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HERMENEUTICS AND EDUCATION:  
UNDERSTANDING, CONTROL, AND AGENCY

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What is at issue here is that when something other or different is understood, then we must also concede something, yield—in certain limits—to the truth of the other. That is the essence, the soul of my hermeneutics: To understand someone else is to see the justice, the truth, of their position. And this is what transforms us.<sup>1</sup>

INTRODUCTION

Recently, a teacher logged onto the PHILOSED electronic bulletin board and asked, What does hermeneutics mean, and how is it relevant for education?<sup>2</sup> Computer screens across the country lit up in response. As conversants shared insights and information, it quickly became apparent that answering the teacher's question would not be easy. Despite a burgeoning literature on the topic, the definition of hermeneutics remains unclear; its implications for educational research and practice are not entirely evident.

Given that hermeneutics denotes the study of understanding, interpretation, and meaning, one might expect that the field of hermeneutics itself would be better understood. Yet throughout history, hermeneutics has provoked confusion. As Gerald Bruns explains, "understanding is not purely and simply one thing"; the study of understanding is "multiple and highly conflicted."<sup>3</sup> In the final analysis, Bruns concludes, "hermeneutics is a loose and baggy monster."<sup>4</sup>

Conceptual conundrums notwithstanding, hermeneutics continues to grow in popularity across a range of disciplines. In addition to fields such as literature and law, which traditionally have been considered interpretive, hermeneutics today informs domains as diverse as science, ethics, and political theory. Growing influence has not made hermeneutics easier to define, however. As one group of editors puts it, "The more philosophy and the interpretive disciplines proclaim the importance of interpretation in all of inquiry, the less there is agreement about what it is, what interpretive practices presuppose, and how to judge interpretive successes and failures."<sup>5</sup>

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1. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Interview: The 1920s, 1930s, and the Present: National Socialism, German History, and German Culture," in *On Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics*, ed. Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, trans. Lawrence Schmidt and Monica Reuss (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), 152.

2. The PHILOSED computer discussion group was created by Thomas F. Green of Syracuse University and is now maintained by David Blacker of Illinois State University.

3. Gerald L. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 1.

4. *Ibid.*, 17.

5. David R. Hiley, James F. Bohman, and Richard Shusterman, eds., *The Interpretive Turn: Philosophy, Science, Culture* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991), 1.

Into this interpretive quagmire, education scholars are plunging with increasing frequency. Three contributions to the literature will be reviewed in this essay. Although they differ in purpose and style, all three works deal either explicitly or implicitly with the connection between education and the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer.

*Hans-Georg Gadamer On Education, Poetry, and History: Applied Hermeneutics* brings together fifteen essays and speeches authored by Gadamer between 1947 and 1988.<sup>6</sup> Edited and translated from the original German by Dieter Misgeld and Graeme Nicholson, the materials in this volume address a broad spectrum of educational issues, including the training of teachers, the role of the humanities in an increasingly multicultural world, and the ramifications of escalating costs for university-based research. Three interviews with Gadamer conducted by the editors round out the collection.

A second edited collection has been assembled by William Pinar and William Reynolds in their book, *Understanding Curriculum as Phenomenological and Deconstructed Text*.<sup>7</sup> Penned by twelve different authors, the essays in this volume explore educational research, teaching, learning, and curriculum theory from a variety of interpretive perspectives. While Gadamer is referenced explicitly by only two of the authors, I believe that many of the essays display Gadamerian themes.<sup>8</sup>

The third publication is Shaun Gallagher's *Hermeneutics and Education*.<sup>9</sup> Whereas the other two volumes are edited collections, Gallagher's book lays out a philosophical argument to develop what he calls a "moderate" theory of education, based on Gadamer's hermeneutics. In the course of developing his Gadamerian theory of education, Gallagher compares and contrasts Gadamer's philosophy with the full spectrum of contemporary hermeneutics, including the conservative hermeneutics of E.D. Hirsch and Emilio Betti, critical hermeneutics as articulated by Jürgen Habermas, and radical or poststructuralist hermeneutics, associated with figures such as Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-François Lyotard.

Rather than consider each book separately, let us imagine that this diverse group of authors and editors has come together to engage in one integrated conversation about the meaning of hermeneutics for education. How might their conversation

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6. Misgeld and Nicholson, *On Education, Poetry, and History*. This book will be cited as *EPH* in the text for all subsequent references.

7. William F. Pinar and William M. Reynolds, eds., *Understanding Curriculum as Phenomenological and Deconstructed Text* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1992). The book will be cited as *UC* in the text for all subsequent references.

8. The two authors in *Understanding Curriculum* who explicitly reference Gadamer are David Jardine and Jan Jagodzinski.

9. Shaun Gallagher, *Hermeneutics and Education* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992). This book will be cited as *HE* in the text for all subsequent references.

proceed? What twists and turns might it take? On which points are the participants likely to disagree? What common themes and conclusions might emerge?

One overriding concern is evident from the start. On the view of these authors, hermeneutics — specifically, hermeneutics as described by Gadamer and his teacher, Martin Heidegger — entails an understanding of understanding that is very different from the way understanding typically is defined within the framework of modern Cartesian epistemology. This difference is important, the authors maintain, because what one assumes about understanding influences and indeed shapes how one approaches and practices education.

How, exactly, do epistemological and hermeneutic conceptions of understanding differ? Shaun Gallagher typifies the way many of the authors think about this question. He writes,

In epistemology the word *understanding* usually signifies a mental process which takes place in the mind (the soul or consciousness). It is an intellectual process whereby a knower gains knowledge about something. This is explained in terms of a straightforward linear, dualistic relationship between the subject (the knower) and the object (the known). Quite often in epistemology understanding is said to depend on a representation, a mental image that mediates between subject and object (*HE*, p. 40).

From the perspective of hermeneutics, by contrast, understanding “is not, fundamentally, a mental or intellectual operation” (*HE*, p. 43):

For Heidegger, understanding is essentially a way of being, the way of being which belongs to human existence....Being-in-the-world is not primarily a cognitive relation between subject and object, although being-in-the-world is a way of existing which allows there to be cognition. Human existence discloses the world, or is in-the-world by way of an understanding that functions on all levels of behavior, conscious or unconscious. Thus, Heidegger, contends, understanding is “a basic determination of [human] existence itself” (*HE*, p. 42).<sup>10</sup>

In short, Heidegger removes understanding from the domain of epistemology and situates it within the realm of ontology and existential philosophy.

Gallagher goes on to explain how Heidegger’s ontological reconceptualization of hermeneutics is developed by Gadamer.<sup>11</sup> For Gadamer no less than Heidegger, understanding is the gateway to Being, the means by which Being is both disclosed and concealed in human experience. In this respect, understanding is unique to and definitive of the human condition. Put simply, understanding “is not an isolated activity of human beings but a basic structure of our experience of life” (*HE*, p. 43).<sup>12</sup>

Gadamer’s assumption that understanding at once discloses Being and distinguishes the human way of being in the world has important implications for the way we think about, structure, and practice education, Gallagher argues. Conceived from the perspective of Gadamer’s hermeneutics, education looks very different from so-called “modernist” educational approaches, which are rooted in the assumptions of Cartesian epistemology. Indeed, Gallagher concludes, hermeneutics opposes epistemological approaches and compels us to think beyond them (*HE*, pp. 39, 179).

10. Gallagher is quoting Heidegger in *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*.

11. As we will see, Gadamer also diverges significantly from Heidegger’s position, a fact which I contend Gallagher misses.

12. Gallagher is quoting Gadamer in *The Hermeneutics of Suspicion*. This statement captures why the work of Gadamer and Heidegger sometimes is called, “philosophical anthropology.”

The claim that hermeneutics challenges and ought to override modernist goals and practices reverberates throughout *Understanding Curriculum*. Tetsuo Aoki argues that the search "for the being of teaching... calls for a break away from the orientation that may blind us" (UC, p. 20). Madeleine Grumet speaks about "repudiating" statistical methods in order that research might be "reconceptualized" to capture more fully the holism of human experience in the world (UC, pp. 40, 31). In his essay describing the work of Max van Manen, Robert K. Brown observes that van Manen's "ontologically oriented methodology...[is] well suited to radically reforming educational practice" (UC, pp. 58, 57); Jan Jagodzinski calls for the "radical restructuring of educational disciplines" (UC, p. 178).

