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The Family and its Ethos. A Philosophical Case Study in Ontologico-Historical Understanding

Summary

This paper attempts an investigation of the system of references and interdependencies linking historical and ontological concerns to one another in the context of family life as we know it today. The results are examined with a view to establishing their implications for some broader issues pertaining to post-Heideggerian phenomenology, critical social theory (Adorno), and post-Wittgensteinian philosophy of language. Finally, the distinctive form of intelligibility presented here is compared to the conception of ethos presented in Aristotle's account of rhetorical practice.

Key words: Family – Ontologico-historical understanding – Ethos – Aristotle – Heidegger – Adorno – Wittgenstein

1. The question of what, exactly, family life represents for society as a whole, is one that frequently shows up as relevant in the context of the discourse of contemporary social and political philosophy. This is hardly surprising. Whatever 'familiality' or 'familyhood' as we understand it consists in, it clearly occupies a close relationship both to biologically determined structures of kinship and descent, and to the practical and material interdependence between generations

that arises whenever human beings carry on their lives together in one place, or on the basis of some otherwise finitely determined set of natural or human resources. This, I think, explains why it is that philosophers and thinkers with quite different positions on social and political issues are nevertheless able to share, at least for the most part, the intuition that ‘the family’ offers a window onto some of the most elementary and persistent forms of human coexistence — forms that must somehow be taken into account within any broader theoretical understanding of human society.

Indeed, it seems reasonable to think that the importance of such forms can be safely assumed, even in societies and cultures very different from our own, where they may not even figure in ways that we would recognize as being connected to the family. This is not to deny, or in any way diminish, the significance of the variations in the organisation of kinship relations noted by social anthropologists. It is only to note that anthropology has yet to identify a society or way of life that could be said to be conducted in terms entirely indifferent to *any* form of kinship structure that is connected in some way with the facts pertaining to biological descent — be it part of something we would call ‘familial’ or not.¹

I do not wish to imply here any general view about exactly how much of our sense of the significance of familyhood should be thought of as just reflecting either biologically or culturally construed notions of kinship and descent — at the expense, say, of an acknowledgement of the overall role played by practical conditions of life in shaping human social existence. My point is just that wherever we look, we find that the practical dimension of how human beings collectively organize themselves takes for granted and reflects certain rudimentary forms of relationship of interdependency between those who come earlier and those who come later, while in our modern culture it is also a fact that these particular forms of relationship principally take the

¹ Some such structure is, arguably, presupposed wherever the taboo on incest is to be found — or even just wherever the behaviour of sentient living creatures demonstrates a preferential concern for their own immediate biological forebears and/or progeny.

form of intergenerational familial relationships, whose importance is linked to the particular understanding of relations of kinship and descent that we find exhibited there. The overall purpose of this article is to explore what these rudimentary forms of interdependency relationship amount to. It seeks to accomplish this by primarily considering them in the form most familiar to *us* – which is that presented by the structures of familial relationship typically operative in our lives. Beyond this, it also seeks to identify possible broader implications that an understanding of these forms could have for a theoretical construal of the social dimension of human affairs more generally – the sort of theoretical construal whose relevance would extend beyond our particular contemporary forms of coexistence, be they familial or not, since it would involve grasping features exhibited by such rudimentary forms wherever they are to be found.

The fact that such rudimentary forms of relationship show up as important for us moderns above all in the context of family life may help to explain why family-related matters constitute an ethical and political touchstone for us – one that we often feel compelled to invoke when seeking to arbitrate between the competing ideals and concerns that figure in discussions about what should count as our preferred form of communal living. Yet this also risks turning our understanding of the importance of the family into a hostage to fortune, in the form of the various agendas and outcomes that tend to figure prominently in such discussions, together with the conflicts of perceptions and of interest that motivate them. The fact that what we call ‘the family’ can be recognized as a feature of human collective existence at a level of specificity that is, to all intents and purposes, pre-political and pre-cultural (and for some, perhaps, even pre-ethical), may tempt thinkers of various persuasions to seek to ground their preferred understanding of the political, cultural and ethical spheres in an interpretation of what they regard as being latent within the supposedly more basic, and therefore potentially more universal, structure of familial existence itself.

In this way, then, conservative thinkers tend to find embodied in family life the ideals of adherence to tradition and attachment to place

associated with a geographically settled or ‘rooted’ material existence — ideals that then find expression in a treasuring of the legacy of one’s forebears and a sense of being responsible for the state of one’s localized surroundings. Liberals, on the other hand, be they libertarian or socially progressivist, individualist or communitarian, tend to view ‘the family’ as a kind of project. For them it is something that essentially exists in order to provide an ethical training-ground for the young, helping them to acquire that mutuality of understanding and acknowledgement that will be required of them if their relationships and dealings with one another are to be grounded in genuine freedom and thus approximate to what is, for liberals, the highest ideal of morally civilized co-existence. Meanwhile, marxists will tend to regard familyhood in yet another way, finding in it no more and no less than a direct reflection of the structural factors that, at some given historical juncture and in some particular place, are thought to be responsible for determining how human beings stand relative to a nexus of materially constituted economic concerns.

Whatever our own political and cultural persuasion may have happened to be, the danger we face here is that of naively assuming that our understanding of the rudimentary forms of social relationship we manage to identify, and which we then invoke as a yardstick for clarifying our intuitions about social and political matters generally, will not already bear traces of the more abstract (and potentially idealizing) theoretical commitments we hope to vindicate. With just this caveat in mind, I shall proceed to a consideration of the features associated with modern family life whose wider social implications form the basis of the topic I wish to explore.

