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# Critical-Reflective Thinking: A Phenomenology

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CRITICAL-REFLECTIVE THINKING:  
A PHENOMENOLOGY

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By  
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Lexington, Kentucky

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### CRITICAL-REFLECTIVE THINKING: A PHENOMENOLOGY

This dissertation formulates and describes a type of thinking called critical-reflective thinking. Examples of critical-reflective thinking appear in the works of many major Western philosophical figures, including the main thinkers considered here, Plato, Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and Henry David Thoreau. Although this list of thinkers is eclectic, these philosophers come together in describing a common phenomenon, although they do not thematically designate or explain it. Their works illustrate a type of thinking in which people are invited by prompting events to consider their presuppositions— notions they have taken as true without prior consideration. I have deemed this phenomenon “critical-reflective thinking” to emphasize its dimensions of self-reflection and critical consideration. By exploring examples from the works of the authors listed above (among others, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Elaine Scarry), I formulate critical-reflective thinking as a specific phenomenon.

In Chapter One, I formulate this important type of human thought by describing its occurrence, especially the invitation of the prompt and the disclosure and examination of presuppositions. In Chapter Two, this dissertation explicates the value of taking part in this type of thinking. Since critical-reflective thinking allows people to consider previously unreflective aspects of their understanding (i.e. presuppositions), by taking part in critical-reflective thinking, people stand to grow in self-awareness and become liberated to new possible ways of seeing the world and going about life. Given the value of such growth and liberation, it is important to explore how humans can develop the practice critical-reflective thinking. Chapter Three explores strategies for cultivating critical-reflective thinking. Plato,

Heidegger, Arendt, and Thoreau suggest five such strategies: spending time in solitude, taking leisure, developing an open attitude, practicing wakeful attentiveness, and acquire virtues such as humility, courage, and fortitude.

Formulating and exploring the phenomenon of critical-reflective thinking not only provides a theory of a type of thinking, but also describes an important aspect of human experience. This dissertation encourages readers to consider their own experiences of thinking. It also poses the challenge of leading a more examined life by critically-reflecting on notions we often take as given.

KEYWORDS: Critical Thinking, Self-Examination, Human Thought,  
Phenomenology, Self-Reflection

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## INTRODUCTION

Theorizing human thinking—what it is, how it happens, and its role in human life—has long been a central concern of Western philosophy. This attention is hardly surprising given that philosophers often engage in the activity. Throughout the history of the West, philosophers have defined thinking in varying ways. Although most agree that it is a mental activity and an important part of human life, disagreement has reigned about whether thinking is a process of examining something or merely perceiving it, an active or passive occurrence, a categorical description of all mental faculties or one mental faculty among others, and whether there are many types of thinking or just one. Regarding the latter issue, this dissertation affirms the idea that there are many types of thinking. Rather than dealing with all types of thinking, however, it takes up the project of describing one type: critical-reflective thinking. Critical-reflective thinking is described, though not explicitly theorized, in many accounts of thinking, especially those of Plato, Henry David Thoreau, Martin Heidegger, and Hannah Arendt. To situate this type of thinking in the Western philosophical tradition, I will provide brief descriptions of the accounts of thinking given by certain major figures in the history of Western philosophy, namely, Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, René Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Immanuel Kant, Martin Heidegger, and Hannah Arendt. Doing this will also enable me to indicate where my account of critical-reflective thinking stands with regard to the distinction of between thinking as perception and thinking as examination mentioned above.

Socrates, conversing in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE, says in the *Theaetetus* that thinking (*dianoiesthai*) is “a talk which the soul has with itself about the objects under its

consideration.”<sup>1</sup> This is one of the few thematic descriptions of thinking given in Plato’s known corpus. The same definition comes up again in a conversation between Theaetetus and a Visitor in the *Sophist*. There, thinking is linked to belief and the conversation partners agree that “belief [is] the conclusion of thinking.”<sup>2</sup> Thinking as talking, that is, as speaking with oneself, concludes in belief that can be either true or false because speech itself can be true or false.<sup>3</sup> Thinking, for Plato, is thus an internal dialogue of the soul that leads to belief about whatever one thinks about. Though it may appear obvious that thinking is an activity of the soul (as opposed to the body), it warrants noting that the notion that thinking is a mental rather than a bodily activity has characterized much of Western metaphysics. An important way, however, in which the views of Plato’s successors differ from his rests in a fundamental distinction between thinking as examination and thinking as perception. Examination is an intellectual activity wherein a person consciously considers some matter. This is distinct from perception. To perceive means to have something (for example, an idea or a mental image of something one has experienced via the senses) in mind. Perception need not be accompanied by examination. Aristotle and Aquinas describe thinking as perceiving.

In his text, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, Aristotle describes of the soul (or psyche). His psychology describes three faculties that are present in the human soul: the nutritive, sensitive, and cognitive. The capacity for thought is included in the cognitive faculty (or intellect), which belongs to humans but not to plants or animals. Aristotle focuses on

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<sup>1</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, trans. M.J. Levett, rev. Myles Burnyeat, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 189e.

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Sophist*, trans. Nicholas P. White, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 264b1.

<sup>3</sup> In other words, thinking does not necessarily lead to knowledge since knowledge is justified *true* belief.

thinking in particular in *De Anima* III. There, he describes thinking as a passive undertaking that has parallels to (though it is not the same as) sense perception. Thinking is passive in that thinking something means receiving its form.<sup>4</sup> The intellect “has no other nature”—it is purely a “place for forms or ideas” and “is nothing at all before it thinks.”<sup>5</sup> When the mind receives a form, it “thinks in mental images” of whatever it has received.<sup>6</sup> In *De Anima* III, Aristotle also refers to thinking as an active undertaking. His discussion of active intellect is, however, a hotly debated topic to which I cannot do justice here. A follower of Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas, contributes further elucidations of the active intellect.

In the 13<sup>th</sup> Century, Aquinas takes up the Aristotelian view that thinking is a faculty of the human mind, though he focuses more attention than Aristotle did on its active nature. In Aquinas’s *Summa Theologica* (Question 79), he inquires into cognitive intellectual powers. According to Aquinas, forms are not perceptible and, thus, not immediately intelligible. The active intellect does the work of “abstracting forms from material conditions.”<sup>7</sup> That is, thinking, performed by the active intellect, must actively process perceived material objects in order to abstract their forms and make them intelligible to itself. Aristotle’s and Aquinas’s views thus agree in describing thinking as an intellectual capacity of the human psyche and in defining thinking as the basic power of human intellect. Thinking allows people to think

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<sup>4</sup> The thinking mind receives the form of something potentially and not actually. This means that the mind does not actually become whatever form it receives but, rather, has its image in mind. Thinking, however, differs from sense perception because whereas one’s sense of hearing, for example, may no longer perceive sounds if it has encountered too intense a sound, one’s power to think is not dulled by intensely encountering things in thought (see Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. R.D. Hicks (Amherst: Prometheus, 1991), 429a).

<sup>5</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima*, trans. R.D. Hicks (Amherst: Prometheus, 1991), 429a.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 431a.

<sup>7</sup> Aquinas, *A Summary of Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Richard J. Regan (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2003), 77; *ST I*, Q.79, A 3. Cf. Giorgio Pini, “Two Models of Thinking: Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus,” in *Intentionality, Cognition, and Representation in the Middle Ages*, ed. Gyula Klima (New York: Springer, forthcoming).

thoughts about whatever their senses perceive. Conceptualizing thinking as perceiving is a trend that continues into modern philosophy. René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, for example, both take it up. Descartes, however, broadens the concept by making thinking a catchall category for all mental activities.

In the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, in addition to following his predecessors by assigning thinking strictly to the mind side of the dualism between mind and body, Descartes also describes other mental activities as modes of thinking. This becomes clear in Descartes' inquiry in *Meditations on First Philosophy*, where he considers what he can know "by putting aside everything that admits of the least doubt" and attending to what, if anything, is certain.<sup>8</sup> In the course of this experiment, he notices that once everything of which he is uncertain has been banished, all that is left is thought. He concludes that the only thing of which he is certain is that "thought exists" and that "it alone cannot be separated from" his own existence.<sup>9</sup> In addition to taking this fact as proof of his own existence as a thinking thing, Descartes goes on to use thinking as a catchall category for mental activity. He writes, "But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, and that also imagines and senses."<sup>10</sup> Sensation, here, does not refer to bodily sensation but, since thinking is strictly a mental activity, to mental sensation, or perception. For Descartes, being a thing that thinks means being something that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, imagines, and senses, *ergo* these activities are modes of the primary activity of thought.

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<sup>8</sup> René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, trans. Donald Cress, in *Modern Philosophy: An Anthology of Primary Sources*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Roger Ariew and Eric Watkins (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2009), 43.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

Two hundred years after Descartes, Immanuel Kant, too, describes thinking as perceiving. Kant's account significantly differs from Descartes's account, however, in two fundamental ways. First, Kant situates thinking in a more systematic account of mental processes and assigns it a highly specific function (rather than describing thinking as the encompassing category of all mental activities). Second, in contrast to Cartesian mind-body dualism, Kant posits an intimate connection between sensation and thought. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant states that thinking is one of the key activities of the faculty of the understanding and explains that sensation provides content for thought. Whereas sensation allows a person to intuit the manifold of appearances, thought perceives things by predicating concepts of intuitions: "thoughts without content are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind."<sup>11</sup> Bringing intuitions under concepts makes them intelligible and, thereby, knowable. As Kant defines it: "Thought is knowledge by means of concepts."<sup>12</sup> Later in the book, in the "Transcendental Deduction," Kant clarifies the importance of the "I think." He writes that the "I think" must "accompany all my representations."<sup>13</sup> Whatever a person mentally represents to herself must also be thinkable by that person. The "I think," thereby, conditions the synthetic unity of apperception. In order to experience mental representations (i.e. to perceive things) in a unified way, where one's consciousness is identical to itself and persists through time, all of one's representations must occur to a singular "I" that thinks them. Kant, thus, describes thought as perception, as a faculty that renders appearances knowable, and notes its fundamental importance for the identity of consciousness.

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<sup>11</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin's, 1965), 93; *KRV* A51/B75.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 106; *KRV* A69/B94.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 152; *KRV* B131.

So far, I have illustrated how Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, and Kant conceptualize thinking as perceiving. It is important, however, not to reduce their theories to this. Kant, for example, also discusses thinking in his 1784 piece, “What is Enlightenment?” There, he describes independent thinking as an activity that helps humans progress and thrive in society. Though Kant does not offer an explicit characterization of thinking in “What is Enlightenment?,” it is clear that he does not mean thinking as perceiving but, rather, thinking as examining. He endorses the importance of thinking as an activity that enables humans to emerge from “self-incurred minority,” breaking free from prejudice, dutifully contributing to the welfare of their societies, and valuing the dignity of their rational being.<sup>14</sup> These are not the achievements of mere perception. They come about through consideration of oneself and the world. This is much closer to the Platonic concept of thinking as examining than to thinking as perceiving. This way of thinking is also important to Aristotle, Aquinas, and Descartes in that they take up thinking as examination in carrying out their own work (each of them was doubtless involved in thinking as examination), even if their explicit theories of thinking tend more toward describing it as perception. With the rise of phenomenology in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, however, philosophers such as Martin Heidegger and Hannah Arendt more readily define thinking as examination.

This shift is due, in part, to Heidegger’s interpretation of Aristotle, Aquinas, Descartes, and Kant. He finds their views to be entrenched in the metaphysical tradition that, according to him, envelops all Western philosophy up through Nietzsche as well as

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<sup>14</sup> Immanuel Kant, “An answer to the question: What is Enlightenment?” in *Practical Philosophy*, ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1996), 17.

aspects of his own early work.<sup>15</sup> This tradition privileges objectivity over subjectivity and tends to rely on dichotomies such as that between mind and body. In turn, these stances orient metaphysical investigations of thinking toward discovering how it works universally, in all human minds, divorced from subjective experiences of it. Metaphysicians often describe thinking as a human mental faculty that performs certain functions (such as perception) for every person by virtue of its place in the human mental apparatus. Besides the fact that in the history of metaphysical philosophy, some accounts of the mind miss the mark of achieving a universal theory simply because they exclude some humans—for example, women, people of color, or people of certain socio-economic status—from the group they attempt to describe,<sup>16</sup> the metaphysical approach to examining thinking overlooks other ways of characterizing it. Metaphysics ignores other aspects of the occurrence of thinking that may be revealed by attending to how people experience it.

The imperative of the phenomenological tradition, “To the things themselves!”—an imperative posed by Heidegger’s teacher and the founder of phenomenology, Edmund Husserl—aims to orient philosophy toward phenomena (that is, things that show themselves<sup>17</sup>). Though in *Being and Time*, Heidegger’s main objective was to reawaken the question of the meaning of being by investigating the phenomenon of *Da-sein*, Heidegger later explored the phenomenon of thinking. Rather than continuing the definition of

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<sup>15</sup> In *The Event*, written fourteen years after *Being and Time*, Heidegger critiques the earlier text because, according to him, it remains “still within the broadest sphere of ‘metaphysics.’” (Martin Heidegger, *The Event*, trans. Richard Rojcewicz (Bloomington: Indiana, 2013), 75.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle, for example, though he attributes them with humanity, maintains that slaves and women have weak souls by nature and cannot rule themselves by rational principles. In *The Politics*, he writes that “the deliberative faculty in the soul is not at all present in a slave; in a female it is present but ineffective...” (Aristotle, *The Politics*, trans. T.A. Sinclair (London: Penguin, 1981), 1260a).

<sup>17</sup> In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes the meaning of “phenomenon” through the Greek term, *phainesthai*. *Phainesthai* is a verb that means, “to show itself” (see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY, 1996), 25-30).



thinking as perception, in his 1944 lecture course, *Introduction to Philosophy—Thinking and Poetizing*, describes philosophical thinking as an essential part of human life, as an activity proper to human beings “as reflective-thinking” beings.<sup>18</sup> Thinking brings humans closer to the phenomena around them and this determines whether they will be “at home or not at home in this place where they sojourn.”<sup>19</sup> For Heidegger, thinking has to do with examining phenomena and, people, by thinking, can dwell more authentically in the world into which they are always already thrown.

Heidegger’s student, Hannah Arendt, treats thinking exemplarily as examining. She does this by employing Heideggerian phenomenology and explicitly adopting Plato’s description of thinking from the *Theaetetus*. Although she identifies thinking as one of the three primary activities of the life of the mind and describes its bearing (or lack thereof) upon willing and judging (the other two primary activities), for Arendt thinking is not primarily a matter of perceiving. Instead, Arendt describes it as a process of examination. Echoing Socrates’s description of thinking, Arendt holds that people think when they consider matters in conversation with themselves. She also describes what thinking is phenomenologically by discussing how it appears (or, rather, does not appear) in the world and what the experience of thinking is like from a first-person perspective. Arendt’s examination of thinking, though present throughout the corpus of her work, fills out the first volume (*Thinking*) of her final work, *The Life of the Mind*. According to Arendt, thinking (and other activities of the mind) are utterly “invisible,” or non-apparent, in a world of

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<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Introduction to Philosophy—Thinking and Poetizing*, trans. Phillip Jacques Braunstein (Bloomington: Indiana, 2011), 3.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

appearances.<sup>20</sup> Since thinking is invisible, it can take place only when one withdraws from the world, though it remains temporally situated in the now of the present moment. Thinking is motivated, moreover, by the essential human need for meaning that people seek to fulfill when they experience wonder or conflicting ideas that are in need of reconciliation.<sup>21</sup> Beyond making sense of thinking through both her own experience and others' written accounts of it (especially those of Socrates, as reported by Plato), Arendt deems thinking important vis-à-vis human morality. She is particularly concerned with the question of whether thinking can stop a person from doing evil. She thereby locates the work thinking does in social and political life. In sum, for Arendt, thinking is an activity in which people converse with themselves, often to examine matters pertinent to morality.

In this dissertation, I, too, consider, from a phenomenological perspective, a type of thinking that can be classified as examination. My project, however, differs from those discussed so far in that I do not attempt a general characterization of thinking. All the authors discussed above characterize thinking in its entirety, at its most basic and general level. Though it could be argued that thinking as perception and thinking as examination are two different types of thinking, the above authors characterize thinking as either essentially perception or essentially examination. It is also possible, however, to analyze the different ways of either perceiving or examining. My dissertation, rather than analyzing thinking as a whole, as either perception or examination, describes how a certain type of examination, namely, critical-reflective thinking, takes place. Critical-reflective thinking is thinking because, in line with the traditional characterization of thinking, it is a mental activity. Yet, it

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<sup>20</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Thinking*, vol. 1, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 72. In addition, thinking deals with invisibles (ideas and thoughts), which also do not appear in the world.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 150-153.

has particular phenomenological characteristics that set it apart from examination (and perception) in general as well as from other activities that can be classified as thinking.

Types of thinking might be better described as *ways* of thinking, distinguished from each other by virtue of what their aims are and/or how they occur. Two prominent types of thinking are *deliberating* about decisions and *ruminating* about past events. Each of these ways of thinking has a particular goal: whereas deliberation aims at making a decision, rumination recollects and contemplates a day's events. Deliberation is ends-oriented, since it aims at making a decision (something that must be completed beyond the activity of thinking) while rumination, whose only goal is to participate in the activity of thinking itself, is an end in itself. A variety of types of thinking such as these have been described by other authors in the history of Western philosophy. Thomas Hobbes, for example, describes a further type of ends-oriented thinking in the *Leviathan* for example under the name "reasoning" or "reckoning." Reckoning is a type of thinking that aims at calculating consequences or working backwards to find the causes of some consequence. Hobbes defines reckoning as: "conceiving of the consequence of the names of all the parts, to the name of the whole; or from the names of the whole and one part, to the name of the other part."<sup>22</sup> Reckoning might appear to be the same as mathematics, but it exceeds this subject area and is relevant to all circumstances in which parts and wholes are involved. Such circumstances include logical argumentation, physics, and prediction (a practice wherein consequences must be projected from present factors).<sup>23</sup> Reckoning is distinct from deliberating about a decision, pondering a problem, and ruminating because it has particular aims (i.e., discovering consequences or conditions) that are not pursued by these others. In contrast to reckoning

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. C.B. Macpherson (Penguin: New York, 1968), 110.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 110-112.

and deliberating, critical-reflective thinking (though it is accompanied by positive bi-products including growth in understanding) does not take up aims beyond itself and, in this, it is similar to rumination.

Different types of thinking can also be distinguished from each other by virtue of how they take place (e.g. whether they begin when a person chooses to perform them or whether they simply befall a person) or the aims people pursue in taking them up (e.g. whether they are oriented toward achieving certain ends or not). For instance, some types of thinking can be chosen and carried out at will while other types befall a person. Deliberating about a decision, for example, is a mental activity a person can simply choose to perform whereas the event of spontaneously having an idea happens precisely when one does not compel its occurrence. Still others types of thinking might be instigated through external provocation emanating from a gadfly or stingray, or, as for Socrates, through internal provocation by one's *daimon*. Considering what one thought one knew, for example, may occur only when one discovers that one never knew it in the first place. This can occur when someone else, Socrates for instance, demands that one give an account of something and one discovers that one cannot. Critical-reflective thinking, too, requires a type of provocation: an invitation to think, which is issued by a prompting event. Since such prompts cannot be compelled, critical-reflective thinking is also distinct from deliberating about a decision.

“Critical-reflective thinking” is a term I have coined to describe a phenomenon that appears in many experiential accounts of thought. It is a mental activity in which a person critically considers something that she has been taking as true without prior reflection, i.e., a presupposition. Plato, Henry David Thoreau, Martin Heidegger, and Hannah Arendt all provide examples of its occurrence, although they do not theorize critical-reflective thinking

thematically. Due, however, to their descriptive approaches to philosophy, these authors provide examples that are rich in detail and ripe for analysis. My account of critical-reflective thinking has been deeply influenced by their works. This dissertation, however, examines only the pertinent aspects of each of these authors' works rather than fully explicating the thought of any one of them. Thoreau, Arendt, Heidegger, and Plato each have their own rich and sophisticated theories about thinking more broadly. Though I engage with their wider theories of thinking throughout the dissertation, these theories are not the main topic under consideration. Instead, I formulate a notion of critical-reflective thinking and describe how it shows up in their writings.

This dissertation is composed of three chapters: "The Phenomenon of Critical-Reflective Thinking," "The Value of Critical-Reflective Thinking," and "Cultivating Critical-Reflective Thinking." The first chapter explores the event of critical-reflective thinking by analyzing similarities among accounts of it in the works of Plato, Thoreau, Arendt, and Heidegger. These accounts provide rich material for specifying presuppositions as what comes under consideration in critical-reflective thinking and for describing the prompts that invite people to critically-reflectively think. Presuppositions are not just ideas people have; people are usually not conscious of their presuppositions, and these presuppositions deeply undergird how they see the world and go about life. Presuppositions are notions people take as true and that function as frameworks providing understandings that underlie how they lead their lives. A presupposition might undergird what a person values, endorse a way of living, or inform how she sees the world. Presuppositions are often shared among people who exist in the same historical time, place, community, or family. Sometimes, however, people have somewhat idiosyncratic presuppositions that have been formed through their personal histories, on the basis of their own thoughts and experiences. In critical reflection,

a person both becomes aware of a presupposition and considers its truth or worthiness. The result of this process need not be the destruction and abandonment of the presupposition. Though this does sometimes happen, critical-reflective thinking can also reinforce a presupposition's hold.

In everyday life, people are not often aware of, let alone critically concerned with, their presuppositions. Presuppositions instead operate in the background, always already forming one's prior understanding of the world, oneself, and others. An event that brings a presupposition to awareness must occur in order for a person to critically reflect upon it. I call such events "prompts." Prompts can take place at any time and place, and they issue an invitation to consider a presupposition. Some people can be prompted by their own thoughts, while others are prompted through conversations or events. People cannot, however, compel prompts to occur. The person affected by a prompt responds to its invitation to think by either thinking or not thinking.

There are great benefits to accepting a prompt's invitation to critically and reflectively think. In chapter two, "The Value of Critical-Reflective Thinking," I consider how critically reflecting on presuppositions can facilitate growth in understanding and liberation from unreflective ways of seeing and going about. To explore how growth and liberation take place, I bring Hans-Georg Gadamer and Ralph Waldo Emerson into dialogue. Gadamer and Emerson contribute to the discussion by offering a dynamic account of the "horizon of understanding." Horizons delimit a person's possibilities for understanding and going about. Horizons can, however, be reshaped and expanded through critical-reflective thinking. I argue that horizons are partly delimited by presuppositions. When a person considers a presupposition, her horizon expands via awareness of a part of it that was previously unnoticed. Critically considering presuppositions implies greater self-

awareness that can deepen understanding of what underlies one's view of the world and open other ways of seeing, though it never makes a person completely transparent to herself. In addition, the *telos* (ultimate endpoint or aim) of critical-reflective thinking is not reaching or striving toward any particular understanding, but continual growth and liberation with respect to one's own previous understanding (or horizon).

Because critical-reflective thinking is valuable, people might want to practice it more often or more deeply. In the final chapter, "Cultivating Critical-Reflective Thinking," I propose that people can enhance their own open receptivity for critical-reflective thinking by taking up certain activities. Since people cannot compel prompts to occur, working on developing themselves in ways that encourage acceptance of prompts and critical engagement with presuppositions can facilitate, though not cause, the occurrence of critical-reflective thinking. Arendt, Thoreau, and Plato suggest the importance of solitude, leisure, and attentive wakefulness in this context. Heidegger advocates a practice of meditation that, I argue, allows one to adopt an open and receptive attitude. I also draw on Plato for a brief discussion of how practicing virtues such as courage, fortitude, and humility can facilitate critical-reflective thinking.

In this dissertation, I treat thinking as examination rather than as perception. I describe critical-reflective thinking as an event in which people examine the presuppositions that underlie how they see and go about the world. Furthermore, I use a phenomenological methodology that promotes the analysis of textual examples and personal experience for the purpose of theorizing critical-reflective thinking as a phenomenon of everyday life. By conceptualizing its salient features (such as prompts, presuppositions, growth in understanding, and liberation to new possibilities), I hope to shed light on a common human experience, how it takes place and its significance for self-reflection and -examination. In

addition to illuminating a phenomenon that has, to my knowledge, been left unthematized in the history of Western philosophy, this exploration promotes personal reflection on one's own experiences of thinking and the significance of thinking in one's life.



CHAPTER ONE:  
THE PHENOMENON OF CRITICAL-REFLECTIVE THINKING

Having bathed after his day's labor, John Farmer<sup>24</sup> sat down and began to consider the tasks awaiting him the next day. In the midst of his thoughts, he heard a flute that "came home to his ears out of a different sphere from that he worked in, and suggested work for certain faculties which slumbered in him."<sup>25</sup> The strains of the flute summoned him from his thoughts and instigated a train of questioning: "A voice said to him,—Why do you stay here and live this mean moiling life, when a glorious existence is possible for you? Those same stars twinkle over other fields than these."<sup>26</sup> The question directly criticized the way of life that he normally practiced. Farmer discovered that other fields, other possibilities, for his life existed: there were other ways for him to live.

In the brief account of John Farmer, given by Henry David Thoreau in *Walden*, Farmer's thinking displays several distinguishing features. First of all, John Farmer did not begin to think critically about his life simply by choosing to do so. Instead, the music of the flute somehow drew him into thoughtful reflection. Second, in the considerations and question that followed from the flute's prompt, Farmer engaged in deep criticism of his own life. The voice that seemed to speak to him posed a critical question about something he had often taken for granted: his normal everyday way of living. If asked to describe what

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<sup>24</sup> John Farmer was identified in manuscript drafts of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* as John Spaulding (Jeffrey S. Cramer, "Editorial Footnotes," in *Walden*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven: Yale, 2004), 213f). Spaulding's farm is also mentioned in Thoreau's essay, "Walking." Thoreau does not, however, detail Spaulding's life in his writings.

<sup>25</sup> Henry D. Thoreau, *Walden*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven: Yale, 2004), 213.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

John Farmer was doing in this moment, I would say he was thinking. But, not just thinking in general. Rather, a certain sort of thinking was taking place.

These features and their apparent connectedness in Farmer's thinking process are not unique to Thoreau's description of thinking. Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt, and Plato all provide similar examples of a type of thinking that (1) is prompted by something that invites thinking and (2) leads to the critical questioning of something that the thinker normally presupposes. In fact, examples of this type of thinking appear in the work of many different authors, as will become apparent by the breadth of evidence employed in this dissertation. The particular phenomenological attention that Heidegger, Arendt, Thoreau, and Plato give to the topic makes their descriptions of and theories about thinking particularly rich. Other notions of thinking prevalent in the history of philosophy describe thinking as a subjectively instigated mental activity (e.g. deliberation) or as the constantly and automatically occurring mental perception.<sup>27</sup> The type of thinking described by these philosophers is, however, fundamentally different. John Farmer did not instigate his own thinking. Rather, it was instigated by the music of the flute. His thinking was also not just the perception of the sounds of the flute. His thought offered a deep critique of something completely unrelated to the music, namely, how he led his life.

In the examples of this type of thinking that Thoreau, Heidegger, Arendt, and Plato give, a phenomenon that demands its own analysis and explanation is revealed. I call the phenomenon "critical-reflective thinking." In critical-reflective thinking, the thinker is prompted to reflect on something that she had, up until then, presupposed. Encountering a presupposition opens it to question, and the thinker, then, interrogates it through critical

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<sup>27</sup> See "Introduction" above for comparison of critical-reflective thinking to other historical notions of thinking.

scrutiny. Both of these moments take place together in occurrences of critical-reflective thinking. I will refer to these two moments of critical-reflective thinking as (1) the prompt and (2) the critical moment. As I will show, however, one moment does not cause the other. Rather, the prompt makes way for the critical moment. This qualitative relationship bespeaks the phenomenological connectedness of the two moments. Thus, I treat the phenomenon of critical-reflective thinking as a unified phenomenon of which each moment is a part.

Thoreau's example of John Farmer paradigmatically demonstrates these two structural moments that are present in all instances of critical-reflective thinking. In critical-reflective thinking, Farmer's way of life came into question following the prompt of the flute. It became apparent to him that his life was "mean" and "moiling" when other, more "glorious" ways to live were possible.<sup>28</sup> Although the reader does not know whether Farmer has had these thoughts before, his subsequent considerations and the question that posed itself to him oppose the way of life that he had been affirming simply by continuing to lead it. In turn, this affirmation signaled that he had presupposed its necessity, whether intentionally or not. In what follows, I will examine this prompt-criticism structure through examples given by Thoreau, Plato, Arendt, and Heidegger. In this section, each of these philosophers will be introduced through an example of critical-reflective thinking discussed in their work. Although I began with a Thoreauvian example, I turn now to Plato, the first philosopher in the chronology of the philosophers of thinking whose work I engage.

The Platonic dialogues offer numerous examples of the phenomenon of critical-reflective thinking. In the dialogues, Plato paints Socrates as a masterful thinker who is often immersed in reflection and who challenges his contemporaries to think as well. One

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

example that clearly exhibits the prompt-criticism structure comes from the *Apology*, where Socrates describes how his *daimon*, or “spiritual sign,” calls him to stop and think. Socrates’ *daimon* is a kind prompt that is unique to him.<sup>29</sup> His experiences of the *daimon* began during childhood, and whenever his *daimon* calls to him, it stops him from what he is about to do. During the course of his defense, Socrates describes the *daimon* as “a voice, and whenever it speaks it turns me away from something I am about to do, but it never encourages me to do anything.”<sup>30</sup> Although the *daimon* does not tell him to do anything in particular, it prompts him to reflect by giving him pause. In the *Apology*, Socrates defends himself in a trial against charges of impiety and corruption, but in the end is sentenced to death. In this dialogue, he describes how the *daimon*’s presence stopped him from taking part in public affairs during his adult life and, conversely, how its *absence* during his trial leads him to think that his impending death is not an evil.

Although the *daimon* does not call to Socrates to stop and think in the *Apology*, when he notices its absence, he is given pause. The absence of the *daimon*, that is, prompts Socrates to think. Socrates remarks on his “surprise” that his *daimon* did not call to him in the morning or during the trial.<sup>31</sup> In the past his *daimon* had opposed him even in “small matters,” yet on the day of his trial, when he is faced with “what one might think, and what is generally thought to be, the worst of evils [i.e. a possible death sentence], [his] divine sign has not opposed” him.<sup>32</sup> When Socrates notices the absence of his *daimon*, he stops to examine this fact and what it means about his conviction and sentence. Because he trusts the *daimon* entirely, he says to the crowd, “it is impossible that my familiar sign did not

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<sup>29</sup> Socrates also discusses his spiritual sign elsewhere (see the *Phaedrus* and the *Euthydemus*).

<sup>30</sup> Plato, *Apology*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 31d.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 40a.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 40a-b.

oppose me if I was not about to do what was right.”<sup>33</sup> He believes that if he had been about to do wrong during the course of his trial by what he said or did in his defense, the *daimon* would have called him to stop. So, its absence, too, is worthy of consideration.

Socrates interprets the absence of the *daimon* as an indication that what he said in his defense was not wrong even though it led to his death sentence. In fact, according to Socrates, death “may well be a good thing.”<sup>34</sup> The presupposition he critically examines is precisely that death is the worst of all evils. Socrates says that, indeed, many would suppose that death is the worst evil. If death were the worst evil, Socrates reasons, his *daimon* would have appeared and stopped him from making a defense that would lead him to a death sentence.<sup>35</sup> In response to the prompt that is the *daimon*’s absence, Socrates begins to inquire into the nature of death. He quickly finds that death might be a good thing: it could be a state in which one is “nothing” and has “no perception” or it could be “a change and relocating for the soul from here to another place...and all who have died are there.”<sup>36</sup> In the first case, death would be like the soundest, most pleasant sleep, and this is not the worst of all evils.<sup>37</sup> If death were a relocation, it would be a great blessing because he would have a chance to meet, converse with, and examine the great men who had already died.<sup>38</sup> In either case, the outcome is not the worst of all evils. In examining this presupposition after having

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 40c.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 40b.

<sup>35</sup> In the *Gorgias* and the *Phaedo*, Socrates argues that the health of the soul is more valuable than the health of the body. He also says that the soul is the most valuable thing of all. If this view can be imported into the *Apology*, we can imagine that the illness or fracture of the soul, rather than the death of the body, would be the worst of all evils.

<sup>36</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 40c, 40e.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 40d-e.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 41a, 41c. Socrates mentions Orpheus, Musaeus, Hesiod, Homer, Agamemnon, Odysseus, Sisyphus, “and innumerable other men and women” (*Apology*, 41c).

been prompted by the absence of his *daimon*, Socrates participates in critical-reflective thinking.

Arendt deeply engaged the topic of thinking in her own work, notably in her essays included in *Responsibility and Judgment*, observation of Adolf Otto Eichmann's trial and, later, an entire volume of *The Life of the Mind*. One of the most striking examples of her own experience of critical-reflective thinking is displayed in her narrative account of her own project. She, like Socrates, described how something she experienced prompted her critical work, although it was not a spiritual sign like the *daimon*. In "Thinking and Moral Considerations," she writes that she was "struck by a phenomenon."<sup>39</sup> This phenomenon instigated her critique of the traditional notion of evil. The phenomenon that struck her was Eichmann's seeming inability to think. Eichmann worked as a Nazi logistics expert who scheduled trains to transport Jewish and other persons to the camps where millions were killed. During his trial, however, Eichmann proclaimed that he never wanted to hurt any of these people. Why, then, did he continue to serve as a transportation expert for the Nazis? Arendt thinks it had to do with his inability to thoughtfully confront the real consequences of his actions.

Eichmann's inability to think was particularly apparent in the way he spoke, using clichés and the "Officialese" of the government.<sup>40</sup> By using this "pre-scripted language," Eichmann avoided having to autonomously consider the meaning of his actions.<sup>41</sup> The "standardized codes of expression" allowed him to understand events in terms that gave

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<sup>39</sup> Hannah Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003), 161.

<sup>40</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 49.

<sup>41</sup> Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 160.

meaning in the context of the Nazi regime.<sup>42</sup> This “pre-scripted” meaning effectively distanced him and many other officers from the reality of their acts. For example, the term “Final Solution” literally meant the eradication of all Jewish people and others targeted by Nazi eugenics. The abominable meaning of such a “solution” was, however, veiled by the use of this expression as the “Officialese” of the administration.<sup>43</sup> Everyone who took part in the “solution” obeyed the official demands of the government in power. The officers saw their official undertakings as “necessary tasks” of their difficult mission.<sup>44</sup>

This phenomenon of Eichmann utilizing words imbued with “official” meaning and not thinking for himself about the real consequences of his acts “attracted [Arendt’s] interest.”<sup>45</sup> This attraction prompted Arendt’s “thinking attention.”<sup>46</sup> As in John Farmer’s experience, a question “imposed itself”:

Could the activity of thinking as such, the habit of examining and reflecting upon whatever happens to come to pass, regardless of specific content and quite independent of results, could this activity be of such a nature that it “conditions” men against evildoing?<sup>47</sup>

Arendt’s question asks whether there is a connection between thinking and moral action. Can thinking condition humans against doing evil? Correlatively, is one’s “inability to *think*” related to one’s ability to perpetrate atrocities?<sup>48</sup>

Eichmann’s remarkable lack of thought, coupled with the absence of malice with which he did his job of organizing trains, prompted Arendt to begin critically reflecting on the notion of evil that imbued her society. Her society took evil to be rooted in the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann*, 48.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 105-6.

<sup>45</sup> Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 160.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann*, 49.

“wickedness, pathology, or ideological conviction of the doer.”<sup>49</sup> Evil people were thereby defined as those who are somehow monstrous or demonic because they sadistically and purposively harm others.<sup>50</sup> Eichmann, however, was not purposively wicked in perpetrating atrocities. Instead, he just could not think about the suffering he was helping to inflict.<sup>51</sup> Arendt criticized the traditional definition of evil because she saw Eichmann as evil too, though in a different way. She described how evil can also be present in behaviors performed carelessly and without thought. Evil can take place in the everyday: it can be banal. As in Nazi Germany, evil behaviors can even be institutionally allowed and recommended by government and society. When the government not only condones, but also requires such actions, the fact that they are evil might, for some, be occluded. Doing evil can, thus, become mundane. Eichmann’s behavior prompted Arendt to think, and she thereby critically examined the traditional notion of evil, which many around her presupposed.

Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, offers a poignant example of critical-reflective thinking in which a human *Da-sein* is called by its conscience into reflection upon itself. *Da-sein*, literally translated, “being there,” is the *way* of being of human beings and not itself a being. Humans, “being there,” always find themselves in a world, among other beings with which they are concerned. *Da-sein*, however, is different from the way of being of other beings in the world: while humans are essentially concerned with their own being, other beings are not. Though humans have this essential concern, they often forget about the importance of their own being. They often do not expressly concern themselves with their way of being,

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<sup>49</sup> Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations, 159.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Although Arendt famously says that Eichmann had the “inability to think” (*Eichmann in Jerusalem* 47) elsewhere, she also says that thinking is a possibility for every person. Humans are and always have been “thinking beings” (Arendt, *Thinking*, 11).



*Da-sein*, which grounds their nature (*Wesen*). When, then, the “call of conscience” prompts a human to think, the human can notice that it has become lost in a way of being that is unreflective and not expressly concerned with its own being. Heidegger calls this way of being the way of a they-self. Having fallen prey to the they (*das Man*), *Da-sein* leads an inauthentic existence and does not consider its own being. When, by contrast, it is called by its conscience, a human *Da-sein* is prompted to encounter its being a they-self.

Everyday *Da-sein*, for the most part, has the character of a they-self.<sup>52</sup> It primarily leads an unreflective, average, everyday existence. *Da-sein*, moreover, always already understands itself and others within the worldly context into which it has been thrown. As they-self, *Da-sein* takes care of things and spends time among others without considering its own being. When we (as human *Da-sein*) exist in the mode of they-self, we simply behave like others:

We enjoy ourselves and have fun the way *they* enjoy themselves. We read, see, and judge literature and art the way *they* see and judge. But we also withdraw from the “great mass” the way *they* withdraw, we find “shocking” what *they* find shocking. The they, which is nothing definite and which all are, though not as a sum, prescribes the kind of being of everydayness.<sup>53</sup>

Understandings of everything from enjoyment to shock are already given (and accepted). By accepting the given understandings and ways of proceeding, one avoids the difficult work of recognizing and coping with the fact that one has a being of one’s own and is capable of taking responsibility for one’s own possibilities. As they-self, *Da-sein* is disburdened of any need for explicit concern about its own being.<sup>54</sup> Everydayness, however, does not completely obstruct *Da-sein*’s capacity to return to concern about its being, which is grounded in its *Wesen*. *Da-sein* can be summoned back to its *Wesen* via the “call of

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<sup>52</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY, 1996), 121.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 119, 126-127.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 120, 128.

conscience.” When conscience calls, *Da-sein* is summoned “to its ownmost potentiality-of-being-a-self.”<sup>55</sup> It is called to take on the burden of its being. Instead of allowing *das Man* to dictate its way of being, it must choose how to be. The call of conscience operates as the prompt in this example.

In the call of conscience, *Da-sein* is specifically prompted to recall that it has a being of its own. Because it has this being of its own, it has the opportunity to realize possibilities outside of those normally taken up by *das Man*. Prior to the call of conscience, however, it had simply taken up being like the others. The call, moreover, is bound up with *Angst*. In *Angst*, a human *Da-sein* becomes anxious (Heidegger also calls this anxiety uncanniness), though without a particular object in the face of which this feeling occurs. Though the anxious person might attribute her *Angst* to some particular aspect of her life, the true source of *Angst* is *Da-sein*’s individual being-in-the-world wherein it can choose its own possibilities (i.e. that it exists and can choose its own way of being). *Da-sein* can have *Angst* whether or not it expressly knows that it has its “own potentiality-of-being.”<sup>56</sup> Its anxious uncanniness, because the feeling has to do with *its own* being, is radically individuating. *Da-sein* might not undergo the call of conscience when in *Angst*. *Angst*, however, attunes *Da-sein* to its own individuality and possibility for being. When the call of conscience takes place, *Da-sein* is summoned to itself, away from *das Man*, so that it can “project upon its ownmost potentiality-of-being.”<sup>57</sup> Without the attunement of *Angst*, *Da-sein* would not be able to come “face to face with its own uncanniness.”<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 255. “*Angst* reveals in *Da-sein* its *being toward* its ownmost potentiality of being, that is, *being free* for the freedom of choosing and grasping itself” (*Being and Time*, 176).

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 256.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 272.

The call summons *Da-sein* to its own being, and *Da-sein* thereby recognizes that it has forgotten the possibility of being itself that lies outside of the dictates of *das Man*. This usually means that it realizes that there are possibilities beyond those that *das Man* recognizes. The human *Da-sein*, thereby, encounters its presupposition of the rightness of the ways of being of the they-self. Encountering itself enables the human *Da-sein* to recognize its unreflective way of being (i.e. the way of being it had, as they-self, unreflectively fallen into and, thus, presupposed as necessary or fitting). This encounter opens the possibility that *Da-sein* can critically question its being as they-self. By questioning, it might stop being as they-self and, instead, reflectively choose itself and, maybe, also its own possibilities.

The human *Da-sein* in this example critiques its way of going about as they-self, whereas Socrates is concerned with death, Arendt with evil, and Farmer with his lifestyle. In each of these instances, however, the thinker is prompted by something and carries with a presupposition. The four examples discussed here demonstrate the key aspects of critical-reflective thinking: the prompt and the critical moment. These aspects are formally structural. Although they assume different content in each case, they operate similarly in each case of critical-reflective thinking. The phenomena of prompt and critical moment require further explication, however, to make sense of critical-reflective thinking as a singular, integrated, well-defined phenomenon of which there are many instances. The following subsections (“The Prompt” and “The Critical Moment”) lay out key aspects of the two moments of critical reflective thinking and describe the relationship of each moment to the other.