On what basis do these authors judge hermeneutics and hermeneutic education to be in conflict with and superior to epistemology and modernist education? What, exactly, is so pernicious about epistemology? What does Gadamer offer education, and why is his hermeneutics thought to be more productive for teaching and learning?

Given that epistemology undergirds much of Western education today, the position of Gallagher and the Pinar and Reynolds authors seems extreme and perhaps not worth exploring. On closer inspection, however, it becomes apparent that the polarization of existential hermeneutics and epistemology involves more than a debate about the differences between understanding and knowledge. More profoundly, the proposed dichotomy between hermeneutics and epistemology is fueled by competing claims about what it means to be a human being, what human agency entails, and the extent to which human beings control the direction of their lives. Framed as a discussion about existential meaning and the significance of control for human agency, the issues that vex these authors are philosophically rich and educationally compelling. Untangling them will occupy the remainder of this essay.

I should say at the outset that, for me, the view of agency that Gadamer articulates does not in principle conflict with the view of agency that Gallagher, et. al. associate with epistemology. To maintain that Gadamerian and epistemological views of agency are opposed gives rise to claims about educational purposes that are hard to defend. It suggests, moreover, that human beings are by nature deeply self-alienated. Finally, the polarization of epistemology and hermeneutics fails to do justice to the nuanced and complex way Gadamer portrays understanding and human experience.<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless, the confusion that informs this position is worth our attention. Its overly narrow conceptualization of agency is widespread, I believe, and speaks to generally unacknowledged and sometimes conflicting desires we human beings have for ourselves as agents in the world. Identifying these conflicts and desires is important, because whether we realize it or not, we visit them on the children we educate. In the end, I hope that clarifying Gadamer's views about control and agency and comparing them with assumptions commonly attributed to epistemology will illuminate educational questions and concerns that might otherwise go unnoticed.

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13. I would add that the dichotomy also fails to do justice to the nuanced complexity of human life portrayed by many epistemologists. But that is the subject of another essay.

With this overview in mind, we are ready to scrutinize the issues in greater detail. Our discussion will be divided into five parts. The first part addresses Gallagher's analysis of Gadamer's hermeneutics, focusing on one insight that I believe goes to the heart of Gadamer's philosophy of understanding and proves central to the discussion about control and agency. Insofar as Gallagher directs our attention to this insight, he does us an important service. Gallagher's discussion of Gadamer is not sufficiently deep, however. Thus, despite his stated intention to distinguish hermeneutics from epistemology, Gallagher ultimately fails to show how and why Gadamer's view of understanding differs from knowing and knowledge.

The second part focuses on this crucial insight into understanding, which, Gallagher underscores but does not analyze satisfactorily, and reframes this idea to highlight its distinctively Gadamerian dimension. With this clarification in mind, the third part turns to educational issues. Looking at educational goals and practices through the lens of Gadamer's hermeneutics, what might we see? The Pinar and Reynolds authors, Misgeld and Nicholson, and Gallagher all contribute to this phase of the discussion.

The fourth part introduces the putative opposition between hermeneutic and modernist education and analyzes the specific assumptions upon which the conflict is thought to rest. In the fifth part, I will explore how and why these assumptions unnecessarily constrict the meaning of agency and control. Checking key passages in the Misgeld and Nicholson volume, I will investigate how Gadamer reconceives these terms. My discussion goes on to probe the strengths and limitations of Gadamer's reconceptualization and concludes by suggesting why Gadamer's view of agency is educationally significant.

#### GALLAGHER'S ANALYSIS OF GADAMER

What, then, is the insight into understanding that Gallagher highlights? One third of the way into his book, Gallagher cites the following passage from Gadamer's *Truth and Method*:

Hermeneutic work is based on a polarity of familiarity and strangeness.... There is a tension. It is in the play between the traditional text's strangeness and familiarity to us, between being a historically intended, distanced object and belonging to a tradition. *The true locus of hermeneutics is this in-between* (HE, p. 125).<sup>14</sup>

This passage is important, Gallagher states, because it delineates the conditions under which all understanding becomes possible (HE, p. 128). Specifically, understanding arises in the intermediate space between perfect familiarity and absolute strangeness. On the one hand, a context of preunderstandings always funds interpretation. Without at least some familiarity with what we are trying to interpret, understanding never would get off the ground. At the same time, interpretation

14. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2d. rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 1993), 295. This book will be cited as *TM* in the text for all subsequent references. See also Gadamer, "On The Circle of Understanding," in *Hermeneutics Versus Science? Three German Views*, ed. John M. Connolly and Thomas Keutner (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988), 75-76.

would be unnecessary if everything already were familiar. Interpretation is stimulated by difference and distance. As a consequence of encountering difference, the familiar is transformed; the "other" also undergoes change in the dialectic of understanding. The continuous interplay between "the whole" we already comprehend and the "new parts" that surprise and challenge us typically is described in terms of a "hermeneutic circle."

On Gallagher's view, the hermeneutic circle of understanding is educationally significant because learning operates in exactly the same way (*HE*, pp. 54, 71, 180). To support his thesis that learning and understanding exhibit the same experiential structure, Gallagher turns to Plato's dialogue, the *Meno*. *Meno*, it will be recalled, cannot fathom how learning is even possible. His bewilderment is expressed in his famous paradox, which "is as follows: a person cannot learn that which he knows, for if he already knows it, he has no need to learn it; nor can a person learn what he does not know, for if he does not know what it is, he does not know what to look for" (*HE*, pp. 194, 69).<sup>15</sup> To *Meno's* way of thinking, individuals are caught on one of two poles: either things are completely familiar, or else they are totally alien. Neither pole promotes learning. In the first instance, learning is stifled by unacknowledged expectations and assumptions. In the second instance, learning eludes our grasp, because things are so alien as to be beyond recognition. Either way, it is impossible to be fully conscious.

In actuality, Gallagher observes, neither extreme obtains. Contrary to *Meno's* belief, the world for us is neither utterly transparent nor altogether occluded. Rather, "knowledge is a movement between ignorance and absolute insight which never comes in contact with either extreme" (*HE*, p. 195). That which seems strange always is a little familiar; things are never perceived in isolation but rather within a context. "We can learn about the unknown only by recognizing it *as* something that fits into or challenges what is already known," Gallagher says (*HE*, p. 195). In learning, "we simply bring forward the parts that we are familiar with so as to illuminate the part that requires understanding" (*HE*, p. 70).

At the same time, our preconceptions do not overwhelm us; it always is possible to recognize that which is different and new. New knowledge, of course, is conditioned by prior learning (*HE*, p. 69). That we are predisposed to see things in a certain way does not preclude us from recognizing when our assumptions are being challenged, however. Indeed, it is precisely the existence of an already operative context of expectations that makes the perception of contrast possible.

A degree of openness thus informs every act of learning. In contrast to rote memorization or indoctrination, genuine learning consists in questioning what we think we know. Questioning assumptions does not mean that we completely forsake them, however. Rather, new knowledge is accommodated within our conceptual frameworks. Frameworks hence are modified by the new knowledge that they make possible, even as new knowledge is conditioned by the assumptions that they challenge.

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15. Gallagher is referring to section 80:D-E of the *Meno*.

For Gallagher, then, "educational experience is always found between the ideal extremes of complete coincidence...and complete openness" (*HE*, p. 80). Learning can be imagined as a movement within this space, a process Gallagher describes in terms of wholes and parts. In learning, new parts are integrated into an existing network of assumptions. This network or "whole" in turn is informed and altered by new parts:

The knowledge which we already have of the whole, constituted in our prepredicative experience, impacts on the constitution of the meaning of any particular thing, while the meaning of any particular thing adds to or reshapes our knowledge of the whole and will go on to condition our subsequent understanding (*HE*, p. 60).

The structure of learning thus consists in a dialectical interchange, one that Gallagher posits is productively circular (*HE*, pp. 75, 77).

In sum, as understanding partakes of familiarity and difference, so learning depends not only on preconceptions, but also on openness and questioning. Neither the experience of learning nor the experience of understanding is reducible to perfect empathy on the one hand or neutral objectivity on the other. As Gallagher tries to make clear, strangeness and familiarity are not incommensurable; thinking of them as such leaves us trapped within a paradox. It is only in virtue of a continuous interplay between the alien and the ordinary that understanding and learning arise. Revolving in the space between utter darkness and blinding light, learning and understanding are relational, transformational, and ongoing.

