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Moral Friction, Moral Phenomenology, and the Improviser

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Moral Friction, Moral Phenomenology, and the Improviser

By

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my parents Stephen and Theresa Young, whose love, support and encouragement has inspired and cultivated the sense of the grace, play, faith and freedom that stands at the core of improvisation. I love you both with all my heart!

I also want to dedicate this work to my grandparents Bud, Arlene, and Gisela Scott. Each of you has inspired me over the years to rigorously pursue, enjoy, and perfect my passion for what is beautiful and what is good. Much of what I have to offer in this dissertation was inspired by your way of being and was honed in our many Sunday dinners. I love each of you with all my heart!

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Abstract

This dissertation offers a phenomenology of that mode of self-interpretation in which it becomes possible for an interpreter to intentionally participate in the production of moral norms to which the interpreter himself or herself feels bound. Part One draws on Richard Rorty's notion of the "ironist" in order to thematize the phenomenon I call "moral friction"; a condition in which an interpreter becomes explicitly aware of the historical and cultural contingencies of their own moral vocabularies, practices, and concerns and as a result find themselves incapable of feeling the normative weight implicit in these. Part Two draws on Heidegger's existential analytic of human being, Gadamer's development of Hermeneutic Phenomenology, and Hegel's notion of "sublation" in order to map how novel interpretations can irreversibly displace the coherence of older interpretations. I call this form of interpretation "moral phenomenology." Finally, in Part Three, I utilize a selective phenomenology of musical improvisation to plot the unique temporal orientation of self-interpretation that results from intentionally deploying this irreversible displacement of older interpretations that involve normative moral implications. I call the form of life that is marked by this hermeneutic mode the "improviser." The result is a description of a form of life in which it becomes possible to explicitly participate in the production of moral norms within a historical and culturally contingent context that nevertheless preserves

standards of rational justification for normative moral judgment without the need for atemporal first principles. The availability of this mode of self-interpretation displaces the sharp distinction between non-normative descriptive phenomenology and normative moral reasoning by placing the latter within a non-teleological historical practice that engages in the production of interpretations which irreversibly displace older interpretations--a practice that is governed by the critical cultivation of contingent moral norms within the open investigation into the good life for human being.

Introduction

This dissertation offers a phenomenology of that mode of self-interpretation in which it becomes possible for an interpreter to intentionally participate in the production of moral norms to which the interpreter himself or herself feels bound. The very idea of such a mode of self-interpretation presupposes two prior theses. First, it presupposes that moral norms are contingently produced in the constellation of ideas, practices, habits, institutions, and material conditions of a culture as it develops through time. I will use the term “moral norms” in the standard but broad sense to indicate principles that guide or restrict those human activities that involve, at some level, reflective decision-making. Defined in this way, the phrase “moral norms” does not merely name that narrow range of human behavior that is directly governed by reflective decisions, but rather includes the far wider range of tacit cultural patterns of meaning and practice that, while remaining largely unconsidered as the background conditions which enable and frame ordinary everyday concerns, practices, and institutions, can nevertheless be brought forward for moral reflection, criticism, and decision. The second presupposition of this mode of self-interpretation suggests that it is somehow problematic when, under certain conditions, human beings are able to reflect upon these largely hidden backdrop norms in such a way that it undermines the “force” or “claim” that they would otherwise exert on their own reflective decision-making. Although I will make clear what the first

of these presuppositions involves, I will not here explicitly defend it. It is a thesis rooted in the history of Western metaphysics and epistemology and I will rely on the achievements of that philosophical discourse stemming primarily from Hegel, Nietzsche and Heidegger to motivate and frame the central thesis of this investigation. The second presupposition, however, requires a specific thematization in order to motivate the need for a mode of self-interpretation that makes it possible to explicitly participate in the production of moral norms that can, once produced, exert sufficient force to effectively guide our everyday decision-making. Part One, which develops the concept of “moral friction,” provides an account of this problem, and serves to anticipate the need for a phenomenological thematization of this mode of self-interpretation, the method for which I developed in Part Two. In Part Three, I define the term “improvisation” to indicate this mode of interpretation, and the term “improviser” to indicate the character who operates in this mode.

In order to key into this peculiar mode of self-interpretation, and to show why it is a topic worthy of phenomenological investigation, I want to draw attention to what Richard Rorty, in his 1998 monograph *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, calls the character of the “ironist.” According to his account, this character is one who explicitly accepts that in the course of everyday life she must articulate her life, to herself and to others, in words that are ultimately grounded in what Rorty calls a “final vocabulary”; i.e., that vocabulary which articulates the ultimate “court of appeal” for determining what is worth doing, saying, what goals are worth having or achieving, and what is worth avoiding or condemning. In the process of working out these normative judgments in the course of his or her own thoughts, intentions, and actions, which unfold

in relationship to the practical context of everyday judgments, the ironist effectively treats her own final vocabulary “as if” it had some ultimate warrant in her comportment. Yet what is most distinctive about the ironist is the fact that she also explicitly admits that no such warrant can be found to have the sort of universal or necessary legitimacy that her comportment suggests. The ironist then is in the awkward position in which she must accept and not accept her final vocabulary. That is, she is in the position of talking, thinking and acting in a way that suggests that her beliefs and judgments have normative warrant, while believing herself to exist in an epistemic condition that undermines the ultimate legitimacy of those beliefs and judgments.

In this account, Rorty preserves the central meaning of the concept of “irony” that comes to us from Quintilian; i.e., a figure of speech or trope “in which something contrary to what is said is to be understood.” (*Contrarium ei quod dicitur intelligendum est*).¹ One might be tempted to think at first gloss that this definition suggests there to be a sort of self-deception going on; as if the ironist talks and acts in a way that intends to conceal from herself or others her own “true belief.” Yet this is clearly not what Rorty has in mind. Rather, the ironist takes the stance she does primarily because she finds herself in the awkward position of facing a world in everyday life that demands that she make value judgments while at the same time that she finds herself lacking the epistemological recourses to ground those judgments in such a way that could secure them against conflicting judgments made by others. Far from a sort of deception, the ironist is best thought of as one who finds herself unable to honestly endorse even her own deepest held values as if they had a sound foundation that she does not believe them

¹ *Institutio Oratorica* 9.22.44. Cited in Vlastos, *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, 21,

in fact to have. From the ironist point of view, irony is the only intellectually honest disposition to have.

There is, nevertheless, at least one “face value” message that Rorty suggests ironists are likely to endorse; and it comes as a result of their own ironic attitude about their deepest held values. It is a message advocating the liberal embrace of institutions that provide the greatest degree of private freedoms; and this means embracing the sort of negative liberty that rationally suggests the embrace—or at least tolerance—of difference and diversity between oneself and others and between communities. Only in such a society is the liberal ironist freed for the greatest degree of private self-interpretation. This rather un-ironic message can be put in the following way: since no one can demonstrate that her own final vocabulary and value judgments have ultimate legitimacy, no one has the intellectual or moral right to impose her judgments on others unless doing so impinges on the negative liberty of others. Rorty of course admits that a thoroughgoing ironist is not in a position to argue for a solidarity regarding the preferability of a liberal society—if “preferable” is meant to convey the idea that it is legitimated by some extra-linguistic, universal and necessary standard. Yet he does think that it is the most choice-worthy for the ironist, as it provides for the least amount of violence and maximizes space for personal creativity. But even if we grant that this un-ironic conclusion is consistent with the sort of freedom for self-expression or self-interpretation that an ironist might seek for herself, unconstrained as it is by a belief in any ultimate ground for moral norms, it nevertheless leaves unexplored the psychological and sociological tensions that adopting such an ironist attitude involve.

In order to give an indication of what I think remains unsaid in Rorty's account of the ironist, it is worth first considering the structure of irony as a mere figure of speech. Doing so will help make clear why a phenomenology of improvisation can clarify and diffuse the seemingly awkward psychological and sociological tensions—and the seeming practical contradiction that accounts for those tensions—that lie at the heart of the ironist's form of life.

Taken as a mere feature of communication, irony always involves two meanings: the “face value” of what is said and the “hidden” meaning that is thought to be the *real intention* of the communication. And yet, again, to call the intended communication “hidden” is not to say that irony involves a sort of deception. On the contrary, the “real meaning” of the communication is “hidden” in the open, so to speak. When speaking ironically, the hidden meaning is intended to shine through, albeit in a peculiar way that leaves the “real” meaning open to interpretation. The essence of irony, then, consists not in a form of deception, but in communicating multiple meanings simultaneously which together produce an effect of meaning that could not be communicated otherwise. In irony, something like a straightforward “assertion” is held back precisely in order to suggest other possible interpretations in a mode of open-ended consideration that could not be indicated in any other way. Irony therefore need be neither a form of deception nor of intentional obscurantism. Rather, there is something in the juxtaposition of meanings produced in the ironic modality that exhibits what is communicated in a light that the un-ironic, face-value assertions of the various possible interpretations cannot. There is, in other words, an essential openness at the heart of irony that cannot allow the mind to rest in one interpretation as the “right one” or the “intended one.” To the extent

that one looks at a statement solely as a means of communicating an already worked-out meaning, irony is likely to be seen as conveying a sense of insincerity. But this very expectation that all communication aims at an earnest conveyance of well worked-out ideas is what covers over, I will argue, what irony might accomplish.

In order to develop this hidden potential in irony, I want to draw on an example used by Gregory Vlastos in his monograph *Socrates: Ironist and Moral Philosopher*, which he uses to make a similar point to the one I intend here. He entertains the response that Mae West is said to have given upon receiving President Gerald Ford's invitation to a state dinner at the White house: "It's an awful long way to go for just one meal." As Vlastos points out, her response is indicating something like: "if you are not an utter fool you'll know this isn't my real reason. Try guessing what that might be."² Mae West is offering a sort of riddle that runs the risk of being misunderstood only if it is taken at face value. But it is clear that she is making a pointed joke. As Vlastos suggests, her real meaning seems to be not just humor but disinterest, if not outright disregard. This is a joke that works only because one should not be deceived into thinking that she intends the meaning to be taken at face value. But then what is the value in the irony here? Is it merely humor? Perhaps. In this case, it is probably safe to leave the joke as simply something amusing. One would likely miss what is valuable in the statement, i.e., its humor, if one spent too much time inquiring into the "real meaning." But is it the case that the value in the ambiguity of irony is always humor? I think not.

In Rorty's account of the ironist, we seem to be left with few options other than to be ironic with ourselves, about what is most important to us, i.e., our ability to make

² Vlastos, *Socrates*, 21-22.

evaluations of different moral ideas, practices, and concerns that both shape and motivate our lives. His message, however, is not “lighten up and laugh at it all.” And yet he still concludes that we cannot take our deepest held beliefs about what is worth doing and saying too “seriously.” One might feel as a result that the options consist of either taking things too seriously or not seriously enough—and that one would be somehow in the wrong either way. I want to suggest that this bifurcation is the result of failing to appreciate another possible value in the openness implicit in the ambiguity of irony: the role that irony plays in the production or transformation of both the meaning and value distinctions that structure our final vocabularies.

If we expect that an ironic statement is a communication of already understood and intended meanings, then the ironic form of speech can only be understood as a statement of mockery or dissembling. But if what we expect in the ironic communication is a playful space in which new meaning is produced, then irony can be understood as a creative movement; a sort of “play” of meaning that takes the face value of well understood ideas, practices, and concerns and alienates them in such a way as to make them accessible as “objects” of reflection. Irony has the power to dislodge us from what seems obvious so that we might explicitly consider it as something to again get clear about. Irony, in other words, has the ability to reveal that we are not *now* clear about what we once uncritically took to be clear and unproblematic; and thereby it opens up for us, often for the first time, the task of getting clear about the ideas that we usually have simply uncritically inherited from our tradition. The crucial feature of this turn of thought is its ability to open up a playful space in which we can consider multiple

meanings simultaneously without committing to any one of them in advance of the inquiry.

To anyone who is intent upon uncovering the “right” or “intended” meaning of a statement—that is, one who believes that communication consists in making one’s own already well-understood ideas clear to others—such free play will inevitably seem dishonest or frivolous; and this sense may be made more acute when it is employed in discourse about what is most important to us. This is the sort of complaint that Thrasymachus charges against Socrates in Plato’s *Republic* when Socrates inquires into the meaning of the most basic and crucially important moral ideas held by his interlocutors without offering his own understanding of these ideas.

“Heracles!” Thrasymachus exclaims in frustration. “This is Socrates’ habitual shamming. I had predicted to these people that you would refuse to answer and would sham and would do anything but answer if the question were put to you.”³

Thrasymachus cannot seem to fathom that one might challenge the deepest held moral commitments of others without a presumed “knowing for oneself” what the “right” answer is in advance of doing so. The fact that Socrates denies that he has such knowledge seems deliberately dishonest to Thrasymachus. To him, Socrates seems to be proceeding as if he knew what the “right” answer is, while simultaneously denying that he has such knowledge to offer; and this seems to him simply dishonest. What Thrasymachus does not seem to grasp is that Socrates can engage in dialogue in order to come to have the right understanding. The dialogue itself is not a speech act aimed at the communication of already worked out clarity, but is a speech act aimed at arriving at such clarity.

³ Plato, *Republic*, 337a. Quoted in Vlastos, *Socrates*, 24.

What makes such “playful” speech about the most important matters valuable in the context of Plato’s Socratic dialogues is the belief that knowledge of such matters is indeed possible but not yet obtained, and that playing in the ambiguity will help reveal the truth. But Rorty’s ironist does not have this sort of hope. The ironist, in advance of this play, does not anticipate that a final answer is possible. If there is no prior belief that knowledge about the most important moral determinations in life is in principle accessible, then it does raise a second sort of challenge: what is the value in being ironic about these most basic and determinative moral beliefs if not irony’s role in the pursuit of knowledge?

The course of everyday human life does seem to demand that we make value judgments and often these have far reaching consequences both for our own lives and for the lives of others. And if one believes in advance of any inquiry into such matters that the conclusion regarding these judgments cannot be legitimated by some extra-linguistic “truth” that could ultimately determine our opinions as the right ones, then such playful inquiry seems to produce two sorts of dispositions. Either one tends to reject such inquiry as frivolous talk that makes a mockery of the most serious of matters, or one must embrace such inquiry for its own sake as somehow ultimately valuable (if for no other reason than to ward off the evils of ignorance). The former option regards life as better off with a potentially unwarranted “belief,” whereas the latter embraces the idea that it is better to be in a perpetual state of criticisms and potential confusion than to uncritically believe what cannot be demonstrated to be true. That is, one either simply *decides* what value judgments and moral norms are to be endorsed without

demonstrating a knowledge that they are the right judgments, or one adopt a *suspicious* attitude towards any value judgments held by oneself or others.

What this bifurcation overlooks is the possibility that ideas can legitimately displace other ideas without themselves being demonstrably “true.” But in what could such legitimacy consist? I want to draw on Hegel’s idea of “sublation” here to suggest that new ideas can arise out of the conflict between two or more competing meanings and that once these new ideas become available, they render it impossible to believe in the “face value” of older meanings. I will be arguing that irony provides a space of the “free play” of meaning that can let new understanding arise, but where the substance of this new understanding cannot be anticipated in advance of engaging in that playful inquiry. According to the view I am advancing here, the space of free play opened in the structural ambiguity of irony is productive—it provides the opportunity for new ideas to be born that, once “alive,” reveal older ways of thinking in such a way that they can *now* only seem to have been “leading to” or “approximating” these new ideas. The crucial idea here is that when these new meanings arise, it is impossible to return to the face value meaning of older ideas. Thought of in this way, the ironist is not one who is “backed into the corner of irony,” so to speak, but one who is enabled to actively engage in disclosing our most precious evaluations in an open space of questionability *with the anticipation* of uncovering ways of seeing that are “better” or “more choice-worthy.” These new ways of seeing are not “better” because they correspond to some extra-linguistic, atemporal, universal and necessary truths, but rather they are “better” because of what might be thought of as a “contingent necessity” produced by the irreversibility in a temporal development in meaning when new ideas press upon us in such a way that

they render it impossible to revert to the “face value” understanding of the older ideas that gave birth to them.

Thought of in this way, we can mark out two distinct modes of being an ironist, one active and one passive. Rorty spends much of his efforts in a polemic against the point of view of one who thinks that knowledge about moral matters is in principle obtainable. As a result, the picture we get is predominantly reactive—the effort is spent on introducing suspicion to those, and regarding those, who uncritically and unironically pursue “truth.” What is less evident in Rorty are clues to what being an *active* ironist would practically involve. This is the possibility I intend to clarify here. In order to distinguish the predominantly *reactive* picture of the ironist painted by Rorty from the form of life of an *active* ironist, I will call the latter an “improviser.”

Although both are epistemological ironists, they are so for crucially different reasons. I do not want merely to lay out these two ironist forms of life side by side as two merely possible dispositions, nor do I want to argue that one ought to be preferred over the other. Rather I want to argue for the stronger thesis that once fully thematized, the form of life of an improviser sublates that of a reactive ironist. In order to begin developing this thesis, I want to give a brief account of the origins of this idea.

This project began with the vague insight that the dynamics of musical improvisation might serve as an analogy by which to thematize a distinctive mode of self-interpretation appropriate to contemporary Western life; a mode of self-interpretation that, despite this seeming suitability, is not presently available in the repertoire of familiar themes of self-understanding. By “improvisation,” with regard to self-interpretation, I mean a dynamic interplay between meaningful actions in the

context of an incomplete understanding of the horizon of significance that makes the act possible, on the one hand, and the constitution and preservation of that horizon of significance partially accomplished by those very acts on the other. The idea here is that intentional action can only be taken in relation to some horizon of meaning. Intentional actions, in turn, preserve or sustain that horizon of meaning. By the phrase “horizon of meaning,” I intend a more or less well-organized configuration of ideas, practices, institutions, and concerns that “hang together” and mutually support each other in a particular configuration or coherence. If, however, the horizon of meaning is “incomplete,” contains internal contradictions, or is simply open to the possibility of revision, then every intentional action always presents the possibility that it might confirm the expected configuration of meaning, it might reveal some contradictions, or it might simply open up new possibilities of coherence that could not be anticipated prior to a particular event. As a result, intentional action is charged with the possibility that it might either sustain or modify the horizon of meaning that motivated it.

Understood in this way, one might expect examples of improvisational interpretation to be readily available; and to varying degrees, and in different circumstances, it is true that everybody engages in the sort of interpretation that loosely resembles the particular dynamic relationship between attention, time, and contextual reframing in terms of which I will be characterizing the improviser. But my original intuition led beyond the applicability of the metaphor of improvisation as a descriptive tool to account for how individuals comport themselves in the face of a break-down in meaning within a particular horizon of meaning; rather, the intuition suggested that musical improvisation possessed clues to characterizing a mode of interpretation that

might be explicitly embraced—a disposition that characterized a mode of comportment that characterized the crucial feature of a form of life. And more than being a mere alternative mode of interpretation that might add to the cultural repertoire, I sensed that there was something singularly appropriate, perhaps even necessary, about this improvisational mode for contemporary Western culture.

Examples of situations that called for a whole form of life represented by the improviser metaphor were not so obvious however, and as a result it was not obvious how or even why such a *normative* intuition should be discharged. While it seems relatively unproblematic to think of particular situations in which an improvisational mode could be more effective, given the motivations of the agents involved,⁴ it is not clear what could motivate adopting improvisation as a clue to a mode of interpretation appropriate to contemporary life in the Western world generally. What was needed to sound out this intuition was some definite problem unique to contemporary Western life to which an improvisational mode of interpretation might be generally applicable. A problem, in other words, which could serve as a frame, not only to motivate the investigation, but also to guide and structure its thematization. What I had at the outset then, in effect, was an intuition regarding a solution that was in need of a well-articulated problem.

The relevant “problem” became apparent quite independently in the course of reflecting on Richard Rorty’s notion of the “ironist.” Here again I had an intuition that there was something practically problematic about the form of life that Rorty was

⁴ For example, a situation in which there is no adequate precedence to guide interpretation in the face of an unanticipated event in the course of an expected ordered temporal sequence such as a musical score, a narrative, or a building plan—or, more concretely, such as when one is faced with the task of building, say, a wooden desk without the proper tools and is thus put in a position of “seeing” other tools not intended for the task at hand in new ways that render them as resource for accomplishing the task.

advocating. I agree with Rorty that the history of metaphysics has left us with the epistemic situation that produces the ironist's form of life, a condition that seems unavoidable given the condition of knowledge in the contemporary Western world. I concur with Rorty's strong claim that when properly understood, intellectual honesty would draw any thinker into the basic condition that underwrites the ironist orientation; or to put it in another way, the claim that whether one runs into that condition willingly or reluctantly fights against it, the condition involves a sort of "gravity" from which it is very difficult to escape once one fully appreciates the intellectual and cultural forces that produced it. Thought of in this way, the character of the "ironist" is not a disposition to be argued for—it is not the way we ought to live—but rather it names a form of life from which it is seemingly impossible to escape. It is not a matter of being "right," but a matter of being unable to return to a previous form of thinking. The condition has the character of the relationship between the "experienced" and the "naïve" points of view. Whether one enjoys or regrets the "experienced" position, it is impossible to unproblematically return to the naïve position. Whichever the case, however, there is something incoherent in the form of life that expresses an *explicit* appreciation of this condition. I will argue in Part One that it is extraordinarily difficult to sustain an ironist form of life; difficult, that is, not only from a personal point of view, but also with regard to the sustainability of a culture as a whole.

In order to thematize what is problematic in the Ironist's form of life, I will introduce the concept of "moral friction." This notion is intended to name the practical contradiction that results from the *explicit* recognition that one's own vocabulary, values, and practices are the product of historical contingency on the one hand, and the

necessity, on the other hand, of presupposing the normative weight implicit in these values and practices as they are used in the course of navigating everyday situations. This “practical contradiction” can be thematized phenomenologically by drawing attention to experiences that are ordinarily addressed by disciplines such as psychology and sociology.⁵ In the course of thematizing moral friction, however, it quickly became clear that the familiar psychological and sociological vocabulary that we commonly employ to discuss the relevant human phenomena are systematically inadequate to the task of properly identifying moral friction. These inadequacies are due to the ontological and epistemological presuppositions built into the vocabulary of the human sciences, a vocabulary that produces both (1) a sharp distinction between morally neutral empirical descriptions and normative moral descriptions, and (2) a sharp distinction between “inner” psychological phenomena and “outer” sociological phenomena. The thematization of moral friction required an ontological and methodological shift even before the phenomenon can be properly indicated. Yet once these conceptual difficulties are neutralized, a clear connection can be made between the ironist form of life and phenomena such as depression (a traditionally “inner” phenomenon) and the

⁵ For my propose, I will use the terms “psychology” and “sociology” in the simple sense of dividing the human sciences into accounts devoted to illuminating “inner” vs. “outer” human phenomena. This distinction, although it has some historical basis, is a crude characterization given the rich theoretical complexity within the self-understanding of these disciplines. Moreover, characterizing the division between these two topics according to “inner” and “outer” phenomena also fails to capture the diverse approaches offered by other disciplines within the human sciences (e.g., history, literature, anthropology, etc.). My intention in drawing this distinction, however, will be to show how the division itself tends to pre-categorize phenomena as falling either into a domain appropriate to one or the other; and this categorization, predicated as it is upon ontological presuppositions, covers over the possibility of making a connection between familiar problematic phenomena and the cultural and epistemic conditions that lead to an ironist’s form of life. As a result, in order to thematize moral friction phenomenologically, this ontological presupposition must be diffused such that familiar phenomena can be observed as instances of moral friction. For this purpose, this simplification regarding the sciences of psychology and sociology is rhetorically useful in order to capture this basic division.

loss of the depth and complexity of social roles (traditionally “outer” phenomenon such as, for example, “friendship,” “marriage,” “citizenship,” or “professionalism).

This conclusion, once supported phenomenologically, provides the occasion for introducing improvisation as a form of life appropriate to the contemporary Western condition. The dynamics of improvisation, in other words, provides a clue to a form of life that does not fall prey to the practical contradiction—moral friction—that is characteristic of the ironist’s form of life. Yet even if improvisation can be shown to be a form of life distinct from that of the ironist’s, it is nevertheless not enough for my purposes to demonstrate that improvisation is merely a potentially preferable alternative. I intend to defend the stronger claim that once properly understood, not only is the improviser a form of life distinct from that of the ironist, it also names a transformation that, once occurring, makes it impossible to return to a reactive ironist point of view. Although, as suggested above, the character I will be calling the “improviser” utilizes the peculiar semantic relationships of irony, the aim of this utilization is fundamentally different from that of the ironist. The ironist largely aims to escape the confines of the illegitimate claim of moral norms—or, in another way that I will be arguing below, aims to escape uncertainty by rejecting the need for rationally justifying moral norms while nevertheless embracing them. The improviser, in contrast, seeks to participate in the production of new norms that have binding force.

In order to defend these claims, I will introduce in Part Two a method of inquiry called “moral phenomenology.” This notion draws a connection between hermeneutic phenomenology and Hegel’s notion of “sublation,” and is intended to characterize an *active inquiry* into the availability of novel interpretations that can dissolve the

contradictions that provide occasion for the hermeneutic itself. When applied at the most general level, this methodology undercuts the practical contradictions within the ironist form of life that lead to moral friction. A simple example can illustrate the central idea.

The reinterpretation of what it *is* to be in a marriage after a practical contradiction has arisen in the course of a particular life can provide the context under which the older meaning of marriage looks “naïve.” One may understand perfectly well what one once understood marriage to be, but given an interpretation that dissolves a practical contradiction while preserving other essential features of the practice, it becomes impossible to unproblematically embrace the “naïve” meaning. The new meaning might yet still be recognizably incomplete, but what is essential here is that the new meaning is more coherent than the previous meaning. Moreover, once one begins to understand this novel meaning in relation to other social roles, practices, and ideas, and begins to modify these to accommodate the new meaning of marriage, the older meaning of “marriage” increasingly diverges from what now seems like “common sense.” Eventually, the “problem” or contradiction that gave rise to the new meaning begins to fade to such a degree that it is hard to “feel” the weightiness that “motivated” or “occasioned” the birth of the contemporary meaning. Crucially important to notice in this process is the normative transformations that accompany the transition from the old to the new meaning. When the meaning of “marriage” changes, so too does the normative claims it makes on us when we self-identify as “being married.” I use the phrase “moral phenomenology” to capture both the ontological development in what it is

to “be married” and the normative development regarding how someone who is married understands that he or she “ought act.”

