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Education and the Formative Power of Hermeneutic Practice¹

Nicholas Davey

Abstract

This paper seeks to clarify the educational role and effects of hermeneutic practice. The argument is that far from becoming irrelevant to the ever changing needs of the social economy, the humanities and especially the hermeneutic practices on which they depend, are vital to intensifying those processes of social and cultural renewal upon which the well-being of a community depends.

Keywords

Hermeneutics, interpretation, incommensurability, subject-matters, practice, education, social renewal

Statement of Aims

This paper endeavours to demonstrate that hermeneutic practices have indirect formative educative effects that are key to processes of social transformation and re-vitalisation. Not only do hermeneutic processes interpret cultural change but they can initiate it. The argument does not seek to legitimise hermeneutic practice by subsuming it within a preferred educational ideology. This would instrumentalise hermeneutic practice as a means of achieving pre-defined objectives and render it a tool of social management. Such an outcome could not have been further from

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Gadamer's mind when he argued that the task of university education is to allow individuals to create their own free spaces and for them to move there in (Gadamer, 1992, p. 59). It is precisely the non-utility of hermeneutic practices which make them so vital to education and to encouraging those processes of experiential transformation upon which cultural and economic rejuvenation depend.

To understand the relevance of hermeneutic practices to both humanities education and the task of social renewal, we need to think about philosophical hermeneutics differently. We need to take a step beyond Gadamer and consider the anthropological dimensions of hermeneutic practice and their effects. With this step, the educational and socially generative powers of hermeneutic practice will become apparent. This also has a bearing upon how post-Gadamerian hermeneutics might develop.

Working within a Heideggerian architectonic, Gadamer establishes the philosophical pre-conditions governing the possibility of understanding. These articulated ontologically are that any literary or historical experience of meaning is preconditioned by the enabling fact of existence within the horizons of language and tradition. Appropriately, the nature of cultural and historical transmission figures prominently in Gadamer's reflections. The argument that a cultural work is historically constituted by its effects is central to Hans Jauss's and Wolfgang Iser's development of reception theory.¹ The latter reveals what is missing from Gadamer's position: A clear account of how the processes of historical transmission work. This is not fully given by Iser but his emphasis upon the effects of interpretation-practices moves in an appropriate direction. Gadamer's hermeneutics provides a classic explication of what hermeneutic practice pre-supposes but leaves the key question unanswered: *What is it about the givens of tradition and linguisticity that render hermeneutic practice transformatively effective in experiential terms?* What are the operative "mechanics" of hermeneutic practice through which its effects are generated? If we can understand the mechanics of hermeneutic practice, we can appreciate their effects and if we can understand how they are achieved, we can understand the pivotal educational importance of hermeneutic practice. The transformative effects of hermeneutic practice (and hence their educational significance) are a consequence of (1) interpretation's anticipation of completeness being applied within, (2), the indeterminate horizons of linguistic meaning. The social and educational relevance of hermeneutics is a consequence of the productive tension between the aims of hermeneutic practice—the achievement of completion—and the environment of linguistic indeterminacy in which that achievement is pursued.

The Practice Turn

Why the practice turn within hermeneutic reflection? Without reflecting on the nature of hermeneutic practice itself we will fail to grasp its educational importance. To do this we need to think about hermeneutics slightly differently: we need to consider hermeneutic practices from the "outside" as it were, and seek to grasp the mechanisms which both institute and constitute hermeneutic experience. We need to ask not what these mechanisms are for but what do they do? To understand what something does, is to understand its effects.

¹ See in particular Wolfgang Iser (2000), *The Range of Interpretation*, New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

We must start to think of hermeneutics as something other than a variety of interpretive methods evolved toward pre-defined objectives irrespective of whether they be philological correction or the reconstruction of a rational intentionality. Nietzsche was on to something when he commented, “the most valuable insights are methods”: The instituting of practices generates the valuable insight (Nietzsche, 1968, sec 469). It is not the objective of a hermeneutic practice that matters but what the pursuit of that objective engenders irrespective of any prior intention.

