

Values, social and beyond

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1. What is a value?

... aus dem vorhandenen Vorrat einzelner Tugenden [Werte ME], bald die eine, bald die andere hervorgeholt und in den Mittelpunkt einer lärmenden Verehrung gestellt wurde. Nationale Tugenden, christliche, humanistische waren an der Reihe gewesen, einmal Edelstahl und ein andermal Güte, bald Persönlichkeit und bald Gemeinschaft, heute die Zehntelsekunde und tags vorher historische Gelassenheit: der Stimmungswechsel des öffentlichen Lebens beruht im Grunde auf dem Austausch solcher Leitvorstellungen... (Robert Musil *Der Mann ohne Eigenschaften* Buch II Teil 3 Kap. 18)

... from the existing stock of individual virtues [= values ME] sometimes this one and sometimes that one was pulled out and placed at the centre of noisy veneration. National values, Christian, humanist values had had their turn; at one time noble steeliness and at another time kindness; sometimes personal character and sometimes community, today the tenth of a second and the day before historical equanimity: the change of mood in public life basically rests on interchanging such guiding ideas...

What is a value? Or, since they are plural: What are values? A value is something valued. A value is something valued by human beings. This points to the *relational* nature of values, just as knowledge is always knowledge of something and therefore likewise relational. Something valued by an individual human being alone does not count as a value, for it could be entirely idiosyncratic, such as having fresh flowers everyday

in a vase on one's desk, although this idiosyncrasy could fall under a broader value of enjoyment of nature. Notwithstanding the predominant Anglophone philosophy of values with its famous 'linguistic turn', according to which values reside in certain kinds of sentences,¹ values are something valued for contributing to a good way of life that, in countless different particularized configurations, is appreciated by many.

Use-values, constituting the basis of material well-being, are things valued for use in the usages of a customary, shared way of life. Uses are practices, but not all practices are uses in this narrow, pragmatic sense. A 'higher' value is, for instance, freedom of religion which is also lived out in certain religious usages and customs of tolerance. Customary practices, i.e. usages, of a way of living shared by many are valued as belonging to and enhancing that way of living. A way of living can be that of a community, on a small scale, or, on a large scale, that of a society. Individuals find themselves by identifying, in some particular configuration, with a way of living, which amounts to identifying with and adopting as one's own a certain subset of usages constituting one's customary life. In adopting certain usages as one's own, these are regarded as valuable and good, and the subset adopted constitutes in some sense the good life for that individual self. The subset adopted may conflict with other subsets of usages adopted by others in the same community or society.

2. A confusing abundance of values

The values of a given community or society therefore do not have to be consistent, and there may be tensions among them. For instance, the value of obeying one's parents, or at least largely conforming to their wishes and judgments, conflicts with the value of having the freedom to shape one's own life. Or, the value of compassion for those in need conflicts with the value of furthering those with extraordinary ability. Honesty, tact, fidelity, discretion, compassion, marriage, friendship, love (of another person, an art work, a country, the land, etc. etc.), frank

¹ Cf. e.g. the article 'Value Theory' by Mark Schroeder in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2008.

talking, free speech, polite reticence, freedom, security, justice, pursuit of individual happiness, equality, modesty and obedience, fair competition, material security, self-reliance, reward for personal excellence, charity, self-discipline, pleasure in life, healthy, sustainable environment, private property, sexual freedom, chastity, secure employment, kindness, wives' obedience to their husbands, self-determination, piety, self-expression, peace, military valour... — the list of values is endless and its entries obviously partly in conflict with one another, partly incompatible and partly even downright contradictory. One person's or community's or culture's value is another's anathema. Valuing itself is an act of estimating highly, which may be singular and deeply personal, although insofar as it is comprehensible to others, the value exceeds mere idiosyncrasy. On the social plane, however, values are invariably associated with usages that in one communal way of life or another — whether it be individual conduct, institutions, guaranteed rights, codes of customary conduct, traditions, etc. — are regarded as *good for living* and therefore singled out and held high as something of value.