2. It seems to me that the central — because most significant — feature of being involved in family life as a member of a family as we know it is the following: one finds oneself inhabiting, at one and the same time, two roles, each of which corresponds to one of the two sides of a certain sort of asymmetric relationship that a human being will, in the natural order of things, typically stand in to cer-

tain other human beings.² On the one hand, one stands at the end of a chain of relationships linking persons to their ancestral progenitors. This, viewed from the perspective of one's own standpoint in time, typically begins with one's relationship with one's parents (be they living or dead), and extends backwards in time from there. On the other hand, one also stands at the beginning of a chain of relationships linking persons to their descendents. This, viewed (again) from the perspective of one's own standpoint in time, begins with one's relationship to one's children, who may already be living or may just represent possibilities that one entertains on the basis that, all other things being equal as part of what we might call 'the natural order of things', it is only a matter of time before they are so. In this case the chain of relationships extends forwards in time from there.³

To understand oneself as a descendant of one's ancestral progenitors (parents, etc.) is to understand oneself as forming one constituent element within a relationship whose other constituent element, formed by one or more of one's ancestral progenitors themselves, corresponds, with respect to its role within that relationship, to the role of the constituent element that one finds oneself forming in the context of one's relationship with one's descendents. Likewise, to understand oneself as an ancestral progenitor of one's descendants (children, etc.) is to understand oneself as forming one constituent element within a relationship whose other constituent element, formed

² We shall bracket out epistemological issues here, much in the way that the later WITTGENSTEIN does, by holding that it is self-evident that the concerns of epistemological sceptics, though not refuted, can be ignored, if what is being described is so deeply embedded in the fabric of our lives that we cannot conceive of those lives as retaining any meaning or value for us in its absence. Where we differ from the later WITTGENSTEIN, though, is in the matter of how far (or in what way and on what basis) this status is to be specifically associated with responses we have to the *practical* dimension of our affairs, as distinct from the contemplative dimension that shows up when, for example, we reflect on things from an *ex post* standpoint that brings to light more than just what is presupposed by our ongoing practical concerns.

³ What it means to stand in a relationship to a living being who is no longer alive, or to one that is not yet alive, are, of course, matters for further elaboration, but we certainly do seem to understand ourselves as standing in such relationships, and it certainly does seem to matter to us that we do so.

by one or more of one's descendents themselves, corresponds, with respect to its role within that relationship, to the role of the constituent element that one finds oneself forming in the context of one's relationship with one's own ancestral progenitors. Viewed in terms that are independent of which role one happens to occupy, the two relationships have the same form and are therefore of the same kind, involving as they do the same contrastive duality of roles. Viewed in terms of the fact that one occupies opposing roles depending on whether the relationship in question locates one at the end or at the beginning of a chain of relationships stretching away from one's own temporal standpoint in one or other of the only two directions available (i.e. running towards either 'earlier and earlier' or 'later and later' times, either 'into the past' or 'into the future'), they correspond — as we shall see — to entirely distinct perspectives on how one stands relative to the other persons involved. Relative to these standpoint-dependent perspectives, then, the two relationships do not have the same form, and so cannot be said to be of the same kind.

One's relationship with one's ancestral progenitors is a relationship that has the same essential character, regardless of whether they happen to be still living or already dead — though it is one that is, perhaps, brought into a more explicitly graspable form when they *are* actually dead. *Their* legacy is *one's* inheritance, and this legacy-inheritance structure links a *historical* understanding of their lives, construed as structures of historical development ultimately to be comprehended *ex post*, with an internally ahistorical *ontological* understanding of one's own life, construed as that structure of constitutive possibilities identifiable as having already been in place prior to any actual developments pertaining to its historically contingent unfolding as this may have occurred so far.

This linkage forms a structure of constitutive 'references' running in both directions at once.⁴ On the one hand, the possibilities that

⁴ This idea of 'constitutive references' has some sort of a precursor in HEIDEGGER'S elaboration of the intelligibility conditions pertaining to equipmentality in Division I of *Being and Time*. However, we are talking here about references running to and fro *between* the two mutually irreducible domains of the properly ontological and

one takes to be constitutive of one's own life as an ontological phenomenon, in that they furnish the background framework for making sense of what actually occurs over the course of one's life, are *already* pre-imbued with a meaning: one that reflects a grasp of the historical developments that had to occur in the life-histories of one's ancestral progenitors in order for one to have just *that* totality of possibilities available to one, and not some other greater or smaller (or otherwise different) one.⁵ (Those developments are ones that, at some point in time or other, either had to occur for the possibilities available to one to be so, or had to occur for the possibilities not available to one to not be so.⁶ On the other hand, the structures of historical development that happened to occur in the life-histories of one's ancestral progenitors are, at the same time, imbued with a meaning that reflects a grasp of the changed structure of possibilities for one's own life that one takes to actually have issued from them. That such-and-such a possibility, or such-and-such a contingent necessity (corresponding to a contingent absence of alternative possibilities), obtaining with respect to one's life, issued from such-and-such a series of events, is — within the context of the particular example we are seeking to elaborate — part of what defines these events as the historical development they are, just as that which, at certain decisive junctures, had to happen in the lives of one's ancestral progenitors for some structure of possibility to obtain with respect to one's own life is part of what defines that structure of possibility as the ontologically signifi-

the properly historical. HEIDEGGER, by contrast, is only concerned with references obtaining *within* the domain of the ontological itself — a domain which he conceived of at that stage in his development as in some general sort of way standing entirely prior to the historical. See HEIDEGGER, *Being and Time*.

