Backwards and Forwards: Conceptualizing Philosophy's Role in Historical Traditions

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In the preface to *Between Past and Future,* Hannah Arendt speaks of the role of thought in relation to human history and human possibility. She illustrates her claim that thought is conditioned by its relation to the past and future with the following parable from Franz Kafka:

> He has two antagonists: the first presses him from behind, from the origin. The second blocks the road ahead. He gives battle to both. To be sure, the first supports him in his fight with the second, for he wants to push him forward, and in the same way the second supports him in his fight with the first, since he drives him back. But it is only theoretically so. For it is not only the two antagonists who are there, but he himself as well, and who really knows his intentions? His dream, though, is that some time in an unguarded moment – and this would require a night darker than any night has ever been yet – he will jump out of the fighting line and be promoted, on account of his experience in fighting, to the position of umpire over his antagonists in their fight with each other.[1]

Human presence itself seems problematic in the parable – if it were not for humanity it seems the universe would somehow be at peace with itself. As Arendt points out, "the fact that there is a fight at all seems due exclusively to the presence of the man, without whom the forces of the past and the future, one suspects, would have neutralized or destroyed each other long ago"[2]. At the same time, the man does not choose the difficult position in which he finds himself. Instead, he wishes for a place outside of the forces that cause him to fight, a metaphysical wish that would allow past and future to crash together into a simple continuum. But "time is not a continuum…it is broken in the middle," and it is humanity that rends time and creates the ongoing battle that Kafka represents[3]. The question that Arendt derives from Kafka's story is what role thought – represented in the parable by the metaphysical wish to leap outside of time – might play in the mediation between a past which does not drag behind us as a dead weight but forces us forwards, and a future that does not beckon us forward but forces us to turn back and consider history as providing the conditions for our existence.[4]

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[1]Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin Books, 1980). 7. Thanks to the Fall 2001 Philosophy and Education Doctoral Proseminar where some of these ideas first took shape, especially in conversations with Rodino Anderson, Seth Halvorson, and David Hansen. Thanks also to Terri Wilson and John Knapp for helpful criticism on early versions of this paper.

[2] Ibid. 10.

[3] Ibid. 11.

[4] Ibid. 10.

The answer Arendt suggests in her preface is that the relationship of thought to those transcendent truths that stand outside of time and space is not one of simple verticality. Constituted by its own historical moment, the vector of thought is not the shortest distance imagined between the horizontal line of history and a transcendent principle that lies outside of time. The vertical is the prerogative of the divine, the historical moment that results from the revelation of transcendence itself. Verticality is not part of the human project. As a moment of revelation cuts across human history in a singular, perpendicular intersection, the uniquely human initiative of thought is instead a diagonal line that cuts across both the transcendent and the historical as it runs parallel to neither. Structured in its origin by the forces of past and future, human thought is nonetheless a product of these infinite forces that deliver limitless possibility to the human mind's capacity for self-understanding.[5]

Arendt's discussion of the place of thought in history brings more to the question of our relation to the historical and transcendent conditions of our existence than Kafka's story of transcendent verticality and imminent historicity can provide. Specifically, it points to a productive relationship between the metaphysical wish and the historical conditions that are shaped in relation to the metaphysical transcendent, in that it provides human initiative through the diagonal vector of thought. If thought is neither a mere sharing in the movement of history that defines us, nor a sharing in the work of the transcendent, the uniqueness of human thought seems to save human freedom. Still, Arendt's discussion of the diagonal is more suggestive than final in any sense, and as readers we are driven to seek examples of diagonalization in thinking as it has been realized in the traditions of philosophy that inform our discipline. For her part, Arendt provides examples of the latter in the eight exercises in political thought that follow. But is the diagonal vector of thought a heralding of Arendt's particular project, or does it help us to theorize a more fundamental position of philosophical thought, a more basic relationship between transcendent truths and the historical lives they inform?

In this paper I will look at two passages from Plato as places where Arendt's sense of the diagonal of thought might take place. In the *Meno* I discuss the relationship of philosophy with the past – conceived here as a negative hermeneutics through Socrates' discussion of tethering – as the move by which thought connects with the revelation of transcendence received through historical tradition. In the *Phaedo* I try to show the future's influence on thought as providing the pedagogical ideals that sustain tradition through Socrates' stance as a poetical thinker. Through the two I hope to show that Arendt's sense of the opposing forces of history and the future, and their relation to transcendence through humanity as a break in the continuum, are fundamental to these expressions of philosophy's place within human traditions.

