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Theory and Practice: From Kant to Plato

Critical Practice in the creative arts defines a productive relation between speculative thought and the making of art objects. It does not necessarily lie in the objects themselves but in the process and attitude by which philosophy and art speak to one another in a dynamic that is neither dialectical nor a privileging of one over the other. Critical Practice is living with aporia as the condition of being able to think or make anything at all. While the relationship between theory and practice in our art schools and on our university courses for the creative arts may seem a relatively recent occurrence, this chapter looks at the deeper philosophical roots of the divide between these terms. That is to say, the contrast between philosophy and creative art (theory and practice) is itself a philosophical issue and has a long conceptual inheritance that comes into play every time we approach the task of engaging with Critical Practice. The place of art in the philosophical inheritance is complex and is one that can be traced back to foundational moments in the speculative tradition. It is not the case that philosophy can be made to account for art because art is a philosophical problem. Equally, art does not come after philosophy as a by-product of thinking. Rather, art and philosophy open up one another at decisive moments, preventing the foreclosure of thought in philosophy or the possibility of rest in art. Similarly, Critical Practice is not a late, aberrant idiom of the more normative genres of art and philosophy. Rather, in the beginning was Critical Practice and neither art nor philosophy will ever get over it.

Practical philosophy

Kant was a great defender of the prospects of Theory. He offers us a distillation of his position in the archly titled essay, 'On the common saying: That may be correct in theory, but it is of no use in practice'.¹ He opens it by defining his terms.

By 'theory' he means a collection of rules, 'if those rules are thought as principles having a certain generality, so that abstraction is made from a multitude of conditions that yet have a necessary influence on their application' (p. 279). This is not quite what we mean by Theory in this book but the description will help us understand the set of relations we are trying to draw here. Theory as a term used in the contemporary humanities describes a canon of texts more or less derived from a tradition of modern European philosophy, related to questions of culture and politics. Every book of Theory is in its own right a singular account of a distinctive topic and the canon is often in contradiction with itself. In this sense, it would be inaccurate to describe Theory in its latest sense to mean a set of rules that are applied in the study of the arts and humanities. However, it would be fair to say that Theory helps to form a way of thinking about and questioning the world. It is then more of a framework, or, intellectual scaffolding rather than a body of rules. When *used* by naïve readers it can easily become an application, of the order, say, of 'a Freudian account of something' or a juxtaposition, of the order of, say, 'Deleuze *and* animals/art/music/gardening etc.' Theory in this context can indeed have a quantum of utility and so must involve as Kant defines it a certain generality that has a necessary influence on its application. What Kant is in fact defining in his essay is philosophy itself, which in its most formal aspect attempts to produce universal axioms from the examination of singular case studies. This transcendental gesture is both the defining characteristic of philosophy, its main muscle as it were, and that which distinguishes it from other idioms of reflective thought such as, say, literary theory that would work according to a principle of reading or textual explication that was more hesitant about, if not entirely free from, deriving abstraction from singularity.

Kant's definition of practice is just as illuminating, 'not every doing [*Hantirung*] is called practice, but only that effecting of an end which is thought as the observance of certain principles of procedure represented in their generality' (p. 279). This is perhaps a stricter definition of practice than the one intended in this book. Kant seems to want to reserve the name of practice only to those activities that are the result of application of general principles, as when we speak of 'clinical practice' to mean following the rules of best procedures for health care. We speak of best practice in treating a wound, of a dental practice, or of a 'general practitioner' as someone 'in practice'. This sense of 'practice' would seem to exclude the idea of practice as making mistakes, as a learner does when practicing a musical instrument or as in the old joke that the young Augustine would be considered an example of a practicing Catholic because he had not got it quite right yet. Practice may make perfect but it can also involve

a degree of experimentation or pushing at the boundaries of what is possible in a sport or discipline. Practice in that sense can also be repetitive and dull, a form of training in the execution of technique. In the mode we wish to use it in this book, and in the sense it is employed when we speak in the academy of 'practice-based research', we mean the work of creative artists across art, architecture, design, film, drama, dance, creative writing, and music. When we talk of practice in this context we are speaking somewhat tautologically of the stuff that practitioners do.

This is in contrast to so-called non-practitioners, such as say a critic or a philosopher, who does not have a practice but instead writes criticism or philosophy. Writing either philosophy or criticism of course requires practice and can rightly be thought of as a practice as much as any occupation. Blurring the lines between what does and does not constitute practice will be a considerable stake for us going forward. As a text a work of formal philosophy is every bit as figurative as a novel, the fact that one narrates concepts and the other narrates characters is neither here nor there when it comes to composition and reading.² The difference comes in the type of truth claims that the novel and the work of philosophy wish to make, the former not necessarily being less true than the latter. The truth of a novel does not necessarily lie in its reference to supposedly real things. However, practice in the sense of the creative arts, and in particular the creative arts as a medium for research in a university context, depends more upon the sense of practice as serendipity and experimentation than it does on practice as the repetitive application of rules. Nevertheless, we can accept the notion that practice in the university-based creative arts can have a notable relation to Theory in the sense of the philosophical culture of the humanities. Indeed practice as an academic practice, practice worthy of its place in the academy, often requires an essential relation to Theory in order to justify its status as a 'serious' university discipline. This sort of practice, in so far as it has been welcomed into the university, must give itself up to be measured and evaluated. At this point, practice is keen to point to its capacity for abstraction or its determined application of general principles. Again such attempts to determine the value of practice can lead to a utilitarian approach to Theory in which one might have a 'Deleuzian art practice', for example. Practice in order to be research must have a research element or address a research question. Simply being good at playing the piano will not cut it in the university, as compared to the conservatoire, which is concerned with the training of artists. That requires a different kind of practice. Practice-based research often derives its research content from the Theory it adopts or misprisions. In such scenarios Theory

remains the privileged term and practice runs the risk of subordinating itself in order to claim legitimacy through the written idiom that it supposed to displace.

If Theory can legitimately lay claim to be a modality of practice itself, and if practice can be a complex and unpredictable phenomenon, then it is clear enough that the hard borders of any definition of either is bound to come under pressure when we look at specific examples. The difference between Theory and Practice and the ways these two terms rely on and define one another will be of considerable interest to us in this study. It will be difficult, even if it were desirable, to hold fast to any rigorous differentiation between the two as they are understood in an academic sense at this present moment. However, one cannot speak about Theory and Practice in that sense without partaking of an entire history in which the two terms have been opposed to one another, with a privilege accorded to the manly action of practice. This is the situation summed up in the title of Kant's essay, with the philosopher setting out to make a defence of theory, or speculative thought, in face of the value accorded to utility and achievement. Rather, than simply take the side of theory over practice and so repeat the gesture that wants to seek a winner between the two terms, Kant proposes a third term that joins theory and practice in a more complex relation. He writes that this middle term provides 'a transition from one to the other' because 'no matter how complete a theory may be ... a concept of the understanding, which contains a rule' also requires 'an act of judgment by which a practitioner distinguishes whether or not something is a case of the rule' (p. 279). The passage from theory to practice is not a simple application or initiation of predetermined rules. This would not be practice but a programme, pre-ordained in advance without the prospect of unexpected outcomes. It would be computational and inflexible, hardly worth bothering with as a practice. Indeed no practice would be involved as there would be no possibility of failure, experimentation, or surprise. Instead of the application of principles, Kant gives us the exercise of judgement as the bridge between pure and practical reason, or, between theory and practice.

