁹ *by definition* cannot be solved in the same way that economic problems can. In the economic sphere, according to this definition, goods may be exchanged for money or other goods and incentives may be offered to induce certain kinds of behavior (because people in the economic realm may be influenced by economic incentives).

But in realms where the passions dwell and rule, we cannot always keep people from satisfying their desire for victory over an opponent in some venue by simply always paying them not to, nor can we give people material goods in place of a sense of solidarity with their fellow man. While one might respond that the interests often do

⁷ Grant (2008), 453.

⁸ It seems to me at least that Grant intends this list as more suggestive than final.

⁹ When I refer to “political problems” in this section, I, along with Grant, am speaking primarily of the question of human fulfillment. The political problems arising out of the passions have to do with finding a way of giving people *all* of what they want, or, if that is inconsistent with order or the aspirations of others, of transforming those wants. The political problem from this perspective could be understood as analogous to the problem of Pareto optimality in economics, except with a broadened palette of human wants and needs.

conquer the passions,¹⁰ it is difficult to imagine a world in which we are creatures of pure, tame interest in this respect.¹¹ To give another example, “explanations of politics based on economic models which assume the rational actor psychology of *homo œconomicus* are particularly weak in explaining social movements,”¹² largely because social movements rely so heavily on a sense of righteous indignation or concern for the suffering of others—and often depend so little on simple bread-and-butter economic considerations. Even the economic sphere is not exclusively ruled by calculable interests, as there are also present in that sphere status-related passions like “envy, ambition, the desire for esteem, and so forth.”¹³ Our motivation in buying certain products might lie in that they’re useful in projects that we undertake in association with passionate attachments or needs. Purchasing certain luxury items might seem to go above and beyond economic interests, but such purchases might make perfect sense if we recognize

¹⁰ To give an example, Hirschmann (1977) argues that one of the arguments for capitalism, beginning well before its predominance in the West, was that the interests were a powerful tool in the struggle against human passions, and that commercial societies were bound to be more generally docile and reasonable than societies that did not place the interests at the heart of political thinking.

¹¹ Plato’s *Gorgias*, for example, confronts us with the character of Callicles, who is a vividly constructed embodiment of the desire to dominate others (and a self-conscious desire at that). His attitude is strikingly similar to that of the Athenians in Thucydides’ so-called “Melian Dialogue.” The question posed by Grant’s discussion seems to be something like the following: *what is to be done with Callicles?* Assuming that his lust for lording it over others is fundamentally incorrigible and we choose not to simply banish him from the polity, what outlet do we give him to cathartically express that lust? If we build a society assuming everyone is *homo œconomicus*, are we prepared to ethically or perhaps even institutionally deal with a Callicles in our midst? Grant’s discussion seems centered around building a psychology that is capacious enough to enable us to anticipate Callicles’ existence and to design institutions in advance that can deal with him—along with many, many other character types.

¹² Grant (2008), 456.

¹³ *Ibid*, 457.

how important a person's position in the status order is. All passions share *pleonexia* as a distinguishing trait. This is not necessarily to denigrate the passions, for there are surely many insatiable desires that we might take to be normatively desirable, for example the desire for justice or the desire for virtue (which Aristotle famously describes as the only thing that we should seek in immoderation).

Pleonexia is linked to transcendence because it continuously pushes us beyond what is present and already available to us—beyond immanence. If our desire for something is nagging and incessant, not only do we take it when it comes our way, but we seek it out, we scour the world for it. We *expand* our choice sets in the name of getting it. But the passions also *restrict* our choice sets in important ways, and this is the source of so many of the problems associated with them. Most poignantly, passions seem to intrude upon our decision making in ways that might make it difficult to decide reasonably (for Grant, for example, they do so by definition). When this is the case, whatever choice would be consistent with the imperative of “acting reasonably” in a situation is excluded from our choice set.¹⁴ Passion may not be all bad. For Roberto Unger, for example, passion is the basis of the “striving self,”¹⁵ a “necessity that drives [us] out of [ourselves].”¹⁶ While passion certainly has negative, destructive potentialities within it, we must also view it as “an elementary energy without which reason would be

¹⁴ A passion like rage might cause us, for example, to make a scene at a friend's dinner party in ways that we regret and have no positive relationship with any of our valued life projects. This is not necessarily to equate interests with “acting reasonably,” but passions can be understood as an antinomy to both.

¹⁵ Unger (1984), 6.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 95.

impotent and aimless,”¹⁷ and thus as far more than simply the “rebellious serf of reason.”¹⁸ Thus, passion must be understood as more than simply pathological, as interests run amok. In other words, transcendence over our immediate circumstances helps us becoming something *more* than creatures of mere interest, and that “more” might often be essential to our flourishing (although it might often be essential to our diminishment or misery, and this is the central problem presented by the passions).

Returning to the philosophy of action, the passions must thus be seen as inseparable from practical transcendence in myriad ways. First, passion has a special relationship with our projects. As discussed in Chapter 2, projects, closely aligned with *prohairesis*, must be understood as restrictions on our choice sets. Completing a project requires a whole sequence of actions and decisions from us spread through time. Talcott Parsons, for example, argues that “a course of rational action is by its very essence something spread over time. Hence any theory of action which squeezes out this time element is fundamentally objectionable.”¹⁹ Furthermore, our ends are by definition those things that persist outside of our decision spaces (we could even say *transcend* our decision spaces):

Ends are “subjective” not merely in the sense of being “reflected in the consciousness” of the actor but in the more radical sense of being adhered to by him independently of those “conditions” of the situation which are outside his control.²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid, 101.

¹⁸ Ibid, 103.

¹⁹ Parsons (1934), 514.

²⁰ Ibid, 515.

If we do not understand ends this way, then ends are mere “epiphenomena” and ultimately emergent aspects of context, for if “the subjective aspect of action is a purely scientific theory it is merely a reflection of the external ‘facts’ and cannot itself be a creative element.”²¹ The relationship between ends and decision spaces is often a tense and difficult one (and increasingly so as our ends become more abstract, for example, the end of “becoming more knowledgeable about global affairs”). But this so-called “time element” is typically excluded from consideration by RCT, likely because it is simply non-observable. We can perhaps observe people making choices at a time t_1 , but we cannot see them planning, putting together possible outcomes and courses of action in their mind, gathering information, etc. Instead, “from the point of view of the actor all the elements affecting his action are conceived as simultaneously given on the same plane with each other.”²² But we must not understand ends as “given data” or as “conditions” that are coterminous with decision spaces themselves. Parsons gives the example of a set of economic curves (say, supply and demand curves). Assuming that those curves do correspond to some kind of reality out there (that they correctly describe supply and demand conditions within a given market), they “must refer to a period, not to an instant.”²³ When we think of many of the passions, we think of precisely this sort of stretching of the practical being through time. While a passion like rage can flare up for an instant and then subside, passions like the desire for revenge persist across time

²¹ Ibid.

²² Parsons (1934), 515.

²³ Parsons (1934), 516.

periods, perhaps subtly influencing *all* of our decision making, including the kinds of transformative acts we end up initiating in the world (more on transformative acts in the third section of this chapter).

In colloquial speech, we speak quite frequently of the connection between passion and energy on one hand and the ability to complete projects, to “follow through with things” or “stick with things,” on the other, and in this case, at least, our basic common sense finds us at odds with a conception of practical agents as deciding at discrete moments in time. Passions thus influence our very choice of projects. Experiencing a need for attachment to a larger community might impel me to take on the project “get back in touch with my former classmates,” which is a different choice from “which laundry detergent do I choose from the 10 available in front of me?” But beyond the choice of projects, the passions make us, more generally speaking, practically transcendent vis-à-vis our immediate scope of action. Sometimes they might tie us to our immediate circumstances in a way that is detrimental—as when my anger toward someone in a social situation makes me unable to think of anything else and impels me to do something detrimental to my reputation with others. But often they push our concern and our action beyond our immediate horizons and thus beyond the possibilities that are readily available to us. If I burn with a desire for revenge against someone, I might harbor this sentiment for months or years, waiting for the perfect moment to strike, or devising a method of revenge that I feel the person deserves. The passions may push us to be attentive to possibilities and opportunities to which we were not previously attuned (a person experiencing a sense of lack of community might well be more attuned to

opportunities for social interaction than others). But for Grant and others, we have done conceptual violence to praxis by replacing the language of the passions with the language of preferences.²⁴

What is perhaps most surprising about *homo æconomicus* as a construct used to describe a creature ruled by interests rather than passions is that when we dig for the roots of *homo æconomicus* in Hobbes' *Leviathan*—the work widely considered to be *the* foundational text in the life of the construct²⁵—we find something far different from a simple interest/passion dichotomy. My basic argument regarding Hobbes is that if Hobbes is indeed the originator of *homo æconomicus*, then *homo æconomicus* itself demands a thorough rethinking. For the practical being set forth by Hobbes is far from a tame creature of interests (in Grant's sense). Hobbes presents humans as passionate beings—in line with Grant's proposed “political” psychology—and not as “tame,” interest-driven beings. *And yet*, Hobbes' idea of the human is supposed to provide us with the conceptual basis for RCT. What we find, however, is that Hobbes' passionate, striving human, driven by passion after passion until death, is a being who transcends its given circumstances, who harbors all kinds of world-transformative hopes, and could well be understood as a utopian at heart (and might harbor utopian and other hopes at odds with “reality” whether or not reality is ready to be changed). For Hobbes, as for

²⁴ I hope to have shown in the last chapter that this distinction is quite difficult to maintain if we pose certain questions that the classical theory of preferences has difficult answering.

²⁵ When I say “widely considered,” I have in mind, for example, Eric Voegelin (1952) and, in a Voegelinian spirit, Mark Lilla (2007), who locate a turn in Hobbes' thinking toward empirical observation of human motivation and decision making, and a set of implicit axioms about those things that are quite similar to the *homo æconomicus* of modern economics.

Grant, dealing with *this* creature is precisely the problem that needs to be addressed—although perhaps never once and for all—by political thought.

My overall contention is thus not that Hobbes' idea of the human is fundamentally unsound; much of what I have said so far should strongly suggest that a conception of the person as being driven by passion upon passion is one that I find in many ways convincing. My argument is rather that Hobbes' own premises, as well as the political fears expressed elsewhere in *Leviathan*, ultimately call the compatibility of his anthropology with *homo œconomicus*—of which he is supposedly the founder—deeply into question. For Hobbes, *homo œconomicus* is understood as both (a) concerned with things—money, acquisition, love, sex, health, managing our “estates,” etc—and also as (b) grounded exclusively in *memory*, in the past, which is supposed to delimit its conception of the possible. But does this idea of the human truly exhaust our practical relationship with the world? Does it do so even on its own terms? My argument throughout this project has been that human praxis is perhaps above all (a) a concern with the *world* rather than with particular projects, and (b) a relationship that is often decidedly non-mnemonic, that is, grounded in anticipation and introduction of non-immanent possibilities rather than in memory.

I'll begin with a reading of the first two books of *Leviathan*, which I read as a sort of phenomenology *avant la lettre*. Hobbes' effort to finally get to the true essence of the human cannot help but remind us of something like a phenomenological reduction: “The characters of man's heart, blotted and confounded by as they are with dissembling, lying,

counterfeiting, and erroneous doctrines, are legible only to him that searcheth hearts.”²⁶

The results of Hobbes’ search mark a fundamental break with previous understandings of human desire and psychology. Hobbes sees himself as clearing away old ideas—such as reason as *nous* (intuition or intellection of essences), desire as orientation toward a universal *summum bonum* (highest good), and the ultimate goal of human striving as peace and contentment—like so much pesky underbrush. In place of the old Aristotelian framework of thinking about human action, Hobbes understands man as that perpetually dissatisfied creature for whom satisfaction—if we think of satisfaction as peace or rest—is really just another name for death. Furthermore, Hobbes’ anti-humanist orientation makes humans just another part of nature, which for Hobbes can be understood as perpetual motion: “For what is the heart, but a spring; and the nerves, but so many strings; and the joints, but so many wheels, giving motion to the whole body, such as was intended by the Artificer?”²⁷ God indeed created us, but, in contradistinction to Descartes’ understanding, gave us no special ontological status vis-à-vis nature. The consequences are profound. Thomas Spragens expresses it with clarity:

In Hobbes’ world the Aristotelian configuration of purposeful, finite movements had disappeared entirely. In their stead remained a homogeneous swarm of incoherent, aimless perpetuations of momentum that had no capacity for growth, for fulfillment, or for rest. The new universe was open-ended rather than finite, literally restless, and completely without intrinsic ordering purposes beyond the striving to persist in its motion.²⁸

²⁶ *Leviathan*, “Introduction.” Because *Leviathan* is so readily available online, I will refer only to the section rather than to page numbers.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ Spragens (1973), 73.

The passions are thus no longer understood as deviations from the norm or as excesses, but rather as the fundamental ground, so to speak, of human life. On top of this, the insatiable character of the passions renders them incredibly diverse not only across individuals but also within their lifespan. What does set us apart from one another is thus not our basic passions—“desire, fear, hope, etc.”—but rather the objects that those passions come to seek. While older concepts describing humans remain within Hobbes’ vocabulary, *Leviathan* effects a deep reworking of those concepts.²⁹ Thus, reason, for example, previously understood as noetic access to essences, becomes purely instrumental: “For the thoughts are to the desires as scouts and spies to range abroad and find the way to the things desired, all steadiness of the mind’s motion, and all quickness of the same, proceeding from thence.”³⁰ If we expect humans to be anything else, we are led into grave error, both conceptually and politically. Eric Voegelin, for examples, correctly argues that for Hobbes the “demoniac type” is the “normal human type.”³¹ When multiple “demoniac types” confront one another in the social realm, particularly without some form of higher violence to constrain them via fear, the result is Hobbes’ well-known war of all against all. Politics is now understood as the project entrusted with managing such creatures—that is, attempting to ensure that this creature can live in peace in spite of its worst tendencies.

