

# **The Reciprocal Character of Self-Education: Introductory Comments on Hans-Georg Gadamer's Address 'Education is Self-Education'**

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Gadamer's address 'Erziehung ist Sich-Erziehen', which follows the present essay, was presented at the Dietrich Bonhoeffer Gymnasium, Eppelheim, on 19 May 1999, three months into his hundredth year. The address was not a scripted lecture, but rather a conversational series of reflections arising from summary notes that Gadamer consulted from time to time as he spoke. Thus the address carries the spontaneity and vitality of a live event. But this also presents some difficult choices when it comes to publishing it in written form, something we became acutely aware of as we worked on our translation of the printed German version. That version, published as a pamphlet in 2000, was replete with Gadamer's asides, reminiscences, anecdotes and references to specifically German contexts. It also included idioms and phrases which are quite natural in spoken German but which appear contrived or imprecise in written English. The temptation was strong to remove these references and idioms in order to make the text more suitable to the readership of a philosophical journal in the English language. But to do so as a matter of course would be to do less than justice to something central to Gadamer's approach throughout his long philosophical life: namely his commitment to philosophical enquiry as an invitation to critical dialogue. Yet to attempt a direct translation of the German text might do a greater disservice to the substance of his thoughts.

The strategy we decided upon seeks, first, to preserve the character of the address as a contribution to a conversation. This is important for philosophical reasons, as we shall see below. More directly, it is important because in his opening remarks Gadamer himself stresses that the address is not a lecture. Second, we have sought to render more explicit the connections between Gadamer's remarks to an audience of non-philosophers and some major themes in his philosophical work. Any editorial changes we made were informed by this purpose. Third, although we would like to develop in this introductory essay some of the themes in Gadamer's work that feature in the address, this would make the essay longer than the address, so we have declined this option in favour of referring the reader to selected writings from Gadamer's own

work. Finally, the work on this translation involved a series of conversations with Professor Gadamer himself, who has given his approval for the editorial approach we have adopted.

Let us begin then by recalling in summary some of the distinctive features of Gadamer's philosophy, especially those that deal with issues of learning and communication. This summary should help to introduce Gadamer's work to those who have little familiarity with it, and also to furnish a philosophical context for the Eppenheim address. Among these features are:

- Gadamer's conception of philosophical enquiry as a conversational more than an adversarial undertaking;
- his 'hermeneutic' recognition that all translation is itself interpretation, but interpretation that requires more insight and circumspection than are shown by traditional accounts of validity in interpretation;
- his emphasis on the point that the self-critical venturing of different perspectives provides a more promising path in the search for truth than does any traditional epistemological quest for certainty;
- his active conception of human experience as something that is always at play, or is being-played, or is invariably engaged in one or other kind of interplay;
- his unearthing of the pervasive extent to which the language in which one becomes at home, including languages of scholarly enquiry, pre-forms (*vorschreiben*) one's thoughts and thus predisposes human experience and its best efforts to understand;
- his rejection of relativism and of objectivism, though accused of the former by many of his critics who themselves reveal a tendency towards the latter in their works;
- his argument that 'tradition' is to be understood not as the dead or oppressive hand of the past, nor as anything monolithic, but as the active (often intractable) context of understandings, beliefs, commitments, which overlies the self-understanding of each human being;
- his recurring demonstrations that the real significance of tradition emerges not in acts of acquiescence but through acts of progressively more informed questioning of all that seeks to address and influence human understanding;
- his keen awareness of the limitations and the fallibility, yet also of the significance and the promise, of such questioning;
- his view of philosophy as critical dialogue, which he takes as the important lesson to be learned from recognising the inescapability of plurality and from acknowledging the unattainability of absolute knowledge, or of complete rational self-clarity.

