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The Primacy of *Phronesis:* A Proposal for Avoiding Frustrating Tendencies in Our Conceptions of Rationality

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The purpose of this article is to propose a strategy for avoiding certain tendencies in our prevailing conceptions of rationality that inevitably prove frustrating. The strategy involves cultivating a deeper appreciation than most of us presently have for what Aristotle called *phronesis* or "practical wisdom." I shall contend that, ultimately, all forms of thoughtful activity are at their best not simply when *phronesis* plays some part in them but only when it plays the primary and most decisive role. Followers of the growing literature in hermeneutics, critical theory, revived pragmatism, and related movements are likely to find themselves on familiar ground with proposals of this sort, though not all will agree with my insistence on the primacy of *phronesis* and some of the conclusions I draw from it. This is hardly surprising, for among the movements just cited, as well as within each of them, the range of disagreement on a given issue is as noteworthy as any momentary convergence. The strategy I shall be proposing only adds one more voice to the growing discussion, but at the very least it is a distinctive voice, stressing certain points that for the most part have been left relatively undeveloped or else rejected altogether. In particular I shall emphasize how such a strategy would allow us to salvage much more of our philosophical and theological heritage than is presumed possible in many current discussions. While I write as a Christian theologian and intend this discussion to be directly relevant to theological tasks, I believe the proposed strategy will also be relevant to anyone aspiring to be a critical thinker—or, as I prefer to say, a thoughtful activist.

There are basically two contrasting tendencies in our prevailing conceptions of rationality that we need to avoid. For want of universally accepted labels I shall call one of these tendencies "objectivism" and the

other "tribalism."[1] Objectivists, since Plato, have held that in reasoning we should aim for one set of standards that are so rigidly fixed as to be completely unaffected by people's contingent standpoints. Modern-day objectivists, such as Martin Hollis and P. F. Strawson, may not endorse Plato's cosmology, but they nevertheless insist that the bare possibility of understanding diverse cultures requires "a massive central core of human thinking which has no history."[2] Tribalists, since Protagoras, have held that in reasoning we should content ourselves with innumerable sets of standards that are so localized as to be completely subservient to people's contingent standpoints. Modern-day tribalists, such as Barry Barnes and David Bloor, have no objection to judging between true and false, rational and irrational beliefs. But they insist that the standards to which one appeals in making these judgments are confined to one's own "tribe." "In the last analysis," they claim, the tribalist "acknowledges that his justifications will stop at some principle or alleged matter of fact that only has local credibility."[3]

Despite what appear to be the sharpest possible differences, objectivists and tribalists share one assumption in common, namely, that the standards that guide our reasoning are either completely unaffected by our contingent standpoints or else are wholly subservient to them. As objectivist Gottlob Frege put it, "If . . . nothing maintained itself fixed for all time . . . everything would be plunged into confusion."[4] Frege uses this assumption to argue that some things do indeed maintain themselves fixed for all time and that he has uncovered enough of them to deliver us from confusion. But the tribalist uses the same assumption to argue that outside our tribal customs confusion is all we should expect to find since nothing we know of has ever maintained itself fixed for all time.

Now, unlike many current writers on this subject, I am more interested in warning against these tendencies than in accusing people of succumbing to them. It is fairly easy to find thinkers, such as those just cited, whose work (or at least certain aspects of it) can be defensibly construed as objectivist or tribalist. But that in itself will not warrant our assuming that

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[1] Objectivists can also be called absolutists, foundationalists, or rationalists, while tribalists can be called relativists, historicists, or subjectivists (and in theological circles are often called "sectarians"). The terms matter less than the conflicting tendencies they describe.

[2] P. F. Strawson, *Individuals* (London: Methuen, 1959), p. 10. Martin Hollis takes up Strawson's phrase and defends it in "The Social Destruction of Reality" in *Rationality and Relativism*, ed. Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1982), pp. 67–86.

[3] Barry Barnes and David Bloor, "Relativism, Rationalism and the Sociology of Knowledge," in Hollis and Lukes, eds., p. 27. This statement might not qualify as tribalist were it not for the word "only." Substituting less than absolute terms, such as "mostly" or "primarily," might get them off the hook.

[4] Gottlob Frege, *The Foundations of Arithmetic*, trans. J. L. Austin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), p. vii.

this is the only defensible construal, and in fact it usually is not the only one. The same work can sometimes even lend itself to construals that provide valuable resources for avoiding the very tendencies it has encouraged. Richard Bernstein, for example, offers alternate readings of critical theorist Jürgen Habermas and new wave pragmatist Richard Rorty. He argues, convincingly in my judgment, that, while Habermas does indeed show tendencies toward objectivism and Rorty toward tribalism, both thinkers are nevertheless among the most important pioneers in recent attempts to move "beyond" objectivism and tribalism.[5] I am convinced that similar multiple readings can be defended in the case of thinkers often accused of being the most sinister exemplars of objectivism (e.g., Descartes, Kant, Husserl, or theologian Schubert Ogden) or tribalism (e.g., Nietzsche, Kuhn, Foucault, or theologian George Lindbeck). The question ought not be one of whom to read and not read but of how to read people in ways that help us avoid tendencies that all of us find tempting at one time or another.

