OPENNESS TO CONTINGENCY:
HUCKLEBERRY FINN
AND THE MORALITY OF PHRONESIS

Gerald Bruns’ book, Tragic Thoughts at the End of Philosophy: Language, Literature, and Ethical Theory, makes some compelling claims about the philosophical climate of our time. Drawing mainly on Stanley Cavell, but also on philosophers as diverse as Levinas, Nussbaum, and Gadamer, Bruns claims that we have indeed come to the “end of philosophy,” where the key questions of the day are not “What do we know and how do we know?”, but “How can we relate to things besides just knowing them?” (Bruns 14).¹ For Bruns, one of the pivotal thinkers to show how philosophy has moved beyond epistemology is Hans-Georg Gadamer, whose dialogical model of reading extols the value of openness. Bruns states that this openness is “not the open-mindedness of liberal pluralism,” but an “exposure to the other, in which our self-possession, or say our existence, is at stake” (195). This is reading “without epistemology”² — reading not for knowledge of a text, but as an act of self-questioning. In this model, understanding a text is more than just knowing what it says, it’s also knowing “what it asks of us” (196).

Though Gadamer isn’t primarily regarded as an ethical philosopher, his philosophical hermeneutics can have significant implications for ethical philosophy, as Bruns’ application of Gadamer demonstrates. Furthermore, Gadamer seems to invite such applications of his hermeneutics to ethics in his discussions of Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics, found in Truth and Method and elsewhere in his work.³ One of Gadamer’s most provocative uses of Aristotle is in his resurrection of the terms phronesis and techne.⁴ Phronesis can be translated as “practical wisdom” or “wisdom in action,” (Ostwald 312) and it designates behavior that is good in itself, means and ends undivided. Techne, on the other hand, is a term taken from the kind of knowledge artisans use to construct an object according to a predetermined plan. It designates an action that has a predetermined end in view — the means separated from the ends. With phronesis, a right-minded person will grasp the situation at hand and act in the right way, without any predetermined idea in mind, such as “Will this action pay-off for me?” or even, “Does this action correspond to what is right, categorically?” For Gadamer, the concept of phronesis is important for understanding interpretation as a complex task for which predetermined rules are never adequate. Similarly, for Aristotle the moral universe is
too complex to be navigated with preset rules; thus a "technical" morality will never be adequate to meet the most difficult moral challenges. For both Gadamer and Aristotle, the key to practical wisdom is openness. One must be open to the possibilities of the text, or to the person next to you, or to the difficulties of the situation at hand, if one is to adequately interpret the situation and decide what must be done. Where a morality of techne seals itself off in order to follow a set of rules, a morality of phronesis remains open to new, unthought of possibilities.

Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* keenly demonstrates the value of "practical wisdom." Twain's book fits well into the current philosophical mood when it comes to ethics, since much of the irony of the book rests on Huck's lack of a sense of epistemology. But, one of the problems that critics fall into, even ones who see the morality of Huck as intensely pragmatic, is that they tend to view Huck as an individual ego, hermetically sealed and shut off from others. They fail to see how Huck, in his pragmatics, his wisdom in action, remains open to the people and communities surrounding him. Only through this openness is Huck able to successfully navigate the muddy moral waters in which he finds himself. This study critiques, even as it adds to, the swollen body of work that claims to be moral or ethical criticism of *Huckleberry Finn*. By viewing Huck's moral decision-making through the lens of the Aristotelian ethical terms phronesis and techne (as appropriated by Gadamer's hermeneutics of openness), I will demonstrate that Huck's moral development is not compromised by the book's final sequence since a morality of phronesis allows one to remain open to others and is primarily directed toward specific situations, not towards any teleological goal of moral development.

