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**The Rabbi and the Gadfly:**

**Finitude and the Dialectic Tradition and Critique**

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INTRODUCTION

Children summon all societies to education; the Gospel calls all believers to prophetic critique and evangelism. In these activities human agents advance a set of life-forming convictions. This was once uncontroversial; no one thought that attempting to mold or revise what people think might be oppressive or even violent. But now, with greater realization of the diversity of human backgrounds, and of how individuals reflect (and are limited by) their particular backgrounds, doubts have crept in. If everyone falls far short of “objectivity,” or the God’s-eye view, what could justify anyone’s attempt to shape, or change, how other people see and think? Such attempts may aim to be beneficial, but can come across, from another point of view, as an unwelcome disturbance or a choice-threatening endeavor of control. How could effort of this kind be anything but self-assertive, and likely self-aggrandizing, manipulation?

What underlies these doubts is the now-familiar sense of the “postmodern,” which has radically undermined the concept of the timeless, unprejudiced self. The individual who thinks and perceives in independence of all previous interpretation is now widely seen as a fantasy, an impossibility. Yet if the postmodern shift touches all thoughtful people, so does ambivalence about it. Parents still support formal education for their children, although formal education instills a particular tradition. Religious believers who bear witness to their faith often feel more reticent now, less sure of themselves.

My purpose is to introduce a philosophical development with roots in post-Reformation piety in order to extract insight morally pertinent to all of this. Everyone here is familiar with “hermeneutics” as a strategy for reading Scripture. Fewer are familiar with how this strategy eventually gave rise to “philosophical hermeneutics,” a twentieth-century movement relevant not just to the reading of texts but also to all human understanding and conversation. In its light, and with a view especially to the movement’s most important proponent, Hans-Georg Gadamer, I am going to reflect on how we may give voice, responsibly, to our convictions. Despite the postmodern turn, human beings still affirm what they believe and take to be important. Where ambivalence about postmodern sensibility veers toward antipathy, or into opportunism, people lapse easily, as we all know, into brash, unruly arrogance. What, then, might constitute an “ethics of affirmation,” or of how we *ought* to deal with our convictions in a time of doubt, reticence and (ironically) bull-headed self-assertion?

That question kindles the analysis that follows. Also germane to it is the contrast between two icons of Western antiquity. One is Jesus of Nazareth, whom the Gospels characterize as (among other things)—a rabbi. Like John the Baptist, Jesus devoted himself to exploring and instilling Israel’s vocation. He disrupted religious convention, but was at all times beholden to the Torah and the Prophets. When he was amending his tradition, he was still teaching it. He looked for what was best in what he himself had been taught, and sought to hand it on.

Jesus presumed, then, to have substantial positive knowledge of how best to live. Socrates also had such convictions, but he specialized in raising questions. He challenged people’s beliefs, hoping to provoke them out of complacency and ruts. Critics like Aristophanes denounced him as a subverter of the moral order, and although Socrates disagreed, he did describe himself as a stinging gadfly. His work, he told the Athenians, was “alighting upon you at every point to arouse, persuade, and reproach each of you all day long” (Apology 30e). Socrates questioned tradition; he did not focus on instilling it.

Both figures shared an agenda of human betterment by way, at least in part, of words. With respect, however, to how we deal with our convictions, secular orthodoxy reveres Socrates above Jesus. But on my reading, the story of philosophical hermeneutics invites another thought: the image Jesus embodied—not the gadfly questioning tradition but the rabbi instilling it—is equally pertinent. It is now time to see why.

HERMENEUTICAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Modern philosophy has been a long conversation about knowledge. The Enlightenment thinkers Descartes and Kant wanted to liberate our search for knowledge from the influence of prejudice and tradition. Another issue was how to access other people’s minds, and so to feel confident that we actually understand them. With the coming of the nineteenth century, Protestant theologian-philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher became one of the first to address this challenge. What conditions must be met, he asked, for understanding to occur?

Scholars had already concluded that a “circular movement between part and whole” affects such efforts (Zimmerman, 2015: 25). They realized that we construe the parts of what we interpret in light of what we think about the whole, and the whole in light of what we think about the parts. This is the familiar “hermeneutic circle,” and Schleiermacher saw that it affects *all* our attempts at knowing, not just the reading of texts. But in order to avoid ever-looming *mis*understanding—a key threat for Schleiermacher, and one somewhat different from merely failing to understanding—the interpreter must struggle not only with the hermeneutic circle, but also with grasping the language of the (often very distant) speaker, author or artist, as well as the pertinent historical context. Finally, the interpreter must, by an “intuitive leap” (Zimmerman, 2016:28), enter the other person’s mind, or “individuality” (Gadamer, 1989: 186). Divine power, pulsing through all of life, assures, Schleiermacher held, that by such hermeneutical exertion understanding can occur, even “across time and language” (Zimmerman, 2015: 25).