What are we to make of Gallagher's argument? That understanding consists in a circular tension between the familiar and the strange is, I think, a crucial insight. Whether or not this tension also characterizes learning may not be as important to demonstrate as Gallagher assumes. Gallagher believes it is vitally important to show that "educational experience is always hermeneutical experience" (*HE*, p. 39). If understanding and learning are the same experience, then at a more abstract level, educational theory and philosophical hermeneutics also will share "essential relations" (*HE*, pp. ix, 2, 26, 320). Insofar as the relation between educational theory and Gadamer's philosophy is *essential*, Gallagher concludes that a "hermeneutic approach to education will answer objections raised by conservative, critical, and radical theories" of education (*HE*, p. 28). *Aporias* in the field of philosophy will be resolved as well (*HE*, pp. 27, 319).<sup>16</sup> Finally, the relation between education and epistemology will be exposed as contingent, vulnerable to being replaced by Gallagher's hermeneutic theory.

Gallagher's fixation on essential connections is unfortunate. His quest to establish one all-encompassing educational theory based on Gadamer's philosophy rests on the specious assumption that experience drives theory.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, it misunderstands the purpose of philosophical hermeneutics. Gadamer stresses that philosophical hermeneutics is not concerned "to offer a general theory of interpretation and a differential account of its methods" (*TM*, p. xxxi). Neither does Gadamer

16. In fact, Gallagher contradicts himself on this point. See, for example, pp. 169 and 205.

17. In Gallagher's words, "The *is* constrains the *ought*, even if we think it *ought* not to" (p. 57).

seek to adjudicate conflicts or subsume all interpretive variations under one superior vision. Difference, after all, does not impede understanding but is constitutive of it. Given that it is Gallagher who helps us see this point, one wonders why his own project fails to explore it more adequately.

Ironically, Gallagher's attempt to reduce all models of understanding and education to one Gadamerian theory ultimately blurs what is distinctive about Gadamer's philosophy. Gadamer is not the only thinker to recognize that understanding consists in a tension between the familiar and the strange. As Richard Bernstein points out, postpositivist philosophers of science also struggle with the question of "how to understand and do justice to something that at once strikes us as so strange and alien and yet has sufficient affinity with us that we can come to understand it."<sup>18</sup> Acknowledging this tension, postpositivist philosophers are redefining scientific knowledge and methods. Insofar as Gallagher is concerned with building theory and refuting arguments, his work speaks more to the concerns of postpositivist epistemology than to the questions that drive Gadamer's existential hermeneutics.

Despite the problems in Gallagher's argument, his project should not simply be dismissed. Gallagher's emphasis on the circular tension of understanding is well placed. Although he fails to distinguish adequately Gadamer's interpretation of hermeneutic tension from the way this tension is conceived by postpositivist epistemologists, Gallagher is right to claim that the interplay between familiarity and strangeness captures something significant about understanding. Let us put aside Gallagher's concern for essential connections, then, and concentrate on the tension that he correctly identifies. What is distinctive about the way Gadamer imagines the hermeneutic tension between the familiar and the strange?

#### THE TENSION OF UNDERSTANDING: GADAMER'S VIEW

To answer this question, it is helpful to contextualize Gadamer's ideas within the history of hermeneutics. For centuries, hermeneutics has been synonymous with textual exegesis, particularly the interpretation of legal, classical, and biblical texts in the Protestant tradition. The circular interplay between familiarity and strangeness is central to exegetical methodology, which assumes that construing new or strange parts of a text requires familiarity (however vague or inchoate) with an entire narrative. Grasping the strange parts of a narrative, in turn, helps the interpreter fathom the text as a whole. By systematically negotiating the familiar totality of a narrative and its strange parts, interpreters eventually produce meaning where previously it had been occluded, ambiguous, or absent. Understanding is thereby secured.

Following Heidegger, Gadamer holds that meaning is not something that has to be produced methodically; nor is understanding an outcome we deliberately set out to achieve. Rather, we human beings cannot help but engage in understanding the

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18. Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 141. See also Georgia Warnke, *Gadamer: Hermeneutics, Tradition, and Reason* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1987).

people, events, institutions, and practices that comprise our everyday world. As Bruns puts it, "one can hardly not understand."<sup>19</sup> Understanding is possible and indeed unavoidable, because we are born or "thrown" into sociohistorical contexts that are saturated with meanings that always already have been interpreted: "Human beings always have inherited a way of looking at things around them long before they begin to modify that way of looking," Brice Wachterhauser observes. "Our very ability to understand at all comes from our participation in the contexts that make reality meaningful in the first place."<sup>20</sup>

In our everyday world, then, meaning is intersubjective, publicly available, linguistically constituted, and deeply familiar. We do not so much analyze or thematize the meanings that orient social life as prereflectively integrate and participate in "ways of acting, thinking, and feeling that are local and current."<sup>21</sup> In this respect, understanding is a mode of ordinary practical experience. We understand in and through the experience of being involved with and concerned for people and events. Gadamer calls such understanding *know-how*, knowing one's way around situations and forms of living (*TM*, p. 260).

As a mode of practical involvement and experience, understanding is never disinterested. Knowing my way around requires not only that I recognize the parameters of a given situation, but that I have a sense as well of my own possibilities within it. What is this situation asking of me? How do I stand, in light of what needs to be done? Am I willing or able to respond? Why or why not? These questions may not be formalized or even conscious. Nevertheless, they shape and reflect all understanding. Gadamer calls this type of ongoing negotiation, application or *self-understanding*. In his words: "*all such understanding is ultimately self-understanding (Sichverstehen: knowing one's way around).... Thus it is true in every case that a person who understands, understands himself (sich versteht), projecting himself upon his possibilities*" (*TM*, p. 260).

In short, prereflective understanding is a mode of practical experience that construes both contexts and relations with which we are involved and also how we see ourselves in light of our situation. Insofar as understanding is ordinary practical activity in which we cannot help but be engaged, it remains to a degree prereflective and situationally conditioned. This does not mean that we are bound by that which is familiar, however. Although we tend to take our expectations and assumptions for granted, they are not straightjackets. Presuppositions are more like horizons: situated, yet open, amenable to being awakened and critically examined (*TM*, p. 302).

Just as prereflective understandings arise in relation with others and with a world, so awakening and examining our assumptions is not something we can do alone through contemplation or introspection. It is only in the experience of being practically engaged with people and events that our deep-seated biases, together with

19. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, 3.

20. Brice R. Wachterhauser, "History and Language in Understanding," in *Hermeneutics and Modern Philosophy*, ed. Brice Wachterhauser (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1986), 22.

21. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, 3.

the sociohistorical interpretations out of which our individual understandings are constituted, become available for inspection. According to Gadamer, the kinds of encounters that tend to "break the spell of our own foremeanings" are those that question, challenge, resist, or refute our assumptions about what is ordinary and familiar (*TM*, p. 268). Encountering people and situations that defy our expectations can fill us with awe and wonder. It also can make us feel as though we are "being pulled up short" (*TM*, p. 268). Gadamer acknowledges that being pulled up short is not very comfortable. In his words, "every person is then a little distressed and doubts himself more than he usually does" (*EPH*, p. 58). Self-doubt arises because what is challenged in these experiences is never external or incidental to how we see ourselves. Insofar as recalcitrant persons and events touch us at all, they do so because they criticize, distrust, or dismiss our self-understanding. The persons and events that strike us as being most threatening or bizarre speak precisely to the qualities we fear most in ourselves.

There is another reason why being pulled up short tends to make us uncomfortable. Finding ourselves challenged or resisted reminds us that although the world we inhabit is familiar, it nevertheless exceeds our expectations, assumptions, and desires. The world continually surprises us, refuses to be appropriated or confined within what Bruns calls "the conceptual apparatus we have prepared for it."<sup>22</sup> Gadamer puts the matter like this: "As a rule we experience the course of events as something that continually changes our plans and expectations. Someone who tries to stick to his plans discovers precisely how powerless his reason is" (*TM*, p. 372). As the saying goes, "Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans."

Facing the world's ruptures and refusals, we come to see how inscrutable life can be. Experiencing disappointment need not shut down understanding, however. Rather, Gadamer notes that frustration and suffering can bring "insight into the limitations of humanity, into the absoluteness of the barrier that separates man from the divine" (*TM*, p. 357). Realized in terms of strangeness, understanding is an experience of limitation that can make us more cognizant and perhaps more accepting of our inalienable finitude.

