

Brad Thames
Seminar Paper for “Gadamer and Charles Taylor”, Fred Dallmayr, Fall 2004.
27 April 2005

Gadamer’s Hermeneutical Ethics: An Ethics of Life

1

One of the central threads that runs through Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics is the emphasis on life: life is where the circle of hermeneutics begins and where it ends. His analysis of the history and development of hermeneutics carries persistent undertones (and overtones) of aversion to the idea of hermeneutics as merely a theory or methodology, where the method or theory is abstracted from its roots and application in concrete life. To be sure, we theorize about hermeneutics, and there are pseudo-methodologies involved, especially pertaining to particular ends; but hermeneutics is incomplete and insufficient as a theory: we don’t engage in hermeneutics until we live hermeneutically. But we are conditioned, finite beings; thus, the hermeneutical problem is universal. That is, interpretation is a fundamental mode of life for the sorts of beings that we are. The very nature of being-in-the-world entails that we must begin from some place in the world, and find the meanings in the world we encounter from where we begin, continually interpreting and revising our understandings in response to this encounter.

Such an introduction to a treatment of Gadamer’s ethics is needed to establish right off the way in which, first and foremost, ethics is hermeneutical and thus ethics is practical. In this sense, Gadamer departs from much of the ethical tradition of the past few hundred years, which have been focused mostly on identifying and articulating rules and principles that lead to or define right action—abstract, theoretical formulations that

reveal and analyze ‘moral truths.’ From Gadamer’s perspective, not only do these theories neglect the essentially practical nature of the ethical, but underlying them is a flawed conception of the ethical agent and its relation to the world: that of an essentially disengaged and atomistic subject. Depending on the theory, this subject is supposed to be capable of pure rational reflection on universal principles, can distinguish fact from value and reason from emotion, is the ultimately self-interested individual in terms of whom the community is defined, and so forth; not all of these would necessarily apply to every theory that begins with the disengaged atomistic subject, but most would embody one or another of them in some form. Gadamer, as we shall soon see, instead follows Heidegger’s analysis of the person as first and foremost embedded within a world, inheriting prejudices and webs of significance from its tradition, environment and community out of which it always makes ethical judgments and engages in morally significant acts, and from which it can never fully escape. In this way, Gadamer’s ethics is largely a return to Aristotle and his account of the virtuous person. Possession of the virtues requires *phronesis*, Aristotle’s practical wisdom, a kind of wisdom that for Gadamer requires an understanding of one’s situation and context that becomes manifested only in virtuous living. That is to say, the ethical life is not capable of abstraction into discrete ‘acts’, regarding which we can give a complete and determinate answer to the question, ‘what should I do?’ Rather, just as understanding is never complete, so is the answer to that question never universal, determinate, or apodictic. On the other hand, this is far from skepticism or relativism about the ethical, for such a position would ignore the constraints following from the fundamental conception of the person as being-in-the-world. The ethical life must stand open to the possibility of a

superior truth which may confront and change one's prejudices. Indeed, there remains in Gadamer a robust sense of the Good that always occupies ethical judgment and behavior, drawing us to a dialogical relationship in which we critically examine our own ethical understandings even as we challenge others to do the same with theirs. The analysis and evaluation of these points will constitute the structure of our foray into Gadamer's philosophical ethics.

2

The problems in modern ethical theory alluded to above mirror, and indeed seem to be a symptom of the pervasive errors of the modernist project, involving a neglect of the effect of history on our understanding as well as the subsumption of understanding to methodology. Schleiermacher and Dilthey, two of the early developers of hermeneutics and both of whom had a significant effect on the development of Gadamer's thought, each failed to overcome the foregoing deficiencies—neglect of historical effect and elevation of methodology, respectively. Schleiermacher's hermeneutics derived from the problem of Biblical interpretation that arose as a result of the Reformation's rejection of dogmatic authority and emphasis on 'solo scriptura'; he broadened this problem of Biblical hermeneutics to one of interpretation and understanding of texts in general. Schleiermacher addresses the problem of Biblical hermeneutics by insisting on the centrality of the personal encounter with scripture—letting the text address the individual believer as if it was written specifically to him. The goal was to discover the faith experience that produced this text, amounting to a sort of divination process whereby the interpreter makes the text intelligible by a 're-creation of the creative act.'¹

¹ Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method* (henceforth TM), 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weissheimer and Donald G. Marshall (NY: Crossroads, 1989) 187.

This characteristically Romantic move involves a bracketing of the ‘truth element’ in favor of the pure understanding of a singular experience—the experience of life—thus marking a break from the Hegelian concern with Absolute Reason becoming transparent to itself. However, he maintains Hegelian residues by suggesting that hermeneutics essentially aims to ‘understand a writer better than he understood himself,’² perhaps by revealing what had been unconscious in the original producer. For Schleiermacher (unlike Hegel), this is ultimately an understanding not of the Absolute Truth or even the subject matter itself (pace the Rationalists) but of the creative expression; indeed, the claim to understand better is only possible because of the independence of hermeneutics from the knowledge of such things themselves. This has to do with the inherent freedom in a creative expression, indeed a kind of “divine productivity,”³ which he saw as rising above the content of the text itself.

