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Hölderlin’s Ethical Thinking: “The Processes of the Actual” in *Heidelberg*

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I

It is no news that ethics traffics in *oughts*, and it is also no news that this is a problem. To say that rights and goods ought to be distributed according to the difference principle, or according to historical entitlement, or according to merit; or to say that persons ought to cultivate their talents, or respond to others with compassion, or lead stable, orderly lives—all these things seem very different from simply describing what is materially the case. To be sure, descriptions of what is materially the case may themselves be generated in accordance with scarcely articulated norms for regarding things as worthy of notice. The material facts that we identify may themselves be salient only within human worlds of value and interest. But it is true nonetheless that determining the type of a given blood sample or calculating the apex of the trajectory of a projectile launched at a given velocity and angle present fewer problems than figuring out whether one ought to contribute to a particular charity or whether one ought to blame someone for eating too many cookies. In the former cases, it is pretty clear what one is to do in order to arrive at an answer, and this supports confidence that the results at which one arrives are descriptive of what there is, not only projections of our attitudes.

Moral philosophers have nonetheless often given way to a temptation to suppose that there exists a class of moral facts, on analogy with material facts, discovery of which might yield definite answers to questions about oughts. Plato is the paradigm case, in supposing that the Good is a standing object open to intellectual discovery. The trouble, however, is that such claims to have made discoveries of moral facts have often functioned as *ad hoc* rationalizations for moral stances that have not been widely shared. It is certainly not clear that many people will endorse the claim that a discovery through dialectic of the nature of the Good shows that the best life is the life of the philosopher.

Aristotle, with his commitment to the immanence of forms in nature and ordinary life, in contrast supposes that all we need to do is to discern what the best people are already up to. We are happily not required to look for Platonic moral superfacts or otherwise elsewhere than at common human life. The discovery of appropriate moral norms will be a matter of careful description of the way of life of people of practical wisdom. But here too there is a problem. Who really possesses practical wisdom? The description of moral achievements in ordinary practical life seems to be neither trivial nor innocent. Aristotle, for example, finds in surveying practical life that women “may be inferior and [slaves] wholly worthless.” Falling in with Aristotle’s descriptions of achievements of value in moral life seems to involve endorsing the
quite sectarian attitudes of a male Greek aristocrat.

It is tempting, then, to conclude that it is always like this. To describe achievements of value seems to be to project one's own subjective attitudes onto things, not to discover what there is. When we ourselves moralize, we produce essentially dramatic acts: projections, not discoveries.

But why should we do that? The moral evaluation of actions and ways of life is very different from the more evidently worthwhile enterprise of what Quine calls "limning the true and ultimate structure of reality." Instead of dramatically projecting our own attitudes or, worse yet, submitting to the dramatizings of others, why not, in the spirit of genuine description, stick to an external standpoint on the facts that people hold and endorse certain values. These are things people do, but their doing so can not be justified by the discovery of any moral facts. There are no moral truths waiting to be discovered. As Quine puts it, "It is merely that [moral] values are passed down the generations, imposed by word of mouth, by birch rod and sugar plum, by acclaim and ostracism, fine, imprisonment. [At best] the moral law of a society ...coordinates the actual scales of values of the individuals in such a way as to resolve incompatibilities and thus promote their overall satisfaction."

Yet this externalist stance on moral attitudinizing has the characteristically modern appeal of offering a clear-sighted view of the facts, without projection, also suffers from severe liabilities of its own. It offers no account of objective interests, acknowledgment of which might justify evaluative stances. Hence it first of all makes impossible any account of growing up as involving coming to grasp more fully what it is in the objective interest of persons to be or do, instead casting changes of attitude and aim as mere shifts in subjective preference. This seems false to the experience of learning, say, that Bach's Cello Suites are better than The Barney Song. Second, it makes impossible any rational resolution of social conflict through appeal to an objective interest and available means of satisfying it. On this view, the spoils of social life are of necessity divided up through plays of violence and counterviolence, at best holding one another in check under the mask of compromise. The best that can be done is to "coordinate the actual scales of values of the individuals..." in the manner of Hobbesian political realism.

