

AN INTERVIEW WITH GREGORY FRIED, PH.D., PROFESSOR OF PHILOSOPHY AT BOSTON COLLEGE

Towards a Polemical Ethics: Between Heidegger and Plato

"I think for Plato and for Socrates, the philosophical life is a constant striving to seek that enlightenment: to try our utmost to transcend our historical circumstances, even knowing that we will ultimately fail."

Patrick Kelly, Managing Editor Thank you, Professor Fried, for agreeing to have this interview with us.

Professor Gregory Fried Thank you so much. I look forward to our chat.

PK So can you give us a brief introduction on the relevance of your book *Toward a Polemical Ethic*, why you chose to write it, how you think it might prove useful for today's philosophy students as well as for non-philosophers, and why you chose to focus on this area?

GF Thank you for that question. It's always a difficult question to ask a philosopher, but I think it's the responsibility of a philosopher to try to answer the question, who is their audience, and what are they trying to achieve? Many academic philosophy books—in fact, I would imagine the vast majority of them—are written for a specialized academic audience. While I think philosophers are very happy when people outside academic life—or outside of philosophy as a specific discipline—read them, it's not common and it is not the audience most professional philosophers

write for. However, I tried to write this book for a more general audience than just Heidegger specialists or philosophy specialists. That is very difficult to do when working on a figure like Heidegger. But I believe there is something relevant to a wider audience here.

I think the fundamental issue that is at stake is Heidegger's claim that the challenges facing European civilization, which has effectively become a global civilization after colonialism, and the integration of the world into a single world economy—that those challenges are addressed by Heidegger as going all the way back to a tradition rooted in Greek thought and in Plato.

Heidegger is challenging Plato and challenging that tradition. Very unfortunately, Heidegger's own personal response to those challenges was to say that this tradition needs to come to an end; that it has exhausted itself; that what we think of as contemporary, enlightened liberal societies—those are manifestations, not of the strength of our civilization, but of its decline and its weakness.

Heidegger traces that weakness back to Greek thinking, starting with Plato, which sees the world as divided between historical reality—the shadows of the cave that we live in—and the realm of philosophical truth, the realm of the Ideas, which philosophy can bring us to as the true world beyond our historical experience in which there are everlasting truths that transcend us.

Heidegger thought that way of thinking about what it means to be human in the world was responsible for uprooting humanity from its connection to the reality of its historical world. I disagree with him about that. I think there's a way of reading Plato, which shows that Plato takes into account the concerns that Heidegger has and that he has an answer for Heidegger.

Obviously, Plato comes more than 2000 years before Heidegger, so he's not answering him personally. But I see it as my task in the book to think with Plato against Heidegger, but also to think with Heidegger, to take seriously what his challenges to us are. That brings me to the present because I do believe that, especially in the United States, we are facing a political, social, and cultural crisis over the meaning of our own national political identity, and that this has something to do not with Plato and Heidegger directly, but the issues these two philosophers bring up for us—issues that can be traced to the kinds of thinking that do exist in our own historical tradition and that are familiar to Americans.

My book's last chapter is about Frederick Douglass as an American thinker and political actor who embodies for me the response that I actually think is a platonic or Socratic one to the challenges of contemporary American democracy. I do hope that I have a wider audience that can understand the broad relevance of philosophy in the

Western tradition for the crises that we face in the United States and elsewhere in the world that revolve around the human beings that we want to be in the 21st century.

PK What is your own approach to writing? Socrates, as you mention in your book's address to the reader, never published a single word. So, what is your method in approaching writing and stepping into, as you just said, the space where conversation with Heidegger and Plato is possible?

GF I think I say at the very beginning of the book that I'm a Platonist and a Socratic. And for me, thinking is dialogical. I think in conversations. I think in conversations with philosophical thinkers, but also with colleagues and with friends. It's very hard for me to write from a standing start, as it were. So sometimes I feel that conversation very directly, and it allows me to write quickly and well. Sometimes I have to really examine myself to see what the conversation is that I want to take up in order to get my dialogical energies flowing. So, in fact, when I started this book, I began writing it as a letter to one of my close colleagues and friends, because that was the way for me to imagine my way into a philosophical dialogue about what matters in this project. I try to engage in that dialogue with Heidegger, against Heidegger, with Plato, and even against certain aspects of Plato. I think that's the best general explanation of how I go about writing. I do have an outline. I have a plan for what I want to do, but I don't write according to a fixed outline of what's definitely going to happen in my book. It's more of an outline around broad issues, even questions that I want to address, because my thinking happens *in* my writing. The writing is a dialogue for me, so I'm not entirely sure what's going to happen or where it will go. I'm telling a story about thinking when I'm writing.