## THE PROMPT

Critical-reflective thinking is comprised of two elements. As described above, the first of these is the prompt. The prompt is the occurrence of an invitation to think. Prompts always happen to people.<sup>59</sup> They are not, in other words, events that occur independently. A prompt occurs when someone is invited to think. When a person is invited to think, she must respond to the prompt. She may accept or reject the invitation.<sup>60</sup> Each of these constitutes a response to the prompt. Although the prompt occurs in concrete, determinate circumstances and may issue from an object, the prompt itself is an occurrence rather than a thing. In the following, I will elaborate its key characteristics:

- (1) a prompt can address a person from many different sources,
- (2) its arrival is not compelled by human agency,
- (3) it is empty of content, and
- (4) it functions merely as an invitation, without a necessary causal relationship to the critical encounter with a presupposition.

Because the prompt is something that humans cannot compel ((2) above), the conditions for its occurrence must also be addressed. Conditions for prompts, though addressed only in passing in Chapter One, are a primary topic of discussion in Chapter Three. At the end of this section, I will point our way forward by discussing possible obstructions to the prompt.

### *Sources of the Address*

We have already seen that the prompt can issue from a variety of sources. The invitation to think has presented itself in the sound of a flute, the warning of a *daimon* (and its absence), reflections upon an individual, and the call of conscience. These examples provide a glimpse into the diversity of sources from which prompts can issue. Arendt

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<sup>59</sup> Although the question of whether animals too can be prompted might yield interesting work, here only humans are under consideration.

<sup>60</sup> A rejection of the prompt includes instances when the thinker ignores the prompt. Ignoring, although it is a refusal to take up critical consideration, is still a response to the invitation.

expresses the breadth of this diversity in “Thinking and Moral Considerations” when she writes that *all* “events and facts” provoke “our thinking attention” simply “by virtue of their existence.”<sup>61</sup> Anything can be the source of a prompt: an experience, a feeling, an idea, a person, a thing. Although anything can be the source of a prompt, something may not offer a prompt, or even the same kind of prompt, to different individuals. In other words, different people are prompted by different things. In this subsection, I will consider, first, the relation between the source and the prompt and, second, the variation of sources among different people.

The relation between source and prompt is not one of identity. Each source, whether an experience, feeling, idea, person, or thing is not the same as an invitation to think. This relation of non-identity holds for all source-prompt pairs. An individual, like Eichmann, who invited Arendt’s thought, is clearly more than just a prompt. Moreover, the prompt cannot be found somewhere in that person. No matter how much we analyze the source of a prompt, the prompt itself cannot be found there in any physically objective sense. Imagine a geologist examining a rock. In the course of her examination, while magnifying and analyzing its minerals, she might be invited into critical-reflective thinking. In this example, the source of the prompt is the rock. If she notices that she has been prompted and begins to wonder where the prompt has come from, perhaps she will start looking more closely at the rock. She might dissect it, analyze its composition, and break it into pieces. But no matter how closely she looks, there is no physical aspect of the rock that is the prompt. In the example of John Farmer, we might seek the prompt in the strains of the flute. But the music is not identical with the invitation to think. And even if we look very closely at the notes and trills, the invitation will not be found. Although the invitation

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<sup>61</sup> Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 160.

and the sounds happen together, the prompt is not somewhere in the sounds. The invitation is an occurrence of its own that takes place through a source, but is not inherent the source. A prompt and its source must, thus, be differentiated. The prompt is not some physically objective part of its source. Rather, the prompt occurs through or in the context of the source.

The non-identity of prompt and source is further supported by Elaine Scarry's example of her experience of being prompted by a palm tree. This example further distinguishes the source from the prompt by showing that a thing that has never prompted one to think before may suddenly do so. In *On Beauty and Being Just*, Scarry explains that she had always "confidently repudiated [palm trees] as an object of beauty."<sup>62</sup> One day, however, while standing on a balcony, she saw a palm tree's

huge swaying leaves...at eye level, arcing, arching, waving, cresting and breaking in the soft air, throwing the yellow sunlight up over itself and catching it on the other side, running its fingers down its own piano keys, then running them back up again, shuffling and dealing glittering decks of aqua green, yellow, and white.<sup>63</sup>

In this moment, Scarry was struck by the beauty of the palm tree. This sudden manifestation of beauty prompted her to reflect upon her former presupposition that palm trees are not and cannot be beautiful. In Scarry's experience, a prompt took place when she noticed a common object through which she had never previously been invited to think. She had seen many palm trees before and had surely glimpsed the very palm near the balcony prior to her meditation on it at the particular moment when she became enthralled by its beauty. Palm trees in general, and this palm tree in particular, did not consistently yield a prompt for her. An invitation to think, in other words, had not previously issued from this

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<sup>62</sup> Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (Princeton: Princeton, 1999), 16.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

source. Insofar as the palm trees and prompt are not inherently simultaneous, this example reiterates the non-identity of source and prompt.

Conversely, moreover, things that have prompted one in the past may not consistently continue to do so. A place or an object that had, at one time, remarkably excited one's thought can become dull or so overworked with consideration as to no longer invite one to think. Even in cases when something has always previously provided a prompt, it may not continue to do so. This might occur when someone experiences something new for the first time. The experience of a new food or activity might be the source of a prompt that, after repeated trials, ceases to occur. For example, having been raised as a strict vegetarian, my first experiments in eating meat drew my attention to my prior understandings of nutrition. Although I did not ultimately decide to integrate meat into my diet, I imagine that had I done so, its novelty would have worn off and meat would have become commonplace for me. I would no longer be prompted by it to think about how I eat. The disappearance of this prompt would show that a usual source is not necessarily a consistent source. Prompts do not always take place through particular sources, so prompts are not identical with their sources.

This does not, however, preclude the possibility that a prompt might often issue from a particular source for a particular thinker. Thoreau explicates the relation between people and particular sources when, in a chapter from *Walden* entitled "Solitude," he writes,

What do we want to dwell most near to? [...] to the perennial source of our life, whence in all our experiences we have found that [i.e. life] to issue, as the willow stands near the water and sends out its roots in that direction. This will vary with different natures...<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 129.

The fact that a source of life is perennial refers to the fact that it can be constant or continual for a certain person. A person might be enlivened by a specific thing over and over again. In the passage, Thoreau suggests that to be more alive, one should dwell near to the source in whose presence one is continually enlivened. The willow does this naturally by sending its roots toward the water. Humans too can physically nourish themselves by acquiring basic necessities like food, water, shelter, and clothing. Thoreau, however, has something other than physical life in mind when he recommends that humans dwell near to the source of life. Although it is not immediately clear from the passage at hand, living, for Thoreau, is partly constituted by thinking. If one is truly alive when one thinks, then the passage can be interpreted as a suggestion to dwell near to the sources that perennially prompt thought.

In “Where I Lived and What I Lived For,” a chapter that precedes the passage above, Thoreau connects life with thinking via a discussion of wakefulness. He writes: “To be awake is to be alive.”<sup>65</sup> Contrary to understanding “being awake” as a descriptor of a person’s physical state, wakefulness is defined by the ability to take part in deep thinking. For Thoreau, being awake has little to do with getting out of bed in the morning and “what the clocks say.”<sup>66</sup> In the morning, when we awaken, “there is least somnolence in us; and for an hour, at least, some part of us awakes which slumbers the rest of the day.”<sup>67</sup> According to Thoreau, the part of a person that awakens is his or her intellectual or spiritual faculty.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. This means, furthermore, that any time of the day when one awakens is the morning.

<sup>68</sup> Though the spiritual faculty is essential to a complete understanding of Thoreau and it is not entirely divorced from the intellect, I will concentrate, here, on the intellect.



When one is truly awake, one may engage this faculty in “effective intellectual exertion.”<sup>69</sup> Though such wakefulness is often limited to brief moments, Thoreau contends that being awake could persist throughout the day: “To him whose elastic and vigorous thought keeps pace with the sun, the day is perpetual morning.”<sup>70</sup> Thus, Thoreau describes being awake as thinking. If being awake means being alive, then thinking is also constitutive of life. By utilizing Thoreau’s understanding of life as constituted by thinking when reading the passage from “Solitude,” the passage more clearly has bearing on critical-reflective thinking. The passage says that thinking is occasioned by various sources. In order to think, one should dwell near the sources where one is perennially enlivened (i.e. prompted).

Thoreau description of enlivening sources helps explain two facts: first, that different individual people are prompted by different sources and, second, that it is possible for particular individuals to be perennially prompted by particular sources. That these facts obtain is already apparent in the primary examples discussed so far. We can see that different people are prompted by different things in the examples of Socrates, Farmer, the they-self, and Arendt in that the prompt is highly individual in each instance. Though it is possible for two or more people to be prompted by the same source, most often, different people are affected differently by a thing. We might imagine two people viewing the same artwork. Though both might find a painting beautiful, it might be merely a pretty picture to one while the other launches into thought after having been prompted through its colors and shapes. Furthermore, the fact that a person can be prompted again and again by the same source is already apparent in the example of Socrates and his *daimon*. Socrates’ *daimon* continually prompted him throughout his life.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. According to Thoreau, in wakefulness, a vast minority also leads a “poetic or divine life” (*Walden* 87).

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

For Thoreau, the claim that particular sources continually enliven particular persons is, however, grounded in the idea that a person's nature is native, ever-present and, to an extent, individually personal.<sup>71</sup> As he writes in the passage cited above, the variation of sources of life "will vary with different natures."<sup>72</sup> In Thoreau's account, one's ever-present, personal nature somehow accords with certain sources of life. This accord is the basis for the two facts discussed above. One is perennially prompted by a particular source because one's nature (as ever-present) always accords with it; one is prompted by a source while another is not because it resonates with one's nature while not with the other's. Grounding the relation between a source and prompt in personal nature is, however, problematic in the context of my project. For, exploring the metaphysical claim to constant personal nature, which underlies a theory of the person that comes along with its own consequences, would require a dissertation of its own. As I will show below, however, Thoreau's metaphysics of the person is dispensable for my purposes. Rather than by taking recourse to personal natures, the continual occurrence of prompts through particular source for certain people, as well as its variation among individuals, might be explained by the fact that different individuals approach things in different ways. Sometimes, if someone has an interest in some specific thing or activity (or type thereof), one approaches it with open receptivity. Such open receptivity facilitates the constancy of prompts that occur as long as one's comportment toward a specific source remains the same.

When a person has a particular interest in something, she often attends to it differently than someone who is not interested in the same thing. This particular attention might allow a thing to prompt her to think again and again. An art-enthusiast, for example,

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<sup>71</sup> Jane Bennett, "On Being Native: Thoreau's Hermeneutics of Self," *Polity* 22, no. 4 (1990): 559-580.

<sup>72</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 129.

might often be prompted by artworks while someone who is uninterested in art might not. This need not be explained by an inherent, natural difference between the two people. Rather, it likely has to do with the fact that the enthusiast attentively engages artworks while the other person does not. The difference between the two people lies in how they approach artworks, which depend on their interests and desires. The enthusiast might excitedly approach a work, receptive to finding out what it might reveal to her, while the uninterested person might be bored and listlessly mill around the museum until it is time to go home.<sup>73</sup> Even if the latter attempts to pay attention to the artworks, his disinterest might close off and limit his ability to engage them so as to make way for a prompt. By attentively and openly engaging with the artworks, the art-enthusiast is more likely to be prompted by them. A person who is interested in something might, thus, attend to that thing in such a way as to increase the possibility of a prompt.<sup>74</sup> If one's approach to certain things remains attentive and openly receptive, one might be perennially prompted by the same source. The variation between and perennality of particular sources for particular individuals can, thus, be explained by how they approach things.

Orienting the likelihood of prompts around attentiveness and open receptivity can also help explain the possibility of new prompts as well as the variation of prompts over a person's lifetime. Though an openly receptive approach is often linked with a person's particular interests, a person can also approach thing in which she is not (or had not been) particularly interested. This approach makes one available to be prompted by sources that had not issued prompts in the past. So, prompts can seemingly occur with respect to arbitrary objects, though this still requires some openness. A person's interests and

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<sup>73</sup> The uninterested person might, of course, become interested during the trip to the museum. But, her initial approach to the artworks is different from that of the enthusiast.

<sup>74</sup> Precisely what constitutes this type of attention is a topic to be explored in Chapter Three.

approach to things might also change over the course of her life such that she is attentive and openly receptive to different things at different times. To be fair to Thoreau, however, it must be noted that his metaphysics of personal nature might allow concessions for prompt-relevant change for an individual. For Thoreau, a person's nature underlies the growth and change that take place throughout his or her lifetime. This is apparent in Thoreau's imperative to his reader to "grow wild according to thy nature."<sup>75</sup> When a person grows, his or her way of approaching things and the world changes. Personal changes arguably affect the possibility of prompts. So, even if one accepts the claim to ever-present, native personal nature, it is possible that the sources of prompts will, for an individual, vary over time.

This discussion of the relation of person to source emphasizes the role of the person in the phenomenon of critical-reflective thinking. Whether something is a source of a prompt for a particular person is not only a matter of its presence. Rather, *the person* and how she goes about the world also has bearing on the likelihood that a prompt will take place. In order for anything to be a source, the person must, in some way, be open and receptive to its invitation to think. The importance and efficacy of open receptivity is a topic I will explore at the end of "The Prompt," in *An Obstacle to Hearing and Accepting the Invitation*.

Emphasizing the importance of the person for the occurrence of a prompt is not to downplay the necessity of specific concrete sources. Even if the prompt is not identical to the source, people always exist in concrete circumstances and are always prompted by specific things. Neither the person nor the source is solely responsible for the occurrence of prompt. Each of the thinkers I examine agrees that a prompt arrives through concrete, determinate circumstances. As we have already seen, for Arendt the prompt issues from

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<sup>75</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 200.

events and facts. Though Scarry's project is focused on the appearance of beauty, she too maintains that beauty becomes apparent and prompts thought through singular particulars.<sup>76</sup> Feelings of anxiety, the strains of the flute, and the warnings of the *daimon* are also determinate and specific. It is worth adding that the possibility of an invitation appearing in the absence of specific circumstances is radically problematic. Because humans always exist in definite, particular contexts, any possible prompt must also take place within these circumstances.<sup>77</sup> There is no location where a human is absent from particular places, things, people, events, and experiences. Any place of escape would still be just that, i.e., a place, and, thus, in some way determinate.<sup>78</sup> Any possible prompt will arrive in concrete circumstances, issuing in a context and from particulars.

#### *Arrival and Compulsion*

When Scarry stood on the balcony, she was "suddenly" called, through the palm tree, to rethink her presupposition that palms are not beautiful.<sup>79</sup> She did not expect, nor did she will, the prompt to take place. The prompts in the other examples above are similarly unwilling. Socrates did not choose to be prompted when his *daimon* left him alone during his trial. The human *Da-sein* did not choose to be prompted by its *Angst* and the call of conscience. Arendt did not choose to be prompted by the phenomenon of non-thinking. John Farmer did not choose to be invited to critically reflect by the music of the flute playing in the distance. In each case, the prompt arrives unexpectedly and without compulsion by

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<sup>76</sup> Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 15.

<sup>77</sup> Heidegger describes human *Da-sein* as essentially being-in-the-world. This means that humans always are in such a way that they are in a world, among other beings.

<sup>78</sup> Even if one does not understand one's own context, one's ability to experience it at all is based on its concreteness. That is, to experience something, it must be there in some way, even if its way of being there is abstract or cloudy.

<sup>79</sup> Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, 16.

the agency of the thinker. This points to a key characteristic of the prompt, namely that it is not compelled by human agency.

Heidegger describes the unplanned character of the arrival of the prompt when he writes that the call of conscience is something “that *we ourselves* have neither planned nor prepared for nor willfully brought about,” and, further, that “the call lies in the factor of a jolt, of an abrupt arousal.”<sup>80</sup> This suddenness, common to Scarry’s example, reinforces the fact that humans do not compel the prompt. Humans, furthermore, *cannot* force it to occur. Each of us has likely had the experience of sitting down with the best intentions of engaging in deep reflection and being unable to produce the thinking we seek. Just because we sit down to think does not mean thinking will take place. We might read, write, talk about, and mentally summarize our ideas hoping that one of them will catch us and draw us away. We desire and attempt to bring about something that will start us thinking. But no matter how hard we try to be struck by something interesting, to enter a thought process in which we can critically consider our deepest assumptions, the prompt simply does not occur.

Even though it might seem that such attempts involve attentive engagement that makes way for the occurrence of a prompt (and sometimes they might), by trying so hard, one can actually close off the possibility of the invitation to think. By attempting to compel a prompt, one desires and awaits something in particular. Such expectancy concerning the prompt and its occurrence limits one’s openness to whatever might occur. By looking out for something in particular, a person closes off other possibilities of being prompted. This does not mean that an invitation to critical-reflective thinking is impossible along the way when we engage in reflective projects. Just such a prompt takes place in Arendt’s critical reflection on evil. For Arendt, a prompt occurred in the midst of carrying out her project of

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<sup>80</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 254, 251.

observing and researching Eichmann's trial. The fact that the phenomenon of Eichmann's inability to think "struck" her, however, shows that it was unforeseen and abrupt.

The fact that the prompt does not present itself when we want it to, expect it to, or attempt to compel it opens the possibility of inquiry into whether we can cultivate critical-reflective thinking. If the prompt is a constitutive part of this thinking, and if humans cannot force it to occur, is it possible for humans to encourage critical-reflective thinking in any way? Directly compelling critical-reflective thinking may be impossible. Yet, humans can open themselves to prompts by cultivating openness and receptivity. In Chapter Three, I will discuss the matter of cultivation in greater detail. For now, we can note that receptivity might be cultivated by achieving a type of openness that allows prompts to occur. This includes not only approaching things attentively and openly, but also putting ourselves in the right circumstances to hear and respond to prompts. We may need to arrange our lives so that there is time and space for reflection. Such openness also requires accepting the possibility that some things we hold to be true may turn out to be otherwise. Having described the arrival of and the human inability to compel the prompt, I turn now to a discussion of the way in which it lacks content.

### *Emptiness*

In addition to arising from many various sources and not being compelled through human agency, prompts are empty. A prompt is empty in two important ways:

1. Neither (a) the prompt itself nor (b) its source is necessarily the object of reflection.
2. The prompt does not provide a specific message that becomes the content of thought.

Although the prompt is empty in these ways, the prompt is not utterly devoid of content. It is still an occurrence that one can remember, describe, discuss, and try to explain. Its content is its invitation. Socrates, for example, describes his *daimon* as a "sort of voice" that

calls him to stop what he is doing, but that never encourages or requires that he do something else.<sup>81</sup> For Farmer, the content of the prompt is even less specific; the invitation that comes through the music does not demand that he stop, but gently draws him in. The prompt's content is simply the content of an event, which for the most part is not the content upon which the thinker critically reflects. Its emptiness refers to the fact that neither the prompt itself nor its source is necessarily thematized or reflected upon by the thinker. Nor does the prompt speak a specific message that will necessarily become the content of the subsequent critical moment. The prompt simply invites a person to critically reflect.

That thinkers do not often consider the fact that something has prompted them to think is already apparent. In none of the above examples does the thinker turn to consider the prompt when the invitation to think occurs. Rather, having been invited to think, the thinker begins to explore a topic besides the prompt itself. Although the prompt could become the object of reflection, this is rare.<sup>82</sup>

In addition, the *source* of the prompt (as noted above in 1(b)) is not always, and so, not necessarily, the object upon which the thinker reflects. This comes out clearly in the example of John Farmer. His reflections about his lifestyle have no content-laden relationship to the sounds of the flute. It is not the music of the flute, through which he was prompted, that he considers. Instead, Farmer critically examines an entirely different topic. In other instances, the prompt is more closely connected with the specific content of the

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<sup>81</sup> Arendt refers to this quality of Socrates' experience of his *daimon* as the "stop and think" of thinking (Hannah Arendt, "Some Questions of Moral Philosophy," in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn, 49-146, (New York: Schocken, 2003), 105).

<sup>82</sup> A thinker could consider the prompt in the critical moment, but this movement seems to be unusual. In none of the examples discussed so far does the thinker consider the event of the prompt. In *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt discusses the work Socrates' *daimon* does to make him stop and think. She, thus, begins to consider the prompt as such. But, I have found few other examples in which a thinker considers the prompt itself.



thought. For example, the prompting of the palm tree through its movement and colors starts Scarry on a path of criticizing her aesthetic judgment of palm trees. Still, the primary presupposition she encounters is her judgment of the trees and not the palm tree itself (i.e. the source of the prompt). So, although she considers the palm tree, her criticism is not strictly focused on the source of the prompt (the tree). For both Farmer and Scarry, the source of the prompt is not the topic considered in their subsequent thought. I leave open the possibility that the source of a prompt could also be the content considered in a critical moment (e.g. if the idea of a presupposition were to invite one to think and then also undergo questioning through critical reflection). Farmer and Scarry demonstrate that the prompt and its source may, but need not, be related to the content of the thinker's reflections. Neither the prompt nor its source determines the particular content of thinking.

Secondly, the prompt is empty in that it does not give a specific message that determines what is to be thought. We can see this emptiness best in the prompt issued to Socrates by his *daimon*. The *daimon* causes him to pause, it does not speak a message with any specific content besides its interruptive, "Stop!" It does not "encourage" him to do anything or to think anything in particular, but only to stop and think.<sup>83</sup> Socrates must interpret the meaning of its call. In the *Apology*, the *daimon's* absence leads Socrates to consider death. Although considering death may not be surprising given the proceedings of that day, this topic is not given by the prompting absence of the *daimon*. In Heidegger's description of the call of conscience, he makes explicit the call's lack of content.<sup>84</sup> He writes that its summons calls nothing out: "The call does not say anything, does not give any information about

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<sup>83</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 31d.

<sup>84</sup> Michael Haar too has likened the Socratic *daimon* and the Heideggerian call of conscience in his *Heidegger and the Essence of Man* (see Michael Haar, *Heidegger and the Essence of Man* (Albany: SUNY, 1993), 24).

events of the world, has nothing to tell.”<sup>85</sup> This statement may seem odd since Heidegger goes on to elaborate the meaning of the call as a specific summons to oneself and back from the they-self. This, however, is Heidegger’s existential interpretation of the event of the call. The call of conscience occurs because *Da-sein* has lost itself in the they. But the call itself does not articulate this specific message to *Da-sein*.

This sort of emptiness may seem to run contrary to the specific questions that present themselves to John Farmer and Arendt. In each of these examples, a very clear question follows the prompt and addresses the thinker. In John Farmer’s case, a voice speaks to him, asking why he leads his life the way he does. It appears as if, in this instance, the prompt comes with content for thought. Although the prompt occurs together with the music of the flute, note that the immediate result of the prompt is that Farmer is drawn away into thought. The music of the flute does “away with the street, and the village, and the state in which he lived” and awakens his mental faculties.<sup>86</sup> Only once he pauses and becomes alert does this question appear to him. Although this does not prove that the question is not somehow inherent in the prompt, there is good reason to believe that the question may already have been rooted in John Farmer’s mind. If the question was already present in his thoughts, perhaps incipient and unformed, the prompt merely made room for its explicit expression through thinking. In this case, the question is a response to the prompt and is not given by the prompt itself.

Having been drawn into thought, the question comes to light, seemingly out of nowhere. But the question is not so strange as to have no relation to Farmer’s own interests. We cannot know his psychological state or why *this* question appears. Because the question

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<sup>85</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 252.

<sup>86</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 213.

is so utterly pertinent to him, however, it seems unlikely that some mysterious voice that existed apart from his own concerns posed it. It is also striking that a question specifically relevant to Arendt's own interests addresses her in the example above. Her question has to do with thinking and evil. Arendt had already broached topics related to thinking and ethics in *The Human Condition*, where she examines the *vita contemplativa*. She published that work in 1958, whereas Eichmann's trial did not take place until 1961. The question that imposed itself came about in the thought space in which she moved, following the prompt that occurred through Eichmann's testimony. It is remarkable that the contents of Farmer's and Arendt's questions, although these questions seem to appear out of thin air, pertain to matters with which each is deeply concerned. I find it, thus, compelling that the content of their thought was generated by the thinkers themselves, on the basis of their own interests and not by the immediate prompt. In this way, even if the thinkers did not purposively state the questions to themselves, the questions appear in the course of critical-reflective thinking, as a response to the prompt. The prompt made room for Farmer and Arendt to think such content by inviting them into thought. The next topic for consideration is the character of prompt as invitation.

#### *Invitation*

Prompts function as invitations both because they provide an opportunity for a thinker to enter the critical moment and because they require a response. When a thinker is affected by a prompt, she responds to it by either accepting or rejecting its invitation. If the thinker accepts the invitation, she moves into the critical moment, and if she rejects it, she does not. The response can happen in one of two ways: either (1) unintentionally or (2) intentionally. The unintentional acceptance or rejection of a prompt is just as much a response as is a purposive, intentional engagement with or turning away from thinking. An

unintentional response is an unconscious acceptance or rejection. This means that a thinker might enter the critical moment without consciously choosing to do so. A response to a prompt can, thus, also be characterized as whatever a thinker does once the prompt occurs. In this sub-section, I discuss both unintentional and intentional responses to prompts in order to also clarify the relationship between prompt and critical moment. Since the prompt's invitation can be refused, the critical moment does not always follow.

Both Socrates and Farmer unintentionally accept the invitation of their respective prompts. Their thinking attention is not merely "aroused," but also "claimed" by the prompts they encounter.<sup>87</sup> Affected in this way, neither Socrates nor Farmer has a chance to intentionally choose not to follow out the prompt. Socrates' *daimon* stops him completely. In the *Symposium*, Aristodemus describes how Socrates, claimed by thought, sometimes "just goes off... and stands motionless, wherever he happens to be."<sup>88</sup> The sounds of the flute that John Farmer hears whisk him away into thought more gently. Though the *daimon* and the music of the flute affect Socrates and Farmer differently, in each case the prompt immediately instigates the critical moment. Both Socrates and Farmer respond to the prompt by accepting its invitation unintentionally. Both of them, in other words, begin thinking without making a purposive decision to accept the invitation of their respective prompts.

It is also possible to intentionally accept or refuse the prompt's invitation. Ralph Waldo Emerson, Thoreau's mentor and friend, mentions the neglect of the prompt in his famous essay, "Self-Reliance." He writes, "A man should learn to detect and watch that gleam of light which flashes across his mind from within, more than the lustre of the

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<sup>87</sup> Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 160.

<sup>88</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 175b.

firmament of bards and sages. Yet he dismisses without notice his thought, because it is his.”<sup>89</sup> Here Emerson comments on the way we respect the thoughts of the esteemed and learned (i.e. the bards and sages) while dismissing our own. If we do not hold our own thoughts worthy of consideration, we will likely reject the invitation of the prompt. Additionally, however, his description of the prompt as a gleam of light that flashes across the mind reinforces the possibility that the one affected by it might reject its invitation. In this Emersonian example, the prompt does not demand attention like Socrates’ *daimon* does, nor does it immediately draw one in as in the case of John Farmer. It arrives, but is brushed aside.

Choosing to take up or refuse the invitation can be a highly conscious act, especially if the decision requires that one actively give up another understanding or activity in favor of taking a questioning departure into thought. Arendt’s example of the “respectable members of society” illustrates this possibility. Arendt refers to the group of people who accepted and willingly went along with operations of the Nazi regime as “the most respected members of respectable society.”<sup>90</sup> She calls them “respectable” because, as law-abiding citizens they continued to do what would be respectable under normal circumstances.<sup>91</sup> They followed new rules that came into force with the new regime. These people were not sadists, and may not have even held anti-Semitic sentiments, but they supported actions of the regime simply

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<sup>89</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Self-Reliance,” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 132.

<sup>90</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Personal Responsibility Under Dictatorship,” in *Responsibility and Judgment*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken, 2003), 42.

<sup>91</sup> Though when the National Socialists came to power, the circumstances were no longer normal. Because of this change in the circumstances, the actions of the “respectable citizens” were also no longer appropriate. The new circumstances required the measurement of respectability on a new scale, in accord with the concrete situation, in which actions took on new meanings and bore different consequences.

because the “will of the Führer... had the force of law.”<sup>92</sup> It might be difficult for a member of this “respectable society” to accept the invitation of a prompt if doing so would require acting against the law or considering the possibility that obeying the law is not always best. Even though accepting this invitation would be difficult, I do not believe it is impossible.

Each of us likely knows moments in which we feel the tug of an idea that calls for more attention. Sometimes we intentionally break ourselves away from other tasks in order to investigate it. At other times, however, we are too committed to what we are doing to abandon our tasks in favor of thinking. Though we are affected by the prompt, we swiftly push it aside in order to stay with our other tasks. Alternatively, we might be too lazy or distrustful of our own thoughts (as in Emerson’s example) to accept the prompt.

Since a prompt can be refused, the occurrence of a prompt does not necessarily lead to a critical moment. There is no necessary causal connection from the prompt to the critical moment. The independence of prompt and critical moment, however, does not mean that the prompt’s invitation and the thinker’s response cannot be phenomenologically inseparable. In Farmer’s case, the transition into the critical moment is phenomenologically smooth, effortless, and spontaneous. Farmer does not confront an explicit moment of decision about whether to accept or reject the prompt. A rejection of the invitation can also happen smoothly. When someone is in the midst of another activity (rushing to work, for example), ignoring the prompt might not require conscious rejection. Instead, other concerns and thoughts (for example, “Did I remember my keys, my lunch? I need to prepare for my meeting. I must bring up x, y, and z there...”) supersede the invitation, and the thinker ignores the prompt without deciding to do so. In such circumstances, the thinker might hardly notice the prompt. Experientially, a thinker might or might not

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<sup>92</sup> Arendt, “Personal Responsibility,” 43.

consciously choose a response. A distinct, intervening moment of choice, therefore, is not essential to critical-reflective thinking.

In his discussion of the call of conscience, Heidegger writes something that seems to conflict with my assessment of the relationship between prompt and critical moment:

The *authentic* understanding “following” the call is not an addition annexed to the phenomenon of conscience, a process that can either occur or else be lacking. The *complete* experience of conscience can only be grasped *from* understanding the summons together *with* it [...]. Viewed existentially, an unattached call from which “nothing ensues” is an impossible fiction.<sup>93</sup>

This passage seems to imply that the prompt as call of conscience cannot be separated from what occurs subsequently, namely critical reflection. In the last sentence, Heidegger avows the impossibility of a call that does not lead to something further. The prompt and the critical moment are, in this description, inseparable. So, how can the prompt be a mere invitation without a necessary connection to the critical moment?

It is important to note that this passage is about “authentic” and “complete” engagement with the call of conscience as prompt. To enter presently into a more detailed discussion of Heideggerian authenticity would take us far afield. I should explain, however, that in an authentic engagement with the prompt one not only receives its invitation but also accepts it. The call of the prompt and following it out in thought are inseparable when one authentically understands the prompt. This analysis, however, also places limits on the necessary connection of prompt and its subsequent effects. The necessary coupling of prompt and critical reflection is limited to instances in which a human *Da-sein* is authentically engaged with the call of conscience. One might also *inauthentically* understand a prompt and, thereby, fail to follow it out. Though Heidegger is specifically discussing the call of conscience, his point is applicable to other types of prompts as well. Experiences of

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<sup>93</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 258.

prompting are not necessarily authentic in the way described in the passage. Thus, the above passage does not imply that the prompt necessitates entry into the critical moment.

Both a prompt and the conscious or unreflective acceptance of its invitation are requisite to entering the critical moment. These prerequisites motivate questions about what makes prompts occur and what enables a person to respond to them affirmatively. The first of these questions (i.e. “What makes prompts occur?”) is not a question I propose to answer from the pole of the prompt. Insofar as people cannot compel prompts, their occurrence is unpredictable. Since prompts always happen *to people*, we can, however, further consider the role of thinkers in the occurrence of prompts. As I began to discuss in *Sources of the Address* above, I contend that a thinker’s openness and receptivity affect her ability to be addressed by a prompt and to accept its invitation. The suddenness of the prompt implies the importance of both readiness for and openness to the prompt. The question of developing openness and receptivity will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Three. Here, I will provide some initial remarks upon the obstacles that can impede open receptivity to the prompt.

#### *An Obstacle to Hearing and Accepting the Invitation*

The ability to be addressed by a prompt is related to the readiness to accept its invitation while a certain type of closed-ness can inhibit ready openness. Hearing and accepting the invitation require a thinker to do something that is not part of his or her usual activities. If one is closed off to critical reflection, one will not hear or, even in the case of hearing it, respond affirmatively to a prompt. As Arendt writes, “All thinking demands a



*stop-and-think.*”<sup>94</sup> Though a person’s interested attentiveness to something might provide an initial openness to being prompted, her ability to hear and accept the invitation to think through such a source is limited if she is unavailable to cease other activities in order to think.

The prompt’s arrival is sudden in that it comes unexpectedly and unwilling. In order to be addressed by the prompt, a person must be able to suddenly receive it, suddenly to be invited. Accepting the invitation requires further openness. When a prompt takes place, its subsequent acceptance can likewise be impeded if one is closed to abandoning other activities in favor of thinking.<sup>95</sup> Both the occurrence of the prompt and the acceptance of its invitation require openness or receptivity and can be obstructed if people are unavailable or closed off to them. Although I will leave the question of developing openness and receptivity for Chapter Three, in this section I will provide examples that illustrate how our everyday, quotidian ways of going about can close people off from being prompted and accepting the invitation to think. Quotidian existence is the way people usually go about and understand the world. Quotidian existence need not, however, completely obstruct prompts, as is clear from Heidegger’s example of *Da-sein* as they-self. When people adhere too strictly to the usual and familiar, however, people can be closed to prompts and, thus, critical-reflective thinking.

If one already has plans for the day and is closed to the possibility of diversion, it is difficult for anything—like a prompt—that lies outside the bounds of the plans, to take place. The sudden invitation of the prompt might break the constancy of the everyday or

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<sup>94</sup> Arendt, *Thinking*, 78. Even for John Farmer, who transitioned smoothly into critical reflection, stopped dwelling on thoughts about his day and work and started thinking (critically) about the presupposition that became apparent to him.

<sup>95</sup> Although one can prepare oneself to accept the invitation, I leave this matter for further consideration in Chapter Three.

come as an irritation. In either case, it disrupts the usual or expected course of things; it arrives as an interruption. It stops one in the midst of something else and requires a response. According to Arendt, thinking “interrupts any doing, any ordinary activities, no matter what they happen to be.”<sup>96</sup> In Heidegger’s account of the call of conscience, he too explains that the interruption is something that breaks in. When the they-self hears the call of conscience, how it usually proceeds as they-self is “broken by the call.”<sup>97</sup> The prompt is characteristically disruptive. The occurrence of the prompt, thus, depends on one’s availability to interruption.

Although human activities may seem, in principle, to be open to interruption, it is easier for some people than for others to be interrupted and allow distractions from whatever tasks are at hand. Daily activities can be so regular and fixed that getting out of them is difficult. Even if some unusual accident occurs, one may notice it for a moment and then turn back to what one was doing. The ways in which one understands the world also favor some possibilities at the expense of others. Strict adherence to one’s usual views can close one off to interruption by anything (like a prompt) that is unusual. Receptivity to being addressed by a prompt is limited because people are so deeply involved in and committed to certain ways of going about and understanding and leave little room for anything out of the ordinary to disturb this. Arendt’s example of strict adherence to laws by the “members of *respectable* society” could be explained by this phenomenon.<sup>98</sup> The “respectable” people held fast to the laws, although the laws “changed overnight” when the Nazis came to power.<sup>99</sup> Some Germans’ adherence to a quotidian existence that valued

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<sup>96</sup> Arendt, *Thinking*, 78.

<sup>97</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 250.

<sup>98</sup> Arendt, “Personal Responsibility,” 44.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

governmental authority (authority in general) may have limited their susceptibility to the prompts that would have jarred them out of this way of being. An outsider might view their circumstances as extraordinary and, thus, as teeming with the possibility of prompts. Insofar as they were not open to the interruption of their usual ways, however, such prompts did not occur. Furthermore, even if prompts had taken place, the people may have held so tightly to their law-abidingness that they would have declined prompts' invitations to engage in critique.

Thoreau presents two particularly pithy examples of moments ripe with the prospect of a prompt, but whose potential goes unfulfilled. In Thoreau's respective interactions with a farmer and a seamstress, both interlocutors find themselves in what we might have thought was a perfect moment for critical-reflective thinking. Each is presented with a view contrary to his or her own. Their deep-rooted involvement in their own understandings, however, make it impossible for these alternatives to strike them as legitimate, let alone thought-worthy.

A farmer learned of Thoreau's intention to move to Walden Pond and grow his own food. Thoreau planned to eat a primarily vegetarian diet in order to free up his time. He reasoned that by not eating meat, which cost more than vegetables and grains, he would not have to work as much to earn the money he would need to buy food. He would, thereby, gain free time to devote to activities he found more valuable than earning wages. The farmer imparted his opinion with regard to Thoreau's dietary plan, simultaneously driving his [vegetarian] oxen:

One farmer says to me, "You cannot live on vegetable food solely, for it furnishes nothing to make bones with;" and so he religiously devotes a part of his day to supplying his system with the raw material of bones; walking all

the while he talks behind his oxen, which, with vegetable-made bones, jerk him and his lumbering plough along in spite of every obstacle.<sup>100</sup>

The oxen, with whom the farmer worked the fields on a daily basis, were living proof, contrary to the farmer's view, that a vegetarian diet can sustain life and help build strong bones. His oxen ate nothing but "vegetable food" and, yet, continued to live and work. The farmer's adherence to his view that being a vegetarian is an unsustainable lifestyle obscured the fact of the oxen who stood directly before him. If he were more receptive (if his view were open to interruption and question), perhaps the life and strength of his oxen would prompt him to critically reflect upon his view.

Thoreau experienced a similar lack of receptivity to notions that lay outside, in this case, the norms of fashion when he asked his seamstress to sew a particular garment for him. Their short exchange prompted Thoreau himself to consider her presupposition that the contemporary fashions determined what could be sewn. The seamstress, by contrast, remained at a loss:

my tailoress tells me gravely, "They do not make them so now," not emphasizing the "They" at all, as if she quoted an authority as impersonal as the Fates, and I find it difficult to get made what I want, simply because she cannot believe that I mean what I say, that I am so rash. When I hear this oracular sentence, I am for a moment absorbed in thought, emphasizing to myself each word separately that I may come at the meaning of it, that I may find out by what degree of consanguinity *They* are related to *me*, and what authority they may have in an affair which affects me so nearly.<sup>101</sup>

The seamstress appeared to be stuck within the bounds of contemporary fashion, unable to comprehend the idea that an unusual garment could be stitched to meet Thoreau's needs. That is, she could not be interrupted by something that might lead her to this new view. The norms of fashion held her too strongly. Thoreau, conversely, began to thoughtfully

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<sup>100</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 9.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-24.

question the authority of the fashion “They” during this brief conversation. She found his request to be “rash” and, perhaps, ridiculous. For all appearances, the seamstress was not struck by a prompt. But even if she was, she did not appear to be open to reconsidering her way of creating garments and her attachment to the “fateful” fashions. Her deep-rootedness within the bounds of contemporary fashion obstructed her ability to critically and reflectively think.

In Plato’s *Republic*, Cephalus too seems to be in a situation rife with possible prompts. Yet, he leaves his conversation with Socrates before it develops into more than a basic disagreement about the meaning of justice. Cephalus is the wealthy father of Polemarchus and it is he who greets Socrates when Socrates stops by to visit Polemarchus’s house in Pireaus. Sitting down and taking a break from making his morning sacrifice in the courtyard, Cephalus is very happy to see Socrates and to talk with him. Because of his decreasing ability to walk the long distance to Athens as he gains in years, Cephalus does not often visit Socrates. Socrates also does not often venture to the Pireaus. Cephalus and Socrates begin discussing Cephalus’s attainment of the “threshold of old age” and whether old age is a difficult stage of life.<sup>102</sup> This conversation leads into a nascent examination of justice.

Cephalus expresses the opinion that his wealth has made old age easier for him because (1) he has not been tempted to “cheat or deceive” anyone on account of being in need and (2) having paid all his debts, he need not worry about owing anyone money when

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<sup>102</sup> Plato, *Republic*, trans. G.M.A Grube, rev. C.D.C. Reeve, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 328e. Socrates attributes this phrase to the poets. According to the translator and reviewer (G.M.A. Grube and C.D.C. Reeve), it can be found in the *Illiad* xxii.60, xxiv.87 and the *Odyssey* xv.246, 348, xxiii.212.

he dies.<sup>103</sup> Socrates takes him to be talking about justice. He attributes to Cephalus the position that justice is “speaking the truth and paying whatever debts one has incurred.”<sup>104</sup> This position is, however, easily opposed, and Socrates counters it by giving an example of an occasion when it would be unjust to speak the truth and/or pay debts. When the indebted person is a friend who has lent you his weapons and asks to have them back, it appears to be just, on Cephalus’s account, to fulfill his request. But if this friend is “out of his mind,” Socrates claims, it would be unjust to return the weapons.<sup>105</sup> Likewise with regard to truth telling: no one should be “willing to tell the whole truth to someone who is out of his mind.”<sup>106</sup> According to Socrates, justice does not require telling the truth and repaying debts in every circumstance. Having given this example, Socrates believes he has refuted the stance attributed to Cephalus: “Then the definition of justice is not speaking the truth and repaying what one has borrowed.”<sup>107</sup> Cephalus agrees with this assessment. Though he had initially supported the notion that justice is speaking the truth and repaying debts, he now finds himself in disagreement with this stance.

At this point in the conversation, Polemarchus boldly jumps in to counter Socrates’ conclusion. Polemarchus agrees with the initial definition of justice and attempts to defend it. Cephalus willingly bequeaths the argument to Polemarchus and leaves the room, going back to the courtyard to look after his sacrifice. The reader of this dialogue might think Cephalus is leaving at the most interesting part. The tension between his initial view, which has just gained a supporter, and the discovery that he disagrees with it, though it may bring the reader suspense, does not prompt Cephalus to engage in an examination of justice. His

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 331b.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 331c.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 331d.

discovery that his prior understanding of justice was wrong does not seem to disturb him in the slightest as he “laughing[ly]” gives the argument over to Polemarchus and disappears to tend his sacrifice.<sup>108</sup>

Perhaps the sacrifice demands his attention. This task might so define the trajectory of his day that even an immanent tension on the topic of justice cannot prompt him to think further about it. The importance of the sacrifice might also signify Cephalus’ concern for piety as opposed to knowledge in his old age. As he draws nearer to death, his primary aim might lie in readying himself for the afterlife by making sacrifices and not reasoning about justice with Socrates.<sup>109</sup> Whatever the reason, Cephalus returns to his usual activities apparently unbothered by the disagreement generated in conversation with Socrates.