Perhaps because he takes these pictures of growing up as sheer change in preference and of social structures as necessarily reposing on violence to be insupportable, Northrop Frye remarks that "A serious human life...can hardly begin until we see an element of illusion in what is really there, and something real in fantasies about what might be there instead." That is, it must be possible to think of changes in preference and of the development of social life otherwise. Our seriousness in thinking that we might affirmatively lead our lives in accordance with understanding requires that we think of the material facts of preference and social violence not as simply given, but also as open to transformation through understanding. This thought of the possibility of transformation based on understanding requires that we think of the material facts of preference and social violence not as simply given, but also as open to transformation through understanding. This thought of the possibility of transformation based on understanding requires not only disciplined understandings of the causes of material events and of the phenomena of social life, as such understandings are achieved in the natural and social sciences. It requires further an understanding of objective human interests—objectively valuable possibilities of shared human life. Without a sense of how the different things people do may be reciprocally reasonably endorsed as contributing variously to the realization of an objective interest, we either, as Frye puts it, fall into "the subordination of everything creative and scholarly to the expediencies and superstitions of authority..., [or] we fly apart into a chaos of mutually unintelligible elites, of which those nearest the center of society would soon take control. So atavistic a social regression, in the present stage of technological development, might well wipe the human race off the planet."
So we need a conception of objective human interests. Yet how is this need to be met? Interests are made evident to us in what people say and do, and in what they may plausibly be imagined to go on to say and do. Here actual historical pursuits of interests seem troubled by the very phenomena of parochialness and conflict that we seek to overcome. Various intellectualisms and esoteric fundamentalisms—putative new discoveries of an objective interest, accomplished through new techniques—may seem to offer a way out of historical conflict. But as in Plato they tend to function socially as a favoring of the parochial.

One might stand back quietistically from interests as they have been pursued and simply hope for something better. But this is a counsel of impotence that leaves regnant powers and conflicts in place or one might simply embrace some already existing strategy of the pursuit of interest. This runs the risks of didacticism and authoritarianism, in making no place for those disposed otherwise. How, then, might we both accept the existence of antagonistically opposed ways of being and regard these opposed ways of being as serving a common interest?

One well-known solution to this problem is Hegel's, in both *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and *The Philosophy of Right*. Hegel describes historically, in Chapters 6 and 7 of the *Phenomenology*, how bitterly opposed social experiments in the pursuit of freedom become progressively more adequate and progressively more rationally transparent to one another. He describes in *The Philosophy of Right* the structures and workings of the ideal social institutions now available to us, under which the subjective and objective points of view, or our opposed particular pursuits and our common interest, might be reconciled. These descriptions offer us, Hegel holds, the chance

To recognize reason as the rose in the cross of the present and thereby to delight in the present — this rational insight is the reconciliation with actuality which philosophy grants to those who have received the inner call to comprehend, to preserve their subjective freedom in the realm of the substantial and at the same time to stand with their subjective freedom not in a particular and contingent situation, but in what has being in and for itself.

It is a wonderful idea. But one does not have to be a fullblooded Marxist or Nietzschean nonetheless to be suspicious of whose particular, competitive interest might be served by the offer of such a recognition and reconciliation to "those who have received the inner call to comprehend" and thereby also the entitlement to rule. Once again philosophers are to be authorities, albeit more historically minded and democratic ones than in Plato. But can historico-philosophical reflection show us how to house divergent subjective interests happily and fitly under common social institutions, as Hegel suggests? As Herbert Marcuse comments: "A strange reconciliation, indeed. There is hardly another philosophical work that reveals more unsparingly the irreconcilable contradictions of modern society, or that seems more perversely to acquiesce in them."

But if not by historical description of an emergent resolution of social antagonisms, then how? How are we to articulate an objective interest and to identify the social pursuits and institutions that might further its effective and universal satisfaction? To what should one turn what sorts of attentions? How might one speak of an objective interest—let us say in human freedom—in such a way that both the ways of the world and of other human beings can be loved in general and the diversity of ways of being and the values
of independence and subjective particularity that that diversity supports can be upheld?

