



GADAMER'S PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS ON EDUCATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine philosophical hermeneutics as a referent for language learning concepts. This study seeks to explicate a descriptive set of principles based on Hans Georg Gadamer's theory of interpretation that has the potential for developing dispositions necessary for understanding. Central among these are the concepts of forestructure, prejudice, temporal distance, history of effect, dialogue, writing, tradition, virtue and culture all of which constitute part of the whole of the hermeneutic circle as envisaged by Gadamer. As such, Gadamer's hermeneutics is contrasted with Cartesian epistemology and its primacy of method, the Enlightenment's prejudice against prejudice, the modernist/progressive tendency to consider all situations as problems to be solved by relegating all forms of knowledge to techné, and the subjective nature of interpretation inherent in a hermeneutics of suspicion. While he did not write extensively on the subject of education, Gadamer is credited with developing a hermeneutics not as an attempt to prescribe a method or set of methods for understanding but to discover what is common to all modes of understanding and to show that understanding is never a subjective relation to a given 'object' but to the history of its effect.

Key Words: Gadamer, education, understanding.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study is to examine philosophical hermeneutics as a referent for language learning concepts. This study seeks to explicate a descriptive set of principles based on Hans Georg Gadamer's theory of interpretation that has the potential for developing dispositions necessary for understanding. Central among these are the concepts of forestructure, prejudice, temporal distance, history of effect, dialogue, writing, tradition, virtue and culture all of which constitute part of the whole of the hermeneutic circle as envisaged by Gadamer. As such, Gadamer's hermeneutics is contrasted with Cartesian epistemology and its primacy of method, the Enlightenment's prejudice against prejudice, the modernist/progressive tendency to consider all situations as problems to be solved by relegating all forms of knowledge to techné, and the subjective nature of interpretation inherent in a hermeneutics of suspicion. While he did not write extensively on the subject of education, Gadamer is credited with developing a hermeneutics not as an attempt to prescribe a method or set of methods for understanding but to discover what is common to all modes of understanding and to show that understanding is never a subjective relation to a given 'object' but to the history of its effect; in other words, understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood.

FORESTRUCTURES

According to Gadamer, Heidegger's *Being and Time* provides the hermeneut with a circle of understanding that is comprised of working out a series of fore-structures (fore-having, fore-sight, and fore-conception) in an attempt to project a meaning for a given text. Furthermore, understanding is possible only when these fore-structures are not arbitrary but rather considered in light of the things themselves. Gadamer is explicit in suggesting that what is constitutive to the art of understanding involves not a subjugation of these particular fore-structure rather a hermeneutic consciousness that remains open to the meaning of the other. Of course, this does not mean that when we listen to someone or read a book we must forget all our fore-meanings concerning the content and all our own ideas. All that is asked is that we remain open to the meaning of the other person or text. But this openness always includes our situating the other meaning in relation to the



whole of our own meanings or ourselves in relation to it...this kind of sensitivity involves neither neutrality with respect to content nor the extinction of one's self, but the foregrounding and appropriation of one's own fore-meanings and prejudices. The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and assert its own truth against one's own fore-meanings.

HISTORICAL HORIZONS

In explaining the history of effect as it relates to a fusion of horizons, Gadamer (1977) further distinguishes his notion of understanding predicated on a dialogical interchange between the past and the present: Understanding tradition undoubtedly requires a historical horizon then. For what do we mean by transposing ourselves? Certainly not just disregarding ourselves. This is necessary insofar as we must imagine the other situation. But into this other situation we must bring, precisely, ourselves. Transposing ourselves consists neither in the empathy of one individual for another nor in subordinating another person to our own standards; rather it always involves rising to a higher universality that overcomes not only our own particularity but also that of the other. To acquire a horizon means that one learns to look beyond what is close at hand- not in order to look away from it, but to see it better, within a larger whole and in truer proportion. The horizon of the present cannot be formed without the past. Rather understanding is always the fusion of these horizons supposedly existing by themselves. The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension (between horizons) by attempting a naïve assimilation of the two but in consciously bringing it out.

Gadamer next addresses the concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) for the philosophical hermeneut. He contends that self knowledge cannot be separated from experience as in the case of knowing how to do for oneself. The latter form of reasoning is predicated on a teleological view of experience that concerns itself with the knowledge to be gained through a confirmable event. Gadamer favors a dialectic of experience that has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself. In describing the dispositions characteristic of the experienced person, Gadamer writes that the consummation of his experience, the perfection that we call being experienced, does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them.