So far I have emphasized how adhering to usual ways and understandings can decrease one’s chances of being prompted and accepting the invitations involved. Most people lead their lives without regular interruptions by prompts. Although I would attribute the relative rarity of critical-reflective thinking partly to the fact that most people are deeply rooted in their quotidian lifestyle, it is important to note that quotidian existence does not completely obstruct prompts or obstruct the possibility of responding affirmatively to them. It is not just the quotidian itself, but our deep attachment to it that limits the possibility of prompts and critical-reflective thinking. For, it is possible to be committed to familiar understandings and lifestyles in a way that does not close off the possibility of interruptions by prompts. Heidegger’s explanation of the call of conscience illustrates how a prompt can still take place for *Da-sein* as they-self.

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 331d.

<sup>109</sup> Though Socrates might disagree with Cephalus about the ordering of his priorities.

The they-self characteristically does not experience prompts. Rather, they-selves continuously and, for the most part, uninterruptedly live like others. A they-self's involvement in average everydayness, however, does not completely obstruct the call of conscience. The call of conscience happens precisely to a person who is involved in being like the they: "The call reaches *Da-sein* in this always-already-understanding-itself in everyday, average taking care of things."<sup>110</sup> Though deeply involved in particular understandings and ways of life, a human *Da-sein* as they-self can be summoned by the call. In order to hear the call of conscience, however, *Da-sein* must be resolute. *Da-sein* can be resolute while it is also involved in the they.

Heidegger describes resoluteness as the major condition that must obtain for human *Da-sein* to authentically hear the call of conscience. He writes, "To the call of conscience there corresponds a possible hearing."<sup>111</sup> In order to hear the call, *Da-sein* must be ready to hear it. Normally, a *Da-sein* as they-self is caught up in *listening* to the they. The call of consciences interrupts this listening and "arouses another kind of hearing."<sup>112</sup> This "other" kind of hearing, however, can only be aroused if the human *Da-sein* is ready for it. The call "reaches him who wants to be brought back [from the they]."<sup>113</sup> This means that the call cannot always reach every they-self. Being ready for the call consists in *Da-sein*'s wanting to hear the call, or "wanting to have a conscience."<sup>114</sup> Only the human *Da-sein* who wants to have a conscience can heed the call: "Understanding the summons reveals itself as *wanting to*

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<sup>110</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 252.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 251.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 250.



*have a conscience.*”<sup>115</sup> Heidegger calls this way of being—being ready to hear the call or “wanting to have a conscience”: “resoluteness.”<sup>116</sup>

If *Da-sein* is resolute, it is, thus, ready for the call of conscience. The conditions for hearing the call will have been met. Although the fulfillment of the conditions does not necessitate the prompt’s occurrence, without resoluteness a human *Da-sein* would not be available for the prompt. Those who go about their usual ways in quotidian life can also be open to the prompt and to accepting its invitation. I will leave to Chapter Three a full discussion of the types of readiness that can make one more openly receptive to the prompt. Arendt’s respectable, law-abiding citizens, Thoreau’s seamstress and oxen-driving farmer, and Plato’s Cephalus were closed to the prompt because they strictly adhered to their own usual ways.

Although the prompt is a mere invitation, not identical with the physical existence that is its source, and empty of content that the thinker must take up in thought, it is essential to critical-reflective thinking. The fact that the prompt precedes the critical moment in all of the examples provided lends empirical evidence to this contention. Because the prompt, moreover, invites the thinker to critically reflect, it is preparatory. The prompt prepares the thinker by inviting her to critically reflect. The prompt opens the way for the critical moment by inviting the thinker to take up considerations different from his or her usual concerns. The thinker who accepts the invitation enters into a space of thought where things usually presupposed can be examined, questioned, and criticized. This questioning takes place in the second constitutive moment of critical-reflective thinking: the critical moment.

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 249, 273.

## THE CRITICAL MOMENT

Many different presuppositions operate in the primary examples discussed in the first part of this chapter. In the critical moment, the presuppositions become disclosed to and are questioned by the thinkers. Arendt's society presupposed that evil is solely malicious; John Farmer presupposed that his lifestyle was somehow necessary or fitting; *Da-sein* as they-self presupposed the necessity of the ways of the they; and Socrates' countrymen presupposed that death is the worst evil. Each of these suppositions came into question in the respective thinkers' critical moments. Presuppositions were also at play in the examples of the "respectable" members of society, the ox-driver, the seamstress, and Cephalus. Each of these latter persons or groups, however, did not reach the critical moment. They did not become aware of their presuppositions so as to be able to question them because they either were not prompted or, though they were, did not accept the invitation. Only through the acceptance of a prompt's invitation is a presupposition disclosed to the thinker and made available for questioning. Critical-reflective thinking is then carried out when a thinker examines the presupposition.

Presuppositions are notions that we take to be true without first considering them. They are not usually apparent to us, but instead operate in the background, undergirding how we go about and understand the world. Although lacking awareness of our own presuppositions might appear to be radically problematic, presuppositions do the positive work of providing each of us a context for concrete, practical life. An existence without presuppositions is impossible. Only by taking some things to be true can our physical surroundings be present, our choices grounded, and possibilities for our lives available.

Wittgenstein aptly refers to the necessity of presuppositions when he discusses "hinge propositions" as the assumptions we must make and accept in order to go about

living.<sup>117</sup> To exist, we must hold some things to be true, though there may be variance between the presuppositions upheld by different persons. In *On Certainty*, he explains the necessity of always maintaining some such propositions. Not only does this necessarily arise because we “just *can't* investigate everything,” but also because these propositions act as “hinges” that allow us to pose questions, have doubts, take up scientific investigations, and even live.<sup>118</sup>

343. [...] we are forced to rest content with assumption. If I want the door to turn, the hinges must stay put.

344. My *life* consists in being content to accept many things.<sup>119</sup>

Just as sturdy hinges make it possible for doors to swing open and closed, our presuppositions enable us to go about our lives. They are basic understandings that we usually do not notice, although they underlie our actions and thoughts. Our presuppositions can be thematically problematized. A presupposition-less existence, however, is not possible. For when one questions a presupposition, a different hinge that enables this doubt to be raised must be in place. Wittgenstein writes, “Doubting and non-doubting behaviour. There is the first only if there is the second.”<sup>120</sup> The presupposition that underlies doubt might simply be that doubting is possible or that whatever is doubted can be doubted. Presuppositions always operate, even during critical-reflective thinking. A presupposition can only be questioned on the basis of other presuppositions on whose basis it can become problematic for a thinker. There is, thus, no end to critical-reflective thinking, no stopping point where all presuppositions are recognized and considered and a thinker becomes utterly

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<sup>117</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe and G.H. von Wright, trans. Denis Paul and G.E.M. Anscombe (New York: Harper, 1969), 44e.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

transparent to him or herself. Presuppositions of some sort must continually operate in order for humans to think and to go about their lives.

My purpose in the following subsections is to further describe presuppositions and what happens when they are disclosed in the critical moment. I will also discuss the outcomes of critical-reflective thinking, whose processes Arendt describes as fundamentally destructive. Destruction takes place in two ways. First, the destruction of a thinker's prior, unconsidered, relationship to her presupposition occurs when the presupposition is disclosed in the critical moment. Second, destruction takes place if a thinker undermines a presupposition through his or her critical, reflective examination. Lastly, I will illustrate the conversational nature of critical questioning. In that questioning is dialogical, critical-reflective thinking is not limited to solitary thinkers, but can take place amongst a group of thinkers conversing together.

### *Presuppositions*

Presuppositions are notions people take to be true prior to considering them. A full account of how humans take up presuppositions would be another project of its own. For now, we can understand presuppositions as notions that shape one's perspective and that one takes for granted. They often seem to have been ingrained in people by virtue of their socio-historical context, family, community, or personal developmental experiences. Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of Heidegger's students and a leading philosopher in the history of hermeneutics, refers to presuppositions as "prejudices." He explains that everyone has prejudices because of his or her historical and social situation within a tradition: "Long

before we understand ourselves through the process of self-examination, we understand ourselves in a self-evident way in the family, society, and state in which we live.”<sup>121</sup>

Prior to his experience of critical-reflective thinking, for John Farmer, the propriety of orienting life around work seems to have been self-evident. Farmer held the notion that his life, consumed with work, was somehow necessary. This presupposition was closely related to (and may have even stemmed from) a value that was prevalent in his society, namely, the importance of earning money in order to purchase what the society deemed to be the goods necessary for life.<sup>122</sup> In the course of everyday life, we do not have many occasions to reflect upon presuppositions because they always already frame how we proceed. A person can gain the critical distance necessary for considering presuppositions if she accepts the invitation issued by a prompt. Accepting the invitation allows the thinker to stop what she is doing and to critically question a presupposition. In critical-reflective thinking, presuppositions become overt and can, thereby, be scrutinized. Before, however, investigating how they become apparent and what takes place in the critical moment, what presuppositions are must be further elaborated. In this section, I will draw on the examples already given to illustrate the work presuppositions do in practical, everyday life. Although humans are usually unaware of them, presuppositions continually shape daily life and understanding on both personal and societal levels.

Presuppositions frame our world. Whether held personally or by a broad community of people, they define a context of relevance and value within which people go

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<sup>121</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Bloomsbury, 1989), 289.

<sup>122</sup> In addition, Thoreau notes that it was expected of farm inheritors to keep up the family farm even if they were not interested in farming. We do not know whether John Farmer inherited his farm. This social expectation was, however, likely been ingrained in him and others (Thoreau, *Walden*, 3).

about and understand. When a thinker comes to question a presupposition, it has already been there, giving shape to his or her everyday activities. Heidegger describes how *Da-sein*, simply by virtue of existing, always presupposes the ways of *das Man* and the “customary interpretation” of its being:

In its manner of existing at any given time, and accordingly also with the understanding of being that belongs to it, *Da-sein* grows into a customary interpretation of itself and grows up in that interpretation. It understands itself in terms of this interpretation at first, and within a certain range, constantly. This understanding discloses the possibilities of its being and regulates them.<sup>123</sup>

*Da-sein* has always already been thrown into a world among others, wherein it exists and is thereby defined. In a totalizing and inconspicuous fashion, *das Man* frames *Da-sein*'s practical activities and understanding.

The they not only influences how everyday *Da-sein* enjoys itself, reads literature, withdraws from society, and is shocked.<sup>124</sup> *Das Man* also prescribes possibilities for *Da-sein*'s own action, its pre-ontological interpretation of its being, and even the way it “sees.”<sup>125</sup> By “articulat[ing] the referential context of significance,” the they provides the framework within which humans exist together.<sup>126</sup> In such a framework, “everyday possibilities” are determined for *Da-sein* because only what is significant in the context is immediately available to *Da-sein*. By defining what is available, the they “prescribes the kind of being of everydayness,” thereby prescribing “what can and may be ventured.”<sup>127</sup> Everything is determined by what is normative and significant for the they. A human *Da-sein* in its everyday fashion, as they-self, proceeds within the framework of the they and cannot help

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<sup>123</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 17-18.

<sup>124</sup> That is, like *they* do (see passage cited above on p. 23).

<sup>125</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 159.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

but to do so. Each individual *Da-sein* must presuppose the ways of the they because such ways are already operative in the world into which is thrown.

A human *Da-sein* is always among others and exists in the same context as they are. The possibility of a common context inherently rests upon common presuppositions. By being thrown into such a context, *Da-sein* takes up its existence with respect to what is already there: “What is decisive is only the inconspicuous domination by others [i.e. the they] that *Da-sein* as being-with has always already taken over unawares.”<sup>128</sup> *Da-sein* as they-self, its everyday self, presupposes the truth, propriety, and necessity of the ways of the they because these simply are normal and apparent. *Da-sein* naturally takes up the presuppositions that are always already set out by the they. Although *Da-sein* initially takes up the ways of the they, these can also come into question. Such questioning can occur when the they-self is summoned by the call of conscience to consider its being. The prescriptions of the they are not, thus, necessary. Thoreau’s example of John Farmer provides a concrete example of how the prescriptions of one’s presuppositions frame daily life.<sup>129</sup>

Farmer’s usual everyday tasks and thoughts were oriented by his focus on working in the fields, almost to the extent that another life was unimaginable to him. Although Thoreau did not provide an extensive account of Farmer’s life, the reader gleans that Farmer’s activities and thoughts usually centered on work. Farmer’s work-consumed existence is apparent not only in that he inquires about living a mean, moiling life, but also in his train of thought before and directly following the music of the flute. On the day when he took part in critical-reflective thinking, he sat down after working all day to “recreate his intellectual

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>129</sup> The presuppositions of Thoreau’s seamstress also clearly come into play in her everyday work.

man.”<sup>130</sup> At first, however, his thoughts remained focused on work. Thoughts of field labor and the impending frosty weather (which also would have been relevant to the welfare of his crops) ran through his mind. When the notes of the flute initially sounded, “still he thought of his work.”<sup>131</sup> He eventually began to drift away from his usual concerns: the notes “gently did away with the street, and the village, and the state in which he lived.”<sup>132</sup> The word “state” refers to his usual condition, being primarily, though not self-reflectively, concerned with his work. Farmer’s presupposition (i.e. the necessity of the work that composed his mean, moiling life) provided structure for his daily life. Additionally, it offered the fodder that kept his mind busy.

On the scale of a community, Socrates offers evidence of the practical effects of the presupposition that death is the worst evil. Many of Socrates’ fellow Athenians seem to have understood life as the best of all things and death as the worst of all evils. They were willing to do almost anything to protect themselves from death. When Socrates noticed that people around him held this presupposition, he commented that his defense was undergirded by something higher than physical life, namely the well-being of the soul. During his trial, Socrates did not come to the jury with “lamentations and tears,” nor did he confess to any of the crimes of which he was accused.<sup>133</sup> According to Socrates, juries in Athens were “accustomed to hear” such pleas from defendants who merely wished to save their own lives.<sup>134</sup> We can, thus, see two practical effects of the presupposition that death is the worst of evils. First, the presupposition established what the jury expected to hear in response to charges punishable by death. Second, it might undergird how those on trial defend

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<sup>130</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 213.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Plato, *Apology*, 38d.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 38e.



themselves. Those who presuppose that death is the worst of all evils might engage in practical actions whose aim is to preserve their lives, even if it requires lying while on trial. The presupposition that death is the worst of all evils, thus, might underlie behavior on the parts of both defendants and jurors that may be antithetical to doling out fair punishments on the basis of true testimony.

For Arendt, the presupposition that evil is characterized by malice also carried a disturbing practical implication in the judicial realm. If courts of law are supposed to punish those who do evil as so defined, imputing punishable responsibility to criminals presumes that they have acted with malicious intent. Arendt goes so far as to ascribe this presupposition to modern courts as their fundamental perspective: “the assumption current in all modern legal systems [is] that intent to do wrong is necessary for the commission of a crime.”<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, the requirement of intent is not only a presupposition of the legal system, but also of many individuals: “Where this intent is absent... we feel no crime has been committed.”<sup>136</sup> The requirement of intent struck Arendt as distinctly problematic for the judges who would determine Eichmann’s fate.

In accord with this presupposition, the prosecution claimed that Eichmann was a “perverted sadist,” painting him as an obviously culpable criminal.<sup>137</sup> In truth, however, he was “terribly and terrifyingly normal.”<sup>138</sup> When taken to Jerusalem for his trial, Eichmann was put through rigorous psychological examinations. The results were that “half a dozen psychiatrists [...] certified him as ‘normal’ [...and one psychiatrist] found that his whole psychological outlook, his attitude toward his wife and children, mother and father, brothers,

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<sup>135</sup> Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, 277.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 276.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid.

sisters, and friends, was ‘not only normal but most desirable.’”<sup>139</sup> A minister who regularly visited Eichmann in jail even declared that Eichmann was “a man with very positive ideas.”<sup>140</sup> Eichmann understood himself to be a law-abiding citizen and a follower of Kantian ethics. His sense of moral idealism entailed that he had to put his feelings aside so as to never be diverted from his duty, which was to obey the law and carry out the professional tasks assigned to him.<sup>141</sup> And, indeed, he did not allow his personal feelings (i.e. that he “never had anything whatever against Jews; on the contrary, he had plenty of ‘private reasons’ for not being a Jew hater”) to interfere with his professional duties.<sup>142</sup> Although his duties were attended by disastrous consequences for the passengers he helped to transport, he was not, at heart, a hateful murderer.

His normality and lack of malicious intent conflicted with the understanding of criminal activity as evil in the traditional sense. On the presupposition that evil is characterized by malice, Eichmann’s case would be difficult to decide. The presupposition poses a difficulty to making sense of Eichmann as a criminal, someone who intended to do harm. Although he was, in the end, convicted and sentenced to death, Arendt recognized the tension between the traditional view of evil and the murderous activity in which Eichmann participated, though not maliciously.

Of course, people can be aware that they hold certain things to be true, though they may not recognize them as presuppositions. In the *Crito*, the Platonic dialogue that chronologically follows the events of the *Apology*, Crito exemplifies someone who explicitly presupposes that death is the worst evil and leads his life accordingly. Because he thematizes

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid. 42. See also Chapter VIII in the same source, “Duties of a Law-Abiding Citizen.”

<sup>142</sup> Ibid. 26.

his presupposition, he is clearly aware of it in some sense. His awareness, however, differs from the critical-reflective awareness and engagement with the presupposition that could take place in critical-reflective thinking.

Crito visits Socrates in prison and attempts to convince him to flee (i.e. to evade his sentence and save his life). Socrates disagrees with Crito's plan on the grounds (among others) that by escaping his sentence, he would be acting unjustly by intentionally harming the laws of Athens. Committing the injustice and intentional harm that would save his life would also damage the part of him that is concerned with justice, namely, his soul. In the course of conversation, Socrates and Crito agree that the soul is more valuable than the body:

Socrates: And is life worth living for us with that part of us corrupted that unjust action harms and just action benefits? Or do we think that part of us, whatever it is, that is concerned with justice and injustice, is inferior to the body?

Crito: Not at all.

Socrates: Is it more valuable?

Crito: Much more.<sup>143</sup>

Because of the harm it would inflict on his soul (and the benefit for his soul of doing what is just) Socrates is unwilling to follow Crito out of the jail.

Although it appears that Crito and Socrates agree upon the relative value of soul and body, Crito's actions and arguments up to that point in the dialogue show that, prior to their conversation, Crito operated on a different presupposition. By attempting to help Socrates escape from jail, Crito shows that he is most interested in saving Socrates' life, even if it requires acting unjustly by disobeying the law. Prior to their agreement that the soul is more valuable, Crito thematizes the notion that death is the worst evil. If death is the worst evil,

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<sup>143</sup> Plato, *Crito*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 47e-48a.

the demise of the body would be far worse than the demise of the soul brought on by doing injustice. He says, “the majority can inflict not the least but pretty well the greatest evils [i.e. put one to death] if one is slandered among them.”<sup>144</sup> This implies that his intentions in saving Socrates are primarily oriented toward preserving Socrates’ physical life. So, it is evident not only from his actions, but also from what he says that Crito had presupposed that death is the worst of evils. Although he comes to agree with Socrates’ counter-arguments in the course of their conversation, he had not previously critically reflected upon the presupposition that led him to propose Socrates’ escape. Although he could articulate the basis of his actions, Crito had taken this presupposition to be the simple truth of the matter.

Although people can thematically articulate their presuppositions, such awareness does not equate to the critical awareness that takes place in critical-reflective thinking. Whether or not we thematically articulate our presuppositions, we go about, for the most part, critically unaware of them. In order to come to critical awareness, the presuppositions must be disclosed as such so as to allow for questioning. This alteration in a thinker’s relation to a presupposition takes place in a moment I call “disclosure” and discuss in the next section.

#### *Disclosure, Questioning, and Destruction*

Arendt wrote, “thinking inevitably has a destructive, undermining effect on all established criteria, values, measurements of good and evil, in short, on those customs and

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 44d. Crito’s reference to the power of slander likely rings true for Socrates, who, during his speech in the *Apology*, refers to accusers who have slandered him in the public eye for many years. Socrates says that they have “spread rumors” and have been believed by the Athenians. They are, furthermore, formidable because he cannot name any of them (besides the author of *Clouds*, Aristophanes) and bring them to court to refute their arguments (Plato, *Apology*, 18-19). Though Socrates understands that one’s reputation has consequences, the consequences are not of the type he finds most important (i.e. consequences for one’s soul).

rules of conduct we treat of in morals and ethics.”<sup>145</sup> It should be noted that thinking reaches into all areas, not just morality and ethics.<sup>146</sup> The things Arendt refers to as “established” include presuppositions. Presuppositions are established insofar as we take them to be true without question.<sup>147</sup> Through critical-reflective thinking, established presuppositions are destroyed. What does destruction mean here, and how does it take place in the critical moment? Regardless of whether a presupposition has been previously articulated, in order to be questioned it must be thematized. The critical moment thus includes disclosing the presupposition as well as questioning it. In both disclosure and questioning, destruction can take place. To destroy a presupposition, however, does not mean to annihilate it. Rather, for my purposes here “destruction” denotes two ways in which the thinker’s relation to the presupposition can be fundamentally altered. First, when disclosure takes place, a presupposition is articulated and disclosed *qua* presupposition. From that moment on, it is no longer an underlying notion taken to be true without consideration. Disclosure, in other words, fundamentally changes and, in this sense, destroys the thinker’s previous relation to the notion presupposed. Second, the thinker can destroy the presupposition in the sense of defeating it during questioning. The defeat of a presupposition happens when the thinker, through critical reflection, finds it to be false or

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<sup>145</sup> Arendt, *Thinking*, 175.

<sup>146</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson seems to have had a similar idea. In *Circles*, he writes, “Beware when the great God lets loose a thinker on this planet. Then all things are at risk. It is as when a conflagration has broken out in a great city and no man knows what is safe, or where it will end. There is not a piece of science, but its flanks may be turned to-morrow; there is not any literary reputation, not the so-called eternal names of fame, that may not be revised and condemned.” (Ralph Waldo Emerson, “Circles,” in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson, (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 255-256).

<sup>147</sup> As discussed briefly in the previous section, humans might appropriate presuppositions that are socially instituted in their communities or families. By taking them to be true, however, presuppositions are not only established in some greater context, but also in individuals.

unnecessary. Through this second type of destruction, the presupposition might lose its grip on, or efficacy in, the thinker's practical life and understanding; this need not, however, take place when instances of the first type of destruction occur.

When a presupposition is disclosed, it is articulated as a presupposition. By articulating it, disclosure makes the presupposition known to the thinker and, thus, available for questioning. Whereas beforehand it was simply taken as true without being considered, after disclosure it is known and no longer has this quality. Moreover, because a thinker cannot question something of which she is unaware, disclosure is indispensable to the critical moment. Whether or not the thinker previously articulated the presupposition, she comes face-to-face with it in the critical moment. Like coming to know a secret, the presupposition appears to the thinker, and she sees that it underlay her way of going about and understanding. Disclosure thus articulates not only the presupposition's content, but also its status as presupposition. This makes the presupposition as presupposition available for questioning.

Both Elaine Scarry and Crito, for example, had articulated their presuppositions prior to the critical moment. The presuppositions had not, however, been previously disclosed as worthy of question (i.e. their status as presuppositions had not been disclosed to the thinkers). Scarry tells of her life-long aversion to palm trees leading up to the moment on the balcony. When she was struck by the beauty of the palm tree she viewed there, Scarry became poignantly aware of this presupposition as a presupposition and thus as something worthy of question. She recalled the presupposition and found it wanting, given the beauty of the palm tree near her balcony. Similarly, Crito told Socrates that the majority

could inflict the worst of evils, namely, death.<sup>148</sup> He assumed without question that death is the worst of evils, but this assumption did not become available for questioning until Socrates directly countered it: “Would that the majority could inflict the greatest evils, for they would then be capable of the greatest good, and that would be fine, but now they cannot do either.”<sup>149</sup> As they continued in conversation, Socrates reminded Crito of the importance of self-examination. By inquiring into the relative value of body and soul, Crito became aware that the presupposition is dubious and eventually agreed that “the most important thing is not life, but the good life.”<sup>150</sup>

In the case of John Farmer, the reader does not know whether he had previously thematized his presupposition. Regardless of whether he had or had not already articulated it to himself, the presupposition is thematically stated in the form of a question that appears to him after he hears the flute’s music. The question, recall, asks, “Why do you stay here and live this mean moiling life, when a glorious existence is possible for you?”<sup>151</sup> A notable feature of this question is that it at once articulates and critically questions the presupposition. The coincidence of the formulation of the presupposition and the questioning of it seems contrary to what I have described as the necessary course of events: the presuppositions must *first* be disclosed in order to *then* be questioned. If we look at Farmer’s thought after he hears the flute and before the question forms itself, however, we find strong evidence that the presupposition is disclosed before the question arrives. If the presupposition was disclosed to Farmer prior to the question, his experience fits into the structure I have described.

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<sup>148</sup> Plato, *Crito*, 44d.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 48b. The good life corresponds to a life in accord with the goods of the soul in opposition to life as simply keeping the body alive.

<sup>151</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 213.

After Farmer heard the flute's notes, he became aware of the train of his thought. The question did not occur immediately after the notes. Rather, "still he thought of his work; but the burden of his thought was, that though this kept running in his head, and he found himself planning and contriving it against his will, yet it concerned him very little."<sup>152</sup> It was when the flute interrupted him in the midst of "recreating his intellectual man," that Farmer, thus, first began to reflect on his thoughts and to recognize what they were about.<sup>153</sup> His thoughts concerned work. He was also "burdened" by the fact that that he continued to think about work even though he did not will himself to consider this topic. Now aware of the course of his thoughts, Farmer noticed that his life was so oriented toward working that his work took up not only his days in the fields, but continued to consume him in his free time. Furthermore, thoughts of work were of little interest or importance to him. In his thoughts before the question arrived, he characterized his work as "no more than the scurf of his skin, which was constantly shuffled off."<sup>154</sup> Yet, at first, he could not simply "shuffle off" thoughts of his work.

These initial reflections imply that, in the moments before the question arrived, the presupposition had already been disclosed. In recognizing the burden of his work-focused lifestyle (which continued to burden him even during his recreational hours), he noticed that he was leading a mean and moiling life. He was so fixated on his work that it kept running through his mind even though he did not will it. In the midst of these musings, he was becoming aware of the fact that his life was centered around the presupposition that work was necessary and proper. Life could, however, be otherwise, if he could just allow the presupposition that oriented his activities and thoughts to be "shuffled off." It is, thus,

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.



evident that the presupposition was, indeed, disclosed in his reflections following the invitation of the flute. Through its disclosure, the presupposition became available for questioning.

By opening a presupposition for question, disclosure fundamentally alters a thinker's relation to it. Once articulated, Farmer saw the presupposition as something that can be considered and critically examined. Similarly, Scarry, Crito, and Farmer all began to question notions that they had previously taken simply to be true. Perhaps some of Socrates' fellow Athenians also underwent a moment of disclosure when, at the end of his trial, he enumerated the idea that death is not the worst of all evils. At the very least, the presupposition was disclosed to Socrates: he inquired into it and expressed it to others. The traditional notion of evil likewise became apparent to and questionable by Arendt through her observations and research on the Eichmann trial. Eichmann did not make sense as an evil-doer under the definition of evil as malicious. By noticing this, the presupposed traditional notion of evil became available to Arendt for question. Finally, in Heidegger, the *Da-sein* goes about as they-self becomes apparent to itself. It can then consider its "existent potentiality-of-being" (i.e. that it could take up other possibilities).<sup>155</sup>

The new availability for questioning that results from the disclosure of the presupposition constitutes the first type of destruction. The quality of the presupposition as presupposition, as something held as true without consideration, is destroyed. Even if the thinker abandons the critical moment before fully examining the presupposition, she sees it in a new way at the moment of disclosure. It is no longer unconsidered, but there, available to questioning. Its disclosure denotes the first moment of destruction. Following this moment of destruction the thinker might or might not further examine the presupposition.

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<sup>155</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 256.

If the thinker pushes the presupposition aside and completely forgets that it was ever disclosed, she might return to presupposing it. But at the moment of disclosure, the thinker's unconsidered relation to it fundamentally changes. Thus, even if the thinker notices the presupposition *qua* presupposition only for a short time, destruction takes place. If a thinker subsequently forgets that the presupposition is a presupposition, the disclosure simply has no long-lasting destructive effects.

In the context of the they-self, Heidegger describes the destruction of disclosure as a "collapse."<sup>156</sup> When the they-self is disclosed to itself as having taken up the ways of the they, as having presupposed the necessity of the they, "the *they* collapses."<sup>157</sup> By "collapse," however, Heidegger does not mean that *das Man* disappears as an operative feature of *Da-sein*'s world. Rather, when *Da-sein* recognizes that it has presupposed the necessity of the ways of the they, the necessity is neutralized and the unquestioned hold of the they negated. The they does not disappear, but it can influence *Da-sein*'s way of going about only if *Da-sein* allows this. Similarly, other presuppositions are not necessarily rendered ineffective when they are disclosed. A presupposition can, however, become ineffective if the second type of destruction takes place.

The second type of destruction becomes possible after a presupposition is disclosed. Once the presupposition is disclosed, the thinker can critically interrogate it and potentially defeat it in thought. Defeat consists in finding the presupposition unworthy of being held. A presupposition might be unworthy for a number of reasons. The thinker might, for example, judge it false, pragmatically limiting, or unnecessary. In the examples I have discussed so far, Crito, Socrates, Scarry, Farmer, and Arendt clearly defeat their

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<sup>156</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 252.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid. The German for this passage reads: "*sinkt das Man in sich zusammen*" (Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 19<sup>th</sup> ed. (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2006), 273).

presuppositions. Crito and Socrates defeat the notion that death is the worst evil; Scarry, that palm trees are always ugly; Farmer, that his lifestyle is necessary; Arendt, that evil is always and singularly malicious; and *Da-sein*, that going about as they is necessary.

The second type of destruction does not, however, always take place in the critical moment. A thinker might question a presupposition but still affirm it in the end. Even if a thinker concludes the critical moment by affirming the presupposition, she has nonetheless taken part in critical-reflective thinking. She has been invited by a prompt, accepted its invitation, and critically engaged a presupposition. In the next section, on conversation, I will show how Callicles, Socrates' main conversation partner in the *Gorgias*, held onto his presupposition even after critical-reflective thinking. Before considering this dialogue, however, I will discuss possible effects of defeating a presupposition in thought (i.e. found unworthy of being held as true or right).

Defeating a presupposition in thought can, but need not, result in noticeable changes in a thinker's practical way of going about. Because thought does not always translate into action, it is possible that new thoughts will not be enacted in practical life. This issue will, in part, motivate the discussion of the value of critical-reflective thinking in Chapter Two. For now, it is important to note that although in many of the examples discussed here, the defeat of a presupposition does have practical consequences in the thinker's life, it need not. The lack of practical transformation following critical-reflective thinking might be attributed to a thinker's forgetfulness, strong opposing habits, or simple failure to act on new discoveries. Both Farmer and Arendt defeat the presuppositions that were disclosed to them in the critical moment. Yet, only in Arendt's case does this defeat clearly have long-term effects in her practical life. This is evident in her intellectual work. This ambiguity does not, however, change the fact that both Arendt and Farmer took part in critical-reflective thinking.

Arendt decisively defeats the presupposition that evil is fundamentally malicious. She found this traditional notion of evil insufficient to describe the banal evil perpetrated by Eichmann. Furthermore, Arendt defeated the presupposition by abandoning it as an adequate notion of evil and elaborating an alternative notion of banal evil that informed her subsequent work. Arendt developed the latter notion by questioning the traditional notion of evil and observing Eichmann. Eichmann's testimony provided proof that evil is not always malicious and performed by people who desire to harm others. Banal evil is a type of evil that people perpetrate in their everyday lives, in part as a result of not thinking about the meaning and consequences of their activities. Sometimes banal evil is structurally present in the activities accepted by society or demanded by government authorities. The Nazi regime took advantage of long-standing German attitudes toward authority to systematically build evil into the workings of its society. To perpetrate this evil, citizens did not have to actively hate Jews. They merely had to obey the laws. The Nazis brought "criminality into the public realm" by demanding terrible acts of its functionaries.<sup>158</sup> This drastic change in the moral quality of German society seemed to take place "overnight" and to take hold of "a great majority of public figures in all walks of life."<sup>159</sup> Normal people perpetrated evil even though they did not desire to harm others. Arendt remained committed to her concept of banal evil in essays many years after the Eichmann trial.<sup>160</sup> Her continuing affirmation of the reality of banal evil attests to the long-term defeat in her life of the paradigm of traditional evil. Critical-reflective thinking, not only neutralized Arendt's relation to the presupposed notion of malicious evil, but the presupposition itself was destroyed.

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<sup>158</sup> Arendt, "Personal Responsibility," 24.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> See essays in *Responsibility and Judgment*, written between 1965 and 1975. Additionally, in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt discusses whether thinking is related to evil-doing of the banal type, which lies outside of the traditional notion of evil.

The effects of Arendt's long-term defeat are evidenced in her new formulation of evil (which was made possible by her examination and defeat of the traditional notion of evil) that maintains a presence in her work until the end of her life. In contrast, we cannot say whether defeating the presupposition had a long-term effect in Farmer's life. After the presupposition had been disclosed, Farmer thought to himself: "Those same stars twinkle over other fields than these."<sup>161</sup> The "fields" spoken of here are not only the physical fields in which Farmer worked each day, but also the fields of possibilities for his life. "These" fields delimited his familiar horizon of possibilities. He affirmed "these" fields by continuing to lead the same mean, moiling life. "These" fields, however, were not the only fields available to him. There also are "other fields" under the "same stars" that defined his world. He was not stuck in "these" fields but could also explore "other fields." John Farmer saw that there are other ways to live, other possibilities to be had, "other fields" that he could occupy.<sup>162</sup> The presupposition that his current way of life is the only way of life is untrue if other ways of life exist. This metaphor thus indicates that John Farmer defeated the presupposition that his mean, moiling way of living was necessary. Not only did his relation to the presupposition undergo destruction through his reflection upon it, but the truth of the presupposition was also destroyed.

The reader of *Walden* does not learn of Farmer's future. Thoreau only briefly relates Farmer's subsequent thoughts: "—But how to come out of this condition and actually migrate thither [i.e., to other fields]? All he could think of was to practise some new austerity, to let his mind descend into his body and redeem it, and treat himself with ever

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<sup>161</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 213.

<sup>162</sup> In fact, one of Thoreau's central tenets is that "there are as many ways [to live] as there can be drawn radii from one centre" (Thoreau, *Walden*, 11).

increasing respect.”<sup>163</sup> Farmer seemed to grasp the possibility of incarnating understandings of “other fields” into his life. By bringing his mind, or his thoughts, into his body and the way he lived, he could perhaps begin to lead his life in a new way. The reader never finds out, however, if Farmer abandons his presupposition and leads his life differently. In other words, it is unknown whether Farmer’s destruction of the presupposition in thought had long-term practical effects. Whether or not he subsequently changed his life has, however, no bearing on the facts that he engaged in critical-reflective thinking and that destruction took place in the critical moment. He was invited by a prompt and, in the critical moment, carried with the presupposition that his work-centric way of life was necessary.

#### *Critical-Reflective Thinking in Conversation*

In this chapter so far, I have focused on the phenomenon of critical-reflective thinking as something that takes place in individual people. Although thinking is often a solitary activity, it can also take place among people. It can be a collective activity, something people do together. People, in other words, are more than just sources that prompt individuals’ solitary critical-reflective thinking (as Eichmann was for Arendt). They can confer with one another and, in conversation, think together, as Plato’s dialogues attest. Conversation provides a context in which presuppositions can be effectively disclosed and considered collectively. Communal critical-reflective thinking can occur among people when they are physically present to one another and words are directly exchanged. People can also converse through writing and reading (e.g. writing a letter or engaging an author by questioning and seeking out responses in texts) or through conference calls and video chatting. Critical-reflective thinking can take place in any of these types of conversations. Presently, however, I will focus on in-person dialogues.

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<sup>163</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 213.

In her later writings, Arendt follows Plato in characterizing thinking as dialogue. Although Arendt's writings on thinking primarily focus on the dialogical character of the thinking that happens when an individual converses with herself, the thinking that takes place among people is also dialogical. Readers of her later works will recall that she defines thinking as "the two-in-one of the soundless dialogue" and describes this dialogue as taking place between "me and myself."<sup>164</sup> Socrates prefigures this definition of thinking when, in the *Theaetetus*, he suggests that thinking is "a talk which the soul has with itself about the objects under its consideration."<sup>165</sup> Both Plato and Arendt agree, however, that people can think together in dialogue or conversation. In conversations with other people, "if, as sometimes happens, we begin to talk in the form of dialogue about the very same things either one of us has been concerned about in solitude, then it is as if I now address another self."<sup>166</sup> Arendt's definition of thinking as solitary conversation is, likewise, extended to include people conversing with one another. These historical and textual references to thinking as dialogue motivate the task of examining how critical-reflective thinking might collectively take place.

In collective critical-reflective thinking, the same prompt-critical moment structure occurs as in solitary instances of the same phenomenon. The difference is that the various individuals involved in the conversation might be prompted at different moments and by different things. The interlocutors, however, critically question a single presupposition together. In Plato's dialogues, Socrates often seems to discover what his interlocutors

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<sup>164</sup> Arendt, *Thinking*, 193, 122.

<sup>165</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 189e. This definition also comes under consideration in the *Sophist* in connection with speech, perception, and belief.

<sup>166</sup> Arendt, "Some Questions," 98. There is a clear connection between Arendt's description of interpersonal conversation and Aristotle's notion of friendship, wherein the friend is a second self.

presuppose before the interlocutors do. By asking the interlocutor about the matter, he assists in the disclosure of the presupposition and the process of critical questioning.<sup>167</sup> If we believe Socrates when he pleads ignorance to true knowledge of the topics he examines with his conversation partners, the conversations might also be an occasion when he himself examines presuppositions (including presuppositions he might not personally hold). In other dialogues, however, interlocutors discover and question shared presuppositions together. In what follows, I will examine the occurrence of critical-reflective thinking in three philosophical conversations: two Platonic dialogues, *Crito* and *Gorgias*, and Heidegger's triadic *Country Path Conversation*.

In contrast to Socrates' monological, though public, examination of death in the *Apology*, critical-reflective thinking takes place among people in many Platonic dialogues. One example of dialogical critical-reflective thinking is in the *Crito*. Beyond valuing Socrates' bodily life, one of Crito's more selfish reasons for wanting to save Socrates is to preserve his own reputation. Though Socrates' death would deprive him of a friend, "the like of whom [he would] never find again," it would also sully his reputation as a friend, something Crito wishes to avoid.<sup>168</sup> Crito's reputation would be a discredited because, as he says to Socrates,

many people [...] will think that I could have saved you if I were willing to spend the money, but that I did not care to do so. Surely there can be no worse reputation than to be thought to value money more highly than one's friends, for the majority will not believe that you yourself were not willing to leave prison while we were eager for you to do so.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> When Socrates functions in this way, he practices the "midwifery" of which he speaks in the *Theaetetus*. As a midwife, Socrates assists his interlocutors in the birthing of ideas as well as the testing of them to "distinguish the true from the false offspring" (Plato, *Theaetetus*, 150b).

<sup>168</sup> Plato, *Crito*, 44b.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 44c.



To save his reputation as someone who does not value money more than his friends, Crito offers to bribe those who would make Socrates' escape from jail impossible. He also offers to hide Socrates in Thessaly among friends. Their dialogue provides Crito an opportunity to consider not only his presuppositions about the value of life, but also his reputation. Together, Socrates and Crito consider the power of the majority and its relation to Crito's reputation. Insofar as "the many are able to put us to death," the many have immense power.<sup>170</sup> Socrates, however, disputes the idea that the many can rightly appraise the value of Crito's friendship. If they cannot, Socrates argues, their opinion should not be heeded.

Crito's presupposition that his reputation, as judged by the majority, really matters is thereby disclosed and open to question. Socrates seems to recognize Crito's presupposition before Crito does, and he poses a question that discloses it to Crito. He asks: "Consider then, do you not think it a sound statement that one must not value all the opinions of men, but some and not others, nor the opinions of all men, but those of some and not others?"<sup>171</sup> By asking this question, Socrates asks whether all people's opinions are worthy of attention. He articulates (and, thereby, discloses) an idea that Crito had taken to be true and opens it to doubt. Crito and Socrates then begin to examine together in conversation the notion that reputation as judged by the many really matters. This phenomenon of one person recognizing another person's presupposition is not particularly rare. In conversations with others, we have all likely experienced occasions when our conversation partner discerned a presupposition that underlaid our views or activities. Sometimes we are not aware of our own presuppositions until someone else voices them to us. Although Thoreau does not begin a critical-reflective conversation with his tailor, he espies her presupposition about

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 48a.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 47a.

the dictates of the fashionable they. Regardless of whose presupposition it is, in collective critical-reflective thinking as in solitary thinking a presupposition is disclosed and examined.

After Socrates poses the above question, he and Crito agree that, by analogy to the trustworthiness of trainers who give advice in matters of physical training, only those who have knowledge in a certain area can properly judge it.<sup>172</sup> This applies to “actions just and unjust, shameful and beautiful, good and bad,” for example, the goodness of a friendship.<sup>173</sup> The majority of people do not have knowledge of what is just and unjust, shameful and beautiful, or good and bad. Thus, although a majority might judge Crito to be a poor friend when Socrates dies, its opinion should not be valued. Socrates and Crito claim only that “one who has knowledge of these things and before whom we feel fear and shame more than before all the others” should be trusted in such matters.<sup>174</sup> By heeding what these individuals would say, Crito comes to recognize that he had misguidedly prized both bodily life and his reputation. The defeat of these presuppositions has practical outcomes for Crito. When he abandons the presuppositions, he stops trying to convince Socrates to escape from jail and to flee his sentence. When he affirms that his own reputation, as well as Socrates’ bodily life, is not as important as he previously thought, he also gives up his goal of rescuing Socrates from death, this being the goal that had followed from the presupposition.