Schleiermacher’s influence on Gadamer included the broadening of hermeneutics beyond Biblical or even textual interpretation to the more general mode of interpreting other people and the world, as well as acknowledging the limitations of rationality in interpretation. Gadamer’s critique of Schleiermacher centers, though, on the problem of historical understanding. He argues that the ideal of ‘con-geniality’ (recreating the experience of the author, getting into his mind) ignores the differences of interpretive frameworks whenever there is historical distance (which Gadamer will extend to any distance at all: cultural, linguistic, etc.).⁴ In questioning the Romantic ideal, however,

² TM 192. Gadamer notes that the idea of understanding better than the author was present in Kant and Fichte as well, but in their writings it carried the sense of having a greater clarity into the content of the author’s insights themselves. This ideal, Gadamer notes, has occupied philosophy for ages before Kant, so Schleiermacher can be seen as offering a rather radical sort of take on this idea compared with his predecessors.

³ TM 197

⁴ See TM 297-8, 453.

Gadamer does not reject their critique of Hegel; that is, human finitude precludes a return to the notion of the Absolute Truth as the object of shared or superior understanding. This will mark the beginnings of Gadamer's emphasis on understanding not 'better', but 'differently', which will be relevant later in the discussion on Gadamer's ethical pluralism. However, neither will he accept the bracketing or subordination of truth in understanding to the pure creative expression. We must see the hermeneutical life as one that is finite and historically conditioned, and yet one that nevertheless approaches the subject matter with a presumption that what it says is true, part of what Gadamer calls the foreconception of completeness.

Before exploring this somewhat difficult but critical place for truth in Gadamer's thought, though, we will explore the move from the critique of Schleiermacher to Dilthey, in whom the emphasis on the historical effect takes shape, but in whom he also sees all the dilemmas of historicism brought out. Dilthey sought the structure of historical understanding in 'life', in collective lived experience. This involved a transference of Hegel's Geist from the level of a mental, rational construct to the concrete—i.e., to the 'lived'. In this way he also goes beyond Schleiermacher's 'mind knowing mind', which retains inherent individualism and idealism. Dilthey emphasized the continuity or homogeneity of historian and history in the shared lived experience of history: the history which the historian attempts to understand is one in which he himself participates. Gadamer's main criticisms, though, have to do with Dilthey's insistence on developing a methodology of historical science. Indeed, Gadamer finds in this a lingering remnant of Cartesianism: the methodological enterprise still presupposes that the historicist can stand outside or beyond the subject-matter, from which he forms and

applies the methodology—hence historicism’s dilemma. As we will see shortly, this critique of historical methodology affects much of modern moral philosophy insofar as it shares the presumptions of methodological adequacy, which likewise rests on a pseudo-Cartesian (mis)conception of the human person.

We have already seen that Gadamer’s critique of Schleiermacher involved the neglect of historical distance, albeit this was partially addressed in Dilthey. The problem, then, is more fundamental: hermeneutics cannot begin in the detached subjectivity, rather, following Heidegger, hermeneutics begins in Dasein’s fundamental facticity, which is to say that it cannot begin with any assumptions about the sort of being that Dasein is—conscious, rational, historical, and so forth. For Heidegger the Being that is given to this Dasein is temporality, which for Gadamer will, along with Dasein’s finitude, provide the conditions for the possibility of understanding.

Gadamer inherits from Heidegger the tripartite scheme of understanding, corresponding to the three modes of Dasein’s temporality.⁵ The first dimension of the scheme, fore-having (*vorhabe*), is the frame of reference from which hermeneutics proceeds. I interpret something into an existing structure of prejudices and preconceptions. Second, fore-sight (*vorsicht*) is the dimension where I apply my understanding in such a way that I recognize the object of understanding as an object of a certain sort; I see it in a certain way. The third dimension of understanding is the fore-conception (*vorgrift*), where I articulate it in such a way that can be understood or make sense to others. These three dimensions are involved in the ‘hermeneutic circle’: in terms of textual interpretation, understanding always begins from somewhere with certain prejudices and assumptions as to the meaning of a text as a whole; we project these

⁵ See especially ¶32 of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*.

prejudices onto the text, but when the text does not validate our projections, we find that we have to return and correct our preunderstandings in light of what we find there in order to perform the articulation on the basis of these revised prejudices. So hermeneutics is circular in the sense that it always moves from whole to part and back to whole again, never escaping our prejudices but never wholly bound to them either; our prejudices are able to be corrected in light of what we encounter in the text. For Gadamer, as we noted at the outset, all the world is a text in this way; that is, all experience is hermeneutical. Like Husserl, Heidegger and Gadamer agree that our prejudices color our understandings such that so long as they are operative, we can never get to the essential reality of things. But unlike Husserl, they do not think that the solution is to bracket our prejudices so as make essences available before pure reflective intuition. Rather, all understanding must be structured by prejudices in some way for it to be possible at all; we can never attain a ‘view from nowhere’, or pretend to theorize from behind a ‘veil of ignorance’ to find some neutral, universal common ground for knowledge. Understanding, then, can never be a matter of seeing things ‘as they really are’; nor can

To state the point a bit differently, the facticity of being-in-the-world means that understanding must recognize the finitude of Dasein. Dasein’s finitude precludes the ability to step outside the conditionedness of lived experience to take a universalistic perspective on the world. The universalistic perspective and the grasping of what is real, eternal, or apodictic, the correspondence of our language and thought to what transcends it—all of this requires Dasein to overcome its finitude and direct its mind to something beyond it. Yet for an essentially finite being, this is an absurdity. Dasein can no more

transcend the limitations of its finitude than it can become something that it is not. Thus are the possibilities for understanding limited by its finitude. Understanding can never be completed, as that which we may seek to understand will always lie beyond our finite capabilities, and thus any claim to a correspondence of what we understand to what is real or true or universal can never be validated.