Critics often fail to point out that both tendencies are likely to produce the *same* frustrating consequences (to put it mildly), albeit in different ways. Their more sinister forms can lead to imperialism, while their more benign forms can lead to irrelevance. Imperialism and irrelevance may of course be genuine risks haunting any attempt to be reasonable, but objectivism and tribalism, by virtue of their extremism, are the most likely means to winding up with one or the other. By insisting on only two basic options in reasoning, they leave themselves basically with only two possible outcomes.

If the objectivists' program is to be of any help, they cannot merely *aim* for ahistorical standards. They must also claim to have found at least some, and preferably most, of them. The alternative would be to admit that, despite all well-intended efforts, all of our standards remain wholly subservient to contingent standpoints, which for an objectivist would amount to an admission of utter despair. Such high stakes are bound to generate considerable anxiety and, for that very reason, are also likely to make objectivists extremely reluctant at certain points to make room for their own fallibility and finitude. They will have a great deal of difficulty in

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[5]Richard Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), pp. 182–206. Bernstein is among the most helpful and accurate commentators on, and contributors to, strategies for avoiding objectivism and tribalism. I have borrowed the term "objectivism" directly from his work. I want to press the possibility of alternate readings further than even he seems willing to do, however, and I prefer to speak of *avoiding* objectivism and tribalism, instead of *moving beyond* the two tendencies. For now, at least, their hold on us seems too persistent to speak of escaping their influence altogether. Indeed, their hold on us may turn out to be so firmly entrenched and pervasive that we would do better to speak of *resisting* them rather than avoiding them. I shall not pursue that further possibility here, however.

seriously entertaining the possibility that they could be mistaken about standards they now take to be genuinely ahistorical or that they have not already found most of the truly important ones. This means that the aims and consequent anxieties of objectivism can quite easily legitimate imperialism and ethnocentrism, where little if any provision is made for dissenters to get even a hearing.[6] To be fair, I must acknowledge that a good many objectivists nevertheless do recognize the dangers involved even in their own projects and strive to cultivate a healthy degree of fallibilism.[7] But given the anxieties that inevitably accompany their aims, this recognition of fallibility will always be an uphill battle. Historically, conscious objectivists typically attempt to make room for fallibilism by first restricting the applicability of their standards to "ideal" (i.e., made-up), simplified, and sharply circumscribed languages, and then saying very little about the consequences of these ideal languages for languages that people actually use. In doing this they may be more likely to avoid imperialism but they also, in effect, give up claiming much relevance, if any, to the sorts of reasoning people find themselves having to pursue.[8] I doubt that objectivists find this alternative much more attractive than imperialism. In any case, people who turn to them for guidance are bound to be disappointed.

Tribalists are no better at escaping these alternatives. By their own admission they are just as involved as objectivists in evaluating beliefs and practices. Granted, when others' standards of evaluation seem to differ from their own they do not feel the need to critique them, which may make them appear more open-minded. But this appearance is deceptive, for while they may not want to critique others' standards they also feel no need to listen if others want to critique theirs. Exchanges that take place between different tribes are rather viewed as exchanges of power, not reasons.[9] So long as other tribes' standards do not threaten to erode theirs, tribalists can afford to let people go their separate ways, but once they feel sufficiently threatened, they will have to do whatever is necessary to stop the others' influence. Short of killing, they can force the offending tribes to move away or convert, which puts them on the path of imperialism, or else they can find some way to isolate themselves, which is another variety

[6]See ibid., p. 19.

[7]As Bernstein points out, for objectivists and tribalists alike, "The dominant temper of our age is fallibilistic." Ibid., p. 12.

[8]Stephen E. Toulmin offers an argument along these lines in *Human Understanding* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1972), 1:63. Hilary Putnam makes a similar point in response to W. V. Quine in *Realism and Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 284: "Ordinary language, or at least language containing terms that are not 'perfectly precise', is the only language we are ever going to have: *philosophy cannot forever confine itself to theories of the logical structure of make-believe languages*" (Putnam's emphasis).

[9]See Toulmin, *Human Understanding*, 1:76–80.

of irrelevance. If reasoning is assumed to be completely subservient to local custom, there are no other choices.

Hardly any, and probably none, of us wants to be an imperialist, and while irrelevance appears somewhat more benign, we would all most likely prefer some nonimperialistic way of avoiding that consequence as well, if such a way could be conceived. Fortunately, as I have hinted, such a way can be conceived, though following it may be difficult and sometimes hazardous—at least as difficult and hazardous as people's lives tend to be already. Conceiving such a way requires an account of human understanding that can defensibly claim to be neither objectivist nor tribalist and can offer resources for avoiding the temptations of these methods.