To say that moral phenomenology is an “active inquiry” is to differentiate it from the passive participation in the historical development of cultural meanings and practices. It is this “active” or “intentional” participation that marks the crucial difference between the ironist and the improviser. It is one thing to let the meaning of particular social roles and practices more or less passively develop through one’s own life experiences, it is another to attentively embrace the task of doing so. For reasons that will be developed in detail in Part One, the ironist is not in a position to take this active stance toward the development of meaning, and “moral friction” names the contradiction that accompanies this lack of ability.

Moral phenomenology plays the dual role of revealing both how the resolution of moral friction in the improviser’s form of life makes it impossible to uncritically return to that of a reactive form of ironist life as well as provides a formal account of the sort of necessity involved in the dynamics of improvisational interpretation itself. It is for this reason that the notion of “moral phenomenology” is worth developing systematically wherein the relationship between the ironist and the improviser is a special case. By developing moral phenomenology as an independent mode of inquiry it can then be deployed simultaneously as the method of this investigation and as a formal account of the structural relationships of necessity within the temporal unfolding of the improvisational hermeneutics of self that work to produce the historical forms of moral advance appropriate to the contemporary Western condition.

The concept of “improvisation,” as I intend to employ it, can initially be understood as a mode of comportment in which one intentionally takes responsibility for the development of the implicit normative moral claims that emerge from the dynamic interaction between various social roles, practices, ideas and concerns which, taken together in any particular situation, compose the whole of one’s own self-understanding. Two key movements mark this particular form of self-interpretation. First, it requires attentive listening for (or readiness for) dissonant events within otherwise familiar situations—a dissonance that upon reflection can be resolved into conceptual contradiction. It is the disposition of irony that allows us to entertain the schism that gives rise to multiple interpretations without committing to one of them prior to the investigation. And second, this form of self-interpretation is accomplished by actively looking for and recognizing new interpretations that reframe the context of significance in which the interpretive situation is enveloped; and in such a way as to simultaneously dissolve and appropriate the contradiction. An improviser then, refers to one who is disposed to intentionally attend to ambiguous occurrences in the course of a particular instance of familiar sorts of situations, and to see them as opportunities for reframing the meaning of the situation in general.

Once improvisation is taken up as a form of life, the relationship between the improviser and the ironist can be seen to mirror the kind of irreversible transition that exists between the form of life of the ironist and what Rorty calls the “metaphysician;” where this latter term indicates one who believes in advance of the investigation that an ultimate and epistemologically warranted truth can be found for moral judgments. Again, the idea here is that one need not argue that it is “right” to be an “ironist” and that

one ought to embrace all that that form of life entails, but rather, one simply needs to show that it is no longer possible to be a metaphysician in the old ways of being so. In the same way, the form of life of an improviser that I am proposing renders the form of life of an ironist no longer appropriate.

It is of course always possible to transform the meaning of “metaphysician,” or “ironist”—just as it is possible to transform the meaning of “marriage”—in order to preserve continuity with the past; but this runs the risk of covering over the sort of profound transformations of meaning that have occurred. On the other hand, introducing new vocabulary runs the risk of suggesting that there is no essential relationship to the past; both results are misleading. What is crucial, then, is to track the shifts as best as one can in order to keep in view the sort of activity one is engaged in when actively taking up the improvisational form of life.

The improviser always “improvises” with something received. In the case of self-interpretation it is with traditional or received ideas, practices and concerns and the particular place within that constellation that one occupies. Some dimensions may be highly relevant to one’s positioning within the cultural horizon of meaning (e.g., gender, skin color, socio-economic class) and others far less so (e.g., eye color, tastes)—although it is telling to note that almost no points of noticeable difference are devoid of any meaning.

Seeing the task of the improviser in this light, it becomes clear that the improviser can fail in either of two ways. One misstep would be to resolve upon a particular interpretation as if it could never be developed any further, and the other would be to think that one could make a radical break with the past and start as if from

nothing. In this same way, the heart of my argument lies in the strong claim that once one understands what is entailed in being an “improviser” it is no longer possible to return to and sustain the sort of passivity of a reactive ironist entanglement with the inadequacies of older, more “metaphysical,” ideas, practices, and concerns of Western thinking. If the argument is successful, what is right not only about the ironist’s position, but also that of the metaphysician, are preserved and transformed. And yet at the same time, what is practically contradictory about the ironist’s form of life—what I am calling “moral friction”—is defused and transcended.

Part Three begins with “clues” to the phenomenon of moral friction, which both retrodictively confirms the thematization of “moral friction” and anticipates the sublation of this core problematical feature of the ironist form of life in the form of life of the improviser. In other words, these clues accomplish this sublation from two distinct directions: (a) from the direction of what we already find problematic in familiar phenomena that are reinterpreted under the theme of moral friction, and (b) from the direction of how this tension can be resolved via the theme of improvisation.

Part Three concludes with an account of the central temporal dynamics of what I will call an “improvisational hermeneutics.” To accomplish this, I will utilize a selective phenomenology of musical improvisation in order to isolate the distinctive structural features of its temporal orientation. When the dynamics of this phenomenon are applied to the movement of self-interpretation, it provides a powerful analogy by which to characterize a form of life that dissolves moral friction while simultaneously preserving the open creative and critical space of irony.

Part One | Moral Friction

The aim of this first of three parts is to indicate and thematize a phenomenon that I will identify with the phrase “moral friction.” The concept is intended to capture a practical contradiction within the form of life characteristic of late modernity and is intended to prepare the ground, by way of providing the necessary ideas and tensions, for disclosing a form of life that defuses and transforms what is practically problematic in the phenomenon of moral friction. The form of life that I have in mind, the disclosure of which constitutes the ultimate aim of this project, cannot be thematized without a prior hermeneutic of more familiar themes. My intention here is to provide a conceptual bridge from these more familiar discourses to the primary topic in such a way as to at once motivate and anticipate the characterization of the form of life I will call the “improviser.”

A first approximation of what the phrase “moral friction” is intended to indicate would be to say that it names a phenomenon in which situations as such “lose energy”; or in another way, that it names how it is that situations in general can involve a “diminishing enthusiasm or passion”; or, in yet another way, that it points to the fact that situations might simply become “uninteresting.” Just as some instances of a particular sort of situation might “capture one’s attention” or “keep one’s interest,” and yet not in

other cases, I want to suggest that under certain conditions, “situations” as such can exhibit a generalized loss of energy, a diminishing enthusiasm, or a loss of interest.

This is a coarse and vague description; but it is necessarily so. Even the phenomenological clues that I mean to draw attention to cannot be directly indicated utilizing familiar concepts from much of contemporary philosophical discourse. This is so because these discourses tend to involve certain basic metaphysical presuppositions built into the every language that governs the way we talk about the relevant phenomena that correspond to this rough description, and these presuppositions work, by virtue of these prior epistemological and ontological commitments, to conceal moral friction. Specifically, such phenomena are usually approached empirically by the human sciences as either psychological or sociological events. Both approaches build in a similar set of prejudices regarding *how we see* the relevant phenomena prior to any actual investigation. The situation can perhaps best be illustrated by analogy; and it is worth beginning with an elaboration of this analogy even before an initial exposition of the meaning of moral friction. Doing so has the advantage of signaling how the concept is to be understood in contrast to more familiar ideas and methods that must be drawn upon in the task of sounding out this provisional indication of moral friction.

§1.1 | *The Difficulty of Indicating Moral Friction*

Since the concept of “moral friction” names a phenomenon, it is natural to suppose that the first task of making the concept clear ought begin by simply indicating instances of the phenomenon. The difficulty that arises even before this most basic step, however, is not unlike the difficulties one might encounter in an attempt to show an

instance of electromagnetism to—let us suppose—a well educated scholar who has neither encountered the concept nor any related subordinate concepts. No matter how acute, such a scholar would simply lack the necessary conceptual framework to notice the relevant array of very different “looking” phenomena *as* instances of electromagnetism prior to mastering a range of new concepts, relations, and questions. Only after this new conceptual framework has become available to the scholar would it be possible to see familiar phenomenon such as lightning, the interaction of lodestone and iron, and visible light as instances of the same kind of phenomena.

What is worse however is that such a scholar is unlikely even to be in a position to consider that there is something lacking in the basic commonsense understanding of the phenomena that she already possesses—at least not lacking in such a way that the sudden availability of the theory of classical electromagnetism might somehow illuminate the misgivings that she does happen to harbor in regards to these phenomena. In other words, because a very specific set of questions need to be asked in order to arrive at the theory of classical electromagnetism, a scholar not troubled by this specific set of questions is unlikely even to have the requisite concerns that could serve to motivate a consideration of the theory; and this is so precisely because it is an answer to a problem that she is not yet in a position to enquire about. Indicating the phenomenon of moral friction is not unlike the above example in that it involves the awkward communication that results from attempting to develop an “answer” for an audience that has not yet been troubled by the *relevant form* of the “question.” To anyone who has not yet framed the “question” in this novel form, such an “answer” would undoubtedly seem puzzling and unnecessary at first glance. Much must be said in order to make the

concept of “moral friction” familiar, not only before its adequacy can be evaluated, but even before a good reason can be given for its consideration.

To extend this analogy a bit further, like with electromagnetism, instances of moral friction are readily available once properly thematized. However, just as in the attempt to indicate instances of electromagnetism before the proper conceptual frameworks and concerns are available, simply enumerating familiar phenomena that are to be re-described as instances of moral friction will do little to illuminate the concept itself or motivate a consideration of it; e.g., it is of no help whatsoever to simply point to lightning, to the movement of a lodestone compass, or to sunlight in order to indicate instances of electromagnetism prior to knowing anything about the problem space in which the theory of classical electromagnetism moves. What is needed first of all is a method that at once transforms what are initially seen to be very different sorts of phenomena into a single unified phenomenon in such a way that it also carries with it the motivation to carry the investigation through.

And yet, just as it would be necessary to baldly insist upon an initially opaque relationship between very different familiar phenomena in order to indicate “the place to look for” electromagnetic phenomena, the indication and thematization of moral friction must include some provisional bearings within a range of familiar ideas and concerns. That is, the indication of moral friction must begin with a provisional set of recognizable phenomena that can serve to mark-out the basic terrain in which moral friction is to be thematized.

Although there are a number of familiar phenomena that correspond to the vague description “a generalized loss of interest, diminishing enthusiasm, or loss of energy”

(the most familiar of which is undoubtedly the phenomenon understood by the psychological concept of “depression”) these phenomena have traditionally been accounted for in the terms that are native to theoretically distinct and often incompatible lines of inquiry (e.g., by psychology, sociology, moral theory, political science, etc.). The epistemological barriers that separate these disciplines, and most importantly, the ontological presuppositions that determine their proper subject matter, have had the effect of covering over any opportunity for understanding this particular sort of “generalized loss of energy in all situations” as an aspect of a single unified phenomenon.

§1.1.2 | *How Moral Friction is Ontologically Obscured*

By saying that moral friction is a “unified phenomenon,” I mean to say that there is a description under which it is possible to express both inner psychological states and outer sociological relations as aspects of *one sort* of phenomenon; aspects, that is, that are conceptually interdependent rather than empirically interdependent. Empirically dependent relations between phenomena—such as causal relations—always involve a multiplicity of distinct “things” that stand as the relata of a relation. Conceptually dependent aspects of a phenomenon, on the other hand, are analyzed components of a single sort of phenomenon. In other words, an account of a phenomenon—a phenomenology—aims at disclosing what are initially hidden *aspects* of a single sort of phenomenon. What is revealed in the phenomenology cannot be understood as the initially concealed parts standing in a causal relationship to each other in such a way that they “add up” to a phenomenon at a greater level of abstraction. It is not the kind of

investigation that seeks to reduce some whole to the component parts and the relations that stand between them, which together, once made plain, compose and explain the interactions of parts that compose the whole. To say that moral friction is a unified phenomenon, then, is not to say that there is some “whole” that has somehow been “missed” or “obscured” in the past because we have only been focusing on the parts; as if there were some possible “whole” that had both inner psychological parts and outer sociological parts. Rather, I want to argue that the very distinction between inner and outer is precisely what has made the phenomenon inaccessible for thematization.

In the current investigation, the task is to show how a particular phenomenon—moral friction—has been hidden by the dominant ontological biases of the Western tradition. It is “hidden,” that is, by the tradition’s tendency to explicate the ordinary ways in which moral friction does show up to us by imposing—prior to the concept which picks out and frames a phenomenon and prior to any actual subsequent investigation—two ontological classes into which the relevant phenomena are sorted. Once so sorted, those phenomena are at best only causally related (as if to say that some aspects of psychological states are caused by sociological phenomena and *vice versa*). When this ontological bias is removed, however, what initially looked like two separate kinds of causally related phenomena is now revealed as two aspects of one phenomenon. Analogously, just as with the example of lighting and the movement of a lodestone compass, the unified phenomenon of electromagnetism is obscured or hidden so long as one clings to the “fact” that one is an electrical phenomenon and the other a magnetic phenomenon (and the fact that the movement of a compass is affected during a

lightening storm is a mere causal curiosity yet to be explained).⁶ This analogy works to outline the basic move that I want to make. Nevertheless, it is also limited because the ontological bias that obscures moral friction is far deeper than the prejudices that obscures scientific theories.

It is the very ontological division between “subjects of knowing” and “objects of knowledge”—the characteristic ontological framework in the Western intellectual tradition since Descartes—that obscures moral friction. Given the ontological presuppositions of the human sciences, and to the extent that psychological and sociological phenomena mark a distinction between subject matter relating to “inner mental states” and “outer social relations,” these sciences are not capable of unifying psychological and sociological aspects of a *single* phenomenon. The phenomenon I am calling moral friction demands just such unification. To the extent that an investigation begins as an empirical psychological or sociological inquiry, then, the ontological presuppositions concerning the being of the subject matter of these sciences (i.e., human beings) render the phenomenon of moral friction inaccessible from the start.

§1.1.3 | *How Moral Friction is Epistemically Obscured*

There is a second problem with the approach taken by the human sciences that covers over moral friction; and it lies in the nature of empirical investigation itself. One

⁶ Again, by analogy, if like Newton one presumes that “space,” “time,” “body,” and “force” are the basic concepts that articulate the ontology of all physical phenomena—a presupposition that inclines one to understand light as discrete entities possessed of kinetic energy, a finite velocity, and a linear trajectory—an inquiry into the nature of light is unlikely to reveal any underlying identity between magnetism and optics. Rather, noticing such an identity, historically, required something of a “gestalt shift” whereby optical phenomena come to be understood in terms of waves. Only in virtue of this alternative view was it possible for James Clark Maxwell to be in the position to notice the fact that the propagation of an electromagnetic wave was approximately the same as the speed of light—a fact that could not be reasonably dismissed as coincidence.

of the hallmarks of modern science is its epistemic division between normative moral claims and empirical factual claims. The third-personal “objective” frame of reference of empirical investigation conveys no normative moral force. This means that third-personal empirical descriptions cannot in principle provide normative conditions that guide willful or deliberative human activity. The empirical descriptions of phenomena by the human sciences, as part of the modern scientific project generally, intentionally exclude normative moral content. On this view, simply concluding something is the case about some human phenomenon from a third-personal point of view does not inform the one making the judgment how they or others ought subsequently to act in light of the judgment. One would have to add the idea of an “ought” to a purely third personal empirical descriptive claim (a description that is composed of “facts”) and this subsequent addition is understood as a merely first personal value judgment. The concept of moral friction that I want to develop here, in contrast, *is a third personal description that carries morally normative content*. Moral friction names a condition in which situations as such, and not individuals or particular situations, “lose energy or vitality” or become “uninteresting.” A concept like “uninteresting” is not value free. To say that a situation as such can become uninteresting is to give a third personal (the situation itself is uninteresting, not my idiosyncratic perception of it) descriptive claim which is value laden. It is, what Bernard Williams calls a “thick concept.”

One way to make this idea more clear is to see how Williams’ notion of a “thick concept” corresponds to what I called above, a “morally normative description.” The latter phrase indicates descriptions that carry the evaluative content that governs a field of possible reflective judgments that yield deliberative actions—a description, in other

words, that construes a situation in such a way that one might reflect upon it, deliberate about possible alternatives, and decide upon a course of action. “Thick concepts”, to use Williams’ own way of putting things, are notions such as:

...*treachery* and *promise* and *brutality* and *courage*, which seem to express a union of fact and value. The way these notions are applied is determined by what the world is like (for instance, by how someone has behaved), and yet, at the same time, their application usually involves a certain valuation of the situation, of persons or actions. Moreover, they usually (though not necessarily directly) provide reasons for action...It is essential to this account that the specific or “thick” character of these terms is given in the descriptive element. The value part is expressed [only] under analysis, by the all-purpose term *ought*.⁷

Morally normative descriptions of situations given in the first person are unproblematic. It is uncontroversial to assume that first personal deliberative action is motivated by a value-laden understanding of a situation (an understanding which could in principle be made explicit with a morally normative description) and that those motivations can be expressed in terms of value distinctions imbedded within that understanding. It is unproblematic, that is, because the “ought” is thought to be supplied by the subject and so carries no legitimate “objective” normative weight.⁸

Modern empirical science, including the human sciences, utilizes a third personal grammar in the account of phenomena (or it translates first person accounts into third personal generalizations) that strips out the valorized language that could present the situation in terms that mark out the value distinctions within the situation that could provide the opportunity for exercising reflective choice. A claim like “she did such and such” can be part of a third personal empirical description, but a claim like “she ought not to have done such and such” cannot. As a result of this distinction, for example, the

⁷Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, 129-130.

⁸ See Putnam, *The Collapse of the Fact/Value Dichotomy*, 2002

employment of the value neutral vocabulary native to empirical science as a normative source in first personal deliberative activity always runs the risk of distorting the experience by committing the naturalistic fallacy. It does so precisely because it tries to justify first personal choice (and the value distinctions that make that choice possible) by reference to third personal descriptions that are taken to be “true” or “right” or to “accurately reflect the world.”

Nevertheless, reflective deliberative actions require that there be some normative components in the explicit understanding of a particular situation. If one was to strip away any legitimate source for a normative component, the “action” can only be described via a value neutral *third personal* empirical description. For example, the phrase “Benjamin is sailing,” when understood as an empirical description, is of no help whatsoever for informing me what I ought to be doing when sailing. I go beyond the empirical description if I say, “because I am sailing, I ought try to catch the wind.” Or worse, if I say: because it is a *beautiful* day, I ought go sailing. Because the third personal descriptions of empirical science carry no such normative force, they cannot properly account for the *first personal experience* of taking action. In contrast, if I say, “I go to the beach,” then I am saying that I have chosen this course of action.⁹ Implicit in that statement is the possibility that I could have done something other than go to the beach. Because I have chosen to go to the beach, I must understand my choices in terms of contrasting values. That is, to the extent that it was a choice, I must—at least in principle—be able to give some reason why I have gone the beach instead of, say, out on

⁹ First personal grammar that is phrased as an active voice always implies choice. However, when using the passive voice, it is possible to phrase first personal statements that do not imply choice. I can say, for example, that “my heart beats,” but I cannot say “I beat my heart.” For the purposes of this analysis, when I refer to “first personal grammar” I will always assume an active voice.

a sailboat. I must be able to say, in other words, that under the circumstances it is *better* to go to the beach.¹⁰ If the same event was described from a third person point of view in value neutral empirical terms, no such normative component is required to understand the description. The phrase, “he goes to the beach” does not imply that in going to the beach I have chosen it. I could, after all, have been asleep when I was taken to the beach.

This distinction between the first personal deliberative vantage point and the third personal empirical vantage point is a familiar one. Unlike G. E. Moore’s conception of the naturalistic fallacy, however, a notion that cuts *between* empirical and moral inquiries, the concept of “moral friction” might be said to cut *across* this epistemological divide. As such, it is precisely the epistemological prejudice, which is neatly captured in the idea of the “naturalistic fallacy,” that makes moral friction initially inaccessible.

Now that these obscuring presuppositions have been roughly sketched out, I want to provide a provisional indication of the problem of moral friction in order to provide the basic “bearings” of the exposition before elaborating further on how both these presuppositions obscures moral friction. I call this account “provisional” because it must employ the very deceptive language that obscures moral friction. To achieve this interim or transitional account, I want to draw attention to what can initially be thought of as three interdependent dimensions of moral friction: an epistemological element concerning the legitimacy of moral judgments or evaluations, a sociological element regarding the public meaning of social roles (an “outer” or “public” dimension), and a

¹⁰ A truly capricious “act” is no more an action—a product of deliberation—than a physical reflex is an action.

psychological element concerning first personal experience of taking over these social roles (“inner” or “private” dimension).

§1.2 | *The Moral/Epistemic Dimension*

The moral/epistemic axis of this provisional account of moral friction concerns the conditions under which it becomes impossible to experience making what Charles Taylor has called “strong evaluations” in such a way that the result of the evaluation makes an unavoidable first personal normative claim on one’s own willful activity. That is, it names a way of thinking in which it becomes impossible to experience those standards of moral evaluation that enable discriminations between “right or wrong, better or worse, higher or lower,” etc., as making a claim on one’s own moral judgment and will; a claim, that is, which must either be heeded, rebuked, or strategically avoided, but which it is impossible to ignore. The kind of evaluations that Taylor intends to indicate by the phrase “strong evaluations” are those, as he puts it, “which are not rendered valid by our own desires, inclinations, or choices, but rather stand independent of these and offer standards by which they can be judged.”¹¹ These are evaluations that have “normative force.” They are claims that take the form of an imperative—“I *must* do this because it is *right*,” or “you *must* live this way because it is *better* to do so,” or, in another way, assertions like, “that is a *lower* form of life that I *ought not* to peruse.”

One way to understand why it might become impossible to feel the imperative implicit in strong evaluations is to consider situations in which the “normative question” (why ought I be moral?) exerts a force on just those occasions when a strong evaluation

¹¹Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 4.

might have otherwise unreflectively exerted its normative force. Situations, in other words, in which the question, “what *justifies* the claims that morality makes on [me],”¹² arises in just those instances when one would otherwise simply “feel” the force of a moral imperative—one in which that force is expressed via the strong evaluation itself.

If I were to find myself in a situation in which I am inclined to lie, but yet at the same moment also inclined to think that it would be wrong to do so, I might respond to the situation in one of three ways. I might respond to the conflict by reflectively endorsing the strong evaluation that “it is wrong to lie” and subsequently act in accord with that judgment. Alternatively, I might also respond—either explicitly or implicitly—by doubting the validity of this particular moral inclination (that it is “wrong to lie in this situation”); and passing through this doubt, conclude that either it is permissible to lie in general, or that it is permissible to lie in this particular case. Either way the doubt is concerning assertions regarding which occasions or under what conditions it is wrong to lie. The resolution of this doubt, whatever it may be or however it is achieved, itself constitutes a strong evaluation and assumes the implicit force of that evaluation.

A third way in which I might respond involves a more universal doubt concerning the validity of the kind of claim I would be endorsing if I were to come to any conclusion regarding the appropriateness of a lie in any given situation. In other words, I might both be inclined to think that in general there is something wrong about lying, agree with this intuition upon reflection and, moreover, I might find no good reason why a given situation might warrant a justifiable exception to this rule, and yet, I may nonetheless be hesitant to endorse this evaluation because of the *kind* of evaluation

¹² Korsgaard, *Sources of Normativity*, 9-10. *Korsgaard's emphasis.*

it is. I might hesitate precisely because I harbor misgivings about endorsing the normative force implicit in a strong evaluation as such. It is just this sort of “misgiving” that amounts to the kind of explicit doubt that motivates the “normative question.” The question as to why ought I to heed the normative force implicit in a strong evaluation just amounts to—when made explicit and generalized—the question, “why ought I be moral?” The first person experience of doubt at this level involves a kind of “hesitation” or “break” in the continuity of the otherwise smooth flow from our moral intuition, to the explicit critical assessment of that intuition, to finally a considered evaluation and subsequent action.

However, it is reasonable to protest that any such practical “hesitation” which manifests as the result of such a doubt is only a possible “psychological” result of what is strictly speaking a purely epistemological issue. The question “what justifies the claims that morality makes on me” is only contingently related, the objection might go, to any psychological effects it might or might not have. One can imagine, of course, entertaining the normative question in “controlled academic settings” and yet experiencing no corresponding “hesitation” when it comes to actually making strong evaluations in the course of everyday life. The situation is different, however, if we add to this state of affairs the considered conclusion that the normative question cannot, in principle, have a decisive answer.

If we are under the presumption that the normative question cannot be answered (setting aside for the moment the question of whether or not this presumption is justified), if we presume, that is, that there is no compelling reason to be moral regardless of the particular moral intuitions or ideas one happens to have—which

amounts to saying that there is no good reason to heed the force implicit in the strong evaluations I find myself inclined to make—then the very idea of thinking about evaluation in “strong evaluative terms” begins to look wrong-headed. What is left, for *all practical purposes*, are evaluations based on non-normative claims such as “tastes,” “feelings,” or “inclinations”; i.e., what in Taylor’s terminology are “weak evaluations.”

Rorty’s notion of the “ironist” is helpful here in getting clear about what a life governed by such a conclusion regarding the normative question might look like, and it can serve as a kind of shorthand to indicate that form of thinking that developed after the historical transformation which Nietzsche thematized as that historical “moment” in which it became possible to articulate a natural and social order without reference to an absolute (God, nature, history, etc.)—an absolute, that is, that could ground and motivate the normative force in a strong evaluation. But more than this, it also helps clarify the form of life that emerges in that historical moment when it became possible to entertain the idea that even the vocabulary in which we articulate our deepest ethical and metaphysical commitments—an idea Rorty captures in the notion of a “final vocabulary”—might be inextricably confined to the historically contingent constellation of ideas, practices, and concerns of the particular people we happen to find ourselves with. If it is the case that our final vocabularies, and the commitments that they articulate, are at the deepest level radically historically contingent—that they are constrained by the horizon of a particular cultural context—then it becomes impossible to give a metaphysically grounded answer to the normative question.

The idea here is that human beings always make evaluations in the terms of some final vocabulary or other, and because we cannot get outside our final vocabulary in

order to legitimate it (and delegitimize others) via a comparison with an extralinguistic, non-contextualized, and atemporal standard, the only intellectually responsible attitude to take in relation to one's own final vocabulary is an ironic one. In accord with this attitude, Rorty articulates the character of one who takes the effects of this historicization of final vocabularies seriously in this way:

...an "ironist" is someone who fulfills three conditions: (1) She has radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary she currently uses, because she has been impressed by other vocabularies... (2) she realizes that argument phrases in her present vocabulary can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts; (3) insofar as she philosophizes about her situation, she does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others, that it is in touch with a power not herself. Ironists, who are inclined to philosophize see the choice between vocabularies as made neither within a neutral and universal metavocabulary nor by an attempt to fight one's way past appearances to the real, but simply by playing the new off against the old.¹³

Understood in this way, it becomes clear how it is that one might reasonably become skeptical about the legitimacy of strong evaluations as such. From the vantage point of the ironist, the question of how one is to interpret or respond to the force that strong evaluations make on us is far from clear. Given that criteria of moral judgment and evaluation are always articulated in some final vocabulary or other, if vocabularies are historically contingent, then any given moral theory will itself only ever have a finite relevance for the range of concerns and intuitions of a particular historical people. The ironist cannot get sufficiently outside her final vocabulary to legitimate it.