**HUCK'S EARLY RELATIONSHIPS**

Many critics rightly point out the rather repressive environment in which Huck finds himself at the beginning of the novel. The widow and Miss Watson attempt to instill in Huck a dogmatic and technical morality and mythology.6 William Heath writes that Miss Watson and the widow "combine to inflict their insipid sanctity on Huck" (66), and James D. Wilson similarly comments that the Christianity of the widow and Miss Watson is an abstract moral code that Huck must come to reject (81). Wilson's description of the Christianity of Huck's guardians as an abstract moral code is perfectly suited to this discussion since it highlights the distinction between moral techne, which would adhere to pre-established codes, and phronesis, which is "direct-
ed towards the concrete situation” (Gadamer, *Truth* 21). The critical temptation is to see Huck as somehow inviolable, as above the squeamish moralism surrounding him, and as essentially morally superior to the widow and Miss Watson, since he sees through the dogma to the problems and inconsistencies of such morality. However, giving in to this temptation simplifies Huck’s character to an unrealistic extent. He does not completely reject the widow and Miss Watson’s Christianity, standing apart from it, inviolable. Instead, he is in conversation with both of them and their dogma throughout the novel, but especially when he is under their supervision at the beginning of the book.

The place where Huck most clearly does not stand completely apart from the doctrine of his two guardians, but instead engages it in a dialogue occurs when Miss Watson instructs Huck about prayer. Huck listens to Miss Watson and actually tries to pray; and even though it does not work to his satisfaction (“I got a fish-line, but no hooks” 15), he tries it again. He even re-engages Miss Watson in conversation about it by asking her to do his praying for him. Miss Watson is, of course, incredulous, but Huck does not yet discard the concept. He takes time to reflect further upon it: “I set down, one time, back in the woods, and had a long think about it” (16). He then seeks out the widow to get her views on the issue, and when the dust settles, he decides prayer can do little good for him, but that he will adopt the widow’s conception of Providence (16).

This sequence clearly demonstrates that Huck does not cut himself off from society completely, nor does he stand in resistance to all claims of society. Even when Huck does seem to stand in staunch resistance to the widow and Miss Watson’s teaching on heaven and hell, it is clear that he has to some extent accepted, or at least seriously considered, their views, since in chapter thirty-one, when Huck deliberates about Jim’s fate and his role in it, he seems quite concerned about Hell, a concept Miss Watson taught him in chapter one.

This passage on prayer and Providence also demonstrates Huck’s hermeneutics of practical wisdom. According to Gadamer, understanding is only possible through one’s openness to conversation, and one’s position of openness is a questioning position; and in Gadamer’s words, “the art of testing is the art of questioning” (*Truth* 367). Huck often questions those around him, and when Miss Watson propounds her abstract doctrine, Huck tests it by applying it to his concrete reality and finds it wanting. Practical wisdom requires actions that are good in themselves in the particular moment, but abstract doctrines don’t fit into Huck’s real-life needs. When the widow tries to persuade Huck that prayer still works, but only on the spiritual plane, Huck rejects prayer because it holds no advantage “except for the other people”
(16). At this point, Huck’s situation, or perhaps just his level of maturity, is such that the needs of others are not a concern for him; however, the needs of others will become a practical reality for Huck, and he will eventually become concerned for them. Interestingly enough, in the pivotal moment when Huck is considering the needs of Jim (the most important “other” for Huck), the concepts of prayer and Providence re-enter Huck’s mind (272). This demonstrates just how open Huck is to the discourse of the widow and Miss Watson; he has allowed their teachings to stay with him.

The dialectic of conversation is an important part of Gadamer’s hermeneutics. Openness to and in conversation is necessary for understanding to occur (and understanding entails interpretation and application). But, Gadamer writes that people do not so much “conduct” conversations as hey “fall into” them: “the partners conversing are far less the leaders of it [the conversation] than the led” (Truth 383). This is true in Huck’s case. One of the most interesting aspects of Huck as a character is his education in two antithetical doctrines: the widow and Miss Watson’s rigidly pious Christianity and Pap’s simple-minded hedonism. Readers can see a conversation between these doctrines working itself out in Huck’s practical behavior. He is, in a sense, being led by this conversation.

