

Understanding as Self-Understanding: Recovering the Question

Walter Okshevsky

Memorial University of Newfoundland

What man needs is not just the persistent posing of ultimate questions, but the sense of what is feasible, what is possible, what is correct, here and now.¹

There is much in Deborah Kerdeman's very fine essay that is of utmost importance for educators to reflect upon. I believe we are in her debt for her efforts to interpret Gadamer's phenomenological ontology of hermeneutic understanding for us and for her ability to clarify some of the significance of Gadamer's work for our own present and future pedagogical practices. I find it somewhat difficult to know where to begin and what to focus on in this short space — especially so given that, by my count, her paper explicitly raises 35 questions! But this is, of course, as it should be for the nature of the question, the disposition for engaging in the distinct and very difficult activity of genuine questioning is at the heart of Gadamer's inquiries into what it is to understand the world and ourselves as interpreting beings.

I would like to begin by saying something about the boy in this story. Something happened to the boy at music camp. What happened? I admit it is difficult to say with confidence given that the boy utters only 68 words in the story and we find out very little about himself and his circumstances. Hence, the boy is not a simple text to read. But if what happened is what I think happened, then I am afraid it would be overly optimistic to reply: "Life happened to the boy." For many of us, life does not "happen" — ever. For many of us, fate, or our preparation for it, just does not deliver to us the kind of event or encounter that I think this boy has experienced. For many of us, there is just no time between birth and death at which life descends upon us in all its force and majesty and addresses us in our singular naked particularity, leaving our sense of our own being, our relations with others, and our orientation towards and within the world profoundly transformed. For this boy, to this boy, life happened in the shape of music. He has experienced music and he has become significantly more experienced in its light. More importantly, pedagogically and existentially, this life-encounter has left him with a deeper openness to the possibility *for* experiencing. His given, found self, as if suffering from a very common form of illness, has undergone a significant moment of negation; his condition-in-the-world has made a turn for the better. Gadamer writes: "[E]xperience is initially always experience of negation: something is not what we supposed it to be.... We know better now" (*TM*, 354). Being descended upon by music — or, in another form, by philosophy — is an event which, like falling in love with a person, experiencing the tragic loss of a friend or relative, experiencing the birth of one's child, or hearing the call to a particular vocation, transcends our ordinary mundane notion of experience together with its more technical variants in much of the history of academic philosophy. To experience, in this latter sense, is to experience something already discrete and individuated. There is a beginning and an end to each experience and one experience homogeneously follows another in a linear sequence. The experience here is defined by a metaphysics of the object as simply present. But the

boy's experience of playing first chair was an experience not of an object but of an event. Here, the event as that which "has been," is "now over" but may be replicated at will by oneself and others "yet again," has no place. It is rather the kind of event one experiences as a "seizing of the moment," although one recognizes that it is actually one's own self that is being seized. It is not the kind of moment or time that one can ever "get over" because the involved negation of self generates as well an affirmation of a self forever transformed — now with a deeper capacity for a certain kind of openness-for/towards a world and oneself. Its origins are always mysterious. For while it arises from somewhere we have not yet been, we are left with the sense that something within us has already prepared us for its possibility. And this leaves us with a certain orientation towards the future — one structured by a sense of an "always already not yet." We come to be granted a new horizon of/for understanding. Its effect typically counter-point our relationship with the community of our birth and our socialization into its traditions, even while we may recognize an autobiographical debt to a community we have never ourselves chosen and can no longer participate in as before.² For this ability-to-be-influenced, the boy should be grateful to his unchosen community.

Kerdeman very sensitively draws out the lived-character of "experience" that Gadamer articulates in his account of the distinctive hermeneutic sense of understanding. Experience in this sense always involves a moment of negation; it brings about a "reversal of consciousness," in Hegel's words.³ It is no doubt initially a disorienting experience because disorientation is itself a structural moment of the event. It affects and reconstitutes our basic understanding not only of the familiar and the strange, but of what is real, essential, and necessary to ourselves and what is really only contingent, apparent, and adventitious despite its many years of pretending to a claim on us. But, as I am reading the event here, there is nothing in itself tragic in this dialectical experience. The boy's experience, we can say, is essentially Socratic; it is disclosive of a horizon of meaning and further possibilities he had already been anticipating, projecting-upon without any knowledge or cognition of it as a plan of action or end to be attained.

Being educators, I think we all understand quite clearly that making life happen for a person, trying to coax fate itself to bring about an existential overwhelming, creating opportunities for a dialectical negation of self and a disorientation of self from the given natal ties of an unchosen community, is the constellating aim of any teacher who is engaged in the practice of liberal education rather than in the business of car maintenance. Music camp was not only spiders and snakes, burgers and videos, the orchestra and its rehearsals, the evening dances and afternoon swimming. It was most probably also a teacher who (led) let the boy (to) play Holszt's "Planets," first chair, in all its profound vastness and majestic beauty. Placing a person in the way of a possible experience promising to negate one's received self is the heart of the Socratic task to which we as teachers are indebted and accountable at any given moment in our professional practice. And it is of course through such pedagogical events, through success and failure, that we ourselves learn the most.⁴

But it is one thing to recognize with Henry Adams that "A teacher affects eternity," and quite another to identify the "tools, techniques, and hardware" for the

attainment of that knowledge, technical expertise, and support which meaningful teaching and learning requires. Kerdeman's question regarding what it is to understand opens up and calls into question the currently pervasive pre-judgment or prejudice that knowledge or information and technical competence are in themselves sufficient here. In my mind, to believe that this is so is to be as innocent of the educational requisites for the task as are those members of the boy's community whose idle chatter is unable to comprehend "what has come over that boy." In both cases, we encounter an entire skein of pre-judgments or prejudices which structure horizontally our very orientation and attunement to the question.