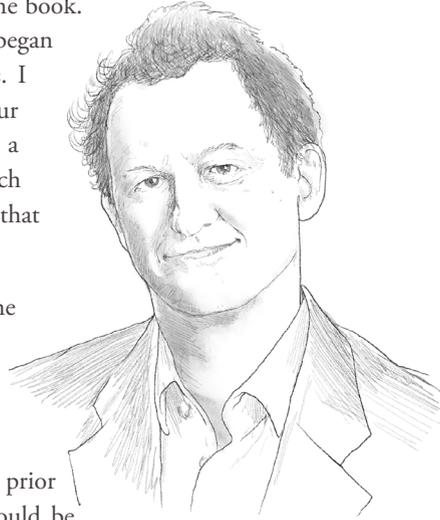
PK On that note: in your first chapter, you describe philosophy as a form of absolute freedom. Do you feel that way yourself when you're entering into these dialogues, when you're writing? Or put it this way: Would you care to elaborate on what it means for you, in the confines of the discussion between Heidegger and Plato, to experience philosophy as a form of absolute freedom?

GF First, abstractly, I think philosophy is absolute freedom because philosophy asks us to take seriously the challenge of separating ourselves from our most immediate convictions and attachments and prejudices in order to think through a question or a problem with fresh eyes. It's very hard to do that. I don't think human beings can ever fully do that. But I do think there is an ethical obligation on us if we're going to think of ourselves as engaging in philosophy to take seriously the challenge of being that free. I do think that the experience of that freedom can be terrifying sometimes because, as human beings, we are attached to our convictions, our opinions. They attach us not only to our sense of ourselves, but to other people as well. And so seriously questioning one's own deepest convictions can be very disorienting; it can even give a sense of danger that one may be risking relationships with people one

cares about if one ends up with a different view than one had before one started philosophizing, especially about ethical and political issues. But I also think that this sense of liberation from one's own context can be exhilarating. I don't think we can ever completely leave our own context, and that's part of my argument in the book.

We're always returning to where we began and trying to see it with fresh eyes. I think there is a way to reconcile our embeddedness in a context and in a world which matters to us, in which we have opinions and convictions that matter to us a great deal.

It's possible to look at those with the ideal of freedom and consider them and then return to them in ways that can rejuvenate them. If there are aspects that we really discern, we need to reject about our prior convictions and prejudices, that should be liberating and not depressing.



PK Regarding freedom: In your chapter titled “Freedom Under Fire,” you discuss Heidegger in terms of the cave-analogy. Leo Strauss has famously said that modernity is the second cave under the cave. In what way does Heidegger see our freedom as being under fire, is it similar to Strauss’s point? How would Plato respond to this argument?

GF Strauss’ point about modernity having dug a cave, even beneath the cave-floor of Plato’s allegory is really very interesting. I do think that Strauss has in mind the predicament that Heidegger presents us with. I’ll come back to that. But I think what Strauss meant by that was that for the Greeks, for Plato and Plato’s allegory of the cave, they, could really recognize the shadows of everyday experience as a normal aspect of political life, and that that was immediately tangible to them. Modernity, on the other hand, conceptualizes and theorizes and historicizes political life so radically that we’ve in fact lost touch with the phenomena of everyday political experience—what it means to be a social animal. For Strauss, we have to claw our way back just to the experience of what it means to be situated naively in one’s own historical, political, cultural context because we have mediated that so much with theories that no longer allow us to experience it directly.

To come back to Heidegger: I titled that chapter “Freedom Under Fire” for two reasons. One is because in the allegory of the cave, we, the prisoners in the cave,

are literally by the topography of the cave that Socratic depicts, *under* a fire behind and above us, a fire we can't see as projecting the shadows on the wall of the cave. How can we be free under the fire of the cave, which is what gives us the minimal illumination that we have to see even the shadows by? Can there be freedom there? That's part of Heidegger's question. What is the freedom of the cave? Is there freedom in the cave? How do we become free in the cave? That's a question for Socrates and Plato as well.