The next great figure in the story of hermeneutics was Wilhelm Dilthey, who rejected appeals to the divine but sought, nevertheless, to make hermeneutics a methodological basis for the human sciences equal in rigor to methods used in the natural sciences. Then, in the twentieth century, Martin Heidegger, yet another German, completely overturned the ideal of the scholar who “successfully extricates himself” from “entanglements” associated with a particular history (Linge 1976: xiv). On Heidegger’s view, not just scholars but all human beings are—*interpreters*. Each of us is embedded in a particular, life-shaping history where we try to make productive sense of what we encounter. We perceive what we encounter, moreover, through the language we use. This language guides “perception” by providing a “*pre-understanding*”of what we attempt to “interpret” (Zimmerman, 2015,15) Motivated by need and hope, we try to engage the world fruitfully, with our “preunderstanding” as what enables us to engage it at all. The human condition is that of appropriating understanding given by the past and then of reshaping it in light of projects we pursue within “our own present situation” (2015: 34-38).

Hans-Georg Gadamer, Heidegger’s student, now steps in, developing, during a lifetime that spanned the entire (!) twentieth century, what he called “philosophical hermeneutics.” For him, hermeneutics was not just a “methodology” or “technique” for comprehending hard-to-grasp texts or other phenomena, but an account of how all human understanding happens. He was not “‘*proposing a method*,’” but “‘describing *what is the case*’” (Gadamer 1989: 512).As I now explore his description further, my interest is light on how to deal with moral conviction in a time of postmodern sensibility. What might an “ethics of affirmation” look like? Is Socrates, the self-described gadfly, the most important part of the answer? How might the image of the rabbi, the teacher who expounds and instills a particular tradition, also come into play, and why?

Gadamer’s masterwork is *Truth and Method*, which appeared in 1960. Here and in other writings he argues that efforts of interpretation *constitute* the human condition and that “hermeneutical consciousness”—ever-keener awareness of, and engagement with, the process of interpretation—is therefore crucial. One aspect of the argument is his insistent reminder of human *finitude*. We occupy no God-like vantage point. Our awareness is “historically effected,” or formed (and limited) by our particular language and tradition (1989: 299, 454). Certain “fore-conceptions,” some of them misleading, affect all our thinking (1989: 269-270). Although we can transcend our “particularity” and rise to higher understanding, we cannot transcend finitude. Thus the “whole idea of a unique, correct interpretation” of anything becomes “absurd.” (1989: 304,118).

Another aspect of the argument is Gadamer’s repudiation of Enlightenment bias against tradition and authority. Unquestioning deference to authority does block off other pathways to insight. But if some person, institution or tradition is a source of “prejudices” that actually help, including ones that cannot be, or have not yet been, exhaustively “examined,” one reason is that some such prejudices are “true” (1989: 273,275). When I bend to authority, I may be acknowledging what Gadamer calls “earned” authority; I may be trusting, that is, “the better insight of others” (1989: 281). The distinction between “true prejudices” and “false” or misleading ones remains, of course, and continues to matter. But if tradition, and the authority it bears, is indispensable, so is openness to revision of it.

Relentless devotion to conversation, or dialogue, is a third aspect of Gadamer’s account. Openness consists substantially in engagement with points of view not our own. Intellectual integrity requires me to enlarge my horizon of awareness through self-questioning dialogue with “otherness,” with “opposed thinkers, with new critical tests, with new experiences” (1989: 272, 551). In an ideal conversation, participants look for points of “agreement,” some “fusion of horizons,” as Gadamer famously puts it, that *advances* “self-formation” (1989: 337,292). Questioning and answering engenders still more questioning and answering, always with the goal that “truth finally emerges” (1989: 356, 361).

So knowledge arises by way of self-questioning dialogue. But in stressing this point, Gadamer pays little attention to convictional affirmation, or what we might call tradition *assertion*. One Gadamer scholar reflects this fact in his own analysis. Having noted our finitude, and the way dialogic encounter can, nevertheless, pull us toward “self-transcendence and growth,” Scherto Gill identifies four main aspects of Gadamer’s “ethics of dialogue (2015:14).

