

Ethics of Hermeneutics: Heideggerian Resoluteness as a Meta-virtue

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Abstract

The relevance of *φρόνησις* to the hermeneutic turn in phenomenology is documented in a course conducted by Heidegger during the WS 1924/5. *Φρόνησις* offers a paradigm for authentic existence, demanding a conversion of the soul and the acquisition of a new worldview. While the intellect abstracts from the *παθη* of sensibility, *φρόνησις*, as its perfection, entails pursuing the universal good, which the former presents as its destination. This concept aligns with the Kantian notion of wisdom: a practical interpretation of the world achievable only through ethical striving for the highest good. However, the consistency of the latter has often been questioned, as its reality implies a moral author of the world, generally considered at odds with autonomy. This impasse still provides a deeper insight on a meta-virtue required by *φρόνησις* – resoluteness – defined by its insistence on a gaze capable of discerning qualitative difference among the various phenomena we encounter.

Keywords: Heidegger, Aristotle, Kant, ethics of hermeneutics, phronesis, resoluteness

Introduction

Few are the attempts to draw an ethics out of the works of Heidegger. And this is not surprising. First of all, his political engagement casts an ominous shadow on an eventual practical development of his philosophy. Furthermore, a moral interpretation of *Being and Time* has been rejected on several occasions: one need only to consider the answer given to the request for a clarification of the relationship between ontology and ethics made by Beaufret, who was replied that the aforementioned dichotomy is derivative and therefore

misleading (Heidegger 1976b, 353). On the other hand, just a few pages later a more originary way to understand $\tilde{\eta}\theta\omicron\varsigma$ is put forward: “ethics ponders the abode of the human being”, “thinking which thinks the truth of being as the primordial element of the human being, as the one who eksists, is in itself originary ethics” (ivi, 354).

While the originary ethics is worthy to be mentioned as it confirms the practical outcome of Heidegger’s later thought, we shall not delve into its implications for it would be almost pointless outside of the so-called ontohistorical thinking. More interesting is the emphasis given to practice in the courses which precede the publication of his 1927 masterpiece, where the relevance of $\varphi\rho\acute{o}\nu\eta\omicron\iota\varsigma$ as a dianoetic perfection to the hermeneutic turn of phenomenology is well documented. In parallel, in a 1924 conference on the concept of time, Heidegger praises the formalism inherent in Kantian practical philosophy, contrasting it with the material ethics of values due to an original connection with the call of moral consciousness. I believe that, in both cases, a stark criticism towards Husserl and his theoreticism is at stake.¹ The father of phenomenology discovered the intentionality constitutive of every experience and yet he failed to clarify the specific essence of the consciousness, reducing its inner phenomena to theoretical noemata. In a 1925 lecture course, the limits of his system of thought are so pinpointed:

“Every directing-itself-toward (fear, hope, love) has the feature of directing-it-self-toward which Husserl call *noesis*. Inasmuch as *noein* is taken from the sphere of theoretical knowing, any exposition of the practical sphere here is drawn from the theoretical” (Heidegger 1995a, 60-1).²

Husserl is guided by the ideal of a universal $\mu\acute{\alpha}\theta\eta\omicron\iota\varsigma$, a form of will-to-be-certain which haunts the history of philosophy as a whole and the modernity in particular, so as to cover the pre-theoretical dimension in which human beings actually live. This kind of rigorous science is to be substituted by hermeneutics as self-interpretation of the effective life, where the genitive is meant both as subjective and objective. From time to time, understanding life comprehends itself in its dynamic identity, which unfolds through the anticipation of its

myriad possibilities. This should be sufficient to attest to Heidegger's interest in *πρᾶξις* and the possibility of investigating the ethical phenomenon in his works. Furthermore, the analysis of both the Aristotelian notion of *φρόνησις* and the Kantian notion of *Gewissen* still plays a role in the second section of *Being and Time*, where another concept is introduced: resoluteness, as a resemantization of the more traditional virtue of moral fortitude.

This paper mainly focuses on resoluteness, a concept that is nearly forgotten in contemporary attempts to develop an ethics of hermeneutics; yet it may still resolve some impasses. Firstly, I will provide a brief overview of the recent history of hermeneutic ethics and then proceed to demonstrate through the use of practical syllogism the problems it currently faces: essentially, I will show the lack of adequate consideration for the major premise, left to an arbitrary game of interpretations (2). Secondly, I will examine the paradigm of resoluteness in *Being and Time* to suggest a way out of the aforementioned deadlock. In particular, I will first focus on its Aristotelian roots (3) and then on the Kantian ones (4). Finally, I will illustrate how resoluteness serves as a negative meta-virtue, acting as a material condition to address some of the issues of ethical nihilism, while also indicating a path to find a more positive guiding criterion (5).