Occupying this "in between" position (in between a particular culturally contingent inheritance and the explicit recognition of that contingency) makes it possible for one both to fully *understand* what weight a strong evaluation is supposed to exert given a proper understanding of its meaning within one's own final vocabulary and yet

¹³Rorty, Richard. *Contingency, irony, and solidarity*, 73.

to not *feel* the imperative that that meaning is clearly supposed to exert. In other words, for the ironist, a gap exists between understanding the “force” conveyed in a strong evaluation on the one hand, and actually feeling that “force” in practical deliberation. This moral/epistemic gap can be seen to manifest itself in two sorts of human phenomena: an “outer” social phenomenon and an “inner” psychological phenomenon. I will discuss these in turn over the next two sections.

§1.3 | *The Sociological Dimension*

The phenomenon of moral friction can be initially indicated with reference to the sociological process commonly identified as “normalization.” In the sense that I want to use the term, the idea refers to the human tendency to censor their own behavior in relation to a shared set of cultural norms. The unmodified sociological concept is a third personal empirical description of human social behavior. The social phenomenon I want to draw attention to, on the other hand, although it includes this third personal descriptive orientation, also involves a valorization of the phenomenon in such a way as to make it capable of functioning as a normative description; i.e., as a “thick” concept. Third personal normative descriptions include, for example, all ancient cosmologies wherein nature is thought to express its own inherent value (as opposed to being assigned value by human beings). It is worth reflecting on these third personal normative descriptions in order to highlight a few key features that are lost in this peculiar development in the modern Western worldview. According to these older cosmological views, simply by indicating what something *is* evokes a host of implicit strong evaluations. I can say, for example, “that coupled is married,” and in doing so, if

I understood marriage to be a “sacramental gift of God and part of a divinely intended cosmic order,” for example, I would not only be indicating a fact about the state of affairs, but rather I would also be indicating how the couple *ought* act. Even though in this example I have phrased the description in the third person, doing so has not diminished the strong evaluative content implicitly conveyed by the description. Simply “being married” involves a set of strong evaluations that provide the value contrasts in terms of which one might succeed or fail to achieve harmony with a prior “proper order.” In the case of pre-modern cosmologies, the force of the strong evaluations implicit in marriage practices is grounded in the role that these practices play in the larger cosmic order of things. It is this metaphysical grounding that makes such claims, whether expressed in the first or third person, capable of carrying normative force.

The third personal normative descriptive term that indicates the sociological dimension of moral friction, on the other hand, is not grounded in the metaphysics of pre-modern cosmology. Rather, the normative force that distinguishes third person morally normative descriptions from mere third person empirical descriptions is grounded merely by how we come to *understand* the situations we are in. Since the distinction between “empirical” investigations and “moral” investigations must be blurred in order to point to the sociological dimension of moral friction, it will be useful to introduce at this point a vocabulary that does not so much cut across the empirical/moral divide but rather diffuses it via a more radical ontological reorientation. The idea here is that if human understanding is thought to be at the center of ontological thought, the metaphysical basis for a morally neutral third personal vantage point is dissolved.

§1.3.2 | *Levelling*

In order to introduce the sociological dimension of moral friction, I want to draw on Heidegger's concept of "averageness" (*Durchschnittlichkeit*) and his concept of "levelling" (*Einebnung*).¹⁴ Heidegger describes averageness as a process whereby "[e]very kind of priority gets noiselessly suppressed...everything that is primordial gets glossed over as something that has long been well known...every secret loses its force."¹⁵ This way of putting things exhibits how what at one level can be understood as a purely factual account expressed from a third personal empirical vantage point, can at another level express a valorized understanding involving a negative estimation. That is, on the one hand, the account is merely describing how it is that human beings tend to understand and evaluate ideas, practices, and concerns over time; the great passions, wisdom, and hard fought achievements of one generation get displaced and devalued as "obvious" by the next. Yet on the other hand, it is also clear that there is something objectionable about "leveling." It expresses a sense of loss regarding something important to us. For Heidegger, the concepts of "averageness" and "levelling" bear both a neutral and a valorized sense. My intention here however is not to critically appropriate these two Heideggerian concepts by way of commenting on Heidegger's intended meaning. Rather, I will use the term "levelling" simply to name the sociological dimension of the phenomenon of moral friction.

Nevertheless, it is worth elaborating on how these concepts work for Heidegger in order to make plain the particular sense in which they can give insight into the sociological dimension of moral friction. Heidegger employs these two concepts in the

¹⁴ Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 164-165 (hereafter cited as "BT")

¹⁵ *ibid.*, 165

context of what he identifies as necessary structural features of human existence in general. One way to understand these terms is as an ontologically prioritized sense of “normalization.” That is, a sense in which “normalization” is not understood as an empirical concept indicating a process whereby individual “rational animals” tend towards uniformity, but rather is to be understood as a concept that indicates an ontological structure of human being that is the condition for the possibility of the existence of a background horizon of meaning against which human beings can first discover themselves *as* individuated entities.¹⁶ Heidegger uses the term “*das Man*”¹⁷ (sometimes translated as “the Anyone” or “the They”) to indicate this ontologically prioritized sense of normalization. On this view, the directionality implied by the term “normalization” is ontologically misleading. The term communicates that there is first a diversity that is then normalized. *Das Man*, on the other hand, is to be understood as a structural item of human being that provides for the background of meaning and norms that enables the horizon of significance in terms of which any particular deviation from the norm can first come into focus.

The idea of “*das Man*,” even if initially ontologically exotic, is grammatically very familiar. If we ask, “what does *one* do in this situation,” or if we assert, “one ought do such and such,” we are drawing upon the background understanding against which our ideas can be registered as “same” or “deviant.” Ontologically, to say that *das Man* is primary, is to say that human being (*Dasein*) is always already “normalized” or “thrown” into an ongoing horizon of significance in terms of which it is first possible for

¹⁶ See §2.2

¹⁷ BT, 164 I choose here to leave “*das Man*” untranslated. There are no obvious English equivalent and translating the term into “the Anyone” or “the They” is at least as, if not more, awkward as leaving the term in the original German.

one to find oneself; and against (or for) which one might achieve a sense of individuation. It is only in relation to the norms within this horizon that one can achieve distinction—achieve individuation. In this way, *das Man* is as ontologically “original” or “primary” as the individuated human being. Individual human beings, as beings that understand themselves in relation to the world and to others, can be individuated only within the shared “normalized” backdrop understanding of *das Man*. Moreover, when individuated, one does not leave the horizon of understanding that is *das Man*. Rather, every possibility for being something (a father, mother, citizen, professional, sports fan, etc) is part of *das Man*. Thought in this way, *das Man* is not a culturally confining “prison,” so to speak, from which individuals can never escape, but rather, *das Man* is the ultimate enabling condition making possible any identity or self-understanding possible whatsoever. On this view, the individual human, is to be understood as an instance of *das Man*.

Heidegger suggests that there is an “authentic” and “inauthentic” mode of comporting oneself as an “instance” or “expression” or “mode” of *das Man*. An authentic mode of comporting oneself involves explicitly recognizing and taking ownership of a historical/cultural matrix of norms that populate and organize the ways of life that one would ordinarily be unreflectively realizing in the course of everyday activities and events. This public “cultural” matrix is nothing other than the understanding of *das Man*, and authenticity involves an alteration of the typical way in which we comport ourselves in the world as an instance of *das Man*. Typically, that is, human beings are “lost” in the business of realizing a life governed by public norms, a condition Heidegger calls “fallenness” (*Verfallenheit*). By contrast, an authentic mode

of comportment involves first of all explicitly “finding oneself” as that being who is realizing these norms—or in other words, explicitly finding oneself *as* an instance of *das Man*. We discover, for example, that “we take pleasure and enjoy ourselves as *Man* [anyone] takes pleasure; we read, see, and judge about literature and art as *Man* sees and judges; likewise we shrink back from the ‘great mass’ as *Man* shrinks back; we find ‘shocking’ what *Man* finds shocking. *Das Man*, which is nothing definite, and which all are, though not as the sum, prescribes...”¹⁸ and “articulates the referential context of significance”¹⁹ for any individuation or difference.

But this explicit “finding” of oneself as an instance, expression, or mode of *das Man* also involves being alienated from the smooth flow of ordinary everyday worldly engagements. Heidegger suggests that anxiety is the mood that marks this alienation.

He writes:

Anxiety makes manifest in Dasein [human being] its *Being towards* its own most potentiality-for-being—that is, its *Being-free for* the freedom of choosing itself and taking hold of itself. Anxiety brings Dasein face to face with its *Being-free for* the authenticity of its Being, and for this authenticity as a possibility which it always is.²⁰

As I mean to use the term here, “alienation” indicates the sense in which an individual can become not “at home in” the particular content of their familiar life world. This happens when one comes “face to face” with her freedom for “choosing and taking hold of her self” *as* that being which she always already is in her everyday dealings in the world. The distance between this authentic “taking hold of oneself” on the one hand,

¹⁸ BT, 164. I have modified Macquarrie’s and Robinson’s translation of this passage by leaving “*das Man*” untranslated.

¹⁹ BT, 167

²⁰ BT, 232

and that factual being that is taken hold of on the other, discloses an essential “lack” or “nullity” (*Nichtigkeit*)²¹ in human being as a being thrown into the world.

Thought in this way, it is easy to be drawn to the conclusion that human ontology involves two essential aspects: on the one hand, a self that *is seen or described* (i.e., utilizing everyday worldly self-identifications such as “woman,” “father,” “citizen,” an “academic,” etc.) and on the other hand, the self that *is doing the seeing or describing*. Or to put this distinction in another way, one may be inclined to see the self as composed of both an “objectivity” that can be described and a “subjectivity” that gives the description. This is the sort of conclusion that Sartre comes to, for example, when he accounts for the human predicament with reference to two essential aspects: “facticity” and “transcendence.” Heidegger, however, maintains that this is the wrong way to understand the essential “lack” or “nullity” that makes authenticity possible.

The term that Heidegger uses to indicate the mode of worldly comportment whereby one can come to explicitly recognize one’s own involvement in everyday affairs is “resoluteness” (*Entschlossenheit*).²² The idea of “resoluteness” contrasts with the Sartrean emphasis on the radical freedom of transcendence—a freedom in the sense that I am free to choose a different life than the one I am currently leading. Rather than choosing the description I give of myself, Heidegger suggests that authenticity involves recognizing or being “free for” the possibility of taking “ownership” for what I already am. In other words, unlike the notion of “transcendence” or “subjectivity,” the notion of “authenticity” does not indicate an irreducible “part” my being—as if the very capacity for reflection has made my true “subjective” nature visible. “Resoluteness,” Heidegger

²¹ BT, 329

²² BT, 343-345

writes, “as *authentic Being-one’s-self*, does not separate Dasein from its world, nor does it isolate it so that it becomes a free-floating ‘I’.”²³ But rather, authenticity is a modification of how I comport myself towards the ordinary everyday activities that reflects the constellation of self-identifications or social roles (e.g., being a “man,” a “philosopher,” a “friend,” a “lover,” etc.) that I have already been realizing as an instance of *das Man*. In fact, in Heidegger’s account, it would be a category mistake to think that becoming authentic involves doing anything outwardly different in my everyday activities. Rather, being authentic involves what Nietzsche meant by the dictum: “become who you are.”²⁴ Being authentic involves “owning up to,” “taking over,” or “taking responsibility for” what I have *already* become in terms of the public norms I have *already* been expressing in everyday worldly engagements. On this view, for example, it is possible for me to be an “authentic scientist;” but as “authentic,” I do not thereby do something different from what I might otherwise do—as if to employ a different method than an “inauthentic scientist”—rather, what would make me authentic in this case is a mode of comportment in which I “take up” or “take ownership of” the constellation of norms, practices, and concerns that constituted my understanding of what being a self-identified “scientist” is all about.

An inauthentic mode of comportment, in contrast, involves a kind of refusal in the face of this “call” for an explicit recognition of oneself by engaging in a kind of “turning away” (*Abkehr*) or a “fleeing” (*Fliehen*) into the everyday business of realizing a life governed by public norms.²⁵ “Averageness” and “levelling,” when understood in the valorized sense, name the consequences (or even the goal) of this fleeing. In the

²³ BT, 344

²⁴ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 152 (Sec. 270)

²⁵ BT, 228-231

non-valORIZED sense, regardless of whether I am in an authentic or an inauthentic mode, being human just involves being continuously drawn back or “falling” (*Verfallen*) into the life-world that constitutes and frames who I understand myself to be, and what I understand myself to be “up to” (i.e., the life-world of *das Man*). To be human just means being inextricably immersed in public norms and ideas—what Heidegger calls “fallenness.” However, what makes “averageness” and “levelling” potentially pernicious—what gives the terms a negatively valorized meaning—are those situations in which I “actively fall” or “flee” into averageness or “mediocrity” in order to escape the call to explicitly “take over” the forms of life I find myself always already realizing. Just as authenticity involves being attentively immersed in everyday affairs, inauthenticity involves escaping that “explicit attentive immersion” by fleeing into those same everyday affairs; that is, fleeing in such a way that I cover-over and become inattentive to my immersion. Averageness and levelling are “problematical” when they become ends that are projected for the purpose of turning away from the task of explicitly “owning up to” who one already is. It is this last possibility that provides entrance into the sociological dimension of moral friction.

§1.3.3 | *Levelling as a Product of Contradiction*

I want to introduce a way of understanding “averaging” and “levelling” that builds on Heidegger’s suggestion that “being average” can itself become an aim or goal in an attempt to actively escape the “awareness” of one’s “thrownness” into a historical cultural horizon of meaning. The sense in which I want to appropriate the idea, in other words, shares the negatively valorized assessment of a motivated inauthentic willful

dispersion or “fleeing” into the everyday public life world. However, my appropriation of “averaging” and “leveling” is not built out of the relationship between the ontologically co-primordial background understanding of *das Man* and the possibility of authentic individuation via the essential “lack” or “nullity” built into being “thrown.” Rather, the notion I want to work with is the product of the relationship between two historically contingent sets of ideas that together partly compose the contemporary Western forms of life (two ideas that were expressed above in a different form in the discussion of Rorty’s conception of the Ironist): (1) The actual constellation of ideas, practices, concerns and institutions that compose the life world in which we come to understand ourselves, and in terms of which we comport ourselves in everyday activity as willful “individuals” or as “selves” and (2) the idea that the possibility of being an “individual” or “self” is itself a historically contingent form of life.

If both (1) and (2) are unavoidable ideas imbedded in the modes of life characteristic of the modern Western, then there exists a basic contradiction that is expressed phenomenologically in a way closely related to Heidegger’s notions of “averageness” and “levelling.” The concept of “levelling,” as I will appropriate it, is here understood as a condition of culture in which there is a generalized loss of interest, passion, or energy for realizing a life governed by a particular set of historically contingent social roles. The idea here is that because the form of life of an individual or self is understood to be only one historical possibility among others, there is a contradiction at the heart of modern Western forms of life that consists in recognizing that the norms involved in being an individual are both unavoidable and yet historically contingent. The response to this contradiction is generally to turn away (or “flee”) into

the everyday activities of realizing a life that conforms to the norm of being an individual. Just like in Heidegger's distinction between authentic and inauthentic modes of comportment, the difference does not consist in doing something different when realizing the life of an individual, but rather, in how, on the one hand, one can be "free for" taking up and intentionally realizing the life of an individual, and on the other hand, how one can "flee" into the those same norms that compose the life of an individual. My aim here is to point out important impediments to realizing the first possibility and a negative consequence in realizing the latter possibility.

The technical sense in which I want to appropriate the term "levelling," will be to indicate a state of affairs that results from an interaction between two finite, temporal, and contingent social/cultural ideas that together produce a way of life which inherently displaces the possibility of the moral force in a normative description of that life and yet at the same time leaves no possibility other than to realize a life that is shaped and constrained by that very description. Levelling is the product of valorizing an active "turning away" from an explicit recognition of this contradiction and where the norms of the culture involve individuals "fleeing" or "escaping" into the business of realizing the life of "being an individual." In order to see what this "inauthentic" escape into the everyday life of being an individual produces, it is worth starting from two ineffective attempts at what in Heidegger's language would correspond to "authentic" modes.

There are two forms which an "authentic" response might take to the contradiction between (1) and (2) cited above. Each response however is ultimately incapable of effectively resolving the contradiction and as a result, each response must eventually resort to a form of inauthentic fleeing in order for the form of life to be

practically sustained. And this means that both authentic modes, along with the inauthentic mode, ultimately result in what I am here calling “levelling.” Observing exactly how these “authentic” attempts fail can reveal the everyday commonsense phenomenological manifestation of levelling.

First, one might respond to the practical contradiction between (1) and (2) by decisively choosing a “final” set of values—or a “final vocabulary”—that can serve as a basis for a structure under which one can subordinate all other normative descriptions. Let us call one who adopts this option a “decisionist.” This option can be further divided into a first personal normative language or a third personal normative language. The first person normative description requires no claim to universality; it is intelligible to say, for example, “these are my values, but yours may be different.” On this option, a third personal normative description is used, but it is not intended to exert a normative force for anyone *except* the one giving the description. An example similar to, but not identical with, this option is Kierkegaard’s notion of Religiousness B. In this cases, a “defining relation” with a “personal absolute” fixes one’s sense of self by providing an ultimate context for any act of will. A “personal absolute” functions in much the same way as an “absolute” by providing a moral force behind our strong evaluations, but without drawing on a universal *normative* force.

Kierkegaard’s conception of a personal absolute involves being claimed by some experience in such a way that that particular event becomes definitive of one’s life as a whole. It is an experience that happens to one, rather than a personal absolute that one chooses. In contrast, the difficulty with deciding upon something like a “personal absolute” is that barring some profound event that *happens to a person*, which of course

is not a matter of decision, it takes a great deal of energy to sustain a commitment to one's chosen final vocabulary in the face of the inevitable practical contradictions and inconsistencies that arise in the course of implementing any value system over the span of a life.

The third personal intentional description suffers from the same problem, but this effect is amplified by the fact that such descriptions are up for public rational scrutiny. Because the force that the absolute is supposed to exert is "normative" in the proper objective sense, which is to say that it holds for you just as much as it holds for me, the absolute itself must be in principle universally acceptable. However, not only do practical contradictions arise in the course of one's own life, but also, *a fortiori*, they arise for all. An absolute requires universal justification, and it is just this kind of confirmation that Nietzsche so poignantly observed is no longer possible.

When one's own decision, and thus one's will, is explicitly implicated in accepting the legitimacy of a value system, the tendency is to revert to an inauthentic mode in everyday life—to flee from the responsibility involved in such an endorsement. One thereby covers-over and escapes those practical contradictions by finding refuge in the day-to-day activities of realizing a life articulated by those same values that one would otherwise have to take responsibility for. By fleeing into the mundane day-to-day affairs of life one can more easily avoid taking responsibility for resolving the practical contradictions that arise in the course of sustaining a final vocabulary; contradictions which threaten the legitimacy of that vocabulary. As these contradictions mount in the face of continued avoidance, this tendency to fall back into an inauthentic mode of comportment ultimately leads to levelling in the decisionist form of life. The once

“thick” meaning of the terms in which a strong evaluation is articulated becomes increasingly thin and begins to take on the quality of a façade that covers over an increasingly incoherent form of life.

The second authentic mode of confronting the contradiction between (1) and (2) is a form of life I will identify as the “suspicionist.” By the use of this term, I mean to indicate someone who is inclined to question the motives behind human action regardless of the stated intention. Unlike the decisionist who can be thought of as a sort of covert or reluctant ironist (in the sense that Rorty uses the term), the suspicionist is an overt ironist and as such, rejects the idea that there can be any legitimate ultimate final vocabulary that can express a “final” set of values. Moreover, in contrast to the decisionist, the suspicionist confronts the contradiction between (1) and (2) head-on; but she does not thereby resolve the contradiction. The result, rather, is a bifurcation between what can be called the rhetoric of “liberation” from the oppressive final vocabularies (“oppressive” in the sense that they are serving the interests of others than oneself) of traditional cultural institutions, on the one hand and, on the other, the necessity of operating within the horizon of those vocabularies in order to negotiate everyday life. What the suspicionist cannot do is effectively articulate an alternative mode of comportment that could replace the vocabulary about which they are suspicious. The problem is that the rejection of oppressive traditional final vocabularies is predicated upon the idea that a dominant group within a culture adopts these vocabularies for self-serving purposes and that such motivations are illegitimate. However, any resistance to these vocabularies must also be understood as being motivated for the self-serving purposes of the oppressed group. The result is that either

one must accept that it is ok to explicitly endorse a self-serving final vocabulary and thereby undermine the rational justification for resistance, or one must reject such motives and thereby undermine the only available source or ground of resistance. As a result of this condition, with regard to everyday life, the suspicionist must reluctantly flee into the very cultural norms of which they are suspicious when it comes to matters of making every day life choices (e.g., in one's profession, one's political participation, family life, or—in a more particularly way, for example—in being a consumer). This “reluctance” is a sort of war against oneself that is produced by the contradiction between (1) and (2); and this war is impossible to sustain in a generalized way. One must, even if only episodically, fall into the everyday norms of the society simply to cope with life. The suspicionist too falls into a way of life characterized by levelling.

From the suspicionist point of view, levelling corresponds to common everyday intuitions that suggest that expressing “too much excitement” or “too much enthusiasm” about one's projects is a signal that one does not “rightly” or “fully” understand the irony of their situation. This intuition suggests how levelling is phenomenologically encountered. If being an “individual”—which means adopting a concern for “freedom,” “responsibility,” and with participation in institutions such as liberal democratic forms of government, for example—is thought in advance to be historically contingent, then actively adopting such concerns and participating in such institutions will be revealed to have no more significance than any other particular way of life to which we happen to conform in the modern West. And thus, to take being an “individual” seriously—taking on the values and responsibilities of being an individual without the mediation of an ironic attitude—looks like a naïve form of conformism. From the suspicionist's point of

view, making an “exception of oneself” or “being an individual” in an unreflective or non-ironic way must be evaluated negatively.

Levelling is a social phenomenon that results from a practical contradiction between the fact that our modern form of life is shot through with the ideas, practices, concerns and institutions that articulate human life in terms of being autonomous individuals on the one hand, and the recognition that this form of life is only a historically contingent possibility on the other. The concept of “levelling” is a third personal normative descriptive term that at once articulates a particular state of human affairs, but yet is also value laden. Like the concept of depression, which I will discuss in the next section, it is an inherently objectionable state of affairs. And it is so precisely because realizing the life of an “individual” by fleeing or escaping into the everyday activity of being an individual is motivated by an escape to the norm rather than by an explicit embrace of the form of life as one’s own. In the inauthentic mode, the value in being an “individual” is extrinsic to the strong evaluations that compose what it means to live a life as an individual; its value lies, rather, in being the place of escape. In contrast, an authentic form of being an individual would have to involve directly embraces the strong evaluations implicit in the meaning of being an individual as intrinsically valuable; something the suspicionist cannot do.

The result of an inauthentic appropriation of being an “individual” is to “thin” the form of life. By “thin” or “thinning,” I mean to indicate that the possible practical expressions of what is to be an individual become fewer and fewer; and subsequently the contradictions between these possible expressions also diminishes. However, it is precisely in the act of resolving such contradictions that the form of life of being an

individual is cultivated, sustained and transformed. This “thinning” is nothing other than what I have been calling the phenomenon identified by the term “levelling.”

In contrast, a “thick” notion of “individual” must involve, first of all, taking this description over for oneself, i.e., in taking ownership of it. It is only under the condition that one works toward an *integrity* with regard to being an “individual” by comporting oneself in such a way that one is constantly in the process of “figuring out” what it means to realize a life as an individual, that the form of life we call “being an individual” can be sustained in the face of practical contradictions. Without the aim of the integrity involved in an authentic mode of comportment, the creativity involved in resolving practical contradictions has no motivating force. The inauthentic mode simply lets what it means to be an individual erode. The sociological manifestation of moral friction is, therefore, a “leveling” of the diversity that exists as each person appropriates being an individual as his or her form of life. This lack of diversity can be thought of as a “deadening” of the form of life; or, put in another way, *it names the loss of vitality that is expressed in the strong evaluations that are implicit in the form of life itself.*

§1.4 | *The Psychological Dimension*

With the groundwork laid in the previous section, the introduction of the psychological dimension of moral friction can be easily displayed. This dimension of moral friction is best exhibited by linking it to the familiar psychological concept of “depression.” Like the concept of “levelling,” depression is a third personal description that carries normative force. Unlike the notion of “normalization,” however, it already blurs the line between morally normative descriptions and empirical descriptions

because of its use as a clinical term in therapeutic practice. Nevertheless, precisely because of common familiarity with the concept, it is also just as likely to conceal moral friction as much as it is useful as a provisionally useful concept in the indication of moral friction.

In order to distinguish the usage of the term “depression” from the start, I want to begin by associating it with another term familiarly understood as psychological, “anxiety.” However I want to distinguish my meaning from the start by associating it with Heidegger’s usage of the term discussed in the previous section. “Anxiety” names the mood associated with coming face-to-face with the essential nullity within human being as “thrown” into an ongoing life world. Making this association has the advantage of dissociating the term from the idea that anxiety names a particular internal subjective psychological state. Nevertheless, I will not be appropriating Heidegger’s technical usage of the term directly; rather I will be employing it in a relatively non-technical sense to indicate the general state of being “unsettled” in what would otherwise be a familiar situation. That is, it indicates instances in which one feels that the situation one is in has, for no recognizable reason (that is to say, not because of an identifiable lack of understanding in the situation), becomes “alien” or “uncanny.” In anxiety, we “lose step” with the life-world we ordinarily competently navigate, whether that navigation involves explicit reflection on our situation or a simple tacit immersion in it. The concept of “depression” can be understood as a generalized “loss of energy” that is accompanied by anxiety *regardless of the particular situation they happen to be in*. As a third personal descriptive concept, “depression” names a description under which one

encounters *all situations* in the mode of anxiety that is accompanied by a generalized loss of energy, enthusiasm, or interest for being in any particular situation.

