Some Notes on the Primacy of the Question in the Activity of Understanding

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The real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable.

- Gadamer

Gadamer’s claim concerning the hermeneutic primacy of the question in the activity of understanding must be viewed in light of his insistence that the question involved is not just any question, but the right question, the authentic question, the question “open to” at the same time that it is “bounded by” a “horizon.”

The question that is “open,” in Gadamer’s sense of “open,” is said to be in a “state of indeterminacy,” for if the answer to it is anywhere to be found, it is hidden behind an obscurity that has yet to be dispelled. It is said as well to possess a certain “negativity,” akin to the Socratic docta ignorantia, or that “knowledge of not knowing” which stems from the “experience” of “the reversal consciousness undergoes when


it recognizes itself in what is alien and different.” It is the “experience” of such “reversals” that unmask the posturing and pretensions of the understanding, and paves the way for the growth of wisdom.

The authentic question is said, moreover, to possess a purity and innocence redolent of the questions that little children ask. What is most characteristic of little children is that, possessing little of their own knowledge, they do not, when they want to know something, anticipate ready-made answers (as adults do who, in a sense, merely “beg the question,” since they believe they have the answer already). They remain remarkably receptive, as such, to everything (no matter how outrageous or surprising) told them by adults. Analogously, then, to children’s questions, the authentic question is not ancillary to a ready-made answer, remaining amazingly “open” to whatever “experience” might bring.

The authentic question does not, however, on that account, simply “float around”; neither does it trade in the currency of answers designed to evade the question itself, or vainly point back to itself. Rather, it gestures outward, and forward, to an answer, or a settlement of some kind. To be able to do this, it must find its way into language, expression, articulation. An instance of this is the statement of the problem one encounters at the beginning of the standard research paper, in the form, sometimes, of a question. It marks out the bounds of the problematic, indicates the extent to which the mode of discussion will be open-ended and multi-directional, says from where it is coming, and where it would like to go—facilitating, in that way, the growth of understanding.

For a better grasp of the aforementioned points, consider the nature of play.³ Play, on Gadamer’s account of it, is pure surface movement. In that sense, it is not, so much about players, as about their movements. Even so, play requires of its players a perfect and assiduous conformity to its own rules of play. It expects from them a certain “seriousness,” a readiness to “loose themselves” in the movement of play. In the way that colors blend in with other colors in a “play” of colors, so also good players meld, seemingly effortlessly and spontaneously, with the texture of movements constitutive of play. Spellbound by play, they are intent, not upon winning (for winning, like losing, occurs at a point beyond

³ Gadamer’s use of the words “game” and “play” generally overlap in his writing.
play, terminating play), but upon moving with the play movement itself. The objective of the game, Gadamer tells us, is "not really solving the task, but ordering and shaping the movements of the game itself."\(^4\)

Just as play trades on the player’s readiness to submit himself wholly to the power of play, the authentic question pivots on the readiness of the questioner to go wherever the movement of the inquiry leads. The questioner’s question, by implication, must be susceptible to being taken up in a succession of increasingly larger frameworks whose effect on the question will be to variously reconfigure it. This, however, is not to diminish the importance to the inquiry of a system of directions within which it can operate; for just as there could be no play without rules, there could be no inquiry in the absence of a “horizon” to enable it to set its bearings. In relation to the inquiry, such a horizon would be no more an end or a finality, than a “win,” as we noted above, would be to play. The inquiry, in fact, strives only to keep itself going by means of the question that, in the play of inquiry, is opened up to increasingly larger frameworks, and variously configured and reconfigured, to the point that it becomes as threads that are woven into the fabric of the horizon itself, constituting it, making it to be.

It would be helpful at this juncture to recall to mind Gadamer’s assertions concerning the fusion of horizons. In Truth and Method, he argues that the hermeneutically trained mind is “a historically effected consciousness,”\(^5\) one that, as such, has the capacity to bring to surface “the prejudices governing [its] own understanding, so that the text, as another’s meaning, can be isolated and valued on its own.”\(^6\) He means, of course, that the human being’s very historical situatedness gives him the ability to establish a “temporal distance” from the prejudices that, on account of that same historical situatedness, develop around everything human, especially knowledges and beliefs. Time, in that sense, is a productive starting point for all our thinking; it need neither be denied nor overcome. It foregrounds human

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\(^6\) Truth and Method, p. 299.
understanding and is "already effectual in finding the right question to ask." Gadamer writes:

Time is no longer primarily a gulf to be bridged because it separates; it is actually the supportive ground of the course of events in which the present is rooted. Hence, temporal distance is not something that must be overcome. This was, rather, the naïve assumption of historicism, namely that we must transpose ourselves into the spirit of the age, think with its ideas and its thoughts, not with our own, and thus advance toward historical objectivity. In fact, the most important thing is to recognize temporal distance as a positive and productive condition enabling understanding.  

Gadamer further notes that every event in history “can never be completely achieved... To be historically means knowledge of oneself can never be complete.” Precisely because our knowledge of ourselves can never be complete, we pose questions, explore other horizons. But what are these “other horizons”? Is it proper to even speak of them? Is historical understanding about “learn[ing] to transpose into alien horizons”? Gadamer ties his answer to the human world, the historical nature of which fuses individual historical horizons to history itself.