However, these consequences of limitation do not, as we touched on earlier, dissolve the importance of Truth in Gadamer's hermeneutics. A point that seems often neglected or underestimated is that hermeneutics involves what we briefly alluded to earlier as the fore-conception of completeness. Contrary to a hermeneutics in which we always approach a text with the suspicion that something in its meaning is hidden from us, and contrary to Schleiermacher's hermeneutics where we bracket any truth claims and see the text as an expression of the author, the fore-conception of completeness assumes that the *text*—that which confronts us directly—is complete in what it says, and we initially project meaning with this presumption. Uncovering hidden meanings, trying to recreate the mind of the author—these only take place when on the basis of the projections the presumption of completeness “proves mistaken—i.e., the text is not intelligible.”⁶ But Gadamer goes on to emphasize that such a presumption regards the content as complete not merely internally—that is, not simply as internally coherent; rather, “not only does the reader assume an immanent unity of meaning, but his understanding is likewise guided by the constant transcendent expectations of meaning that proceed from the relation to the *truth* of what is being said.”⁷ Here Gadamer distances himself from others (such as Rorty, to whom we will return) who follow him in

⁶ TM 294, my emphasis.

⁷ TM 295

rejecting a correspondence theory of truth, but who then refuse to make a substantial distinction between the content of the text as opinion—merely a person’s own perspective—and as true, in a sense that transcends opinion. Again, echoing the previous statements:

It is only when the attempt to accept what is said as true fails that we try to ‘understand’ the text, psychologically or historically, as another’s opinion. The prejudice of completeness, then, implies not only this formal element—that a text should completely express its meaning—but also that what it says should be the complete truth.⁸

Through the presumption of truth we open ourselves up hermeneutically to the transformative effect that this truth can have on our prejudices, and thus our understanding. To be sure, this prejudice does not entail that we can fully recognize the content of the text *as* the truth; such a claim would lapse back in a correspondence claim that cannot be substantiated. Nevertheless, neither does this concession entail that the truth is irrelevant to our understandings; rather it is the openness to the truth of what being said that allows that which transcends our capabilities to draw us closer to itself through the conversation with the text.

3

This completes the brief synopsis of those aspects of Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics most relevant to a discussion of his ethics. The universality of the hermeneutical problem, of course, brings ethics into the hermeneutical problem; in this way Gadamer’s ethics, like hermeneutics, begin with the limitations of prejudices and finitude on understanding, and involve the concrete practicality of hermeneutical application. As such, we can already detect a departure from much of modern moral philosophy. Warnke puts the ensuing problem for ethics thusly:

⁸ TM 297

If our attempts to understand ourselves and to consider how we ought to act proceed only on the constantly shifting ground of an ongoing history, we cannot hope to transcend that history. Moreover, if what and how we understand changes, it is not clear that we can appeal to an unchanging human nature or human reason for our moral foundations.⁹

Yet this appeal is implicit in the structure of utilitarianism, to take one example. The guiding premise in utilitarianism is founded on a conception of the right act, the one that has or is projected to have the greatest overall benefits. On Mill's account, this thesis was justified by the claim that all humans desire pleasure over anything else, and concluded that the maximization of pleasure was thus the highest good. (Others might consider desire satisfaction, happiness, or some other universal, quantifiable good the target of maximization.) Whether utilitarianism provides a procedure for deciding what's to be done in a circumstance, for evaluation and judgment, or simply conducts an analysis of our moral concepts, it rests on both the 'appeal to an unchanging human nature [and] human reason' for its methodology.

From the Gadamerian perspective, then, the problems with a utilitarian theory of morality begin in its claim to methodological adequacy. The adequacy of the methodology would rest on the possibility of projecting (or recognizing) the consequences of the various possible (or actual) acts, and making a universally valid judgment on the respective utility. However, such projections and judgments presuppose a human rationality that we have seen to be incompatible with the finite historically-effected consciousness. The application of the theory would require that the ethical agent be able to view the actual and/or possible consequences of a single act in a detached, neutral way, and thereby recognize *the* quantity of happiness, benefit, goodness, or

⁹ Georgia Warnke (2002), "Hermeneutics, Ethics and Politics." In *The Cambridge Companion to Gadamer*, ed. Robert J. Dostal (Cambridge: CUP), 79-101. Quoted from p 82.

whatever the theory professes to be the end of moral behavior. But as we have seen, Gadamer insists that how we view and thus judge the world, what is considered happiness, benefit, etc., and so forth, take place from a preexisting framework that colors such projections and judgments; thus the utilitarian theory could never suffice in its claim to universal validity. Moreover, the theory depends on a conception of an unchanging human nature: one whose final ends—be they pleasure, happiness, or whatever—are consistently and universally operative in determining the ethical norms.