The ten features presented in summary here do not comprise an exhaustive list; rather they reveal in a preliminary way something of the tenor of Gadamer's thinking, especially where it concerns human

encounters with anything that can properly be called tradition. To engage in thinking of this kind moreover calls for certain practices of learning rather than others. Consider, for instance, a seminar in philosophy which is conducted as follows. The students are introduced to a starting premise and from here the teaching proceeds methodically to establish a conclusion, already envisaged by the teacher as the right one, towards which the students are compelled by the force of a watertight logic that the teacher's presentation seeks to exemplify. Where philosophy is concerned, such practices are of course not confined to the subject of formal logic. Now the kind of approach to learning in evidence here is nowhere explicitly condemned by Gadamer. It is foreign, however, to the practices through which his own arguments take shape and through which they find articulation and response. Were Gadamer to find himself as a participant in such a seminar, his questioning would be more than likely to focus on the presuppositions underlying the starting premises, including those that underlie formal logic as a particular form of rationality. This questioning would be likely to become especially busy if the presuppositions of one form of rationality were somehow granted exclusive authority in a field of enquiry which sought to understand different, wider, or more inclusive forms of rationality.

Such busy questioning, like that practised by Socrates in ancient Athens, can provoke resistance, or indeed controversy. This is so especially where the participants themselves view the discussion, or the interplay between teacher and student, in adversarial as distinct from conversational terms: as a battle for victory by truth in the conquest of falsehood or illusion. The virtue of engaging in such battles loses much of its lustre however when confronted with the unsettling awareness that falsehood may yet linger where one's efforts on behalf of truth have publicly won the day. Even more sobering is the recognition that, far from being finally vanquishable, illusions — especially one's own illusions — often present an oblique face to one's best critical efforts, but might be all too discernible to the gaze of others. To begin to appreciate the philosophical force of this is to begin to understand also the particularity and limitations of even the most accomplished of individual critical efforts. It is to perceive the scope and promise of philosophy as a conversation, constituted by a plurality of voices and governed by a common investigative concern, however differently or minimally that concern is conceived; a conversation moreover which is essentially inclusive rather than exclusionary. It therefore gives attentive consideration not merely to 'commensurable' arguments, but also to criticisms of its own most warranted arguments to date, especially on major questions such as justice, religion, ethics, politics, understanding and its advancement.

So far as it goes, this description of philosophical practice fits Gadamer's writings closely, but there are yet two further aspects of his work that must be mentioned. The first is that Gadamer's writing, even when it makes hefty demands on one's concentration, addresses the

reader not as a spectator, nor as an observer, nor as a jury member, but as an engaged, yet critical participant in an unfolding enquiry. The second is that Gadamer converses actively with every one of the wide range of philosophers he invariably draws into his investigations. Whether living or dead, they are present not as authorities, nor as adversaries, nor as figures who have already had their say, but as active voices that speak with a freshness which is sometimes remarkable.

Following our presentation of these outlines of prominent features of Gadamer's arguments and of his approach to philosophy as a practice of enquiry, we can now turn to a brief preview of some of the main themes of the address 'Erziehung ist Sich-Erziehen'. We have selected six of these, together with the specially significant concept of *Bildung*.

## I SELF-EDUCATION OR EDUCATION THROUGH CONVERSATION?

This implicit contradiction arises in the opening paragraphs of the address. On the one hand Gadamer is keen to argue that 'one learns only through conversation', which gives a key role to others; but on the other, he wishes to argue that education is primarily self-education. Rather than being a contradiction, however, what is involved here are two contrasting emphases, which are nevertheless complementary. Gadamer's remarks develop the point that self-education is an emergent *capability* that one could easily misunderstand or bypass; but a *capability* that one should gradually learn to embrace as an enduring *responsibility*. Both the successful nurturing of the capability, and its mature exercise as a responsibility, involve relationships of a particular quality with others. Where the nurturing (or the neglect) of the capacity to learn is concerned, parents play a decisive role, as the early sections of the address show; a role which is later played by teachers, classmates and others from the earliest years of schooling onwards. Second, this important role depends largely on oneself as one learns to embrace learning as a personal responsibility, or where one fails to do so. Yet, as the later arguments in the address illustrate, this individual responsibility is best exercised and developed in contexts that involve others in an unforced, active and memorable way. The example Gadamer gives is that of voluntary study groups or learning circles, where one's own sense of being-in-the-world comes to fullness as a being-with-others in purposeful relationships of learning. Thus Gadamer's phrase 'the reciprocal character of self-education' expresses a perceptive insight rather than a contradiction.