Gadamer's hermeneutics considers understanding as capable of being enlarged into different understandings, not necessarily superior or better, than those inherited from the horizon of tradition. Such a perspective is predicated on the aforementioned Gadamerian notions of experience and questioning, both of which seek to retain an open dialectic that does not admit of routine or foreclosure. Philosophical hermeneutics additionally permits a reconsideration of these assessments in light of its insistence on an inseparable relation between understanding and application.

LISTENING AND DIALOGUE

For Gadamer, what hermeneutics means is understanding (*das Verstehen*). What anyone is attempting to do in the hermeneutical situation is to understand the other, to understand the text. In this attempt to understand, one is trying to come to an understanding with the other. Gadamer offers us the model of the dialogue. A basic presupposition of the dialogue, within which we attempt to come to an understanding, is a good will toward the other. In the essay, "Text and Interpretation," Gadamer (Palmer, 2007: 172) writes: "Thus for a written conversation basically the same fundamental condition obtains as for an oral exchange. Both partners must have the good will to try to understand one another", which calls humility.

Genuine listening or careful reading asks that we let the text or our partner in dialogue speak to us and possibly correct us. Gadamer clearly sees trust, humility, modesty, fidelity, and carefulness as the hermeneutic virtues. At the core of this is what Donald Davidson calls "the principle of charity"(1980) and Jonathan Lear, "the principle of humanity."(2006:4) Virtues are appropriate of a discipline; principles, of a method. Recall the concluding line of Truth and Method (2006): what method cannot achieve, discipline (or a habit of mind) can provide—a warrant for truth.



Gadamer develops his account of the interpretation of a text on the model of a dialogue or conversation between two speakers. There is a limit to the way a text can act as a partner in a dialogue. As Plato has Socrates point out in *Phaedrus* 275D, texts quite literally say the same thing over and over again. It is with regard to the written text (and not the dialogical partner of oral speech) that Gadamer advocates the submission/service/subordination of the reader to the text. For example, in "Text and Interpretation," Gadamer writes, with regard to the interpretation of written texts, that the interpreter has no other function than to disappear completely into the achievement of full harmony in understanding. The discourse of the interpreter is therefore not itself a text; rather it serves a text (Michelfelder & Palmer, 1989: 41). There is no intention [in the interpretation of texts] to place the realization of the text aside from the text itself. On the contrary, the ultimate ideal of appropriateness seems to be total self-effacement because the meaning [Verständnis] of the text has become self-evident.

Focusing less on the prejudice structures inherent in understanding and considering that the goal of dialogue, for Gadamer, is to reach an understanding that centers less on asserting one's point of view and more on individual transformation, he contends that the personal growth is at the center of the dialogical interplay as well as development of the cognition and understanding.

TEXT AND WRITING

As noted earlier in this paper, the center of Gadamer's hermeneutics is an account of understanding (Verstehen) according to which we attempt to come to an understanding (Verständigung) with the other, be it a text or a dialogical partner. In addition to Plato, there is a second moment in the history of philosophy for which irony is extremely important and which is also important for Gadamer—the moment of German romanticism, especially the work of Friedrich Schlegel. It is telling that one of F. Schlegel's most important writings on irony is entitled: "Über die Unverständlichkeit"—literally, "On Nonunderstandability" or, as it has been translated, "On Incomprehensibility." In short, what makes a text incomprehensible for Schlegel is irony. How does a Gadamerian hermeneutic withstand the challenge of irony and the hermeneutics of German romanticism?

We need to unmask the text, to find the deeper meaning behind the surface meaning. This seems very like the hermeneutical task that psychoanalysis and the critique of ideology set for themselves. Gadamer is here acknowledging the importance of this question when he writes that this presents one of the most difficult hermeneutic problems. We might be led to think that if the text does not say what it means, that we need to concern ourselves with what the author or speaker ironically means—that is, that the intention of the author would become primary in this context. Gadamer insists 1) that such texts are the exception (Ausnahmefall), and 2) that the key to the unmasking irony can be understood only by someone who shares his knowledge of the subject matter. He reiterates his claim that artistic irony can be understood by someone who shares his knowledge of the subject matter.

Texts are meant for readers who do not share the same lived context with the author. It is this not being a part of the immediate lived experience of the reader that constitutes a text for Gadamer and why he rejects notes, letters, transcribed conversations, or tape recordings as genuine texts. A challenge for the written text is to provide, to some degree, its own context. What people take the primacy of the spoken to mean for Gadamer is the primacy of lived experience that has linguistic, nonlinguistic, and pre-linguistic aspects and this primacy points to the central significance, again, of *die Sache*, the matter at hand, for language and lived experience are always of something. Here we see the "phenomenological" side of Gadamer's hermeneutics. In his later work Gadamer is much concerned with the limits of language and the limits of understanding. For him, this concern for limits is simply the other side of the concern for the conditions of understanding, which is closely tied to language and which predominates in *Truth and Method* (1989).