The problems with such an approach to ethics run deeper than the methodological inadequacy critique I've just given, however. The very assumption that the ethical life should or could be subsumed under a general set of rules, principles or methodologies, that the right or the good can be found through abstraction, universalization, or apodicticity misses the fundamentally practical nature of the ethical life. The sorts of principles that underlie much of modern ethics are merely formal principles which by themselves have no substantive content. That is, they seek to understand in an abstract formalization what can only be understood by engaging in the concrete, in praxis. Thus, as we have been claiming, for Gadamer 'ethics' begins in life; rules and principles, if they play any role at all, play only a schematic and subsidiary one. Furthermore, the hermeneutical life is an ongoing, never-ending process of engagement with the world as a part of it. Thus, just as hermeneutics is never complete, we can never come to a complete knowledge of what the ethical demands consist of through such universal or apodictic formulations. Indeed, in this way the abstract ethical theory might be considered a hindrance to the ethical life by feeding a sense of the sufficiency of theoretical knowledge to the moral life. But for Gadamer this would not only be illusory, but dangerous as

“knowledge that cannot be applied to the concrete situation remains meaningless and even risks obscuring what the situation calls for.”¹⁰

This focus on praxis grounds Gadamer’s critique both of the Kantian formalism as well as the Husserlian ethics of value advocated by Scheler and Hartmann. The Kantian formal system, insofar as it is taken to ground moral self-determination in a kind of autonomous, subjective knowledge of the necessary moral truths (albeit this is a read that Gadamer attributes more to neo-Kantians than Kant himself), can never descend from the realm of the purely theoretical in order to have substantial bearing on concrete practical decisions. Moreover, this kind of purely theoretical knowledge of the a priori, universal law can only be attained if we conceive of the agent as essentially subjective and capable of theoretical distancing from both her world and the limitations of finitude, both of which Gadamer rejects. Though Scheler and Hartmann’s ethics consciously situated itself in opposition to Kant’s formalism (noting that “there is, for example, no duty to love”¹¹), “such a theory founders” Gadamer contends, “on the necessity [...] that every morality is a concrete ethical form.”¹² These ethical systems claim to be an a priori research program into the essential nature of the values inherent in our ethical practice, thus revealing values that we otherwise might be blind to. But like Kant’s formalism, this system nevertheless presupposes its own ethos—a concept we will come back to presently—that goes unrecognized and thus claims an a priori objectivity that is impossible for any human moral system. Indeed, “what the fundamental idea of an a

¹⁰ TM 313

¹¹ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutics, Religion and Ethics* (henceforth HRE), trans. Joel Weinsheimer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999) 27.

¹² HRE 28

priori value system essentially calls for is an infinite subject.”¹³ So then, Gadamer is concerned with a philosophical ethics that does not require a ‘superhuman self-transcendence’, and “achieves its real determinacy...from the concrete reality of the case,”¹⁴ a claim that we now turn to.

4

This characterization of the ethical as praxis reveals the significant influence of Aristotle in Gadamer’s ethical thought, especially in his interpretation of Aristotle’s account of *phronesis*. Phronesis, as Gadamer sees it, is a sort of knowledge, but one that differs from mere theoretical knowledge in being itself a praxis, and in this way mirrors hermeneutics itself. Just as hermeneutical reflection begins and ends in the historically effected consciousness, Aristotle’s practical wisdom begins in what we introduced above as the *ethos*, “what a person is like...formed beforehand through his or her education and way of life.”¹⁵ The virtues take form in a person’s character as she develops within a community, acquiring habits, understandings, and most importantly, conceptions of the good. As character traits they are not something acquired either by a process of theoretical reflection or teaching, in the way that we acquire a skill (*technē*). Technical knowledge and skill have a limited range of application, are such that we can choose whether or not to learn and apply it, and whether or not we do is incidental to the human life as a whole. The development of the virtues, on the other hand, presupposes “a demeanor that [the person] is constantly concerned to preserve in the concrete situations of his life and prove through right behavior.”¹⁶ Ethical knowledge is not like technical

¹³ HRE 28

¹⁴ HRE 31

¹⁵ HRE 28

¹⁶ TM 313

knowledge, not something that has a limited range of application; rather, we are always engaging in morally significant behavior. Moreover, we don't choose when and whether to apply this knowledge: if we have it, it gets expressed in all of our behaviors insofar as it constitutes the prejudices, values and conditions that guide our life as a whole. So in some sense the acquisition and development of the virtues depends on a certain character that seeks to develop those dispositions that will be exercised in virtuous behavior, which is to say that it presupposes the possession of the virtues to a certain extent. This is not to say that a person must already *be* strongly virtuous to develop virtuous character; it does, however, mean that virtuous character is not something that available in the same way to everyone regardless of their background or embedded dispositions, as if there were an instruction guide that anyone could check out from their local library and master the concepts and techniques therein, or a monastery in Tibet that one could spend a month at to learn the secrets of being virtuous.

Becoming an ethical person, then, is not a process entirely 'up to us,' but assumes some background factors beyond our control. There is, along these lines, much controversy in Aristotle scholarship over the role of luck in his account of virtuous education, whether he would have agreed that anyone, no matter their initial upbringing, could in principle become virtuous, or whether, as some suggest, he thought that the extent to which you could acquire the virtues depends on the fortune of having been brought up in the right sort of community, and that the sort of training necessary to have these character traits must take place before one reaches a certain level of maturity.

