If the Truth Be Told of Techne: Techne as Ethical Knowledge

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Abstract

Here lies the real problem of moral knowledge that occupies Aristotle in his ethics. For we find action governed by knowledge in an exemplary form where the Greeks speak of techne. This is the skill, the knowledge of the craftsman who knows how to make some specific thing. The question is whether moral knowledge is knowledge of this kind. This would mean that it was knowledge of how to make oneself. Does man learn to make himself what he ought to be, in the same way that the craftsman learns to make things according to his plan and will.

What are the ethical possibilities of “techne?” To what extent is it a medium that facilitates ethical knowledge in social and political human thought and action? Gadamer suggests that techne as opposed to ethical knowledge is not a sufficient basis for ethical judgments because it is too far removed from Truth to meet genuinely ethical ends. On the contrary, Foucault finds that techne’s detached relationship with truth (or what poses as Truth) is precisely what makes ethics possible. Gadamer and Foucault, therefore, disagree about the worth of techne as a basis for ethics. Nevertheless, they do agree that ethics turns upon the question of whether or not the self internalizes knowledge. To examine Gadamer and Foucault’s opposing ideas about whether or not techne is a medium for ethics, I will initially look at Aristotle’s original distinction between “ethical knowledge” and techne. I will also illustrate the practical implications of their theories for ethical action by applying them throughout this paper to some contemporary social and political contexts. Gadmer’s concerns with the necessary shortcomings that are elicited through the use of techne in ethical contexts will be taken up; and, yet, I will also return to Foucault in order to establish that there is an equally necessary promise entailed in the ethical use of techne. In other words, I will suggest that the exclusive use of what Aristotle and Gadamer call “ethical knowledge” over techne (or vice versa) ultimately undermines the self’s ability to fully respond to the fluctuating social and political demands of ethical contexts. Given the technical difficulties associated with this conclusion, I will reconcile Gadamer and Foucault’s perspectives by showing how both types of knowledge can be either appropriate or inappropriate, because the appropriateness depends on the ethical demands of each new context. Finally, I will return to Heidegger, whose influence is profound in the works of both Gadamer and Foucault; I will reconcile their disparate stances on techne through a consideration of Heidegger’s ideas, in The Question Concerning Technology, wherein he suggests “questioning is the piety of thought.”

What is techne? Techne is art, and every art, according to Aristotle, “is concerned with bringing something into existence.” More precisely, it is characterized by production in that the artist’s aim is to produce. According to Aristotle, the moving principle or the eidos he attributes to art is said to occur “in the producer and not in the thing produced; for art is not concerned with things which exist or come to
be of necessity, nor with things which do so according to their nature, for these have the [moving] principle in themselves.”

Aristotle’s firm distinction between the genuses of production and action therefore excludes techne from other types of knowledge “by which the soul possesses truth.”

Knowledge that is action is unlike knowledge that is tied to production because action is an end in itself, whereas, the end of production is the product. As an end in itself, the eidos or the moving principle is the moment of knowledge that is action or action is the moment of the knowledge of the eidos. Action is also simply the moment of knowledge. To put it another way, the appropriate eidos occurs within the moment of a given action because every action is necessarily moved by its coinciding eidos. So too is the same action moved toward the same eidos which simultaneously is the end of the same action. For instance, if the self is good as a result of a developed “eye of the soul,” and finds itself faced with a situation concerning the possibility of doing good or evil, then as a necessary result of its developed soul, it is also moved toward the good by the knowledge that simultaneously is good and is action. In other words, when the self reaches this heightened state of knowledge, its actions are also tantamount with the eidos of good. The end of the eidos of good as it moves and resides in human action is necessarily one and the same with the goodness, or the eidos of good, which moved the self to action in the first place.

On the contrary, in the instance of production, the good end, as an object of art, does not occur in and of itself. Here, the end is produced by the artist who is first moved by the eidos of good and, as a result, goes on to mediate between this eidos and the material that will become the end object. The artist’s activity, as opposed to action, is a mere means by which the end (the good object) comes about. Thus, this end is detached from the eidos of good in a way that the ethical end of action is not. The artist’s activity in and of itself serves no end unless she creates a product. This basic ontological difference is what separates techne from what Aristotle calls ethical knowledge. Techne brings something into existence through the course of production. Ethical knowledge exists only in the duration of action that is itself an end in itself. Good action is ethical knowledge, whereas the good product, as the end result of an activity performed on material that, in turn, brings something into existence, is techne.