Towards the end of the Meno, after Anytus has made his appearance and angrily departed, Socrates makes a distinction between two ways the mind relates to its subject. Although strict definitions are not given, knowledge, the first and more rare of the two,

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[5] Ibid. 12.

seems to mean a rational relationship of corresponding representation between mind and object. The second, 'true opinion' is a term we recognize as relating to folk-belief, or ways of knowing passed on by tradition rather than established by rational thought. The significance of true opinion is introduced when Socrates questions whether his teacher, Prodicus, had not been mistaken in his insistence on knowledge as the "*sine qua non* for right leadership" (97A).[6] This questioning he explains to Meno through the metaphor of the guide, in which he argues "if a man judges correctly which is the road, though he has never been there and doesn't know it," he will still be judged as a useful guide, as the practical problem of achieving the intended destination will be solved (97B). With this pragmatic shift, namely that "right opinion is something no less useful than knowledge" (97C), Socrates affirms something of the status of the traditional understanding of *arête* at issue at the opening of the dialogue, albeit in a highly qualified manner: traditional answers to important questions may be valuable, but only insofar as they are correct.

The qualification that Socrates places on the practice of traditional values is couched in a further metaphor – that of the statues of Daedalus, known for their tendency to "run away and escape" "if no one ties them down" (97D). Like the Daedalan statues, Socrates argues, true opinion that is not somehow tied down "is not worth much … But a tethered specimen is very valuable" (97E). The tethering of true opinions, Socrates explains, is achieved in the practice of reason, through which true opinions may become knowledge (98A). The precise meaning of what it might mean for true opinions to "run away" when they are not so tethered, however, is left unstated, and is crucial to the relationship between traditional practices and reason. It is necessary, therefore, to attempt some approximation of Socrates' meaning here.

There are two reasons why someone might tether an object: one, as in the case of a helium balloon or a bicycle, so that it will not be lost or stolen; the second, as in the case of a dog, so that it will not go where it does not belong – in the neighbor's garden, for example. The first of these two cases can be easily dismissed from Socrates' possible meanings, however, as it cannot possibly be the *loss* of traditional forms of thinking that worries him. The rationale for this dismissal comes earlier in the *Meno*, which suggests an overbearing and confused presence of traditional views rather than their absence. We are left, then, with the second option, which the reasoning behind the dismissal of the first helps to explain.

Socrates' habit of questioning is often intended to bring his interlocutor to a sense of *aporia* or undecidability with regard to their own sense of values, exposing the internal contradiction of traditional views. It seems from the metaphor of tethering that we have come upon Socrates' understanding of the source of this confusion. The traditional values of Athens, we learn later in the dialogue, are generally understood to have been revealed by poets, "prophets and tellers of oracles, who under divine inspiration utter many truths" (99C). As these messages are of divine origin, they may be believed and practiced without further investigation; their truth is vouchsafed by the gods, and can only be altered or challenged by another revelation. The role of questioning is to

[6] Plato, *Protagoras and Meno*, trans. W.K.C. Guthrie (Baltimore: Penguin, 1956).

emphasize a cutting back against the force of history as that which uncritically applies revealed truth to places where it might do harm rather than good. In other words, Socrates does not want to accept transcendence as it is currently present in the opinions that have been handed down by tradition, but at the same time recognizes that the historical moment in which the transcendent was revealed is not available. The role of thought is to work against the muddling force of history to regain the significance of transcendence as it might be realized in the present. This position, defined negatively as neither the horizontal force of the tradition we cannot trust, nor the vertical, transcendent moment to which we have no access, can be understood as the diagonal, that which cuts through both.

But if the past conditions our thinking, where are we to look for the principle of critical rationality that might allow us to read the past productively? Returning to Arendt's idea of the future as that which pushes us back against the past, we can look to the future – that which is not yet inscribed in tradition – to provide this principle.[7] The force of the future, as Arendt argues, is the imposition of the new, in the form of new people coming into the world, providing it with the possibility of change, including the possibility of complete destruction. The good that we project into the future is the historical possibility that we seek to create in our own interpretation of transcendent goods, the possibility of human happiness. In the next section I look to the *Phaedo* through its creative, poetic force in Socrates' role as a poet who writes the possibility of his students' futures in his interpretation of the transcendent.