Even an experience of limitation has its limits, however. As understanding cannot be conscious if it is sunk in complacent familiarity, so understanding ceases if it is too badly shaken by uncanny strangeness. In both these extreme situations, we feel indifferent, absorbed, or distracted, unable to fathom or clearly see the meaning of encounters and events. Understanding that is clear and awake, by contrast, requires us to "be there": wholly involved in and attentive to our situation, responsive and fully present. When we are fully present, we are neither so paralyzed by the unexpected that we cease to know how to get around in life, nor so lulled by our assumptions that we lose the capacity to acknowledge life's extraordinary moments. "In this Between is the true place of hermeneutics," Gadamer declares.<sup>23</sup> "Hermeneutic consciousness... must be awakened and kept awake" (*TM*, p. xxxviii).

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22. *Ibid.*, 180.

23. Gadamer, "On The Circle of Understanding," 76.

The person who is awake to and accepting of living "in between" is able to "have new experiences and learn from them" (*TM*, p. 355). She is vulnerable, open to challenge and difference. Facing loss and limitation, she does not despair or deny her situation but instead re-adjusts her position so that she becomes more accepting of human finitude. Such a person lives in a state of resilient self-examination and renewal. Choosing a life of continuous revision always involves more than changing one's mind. To one degree or another, change entails self-transformation, a "conversion," as Bruns puts it, to "a different mode of existence."<sup>24</sup>

In sum, understanding that is clear and awake is practical experience in and of the world in which self-understanding is both shaped and implicated. In this respect, clear understanding resembles understanding that is prereflective. But whereas prereflective understanding is only of the familiar, clear understanding consists in a negotiation between familiarity and strangeness. This negotiation, Gadamer says, does not require specialized technical expertise. Like prereflective understanding, clear understanding is available as part of ongoing daily experience. Both prereflective and clear understanding attend our being human, the former because it is an activity we cannot help but do, the latter because it requires us to be consciously present. Both experiences might therefore be called "lived" or "existential" understanding, understanding that is part of our very being. As Gadamer puts it, "*Understanding* is not a resigned ideal of human experience.... Understanding is the original characteristic of the being of human life itself" (*TM*, p. 259).

To appreciate the originality of Gadamer's hermeneutics, it is helpful to return to the tradition of hermeneutic exegesis and compare how it conceives the tension between familiarity and strangeness with the vision put forward by Gadamer. As terms of exegesis, familiarity and strangeness refer to the nature of the relation that exists between two discrete entities: interpreters and linguistic objects. More specifically, familiarity and strangeness represent opposing and even contradictory evaluations that interpreters assign to objects that confront them. Linguistic objects are deemed familiar when they are close to, in common, or identical with what an interpreter already knows. Expressions are strange when they are *sui generis*, far or different from an interpreter's expectations and assumptions. Exegetical methodology plays the strange parts of a narrative off against the integrity of the narrative as a whole until its strange passages are worked out or accounted for. An interpreter's self-understanding neither affects nor is affected by the negotiation of understanding. Indeed, insofar as interpreters and linguistic objects are presumed to be distinct, self-understanding is believed to bias and distort successful interpretation.

Gadamer, by contrast, articulates a hermeneutics of existence, not a hermeneutics of traditional exegesis. Familiarity and strangeness are not qualities of relation for Gadamer or evaluative terms assigned by knowers to interpretable objects. Neither is the tension between familiarity and strangeness an exegetical methodology.

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24. Bruns, *Hermeneutics Ancient and Modern*, 11. See also Charles Taylor, "Interpretation and the Sciences of Man," *Review of Metaphysics* 25, no. 1 (1971): 47.

Rather, familiarity and strangeness connote ways of being oriented in the world, modes of existing within the interpretive situations that we inhabit. Defined as an existential event, the familiar is not a proximal object or something we have grasped before. The familiar is that which we live through as an experience of affirmation and comfort. Familiarity is a condition of belonging, of being at home in the world. Strangeness, no less than familiarity, is emblematic of human existence. That which is strange is not an objective problem we solve or finally transcend. Strangeness is an experience of disorientation, exile, or loss. We live through and are implicated in a situation in which we feel confused, unable to find our bearings. Pulled between familiarity and strangeness, we find ourselves in the middle of an on-going liminal experience, not quite at home in the world, yet not entirely estranged from it. The existential tension between "home" and "exile" at once distinguishes our human situation and also is the very condition that makes understanding it possible. In Gadamer's words, "The hermeneutic task consists in not covering up this tension...but in consciously bringing it out" (*TM*, p. 306).

#### EXISTENTIAL HERMENEUTICS AND EDUCATION

As Gadamer's existential hermeneutics is not a theory of traditional exegesis, neither is it a theory or example of knowing and knowledge.<sup>25</sup> The hermeneutic problem "is clearly distinct from 'pure' knowledge detached from any particular kind of being," Gadamer explains (*TM*, p. 314). From Gadamer's perspective, what we know cannot be divorced from who we are. The salient puzzles of understanding for Gadamer do not concern the quest to achieve propositional and theoretical knowledge of objects from which we stand apart. What intrigues Gadamer is the struggle to understand ourselves and our human situation clearly and fully as we try to construe meaning in experiences and situations of which we are a part.

How do we negotiate the tension between self-satisfied know-how and paralyzing dislocation, such that it becomes possible to be fully awake and present in the world? How do we understand with a heart that is open and a mind that is alert? How do we come to see and act on a range of responses and options? Given the parameters of life's hermeneutic circle, how do we choose wisely and well? Whether we acknowledge it or not, we human beings are caught up in the drama of these questions. Responding to them is not strictly a matter of learning how to be technically proficient, theoretically sophisticated, methodologically adroit, or logically elegant. To learn about and understand life's purpose and meaning, it is necessary to live through a range of experiences that both affirm and shake up our orientation, such that understanding and self-understanding are not distorted or denied but clarified and furthered.

Can one be educated to be awake, responsive, and wise? What might such an education entail? Although these specific questions are not explicitly raised in

25. The dualism of hermeneutic exegesis reflects and indeed is rooted in the subject-object dualism of epistemology. That is, the goal of exegetical hermeneutics is to gain and produce knowledge systematically about the meaning of texts. Gadamer's existential hermeneutics, by contrast, is not a form of dualistic epistemology. For Gadamer, understanding is ordinary practical experience in and of the world in which self-understanding is both shaped and implicated.

*Understanding Curriculum*, they nonetheless evoke the kinds of themes that resonate throughout this volume. Education, these essays proclaim, must enable students to confront and struggle with existential dilemmas, realize life's purpose and direction, and ultimately learn how to lead good, meaningful lives. As Jan Jagodzinski puts it, education confronts and explores "questions of profoundly enigmatic human concerns" (UC, p.175). William Pinar, following the work of Dwayne Huebner, argues that the purpose of education is to "make possible those moments of vision when the student, and/or those responsible for him, project his potentiality for being into the present" (UC, p. 99). Robert K. Brown tells us that for Max van Manen, pedagogy consists in the determination "to bring into being for the sake of this child and with the help of this child, all that is essential to its being human" (UC, p. 48). Not just educational norms and practices, but educational research as well, should be oriented around existential questions, van Manen asserts. As he puts it, educational inquiry consists in "a heedful, mindful wondering about the project of life, of living, of what it means to live a life" (UC, p. 50).

In arguing that education ought to take up existential matters, the *Understanding Curriculum* authors are not simply recommending a specific focus or subject matter around which to organize teaching and learning. More profoundly, they are calling on educators to develop a type of understanding that echoes Gadamer's description of "lived" understanding. Jagodzinski calls such understanding "aesthetic" or "lived" experience (UC, p. 159). Aesthetic experience is spiritual, jagodzinski says; it is concerned with sacred mystery. Van Manen calls lived understanding, "tact." Tact cannot be manufactured or treated as a discrete intellectual skill that can be separated from one's development as a full human being, van Manen argues. The education of tact rather entails a "profound process of humanistic growth" (UC, p. 57) that "involves the total corporeal being of the person" (UC, p. 56).

What, exactly, does this mean? Which qualities of character, judgment, and action are evidenced by persons who have been well-educated in lived understanding? What kinds of pedagogic strategies and structures does such an education suggest? When it comes to answering these questions, the *Understanding Curriculum* authors tend to prescribe general topics and attitudes rather than develop or cite specific practices and dilemmas that would concretize the kind of education they have in mind. Insofar as these essays spark further thought, however, they are helpful. Three issues in particular recur throughout this volume.