⁵ Invoking HEIDEGGER once more, one might, within the context of *this* example, call this *the forestructure of the forestructure* — the prefix 'fore-' here denoting historical antecedence in the first case, but presuppositional-hermeneutic ontological priority in the second.

⁶ The disappearance or non-disappearance of possibilities over time, construed as a function of events, has been analyzed in formal logical terms by G.H. VON WRIGHT as an evolving diachronically modal scenario. That analysis will be taken to be correct for all essential purposes here. See VON WRIGHT, *Diachronic and Synchronic Modality*.

cant structure that it is. To come to appreciate this structure of jointly constituted significances is, we may say, to come to appreciate both their legacy to one and one's inheritance from them — understood as two inseparable aspects of one relationship.

In parallel to this, we may say that one's relationship with one's descendants is also a relationship that, taken in non-standpoint-dependent terms, exhibits the same essential character, regardless of whether they happen to be already living or to be as yet unborn and unconceived — though it is one that is, perhaps, encounterable in a more explicitly graspable form prior to their actually being conceived or born. *One's* legacy is *their* inheritance, and this legacy-inheritance structure links a *historical* understanding of one's own life, construed in terms of structures of historical development ultimately to be comprehended by others *ex post* (where such comprehension is thus something that one mostly stands in an anticipatory relationship to), with an internally ahistorical *ontological* understanding of their lives, construed as that structure of constitutive possibilities identifiable as already in place even prior to any actual developments pertaining to the historically contingent unfolding of their lives so far.

Here we find the same linkage, forming the same structure of constitutive 'references' running in both directions at once. This time, though, the possibilities that one takes to be constitutive of one's descendants' lives, construed ontologically as furnishing the background framework for making sense of whatever will actually occur over the course of those lives, are pre-imbued with a meaning that reflects the historical developments that have had to occur in one's own life-history (at certain decisive junctures) for them to have *ended up starting out* with just *those* totalities of possibilities available to them, and not others. Meanwhile, the structures of historical development that have actually occurred in one's own life so far are imbued with a meaning that reflects a grasp of the changed structure of possibilities for the lives of one's descendants that one takes to have issued from them. That such-and-such a possibility, or such-and-such a contingent necessity (corresponding to a contingent absence of alternative

possibilities), obtaining with respect to their lives, issued from such-and-such a series of events in one's life, is – within the context of our example – part of what defines these events as the historical development they are, just as what had to happen in one's life for some structure of possibility to obtain with respect to the lives of one's descendants is part of what defines that structure of possibility as being ontologically significant for them in the way that it is. To appreciate this structure of jointly constituted significances is to appreciate both one's legacy *to them* and their inheritance *from one* – understood here, just as before, as two mutually inseparable relational dimensions within one internally complex structure of relationship.

In each of these cases, the (structure of) relationship involves an irreducible conjunction of elements – of historical commitments and concerns that derive their form and meaning from references to ontological commitments and concerns, and vice versa. As such, such relationships must be thought of as constituted with reference to a form of understanding we shall call *ontologico-historical*. But in one of these two cases *one* (i.e. I/you/he/she) occupies one role, one standpoint, and one perspective on this conjunction of elements, and in the other case *one* occupies the other role, the other standpoint, and the other perspective on them.⁷ And it is in what we might loosely and provisionally describe as 'the natural order of things' for one to occupy both roles at the same time, where this fact can itself only be understood with reference to that same form of understanding. Hence we must add that an understanding of relationships of this kind in ontologico-historical terms implies, for the purposes of understanding everything that such relationships imply, an *ontologico-historical* construal of whatever it is that is denoted by the expression 'the natural order of things' itself – one that will require us to conceive of the terms 'natural', 'order' and 'things' in a way that will be marked off

⁷ Our use of the term 'one' here, in preference to 'we' or 'human beings', is meant to be ambiguous between first-person and third-person pronominal meanings. The point is to avoid any suggestion at this stage of a definite commitment with regard to how such matters stand relative to either a privileging of the first-person standpoint over the third-person one, or a denial of any such privileging.

as distinct from any prior usage of these same terms to denote (separately or together) strictly and exclusively ontological or historical forms of understanding. At any rate, in pursuing the approach that we have taken so far, this seems to be the point that we have inevitably been brought to. The same will hold true for the many and various references made in the present text to ‘*our culture*’, ‘*our concepts*’ and ‘*our language*’, to ‘the family as *we* know it’, and so on.⁸

3. To say that historical and ontological forms or modalities of understanding are, in the context of familial relationships of the kind just mentioned, conjoined in a structure of mutual irreducibility and interdependence, is to say two things. Firstly, it is to imply that we cannot make sense of our *caring that* certain things did-or-did-not happen by treating this as if it were entirely a function of our *caring about* certain things’ being-or-not-being the case (in the sense of the obtaining-or-not-obtaining of certain states of affairs, possibilities, impossibilities, etc.). Secondly, and conversely, it is to imply that we cannot make sense of our *caring about* certain things’ being-or-not-being the case by treating this as if it were entirely a function of our *caring that* certain things have-or-have-not happened. These two implications, taken together, may be said to constitute the *ontologico-historical structure of familial care* — the structure of care implicit in our conception of what it means for a human being to be embedded in a structure of familial relationships.