Judgement in Kant is sticky, regulated by the framework of the unconditional imperative of duty but not teleological, or, at least not teleological in any sense that Kant can adequately explain. It is in the realization that there can be no satisfactory delimitation of the conditions of judgement that the *Third Critique* comes up short and ruins the project of critical philosophy.³ However, this is not to say that Kant is not on to something here. The passage from theory to practice is not straightforward and requires a transitional element that is neither a strict comprehension through rules nor an unreflective process or action. That which joins theory and practice needs to be something that is neither wholly

theoretical nor entirely practical. Kant identifies this lubricant as judgement, which cannot be reduced entirely to an act of cognition but is a necessary step in order to embed the principles of theory into a material action. Judgement is a sensibility, something learnt by experience through a historical and subjective formation. It has then a relation to the practice it enables without being reducible entirely to action. It is an excess of judgement that stays the hand of Hamlet, but it is judgement finally that compels the name of action. Judgements are made for reasons that cannot always be confined to available evidence, data sets, or algorithms. There always remains a gap in judgement, which makes it something other than pure thought.

Kant suggests that the theoretician who lacks judgement will never become practical. Equally practice can prove itself a failure when new circumstances demonstrate a prior theory to have been inadequate. In such a scenario, Kant says the problem is not theory but a lack of theory, the new circumstances requiring further abstraction and a more robust set of general rules to expand our understanding of the scene that caused the failure. The example he gives is general mechanics in which it would be foolish for an engineer to dismiss a mathematical theory of ballistics before fiddling with heavy artillery. The rejection of theory in this instance comes from a preference for experience. The veteran canon operator knows more about how his gun works than the mathematician. The solution for theory is to have more information from the artillery man so that an adequate theory can be developed that better understands the effects of friction and wind speed so as to accord better with the experience of the soldier. Where theory is of a more speculative order, dealing with concepts rather than cannon balls, it is harder to calibrate their practical value. However, Kant's interest lies in a theory based on the concept of duty that would immediately remove any concerns about the empty ideality of concepts because the effects of such a theory would be directly relevant to experience. The point is not to change philosophy through an exposure to experience but to move beyond a dull understanding of experience as the justification for an unreflective preference for the practical:

For, to the scandal of philosophy, it is not uncommonly alleged of this theory that what may be correct in it is yet invalid in practice; and this is said in a lofty, disdainful tone, full of the presumption of wanting to reform reason by experience even in that in which reason puts its highest honour and in a wisdom that can see farther and more clearly with its dim mole's eyes fixed on experience than with the eyes belonging to a being that was made to stand erect and look at the heavens'. (p. 280)

Kant would seem to be a believer in Oscar Wilde's maxim concerning lying in the gutter but some of us looking at the stars. His defence of Theory is commendable and fierce, philosophy's dim mole eyes can still tell us more about experience than the empiricists can.

In this context (that of morality and duty) the only value of actions is for them to accord perfectly with theory. Some of us on this topic, however, would prefer to be in the gutter with the moles, innately suspicious of Kant's call of duty and more open to the experiences of the world than the demands of the starry heavens above. For Kant, it has to be this way, 'all is lost if the empirical and hence contingent conditions of carrying out the law are made conditions of the law itself, so that a practice calculated with reference to an outcome probable in accordance with previous experience is given authority to control a self-sufficient theory' (p. 280). The law transcends experience and must regulate it, experience should not be that which shapes and transforms the law. We might begin to sense a flaw in Kant's argument, noting that this in fact is not how law works. The law is made and shaped by experience, changing with governments and as new facts emerge, and not always for the better. However, Kant is talking about the moral law, which for him would fall into a different category than civil law. Nevertheless the bridge of judgement would be common to both. While it is a hard sell to imagine that a perfect judgement is possible that will accord the moral law with the actions of humanity, it is entirely plausible that an imperfect judgement, flawed, and necessarily capable of error, is the mechanism by which theory arrives in the misshapen form of practice. It is down here in the gutter of practice that philosophy needs to train its mole like vision.

Kant goes on to run his thesis, this theoretical argument about theory, through the three practical examples of the morals of individuals, the right of the state and the right of individuals. In this way he risks his theory against the practical, even if his account never leaves the ambit of a theoretical text of formal philosophy, although one which could rightly be called entirely practical. Even here in the most canonical spaces of philosophy, in the founding texts of the critical tradition, we can find an opening to the practical that results in a trembling within the genre of philosophy. 'Practical Philosophy' in the Kantian sense ought to be an oxymoron, or at least something other than philosophy proper, the ideation of theory that Kant identifies in this essay as the object of scorn by worldly-wise practitioners. Working at the frontiers of philosophy, expanding its horizons, and working in an entirely philosophical way, using the resources of the philosophical tradition, Kant imagines a new idiom of philosophical inquiry, one that is opened by and to practice. In so doing, Kant

demonstrates that all philosophy has always had this orientation and that the boundaries between theory and practice are considerably porous. Something like 'practical philosophy' would surely merit the name of both a practice and a theory? It very much depends upon what one means by 'theory' and what is meant by 'practice'.

What holds for Kant surely holds elsewhere, and there will be no secure position from which to take up an easy opposition between these two terms. Kant's essay ends with a rousing defence of theory but it also a commentary on the difficulty of extracting theory from practice. He writes:

For my own part, I nevertheless put my trust in theory, which proceeds from the principle of right, as to what relations among human beings and states *ought to be*, and which commends to earthly gods the maxim always so to behave in their conflicts that such a universal state of nations will thereby be ushered in, and so to assume that it is possible (*in praxi*) and that it can be ... (p. 309)

That is to say, that despite the flawed behaviour of politicians and kings, theory is there as a horizon to be aspired to, of how the world ought to be. One needs to hold on to the possibility that in principle the world is perfectible according to theoretical principles. However, Kant continues: 'But at the same time I put my trust (*in subsidium*) in the nature of things, which constrains one to go where one does not want to go (*fata volentem ducunt, nolentem trahunt* [the fates lead the willing, drive the unwilling])' (p. 309). His focus is also on the world as it is, not as he would like it to be; Kant is a very practical philosopher. The interesting word in this paragraph is 'trust', *Vertrauen* in German, whereby Kant says he trusts in theory but also in the world of humanity. This act of trust, like judgement, is something that cannot be reduced to pure cognition. This trust in trust comes as much from experience as it does from theoretical principle, and it is neither strictly an applicable rule nor an action in itself. Trust is another bridge that connects the practical to the theoretical:

In the latter [the nature of things], account is also taken of human nature, in which respect for right and duty is still alive, so that I cannot and will not take it to be so immersed in evil that morally practical reason should not, after many unsuccessful attempts, finally triumph over evil and present human nature as lovable after all. Thus on the cosmopolitan [world] level too, it can be maintained: What on rational grounds holds for theory also holds for practice. (p. 309)

In morality we trust, says Kant. This is a trust not based on evidence but on a faith in the judgement of humans. It is undoubtedly a trust in Kant's own

theoretical position but it is also not something that can be strictly called theoretical: belief or faith cannot ground itself in theory, nor does it require empirical evidence. Experience can shake faith but equally for the true believer no evidence is required or ever enough. No one would ever accuse Kant of being a people person, but at least in theory he does not believe that people suck. This is a remarkable position for a practical philosopher to take. Whether it is true or not should be left for the reader to decide but what it demonstrates, as a position, is that theory and practice are not binary terms, and that the economy between them is determined by something other than the theoretical or practical *stricto sensu*. Judgement, trust, faith are all philosophical concepts of course but they describe something that philosophy may not be able to account for. That is to say, dominate in an entirely theoretical way, which is not to say that this will not stop philosophy from trying. This is its practical nature.