In the *Gorgias*, Socrates’ interlocutor, Callicles, has a different experience. Although Callicles is able to critically reflect on a presupposition that he and Socrates examine together, in the end, he is unable to give it up. He does not effect the second type of destruction during the course of the conversation. In the midst of a discussion between Polus and Socrates about the value of rhetoric, a bystander, the politician Callicles, breaks in.

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 47a-b.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 47c-d.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 27d.

Together with Polus, Socrates has just determined that rhetoric is a skill that is useful for escaping punishment when one has done something unjust. A person practices rhetoric when he makes speeches in court to support a claim to innocence, even though he is not really innocent. By contrast, rhetoric will not be needed if one has committed no injustice. Although Polus finds Socrates' contention strange, he agrees with Socrates. Callicles, however, finds their conclusion utterly wrongheaded. He believes that it is more shameful to suffer injustice than to do injustice. In his opinion, consequently, it is more important to be able to defend oneself in court than always to do what is just.<sup>175</sup> From Callicles' perspective, it is most repugnant not to be able to "save either himself or anyone else from the greatest dangers" of having his life or property threatened in court.<sup>176</sup> In Callicles' opinion, therefore, rhetoric is the most valuable skill.

The major presupposition that is disclosed and questioned in the *Gorgias* is that it is worse to suffer than to do injustice. Although this is not a presupposition Socrates holds, it was widely held among his fellow Athenians at the time—it was a collective presupposition.<sup>177</sup> Once this presupposition comes out into the open, Socrates and his conversation partners tarry with it. The presupposition is disclosed early in the dialogue, when Socrates and Polus are still the main interlocutors:

Polus: Surely the one who is put to death unjustly, at any rate, is pitiable and wretched, I suppose.

Socrates: Less than he who kills, Polus, and less than he who is justly put to death.

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<sup>175</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, trans. Donald J. Zeyl, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 482d-e.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 486c.

<sup>177</sup> Those present during the historical occasion of the conversation might have begun to think, though they do not speak up in the dialogue. This conversation speaks not only to the people who might have been physically present during conversation, but also to readers many years removed. In this way, people who are not main characters of the dialogue can also take up the conversation and enter critical-reflective thinking themselves.

Polus: How is this, Socrates?

Socrates: In this way, that doing injustice happens to be the greatest of evils.

Polus: Can it be that this is the greatest? Isn't suffering injustice greater?<sup>178</sup>

This disagreement between Polus and Socrates articulates a presupposition (that suffering injustice is worse than doing injustice), into which they begin to inquire. In the midst of their discussion, Callicles becomes agitated and is prompted to speak up. He turns to another bystander, Chaerephon, and asks, "is Socrates in earnest about this or is he joking?"<sup>179</sup> Callicles finds Socrates' conclusion, that doing injustice is the greatest of evils, so strange that he asks Socrates,

For if you *are* in earnest, and these things you're saying are really true, won't this human life of ours be turned upside down and won't everything we do evidently be the opposite of what we should do?<sup>180</sup>

The idea that doing injustice is worse than suffering injustice is completely contrary to the normal attitudes and practices of the Athenians. Socrates' claim, if true, would turn their world upside down. By championing the common collective presupposition, Callicles' view is representative of what most normal Athenians of the time might have taken to be true.

In the lengthy conversation that ensues, Socrates supports the idea that doing injustice is far worse than having justice done to oneself because doing injustice harms one's own soul, whereas suffering injustice harms only the body. If one is unjustly convicted in court and sentenced to a fine or even death, the body is punished.<sup>181</sup> Such unjust punishment, however, does not affect the convicted's soul. For Socrates, the health of the soul is radically more important than that of the body. Rhetoric, like all other life-saving

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<sup>178</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 469b.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 481b.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 481c.

<sup>181</sup> The health of the body includes not only one's physical body, but also one's material property.

techniques (e.g. piloting a boat, swimming, medicine), can save only the body.<sup>182</sup> It cannot help one be just and pursue the good, which are the conditions for happiness.<sup>183</sup> Such pursuits cannot occur without a prior understanding of the good itself, which, according to Socrates, can be found only by doing philosophy.

Through his exchange with Callicles, Socrates is convinced that he has defeated the presupposition that having injustice done to one is worse than doing injustice. Callicles, on the other hand, is not swayed by Socrates' argument. Some of Callicles's statements even cast doubt on whether he actually thinks through the issue with Socrates. Although he enthusiastically begins the conversation, Callicles soon becomes frustrated. Because Socrates continually questions Callicles' statements and shows them to be self-contradictory, Callicles complains that Socrates is "talking nonsense," "being ironic," and shamefully "catch[ing] [his, Callicles'] words" in order to make "hay out of [his] tripping on a phrase."<sup>184</sup> Callicles takes Socrates to be so intent on merely winning their argument that Socrates will attempt to set ablaze any small turn of phrase to show that Callicles is mistaken. Eventually, Callicles appears to give up the attempt to say what he honestly believes so as to avoid being shown up as inconsistent.<sup>185</sup> He says, for example, "I won't dissent. I'm going along with you, both to expedite your argument and to gratify Gorgias here," who has urged Callicles to continue the conversation for the sake of the common elucidation of the spectators.<sup>186</sup> Moreover,

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<sup>182</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 511-512.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 508b. Socrates' view that happiness [*eudiamonia*] is conditioned *only* by the pursuit of justice and the good has been challenged (for example, Julia Annas—see Julia Annas, *Platonic Ethics Old and New*, (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999)). Along an Aristotelian line of thought (see Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* I.9) conventional goods, like family, friends, and material necessities, and good fortune also condition one's happiness.

<sup>184</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 489b-c.

<sup>185</sup> *Ibid.*, 495a.

<sup>186</sup> *Ibid.*, 501c.

Callicles admits to Socrates that he “couldn’t care less about anything” Socrates says.<sup>187</sup> If Callicles does not take part in the conversation as an earnest interlocutor who listens to and engages his conversation partner, is he really critically and reflectively thinking together with Socrates? The evidence of Callicles ambivalence and disdain for the conversation shows that for much of the conversation he may not have been in critical-reflective thinking.

Yet, there is one moment in the middle of the conversation when Callicles indicates that Socrates has successfully brought the presupposition into question. At 511c, Socrates makes a long speech in support of his claim that because doing injustice is harmful to the soul, it is far worse than having injustice done to oneself. At the end of the speech, Callicles’ response shows that Socrates succeeded in articulating the presupposition and opening it to question. He says, “I don’t know, Socrates—in a way you seem to me to be right, but the thing that happens to most people has happened to me: I’m not really persuaded by you.”<sup>188</sup> Given the continual skirmishes between Callicles and Socrates up to this point and the fact that Callicles has all but abandoned the conversation, this statement is surprising. Callicles was apparently able to transcend their differences and follow Socrates’ train of thought. He was able to see the presupposition in a critical light and to understand that it might not hold true. It is only by considering the presupposition critically, if only for a moment, that is he able to say that Socrates seems to be right.

Although Callicles does not give up the presupposition, he entertains the possibility that it might not be true. Like many others who conversed with Socrates, Callicles’ position does not shift; he ultimately remains unpersuaded of Socrates’ position. The fact that he does not abandon the presupposition, however, does not mean that he did not critically and

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<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 505c.

<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 513c.

reflectively think despite himself. Callicles was prompted to essay thought by Socrates' and Polus' initial conversation. In the subsequent conversation, he was able to consider that his presupposition might not be true, if only for a moment. When Callicles says that Socrates, in a way, seems to be right, he demonstrates that he has encountered the collective presupposition as something open to scrutiny. His relationship to it changed, at least briefly. Others present for the conversation (both historical persons or readers) who think along with it might also find that their relation to the presupposition has changed.

There are many possible reasons that Callicles' engagement with the presupposition does not result in defeat. Callicles might be loath to be bested in argument or to agree with Socrates, whose talk he calls "nonsense." Perhaps his lack of sincere involvement in the conversation prevents him from agreeing with Socrates and requires that he further examine the presupposition on his own if he is to reject it. Socrates, however, attributes Callicles' defense to his love of the people: "It's your love for the people, Callicles, existing in your soul, that stands against me."<sup>189</sup> As a budding politician, Callicles loves the people of Athens and desires to be respected and loved by them. Callicles cannot "contradict [his] beloved."<sup>190</sup> Instead, he must say "what [the people] wants to hear."<sup>191</sup> Socrates' thesis on the baseness of doing evil, however, opposes what people usually do and think. In fact, Callicles contends, normal life would be turned upside down if Socrates is right. So, Callicles must defend the position of the many, namely, that it is worse to be harmed than to do injustice. He continues, accordingly, to uphold the presupposition although it has been brought into question. This example from the *Gorgias* shows that an examined presupposition need not be abandoned. Thinkers might have various reasons for retaining a presupposition even

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<sup>189</sup> Ibid.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid., 481d.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid., 481e.

after having examined it in critical-reflective thinking. Even so, disclosure of the presupposition effects the first type of destruction, which consists in questioning a presupposition that had been previously taken to be true without consideration. As I will discuss in Chapter Two, even the first type of destruction has consequences for a thinker's understanding. Simply by becoming aware of her presupposition, a thinker gains perspective and nuance that was not previously present.

To look at critical-reflective thinking in conversation from one further perspective, I turn to one of Heidegger's *Country Path Conversations*, "Αγχιβασίη: A Triadic Conversation on a Country Path between a Scientist, A Scholar, and a Guide." The topic of this dialogue, written between 1944 and 1945, is thinking. Along the way, the interlocutors encounter a presupposition that they collectively hold. The presupposition concerns the nature of conversations: the interlocutors presuppose the necessity of staying on track and not allowing diversions. For the Scientist and the Scholar, this means investigating thinking, the main topic of their conversation, to the exclusion of all other topics. They believe that only by sticking to the topic will they gain new, essential knowledge of thinking. This presupposition first appears as a presupposition to the Guide, who puts it into words for the others. It subsequently comes under critical questioning. The interlocutors eventually defeat the presupposition in that, instead of continuing to avoid digressions, they allow themselves to explore ideas that do not appear to be relevant to the main topic.

The conversation takes place on a country path along which the interlocutors walk as they talk. Early in the dialogue, the Scientist and the Scholar adamantly attempt to stick to the topic that had been selected at the outset. They believe that, by choosing the topic in advance and sticking to it, they will best be able to uncover the nature of thinking. The Scientist, unsurprisingly, wishes to examine the matter from the perspective of the natural



sciences; at the beginning, consequently, he attempts to focus on cognition. He also proposes that the best way to find out about thinking is through the methods of modern physics. The Scholar, by contrast, treats the topic of thinking historically. When the interlocutors begin discussing Kant's notions of thinking, cognition, and intuition, the Scholar refers to Leibniz in order to connect historical viewpoints. Both the Scientist and the Scholar attempt to keep the conversation centered on the topic of thinking by using their favored methods of investigation. The Guide is less attached to sticking to the topic of thinking, though he too is not aware of the presupposition at the beginning of the dialogue. He primarily makes enigmatic comments that push the Scientist and Scholar to consider the topic in new ways and, eventually, to question the presupposition.

Though each of the interlocutors is prompted at different points in the conversation, it is clear that each interlocutor undergoes an interruption. The fact that an interruption takes place implies that they have been prompted. Within the context of conversation, each interlocutor departs from his usual affairs and way of being. The Scientist says, "In our conversations it always seems to me as if [one's] standing and name—indeed, even one's own accustomed daily being [*tägliche Wesen*]<sup>192</sup>—were to vanish." The Scholar and the Guide agree with the Scientist's assessment by questioning why this occurs in their conversations.<sup>193</sup> Apparently, the interlocutors have undergone interruptions where they depart from their daily ways of being during their conversations before; this is a perennial phenomenon. This departure occurs in that their "standings," "names," and "ways of daily being" seem to

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<sup>192</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Αγχιβασίη: A Triadic Conversation on a Country Path between a Scientist, a Scholar, and a Guide," in *Country Path Conversations*, trans. Bret Davis (Bloomington: Indiana, 2010), 54.

<sup>193</sup> The interlocutors agree that it has something to do with how new horizons open up in their conversations. This conclusion leads into a discussion about the nature of horizons and the relation between horizons and willing.

vanish. These aspects of their lives are representative of their usual, likely unreflective, ways of going about. By experiencing an interruption of their usual activities, the interlocutors are able to enter the critical moment wherein their shared presupposition is disclosed and questioned. The interlocutors begin to think together. Their collective presupposition (that they must discuss solely the topic under consideration if they are to succeed in discovering something new and essential about it) comes to be disclosed when it obstructs the discussion's progress.

The presupposition becomes problematic very early in the dialogue when the conversation veers away from the topic of thinking. When the Scientist proposes that modern physics provides the best method for discerning the nature of thinking, the Guide poses the hermeneutical question of what such a method presumes. The Guide believes that modern physics is bound up with technology. By approaching the topic of thinking from the perspective of physics, any results would, thus, inevitably be colored by technology. The Scholar, meanwhile, notes that if they use the methods of science to find out about thinking, they must examine the essence of theoretical physics. The Scholar is anxious, however, about such an inquiry. He fears that it would lead to mere speculation and that the interlocutors "will fall into vacuity with it."<sup>194</sup> The Guide responds to this comment by posing a general question about the relationship between anxiety and speculation. The orientation of the conversation toward its goal of finding out about thinking weakens through the twists and turns of these exchanges. The Scientist admits that he is beginning to feel lost, and the Guide issues one of his enigmatic remarks, "The human only ever loses that which he does not yet properly *have*."<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Heidegger, "A Triadic Conversation," 5.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid., 6.

This remark frustrates the attempts of the Scientist and the Scholar to stay on topic. They consider it completely unrelated to the matter at hand. Indeed, the reader of this dialogue might have sympathy with the Scholar, who attempts to bring the conversation back on track. A short exchange directly following the Guide's enigmatic remark is the initial moment when the narrow topical focus of the conversation comes into view:

Scholar: Now I too must confess that everything escapes me when I try to think what you just said. So I think it would be beneficial for me to bring our conversation back again to its path.

Guide: I am happy to entrust myself to your guidance, so long as you take into account that my interspersed remarks will sometimes slow down the course of the conversation.

Scientist: Such delays don't harm anything, as long as they don't cause us to get off track.<sup>196</sup>

The Scholar and the Scientist presuppose that the success of their discussion rests on their ability to stay on track and not to digress into topics that are not clearly related to thinking. The Guide, though more prone to "getting off track," does not initially dispute this idea. Not only is it ironic that he submits to the guidance of his conversation partners, who are not, strictly, guides.<sup>197</sup> His statement also shows that he understands the effects of his remarks in a different way than the Scientist and Scholar. Rather than turning the discussion away from its course, he sees his contributions as merely slowing its progress. For him, discussing topics that might not be clearly relevant constitutes another way of finding out about thinking. Other topics that come up in a conversation about thinking are bound to be related to it in some way. Although the presupposed importance of keeping the conversation on track is thematized and becomes problematic at this point in the dialogue, it is not yet disclosed as a presupposition. Consequently, it does not yet come under question.

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<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> In German, the Guide is called the "*Weiser*." Bret Davis, in his translation of the *Country Path Conversations*, has rendered this German word as "Guide," though it has the double meaning of "sage" and "one that shows the way."

Instead, further departures from the topic of thinking occur again and again throughout the dialogue.<sup>198</sup> The Scientist and Scholar continually respond by trying to bring the discussion explicitly back to the topic of thinking. Eventually, however, it becomes apparent that their attempts are in vain. Not only do they fail to keep the conversation on track but, through these attempts, they fail to gain essential knowledge of thinking.

At one point, one of the Guide's remarks shifts the topic of the discussion from thinking to willing. This shift provides the occasion for the disclosure and critical questioning of the presupposition. This moment occurs when, the Scientist and the Scholar, having been continually thwarted and puzzled by the Guide's remarks, ask the Guide to say exactly what he wants to gain—or “wills”—in the conversation. At this point, the Guide again gives an enigmatic remark. This remark, however, serves to shift the topic of the conversation. The Guide says, “Since you so directly put me on the spot to say something, I must also directly, and therefore insufficiently, reply. What I really will [*will*] in our meditation on thinking is non-willing [*Nicht-Wollen*].”<sup>199</sup> The meaning of this reply is not immediately clear to the interlocutors, not even to the Guide himself.<sup>200</sup> And despite their previous attempts to stay on topic, the appearance of the related topic (i.e. willing) grabs the Scholar's and Scientist's attention, and they begin to inquire into it.<sup>201</sup> In this, they appear to unreflectively abandon their presupposition. At this point, however, the Guide discloses the presupposition and instigates the critical moment.

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<sup>198</sup> See also Heidegger, “A Triadic Conversation,” 16, 21, 30, 32.

<sup>199</sup> Heidegger, “A Triadic Conversation,” 33. The German words, “*will*” and “*Wollen*” might have also been rendered as “want” and “wanting,” respectively.

<sup>200</sup> The Guide thinks this comment has been elicited from him. He cannot immediately say what it means, and the interlocutors proceed to examine the meaning of his statement together.

<sup>201</sup> Heidegger, “A Triadic Conversation,” 33.

The Guide notes the risk of digressions and the fact that his conversation partners have, up to this point, blocked them. In beginning to investigate willing, he says to the Scientist and the Scholar, “You are thereby running the risk of shifting our conversation on thinking to the topic of willing, while it is you who are continually and at times violently struggling to keep the conversation on its topic. The topic, however, is thinking and not willing.”<sup>202</sup> This statement discloses the underlying and unquestioned method that the Scientist and Scholar have pursued throughout the conversation. They have presupposed the importance of discussing thinking to the exclusion of all else.

Although willing is not the same as thinking, all three interlocutors agree that investigating it might lead them to new findings about thinking. The Scientist and the Scholar now leave the path of the conversation they had set out before. This fact, coupled with the Guide’s comment about non-willing, brings up the question of whether a conversation can reach essential knowledge of its object if it willfully limits itself to discussing this object alone. The Guide states the central issue: “Yet perhaps one could doubt whether a conversation is still a conversation at all if it wills something.”<sup>203</sup> Instead of willing something (i.e. willing the conversation to stay on track), the interlocutors discuss that if something essential is to come to light through their discussion, an event that they cannot plan in advance must occur, namely, the event of something coming to language (“in a proper conversation an event takes place wherein something comes to language”).<sup>204</sup> The Scientist accepts this notion, and it moves him to explicitly reject his prior commitment to staying on track. He says, “Then in fact my question, what *we* will in the conversation, would

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>204</sup> Ibid., 37.

be contrary to the essence of the conversation, since at best *it* wills something with *us*.<sup>205</sup> He sees that by forcing the conversation along a narrow path confined to the topic at hand, the conversation is not allowed to move on its own. The interlocutors do not think that the conversation actually has agency of its own. Rather, this statement expresses a shift in their understanding of how conversations work. As a result, they abandon their attempt to focus on the narrow, pre-defined topic chosen in advance, and reorient themselves to allow the investigation of other topics that come up along the way.<sup>206</sup> This shift signals an abandonment of their presupposition. By allowing the discussion of topics that do not immediately appear relevant to finding out about thinking, they leave behind the premise that had guided the direction of their conversation up until then and enact the implications of defeating it.

The dialogues presented here illustrate how conversation can provide a prime site for critical-reflective thinking. Not only can each person involved in a dialogue be the source of a prompt for the others. Conversation partners can also, together, disclose communal presuppositions and question them. The critical-reflective thinking in these conversations did not always result in defeat of a presupposition. Calicles did not abandon his presupposition in the course of his conversation with Socrates, although Crito and the three interlocutors in the *Country Path Conversation* did abandon theirs. Each of the interlocutors,

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<sup>205</sup> Ibid.

<sup>206</sup> In his 1955 “Memorial Address,” Heidegger reinforces the idea that it is important to consider ideas that do not initially seem to be related to topics of interest. When discussing meditative thinking, a type of thinking that is uncommon in the contemporary world, he says, “...meditative thinking demands of us not to cling one-sidedly to a single idea, nor to run down a one-track course of ideas. Meditative thinking demands of us that we engage ourselves with what at first sight does not go together at all.” (Martin Heidegger, “Memorial Address,” in *Discourse on Thinking*, trans. John M. Anderson and E. Hans Freund (New York: Harper, 1966), 53).

however, partook of critical-reflective thinking in being prompted, encountering a presupposition, and critically questioning it.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Arendt discusses one final sense in which thinking is destructive. In critical-reflective thinking, thinkers recognize and question presuppositions. Because people hold a multitude of presuppositions many of which they will never discover, thinking can always take place anew. Even if a thinker believes that she has reached a conclusion and has new, true knowledge, this too can be questioned. Arendt refers to Kant when discussing the possibility of never-ending thinking. She writes that,

In the privacy of his posthumously published notes, Kant wrote: “I do not approve of the rule that if the use of pure reason has proved something, the result should no longer be subject to doubt, as though it were a solid axiom”; and “I do not share the opinion... that one should not doubt once one has convinced oneself of something [...]” From which it follows that the business of thinking is like Penelope’s web; it undoes every morning what it has finished the night before.<sup>207</sup>

Thinking is “self-destructive.”<sup>208</sup> Whatever has been thought is susceptible to further examination and possible destruction. Critical-reflective thinking can happen again and again *ad infinitum*. And no matter how often it takes place or how transformative it is, humans continue to hold things as true, presuppositions continue to be maintained. The work of thinking is never finished and can never be completed.

This sort of infinitude is one of the two main issues about the value of critical-reflective thinking that is raised in this chapter. The second issue is that critical-reflective thinking need not be accompanied by practical change in a thinker’s life. Although something fundamental changes for the thinker when a presupposition is disclosed and

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<sup>207</sup> Arendt, *Thinking*, 88.

<sup>208</sup> Ibid.

defeated, these changes do not always translate into action and may even be forgotten or thwarted by other, opposing habits. Consequently, it is difficult to justify the value of critical-reflective thinking on the basis of its results. Arendt, too, motivates this concern too when she asks, “How can anything relevant for the world we live in arise out of so resultless an enterprise [as thinking]?”<sup>209</sup> Though critical-reflective thinking is not completely resultless, Arendt’s question points out that thinking is sometimes quite remote from practical life and action.

The incompleteness and “resultlessness” of critical-reflective thinking should not dissuade us from taking it up when we are invited to do so. Even if it never ends and does not necessarily result in practical change, critical-reflective thinking is valuable. By recognizing presuppositions, people recognize themselves and can, thereby, become more aware of how they lead their lives. Critical-reflective thinking, in other words, encourages deeper, richer understanding and opens new possibilities for life. The value of critical-reflective thinking is the central topic of the next chapter.

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<sup>209</sup> Arendt, “Thinking and Moral Considerations,” 167.



CHAPTER TWO:  
THE VALUE OF CRITICAL-REFLECTIVE THINKING

[W]hen one realizes that understanding is an adventure, one realizes that it affords unique opportunities as well. It is capable of contributing in a special way to the broadening of our human experiences, our self-knowledge, and our horizon, for everything that understanding mediates is mediated through ourselves.<sup>210</sup>

- Hans-Georg Gadamer

This passage from Hans-Georg Gadamer’s “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy” points toward reasons why an activity like critical-reflective thinking is valuable. Like critical-reflective thinking, Gadamerian hermeneutical experience (and the generation of new understanding therein) is a task that requires the examination of notions one has unreflectively taken to be true. It is also a task that, though completed in each instance, is never, as a whole, finished. Because they are never completely finished, both hermeneutical understanding and critical-reflective thinking offer the possibility of a life-long “adventure” wherein participants progress in such a way as to deepen experience, gain self-knowledge, and expand their horizons. These contributions to their understanding help to mediate the world in new ways by allowing people see in new ways. In this chapter, I further clarify the destructive results of critical-reflective thinking to show how critically tarrying with presuppositions positively generates new understandings that contribute to how people see and go about the world. Critical-reflective thinking is valuable in that it facilitates the growth and development of understanding and, thereby, liberates thinkers to new possibilities.

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<sup>210</sup> Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” in *The Gadamer Reader*, trans. and ed. Richard E. Palmer (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2007), 244.

Although Gadamer has not been a main figure in this dissertation so far, as a student of Heidegger and peer of Arendt his thought, like theirs, engages phenomenology and discusses some of the same topics. His writings have two distinct advantages for an analysis of value over those of the other primary authors who have contributed to the discussion so far. First, Gadamer thematically considers and evaluates an activity akin to critical-reflective thinking, whereas Heidegger, Thoreau, and Plato simply provide anecdotes and examples that, though poignant, describe it only indirectly. Though Arendt thematically considers thinking, I find one of her primary reasons for valuing it to be highly problematic. Arendt poses the question of whether thinking hinders evil-doing and ventures an affirmative answer.<sup>211</sup> Even in her final work, *The Life of the Mind*, however, tension between thought and action remains. She writes, “The decision the will arrives at can never be derived from the mechanics of desire or the deliberations of the intellect that may precede it.”<sup>212</sup> Thinking does not determine action. As a result, even if one understands the wrongfulness of some action, one still may perform it and continue to live with oneself.<sup>213</sup> Second, Gadamer treats thinking as valuable in a more straightforward manner than Heidegger, Thoreau, and Plato. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger, for example, explicitly denies that his project is involved with ethics and questions concerning value. He takes himself instead to be engaged in a project (i.e. awakening the question of Being) that he sees as a prerequisite to understanding “the fundamental structures of *Da-sein*.”<sup>214</sup> The way that Plato, moreover, takes up the value of

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<sup>211</sup> Thinking makes one more self-aware in such a way as to make it unbearable to live with oneself if one has committed certain acts (e.g. murder) (see Arendt, “Some Questions,” 97).

<sup>212</sup> Arendt, *Thinking*, 213.

<sup>213</sup> See Aristotle’s discussion of the weak-willed person in *Nicomachean Ethics*. Perhaps this topic would have received more attention in *Judgment*, the unfinished volume of *The Life of the Mind*.

<sup>214</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 14. Cf. Heidegger’s later discussion of ethics in his 1946 *Letter on Humanism*.

thinking in the Socratic dialogues requires more metaphysical underpinnings than I can do justice to here. The statement that thinking is good for the soul, for example, would require an in depth examination of the soul, the good, and their relation to each other. Thoreau, finally, might come closest to describing the value of reflection with commonsensical and practical clarity. Through his anecdotes in *Walden*, he shows the fulfillment people can achieve by gaining reflective understanding of themselves, Nature (i.e. their environment as well as the workings of the world around them), and what they can get out of life by following their own directives (rather than those set forth by the status quo). Yet, Gadamer's confrontation with an activity that has specific similarities to critical-reflective thinking makes his discussion of value more directly relevant than Thoreau's. Gadamer offers a general account of the value of hermeneutic experience and understanding. As in the passage with which this chapter begins, he states that gaining understanding (through hermeneutic experience) broadens not only one's horizon of understanding, but also deepens one's experience and self-knowledge.

Here I will follow out, in the context of critical-reflective thinking, Gadamer's central claim that the adventure of understanding provides transformative horizontal expansion. The destruction of presuppositions, though it is valuable on its own in that it can disabuse people of notions that are false or problematic, is only one aspect of what takes place in critical-reflective thinking. In this activity, new understanding is also generated, and this new understanding reshapes a person's perspective. As described in Chapter One, presuppositions undergird how people see and go about life. In Gadamerian language: prejudices (his term for presuppositions) partly constitute a person's underlying understanding, and this underlying understanding mediates and frames how people see and go about. This mediating understanding also partly constitutes a person's horizon. By

recognizing a presupposition, i.e. a constitutive aspect of her underlying understanding (or horizon), a person gains reflective understanding of it, and this understanding automatically alters the shape of her horizon. Both the content and practical efficacy of the person's horizon change, and this new horizon mediates her world differently than before.

Because there are relevant similarities between hermeneutic experience and critical-reflective thinking, Gadamer's reasons in support of the value of hermeneutic experience (i.e. the generation of new understanding that induces horizontal expansion and gains in perspective) also hold for critical-reflective thinking. Applying Gadamer's account to critical-reflective thinking helps show how critical-reflective thinking can make a difference in a person's perspective, allowing her to more deeply relate to herself and others, the world, and experiences. By approaching critical-reflective thinking in this way, I aim to show that it is transformative and that this transformation is often valuable. Because, however, people's experiences of thinking vary insofar as they consider different presuppositions and their considerations have meaning specific to them, the particular consequences of transformation will be distinct in each case. This means that critical-reflective thinking could have negative effects in some cases, and the negative effects may even devalue it in those cases. These possibilities will be considered below. Two positive transformative consequences, however, are implied by the structure of the activity itself and, thus, usually obtain. First, thinkers grow in understanding and, second, they become liberated to new possibilities for life and thought. These new possibilities not only reiterate that thinkers have reached a greater depth of understanding, but also enable thinkers to act more freely and intentionally, on the basis of reflective considerations.

By conceptualizing the effects of critical-reflective thinking through a discussion of horizons, we can discover more precisely how destroying presuppositions helps thinkers

grow and become liberated to new possibilities. This will build the foundation for a clearer assessment of the value of this thinking. Along the way, I will also bring up possible objections to the value of critical-reflective thinking by considering risks involved in it as well as issues related to its infinitude. In particular, the specific significance of destruction will, as mentioned, vary by thinker, so while for some it may feel empowering, for others it might result in perceived limitations. The infinitude of critical-reflective thinking, its essential incompleteness, might also cause doubts about both what progress in it means and whether thinkers can achieve comfort in the face of understanding that is never final or complete.

#### GADAMER, EMERSON, HORIZONS, & CRITICAL-REFLECTIVE THINKING

The concept of horizon is central in elaborating Gadamer's view. In order to make sense of changes in thinkers' perspectives, I refer to the conglomeration of assorted understanding that every person has. Understanding is composed of presuppositions, beliefs, knowledge, and experiences that, though not always in the foreground of one's mind, undergird one's thoughts and actions. In this way, a person's understanding defines her "horizon" (Gadamer calls it the "horizon of understanding"). Though horizons are described in greater depth throughout this chapter, it is important, from the beginning, to clarify the relationship between understanding, horizons, and presuppositions. Insofar as presuppositions partly constitute understanding, and understanding delimits horizon, one's presuppositions, serve to delimit one's horizon. So, when a thinker considers presuppositions that operate in her understanding, her horizon undergoes change.

Clarifying the meaning of "horizon," Seyla Benhabib writes,

The term *horizon* in phenomenology suggests the ever-present but never quite fully transparent presuppositions, contexts, and referential networks that we must always take for granted when we are in the world [...]; at any point in

time, it is only some aspect of it, some part on which we focus our attention, and this then becomes present to us and reveals itself to us.<sup>215</sup>

This statement thematically connects presuppositions to horizons. Since presuppositions partly delimit horizons, a discussion of horizons is essential to considering the effects of critical-reflective thinking. According to Benhabib, “One of Arendt’s fundamental contributions [...] is the thesis that the human space of appearances is constituted by” just such a horizon, a “web” of “invisible, gossamerlike ties, networks, and contexts of human relationships.”<sup>216</sup> Insofar as every person “must always take [some presuppositions, contexts, and referential networks for granted] when... in the world,” Arendt treats the horizon as a universal human phenomenon; every person has a horizon. By virtue of people’s common humanity, moreover, their horizons might have fundamental similarities. However, their particular horizons are not likely to be identical since horizons are partly constituted by presuppositions and individuals can hold different presuppositions.

Arendt’s discussion of horizons in *The Human Condition* is, however, brief, whereas Gadamer considers the topic more fully. Curiously, another figure related to this dissertation by his association with Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, too, describes a dynamic of horizontal alteration in his essay, “Circles” that is similar to Gadamer’s account. For Gadamer and Emerson, every person has a horizon that demarcates her “realm of vision” (or perspective), defines how she sees, and places different things within her view in relation to each other. Both authors use the metaphor of vision to describe how understanding

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<sup>215</sup> Seyla Benhabib, *The Reluctant Modernism of Hannah Arendt* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996), 112.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid., 112. Benhabib is here referring specifically to Arendt’s discussion in *The Human Condition* in section V. “Action,” entitled, “The Web of Relationship and The Enacted Stories.” It is also worth noting that for Heidegger, worldliness, as the way things are in the world, is similarly constituted by “contexts” and “referential networks” that usually remain hidden, while they also provide a basis for existentiell human existence (see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, Part One: Division One: Chapter III).

mediates experience and possibility. Encounters with and dissolutions of constitutive aspects of one's horizon (such as presuppositions) redefine one's perspective. In turn, a changed perspective allows a person to gain access to new ways of seeing and going about. Passages in Emerson's "Circles" and Gadamer's *Truth and Method* show how the destruction of presuppositions effects a broader or more developed perspective, how this development can shape a person's views, and how these changes liberate thinkers to new possibilities.

Before illustrating the dynamic of horizontal expansion and its effects, the relevance of Gadamer and Emerson for a discussion of the destruction of presuppositions must be more fully established. In the following sections, I will consider each author in turn in order to show the similarities between their views and mine. By exploring how our views converge, I also illustrate the contributions that a horizontal model makes to valuing critical-reflective thinking. After discussing the contributions of each author to the project of evaluating critical-reflective thinking, I also consider an important objection, namely that horizontal expansion is not possible.

#### *Heidegger and Gadamer*

Heidegger deeply influenced Gadamer, who was one of his doctoral students. In fact, Gadamer's magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, could be interpreted as a Hegelian extrapolation of Heidegger's thoughts in §31 and §32 of *Being and Time*. Gadamer's description of "prejudices"—his word for "presuppositions," which he also describes as "pre-judgments," "fore-meanings," and "fore-understanding"<sup>217</sup>—is rooted in Heidegger's notion of "fore-having." In *Being and Time*, Heidegger offers a description of understanding that sheds light on how presuppositions are effective for *Da-sein*. For Heidegger, understanding discloses the world and the beings in it through an always already given

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<sup>217</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxx, 280-282.

totality of relevance: “The totality of relevance reveals itself as the categorical whole of a *possibility* of the connection of things at hand.”<sup>218</sup> The fact that all beings in the world are possibly connected to each other via the totality of relevance does not yet provide the specific details about how they are connected. Though the totality of relevance may provide a set of possible ways in which things can be connected, it does not, in other words, dictate the specific ways in which *Da-sein* will interpret them. Human *Da-sein* interprets the beings and their connectedness to each other through its understanding. Humans always already have ways of understanding, perspectives, and conceptual frameworks that allow them to project meaning onto the totality of relevance.<sup>219</sup> This understanding reveals things as such and such and in specific relations to one another. Each person, for the most part, operates on the basis of her understanding’s interpretation which gives things as there in such and such a way.

If the given understanding allows a person to interpret what and how things are, interpretation is “never a presuppositionless grasping.”<sup>220</sup> Rather, as Heidegger puts it, “When the particular concretion of the interpretation [...] likes to appeal to what “is there,” what is initially “there” is nothing else than the self-evident, undisputed prejudice of the interpreter.”<sup>221</sup> By way of interpretation, humans initially comprehend things in the world based the framework provided by their understanding.<sup>222</sup> Human *Da-sein* always interacts with things based on an understanding that illuminates things in particular ways and gives

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<sup>218</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 135-136.

<sup>219</sup> These correspond to fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception as described in *Being and Time*. Humans’ initial ways of understanding originate in the social and historical contexts into which they are thrown. These ways of understanding, which constitute the fore-structure of interpretation, are always already given to humans (see Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 33).

<sup>220</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 141.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.



them meanings and significance. Since interpretative understanding is always already at work before one encounters something in the world, Heidegger writes that it is grounded in “fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception.”<sup>223</sup> In each case, *before* a human *Da-sein* encounters another being, it *has* a way of interpretively understanding it. Fore-having is the background framework, or totality, of possible intelligibility that people bring along with them in their encounters and experiences. The ability to access the world and interact with others is only possible by virtue of fore-having. Indeed, without a pre-reflective way of understanding, things, people, and one’s environment could not be meaningful or, perhaps, even comprehensible.

Fore-having and presupposing have striking similarities. Fore-having, as the understanding a person always brings along and by way of which she interprets things, is broader and more fundamental than any particular presupposition. Nonetheless, fore-having can be described as an encompassing type of presupposing since people largely take its interpretation of the world as truth without consideration. Insofar as fore-having determines how a person initially encounters other beings, the function of fore-having is similar to that of presuppositions. Both fore-having and presupposing provide initial ways of seeing and interpreting things.<sup>224</sup> In addition, both fore-having and presuppositions can be challenged, questioned, and changed.

For Heidegger, people can question fore-having through practicing phenomenology, whose central tenet is to attend to things themselves. For, attending to things themselves can enable one to critically encounter and possibly neutralize the givenness of fore-having. Heidegger writes that “the last task is not to let fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception

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<sup>223</sup> Ibid.

<sup>224</sup> Ibid., 140.

be given to it [i.e. to an interpretation] by chance ideas and popular conceptions, but to guarantee the scientific theme by developing these in terms of the things themselves.”<sup>225</sup> This shows that things can appear in ways not pre-defined by fore-conception. This happens when something appears different from how one might have expected. When this takes place, one can force the thing to conform to one’s fore-conception *or*, by attending to the thing itself, grasp it in how it shows itself. Doing the latter helps develop fore-having by bringing fore-having into accord with things instead of with one’s own fore-having, which may have been based on “popular conceptions.” Heidegger does not describe specific forms or effects of alterations in fore-having, for example, how alterations would affect understanding or whether the totality of relevance would be affected. According to Gadamer, however, “Heidegger describes [...] that every revision of the fore-projection is capable of projecting before itself a new projection of meaning.”<sup>226</sup> Rather than continuing to project what and how things are on the basis of prior fore-having, revisions of fore-having can yield new projections of meaning and significance. Gadamer’s interpretation of Heidegger suggests that encountering things themselves and paying attention to what they are can provide the opportunity for altering fore-having and fore-projection.

Heidegger’s “fore-having,” as a type of pre-reflective understanding that is embodied in a totality of relevance, constitutes peoples’ horizons. He and Gadamer, however, differ in their descriptions of how shifts in horizons take place. For Heidegger, shared horizontal factors are and must be effective in people’s lives for two reasons. First, certain, fundamental horizons (e.g. time and care) universally shape human lives. Throughout the corpus of his work, Heidegger holds that these cannot change. Second, as emphasized in

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 143, my addition.

<sup>226</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 280.

Heidegger's later work, humans share horizons (e.g. the essence of technology) by virtue of existing in epochs of being. In a given epoch of being, humans share certain basic understandings of things based on prevailing ways in which things are revealed. This differs from the horizon of time, which conditions the possibility of phenomena at the most basic level; epochs of being come with prevalent ways of revealing phenomena, but in every epoch the world and life in it are temporal. If a new epoch of being occurs, which is a rare event, elements of people's shared horizons do, however, change and they change totally. To more concretely demonstrate Heidegger's description of horizontal alteration I will briefly discuss the universal, fundamental horizons of time and care as well as the essence of technology as a horizon shared among people in a particular epoch of being.

In *Being and Time*, Heidegger describes *Da-sein* as situated within a horizon that delimits *Da-sein's* ontological possibilities (i.e. what can be and how it can relate to other beings). By virtue of being there (as *Da-sein*), all individual humans share a world that is constituted by fundamental horizons such as care (*Sorge*) and time. The structure of care makes *Da-sein* essentially concerned with being and the meaningfulness of things in its world as what they are used for.<sup>227</sup> Care is:

a complex but fundamental existential-ontological phenomenon, more basic than any theory or practice, any willing or wishing, any drive or urge. In other words it is "a priori," what is presupposed [by the kind of being that *Da-sein* is] in the most primordial sense.<sup>228</sup>

Insofar as care is an essential "a priori," an encompassing way in which *Da-sein* is, it shapes the way humans interact with things and go about the world. In *Being and Time*, however, Heidegger contends that time is the most fundamental horizon. Time, he claims, not only

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<sup>227</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 271.

<sup>228</sup> Daniel Dahlstrom, "Care (*Sorge*)," in *The Heidegger Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 43. Cf. Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 180-183, 191, 209-210.

conditions the possibility of space, but space—and all practical existential being and experience—is a form of temporality. Among other things, time determines *Da-sein's* being toward death and its abilities to await occurrences and to engage in discourse. The horizon of time defines every human *Da-sein's* way of being. It cannot be surpassed, however, so long as *Da-sein* remains *Da-sein* because it fundamentally specifies the meaning of *Da-sein's* being.<sup>229</sup> It is impossible for humans to gain a perspective that is not delimited by the horizon of time. Hence, care and time are horizons that all people share and that constitute their world.

In his later thought, Heidegger describes a history of epochs of being, in each of which everyone understands things in certain, shared basic ways. As a result, shared horizontal elements are unavoidable among people. At the same time, the fact that epochs of being follow one another shows that aspects of communal horizons can change because they are effective only in certain epochs of being. The essence of technology, for example, permeates the contemporary world and reveals beings as standing-reserve, or resources, that are at the disposal of humans. By revealing things as resources, the essence of technology fundamentally influences how people see and go about the world. The essence of technology could, however, fall away and be replaced by some other destining of revealing if and when a new way of revealing is granted, i.e., when the event of a new epoch of being occurs.

In contrast to Heidegger's rare and total horizontal alterations, for Gadamer horizons are under continuous development. Gadamer's discussion of horizontal alteration focuses on individual persons rather than on epochs of being, though Gadamer agrees that all people

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<sup>229</sup> Later on, Heidegger departs from this notion of finality and stability, referring to *Being and Time* as too metaphysical.

who are situated in a certain historical time and place share communal horizons. The closest Gadamerian analogue to the horizons Heidegger describes is what Gadamer calls, “historically effected consciousness.” This term refers to the fact that all people exist in history, shaped by traditions and interpretations that have been handed down through the course of history. When and where a person exists determines the framework from within which she will understand things: her individual-historical consciousness is a product of a wider historical horizon. The lives of all individuals are imbued by historical consciousness (similar to how, for Heidegger, all human lives are situated in a horizon of temporality), and all individuals who are part of a specific historical time and place share a historical horizon. Similar to time, people cannot escape or undo history; it will, without fail, continue to shape shared horizons. It can, however, undergo development so as to continually change aspects of shared horizons that affect how people understand things. Alterations in this shared horizon are not, however, differentiated as epochs that rarely occur and effect total change. Instead, these horizons are shaped by the past and change continuously as history advances and people live forward into the future.