Isn't value, then, a useless, vague notion that has a positive ring but means almost anything? Probably. At the very least, it is individual values and small ensembles thereof that invite thoughtful attention. But at the core, value nevertheless designates a genuine phenomenon: that human beings live in shared, customary ways of living in which certain individual, collective and institutional practices are held to be good for that way of living, especially by preserving it, as against other practices held to be bad for a way of life. Insofar, values can be regarded as a translation of that venerable Greek term τὸ ἀγαθόν insofar as it relates to practical life, to *πρᾶξις*. The practised goods of living are to be distinguished from the bads. Not all goods of living are values, but only those involved with human practices. Good weather, for instance, is not a value.

Customary practices in a community or society are established and habitual. The ensemble of customary practices regarded as good for living is the *ethics* of that way of living which is *cultivated* and cared for in being practised by that *culture* self-consciously, i.e. those living that

ethical way of life know self-reflectively that they are practising a good life. We human beings cannot help but live ethically in established customs because we cannot help evaluating our own and others' practices as good or bad, as belonging to the good or bad life. Even if I practise my living according to the precept that the good life is, egoistically, the good life for me, the egoistic life led cannot avoid itself being evaluated according to criteria other than mere egoistic advantage, i.e. an egoistically good life inevitably comes into conflict with other values lived as essential to the good life, including that of the egoist himself.

3. Relativism of values?

Doesn't the conflict and incompatibility among values mean that they are relative to a particular customary way of living of a particular community or society? Isn't a *relativism* of values plainly inevitable? Don't particular cultures have their own values relative to that culture? This is a hoary old debate with an obvious answer: certain values can be left in their relativity because they are lived beneath the radar of *universal* values that necessarily apply to human living practices per se. Certain cultural values belonging to the good life call for cultural tolerance, but other values make claims to universality.

However, isn't there also another kind of relativity, akin to the perspectivism of individual truth, that gives scope for each individual to have his or her own perfectly valid, personal values? Individual, personal values are always a (perhaps highly) particular constellation of values chosen from an ensemble lived in a given customary way of life and require the backing of that customary way of life, including the custom of privacy, to gain the status of values at all; personal values cannot be merely idiosyncratic, bloody-minded postulates, but must have at least some communal currency that gains them acknowledgement. The discourse and debate over values begins properly with the claim to certain inalienable, universal human values that are accorded the status of *human rights*, no matter whether these rights are institutionally sanctioned or function as regulative ideals in consciousness. A discourse

on universal values presupposes, of course, that such discourse is itself valued and cultivated.

Consider, for instance, the value of freedom (freedom to determine one's own life, freedom to move and speak freely in society, freedom to have intercourse and make transactions among free persons, etc.) versus the value that women behave modestly and obey their husbands and male relatives. A patriarchal or androcratic order of society can definitely be lived by men, and perhaps even by many women, as a good, stable, valued, traditional way of living bolstered, in particular, by religious beliefs in the proper ordering of the world, today conspicuously exemplified by conservative and fundamentalist Islam. Androcracy has similar chances of justifying itself on the level of discourse over against the value of individual human freedom as does slavery, and it is no accident that androcratic societies strive as far as possible to keep their women dumb, just as slave societies keep their slaves dumb, all the better to handle them as docile, submissive cattle. Religious values are employed to enforce the submission of women by baldly pronouncing that it is God's will that they submit to the rule of men, just as God's putative word is called up to confirm the justness of other social power relations such as the purportedly divine right of kings to rule.

The value of individual freedom has to be portrayed as an element 'foreign' to a given androcratic culture, insidiously foisted upon it from the West to the detriment of the established customary social order, i.e. the value of freedom has to be *relativized* as belonging only to Western culture somewhere *else* on earth. This striking example of a major clash of values today, reflecting historically different cultures of living, shows that there is next to nothing philosophically interesting in the incompatibility between universal values and plainly traditional values. Traditions mutely strive to reproduce themselves as values in themselves, avoiding open discourse on their justification.

It seems as though humankind swims in a bewildering sea of diverse, conflicting and contradictory values where, in part, certain traditions serve as compasses for how to consistently navigate this sea and, in part, the free individual is left to arbitrarily construct his or her own value

universe. For those living within these traditions, this navigation may suffice, especially because traditions offer a way of securely constructing one's own identity, but one can still ask, in risking a step beyond, whether insight into the relations among values can be gained through a kind of dialectic of values that appeals to reason rather than to what has been handed down factually as tradition. To raise this question is already to enter a conflict of values, because there has always been tension, and even outright enmity, between venerated, time-honoured traditions and the endeavour to gain enlightenment through understanding.