Consider then the claim that, ultimately, all forms of thoughtful activity will, at their best, be governed by *phronesis*. This claim will become clearer after I offer a portrayal of this ancient virtue that is suited to our present conversations. The following working definition will serve as a point of departure: *phronesis is the historically implicated, communally nurtured ability to make good sense of relatively singular contexts in ways appropriate to their relative singularity.*[10] This definition covers a number of crucial points that need to be made more explicit. I shall list and then discuss them in the following order: *phronesis* is employed in making good sense; *phronesis* is communally nurtured; *phronesis* is historically implicated; *phronesis* makes good sense of relatively singular contexts; the ways in which *phronesis* makes sense are appropriate to its subject matter.

The first point to note is that *phronesis* is employed in making good sense. Each word of the phrase "making good sense" is crucial to keep in mind. The last word reminds us that *phronesis* is employed in understanding and making judgments.[11] It yields genuine knowledge. But the first and second words also remind us that phronetic sense-making is neither theoretically detached nor value neutral. It is always practically engaged, recognizing that our own participation (*making* sense) and value judgments (making *good* sense) play an essential role in the kind of knowledge *phronesis* yields. Thus, contrary to certain portrayals of rationality, phronetic sense-making does not presume that practical engagement

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[10] I do not wish to get sidetracked here over how close this definition is to Aristotle's treatment of *phronesis* (in Book VI of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. David Ross, rev. J. L. Ackrill and J. O. Urmson [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980]; hereafter referred to as *EN*). There are several diverging perspectives on what he really meant. But, as with other recent thinkers on this subject, my principal concern is with how his account addresses and raises vital issues in our own time. This certainly requires considerable respect for Aristotle, but not slavish reproduction. In fact, I believe it requires respectfully standing Aristotle on his head. Richard Bernstein comes to much the same conclusion (see Bernstein, pp. 47–48).

[11] I am using "sense" more elastically than those philosophers who associate that term only with meaning and not truth.

always interferes with genuine knowledge. It undoubtedly can interfere if not properly taken into account, but taking our practical engagement properly into account no longer means automatically discounting it. If phronetic sense-making makes any sense at all, we have to acknowledge that at least some things can be known only from a practically engaged standpoint and that rationality must, therefore, involve more risks than some of its defenders have been willing to admit.

To say that *phronesis* is also communally nurtured is to focus on an important aspect of its practical engagement. The value judgments essential to phronetic sense-making inescapably arise from the trust and loyalty we already have for the communities that have formed us.[12] What is perhaps most noteworthy about these communal bonds of trust and loyalty is that, while carrying some of their own risks, they also import resources for self-criticism into the heart of our practical engagements. For loyalty brings a sense of being accountable to others for the judgments we make, and trust brings an expectation that those others will consider themselves similarly accountable to us.[13] This is not the sort of formalized accountability, however, that is typified by bureaucratic organizations, for these are designed to work precisely where communal bonds are too difficult (or else too suspect) to establish or maintain. Communal accountability does not primarily depend on the bureaucrat's uniform application of principles but on more elastic standards that, while seeking to preserve continuity, leave considerable room for individual discretion (*epieikeia*).[14]

To make the further point that *phronesis* is historically implicated is to emphasize that its practical engagement nevertheless does have its hazards. As I am using the expression, there are mainly two ways in which *phronesis* can be said to be historically implicated: on the one hand (especially where its sense-making cannot afford postponement), it is bounded by unacknowledged conditions and unintended consequences; on the

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[12]See Aristotle, *EN* 1.2, 1.4, 10.9; Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), esp. pp. 137–53; Bernstein, pp. 150–65; Ronald Beiner, *Political Judgment* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), pp. 75–82, 138–44; William M. Sullivan, *Reconstructing Public Philosophy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), pp. 170–72; Stanley Hauerwas, *A Community of Character* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), esp. pp. 111–28.

[13]Jürgen Habermas has argued that something like this sense of mutual accountability is assumed as a central aim in all acts of communication, no matter how much it may conflict with other, more immediate and obvious aims. Many find his argument unconvincing, however. Bernstein suggests that his point can be rescued if taken not as a strict, transcendental argument but as a "hermeneutical dialectics" supported by plausible interpretations of actually existing communities. See Habermas, *Legitimation Crisis,* trans. Thomas McCarthy (Boston: Beacon, 1975), pp. 107–8; Bernstein (n. 5 above), pp. 195, 225–26.