Huck’s practical, and ever-provisional, rejection of the widow and Miss Watson’s moral techne needs no further explanation; but Huck also gets involved in a dialogue with Pap, and in this conversation, Huck will discover Pap’s too technical morality and will provisionally reject it. I say “provisionally” because though Huck rejects his father forever, he seems to only provisionally reject his father’s morality. Like the widow’s ideas on prayer and Providence, Pap’s doctrines will remain with Huck throughout his adventure.

Wilson is right to say that “both abstractions, Christian piety and selfish hedonism, are too rigid, do not stand the test of human needs, and result in frustration and chaos” (83). However, Huck doesn’t leave Pap directly because of the bankruptcy of his moral code. Like he does with the widow and Miss Watson, Huck engages Pap’s lifestyle in conversation and practically adapts to his new environment to the extent that he can say, “It was pretty good times up in the woods there, take it all around” (34). The very next statement, though, discloses Huck’s reason for leaving that lifestyle behind: “But by-and-by Pap got too handy with his hick’ry, and I couldn’t stand it. I was all over welts” (34). For the practical sake of his well-being, Huck devises a way to escape Pap. But Pap’s morality remains a part of Huck’s moral being (or, in Aristotle’s terminology, “hexis”), as he continues in dialogue with it after he escapes. Eventually, Huck’s practical wisdom will overcome Pap’s doctrine of
selfishness and racial bigotry as Huck bonds with Jim.

Before considering Huck's relationship with Jim and its implications for Huck's morality, I should mention one more character who enters the novel between the widow and Pap to interpose his own abstract code and its resulting moral stance on Huck: Tom Sawyer. Judith Fetterly insightfully suggests that in *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Tom has a better *sense* of himself and society and what is morally good, but that in *Huckleberry Finn*, he is simply obsessed with being right (72). In *Huckleberry Finn*, Tom imposes abstract codes on himself and others, so that while in *Tom Sawyer* he makes all work into play, in *Huckleberry Finn* he converts all play into work (71). Huck, at the beginning, and probably also at the end of *Huckleberry Finn*, admires Tom, but he is also in dialogue with him. Though he rejects Tom's romanticism by saying, "It had all the marks of a Sunday School" (20), this is only a provisional rejection. Later on, when Huck escapes from Pap, he thinks about how Tom would have been useful in helping him escape: "I did wish Tom was there, I knowed he would take an interest in this kind of business, and throw in the fancy touches. Nobody could spread himself like Tom Sawyer in such a thing as that" (43). Huck maintains a conversation with Tom's more aesthetic, but still moral techné throughout his journey. And, of course, Tom will play a major role in the culmination of the novel at Phelps farm.

Even before Huck starts out on his raft, he has to navigate. The voices of Pap, the widow and Miss Watson, and even Tom are in constant dialogue within him and speak Huck into action as he employs practical wisdom. After Huck escapes Pap, he falls into another conversation and adds another voice to the mix, Jim's. Critics are right to note that Huck and Jim are not already best friends as their trip down river begins, and that Huck holds onto his racist attitudes for awhile. However, the temptation is to see Huck, through his relationship with Jim, as developing in a linear manner from racist to abolitionist, or at least to a non-racist. Huck's decision to free Jim and go to Hell himself, though, is arrived at through a complex web of experiences and conversations in which Huck finds himself involved. Huck imposes no moral teleology on himself (i.e. to be a good Christian or to be a more loving person), but it is tempting to place the teleology of becoming a non-racist on him, which would imply a kind of moral techné for Huck. Huck, though, continues to employ *phronesis* as he is ever concerned with the concrete situation, as his web of relations and conversations grows larger and more complex.

The concrete situation of the raft experience means that Huck must yield himself to Jim in order to engage him in conversation and thought so that they can successfully escape. Both of them need each other in a very practical
way. Thus, Jim’s voice, for Huck, gains a kind of practical primacy. However, the voices of Huck’s past still populate the raft, as seen when Huck and Jim discuss the ethics of borrowing. Once again, Huck is caught in a conversation within himself between the widow and Pap: “Pap always said it warn’t no harm to borrow things, if you was meaning to pay them back sometime, but the widow said it warn’t anything but a soft name for stealing, and no decent body would do it” (85). Jim, of course, finds a compromise that is directed toward the concrete situation (to borrow certain things and leave others), and Huck accepts it. These voices will remain within Huck throughout the novel.