²⁹ For an excellent account of Hobbes’ transformation of such concepts, particularly with respect to Aristotle’s *Ethics*, Leo Strauss’ *The Political Philosophy of Hobbes: Its Basis and its Genesis* is all in all an excellent source.

³⁰ *Leviathan*, Chapter 8.

³¹ Voegelin (1999), 206-7.

While the origins of the passions—in the “small beginnings of motion”³² that are likely in themselves unexplainable—might at first glance seem that they result in pure chaos, a variety of human faculties manage to usually and for the most part turn those drives into more tame means-ends behavior. Perhaps the most important of these faculties is that of deliberation:

When in the mind of man appetites and aversions, hopes and fears, concerning one and the same thing, arise alternately; and diverse good and evil consequences of the doing or omitting the thing propounded come successively into our thoughts; so that sometimes we have an appetite to it, sometimes an aversion from it; sometimes hope to be able to do it, sometimes despair, or fear to attempt it; the whole sum of desires, aversions, hopes and fears, continued till the thing be either done, or thought impossible, is that we call deliberation.³³

Appetite and aversion, continuously in flux, are continuously forced into resolution by this faculty, which can be understood as a kind of weighing. The status of this understanding of human behavior as a forerunner of modern RCT—even if it is not exclusively Hobbesian³⁴—is clear. Patrick Neal, for example, has characterized rational choice theory in terms of its (1) instrumentalism, (2) individualism, and (3) subjectivism, all of which are strongly present in *Leviathan*’s anthropology, and defines RCT in terms of its attempt to

understand sociopolitical relations and institutions as the instruments created and used by mutually disinterested and rationally self-interested agents in the attempt

³² *Leviathan*, Chapter 6.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Thinkers in Hobbes’ century, for example Spinoza, often came to similar conclusions about the roots of human behavior and the ground of the political. What they are lacking vis-à-vis Hobbes, however, is an explicit ontology of the human as well-developed as the one found in *Leviathan*.

to maximize the degree to which they can successfully pursue their particular ends and satisfy their particular preferences, whatever those might be.³⁵

Even though practitioners of RCT do not always agree on everything, they do overwhelmingly tend to agree that RCT makes little sense as an explanatory paradigm without the assumption that we (a) judge on the basis of ordered preferences, which allow us to break any decision-making deadlock, and (b) on the basis of expected utility, by which we seek to choose between courses of action under conditions of certainty given what we know about the world. Even in its highly sophisticated forms, such as game theory and formal modeling, both (a) and (b) are a *sine qua non* of RCT. Based on these premises, an infinity of potential hypotheses about human behavior and institutions emerge, hypotheses that can be brought to bear on anything imaginable: on decisions concerning childbirth, legislative decision-making, consumer choices, the urban dating scene, decisions about whether or not to rebel against state power, etc. The result is that from this perspective, all political phenomena tend to be construed as outcomes of rational choice, whether in simple or game-theoretic forms.

As I have discussed thus far, criticisms of RCT tend to focus upon its abstract character, its failure to explain how we arrive at the preferences we do, and its amorality. These criticisms do not interest me here; I seek to discuss RCT more directly as a set of paradigmatic axioms. With respect to (a) and (b) above, Hobbes, and the paradigm

³⁵ Neal (1988), 640.

inspired—perhaps only indirectly—by him,³⁶ make two crucial, corresponding mistakes. With respect to (a), preference orderings, my criticism of RCT lies in that it does not seek to interrogate the assumptions about the *world* that we carry when seeking to realize our projects and satisfy our preferences. That is, it does not account for the possibility that we may experience hope or despair based on the expectation not that our projects will not be realized within the world as we know it,³⁷ but also in the more fundamental sense that the very grounds upon which the formation of our preferences rests might itself shift—for the better or for the worse. Indeed, preference ordering in the most fundamental sense can be understood as preference for particular states of the world, which themselves could perhaps be lexically ordered. Nearly everyone desires a world in which they can fly and would lexically prefer it to their own world. This is certainly an extreme example. A much more historically realistic example is the preference for a world without material scarcity, as embodied by, say, Friedrich Engels (discussed in the last chapter).

This leads us into my criticism of (b), the grounding of rational expectation in memory. My criticism of RCT in this sense lies *not* in that we can't form rational expectations about the future because the future is always uncertain, but rather that our futural orientation is perhaps more fundamentally directed toward the horizon within

³⁶ Hobbes receives very little explicit mention by practitioners of RCT themselves. The most typical use of Hobbes from the perspective of RCT is found in construing the game-theoretic problem of the Prisoner's Dilemma as the basic political dilemma encountered by self-interested actors. Again, see Neal (1988).

³⁷ In my project, I intend to make a distinction between hope/despair on one hand, which pertain to the *world*, and confidence/un-confidence, which pertain to this or that project. Heidegger and Ernst Bloch, discussed in the next section, might make similar distinctions, although for different reasons.

which our expectations can be fulfilled. Thus, if we have a rational expectation that the bus will arrive on time tomorrow morning, we can have this expectation only because we expect that the world will exist in such-and-such a way tomorrow. Attempts to root rational expectation in memory—from thinkers as diverse as Michael Oakeshott, David Hume and Edmund Burke—typically do so within ontologies of the socio-political that would eliminate any prophetic, anticipatory sense of futurity. Granted, their ontologies might be largely right. But if we accept my criticism of (a) above, we must also expect that people will feel now and then confined by such ontologies and seek to overstep them, as in Ernst Bloch’s oft-repeated phrase—“Denken heißt Überschreiten,” “thinking means venturing beyond.”³⁸ Hobbes, conversely, writes that “much memory, or memory of many things, is called experience. Again, imagination being only of those things which have been formerly perceived by sense, either all or at once, or by parts at several times.”³⁹ Hobbes’ project can thus be read as an effort to establish a fully non-prophetic orientation toward the future, rooted in a particular ontology and philosophy of language/experience (as would RCT).

To return to a question posed earlier, why *Leviathan*? Why not simply critique RCT directly without bringing Hobbes into the fray? I would argue that one of the things that makes *Leviathan* a Janus-faced work is that its explicit idea of the human, on one hand, and the political/religious concerns that dominate the work, on the other. The funny

³⁸ This expression probably comes across as out of place here. Its meaning will receive explicit treatment later in this chapter, in a section devoted solely to Bloch’s thought.

³⁹ *Leviathan*, ch. 2.

thing about it is that although *Leviathan*'s idea of the human continually strives to ground expectation in memory (rational expectation) and preference ordering, *Leviathan* is a book rife with anxiety toward messianic and other hopes and fears and how easy they are to instill in the minds of ordinary people.

If this superstitious fear of spirits were taken away, and with it prognostics from dreams, false prophecies, and many other things depending thereon, by which crafty ambitious persons abuse the simple people, men would be much more fitted than they are for civil obedience.⁴⁰

Prognostics, pro-*gnosis*: knowledge of the future as foretold in prophetic elicitations of the future of the *world* itself, not of this or that project. In passages like these, it is easy to forget that Hobbes, in the same chapter, seeks to reduce expectation to memory. In addition to this, *Leviathan* is full of screeds against education in civic humanism, which exalts the heroic achievements of the ancients, against the “theomancy” of would-be prophets, and of course against the ever-present Scholastics, who populate the world with absurd concepts like free will (as the humanists would do as well). Furthermore, the last half of the book—which is far too seldom read in tandem with the first half⁴¹—is deeply concerned with accounts of salvation⁴² and chiliastic political hopes and their consequences. This suggests that Hobbes knows all too well that his philosophical

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Mark Lilla's *The Stillborn God*, for example, interprets *Leviathan* as a text seeking to “change the subject” away from political theology and toward what Voegelin called the new science of politics. Lilla fails, however, to take any account whatsoever of the deeply Erastian second half of the work.

⁴² Indeed, it seems difficult to reconcile any concern with salvation, as a futural orientation, with a mechanistic conception of the human: could desiring-machines have a conception of, say, eternity?

anthropology is at odds with the rest of *Leviathan* but wants to call the “bourgeois” *homo oeconomicus* into being via the fears he hopes to inspire with his work. If we choose to read Hobbes as the founder of modern political thought, at least in its systematic form (contra Machiavelli), we would have to do so with blinders on.

The possibility that I’m putting forth here is the theoretically risky one that Hobbes’ dual political sensibility may actually be right, and the “demoniac” human type and the preference-ordering type are ultimately one and the same, at least in a qualitative sense. If this is the case, taking one of the two ideas of the human seriously and roundly dismissing the other (whichever one we choose to side with or condemn) is a mistake with theoretical and political consequences. To give another example, a phenomenon like *prolepsis* or proleptic expectation,⁴³ which Hobbes may seek to eliminate from human thought and behavior, thereby becomes difficult to classify as a merely pathological or aberrant mode of human existence that can simply be stamped out. Hobbes’ method of dealing with the problem of political praxis that I’ve outlined here is to put the most fundamental forms of human praxis in the hands of sovereign power. While this certainly *is* a solution of sorts, Hobbes’ later critics, particularly those coming from liberal traditions, found this solution deeply troubling and unsatisfying (Locke being the most well known). The question then becomes: in whose hands should praxis most fundamentally lie? Liberalism’s answer tends to be in the hands of “the people”—a

⁴³ Matthias Riedl defines prolepsis as a “psychological disposition determined by anticipation of the future.” For Riedl, prolepsis is a “mode of existence” that first emerges historically in the West via Hellenist Judaism (Riedl 2007). This differs somewhat from my own argument, which holds that prolepsis is always a possibility latent in human praxis.

liberal people, of course—whether through a constitution or some other fundamental political means (British parliamentary supremacy, for example).

If we take seriously the need to rethink our relationship with praxis in its fundamentals, we are forced to concede that *homo œconomicus* might well occupy a useful but subordinate position in our political thinking. At this point, the consequences for political thinking in other domains are not yet clear to me. The questions that this rethinking raises, however, are somewhat more clear: are humans something other than *homo œconomicus* or has the idea of *homo œconomicus* simply not yet been thought fundamentally enough? As we have seen, RCT typically assesses human behavior from a kind of first-order perspective in terms of the way it deals with horizons, preferences, and the like. What I am proposing here is a second-order perspective: humans not only seek to pursue their interests in confrontation with scarcity and with other self-interested actors, but are also fundamentally concerned with the ground upon which that seeking takes place. The further our concerns rise “above” first-order considerations—and the more our praxis concerns itself with the world as such—the more practically transcendent we become.

David Gauthier, a prominent theorist of RCT, gives us another important push beyond a conception of praxis as purely immanent (although he doesn’t quite follow up on the push the way that one might hope he would). He does so by calling into question our usual account of RCT-based instrumental rationality (that is, the means-ends rationality that we are all quite used to discussing):

The immediate consequence of the instrumental view of reason is that rationality is, or at least involves, efficiency...But efficiency is not the whole of the rational manner of acting. The interesting problems of practical reason arise because we cannot secure all of what we want. We have incompatible ends, so that the means which bring about one exclude another. *We have ends to which there are no available sufficient means*, and which therefore are at least partially unattainable. We have open ends, such as happiness, to which no set of means can be complete.⁴⁴

This brings together a number of central ideas in a condensed form. Unfortunately, Gauthier tears a gap open and quickly retreats to a rather standard conception of practical reason:

Rational man acts to bring about that outcome which he prefers, among those which he believes are open to him. Thus he must be able to compare the possible outcomes in any situation, to determine that which he prefers to others.⁴⁵

As usual, I have no immediate qualms with the idea that we indeed quite often act on such a basis. But it's unfortunate that Gauthier so quickly declares this to be the whole of instrumental rationality, because a statement like "we have ends to which there are no available sufficient means" harbors conceptual possibilities that help us understand practical transcendence. We can see this if we transform this statement into the following: "We have ends to which there are *not yet* available sufficient means." Let's assume that those ends are ones that we should pursue (they are moral, beneficial, lawful, etc.). The practical imperative produced by this statement is no longer "give up on this particular end because the means to achieve it are lacking" (as would be the conclusion from the original formulation of the statement), but rather "it is time to gather the means to achieve this end, because that's what our ends necessarily demand of us." The practical

⁴⁴ Gauthier (1975), 413. Italics are my own.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 415.

imperative thus shifts from letting matters remain as they are to finding a way to overcome the basic contours of the current state of affairs. We would expect *any* maximizing being to adopt this kind of stance toward the world. Thus, when Gauthier states that instrumental action always has efficiency as its goal,⁴⁶ we should follow him, but only if we rework our conception of efficiency to include not just the achievement of efficiency within horizons but also the possibility that we may undertake action that transforms those horizons in such a way that the previously impossible becomes possible or the previously difficult becomes easy. Determination to make the world—our means—actually *conform* to our projects rather than the other way around, could even be seen as synonymous with passion in Grant's and Hobbes' sense.

Our conception of instrumental rationality can be expanded even by re-considering the question of what counts as an instrument. According to accounts of instrumental rationality that are founded on the idea of stable decision spaces, we use the world and its various elements as instruments—or, in a more Heideggerian key, as tools [*Werkzeuge*]. In a decision space, there are always a limited number of instruments available to us (including persons, whom we perhaps too often use as instruments). In Heidegger's hammering example from *Being and Time*,⁴⁷ the craftsman in his shop has a finite arsenal of tools available for the specific task at hand. But what if we imagine *horizons* as instruments themselves? States of affairs are not merely inert limitations out there in the world. From a certain practical perspective, they may be used to produce

⁴⁶ Ibid, 413.

⁴⁷ Heidegger (1953), 69.

other states of affairs. A maximizing being would *necessarily* adopt this practical stance. It all depends upon what counts as an instrument. And there's no reason why only things—or from a game-theoretic perspective, other actors—should count as instruments.