The first issue grows out of a conceptual puzzle that is inherent in the process of existential inquiry. How is it possible to examine one's own existence? We cannot scrutinize life-experience in the same way that we scrutinize objects. After all, we cannot stop living in the world in order to observe ourselves within it. If we cannot objectify our existence in order to reflect on it, how is it possible to understand our situation? What kinds of pedagogical strategies might help students to clarify life's meaning?

Responding to this puzzle, Pinar urges educators to wrestle with death, a topic that Pinar admits is not typically broached in school. While it is impossible to

objectify one's life, it is possible to contemplate the meaning of one's death, Pinar notes. Doing so helps students to understand that their existence is profoundly temporal and cannot be repeated. The decisions one makes and the relations one cultivates therefore matter. "Death brings time into focus," Pinar writes. "It makes the moment we share together precious, worthy of caring, worthy of presence.... When I know...that I am dying, I know I am living; I am living in time" (*UC*, pp. 99, 93).

For Margaret Hunsberger, life's intrinsic temporality and meaning is realized every time we read. In the act of reading, "future and past are inseparably involved in the present," Hunsberger explains (*UC*, p. 65). "The completion of every text is an invitation to unity and wholeness" (*UC*, p. 89). Reading thus is important, not only because it is a means for conveying information, but also because it displays and develops our uniquely human "impulse toward making sense, unity, and hence, integrity in our lives" (*UC*, p. 85).

In addition to focusing on temporality and finitude, a second topic that emerges in these essays concerns the idea of existential tension. For Grumet, existential and phenomenological modes of understanding illuminate and express a variety of tensions that are endemic to being human: subjectivity/objectivity, immanence/transcendence, particularization/generalization, and essence/existence (*UC*, p. 31). Echoing Grumet, Rebecca Martusewicz explains that poststructuralist feminist educators "live a tension between a critical theoretical space and an affirmative political space. It is within this in-between, this 'elsewhere,' that we must seek the educated woman" (*UC*, p. 155).

Other authors imagine existential tension in terms that explicitly echo Gadamer's interplay between familiarity and strangeness. David Jardine, quoting Gadamer, states that lived understanding consists in a "relentless inner tension between illumination and concealment" (*UC*, p. 126). Peter Taubman, writing about pedagogical authority and professional identity, contends that teachers must strive to find the right balance between being close with students and being distant from them (*UC*, pp. 223, 224, 230). Jagodzinski imagines a taxonomy of six aesthetic tensions. Four of these tensions can be seen as growing out of a central tension rooted in familiarity and strangeness: being directed/being lost; harmony/disharmony; being at home/being alienated; participation/exile.

Are there specific curricula or educational strategies that might help students see and cope with existential tension? According to Terrance Carson, peace education provides teachers and students many powerful opportunities to experience tension and recognize how ambiguity pervades everyday life. "Teachers of peace education encounter ambiguity and difficulty on a daily basis," Carson notes (*UC*, p. 112). This is because "the way to a more peaceful world is far from clear...peace is known primarily by its absence" (*UC*, pp. 112, 102). Confronting doubt and indeterminacy are not obstacles to teaching and learning, Carson insists. On the contrary: "The difficulty we encountered in implementing peace education should be seen not as an irritation but as a positive experience awakening us to meaning and to the complexity of life" (*UC*, pp. 113-114).

According to Jagodzinski, curriculum not only can help students cope with the "tension of a centered self" (UC, p. 169). Tension also should guide the way curricula are designed and implemented. Typically, Jagodzinski notes, curriculum is viewed as being either a predetermined precisely plotted program or a circuitous excursion. Within a framework of ambiguity and tension, however, curriculum becomes a journey that allows for the unexpected, even as it follows a deliberate plan. Such a journey sees no contradiction between encouraging challenge and surprise while simultaneously showing students "where they have been, where they are going, and how they may get there" (UC, p. 162). In terms of pedagogic contexts and practices, tension suggests that the classroom is both a homeroom, a place in which to center oneself, as well as a space in which to take risks and put one's consciousness "on the line" (UC, p. 161). Failing an examination or grade level provokes neither repudiation nor remediation but instead comes to be valued as an opportunity for healing and growth (UC, p. 166).

The third topic that regularly appears in these writings concerns education for self-understanding. "Whenever we speak of education, we are speaking of a person's experience in the world," Grumet writes (UC, p. 29). "Thus my first request of a reconceptualized curriculum is the safe return of my own voice" (UC, p. 31). The self that Grumet has in mind is not an autonomous clairvoyant ego or *cogito*. Rather, "knowledge of self becomes knowledge of self-as-knower-of-the world, not an expression of latent subjectivity, but...a mediator" (UC, p. 33). Self-understanding cannot be developed in "hermetic introspection," Grumet concludes, but evolves in response to being engaged with others (UC, p. 40).

Grumet's call for self-understanding is echoed both by Gallagher and by Misgeld and Nicholson. According to Misgeld and Nicholson, hermeneutic education "does not separate learning from its application to oneself" but instead regards "learning as a form of self-encounter" (EPH, p. xi). Gallagher concurs: "Primarily what is produced in educational experience, in the tension between the familiar and the unfamiliar, or between student and teacher, is understanding which is self-understanding" (HE, p. 143). Unless the student's own possibilities are at stake, "the best-designed experimental situations and the best attempts to motivate the student will not lead to learning" (HE, p. 164).

Because self-understanding is situated and relational, Gallagher asserts that it can only be nurtured through practical experience with others. In this respect, Gallagher agrees with Grumet. For Gallagher, however, the "other" with whom one is practically engaged can include subject matter as well as people. Moreover, Gallagher takes the explicitly Gadamerian position that the kinds of engagements that awaken self-understanding tend to provoke resistance and confrontation. Indeed, Gallagher concludes, the only time subject matter ever interests students is "when it challenges the existing self-understanding — often a self-complacency — of the one involved in learning" (HE, p. 167).

In sum, these authors maintain that education should cultivate lived understanding of what it means to be fully human. It is through experiencing ambiguity

and doubt, rather than by means of formal or detached analysis, that life's meaning and purpose is understood. Education thus should help students appreciate how meaning can be borne out of existential uncertainty. As they come to understand better the tensions in our human situation, students' own self-understanding is clarified. Clarifying self-understanding may involve creating or seizing opportunities that question and even refute students' expectations. Teaching students to examine their assumptions in the face of uncertainty and challenge represents an important task for education on this model.

#### HERMENEUTIC VS MODERNIST EDUCATION: THE QUESTION OF CONTROL

The idea that education should provide students with opportunities to probe life's meaning, cope with setbacks and frustrations, and learn to see ambiguity and resistance as productive for understanding and self-understanding sounds attractive and perhaps not terribly original. According to our authors, however, these goals are inventive and markedly different from education that is rooted in modern epistemology. Whereas education for lived understanding encourages situated dialectical exploration of existential meaning, epistemologically based education objectifies goals, persons, and even knowledge itself. According to Gallagher, behavioral objectives, programmed instruction, metacognition, and instrumental policies aimed at producing measurable outcomes all testify to the modernist obsession with objectification (*HE*, pp. 172-173, 236-237). While education for lived understanding encourages living with tension, ambiguity is anathema to education as currently practiced. Jardine laments, "If we 'waste time' dwelling in the ambiguous interplays of life, joining in on the conversation with the texts and textures of human life, we are not 'getting ahead' in any securable and specifiable way" (*UC*, p. 123). Indeed, educators are turning "more and more toward the development of 'marketable skills' and away from a 'liberal' education, which has come to be rather vaguely equated with not knowing how to *do anything*" (*UC*, p. 121). Finally, if education for lived understanding stresses self-understanding, Aoki declares that modernist researchers "ignore the call of teachers and students who dwell within the crucible of their own concretely lived situations" (*UC*, p. 18).

Looking over this set of contrasts, one cannot help but question whether education can simultaneously encourage and discourage self-understanding, promote and prevent ambiguity, and assume both objectification and situated relation. For our authors, it seems, hermeneutic and modernist approaches to education are not simply different: they are irreconcilable. What is more, the conflict between the two approaches is framed in a way that makes hermeneutics appear superior. It is difficult, after all, to dispute the proposition that education should help students to understand themselves and the meaning of life. Insofar as modernist goals inhibit this process, they must be rejected.

But while modernist and hermeneutic approaches to education may seem to be opposed, this way of putting the issues raises a number of questions. Why would authors who celebrate ambiguity and existential tension polarize the options and force an either/or choice between them? What, exactly, justifies the claim that lived understanding in principle cannot be reconciled with epistemology? Might we not

counter that hermeneutics and epistemology presume different purposes, both of which are educationally worthwhile?

