Hearing the Other's Voice: How Gadamer's Fusion of Horizons and Open-ended Understanding Respects the Other and Puts Oneself in Question

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Although Gadamer has been criticized, on the one hand, for being a 'traditionalist' and on the other, for embracing relativism, I argue that his approach to knowing, being, and being-in-the world offers contemporary theorists a third way, which is both historically attuned and able to address significant social and ethical questions. If my argument holds, then we ought to give Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics a fair hearing, as its import and application can be expanded and employed for contemporary ethical and sociopolitical purposes.[1] In section one I discuss key features of Gadamer's hermeneutics broadly construed, commenting on partial incommensurability, horizon-fusing, and—via dialogue with Charles Taylor's essay—Gadamer's notion of dialogical, open-ended understanding. Next, I explain Gadamer's complex account of experience, comparing and contrasting it with Hegel's account. In section two I continue my analysis of Gadamer's understanding of a fusion of horizons and provide several musical analogies to further explicate key aspects of this concept. Throughout my essay I highlight how his philosophical hermeneutics and dialogical model of understanding not only emphasizes but also embraces our finitude and thus our *partial* claims on knowledge. Given his stress on our ontological and epistemological limitations, his model requires that in our quest to understand the other—whether a live dialogue partner or a text—we must continually put ourselves in question. In other words, Gadamerian dialogue necessitates a willingness and openness to hearing the other's 'voice' in a

reharmonized key and to creating a new language together. Lastly, in the final section I present a brief analysis of Gadamer's interpretation of Plato's doctrine of the forms. Having sketched the broad contours of my essay, I turn now to examine Gadamer's model of dialogical understanding and partial knowledge.

I. Partial Incommensurability, Dialogical Understanding, and the Surprise of 'Negative' Experience

The socio-political consequences of embracing absolute incommensurability across historical epochs would be far worse than accepting a partial incommensurability in which we acknowledge our attempts to understand the other through our own conceptual, historically conditioned grid. Stated more starkly, with absolute incommensurability, the other is completely unintelligible. Consequently, I am forever hermetically sealed and unable to genuinely identify, respect, or sympathize with, much less learn from and understand the other. Whereas in accepting partial incommensurability, although I must start with my own presuppositions as well as my particular linguistic and cultural inheritances—or as Gadamer calls these various conditionings, 'prejudices' (pre-judgments)—I am not trapped by the historically formed grid through which I see and navigate the world. Rather, to use Gadamer's terminology, the horizon I bring to the text (or other) is fluid and mutable. As I engage a text, a fusion of horizons can occur in which the horizon of the text calls me qua interpreter into question. If I choose to listen and to hear what the other has to say, I may realize that my present horizon must be altered in order to incorporate my expanded understanding of the other's culture, history, current social plight, and so forth. I shall take up this topic in more detail below; however, before discussing Gadamer's notion of horizon-fusing, I begin with an extended prelude facilitated by Charles Taylor's essay, 'Gadamer on the Human Sciences.'

Taylor begins by highlighting the presumption that has characterized the West in its engagement with other cultures. 'The great challenge of the coming century, […] is that of understanding the other. The days are long gone when Europeans and

other 'Westerners' could consider their experience and culture as the norm toward which the whole of humanity was headed' (Taylor 2002, 126). As the seeds of the (rationalistic) Enlightenment-model of knowledge were planted and continued to spread their roots and extend their branches, it became axiomatic that knowledge of science be characterized by 'pure' objectivity and that it produce certainty in its possessors. Yet, the twentieth century's recognition of a 'necessary modesty' in relation to its knowledge claims of the other seemed to land us in a no-win dilemma: either we accept ethnocentrism and remain cut off from the other, or we accept relativism and forfeit all objectivity (Taylor 2002, 126). Gadamer's model, however, takes us through this seeming impasse and calls into question many of the Enlightenment-inspired notions that have shaped the epistemology of natural science and its attempt to colonize the social or human sciences.

In his magnum opus, *Truth and Method*, 'Gadamer shows how understanding a text or event, which comes to us through our own history or horizon, ought to be construed, not on the model of the 'scientific' grasp of an object, but rather on that of speech-partners who come to an understanding (*Verständigung*)' (Taylor 2002, 126). In light of Gadamer's influence and the potential for further development of his project, Taylor devotes significant space to explicating Gadamer's model, which he describes as 'coming to an understanding with an interlocutor,' vis-à-vis the scientific model of 'knowing an object' (Taylor 2002, 127). In contrast with the latter method, Gadamer argues for a model of understanding through dialogue with the other where the *modus operandi* is question and answer. As Taylor explains, Gadamer's approach is characterized by three features: (1) bilateralism, (2) party-dependence, and (3) an openness to goal-revision.

First, the other, which includes texts, is not a silent 'object' to be mastered; hence, it is characterized by bilateralism as opposed to unilateralism. For example, in knowing a tree as object, I do not have to consider its view of me. The knowledge encounter is unilateral. I dictate the rules of the knowing activity, and there is little to challenge me by way of a genuine other as to whether or not my understanding is distortive. By contrast, in a bilateral exchange both the text and other are given a

voice; here the text 'talks' back and can put the interpreter into question, thus challenging her prejudices and horizon and opening up possibilities for self-transformation.