4. Dialectic of key social values: material well-being, freedom, equality, solidarity, justice & power

Conflicts and incompatibilities among values become more interesting insofar as the values are proclaimed to be universally applicable to all human beings sans phrase, regardless of their traditional cultures. A major issue for well over a century has been the tension and open conflict between material well-being and freedom conceived as the freedom to determine one's own individual life in both its minor and major movements. This conflict more than any other underlies the left-right split in the political spectrum. The right to free speech, by contrast, straddles this divide because it is a right of civil society and the political realm, one among that ensemble of 'higher' political rights of the citizen, needed above all to fight politically for either side of the dichotomy.

Western liberal democracies in general have and value a mix of secure material well-being and individual freedom which can be regarded as the momentary balance achieved in the ongoing fight between the two conflicting values. This conflict is overlaid and criss-crossed by other value-conflicts such as that between materialist and non-materialist values, where the latter comprise both social and spiritual values. Social values concern what is regarded as good in how human beings share the world, whereas spiritual values concern what is good in human beings' relations to the divine. Social values such as compassion and solidarity conflict with individual freedom of self-determination and self-

realization, both of which are non-materialist values. From spiritual values laying out a divine ordering of the world, social values in particular are derived and reinforced.

The conflict between the values of material well-being and individual freedom inevitably brings into play also those other time-honoured Western values of equality, solidarity and justice in ways that need to be carefully clarified because discourse on all levels, from the everyday through the political to the sociological and philosophical, invariably is ridden with conceptual confusions. Freedom, for instance, is often rudely truncated to the freedom to vote in democratic elections for government, or justice is understood vaguely as some kind of equality. How do the valued goods of material well-being, individual freedom, equality, solidarity and justice relate to each other? Is there a movement in thought among them that could warrant the title of dialectic? I can only find out by trying, starting with the heart of material values, namely, material well-being which some may regard as the 'lowest' of values, although it plays a vital part in each and every one's life.

There is an endless multitude of material things and practical services that are good for living. To lead an adequate, good life on a daily basis requires many goods, including those that are also consumed daily, especially food. A rural life where the peasants have enough to eat is only a bare minimum for material well-being, beneath which there is only hunger and starvation, regarded universally as bad. *Material goods* of all kinds, including service goods, are literally values in the sense also of *exchange-values* that have the potential to be exchanged for other material goods. In today's world, that universal value, *money*, at the heart of what is called today's 'materialism', must be acknowledged as the universal means for acquiring the goods of living. It cannot be excluded from the heaven of enshrined universal values as something merely grubby, but at most relativized vis-à-vis other, 'higher' values. Money is the value practised in the customary exchanges of goods of all kinds in everyday life that serve materially good living. The opposite of material well-being, namely, poverty, is generally defined as having to live on an income of less than x dollars a day, where x is 1 or 2 or 10 or 20, depending on the part of the world. A quantitative level of income is

a rough and ready way to define the poverty line below which life is materially deprived. This is how money, as literally reified value and hence as the 'material value' par excellence, meshes with the values of material well-being and freedom from poverty.

Freedom from poverty requires sufficient income. How is income to be had? It must be acquired in some way. It may simply be given by another — a charity, a benefactor, state welfare bureau, etc. — whose practices are thereby valued as good. Otherwise, income must be earned. It is earned in the first place by hiring out one's labour power for wages or trading goods as a merchant or vendor, which in turn requires the contractual freedom to do so. This holds true no matter whether the wages or trading returns are a pittance or generous. The obverse side of the freedom to earn income is the contractual freedom to buy the conveniences of life on the market. So contractual freedom itself is a value, and this value goes hand in hand with individual freedom. Where contractual freedom is lacking, there must be some other arrangement for providing socially and collectively to prevent poverty. Material goods are then acquired according to alternative social rules such as traditional customs of distribution or state welfare regulations. The distributional customs or the state's welfare apparatus is then valued as a good, and the freedom to earn income by one's own efforts, whose success is not guaranteed, is correspondingly undervalued.