Practical transcendence comes into view if we continue on the same path but construct the situation differently. What if our craftsman in his shed had a wood-crafting project at hand that was a novel one (he's attempting to make something that has never been made), involving the construction of a wooden object that no craftsman had never before attempted. There may be tools that do not yet exist that would be necessary to the project at hand. Perhaps such tools would be simply composites or modifications of already existing tools within the shop—or perhaps a specific part of a wooden object that is being built requires a tool that doesn't at all resemble any of the tools currently in the shop. Or perhaps the tool that is needed, the one that would be most "efficient" within this scenario, doesn't exist anywhere, and doesn't bear much resemblance if any to tools that are either known to the craftsman or that exist anywhere in the world. A practical agent bound to immanence and the given would be *forced* to give up on the project or to simply use the tools at hand and simply fail in the task of producing the desired object. But if we agree with Gauthier that we often "have ends to which there are no available sufficient means," and that we often overcome that limitation, then we are forced to accept an account of praxis as potentially transcendent. In the next section, I will describe the kind of practical comportment embodied by the carpenter—when he seeks to construct a tool that does not yet exist—as an *entrepreneurial* comportment toward given practical constraints.

Much of the discussion of the passions and practical transcendence comes most fully into focus when we ask important questions about both maximization and world. *Homo æconomicus*, whether of the “tame” sort criticized by Grant or the modified sort that I am seeking to piece together conceptually, is by definition a maximizer. Our definition of what is being maximized usually depends on our theoretical aims, as when we assume that politicians want to maximize time spent in office. In this case, we could even say that the very identity of practical agents in question is inseparable from what they are seeking to maximize (correspondingly, if a random person with no political experience begins seeking to maximize time spent in office, we would probably start calling them a politician). When the idea of an infinitely maximizing practical agent—more than a bit reminiscent of Hobbes’ “restless desire of power after power”—is considered in isolation from a serious consideration of what kind of world that agent inhabits, then *homo æconomicus* ends up looking like a creature that we picture constrained by various choice sets that makes decisions that maximize a given thing—“utility” or whatever—given their limitations.⁴⁸ The ultimate crux of the difference between the *homo æconomicus* criticized by Grant—and myself at all stages of this project—could even be said to lie precisely in the idea of world, especially when we define world as the sum total of a practical agent’s limitations.

⁴⁸ Herbert Simon’s conception of “satisficing,” mentioned briefly earlier, is often called upon as an “alternative” to the idea of maximization. The essence of satisficing is that we never really maximize because we’re limited by cognitive and other constraints in our decision making. But this is not to overcome the idea of maximization but rather to fetter our ability to do so. We could even think of cognitive and other constraints as being part of the *world* of practical agents (and constraints that agents would hope to overcome, like all constraints).

Gauthier's reflections, much like those of Nozick discussed in Chapter 2, call upon us to modify our whole conception of what it means to be "rational," even when we mean rational only in the sense of being "purely instrumentally rational." Gauthier defines practical rationality as follows: "A person is a rational agent only if his actions conform to what he supposed he would do and favor, were he sufficiently informed and reflective."⁴⁹ What I hope to have done throughout this project is to change our conception of what it is that we are informed and reflective about in the first place, to expand our list of the very objects of practical reflection, as well as what it would mean to be "sufficiently informed." In the next section, I will move from the practical agent's relationship with the world—its "outer" practical orientation, so to speak—to its inner world, the world of belief and affect, which is an essential element of praxis if we understand praxis appropriately.

4.2 Hope's privileged place among the affects: Ernst Bloch and praxis

Now that some of the essential modalities of a fundamental practical comportment toward the world have been laid out, it remains to discuss what kinds of attitudinal and affective comportments underlie those modes. In this section, I will focus on hope as a privileged affective comportment vis-à-vis praxis, via an engagement with Ernst Bloch, the thinker who is almost universally regarded as the most important philosopher of hope in the Western philosophical tradition. No philosophical treatise on

⁴⁹ Gauthier (1975), 415.

hope is more widely cited and read than his *Principle of Hope*. His stature alone, however, is not justification for his inclusion in this project. However, I hope that the importance of Bloch in thinking through matters such as hope, praxis, horizons, the futural nature of humans, and so on, becomes clear over the course of my discussion. What we find in Bloch is an account of hope—what it is, what function it serves for us, what promises and dangers are associated with it—that is as thorough and wide-ranging as it is occasionally wide-eyed and careless. There is much with which I will dispute in Bloch, particularly his borderline fetishization of certain aspects of hope and his carelessness in demanding certain kinds of revolutionary hopes in us without properly assessing their consequences. But there is also a great deal that is helpful in his work, and I will attempt to focus on those helpful elements while acknowledging the downsides. Most importantly, Bloch continuously emphasizes the linkage between hope and praxis, and that will be the focus of my investigation.

For Bloch—and I will indeed follow him in this—hope is a privileged comportment because it is an enabling comportment, a comportment that privileges striving over not-striving, for better or for worse. Hope,

superior to fear, is neither passive like the latter, nor locked into nothingness. The emotion of hope goes out of itself, makes people broad instead of confining them...The work of this emotion requires people who throw themselves actively into what is becoming, to which they themselves belong. It will not tolerate a dog's life which feels itself only passively thrown into What Is.⁵⁰

⁵⁰ Bloch (1986), 3.

Hope is an *enabling* affect. The world is a world that is always in becoming, and hope demands of us that we recognize this and act accordingly. To see the world as static or to ask that it become so is to adopt a stance that is inimical to *eupraxia*, which demands that we act in the world *as world*. We are fortunate, however, because even though hope is sometimes difficult to come by, we are typically beings who remain in the thrall of daydreams and wishes that have the potential to call us back to hope (although not in the sense that hope is a “natural” state to which we revert). Some of these daydreams and wishes are characterized by an “enervating escapism”⁵¹ that fails to inspire action, but many are “provocative...not content just to accept the bad which exists, does not accept renunciation.”⁵² But hope is not confined to these kinds of isolated thoughts and desires. Hope has the potential to permeate every aspect of our practical relationship with the world. “Thinking means venturing beyond.”⁵³ When we blithely take matters as they are—perceiving our horizons as fixed—we are no longer thinking in a meaningful sense. For thinking is the difficult task of bringing the new into being: “Real venturing beyond knows and activates the tendency which is inherent in history...Primarily, everybody lives in the future, because they strive.”⁵⁴ The “tendency inherent in history” is history’s plasticity, its constant—although never total—undoing of all that seems stable; in declaring that everybody lives in the future, Bloch should remind us immediately of

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid, 4. This is the translation given for Bloch’s famous “Denken heißt Überschreiten,” which can be more literally translated as “thinking means striding over” or “exceeding” or even “transcending.”

⁵⁴ Ibid.

Heidegger and his concept of always-being-ahead-of-oneself [*Immer-schon-vorweg-Sein*], discussed in Chapter 1.⁵⁵

So important is hope to praxis that hopelessness can only be described as “the most insupportable thing, downright intolerable to human needs.”⁵⁶ Not only does hope stand for us as a kind of nourishment or consolation, but it also underlies praxis in an even more fundamental way. For without hope most of our projects are non-starters. While it’s conceivable that someone would undertake projects despite being indifferent to their success or failure, perhaps simply for the sake of trying, this shows only that what they are after is the attempt itself and not “success” as it is usually understood. To live without hope is to live in a “world without Front,”⁵⁷ and thus in a closed world of immanent possibilities that are merely consumed by practical agents lacking foresight and creativity. But in the philosophy of practical reason—Bloch would say in philosophy in general up to his day—“the Not-Yet-Conscious, Not-Yet-Become...has not even broken through as a world, let alone as a concept. This blossoming field of questions lies almost speechless in previous philosophy.”⁵⁸ The ability of human beings to imagine the future differently, to negate the present and the already-known in thought, to achieve practical transcendence vis-à-vis the world by living, in an important sense, *in the*

⁵⁵ Bloch thus shares Heidegger’s basic phenomenological orientation, assessing hope from the standpoint of practical actors, of hoppers themselves. But for a variety of reasons, some of which are explored here, Bloch comes to vastly different conclusions that have real political consequences.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 6.

future—these are aspects of human experience that, according to Bloch, have not yet received the treatment that they deserve. Clearly, I would say the same about the philosophy of practical reason. I want to correct this along with Bloch, and I wish to do so from *within* the philosophy of action, by showing that praxis *includes* the kinds of things that occupy Bloch. Philosophy of action in the past, I have contended over and over, has always grasped the world as “a world of repetition or of the great Time-and-Again,”⁵⁹ whereas what the philosophy of action needs, if it is to be true to our practical experience in the world, is to engage directly with hope, with our experience and creation of the new, with the expansive set of affects that we bring into our practical engagement with the world. “Expectation, hope, intention towards possibility that has still not become: this is not only a basic feature of human consciousness, but, concretely corrected and grasped, a basic determination within objective reality as a whole.”⁶⁰ Praxis has the possibility of becoming this kind of gap in “objective reality,” of being the medium via which the new comes into being. In short, philosophy will have “knowledge of hope, or it will have no more knowledge.”⁶¹ I’m not sure that I would make a statement that broad, but I would certainly agree that the philosophy of praxis needs a more intimate knowledge of hope if it is to be truer to praxis itself. Bloch criticizes his predecessors for lacking proper categories of “Future, Front, Novum.”⁶²

⁵⁹ Ibid, 7.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid, 8.

Bloch investigates hope from a number of perspectives—theological, historical, psychoanalytical, etc.—but the most important for my purposes here lies in the fact that Bloch in many places shares Heidegger’s basic *phenomenological* orientation toward hope, that is, investigating hope from the standpoint of practical agents themselves. Bloch is interested in how we experience hope, what hope means from the standpoint of real historical human beings. Bloch imagines his most important contribution to the phenomenology of hope to be the discovery and laying out of the “Not-Yet-Conscious.” This somewhat clunky term, slightly more elegant in German (*Noch-nicht-Bewußtsein*), denotes consciousness of “something new that is dawning up, that has never been conscious before,”⁶³ the form of consciousness found most unmistakably among youth (as hope is for Aristotle) and in “times of change.”⁶⁴ This form of consciousness “belongs completely to the Not-Yet-Become, Not-Yet-Brought-Out...in the world.”⁶⁵ Consciousness is usually and for the most part—for Bloch, far too often—absorbed in memory, in what has been, in what has already come into being. But for Bloch, an important aspect of our being human lies in that we are not restricted to this. And if we are practically transcendent vis-à-vis the world, as I argue that we are throughout this project, then we must submit that we *cannot* be wholly immersed in possibilities immediately present to us. If we adopt the proper conception of praxis, then we are operating according to not-yet-consciousness *all the time*, although to varying degrees

⁶³ Ibid, 11.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 13.

(and that variance is naturally very important). We see manifestations of hope and not-yet-consciousness all over the place, not just, say, in social movements that describe themselves as utopian, but in places where we might not expect it. For example, Bloch describes a great deal of advertising in American consumer society as attempting to appeal to various hopes, even hopes that are at root utopian.⁶⁶ He sees utopian hopes even, for example, in architectural forms: “Egyptian architecture is the aspiration to become like stone, with the crystal of death as intended perfection; Gothic architecture is the aspiration to become like the vine of Christ, with the tree of life as intended perfection.”⁶⁷ The bulk of *The Principle of Hope* is in fact dedicated to tracing the imprint of hope through vast swathes of human history, religion, and culture.

In essence, not-yet-consciousness is not only presented as an aspect of human being, but also as carrying a great deal of normative weight with it. For Bloch, if we do not live according to not-yet-consciousness, then we have failed as practical agents in important ways. We have essentially chosen to live according to practical immanence. “Only thinking directed towards changing the world and informing the desire to change it does not confront the future (the unclosed space for new development in front of us) as embarrassment and the past as spell.”⁶⁸ It should be apparent why hope and not-yet-consciousness are fundamentally intertwined (although they are perhaps not fully

⁶⁶ Unsurprisingly, Bloch, who migrated to the U.S. largely against his will due to the rise of the Nazis and who, like other figures associated with the so-called Frankfurt School, never had any interest in assimilation, was bitterly critical of American consumer culture.

⁶⁷ Ibid, 14.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 8.

synonymous). We often do speak of hope when we refer to specific events or possibilities—“I *hope* that my performance goes well tomorrow” or “I *hope* that the weather is nice while I’m on vacation next week”—but it seems more appropriate to speak of hope as concerning horizons of possibility themselves. When we speak of someone with a hopeful demeanor, we are describing aspects of that person’s comportment toward the world as a whole. Similarly, when we speak of someone as optimistic about the prospects of the natural sciences or about the possibility of rising average income in a country, then we are speaking of an affective relationship not necessarily with the world as a whole, but at least with a realm or aspect of it.⁶⁹ Correspondingly, praxis *should* also be oriented toward the world in such a way. This is where Bloch and the logic of care dovetail quite closely. As I argued in the last section, care continuously draws us out of ourselves into the world, potentially far beyond our immediate practical experience (in both space and time). For Bloch, hope does the same thing. Hope for a transformed world—or for transformation in the institution in which we work or in the quality of life in our neighborhood—has the potential to draw our concern out far beyond our everyday tussle with reality. For Heidegger, there is nothing guaranteeing, so to speak, that care is drawn ever outward into the world or forward in time, and the same is true for Bloch. But for Bloch, not-yet-consciousness is an aspect of us, never acknowledged by Heidegger, that does precisely that.

⁶⁹ Ordinary language is somewhat slippery when speaking of hope, which makes it difficult for us to make sweeping statements like “ordinary language about hope is wrong about hope.” I also avoid making such statements, but I hope to show that some of our everyday references to hope might be better described as expressions of confidence.