Furthermore, Gadamer and Heidegger differ with respect to what drives horizontal alterations. Whereas for Heidegger, spontaneous changes in how being occurs constitute new epochs of being, Gadamer suggests that human activities may institute change. Gadamer explains that horizons continue to grow and develop through movements in history in which humans are involved:

Everything contained in historical consciousness is in fact embraced by a single historical horizon. Our own past and that other past toward which our historical consciousness is directed help to shape this moving horizon out of which human life always lives and which determines it as heritage and tradition.<sup>230</sup>

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<sup>230</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 315.

People inherit historical consciousness by virtue of being enveloped in particular historical horizons. Their activities take place in the context of traditions. Yet, the horizon of tradition is always developing because human activities (which, as they occur, become part of the past) continually reshape traditions and generate a new historical situation within which people subsequently go about.

Human situatedness in shared historical horizons might lead us to wonder how, if at all, people are individuated. The facticity of hermeneutic experience provides a key to understanding difference. When one individual human (as opposed to others) undergoes a hermeneutic experience, her personal understanding changes without others' also therewith changing. Hermeneutic experience is something individuals undergo when, for example, they read historical texts or encounter other people. In experiencing a text that is grounded upon different historical presuppositions than one's own, a tension between past and present arises.<sup>231</sup> This tension "projects a historical horizon that is different from the horizon of the present."<sup>232</sup> By distinguishing a horizon of the past from a horizons of the present, the person undergoing the hermeneutic experience posits a plurality of horizons within the "one great horizon."<sup>233</sup> When a person undergoes a hermeneutic experience, her own horizon accommodates more than it had before and in this her individual horizon changes. Insofar as an individual's horizons can undergo such alteration through experiences that are specific to her, each person's horizon differs from each other's.

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<sup>231</sup> Hermeneutic experience no only occurs when one reads historical texts. It can also occur in any circumstance where a person encounters horizontal otherness, for example, in talking people from other cultures or traditions or in discussing ideas that presuppose substantially different assumptions.

<sup>232</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 317.

<sup>233</sup> *Ibid.*, 315.

Gadamer, thus, provides an initial step in understanding the relation between individuals and their tradition's horizon. If different people have different experiences, it is impossible that every person inhabits a traditional horizon in precisely the same way as everyone else. Though they live from out of a shared horizon, individuals' experiences alter the way they go about within it. The hermeneutic experience that a person undergoes modifies her own horizontal understanding by enlarging the horizon of her present to include a projected horizon of the past. The two horizons then fuse with one another, thus resulting in a changed horizon. This fusion does not mean that a person's individual horizontal perspective becomes identical to whatever horizon of the past she encounters. Instead, it becomes a part of her historical understanding. In addition, according to Gadamer, the more one has hermeneutic experiences, the more encompassing one's particular horizon becomes.<sup>234</sup> Thus, people situated within the same traditional horizons do not all share an identical personal horizon or view because of this. Since individual hermeneutic experiences differ from person to person, individual horizontal perspectives develop in distinct ways. Of course, these horizons may not vary radically since they share a starting point and cannot simply erase the ways in which their involvement in a tradition has shaped them. Still, variation between persons' experiences individuates their horizons.

In another passage in *Truth and Method*, Gadamer defines "horizon" in a way that helps make sense of individual horizontality. Here he describes the relationship between horizon and perspective, emphasizing its particularity by noting its relationship to specific perspectives:

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<sup>234</sup> Gadamer refers to this phenomenon as the "fusion of horizons" because one's horizon fuses, though never perfectly, with another previously unknown perspective (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 317).

We define the concept of “situation” by saying that it represents a standpoint that limits the possibility of vision. Hence essential to the concept of situation is the concept of “horizon”. The horizon is the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a *particular* vantage point. Applying this to the thinking mind, we speak of narrowness of horizon, of the possible expansion of horizon, of the opening up of new horizons, and so forth. Since Nietzsche and Husserl, the word has been used in philosophy to characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determinacy and the way *one’s range of vision* is gradually expanded.<sup>235</sup>

Similar to Heidegger’s totality of relevance, Gadamer explains that a person’s horizon defines what is significant and meaningful in her world. It shapes what and how one sees things by demarcating a boundary within which everything is related to everything else while also necessarily referring to and excluding whatever might lie outside. Because a horizon is “particular” and defines “one’s range of vision,” it is highly individual. People with different ranges of vision perceive things in ways that are not completely consistent with the ways others view them; in spite of commonalities between their horizons, things may have differing significance and meanings for each person. The things within a horizon compose a world order defined by their relations to each other and by each thing’s significance. Gadamer writes that, “A person who has an horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon, whether it is near or far, great or small.”<sup>236</sup> His notion of “horizon” thus describes the region in which a person is situated.<sup>237</sup> One can perceive only what appears as significant, and see significant things in relation to other such things, as defined by one’s horizon. Hence, the horizon defines one’s “range of vision.”

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<sup>235</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313. Emphases added.

<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Gadamer’s “horizon” is closer to Heidegger’s notion of the “clearing” which appears throughout his corpus, including in *Being and Time*, *The Anaximander Fragment*, *Four Seminars*, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking,” *Wegmarken*, and *Country Path Conversations*. The clearing is the region where one is situated and where entities appear by coming into the light out of the darkness.



A person's horizon, and the meanings built into the interconnection of things within it, is not fixed and permanent.<sup>238</sup> One's horizon can expand (through hermeneutic experience, for example) and thereby constitute a changed perspective where different things become significant and/or the relations among things within the horizon change. An expanded horizon may allow new things to become visible as well and illuminate what was already present in different ways. Although people may not be able to surpass the singular communal horizons that they, as humans, necessarily inhabit, their personal horizons, based on their understanding and definitive of their perspectives, can undergo change. What's more, by acting upon alterations to their own horizons (or otherwise publicly sharing new ways of seeing), individuals can also instigate changes in the horizon of their tradition, which they share with others. Because I am interested in individuals' experiences of thinking, from here on, unless otherwise noted, I will use "horizon" to refer to individual horizons and not the "one great horizon" of history. As described above, personal horizontal expansion can occur through an aspect of hermeneutic experience that Gadamer describes at length: the recognition and consideration of one's unconsidered understanding, or "prejudices."

According to Gadamer, a prejudice is "a judgment that is rendered before all the elements that determine a situation have finally been examined."<sup>239</sup> Although the word "prejudice" has gained negative connotations (whose source Gadamer locates in the Enlightenment), Gadamer says that he does not mean it in a negative sense.<sup>240</sup> Though Gadamer recognizes that prejudices might be utterly mistaken (and, it can be added, potentially harmful), for him, many are not. Every person has prejudices and exercises prejudgment in the form of her prejudices as a result of her membership in a tradition that

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<sup>238</sup> See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 313.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>240</sup> *Ibid.*

imbues the world with particular meanings. Prejudices can be interpreted as operating in a way similar to Heidegger's "fore-having" in that prejudices and fore-having provide meaningful access to the world. Furthermore, prejudices, like fore-having, can be encountered and developed. When a person's prejudices change, her perspective shifts. In other words, because prejudices shape the horizon, considering a prejudice might lead to a reshaped horizon: "...the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all of our prejudices."<sup>241</sup>

Similar to how prejudices, as constitutive of a person's horizon, demarcate a person's perspective (providing significance and meaning), presuppositions undergird one's way of seeing and going about.<sup>242</sup> In this, prejudices are strikingly similar to presuppositions. Like presuppositions, they are taken as true without reflective consideration, shape how people go about and see the world, and operate primarily without a person's being conscious of them.<sup>243</sup> Moreover, prejudices, like presuppositions, come up for consideration through an event (i.e. hermeneutic experience or the acceptance of a prompt's invitation) in which they become available for questioning. There are, thus, foundational similarities between Gadamer's view and mine. Due to these parallels between prejudices and presuppositions and, therewith, hermeneutic experience and critical-reflective thinking, Gadamer's theory can assist in clarifying the meaning of destroying presuppositions.

The key point I wish to appropriate from Gadamer's philosophy is that people see and go about the world on the basis of the perspectives of their understanding and these perspectives define their horizons. Given that prejudices shape a person's perspective, alterations in a person's consciousness of a prejudice and changes in how prejudices operate

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid., 317.

<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 278-281. A prejudice is a type of prejudgment of which a person largely unaware.

imply horizontal change. Becoming conscious of, and altering the functioning of, a particular prejudice resembles the destruction of presuppositions described in Chapter One. Destroying presuppositions generates changed understandings that similarly amount to shifts in a person's horizon and perspective. Emerson illustrates this transformation in his account of horizon as circle.

*Emerson and Visualizing Horizontal Expansion*

Emerson gives a dynamic and imagistic account of how a person's horizon expands in his essay, "Circles." There, he describes human lives as ever-expanding circles: "The life of man is a self-evolving circle, which, from a ring imperceptibly small, rushes on all sides outwards to new and larger circles, and that without end."<sup>244</sup> A person's circle topographically represents her horizon. The person stands within her circle and, as for Gadamer, the horizon demarcates the boundary of her vision. That Emerson too describes horizons in terms of sight is clear from the first sentence of "Circles:" "The eye is the first circle; the horizon which it forms is the second [...]"<sup>245</sup> A person's horizon is "formed by" her eye in that the extent of the eye's vision marks the boundary of sight. When a person learns something new and gains understanding, "another [circle] can be drawn" outside the circumference of her previous horizon.<sup>246</sup> A person can, thus, transcend her previously delimited perspective. This, of course, does not mean she has transcended all limits. For, although a person's circle expands, its expanded form is still a delimited space (the boundary of which is represented by the newly drawn circle). New understanding draws a new circle that is a new horizon in which one sees things from a new perspective.

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<sup>244</sup> Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Circles," in *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Brooks Atkinson (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 253.

<sup>245</sup> *Ibid.*, 252.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

Although Emerson's language of "expansion" might seem to denote a thoroughgoing positive movement, a negative moment (like the destruction of presuppositions in critical-reflective thinking) is included in the expansion of horizons. Whereas for Gadamer, the fusion of horizons requires that a person challenge her prejudices (i.e., for example, the prejudice that the horizon of the past that she encounters through hermeneutic experience did not exist), for Emerson, horizontal expansion requires that one's creeds and/or the seeming facts about one's world come under scrutiny. New understanding can go so far as to instigate an upheaval of a person's foundational understandings: "In the thought of to-morrow there is a power to upheave all thy creed, all the creeds, all the literatures, of the nations [...]"<sup>247</sup> Notions one took to be fundamentally true or important in previous circles can be disrupted:

The facts which loomed so large in the fogs of yesterday,—property, climate, breeding, personal beauty, and the like, have strangely changed their proportions. All that we reckoned settled shakes and rattles; and literatures, cities, climates, religions, leave their foundations, and dance before our eyes.<sup>248</sup>

Emerson's usage of "creeds," "literatures," and "facts," shows that horizontal expansion occurs in concert with the destruction of things that people pre-reflectively took to be true. Because presuppositions are notions people take to be true without first considering them, they might likewise have the status (for people) of simple factuality. In this, Emerson too describes something similar to the destruction of presuppositions. In critical-reflective thinking, presuppositions, like Emersonian "facts," "shake and rattle," lose their foundational stability, and "dance" before thinkers' eyes.

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<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 254.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 257.

One further similarity between Emerson and Gadamer, is that, for Gadamer, the composition of one's horizon determines what is important:

the state of the world [is] at any one time directly dependent upon the intellectual classification then existing in the minds of men. The things which are dear to men at this hour are so on account of the ideas which have emerged on their mental horizon, and which cause the present order of things as a tree bears its apples.<sup>249</sup>

Dearness depends upon the ideas that take shape given a certain horizon. A different horizon would be a different kind of tree that bears a different kind of apple and, thus, determines what is dear differently. Emerson's mention of what is dear resonates with Gadamer's idea that whatever appears within one's horizon appears greater or smaller and nearer or further away on the basis of the horizon itself.

The similarities between the use Gadamer and Emerson make of the ideas of prejudices, creeds and facts, and presuppositions are unmistakable. Each of these ideas denotes something one takes to be true without first considering it. Moreover, each of these can be encountered and critically challenged in thought. Insofar as presuppositions undergird how people see and go about, presuppositions bear a further similarity to horizons since horizons mediate what and how people see, what is important to them, and what is comprehensible. Presuppositions, like prejudices, creeds, and facts, can therefore be interpreted as partly definitive of people's horizons. The primary effect of encountering and questioning prejudices or facts and creeds is horizontal expansion. Horizontal expansion not only represents a growth of understanding, but also signifies an alteration of perspective.

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 256. Though this comment might appear to require metaphysical idealism, this stance is not strictly necessary to the horizontal model. One might agree that human understanding deeply affects metaphysical possibilities, but at the same time affirm the idea that there are some things that are given otherwise. I do not intend to defend either view here, but rather simply to note that the horizontal model under consideration does not necessarily imply idealism.

These changes result in a person seeing in a new way and the things in her world being reordered. A new way of seeing may also permit a thinker access to new possibilities for her life.

Before clarifying why the growth of understanding and the concomitant opening to new possibilities are valuable, it is necessary to consider a central presupposition of a horizontal expansion model. The model of horizontal expansion presupposes that such expansion is possible. This presupposition has come into question in connection to Gadamer in the philosophy of the social sciences. If horizons cannot actually expand, consequences associated with their supposed outward growth can neither occur in the way I intend to claim nor justify the value of critical-reflective thinking.

*A Challenge to the Horizontal Model*

Charles Taylor and David Hoy defend the claim that horizons can undergo expansion. Both authors are readers of Gadamer and approach the question of expansion by discussing how it occurs through encounters with otherness. They explore this issue as it appears in the social sciences and, in particular, anthropology. The central thesis that opposes horizontal expansion, and against which they argue, is that humans cannot understand anything that does not already fit within their horizons and the perspectives thereby available to them. Since people are always already situated within horizons that form their understandings of things, anything a person encounters will be interpreted on the basis of the horizon and cannot be interpreted on any other basis. So, human horizons can never be challenged and reshaped. In the context of anthropology, this view holds that humans are always ethnocentric—they always understand on the basis of their own rootedness in particular cultures and traditions. Such closed self-referentiality precludes fundamentally new understanding. If this argument against horizontal expansion were correct, it would

imply that anthropologists could never understand other cultures in ways that did not automatically assimilate these cultures to ways their own cultures understand things. Anthropological interpretations would be doomed to ethnocentricity. Furthermore, interpreting other cultures in this way would not generate new perspectives or wider realms of vision for anthropologists. More generally, this argument in effect denies that people can encounter otherness and that this encounter can instigate horizontal shifts.

In his essay, “Understanding and Ethnocentricity,” Taylor explores the view that ethnocentricity will always taint anthropologists’ perspectives on other cultures. He describes anthropologists as situated within their own cultures and discipline. Their situatedness defines their horizons, and these in turn mediate their experiences. Anthropologists, like all people (all of whom have horizons), inevitably have some ethnocentric biases (similar to Gadamerian “prejudices”). The question is whether biases necessarily preclude anthropologists from grasping other cultures in ways that would involve bracketing biases and expanding anthropologists’ horizons. If ethnocentricity were inviolable, anthropology would suffer deleterious consequences. The impossibility of really experiencing and understanding another culture leads to what Taylor calls “malaise.”<sup>250</sup> With regard to anthropological studies, this impossibility would make us uneasy or discontent about anthropology’s claims to learn about and describe other cultures in ways that are not inherently distorted by ethnocentric biases. In addition, it raises a challenge regarding the worth of anthropology as a field of study.

These concerns can be applied to other academic disciplines as well as to critical-reflective thinking. Researchers in other fields and critical-reflective thinkers could be seen

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<sup>250</sup> Charles Taylor, “Understanding and Ethnocentricity,” in *Philosophy and The Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge, 1985), 130.

as “ethnocentric” if encountering something in a way that does not already fit in one’s horizon is impossible. Everyone might be doomed to a certain personal “ethnocentricity” whereby everything one encounters is automatically assimilated into one’s current understanding. Nothing could ever appear other or foreign in such a way as to challenge one’s understanding. If researchers in other fields were doomed to interpret everything they encounter in the terms of their already existing horizons, any claim to understand things as they really are (or really should be understood) would be problematic. Thinkers could be seen as similarly trapped in their horizons and without recourse to growth and change if they were unable to destroy presuppositions and reshape their horizons. If gaining understanding (that causes horizontal change) through critical-reflective thinking is bound up with destroying presuppositions, no such gains could be made. Thus, claims to a growth of understanding, an expansion of horizons, or a new perspectival access to the world via the experience of otherness would be illusory.

This opposition to horizontal shifts presumes that people can never have experiences that lead them beyond their initial horizontal perspectives. If this were true, people would be stuck in the same ways of understanding and could never understand things in new ways. It is certainly true that people initially approach things on the basis of the interpretations set forth by their horizons. Hoy and Taylor, however, point to experiences of otherness as prime moments for self-reflection and for the accompanying generation of new understanding. Even if a person does not fully grasp a perspective that is not her own, recognizing its foreignness can cause her to challenge her own way of understanding. Such questioning could motivate horizontal expansion.

Taylor and Hoy address the argument that humans are hopelessly stuck in their ethnocentric views without the possibility of horizontal expansion by positing that horizons



are permeable. Hoy points out that concerns about the thoroughgoingness of ethnocentricity are rooted in a specific way of conceptualizing horizons of understanding. The impossibility of encountering and understanding otherness is rooted in what Hoy calls a “windowless semantic monad picture of cultures,” or “the *closed horizon* model of understanding.”<sup>251</sup> If a culture or person is a windowless Leibnizian monad, it cannot grasp ideas that are not already somehow inherent in it. Everything “new” that a monad encounters and comes to understand is thus automatically assimilated to possibilities within its permanent and impermeable bounds.<sup>252</sup> Its horizon could, thus, never be reshaped by encountering otherness.

According to Hoy, the closed horizon model contravenes the fact that humans actually experience otherness, especially in the postmodern world. Referring to Clifford Geertz, Hoy says that the contemporary world is characterized by the fact that people encounter otherness on a regular basis. Furthermore, people do not encounter otherness from within integrated and whole cultures of their own:

In the postmodern picture [as Geertz describes it] we live in a crowded world where difference is not exotic and far away, but right next door [...]. The postmodern culture is not a self-contained whole, an autonomous integral “we” that confronts other such cultures as “theys.”<sup>253</sup>

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<sup>251</sup> David Hoy, “Significant Others: Objectivity and Ethnocentrism,” in *Objectivity and its Other*, ed. Wolfgang Natter, Theodore R. Schatzki, and John Paul Jones III (New York: Guilford, 1995), 121.

<sup>252</sup> For Leibniz, new understanding might be driven by the monad’s “entelechy,” or internal principle of change.

<sup>253</sup> Hoy, “Significant Others,” 120. Gadamer says something similar in *Truth and Method*, when he writes, “Just as the individual is never simply an individual because he is always in understanding with others, so too the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon.” (Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 315).

Members of a culture are not contained within an impermeable membrane, nor is their culture whole and homogenous. They are likely to come into contact with otherness both outside and within their own cultures. Especially in the postmodern world, cultures are not “self-contained wholes;” people move in and out of cultures, and intercultural communication is common and necessary. For Hoy, therefore, experiences of otherness result from increased interaction among and proximity between different people and cultures in the contemporary world. By contrast, Gadamer focuses more closely on experiences of historical otherness. For both Hoy and Gadamer, however, experiencing otherness is a simple fact of human life. As Gadamer notes, hermeneutical “experience as a whole is not something anyone can be spared.”<sup>254</sup>

Regardless of whether Gadamer’s or Hoy’s view is more accurate, experiences with otherness can instigate the tension that instigates hermeneutic experience. For Hoy, hermeneutic experience is only possible because human horizons are not closed. In opposition to conceptualizing understanding on the closed horizon model, Hoy proposes a “hermeneutic model for understanding” (and “open horizontal model”) as developed by Gadamer.<sup>255</sup> According to Gadamer, although every person is within a horizon constituted

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<sup>254</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 364. Hoy, “Significant Others,” 120.

<sup>255</sup> Though Hoy’s stance is attractive in that it is an intuitively more accurate picture of human life and sociality, it would be unfair to Leibniz to leave him without a defense. A monadological view, though it might not be as intuitively attractive, could account for new understanding and experiences of otherness. Hoy defines the closed horizon model without considering this possibility. Strictly speaking, monads do not have horizons because they are windowless and self-contained. For this reason, they cannot go beyond themselves. Even if monads are windowless, their internal principle of change (entelechy) could make it appear to a monad itself as though it had experienced something other, that exists outside of itself. So, a monad could have the experience of questioning basic aspects of its understanding and, thereby, altering its general perspective, though its perspective would only be reoriented within the bounds of its windowless existence. Its entelechy would not change and it would not actually grow beyond itself. The disagreement between this Leibnizian view and Hoy’s account has to do with where the otherness is located and whether a person or culture has

by her understanding, horizons are both permeable by otherness and expandable to incorporate new perspectives. Gadamer writes that,

it is important to avoid the error of thinking that the horizon of the present consists of a fixed set of opinions and valuations, and that the otherness of the past can be foregrounded from it as from a fixed ground.

In fact the horizon of the present is continually in the process of being formed because we are continually having to test all our prejudices. An important part of this testing occurs in encountering the past and in understanding the tradition from which we come.<sup>256</sup>

People consistently encounter the otherness of the past in their day-to-day activities, for example, when they read books written by authors in earlier historical eras. Encountering otherness provokes a person to try to make sense of and to understand something that does not fit with how she initially interprets it. Whatever does not already fit within her horizon is something she cannot account for on the basis of her current prejudices. To refer once again to the example of historical texts, tensions can appear when one reads a text whose horizons differ from one's present historical perspective. When one encounters such otherness in a text, the author's horizon comes into tension with one's own. The reader might find the text somewhat unintelligible and have to learn about the historical situation of its author to make sense of it. In the process of working out the meaning, the reader contrasts the understanding based on the foreign horizon of the text to her initial inability to understand. This contrast throws one's views into relief such that one becomes aware of one's own view as such. This experience then allows one to question the basis of one's

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access to it. A Leibnizian argument could be made that even if people or cultures, like monads, are windowless (i.e. even if there is no access to external otherness), horizon-altering growth and change can happen throughout their lives by virtue of internal principles that have not yet realized their work. Though such change would not affect the internal principle, the monad's perspective could undergo alteration. The perspective would remain internally regulated, but it could be reshaped through experiences thereby occurring.

<sup>256</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 316-317.

views. Self-reflection is, thus, implied when inter-horizonal tensions arise through encounters with otherness and this experience results in the consideration of differences. Reflecting on one's horizon can also instigate self-critique, whereby one finds out that particular presuppositions underlying one's initial interpretation of the text were mistaken.

Taylor supports the connection between understanding and critical self-reflection when he says that, "understanding is inseparable from criticism, but this in turn is inseparable from self-criticism."<sup>257</sup> This means that though people bring their own understanding into experiences of otherness and critique otherness on the basis of their views, the act of understanding something other also instigates self-reflection and self-criticism. Understanding something that resists one's initial understanding requires considering one's understanding of it. This involves both determining the merits of the other's view and, conversely, allowing the other to pose challenges to oneself. Encountering otherness can thereby motivate one to take a critical view toward the conceptions in place that have formed one's own horizon. In an open horizon model, even though people are situated within horizons and initially interpret things on the basis of their understandings, they can still encounter otherness and work to understand it. In understanding otherness, people are also brought to criticize their own viewpoints. For anthropologists, this means that even if they have ethnocentric biases, these biases can be challenged as a result of experiencing otherness. Such experiences can make anthropologists aware of their biases (ethnocentric and otherwise) and also cause them to challenge their views in order to develop new and deeper understanding of other cultures.

When people encounter otherness that instigates self-critique in critical-reflective thinking, their presuppositions are disclosed. A thinker faces the fact that, all along, she has

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<sup>257</sup> Taylor, "Understanding and Ethnocentricity," 131.

operated on the basis of something she took to be true without consideration. The simple recognition of this fact might illuminate her past and present in a new way. The presupposition also becomes open to question in the moment when it is disclosed. The person thinking is thus faced with the possibility that her understanding of things could be otherwise. If she then in fact defeats the presupposition in thought, her thought will actually produce a new understanding. Thinking, in effect, opens the possibility of another perspective (i.e. a changed way of seeing, based on different understandings) that can fundamentally alter the way a person sees and goes about.

If, as Hoy, Taylor, and Gadamer suggest, people do not operate within utterly closed horizons, people can have experiences that allows them to gain new perspectives. Though thinkers have horizons and prior understandings, they are not completely trapped in self-referentiality and consigned to interpreting everything only on the basis of their current presuppositions (as constitutive of irreplaceable horizons). Critical engagement with ethnocentricity, prejudice, and/or presuppositions can generate new understandings that alter persons' horizons. The next section is a more precise and systematic description of how the destruction of presuppositions generates new understanding that affects thinkers' horizons.

#### DESTRUCTION AND NEW UNDERSTANDING

To make sense of the value of critical-reflective thinking on the horizontal model, it is important to see that the destruction of presuppositions is accompanied by the generation of new understanding. The destruction that occurs in critical-reflective thinking is not merely a negative step that leaves a void where a presupposition previously existed. Even if a thinker completely defeats a presupposition, new understanding is *ipso facto* generated in concert with

the destruction. By briefly revisiting the two types of destruction that take place in critical-reflective thinking, we will find that three types of understanding are generated:

- (1) The awareness of a presupposition's content and the recognition that one has taken it as true without consideration,
- (2) The discovery that the presupposition is false or unworthy, and
- (3) Horizontal shifts implied by (1) and (2).

The first two types of new understanding correspond to the destruction that takes place in the disclosure and defeat of presuppositions, respectively. The third type captures the fact that (1) and (2), by virtue of taking place for a person with a horizon that is in part shaped by presuppositions, have further effects on that horizon. When (1) and (2) occur, the underlying understanding through which the thinker's commerce with the world is mediated undergoes change. I will attempt to show that (3) necessarily follows from the destruction that takes place in critical-reflective thinking.

Recall the two types of destruction discussed in Chapter One. First, when a presupposition is disclosed, a thinker becomes aware of it and the fact that she has taken it as truth without consideration; her previous relation to the presupposition is thereby destroyed. This event makes the presupposition available for questioning. The destruction of her previous relation to the presupposition minimally generates the awareness of the presupposition *qua* presupposition. This awareness provides a thinker a grasp on the presupposition's content and of the fact that the presupposition has been in operation. Second, if a thinker carries with and defeats a presupposition in the critical moment, she also finds it untrue or unworthy. This also amounts to a new understanding, an understanding wherein the presupposition does not *sotto voce* automatically mediate the world. I have characterized these types of new understanding as (1) and (2) in the list above. (1) and (2), in turn, represent expansions in thinkers' horizons, and this expansion facilitates openness to and the embrace of possibilities not previously viable. The experiences of the thinkers

examined in Chapter One follow this model and thereby demonstrate the connection between the negative moment of destruction and the positive new understanding generated. I will briefly summarize the four primary examples from Chapter One to highlight the new understanding gained by the thinkers.

John Farmer, Socrates, *Da-sein* as the they-self, and Hannah Arendt became aware of presuppositions and defeated them in thought. They came to understand that the presuppositions they examined were operative, taken as true without consideration (type (1)), but, in the end, unworthy of being held (type (2)). Each of the thinkers thereby gained understandings that allowed them to go about and/or see the world in different ways (type (3)). Farmer, for example, became aware of and questioned the presupposition that work is of the greatest importance and should order his life. He also defeated this presupposition during his critical moment. These understandings allowed him to posit that there are other fields in which he could labor, that is, other ways in which he could lead his life. In finding that death is not the worst evil, Socrates came to understand his sentence as something that might be good. Similarly, *Da-sein* as they-self comes to understand that the possibilities projected by the they are not its only ways to be. Consequently, it also saw that it could take up its own possibilities. Finally, Arendt not only defeated the traditional notion of evil (i.e., the understanding that the traditional notion of malice is definitive of evil (2)). Achieving this also enabled her to conceptualize evil as a banal phenomenon. In these examples, the result of critical-reflective thinking is not only negative but also generative. The thinkers do more than just deny their presuppositions: they also gain understanding of them and access to new possibilities. The new possibilities would not have been accessible without their changed understanding. I contend that (1) and (2) necessarily result in (3): a thinker's newly delimited horizon opens her to a new perspective and new practical possibilities.

The reference to “horizon” in type (3) indicates that presuppositions help form the encompassing understandings that mediate people’s world and experiences. Even the basic shift from unconsciously holding a presupposition to gaining awareness of it alters how the presupposition operates<sup>258</sup> and, thus, if only minutely, the shape of the horizon. By gaining awareness of a presupposition, a thinker also understands more than he had previously. The destruction of presuppositions is accompanied by the gain of new understanding that reshapes the more encompassing kind of understanding constitutive of one’s horizon. In other words, though (1) and (2) constitute new understanding of their own, they also imply (3).

I have chosen to list both the awareness of a presupposition and the recognition that one has taken it for granted in (1). When one becomes aware of a presupposition as such, one becomes cognizant of both its content and that one has taken it as true. Because both become explicit in the moment of disclosure, I have organized these aspects into the generation of (1). Since (1) takes place in every instance of critical-reflective thinking, both aspects are inseparable from the phenomenon of critical-reflective thinking. (2), on the other hand, since it corresponds to the defeat that may or may not occur in the critical moment, does not necessarily take place in every instance. Thinkers can find their presuppositions to be worthy and continue to maintain them in good faith after critical-reflective thinking. A thinker (like Callicles, for example) might become aware of a presupposition and recognize its questionability without defeating it in thought and, thus, not achieve (2). A thinker might go even further than Callicles and, having defeated a presupposition in thought, still subsequently uphold it. Such thinkers, who maintain a

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<sup>258</sup> That is, it no longer operates without a thinker’s awareness of it. This changes what its operation means to a thinker and the possibility that it can, in the future, operate quite as automatically as it had before.



presupposition after critically-reflectively thinking, achieve (2) but also allow their presupposition to remain operative.

Regardless of whether a thinker achieves both (1) and (2) or only (1), she still necessarily achieves (3). The structure of the horizon as partly composed by presuppositions illustrates this point. Achieving (1) is the same as gaining awareness of a constitutive aspect of one's horizon. By becoming aware of a presupposition, one sees that it has operated as a presupposition one sees that one has been unaware of it and, yet, taken it as true without consideration. From that point forward, the presupposition no longer operates as an unconsidered mediating aspect of one's understanding. The awareness generated in (1) constitutes understanding that subsequently mediates the thinker's perspective and experiences, though she might not continue to be conscious of it in the future. The presupposition's function as a presupposition has changed and, as a result, the shape of the thinker's horizon has shifted (even if only slightly). So, the achievement of (1) implies a horizontal shift; a thinker necessarily achieves (3).

(2), as the explicit defeat of a presupposition, alters the content of a thinker's horizon. The understanding gained in (2), that one's presupposition is false or unworthy, hinders the presupposition's ability to continue to shape one's view. By gaining (2), a thinker becomes more or less averse to the presupposition's operation. This usually—though not necessarily—neutralizes the presupposition's function as a constitutive aspect that shapes the way a thinker sees and goes about the world. As a result, the structure of understanding of which it is a part (that mediated her perspective) is no longer the same. As I will argue in the next section, defeating a presupposition in thought enables a person to choose among alternative possibilities that were not available on the basis of her prior understanding. This

also implies that her horizon has gained a new component. The thinker's horizon has changed. Therefore, (3) follows from (2).

It might be argued that it is possible for a thinker to avoid (3) even if he has achieved (1) or (2). For instance, an objector could argue that a thinker can avoid (3) by engaging in Pyrrhonian skepticism—wherein the thinker suspends judgment about the presupposition, so the new understanding carries no implications for the structure of his horizon: the thinker's horizon would provisionally maintain its previous shape pending further conclusive evidence or a decision about how to judge the presupposition. The need to suspend judgment, however, shows that the thinker's understanding has already shifted. Prior to critical-reflective thinking, no such suspension occurred because it was not yet possible to suspend judgment. The very possibility of suspending judgment becomes available only when an alternative appears. If an alternative (like the possibility that a presupposition is false or unworthy) becomes available, a thinker's encompassing understanding has still gained a new dimension. In the choice to suspend judgment about the alternative, the thinker performatively shows that the presupposition no longer operates as it had previously. His understanding has changed so as to require a previously unnecessary suspension of judgment.

Another possible objection to the necessity of structural perspectival change is that a person might be able so to bracket the understandings in (1) and (2) as to block their affecting how she views the world or goes about it. People who engage, for example, in radical compartmentalization, self-deception, or forgetting regarding what they have considered in thought might be able so to hold (1) and (2) at bay as to leave their horizons unchanged. Compartmentalizers, self-deceivers, and forgetters, having experienced (1) and (2), would effectively neutralize (1) and (2) and not undergo horizontal shifts. Contrary to

this possibility, I tend to subscribe to the idea that every experience a person has leaves some trace, no matter how minute. Even the smallest trace could structurally alter a person's horizon and, thus, achieve (3). If compartmentalizers, self-deceivers, and forgetters could consistently distance themselves from (1) and (2), they would be impervious to horizontal shifts. If they must work to compartmentalize, deceive, or forget, however, they would be similar to the Pyrrhonian skeptic. Actively blocking (1) and (2) in these ways, like suspending judgment, entails that something has been understood. If (1) and (2) necessitate (3), then any such attempts at blocking these will not completely achieve what they set out to do. (3) is thus also unavoidable for compartmentalizers, self-deceivers, and forgetters.

Horizontal shifts motivated by (1) and (2) have different specific consequences for different thinkers. The shifts that take place are, after all, consequent on the destruction of specific presuppositions that have meaning for specific persons. In addition, the extent to which a horizontal alteration affects a thinker's life will vary. Regardless, though, of the particular quality and extent of its effect on a person's horizon, recognition of a presupposition always provides a person more self-reflective awareness. In the next section, I describe the value of understanding generated in (1) and (2) as lying in a thinker's personal growth and liberation to new possibilities. Here, however, we can already begin to make sense of how in (1) and (2), a thinker grows and can become open to new possibilities.

The growth a thinker achieves in (1) is, most simply stated, an increase in understanding. If the presupposition that came to light was her own, she grows in self-understanding; if it belonged to another (as might occur in anthropological studies (as described by Taylor and Hoy), reading texts (Gadamer), or through a conversation (see Chapter One above)), then she grows in other-understanding. In either case, (1) also opens new possibilities for a thinker's life. First, having become newly aware of a personal

presupposition, she is faced with the possibility of having to consciously choose to maintain it. Though this might happen more smoothly and automatically for thinkers who continue to believe in the merits of their presuppositions, for others, it might take conscious effort. Second, a person's awareness of having operated on its basis enables her to ground her actions or thoughts upon it more intentionally or self-consciously in the future. She may, in the future, more consciously affirm her course of action on the basis of the presupposition that she continues to maintain. Her affirmation would be different from someone who achieves (2) by finding out that a presupposition is appropriate in some situations but not in others. A person, for example, who has presumed that lying is always wrong and attempts never to lie could experience terrible consequences in always telling the truth. Like Kant's harbinger of fugitives, who does not lie to the police that seek to capture them, the harbinger might suffer the pain of (partial) responsibility for their capture when he confesses that they are hidden in his house. As a result, he might subsequently choose not to tell the truth in every circumstance and, thus, partially abandon the presupposition. If the presupposition belonged to someone else, this also provides the thinker an opportunity to respond to the person, in thoughtful discourse or in action, with this new awareness. She gains the possibility of acting with greater understanding of others.

The opening of possibilities operates somewhat differently for those who also achieve (2). Like Farmer, Socrates, Arendt, and *Da-sein*, people who achieve (1) and (2) through critical-reflective thinking alter the content and structure of their horizons. A presupposition that had previously mediated their world has been defeated. Their horizons have thus been reshaped, making new and different possibilities available. Though the specific possibilities generated will vary by thinker, every thinker who achieves (2) renders a presupposition ineffective. Such thinkers must subsequently go about in ways that do not

rely upon the presupposition. This opens the possibility of choosing other ways of going about or of conceptualizing the world that were previously unavailable.

Having to go about without a presupposition could be burdensome for some thinkers. They might try to push new understandings aside or hold them at a distance. Other thinkers might, however, excitedly take them up and achieve new insights that they afford. Regardless of a thinker's individual response to the destruction of presuppositions, destruction *ipso facto* generates understandings that implicate horizontal shifts. These changes come to bear on a thinker's practical life by altering the way she sees the world and the possible actions that are available to her. The growth and liberation that take place in critical-reflective thinking give it great value.

#### VALUING GROWTH AND LIBERATION

Destroying presuppositions, insofar as it generates new understanding that expands a person's horizon, is valuable for two general reasons: it constitutes *growth* and *liberates* people to choosing their lives more consciously. Horizontal expansion, especially as captured in Emerson's image of the circle, captures these aspects of personal progression. A thinker's horizon, or circle, expands beyond its previous form (i.e. she grows in understanding). This expansion liberates a thinker *from* her previous way of seeing. This liberation *from* one way of seeing also implies liberation *to* a new perspective. A new perspective illuminates different possibilities than those that were previously available, one of which is the possibility of choosing on the basis of her new awareness. The growth and liberation that take place occur in most instances of critical-reflective thinking because it necessarily expands the thinker's horizon (though, as I will show in the following sections, some risks of critical-reflective thinking can cause harm that outweighs these benefits). Growth and liberation must, however, be distinguished from the specific consequences a particular thinker might

experience by considering personally relevant presuppositions and responding in her own way. Here, I will first discuss growth and liberation in turn, before considering the objection that growth and liberation can entail great risks. The value of critical-reflective thinking may, indeed, be diminished, or even negated, in instances when a thinker undergoes harm as a result of it. My reply to this objection will be that, although such risks exist, the actual harm that can come to thinkers is uncommon and somewhat unlikely. The risks, thus, only devalue it in few and particular cases, whereas growth and liberation are consistent results.

### *Growth*

Through critical-reflective thinking, a thinker grows and develops. This type of growth, though it may take different forms for different thinkers, demonstrates personal progression.<sup>259</sup> Nicholas Davey, a Gadamer scholar, describes it as “becoming more.” In *Unquiet Understanding*, Davey writes that understanding “‘become[s] more’ [...] by being prompted to disclose more of its overlooked presuppositions” and, in this, “understanding grasps more of itself.”<sup>260</sup> Thinkers recognize presuppositions that are part of their underlying understanding, which undergirds their ways of seeing and going about. Thinkers’ understanding “becomes more” in that they gain awareness of their presuppositions and their horizons therewith expand. One might deem the simple fact of personal growth valuable. It can, however, also add depth, nuance, profundity, or subtlety to thinkers’ views. This added nuance to thinkers’ views contributes to a their self- and other-understanding and enriches their experiences.<sup>261</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> Though “progression” is a word often associated with teleological undertakings, here, it reflects progression with respect to one’s own prior understanding and horizon (and not with respect to a final endpoint). This point receives further treatment in the next section of this chapter.

<sup>260</sup> Nicholas Davey, *Unquiet Understanding* (Albany: SUNY, 2006), 14.

<sup>261</sup> Gadamer alludes to these benefits in the passage that begins this chapter.

When thinkers consider their own presuppositions, they become self-aware in ways that can provide personal insight into, among other things, their past, their attitudes, and/or their usual comportment. Since critical-reflective thinking need not always focus on one's own presuppositions, a thinker could also gain a greater understanding of others or of the world. In conversation, for example, recognizing one of an interlocutor's presuppositions can provide insight into why he goes about or sees in his particular way. By learning how one or someone else has understood things one can approach oneself, others, life, and/or the world differently. A thinker might, for example, view one of his regular experiences differently after critical-reflective thinking. This might have happened to John Farmer when he became aware of the work-centricity of the thoughts that flooded his mind. After recognizing that his life and thoughts were largely about work, he might have approached his recreation time (i.e. when he would sit on his porch) differently. He may have come to understand that his past experiences, even during recreation, were based on his destroyed presupposition, and found this kind of mental engagement less valuable in comparison to other activities he could be doing or other topics he could be considering. Realizations such as this make way for people to consciously change their conduct.

Though the new possibilities will vary by thinker and by specific circumstances, at the very least the possibility of not acting in a way dictated by the presupposition becomes a live option. Although it might be easier or more difficult for individuals to see alternative ways of acting that do not rest on the defeated presupposition and to subsequently take them up, awareness of a presupposition opens them to doing so.<sup>262</sup> Before a person

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<sup>262</sup> A person might have reasons unrelated to her critical defeat of a presupposition for continuing to act in a way her presupposition had dictated. For example, if ceasing to perform a certain action were life-threatening or would cause social exclusion, it could be more attractive to continue enacting it.

becomes aware that a presupposition is part of his horizon, it is automatically effective in mediating his perspective and experiences. By becoming aware of its operation, a person, perhaps for the first time, is able to neutralize it and to consciously see, act, or decide in ways that do not rely upon it. Growth in self-awareness, in other words, makes acting differently a possibility even if the alternatives are yet unclear to a thinker. The possibility of conscious change refers to the other primary reason that critical-reflective thinking is valuable: liberation. Liberation takes place in critical-reflective thinking when a thinker, free to act otherwise, becomes aware of new possibilities.