[14]See Aristotle, *EN* 5.10, 6.11; Stephen E. Toulmin, "Equity and Principles," *Osgoode Hall Law Journal* 20 (1982): 1–17.

other hand, it can also be distorted by various forms of self-deception.[15] This, of course, makes the need for communal accountability that much more urgent, but, insofar as communities are likewise historically implicated, further allowances will have to be made for their own susceptibility to error and distortion as well. Thus, although *phronesis* cannot be cultivated apart from bonds of trust and loyalty, its continued cultivation requires that those same bonds be conditioned by a variety of "distancing" moves, both in our intellectual procedures and institutional arrangements. This point is of considerable significance in helping us understand our present standpoint in Western history. For much of what we have come to call the development of modernity involves recognizing the need for such distancing moves and struggling to secure a prominent place for them in all forms of life.[16] We find them traveling under a variety of labels—experimental (i.e., "scientific") method, ideology critique, hermeneutics of suspicion, social contracts, and bureaucratic rationalization, to name only a few. While defenders of *phronesis* may be right to object to the totalizing tendencies these distancing moves have often displayed, the value of such moves for all forms of thoughtful activity need not be underplayed.[17] Indeed, their value becomes especially crucial for those who hold, with Paul Ricoeur, that practical engagement already involves distancing as a dialectical moment *within* itself.[18]

Phronesis is practically engaged in all the ways discussed so far—not least because its sense-making is always provoked by relatively singular contexts.[19] These are contexts whose intelligibility depends on noting not only how they are to be related to other contexts (how they are to be

[15]I am greatly indebted to the work of social theorist Anthony Giddens for this formulation of the "bounded knowledgeability" of human agency. See Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 282. Recognizing the possibility of self-deception provides at least a momentary point of departure for conversation between Christian theologians and more secularly oriented critical theorists. Perhaps the best known discussion of self-deception as a concomitant of inordinate self-love (i.e., sin) remains Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 2 vols. (New York: Scribner's, 1941), 1:203–7.

[16]One of the most interesting and pertinent recent accounts of modernity's distancing moves is to be found in Stephen E. Toulmin's *The Return to Cosmology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1983), esp. pp. 228–74.

[17]Hans-Georg Gadamer, one of the most important defenders of *phronesis* in our time, has often been accused of underplaying the value of distancing moves. This accusation may be pertinent as far as his earlier work is concerned, e.g., *Truth and Method,* trans. Garrett Barding and John Cumming (New York: Crossroad, 1975). Such an accusation would be more difficult to sustain in light of his later work, particularly *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981). His position now seems close to Ricoeur's.

[18]Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 243–46.

[19]By design I am using "context" so elastically that practically anything we can think about at all can be considered both as a context and as part of other contexts. A context is simply any "things in relationship."

treated as *relatively* singular) but also how they are to be distinguished from every other context (how they are to be treated as relatively *singular*) and, finally, how these two aspects are to be interrelated. Often this interrelationship is spoken of in terms of universals and particulars,[20] where "what is universal and what is particular are codetermined."[21] This suggests that *phronesis* is not concerned with universals and particulars as they are usually understood in formal logic, where universals are completely invariant and particulars function only as instances of universals. Instead, phronetic sense-making presupposes that particulars in their full particularity are capable of making sense in a way that universals cannot fully anticipate and that furthermore affects the way in which universals are to be actualized in that instance. And here it is crucial to note that the way in which universals are actualized, in a relatively singular context, does not require the formulation of more comprehensive universals. As Gadamer points out, "For the application of rules there exists in turn no rule."[22] Aristotle at one point likens this adaptation of the universal to a special type of ruler—one made of lead—which could be bent to take on the irregular shape of a certain kind of molding.[23] We are dealing, then, with *malleable* universals and *informative* particulars, which are capable of mutual influence. These are what jointly constitute a context's relative singularity, and their somewhat unpredictable interaction guarantees that phronetic sense-making will always prove a bit unsettling, especially to those who expect reasoning to fix everything in its proper place. And it will prove doubly unsettling to the extent that relatively singular contexts are thereby often relatively *transient,* requiring that good sense be made of them before the opportunities to do so pass us by.

The final point I wish to make in this portrayal is that the ways in which *phronesis* makes sense are appropriate to its subject matter. Because of its practical engagement with relatively singular contexts, phronetic sense-making has to be elastic rather than rigidly fixed. At the beginning of the *Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle reminds us that one mark of a well-educated person is "to look for precision in each class of things just so far as the nature of the subject admits."[24] And where sense-making is practically engaged, he acknowledges that there simply is too much "variety and fluc-

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[20]Aristotle, *EN* 6.7: "Nor is practical wisdom concerned with universals only—it must also recognize the particulars." See also *EN* 6.8, 11. Aristotle appears unable to decide whether to assign recognition of particulars to perception (*aisthesis*) or to intuitive reason (*nous*).

[21]Bernstein, p. 146.

[22]Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science,* p. 49.