1. Ethics of Hermeneutics: an historical overview

Although Heidegger rejects a radical opposition between theory and practice regarding resolute self-appropriation, many of his students expressed astonishment at his vigorous speculation's ability to arouse vital interests.³ Gadamer's testimony holds particular significance for our research, as the integration of ethics and hermeneutics is a hallmark of his work. In an essay dedicated to Heidegger and his tenure at Marburg, Gadamer provides insight into a seminar he attended on the *Nichomachean Ethics*, with a specific focus on the analysis of *φρόνησις*. Having outlined the limitations of *τέχνη* as a form of knowledge unaccountable for the usage of its products, Heidegger proceeded to distinguish *φρόνησις* from theoretical knowledge and other attainable competences: "there

is oblivion of those kinds of habits, but not of *φρόνησις*" (EN VI 9, 1140b 29). Subsequently, he abruptly introduced the concept of consciousness (*das Gewissen*) to his students, prompting his most insightful pupil to recall this pivotal moment in such a way:

Today it is clear what Heidegger found in it, and what so fascinated him in Aristotle's critique of Plato's idea of the Good and the Aristotelian concept of practical knowledge. They described a mode of knowledge that could no longer be based in any way on a final objectifiability in the sense of science. They described, in other words, knowledge within the concrete situation of existence (Gadamer 1977, 201-2).

These remarks find solid confirmation in the first two hundred pages of Heidegger's commentary on Plato's *Sophist*, where *φρόνησις* is examined as a mode of *τὸ ἀληθεύειν*, that is, as the discovery of a province of being, particularly that of human existence. However, such opposition to theoretical knowledge is only derivative, and the emphasis placed on it primarily reflects Gadamer's own interests. In reality, we must either deny any relevance of theory to practice or even any consistency to every philosophical works or we must acknowledge that what is criticized is only an inauthentic form of speculation (Sadler 1996, 148; Thanassas 2012, 57). What justifies the refusal of a naturalistic understanding typical of modernity, which eliminates the difference between our existence and present-to-hand object, is instead a desire for a more adequate comprehension of human existence.

On the other hand, Gadamer appears primarily concerned with seeking an alternative to a paradigm of disembodied knowledge, which can be traced back to Kantian legalism, neglectful of the uniqueness and irreplicability of each practical situation (2013, 322-4). In this vein, he drafts a philosophical ethics that is not intended to be merely situational, as it also considers the ultimate aims of action. If these aims are not virtuous, there is no *φρόνησις* but rather *πανουργία* or *δεινότης*: essentially, mere cleverness. Gadamer opposes the Platonic paradigm of a shallow universality that is univocally valid in every circumstance. He argues that moral conscience is necessary to perceive the concrete situation in the light of the duties it imposes. However, there is little discussion about how to establish the above-mentioned, if "the right end is

not a mere object of knowledge” and “there can be no anterior certainty concerning what the good life is directed toward as a whole” (ivi, 331). An essay on the nature of the good between Plato and Aristotle exacerbates the dilemma, identifying the question of good with the matter of the “best-ness” of the citizen in the polis: a historically determined and thereby contingent ἡθος (1986, 21).⁴

Hannah Arendt’s purposes are similar, as she recovers a paradigm of rationality from the third *Critique* of Kant as opposed to his *Critique of Practical Reason*. Special focus is given to aesthetic judgment, which aligns with the principle of enlarged or broad-minded thought to serve as a model for democratic political thinking. In both scenarios, indeed, communicability serves as the criterion for making decisions that cannot be immediately categorized under a given rule (Arendt 1982, 124).⁵ Thereafter, the power of judgment is equated with the *φρόνησις* or insight, which the Greeks “considered the principal virtue or excellence of the statesman in distinction from the wisdom of the philosopher” (ivi, 140). Arendt completely ignores the second *Critique*, and elsewhere “her chief reservations about Kant” are said to “concern precisely his moral philosophy” (ivi, 222). Such a partial reading presents two drawbacks: on an exegetical level, it offers limited insight into the notion of judgment; on an ethical level, a complete rejection of a criterion that transcends mere dialogue initiates an anarchical game of interpretations where violent outcomes are always possible and, furthermore, not readily identifiable as such if dictated by the tyranny of the majority.

To summarize: the hermeneutic conversion of phenomenology is carried out under the sign of *πρόξις*. The works of Gadamer and Arendt converge in the resurgence of practical philosophy in Germany, rooted in Heidegger’s earlier contributions (Riedel 1972; Volpi 1980, 11-97; Foster 1991). This resurgence addresses the need for an alternative to a modern paradigm of practical reason, which falls short in the judgment of unrepeatable ethical situations. Taking the practical syllogism as a basis, it is possible to talk about a crisis of its minor premise, which leads to an unsatisfactory

conclusion. Nevertheless, a correct balance is not achieved through this new hermeneutic paradigm. We have just discovered that what is now lacking is a criterion to decide on the major premise, leaving it to an unregulated game of interpretations that pave the way for ethical nihilism.⁶ No wonder if in the past decades, a few studies attempted to initiate a dialogue between Aristotle and Kant, albeit typically only from the latter's perspective.⁷ This paper will primarily emphasize the benefit of such a convergence, but from a different standpoint. It is quite conceivable that Aristotle and Kant hold divergent concepts of reason, leading to significant differences in their understanding of a rational life. This is why a return to Heidegger might prove profitable, as he lays the groundwork for a comparison between the two philosophers.