## II MAKING ONESELF AT HOME IN THE WORLD

At first sight this looks similar to the task that all living organisms must accomplish, namely adaptation to their environment. Yet, though most other organisms achieve this almost as a matter of course, it is for humans a much more complex and anxious affair, burdened as it is with

issues of identity and self-understanding. Gadamer's concern here is less with the research findings of developmental psychology than with the ontological uncertainties that attend the experiences of infancy. He calls attention to the 'first enormous step' of orientation that a child accomplishes in game-like, pre-speech activities such as identifying, locating, reaching for, when such activities meet with success. The second great step then becomes the intricate business of establishing enduring relationships with a range of different others, through activities which learning to speak makes possible: naming, ascribing significance, being recognised, gaining acceptance and so on. But these beginnings in establishing communicative relationships with others can be marked by failure as well as by success, with major consequences for the quality of one's life and one's learning in later years. Gadamer draws on the Hegelian word *einhausen* (in-dwelling) in his discussion of the importance of education for the challenges of making oneself at home in a human world. This making oneself at home is not any form of domesticity, but a recurring interplay, or a challenging tension, between at-homeness and not-at-homeness, between self-possession (*Selbstbesitz*) and 'the understanding that always places itself in question.' ('Letter to Dallmayr', p. 95). This tension is only lightly touched-on in the address but receives much attention from Gadamer in *Truth and Method* and in some of his later writings. (See the section on *Bildung* in *Truth and Method* and also Gadamer's two articles 'Letter to Dallmayr' and 'Destruktion and Deconstruction' in *Dialogue and Deconstruction*.)

### III THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MOTHER TONGUE

Against any suggestions that language is primarily a tool at one's disposal, Gadamer shares with Wittgenstein a keen awareness of its taken-for-granted proximity and its ultimate mysteriousness. In a comment on Wittgenstein's analogy between language and games in *Philosophical Investigations*, which also touches on an early theme in the address, Gadamer writes: 'children's games are of such a nature that we cannot go behind their established rules with any kind of superior knowing' (*Philosophical Hermeneutics*, p. 175). This game playing is central to the child's natural learning, or picking-up, of the mother tongue. We can readily acknowledge that the quality of these gaming experiences in the vernacular is crucial for the emergent identity of the child or pupil. Gadamer is keen to point out, however, the inescapability of the fact that such experiences are never-ending, or are ever renewed conversations that pre-form one's thinking and pre-dispose one's outlooks. This is what his various references to learning situations that 'form themselves' seek to bring out. And again, it is because one can never fully get behind these pre-forming interplays to a position of absolute critical transparency, that the commitment to learning as an attentive yet critical openness to conversation is so important. A failure to accomplish the linguistic resources or fluency to engage in such conversation would thus be something fundamentally more serious for one's well-being than a

failure to master some facts or technical body of information. In addition to stressing the enduring importance for one's self-understanding of the quality of one's learning in the mother tongue, Gadamer also makes some interesting remarks on learning to write, especially on the traces of one's developing individuality and style that show as one's handwriting acquires its unique characteristics. This illustrates the mysterious process through which one's personal voice emerges out of the background of apparent conformity with the prevailing culture.