#### *Liberation and Possibilities*

The simple existence of alternatives is often obscured by unconsidered presuppositions. As Thoreau writes, we “reverence our life, and deny the possibility of change. This is the only way, we say; but there are as many ways as there can be drawn radii from one centre.”<sup>263</sup> Thoreau’s statement might be more obviously applied to someone who *consciously* reverences her life. People can also, however, *unwittingly* do so. People do this whenever they unreflectively uphold presuppositions that guide how they see and go about. Because of this reverence, alternative possibilities remain hidden. Thoreau for example, admonishes his fellow citizens of Concord for reverencing goods that are not the true “necessaries and means of life.”<sup>264</sup> He sees his fellow citizens as valuing the possession and maintenance of fine houses, material goods, and food so highly that these take on the quality of necessity. These citizens unconsciously value these things highly, simply because they presuppose the rectitude of their normative value in their society. Like the tailoress and the ox-driver who have always done things one way, they presume that this way is right and

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<sup>263</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 11.

<sup>264</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.



necessary. In reverencing their usual ways of life, however, citizens ignore other ways of living that might free them from spending the majority of their time and energy working. Critical-reflective thinking instigates an examination of the underlying presuppositions that define what one values, how one acts, and/or how one sees. By reflecting on what undergirds these matters, a thinker becomes aware that there are other possibilities. Such awareness liberates thinkers to more intentionally choosing how to go about life.

The growth of understanding that takes place in critical-reflective thinking can be interpreted as liberating in two senses. A thinker is liberated *from* one set of possibilities *to* another. Because any presupposition that comes under consideration helps to shape a person's horizon, it also effectively helps delimit available possibilities. So, alterations in how presuppositions operate also delimit available possibilities anew. Though the new possibilities may indeed be better than those that were previously available, they might not. The specific new possibilities of which a thinker will become aware cannot be predicted. For this reason, liberation is not valuable simply because it provides new possibilities. Rather, it is valuable because the awareness of previous constraints (as defined by a presupposition) and the opening of new possibilities enables a thinker to choose her life and actions more consciously. When presented with new possibilities that had obscured a presupposition, a thinker need no longer unwittingly reverence her life. Instead, she can reflectively choose among old and new possibilities. She can go about her life and make choices more self-consciously as opposed to automatically on the basis of a presupposition. Critical-reflective thinking is, in this way requisite to more consciously choosing how to go about.

Thomas Carr brings up the idea of reusiteness in his article, "Gadamerian Ethics and the Task of Theology." Carr suggests that hermeneutic transformation (i.e. the

transformation of one's understanding) is required for real change.<sup>265</sup> When applied to critical-reflective thinking, Carr's idea helps describe liberation. We can describe how liberation happens by using the terminology of new understanding employed above. The reflective awareness that comes with the new understanding of type (1) is requisite to the possibilities of consciously maintaining a presupposition, intentionally affirming it through actions, and considering alternatives. That is, a thinker, since she has become aware of a presupposition, gains freedom from automatically subscribing to it.

By finding a presupposition false or unworthy (and, thus, achieving (2)), the way that a presupposition had previously determined what a person could see and do is neutralized. By abandoning a presupposition, the way a person sees and spontaneously interprets whatever it had previously concerned changes. In some cases, this shift happens smoothly, without conscious choice about what notions will henceforth mediate one's approach to it. A person might not choose the new shape of her horizon and the possibilities available therein. Still, however, she is enabled to choose what to do or how to value with more awareness of the notion she held previously. This means she can choose her subsequent actions more consciously than before, with more attention to her understanding. In other cases, however, a thinker might choose the notions that are to shape her life. A thinker may find herself in the situation of letting go of one presupposition and choosing another way to look at the world or comport herself toward things. In addition to the freedom from automatically acting on the presupposition, new understandings of type (2) can enable exploring and taking up alternative ways of seeing and going about. Thinkers may even gain

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<sup>265</sup> Thomas Carr, "Gadamerian Ethics and the Task of Theology," *Revista Portuguesa de Filosofia* 56, Fasc. 3/4 (2000): 481.

access to possibilities that are better than those supported by their previous presuppositions, though the absence of better possibilities does not deny the fact of new found freedom.

Chapter One presented many examples of how the destruction of presuppositions leads to insights and possibilities that could be better (e.g. more fulfilling or productive) for the thinkers involved. John Farmer became aware of additional ways of life. Had he adopted any of them up, perhaps they would have been more fulfilling for him than was endlessly focusing on work. Socrates stayed imprisoned even when given the opportunity to escape, in part because he acted with the understanding that death is not the worst evil.<sup>266</sup> This understanding enabled his attempt to care for his soul. Arendt, meanwhile, spent much of her career considering questions related to evil. This line of thought remained productive even in her final work, *The Life of the Mind*. When *Da-Sein*, finally, discovered that it had presumed the propriety of acting like the they, it was able to seize its own possibilities instead of continuing to go about as before. In each of these examples, the thinker became free to see or go about differently than before. These examples exemplify positive consequences that can accompany critical-reflective thinking.

It is unlikely, however, that newly available possibilities will always be better or make thinkers happier. In fact, a thinker could feel as though his possibilities were vastly narrower than they had been before and/or that the new possibilities are not as attractive as those that were previously available. Imagine a person living in a society where those who do not uphold the understandings that are the backbone of community life are ostracized.<sup>267</sup> This

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<sup>266</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, trans. G.M.A. Grube, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 68b, 83c. Misanthropy (and not death) is the greatest evil (Ibid., 89d) and death as blessing for philosophers (Ibid., 63e-64b).

<sup>267</sup> There are many different reasons for which a person would potentially be ostracized, depending on the society (e.g., in the contemporary era, especially reasons concerning

person thinks critically-reflectively about some undergirding presupposition of the society. If he achieves (2), he could open the possibility of no longer acting in accord with the presupposition. Not upholding the presupposition, however, would also result in his ostracism. If he acts in a way that does not accord with the presupposition, he might lose membership in the society of his friends and family. If the society supported his livelihood, he might also lose his financial ability to support himself. This thinker might feel that acting in accord with what he has discovered in thought would be worse than continuing as before. He might also continue as before, though he would do so with recognition of his own bad faith. He would at least, however, *choose* rather than blindly uphold the communal presupposition.

Because every thinker has her own response to newly available possibilities, the value of liberation cannot be grounded on its thinker-specific outcomes. The opening of new possibilities, including the possibility of continuing as before, is a necessary structural outcome of critical-reflective thinking. In general, awareness of new possibilities provides thinkers the freedom to more consciously choose their courses. Thinkers are offered the possibility of a different life and the opportunity to choose their courses more freely (with less determination by an unreflective presupposition), even if the life that results is not better in every instance. Rather than going about unreflectively on the basis of their presuppositions, thinkers become open to other ways of proceeding.

Since people always operate on the basis of some presuppositions or other, critical-reflective thinking cannot make them completely and utterly free to choose from infinite possibilities. Whenever a thinker gains understanding of one presupposition, others remain

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sexuality, violence, and race). Every real society likely operates on the basis of some weighty shared understandings. Those who defy them face social exclusion.

at work; if Emerson is correct, a newly drawn circle, though its bounds encompass a previous circle, is still a circle. Furthermore, a person might be hard-pressed to acquire possibilities that are gainsaid by presuppositions that are true. For example, giving up the presupposition that gravity naturally occurs on Earth would not enable a person to have the possibility of a zero gravity existence.<sup>268</sup> Therefore, thinkers do not gain complete freedom, where anything is possible. This strong form of freedom is impossible also because there are some aspects of human experience that cannot be denied. Denying that human life is, for example, essentially temporal<sup>269</sup> would be a formidable task. The opening of new possibilities only comes with a weak form of freedom. This need not, however, diminish its value. Even if thinkers remain entrenched in some presuppositions while escaping others, the reflective aspect of this expansion still constitutes a movement in the direction of greater conscious choice. By becoming conscious of what previously delimited their horizons, thinkers are able to choose more self-consciously and from new possibilities.

Hence, critical-reflective thinking is valuable because it facilitates the growth of understanding and liberates people to new possibilities even if these are still limited. These changes are highly valuable for a person's self-development and for her ability to lead a reflectively conscious and intentional life. It would be mistaken, however, to claim that there are no risks incurred in thinking. Thinkers can suffer harm, both psychological and physical, consequent on exercising critical-reflective thinking. In the following section, I describe these risks and ask whether the danger they pose outweighs the value of critical-reflective thinking.

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<sup>268</sup> Those who have access to zero gravity chambers might have the opportunity to experience life without gravity. They would not, however, have to deny the presupposition that gravity naturally occurs on Earth in order to have this experience.

<sup>269</sup> This can be interpreted as a presupposition, albeit a very deep one, insofar as it is something we take as true and that informs the way we value things and go about.

### *Risks of Critical-Reflective Thinking*

There are two types of risks related to critical-reflective thinking: those of immediate harm and those of dangers that are temporally at a distance from the activity itself. Immediate physical harm, though somewhat unlikely, could befall a thinker when, for example, critical-reflective thinking directs her attention away from another high-risk activity in which she is involved. Immediate psychological harm could also take place when a thinker destroys a presupposition that is basic to her identity. Risks of subsequent harm, by contrast, concern dangers that can arise after critical-reflective thinking, partially as a result of the destruction of a presupposition and the new understanding thereby generated. These risks include dangerous acts taken up by a thinker subsequent to and on the basis of possibilities that became available through thinking. Here, I will provide examples that show how critical-reflective thinking holds these risks of harm. These risks diminish the value of critical-reflective thinking in the cases where they obtain and/or where the damage they do outweighs any growth and liberation a thinker gains. Because these cases do not frequently occur, however, they do not refute the value of thinking generally. Furthermore, as Arendt argues, the risks of non-thinking are great.

Critical-reflective thinking can pose immediate risks to a thinker's well-being at the very moment when she takes part in this activity. It would be dangerous, for example, to engage in critical-reflective thinking while skydiving or even, perhaps, when performing more mundane (but still dangerous) activities like driving a car. In both these situations, one is responsible for ensuring one's own safety (and perhaps that of others as well) by following specific procedures. The skydiver must activate her parachute at a particular moment to avoid injury or death. The driver of a car must so operate the vehicle as to avoid colliding with dangerous obstacles, other people, animals, buildings, statues, fences, etc. If a thinker

exercises critical-reflective thinking during high-risk activities like these, her attention could be diverted from the activity at hand. A thinker might, thus, forget to take the necessary precautions. In some cases this might result from the fact that maintaining focus on other activities while in the throes of critical examination can be a challenge. However, it is more likely that a person involved in a dangerous activity would reject any prompts to think that might interrupt her ability to attend to pressing or potentially dangerous tasks at hand. So although it should be acknowledged that thinking can be risky when coupled with dangerous circumstances, it is rather unlikely that a person will succumb to the distraction of thinking in the midst of tasks that demand concentration for the sake of his physical survival or well-being.

In addition to the minor risk of physical harm, there is a risk of psychological harm. Elena Cuffari, in a piece on Simone de Beauvoir's ideas about personal transformation, writes, "Work in cognitive psychology supports Beauvoir's view of habit's hold increasing with time as well as her portrayal of the ontological risk to self that comes whenever such strong sedimentation is disrupted."<sup>270</sup> If a thinker has held a certain presupposition over the course of his life, it might be so "strongly sedimented" in his self-understanding that it forms an essential part of his identity. If this presupposition then comes under question in critical-reflective thinking, the process could damage his psychological well-being or even cause a psychological breakdown. It is also possible that a person in such danger would, like the attentive skydiver, block critical-reflective thinking. Still, this domain of life is dynamic and the risk of psychological harm real. It is important to note, however, that psychological harm does not always result when deeply-held presuppositions are considered (whether or not the presuppositions undergo defeat). For some, questioning a deeply held and

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<sup>270</sup> Elena Cuffari, "Habits of Transformation," *Hypatia* 26, no. 3 (2011): 543.

sedimented presupposition can, to the contrary, be an empowering experience of transformation.

These examples of physical and psychological risk show that critical-reflective thinking can directly cause harm. Had the skydiver not been attending to her thoughts she probably would have opened the parachute at the proper time; had the thinker not been questioning strongly sedimented presuppositions, he would probably not have undergone a psychological break. Though these deleterious outcomes are not inherent in critical-reflective thinking, the risks are. The existence of these risks, however, does not outweigh the valuable outcomes of critical-reflective thinking (growth and liberation) since the dangerous outcomes are neither necessary nor common. Critical-reflective thinking might in itself be highly dangerous to certain individuals in certain situations. But few thinkers suffer physical or psychological harm because they are more likely to stop thinking when it poses a danger. Rather than undergoing harm, thinkers usually gain the benefits of a broader horizon and new perspective.

Risks that result in harm subsequent to critical-reflective thinking are also possible. These risks can cause thinkers to suffer harm after and on the basis of their engagement in critical-reflective thinking. A thinker might, for instance, act in such a way as to harm himself or others based on his considerations. The thinker's acts may be motivated by critical-reflective thinking in the sense that the destruction of presuppositions and generation of understanding in it opened up particularly dangerous possibilities or allowed the thinker to see in such a way as to make dangerous or malevolent acts attractive. Yet, it must be noted, in such cases critical-reflective thinking can only open the possibility of harm, not directly cause it. Other factors must be involved in bringing about harm that takes place subsequent to the activity itself, including the person's dispositions, attitudes, choices, and



other people's reactions. A deeper analysis of action in its relation to thinking than is possible here would have to be undertaken to uncover and describe specific conditions that make dangerous action on the part of thinkers more or less likely. Instead, I will discuss two examples that help clarify whether and how risks removed from the activity affect the value of critical-reflective thinking: first, Arendt's discussion in "Thinking and Moral Considerations" of Critias and Alcibiades who, after thinking with Socrates, took up moral nihilism and harmed their city and countrymen; second, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s descriptions of peaceful demonstrations during the Civil Rights Movement where the demonstrators can be interpreted as having thought critically and reflectively and, yet, violence ensued.

In Arendt's example of Critias and Alcibiades, it is the thinkers themselves who do harm to their *polis*. Both Critias and Alcibiades often talked with Socrates and thought together with him in conversation.<sup>271</sup> According to Arendt, after thinking with Socrates Critias and Alcibiades took up the nihilistic moral stance that anything goes. Although Arendt does not mention particular injustices committed by the two, she presumably has in mind Critias' leadership of the Thirty Tyrants and Alcibiades' shifting political loyalties during the Peloponnesian War.<sup>272</sup> Critias's and Alcibiades's actions were brought up as evidence against Socrates during his trial. Socrates' accusers

cited Critias and Alcibiades as the foremost examples of [... the fact that Socrates had] corrupted [the] youth and said that "none wrought so many evils to the state." Critias as the leading figure in the dictatorship of the Thirty "bore the palm for greed and violence," while Alcibiades under the democracy "exceeded all in licentiousness and insolence."<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>271</sup> Critias appears as an interlocutor in a number of Socratic dialogues including in the *Charmides*, *Protagoras*, *Timaeus*, *Eryxias*, and, of course, *Critias*. Alcibiades as well appears throughout the dialogues, in the *Symposium*, *Alcibiades*, *Second Alcibiades*, and *Protagoras*.

<sup>272</sup> Because of his changing allegiance, Alcibiades can be seen as a traitor.

<sup>273</sup> Isidor Feinstein Stone, *The Trial of Socrates* (New York: Anchor Books, 1989), 29.

Critias and Alcibiades “turned out to be a very real threat to the polis” subsequent to thoughtfully conversing with Socrates.<sup>274</sup> Arendt explains that they reached *aporiae* in their conversations and that the *aporiae* generated the understanding that absolute truth is not to be found. Arendt describes their response to this new understanding as follows: “if we cannot define what piety is, let us be impious.”<sup>275</sup> This statement is an interpretive move on Arendt’s part since none of the published dialogues wherein Critias and Alcibiades talk with Socrates primarily concern the virtue of piety. Her interpretation is, however, corroborated by the description given by Socrates’ accusers. They claimed that thinking with Socrates can make a person less devoted, reverential, or respectful of those things deserving of respect (e.g., one’s city, one’s fellow citizens, the gods, rules about common decency, or one’s parents).

Assuming, for the sake of argument, that both Alcibiades and Critias took part in critical-reflective thinking with Socrates, their experience can be characterized thus: Having broken down previous presuppositions about what was to be revered, the two thinkers came to understand that they could not define piety. Both also came to believe that their inability to define piety entailed its insignificance. This second step made it possible for them to *take up the opinion* that it is not wrong to act in ways that are considered impious by most (since there is no absolute definition or criterion by which actions can be judged impious). So, they concluded, “anything goes.” Critical-reflective thinking thereby made dangerous possibilities available and, perhaps, more attractive. Reaching morally dubious conclusions through critical-reflective thinking is, thus, a risk inherent in the activity. If the damaging

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<sup>274</sup> Arendt, “Truth and Moral Considerations,” 176.

<sup>275</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

consequences of a thinker's subsequent acts are sufficiently harmful, we might judge the value of growth and liberation in his particular case to be outweighed by the harm.

Although thinking loses value in cases where harm outweighs benefits, Arendt cautions us about attributing responsibility for subsequent harm to thinking. In her first argument in support of this stance, Arendt claims that nihilism is not an outcome of thinking. This might appear contrary to her admission that “all critical examinations must go through a stage of at least hypothetically negating accepted opinions and “values” [...] and in this sense nihilism may be seen as an ever-present danger of thinking.”<sup>276</sup> For Arendt, taking up the nihilistic stance, at least hypothetically, is part of the activity of thinking. Yet, nihilism is not the final result of thinking. Rather, thinkers adopt nihilism out of “the desire to find results which would make further thinking unnecessary.”<sup>277</sup> Critias and Alcibiades did not prove the rightness or certainty of nihilism when they discovered that they could not define piety. Instead of continuing to tarry with their ideas about piety and to develop their understanding and action based on further growth and liberation, they prematurely opted to take up moral nihilism out of a desire for finality. Nihilism makes further thinking unnecessary because it denies to thinking (and to many other things) true value. According to Arendt, taking up nihilism is not the end of thinking, but a way out of it. If one continues to think, however, one performatively contradicts the nihilistic claim that nothing has value, both by taking up thinking rather than some other activity and by engaging in an activity that might change one's mind about nihilism itself. The person who keeps thinking in the face of nihilism shows that thinking and the possibility of change remain valuable (or at least choice-worthy) for her.

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<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>277</sup> Ibid., 177-178.

Though Arendt's claim is specifically leveled at nihilism, the idea that thinkers, because of their desires (to stop thinking or otherwise), sometimes take up stances and leave off thinking illustrates the idea that a person's attitudes, dispositions, and tendencies play a key role in what she subsequently does. *Acting* impiously, in other words, is not dependent only upon a thinker's awareness of or attraction to impious possibilities. It does not follow directly from the awareness of the idea and the conclusion that anything goes that Critias and Alcibiades acted in this way. Even if a thinker begins to see the world in a way that makes harmful actions imaginable or attractive, she need not perform them. Awareness and attraction do not imply choice.

People are aware of many more possibilities, even attractive possibilities, than they take up. They might be attracted to the possibilities of eating more healthfully, getting more exercise, stealing things when they would not likely get caught, or supporting sustainability by bringing their own coffee mug to the café. These are real possibilities for many people (that may even have become live options for them through thinking) even though they often do not follow through and carry them out. Their other attitudes, tendencies, and needs or even the fear that their family or friends would disapprove of (or be confused by) such actions affects what possibilities people take up. Alcibiades's and Callicles's moral attitudes, for example, may have informed their choices and subsequent actions. A rational conclusion that anything goes does not automatically make a person carry out dangerous and harmful acts. Critias and Alcibiades, however, chose to perform actions that caused harm and that could be justified by moral nihilism. Their choice was not purely a result of becoming aware of an available option by thinking about it. Additional factors are at play when a thinker chooses and carries out an action (whether it has harmful results or not). So, though the

availability of such actions may have been opened through thinking, they are not solely attributable to the activity itself.

In a second, counterfactual argument about the relation between thinking and harm, Arendt compares the outcomes of thinking with those of non-thinking:

nonthinking, which seems so recommendable a state for political and moral affairs, also has its dangers. By shielding people against the dangers of examination, it teaches them to hold fast to whatever the prescribed rules of conduct may be at a given time in a given society.<sup>278</sup>

Arendt, of course, holds that the banal evil and accompanying violence of the *Nazizeit* was a consequence of the failure to think. Non-thinking too may, thus, be accompanied by terrible results. The results of non-thinking may be just as bad and, as Arendt illustrates in describing Eichmann as the man who was unable to think, even worse than the results of thinking. Moreover, for Arendt, thinking generates conscientious and intentional action. Thinkers are able to act on the basis of awareness, whereas non-thinkers simply follow “prescribed rules of conduct” that may not be morally sound.

In contrast to the example of Critias and Alcibiades, where thinking opened dangerous possibilities for those who thought, the actions of thinkers might also provoke dangerous responses from other people around them. A noteworthy example that implicates thinking in the occurrence of violence can be found in Martin Luther King, Jr.’s book, *Why We Can’t Wait*. There, he describes the thinking that took place in his community and that motivated demonstrations. The demonstrators were met with violence. Although the violence done to them may not have occurred had they not demonstrated after

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<sup>278</sup> Ibid., 178.

thinking,<sup>279</sup> note that the violence in this example comes at an even greater remove from thinking. For the peaceful demonstrators did not carry out the violence—other members of their community, who reacted violently to their demonstrations, did so.

According to King, the centennial anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation, “gave the Negroes a reason to act.”<sup>280</sup> The year was 1963 and in addition to marking the centennial, it had been nine years since the anti-discrimination decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*. King and other African Americans had not, however, seen sufficient change in their situation and were disappointed. King notes a number of reasons for this. (1) They had waited nine years to see adequate progress in the desegregation of schools, and witnessed the Pupil Placement Law that undermined it; (2) they were disillusioned by the fact that the housing order did not stop “discrimination in financing by banks and other institutions;” (3) they were told that racial problems would be solved by “registering more voters,” when those who had political power, no matter how much they proposed civil rights for all, did not seem to understand or could not effect the necessary change; (4) they had observed the USA’s defense of liberty abroad during the Cold War while liberty was not a reality for many in their own country; and (5) they had continued to live in poverty with little hope of economic advancement. Yet, African-Americans still were not free and “still lived a form of slavery disguised by certain niceties.”<sup>281</sup>

King wrote that in 1963 they “awoke from a stupor of inaction.”<sup>282</sup> Although this awakening likely took place in many different forms for different individuals, it is possible

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<sup>279</sup> Although the harm that befell them may not have occurred if they had not demonstrated, those affected by racism will still have suffered other forms of violence—perhaps even more so or longer than—if no demonstrations had taken place.

<sup>280</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Penguin, 2000), 18.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*, viii-x.

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

that it took place for some through critical-reflective thinking. Recognizing any of the disappointments listed above may have prompted people to ask themselves why, in spite of legal policies and mandates, they were not actually receiving equal rights and treatment. Perhaps they discovered, as King did, that they had presupposed that promises and policies made by the government would effect real change. Destroying this notion made it clear that they would have to put pressure on the government or take a stand in some other way to demand their due rights and equal treatment.

The members of King's SCLC acted together to organize and take part in demonstrations, sit-ins, and boycotts in a peaceful push for change. Although the SCLC demanded rights through peaceful means, they were met with beatings by the police, dismissals from jobs, arrests, more beatings while in prison, the "uncertain justice" of the legal system, and targeted bombings by persons and groups opposed to their mission, not to mention many other instantiations of banal bigotry.<sup>283</sup> If the demonstrations carried out by members of the SCLC subsequent to critical-reflective thinking resulted in violent harm, it might be claimed that thinking was indeed a catalyst for this harm. Insofar as this violence may not have ensued had the demonstrators refrained from actions that they conclude were necessary in their considerations, critical-reflective thinking carried the risk of violent responses. If this view were, however, to place blame for the violence that ensued on the demonstrators, it would miss the point that violence was done to the demonstrators. In effect, it would blame the victim where responsibility for harm done rests with those who perpetrated it. Even if the violence would not have occurred if the demonstrators had not thought and acted, their acts did not necessitate violent outcomes. These outcomes may have been provoked by their demonstrations, but critical-reflective thinking did not

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<sup>283</sup> Ibid., 24, 124.

necessitate the violence that ensued. Additional factors like the racial prejudice of others in their community played a key role in the harm that came to the demonstrators. The critical-reflective thinking of the demonstrators did not, in other words, cause the actions of those who responded violently.

Though the risks involved in critical-reflective thinking, both immediate and removed from the activity, contradicts its value in certain cases, harmful results are somewhat uncommon and highly inconsistent. Thinkers can avoid harm by rejecting the invitation to think while in dangerous circumstance or by choosing subsequent actions that are not harmful or likely to incur harm. Thinkers' attitudes, dispositions, tendencies, and needs also influence the outcomes of thinking. Though it comes with risks that may make certain dangers greater, realizing such possibilities is not intrinsic to the activity. A deeper analysis of action could help clarify the conditions that enable or encourage a thinker to carry out possibilities opened through thought.

#### INFINITUDE, INSTABILITY, AND VALUE

Having clarified the outcomes of critical-reflective thinking and described their value, it is necessary to consider one final matter, namely, the infinitude of critical-reflective thinking. The movement of expansion that takes place in critical-reflective thinking can happen again and again. As a result, critical-reflective thinking is an activity that is never finished. Because of its infinitude, it offers thinkers the opportunity to continually gain perspective, grow and develop in understanding, and become aware of new possibilities. By engaging in an “ever completing but never completed”<sup>284</sup> activity, we are, as Gadamer writes, afforded the continuous possibility of “broadening [...] our human experiences, our self-

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<sup>284</sup> Davey, *Unquiet Understanding*, 58.



knowledge, and our horizon.”<sup>285</sup> The possibility of such an endless “adventure,” however, poses both existential and theoretical concerns that must be addressed.

Thinkers who reflect on the meaning of the infinitude of critical-reflective thinking might be troubled by the lack of finality. If anything that someone comes to understand through thinking can itself be, as Arendt and Kant say, questioned in the future, understanding will never be stable (unless thinking ceases). Thinkers, accordingly, are forced to live without stable certainty of what they take to be true. What’s more, the absence of finality indicates that critical-reflective thinking lacks an endpoint and final objective understanding toward which it is oriented. It lacks an objective and final conclusion. Any progress a thinker makes by engaging in critical-reflective thinking is relative to the thinker’s own previous understanding. Even if the growth and liberation that take place through thinking are valuable, these, too, are goals that can never be conclusively achieved. They do not point toward some ultimate horizontal shape that every person approaches through critical-reflective thinking. In this section, I describe critical-reflective thinking’s infinitude in more detail and then consider self-referential growth and the instability of understanding in turn.

Critical-reflective thinking is infinite for two reasons. First, as noted above, Kant and Arendt say that thinking can be self-destructive because whatever a thinker discovers in thought (i.e. new understanding) can later come into question. People can always reconsider what they think they understand. Second, critical-reflective thinking is infinite in that there will always be presuppositions that have not yet been discovered by a thinker. Since presuppositions enable people to go about the world meaningfully and to interpret things around them, people always proceed on the basis of some presuppositions or other. So, no

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<sup>285</sup> Gadamer, “Hermeneutics as Practical Philosophy,” 244.

matter how often a person takes part in thinking, unconsidered notions will always linger in the background. Thinkers can never become completely transparent to themselves: only the length of their lives limits their (potential) consideration of presuppositions.

The infinitude of critical-reflective thinking may be distressing for some people and make it impossible for them to appreciate its benefits. If thinkers cannot reach or even progress toward a final endpoint, critics might wonder, what is the ultimate point of practicing it? This complaint can be interpreted as a *teleological relativistic issue* or as an *existential issue*. The teleological complaint might be that, if there is no endpoint, any sense of progress or forward movement is illusory or nonsensical. This complaint does not deny the fact that there is growth, or change. Rather, it finds the growth to be mere change that has no value since it does not advance or progress toward an objective goal. Even if thinkers do objectively grow in understanding, the fact that this growth cannot be appraised with respect to a final endpoint could be taken to mean that growth is futile. It does not bring one closer to absolute truth, the possession of complete knowledge, or a stage of final maturation. This complaint treats the gain of understanding in critical-reflective thinking as an achievement that is merely *relative* to each thinker concerning both what thinkers come to understand and the directions in which their understanding grows. As I will show, however, the complaint ignores the value of personal expansion, which I have described above. As an *existential* concern, meanwhile, the infinitude of critical-reflective thinking could be construed as undermining its value because of the discomfort thinkers might feel in the absence of stable understanding. The lack of a possible final and stable understanding could leave thinkers disturbingly uncertain. As I will discuss, however, this outcome is not necessary and likely only obtains in isolated cases. It can be understood as a risk that is possible, but unlikely. I will now discuss the *teleological* and *existential* concerns in more detail.

The claim that progress made by thinkers in critical-reflective thinking is relative<sup>286</sup> is indeed true. Thinkers progress with respect to their former understanding; thinkers' horizons broaden from their previous shapes. The critic who propounds the teleological concern is dissatisfied with admitting the existence of growth without an external and objective *telos* toward which thinkers can grow (even if they can never reach it). In addition to denying the value of personal progression in relation to oneself, this complaint ignores the possibility that continual growth and liberation could be interpreted as worthy *teloi*, although, not *teloi* that can be attained once and for all. They serve as *teloi* without positing specific tasks to complete or specific conditions to attain. Indeed, people can look back on their lives and reflect upon how their understanding has changed, often picking out certain events that have altered their perspectives. Growth in their horizons will always have happened with respect to previous conditions, yet, it is still objective growth.

A critic might still be disturbed by the absence of an aim that can be definitively attained once and for all, such as gaining absolute knowledge or participating in Hegelian absolute knowing. Besides the fact that any evidence in human history used to show that people can or do move in the direction of such ends is disputable, there is good reason to be wary of positing an end that has specific content. Any endpoint a person posits is part of her understanding. It is, thus, open to possible revision. Moreover, after having achieved further growth, one may see it from a new perspective and situate it among other things that an expanded view has opened up. It is also likely undergirded by personal, social, and historical presuppositions that she may never have occasion to reflect upon. And even if she were to reflect on presuppositions that undergird the endpoint she posits, further

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<sup>286</sup> Critical-reflective thinking can also be understood as “relationistic” in that a thinker’s understanding grows in relation to a prior form of itself.

presuppositions operate on a subterranean level of her consciousness. Any *teloi* one postulates are grounded upon yet undisclosed presuppositions. This means that any such *teloi* are merely provisional. This is not to say, however, that positing a *telos* is bad or unhelpful. Avoiding dogmatism, however, may require leaving open the possibility of revising it.

Construing the aim of critical-reflective thinking as continual growth and liberation escapes the problem of dogmatism because it makes the activity (and what inherently takes place in it) an end in itself. By proposing that these are the *teleological* aims of critical-reflective thinking, one need not look beyond the activity itself. In addition, it is important to note that these may not be its only or final *teloi*. Perhaps on further considering critical-reflective thinking, other aspects of its occurrence or outcomes will become apparent. These could lead one to posit further *teloi* or revise those I have described here. If a critic, however, demands a stable endpoint that has more content than these to justify the value of critical-reflective thinking, we reach a standoff.

The continual possibility of change also brings up an existential issue related to feelings of uncertainty. Most people do not likely suffer discomfort from the fact that they can always reexamine whatever they have found in critical-reflective thinking. Their new understandings delimit their horizons anew and, without concern, they then see and go about their business on the basis of their new perspectives. They are not haunted by reflective uncertainty, the awareness that their understandings are not stable and can change again through further critical-reflective thinking. The fact that critical-reflective thinking is infinite, however, will be daunting to others. For some people, for example those whose psychological or physical survival fundamentally relies upon existential certainty (even if unfounded) of their way of thinking, taking part in critical-reflective thinking and discovering

through repetition that it does not provide irrefutably certain understanding could cause harm. Defeating a presupposition that is fundamental to one's sense of self or the world could lead one to believe that even the things of which one feels most certain are in fact uncertain. For those who depend on certainty (whether reflective or not) for peace of mind and/or survival, its absence would likely outweigh the valuable aspects of critical-reflective thinking. Practicing it could lead to existential difficulties such as general anguish or indecision. As Arendt writes, thinking "may have a paralyzing effect when you come out of it, no longer sure of what had seemed to you beyond doubt while you were unthinkingly engaged in whatever you were doing."<sup>287</sup> Of course, these people might avoid critical-reflective thinking in the first place. Sometimes, these risks are, however, likely unpredictable since a person cannot always anticipate its specific consequences prior to taking part in thinking itself.

Others, who are neither dependent upon stable certainty for survival nor perturbed by horizontal alteration, may nonetheless be bothered by uncertainty if they recognize the instability of thought and understanding, the fact that their understanding can always change again after coming to some conclusion in thought. If those disturbed by such instability reject the value of critical-reflective thinking, their reasons do not arise from a fear of psychological breaks, but from elsewhere. I interpret their aversion to critical-reflective thinking's infinitude to be rooted in the notion that life is easier or more bearable if their understanding is stable, even if this stability is unreflective. Such individuals prefer not to exercise critical-reflective thinking and to remain unreflectively certain rather than to disturb what they take as true.

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<sup>287</sup> Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 176.

Taken to an extreme, the instability of understanding could lead to practical paralysis. Imagine a thinker who, through critical-reflective thinking, recognizes that a fundamental presupposition that she held true is not true. This discovery establishes a new perspective based on the destruction of a presupposition and the new understanding thereby generated. She might also see that her new perspective is unstable and could be reshaped through further critical engagement. Since her perspective undergirds how she sees and goes about things, her decisions and actions will to some extent rest on it. If her perspective is grounded upon presuppositions of which she believes she cannot be certain, she might not find that she has an adequate basis for deciding and acting. Anything that might seem like a worthy or proper action at one moment, she might fear, could later, through a perspectival shift, appear unworthy or improper. If afflicted by this uncertainty to an extreme, she might become paralyzed, unable to carry out actions or make decisions. For choosing an action requires commitment, if only momentary, to one perspective rather than another. If a thinker sees every belief, conviction, and presupposition as subject to change, choosing, even on the basis of what seems true at the moment, might become difficult. For, if whatever seems true is subject to change and cannot once and for all be proved, there is nothing to rely on. It cannot be counted on again in the future, for example, when she seeks justification for her past actions. It is important to note that this paralysis cannot be total. One cannot but act; even if one decides not to perform one action, a person necessarily does something else. Even if a person “does nothing” and dies rather than take care to keep living and making choices, this is something she does. Complete practical paralysis is, thus, impossible; so long as one is consciously alive, actions must be performed, although uncertainty can make choosing more difficult or all but impossible (even to the extent that it

makes life unbearable). This refutation of absolute practical paralysis does not deny, however, that partial paralysis based on uncertainty can be distressing.

The risk of this distress is best understood as a risk temporally removed from thinking. It is not something that takes place and causes harm to a thinker in the very moment of critical-reflective thinking, but instead something a thinker suffers afterward. Whether a thinker ends up in a state of existential uncertainty depends on her response to thought. Those in whom thinking leads to paralyzing uncertainty are brought to this not only by critical-reflective thinking, but also by other factors such as their attitudes, psychological needs, and conclusions drawn beyond the activity itself. In fact, the instability inherent in the infinitude of critical-reflective thinking may only detrimentally affect those who, subsequently to critical-reflective thinking, both notice the instability it implies about their other presuppositions and need complete certainty. Many likely remain unaware of the instability of their presuppositions. This is, for them, a moot issue. But those who do become aware of it are not likely to all have the same reaction. Someone who has a tendency to be easily and deeply frustrated might throw her hands up and fall into deep doubts about what she takes as true. These doubts might make acting and deciding difficult for her. Conversely, many other thinkers might take the infinitude of critical-reflective thinking as an opportunity for continual growth. For example, a person with an optimistic attitude might hold that the absence of stability is for the best since it affords the possibility of continual growth. Instead of becoming deeply disconcerted by the fundamental instability of understanding, optimists might also accept and act in whatever they understand at a given moment while also allowing the possibility of future change. They are as certain as they need to be (i.e., their needs also determine their reactions to the awareness of instability). Unbothered by recognition that their understanding might change in the future, they forge

ahead in their practical lives. Like other risks temporally removed from the activity of thinking, consequently, practical paralysis cannot be solely attributed to critical-reflective thinking. Disturbing and potentially paralyzing uncertainty is—unavoidably—a possible outcome of the activity, and paralysis might greatly devalue critical-reflective thinking at least for those to whom this occurs. Paralysis, however, is a rare and unlikely outcome. Consequently, its possibility does not refute the value of critical-reflective thinking generally.

One might evade paralysis by avoiding thinking (e.g., by refusing the invitations of prompts). This may allow one to go about with greater, though unreflective, certainty.<sup>288</sup> But if thinking is unavoidable, even people who usually have existential certainty may encounter the instability of their understanding. Gadamer supports this idea as it pertains to hermeneutic experience when he writes, “Although in bringing up children, for example, parents may try to spare them certain experiences, experience as a whole is not something anyone can be spared.”<sup>289</sup> Though some people might be more open to examination and change than others are, no one is utterly closed to its possibility.<sup>290</sup> If he is right, even unreflective certainty *tout court* is not invincible. It might come into question through a hermeneutic experience. So, even those who do not usually think may not always be able to avoid facing uncertainty.

If people have essentially open horizons and their thinking attention may be solicited by prompts that befall them, critical-reflective thinking is an ever-present possibility even if people attempt to avoid it (and pretty well succeed). This possibility can open a continual

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<sup>288</sup> Arendt, of course, goes further than this when she describes the dangers of non-thinking; see p. 147 above.

<sup>289</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 364.

<sup>290</sup> The experience of change need not end in uncertainty or even distress. A person could be certain of the conclusions she reaches through critical-reflective thinking though she might later become uncertain about them and critically examine their worth or veracity.



adventure of growth and liberation, though it comes with risks. Since harm only obtains in some cases, however, harm does not lie in wait for all thinkers. Its possibility, therefore, cannot overshadow the value more broadly. The two arguments against the value of critical-reflective thinking presented here are made possible by the infinite activity of critical-reflective thinking. It is never finished in the senses that it has no objective endpoint and that it does not provide invulnerable certainty. Even if it is endless, the claim that critical-reflective thinking is, therefore, without value does not hold.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND ONE MORE RESULT

Though thinkers face risks in exercising critical-reflective thinking, such thinking is valuable because it helps thinkers grow and develop in understanding. A horizontal model describes this growth as the expansion of one's horizon—or, in Emerson's words, as the drawing of a new circle. Destroying presuppositions generates new understanding that is an expansion of a thinker's horizons. Horizontal growth provides a thinker a new, wider perspective, thus enabling her to see herself, others, or the world differently. This new perspective also opens new ways of going about life. Liberation from one horizontal perspective to others opens new possibilities for living.

Gadamer suggests one final result of critical-reflective thinking. In his discussion of the hermeneutic experience, he writes that,

the perfection we call "being experienced," does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them.<sup>291</sup>

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<sup>291</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 364.

Having undergone hermeneutic experiences, which I have likened to critical-reflective thinking, can remind a person to be “undogmatic” and to seek new understanding. It can open the way for further experience (or thought). Thinkers, in discovering that they had held questionable presuppositions, become open to further self-critique and examination in the future. In hermeneutics, “experience” means having one’s expectations disappointed and becoming steadfastly open to the possibility that what one understands might prove wrong (or at least questionable). Translating this idea into critical-reflective thinking, it means that the destruction of presuppositions makes one more receptive to the possibility that other presuppositions could turn out to be false. In this way, critical-reflective thinking can encourage further instances of the same.

Critical-reflective thinking perpetuates itself by cultivating openness in thinkers. Such openness encourages thinkers to exercise critical-reflective thinking again and again. If critical-reflective thinking proves valuable, we may desire to practice it more often. Since, however, critical-reflective thinking is instigated by the unpredictable interruption of a prompt, though we may become more receptive to it, actually engaging in it is, to some extent, out of our hands. This leaves us with a provocative question: how can people cultivate critical-reflective thinking? Are there strategies for fostering and encouraging its occurrence? These are the questions to which I turn in the next chapter.

### CHAPTER THREE: CULTIVATING CRITICAL-REFLECTIVE THINKING

Growth in understanding and liberation to new possibilities make critical-reflective thinking a valuable activity. If one desires these benefits in spite of its risks, one may wish to practice critical-reflective thinking more often. Humans, however, cannot compel the occurrence of prompts, which instigate the occurrence of this thinking. Directly inducing a prompt is not, therefore, an effective way to bring about critical-reflective thinking. The best humans can do is facilitate its occurrence by developing themselves in ways or creating circumstances that are conducive to critical-reflective thinking. In this chapter, I will argue that people can develop the openness and receptivity that make the acceptance of prompts and deep engagement with presuppositions more likely. Heidegger, Arendt, Thoreau, and Plato describe several strategies for cultivating openness and receptivity: spending time in solitude, taking leisure, having an open attitude, and being wakefully attentive. Each of these is a way of being that can be awoken through practical activities. In this chapter, I will describe solitude, leisure, an open attitude (based on Heideggerian *Gelassenheit*), and wakeful attentiveness and show how they are conducive to critical-reflective thinking. In addition, I will describe how people may develop these ways of being through practical activities. This list of cultivation strategies is, admittedly, somewhat idiosyncratic. I do not intend it, however, to be exhaustive. Near the end of the chapter, I will briefly discuss how developing certain virtues can also make engaging in critical-reflective thinking more likely.

As stated, the above cultivation strategies facilitate the personal development of openness and receptivity for critical-reflective thinking. Being open and receptive makes a person available to heed and accept prompts and to question presuppositions. Openness

and receptivity, moreover, are distinct ways of being available to take part in critical-reflective thinking. Openness is opposed to closed-ness, which limits a person's possibility of being prompted in the first place. Being open means attending to things in ways that do not resist their appearing differently than they usually do. By allowing things to appear differently, a person is open to challenges and prompts that might issue from them. Receptivity, by contrast, means welcoming the opportunity to engage in critical-reflective thinking by accepting prompts when they come along. It is opposed to refusing to take part in critical-reflective thinking by either rejecting prompts or steering clear of considering presuppositions. Receptivity is availability for critical-reflective thinking in the sense of greeting its occurrence. Openness, on the other hand, is a more basic availability for critical-reflective thinking. I will now discuss each of these in more detail with reference to the cultivation strategies.