The social and educational importance of hermeneutic practices lies in their ability to induce serendipitous events which can have significant effects on the horizons of understanding within which they are applied. Nietzsche’s observation that a thought strikes us of its own accord rather than when we want it to is correct (Nietzsche, 1973, part 1, sec 17), yet, this does not mean that emergences or epiphanies of insight originate *ex nihilo*. To the contrary, they are an effect of the fact that the matrix of human understanding is instituted by a constant interplay of multiple horizons of understanding, some linguistic, some cultural and others biographical. The serendipitous emergences of insight are the effect of participating in the multiple horizons of understanding which constitute our *lifeworld*. If so, the question is how to keep these different horizons of understanding in play for it is from out of this play that the serendipitous event of transformative experience can arise.

Emergence and Emergency

The emergence of new insight and meanings is never *ex nihilo* but *contextual*: It presupposes intellectual, linguistic, and historical horizons from within which new perspectives arise. Albeit that these horizons operate within historical *a priori* structures of reception, they are finite, permeable, and unstable. Their instability reflects the fact that their constituting subject-matters are open-ended frameworks of meaning constantly susceptible to re-interpretation. Such indeterminacy of meaning is vital to the humanities allowing its meanings to alter and accrue historically: It always permits something more to be said and the disclosure of unexpected determinations of meaning that the contingencies of our historical or linguistic location often prevent us from seeing. Put another way, the effects that hermeneutic practices achieve depend on the contexts of linguistic indeterminacy in which they operate. The productivity of hermeneutic practice (its ability to disrupt established meanings and create new ones) is dependent upon an incommensurable relation: the horizon of linguistic indeterminacy in which hermeneutic practices operate, will always be at odds with the quest for completeness they pursue. At least three factors render this incommensurability productive: the pursuit of excellence within a practice; the quest for a firmer grasp of a founding truth within a practice; and, finally, the generative capacities of interpretative practices themselves.

With regard to excellence, hermeneutic practices also generate instability within received horizons of understanding because of their normative nature. Alasdair MacIntyre suggests that practices have built into them socially developed expectations of excellence (MacIntyre, 1993, p. 187). Excellence is always contentious and by its nature provokes disagreement and debate. What is more, contested traditions are more often than not intellectually vibrant ones. However, it is not just the normative quest for a more articulate interpretation that drives a hermeneutic practice; it is also the incompleteness of its grounding understanding.

Concerning the quest for a firmer grasp of a founding truth, no historical community owns its truths or meanings. Each requires historical time to fill out their content. As Rowan Williams argues, “there is an indefinite time opened up for (the) reception and interpretation (of such truths); (their) object is located outside the closures of specific conflicts and settlements of interest” (Williams, 2012, p. 15). Precisely because no community can assert complete authority over its truths without denying their transcendent nature, that community is exposed to recognizing the possibility that a foreign tradition may hold an unseen aspect of its own founding truths. The impetus to closure (which is not to say it is achievable) produces instability: by seeking in the foreign a completer understanding of its own position, a community opens itself to truth claims other than its own.

Turning to the generative capacities of interpretive practices, the fragmented nature of experience also has us looking for threads of narrative completeness so that we can make sense of our historical predicament. Gadamer talks in *Truth and Method* of an anticipation of completeness whereby we strive to eliminate the undecided and ambiguous in experience and achieve a *completion of meaning* such that no lines of meaning scatter in the void (Gadamer, 1960/1989, p. 113). The point is not whether such a completion can be achieved but that such quests often provoke new and unexpected alignments of the part-whole relationships that constitute human experience. Interpretation emerges as a practice of proliferation generating additional possibilities from within the subject-matters shaping our horizons.

In summary, we have argued that the conditions governing the emergence of new insight and meaning involve the following. (1) Hermeneutic practices always operate contextually within horizons from which new perspectives arise. (2) Practices are normative in that they seek from within their operational horizons more precise articulations of their subject-matters. (3) The impetus to completeness drives a practice to confront alien perspectives. (4) Hermeneutic differentials (the incommensurable gap between how a subject-matter is conceived and how it is applied) renders interpretation not a practice of closure but one of proliferation. The dynamics of proliferation relate to the incommensurability at the heart of hermeneutic practice.

