

Michael Eldred

Social Ontology

Recasting Political Philosophy
Through a Phenomenology of Whoness



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ὅς κάλλιστος ἐν οὐρανῷ ἴσταται ἀστήρ
That fairest star set in heaven

Homer *Iliad* 22.318

Table of contents

1	By way of introduction – Precious little	1
2	Loosening the ground: Thinking about society, thinking society	15
2 i)	Society, needs and wants, language	16
2 ii)	What is λόγος?	17
2 iii)	Opinion: Holding things and each other to be (whatness and whoness)	18
2 iv)	Showing oneself off as somewho	20
2 v)	The openness of being as the enabling dimension within which society is situated	23
2 vi)	Living well and being somewho – The need to interrogate the tradition	25
3	Further outline of the phenomenon of whoness	29
3 i)	Bearing a name and standing in estimation in the community through valuing interplay	30
3 ii)	Human social being as self-presentation and showing-off in the clearing in an interplay of estimable reputability (politeness, pride, vulnerability, arrogance, conceit)	34
3 iii)	Further exemplary phenomena of standing and not standing as somewho (flattery, manliness) — The existential possibility of coming to one's very own, genuine stand as self	38
3 iii) a)	Digression: Dialectic of self and other – Wrestling with Plato, Hegel, Heidegger	42
3 iii) a) 1.	Preliminary considerations when approaching Plato's and Hegel's dialectical thinking	42

3 iii) a) 2. Approaching an existential dialectic of self and other through an interpretation of a passage from Plato's <i>Parmenides</i>	50
3 iii) a) 3. The Hegelian dialectic of the concept, primal splitting and closing together	61
3 iii) a) 4. Heideggerian selfhood as a "shining-back" from being-in-the-world	68
3 iii) a) 5. Interpreting the dialectic of primal splitting and closing together with regard to selfhood	75
4 The satisfaction of wants and the striving to have more	85
4 i) Economics and chrematistics	85
4 ii) Weber's conception of economic activity	93
4 iii) The Cartesian cast of economics	99
4 iv) Schumpeter's equilibrium theory	102
4 v) Aristotle on money and exchange — Money as a medium practically unifying social usages	106
4 vi) Endless money-making? Economic interplay as an end in itself?	114
5 Metaphysics of exchange	123
5 i) Commodity exchange and the necessity of rethinking Aristotelean δύναμις	124
5 ii) Productive know-how, acquisitive know-how?	127
5 iii) Commodity exchange not guided by the insight of know-how	131
5 iv) Two complementary, reciprocal pairs of δυνάμεις: Value and desire	137
5 v) The coming together of goods in commerce	145
5 v) a) A side-glance at Hegel's treatment of actuality, possibility, contingency necessity and freedom	147
5 vi) Exchange as core phenomenon of social intercourse: Interchange and interplay	157
5 vi) a) Reciprocally showing off who one is in relations of recognition	162

5 vi) b)	The interplay of powers of self-presentation — engendering trust	166
5 vi) c)	Mutual recognition: Personhood, esteem and respect, the power play over who-standing and the possible intimacy between you-and-me	170
6	Justice	175
6 i)	Justice as a fundamental social phenomenon of having one's fair share— Strauss' misconception of ontological origins – The goods of living: valuable things and esteem – Ongoing competitive interplay estimating each other's abilities	175
6 ii)	Distributive and corrective justice	184
6 iii)	Marxist critiques of capitalist social relations as unjust	189
6 iii) a)	The untenability of the labour theory of value as a theory of just exchange masking exploitation	189
6 iii) b)	The untenability of the theory of surplus value as a theory of capitalist exploitation	203
6 iii) c)	Other possible injustices of capitalist wage labour	205
6 iv)	The just distribution of the goods of living including the question of poverty	212
6 v)	Social justice: The state welfare apparatus	225
6 vi)	Esteem, honour and fame in social life with a focus on Aristotle and Schopenhauer	234
6 vii)	A just distribution of honour and fame in society? – The (non-)fame of creative recasters of an historical world – Chapter summary	245
7	Interlude with some intermediate conclusions: Everyday living of finite human beings – Security and insecurity	253
7 i)	Securing the polity of civil society – An initial determination of government (Schmitt, Locke, Kant) – The rule of law	253