#### **IV THE LEARNING OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES**

As distinct from something which is primarily a technical skill or proficiency, Gadamer lays emphasis on the point that the learning of a foreign language is an introduction to genuine experiences of otherness; i.e. of being-among-others in ways which unsettle and re-orient the at-homeness of one's everyday experiences. In this connection, he argues that language courses in school are a second-best way to learn a new language. But, given that such courses are the usual path for most learners, he discusses them in some detail. Here he draws a strong contrast between an emphasis on the active learning of phonetics and an emphasis on learning grammar. Phonetics he views as essential for proper pronunciation and thus for advancing informal understandability in living languages. The study of formal grammar, on the other hand, he relegates in importance. Grammar's educational strength, he explains, is that it holds the key to understanding the formal structures of language, especially a non-living language like Latin. But the point about learning the phonetics of a foreign language is that one can be understood by native speakers of the language so that there is one less obstacle to the give-and-take that is essential for a genuine conversation.

#### **V THE MODEST ROLE OF THE TEACHER**

At certain places in the text, Gadamer seems to diminish the importance of the teacher. This impression might also be gathered from the title of the address. Teachers themselves will be the first to agree with Gadamer that where communications in the home are either lacking or largely negative in character, the efforts of teachers are placed at a serious disadvantage. Gadamer is right to suggest a modest role for the teacher, but the modesty in question has little to do with a relegation of the teacher's significance. Rather, it calls attention to what is specific to the work of teaching as such, as distinct from aspects of that work that are rendered more problematic by shortcomings in communications in pupils' homes. If, as Gadamer intimates, self-education is both a capability to be nurtured and a responsibility to be progressively embraced, then the self-understanding and communicative accomplishments of the teacher come into question in crucially important ways. There is much to be said on this question that relates Gadamer's arguments in this address to what he has to say about dialogue and its critical requirements in his

major writings. These arguments would suggest that the 'modesty' of the teacher's role is itself a subtle capability of a demanding kind. Of first relevance here are Gadamer's observations on 'the conversation that we ourselves are' in his analysis in *Truth and Method* of the predisposing of consciousness by its own history (*wirkungsgeschichtliche Bewusstsein*). Also relevant are the essays on practice in his *Reason in the Age of Science*.

## VI THE ISSUE OF SPECIALISATION

Gadamer's arguments on specialised studies have a twofold import: first, the attenuation of educational experience which results from undertaking such studies at too early an early age; and second, the relationship between the emergent complexion of maturing personal aptitudes and the specific requirements of specialist study in any particular field or subject. Both issues are related, as Gadamer's arguments in the later part of the address suggest. Particularly interesting here are his comments on the study of mathematics, and his view, supported by academic mathematicians, that the specialised study of mathematics proves most fruitful when the student has first learned through the humanities. For our modern exam-oriented practices of education the critical point is that learning how to learn is the most important skill that any student can master, and such skills are better fostered by a humanistic education, properly conceived and experienced.

## THE CENTRALITY OF *BILDUNG*

The importance of this concept in Gadamer's thinking can be gathered in an initial way from the many *Bildung* words that occur in the address: *bilden*, *sich-bilden*, *gebildet*, *herausbildet*, *Fortbildung*, *Wortbildung*, *Vorbildern*, *Allgemeinbildung*, *Bildung*. One of the things it is necessary to stress from the start is that this suggestive word family does not have its proper home in any metaphysics, or in anything that can be pejoratively described as a 'meta-narrative'. On this point Gadamer has been misread or misrepresented by many. Rather, its home — which is also a being-other-than-at-home — lies in a kind of learning relationship, with its own risks and openness to the unexpected.