The infinity of meaning that constitutes the linguistic horizon of understanding spurs hermeneutic practices toward a completer grasp of their incompletely grasped truths. Yet, precisely, because of the infinite relatedness of linguistic meaning, the more hermeneutic practices seek closure, the more they open other possibilities of meaning capable of challenging the truths they have a slim grip on. No practice owns its subject-matter. The indefiniteness of meaning surrounding them allows them to function more as open constellations of concern rather than as determinate concepts. I might as an 18th century aesthician believe that the pursuit of beauty embraces a humanizing concern with balance, harmony and proportion. The author of the *Iliad* knew otherwise: Helen of Troy’s beauty is connected with disharmony, misery and war. Any Cartesian or Idealist aesthician advocating the humanizing virtue of beauty must also contend with its darker maddening powers.

The ability of hermeneutic practices to generate meanings does not just depend upon their subject-matters standing in an opaque field of meaning. It also requires that different fields repeatedly inter-penetrate one another. Subject-matters always reside in other words. They are in

Rosenzweig's term "indefinable:" Temporary historical articulations of meaning that because of the inter-relatedness of all linguistic meaning, contain an infinity of possible meanings yet to be drawn out from them. It is also clear that linguistic meanings can cross and penetrate multiple horizons of concern. Like concepts, they "cut-across one another" (Wittgenstein, 1967, p. 379). Nothing is commoner, Wittgenstein argues, for the meaning of an expression to oscillate, for a phenomenon to be regarded sometimes as a symptom, sometimes a criterion, of a state of affairs (p. 438). A shift of meaning, a new semantic emergence, in one horizon can create an emergency in another. Does this introduce an insurmountable negativity into the argument?

The capacity of hermeneutic practices to generate disruptive effects within established bodies of meaning seems to concede the critical case to post-structuralist and deconstructive critics of hermeneutics and the humanities. In formal terms, it would appear that deconstruction is indeed correct. The finite nature of understanding combined with the infinite horizon of linguistic meaning conspire to guarantee that there can be no final interpretation. Nevertheless, the finitude of understanding allows accrual and exchange between perspectives. However, the inconclusive openness that deconstruction derides in hermeneutics is precisely what an education in the humanities depends on. Indeed, from within the perspective of the humanities, the demand for certainty and a final interpretation is incoherent. An end-interpretation which realized all the possible determinations of a subject matter's meaning would foreclose those free spaces of possibility from within which new learning and action may arise. Furthermore, in times of social and economic upheaval it is precisely the practices that question institutionalized understandings and open new possibilities or understanding that are needed. The capacity of hermeneutic practices to achieve unintended effects that place our perspectives in a new light accords them the agency of change. Coming to understand through the temporal diversity of experience a greater number of a subject matter's possible determinations, allows that subject-matter to become in Gadamer's phrase "more what it is." This, however, is not the only salient educative point.

The drive by hermeneutic practice to overcome the differentials of understanding may productively displace established perspectives on canonical texts (and thereby remind us of the finitude of our judgment) but it affects another more personal dimension of our understanding. When I write about a certain philosophical problem professionally, I do so from within a specialist academic practice with a well-defined objective: To achieve a more adequate understanding of a hermeneutic issue. Blanks in an interpretation may need filling out and, for the sake of its credibility, inconsistencies removed. This formal exercise does not just take place within the horizon of philosophical tradition but also within the existential horizons of my understanding. These horizons are not discrete. Like concepts and subject-matters, they inter-leave and over-lap. Linguality guarantees this. Questions of what it means to be a good husband, a good citizen or a European are not just for moral and political philosophy. They are questions which probe my self-understanding and identity. As Wittgenstein remarks, subject-matters and concepts "cut-across one another" (Wittgenstein, 1967, p. 379). A shift of meaning in one horizon can create an emergency in another. The anticipation of completeness is not just a feature of academic practice but a projective structure within all human experience. Experience is full of contradictions, unresolved questions and unrealized expectations that we yearn to make sense of, complete and fulfil. The partial coherence of such experience suggests the possibility of an as yet undiscovered insight that might render the presently incoherent, narratively coherent.