It is these questions to which Hölderlin develops an especially powerful and plausible not-quite-an-
swer, but mode of response. Unlike Hegel, Hölderlin does not undertake to describe the historical resolu-
tion of all social antagonisms. They are too strong for that, and their undoing might even compromise the
value of independence on which Nietzsche will later so much insist, in urging us to love our enemies be-
cause they are our enemies: they make for a good fight. But neither does Hölderlin stand back quietistically
in the face of the ways of the world, as do various social and material naturalisms that trace successions of
phenomena from an external standpoint. Instead, in a kind of apotheosis of the social, moral, and human
interest of the lyric as a genre, Hölderlin traces his path through partial recognitions of an objective inter-
est in freedom, partially embodied in social pursuits, and recognitions also of the waywardness of these
pursuits, of their resistances to reformation, accompanied by a further reactive sense of the value of his
own independence in being unable wholly to submit himself to anything. He carries out, in his lyric writing,
a kind of conversation with himself, in which natural-social life emerges as always something in between a
fully fit home for human freedom and a locus of gratuitous and violent oppositions to subjectivity.

I will try to make it clear how Hölderlin does this in his poetic writing in detail, how it is above all an
accomplishment of poetic voice in acknowledging one's condition and its possibilities, in tracing the work
of his poem "Heidelberg." But in order to establish the depth and range of Hölderlin's interest in moral
theory and in embodied freedom, it will be helpful first to review briefly some of his philosophical writings
about mind and value from the mid-1790s.

Based on close readings of essay fragments and letters from the mid-1790s, Dieter Henrich has use-
fully described "Hölderlin's 'speculative pro and con' [as] an attempt at a 'unification philosophy'
(Vereinigungsphilosophie)." In particular, Hölderlin in his philosophical writing attempts to describe
how a free, autonomous, self-conscious moral subject might be united through love with the natural
and social worlds. This philosophical effort remains always an effort marked by swerves and never a completed
unification theory. It arises out of Hölderlin's acceptances first of all of Kant's critical stance on the impos-
sibility of metaphysical knowledge of Being and of the Kantian-Fichtean conception of the moral subject as
both negatively free and capable of autonomy. In Hölderlin's own terms, the separation of the conceptually
conscious and self-conscious moral subject from Being arises out of judgment or Ur-theil, which Hölderlin
describes as "the original separation of subject and object, ...that separation through which alone object
and subject become possible, the arche-separation." Once cast out from oneness with Being and into con-
tceptual consciousness and moral freedom, there is no smooth way back. Though the term "Being" "ex-
presses the connection between subject and object" and there is a "necessary presupposition of a whole of
which object and subject form the parts," to think of oneself as an I "is only possible by means of this sepa-
ration...." To be conceptually conscious, to be reflectively aware of oneself as conceptually conscious,
and to have possibilities of free action arising out of reflectiveness—in short, to be a subject—is necessar-
ily to be not simply at one with what there is, however one has arisen out of nature. Hence, contrary to
Fichte's metaphysics of identity, "identity is not = to absolute Being." Contrary to any recuperative meta-
physics of Being and the subject's place in it, and rather in the Kantian spirit, we "cannot know the world in
itself nor of itself."

Yet Hölderlin does not accept a Kantian-Fichtean moral practice of eternal agentive striving. Instead,
he takes on from Jacobi's pantheist skepticism a sense that the world, including both subjects and objects,
is informed by love, even if how this is so or how this love might be accepted and realized cannot be known theoretically. Hölderlin’s sense of the natural and social worlds as suffused with love and meaningfulness that simply present themselves to a subject sporadically, rather than being winnable through striving, comes out clearly in a 1793 letter, in which he recalls

those divine hours when I return from the womb of inspiring nature or from the grove at Ilissus where, resting among disciples of Plato, I would follow with my eyes the flight of the magnificent one as he roves through the dark distances of the primal world, or where, with dizziness, I would follow him into the utmost depth, to the remotest regions of the land of spirit, where the soul of the world emanates its life into the thousand pulses of nature, whereto the effluvial forces return in their immeasurable circle, or when, intoxicated by the Socratic chalice and by Socratic friendship I would listen at the meal to the enchanted youths as they would pay tribute to the sacred love with tender, fiery speech, and how the jester Aristophanes would poke fun underneath, and finally how the master, the divine Socrates himself with his heavenly wisdom would teach them all what is love....