The authoritative voices of Pap, the widow and Miss Watson, and even Tom continue down the river with Huck and Jim. The question thus becomes, “How does Huck come to subvert these voices when he decides to go to Hell rather than turn Jim in?” Another Aristotelian term, hexis, is needed to understand this situation. Hexas is described as one’s moral being or “characteristic attitude” (Ostwald 308), a “direction of will” (Truth 21) toward the good, which is established by phronesis and is constantly revised by one’s acts of practical wisdom, although one’s practical wisdom depends upon hexis for its general direction. Gadamer explains the relationship between phronesis and hexis by saying, “man becomes what he is [the “fixed demeanor” of hexis (Truth 312)] through what he does and how he behaves — i.e., he behaves in a certain way because of what he has become. When Huck begins his adventure on the river with Jim, his hexis has been established so that he views himself as superior to Jim. His direction of will toward the good could not include helping Jim to freedom since Jim is viewed as the widow’s property, and the good for Huck does not include stealing expensive property from the widow. However, faced with the concrete realities of the raft, Huck is forced to open himself up to Jim’s voice; the practical situation at hand allows Huck to engage in conversation with Jim through which Huck’s established values are challenged. As Huck sees Jim do intelligent things that are helpful (“he had an uncommon level head” 99), and even more, when Huck sees that Jim helps him out and cares for him and seeks a friendship with him (Jim calls Huck a friend a couple of times, but Huck never reciprocates that language), Huck’s hexis, his direction of will, is altered.

Through the phronesis Huck engages in with Jim on the river, Huck becomes open to Jim, and a bond is established so that Huck’s hexis is revised to lend credence to the idea of Jim’s worth as a friend instead of as the widow’s property. Therefore, when Huck is faced with the concrete situation of either turning Jim in or working for his freedom, Jim’s voice is included with the widow’s, and Jim’s wins out. The voices of the widow and Miss
Watson aren’t quoted by Huck during his dilemma, but they are evident as Huck deliberates on Providence, prayer, and Hell (272). Huck comes close to actually quoting Jim, though, so the primacy of Jim’s voice through the bond of friendship they’ve established is evident: “and [Jim] said I was the best friend old Jim ever had in the world, and the only one he’s got now” (273).

Obviously, Huck is not acting by moral techne. If that were the case, he would have decided to turn Jim in on the basis of Miss Watson’s commandment that stealing is always wrong. Or, he would have turned Jim in on the basis of Pap’s racial ideology or on the basis of his selfish hedonism, which would have ignored Jim’s desires but would have made things a lot easier for Huck. However, Huck employs phronesis which, in the practical situation, takes into account Jim’s suffering and his desires as a friend, as someone whose voice, to Huck, matters as a part of the community they have established. And as phronesis, Huck’s morality is left open to revision.

Viewing Huck’s morality as phronesis does not allow us to see this pivotal moment as Huck’s progression toward a more enlightened moral state, nor does it allow us to say Huck reaches his ethical climax at this point. Rather, it forces us to see that Huck is constantly making moral decisions while fully aware of the contingency of each situation. Implicitly then, Huck sees himself, as a moral agent, as contingent. This view of Huck is incompatible with those of critics who see him as developing an ability to see Jim (and by extension, all slaves) as a human being like himself, who is thereby deserving of equality and all the privileges Huck himself has, such as freedom. Kantian categorical reasoning has little to do with Huck’s ethical method. Indeed, an ethics of phronesis tends to render categorical imperatives impractical in the face of concrete reality. Kantian abstractions are the farthest things from Huck’s mind as he decides to help free Jim.

HUCK’S ARISTOCRATIC COMMUNITIES

It would be hard to argue that Huckleberry Finn is not a picaresque novel. However, in classifying the novel that way, the temptation is to create an overly simplistic binary relationship between Huck (the rebel) and society. But, though Huck is in many ways an outsider, he does not resist establishing himself within various communities. Huck is a loner at times, but he needs people too, and he is open to the voices of others. This realization is important in studying Huck’s moral decisions since his awareness of contingencies is bound up in his sense of his surrounding community.

