

Dialogue, Goodwill, Community

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Aristotle argues that friendship is characterized by recognized, reciprocal goodwill. Friends are concerned about each other; ideally they want the best for each other. Even masters and slaves can be friends, for, according to Aristotle, they can communicate and thus share in community with each other. As long as dialogue is possible, community exists, and friendship and goodwill are possible. Even when explaining the virtue of friendliness, Aristotle appeals to the virtues of dialogue—the friendly person is contrasted with both the argumentative person and the obsequious person, two people marked by their inability to collaborate in conversation. From the beginning, then, philosophers have connected dialogue, community, and goodwill—community and goodwill are conditions of dialogue, and perfected through dialogue. Hermeneutics, with its focus on dialogue, is the natural place to revitalize these ancient themes.

Dialogue is a central, distinctive feature of Hans-Georg Gadamer's philosophical hermeneutics. It is rare in nineteenth-century hermeneutics and it is all but absent in Martin Heidegger's philosophizing. In contrast, Gadamer "moved the idea of conversation to the very center of hermeneutics" (Gadamer 2001, 39). To appreciate how Gadamer brings back the ancient connection between dialogue, goodwill, and community we need to understand what Gadamer means by dialogue, as not every conversation is a dialogue, and many objections can be averted by knowing exactly what he means. For Gadamer, a dialogue is a collaborative activity of arriving at a shared, articulate understanding of a subject matter. It is collaborative in that it always involves at least two parties, usually two people but it could be a person and a text or a person and a work of art. Importantly, for Gadamer dialogue is always a three-part relation.

There are the two interlocutors and there is the subject matter about which they are collaboratively coming to a shared understanding. The understanding achieved is articulate, so even in the case of dialogue with a work of art, language is the essential medium. The subject matter, *die Sache*, is that which the two collaboratively seek to articulate. Some think that the goal of dialogue is arriving at an understanding of each other, but it is only when something about the interlocutors is the subject of the dialogue that this is the case, and such situations are the exception rather than the rule.

Gadamer argues is that the goal of a shared understanding is necessarily implicit in all dialogue. While the participants always aim for agreement, agreement is not necessary for a "fusion of horizons." Horizons are the conceptual preconditions that make something intelligible to us *as* something. When we work with others to come to an articulate understanding of a subject matter we typically have to make these conceptual preconditions explicit in order to explain our different ways of thinking about the matter at hand. Horizons "fuse" when we come to recognize each others' conceptual preconditions and arrive at an understanding that accounts for these often conflicting preconditions. A fusion of horizons is therefore not necessarily an agreement about the subject matter, but it is a kind of agreement about the ways in which the subject matter is conceived and articulated across participants in the dialogue. As every dialogue will clarify our own horizons in the process of coming to a shared understanding, Gadamer argues that all understanding reached through dialogue about a subject matter will include a new self-understanding. Moreover, since every person is a potentially new occasion for dialogue and we should expect there will always be new ways to articulate a subject matter, dialogue is never ending.

Gadamer famously argues that dialogue can occur with texts and works of art, even though there is a clear difference between these dialogues and dialogues with other people. When engaging in dialogues with other people, the people speak for themselves; when engaging in dialogue with a text or work of art we need to speak for the work. It's been suggested more than once that this kind of ventriloquism could never generate a genuine dialogue as the alterity between the interlocutors is diminished. Since one person is playing both roles, the suggestion is that the way the text or work of art is interpreted will necessarily be within the intellectual frame of reference of the interpreter. That limits the possibility of a true challenge to the interpreter's worldview and, the argument goes, thus limits the encounter's credibility as a true dialogue. Also it's been argued that neither the text nor the work of art has the ability to resist misinterpretations. When we are speaking with other people about something and we mischaracterize their views about the matter at hand, they can correct us. They can tell us how we got their views wrong. Texts or works of art do not have this additional interpretive check

To make his case, Gadamer replies by pointing out how often we are inspired and transformed by experiences with texts or works of art, and indeed he has a point. I'm sure we all can think of books or works of art that fundamentally changed how we think about ourselves and the world. But is it right to call these transformative experiences the result of a dialogue? First Gadamer argues that texts or works of art have no meaning independent from the activity of reading and interpreting them. Through reading a text or tarrying with a work of art we are interpreting it in the way an orchestra interprets a score or an actor interprets a role. We are bringing forth a meaning through our interpretations, one that doesn't exist prior to our "performance" of it. Thus the transformative experience comes to us not passively, but through our engagement with the text or the work of art, engagement shaped by responsive, interpretive

choices. As to the question of the degree of alterity of the interpretation, Gadamer will argue that it is enough for a dialogue that questions are being put to us. He writes,