Second, Gadamer's view of coming to an understanding is party-dependent. Grasping this aspect of his model also helps us to see the different goals associated with the two approaches to knowing. For example, in knowing an object, 'I conceive the goal of knowledge as attaining some finally adequate explanatory language, which can make sense of the object, and will exclude all future surprises' (Taylor 2002, 127). In other words, the goal is to 'attain full intellectual control over the object, such that it can no longer 'talk back' and surprise me' (Taylor 2002, 127). In contrast, when I come to an understanding of some text or some individual, this kind of supposed finality is not possible. For instance, when I understand something about Martin Luther King Jr.'s 1963 'Letter from a Birmingham Jail' or some religious practice in Russian culture, these understandings are achieved through specific dialogue partners (textual or actual). However, when I discuss Dr. King's letter or enter a conversation about Russian religious practices with an interlocutor or with different interpretative communities, new understandings surface given the fusion of my horizon with theirs. For example, a conversation with a Black Nationalist, who, while respecting King, is critical of his method of non-violent active resistance and advocates in certain severe situations the use of force for emancipatory purposes, may alert me to shortcomings in King's approach. I may continue, however, to believe in the ethical merits of King's non-violent strategies to effect social reform, and yet by genuinely listening to my dialogue partner's perspective, my own horizon has been enriched and broadened. What I formerly saw as simply a 'wrong' strategy on the part of the Black Nationalist is now understood as more intelligible, even if I disagree with such an approach in the end. Stated differently, I am now able to see the Black Nationalist's strategy as a legitimate and ethically valid possibility, even if I am more persuaded by King's strategy.

In the aforementioned example, we get a glimpse of the dynamism of interpretative horizons, and the third key feature of Gadamer's model: openness to

goal-revision. In stark contrast with scientific knowing and its attendant goal of 'attain[ing] full intellectual control over the object,' the goal of coming to an understanding is decidedly *not* control (Taylor 2002, 127). That is, my present horizon (and my interlocutor's as well) is in no way fixed; rather, it remains open and fluid, changing and expanding with each new dialogical engagement (if, of course, I choose to remain open). By choosing to enter such dialogues, we allow our own understandings to be questioned and our most cherished beliefs to be challenged and broadened. Thus, unlike scientific knowing and its desire to master or control the other, the aim of coming to an understanding is 'to function together with the partner, and this means listening as well as talking, and hence may require that I redefine what I am aiming at' (Taylor 2002, 128).

As one may expect, philosophers and theorists in support of the scientific model and its supposed 'pure' objectivity have challenged Gadamer's dialogical model of understanding. More specifically, critics claim that the three features outlined above cannot be aspects of genuine science or knowledge. If, for example, party-dependence and openness to goal-revision characterize our understandings, then they lose their status as knowledge (Taylor 2002, 128). Gadamer's response is to reject the claim knowledge pertaining to the human sciences *can* be attained on the scientific model where the goal is full intellectual control over the object.

An important component of Gadamer's argument is found in his discussion of experience in *Truth and Method*. On his account, experience in general is a process that is essentially negative. By 'negative,' he means that our expectations of what something is or means are regularly disappointed and disconfirmed.[2] As Gadamer explains, experience 'cannot be described simply as the unbroken generation of typical universals. Rather, this generation takes place as false generalizations are continually refuted by experience and what was regarded as typical is shown not to be so' (Gadamer 2004, 353). In other words, when we are surprised, begin to see things from a new perspective, and come to know them with more clarity, then we experience what experience *is*. 'Thus the negativity of experience has a curiously productive meaning' (Gadamer 2004, 353). Here it is not merely that we correct our

false beliefs—although that does occur—rather, we gain a new, improved, and enlarged understanding. We do not 'have an experience of any object at random, but it must be of such a nature that we gain better knowledge through it, not only of itself, but of what we thought we knew before—i.e., of a universal' (Gadamer 2004, 353). In other words, what had functioned for us as a fixed universal—for example, our concept of an acceptable religious practice or what we understand 'race' and 'gender' to be—now, as a result of our dialogical encounter, has been revised; consequently, the former limits of our hermeneutical horizon have been expanded and our concepts not only altered but enriched.

Gadamer is *not* denying that our experience of history leads to (historical) knowledge. However, as Joel Weinsheimer observes (and Taylor echoes this thought in his essay), Gadamer's account of experience as ongoing process challenges the typical conception of experience ending in (static) knowledge and thus emphasizing result, closure, and, effectively, the end of experience (Weinsheimer 1985, 202). The theory of induction is an example of experience conceived as 'result.' For example, I look for patterns in my experience that produce the same results. When I do x, y results. From various similar experiences, I abstract a general concept that now applies to *all* such experiences. Thus, the need for further experiences of this kind is eliminated. Weinsheimer puts it nicely, '[i]nductive experience is fulfilled in the knowledge of the concept—which, in both senses, is the end of experience. Thus, in the teleological view, experience finds its fulfillment in its extinction.' Moreover, on this view, confirmation becomes 'the primary and most important aspect of experience. The process of experience is essentially an experience of repetition and the identity of experiences (Weinsheimer 1985, 202).