Gadamer, like Aristotle, maintains the distinction between techne and ethical knowledge. There are three reasons proposed by Gadamer that reinforce Aristotle’s distinction. The first has to do with the way in which ethical knowledge, as opposed to techne, occurs in the individual. According to Gadamer, techne is learnt and can be forgotten, and in this temporal sense it is a practical form of knowledge, or a knowing how, that can be acquired and exercised as a matter of choice. For instance, I can choose to pursue a knowledge of wood-working. Once gained, I can apply it to various projects of my choice. Or perhaps I may neglect to ever put it to use and, therefore, forget how to successfully perform this knowledge due to a lack of practice in the intricacies of wood-working which otherwise ensures the successful creation of wood products. The choice is mine. Ethical knowledge on the other hand is distinct in that it is not something that the self makes choices about or acquires in a practical manner. Ethical knowledge is also unlike techne because it is not transient; the existence of eidos is infinite and, thus, it is always ready for action. For Gadamer, ethical knowledge is not practical because it is “concrete” only in the instant of human action, whereas the existence of techne is realized, established, and maintained pre-production, during production, and post-production. Nor is ethical knowledge chosen, because the soul, insofar as it is developed, is literally moved by the eidos of good and not by the free will of the self. The self does not choose the right action but knows it as it experiences the eidos of good which moves it in the moment of action as a result of an ephemeral fusion between the soul and eidos.
Also setting ethical knowledge apart is Aristotle’s claim that techne does not entail equity, which pertains to whether or not the individual is given to acting or judging rightly relative to the circumstances of every context. According to Gadamer’s discussion of this Aristotelian concept, equity is a unique component of ethical knowledge in that it is what leaves “room for play.” This characteristic of play is determined by the nature of ethical knowledge and it is significant because it accounts for the diversity of action that is the end of one (True) knowledge. In other words, ethical knowledge and action is determined by because it must respond to the specificities of context. Play is the aspect of ethical knowledge that facilitates right action across changing contexts. For example, when faced with the question of lying, the right answer, although informed by the eidos of good, will largely be a consequence of the contextual flux that inevitably and uniquely surrounds the individual who must act. A lie in the context of a ‘queer basher’ asking you to point him in the direction of the individual you saw fleeing only moments before would be a right action, whereas, a lie in the context of a parent asking you to point him toward his two year old’s happy and dangerous escape route across a busy street, which you also witnessed, would be a wrong action. The play in your ethical knowledge and/or action, although informed by one and the same sense of goodness (i.e., a knowledge of the goodness of protecting others from harm) is illustrated by your lie in one context as opposed to your honesty in another. Therefore, context incapacitates the possibility of ethical knowledge being practical (i.e., being learnt in advance of action) because your temporal ability to consciously know the ethical end exists only in the precise moment of your ethical action or in the moment the eidos moves your soul toward the good end.

In other words, contextuality creates a certain and especial unpredictability that is both characteristically unaddressable and beside the point of techne. It is beside the point because techne’s predictability and therefore practicality turns on the consciously known end of production. So if I plan to build a bookshelf and apply the appropriate technical knowledge to the necessary materials, the end of my building activity (i.e., a bookshelf) is foreseen long before the end of my activity is near. That is, regardless of whether or not I run into some contextual difficulty during the execution of my plan, the end of my activity will nonetheless predictably reflect the eidos of bookshelf that served to move my activity toward my original end. For example, perhaps I have overestimated the size of the bookshelf in relation to where I had intended to install it. Nevertheless, an oversized bookshelf still conforms to the end of the eidos of bookshelf, regardless of how my overestimation may impact on the context in which this end comes about. Unlike techne, therefore, action manifesting from ethical knowledge is invariably unpredictable because every ethical context, which, for example, demands my prevention of needless harm coming to others, presents me with new circumstances that alter the action I must take if I am to successfully abide by the eidos of good. Therefore, ethical knowledge is not something that you can practice simply because you cannot predict the appropriate action prior to its context. The singular predict of ethical knowledge, if there is one at all, is that it is always that which facilitates the self’s ability to judge and act ethically in each new context.

For Gadamer, the second quality that sets ethical knowledge apart from techne is “that moral knowledge has no merely particular end but pertains to right living in general, whereas all technical knowledge is particular and serves particular ends.” The implication of this bipolar distinction is that the means of ethical knowledge is also necessarily unlike the means of techne. The means of techne, like its end, is again predictable because it is determined by the human ability to appropriate technical knowledge through learning prior to ever attaining the end of that same knowledge. Thus, I can acquire the means for making a bookshelf (i.e., I can know how to make one) before I ever put saw to wood. For instance, I
can read a book on making bookshelves and plan the design of my bookshelf to the exact millimeter before I act in relation to the material out of which it will be made. Conversely, ethical knowledge is not so much learnt as it is simultaneously the moment and the effect of “self-deliberation.” As a result, it cannot be taught in advance of its end but is experienced, and thus known, in precisely the moment that creates the demand that spurs the self into action. The ethical demand is one of self-deliberated action because the self is momentarily prepared to refashion itself in order to ensure its actions conform to the eidos of good in light of the demand of contextual flux. This is why ethical knowledge is beyond the reach of practice, for there is an “immediacy” that constitutes it which is “not a mere seeing but a nous.” Thus, ethical knowledge manifested in the immediacy of good action, according to Gadamer, is a higher form of knowledge than techne because the human mind is momentarily granted an audience with, and so experiences, the highest sphere of knowledge, namely, the eidos of good.

Although Gadamer makes no mention of whether or not moral maxims are techne, he does clearly state “we do not possess moral knowledge in such a way that we already have it and then apply it to specific situations.” Assuming a moral maxim is a type of knowledge that is possessed prior to a particular context or that a maxim is a predict because it is learned anterior to the ethical moment, Gadamer would likely dismiss the possibility of maxims being a kind of ethical knowledge. In fact, the technical nature of the moral maxim aids in clarifying Gadamer’s experiential notion of knowledge.