[23]Aristotle, *EN* 5.10. This passage is concerned with the relationship between equity and justice. But Aristotle later makes it clear (*EN* 6.11) that discerning the equitable is convergent with phronetic sense-making.

[24]Aristotle, *EN* 1.3.

tuation" for it to be judged by the standards of precision used in, say, a mathematical proof. Instead, we must be content in such matters "to indicate the truth roughly and in outline."[25] By saying that phronetic sense-making is elastic, I am attempting to restate Aristotle's point in light of some recent discussions. In present terminology, at least as employed by some thinkers, elastic sense-making could be called paradigmatic, narrative, analogical, metaphorical, dialectical, and in some cases even paradoxical.[26] Any of these terms can be used to designate a tension between continuity and variation (or relatedness and singularity) that can arise in our sense-making's use of examples, concepts, principles, language, and the like—a tension that nevertheless seems more capable of informing our activity than any attempts at less tension-fraught substitutes. Undoubtedly there are differences in the degree or kind of tension each of these terms calls most immediately to mind, but there seems to be frequent disagreement on precisely where one sort of tension ends and another begins. Perhaps this is because any terms we use to talk about elastic sense-making will most likely wind up being used somewhat elastically themselves. In any case, I shall try to avoid getting entangled in those debates by using "elastic" (somewhat elastically) to refer to whatever it is that these more specific terms seem to have (somewhat elastically) in common. At least in part, what they seem to have in common is a sort of double resistance. Any sort of elastic sense-making resists attempts to classify

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[25]Ibid.

[26]The following literature uses these terms in a way that converges with my understanding of elasticity. On paradigms see Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970); Stephen E. Toulmin, *Foresight and Understanding* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1961); David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), pp. 99–154 (on "classics" as paradigmatic), *Plurality and Ambiguity* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), esp. pp. 12–17. On narrative see Stanley Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), esp. pp. 15–39; Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984), esp. 1:ix–xi, "The Text as Dynamic Identity," in *The Identity of the Text*, ed. Mario J. Valdes and Owen Miller (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), pp. 175–86. On analogy see David Burrell, *Analogy and Philosophical Language* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1973); Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination*, pp. 405–45, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, pp. 92–94. On metaphor see Frank Burch Brown, *Transfiguration: Poetic Metaphor and the Languages of Religious Belief* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983), esp. pp. 44–47; George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); Sallie McFague, *Metaphorical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977); Sheldon Sacks, ed., *On Metaphor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979); Janet Martin Soskice, *Metaphor and Religious Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). On dialectic see Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science* (n. 17 above), pp. 45–50; Paul Ricoeur, "What Is Dialectical?" in *Freedom and Morality*, ed. John Bricke (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1976), pp. 173–89. On paradox see Paul Ricoeur, "Two Encounters with Kierkegaard," in *Kierkegaard's Truth: The Disclosure of the Self*, ed. Joseph H. Smith (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981), pp. 313–42; John Wisdom, *Paradox and Discovery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1965).

everything into one rigidly fixed, hierarchically ordered system. At the same time, however, no matter how far its resulting variations may extend, it preserves some manner of continuity that resists splitting variations off into their own isolated realms of meaning.

I shall not attempt to defend the cognitive worth of elastic sense-making here but will instead assume the overall credibility of defenses offered in the current literature on the subject. Some of its defenders have furthermore acknowledged that, in some way or another, they were talking about *phronesis*.[27] But whether or not the connection with *phronesis* is recognized, I think it safe to suggest that the status of either is linked to that of the other: if elastic sense-making makes sense, so, most likely, does phronetic sense-making and vice versa. Furthermore, I suggest that elastic sense-making needs to be construed in phronetic terms, insofar as any sense-making involves "an interplay of meanings, norms and power."[28] That is, insofar as any sense-making is practically engaged (and thus historically implicated), it loses some of its innocence and must be open to the kind of communal accountability and the sorts of distancing moves that I have insisted are essential to phronetic sense-making. Elastic sense-making is no less essential to the portrayal I have offered, but it still involves risks that need always to be kept in mind.

By now it should be fairly obvious that phronetic sense-making does not share the "either/or" assumption lurking behind objectivism and tribalism. Its practical engagement with relatively singular contexts precludes any pretense of following standards that are (or would even aim to be) completely unaffected by our contingent standpoints. By the same token, however, it does not rest content with standards that are completely subservient to our contingent standpoints, either. It presumes, rather, that the particularity of our contingent standpoints can be more than particularly informative without denying their full particularity, and that the standards appropriate to guide our discernment of informative particularity can aim for a malleable universality that need not be seen as any less universal for being malleable. Granted, these correlative notions— informative particularity and malleable universality—display certain tensions, and both objectivists and tribalists might legitimately wonder whether they are finally incoherent. An affirmative answer to their question would undoubtedly be inevitable if allowances were not made for elastic sense-making. Once we do make such allowances, however, we can

[27] See, e.g., Ricoeur, "The Text as Dynamic Identity," pp. 177–78; Hauerwas, *Truthfulness and Tragedy*, pp. 27–28.