Closed-ness afflicts those who are oblivious to the possibility of critical-reflective thinking because they are unmindful of their surroundings and experiences or are stuck in their ways. These make a person oblivious to the possibility of critical-reflective thinking and unheedful of things that might prompt them. The ox-driver and tailoress whom Thoreau described may have suffered from closed-ness since they seemed to have overlooked evidence contrary to their presuppositions though it was right in front of them. Although complete closed-ness is impossible (since every person has a fundamentally open horizon), and prompts can befall people even in the midst of mundane activities, having a closed comportment toward things makes it less likely that one will be prompted by them. Openness can be developed through adopting an open attitude, practicing wakeful attentiveness, and habituating oneself to be humble. These strategies combat closed-ness by

so orienting a person toward things, events, and experiences as to attend to these in ways that allow them to appear differently than they usually do and thereby issue prompts.

By contrast, a person who lacks receptivity is not simply unheeding or closed to things that might prompt her. Instead, she does not welcome the occurrence of critical-reflective thinking. The unreceptive person is unavailable for critical-reflective thinking because she rejects or flees prompts' invitations and/or refuses to question presuppositions. She may impede its occurrence actively or passively, either consciously rejecting prompts or casually ignoring them when they occur. Usually, practical factors motivate a person's lack of receptivity to critical-reflective thinking. Busy-ness, for example, may cause people to refuse to think: busily working to finish a task (though the busy-ness is not so complete as to close them to prompts) makes them likely to refuse diversions of thinking, which would take them away from the task at hand. The demands of other people, including pressures to conform to social presuppositions, also may contribute to a person's lack of receptivity. If a person expects to be interrupted by someone else, for example, she may be less likely to accept a prompt and begin critically-reflectively thinking. Spending time in solitude, taking leisure, and having courage can help increase people's receptivity to critical-reflective thinking and, thereby, increase the possibility of its occurrence.

Although I have assigned most of the cultivation strategies to the facilitation of either openness or receptivity, this is not meant to exclude the possibility that each cultivation strategy can also help people develop the other. The categorization of the strategies points only to the fact that each of the strategies is more immediately relevant to openness or receptivity. Nonetheless, having the opportunity to exercise receptivity requires first being open. So, strategies that make a person more open may also encourage her to be more receptive. And, vice versa, a person who is open may be even more likely to take part

in critical-reflective thinking if she is not only open, but also receptive. One strategy I have not yet categorized is the virtue of fortitude. Rather than facilitating openness or receptivity, fortitude makes one more proficient in critical-reflective thinking by increasing one's ability to endure through thinking when it becomes a protracted and taxing process. Throughout this chapter, I show how each strategy facilitates openness (as a basic availability for), receptivity (as being welcoming to), and proficiency (in carrying out) critical-reflective thinking.

Before getting into a more detailed account of the strategies, a few words about the assumptions of this line of argument are warranted. This approach to cultivating critical-reflective thinking claims that self-development (and not the compulsion of prompts) can increase the likelihood that a person will take part in the activity and also help her gain aptitude for it. No amount of self-development can, however, guarantee the occurrence of critical-reflective thinking, for it requires a prompt. If prompts simply do not occur to someone, critical-reflective thinking will not take place. This fact, however, should not dissuade people from working to develop themselves expressly for the sake of increasing critical-reflective thinking. For, as Arendt says, "all events and facts" can "claim...our thinking attention" simply "by virtue of their existence."<sup>292</sup> Possible prompts, in other words, are ubiquitous. Consequently, the problem is not that prompts do not occur, but that people are too distracted to attend to things that might prompt them or too stuck in their ways for prompts to appear relevant. Given that the likelihood of prompts is high, cultivating critical-reflective is precisely a matter of both developing personal habits and putting oneself in circumstances conducive to their occurrence and accepting their invitations. Though instituting personal change may sometimes be difficult, it is indisputable

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<sup>292</sup> Arendt, "Thinking and Moral Considerations," 160.

that people can change through their own efforts and, as I will argue, develop openness, receptivity, and aptitudes that will make them more likely and better able to take part in critical-reflective thinking.

One possible objection to an approach of cultivating critical-reflective thinking through self-development is its apparent circularity. It seems that one must become aware of one's own unavailability in order to work toward altering factors (such as the way one usually spends time or how one approaches things) that cause it. Although critical-reflective thinking can befall a person without any effort on her part to increase its possibility, this objection is specifically concerned with what might motivate a person to consciously work on cultivating its occurrence. Reflectively noticing one's closed-ness and/or disinclination to thinking and questioning their propriety could be seen as a necessary prerequisite of critical-reflective thinking. If so, it would appear that one must first take part in critical-reflective thinking in order to work on developing oneself for further critical-reflective thinking. If, then, one is closed to critical-reflective thinking, entering the circle that would allow conscious self-development in ways conducive to critical-reflective thinking would be impossible. Though a refutation of the circularity itself would obviate this consequence, it must also be noted that the consequence itself is unnecessary. Even if consciously developing oneself were required to enter the circle, no one is ultimately and completely closed to critical-reflective thinking. The assumption that a person could be utterly closed stands in opposition to the fundamental openness supported by an open horizontal account of human understanding (see Chapter Two above). Because people have fundamentally open horizons, they may simply fall into the circle without attempting to make it happen. People are not, therefore, ultimately and utterly excluded from critically reflecting on their

own closed-ness, even if they are very closed. Every person may be faced with entering the circle despite herself; that is, it might just happen.

Another problem with the objection, however, is its claim that people must first become aware of and consider their own closed-ness in critical-reflective thought in order to consciously develop openness. Although such awareness might motivate attempts at personal development and allow for a more targeted approach to self-development, one can also begin working toward more openness without encountering one's closed-ness in critical reflection. Attempts to work toward openness could spring from the recognition that one is somewhat closed together with a simple desire for more openness. There are many ways, besides through critical-reflective thinking, that a person might become aware that he is closed (e.g. someone might inform him of this or he might realize that he ignored a possibility because he was set on something else). In addition, one could choose to develop oneself by believing that openness would improve other facets of one's life. The desire for heightened awareness of one's surroundings might be enough to make one want more openness. Therefore, one need not participate in critical-reflective thinking to work toward openness. The process of self-development is not circularly confined within the realm of critical-reflective thought. Wanting, needing, or being eager to change the way one sees or goes about in the world may be prerequisite to conscious and intentional personal development. These do not, however, necessarily rest upon an initial critical-reflective experience.

In the four following sections, I will describe each cultivation strategy in turn and how it is conducive to critical-reflective thinking. I will also describe practical activities that can help a person take up the way of being specified by each strategy. Each strategy is a way of being. Solitude, as described by Arendt and Thoreau, is not simply being alone, but



contains a dimension of being-with. Leisure is not just having free time, but participating in activities with the possibility of diversion. Having an open attitude is being available to see whatever one experiences in new and different ways. And wakeful attentiveness is actively listening to what is going on and what it means. As ways of being, these strategies are not always straightforwardly realizable. By describing circumstances and activities through which people can realize them, however, Arendt, Heidegger, Thoreau, and Plato show how people can establish conditions for critical-reflective thinking through their own actions. By practicing the ways of being described in the strategies, people can develop themselves in the corresponding ways. I begin by turning to solitude as described by Arendt and Thoreau.

#### SOLITUDE AND BEING-WITH

Arendt writes that solitude is “the mode of existence present in this silent dialogue of myself with myself;” this silent dialogue defines Arendt’s notion of thinking.<sup>293</sup> In *Walden*, Thoreau includes an entire chapter titled “Solitude.” When he lived by Walden Pond, he was “as solitary...as on the prairies;” he had “a little world all to [himself].”<sup>294</sup> Yet, he “experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, the most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object” and such objects sometimes prompted him to think.<sup>295</sup> While by himself during “long evening[s]...many thoughts had time to take root and unfold themselves.”<sup>296</sup> Though solitude is not a topic that undergoes scrutiny in Platonic dialogues, in the *Republic*, Book V, Socrates refers to “solitary walks” as the proper context for “feast[ing] upon [one’s] own thoughts.”<sup>297</sup> Socrates’ habit of going off to stand

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<sup>293</sup> Arendt, “Some Questions,” 98.

<sup>294</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 126.

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>296</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>297</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 457e-458a.

by himself to engage his thoughts<sup>298</sup> also makes clear that there is something about solitude that made it an ideal context for his thinking. Insofar as spending time alone makes one freer from distractions by other people, one can realize a kind of solitude that encourages receptivity to prompts that occur there. Furthermore, one may become less inhibited by the need or desire to uphold society's presuppositions and more open to questioning them when one gains distance from society itself and its pressures. In this section, I will focus on Arendt and Thoreau since they offer explicit and detailed accounts of solitude and its connection to thinking.

When we imagine solitude, we may picture a hermit living alone in a hut or a cave situated far away from society, perhaps on a wooded hillside. Indeed, being physically removed from other people can provide conditions favorable for critical-reflective thinking. Arendt and Thoreau agree that spending time in seclusion can provide space for attentive and deep mental engagement. Both authors, however, complicate this representation of solitude. For them, solitude is not simply being alone. For in solitude, one is never completely alone<sup>299</sup>: one is still, according to Arendt, together with oneself or, in special cases, with other people and, according to Thoreau, with other natural beings, Nature, and God. Moreover, thoughtful interaction with whatever or whoever else is present when one is by oneself inheres in their notions of solitude. I will first describe Arendt's and Thoreau's characterizations of solitude. Though they concur that solitude does not mean being completely alone, their views differ in what or who is still present when one is solitary. Both views show how solitude, as a way of being, can facilitate active thoughtful engagement with

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<sup>298</sup> Plato, *Symposium*, 175b.

<sup>299</sup> Although people are never completely alone when they are solitary, neither Arendt nor Thoreau denies that people can experience being alone (especially when they experience loneliness). The fact that they are never alone in solitude does not, therefore, deny the possibility of ever being alone.

whatever is there. In addition, they support the idea that being alone can facilitate solitude and, thereby, make way for critical-reflective thinking.

Arendt defines solitude not simply as spending time alone, but as being “by” oneself. The word “by,” here means “with”: “Solitude means that though alone, I am together with somebody (myself, that is).”<sup>300</sup> When a person is with herself in this sense, she actualizes an “inner dichotomy” that allows her to “ask questions of [her]self and receive answers.”<sup>301</sup> In solitude, one realizes the conditions for conversing with oneself. In fact, Arendt writes that thinking is solitude’s “corresponding activity.”<sup>302</sup> This definition of solitude does not, however, deny the possibility that thinking can also take place when one is in dialogue with someone else. For Arendt, people can take part in the solitude required for thinking in interpersonal conversations, though there is a caveat. Interpersonal solitude is only possible when the other person is like a second self. The other person must be intimately involved with thinking about the same things one had been considering by oneself.<sup>303</sup> This model of interpersonal conversations parallels the solitude a person can have by herself. In both cases, a self is, in effect, involved in conversing with itself; a collective self is present when two people are in solitude together. When one thinks with another person, the other person plays the corresponding role of the second self, to whom one can pose questions and from whom one can receive answers. Although thinking in conversation with other people is possible, for Arendt being addressed by someone else when one is in conversation with oneself effects a change that stops the activity of thinking. When someone else addresses a person in solitude, she must respond. This ends her discussion with herself and instead of

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<sup>300</sup> Arendt, “Some Questions,” 98.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid.

remaining two, she becomes one again. The inner dichotomy disappears.<sup>304</sup> Consequently, being away from others can help one actualize the inner dichotomy required for thoughtful self-conversation.

Although critical-reflective thinking is not identical to Arendt's notion of thinking as conversing, her explanation of how solitude enables thoughtful conversation provides evidence that solitude (as being with oneself) can also facilitate critical-reflective thought. When one is by oneself (or alone with another self), one can attend to and inquire into one's own thoughts. The questions one poses to oneself might prompt critical-reflective thinking. If one is already in conversation with oneself, one might also be able to dialogically examine a presupposition.

Thoreau, too, expresses the idea that solitude is associated with the activity of thought when he writes, "A man thinking or working is always alone, let him be where he will."<sup>305</sup> Jeffrey Cramer, an editor and annotator of *Walden*, points out that in 1853 Thoreau wrote in his journal: "There is nothing so sanative, so poetic, as a walking the woods and fields even now, when I meet none abroad for pleasure. Nothing so inspires me and excites such serene and profitable thought."<sup>306</sup> Thoreau's also pronounces his personal love of solitude in *Walden*, where he says: "I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude" and "I find it wholesome to be alone the greater part of the time."<sup>307</sup> He recognizes, however, that, for many, being alone, without company, is hardly bearable because it places them "at the mercy of [their] thoughts."<sup>308</sup> Though for Thoreau, like

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<sup>304</sup> Arendt allows that one is still, in a sense, two, as long as one is conscious.

<sup>305</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 131.

<sup>306</sup> Cramer, "Editorial Footnotes," 131f; Henry David Thoreau, *The Journal of Henry Thoreau*, ed. Bradford Torrey and Francis H. Allen (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1906), 9: 208.

<sup>307</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 131.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid.

Arendt, solitude is associated with the activity of thought, his notion of solitude differs from Arendt's in an important way. Solitude, though it makes way for thought, is not strictly dialogical thought with oneself or another self.

Thoreau's discussion of an "other self" that shows up when he is alone is radically different from Arendt's description of the other self with whom one can converse. Though Thoreau also claims there is a "doubleness" in himself, the other self does not play the role of interlocutor, but spectator.<sup>309</sup> The duality Thoreau mentions may initially appear to be similar to the inner dichotomy described by Arendt. For Thoreau, however, the doubleness does not bring him into conversation with himself but makes him "remote from [him]self as from another."<sup>310</sup> The second aspect of himself is at once part of him and not part of him; it is a "spectator, sharing no experience, but taking note of it."<sup>311</sup> The spectator operates only as observer of the events of his life rather than a conversation partner with whom he can engage. The spectator is strangely disinterested in what takes place, so much so that Thoreau claims, "When the play, it may be the tragedy, of life is over, the spectator goes his way. It was a kind of fiction, a work of the imagination only, so far as he was concerned."<sup>312</sup> This entity is very different from the other self that Arendt describes, i.e., another self that is also oneself, to whom one can pose questions and receive answers.

In the absence of "human neighborhood," however, Thoreau too finds society, though not specifically with himself.<sup>313</sup> Though he was living alone by the pond, he remarks, "I had a great deal of company in my house; especially in the morning, when nobody

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<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 127.

calls.”<sup>314</sup> He also purportedly “experienced sometimes that the most sweet and tender, most innocent and encouraging society may be found in any natural object.”<sup>315</sup> In an account of one rainy day when he began to feel lonely, Thoreau says, “Every little pine needle expanded and swelled with sympathy and befriended me.”<sup>316</sup> In addition to the society he found with natural things, Thoreau says he had “a great deal of company in [his] house; especially in the morning, when nobody calls.”<sup>317</sup> He mentions specifically “an old settler, and original proprietor, who is reported to have dug Walden Pond, and stoned it, and fringed it with pine woods” as well as an “elderly dame,[...] invisible to most persons, in whose odorous herb garden I love to stroll sometimes.”<sup>318</sup> The old settler purportedly “tells [him] stories of old time and of new eternity” while the dame tells “the original of every fable, and on what fact every one is founded, for the incidents occurred when she was young.”<sup>319</sup> The former figure can be taken to “represent a creative spirit or God” while the latter represents “Mother Nature or Demeter, the Greek goddess of agriculture, health, and birth.”<sup>320</sup> Thoreau’s solitude did not make him completely alone: he was always in the company of natural things, God, and Nature.

Solitude, as essentially a type of being-with, is not desolate or devoid of content. If solitude meant being completely alone, it would actually block the possibility of critical-reflective thinking. For there would be nothing to provide a prompt or to become fodder for thought. Solitude as being away from other people provides space to consider whatever is there. I will discuss attentiveness more fully in “Fostering Wakeful Attentiveness” below.

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<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>316</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 132.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid., 133.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> Cramer, “Editorial Footnotes,” 133f; Thoreau, *Journal*, 1: 293-294.

Here, however, it is important to note that solitude can provide space that encourages attentiveness. Being away from other people creates this space because one is less likely to be disturbed by others' demands. The presence of other people, and the need to be available to respond to them, can block one's ability to begin thinking in the first place. The need to respond anchors one to others and distracts from attending to thoughts and other phenomena. It is difficult to solitarily slip away into self-conversation or a thoughtful reverie when one must tend to the addresses or needs of others. Although people can think together, as Arendt claims, this is rare. Others can also interrupt a person's solitary engagement with her own thoughts. As Philip Cafaro puts it, "being able to think for yourself [...] may be helped by solitude, which to some degree forces us to think our own thoughts as the external stimuli of gossip and friendly chatter are removed."<sup>321</sup> Thinking can also be interrupted in such a way as to make returning to it very difficult or even impossible.

Another benefit of solitude is that when one is alone, one might gain reflective distance from the presuppositions that prevail in society. People often operate on the basis of shared presuppositions that underlie cultural practices and norms and also allow people to go about among one another with shared understanding. When participating in society, one might be pressured to accept that society's expectations. This pressure can impede any motivation to reconsider operative presuppositions. In addition, in conforming to a society's norms and receiving praise (or even simple interpersonal understanding) for doing so, one might continue to default to the presuppositions in place. Being in society can promote conformity rather than self-reflection and considered action. As in Heidegger's condition of *das Man*, without a second thought a person might simply do what the people around her

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<sup>321</sup> Philip Cafaro, *Thoreau's Living Ethics: Walden and the Pursuit of Virtue* (Athens: University of Georgia, 2006), 109.

usually do because it is normatively accepted. In solitude, one faces fewer pressures or expectations to uphold society's presuppositions. One may, thereby, become more receptive to critically reflecting upon them.

Thoreau's removal from society, in addition to providing him space for writing, allowed him to closely listen to and observe nature. This also allowed him to become aware of and reflect upon many presuppositions of his society. A recurrent locus of our inability to get beyond social values while in society is work, the topic John Farmer considered. People in Thoreau's Concord society, because they valued having nice houses, fine clothes, and foods like coffee and butter that, to Thoreau, were luxuries, had to spend much of their time working. People took the value of these things and the necessity of working (and perhaps even the necessity of thinking about work) to get them for granted. In, "The Bean-Field," the chapter of *Walden* where Thoreau considers his own wage-earning labor (growing and harvesting beans during his first season at the pond) he poses the question: "why should not the New Englander try new adventures, and not lay so much stress on his grain, his potato and grass crop, and his orchards?—raise other crops than these?"<sup>322</sup> The "other crops" he has in mind are the personal development of truthfulness, justice, and other virtues. It might be objected that even in solitude people cannot really think in new ways, apart from the horizons within which they have grown up and that have been formed by their society and historical situation. Though I agree that people cannot simply discard all of their grounding assumptions (or other aspects of their horizons) just by spending time alone, with being alone the pressure to adhere to norms may be loosened. The way for independent thinking may be cleared when one gains distance from society.

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<sup>322</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 159.



Arendt, too, supports the idea that being away from others and alone with oneself can provide space where people might stop “cherish[ing] values and hold[ing] fast to moral norms and standards.”<sup>323</sup> Arendt stresses the importance of being able to critically reflect upon and depart from social mores when one’s society institutes violence. The people who turned out to be morally “reliable” during the *Nazizeit* were not those who measured themselves and their actions against the prevalent norms of Germany.<sup>324</sup> The reliable people were those who “examine[d] things and [made] up their own minds,” using themselves as their standard “and not the world.”<sup>325</sup> This may not have required physical separation from other people. According to Arendt, however, it was solitary thought, where they posed questions to and received answers from themselves, that allowed them to judge themselves by their own compass rather than relying on the customary mores:

they asked themselves to what extent they would still be able to live in peace with themselves after having committed certain deeds; they decided that it would be better to do nothing, not because the world would then be changed for the better, but simply because only on this condition could they go on living with themselves at all.<sup>326</sup>

They inquired and answered their queries by considering the meaning of their actions apart from what the government demanded or what “respectable” members of society may have done. They did this in solitude, without relying on the norms that guided many others.

I have been discussing how physical separation from other people has the distinct advantages of providing both a space that is freer of socially normative demands and reflective distance from society’s presuppositions. Being separate from other people does not, however, guarantee that one will gain these benefits. Sometimes, even though one is

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<sup>323</sup> Arendt, “Personal Responsibility,” 45.

<sup>324</sup> Arendt, “Some Questions,” 78.

<sup>325</sup> Arendt, “Personal Responsibility,” 45. Arendt, “Some Questions,” 79.

<sup>326</sup> Arendt, “Personal Responsibility,” 44.

away from others, one may be unable to so shift one's mental perspective as to gain distance from social presuppositions. One might also continue to be distracted by other people even when alone. This occurs, for example, when a person is preoccupied with a conversation that happened prior to her separation from society. People can bring along other people and the distractions attached to them even when physically apart.

People might also be uncomfortable with spending time alone due to the discomfort of loneliness. It is, however, notable that for both Arendt and Thoreau solitude is not the same as loneliness. Both authors contrast the existential experience of loneliness, the feeling of being completely alone and without others, to solitude. For Arendt, loneliness occurs when one is not in thoughtful dialogue with oneself and one is also "unable to establish contact" with others.<sup>327</sup> The loneliness of lacking the company of oneself or others can take place when one is "in the midst of a crowd" or when one is isolated from others.<sup>328</sup> Thoreau relays an anecdote about his experience of loneliness:

I have never felt lonesome, or in the least oppressed by a sense of solitude, but once, and that was a few weeks after I came to the woods, when, for an hour, I doubted if the near neighborhood of man was not essential to a serene and healthy life. To be alone was something unpleasant. But I was at the same time conscious of a slight insanity in my mood, and seemed to foresee my recovery. In the midst of a gentle rain while these thoughts prevailed, I was suddenly sensible of such sweet and beneficent society in Nature, in the very pattering of the drops, and in every sound and sight around my house [...]<sup>329</sup>

Here, Thoreau describes that even though being alone usually did not make him lonely, on this occasion, solitude made him feel "unpleasant." His feeling cannot be equated to

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<sup>327</sup> Arendt, "Some Questions," 98.

<sup>328</sup> Ibid.

<sup>329</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 127-128. We might even interpret this passage as describing an occurrence of critical-reflective thinking, prompted by the feeling of loneliness. Through it, Thoreau is able to consider the presupposition that the near neighborhood of man is essential to a serene and healthy human life. The presupposition is defeated when Thoreau notices the company of nature around him.

solitude, though it grew out of his separation from other humans. Eventually, however, as he tarried with his loneliness and considered whether being around humans was necessary to a “serene and healthy life,” he recognized the natural companions all around him. This shows that, for Thoreau, loneliness is neither the same as solitude nor implied by it.

Arendt, however, cautions us about one possible “vice of solitude.”<sup>330</sup> Solitude can become a vicious loneliness wherein a person loses touch with herself, other people, and actual conditions of life in the world. Loneliness can breed reliance on “the only capacity of the human mind which needs neither the self nor the other nor the world in order to function safely and which is as independent of experience as it is of thinking,” namely, “logical reasoning.”<sup>331</sup> Logical reasoning is all that is left when one’s relationships to oneself and others have been lost and cannot be found again. Arendt describes logical reasoning as, “the inner coercion whose only content is the strict avoidance of contradictions that seems to confirm a man’s identity outside all relationships with others.”<sup>332</sup> If a lonely person reaches this extreme of disconnection from herself and others, she might slip into logical reasoning. Logical reasoning poses great dangers for humans as social and political beings because it attempts to consider things from outside actual conditions of communality. In logical reasoning, one has concern only for non-contradiction and is oblivious to actual conditions. According to Arendt, loneliness and logical reasoning can even drive a person to tyrannical tendencies and prepare lonely masses to accept totalitarian control.<sup>333</sup> Though I

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<sup>330</sup> Cited in Margaret Canovan, “Socrates or Heidegger? Hannah Arendt’s Reflections on Philosophy and Politics,” in *Social Research* 57, no. 1 (1990): 146. The caution is in Arendt’s unpublished manuscript, “On the Nature of Totalitarianism,” Hannah Arendt Papers, 1898-1977 (Arendt MSS, Box 96), 19.

<sup>331</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government,” *The Review of Politics* 15, no. 3 (1953): 325-326.

<sup>332</sup> *Ibid.*, 327.

<sup>333</sup> *Ibid.*, 326-327. Cf. Margaret Canovan, “Socrates or Heidegger?”, 147.

find it unlikely that such consequences will obtain in many cases of loneliness, I accept the idea that being alone can make a person feel isolated and detached from other people and the world around her. For this reason, human life may not always be benefited by separation from others (especially if one experiences the discomfort of loneliness or takes up logical reasoning as a primary way of thinking).

Although critical-reflective thinking might often be a solitary activity, it occurs in the context of society and traditions.<sup>334</sup> In critical-reflective thinking, people consider presuppositions that underlie their existence in a world among others, many of which may also be shared by these others. Furthermore, people's thinking is informed by their worlds and experiences, which are unavoidably imbued with sociality and history. And the occurrence of prompts itself often takes place through other people or phenomena in the world. Critical-reflective thinking, consequently, is not a completely individual activity. Even when people who take part in it might consider presuppositions that are unique to them and come to idiosyncratic conclusions, they do not transcend the social world of which they are members. So, although critical-reflective thinking can be a solitary activity and approaching it through solitude may seem to make it more so, practicing it does not (and cannot) require radical separation or radical distinction from other people.

Those who wish to actualize solitude need not become hermits and live in caves in forested mountainsides. In fact, it is not impossible to achieve the solitude Arendt and Thoreau describe while remaining in society, though it might be more difficult. But being away from other people does increase one's ability to engage oneself in conversation and to

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<sup>334</sup> In fact, it may even be a component of traditions, insofar as parents urge their children, as part of their moral upbringing, to consider why they have made certain choices and insofar as developing the skills to perform "critical thinking" has been instituted in school and university curricula.

be with other phenomena, for example, natural objects or one's own thoughts. People might achieve solitude by taking brief hiatuses from society. People can do this by taking a walk or sitting in a remote area. If remote spaces are not easily accessible, people can also simply remove themselves to a quiet room or a carrel in the library stacks where there are not many other people and those who are there are quietly engaged in their own projects. Though completely avoiding people may be impossible, finding a quiet and secluded space is usually possible and can decrease the possibility of interruptions. Today, entering solitude by removing oneself from society faces the additional challenges posed by modern telecommunications. The ubiquity of smartphones and other communication devices put people at the disposal of others at all times. Turning off these devices, however, can easily cancel this constant availability to others via calls, texts, and other messages. This simple step can put one out of range of the constant contact prevalent in today's world. Removing and disconnecting oneself can help one achieve solitude by limiting distraction and encouraging independent thought. When one is not attending to others, one may become more openly attentive to thoughts and other phenomena that issue prompts or pose challenges to one's presuppositions. These aspects of separation from people increase the possibility of solitude as being-with. Being with oneself, one's thoughts, and other phenomena is a kind of receptive mental engagement and it can open the way for critical-reflective thinking.

#### BEING LEISURELY

Similar to the way solitude can limit distraction by others and pressures to adhere to society's presuppositions, leisure limits the demands of goal-oriented activity. Leisure is a way of going about or performing tasks that permits diversion. Leisure is not the same as free time. Free time can be (and often is) something people fill with activities that pursue

specific aims and from which diversion is difficult. Critical-reflective thinking, however, often requires ceasing another activity or task. Taking up new or further activities (whether during free time or not) thus may obstruct the possibility of taking the divergent path that is thinking. When, by contrast, one comports oneself in a leisurely way, one does not hurry and is not doggedly directed toward specific ends. By permitting diversion in the midst of busy-ness, leisure can make a person more receptive to taking up critical-reflective thinking, though it might require turning away from the task at hand. In leisure, one is available for what might come along and attract one's attention and does not strictly direct energy and effort toward the completion of specific pre-determined tasks or goals. This allows one to receptively welcome prompts rather than refusing their invitations in favor of another activity.

The Greek notion of leisure, "*scholé*," can assist in clarifying certain conditions that help a person be more leisurely in a way that is conducive to critical-reflective thinking. Arendt and Plato describe *scholé* as the condition of being free of worldly concerns (i.e. concerns of the body, politics, working to make money, and social demands). Plato uses *scholé* in his dialogues to describe freedom from everyday concerns and for philosophizing. Arendt, too, uses this term in *The Human Condition* to describe freedom from work and labor. When one is free of these things, one can take part in activities that do not aim at (or need not be compelled to) achieve particular goals or complete certain tasks. Such activities allow for divergence into thought if prompts come along and grant the time needed to take up lengthy explorations in thought. Of course, not having to spend time taking care of the body, politics, work, and social demands does not in itself constitute leisurely comportment. One might be free from all such tasks and still anxiously seek to fill time with other activities that are just as inimical to thought. In this section, I will contrast recreation, wherein a

person fills time with goal-oriented or rule-bound activities that do not permit diversion, with leisure practices. I will also argue, however, that leisure as a comportment in which people are receptive to thinking cannot be attained simply by achieving *scholé*. Leisure is not doing any particular activity, but doing an activity in a leisurely way in which one may welcome diversion. If one can practice leisure, one becomes more receptive to prompts in the midst of other activities.

Annette Holba, in her book, *Transformative Leisure*, elaborates a distinction between leisure and recreation. For Holba, neither recreation nor leisure is a specific activity, but instead ways of carrying out an activity. When one practices recreation, one strives to achieve a specific end. A recreational activity is limited by rules and strictly oriented toward achieving specific goals. Playing sports or board games is a good example of recreation. Each of these usually has rules and a well-defined endpoint that prescribes how to participate in and complete the activity.<sup>335</sup> In a game of *Clue*, for example, players compete to be the first to find out what weapon wielded by whom and in which room resulted in the murder of Mr. Nobody. *Clue* is the game it is by virtue of its rules and defined endpoint, and abiding by the rules and aiming toward the game's goal limits availability for interruptions. Sports games might be even more impervious to interruptions than board games. Even when a clock malfunctions or a player is injured, the remaining players must "keep their heads in the game," and the game must be played to its time-limited completion. True, interruptions that might lead to critical-reflective thinking can still take place in the midst of recreation. Such strictly goal-oriented activities that already presume specific, well-defined

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<sup>335</sup> Annette Holba, *Transformative Leisure: A Philosophy of Communication* (Milwaukee: Marquette, 2013), 22-29.

goals and/or a linear progression, however, largely hinder the participants' receptivity to diversion.<sup>336</sup>

Though we may think of recreation activities as free time where anything can happen, such activities are in reality usually closed to diversion. Recreation practices often generate the same closed-ness as does everyday busy-ness: being set on a path from which one cannot turn away and wander onto others. One's orientation in recreation is not welcoming to the kind of diversion that is conducive to critical-reflective thinking. In contemporary recreation practices, people often schedule their free time full of activities and tasks that can be important to personal fulfillment but do not facilitate receptivity to thought.

Many people today approach free time recreationally, with specific aims to which they strictly adhere. Whether they, for example, play games, work out, go hiking, meet with friends, make crafts, or listen to music, they usually take up these activities in a goal-oriented way that blocks the possibility of diversion and instantiates recreation rather than leisure. If people approach free time with plans and goals from which they are determined not to stray, free time is purposed rather than available for what might befall them. This is not to say that people cannot become leisurely in the midst of these activities. One could also approach these activities in a leisurely way. If one practices hiking, for example, in a leisurely way, one is less bound to achieve the goals of summiting the peak or reaching the waterfall, for example. Taking a leisurely hike would mean that if some other side path catches one's eye, one might take it. Or, if a prompt occurs one might accept it and switch one's attention from following the path to considering what prompts and calls for thought. Thinking while

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<sup>336</sup> Less formally rule-bound recreation activities like hiking to reach a destination or for fitness, might likewise obstruct receptivity because of their predetermined course or end.



hiking does not preclude the hiker continuing hiking and even reaching the summit or falls. Thinking while hiking merely requires allowing one's focus to wander and perhaps be claimed by prompts or other phenomena rather than committing one's mental resources to keeping to the pre-chosen path. Alternatively, one could also stop hiking while thinking and begin hiking again once it has run its course.

In relation to critical-reflective thinking, leisure is a comportment that increases the likelihood that a person will accept prompts and take part in critical-reflective thought in the midst of other activities. Both Plato and Arendt employ the term *scholé* (translated into English as "leisure") to describe conditions that are conducive to what I am calling "leisure" as a way of carrying on activities. In *scholé*, one is free from the concerns of the body, such as taking care of one's basic needs (e.g. eating) and providing for their satisfaction (e.g. by earning money or shopping). One is also free from political concerns, which are related to the body in that they affect one's physical and social existence. For Plato, *scholé* is requisite for doing philosophy. In the *Phaedo*, he writes,

Only the body and its desires cause war, civil discord and battles, for all wars are due to the desire to acquire wealth, and it is the body and the care of it, to which we are enslaved, which compel us to acquire wealth, and all this makes us too busy to practice philosophy.<sup>337</sup>

When people are busy meeting the needs and desires of bodily existence, according to Socrates, they do not have time to philosophize. Arendt further elaborates the meaning of *scholé* based on her knowledge of Ancient Greek culture. In *The Human Condition*, she writes that it is "not simply leisure time," but a condition in which one is free from "political activity," "labor and life's necessities," and, even more generally, "worries and cares."<sup>338</sup> As Arendt notes, having the leisure that is *scholé* is not only about having enough money to take

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<sup>337</sup> Plato, *Phaedo*, 66c-d.

<sup>338</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958), 14f.

care of one's needs. Although having financial resources might make it easier to be leisurely, taking part in politics as a citizen of Athens was time-consuming and could be stressful. So freedom from politics was also a condition for winning *scholē*.

In the *Phaedrus*, Plato offers an example that shows how *scholē* can be conducive to critical-reflective thinking. In the dialogue, Phaedrus and Socrates meet by chance, and Phaedrus asks Socrates if “he is free [has *scholē*] to come along and listen.”<sup>339</sup> Socrates agrees to accompany Phaedrus, and they take a walk outside the wall of the city and critically engage the topic of love. Their freedom from meeting other needs by, for example, taking part in political debates or earning money, allowed them to spend the day talking near the edge of the river outside of town.<sup>340</sup> During their walk, Phaedrus shares Lysias's speech on the dangers of consorting with a lover. According to the speech, because lovers are those who have been inspired by the god of love, Eros, and are therefore possessed by the madness of passion, they tend to exhibit erratic behavior and can even hurt or embarrass the objects of their affection. Initially, both Socrates and Phaedrus agree with this assessment. Socrates even gives a speech that favors many of Lysias's ideas as presented in the speech. After having expressed the dangers of spending time with a lover, Socrates intends to leave off speaking and walk back to the city. Phaedrus, however, asks him to continue, and Socrates undergoes a prompt by his *daimon*. Socrates concludes that he must stay and give another speech because the speech he delivered previously was “foolish” and “close to being impious” because it had spoken ill of the god, Eros.<sup>341</sup> Had Socrates not had the time and

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<sup>339</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff, in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 227b.

<sup>340</sup> Perhaps some of their success in thinking can also be attributed to their physical removal from Athens.

<sup>341</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 242d.

freedom from other concerns to walk about talk with Phaedrus, he might not have been available to experience and consciously accept his *daimon*'s prompt.

Thoreau, too, believed that freedom from everyday concerns is a condition that encourages the possibility of a leisurely approach that clears the way for the activity of thinking. In his journal, he wrote, "What is leisure but opportunity for more complete and entire action?"<sup>342</sup> For Thoreau, complete and entire action includes such activities as writing poetry, becoming divinely aware, and taking part in intellectual activity.<sup>343</sup> One such intellectual activity, for which leisure afforded the opportunity and in which he took part, was critical-reflective thinking. Via his move away from the town and his two-year "sojourn" by Walden Pond, he was able to attain leisure in the sense of *scholé*. By physically distancing himself from the town and living in solitude, he left behind the demands of society. He also, thereby, created free time wherein he was able to go about without strict concern for many everyday concerns.

Although he had to plant beans during the first summer in order to have food, Thoreau did not have many other obligations at the pond. He did not need to earn wages in order to support his lifestyle.<sup>344</sup> This enabled him to spend his time otherwise than a city-dweller normally would. He recounts days when he, sat

in [his] sunny doorway from sunrise till noon, rapt in a revery, amidst the pines and hickories and sumachs, in undisturbed solitude and stillness, while the birds sang around or flitted noiseless through the house, until by the sun falling in at [his] west window, or the noise of some traveller's wagon on the distant highway, [he] was reminded of the lapse of time.<sup>345</sup>

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<sup>342</sup> Cramer, "Editorial Footnotes," 15; Thoreau, *Journal*, 1:293-94.

<sup>343</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 87.

<sup>344</sup> Thoreau found that he did not have to work for an extended period of time to meet his needs. He writes, "For more than five years I maintained myself solely by the labor of my hands, and I found, that by working about six weeks in a year, I could meet all the expenses of my living" (Thoreau, *Walden*, 66).

<sup>345</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 108-109.

Thoreau did not consider these hours to have been spent in mere idleness or to have been wasted time. For, though he “accomplished” nothing, he participated in what he calls “contemplation,” wherein he was simply present and aware of his surroundings.<sup>346</sup> “During these seasons,” according to Thoreau, he grew “like corn in the night, and [the hours]... were far better than any work of the hands would have been.”<sup>347</sup>

Thoreau’s experiment of living by the pond illustrates that leisure can facilitate critical-reflective thinking. He distanced himself from the concerns and demands of the town and took up a lifestyle that was not always already imbued with particular goals. Thoreau, thereby, gained freedom from the concerns that define a specific and predefined trajectory for his days and became receptive to heeding and thoughtfully considering what presented itself and prompted thought: Nature, his own emotions, sounds, sights, etc. Without the pressure of time and striving to reach specific, pre-defined goals, Thoreau became more receptive than he probably would have been in quotidian Concord life.

Both Socrates and Thoreau achieved a leisurely comportment that made way for critical-reflective thinking (among other activities such as philosophizing in conversation and writing). Their leisure was not, however, only due to freedom from everyday concerns. Freedom from serving the needs and desires of the body does not automatically make a person welcome diversion. A person might take aim at achieving other ends (e.g. having a well kept garden or finishing reading a book) in her free time and pursuing these tasks may be just as closed to critical-reflective thinking as is taking up those that serve the needs of the body. Even when people have free time away from work, they often choose to fill it with recreation activities such as working out to achieve personal fitness goals or cooking a

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<sup>346</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid.

specific recipes (whose success relies not only on attention to detail and time allotted for the cooking process, but also acquiring required ingredients and cookware) that are all but invulnerable to diversion. *Scholé*, as freedom from everyday concerns, may provide material conditions for the possibility of realizing a leisurely comportment and even encourage its occurrence. It does not itself, however, directly establish leisure.

If leisure is not reducible to simply being free from everyday concerns, how can people realize it? People can realize a leisurely comportment in almost any activity as long as they go into it with receptivity to diversion. Taking up activities in which one already often notices that one is divert-able or interruptible might be the easiest way to realize a leisurely comportment. One person's leisure activity might be reading books, whereby she both engages with ideas that might prompt her and allows herself to wander off into exploring them (at least when reading the book cover-to-cover or finding some specific piece of information as quickly as possible is not the primary goal). Another person might find leisure in painting or hiking or listening to music. If her mind can take up other threads that present themselves while she is involved in these activities, they might allow her to be receptive to prompts and to accepting their invitation to think. As when pursuing solitude, a person, by taking up activities that facilitate leisure, might become more attuned to her thoughts and the phenomena around her. This might permit her to be more leisurely in general (i.e., during other activities) or to be more receptive to prompts and phenomena in other circumstances.

Although I have focused on the possibility of developing receptivity through solitude and leisure, it should be noted that these strategies could also contribute to a person's openness. Being away from other people and being less focused on completing specific tasks and provide contexts wherein a person might be more mindful of other things around

her so that they might issue prompts in the first place. People can, however, more directly strive for mindful openness to prompts. A person can, for instance, take up an open attitude that allows things to appear in new ways and by wakefully attending to them. I turn now to these cultivation strategies.

#### AN OPEN ATTITUDE (INSPIRED BY *GELASSENHEIT*)

A person can approach things, herself, thoughts, people, and other experiences in many different ways, for example, with closed-ness and hostility, with eager curiosity, with bored disinterest, or even with open letting-be. Perhaps the most obvious strategy for cultivating critical-reflective thinking is to develop a more open attitude that makes one more available for prompts and considering notions one usually takes as true. Heidegger's concept, *Gelassenheit*, most often translated into English as "releasement," provides a starting point for working out what an open attitude is and how it fosters openness. For Heidegger, *Gelassenheit* allows people to let things be rather than forcing things to conform to presuppositions. Being *gelassen* (or, released) is being open to things appearing in new ways. If things are allowed to appear in ways that contrast with a person's present way of understanding, they might prompt a person to think. Heidegger's technical use of the term "*Gelassenheit*," however, poses a problem. *Gelassenheit* is a mood or "fundamental attunement" that a person realizes only when it befalls her.<sup>348</sup> If *Gelassenheit* is not something people can agentially develop or practice, it cannot qualify as a strategy for cultivating critical-reflective thinking. Cultivating critical-reflective thinking by exercising an attitude akin to *Gelassenheit* (and inspired by Heidegger's notion) is something Heidegger might call "existentiell" (i.e., it has to do with humans as entities in the world rather than with their

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<sup>348</sup> Bret Davis, *Heidegger and the Will: On the Way to Gelassenheit* (Evanston: Northwestern, 2007), 23.

existential being).<sup>349</sup> I propose that we can also understand *Gelassenheit* as an open attitude that can be realized through our own attempts. By adopting this attitude, a person allows things to appear in ways that may not match her presuppositions about them. In this, the person is open to the possibility that things she encounters will prompt her by presenting themselves in ways that challenge her to think. Here, I will first describe Heidegger's notion of *Gelassenheit* and then describe it as an adoptable attitude.