And yet, sadly, these divine hours do not last, and they even present themselves, both in recollection and in present experience, not as occasions of full abandonment to natural and social worlds of love, but instead as transitory moments of felt union, on the part of a subject who remains apart, marked by reflectiveness and dim capabilities of autonomy.

Hence Hölderlin arrives, despite his occasional neo-Schillerian attempts "to discover the principle which explains the divisions in which we think and exist, yet which is also capable of dispelling the conflict between subject and object" through the positing of "an aesthetic sense," rather at what Thomas Pfau has called "a fundamental aporia of philosophical discourse." Instead of being able to explain the origins of subject/nature and subject/subject divisions in hopes of overcoming them, human subjects remain caught, in Henrich’s formulation,

between two equally legitimate tendencies designated by the words “love” and “selfhood.” Sensitive to life and to the beauty of nature, ever devoted to his relatives, Hölderlin had a willingness and even a felt need to open himself up to whatever he encountered. He learned early on, however, in the strict educational system of the schools, that self-preservation is possible only for one capable of relying on himself alone and, as Hölderlin put it, of finding something infinite within himself. As much as love and selfhood tend to be mutually exclusive, they nonetheless belong together, and only then constitute a life in its totality.

Conscious life is at once shaped and unbalanced by the basic conflicting tendencies orienting it. And the formative process of life aims at finding a balance and harmony amid this strife, in which no one tendency is entirely suppressed or denied in its own right.
Living our lives within the play of these opposed but equally fundamental tendencies, Hölderlin finds that our place as subjects in Being “cannot be grasped other than from an askew perspective,” as these tendencies show themselves in successive moments of loving attraction and self-reliant resistance that cannot be wholly integrated with one another. In a central image from the Preface to the 1794 “Fragment of Hyperion,” we are, Hölderlin tells us, as subjects cast on “an ‘excentric path,’ a movement through time without a coordinating center.”

At any moment of this movement, “an external object is necessary,” in order that the fundamental tendencies of the subject’s life in Being may display themselves through attraction or resistance in relation to it. Neither Being in itself nor the subject in itself or in its own pure activity can be known directly. A presentation of the life of a subject—a poem—must trace how a subject engages successively with objects of opposed significances for the subject. The objects of the poet’s attention must be successively beautiful objects, or objects of love that absorb the subject and support the subject’s sense of harmony, and sublime objects, or objects of awe that throw the subject back into a sense of independence and reactive self-preservation. In this way, the life of a subject in Being—a life that involves both absorption and active independence—is revealed in the poem, and philosophical characterizations of the subject become realistically contentful in mutual alternation.

Thus, through this hyperbolic operation according to which the idealistic, harmoniously opposed and connected, is not merely considered as such, as beautiful life, but also as life in general, hence also as capable of a different condition, and not of another harmoniously opposed one, to be sure, but of a directly opposed one, a most extreme, such that this new condition is comparable with the previous one only through the idea of life in general,—precisely through that does the poet provide the idealistic with a beginning, a direction, a significance.

What is left, then, as orienting for the subject in its coming to terms with its place in nature and culture, are successive moments of “analeptic Abndung,” or stimulated surmise of possibilities of life, where surmise is dominated by the play of the fundamental tendencies of love and selfhood. The life, the poetic spirit, of the subject “exists as such in definite form and progresses through the alternation of moods where each time the succeeding mood is determined by the preceding one.” (Hölderlin’s Wechseltonlehre or theory of the succession of tones within a poem is the formal counterpart of the fact of alternating moods in the life of a subject.)

These alternations of mood, involving plays of stimulated surmise of possibilities of life, are, however, neither freely controlled by the subject nor simply induced by an overmastering nature. They instead involve plays of active attending with passive receiving, such that within them “there operates a heavenly fire rather than an earthly one.”