Instead of making confirmation the focal point of experience, Gadamer highlights the disappointments and disconfirmations of experience (which is not to exclude the role of confirmation) in order to foreground how 'the negativity of experience has a curiously productive meaning' (Gadamer 2004, 353). Appropriating Hegel's insight, Gadamer views hermeneutical experience and experience generally speaking as dialectical, consisting of the working out and ongoing harmonization of

identity and difference. Thus, experience involves an element of the new rather than a mere accumulation of past repetitions. For Hegel, experience is 'skepticism in action,' as it has the potential to alter 'one's whole knowledge' (Gadamer 2004, 353). To be sure, confirmation is part of the nature of experience; thus, repetition is not disregarded completely. However, paradoxically, once repetition and confirmation occur, the experience is no longer new (Gadamer 2004, 353). 'We can now predict what was previously unexpected. The same thing cannot again become a new experience for us; only something different and unexpected can provide someone who has experience with a new one' (Gadamer 2004, 353). Hegel identified this reversal of the experiencing consciousness as a dialectical structure in the nature of experience itself. As Gadamer explains, when a person becomes 'experienced,' he has 'become of aware of his experience'; '[h]e has acquired a new horizon within which something can become an experience for him' (Gadamer 2004, 354).

Up to this point, Gadamer agrees with Hegel's account. However, he rejects emphatically Hegel's idea that 'conscious experience should lead to a self-knowledge that no longer has anything other than or alien to itself' (Gadamer 2004, 355). For Hegel, the goal of experience is knowledge, and 'his criterion of experience is self-knowledge. That is why the dialectic of experience must end in that overcoming of all experience which is attained in absolute knowledge—i.e., in the complete identity of consciousness and object' (Gadamer 2004, 355). In stark contrast, for Gadamer experience does *not* find its consummation in something that finalizes, overcomes, or annuls it. Consequently, Gadamer parts ways with Hegel's account of history as a dialectical movement leading inevitably to the 'absolute self-consciousness of philosophy,' and concludes that it 'does not do justice to hermeneutical consciousness' (Gadamer 2004, 355). Experience (in the Gadamerian sense) and knowledge-as-staticized-finality stand opposed to one another. 'The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience' (Gadamer 2004, 355). For Gadamer, then, the experienced person 'has become so not only *through* experiences,' but because she has acquired the habit of continual openness to new experiences (Gadamer 2004, 355). The perfection of experience, moreover, has

nothing to do with complete knowledge or knowing more or better than another. Rather, Gadamer's notion of an 'experienced person' is one 'who is radically undogmatic' owing to his multiple and surprise-filled experiences and the knowledge gained therein. Such a person '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 that is made possible by experience itself (Gadamer 2004, 355).

Gadamer's account helps us to understand experience both phenomenologically and existentially. Phenomenologically, he helps us to been understand the structure of experience *qua* experience. Existentially, his analyses are deeply attuned to our human condition as historical, finite beings. None of us are exempt from experience; all of us must acquire experience, which involves necessarily having our expectations upset, overturned, and unsettled (Gadamer 2004, 356). Gadamer's 'negative' understanding of experience—as is hopefully clear by now—should not be interpreted as a pessimistic outlook on life; rather, he brings to our attention the fact that experience and growth by way of experience involve an openness to ongoing confrontations, challenges, and a genuine questioning of our own assumptions and beliefs. When confronted with new information about a person or event, or when we are able to genuinely 'see' an issue or subject matter from a different perspective, we simultaneously put ourselves at risk. That is, we allow questions to be put to *us*, questions that can expose our own false biases and misguided assumptions.[3] Putting ourselves at risk in this way means that we are open to exposure, open to considering what it means, for example, that we characterize certain ethnic groups or individuals as more dangerous, deviant, or criminally disposed than others. The realization that we have been operating under distorted and false assumptions, and the uprooting and relinquishing of our former beliefs, is, though necessary, often unpleasant and painful. Our horizons and hence our identities (given the constitutive character of horizons) must be revised. However, our willingness to make such revisions has the potential to make us better human beings. Personally, we come to recognize our own epistemological limitations. Communally,

our relations with others are enriched as we gain a more accurate and true understanding of our both our differences and similarities. Having this genuine understanding of the other—even if the knowledge is partial and open to revision—creates the conditions for the possibility of respecting, rather than merely tolerating the other.