7 ii) Exchange as the starting-point of social living (Plato, Hegel)	257
7 iii) The reliability of things (Heidegger)	260
7 iv) Exchange essentially unreliable	262
7 v) Free market exchange as both an unreliable and reliable form of sociation	264
7 vi) Money-mediated exchange abstract and reified (Marx)	267
7 vii) Risky enterprise and secure jobs	270
8 The short reach of Cartesian certainty and Leibniz' principle of reason into the social science of economics	273
8 i) Leibniz' principle of reason as a general "grand principle"	273
8 i) a) Digression: The principle of reason further considered	275
8 i) a) 1. Leibniz	275
8 i) a) 2. Hegel	277
8 i) a) 3. Nietzsche	280
8 i) a) 4. Heidegger	282
8 i) a) 5. Anaximander and the justice of interplay	286
8 ii) "The economic law of motion of modern society" (Marx)	292
8 iii) Adam Smith's notion of labour-value	294
8 iv) Economics as a quantitative empirical science (Aristotle, Hayek)	298
8 v) The disclosive truth of markets	301
8 vi) Stock market estimations of the future	305
8 vii) Market irrationality, sentiment and psychology as phenomena of mood	308

9	Reified social relations, the visible and the invisible hand	313
9 i)	Reified social relations and caring-for in a capitalist economy, drawing on Heidegger's <i>Being and Time</i> – Caring for one's own world and indifference to others	313
9 ii)	Self-interest and mutual caring-for in exchange	323
9 iii)	Reified social relations and purportedly 'inhuman' alienation of human being	332
9 iv)	The wage-labour relation and caring-for – Co-operation and conflict – Hierarchy and reified discipline – Economic democracy and total economic control	339
9 v)	The invisible hand and the ontological possibility of a caring capitalism – Unlimited economic growth through caring for each other	347
9 vi)	The set-up and the endless cycle of self-augmentation of reified value (Marx, Heidegger) – The historical possibility of the side-step into endless mutual caring-for	356
9 vii)	State intervention in the economic interplay of civil society	373
9 viii)	Uncertainty of income-earning – The 'law' of social inertia and the tendency toward conservation of a way of life – Openness to the future vs. risk-aversion – The ensconcing of particular interests behind protectionist barriers	379
9 ix)	The manifestation of the visible hand in the shape of bureaucracy	389
9 x)	State intervention as a visible helping hand for the invisible hand – An asserted unconditional right to be	

cared for – Caring-for that “leaps in” vs. caring-for that “leaps ahead” (Heidegger)	392
9 xi) The paternalistic ‘all-caring’ state – Taxation and its tendentially asphyxiating hold on civil society	398
10 Social power and government	405
10 i) Metaphysics of social power	405
10 i) a) Recapitulation: Various kinds of power	415
10 i) b) Aristotle on social and political power	419
10 ii) Two related social powers: Rhetoric and the political power of government – Legitimacy, punishment, terror	424
10 iii) Legitimacy of government further considered – Acceptance and affirmation of government	434
10 iv) The “restlesse desire of Power after power” and the necessity of the Leviathan – Straussian “vanity” and the inevitable ongoing comparison of who-status and individual powers – The modern individual subject as the foundation and starting-point for deriving the Leviathan	440
10 v) Legitimacy of the Leviathan – An arbiter in the “Competition of Riches, Honour, Command, or other power” – The predicament that “nothing is more easily broken than a mans word”	448
10 vi) The individualization of the truth of being (Protagoras, Heidegger) – The ultimate ontological source of strife – The finite process of resolving differences among individual perspectival views	454
10 vii) Sharing the truth of being in interplay – Co-casting an historical world in powerless enpropriation to being – Government cast as the guarantor of free social interplay qua fair power play – The power play of social living paradoxically infused with powerlessness	465

11 The ontological constitution of ‘we ourselves’ 477

- 11 i) Dialectical movement from the sensuous givenness of world to the identity of ego and world – The dialectic of recognition – “*Ego that is we and we that is ego*” (Hegel’s *Phenomenology*) 477
- 11 ii) Universal self-consciousness and irrepressible, questioning, singular individuality – The ever-broken mediation between singularity and universality concretely realized in ethical life 487
- 11 iii) The question of who: Selfhood, my self, you-and-I (Heidegger’s 1934 lectures and *Being and Time*) 494
- 11 iv) How do we ourselves come about? – Belonging together in a situation 509
- 11 v) Constitution of an historical people – Heidegger’s authoritarian, anti-liberal casting of “we the people” – The historical decision to open up to the future – “We are the coming about of time itself” 512
- 11 vi) We the people and singular, rare individuals – The ethos of open-mindedness – Abstract personhood, interplay through a reified medium and the historical possibility of the free individual — The impossible mediation between universality and singularity — Singularity’s shelter in the abstract rights of particularity – Heidegger’s conjuring of a “fundamental attunement” among the people to support the work of a rare, singular individual 521
- 11 vii) The ontological critique of liberalism – Contract as the abstractly universal shell-form for the metabolism of civil society – The possibility and ethos of a liberal We in free and fair interplay 532