In Henrich’s useful summary, Hölderlin interprets the human condition along something like the following lines: man comes forth from a unitary ground to which he remains connected in the certainty of the presuppositions of his existence and of the
possibility of a new unity. At the same time, he is bound to a world that, like himself, originates in opposition. For the sake of unity he strives actively beyond each of its boundaries. Yet in it he at once confronts the beautiful—an anticipation of the unity that is lost to him and that he seeks to restore. As he embraces the beautiful, the complete truth, which lies at an infinite distance, is realized for him within limits. He is thus captivated by it, and for good reason. But he must not forget that his active nature is called upon to overcome the finite. In this conflict of love and selfhood he runs his course, either errantly or with self-understanding.

Poetic art will then describe and enact this course of life, not from a place without, but participatively, as the play of absorption and striving in the poem repeats the play of absorption and striving in life. “Art, like the consummate life, will but repeat harmoniously the processes of the actual, and deliver its oppositions from their conflict through completeness and order.”

2.

“Heidelberg” is one of Hölderlin’s shorter lyrics, written in 1798-1800, probably in recollection of a 1795 visit to Heidelberg, soon after the poet’s painful separation from Schiller. Its combination of compactness, direct address to the city, relatively straightforward syntax, carefully modulated shifts of prompted attending, and final elegiac calm—unusual in its sureness in Hölderlin’s oeuvre, but still in the register of memory of the transitory, not of standing triumph—show in an especially clear form the “processes of the actual” through which the fundamental tendencies of human life are experienced. Here is the entire text:

Heidelberg

Long have I loved you and for my own delight
Would call you mother, give you an artless song,
You, of all towns in our country
The loveliest that ever I saw.

As the forest bird crosses the peaks in flight,
Over the river shimmering past you floats
Airy and strong the bridge,
Humming with sounds of traffic and people.

Once, as if it were sent by gods, enchantment
Seized me as I was passing over the bridge
And the distance with its allure
Shone into the mountainscape,
And that strong youth, the river, was rushing on down
To the plain, sorrowing-glad, like the heart that overflows
With beauty and hurls itself,
To die of love, into the floods of time.

You had fed him with streams, the fugitive, given him
Cool shadow, and all the shores looked on
As he followed his way, their image
Sweetly jockeying over the waves.

But into the valley hung heavy the vast
And fate-acquainted fort, by lightnings torn
To the ground it stood on; yet
Eternal sun still poured
Its freshening light across the giant and aging
Thing, and all around was green with ivy,
Living; friendly woodlands ran
Murmurous down across the fort.

Bushes flowered all down the slope to where,
In the vale serene, with hills to prop them, shores
For them to cling to, your small streets,
Mid fragrant garden bowers repose.

Heidelberg

Lange lieb’ ich dich schon, möchte dich, mir zur Lust,
Mutter nennen, und dir schenken ein kunstlos Lied,
Du, der Vaterlandsstädt e
Ländlichschönste, so viel ich sah.

Wie der Vogel des Walds über die Gipfel fliegt,
Schwingt sich über den Strom, wo er vorbei dir glänzt,
Leicht und kräftig die Brücke,
Die von Wagen und Menschen tönt.

Wie von Göttern gesandt, fesselt’ ein Zauber einst
Auf die Brücke mich an, da ich vorüber ging,
Und herein in die Berge
Mir die reizende Ferne schien.

Und der Jüngling, der Strom, fort in die Ebene zog,
Traurig-froh, wie das Herz, wenn es, sich selbst zu schön,
Liebend unterzugehen,
In die Fluthen der Zeit sich wirft.

Quellen hast du ihm, hattest dem Flüchtigen
Kühle Schatten geschenkt, und die Gestade sahn
All' ihm nach, und es bebte
Aus den Wellen ihr lieblich Bild.

Aber schwer in das Thai hieng die gigantische,
Schicksaalkundige Burg nieder bis auf den Grund,
Von den Wettern zerrissen;
Doch die ewige Sonne goss

Ihr verjüngendes Licht über das alternde
Riesenbild, und umher grünle lebendiger
Epheu; freundliche Wälder
Rauschten über die Burg herab.

Sträuche blühten herab, bis wo im heiteren Thai,
An den Hügel gelehnt, oder dem Ufer hold,
Deine fröhlichen Gassen
Unter duftenden Gärten ruhn.