When we meet Socrates in the *Phaedo*, he has taken to adapting Aesop's fables to lyrical music, his way of obeying the divine instructions given to him in a dream: "Socrates, practice and cultivate the arts" (60e-61b).[8] While he believes his practice of philosophy has fulfilled his obligation to the dream, he is in a sense hedging his bets now that he prepares for his death. As Hans-Georg Gadamer interprets this move, Socrates has taken on a poetical stance that places him in opposition to his interlocutors, the natural philosophers Simmias and Cebes, who are looking for scientific reasoning about death.[9] But why prepare oneself willingly for death? Why prepare at all? If suicide is unlawful and immoral, why should the philosopher accept death willingly? These are the questions that Simmias and Cebes put to him (61d).[10] Socrates' initial response involves

[7] "I am ready to fight for as long as I can, in word and act: that is, that we shall be better, braver, and more active men if we believe it right to look for what we don't know than if we believe there is no point in looking because what we don't know we can never discover" (86B).

[8] Hamilton, Edith and Huntington Cairns, eds. *The Collected Dialogues of Plato*, New York: Pantheon, 1961.

[9] Hans Georg Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*, trans. P. Christopher Smith (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980).

[10] As Gadamer states, "he asks the Pythagoreans what they know of their teacher's, Philolaos', prohibition of suicide, and they admit that they know nothing definite about it and that Philolaos hardly ever spoke of it. Their ignorance gives a clear indication that they are no longer interested in the religious content of the Pythagorean teachings and that they therefore genuinely represent the modern scientific enlightenment."

three parts. The first, admittedly based on "hearsay" (61d), claims that as property of God humans ought not to take the question of their lives into their own hands, but at the same time ought not to hold on to life too dearly, as God might take them at any time "to enter the company, first, of other wise and good gods, and secondly of men now dead who are better than those who are in this world now" (63b-c). As Socrates admits that his belief amounts to no more than "a firm hope," in the rewards for the good after death, "as we have been told for many years" (63c), Simmias and Cebes are justifiably skeptical – they want to hear a philosophical argument that will provide them with proof, but what they receive is a meditation on the traditional views expressed in poetry. Encouraged by their challenge, Socrates makes a second argument that employs the beliefs of his fellow philosophers toward another cause for hope. Calling upon the belief that the body places distractions and obstructions in the philosopher's path to truth (64c-65d), Socrates concludes that "either it is totally impossible to acquire knowledge, or it is only possible after death, because it is only then that the soul will be separate and independent of the body" (66e) – another reason to hope that the philosopher might have something to look forward to in death. This hope for something good after death is based on a more basic, unstated hope that there is something rather than nothing after death, and this will become the basis for Simmias and Cebes' further argument.

The weakness of these arguments in proving the immortality of the soul is clear, but the weakness of the arguments is only properly read in relation to the poetic-mystical role that Socrates has taken on. As Gadamer argues, "the *Phaedo's* poetic power to convince is stronger than its arguments' logical power to prove."[11] In the midst of this weak argument, Socrates introduces an element that we might call the argument's poetic task. Once he has gained Simmias and Cebes' assent on the question of the body's place as an obstacle in the acquisition of knowledge, Socrates pushes forward to connect the disembodied philosopher's life to an idea of the moral life, the life of happiness. He begins with the assertion that "so long as we keep to the body and our soul is contaminated with this imperfection, there is no chance of our ever attaining satisfactorily to our object" (66b) and proceeds to associate the body with "distractions," "diseases," "attack[s]," "fears," "fancies," "nonsense," "wars," "battles," and "slave[ry]," (66b-d). While each of these dangers is presented in relation to the quest for truth, it is clear here – if only from the fact that these dangers go beyond those which threaten our epistemological foundations - that Socrates has introduced the importance of the philosophical way of life as justified from the perspective of happiness rather than from

(p.23) The tension between natural philosophy or science and poetry plays an important role throughout the dialogue, coming to its apex at 97c-d, in Socrates' rejection of natural philosophy.

[11] Gadamer, *Dialogue and Dialectic: Eight Hermeneutical Studies on Plato*. 22. Gadamer's idea is that Plato's plan is to "unite" and show the importance of scientific knowledge for self-knowledge, but nothing of the sort takes place. Instead we are offered an alternative between the two. The two might fit together only to the extent that poetic understanding might underlie scientific insight. Gadamer moves in this direction himself "an adequate understanding of what mathematical purity is, is first made possible by Plato's doctrine of ideas" (p.25). Gadamer states the point of the discussion is not the proof but "that which constitutes the actual being of the soul – not in regard to its possible mortality or immortality but to its ever vigilant understanding of itself and reality" but this could be pressed further – the point is the disposition, the way of life, the vigilance itself (29).

the perspective of truth. Further, Socrates gains assent from Simmias that the life of philosophy, as a life that rejects the pleasures of the body, is more likely to be one of courage and temperance (68a-69a). If philosophy can protect us from anxiety, war and disease, and help us maintain courage and self-control, it will make our lives better even if death does not hold good things for the good, or anything at all. Socrates may not have proof of life after death, but he is convinced that the life of the philosopher, *his* life, is a happy one.