Not-yet-consciousness must be understood not as the whole of consciousness—which also consists of memory, everyday perception, and the like—but rather as “an edge, a threshold in consciousness...pushed forward a greater or lesser distance.”⁷⁰ For Bloch, it is found most abundantly in “youth,” at “times which are on the point of changing,” and in “creative expression,” to give only three examples.⁷¹ Times of rupture and transformation are “sultry, a thundercloud seems to be pent up within them.”⁷² Not-yet-consciousness is something that we possess for reasons that are not explained by Bloch, although one surmises that he and Heidegger would entertain similar reservations about giving it a biological basis. What can be said is that Bloch seems to root not-yet-consciousness in his account of the world, his metaphysics. His account of the world stresses its incompleteness and hence its orientation toward the future: “Essential being is not Been-ness [*Gewordenheit*]; on the contrary: the essential being of the world lies itself on the Front.”⁷³ We are attuned to “Been-ness” in memory, but we are wrong to rely too heavily on memory in praxis. Because the present is always *toward* the future in an essential way, the present must be understood as a Front, as a kind of gate through which the future, the not-yet is continuously passing. This is not far from Heidegger’s understanding of time as *kairos*, as the continuous production of opportunities. It is only because being opens out toward the future—because it continuously *dawns*, in Bloch’s language—that categories like opportunity or possibility make any sense at all. If there

⁷⁰ Ibid, 115.

⁷¹ Ibid, 117.

⁷² Ibid. 118.

⁷³ Ibid. Bloch mentions the Renaissance as an archetypal example of such a time.

were no future, no Novum (New),⁷⁴ then the statement “X is possible but not yet actual” would be *a priori* meaningless.

To give a more concrete example of what I think Bloch means by hope, I will turn to a quite unexpected source. One of the most illustrative examples that I have yet encountered of hope as an affect having deeply enabling/horizon-forming effects in history is that of the “Hermetic” tradition and its impact on modern scientific breakthrough. Frances Yates, arguably the most influential historian of the Hermetic tradition, defines this tradition as involving “all kinds of occult practices,” although it “can be used more particularly of alchemy, usually thought of as the Hermetic science *par excellence*.”⁷⁵ In essence, the Hermetic tradition—which is so diffuse that one can label it as a tradition proper only with difficulty—sees the cosmos as a “network of magical forces with which man can operate.”⁷⁶ This is a quite different attitude from that which dominated the Dark Ages, which had an overwhelming tendency to see the forces of nature as deeply hostile to human projects and to human flourishing. What the Hermetic tradition shares in common is a single text, known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, thought to have been written by an ancient Egyptian priest named Hermes Trismegistus, who was the source of ancient wisdom, which reached even Plato and the Platonists. In this text, we find an account of creation in which the creation of light is followed by the

⁷⁴ In spite of his occasional rhetoric to the contrary, Bloch is not a fetishist of the new as such. He is interested in the “good New,” which is “never that completely new.”⁷⁴ The new as such is never strictly identified with the good. The New can be utopia or it can be a new form of totalitarianism or torture or oppression, and Bloch is wise to explicitly acknowledge this.

⁷⁵ Yates (1967), 255.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

creation of the elements of nature and then of the heavens, that is, the Seven Governors or seven planets that guide the world of the elements. The Governors were in a way friends of man (who was created later) in that each Governor gave man part of their rule. The Hermetic version of Adam “regains dominion over nature which he had in his divine origin”⁷⁷ because he partakes of the mastery over nature held by the Seven Governors. The *Corpus Hermeticum* had a profound impact on both Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola, both of whom were pivotal thinkers in the change of worldview that took place during the Renaissance.⁷⁸ For Yates, “with that oration, man as magus [conjurer, sorcerer] has arrived, man with powers of operating on the cosmos through magia and through the numerical conjurations of cabala.”⁷⁹ This change in attitude concerning man and his position vis-à-vis nature and the cosmos was the “necessary preliminary to the rise of science”⁸⁰ in that it painted the forces of nature as being useful to us rather than merely random or as merely antithetical to our desires and purposes. Man is not lowly but godly, himself Promethean (to return to the title of this project).

The Renaissance magus is defined by Yates as the “immediate ancestor of the seventeenth-century scientist.”⁸¹ The magus must only follow natural philosophy and employ mathematics and the so-called middle sciences. When he does, great and unprecedented things are possible. Those who took the Hermetic corpus seriously saw

⁷⁷ Ibid, 257.

⁷⁸ Pico even opens his rightfully famous “Oration on the Dignity of Man” with a quotation about man as a great miracle taken directly from the *Corpus Hermeticum*.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 255.

⁸¹ Ibid, 258.

ancient Egypt as the home of the natural sciences—sciences which were deemed to have been lost, although *perhaps not permanently*, and this is decisive. Leonardo da Vinci cites “Hermes the philosopher” in numerous places; John Dee, the English mathematician, astronomer and precursor to Francis Bacon in many respects, drew heavily from the Hermetic tradition and alchemy; Paracelsus was strongly influenced by “Hermes;” one could give many other examples of the influence of Hermeticism on the rise of the modern sciences. The conviction that the forces of nature had *already* been understood in the distant past, and thus that that knowledge could be regained via appropriate means, inspired Kepler to seek to discern the laws of celestial motion by drawing diagram after diagram of the motions of the planets, Newton to develop a universal theory of gravity, and Galileo to develop a rudimentary kinematics. This is to give only a few examples.

What all of these crucial figures in the development of modern science share is that they were motivated *not* by the attitude that there *could* be a pattern, discernible to reason and liable to mathematical description, behind the movement of the planets or the effects of gravity, but rather by the conviction that knowledge was *already there*, waiting to be *rediscovered* as soon as the proper efforts are undertaken. We can understand this as a variant of Bloch’s not-yet-consciousness: Kepler did not yet know *how* the motions of the planets functioned, but his inquiry was not based on a blind wager. It was based on a hope, grounded in what he took to be secure knowledge, that what ancient Egyptian magi knew about the solar system could be recovered—and potentially used in the service of human projects. This is a wonderful example of the practical role of hope. Hope cannot only provide consolation or a spur to action, but can be horizon-producing itself. It can

expand what we take to be our immanent horizon of possible courses of action. Without influences from the Hermetic tradition, many of the founders of modern science may have never taken their horizon of practical action to include the investigation of the phenomena that they investigated.

Yates' portrait of the impact of the Hermetic tradition on modern science may not be a completely accurate historical account, and it may not properly describe the motivations and beliefs of the actors in question. But it strikes me as eminently plausible that there are beliefs/comportments, like the ones Yates describes, that produce outcomes that would have been impossible without those beliefs/comportments. One form of hope—a form that Bloch finds primarily in certain historical religions, particularly in messianic religions—is associated with the belief that something decisive has *already happened*. According to some eschatologies, God has already decided how the arc of history is to be constructed, which in turn leads the believer to be filled with certain kinds of hope and to be potentially haunted by certain kinds of despair (for example the fear of not being redeemed). For those not infused with beliefs of this sort, the question of how hope is to be grounded is more fundamentally difficult. When we cannot ground hope in the belief that things have already been decided—that it is only a matter of time until the *eschaton* arrives—then we must ground it elsewhere. People find all kinds of ways to ground hope, and it is likely that we have a practical interest in squeezing hope out of ourselves any way we can.

From this example, we can see why beliefs and affects are so important to praxis. The belief that there are forms of knowledge that have already been achieved but have

been lost is a powerful impetus to seeking to retrieve them anew (or perhaps even a *sine qua non* to that pursuit in the first place). More generally, the belief that things are possible provided that certain conditions be in place is an impetus to take on the project of producing those conditions. What Bloch's discussion of hope does is generalize this way of thinking as far as one can. On what basis should we believe that something is possible given certain conditions? This always brings us back to basic beliefs about the world. If we see the world as pure immanence, as without Front, then the qualitatively new—seeking to introduce it into the world or seeking to discover it—cannot be part of our practical vocabulary. Hope has a privileged place among the affects because it is inseparable from the recognition of our practical transcendence, from our ability to be properly attuned to what the nature of praxis and the world ultimately are. In chapter 2, the importance of belief came to the fore in my discussion of Robert Nozick on instrumental reason. There, I argued that if we misperceive the world—if our basic intuitions about it are somehow off—then praxis is disabled, so to speak. If we think, for example, that the world consists of nothing but stable decision spaces, then we end up making certain kinds of decisions and not others, potentially at our peril. If we assume—presumably falsely—that the world is in a state of utter decay and good things are no longer possible, this will lead us to make poor decision making from the standpoint of our pursuit of happiness. On the other side, if we are convinced that God favors everything I desire and do simply because of who I am, then this might lead us to all kinds of monstrous things. Hope, in contrast to these other compartments, is for Bloch an affective compartment that is properly attuned to the world as flux and to the possibility of

practical transcendence. Hope subsists on the world always being unfinished, which allows it to remain an opportunity structure full of gaps and openings. If the world is not yet full of the gaps and openings that we want, then it might be someday, provided that X, Y, and Z make those openings in the fabric of possibility that we confront.

Bloch is yet another thinker who implicitly argues that *eupraxia* cannot be understood as simply choosing well in the everyday sense. For Bloch, *eupraxia* must be understood as “the practice of concrete utopia,”⁸² always at the limit of what is currently real and possible, always concerned not only for everyday matters but also for deep social structures, the progress of knowledge in general, the destiny of the human race in light of possible ecological catastrophe, and the like. *Eupraxia* might still demand that we choose well in conducting most of our affairs (once again, choice in the sense of “mere” choice, *hairesis*), but such choosing must always be secondary to the more fundamental choosing of horizons of possibility, of taking advantage of opportunities that allow us to usher in those horizons, of being practically circumspect in a way that allows us to identify those opportunities (or keeps us from being too hopeful if those opportunities simply are not there no matter what we do). When we are not acting in a hopeful mode, at the Front, seeking to venture beyond [*überschreiten*] what is now immanently possible, we should *at least* do so with the knowledge that we are not living up to the demands of *eupraxia*, that we have lapsed out of *phronēsis*.

⁸² Bloch (1986), 17.

Conversely, the danger associated with hope—a danger that Bloch never fully and openly acknowledges in any of *The Principle of Hope*'s three volumes—is of course that it draws us into taking practical transcendence *too* seriously. That is, hope might lead us to think that we are transcendent in ways that we are not or perhaps cannot be. What immediately come to mind in this regard are of course the failed “real existing socialist” states of the twentieth century—one of which, East Germany, Bloch supported for a good portion of his life—but we need not think on a large world-historical scale in order to grasp this. One can easily imagine how this can function in our more mundane practical pursuits. We look out into our everyday world and see everything surrounded by a halo of unexplored possibility—more on this in the next section—and this inspires us to undertake projects that either fail—with great costs associated with that failure—or succeed, but with unintended negative consequences.⁸³ One day, I for some reason am struck by a hopeful disposition toward my opportunities in the marketplace. With my hopeful disposition in tow, I overhear random strangers talking about squash soup. I become convinced that there's strong local demand for squash soup, and decide to open a restaurant that serves it. Had I never had such a hopeful disposition, I would have neither

⁸³ The theme of unintended consequences associated with large transformative projects has a long history in political thought. To give the best-known example, much of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* is devoted to the idea that transformative projects might not always fully comprehend just how much is being undone and uprooted in the name of realization. The “Absolute Freedom and Terror” chapter of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, on the French Revolution and the subsequent Terror, is also one of the more important expositions of this basic principle. It could be argued that although both thinkers are probably largely right about the possible dangers of transformative praxis, both have little to say about hope and how we should ground it.

taken on this project nor even had it enter into my mind as part of my horizon of possibilities. I take out a significant loan and open the store, and it founders almost immediately. It turns out that it was merely a coincidence that I had heard the murmurings that I had amongst the citizenry. My project, borne of hope, has left me heavily in debt and the only value in my failure lies in reality slapping me in the face and leaving me leery of similar projects in the future. I would probably simply wish that I had never been hopeful. This isn't exactly the rise and fall of the Soviet Union, but the logic at work is not dissimilar. The problem was perhaps not being hopeful, but rather that I took myself to be more practically transcendent than I truly was. Hope led me to think that I had special kairotic insight into my fields of action, but that turned out to be false.

What hope demands of us is thus that we always hope in just the right amounts, in just the right ways, with respect to just the right objects. Clearly, this is beyond difficult. Hope, like care, draws us out of ourselves and into the world and incites us to do all kinds of things, but there is no stop sign out there in space and time that tells us when we're overstepping the boundaries of what is currently possible (or possible *at all*). But Bloch reminds us again and again that we need to see the world *as possibility*,⁸⁴ as oriented toward the open future ("ins Blaue hinein," into the blue), but never *too much*. We need to see ourselves as practically transcendent, but not *too* transcendent. But if we see the world as flux, then there are no hard and fast standards for determining when we've gone

⁸⁴ In the next section, on Matthew Radcliffe's phenomenology of praxis, I will argue, with Radcliffe, that we cannot *not* experience the world as possibility. Bloch would concur but would stress that there is always a more and a less.

too far or haven't gone far enough. We are once again thrown back upon kairotic discernment to guide us in practical judgment. But kairotic discernment is characterized by its never being perfect, by its constitutive blindness. This is yet another bind into which praxis is always drawn. The solution? To the extent that the language of there being a solution is at all appropriate, the only solution that one can offer is simply *more and better praxis*: more *phronēsis*, less exclusive reliance on *technē*, more efforts to sharpen discernment, continuous reminders of what praxis and the world are, more action at the Front of the possible, more attunement to horizons, more thinking in terms of horizons, etc.

In essence, Bloch calls upon us to become fundamentally different types of beings from what we already are (most of us, at least), with a very specific set of comportments and priorities. We must continuously *seek* to see the world as the kind of open field that Bloch argues it is; our affects and beliefs need to remain rooted in a basic set of ontological claims about the world. Correspondingly, practical agents must be prepared to engage in transformative praxis, even when the potential outcome is not certain (as it probably never is). If there are latent possibilities that others do not see, we must testify to those possibilities; if we see possibilities along with others, we must act in solidarity with them. Hope and courage, for Bloch, are fundamentally related. Hope without courage turns us into mere dreamers and wishers, unwilling to insert ourselves into an ever fluctuating world. *Eupraxia* requires both, and requires us to become something more than a *homo œconomicus* who makes “peace”—of the wrong kind—with the practical world.