Gadamer continues his discussion of experience through an interesting connection with Aeschylus. On Gadamer's reading, Aeschylus's use of the phrase, *pathei mathos* ('learning through experience') signals his recognition of an essential feature of the structure of experience. Like Gadamer, Aeschylus does not claim merely that through suffering we learn to correct our misguided and false views. Rather, his insight is that through suffering we come to see 'the limitations of humanity,' and begin to realize the 'barrier that separates man from the divine. It is ultimately a religious insight' (Gadamer 2004, 357). Thus, once again genuine experience is experience of our finitude and historicity. The experienced person comes to see herself for what she is—limited, subject to time, subject to change, subject to uncertainty. She has come to realize the wisdom in cultivating an attitude of openness to the other, which involves a willingness to listen to the other's perspective not once but again and again. She also comes to see that being 'perfectly experienced' in no way spells the end of experience and thus the acquisition of a superior or higher form of knowledge (as Hegel might say), 'but that for the first time experience fully and truly is. In it all dogmatism, which proceeds from the soaring desires of the human heart, reaches an absolute barrier. Experience teaches us to acknowledge the real' (Gadamer 2004, 357). And for him, to acknowledge the real involves coming to terms with our limitations, failures, and partial claims on knowledge.

Given Gadamer's embrace of human finitude, the attempt to transcend human experience based on the scientific model of knowledge is both foolish and impossible. Because we are historical, finite beings, we must take seriously the role of culture in shaping and influencing human life and thought. Here again Taylor helps us to grasp how Gadamer, who, unlike many modern and postmodern thinkers does

not reject *tout court* premodern insights concerning ethics and metaphysics, nor does he simply embrace them uncritically. Rather, he allows ancient thinkers to speak and appropriates accordingly those insights that still shine forth as true. One could, in fact, one dominant strain in Gadamer's project as a critical reworking of Aristotelian ethics and Platonic metaphysics (i.e. Plato's doctrine of the forms). Yet, given his emphasis on our finitude and historical conditioning, Gadamer also takes serious the insights of Hegel, Heidegger, and other modern philosophers. Below I sketch how one might begin to develop and expand Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, informed by these diverse ancient and modern sources, to address and better explicate human *being* (i.e., non-staticized *identity*) as it unfolds historically in all its diversity (i.e., difference).

Analogous to the open-enededness and flexible ontology that texts possess—an ontology that allows for multiple, legitimate interpretations—so too our social identities or subjectivities are porous and open-ended. That is, our identities are neither fixed nor completely in flux; rather, they are simultaneously constructed and yet able to maintain the stability necessary for our personal and communal being-in-the-world. Ontologically speaking, one might describe a Gadamerian account of human being as a description of human ontology consisting of the unfolding of identity-in-difference in time. On the identity side, so to speak, this account affirms some common human nature or non-constructed capacities essential to humans *qua* humans (e.g. rational and volitional capacities or the capacity for empathy and compassion). On the difference side, these capacities are, as Taylor explains, 'always and everywhere mediated in human life through culture, self-understanding, and language. These not only show an extraordinary variety in human history, but they are clearly fields of potentially endless innovation' (Taylor 2002, 129). To put it provocatively, our common being is the condition for the possibility of our becoming and our becoming is a manifestation of our being.

As feminist philosophers and philosophers of race have brought to our attention, there have been numerous misguided philosophical and 'scientific' narratives claiming to have identified a fixed, essential nature of women and people

of African descent.[4] Given such narratives and the harm they have caused, one can understand why (post)moderns are by and large skeptical and suspicious of a philosophical anthropology that appeals to rigidly fixed essences. However, if we adopt a Gadamerian-hermeneutical approach, we can (and should) acknowledge and reject the errors of oppressive essentialism and yet remain open to an ontological account of human beings that both affirms such shared, non-constructed capacities and our historical conditioning. If we are able to finesse a mediating position, the potential gains for defending human rights, social justice, and emancipatory struggles ought to motivate us to rethink our own (post)modern prejudices and approach questions of human ontology anew with the openness of a truly *experienced* person.[5]

II. A 'Shout Out' for Horizon-Fusing

With this kind of openness in mind, I want to encourage contemporary thinkers to reconsider the fruitfulness of Gadamer's historically-friendly hermeneutics. In particular, his notion of a fusion of horizons, his acknowledgment of our finitude and knowledge constraints, and his emphasis on our need for empathetic and 'open' ways understanding the other have much to offer feminist theorists and philosophers, religious thinkers, postcolonial scholars, and philosophers of race.

Although as Gadamer acknowledges, I can only go *through* my horizon to reach the other, I am neither imprisoned by my horizon nor must I imprison the other by forcing her to conform once and for all to my horizon. Because horizons are historically contingent and socially constructed, they are always revisable so long as I am willing and receptive to such revisionary activity. But in order for this to happen, I have to take risks and allow the other to genuinely challenge me; I must be willing to be 'interpellated by what is different in their lives' (Taylor 2002, 132). When this risk-taking is fruitful and I come to see the other by way of an expanded horizon, two related changes take place: (1) I recognize that a facet of my former way of thinking is particular to me, my culture or group and is not a universal feature of the human condition as such; (2) I perceive the equivalent aspect of the other culture without forcing it to fit my preconceived grid of what it 'should' be (Taylor 2002, 132). Does

this mean that I have arrived a flawless, bias-free interpretation in need of no further future revisions? Absolutely not. However, my understanding has been improved, and my horizon has been enriched or better 'fused' as a result of listening to and being interpellated by the other. Undoubtedly, we will continually bump up against interpretative problems and places of, at least seeming if not actual, (partial) incommensurability; thus, there is always room for more horizon-fusing.