As far as I know, Gadamer never addresses this issue directly. But I suspect there are several points he could make. First, it is true that one's upbringing and community of

development is indeed instrumental to the development of moral character. As we have said, it is not something that can be *taught*, but arises through imitation, through absorbing the values and habits of those with whom one is brought up, and so forth. And I suspect he would admit that there are certain habits and character traits that, when strongly embedded as they would be by being raised a certain way, are quite difficult to break out of. At one point he remarks, “We do not learn moral knowledge, nor can we forget it.”¹⁷ While supporting directly the claim that moral knowledge is not a set of procedural rules or principles that one can forget as one forgets how to solve an equation in differential calculus, it may also suggest support for the characteristically Aristotelian claim that the virtues, once acquired, are impossible or at least very difficult to *lose*. If this is so, then one might suppose the same would hold for vices: once they are ingrained into our character, it is at least difficult to overcome them and acquire the virtues.

Aside from the question of where Gadamer might stand on this controversy, there is another set of questions worth asking. One of the possible implications in the claim—that one must be brought up in the right community in order to acquire the virtues—suggests that there is a universal shape to the virtues that some communities fully embody, others partially, and others not at all. A related question is whether or not one can become fully virtuous, as if there were a universal model of virtuous character¹⁸ that one, in principle at least, could meet. Gadamer’s take on each of these issues, it seems to me, would be no, but with qualification.

¹⁷ TM 320

¹⁸ It should be pointed out that this question could still be asked even if the ‘universality’ was not considered independent of the conceptions and values of a particular community, but was the maximization of the conceptions of virtue that arise out of them. In this way it is distinct from the first question, for even a negative answer to that would still raise this question for each different community.

Addressing this set of questions will guide much of our further discussion, but before we explore it further, we should look a bit more closely at his reading of Aristotle's ethics. We have emphasized Gadamer's continual insistence that the virtues are not simply a conception, not simply a theoretical knowledge of what is right or good that a person applies to her circumstances. This partly has to do, as we saw above, with how they are acquired and developed, but also with how they take shape only through the exercise of phronesis. Phronesis not only begins in the ethos, but manifests the ethos, gives the virtues their *being* in practical life. As Gadamer puts it, "Aristotle wants to show unequivocally that there is no phronesis without ethos and no ethos without phronesis. The two of them are both aspects of the same basic constitution of humanity."¹⁹ Again, contrary to the sufficiency of theory for moral knowledge professed by many modern philosophers, "[Aristotle's] analysis of phronesis recognizes that moral knowledge is a way of moral being itself, which therefore cannot be prescinded from the whole concretion of what he calls ethos."²⁰ This is to say that an ethical *philosophy*, which describes and theorizes *about* the ethical life—the virtues, obligations, and so forth—can only be schematic, offering basic guidelines or suggestive descriptions of what ethical behavior might be like in various circumstances, but never as a substitute for, and always incomplete without concrete practical action. The ethical life begins in the ethos, is lived out through practical wisdom's understanding of the situation and what is to be done, which in turn affects the understanding, and thus the ethos. Through this circularity inherent in the ethical life, Aristotle's ethics can be seen as "a kind of model of the problem of hermeneutics." Gadamer concludes *Truth and Method's* section on

¹⁹ HRE 155

²⁰ HRE 28

Aristotle's ethics with some remarks as to its exemplary relevance to the general discussion of the hermeneutical problem:

We too determined that application is neither a subsequent nor merely an occasional part of the phenomenon of understanding, but codetermines it as a whole from the beginning. Here too application did not consist in relating some pregiven universal to the particular situation. The interpreter dealing with traditional text tries to apply it to himself. But this does not mean that the text is given for him as something universal, that he first understands it per se, and then afterward uses it for particular applications. Rather, the interpreter seeks no more than to understand this universal, the text—i.e., to understand what it says, what constitutes the text's meaning and significance. In order to understand that, he must not try to disregard himself and his particular hermeneutical situation. He must relate the text to this situation if he wants to understand at all.²¹

As we saw above, one of the hallmarks of the hermeneutical life is that interpretation is never complete. We are continually turned back on ourselves as the voice of Being speaks to us, impelling us to revise our horizons and return to the world to encounter what it has to say to us anew. This is why it is a hermeneutics of conversation, of dialogue. To live in the world is to converse with the world; so as long as we are in conversation the dialogue is never complete. So here we might submit a negative response to the second of the two questions above: whether one can become fully virtuous. If the ethical life is the life of engagement with the world, and the virtues are those traits of character out of which we engage, then they are part of those horizons and prejudices that must be continually affected through life. Put differently, since ethical knowledge is the kind of understanding that we bring to bear in the conversation with the world, then ethical knowledge itself—this virtue of phronesis—will never come to a point of completion, owing to the limitations of finitude and the provocative challenges of each character in the dialogue that brings a new truth to be encountered by the ethical

²¹ TM 324

consciousness. Thus, not only can a person never become fully virtuous, to suppose so would to close the door, in a sense, on the conversation. It would lapse dangerously close to methodology once again, ignoring that essential element of Gadamer's hermeneutics that too often gets overlooked: that we approach each new text with a presumption of truth.