4.3 Brief excursus on phenomenology

At least one attempt to understand praxis phenomenologically yields results that are in line with much of what we find in Bloch (as well as Heidegger). Matthew Ratcliffe builds from the phenomenology of human experience and perception found in Edmund Husserl and Merleau-Ponty but goes beyond them in engaging with praxis phenomenologically in a more concentrated fashion than either of these main figures in phenomenology do. For Ratcliffe, “experience has a general horizontal structure, an all-encompassing shape.”⁸⁵ The world of things and persons and other creatures that we encounter on an everyday basis is never, from this perspective, simply “there.” We could not encounter it as a field of inert matter even if we tried. It is always experienced in terms of possibility. When we see a cup, we are instantly aware of the possibilities associated with it (in fact, we would not have a proper concept of “cup” if we did not know what a cup does); when we see water, we know that water can take on various forms; and so on. In a similar spirit, Husserl himself, considered the founder of phenomenology, refers to the world as a “universal horizon.”⁸⁶ When we experience the world, we experience it as a world *of* possibilities, even when all we perceive are things that are inert at a given moment in time. Ratcliffe adds to this notion by arguing that “we encounter objects in the context of a pre-reflective background sense of belonging to the

⁸⁵ Ratcliffe (2008), 133.

⁸⁶ Husserl (2001), 45.

world and this belonging, this universal horizon, is a space of possibilities.”⁸⁷ Things *as* possibilities against the backdrop of the world *as* space of possibilities. This indeed approaches the concept of world as flux/mesh that I introduced in Chapter 1.

Ratcliffe, inspired by *Being and Time*, has a conception of world quite similar to the one that I have put forth in many places: “The world is not experienced in an object-like way. Instead, it is a realm of practical, purposive relations that we *inhabit*. Any encounter with an object...is embedded in this pre-understood context of purposive relations.”⁸⁸ These relations between things are relations of possibility: “The outer horizon of my computer keyboard includes a range of potential interactions with other items of equipment.”⁸⁹ Practical vision involves not just seeing things and assembling them into a coherent mental picture, but also forms of cognition that are based not solely on sight: “Horizons should not be conceived of exclusively or even primarily as a matter of how things are experienced visually.”⁹⁰ We can make practical judgments about things we can’t see, either because they’re near us and hidden—we’ve all played hide-and-seek—but also if they’re far from us and cannot even be potentially brought into view. Our experience of being-in-the-world in general can be thought of as a “diachronic [moving through time] interplay between changing possibilities and actualities.”⁹¹ For Ratcliffe, this interplay gives rise not only to our outward practical motion in the world,

⁸⁷ Ratcliffe (2008), 133.

⁸⁸ Ibid, 45.

⁸⁹ Ibid, 131.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid, 132.

but also to important aspects of our affective life. Depression makes the world seem more like inert, meaningless matter than other mental states. Feelings of intense elation might make everything seem like it's in movement, or make it seem like there's striving inherent in things, or make the world as universal horizon seem open and free. When Bloch speaks of hope as seeing the world in general or parts of it as open to transformative change, Ratcliffe—and others, like Bhaskar—might respond that this feeling is not really so foreign to everyday experience. If we're always seeing things in terms of possibilities, then certain practical/affective comportments towards the world are intensifications of our everyday practical experience rather than something qualitatively different from them.

Heidegger himself is critical of the reduction of affects to what he calls “accompanying phenomena,”⁹² that is, as being incidentally attached to perception, coming along for the ride, so to speak. Affects are so important because they affect our seeing (if we take seeing in this broader, phenomenologically-informed sense). While a great deal of our everyday experience is indeed quite mundane and not necessarily filled to the brim with a riveting sense of excitement about the new and transformed horizons and world-building acts, the fact that we experience things *in terms of possibility* in a fundamental way means that such affects can seize us and change our whole practical experience, perhaps just for a moment or perhaps in more permanent, character-transformative ways. The sense of the possible is crucial to the whole relationship

⁹² Heidegger (1962), 178.

between perception, experience, and praxis. For example, in disappointment, “certain possibilities disappear from experience; in losing a space of practical possibilities that connected us to a situation, we do lose our hold on it, our rootedness in it.”⁹³ In hope, certain possibilities of action are actually *introduced* into experience; we become rooted in situations in new ways, and our choice sets are transformed (opened up in some respects and closed down in others). But what does all of this actually look like? How can we begin to concretize all of this discussion of possibility and opportunity and flux? In the next section, I will seek to do precisely that.

4.4 Practical transcendence in action: the entrepreneur

What the (very abstract) discussion of practical transcendence in this chapter has lacked thus far is some kind of concrete example that can bring the very abstract notion of transcendence to life (the way that I hope to have brought several concepts to life through believable, everyday examples throughout). The concrete example that I have chosen, the figure of the entrepreneur, is not concrete in the sense that it is drawn from history or real experience, but rather because entrepreneurs are culturally familiar figures for us, and because they illustrate what practical transcendence means better than other figures drawn from economic theory.⁹⁴ The figure of the entrepreneur, like any figure, is

⁹³ Ratcliffe (2008), 135.

⁹⁴ I could have used an example, of course, from some other domain, like the revolutionary or the rebel or the creative genius, all of which might exemplify practical transcendence in some way. But I choose the entrepreneur because (a) this figure better exemplifies the range of practical comportments that I seek to illuminate, and (b) it is a figure that is frequently dealt with in

by definition formalized and generic and not really all that concrete. But this figure is less generic than *homo æconomicus* or “a practical agent” or “Dasein,” because entrepreneurs—by definition in this discussion—have specified concerns. An entrepreneur, according to the definition that I set forth here, is simply a synonym for a practical agent who seeks to maximize profit in a market economy that is unstable in certain respects and thus allows for certain kinds of transformative actions. The entrepreneur is intended to synecdochally represent transformative praxis in general.⁹⁵

The antipode of the entrepreneur in certain crucial respects is the consumer, which helps us to define the entrepreneur by contrast.⁹⁶ To give a typical definition of the consumer, I will use the definition provided in a standard microeconomics textbook:

The individual is a consumer. Individuals demand a variety of consumption goods and services from which they derive welfare. There may be a ‘higher order’ of

economics and neighboring disciplines, which helps me to root my discussion in territory that is in proximity with RCT.

⁹⁵ I recognize, of course, that the relevant “world” of the entrepreneur in this discussion is the competitive marketplace, which is a very specific type of world with specific characteristics and dynamics. But I hope that this section nonetheless makes clear why some aspects of the entrepreneur’s practical comportment should indeed be seen as generalizable to lots of different types of worlds and frameworks. But unfortunately, English seems to lack a more general word that describes what I seek to describe. “Opportunist” is perhaps better but is always suffused with negative connotations. The French *débrouillard* comes much closer (Wiktionary defines a *débrouillard* as someone who is “resourceful” and “able to cope” with the world; the root verb, *débrouiller*, can mean to disentangle or to figure out).

⁹⁶ I should make two things clear. First, I do not set up the consumer as the antipode of the entrepreneur because I wish to engage in a critique of consumerism or consumer society. And second, there are many other figures that could be set up as the antipode of the entrepreneur beyond the consumer—for example, price-taking producers that do not transform markets, discussed later in the paragraph—and I use the figure of the consumer, like the figure of the entrepreneur, largely because it is a type of practical agent with which we are all familiar.

demands for the necessities of life than for the luxuries, but this dividing line is a difficult one to draw in practice (especially in rich, developed economies). In practice then, economists treat all goods as providing some satisfaction to consumers and study how choices are made among them.⁹⁷

In standard microeconomic theory, e.g. in the textbook just quoted, consumers confront markets for goods with exogenous budget constraints and preferences and seek to make utility-maximizing decisions based on getting the best bang for their buck. This is of course not intended as a description of “reality” but rather an assumption underlying the construction of various economic models. Similarly, my use of the figure of the consumer is also intended more as a useful theoretical comparison than as a description of real markets and real consumers. More importantly for my purposes in this chapter, the consumer is typically treated as a *price taker*, meaning that market prices are taken to be exogenous not only to consumers’ preferences and budget constraints but also to their purchases themselves.

Consumers cannot change the market landscape with their purchases themselves or via any other means. If consumers face constraints that are on the whole unfavorable—for example if their budget constraint suddenly suffers an exogenous shock that cuts it in half—they can perhaps remedy this problem by changing professions and changing their budget constraint but not in their capacity as consumers. Ideal-typical consumers are not alone in being subject to circumstance in this way. Firm behavior is often modeled by assuming that firms are price takers in the same way that consumers are. Firms, too, face exogenous demand curves and they must adapt their pricing and production decisions to

⁹⁷ Nicholson (1995), 75. Italics in the original.

those conditions if they are to achieve profit maximization. If those conditions happen to be inimical to survival or long-term economic health, then these firms simply perish, without recourse to devices like innovation (which would transform price conditions and turn the firm into a qualitatively different sort of practical agent). All of this is intended as a gross simplification and is not meant as an accurate description of real consumers or firms (although it seems not completely off base as a description of the practical comportment of a great deal of consumers/firms most or almost all of the time).

The entrepreneur is a much different sort of creature, and my goal in this section is to explain why the entrepreneur's basic comportment in the marketplace is fundamentally different from that of consumers and price takers more generally, and also why the comportment of the entrepreneur can be taken as an instantiation of practical transcendence more generally. Thus, my goal in this section is not to say that the entrepreneur is somehow a universal figure in all times and places, but rather that there are conceptual resources that we gain by delving into this concept that in turn help us illustrate some of the consequences of a conception of praxis as independence from and concern with horizons themselves. We must understand the entrepreneur and entrepreneurship as being a quite broad category. This is indeed somewhat risky, as it transports a category that has traditionally been associated with modern market economies and attempts to give it a more general meaning, but it should be read as being more analogically and suggestively than literally intended.

The classical treatment of entrepreneurship from Richard Cantillon in 1755 sees the entrepreneur as "an arbitrageur or speculator, who conducts all exchanges and bears

risk as a result of buying at certain prices and selling at uncertain ones.”⁹⁸ Entrepreneurs are thus those who succeed in taking advantage of opportunities already present in the economy, by definition at risk to themselves (for if there were no risk, we would expect that there would be no need for entrepreneurs, as just about anyone could step in and fill the same void that entrepreneurs typically occupy). But as Simon C. Parker argues, “Cantillon’s entrepreneur is not an innovator, nor does he change supply and demand,” instead relying on being “perceptive” and “intelligent.”⁹⁹ There is a similar way of thinking about entrepreneurship that stresses the superior powers of discernment of the entrepreneur. “Entrepreneurs need to possess particular characteristics such as self-confidence, judgment, a venturesome nature, foresight—and luck.”¹⁰⁰ For example, the practice of arbitrage—taking advantage of low prices for a good in one place and high demand for it in another—would count as “entrepreneurial” under these two conceptions. But neither of these two figures corresponds to what I have in mind for entrepreneurship, which I *define* as world-transformative in the marketplace (because supply and demand conditions are basic parameters of the world that may be changed via transformative action).

But for Parker there is yet another strand of thinking about entrepreneurship that understands it in terms of innovation rather than simply the taking advantage of opportunities already present within existing supply/demand conditions. Parker attributes

⁹⁸ Parker (2009), 39.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 40.

this view to Joseph Schumpeter, best known for his theory of “creative destruction” as one of the driving forces of progress in capitalist economies. Entrepreneurs introduce “discrete discontinuous changes”¹⁰¹ into the fabric of an economy, and this discontinuity is of decisive importance in the life of those economies.¹⁰² For Schumpeter, entrepreneurship has by definition disequilibrating effects on fields of action in the marketplace. When an entrepreneur introduces a product into a market that is vastly better than its predecessor, demand for the old product might sink immediately and drastically, even to zero. This would inevitably force sellers to lower the price in order to meet the new, more meager demand, particularly if they have inventories of that product and want to mitigate losses (or they could fail to lower prices and sell nothing). Entrepreneurs thus must be understood as *price-makers* rather than price-takers. Whereas a typical consumer confronts a market for a good and simply does the best that she can to find the best price for that good, the entrepreneur actually changes basic market conditions.¹⁰³ The entrepreneur who introduces a product onto the market that makes other products permanently undesired does not adapt to supply and demand conditions, but rather recalibrates them and produces the conditions to which other economic actors must respond—or perhaps those actors respond by making transformative changes

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 41.

¹⁰² I would suggest here that it’s unclear that a conception of praxis that is fully wedded to an immanent conception of possibility can account for this sort of discontinuity. Immanent possibilities mean no qualitative breaks.

¹⁰³ We’ll assume once again, for the sake of argument, that the consumer’s purchases, in this example, do not influence other consumers or send signals to other economic actors or make any other impact on supply and demand conditions.

themselves. Schumpeter's "doing of new things or the doing of things that are already being done in a new way"¹⁰⁴ has the potential to throw a wrench into current horizons of action. Naturally, new products and other innovations do not always necessarily do this. If an innovation fails to be world-transformative in a market—or to transform that world itself by bringing in new customers *en masse* or to make such big changes that they render the market unrecognizable—then we must label this a case of failed entrepreneurialism.

Does this mean that markets are constantly being uprooted, at every moment in a process of qualitative shift? I would argue that it does not necessarily mean that. To think so would be to draw the wrong set of conclusions, although there are probably market conditions in which that is more or less the way of things (in Silicon Valley, yes; in the market for toothpaste, probably not as much). It is more appropriate to think of markets that do exist—the array of commodities available, the outlets distributing them, etc.—as often being built on a foundation of *past* entrepreneurship. Even stable market conditions might owe their very existence to past instances of transformative entrepreneurial activity. For Schumpeter, such entrepreneurial transformations are not only rare, but the entrepreneur is not an entrepreneur by nature: "Everyone is an entrepreneur only when he actually carries out new combinations and loses that character as soon as he has built up his business, when he settles down to running it as other people run their business."¹⁰⁵ It is thus less appropriate to speak of people as "being" entrepreneurs than to think of them

¹⁰⁴ Schumpeter (1947), 151.