The horizon of academic life may (because of professionalization) be increasingly separated from that of the everyday but Gadamer's notion of linguality shows that it is not. What sensitizes me to the discovery of new meanings and to changes in established ones is that as a human being of incomplete experience, I am always alert to the configurations of meaning that might make sense of a key problem or difficulty. An anticipation of completeness is as cardinal feature of lived-experience as it is of reading a novel. This suggests that whilst the anticipation of completeness drives hermeneutic practice toward a fuller articulation of a subject-matter's meaning, its generation of new meanings might have unanticipated consequences for my self-understanding. This offers purchase on the questions of how hermeneutic practices produce unexpected effects within the matrix of understanding. The argument returns us to the two operative principles (1) the indeterminacy of linguistic meaning and (2) the impetus to completion.

Hermeneutic Effects

The unexpected effects of understanding are the result of what is already at play within our hermeneutic horizons. This involves the indeterminacy of linguistic meaning and the drive to completion. Regarding (1), the indeterminacy of linguistic meaning; the principle establishes the logical basis of the claim that by virtue of being a language speaker I am connected to networks of meaning I am not presently conscious of. In other words, the transformative effects of hermeneutic practice are a consequence of the inter-relatedness of linguistic meaning. Only because the term "leisure" is already etymologically connected to the latin *scola* could the discovery of that connection transform my hitherto limited grasp of the word. The term has little to do with modern notions of relaxation but more with achieving a freedom from everyday labors in order to learn and contemplate. It was an inarticulate anticipation of a better account of aesthetic disinterest that prompted an enquiry into the connections between leisure and disinterested looking. Hermeneutic practice did the rest. Because of the etymological connections between leisure, *scola* and seeing disinterestedly, a new meaning of aesthetic community arose. The point is simply this: the transformative effects of this localized hermeneutic practice were the direct consequence of that practice's anticipation of completeness exposing and animating hidden conceptual connections within the indeterminate horizon of linguality. It is the pursuit of a better, more comprehensive interpretation which can both expand and unsettle commitments to meaning in the horizons within which that completer interpretation is pursued. This re-iterates the observation that hermeneutic practice is performative: It produces emergent phenomena capable of equally expanding and disrupting established meanings. A key meaning of the verb to educate is to draw or lead out. Hermeneutic practice achieves this. A hermeneutic account of education will have little to do with technical training but more to do with freeing spaces in which new alignments of meaning can arise.

Concerning (2) the capacity of the impetus to completion to induce unexpected effects in the matrix of understanding; some of Wittgenstein's comments about interpretation are insightful. In *Zettel* he comments,

1. ...to interpret, to give the final interpretation which is not a further sign or picture, but something else—the thing that cannot be further interpreted. But what we have reached is a *psychological*, not a logical terminus. (Wittgenstein, 1967, p. 231)

2. What happens is not that this symbol cannot (logically speaking) be further interpreted, but: I do no (more) interpreting. I do not interpret because I feel at home in the present picture. When I interpret, I step from one level of thought to another. (1967, p. 234)

That hermeneutics grants (a) that all linguistic meaning is indeterminate and (b) that there is no end to interpretation, seems to render the drive to completeness logically futile. It is, however, not the achievement of completion that matters but what the quest for it gives rise to, its effects, as it were. Wittgenstein recognises this. That there is no end, logically speaking, to the ways a symbol may be interpreted does not mean that a *practical* closure of interpretation is impossible. Wittgenstein's remark that I do no more interpreting when I have reached a psychological terminus clearly implies that I stop interpreting, that I reach a sort of hermeneutic (though not a logical) terminus. The question is, what is it that induces me to stop? Gadamer might argue that I stop interpreting when the text or art work speaks to me, that is, when a certain *hermeneutic* closure of meaning occurs. For Wittgenstein I stop interpreting when I feel at ease within a certain framework of meaning: I know how to move around it as if I were at home within it. Practical closure is achieved: no longer am I standing outside a framework of meaning analysing it, as it were, but have returned inside it and know how to proceed according to its rules. I do no more interpreting because of something *already* at play in my understanding. It is precisely because I carry within me a whole range of unanswered questions and unresolved experiences that I am vulnerable to the sudden emergence of an image or phrase which can unexpectedly bring those experiences and questions into a meaningful frame. This does not imply that *the* meaning of ambiguous text or experience has been found. As Wittgenstein's position implies, the text logically speaking can always be further interpreted. Nevertheless, the fact remains that I stop interpreting and I refrain from further hermeneutic activity and arguably I do so because a chance epiphany of meaning answers an unresolved ambiguity active in my horizons of understandings. Furthermore, the quest for closure in one framework may give rise serendipitously to a whole range of unexpected associations of meaning which though they might not achieve the sought after closure in one discourse might nevertheless resolve ambiguities in other horizons of concern. An example might be instructive.