This brings us to the first question: whether some communities have the monopoly on the virtues. This, I think given the previous points, is a resounding no. To claim otherwise would be to suppose that they have nothing to learn from other communities, from other possible partners in the ethical conversation that is authentic human life—a supposition that Gadamer heartily abjures. Just as we must approach a text with a presumption that it has something new to say to me, so must we approach encounters with those whose ethical conceptions may conflict with ours, a point that will be elaborated more a bit later.

But for now the more difficult question is whether there are some communities or individuals who are nevertheless more virtuous than others, or whether, in the end, Gadamer's emphasis on the historicity and conditionedness of ethical understanding and the rejection of objective knowledge and the ensuing inability to make determinate and transcendentally valid ethical judgments leaves us with historicism or a pragmatic relativism. This interpretation has been suggested both in criticism (Habermas) and by way of endorsement (Rorty). Each of them share with Gadamer the importance of discourse and the need to reject the presumption of the detached, subjective rationality capable of fully grasping and methodologically applying universal moral truths. That is, they each share the conception of the ethical that arises out of the embedded norms,

values, and self-conceptions of one's history and community. However, they each see this element of Gadamer's hermeneutics more or less giving up a substantially positive role for truth and objectivity in the moral life, concluding that Gadamer's hermeneutics entails that there is no sense of something that transcends these conceptions operating in our moral discourse. Again, this would initially seem to neglect the presumption of truth that Gadamer deems indispensable to hermeneutics; however, if, as we saw above, the presumption of truth functions to preclude anyone from claiming to have the monopoly on ethical knowledge, it doesn't immediately follow that this is anything *more* than a check on our moral claims, a caution against absolute validity claims. That is, more work is needed to show that the moral life may actually be concerned in a substantially positive way with the good and the true. We will see that Gadamer does maintain that this is so, and that the Rorty and Habermas underestimate Gadamer's hermeneutics by limiting the ways that Truth can manifest itself to our ethical understanding.

Rorty shares Gadamer's critique against methodology and against the claim of modern ethics to seek a rational common ground for ethical knowledge, such that agreement is based on a shared objective knowledge of what is 'real' or what is 'out there', independently of our own history and prejudices. Along with Gadamer, Rorty argues that we should abandon "the idea of a natural terminus to the process of understanding... a level at which we have dug down so deep that our spade is turned."²² "Gadamer makes it clear," he also rightly observes, "that hermeneutics is not a 'method

²² Richard Rorty (2004), "Being That Can Be Understood is Language." In *Gadamer's Repercussions: Reconsidering Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. Bruce Krajewski (Los Angeles: University of California Press), 21-29. Quoted from pg. 24.

for attaining truth,”²³ insofar as this is taken in the sense given directly above. He sees this point, then, as support for his pragmatism in which ethical discourse is just the search for new and provocative ways of expressing one’s values and beliefs. Justification of moral beliefs and behavior, then, is a matter of procuring agreement through convincing others to adopt your own perspective, not demonstrating the truth of one’s claims. Once we have abandoned the possibility of rational agreement through shared knowledge of truths that transcend our given conceptions, “all we can do is to show how the other side looks from our own point of view. That is, all we can do is be hermeneutic about the opposition—trying to show how the odd or paradoxical or offensive things they say hang together with the rest of what they want to say, and how what they say looks when put in our own alternative idiom.”²⁴ The essence of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, in Rorty’s perspective, is the weaving of languages together in a useful way. Thus, it is pointless and naïve to suppose that ethical understanding has anything to do with what is right or good as if that was something in any way independent from our own perspectives or the perspectives of the community. Neither, then, is ethical discourse concerned with reaching agreement on that; rather we should understand ‘the good’ as what I or my community take to be the fundamental values and pragmatic goals; likewise for ‘the right,’ and so ethical dialogue becomes hardly distinguishable from rhetoric and manipulation (a charge Rorty actually welcomes). When we are bound to the effect of history, and when the prospects of a truth-attaining methodology and a vision of the moral free from any subjective prejudice are discarded, all that we are left with in ethical discourse is the attempt to justify our own ethical vision by convincing others to see

²³ Richard Rorty (1979), *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 359

²⁴ Rorty (1979) 364-5

things the way we do, to “struggle to capture the imagination, to get other people to use one’s vocabulary.”²⁵ This, claims Rorty, is ultimately what Gadamer was saying in his famous dictum: “Being that can be understood is language.” Being—the Truth, the Good—is *nothing beyond* language.

If there is any sense in Rorty of talking about truth as something other than justification, it is in order to make the point that no matter how strong we feel a certain action is morally justified, this does not entail justification in all contexts. It is thus a pragmatically restrictive use of truth, not positively useful as that to which ethical understanding directs itself. Habermas has criticized Rorty for just this,²⁶ a criticism not wholly unlike the one directed against Gadamer, indicating that he tends to read Gadamer similar to the way Rorty does.