When used in common German parlance, *Gelassenheit* means “‘calm composure,’ especially and originally that which accompanies an existential or religious experience of letting-go, being-let, and letting-be.”<sup>350</sup> For Heidegger, being *gelassen* is not simply a matter of having a calm demeanor. As noted above, it has to do with how a person relates to and experiences things. When one is *gelassen*, one lets things be and allows them to appear from out of themselves rather than forcing them to conform to one's present way of understanding or acting. *Gelassenheit*, in effect, releases people from the way they usually understand things, people, their own experiences, and the world around them and opens them to being struck differently by these entities. Though signs of Heidegger's interest in *Gelassenheit* can be found throughout his corpus,<sup>351</sup> *Gelassenheit* receives special attention in his post-war works. The most prominent descriptions are in the “Memorial Address” and *Country Path Conversations*. In the “Memorial Address,” Heidegger describes *Gelassenheit* as a dual releasement: *from* calculative thinking—which (like the essence of technology) has the primary characteristics of ordering things and calculating how they might be most efficiently

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<sup>349</sup> In *Being and Time*, Heidegger is famously uninterested in existentiell aspects of human being except insofar as they can disclose matters related to *Da-sein*'s fundamental existential being.

<sup>350</sup> Bret Davis, “Translator's Forward” to *Country Path Conversations*, by Martin Heidegger (Bloomington: Indiana, 2010), xi.

<sup>351</sup> Davis, *Heidegger and the Will*, xxiv.

or productively used—to things themselves. This accords with Heidegger’s description of phenomenology in the Introduction to *Being and Time*, where he defines phenomenology as “to let what shows itself be seen from itself, just as it shows itself from itself.”<sup>352</sup> Accordingly, being released to things means letting things show themselves so that they appear as they are even if how they are does not correspond to one’s usual understanding of them.

In his 1953 essay, “The Question Concerning Technology,” Heidegger carries out just such a reflection on a hydroelectric plant on the Rhine River whose energy the plant harnesses. People do not often reflect upon the meanings of power plants; they usually just pass them by, unnoticing, as unremarkable parts of the modern world. When a person is *gelassen*, normal, everyday objects might strike her in new ways. In the essay, Heidegger sees the power plant as an exemplar of the ordering and production inherent in the modern technological way things are revealed. The hydroelectric plant is the harnesser of the river’s energy. This also discloses the modern technological mindset that sees the Rhine as a source of energy rightfully commanded by humans.<sup>353</sup> *Gelassenheit* may have allowed Heidegger to let the hydroelectric plant and Rhine be, so that they could disclose their technological meanings to him.

*Gelassenheit* more explicitly takes place for the interlocutors in the triadic *Country Path Conversation*. In this *Conversation*, the things to which the interlocutors become released are the conversation itself and its topic, thinking. The Guide suggests that the interlocutors participate in a sort of non-willing instead of willfully planning out the course of their conversation and forcing it in a certain direction. In the course of their discussion, they

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<sup>352</sup> Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 30.

<sup>353</sup> Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper, 1977), 16.



become released from forcefully directing their talk. They allow the conversation to move on its own and allow themselves to engage in it, wherever it goes. They become released to its movement and the topics that appear there. If *Gelassenheit* allows people to let things be so that things can appear in new ways, it might allow people to experience prompts more readily and to follow out the thinking that can result from them. By becoming *gelassen*, people might thus become more prone to critical-reflective thinking.

*Gelassenheit*, thus, increases peoples' openness to encountering things in ways that are not based on their presuppositions. When people realize *Gelassenheit*, they let things be rather than automatically understanding them via their presuppositions. This opens the possibility that something could appear in a way that would challenge their understanding. Such a challenge could then prompt a person to think and to consider her presuppositions.

Heidegger offers an example of this process in the triadic *Country Path Conversation*, where one of the interlocutors, the Scientist, becomes *gelassen* (released) in the course of the conversation and leaves behind his initial understanding of thinking. At the beginning of the dialogue, the Scientist understands thinking as cognition. Once the conversation partners have allowed the conversation to take its course, however, they consider other possible ways of understanding thinking. Eventually, the Scientist "summarizes" what the interlocutors have discovered: "Thinking would then be a coming-into-nearness to the far."<sup>354</sup> By this, the Scientist means that thinking is an activity in which a thinker becomes closer to something that is usually far away. What is usually far away and unapparent shows itself and the thinker gains insight into it. This is a clear departure from his presupposition that the essence of thinking is cognition. Furthermore, when asked by the Guide and Scholar how he was able to devise this new notion of thinking, the Scientist describes his

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<sup>354</sup> Heidegger, "A Triadic Conversation," 76, 75.

experience as becoming “released [*losgelassen*] from representing” and “released over to [*überlassen*] the open-region.”<sup>355</sup> Though the etymological relationship between *losgelassen*, *überlassen*, and *Gelassenheit* is obvious, the Guide also clarifies what the Scientist means: “You attempted, if I surmise correctly, to let yourself be involved in releasement.”<sup>356</sup> Though this statement may make it appear as though people can realize *Gelassenheit* through attempts to do so, the interlocutors agree that *Gelassenheit* has been occasioned by their conversation. That is, they did not cause it but were, rather, brought “onto that path which seems to be nothing other than releasement itself” in their conversation.<sup>357</sup>

According to Heidegger, the difficulty in attaining *Gelassenheit* is that it is an “attunement” or “mood” (*Stimmung*). Attunements cannot be realized by sheer will. In *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, Heidegger offers general descriptions of what he means by attunement: “Attunement is [...] the way of our being there with one another” as well as with things.<sup>358</sup> Attunements (e.g., liveliness or grief) affect people like moods. They color a person’s atmosphere, giving it a certain quality. “A human being who,” for example, “is in good humour brings a lively atmosphere with them” while one who grieves might bring sadness and emptiness along when encountering others and things.<sup>359</sup> In addition, attunement constitutes contexts in which people go about; it is not a “side-effect of our thinking, doing, and acting. It is [...] the ‘medium’ within which [such things] first happen.”<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid.

<sup>357</sup> Ibid.

<sup>358</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana, 1995), 66.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> Ibid., 67-68.

Daniel Dahlstrom, author of *The Heidegger Dictionary*, interprets attunements as follows: “Moods are different ways in which we are oriented to this or that [...]. They affect how the world and entities within the world appear to us, e.g. as inviting or irritating, enthralling or threatening.”<sup>361</sup> An attunement (or, mood) provides a “state of mind” that colors how a person experiences things.<sup>362</sup> In addition to grief and liveliness, Heidegger describes other attunements such as fear, anxiety, and boredom. We can imagine how each of these would bear on how a person goes about. Fear, for example, might make things around one appear scarier than usual and, perhaps, motivate one to avoid places or people that might contribute to one’s unease. When one is bored, Heidegger says, “*time* becomes drawn out” and one might attempt to escape boredom by “welcoming highly important and essential preoccupations for the sole reason that they take up [one’s] time.”<sup>363</sup> The attunement of *Gelassenheit* mediates one’s world by neutralizing how things usually appear, that is, on the basis of human presuppositions, knowledge, or desire. In *Gelassenheit*, a person allows things to be and to appear from out of themselves.

For Heidegger, attunements are neither “matters [...] of our choice nor our making.”<sup>364</sup> “Instead,” Dahlstrom writes, “they come over us as a part of our thrownness into the world,” and “if we try to adopt a certain attitude toward others, we may tap into or awaken latent moods, but the mere decision to adopt such an attitude cannot of itself produce a mood.”<sup>365</sup> Heidegger poses the rhetorical questions: “Attunements—are they not something we can least of all invent, something that comes over us, something that we

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<sup>361</sup> Daniel Dahlstrom, “Mood (*Stimmung*),” in *The Heidegger Dictionary* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 133.

<sup>362</sup> Ibid.

<sup>363</sup> Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 78-79.

<sup>364</sup> Dahlstrom, “Mood,” 133.

<sup>365</sup> Ibid.

cannot simply call up? Do they not form of their own accord, as something we cannot forcibly bring about, but into which we slip unawares?”<sup>366</sup> His answer is as follows: “If so, then we cannot and may not forcibly bring about such an attunement artificially or arbitrarily, if we are going to allow it to be an attunement. It must already be there.”<sup>367</sup>

Bret Davis, in his book, *Heidegger and the Will: On the Way to Gelassenheit*, focuses on the attunement at hand. In describing *Gelassenheit*, Davis goes even further than Dahlstrom, defining it as a “fundamental attunement.” For Davis, fundamental attunements constitute what we know as human life. Fundamental attunements are more than moods that can change day-to-day. They shape the way people see and go about the world so deeply that altering a fundamental attunement would amount to a radical shift in their way of being. *Gelassenheit*, as Davis describes it, is “non-willing,” which cannot “be determined as willing, not-willing, deferred-willing, or covert-wiling.”<sup>368</sup> Each of these is still a type of willing, whereas non-willing involves a radical separation from the will. Davis writes, “the prefix ‘non-,’ as distinct from the simple negation of a ‘not-’ or the polar opposition of an ‘anti-,’ expresses a *radical negation*; and thus ‘non-willing’ would indicate a region of *Gelassenheit* outside and other than the entire domain of the will.”<sup>369</sup> These statements represent Davis’s central thesis that *Gelassenheit*—though attempts to fully understand it without, separation from the standpoint of willing, which is the fundamental attunement that defines contemporary life and thought, are hopeless—is a state beyond “activity and passivity.”<sup>370</sup> In

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<sup>366</sup> Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics*, 59.

<sup>367</sup> Ibid.

<sup>368</sup> Davis, *Heidegger and the Will*, 23.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid.

<sup>370</sup> The idea that contemporary human life is defined by willing is echoed by Heidegger’s writings on technology (where humans are continuously involved in ordering resources in order to generate and store more resources that can be tapped at later times) and Western metaphysics (subject and object are always opposed, with one acting upon the other).

fact, entering this state requires “twisting free” from our contemporary way of being and a “leap” into a new beginning.<sup>371</sup> According to Heidegger, radical shifts such as this are not possible except through a new sending of being. A new “granting,” wherein a way of being and revealing of beings is granted, cannot be realized through human activities alone.<sup>372</sup> It must take place as an event.<sup>373</sup>

Though Davis argues that becoming *gelassen*, in the sense of non-willing, requires a radical shift, he also suggests that *Gelassenheit* could be something less extreme, namely, a practical stance that allows people to comport themselves toward other people and beings more attentively. *Gelassenheit* as a practical stance is not something Heidegger describes. To justify considering *Gelassenheit* thus, Davis notes that his project attempts to think after Heidegger. In an article published in *Martin Heidegger: Key Concepts*, Davis considers *Gelassenheit* as it relates to the will. At the end of the article, he writes:

what might a “democracy to come” (Derrida) look like were it to be infused with an interpersonal attunement of *Gelassenheit*? Presumably, such a politics of non-willing would take the form of a democracy based on mutually attentive conversation rather than intersubjective litigation, a dialogical sharing of voices rather than procedural compromises between will-fully antagonistic subjectivities.<sup>374</sup>

In this passage, Davis claims that if *Gelassenheit* were realized in political life, people might more often discuss and explore matters together, rather than carrying out contentious proceedings that are oriented toward serving their individual agendas. We might not wish to go so far—as Davis does—as to disparage willing or take up the idealistic view that people

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<sup>371</sup> Heidegger describes “twisting free” and “the leap” in *Contributions to Philosophy (of the Event)* and another major middle work, *The Event*.

<sup>372</sup> Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 33.

<sup>373</sup> Like a new destining of revealing as described in “The Question Concerning Technology.”

<sup>374</sup> Bret Davis, “Will and *Gelassenheit*,” in *Martin Heidegger: Key Concepts*, ed. Bret Davis (New York: Routledge, 2014), 180.

might abandon subjectivity in order to work together. Davis's description of how *Gelassenheit* could work in a political context still, however, indicates that the term "*Gelassenheit*" is a good name for an attitude that can be adopted and developed. Davis anticipates this idea and elaborates *Gelassenheit* along these lines. He writes,

But could such a political attunement be established? How could it, after all, be regulated, much less enforced? Perhaps, rather, we must continuously find ways to resolutely yet gently infuse the safety-net proceduralism of liberal democracy with a fundamental attunement of *Gelassenheit* through meditative thinking and practice, responsive education and responsible social critique, and the cultivation of forums for open-minded conversation between individuals and groups. A fully engaged *Gelassenheit* would in these ways be always on the way to carefully letting other humans, among other beings, be.<sup>375</sup>

Davis proposes that *Gelassenheit* as a political attunement can be developed through practical actions. People can cultivate it, he says, through meditative thinking and practice, responsive education, responsible social critique, and dialogue in open-minded forums. Even if a person cannot compel herself to be gripped by the attunement of *Gelassenheit*, she can in principle approach things with an attitude of *Gelassenheit*. She can adopt an attitude of *Gelassenheit* by consciously inquiring into and exploring whatever she experiences rather than presumptively understanding and treating them as she usually does. Inquiring into things with openness to the possibility that they might appear otherwise than one usually encounters them avails one of the possibility that they might pose challenges to one's understanding and prompt critical-reflective thinking. Such openness can contribute to one's ability to exercise receptivity by more readily heeding prompts. After the following section, I will return to a discussion of Heidegger's understanding of meditative thinking and practice to show how it can facilitate the development of an open attitude. I put this topic

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<sup>375</sup> Ibid.

on hold to first discuss wakeful attentiveness, another cultivation strategy that can also be developed through the practice of meditative thinking.

#### FOSTERING WAKEFUL ATTENTIVENESS

Arendt and Thoreau both treat actively attending to phenomena as central to thinking. Indeed, by paying attention to whatever is going on around one, one is particularly open to things that might issue prompts. Though Arendt calls it “attention” and Thoreau calls it “wakefulness,” they both describe it as a kind of “listening,” to oneself or other phenomena. I have combined their terms and call this active mental awareness of phenomena “wakeful attentiveness.” Being wakefully attentive is different from simply having an open attitude. Whereas adopting an open attitude makes one available to see things in ways other than how they initially present themselves (i.e., in accord with one’s presuppositions), wakeful attentiveness is active listening and observation. When a person is attentive, she is more aware of the things and people around her as well as her own experiences. If she is both open (in the sense of *Gelassenheit*) and attentively aware, the concentrated focus she gives to things around her can facilitate their striking her in new ways. Wakeful attentiveness might allow a person’s experiences to strike her as prompts or to offer evidence relevant to considering presuppositions. In what follows, I will discuss Arendt’s and Thoreau’s views in turn and show how wakeful attentiveness encourages critical-reflective thinking.

In *Willing*, the second volume of *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt provides a description of how attention works at the base level of perception and shows how attentive perception is a prerequisite for critical examination. For Arendt, attentiveness is fundamental to thinking because it allows one to perceive objects for thought, including one’s own thoughts. In *Willing*, she describes Augustine’s views on perception. Augustine distinguished between

three things that make up perception: the object perceived, the vision (or other sense experience) of the object, and “the power that fixes the sense [...] on the object.”<sup>376</sup> Arendt asserts that the power Augustine mentions is a matter of will and calls it the “attention of the mind.”<sup>377</sup> She writes: “Without the latter, a function of the Will, we have only sensory “impressions” without any actual perceiving of them [...]. The “attention of the mind” is needed to transform sensation into perception.”<sup>378</sup> Here, sensation can be interpreted as consciousness of something while perception is thematic noticing. This is clear when Arendt says “*attention*” “first unites our sense organs with the real world in a meaningful way, and then drags, as it were, this outside world into ourselves and prepares it for further mental operations: to be remembered, to be understood, to be asserted or denied.”<sup>379</sup> We may think of perception as a fairly baseline activity, under Arendt’s description it is a fundamental prerequisite of more complex considerations. Focusing attention on whatever appears brings it to mind so as to make it available to be examined in thought. If one does not attend to the things one experiences, they might remain mere impressions, affecting one in some way without becoming available for reflective criticism. According to Arendt, consequently, paying attention to things by bringing them into thematic awareness, is a prerequisite for thinking about them.

Augustine’s explanation of perception bears on critical-reflective thinking because attentiveness increases explicit awareness of objects, which in turn increases the likelihood that they will prompt one or that one will discover things to weigh in questioning presuppositions. Arendt relates Augustine’s statements about the importance of

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<sup>376</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Willing*, vol. 2, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 100.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid.



attentiveness closer to her understanding of thinking by also showing how attentiveness can help one have a thoughtful dialogue with oneself. She does this by citing Kant's *Anthropology*. In the *Anthropology*, Kant describes thinking as "talking with oneself [...] hence also inwardly listening."<sup>380</sup> By listening to one's own thoughts, one becomes aware of the ways in which one initially understands something. This process could disclose a presupposition. Thematic awareness of what one takes as true can also sometimes alert one to the possibility that what it concerns could be otherwise. Perhaps such attentive listening facilitated Arendt's own formulation and investigation of the philosophical and political questions that struck her.

Arendt's close attention to Eichmann's statements and the actions of others in Nazi Germany allowed her to consider and critique the traditional notion of evil. Thoreau, too, exhibited great self-awareness in his writing, which are highly detailed personal accounts of his experiences and thoughts. In two chapters of *Walden*, "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" and "Sounds," Thoreau also thematically takes up wakefulness. His account of wakefulness adds to the theoretical understanding of wakeful attentiveness provided by Arendt. In addition, Thoreau's description of hearing the sounds of the railroad nearby Walden Pond demonstrates how wakeful attention facilitated his own critical reflections.

According to Thoreau, attentiveness is like a wakeful state wherein ideas might dawn on one, similar to the dawning of the sun in the morning: "Morning is when I am awake and there is a dawn in me."<sup>381</sup> For him, a person can experience the wakefulness of the morning anytime throughout the day since it occurs whenever she is attentively engaged with the world around her. In "Where I Lived, and What I Lived For" Thoreau writes: "The

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<sup>380</sup> Arendt, *Thinking*, 186.

<sup>381</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 87.

morning wind forever blows, the poem of creation is uninterrupted; but few are the ears that hear it.”<sup>382</sup> He echoes the idea that people are not often awake enough to see, hear, read, experience, or contemplate the world around them when he writes, “The millions are awake enough for physical labor; but only one in a million is awake enough for effective intellectual exertion, only one in a hundred millions to a poetic or divine life.”<sup>383</sup> The dearth of wakefulness in society warns of the “danger of forgetting the language which all things and events speak without metaphor.”<sup>384</sup> That things and events might speak to us by virtue of their non-metaphorical factual existence means that they might strike us or reveal some meaning. When a thing speaks to a person, consequently, she might notice it for the first time or see it in a new way. A thing or event might also reveal historical connections or make a person aware of her own understanding. Though a thing or event speaking to one might not lead to critical-reflective thinking, it can prompt thought about how one had understood it and prompt one to begin questioning a presupposition. This process is less likely if people are not wakefully attentive to things or events.

Thoreau does not claim that things and events have the same things to say to every person. As Jeffrey Cramer, an editor of *Walden* notes, Thoreau wrote in his journals that there are “manifold visions in the direction of every object.”<sup>385</sup> It is not only the thing that speaks, but a person’s vision that makes it say something specific. So, a thing’s significance varies for different people. Being awake simply means listening to what a thing or event is saying. Finding out what things or events have to say requires wakeful attentiveness: “No

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<sup>382</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., 87. This passage also connects wakefulness with thinking insofar as thinking falls into the category of “effective intellectual exertion.”

<sup>384</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>385</sup> Cramer, “Editorial Footnotes,” 108f. Thoreau, *Journal*, 1:47-48.

method nor discipline can supersede the necessity of being forever on the alert.”<sup>386</sup> For Thoreau, being on the alert allows things like the sounds of a train to take on meaning for him. Not only do they express meanings, they also prompt him to question his previous ignorance of their meaning and significance in his society. That is, they prompt him to critically reflect upon how he had understood the railroad prior to noticing it in his state of wakefulness.

While giving an account of the sounds he heard one day while sitting at his window, he remarks upon the train’s whistle and the rattling of the cars passing by Walden Pond. The sounds of the train had significance for Thoreau beyond the fact that a train was passing by. They also meant that people and goods (groceries, lumber, berries, silk, wool, fabric, cotton, and books) were arriving in town. Thoreau worries, however, that people do not use the new efficiency of transportation afforded by the railroad for “noble ends.”<sup>387</sup> It ends up that the goods are what is important. The importance of the goods, however, overshadows detrimental consequences of collecting or producing and shipping them. Thoreau voices concern that “All the Indian huckleberry hills are stripped, all the cranberry meadows are raked into the city” and that even though the city imports more books, “down goes the wit that writes them.”<sup>388</sup> Goods must be brought to the cities no matter what the consequences. Moreover, during Thoreau’s time, the train schedule began to regulate time in America. People would “set their clocks by” the trains.<sup>389</sup> Understanding time and the activities of one’s day “‘railroad fashion’ [...] construct[s] a fate, an *Atropos*, that never turns aside.”<sup>390</sup>

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<sup>386</sup> Thoreau, *Walden*, 108.

<sup>387</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.*, 112-113.

<sup>389</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>390</sup> *Ibid.*, 115. As Cramer notes, Atropos is the name of one of the Greek fates whose name means “never turn aside” (Cramer, “Editorial Footnotes,” 115f).

People hurry down the tracks that have been laid out before impervious to diversion. By wakefully attending to the sounds he hears, Thoreau considers their meaning. This also allows him to critique presuppositions that he and others around him might have held. They bring on a dawn in him whereby he hears not only the whistle and rattle of the trains, but also their significance as commercial forces and shapers of American culture. Such considerations can challenge presuppositions concerning the positivity of technological advancements and the consequences of such advancements for American commerce and culture.

Arendt analyzes attentiveness as a primary prerequisite of thoughtful engagement. Thoreau describes wakefulness as a type of mindfulness in which people are sharply aware of phenomena. By encouraging the awareness of oneself and other phenomena, wakeful attentiveness strongly bears on critical-reflective thinking. Being wakefully attentive means intentionally engaging (or at least going about with the expectation of engaging) with whatever strikes one. If one is attentive, something might strike one as a prompt or, after one has accepted a prompt's invitation, disclose a presupposition. Moreover, attending to things allows them to become fodder for thought rather than simply passing them by without notice. I have alluded to ways in which people can practice wakeful attentiveness by discussing Thoreau's imperative, always be on the alert! In the following section, I turn to a fuller consideration of practical methods that can encourage development of an open and attentive approach to the world.

#### *Developing Openness and Attentiveness*

Thoreau offers a vehemently optimistic view that people can change the way the world appears by taking up open and attentive approaches to what they experience. In the

following passage, he expresses how a person's practical efforts can make a difference to how the world appears:

I know of no more encouraging fact than the unquestionable ability of man to elevate his life by a conscious endeavor. It is something to be able to paint a particular picture, or to carve a statue, and so to make a few objects beautiful; but it is far more glorious to carve and paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look, which morally we can do. To affect the quality of the day, that is the highest of arts.<sup>391</sup>

For Thoreau, people can affect this atmosphere by taking up an "infinite expectation of the dawn."<sup>392</sup> By this, Thoreau means that taking up the expectation that something might dawn on one at any moment, one colors the way experiences are mediated. This idea echoes Thoreau's notion that wakefulness can be cultivated by always being on the alert. Going about with the expectation that anytime something might appear in a new way makes one more prone to actually experiencing prompts and/or so experiencing things as to challenge one's usual understanding.

In what ways, however, can people learn to "paint the very atmosphere and medium through which we look" by cultivating a new open and attentive approach to life? Simply deciding to be alert may be easier said than done. Thoreau himself places great stake in practicing observation. His time in the woods provided many occasions for listening and watching nature around him. In the chapter titled, "Brute Neighbors," he discusses some of his experiences observing animals. These experiences taught him that "you only need to sit still long enough in some attractive spot in the woods that all its inhabitants may exhibit themselves to you by turns."<sup>393</sup> One might take this as the recommendation to simply sit and observe what is taking place around one in order to develop attentiveness. The

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<sup>391</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid., 219.

possibility of sitting still and attending to things is related to cultivating solitude and leisure, as discussed above. People can establish material conditions that are conducive to critical-reflective thinking. They might physically leave society and sit somewhere alone without a task in mind as a way to allow prompts and presuppositions to present themselves. Heidegger, however, also describes a type of thinking that can help people practice openness and attentiveness. The type of thinking he describes is “meditation” (or “meditative thinking”).

In the “Memorial Address,” Heidegger describes meditation as a practice that people can take up. Though he proposes that meditative thinking may awaken *Gelassenheit*, *Gelassenheit* is not a necessary bi-product of meditation. In the following I will set aside *Gelassenheit* as attunement and instead show that practicing meditation requires adopting an open attitude and being attentive. If an open attitude and attentiveness are required for meditation, and meditation is something people can practice, by practicing it, they can realize the two cultivation strategies.

According to Heidegger, meditation is an activity with three distinctive features. To meditate means to inquire into the meanings of things, to not “cling one-sidedly to a single idea, nor run down a one-track course of ideas,” and to “engage...with what at first sight does not go together at all.”<sup>394</sup> Taking up an open attitude is required in meditative thinking because one must allow things to present themselves in new ways rather than forcing them to conform to one’s present understanding or expectations (one may not cling one-sidedly to an idea about them). In meditation people also realize attentiveness precisely by inquiring about the meanings of specific things. Such inquiry involves paying attention to what something is, what it means, and what it says to one. The clearest example of meditation is

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid., 53.

in the triadic *Country Path Conversation*, where Heidegger often employs the word “meditation” to describe what the interlocutors are doing. In the *Conversation*, the interlocutors are involved in inquiring into the nature of thinking when they discover that their conversation requires not strictly clinging to this topic but, instead, exploring other topics that come up along the way. They then allow themselves to converse about the topic of willing when it comes up in their conversation. Although willing does not seem to be related to thinking, by pursuing this seemingly unrelated topic they also eventually discover more about the nature of thinking.

Although the requirements of not clinging one-sidedly to an idea and of engaging with seemingly unconnected topics might appear to require an open mood from the start, one need not be *gelassen* prior to meditating. In a moment of uncharacteristic optimism, Heidegger proclaims that all people can take part in meditative thinking by taking it up as a practice when he says,

...anyone can follow the path of meditative thinking in his own manner and within his own limits...meditative thinking need by no means be “high-flown.” It is enough if we dwell on what lies close and meditate on what is closest; upon that which concerns us, each one of us, here and now; here, on this patch of home ground; now, in the present hour of history.<sup>395</sup>

In the “Memorial Address,” Heidegger even suggests that he and his audience “give it a trial” together.<sup>396</sup> Simply by inquiring into what lies near and what it means, people can start along the path of meditation. Openness and attentiveness inhere in this practice of inquiry that does not hold tightly to the objects under consideration.

In meditative thinking, people practice wakeful attentiveness by dwelling upon whatever lies near. On the occasion of the “Address,” which was a commemoration of

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<sup>395</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid., 53.

composer Conradin Kreutzer's 175<sup>th</sup> birthday, Heidegger invites those in attendance to participate in a meditation on the nature of commemorative celebrations, like the one in which they are involved. He instigates an attentive inquiry into this nearby phenomenon while remaining open to other topics that present themselves along the way. Heidegger's inquiry finds its way to the topic of thinking via an exploration of the nature of memorial events, which require thinking back and, thus, thinking.

This leads Heidegger into a critique of what he considers to be the type of thought that prevails in the modern world: calculative thinking. Calculative thinking stands in strong opposition to meditative thinking because in it, humans "plan, research, and organize" on the basis of "conditions that are given" in order to "serv[e] specific purposes."<sup>397</sup> By presupposing the worthiness or propriety of certain ends, calculative thinking neither stops to consider these aims nor its own way of approaching things. Things are at its disposal for use in achieving presupposed ends. Heidegger agrees that calculative thinking is useful in achieving many practical goals. Its prevalence, however, threatens to dominate all of human thought and, thereby, to obstruct the possibility of meditative thinking. Meditative thinking is important because it can inquire into the meaning of the aims calculative thought takes as given.<sup>398</sup> By attentively and openly meditating on the commemorative celebration in the "Address," Heidegger comes to the state of modern thought. Through meditation, he both illuminates and critiques the modern situation.

If openness and attentiveness are necessary aspects of meditation, people can practice having an open attitude and being wakefully attentive. Meditation is an activity in

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<sup>397</sup> Heidegger, "Memorial Address," 46.

<sup>398</sup> There are likely other types of thinking, besides what Heidegger calls "meditative thinking," that similarly inquire into what people often taken as given. Since Heidegger is under consideration here, I allow his description of such thinking to motivate the discussion.



which people can take part through their own efforts. Though gaining skill at meditation may take effort and practice, people could start by looking around themselves and inquire into the meaning of what lies near. By allowing their thoughts to take up other ideas as they come along, people can practice openness. This could likely be achieved through conversation, in writing, by thinking to oneself, or taking part in self-conversation as Arendt and Plato propose. As Plato suggests, thinking is merely “a talk the soul has with objects under its consideration.”<sup>399</sup> A person could actualize openness in such a talk by allowing herself to consider other ideas that come up along the way, even if they do not seem to be related to topic at hand. In the process of so meditating, one might experience an idea that prompts critical reflection. Furthermore, practicing open attentiveness in this way might allow a person to develop skill in adopting an open attitude and being wakefully attentive in other contexts.

#### ON VIRTUE AND HABIT

The strategies for the cultivation of critical-reflective thinking discussed above in no way constitute an exhaustive list. One further strategy of which I and the other authors, excluding Plato, only graze the surface is self-development through the cultivation of virtues. Virtue theory, especially as in Plato and Aristotle, could valuably contribute to a study of self-development both through its method of habituation and by suggesting other traits whose development might encourage critical-reflective thinking. I have described the possibility of cultivating openness and receptivity by practicing them in specific activities. The more often one practices having an open attitude and attending to things, the more likely these are to become part of one’s general comportment. Arendt suggests that thinking itself is something people can habituate when she describes it as “the *habit* of examining

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<sup>399</sup> Plato, *Theaetetus*, 189e.

whatever happens to come to pass or to attract attention.”<sup>400</sup> A person might habituate herself to think, for instance, by taking part in self-conversation or meditative thinking.

It is not just the process of habituation, but additionally the virtues such as courage, humility, and fortitude acquired through habituation that might help a person gain openness, receptivity, and aptitude for the critical examination of presuppositions. Courage, for example, could combat various fears associated with or arising out of thinking: the fear of questioning a presupposition one deeply holds, the fear of the unknown conclusion of thinking, or the fear of negative repercussions that might come with defeating a presupposition and acting differently subsequent to thinking. A courageous person would be more apt both to engage a prompt even if it is not an experience she usually undergoes and to consider alternative views (including that one’s presupposition could be unworthy or false) even if this could have many or deep implications for her life. By being bold in examining presuppositions, a person exercises receptivity. Humility, meanwhile, can make one more open to the possibility that one’s own view might be faulty, incomplete, or possible to improve. This virtue thus facilitates a person earnestly engaging other views and not stubbornly holding to her own view. Fortitude, finally, could help one forge ahead even when thinking presents difficulties. Critical-reflective thinking can be a taxing process, and fortitude might supply the necessary endurance. Fortitude, rather than contributing to openness or receptivity, increases a person’s aptitude for taking part in critical-reflective thinking.

Since these virtues foster critical-reflective thinking, we should seek to develop them. For Aristotle, the father of virtue theory, developing virtues requires continual practice. Only by acting in ways that accord with virtues can one habituate oneself to the virtues such

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<sup>400</sup> Arendt, *Thinking*, 5 (my emphasis).

that virtuous action becomes ingrained and the virtue part of one's character. If one wants to be courageous, for example, one must practice being courageous by facing fears, which is not the same, of course, as acting fearlessly in the sense of being rash or foolish.<sup>401</sup> To practice being courageous, one might choose something small that one is afraid of and face it. To develop courage in the context of thinking, one could choose an idea that one is not completely comfortable questioning and examine it in thought. One could, for example, take up the nihilistic moment (that Arendt says is essential to thinking) with regard to one of one's own opinions and scrutinize it in thought, though doing so might make one uncomfortable.

Fortitude can also be developed through practice. Although people cannot compel prompts and intentionally instigate critical-reflective thinking, they can practice other mentally taxing activities that would help them develop an ability to endure through its sometimes long or arduous course. In Book VII of the *Republic*, Plato sets forth a model for the philosopher kings of the *kallipolis*. Socrates proposes that in addition to intensive and lengthy physical training, study in mathematics, and a political practicum, potential kings should be trained in dialectic for five years. Although, for Socrates, the main goal of training in argumentation is to develop the possibility of seeking the good and the true,<sup>402</sup> such training can also be interpreted as practice in the movement of dialectic. Through training in argumentation, a person can practice taking up one side, considering another, and defending what one (upon consideration) takes as true. People can also practice mental endurance by,

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<sup>401</sup> This refers to Aristotle's stipulation of the "golden mean" as the only way to act virtuously. Acting virtuously means practicing a virtue under proper conditions (in the right way, at the right time, and in the right place) and not taking a virtue's dictates to any extreme. In courage, the extremes are facing a fear though one knows it would be rash and running from a fear because one is not completely certain that it is something one can overcome.

<sup>402</sup> Plato, *Republic*, 539c.

among other things, reading, writing, or performing activities that require problem solving. Reading can require sustained attention on ideas that are not one's own, whereas in writing one can engage with one's own thoughts. Practicing problem solving (by, for example, playing games or doing projects that require abstract and creative thinking) can help one develop trust in one's ability think out of tricky spots rather than giving up. Though practicing problem solving in these ways may conflict with the openness and receptivity supplied by leisure (i.e. focusing not on reaching particular goals), having the virtue of fortitude does not mean continuously being involved in activities that require the achievement of some end. Rather, people can bring the virtue of fortitude into leisure activities. This makes it possible for a person to accept the invitation of a prompt that requires diversion and to then carry out thinking with endurance. Through practice, people can develop habits and aptitudes, such as humility, that could make them better able to thoroughly question presuppositions.

Gadamer describes humility when he writes: "The soul of hermeneutics consists in the possibility that the other might be right." Earnestly taking part in hermeneutics means allowing, from the start, that the other person or view might be right. It might turn out, of course, that the other is not right. But only by earnestly encountering and thinking about otherness can one weigh its merits and deficiencies and not obscure the possibility that it has something from which one can learn or is better than one's own view. The humility that can be helpful in thinking, however, does not require self-effacement. One need not abandon one's own views or presuppositions when other views present themselves and another more worthy view might exist. Being humble means not accepting or embracing other views immediately, but instead considering whether they have merit. The conclusion of critical-reflective thinking can be that one's presupposition is worth retaining.

In the context of thinking, as in all contexts, becoming more humble requires practicing humility. One can do this by giving other views and ideas audience, allowing that they might be right even if one is not initially attracted to them. Or, again, one could practice what Arendt described as the necessary moment of nihilism. Arendt claimed that the process of thinking requires a moment of nihilism. Her and Gadamer's views might be interpreted as two sides of the same coin: allowing that another view might be right requires provisional skepticism of one's own view.

The more often and consistently one practices relevant virtues such as courage, humility, and fortitude, the more likely the virtues are to become part of one's character. The more ensconced a virtue is in one's character, the more likely it will affect one's approach and response to situations one encounters.<sup>403</sup> According to Aristotelian virtue theory, virtues can become part of one's character via a process of habituation. Once a virtue is part of one's character, one will not have to put forth effort or consciously choose to practice it, for it will guide one's actions automatically. Even if a virtue does not become deeply habituated, practicing it might still increase a person's ability to recognize how and when to do so. A person who experiences a prompt might be better able to accept its invitation if she has practiced courage even if critical-reflective thinking is not an activity with which she is well acquainted. Even if she does not know what to expect and is afraid of what will happen in thought, she might take it up courageously, welcoming its challenge.

One aspect of Aristotelian virtue theory that may make it less attractive as a strategy for cultivating critical-reflective thinking is Aristotle's idea that material conditions affect a person's ability to develop virtues. He writes that one's upbringing, financial situation, and the amount of free time one has can affect one's ability to develop virtues. These factors

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<sup>403</sup> A person must also have some amount of *phronēsis* in order to discern relevant situations.

might hamper certain people from developing virtue. If one has not had the ideal upbringing, for example, one's attempts to develop some virtues might be precluded by the time that one becomes aware of the desire to do so. If Aristotle is right, it follows that everyone cannot develop the virtues to the same extent. This situation should not, however, discourage people from attempting to develop them. For, even if one's upbringing, finances, and amount of free time are not ideal, one can still, through practice and effort, to some extent, habituate oneself to be virtuous. In any case, the desire to practice and cultivate humility, courage, and fortitude is not likely to decrease one's proficiency in thinking critically-reflectively.

## CONCLUSIONS

Though I cannot do virtue theory justice here, its primary thesis that people can develop themselves through practice and habituation is relevant for each of the cultivation strategies discussed above. By setting up material conditions that are conducive to solitude and leisure, and by consistently practicing activities that require the adoption of an open attitude and wakeful attentiveness, one may develop openness and receptivity and thereby increase the likelihood of critical-reflective thinking. Furthermore, one may gain aptitudes relevant to critical-reflective thinking by developing skills and comportments relevant to its practice.

Furthermore, if people so practice openness, receptivity, and aptitude for critical-reflective thinking that these things become habitual, people may lead their lives more prone to think. An ethos of openness and receptivity supports the continual possibility of critical-reflective thinking. It promotes a welcoming and attentive way of being in everyday life that facilitates consciously taking up critical-reflective thinking when the occasion arises. Having this ethos does not, however, imply that one take up every prompt that comes one's way.

Inhabiting the world with open receptivity does not necessitate leading a life of pure reflection but, rather, remaining available for critical, self-reflective thought and sometimes engaging in it.

As described in Chapter Two, critically-reflectively examining presuppositions promotes growth in understanding and liberation to new and different possibilities. These conditions are valuable because they allow people to more deeply understand themselves, others, and the world and to become aware of new ways of seeing and living. By analyzing instances of critical-reflective thinking in the works of Plato, Heidegger, Arendt, and Thoreau, four thinkers who closely attend to phenomena, this dissertation has articulated and specified a particular and important aspect of human life and experience. Beyond its contribution to the academic discourse surrounding the topic of thinking, this dissertation points ways forward regarding both the praxis and further investigation of critical-reflective thinking. In the remainder of this conclusion, I will briefly elaborate three possible paths for further investigation into the following topics: cultivating critical-reflective thinking, critical-reflective thinking and action, and typologizing thinking.

The first path concerns the cultivation of critical-reflective thinking. After having considered the phenomenon of critical-reflective thinking, people can, for one, facilitate critical-reflective thinking by taking practical steps to develop themselves in the ways described above. This should not, however, limit the other important project of further investigating how critical-reflective thinking might be cultivated. By further considering the development of openness and receptivity, people might come up with their own strategies beyond those discussed here. This might include the discovery of practices that one personally finds helpful for developing openness and receptivity. People might, for instance, discern additional circumstances that, like solitude and leisure, facilitate receptivity, as well as

other practical means by which they can realize an open attitude and wakeful attentiveness. Furthermore, people might uncover strategies that do not fit into the rubrics of openness and receptivity and, thus, discover that they must take up self-development in more ways than these in order to encourage critical-reflective thinking. A deeper analysis of the virtues could also reveal additional virtues that facilitate critical-reflective thinking, just as looking further into virtue *theory*, by providing greater insight into how people develop virtues, could reveal further or more specific ways to acquire them.

The second path is to consider how critical-reflective thinking is related to action in the world. This is a project in which Arendt was involved throughout her career. Arendt comments on the relation between thinking and acting in *The Human Condition*, where she compares the *vita activa* (the life of activity, composed of labor, work, and action) to the *vita contemplativa* (the life of the mind), and later in *The Life of the Mind*, where she contrasts thinking and willing. A question I have not deeply explored in this dissertation is whether people are likely to act on new possibilities to which they are liberated through critical-reflective thinking. There is also the additional question of whether the conditions that facilitate critical-reflective thinking enhance taking up new possibilities as well. An inquiry into these topics could include questions about what makes it more and less likely to act on new possibilities and what effects acting on new possibilities might have for life in the world and for the value of critical-reflective thinking overall. Understanding the relation of thinking to action could also better situate the role of critical-reflective thinking in a human life that is engaged in many activities besides thought.

The third and final path is the exploration of types of thinking. Critical-reflective thinking itself could be further investigated by seeking additional instances of critical-reflective thinking in the works of Plato, Heidegger, Arendt, and Thoreau. Since critical-



reflective thinking is, however, a common (though infrequent) phenomenon, examples of it can also likely be found in the works of other authors. Exploring this phenomenon could also occasion the disclosure of other types of thinking that can be differentiated, theorized, and explored in their own right. The discovery and/or elaboration of other types of thinking would permit a deeper understanding, not only of the various ways of thinking in which people participate, but also the distinct roles different types of thinking play in human life. Lastly, critical-reflective thinking and other types of thinking could be related back to more general descriptions of what thinking itself essentially is. This could help make sense of how the activities that constitute thought hang together and are all included in the singular phenomenon of thought. Moreover, typologizing thinking could provide content that would help better clarify the broader phenomenon of human thought.

Regardless of where the considerations taken up in this dissertation lead (e.g. to self-development, to considering thought and action, to a typology of thinking, or even to none of these), the reader will still likely undergo prompts and be invited to critically-reflectively consider his or her presuppositions. It is my hope that this dissertation makes people aware of the phenomenon of critical-reflective thinking so they might recognize it and consciously welcome its occurrence more often. Awareness of critical-reflective thinking not only allows people to further reflect upon and attend to the human experience of this type of thought, but also opens the way for growth and liberation, both of which constitute a more examined and intentional life.

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M.A., Philosophy, University of Kentucky, 2011  
B.A., Philosophy, Whitman College, 2008

*Professional Experience*

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Teaching Assistant, University of Kentucky, 2008-2014

*Honors*

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Ph.D. Research Scholarship 2014  
German Research Foundation  
Universität Freiburg Special Research Projects

Philosophy Department Fellowship 2013  
University of Kentucky

Heidelberg Exchange Scholarship 2009-2010  
University of Kentucky  
Karls-Ruprecht-Universität Heidelberg

APA Travel Grant 2012  
American Philosophical Association

Daniel R. Reedy Quality Achievement Award 2008-2010  
University of Kentucky

Washington Scholar Award 2004-2008  
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*Publications & Translations*

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“Arendt’s Phenomenology: Social-Political Thought and Ethical Life” in *Dialogue and Universalism*, (July 2015).

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