Nowadays the terms “anxiety” and “depression,” when uttered in the context of a philosophical discussion, undoubtedly sounds an immediate ironic tone. It calls to mind a distinct set of historical polemics against the first-person experience of the modernist ideals of “subjectivity” and “individualism” (as pictured by Kant, for example); these ways of talking have collectively been gathered, in a “textbook” sort of way, under the heading of “existentialism.” The most common complaint against this “textbook” characterization of the existentialist’s problematic is that it failed to fully appreciate the contingency of “subjectivity.” In other words, the idea is that those who railed against the enlightenment ideals because they produced feelings of alienation, anxiety, and depression, did so only because they took themselves (their own subjectivity) too seriously—they were not sufficiently ironist. From the ironist’s point of view, getting too worked-up about such essentially subjective experiences is unwarranted because, as effects, they are no more necessary than the cause; and subjectivity, it is thought, is nothing more than an historically contingent possibility for self-understanding. The idea seems to be that this recognition itself has some therapeutic value; that by recognizing that there is nothing necessary about understating myself to be a “free individual responsible for the course of my own life,” the anxiety and depression that might result from such an understanding in combination with the fact that there are no objectively verifiable moral norms, can be “disowned.” On one view, these experiences are further reason for rejecting “subjectivity” and “individualism” because they are thought to be the product of this enlightenment notion of self. On another view, which comes to the

same rejection, these enlightenment notions are thought to be inherently violent to other historically contingent forms of life because it imposes an unwarranted privilege to the ideals of subjectivity and individualism.

The meaning of “depression,” then, can be understood as the disempowerment that comes with both understanding that being an individual self is inextricably entwined with particular historically contingent cultural practices, ideas, concerns and institutions while at the same time recognizing that these very contingencies are necessary for the recognition of the contingency itself. It is hard to experience enthusiasm for a form of life that is the condition for the possibility of recognizing the contingency of that very form of life; one has necessity without certainty and contingency without freedom.

§1.5 | *Moral Friction as a Unified Phenomenon*

A tentative link can be made between these moral/epistemic, sociological, and psychological dimensions by pointing to how it is that we might experience levelling *as* depressing (generalized anxiety) when we are prevented from comporting ourselves toward a norm in such a way that it “has weight” or “pull” on our attention. I have been suggesting thus far that this deficiency might be produced when the epistemic legitimacy of moral judgments generally, and strong evaluations in particular, are explicitly in question; or in other words, when the “normative question” becomes pressing in precisely those instances when we are called upon to actually make strong evaluations in the course of every day activity. I want now to make this suggestion more explicit.

To say that a moral judgment or evaluation is “in question,” is to say—in temporal terms—that there is a kind of “delay” or “suspension” in how we *would have*

ordinarily comported ourselves tacitly towards what *is now* explicitly “in question.”

The question itself is this delay. If the legitimacy of moral judgments and evaluations as such are “in question,” we might expect to see a definite phenomenological attestation—by way of a suspension—in how we comport ourselves in any situation—all of which involve strong evaluative distinctions.

However, we might reasonably expect such a “delay” or “hesitation” in moral judgments and evaluations to be a purely theoretical affair. We might think, in other words, that for the most part the suspension of judgments does not effect most practical situations—and are thus not “hesitations” in the practical or behavioral sense. It is reasonable to think, for example, that in the standard sense, practical considerations may force us to act prior to resolving our hesitation; and that mere action in such cases does not constitute a moral judgment in the relevant sense. We often act on our “best judgment” at the moment; and thereby acknowledge that our “real” or “considered” judgment on the matter is still in suspension. In this way, cognitive events like moral judgments may not be expected to directly impact our normal everyday worldly dealings in anything close to a pervasive way. According to this objection, it can be expected that we can be practically engaged in everyday, life-world decisions with competence regardless of the state of our considered judgment concerning a relevant strong evaluation. What this separation between “theoretical” and “practical” contexts presupposes, however, is that moral judgments and evaluations are only about resolving conflicts between competing ideas or intuitions concerning right actions in a given situation. Although this is a useful way of understanding the relationship between moral judgment and practice—and it is for the most part the proper understanding for moral

theory—this understanding tends to cover over a deeper relationship between our understanding of the situations we find ourselves in and the moral judgments and evaluations that we make.

I will be arguing that the very ability to understand oneself—which is to say, find oneself in a situation—*as* such and such, and *doing* such and such, essentially involves strong evaluative distinctions. The very ability to understand a situation—and therefore, to be in a situation—involves a familiarity with, and competency in navigating, a particular set of strong evaluative distinctions. If I do not understand, for example, how a romantic dinner might go well or go poorly, it is hard to imagine what it would mean to say that I understand what a romantic dinner is. It is a matter of practical necessity that I acknowledge the strong evaluative distinctions imbedded in situations like romantic dinners—by either being for or against them—if I am to negotiate a world that includes romantic dinners. Understood in this way, it becomes clear how a suspension concerning moral judgments generally, and strong evaluations as such in particular, might have a dramatic practical impact on how we comport ourselves in our everyday lives. It is one thing for us to suspend a judgment or evaluation concerning a discrepancy between two understandings of “what is to be done” in a particular situation; however it is a fundamentally different condition when what is suspended is the force of strong evaluative themselves—i.e., a suspension in the motivational force behind any decision along the distinctions which work to partly constitute our understanding of the situation we are in. In the latter case, such a “suspension” in judgment could not but affect how we comport ourselves in all ordinary everyday situations.

If epistemic concerns regarding the legitimacy of moral judgments and strong evaluations can have an effect on our comportment in situations as such (and so long as we are awake and minimally attentive, we are always already in one situation or another) we would expect a phenomenological confirmation of these effects. If we consider that doubts about the legitimacy of moral judgments and strong evaluations involve a reflective “stance” or “orientation” towards something we ordinarily “do” in a pre-reflective fashion (one would actually make strong evaluations about better and worse actions in the context of demonstrating one’s understanding of what a romantic dinner is simply in virtue of participating in the situation) then we should expect that what gets “suspended” in our doubt is not only our judgment (a reflective cognitive event) but also something in how one practically comports oneself in one’s ordinary worldly engagements. In other words, since strong evaluations are built into the tacit background understanding that enables our comportment in everyday life, doubts concerning the legitimacy of strong evaluative distinctions as such are going to impact that comportment generally. This *practical suspension* occurs because this “reflective stance” concerning the legitimacy of moral judgments and evaluations amounts to a kind of “foreknowledge”—or perhaps “view from an alienated vantage point”— which shows that one is always acting in accordance with “questionable” evaluations. A clue to how this “foreknowledge” might manifest in familiar phenomena might be found in an analogy with dance.

Suppose that I can demonstrate my knowledge of a particular dance in virtue of an ability to actually execute a prescribed sequence of steps; as such, I am a minimally competent judge as to how well I am doing when I am actually performing the dance.

To say that I am a “competent judge,” simply means that I have access to criteria that could be used to judge how well I am actually dancing. Suppose also that for one reason or another, I have come to doubt the legitimacy of making such judgments or assessments in dance; i.e., with regard to the legitimacy of the standards and norms of dance. “After all,” I might think to myself, “there are many kinds of dances; and moreover, each dancer brings their own style to any given dance.” To insist upon the evaluative criteria that I happen to employ given my understanding of the dance and the ideal “style” of its execution, might seem to me nothing more than a kind of sheer stubbornness. So it might seem reasonable to suspend my judgment concerning “how well I am doing.” Yet because I am the one dancing—and unless I take this occasion to “sit this one out,” I must continue dancing—this suspension in judgment puts me in an awkward practical position. I might think thoughts like, “what is the point of following the steps if it turns out that in doing so I would be demonstrating little more than a kind of stubbornness with regard to the importance of preserving the traditions of dance.” Or worse, I might think, “given that the most that can be said for the legitimacy of such standards is that they are ‘traditional,’ my insistence on such standards for myself and others seems to be a kind of tyranny.” “Why not,” I might conclude, “just loosen up, have fun, and be inclusive of different ‘styles’?” Why not admit that my evaluations are grounded in nothing more than “taste”?—i.e., “weak evaluations.”

On the other hand, if I happen to be good at the dance, I might despair with thoughts like, “my talent does not amount to much after all if there might be no ultimately legitimate criteria for evaluating good dance from bad dance.” Even though I understand the relevant standards of excellence, the fact that those standards show up to

me as lacking any defined ground—any definite legitimacy—robs me of the “pull” that the achievement of excellence might have otherwise provided. At the very least, such thoughts may dampen my enthusiasm in the situation. And at worst, it might induce the kind of awkward self-awareness that manifests as a kind of hesitation that prevents me from dancing at all.

In the same way that this kind of foreknowledge or awareness of the questionability concerning the legitimacy of strong evaluations amounts to explicitly acknowledging, in some fashion or other, that the implicit criteria for evaluation that shape any given situation might lack any substantive illegitimacy, such a foreknowledge would have the effect of dampening enthusiasm in all situations. At worst, that is, it is a state of affairs that might prevent one from smoothly engaging in any activity, such that in order to get by at all, one must abruptly alternate between the alienated reflective awareness associated with acknowledging the possible illegitimacy of evaluative criteria on the one hand, and the unreflective presumption of those criteria that one must maintain in order to continue an engagement in a situation on the other. Or in other words, one must “flee” the “foreknowledge” in order to get lost in—conform to—the “normal” just to “get by.” We call such awkwardness and alienation in relation to the otherwise smooth flow of ordinary situations, “anxiety.” States of anxiety generally are a normal part of everyday life that corresponds to “falling out of the flow” of particular situations in such a fashion that the situation itself becomes uncanny—where what was once familiar becomes alien—and, in the very ambiguity of this distance from what is familiar, often shows up as menacing.

But the kind of alienation and anxiety that corresponds to an epistemic concern with the legitimacy of moral judgments and strong evaluations as such—i.e., that corresponds to the thought that the normative question cannot, in principle, be answered—has an altogether more radical meaning. The difference is not in the kind of anxiety as such, but rather the degree to which it ranges over all situations. The anxiety produced by a dampened ability to smoothly comport oneself in any ordinary everyday situation is both more universal and more constant. Without a meaningful development in the epistemic status of the commonsense understanding of moral judgments and strong evaluations, we should expect that such a universal and persistent state of anxiety would lead to further drag on the enthusiasm, energy, or interest in “being in” any given situations; that is, enthusiasm, energy or interest that we might ordinarily expect to be exhibited in those situations. This peculiar kind of generalized “drag” or “friction” on our ability to comport ourselves energetically or with enthusiasm in any give situation corresponds phenomenologically to what in psychological terms I have been calling “depression”.

At the same time, this diminished energy or enthusiasm also manifests itself sociologically in what I have called “levelling,” whereby one has the sense of “simply going through the motions” of publically defined social norms and practices. Participation in a situation involves exhibiting an understanding of those particular strong evaluations and standards of excellence built-in to the meaning of the situation itself; and this is just to say that it is a condition for the possibility of being in a situation that we sensor ourselves in light of some idealized norm that corresponds to the paradigmatic case, or definitive idealized case, of the situation. When we question the

legitimacy of strong evaluations generally and thus also the idealized norms of a given situation that they compose, our comportment towards those norms is “suspended” in the same awkward, alienated, reflective state that leads to depression—i.e., the result of a generalized and persistent state anxiety. At first gloss, it might be supposed that this loss of energy, enthusiasm, or interest might result in a diminished adherence to all standards and norms. From the vantage point of mere reflective thinking, this seems to be true; that is, it enables a kind of “unreflective moral relativism.” However, with regard to our tacit pre-reflective everyday engagements, which demand of us that we take a stand on the particular strong evaluations imbedded in the situations we happen to find ourselves in, just the opposite occurs.

If we consider again that all intentional human behavior occurs as participation in—or “being-in”—particular situations, our participation in which essentially involves submitting to the governance of particular publically prescribed strong evaluations (either by being for or against the prescription), which is to say that our participation in any given situation essentially involves the norms that make it the particular situation that it is, it becomes evident that those norms can be “*pre*-scribed” only because of a prior shared public understanding of the situation that the individual subsequently comes to find themselves in terms of. In what would be in Heideggerian language, the understanding of *das Man*. Strong evaluations can be said to be “built-in” to the meaning of a situation precisely because we do not constitute the meaning of those situations; rather, we inherit them from the social/historical matrix of norms into which we are born. We can conform to those standards or we can rebel against them, but we are always in relation to them.

There is, however, another distinction regarding the modes of comportment one might take towards this matrix of norms, which is captured by Heidegger's distinction between authentic and inauthentic appropriation of a form of life. If one turns away from an explicit recognition that one is an instance of *das Man* in the life that he or she is already leading, one can only do so within that same form of life whose explicit recognition one seeks to escape. That is, by busying oneself with the everyday activities of what it is to be a fully functioning individual in the modern Western world, one can cover over how those activities hang together as a whole. The effect of this inauthentic mode of comportment is to render the intrinsic value distinctions as inherent strong evaluations within the particular situations one encounters in the course of realizing a form of life extrinsic to the goal. Unlike an authentic mode of taking ownership of a particular form of life, which exhibits an internal pressure to unify the constitutive value distinctions into a coherent and consistent whole, the inauthentic mode's externalization of the goal provides no such pressure. If the goal is "being normal" rather than "being an individual," then there is no internal pressure to maintain the constitutive value distinctions in the meaning of "being individual" as a coherent whole. The result of this lack of pressure to unify or maintain the integrity of a form of life in the face of practical contradictions between various value judgments that arise in the course of living out that form of life, is the "fleeing" away in the face of these contradictions. Resolving contradictions takes work, energy and interest to resolve. But if the only reason one has fore taken over the form of life is to escape the call to take ownership that very form of life one is already living, then it makes sense that these contradictions would be passed

over. But these contradictions are precisely the moments in which these forms of life express their vitality.

Consider again the example of the dancer. Suppose that I understand and conform to the proper form of a particular traditional dance. Suppose also that I have become good at this dance and can execute it with graceful excellence. Now finally, suppose that another dancer informs me that as they understand the execution of the dance, how I perform a particular sequence is incorrect or not as elegant. I could respond by asking other authorities. But if I do not take tradition-for-traditions-sake too seriously, I would have to look to the standards internal to the dance itself to resolve this conflict. Suppose that upon investigation I discover that although my way of executing the sequence maintains a graceful continuity of a particular form between the immediately preceding sequence to the one in question and to the one subsequent to it, I also notice that the other option provides for a more overall graceful continuity in the dance as a whole. The conflict has now given rise to what I have been calling a practical contradiction between the expressions of a value within a particular sort of situation. I could respond to this practical contradiction by simply accepting that both are equally valid; and leave it at that. I simply go on dancing *my* way. This is, of course, the easiest thing to do and if my motivation of dancing does not arise out of concern for the integrity of the dance itself, there really is no reason to do otherwise. However, I might care about the integrity of the dance. I might, that is, sense that something is lost by this multiplicity of interpretations. I could focus on determining which one is “more right.” But if it is recognized that each is genuinely virtuous in its own way, then this approach seems only to lead to a kind of self-deception regarding the motivations I have for

wanting to “get it right” (e.g., pride, resentment over being corrected by another, avoidance of other responsibilities, etc.). If, however, I am motivated by a desire to discover the most excellent form of the dance on its own terms, then this practical contradiction provides an opportunity for integrating what is virtuous about both approaches into a single, new way of executing the sequence. Indeed, I might go so far as to modify other sequences in the dance to accommodate the new form of the sequence in order to maximize the overall excellence of the dance. In doing this, however, it is important to emphasize that I am not interested in “creating” a new dance. Rather, it is precisely in being open to what this particular dance calls for with regard to its most excellent form that motivates the alterations. Doing all this takes energy, enthusiasm and an interest in the integrity and excellence of the dance on its own terms. But if one accepts in advance that it is pointless to inquire into the excellence of a particular dance because the dance is nothing more than a contingent tradition, then it becomes clear how mustering this energy, enthusiasm, and interest in the integrity of the expression of the values intrinsic to the dance might be problematic. Even if one were to muster the energy, one could only describe the activity as a particular form of “self-expression” or “creativity”—and ultimately, as an expression of one’s taste. Even if one feels a “call” or “responsibility” to maintain the integrity and excellence of the dance on its own terms, it may seem impossible to respond to this “call” in the terms that directly express the way that the “call” is experienced. That is, that the dance itself calls for its own integrity. When I take up the dance in an authentic mode, I take it over in such a way that “it becomes me” or “I become it.” This experience is not uncommon. When we master the art of driving a car with a clutch, for example, it “becomes us” in such a way

that no distinction can be made between “my driving excellently” and the “proper or excellent form of shifting gears.” However, if I take up the dance (or art of shifting gears) in an inauthentic mode, which means that I take up the dance simply *because* it is what one does (i.e., my aim is simply doing what one does), then reconciling the difference in a practical contradiction by discovering a third—most excellent—form of the dance seems pointless.

But more than this, if my motivation for taking up the dance is only because it is “what one does,” then we would expect that performers would have no particular attachment to any particular expression of it. By fleeing into the dance in an inauthentic mode I am drawn to dance as “anyone would dance.” Each inauthentic dancer is drawn to the form expressed by every other inauthentic dancer. The result is a kind of “averaging” of the differences.

A particular dance is, of course, only a particular situation. However, if we take the above example as an indication to a general inauthentic comportment in all situations, then the averaging of a whole form of life is the result. When the opportunities for cultivating a better form of life that a practical contradiction provides is passed over because one has taken up the form in an inauthentic mode, the result is averaging and thinning of what it *means to live* this form of life. That is, the form of life itself is averaged or “thinned” out.

My aim in this first part has been to thematize an internal contradiction in the form of life that Rorty identifies as the ironist. This has been done in anticipation of disclosing a form of life that resolves this contradiction. In order to show exactly how the form of life of an improviser eliminates the problem of moral friction, and thereby

makes the ironist form of life no longer a viable option, I will in Part Two develop an argument form that substantiates these claims. Once in place, I will use this argument form to discharge the thesis that the improviser sublates the ironist form of life

Part Two | Moral Phenomenology

§2.1 | *Kinds of Accounts*

Every account gets guided in advance by some expectation concerning what the account itself is expected to achieve. *Prima facie*, modern empirical scientific explanation is ideally, for example, expected to provide an accurate representation of the causal workings behind some set of observable phenomena. All empirical scientific accounts presuppose an asymmetrical relationship between what the explanation concerns and the terms of the explanation itself. The explananda, in other words, are thought to be independent of the explanation and thus are supposed to be possessed of a nature in relation to which the explanation may or may not be adequate. What is expected of a scientific explanation—what the account itself is supposed to accomplish—is an accurate mapping of explicans onto real, but otherwise hidden, relationships between raw empirical facts. On this view, by contrast, the “ideal” scientific explanation is one that achieves a faithful model of these facts and their relations that together provide undistorted access to the way things “really are.” Thought in this way, the present investigation does not follow a “scientific” model in this ideal sense. The aim here is not to develop a polemic against the mode of thinking that produces moral friction because it is an inaccurate representation of how things really are.

Nor is the aim to produce a polemic on normative moral grounds: as if to say that one *ought not to* adopt a mode of thinking because moral friction ought to be avoided. Normative moral accounts involve the production of a justifiable standard that makes a claim on the intentions of a free agent: it takes the form, “one ought (or, ought not) do X.” To say that one “ought” do something is at the same moment to recognize that one could do otherwise, but that it is “right,” or “proper,” and so on, to do X. Although a normative moral argument may involve description in its supplementary reasoning, its conclusion always goes beyond an explanation of facts. Even if an argument comes from the idea of “natural law,” and suggests that: “you ought to do X because you are human and human beings naturally do X,” the implication is that “being properly human” is optional, and that one ought to choose to be properly human. If successful then, a normative argument is expected to shape how a free agent makes choices. On the other hand, if one could not do otherwise, then the claim would be tantamount to an empirical description concerning how things are rather than a claim about how things ought to be. Again, understood in this way, the diagnosis of moral friction is not part of a larger polemic that aims to produce compelling claims on the will of a free agent. The aim, that is, does not involve the anticipation of a conclusion that passes judgment on a form of life, and on that basis, recommends an alternative.

Rather, the theme of moral friction is intended to make explicit the practical contradictions that would otherwise remain implicit within a particular historically contingent form of life. Putting it this way reveals that the form of its task is primarily descriptive. However, it’s “guiding expectation” concerning what is to be achieved by that description also involves the anticipation of a change in how something happens—

as opposed to a change in what description we believe to be “true”—and this aspect of the “anticipation” of what is to be achieved by the argument is not passive. But if not in the relation between account and reality, or between proper and improper, on what does the “necessity” of this active aspect turn?

Both the passive and active elements of this sort of account come into relief if the descriptive account itself is understood to participate in an irrevocable change in how we think about what is being described in the account. A task of this sort must be understood to operate *within* a historical and developmental cultural matrix of ideas, practices, concerns, institutions, etc. Unlike an empirical scientific account, and unlike a morally normative argument, both of which operate within a temporally neutral conceptual field, the sort of argument I want to produce here understands itself to be part of a dynamic, or unfolding, cultural context of significance. The character of what it anticipates, then, should be understood in terms of how it impacts that context. I propose that the character of what is to be achieved in virtue of the present account can provisionally be characterized as “practical.”

The vague usage of the term “practical” here is useful because it indicates that both the sort of argumentative strategy characteristic of the methodologies and aims of modern science on the one hand, and of normative moral arguments proper to ethical and political strategies on the other, may be inadequate for the task of addressing the matter at hand. Since these are the most common argumentative strategies in systematic investigations, it will be crucial to lay out the aim and strategy of this investigation in formal terms in order to properly develop the thematic of moral friction and subsequently of improvisation.

Both aim and strategy can efficiently be indicated by reference to two constitutive conceptual elements: “hermeneutic phenomenology” and Hegel’s notion of “sublation.” Together, these ideas form a distinctive kind of investigation that I will call “moral phenomenology.” The aim of such an inquiry is first to disclose contradictions within our own modern Western form of life (i.e., our own context of significance composed of ideas, practices, intuitions, institutions, concerns, etc.) and second, to disclose a form of life that at once appropriates and diffuses what is practically problematic about those contradictions. Understood in this way, “moral friction” names a contradiction within the ironist’s form of life and the “improviser” names a form of life that transcends/resolves (appropriates and diffuses) these contradictions.

§2.2 | *Hermeneutic Phenomenology*

Broadly conceived, phenomenology is the attempt to give careful description of phenomena as they are encountered prior to the reflective influence of theoretical concepts. The aim is to provide a description of how things looked before one reflects, applies concepts, and makes judgments. The worry that phenomenology attempts to address concerns the potential distortion that theoretical concepts and judgments might introduce when they sink to the level of commonsense presuppositions that color how we talk about those entities and events that are to be explained even before any actual investigation. The aim, then, is to get out from underneath these presuppositions in order to get an undistorted view of things—to get at “the things themselves” (where this phrase now means how things “appear” or “show themselves” prior to theoretical reflection). What is essential here—what makes phenomenology categorically different

from all empirical sciences as they are ordinarily conceived—is the idea that there exists an undissolvable relationship between the condition of the observer and the nature of the entity that shows up to her. Phenomenology attempts to describe *how things are encountered* in ordinary, everyday lived experience. Unlike an empirical scientific method, which attempts to get past how things merely appear in order to get a “true” picture of how things are independent of an observer, phenomenology begins from the intuition that what things *are*—in themselves—is nothing other than how they “show up” prior to reflection; and as such, the “essence” of things (what they are) is inextricably entwined with the condition of the being who encounters them. As an event of “seeing” or “encountering,” a phenomenon as such involves both that which is seen and the being that is seeing. Understood in this way, a “phenomenon” is ontologically co-primordial with both what shows itself in appearance and the being who encounters that which appears. In this way, the science of phenomenology rejects the metaphysics implicit in the standard empirical scientific account that considers a description to be the derivative reflection of an independent (non-linguistic) reality to which it must, if true, correspond. In contrast, according to a phenomenological account, rather than being dependent on a degree of correspondence, the adequacy of a description is tied to the degree to which it is faithful to how things looked prior to the reflective application of theoretical constructs.

This way of understanding phenomenology derives from Edmond Husserl’s adoption of the term; and it is worth briefly rehearsing some key features of Husserl’s “transcendental phenomenology” as a backdrop against which to foreground “hermeneutic phenomenology.” As Husserl understood it, phenomenology promises to

be a new science of being that can serve as an epistemic foundation for modern science generally. Husserl, in the same spirit as Descartes, considered the essence of modern science—and, as the “all-inclusive science,” the essence of philosophy itself—to consist in the promise of apodictically certain knowledge.²⁶ Unlike Descartes, however (but in basic accord with Kant’s epistemic “Copernican revolution”), Husserl considers this certainty to be achievable only for a “transcendental subjectivity.” It is to this universal “transcendental subjectivity” that the essence of a thing is tied and not to the individual “thinking, doubting thing.” In other words, although an understanding of the essence of a thing necessarily involves understanding something about the being for whom those things appear, since this “necessity” is derived transcendently—as the condition of experience—it is attached *only* to those features common to all experiencing subjects; what Husserl calls a “transcendental ego.” Or to put the point a third way, the answer to the question of “who” it is that stands in an insoluble relationship to the essence of things is not “the experiencing subject” (with all its psychological idiosyncrasies), but is rather the “transcendental subject” or the “transcendental ego.” It is this universality that provides the epistemic guarantee that phenomenology can ground the sciences by defusing the subjectivism that might otherwise plague any attempt to understand the essence of things as tied to how they appear to a subject.

In contrast to Husserl’s view, hermeneutic (or interpretive) phenomenology rejects the idea of a “transcendental subjectivity.” It denies the possibility of occupying a presuppositionless vantage point that would render the science of phenomenology a merely descriptive activity. On this view, everything that is to be described by a

²⁶ Husserl, *Cartesian Meditations*, 1-5. Also see Husserl, *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*

phenomenology always comes to us already interpreted in some fashion or other. And as such, a theory of interpretation—a hermeneutics—must be incorporated into the phenomenological method from the start. However, the rejection of transcendental subjectivity does not commit hermeneutic phenomenology to a psychological-subjectivism. On the contrary, hermeneutic phenomenology involves its own limiting features that insure an “intersubjective” vantage point that stands in an insoluble relationship with the essence of things.