¹⁰⁵ Schumpeter (1934), 78.

as occasionally operating in an entrepreneurial mode or having entrepreneurial effects in the world (which enables us to say that people can be thinking entrepreneurially and then failing when it comes time to act, which must necessarily be an aspect of entrepreneurship understood in the broadest sense). When we adopt this perspective, rather than thinking that some people simply “are” entrepreneurs while others “are” consumers and so on, we would be able to account for the possibility of consumers seeing an opportunity that others have not yet seen and acting upon it, learning from that encounter, becoming better at seeing what others don’t see, etc. And it could also account for the opposite possibility, in which someone acts entrepreneurially a great deal of the time but then progressively scales that sort of activity back in the name of other goods (like certainty, leisure, the time care for a loved one with a long-term illness, etc.). Those who have personality traits fit for entrepreneurship could well take on that comportment—or take on the practical comportment of the entrepreneur and simply fail.

Can a standard RCT-based account be marshaled to account for the actions of the entrepreneur? In a sense yes, because if we construct our set of assumptions properly, the market-transformative actions of the entrepreneur become necessary consequences of those assumptions. But in order for that to happen, we have to couple our assumptions about the aims of practical agents with an appropriate account of the world in which they are embedded. This harkens back to the discussion of praxis and worlds in Chapter 2, where I used Robert Nozick’s thought to show how dependent our assumptions about praxis are on our assumptions about the world in which it takes place. In this case, when we assume the right kind of world—in this case the world as a market for a single type of

good in which consumer demand for the array of products within that market can be transformed by entrepreneurial action—then entrepreneurial action and a corresponding entrepreneurial comportment become not intelligible but also *demand*ed by the world-actor model that we have set up.

This brings us back to a conceptual issue that has been present from the start. The innovative rather than merely perceptive entrepreneur (Cantillon) is also taking advantage of opportunities. The personal computer could not have been invented in the 1930's. No practical agent had the intelligence or the resources to do so at that time because the practico-inert set of technological advances available did not allow for it. All practical agents at all times share some kind of absolute limit past which practical possibilities have not yet been expanded.¹⁰⁶ But several decades later, conditions were indeed ripe for the PC to come into being. Opportunity structures conducive to the PC being invented had to come into being first. One thing that is important to note about the relationship between RCT and worldhood is that most theories of entrepreneurship, even when fully consistent with RCT, seem to actually *pre-suppose* a world that essentially corresponds to the concept of world that I have been developing thus far, that is, one in which the introduction of qualitatively new things into the practical field is possible, in which there are gaps and instability in basic elements of the world—like demand for goods—that can

¹⁰⁶ The realm of technology is perhaps the one in which the idea of the practico-inert makes the most intuitive sense. Technologies are continuously expanding the common practical possibilities of human beings, while often producing unintended consequences.

be exploited by agents, and so on. But as usual, the “worldhood of the world” (Heidegger) does not become a theme for reflection.

The entrepreneur is taken here as the embodiment—perhaps on the ideal-typical side—of a specific practical orientation with specific consequences. The figure of the entrepreneur has a specific attitude toward risk and pay-off and also, more importantly for our purposes, toward possibility and opportunity. Within the confines of this world, the entrepreneur is more phronetic, more kairologically minded, than other practical agents. But what sustains the entrepreneur? This is when the question of affects and beliefs comes heavily into play. Let’s assume for a moment that everyone in this hypothetical world would like to have the kinds of things that the entrepreneur ends up having, that is, higher profits than others, maybe even the cruel satisfaction of putting others out of business, or perhaps the more noble desire to introduce creative new things into the world. The entrepreneur is *by definition* the person who acts according to the very essence of that world. Consumers and price-taking firms do not (also by definition). The entrepreneur *believes* that the world is full of gaps and openings and acts accordingly. She acts as a Prometheus in the marketplace because she worships at the temple of Caerus (the Greek god of opportunity). Others might not because what they see is an inert world in which supply and demand conditions are simply given, the array of products available never changes, and nothing qualitatively new is possible. But the entrepreneur has beliefs about the world that might be inseparable from a passion for transformation (or perhaps for simple profit).

It is important to note that what has been said about the entrepreneur need not be restricted to the artificial world that I have set forth here. In other worlds the entrepreneur—as a market actor by definition—makes no sense. But the kinds of compartments embodied by the entrepreneur in this example would be valuable in any number of worlds. Let's design a world in which the good is social honor gained by feats of strength. Most people in this world train their bodies in similar ways, hoping to become stronger than those around them, desperately trying to get the trophy in the yearly strength contest. Everything else in that world is seen as being of qualitatively lesser value; those who do not participate in the contests are seen as worthless and see themselves as worthless. I look around and see everyone else participating in this rat race, and I notice based on my superior phronetic capabilities that if I transform inherited work-out routines in a certain way I will have a competitive edge over others. I rightly detect an opening in the fabric of possibilities, I spread my care-based tentacles out into the world and discover an opportunity, and I take home the trophy the next year. I *win*, and I win via taking advantage of an opportunity in a transformative way.

Is it *easy* to act entrepreneurially? To return to the market world described above, it's difficult to tell because I have said nothing about how much actors actually *know* about the market in which they're operating. For Armen Alchian, in his path-breaking work on entrepreneurship, it is not at all easy to be an entrepreneur because there can be no guarantee of success, for the real-world entrepreneur swims *by definition* in the waters of uncertainty (the model world that I set forth was fully agnostic on this, insofar as the likelihood of the entrepreneur actually becoming a price-maker was not discussed).

Alchian begins with something like a conception of world akin—although not identical—to the one I have put forth here, in beginning with a conception of world characterized by “the pervasiveness of uncertainty and incomplete information.”¹⁰⁷ In such a world, even the best entrepreneur likely does not maximize profit, because that would mean being right all the time and coping with uncertainty in exactly the right way always and without exception. For Alchian, in a world characterized by uncertainty, we must replace the concept of “profit maximization” with that of “positive profits,” because “profit maximization” *cannot* serve as a guide to action. Profit maximization can never be undertaken because the conditions in which it is undertaken are so fundamentally topsy turvy: “Nobody is able really to optimize his situation according to these diagrams and concepts because of uncertainty about the position and, sometimes, even the slopes of the demand and supply functions.”¹⁰⁸ If the entrepreneur were able to know relevant supply and demand structures with full certainty, then profit maximization would indeed be secured (unless others also knew those structures in full, which would transform the whole game significantly).

Instead of thinking about actions and necessary consequences, it would be more appropriate to associate actions with an array of outcomes of varying probability (a standard move in all Bayesian accounts of behavior).

Under uncertainty, by definition, each action that may be chosen is identified with a *distribution* of potential outcomes, not with a unique outcome...It is worth emphasis that each possible action has a *distribution* of potential outcomes, only

¹⁰⁷ Alchian (1950), 211.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, 212.

one of which will materialize if the action is taken, and that one outcome cannot be foreseen. Essentially, the task is converted into making a decision (selecting an action) whose potential outcome *distribution* is preferable, that is, choosing the action with the *optimum distribution*, since there is no such thing as a *maximizing distribution*.¹⁰⁹

Since the entrepreneur by definition operates under conditions that prohibit easy $X \rightarrow Y$ inferences about action, then the entrepreneur is forced to think in terms of such distributions, even when “profit maximization” is her implicit goal. When we are choosing distributions, maximization necessarily flies out the window. Imagine that we are presented with two possible distributions, each having four possible values.

Distribution 1 consists of (88, 75, 70, 7) and distribution 2 consists of (99, 8, 6, 1). Then, imagine that we do not know the likelihoods of the particular values. Which distribution do we pick if we’re seeking to maximize generic “value?” It’s impossible to say without clear criteria and without knowing the probability distribution of those values. But there is no reason why we would automatically choose distribution 2 just because it happens to contain the maximum value (99) amongst the two distributions. Indeed, if the probability distribution for distribution 1 turned out to be (.9, .025, .025, .025) and for distribution 2 (.0000001, .4999999, .25, .25), then we would be foolish to pick distribution 2, for distribution 1 would yield an expected value of 83 (versus around 5.75 for the other).¹¹⁰

Uncertainty and maximization do not make the most unproblematic of bedfellows.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.

¹¹⁰ This assumes, of course, that we adopt “highest expected value” as our criterion for decision. This need not be the case. An agent who prefers life over death and would be killed if she obtains a value under 90 would always choose distribution 1. This is a farfetched example, but one could think easily think of other more believable examples.

Ultimately, “the maximum-profit criterion is not meaningful as a basis *for selecting* the action which will, in fact, result in an outcome with higher profits than any other action would have.”¹¹¹ Even if we end up making the right choice—we choose distribution 1 and end up with a value of 99—we cannot be said to have done so *for the right instrumental reasons* if we did not know the distribution of probabilities to begin with. We could only attribute profit-maximizing *behavior* to them—as opposed to profit-maximizing *motives*, which we could rightfully attribute to anyone—if the agents in question somehow acquired knowledge about the probability distribution, or came close enough to discerning the distribution to have made the right decision for the right reasons.

In such a market-based practical world, those practices that prevail—and thus that we find to be predominant at any given time—are by definition those that have succeeded. Viability, in such a system, is won via realized positive profits, *not* maximized profits. In this case, better than others turns out to be good enough (at least until a firm ceases to be better in the relevant ways): “The crucial element is one’s aggregate position relative to actual competitors, not some hypothetically perfect competitors.”¹¹² Not only does uncertainty turn many intelligent and foresight-rich firms into ruin, but there rules a general principle that “the greater the uncertainties of the world, the greater is the possibility that profits would go to venturesome and lucky rather

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ibid 213.

than to logical, careful, fact-gathering individuals.”¹¹³ Correspondingly, different degrees of general uncertainty call for different practical virtues.¹¹⁴ Alchian effectively argues that when supply and demand curves are more or less reckonable for firms, survival—not to mention thriving—demands the kinds of intelligence and foresight typically associated with profit maximization. Firms must remain in touch with demand patterns and respond by providing what consumers want and by potentially innovating in a way that captures market share from other firms. But when the environment becomes more heavily dominated by chance and demand curves are more random and thus more inscrutable for firms, then efforts to determine what supply decision a firm should make become pointless.

In fact, Alchian even argues that those firms that rely solely on intelligence likely will not survive. Firms that are more willing to simply throw out a product and see if it sticks might be more likely to latch onto some market share and survive. Firms that seek to figure out the “right” product to introduce are wasting their time and might as well use their resources to produce a product and see if it flies. When we see a successful firm, we should ask ourselves the following question:

Should one rule out luck and chance as the essence of the factors producing the long-term survival of the enterprise? No inference whatever can be drawn until the number of original participants is known; and even then one must know the

¹¹³ Ibid.

¹¹⁴ As I have done elsewhere in this project, when I use the word “virtue” I am speaking *only* of capabilities, and hence of the ability to effect practical success. I am thus intentionally emptying the word “virtue” of all moral/normative content.

size, risk, and frequency of each commitment [that is, each decision made in the market].¹¹⁵

This does not mean, fortunately, that all economic behavior becomes inscrutable; we are not delivered over to chaos.

With a knowledge of the economy's realized requisites for survival and by a comparison of alternative conditions, [the economist] can state what types of firms or behavior relative to other possible types will be more viable, even though the firms themselves may not know the conditions or even try to achieve them by readjusting to the changed situation if they do know the conditions.¹¹⁶

At any given moment, market circumstances present firms with an optimum course of action, and the firms that come the closest to mimicking that course of action, however they can, are the ones most likely to survive. Those firms will in turn become the "prevailing type" and may thus be imitated by future firms, who may in turn become sources of information in the future.

Alchian's argument is not as extreme as it may sound. He in no way argues that there is no such thing as purposive behavior, or that chance is the sole determining factor producing economic outcomes. What he is saying is rather that the practical virtues demanded of us by the world are not the same all the time. Alchian never discusses *phronēsis*, but we can describe entrepreneurial behavior à la Alchian as having strong phronetic traits. *Phronēsis* must mean, among other things, the capacity to discern what practical virtues are demanded of us at a particular juncture. A firm that was able to know when to act somewhat randomly, probing the limits of possibilities, testing the waters, on

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 215.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 216.

one hand, and to conservatively stay on more certain paths, on the other, would be most likely to survive, to succeed in the project that constitutes them *as* firms. But this capacity is by nature limited, for a firm might not realize supply and demand conditions have become fundamentally uncertain until it is too late. *Phronēsis* is no guarantee of success, for these firms and also in general. Perfect *phronēsis* in Alchian's world would be the ability to know precisely when conditions became fundamentally uncertain and when they transitioned back into "normality." But if conditions are "normal" at t_1 and "uncertain" at t_2 , when did circumstances cross the threshold? It seems unlikely that there could be a criterion that would enable agents to discern when that threshold has been crossed. It is far more likely that this discernment could be made only *ex post facto*, when their strategy under "normal" conditions has already begun to fail, at which point it might already be too late for our hapless firm. When we look out into the world and see a vast number of surviving firms at any given moment, we *could* conclude that those firms made good decisions most of the time and did so for the right reasons, or we could conclude that the existing firms are a mixture of those who indeed have engaged in a degree of *eupraxia* mixed with firms who have merely been lucky mixed with firms who made a handful of good decisions but are on the verge of perishing because their run of good decisions is about to come to an end.

Alchian makes practical life even more difficult than life for the entrepreneur in the world I constructed by identifying a limit to convergence to an "ideal" comportment vis-à-vis the world. Assuming that rising toward this ideal comportment is achieved via a process of trial-and-error, an epistemological problem arises, for "a trial must be

classifiable as a success or failure,” which involves the position achieved via action being “comparable with results of other possible actions.”¹¹⁷ This process is possible only in what Alchian calls static environments, in which we can easily compare our standing at any given moment to our prior standing (for example, if we capture more market share than previously and can discern *why*). But when our environment is non-static, this comparison becomes difficult to impossible, and the ascent to optimality is never even begun. Indeed, in unstable environments, optimality turns into an ever-shifting target. This accounts for what Alchian describes as the pre-dominance of imitative behavior in uncertain environments. But imitation is not all there is. “Venturesome innovation”¹¹⁸ is also a possibility for practical agents, one that makes far more sense under conditions of uncertainty than it does in static environments, where there is by definition little to no potential surplus pay-off associated with innovation. All of this is a long way from “profit maximization.” Alchian’s way of thinking can be described as “evolutionary” because survival, not optimality, is what’s fundamentally at issue. If optimality ever comes into play, it does so more or less by accident. Alchian advises us not to begin from the assumption that practical agents behave optimally and then add “realistic” constraints to optimization, but that we should rather “start with complete uncertainty and nonmotivation [*sic*] and then to add elements of foresight and motivation in the process

¹¹⁷ Ibid, 219.