For instance, consider the earlier example wherein circumstance demands a lie in order to prevent a ‘queer bashing.’ Juxtaposing this lie with the contrary fact that most of us have indeed been taught to unexceptionably abide by the maxim thou shalt not lie, this situation depicts how and why ethical knowledge necessarily manifests in experience rather than in maxims. Faced with the ‘queer-basher’ who asks, “Which way did he go?,” I need only briefly weigh the unethical consequences that will result if I apply the maxim I have learned against the ethical demand posed to me by the immediacy of the situation to know the situation demands that I lie. If I apply the maxim though shalt not lie in this particular context, I necessarily become complicit in an assault and hate. Yet, if I transcend the technicality of the maxim and take it upon myself to deliberate on what constitutes the good in this context, then what I will experience is the knowledge that perhaps it is not always ethical to tell the truth, in spite of what I have been taught. Thus, ethical knowledge has to do with foresight only to the extent that anyone is prepared to know solely in relation to the demand of every new situation. For Gadamer, therefore, means are justified by the good end, which only ever becomes clear in the moment that the self is addressed by an ethical context. In effect, the immediate experience of knowing right action is ethical knowledge. Conversely, techne necessarily “alienates” or detaches the self from ethical knowledge, and from the possibility of its being experienced, because the means of techne is uncompromisingly prescripted. On this view, the application of techne to ethical contexts proves to be too brutally “dogmatic;” it removes the self from the knowledge of right action in the same way that the above truth-telling maxim does, that is, if I abide by it in the face of the ‘queer-basher.’

The third and final quality that Gadamer attributes solely to ethical knowledge, based on Aristotle’s modifications of the Platonic concept of ethical knowledge, is that of “sympathetic understanding.” Sympathetic understanding belongs to the realm of ethical knowledge, although it is said to be linked to the self who judges as opposed to the self “who must act.” What it entails is an ability, again due to the developed soul, which empowers the self to empathetically know the other insofar as the self is able to put itself in the “concrete situation” of the other who is acting. Albeit a somewhat different experience
of ethical knowledge than that which is encountered by the other who is acting, sympathetic understanding is a form of ethical knowledge for Gadamer because it, too, is context specific. The self’s ability to understand the other’s action is genuinely possible insofar as the self is also able to understand the moment or context that initiated the other’s action. By understanding the moment, the self still recognizes the demand of the eidos of good, even though that demand is proposed to the other, initiates action on the part of the other, and leads the other toward an experience of the eidos of good. The sympathizer is therefore united with the actor if she (her soul) grasps ethical knowledge, because then she, like the other, is commonly driven by “what is right.”

In this momentary state of mutual understanding the judge is unable to disassociate herself from either the actor or the end in itself pursued by the actor, and so she is necessarily rendered incapable of misjudging the other. In light of this, techne, used in hopes of gaining sympathetic understanding, for Gadamer, is as likely to lead to misjudgment as to result in wrong action because it merely facilitates an inflexible prediction of mean to ends. So, if you are prone only to the means of maxims, you will likely witness my lie to the queer-basher as wrong and (mis)judge me accordingly. Conversely, if your soul and mine are developed and are capable of experiencing the eidos of good in the moment you observe my lie, you too will know (i.e., sympathetically understand) that my lie is the right action.

In order to convey a contemporary understanding of Gadamer’s rejection of techne being equal to the task of the demands of ethical moments, be they moments demanding right action or concerning sympathetic understanding, consider the following real life example: Having long been committed to specific feminist principles with regard to sexual harassment and violence, I have felt, in the past, that I did know how I would react if I was subjected to a similar context. And even when I have listened to people discuss being completely immobilized in these contexts, I have invariably had some confident thought, or dare I say it prediction, regarding what I’d do based on my feminist ethics. Then, a few years ago, a physician assaulted me during a medical exam that I had to take in order to attain employment. In that moment, I discovered not only that my predictions would completely fail me, but that as a result of having such self-assured predictions, I had peripherally misjudged the inability of others to act because, due to my reliance on a detached or technical knowledge (as opposed to internalized knowledge) of feminist principles, I had inadvertently assumed that I would know in the moment how to act differently.

This said, it took me nearly a year to take any action against the physician that at all resembled my so-certain beliefs. Thus, not only was I left with the shock of the assault but also with the shock and guilt of my inaction. Given the doctor’s practice revolved entirely around employment related physicals and, further, physicals which new immigrants to Canada must undergo in order to gain citizenship, I knew throughout the duration of my silence that he had access to a particularly vulnerable clientele. Putting aside the legitimate reasons I had for not acting immediately, and acknowledging the potential danger of using “ethical” discourse in relation to issues regarding the immobilizing affects of sexual assault, I am not suggesting that my feminist principles are tantamount with techne. Instead, I am suggesting that as I understand and practice such knowledge by projecting it as a means that aims to predict some future end, then for all intents and purposes I am applying that knowledge in a technical as opposed to an ethical manner. Or, as Gadamer would suggest, I am relying on a form of knowledge that is irrelevant, because it is uninternalized, to guiding action in accordance with the ethical demands of unpredictable contexts. In doing so, I fail to be moved toward the action, for instance, that will enable me to protect myself or others in unpredictable moments, because the type of knowledge I am relying on is inappropriate.