At one point in Huck’s journey with Jim, he finds himself involved in
a community quite different from any he had previously experienced: the aristocratic Grangerfords. Huck seems to enjoy life in this community despite its eccentricities. He gets to flirt a bit with Miss Sophia, play with Buck, and even has a personal slave assigned to him (156). However, the Grangerfords represent the most extreme form of moral technē by upholding strict standards of behavior that few people understand, even those who are directly involved. This strict moral technē eventually leads to chaos and suffering, and Huck is forced to leave. Perhaps by making Buck similar in age, and by making their names so similar, Twain shows that Huck could have ended up like Buck if he had followed the path of moral technē rather than that of practical wisdom. Buck, of course, dies, leaving Huck to cry over him. The images of the disaster stemming from the Grangerfords’ and Shepherds’ moral technē haunt Huck as he admits, “lots of times I dream about them” (160).

The next community Huck and Jim find themselves a part of is also an aristocracy, though it is substantially different from the Grangerford type. The King and the Duke are not concerned at all with aristocratic codes of behavior. The moral technē the King and Duke adhere to is much like Pap’s hedonism. In many ways, though, the King and Duke are like Huck and Jim; both are basically outsiders who are drawn together out of necessity. And as he has with other communities, Huck will remain open to the voices in this one, and will make decisions based on how it will affect the community.

Ever practical, ever adaptable, Huck slides easily into his new role as a subject under the King and Duke. Huck is open to them and learns from them. Unlike his relationship with Jim, but like his relationships with the widow, Miss Watson, and Pap, the openness is not reciprocal with the King and Duke. Huck, right from the beginning, sees through their trickery, but through a moral sense that is directed toward the situation-at-hand, Huck is willing to go along with their plans. Huck’s thinking on how best to deal with the two frauds is seen when he says,

It didn’t take me long to make up my mind that these liars warn’t no kings nor dukes, at all, but just low-down humbugs and frauds. But I never said nothing, never let on; kept it to myself; it’s the best way; then you don’t have no quarrels, and don’t get into no trouble. If they wanted us to call them kings and dukes, I hadn’t no objections, long as it would keep peace in the family. (171)

James L. Kastely and Lee Clark Mitchell see Huck’s accommodation of the two frauds as stemming from a desire for “easiness,” or for peace and
the general welfare, respectively. I agree with these views; however, I want to emphasize the fact that Huck, as a part of the community, cannot ignore the claims made on him by members of the community. Huck’s practical wisdom depends on openness. Without openness, one cannot “see situations correctly” (Crisp, Introduction xxiv) in order to make the right decision in the particular, concrete situation.

Huck will continue to maintain this community and be open, and subject, to the voices of the King and Duke until others enter Huck’s community-space. Huck can abide the ruthlessness of the King and Duke as long as no one else is a part of his community, as long as no one else makes a claim on Huck so that he must listen to their voice. Of course, the Wilkes sisters change the structure of Huck’s community, and their collective voices (but especially Mary Jane’s) force him to make a moral choice that will eventually break his bond with the King and the Duke. This is evident when Huck says, “It made my eyes water a little, to remember her [Mary Jane] crying there all by herself in the night, and them devils laying there right under her own roof, shaming her and robbing her” (248). Surely, Huck was not altogether happy in his relationship with the King and Duke before they came upon the Wilkes sisters. However, Huck’s contingent sense of morality allows him to continue on until another voice makes a claim on him for action, and this is why Huck decides to expose the King and Duke.