Heidegger’s concept of *das Man* provides for this “intersubjective” vantage point. *Das Man* is the subject indicated, for example, in phrases such as: “What does *one* do in this situation?” Or, “*one* ought not to lie.” It is the vantage point composed of that set of normative standards of a culture in terms of which any articulation or understanding of “self” is achieved. On this view, all self-understandings or self-interpretations are interpretations or commentaries on (and by) *das Man*. What it is to be human does not involve being an “individual” (where the term “individual” is understood to involve a primary set of individuating features that are uniquely attached to some ontologically primitive and independent underlying substance.) On the contrary, to be human is first of all to have taken up a particular way of life composed of public ideas, practices, concerns, etc. The idea here is that prior to any theoretical reflection, we encounter entities (including ourselves) and events in the course of realizing a particular self-interpretation. I encounter a book as something to be read because I understand myself to be an academic. Or I understand a tree to be a resource for building because I have some understanding of what it would mean to be a builder or a carpenter. The key idea is that both the role of an academic and a carpenter are

essentially public. I can understand what it would be like to be a carpenter (even if it is only a vague sense) because what it means to be a “carpenter” is wholly circumscribed by public ideas, practices, concerns, institutions, etc. It is, for example, always open to me to drop the life of an academic and take up the life of a carpenter. According to the normative phrases offered above, then, it is because “one” does (or, ought to do) such and such, that I also (should) do such and such. It indicates that this standard is independent of, and prior to, any idiosyncratic subjective self-knowing, as it is only via an interpretation of myself that involves being either for or against what *Man* would do that I can *be* anything at all.

However, unlike the presuppositionless transcendental ego, *das Man* is defined as a particular set of presuppositions or prejudices. According to this view, absent the constellation of prejudices (ideas, practices, intuitions, concerns, institutions, methods, and so on) that constitute the horizon of context within which any particular entity or event can “show up” meaningfully for *das Man*, there could be no phenomena. In this sense, it is appropriate to understand *das Man* as a “formal” condition for the possibility of any phenomena whatsoever, and is thus transcendental in a similar fashion to Husserl’s understanding of phenomenology. The difference, however, concerns “what” constitutes those conditions. For Heidegger the ultimate horizon of meaning and the ground for any transcendental conditions for the possibility of significance (and thus the condition of possibility for phenomena) is *das Man*—a historically contingent being—whereas on Husserl’s account, it is transcendental subjectivity—an ahistorical non-contingent being.

In Heidegger's account, human beings are distinctive (among other entities) in that they have an understanding of, and care about, their own being. I care about what my life amounts to as a whole; where the "quantity" of "wholeness" is marked off in a determinate way by the bookends of birth and death. To say that I care about my life as a "whole," then, is to say that I care about the meaning of my life as it unfolds temporally and teleologically; I am always projecting towards a completed life, some stable configuration of meaning that makes sense of the events that compose my life as a whole. I might ask, "am I realizing the life of a 'philosopher' or of an 'academic,' am I a 'family man' or a 'professional'?" The idea here is that at any given moment my actions are intelligible precisely because, if I reflect on it, each action I perform makes sense in the context of some set of projected goals. I sit down at the computer to write *in order to* organize and archive my thoughts. This goal in turn may be *in order to* think clearly about some topic. But ultimately, all these actions are done *for the sake of* realizing the life of a "philosopher" or an "academic."

To say that I care about my life as a finished meaningful totality is not to say that in focusing on "becoming something" I am attentive to what I am up to in a way that, say, a more "relaxed person" might fail to be. Rather, that we care about who we are is a structural feature of what makes human beings distinctive. My intention to "take it easy" or "enjoy the moment" makes sense only because I project the idea of being a "relaxed person" as constituting part of how my life will turn out as a whole. Being a "relaxed person," that is, is itself a form of life that we might care to realize. According to Heidegger's view, the "care structure" of human existence is the formal condition for

the possibility of meaning generally; and this is just to say that the being of things are determined within the horizon of some intentional meaningful totality or other.

The essence of entities is tied to this teleological dimension of human life because it is in realizing a particular form of life—or constellation of roles that I project myself to *be* “in the end” and as a whole—that entities can show up for us in determinant ways. Heidegger expresses this idea by suggesting that entities have the character of “equipment.” I use things in the course of particular activities that are in turn governed by the form of life I am in the process of realizing. It is because I project the meaning of my life (which, to put it another way, I take on the “identity” of) being an “academic” or an “intellectual” that I buy and read books in the way that I do (that is, rather than buying books for entertainment, to have a pretentious book collection, or, in another way, to use as paper weights or as tinder to start a fire). And, in turn, it is in order to organize and protect my books, for example, that I have bookcases. It is only because of the role of being an “academic,” “intellectual” and alike, that “bookcases” have the qualities they do. The essence of what it is to be a “bookcase” is inexorably tied to a particular set of possibilities for self-understanding that are available in a particular community and at a particular time. It is only because I participate in a world (the “world of academia”) that involves the use of books as reference material that having a bookcase that protects and organizes those books becomes important. In the same way, a book can show up to me as “something to read”—rather than as a “paper weight” or “an oversized coaster”—because one *use* it *as* something to be read in the course of acting and thinking as one who participates in a world in which books are read.

But as mentioned above, it is not to a psychologically idiosyncratic individual subject that the essence of entities are tied, but to *das Man*. The social roles that I might take up—either explicitly or by simply falling into them—and project for my life as a whole are not of my making. Rather, these social roles together constitute the ultimate range of possible self-understandings available to a particular people at a particular time. I am “thrown” into this range of possibilities and have always already taken up some of them; as it is only in projecting some particular range of possible social roles for my life as a whole that I can “come across” myself *as* anything at all.

On this view, for example, taking on the role of a solipsistic “doubting, thinking thing,” far from being the only original and certain human perspective, is rather a highly specialized and derivative activity that is intelligible only within the framework of a unique set of historically contingent concerns. In order to understand what Descartes is up to in his *Meditations on First Philosophy*, one must understand the particular kind of epistemic “crisis” that Descartes is attempting to avert. Without the context of meaning which is itself governed by a concern for establishing epistemic certainty in the sciences—as well as the socio-cultural and psychological context fueling the enlightenment as a whole—Descartes methodological doubt seems absurd (as my students never fail to remind me upon their first encounter with the text). It is not obvious, that is, why one should care about discovering rational and certain grounds on which to build the sciences. One has to be *taught* why one should have this particular care; which is to say, that one must be *educated* into a form of life (a set of ideas, practices, concerns, and so on) in which caring about achieving absolute certainty matters. If one is concerned, for example, about “replacing the superstition of religion

with the promise of ‘knowledge’ offered by the empirical sciences,” or in another way, about “understanding the world correctly such that we can live within it properly” (because the welfare of our immortal soul hangs on getting this right), then it makes sense to care about achieving apodictic certainty; and it thus makes sense to follow Descartes’ *Meditations* through. But one has to project being (at least methodologically) an “atheist” or a confirmed “theist” respectively (along with the rich complex of ideas, institutions, practices, intuitions, etc., that go along with realizing these social roles) in order for it to make any sense at all why it is important, and why it might be appropriate, to take on the perspective of a “doubting, thinking thing.”

It should be clear at this point that Heidegger’s understanding of human being (what or “who” is under consideration, that is) is essentially (as long as we attach no technical ontological priority to the term “subject”) an “intersubjective” entity. We are, in our concrete everyday lives, realizing what it is to be an instance of *das Man*; and respectively, *das Man* has no existence independent of what human beings, in their care for their own being, are sustaining via the lives they are in the process of actualizing.²⁷

As the ultimate context of significance, it would be a distortion to think that we are individuated organisms that, through some kind of “emergence” which has yet to be explained, are collectively the network of organic “hardware” on which the “software” of culture operates, and through which it is sustained. Putting things this way confuses Heidegger’s existential analysis of human being with a kind of empirical anthropology.

²⁷ This point might perhaps be more obvious if Heidegger’s term to designate the being of humans were introduced: “Dasein.” Dasein is, by definition, the being who is distinctive in that its essence consists in the care it has for its own being. Although it is a familiar term now for anyone even casually acquainted with Heidegger, it is nevertheless a bit of jargon that is not necessary to introduce for the purposes of the present investigation. It is sufficient to define “human being” as an entity whose being consists of the mutual dependence between the understanding of *das Man* on the one hand (which provides the content of any self-understanding) and the individuating power of a finite life stretched between birth and death, on the other (which makes “being something as a whole” pressing for particular human beings).

Heidegger's suggestion is of an altogether different sort. This can be made clear if we recall that Heidegger's analysis is aimed at disclosing transcendental conditions for the possibility of encountering any entity in its being whatsoever; and this includes the ontological presuppositions that underwrite any empirical anthropology. The essence of an "organism," of "culture," or, in another way, of "consciousness" are all determined, *prior to any theoretical inquiry*, by some range of self-understandings available to a particular people as a possible way of being.

Like Husserl, Heidegger maintains "that phenomenology is not just one philosophical science among others....[but] rather, the expression 'phenomenology' is the name of the method of scientific philosophy in general."²⁸ However, what should now be heard in this claim is the idea that phenomenology is the "way" of doing philosophy that is appropriate to the relationship between human being as an instance of *das Man* and the essence of any entity whatsoever. Or, in other words, phenomenology is the proper way of doing ontology. It is the science that is appropriate to the determination of what it *means* to inquire into the being of entities; what in *Being and Time* Heidegger calls "fundamental ontology."

The task of fundamental ontology, as that which discloses what it means for an entity to *be* as such, must be understood to precede the findings of any empirical science. But more than this, it must precede what might be called a "regional ontology"—whereby this phrase I mean to indicate the science which determines what can properly count as an entity in a particular context. We must know, for example, what it is to be a "mollusk," a "painting," or a "ghost," before we can get to the business

²⁸ Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, 3

of studying them—lest we would not know which entities to study or how to approach them. Certainly the fictional character Sherlock Holmes “exists” in some sense—i.e., has an essence—but we would have made a basic ontological error if we travel to 221b Baker Street in London to learn about him. We must know what it is to “be” a fictional character before we begin our investigation into any particular fictional character.²⁹

According to the view outlined above, we discover the essence of a thing, not by sloughing off our prejudices such that we can get at the thing as it exists independent of us (if this were the order of investigation, an empirical investigation could never get under way), but rather, by being attentive to how things originally show up for us, prior to reflection. What I am here calling a “regional ontology,” then, is the determination of what way of life it is that discloses—prior to reflection—entities such as “mollusks,” “paintings,” ghosts,” or “fictional characters.” Fundamental ontology, on the other hand, tells us that the way to conceive of these entities is as “equipment” in the unfolding of some particular self-understanding or other. It is fundamental ontology that tells us what it *means* to look for the being of an entity; it tells us, that is, that there are regional ontologies that are determined by different contexts of equipmental use under different self-understandings. “Phenomenology” names *how* we make these contexts explicit.

This way of putting things opens Heidegger to a problem of reflexivity.³⁰ The explicit aim of *Being and Time* is to “lay bare the horizon within which something like Being in general becomes intelligible...[that is,] to clarif[y] the possibility of having any understanding of being at all”³¹; which means that the aim is to uncover the

²⁹ I gathered this particular example from personal conversation with Charles Guignon.

³⁰ Charles B. Guignon, *Heidegger and the problem of knowledge* (Hackett Publishing, 1983), p. 208.

³¹ BT, 274

transcendental conditions within which any understanding of being whatsoever must be subject. But this aim conflicts with the findings of Heidegger's existential analysis of human being in the first division of *Being and Time*. If we follow those findings through, then doing fundamental ontology must itself be understood as a highly contextualized activity that makes sense only in the frame of a finite and contingent range of possible self-understandings available in our particular cultural context.

One way to see how fundamental ontology can itself be contextualized, and yet retain its transcendental necessity, is to place it in the context of an irreversible cultural development. Irreversible, that is, because Heidegger's approach to ontology has fundamentally altered how we talk about what it is to *be*. We cannot, that is, at least not without showing how Heidegger's approach is faulty in some essential way, simply forget about the possibility that the essence of entities, and thus what concerns the foundation of any science whatsoever, is tied to the teleological projections constitutive of a unique and contingent range of possible self-understandings available to a particular people. Although it was not Heidegger's intention, on this way of seeing things, the fact that fundamental ontology is itself a historically contingent and highly contextualized activity is a virtue—as confirmation of its findings—rather than a failing. But to see exactly how this idea works, it will be helpful to draw on Gadamer's development of notion of "*Bildung*."

In his *Truth and Method*, Gadamer develops the concept of "*Bildung*" (cultivation, enculturation, or education) in relation to Hegel's notion of "practical *Bildung*." For Hegel, this phrase names the process by which one appropriates—or, is educated into—a set of norms or standards imbedded within a particular community. It

is worth quoting Gadamer at length here. Utilizing the example of one's profession, Gadamer writes:

Practical Bildung is seen in one's fulfilling one's profession wholly, in all its aspects. But this includes overcoming the element in it that is alien to the particularity which is oneself, and making it wholly one's own. Thus to give oneself to the universality of a profession is at the same time 'to know how to limit oneself—i.e., to make one's profession wholly one's concern. Then it is no longer a limitation.' [This idea] becomes completely clear in the idea of theoretical Bildung, *for to have a theoretical stance is, as such, already alienation*, namely to demand that one 'deal with something that is not immediate, something that is alien, with something that belongs to memory and to thought.' Theoretical Bildung leads beyond what man knows and experiences immediately. It consists in learning to affirm what is different from oneself and to find universal viewpoints from which one can grasp [things in an objective manner]. That is why acquiring Bildung always involves the development of theoretical interests, and Hegel declares the world and language of antiquity to be especially suitable for this, since this world is remote and alien enough to effect the necessary separation of ourselves from ourselves, 'but it contains at the same time all the exit points and threads of the return to oneself, for becoming acquainted with it and for finding oneself again, but oneself according to a truly universal essence... To recognize one's own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the basic movement of spirit, whose being consists only in returning to itself from what is other. Hence all theoretical Bildung, even acquiring foreign languages and conceptual worlds, is merely the continuation of a process of Bildung that begins much earlier. Every single individual who raises himself out of his natural being to the spiritual finds in the language, customs, and institutions of his people a pre-given body of material which, as in learning to speak, he has to make his own. *Thus every individual is always engaged in the process of Bildung.*'³²

On his view, rather than being part of a *method* for arriving at an ever more accurate description of the way things originally "show up," hermeneutics is thought to be the basic movement of culture itself—i.e., as the movement between "individuals" and the vocabularies, norms, social roles, etc., they received from their cultural traditions; and which, in the very act of taking them over, participate in an original

³² TM, 13-14. *My emphasis*. The last embedded quote from Hegel in the passage, as cited by Gadamer, is from: Hegel, *Nürnberg Schriften*, ed. J. Hoffmeister, p.312 (1809 Address).

interpretation of them. We are all always in the business of doing hermeneutics in the activity of learning. Education (*Bildung*) itself, on this view, is from the start an interpretative activity.

We can see in both Heidegger and Gadamer the formal movements of hermeneutical phenomenology. This movement involves three moments or positions: (1) a “naïve” reception of tradition in a pre-reflective appropriation (which is itself a kind of unreflective interpretation); (2) an alienation from this tradition³³ via a kind of uncanny individuation or negation with what was once familiar via (somewhat counterintuitively) revealing what we are in a theoretical or reflective attentiveness; and (3), a return to the tradition that has been explicitly interpreted and appropriated (i.e., through education). Nevertheless, the return is always an arrival to a condition that has been altered by an explicit interpretation. “Hermeneutics” names the transmission and alteration of culture through the mediation of an alienated position.

In the sense that Gadamer means it, as an essential feature of the human condition, hermeneutics is the movement of culture itself. From this broad umbrella, fundamental ontology can find a home within that movement. Yet imbedding it within the movement of culture—and here is the curial point—it does not lose any of its immediate necessity. There is no way to undo the shift in thinking, and the corresponding cultural transformations that were precipitated by Heidegger via the

³³ On Heidegger’s account, this alienation is achieved via confrontation with one’s “ownmost possibility for being” as disclosed in a confrontation with the possibility of being a whole that is revealed in a projection towards one’s own death. (*Being and Time*, sec. 46 – 53). This possibility of being a whole—which indicates nothing other than the idea that if I, for example, were to recognize that the process of appropriating the tradition in to which I have been “thrown” will someday end, *for me*—individuates and set one over against the received norms and social roles. On the other hand, in regards to Gadamer’s reading of Hegel quoted above, the movement of alienation that derives from “theoretical *Bildung*” is one in which one is alienated from oneself via the discrepancy between what is particular and immediate with what is universal and mediate.

widespread appropriation of many of his key ideas. Moreover, because there is no “outside” the hermeneutic horizon of our unique moment in history, there is no higher court of appeal. The very possibility—and this simply means its intelligibility—of Heidegger’s account, makes the changes in thinking and culture that correspond to it as necessary as anything can be.

But the framework in which this necessity is binding, of course, is itself subject to further development. And this development, we would expect (although it may not), would bear a relationship to fundamental ontology similar to that which fundamental ontology has with transcendental phenomenology. Such developments are accomplished, for the most part, incrementally via small but decisive shifts in how we think about particular problems that arise within highly contextualized environments. What is key to note here is that such developments are of the same kind as more mundane developments; such as how we think about the nature of electrical currents and magnetic fields, for example. In each case, the development is accomplished by an alienation from the commonplace—breakdowns in the otherwise smooth flow of life. In these moments of alienation, there is an opportunity to draw on the resources (the stockpile of ideas, practices, concerns, etc.) that reside in the backdrop of our own cultural horizon.

“Moral phenomenology” then, names the practice of *actively* putting a received set of ideas, vocabularies, practices, and concerns “into question” via a careful description of the phenomena those concepts ordinarily “simply indicate.” The discrepancies between the descriptions that hermeneutic phenomenology produce, on the one hand, and the character of the “simple indication,” on the other, provide the

occasion for seeking out a new interpretation. Or in other words, it is a practice that utilizes careful description to alienate the received tradition such that a “gap” in meaning is opened, and within which it become possible to discover phenomena that would otherwise remain concealed—discover phenomena, that is, via an uncommon appropriation and deployment of other vocabularies within the same tradition.

But to do hermeneutic phenomenology properly and consistently (that is, carry through with its implications), *everything* must swing free—every idea, practice, concern, institution, and so on, or any constellation of these, must be available for possible redescription. Even “down” so far as to fundamental ontology itself—which also means the meaning of hermeneutic phenomenology. But to say this is of course not to imply that everything must swing free all at once. It is unclear what a generalized decontextualizaion would mean (and whatever it would mean, it would involve the cessation of culture and, indeed, of thinking itself). Rather, the idea here is that nothing is barred in advance from a possible redescription. As I suggested above, substantial cultural developments generally occur incrementally (but decisively) in highly contextualized situations; and on occasion, their very presence or availability (rather than their being demonstrably “true” or “right” according to the typical, received standards) have far reaching consequences for our whole historical horizon of meaning.

My aim in the present investigation is to open up the possibility for such a development. The theme of moral friction is intended to be a wedge, as it were, to expose fissures in the ironist’s form of life in such a way that it also anticipates a form of life that transcends/resolves (or, dissolves) the tensions that force those fractures. But what specific arguments, one might reasonably ask, can be given to prefer the new

description over the old? Is this a mere matter of preference? Or is there a necessity built into the movement from the one description to the other? The kind of active “force” of persuasion that this investigation should have can be exhibited in a technical sense via the Hegelian notion of “sublation.”

§2.3 | *Sublation*

Gadamer’s way of understanding hermeneutic phenomenology as an investigation into the dynamics of cultural development itself is built on a conceptual foundation laid by Hegel. The pattern of cultural development embodied in the concept of “*bildung*” corresponds to the key features in the development of what, for Hegel, is “spirit” or “mind” (*geist*). Those key ideas can be combined in this way: Human beings always make sense of their lives in the terms given by a publicly articulated constellation of ideas, intuitions, practices, concerns, and so on. This constellation is constitutive of the norms and standards that enable and govern human intentionality (what we project or “intend” for our lives and the lives of others in our ordinary way of understanding what we or others are “up to” when taking action). Within the framework of his account, spirit circumscribes human understanding as the condition for the possibility of agency itself. As Robert Pippin puts it, “for an action to count as mine, it must make a certain kind of sense to the agent, and that means it must fit intelligibly within a whole complex of practices and intuitions within which *doing this now* could have a coherent meaning.”³⁴ Yet because this “complex of practices and intuitions” (and ideas, concerns, etc.) is *not* given by the agent herself, it would be incorrect to think

³⁴ Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy*, 5. Pippin’s emphasis

of spirit as a phenomenon that can be accounted for via a reduction to the intentions of individual human beings. On this view, being an individual, and having intentions that correspond to the recognition of oneself and others as individuals, is itself a possibility only because of a particular set of relationships between ideas within spirit. The idea of being an individual, of having freedom, rights, and responsibilities, is a historical achievement for spirit and not a simple ahistorical aspect of human ontology. It follows from this that accounting for spirit (and the particular relationships that exist within it at any one time) cannot operate within a traditional ontological dualism wherein natural events are distinguished from purposive or intentional events. Spirit is not the content that flickers on the screen of consciousness—a consciousness possessed by an ontologically primitive and individuated “thinking thing.” Properly speaking, as the ultimate horizon of context within which anything whatsoever can show up as meaningful, spirit can be accounted for only from within spirit itself. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* is explicitly a developmental account of spirit becoming *aware of itself*. What is of particular interest for the present project is the way in which Hegel accounts for this development of spirit towards self-recognition.

At any given stage of development, spirit is understood to include a host of conflicting ideas, practices, concerns, etc., which together produce contradictions particular to that stage (particular to that configuration of constitutive ideas, practices, etc.). Because these contradictions are in part definitive of that stage itself, they are not resolvable without a development of spirit *as a whole*. This shift in spirit from one stage to the next is marked by a resolution of the contradictions that were definitive of the previous stage. However, this “resolution” is not accomplished by a rejection of one of

the contradicting terms (idea, practice, concern, etc), but rather involves a shift in perspective that fundamentally transforms the meaning of those terms in such a way that what was contradictory about them becomes irrelevant.

To give a contemporary example, the Marx-inspired international proletarian revolutions of the last century, which sought to facilitate the transition from a capitalist control of production to a more egalitarian (classless and stateless) social order, is increasingly absent from mainstream discourse in contemporary North America. It is certainly not the case that the tensions that called for this revolution have been resolved, but rather, that the conceptual and practical coherence of both capitalist and communist ideologies (and the forms of life they articulate) have been blurred. How we think and talk about what it is to be human, and therefore, what it means to be in a social order, has changed (amongst other things). Many of the very same intellectuals who we might expect to have been moved by Marx, Lenin, and Trotsky are now working in a vocabulary informed by thinkers such as Heidegger, Derrida, and Foucault. The contemporary North American leftist intellectual has no doubt retained a moral and political intuition concerning social justice that would have once naturally reposed within a Marxist inspired political vocabulary, but this intuition goes largely “unjustified” today—that is, robust and comprehensive arguments are seldom marshaled to provide a broad spectrum rational justification of these intuitions. Nevertheless, just as this quasi-Marxist moral intuition has been retained, so have particular Marx-inspired ideas concerning the “resistance” to oppressive social norms and vocabularies, for example. Despite the blurring of the conceptual coherence that give meaning to these ideas and intuitions, they persist by being integrated into the foundation of new ideas,

practices, and intuitions—as foundational to these developments, they are inextricably entwined in future forms of life. Yet, at the same time, the blurring diffuses what made for well-formulated oppositions. It is this movement that both diffuses oppositions and yet retains the terms of the opposition that provides for both a preservation and transcendence of a particular stage of spirit that Hegel calls the process of “sublation.”

In its most basic form, the concept of “sublation” (*Aufhebung*) refers to a dialectical movement from an initial opposition between two contradictory ideas or set of ideas to a third idea or set of ideas in which what was contradictory in the initial pair is at once fully appropriated and preserved and yet transcended or resolved. One way to make sense of how this movement works is to take note of how different “vantage points” operate in the development. The movement itself has three “vantage points” or “positions.” First, (P1) there is a “pre-reflective” or “unmediated” position. Next, there is a (P2) position in which the ideas implicit in the pre-reflective position (P1) come in to view via a contrast produced by the disclosure of internal contradictions within the ideas that compose (P1). And there is a final position (P3) in which the opposition revealed at (P2) is transformed in such a way that the opposition can be viewed in terms of the contradiction, but which can at the same time be resolved by its inclusion in a new wider set of ideas that was not available at (P1) and is only anticipated or “hinted at” in (P2) by the contradiction itself. The concept of sublation names this particular movement from (P2) to (P3).³⁵

³⁵ The multiple meanings of the German word that Hegel uses to indicate this movement, “*aufhaben*,” can be instructive here. Its most basic meaning is “to pick something up,” or “to raise” something from a lower position to a higher position. It can also mean “to preserve” or “to save”; as if “to pick something up and save it for later.” More commonly, however, it is used to mean “to cancel” or “to reverse”; in the sense that a prohibition or law might be “lifted.” All three meanings indicate how the movement from (2)

We have seen this pattern already in discussing the basic movement of Heidegger's and Gadamer's phenomenological hermeneutics. There we saw three positions: (P1) a "naïve" or "pre-reflective" appropriation of a way of disclosing the world provided by the traditions of a historical people (its vocabulary, practices, concerns, etc.); (P2) an alienation from this initial pre-reflective mode of appropriating a tradition—an alienation that is occasioned by an explicitation of what *now* can only be seen as having been implicit at (P1); and (P3) an explicit appropriation of what is revealed at (P2) back into the tradition, albeit in a way that has been transformed.

Although it follows a similar—though not identical—structure, one crucial difference between Heidegger's ideas as developed in *Being and Time* on the one hand, and Gadamer and Hegel on the other, is that for Heidegger, the vantage point from (P3)—what would be the "authentic" mode—does not amount to a substantial development beyond the form of life that one is always already realizing at (P1). Rather, it is a transformation in the mode of comportment toward that same form of life by way of an explicit approbation of it; or in other words, by taking ownership of it. For Gadamer and Hegel, on the other hand, the movement from (P2) to (P3) constitutes a substantial development, such that after the passage through (P2), one can no longer return to the same form of life as at (P1). Or to put it another way, whereas for Heidegger the only difference between (P1) and (P3) is how things "look," for Gadamer and Hegel, the difference between (P1) and (P3) is substantial; that is, the dialectic has changed the "world" itself.

to (3) involves the *transcendence* of the opposition (*reversal*) revealed at (2) while at the same time *preserving* that contradiction.

