

Humanities Education and Gadamer: Three Clarifications

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In this sensitive and beautifully written paper, Dale Brown analyzes Gadamer's hermeneutics to argue that humanities texts "have truths that speak to those who engage with them." These truths are not canonical claims that we blindly accept. Rather, they pose "perennial questions of human experience." Engaging in a "dialectic of question and answer" with humanities texts, individuals can "expand their horizon of understanding" and "increase their sense of belonging in the world." Brown concludes that the transformative potential of humanities education is especially important for incarcerated students, "whose sense of belonging in the world has been unnecessarily restricted."¹

Brown makes a convincing argument that humanities education enriches students' lives, and that it therefore is both practical and necessary. Sharing examples of his own engagements with texts, Brown invites us to experience for ourselves how humanities education can clarify our self-understanding and also deepen our understanding of life's meaning.

But while Brown's paper is illuminating, it nonetheless misrepresents Gadamer's views concerning (1) humanities texts; (2) interpretive agency; and (3) the kind of transformation that humanities education makes possible. In the spirit of enhancing this fine paper, I would like to clarify how Gadamer conceptualizes these three phenomena.

To begin, it is helpful to recall Gadamer's key idea: understanding is not simply one possible behavior that humans can choose to enact. Nor is understanding necessarily an epistemological achievement. Fundamentally, understanding is ontological, insofar as, it is endemic to human existence. By virtue of being human in a meaningful world, we always and necessarily are engaged in understanding our situation and ourselves.

As a way of being in the world, understanding is embedded in experience. Unless we live through an event or encounter, we cannot understand it.

“You had to be there,” we sometimes say. “You have to go through this in order to get it.” The death of a loved one; the birth of children; falling in love: these experiences exemplify the kind of “lived” understanding Gadamer has in mind.

We don’t experience life all at once. Rather we live over time. Time consists of a past that once was a future; the future, in turn, is made possible by a past that precedes it and that also is carried forward as the future unfolds. The relationship between the future and the past is circular. The meaning of the past influences how we understand the future, even as understanding the future reframes past understanding. The circular dynamic flow of time makes it possible for us to understand life’s meaning.

Two points about lived understanding are important. First, life is not an object that subjects confront. We cannot divorce ourselves from our temporal existence in order to understand it from afar in the way that a craftsman inspects his material. Lived understanding instead expresses how we are *present* for life, how we care about and are involved with people and things.

Second, insofar as we always are engaged in understanding our world, we cannot help but draw on our assumptions—for instance, our prejudices—to make sense of our situation. Pre-understandings are not obstacles to future understanding. On the contrary: without pre-conceptions, we would have no basis on which to construe anything.

These two features of lived understanding pose a dilemma. If we cannot escape our situation, and if pre-understandings always are operating, how can we understand that which is different or new? When we read a text, for example, it seems that we cannot avoid projecting our assumptions onto the material. Understanding consequently remains self-referential; we thus miss or misconstrue what *the text* has to say.

Gadamer counters that we need not remain trapped within our interpretive lenses; it *is* possible to recognize when a text’s meaning defies our expectations. For this to happen, however, we must become conscious of the prejudices that inform our reading. “The important thing,” Gadamer writes, “is to be aware of one’s own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its

otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own foremeanings."²²

We do not become conscious of our prejudices by making them objects for self-reflection. Rather we become conscious of our prejudices when something or someone interrupts and negates them. Following Hegel, Gadamer says that when understanding is negated, it reverses direction and turns back on itself. This reversal is catalytic: it wakes us up to preconceptions we had not previously noticed. Waking up is not strictly intellectual: it is an experience that *affects* us. Living through this negative experience, the individual acquires "a new horizon within which something can become an experience for him."²³

Gadamer calls challenging experiences of awakening, "being pulled up short."²⁴ Because being pulled up short alerts us to differences between our initial understanding of a text and the text's meaning, we might conclude that this experience distances us from texts. We might further conclude that distancing is necessary if we are to respect the fact that a text does not simply echo what we think.

Gadamer concurs that a text's meaning is not subject to our appropriation, prediction, or control. But the difference between our perspective and that of a text does not distance us from texts. Putting distance between our perspective and that of a text prevents the text from *affecting* us. Our assumptions thereby remain protected and unchanged.

To acknowledge the difference between our perspective and that of a text, Gadamer says that we must allow texts to question and possibly refute our beliefs. Allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to a text's challenge, we do not regard the text as a distant "other" whose different perspective has no impact on our understanding. We rather regard the text as a "Thou," which "asserts its own rights and requires absolute recognition."²⁵

Our task, Gadamer concludes, is to acknowledge that the text's perspective differs from our own and to remain open to the possibility that this difference will pull us up short. Being open to such negative experience is hard. "Openness to the other," Gadamer writes, "involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces

me to do so.”²⁶ But allowing ourselves to be pulled up short makes it possible to fathom meanings we could not imagine on our own. Our understanding consequently is furthered as we come to appreciate “other, more universal points of view.”²⁷

How does Gadamer’s conceptualization of humanities texts, interpretive agency, and transformation differ from Brown’s description of these phenomena? First, following Deresiewicz, Brown likens humanities texts to mirrors that help us see our nature anew. Gadamer concurs that humanities texts can help us understand ourselves differently. But self-understanding that is genuinely new negates how we currently see ourselves. Insofar as engaging with texts initiates this negative experience, a text is not a mirror that enables self-reflection. Texts instead are partners in a moral relationship. We regard the text as a Thou, which exerts its own meaning in a way that exposes our blind-spots.

Second, Brown suggests that reading humanities texts enables interpreters to create meaning and invent themselves. Gadamer concurs that interpretation requires agency. But interpretive agency for Gadamer is not constructivist. To be an agent, rather, is to choose to be open and vulnerable, to risk acknowledging our lack of control and the limits of our productive capacity. Humanities education thus does not foster mastery. Instead, it helps students recognize and accept their finitude.

Finally, Brown conceptualizes the transformative potential of humanities education in additive terms. Specifically, humanities education expands our horizons of understanding, allows us to access a broader view of our being in the world, and makes it possible for us to be more than we are now. Gadamer agrees that humanities education can and should broaden our horizons. But the broadening of horizons is not strictly expansive. Horizons cannot widen, Gadamer argues, without first being challenged; transformation is an experience of expansion *and* negation. “What is at issue here,” Gadamer writes, “is that when something other or different is understood, then we must also concede something—yield, in certain limits—to the truth of the other. That is the essence, the soul of my hermeneutics: To understand someone else is to see the justice, the truth of their position. And that is what transforms us.”²⁸ The transformative

potential of humanities education thus consists in the fact that it is uniquely suited to help students embrace being pulled up short as a learning opportunity.

I'm not sure Gadamer's ideas about texts, interpreters, and transformation will make humanities education any more palatable to Brown's colleagues. People don't like to be challenged and reminded of their limits. Nonetheless, these lessons are needed today more than ever. I hope my comments strengthen Brown's argument for the urgency of humanities education.

REFERENCES

- 1 Dale Brown, "A Gadamerian Defense of the Use of Transformative Humanities Literature in Higher Education," *Philosophy of Education* 79, no. 1.
- 2 Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd ed. (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 282.
- 3 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 362.
- 4 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 280.
- 5 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, xxxii.
- 6 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 369.
- 7 Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 16.
- 8 Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, eds., *Hans-Georg Gadamer On Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 152.