Ethical dilemma

The metaphysical distinction between theory and practice has longer roots than the ones that Kant seeks to pull up. However, a familiarity with the origins of this opposition will show us that philosophy has always had a problem with containing the conceptual overspill around the borders of theory and practice. For example, in Book VI of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle makes a famous distinction between *episteme* and *techné*.⁴ This differentiation between ‘knowledge’ and ‘craft’ is frequently taken to define an opposition between the theoretical and the practical. However, the text of Aristotle intends no such easy distinction and in fact lays out a problematic, without resolution, that demonstrates the conceptual excess at play in any attempt to fence off theory from practice and vice versa. This section of the ethics is a discussion of *arete* [intellectual excellence/virtue] and *dianoia* [thought]. Here, thought in the context of the discussion of human good in the Ethics, refers to a faculty of the soul. That is to say, the discussion pertains to how intellectual excellence or virtue pertains to moral excellence. In order to set out this argument, Aristotle deploys a number of terms that while seemingly producing clarity within his exposition, presents a reader concerned with Theory-Practice with less certainty.

Firstly, there is a division between ‘practical wisdom’ [*phronesis*] and ‘theoretical wisdom’ [*sophia*]. *Phronesis* is one of the intellectual virtues, and so moral virtue requires a degree of practical wisdom in order to enact the choices

that would lead to moral excellence. *Sophia* is also an intellectual virtue but relates to thought that is not straightforwardly useful or pursued for practical application, such as mathematical formula. In English-language translations of Aristotle these two terms look as if they form an easy dichotomy or are two varieties of the same thing. In the Greek the terms are not related, '*sophia*' is often translated simply as wisdom, as in the etymology of 'philosophy', the love of wisdom. In fact, philosophy would seem to contain within its very roots an attachment to the theoretical, abstract, and the non-instrumental. Equally, there is no etymological connection between *sophia* and *theoria* [contemplation or theoretical knowledge]. The terms obviously have a connection but they are *sui generis* in Greek and are intended by Aristotle to define separate virtues.

Now, while *sophia* describes an intellectual virtue that is abstract there is clearly some of this 'theoretical wisdom' that is of practical value. Knowledge such as the higher mathematical formula are essential in the exercise of engineering or architecture. Kant identified them in relation to the arc of an artillery shell. There is nothing more practical than theoretical physics, which moves over time from the lecture hall to the destroyer of worlds. The distinction that Aristotle wants to make is between theoretical knowledge that concerns 'unchanging realities' and making reasoned choices, *boulesis* [deliberation], concerning what can be changed with our actions as the exercise of intellectual and moral virtue. It is necessary to understand the difference between what can be changed and what cannot in order to exercise moral virtue. Hence, *sophia* is essential to the *arete* of *dianoia*. As is the activity of the mind, *nous*, usually translated as intelligence. It is of course difficult to separate this virtue from either practical or theoretical wisdom. In Book I of the Ethics, Aristotle has suggested that the human has an *ergon* (function or work) that would seem to have something to do with the exercise of reason. Book VI is an attempt to unpack that *ergon* of human reasoning. He notes, 'truth [*aletheia*] is the function [*ergon*] of both intellectual parts of the soul [i.e. *nous* and *orexis*, desire]. Therefore those characteristics which permit each part to hold truth most will be the *aretai* of the two parts' (1139b; Book VI, Chapter 2). *Aletheia* in Aristotle means more than truth in its conventional modern sense, rather it refers to the unveiling of reality or disclosing the genuine. That is to say, the function of the intellectual part of the soul is to work out and desire the genuine or real, i.e. to distinguish between the true and the false. One should desire what is real and obtainable not false dreams if one is to excel in moral virtue. For the moral person, intelligence should lead them to desire real things, 'reasoning must affirm what desire pursues' (1139a25).

Knowing what is good and what is real then requires, *sophia*, the theoretical wisdom that tells us what is unchangeable and what can be otherwise. Truth, according to Book VI Chapter 3, can then be attained by a five faculties of the soul: *phronesis*, *sophia*, *nous*, *techne* (art, skill, craft) and *episteme*, often translated as ‘scientific knowledge’ but more generally means demonstrable knowledge. *Episteme*, here, does not mean scientific in the sense of theoretical physics, rather ‘what we know through *episteme* cannot be otherwise than it is’ (1139b20). This is knowledge that can be taught by demonstration, i.e. not through what we would now call ‘practical demonstration’ but through argumentation or by showing a valid reasoning that leads to a certain conclusion. In particular it involves demonstrating the truth of a proposition or hypothesis that might begin by being not well understood but which through reasoning can be shown to be true. The proof of a mathematical theorem would be a matter of *episteme*, for example. Hence, we can see that *episteme* would have a close relation to *sophia*. It is key to an attempt to gain the theoretical wisdom essential to the exercise of moral virtue and is required for deliberation. *Episteme* would then seem to be an extremely practical virtue and not easily bracketed off as a mode of abstraction. It is absolutely necessary in the definition of the function of the human.

Techne, by contrast, as detailed in Chapter 4, is a ‘trained ability of rationally producing’ (1140a). In other words, it is the ability to exercise reason under different conditions to produce reliably an outcome. It is variously translated as ‘applied science’, ‘skill’, or ‘art’. This would be ‘art’ in the sense of the craft of production, like the art of captancy or the art of the deal, as it were. The figurative shift that displaces *techne* as art into the sense of fine art, and *episteme* as reasoning into *episteme* as abstraction, clouds the conceptual tradition that follows from Aristotle. This move, however, while not apparent in the text of Aristotle itself, does owe much to Aristotle’s own inability to control the ambiguity of his terms. For Aristotle, *techne* and *episteme* are not mutually exclusive terms. He cites architecture as an example of *techne*:

Now architectural skill, for instance, is an art, and it is also a rational quality concerned with making; nor is there any art which is not a rational quality concerned with making, nor any such quality which is not an art. It follows that an art is the same thing as a rational quality, concerned with making, that reasons truly. (1140)

So, *episteme* is inescapably involved in *techne*. In architecture or artillery, there must be reference to the stable principles of geometry, for example, that are familiar to theoretical knowledge. In order to produce results under the

guidance of reason then it must be necessary to refer to those reliable principles. *Techne* is required for moral virtue because under certain circumstances it will be necessary to have the technique of reasoning to produce the appropriate outcome. *Techne* and *episteme* lean on each other just as they rely on *phronesis*, *sophia*, and *nous*, as they all pertain to the achievement of truth, or, *aletheia* as the disclosure of the reality of things.

For Aristotle, there is no easy distinction between the practical and the theoretical, and both are required for a pursuit of truth, which in Aristotle's terms is a material experience:

All Art deals with bringing some thing into existence; and to pursue an art means to study how to bring into existence a thing which may either exist or not, and the efficient cause of which lies in the maker and not in the thing made; for Art does not deal with things that exist or come into existence of necessity, or according to nature, since these have their efficient cause in themselves. But as doing and making are distinct, it follows that Art, being concerned with making, is not concerned with doing. And in a sense Art deals with the same objects as chance, as Agathon says: 'Chance is beloved of Art, and Art of Chance'. (1140a)

Techne pertains to the artificial, things that do not come into existence through natural means. However, it is concerned with making rather than doing. That is to say, if anything, *techne* would seem to sit on the edge of the practical. Equally, this not a question of programming an outcome from first principles or of *techne* as something algorithmic. Rather, *techne* works in the same realm as chance. Risk and serendipity attach themselves to *techne* in a way that would be different from the stable principles of theoretical knowledge. *Phronesis* also relates to that which is subject to change but it is not an art because doing and making are, for Aristotle, generically different, '*phronesis* is an excellence or virtue, and not an Art'. Practical wisdom then, while the basis of deliberation, looks to be the supplement that *episteme* and *techne* require to contribute to the uncovering of truth and the achievement of moral excellence. However, the same could be said of *nous* and *sophia* as terms within Aristotle's classification. There is no simple division between the practical and theoretical in this schema, and *episteme* and *techne* cannot be separated from the context of the other three virtues. Equally, the five terms in total are overlapping and mutually dependent.