Habermas criticizes Gadamer for remaining too close to historicism, confusing ‘ethics,’ which indeed has to do with the historically conditioned prejudices of communities, with morality, wherein questions of rights, justice and the like are not inherently tied to a particular community’s values and prejudices. The Gadamerian picture, as Habermas understands it, carries the pernicious consequence that individuals don’t have the tools to be sufficiently critical of their own or others’ ethical systems. Incidentally, coming out of post-Third Reich Germany, and the perceived success of that regime in justifying its ideology according to certain cultural values (however twisted this supposed ‘justification’ might have been), this is certainly an understandable worry on Habermas’ part. In a human history rife with societies that practiced behavior that we consider utterly abhorrent, and yet nonetheless arguably consistent with at least many of

²⁵ Rorty (2004) 29

²⁶ See, e.g., “Richard Rorty’s Pragmatic Turn,” in *Rorty and His Critics*, ed. Robert Brandom (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2000), 31-55.

their core values, we naturally worry about theories that are seemingly unable to provide grounds for justification that are independent enough from a particular society's conceptions such that there is simply *no* sense in which certain ethical behaviors can be legitimated, especially those which grossly devalue certain human beings. Habermas indeed is seeking to provide such grounds, which are the grounds for *morality*, as opposed to ethics. As Warnke reads him:

Justifying a particular course of action requires more than asking whether it reflects either an individual conception of who I am and want to be or a collective conception of who we are or what our values mean for a particular situation. Rather, it includes a consideration of whether the action is just, and issues of justice involve a consideration of whether the interests embodied in contested norms are unreservedly universalizable.²⁷

She goes on to suggest that

for Habermas, only those norms are morally justified to which all those affected can agree under certain ideal conditions of symmetry and reciprocity: all speakers must have the same chances to raise and challenge claims to the validity of a norm; all intrusions of internal or external force must be eliminated and only the force of the better argument can hold sway.²⁸

So, from Habermas' perspective, the worry is that from within the hermeneutical circle, if it is inescapable as Gadamer claims, moral agents are unable to offer a critique of what might be (from our perspective) a fundamentally odious ideology at its core. Without some truth accessible through rational reflection and discourse that transcends one's embedded values, all we can say is that *from our perspective* their ideology seems odious; but should we not eschew a moral philosophy that entails the inability of one *within* such a society to emancipate themselves according to some universal conception

²⁷ Warnke (2002) 87

²⁸ Warnke (2002) 89

of justice? Habermas, of course, thinks so, but doubts whether Gadamer has a robust enough sense of truth to provide such grounds.

So under these interpretations of Gadamer, truth does not function in a positive sense, as that which we strive to attain; rather it has the cautionary function to remind us that in the hermeneutical life ethical understanding is never complete: the reflective understanding can never claim with finality to be attending to what is *the* good or *the* right, and we can never claim to have universal justification for moral claims. No doubt Gadamer does include this as an important aspect of the conception of the truth. Indeed, it appears that this is what Gadamer finds valuable in Kant's ethics. While we saw above his critique of Kant's formalism, he thinks that there is nevertheless a crucial insight of Kant that we cannot ignore. Viz., Kant reminds us that there is a difference between the *is* and the *ought*; more specifically, that there is a dangerous tendency to subvert what one perceives that one *ought* to do to what one wants to do. To be sure, we cannot reduce the *ought*, as some Kantians would have us do, to an a priori formal principle, for that has no substantive content, and thus fails to embody the conditionedness and practicality of the moral as we discussed above. Yet within the conditionedness of the human condition, Kant reminds us of a persistent unconditionality to the moral phenomenon. This includes the hermeneutical demand that we subject our own prejudices and inclinations to critique, guarding against what Gadamer calls the "dialectic of the exception that at once considers something valid yet excepts itself from it."²⁹ When we ignore the unconditional, practical reason's creativity becomes free to justify itself as the exception to the rule, to "attenuate a given duty's power to obligate." The truth that Gadamer draws from Kant's juxtaposition of the good will and the inclination is that the moral agent must sometimes

²⁹ HRE 158

recognize and honor demands on its behavior that might run contrary to feeling and sentiment, to habit and custom, to its own wants and desires. Inclination cannot have the final word on how to act; otherwise, we have lost *phronesis*, the wisdom which recognizes when a situation imposes such demands, or we have made its capacity the servant of inclination, rationalizing away the moral demand.

Naturally we have to read ‘unconditional,’ ‘moral demand’, and so forth in light of Dasein’s finitude and the limitations of knowledge. So in a sense these terms do have a cautionary use against claims to absolute justification in our moral judgments and behavior. We have to be wary, however, against reading this side of Gadamer as representing the full extent of his conception of truth, as Rorty would have us think, or underestimating the power of Truth to shake up our prejudices as Habermas seems to do. ‘Obligation,’ ‘duty’, and the ‘unconditional’ are not *limited* in Gadamer to the cautionary function of reminding us that we are never universally justified in our ethical understandings, even if they play this role. Rather, Kant must be acknowledged alongside Aristotle, not only the Aristotle who teaches us that ethics begins in the conditionedness of human experience, but that practical wisdom must always be striving towards the Good, however elusive it might be.