Structurally, the poem consists of five sentences running across the eight strophes: sentence 1 = strophe 1; sentence 2 = strophe 2; sentence 3 = strophes 3 and 4; sentence 4 = strophes 5, 6, and 7; sentence 5 = strophe 8. As the sentences increase in length, the imaginative action intensifies. The first three lines of strophe 6 ("Aber schwer...") form the point of greatest tension, with the resolution beginning in the fourth line of that strophe, with the calming "Doch...." The seventh strophe establishes the content of the resolution of the imaginative action; the eighth strophe—a sentence on its own—is then a concluding, shorter apposition to that resolution, reinforcing it in its own brevity and arriving at the final "ruhn."

The two sentences that form the first two strophes are fully apostrophic, directly addressed to the city ("dich"). The present tense of the second strophe ("schwingt sich," "glänzt," "tönt") offers direct description of the city. This direct description is mixed with the more indirect past tense ("Lang lieb' ich dich schon")
and subjunctive ("möchte") of the first strophe. In that first strophe, the poet-persona is both recalling the city and trying to establish or resolve a relation to it. He would call it mother and would send or give it an artless song. The second, more directly descriptive strophe seems to make it clear why the city is the appropriate object of such wishes. The bridge swings itself, at once almost agentively and freely, airily, like the flights of birds, and it does so lightly and powerfully ("leicht und kräftig") as though its power and effort were for it matters of ease and grace, again like the flights of birds. It combines artifactuality with naturalness. The vaulting movement and the functioning of the bridge in spanning the river serve as images of the accomplished task of a poet, who might hope to arrive at a graceful and powerful wedding of natural voice with the conventions and craft of language, so as to support a human community in its endeavors. The bridge sounds ("tönt") of both the people and their works, as it bears the wagons that they have built to carry their goods.

Yet the poet is at the same time separated from these works and from the bridge's and the city's accomplishments in supporting and housing them. He is not now in Heidelberg, but is instead remembering it, the city he once saw, and he would call it mother and sing to it, but perhaps cannot do so, at least not with the naturalness of the bridge and of the flights of birds. Why not? What has happened?

Strophes 3 through 6, line 3 fill in the answer. They are written in a further past tense, as a recollection within recollection. Perhaps the poet is remembering that during his 1795 flight from Jena he had stopped on the bridge in Heidelberg, just where earlier he had once stopped in enchantment. Once, earlier, he had been seized or chained ("fesselt"), stopped in his tracks, fully absorbed in the scene presented to him from his vantage point on the bridge. His gaze at this earlier time is first filled by the mountains in the charming distance ("die reizende Ferne"), which appear to him ("Mir ... schien") almost agentively, beneficently. It then falls to the Neckar, rushing beneath the bridge, sorrowing-glad ("traurigfroh"), drawing or arcing forth into the plain, where its noisome sad-gladness will flatten out into a calm, thence to empty, to throw itself ("sich wirft") into the sea.

The river, too, is an image of a poet's accomplished task, now more clearly accomplished within time, within a mortal life. The river seems to bear a kind of chthonic vocation. It stands in reciprocity with human life, as it carries the image of the city, is fed by the smaller streams that flow through the city into it, is given the shadows of its banks, and looked on by its shores. The streams, shadows, and images that the river carries mediate and reconcile the natural flow of the river with the artifactual life of the people and city on its shores. This carrying, and this reconciling of the natural with the artifactual, within a mortal life in time, offer an image of a poet able to speak, both independently, naturally, autonomously; going his own way, like the river, and in harmony, reciprocity, and love with the life of the people and with the social world of human commerce, where the buildings stand. All seems to be well.

"But...." ("Aber...."). The poem pivots on this word, which makes it clear that this earlier scene, the recollection within a recollection, is also a scene of trauma. The poet's gaze lifts from the stream. It finds that heavy in the valley hangs the gigantic fort, versed in fate. The fort is at the very least a reminder of human conflict. People build forts to control boundaries and commerce and to surround themselves with protection. Hence there will be, for any poet, resistances to the poet's work from within the social world, resistances undergirded by opposed natural routes of desire and interest. The fort seems in its size, its heaviness, and its foreboding hanging, to be both an artifact, made by men, and naturalized, an inevitable and unavoidable something. Any effort at the blending of autonomy and independence with love and reciprocity
must end, at least in part, in oppositions, in encounters with resistances. Psychoanalytically, these might be paternal. What is more important, however, is that these resistances present themselves as unavoidable, as the gigantic fort fills the poet's gaze, and as terrifying. Human social life in nature is a scene not only of partial reciprocities within the social and between the human and the natural, but also a scene, always, of oppositions, for poets and for anyone burdened with conceptual consciousness, given over to efforts at expressiveness, and cast into the floods of time.