If there is no clear distinction in Aristotle, how are we to account for the unbundling of *episteme* and *techne* as the progenitors of a binary division in the conceptual heritage that follows? We should note the distinction Aristotle makes between making and doing. Here the important term in the Ethics is *praxis*, as

derived from the Greek verb *prattein*.⁵ Praxis, as one might suspect, has several operational meanings in Greek and in the text of Aristotle. It can refer to action and agency. In the opening lines of the Ethics, Aristotle says, 'every art and every kind of inquiry, and likewise every act and purpose, seems to aim at some good: and so it has been well said that the good is that at which everything aims' (1.1). The Ethics speak of 'good living and good acting' as well as 'men of culture and me of action', where *praxis* is synonymous with political action. Action here is opposed to an inactive and speculative type of existence. In all of these senses, *praxis* involves the exercise of virtues that result in outcomes for the human good. Accordingly, while it might seem that *praxis* might be opposed to knowledge or speculation, it in fact involves and implies these undertakings as the means through which action takes place. Intelligence, practical wisdom, craft, and so on are all required and find their form in action, the *praxis* that leads to the good life. This *praxis* can connote both ethical behaviour and political interaction, the way in which people act towards one another within the polis, the city. These two senses of *praxis* come together in the notion of 'making oneself' by acting for the common good in accordance with the five virtues we have previously identified. This results in *autarkeia* or the ideal of self-sufficiency that pertains not to a 'solitary animal' but to the human who is 'political by nature' (1079b8-11). The classic distinction between man as 'a political animal' and other beasts, then owes its formation to this classification of *praxis* and *autarkeia*.

Praxis is an important third term in the division between *episteme* and *techne* as *poiesis* (making, poetry) in order to determine the value of *phronesis* as part of the argument of Book VI. *Praxis* triangulates *techne* and *episteme*. However, by Book X of the Ethics, Aristotle has replaced *episteme* with *theoria*, which seems to take on the previous values of this term as well as having its own theological dimension in which *theoria* operates at the limits of the human and in contact with the divine. Only a god can operate at the level of pure *theoria*. What we see in later accounts of theory and practice or thinking and making, is an erasure of this important ternary structure in Aristotle's thinking and a figural substitution in which *theoria* takes the place of *episteme* and also loses its theological connotation, resulting in a division between theory and practice that has lost all of the conceptual caveats of the Aristotelian schema.

The triad between *praxis-poiesis-episteme* is there in the opening lines of the Ethics, 'every art and every inquiry, and similarly every action and pursuit' [*pasa techne kai pasa methodos, homoios de praxis te kai proairesis*]. A few lines later Aristotle speaks of 'actions, arts, and sciences' [*praxeon kai technon kai*

epistemon]. Here *poiesis* and *praxis* belong to the faculty of making and the faculty of acting. But as we have seen art is not separate from chance, even if Aristotle insists that *poiesis* and *praxis* are part of the realm of the rational, as necessary to the true course of reasoning, one to produce the other to act. Interestingly and importantly, while *episteme* refers to the necessary and general, the element of contingency in *poiesis* and *praxis* means that they work on a case-by-case basis, what we would now term 'singularity'. This sort of making brings material into the world through chance rather than as a result of a programme or calculation. Equally, in the *Ethics* *praxis* forms a significant coupling with *episteme* in contrast to *poiesis*, whereby the shaping of the morally excellent human is a *praxis* that is guided by *phronesis*, practical wisdom, which leans on the unvarying nature of *episteme* in necessary ways. However, *praxis* is said to approach *episteme* through a relation to singular cases, drawing upon it on a case-by-case basis as well, 'nor is practical wisdom concerned with universals only – it must also recognize the particulars; for its practical, and practice is concerned with particulars' [*praktike gar, he de praxis peri ta kath' hekasta*, 1141b14-15]. *Praxis* then in some way exceeds *episteme* and *praxis* is importantly related to the individual circumstances of the political, 'political wisdom and practical wisdom are the same state of mind', says Aristotle, (1141b23).

Political *praxis* is by this point of the *Ethics* close to the ideal of self-sufficient *autarkeia*. This is the classical formulation of practice that passes through the Western philosophical and political tradition in which *praxis* is the means by which moral excellence is realized, as the compulsion beyond abstraction and theoretical knowledge. However, it is a model that Aristotle himself goes on to challenge in Book X of the *Ethics* in which, during a discussion of pleasure, he uncouples the necessary link between living well and acting well implied by *praxis* as politics. In this later section of the book, Aristotle recognizes the life of the mind (speculation, theory) as an acceptable basis for *autarkeia*, 'the self-sufficiency that is spoken of must belong most to the contemplative activity' [*legomene autarkeia peri ten theoretiken malist an ete* 1177a27]. This later revision of Aristotle's earlier conclusion seems to have fallen away in the transmission and translation of *The Nicomachean Ethics*. In Book X, ethical and political *praxis* still relies on *poiesis* because it does not produce objects but effects in the relations of humans. Consequently, *theoria* must be a verifiable *praxis*, 'nothing arises from it [excellence in theoretical thought] apart from contemplating, while practical activities [or excellences, *aretai*] we gain more or less apart from the action' (1177b1-4). *Theoria* then takes its place in the accomplishment of

moral excellence through its own praxis. Equally, a subtle shift has occurred here in which excellence in virtues is achieved not by the shaping of humans through their interaction with other humans, but through the contemplation of first principles. Excellence can then be achieved through the life of the mind, because in *theoria* we approach the status of the divine.

This might look like something of a *deus ex machina* as a final twist in the text of Aristotle, which places the good life beyond the reach of the actual life that humans lead. However, it is Aristotle's contention here that speculative thought is a transcendent activity that raises the human world beyond the opposition between action and predisposition, 'it is not insofar as he is a man that he will live so, but insofar as something divine is present in him' [1177b27-28]. Equally, it is this aptitude for transcendence that is specifically human, 'that which is proper to each thing is by nature best and most pleasant for each thing; for man, therefore, the life according to reason is best and pleasantest, since reason more than anything else is man' (1178a5-7). That is to say, *theoria* is the best means to uncover the actuality of things, the best path to the truth and moral excellence, because it is, according to Aristotle, the nature of what it means to be human. On this estimation, *theoria* would be more essential to the human condition than *praxis*.

This is quite a different version of the relation between theory and practice than the one that is handed down to us today. Our modern sense of praxis has of course passed through the Marxist tradition, and Marx's transliteration of Aristotle's term based on his own familiarity with the Ethics as a commentary on practical philosophy. In this tradition the divine or even mystical aspects of *theoria* are dropped as a form of idealism and an inversion takes place that once again privileges praxis, grounded in political circumstances. In this scenario, self-sufficiency and moral excellence are replaced by humanity's self-realization and transformation through the historical dialectic. As the eleventh theses on Feuerbach says, 'philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways [*verschieden interpretirt*]; the point is to change [*andern*] it'.⁶ However, several of the other previous theses explicitly invoke the term praxis, as if it were a German word and not an adaptation from Aristotle. For example, the second thesis states, 'The question of whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question [*eine Praktische Frage*]. Man must prove the truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness [*Wirklichkeit und Macht Diesseitigkeit*] of his thinking, in practice [*in der Praxis*]. The dispute over the reality or nonreality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question'. The

mobilization of the same concerns as Aristotle with respect to thinking and the human good is evident but the conclusions seem to be different. The third thesis reads, 'the coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-change can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice [*revolutionäre Praxis*]'. In Marx, the Greek word has not been translated at all but the concept it named has been shorn of the meanings that attended it in its original form. The eighth thesis says, 'all social life is essentially practical. All mysteries that lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice [*in der menschlichen Praxis und in dem Begreifen dieser Praxis*]'. There is a literal way of reading all this, namely, to imagine that the inversion of *theoria* and *praxis* is of a piece with the reversal of idealism in Marxian thought specific to the philosophical conjuncture of which the *Theses on Feuerbach* would be a part. However, this reversal in Marx is only ever a provisional change in emphasis while historical materialism establishes itself. It is not a refutation or dismissal of the conceptual inheritance.