[28] Anthony Giddens, *New Rules of Sociological Method* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), p. 161. John B. Thompson also discusses how easily elastic sense-making lends itself to ideological use (i.e., "the mobilization of meaning in order to sustain relations of domination") in *Studies in the Theory of Ideology* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 200.

no longer assume that the tensions these notions display are necessarily symptomatic of an underlying incoherence.[29]

So far, in the preceding portrayal, I have presented *phronesis* as one legitimate way of making sense. My original claim goes further than this, however. Ultimately, I claimed, *all* forms of thoughtful activity are best *governed* by *phronesis*. I am claiming, in other words, that *phronesis* is not simply one legitimate way of making sense but that it is the most fundamental and inclusive way, from which all other ways of making sense derive whatever merits they may legitimately claim. If we are to give *phronesis* its due, we must acknowledge not only its legitimacy but also its primacy.

I find it necessary to claim such primacy for *phronesis* mainly because it seems that accounts of reasoning that would make *phronesis* either subordinate to or completely separate from some nonphronetic way of thinking tend to presuppose the either/or assumption behind objectivism and tribalism.[30] This, of course, is where my understanding of *phronesis* has to part company with Aristotle's.[31] But the parting seems unavoidable, and not only for the reason just given. As Stephen Toulmin points out, many of Aristotle's assumptions about reasoning were reinforced by assumptions about the nature of things (e.g., the fixity of species and the unqualified immutability of the gods), which no longer seem warranted.[32] Other alternatives now seem more viable. "In intellectual history as in natural history, the old philosophical ideal of 'permanent entities', which preserve an essential identity through a continuing sequence of 'accidental' historical changes, can now be superseded by a more life-like, and less mysterious notion: viz., that of 'historical entities' which, though possessing no absolutely unchanging characteristics, preserve enough unity and continuity to remain distinct and recognizable from one epoch to another."[33] For Toulmin and others, this shift in our understanding of the nature of things requires us to speak even of theoretical knowledge primarily in terms of a moral commitment to certain ideals of human flourishing.[34] Thus, appeals to theory become "one

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[29] This is not to deny that tensions can ever lead to incoherence. They often do, even when coherence itself in construed elastically.

[30] This is documented (at least as well as such a charge lends itself to documentation) in Toulmin, *Human Understanding* (n. 8 above), pp. 41–130, 478–84.

[31] See Aristotle *EN* 10.7–8, and Bernstein's comments (n. 5 above), p. 47.

[32] Toulmin, *Human Understanding*, p. 356; see Bernard Lonergan, "Aquinas Today: Tradition and Innovation," *Journal of Religion* 58, suppl. (1978): S1–S17; Langdon Gilkey, "Response to Lonergan," ibid., S18–S23.

[33] Toulmin, *Human Understanding*, p. 141.

[34] For the phrase "human flourishing," see Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

more element in critical *praxis.*"[35]

In the terms I have been using, it now seems that all forms of thoughtful activity are precisely that—forms of thoughtful *activity.* Ultimately, all reasoning everywhere is practically engaged and thus communally nurtured, historically implicated, and provoked by the demands of relatively singular contexts. So if we are to retain any commitment to a more than tribal rationality, it will ultimately have to be on phronetic terms or at least something very much like them. This is not to rule out the relevance of any number of distancing moves (as mentioned earlier), some of which may claim to be more rigidly systematic, detached, or value neutral than overtly phronetic sense-making. But their guidance, however crucial, cannot displace *phronesis* from rightfully playing its more radically influential role.

As I hinted at the outset of this article, an interesting consequence of according primacy to *phronesis* is that it can help us avoid objectivism and tribalism without wholly abandoning certain moves that have been taken to be characteristic of one or the other tendency. The universalizing moves that objectivists hold dear can be reinterpreted in terms of a malleable universality, while tribalists' localizing moves can be reinterpreted in terms of an informative particularity. In carrying out these reinterpretations we would, in effect, be replacing objectivism with what I shall call confessional radicalism and tribalism with what I shall call radical confessionalism. These are tendencies that would still pull our attention in different directions, but as the play on terminology suggests, each is nevertheless linked rather closely (if somewhat dialectically) to the other.

Just how closely (and dialectically) these tendencies can be linked is well exemplified, I believe, in many of the claims I have made so far about *phronesis*—especially the claim that *phronesis* can and must be accorded primacy. For I understand this claim, and others related to it, to be at once radically confessional and confessionally radical.