To search out the self-contradictory and polarizing tendencies in these essays, it is helpful to look beyond the obvious debate about knowing and understanding. Surrounding this debate is another conversation, having to do not only with the nature of understanding, but with our own possibilities and limits as understanding agents. It is the set of assumptions our authors hold about the human condition in general and human agency in particular that I believe helps explain why the issues for them are so charged.

From the perspective of existential hermeneutics, the human being who is endowed with lived understanding is inextricably embedded in sociohistorical contexts. What she understands about life and herself, and how well she understands the meaning of existence, is situated and conditional, profoundly dependent on the quality of her interrelations. Born into a world she does not create and moving inexorably into a future she cannot entirely anticipate, such a being above all is mortal: circumscribed, vulnerable, and limited.

The epistemological subject, by contrast, is the source and arbiter of her own thinking and action. Inheriting from the cosmological revolution of the seventeenth century what Charles Taylor calls "liberation through objectification," the modern individual regards the world as an object removed from herself.<sup>26</sup> Disengaged from ties to nature, society, and history, the modern subject is less a bounded, fragile, restricted being than an autonomous, self-conscious, unperturbable agent. Such a person is free, Taylor notes, able to act on her own "without outside interference or subordination to outside authority."<sup>27</sup> The epistemological picture of disengaged identity continues to saturate a variety of economic, scientific, technological, and psychotherapeutic practices, Taylor observes. This is so, he suggests, because the "background distinctions of worth" that attend this view of agency are very appealing. Indeed, the "epistemological weaknesses" of dualism "are more than made up for by its moral appeal."<sup>28</sup>

In sum, while the epistemological subject is self-sufficient and detached, the hermeneutic being is ensnared and engaged. If lived understanding underscores relation and limitation, epistemological dualism emphasizes power and control. As Gallagher puts it, "The [modern] individual, either as independent subjective substance (ego, mind, consciousness) or as political individual working with others in social groupings, demonstrates a conscious and complete control over self, environment, and nature" (*HE*, p. 174).

The dualistic assumption that agents control themselves and the world may be widely popular. Many of our authors, however, believe that our preoccupation with control is deleterious for humanity and especially pernicious for education. Gallagher

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26. Charles Taylor, "Introduction," in Charles Taylor, *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 5.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 6.

warns that dualism and its attendant glorification of control are dangerous (*HE*, p. 176). Aoki contends that our obsession with "manipulative grasp and control" is wildly out of tune with "the essence of teaching" (*UC*, pp. 20, 21). Misgeld and Nicholson associate control with coercive force, competition, and claims to superiority (*EPH*, p. xviii). Brown states that for van Manen, "the greatest enemy of pedagogical tactfulness is 'the hegemony or desire for control'" (*UC*, p. 57).

Why is control deemed so harmful? Jardine sheds light on this question. Speaking about the objectification of technical-scientific discourse, Jardine suggests that such discourse exhibits "the desire for finality, the desire for control, the relentless human lust to render the world a harmless picture for our indifferent and disinterested perusal" (*UC*, pp. 118-119).

Why does Jardine call the desire for control a "relentless human lust?" One might retort that it is not so bad to regard the world as harmless, removed from us and therefore at our disposal. Seen this way, the difficulties that we encounter, whether natural or social, become problems we can fix or at least ameliorate. Science, social science, and technology certainly have improved, prolonged, and saved many lives.

Nevertheless, Jardine points out, trouble is sown by success. The advances we have achieved through science and technology have been so "breathtaking" (*UC*, p. 123), they have seduced us into believing that any difficulty we encounter is "an object ripe for technical manipulation" (*UC*, p. 122). If we try hard enough and apply the appropriate techniques correctly, we can contain or transcend any situation.

Not all the world's difficulties are "technical problems requiring a 'technical fix,'" however (*UC*, p. 117). Suffering the pain of loss, choosing between values we hold dear, returning home after experiencing new and different worlds, confronting our mortality: trials such as these are part of the world we live in, not objects in a world we observe. The only way to understand their meaning is to live personally through them. Human engineering, statistical forecasting, and scientific administration consequently will not help us predict, manage, overcome, avoid, distance, diminish, or eliminate the life-experiences that comprise our existential world (*EPH*, p. x). To deny the world's existential dimension and maintain that life-experience is something we in principle control betrays confusion, arrogance, and self-infatuation.

Disastrous consequences follow. Trapped by an exaggerated sense of pride and power, we find ourselves bereft of the emotional and spiritual resources necessary "to actually face the troublesome character of life" (*UC*, p. 123). More significantly, the belief that existence is something we control impoverishes and even deludes our self-understanding. As Gallagher puts it,

By reducing everything to a solvable problem, and by denying the permanency of certain fundamental ambiguities, the modern individual's own self-understanding is endangered. Our modern understanding falls prey to the illusion that our control is complete, that we are independent and self-empowered subjects who order the objective world. This illusory understanding is what closes off the possibilities of human self-understanding (*HE*, pp. 176-177).

Our desire for control, in short, "seems to deny what we already know about being alive" (*UC*, p. 124). We are not in control: independent and self-efficacious. On the contrary, we human beings are undeniably finite.

Framing the issues in terms of control thus leads our authors to conclude that the way epistemology envisions the human condition competes with and indeed cannot be harmonized with the view of hermeneutics. Whereas hermeneutics is true to the unforeseeable messy tangle of human existence, epistemology distorts and denies our human finitude, rendering us unable to cope with life's inevitable disappointments. These repressive tendencies are exceedingly intractable. It is precisely the fact of our situation in the world, and our dependence upon others in it, that the vision of disengaged identity warps and conceals.

Our self-understanding must be set right, our authors proclaim, realigned to accord more accurately with the reality of our situation. This can happen only if our desire for control is exposed and relinquished. Relinquishing control redeems our self-understanding; it reframes the way we conceive understanding and agency. Within a context that stresses abandoning control, understanding ceases to be a function of intellect or will and becomes exclusively a life-event in which we cannot help but participate. Understanding "requires a self-transcendence which displaces subjectivity," Gallagher explains (*HE*, p. 182). "Understanding is not something that I (the epistemological ego) do, but something that I am included in...a way of being taken up into the whole" (*HE*, pp. 45 and 183). Jardine says that understanding entails "a 'self-transcendence' of which technical-scientific discourse is not capable" (*UC*, p. 125). Aoki talks about "an attitude of surrender [to] the sound of the voice that calls" (*UC*, p. 22). In short, once we discard control, we sever understanding from agency. Whether this dissociation reframes what we mean by agency or dissolves the notion altogether represents an important question, as we will shortly see.

How, exactly, do we wean ourselves away from control and reorient our self-understanding? Modernist education, our authors declare, only impedes the task. Rooted in the assumptions of dualistic epistemology, modernist education feeds and celebrates the pursuit of control. Behaviorism, Deweyan pragmatism, cultural literacy, Marxist pedagogy, critical thinking, phenomenology, humanism: despite their differences, all these epistemologically based educational approaches aim "to empower the individual to gain increasing control over life" (*HE*, p. 175). Jardine suggests that "a predatory job market and adverse economic conditions" fuel our "consumptive pursuit of mastery" (*UC*, p. 122) and attendant belief that education's primary purpose is to help one gain "control over one's place in the world" (*UC*, p. 121). In such an environment, Jardine observes, students and teachers do not seriously discuss or even acknowledge the possibility that "life dwells in an original difficulty, an original ambiguity that cannot be mastered but only lived with well" (*UC*, p. 124). On the contrary, "finding one's life difficult, ambiguous, or uncertain is a *mistake* to be corrected" (*UC*, p. 122). Living well "is reduced to a form of problem-solving or technical know-how," Gallagher adds (*HE*, p. 178).

It follows, then, that modernist education must be renounced in favor of an approach that presents a more honest account of our human situation and thereby helps clarify rather than delude our self-understanding. Educate for mystery, not for mastery, Gallagher advises (*HE*, p. 176). Such an education not only will help us forego our desire for control. More profoundly, it will reflect and express the idea that understanding is not under the control of human agents. "We should conceive of

education not as a deliberate human enterprise, but as a process that happens to the human enterprise," Gallagher argues. "We are motivated to question whether education is something under our control, or something that has its own power in which we must learn to participate" (*HE*, p. 179). Gallagher goes on to explain how, on this view of pedagogy, "individuals are 'put in the way' of educational experiences....teachers and students find themselves in a process that encompasses them and that cannot be reduced to their individual efforts" (*HE*, p. 180). To the extent that we do "hold" a position with respect to education, we "can only acknowledge that our educational experience, which is more than we have chosen, has led us there" (*HE*, p. 347). Purposive goals and practices, in short, are *anti-educational*.