Socrates' reflection upon the ethical effects that a life of philosophy may produce contributes nothing to the proof of the afterlife that his interlocutors want. At the same time, it is compelling insofar as it demonstrates the good of the philosophical life from the quality of life it brings into being. But if the end is happiness, why don't we seek after it directly? Socrates maintains that his own happiness has not been gained by searching for happiness, but by searching for wisdom. "[I]t is not the right method to exchange one degree of pleasure or pain or fear for another, like coins of different values" (69a-b). In other words, if we spend our lives chasing after happiness, we will lose ourselves in this chase in the same manner that the intemperate or the coward spends his life running after or away from the things that bring him pleasure or pain. The only goal we may set for ourselves that will bring about this life of happiness is wisdom (69b). The indirection of Socrates' life of happiness through the seeking of wisdom mirrors the indirection of the argument that Socrates has been attempting. In contrast to the logical argument demanded by Simmias and Cebes, which would proceed step by step toward the goal of a valid conclusion with each step grounded by that which precedes it, Socrates' argument posits the conclusion at the start. As if introducing a distant, impossible object, the force of Socrates' argument comes from our ability to imagine ourselves in relation to that object, and how life might be lived in that relation. Like the closing line in Rilke's "Archaic Torso of Apollo", the presence of the object makes our lives objects of contemplation and tells us, "you must change your life."[12] The reversal of the argument's structure recalls the fundamentally ethical purpose of philosophical thought. By postulating the transcendent, Socrates emphasizes the question of how we live, and the effects of our beliefs on our lives, over the question of certainty. This concern manifests itself later in the dialogue in Anaxagoras' idea, quoted by Socrates, that "it is mind that produces order and is the cause of everything". With this, Socrates' focus shifts finally from the truth of the natural world to the truth of human life: "On this view there was only one thing for man to consider, with regard both to himself and to anything else, namely the best and highest good." (97c-d). As human lives are lived always in relation to what is believed to be the highest good, whether consciously or unconsciously, they are shaped relative to the goods they seek. For Socrates in his last dialogue, his concern is not the 'natural' reality of the afterlife, but the force that such a concept has in framing the happiness of his students' lives. Both in the content and the form of his argument he emphasizes the importance of the relationship between our beliefs and the lives they bring into being as products of those beliefs.

[12] *Ahead of All Parting: The Selected Poetry and Prose of Rainer Marie Rilke*, translated and edited by Stephen Mitchell, New York: The Modern Library, 1995, p.67.

Through the model of Socrates' last dialogue we can begin to understand the force of the future in our relation to the past. The significant content of traditional views on the afterlife and goodness for the Socrates of the *Phaedo* is their poetic force in shaping the future in the form of the new – his students. The possibility of goodness and happiness in the future serves as the principle by which he cuts across the force of history, tethering traditional beliefs to the meaning that they have in shaping human lives. Certainly, our views of what we want for the future are shaped by the force of the past, and so the relationship of principles by which we consider the past and the future is necessarily circular, with no final founding of our judgment in an absolute certainty. Like the man in the parable who fights backwards and forwards, we make meaning of the past and future through our mediation of the space we create between the two. The central task, as Arendt seems to suggest, is to preserve the space of this thought from one generation to the next. Like the life of happiness that Socrates seeks to call forth in his own students, the preservation of the space of thought For Arendt lies along a similar path of indirection:

> This small non-time space in the very heart of time, unlike the world and the culture into which we are born, can only be indicated, but cannot be inherited and handed down from the past; each new generation, indeed every new human being as he inserts himself between an infinite past and an infinite future, must discover and ploddingly pave it anew.[13]

While this non-time space must be preserved if humanity itself is to be maintained, Arendt makes clear that it is not something we can dictate or hand down. The tradition of thought has its being in practice – the rift that cuts the continuum of time into past and future is the presence of the human mind that struggles with each. As our possibilities are conditioned by a historical moment of transcendent revelation to which we have no access and by the demands of a future that has yet to take shape, the role of thought is to engage with the past to find a place in the future for the transcendent within which human history has meaning. In practice, these two moments might exist intertwined in the same action, that critical dialogue by which we make sense of the past by considering its ultimate claims with regard to the force of the future. The separation of this action into its two strands here has allowed us to consider it in terms of the powerful forces of past and future in which, according to Hannah Arendt, thought has its being.

[13] Arendt, *Between Past and Future*. 13.