What did Nietzsche mean when he asserted that it was of the utmost importance to give style to one's life? Pursuing this question will give rise to a parallel concern with the shaping power of narrative structure. Style and narrative both offer ways of giving unity to multiplicities but, as always, the question is which structure to choose? Argument is truly engaged: Followers of Galen Strawson on the one hand and Alasdair MacIntyre on the other dispute whether with human life becomes insufferably restricted by the imposition of a narrative structure upon it, or becomes quite unintelligible without it. Strawson's scepticism reflects a criticism made of Gadamer. When Gadamer argues that an encounter with art reveals the "hermeneutic continuity of human existence," he has no right (it is claimed) to assume without warrant that life has such a continuity. Now, it would be churlish to suppose that these issues concern just academic charge and counter-charge. They also speak to how we orientate ourselves to experience. A chance remark of Wittgenstein offered a serendipitous solution to both the formal and existential dimensions of Nietzsche's question. The key hermeneutic point is that the remark could not have done so had my academic and personal horizons not already attuned me to the possibility of an answer. Wittgenstein remarks that "seeing life as a weave" implies a "pattern" that "is not always

complete and is varied in a multiplicity of ways” (Wittgenstein, 1967, p. 568). The argument is, then, that there is no narrative or style to be imposed on life; there is no continuity which a life has. Much rather, it is a question of drawing out the implications of those possibilities *already at play* within one’s horizons. It is the ever changing patterns of one’s involvements that gives sense to, give style to a life, not any narrative imposed upon it. The question of what style to adopt for one’s life arguably disappears. It becomes a question of becoming more what one is, that is, of pursuing the concerns and interests already at play within one’s existence. The salient point is that Nietzsche’s question and its existential implications sensitize and pre-dispose me to Wittgenstein’s remark. I am hermeneutically primed to be receptive to it for it offers a way of closing the problematic that Nietzsche’s question opened. I no longer interpret Nietzsche’s question because I have found a way of living within its entailments.

Formally speaking, my way of living with Nietzsche’s question does not constitute a logical terminus to its interpretation. The indeterminacy of linguistic meaning implies that the nature of the question and its possible answers always remain open. Yet the hermeneutic effect (my response) is not arbitrary: it touches on sensitive issues within my existential horizons. Wittgenstein’s remark meets what my anticipation of completeness strives for. However, though the solution may fit the needs of my present existential horizons, it always remains vulnerable to the challenge of future experience.

Education: Hermeneutics as Disruption

At the heart of this argument is an anthropological speculation: Change and its challenge is fundamental to human existence. Gadamer indicates that understanding is never stable but always reflects the type of beings-in motion that we are (Gadamer, 1989, p. xxx). What he describes as the negativity of experience—the capacity of change to disrupt expectancy—has always disturbed human beings. Academia is not immune from such disruption. There is no doubt that the global economic crisis and the merchandising of university education pose serious challenges to the teaching of the humanities. Their lack of obvious material productivity in a shrinking economy questions their contribution to social wealth. However, educating communities only in today’s productive technologies in effect condemns them to future redundancy. It is the capacity to meet social and economic change that matters, not the short-term ability to render oneself safe from a challenge that will always return. The contrast between technological and humanities based education is in this respect stark. The implementation of technological systems demands the elimination of chance and disruption. The well-being of the humanities demands the opposite: The generation of chance and disruption. Only in times of paradigm crises are technological disciplines forced to re-appraise their operating parameters where as in the humanities, the dynamics and context of hermeneutic practice guarantee to keep their self-understanding in permanent crisis. This is a point of dual importance.