#### AGENCY AND EDUCATION: GADAMER'S VIEW

Two claims sum up the conflict between hermeneutics and modernist education: (1) lived understanding as envisioned by Gadamer expresses and reveals the finitude of human existence; (2) hermeneutic education corrects our self-understanding, which has been distorted by epistemology's fascination with mastery and control. Like all arguments, this one is subject to interpretation. A "strong" interpretation is advanced by authors like Gallagher. Once Gallagher reframes lived understanding in terms of a dialogical event that is not under the control of participants, he can find no place for human will and determination. This absence constitutes an assault on purposive education. I find it bizarre and frightening.

On a more moderate reading, the argument simply challenges rabid anthropocentrism. Individual control is decentered, but not altogether renounced. With respect to education, the moderate challenge to anthropocentrism represents an important corrective, not only to the instrumentalism of publications such as William Bennett's "What Works In Education?"<sup>29</sup> but also to the self-centered tendencies of movements like radical constructivism. Grumet, Taubman, and Martusewicz are among the authors who try to flesh out this more moderate stand. To one degree or another, their essays attempt to reconcile the tension between situated finitude and individual efficacy such that the two positions do not conflict.

I am sympathetic with this endeavor. However, I do not think that any of the authors manages to pull it off. Taubman, for example, poses this tantalizing question: "The pull is always there. And yet it is the midpoint that seems most attractive, most rich. How, then, can we maintain it without being pulled irrevocably in directions that are dangerous?" (*UC*, p. 230). Disappointingly, Taubman never goes on to embellish the midpoint he imagines.

Thus whether the interpretation of lived understanding is tempered or extreme, we are left straddling two views of what it means to be human. Either we are understanding beings, finite and frail; or else we are knowing subjects, unbounded and in charge. These two outlooks are presented as being, if not downright contradictory, then certainly difficult to harmonize. Our self-understanding therefore seems irrevocably split.

29. William J. Bennett, "What Works in Education? The Scientific Approach," *Education* 108 (1987).

The split we experience in our self-understanding stems directly, I suggest, from the way we construe control. To paraphrase Richard Bernstein, control engenders in us a kind of "Cartesian anxiety." Either we hold on to control and actively exercise our power, or we let go of control and allow the exigencies of our situation to penetrate and overwhelm us. We do not seem able both to direct experience and to respond flexibly to its vagaries. We do not seem able to pursue excellence and strength without minimizing and even denying our boundaries and limits.

Might it not be possible, however, to reframe control so that we may begin to heal our existential division? I believe this question profoundly interests Gadamer. Gadamer, I submit, offers a view of agency that allows for situated finitude without compromising our capacity to intend, decide, and direct.

My claim may be surprising. Gadamer, after all, is adamant that "irreducible finitude" determines us "completely" (*EPH*, pp. 178, 90). We are "not masters and rulers of our life situation," Gadamer reminds us, but are "affected by this or that, hindered in much, disappointed by lots of things, and often also happy for a success that went beyond what we had only dreamed" (*EPH*, p. 230). Gadamer's entire philosophic program is devoted to rejecting self-conscious subjectivity with its accompanying eclipse of God and Being (*EPH*, p. 180). According to Michael Ermarth, Gadamer wants even more than Heidegger to show that understanding is neither "the free self-possession of the human mind" (*TM*, p. 345), nor the methodical managed achievement of constructing subjects (*TM*, pp. xxxvi, 309, 454).<sup>30</sup> To understand, rather, is to participate in an event of time and tradition in which common meaning comes to be realized in the "to-and-fro" of language and dialogue (*TM*, pp. 290, 309). Gadamer succinctly articulates his position in the Forward to *Truth and Method*: "My real concern was and is philosophic: not what we do or want to do, but what happens to us over and beyond our wanting and doing" (*TM*, p. xxxviii).

Gadamer's emphasis on finitude, however, does not forsake control. How can this be? What does control mean in the context of Gadamer's mortal subject? Close analysis of key passages in *On Education, Poetry, and History* can help answer these questions. For me, the most illuminating insights Gadamer offers into the nature of control are contained in his comments about science.

At times, Gadamer associates scientific control with our urge to manage, regulate, and order (*EPH*, pp. 144, 166). Fueling this urge, Gadamer suggests, is a longing to be certain and safe, to protect ourselves from life's darkness and impending dangers (*EPH*, pp. 232, 183). In this respect, control is rooted in fear of the unknown. Science becomes our shield as we encounter the strange.

At other times, Gadamer uses scientific control to describe, not fear of the unknown, but its opposite, our proclivity to advance without pause into uncharted territory:

Under the signature of modern science there exists, to give it a name, an arrow-straight will,

30. Michael Ermarth, "The Transformation of Hermeneutics: Nineteenth Century Ancients and Twentieth Century Moderns," *Monist* 64, no. 2 (1981): 188.

which thinks up possibilities, constructively investigates them, and in the end evokes them into being, constructs them, and realizes them — daring and precise at the same time. An unbounded field of investigation and production has unfolded which everywhere advances into the unknown (*EPH*, p. 227).

Here, scientific control connotes our capacity to make, create, and plan (*EPH*, pp. 144, 165). Indeed, science enables us not only to comprehend “the existing order”; it empowers us to fashion “an order not yet in being” (*EPH*, p. 165).

In the context of science, then, control represents both fear of the unknown and intrepid pursuit of it. Neither connotation is necessarily bad. Sometimes it is good to be cautious in the face of inscrutability. By the same token, our successful march into the unknown has bettered many lives (*EPH*, pp. 165, 17).

Nevertheless, Gadamer warns, if our orientation to the unknown becomes fixed and rigid, the benefits we realize through control can become unhealthy. Controlling the unknown by steeling ourselves against it, we resolutely stick to familiar assumptions. As a consequence, we deprive ourselves of the chance to test our limits. By the same token, controlling the unknown by relentlessly chasing after that which we take to be thrilling, exotic, or untamed denies us the opportunity to examine our expectations. This compromises our ability to distinguish what we can change from what we cannot.<sup>31</sup>

Thus whether it signifies fear of the unknown or unquestioning embrace of it, control can obscure what we see and imagine. On the one hand, we dwell on the familiar and so repress or exclude the strange. On the other hand, we obsessively pursue the strange and so dismiss or deny the familiar. In both cases, we shut down possibilities for greater understanding and the chance to be more awake and present in the world. Inasmuch as control diminishes understanding, Gadamer judges it to be destructive.

Control, however, need not signify closing down. Gadamer makes this clear in the following passage:

It is truly a tremendous task which faces every human every moment. His prejudices — his being saturated with wishes, drives, hopes, and interests — must be *held under control* to such an extent that the other is not made invisible or does not remain invisible. It is not easy to acknowledge that the other could be right, that oneself and one's own interests could be wrong (*EPH*, p. 233, emphasis added).

In this context, control does not denote exclusion, denial, or repression. Control instead stands for the capacity to remain open to the possibility that one's position may be misdirected.

Gadamer's point is startling. Isn't he rather talking about *losing* control? After all, examining our expectations and assumptions can leave us feeling exposed and vulnerable. This is true, Gadamer acknowledges. Scientists, for example, risk vulnerability all the time: “Every moment [the scientist] must be critical enough not to allow hasty hypotheses and expectations or favored ideas to go unexamined but must critically examine these and then expose them to scientific criticism....The

31. Gadamer writes beautifully about that which lies beyond the capacity of humans to change. See the last paragraph on p. 180 of *On Education, Poetry, and History*.

vexation which [the scientist] experiences in his work forcibly teaches him the boundaries of his ability and the overwhelming size of his task" (*EPH*, pp. 230, 21).

Staying open thus is difficult, because it compels us to acknowledge our limits. "What an enormous demand on the weakness of humans, all of whom so very much love their own opinions and being right in discussions," Gadamer exclaims (*EPH*, p. 19). We do not like to admit that we are restricted by boundaries. We much prefer to go after what we want, swallowing up if necessary whatever inhibits our plans. The alternative, we think, is simply to yield to that which is strange or other. In this case, we do not hold back. We become so absorbed that "we do not remain who we were" (*TM*, p. 379). Absorption is no less frightening than restraint. If being open to boundaries and limits exposes and curtails us, opening up to others means that we might disappear.