One of these aspects he calls “the ethics of alterity,” or “otherness” (Gill 2015: 16, 17). When we meet with a point of view that is “alien” and puts our own “prejudices” in question, “openness” is morally required. Our ability to question ourselves can mature only as we pay self-risking attention to points of view different from our own. Gill calls the second aspect of dialogue ethics the “ethics of self-cultivation” (2015: 17). If our finitude requires humility it also summons us to aspiration: perfect understanding is impossible, but we can and ought to *grow* in understanding. Here, too, the key is dialogue. Self-cultivation happens *through* a kind of “mutually enriching” give-and-take that is at once “productive and transformational” (2015: 18,19). Gill speaks next of “the ethics of mutuality.” When two interlocutors with different histories cooperate toward deeper grasp of a subject, the “interplay” of different times and horizons generates “new meaning,” or insight (2015: 20). From this Gill moves on, finally, to what he calls “the ethics of solidarity.” Still echoing Gadamer, he notes that language, like air, is indispensable, the very “‘medium of human being’” (2015: 21; Gadamer 1976: 68). And because language is necessarily shared, we belong necessarily to “the sphere of ‘we,’” and can see that our being is necessarily “‘being-together.’” This makes solidarity a moral demand, or “universal human task” (2015: 22). Language alerts us to solidarity; solidarity calls forth moral commitment to still deeper and wider solidarity. As in the case, for example, of the environmental movement, the experience of solidarity can enable diverse peoples to see “‘new ways’” in which we are, all of us, “‘bound together’” (Gill 2015:23; Walhof 2006: 586).

But Gill’s fourfold analysis is incomplete. Surely the ethics of dialogue must also attend to affirmation, or tradition *assertion*. In a provisional (and far too abbreviated) way, that is what we turn to now.

THE ETHICS OF AFFIRMATION

Conversation presumes partners who *affirm* what they believe and take to be important. It could not otherwise be illuminating. Properly “open” participants would have little to open up *to* if no challenging words came into play. So if true conversation implies flexibility in the face of alien perspectives, it also implies that participants announce and attest to their own beliefs. Language itself instills a standpoint, or “view of the world.” (Gadamer 1989: 438). But if no rabbi and no one remotely like a rabbi—no parent or teacher or mentor—has helped bring conversation partners to knowledgeable *conviction* about some life-shaping agenda, the give-and-take must be bland, unchallenging, powerless to advance understanding.

Yet in Gadamerian light arrogance is forbidden. Finitude entailed by our embeddedness in particular histories and cultures is inescapable, and that means human language cannot offer a unique, correct interpretation of anything—not of political and economic theory, not of sexuality and gender, not of any question in metaphysics, not of any religious or moral teaching. Any effort, whether by individuals or institutions, to discourage openness and conversation is thus self-deceived and corrupt. In the human realm further consideration is *always* warranted; the “last word” never is. The point, though, is not to gut conviction altogether; that would cripple conversation and stifle understanding. The point is to uphold humility and truthfulness.

Everyone belongs to the “sphere of the ‘we,’” not in some general sense but as members of particular communities. How, then, ought “we”—whether as people of faith or citizens of a nation or members of any interest group—to deal with *conviction* amid *difference*? Without presuming to address countless nuances occasioned by individual make-up and specific circumstance, let me suggest three points: 1) We must embrace rabbinical concern with instilling traditions and we must embrace Socratic concern with complacency and ruts; moral integrity requires both. 2) We must shape our children toward the moral and spiritual agenda that seems best to us; at what we deem the appropriate age, and with due circumspection, we must also steer them, as we steer ourselves, toward encounter with “otherness,” and with the self-critique that such encounter brings about. 3) We must, insofar as we are able, couch all persuasion to our own perspectives as invitation to dialogue. Gadamer alludes to tradition-assertion without emphasizing it: conversation involves “giving” as well as “taking,” answers as well as questions (Gadamer 1989: 361). And he also, of course, offers his own philosophical account as worth coming to share. Still, one focus of that account is self-questioning through interaction with otherness, and so persuasion itself must embrace conversation. At all times there must be a dialectic of tradition and critique.

My purpose, I said at the start, is to extract, from a philosophical movement rooted in post-Reformation piety, insight morally pertinent in a time of postmodernity. But do the three points just articulated sabotage the passion for truth we all hold in such high regard? Have we, perhaps inadvertently, trod a path to pernicious relativism? The zeal for conversation these points reflect suggests that the answer is No. Still, it is worth ending with reference to Hans-Georg Gadamer’s own explicit repudiation of “linguistic relativism.” It is true that there can be no final, human account of anything, but conversation is still revealing, still disclosive. Limited by our own language, we are *not* bound by it. There is “absolutely no captivity within a language,” and dialogue among the many languages and points of view is a journey precisely toward—the truth (Gadamer 1975:15-16).

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