But this is where Heidegger and Plato diverge. And because they diverge, that's the other meaning of freedom under fire. Being under fire means you're under attack. Attack by an enemy. I do think that there is an attack that Heidegger is making against freedom as it has been understood, at least in the last several hundred years of the liberal Enlightenment. That's a very broad statement. The Enlightenment was many things, and liberalism was and is many things. But I think that's still the issue on the table: the nature of freedom and modernity. So, for Socrates in telling the story of the cave, freedom only happens when we're released from the chains. But it's not just the release from the chains that really makes us free because we're enormously disoriented once we lose those chains. We can't make out the shadows in the dark anymore. We're blinded by the light of the fire. We need a new orientation, and we need to climb out of the cave to see what the ultimate reality truly is. I think for Heidegger, there is no ultimate climbing out of the cave. Why? Because Heidegger rejects the platonic distinction between the eternal world of the ideas that are accessible to us through philosophy and the historical world of our opinions, our embeddedness in a particular culture and society that for the most part dominates us, but a world that we can transcend philosophically. Heidegger rejects that. He does not believe that there is a realm beyond history that we can achieve. His interpretation of the cave is not to free ourselves from our historical boundedness to a particular time and place, but instead to free ourselves from the average everyday lazy interpretation that we have of our historical situatedness, where we don't confront it, where we don't assess it for ourselves, where we don't make it our own. His understanding of liberation from the cave is as a way of being more authentically *situated* in the cave itself.

I think for somebody like Strauss—and I would agree with him on this—Heidegger effectively walls off the exit to the cave and leaves us there in our historical time, our historical place, without the possibility of true transcendence to something, some objective standard, that's beyond time and beyond history that we can use to evaluate our historical situation. So for Heidegger, the freedom within the cave is just to know and to authentically live within it and situate oneself inside it without using an external standard—whether eternal or natural—to justify it with.

For Heidegger, *nature* means something very specific. So, he would agree that there can be a natural standard, but not in the sense that nature has been used in the liberal Enlightenment by natural rights theories, where nature becomes something universal

that we can philosophize about and can apply to all human beings, where we all have natural rights or what in contemporary times we call human rights that transcend history and time and place. For Enlightenment, liberal thinking, again, speaking with a broad brush, if we have a natural right, then that right applies irrespective of culture, time, and place, even if people don't recognize it as such. Heidegger is rejecting that.

What does that mean? It means, yes, that the freedom we have is freedom to own up to the finite specificity of our worldly existence. What's natural about that is not something that unites all of humanity across time. Nature, for Heidegger, is about genuinely experiencing what history means for you in your time and your place and the tasks that your history presents you with in your time and place, and voluntarily taking those upon your shoulders rather than just being borne along by the current of what everyone else is doing; but there's no eternal external standard by which to judge the choices you make in that freedom.

Now, I think that's a very powerful argument.

PK Yes, I'm simultaneously compelled and repulsed by it.

GF Yeah, people do find it very attractive, and yet there is some profound danger to it.

PK Well, I'm just thinking of Heidegger's own history. On the one hand, there seems to be a certain impossibility about what Plato is calling for. But on the other, without it, you can situate yourself in such a way that Naziism becomes not only appealing but acceptable.

GF That is, in my view, the danger of this position, because it makes one's own historical situatedness an ultimate barrier to identification with all of humanity. That ends up leading into nationalism—if not worse.

Because one's most important commitments are historically bound, and there's no way for a very different culture with a very different history to share that, one can respect that other cultures, other nations, other peoples have their own histories and their own historical tasks to take up authentically. And what you don't want to do for Heidegger is fuse them all together into some mishmash where everyone then loses the singularity of their own historical traditions. But Heidegger is not merely some traditionalist. He's not calling for a return to the past. He's calling for taking one's own past really seriously, though, in terms of what it means for dealing with one's own present and the *future*, and to make the past questionable. But it's questionable in *your* way as a member of that tradition. And that's your obligation—to think *that* through.

PK I have one more question. In your concluding chapter, you discuss how a reconstructive view of history can help us to embody “polemical” ethics and lead to a new understanding of freedom. So, in the context of the present-day United States, how can a reconstructive view of our history elucidate polemical ethics and help us move forward as a people? What might that look like?