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

of building an analytical model,” which yields an analytic approach that is “intellectually more modest and realistic.”¹¹⁹

The search for optimality, then, might live on only in our hopes. But this is a non-inconsequential aspect of praxis, as we saw in the previous section. Alchian’s implicit advice for *all* practical agents? There is no “solution” to the problem of uncertainty. No retreat into theory or abstraction overcomes it. The best that we can do—the closest thing to a “guarantee” of survival for a firm—is to embody Heidegger’s *resoluteness* (*Entschlossenheit*): continue to do what the flux, in light of your objectives, demands. Do not assume that “normality” will persist forever; uncertain times could be just around the corner, and if there are signs of this we must be there to seek to interpret them. Imitation of the behavior of other firms can be a useful guide when we have no better guide, but we must be ready to engage in venturesome innovation if our context is one in which that is the right thing to do. As in the conception of the entrepreneur that I introduced earlier, one can immediately sense what the broader practical implications are. Knowing the degree to which conditions are stable or unstable is an essential aim of praxis, even if it is something that can only be determined *ex post facto if ever*. If practical agents exist in conditions of uncertainty or alternating certainty/uncertainty, then they must have an extensive bag of tricks available to them, one of them being the willingness to just throw something out there and see if it sticks (as an entrepreneur throws a product on the market to see if there’s demand for it), although even this likely admits of more and less

¹¹⁹ Ibid, 221.

informed instances of this kind of action. Real practical agents must muddle through the flux, and are occasionally ground down and even eliminated by it. But even Heidegger, supposedly a thinker of overweening destiny, has moments in which he puts forth a belief in authentic historicity [*Geschichtlichkeit*], which would be something like *eupraxia* observed from the standpoint of the ever-shifting world as a whole and not just this or that horizon. But he would agree with Alchian that the cards are stacked against us. We might describe this as the tragedy of praxis. Even the most phronetic praxis, deeply in tune with the world as a mesh of possibilities, does not guarantee *even* survival, and yet it demands *phronēsis* of us nevertheless.

This Gordian knot between is and ought is not one that is meant to be cut. Pushing as far as possible in the direction of discovering what we always and everywhere *are* as practical beings is essential to understanding what we should *become* as practical beings. The idea of practical transcendence helps us do that because, as I have argued, it functions both as a description of what we are—never fully horizon-bound, always inserted into the flux—and of how we become better at world-bound praxis. But if we accept the account of world that I have put forth, then no one is *truly* transcendent. Every agent is worldly, bound by the limitations and consequences that that always entails. But it's essential to the philosophy of praxis to gain a precise sense of what those are.

Michael:

4.5 Practical transcendence in the polity

The figure of the entrepreneur shows us how practical transcendence can be woven into the fabric of our day-to-day practical lives and how an entrepreneurial practical comportment is understood on the basis of the central concepts at play in this project, from *phronēsis* to decision spaces. I also believe I have shown a little more concretely in that discussion not just what a phronetic comportment vis-à-vis reality looks like but also why we should see the world as we experience and operate within it as being the *product* of that kind of comportment. Behind every product we consume and every institution in which we take part, according to this understanding of praxis, we are likely to find *phronēsis*, and thus instances of transformative praxis that introduced qualitative (and thus unpredictable) changes into the world. This certainly happens in the marketplace, but what about the political sphere? What happens to our conception of politics when we transform our sense of how things are done?

Heidegger's conception of the *polis* in his earlier work, discussed briefly in the first chapter, is once again a crucial starting point. For Heidegger, the polis is not a necessary product of human interaction (as it is for Aristotle, for whom the polis is natural). For Heidegger, living with one another, being-with (*Mit-sein*), is indeed "natural" for us—a properly *ontological* aspect of Dasein—but the polis must be understood as an *achievement*, a product of a form of being-together (*koinonia*, *Miteinandersein*) that is self-reflective, in which human beings as practical agents come together in the name of collective praxis. Heidegger saw the polis as threatened by the rise of modernity and the rule of technical rationality, which in his view (and that of

many of his contemporaries) enmeshes all of us in a system dedicated to the value of the endless augmentation of efficiency and productivity rather than to a form of life in which is political, i.e., a form of life in which *phronēsis* rules over *technē*.¹²⁰ A form of life ruled by *phronēsis* is one in which the question of the good, of *agathon*, plays the central role in political life and displaces the value of instrumental efficiency (which is always the implicit aim of *technē*).¹²¹ For Heidegger, modernity is guilty of depoliticizing life, of the triumph of production over polis (and in this he saw American capitalism and Soviet communism as more or less equally threatening). This picture of modern life is of course deeply controversial. Even if we accept a great deal of Heidegger's account of praxis, we need not follow his almost completely monolithic diagnosis of our ills. But I do believe that we *should* follow Heidegger in (a) making the question of praxis and the question of the polis absolutely inseparable from one another, and (b) using the inseparability of praxis and the polis to make strong normative claims on us.

¹²⁰Michael Gillespie has argued that this concern gave rise to Heidegger's beyond-questionable association with Nazism. saw *phronēsis* as a potential solution to the structural problems produced by modern technology—not to mention political liberalism—but his hopes for a phronetic renewal of German political life were vested not in the populace but rather in Hitler as leader and highest law (Gillespie 2000). To the end of his life, Heidegger entertained grave doubts that modern democracy could overcome the problems of modern technology.

¹²¹This position in our time has been explored and defended by Charles Taylor and Alasdair MacIntyre among others.

For Heidegger, the polis is a “*possibility of human living*”¹²² that emerges when human beings as practical agents come together to engage in collective praxis.¹²³ Just as practical transcendence and *phronēsis* both characterize humans as practical agents and provide them with a normative bearing in their practical relationship with the world, in modern, deeply interconnected societies, it is the case both that we both *are* political beings, thrust into the polis whether we wish to be or not, and also that the political has a *normative* status. As I argued in chapter 3, the conditions within which our praxis takes place are never isolated. They always have a necessary relationship with broader conditions of possibility (which in turn have necessary relationships with other conditions, and so on). This is not just a repetition of the now-old truism that “everything is connected.” The logic of care inserts us into the mesh of possibilities that is the world and rarely makes the realization of our projects easy for us (and when it does, we should not over-hastily judge that we have succeeded because the world is fundamentally well-disposed towards us). *Eupraxia* demands that we recognize our insertedness into the world for what it is and to act accordingly. It is difficult to see how we can do so without being concerned about the political horizons within which praxis takes place, from

¹²²BC, 45. Italics are mine.

¹²³When I speak of “collective” praxis here, I should make it clear that I do not necessarily mean *collectivist* praxis. *Eupraxia* at the collective level might well involve strong property rights and strong limits on the kinds of things that the collective can demand from individuals. But the determination that those limits are essential to *eupraxia* could itself emerge from the values of a group, and those values could have come about due to self-reflective praxis.

legal/regulative frameworks (or the lack thereof) to the distribution of power and institutional opportunities in society.

The logic of care, as I argued in the last chapter, has the potential to push our horizons of concern ever outward. If we wish, we can choose to keep our horizons of concern relatively narrow, focused on a few friends and family members, the procurement of basic income, the pursuit of a few hobbies, etc. Some of us are forced to keep our horizons narrow due to circumstances. *Poleis*—the plural of polis—are what emerge when practical beings with fundamentally open horizons of concern find themselves sharing those horizons of concern. How large is the polis? There doesn't seem to be any way of answering such a question theoretically. Practical agents decide quite often to take it upon themselves to shrink or expand various poleis, and we would not expect otherwise if we understand praxis properly. Depending on our ends, the relevant polis might be the family dinner table, or the firm in which we work or the United Nations General Assembly. [I'm not sure this is true. The family is rooted in nature and the firm in contract in a way that the polis is not. It might be better to temper this last sentence.]

I do not intend to say that all projects are “equally political,” whatever that may mean. What I mean, rather, is that it would be quite fitting to call praxis fundamentally *ecological* from the standpoint I develop here.¹²⁴ Praxis is ecological because it is always

¹²⁴This vision of ecological praxis (not to be confused with environmentalist praxis) has affinities with the work of Thomas Schelling, particularly in his article “On the Ecology of Micromotives” (Schelling 1971), although Schelling never breaks free from RCT in any significant way.

bound up in the world as mesh, always horizon-bound, never sealed off in isolation—in other words, always bound by the logic of the practico-inert. Seeing the world as a mesh doesn't necessarily mean seeing it as one, big undifferentiated mass; there are certainly zones and realms and distinctions within it. In the last section, we saw how the entrepreneur has the capacity to transform the economic sphere when she adopts a particular practical (and also affective) comportment toward the marketplace. In the political sphere as we commonly discuss it—in elections, legislative bodies, various institutions, perhaps in violent conflict—we would expect to find qualitatively analogous forms of both action *and* the practical comportments that underlie that action. I have argued that RCT is unable to fully grasp these comportments; it also seems that empirical social scientific research has a corresponding difficulty. Karl-Deiter Opp's recent *Theories of Protest and Social Movements*¹²⁵ is an effort to understand broad-based social movements (such as the East German movement for regime change in the late 1980s) within an RCT framework, using what he calls the "protest model." This model is intended to be more nuanced than other RCT accounts of social movements because it includes variables like the probability of repression, the expected severity of repression,

¹²⁵Opp (2009).

levels of discontent, and so on.¹²⁶ Elizabeth Jean Wood's *Insurgent Collective Action and Civil War in El Salvador*¹²⁷ attempts to supersede the RCT paradigm by adding a "pleasure in agency" to the possible motivations of peasants in engaging in political action, which she defines as "the positive effect associated with self-determination, autonomy, self-esteem, efficacy, and pride that come from the successful assertion of intention."¹²⁸ Timur Kuran's *Private Truths, Public Lies: The Social Consequences of Preference Falsification*¹²⁹ is an effort to understand events like revolution from the standpoint of RCT by positing that unexpected revolutions can occur because subtle or not-so-subtle changes in the public sphere might make people suddenly express hidden preferences (for regime change) that they had previously "falsified."

These are just three examples, and one could certainly find a multitude of others. What all three share is both an open rejection of existing variations on the theme of RCT that are deemed fundamentally lacking as well as a perspective on agents of political change that is *still* fundamentally limited. All of them see transformative action in terms that are fully compatible with RCT rather than with a logic of practical horizons. None of

¹²⁶Ibid, 11.

¹²⁷Wood (2003).

¹²⁸Ibid, 235.

¹²⁹Kuran (1995).

them are open to the possibility that East Germans marched in the streets every Monday in Leipzig in 1989 or Salvadorean peasants take part in rural revolts because they think that victory might mean that their world becomes permanently, qualitatively more conducive to their flourishing. Naturally, it is doubtful that this is always the reasoning behind participation in transformative praxis. But I feel that I have shown that there is little philosophical reason to exclude this form of reasoning from the arsenal of reasons available to practical agents.

More broadly, I would argue that when we understand human decision making from the standpoint of “choice,” we are pursuing *technical* knowledge of human beings. I am certainly not the first person to express this reservation about the social sciences. Two now-classic works, Jürgen Habermas’ *Knowledge and Human Interests*¹³⁰ and Herbert Marcuse’s *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*,¹³¹ express precisely this concern in their respective critiques of August Comte, positivism, and the theme of social control. My critique is not wholly dissimilar but it has a different intent. My contention is that irrespective of whether or not RCT is bound up with problematic forms of social control, its way of framing action potentially leads us to misunderstand the relationship not just between generic practical agents and the world—which has been my criticism thus far—but also between actors in the political domain as well. If Ruth

¹³⁰Habermas 1971.

¹³¹Marcuse 1968.

Grant is right that *homo politicus* is a much more complex being than *homo aeconomicus*, then we would expect that the political realm would be a more all-encompassing realm than RCT can account for, encompassing our practical attempts to meet *all* of our many, potentially incompatible needs. If Hobbes is right that praxis is fundamentally shaped by things like language and belief, then the political realm would be a realm in which there are a variety of qualitatively different *types* of transformative praxis. Changing a regime type within a nation-state from presidential democracy to proportional representation might still count as transformative (depending on the impact of such a change). But we would also be forced to see a figure like Socrates as an initiator—or at least a would-be initiator (he doesn't seem to have been all that successful)—of transformative praxis as well. Imagine that Socrates had single-handedly been successful in convincing Athenians to transform their values and their conceptions of the good, to give up a thymotic martial spirit in favor of *philosophia* and other pursuits. Athens may not have embarked on the disastrous Sicilian Expedition, to give one example. From what perspective could we convincingly argue that Socrates' activity in the marketplace could *not* be understood as transformative praxis? But *eupraxia* of the transformative sort need not take place on such a grand scale. Just as our sense of how transformative praxis might function in the economic sphere need not be especially grandiose—the entrepreneur might be a Promethean mover of national markets but could also be someone who starts a food truck or discovers a slightly more efficient way of fixing bicycles—the same goes for our conception of praxis in the political sphere. There might be a Socrates in a city council

meeting who talks policymakers out of a decision that was unnecessarily detrimental to the flourishing of a few dozen residents of a small town.