As I mentioned earlier, the analysis of *φρόνησις* still holds significance in the second section of *Being and Time*, and during these same years, Kant becomes a point of reference for how to conceive *Dasein*. In addition, when considering these perspectives, Heidegger highlights the centrality of another concept: that of resoluteness. Therefore, it is now imperative to explore a resolution to the crisis of the major premise of the practical syllogism within an investigation into the relationship between *φρόνησις* and resoluteness. In the first instance, I will summarize Heidegger's discussion on *φρόνησις* in the WS 1924/25 course and then I will trace its continued relevance with reference to resoluteness in the 1927 masterpiece.

2. The call of conscience: Heidegger's appropriation of *φρόνησις*

The aforementioned particularistic reading is supported by Aristotle's assertion of a noetic apprehension directed towards concrete beings as the outermost limit of deliberation: that is, of an immediate grasp which is no longer justifiable *μετά λόγου*. Yet, the manner *νόησις* is to be understood is not entirely clear, as it is said to differ from mere sensible perception, despite being somewhat similar to it. In fact, it "must be distinguished from the *αἴσθησις* in mathematics", which is "more of a pure grasping than the aisthesis of *φρόνησις*" (Heidegger 1992, 162; see also Volpi 1984, 90-116).

Since the latter is still related to practical matters, it is a form of circumspection rather than inspection. In other words, it is guided by the correctness of its purpose, the *εὐπραξία*, so that the grasped objects manifest “the character of the *συμφέρον*.” Heidegger explicitly suggests that one needs to see the particular situation in the light of an anticipated universal, saying that research always “proceeds from the unarticulated *καθόλου* to the articulated *καθ’ ἑκάστον*, so that every single *μέρος* becomes visible [...] in its functional significance” (ivi, 89).⁸ In parallel, we do have *νοῦς* only in an improper sense: precisely in a hermeneutical one, which compels us to take an interpretative stance toward every concrete situation. While the apprehension of the relevant circumstances concerns the second premise of the syllogism, the first one is up to *προαίρεσις*.

From the *ἀρχή* on, from what I want to do, from my decision to act, all the way up to the completed action itself, *φρόνησις* belongs intrinsically to the acting. In every aspect of the acting, *φρόνησις* is co-constitutive. That means therefore that *φρόνησις* must make the action transparent from its *ἀρχή* up to its *τέλος*” (ivi, 147).

Given that volition is an integral part of *φρόνησις*, questions arise regarding the structure of volition and the correctness of its ends. Since *φρόνησις* represents a dianoetic perfection within man, its terms cannot be arbitrary, and we are in need of a criterion. The volitive phenomenon (*βουλευέσθαι*) is defined as a “circumspective self-debate” (ivi, 143). In attempting to trace the outliving of *φρόνησις* in *Being and Time*, this definition facilitates the identification with circumspection as a central pillar in the analysis of everydayness: whenever we have something to contribute or perform, it gives us “its route of procedure, the means of doing something, the right opportunity, the proper moment” (Heidegger 1976a, 228).⁹ Of course, circumspection owns its specific excellence. Yet, in the WS 1924/5 course will is said to be correct on the basis of two different interpretations. On the one hand, the deliberation can be good even if the ends are not. In this case, “nothing can be objected against *φρόνησις* itself as regards the mode in which it has been formally carried out” (1992, 154). Conversely, the good could and should pertain to the proairetic moment as *εὐβουλία*: that is, to a decision

oriented toward a good end (as for the distinction between resoluteness-*Entschlossenheit* and decision-*Entscheidung*, cf. Fabris 2020).

The *τέλος* of *φρόνησις* is not a *πρὸς τί* and not an *ἐνεκα τινός*: it is the *ἄνθρωπος* itself. *Αὕτη ἡ εὐπραξία τέλος* (NE VI, 1140b 7), the proper Being of man is the *τέλος*. But this is *ζωή πρακτική μετὰ λόγου*. The *τέλος* of *φρόνησις* is a *τέλος ἀπλῶς* and an *οὐ ἔνεκα*. [...] *Dasein* is the *ἀρχή* of the deliberation of the *φρόνησις*. And what *φρόνησις* deliberates about is not what brings *πρᾶξις* to an end. The result is not constitutive for the Being of an action: only the *εὐ*, the how, is (Heidegger, 1992, 50).

Even if the continuous switch of the languages employed can be puzzling, the overall meaning of this section is plain: the aim of *φρόνησις* is the rightness in action, which is the same as the proper being of a man; then it is not about producing a specific result, but about one's general disposition toward the world and itself or how he behaves. The how as an *εὐ* is precisely the determinant factor in seeing the particulars under a moral light. But by which means do we become able to conceive this how? And in which manner does our gaze actually change? In a passage which attracted attention from several interpreters, Heidegger states that, analysing *φρόνησις*, the Stagyrte came across the phenomenon of moral conscience.

Φρόνησις is nothing other than conscience set into motion. Conscience cannot be forgotten. But it is quite possible that what is disclosed by conscience can be distorted and allowed to be ineffective through *ἡδονή* and *λύπη*, through the passions. Conscience always announces itself (ivi, 56; on this topic, other than Gadamer and Volpi, see also Taminaux 2002; Borgon 1989; 2005, 138-57).