Thus far I have described the fusing of horizons as an expansion or enrichment of one's former horizon. This is an accurate description; however, I want to offer a different metaphor, the improvisational attitude, to try and capture the permeability as well as the semi-solid-(temporal)-stability characteristic of our interpretative horizons. Given that a horizon in some important sense is constitutive of one's subjectivity, many of my claims regarding horizons are applicable to individual and collective identity-formation. With these claims in mind, let me introduce my musical analogies.

When a jazz small group—for example, a trio or a quartet—performs, each musician has an assigned part that contributes to the overall coherence of the group as a whole. The drummer keeps the rhythm steady and solid. The bass player also has a key role in the rhythm section, working closely with the drummer and, in addition, providing the low-range contours of song's harmony. The piano player fills in the harmonic details, providing a spectrum of chordal textures and colorings as well as harmonic extensions and superimpositions. The saxophonist interprets the melody, which, compared to the other parts, is what 'connects' most readily with the audience. When all of these parts come together well, a unified, not to mention aesthetically-pleasing whole results. Each player does more than simply play his or her part as an atomized individual. Instead, the individual musicians must perform in a constant mode of attentive listening in order to play *as* a unified group. If one player decides to stick rigidly to a rhythm pattern or a harmonic progression while the other members have collectively developed new patterns, then the cohesion of the group is diminished.

Alternatively, the unity of the group is augmented when, for example, the saxophonist in a mode of attentive listening hears and responds to the pianist's altered, superimposed harmonies and thus adjusts her solo accordingly. That is, as a skilled improviser listening empathetically she does not simply continue to play melodic lines that fit the original harmonic progression as if the former harmonies were the *only* proper way to play the tune; instead, she changes her lines to harmonize with the pianist's new chordal colorings. By listening carefully to the pianist (the other), the saxophonist does not continue with her previous, as it were, 'way of understanding' the pianist's horizon. Rather, she modifies her own horizon so that the pianist's horizon is made intelligible and put in the best light. Given her broadened horizon, the pianist's altered harmonies are not heard as mistakes—if they were, this would be analogous to forcing the other into one's preconceived grid and thus distorting the other. Rather, a genuine understanding has been achieved through the communal creation of a new harmony analogous to a newly fused-horizon.

My example highlights the fluidity of horizons (and identities), but we should also recognize the ability of horizons to solidify through shared practices and customs. For example, the pianist's harmonic superimposition may catch on and become a regular practice associated with a certain style of jazz. This temporary solidifying-ability in no way translates into a permanent immutability, and the same is true for horizons. Gadamer sums this up nicely:

> Just as the individual is never simply an individual because he is always in understanding with others, so too the closed horizon that is supposed to enclose a culture is an abstraction. The historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving. Thus the horizon of the past, out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition, is always in motion (Gadamer 2004, 304).

As contingently formed ways of seeing and engaging the world and others, horizons are neither closed nor are their boundaries opaque. Rather, they are mutable, porous, and capable of re-harmonization—that is, if one adopts an improvisational attitude and is willing to listen to and be changed and enriched by the other.

Another aspect of Gadamer's hermeneutics that belies commonly held beliefs regarding what is necessary for interpretative 'objectivity' is his observation that our own pre-judgments and biases are made explicit in and through our hermeneutical struggles. Our unreflective prejudices, in other words, often show up as such when, recalling our musical example above, they cannot be harmonized with the chordal progressions (i.e., horizon) of the other. Stated slightly differently, we are not able hear our own assumptions and biases *as* dissonant until we risk 'playing' them with the other's harmony. So rather than distance or separate ourselves from the hermeneutical performance, we must remain engaged with our prejudices, as it were, in full force. Rather than 'disregard ourselves' as 'historical objectivism' demands, we bring our pre-judgments to the hermeneutic table (Gadamer 2004, 299).[6] In so doing we put our own prejudices and thus ourselves at risk. By allowing our prejudices 'full play,' we are 'able to experience the other's claim to truth and make it possible for him to have full play himself' (Gadamer 2004, 299).

Here I return to an important point about horizon-fusing highlighted in Taylor's essay. Though prior to the original fusion, my horizon and that of the other are distinct ways of 'understanding the human condition,' once the 'fusion' occurs and 'one (or both) undergo a shift; the horizon is extended so as to make room for the object that before did not fit within it' (Taylor 2002, 133). But as Taylor emphasizes, what has taken place is more than a mere extension of previous conceptual limits; it is better described as a 'fusion' creating something new. For this reason, I have opted for the analogy of an improvisational attitude in which melodic lines and harmonies are constantly being re-harmonized in order to describe the act of ongoing horizon-fusing. It is not that the other's melodic fragment or harmonic progression is *completely* foreign or unintelligible to me—otherwise, neither would show up *as* problems or puzzles. Rather, they do not fit well within my present harmonic and

melodic schema (i.e., my as of yet, unchanged horizon). However, when a genuine fusion takes place, something has happened allowing me, as Taylor puts it, to 'find a language' in which my understanding of the other has come about through an in-fusion of something of the other's world 'in' me. Mixing metaphors, my horizon has been reharmonized by the melodic lines of the other such that the other's melody is heard undistortively in the new harmony. This is *not* to say that the other's 'melody' is heard *exactly* the same in my horizon as in her horizon. It is to say that the other's voice has been preserved, neither muted nor silenced but continues to sound its melody within the new harmony that we have created together.