Yet "Heidelberg" is nonetheless a lyric, not a desperate lamentation. In a second dramatic pivot, coming on the "Doch" ("yet"), the poet accepts this unavoidable condition, just as the fort accepts the poured out rays of the sun, which shine, lightening, alike on those who will hear the poet and those who will not. Around the fort, and around us, there is a freshening light, making for youth and innocence ("verjüngendes Licht"), and also living ivy and friendly woods. Running up and down the hills on which they lean, and along the banks of the river, and amidst fragrant gardens, the cheerful streets rest, repose ("ruhn"), and so also the ways and manners of the people. The freshening light of the sun shines, betimes, on the just and the unjust, the great and the small, the tradesmen and the poets, in their rounds of affairs, in the streets that carry their business. This sense of the repose of things that comes over the poet does not support any moral or doctrine of manners or human life. It is rather something more like an acknowledgement in reflective recollection of the conditions of human life as such.

3.

What are we to make of this lyric? Its teaching, if it has one, reposes on no discovery of moral facts about right and wrong. It offers us no principles to orient our actions. It is rather a vehicle of the acknowledgment of a condition simultaneously of hope to negotiate the experience of the fundamental tendencies of love and selfhood, of the frustration of that hope, and of the moderation of despair. It offers us neither the prophetic eschatology of the re-presencing of Being that Heidegger would see in Hölderlin—something that is in fact never an option in Hölderlin—nor the modernist apotheosis of resistance that Adorno would see in him. Instead, as a lyric, it records recollection, as it is experienced by a human being living out the fundamental tendencies of human life. In this, Hölderlin decisively rejects the representationalist conceit that would suppose that we can or ought to settle decisively on a definite ethical policy ("the greatest good for the greatest number;" "fair conditions of economic competition") as a full embodiment of right.

In resisting both the triumphant discovery of practice-orienting moral facts and moral despair, "Heidelberg" endorses the conceptual priority of Tugendlehre over Rechtslehre: our moral aspirations that come with conceptual consciousness and reflectiveness arise prior to and necessarily found commitment to any definite policies of right, whether legally enforceable or as a moral code. (It is hard to see how any social contract or ethical policy could lay claim to rational allegiance in the absence of this priority of Tugendlehre over Rechtslehre. Without it, commitments to social institutions and to patterns of action would have to arise not out of ethical aspirations grounded in objective interests, but out of competitive subjective interests as, at best, devices of social compromise and coping with life.)

It is possible to criticize such a stance, as Hegel did criticize it, for its subjectivism, in its lack of any commitment to any definite policies of right. As Hegel remarks about the "so-called 'beautiful soul'", plausibly identified with Hölderlin:
It lives in dread of besmirching the splendour of its inner being by action and an existence; and, in order to preserve the purity of its heart, it flees from contact with the actual world, and persists in its self-willed impotence to renounce itself, which is reduced to the extreme of ultimate abstraction, and to give itself a substantial existence, or to transform its thought into being and put its trust in the absolute difference [between thought and being]. The hollow object which it has produced for itself now fills it, therefore, with a sense of emptiness. Its activity is a yearning which merely loses itself as consciousness becomes an object devoid of substance, and, rising above this loss, and falling back on itself, finds itself only as a lost soul. In this transparent purity of its moments, an unhappy, so-called ‘beautiful soul’, its light dies away within it, and it vanishes like a shapeless vapour that dissolves into thin air.