THE PHELPS FARM, SHERBURN, AND THE UNDERTAKER

Besides debates over the censorship of Huckleberry Finn and over the propriety of teaching it in public schools, no other issue about the book has spawned as much controversy as the ending. Ernest Hemingway described the end of the novel as “cheating” (he seemed to be speaking aesthetically), while Lionel Trilling and T. S. Eliot saw “a certain formal aptness” to it. Leo Marx took the high ground by proclaiming that the ending is morally bankrupt, while James M. Cox argued that it is supremely moral. Numerous (almost innumerable) critics have sprung up to take sides and to slightly complicate these four basic positions about the ending. By examining Huck’s morality of practical wisdom, through which he demonstrates a continual understanding of the contingency of his moral decisions, and of himself as a moral agent, I argue that the ending if fitting in that it demonstrates Huck’s ability to navigate increasingly complex moral situations and to successfully mediate a multiplicity of competing voices, all of which make claims on Huck as a moral agent.
The concrete situation Huck must navigate at the Phelps farm is quite complex, more complex than any situation he has yet faced. He goes there to help Jim gain his freedom, but Tom’s appearance immediately complicates the situation. Not only must Huck, in remaining open to the voices of his surrounding community, take into account Tom’s voice, but he must also figure the Phelps into the equation as well. Each one of these voices demands something different from Huck: Tom wants Huck to follow him into romantic escapades and follow his rules, the Phelpses want him to behave properly, and Jim, of course, wants freedom.

The reintroduction of Tom Sawyer at this point in the novel seems to be Twain’s parting satirical shot at the insanity of placing such high value on abstract precepts that are obviously inadequate to address reality. In the terms of this study, Twain demonstrates the inadequacy of techne through Tom’s antics. Critics following Leo Marx see this as the most critical problem of the last chapters, in that by submitting to Tom’s (largely literary) authority, Huck implicates himself in the actions that unnecessarily extend Jim’s suffering. In this vein, Marx writes, “Most of those traits which made him [Huck] so appealing a hero now disappear” (296). Critics sometimes say Huck is subsumed by Tom, and Neil Schmitz asserts that Huck’s discourse is taken from him by Tom (68). In one of the more ingenious readings of the ending, Keith Opdahl argues that the ending is weaker because it, quantitatively, lacks the amount of first-person narration (the communication of Huck’s inner-life and feelings to the audience) that the first part of the novel has. Opdahl’s excellent observation is well-taken, but when viewing Huck’s morality through phronesis and Huck’s sense of contingency, Opdahl’s observations help strengthen my claims about the strength of the ending. Huck’s situation at the Phelps farm is so complex, and he has to navigate such a multiplicity of voices and demands, that he has much less room for himself and his own considerations. Huck does indeed get subsumed, but not just by Tom. Instead, his person is subsumed in the multiplicity of voices competing for his attention and action. Huck’s narration effectively realizes this, and therefore reflects the complex contingency of his situation. Hence, Huck does less communicating of his inner-feelings.

Tom H. Towers well describes the difficulty of Huck’s situation when he says that the last chapters demonstrate how decisively he [Huck] has entered the world of contingency and complication which for Huck, and Twain, is a hell far worse than the dreariest imaginings of Miss Watson. Nor
can Tom be held finally responsible for the events of the last chapters. He is merely the personification of the trouble that Huck has chosen. Even if Tom had not re-entered the story, and even if Huck had freed Jim from the Phelps farm as easily as he might have, the pursuit of the slave-hunters would be renewed; and as the Phelps chapters suggest, that pursuit would be more dangerous than before. And, with or without Tom, Phelps’ advertising of Jim’s — and Huck’s — secret. [...] It is not even the case that Tom’s desire for intrigue mesmerizes Huck to the peril of this character. Tom’s romancing is just another trouble Huck must deal with. Since Tom knows both Huck’s and Jim’s secrets, Huck must first placate him and in the end take him along. (35)