The reason techne fails me has to do with the alienation it causes between the self (the soul) and the end
in itself (right action). Essentially, as I predict the end prior to the moment that is the end, I exclude and undermine my ability to know and thereby attend to what Gadamer refers to as the play of context or the demands of the moment. As you recall, techne is learned and can be forgotten, as were my principles in the moment I was assaulted, but ethical knowledge is internalized by the self (when the eidos of good moves the soul) and, known thus, it literally entitles the self to know how to act in the most unpredictable moments. Whereas, techne’s predictions, for example, in the form of maxims, are simply inadequate because they do not reflect the complexity of the circumstances. Of course, this is not to say that my inability to act against the doctor in the moment in which I was assaulted is ethically reprehensible, but that had I not relied on an uninternalized or technical knowledge, I might have been able to act differently. To put it another way, if I had genuinely internalized the knowledge reflected in my principles then I could have felt entitled to take immediate action against the doctor for my sake, and in hopes of preventing his other clients from being exposed to abuse and harassment. And had I internalized it sympathetically, perhaps I would not have carelessly misjudged others as a result of thinking I would not react as they had.

Before turning to Foucault’s views on techne, we must first attend to the issue of truth. Clearly, Gadamer’s discussion of eide is informed by a structuralist view of truth, wherein truth is Truth in the universal sense. For instance, he suggests the eidos of good is capable of initiating right action or ethical knowledge because goodness, in Truth, exists formally apart from humanity even as it affects humanity. Still, Gadamer does leave room for play with regard to the experience of Truth in that he contends that its collision with the infinite flux of context does affect how Truth is understood or interpreted. In fact, his entire hermeneutic project in Truth And Method is ultimately rooted in his conciliatory concern with understanding truth as universal Truth, even though he suggests Truth throughout the course of history (i.e., contexts) means different things in different times. Although it may not always appear so, Truth past and present for Gadamer remains unified in every context, because every context, while infinitely new, nonetheless partakes of the unchanging Truth of the eidos. Thus, it is contextual change and not Truth that results in the differences of the meaning of Truth throughout the ages. As a result, the good incarnate in genuine ethical knowledge is indeed true for Gadamer even as it remains infinitely susceptible to the different affects context imposes on its appearance.

Foucault’s take on truth and, therefore, ethics is different from Gadamer’s in that he is not at all concerned with determining whether or not Truth exists, but rather with the power and/or effect of truth as it changes or is maintained across time. To a point, Gadamer’s concerns with how Truth/meaning is assimilated and Foucault’s views on the construction of the knowledge of truth/meaning in general can be understood to be parallel in one respect. That is, they agree that whatever Truth/truth is or is not, it is temporally subject to the confines of context. Nonetheless, they immediately part ways with regard to the ontological status of Truth -- Gadamer, as we have seen, because he believes Truth exists and informs the experience that moves one to ethical action, and Foucault because he believes “too much in truth [not Truth] not to suppose that there are different truths and different ways of saying it.” For Foucault then, the question of Truth is wholly unimportant. What is important is only the historical significance of the fluid manner in which truth has masqueraded as Truth with the effect, intended or not, of facilitating various means to power. For instance, in The History of Sexuality Foucault traces the history of how sexuality is known and the truths that sexuality’s categories propose in order to examine the polymorphous techniques of power” to which these knowledges have given rise. It is these contrary notions of Truth and truth that elicit both Gadamer’s certainty that techne is an ethically barren form of knowledge and Foucault’s intrigue with techne as a mode of knowledge that can create ethics.
As evident from the progression of his work, ethics primarily became a significant pursuit for Foucault late in life. Given his theories about truth (or the knowledges which pose as Truth), Foucault is only willing to investigate a notion of ethics that effectively deflects the demand to make any concessions toward universal a notion of Truth. This is the rationale behind his pursuit of the ethical implications of techne. Foucault, having worked a lifetime to undermine truth as Truth, refuses to entertain an ethics that reinforces the appearance of Truth as universal because doing so hides the insidious powers behind knowledge production. Foucault is taken with techne because his past genealogical and archaeological inquiries into truth repeatedly led him to conclude “that truth or being does not lie at the root of what we know and what we are, but the exteriority of accidents. This is undoubtedly why every origin of morality from the moment it stops being pious . . . has a value as a critique.”

Origins, which for Gadamer are universal because they are eide, are critically valuable to Foucault because of their accidental nature. If truth is accidental, then ethics cannot be as Aristotle and Gadamer propose. Furthermore, if Truth, which informs the eidos of the good, ceases to be understood as symbiotically entwined with ethics, then perhaps the only possible site for ethics is one which maintains a detached relationship with truth, which techne of course does.

Prior to examining techne as a mode of ethics, however, let’s first consider the full significance of Foucault’s views regarding the accidental roots of knowledge in light of what he referred to as the will to truth. Influenced by Nietzsche’s will to power, Foucault’s notion generally treats truth as an arbitrary effect of the human will, a will which when faced with the world’s chaos, finds comfort in the appearance of order it creates through the production of categorical exclusions or discourse. Once named, the arbitrariness of these categories is concealed within history as knowledge, and for the sake of human comfort, begins to be mistaken for, or appear as, Truth. In Foucault’s own words, “[t]rue discourse, liberated by the nature of its form from desire and power, is incapable of recognizing the will to truth which pervades it; and the will to truth, having imposed itself upon us for so long, is such that the truth it seeks to reveal cannot fail to mask it.”