Suppose that I, for example, were to have grown up thinking that some particular version of modern progressive liberal politics was the “obvious” way to see the world (P1) and that all other politics were simply a result of either “poor thinking” or a holdover from older, more “primitive,” ways of seeing the world. And then let us also suppose that I was subsequently exposed to the ambiguities and contradictions (P2) involved in the attempt to give a coherent history which reflected a linear and rational development from the “primitive” to the “enlightened” way of seeing things which I had once thought to be “obvious.” I might, upon reflection, eventually come to affirm my initial political orientation at (P3), or I may come to reject it. If I do come to reject it, either in part or in whole, such a rejection would not constitute a negation of the world I lived in at (P1); rather, it would be a rejection of how what was “obvious” or “taken for granted” at (P1) looks *after* it has been thematized and made explicit at (P2). Likewise, if I was to affirm a modern progressive liberal politics at (P3), what I affirm are the modern progressive liberal politics as seen through the thematic mediation accomplished at (P2). On this view, the “return” at (P3) is a return to a transformed landscape. What is of crucial importance for this investigation is the nature of this substantial difference between (P1) and (P3).

From the vantage point of (P3), how things look from (P1) seems “naïve” or “unsophisticated.” What is most interesting about this difference, however, is that it is *impossible* to willfully choose to take up the naïve position once one has passed through (P2). The act of *deciding* upon what to affirm—which marks the transition to (P3)—is itself made possible by the “option” itself; and options are available only after one has been alienated from the undifferentiated/pre-reflective form of life at (P1). Reversing

the process of alienation is impossible precisely because what was undifferentiated at (P1) has been transformed by the mediation of interpretation at (P2). Only by a genuine lapse of memory, not only for an individual, but for all who participated in a particular interpretation (which is, in Heidegger's terms, the cultural memory of *das Man*), could something like a true return (at least in principle) be achieved.³⁶ The fact that the condition for the possibility of "forgetting" would necessarily involve the "collective forgetting" by a whole community accords with the idea that interpretations are essentially public. And this implication means that the proper level of these dialectical developments is that of traditions, as Gadamer's notion of *Bildung* suggests.

It also means that every occasion for a hermeneutic phenomenology must proceed from the inadequacies of a *publicly available contradiction* or discrepancy between two elements within the "common sense" of a particular people. In formal terms, the investigation must proceed along the initial steps in the thematization of the inadequacies of the naïve position accomplished at (P2), but it can do so only after a publicly accessible "prompt" which initiates the alienation by revealing a systematic contradiction within that form of life. In other words, there must be some definite phenomenological indication that something is "amiss," that something is calling us out

³⁶ We see something like an attempt at such a reversal, for example, in parents who, due to a kind of nostalgia for the naïve position, attempt to shelter their children from the conditions that produce the alienation that is occasioned by the reflection, thematization (interpretation) and choice that makes the naïve position unrecoverable. The above analysis, however, would suggest that such attempts are, at best, futile, and at worst, crippling to the child's ability to negotiate the "common sense" of the wider community. Even in extreme attempts where a whole community isolates itself, and thereby provides the most practically optimal conditions for sheltering its children, it is hard to imagine that the world-view of the parent, which is disclosed from the position of having made a choice, could be concealed from the child. There would inevitably be gaps in meaning between the world that the parents wanted the child to see and the world that they reveal to them through their own actions. Only through a kind of punitive or disciplinary procedure encouraging one "not to think," one can imagine, can these gaps of meaning be kept from spreading in to alienation.

of our immersion in our everyday worldly engagements and is prompting reflection, questioning, and interpretation.

§2.4 | *Two Kinds of Clues*

I concluded the previous section by suggesting that the character of the transformation that is to be achieved in virtue of the account could only be identified in relation to a prior clue concerning what is to be addressed in the investigation. In other words, a “change” or “transformation” can be *anticipated* in what is to be accomplished in virtue of the account only because there is a prior perception that something is “amiss,” and that it is partly constitutive of the task of giving the account to penetrate this perception in such a way as to resolve what is perceived to be problematic in it. The particular “change” in question can only be identified in relation to what motivates the account. To say that we have such a “prior perception” is to indicate that we already have access to the “problem” in some definite sense. It follows then, that with regard to the thematic of moral friction we should already be familiar with the phenomenon in some determinant way (even though it might be obscured by traditional epistemic, moral, sociological and psychological theoretical frameworks).

On the other hand, I began this chapter by suggesting that every account gets guided in advance by some expectation concerning what the account is supposed to achieve; and the anticipation of what is to be accomplished by the investigation guides an initial hermeneutic that enables us to pick out the relevant phenomenon as our initial “prompt”; that is, the first sort of “clue” I just introduced in the above paragraph about something being ‘amiss.’ In other words, we cannot proceed from an uncanny situation

alone. Rather, some intuition that suggests a novel thematic must be available to provide a “wedge,” as it were, to pry open the gaps in meaning that accompanies the uncanniness of alienation. Alienation alone only provides the occasion for a hermeneutic phenomenology; the substance of that hermeneutic can only be unlocked by yet another kind of clue about what might be achieved by the investigation, even if that clue is initially quite vague.

In formal terms, the point may be put this way: the transformation that is accomplished at (P2) begins from vague insights or clues at both its “borders” with (P1) and with (P3). In our case, this means that the phenomenon of moral friction first becomes accessible only in the presence of these two sorts of clues. However, it is important to make a distinction between two movements of the hermeneutic for the purpose of illuminating the two tasks implicit in this sort of investigation. The first task is to recognize—to become aware of—a contradiction or opposition between two elements that are definitive of a particular way of life. This “awareness” arrives as the anxiety that accompanies the alienation from the familiar flow of one’s everyday engagements. The second task is to thematize that awareness (and thus become “substantially” aware) in such a way as to anticipate and ultimately achieve a resolution to what is contradictory while at the same time preserving the terms of the contradiction. In fact, both tasks are accomplished at once with the arrival of the mediating theme. But such an “arrival” is only made possible by two conditions. There must be something “amiss” in the original position, and there must be some definite possibility of resolving what is awry. From a methodological point of view, these two “conditions” can best be thought of as “clues” to the thematic that at once first reveals the contradiction, and then

ultimately anticipates a resolution of the contradiction, as that which is to be achieved by the arrival of the mediating thematic.

The first kind of clue (C1) concerns familiar situations that consistently produce an uncanniness or awkwardness in the otherwise smooth flow of the “naïve position.” At the same time, however, there must also be a clue (C2) concerning what might be achieved at (P3); and this requirement is pressing not only as that which provides phenomenal conformation of (C1)—as the indication of a contradiction worthy of consideration—but also as that which provides a trajectory for how the transition from (P2) to (P3) is to be accomplished (or at least what is called for in order for such a transition to be possible); and it is thereby the ground for all meaningful interpretive activity that constitutes (P2). Without (C2), the uncanniness of any sort of situation at (C1) would undoubtedly be repeatedly lost and overrun by the demands of everyday life, we would simply fall back into the “flow.” Whatever opportunity might be offered by a moment of uncanniness is lost if no thematic wedge can keep it alive as an open question—as a topic of concern.

In the course of communicating a theme that has been identified, it is more useful to begin from (C1) since it is this condition that first illuminates a potential need—as that which first indicates what practical end is to be achieved by an account. However, just as (C1) depends upon (C2) to confirm its significance (as a topic worthy of consideration—as a topic we already care about), (C2) will remain a mere fancy—mere abstraction or intuition--without the phenomenological substantiation provided by (C1).

§2.5 | *Moral Phenomenology*

I want to conclude this chapter by giving a formal definition of the form of argument I have been calling “moral phenomenology,” as well as to anticipate the relationship that moral phenomenology will have to a form of life that I will call the “improviser.” *“Moral phenomenology” names the practice of explicitly disclosing contradictions within a particular form of life in such a way that the interpretation that discloses the contradiction is itself catalyst to the transformation of the background context of significance that eventually transcends/resolves the contradiction.*

Hermeneutic phenomenology, when understood as the practice of interpreting how we encounter the world prior to rational reflection, in combination with the asymmetrical cultural development captured in the notion of “sublation,” together constitute the elements that accomplish the task of moral phenomenology. Hermeneutic phenomenology concerns the interpretation of phenomena from the point of view of *das Man*; it is the “way” or “practice” of doing philosophy that is appropriate to the relationship between human being as an instance of *das Man* and the essence of any entity whatsoever. It is on account of the fact that an asymmetrical cultural development, produced by the deployment of hermeneutic phenomenology in the course of revealing the contradictions first encountered as anxiety, ultimately has the consequences of altering the significance of “things and events” as they show up in any particular social role, that I call the method I am introducing here “moral *phenomenology*.”

Moreover, hermeneutic phenomenology has the power to instigate asymmetrical temporal development in the background horizon of significance for a whole form of

life, with the effect of altering (to varying degrees) what it means to occupy a particular social role at any given stage. As a result it also changes the value distinctions (in relation to which strong evaluations are expressed) that are partly constitutive of those very social roles. A change in the background horizon of significance of a particular form of life will inevitably alter the meaning and importance of any particular strong evaluation. Once this asymmetrical development is accomplished, the strong evaluations expressed may be in conflict with those characteristic of the previous stage. However, regardless of whether they are compatible or not, the relationship between the strong evaluations and norms expressed from (P1) will inevitably reveal those expressed from (P3) as incoherent and threatening. Alternatively, the strong evaluations and norms expressed from (P3) can only reflect on those expressed at (P1) as “naïve.” It is in virtue of this substantial development of the context within which strong evaluations are made that I call this method “*moral* phenomenology.”

From a purely methodological point of view, moral phenomenology is both descriptive and normative. Therefore, the vocabulary it develops will not suffer from the ontological difficulties discussed in Part One regarding moral friction; difficulties that required delaying the final account until after the framework of moral phenomenology became available. On the other hand, Gadamer is right to say that hermeneutic phenomenology describes the inherent movement of culture itself, and is thus not properly a “methodology” at all; however, what makes moral phenomenology a categorically different concern is the explicit or *intentional* use of hermeneutic phenomenology to expose contradictions when we encounter them as anxiety in everyday life. Culture can—and does—take care of itself. However, there is nothing to

prevent us from seeking out, in a systematic way, redescriptions that have the effect of subverting the tensions that characterize our own form of life. If an account is formulated such that older alternative ways of thinking seem both naïve yet necessary as foundations or sources of the new account, then the hermeneutic is successful as a moral phenomenology. Or, put in another way, the mark of a successful moral phenomenological investigation is that its results seem obvious—as if one should have always understood this—and yet are substantially different from one’s older ways of thinking.

Moreover, moral phenomenology is not external to culture—i.e., such that it must (or ought) be employed if culture is to “get it right” (descriptively or normatively). Understanding moral phenomenology in this way once again confuses it with the epistemic structure of an empirical scientific or normative moral argument. It suggests that a methodology is appropriate to an extra-historical form of thinking that can then be applied to that history and thereby direct its course from *outside*. This is how Gadamer uses the term “methodology,” and it is what motivates its rejection when characterizing hermeneutics. However, I want to appropriate the term in a way that recognizes that any *method* of thinking is always internal to a particular historical cultural context of significance; and as such, it carries the necessities that obtain within and between the ideas, practices, concerns, etc., of that stage of cultural development.

Understanding that any methodological thinking whatsoever exists within the context of some historical situation or other is the consequence of accepting the radical historicization suggested above. When placed within historical development, however, we get “methodology” back, so to speak, albeit in a way that limits the significance of

the method to a particular historical context. But this, again, does not diminish the necessity of the relationships between ideas, practices, concerns, etc., to which that method is appropriate. On the contrary, the radical historicization of any mode of thinking whatsoever reveals the necessity within a context as its internal limits; and with regard to a particular configuration of meaning, these limits are ultimate. Nevertheless, those limits can be transformed if and only if the configuration of meaning as a whole itself is transformed. Yet as a structural condition for the possibility of thinking (whatever those conditions might be), it is important to note that such limits cannot be simply ignored, as if to suggest that because they are contingent, they are not binding. On the contrary, within the limits of a particular total context of significance, they are absolutely binding.

When understood to be appropriate to a particular context of significance, moral phenomenology must be thought as ultimately self-referential. But this fact should be understood as a virtue. Once one accepts a radical historicization of the total context of significance, any systematic method of thinking should be able to account for itself in relation to that context. As an intentional practice, and in the course of its novel illumination of the world, it will undoubtedly ultimately transform both itself and its relationship to the world.

It should be clear, then, that I am in agreement with Gadamer's assessment of the primacy of *Bildung*. But I want to go further than he does by suggesting that in explicitly accepting the idea that the basic character of human thinking is hermeneutic, we are given license to appropriate this insight for a systematic employment of hermeneutic phenomenology in the service of actively or intentionally transforming our

own cultural context of significance. And this appropriation and active deployment of hermeneutic phenomenology is given *philosophical* warrant to make claims of necessity (rather than deploying it as mere cultural criticism) *just in case* it actually accomplishes an irreversible shift in a background of significance as a whole.

Part Three | The Improviser

§2.1 | *Two Clues*

In order that the task of defusing moral friction via the characterization of the “improviser” might both be motivated and guided by a sense of what is at stake in achieving its end, it must begin by treating a familiar sort of phenomenon. The example I have in mind pertains to situations in which a range of attitudes—what may be characterized as a generalized form of “unreflective” or “commonsense moral relativism”—works to shape how we think about any more or less explicit formulation of the question of the good life. By the phrase “question of the good life,” I will mean any inquiry aimed at establishing an understanding of what kind of life is more (or most) worth living. The example can serve as a clue to what has become objectionable about situations in which this question is either explicitly expressed or implied.

In other words, fully thematizing the condition of moral friction and the condition of its sublational defusion must be guided by what is to be achieved via the thematization itself. What is needed, in other words, is a particular familiar situation that may or may not be subject to moral friction depending on how it is interpreted by those participating in the situation. With regard to methodology, such an indication or clue must suggest a substantive vision of some alternative form of life that opens a space in which moral friction is retrospectively the proper theme. The “negative space” that

the problematic of moral friction presents as a “question” in need of an “answer” is not enough to justify the kind of redescription of familiar conditions (leveling and depression) that the theme of moral friction itself requires. Only a situation that can be exhibited from the view that produces moral fiction and then the view from that of the improviser, without fundamentally altering the essential characteristics of the particular sort of situation under examination, can justify or properly motivate both redescriptions as part of a problem (moral friction) in need of an answer (improvisation). Providing these two clues utilizing the same situation as experienced from different vantage points has the advantage of not only justifying both redescriptions, but also of providing a phenomenological introduction to the distinctive structural and temporal features of the improviser’s form of life.

My strategy then is to look at a particular situation in which the “question of the good life” becomes practically pressing. Looking at a particular situation, an example, makes clear both how the forms of ironist (the decisionist and the suspicionist) and the improviser comport themselves in fundamentally different ways. An examination of this situation helps build sufficient phenomenological contrasts to provide for an initial formal thematization of the improviser. In order to build-out this formal account, in section 3.5, I turn to the peculiar temporal dynamics of musical improvisation as a clue to the temporal dynamics of hermeneutic improvisation. Finally in section 3.6, I draw these temporal dynamics together with the formal structural account of moral phenomenology accomplished in Part Two in order to (1) discharge the thesis that the improvisational mode of self-interpretation provides for an explicit participation in the production of moral norms to which in turn the interpreter feels bound; and (2), that

because of the very possibility of this mode, the reactive ironist, and their experience of moral friction, is sublated.

§3.2 | *The First Clue: The Problem with Questioning the Good Life*

I want to give a first approximation as to why I think it is worth attending to the status of the question of the good life and at the same time convey a sense of why this otherwise seemingly uncomplicated question quickly becomes knotty and vague when anything more than a perfunctory set of platitudes are marshaled to ward off superficial or fleeting everyday doubts and anxieties about the kinds of lives we lead. An indication of both the degree of centrality that explicit notions regarding the good life (both in general and in particular situations) have in the unfolding life drama of individuals, as well as the way in which putting these notions into question has become a conceptually thorny business, can be exposed simultaneously by drawing attention to a commonplace public phenomenon in which the question itself is strategically avoided.

Consider the sort of situations in which the following phrases might be deployed: “to each his own,” or “everyone is entitled to his or her own opinion,” or “we should agree to disagree.” Such phrases, or ones like them, are common in the dominant discourse in North America and they point to a familiar sentiment imbedded in the background “common sense” of the culture. The sentiment expressed in these sayings can most certainly be illuminated by reference to the liberal Anglo-American tradition (and western social history, generally), and there is certainly a rich cultural and intellectual history to be told about how those expressions have achieved some level of common sense. However, I want here only to draw attention to the way that such

sayings actually operate in common parlance to deflect talk about moral topics that would otherwise involve the prospects of some agreement about what kinds of ends or practices are worth pursuing, what values are most important, or what “truths” merit belief. That such phrases are expected to achieve these topical deflections when uttered suggests that there is a range of sentiments that the speaker more or less tacitly expects to be common enough that the listener will “understand” and thus subsequently desist from pursuing the contentious topic of conversation. There may be any number of psychological, social, or situational accounts that can make sense of why any given person may employ one of these phrases in a particular situation; however, because the use of the phrase depends upon the presumed existence of a common sentiment, it is reasonable to speak about this range of attitudes as having a singular, publicly available meaning. In other words, with regard to their function, such phrases are effective precisely because they have a singular meaning; i.e., something like: “I don’t want to talk about this topic because I disagree with you and I don’t think a conversation will be fruitful in resolving these differences.” The usage of these types of phrases to express this sentiment, as well as to direct conversation, reveals that topics concerning the good life (i.e. topics concerning what is most worthy, valuable, or true about the lives we lead) are *already* a matter of concern for us; i.e., insofar as this care is attested to by the fact that these strategies have emerged by which conversations about this class of topics can be evaded. There is no sense in strategies for avoiding topics we are indifferent to. At the same time, it also reveals that there is something awkward and hostile about these topics—insofar as they are often successfully evaded by these very strategies (otherwise the strategies would not be commonly employed). The fact that we all more or less

know what it means when someone says that “we should agree to disagree about this topic” reaffirms that these topics already hold some importance for us. And yet it also hints at the extent to which a practice of avoiding conversations concerning a moral topic that we clearly care about occupies a common sense position in our public repertoire of social engagements.

The above example offers intimation regarding both the importance that ideas about the good life already have for us as well as a hesitation or unwillingness to address the question. Said in a different way, it points to a vague sense that not much insight will follow from talking about one’s deeply held ideas about the good life; and *a fortiori*, the intellectual project of actively putting one’s ideas about the good life explicitly into question seems pointless or even pernicious.

Nevertheless, it seems that no question could be more obvious. Is it not the case, one may protest, that everyone must ask this question at some point, and perhaps even at many points? It may be plausible to consider the possibility that in earlier times, when there were fewer social roles available, where roles may have been experienced as more clearly and rigidly defined, and/or social mobility was more limited, that such questions may never arrive in common attention with much more force than a mere curiosity; but it seems implausible that such a question would not arise as a matter of course in the contemporary Western world. In our time, it seems, with the proliferation of vivid portrayals of very different cultures and sub-cultures through film, television, the internet and alike, there exists something of a smorgasbord of often conflicting social roles and cultural fragments from which every teenager attending public education in North America, for example, is expected to select, and by which they are expected to

compose their own personal identity; e.g., that “personal identity” on the basis of which they are expected to coordinate the “tastes” and “desires” that a modern free market economy presupposes as the “natural” pump that drives commerce. And in a different way, in a culture in which one’s professional career is often thought less of as a vocation than as a coincidental and provisional activity aimed at gathering the resources for the purpose of realizing one’s own private self-articulated goals, is not the question of the good life inexorably bound up with modern life as the vehicle by which those private goals are first articulated? In our modern liberal society, it is hard to imagine that the question of the good life would not emerge often.

Moreover, the idea that the question of the good life has been obfuscated in contemporary Western life seems less than obvious when we consider the fact that our public discourse is riddled with various voices that often explicitly call us to live in accord with a particular conception of the good life (as found in religious institutions, various manifestations of the “self-help” movement, or political ideology, just to name a few). Or, as is more often the case, we are urged to adopt a particular vision of the good life via the tacit demands imbedded in the background of social norms implicit in the range of conventions, vocabularies, practices, and norms that populate particular social settings (e.g., the constellation of background social norms that compose and sustain academic institutions, the implicit moral background that undergirds the narrative continuity in films, novels and commercial advertisements, or the moral presumptions that tacitly stand behind and motivate topical political rhetoric). With so many voices demanding conformity with particular answers to the question of the good life, it seems odd to suggest that the question which it is natural to suppose generates the call for these

answers is in some way more obscure in the modern Western world than say, in former times.

Such objections to the very idea that the question of the good life has somehow become addled seem quite reasonable at first gloss. However, even though it is reasonable to grant that there is a necessary connection between assertions about the good life and the possibility of formulating a question for which such assertions could count as answers, what such objections nevertheless seem to presuppose is the unwarranted inference that, because there is no dearth of answers to the question of the good life, it is also unproblematic to explicitly ask the question. It is just this presumption, however, that tends to cover over and obscure the ways that we avoid such contentious topics at just those moments when they are most “question worthy”—that is, when explicitly posing the question has the most potentially forceful practical implications for everyday affairs. In other words, it does not follow from the fact that various conceptions of the good life are reproduced in the images, practices, and vocabularies that work to constitute our ordinary everyday way of life, that there also exists some antecedent more or less explicit discourse in which the question is framed. On the contrary, it is a phenomenon worthy of note that there exists such a discrepancy between the prevalence of discourse dedicated to expounding particular visions of the good life and the relative scarcity of discourse oriented towards formulating and asking questions about it.

This discrepancy might seem nothing more than a mere curiosity, an interesting but inessential cultural artifact, if not for the role that this question plays in contemporary Western life. As suggested above, having a practical answer to the

question of the good life is essential for making choices in everyday life. We must make choices about what career to pursue, what political party to support, what toothpaste to buy, we must, in short, make all sorts of evaluations (both strong and weak) in the course of everyday life as we peruse aims that correspond to some picture of how life is supposed to unfold. To do this, we need some grasp of how these different choices hang together according to some picture about how it is that one's life *ought* to be lived. This picture, of course, might be fragmented and discontinuous across different contexts (work, family, political action, etc.), but in order to participate in any particular context, one must have a grasp of—and take a stand in relation to—the strong evaluations internal to the meaning of those situations.

If there is something more to our reluctance to ask the question of the good life in public spaces than mere liberal tolerance or conversational courtesy, then that “something” is to be found in what we understand strong evaluations themselves to involve. If a strong evaluation is understood as an assertion of truth, then the evaluation itself demands criteria that give it warrant. If one has a general incredulity towards the possibility that such criteria can be found to have universal warrant, then strong evaluations as such seem to be inherently unwarranted. And if strong evaluations as such are inherently unwarranted, then conversation that would put such evaluations in question seems pointless at best. I would be reluctant to ask the question of the good life, in other words, if I believed that there is no possible criteria for resolving upon a set of “right” answers to the question in my own life—let alone answers that apply in some binding way to others.

It is important to be clear here that the phenomenon of reluctance that I am

indicating is not reluctance concerning an assertion of a vision of the good life, but rather of approaching those conversations about topics that may put the beliefs one already possesses about the good life in question. There is no dearth of talk about strong evaluations among people who already more or less agree about these evaluations. What is remarkably scarce is talk about these evaluations in the mode of an open question. The phenomenon then concerns first of all the terms of our own self-interpretation; our own understandings about who we are and what sort of lives that we ourselves lead or ought to lead.

In the next section I want to give an example of how this tension might play out in a very specific context. The situation has the advantage of admitting of a variety of possible modes whereby the participants might interact without fundamentally changing the essence of the situation itself. As such, it will provide the linkages needed in fleshing out how moral friction may be seen to work in the interpretations given by the participants and provide entrance to the interpretational mode of the improviser.

§3.3 | *The Situation: An Example*

In order to develop the first clue in a particular context, consider the following situation. Suppose that you are entering a new social environment that, while still within your wider culture, is nevertheless sufficiently foreign that the encounter feels uncanny. You are not at home with either the people that compose the group or the background ideas, practices, concerns, etc., that binds the group. Suppose further that the members of the group you are meeting are quite familiar with each other. Let's say also that there is something at stake, you are meeting the friends and family of your new romantic

partner. It is important to you to make a good impression and develop rapport with this group. Your goal is to be “welcomed in” and as such you are concerned both with being accepted and with providing some sort of value to the group. In most social situations, conformity to the group, having the right opinions, practices, concerns, etc., has value as a kind of confirmation of the way of life that the group exhibits. Moreover, you recognize that even if such conformity is not of explicit value to the group, some amount of overlap with the group is necessary even to begin an interaction. We have the convention of asking questions in our culture like: “What do you do for a living?” or perhaps, “Do you follow baseball?”, etc. The aim is to discover what kind of person(s) we are dealing with—what common motifs or forms of life can we expect. Most people, in more or less neutral circumstances—that is, without prior profound prejudice—yet in the presence of even a minimal motivation to get to know the other person, are willing to assume that others have something in common with themselves. I have charged this example with the stakes of a social interaction in which both the friends and family members of your romantic partner and you are motivated to develop such rapport.

Since you are, again by hypothesis, motivated to gain acceptance by the group, you are likely to bracket your more innocuous prejudices that might have otherwise deterred you from further interaction in a more neutral setting. You are open-minded and curious to know what these people are all about. It is almost certainly the case that your new romantic partner has prejudiced you either directly or indirectly. You have some ideas about who these people are. Yet the reality of interacting with people far outstrips the sorts of prejudices one may have casually garnered from your romantic partner. Let us

suppose that you have not been prejudiced with foreknowledge of any particularly moral objectionable past behaviors by the group. Far more difficult to hold in abeyance, on the other hand, are cultural prejudices that you may hold regarding the social group to which these people belong. Indeed, it is on the basis of these richly textured prejudices that we have any basis for interacting at all.

Since you are motivated in this example to “make a good impression” you are likely to bracket even these prejudices—or hold them in abeyance—with greater care than in more neutral circumstances even as you utilize them as a basis for your interaction. The situation itself calls for this “open-mindedness.” What is crucial to notice here is that this sort of “bracketing” involves taking on something of an ironic attitude. One does not do so by “bracketing” one’s prejudices and one’s own strong evaluations as though to reject one’s own ideas, cares, practices, etc. Rather, you simply refrain from asserting them bluntly or dogmatically before knowing something about, we might say, your audience. So you ask questions and make guarded assertions, being careful to concur with what you in fact agree with and simply avoiding potential topics that you suspect would cause disagreement. What is crucially important to note in your motivated disposition is the curiosity and desire to see what is right or good or agreeable in the ideas, practices, concerns, etc. of the group that you are getting to know.