Surely, *φρόνησις* is not mere circumspection. But, in antithesis to Gadamer's thesis, it is not simply moral conscience either. Rather, it is a syntonic answer to the call of conscience, an *ἀληθεύειν* which renders man transparent to himself. Such an answer requires a good decision and resoluteness in striving toward the good, so as to silence the disturbing noise produced by the heteronomous *πάθη* which makes conscience almost inaudible. Incidentally, it should be noted that Aristotle never talks about moral conscience and a similar interpretation is smoothly supported by Aquinas alone: provided that Aristotle mentions an *intellectus principiorum* as for the speculative

intellection, then something analogous must exist as for the practical intellect (ST I, 79, 12) – that is *synderesis*, the *habitus* with reference to which conscience represents the *actus* (ST I, 79, 13). Even if one may dismiss a connection apparently influenced by both authors’ religious background, a more cautious reading might notice that the religious moment is only an interpretation of a phenomenological evidence. Furthermore, *φρόνησις* is a perfection of the intellect which enables its right usage. Given that we dispose of an intellect within a finite existence, conscience can be seen as the call our very essence addresses to us so that we live according to our highest possibility. As the Stagyrte synthetically suggests, “intellect is always correct” (*De Anima* III, 433a 27): for it determines our appetite, it compels us “to resist in sight of the future, while desire wants us to act on the basis of the present, because what is immediately pleasant appears to it as absolutely pleasant and absolutely good” (433b 8). Along the same line, Aristotle states that *σωφροσύνη* and temperance saves the *φρόνησις* (NE VI, 1140b 11). But provided that *φρόνησις* performs a resolute answer to the call of conscience, what does it actually enable to hear or to see? Its *ἀληθεύειν* grasps the being of man, who is a being-in-the-world. The interpretative lenses one requires to act morally need further clarification. Therefore, we should now move on to examine the 1927 existential analytic.

I believe that the most accurate translation of *φρόνησις* is still found in Gadamer’s definition of “self-knowledge, i.e. knowledge-for-one-self” (2013, 326).¹⁰ However, we must clarify which ‘self’ is being referred to and the semantic of a reasoned life. In *Being and Time* the call of consciousness is hearable through death, signalling a possibility which man “always has to take upon itself” (Heidegger 1976a, 333): “the possibility of no-longer-being-able-to-being-there”, whose profound significance undermines every contingent and mundane project. To live authentically means to self-appropriate such a finitude constitutive of our being, to which we are drawn by the resonance of consciousness every time the world fundamentally contradicts our vital projects.

The finitude of existence thus seized upon tears one back out of endless multiplicity of possibilities offering themselves nearest by-

those of comfort, shirking and taking things easy – and brings *Dasein* to the simplicity of its fate. This is how we designate the primordial occurrence of *Dasein* that lies in authentic resoluteness in which it hands itself down to itself, free for death, in a possibility that it inherited and yet chosen (ivi, 507).

Even when *Dasein* is "sure" of its "whither" in faith or thinks it knows about its whence in rational enlightenment, all of this makes no difference in the face of the phenomenal fact that moods bring *Dasein* before the that of its there, which stares at it with the inexorability of an *enigma* (ivi, 181).

Consciousness offers us an opportunity to resolutely become aware of a mysterious fate or to neglect it in the everydayness of our projects – or, in a more Aristotelian fashion, to be truthful to our essence as beings thrown in their own manifested mystery, or rather to betray our humanity. Aristotle would surely reject such an interpretation. Yet, fundamental disagreement would lean on a divergent conception of man and not on the tendency to elevate *φρόνησις* from a moral status to the ontological level of authenticity (as argued by Rosen 2002, 117-34). But, more importantly, the Stagyrte seemingly provides us with a criterion to act as the corpus of its ethical writings demonstrates, while Heidegger never writes an ethics. This is, perhaps, due to the indeterminacy we are left with, once resoluteness discloses a mystery of being which fails to provide any proper indications on how to behave. Apparently, we are given at most one negative admonishment: not to overestimate our secular projects. There is more to say: mystery is variously inhabitable, so that it can be argued that it is only because of an insufficient epistemic condition that we perceive it as such, and its true aspect may frustrate our moral expectations, leading to a nihilistic outcome. Even if we tried to resolutely see the particular situation, holding in sight the mystery of its provenance and destination, in the end, we would not gain any clear clue on what to do.

Heidegger however insists that the *εὖ* of the *εὐπραξία* is not a matter of what we do, but of how we act. In a 1924 conference on a concept of time, a similar opinion is attributed to the moral writings of Kant. After having defined the essence of authenticity, Heidegger praises the philosopher of

Königsberg for having determined the fundamental principle of his ethics in a formal way: “he perhaps knew from a familiarity with *Dasein* itself that it is its *how*” (Heidegger 2004, 117). This reference is important, since it reveals a side path which may help us deepen our understanding of the practical syllogism and of its major premise.

3. Kant: a moral vision of the world on the edge of the absurdum practicum

Beyond the common “formalism” of authenticity and practical reason, there are multiple points of contact between the accounts of moral person and factitious existence respectively given by Kant and Heidegger. The latter can be seen as a redefinition of the notorious *Factum der Vernunft*, as a self-affection of reason, whence consciousness springs as the sensible notification of its operativity. In addition, Kant seldom employs the term resoluteness and yet defines virtue as a “moral fortitude” (1991, 186). However, in order to appreciate these convergences and to seize the hermeneutical character of resoluteness, it is necessary to prepare the dialogical ground between Aristotelian and Kantian ethics.

a. On φρόνησις: prudence or wisdom?