According to H. Richard Niebuhr, we proceed confessionally when we cannot avoid stating "what has happened to us in our community, how we came to believe, how we reason about things and what we see from our point of view."[36] If, as I have argued, all reasoning is practically engaged, thereby requiring that *phronesis* be accorded primacy, then I can hardly deny that the claims involved in this argument are themselves practically engaged. Indeed, I find it necessary to acknowledge not only that these

[35]Stephen E. Toulmin, "Explanation and Interpretation" (Course lecture, University of Chicago, Chicago, Ill., January 24, 1984).

[36]H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Meaning of Revelation* (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 29. I find this characterization helpful as far as it goes but do not always draw the same implications for universalizing moves that Niebuhr seems to draw.

claims are influenced by my contingent standpoint but also that they are radically influenced by it—influenced all the way down—to the point that certain strands from the variety of traditions that partly constitute that standpoint already elicit from me a degree of trust and loyalty more basic than any of my attempts to justify the claims they make on me.[37] This is a familiar admission to make about overtly religious commitments, but I believe it applies as well to commitments that are not overtly religious. Thus, I am also committed to critically examining even my most deeply held convictions, largely because I find the efforts of Socrates and his heirs more admirable than those of Protagoras and his heirs,[38] and while it is hardly negligible that the former group offered arguments on behalf of their efforts—sometimes very forceful and elegant arguments—I remain more convinced of their efforts' admirability than of the soundness of any one of their arguments.[39] My claim that all forms of thoughtful activity ought to be governed by *phronesis* and my proposal for how *phronesis* should be understood are on no firmer footing than this. They are radically confessional claims.

Without ceasing to be radically confessional, however, my claims can also be regarded as confessionally radical. For an important reason for claiming that all reasoning everywhere will, at its best, be phronetically governed is that I presently cannot conceive of any other alternative that appears as substantively coherent as this one.[40] Thus, while not pretending to have suddenly jumped beyond my contingent standpoint, I am making what sounds suspiciously like a transcendental move. It sounds like that because, at least in a way, that is what it is, although it can also be regarded as a rhetorical move.[41] I do not want to quibble over what to call

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[37]This is not to say, with the tribalist, that my attempts to reason critically are therefore wholly subservient to my contingent standpoint, for though I can hardly regard my trust as completely unaffected by such a standpoint, I could hardly take it seriously if I thought my trust wholly subservient either. My line of thinking here is indebted to Paul Ricoeur's reflections on "the antinomy of human value." "If values are not our work but precede us," Ricoeur asks, "why do they not suppress our freedom? And if they are our work why are they not arbitrary choices?" (Paul Ricoeur, *Political and Social Essays* [Athens: Ohio University Press, 1974], p. 250.) He concludes that we can make sense of this only by setting up a circular, practical, and concrete tension "between the sort of participation which is the soul of historical consciousness and the sort of distanciation which is the soul of critical philosophy" (p. 249). I agree.

[38]By choosing Socrates over Protagoras, I do not mean to disparage all forms of rhetoric, but only its more opportunistic forms. And I am not trying to shut rhetoric out of philosophy or critical inquiry, for I believe that critical inquiry at its best is rhetorical.

[39]My reflections here also parallel David Tracy's claim that conversations with classics cannot be replaced by arguments about them. See *Plurality and Ambiguity* (n. 26 above), pp. 19–27.

[40]By "substantive coherence" I mean something much more elastic than formal consistency. Indeed I find substantive coherence more substantively coherent than a strict interpretation of the latter.

[41]According to Stephen Körner, arguing "from so far inconceivable alternatives" can be regarded as "a much weakened, but plausible, version of Kant's transcendental deduction." But

it, but in the perhaps naively optimistic hope of avoiding trivial controversies, I am suggesting that we call this type of move confessionally radical. It is confessional because it is always mindful of the radical influence of contingent standpoints on its own efforts. But it is nevertheless radical in the sense of seeking to get at the very roots of everything we say and do as radical confessionalists.[42] It is also radical in the sense of recognizing that we cannot get at those roots as long as we pretend to be detached spectators instead of thoughtful activists—which, in turn, means that we cannot get at them without affecting them (and thus affecting ourselves) in ways we cannot foresee before the attempt is made. While recognizing the risks inherent in making any universal claims about human life in the world, confessional radicalism nevertheless does make such claims in hopes of provoking respectful and suspicious conversation with those who may wish to differ.[43] So instead of seeking to place radical confessionalism on a firmer footing than it already has, confessional radicalism is far more interested in reminding us all of how volatile our standpoints inevitably are.[44]

Perhaps characterizing phronetic alternatives to objectivism and tribalism in this way will sound too theological to some potential conversation partners. But what else should they expect from someone whose primary interests are in fact theological? In any case, nothing I have said would prevent others from developing and defending similar, less

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he also considers such a move to be a type of "nonsophistic rhetoric." See Stephen Körner, *Metaphysics: Its Structure and Function* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 192. I have elsewhere offered a defense of transcendental moves along similar, rhetorical lines, defining it as "an historically implicated comparison of claims explicitly made (including its own prior claims) with whatever more or less contestable sense can be assigned to the performative situation accompanying those claims, attempting to determine whether *and in what way* they can be understood to be anywhere from performatively self-warranting to performatively self-refuting" (Charles W. Allen, "The Recovery of *Phronesis:* Its Implications for the Role of Practical Reason in Theology" [Ph.D. diss., Divinity School, University of Chicago, 1987], p. 52).