The freedom to earn income does not stop with earning wages or making a living as a sole trader. Wages in themselves refer to an employer on the other side, and an employer acts with capital according to the capitalist principle of making money rather than losing it. Profit is therefore another form of income. Since money capital can be lent, and land leased, there are two further forms of income, namely, interest and ground-rent, respectively. The freedom of market exchange mediated by money is of a piece with full-blown capitalism that sprouts of itself from social intercourse with private property. The freedom of private property, however, can be and is curtailed partly by the state in favour of a state-regulated distribution of material goods, starting with the redistribution of income downward to the have-nots and ending with the abolition of private property altogether.

The freedom of private property to pursue the earning of income inevitably goes hand in hand with the *inequality* of income earned. I come thus to the value of *equality*. Capitalism inevitably implies a divide between the haves and the have-nots, no matter whether the have-nots live above the poverty line and no matter whether the haves are privileged in their pursuit of income. The freedom to earn income is the other side of the freedom to spend it, and the spending of money is the core of *individual freedom* to shape one's own life, because money as universal equivalent can be spent on anything at all offered on markets of all kinds, and therefore offers the maximum degrees of freedom for anyone possessing it, not just in the freedom to enjoy consumption, but in the freedom to make independent life-decisions.

The cost of this individual freedom is that the have-nots do not have it or are offered on the markets only the tawdry, tacky imitation of it. They have a hard time making ends meet, which is regarded as bad. Because of the inevitability of inequality of incomes through the exercise of private property rights, the value of the freedom of private property itself is therefore devalued to the status of a bad. Conversely, any curtailment of the freedom of private property for the sake of the downward redistribution of income can be seen as bad since it is an affront to the value of self-reliantly providing for oneself through one's own income-earning efforts. The incompatibility between the income-striving freedom of private property and equality of material well-being is lived out in perennial political struggles in countless different forms. A compromise between these values may be sought in some sort of criterion allowing for a measure of income inequality (e.g. Rawls' maximin principle²). Politically, at any point in time, a temporary compromise has been reached factually.

To justify such a criterion limiting income inequality, the value of *solidarity* within a community or society may be brought into play. Since spending income is the basis for shaping one's life in a money-mediated market society, solidarity may be made to cover all aspects of

² Cf. my 'Anglophone Justice Theory, the Gainful Game and the Political Power Play' at <http://www.artefact.org/untplcl/angljstc.html>

life, including education, health care, old age care, retirement benefits, environmental quality, etc. Solidarity means that the gaps between the well-off and the deprived in any particular regard should not be crass. A solidaric community or society sticks together within a bandwidth of material well-being. The converse view of this value is that, driven by envy, the demand for solidarity becomes the *collective egoism* of those who feel hard done by in life and make a claim on those who have done better who are seen to be per se in the wrong by virtue of having more. Here it becomes apparent that the value of equality does not cover only income equality and equality of material standards of living. There is also a kind of equality among those pursuing income. How so?

Income-earning is pursued through the exercise of contractual freedom with private property. Private property owners, including wage-earners, are *abstractly equal* in contractual relations with one another. A contract is entered into on the basis of mutual consent between formally equal persons and for their agreed mutual benefit, and any person has *equal* contractual rights. Rights of contract are formulated in terms of abstract equality among persons exercising their freedom with their private property. This abstract equality goes hand in hand necessarily with the *concrete inequality* between the two private property-owners for, without a difference between them, there would be no point in entering a contract with each other. In particular, in the income-earning contracts that constitute capitalist economic life, each party to a contract is interested in harnessing the *powers* of the other for contributing to the generation of revenues that ultimately are paid out as incomes. To start with, in any wage contract, the employer is interested in hiring the employee's labour *power*. Thus power intrudes into the list of values: material well-being, freedom, equality, solidarity and justice I have been considering. Is power itself a value? Are only certain kinds of power values? These two questions are more than I can deal with here, since what a power is and the kinds of power require closer consideration.³

³ Cf. my *Social Ontology* Chapter 9 and 'Social Power and Government' at <http://www.arte-fact.org/untpltcl/sclpwrgrv.html>