There are many obstacles to the possibility of a comparison between Aristotle and Kant, as the latter usually presents his practical philosophy as a novelty in the whole history of philosophy. First and foremost, prudence is excluded from the realm of ethics and confined within the broad class of the hypothetical imperatives. In the *Groundwork*, a tripartite scheme is established, opposing technical and pragmatological to moral imperatives. Both the technical and the pragmatological ones fall under the category of the hypothetical imperative, for “whether the end is rational and good is not at all the question here but only what one must do in order to attain it” (Kant 2006, 26; see also Da Re 2020). The formers concern the rules to produce something in a correct way, while the latter involve the pursuit of individual happiness, an aim one can presuppose in human beings so that the precepts of prudence refer to a natural end, which does not need to be absolutely commanded.

Either the pursuit of happiness is demanded as a duty, or morality is to be found elsewhere. One possible way to interpret the aforementioned tripartition is to associate the technical rules of skill and the pragmatism of prudence respectively to *τέχνη* and *φρόνησις*, understood as a deliberation over means with regard to different orders of purposes. Consequently, the categorical imperative of morality would be an absolute novelty in a stark opposition with all the previous ethics.

Kant probably sees it this way as he draws his polar contrasts, and perhaps not without textual support, provided that Aristotle believes “we deliberate not on ends but on what leads to the end” (NE III, 1112b 12).¹¹ However, we previously saw that the difference between *φρόνησις* and *πανουργία* precisely lies in the chosen purposes – whether they are good or not. It is a one way out aporia: *τὰ πρὸς τὸ τέλος* shall refer both to means and to essential ends, which still are not our simple and ultimate end. The latter is the standstill of an ethically oriented life and it is not meant to be decided or projected but rather to be recognized. Heidegger would not be far off from such an ethical realism, as authenticity is achieved by a reappropriation of one’s own given essence. This being the case, *φρόνησις* would also be analogous to the Kantian notion of wisdom: namely, to a moral interpretation of the world resulting from “the idea of the necessary unity of all possible ends [...] as a rule, the original and the at least limiting condition, for everything practical” (Kant 1998, 403). As wisdom perfects a twofold reason, it is said to possess a double character: “considered theoretically signifies cognition of the highest good and practically the fitness of the will for the highest good” (2015, 105). In order to comprehend the nature of wisdom, we need to consider how it relates to reason and to its ends as they shape a moral conception of the world (Ferrarin 2015, 90-104; La Rocca 2003, 217-42; Perulli 2017).

First to be noticed, wisdom is explicitly thematized in the *Canon of Pure Reason*, a section where the correct usage of reason is examined. Later on, in the 1798 *Anthropology* it is explicitly identified with “the idea of a practical use of reason that conforms perfectly with the law” (2006, 94). Given that reason is a normative faculty, whence we are required to derive

the determining motive of our will, then wisdom represents its perfected effectivity. On its practical side, wisdom requires us to realize the ultimate end of reason prescribed by the law: the highest good as the complete object of practical reason, which we are compelled to think as possible if moral law is not meant to be absurd. But the ontological facet of reason designates only a part of its activity. As we approach reason only from within its effects on our sensibility, normativity appears to us indeed as its leading part. Yet, reason in itself features a wider teleological structure: duties are not mere prohibitions, but they rather shape the autonomous path followed by a pure reason striving towards a positive good which is a mandatory end for us (Fugate 2014, 9-15; Cunico 2018, 118-23; 150-4; Camera 2017). From our perspective law is an objective principle or a prescriptive criterion to morally decide among subjective maxims, so that our natural and our intelligible ends are set in a correct harmony. The same does apply to *φρόνησις*, as it aims at developing our rational attitudes and to attune our irrational soul so that it comes to cooperate with the former. But there is more to wisdom, for on a theoretical ground it implies the cognition of the highest good:

The moral law commands me to make the highest possible good in a world the final object of all my conduct. But I cannot hope to produce this except by the harmony of my will with that of a holy and beneficent author of the world; and although in the concept of the highest good, as that of a whole in which the greatest happiness is represented as connected in the most exact proportion with the greatest degree of moral perfection (possible in creatures), my own happiness is included, this is nevertheless not the determining ground of the will that is directed to promote the highest good; it is instead the moral law (which, on the contrary, limits by strict conditions my unbounded craving for happiness) (Kant 2005, 104).

Moral conscience signals the imperative command of reason, whose teleological interpretation configures the highest good as its object. If the highest good were not possible, then morality would command us to strive for something we cannot but fall short to realize: we would perceive it as absurd. For this reason, we must acknowledge the ontological conditions of its possibilities as moral postulates, provided that they are not declared impossible on a strictly theoretical basis. This negative

stance to the theoretical domain distinguishes the modern conception of wisdom from the ancient one, where wisdom meant “a direction to the concept in which the highest good was to be placed and to the conduct by which it was to be acquired” (ivi, 88).¹² Conversely, modern reason “strives to bring it to science”. However, there is no scientific knowledge about the positive contents of wisdom, which are known only on a practical account: within a postulatory doctrine that demands a resolute faith capable of bridging the gap created by moral conscience, as it commands something that is not entirely within our power to achieve.