For Foucault, therefore, the liability of knowledge or the will to truth is not really the accident as origin. Instead, it is the effect of the accident’s pose as Truth; it comforts the self with the belief that there are origins which are True. And this facilitates the potentially dangerous power that is elicited by the internalization of categorical judgments. Once internalized, truths posing as Truths necessarily usurp the self’s ability to consciously recognize origins as accidents and, thus, the self’s ability to oppose the unethical affects that are characteristic of that truth. For instance, the ethical cost of truth as Truth for Foucault is comparable to the Dostoevskian flavour of an episode of the television show the “X-Files” wherein the “Cancer Man” echoes The Grand Inquisitor by asserting that “any man who can appease man’s conscience can take away his freedom.” Specifically, the conscience appeased is commensurate with a willing and unquestioned belief in the truths knowledge proposes. The loss of the self’s freedom that is exacted by the pleasure of appeasement is equal to the power the self denies itself through its indifference toward the posturing of truth as Truth or its acceptance as knowledge that is rooted in origins.

The danger of Truth is “the right it appropriates to refute error and oppose itself to appearance” even as it too is appearance, and so one begins to understand Foucault’s earlier use of the word “morality.” As was true of Nietzsche, Foucault’s mention of morality by no means refers to any particular mode of knowledge, but to all knowledge, simply because all knowledge is susceptible to the danger of becoming pious. Knowledge is pious in every moment that it fosters some false sense of right or entitlement by appearing as Truth. Thus, even though Gadamer’s notion of ethical knowledge shifts relative to context,
both Aristotle’s and Gadamer’s ideas would be immediately suspect for Foucault because it is a
knowledge that advocates the right to judge through action or sympathetic understanding on the basis of
the experience or internalization of Truth. Still, this is not to say that Foucault imagines that techne is
somehow immune to becoming pious, for like all knowledges it too can retain the right to judge
whenever it is internalized and used in the place of any retired True knowledges.

This said, Foucault’s interest in techne is not aimed at proposing a hard and fast “alternative” to
universalizing ethics, which would merely replace old truths with new ones, but more with the exploring
the ethical merit of the idea of the “art of life.” As we shall see then, what is appealing to Foucault
about techne is exactly that which Gadamer pointed to as the ground for dismissing techne as form of
ethical knowledge. Specifically, you will remember that Gadamer suggests ethical knowledge cannot be
practical, consciously known or chosen, whereas techne is practical, involves choice, and is conscious.
For Foucault, however, the singular appeal of techne for ethics turns on its possibility as a means to
practically and consciously choosing knowledge; choosing knowledge in this manner protects the self
and others from the devastation of fraudulent nous knowledges that reign through their internalization or
through their function as an unquestionable basis for judgment.

To better understand why Foucault is concerned about notions of ethics that propose the internalization of
some external truth, or the experience of knowledge, is the basis for ethical or just action, consider the
import of Technologies Of The Self. Here, Foucault offers a genealogy of two Greco-Roman precepts that
pertain to the ancient ethic of the art of life. Firstly, there is “Take care of yourself” which Foucault
contends is, “for the Greeks, one of the main rules of social and personal conduct.” Secondly, there is
the “Delphic principle” that proposes you “Know yourself.” This concept, Foucault explains, is
“technical advice” that you perform upon yourself as a means of care. It is also a secondary pursuit in
that you apply it to yourself only after you begin to initiate the former precept of self-care. Knowing
yourself involves realizing the soul is distinct from the body (i.e., that the body does not equal the self),
which aids in the conscious realization that care for the body alone does not equal care for the self.
Ultimately, the conscious affect of self care is such that it also aids the self in discovering further “the
rules to serve as a basis for just behaviour and political action” and, more importantly, that actually
existent in the “effort of the soul to know itself is the principle on which just political action can be
founded.” What therefore distinguishes this ancient ethics from later notions is its grounding in the
principle of self care entails that the self must perform practical conscious work upon itself. In other
words, the import of the ethical notion of care for the self is not simply the self-consciousness it creates;
it is also that this self chosen exercise is the actual medium of ethics.

As Christianity emerges, however, Foucault suggests a new ascetic meaning is attached to knowing
yourself, one that overshadows and replaces the ethic of care of the self. Knowing yourself is now
devoid of care, and becomes a frequently ruthless personal interrogation which is meant to wash away the
self that entertains thoughts, pleasures, desires, and ways of being that are newly demarcated as sin. The
key danger of this transition, and a legacy in contemporary ethics, is that knowing yourself now becomes
“paradoxically the way to self-renunciation.” According to Foucault, the main problem in this, which
techne solved, is that the rejection of self is the means by which the self’s consciousness and choice
surrounding knowledge is allowed to be subverted. Therefore, the dilemma Foucault would find in
Gadamer’s ethical moment is precisely the nature of the demand it poses to the self. Specifically, to be
entitled to act upon ethical knowledge, the self must first suspend its choice in order to experience or
internalize the (appearance of) Truth that moves it to action.