Both fears are unfounded, Gadamer says. Being open does not require "extinguishing the self" (*EPH*, p. 207). It is true that confronting others' questions and challenges can throw our own beliefs into doubt. Doubt, however, need not overwhelm us. Doubt, rather, is precisely the condition that loosens rigid thinking and makes it possible to explore alternatives and clarify where we stand. "It is also the inviting otherness which contributes to the encountering of one's own self," Gadamer explains (*EPH*, p. 234). "A type of self-encounter can also occur with another and in relation to what is different" (*EPH*, p. 219).

At the same time, we discern others as being different from ourselves only insofar as we are able to situate their meaning "in relation to the whole of our own meanings" (*TM*, p. 268): "It is a widespread mistake to take tolerance to be a virtue which abandons insisting on one's own position and represents the other as equally valid....It is rather one's own strength, especially the strength of one's own existential certainty, which permits one to be tolerant" (*EPH*, p. 206). We see others, in short, to the extent that we see ourselves. Accepting ourselves, in turn, helps us to recognize others. Being open thus need not entail self-denial or self-defensiveness. Only in risk and relation can we clarify who we are; being available to ourselves helps make us available to others. "We are all others and we are all ourselves," Gadamer concludes (*EPH*, p. 234).

This way of thinking makes no sense as long as we associate being open with losing ourselves. Given how prevalent this fear is, being open does not just happen. Being open instead represents an ongoing choice, a conscious willed decision nourished by hope and desire. In this sense, being open to limits and challenges does not obliterate the self. On the contrary, being open both requires and sustains agency, realized in persons who intend, enjoin, judge, direct, and take responsibility for their actions. Each of us must choose and deliberate for ourselves; no one can choose to "open up" another or *be* open in her place. The decision to be open thus is a life-orientation, requiring a form of control we can call self-discipline (*TM*, p. 322).<sup>32</sup> In terms of self-discipline, control denies neither our efficacy nor our finitude. It rather attends understanding how to be a fully present human being.

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32. Gadamer's term is "self-mastery."

Gadamer insists that control can be taught and learned. Indeed, the primary purpose of education is to foster the kind of self-discipline that is necessary for understanding how to be open and present. While Gadamer does not offer an explicit program, he does present some general guidelines for education on this model.

With regard to younger children, Gadamer stresses the importance of learning how to lose. "To be able to lose in a game and similar things are extremely important in the education of preschool children," Gadamer writes (*EPH*, p. 189). Indeed, learning how to handle loss "begins with the age of two or maybe even earlier. He, who has not learned this early, will not be able to completely handle the greater tasks of adult life" (*EPH*, p. 233). Experiencing loss, Gadamer suggests, pierces our natural "armor." It thus prepares us for the life-long task of learning to be open.

Gadamer recommends involving older students in research. He emphasizes as well the importance of science and the humanities (particularly history and poetry). These academic disciplines, together with research, expose students in an immediate way to vexing questions and challenges and so provide them countless opportunities to confront their biases. By acknowledging their own positions, students come to recognize others. Rather than accentuating divisiveness, Gadamer believes that encountering difference promotes community. "It is exactly the otherness, the recognition of our self, the re-encountering of the other, in language, art, religion, law, and history, which is able to guide us toward a true communality," he asserts (*EPH*, p. 235).

Challenging students' assumptions and exposing them to loss will not be productive, however, unless undertaken by persons who themselves are open:

Only those teachers who can freely question their own prejudgments, and who have the capacity to imagine the possible, can help students develop the ability to judge and the confidence to think for themselves.... That we criticize ourselves and that others criticize us is the authentic breath of life for every true academic and researcher. This is not always comfortable. I do not propose that to be criticized is comfortable. Every person is then a little distressed and doubts himself still more than he usually does. This is true for teachers as well as for learners — and to have chosen this is our lot (*EPH*, p. 58).

Teaching, for Gadamer, thus exemplifies what it means to be awake, understanding the world and one's place in a way that is fully present.

#### CONCLUSION

Gadamer's reconceptualization of control in terms of a willed decision to be open both to oneself and to the positions of others weaves together a concern for finitude with a concern for the intending agent. His vision of the human being, fully present in the world, aims to succumb neither to a rigid metaphysics of presence nor to the arbitrary and annihilating tendencies of postmodern absence. In this respect, Gadamer invites rather than discourages reckoning with ourselves. His philosophy of understanding thus speaks directly to the work of healing our self-understanding. I think this is very helpful.<sup>33</sup>

33. In making this claim, I am following those such as Jean Grondin who attend to the significant ways Gadamer diverges from Heidegger. Grondin succinctly captures the difference between the two thinkers: "To put the thesis bluntly, Gadamer is a humanist and Heidegger is not." See Jean Grondin, *Sources of Hermeneutics* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 112. For additional essays on the differences between Heidegger and Gadamer, see Brice Wachterhauser, ed. *Hermeneutics and Truth* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1994).

A major problem nonetheless besets Gadamer's thought. Attention to the needs of preschoolers notwithstanding, Gadamer ironically fails to address how concrete contextual factors might influence the capacity to acknowledge limits and remain open. Are there psychosocial developmental issues, for example, that might be important to consider when educating teenagers to accept others and themselves? How might the real-life political demands faced by teachers influence the way they choose to be open with students, administrators, and parents? How might Gadamer's ideas about yielding and changing position be read in cultures where "saving face" is prized? Does loss that results from voluntary choice or natural causes like death resemble loss that results from physical violence or socioeconomic injustice? If not, how does this difference affect the cultivation of self-understanding?

Each of the above scenarios points to the same question: How, exactly, do we distinguish relations and conditions that promote openness from those that shut it down? Gadamer seems to think that simply encountering difference is sufficient to compel a person to examine her biases and acknowledge the challenges of others. "My experience has been that my own power of judgment finds its limits, and also its enrichment, whenever I find someone else exercising his own power of judgment," Gadamer writes (*EPH*, p. 153). But why should simply confronting another have this effect? Why might experiencing challenge and loss not make a person *more* defensive? Why is it that some well-adjusted people are able to learn from pain, while others react by "hiding out" in various sorts of ways?

It seems that in order to get off the ground, Gadamer's philosophy must presuppose what it promotes. That is, in order to learn how to be open, one must *already* be willing to engage in self-acceptance and self-questioning. How does this happen? This is the question Jacques Derrida raises in his criticism of Gadamer.<sup>34</sup> Therapists might raise this question as well. What Gadamer does is to locate this concern centrally for education. I think it is a vital issue for educators to consider.

These points aside, Gadamer's philosophy is significant because it enriches and expands what we mean by "education for understanding." In making this claim, I disagree with those who argue that existential hermeneutics conflicts with contemporary "modernist" education. Rather, I think that existential hermeneutics helps us think in ways we might not otherwise imagine and raises questions that we might not otherwise entertain.

How might education for understanding proceed if understanding were not regarded exclusively as an intellectual achievement, cognitive performance, exercise in information-processing, or indication that we have achieved command of a subject-matter? What if understanding also were viewed as emblematic of our "being" in the world? If understanding oneself and the human condition were taken to be pivotal for education, what kinds of pedagogical strategies, practices, and relations might follow? Can we think about understanding, not as a matter of assimilating or accommodating new problems to background knowledge, but rather

34. See Jacques Derrida, *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Gadamer-Derrida Encounter*, ed. Diane P. Michelfelder and Richard E. Palmer (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989).

in terms of a life-long struggle to find meaning in that space we experience as being in between "exile" and "home?" What might educational reform entail if it were concerned not only with effecting institutional change but with facilitating our own self-renewal? Can we conceive of failure in terms other than low test scores? What might it mean to construe failure as an experience of disorientation and loss that is endemic to all understanding?

These are fruitful questions for professional educators. But experts alone will not help us answer them. Serious sustained conversation among a variety of willing participants also is necessary if we are to think creatively about these issues. The quality of our conversation will depend, not just on what we know, but on who we are and choose to become. What qualities of character and understanding might prove especially helpful? As we think about these questions, it is helpful to note this insight from Gadamer: "Two things are required of us, both to possess and to teach: ability, which is restrained, and wisdom, which is humble" (*EPH*, p. 45).

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