Indeed Gadamer finds this to be just as crucial to phronesis as its own historicity. “Aristotle...does not for a moment overlook the fact that people are concerned with justice for its own sake, and that no considerations of hedonistic, utilitarian or eudaimonistic kind can be allowed to prejudice the unconditionality of a genuine moral decision.”³⁰ Recalling the discussion before that phronesis is a practical kind of knowledge, its practicality should not blind us to the fact that it remains knowledge. It is

³⁰ HRE 35

a knowledge in which thinking and doing—theoria and praxis—are bound up together. “Virtue,” in his interpretation, “is behaving *with* logos...which means that this behavior...does not just correspond to thought but has thought in the very midst of it.”³¹ This is again where we see the relevance of Kant, providing a guide for that reflective aspect of ethical understanding, that which draws me away from mere self-interested behavior. Through reflection, we open ourselves up to the Good, not in the sense of pure intellectual correspondence, but allowing it to reveal *itself* through the encounter with the other.

This is key to understanding why Gadamer is not a historicist or pragmatist as Habermas and Rorty read him. They misunderstand him by insisting that understanding Truth or the Good, insofar as it can be grasped at all, must be something that my reason actively attends to by some sort of reflective procedure that takes me outside the conditionedness of my understanding. And, hence, they think that by rejecting this possibility, Gadamer has thus rejected *any* sense of understanding the Truth. But Truth is not something that passively stands behind the veil, waiting there for the intellect to expose it. Instead, as Gadamer sees it, it is something that is actively exposing *itself*, and reveals itself by transforming our horizons as we engage in life. This is why we need logos, to mediate between our prejudices and fore-conceptions and the Truth that the world’s text brings before us.

To return to the ethical life once more, the problem was how to reconcile the historicity of the ethical agent, the finitude of understanding, and the inescapability of prejudices with the sense of reality and imperativeness of the morally good. We see, then, that in Aristotle’s thought, at Gadamer interprets it, the Good reveals itself to us,

³¹ HRE 155

albeit in this indirect way by challenging our prejudices and assumptions. “Against the conditionedness of all moral knowledge by moral and political being,” Gadamer observes, “Aristotle counterbalances the conviction that he shares with Plato that the system of being is powerful enough to set limits to all human confusion.”³²

Are there, then, persons or societies more virtuous than others? Undoubtedly so. But the mistake of modernity was to suppose them to be coextensive with the enlightened mind, the ones who have escaped the illusions of mythology and superstition and the cave of ignorance to bask in the unobstructed view of the absolute. For Gadamer it is the reverse. The virtuous are the ones that escape the arrogance of moral self-satisfaction and open themselves up to the presumption that the person I encounter will broaden my own understandings of what is right and good, that he brings a truth to me as much as I to him. This is what Rorty has failed to grasp, assuming that in the broadening of horizons it makes no difference whether one player in the ethical game just subsumes the other. On the contrary, if we acknowledge that the reality which transcends us can reveal itself in ways other than by correspondence to our ideas, as Gadamer maintains, then subsuming the other horizons to ours risks becoming deaf to its voice.

Likewise, though we are always stuck in the hermeneutical circle, the circle need not be vicious, as Habermas’ critique supposes. Nazis, racists, misogynists, and others of this sort refuse to recognize some group of people as partners in dialogue, instead stripping them of their humanity through objectification. Yet we hardly need something like Habermas’ morality to see the inconsistency of this anti-dialogue with the *ethical* life modeled on the hermeneutical life.

³² HRE 35-36

One might object, however, that this presumes that I must be open to dialogue with the racist, the Nazi and the misogynist, and must presume that such people are bringing a truth to me that I must take seriously. Why should I suppose that someone with values so far removed from mine has anything to say to *me*? Indeed there is a legitimate concern over the *extent* to which we must be open to the other. On one hand, it seems true that we should not choose whether or not to engage in dialogue merely because they seem on the surface to embody prejudices that are not only inconceivable to us, but so far rooted that dialogue seems fruitless. To assume this from the start is to overestimate one's own capacities to judge who a person *really is*. When we reduce the whole person or community to those values and conceptions that we find abhorrent, we have, no doubt, objectified and dehumanized *them*. Nevertheless, through opening ourselves up to what the other has to say to us, we may find it utterly incomprehensible, conflicting with those of our own preconceptions that are so fundamental that there is simply no way to see anything right about it. When we utterly fail to comprehend the other, when we fail to see what the other is saying as true, as we quoted Gadamer saying above (page 9), then we can understand it as opinion, and perhaps a rather vicious one at that.

Through this analysis of Gadamer's ethics, I have attempted to contrast it and its Aristotelian influence with various other moral philosophies by relating it to his overall hermeneutical philosophy, both of which are philosophies of *life*. This is to say that ethics, like hermeneutics, begins in life—in the finite, historically conditioned and culturally embedded person—and manifests itself in life, as a kind of understanding which is both theoretical and practical, taking its shape through the way one engages in

concrete behavior. As such it rejects the formalism and methodology of other ethical theories, centering instead on the practical living out of ones prejudices and values. Yet it maintains a substantial role for the obligatoriness of the moral phenomenon by maintaining the need for the ethical life to be one in conversation, open to the ways in which the Truth and the Good reveal themselves, affecting and transforming my own conceptions and values. One might suppose Gadamer's ethics to be rather fanciful, envisioning a form of life which is rather foreign to what we actually see. Perhaps this latter part is so; yet perhaps this is due to the widespread influence of those theoretical presumptions that we have suggested are illusory. Indeed, one has to wonder what we might see were people instead to see themselves and the ethical life in a Gadamerian way.