b. The shipwreck of morality: Heidegger’s appropriation of practical reason

Wisdom implies a practical interpretation of the world, which is effective only through ethical effort to realize the highest good. In a 1795 essay Kant talks about a “heroic faith in virtue” (2001, 225; see Hill and Curteon 2018). As we have seen, virtue is a specific manifestation of fortitude concerning what opposes the moral disposition within us: it is moral fortitude, this being defined as “the capacity and considered resolve to withstand a strong but unjust opponent” (Kant 1991, 186). Elsewhere virtue is simply depicted as “the firm resolve to comply with one’s duty” (2001, 91), which has become a stable attitude. Initially, we might think of the drives of sensibility as the aforementioned opponent. However, while immorality leans on the heteronomy of the sensible *πάθη*, evil does not spring from natural inclinations:

For not only do these bear no direct relation to evil (they rather give the occasion for what the moral disposition can demonstrate in its power, for virtue): we also cannot presume ourselves responsible for their existence (we cannot because, as connatural to us, natural inclinations do not have us for their author), though we can well be responsible for the propensity to evil which, since it concerns the morality of the subject and hence is to be found in the latter as a free acting being, must be capable of being imputed to the subject as itself guilty of it (ivi, 81-2).

The enemy has less to do with a form of intemperance than with a feeble will, unready to believe in the effectiveness of what truly matters to it. Without this kind of resoluteness,

temperance would seem utterly pointless: why should we resist temptation, when our will is not strong enough to believe in its true self? But such a faith in virtue also requires entrusting the feasibility of the highest good as its wider horizon of sense, and here a problem arises. In the last two centuries, the consistency of the highest good has generally been denied, as its reality requires a moral author of the world considered at odds with autonomy. According to Hegel, moral conscience is hypocritical insofar as it pours the entire value of action into a constant strain toward a morality that cannot become effective and yet demands, in its favour, a retribution of happiness in accordance with virtue as its dignity. But such a retribution cannot be favourable to conscience except by grace, provided that the latter is structurally incapable of reaching its completion. Hence, within the doctrine of postulates, mere blessing is at stake (Hegel 2018, 348-65). Schopenhauer goes along this line, stating that the eudaemonism Kant “ejected through the front door of his system as heteronomous [...] now creeps back in through the back door under the name: highest good” (2009, 128). Nietzsche draws the immediate consequences, as he witnesses the shipwreck of a morality, whose object now appears to be contradicted by the inner structure of the world. While we shall not take the onto-theological path to solve the aporia, the impact of negativity on *φρόνησις* as a moral interpretation of the world urges to be taken into account.

On the one hand, the deflation of values exacerbates the so-called *absurdum practicum* (Kant 2001, 415; 2015, 80).¹³ Nietzsche traces the origin of the contemporary nihilism to the self-overcoming of morality: the process by which Christian morality triumphs over Christian God, “as the most fateful act of two thousand years of discipline for truth that in the end forbids itself the lie of faith in God” (2001, 219). Thus every moral perspective appears as vapid and historically conditioned, its value being confined to subjective evaluation: after all, no divine principle means no absolute good. On the other hand, this impasse provides a deeper insight on the meta-virtue of resoluteness. While it is not possible to delve into the deep dialogue with Nietzsche engaged by the professor of Meßkirch in the late thirties, suffice here to say that the former

believes the latter to be rights as he develops the aporias of the postulatory doctrine and to be wrong as he insists on interpreting the *noumenon* (Zali 2022a). Perhaps for this reason, the dialectic of the second *Critique* is never mentioned in a SS 1930 course dedicated to the question of human freedom within Kant. The analytic of practical reason is conversely given a substantial space as for the insight it provides on the phenomenon of volition, whose account clearly anticipates the existential analytic.¹⁴ However, Kant is prevented from the access to a genuine understanding of the essence of human beings by a naturalistic comprehension of being. As a result, practical freedom is put in a spurious synthesis with a theoretical determination of reality as nature, whose obscure ground is located once again in an interpretative *πρᾶξις*.

It remains true that Kant experienced, albeit the indicated limits, the specificity of will-governed actuality as a fact, and defined the problematic of practical reason from this experience. The factuality of the fact of pure practical reason is always and only given by us ourselves in our resolve to pure willing or against it [...]. The pure willing is the *πρᾶξις* in and through which the fundamental law of pure practical reason has actuality (Heidegger 1994, 295; among the few interpreters who have devoted attention to this lecture-course, see Chiereghin 1985; Schalow 2002; Esposito 2004; Pietropaoli 2016).

Alongside with Aristotle, Kant plays an important role in the genesis of *Being and Time*. So does the *factum* of moral conscience, which notifies us of the unconditional imperative of our essence. *Φρόνησις* is the positive response to this *factum*, but paradoxically, on a theoretical ground, it reveals a negative content. Casted aside the postulates of practical reason as a spurious way to produce a synthetic unity between freedom and nature, only the mystery of a finite freedom remains. In other words, the phronetic spectrum is considerably reduced as we are left with the possibility of acting in accordance with our mysterious essence or living in a forgetful and passive state. Still, even if we refrain from casting the shadows of our interpretations in the tenebrous ocean of being within a theoretical ground, our practical stance betrays a fundamental decision (Zali 2022b). Resoluteness entails the belief on the consistency of a differential gaze on things. Were we to make our resolve, then we would put faith in something we consider

to be worth the risk. And the first object of such a resolute faith is this very faith itself.