But is this Hegelian criticism quite right? Hölderlin’s lyrical tracing and enactment of the condition of human consciousness in its natural and social surrounds does not clearly involve any moral subjectivism or quietism, any rejection of either action or commitment to public laws and institutions. If anything, Hölderlin in “Heidelberg” is committed to the thought that there will be action, within a structured social space, as he is for only a moment stopped on the bridge, or stopped in the recollection of being stopped on the bridge. There is no sense that action is futile or that the objective social structure is simply to be rejected.

Yet there will be resistances and oppositions that any course of action and life will encounter. The social world resists full reformation and perfection. Contrary to Hegel, the oppositions to be faced in courses of life and action do not lie entirely within the social world and cannot all be worked through to yield social transparency and reciprocal recognition (with only routine punishments and rebalancings of social life). The sources of opposition lie deeper than the social, in the primordial fact for human consciousness of the original Ur-theil. As Henrich notes, for Hegel opposition leads to “what Hegel calls ‘development’: the working out of increasing determination on the basis of the indeterminate..., [Whereas] in Hölderlin’s thought...every­thing is separation, modulation, and exchange....”

But it is also not all, not always and necessarily, sheerly subjective and factional opposition, within one’s own desires or among us, to be negotiated by brute acts of will and the workings of a competitive market. The aspiration to unity—with oneself in the rational coherence of desires, and with others in love and social reciprocity, but also without any sacrifice of autonomy or independence—persists. This aspiration can be acknowledged and acted on, if not stilled by full success in the embodiment of value.

The fact of this aspiration, if it is a fact, may support a continually self-refORMING commitment, quite different from moral a priorism, to a very abstract moral norm, a categorical imperative, without yielding any definite way of going on to act productively according to that imperative. Acknowledgment of such a standing aspiration, within oneself and others, prevents one from adopting a wholly exterior standpoint on moral attitudinizing, in the causal-explanation-seeking styles of Quine or Hume or New Historicism. One finds oneself within the processes of the actual, with one’s objective aspirations for love and selfhood. Yet self-refORMING commitment to an abstract moral norm, arising out of such acknowledgment, will not overcome the force of resistances to come, nor will it afford any achieved unification of the self with itself and
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others, under any definite moral or social policy. All this is the standing moral force of this kind of lyric writing.

Hence we find in “Heidelberg,” in a phrase that Simon Critchley has usefully coined for poetry in general, “a fleeting saying of a fleeting thing by a fleeting being,” in which the fundamental tendencies of life, “the processes of the actual,” are made available for our acknowledgment. In such acknowledgment, one finds oneself identifying oneself as leading a human life within these processes, in standing, imperfect pursuit of love and selfhood. Thinking about and through our entanglement in these processes is one central part of what ethical thinking is and ought to be.

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Notes


22. Ibid., p. 68.


25. Ibid., p. 134.


27. Henrich notes that “the bridge itself therefore represents movement.” The Course of Remembrance, in The Course of Remembrance and Other Essays on Hölderlin, p. 150.

28. Here I am at one with Henrich’s criticisms of the readings of both Heidegger and Adorno. On Heidegger: “Heidegger is no help at all in methodically uncovering Hölderlin’s approach or the kind of thinking from which it derives. He speaks instead with the conviction of someone in touch with Hölderlin’s ideas from the outset and is therefore imperious rather than thoughtful and reflective. We can thank Heidegger for contemplating Hölderlin’s work in relation to real philosophical questions, and here we can agree with him. But depth without flexibility in questioning can easily distort and obstruct; moreover it encourages mindless imitation.” (“The Course of Remembrance,” note 94, p. 294). On Adorno: “Adorno uses Hölderlin as no more than occasion for the pure employment of aesthetic categories.... [Contra Adorno], the paratactic linguistic form of the late poems is grounded in the integration of incongruous vital horizons and in the
depiction of the unrepresentable emergence of meaning, not simply in an antagonism to the synthetic establishment of the idealist-bourgeois subject.” (“The Course of Remembrance,” note 139, pp. 300-301.


31. The possibility and interest of a substantively Kantian moral stance, but without a priorism, is a major theme of my *On Moral Personhood: Philosophy, Literature, Criticism, and Self-Understanding* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).


33. I thank Fred Rush for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay and the members of the audience of the philosophy colloquium at the University of Leipzig, and especially Richard Raatzsch, for their discussion of it.