12	Government and the state	541
12 i)	Recapitulation: The liberal conception of government, its critique and socio-ontological grounding in the power play of civil society (Locke, Hegel)	541
12 ii)	The totalitarian state as a counter-casting to liberalism – The yearning for a totally controlled “organic construction” as the pinnacle of productionist metaphysics (Ernst Jünger)	555
12 ii) a)	Heidegger’s anti-liberal interpretation of the German tradition in 1933 (W. v. Humboldt, Kant, Hegel)	569
12 iii)	The forever contradictory, moving realization of freedom in civil society and state as power play (Hegel’s <i>Rechtsphilosophie</i>)	579
12 iii) a)	Diremption of particularity from the universal in civil society and their mediation	579
12 iii) b)	The police and civic corporation as supplements to the interplay of civil society	585
12 iii) c)	A problematic transition from civil society to the state – ‘Infinite’, singular affirmation of the concept of freedom through an ethos of free and fair interplay – The chimera of a final resolution of the power play	589
12 iii) d)	The state as the universal that remains particular in foreign relations	600
12 iii) e)	The inner constitution of the state and the singularity that remains plural – The endlessly contentious issue of taxation – Never-ending controversy over concrete conceptions of the universal good – The two-way power-mediation between civil society and state – The media and freedom of speech	602
12 iii) f)	Division of powers within the state in accord with the concept of freedom – Hereditary monarchy “outside human freedom” true to the paradigm of productionist metaphysics – The concept of freedom does not come to a unified closure – The people’s (mis-)trust of the state	608
12 iii) g)	The transition from civil society to state reconsidered: The power play over social recognition and identity in belonging to	

a political whole — Constitutional rules of play for the ongoing political power struggle	613
12 iii) h) The reality of freedom as the shared, ethical social living of a people and its fracturing, through which free societies remain in flux	616
12 iii) i) Hegel’s critique of the liberal conception of state – Kant’s “idea of the original contract”	618
12 iii) j) Ontic-ethical ‘second nature’ and ontological insight into the political realm	622
12 iii) k) The dispensability of the philosopher king and the precipitation of ontological structures in historically lived, ethical usages	627
12 iv) Democracy, competitive electoral struggle and majority will vs. individual freedom	632
12 iv) a) The political power struggle for recognition as a worthy politician – The government’s power to enact concrete policy and its mirroring in democratic public debate – The infection of the universal good with particular interests – Protectionism	632
12 iv) b) The tendential danger of the dissolution of freedom in merely democratically mediated, state-positing will – The erosion of the freedom of interplay through the sham universal of social justice – Constitutional law as a bulwark against merely positive law	640
12 iv) c) Schumpeter’s competition theory of democracy – The ethical practice of money-mediated exchange – The ethical usage that is the democratic power play over government – Democracy’s wavering course between an appetite for freedom and a craving for security	645
12 iv) d) Carl Schmitt’s critique of the “parliamentary law-making state” – The contradiction between formal law-making procedures and substantial rights – Direct plebiscitary democracy	663
12 v) Democracy, freedom and justice: A recapitulation	677
13 Relations among states and the global power play among peoples	685

1 By way of introduction – Precious little¹

Singularity hyperborean
Throbbing crystal
Precious little

καὶ περιττὰ μὲν καὶ θαυμαστὰ καὶ χαλεπὰ καὶ δαιμόνια εἶδέναι
αὐτοὺς φάσιν, ἄχρηστα δ', ὅτι οὐ τὰ ἀνθρώπινα ἀγαθὰ ζητοῦσιν.
(Aristotle *Eth. Nic. Z 7 1141b7ff*)

And while people say that they [thinkers such as Anaxogoras and Thales] understand things that are extraordinary, astounding, difficult and even superhuman, they nevertheless claim that they are useless because they do not seek what is good for human beings.