On a related note, Taylor explains how Gadamer's fusion of horizons avoids the 'ethnocentric temptation' (Taylor 2002, 138). That is, because I attempt to interpret the other in the language we have created *together* (that is, my newly expanded horizon) rather than my prior un-fused language, I can avoid distorting the other by making him 'intelligible' *only if* he passes through my Procrustean mold. '[T]he problem is that the standing ethnocentric temptation is to make too quick sense of the stranger, i.e., sense in one's own terms' (Taylor 2002, 138). An example of ethnocentric distortion would be to conclude that a people group with no *written* language and hence no written constitution must be, first of all, inferior intellectually to my group possessing both of the above, and, second, less able to transfer their traditions and to implement their laws. Here I have 'made sense' of the other, but only by holding up my group's practices as *the* standard. With this approach, whatever does not conform to my group's way of doing things is a deviation. No fusion, expansion, or, using my metaphor, reharmonization of horizons has occurred. However, precisely what we need in order to avoid distorting the other, as Taylor puts it, is a 'richer language,' a reharmonized horizon (Taylor 2002, 138).

As we move from our initial encounter wherein the other is strange and puzzling toward a fusion of horizons, we strive to locate 'that facet of our lives that their strange customs interpellate, challenge, and offer a notional alternative to' (Taylor 2002, 139). To illustrate, Taylor gives an example of how a Gadamerian-reading of Aztec practices of human sacrifice might correspond to one's own

ritualistic practices such as the Catholic mass. Perhaps we will not be able to name what this common element between the two cultures is. We might be tempted to call it 'religion,' as both practices involve a sacrifice of some sort and are ways of coming to terms with our common human condition (Taylor 2002, 140). However, here we must take care not to import unnecessary conceptual and other baggage from our horizon into the meaning of the term, lest we fall prey to the ethnocentric temptation. So we must 'beware of labels'; yet, that the two sacrificial practices offer competing interpretations of some aspect 'of the human condition for which we have no stable, culture-transcendent name, is a thought we cannot let go of, unless we want to relegate these people to the kind of unintelligibility that members of another species would have for us' (Taylor 2002, 140). Clearly, for Gadamer the latter is not a viable option.

We have seen how our interpretation of the other's practice and the other's interpretation of her practice is not the same. This is true even *after* a fusion of horizons has occurred because we both come to understand the practice under consideration through our original horizons, each of which involve different questions, experiences, struggles, cultural and institutional conditioning, and many other factors too numerous to list. This non-identity of our common 'object' of knowledge speaks to the party-dependence feature of Gadamer's model—that is, his model of coming to an understanding with a dialogue partner. Our understandings of the other can and do improve, but their accuracy and correctness do not translate into an *identical* understanding that we now both possess. A corollary of coming to understand the other through a fusion of horizons is, of course, that *we* are changed. Genuine understanding of the other requires an 'identity shift in us' (Taylor 2002, 140–41).

III. Gadamer's Flexible Forms

Among the many dialogue partners Gadamer has engaged, Plato stands out as one having captured Gadamer's attention in a special way. Although his interpretations of Plato are controversial in some scholarly circles, his discussions of

the later Plato have earned him respect among political philosophers and classicists alike. Below I provide a sketch of one aspect of Gadamer's interpretation of Plato's theory of the forms.

Gadamer approaches Plato's corpus by first looking at his later works (for example, the *Parmenides, Sophist, Statesman*, and so forth) and then reading these as the fulfillments of what was presented in shadow-form in his early and middle dialogues. Not only does Gadamer find a great deal of continuity in Plato's oeuvre, but his interpretation of a non-dualistic theory of the forms or ideas likewise makes Gadamer's Plato resemble Aristotle in significant ways. The ideas are *not,* according to Gadamer, the central focus of Plato's philosophy. Rather, the theory of forms or ideas is a presupposition Plato believes is required in our strivings for truth, understanding, and living well. In a sense, the ideas or forms function in a way similar to Kant's regulative ideas—as ideals toward which we must aim but never quite attain. However, as Brice R. Wachterhauser explains, Gadamer's view goes beyond Kant's regulative ideas and involves a ontological 'thickness.' Gadamer holds that Platonic ideas 'refer to the most basic structures or patterns of intelligible meaning that lend reality whatever intelligibility it has' (Wachterhauser 1999, 66). In addition, he claims—both as an interpretation of Plato and as his own view—that we share a common world, although we no doubt interpret, decipher, linguistically approach, experience, and navigate that world differently and often in opposing and conflicting ways. In short, Gadamer's Plato is more like Aristotle in that both place the forms or structures of things squarely in this world and not in some Platonic other-worldly world.