However, as soon as we try to elaborate the understanding ‘internal’ to the perspective opened up by this structure — much as

⁸ Here, to be sure a first-person standpoint *is* being invoked, albeit only in a plural form. But it is important to note that this leaves entirely open the issue of whether, when *this* plural first-person standpoint is construed, as we are suggesting it should be here, in ontologico-historical terms, it will involve a privileging of the first-person-plural standpoint over the thirdperson one, or not. That is to say, it might be that an anthropologist visiting our culture as an outsider would form the same conclusions about the nature of our familial legacy-inheritance relations as I take to be internal to our collective self-understanding, and it might be that they would not. What is clear, is that were any such divergence of understanding to emerge, it could not be properly construed either as a divergence at the level of our respective ontological commitments (pertaining to our social *world*), or as one at the level of our respective historical ones (pertaining to the current state of our social *development*).

HEIDEGGER in *Being and Time* sets out to do for that internal to his conception of Dasein and its relation to 'Worldhood', or as WITTGENSTEIN in the *Investigations* suggests we might do for the understanding internal to this or that practice-constituted form of life — we encounter a problem. This, in turn, is something that, as we shall see, derives its problematic significance from the fact that it highlights the extent to which we have arrived, in fact, in a very different kind of philosophical territory from that typically associated with attempts to elaborate, in the manner of a hermeneutics, the understanding internal to some care-constituted perspective or other, such as might be taken to be defined by its horizons, construed as structures of givenness.

The problem we face here is a logico-linguistic one. Essentially it consists in the fact that the relation between the two forms of care just mentioned must mirror the structure of mutual irreducibility and interdependence that, we have claimed, is a feature of the configuration of legacy-inheritance relationships described above as furnishing the minimal case of the embeddedness of an individual in the structure of relationships characteristic of our conception of the family. That is to say, it must mirror the fact that for one of these two forms or modes of caring corresponding to a role in which the individual is cast, there are historical commitments and concerns that derive their specifically historical form and meaning (as structures of constitutive actuality) from references to ontological commitments and concerns, while for another of these two, corresponding to that same individual's being cast in the opposite role, there are ontological commitments and concerns that derive their specifically ontological form and meaning (as structures of constitutive possibility) from references to historical commitments and concerns.

What this means is that in one of these two cases our understanding must be conceived of as an understanding of a world that is defined with reference to its constitutive possibilities (to which all contingent historical actualities are then necessarily relativized), while in the other case it must be conceived as an understanding of a structure of events that, in some important sense, could never have been conceived of as corresponding to a set of meaningful (i.e. realistically

plausible rather than abstractly hypothetical) possibilities before their actual occurrence — rather in the manner, say, of certain coincidences, or the sort of historical developments that constitute watersheds in our understanding of our ethical and practical circumstances because they seem to have brought about irreversible changes to the latter. The point about ‘watershed cases’ like these is that while we might recognize, in a quite abstract way, that they are possible in advance of their happening, we find it absurd to attach any importance to them as possibilities on this basis. Yet once they *have* happened, their sheer consequentiality obliges us to attach significance to them as actualities, and we cannot then insulate our understanding of them as possibilities from this. Hence our understanding of the world as a world of constitutive possibilities takes on a specifically *ex post* character, which we must somehow seek to reconcile with the fact of its also having had the *ex ante* character that it did have prior to any such coincidence or historical watershed having occurred.

The logico-linguistic challenge that this poses to our understanding lies in the fact that it makes it impossible for us to straightforwardly embrace, in any internally unified and consistent way, a certain conception of the nature of our ordinary conceptualizing activities, and of the logico-linguistic form through which we convey, and in terms of which we evaluate (as true/false, inferentially valid/invalid, etc.) the commitments that these activities give rise to. According to this conception — which, of course, has been glossed in many different ways in linguistically oriented analytical philosophy over the last hundred years or so (it having furnished most of the latter’s defining concerns) — our understanding, insofar as we evaluate it with respect to issues of truthhood/falsity and inferential consistency, takes the form of propositionally articulated thoughts about how things are, where these thoughts can, in virtue of certain structural features (whose exact nature is then debated), be grasped and assessed truth-functionally in terms of how they connect up with factually obtaining states of affairs.

One of the central ideas — arguably *the* central idea — of modern analytical philosophy of language is the notion that such thoughts

must first satisfy some general criteria of appropriateness as candidates for these forms of evaluation — criteria of the sort that will serve to differentiate *sense* from *nonsense*. The first comprehensively worked out treatment of what this might mean was WITTGENSTEIN'S *Tractatus*, and to the extent that all subsequent accounts build on certain basic features of the account developed there, it seems reasonable to assert that the underlying idea put forward in that work as to the nature of propositional sense remains as a common presupposition behind all subsequent accounts, however different they may be in other respects. That basic conception holds that those declarative sentences that possess truth-functional evaluability (or the thoughts they might be said to express) are identifiable as such partly, if not wholly, on the basis of how they stand in relation to other such sentences (or thoughts), at a level where they are construed as true-or-false thinkables or assertibles (i.e. as possibly true and possibly false), rather than as instances of actual thinking or asserting (such as would have to be taken, in a manner that invokes a stronger, exclusive form of disjunction, to be either actually true or actually false).⁹ The distinctive challenge posed by the foregoing analysis of the two structures or modes of ontologico-historical understanding found to be constitutive of the perspectives internal to familial care is just this: that these two

⁹ It seems to me that at some level of specificity this basic conception remains in force even if one embraces the later WITTGENSTEIN'S account, or some account based on this, according to which relations between thinkables are to be construed not with reference to the constraints of a single monolithic framework governing relations of fit between 'language' and 'world', but as corresponding instead to whatever is part of the 'grammar' internal to a particular language game, practice or form of life. The real change there is from a monolithic to a piecemeal construal of the issues pertaining to the *regulative role* that any such framework of thinkability might play, as in the context of WITTGENSTEIN'S later approach such issues must be resolved anew for each and every practice-constituted structure of logico-grammatical commitment. It is precisely because propositions lose the truth-functionally bivalent character they must possess to be counted as part of any such framework of thinkables when they function as hinges and serve to convey bedrock commitments, that the function they fulfil is held by the later WITTGENSTEIN to be constitutive of a radically distinct mode of commitment. (See WITTGENSTEIN, *On Certainty*.)

structures or modes, by their very nature, will stand in fundamentally different relationships to this conception.