4. Hermeneutics of resoluteness: a negative meta-virtue

The path we have followed may seem intricate. Its purpose is to reconstruct the genesis of resoluteness in *Being and Time*, as the possible core of a hermeneutical ethics capable of coping with the apparent absence of a major premise in the practical syllogism. The research is led in a dialogical context, which calls for a conciliation between two philosophers generally understood to radically diverge: Aristotle and Kant. This operation generates a series of issues, both at the terminological and at the conceptual level. For instance, there is a significant gap between Kant's conception of the eternity of the highest good and the temporality of resoluteness in Heidegger's sense. Nevertheless, this hermeneutical infidelity allows for the creation of a level of translatability where different conceptions of practical reasons can be compared with each other. What we acquire is a direct insight of *φρόνησις* as a paradigm for authentic existence, one that renders existence transparent to its very constitutive essence, thus enabling it to grasp its true nature. This transparency aligns with the Kantian notion of wisdom, since *Dasein* is a being-in-the-world and to be wise means to see the world in such a way that every situation is valued within the wider of its ultimately unveiled mystery. Furthermore, a firmness in front of this abysmal enigma is required as the sole possibility left in contemporary nihilism. Beyond Heidegger, a resolute standing implicitly recognizes a vital concern to be at stake. Still, the problems of this solution are glaring enough and the testimony of another prominent student of Heidegger appoints them most clearly. I am referring to Leo Strauss, who, in a report over his scholar education, shows appreciation for the primacy that the professor of Meßkirch attributes to the things as we take care of them rather than as we perceive them. And yet, he then goes on to remark: What I could not stomach was his moral teaching, for despite his disclaimer he had such a teaching. The key term is "resoluteness", without any indication as to what are the

proper objects of resoluteness. There is a straight line which leads from Heidegger's resoluteness to his siding with the so-called Nazis in 1933 (1997, 461).¹⁵

The positive indication we thereby gain is that resoluteness is only a neutral and negative meta-virtue. It is a requirement of ethical life, not its fulfilment: as a matter of fact, one can be resolute in their desire to acquire power to the detriment of others, so that, if resoluteness were the sole criterion, then we would be compelled to accept such a behaviour as morally correct. Apart from our moral intuitions, we are clearly facing two phenomena which require to be differentiated. Accordingly, Aquinas states that "the praise of fortitude depends upon justice" (ST II-II, 123, 12). If fortitude were not oriented towards the good, it would deteriorate into mere grit (Campodonico 2018; Samek-Lodovici 2019). Moreover, the juxtaposition with the third cardinal virtue, justice, is not farfetched, since in both cases the ultimate challenge is death. Considering that bravery entails being able to endure injury, and that the deepest injury imaginable is death, Joseph Pieper asserts that:

All fortitude stands in the presence of death. Fortitude is basically readiness to die or, more accurately, readiness to fall, to die, in battle. Thus every courageous action has as its deepest root the readiness to die [...]. Fortitude that does not reach down into the depths of the willingness to die is spoiled at its root and devoid of effective power (2010, 117).

As we have seen, in the case of Heidegger, death is not only a natural event, but more importantly a psychical one. It means that every reassurance falls short, as we are prefigured the abysmal death of our spirit. Death is the coffer of nothing and nothing is the veil of the mystery surrounding our existence, which compels us to withhold our judgment on the inner meaning of our actions. Resoluteness undertakes even the risks of its spiritual death: that is, of the futility of what one strives for and of the possibility of its complete annihilation. Depending on the degree of this awareness, maintaining a "moral" perspective on the world can become increasingly challenging. And here lies the hermeneutic character of resoluteness: it involves striving for something we recognize as

an absolute good, to the extent that even self-sacrifice becomes a possibility, although this recognition is inevitably bound to remain an object of hope. This outcome leads to a re-evaluation of the highest good, necessitating a new understanding of its significance. The positive aim of *φρόνησις* and the reality of the highest good have yet to be fully explored. So, why should we persist with a moral perspective on the world? What are we truly seeking that informs our behaviour?

Pieper identifies three interconnected forms of fortitude – the pre-moral, the properly ethical and the mystical. All of them reflect a common theme: “man accepts insecurity; he surrenders confidently to the governance of higher powers; he risks his immediate well-being; he abandons the tense, egocentric hold of a timorous anxiety” (ivi, 138-9). And he acts in hope of victory, for the triumph of a higher love. This self-abandonment resonates with Heidegger’s notion of releasement: the “availability before what-is which permits us simply to let things be in whatever may be their uncertainty and mystery” (Heidegger 2010, xi). But releasement emerges from an intense struggle (Dillard 2020, 1-16). It is in this struggle that it is determined whether every experience involves an indifferent quantitative difference in the increment of power or if our possibilities of action are situated within an axiological hierarchy of qualitative differences. If the former option holds true, conscience would be susceptible to a deconstruction, as its content would be absurd. Conversely, it would beckon us back to what truly matters, the reality of which needs to be explored if we are willing to imbue the major premise of the practical syllogism with positive content.