Take labour power for the sake of simplicity. Is it a value? It is not usually included in the conventional lists of values. Labour power, however, is productive. It brings forth effects (products, including service-products) that contribute to material well-being in all kinds of living practices. So labour power is a *potential* or potency whose exercise *actualizes* a material good of some kind that indubitably contributes to material values. And yet, an individual, a community or a society would not count labour power, or the ability to work, among its values, but rather among its economic resources. This is because, as already pointed out, values are involved with good practices with an ethical ring, and labour power itself is only a potential whose realization is labour or work itself. Work itself can easily be included among values, conventionally understood, not only because work contributes, through its products, to material well-being, but also because work itself is a practice that takes up a good portion of life-time. Work satisfaction is therefore a value in itself for, without it, good living is detracted from. Moreover, hard work by an able person is socially prized. The exercise of one's productive abilities is rewarded by social acknowledgement, by being given responsibility and above all by remuneration. Inequalities in income are, once more, the inevitable consequence.

Unequal incomes put different amounts of *reified social power* into the hands of their earners, for money's exchange-value is the power to acquire anything at all that can be bought or hired. Furthermore, money itself loaned as money capital is rewarded with interest, it can purchase land that brings in a rental income, and it can also buy a company that throws off profit or shares therein that are rewarded with dividend payments. So all the income-sources in a capitalist economy are also sources of power that are valued and rewarded. And yet equality of material well-being is still held up as a value against the freedom to competitively earn income in a capitalist economy. Competitiveness itself is given a negative tinge against the social values of harmonious co-operation and modesty in one's material aspirations. The competitive power play to gain income appears in a negative light also against the claims of material well-being for all. It is now no longer a matter of alleviating poverty and guaranteeing a minimum living standard, but a

more militant claim to iron out differences in income in the name of equality.

Traditionally, however, equality has meant equality before the law, equal formal rights of personhood comprising life, personal freedom and private property, and equal rights in the political sphere as a citizen of the state. With respect to the exercise of property rights to earn income, equality means the equality of persons to exercise their powers, starting with their productive abilities, to compete in the power play for gain. Beyond the formal rights of property and contract, the equality of competing players means *fairness*. The power play for gain is to be fair in the sense that the competitors are not from the start exposed to a bias in the rules of play. One such bias is *social discrimination* of any kind on the basis of race, gender, sexual orientation, or whatever. Another principal bias arises from certain players or groups thereof having too much weight in the market (monopolies of all kinds, collusion, etc.). Such fairness in the striving for income therefore relates to *potentials*, not to realized, *actual* results of the competition for income. The demand for equality of material well-being, by contrast, is a demand for *actualized* equality (perhaps within an accepted bandwidth), regardless of any competition for income, whether fair or unfair.

Hence two entirely different conceptions of equality clash irreconcilably. Irreconcilably, because they are on different ontological planes: one the plane of *power*, potential, potency, ability, and the other on the plane of *actuality* of the material goods people *actually have*, the distinction between potential and actuality deriving from the ontological structure of movement itself. The irreconcilability has to do with life itself being a *movement* whose ongoing outcome remains always uncertain. The risk-averse prefer the bird in the hand; the more adventurous will take a shot at the two in the bush. Since *actual* material goods are only *produced* by the ongoing exercise of powers, including above all individual abilities, how is this individual exercise of abilities to be motivated, incentivized without individual reward that inevitability gives rise to material inequalities? This is the perennial conflict between capitalism and socialism, whose historical working compromise is the social welfare state that admits a hybrid 'social-market' economy that

could properly be called a socialist-capitalist economy. Capitalism is concerned with the gainful *power* play, whereas socialism is concerned with what people *actually have* materially. This irreconcilable conflict between capitalism and socialism is played out not only, and not even primarily, on the grand stage of history in conspicuous political struggles, but already for anyone confronting him- or herself with the antinomies that arise between the values of secure material well-being, on the one hand, and the freedom to pursue income as a basis for shaping one's own life, on the other. Capitalism and socialism are, in the first place, irreconcilably *antagonistic ways of thinking* that can be brought to light by a dialectic.