1. The significance of hermeneutic practice within the humanities is that it offers experiences both of change and disruption and of learning how to control such “negativity of experience” in safe and creative ways. This is the vital relevance of the humanities to the social economy: Using personal experience it teaches how to react positively and creatively to the demands of radical change. In times of crisis who is more deployable: those trained in systemized logics of the same and the repeatable or

those who have acquired the disruptive skills of creative thinking and who can confront difference, disruption and change? If humanities academics thought more of the hermeneutic effects of their practices, their economic and social value would be self-evident.

2. From an anthropological perspective, the provocation of change is fundamental to the development and testing of human capacities. Francisco Varela, the Brazilian phenomenologist and anthropologist, speculates that if human beings had a fixed essence with a determinate set of response repertoires, human survival in a world of constant flux would have been comprised long ago: “Living systems are autopoietic insofar as they have no essence that they could appeal to or draw from in order to function” (Varela, 1979, p. 107). “As the system has no essence, it must avail itself of... previous behavioural patterns and processes potentially all the efforts it has made to ensure self-maintenance” (Iser, 1968/2000, p. 105). For Michael Oakeshott, we are essentially narrative creating creatures, continually assessing collected experience discursively. The importance of hermeneutic practices within the humanities is that they institute mechanisms for constantly probing received wisdom. Their importance for education and social rejuvenation resides in their capacity for generating controlled disruption.

Part of the persuasiveness of Varela’s argument is that it links Gadamer’s account of education with its idealist background. Varela presents the organic nature of human life as a system that “has no goal outside itself.” “It must take up what it has already developed earlier as guidance for maintaining self-organisation” (Iser, 1968/2000, p. 105). “Recursive history allows the system to reactivate its own past as an interlocked history of structural transformations” (p. 105). These remarks compare well with Gadamer’s presentation of *Bildung* as the self-formation of human beings through self-education, a complex notion which has roots in philosophical romanticism.

Bildung is not achieved in the manner of a technical construction, but grows out of an inner process of formation and cultivation, and therefore remains in a state of continual *Bildung*... Like Nature, *Bildung* has no goals outside itself... In having no goals outside itself, the concept *Bildung* transcends that of the mere cultivation of given talents. (Gadamer, 1989, p. 11)

Bildung is not a point of graduation, more a mode of being that knows how to keep the different horizons informing experience in constant play. The play is crucial for, as we have argued, it sets the circumstances out of which unexpected hermeneutic effects can arise.

In Hermeneutic Workshops

In the essay *The Idea of the University* Gadamer asserts that the very task of university education is to “find free spaces and learn to move therein” (1992, p. 59). Education is thus a matter of finding the “truly open questions and therefore the possibilities that exist.” Moving into this openness is a passage into something more than something known, more than something

learnable "... it is a passage into a place where something happens to us" (p. 59). Gadamer's invocation of the "free space" offers a useful summary point for our argument.

1. The "free space" Gadamer's speaks of is the space of hermeneutic inter-play between the indeterminacy of all linguistic meaning and the impetus to completion.
2. The impetus to completion seeks to actualise many of the possibilities for meaning held within the indeterminate horizons of language. Hermeneutic practice is educative in that it *draws out* possibilities for new insight from what is already at play within our personal and collective horizons of understanding.
3. Hermeneutic practice is attentive to that space of inter-play. Within that space, hermeneutic practice is a way of encouraging the emergence of new modes of understanding by reason of our involvement in that space and not because of any deliberate intention.