In Kant's practical philosophy, like Aristotle, moral goals are attached to the exercise of reason. Throughout his writing he makes systematic use of the term *praktisch* in his designation of practical reason and pure practical reason. His only use of the word *praxis* comes in the essay with which we began, 'On the Common Saying: This May be True in Theory but it Does Not Apply in Practice [*Praxis*]'. Elsewhere, Kant will speak of *das Praktische* [the practical or the practical element] but in this essay adopts the substantive *Praxis* in his title as a common saying. In this sense, he is adopting the term used by the writers he is opposing in his essay, the 'popular' philosophers of the eighteenth century who oppose the radical implications of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution and who imagine institutional tradition and inherited privilege to be the reservoir of political wisdom [*Staatsklugheit*]. For Kant the moral achievement of practical philosophy does not lie in *phronesis* or technical skill but solely in morality as principles that define the categorical imperative. His is a *moralisch-praktisch* rather than a *technisch-praktisch*. The path from the laws of practical reason to action and experience is a matter, for Kant, of the pragmatic and of managing the pathological element introduced by the vicissitudes of human nature. The pragmatic task of practical philosophy is to put morality at the centre of relations between humans and so to transform the world. We can see how that inheritance plays out in Marx, even if it is realized in a quite different way.

However, it is Kant's three critiques that place the question of the practical at the heart of theoretical discourse. In so doing, he does not easily separate outcomes in the material world from a speculative principle identified with

reason, and accordingly neither do Marx and Engels even if their own extensive theoretical accounts wish to put a pin in *theoria* to further the cause of *praxis*. Other traditions are available, and we could follow the transmission of Aristotle's ethics through a French line that would suffer equally from the failure of the *translatio philosophiae* from Athens to Rome and into European vernacular languages to render an adequate Latin translation of the Greek word *praxis*. The point here is not to prefer one tradition to another or to prefer *theoria* to *praxis* or vice versa, but to recognize that the relation of one to the other is complex and runs to the very roots of the philosophical tradition. Art cannot hold this philosophical tradition to account on this point, because 'art' in this sense, as we saw in *The Nicomachean Ethics* and in Kant's *Third Critique*, is also a product of that tradition. We are not dealing with an easily dichotomized academy between the theoretical and the practical, between the humanities and the creative arts. Instead, we are looking at a set of relations, conceptually and historically overlaid, from which a complex object of study begins to emerge as a decisive index of some of the most compelling questions raised by human experience.

Plato's Other Republic

Theory-Practice is not the same thing as philosophy. The former has a clear relation to the latter but philosophy designates an idiom of writing and a register of thought, a training, and discipline, which cannot be reduced to other related genres. However, it is our contestation here that as a genre philosophy has its limits, and it is precisely at these borders that philosophy is opened up, presenting us with the most decisive indices of what philosophy might be and performing its differential relation to other idioms. The border between philosophy and literature, for example, is of particular interest to us. It is increasingly difficult to determine the exact nature of that boundary as soon as one considers the history of philosophical writing. For example, how are we to determine which aspects of Augustine's thought in *Confessions* amounts to 'life-writing' and which to philosophy?⁷ How are we to read across the corpus of a Rousseau or a Sartre and decide which text can be designated as novelistic and which earns the name philosophy? Is the *Emile* a treatise on the philosophy of education or is it a bildungsroman that recounts the story of a student and his tutor?⁸ Is *The Age of Reason* a commentary on existentialism or a story of 1930s Paris?⁹ From Boethius to Abelard, from Thomas More to Pascal, from Voltaire and Diderot to Schiller and Wollstonecraft, from Madame de Staël to Kierkegaard, from Thoreau to

Nietzsche, from Benjamin to de Beauvoir, from Bataille and Blanchot to Derrida and Cixous, how can one draw a line through a body of texts and determine where literature ends and where philosophy begins? In these examples, and across the tradition of Western thought, literature, and philosophy bleed into one another across idioms of writing that cannot be easily disentangled. And of course, philosophy itself begins, with Plato and with writing that cannot be said to be straight forwardly or purely 'philosophical'. Philosophy begins in writing and never escapes it. While it may be important politically and pedagogically to defend the borders of philosophy and to maintain the institutions of philosophy in order to preserve a disciplinary training in a properly philosophical space, this should not be at the expense of recognizing the artificial nature of those borders. It is not possible, under any degree of readerly pressure, to separate the philosophical from the other genres of writing, as if it were, to not subject to the same rules of figuration and composition to be found elsewhere. Accordingly, while we might wish to retain an institutional distinction between Theory-Practice of the sort exemplified by *Delphine*, *Candide* or *La Carte Postale*, and philosophy proper, such a categorization falls away at first point of contact with these texts.¹⁰ Theory-Practice as the near neighbour of philosophy opens philosophy up and restores it to the wider terrain of writing that is its inescapable home.

This is not to say that philosophy thinks in the same way that Theory-Practice does. In the case of filosophy (films that exhibit philosophical content) for example, the sound-image of cinema does not operate on the same level of conceptualization and critique as idiomatic philosophy, despite all the claims to the contrary by writers who have read their philosophy but never made a film.¹¹ If we are to account for the question of film there must be a reckoning with the material difference of film to philosophy, a materiality that cannot be abridged as the thematic or illustrative. Theory-Practice can do its work across a range of genres and media, visual art for example does not operate in the same way as philosophy does. However, it can perform an idea with its constative dimension inseparable from its performative element. Conceptual art remains irreducibly conceptual and irreducibly art. While the constative and performative dimensions of philosophy are equally inextricable, it is in that part of Theory-Practice that grafts philosophy to art that it accepts another logic to philosophy, namely, that of contradiction.¹² It is the purpose of philosophy to seek to establish a principle of truth, while it is the nature of art to embrace a principle of ambivalence. The literary text, for example, is free to work within a double resonance at once accepting no referential relation to the real world and relying

entirely on this suspension of reference as a means of presenting the truth of the world. The work of literature and its fundamental difference from philosophy is that in order to be literary the text must accelerate and heighten that ambiguity as a condition of its own status as literature. Philosophy, by contrast, seeks to repress that element of uncertainty within its position as writing. Philosophy as an idiom and a discipline proposes a logic of non-contradiction as the basis of its rational discourse and the condition of all ontology. Literature by contrast requires a logic of ambivalence, in which equivocality puts in play an essential non-resolution of polarities. Philosophy accepts the logic of the logos, while literature departs from it and seeks another mode of comprehension. In this sense, philosophy and literature are not the same thing, even if we struggle to separate them in the textual history of Western thought. However, as we can see from the example of Plato, philosophy's law of non-contradiction emerges from the ambiguous pages of a formal equivocality. The genre of the dialogue and the frequent use of myth and narrative illustration by Plato places his work firmly in the category of 'writing' and to all intents and purposes in the realm of fiction. Philosophy then begins in fiction, one might even say that Theory-Practice precedes philosophy. In the beginning was Theory-Practice and philosophy has never recovered.