An ethics of hermeneutics demands more than just a theory of practical judgment to subsume the particular situation under a given rule. In fact, the rule is never preordained and requires an act of interpretation to be understood. However, this interpretative activity necessitates resoluteness as the strength of the will to uphold the highest good. Therefore, resoluteness emerges as a contender for the role of meta-virtue, that is, a virtue essential for all other virtues to follow – albeit in a negative sense. Conceding that every virtue relies on the guidance of prudence, interpretative

resoluteness is also indispensable as it determines whether we chose to trust or not the good that prudence identifies. Moreover, resoluteness places faith on itself so that it comes to be a recursive virtue. Its spiral structure offers a glimpse into the reality of the highest good, which must endure beyond mere psychical existence and prove itself worthy of sacrifice. In other words, resoluteness provides a formal indication on the positive content of *φρόνησις*, which blends the immanent logic of bare survival toward a spiritual order. On these bases, resoluteness emerges as a hermeneutic meta-virtue: it is the strength to perceive the specific ethical situation within a broader framework, and the firmness required to interpretate the world in a manner which imbues it with a meaning that is hopefully not only bestowed, but also recognized.

NOTES

¹ But theory is described as a fashion of fallenness already in the outlines of a lecture on medieval mysticism programmed for the WS 1918/19 (Heidegger 1995c, 313-4). As for the retrieval of Kant against Husserl, see Heidegger 1995b, 431: “When some years ago I studied the *Critique of Pure Reason* anew and read it, as it were, against the background of Husserl’s phenomenology, it opened my eyes; and Kant became for me a crucial confirmation of the accuracy of the path which I took in my search.” On the hermeneutic turn of phenomenology, cf. Volpi (2007, 169 ff).

² For an overview on the genesis of hermeneutics out of phenomenology, see also Perego 1998.

³ For example, see Heidegger 1976a, 398: “that term suggests a misinterpretation of the ontology of *Dasein* as if resoluteness were a special mode of behaviour of the practical faculty as opposed to the theoretical one. But, as concerning taking care of things, care includes the being of *Dasein* so primordially and completely that it must be already presupposed as a whole when we distinguish between theoretical and practical behaviour.”

⁴ Later in this work, however, the good is associated with beauty as a harmonic relationship between the parts of a whole. Gadamer quotes Phil. 64e: “the *δύναμις* of the good has taken refuge in the *φύσις* of the beautiful” (ivi, 115). On this topic, see Zali 2020, 190 ff., particularly in relation to a Heideggerian perspective. The connection between hermeneutics and ethics in Gadamer’s thought is thoroughly examined by Camera 2001, 119–44; see especially p. 129, which includes an extensive bibliography on the subject.

⁵ The passage from Kant’s *Critique of Judgment* that Arendt has in mind is §40, where Kant discusses the *sensus communis* as a principle of taste (2000,

175). Ferrarin 2004, 43–51 and Siani 2017, 21–35 offer insightful analyses of this theme.

⁶ An analogue situation occurs in an Anglo-Saxon contest, where the classical particularistic reading supported by McDowell is now being criticized on the behalf of a renewed need of *φρόνησις*: that is, of an action-guiding theory (cf. Vaccarezza 2018; Kristjánsson 2022).

⁷ The aforementioned article by Ferrarin (2004, 58, n. 30) includes a brief list of key authors associated with this movement, such as O’Neill, Höffe, Sherman, Korsgaard, and Herman.

⁸ Consequently, the 'situational reading' proposed by Weidenfeld 2011 shall be rejected.

⁹ Bernasconi 1990 suggests “circumspection” as a possible translation of *φρόνησις*, alongside “understanding”, “conscience” and “resoluteness”.

¹⁰ It should be noted that this is a calque of Aristotle’s expression: “τῷ αὐτῷ εἰδέναι” (NE VI, 1141b 33).

¹¹ According to Natali, the end is determined by a practical form of induction among accepted customs, namely *ἔθισμός* (cf. Aristotle 2018, 472, n. 214; see also Natali 1989, 103–142). On the longstanding question of means and ends within the deliberative process, see Irwin (1978).

¹² This is a rare instance in which Kant presents his moral doctrine as continuous with a proposal from the past, as underlined by Engstrom 1997.

¹³ To the best of my knowledge, the theme of *absurdum practicum* has received little attention from scholars. On this topic, see Wood (1970, 248); see also Pelegrín (2016).

¹⁴ In the preparatory sketches for a later seminary course, the highest good is dedicated only three brief paragraphs, without any significant interpretative stance (cf. *Seminare: Kant – Leibniz – Schiller*, GA 84), 258; 325-327). Few more things are said about it in a section dedicated to the postulates, where the highest good grants an enlarged comprehension of “the finite rational practical being in its contemporary relationship toward being in its entirety” (ivi, p. 254).

¹⁵ Strauss 2006, 128 directs a similar criticism towards Ernst Jünger’s concept of courage. I do not endorse the view of resoluteness as a form of 'decisionism' that can be used as a conviction at the expense of others. Resoluteness also involves an openness that can respond to the other and invite a reciprocal acknowledgment of the other’s freedom. What I wish to emphasize is that, when considered in isolation, resoluteness fails to justify this positive outcome and remains susceptible to a negative one.

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