The distinction and conflict between potential and actuality carries over to the conceptions of that other major social value, *justice*. The justice of capitalist power play concerns first and foremost the *fairness* of the transactions or *commutations* in economic life. The pedigree of this kind of justice goes back to the *commutative justice* first thought through by Aristotle. The justice of the socialist way of thinking, on the other hand, concerns *distributive justice*, likewise first named such by Aristotle. The criterion for distribution in socialist thinking is to be equality, namely, the equality of material well-being *actually had* by each member of the population, no matter whether this material well-being is achieved by working for it, or is handed out by the state that redistributes what is earned in productive activity downward from the capable and successful to the relatively unsuccessful and incapable. This redistribution takes place not in the name of charity, nor in the name of the alleviation of poverty, but in the name of so-called *social justice*, a misleading misnomer insofar as all justice is per se social. Redistributive social justice steps forward not merely as an admirable value, like charity and benefaction, but militantly as a *human right* and *entitlement* demanding political guarantees and a political apparatus that *actually* delivers welfare.

5. The value of freedom and the good of philosophy

The dialectic of key social values remains on the level of everyday political reality, where everybody lives. Today's global world is a

democratic political set-up, whether already actualized or demanded as an ideal, in which *everybody* is the ubiquitous actor. Everybody has to have a say, first of all in elections for government, but then in all matters of living together in which they are concerned. The conception of freedom that goes along with the ubiquitousness of the democratic everybody is that of being free to do what you like if it doesn't harm others, the traditional liberal conception of freedom. The goal of the exercise of freedom is taken to be happiness both individual and shared with those who are part of one's private or small community world. Freedom conceived as being able to do what you like goes hand in hand with money as the reified medium of sociation. Money is the reified social power that enables freedom as individual arbitrariness to be lived in shaping one's own life.

If freedom is valued as the freedom of individual arbitrariness, the dilemma soon arises that this freedom is empty, especially since there are limits to hedonistic self-enjoyment and self-indulgence. The question of the meaning of life is raised. Everybody asks: What am I to do with my freedom? Why am I here on earth? What meaningful direction can my life take? How am I to shape my life-time here? Shaping one's life amounts to deciding how to develop and exercise one's very own aptitudes, potentials, abilities, powers. Such development and exercise always implicates one with others; even the most egoistic individual must share a world. One's very own powers, once developed, are exercised and lived in leading a life with a certain direction, a certain meaning that inevitably involves also others.

Modern civil society is one in which free individuals exercise their powers in each other's favour on a basis of mutual benefit, usually remunerative. What these particular powers are and how they are exercised remains open. Only the individual's *singular* freedom as a point of origin of its own actions can decide. Every individual casts itself into its very own cast of existence. This cast of existence may be a 'materialist' one, i.e. the casting of a life based on 'normal' ideas of the good life of material comfort and security, a successful career, a happy family, with the usual trials and tribulations, but happy nonetheless. Singularity is thus never grasped, but slips away into average normality,

and freedom is exhausted in choosing and enjoying consumer conveniences.

Genuine singularity demands a decision. That is the lure of, say, a creative, artistic casting of one's existence in any of the artistic media, and it is also the lure and enticement of a philosophical casting, properly understood as a creatively thoughtful existence. Here I will discuss only the freedom of casting oneself as a philosophizing existence. In connection with a philosophical existence, as with an artistic existence, the values of social normality are left behind and slip into a secondary status. A philosophical existence must grapple with the question of *who the human being is in the world*. The questions concerning being, the whatness of the world and the whoness of human being are thus raised. The first two of these questions run through philosophy since Plato; the last has come explicitly onto the philosophical agenda with Hegel, Feuerbach, German dialogical philosophy and Heidegger. Here I will take only the first question, the question of being, a small step further in outlining Plato's conception of being and what lies beyond it, namely the good, τὸ ἀγαθόν, or more precisely, the idea of the good, ἡ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα. In so doing I will draw on Heidegger's lectures on truth and being from winter semester 1933/34 (Heidegger 2001), where he provides an interpretation of Plato's famous allegory of the cave from Book VII of the Πολιτεία.