Now suppose that the group has accepted you. That is not to say that you have become fully integrated, but that you have developed a sufficient region of overlap with them that you and they have begun to feel comfortable. Moreover, you have also gathered a sense of what topics would be points of disagreement. In short, you have a sense of your audience. By bracketing your own beliefs, practices, and concerns, you

have attuned yourself to another social region that, although overlapping with your own, is not identical to it. You are careful to note the similarities and the differences. You could at this point leave the differences as mere curiosities and when the interaction is over, think little more of it. But now suppose that you strike an attitude in which you hold the more or less coherent form of life that you had before the interaction side by side with the one that you encountered in the interaction and asked the further question: “Which one is better?” Of course, in asking this question, you do not need to suppose that you must either choose one or the other. You could intentionally use aspects of the challenging and discordant aspects of these foreign ideas, practices, and concerns to challenge your own. In other words, you might try to integrate the two.

Now let us suppose that the interaction has uncovered a practical contradiction of the following sort. Suppose that the group you encountered has a very rich conception of family life; one that you are particularly attracted to. It involves, however, spending much of one’s time and energy focused on “being a good father or mother” or “being a good son or daughter,” where each of these social roles is richly textured with well-defined ideas, practices and concerns. Suppose that you are inclined to think that this group has something importantly “right” about this conception. On the other hand, suppose also that you have put much of your time and focus into being a good “professional.” You know very well the finely textured flow of life that constitutes what being a professional is all about and what exactly it has taken for you to become proficient at it. You feel that these two forms of life are in many respects practically incompatible. As one who has prioritized your professional life, you have a well-developed vision of what it is to be accomplished “as a professional.” Your mood is

generally one of rigorous determination deployed in the service of realizing the particular ends to which your profession aims. From your professional perspective, the “family person,” with his or her attunement to the give-and-take flow suited to enjoying family interaction exhibits a complex of ordered priorities that are incompatible with the priorities internal to the meaning of realizing a life as a professional. From your perspective, that is, spending that much time focused on adopting the moods and aims of family life, although perhaps pleasurable and desirable, are simply incompatible with realizing the role of a “professional.” On the other hand, from the perspective of the “family person,” your focus on an attunement to the disposition and vocabulary of accomplishment comes at the expense of cultivating the relationships that make the dynamics of friends and families flourish.

There seem to be two possible forms of life presently available, each good and choice-worthy, but practically incompatible in many important respects. One way of resolving this problem is to assume that there exists some basis for thinking that one form of life is in principle more choice-worthy than the other. Perhaps we can look to nature or to reason as a basis for prioritizing the values and strong evaluations implicit in each. The idea that there is such a basis for determining the truth of the matter is what Richard Rorty identifies as the disposition of the “metaphysician.” On such a conception, one looks for the objectively right priority of the roles relative to what it is to be a human being and thereby coordinates the two by subordinating one to the other. One might conclude, for example, that the professional who is at the “top of his or her game,” but who does not attend to family matters, is simply out of sync with nature, reason, or history. On this view, there is a belief that, at least in principle, some

verifiable objective order concerning human beings exists and can serve as a basis on which to judge and order the strong evaluations that compose the multitude of social roles that we take up in the course of life. But let us suppose that you are an “ironist” in the sense that Rorty uses the term. You do not believe that such an objective order can be rationally justified; you do not believe that there is some meta-vocabulary that bridges the gap between a non-linguistic objective order and the everyday language we use to articulate our understanding of the world and ourselves. You are left then with a sort of smorgasbord of social roles that you gather from your culture and your interactions with other cultures that are compatible in some ways and not in others, but without any ultimately legitimate means for navigating conflicting demands that follow from the strong evaluations that organized each role. If you are inclined to affirm two social roles that are incompatible, then you are left with what might seem like a tragic necessity. This seeming “necessity” consists precisely in the indeterminacy of priority between one set of strong evaluations and the other. Since it seems up to you to choose between the “final vocabularies” that justifies each view, and since the strong evaluations that those final vocabularies endorse are incompatible—and you simply do not believe that there is some larger “final vocabulary” that can get sufficiently outside of each and that could command independent legitimacy—you seem to be left with the task of accepting the incompatibility as tragic. You are left with the task, in other words, of personally choosing which vocabulary and the values you want to compose your life with, but without hope of “getting it right.” Nevertheless, although life may involve a certain tragic element due to the fact that we cannot be all that we would like

to be in our finite lives, it may seem that we have nevertheless gained a great deal of freedom with regard to poetically composing our own personal lives.

Yet as I suggested in Part One, there is an insidious element to this condition that I have identified with the concept of “moral friction.” That is, the problem of being unable to feel the “weight” or “claim” of the strong evaluations we explicitly choose. The ironist, to the extent that they experience moral friction, simply cannot be “moved” by the evaluations they have freely chosen. But if one who makes choices that are incompatible with other possible desirable social roles recognizes the seemingly tragic nature of being unable to adopt both, and at the same time experiences a lack of weightiness regarding the choices they do make, it becomes easy to see that the resulting emotive state would resemble something like “depression,” as the term is commonly used. Or as I have use the term in a more specialized sense, it can be seen how this sort of circumstance would lead to a lack of enthusiasm or interest in all situations.

One obvious response to this condition is to “get lost” in the activity of realizing a particular form of life; what Heidegger calls “fleeing.” So, to continue the example above, you recognize that being a “professional” in the way that you personally endorse and being a “family person” in the way that you have come to admire, are practically incompatible. You decided to follow the life of a professional and you recognize a certain tragedy in the necessity of foregoing the life of a “family person.” But rather than remain in the state of such an explicit recognition, you immerse yourself in your freely chosen form of life. In Part One, I called this sort of response that of a “decisionist.” One simply chooses a particular form of life and immerses oneself sufficiently in it so as to “forget” that one has chosen it. This strategy is post-ironic in the sense that it is a

form of life one has chosen without reference to ultimate criteria. It is similar to the response of a metaphysician's conviction that a particular form of life, or in our example, a particular coordination of strong evaluations, is "the best," but it lacks the authoritative rational basis that assures you that you have chosen *for good reason*. As a result, when in the course of realizing the life that you have chosen, you encounter evidence which challenges it as having been the "right choice"—suppose you find yourself unhappy despite your professional success—you are put in an awkward position. The metaphysician could simply take this evidence to suggest that one doesn't have it right *yet*. If he were sufficiently philosophically minded, he could then seek rational means by which to modify his form of life to accommodate the new evidence. But the post-ironist decisionist does not have this recourse. Rather, such counterevidence works to simply thrust the decisionist back into the ironic position wherein he once again has to accommodate two or more incompatible forms of life; and his "having chosen" becomes evident to him once again—his "guilt" for having fashioned his life becomes visible. The decisionist, then, lives under the constant threat that his role and responsibility for choosing the form of life that he has will be thrust back upon him. And it is in this sense that the decisionist is essentially vulnerable.

In addition to the response of the decisionist, there is a second post-ironist attitude. This post-ironist attitude is more transparently "ironist" in the sense that Rorty uses the term. In order to draw out the features of this second ironist response, I will again continue with the example above. Suppose that when meeting your significant other's friends and family, you feel "put upon" or "judged" by the standards and norms implicit in the form of life they share. You feel the weight of their judgment not only because

you are motivated to make a good impression, but more substantially because you are sufficiently attuned to the strong evaluations implicit in their form of life and you are aware of the extent to which they are incompatible with your own. You may even have found something “right” in their prioritization of values given their emphasis on “family” and because you both understand the coherence of their view and you can see and feel what is valuable in it, you feel the implicit criticism of your way of life as a deeply committed “professional.” This tension might lead you to a sort of reactive hostility.

If you are an even-minded metaphysician, you might see this as an opportunity to figure out what exactly it is that they have right and uncover why you feel the weight of their criticism so poignantly. That is, if you are philosophically minded, you might separate out the seeming—or even genuine—hostility and adopt a magnanimous disposition in which you earnestly seek to uncover what is right about what is said so that you might discover the proper order of things. Even if a resolution cannot be reached, you conclude that it is because you have not reached the truth of the matter *yet*. Even if your investigation ends in *aporia*, you have faith that the proper order of things is, at least in principle, available in the future.

If, on the other hand, you are an ironist, you might find the seeming hostility of their implicit strong evaluations particularly threatening because you have no such faith for eventual resolution. You have no faith in this regard because you do not believe that there is any ultimate basis for determining which coherence is the “right” one. The hostility seems like “mere hostility” because you lack the resources to respond to the felt aggression except by counter aggression. The situation is this: you have chosen a

certain coherent form of life, you see them as having either critically or uncritically accepted a different and incompatible form of life, and in either case, you feel that you are being unjustly judged from what—from your ironist point of view—is an unfounded presupposition of moral legitimacy. In other words, you understand them to believe that they are right, and you, from your elevated ironic position, can see why they think so as well as why they are not entitled to their judgments on any ultimately authoritative ground. You experience them as being violent and your suffering is either because they are either uncritically operating from a presumed authority that you see as unwarranted or because they are simply being aggressive. In either case, you might imagine retaliation or avoidance as your only recourse. If one chooses a course of retaliation, then it will involve choosing the same sort of naked and ultimately unwarranted aggression that you find so offensive in the first place. The easiest path is avoidance. Whichever path one chooses, it is easy to see how an ironist may be led to a particular sort of motivated suspicion regarding the strong evaluations of other groups. And to the extent that one remains an ironist while at the same time retaining a kind of moral indignation against those who make claims on them from what are—from the ironist point of view—the unwarranted authoritative position given by a particular contingent coherence of meaning, the ironist is in the awkward position of attempting to escape being “put upon” without advancing a substantial vision of a counter form of life. The reason that one may avoid this “counter assertion” is for the same reason that one rejects the offending other—that it has no ultimate warrant and therefore would involve naked aggression. The dominant disposition of an ironist who has this particular constellation

of concerns can be characterized as “suspicion.” In order to capture this mode of interpreting, I have called this orientation in Part One that of the “suspicionist.”

The ironist-as-decisionist will have his own form of suspicion, of course, one motivated by his drive to immerse himself in a chosen form of life—i.e., suspicion of the ideas, practices, and concerns of others that may bring to light the role and responsibility that they themselves have played in choosing the form of life they live; a form of life they have chosen without ultimate criteria that might make their choice uncontentious. The suspicionist, in contrast, is as dominated by a suspicion of his own motivations as he is of others. He is suspicious, that is, not of claims to truth made by others that reveal that his own claims may be unfounded, and therefore a product of his own will, but rather the suspicionist is suspicious of any claim to truth—including his own. It is this inward-turned suspicion that renders him more transparently ironist and which is the basis for his indignation towards the claims that others make on him. Whereas the ironist-as-decisionist is suspicious of potential enemies—the authoritative claims of others that disagree with his own—the ironist-as-suspicionist is suspicious of every authoritative claim, even his own. Each of these post-ironist forms of life experiences what I have been calling moral friction, albeit in different modes.

The ironist-as-decisionist is locked into a particular coherence and is threatened by any counter-evidence from both his experience and the ideas of others. In order to avoid such threats, he must adopt increasingly thin conceptions of his chosen mode of life. Thin, that is, in the sense that words like “professional” or “marriage” become mere abstractions composed of principles that increasingly fail to respond to counter-evidence. There is no attempt, in other words, to integrate counter-evidence or

challenges from the ideas of others because doing so involves either taking up an earnest inquiry into the “truth of the matter” (a metaphysician’s strategy) or an ironic attitude towards one’s own final vocabulary. The latter disposition would force the ironist-as-decisionist to confront the one thing he seeks to avoid; i.e., the seemingly hopeless awkward friction produced by acknowledging his role in choosing the moral norms that govern his life.

The ironist-as-suspicionist, on the other hand, comes to a very similar conclusion, though from different motivations. Because he is invested in resisting the unwarranted claims of others, he is also unwilling to make unwarranted claims on others. He must, of course, take up particular social roles in the course of life, but when these come into conflict with others, he simply says something like “Well, this is the way that *I* do it”—with an implied emphasis claiming “and don’t you try to put your norms on me.” But almost by necessity the social roles and norms that the ironist-as-suspicionist takes up in everyday life must be relatively thin. To experience them as “thick” would seem tantamount to being un-ironic and begin to resemble the attitude of the metaphysician, or worse, the ironist-as-decisionist. This self-directed suspicion is in conflict with the strong evaluations implicit in the constellation of social roles and practices that he realizes in the course of everyday activity. An ironist of this sort cannot take himself too seriously. The net result of these two post-ironist forms of life is what I called in Part One, drawing on Heidegger, “levelling.” And as I mean to adopt the term, this means not only a lack of enthusiasm for any possible life, it also means that the actual life styles that we could adopt become thin; the cultural repertoire of possible ideas, practices, norms, social roles, concerns, etc., becomes thin. Thin not in the sense of a

reduction in their number, but thin in the sense that each becomes more like a “persona” or “facade”—an abstraction—rather than a rich or deeply integrated form of life.

I also asserted in Part One that this lack of enthusiasm also has an “inner” manifestation, what I called “depression.” We can see that clearly at work here if we consider the above example once again. In this variation, suppose you are coming from the point of view of the ironist-as-decisionist. To the extent that you are interested in making a good impression, you might hold back your strong evaluations, but you are not very interested in considering the ideas, practices, and concerns of the group you are meeting. You are likely only to have a very superficial encounter. Even if they are not at all malicious, the very process of making yourself understood to this audience would likely itself involve the possibility of disclosing fissures in the coherence of your form of life. Revealing such fissures is threatening precisely because it brings to light your own role in interpreting and evaluating features of that chosen form of life in the way you do. The very process of making yourself understood to an audience that is sufficiently different from yourself unavoidably involves the threat that the interaction itself might show that you are making choices. If you do not think, in advance, that your own position is rationally grounded in some ultimately legitimating source, and to the extent that you are an ironist-as-decisionist, it is your immersion in your chosen form of life that is your only protection against being forced to explicitly take responsibility in lieu of such a source. The awkward outcome of this situation is a sort of isolationist approach to life in which nothing important is talked about. This strategy may work in a relatively isolated social environment, but in a media-saturated culture like ours, every communication must seem threatening. So the ironist-as-decisionist desires to protect

his enthusiasm precisely by not interacting substantially with others. Yet because such interaction is hard to avoid, one's enthusiasm is dampened. The success of the strategy is inversely related to the amount of interaction one has with difference. It is hard to imagine how an ironist-as-decisionist could be enthusiastic about meeting the friends and family of a significant other who happen to be sufficiently different from his own way of life, even under the best conditions.

Now, in contrast, suppose that you are an ironist-as-suspicionist, all else in this variation of the example being the same. You may of course get along with a magnanimously minded group quite well initially. But our example has the advantage of showing how human life is rarely neutral. Surely individuals can "mind their own business" when they are isolated individuals, but coordinating one's own commitments, no matter how ironist one is about them, will inevitably conflict with the expectations of others when the circumstances of those expectations bear on their own experience. Suppose that you, as a committed "professional," expect to take a job in a foreign country and also hope that your new romantic partner will join you; which would effectively be depriving the friends and family of your partner of their loved one whom, given their thick conception of family life, they expect to be present in their everyday lives. If you are predominately suspicionist, you are likely to take offense at such expectations regardless of whether or not they are couched in uncritical, traditional beliefs about the proper order of family, or if they are nakedly "selfish" assertions about what is desired. One of the more likely responses is to reassert the right of individuals to make their own decisions and to give the responsibility to choose entirely to your significant other. Alternatively, you might "compromise" your own agenda in order to

accommodate these demands. The problem in either of these possible responses is the sort of attitude that accompanies the tragic mindset. The seemingly unwarranted claim of others is threatening to your own commitments and so it seems to you that you can either choose a life of isolation or compromise. The result is a sort of resentment that the world is not other than it is; i.e., resentment that others have different ideas and motivations than one's own. It is precisely because you are an ironist that the coordination with others seems to involve this sort of tragedy. Although the dynamics are a bit different, the result is remarkably similar to the situation of the decisionist. In both cases, it is hard to be enthusiastic about talking with others about what matters most to you in your own life.

There is a third post-ironist option, however; and this is the mode I have been calling that of the improviser. Consider once again our example. You take up the “well mannered” magnanimous and curious disposition with the aim of attuning to the social group. Just as in the other variations of this example, you track the similarities and difference between your view of things and how it is that they tend to talk and think about matters. And again, as before, you discover something you admire—say, the way they conceive of family—and as before, you notice its practical incompatibility with your own vocabulary, disposition and concerns, which together corresponds to your conception of what it is to be an excellent professional. Like the metaphysician, you take this as an opportunity to critique your own priorities, but unlike the metaphysician, your aim is not to discover an objectively and absolutely warranted proper order of things. Rather you take this as an opportunity to put into question what it means to be a top-flight “professional” or a successful “family person.” Indeed, your aim in doing so

is not to figure out what is the proper way of being either or both, but to use the discrepancy as the opportunity to modify the meaning of both in such a way that brings them into accord. Your aim is to arrive at some new conception of each that is well coordinated and that presents itself in such a way as to be the “obvious meaning of both.” In other words, the discrepancy provided the proper semantic balance between freedom and constraint of interpretation, a balance that makes it possible to arrive at a third interpretation of the meaning of each that displaces the earlier meanings. And it does so in such a way that when the new interpretation becomes available, it is simply no longer possible to uncritically return to either the previous interpretation you held regarding what is to be an excellent professional or the unmodified vision of what you thought right about the interpretation of “a good family person.”

Notice that the improviser is fully ironist in the sense that she is able to entertain two conflicting accounts at once and to see things through the perspective of each. Notice also that, like the metaphysician, the improviser’s aim is to see the discrepancy as an opportunity to find the “right” form of life that would properly integrate what is good in each form of life. Unlike the metaphysician, however, the improviser’s aim is not to find the “right” answer that could be demonstrated according to some independent standards. Rather, the criteria of “better” or “good” here are drawn from the particular tensions that produce the discrepancy that initiated the reflection. By being fully ironist while at the same time looking for the best form of life, she is engaging in what might be thought of as a “poetical activity.” She is utilizing the discrepancy to call into question the very meaning of the social roles that are in conflict. Her aim, in this case, is to participate in a modification in what it means to be a professional and a family person in

such a way as to see how it is practically possible to be fully excellent at each without compromising the other. If such a reinterpretation is successful, the result has the intuitive weight of that coordination as its warrant when compared to the original meanings. And if the reinterpretation of these social roles is sufficiently integrated with each other—as well as with other aspects of life beyond the two under consideration—then the result will have the quality of “looking obvious,” but nevertheless substantially different from the older way of seeing things—which, in their time, also looked obvious. The new meaning is preferable in the same sense that the experienced person prefers one way of doing things rather than another, not because the other could not work, but because it would seem naïve to adopt the other way because it simply does not fit with a wider constellation of commitments. The mark of a good hermeneutic that arises out of such a contradiction is that the older terms that produced the contradiction simply seem naïve.

What differentiates the improviser from either of the other two forms of ironist is her expectation that such a hermeneutic is possible and forthcoming. This expectation undermines what is threatening about explicitly asking questions that reveal discrepancies in strong evaluations; and as a result, there is no need to flee into the life of an ironist-as-decisionist. Equally, it undermines the conditions of suspicion because it supposes that all forms of life are “unwarranted” in the sense of universal, extra-linguistic and ahistorical criteria, but it does not suppose that therefore no such criteria for “the good life” exist. Indeed, if a hermeneutic is successful, then it will be rationally preferable precisely because it seems to be the “real” meaning of the terms involved—and it looks so precisely because it fits more clearly within the wider coherence of the

constellation of ideas, practices, concerns, institutions, etc. that compose the life world in which the improviser resides. If the interpretation does not achieve this greater coherence, then the hermeneutic is not successful—*yet*.

It is this anticipation towards a future more integrative coherence of meaning that the improviser shares with the metaphysician, and that marks them off in a distinctive way from the ironist-as-decisionist and the ironist-as-suspicionist. Like the metaphysician, the improviser is not playing a “defensive game,” so to speak. Rather, she is looking to formulate a vision of things, a coherence of meaning, that resolves the contradiction while at the same time preserves what was substantially right about older conflicting forms of life. The key here is that *the improviser actively deploys sublation*. It is this active deployment of sublation in the interpretation of particular contradictions in the course of life, understood as a practice of shaping culture, which distinguishes the form of life of the improviser.

One of the key points to notice here is that the improviser is not doing private interpretation. In the practice of interpreting the meaning of public ideas and norms, she is impacting the lives of others by participating in the transformation of how they understand these ideas and norms. Improvisation with the meaning of ideas and norms—and the meaning of the social roles in which they reside—when two or more of these are in contradiction with each other is an active public engagement. Like the metaphysician, the improviser understands that the stakes of her interpretation reach far beyond her personal life. By taking up an interpretation publicly—via her own speech and action—she is interacting with the ideas, practices, concerns, etc. of others, and to

the extent that her hermeneutic efforts are successful, they will affect the meanings of the vocabulary and social roles in which the strong evaluations of others are composed.

It is important to notice that the hermeneutic activity of the improviser makes no important distinction between the understanding that she has and the understanding that others have. As ironist, the improviser accepts that the ideas, practices, and concerns that animate her life are the result of being “thrown” into a particular life world; and that the contradictions that draw her focus, challenge her, and incite her to explicit hermeneutic activity are the product of these contingent historical forces. But it is precisely because these artifacts are not her private possessions—because they are essentially public—that reinterpreting them is a public activity. Self-interpretation is not importantly distinct from the interpretation of others. Both activities use a public language. Moreover, on this way of thinking, there is no important distinction between inner (psychological) and outer (sociological) interpretation and, as I argued in Part One, moral friction is to be understood as a unified phenomenon. From the point of view of the improviser, allowing such a distinction covers over the very possibility of seeing the problem of moral friction, let alone the form of life of the improviser which itself sublates that tension. In the following section, I want to complete the second half of this dialectic of “two clues” by looking at the significance of the question of the good life from the improviser’s point of view.

§3.4 | *The Second Clue: Improvisation and the Question of the Good Life*

In the previous section I described the improviser as one who actively deploys hermeneutic phenomenology and the process of sublation as a means for uncovering and

resolving practical contradictions imbedded in the total constellation of meanings, concerns, practices, etc. that compose his or her life world. The corollary thought to this activity, is to explicitly consider one's life world *as* a host of interpretations. And once this basic move is made, the possibility of reinterpreting that life world becomes available. But interpretation itself requires a manifold of ideas and practices both as to its content—what is to be reinterpreted—and as to the means by which it is to be accomplished. The crucial thing to notice regarding the improviser as a distinct form of life is that since she is fully ironist, she is always dealing with the widest horizon of meaning, and therefore the constellations of ideas, practices, concerns, etc. must serve both the function of what is to be reinterpreted and the means by which it is accomplished. There is no position outside the horizon of meaning that could provide a vantage point from which to do the reinterpretation or verify its results as being more right or true in an absolute sense. This condition produces a peculiar result that can be marked out by reference to two of its key features. The first concerns the criterion for accepting a new interpretation and the second concerns attitude or disposition. I have suggested that the problem of the criterion can be solved utilizing the notion of sublation. The *structural dynamics* of this movement was worked out in Part Two with regard to what I have called “moral phenomenology.” The second feature, however, which allows explicit and active participation in the process of sublation in the course of everyday life, requires a shift in how we orient ourselves in the temporal dimension of projection or anticipation and memory or retention. This *temporal dynamic*, which involves the expectation of future sublations which we cannot as yet anticipate but which will inevitably alter our current understanding of ourselves, needs to be mapped

with regard to what might be called its “disposition” or “mode of comportment” as it illuminates our situations in the course of everyday phenomenological hermeneutic activity. In the next section I will turn to a formal account of this temporal structure. In the remainder of this section, I want to anticipate this account by showing it in action, so to speak, in regard to how we comport ourselves to the question of the good life.

In moral phenomenology, the criterion for accepting a particular interpretation revolves around its ability to displace older meanings that sparked the hermeneutic in the first place. Making this process something active—making it into a practice— involves taking on a sort of sustained ironist attitude toward the total constellation of cultural fragments that compose one’s whole life with an eye towards reconfiguring those fragments in ever more coherent ways. This “ironist attitude” can be thought of in the straightforward sense of holding those fragments “in question.” And the total horizon of those questions can be thought, in the most general sense, as the question of the good life. But this observation is not a mere retrodictive account. The hermeneutic activities of the improviser need a positive aim and not just the possibility of a sublation. In other words, although a sublation is accomplished as the result of a successful moral phenomenological inquiry, a distinction must nevertheless be made between this structural or methodological aim and the aim that motivates the inquiry itself. The sublative feature of moral phenomenology only makes the hermeneutic activity potentially fruitful, but it does not serve to flesh out what such “fruit” might be. Here the idea of envisioning a “better life” or the “good life” can serve as the frame for both a specific topic of inquiry and a general frame that marks out what can be anticipated as the sort of result that such an inquiry aims at. For example, if I ask

“What is the best way to understand what a marriage is?” then I can anticipate that the sort of answer I find will be valuable only because I understand that the answer will be “better” than my current understanding because it helps answer the larger question, “What is the good life?” The question of the good life has the advantage of being intrinsically valuable, even if it is the most generic and thinnest of all formulations.

The question of the good life, although so generic as to be an inadequate place to start, nevertheless can serve to name the ultimate genus under which all moral phenomenological activity fits; and it serves as a convenient way to mark out the essential features of this form of activity. In other words, what one is doing when one looks to reformulate the meaning of “being a professional” and “being a family person” in such a way that it is possible to be fully excellent with both without practical or conceptual contradiction, one is doing so because arriving at such a formulation would resolve something problematic—and it is problematic in relation to giving a coherent answer to the more general question concerning the good life in general. The fact that the tension showed up as a “problem” to begin with indicates this aim.

The improviser, by actively engaging in cultural and philosophical critique, is looking to unearth these contradictions; not for their own sake, but as the condition of an anticipated eventual redescription that resolves the contradiction *and produces a more choice-worthy form of life*. Clearly some contradictions are less “problematic” than others. But what makes something “problematic” in this sense is the extent to which the contradiction seems to affect our most basic ideas about what the good life amounts to. Yet the whole point of uncovering these contradictions and making them explicit is to provide the grounds for asking the question of the good life in a concrete and timely

form. It is this activity of looking closely to the conditions of actual existence that makes the very abstruse idea of “asking the question of the good life” concrete and practically pressing. Yet as philosophers are well aware, and what non-philosophers find hard to fathom, the sheer generality of the question of the good life is only a convenient way of grouping those questions about how we live, questions that concern topics which, depending on how we conceive of them, produce dramatic effects on how we actually live. What philosophers sometimes fail to make explicit is that the cue for these abstractions is the concrete experiences of life. And this tendency is in part the product of thinking that these abstract, yet crucially important questions can be determined according to non-historical extra-linguistic criteria. The philosophically minded improviser would not be tempted to leave the account in abstraction. For the improviser, the generality of questions regarding the good life are themselves interpretations of interpretations; and therefore represent just one “edge” of the hermeneutic process itself. The hermeneutic improviser is a hermeneutic phenomenologist who looks to “the things themselves” as the ultimate evidence for the adequacy of the interpretation.