In the case of one's legacy *to* others, where one cares *that* what has (or will have) happened in one's life has (or will have) happened, but does so in a way that reflects one's already caring about the structure of ontological possibilities relevant to the lives of others that those others are going to inherit from this, the historical understanding of one's own life as a series of events is relativized to a set of framing considerations that correspond to that set of ontological possibilities — a set that are 'internally ahistorical' in the sense that they are taken as unconditionally given when figuring in this kind of relation.¹⁰ Construed as a structure of understanding expressible in the form of truth-functionally evaluable thoughts about reality, these framing considerations will then resemble those which we encounter in the context of an ontologico-metaphysical reading of the significance of the logico-linguistic framework of thinkability that, in the context of the Tractarian model, is put forward as capturing the nature of the propositional sign.¹¹

In the case of one's inheritance *from* others, where one cares about the structure of ontological possibilities relevant to one's own life, but does so in a way that reflects one's already caring that the things that

¹⁰ One may liken *this* particular scenario to the ontological-ontic relation set out by HEIDEGGER in *Being and Time*, except for the following crucial difference: here it is a requirement of any such relation being in force that the ontic dimension pertains in the first instance to the life of the person(s) whose legacy is at stake, while the ontological dimension pertains in the first instance to that of the person(s) whose inheritance is at stake, within the relationship in question. Such relationships would appear to be entirely absent from HEIDEGGER's account, which is thus ultimately confined within the horizons of meaningfulness of individual and collective forms of first-personhood. Viewed from the perspective of the concerns elaborated here, HEIDEGGER's treatment of such matters resembles a form of philosophical autism — one which (like its pathological equivalent) may bring to light some otherwise unnoticeable features of great significance, but which one should nevertheless not succumb to.

¹¹ For such a reading, see the writings of J. PERZANOWSKI: e.g. those collected in SYTNIK-CZETWERTYNSK, *Art of Philosophy*. For a more sophisticated interpretation that is also, I think, potentially relevant here, see CEREZO, *The Possibility of Language*.

happened in the lives of others that happen to be responsible for this structure of possibilities in one's own life happened as they did and not otherwise, the internally ahistorical ontological understanding of one's own life as a set of possibilities (a kind of situation) will be relativized to a set of considerations that, in effect, make it a function of a particular historical *moment*.¹² This time, when we construe the resulting structure of understanding as being expressible in propositionally truth-evaluable thoughts about reality, we must do so by attaching a quite different sort of significance to the logico-linguistic framework of thinkability that, in the context of the Tractarian model, is put forward as capturing the nature of the propositional sign. One potentially helpful way to think of this would be to draw a rough analogy with a certain kind of interpretation of a linguistically oriented reading of the *Tractatus* — one that ascribes to the historically contingent limits of 'natural language' itself, as it appears at a given juncture in cultural or personal history, the role of constituting, for the relevant sort of 'subject', the limits of the logical space in which they are able to entertain thoughts about their historically actual world.

In effect, this means taking both the world as we actually find it, *and* the logical space in which its relationships to all other possible world-states (or so-called 'possible worlds') are held to obtain, to be a historical affair. The value for our purposes of the analogy with the abovementioned kind of Tractarian linguistic contingentism is limited, though, as it tends to draw attention away from the fact that what we really have to make sense of here will be *any* context where ontological matters (pertaining to one life or set of lives) are relativized to what, in that same context, count as an overriding set of pre-established historical considerations (pertaining to another life or set of lives), where this need not be held to be a specifically lin-

¹² The term 'moment' should be understood in a technical way here, as marking not just a chronological point in time, but also a juncture defined by the arrival of a new state of affairs that is, in turn, significant qua its being the outcome of some course of events — the sort of course of events that typically acquires a significance of its own for those who contemplate it that is inseparable from the fact of its having terminated (e.g. a person's life, contemplated by others who were already acquainted with that person in some way before they died).

guistic affair. Ultimately, then, what we need here is a general theoretical account of what all such cases amount to – one that would take in not only this dimension of familial care, but also a wide variety of phenomena that may be grouped under the category of historical ‘watershed cases’. (That is to say, cases that involve the thought that an event or course of events has occurred, whose outcome is a radically changed overall state of the affairs, either for things generally (i.e. ‘the world’), or for some particular domain of human concern that can be meaningfully conceived of in self-sufficient terms.)

4. The issues involved in giving a general account of such cases are, to say the least, complex. Nevertheless, as far as the overall logico-linguistic challenge posed here is concerned, if we consider how certain related problems have been addressed by philosophers on previous occasions (albeit in quite different contexts of theoretical concern), we find that there are at least three possible strategies that might be called upon.