It is appropriate then to look to the text of Plato for an indication of the difficulties of creativity and the aporias of Theory-Practice. We might turn with advantage to one of Plato's most significant texts on the question of creation, the *Timaeus*.¹³ It is notable that Plato's account of the origin of the universe is embedded within a series of narrative frames, in which we pick up the dialogue the morning after the discussion on *The Republic*.¹⁴ Seeking alternative 'entertainment' Socrates wishes to hear an account of how the ideal state engages with other states. Critias then tells the story of Solon's journey to Egypt where he in turn hears the tale of Atlantis and its war with Athens. We will return to this particular issue in a moment, as it is by no means the least interesting aspect of the *Timaeus* even though it is one that attracts little attention within the philosophical commentary on Plato's text. Even Critias interrupts his own account of Atlantis to note that he is getting ahead of himself and inviting Timaeus to offer an account of the origin of the universe, folds his own diegetic level onto that of the eponymous interlocutor. Critias will pick up the story of Atlantis in the subsequent dialogue that takes its name from his own and which remains incomplete or lost, ending the text of Plato in fragments and fiction. All of this works on a level of considerable textual sophistication and narrative complexity, introducing the logic of ambivalence into the text of philosophy with

every narrative twist and turn of character. In this dialogue we have both the use of *mythos* as a predicate for *logos*, and a philosophical text that puts on display its figurative dimension in an extended performance of its own textuality. And yet such a text is taken by the institutions of philosophy as the edge at which *philos* breaks from *mythos*, and the idiom buries its own status as writing. The text is in fact Theory-Practice that aspires to the condition of philosophy through the repression of its own performativity. We might equally say that philosophy is Theory-Practice that denies its own figurative dimension.¹⁵ This will take a little unpicking.

Here, it would be advantageous to attend to Jacques Derrida's reading of the *Timaeus* around the Greek word 'khora' [χώρα] which in its most common usage names the territory of the polis outside of the city proper.¹⁶ In the text of the *Timaeus* to mean a 'third kind' [*triton genos*, 48e4] of space in the creation of the universe that is neither that of being nor non-being but a material substratum through which *eidos* [form] enters into existence.¹⁷ As such khora presents another logic to that of non-contradiction, to the binary of yes or no. It is described by Timaeus variously as a receptacle, mother, or a midwife, operating as a concept through a figurative chain of metaphorization to denote a place beyond categorical oppositions. Khora, then names another logic than goes beyond that of the *logos* but which is at the same time does not belong strictly to *mythos*. It is a philosophical concept that emerges from narrative fiction, denotating as it performs, creating as it describes creation. Khora is a figure that, in Derrida's terms, 'oscillates between two types of oscillation: the double exclusion (neither/nor) and the participation (both this and that)' (p. 91). The philosophical commentary on khora notes the metaphorical nature of the term without necessarily mobilizing the resources of rhetorical reading to consider it further.¹⁸ Philosophy is also blind to the translation that seems to be integral to khora as a term that begins as a reference to one thing but must necessarily move through a transformation to refer to something else. At the same time, khora as a concept describes a place that is beyond the polarity of structures such as metaphor or translation. Khora itself would make tropology inevitable but not something supplementary to denotation or a provisional or accidental state. The naming of khora itself is an effect of khora, the form by which khora is formed. At the same time, khora itself is neither of the order of *eidos* nor that of *mimesis* (the image of forms). The non-being of khora cannot be rendered by the anthropomorphic schemas that are used to translate it. It is something that is not a thing, escaping the order of meaning it puts into play. It is not then subject to or of an ontology, to an order of the intelligible or sensible. That is to say, khora

may be that which initiates a certain philosophical idiom but which cannot be submitted to its logical regime. Khora is the formalization of the unformed as well as the formalization of formalization.

Derrida's reading of Plato takes a route through Hegel and for good reason. Hegel notes, following Aristotle, that 'those who philosophize with recourse to myth are not worth treating seriously'.¹⁹ This would seem to place Plato's presentation of the origins of the universe in a difficult position given that it seems to explicitly rely on myth and moreover figuration and fiction. Hegel also suggests that 'the value of Plato, however, does not reside in myths'.²⁰ That is to say, for Hegel, there is a 'seriousness' in Plato that allows the Western tradition to extract his thought from its fictional and figurative setting. In this sense, Hegel sets up his own binary opposition between the serious and the non-serious that maps onto that between *philos* and *mythos*, rescuing a logic of non-contradiction from a context of originary ambivalence. Hegel is of course privileging the content of Plato, while subordinating the form of Plato in order to justify the seriousness of Plato and so the origins of philosophy and accordingly his own dialectical method, which in this way operates as both the sublation of philosophy and philosophy as sublation. In this way, the text of Hegel offers an exemplary 'Platonism' in the way it extracts content from form, removing an ideal Plato from the actual text of Plato. The philosophy of Plato comes at the expense of Plato the writer, and Platonism is something that Hegel applies to Plato himself. In contrast, khora would be a place inimicable to this logic of opposition, a place without place, that is the threshold of place and an undiscoverable place. In so far as philosophy then extracts khora from the text of Plato, we have the becoming philosophy of myth, in which the non-serious becomes serious by removing it from its own place, enacting a reductive violence on khora that as a term designates another kind of logic.

The place of khora is the place of Theory-Practice, a place of creativity that is both theory and practice, and neither fully theory nor solely practice. Theory-Practice is the place of Plato the writer, a place that is not fully recognizable to philosophy or as literature. It is a place without place that can address the place of philosophy and the place of practice, both from the outside and as a receptacle for philosophy and the creative arts, while generative of both. Theory-Practice occurs in a third genus and in the 'neutral' space of place without place. As Roland Barthes tells us the *neutre* is not a simple splitting of the difference between two binaries, rather it is its own space, which is marked in its own distinctive and singular way just as it appears to be unmarked.²¹ Theory-Practice is not neutral in the sense that word often has, meaning uncommitted or disinterested. It is *le*

neutre in the contradictory sense that Barthes suggests, a commitment to both theory and practice, from a space that is neither strictly theory nor practice. To reduce the outcomes of Theory-Practice to an identifiable truth of philosophy would be to do considerable violence to the mis-en-abyme of the scene of Theory-Practice and to ignore the materiality of the practice that structures that scene. It would be to enact the abstraction of Platonism on Theory-Practice, reclaiming it for philosophy in a universalizing gesture that philosophy finds second nature. This extraction and reduction constitutive of philosophy itself would then be an effect of Theory-Practice itself. Derrida suggests that Platonism 'is not only an example of this movement, the first 'in' the whole history of philosophy. It commands it, it commands this whole history' (p. 121). That is to say philosophy as such, formally, is henceforth always Platonic. Philosophy then has its origin in a singular example of Theory-Practice, an idiom that it would relegate as a non-serious genre. It is not that Theory-Practice suffers from a philosophy deficit as an inferior or imitative field. Rather, Theory-Practice opens up philosophy from the beginning, giving birth, as *khora*, to the form of philosophy. The ruin and exposure of the formal edifice of philosophy lies in its originary relation to Theory-Practice, which gives to it writing as its cause and disarticulation. This is an origin older than the origin of philosophy itself, an origin given in writing that takes and gives the form of Theory-Practice.

Theory-Practice then gives philosophy its form but it also holds that form. *Khora* is only a figure of Theory-Practice and is not more of a receptacle than a nurse or a mother. As a figure of origin, it can be no more originary than any other figure. As a *triton genos* it cannot be a *genos* as such because it is unique. It is a figure that is inscribed fully in its own singular materiality, in which its meaning cannot be abstracted from its form, as if the ideality of theory could be extracted from the embodiment of practice, as if both theory and practice were not simultaneously figurative and material. If Theory-Practice is a philosophical idiom, a pre-originary genre that gives the form of philosophy, then it is a bastard and hybrid idiom that retains its distance from philosophy. It is necessary for philosophy, placing itself prior to and below the origin of philosophy, preceding and receiving the effects of philosophy. As Derrida notes in his reading of Plato, 'the discourse on *khora* thus plays for philosophy a role analogous to the role which *khora* 'herself' plays for that which philosophy speaks of, namely, the cosmos formed or given from according to the paradigm' (p. 126). That is to say, just as the universe is created through *khora* in Plato's cosmology, so formal philosophy emerges from Plato's writing of the figure of *khora*. By extension, as we find in the text of Plato an exemplary figure of Theory-Practice, so we

find that Theory-Practice is the matrix of *khora* from which philosophy itself emerges.