Assuming Foucault’s main ethical concern with knowledge is tied to the realization “that everything is dangerous” and that “the ethico-political choice we have to make everyday is to determine which is the main danger,” the detriment of self-renunciating ethics that he perceives begins to surface. Simply, imagine that the danger is knowledge posing as Truth while ethics simultaneously proposes that the self must internalize that knowledge in order to gain the sense of entitlement that propels the self to judge itself and others against that knowledge. Now, before going any further, let’s assume Gadamer and Foucault can, at least, be said to agree that the end, apart from the means, of ethics is ultimately about preventing the self’s misjudgment or harm of others in ethical contexts. Having said this, if internalized knowledge is an unrelenting judge, as Foucault suggests, then the end of ethics is unlikely to be realized if it is sought by the means proposed by Gadamer. In light of Foucault’s view, the only ethical means that begin to attend to the threat of knowledge, posing as Truth, is an approach wherein the self is practically, consciously, and infinitely open to choosing new knowledges as the dangers of old knowledges become apparent. For Foucault, therefore, techne alone serves this end of ethics because it is the only mode of knowledge that reassures the self of the possibility that knowledge can be learned and then, if need be, forgotten; it allows for a practical consciousness of the arbitrariness of origins that constitute knowledge.

Now, what does any of this have to do with our real lives? To ground Foucault’s ideas in everyday life, let’s consider them within our own social-historical-political context, one that judges heterosexuality to be normal sexuality. Within the confines of a knowledge that is categorically heterosexual, the self is known to be right when it internalizes (as True) what that knowledge proposes it ought to be, which is heterosexual.’ In turn, the internalization of heterosexual knowledge accords the self with the ethical (i.e., categorical) judgments of that knowledge and, thus, its prescriptions against all ‘non-heterosexuals.’ For example, I recently found myself debating the ethics of homosexuality with a coworker. In his earshot, I had been discussing a film, entitled Beautiful Thing, which I described as “a wonderful story about two teenage boys who don’t commit suicide because they are in love.” Knowing me to fall outside the category of ‘heterosexual,’ my coworker flatly stated, “And you think that is all right?” My response was, “How about you explain why it’s wrong.” Without feigning a reasoned account of why, and without the aid of, at least, the story of Sodom and Gomorra, he confidently and unquestioningly assured me of what he knew to be True, “It just is!” Still pressing him further, he would only repeat while shaking his head, “It’s just wrong!” Arguably, what this exchange illustrates from a Foucauldian perspective is the extent to which internalized knowledge serves as the ground the self will exercise without question. Yet the ethical threat is not so much the knowledge itself as it is the effect of internalization. Internalization certifies for the self that a particular knowledge is beyond question, which is also what my coworker’s unquestioning surety suggests. Thus, in the event that a particular knowledge is harmful to others and, yet, is internalized, the self in some sense still has no choice but to participate in (unethical) judgments or actions that inevitably have dangerous ramifications for the lives of others.

The main tension between Foucault and Gadamer, therefore, is less to do with Truth/truth or knowledge than with the necessity as opposed to the danger of internalizing (ethical) knowledge. In Gadamer’s view, as it was illustrated in the case of the harassing doctor, internalizing knowledge grants the entitlement that is necessary to enable the self to confidently act or know in ethical contexts. Conversely, Foucault’s position, which is reflected in the example of my coworker, lauds the necessity of techne or a detached relationship between self and knowledge because it ensures the self’s conscious ability to actively
interrogate and reject harmful knowledges. The dilemma of ethics raised by Gadamer’s and Foucault’s differences is that both internalization and detachment seem to be equally necessary and detrimental components of ethical actions. Respectively, the problem is that the self either runs the risk of internalizing unethical knowledge and commits harmful judgments and acts or the self runs the risk of inaction (via the loss of a sense of entitlement that is due to conscious detachment) if it avoids the internalization of knowledge, even though the aim of avoidance is to prevent harm.

Heidegger, whose thought profoundly influenced both Gadamer and Foucault, also considers the implications of techne or technical knowledge for thought and action. Indeed, his investigation of techne, in *The Question Concerning Technology*, arguably solves the dilemma posed to ethics by the promise and threat of both internalized and detached knowledge. Generally speaking, Heidegger’s essay is an exploration of the simultaneous “danger” and “saving power” of techne. His idea concerning the potential of techne or technological knowledge is distinct from Gadamer’s because he proposes that it is the means that both reveals and, ironically, conceals Truth. As technology advances it reveals and conceals. This is because as it reveals a Truth, which is its end, it nevertheless “orders,” “enframes,” or “destines” that Truth according to the demands of human technological development. Heidegger’s notion of techne, therefore, is unlike Foucault’s both because he accepts the existence of Truth and he envisions the saving power of techne, as opposed to the danger, to be precisely its piety or its role in the “safekeeping of [T]ruth.”