Firstly, we might broadly follow the example of HEIDEGGER and attempt some sort of intervention aimed at making the lexicogrammatical ‘deep structures’ of our language more revealing than they otherwise would be of the points that concern us philosophically.¹³ That is to say, we might seek to identify a hidden structure of meaning, or institute by stipulation a new structure of meaning (which we might then anyway be tempted to argue was latent in language all along), *within* our ordinary everyday fact-reporting language. This might involve attaching a specific kind of significance to what, under logical analysis, are considered the basic forms of assertion pertaining to ontological and historical commitments: informal phrases and grammatical particles that function in everyday language to express existential commitments (e.g. phrases like ‘there is’, that count as paraphrases of uses of the existential quantifier, and related

¹³ Here, of course, I especially have in mind his treatment of the concept ‘Sein’ in *Being and Time*. (See HEIDEGGER, *Being and Time*.) Nevertheless, similarly tendencies may be observed in his later work too. One example taken from the latter that seems particularly relevant to the analysis undertaken here is his exploration of the concept of ‘Geschick’. (See HEIDEGGER, *The Principle of Reason*.)

uses of either the definite article or demonstrative terms), would be subject to qualification through the use of an ontologicality or historicity conferring operator.¹⁴ The same would apply to those elements of our language through which we express ‘happenstantial’ commitments – commitments, that is, pertaining to what we take to have happened or not happened in terms that count for us as historically contingent.¹⁵ To adopt such a strategy is to suggest that our relationship to our affairs as manifested through language stands in need of *systemic* adjustment to reflect the particular philosophical insights that are taken to motivate and justify the interventions in question. Yet this will be tantamount to investing a further level of significance in those philosophical insights themselves, which may or may not be appropriate. (For example, there may be substantial areas of our linguistically engaged existence whose internal character – say, as fundamentally practical-ethical, or ultimately strictly aesthetico-contemplative, requires us to understand language itself as being strictly closed off from the sort of duality that finds expression in the idea of introducing ontologicality and historicity conferring operators alongside one another.)

¹⁴ It seems to me that stress on the ‘epochal’ origins and significance of ontological concerns that we find in HEIDEGGER’s later thinking can be glossed in terms of the idea that it amounts to an introduction of a historicity conferring operator: one that, for him, would be required to take in the entire logico-linguistic domain within which ontological concerns have so far come to be articulated. Some of the historicist currents in COLLINGWOOD’s philosophy may also plausibly be interpreted along similar lines.

¹⁵ Applying an ontologicality conferring operator to ‘happenstantial’ commitments to indicate that certain historical facts are, in certain contexts, invested with a significance that can only be cashed out in terms of the idea that they have ontological implications (albeit for the life of another), has a parallel in an idea that appears in WITTGENSTEIN’s thinking towards the end of his career. This is his notion that what is, in its own terms, a contingent truth (such as might correspond *inter alia* to a historical fact) can nevertheless take on the character of a necessary truth of sorts, when it functions as a ‘grammatical’ commitment (in his special sense of the term ‘grammatical’) – something which, according to WITTGENSTEIN, it may do in virtue of its role as part of a structure of commitment presupposed by a given practice or form of life. See WITTGENSTEIN, *On Certainty*, §98.

Secondly, we might follow the example of WITTGENSTEIN, drawing a line between the sort of structures of understanding we take to be consistent with our logico-linguistic intuitions and philosophical commitments regarding the nature of our everyday fact-stating declarative utterances, and some other dimension of language-use that we take to lie strictly beyond this, in which some or all of the lexico-grammatical forms of our language may also show up, but with a radically transformed function, given the *extra-linguistic* context that happens to be in force. Such is the status accorded by WITTGENSTEIN, not uncontroversially, to various forms of language-use specifically associated with ritual and religious practices, and (also controversially) to first-person avowals of the sort that he himself considers inherently non-informative (e.g. ‘I am in pain!’), and which must therefore be understood as standing in lieu of behaviour that would itself count as symptomatic — as a kind of non-fact-stating, primitive verbal expression.¹⁶ Applied to our case, this would require us to designate just one of the two dimensions of the relationships and structures of care we are seeking to understand as being in line with the fact-stating character of our ordinary everyday language-use, while consigning the other to whatever conception we are able to form of how language functions as significant in our lives when it performs some such alternative, non-informative or purely expressive role. Yet the difficulty here is plain to see: neither of the two dimensions in question, as elaborated here, lends itself to being construed as a more appropriately subject matter either for fact-stating forms of language-use, or for some other sort of language-use of that alternative, non-fact-stating kind. To introduce such a contrast here would thus be tantamount to arbitrarily attaching a particular significance to one or other of these two dimensions of familial care and its related forms of ontologico-historical understanding, where this also then means denying it to the other one. This, in turn, would tend to invite interpretations according to which such a move is taken to be indicative of a view that holds one of these to be more public or ob-

¹⁶ See WITTGENSTEIN, *Philosophical Investigations*, Part I (§§ 244-309) and Part II (subsection ix).

jective, and the other to be more private or subjective. This, as a conclusion, is something our analysis so far suggests would be entirely unfounded.