There is an obvious critical *riposte*. How can such spaces be free when all cultural, linguistic spaces are determinate spaces? They cannot be, by definition, pre-suppositionless spaces. If they were, they could not be places of possibility. Skorupski comments that after Kant, "truly free thought... must investigate the conditions of its own possibility."² Gadamer describes the task of hermeneutics as enquiring into the very conditions of understanding. Free thought for Gadamer is not a question of pre-suppositionless understanding but of freeing thought from being exclusively concerned with the everyday in order to allow that which is already at play-within-one's thinking to unfold its possibilities. This indicates how close Gadamer remains to Lessing and Humboldt and their notions of history as the self-education of mankind. As John Burrows observes,

This concept (*Bildung*) contained, or could be invested with... the pre-supposition of an inner, spontaneous vitality, and of an, underlying coherence or pattern working itself out through an immense diversity and gaining nourishment from it, and of a creative, reciprocal relation to experience, in which even error and suffering were made meaningful through the concept of education. (Burrows, 1969, p. xviii)

The parallel with Gadamer's Hegelian notion of the negativity of experience and its classical roots in Aeschylus's conception of *pathei mathos* is striking. However, the useful aspect of this critical *riposte* is that offers the occasion to re-emphasize that Gadamer's appeal to a situated free space is an appeal to set free the possibilities that are already within our hermeneutic horizons. In this respect, Gadamer's free space is closer to Heidegger's notion of an "opening" or clearing.

The freedom of the open consists neither in unfettered arbitrariness nor in the constraint of mere laws. Freedom is that which conceals in a way that opens to light, in whose clearing there shimmers that veil that hides the essential occurrence of all truth and lets

² John Skorupski, *Why Read Mill today?* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 6. I am indebted to Robert Stern's "Hegelian Metaphysics," *Oxford Scholarship On-line* (Sep. 2009): doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199239108.001.0001.

the veil appear as that which veils. Freedom is the realm of destining that at any given time starts a revealing upon its way. (Heidegger, 1977, p. 25)

These remarks emphasize that freedom and free thinking involve not a vacuous, pre-suppositionless space but rather an acceptance of that which comes to and unfolds before us as a specific and actualisable set of existential possibilities. These remarks might strengthen the charge that the “free space” in question is the unfree space of tradition but, as we have commented, a truly pre-suppositionless space would be a space without possibility and, hence, without the opportunity for action. Without the exercise of hermeneutic practice, the generation of new insight is seriously diminished. A hermeneutically orientated education has to aspire to the public and private pursuit of those “free spaces” capable of drawing out those yet to be realised possibilities already at play within our various horizons of understanding. A hermeneutically orientated education would entail the acquisition of those modes of attentive looking and reflection attuned to keeping those horizons in play. By perpetuating such movement, hermeneutic practice would create the conditions whereby emergent and transformative insight arise by default of engagement and participation rather than by deliberate planning or intention. In so far as such a mode of education initiates its participants in processes of extensive, profound but controlled intellectual and personal change, it is hard to think of what greater relevance to the practical and spiritual health of society the humanities could have.

A Virtuous Practice

We have argued that hermeneutic practice involves the inter-play of the indeterminacy of all linguistic meaning with the impetus to completion. The impetus to completion strives to actualise anticipated possibilities for meaning held within the indeterminate horizons of language. Hermeneutic practice is educative in that it *draws out* both anticipated and unexpected insights from what is already at play within our personal and collective horizons of understanding. As a way of encouraging the emergence of new modes of understanding, hermeneutic practice also generates its own effects. We might call these effects the virtues of hermeneutic practice. What virtues does the practice hermeneutics instill? The key dispositions are:

1. *A sensitivity to how the local and particular is resonant the transcendent.* The quest for completeness in horizons of linguistic indeterminacy necessarily leads to the emergence of meanings other than the expected. The emergence of such disruptive moments explodes the cogito of everyday consciousness and exposes it to the speculative reality that transcends each and every ego. Hermeneutics gives expression to a philosophy of praxis that opens self-consciousness to the speculative dimensions of the speech-created world that transcends it. Hermeneutic practice respects the local and particular as a gateway to the speculative reality beyond it.
2. *A faith in the always-more to be seen or understood.* Attention to hermeneutic detail encourages a patient reflective distance, an awareness that what a hermeneutic experience reveals of a work’s meaning is never complete or final. Hermeneutic practice cautions against any rush to judgment: No text or art work discloses itself completely; there is always something more that can be said.