Kerdeman very appropriately draws our attention to the "where," the place we inhabit — out of which we know, act, experience and understand.⁵ For it is as a place *from* which we speak and question that our prejudices fashion for us our horizons of possibility and define how we find ourselves in relation to a question. Gadamer writes:

[A] person who is called experienced...is...open to new experiences.... [T]he experienced person proves to be...someone who is radically undogmatic; 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. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience [Offenheit fuer Erfahrung] itself that is made possible by experience itself [die durch die Erfahrung selbst freigespielt wird] (*TM*, 355).

If there is something we are to do or attempt in order that our own understanding come to share something of the character of an event, then a condition of the required "expertise" must take the form of what Gadamer calls a "hermeneutically trained mind" — a "methodologically conscious understanding" (*TM*, 299, 269). For Gadamer, this refers to an attunement to or disposition for thematizing or "foregrounding" those prejudices that position us to believe that we already understand, know the right answer. Some prejudices are not fruitful ones; they lead us to occlude the dialectical character of the question as an event for understanding: "Foregrounding a prejudice clearly requires suspending its validity for us. For as long as our mind is influenced by a prejudice, we do not consider it a judgment.... But all suspension of judgments and hence, a fortiori, of prejudices, has the logical structure of a question" (*TM*, 299).⁶ Something has to provoke this suspension, to generate that dialectical movement of negation which enables a question to be authentically raised by and for a person and which bears the possibility of transforming understanding into a more consciously aware self-understanding or disposition.⁷ If we are to do anything to encourage such a possibility/openness, if we are to secure the "human resources" required for this, then developing a "hermeneutically trained mind" may just be the way to go. For our boy in this story, a dialectical encounter with a text called "Planets," perhaps orchestrated by a very special kind of teacher, moved him along his way.

1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d ed., trans. and rev. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1993), 354. This book will be cited as *TM* in the text for all subsequent references.

2. For a view on personal individuation as a movement toward “strong poetry” and the poet’s relations to a chosen and unchosen community, see Richard Rorty, “The Contingency of Selfhood” in *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

3. For the form of the dialectical journey of the mind/spirit see G.W.F. Hegel, “Preface and Introduction to the *Phenomenology of Mind*,” in *Hegel: Selections*, ed. Jacob Loewenberg (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1957).

4. Remembering though, with Heidegger, that “[I]n teaching, it is always the teacher who learns the most.” I have since lost the reference to this quotation.

5. Charles Taylor provides a fine rendering of this “whereness” of the self with which I believe Gadamer and Kerdeman would concur: “To know who I am is a species of knowing where I stand. My identity is defined by the commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, or valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose. In other words, it is the horizon within which I am capable of taking a stand.” *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 27.

6. Gadamer may well charge my reading of his hermeneutic theory with the same kind of “lack of hermeneutical awareness” that he ascribes to Heidegger’s reading of certain texts (*TM*, 501). For I am perhaps one-sidedly centering on Gadamer’s acknowledgment of our individual human capacities for volitional and rational agency that are able to “break with tradition, to criticize and dissolve it” (*TM*, xxxvii) and thus downplaying the conservative-romantic side of Gadamer’s account expressed in such claims as “[T]radition has a justification that is outside the arguments of reason and in large measure determines our institutions and our attitudes” (*TM*, 249) and “What a man has to learn through suffering is not this or that particular thing, but insight into the limitations of humanity, into the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine” (*TM*, 357; also 276 and 301). I read such claims as part of Gadamer’s agenda on human finitude: providing an account that “limits the position of the philosopher in the modern world” and shows that “[t]he philosopher, of all people, must, I think, be aware of the tension between what he claims to achieve and the reality in which he finds himself” (*TM*, xxxviii). I think Gadamer has Heidegger particularly in mind here — a philosopher who Gadamer believes “would probably feel a lack of ultimate radicality in the conclusions I draw” (*TM*, xxxvii). For Gadamer’s account of the similarities and differences between his own account of hermeneutic understanding and Heidegger’s transcendental project in *Being and Time*, see *TM*, xxi, xxviii, 259-71, 501. But Hegel, too, is being implicitly targeted for his faith in the powers of reason to formulate universal principles in its struggle to “get out of the unbroken immediacy of naive psychical life” and “to work up simply to the thought of the subject-matter in general, not forgetting at the same time to give reasons for supporting it or refuting it, to apprehend the concrete riches and fullness contained in its various determinate qualities, and to know how to furnish a coherent, orderly account of it and a responsible judgment upon it”; Hegel, “Preface,” 4.

7. As Aristotle puts it: “For we aim not to know what courage is but to be courageous, not to know what justice is but to be just, just as we aim to be healthy rather than to know what health is, and to be in a good condition rather than to know what good condition is.” Quotation from Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* I.5 (1216b22-25) in Martha C. Nussbaum, *The Therapy of Desire: Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 59. Gadamer’s recourse to Aristotle’s conception of phronesis and application in developing the character of the non-objective and non-technical relationship between interpreter and text is central for comprehending Gadamer’s seminal idea that “understanding belongs to the being of that which is understood” (*TM*, xxxi). See esp. *TM*, 295, 309-22 and “Hermeneutics as a Theoretical and Practical Task” in Gadamer, *Reason in the Age of Science*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1981).