But how is it with artwork, and especially with the linguistic work of art? How can one speak here of a dialogical structure of understanding? The author is not present as an answering partner, nor is there an issue to be discussed as to whether it is this way or that. Rather, the text, the artwork, stands in itself. Here the dialectical exchange of question and answer, insofar as it takes place at all, would seem to move only in one direction, that is, from the one who seeks to understand the artwork . . . [However] the dialectic of question and answer does not here come to a stop. . . . Apprehending a poetic work, whether it comes to us through the real ear or only through a reader listening with an inner ear, presents itself basically as a circular movement in which answers strike back as questions and provoke new answers. (Hahn 1997, 43–44)

Gadamer presents two main criteria for when something counts as a dialogue: the exchange operates according to “the logic of question and answer,” and it generates insights. He writes that

It is not that we have found out something new that makes a conversation a conversation, but that we have encountered something in the other that we have not encountered in the same way in our own experiences of the world. . . . Conversation has a transformative power. Where a conversation is successful, something remains for us and something remains in us that has transformed us. (Gadamer 2006a, 355)

Texts and works of art put questions to us, questions that we need to think through to understand them. They generate insights about a subject matter. That is enough, Gadamer thinks, for our engagement with them to qualify as dialogical.

Gadamer’s focus on questions raised more than views expressed distinguishes his position from most thinkers about the value of dialogue. Most people think the point of dialogue is to encounter something different that can serve as a check—a confirmation or falsification—on one’s beliefs. These exchanges are not the kind of exchanges Gadamer focuses on when he privileges dialogue. Gadamer is interested in the less common case where two people are collaborating to arrive at an articulate understanding *anew*. Gadamer stresses the importance of listening to the views of others, but he also stresses the importance of reformulating our views

anew in a way that makes sense to our interlocutors. That is what is behind his controversial view that hermeneutics is a rehabilitation of ancient rhetoric. To speak with someone is to find the words anew to present our ideas a plausible way. In the case of interpreting texts or works of art, this means interpreting what they present in ways that make them as plausible and insightful possible; Gadamer thinks that is best done by seeing them as answers to questions.

Gadamer traces the philosophical value of dialogue back to Socrates and Plato. He argues that Plato's use of dialogue was not simply because it best captured Socrates' philosophical style, but because Plato recognized the essentially dialogical structure of reflection. "Plato, in his efforts to disclose the facts of the matter, recognized in Socratic dialogue itself the means—and the only means—by which to arrive at a really secure stance towards the things" (Gadamer 1991, 20). Just as Socrates engaged in dialogue, and Plato's dialogues are representations of a philosophical dialogue, so too are we supposed to engage in dialogue with Plato's dialogues.

Gadamer considers his account of dialogue as the main way he moves beyond Hegel and Heidegger. He argues that Hegel's dialectic replaces lived, actual dialogue with a Cartesian inspired methodology aimed at of trans-historical self-certainty. Instead Gadamer argues that to take finitude seriously is to embrace the speculative moments of dialogue over the speculative dialectic of Spirit. Against Heidegger, Gadamer argues that our relations to others may have a positive, not only limiting, force.

I was trying, in opposition to Heidegger, to show how the understanding of the Other possesses a fundamental significance. The way Heidegger had developed the preparation of the question of Being, and the way he had worked out the understanding of the most authentic existential structure of Dasein, the Other could only show itself in its own existence as a limiting factor. In the end, I thought, the very strengthening of the Other against myself would, for the first time, allow me to open up the real possibility of understanding. To allow the Other to be valid against oneself—and from there to let all my hermeneutic works slowly develop—is not only to recognize in principle the limitation of one's own

framework, but it also allows one to go beyond one's own possibilities, precisely in a dialogical, communicative, hermeneutic process. (Gadamer 2000, 284)

For Gadamer, then, dialogue is a central feature of philosophical hermeneutics, it attaches him to the tradition of Socratic dialogue and separates him from two philosophers he is otherwise closest to, Hegel and Heidegger. In its ideal form dialogue is "the process of reaching a shared understanding of the matter in question" (Gadamer 1991, 17).