Philosophical knowledge is useless, although common opinion may concede it to be, as Aristotle puts it, “extraordinary, astounding, difficult and even superhuman”. This knowledge does not embody practical reason directly applicable to the practices of human living, but is theoretical speculation to be indulged in only by those with the leisure to extricate themselves from involvement in pragmatic affairs and escape to rarified climes supposedly divorced from the so-called ‘real world’.²

¹ Work on this inquiry began late in 2000. It eventuated on a mountain top, but not in a vacuum. Especially invigorating is the ongoing dialogue with Astrid Nettling. I am grateful also for feedback from readers of various bits of this digital script and for other help along the way, including from Chris Arthur, Charles Bambach, Keith W. Brown, Rafael Capurro, Ted Kisiel, Eric S. Nelson, Michael Pennamacoor, Mike Roth, Iain Thomson, Jeff Todd, Tom Sheehan, Peter Trawny, Robert E. Wood, Michael E. Zimmerman and particularly Dennis Skocz. The exchanges and fights at the Heidegger e-mail discussion list since 1996 have been sometimes highly stimulating.

² “One can call philosophy a kind of luxury insofar as luxury designates those enjoyments and preoccupations that do not belong to external necessity as such. Insofar, philosophy is certainly dispensable. However, the crucial point is what is to be called necessary. From the aspect of mind and spirit, philosophy can be posited precisely as that which is most necessary.” (Die Philosophie kann man

Abstract speculation seems to characterize philosophy in its more esoteric mode and serves as a justification for why it can be put to one side by normal mortals. Abstraction from what is palpably present to the senses or can be imagined in concrete terms with some reference to experience is difficult and strenuous for the unpractised mind to perform, and only in the case of mathematics, whose abstractness is at least justified in the end to common sense by its practical fruits which precipitate in technological feats such as suspension bridges, space travel or internet banking, does this abstractness appear to be worth the effort of mastering. Common sense is only prepared to more or less mistrustfully concede abstract thinking a place if it can ultimately prove its worth in practical life. Abstract algebra, for instance, can justify its existence by providing the mathematical theory that allows unbreakable encryption codes for electronic banking to be generated. When philosophy claims that there would not even be any such thing as electronics and digital technology without the thinking done at the heart of philosophy, this claim is greeted with boundless skepticism, since it seems patently otherwise, namely, that scientists, mathematicians and engineers worked for generations to develop such technologies and also their abstract theoretical foundations. To trace a line back to philosophy itself as the birthplace of technological knowledge would require thinking philosophically, and it is precisely this enterprise that seems to be less than worthwhile, not only for ordinary lay persons, but also for the highly educated. At best, such a tracing is apparently of interest only for a scholarly history of ideas in which initial, crude notions purportedly have evolved and been scientifically refined over the centuries.

It seems, even and especially to the highly educated today, that one can talk reasonably about the deepest secrets of the universe, such as the nature of time or life or thinking, without having to bother about philosophical,

[...] eine Art von Luxus nennen, eben insofern Luxus diejenigen Genüsse und Beschäftigungen bezeichnet, die nicht der äußeren Notwendigkeit als solcher angehören. Insofern ist die Philosophie allerdings entbehrlich. Es kommt aber darauf an, was man notwendig nennt. Von seiten des Geistes kann man die Philosophie gerade als das Notwendigste setzen. G.W.F. Hegel *Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie I* Werke Band 18 Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/M. S. 70) All translations from German are my own. Those from the Greek are at least modified by me.

‘metaphysical’ notions and ‘speculations’ that purportedly have long since been discredited and dispensed with by scientific thinking. Indeed, philosophical speculations about time or life or thinking today, it is claimed, have been superseded by more reliable, empirically based, scientific knowledge. Even the mere word ‘speculation’ (Gr. θεωρεῖν, θεωρία) today has a pejorative ring. Experiments can be set up to test the notion of time in relativity theory. Life is the object of knowledge in modern, experimental biology with its diverse branches, including molecular biology and the digital decoding of the human genome. The nature of human thinking itself can be investigated in neurophysiology and modelled in computers. What need is there still in these areas for philosophy, which can provide no empirical evidence apart from apparently naive, trivial, general statements? Instead, don’t data need to be collected, and treated and filtered by sophisticated statistical methods which have only been available for around a century? Doesn’t our knowledge have to be based on verifiable and verified hard facts? Isn’t truth a matter of fact?