3. *A readiness for the unexpected.* Exposure to the unexpected hermeneutic emergence does not deny the need for planning in any enterprise but recognizes that planning can have unexpected consequences and be frustrated by unforeseeable events. The incommensurability between the indeterminacy of linguistic meaning and the impetus to completion enables the humanities to become workshops for generating and coping with the unpredictable.
4. *An open and patient disposition toward the possible.* Hermeneutic practices encourage opening not toward emptiness but toward hitherto unseen possibilities within the seen. Hermeneutic practices reveal how all emergent phenomena can be other than how they present themselves. No interpretive task can formally be judged complete in that a text or artwork can always in principle reveal other of its aspects. Learning within the humanities is never complete.
5. *A willingness to take part in communicative exchange.* Although philosophical hermeneutics correctly emphasizes that dialogical exposure to pre-suppositions other than one's own can make one think differently about one's initial points or orientation, the very act of participating in dialogue can have unintended effects. A certain accidental turn of phrase or a chance association of images can offer surprise closures of meaning within a certain horizons of expectancy. Not only is individual participation a force for collective emergence but simply by being willing to speak we can unbeknown to ourselves help others to come to an unexpected understanding.
6. *A courageous openness to experience and inter-disciplinarity.* A hermeneutic orientation to leaning becomes ever more conscious of the fact that experience concerns the process of drawing out the possibilities that are already at play within one's horizon. This implies a willingness to think differently about one's involvements, and to adopt different experiential and intellectual perspectives toward them, precisely to the end of finding in them unseen or overlooked aspects. A hermeneutic approach to education is acutely aware of the constant need for circumstances and experiences that force us to think differently. Hans-Georg Gadamer's inter-disciplinary hermeneutics can be understood as an eloquent protest against the limitations of living only one life.³
7. *A modesty of disposition to the unknown and the unexpected.* The "negativity of experience" always offers a painful reminder that we are not gods, that we are only too capable of getting it wrong, that we do not know it all, and that (thankfully) horizon of learning is always open.
8. *A detached but committed attentiveness.* Hermeneutic practices establish a "free space" whereby the movements of the subject-matters that constitute our personal and collective lifeworlds can be discerned. Attending to movement in one horizon can induce transformative change in another. The impetus to completion drives hermeneutic attentiveness. Hermeneutic experience teaches, however, that rarely is it the meaning pursued that is productive but rather the transformative meanings which

³ To compare Gadamer's stance with that of Alexander Humboldt, see the latter's *The Limits of State Action*.

the quest gives rise to. Participation within the various horizons of understanding is key.

An Open Conclusion

The well-being of a tradition as well as of the horizons and concerns of a spectator require that they remain in motion. Movement, as Gadamer, insists is the life of the human spirit. Intellectual and creative renewal depends upon a degree of disruption. The vitality of social and economic endeavour let alone that of university education, demands adaptability and the skills of thinking beyond the restraints of the customary and the expected. Exposure to the strange and unexpected can be unsettling, but as Gadamer suggests, no one can be protected from experience (Gadamer, 1989, p. 356). In an environment of change, a creature formed by dint of experience survives only by constantly questioning and testing its expectancies. Here, the social and economic significance of the humanities can be effectively and emphatically asserted. The practice of hermeneutic attentiveness across the humanities requires controlled environments within which participants can safely expose their cultural expectancies to the unexpected and test their capability for transformative response. It is impossible to predict the nature and extent of the challenges that the future holds but the quality and depth of response will be key. If transformative experience arises when the horizons of meaning attached to cultural works collide serendipitously with those of the spectator, the extent and creativity of the spectator's response will be informed by the width of the cultural horizons they can draw on. The value of discipline canons is not that they perpetrate exemplary practice but that they lay down in the spectator the foundations of response-repertoires that only the future will probe and test. Not to invest in the attentive practices of the humanities; not to nurture the ability to dwell within spaces of hermeneutic challenge, and not to teach how to be patient in developing as yet unknown but wished for responses to such provocations, is to disinvest in our collective ability to respond creatively to the inevitable challenges of the future.

Notes

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