These structures are logically distinct and can be distinguished mentally; however, they exist as an 'a web of ideal relations, which are internally connected to each other in inseparable ways and at many different levels' (Wachterhauser 1999, 67).[6] Consequently, the ideas implicate one another and come as a 'unified package'; for example, questions of justice will lead to questions of the good, truth, virtue, and so on. In order to attain a proper understanding of one notion, we must enter into the web as a whole. However, our epistemological limitations and our finitude constrain

us such that we can only grasp (and partially at that), one strand or node at a time. We simply cannot know the web of structural relations in its totality and all at once. To claim that we can is to claim that we know, as medieval thinkers put it, as God knows, namely, in *uno intuitu*. Moreover, when we focus on one strand or section of the web, we necessarily suppress or choose not to focus upon the other strands. Here Gadamer employs Heidegger's notion of *aletheia* or truth as characterized by a dialectical movement between concealment and unconcealment.

If we connect Gadamer's Plato's forms as an interconnected, dynamic web and his more 'Aristotelian' non-dualistic Plato, we can begin to see how gradual movement in the structures or forms is possible. Through his act/potency distinction, Aristotle was able to account for a teleological movement in plants, animals, humans and so forth. According to Gadamer, Plato presented this same movement albeit mythically and literarily in his dialogues. Since the things of the world are themselves in motion given their movement from potency to act, could it be that structures themselves are to some degree dynamic rather than rigidly static? This is not to suggest a dynamism with no boundaries; instead, the notion is more of a structure that can both congeal for an extended period and yet is not rigidly fixed for all times. That is, it has a built-in flexibility allowing it to show itself differently in different historical periods, and yet within each period produces something stable enough to count as a meaningful identity. In other words, if *reality itself* is constituted by a complex set of interconnected structures whose ontology allows for a dynamic range of manifestations—what I call a flexible-multifaceted identity—then we ought to expect as history unfolds a multiplicity of legitimate subject-constructions, concepts, traditions, and so forth.

Wachterhauser refers to this flexible ontology as Gadamer's 'ontological perspectivism,' which claims that both things and texts 'contain within themselves different 'faces' or 'looks' that present themselves in different historically mediated contexts in such a way that we can say that it is possible for one and the same reality to show itself in many ways' (Wachterhauser 1999, 7). This brings us to what Gadamer sees as the crux of Plato's philosophy—the relation of the one and the

many. Gadamer states this explicitly in his essay, 'Dialectic and Sophism in Plato's *Seventh Letter*,'

> [t]he assumption that there are ideas remains for Plato an inescapable conclusion to be drawn from the nature of discussion and the process of reaching an understanding of something. […] Far from being Plato's philosophy itself, the assumption occasions his real philosophical endeavor. As the *Parmenides* shows, a single idea by itself is not knowable at all, and here is the source of error which the young Socrates makes. In any insight an entire nexus or web of ideas is involved (Gadamer 1980a, 119).

Because each idea—justice, reason, virtue, and so forth—has its own distinct contours or unity (its oneness) and yet simultaneously is multiple as a result of its interrelation to other nodes in the web such as truth, equity, and decency, the notion of grasping an idea in isolation is a fiction. Thus, whenever we encounter the one, we also encounter the many, and with the presence of the (unveiled but in no way exhaustively expressed) one there is also present even if absent the (hidden) many (Gadamer 1980b, 136–37).

Much more could be said with respect to Gadamer's interpretation of Plato; however, from what I have sketched above, it is clear that the former's recognition of our finitude, historical embeddedness, and epistemological limitations, in conjunction with his understanding of the structures of reality as dynamic, function in a sense as correlates to his dialogical hermeneutics. That is, given our knowledge constraints and the dynamic range of possibility built-in to the very ontology of things, subjects, texts, and works of art, we ought to expect multiple interpretations and polysemous meanings—meanings whose flexible identity make possible a surplus of new significances through interaction with diverse dialogue partners.

Before closing I want to mention briefly Gadamer's re-appropriation of the transcendentals and implications of his metaphysics as related to human ontology. To recap a bit, Gadamer's metaphysical structures are similar (but *not* identical) to

Aristotlean forms; however, Gadamer's version of these conditioning structures allow for a kind of limited movement because the flexibility of the forms themselves allow the things they structure to have diverse manifestations and appearances over time. In addition, forms are not isolated but are part of a larger interconnected web, which, for limited historical beings, cannot be known exhaustively or all at once. We know some aspects of some things discursively, and the movement and ongoing change in the things and in ourselves ought to compel us to a more humble epistemological *ethos*.