Even the world’s most prestigious universities today subscribe to the view that philosophy has outlived its usefulness for the deepest questions confronting humanity today. Philosophy is preserved as a kind of artefact of the West’s cultural heritage, commemorating its historical beginnings and immured in ivory tower humanities departments where scholars spend their days, while the really crucial, ‘relevant’ thinking, the thinking that ultimately makes a difference to how we live, gets done in institutes of natural and social science. There is a distinction popular today among the educated between ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ science or knowledge. ‘Soft’ knowledge is regarded as a kind of cultural embellishment to living that relies on ‘fuzzy’ concepts about things like humankind’s ‘humanity’, its ‘soul’, etc. ‘Hard’ science, by contrast, is unquestioningly taken to be where the important, decisive thinking with ‘real’ implications for humankind gets done.

So it has to be asked whether the opinion commonly held by popular understanding, the media and the educated elite regarding the dispensability of philosophy in this age overlooks something. This something must have to do with the specific business of philosophy, which

is thinking and not the history of ideas. The thesis may be entertained that thinking genuinely only takes place in genuine philosophy, and that genuine thinking unearths something that remains hidden to the thinking of both common sense and complicated scientific thinking. This sounds like an arrogant assertion that could only increase the contempt for philosophy. It's easy for any of us to admit that they are ignorant of medicine if they are not a trained doctor, or that they cannot play a musical instrument if they haven't learned one, but there is nothing self-evident about philosophy covering an area of knowledge which someone could easily admit is not covered by any other endeavour, especially since medicine at least can restore health and music can give pleasure, whereas philosophy, to all intents and purposes, seems useless. Rather, thinking is taken to be the hallmark of humankind in general and not the domain of a specific endeavour. The very species is called homo sapiens, i.e. wise, knowing man. Man is a thinking being, indeed, the only thinking being, so every human being is philosophical. Every instance of the species is a more or less thinking, knowing, understanding being. This capacity for knowledge, it is presumed, has developed over the aeons of human evolution to modern-day science, which is said to represent the culmination and pinnacle of human knowledge. Moreover, since it is the hallmark of human beings to think, and every single human being thinks it thinks, and takes its own thinking to be the yardstick for truth, it seems impudent to claim that, at first and for the most part, we think only deficiently and dwell outside the bounds of thinking that truly matters. Such a claim also seems impossible, for how could an individual's very thinking, through which it holds the world to be as it is, itself be put into question for something so alien as philosophical thinking?

And yet, it has been said that common sense and scientific knowledge, both natural and social, have not learned to think and do not even notice the deficit. On the contrary, science has been basking complacently for several centuries in an unquestioned superiority over philosophical knowing, which has ostensibly long since outlived its day. Philosophy's claim to a special, unique, general status is weakened by the facticity of diverse, specialized philosophical endeavours today and in the past. How is genuine philosophical thinking to be picked out from among the facticity

of countless philosophical specializations and the plethora of philosophical authors? There are as many philosophies as there are philosophers, even when one reduces the number by concentrating on the great names in philosophy. The living philosophers recognized and acclaimed today in both the public domain and the learned institutions do not make preposterous, arrogant claims concerning the uniqueness of philosophical thinking and they take care not to insult people by claiming that they have yet to learn to think. This indicates that there is a tension in the very term, 'established philosophy', an immanent friction arising from philosophical thinking chafing under its bridling by a status quo that has, from the start, demarcated the zone within which philosophers are called on to say something.

The predicament is confounding: truth passes, and has to pass, through each individual *individually*, and this applies most of all to philosophical truth, i.e. to what philosophical thinking discloses. Truth accepted on authority is not truth, but an adopted opinion based on trust or faith in another. For the truth to be appropriated, it must be disclosure to an *individual*, learning self. Isn't this statement tantamount to saying that each human individual has its own individual, 'subjective', ultimately opinionated truth or that each philosopher has his or her own particular, purportedly arcane knowledge, or system of 'beliefs', beyond the reach of most mortals and beyond the realm of 'objective' knowledge? Do philosophers only present views they believe in which others may find interesting? How then is a philosopher to be distinguished from a crackpot? Or are philosophers, if they are genuine philosophers, all crackpots, situated beyond the verifiability of 'hard' science? How to decide? Who is to decide? Each thinking individual has to decide for her- or himself, which however does not mean that truth is a matter of merely individual, 'subjective' opinion, because the vexing questions of philosophy are not just made up by individuals, but rather, each has its own tradition and pedigree which has to be taken on and grappled with in argumentation and questioning open also for others to follow. The individual is thus embedded in a greater whole of questions — starting perhaps with the universal question concerning the nature of human being and the 'human predicament' as such — that have always already, in one way or another,