We have already called attention to Gadamer's stress on self-education as a personal responsibility. Yet the quality of this responsibility, and of the learning experiences that constitute its proper exercise, remain somewhat vague unless one appreciates the richness and resonances of the concept of *Bildung*. Gadamer's detailed exploration of this concept in the opening chapter of *Truth and Method* provides an illuminating account of the history of the concept and some incisive observations on its promise for current generations. One might initially translate *Bildung* as 'liberal education', or as the learning experiences that make for a cultured or well-lettered person. But this translation misses most of what Gadamer's historical review recovers. Beginning with the origins of the

term in medieval mysticism (*Bild* as image of God), Gadamer traces its history through the Enlightenment to the nineteenth century, including the shifts of meaning which made it more a humanistic concept than a mystical one, while also enriching his account with astute insights of his own. This review reaches from Herder's presentation of *Bildung* as a new ideal of 'reaching up to humanity', to the Enlightenment thinkers' view of it as the properly human way to develop one's talents, to Hegel's emphasis on human awareness of the gap between nature and spirit, between what one is and what one might be. Thus for Hegel, *Bildung* embodies the duty to cultivate oneself, or as Gadamer paraphrases him, 'to keep oneself open to what is other, to other, more universal points of view' (*Truth and Method*, p. 17).

Gadamer credits Wilhelm von Humboldt with making a decisive distinction between *Kultur* and *Bildung* and quotes him as follows:

but if in our language we say *Bildung*, we mean something both higher and more inward, namely the attitude of mind which, from the knowledge and the feeling of the total intellectual and moral endeavour, flows harmoniously into sensibility and character (*Truth and Method*, p. 11).

But Gadamer is keen to point out that this reference to harmony should not obscure another important feature of *Bildung*, namely the tension between the self-possession through which one makes something one's own on the one hand and, on the other, the alienation which unsettles such self-possession. This alienation is inescapable if one genuinely attempts to remain open to what is very different from that to which one has become accommodated, or from what one may have more actively accommodated. In a passage which has a pronounced Hegelian accent and which also touches on some of the themes in the address we have translated here, Gadamer writes of this tension in the following words:

To seek one's own in the alien, to become at home in it, is the basic movement of spirit, whose being is only return to itself from what is other. Hence all theoretical *Bildung*, even the acquisition of foreign languages and conceptual worlds, is merely the continuation of a process of *Bildung* which begins much earlier. Every single individual who raises himself out of his natural being to the spiritual finds in the language, customs and institutions of his people a pre-given body of material which, as in learning to speak, he has to make his own . . . Thus it is clear that it is not alienation as such, but the return to oneself which presupposes a prior alienation, that constitutes the essence of *Bildung* (*Truth and Method*, p. 15).

However, Gadamer parts company decisively with Hegel's historicist and metaphysical assumptions, which would draw *Bildung* into the service of absolute knowledge. He is also unhappy with the Hegelian idea of *Bildung* as 'cultivation', as it suggests that it is something that can be made perfect or brought to completion (*Truth and Method*, p. 15). Far from being any kind of process that reaches finality, or that achieves an



overview of the historicity of experience, human participation in *Bildung* is for Gadamer marked by a disciplined interplay of promise and limitation. In this, as he has pointed out in his recent essay 'Reflections on my Philosophical Journey' (in *The Philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer*), there is a recognition of something genuinely Socratic, namely the 'fallible and merely human wisdom', which can yet bring within the stay of human experience something 'more universal' than the parochialisms old and new that throng the 'metaphysical conceptuality' of Western philosophical tradition.

In that same essay, he calls attention to some important consequences hermeneutic philosophy has for the teaching of philosophy and for the responsibilities of professors of philosophy. We would like to conclude these introductory remarks with the suggestion that what Gadamer has to say here applies with equal weight to all experiences and actions that are worthy of the name of teaching and learning:

'Hermeneutic' philosophy, as I envision it, does not understand itself as an absolute position but as a path of experiencing. Its modesty consists in the fact that for it there is no higher principle than this: holding oneself open to the conversation. This means, however, constantly recognizing in advance the possibility that your partner is right, even recognizing the possible superiority of your partner. Is this too little? This seems to me to be the only kind of integrity one can demand of a professor of philosophy — but it is one which one ought also to demand ('Reflections on my Philosophical Journey', p. 36).

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