The nature of techne as skill or craft links techne to Truth for Heidegger because “[t]he possibility of all productive manufacturing lies in revealing.” Techne genuinely reveals Truth, but it reveals only that aspect of Truth that necessarily needs to be uncovered in order to achieve its practical end. Thus, while techne reveals Truth, its revelations are enframed in such a way that it reveals a Truth instead of the Truth. Enframed Truths are ultimately partial and, so, obscure the possibility of humans being able to “enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth.” Nonetheless, Heidegger suggests, techne’s genuine tie to Truth is what makes techne a simultaneously dangerous and saving power. Although techne’s truth is ordered, techne or that which enframes the Truth can be infinitely restructured with the realization that any single frame obscures the possibility of other revelations of Truth. In fact, the revealing that arises from techne, even as it moves toward enframed technological ends, is due to the new questions techne must ask of old technologies in order to progress toward its new goals. As a result the questioning that motivates techne points to the revealing or saving power of questioning, even as techne is also dangerous because it unwittingly enframes that which is newly revealed in the name of production.

The significance of choosing to understand techne is this way is twofold. By allowing for the possibility of Truth, Heidegger addresses Gadamer’s concern that ethics necessarily entails a ground or Truth that genuinely entitles the self to judge and act ethically. Furthermore, to the extent that Heidegger takes issue with the partializing affects of enframed or ordered Truth, his view of techne as a site of revealing parallels Foucault’s insofar as he too envisions techne to be a medium that provokes the realization of the infinite possibility of truth. In other words, they can be said to agree in that Heidegger recognizes the infinite necessity of distrusting truth/knowledge simply because enframed Truth operates in much the same way as Foucault depicts the relationship between truth and power/knowledge. As a result, both are equally concerned with preventing truth/knowledge or enframed Truth from serving as the ground that leads to unethical or harmful misjudgments. Furthermore, questioning the revelation of enframed Truth also maintains the self’s choice which Foucault fears is lost in a relationship with ethical knowledge that
For Heidegger, revealing gives rise to the possibility of “human reflection” or questioning and, thus, to a choice to hold “always before our eyes the extreme danger” of enframed Truth. For Heidegger, revealing gives rise to the possibility of “human reflection” or questioning and, thus, to a choice to hold “always before our eyes the extreme danger” of enframed Truth. Assuming, then, that the possibility of ethics does lie somewhere between Gadamer and Foucault, we are now faced with the hard but practical question: how does one detach from truth/knowledge in order to maintain choice and internalize Truth in order to be entitled to act ethically?

The remedy to the dilemma which arises out of Gadamer’s and Foucault’s contrary perspectives on techne, wherein ethics now entails a simultaneous demand of both internalization and detachment relative to Truth/truth is Heidegger’s final remark in The Question Concerning Technology: “questioning is the piety of thought.” Simply, this notion, questioning is the piety of thought, alleviates the paradox of the simultaneous ethical demand for internalization and detachment because it suggests that questioning alone (not Truth) is what entitles you to act in ethical contexts. From the perspective of Heidegger, neither the Gadamerian claim that ethical judgment and action is due to the internalization of True ethical knowledge, nor the Foucauldian claim that ethics can only occur as a result of self-conscious detachment from truth (via an ongoing interrogation of knowledge posing as Truth) needs to be forfeited out of necessity. The reason is that neither claim is essentially at odds with Heidegger’s idea that questioning is a ground for judgments, ethical or otherwise, that pertain to Truth.

For Heidegger, the process of questioning does not guarantee the knowledge you choose as the basis for your judgment will be ethical. Instead, it is the act itself of questioning enframed Truths, prior to choosing a basis for judgment, that is ethical. In this sense, therefore, Heidegger stands outside the truth/Truth debate that necessarily arises for Gadamer and Foucault, not because he does not suggest Truth exists, but because its existence is irrelevant to the possibility of any judgment being ethical if that judgment is not first and foremost the result of questioning, regardless of whether it is true or not. This is not to say that, for Heidegger, Truth does not have any role in ethics, for the judgment you make following questioning will be right or wrong, but even in the event that you make the wrong judgment your questioning alone will mark your action as ethical. For instance, if my coworker was committed to ethically questioning whether or not homosexuality is right or wrong prior to feeling entitled to pass his judgment (it’s just wrong) and, nevertheless, concluded it was wrong, then his judgment would mean more (ethically speaking) than does his unquestioned judgment. Although a questioned judgment that homosexuality is wrong, once it is made, is equally as dangerous for homosexuals as when it is an unquestioned judgment, the ontological difference elicited by a questioned judgment is significant in relation to ethics. If the self consistently commits to a conscious state of being that questions prior to every judgment in each new ethical context, then the possibility of the result of an ethical judgment is, nevertheless, increased. Thus, even as my coworker might feel entitled to come to the same conclusion as a result of an ethical commitment to questioning, the chance remains, due to the commitment to questioning, that he will yet again have to question his past judgment regarding homosexuality when faced with the demands of some new ethical context. As a result, he might well, in future, reject that which entitled his prior judgment on the new basis of what a current act of questioning reveals.