The conception of the political that emerges when considered in conjunction with my proposed conception of praxis would hold both that we would expect humans to engage in all sorts of transformative praxis in the interest of pursuing their various ends. But praxis has certain normative considerations built into it. There are limits to what praxis can achieve, and not just technological ones. Praxis cannot change the kind of practical being that we are, even if we lived on Martian colonies (to use the example from chapter 2). No transformative praxis, for Heidegger or Bloch or Bhaskar or Sartre or anyone else mentioned in this project, can come along and free us from the necessity of acting phronetically or from the demands of confronting the mesh-like actuality that we always confront. Horizon-transformative politics must recognize certain limits. The effort to overcome those limits by means of efficiency or “growth”—as Heidegger might characterize modernity—might have destructive consequences that are unforeseeable. Therefore, my continued insistence that we should expect transformative praxis out of human beings (and often hope for it) should not be interpreted as tantamount to an unqualified celebration transformative praxis. There is quite simply no reason to believe that thinking and acting in terms of horizons is *prima facie* a good thing. Machiavelli certainly thought in terms of qualitative changes in broad—perhaps even epic—horizons when he exhorted his contemporaries to liberate Italy from the yoke of the barbarians. But the rest of *The Prince* gives us a vivid sense of what that might entail, and we

rightfully recoil in horror from some of those consequences—just as we recoil from the transformative praxis of the great totalitarian movements of the twentieth century.

What, then, are the normative demands that spring forth when we render praxis and the polis inseparable from one another? Unfortunately, it is difficult to either provide a great deal of concrete content to what *eupraxia* means divorced from the experiences of practical agents. The normative demands on praxis that I have discussed so far, like the privileging of *phronēsis* over *technē* and the call to engage in transformative praxis when it is demanded, remain essentially *formal*. But I would nonetheless assert that those more formal demands begin to take on a more determinate shape when we begin to insert them into more determinate contexts. Where “be more phronetic” or “be transformative when necessary” are empty, we can imagine what transformative praxis might mean in a parliamentary decision-making body (perhaps stringing together a majority to pass a bill that was thought to be dead in the water). We have a good sense of what it means to be a phronetic basketball player (Magic Johnson would probably qualify better than the members of the Duke Political Science intra-mural team).

In the end, political theory seems to be in a unique position both to make the kinds of critiques of social-scientific (read: technical) understanding that I have made here, and to begin tracing the impact of an alternative theory of praxis on political thought and action. It is uniquely suited for the task both because it is fundamentally rooted in a set of basic political questions and problems and because it is frankly freed from the institutional compulsion to produce “empirical results.” The drive to produce “results,” to turn data into claims often leaves little room for systematic reflection on the

axioms that are relied upon to turn human practical activity into something operationalizable (to use a standard term in the social sciences) and, it is hoped, predictable. It is my hope that political theory will find itself compelled to fill in this reflective gap. But it cannot do so if it simply distances itself from RCT without even *attempting* a sympathetic, immanent critique of the approach. If political theorists take issue with the kinds of claims that practitioners of RCT make, then they should step up to the plate and address the same questions that RCT seeks to address: what motivates us? What would it mean to have theoretical knowledge about human beings? If there are strict limits to theoretical knowledge about human beings, where does that leave us? What are the political consequences? This project is the beginning of an attempt to bridge this gap. That it does not take us all the way to the other side is obvious but also understandable given the scope of the project itself. It is my hope, however, that it opens up our horizon and allows us to glimpse the ways we might follow to finally cross over.

Conclusion

While the end result of this project is not necessarily a finalized picture of *homo practicus* with all of the details ironed out, there is a great deal that I hope to have convincingly demonstrated. First, I hope to have shown that RCT, as a set of paradigmatic assumptions about agents and the world, does not provide us with a complete philosophical account of human beings as practical agents. The insufficiency of RCT lies not only in its inability to account for the complexity of the horizons that shape our world and of the kinds of decisions that we make within these horizons—an issue with which I dealt in chapter 2—but more fundamentally in its inability to grasp the qualitative *character* of our practical experience. It is this qualitative and not the quantitative barrier that RCT cannot surmount. For RCT, true to its name, is a paradigm of *choice*: it seeks to understand human action on the basis of how we make choices within situations and constraints, within “choice sets” or, to use the term I develop, stable decision spaces. But where do these choice sets/decision spaces come from? How do we arrive at them? As I have shown, praxis is not just what we do within them—it is fundamentally *about* them. When we conceive ourselves as creatures able to make decisions about them and not just within them, we are already well on the way toward a *qualitatively* different way of understanding praxis.

Perhaps more importantly, once we are on that path and we begin to engage in a reconstruction of praxis from basic conceptual building blocks—beginning with the almost elemental encounter between creatures concerned with their possibilities and a world in which those possibilities are often difficult to realize—then we begin to see why

the “choice” paradigm¹ needs to give way to an understanding with fundamentally different contours. Here, I have laid out many of the necessary foundations for such a new understanding. There is no doubt that we are beings concerned with specific things and goals and projects and games, as RCT would have us be. This is part of its great strength. But if we make certain assumptions—very realistic assumptions—about the *world* in which practical agents operate, then we are forced to see praxis not in terms of these specific things—and goals and projects and games—but rather in terms of *horizons*. This concept enables us to re-infect our conception of what praxis is all about, and to understand that specific choice sets all only exist within the larger realm of life or living, and for us as human beings that means above all within the political.

Within politics and in political theory, the stakes involved in these questions are not always apparent. The project of reconsidering human praxis does not seem to yield a single compelling picture of the good life, nor does it tell us what the best regime type is, nor does it decisively affirm or discredit any reigning political ideology or school of political thought. Instead, the importance of a reconsideration of praxis lies in its implications for how we characterize ourselves as practical and thus as political beings, and in turn for what kinds of expectations that we form about, and demands that we make of, human beings in their many practical environments, from the produce aisle to the boardroom, city council meeting, and constitutional convention. Our assumptions about

¹ As I suggest in chapter 2, there may be exceptions to RCT’s epistemological limitations, and thus realms of behavior within which RCT might indeed give us a philosophically convincing account of human decision making. But in that chapter, and here as well, I leave that only as a suggestion.

how our decision-making works or could work cannot help but significantly inform our institutions and our politics.

If all of us really thought that human beings are merely “behaving” beings rather than *acting*, phronetic beings, then we would never design institutions that actually *rely* upon us acting phronetically. We would never set bands of soldiers loose on the battlefield to engage in intense phronetic decision making under fire, nor would we put comedians up on stage with the hopes that they would have witty comebacks for hecklers or award patents and thus the possibility of significant monetary reward to inventors, or imagine that we should choose candidates for office on the basis of how well they perform in debates in which they are challenged to answer tough questions “on the fly.” Even on an economic level—where RCT is often thought of as having its most direct application—the modern market economy could not exist without its reliance on the phronetic comportment of the entrepreneur. But we have, in fact, created all of these institutions, and what this clearly demonstrates, I think, is that the way that praxis is widely understood in many of the social sciences is at odds with our underlying intuitions about praxis—and that the conception of praxis I put forth here is truer to our intuitions and truer to the kinds of expectations around which we actually structure much of social and political lives.

I want to emphasize that this doesn’t necessarily commit us to abandoning RCT in our investigations of social and political phenomena. The aims of the social sciences are often highly worthwhile aims: using knowledge about human beings to, for example, produce governing institutions that are less corrupt and better represent our preferences,

economies that are more productive, health care systems that offer higher average life spans, and so on. “Theoretical” understanding (in the Heideggerian sense) of human decision making is essential, I believe, to the general self-reflexivity of human beings and to the project of constructing institutions that are products of reflection rather than manifestations of haphazard historical development.² This knowledge is important *even if* (as I believe to be the case) there are limits to the kinds of theoretical knowledge about praxis that are possible. Even if there turns out to be no *episteme*³ of praxis that achieves the epistemological heights of physics or organic chemistry, we simply have no excuse not to do our best, and we fail to do our best if our understanding of praxis cannot account for the whole breadth of the human practical experience. I have shown that RCT has fundamental difficulty understanding whole types of action. Even when it can show *ex post facto* that a decision was instrumentally rational given the circumstances, it cannot be said to “explain” that action unless it can know *why* that decision was made—and according to the terms of RCT, it cannot know *why* that decision was made unless it can *fully* reconstruct the choice set out of which the decision emerged. I argued that there is good reason to think that that can be done in certain kinds of limited situations. But for the most part, practical agents are inescapably entangled in the mesh of possibility that is the world, not in these kinds of exceptional situations. We might sometimes learn from *ex*

² Although I follow Edmund Burke in my concerns about “reflection” run amok in the transformation of human societies, we must remember that *eupraxia* is necessarily more than simply transformative for the sake of being transformative. And understanding transformative praxis is not the same as championing it in all cases.

³ For Aristotle, *episteme* is the form of knowledge associated with *technē*. It is closest to what we would call “theoretical” knowledge, at a remove from daily practice.

post facto reconstructions of our past decisions, but we do not have the luxury of doing so in the continuously advancing present—and such reconstructions might hold little benefit for us as we face the uncertain future. If, like Gatsby, we remain rooted in a world that no longer exists, we will be constantly rowing against the stream and constantly borne ceaselessly into the past. At our best, we do not take our choice sets for granted. We rarely if ever even know exactly what our choice sets *are*. But any social science that seeks to have genuine explanatory power and to go beyond being able to “explain” things via fortuitous coincidences between expectations and observations in isolated cases (as Milton Friedman envisions macroeconomics) must also be able to reconstruct our choice sets. It must understand not only why A was chosen, but also why B, C, and D were *not* chosen, and it can only do so if we know that [A, B, C, D] was an agent’s choice set at the time in question. If the agent had another choice E in their choice set that was not chosen, it might not have been chosen for reasons that would transform our whole conception of the choice situation. In order to understand an agent’s choice, we must understand why certain choices were *rejected*. If we’re seeking to understand the ice cream choices that people make and we for some reason mistakenly think that they have fewer choices than they do—we think that they are only choosing between chocolate and vanilla, but they actually have strawberry as an option as well—then we cannot adequately reconstruct their choice (we need to know what it is about strawberry that they dislike). Analogously, if we misunderstand the very *character* of choice sets, of where they come from and how agents construct them, then we fail to adequately reconstruct decision making in a way that yields anything resembling *explanation*. If we take

seriously the idea that praxis concerns horizons, then we must also hold that horizons fundamentally structure our decision-making process a great deal of the time. From this perspective, if we fail to even *look for* horizontal thinking, then we never even come close to adequately reconstructing the decision-making process.

My conception of praxis holds that people might well act for reasons such as “I have an opportunity to change my whole life situation and I should take it” or “we seem to stand at a historical moment in which we can overthrow the current regime with peaceful demonstrations and we must do this for the sake of our children.” Depending on how we construe the decision spaces of those actors, we might only see, respectively, “this agent is seeking a higher income” or “these agents expect that regime change will yield material benefits.” Our assumptions about what kinds of things are actually at stake for actors cannot help but structure our explanation. Changing those assumptions, by changing our whole sense of what praxis is about, is the key to unlocking elements of praxis that are obscured from view when we cling to ideas like stable decision spaces because it’s simply how research has been conducted thus far.

The vision of praxis that I piece together here does not immediately offer an alternative form of explanation that would allow us analytically to predict when or how human beings actually act transformatively, but it does make the rather bold claim that we need to change *what we’re looking for* when we seek to explain certain varieties of decisions. And it also gives us a stronger sense than before of when we might need to think about action in *qualitative* terms, and gives us strong clues about how to construct a new basis for studying and grasping social and political phenomena.

My aim is to pursue this possibility. Such a research program would take transformative praxis as its subject matter, as its dependent variable, so to speak. It would seek out exemplary individual actors rather than ideal-typical agents and would be oriented toward exceptional instances rather than the routine.

At the very least, I hope to have convinced the reader that praxis is worthy of another look, and a deep and potentially difficult one at that. Concepts like *prohairesis* and *phronēsis* and world and infinite games and the given and immanence and others are not easy concepts to deal with, especially when they are continuously read and inflected through one another. But Heidegger is right, I think, when he exhorts us never to shrink from the strangeness of concepts and to always be willing to accept the consequences of a new line of thinking when it has been opened up. This should mean that we no longer see praxis as simple choosing or as simply contending with whatever our immediate circumstances give us, nor as uninformed or unrestricted by accumulated praxis. Praxis is always fraught with difficulty, uncertainty, and limitation. When we act we are always in one sense like Prometheus bound to the rock, forced to simply accept whatever happens to us. This is analogous to our ever-renewed contention with the practico-inert, with horizons as products of the past. But Prometheus ends up chained to the rock as punishment for ushering in the most decisive qualitative break in the lives of human beings in all of Greek mythology: the bestowal of fire to humans. In doing this, Prometheus breaks rules, forges vast new horizons, and changes the contours of what it means to be human. This is why he is the only historical or mythological figure who adequately captures the eternal double bind of praxis.

Hegel famously claims in the preface to the *Philosophy of Right* that the owl of Minerva only takes wing at dusk,” that philosophy is only afterthought. Modern social science longs to emulate Prometheus in becoming forethought and thus predictive. Insofar as it binds itself to the rock of the past in its acceptance of decision spaces as unchangeable, however, it remains trapped in a Hegelian cage, able only to paint its gray on gray. Prometheus, if Aeschylus is to be believed, knows that one day he will be freed because Zeus will need his powers to help him find his way in the world he has come to rule. The new notion of praxis that I have presented in this work also points to such a liberation, to a Prometheus unbound.

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Biography

Lucas Ross Perkins was born in Soldotna, Alaska on March 16, 1982. He attended Reed College in Portland, OR as an undergraduate, earning a B.A. in political science in December 2004. At Reed, he was awarded with a Commendation for Academic Excellence several times and was awarded a Corbett Grant for summer research for Summer 2004. In Fall 2005, he began his doctoral studies in the Department of Political Science at Duke University, with specializations in political theory and religion and politics. He received his Ph.D from Duke in Fall 2011.

In 2010, Lucas published an article titled “Political Anti-Theology,” a response to Mark Lilla’s *The Stillborn God* in the journal *Critical Review*, co-authored with Michael Gillespie. In 2009, he published a review of John Betz’ *After Enlightenment: The Post-Secular Vision of J.G. Hamann* in the journal *Polygraph: An International Journal of Politics and Culture*, for which he has acted as an editor since 2006.