One of the most crucial implications of this result for the improviser is that she can never expect a final answer to the question of the good life. Rather, it must remain *in question*; or, more accurately, *a dynamically unfolding region of questions*. Although the promise of a better life remains the *telos* of moral phenomenology, that *telos* can be understood as both a practical and structural condition of the activity itself. Every successful hermeneutic displaces a previously problematic condition; yet, although a move for the better has been made, the moral phenomenologist now operates in this new

space looking for new, previously unfathomable, contradictions. In other words, the resolution of a contradiction via a particular sublation only opens up a new space for further inquiry.

What is novel in this mode of life is the extent to which there is a dual activity that is both maximally critical and maximally creative while being at the same time deeply intertwined with the concerns of everyday life. It is as much concerned with solving everyday worldly problems—contradictions that show up in the course of realizing a particular self-interpretation—as it is with poetically entertaining ideas that have no obvious practical value. It is as much concerned philosophically with “getting it right” as it is with creatively engaging in the composition of the background horizons in which “getting it right” matters to us. Achieving this form of life takes a peculiar disposition. It involves, most crucially, a sort of “hope,” or even “faith” that a better, more coherent, more choice-worthy—from the point of view that cannot yet be envisioned—interpretation is forthcoming. But this is not a “hope” or “faith” that is contrasted with having good reason to anticipate an eventuality. Rather, it is rooted in the idea that hermeneutic phenomenology maps the historical process of interpretation itself. To see this clearly, I now turn to a formal account of the temporal structure of hermeneutic time and the temporal dynamics of improvisation.

§3.5 | *The Temporal Dynamics of Improvisation*

I have been using the concept of “improvisation” to indicate a particular mode of self-interpretation. So far I have developed this idea without reference to the concept of “improvisation” as it is ordinarily understood. In order to indicate why I have used this

concept as the primary means to indicate the particular form of life I am thematizing here, as well as to distill the crucial temporal aspects of what this form of life practically involves, in this section I will give a selective phenomenology of the temporality of musical improvisation. Musical improvisation has the advantage of underscoring the temporal dynamics of improvisation in a mode that does not directly involve “meaning” or “interpretation” in its ordinary sense; and this fact allows the peculiar temporal relationships in the movement of improvisation to shine through with clarity. But the aim of this phenomenology of musical improvisation is to bring into relief these temporal features of improvisation so that they can be brought back into the context of language, meaning, and value.

The movement of “improvisation” can be distinguished from what might be called the movement of “recital.” By the latter term I mean any performance of a piece of music that is composed in advance. Whereas the mode of recital begins only after the whole of the piece of music is formed, improvisation is distinctive in that it begins in the midst of the performance. Or, in another way, in an improvisational musical performance one might be thought to begin “in the middle.” As a musical improvisation begins and unfolds, it starts by relating its movement to itself and thereby initiates a *forming* whole; it is, so long as it remains an improvisation, both organized and yet unfinished.

The distinctive modality of improvisation that I want to highlight and draw upon in the service of developing this particular form of self-interpretation can be introduced in structural terms by indicating two of its central aspects. The unfolding of an improvisational work is first marked by an active freedom to remain open at each

moment to accept or receive whatever arrives. The character of this aspect gets communicated as an “unshakable” presence or attention in the face of all challenge. The second aspect involves an active “giving in” to a demand for, at each moment, the maximization of excellence of what has already been played and what is projected to come. The character of the second aspect has two complimentary aspects. The same set of notes or phrases, for example, (a) offers something new, and thereby (b) simultaneously comments on what has come before and what is expected to come. Or in other words, there is a “creative” aspect and a “critical” aspect of the same expression. These two aspects are, in the actual movement of the improvisation, accomplished simultaneously by bringing what is novel into accord with what has already been played by virtue of a change in what is anticipated to come next. This “bringing into accord” while in the midst of an unfolding improvisational event can only be achieved by an attention to, accepting, and incorporating novel developments in the course of the event. There is a sort of “alignment” happening in which the integrity of the whole is shifted to accommodate the new element. But this shifting itself needs to be calibrated, in a skillful way, by reference to what potential good lies in what has actually been played so far. The alignment is never itself “perfect,” nor does it aim at perfection—where this idea indicates a judgment that could be made from an atemporal perspective. Rather, it looks at each new event as opportunity to modify the trajectory of the play as a whole toward the “better” as it is conceived from *that moment in the unfolding event*. The net effect of this, when accomplished skillfully, is that each new element arrives and is incorporated as if it had been anticipated all along. The mark of a good improvisation is that its movements are both fresh and unanticipated but nevertheless exhibit a kind of

retrospective quality or seeming “polish” that is usually associated with well-executed recital. In other words, the novel element impacts the whole in such a way that as it moves forward it “feels like” it was the obvious or “intended” direction all along.

A pianist, for example, who at once can actively make space to receive each note or phrase—as if to be open to the questionability of what is given—while at the same time entertains that expression or phrase as a particular question that stands in response—as an answer—to the previous expression or phrase, *and* entertains that response as something to be assessed and reassessed at each successive moment with regard to its excellence in relationship to the whole—what is remembered and anticipated—such a pianist is one who can be said to be playing in the mode of improvisation. Understood in this way, improvisation can be more clearly contrasted with recital. A pianist who actively performs each note or phrase in anticipation of some definite form of the whole from the beginning can be said to be playing in the mode of recital.

Many contemporary Western modes of self-interpretation operate in the mode analogous to that of a musical recital. The form of a particular life is given in advance and chosen as if it were analogous to a pianist selecting a piece of music. And likewise, most criticism, therapies, art, etc. are comments on the “self” wherein the self is understood to involve particular essential features and where what is most essential for self-understanding is that one be a technically well-rounded performer capable of accurately rehearsing a repertoire of pre-given forms. There is of course something impressive and deeply compelling about an excellent technician. But the aim of an excellent technician is to eliminate just those moments when an improvisation could be

born. The technician, with the aim of getting it right according to preset standards, can only encounter a deviation as error. The recital modality has a fixed teleology and any deviation from the steps that are involved in realizing that anticipated form is to be avoided. In contrast, the improviser is one who can be said to be “ready for” deviation.

The improvisational response to deviation, in contrast to the “closed” response of the technician in the mode of recital, is an interpretational openness to the possibilities that deviation might offer. This openness *is not* in direct opposition to the critical impulse implicit in the demand for the excellence of accuracy imbedded in mode of recital. To understand the difference between improvisation and recital in this way fails to capture the fact that an improvisation always involves a *responsive element*. That is, it would be to think that improvisation arises as if from nothing. But a temporal sequence that does not respond to what is given, and thereby starts as if from nothing, is not a temporal sequence at all. Each note stands alone and exists only as part of a potential sequence. To the extent that the next note does not respond to the one before it, the potential in each note is never realized—the sequence fails to start.

The opposition between the temporality of recital and improvisation can best be understood as an interaction between differing dimensions of temporal sequences. The nature of the temporal sequence itself, as a projection into the future and retention from the past, is the same. What differs between these two modalities is that the improviser operates at two levels of this temporal sequence—levels that interact in a peculiar way.

This peculiar relationship to time can be illustrated graphically. In Figure 1 below, the simple anticipated temporal sequence in the mode of recital is represented by line \overline{AJ} . If point A represents the beginning of a piece of music at time 1, or t_1 , and

point *J* represents the end at t_3 , then point *B* at t_2 indicates somewhere in the middle of the piece when one is “underway” in the recital of the piece of music.

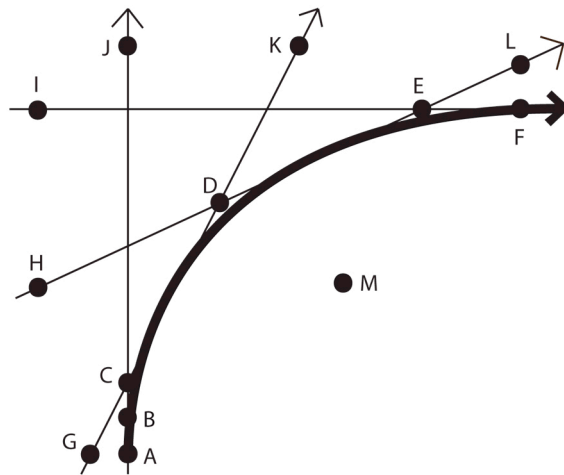


Figure 1 | Hermeneutic Improvisation

From the position of *A* at t_1 , one is able to project or anticipate what is to come along the whole temporal sequence up until the anticipated completion, *J* at t_3 . Any deviation from the sequence is understood as error.

In an improvisational mode, however, one begins as if already underway. By the time a few notes are available—and it really does not matter what these notes are—one can project toward *J* at t_3 only because one simultaneously gives an interpretation to the notes already available that one retains in memory. In figure 1 then, improvisation can be said to begin at *B*. The notes available between *A* and *B* are given an interpretation that includes a projection toward *J* and it is in light of this projection that one “reaches” for the next note which corresponds to point *C*. I use the somewhat ambiguous term “reach” here to capture the sense in which one’s movement to *C* is not random. It

“makes sense” given an interpretation of the movement from A to B and an anticipation of the whole movement from A to J. But the improviser reaches out to C in a peculiar manner. In acting on the basis of an understanding of the movement from A to J, she plays the note corresponding to C, but does so with the anticipation that C may offer new possibilities for understanding where the improvisation is going, an understanding that could not be anticipated at B. When C arrives, it comments on what has already come before and contains the possibility of changes to its meaning. This change corresponds to a change in the interpretation of the improvisation as a whole. At point C in the sequence, the meaning of what has come before is transformed and correspondingly an anticipation of where the improvisation as a whole is going is also transformed. The same notes that were played from A to C now take on a new significance, which is represented by the distance from G to C. At point C the total temporal projection is transformed which is represented graphically as the transition from \overline{AJ} to \overline{GK} at point C. The improvisational event, from beginning to end, has been transformed both in terms of the anticipation of the future and the retention of the past.

The transition from \overline{AJ} to \overline{GK} at C is accomplished only because the note or notes played at C challenge the integrity of the projected \overline{AJ} . In the effort to incorporate C, the projection as a whole must be altered. Once that projection is incorporated, what would be “best” to come next is altered. The first crucial idea to notice here is that the shift from \overline{AJ} to \overline{GK} is not arbitrary. Proceeding along \overline{AJ} after the arrival of C would reveal C as mere error. But secondly, it is crucial to notice that if one starts afresh from C, which is tantamount to starting from nothing, the music stops altogether. One might just as well pick any note next, or any note after that, with no

regard to its contact with what is retained or projected. Without retention or projection, all that is left is noise. The shift from \overline{AJ} to \overline{GK} involves maximizing the integrity of what has already been played with what new possibilities are available at C. The third crucial thing to notice at this point is that there is a relationship between what is understood to be good or best and the maximization of the integrity of a whole projected sequence. *At each moment, the good of the whole must be in question and pursued.*

Not every note in the musical improvisation accomplishes this sort of transition. But each note can be anticipated as potentially holding this power. The improviser is distinguished as such because she is *ready for* this sort of transition. One way to capture this sort of movement is to mark out two sorts of change. There is the sort of change that corresponds to the smooth flow from one note to the next where the note that arrives confirms what is expected in the anticipation of the whole. Let us call this a “diachronic change,” or “D Δ ” for short. D Δ is the normal sort of change that corresponds to the modality of recital. It is the sort of change that occurs in the smooth flow along a sequence that is anticipated from the beginning.

On the other hand, there is the sort of change that occurs in an improvisation in which the arrival of a particular note is “discordant” with what was anticipated—the sort of note that would be understood as an error in the mode of recital. But in the improvisational mode, this note provides occasion for a transformation of the musical event as a whole. It changes not only where the piece is going, but also the meaning of what has already been laid out. A skilled improviser is one who can instantly respond to this opportunity and moves to incorporate the discordant note into what has already been played. This instantaneous acceptance and incorporation of the discordant note is a

change, but it is not in the DA mode. Let us call this sort of transition synchronic change, or “ SA ” for short. The key temporal distinction between a recital and improvisation, then, is the openness to, or anticipation of, an SA .

This sort of “openness,” however, is not as straightforward as it seems. It involves an explicit *anticipation* of an SA ; and this means that SA is projected as an occurrence in the modality of DA . Considering again Figure 1, if one is at C in the projected whole of \overline{GK} and moving toward D , then to say that one is projecting an SA is to say that one anticipates the SA at D which transforms the musical event as a whole to a new interpretation represented by \overline{HL} ; but without being able to anticipate exactly how that change will affect the whole of the musical event. The exact character of \overline{HL} cannot be anticipated until D . Once the improvisational event shifts from \overline{GK} to \overline{HL} at D , the trajectory of \overline{HL} seems obvious. If one were to “look back” and track the difference between \overline{GK} and \overline{HL} , the former would look “out of sync” with the whole. This sort of difference is hard to track when one is improvising alone. However, in an ensemble, the difference can be made evident when one or more of the improvisers fails to notice the change. The resulting dissidence reveals the different understandings of “where this is all going.” Two skilled improvisers can accept this dissidence as something to be responded to and incorporated in such a way as to reveal it in a manner that makes it feel obvious—as if it were intended all along. In other words, the dissidence produced by the discrepancy between the two improvisers itself can be understood to correspond to point E , in which case together they transition from \overline{HL} to \overline{IF} .

However, consider a situation in which an improviser is interacting with one who is in a recital mode. Such an interaction would likely not get beyond C. From the point of view of the technician aiming to realize \overline{AJ} , the improviser is in error. From the point of view of the improviser, the technician is simply unresponsive to what is potentially good about the unexpected arrival of the notes at C. And moreover, more than simply missing opportunity, the technician is doing violence to what is actual by holding on to the particular anticipation imbedded in \overline{AJ} . The maximization of beauty, with regard to this particular performance, is achieved not by stopping and starting again, but by incorporating what has become available at C. From the improviser's point of view, the technician's rigid attachment to getting \overline{AJ} "right," prevents her from doing what is revealed to be *best* in response to what is actual.

The technician in the mode of recital is proceeding as if there is some point of view, and some standard, external to the musical event that can allow her to assess her progress, a position corresponding to point M in Figure 1. From the vantage point of M, the technician can see the whole of \overline{AJ} prior to beginning at A. She understands herself to be engaged in an activity that is fully constrained by the excellent execution of what can be seen of \overline{AJ} as a whole from M. In contrast, the improviser never occupies a position outside of the unfolding event itself. Rather, she occupies a peculiar modality of time that gives perspective because of successive $S\Delta$ development. That is, she occupies a $D\Delta$ temporal dimension that includes $S\Delta$ as an aspect that has both already happened and that can be anticipated to happen again. This perspective corresponds in Figure 1 to the bold curved line \overline{AF} . By superimposing multiple $S\Delta$ as multiple $D\Delta$ on a single $D\Delta$ -projected whole, one gets what can best be understood as "historical

perspective.” Rather than gaining perspective on the whole from a perspective outside of the musical event, the improviser gains perspective by tracking $S\Delta$ from the perspective of a historical meta- $D\Delta$ (\overline{AF}). Where the musical event should go can only be determined from an assessment of what is good given one’s perspective at a given moment along a projected meta- $D\Delta$ that includes retained $S\Delta$ and anticipated $S\Delta$. It is perhaps important to point out that it is the asymmetry between retained $S\Delta$ and projected $S\Delta$ that corresponds to the fact that the meta-temporal dimension is $D\Delta$ projection. Projected $S\Delta$ is always anticipated in the mode of a question—an open-ended possibility, the content of which cannot be filled out in advance. Retained $S\Delta$, on the other hand, does have specific content, the specific meaning of which remains in flux so long as future $S\Delta$ is anticipated. But it is only on the basis of some particular interpretation of that content as a $D\Delta$ projected as a whole that one is able to “reach for” and “receive” the novel notes as potential occasion for the next $S\Delta$.

With regard to music, the modality of recital and improvisation can be understood as two different activities. Incompatible though they may be, there is nothing inherently better about one or the other. But when these temporal dynamics are used to reveal the interpretational modalities of language, meaning, value and moral norms, the result is not neutral.

In the final section, I want to transition from the analogy with musical improvisation back to a consideration of language, meaning, value, and moral norms and reveal the temporal interpretational dynamics the “improviser” understood as a self-interpreter. Next, I want to show how the analogy with musical improvisation helps throw into relief exactly why the ironist-as-decisionist and the ironist-as-suspicionist are

subject to the experience of moral friction. And finally, the analogy shows clearly how the improvisational mode sublationally diffuses the moral friction present in the ironist's form of life.

§3.6 | *The Improviser and the Sublation of the Reactive Ironist*

Let me begin by summing up what has been said with a formal account of the “improviser.” She is (1) attentive to the fact that her everyday worldly engagements involve “acting out” certain social roles and norms—she recognizes the contingency of these norms and by so doing entertains them as interpretations. These activities are understood then as participating in durable patterns of behavior and understanding, and moreover of conforming to practices that involve implicit goals and standards (strong evaluations); and moreover that it is on the basis of her having these understandings of what these demand of her that her “actions” can be said to be intentional within the matrix of meaning that they provide. And yet (2) she is also explicitly aware of the fact her own social emersion in roles, norms, concerns, institutions and practices, occurs in such a way that these understandings are not only incomplete and fluid at any given moment, but also that she can only ever occupy but one of many possible perspectives within the understanding she does happen to have.

She is also capable of noticing that the first-personal, second-personal, and third personal interpretations of her actions are all part of her own understanding—a self-understanding that is expressed in an irreducibly public language not originating in herself. She understands all these “perspectives” as part of a wider cultural horizon of meaning that she can never fully exit or master. The incompleteness of understanding

produced either by a sense of the partial understanding of a social role, for example, or the incompleteness and contradictions produced by the multiple perspectives one might take in relation to one's own actions, open up even the most ordinary everyday situation in which an action might be taken to the possibility of active reflection and interpretation. And so, the improviser is (3) attentive to the fact that her actions are commentaries on her own understanding which, like the interjection of a phrase in an unfolding musical improvisation, alters—sometimes rather imperceptibly and other times abruptly and profoundly—the meaning of the social roles, norms, patterns of behavior, or practices she is realizing. In other words, the improviser is attentive to the interchange between the meaning of specific acts she takes, and how those acts comment on, ultimately, the total horizon of significance that makes those acts meaningful.

She plays in the give-and-take between the “immediacy” of realizing her understanding in an action on the one hand, and the “aboutness” or “mediated” distance between the incompleteness of the meaning of her act in relation to the horizon of significance in which it is situated; or, to give the point a higher resolution, she attends to how that particular act comments not only on the meaning of the sort of act it is, but also the relation that that kind of act has to the total horizon of meaning. For the improviser, action *is* interpretation, and reflective interpretation is a sort of action; both of which are circumscribed by the historically contingent public life world in which she lives.

The crucial implication of this synthesis between interpretation and action is the responsibility it implies. By taking a stand on the meaning of some role, norm, pattern of behavior and practice—or some thematized constellation of these—she is altering the

claim they make on herself and others. One cannot interpret the meaning of what it is to be a mother, for example, in action without communicating that interpretation to others. *Interpretation as action is always public.* Even to hide one's motherly actions from public view is to interpret motherhood as a "private affair" and to communicate that to others. The communication of this interpretation to others concerning what it is to be a "mother," a "father," or a "professional," conveys all of the normative implications or strong evaluations that compose the self-interpretation. Every act, to varying degrees, alters the field of meaning for anyone who takes over this self-understanding or who tries to understand others who identify with the social role. And moreover, since when acting *as* a "mother," the world is lit up through the prism of this self-understanding, an alteration in the meaning of "motherhood" ripples out across the web of meaning as a whole. Accepting the challenge of improvisation, then, involves taking on an extraordinary responsibility for others; and it requires this without the anchor of an anticipated certainty.

Such an active synthesis of action and interpretation, and embracing the responsibility it entails, requires finally an orientation toward the good—or, more particularly with regard to the practical social role, norm, pattern of behavior or practice in question, an orientation toward excellence. Without this orientation, the opportunity of interpretation granted by an attention toward the incompleteness of meaning remains directionless; and in a dearth of the possibility of direction, attentively accepting the responsibility that comes with making an interpretation—which in the case of the improviser, is characteristically in the form of an action—is unsustainable. On this

view, then, orientation towards the good—in *the mode of a question*—is a necessary condition of an improvisational action/interpretation.

Improvisation requires a form of what we ordinarily call “integrity.”

Improvisational moral phenomenology entails continuous integration of what one believes being a “mother,” a “father,” or a “professional” is all about and what one does as being an instance of these. And moreover, the particular pressure of the kind of responsibility that comes with attentively acting as an interpretation that potentially alters the very meaning of motherhood or fatherhood, etc., and ultimately altering the total matrix of meaning in which the idea and practice is imbedded.

The improviser combines the immediacy of the flow of life when realizing herself as a particular sort of person with the “aboutness” orientation of reflection with the intention of poetically reworking the public ideas, practices and concerns that compose her own self-understanding; and she does this in anticipation of a particular meaning of the “good” that she can only anticipate is forthcoming. She is both the “observed” and an “observer” who hermeneutically intervenes as a participant in the re-composition of the rules of the social and intellectual “game” she is playing; where “changing the rules” means changing what it means to occupy different positions in the field of play, so to speak. But since these “positions” (social roles, norms, ideas, practices, patterns of behavior, concerns, etc.) are public, she is capable of changing the game just in case her hermeneutic activity is received by others, and thereby of revealing the new order in such a way for it to seem that it was the meaning intended by a community all along. In other words, the old order can, and always does, retrodictively look like it was aiming at the new order.

I want to fill out this account of the disposition of the improviser by pointing to the sort of “faith” that the form of life requires. This faith consists first of all precisely in acting—which is always itself an interpretation, or what we might call a “speculation”—without concern for having it “right” in any absolute sense, or of even getting it “right” in an absolute sense in the future. The improviser is *always* in a condition of incomplete understanding. But more importantly, it involves the faith in the eventuality of a more complete or coherent understanding. She is willing to act and interpret in ways that comment on a particular more or less coherent horizon of meaning she happens to live in because this hermeneutic activity stands in anticipation of a future coherence that retrodictively will reveal, and pass judgment on, whether she has acted well or not. It involves faith precisely because this evaluation can only take place after the phenomenological hermeneutic itself has produced results; i.e. what corresponds to what was called in the last section a synchronic change in the historical meta-narrative as a whole. But it is only on the basis of the log of evidence produced by her own actions that the phenomenological hermeneutic can be accomplished. Her active hermeneutic activity can only happen if she is in a position of faith in regards to the idea that such an SA hermeneutic is forthcoming. And she must do so without the ability to anticipate with certainty if that hermeneutic will find her actions excellent or wanting. But to say this, is not to suggest that there is no guidance at all, as if each act happened in a vacuum.

Rather, we are always “already underway” in an ongoing life-world composed of more or less coherent contexts of meaning laden with strong evaluations. To think that one can simply step out of the flow of this larger horizon of meaning is to make the

same sort of mistake in musical improvisation whereby one suspects that there is no relationship between the previous notes and the ones that are forth coming.

Improvisation is not the production of noise. Rather, the improviser is always improvising with, and deeply imbedded in the context of, the world or meanings, norms, vocabularies, practices, and concerns into which she first finds herself as a participant. She has always already been living a particular composition of public ideas and practices that she did not herself make and which, to the extent that these roles develop historically, and that she is aware of this development, she can never fully master herself; that is, produce a final definitive self-understanding.

What allows her to live in the gap between the interpretive freedom that historical consciousness allows is precisely a concern for the “Good” (always in the mode of an answer/question) as disclosed from whatever historical moment or position within the unfolding cultural ensemble works. The primary feature of the improviser that constitutes the sublation of moral friction is the continuous speculation or answer to the “question of the good life” that itself provides further content and context to ask that question again. The improvisation accomplishes the sublation in a way that shows that “improvisation” is the fulfillment of what the ironist form of life promises. The improviser, as I have thematized her, could just as easily be understood as an “active ironist.” Which, understood in this way, retrodictively reveals other forms of the ironist form of life (the decisionist and the suspicionist) to be incomplete forms of the ironist life. I think it is worth adopting the terminology of “improvisation,” however, because in the anticipation of a better more coherent form of life composed of meanings that are more adequate to each other, the improviser lives in a sufficiently different modality

than other forms of the ironist life such that to see these as aspect of a unitary “ironist form of life” has the effect of continually attaching the possibilities of self-interpretation merely to the rejection of a universalizing, ahistorical, and necessary absolute meta-vocabulary. This effect covers over a form of life that employs moral phenomenology in the course of everyday affairs and understands those everyday activities as potentially having deep significance or impact on the whole cultural horizon in which we find ourselves. A “reactive ironist,” in other words, is still attached to the Enlightenment and Romantic meta-narrative of liberation; and he is so in a relatively un-ironic fashion. From the improviser’s point of view, the reactive ironist is not sufficiently ironist. And the confirmation of this insufficiency is the phenomenon of moral friction. A full appropriation of the historicist understanding of the contingency of language, the self, and of culture leads one beyond the liberation meta-narratives of the last half millennium, in whatever form it takes, and puts one fully into the self-aware, poetic activity of participation in the production of evermore coherent public answers to the question of the good life; not only at the far-ranging level of abstract final vocabularies, but in the course of ordinary everyday participation in the public “orchestral” improvisation of the meanings, norms, and strong evaluations that most concretely govern our lives. The picture we get, then, is a life not unlike that of the Socrates of the early Platonic dialogues who professes not to know about “Justice,” for example. Clearly he knows something, but in knowing something he earnestly, yet ironically, professes that in knowing he does not quite know what he knows. Only after rigorous examination of what we mean when we talk and act can what we think we know come to light; but such examination is never neutral with regard to the topic. What we mean

has changed because we have examined it—and so we must examine it again *as we live it*. It is this active participation in the examination of our lives, with the ever-renewed, anticipated arrival of a better understanding, that accomplishes a transformation of our way of life—an interpretation of the good life from our own finite limited perspective on the whole, which is necessarily open to further criticism from oneself and others—that it becomes possible for the improviser to explicitly participate in the production of moral norms, according to which, the improviser feels deeply bound.

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