While it does at first appear that questioning creates better than fifty/fifty odds of making the right choice, if we genuinely consider what questioning entails we can be certain the odds are even better. Regardless of whether you are familiar with Heidegger, questioning has inevitably altered entire canons of values that produce unethical judgments. Indeed, is it not the questioning of falsehoods on the basis of partial Truths that has given rise to feminist, anti-racist, queer and anti-classist theories of resistance? Someone literally thought to ask, “Why?,” “Why should we allow the state to perpetrate racism through
the death penalty given that this penalty is given more frequently to blacks than whites for the same crimes?,” “Why shouldn’t women have equal pay for equal work?,” “Why shouldn’t queers have the right to adopt?” or “Why should people be denied health care or education simply because they are poor? ” The ethics behind these reactions to domination find their origins precisely in the self-conscious act of questioning both traditional maxims of racism, sexism, heterosexism and classism, and the new forms these ‘isms’ can take in new contexts. Renewed questioning simply (re)creates the possibility of (re)addressing current and new manifestations of domination in present and new social and political contexts. A commitment to questioning has also led to the rejection of theoretical tenets that in one context served against racism, sexism, heterosexism, or classism, but in new contexts may again serve the forces they originally countered. For instance, liberalism at one time served women’s rights, but it has also hindered them. This is why many feminists began to question and subsequently rejected liberal notions of equality that grant rights solely on the basis of women’s likeness to men; an equality that demands sameness nevertheless produces women as unequal to the extent that they are different.

Choosing questioning as ethical practice allows the self to forget knowledge that no longer serves ethics and to produce new knowledge that can be momentarily internalized as a foundation for judgment in order to address the play and demand of ethical contexts. Questioning, therefore, addresses both Gadamer’s and Foucault’s respective concerns about internalization and detachment relative to Truth/truth in order to bring about ethics; it combats the potentially dangerous affects of techne as a memorized maxim, craft, or skill, regardless of what the moment demands, and it combats the dangerous affects of “nous” knowledges that flood the self and drown its freedom or choice.

Gadamer and Foucault, therefore, are both right to be concerned with the role internalization and detachment must and must not be allowed to play in ethics precisely because both relationships to knowledge are equally a dangerous and saving power. Yet, if we accept Gadamer’s claim that there is a significant need for grounds that entitle the self to make ethical judgments and Foucault’s contradistinctive suggestion that ethics needs never to lose sight of the dominion of uncertainties that is truth, it appears that the relationship between Truth and ethics must remain unresolved. Or does it? For perhaps the result of finely blending the ideas of Gadamer, Foucault, and Heidegger is that our answer lies in the simple contention that Truth has little or nothing to do with ethics until ethics is a self-conscious action which persists in questioning Truth’s appearances in order to act ethically or to discover the momentary entitlement that facilitates ethical judgments. In other words, the Truth of ethics lies the self’s questioning effort to ensure that what is unTrue is not put into practice.

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Works Cited


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**Endnotes**


5. Aristotle 496, 498.


9. On this point, a number of people have suggested to me that the fact that “you never forget how to ride a bicycle” implies that Aristotle and Gadamer are wrong about the nature of techne as a kind of knowledge that can be forgotten. To this, I imagine Aristotle and Gadamer would claim the key component to bicycle riding, balance, is not an example of techne, but of something inherent to the human organism, assuming a person has no problems with their ears or any other physiological or chemical balance mechanisms. Other aspects of cycling such as signalling and looking out for cars as you go can be forgotten in the absence of practice. I discovered this personally when I began to ride a bike after an eight year hiatus, and was almost hit a number of times because I kept forgetting to look for parked cars opening doors or pulling out into my lane, something I used to do all the time.


11. Aristotle 504, 697.

13. Given his idea of play Gadamer would be at odds with Kant in regard to the ethics of lying.


18. Gadamer 317.


20. Gadamer 323. As far as I can tell, Gadamer’s distinction between action and judgment, even as both come under the heading of ethical knowledge, seems to be the result of his general acceptance of Aristotle’s own distinctions. However, it does seem possible that judgment is a kindred spirit of action given that to judge others creates an ethical context that demands self-deliberation, which, again, could lead to the experience of ethical knowledge insofar as judgments have ramifications with regard to the good. For instance, there are real effects on the well-being of others when they are misjudged as opposed to ethically judged.

22. Gadamer 323.


24. For the sake of clarity I have used “Truth” to convey the universal notion Gadamer proposes and “truth” to convey Foulcault’s notion of any knowledge that appears or is commonly mistaken to be universal.


27. For the most part, truth is our focus herein, and although the issue of power necessarily comes up peripherally in relation to the end of ethics, a full discussion of Foucault’s views on power is impossible within the context of this paper.


38. Foucault, *Technologies Of The Self* 22.


42. Heidegger 34.

43. Heidegger 12.

44. Heidegger 28.

45. In an interview, Foucault says his “whole philosophical development was determined by [his] reading of Heidegger.” Speaking about Heidegger and Nietzsche he also says, “I think it’s important to have a small number of authors with whom one thinks, with whom one works, but on whom one doesn’t write.” Foucault, *Foucault Live*, 326.

46. Gadamer 322.

47. Heidegger 33.

48. Heidegger 35.

49. This raises the issue of Heidegger’s own unethical judgment with regard to being a Nazi sympathizer which cannot be ignored. And one wonders if this judgment was a product of a commitment to questioning. If it was not, it comments on the danger of not questioning and if it was, it is a terrifying testament to Heidegger’s own claim concerning the danger surrounding an ethics of questioning. Nevertheless, Heidegger’s unethical judgment in and of itself does not out of any necessity contradict the idea of questioning as an ethical practice.

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