Thirdly, we might pursue the sort of approach taken by ADORNO, who invokes a class of elements that are present within the propositionality-supporting structures and practices of our ordinary everyday language use, but which, in themselves, are rendered distinctive by the fact that they carry, even there, a specific kind of significance, which by its very nature persists outside of those contexts as they are typically construed in our everyday discourse. This is how ADORNO goes about construing the special status of proper names in the light of the significance he wishes to invest in those instances of their use that interest him. These, typically, are ones where such names have been invested with the personal associations brought into play when, as names of places remembered from one's past, they are linked to our recollections of those places, and to what follows from these recollections in terms of our wider responsiveness to things.¹⁷ The difficulty for us here stems from the fact that ADORNO operates with a paradigm of the historical character of our understanding of

¹⁷ See ADORNO, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 373-374. Although ADORNO works within a broader framework that might be described as a hybrid of elements drawn from the philosophies of KANT, HEGEL, and MARX, together with elements of WEBERIAN sociology and FREUDIAN psychoanalytic theory, the relevant precursors to his account of the significance of proper names corresponding to remembered place names are PROUST and WALTER BENJAMIN, neither of whom could be said to straightforwardly occupy a place within the lines of intellectual development represented by those thinkers. It is important for understanding the use ADORNO makes of this device that one realizes that his intention is to link such place names specifically with recollections of places assumed to represent, for the recollecting subject, both sites of unconditionally given aesthetico-spiritual value and sites whose disappearance or loss of value counts as a historically given fact. In logico-linguistic terms, ADORNO's conception of the radical ethical significance of such uses of proper names implies something like KRIPKE's anti-descriptivistic conception of them as rigid designators. (See KRIPKE, *Naming and Necessity*. It also requires that they be seen as maintaining their significance for us independently of any practice-dependent name-tracking network of the sort that has been invoked by those seeking to understand the functioning of proper names in late-WITTGENSTEINIAN terms. (See HANNA & HARRISON, *Word and World*, pp. 126-132).

the ultimate (and essentially personal) meaning and value of things that, albeit in the context of a wider dialectic, links this understanding to a specific mode of reflective responsiveness. This, to be sure, is one that might plausibly be thought to have its fitting analogue in the overall role that, on his account, proper names sometimes fulfil within our overall living out of our lives as language users, where they may be said to live a double life as elements figuring within the public discourse of our fact-stating propositional utterances and as markers for some irreducibly personal sense of the meaning of what has transpired in the world, gauged according to the ethico-aesthetic yardstick of the responses engendered by one's recollections of one's own past. But to link either of the modes of understanding and care we have been exploring here with such features of language is to do something not much different from what is involved when we conceive one or other of them as lying outside of the boundaries of ordinary language altogether, as would be the case if we were to follow the WITTGENSTEINIAN strategy outlined above. It would also then bring into play similar, and equally problematic, implications as to the relatively more subjective and personal character of one or other of these two modes.

Perhaps our biggest problem here is that language — or, at least, *our* language¹⁸ — does not itself encourage or oblige us to differentiate systematically between what it means to construe something as significant in essentially *ex post* terms as a set of historical actualities, and what it means to do so in essentially *non-ex-post* terms as a set of possibilities or potentialities (for living, acting, suffering, thinking, and so on).¹⁹ This makes it tempting, when seeking to systematically

¹⁸ It seems appropriate to restate the comment made at the end of Section 2 of this article, to the effect that references to '*our language*', '*our concepts*', '*our understanding of the family*', etc., must themselves be conceived (which means, in theoretical terms, reconceived) in specifically ontologico-historical terms, if they are to be in proper alignment with the kind of understanding elaborated here.

¹⁹ It is worth noting that this problem remains essentially the same, no matter whether we construe such modes of understanding and care perspectively in the sense of their just being a function of differences of temporal-indexical standpoint (i.e. as directed towards what happens to count, for some person sometime, as 'in

unfold the understanding internal to either of these perspectives, to introduce a thesis to the effect that the nature of language or thought or human life generally is such as to validate a presumption in favour of one or other of these two modes of understanding and care as being fundamental, so that it (or at least its manifestations in thought and/or language) encompasses the other entirely. That, however, would be tantamount to making a wholly unwarranted assumption about the status of the particular sort of structures of understanding and care that we have been concerned to analyse here, since it would imply that these structures themselves have no fundamental or ultimate implications whatsoever for those very generalities. Hence it is a temptation that we should resist.

5. What other options might be available to us? One possible course of action here would be to pursue a line that takes as its premise the thought that we have just invoked, to the effect that language — or, if one prefers, the loose network of diverse fact-stating and non-fact-stating practices that, taken together, might be said to sustain and thereby constitute what we call ‘language’ — does not give any clear sign of being grounded in terms of reference that systematically grant privileged status to ontological concerns over historical ones, or *vice versa*. In that case, it ought to be possible to invoke one of the most basic devices that we know of for indicating, through language, a positive commitment to the reality of something — namely, the coining of kind-terms as names denoting distinct classes of referents — without prejudicing the issue of whether what any such kind-term is supposed to refer to should properly be conceived in terms that imply a priority for ontologicality over historicality, or in terms that imply the converse of that.

This, it seems to me, is where the concept of *ethos*, which has its origin in the Ancient Greek theory of rhetoric as formulated by ARISTOTLE, could — at least in a loose and limited kind of way — prove

the past’ or ‘in the future’), or in some other kind of way, taking them to manifest differences of temporal orientation constitutive of phenomena themselves, where it then becomes an open question whether these difference are intelligible in the absence of a tense-specifying mode of construal.