This historical movement of human life consists in the fact that it is never absolutely bound to any one standpoint, and hence can never have a truly closed horizon. The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving. Thus the horizon of the past, out of which all human life lives and which exists in the form of tradition, is always in motion. The surrounding horizon is not set in motion by historical consciousness. But in it, this motion becomes aware of itself. When our historical consciousness transposes itself into a historical horizon, this does not entail passing into alien worlds unconnected in any way with our own; instead, they together constitute the one great horizon that moves from within and that, beyond the frontiers of the

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7 Ibid., p. 301. Gadamer’s emphasis.
8 Ibid., p. 297.
9 Ibid., p. 302. Gadamer’s emphasis.
present, embraces the historical depths of our self-consciousness. Everything contained in historical consciousness is in fact embraced by a single historical horizon. Our own past and that other past toward which our historical consciousness is directed help to shape this moving horizon out of which human life always lives and which determines it as heritage and tradition. Understanding undoubtedly requires a historical horizon, then. But it is not the case that we acquire this horizon by transposing ourselves into a historical situation. Rather, we must always already have a horizon in order to be able to transpose ourselves into a situation. For what do we mean by “transposing ourselves”? Certainly not just disregarding ourselves. This is necessary, of course, insofar as we must imagine the other situation. But into this other situation we must bring, precisely, ourselves.\(^\text{10}\)

Gadamer is here speaking of the historical advance of the understanding as it gets swept up into increasingly larger frameworks of meaning. But precisely because everything human, including human consciousness, is historically effected, not only is the human being moved by history, he is able also to move with history. This means that in order for the horizon of one person to fuse with the horizon of another person, there need not be between them, from the start, perfect agreement about everything, but only the opening of channels of communication between them that will effect, not a perfect coincidence or identity, but a mutuality of openness in understanding.

Let us consider the relationship between the question, and the historicality of that which is put in question. Since, in hermeneutics, this ordinarily is the “text,” let us recall to mind what Gadamer says about the text, that to read a text is to presuppose its completeness. A question, then, would be posed to the text in the expectation from it, of an answer. What answer? The text, as historical, is “other”—that is, in one sense, complete, in another, on the way still to completion. The question, lies in the breach of these two senses, and it asks how the text has come to be, how it has evolved over time. This how type of question must be distinguished from the what type of question from which nothing important can be learned. To ask what karate is, only

\(^{10}\) Ibid., pp. 304-305.
to be told that it is a form of unarmed self-defense that originated in Japan, causes nothing significant or essential to be learned. To truly know about karate is to be able to execute it. It is to learn how to perform its complex and intricate technique of delivering kicks and highly efficient blows. This kind of learning, however, can only take place over a long history of training. The question, then, relates to the historicality of the text when it is a how, not a what, type of question.

In his essay, “On the Origins of Philosophical Hermeneutics,” found in Philosophical Apprenticeships, Gadamer explains that asking a question, like history itself, always occurs at the present moment. Even a question retrieved from the past is a question relative to the present, not to the past. To raise a question without relating it to the present is not to ask it, but merely to remember it. Gadamer writes:

[I]t seems to me that there is no history of being. Remembrance has no history. There is a growing forgetfulness, but in the same manner there is no such thing as a growing remembrance. Remembrance is always what comes to one, what overcomes, so that a re-presencing [Wiedervergegenwartiges] offers a brief respite from passing away and forgetting. But remembrance of being is in no way the memory of a prior knowing now “presencing” [Vergegenwartigen]. It is a memory of a prior questioning, a memory of a lost question. But then any question that is posed as a question is no longer a remembrance. As the remembrance of what was once asked, it is the now-asked. This is the manner in which questioning raises the historicity of our thinking and knowing.

To remember, then, is merely to remember something already learned; it is to remember that one already possesses answers.

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11 Gadamer here refers to Heidegger’s question, “What is being?” about which Heidegger conducted a seminar in 1924.
13 In Gadamer’s view, pedagogical and rhetorical questions are only “apparent questions.” Such questions are usually reconstructed from the past and do not underwrite effective communication with their audience. Pedagogical questions are questions “without a questioner,” and rhetorical questions not only have no questioner, but have “no object” besides. The presentness of a question must be complemented by the presence of a questioner and an object. Cf. Truth and Method, p. 363.
When, however, the question occurs in the present, what transpires is something altogether different. The question, in this case, is a new question, it constitutes a uniquely new event. To get a better grip on this, let us clarify what is meant by the term, “being present.” The question, we noted above, brings the historicality of the text to surface, by bringing it to the present. When, at that point, the present extends its historical structure to the text, there occurs what Gadamer calls participation, a process of implicating the text in its completeness to yet another historical process. On account of the fact that the question fuses the historicality of the text with the historicality of the present, the text becomes something to be completed again. Let us call this the fusion of historicalities. By asking a question, one brings the historical horizon of the text into the presently unfolding historical horizon of the present, widening by so going, the present horizon. Hence the formulation: asking a question is openness to a wider horizon. A question that takes off, lifts away from the ground, so to speak, in search of its place in the wide expanse of sky. The question performs, in that sense, a twofold action: that of letting go, and that of letting in.

Of the dignity of the “experienced” person, Gadamer, in Truth and Method, says:

The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward a new experience. That is why a person who is called experienced has become so not only through experiences but is also open to new experience. The consummation of his experience, the perfection that we call ‘being experienced,’ does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them.15

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14 Gadamer’s example is the celebration of the festival. To be present in the festival is to participate in it. That means doing what is ordinarily done to celebrate the festival.

The experienced person, of the widely-constituted horizon, knows there are always new things to be learned, that learning never stops. He knows that experience hardly ever unfolds in accordance with a plan, that it must constantly come to grips with negativity, that it is closely related to disappointment, failure, pain. He knows, however, as well that the present is not a black hole, that it contains within its folds, and within the reach of those who would take a chance on them, new modes of living and experiencing. The inexperienced person, of the narrowly-constituted horizon, on the other hand, is someone who in his arrogance believes that he has found the truth—the whole, immutable, inviolable truth. Having come to the end of his struggle to find resolution, he stoppers his ears to renewed calls to do his part in fusing the legacy of the past with the present; shuts himself off from whatever else might come.