Now I turn more specifically to Gadamer's understanding and application of transcendentals. As Wachterhauser explains, Gadamer distinguishes ontological differences among the ideas. That is, he recognizes ideas functioning like genera and species and those functioning as transcendentals. The latter, which, in Gadamer's formulation, include being and non-being, one and many, identity and difference, goodness, truth, beauty, and even motion and rest, cut across or transcend the categories of genera and species. The transcendentals make it possible for identity, unity, differentiation, and the like to 'show up' at all. Analogous to the way that vowels when properly combined with consonants allow us to recognize words as such, 'the transcendental 'elements' of discourse make it possible for us to both group together things in terms of various unities and differentiate them by recognition of difference. In this sense,[…] they make all speech possible' (Wachterhauser 1999, 85).

Likewise, the transcendentals are syncategorematic, as they are always present with the other ideas. 'Whenever we grasp a determinate something we have an understanding of its being, of what and how it is, as well as what it is not: we grasp it as a unity of properties and a 'true' instance of its kind' and similarly with the other transcendentals (Wachterhauser 1999, 85). In addition, we do not know the transcendentals by way of genera or species, nor in some kind of direct vision; 'rather, they are always already there whenever we become aware of our own thinking' (Wachterhauser 1999, 86). They are grasped as present with or in combination with other ideas. Again, this is similar to the way that vowels are

understood not in isolation but 'in their function of combining letters' (Wachterhauser 1999, 86). As simples or primitives always present in complexes, transcendentals are grasped intuitively and cannot be further divided (logically speaking). Lastly, to claim that we have an intuitive understanding of transcendentals is *not* to claim that we have complete or transparent knowledge of them. Gadamer stresses this point with his recognition of the crucial role of non-being or negation in our thinking. We come to understand something not only by what it is but by what it is *not*. That is, not only positive but negative predicates play a constitutive role in understanding whom or what a person or thing is. Because concepts, entities, and individuals stand in a complex interrelation with one another, they can be described from 'nearly inexhaustible viewpoints' (Wachterhauser 1999, 87). This complex interrelated net of relations into which all of reality is implicated gives rise to multiple perspectives and (legitimate) multiple and diverse meanings, whose accounts include both positive and negative descriptions of what things are and are not. Such an ontological vision is both hermeneutically rich and yet retains an epistemological humility, which Gadamer obviously values.

To conclude, Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics, especially his notion of a hermeneutical horizon, has much to contribute to current ethical, philosophical, and sociopolitical discussions. After all, how we see and understand the many others we encounter has significant implications in the concrete decisions we make individually and collectively. If, by employing a Gadamerian model of understanding as a dialogical encounter with the other wherein we listen empathetically and charitably, not forcing her to confirm to our preconceived grid but allowing her to enrich and expand our present horizon, we have the opportunity to develop, as Taylor puts it, a new 'language' together. By developing a new, common language we are able, on the one hand, to genuinely respect the other and the other's differences, having attained genuine knowledge—albeit partial—about the other. On the other hand, we are able to see areas of shared 'common ground' that formerly we had assumed either did not exist or could not be a legitimate human 'good' since it was not *our* 'good.' This is not to say that we will always agree with the other or that we cannot make moral

judgments about the other's practices or actions. We may, at the end of the day, strongly disagree and morally condemn the other's actions.[8] Even so, by adopting Gadamer's dialogical and history-sensitive approach to understanding, we allow ourselves the possibility of failing, of being dead wrong about the other and of becoming an ever more 'experienced' and resolutely undogmatic person.

Notes

1. See, for example, Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self,* where she develops and expands Gadamar's notion of horizon for her own account of fluid identity and embodied difference.

2. On Gadamer's account of experience as 'negative,' that is, as characterized by alternating cycles of hope and disappointment, see Weinsheimer 1985, 202.

3. On remaining open and allowing the text to say something to us, see also Warnke, 'Hermeneutics, Ethics, and Politics.'

4. For a helpful overview of gender essentialism and its claims, see Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self,* esp. pp. 134–44. For critiques of racial essentialism and racist narratives and assumptions in key thinkers in the Western tradition, see, Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* and Robert Bernasconi, 'Who Invented the Concept of Race? Kant's Role in the Enlightenment Construction of Race.' and 'With What Must the Philosophy of World History Begin? On the Racial Bias of Hegel's Eurocentrism.'

5. I argue for such a mediating position in Nielsen, *Foucault, Douglass, Fanon, and Scotus in Dialogue: On Social Construction and Freedom.* New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

6. Here, of course, I am using the term 'prejudice' in Gadamer's sense, namely, a pre-judgment (Latin, *praejudicare*). In short, Gadamer rejects the Enlightenment's reduction of prejudice to its negative aspect and by retracing

its Latin etymology, he foregrounds its non-negative aspects. Given our finitude, we necessarily make pre-judgments, which in many cases turn out to be correct. For example, without knowing exhaustively the rules of physics, I may pre-judge that a bridge is safe for me to drive across.

7. Wachterhauser adds that Plato himself employs the metaphor of a 'woven fabric' in the *Sophist*, 260a (1999, 67).

8. See, for example, chapters 3 and 4 of *Foucault, Douglass, Fanon, and Scotus in Dialogue,* where I discuss Douglass's and Fanon's moral critiques of slavery and colonialism. For Douglass and Fanon, such practices are judged unjust and inhumane regardless of the culture or historical period in which they are found.

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