Understanding what exactly Gadamer means by dialogue can help us understand why it serves as a linchpin of his moral thinking. There are moral conditions for engaging in dialogue. Gadamer emphasizes openness, and by that he means a willingness to work with others to rethink something (or to think it for the first time). Gadamer says "[t]he modesty of hermeneutic philosophy consists in the fact that for it there is no higher principle than this: holding oneself open to the conversation" (Hahn 1997, 36). It's often been said that what is required is the modesty and humility to recognize we may not have the right answer on a subject matter, but it's not simply an acknowledgment that what we believe might be wrong. It's not the humility of fallibilism; it's the humility of inarticulateness. What is required for dialogue is the humility of accepting that we might not know what we believe, for it may turn out in talking it through with someone else, we find a better expression for what we think than we had before the dialogue. To acknowledge the otherness of the other, then, is to recognize that we have something to learn from another, not just in the sense of learning new information or confirming views we already hold, but in the sense of acquiring an understanding of our views, even, or especially, those we think we understand. Since our beliefs are not formed independently of the way we express them, being willing to acknowledge we are not articulate about our beliefs is to acknowledge we do not yet know what to think about something. That humility is what is required to recognize the power of dialogue.

One of the main source for Gadamer's ethics of dialogue is his discussion of three ways of addressing someone as a Thou. First, we can take them seriously as a data point, as evidence, as a source of information about what someone thinks about a subject matter. We recognize them as having a particular view on the issue at hand, but we are not trying to understand their view any more than that. Their view need not engage us. The second way of taking seriously what someone says is to understand their view as an example of a broader point of view. Rather than simply noting their view, we try to understand it, but not necessarily in way that we have to consider it as possibly true. It is merely an example of what a particular group thinks. Gadamer says in these first two ways of engaging others as Thous we reflect ourselves "out of [our] relation to the other and so become unreachable" (Gadamer 2006b, 354). The third way, and, Gadamer thinks, the only way that properly respects others as Thous—the only way that properly reflects an awareness of our own limitations—is to take them seriously by trying to understand how what they are saying is true. We recognize them not just as having a view on the issue, as in the first case, nor as having a view that reflects a larger outlook, as in the second case, but as having a view from which we can learn, one that should lead us to rethink our own views. On these grounds Gadamer claims that to take other views seriously as potentially true means we do not rest with their given reasons for their views. To understand how a person could be right means that "we will try to make his [or her] arguments even stronger" (Gadamer 2006b, 292). We always look for new reasons why what they are saying might be right. We let "the other person help [us] in the process of gaining access to the fact of the matter" (Gadamer 1991, 39).

To properly treat others as partners in dialogue is never more nor less than the actively acknowledging that they have something to teach us that we might not learn. Less than that level of alterity is a case of pride in our own understanding of the subject matter. It is to forget about

our finitude and the inescapability from our prejudgments. But more than that, it is an obliviousness to experience, as our experiences constantly call forth the revision of our judgments and pre-judgments. At the root of taking our finitude seriously is never knowing when we have something to learn from someone or something, and always expecting it to be the case. To hold that the alterity is greater than simply having something to learn from others, for example, the idea that one could know something that would be impossible for others to understand, is in principle and in practice precluded by Gadamer. There is nothing that can be understood that can't be communicated and thereby understood by others. Part of this follows from his view of understanding, namely that understanding is always a process of articulation and articulation always occurs in language. And part of it follows from his views on language, namely there is no language that can't be learned. All languages are public languages. It may be difficult to communicate one's insights to someone who holds very different views, but the limitations are always only one's of time and of willingness to try. There is no such thing as an incommensurability of what is understood. Even more, we are never in a position to conclude that the differences in communication are unbridgeable. In the end the conversation may fail, but the failure will only be apparent at the end, and we are never at the end. To have evidence of unbridgability is to have an understanding of the both sides the bridge is meant to span, but that understanding is precisely what the claim to unbridgability precludes. And, note the final consequence of holding a degree of alterity greater than simply having something to learn from others. If the alterity of others is beyond that of having something to teach us about a subject matter, then the motivation for dialogue with the other is eliminated. The result is not a greater openness to difference, but the recognition of the ultimate futility of openness and a justification for not entering into conversation with the other. So all there can be in the acknowledgment of

the otherness of the other for conversation is the acknowledgement that the other has something to teach us about the subject matter, no more and no less. The denial of radical difference shows that community in dialogue is always possible; the acknowledgement of finitude shows that community in dialogue is always necessary

There are moral preconditions for dialogue, and there is a morally appropriate way to relate to others in dialogue. In addition, the outcome of dialogue will always be a newfound community of shared understanding for it will inevitably involve working together to find new ways to articulately reveal the matter at hand. Gadamer writes,

Every conversation presupposes a common language, or better, creates a common language. ... To reach an understanding in a dialogue is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion, in which we do not remain what we were. (Gadamer 2006b, 371)

The community that is established through dialogue is what Gadamer calls the community of friendship, for the participants in dialogue have collaborated to share a world.