The same is true of practice as a *genos*. There can be no abstraction of a model, procedure, or ideal from the singular inscription of Theory-Practice, each instance must be absolutely singular and inaugural of a space from which practice merges but cannot be identified as strictly practice, or be reduced to the practical, utility, or function. The impulse of practice towards an absolute affect would also be an effect given and received by Theory-Practice. The writing of Plato wants to run away with the thought of Plato as nothing but a textual scene of the exchange of figures. However, Theory-Practice draws it back into space of philosophy in a necessary tension between abstraction and embodiment. Both theory and practice claim to be the serious outcome of the non-serious scene of Theory-Practice. Practice, in this sense, in relation to *khora* and the philosophy of Plato means politics and the *polis*. Practice always wishes to stake its credentials as serious compared to the abstraction of thought in the Ivory Tower. This leaves Theory-Practice as the non-serious practice of practice, a practice that does not take itself seriously by being practical enough. Politics and philosophy both take their distance from writing as a genre just as it is writing that gives and receives the form of politics and philosophy, opening and ruining both in the process, inimicable to the binary logic that divides the two. The foreclosures of practice are just as reductive and limiting as the abstractions of theory. They justify themselves in their constraints by associating those closures with what it would mean to be serious or committed, having chosen a side in the binary choice between theory and practice, insisting on and reinstating its own logic of non-contradiction. In this way to be serious is both to be practical in the case of politics and to be thoughtful in the case of philosophy. However, within a rigorous logic of non-contradiction practice and theory cannot both be serious. Would the more serious thing not be to take seriously how this logic is indeed in contradiction with itself? That is to say, to speak of and to do seriousness from another place, the space of *khora*, which gives and receives seriousness, below all its forms and a certain formlessness. Hence, there would be nothing more serious than Theory-Practice, nothing more philosophical and nothing more practical.

There is, one might say, an exemplary deconstructive emphasis to *khora* and to what we are calling Theory-Practice.²² The action of *khora* might be thought of as exemplary of quasi-transcendental and supplementary logics that we see elsewhere in Derrida's writing.²³ However, it is remarkable in Derrida's reading of Plato that while he identifies the way in which philosophy masks its originary

debt to writing through an appropriation of the merits of seriousness, Derrida completely ignores one of the most interesting aspects of the *Timaeus*, namely the 'non-serious' references to Atlantis that open the dialogue and are continued in the *Critias*. This omission is curious given the importance of Atlantis in these dialogues in relation to the question of politics and the space of the city that structures the significance of khora in the *Timaeus*. It is accordingly, of some interest here in the context of Theory-Practice as a non-serious relation of philosophy. When Derrida reads Hegel or Aristotle on philosophy and myth, perhaps Atlantis is in the background of his essay but it is never explicitly brought to the fore. Derrida was of course an extremely serious philosopher, his concern for the canon of modernist literature, for example, places his interests in literature in the realm of the suitably serious. Perhaps, the question of Atlantis was not serious enough for Derrida to consider and he thought it enough to speak to the distinction between *mythos* and *philos* in the text of Plato. But when addressing *mythos* as a problem for philosophy he does specifically single out the singularity of khora and does not mention Atlantis. And yet the topic is perhaps a more striking example of *mythos* in the whole of Plato and clearly a point of contrast for the seriousness of Athens, place of politics and philosophy. There might be a reluctance to take Atlantis seriously because it has been historically the preserve of cranks and pulp fiction; it was an object of fascination for National Socialism and its ludicrous attempts to mobilize a mythology of Aryan giants.²⁴ It is however, a matter of unquestioned seriousness for Socrates.

The *Timaeus* is a receptacle for stories, one narrative embedded inside the other, the account of the origins of the universe, the story of creation itself, is framed as a delay to the business of Atlantis that will be taken up again in the *Critias*. In the *Timaeus* the story is described as having been recorded in the histories of Egypt, the relevant passage may be more or less familiar to readers of Plato:

These histories tell of a mighty power which unprovoked made an expedition against the whole of Europe and Asia, and to which your city put an end. This power came forth out of the Atlantic Ocean, for in those days the Atlantic was navigable; and there was an island situated in front of the straits which are by you called the Pillars of Heracles; the island was larger than Libya and Asia put together, and was the way to other islands, and from these you might pass to the whole of the opposite continent which surrounded the true ocean; for this sea which is within the Straits of Heracles is only a harbour, having a narrow entrance, but that other is a real sea, and the surrounding land may be most truly called a boundless continent. (25a)

If this is the stuff of myth then there is a considered attempt on Plato's part to invoke a cartographical verisimilitude in order to place Atlantis within the ancient world. Realism is as much a trope as myth is. Its size alone, 'larger than Libya and Asia,' requires us to take it seriously. This is a myth about the foundations of Europe and the origins of philosophy, by which a Mediterranean heritage is accorded to the becoming European of the continent and of the philosophical discourse of the Greeks. This is in contrast to the colonial ambitions of the kingdom from the Atlantic. As such it serves a serious role in the text of Plato and it is precisely for this reason that fascists such as Julius Evola also took it seriously. There is of course a difference between taking the story of Atlantis seriously and taking it literally:

Now in this island of Atlantis there was a great and wonderful empire which had rule over the whole island and several others, and over parts of the continent, and, furthermore, the men of Atlantis had subjected the parts of Libya within the columns of Heracles as far as Egypt, and of Europe as far as Tyrrhenia. This vast power, gathered into one, endeavoured to subdue at a blow our country and yours and the whole of the region within the straits; and then, Solon, your country shone forth, in the excellence of her virtue and strength, among all mankind. She was pre-eminent in courage and military skill, and was the leader of the Hellenes. And when the rest fell off from her, being compelled to stand alone, after having undergone the very extremity of danger, she defeated and triumphed over the invaders, and preserved from slavery those who were not yet subjugated, and generously liberated all the rest of us who dwell within the pillars. (25b-c)

The story of Atlantis is nothing short of a founding narrative for the justification of Athens's own colonial domination of the Mediterranean basin in the years before the Peloponnesian War. Written in 360 BC following the defeat to Sparta and in a time of Hellenic decline, this dialogue might be characterized by its post-colonial melancholy in which the now compromised virtue of Athens is contrasted to the mythic vice of the Atlantians. The historic influence of Athens is then not the result of military might and trade but the consequence of Athens having stood alone against the threat of Atlantis, in a binary contest that brooks no contradiction. The reach of Athens is thus rendered not as a material advantage to the city but as a result of virtue, the advantages that come with it are not subjection of others but precisely the result of the liberation of those people now dominated by Athens.

The virtue of Athens is of course a product of the philosophy and politics that distinguishes the city and makes it 'leader of the Hellenes.' There could be little

more serious to be considered with respect to the ancient world, and yet here we have the serious virtue of Athens, and all that this means for the European tradition and European colonialism, putting down its roots in the myth of the cruelty of the empire of Atlantis. Empire founds itself on a pre-originary colonialism from which it takes its distance and repeats its effects. In this way the empire of Atlantis is generative of a European tradition of colonialism that in perpetuity occurs around a justification through reason and enlightenment while depending on mythic origins and stories of virtue. The seriousness of colonial occupiers is always in contrast to the childlike simplicity of the occupied, just as the seriousness of the logos is explicitly compared in Plato's text to the childish mythology of the Egyptians. Virtue is its own reward, even if that reward is hegemony over the Mediterranean region. The vice of the Atlantians is suitably punished:

But afterwards there occurred violent earthquakes and floods; and in a single day and night of misfortune all your warlike men in a body sank into the earth, and the island of Atlantis in like manner disappeared in the depths of the sea. For which reason the sea in those parts is impassable and impenetrable, because there is a shoal of mud in the way; and this was caused by the subsidence of the island. (25d)

Athens suffered its own loss of blood and treasure but Atlantis sinks into the sea, its submerged fragments marking the boundaries of the European space, beyond it there lies another place 'impassable and impenetrable' and undiscoverable.