helpful.²⁰ In its original context, *ethos*, together with *logos* and *pathos*, makes up a tripartite division whose purpose is to conceptualize the features in virtue of which a speaker counts as rhetorically effective. Where *logos* designates their argumentative efficacy, and *pathos* their success in affecting the feelings of their audience, *ethos* refers to the plausibility we are inclined to attach to what the speaker has to say just in virtue of their credibility as a speaker — which means, at least in some respects, as a human being. This is something to be construed on the basis of both their past standing and any immediate impression they make on us through the vehicle of the oratorical performance itself. It therefore implies an evaluation of the person that takes into account both ‘where they have been’ and ‘where they are now’ — in the figurative senses of these phrases that refer, respectively, to an understanding of ‘who’ or ‘what’ they have already amounted to, and ‘who’ or ‘what’, in any relevant terms, they promise to turn out to be. In the formal context of Ancient rhetorical theory and practice, this concept appeals to something beyond the conceptualization of practical possibilities implicitly invoked by an appeal to rational argumentation, but also stands apart from what, at any given juncture, we can sensibly think of as a causally determined outcome of the rhetorical process (in the sense of a historical ‘factum’ achieved through the brute power of affective persuasion). Hence, within that context, *ethos* may be said to be necessarily irreducible either to a set of terms that would imply a priority for ontologicality over historicality, or to one that would imply the converse of this.²¹

Something of this same irreducibility, it seems to me, persists in our modern usage of the term. When talking about the *ethos* of an institution, a culture, or even a society, we surely invoke more than

²⁰ See ARISTOTLE, *The Art of Rhetoric*.

²¹ Of course, we quickly run up against limits to how far we can pursue this analogy: not least because of the fact that, in the context of ARISTOTLE’S own wider philosophy (and in that of most of other thinkers), the terms of any such construal of an orator’s standing will reflect wider notions of goodness (including ideas about the good life and the good person), and these notions will tend to attain their distinctive form in ways that themselves involve granting some sort of priority to practical-ontological criteria over historical-contemplative ones, or *vice versa*.

an understanding of just its values, customs and habits, conceived as possibilities that have, as part of their telos, their being transmitted as part of an ongoing tradition that sustains itself through its form as a constellation of practices. Yet we also, conversely, have in mind more than just what is grasped when we think of these same values and customs and practices as outcomes of contingent processes of historical evolution — as, in effect, patterns of ongoing responsiveness, causally shaped by antecedent events and situations and the history of a group's particular responses and reactions to these (where the significance of these for their participants remains essentially tied to that of those events and situations themselves).²²

²² This suggests that we should be critical of a way of thinking about the nature of social institutions that has proved influential both within and beyond philosophy, and which reflects a certain reading of the implications of both WITTGENSTEIN's later philosophy and the philosophy of Wilfred SELLARS. (I have in mind here the lines of interpretation of these two thinkers developed, above all, by John MCDOWELL and Robert BRANDOM.) That 'normativistic' approach construes social institutions as being practice-constituted in a sense that we might wish to criticize as artificially narrow, in that it identifies this characteristic of them strictly with those features in virtue of which one can say of them that they are irreducibly 'norm-governed' or 'social', rather than 'natural'. That is to say, it makes our concepts of the 'institutional' and the 'social' hostage to our ability to give a meaningful account of what differentiates '*the* normative' from '*the* natural'. This seems rather stilted, because it implies that our most basic and central practices are only ever constituted as intelligible in terms of how they are carried on against the background of a set of contextual conditions that are taken as unconditionally given (in the sense that they are taken not to be contingent on anything in particular at all), and not also with reference to a (conscious or unconscious) awareness on the part of their participants of the specific historical factors that have, in fact, contributed to their intelligibility. As far as the later WITTGENSTEIN is concerned, this feature is perhaps less significant than such normativistic readings suggest, in that they underestimate the quietistic dimension of his thought. However, even taking that into account it seems fair to say that it reflects a blind-spot in WITTGENSTEIN's own philosophical sensibility — one that makes his later thinking unattractive to many who would otherwise be sympathetic to his account of the irreducibility of the participation-dependent forms of understanding internal to our practices to reductive, naturalistic modes of explanation. The blind-spot in question is his lack of any feeling for the ways in which our internal sense of what it means to participate in a given practice can be suffused by an awareness of the significance that such participation takes on in the light of a grasp of the history of how it came about that we are participating in it, where this

Perhaps, then, it is no surprise to find that it can also ring true intuitively to talk about the *ethos* of a family, or even of familyhood or family life itself (and, by extension, of a culture or a society), where what this is meant to evoke is precisely the idea of a structure of values and responses ‘carried’ across the divide between *non-ex-post* and *ex post* standpoints (while still properly registering the distinct concerns operative on either side of that division) – just what we have found to be in play when we think of human relationships as we have tried to do here, in terms of an irreducible conjunction of what is denoted, respectively, by the concepts of legacy and inheritance.

Streszczenie

Rodzina i jej etos. Filozoficzne studium rozumienia ontologiczno-historycznego

W artykule jest podjęta próba zbadania systemu odniesień i współzależności, który – w kontekście życia rodzinnego, jakie jest nam znane dzisiaj – wiąże obustronnie kwestie historyczne i ontologiczne. Uzyskane wyniki są analizowane w celu ustalenia ich implikacji dla szerszych zagadnień dotyczących fenomenologii po-HEIDEGGEROWSKIEJ, krytycznej teorii społecznej (ADORNO) i po-WITGENSTEINOWSKIEJ filozofii języka, a następnie to nowe ujęcie jest porównane z koncepcją etosu obecną w ARYSTOTELESA opisie praktyki retorycznej.

Słowa kluczowe: rodzina – ontologiczno-historyczne rozumienie – etos – Arystoteles – Heidegger – Adorno – Wittgenstein

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variable sense of what it means to do so at the same time translates into potentially significant differences in how we conduct ourselves in respect of that participation itself.

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