The text, which is simply linguistic—that is, words on a page—may evoke lived experience and the limits of speech and understanding through words. We see the priority of the spoken even for the text that is not derived from the spoken, as Gadamer develops his account of the text by discussing the text's "ideality" and



the reader's "inner ear" (Palmer, 2007:145). The text prescribes how it is to be read. In this reading, though it be silent, we hear it in our "inner ear."

For Gadamer, what is spoken and not written is not a form of writing. What is written is not necessarily a text. Gadamer, in contrast to Derrida, does give a certain kind of priority to spoken discourse; but the highest form of writing, that is, the texts of literature and poetry, prescribe what is to be said and are not derivative from spoken discourse. For Gadamer, as we have seen, the priority of the spoken does not mean that a text is derived from or refers back to spoken speech; rather it refers forward to repetition in speech, if only for the inner ear. This kind of priority Derrida does not consider.

TRUTH

Gadamer's definition of truth is not scientific, but humanistic. It is not the traditional Western "correspondence theory of truth," which means that an objective statement corresponds correctly to a public fact, or the "pragmatic theory of truth," that whatever works is true. No, the ideals of the ancients, of Plato and Aristotle, echo in Gadamer's thinking. Gadamer speaks of the striking truth, the radiance of art shining forth in the work of poetry or visual art or the persuasiveness of poetic truth because it appeals to what we all recognize to be true. The truth of a tragic play, for instance, is one experienced so that afterward, one says, "So true!" Gadamer's concept goes back to Plato, where truth is closely associated with what is right and also with beauty. When one lives truthfully or in truth, one lives up to being a father, a son, a wife, or a minister of the state. It is a truth that grows out of the social fabric of the tradition, a truth that one "recognizes" as true.

TEXTUAL CONTEMPORANEITY

The German word *Zeitlichkeit* in Gadamer refers to the fact that a text of poetry or of philosophy or a great work of art speaks as vividly and compellingly today as when it was created—if it is truly poetry, truly philosophy, or truly art. This is almost magical. It overcomes time! The work can be written or created 2,500 years ago or only five hundred or a hundred years ago, but it is as relevant now as it was then, if it is humanly true in the deeper sense of truth. If it is a "classic," its truth shines through and has been confirmed over and over in our experience of it. This is the reason it is so important to preserve the great works of art, poetry, philosophy, and religion of the past. This is something Gadamer worked on for his whole life. This is the significance and importance of *Bildung*, of culture. In his education to prepare a perfect Gentleman and civil servant, education trains a person not only in mathematics and logic, but also in the arts and poetry, in history, in literature. This is the fabric that humanizes and creates the Gentleman.

PHRONESIS ("PRACTICAL WISDOM" IN GREEK)

The term *phronesis* in Aristotle's ethics refers to the ability of a person to make wise judgments in practical, personal, and political matters. Gadamer takes this term from Aristotle and integrates it into his hermeneutical theory. In the case of *phronesis*, for both Gadamer and Aristotle, one's understanding and judgment are part of the social fabric, the fabric of tradition. These are at work in wise and personal judgments as well as in the decisions one makes in public life. For Gadamer, it is in the context of the social–historical–linguistic fabric of one's life (one's *wirkungsgeschichtliches Bewusstsein* or "historically effected consciousness") that one makes wise judgments. The parallel in the Confucian tradition is the Gentleman (*junzi*) who thinks and lives well. Of course, the Gentleman has a piety for his parents and ancestors that is deeper than that of Gadamer for his familial and philosophical forebearers, a piety that is expressed in ritual sincerely practiced. But Gadamer's respect for culture, tradition, and authority sets him apart from most other Western philosophers.

APPLICATION

Application is one of the most central concepts in Gadamer's hermeneutical philosophy. For him, in contrast to many others in the hermeneutical tradition, to understand a text is not just to know what it means; rather, it is to grasp how it would apply today and in one's own personal life and understanding. Here Gadamer draws upon the tradition of Western law, where one not only has a set of rules and prescriptions, or a constitution



and set of laws, but also needs to see how these rules would apply to the current situation. In religious texts, also, one needs to see what their relevance and application would be to one's own life and situation. It is not enough just to see that the Good Samaritan cares for the man in trouble beside the road, while the Priest and the Levite have walked past him on the other side of the road; one needs to grasp what this means for how one personally lives now in relation to those who are currently our neighbors and are in need of help. But Gadamer is not satisfied to limit applicatio to either interpreting the body of law in legal judgments or with the practical interpretation of scripture, sometimes called "the proclamation of theWord." No, he elevates applicatio to a general principle of all understanding! To truly understand a text is to see its application, its context, and direction of meaning; it is to get the point (Palmer, 2006: 85).