It is striking how the figure of Atlantis works in this dialogue, a myth that gives birth to a formal logocentrism (colonialism is always a logocentrism²⁵) sitting below the propriety of Athens as an origin of the virtue of Europe and philosophy as discourse of reason. It should not be surprising that *mythos* should operate in this way in the text of Plato, it is the same action that we tracked in the figure of khora in which writing gives and receives the effects of a seriousness that imposes a logic of non-contradiction onto a matrix of ambivalence. Even those who historically took the myth of Atlantis seriously did so because it derived its authority from Plato. That is to say from Plato the philosopher, not Plato the writer of fiction. The corrupt racialized history of the Atlantis myth in the twentieth century played precisely on this distinction between the serious and the non-serious that results from the becoming Platonism of Plato. Even the most mythic aspect of the mythos, myth at its own limits, benefits from the serious effects of Platonism, granting plausibility to the most ludic of Plato's inventions. This is the Plato effect, the outcome of a writing that bestows seriousness through an

insistence on non-contradiction as a consequence of a textual scene of extreme referential suspension. Imposing non-contradiction onto a field of ambiguity is the principle by which philosophy works and characterizes the mechanism of universalization derived from particularity that gives philosophy its formal character. It would also seem to work in the case of politics as a practice that seeks to outflank philosophy as well as ambiguity. The appropriation of the myth of Atlantis by National Socialism is above all political, as much as it relies on a warped historiography or anthropology.

Critias is also the name of the Athenian politician (460–403 BC) who was one of the thirty Tyrants, the pro-Spartan oligarchs installed after the defeat of Athens.²⁶ He is said to have been a first cousin of Plato's mother. It is importantly undecidable for the reader of Plato's dialogues whether the likes of Critias or Solon can be identified with historic figures. Plato is a writer of fiction, his Critias is no more historical than Shakespeare's Richard III. However, the name of Critias firmly places the two dialogues within the legible frame of politics. The historic Critias was also a dramatist who is sometimes credited with the Sisyphus fragment rather than Euripides.²⁷ He is another figure of Theory-Practice within an exemplary fragment of Theory-Practice. It would seem that while theory and practice might be thought of as pulling in opposite directions, we can see in the text of Plato a different action for theory and practice. In fact, they both tend towards the same direction, seeking to calm or erase the field of ambivalence by staking a claim to non-contradiction and so to be non-contestable. Practice attempts this as much as Theory does. The end of politics is the end of politics, as Geoffrey Bennington would say, that is, the foreclosure of further argument and action following the application of a perfect political programme aimed at the resolution of all debate and material need.²⁸ In this way, practice is equally open to the ruin of disarticulation that comes from its origins in ambiguity. The trick in reading Plato as Theory-Practice is to keep that ambiguity open and to refuse a foreclosure that would make us decide between these dialogues as Platonic philosophy or as tales of Empire. They occupy a different space that gives and receives both as an effect of writing.

The *Critias* is an even more remarkable text than the *Timaeus* as it returns to the deferred story of Atlantis and its war with Athens said to have taken place nine thousand years before the dialogue. It goes into considerable detail on the foundations of Atlantis as the island of Poseidon and his progeny, including Atlas who begat the kings of Atlantis. The political structures of the island are described, as are the agricultural routine, rituals, and the division of land. The dialogue is incomplete or lost but Critias outlines the shape of the story he wishes to tell

the assembled company; he wants to recall an ancient war between 'between those who dwelt outside the Pillars of Heracles and all who dwelt within them' and 'the progress of the history will unfold the various nations of barbarians and families of Hellenes which then existed, as they successively appear on the scene; but I must describe first of all Athenians of that day, and their enemies who fought with them, and then the respective powers and governments of the two kingdoms' (88-91). His opening remarks then 'give the precedence to Athens' before turning to Atlantis. This is a classic tale of conflict between those who dwell outside of 'Europe' and those who live within, separated now by an impenetrable barrier of mud, between barbarians and the civilized Hellenes.

The fragment ends with an insight into why a race of gods declared war on the virtuous Greeks, noting that over time the human aspect of the Atlantians began to dilute the divine dimension of their character, making them selfish and warlike. The war is then said to be a punishment from Zeus who wished to correct their avaricious ways. The fragment ends here but we could accordingly, in light of this, read the dialogue in a different way, namely as an allegory. The purpose of the story of Atlantis might not be to contrast virtuous Athens with a warlike other, but to reflect back to Athenians in the years of defeat and decline after its own war with Sparta, how far the Athens of Socrates was from an imagined pristine state of nine thousand years ago when it fought Atlantis. In this sense, Atlantis and Athens are not two capitals divided between a binary choice between virtue and vice, but are the same place mapped onto one another through the allegory of the *Critias* dialogue, in which the fate of Atlantis serves as a warning to the Athens of Plato. It is not possible to be definitive on this point; it is sufficient that it is a reading that presents itself from the referential field of Plato's text. It is not clear what exactly Atlantis is referring to but it is a good bet that it is referring to something other than its own myth, although it is also at the same time doing precisely this.

Atlantis is not serious, it is the preserve of pseudo-history and occultism. No doubt this is why Derrida chooses to shy away from it in favour of *khora*, an otherwise marginal figure to the dialogues. If we take Derrida's reading practice here and elsewhere at face value, the point would be not to oppose *khora* to Atlantis but to see in his reading of *khora* a decisive case of how *mythos* and *philos* work more generally in Plato and so also in the case of Atlantis. However, this non-seriousness is extremely serious and not just because its appropriation was used to justify a murderous, racist ideology. Rather, the seriousness of Atlantis lies in its capacity to give and receive speculation. Speculation in this sense means both the speculative tradition that emerges from Plato as the canon

of Western philosophy and the speculation that comes from the ambiguity of storytelling as the conjecture of narrative fiction. If, as we have suggested throughout our own account of these dialogues, the writing of Plato is a notable case of the sort of Theory-Practice under discussion in this book, then we might say that speculation is the space occupied by Theory-Practice. It is a space for thought, that speculates to accumulate, laying a wager on the future, while noting its debts to a thinking that it both gives and receives. It is also a space of experiment in which the referential rules of non-contradiction are suspended.

The *Timaeus-Critias* is both a work of philosophy and a narrative fiction, and neither fully a work of philosophy nor just a narrative fiction. Theory-Practice in this sense operates according to another logic, one that might be called allegorical, in which the work of Theory-Practice always refers to something other than itself, while simultaneously working through the task for which it has been set up. Theory-Practice sets up a scenario in which speculative thought can take its place, only to undo the security of that scenario and thought in order to establish their very undecidability, only to further complicate this by denying any security to this disarticulation as well.²⁹ It is in this folding and unfolding of layers of practice and thought, their initiation, undoing and recuperation, that Theory-Practice occupies a different space from that of other idioms of intellectual inquiry or creative making. The seriousness we accord Theory-Practice will depend entirely upon how seriously we want to take philosophical culture or practices such as art or politics. As far as ancient Athens was concerned there would be little that one should be prepared to treat more seriously. The serious role of Theory-Practice is that it shows us that in their proprietorial claims to sobriety, solemnity, or earnestness, philosophy and politics are simply not serious enough. Their sincerity is merely sombre, masking the reserves of ambiguity upon which their own practice is founded. If the speculative space of Theory-Practice has a serious role to play, it is in untapping these reserves giving and receiving the resource of undecidability to both the theoretical and the practical.