Gadamer sees dialogue not just as something we engage in, but as something that realizes our nature as human beings. He follows Aristotle in thinking humans are *zoon echon logon*, and follows Heidegger in translating *logon* as language, so humans are essentially linguistic animals. We by nature seek understanding and we understand through bringing things to language, for language is the only means we have for making the world intelligible. Language, however, is shared. We belong to a language with others and cannot simply decide that words mean what we want them to. We must find our way in language with others. Thus the activity of coming to an articulate understanding of something with others—dialogue—is the realization of our dialogical, linguistic nature.

Given how central it is to his thought, it is unsurprising that critics of Gadamer's hermeneutics have focused on how dialogue can or cannot serve as the basis for an adequate moral theory. Gadamer's connection between dialogue, community, and good will has received criticism from both deconstructionists and critical theorists. In Gadamer's exchange with Jacques Derrida, Derrida raised three questions all suggesting that Gadamer's account of dialogue is hopelessly idealized.¹ His first question is whether the desire for consensus that initiates and drives dialogue is not the goodwill of Aristotle, but the good will of Kant, and thus stands as an implausible unconditional good irreducible to any calculation of gain or loss. His second question is whether hermeneutics can take seriously psychoanalysis. Doesn't the general insight of psychoanalysis about the complexity of the will undermine our ability to speak of a simply good will? His third question is whether Gadamer emphasizes community, *rapport*, too strongly. Derrida rhetorically asks whether, in fact, a break in *rapport* is the necessary condition for the extension of a good will towards other in dialogue. All together, Derrida is challenging what Gadamer presents as the condition for dialogue; his challenges also put to question whether Gadamer has idealized the outcome of dialogue. For if the will is impure—whether calculating or repressing its own motives—or if dialogue is not occasioned by community as much as unmediated difference, then the understanding that arises from dialogue is never simply a straightforward disclosure of the truth of the subject matter. The community created through the dialogue is always to a degree illusory. Gadamer makes the obvious reply, that he was speaking of goodwill in the ancient Greek sense, not in the Kantian sense: in the sense that one should

¹ See "Three Questions to Hans-Georg Gadamer" in Michelfelder, Diane and Richard Palmer, eds. *Dialogue und Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 52–54.

always seek to discover what one can learn from others, rather than always seek to discover how others might be mistaken.

I stated quite clearly what I mean by good will: for me, it signifies what Plato called *εὐμενεις ἐλεγχοι*. That is to say, one does not go about identifying the weaknesses of what another person says in order to prove that one is always right, but one seeks instead as far as possible to strengthen the other's viewpoint so that what the other person has to say becomes illuminating. Such an attitude seems essential to me for any understanding at all to come about. (Gadamer 1989, 55)

Derrida later acknowledged that he was not as familiar with Gadamer's writings as he should have been when he raised his questions, but aside from his misunderstanding of what Gadamer means by goodwill, questions remain as to whether Gadamer unrealistically idealizes our ability to achieve the conditions for dialogue and our ability to achieve the goals of dialogue.

Critical theorists have raised a different concern about Gadamer's accounts of dialogue, community, and goodwill. Axel Honneth focuses on Gadamer's account of three ways of engaging a Thou and raises a concern for how, according to Gadamer, reflection destroys the immediacy established in the properly dialogical relation to a Thou.² If the immediate relations to others in dialogue is the realization of community, then how can Gadamer arrive at an ethics that takes seriously our responsibility to others who share a community with us, but are not, nor may never be, in dialogue with us? Even more, Honneth asks, how can Gadamer arrive at an ethics that explains our moral responsibility to those who are foreign to us, to those who are not members of our community but who still have moral standing? Honneth argues, following Jürgen Habermas who was following George Herbert Mead, that we need to draw our moral norms not only from our immediate relations to particular others, but from reflectively mediated relations to generalized others. Only in this way can we arrive at general moral principles that go