Towers’ explanation of this scene is excellent for demonstrating the complexity of the predicament Huck and Jim face. I only want to modify slightly the way Towers characterizes Huck’s view of Tom. Huck does not just “deal with” Tom’s romancing on his way to setting Jim free his own way; instead, Huck maintains a sincere and open communication with Tom, just as he has with the other characters, and he takes Tom’s views seriously. In fact, he admires Tom immensely. Thus, if Huck listens seriously to people he doesn’t admire, like Pap and Miss Watson, how much more consideration will he give to Tom’s perspective? Of course, this is not to say that Huck is completely submissive to Tom. He continually questions him on the practicality of his plans and occasionally makes an outright suggestion. Thus, he is able to navigate Tom’s voice of mostly literary authority, while also heeding Jim’s need for freedom. It seems that the third voice of this community, the Phelps’s voice, is often least heeded by Huck. However, Huck periodically mentions Aunt Sally’s possible consternation over their activities to Tom (303). Huck’s openness to Aunt Sally is most clearly seen, though, when she talks to Huck after Tom has been shot, and trusts him to stay in his room through the night, even though he desires to be with Jim and Tom. Huck listens to her and decides to stay in his room: “Laws knows I wanted to go, bad enough, to see about Tom, and was all intending to go; but after that [Aunt Sally’s admonition] I wouldn’t a went, not for kingdoms” (351).

By maintaining a basic relational openness to those surrounding him, and employing a morality that is based on what is contingent and on the concrete situation instead of abstractions, Huck successfully navigates an extremely complex situation at the Phelps farm. One could question whether
or not Huck would have been successful had Jim not already been free, but
such questions are ultimately moot since Tom’s behavior would have been dif-
f erent, and Huck’s actions, through practical wisdom, would always adapt to
the situation.

The Phelps farm section concludes the novel with Huck’s greatest
moral accomplishment. If anything about the last chapters is “cheating,” it is
the last paragraph in which Huck sets out alone for the Territory. Like Michael
Boughn, I too read “deep sadness” in Huck’s decision to head for the Territory
(46). It seems like a rejection of community, with all its attendant moral com-
plexities, that Huck has so well learned to navigate. And since Huck’s moral-
ity based on contingency implies an understanding of the self that only exists
as contingent, his rejection of community “means rejecting some possibility
of a further self” (Boughn 46). Phronesis is about possibility. Where techne
must fit all moral situations into some predetermined plan of behavior or set
of precepts, phronesis allows for infinite possibility — Huck leaves much of
that behind, it seems, to live apart from community in the Territory.

One the other hand, after all Huck has been through, perhaps the idea
of a temporary vacation (a getting away from one’s usual community) is not a
bad one. For, even with his escape to the Territory, I do not want to place Huck
in the same category as Sherburn, the loner who Twain handles rather ambiva-
lently. Even though Sherburn looks Boggs straight in the eyes when he shoots
him, and even though he looks the community straight on when he calls them
cowards, at bottom, Sherburn is the novel’s greatest coward, morally, when
viewed through the lens of phronesis. Sherburn stands alone with his moral
precepts of manhood which only serve to isolate him from the community. He
is, perhaps, afraid of the complicated moral contingencies that life in a com-
community entails. For Sherburn, it is easier to stand on his porch and preach a
stern message than it is to navigate the demands of life with others.

Huck, though, is no Sherburn. Instead, he is more comparable to the
undertaker he witnesses at Mr. Wilkes’s funeral. Huck, in admiration,
describes the undertaker in action:

When the place was packed full, the undertaker slid around in
his black gloves with his softly soothing ways, putting on
the last touches, and getting people and things all ship-shape
and comfortable, and making no more sound than a cat. He
never spoke; he moved people around, he squeezed in late
ones, he opened up passage-ways, and done it all with nods,
and signs with his hands. Then he took his place over against
Huck, like the undertaker, is also quite stealthy. He has a knack for accomplishing what he needs to without anyone noticing and getting his way while still keeping everyone happy. But the key moment for the undertaker comes when a dog gets hold of a rat during the service and causes not a little commotion. The undertaker, quite unobtrusively, and effectively, takes care of the problem and satisfies the people’s curiosity by notifying everyone of the source of the noise: “He had a rat!” the undertaker explains. There is no book of etiquette that outlines the proper behavior for such a situation; no techne would be adequate to what the undertaker accomplishes. Huck praises his handling of the situation: “You could see it was a great satisfaction to the people, because naturally they wanted to know. A little thing like that don’t cost nothing, and it’s just the little things that makes a man to be looked up to and liked. There warn’t no more popular man in town than what the undertaker was” (237). And, in the end, Huck is popular as well. He has maintained community, kept himself open to many voices and many possibilities, and he has helped a friend in need of his help. Quite an accomplishment for an adolescent boy!