TRADITION

Tradition in Gadamer's German is *Überlieferung*—that is, that which is "handed down," or handed over to us, but which nevertheless has to be made alive and meaningful today through interpretation. Gadamer is skeptical of claims made during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment period that tradition is a dogma that must be transcended and overcome by reason. Palmer (2006) uses a consciousness in which history is always at work, which other translators are satisfied to translate it as a historically effected consciousness. In any case, for Gadamer's hermeneutics, to understand anything is already to have a pre-understanding of the topic involved, of the language, of the question involved. All of these are shaped by the historical situation in which one finds oneself. Some translators call this phenomenon the historicity of understanding. In short, the consciousness in which we understand what we understand is already pre-shaped by history. This means we cannot escape from a prior understanding, which Gadamer provocatively calls people's prejudice. Gadamer even defends prejudice as he understands it as necessary and in many cases fruitful. He puts a positive spin on certain prejudices, but not on racial, cultural, or religious prejudices. One should certainly try to become aware of one's prejudices and to purge those that are undesirable. On the other hand, one can never purge oneself of one's language, which has certain ways of seeing built into it, nor can one purge oneself of the historical moment and place in which one finds oneself, and these influence the way one understands and interprets a text or an utterance. This is what Gadamer calls the historically effective consciousness. One should not purge oneself of one's tradition but rather become conscious of its positive and negative sides, and try to overcome the undesirable prior beliefs.

CONVERSATION, DIALOGUE

Conversation or dialogue is a central element in Gadamer's hermeneutics. This emphasis comes out of Gadamer's studies of the dialogues of Plato, where he became an expert. As he learned from them, Socrates always assumed as part of his dialogic method that the other person could be right [Greek: *eumeneis elenchoi*]; in dialogue he saw himself and the other person engaged in a common quest for truth. This assumption created a hermeneutical openness to the other person. In the outstanding recent book on Gadamer by James Risser, *Hermeneutics* is the "art of listening" to the voice of the other, the art of hearing the voice of the text in a deep and dialogical way (Palmer, 2006). He places a high value on tradition; both emphasize the importance of virtue, culture, and poetry; and both value harmony and balance in social life.

Gadamer believes that language is by nature the language of conversation. Three central themes that a hermeneutic analysis of questioning offers education are what Bingham (2005:27) calls 'non-superficiality', 'pedagogical humility', and 'circuitry'. As Gadamer put it during his interchange with Habermas around the scope of hermeneutics, there is no societal reality, with all its concrete forces, that does not bring itself to representation in a consciousness that is linguistically articulated. Reality does not happen behind the back of language ... reality happens precisely within language'. Gadamer explains the circuitry of the questioning process as follows: To understand a question means to ask it. To understand meaning is to understand it as the answer to a question. In other words, the process of questioning, once begun by a person in a particular situation, requires that the recipient of the question must walk in the shoes of the questioner, must experience the questioner's particular situation. The one-questioned must do more than simply acquire a questioner's humility; she must also acquire the particular humility that the questioner used to pose the question in a



particular way. The one-questioned needs to be able to think through the question from the questioner's position, or, in other words, she must be in a position to pose the same question in the same way.

As is seen above, there is no simple definition for hermeneutics. Broadly speaking, hermeneutics is a philosophical mode of thought. In a more general definition, hermeneutics is regarded as the art of philosophy of interpretation and understanding. Likewise, Dostal (2002: 81) defines hermeneutics as a historical circle in which our understanding is oriented by the effective history or history of influences of that which we are trying to understand. Hermeneutics then claims that the meaning of a text is richer than the content the author intended, while deconstruction says meaning is indeterminate and beyond authorial control. An easy example for hermeneutics may be this: The Ancient Greek Philosopher Aristotle's in his "Poetica" explained the rules of 'Tragedies' how to be written. But most of the pages about comedies in his book are lost. By applying hermeneutics here, we must think about Aristotle's personality and thoughts and subsequently write like Aristoteles in such a way that what he must have said about "comedy". Therefore, it would not be surprisingly to say that hermeneutics includes traces which give evidence of a former influence of something. Because of this, hermeneutics is a footprint which is left by the text to the reader.

In short, establishing the principles of historical effect, temporal distance, prejudice, and forestructures then is integral to the development of a hermeneutic consciousness and these same principles allow Gadamer to expound on a series of topics, namely the priority of the question, the meaning of experience, and the idea of application even in the field of language learning where it is indispensable for teachers to establish a good rapport with students to help them proceed from the already acquired experiences to the new ones, apply the new language items to the personal life experiences and practice vigorously.

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