The idea of the good is encountered in the third stage of the allegory, before the philosopher returns to the cave, when he, who has been freed from his chains in the cave and has been led out of it to see the daylight world, is confronted finally with the sun itself, which is the symbol for the idea of the good, which is “utmost ... and hardly to be seen” (τελευταία ἡ τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ ἰδέα καὶ μόγις ὁρᾶσθαι 517c1). To see this ultimate idea is like looking at the sun and being blinded by it. The sun as this symbol then calls for a translation back from the allegory. It stands for the highest idea, the idea of the good, which, as Plato says, is even “beyond being” (ἐπέκεινα τῆς οὐσίας 509b9). What is this supposed to mean — an idea that is beyond being? It is imperative —

pace Levinas — that any moral or ethical understanding of the good here be held at bay. First of all it has to be clarified what being is for Plato.

Plato asks the question of being with regard to beings, that is, he asks for the beingness of beings and finds it in the ideas, which are the defined sights that beings *as* beings present of themselves to the mind's eye, to νοῦς. Human beings can only see beings in their being by perceiving with the mind's eye the contours of their ideas, which are not visible to the senses. The ideas as the sights beings as such show of themselves are unconcealed in a dimension of unconcealment to which the mind is also open and sensitive. This is the open dimension of truth, of ἀλήθεια, which can be literally, and also soundly, translated as unconcealment, which corresponds in the allegory to the light that allows the sense of sight to perceive what is given to the senses. Both the open space of unconcealment and the ideas are necessary for any being to *be* a being and also be taken in (νοεῖν) as such by the human mind.

This is where the idea of the good as the highest idea comes in as beyond being in the sense of its being the idea that enables both truth as the dimension of unconcealment and the ideas that define the being of beings. The idea of the good is the enabling power (ermöglichende Macht and δύναμις) itself that enables both beings as such to stand within the defined limits of their looks, and also to show their unconcealing truth to the human mind.

Truth as unconcealment is defined negatively as the negation of concealment. This means that truth always has to be won and wrung from hiding, that beings in their being are either entirely in oblivion to the mind, or present themselves to it only partially or distortedly, namely, as what they are *not*. The human being *is* a human being only by virtue of i) being exposed to the openness of unconcealment, including the play of concealment and distortion and ii) taking in beings as such, thus *understanding* them. Human being's destiny is this exposure and mindful taking-in. The idea of the good is the enabling of both truth and being and hence the enabling of human being itself. *Who* I am as a human being depends on how clearly I see, i.e. understand, beings in their being, casting my *self-identity* accordingly as a shining-back from the world in its comprehended truth.

How beings show themselves in their ideas depends upon how the idea of the good enables and empowers them to *be what* they are. Insofar, the idea of the good must be understood as the enabling of human history itself in its sendings of the cast of beings that defines each historical epoch. Therefore, to *question* philosophically the sendings of ideas defining an age is to keep history open. The *freedom* to cast oneself as a philosopher thus goes hand in hand with committing and binding oneself to the *necessity* of questioning how beings as such shape up and show themselves in an historical world, for this questioning also cocasts *who* the human being can *be* historically. The *ethics* of a philosopher is therefore to genuinely *be* a questioning thinker and not to fall short of this responsibility to respond to the future's ever unsettled openness.

6. Further reading

- Eldred, Michael 'Anglophone Justice Theory, the Gainful Game and the Political Power Play' Version 1.1 2010 at <http://www.arte-fact.org/untpltcl/angljstc.html>
- 'Why social justice is a specious idea' Ver. 1.0 2005, Ver. 3.2 2010 at <http://www.arte-fact.org/untpltcl/scljstsp.html>
- *Social Ontology: Recasting Political Philosophy Through a Phenomenology of Whoness*ontos verlag, Frankfurt 2008. Second emended, revised and enlarged edition 2011, including an extensive bibliography, available at <http://www.arte-fact.org/sclontlg.html>
- 'Social Power and Government — With a focus on Hobbes' political philosophy' Version 2.1 2010 at <http://www.arte-fact.org/untpltcl/sclpwrgv.html>
- Heidegger, Martin *Sein und Wahrheit* (ed.) Hartmut Tietjen *Gesamtausgabe* Bd. 36/37 Klostermann, Frankfurt 2001.