² See Axel Honneth "On the Destructive Power of the Third: Gadamer and Heidegger's Doctrine of Intersubjectivity," *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 29:1, 2003, 5–21.

beyond those realized in face-to-face dialogue. Once we acknowledge the relations to a generalized other and the moral responsibilities that follow from those relations, we must also recognize that these are not secondary to the moral responsibilities to particular others in dialogue, but dialectically inform them and are informed by them. The consequence for Gadamer's account of dialogue is that we should no longer see "reflecting out of the relation to the Thou" as undermining the possibility of properly relating to the Thou. We can no longer accept Gadamer's conclusion, according to Honneth, that "holding-oneself-open is... the highest level of moral attitude in intersubjective interaction" (Honneth 2003, 19). Gadamer could respond that Honneth separates too starkly dialogue from reflection. As dialogue is the collaborative attempt at an articulate understanding, it is always reflective about the subject matter. It is the practice of collaborative reflection. The problem of "reflecting out" of the dialogue is not the reflecting part, but the shift away from the subject matter and away from the collaboration to classifying our interlocutors' views. Nevertheless there remains the worry that Gadamer's ethics of dialogue cannot produce the moral norms needed for explaining to proper treatment of people we will never meet, such as the norms grounding our obligations to future generations.

There is one figure in hermeneutics who argues for the essentially dialogical character of Plato's dialogues, who criticizes Kant's account of a good will as too abstract, too idealized, and too rational, and who stresses the importance of promoting the autonomy of all members of a community: Friedrich Schleiermacher. The earliest writing we have of Schleiermacher's is a "commentary" he wrote on the friendship chapters of Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. He wrote it in 1788, the same year Kant's *Critique of Practical Reason* was published. "The only practice of beneficence that can really nourish sociable sentiments, and even awaken the need for them,"

Schleiermacher claims, "is one that goes beyond the system of its own ideas and acts in accordance with an alien purpose." If out of that beneficence we learn to "subordinate [our] thoughts to the thoughts of another being," then we "will produce those mutual sentiments that are the ground of all sociability and all connections of friendship" and treat humans as "beings that are free and follow their own maxims, yet at the same time are needy" (Schleiermacher 1999, 166–67). Schleiermacher goes on to argue that religious feelings can inspire us to this level of moral beneficence. These views prefigure his later views expressed in *On Religion*. There he argues that the profound experiences of life compel us to share them with others and to create a community around this mutual communication. Only in such a way can we come to understand our experiences, for "the art of finding principles of knowledge can be none other than our art of carrying on conversation" (Schleiermacher quoted in Bowie 2005, 80).

In religious experience we recognize the limits of articulation. It draws us together and inspires a community motivated, by the shared awareness of our finitude, to develop each member's spiritual growth toward autonomy.

No element of life, so much as religion, has implanted along with it so vivid a feeling of man's utter incapacity ever to exhaust it for himself alone. No sooner has he any sense for it than he feels its infinity and his own limits. He is conscious that he grasps but a small part of it, and what he cannot himself reach, he will, at least, so far as he is able, know and enjoy from the representations of those who have obtained it. This urges him to give his religion full expression, and, seeking his own perfection, to listen to every note that he can recognize as religious. Thus mutual communication organizes itself; thus speech and hearing are to all alike indispensable. (Schleiermacher 1994, 149)

In community we share our interpretations in dialogue, moving us ever beyond our limited, individual understanding of God and creation and becoming ever more aligned with the Infinite. The true Church is the community of freely associating believers working together in dialogue to come to an intuition of the infinite. All human interpretations of the infinite will reflect human

finitude; only a community of conversation can begin to overcome that finitude. A true religious interpretation is one that leads the believer to embrace the good will toward all and respect for freedom of all. As an explicitly Christian community, Schleiermacher argues that it incarnates an ethics of love modeled on Christ's love for humankind.

Schleiermacher does not run into the criticisms that Gadamer faces as Schleiermacher does not put the same weight on dialogue as Gadamer does. Gadamer has other sources for his views on community—he expresses in interviews and in later writings that a concern to avoid nuclear destruction can unite people; he has other resources for a full-scale moral theory—he approvingly says about Kant that he recognized freedom as a unique fact of reason; and he connects what he says about dialogue to an ethics of friendship, returning to themes raised by Aristotle. But to the extent his thinking is focused on immediate interpersonal relations, it is difficult to see how it generalizes into a theory that explains our moral obligations to show goodwill towards the greater community of human beings.

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