GF By “polemical ethics,” I do not mean a combative attitude that’s looking for fights, that’s trying to win at all costs. Here, I’m trying to think with Heidegger and Plato against the historically limited way that Heidegger thinks about political belonging. I think that Heidegger is right in saying that what it means to be human is to be polemical in his larger sense, which means to be confronted with one’s own history and to confront one’s own history and have to interpret it. We are necessarily embedded in the world that we’re born into, and that has to have an impact on us. There’s no getting around that. And all of us are confronted by that task in little ways and in big ways in our everyday life and in momentous decisions that we have. We’re informed by the past, we’re carried forward by the past. But if we don’t take seriously for ourselves what that past really means for us going forward into the future, we’re not taking ourselves seriously, and we’re not taking other people seriously. The polemical ethic is to take oneself, one’s history, and other people in the world around you—what they have to say, what they have to do—with utmost seriousness, and to be challenged by it and to challenge it.

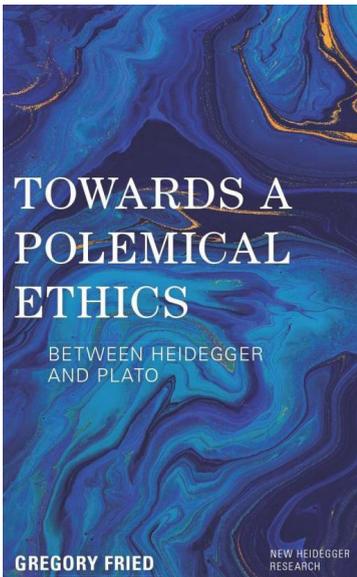
My difference with Heidegger is that I think he’s fundamentally wrong about denying need for transcendence beyond our own historical situatedness. I don’t think—and this is getting very complex, so I can only say a little bit about it, and the readers of this interview will have to read the book—I don’t think that Plato or Socrates believe that absolute transcendence from our finite situatedness is truly possible for human beings. I believe they both think we can get glimmers of what that might mean and have experiences of transcending our limited finite understanding of things and of coming to a new understanding of them. But I think for Plato and for Socrates, the philosophical life is a constant striving to seek that enlightenment: to try our utmost to transcend our historical circumstances, even knowing that we will ultimately fail. And that’s an ongoing struggle that makes life interesting but is also an ethical and political requirement on us. In our context, I think that we see this animated by the American experiment in liberal democracy, where the American experiment begins with these very high-flying words: We hold these truths to be self-evident that all men are created equal.

That’s an ideal standard for what you think of as human life—and also what society you think would be a good and decent one, and what government you think would be a legitimate one. Did America in 1776, at the time of the Declaration of Independence, or in 1789, when the constitution was adopted, embody those

ideals? Was reality in conformity with those ideals? Absolutely not. There was slavery, there was the subjugation of women. Even white men didn't have the vote because there were property requirements for having the vote. So, in what sense are all persons created equal if that's the world that we are inhabiting? An example of the "polemical" ethic is to confront the historical reality in which one lives and say: We have this ideal, we claim we're living by this ideal. What does that ideal truly mean? Have we misunderstood it? When it says *all men*, does it mean only *all white men*, or *all white men who own enough property*? Does it include the people of color who have been enslaved? We had a Civil War to try to resolve that question. Does *all men* mean *all males*, or does it include women?

The confrontation with our history tells us that women should have the vote and have equal rights under the constitution—that working itself out of what the ideal means requires that we transcend our time in order to understand the ideal more fully. If people couldn't do that, slavery would never have been challenged in the way it was by figures that I take as heroic and emblematic of this. And the one that I've chosen here to speak of is Frederick Douglass and others. But Douglas, in my view, is a paramount version of a modern American Platonist who confronts his lived situation and is faithful enough to the ideals of what that situation *ought* to be, what it *should* be, to try to rectify and change the lived world so it's a little bit closer to what that ideal, as best he understands it, requires. I think we're still fighting that fight. That's a summation in very broad strokes of what's going on in my book and why I think these issues are important.

PK Thank you for your time, Prof. Fried. It's been a pleasure.



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Professor Fried's book can be purchased on Amazon or from the publisher at <http://www.rowman.com>.