Paul Ricoeur has written that “Few ideas today are as healthy and as liberating as the idea that there is a practical reason but not a science of practice” (199). Ricoeur argues that a healthy understanding of morality realizes that action is governed by what is plausible, not by what is demanded. Huck’s is a practical ethics, an ethics of phronesis, of possibility. By giving us Huck, Twain has given his readers a breath of fresh air; for in our time as in his, there are pressures that work to force us into narrower visions of morality, narrower views of what is possible. We need art and criticism of art that helps us realize that few things are actually ever demanded of us, that there is no “science of practice,” but that the ethical universe is always full of possibilities, if we only have the courage, like Huck, to open ourselves up to them.

NOTES

1 The questions in quotation marks are not quoted from Bruns, but are paraphrases of the kinds of issues Bruns raises on page 14 of his book.

1 I take the phrase “without epistemology” from the title of chapter eight of Bruns’ book: “Wallace Stevens without Epistemology.”

1 Outside of Truth and Method, Gadamer speaks of Aristotle in an essay entitled “Aristotle and Imperative Ethics,” which can be found in

Gadamer’s discussion of phronesis and techne can be found, primarily, in Truth and Method, pp. 312-324. Other helpful explanations of phronesis and techne can be found in Martin Ostwald’s glossary in his translation of Nicomachean Ethics, as well as in Roger Crisp’s introduction to his translation of Nicomachean Ethics. David Haney’s article, “Aesthetics and Ethics in Gadamer, Levinas, and Romanticism: Problems of Phronesis and Techne,” published in the January 1999 PMLA, is an excellent resource for understanding these terms in relation to literature and literary theory.

Scott Carpenter argues that “The beginning of Huckleberry Finn […] establishes meaning in a form one might refer to as myth; the general movement, however, as the novel and narrator free themselves from their past, sanctions a systematic undercutting of this form of communication. “demythifying” the world by a constant refusal to interpret or to impute transcendental meaning to the concrete” (211).

Gadamer says, “Understanding here is always application” (Truth 309). This, to me, makes the hermeneutic enterprise an ethical enterprise; however, Gadamer does not explicitly promote such an idea.

Huck shows in chapter thirty-two, right after he has made his moral decision not to turn Jim in, that he is still a racist when Aunt Sally asks him, “anybody hurt?” and Huck replies, “No’m. Killed a n——r” (281).

This reciprocal relationship, as I have outlined it, is indeed circular. The question of how one begins to interpret, so as to partially break this circle, is explained by Gadamer in many places and is entailed in his discussion of the hermeneutic circle, history, tradition, and prejudice. Discussion of these things here, though, would involve too much time and space. For a good introduction to Gadamer’s thought on this problem, see Truth and Method, 266-71.

Carol Freedman’s article is a brilliant analysis of Huck’s decision to try and free Jim in terms of Kantian ethics. Though Freedman’s thesis makes good sense in its own context of studies of Kant’s ethics, it makes less sense in terms of direct criticism of Huck Finn. Refer to note 5 above to see that Huck hasn’t come to any categorical conclusion about slaves. “The Morality of Huck Finn.” Philosophy and Literature 21.1 (1997): 102-13.

See Kastely, 155, and Mitchell, 85.

This is an oft-quoted phrase from Hemingway. I have lifted it out of Gerald Graff and James Phelan, “The Controversy over the Ending: Did Mark Twain Sell Jim down the River?" Adventures of Huckleberry Finn: A Case Study in Critical Controversy. New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 1995. 279-84.
The quote from Hemingway can be found on pp. 279-80.

12 See Lionel Trilling, 285, and Eliot, passim.

17 Thomas Pribek is one critic who says this, although he puts a different spin on it, contra Marx. He argues that Huck’s subsumption by Tom is evidence of a more positive kind of social and moral development (68).

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