[42]Objectivists prefer the metaphor of foundations to that of roots. I doubt that one's choice of metaphor matters as much as what projects we try to use the metaphor to underwrite.

[43]Both Toulmin and Ricoeur have occasionally recommended transcendental moves in this confessionally radical sense (and with similar reservations about how the term might be misunderstood). (See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1970]; and Stephen E. Toulmin, *Knowing and Acting* [New York: Macmillan, 1976].) For Ricoeur there can still be a kind of "transcendental logic . . . not exhausted in the Kantian a priori" (p. 52), but this move turns out to be thoroughly hermeneutical. For Toulmin, a transcendental move is the most inclusive way to respond to the question "What then are we to make of ourselves?" (p. 296) while attempting to "yield a broader and more consistent picture of human life in the world" (p. 242). Both Toulmin and Ricoeur view such a move as practically engaged and therefore potentially self-transformative, and both intend such a move to aim more at provoking conversation than at bringing conversation to a halt.

[44]I agree with Richard Rorty that, insofar as transcendental moves try to get behind our confessional standpoints to something firmer, they are bound to fail. But I do not share his further conclusion that such moves are therefore pointless. See Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982), pp. 173–75.

theological-sounding alternatives. While we would doubtless find our-
selves obliged to converse and argue about the relative adequacy of their
formulations as compared with mine, the probability that our disagree-
ments would continue indefinitely would not prevent either of us from
freely borrowing and adapting one another's strategies in order to avoid
temptations toward objectivism and tribalism. Phronetic sense-making's
elasticity leaves room for that much latitude.

My principal concerns, nevertheless, do remain theological, and one of
my fondest hopes is that the theological community would increasingly
turn to strategies such as these for avoiding the same temptations in their
own ranks. In fact, some of them already have turned to such strategies,
though they do not always recognize one another. Many who style them-
selves as postliberal (in George Lindbeck's sense of the term) are, I
believe, better described not as sectarians but as radical confessionalists.[45]
They may seem at points to eschew universalizing moves altogether, but
eventually they grant them some legitimacy, albeit grudgingly.[46] Still,
many who are more sympathetic with a revised correctional approach to
theology (in David Tracy's sense of the term) are better described not as
foundationalists but as confessional radicals.[47] They may at times seem too
optimistic about the ability of universalizing moves to settle conflicting
claims, but a closer reading usually reveals a more theologically apt sense
of hope, not optimism.[48] (Nor are these moves intended to assume priority
over the particularity of one's subject matter.)[49] To the extent that these
two descriptions are accurate, I am surely warranted in hoping that mem-
bers of these two circles will eventually find ways to work more closely
together than they presently seem ready to do. This is not a hope that
their mutual suspicions would then be laid aside, but that their mutual
respect would become just as evident. For confessional radicals and radi-

[45]See George Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age* (Phila-
delphia: Westminster, 1984). Other examples of postliberal theology include Hauerwas; Ronald
F. Thiemann, *Revelation and Theology* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).
One might also include Francis Schüssler Fiorenza, *Foundational Theology* (New York: Crossroad,
1985); and Sharon D. Welch, *Communities of Resistance and Solidarity* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis,
1985), as examples of postliberal theology with a more overtly political aim.

[46]See Lindbeck, pp. 129–35; Thiemann, p. 83; Welch, pp. 81–92.

[47]Tracy makes no secret of his confessional standpoint. See *Plurality and Ambiguity*, pp. 110,
113. Other examples of revised correlational approaches include Langdon Gilkey, *Society and the
Sacred* (New York: Crossroad, 1981); Schubert M. Ogden, *On Theology* (New York: Harper &
Row, 1986).

[48]See Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, pp. 27; 134, n. 40; Gilkey, *Society and the Sacred*, pp.
26–41; Ogden, pp. 107–8.

[49]"As always, a general method can only heuristically guide the inquiry; the subject matter
alone—and that in all its particularity—must rule" (David Tracy, "Practical Theology in the Sit-
uation of Global Pluralism," in *Formation and Reflection*, ed. Lewis S. Mudge and James N. Poling
[Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987], p. 140).

cal confessionalists are both phronetic sense-makers, and while it would be naive to pretend that their concerted efforts would ever totally banish temptations toward objectivism and tribalism, their mutually respectful and suspicious alliance would seem to offer one of the best hopes imaginable for keeping those temptations at bay.